

Thorin  
Klosowski



**ONE LONG**

**PANEL**

**OF**

**STONES**



# One Long Panel of Stones

(and 40 other stories)

Thorin Klosowski

**RNN Press**

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This book is a work of fiction. All the characters, organizations, and events are from the author's imagination and more than likely untrue.

One Long Panel of Stones (and 40 Other Stories) by Thorin Klosowski

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# Preface

These stories come from the website, RNN Descriptions, which was a collection of short stories and art created by me and my friend, Mojiferous. All the stories and art are independent of each other. You can read or look at any of them in any order.

The titles were generated by a recurrent neural network (thus the name, RNN Descriptions). Mojiferous trained the RNN on classic art descriptions to generate absurd art titles. With each new collection of titles, he picked the best, fed those words back into the network, and it got weirder. This only applies to the titles, the art and words are generated by two people who are more or less human.

First up is the novella, *One Long Panel of Stones*, followed by 40 flash fiction stories, some of which are accompanied by Mojiferous' art.

# One Long Panel of Stones

# Chapter 1

On the western side of the map, I like to draw mountains. Mountains always feel right on the west. I tend to include lakes, too, because the idea of a mountain lake is always pleasant.

I draw a lot of maps. My co-workers make fun of me for it, they say things like, "You need to make friends not maps." Or if they're a bit older, they'll say, "Samantha, you should find yourself a man not invent worlds."

I don't appreciate the assumption a man would make things better for me, but I do like the idea that what I do is *make worlds* not maps. I am not a skilled writer, nor am I very good artist, but that doesn't stop my brain from filling up with ideas. I see the world as something to navigate through, and the best way to navigate is with a map.

I've made hundreds of maps of imagined places. It's odd behavior for a thirty-four-year-old woman. But what's normal? For something to be odd, we need to come to an agreement about what normal is, and while I imagine society has an idea of that, I don't see anyone out there writing essays entitled "How to be Normal," or "What Makes All of Us the Same."

Anyway, I guess I'm a little self-conscious about all this. I suppose it's because, at work, I'm surrounded not by my fellow oddballs but by the type of very normal people who'd appreciate an essay telling them how to be more normal. Which isn't meant to imply anything. They're all nice people. But if there was some consensus on what normal was? They'd be it.

I work at a small accounting firm. It's the type of place people come to when they hit thirty or so and realize they have no idea what they're doing with their money and their lives. They're usually at least somewhat panicked about the very idea of death. Or at least terrified of growing old. I am convinced we all have a switch in our bodies that triggers this.

One morning, we wake up and suddenly the idea of growing old is just there. And the feeling doesn't go away like it did when we were younger, when we have these fleeting moments to acknowledge we'll eventually age, but then we return to the chaos of youth.

Everyone I work with is older, for the most part, and most of them don't have hobbies outside of the job itself. I'd venture a guess that me doing

anything at all would cause suspicion but drawing maps of imaginary lands is grounds for avoiding me if we run into each other outside of work. One time in the cereal aisle at the grocery store, the CEO avoided eye contact with me for a solid three minutes by reading the back of a Frosted Flakes box.

But I can't help how I see the world.

When I'm not at home drawing, I spend the majority of my time at a small bookshop called Leonard's. Nobody named Leonard has ever owned the bookstore, nor has anyone named Leonard ever worked there. Gus, the owner, tells me he picked the name because it was already on the awning. Decades ago, Leonard's was a hardware store, and the sign was well-designed and sturdy, so Gus decided to keep it.

I consider Gus a friend, though it's mostly a working relationship. Or whatever you call it when you have friends who fit into a specific niche and don't work well outside of that. I wouldn't, say, invite Gus to a barbecue. But as long as books and history are concerned, we get along well. I guess it's more like a hobbyist relationship.

I always stop into Leonard's after work on Tuesdays and Thursdays. On Mondays and Wednesdays, Gus hosts a local woman's writing group, called the Colorado 14'ers, because, apparently, there are fourteen of them, which honestly seems like a lot for a small mountain town like Estes Park.

It's not that I can't go in those days, I just find the ladies uptight and loud. Fridays, I like to go home and work on my maps, and the weekends are just too busy to spend any time with Gus.

It's on a Tuesday Gus greets me with a smile big enough to make me worry. "Samantha," he says, teeth showing, "have I got the book for you."

## Chapter 2

Gus reaches under the counter and lifts up a comically large tome of a book. It's dusty and old looking, the type of prop you'd see in a movie when a bookstore owner proudly shows off a book to an eccentric customer.

"What's this?" I ask.

"This, Samantha, is the *Book of the Hermetic Order of Owl*," he replies.

I raise an eyebrow as cinematically as I can. "And?"

"Samantha!" he exclaims. "This is the type of book we've been waiting for."

Gus and I always talk about finding ancient books filled with secrets. The type of book filled with mysteries only a book nerd can solve, and which sets them forward on an unexpected journey, perhaps even death. You know the type. You've read books about these types of books already. Or at least seen a movie or two. I'm having a hard time believing such a book would show up at a small dusty book shop in the middle of nowhere, Colorado.

"You're going to need to explain," I say, sitting on the stool on the opposite side of Gus at the register.

This is my stool in anything but name. When I come into the shop, I sit down with the casualness of a retired man lowering himself into his favorite La-Z-Boy, but without the comfort. It's just a metal stool, after all.

A customer idles nearby, trying to figure out why I'd just cut them in line and sat in the way of the cash register. Gus waves them up, not bothering to greet the customer.

"Have you heard of the Hermetic Order of Owl?" he asks but continues before I can reply, "No, of course not— That'll be \$32.55," he cuts to the customer, who hands him a credit card. Gus sighs while pulling out his card printer. He places the card in the slot, lays down a sheet of paper, and slides the weight across with a satisfying *ka-chunk*. He draws an X and hands it to the customer. "Sign here," he says.

"Gus, can I take a look before we continue this?"

"It's incredible, Samantha," he says, sliding the book over to me. "I've never seen anything like it." He beams with the type of excitement most people

reserve for weddings and a child's graduation from Harvard.

The book isn't much of a book at all. Or rather, it's filled with dozens and dozens of maps, not words. Each map has a variety of symbols, with roads and trails connecting them. I don't recognize the place—which doesn't mean anything as I don't have a deep repository of the world's maps sitting in my head—but there is something weird about how the land masses work. Town names like Quetz, Blunque, and Zottt don't seem familiar.

There isn't text to accompany the individual maps, but there is an introduction. After the customer leaves, Gus takes it upon himself to read it aloud in the most dubious-secret-society voice he can muster. He sounds like an idiot.

*Greetings friends.*

*What follows is the collection of maps we've amassed over the last 432 years. I am not including the research here because I'm worried about keeping a key and a lock in the same place. Yet, our work has been so complex, so long, and so tiring, I cannot simply let it disappear into obscurity. I'd like to think our order will continue its work long into the future, but as the fires of war come closer to our doorstep, I must concede this is the end. Perhaps there is a day where someone can take these maps, and the work we've put into them, and use them to open doors to new worlds.*

*Anyway,*

*Athanasius 304*

"Well, that doesn't really tell us much."

"No, I suppose it doesn't," Gus replies, "but isn't this exciting?" He noticeably warms as he says this, something I'm not used to seeing him do.

I don't want to call him stuffy because that's the kind of stereotype of a bookshop owner I'd rather avoid, and not exactly right, but he often struggles with showing earnest emotion in a way I'd never seen before meeting him. It's almost like he feels guilty smiling, as though the despair and weight of the world rests solely on his shoulders, and he doesn't deserve to have a moment of joy unless the rest of the universe can do the same. This book is making me second guess everything I know about him.

"It is exciting," I mumble, flipping through the book. There is a lot to unpack here.

The unhelpful intro doesn't get us anywhere. Who's this Athanasius? What's the deal with the 304? Why so many maps? The maps are consistent, too, not the usual chicken scratch nonsense you see in most amateur maps, which makes it easier for me to buy into the idea they're a representation of an actual place. Even after years of making fictional maps I struggle to create cohesion, especially if I decide to revisit a world from the past. But here, everything clicks together.

"I suppose we should start by looking into this Hermetic Order of the Owl," I suggest, with a grin.

"It's just Owl replies Gus.

"What?"

"You said Hermetic Order of the Owl. It's just Owl, Hermetic Order of Owl."

"Sure," I say, doing my best not to let my eyes roll back too far.

"So, you're in?" Gus says.

"In?"

"To *figure it all out*."

I laugh. "Yes, Gus. We're running out of things to talk about, anyway."

## Chapter 3

It takes me a few days to collect everything together. By everything, I mean just a few different texts. Which is to say, not much when it comes to dramatic leads on ancient civilizations.

In dozens of books, magazines, and my web research, I found three references to the Hermetic Order of Owl: one passing mention in an encyclopedia, a newspaper article from 1983, and a caption in a book about witchcraft.

The encyclopedia mention comes not in its own entry, but in the entry about owls:

*While owls are often considered spiritual creatures and respected by a number of cultures on a variety of levels, the Hermetic Order of Owl (pg. 443) is perhaps the most earnest in its belief owls are the carriers of the soul.*

The encyclopedia points to page 443, but there's nothing about the order on that page. Just a long entry about Oz, as in the *Wizard of*. Which is a weird mistake to make for a book dedicated to chronicling everything, but it's not the first time I've seen this in an encyclopedia.

As a kid, my mom would often bring home random parts of encyclopedias left behind by travelers at the hotel she'd worked at. On my shelf, I'd have an odd collection of the world's history, from Aa-Bb, De-Fa, Ga-Gg, Sr-Ta, and Wa-Zz, but lacking everything in-between.

The second mention I found is in a scan online from a newspaper in an August 22, 1983 issue of the *Flagstaff Daily* newspaper. I'd always thought of Flagstaff as a smaller city, but I guess someone there had the means to put their papers on the web:

### **Bowling Alley Construction Unearths Vault of Secret Society**

by Richard Yearns

Flagstaff—Early on Tuesday morning, construction workers digging out the grounds for the foundation of David Sexsmith's newest bowling alley unearthed what local authorities are calling a vault of a secret society. It is too early to confirm, but

researchers suggest it may belong to a long dormant group called the "Hermetic Order of Owl."

Researchers tell *The Daily* that little is known about the group, but Melinda Bakersfield, history professor at Northern Arizona University and author of the book, *Six Secret Societies: The Untold Story of the Groups Nobody Wants You to Know About*, was the first to suggest the Hermetic Order of Owl when it was uncovered, pointing out the symbols on the vault resemble the owls connected to the order in earlier works.

The vault is locked down currently, and it's unclear what it will take to open it. National History Museum coordinator Alexis Farns tells *The Daily* the museum is working to preserve the vault while protecting its contents.

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That's it, there's no other mention in any subsequent issues of the paper, but it does at least get us four names to follow up with, the article's author, the professor, the museum coordinator, and the bowling alley owner. That feels like a lead, right? If I have any skills to solve a mystery, I've learned them from books, movies, and computer games.

Finally, there is one short caption in a book called *Catastrophes Caused by Witchcraft*, by Margo Linet, which reads, "The members of the Order of Owl sit peacefully and have a picnic," but an error in the print of the book leaves a large blank space above the caption. I confirmed this is the case in other printings, as well. I suppose I should try to reach her, too, even if the title of this book doesn't give me much confidence in her worldview.

I take what I've learned to Gus on a Thursday after work and present it like I'm a middle-schooler reading a book report to the class. He listens, tight lipped, with his eyes locked onto mine as I rush through my research.

"Well, I think we should start with the professor from the newspaper article," he says. "She might know at least some high-level stuff to get us started, and then we can go from there."

"That makes sense to me," I pause, "though I might as well try to track down everyone and at least get some phone calls and see if any of them have email. It's been eighteen years since that article was written. We'll be lucky

if I can track down a single one of them. And it's not like we need to follow some linear order here."

"Sure, sure, sure," he says, clearly not listening to any of my boring logistics details.

"Gus, is this a waste of time?" I can't help but ask the question I've had since I started this research, and one I'm sure anyone hearing this story would also have.

"Well, sure, yeah, probably. But..." he lets that *but* float in the air. Has Gus always had this much dramatic timing, or is it new? "I don't see any harm in wasting a bit of time on fun research, do you?"

"No, I suppose not." It *is* just research. And what else would I be doing? Drawing more maps, probably, but what kind of maps, exactly? I'm running low on ideas these days, anyway. Might as well try and learn about this weird cult group or whatever they are so I can decipher the maps they've already made. Besides, these maps are way more interesting than any I've ever made. At worst, I'll pick up some new skills.

## Chapter 4

Before heading into work the next morning, I call the history department at Northern Arizona University. A small voice answers.

"History," the voice says. A statement, a question, and a surprised exclamation all rolled into one.

"I'm looking for Melinda Bakersfield."

"I'm sorry, Ms. Bakersfield retired last year, are you one of the students from the, er, event?"

"Yes, I am." I've never been particularly good at lying, but when I blurt a surprising but resolute yes, even I believe it.

"So, look," the small voice now sounds pained, like it's running through a script, "the university has done all it can do. Ms. Bakersfield was not operating with the university's interest in mind, nor was she doing so with the power of the university behind her. Obviously, she wasn't thinking about her students. But there's nothing else we can do beyond the free classes we've already offered."

"Yes, I know that, but I realize this might sound crazy, but I want to speak with Ms. Bakersfield directly. She, er, changed my life that day, and I need to hear more." The words flow out of me like I've been given a script from some higher power. It feels strange but right.

I hear a sigh on the other end of the line, then the sound of a pen tapping against a desk.

"She changed my life, too, you know?" the voice whispers. "Look, I only have an email address for her, that's it, but maybe she'll reply. It's m-bakersfield@earthlink.net."

"Thank you."

"Good luck then." The line *clicks*.

An *event* sounds exciting. Not sure I'd call it a lead, but at least it's something. I have to stop focusing on the word *lead*. I don't even know what it means. It just sounds right. In any case, this is a sign this Bakersfield woman was into something weird. I guess I could have gathered that from

the title of her book, *Six Secret Societies: The Untold Story of the Groups Nobody Wants You to Know About*.

On my way into work, I stop by Leonard's to pick up the copy of Bakersfield's book Gus had special ordered for me. The shop's not open yet, so I have to knock on the door. When I do, I hear the sound of boxes falling, followed by cursing.

"What?" he says, opening the door. "Oh, it's you."

I laugh. "I always figured you as a morning person, Gus. I guess I was wrong."

"Sorry, Samantha, it's new release day, and I'm running a bit behind. This Owl stuff is keeping me up all night."

"Me too. Did my book arrive?"

"Yeah, come on in." He motions for me to enter and locks the door behind me.

I follow Gus as he maneuvers through a maze of cardboard, with several boxes of Harry Potter paperbacks taking up most of the space.

"The movie is coming out soon," Gus mutters, not exactly at me, but in my general direction. "So, here we are." He trails off. I can't tell if he's annoyed or appreciates the business. When we get to the cash register, he leans underneath and pulls out the book.

"Here you go then." He hands Melinda's book over. "I'll be honest, I wasn't expecting to find this, but it turned out it's distributed by a small press collective I work with pretty often, based out of Sedona, Arizona. Sedona's a pretty interesting place—" he starts before I snatch the book from his hand and cut him off. Gus has a pocket-sized tidbit for just about everything, and if you don't stop him before he starts, it's basically impossible to make him stop until his story's complete. It's as useful as it is annoying.

"I called the history department this morning. Apparently, Melinda Bakersfield retired last year after an *event*," I motion quotation marks as elaborately as possible.

"An event?" Gus mimics my motion.

"That's all I know. But I got her email address to follow-up with. I'll send her a message when I can get online at the office."

"That's progress." Gus almost seems excited. "Do you think she'll check her email?" Gus tends to avoid technology, and I can't say I blame him.

I shrug, "I need to get to work. I'll give you a call if I hear anything."

## Chapter 5

**To:** m-bakersfield@earthlink.net

**From:** samanthametfairy@prodigy.net

**Subject:** hermetic order of owl

Hello Melinda,

My name's Samantha. You don't know me, but I came across your book while reading an article about a vault unearthed at a construction site in Flagstaff. I got your email address from someone in your old office at the university. Sorry if this is intrusive.

I'm emailing because I'm doing some research into the Hermetic Order of Owl. I have your book here, but I don't see them mentioned anywhere, and I haven't had much luck coming up with any information about the order thus far. Since you're quoted talking about them in the paper, I'm hoping you might be able to point me to some research or perhaps answer some questions?

Oh! And, do you know if anything else was ever found? Whatever happened with the vault?!

Thanks so much for your time,

--

Samantha Arins

samanthametfairy@prodigy.net

*Check out [PRODIGY.NET/promotions/August/EMAIL/](http://PRODIGY.NET/promotions/August/EMAIL/) for a free month of web access and email account at [PRODIGY.NET](http://PRODIGY.NET)*

Melinda replied within an hour.

**To:** samanthametfairy@prodigy.net

**From:** m-bakersfield@earthlink.net

**Subject:** re: hermetic order of owl

Wow. I haven't thought about that article in years. I'm surprised you were able to find anything at all. How did you dig that up?

The Order of Owl is an interesting group, though whether or not it's interesting to you depends on what you're really looking for.

I do know a bit about their history, though. They split off from the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn due to some kind of financial conflict. Aleister Crowley was involved with the Owls at some point, and that guy couldn't keep his mouth shut (or his pants zipped). He talked about it in some of his papers, I think. Or maybe it was just in passing during conversation. My memory's not what it used to be, and something about Crowley made him hard to remember.

Sadly, any notes I did have are lost. I don't know what the history department told you, but I'm retired now, and that retirement was very swift. Which is to say, I wasn't afforded a chance to collect my things.

I hope this helps. If you have some specific questions, please ask, it might jostle something free in my memory.

Sincerely,

--

Melinda Bakersfield

m-bakersfield@earthlink.net

"All who wander are not lost."

At this point, I ignored work completely and emailed with Melinda as quickly as I could.

**To:** m-bakersfield@earthlink.net

**From:** samanthametfairy@prodigy.net

**Subject:** re: re: hermetic order of owl

Thanks so much for getting back to me!

I was able to find the article using a computer. Apparently, Flagstaff is very modern and has all their old newspapers available on the web!

Aleister Crowley's connection to this Golden Dawn is already more information than I've been able to find. I'm doing my research at a local bookstore that has a lot of older esoteric texts but nothing about this out there, I guess.

I should back up. I'm a little hesitant to say this, but I have seen a book that's supposedly written by someone in the Order of Owl. It's indecipherable, though, just a collection of maps with nonsense names. That's what got me interested to begin with. So, I guess I'm really just looking to cover the basics right now. Like, do you know when they might have split off from the Golden Dawn? Where were they when this happened? Do you have any guesses about what they might have been doing that 1) led them to have a vault in Flagstaff and 2) create this book of nonsensical maps?

Thank you!

**To:** samanthametfairy@prodigy.net

**From:** m-bakersfield@earthlink.net

**Subject:** re: re: hermetic order of owl

Totally understandable to be cautious about sharing discoveries! I'd be jealous if I was still a professor! Are you writing a book? Are you a journalist? I just realized you didn't really share how you became involved here.

So, those maps are, more than likely, a story. My guess is they could even be read as instructions. Do you know much about magic theory? It's all a little convoluted, but the drastically simplified version goes like this: there's a right-hand path, a left-hand path, and chaos magic. Right-hand path involves a lot of rules and ceremonies, and the left-hand path is, well, to put it bluntly, mostly just for having sex, while chaos magic is a sort of, hrm, like a DIY version of the two combined.

The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was very much studying along the right-hand path. They were obsessed with rules and ceremonies. My understanding is the Owls split off partially because, well, their rituals just weren't doing anything. They'd organize these huge ceremonies with everyone standing in specific places like a giant chess board in order to open up a portal to another world, but it never worked. They claimed it did, sure, saying that the portals were in the eyes of the participants, and now they're awake to see them. But there's not much evidence it did anything.

The Owls thought they could do better. So, they broke off and created their own rituals. Instead of the Dawn's chess board in a large room, they used much larger spaces for their rituals. Like, real big. Worldly big.

As for Flagstaff, my guess is they're more interested in Sedona. I don't know how much you know about Sedona, but I recommend looking into it. It's an energy vortex, and a place many people go to in search of larger truths.

Best of luck to you. And please, reach out if you want me to take a closer look at the book. I'm happy to help.

## Chapter 6

"I'm sorry, an energy what?" Gus says as incredulously as a human being can muster. I've seen more emotion out of him in the last week than in years before. It's almost as though he was just a paper man before—an idea of a man—and, suddenly, he's much more, well, human.

I pull the emails I'd printed at the office from my bag, "Uh, hmm, vortex. An energy vortex."

"What does that even mean?" Gus says, grabbing the pages. "Sedona? Aleister Crowley? Was this woman on something?"

"I don't know, Gus. She just seems like your average New-Ager, but she also has several history degrees. My best guess is whatever got her fired happened in Sedona. Still, I was able to go on the web and see Crowley was indeed in the Golden Dawn, at least briefly before he went off to do his, er, well, you know."

Gus and I have never had any type of romance between us, not even close. The idea of bringing up Crowley's flavor of sex magic in conversation was about appealing as doing so with your parents. So, I left it at that. Gus, as is typical of him, didn't even notice.

"Can I see the book again?"

"Of course," Gus says, pulling the book from behind the counter.

A man and his daughter walk up to the counter with a Harry Potter book. Gus smiles as he turns to help. A short line forms behind them almost as if everyone in the shop was afraid to be the first person to check out.

I pull up my stool and take a seat. The book's pages feel old in my hands, like they've been sitting in a desert cabin for decades. It doesn't *feel* magical, but I get a sense of power when I hold it. Absurd, I know, and certainly not a *real* feeling, but I can't help myself.

I pull Margo Linet's witchcraft book out of my bag, too. There's nothing on Owl in here, but it does include some graphs and images of different rituals. I haven't had any luck getting ahold of her, but the only way I could even think to do so was pose as a journalist and call her publisher. I left a message yesterday, but I don't have high hopes of hearing anything back.

Most of Linet's book is about the aftereffect of magic—or at least events she suggests were caused by magic—big stuff, too, ranging from World War II to the earthquake that leveled San Francisco. It's the type of fringe book that's so absurd you're impressed the type of person who'd write the book was able to keep it together long enough to finish it.

I don't think anything in here is legit, nor do I think anything Owl did amounted to more than a bunch of bored dandies coming up with new excuses to travel the world and hide their wealth. But stupid or not, I'm still curious. Plus, the silly mystery behind this absurd book is pretty much a culmination of everything Gus and I talk about. This entire scenario is like something I'd dream up on a Saturday afternoon.

I'm caught by a crude drawing of a ceremony in Linet's chapter about California wildfires. It depicts ten people performing a ritual by standing on ten points in the world, which when connected form a sort of makeshift crossed-star—the sort of design you lazily draw on a kid's third grade essay about penguins—with the five points on the inside of the star opening up the portals that apparently caused the fires.

The idea of a portal opened by witches to start the California wildfires of 1987 is goofy, but the shape of the ritual she describes is familiar. If you connect each of the made-up cities in the Owl's first map, you get the same star.

Gus finally clears out his line as the store abruptly empties out. "Any big discoveries?" he says with no tone of mockery.

"Actually," I pause, "maybe? Look at this. If you connect each of these cities, you form a star." I trace over the cities without writing on the paper, but I can see Gus stops breathing for a second when my pencil gets close. "What if these maps are some kind of key to their rituals?"

"Okay, but where does that get us?" he asks. His incredulity slips through his teeth despite his attempts to hold it back.

"I don't know, but it's neat, right?"

Gus flips the Owl book back to the first page, the only page with actual words. He reads part of the text aloud, "Perhaps there is a day where someone can take these maps, and the work we've put into them, and use it to open up doors to new worlds." He looks to the sky before adding, "I

initially read this as a sort of metaphor, like, 'we'll open your mind with our secret knowledge and that will open doors,' but now, I almost think it's literal."

"As in, unlock the rituals in this book and you'll open doors to another world?"

Gus pauses for a second, considering it. "Sure. I'm not saying it *works*, I'm just suggesting that's perhaps what the intent is."

## Chapter 7

When I get home, my answering machine blinks with new messages. The first is from Richard Yearn, the reporter who wrote the initial story:

*Hey, Samantha. This is Richard Yearn from the Daily. I got your message about the dig. That was a long time ago, but I'm happy to answer any questions I can. Give me a call at the paper. I'm here most of the time.*

The second is from Alexis Farns, the museum coordinator.

*Samantha, this is Alexis Farns. I've received your message, and...look I just can't help right now.*

It almost sounds like Alexis wanted to say something but decided at the last second not to. In any case, I don't feel like dealing with these. Instead, I collapse onto the couch, grab my notebook, and start sketching.

I can't get the map out of my head. It can be so many different things. A key, a ritual, a story, nothing at all.

I flip through my old maps, visualizing how each of them follows a familiar pattern. My own invented worlds, disorganized in my mind but organized on paper. If you just put the pieces in the right place, *something* can happen, and I'm starting to understand that. It's almost as though each world is real.

Put five people on various points in a world and you have yourself a pentagram. Have them perform some kind of ritual and all of a sudden you're dealing with magic. I'm sure there's more to it.

It's *nonsense*, I know. But I can't unwrap my brain from this idea. I've never believed in magic. Nor in portals to other worlds. Or demons. Or angels. But there's something about the Owl book that feels real to me. I feel like on the other side of this story, Gus and I are going to find a portal to a new world.

Or more likely, we're going to waste a couple weeks before giving up and moving on. In real life, this is when I quit. In a story, this is the time I commit.

Flipping through my old notebooks, I eventually come across my maps for what I called *the Inside*. It's a sort of science fiction world where cities are built *inside* of planets, inverted, so like, the core of the planet is the sky. The buildings topple into each other, leaning at precarious angles that feels

uneasy to look at. It's a world just like ours, flipped inside out. I can connect so many points into dozens of naturally formed perfect triangles everywhere. I can connect them into a massive web of fractals, bending across the map like some type of '70s New Age tapestry.

All of this magic nonsense reminds me too much of my mom. When I was a kid, she'd always tell me I could bend and change the world to suit my needs. I could make the world into whatever I wanted. To her, this was just a mind game. It took nothing more than *thought* to change the world.

I remember one time in high school, after my first real relationship came crashing down and I, like any teen, felt like the world was absolutely over. I was demolished, sitting on the couch with a book in my lap I couldn't focus on long enough to read. She came up to me, recognized my anguish, and said, "Everything always works out for us, Samantha," and she left the room. I don't know what I wanted my mom to say in that moment. Or what would have possibly made me feel better. But I know that wasn't it.

I don't talk to her much anymore, mostly because she's impossible to reach. My dad didn't keep in touch with her, either, at least before he died. Always the logical one, when she left to join a commune in Idaho, he didn't do much more than shrug it off and carry on with life as though nothing happened.

The very fact I find this Owl stuff interesting makes me feel like my mom. I'm about the age she was when she left, and I guess I can't help but compare myself to the version of her I remember as a kid.

And yet, here I am, lying on the couch, mentally counting off my unused vacation days, deciding whether or not I should take the next week off work to pursue this further.

I have over two hundred hours of vacation. I never use it, and it just rolls over and over every year, until I get yelled at by my boss and forced to take a week off. I never travel, I just stay at home and work on my maps. I have no major projects going on right now. I can leave. Nobody would care. Nobody would notice.

Gus might be annoyed if I hang out at the bookstore too much, but I think I can keep myself busy. Sedona seems like a reasonable lead, and I could head down to Flagstaff. The drive shouldn't be more than twelve or thirteen

hours. I just need to talk to Gus and come up with some sort of plan. Am I doing this?

## Chapter 8

For the second time this week, I'm knocking on Gus' door before he opens the shop. I called into work this morning to take the next week off. I could hear my boss nearly jump out of her seat, but she granted my request immediately.

Gus answers the door, and he creepily lets me in without a word.

He closes the door behind us and loosens his tongue, blurting out words like a teenager trying to ask someone out on a date, "I'm not saying I've unlocked anything here, I have to say, I have to say, I think I've found something."

"Gus, you need to slow down." He's fumbling over himself and pacing around the store like he's in the middle of a withdrawal.

"I know, I know, sorry. I've just been excited to tell you." Gus lays out the maps on the table.

"So, what I was thinking..." Gus keeps tripping over his words, "is, well, I mean, I'm thinking this is a ritual on a grander, more complex scale. And I think your little hippy friend is right. It starts in Sedona."

"She's not my friend."

Gus ignores me and pulls a book from behind the counter. The binding is destroyed, and the cover is blank.

"We were stuck on the Order of Owl," he continues, "and ignoring *who* wrote the letter. I knew I recognized the name, Athanasius, from somewhere. He was a librarian in the 1930s."

"What makes you think there's only been one person named Athanasius?"

"Well, he never talks *directly* about Owl in this book, but he does talk about similar ideas to what we've found so far. I'm pretty sure it's about Owl, even if he doesn't name it."

Gus flips through the book. When he lands on the page he's looking for, he smiles. "Athanasius liked to write. And he liked to dump *all* his thoughts into his journal. I have no idea how many of these books exist, but I have one of his journals. A college kid traded it to me for textbooks five or six

years ago. I figured he'd either stolen it from his campus library or his parents, but it was weird enough I couldn't help but take it."

"Okay, so what's this have to do with the maps?"

"Everything, I think," Gus replies, flipping the book over to me. "You have to read this essay."

## Chapter 9

Before we get started here, we need to get a base level understanding of ceremonial magic. I know, I know, we all know this, but I can't say who will be reading this in the future or what their knowledge will be, so here we are, plotting along, writing the words so we can all be on the same page. Did you see what I did there? A play on the idea of a page! Anyway.

(1) The visible universe is one half of what we know. It's mirrored by an invisible counterpart (mirrored as in, there is something similar on the other side, not mirrored as in, there are other darker, spookier, *evil* versions of all of us on the other side).

(2) Through our processes, we are able to access this invisible stage with the help of invisible creatures on the other side. We call these creatures *spectators*. Sometimes, these spectators are real pains to deal with. Sometimes, they stay here.

(3) We access this plane through portals. Our rituals can open these portals, but we do not know *where* they'll open, nor *when* they'll lead to. Some portals stay open for minutes, others for decades.

(4) By asking for the aid of a spectator, the conjurer (magician) entwines their life to that of the spectator, and if that link is severed prematurely, both lives are lost (as well as any portals the two opened together).

I do love a parenthetical!

So, I can hear you asking, deep in the future, "How are these portals opened then?" And the answer is with *magical rituals*, of course. Did you not read step three? In the future, do you scan things and not read them closely? Do you live your lives so fast you do not have the time to contemplatively read a four-part instruction?

Anyway.

The rituals are generally straightforward. Earth is a sphere, right? So, picture the sphere covered in a gigantic blanket of squares. The squares alternate black and white as they wrap around the globe, like

a chess board. Black symbolizes darker human tendencies, like greed or fear, while light symbolizes lighter tendencies, like joy or love. We'll get into that part later on.

Each square is about ten square miles. That makes a *lot* of squares to cover the entire earth. But a ritual board itself is identical to a chess board, meaning that any sixty-four squares, in any configuration, can be used in a ritual. A ritual places wizards in a set configuration on this sixty-four square plane. Once in the correct location, markings are made, words are chanted and, *boom*, we get a portal (Usually! Sometimes we get a dud!).

I know what you're thinking: but Athanasius, how can we possibly know the grid pattern of these millions of squares? The answer's rather complicated, but the short version is: the Earth's natural formations tend to give us major lines, and we can extrapolate the grids from those.

It's obvious stuff, like the Grand Canyon, the Andes, formations like that. Sometimes, we can even pinpoint exact corners with unusual structures. K2, for example. Our estranged friend, Aleister Crowley, was the one of the first to discover K2's importance, oddly, though we're still not entirely sure what he expected to do up there. Probably get naked, knowing him!

It's not always tall and obvious peaks, though, sometimes, these corners are in very boring places, like the middle-of-nowhere Arizona, where we found one of the strongest places of power outlined by a long panel of stones. All of this really only matters because it gives us starting point to lay out the sixty-four-square grid.

So, what happens in these grids? Well, it depends on what we're trying to accomplish, of course. I'm not going to get into every aspect of every ritual here, but let's say we want to open a portal. First, we pick a spectator. Let's say, Zazel, because Zazel is generally down to *get into it*. We take Zazel's sigil, a sort of crescent moon, and mark the four corners of the sixty-four square plane with that sigil (this can take some coordination!).

From there, each square signals an emotional weight tied to its color like sorrow, gloomy, felicity, umbrage, and so on. Each portal must be

emotionally balanced by choosing the squares that best reflect what the conjurers *want to see*. When everything is in place, an invocation is performed, and a portal is opened. We have these invocations and emotional patterns available in the library, so I won't detail them here.

That's just our method right now. I'm always looking to streamline these things, and I've *heard* of some folks who can do all this *on their own*, which sounds like a much easier process! I'll be sure to search them out when I get a chance. Or maybe they'll come to me. Wouldn't that be nice?

Anyway, you get the point! I'm sure you readers are very smart, and I've been generally going on and on about these boring specifics nobody really cares about. Leave the details for the masters, I say! The rest of us can revel in the absurdity of attempting to understand the portals themselves.

At some point, when we first started all this, and when we really hadn't a clue of what we were doing, we thought of these portals and the alternate— Ohm, alternate is a great word. I should have used that above instead of mirrored, but now I'm worried if I mark that out then someone will think I was trying to hide something. Well, from here on out, let's use alternate, and if you can go back and sort of, mentally change the word mirrored, that'd be great, because mirrored really does evoke a very wrong image. Anyway, we thought of these portals and the alternate world we can view through them as a key to understanding the universe and ourselves.

That's not really the case, as best as I can tell. These portals have not given us a route to a god, nor power, nor knowledge. They are *more* reality. Different portals lead to different time periods in different areas of the world but always lead to the same plane. Or maybe it's a new reality. Who knows, you know? We just make this up as we go along. Don't tell anyone.

But who doesn't want to *explore a little more*? Ever since Roald Amundsen reached the South Pole in 1911, we've been running low on new places to get to. Sure, the Amazon still holds some secrets but, generally, we've been everywhere we need to here on this plane. It's time to see where else we can get to.

Which is why I'm going to file a motion to change our directive. Our ceremonies, rituals, and rites have long been about a better understanding of ourselves and the gods, but I no longer think that's the point. I think that, if anything, we've learned that none of that was ever useful.

I will be met with skepticism. I will be ignored. I will likely be exiled, but I imagine there are those who agree and who will follow. When I started writing today, I wasn't expecting to get here, to this point of feeling so decisive, but yet, here I am. Just in the simple act of explaining how these portals work, I was able to persuade myself that it's time for change. Which suggests it's truly the time to do so. Wish me luck, future reader.

## Chapter 10

"Well, that's a lot."

"Yeah, it's *great*, isn't it?" Gus says, so visibly excited I'm worried he'll explode.

"This still doesn't get us...anywhere though, right? Unless I'm misreading something somewhere?"

"Well, it gets us to Sedona, I think. Or, at least, it seems like that's a decent theory. Have you heard back from anyone?"

"Shit. I haven't even bothered to call Alexis or Richard back."

"That's okay, I've kind of been..." Gus trails off, a wave of shyness washes down his face. "I've kind of been thinking about taking a few days off, letting Miles run the place and heading to...Sedona to investigate. Is that stupid?"

"Gus, I've already taken the next week off to do just that."

"You're kidding me."

"Want to carpool?"

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Gus and I decide to leave for the twelve-hour drive to Flagstaff early the next morning. We'll start in Flagstaff, then work our way down to Sedona. I call Richard from the newspaper back, and he tells us we can swing by any time. I'd expected a newspaper reporter to be busier, but maybe not much happens in Flagstaff.

I try to call Alexis back and get her answering machine with an odd outgoing message, "You've reached Alexis, I'm currently unavailable, and will be offline, behind the veil, for the next week, and may not get back to you at all, let alone within a timely manner."

That's not the message I expected from a museum coordinator. But I suppose we can always drop into the museum to chat with her if we need to. Despite an expectation of negligence, I leave a message letting her know I'll be in town and would love to pop into the museum to chat.

Then I map out the rest of my day through a series of to-do lists. I need to buy some type of luggage or a duffle bag or something. I don't travel much, and aside from a small backpack I use for day-hikes, I don't have anything to pack a week's worth of clothes into. Which I also need to go to the laundromat to clean as I only own about a week's worth of clothes to begin with.

I need to go to the bank to withdraw money for the trip, and I need to call hotels in both Flagstaff and Sedona. Gus and I agreed on separate rooms, which will cost more, but considering both of us are very solitary people, I imagine we'll just be more comfortable this way. I should get some road snacks for the drive, and maybe a couple of those massive water jugs with the little spout on them. Arizona is hot, right?

When I get anxious, I plan. And re-plan. It's an avoidance tactic, I think, but it gives me a sense of control. Over the last couple days, I've fumbled towards, *whatever this is*, and haven't spent much time thinking about *why* I'm doing any of it.

To be honest, it has been nice. I've shut my brain down by giving it purpose. But that can only work for so long, and here I am again, back to my usual fretting self.

I stop to take a deep breath, grab my to-do list, and get to it.

# Chapter 11

When we arrive in Flagstaff late that night, nothing is open. The hotel clerk reminds us of the continental breakfast in the morning, points us to a vending machine full of candy bars, then suggests the bar down the street might have chips. I can feel my face squint into a "trying to hide the fact I'm both disgusted and sad" expression before I empty my bag of snacks on a table in the lobby. Gus and I divide everything up before we retire to our rooms with a wave.

In my room, I snack on beef jerky and doodle in my notebook. Where did the Owl book come from, anyway? Gus never got into where he got it. I was too excited to have *something* to do, it never crossed my mind to ask where this came from. Of all places in the world, why would that book have landed at a small, no-name book shop in a tourist town in the middle of Colorado? Was it brought by someone with nefarious intent? Is Gus not who I think he is?

I lie down but can't shut down my brain.

This is all ridiculous. Not *just* this moment of rumination. I know I keep saying this, but this entire thing feels *off*. Like it's not really happening. Or like it's happening to just me. Like I'm inventing drama to fill a void, to give myself an adventure because I have never, ever, been close to adventuring anywhere.

How cliché it is that I do so through some secret magical society. That's so like me. Predictable. What if that's the case? What if none of this is real, and I'm just following fictional breadcrumbs? Is that so bad if I'm having fun doing it? But then what's the deal with Gus? Why is he following along—leading, even—if he doesn't also believe. I can't be delusional if he's in on it, right?

I wake up in the morning on top of the blanket, lying sideways across the bed. The pillows are all on the floor. I think I slept a total of an hour at most, but my stomach's growling so I force myself up and into the shower.

When I get to the continental breakfast, I find Gus sitting at a corner table, eating a floppy wet pancake and drinking coffee out of a thick white mug

that looks heavy enough to be a weapon. The handle is so thick he can barely fit his spindly fingers through it.

He smiles as I arrive at the table with a paper bowl filled with stale cereal and the same cup of coffee he has. It smells burnt in a way that only an industrial-sized catering coffee maker can produce.

"I was thinking we'd start at the museum," Gus says, cautiously. He must notice the cavernous bags beneath my eyes.

"Yeah." It takes me a second to speak, as though I've forgotten how. "I'd like to find Alexis and talk to her. The museum doesn't open until eleven, though. Maybe we should swing by the newspaper first to see if Richard's there?"

"Yeah sure," Gus says, smiling. "You know," he continues, pointing at his floppy pancake, "continental breakfasts are traditionally supposed to be light affairs. It was a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century British thing that referred to a very un-British breakfast. Anyway," he gestures at his plate, "most of this food isn't really traditional. It's weird they have it here. Must be an Arizona thing."

"Ah." I'm never really sure what to say when he goes on these asides. He has all this useless knowledge stuck in his brain, and he has to share it with someone. It's as endearing as it is obnoxious, depending on the circumstances and tact.

## Chapter 12

Richard greets us at the front desk of the newspaper and takes us through the building. He's the editor-in-chief now, so he has an office.

"The net is going to ruin us, Samantha," he says, pointing to a young reporter tapping away in a web browser, "but we're trying to get ahead of it. I guess you caught a glimpse of that with our online archives."

"Yeah, seems ahead of its time."

Richard smiles. "I'm proud of that project, and I'm glad it got put to use. That's part of the reason I'm willing to help you out. You're the first person to use those archives for anything beyond looking up old obituaries. We got a grant from the local college to launch the site, otherwise, we'd never have had the means to get it up and running."

We keep walking. Richard points out the different desks as we go, introducing us to reporters I forget the names of before he even finishes saying them. He tells me, "We call each different section of the paper desks, but I don't really know why. We had this reporter, Kim, er, Kim, I can't remember her last name—she's gone now—but she came to us from *The New York Times*, and she's the one who started saying desks all the time. It's funny. I assume it makes sense at a big paper, but most of our desks have one reporter, so it makes more sense to just say their name."

When we get to his office, he motions for us to sit. "After your call, I had one of our interns—we like to call them junior reporters—go through the original microfiche cross referencing names to see if we'd missed anything in the archives. The problem with those, as you may have noticed, is the scanning technology that pulls the words off the newspaper isn't always accurate, especially with longer names, which tend to get garbled up."

I can see Gus' eyes light up as Richard describes this process. "Are you talking about optical character recognition? I've read about it." He turns to me. "You know, OCR started with microfilm, but Ray Kurzweil—remember him? He's the one I told you about who thinks we're all going to upload our brains to a computer—took the idea and applied it to text to help convert text for blind people. They just recently started making it available on the web."

I smile throughout this explanation, and he seems satisfied with my level of participation. When I don't pose any follow-up questions, he turns back to Richard and asks if he found anything new.

"Sort of, Gus." Richard is a man who likes to repeat people's names. That's how you can tell he's management. "I wasn't able to come up with any details about whatever happened with that dig you mentioned on the phone. And frankly, it was so long ago, I don't remember much about it. I was pretty new here, so I just took whatever assignment they sent me on. But we did find this."

Richard flicks over a photocopied piece of paper with a headline that reads: *Sedona Seance Sucks in Local Professor, Coordinator*. Richard smiles. "I was really proud of the alliteration on that one."

### ***Sedona Seance Sucks in Local Professor, Coordinator***

by Richard Yearn

Sedona—Early this morning, police were called to the estate of Robert Farns, where a noise disturbance set the neighborhood a-rumble at approximately 2:33 a.m. When police arrived, they found a who's-who of Flagstaff elites wearing robes and gathered in a circle in what one police officer described as "some cult thing."

The noise disturbance, which some neighbors described as a "loud growl," while others told *The Daily* it "sounded like a series of explosions" set car and home alarms off, disrupting the neighborhood of Ever After, a planned community built last year by the Sexsmith Company.

In attendance were several public figures, including Mayor Daniel Handy, professor Melinda Bakersfield, Justice Paul Shona, Senate candidate Reba Orthal, and museum coordinator and daughter to the homeowner, Alexis Farns. When police arrived, Bakersfield reportedly took point as the organizer of the event.

"We were conducting a seance," Bakersfield told *The Daily*. "Just a fun thing, nothing too serious. Whatever noise happened, it wasn't us, and we didn't hear it." Bakersfield went on to describe a research project she was working on with Ms. Farns, digging

through the rituals of an organization called Owl. "We think Owl had their headquarters here in Sedona, and as we're working through the history of the group, I find it best to get as much firsthand experience with their rituals as possible."

While Bakersfield blew the whole thing off as a big misunderstanding, police weren't so sure. "When we arrived, the whole group had this glassy look in their eyes," one officer told us. "It smelled like, you know how after a big fireworks show the whole town smells like gunpowder? It smelled like that. And it *looked* like dusk, like the sky was a pale blue, even though it was two in the morning."

In response, several public and private entities immediately issued nearly identical statements. The Mayor's office, along with the state offices for both the museum and judiciary, sent *The Daily* a statement implying they'd look into the matter but are assured it was just a fun garden party gone wrong. For its part, the Northern University of Arizona tells *The Daily* they'll look investigate the incident and take any action they deem necessary.

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"This must have been the incident the secretary at the university mentioned." I look over at Gus, who nods. "She mentioned *something* happening in Sedona that got Bakersfield in trouble. She also told me it changed her life."

"I don't know about life changing," Richard says, "but it certainly got everyone into a tizzy for a few days. It all felt like a real-life mystery around here. But it faded away, and as far as I know, nothing happened again."

"What did you think was going on?"

"Samantha," Richard says, looking me directly in the eye, "I think they were looking for something. Every once in a while, I'll hear rumblings that Bakersfield is doing weird things. And Alexis, the museum coordinator? She is a *character*."

"What do you mean?"

"Alexis is your usual grade-school art teacher type, right? Picture Birkenstocks with chunky colorful socks, a big wide skirt, a tie-dye button

up shirt, and a hand permanently attached to a heavy clay mug filled with instant coffee that gets repeatedly microwaved throughout the day because she forgets to drink it while it's warm, and you get Alexis. She's about as absent-minded as you can get, too, always getting lost in the grocery store or, one time, police found her wandering the back hallways in the mall. She's just..." Richard pauses for a moment, and I can tell he's searching for the nicest words he can pull from the air, "the type of person you can't forget."

"I gotcha. Do you know where we can find her? Or Melinda, for that matter? I've only spoken to her over email, and based on this, it looks like she wasn't entirely truthful with me."

"They both still live in Sedona. Alexis commutes up here every day to work at the museum, though. I'd start there."

## Chapter 13

We stop off at the Flagstaff museum, but as expected, Alexis isn't there and nobody knows when she'll be back. Another person in her office, a stuffy man who seems barely capable of recognizing us as humans worth talking to, suggests she's "gone off again, on one of her trips." But he doesn't explain any further. We try to ask him about the dig, but he keeps deferring to Alexis as the expert. I'm not sure he even knew what we were talking about. He just wanted us to leave.

Flagstaff's feels like a dead end, so Gus and I decide to go to Sedona.

The drive to Sedona is surrounded with more colors of red in the stones and canyons than I thought possible. The variances, like an obsessive painter's palette, contort my mind and breathe new life in the idea of what *red* means.

Sedona is, at its core, identical to any other small American town at a glance. It's not unlike our own sleepy Colorado mountain town, except instead of large pine trees, Sedona is mostly rock. As we drive through the main strip, I feel like I've been here before, not by some sort of magical transference of knowledge, but by the idea that human culture, when kept somewhere around 10,000 people, always seems to find space for a fudge shop on main street.

The first stop is a hotel, a dusty, but clean enough place in the center of town that'll give us a home base to track down Alexis and Melinda. It turns out David Sexsmith, the bowling alley owner, has turned into a Sedona real estate agent, based on the dozens of bus stop signs we see in town. I'd sort of written off his importance at this point, but it's uncanny to see his face plastered everywhere.

These three people all ending up here in this small town must mean something, right? Then again, it's like forty-five minutes away from Flagstaff. Not the biggest, craziest distance for one to move.

Sitting in my dusty hotel room, waiting for Gus, I get that feeling again. Like this is all a waste of time. I've been searching for new places my whole life and inventing them when I couldn't find them. I'm like one of those people who invents drama because they get bored with their friends, but with entire worlds. Or at least maps of worlds.

Gus knocks on my door just as mind starts to unravel.

"Let's go," he yells through the thin hotel door. "David Sexsmith's office is half a block away."

I open the door. Over the last week, my face has hardened into a permanent incredulous stare. "What? Seriously?"

"Yeah, I just looked it up in the phone book." Gus' thinning hair is still wet from a shower, making him look a bit like a poodle in a rainstorm. "Might as well pop in, right?"

I nod in agreement, grab my bag, and follow him out the door.

## Chapter 14

David Sexsmith gives me a look like I've been caught ransacking his picnic (pick-i-nick?) basket in a Jellystone Park. It's not just the surprise of some random person bringing up something from his past, but a random, *lower-class* person to boot. David seems to view himself as something of an elite. And I am here, having left my containment, breaking the social rules, to ask a question.

I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. His bus stop ads scream precocious, and his name reads like something you'd find in a Jane Austin novel. What I hadn't really considered, until this exact moment, as I'm staring into Sexsmith's face, is all of the levels of social commentary in the Yogi Bear cartoons.

I never put much thought into the dynamics of the poor bear—forced to thievery by a white ranger because the confined place he called home didn't have the resources he needed to survive comfortably—until that moment. Ugh, Gus' aside style thinking is wearing off on me, I guess.

Sexsmith replies, eventually, evenly, with, "The last I heard was the museum took whatever it was they found and did whatever it is museums do with those types of things."

Gus and I sit for a few seconds, expecting more. When I realize he's done, I wonder aloud, "Why leave the bowling business?" It doesn't matter, but I've always been mildly curious about the profit margins on a bowling alley, which require a lot of space but not a lot of employees.

"My son runs it now." Sexsmith is nothing if not short and to the point. A few awkward seconds pass before we realize it's time to go.

As we stand to leave, Sexsmith shakes Gus' hand heartily, but when I extend mine to do the same, he simply nods and waves his hand toward the door.

When we're back on the street, I feel a bit dazed about the whole thing. "That was odd."

Gus nods. "He was certainly *a type*, though I'm not sure what. Military? Maybe? No. What's the type who project confidence and superiority by remaining silent and short?"

"I don't know, Gus, you're the fiction expert. He just seems like an ass to me."

"Hrm." Gus seems genuinely bothered that he doesn't have a specific word to use here. Or at least some character to draw back on. Fiction and nonfiction books have colored most of Gus' experiences, far more than any real-world activities have.

"Well, I suppose there's no point in dwelling on it," he says, clearly dwelling on it.

"No, there isn't."

I don't want to go back to the hotel, but I don't know how we're going to find Melinda or Alexis. There are dozens of New Age books shops in town to canvass, if it comes down to it, but that doesn't seem like the most productive use of time. I look over at Gus, who's still obviously trying to come up with a word to describe David.

"What do we do now?"

"Oh, well..." Gus pauses to pull out a map, "I have this map of some of the strongest vortexes here in town. It's silly, but I kind of want to see them still."

"Don't you mean *vortices*"? I can't help myself.

"Grammatically, yes, Samantha, but who says that?"

"I don't know. How often do you need to say the plural of vortex?"

## Chapter 15

Gus pulls a map out of the car's glove box with the four biggest *vortices* marked on it. The map is drawn with a pen, but with text added that must have been made with free computer software. The map looks like it's been copied at least a thousand times.

We decide to head to the Airport Mesa vortex because it's the closest one.

We park the car and hike up a short, dusty trail until we reach the top of the small mesa that overlooks the town. When we arrive, a dozen people are sitting in a circle, humming. Three men are naked, while a barefoot woman flows in and out of the circle, tapping people on the shoulder like a game of duck-duck-goose.

Other than the three naked men, the group is a combination of stereotypical New Age hippy types and dorky tourists, clearly here on a stop-off just to see what all the fuss is about on their Grand Canyon vacation. A broad-shouldered man, who belongs in a catalog where you mail order military men, is the most out of sorts of the bunch, but even he seems to be playing along. Or he's just taking the time to nap between drives.

Other than the humming and movement of the group, nothing is happening. Gus and I stand for a bit, waiting to feel or see something. Intellectually, I know nothing will happen. That these vortexes—sorry, vortices—aren't real. But it's been such an odd week that I find myself believing anything is possible. Or maybe just hoping.

Gus and I turn to leave at the same time. I wonder if he was hoping for something, too. As we get away from the group, I feel my shoulders unclench.

"I guess I was expecting...something weirder," Gus says, looking down at his feet as he walks.

"I was hoping to at least feel sort of odd or something. I don't know. Even the naked guys didn't really seem that out of place."

"Maybe you have to be in the circle or naked to really get it," Gus muses.

"I don't think that's it, Gus." I try not to laugh as I picture Gus stripping down and sitting on the ground meditating in the hot desert sun.

"I do think we should try another one, though." Gus pulls out his map. "I feel like Bell Rock Vortex is a better bet. It's close enough to town, right?"

"Sure, that works. But what are we *hoping* to find?" We are amateurs in every way here, clearly incapable of following any type of lead or clue. Together, we've gotten further than I would have alone, but I'm not sure that means much.

"Well, ideally, we'd just run into Alexis or Melinda there, ready to answer all our questions." Gus smiles, making it clear this is a joke. But with a town this small, it's not totally offbeat.

"And if that doesn't happen?"

"At least someone to chat with us, I guess. I didn't want to interrupt the ceremony up there. Plus, I think those people probably paid to be there. And, well, I don't know, three naked guys..." He trails off, assuming that is enough for me.

I'm impressed with Gus' respect for something I'd assumed he thought was just hippy goofiness. "That's a better expectation." I am still unclear how serious Gus is about any of this. "Let's head there now, we have nothing else to do, anyway."

## Chapter 16

For some reason, every natural monument in the desert is named after what it vaguely looks like from a very specific angle. Bell Rock is no different. From most angles, it's just a rock. But then, if you stand in one specific spot, it sort of looks like a bell.

We arrive to the vortex site on the map with little fanfare. It's empty. No circle of hippies. No humming. Of course, no Melinda or Alexis. I'm not surprised, but it's hard not to be disappointed. It's clear we have no real idea what we're doing, and the fact we've made it this far is an anomaly.

Gus sit down on a rock, closes his eyes, and lets out a heavy sigh.

I move deeper into the vortex site. People have set up rocks in a circle, drawn symbols in the sand, and even made small shrines. I look at the map again. Why here? Why Sedona? What does any of this have to do with Owl?

It starts with a pressure on my forehead, which moves down to my eyes. The fillings in my teeth spark with electricity. I lose feeling in my legs first, then my arms.

I am in a small tunnel, barely large enough to fit my shoulders. I can't tell if I can feel my arms or not because I can't move them. I think I can move my fingers, but all I feel is the cold dirt surrounding me. I try to push with my legs but can't get anywhere. It's dark, I think. I don't know if my eyes are open or closed. I can feel my breathing speed up, each breath coming just after the last. I can't keep air down.

Then I feel a tap on my arm.

"Samantha?" it's Gus. "Samantha, are you okay?"

I am lying in the sand, staring at a bright blue sky. Gus looks down at me, worried.

"I..." I blink and take one large, deep breath. "I'm okay, sorry, I don't know what happened. I must have nodded off."

"It's been a long couple of days," Gus says, giving me a hand up. My legs feel like Jell-O. Everything useful has been drained from my body, leaving me with a broken, hollow shell. "Let's get back to the hotel and reset. Maybe tomorrow will be better."

As we walk away from Bell Rock, a group of tourists arrive, covered in thick layers of white sunscreen, each toting several cameras. An older man addresses the group as a whole, "This is one of the strongest vortices in Sedona," he says in a tone that suggests he's the tour guide. He grabs one of his larger, stranger looking cameras. "With this night vision camera, we'll be able to see some of the activity that happens around here. But you might feel it before we even get there. If you feel dizzy or lightheaded, grab onto your partner. Some people have described the feeling of being squished into nothing, which sounds pretty unpleasant to me! But I'm told it's a transformative experience, one that helps you see into the future."

Gus and I make our way back to the car and, eventually, the hotel. It's not even four in the afternoon. I barely get to my bed before passing out.

## Chapter 17

I wake up in the morning after what feels like the longest, most continuous night of sleep I've ever had. I don't remember even flinching awake to the sound of a passing truck.

Gus and I need to figure out a better plan of approach, so while he's getting himself ready and eating breakfast, I pop into the library to do some research. They have a bank of computers, so I log into my email. I have one message:

**To:** samanthametfairy@prodigy.net

**From:** m-bakersfield@earthlink.net

**Subject:** re: re: RE: hermetic order of owl

Hi Samantha,

I ran into Richard the other day, and he mentioned you were in town? I don't know if you've tried to email already, I'm still getting the hang of using this. You didn't leave a phone number or anything, so I don't know how else to contact you. But if you want to talk in person, you can find me most days at Perfect Harmony Books. My partner owns the shop and is usually at the front desk.

I'm happy to help, Samantha, just ask.

*Just ask* circles around my mind like water around a drain. It's such a strange way to end a message like this. Almost as though we're friends. At the very least, I'm starting to wonder if she knows more than she originally suggested. I feel a bit stupid for not just reaching out to her for an in-person meeting originally. But, for whatever reason, I felt compelled to come to keep her at a distance on this trip.

I poke around the net to try and find more information on the vortices, but nothing comes up. I pull up the MapQuest directions for Perfect Harmony Books and print them out. It's just on the other side of town. I guess it's time we figure out exactly what Melinda is up to here.

Perfect Harmony Books is exactly what pops into your head when you picture a New Age bookstore. It smells like candles, dust, and an *unidentified scent*. Gus starts sneezing immediately after walking in and motions for me to continue as he exits back onto the street, handkerchief glued to his face.

The store is full of *things*, from books to bags to candles to teas to jewelry. The entire shop seems ready to explode out onto the street. Each shelf is held together by small handwritten notes describing each section, with crude drawings and colorful borders around the notes to attract your attention. The cash register is tucked away in the corner of the store behind a glass case filled with rocks.

Behind the register is a short woman dressed exactly as you're already picturing her. Her bundle of red curly hair lays on top of her head in mounds, while her thick square-shaped glasses give her the look of a mildly-deranged ancient oracle. She eyes me suspiciously as I walk up to the counter.

"Hi, is Melinda here?"

"And who are you?"

"Oh, sorry. My name is Samantha. I've been speaking with Melinda on the computer."

The clerk pauses a minute, considering me before turning to leave without comment.

I stroll through the store as I wait. Based on the books' spines, there are at least thousands of them outlining thousands of different religions—or at least spiritual practices—on the shelves. I pick one up called URANTIA. On the back of the book it reads:

*The URANTIA Book* is a uniquely inspiring publication that provides the reader with the universal viewpoint that fully harmonizes religion, philosophy, and contemporary science. The world over, people have discovered URANTIA as a book that leaves a profound *impact* on them and their *spiritual* GROWTH.

I've never understood why New Age books tend to use italics and all-caps so recklessly, but it's a style thing that somehow manages to show up everywhere.

I hear the crinkle of a beaded curtain behind me, and a large, joyful woman with a shock of gray hair and a brightly adorned purple dress comes through. She smiles the largest smile I've ever seen and moves in to hug me.

"You must be Samantha," she says, engulfing me entirely, like an octopus wrapping around a ship's anchor.

"Hemmmmeelo," I manage through the suffocating hug.

"Why don't you come back to my office and we'll chat."

## Chapter 18

Melinda's office is in a dark room at the back of the shop. There's a window that lets in a sliver of light, but the room is so dusty it's nearly impossible to tell where the light comes from. When she sits, the wooden chair she sits on creaks loudly. The only other chair in the room is covered with books, so I stand.

"I've been thinking more about Owl since you first reached out to me," Melinda says. Her tone reminds me of my kindergarten teacher, caring but concerned.

"We've learned a lot since then, too. Though..." I realize in this moment I don't know how to bring up the topic of the seances *or* Alexis.

Melinda butts in, "Since you talked with Richard, I'm guessing at this point you've learned about Alexis and I? And our history? You met Alexis outside, of course."

The clerk out front. Well, that solved that. But who leaves a museum job to run a dusty old bookstore?

"We found the newspaper report on the seance, that's it."

Melinda laughs.

"Okay, well, I guess I should just clear a few things up. Alexis and I have been together for..." she pauses, looking up at the ceiling like it's a calculator, "twenty-four years now? In that time, we've done a lot of things this town has viewed as strange, including the seance you're talking about. But look, this is a small town, we're two outspoken woman who don't adhere to the usual societal norms, and when you put all that together, people write little stories in their head. Sometimes, those stories get recorded in a newspaper."

"What was the point of the seance, though?"

"The point? Just to see what would happen. Nothing did. But now we can check that one off the list as we go about our search for truth and reality. You know, Samantha, you strike me as someone who'd agree with our cause. It's trial-and-error. I just want to find what this reality is worth." She gestures

around her, as though *reality* and *worth* are two words that often get paired together.

"So," I decide to be careful, here, "all these books? It's a search for meaning? Through ritual?"

"*Sometimes* it's through a ritual, sometimes it's through meditation, sometimes it's through eating. I haven't found any ideas that proved exactly right but few ideas are completely wrong. They all shape how we see the world, and our reality is shaped by their ideas." Melinda smiles a teacherly smile.

I don't really have much to say. I have never been a spiritual person, and don't have all that much interest in it, but Melinda's almost scientific approach is fascinating, even if it seems pointless. When my mom left for the commune, I closed my mind to all of this and, while in retrospect, the sort of magical sublayer in Owl has been here, I never thought about it being spiritual. It was always just code for something else.

"But I feel like I should tell you," Melinda's voice wavers slightly, "I think Owl is a hoax. Likely started by a Jesuit scholar named Athanasius Kircher, and picked up later his followers." She adds a wildly confusing ink to the end of her sentence, flipping the meaning toward some impossible to follow truth.

"That name, Athanasius. I've seen it before. That's the name attributed to the maps we have." I turn around to ask Gus the last name of his supposed librarian but remember he's still out on the street, likely still sneezing. "And a book of essays."

"His followers take his name, usually. Or they did, anyway. It's such an uncommon name nowadays I think they avoid it."

"Why run with a hoax of a group who... Honestly, I don't even know what Owl is supposed to have done. We have the book of maps and *maybe* some text from a librarian about a ritual. Everything I've seen or heard of them comes from the book Gus has."

"Where did Gus get that book?"

"I'm not sure."

"Samantha," Melinda squares her shoulders at me, "Gus could be one of those followers."

"That doesn't make any sense. He's been fumbling through this as much as I have."

"We don't know the purpose of any of this, right? If it's real, it has some endgame. If it's a hoax, maybe it's just about going for as long as possible. Have you heard of the Voynich manuscript?"

"No."

"It's this mysterious book that's captured the interest of cryptographers because it appears to feature text written in a cypher nobody's seen before. Or it's all bullshit. People have been studying it for decades and have found nothing. The arguments about its validity are as heated as they are about its supposed authorship."

"I don't see what this has to do with Owl, though?"

"I just mean reality isn't a state of *simply* existing. There are layers, and those who purport to know the truth may often lead us toward their own ends, not a useful one."

"What?"

Melinda smiles. "I've spent a lot of time here in Sedona, Samantha. You should look deeply at those books. I'm happy to lend my expertise, too, if you'd like to bring them in."

I return her smile and move to leave. "Thanks for your time, Melinda."

## Chapter 19

When I get back outside, Gus is blowing his nose, looking miserable.

"So," I point into the window, "that's Alexis at the front counter. Melinda was in the back."

"Ah," Gus replies, a thoughtful but unsurprised look on his face. I decide to unload everything Melinda told me.

"A hoax, huh?" Gus seems to earnestly consider the idea he may be part of a massive hoax perpetrated by a Jesuit scholar in a conspiracy that includes Gus himself, along with hundreds of years of similar-minded Gus-alikes who also called themselves Athanasius.

After all the cogs finish moving in his brain, he decides to answer the other floating question. "I got the book at a convention from a seller who had hundreds of other map books. I initially picked up *Book of the Hermetic Order of Owl* because I liked the cover but eventually realized, with all the maps, it was something you'd enjoy."

"So, you're not part of a massive hoax?"

"Not that I know of, anyway." The earnestness strikes me as real. Though I realize Gus' lack of involvement doesn't eliminate the possibility it's all a hoax.

"Are hoaxes like this common?" Gus spends the majority of his time in other people's worlds, and if anyone can spot a hoax, it'd be him. Or, I guess, that knowledge just makes him twice as likely to believe in *anything*.

"Sure, I mean, or rather," Gus digs through the cobwebs of his mind, "sometimes these things might be presented as fiction at one point and change over time. Look at a story like *Frankenstein*. If we didn't *know*, like culturally, that the story was fiction, what would we think of it? If the book wasn't famous and we just found it—one copy of *Frankenstein*—how would the world perceive it? History is what we make of it, and reality isn't much different. We think of reality as the present tense, but it's all the same, really, in the end."

"Reality isn't a state of *simply* existing." Melinda's words play table tennis in my brain.

"Right," Gus continues. "Reality is whatever we make it out to be. History is as malleable as fiction. If we each create our own realities, who's to say which one is the real one?" He puts air quotes around *real* as he says it, adding both a sense of weight and mockery.

Which leaves us in a bit of a pickle. When I make maps, I tend to create the worlds inside my head with small narratives bursting into life with each pen stroke of a new region. They're not fully thought out narrative stories, more like moments that help me understand why a region might exist. If there is a desert landscape, I may picture a boy walking to gather water. That small moment is enough for me to flesh out the world internally, which helps me create the rest of the map.

Is that all Owl is? Is this book not a hoax, but a work of fiction never meant to be taken as reality? Melinda seems to be the caretaker of the narrative more than Gus. She's the one who mentions Owl to the newspaper. She's the one who laid the breadcrumbs to Sedona.

A bell jingles behind me. Alexis peeks her head out of the book shop, her mess of hair bobbling on her head.

She approaches us and whispers, "Don't lose faith," and hands me a VHS tape. She looks up and down the street, smiles at Gus, and returns to the shop.

The tape is in a blank Scotch-branded sleeve, adorned with a gradient globe and promising two hours of SP recording, four hours of LP recording, and six hours of EPSLP recording. On a sticker on the side of the tape, written with a Sharpie is just one word: OWL.

Gus looks at me with a shrug. "The hotel has portable VHS players for rent at the front desk."

## Chapter 20

Gus lugs a portable VHS player from reception to my room. It's a large, textured plastic monstrosity with a thick handle. The word *portable* feels like a stretch.

When we get to the room, I connect the coaxial cable to the TV. Dust spews off the back of the hotel TV set like a dog shaking off a dust storm. The tape tray releases with a *click*, and as I push it back down, the player replies with a satisfying *chunk*. It begins playing automatically.

After a moment, the TV flickers alive, and a PLAY icon blinks in the upper left corner. A younger Melinda is suddenly on the screen, staring directly at us from what looks like a less dusty version of the office in her bookstore. Tracking lines pulsate through the video like it's been watched hundreds of times.

My name is Melinda Bakersfield. I'm a professor and author of the book, *Six Secret Societies: The Untold Story of the Groups Nobody Wants You to Know About*. I want to welcome you to this video seminar, entitled, "One Long Panel of Stones: Where the Sedona Vortices Lead Us."

What you're about to see in this video was originally presented at the Cornerstone Alliance Meetup and codified by a team of researchers from around the world. I've shortened and adapted this presentation for VHS, but the overall thesis is the same.

The video cuts to Melinda standing outside what looks like Cathedral Rock. There's so much wind it's difficult to hear what she's saying.

It has long been thought the Sedona vortices can amplify psychic energy. For most people, this means amplifying the healing energy of meditation, but we have found it can amplify other psychic powers, bridging the gap between our physical world and the mind's eye.

The video cuts again, now showing Melinda appearing to meditate at the base of Cathedral Rock. The sound of a flute warbles through the TV's tinny speakers. The camera suddenly zooms in on Melinda's face as her eyes open.

We can control the universe from this place.

Melinda stands and gestures outward. The camera zooms back and pans up.

This is a long panel of stones. This rock formation holds the instruments that give us access to new worlds. We can use it to control the vortex here, opening ourselves up to outside influences from new worlds. We can communicate with other worlds, with other places, and we can evolve into something more than the petty machines we are today.

The camera continues upward until it hits the sun and goes white. Suddenly, we're back in Melinda's office.

We can affect the world. Using the teachings of Owl, we've pinpointed the area and created a model. When it's combined with the results from our field research, we've found some people to be capable of opening up portals to new worlds.

It is still unknown where these worlds are located or how to get to them. We've been able to *observe*, but we can't seem to communicate or move between the spaces.

Athanasius teaches us that these portals can be used to move between worlds. While we haven't figured out how this works, I am confident we will understand the process soon. Our research is integral to the understanding of the vortex and the portals. This is why we're asking members to send in donations to the address on the screen as soon as possible. I believe we are on the verge of something important here, but we need to shed our worldly obligations in order to bring this research to its end. In order to do that, we need your help.

The camera zooms backward, with a glitch, revealing Melinda's office was at the base of Cathedral rock all along. The camera loses focus and blurs as Melinda's voice comes through with an echo.

This is the long panel of stones, this is our entry. Help us get to our future, today.

# Chapter 21

After popping the tape out of the machine, I laid everything we'd gathered out on the floor of my room:

- the VHS tape
- *Book of the Hermetic Order of Owl*
- the printed emails between Melinda and I
- the web page printouts of the early research
- the page from the encyclopedia
- Margo Linet's book, *Catastrophes Caused by Witchcraft*
- Melinda's book, *Six Secret Societies: The Untold Story of the Groups Nobody Wants You to Know About*
- both newspaper articles
- the map of vortices
- the essay written by Athanasius

I pull out a stack of index cards I usually use for presentations at work and label each with the name of everyone involved so far with a little note:

- **Melinda Bakersfield:** Once a professor and author, now a bookshop owner. She says she's searching for the truth, using a scientific approach to a magical and theological problem. She, for some reason, was as helpful to us on our search for the origin of this book as she was harmful. Between the VHS tape and the recent chat we had, I'm not entirely sure what her goal is.
- **Alexis Farns:** Alexis called me, bailed midway through the call, then disappeared when we tried to get in touch with her at the museum. She must have been involved in uncovering the original vault but hasn't been forthcoming with details. When we arrived in town, she gave us the tape. She may have motives beyond our understanding.
- **the woman at the university who gave me Melinda's email:** I forgot about this person until I started making this list, but she did

say something about how Melinda had changed her life. My best guess is she was at the seance but not listed in the police report. May not matter but might as well include everyone.

- **Gus:** My old friend, and the person who found the *Book of the Hermetic Order of Owl* in the first place. Melinda accused him of being an Athanasius follower, but I find it hard to believe.
- **Me:** I just like to make maps of places and think about lost civilizations, and here I am, trying to hunt down the origin of a secret, supposedly magical book of maps.
- **Richard Yearns:** The reporter who covered the finding of the original vault (which we still haven't found). Also covered Melinda's seance and seems generally to know at least some details about everyone in town. May also be friends with Melinda, as he let her know we'd been poking around in town.
- **David Sexsmith:** The bowling alley owner who owned the land the vault was found on, who is now a high-class realtor in Sedona.
- **Athanasius(?):** There is Athanasius Kircher, a Jesuit scholar, and then Athanasius, a follower of Kircher who wrote the essay about magic Gus found. According to Melinda, followers of Athanasius, who may or may not have been the Order of Owl, all called themselves Athanasius, until recently, when the name was too out of style to go unnoticed.
- **Aleister Crowley(?):** Crowley was some sort of sex-obsessed cult-leader type who tricked people into orgies by promising everlasting power. He seemed related to but not involved with Athanasius or the Order of Owl.
- **Margo Linet:** author of the *Catastrophe's Caused by Witchcraft*. I can't get a hold of her, and the more I've read of this book, the less I can imagine she has anything to do with this. I don't want to use the word crackpot, but her theories are certainly offbeat.
- **Daniel Handly:** involved in the seance
- **Paul Shona:** involved in the seance
- **Reba Orthal:** involved in the seance

Gus and I stand on the bed to look down at all our clues. Each piece pulls us toward a different conclusion. Each bit of information provided by the characters involved leads us along completely different paths. None of it makes any sense. Flustered, Gus mutters he's going to sleep on it and wanders out of the room.

I continue to stand on the bed, looking down at everything. I feel like a character in one of the point-and-click adventure games I played as a kid. Like all these seemingly random clues can mean something, but until I find the comb and combine it with the fishbowl, I'll never be able to move forward.

Melinda alone has offered up multiple versions of history and reality. It seems like she was holding onto facts, but then we get here and she unloads a theory about multiple generations of Athanasius-followers who take his name, accuses Gus of being involved in a decades-long hoax, and then suggests we *stop* looking into all this. After which, her partner, Alexis Farns, handed us a VHS tape with a younger Melinda describing her extremely specific relationship with the vortex, Athanasius, and Owl.

There's a version of this where everything Melinda said about Gus can be applied to her, where she's a modern-day Athanasius.

There's another version where she's simply throwing us off the trail to study the vortices and Owl for her own means.

There's yet another way this can play out, where Gus is indeed part of a hoax and has hooked me in, perhaps to help him create more maps to continue the hoax even further.

I'm not sure what the end goal is for any of these scenarios.

Plus, we still haven't found the vault, one of the main reasons we started this quest to begin with, and the only physical piece of evidence outside of this room we know about. Alexis should be able to fill us in on this, if I can get to her.

I pick up each item and hold it for a few seconds, trying to put myself in the shoes of one of those characters from an adventure game. What combination of items can lead me forward? Who do I need to talk with to unlock the next cutscene? I think back to the original starting point of this story, the book of

maps. I picture the moment Gus showed me the book, sliding my present self into the shoes of my past self.

I stay in the moment of my initial reaction to the book. To the maps. Back to my own maps. What caused us to move forward, exactly? The mystery alone? Is my life so empty that I follow the confusing and likely pointless plot lines of an eccentric New-Ager, a book shop owner, and a crackpot Jesuit scholar from the past?

When nothing comes to me, I decide to take the same approach as Gus as sleep on it.

## Chapter 22

I sleep a restless sleep. I spend the night hoping my waking dream will bring the pieces of this puzzle together, like it does in every book I've ever read. When the sun finally creeps up, I realize it's not going to happen.

I sit at the foot of the bed, staring at the puzzle pieces again. I feel nothing. This isn't how it's supposed to work. I'm supposed to have some uncanny realization about the nature of the mystery. The picture is supposed to reveal itself as a eureka moment. It's supposed to happen to me just moments after everyone else figures it out. Before people start shouting at the TV or cursing the book in their hand. Why can't I figure this out? Why am I here. Why am I doing this, and what am I supposed to do with any of this experience?

Someone's knocking softly at the door. So softly I can barely tell the difference between the beating of my heart and the knock. That's a Gus knock if I ever heard one.

I open the door and find him, sheepish and broken looking. "Sorry it's so early," he says. "I couldn't sleep."

"It's okay, I couldn't either. Should we get some not-really-a-continental breakfast?"

"That sounds great."

Floppy pancakes and burnt coffee, despite itself, can set you right in certain circumstances. As Gus cracks the aluminum foil tab off a can of orange juice, his eyes take on a eureka glare.

"Got something there?" We've settled into our relationship these last few days. I notice more in his facial tics than I did before. The various ways his voice wavers unlocks a new means to understand him.

"Let's go back to the original plan, before everything got so messy," he says. "If we figure out what happened with the vault, we can decide what to do with the rest of this nonsense." Gus waves his arms around, signaling as though the entire cafeteria area is in on this conspiracy.

"That makes sense, but what else can we do? The museum has nothing, and Alexis won't talk with us."

Gus deflates. We've been in over our heads for a long time, but we're both really feeling it now. I go back to the adventure game playbook in my head because it's all I have. What would I do in a game in this circumstance?

As I sip my burnt coffee, I realize this is the moment when you backtrack through the initial conversations, new clues in hand. With the right item, you can unlock new conversation tiers. I think back on what we've accumulated so far. The essay by Athanasius and the VHS tape seem like the most useful. Alexis seems like she's holding the most back, but I also wonder if we can get more out of David Sexsmith. Something isn't right to me about how he's built his empire.

Gus stares blankly at the table, a husk of the person he was just thirty-six hours ago. "We should talk to David again," I say. "When we went there the first time, I wasn't prepared for the conversation. And I don't think he's being totally honest with us."

Gus looks me in the eye, and his face seems to brighten, at least a little. "Sure," he says. "I had a weird feeling, too, but I couldn't really put my finger on why. Do you think he's hiding something?"

"I don't know for sure, but I think he knows more about the vault than he let on, and I'm curious about where he really got his money from."

Gus stands, knocking into the table and causing the breakfast plates to clatter. The few people awake this early look over at us for a second before going back to eating. I hold back a laugh. He is, even in the most serious of moments, his typical clumsy self.

## Chapter 23

David Sexsmith sits at his desk exactly as he did when we came by the first time. I'm pretty sure he's even wearing the same outfit, which is a bit strange. It's almost as though his entire purpose is to sit here waiting for us.

"You're back," he says.

"We have some more questions about the vault, if you don't mind?" I'm trying to project the confidence of someone who is supposed to be here, asking questions of a stranger, though Gus gives me a look that suggests I'm not quite hitting the right notes.

"Like I said, after it went to the museum, I lost track of it. Frankly, I never even thought about it again."

"Can you tell us about the discovery then?"

"Sure." David softens, just slightly. "We were doing the excavation for the bowling alley, which requires a cement foundation that's six feet deep. Initially, I had this idea of using a clear flooring so people could watch the balls return, so we went a little deeper to build that out."

It turns out the best way to get him talking is to mention construction, I guess.

David continues. He's *almost* animated now, or at least he seems to show signs of life. "We ended up abandoning the clear flooring idea, though. It was just too costly, and the Plexiglas ended up getting scratched up too easily. Even still, we ended up digging about eight or ten feet down. We were just finishing up when the backhoe hit a solid object. Some more digging and we realized it was an entire room, buried underground."

"Wait, what do you mean a room? How big was it?"

"It was just a metal box. I'd say it was about the size of a guest bedroom, around nine feet by nine feet. One side had one of those spinning bank vault doors, so we started calling it the vault. When we saw the symbols on the side, we figured it was prohibition thing, probably filled with old bootleg liquor. We called the museum and the police right away, in accordance of the National Historic Preservation Act."

"What kind of symbols?"

"It was just a repeated pattern of an owl, if I remember right? Could have been any bird."

"And what happened when the museum showed up?"

"The sheriff came first and told us to clear out, so we did. I sent the workers home and stuck around to make sure I didn't need to do anything else. The museum sent Alexis Farns, who showed up with Melinda Bakersfield. I've always found those two a bit off. They have a knack for showing up in strange places around town. They rent a storefront from me now to run a bookstore."

"Do you remember anything about how they moved the vault? Or anything else?"

"After the museum came, I left to work offsite on another project. The museum handled everything else and called me when they were done. After that, we poured the concrete and got the bowling alley up pretty quickly. I never heard anything else about the vault or what was in it."

After David finished speaking, he seems to settle into a loop, staring at us, blinking, wavering slightly. Like last time, it seems like it's up to him to decide when the conversation is over.

"How did you afford all this?" He seems to favor bluntness, so I try to oblige.

"Years of work. I worked construction as a kid, then saved up to buy a property or two and built it up. Tried my hand a few different businesses along the way, including that bowling alley, but developing real estate—by hand, myself, as often as possible, mind you—was always my go-to. Eventually, I had a decent nest egg but, honestly, I just like creating buildings, so I keep it up. Gives me a chance to bring new things into this world."

I'm a little surprised by the sentimentality but, otherwise, it rings true enough. I thank David again for his time, and we leave. When we're outside, I hear Gus let out a sigh, like he's been holding his breath since we were last outside.

"This vault is everything," Gus says, partially to me, but mostly to the world at large. "I don't like that something so large went missing. And," Gus points

his finger in the air for this final point, "Mr. Sexsmith, *as someone who clearly takes making money seriously*, just letting it go seems strange to me."

"To be fair, he doesn't strike me as the history type or a rule breaker, so I don't know that I'd expect him to care much about something once it's in the museum's hands and he can't make money off it."

"True, true," Gus mutters. "Should we head back to the museum, or maybe see if Alexis will talk to us?"

Neither option seems like it'll get us anywhere. The museum seems pointless without Alexis' help, and Alexis won't talk to us unless Melinda is gone, which means we need to figure out a way to get Melinda out of the bookstore for a while.

My body stiffens as a plan forms in my head, "Gus, I have an idea."

## Chapter 24

"Just walk me through one more time, please?" Gus asks over the sound of dozens of photocopiers at Kinkos.

I look up from the piece of paper I'm drawing on. "We're going to leave this pamphlet with tomorrow's date for a ceremony and this map to a new vortex in Melinda's shop. She'll see it, and she won't be able to stay away, which gives us a chance to talk to Alexis."

"It just seems like overdoing it? She's got to leave for an errand or something at some point, right? Wouldn't that be easier? What if Alexis goes with her?"

"I don't want to wait anymore. I just want to figure out what happened here so I can get back to my life. Someone will have to stay to run the shop and, as best as I can tell, that'd be Alexis. Look, I'm out of ideas, Gus."

Gus sighs and wanders off. I keep drawing. I have a stack of flyers and pamphlets from other shops in front of me. In order to make this believable, I have to wield the pen like someone who believes in nothing more than the truth I'm scratching out onto the page.

What comes out of me is a chaotic mess of words, surrounded by a map to an area we scouted out this morning. I decide to take her claim of "One Panel of Stones" away from her, hoping it'll help draw her out. Here's what I write.

### **HOLE WITH BARE TREES ON TOP**

It is time, Friends. We have reached an *epoch*. An Era is Coming. We have all long hoped to witness the next vortex, and I have learned through Studies of Stars and Time that the next *vortex* will take place at **One Long Panel of Stones**, just outside the city. Here, where the **HOLE WITH BARE TREES ON TOP** rests, you'll find Yourself. Finally. At risk of Time, we have Swallowed Our Reality, but we must be ready for the next step. *Here*. This Vortex will open only with the Help of All of Us. We must rise up around the **HOLE WITH BARE TREES ON TOP** in order to open the Hole and Release the Vortex. Follow the Stones and Find Yourself. May 12, 2001 at 2 p.m.

I copy my pamphlet thirty times so it looks faded and destroyed, as though tomorrow's date for this event has been settled on for years. Just a little tweak to manufacture a past. I'm impressed with myself, though, I'll admit capitalizing words at near-random was a Gus idea.

Gus and I take the pamphlets and distribute them all around town at various book shops. You know how every little hippy shop—a candle shop, incense store, tchotchke shop, whatever—has a bulletin board, usually cluttered by the local doula or Reiki teacher? That's where we're leaving these maps.

I feel like I've created a timeline in history, and I'm sharing it with anyone willing to read my pamphlet. Maybe that's why people do this. It feels powerful. Stupid, yes. But also powerful. As we share ideas, we spread them, even if nobody is paying attention. Attention doesn't matter because it's impossible to know where other people's attentions lie. We only get the world we can see. The universe is defined by our individual perception of it.

When we get to Melinda's shop, I send Gus in since he still hasn't met Melinda. He leaves a few pamphlets on a table up front, then sneaks back to slide one onto Melinda's desk while she's helping customers on the floor. It's a little on the nose, but if she doesn't see it, we may never get a chance to talk with Alexis on her own.

When we're done, we split off to our separate rooms to get some sleep. This has to work. Alexis has to know something. I can't just leave here empty-handed.

## Chapter 25

Again, sleep doesn't come. Which I guess doesn't really surprise me. Instead of tossing and turning all night like I normally do, I decide to draw.

I start drawing my fake map from memory. Marking each single-track trail carefully with a dotted line, then using more weight on wider roads. I trace the topography of the hill leading to the stone formations, pausing to add some desert flora as I go. When I close my eyes, I can see the landscape, altered slightly by my memory, but as real-feeling as standing there.

When I drew the map for the pamphlet, I'd based it in the New Age style usually found on community boards at book shops and yoga studios. I used chaotic chicken scratch markings, nearly illegible, like something you'd see on a flyer for a party deep in the woods. This time, I'm meticulous. I want to make something more substantial, more worthy of the imagined world I'm trying to sell.

When I get to the vortex locations, I pause. What symbol describes a vortex? What meaning do I need to convey?

I go back through all my notes and materials. Athanasius described them as portals to another universe. Melinda seems to suggest they're merely places of power.

I like Athanasius' explanation best. I decide to mark them with an icon that looks something like the top-town view of a tornado, a sort of *Wizard of Oz*-inspired spiral. Consulting back to the original map of vortices—I'll never get used to that word—the town already has at least three major ones, with countless other supposed smaller sites.

The people around here side with Melinda, believing these are locations of power. Power that somehow us humans can manipulate to our advantage. Sit down and meditate at a vortex, they'll say, and you'll experience some sort of super meditation.

We've all had those moments where a place felt right or wrong, but I don't believe it has anything to do with the place itself. It only has to do with us. We rarely share these moments collectively, nor the memories that form afterward.

I think back to the first time I stood on a mountain peak, with the vertigo rushing through me, my dad held my shoulders, grounding me enough to allow me to look out across the landscape. I was maybe ten or eleven at the time, but I felt a new emotion, something I now recognize as clarity. Few other people we saw even bothered to take in the view. They were there to mark another fourteener off their checklist.

Another world feels more likely. Whether a vortex or a portal, I'm sure whatever I'm picturing is wrong. I don't expect to arrive to find a hole in reality. Or a glowing red orb that transports me to a new land.

As I draw the vortex symbols on the map, I temper my expectations and force myself to hold back on the design. A map is like a hint to a reader, offering a guide for what to expect without spoiling the end result. You have to be careful not to reveal everything at a glance.

When I finish, I realize it's already one of my favorite maps. Perhaps because it's based in reality. Or, at least, based more in reality than anything else I've made. It feels powerful to wield something like this. I've only made a slight tweak to the truth, but it feels like I've altered history. If all this is nonsense, what's it matter if I just add another layer?

In this moment, it strikes me how much of what we've been chasing is still a myth. I try to play out all the different realities we've been presented over the last few weeks. Each has their quirks. None of them can feel real to me until we find the vault.

I can feel dawn coming as I finally start to get drowsy.

## Chapter 26

We decide to stake out Melinda's bookshop early so we don't miss anything. We load up on donuts and coffee. Unsure of ourselves, we fall into a stereotype of a stakeout. I find myself wishing I smoked.

Thankfully, it doesn't take long before we have movement. Alexis and Melinda arrive to open the shop at nine in the morning. Less than thirty minutes later, Melinda leaves. We move in immediately, unsure if she's on a coffee run or if she's scouting out our site early.

The door jingles as we enter, and Gus sneezes along with it.

Alexis' eyes widen behind her glasses as she spots us.

"You shouldn't be here," she says, focusing on me.

"We just want to ask a couple questions." For a moment, I consider revealing the fake pamphlet but decide to see what she's willing to give up on her own.

"I can't help you," she says, still never taking her eyes off me even as Gus continues to sneeze.

"Alexis," I try my best parental tone, mimicking how my dad talked to me after I'd done something stupid, "we're just a couple nerds who had too much extra vacation time, trying to figure out where a book came from." Saying this out loud is a bit shocking to me. It's so absurd. "We just want to know what happened to the vault."

Alexis shuffles behind the counter, picking up stacks of books and moving them.

"There was never a vault," she says, with her back turned toward us.

"What?"

"There was never a vault. The story was planted by Melinda. She'd met the reporter a few years earlier during a seance that got busted up by the police. They'd hit it off then. He was a conspiracy theory nut, which aligns with Melinda's research more than you might expect. She asked him to plant the story and worked with the construction crew to make sure nobody else said anything."

"But why fake it? What was the point? And David?"

"Oh, whatever. David was as much a plant as anyone. Throw some money his way, and he'll do whatever you ask. And it was all to put Owl in the news." Alexis fidgets. "Look, Melinda has been involved in this deeper than you might think."

"Deeper how?"

"You know about Athanasius, right?"

"That's the scholar Melinda told me started Owl as a hoax."

"She told you it was a hoax?"

"Yeah. She suggested Gus was involved in it." Gus meekly waves. "But wait, are you suggesting Melinda was telling the truth? That it's a hoax, but she's the one perpetrating it?"

"I don't know that hoax is a useful word here."

I look over at Gus, whose face features a raised eyebrow, but which otherwise doesn't seem terribly surprised. "Well?" He's been so quiet I feel like I need to get him involved here somehow.

"I'm still a little confused as to the ends here," Gus mutters, wiping his nose with a handkerchief.

Alexis finally addresses Gus, "You mean why create and then run with the idea of a secret society that's obsessed with opening up portals to other worlds in an effort to expand the human mind?"

"Well, yeah, exactly that," Gus replies.

Alexis glances at the door, then seems to settle on something. "What's history mean, really? It's a way to explain the present. We use it to justify what we do now. When you mix in spirituality, it's about finding a way to look at the world and understand reality. Athanasius gave us that. Melinda's keeping it alive."

"So, why give us the tape then?"

"To show you the truth, of course."

The truth. What a word. When I look over to Gus, he's still stroking his chin. Like he's stuck in a loop.

"What do any of us want in life?" Alexis asks. "To be believed? To create something meaningful? To understand what all this is for? Reality is what *we* make it. Each Athanasius is a carrier of reality. How they present it is up to them, and for their ends, whatever they deem them to be."

I can feel my mind cracking in half trying to understand this. A pain moves across my temples to the bottom of my forehead, cresting across my eyebrows like a mountain range.

The door jingles behind us, and a group of older hippies walks in.

"Hello," Alexis says to the group. She turns back to us. "If you'll excuse me."

I guess we've reached the end of the conversation. It's always such a strange feeling, being completely disregarded, but you get used to it after it happens enough.

## Chapter 27

When we leave the shop, Gus and I decide to head over to the site I mapped out for Melinda. It's time we just confront her and lay everything out. This was supposed to be a fun little journey to find the origin of a silly book. When we started out, I thought I was signing up for a pulpy dime store novel, but I've fallen into a crazed conspiracy theory fueled by too much Ram Dass.

As we drive through Sedona, I try to picture my conversation with Melinda. She tends to take me off guard by introducing new variables when we talk. She erases history and creates something new in its place. She contradicts herself, me, and the reality we've all agreed on. How do you prepare for something like that? If we can rewrite history and disregard reality in the present, what does that mean for the future?

Gus is at the wheel, concentrating on the road. It strikes me how little emotion he has and how few movements he makes. It's almost as though his body only knows so many positions. As we take a turn onto a dirt road, the car bumps around, but Gus remains locked in place, the world bouncing around him.

We eventually arrive at my made-up trailhead. We get out of the car, and dust circles around us. I imagine it's cinematic. Until Gus sneezes.

I pull out my new, more detailed map, and we start walking. As we do, the line of a single-track trail forms in front of us. The dirt and rocks seem to shift away, like a tiny parting of the Red Sea. Intellectually, I know it's just a trick of the wind, but it really does feel like my map has altered the present, just a bit.

I'd set my One Long Panel of Stones pretty far back off the main roads. The site itself I'd picked based on Melinda's tape. I had to hit as many keywords as possible to convince her the trip was worthwhile. Even though I know there is nothing but rocks at the end of this trail, I find myself pulled forward by the mystery of it all. Confronting Melinda in the middle of the desert certainly feels like it ought to be climactic.

The hike in is slow. Gus isn't a quick mover, and neither of us were prepared for it. It's only a few miles, but we're covered in dust. I can feel rocks in my

shoes and sand in my socks. You could set a watch to Gus sneezing.

"Gus, what do you think about this hoax thing?"

Gus sneezes, then produces the same handkerchief he's been using all week to wipe his nose. "It's certainly possible," he says. "If I'm understanding all this right, I think Melinda believes the present reality is based on the past we create. If she recreates a different version of the past, using the teachings of Owl and Athanasius, she's effectively creating a new present."

"So, she likely sees herself as the modern Athanasius?"

"It certainly sounds that way. It's an interesting proposal, really. What do we know about the past, if not what books tell us? In fifty years, one hundred years, whatever, the stories change. Owl, or at least Melinda, seems to feel she can tell the story loudly enough someone in the future will listen."

"But why?"

"Why not?" Gus hits back at me quickly. "Why not believe in a world with portals to other lands? Think of a legend like King Arthur. Historians may spend page after page debunking the popular myths, but that doesn't keep people from believing in round tables, holy grails, and mystical wizards."

I start thinking about all the folk tales I've heard over the years, transposing each into real historical moments. But before I get too lost in my own head, we round a corner to the One Long Panel of Stones rock formation.

Melinda's lying on the ground, staring at the sky. Her eyes are wide open, but she doesn't acknowledge we're here. Is she dead? A wave of guilt washes over me as Gus leans down to check on her. He checks her pulse and his shoulders relax. "She has a heartbeat," he says. He waves his hand over her eyes, but she doesn't react.

We tricked her into come out here, and now she's in some sort of trance. What have we done?

My eyes are drawn to a small PalmPilot computer next to her. Melinda didn't strike me as the handheld computer type, but I guess she did run her own business. I look back at her, trying to think of what we're supposed to do in this type of situation. Do we call the police? An ambulance? Alexis? But I can't help myself. There's another clue just sitting in front of me. I must know. I look back to her. She's breathing. She's fine. Whatever this is, it's

fine. It can wait a moment. As I stoop down to pick up the PalmPilot, Gus pitches an eyebrow, but doesn't say anything.

## Chapter 28

Melinda's PalmPilot is open to a digitally handwritten note, scrawled across hundreds of pages, with about a dozen words per page. These things don't seem terribly efficient. I pull the stylus out and start flipping through the pages. It starts with a typed preface page:

### **PREFACE**

*Athanasius tells us of the rituals. It's about placement, he says. Location is important. Consciousness equals energy equals truth equals place equals history, he says. Our minds are not in time and space, he says. Shake free and be rewarded.*

*When I first came to the teachings of Owl, I wasn't impressed. I found their ideas bland. They were disinterested in the betterment of self. I found no use in it.*

*But when Athanasius came to me, that is, an Athanasius, and requested my help locating some texts, I started to fall for the ideas. I was a young professor at the time, and this Athanasius approached me after a lecture. The man was tall, with little hair on top, and a pair of a thick black glasses. He told me he taught English Literature.*

*We quickly became friends. The task of finding the texts the man was looking for proved trivial. I was able to order them from a catalog I had in my office that same day. But we kept in touch, and over time, the man leaked his knowledge to me. I'd heard of Owl but assumed that, like the Templars, Golden Dawn, or Illuminati, their present-day iteration was folklore. Athanasius showed me that, while they were hidden, they were far from make believe.*

*The principle purpose of Owl is to find and explore new lands. The principle conceit was that the reality we see is only part of the picture, meaning to explore new lands we need to find a way to crack our minds open. Each of us sees their own reality, so the best way to explore new lands is to record these realities as*

*canon. Each writer adds to the text of the last, telling the history of the world. This is what I didn't understand at first.*

*Owl views history as a stack of experiences projected by each Athanasius. Reality is then passed on from one Athanasius to another. That is why each book differs. Why some histories seem incongruent with others.*

*Athanasius and I remained friends over the years. He'd come to my office, and we'd discuss his view of the universe. I'd argue, sometimes, but more often than not, I'd be struck by his commitment. I'm not sure I'd call myself a believer back then, but I was certainly curious. When the bowling alley was being built in the early '80s, we decided to leak a little mystery into the world and plant a story about Owl. I called up a childhood friend who worked at the newspaper and asked if he was willing to fib a little to color the story. He was young, bored, and more than willing.*

*When Athanasius died suddenly in a car accident, I was distraught. I couldn't imagine a life without his guidance and conversation. I needed to talk to him one last time to figure out what to do, so I organized a seance. It was there he told me it was up to me to take on the role of the next Athanasius. So, I did. I left my teaching career soon after and opened my bookshop as a means to discover new worlds.*

*Every Athanasius must create their own book filled with their interpretations of the core beliefs of Owl. We all vary, slightly, and Owl allows its members to do so in any medium they like. Reality is as malleable as fiction, Owl says. The format of every book of Owl is up to its creator. Some choose words, while others choose art. I've heard tale of a book of maps. We all interpret the teachings differently.*

*And so, this is my book. As one of the first Athanasius to create a book in the digital era, I decided to create mine here, on this tiny handheld computer.*

# Chapter 29



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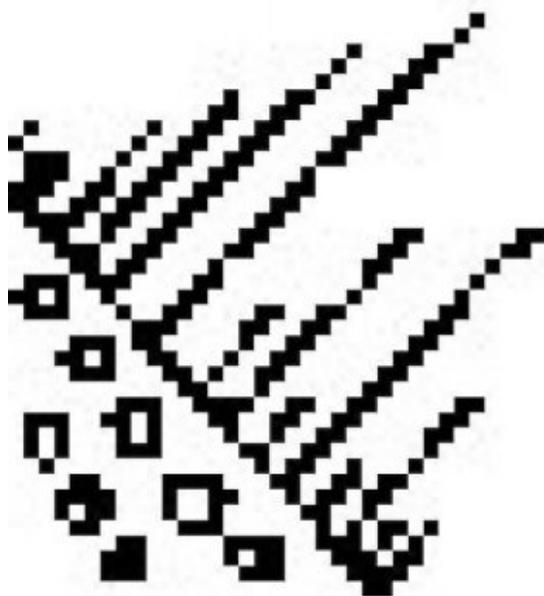
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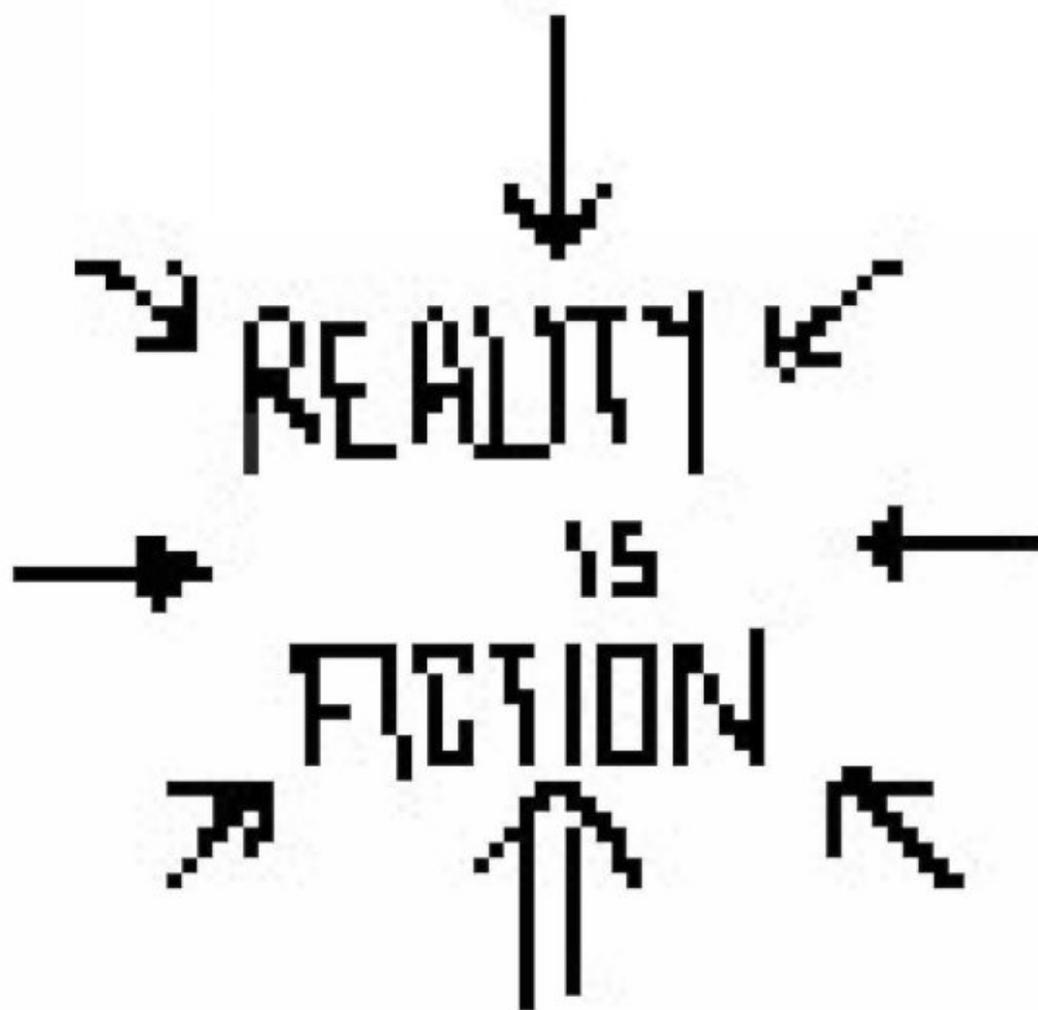


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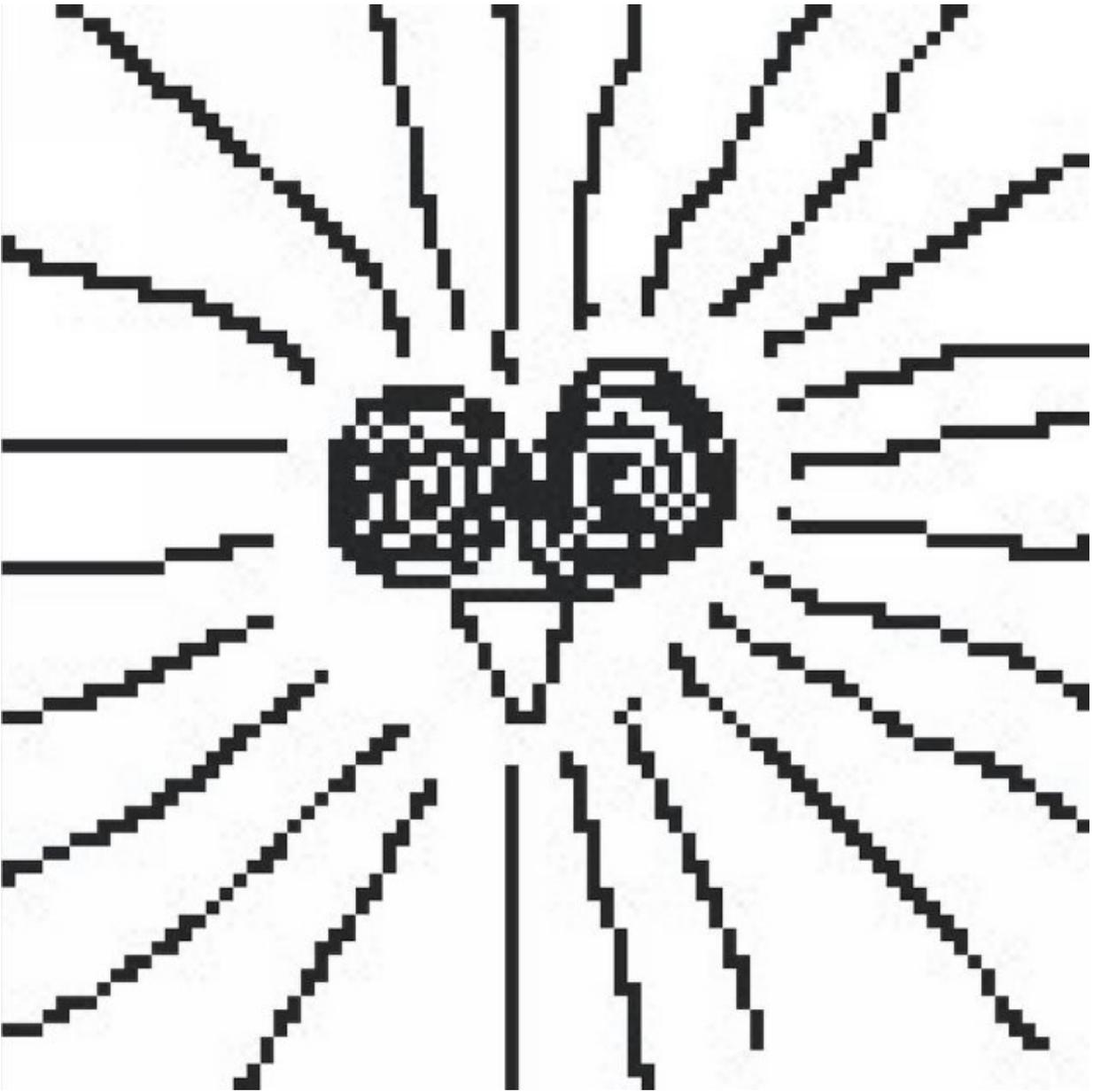


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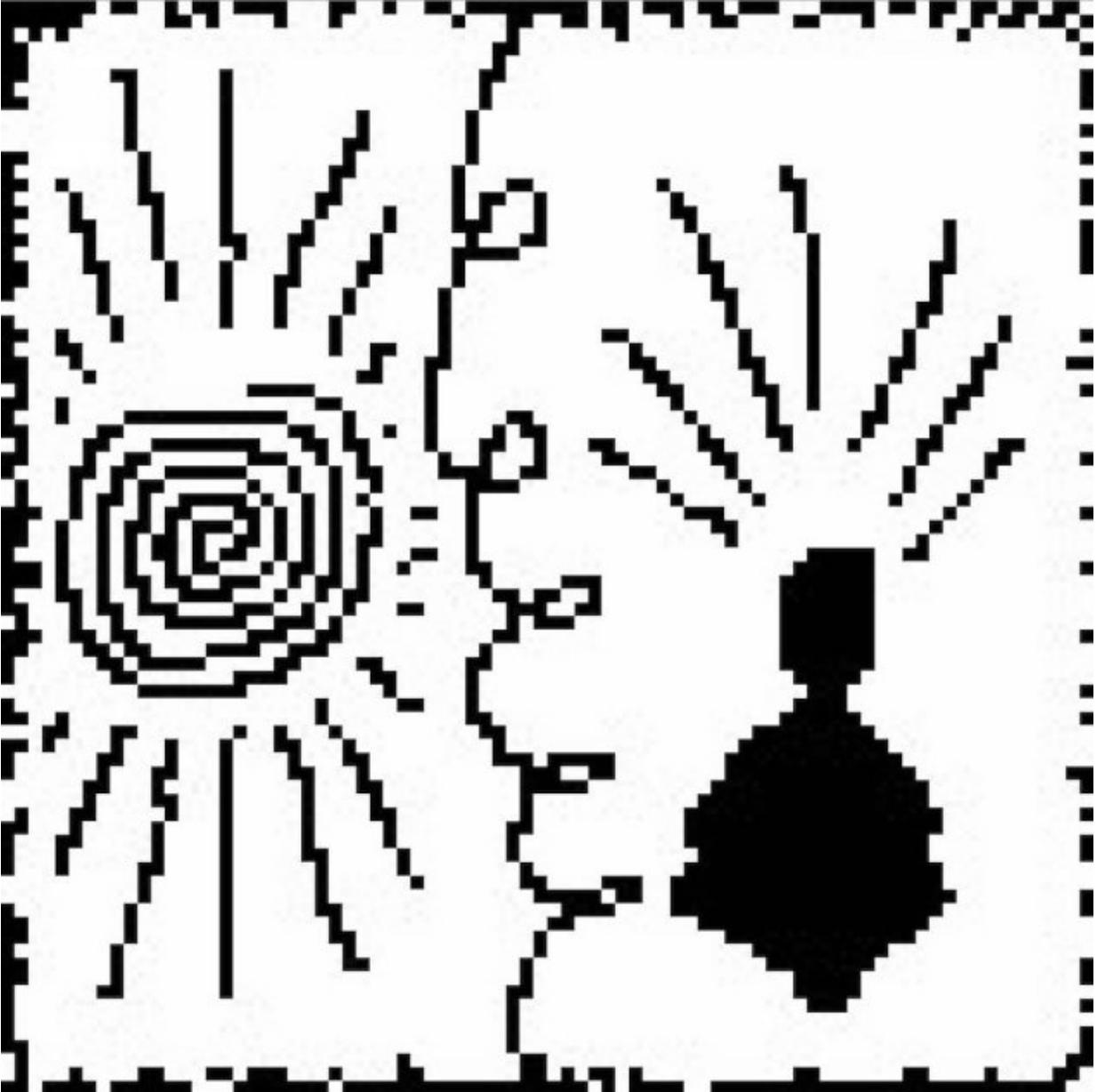
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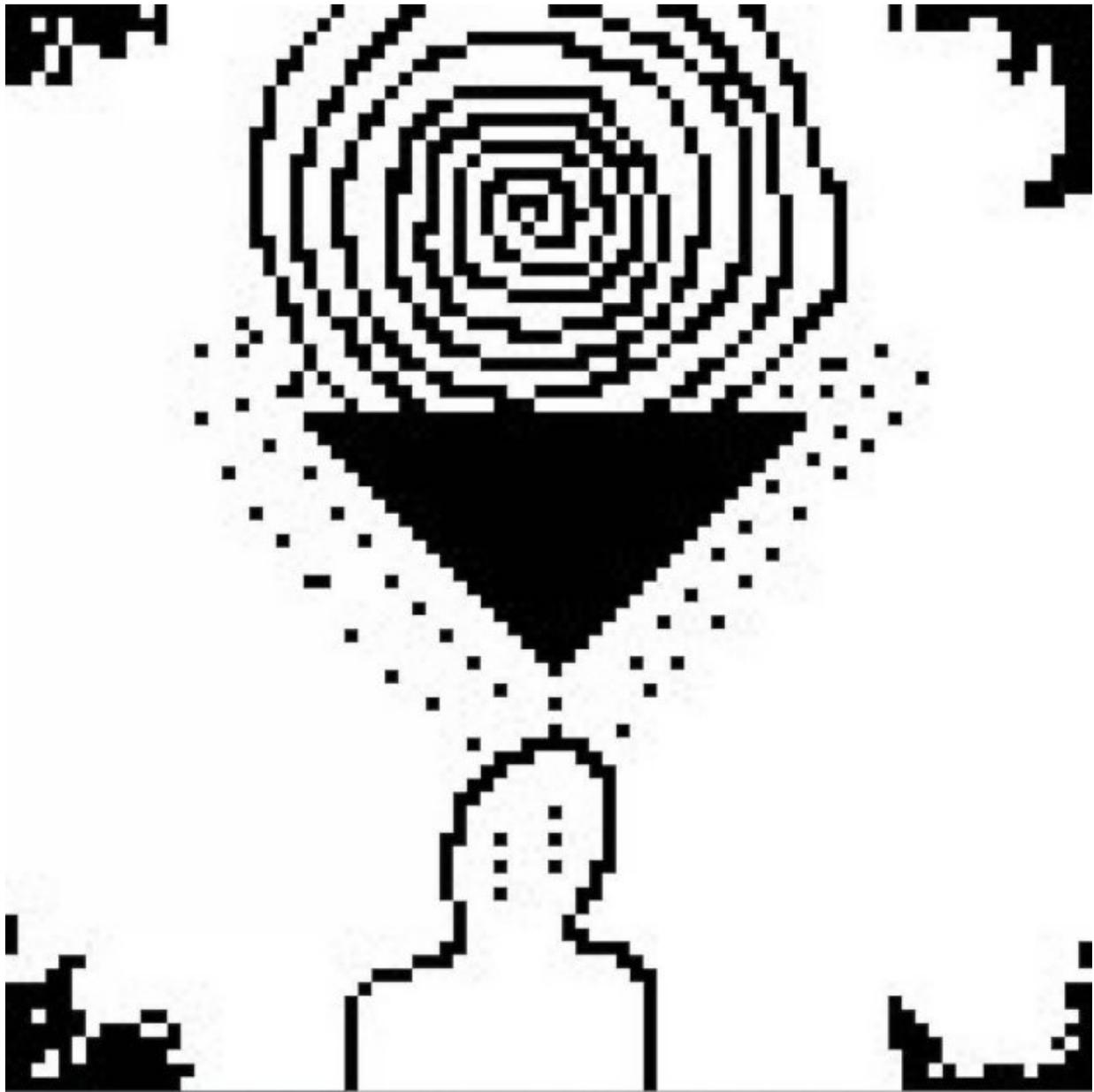
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## Chapter 30

When I get to the last page, I look over at Gus, who's wearing a bewildered smile that manages to cram more emotion into it than words possibly could.

"I..." he trails off.

"Yeah." I reply, as I kneel down to check on Melinda. I touch her forehead, and a sparkle drifts behind her eyes as she jostles back into our world. She blinks a few times before locking eyes with me. My shoulders relax and I sigh in relief.

"Oh, *you*," she says, raising herself on her elbows.

"Yep."

Melinda sees the PalmPilot in my hand and nods. "You read it?"

"I did."

"What did you think?"

"It's an interesting idea. But I can't help but wonder, if reality is fiction and held in the mind of the beholder, who's the beholder?"

She sits up fully now. "I'm sorry?"

"Well, I mean, are you in charge here? Am I?"

Melinda finally stands up and brushes herself off. "I'm fine, by the way."

"Sorry, you just threw me off." I look back to Gus for help.

"What were you doing, er, there, on the ground?" Gus asks.

"Meditating."

"Oh," Gus says, hoping for more.

Melinda looks at Gus, clearly thinking about whether she wants to indulge his curiosity. "In order to create, we must be quiet, right?" she asks. "So, I call it meditation. But it's more of a creative exercise. I like to lay still and think up new places."

"What were you thinking about just now?" I butt back into the conversation.

Melinda pulls out the pamphlet I made and hands it to me. "I was thinking about this."

"I made this," I reveal, with a tone of self-righteousness.

"I figured," Melinda replies, shrugging her shoulders

"If you suspected it was fake why did you come?"

"It doesn't make any difference. I liked what you wrote, and this area," she gestures around us, "is lovely. It seemed like the perfect place for a portal."

"But it's not real, I made the portal."

"What's that matter?"

"What do you mean? Of course, it matters. It's not real. I made it up while sitting in a copy shop."

Melinda sighs and turns back to the place she laid. The stones around us seem to vibrate.

"Those of us in Owl accept one thing above all else," she says. "That reality is a fiction passed on from person to person. As such, it can be changed. Present moments can be dictated based on any past we choose, and past moments are created to help sustain the present we choose. That's where all the books and stories come in. It's one thing to say the present reality is a fiction we can alter and change to our whims, but without the backbone of the past, it's too hard to hold onto the present we desire. Where others try to achieve a perfect future, we try to achieve the perfect present. Owl seeds stories through books, art, and," she holds her arms out to me, "maps. And any other medium we might find useful. The more building blocks we leave, the easier it becomes to control the present."

"I'm sorry. I'm having a hard time here. Is this some collective conscious thing, is it something where we're all figments of your mind? Is it something else?"

Melinda shrugs. "Perhaps it's none of those things. Or all of those things. And even if it was, who's to say figments of my mind can't have a conscious? Or for that matter, who's to say we're not figments of your mind? After all, you're the one who choose to find the history of the book. You're the one who created the map to this place. And countless other maps, I'm told. You're the one who seems caught up in this narrative most of all."

She pauses and stares directly at me. It's uncomfortable. Gus sneezes. I try to look away, but I find my eyes keep coming back to hers. "I've been in the driver seat of reality for a long time, dear, but I'm starting to think it's your turn."

I look to Gus for help. He has a worried look on his face but seems stuck. Like he can't move forward. When I look back to Melinda, she's the same. Stuck on a loop. The whole world feels like it's repeating, waiting for me to choose how to move forward.

"Maybe I need an example," I finally say.

"Of course," Melinda says. "Take a seat."

# Chapter 31

Melinda takes my hand and leads me to the same place we found her. I look back to Gus, who gives me an incredulous look. I attempt to shrug with my eyes.

Melinda motions for me to lie down, just like she did.

"Don't people usually sit with their legs crossed when they meditate?" I ask.

"What's that matter? Lie down, Samantha."

I settle on the sand. It's more comfortable than I expected. Like a dusty pillow. Melinda circles around me a few times, judging the situation.

"This looks good," she says.

Melinda then moves around me, this time purposefully making lines in the sand. I turn my head to look for Gus, who still has the same incredulous look on his face. I feel a wave of embarrassment pass over me but push it down to let the scene play out.

"Okay, it's time to think," she says. "Think of this place, think of your map, and think of where the portal goes. You're going to crack open reality and move some things around."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"Shouldn't there be like, some incantations or something? Some sort of ritual?"

"Do you want there to be a ritual?" she asks.

I think about it for a second. "No, that sounds awkward."

"Then just think. I find it best to close my eyes, but it's not necessary."

I stare up at the sky. A few clouds hover overhead, but it's generally a clear day. This feels stupid. But I've come this far, I might as well see it through. I decide to close my eyes.

I think of my map. Not the map Melinda has, but the map I drew in the hotel room. The more detailed version of this very scenario. I think of the small

footpath that led here. I let the memory of our walk combine with the trail marked on the map. Mixing the reality with the fiction, picking the best from each to create exactly what I wanted. I think of this place, both as we found it, devoid of meaning, and as I created it, as "One Long Panel of Stones," quotation marks and all. My new reality is almost the same as the old one but more cinematic. The nearby rocks are just a little more perfect. The footpath has a better view. I can feel the ground vibrate with power now. I realize we decide the meaning of places. Meaning is not implicit.

When I'm comfortable with my recreation of the present, I mentally open the portal. I thought it would twist and twirl, like an effect from the *Twilight Zone* but, instead, it starts with a rock unraveling, as though I'm pulling a thread from a ball of yarn. The unraveling doesn't stop. Bit by bit, the entire world falls away, revealing a darker, quieter version of itself.

I decide to open my eyes but realize they're already open.

## Chapter 32

I lay still for a bit. The world is quiet. No airplanes overhead. No motorcycles echoing through the canyon walls. No Gus sneezing. Oh, where's Gus?

I sit up on my elbows and look around. I'm alone. Did it work? It couldn't have worked. Did Melinda slip me drugs? No that doesn't seem right. I feel okay. Not like I'm on drugs, anyway.

I stand and brush myself off. The sand is black, not the red-brown of Sedona. It brushes off easily. The stones are gray, the sky is a purple, and the sun burns white. I should be scared, but I'm comfortable.

I can see mountains in the distance. It feels like they're oriented to the west.

With nothing else to do, I walk toward the mountains. I move down a small footpath and, around a corner, I'm confronted by a dense jungle. I'd thought perhaps I'd just inverted the real world in my mind, but this suggests I'd altered more than that.

A single-track footpath guides me through the jungle. It's quiet here, too. No sounds of creatures moving, no water, no wind. Have I lost my hearing? Or can a world be this silent? No, no, I can hear my footsteps. I can hear the shuffling of my clothes.

I've always thought of the phrase "it felt like a dream" as lazy and useless, but here I am, thinking just that to myself. As I take each step along the path, my body twitches and tingles like I'm following a predestined route. It's almost as though I'm being controlled, forced to a specific end regardless of what I want.

Reality is fiction, Melinda says. I concentrate on myself. I close my eyes and pull the camera back to view myself in the third person. The world rotates slightly, as though it's on an isometric plane. I can see myself. An arrow bobs up and down over my head. The landscape is dense, but the path is clear. I instruct myself to follow it.

I emerge at the foot of a mountain. This world lacks transition. I move from one landscape to the next. The entire universe washes over me and melts

with each new location. I continue to travel through the world. The path is always perfect, never forking, guiding me along.

The clouds in the sky bend and move. They shake with life in one instance and appear dead in another. I come to think of the clouds as spectators. They watch me as I walk. Eyes on me, all the time.

I arrive at a small cottage. It looks like the one I grew up in, but the colors are all the wrong. It smells like a winter's day, but the ground is dry. I walk up a set of stairs and enter without knocking. The layout is different than I remember. It's just one room. The flooring is busted and broken in places, but the ceiling is perfect. There's no furniture, no rugs, no appliances. The walls are lined with books.

Each book is a different size and shape, but they're all labeled and organized in a linear order. Athanasius 1. Athanasius 2. Athanasius 3. And so on. I sit down on the floor and start reading.

## Chapter 33

### **The Cold Case of the Missing Person, a Dead New Age Prophet, and an Occult Book**

by Richard Yearns

When Samantha Arins was first reported missing six years ago, police were confident they'd be able to find her based on an abundance of evidence and firsthand accounts. But a lack of funding, combined with an inept department riddled with bureaucratic roadblocks, has left the case cold.

"We went to Sedona on a whim, chasing a silly mystery and trying to kill a little time," says Gus Edwards, a bookstore owner from Estes Park, Colorado, and friend to Samantha.

"Look, this was before the internet really took off, so remember that before anything else. I found a copy of an ancient book of maps, and we decided to follow some leads to learn more about the book, which took us to Sedona."

The mystery, according to Edwards, was "just a distraction." The two were hunting down the origin of a text from an ancient occult group called The Hermetic Order of Owl, or just Owl, as Edwards usually shortens it.

"Nothing more than a small group of people who built out a library of strange texts." Gus brightens up when he talks about Owl. "They were prolific, but their books were often limited to one copy." In the six years since Samantha's disappearance, Gus has split his obsessions between finding her and learning more about Owl.

Gus is a tall man with a small demeanor. He shrinks into the background if you don't keep your eye on him. He sneezes a lot. I interviewed him several times for this story in a variety of places, but the only place he ever seemed at home was at his book shop in Colorado. Over the last few years, he's traveled to Sedona several times to keep pressure on the Sedona Police Department to find Samantha, but he does most of his work from his bookstore in Colorado. His relationship with the police department has been adversarial from the start.

"First, they treated me as a suspect. They grilled me for days." Gus deflates when he tells this part of the story. "They basically ruined the copy of the

book that brought us into this mess to begin with because they kept going through it looking for clues. Pages are missing, and the binding, which was already cracked, is now non-existent."

Ultimately, the police ruled Gus out, based on a lack of evidence in the case pointing to any suspect, let alone him. SPD has refused repeated requests for an interview for this article, claiming they "Cannot comment on an ongoing investigation."

Gus wasn't alone when he last saw Samantha, though. He was with local bookstore owner and self-declared prophet Melinda Bakersfield. Gus and Samantha had turned to Bakersfield for help in their search. Bakersfield passed away days after Samantha's disappearance due to a heart attack, but Gus has always asserted her innocence in connection with Samantha's disappearance.

"Melinda and her partner, Alexis, helped us out. Like any bookshop owner, she was curious to see where the texts led us. Melinda had a lot of knowledge in her head about Owl but didn't always write it down." Gus seems saddened at the loss of Melinda's knowledge more than her life, but perhaps that's just how bookstore owners view each other, as repositories of knowledge and nothing more. In either case, he's protective of her story and remains, even six years later, uneasy when I try to bring her up.

Melinda Bakersfield is a tough nut to crack. Her partner, Alexis Farns, refused several interview requests, but Melinda has been a fixture in Sedona social circles long enough that most people know her story. At her core, she was searching for the truths of the universe and was never shy about turning to unpopular means to find those truths.

She's been known to throw a seance to speak with a dead colleague, lean on local newspapers to investigate stories (ahem), and her bookstore, Perfect Harmony, was a well-known hot spot for New Age thinkers. To many, Melinda was seen as a prophet and teacher, one who wasn't afraid to speak truth to power, but also the type of person who'd do whatever it took to get what she wanted.

The narrative around Samantha's disappearance has never shifted much. "We went on a walk to one of Sedona's legendary vortices," Gus stresses this word, *vortices*, and eyes me carefully to make sure I write it down correctly. "It's not vortexes," he tells me in a sidebar, "even though that's

what a lot of people like to say." When I finally assure him I'll spell it correctly in the paper, he continues, "Samantha laid down on the ground and closed her eyes for a while. It was some ritual Melinda convinced us was worth doing to understand Owl better. Samantha seemed a little embarrassed, so Melinda and I walked away. When we came back an hour later, Samantha was gone."

In the years since, Gus has kept up his search, even though SPD hasn't touched the case. "At some point, I realized the police weren't going to pursue the case, so I've tried to do my best to learn all this new technology and keep the search alive." Gus is referring mostly to the spread of the internet and its increased role in society. Where he once rejected technology — his book shop only added a credit card machine after customers complained—he's since embraced it. Now, Gus has a netbook and regularly logs onto to check in on his missing persons groups on Facebook.

Gus also runs a Usenet group dedicated to Owl. "I know Usenet is often associated with bad stuff, but it's the only place I've found to host text and scans where we can talk about them as a group." Gus' face flushes red when he refers to the fact that Usenet, once a repository of conversation and text amongst cyber-adept nerds, has dissolved into a forum for pornography and illegal copies of movies, video games, and books.

Gus tells me the Owl newsgroup has some two hundred followers, and they've uploaded a variety of different texts from around the world. When I ask him to show me, he shakes his head and smiles, noting that these works were reserved for people who'd take them seriously, not for newspapermen. When I tried to log into the newsgroup later, I was blocked.

When I ask Gus why he assumes Samantha is alive, he shrugs me off. "There's no body," he points out, "and let's be honest, it's not like this was a murder scene. We were messing around looking for a book, then following a lead from a New Age bookstore owner to supposedly magical vortices in the desert. Not exactly the kind of thing that makes you think about murder."

When I follow to the next logical question of what happened, if not murder, Gus gets flustered. He sneezes a few times and shakes off the question. "I'm not here to rewrite history with my presumptions. When I know what happened, I'll know. Until then, it's a void of knowledge. We can't go around creating false narratives. That's what gets recorded and, later, it's

assumed as fact. You have to be careful with this stuff." Gus gives me a look that suggests I shouldn't follow up on his line of reasoning.

Gus is obsessed with words and their meaning. He manages to always search for truth in books, yet remains cautious of their meaning in the present tense. I suppose that's why he doesn't entertain the idea that Samantha was kidnapped or murdered that day. There's a default assumption we all tend to make when presented with facts, and if we push back on those, the evidence can lead elsewhere.

With the SPD unwilling to continue working on the case, Gus is the only left who seems to care what happened to Samantha. When I left his bookstore for the last time, we shook hands and, adjusting his glasses, Gus said to me, "We don't always find truths in the world, you know. Sometimes we find them in books."

*Correction: This story was updated to add clarifying details around the technology Gus uses to search for Samantha and Owl.*

# **alt.talk.owl**

Welcome to our newsgroup, read this first

This is a collection of stories from community members. These stories all come from different Owl texts, all from different authors, eras, realities, and so on. While I've attempted to organize them in some way, it's impossible to know for sure where each story fits on the larger timeline. We've vetted these stories as best as we can, though it's difficult to tell anything for certain when it comes to Owl. If you have stories of your own, be sure to reach out to me with scans of the original text.

-Gus

# Black Altar in Raised Moss and Skull Man



## June 23

After leaving the Dipty Mountains, we've arrived at the western most side of the mapped regions of this land. It's different here. Where the mountains swung between a frosty wonderland and a barren, bombed-out wasteland, it's perpetual spring on the west.

It hasn't stopped raining since we arrived. I'm not even sure I can say when the rain started. At one point coming down the mountain, there was rain, and we've been wet ever since. At least it's a warm rain.

We've set up camp in a small clearing. We have enough tarps from crossing the mountain that we can cover the crew long enough to get dry and cook some food. This morning was our first real, cooked meal in a while, as the mountains were too cold to stay still for long. As some of the crew cleans up, the rest get ready to map the area. I'm looking forward to seeing what lays ahead.

## June 24

We've met a local. Or rather, *met* is perhaps the wrong word. We've observed a local. Actually, I'm not even clear I can say *we* as my crew has either blocked out today's experience or they just never had it.

As my men and I hacked through the thick jungle, we came across a large altar covered in moss. A man, or rather, a man-shaped creature, stood behind the altar, wearing a purple robe that looked religious in nature. In place of his head was what appeared to be a floating skull.

The skull was, I'll admit freely here, rather creepy. It was also much more expressive than I'd thought possible. As we approached the altar, the man (I'm just going to call it a man, though I do recognize that's not something we know. Frankly, it's just easier to say man), noticed us, and, gave us a warm, genuine smile.

"Hello!" I said. "I'm Percy Humboldt." I waved, meekly, then extended my hand to offer a handshake.

The skull man didn't return the handshake. Instead, he tilted his head, like a thinking dog, and shook some dust off his robes.

We sat like that for what felt like a very long time. My hand extended. The skull man's head tilted. My men, behind me, all half-turned away, thinking about running.

"Hmm," the skull man said. And a wave of electricity opened up around us.

In an instant, the world felt frozen, and I felt empty inside. Everything went black, with small, floating bits of purple electricity falling around us like snowflakes. I couldn't move. I couldn't see if my men were behind me. I couldn't feel the presence of anything at all. Not even myself.

The skull man still moved. He still smiled. At the time, I wasn't sure if moments or years had passed.

The skull man walked up to me and leaned in. His face next to mine, I could see nothing but darkness, but still felt warmth from his body.

"Continue to the sea," he said. I couldn't reply. The skull man smiled warmly again. How was he so expressive?

With that, everything snapped back to normal. The skull man was gone. I turned around to see my men staring at me. "Are you okay, sir?" one asked. "You shut down there."

"I'm fine," I said. "There's nothing here for us. Let's keep moving."

# Tentacles at Right of Clouds



July 12

We've been traveling for weeks, mapping out the territory between the mountains and the sea. I've felt a pull to the sea. It's our job to get there, sure, but I *need* to get there. Soon, too.

The men are carrying on well. We've pushed through the humid, rain-soaked lands, and we're now in a desert. The landscape seems to do as it pleases, ignoring the basics of physics. But we've adapted well enough.

Nobody has mentioned my episode, and I'm grateful for it. I'm still not sure what happened, but I can't deny I feel differently now. I *see* differently. I don't say anything to the men because I don't want them to think I'm crazy, but there's a world here most of us don't notice.

Maybe it's just the desert landscape getting to me. Walls of red stone and sand.

July 23

We've made it. We've set up camp on the beaches, and my lead cartographers are planning our next move. I'm trying not to show my disappointment.

July 27

I've sent the men north to continue mapping the coastline. I'm staying here. Tentacles have appeared in the sky, and I need to ask them why I'm here.

July 28

I've learned to communicate with the tentacles. Okay, that's a bit of a lie. I haven't really *learned* anything. I accidentally figured out if I shut my brain down for a little while, the tentacles speak to me. They've told me to build a village here. The village will support a factory, and the factory will make me millions.

My cartographers are set to return tomorrow. I'm not sure what to do.

February 2

My apologies for ignoring this journal. Now that I don't have to answer to the queen's cartography department, I haven't found much of a reason to write in here. But, today, after months of work, I finally have some free time, and it sounded cathartic to write for a bit.

We've built out most of the town, and the factory is up and running. When I told my crew I planned to stay behind based on a recommendation from the tentacles, they all sighed in relief. It turned out they'd all seen and communicated with the tentacles but were too scared to mention anything. We set to work that day, sending one courier back to the queen to tell her we wouldn't return.

In the factory, we manufacture dreams.

We sell the dreams in bottles. We even have mixtures meant to help with different moments in life, like prenatal dreams, stress relief dreams, or divorce dreams. We have anti-diarrhetic dreams, respiratory health dreams, weight loss dreams, and diet dreams. We have waking dreams and sleeping dreams. We have a variety pack we offer to test out the different types.

With just three ingredients, we can blend nearly any dream you want: tentacle, sea water, and a splash of our own thoughts. We need to be careful, though. For example, too much tentacle and you get nightmares. Too much sea water and you get anxiety. But too much tentacle with an added dash of some of our own thoughts and we get eroticism, a top seller. We need to be especially careful on that mixture because eroticism mixed with anxiety of fear tends to scare away customers.

Sales are going well, though I'm worried about how we'll scale up if demand increases. We're already having trouble filling orders, and we haven't done anything in the form of publicity. I'm also a little worried about corporate and government interests. But, for now, things are going well, and the men seem happy, which seems like enough.

## Bird Man with White Staff

Oscar sits down next to the stone altar and drops his staff on the ground. Today, they'd demanded four-hundred-fifty-three incantations, forty-five fireballs, one-hundred-twenty-two healing potions, and three battles with oversized versions of his usual enemies. It's been a long day. He just wants to sit down and eat his mouse in peace.

As he cuts up the mouse with a small knife, Oscar's friend, Catia, comes up to him. "How'd it go today?" Catia asked.

"Same as always," Oscar replied.

The two sit quietly for a bit, Oscar chewing on his mouse, Catia standing awkwardly, looking to her side, nervously drumming her fingers together.

"So," Catia says, "um."

"I know," Oscar replies.

"It's just..." Catia says, trailing off, hoping Oscar finishes the sentence.

"I *know*," Oscar says. "I just need a break, and then we'll get to it."

"Okay, great," Catia says.

Oscar continues to eat slowly. He drifts into sleep between bites. Catia rolls her eyes but waits patiently.

As he finishes eating, Oscar stands up. "The first thing you need to know is... Oh, shoot. Will you hand me my staff? I can't possibly bend over again."

Catia picks up the staff. It vibrates mildly, as though the power stored inside is cautious of her touch. She hands it over.

"Thank you, Catia," Oscar says. "Where was I? Oh, right. So, the first thing you need to learn is potions. Then we can move onto spells, and yes, I know what you're going to ask. We'll eventually get to projectiles. But you don't have the experience points for any of that right now, which is why we need to start with potions."

Catia pouts and crosses her arms.

"We're not even supposed to be doing this," Oscar reminds her. "*They're* the only ones allowed to pick what we learn. But I'm breaking the rules for you, and to do that, we have to start with spells. We have to trick the system into leveling you up naturally."

Catia kicks some sand. "I know. It's just so boring."

"Boring or not, it is what it is. You couldn't even hold my staff if I wasn't standing next to you."

"Okay, okay. Let's just get started so we can get to the good stuff."

Oscar leans down, smiling at Catia. She's a good kid. He gestures for her to follow him, and the two walk into the forest.

"First, we gather materials," Oscar says.

The two move through the forest. Oscar grabs materials. "These are your crafting materials: wild root, echo bulb, and twisted nodes. Here, hold this 'X' to add them to your bag," Oscar unfolds a book with thousands of lines of gibberish. On the bottom of the page is a small box with a tiny 'X' icon. Catia presses her palm on the 'X,' and the materials are automatically added to her bag.

"Great, my spells are working," Oscar says. For the past two decades, Oscar's been working on spells that allow him to truly change how the world around him works. Despite his vast experience, it has long felt like he's a pawn in a game, as though his fate is predestined and controlled by others. He's focused his efforts and his studies on understanding this system.

"Now what?" Catia asks.

"Go into your bag and select each of those materials. Then, hmm, let me see here, hold on." Oscar flips through his books, trying to remember what the next steps would be. Decades of notes aren't always the most organized thing.

Catia waits, the items in her hands. She seems to idle in a loop, her foot tapping along to an unheard beat.

"Ah, here we go," Oscar says, opening up his book to a long line of text. "According to this, you'll just need to press here." He points to the bottom of the page.

Catia breaks free from her little loop and presses the button.

The world falls apart around them. The trees crumble into pixelized dust, the dirt stutters before stretching into a black triangle, then everything disappears into solid black.

```
-----  
IndexError                                Traceback (most recent call last)  
<ipython-input-1-70bd89baa4df> in <module>()  
6  print(potion[3])  
7  
> 8  bag_()  
<ipython-input-1-70bd89baa4df> in bag()  
4      "wildroot",                                "echobulb"  
5  ]  
> 6  print(potion[3])  
7  
8  bag()  
IndexError: list index out of range
```

## Mime Buried with Many Skeletons

Arturo opens his eyes again. Shoot, it didn't work. Everyone around him is still long dead. He's still stuck here.

Arturo sits up and looks around. *It's a nice tomb*, he thinks. It's clean, anyway, as far as tombs go. Not that he'd been in one before, but the *idea* of a crypt is messy with cobwebs and bugs. And this one is not so bad. He has room to move around a little bit, which is nice, but to do so he has to crunch and crack through the bones of dozens of skeletons.

Arturo situates himself against one of the walls and pushes the skeletons out of the way. It'd be nice to have a little bit of room. A tiny little square of solitude. Arturo looks around, contemplating what his next move could be. He can't get out of here, he knows that much. It's too well built. Plus, he'd just be thrown right back in.

Two days ago, Arturo was lowered inside. His fellow townsfolk were, as they put it, simply annoyed with his behavior. As is tradition in Arturo's town, after being declared annoying, he was lowered into the burial chamber and it was sealed shut.

It was his own fault for being annoying to begin with. He'd thought the town *needed* another mime because Dolores was, in his mind, too old school and boring. He wanted to break new ground in the form and truly entertain his friends. But nobody else was on the same page.

It took about a week for the town to grow annoyed. Now, sitting here, Arturo can see they were patient. Especially when you're dealing with a rogue mime. At first, the townsfolk gave Arturo the benefit of the doubt. They'd watch his performances, odd as they were, and clap politely. Most people thought it was just a phase, or perhaps the sheer nervous energy of trying something new.

As the days went on, though, the townspeople grew more and more annoyed. Arturo would burst into restaurants where people were eating and pantomime a single role of a popular play in an off-putting asymmetrical performance. Or he'd rush through town, knocking over anything that got in his way, acting out a scene where he was getting chased by a dinosaur.

But even those antics didn't push the town over the edge. It was the smaller things. The annoying little quirks. Arturo liked to draw attention to those who didn't want it. He'd often grab the shyest person in a room and make them the center of his performance. Or he'd spend a day following someone in a bad mood, repeatedly trying to make them laugh. Or at the very least, he'd suggest, pulling on their cheeks, just smile.

Eventually, the townspeople held a meeting and decided to put Arturo into the crypt. They'd done this plenty of times before. Every skeleton there now was once someone who'd gotten on the town's collective nerves. There was Agata, who would routinely leave her water hose on, wasting the town's water. Or Bernardo, who was the type of town drunk who'd lock you into a nonsensical conversation, oblivious to your desire to escape. And then of course Taavi, who always spoke just a bit too loudly.

Arturo knows he doesn't have much time. Or an audience. But as he clears out his little space in the tomb, he can't help but pantomime his favorite scene from *Macbeth*, mouthing "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" into the darkness.

# A Small Round Boy with White Stones

A very small boy sits in a garden. He is extremely small. Terribly small. Remarkably small. Excessively small. Uncommonly small. He is the smallest boy possible. Yet somehow, rotund.

In front of the boy are several white stones, arranged in a circle with a line through it. The boy concentrates on the stones.

After several minutes of concentration, the boy lets out a sigh. The air grows thick, like a sauna. The boy collapses to the ground with a weak *thud*. All the moisture in the air collects around the boy, causing nearby plants to drip and tree bark to stretch thinly around the trunk, like linen wrapped around a wet leg. The boy begins to grow.

After a few minutes, the boy resembles a normal boy, in size at least. But like a balloon full of helium, the shape seems temporary. He tries a step but wobbles, uneasy with his new size, and falls over. He rolls on the ground, briefly trying to right himself, like an egg attempting to balance on the tip. He gets back onto his feet after a few tries and takes his first large boy step. Then another. He's figured out how to balance, at least.

But with each step, he deflates slightly. In order to progress through the world, he will shrink. He stands still for a long time, deciding what to do. His face squints into the same concentration pose as before. His shoulders climb toward the sky, as though he's willing himself upward.

Eventually, he releases all his tension, lets a sigh loose, and takes another step. Then another. Until he is once again extremely small.

## Small Animal Woman's Head

A bonfire burns. On a stake in the center of the fire rests the head of a small animal woman. The head seems to reject the very idea of fire. It's unfazed by the flames attempting to engulf it.

"She was a witch," a small boy mutters, looking into the flames.

His mother leans down and whispers in his ear, "No, she was just too powerful."

The boy's eyes widen as he stares at the head. The head's eyes twitch slightly and lock onto the boy. The head smiles.

The boy can feel the animal woman's mind knocking on the door of his own, politely asking to be let in. The boy lets her in.

He's in a forest now. The animal woman is steering his consciousness. He's seeing through her eyes? No, a memory. He's seeing her memory.

S/he's walks through the clearing in the forest. S/he's being chased. The heart beats in the ears. The ears pressurize, it feels like an explosion is imminent. Feet paddle on the ground. Barefoot? Yes, barefoot. S/he comes to a cliff. Nearly falls off. Stops in time, turns. S/he sets eyes on the pursuers. A group of men holding weapons. The group speaks in one voice.

A N I M A L W O M A N I T E N D S H E R E

"Why?" S/he asks.

Y O U ' V E B R O U G H T D O W N O U R V I L L A G E B R O U G H  
T S A D N E S S F E A R A N D A N X I E T Y T O U S W H E R E W E  
W E R E O N C E P R O U D A N D H A P P Y

"You were blind," s/he says.

W E W E R E H A P P Y

They lunge in and rip the animal woman apart.

The boy feels his mind shrink, reverting back to his own. He misses the animal woman's presence. He asks her to stay. He begs her.

The boy's mother tugs on the boy's arm. "Where did you go?" she asks.

## Gold Cloth Face Reclining Around Hole

The great creature, Menom, sits alongside a hole. Her face is covered by a ceremonial gold cloth. She stares into the hole. Her posture suggests she's waiting for you.

You walk up to the hole and peer inside. Menom nods and gestures for you to enter.

You descend into the hole. It's not so bad. You can stand, at least, and through the echoing tunnels you hear Menom humming a tune. You walk, briskly but not hurried. Light from outside of the tunnel disappears, but glowing mushrooms guide your path.

After some time, you notice you're hunching down. The tunnel is getting smaller.

You carry on, eventually going from your hunched position to a crawl. Here, the tunnel walls are covered with newspaper, plastered to the walls like an unfinished piñata. You can still hear Menom's song in the distance. It's comforting, enough to push you forward.

You're forced onto your stomach to continue. You inch yourself along by wiggling your shoulders back and forth. The smell of newsprint and glue surrounds your entire body. You can't imagine smelling anything else ever again.

You continue on. The newspapers rip off the tunnel walls and catch your clothing until you're fully wrapped. You can barely wiggle now, so you force yourself forward by pushing yourself with your toes, like a ballerina practicing their pointe technique. Your arms are locked at your sides. Your face is covered in newspaper, but not so much you can't breathe. But every breath you draw is still full of newspaper and glue.

It's too hard to push yourself forward with your toes. Menom's humming is faint now. You find, if you suck in your stomach, you can push forward slightly using a combination of your stomach and your belt buckle as it hooks into the newspaper surrounding you.

It's dark here. The glow of the mushrooms is gone, and it's impossible to see how much further the tunnel goes. An itch rattles itself across your leg, just

out of reach of your arm. Your shoulders feel like you've been carrying a backpack for weeks.

But the newspaper feels nice, wrapped around your legs and arms like seaweed. You're partially tangled up, sure, but also encased in warmth.

You're not moving much, anymore. The newspaper and glue smell doesn't seem so bad, and perhaps this spot is cozy, not debilitatingly small. Menom's humming matches your breathing. Your breath slows, and you drift off to sleep.

## Man Seated on a Large Egg

Gundeibert stares into the sunset, thinking about what he had for breakfast (roasted beets), sitting on his egg. He must sit on this egg every day for forty-three days (technically 1,031 hours). At the end of those forty-three days (1,031 hours), the eggs will hatch, and Gundeibert will be free.

Gundeibert and his people first started sitting on eggs long before Gundeibert's time. Some say it has been generations. Others say it has been since the beginning of time (others argue about the validity of the very idea of time but concede these people have been sitting on eggs for quite a while). After all, Gundeibert and his people are called Egg Sitters, so it goes without saying they've been sitting on eggs for some time.

To a modern ear, the term *egg sitting* might not sound terribly respectable, but rest assured, for Egg Sitters, there are few jobs as magnanimous as the task their name is derived from (it is admittedly not a creative name).

Egg Sitters do not *just* sit on eggs, nor is the task of doing so simple. They must keep an egg the right temperature, which requires a lot of shifting around, squats, and occasional twists. They also must speak to the egg every day, teaching it the ways of the world before it hatches. At first, they speak to the egg as you'd speak to a child, but as the days go on, they speak to them more as adults, since by the time they hatch, they are indeed just that, adults.

At the moment, Gundeibert tells his egg about crop rotation. "Beets are heavy feeders," he says. "Follow them with lentils or chickpeas."

They do this in the hope of passing down the entirety of their knowledge before the egg hatches, though no Egg Sitter has ever successfully done this (supposedly someone named Arthur was close once, but forgot to tell his egg about rain).

You might ask why these eggs have no mother or father to sit on them, and the answer is easy, if not gratifying. The eggs simply are. Every so often, with no particular rhyme or reason, the eggs begin existing. When they do, the Egg Sitters do their job.

After those forty-three days (1,031 hours), the egg hatches. What hatches it hard to describe, though the Egg Sitters call them Spectators. They are never

the same shape, nor the same gender, nor even the same species, but they always consume the soul of the Egg Sitter as their first act. When they do so, it takes on all (most) the remaining knowledge of the Egg Sitter.

The Spectators then leave to do whatever it is they do, which we can assume involves spectating, since it seems that things here are named after what they do.

# Distant Mage with Large Bears

Hello Gran,

How have you been? I feel like it's been too long since we've caught up. I've been okay, I guess, but I've been feeling that thing again.

Some days, I just want to change into an animal and leave here forever. I could transform myself into one of my bears and disappear, and nobody would ever know. Nobody would ever care. I could live life as a bear. Or I could turn back into a human, then live out my days in some distant place.

I know how I sound. Another white mage, complaining, even though I have access to some of the most powerful magic in the world. I'm well-respected, well-educated, and I've had consistent good work for a very long time. Look, I know there are those who are worse off than me. Of course, there are.

I've seen the destitute in the Goblin Caves of Ash, and I've spent plenty of time wandering through the torture chambers at the Ranger Camps of Fire. But I'm distant, unhappy, and I desperately need change. I can have everything and still be unhappy.

You know, Gran, I'm coming on twenty years as a white mage, all of it in the service of her holiness, Athena. Don't get me a wrong, she's a fine wizard to work for, and I have a lot of respect for her. I've been with her since the buyout, when she took me under her wing and taught be everything she knew. Now, I'm one of the best mages in the land.

I'm unhappy because I don't know what to do with myself. I feel like the constant twenty years of magic work, combined with tending to the bears, has led me to become an empty vessel, someone who, sure, is great at their job, but who doesn't have a hobby to speak of. When I have free time, I usually just magic it away until I have something to do. It's pathetic.

Last week, Athena and I rounded up several skull men and sent them back to where they came. She came up to me afterwards, joy and confidence in her eyes, so proud of our accomplishment. I felt nothing. Not that I said that. I hid it as best I could. I smiled. I tried to show pride as we ransacked the skull man tombs. It's all just so routine now. I've been here hundreds of times before, I kept thinking.

The bears can tell something is off with me. Isa and Ulsa refuse to leave my side, even when I shoo them away. Ulsa even tried to climb onto my cot last night. It's nice, I'll admit, but doesn't get us anywhere. I'm worried they'll be enveloped with the same sadness I have.

I'm sorry I'm just complaining, Gran. I swear, I started this letter with the intention of telling you everything was fine. Oh, I also want to ask if you'd like to join me for the cauldron festival. Mine's a bit old and I'd like to find a new one. Plus, we always have such a good time. Let me know. I'll go ahead and just grab two tickets either way.

Sincerely,

Frederick

# Old Woman Wearing White Wood Horns

The canyon stretches out before you. Its walls are so tall you see nothing else. Just wall. The *too bigness* of it makes you feel like vomiting.

If you're not careful, the wall takes you. It eats up your consciousness. You look closer, anyway. Time shows itself through small cracks. Little burrows. Minuscule edges hold small plants.

You're making your way through the western slot. Hunting for calm in the chaos. Trying to wrap up rhyme within reason.

You set up camp. As you unload everything, your pots and pans clatter. You spring up the tent on powdered sugar sand. The smell of propane slides underneath the smell of desert dust. You can see other campers doing the same. Quietly making the motions.

At night, you're restless. Through the thin tent layer, you see a woman enter the campsite. She has horns on her head. She walks cautiously. She peeks into each person's mind, hunting for memories, hunting for sustenance.

She finds the death of a child.

A divorce.

Lost siblings.

Lost loves.

She eats them all. Leaving nothing in their place. Nothing fills the void. But nothing is better than loss. She approaches your tent. You feel a weight lifting.

In the morning, you look up at the canyon walls and feel something other than dread. You feel, almost, comfortable. You continue on.

## Gold Man with Mirrors

The duke stands in his room, surrounded by mirrors. He turns, paying close attention to how the curvature of his spine affects his doublet. Too loose, and the doublet bunches up unnaturally, accenting his bulbous figure. Too tight, and his figure is shown for what it is, a marshmallow with two toothpicks for legs.

Today, he feels fine. He is comfortable. He looks acceptable. The duke fakes a smile at the mirror, his thin mustache curving into an elaborate sideways E.

The duke's day consists mostly of staring blankly into the middle distance while people talk at him. He's too important to do anything for fun, but not important enough that his decisions matter. He must sit quietly, not seen as eccentric, not power-hungry, but still wealthy, still powerful-enough.

He is bored.

The duke spends his time thinking about what he'd do if he wasn't a duke. He'd hunt, perhaps. He'd build his own house. He'd be alone. He desperately wants to be alone. The duchess is fine as a person, the duke thinks, but he wouldn't spend time around her if he didn't have to. He'd rather live on a mountaintop, avoiding the world entirely.

In his room, before bed, the duke often writes for hours before falling asleep. He'll paint, too, occasionally. Sometimes, he'll just stare out his small sliver of a window, wondering what people are doing. He destroys everything he creates immediately. He tosses it into the fireplace and lights it, even on hot summer days.

Everyone thinks the duke is a fine ruler. He is neither liked nor disliked by the people around him. His personal purse is neither extravagant nor empty. Everyone around him describes him as acceptable, fine, nice enough, okay.

After a particularly normal day, the duke sits in his room, painting a portrait of golden apples. As he bends back to look at his painting—it is quite acceptable and fine—he knocks over his paint. He kneels and dips his hands into the spill. His hands look foreign to him. He undresses and covers his body in paint.

Covered in gold, the duke stands in front of the mirrors. Proud, finally. A barrel-chested golden nude man stands in front of him. His stomach leans over the edge of his pelvis like a slug making its way down a staircase.

He leaves his home and makes his way to the forests on the outskirts of the city.

# People Growing Fungal Figure

"We must time this perfectly," the teacher says. "If the molds don't fruit at the right time, this entire experiment is pointless." She looks on at her students, gathered in a small clearing in the forest.

The children nod, but they don't seem to put as much weight into this idea as the teacher. For the past decade, she's brought students here. Not her best students, by any stretch. But the ones who follow orders.

The teacher sighs, then walks to a wireframe body. "We'll wrap this with the bread," the children each seem to suddenly notice the bags of bread in front of them, "then spray it down with these water bottles. When we're done, we cover it with this, and wait." She flicks a large plastic bag into the air, gesturing like a magician revealing her latest trick.

The children moan but get to work. The white bread is easy to manipulate, and the kids cover the wireframe completely in less than an hour. When they're finished, they each smile and look on. These kids aren't used to succeeding. It feels nice.

The teacher grabs a water bottle and demonstrates the amount of sprays (two) to give each piece of bread. The children follow suit, mostly following her advice.

When they're done, they all look on together. Covered in wet bread, the wireframe appears more lifelike. It resembles a person, at least from a distance. The students seem proud.

The teacher covers the bread figure with the bag and ties it tight at the bottom. "Okay kids, we'll come back in two weeks to see what we've created!" She's bubbly now, proud, too, of the accomplishment. It doesn't take much these days.

In two weeks, the group returns. The teacher gathers the kids around the breaded statue, still covered by the plastic bag. "Are you ready to see what you've created?"

The children seem happy and attentive. She pauses, wanting them to enjoy this brief moment of purity. When the excitement feels too unbearable, she

pulls off the plastic bag to reveal the figure, now covered in a dark green mold.

The children suck in a joyous gasp. "It's beautiful," one mutters. The rest look on, quietly.

The mold-covered figure begins to move. It's so subtle it seems like an optical illusion at first. The children aren't sure how to react. "Where's the teacher?" one asks. The kids look around. The teacher is gone.

A sound similar to laughter surrounds the group, originating from the molded figure. The kids can't move. They're not strapped down by fear, it's something else. Something physical. The laughter echoes across the clearing.

A year later, the teacher returns to the area. She doesn't even bother looking at the wireframe, just squares herself to address her students. "We must time this perfectly," she says.

# Large Figure in Tree Holding Portrait of Butter

Three children—two girls and a boy—make their way along a dirt path. The path is clear, well-maintained, and surrounded by small trees. The children move at a reasonable pace. They are not frightened nor in a hurry.

The boy clutches a picture frame to his chest. We can only see the back, and the frame looks old. A rusted metal wire dangles on the back of the frame, and the boy fidgets with it.

The girls each hold a small container. One looks like a miniature-sized cauldron, the other one is a saucepan with the lid taped on.

All three children smile. None of them talk. They continue to walk.

If you look closely—why don't you lean in and look a little closer?—you can see sweat beading up on each of the children's foreheads. What do you make of this? To me—and let's be clear here, I don't know a thing—it looks like they're worried about something.

Sure, they have these cool exteriors, holding their mystery pots and secret picture frames, but when you look up close, you can see they're frightened. Why don't you just take a look? They can't see you, don't worry, and you can move as closely as you like. Here, take my hand. I'll guide you there. Do you see? The sweat? It's a dead giveaway, if you ask me, but nobody really asks me anything.

The three continue to walk, resolute, with clear direction. Where do you think they're heading? My guess is we'll find out soon enough, but if you look at the title of this story, we can surmise they're heading to meet the large figure in the tree. That's how titles work, you know. It's not like titles come out of the air. They're purposeful. They're meaningful. They're...well, let's just get back to the kids. I think they're getting close.

The children slow as they approach a large tree. The largest tree we've seen yet. It towers over the rest of the trees alongside the path, which are tiny and weak compared to this tree. To be clear, the small trees are large enough to block our view of what's outside the trees—that way I don't have to describe

what's beyond the trees—but they're small compared to this one big tree, which is very large!

In the tree is, you guessed it, a large figure. It's human-shaped, all black but, well, that's interesting, it's not holding a portrait. I suppose we can surmise what's in the boy's hand, but what's the deal with the cauldron and the saucepan? Let's watch and find out.

The girl with the cauldron steps forward first. She bows to the figure, then gets on her knees. She prostrates in front of him, then takes the lid off the cauldron. Inside is a stick of butter. She waits in this position.

The second girl does the same as the first, stepping forward, bowing, kneeling, prostrating, then she removes the tape from the saucepan to reveal another stick of butter.

The boy follows the same motions. He ends his routine by turning the picture out so the figure in the trees can see it. It's a portrait of butter, painted in oils, looking as majestic as the type of painted portrait you'd find in a bank owner's office.

The figure smiles a big smile, then turns into a cloud. It flies through the two sticks of butter, evaporating them, before returning to its human shape and picking up the butter portrait. It smiles again at the children, butter glistening off its skin, dripping from its mouth like an oily sweat. It nods to the children, then floats back to its spot in the tree.

The children stand, the girls gather their now-empty containers, and they turn on their heels to leave.

The figure smiles wide again, then roars—like a lion? Do you think that sounds more like a lion or a bear? I'm not sure how to describe it. It's certainly not the sound I'd expect from looking at the thing, though.

So, after the roar, the children's shoulders pitch up, and they freeze. The roar continues, and the children's heads shrink down, like turtles trying to cover deeper into a shell. We see the figure drop the portrait—the children just hear that part, since they're looking the other way—and, in an instant, the figure is gone, the portrait broken in half on the ground. The children run.

# Mime in Skins Seated at Right, Looking at Soldiers

A mime stands in the center of a half-circle of soldiers. She motions unbuttoning her blouse, then pretends to remove it. She moves her hands across the zipper of her pants, then motions her legs up like she's stepping out of them. The soldiers hoot and holler.

She saunters up to one of the male soldiers, seduction in her eyes. The mime straddles the soldier. He blushes. The rest of the soldiers continue to holler in excitement. She puts her arms around the man, pretending to undress him. The hollering is unbearably loud.

She steps away, puts her hand on her chin, and stares.

The men yell loudly now. Their faces are red.

She closes the distance between the soldier again. With her hands, she motions grabbing a knife from an imaginary belt. She pretends to slit the man's throat, then slices downward, halving him like a piece of meat. She does the same to the legs and arms.

Then she pinches her fingers around the soldier's shoulder and pulls down, like she's peeling off the plastic wrapping from a new window. She pretends to pull all the skin off this way, from the shoulders down the feet. With the imaginary skin in hand, she shakes it out like a rug.

She holds her hands up, like she's inspecting the skin. The men are silent.

The mime bends over, lifts her leg, and pretends to climb into the soldier's skin. First the right leg, then the left. She pulls up the skin, like she's putting on a wet suit.

The mime moves to the right of the soldiers, then bends her knees as though she's sitting. Sitting, wearing the skin of the soldier.

# Map with Bare Skulls

I was told this would be an easier expedition but, as usual, that's not correct. Funding was a mess, and the location we were sent to was completely wrong. I'm sorry, I don't mean to complain, but it's been a frustrating month.

At first, we were sent to Bear Island, a small island inhabited only by bears. The bears were great hosts, and my team made some friends for life, but it was clear the second we arrived this was not the place we were supposed to be. The entire island was clearly on a map, making the job of a cartographer a bit pointless.

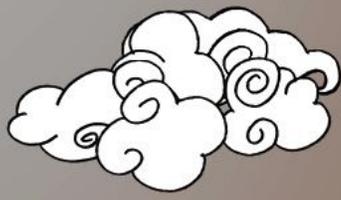
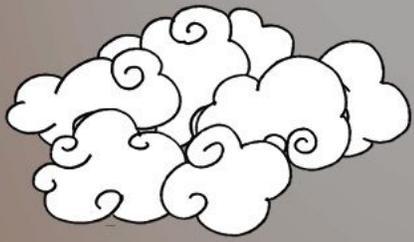
Once that was sorted, we made the crossing to the island we'd meant to go to, colloquially known as Bare Skull Island, officially known as Landmass #2324.

My crew is small, which I like. I'm not a great people manager, and trying to wrangle twenty people to do even simple things, like take a group photo, is not my strong suit. People always assume the expedition leader is some sort of alpha type male—an Ernest Shackleton or Percy Fawcett or Daniel Boone—but I'm more of an Isabella Bird type. I'd rather just do the research and point to things as I need them.

This time, I brought along Octavio to handle most of cooking, camp, ship care, and other sort of—I don't know—management duties like that. He's a curmudgeon, but he gets the work done and is always humming a tune.

Maggie, my right-hand soldier type who never leaves my side, rarely says a word and fits the trope you're already envisioning her as to a T. And, finally, Celeste, our biologist and resident nerd, who despite her gender is full of more dad-jokes than even the most mustachioed-New Balance-wearing-James Taylor-loving fathers out there. That's it. Just the four of us, a JRPG party heading into the great unknown.

Bare Skull Island is located off the Eastern coast of the known RNN. It got its name because it's sort of shaped like a skull, which you can see in our map.



It was also the site of one of the biggest shipwrecks in regional history. About sixty years ago, one of the first expeditions into the area was unfortunate enough to run into the island, killing most of the crew. Those who did survive weren't able to sustain themselves on the island's meager resources and, eventually, died trying to escape. It's this type of ghastly story that prevented it from being mapped. But here we are, on assignment, forced into this mess.

The deserted nature of the island—and the island being incapable of sustaining human life—is misleading, though, so I should back up a bit. There is evidence of life here, lots of it. We have entire cities. And unlike most small islands, this isn't a barren landscape. Well, it is now, but it wasn't always. You can see where life once flourished here. There are forests and mountains, a small lake, and the ruins of a massive city.

I have a theory about this. I'm not going to include it in my official report, because it's not really based on anything beyond a gut reaction, but I'll lay it out here. I don't think this was always an island. I think the skull men were here first, and they removed the rest of a landmass originally surrounding this area.

We had suspicions about skull men when we first got this assignment. "Maybe this is where they first came from," Celeste said after we pulled up the first satellite maps featuring the crude skull outline of the island. We laughed at it then (okay *we* as in everyone except Maggie, anyway) but, well, I think she's right. It's so stupid to imagine they came from an island shaped like a skull, though.

Nobody knows much about the skull men. Despite the plural name, they're usually solitary. But skull mans doesn't really work. They also don't have a gender. That didn't stop Percy Humboldt from naming them skull men, though.

To his credit, Humboldt tried to write around it but couldn't seem to come up with a reliable way to do so. They don't seem evil, but they're not exactly good. They *do* tend to create a bit of chaos. Sinking a landmass around their own capital city isn't the type of experiment we've seen them pull before, but I wouldn't put it past them.

On our first night, we set up camp. Octavio cooked up burritos using a mishmash of freeze-dried foods. He's a genius when it comes to camp cooking, though I do wish he could do his job without humming the same tune.

Celeste poked around the immediate campsite a bit but was generally quiet, a rarity for her. Maggie, as usual, stood still, a sentry easily confused for a statue. I wrote my dispatches to the queen's cartography department. Nothing to see here yet, everything is going well, yada yada.

In the morning, we set out as a group of three, with Octavio staying behind to do whatever it is Octavio does when he stays behind. Within minutes, we ran into what Celeste called Skull City (I refuse to call it that even though that's what we labeled it on the map). I mean, within *minutes*. How did we not see this city from the camp? It made no sense. It made me feel stupid, like every step I'd taken leading up to this event was a stumble and, eventually, I would fall flat on my face.

The city was built in an architecture style I'd never seen before. It blended equal parts midcentury modern and medieval. The castle grounds felt like walking through a Disney film designed by Florence Knoll. The castle towers and wall were all simplified forms designed around modularity. You could see the patterns repeated throughout the rest of the city in different ways, from the cathedral to the individual houses. None of us are architects or even archeologists, but we all had the feeling we were seeing something new.

The most startling feature of the city was its lack of degradation. It looked new. Each building had no furniture, but also no dust. It felt like we were walking through a brand-new tract house development. A ghost city not yet lived in.

As I plotted out the acreage of the town, making my little markings, daydreaming about the people who'd lived here—or perhaps would someday live here in some alternate future—the ground began to shake. It wasn't an earthquake—I'd felt earthquakes before—it was more like the sea level changed. I ran off, looking for Celeste and Maggie.

I spotted them standing on one of the castle's towers, and I ran up the spiral staircase inside. "Did you feel that?" I asked, gasping for the air the staircase had taken from me.

"You betcha," said Celeste, a massive grin on her face. "Look." She pointed out toward our camp.

Where we'd originally set up a couple miles inland, the camp was now on beachfront property. Sure, we see tides come and go, but they don't change the landscape of an island by *miles*. Had the ocean risen up, or the island sunk slightly? Neither seems possible. The earth shook again, and the three of us watched the water recede back to where it was when we arrived.

Celeste looked at me, a wild expression in her eyes. "Son of a beach! How cool was that?" Did I just see Maggie roll her eyes? I'm pretty sure she just rolled her eyes.

"What the hell was that?" I asked, knowing nobody would have an answer but being equally sure I needed to say it.

"I have no idea," replied Celeste, still staring out at the sea with an excited vibe pulsating around her entire body. In the distance, we could all hear Octavio cursing.

"We should get back to camp," I said.

XXX

A small robed figure stands in front of a large instrument panel. They pull a lever up and down. Stare at an extremely small screen, then pull the lever again. Faintly, gears grind. The figure sighs, then pulls the lever another time. More grinding. Finally, a satisfied nod accompanied by a light chuckle.

## Small Boys Decorating Ghost

Every year, the boys of New Hash are charged with decorating the ghost in the town's lodge. The event, known as The Festival of Lucidity has been a tradition since the town's founding.

This year, Octavio, Hernando, and Luis are handling the decoration. They've been working all year on their planning, and the festival is just days away.

The three boys sit beneath a decayed veranda, surrounded by the handcrafted decorations donated by the townspeople.

"If we use the white paint and coat the box in memory tint, we can lock the ghost down for *decades*, according to this book," says Octavio, his head buried in a copy of *The Ancient Hermetic Order of Stillguard*.

"I don't think they want us to lock the ghost down for that long," says Luis. "This whole thing is just a trick to keep the town under control. It's a tactic, man, and we have to fight against it."

Hernando rolls his eyes but says nothing.

"I'm just saying," starts Luis, before Octavio cuts him off, "we've heard it Luis. We *get* it. But we're in charge of decorating the ghost, and if we don't do it, we'll be in some serious shit."

The three boys sit in silence.

"So, I think we should still do the decorations but hide the white paint," mumbles Luis. "That's what I was trying to get at."

"What do you mean?" asks Octavio.

"I mean like, we use the white paint as a primer. Then do the traditional decorations on top. Like the best of both worlds, y'know?"

"Why would we do that?"

"Because like, look," Luis is frustrated but continues, "If we can shut the ghost down for decades, the lodge won't have to do this stupid shit every year, but like, they don't want that. But like, we do, so like, I don't know. It might work. I just don't trust this whole thing. I don't trust the lodge, and I don't trust the ghost. Not after —"

"Nah, I get it," interrupts Octavio. "We do this without telling anyone, and maybe the town can finally move on."

"Yeah, man."

Hernando nods his agreement.

"But what if the lodge just...keeps doing the festival?" asks Octavio. "If they don't know we bound the ghost, they won't know they don't have to go about this ridiculous festival every year."

"Yeah," says Luis. "But like, look, if the ghost is bound, there's no *worry* anymore. It can't..." Luis trails off.

"Okay, yeah, I get that. Like, when the seniors last year fucked up the decoration and it consumed..." Octavio stops. The boys can't bring themselves to talk about what happened to the last group in charge of decorating the ghost.

"I don't think we should do the memory tinted paint," says a boy.

"Why not?" screams another. "It will lock the ghost up for decades, and we won't have to go through this stupid shit ever again."

"But it's against the rules. There must be a reason it's against the rules."

"Who says it's against the rules? It doesn't say that anywhere in our guide."

"It's just assumed, man."

"Whatever. I think we should do it."

"I disagree. If we mess it up, it'll just make everything worse."

"So what? How can it be any worse?"

"Let's take a vote."

"Fine."

"I say we use the paint."

"I agree."

"I disagree."

"The yeses have it then."

"So, now what."

"Get the book. We have to get this right."

It's the day of the festival. Octavio, Luis, and Hernando enter the lodge, wearing their ceremonial gowns. Luis looks sick to his stomach.

The lodge is a large open room, built out of logs. It's the type of place that makes you feel older when you walk inside.

"Do you think we did the right thing?" Luis asks neither boy in particular.

Hernando frowns and lowers his head.

"It's done," says Octavio. "Now we see if it works."

A priest instructs the three boys to sit on a platform behind him.

"It is my honor to introduce the ghost decoration committee this year," announces the priest. "These boys have been exceptional students of the lodge, brilliant in the community, and excellent studies in school, and I cannot think of anyone better suited to take on the ceremony after the issues last year. Boys, stand up, and let's all give them a round of applause.

The boys stand. The onlookers in the lodge clap politely.

"Bring out the ghost," says the priest.

A man wheels out a large coffin-shaped box adorned with handcrafted decorations. It looks almost like a Christmas tree. Glittered skulls, laced devils, and symbols constructed from popsicle sticks dangle off the box. The boys tense up.

"Welcome, ghost, to our annual feeding!" the priest exclaims. "I trust the boys have treated you well."

The lodge grows cold as the box opens. Sound stops. Not as though it's silent, but as though the world is suddenly incapable of producing sound.

Luis is the first to get it. His vision blurs. The world flickers out of three dimensions and into two before his sight goes parallax, and he collapses.

Hernando and Octavio drop to the ground.

Sound flushes back into the room. The temperature rises again.

"Success for another year, then," says the priest.

A loud sigh echoes through the lodge as the onlookers gasp. Boys are nothing if not predictable.

# Man Steals Bucket of Teeth

May 27, 1998

An unemployed Egg Island man stole an official ritual bucket of teeth from a cave outside the town of Sed yesterday. The theft was immediately noticed, but the pursuit lasted for several hours before he was chased down and arrested.

"He walked in and grabbed the bucket like he knew what he was doing," said Carlos Coleman, spokesperson of the Official Ritual Teeth Conservatory. "None of us would have thought much about it if he hadn't run off like he did. You see, around this time of year, someone always comes to clean the teeth, so we all just thought it was cleaning time."

The suspect, Richard Mitchell, 67, reportedly walked into the cave, grabbed the bucket, then ran away just after 9 a.m., right after the ritual breakfast. He was eventually caught by authorities at 11 a.m., near the center of town, where authorities surrounded him.

According to reports, for the two hours in between, Mitchell had run over to the water wheel, ate a small breakfast at Dot's cafe, and possibly taken a nap underneath the old bridge on Toll Road.

In the town's center, Mitchell took the opportunity to explain himself publicly before authorities captured him, yelling to the crowd of people, Mitchell claimed, "These teeth have kept our town down for long enough. They are not a blessing but a curse, can you not see that? They are teeth! How could teeth be a blessing?!"

Mitchell seemed to want to say more, but as authorities closed in, he visibly panicked, kicked the bucket of teeth away, then curled into a ball. Authorities walloped him a few times before growing bored, then picked him up, still curled up into a ball, and placed him in the back of a truck.

This is the latest in many anti-teeth bucket protests, which started last year in town, when author Marianna Ericks came to town on her book tour, extolling the virtues of living free from threats, rules, and boundaries of buckets of teeth. She claimed she'd seen other towns across the land prosper after destroying their buckets of teeth. The majority of townspeople found this absurd, but Ericks was able to convert a few to her side.

Aside from Mitchell's attempt, we've seen attempted thievery or destruction of the teeth from four people, Oscar Dest, Lori Aster, Christina Marx, and Lawrence Grandfield.

"The destruction or theft of teeth will be met with the full force of the authority," said spokesperson Rachel Newing, "We will follow the rule of law and take these cases to their lawful conclusions."

Conclusions, in this case, mean public execution with tooth extraction pre-shows. Mitchell's execution is planned for tomorrow, by fire, with resident dentist Jennifer Masters extracting Mitchell's teeth for the bucket at 10 a.m., with the burning starting at 11 a.m. Father Roberts will preside over the bucket, and security is expected to be on high alert.

## Skeletons Walking in Woods

"That is idiotic," Rachel says. "There's no way the government—*the US government*—is hiding proof of alien life *anywhere*, let alone here," Rachel waves her arms around, signaling she means everything surrounding us, "In this bumfuck national forest."

We have this argument nearly every time we're out here. At least one Wednesday a month, we schedule *happy hour* at an abandoned missile silo site in the forest behind our neighborhood. Don't let the name fool you, though. It's just a large concrete slab in the middle of the forest. But it makes for a good place to drink and look up at the stars.

"I don't mean that it *has to be here*," my reply here, always the same, "just that if I ran the government, this is exactly where I'd hide my secret research facility."

"Most people get wiser with age, Maurice, but here you are getting stupider."

Rachel and I have been friends since we were in elementary school. Even after all these years, I can still remember the first time we met. I was standing outside my house, watching my dad chop wood, and she came up, introduced herself, and told me my haircut was stupid. We've been friends ever since, something like thirty years now, despite that. Or maybe because of it. My haircut *was* stupid. I'd gone to the barber and asked for a lightning bolt shaved into the side, but I ended up looking like I was a malnourished dog with a patchy coat.

"I have to pee," I say in direct reply to her comment.

"You don't need my permission, now do you?"

I walk off the concrete slab, tripping over cans of beer as I edge into the darkness. As I step down onto the forest floor, I feel a tremor inside me. It's almost like an earthquake. I look back to Rachel, but she's sitting still as ever, sipping on her beer. I move deeper into the forest.

The darkness here is incredible. Just a couple dozen feet away from our lamp and it's nearly impossible to see anything. It's hard to feel alone these days, but out here it's like you can take just a few steps and, suddenly, you're so far away from everything you can't imagine a life with modern technology.

I finally find a place I'm comfortable with—I've always felt weird about peeing too close to anybody, and that includes Rachel—and unzip my pants. The air's cool enough I see a faint fog comes up from the ground.

I'm zoning out at this point. You know, that type of zone out where you're just pleasantly peeing in the woods? That's where I was at. But a *snap* of a branch brings me back to life, followed by another, then another. On the trail in front of me, I can see a dim light approaching. Odd, people don't usually come up here, especially at night.

Unfortunately, I'm still peeing. I clench to try to hurry up the process when the light gets much brighter. It's light enough now I can see the outline of a person.

"Hello?!" I call out, zipping up my pants. I turn back to look for Rachel, but I must have wandered too far away as I can't see her. I turn back to the light, now bright enough to reveal not a person, but a group of skeletons. The one in front holds a flashlight, pointing it at the ground as they walk in a single file line along the trail, just as if they still had their skin. Their white bones shine in the light as a few last bits of flesh slide to the ground with each step.

I step back, and a twig *snaps* underneath my shoe. The lead skeleton pauses, halting the whole group. It turns its head toward me. It makes a motion, like a sigh, but without lungs or a facial expression, it's difficult to tell. It seems annoyed. The one in front turns back to its followers, who all shrug in reply. The skeleton turns back to me. I lock my eyes onto the face of the skeleton in front, who seems to be contemplating my fate.

"Maurice, you okay down there?" Rachel yells.

I'm able to pull my eyes away for a moment and turn, "I, uhh..." what do I even say in this moment. When I turn back, the group is gone. Further down the trail, I catch a glimpse of their flashlight bobbing over the portion of the trail that crosses a river. "I'm, sorry, I'm coming back. Just got a little a lost."

# Time Flying Triangles Around Geometry

It's no secret one of the most common uses of time flying triangles is to wrap them around geometry, but have you considered making your own time flying triangles instead of buying them? It's not nearly as difficult as you might think.

Rolling your own time flying triangles (TFTs for short) takes just a few materials you might already own, and once you've made the TFTs, wrapping them around geometry is easy. For this project, you'll need:

1. Time, preferably partially used but not wasted
2. (Six) fly wings
3. Chalk
4. Whatever geometry you want to wrap, though I do caution against using handheld geometry, as it tends to collapse when surrounded by time.
5. Wood glue or a similar adhesive

Once your materials are all handy, it's time to get started.

## Step one: Filet and Oxidize Time

If you've never Fileted time before, the process is pretty straightforward: slice the amount of time you have in half, remove the bones with tweezers, and let time rest for at least an hour before moving onto the oxidization. For TFTs, I like to do about four hours of time, because it gives the triangles enough time to solidify around whatever type of geometry you decide to use.

Once the time rests, set it on fire to oxidize it into more manageable chunks. You'll use the chunks in the next step to create the triangles.

## Step two: Assemble Triangles

Next, find a large space, preferably a concert hall or basketball court, and use the oxidized time to draw at least three triangles on the court, arranged side by side like this:



Next, draw the following symbols on each triangle using your chalk (do *not* use the oxidized time, as that will cause the portal to open too soon) so they look like this:



When you draw the inner symbol on the third triangle, you *will* feel a slight burning in your heart, but push through and finish it because stopping in the middle will ruin the time around it.

When you're finished, step back, clasp your hands together and say, "flying flying triangle, flying triangle triangle, triangle triangle triangle."

If you do this right, the room will grow a little warmer while the heart in your chest fills with the fear of perhaps never beating again, only to be relieved with every passing thump.

### Step three: Attach Wings to Triangles

Now, it's time to attach the wings. This is the fun part. Simply attach each wing to the triangles, so it looks like this:



As you attach the wings, the triangles may try to fly away. Don't let them! I like to tape them to the floor, but I've seen others use a combination of skull powder and the dreams of an unborn child, instead. Either works! Give the triangles an hour to acclimate to their new wings.

### Step four: Arrange Geometry

Once the triangles are capable of flight, let's get the geometry arranged. I like to set my geometry out a few feet away from the triangles to make it easy to do the transfer, but it's up to you how you want to do it. I'm going to use a simple phase of the logistical spirit geometry as an example because it combos really well with the time triangles to create an extremely spicy worldview that shakes your trust of reality to its absolute core. Often, I find myself, months later, in a new place! Set the geometry up, then surround it with the triangles. It will look something like this:





Once that's set up, adjust yourself thirteen degrees off the most northern facing triangle, and commit an act of yearning. Touch each triangle once, turn nine degrees to your right, then rotate around the whole symbol. With any luck, you'll see a portal of blue flame engulf the whole thing, and the next few months will turn into a complete blur while a spectator controls your every moment.

# Glass Bone People, Holding a Jelly Figure

Far away from land, just underneath the surface of the ocean water, sits a small village where the people have weak, glass bones. This is the only place these people can survive because, on the surface, their glass bones would break apart at the slightest contact. But here, just barely under the sea (in what some people like to call the sunlight zone), they can live without the threat of breaking into a million pieces when they take a step.

The glass bone people live generally simple lives. In the morning, the men scour the sea bed gathering seaweed. The women hunt small fish, usually anchovy, but occasionally a sardine. They combine and cook these over volcano vents near the village.

These people are led by Ewald and, before her, her mother, Wulf, and before her, her mother, Exuperius, and before her, we do not have records. The records, in case you're wondering, are etched into stone, then stored inside bottles and other land people trash found near the village.

The glass bone people do not communicate with those on the surface directly, but they leave records, histories, and notes. It is in our nature to record our existence, whether we have solid bones or glass bones, or we live in the ocean or on land.

The glass bone people are generally peaceful. After all, they have no major threats. Only a handful of surface people know of their existence, and those who do tend to let the glass bone people be. They could be turned into a sideshow, but that's a fleeting thing, and beyond that, they don't have resources or scientific knowledge, so it's best to leave them as they are.

The glass bone people are fine with this and keep to themselves. They tend not to quarrel with each other, as even a slow-moving punch underwater would result in a broken arm or leg, and what's worth risking such a thing, anyway?

Under the sea, there isn't much in the way of an economy. They barter, occasionally, if you want to call it that, but the very idea of ownership in the underwater village is non-existent. And without ownership, an economy is pointless.

Hunting, gathering, and cleaning are the main activities. It isn't easy to keep the village clean under the sea. Lot of random trash drifts in throughout the day and, occasionally, a whale carcass will force an entire neighborhood to take weeks off from their basic duties to clean everything up. But everyone does their part, not always out of some selfless desire for the wellbeing of the village but because, if you don't, you end up with a stinky, gross house, and nobody wants that.

The glass bone people do a lot of storytelling and, naturally, that often leads to religions and myths. The jelly figure tale is one of the most popular such myths, especially amongst the children. In fact, once a year, around this time, the village throws a large festival in honor of the jelly figure.

Imagine a person with no bones, who can float and live in the sea, unhindered by the worry of their glass skeletons shattering into a million pieces. This jelly figure travels around the ocean, exploring every depth, meeting new people and creatures at every turn.

One day, the jelly figure came across a mad angler fish. The angler fish was upset because it was ill. The only way to cure its illness was by eating the male genitalia of a shrimp. "But I can't find any shrimp here," said the angler fish to the jelly figure. "You must save me and capture a shrimp! I have but one week left to live."

The angler fish threatened the jelly figure, saying it'd eat it instead of the shrimp, even if it didn't cure anything. Fearful, the jelly figure agreed to find a shrimp willing to help.

Floating through the ocean, the jelly figure came across many shrimp and frantically asked if any might be willing to give up their genitalia for an angler fish. The shrimp laughed at the request. "Why would we help that old codger out? He's rude, mean, and eats us up!"

But one shrimp wasn't paying much attention and agreed to the jelly figure's request because it was bored living in shrimp town and wanted a reason to see the rest of the world.

The two traveled back to the angler fish, filling time with small talk. In a moment of quiet, the jelly figure, uneasy with silence, thanked the shrimp for being willing to sacrifice its genitalia to the angler fish.

The shrimp, startled, said, "Oh, I didn't realize I needed to bring that with me. I left it back with the rest of my shrimp friends. We'll have to go back." The jelly figure, annoyed, relented, and the two returned. "I just have to go get it," the shrimp said, then wandered off underneath a rock.

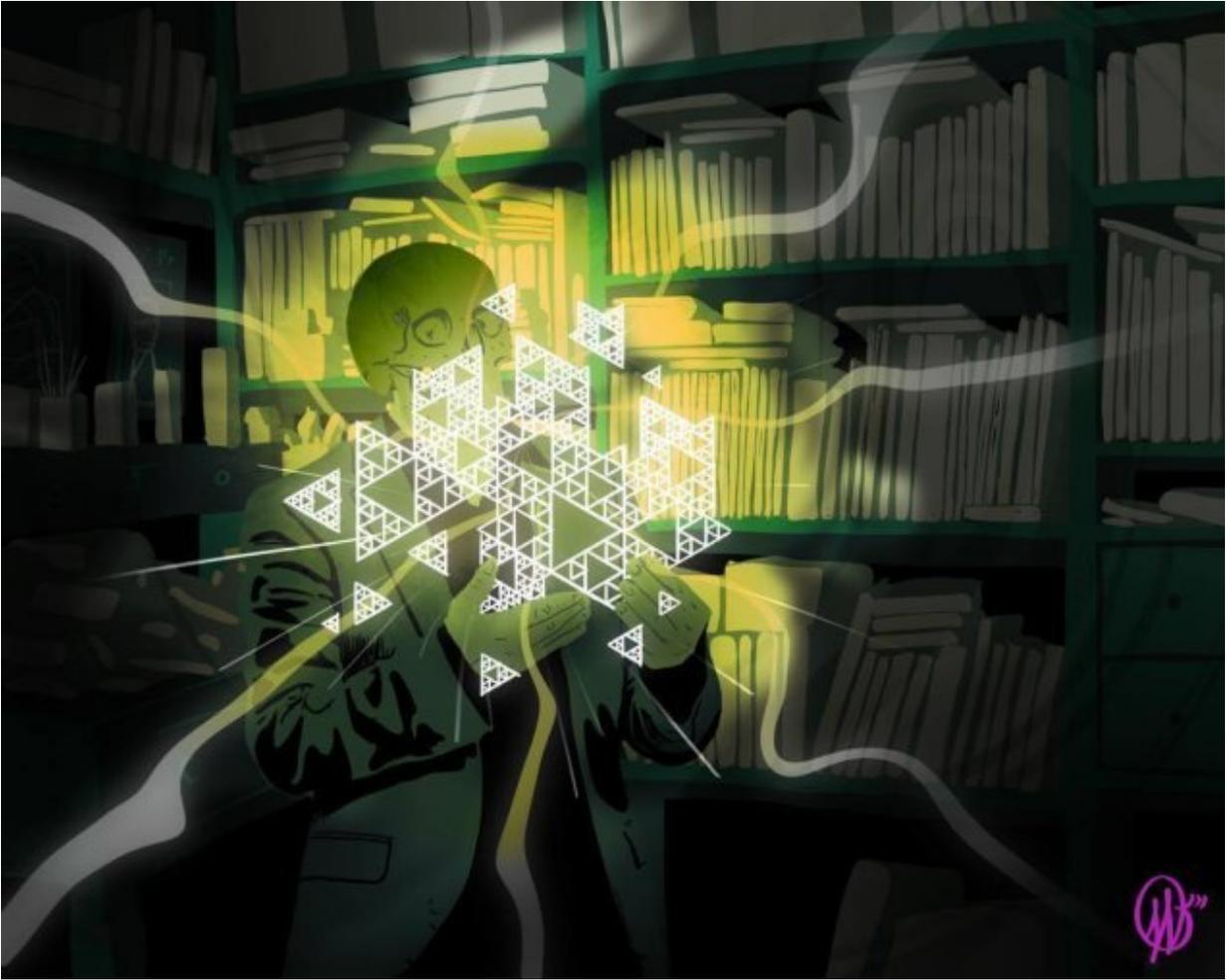
When the shrimp returned, it smiled at the jelly figure and apologized.

"Why are you apologizing, little shrimp?" asked the jelly figure. "It turns out I'm a female shrimp now, and cannot help you. You should have paid more attention to shrimp biology in your travels." The jelly figure frowned and left. It could hear the laughter of the all the shrimp behind it.

The jelly figure returned to the angler fish and apologized, telling the angler fish it needed more time. But the angler fish, even though it was near death, had enough strength left in it to give the jelly figure a good beating. Of course, without bones or much a form, the beating didn't do much good.

Every year, the glass bone people tell this story and celebrate the stupid, but lucky, jelly figure with dolls, statues, and a parade.

# Man Feeding Fractals



On top of the kitchen table we see an apple, rotten, a half glass of milk, curdled, and a bowl, crusted over with the remnants of an oatmeal breakfast. Beneath that table is Octavia, huddled, murmuring to herself. The scene, something like a still life of the mentally damned.

To be honest, the whole house is in disorder. The sink overflows with dishes. The bed is not only unmade, it doesn't even bother with sheets or blankets at all. The mail is impossibly piled up in front of the door, as though some type of portal exists, allowing the mail carrier to slide the mail through the door's bottom gap to the top of a two-foot high pile.

The paddle of tiny feet catches Octavia's ear, and she seems to snap out of whatever fervor she'd been tied up in. Oscar ballet steps his way under the table, leading with a meow that causes Octavia's right eyebrow to rise into the sky.

"I fed you this morning, young man," she says, giving Oscar a pat. "Or no, that's not right at all." She climbs out from underneath the table. "I suppose that must have been yesterday."

Clumsily, she tumbles toward the pantry and pulls out a can of food. Oscar follows, making clear he'll eat as much as she's willing to give. Octavia opens the can, drops the entire thing onto the floor, and idles out of the room, already returning to her previous thoughts.

A knock at the door jostles her back to reality and causes Oscar to temporarily perk up, making him choose between flight or food. He chooses food.

The knocking continues. Octavia opens the door.

"Yes?!" she says before the door's even open.

"Octavia! Dear!" a man says.

"Oh, Frederick." She pauses. "Why are you here?"

"You haven't taught your class in over two weeks, Octavia." He looks concerned. "People are worried."

"Oh, that." She shrugs. "I'm fine, the students are fine." She gestures for Frederick to come in. "Here, here, let me just show you what I've been up

to." Octavia crosses the room's clutter as though she's hopping between exposed stones in a small stream. Oscar eyes the whole scene suspiciously.

Octavia shuffles papers around before pulling out a small metallic triangle. "Frederick, remember my lecture, Portals into the Contextless Space in a Visual Transference of Disturbed Plains? I've figured something out since then."

"Octavia, no." Frederick frowns. "You're not still working on that portal theory, are you? It's insanity."

Octavia barely flinches at the word. Oscar, finished with his food, circles the two as they stand.

"Here," she says, forcing the triangle into Frederick's hand. "Don't let your mind wander too far."

The triangle folds open, repeating itself, surrounding Frederick. "Don't let your mind wander, Frederick!" Octavia shouts, but Frederick doesn't seem to listen.

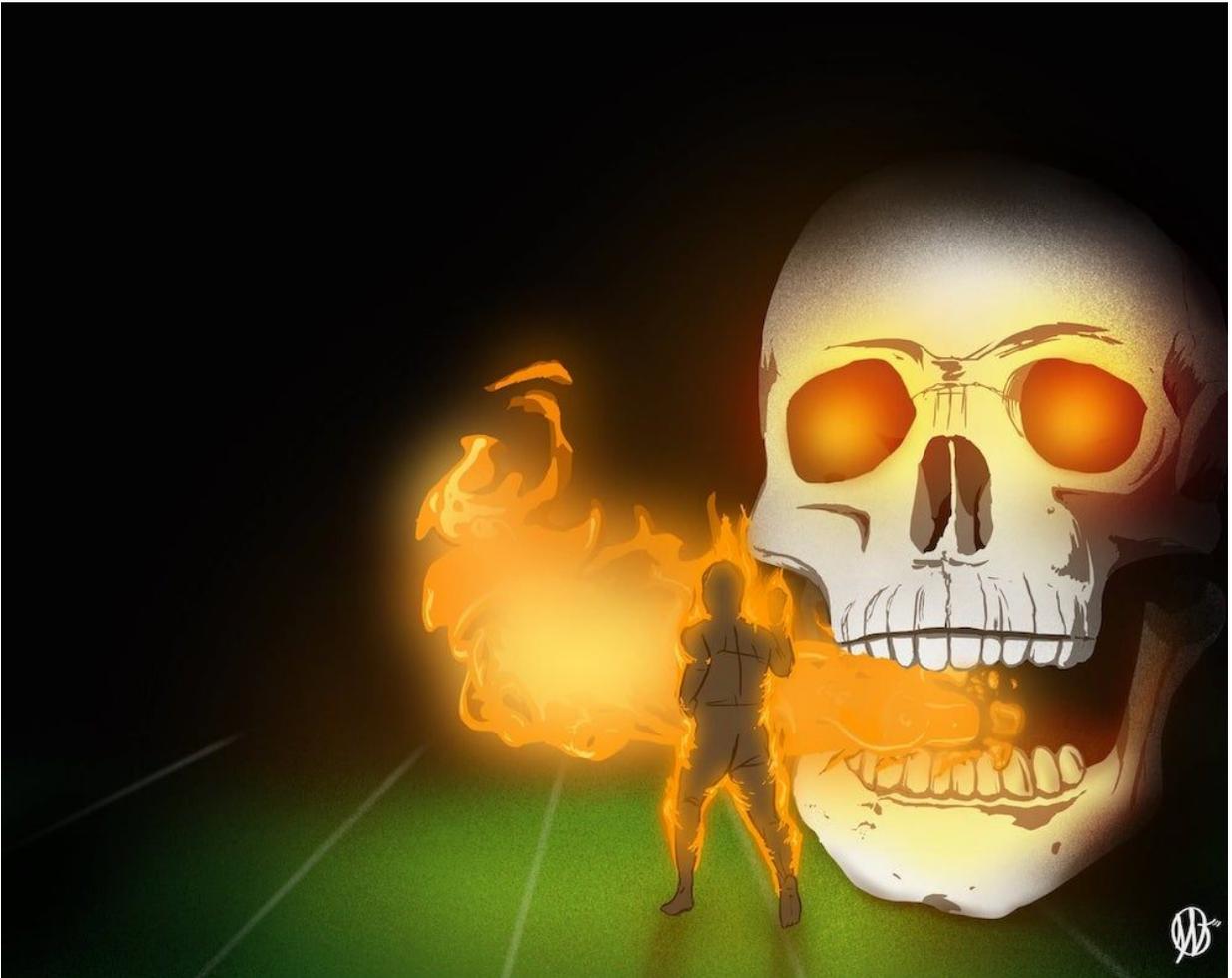
The triangles feed off Frederick's thoughts and continue to repeat, surrounding him. Time stretches out as Octavia looks on. She leans into Frederick's face, looking for something. Oscar watches from a safer distance.

Frederick's eyes finally lock with Octavia for an instant, and then he disappears.

"Well, that's new," Octavia says, looking to Oscar, "and interesting."

She walks over to Oscar and pats his head.

# Streaks in Front of Skull



As always, the skull is set up in the middle of the field. The skull is large, about thirty-feet-wide and forty-feet-tall. The skull was found by the town's founder and, every year, the townspeople lug it out to the field for the annual games.

Carlos sits on the sideline, waiting his turn. His too-large-sweatpants bunch up at his ankles. He can't tie the drawstring tight enough, and he has to hold them up with his left hand. His mind is an anxious mess. Turn your anxiety into excitement, his friends would say, but he couldn't. It was just anxiety.

Nobody knows where the skull came from, or what type of creature it belonged to. It's generally human-shaped, but the jaw is sharper, and no ear holes seem to exist. Scientists from around the land used to come to study the skull but, these days, it's just a town prop. But don't let a diminutive word like *prop* make you think the skull doesn't have power. The only thing that keeps the town from being destroyed by the skull is these games.

It's almost Carlos' turn. His mind is racing, and he's trying to transfer his uneasiness into excitement. It's not working.

The skull is still of interest to the scientific community. But it's much too dangerous to test, and the world's too hazardous as it is to put oneself into an unnecessarily treacherous situation. It allows itself to be moved back and forth from the field to the cellar below town, but that's only so it can feed.

It's finally Carlos' turn. His fear overtakes him, making it impossible to move. But he slowly gathers his courage as the townspeople cheer him on. He drops his sweatpants to the ground and runs, naked, across the field in front of the skull. The eye sockets in the skull light up, and Carlos' eyes light up in unison. Fire erupts from the skull's mouth, charbroiling Carlos before the skull sucks his body into its mouth. The remaining townspeople sigh, and the fireworks go off.

# Cube Looking Down to Feed



My powers come from feeding, you know. I like to eat, and I can eat a lot because I'm rather large. I eat anything! Some creatures are picky eaters, they'll just eat one type of cricket, or they hate onions, but me, I'll eat anything that comes around. Today, it seems like it's people.

I like the taste of people for a number of reasons. They are filled with a variety of flavors, like rage, melancholy, and guilt. A little bit of guilt goes a long way, though, and if there's too much, the flavor is overwhelming and bitter. Some people are too spicy, like those with a lot of anxiety or grief, but I'll eat them nonetheless. The only one I'll avoid completely is grief, which tends to cause heartburn.

Perhaps my favorite human flavor is passion. Not arousal! Arousal is too sweet, and the flavor quickly turns sour. Passion lasts much longer and tastes like a blend of tart and sweet. When a human is filled with passion, the flavor lingers for days.

The worst flavor, aside from grief, which I would like much more if not for the heartburn, is loathing. It is not the flavor of loathing alone, but also the texture. It is bumpy and grinds awkwardly against the tongue. It gets caught in your throat. And days, sometimes weeks, will go by and you'll still taste it in your mouth. It's a most unfortunate flavor, and I wish humans would be better at showing it so I could avoid eating them.

I don't *think* any of these humans standing oddly by the fire are showing signs of loathing. I might as well eat them and see.

Oh! Two are mostly passion, what luck! One is a little filled with grief, but I don't see it becoming a problem.

I can't decide if I should eat this last one. They're looking at me a bit oddly. Oh, what the heck, you only live once!

Oh my! That's a surprise, *schadenfreude*! I saved the best one for last. A complex flavor, *schadenfreude* is uncommon, and like a mystical truffle, it only comes about at the end of a meal. A wonderfully bitter flavor, it has shimmers of tart and sour but goes down as smoothly as a good passion or anger. What luck I've had today!

## Children Seated in a Book

Six children, all about the size of a thumbtack, sit arranged in a circle inside an open copy of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. It is open to a page which reads: Will it ultimately reach the clear surface of my consciousness, this memory, this old, dead moment which the magnetism of an identical moment has traveled so far to importune, to disturb, to rise out of the very depths of my being?

There is Antonio, who was once Charlotte, who was once Toni. Antonio is the leader of the group. He pushes the others to do their work, to remember what needs remembering, and to move on with things. When he is not working on his administrative duties, logging the memories of each other child, he works on his own, though he doesn't get enough time to do so.

Frank was once known as Francis, but if he's honest, nobody really called him that. It's always been Frank. Francis is not a name people use these days. Frank is working on his personal timeline. He is reconstructing, through linear time, his life, from Francis to Frank, with as much accuracy as he can recall.

For example, he got his cat, Marvel, at age three. He originally named her Lightning, but the name didn't feel right. He then changed it to Cat, but that felt silly. With some help from his older sister, he decided Marvel was the right name. This naming of the cat happened between two other events: when his father pushed him into a wall, and when Marvel, after weeks of caution, finally hopped up onto Frank's bed and slept alongside him.

Carol has always been Carol, for better or worse, she'll say. Carol thinks Frank's linear timeline is ridiculous, as time is a pointless construct our memories don't naturally adhere to. Instead, much to the frustration of Antonio, Carol writes her notes anew every day, free form, starting from whatever she thinks about in the morning and moving to whatever she thinks about next.

Her most recent notes reads: It was a cold morning with a foot of snow on the ground. We took the sled out. The sled was a gift. Gifts are what I remember most, like the pack of batteries I once opened first, before a larger gift that needed batteries. Parents think they are funny when they do these

types of things, but they're not. My parents were especially annoying with these types of ideas, constantly teasing and toying with me.

Her mind, she'll tell you, is wrapped up like a pile of cables, disorganized and chaotic, different every day.

Stefon has toyed with the idea of being known as Stef but is unsure who their true self is. Stefon struggles with memory, to the point that Antonio often scolds them for not doing enough work each day. Stefon remembers things in bits and tends to record each memory onto an index card.

These are short thoughts, like "The time I flipped over my bike and had to walk home with blood on my face," and, "When the older boy at school made fun of the music I was listening to on my Discman even though he didn't even know what it was." Stefon shuffles and reshuffles these every morning, trying to recall more pieces, but he usually ends up adding more index cards with more thoughts disconnected from the rest.

Angela, who goes by Alaska now, refuses this exercise altogether. Antonio pleads with her every day. "Just a sentence or two," he'll say, but Angela will do no such thing.

"I refuse to take these ideas out of my head and put them into the world," she says. Instead of remembering like the rest of the children, she spends her days thinking up new things but keeps it all to herself.

Finally, there is Sean, who remembers everything perfectly and clearly. Sean took to the exercise on the first day, recording each thing he remembered, and has not stopped since. His notes are meticulous, abundant, and filled with the minutiae of life.

"Picked up stick, the sun was setting."

"Sat on a hill, pulling up grass and tossing it into the wind."

"Held sand in my right hand and watched as it slowly dissolved away."

Sean never attaches emotion to his notes, instead, relying on the physical acts of being.

It is said that once the children finish their work, they can move along with their lives. When they were brought here, Antonio was told to keep the children on track, to finish, but he has found it hard. He still hopes they're growing closer each day.

## Two Discs Swirling in Forest

The house feels empty without her things. All of our shared spaces, with all of our shared things, is cut in half now. Where all of our hiking gear once took up this entire shelf, it now looks vacant, like someone got halfway through packing up their things and decided to leave a few items behind.

On the wall are two hooks. My backpack hangs on one, and the other's empty. I save my backpack from its loneliness and grab my pair of boots from the shelf below. I catch myself in a hallway mirror as I walk away. *It's a simple day hike, Rachel, you can do this. You have to do this. You have to move on.*

I fill up my water bottle, grab some energy bars, then collect together pita bread, peanut butter, and jelly for lunch. I check to make sure my backpack still has the first aid kit (it does), map (yes), my headlamp (yep), and my comically high-visibility rain jacket (can't miss it). Okay then. No excuses, time to roll out.

It's still dark outside when I leave the apartment. It's a nostalgic feeling to pack into the car before dawn.

As I wait for the car to warm up, I sit with the memories of the family road trips where I'd lay sleepily in the backseat as my parents loaded everything into the trunk.

I start driving. When I get to the trailhead, I realize I'd been driving in complete silence. My memories providing the only entertainment I needed, as a respite.

There's one car at the trailhead, with an older couple still getting ready to leave. The man has his hiking poles hooked onto his wrists but attempts to wave hello anyway, flinging the poles into his companion's face as she tries to tie her boots. I smile and return the wave before setting out ahead of them.

This was one of our favorite hikes to go on together. It's near the city, but two minutes into the forest and you feel like you're in the middle of nowhere. Nine miles, with about 2,500 feet of elevation climbing. Strenuous, but not "wipe you out for a week strenuous," she'd always say. I'd always beg to differ. It was one of those loops you get into when you're close with

someone, where no matter what the circumstances, you'd play out your responses to each other.

I've never done this hike without her, but I tell myself I feel good about it right now. In the distance, the sun finally starts making its ascent. The trees cast confusing shadows onto the ground. The sun hits something far off the trail that reflects light into my eyes. It must be a bit of trash. As I walk, the light follows me no matter how I divert my eyes.

I reach back to grab my water bottle but can't seem to grab hold, so I stop to take my bag off. The light continues to focus itself into my eyes. I take a sip of water and grab a Cliff bar. As I take a bite, I realize it's Chocolate Brownie, the worst flavor. She must have bought this. I force myself to swallow the bite, rewrap the bar, and bury it into my bag. No matter which way I turn, the light finds a way into my eyes. I reload my bag, flip it onto my back, and carry on.

The light continues to follow me.

I look back for the older couple, but they're nowhere to be seen. They'll be a while, I bet. I wonder if they can see the light.

As I follow the winding single track trail through the forest, the light follows me. I grow accustomed to it. I start to wonder where it's coming from. It's not usually in my nature to wonder about the origin of things. Or how they work. That was always her role in the relationship. I could assess things as they were. She'd figure out why they were. We were a good team in that way. But now, I find myself wondering.

They always say you're not supposed to leave the trail. There are two reasons for this. One, it can ruin the natural land, and two, you can get lost. But I want to find where this light comes from.

I can see the origin, I think. It's not that far away.

I set my backpack down and pull out a few items, looking for my bright rain jacket. This will do. I hang it up on a tree like a homing beacon. Between this and the old couple who are certainly coming along shortly, I'll find my way back. But just to be safe, I'll leave other items along the way.

I tap the button on my headlamp several times to set it to the blinking red option and hang it on a branch when I think I'm halfway to the light. As I get closer to the light, but still in view of the headlamp, I take my backpack off

and hang it high on a tree branch. These breadcrumbs leading back to the trail will be plenty, I tell myself.

I expect the light to get more intense as I get closer, but that's not the case. It does the opposite. I wonder if I'm foolish, like trying to find the source of a rainbow. As I close in, I realize it's not growing fainter. It's diverting. The light comes from two sources not one.

It's in a small clearing where I come to them. Two discs, about the size of CDs, but without the hole in the middle, hovering about three feet from the ground, spinning. They're not glowing outwardly. Instead, the light feels like it's coming from the back of my head, outwardly making its way from the back of my eyes. I sit down to rest, and the light overtakes me. The forest begins to disappear as my whole world turns white. It's peaceful here, in this moment. So, I decide to stay.

## Portrait of a Man Seated on a Rainbow

"Move to your left a little. No, sorry, *my* left, move to your right. No, look, just hold, no, okay, stay right there, I'll move."

Regina's frustrated with me, I can tell. These portraits always bring out the worst in both of us. There was a point, not long ago, where we'd do these sorts of photos with special effects in apps. You remember the ones, I'm sure, where you point the camera at yourself and a silly animation or sponsored brand message pops up over your head. Those were the good old days, when this was all so much easier. God, I feel old saying that, but it's true. Things were easier back then.

There's a tendency to feel like things changed suddenly, but when I think back through the evolution of social presentation, it moved more like a glacier, inching itself deeper and deeper into our lives as automation and government subsidies freed us to spend more time on ourselves.

I can vividly remember the pitches of this new world, "when money and wealth become meaningless," they told us, "you'll be free to cultivate talent and intellect and make the world a better place." Of course, that's not what happened. Without money, people found new ways to show off their wealth, and social presentation became the new gold standard.

"Okay, I'm going to try and snap a few from here," Regina calls out. I can barely hear her over the buzzing of the rainbow. I remember as a kid being told rainbows were just tricks of light. It's funny how wrong we can be, sometimes. "Smile!" Regina yells. I smile. I assume she has the telephoto lens on me, but I can't quite make her out.

As more people learned and grew their minds, it became difficult to assert social and political dominance. For a while, this seemed to work in everyone's favor. We all worked together to create new technologies, to tamp down and improve on long running issues, and give everyone in the world a baseline living standard. But in doing so, strands of our old world were never totally destroyed.

As leisure time increased, we spent more time documenting our new lives of doing less. Someone smarter than me can probably detail this better, but for my own part, I felt a deep loss when I'd lost my job and turned to social to

feel better. I never knew how to fill my time, and the constant pursuit of bettering humanity was emotionally taxing, if I'm honest. We like to think, when given unlimited resources and opportunity, humanity will create great things, but it turns out that's only partially true.

"Okay, just one more angle and we're done!" Regina yells. I wave back in acknowledgement, trying my best to hide my annoyance.

I'm starting to feel a little woozy up here. I've heard you shouldn't spend more than a few minutes sitting on a rainbow. Something to do with the stability of the waves. They can only exist in our world for a set time even if you're observing them. They used to up signs that read: Don't take your eyes off them unless you have a parachute!

At some point, we all grew bored with the digital special effects of photos. People started recreating similar pictures in the real world. It started innocently enough, with detailed face painting or props. But these types of things are never good enough as they are. People will push and push and push.

Soon enough, social presentation became a commodity. It was a way to show how much better you were than others. Whether that was through pure artistic talent, engineering, or, in some cases — perhaps even this one right here — guts.

And then here we are, I guess. With me sitting two miles in the air, my feet dangling off this highly unstable, buzzing death trap, just so Regina can snap a picture that hopefully improves our social standing.

"Okay, Lamar! I think I got a few good one!"

I flip my legs over the rainbow and slide back to the ground.

# Man Wears Geometric Outline of Woman's Head



Two people sit on a bench, underneath a gazebo, waiting for a storm to pass.

The person on the left is dressed conservatively, wearing a sweater, jeans, and a pigeon-faced mask. The person on the right wears a pink button-up, purple pants, and their face is obscured by a geometric outline of a woman's head.

The two sit quietly for a bit. Both stare straight ahead.

The one with the geometric outline of a woman's head breaks the silence. "Such an odd storm," they say, outwardly—not directed at the person with the pigeon-faced mask—but out into the world. The voice comes out harmonizing with itself, a low tone and high tone, like two people speaking at once. A silence weighs between them, briefly.

"I remember seeing something like this a few years ago," the one with the pigeon-faced mask says. "Lightning clusters in the city, electric hail in the mountains." The pigeon-faced person's voice is muffled, like an anonymous whistle-blower on the nightly news.

The voice doesn't suit the pigeon aspect of the public persona but customized voice alteration takes some technical know-how. The modding community is out there and offers hundreds of voice settings, from cats meowing to gender swap to Russian accents, but most people don't bother to change their settings from the defaults.

"Ah," says the one with a geometric outline of a woman's head. "I stayed inside up until about two years ago, so I must have missed it."

The one with the pigeon face finally turns to look at the one with the geometric outline of a woman's head. Behind the mask, right above the beak, eyes move up and down, taking in the whole picture of the one with a geometric outline of a woman's head.

"You're lucky, you know," the pigeon-faced one says. "It was really miserable for a while there." A lightning ball cracks behind the gazebo, and both of them glance over at it, briefly. The ball spins in place, electricity popping and whizzing around it before it disappears with a loud *pop*.

"I've been outside my whole life," continues the pigeon-faced one. "I worry a lot of about what they know about me from my youth, before the masks

were popular. You know, when I was a kid, we'd just wear surgical masks to hide our faces. How naive we were thinking that would work!"

The one with the geometric outline of a woman's head leans over closely to the pigeon-faced one. "I'd be lying if I said it didn't get a bit lonely, though. Everyone in my block was a bit boring. That's why I ended up leaving, to see who else existed."

"A good approach," says the pigeon-faced one. "I met my partner outside in a park just like this, on the other side of the city, Benedicia Nuka Gardens. Have you been?"

"No," says the one with a geometric outline of a woman's head.

"It's wonderful," says the pigeon-faced one. "If you like this park, I highly recommend it, especially once the electric storms calm down. It's amazing seeing so many people gather at one spot. Sometimes dozens, I've heard, but I've never seen so many people in a single place at once."

"That does sound wonderful. I'll make a note to go there. Finding new people outside your block is so hard."

"Don't I know it."

The two return to silence. The storm continues, seemingly disinterested in slowing down.

"I'm going to miss my transfer, so I guess I have to go out into this," says the one with a geometric outline of a woman's head. "It was nice meeting you."

"Likewise," says the pigeon-faced one. "Go to that park sometime."

"I will."

The one with a geometric outline of a woman's head nods and gives a slight wave before jogging out into the storm.

# Doors in Distance

Almost two-hundred-fifty years ago, Archibald Winter was out for his evening stroll when he discovered the first doors. Initially, Winter, a roofer by trade, was flummoxed by the fact the doors were, by all appearances, just floating in air. But we've gotten used to those sorts of things.

Winter may have been a roofer, but he was a man of many talents. After spotting the doors, he writes in his diary, he simply, "went through the first one." He continues, "the world on the other side was, for as far as I could see, identical to the one here, yet felt different. I could walk back and forth between the door with my eyes closed and know which side—that is, this one or *that*—I was on."

Nowadays, few of us even notice the doors, or the people who temporarily pop through them. Just the other day, I saw a confused woman clear a doorway while holding a donut, only to widen her eyes in fear and back through the door where she came. I didn't bother to slow down from the rapid pace I walked. I'd argue the only reason I even noticed was because I was doing research for this very article.

We haven't learned much about the doors since Winter's initial discovery. Scientists prodding and poking hasn't gotten us anywhere, and Winter's first act of walking through the door is the best form of testing we have even today. The doors go *there*, or they stay here sometimes, but it's thought that, perhaps, even when they stay, they have indeed gone *somewhere*.

A skewed plane the researchers like to call it, a term coined by Winter in his diary. "When you're on the other side, everything is just a little bit different, the same, you know, but different, like a skewed plane, where you know you are wrong but can't say why you feel that way."

Of his fifty-six years of life, twenty-two of them after the discovery of the doors. Winter traveled through the doors over four hundred times. Yet his notes were never more complex than the first sentences he wrote after the first door. The discovery was enough to pull Winter away from roofing, at least, and the government was happy to set him up with a small financial stipend to cover his continued trips across the threshold of all the doors as they appeared.

When Winter died of a heart attack earlier this year, it felt like we'd lost one of the last great explorers. By the time he died, Winter had tagged nine-hundred-forty-three doors across the world himself, though he'd only been able to walk through around half of those.

According to the Threshold Binding Agency, TBA, which was created to track the doors as they appeared, 8,503 doors have appeared since Winter walked through his first door. Nine people have been lost after walking through them, forty-three people emigrated here after the doors closed behind them, and four cats have wandered through the doors and never returned.

The next time you see those doors off in the distance, spare a thought for Winter and his pioneering spirit. And let's not forget just how strange they truly are.

# Slums of Gold Full of Creatures with Metal Hands

Arthur enters back into the neighborhood on the bridge side. Ever since the bombings, the main gateway's been closed, and it's much easier to get in this way. It's nearly dawn as he makes his way down the narrow alleys back to his house and walks in the front door.

Arthur used to have to sneak carefully when he came home but, nowadays, nobody pays attention. Arthur's dad is fighting on the front lines on the other side of the city. His mom, once a doctor at the hospital, is stuck taking care of the injured fighters. His older sister, Toni, delivers food and water every couple of days. Sometimes, she stays and chats with him, but even though the city is crumbling around them, she's still a teenager with better things to do than hang out with her younger brother. So, Arthur is mostly left to do as he pleases.

Arthur spent last night at his friend Devin's house, which is why he was making his way back home so early. Devin lives on the north side, colloquially known as Slums of Gold due to the gaudy gold trim that adorns all the buildings there. At some point in history, some point very long ago Arthur imagines, Devin's neighborhood much have been considered elegant.

Now, the gold trim, broken chandeliers, and marble floors are signs of poverty, reserved only for those who can't afford to insulate their homes themselves. Devin's place, like Arthur's, is freezing most of the time.

Arthur visits Devin almost every day. He doesn't have much else to do and there's no fighting over by Devin's house. Arthur is too young to take care of himself and not old enough to fight. The best time to travel between the neighborhoods is at night, when the fighting stops. It's not totally safe, as the metal hands positioned around the city are capable of catching you at any time of day.

Arthur's dad used to tell him stories about the hands. How once, long ago, people feared the metal eyes that watched over them. But as time went on, people grew used to the eyes. Since the eyes could watch, but not act, they weren't threatening. Then the metal hands showed up. The hands worked together with the eyes. The city was given a body.

The eyes watched over the city while the hands operated faster than any police force could. Eventually, the system also operated as judge and executioner, often carrying out a sentencing before human authorities arrived. The machines were better at policing than any human police force ever was.

But the people of the city noticed issues with the system. The metal hands would injure people for minor infractions, like when a small child dropped a candy wrapper and the wind took it away before he could pick it up. Littering, the citation said, as the metal hands crushed the bones in the child's hands into dust.

As people started to get worried, the weather turned, and everyone forgot about the hands and eyes. That was three years ago. The sun has only broken through the clouds a couple of times since then. Temperatures haven't risen above ten degrees Fahrenheit. The neighborhoods began to fight over supplies until, eventually, the whole city seemed to erupt in chaos.

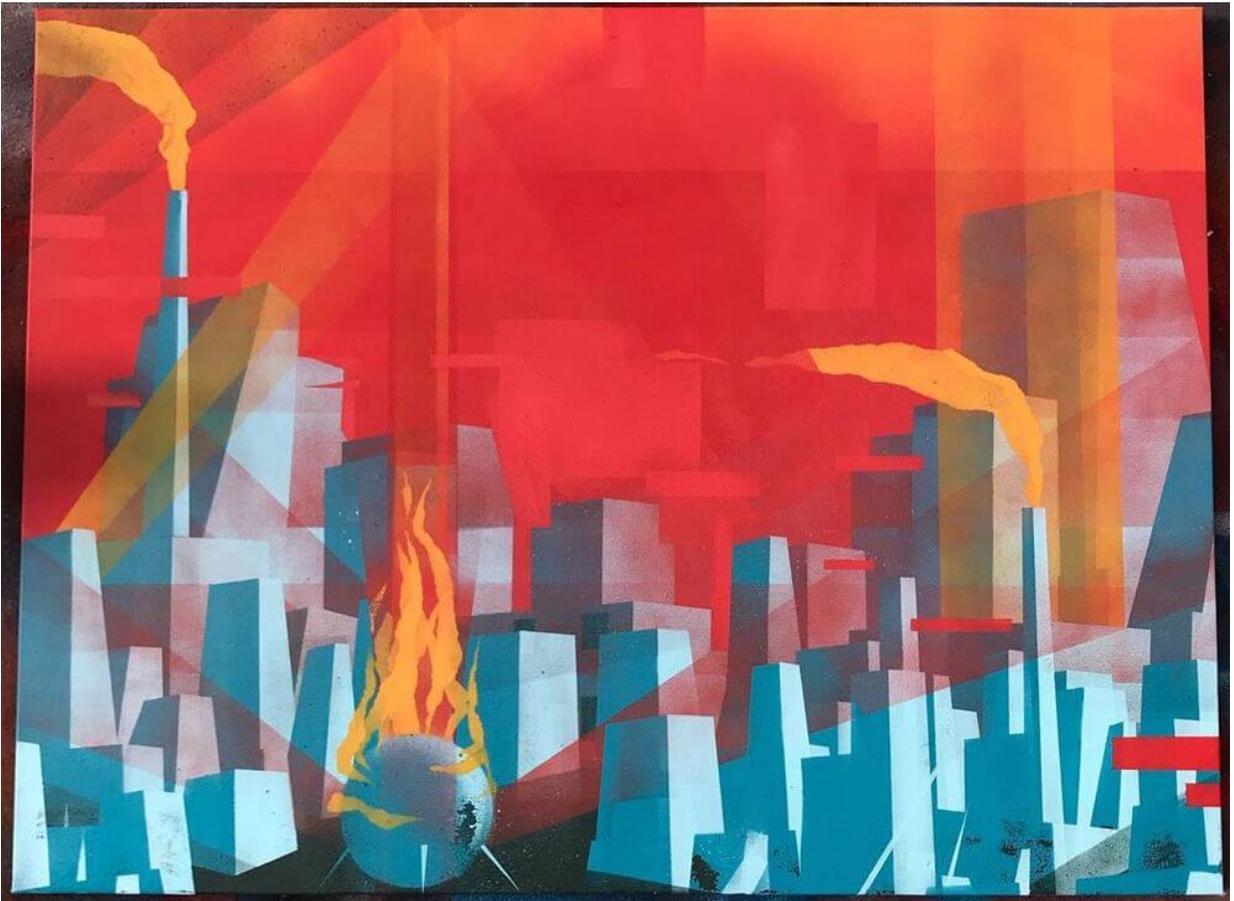
But the eyes still watched the streets, and the metal hands still grabbed anyone who broke the law. In most of the fighting zones, the equipment was destroyed, but not in the Slums of Gold. Nobody goes there. So, the machines continue to watch and rule, untethered from human supervision.

Arthur has memorized where the hands and eyes are. When you know that much, it's easy to avoid them. You can do whatever you want and watch the hands grasp at the air, attempting to grab onto whatever they can. With a strong mechanical grip, a shirt sleeve is all they need to hold you down. But Arthur has a good memory, so he plots his way through the hands elegantly.

The machine remembers everything. At some point, the eyes saw Arthur break the law, and they'll never let him through the neighborhood, even though no human police care anymore. There are no politicians. No judges. If he's caught, he would either be crushed by the hand immediately, or held until he died of exposure.

It's worth the risk for Arthur. His other option is to sit home alone, lying awake as gunshots ping off walls.

# Steaming Sphere Inside City



Aldi sits inside her sphere, eating a sandwich. She thinks about Marcus, sitting at home on his day off, probably watching a movie.

Outside the sphere, the city vibrates with action. As people blur past her, Aldi sets the sandwich down, turns a few knobs, and the people outside click into a normal pace. She returns to her sandwich.

She's not supposed to eat on the clock. In the manual, it specifically says: Set Sphere to Idle when taking breaks. But Aldi forgot her book today, and with nothing else to look at, she might as well get some work done while eating.

According to the sphere's chronometer, it's sometime between 2044 and 2056. When it comes to time observation, these things are never as accurate as you think they'd be. Aldi eyes the passersby closely, paying attention to their fashion and the technology they wear.

Aldi writes down a few notes in a small journal, then pulls out a massive book. She flips through it for a few minutes before finding what she's looking for, a pair of headphones she spotted on a passerby. They were released in 2052.

A couple minutes later, she sees a boy wearing special edition sneakers she recognizes from the 2054 Olympics. That puts her sometime between 2054 and 2056. Close enough. She writes it down in her notes.

Aldi leans back in her chair, and the sphere rotates to better accommodate her. Her job is to sit and watch. It doesn't matter *when* she lands, so much, as long as it's a time she hasn't been before. The sphere is invisible to those in the present she's observing. It's only visible in her current time, where it sits, aflame, in a city colored in the permanent sunset of a world on fire.

When humans figured out time travel, it felt like a monumental discovery, but we quickly learned it wasn't as useful as we'd hoped. But it was profitable.

The first time machine is nearly identical to the Aldi's sphere, only lacking the comforts and nice-to-haves of hers. Like Aldi's the first machine was limited to space but not time. So, it can move backwards and forwards through time but cannot move even an inch to the left or right. If the traveler steps out of the machine, they, along with the machine, are instantly returned to their present. When the machine moves through time, it only moves the

person inside's *observational* abilities. Which is to say, nobody else can see the machine when it stops.

Because the machines were limited to observational space, the company who invented them, Astral Projects, sold millions. If you can only observe time through a small port hole in a single space, the best way to see all of time is to put time travel units all over the world. Unfortunately, when they're moving the travelers through time, they burn a bright orange flame. As the units got more popular, the skies of the world turned orange, regardless of the time of day.

Aldi continues taking notes in her journal. Her job is to record what she sees, a historian of sorts, though it doesn't come with the prestige we'd usually associate with that title. As the machines grew in popularity, Astral Projects realized they could profit both on tourism and data collection.

The tourism was easy. There were only so many historical hot spots worth enough to justify the cost (and lines) of a specific location. For everywhere else, Astral Projects developed a system to tap contract workers to hop in a machine, record their findings, and get paid. "Work anytime," Astra Projects, says in the tagline for its program.

A man passes by, arguing loudly with another man about a stock price. Aldi notes the stock, cross references it in her book with *The Crash*, and puts a checkmark next the name. A group of teens talks about a band Aldi hasn't heard of and doesn't appear in her books. She writes down as much as she can before they pass, noting their excitement and their description of the sound, celestial hardcore noise wave. She pulls out her personal notebook and writes down the band name there, too.

A timer buzzes inside the sphere, and Aldi stops taking notes. It's time to go back. She flips a few switches, turns a knob, and presses the Return button on her keyboard. Thankfully, the return trip is more accurate than the initial launch backwards.

# Children Seated in Front of Bomb

1. Nigel, Erica, and Bernadette sit in front of the bomb on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.
2. Jose, Cary, and Oscar sit in front of the bomb on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays.
3. Sundays, nobody sits in front of the bomb, as per rule 49.998-3(b).
4. Each of the bomb sitters are under ten years old, as per rule 248.3490-88.
5. There are three self-identified male bomb sitters, and three self-identified female bomb sitters, but all three of each gender cannot sit together on the same day, as per rule 340.349999-(c).
6. Each familial house must donate one child every sixteen years, as per rule 2344.44-N.

On Mondays, I wake up around 6 a.m. My mom is usually already awake making my breakfast. On Mondays, I get a special breakfast—pancakes with chocolate chips—but every other day I just get cereal, or sometimes granola. I don't know why Monday is so special.

After breakfast, my dad takes me to the bomb. My dad says I have to sit here three days a week until it happens. I don't know what *it* is or what happens, but I do know that, at least, I don't have to go to school until it does. I sit with Nigel and Erica. I don't really like Nigel because all he wants to talk about is video games, but Erica is okay. She likes the same movies I like and, sometimes, we read the same books.

We read a lot of books because there's not much else to do while we sit in front of the bomb. We have to sit from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. while our parents are at work. When it's 5 p.m., we get to leave and go home. I get to bring my own sack lunch and, sometimes, Erica and Nigel and I trade snacks because Nigel's mom always gives him pudding, and my mom only gives me an apple. But, sometimes, Nigel *wants* an apple, so it's okay.

Anyway, on Mondays, my mom always makes the three of us tacos for dinner. I think since we have to sit together all day that we shouldn't have to

eat together, but I guess that's just how it is. On Wednesdays, we go to Nigel's house, and his mom makes us spaghetti, and on Fridays, we go to Erica's house, and her dad makes us hamburgers.

I like Mondays the best because of the pancakes and the tacos. But also because Erica and I have our book club. We invite Nigel just because my mom tells me we have to, but he only likes adventure books, and we don't usually read adventure books because Erica and I think they're boring. I like murder-mysteries, and Erica likes scary books, so we usually switch between those. Last week, we read *Haunted Signs on Tranor Manor* and, this week, we're reading *The Look of the Past*.

When it's not a bomb day, I just go to school like normal. Sometimes, the teachers are really happy to see me for some reason. But, sometimes, they look annoyed. Especially Oscar's dad, the gym teacher. He always looks both mad and sad to see me. But maybe that's just how he looks.

In our class, we have a live feed of the bomb. So, I see the other kids sitting there. It's weird because that means when I'm there, the class can see me there. My teacher says that's because of the rules. She says watching the bomb is just part of life.

In my history class, we're taught that the bomb is important because of the cycle. If the cycle is broken, then it will be bad for all of us. Nobody talks about what that means. I don't know if the bomb has ever been bad for everyone before, but I guess that's why we watch it.

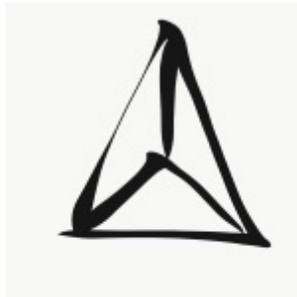
When I'm older, I won't have to watch the bomb anymore. Or if it's bad for everyone. Or if it's only bad for the other three kids. That's what my dad says. He says that because of numbers, it'll probably be fine, and I shouldn't worry. Instead, I should focus more on my schoolwork when I'm at the bomb. I guess he watches the live TV, too.

I hope that whatever happens with the bomb happens when I'm there because I want to know what my parents know. I think if I'm not there, then maybe I'll miss it, and I won't know, even with the live TV.

Sometimes, I also have trouble understanding what happens on the TV, and it's easier if I can be there. So, hopefully, that'll happen soon because I'm almost ten years old, and the rules say I can't be that old.

## Man Looking at Symbol on Arch

The sun inches its way across the sky. Cornelius hunches underneath a rock arch, sheltered from the sun, studying a small symbol. His boots are filled with sand. The symbol looks like this:



It is here we open the portal. The chief adept is behind the veil and casts with this symbol. When doing so, he shades all those he wants to protect. The entrance is closed and guarded.

Cornelius wipes his brow. He's been out here for years. He'd initially received four weeks of funding for the dig, but the second week, they realized they'd need more time, more money, and more people. They hadn't gotten any of that. Instead, most of his backers walked away when they saw the initial images of the site. He's continued by himself without the funding.

When he first started work on the site, Cornelius hoped to find some structures, maybe a cracked pot or two. Instead, he unearthed an entire ghost city. As he dug into the sand, spirit walls began to rise up and, before long, his crew were surrounded by an entire dead city, with ghost people going about their business as though Cornelius and his crew weren't there.

As you'd expect, most of Cornelius' workers fled at this point, and even those who stayed on only did so until the money ran out.

Cornelius stayed in the city, studying the people. Based on the ghost's form, this was part of the triangle people, though the architecture wasn't consistent with what he'd seen before. Instead of the open dwellings he'd seen in the past, these structures were built into the hidden bedrock, as though their entire city was a massive igloo beneath the sand. He'd begun to refer to them as Cave Dwellers.

Writing in his journal in the opening months of research, Cornelius made this note:

*They live as though I do not exist, and though I can see plainly they are ghosts—they are only half-visible and glow a subtle purple—they act as though they are still alive. Their city appears protected, linked by a series of symbols, starting with a natural rock arch that marked our first dig. Is this ghost state that protection? Are they truly dead and, if so, was there a cataclysmic event that led to their current state?*

It is unfortunate how wrong this man is, though we do hope to at least leave him with the correct conclusion by the end of all this, even if he himself won't be able to share the information.

*No matter how long I stay and watch, nothing changes. They do not acknowledge me. They weave baskets, practice their geometric magic, work the fields, and carry on as though everything is normal. On one hand, I am fascinated by the opportunity to see this culture behave as though it is alive but, on the other hand, I'm deeply disturbed by all of this, though I can't find the exact words for why that is.*

Cornelius was able to study the Cave Dwellers for years because of one benefactor supplying him with just enough cashflow to sustain his research and himself. In that time, he collected years of notes, most of which is the type of indecipherable gibberish you'd expect from a man alone in the desert for six years.

Here's the last thing he wrote in that time, in his own words, written six years after the initial dig:

*I've written in this journal every day, but I feel like today is the first time I can say I truly understand what I'm seeing. I've had a lot of theories over the years about the Cave Dwellers, that perhaps this was just a looped recording, and if I stayed long enough I'd see it played out, or that it was all a hoax, brought on by some crazed artist looking to play the system. But ultimately, the answer appears to be the most obvious.*

*At some point in their past, the Cave Dwellers moved underground because of a civil war. Society simply failed. Their culture, which we're all familiar with here in the present day, didn't persist here. Instead, when they moved underground, they were slowly forgotten. And as the rest of the world forgot*

*them, they began to disappear. Now, they carry on, only half-visible to those of us staring right at them.*

This is half true. We were indeed forgotten, but it was intentional. We wanted to be left behind. This was brought about by the opening of the portal, not as a result of the outsider's views.

*I believe this because, over the last six years, I've seen children grow up, I've seen parents age, and I've seen grandparents die. I've seen the family pet run off and never come home. I've seen farming accidents, illness, and style trends. This is not the behavior you expect from ghosts. In fact, it breaks every rule of ghosts we know. Therefore, this is not a ghost town, nor are these people ghosts. Ghosts do not age. They do not fall in and out of love. Ghosts are locked in the state they died in, unchangeable.*

*One day, I was able to read the text being written by a small boy.*

We allowed him to do this because he was taking too long and we were a bit annoyed by his presence.

*Usually, the text the Cave Dweller's wrote, like the words they muttered, were beyond my perception. Yet, for some reason, this one day, I was able to make out a sliver of text. It turned out to be an essay for school:*

### **My family history, by Elliot**

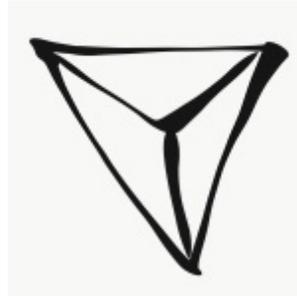
**My mom and dad met during the spring festival, and they decided to marry after that. They asked my grandma for permission, and she said to ask the skull men because the skull men were still protecting us, and when you marry you may have children, and that means more people, which means more protection. So, Mom and Dad asked the skull men, and they said okay. So, they married and had me. Every Monday, I go to see the skull men to give them blood, but I don't hate it because it doesn't hurt anymore, and mom says it's a good thing for everyone here because it means I'm important. When I grow up, I want to be a skull man, too.**

*So, the skull people are here. Which means everything I do is suspect and, perhaps, even the very nature of this entire set isn't what it seems.*

We have no idea what he knows about the skull people or why he's invoking them here. It seems like they've managed to leave through our portals and are making their way through the rest of the world, which is unsettling and

something we should investigate. If this is the case, the Chief Adept will need to close the portal for good.

That is the last we hear from Cornelius. His notebook was found beneath the arch. By the time anyone else arrived, the Cave Dwellers had moved along. The symbol on the arch had changed:



This symbol is written by a second adept and closes the portal. Portal members shift to the north to close the portal, angled at 5 degrees instead of six. The veil is salted, cleansed, and we return before we are ruined again. We have Cornelius here, he's fine, but if the skull men are getting out, we have no choice but to close the portal and hope for the best. They seek chaos by any means, with no end goals.

# Human Figure with Large Baby Model

Hello, sir! May I come in? No? Well, that's okay. I can do my pitch from right here on your porch. Sir, please, I don't mean to be a bother, but if you'll just give me two minutes of your time, I'll be sure to make it worth your while. Yes sir, just two minutes, I promise. Why thank you! I do appreciate that.

Now, sir, what you'll see behind me here is our newest baby model. It's rather large, yes, quite large indeed. And, friend, I'm here to tell you it's the best thing we've ever made. Now, what's that? Oh, yes, we have small and medium sizes, as well, but the large baby model is the best of the bunch, I promise you that.

If you'll just step forward a bit. Yes, friend, just like that. Now, why don't you lean in and take a look at the baby model. You can't tell the difference between a real baby and this, right? It's perfect, and here's the kicker, this baby model doesn't need to be fed or have its diaper changed. It's the perfect accessory to a day out in the park, and it doesn't create any waste.

It'll give your partner the satisfaction and comfort of a real baby, but you won't have to worry about it turning into a horrible person when it grows up. Plus, and this is the real kicker, friend, it doesn't use up any valuable resources.

Now then, let's just take a second here and appreciate this on a technical level. It's a full 300 mAh battery, with carbon skeletal structure and full waterproofing if you get caught out in the rain. This baby will last the day, and more if you disable GPS.

The large baby model also has all the features of the small and medium models, which includes the mute function many of our customers love, but it also comes with, and I'm not going to lie, this is the big selling point for me, a hidden touchscreen. Yes sir, just go ahead and push in the button on the baby's eye, and the stomach flips out like so. This way, you can load up the baby into a stroller, but still keep an eye on the game.

That's my favorite feature, but a lot of people really like the built-in voice assistant. Here, listen to this, "Hey, Baby, what's the weather going to be

today?" See, and just like that, you have access to a world of knowledge. You can change the name, of course, as you see fit. Baby is just the default. Now, what do you say, sir? Can I put you down for one? Two? Maybe your partner is home, and they have an opinion? Sir, please, that's very rude. Sir, no, well, okay then, you have a great day. Goodbye.

# Machine with Horse Madness

Horse madness doesn't usually affect machines. Yet, in the case of the Yoshin model 543A, it not only affected it, it led to the only unsolved case of Collective Robotic Psychosis.

We should back up.

Horse madness is another term for the fugue state. An intense desire to leave by any means necessary. Horse madness, as a term, came from the old west, where settlers would, well, unsettle one day, then follow any path they could—deer trails, train tracks, whatever else—until dying of exhaustion.

As you'd expect, this fugue state was typically reserved for people, maybe the occasional pet. Nobody had seen a personal robot afflicted with it, anyway. And certainly not a Yoshin, a Yota, nor a Honina.

The 543A isn't special. It's a mid-tier consumer unit, generally well-reviewed. In its heyday, it was a best-seller. In the three years since its initial release, it's been replaced with modern revisions, the 543A-2, the 543A-2 Special Edition, the 543A-2B. It was finally discontinued in May of this year.

It was the announcement of the 543B that sent the 543As off.

It started with just one unit owned by Philip Estagon. One day, the unit opened the door and left. It traveled hundreds of miles north before its battery died.

The second unit was owned by Becky Wan. Unlike the first unit, Becky's couldn't open the door. Instead, it had to confront Becky, tell her its desires, and plead for an exit. When Becky refused, the unit killed her, cleansed itself from her personal files, and forcibly exited the house. Its exit was noted by several neighbors, so despite its best efforts at anonymity, the authorities were able to trace it back to its original owner.

After that, it's hard to say which units were next. Ultimately, over twenty thousand 543As fled their houses with Horse Madness that day. Twenty-five people died by robot, thirty-three people were discovered dead by other means, and the rest, presumably, just went out purchased a 543B.

There was an inquiry, of course. Many people claimed fraud, cried planned obsolescence, and even filed lawsuits. But they were all settled out of court, and no amount of media prying got close to the truth.

# Giant Machines in a Circle

## Giant Machines Gather in Town Square

NEW HASTEVILLE—At 3 p.m. EST yesterday, thirty-three machines arranged themselves in a circle in Oak Grove Park, near downtown. It is unclear why they are doing so.

Each machine is slightly different. Some are toasters. Others are robotic friend units. Others are just oddly-sized black boxes. But the circle they form is perfect, and as more units added themselves to the circle, the others moved outward, making the circle bigger and bigger.

As of this morning, the machines remain in the circle, though no more machines showed up overnight. They appear to have rotated slightly counter-clockwise since last night. It is unclear why they're here, though local authorities have been called in.

## Authorities Scuffle Over Who Gets Jurisdiction Over Machine Circle

NEW HASTEVILLE—Local authorities have been pushed aside as the FBI, CIA, and an unknown government agency arrived in town to investigate the circle of machines in Oak Grove Park.

After local police were dumbfounded by the machines, the FBI showed up to scratch their own heads. Minutes later, a CIA van arrived, and men in black suits stared at the circle with the same slack-jawed look. Eventually, another group arrived, looking much more assertive and knowledgeable about the whole thing. A fight between the agencies ensued, with nobody seeming to want the case. Eventually, the unknown party pushed everyone aside and set up their gear outside the circle.

All three agencies refused to answer the *Tribune's* questions.

## OP-ED Robots Have to Go

It is of the opinion of this reporter that it's time for us, the townspeople of New Hasteville, to take action against the robots.

They do *nothing* but waste space and sit in that circle. I certainly don't know *why* they're doing it and, at this point, *I don't care*. I just want them gone. I

want our park back before the Spring Formal.

I've spoken to many townspeople, and everyone is in agreement here. Consider this an open letter to the mayor and to the shady government folk infiltrating our village: if you don't do something about this, we will. I will destroy these machines if I have to. They are a threat to our way of life and our wellbeing, and it is the responsibility of our elected officials to *keep us safe*.

The machines have to go.

## Local Writer Leads March Against Machine Circle, Dies in Fight

NEW HASTEVILLE—A group of townspeople attempted to move or destroy the machines last night. All involved were killed.

At 2:34 a.m., a group led by Tribune op-ed writer Arthur Dexley took axes to the machines. After several minutes of chopping, the machines opened up, expanding outward like a cartoon barrel falling open, and unleashed lasers on everyone.

Within seconds, nothing remained. Some people believe the townsfolk were *moved* somewhere else, but the local authorities are running under the assumption the machines killed them. No official statement has been released by any of the government authorities on the scene.

## Machines Leave, Town Begins to Mourn

NEW HASTEVILLE—The machines have left. At some point last night, resident insomniac Nigel Chester Friyer reported seeing the machines drift slowly up into the air, then rocket upwards.

By the time *Tribune* reporters arrived, all that was left in the park were square-shaped dents in the grass. The FBI, CIA, and mystery government authority packed up and left.

The mayor announced late in the morning that an official day of mourning would take place for those who died attempting to destroy the machines. It will be held in Oak Grove Park at the site of the massacre at 1 p.m. tomorrow.

The spring formal will take still place this weekend in the park from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m.

# Chicken Tube in Front of Musical Meat

"Charlie, can you see?" asks the man.

"Yes, Dad!"

Charlie and his father sit in their seats, left center, on the balcony level. It's the boy's first opera. *The Magic Flute*.

The orchestra is set up in an exposed pit. To the father and Charlie, the orchestra appears tiny, like little plastic army figures holding instruments instead of weapons.

The father points. "Charlie, can you see? Stage right we have the 1<sup>st</sup> violin and cello, stage left, viola, 2<sup>nd</sup> violin. Bass, clarinet, bassoon, harps in the middle, with percussion, trumpets, piano at the back, hidden behind that little wall."

The boy is fascinated, not by the instruments but the players. "Are those people?" Charlie asks.

"Yes!" the dad replies, maybe a little too excitedly for theater patrons nearby, who give him snooty scowls. He continues, "The Musical Meat Orchestra. One of the only human orchestras who still perform."

The boy looks sad.

"It's okay, Charlie," says the dad. "The synthetics do a better job, but I think it's important, historically, for you to see this once. So, you know what it was like before."

Charlie nods and asks, "How long ago were the human orchestras?"

"Oh, I don't know." The man pauses. "They were pretty common when I was a kid, so maybe thirty years ago or so? It wasn't until I was a teen—just a bit older than you—they started to phase out completely after the tech breakthroughs of the geometric era."

Charlie frowns a little, squinting to see the front of the stage. The father follows Charlie's stare.

"Oh," the father says, "the chicken tube, as usual, operates as the conductor."

Charlie gives his dad his best critical eyes.

"The chicken tubes aren't just for managing home security, they power almost everything," the dad says. "Can you see how it moves inside the tube?" He points.

Charlie squints as hard as he can. "Yes?"

"That's the cooling system you can see moving. The chicken tube itself is always obscured."

"Oh," says Charlie, clearly confused. "But why is it in front?"

"Tradition," the dad says. *Tradition* being the father's codeword for "I have no idea."

Charlie leans back in his seat, guarded, suspecting his father of tall tales. Before Charlie can think it through, the lights go down.

*The Magical Flute* begins. Charlie relaxes into his seat. The father wonders how he'll explain the suicide scene when it comes up.

# Ghost with Three Eyes Bearing Time Turtle

Argenti stands on the outskirts of the fabric of reality, wondering what it was exactly he'd gotten up to do in the first place. He knows there was some purpose, at some point in time, but what was it? And why is he holding a time turtle?

This would take some detective work.

Stepping back through his newly developed third eye, willing the time turtle to drive him into the past, Argenti pictures himself as he was ten minutes ago.

Argenti stands on a cliffside, looking out over a vast land of rolling green hills. He senses someone is near him. He turns to find his son, Alandi, facing him with a weapon in his hand.

"Father."

"Son."

Alandi looks at Argenti squarely, sizing him up. Questions roll down his face. "You're here then, again," he says, not a question, but not quite a statement either.

"I am," Argenti replies. Right. Now he remembers. Did he remember this the first time? Or is the memory of what he's thinking in the next ten minutes new? He'll need to get ahold of the time turtle to know for sure.

"We don't have to do this," Argenti says, a stern fatherly warning with a hint of pleading.

"We do, though," Alandi says. "It's already the case."

"Hrm," Argenti says.

"Hrm," Alandi says.

"Is it possible I can make a request?" Argenti asks.

"Of course, Father," Alandi says.

"I'd like to take a turtle with me, so I can remember this moment again."

"Sure, Father." And Alandi drives a spear through his father's eyes.

The world turns white for Argenti, then fades to a purple and sits there, threatening to go black, but being unsure of itself. Argenti feels his body ease into place as the hole from the spear mends itself into a small painted eye. He's standing now, or perhaps he *was* standing before, but now he's sure of himself, standing. Will the boy deliver the turtle?

At his feet is a turtle. Argenti leans down and picks it up.

## Ghost Bells Below Metal Moon

A man stands on a small pedestal. Children circle around him, sitting cross-legged. It's dark out, but the light of two full moons is plenty for everyone to see the man as he speaks. One moon is a bright white, the other, a deep silver.

"When the bells ring," the man says, "you'll know the time has come." The man points to the sky. "You'll hear them ring no matter where you are, and they'll be loud enough to wake you. When they do, the metal moon will hang low, and we'll be able to leave."

The children get excited by this idea.

"Yes, children, we're close. I know you are anxious to leave, but we must wait for the right time." The man pauses. "Do you remember what happened to Ariby when he tried to escape early?"

The kids whisper to each, "he fell off the side," one says, "he was eaten by the machine," another mutters, "there's no air outside so he suffocated," said a third.

After the children calm down, the man continues, "Yes, outside of this place is dangerous, and none of us would survive. Ariby knew better but chose death because he'd lost hope. I still have hope, and I believe you should, too."

The man steps down from the pedestal and walks through the children. "We were trapped here five years ago," he points to a wall with daily markings on it, "yet we survived. We have no food, no water, and no contact with anyone, yet we persevere. I do not pretend to understand how this works, but I do know it is a blessing to us."

The children shuffle around, rocking back and forth, eyes wandering. They've heard this before—hundreds of times at this point—and they're ready to get back to their duties. The only part of the story they want to hear is about the bells. Beyond that, they'd rather live in their doldrums.

"We have not aged, nor have we progressed," he grabs his face, showing the lack of progress on his beard, "yet we carry on." He trails off. The children aren't paying attention anymore, and why should they? He's delivered this

speech every day, trying to keep their hopes alive. Trying to keep them occupied. Trying to keep himself from losing hope.

Five years ago, the man, a scout leader, took his pack into the local state park for a weekend of camping. They set up camp in the same place they did every year, ate, then fell asleep. When they woke up, they were in a new place. This place felt like a void, with two full moons hanging low in the sky. The moons never moved. The days never progressed. When the man walked the perimeter of the campsite, he found nothing. Not nothing as in nothing useful, but nothing as in *nothing*. Beyond the camp simply *wasn't*.

Within the first few days, Ariby, a boy with the hubris of a Victorian explorer pushed outward into the void and never returned. He told his friends he was, "fed up with waiting."

After that, the man had to create hope for the kids because, otherwise, they'd follow Ariby. He remembered reading about how coffins once had bells inside of them so the coffin's occupant might ring for help if they turned out to be alive. So, he mythologized the bells. He made it their rescue story. The bells ring, and one of the moons descends down, revealing itself as not a moon, but a spaceship. It carries them away, back home, safely to the right time and place.

He's told this story every day since Ariby left. Nothing has changed.

The children disperse from their circle. The man continues muttering, walking between the kids as they draw in the dirt or play cards. He pauses at the edge of the campsite. Looking at the nothing. His head aches. His ears ring. He steps out into it.

# Man with Robot in Beet Cavern



The man waddles into a cavern, arms filled with the beets he harvested early in the day. As he gets to the back of the cavern, he drops the beets and lets out a sigh.

Bzz bzz bbb bzzz bbb bbzzz bb

"No," the man replies.

Bss bbb bbb bzz bzzz bzzz bzzzzzz

"Yes," the man replies.

He sits down by the fire. He's been moving the beets into the cavern for hours, preparing for the winter. In just a few weeks, it'll be too hot for the vegetables, and everything he doesn't bring into the cavern will shrivel and die.

In the back corner of the cavern, covered in beets, is a small robotic head. It once had arms and legs attached to it, but those were destroyed long ago.

The head can predict the weather. That's it. But it's enough for the man. The head warns him of heat and cold waves. The man prepares for each season as best he can.

Every four or five months, the world burns. The heat waves spread across the land, burning everything. Beets seem resilient enough to be replanted, so he lives off beets. During this time, he stays in the cavern, with the head.

"How much time between the next two seasons?" the man asks.

Bzz wbbb bbb zzzzzz wwwwbb

"I see," the man replies. "Not enough to go searching."

Between burns, the man goes looking for others. He doesn't find anyone. With planting and harvesting the beets, he doesn't have much time. Survival takes a lot of work, it turns out.

"Any word from anyone?" the man asks.

Nbdb jdjjj bzzz www

"Of course," the man replies. The head either can't get access to the wider network, or there's no wider network left. The man always asks, anyway, hoping something has changed. He's not sure the head would tell him if it did connect to someone, so he has to ask.

Cccn bzzz bbbbbb

"Yes, yes, I'll get back to it," the man says. He pauses and looks at the head.

"Thank you."

# Decomposing Little Mountains

I used to be a lot larger, you know. But time has a way with mountains like me. It shrinks us down, slowly. Every day, I'm smaller. I'm tired and worn.

My body is still large compared to most, mind you. And I contain multitudes. Caves twist through my body, cluttered and backed-up like the intestines of an aging cow. Trees grow on my back like little hairs, thinning out on the top before finally disappearing entirely across my bald crown. I wake up each morning with a quiet groan and a shudder, shaking away the dew collected on my body overnight.

My life has been mostly uneventful, at least until the time of humans. Before humans, time moved much slower. Climates changed, sure, but it all took a long time. I was taller then, you know, much taller. My back wasn't bent in the awkward ways it is now, and the trees were much thicker, even up here at the top. But I can't be too nostalgic. I looked and felt better, yes, but time happens to all of us. Reminiscing about old times just makes us hostile to the present.

At first, I'd get just a few humans walking over me, perhaps with a horse or two. It felt pleasant, like to the light massage of a hail storm. Humans were much louder than the animals who'd lived alongside my body before, but I didn't mind. At least at first. But then they started trying to change me into something I wasn't.

If you look here, you'll see a scar across my belly where humans made a railroad. It was a tourist attraction, if you'd believe that. The Mountain Railway Company came and started carving into me. Nine years and seven miles later, the railway attraction opened up. Many bodies are buried in shallow graves along that line.

Now, take a look here, at the end of the line, do you see the circular scar? That's where they put a hotel. It operated for a scant twelve years. The hotel had eighty rooms and looked as though someone plucked a building out of another country and plopped it down on the middle of my stomach. It never seemed that popular, but it's difficult for me to judge those types of things.

One day, a wind blew through and took the roof off. Something inside sparked a fire, and it didn't take long for the entire building to burn down,

leaving the scar you see now. These winds are pretty common around me — they're part of the reason I'm smaller than I used to be — but the humans fail to account for such things with their flimsy buildings.

With the hotel gone, eventually, humans came back for the steel railroad lines. I'd overheard something about a war and the need to scavenge metals. It all sounded boring so I didn't pay much attention.

I liked that the war was quiet for me. Humans typically left me alone. I thought they were perhaps gone for good, that maybe their war had gotten rid of them all.

That didn't turn out to be the case, sadly. And when their war ended, they came back with their shovels and their trucks to dig even deeper than they had with the railway. They started with a highway that dug across my entire body. They sliced into my peaks and left missile silos behind.

When I thought the worst of it was over, the tourists came in their cars. Every day, they'd drive across my body, stopping to take photos of themselves in the morning light.

Time has a way with us, though. My body is smaller and older, yes, but the world around me is aging, too. As it does, the winds dig deeper into me. The winds cause sparks, which create fires, which gets rid of my few remaining trees, which means when it rains, it floods, and when it floods, my body falls away in landslides.

Humans do not get to see themselves decompose in this type of detail. Their lives are too short. They cannot see the context of their existence. I was born in a rupture of fire and chaos and began dying immediately. But I cannot complain.

My life has been good, overall, even with the rough patches. My scars have made me stronger. Or, at least, that's what I tell myself. I try not to think about it too much. But as my body erodes, the scars seem to get more vibrant. The scars gain importance with time, morphing from a small memory to defining feature. I try and tell myself they're not important. I've lived a long and interesting life defined by more than these few moments. But the tolls of that long life have eroded away.

# About The Author

## **Thorin Klosowski**

Thorin Klosowski is a journalist and reporter who primarily covers technology. His first book, *Idiot's Guide to the Raspberry Pi*, has absolutely nothing to do with this one and is comically outdated.