

# Exacerbation

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a novel

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part of the Brick Jayne universe

## WINNING

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The night was crisp. The storm was mild outside. Ira Best stood at the craps table and pondered another roll. He had twenty dollars left and he had a plane ticket in his pocket. He thought he could place five on the come line without putting any money behind when a number was rolled. Seven or eleven would have been heaven, and normally, he would choose to put ten behind the five unless the shooter crapped out. He didn't have that option and the butterflies started to tinker in his stomach.

Ira stood and watched a waitress go by. He opted to not yell at her for another Beamish stout beer and it made him nervous—*more* nervous—when a shooter from a nearby table hit seven. He could tell by the yell of the crowd. He thought he ought to be somewhere else... but he sipped what little he had in his auburn beer bottle and he passed the dice to a lady next to him. He opted out of the roll. He stood around to see “what would have happened” and was humiliated when she rolled an eleven—a *winner* for the come line—but he contemplated that it would have been different if *he* would have rolled the dice. Cab fair was going to be twenty dollars, the walk was far enough that he would miss his air flight because he didn't have ground transportation, it was raining outside, and “luck” didn't seem to be going his way. He swallowed the last of his beer, set his bottle into the craps cubbyhole, and took off toward the door of the Luxor hotel.

Sleet pelted Ira Best as he made his way to the street. He had called Desert Cab on his cell phone five minutes prior and he knew it was due any time. He heard the roar of the crowds behind him and he heard the chings of the slot metal basin trays even though he was well on his way toward Las Vegas Boulevard. He heard laughter in his head and he put four five-dollar chips into his front-right pocket of his charcoal slacks. He ran with a newspaper he had carried which shielded his head from hail as weather began to become more frightening. Lighting flashed on the distant horizon and he thought about what he would tell the cabby when he arrived. *I know you prefer cash... but the reason I call Desert Cab is 'cause the others don't consistently give me rides without a hassle!!! Some of 'em won't even pick me up!!*

Mister Best, having forgotten about all the business meetings he was part of the prior week in Los Angeles, looked in anticipation as the purple, citron, and black sedan approached splashing water onto a perambulator's feet. Ira felt jubilant awe as the taxi driver rolled down his passenger's side window electronically. Ira Best thought he was going to get a front-seat ride because of the heavy rain—maybe a gratuity from the company so they didn't have to hear him whine about the outside conditions. He peeked his head into the minivan to ask if he was supposed to hop along as a fleeting sidekick transient but instead was cut off by the subchauffeur's roar. *"WE ARE TWENTY-ONE CAB, NOW... 'CAUSE OF THE CITY-O'-LIGHTS NOTORIETY!! AND YA' CAN HOP IN THE BACK AFTER PAYIN' YOUR FARE UP FRONT!! WE HAVE TO DO THESE REGULATIONS 'CAUSE TOO MANY PEOPLE WERE SKIPPIN' OUT WHEN WE GO TO MC CARRAN INTERNATIONAL!!"*

"Listen, *man!*!" Ira whooped as he continued to shield his head from pouring ice pebbles. "I got twenty... like I always have at the end of my stays, here!! You didn't tell me anythin' on the phone of a *RATE HIKE!*!"

"We don't have to!! We run our business without the feds!!" The cab driver thought about letting Ira Best in without a problem. He reconsidered. He looked at his dashy sport coat and figured the probable patron could run into the casino, pull out a few twenties, then be able to endow a tip worth having. Otherwise, the ride was not worth it. Twenty dollars barely covered his time and gasoline. "If you have a twenty, lay it *on me!*!" The cab rustler spit out. "I'll make an exception... and next time I'll make it clear on the wire that TWENTY-ONE CAB means twenty-one dollars... *flat!!* And we aren't just feelin' the vibe o' the city around us!!"

"You were *DESERT CAB* a couple o' months ago when I came 'ere last, you *answered* the phone as *DESERT CAB*... an' ya' have a fiduciary duty to let me in at the expense I was expectin'!!" Ira Best pulled out the same four five-dollar chips he had not long before put into his trousers. "Here's my *money!*!"

The cabby began to feel taken. "I don't know what you're talkin' about with *flippadola* duties o' *dufaces*, but the fare is TWENTY-ONE dollars... so why don't ya' run in there an' grab out another twenty, or so... an' break change with a bar maid!? I'll wait 'ere outside an' I don't *mind!!* FIVE minutes though... or I'll leave an' you'll have ta' call another carriage service!!"

Ira Best fought off a tinge of ferocity but then decided to reach into his wallet to show the driver his airline ticket with its corresponding departure time. The cabby thought momentarily that Ira Best had fooled him—that he was only trying to get rid of his chips without cashing out, as so many people had done in the past—and looked at the azure-indigo Pacific Airlines express pass. Once again, he considered allowing Ira Best along for the ride but thought willfully about having a nineteen-dollar tip if the man in front of him would just run into the casino and pull out an *Andrew Jackson*. The scrubby despot behind the wheel waggled his head in negation and Ira retorted, "I don't have long... and my wife—my future *ex-wife*—has seized all my assets and I can't use my credit or *ATM* cards!! I'm broke an' I need a ride!!" Ira

became impatient and began to shift to the rear sliding hatch as if it was common sense that the scruffy auto skipper would allow him in without much remorse.

“HEY!!” the cabby yelled. Embarrassment and humiliation flushed into his face as he felt he was losing control of the predicament. “I run a *BUSINESS!!* This is not a lowdown, rag-tag auction where the price is *COMPROMISABLE!!* You get me twenty-one dollars, an’ I’ll get ya’ to the airport on *TIME!!* Go in there, put twenty on the table an’ you’ll have enough for the faire... an’ some *FOOD* when ya’ get to the airfield lobby!! Tropicana Avenue’ll never pass ya’ by so *FAST!!*” The dry, portly chief-in-charge challenged to muster a fervent radiance but found stimulus faltering.

“You’re a *dick!!*” Ira Best snapped, “but I don’t have a lot of *choice!!*” Ira thought to grab the half-hearted snortling fellow by his stained brown polyester collar in order to yell at him about circumstances pending a divorce he had recently become involved in. Vicky Best would surely be ecstatic if he goofed at this juncture in their proceedings but euphoria swept through his midsection as he thought about the rings from many silver dollars slamming vigorously against luscious metallic reservoir salvers inside. He could hear the boisterous laughter in his head. He could see the pretty women. He could feel the joy of people passing by as they congratulated him on jackpot winnings. He could visualize coming home in a *helicopter* if need be... if the payoff was enormous enough. He flipped off the cab drive, tossed a five-dollar chip onto the passenger’s side seat then touted, “I’m goin’ to come back with a *GRIP* of money!! That five is to keep ya’ here for *five minutes!!* I want an apology when I get back... AND I WANT TO RIDE IN THE *FRONT!!*”

“Good enough, *first mate!!* Go in there an’ *WIN!!*” The cabby thought to flip off Ira Best in reciprocity but resolved his inner emotions by shooing him with palm movement.

Ira ran back toward the pyramid-shaped tinted titatic bungalow clutching three remaining chips and singing, “*Lightning... STRIKIN’... AGAAAIN!!*” In no time, he was at a blackjack table. He put three chips on the felt and became queasy at the thought of missing his flight. Cards were dealt. A king and a jack were given. The dealer showed a seven of diamonds. After moderately slashing the thin air rightward with a horizontal “stay” signal, the dealer showed a face card underneath. Seventeen. Bettor wins. No one else at the table meant Ira could play another hand and still have time for the quick jaunt with the awaiting shuttle crony. Instead, Ira asked for three silver dollars back in return for one of his chips so that he could tip the dealer a couple of bucks. After receiving his share, he ventured to a closeby slot machine for one pull in hopes of hitting it large. To his surprise, three glittering round metals netted him the progressive—the jackpot of all *jackpots*. He was enthusiastic and forgot about the ride outside. Later, after processing data needed to fill his bank account with enough zeroes to forget his recent spouse, he recalled the name of the driver whom seemed not to care that a multimillion-dollar episode of corporate dealings was nearly in jeopardy. Jude Harker was the name hanging from the badge below the rearview mirror. Ira Best tried to forget it... but was unable to. He drank many beers of different varieties high atop a *Mirage* suite that night... but “Harker” kept harking in his mind as he tried to forget the business meeting he would not be

part of due to his winnings. He didn't regret a thing... but torment crept into his world the next morning when he woke up.

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Jude Harker was not a “regular guy.” He owned one of the top helicopter services for tourists at a time. He was a “high roller” and when a relationship with his favorite escort lady “fell through” a year and a half prior, he decided to invest in a limousine service. His credit was not bad—he made payments on time and made sure not to max out any of the *major* credit cards in his wallet—but the memory of a tall, slender lady whom had shared company with him many a night began to haunt and beckon him like a mad dream from a discontented sequence of horrible events. He applied for credit at Olympic Extravagance. He knew three limos would suit him well and his ambitions to magnify his tourist agency would probably take his mind off the broad whom bolted on him without an explanation or warning. The reality was that he could afford *one* limo if all the numbers he had done on paper were accurate. He picked a “bottom of the line model” to invest in with all intentions to fix it up to something of great worth in the coming months. After three and a quarter hours of haggling with an attractive lady in a fine violet skirt uniform, all the numbers were run to their standard credit information company. Jude Harker had received files from the three major brokers in the weeks prior, and two of them hovered high in the seven hundred range. That was pretty good, in his mind, but it wouldn't be enough to outfit him with the three *large* extrastretch limousines that he wanted. One credit report—the one from *Experian*—was laden with erroneous charges and miscellaneous goofs. He suspected identity theft or that the former escort he had been seeing *took* a few of his cards, unbeknownst to him. He had to challenge what was on file, and he hoped that Olympic Extravagance didn't use *that* particular agency as the ultimate indicator of what would be allowed. In order that there were no mixups, he brought along all three statements... “just in case”!! He wanted to show that he was fine with the exception of a series of what seemed to be *stupid* purchases. Land deals in northern California. Vacation getaways in east Asian countries. Fashion outbreaks in the Pacific Northwest. The other two, on the other hand, had *clean* dealings of only-Nevada scopes and magnitudes. It would be easy to see that his *credit* was clean, and that the lone dissenting account testimony was incorrect and not worth considering.

Julie Liquet was in charge of her father's operation for the first time in a full month. Usually, she did the dealings for him... but he would do the closing. On the particular day that Jude Harker wanted to purchase a new limousine for his existing tourism service, Jerry Liquet was far away in Reno, Nevada trying to acquire a preowned automobile sales outlet which went on the market after a former lightweight boxing opted out of the renewal of a lease. The business could be had for “pennies on the dollar”... or so insiders relayed to him. Julie Liquet, *when* her father was gone, was “cut and dry” about company policy. Their company used *TransUnion* exclusively to determine ratings. Jerry Liquet, when he was around,

would wire *Equifax* or *Experian* personally if disputes were heated about understood evaluations. Olympic Extravagence rated clients as *platinum* if the measure came back eight hundred and fifty or greater. Seven seventy-five to eight hundred and forty-nine would net a *gold* status. Seven hundred to seven seventy-four would net a *silver* rating—enough to buy a fleet car, but not one of the limos. Six twenty-five to six ninety-nine would ascribe a *bronze* ranking—something which would assure a “thank you for trying” and a nice pat on the shoulder. Five fifty to six twenty-four would likely merit disdain unless the person was attractive enough with outward features conducive to the Vegas nightlife. Four seventy-five to five forty-nine would raise red flags. Jerry or Julie Liquet would ask if there was a recent breakup, ironically, or if the applicant had lost a purse within the preceding few months. Below that level, it wouldn’t really matter. Customers were easy to spot as hopeful but not able to sign documented papers.

A year and a half before insulting Ira Best into oblivion, Jude Harker was ready to make a *move* in life. At seven seventy-nine with Equifax and seven seventy-four with *TransUnion*, he was sure he could buy a limo... but he *hoped* three were possible. His helicopter payments were more than half over, and he thought he could hire a fleet to take care of the added business. His mind was clouded with becoming ruined in the romantic sense... but he had *promise*. He knew how to get along with tourists and natives alike.

Julie Liquet came back with a hard answer on the day that Jude Harker applied for a new Lincoln limousine. He couldn’t have it. She said that her father could approve of it the following week when he came back from his business dealings. She informed Jude Harker that she could not *call* her father when he was away unless it was a dire emergency regarding “physical torture”... *as she had put it*. The TransUnion number was one point short of where Jude Harker needed to be. She pulled out “company policy papers” which had attributed color codes on bright high-gloss papers. Eight fifty could have discharged three Lincoln limousines to him—he *was far from that*—or it could have netted him two *Humvee* superliners. It could have gained him one Lincoln limousine and one “Hummer special” if he really wanted that route instead.

Jude Harker remembered precisely what she said to him that day: *With a man’s credit so goes his character*. He was insulted for *two* reasons at that remark. He had a couple of sisters whom lived in California whom were vehement feminists... and they didn’t like “sexist language”!! *With a PERSON’S credit so goes her or his character!! That’s what she should’ve SAID!!* That’s what went through his head. The second thing was, *How are you goin’ to treat me like a LOWLIFE for havin’ barely missed the ability to purchase a limousine by YOUR standards?!* Jude Harker let his anger subside and asked sarcastically to the girl, *Can ya’ call your DADDY in Reno to ask ‘im if it’s “okay” if I THREATEN TO STRANGLE ya’?!*

The woman became insulted. She felt ashamed. Her credit had barely risen to the “gold level” and she was proud that she was better than someone... at least in her own mind... and at least temporarily. She *could* have called her father for an “extreme emergency” and tacked up his remark as blatantly exaggerated. She didn’t like Jude Harker enough. He was almost good-looking, but he was mean. She

knew that no matter what, her father would have yelled at her anyway. If it was okay to “bend the rules”... *it was better to defy the one about allowing leeway.* Jude Harker showed Julie Liqueur the Equifax papers which barely put him in the Olympic Extravagance’s “qualifying zone” as far as gold strata. She said she didn’t recognize that agency and her orders were clear to “go by the books when ownership was away”!!!

Jude Harker was dismayed that day. He gambled two thousand dollars of his personal petty cash within hours of leaving the limousine dealership and started to drink alone heavily for the first time in his adult life. It wasn’t long before he stopped making payments on his *tourist service* and confiscators seized everything he had of his physical value within months. He applied at *Desert Cab* to make ends meet and to avoid being on the streets as a vagrant... and hated management when the company was bought and turned into *Twenty-One Cab*. He couldn’t help but to be mean to the populous he had once adored. He disdained life and he was hanging on by a thread.

Ira Best was greeted by Julie Liqueur on the morning after he acquired jackpot winnings. She said that Jude Harker aimed to destroy anyone in his path. She had put him under social observation through a series of reliant confidantes. After collecting pessimistic and disheartening feedback data she learned that he had planned an assault on Ira Best for not returning with the assured fare from the night before. Privately, Julie wanted part of Ira’s money. She was sure she could schooze him into the release of twenty thousand dollars through a series of sexual acts.

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Julie Liqueur had been greeted by her father when he returned from the Reno sales jaunt and was greeted with jubilation. The transaction was a success and he managed to purchase the northern car lot for “pennies on the dollar”!! Jerry Liqueur had exclaimed, *I turned my green chips into black ones!!* He was going to transform the entire makeup of his limo sales service to become more “customer friendly”... and he wanted to see happy people around him. He didn’t care if it was a break-even business, as he told his daughter, because it was his life and livelihood. He had to see the cheery smiles on people’s faces because the lot in the “Smallest Little City In the World”—*Reno, Nevada*—was going to augment what he otherwise would be doing. Julie informed her father that he lost a sale—the company lost a sale—by being too “anal retentive” about their retailing policy. She expected anger... but she got a hug instead. Her “daddy” slipped a couple of crisp one thousand dollar bills into her violet overcoat pocket. He cried with glee and said that it didn’t matter—it was “water under the bridge”!! Julie sniveled because she could’ve *goofed* really bad. She could have played stupid about company policy and copied the *Equifax* papers to verify the solid standing of Jude Harker’s trust level regarding credit approval. She could have showed the seven seventy-nine figure and falsely stated that the TransUnion link was down and Equifax reports were the only way to go. Jude Harker had received his reports earlier in the week and there was no reason to believe there was a significant adjustment in standing. She might have got yelled at... but it would have taken her to *one car*

*past her projected quota for the week!!* She told her father she would sell three limos... and that would have been the fourth. Her father had *always* liked overachievers, from what he expressed, and that would have made him *proud*.

Julie Liquet slept with Ira Best and explained the backdrop of why she approached him. She wasn't "all about sex" as she put it, but rather about understanding the "Vegas mentality" and trying to get out of it. She wanted money, yes, but she wanted to make sure that Jude Harker wasn't trying to murder *anyone*.

Luxor administrative officials compted Ira Best with three thousand dollars worth of chips until full payment could begin in a soon-to-be-setup account. He gave Julie Liquet three thousand dollars worth of chips and said to make Jude Harker happy "at all costs—in any account"!! He had pleasurable interludes with her throughout the evening and expected a breakaway when all was said and done. Instead, by the end of the first night together he asked her, "Can you help get me over my *wife?!?*" Julie Liquet said that she could... if he could get *her* away from an overbearing parental apparition. Before twenty-four hours passed of knowing one another, they exchanged promissory regards with each other in a wedding-like service with an Elvis Presley impressionist as their mock minister. They couldn't "make it legal" until Ira's divorce was culminated with "ludicrous intentions from the opposing party"... as he told Julie. They loved each other as much as two birds in spring undergrowth fauna shrublike herbaceous verdant meadow ranges *could* love each other.

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Ira Best's job back in Los Angeles was to maintain surveillance control of non-state-owned cameras. He did not have a monopoly on them, and the reasons doing so varied from instance to instance. In the same way that Nielsen ratings were determined from relatively few people in the country, Ira was to compose daily and weekly composites of people's habits in malls, at gas stations, through bank teller drive thrus, and certain city walks. There were more than a hundred regular "hot spots" and there were usually a hundred or so that would crop up with unusualities. These would be put together in video albums for store owners, politicians, and certain public and private teachers. There would be a cost, and the intent was to determine buyer habits, crime waves, and desolate locations. People would use the information however they would and it was no different than hiring a private detective... *the way Ira's people came across*. They didn't care if a person or firm leaned toward being Republican, Democrat, or "other"!! They didn't care about what the religious affiliation was... if *any*. They didn't care about past history, and as long as the price was being paid, they didn't have qualms about giving out information of any kind.

Ira thought of it like having a library for the elite... of the *video* kind.

Ira Best moved to Laramie, Wyoming with Julie Liquet not long after the fun of a "new marriage" faded. He found the place queer, and he had hard times adjusting to the "Old West mentality" it seemed to



still incorporate. Julie was a good lay, but Ira didn't trust her all that much. His wife—his *actual* wife whom he was legally married to according to jostling lawyers around the Golden State's West Coast beaches—was probably trying to find him to serve these or those papers. He could only imagine what she was going through.

In time, he forgot his about wife.

Ira Best purchased a traditional log cabin eleven and a half months after hitting his jackpot. The job back home was long gone—a *memory*. His friends now faded to “acquaintance status” in his head... if he were to ever come across them in any particular spontaneous visit back to the *City of Lights* where he won so much money that he could barely count it. The loads of mail he received from credit card companies faded. The home—the *log cabin*—was put in Julie Lique's name so that telemarketers and credit card hounds would not be yelling at him on the phone through electronic tracking methods. The thoughts—the *memories*—of Southern California blurred in his mind with each passing month. He started to confuse reruns of *Baywatch* with the actuality of a male-dominated beach around Huntington in his head. He couldn't tell the difference, and sometimes what he spoke to Julie Lique of his life, he *confused* his existence with that of things experienced by David Addison from television's *Moonlighting*. It didn't matter to him. The past was the past, and it was to become left behind.

Julie Lique started to feel the pressure which Ira Best wanted to ignore. She went shopping in Cheyenne and could feel *eyes* upon her. She didn't know if it was because she was relatively new to the area, or if Ira Best's “real wife” was trying to track him. She didn't know if *creditors* got screwy... and started to have manhunts of untraditional kinds. She bought what she needed, she made it as fast as possible... and she always planned to have good *sex* with Ira Best upon returning... but every time she got near him, she couldn't bring herself to tell him about what seemed to be irrationally amplified fears.

Ira Best believed Julie Lique was becoming suicidal by staying around him for so long. He thought it was because of desolation, but he *didn't* believe she would leave because of the feelings. He thought she would “grow into Wyoming”!! It was a veil to him. He didn't plan to stay there for more than another couple of years. He wanted to not be hounded any more. He wanted his wife to find him eventually with all of her lawyers and private detective thugs, but he didn't want it to be *so* soon that he would regret stationing himself deep into the Midwest. LA was strange to him in that he *ran* a detective agency, for all practical reasons. It was a *passive* one and it relied on the participation of the community around him. He saw the magazines, though, and he knew “the truth” as it was conveyed to cameras within an hour's drive of his downtown office. *People* magazine was going to portray the celebs as something glamorous... and the tabloids were going to knock them down. Everything happened for a reason, and when things got ugly, detectives would start chasing detectives, and photographers would get in the face of other paparazzi group members. He knew the game in roundabout ways, and he knew his wife—his “*real one*”—would be on his tail in no less than a year's time... if he *knew* her well enough.

Julie Lique believed she was going insane with each passing season. She knew that turning back

to her past was an impossibility, and “riding out the storm” was the ultimate way to go.

Ira Best planned no less than fifty murders in the first full year he was in Laramie. There were enemies in the back of his mind. There were prospective villains whom would want his loot. There were people that *pissed him off on the road*. He had the funds to do anything he wanted. *Prudence*, he thought over and over. *Prudence*.

He knew it would be no less than a year. He would have to go through his veil and forget his adversaries. If he were to go straight to any big city around the nation right after his winnings, he would be blatantly harassed. He would be provoked, enticed, and allured to do things he otherwise would not be doing. Staying in Laramie was a dream. The downside—the *only* downside—was his focus. He had to remember that he was decent... and life wasn’t always about roller coasters in California. He had to know there were other places. He had to know that *Julie Liquet* was decent to him in the beginning... and she could be snapped out of the trancelike mechanisms she went through... with the right *support* team. His foes would have to be worn down, confused, and drawn out. Staying “in the middle of nowhere” was the beginning of it. Revenge crept into his belly for fleeting moments throughout the days. He was afraid of losing sight that life didn’t have to be bad in the *future*. He knew he didn’t have to be hounded to begin with—that *was the permeating thought which kept occurring to him*—and he thought that retaliation might actually feel *decent*.

Sometimes he found himself staring blankly into the evening sky while Julie Liquet skirted around like a ghost from the past. He thought to take a knife to her throat, slit it to put her out of the agony she was in, and begin a trek of mowing down as many people as he could... all of whom made his existence perpetual torment when his life surely should have been *gratification*.

Those nights, he made love to Julie Liquet the best. “Julie... I love you with everything I *have*,” he said into her ear on the three hundred and sixty-fifth night of their extended interlude with one another. “I’m going to show you things you’ll never see again,” he whispered to her as he admired her body through a handmade dress. Her body flexed on their stiff bedroom mattress... *as he ran his tight hands from her calves to her buttocks*. He dared not take off her clothes for fear of the demon he would release from his head as knives were not far in the visible kitchen as he could seem them through the dimly lit flickers of a traditional lamp. He thought of what he said... and he didn’t know if it was paradise or *hell* he wanted to take Julie to. He knew he had to get out of Wyoming before long, and all would take care of itself.

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Doomsayers had filled the airwaves for much of the latter part of the previous millennium and Ira Best was careful about what to do with his money... and what *not* to do. He knew perception controlled the world, and just the same as a maxed-out credit card had no more use, the *United States* could be in for a spin if financeers ever decided to stop funding military or domestic programs. Julie Liquet had told him

about an author named *Batra*, but Ira was more intuned to a guy by the name of Kiyosaki. He believed, deep down, that it didn't *matter* what happened. If the banks closed—*all of them*—the country still had nukes and a killer fleet in the sea. The *value* of things would change, and people would become focused on bullet stockpiles instead of *paper* stockpiles... of the monetary kind. Ira supported a man by the name of Bruce Babbitt during the run of 1988 presidential electoral candidates... and even though he thought many of the dudes were *queer* after watching so many private, closed-circuit video monitoring of them, this one in particular had a peculiar stance in that he wanted to return the country to the *gold standard*. That meant that for every dollar a person had in his wallet, he could exchange it for a dollar's worth of classic aurum. For every lady that wanted a load of bullion, she would just have to take enough money to the *Treasury* and exchange it over there. Ira picked up on it, and he decided to invest in gold—*real gold*—while in Wyoming. Other people had taken government cues and decided to stockpile arms. Ira believed it was dangerous. Unless a local inhabitant owned a *Tomcat* fighter jet, it was no use if the economy bottomed out. After all, total collapse socially meant that *military* guys still knew how to fly planes, and they knew how to run troops. If a person believed his sawed-off shotgun allocation was enough to stop a *serious* government downfall, he had another thing coming. Ira Best, on the other hand, believed if and when the inevitable happened, *gold* would still be used... and it would be used in every corner of the land. He learned how to fly a small airplane in case he had to take off to Canada or Mexico, and he began contact with amateur radio so that he was on the same page with other “paranoid nuts” whom were dispersed throughout the reaches of the Great Plains and beyond. He learned Spanish through home tapes, and he began to practice French. A lot of what he went through was to “kill time”... and it was a formality, in a lot of ways, of guarding his possessions. Some people did it with insurance. Some people diversified portfolios. Ira Best thought it was prime to go the “old fashioned route” of primal budgeting. Ink on bank statements never meant much to Ira, even when he was a newlywed in what seemed like eons ago. The gold, on the other hand, could be *viewed*. He could go deep into his basement, twirl the knob of his safe to the left, right, then left again... for the necessary distances... then he could *hold* a few bars in his hand. He had no problem with it, and the dobermans he kept outside were perfect for curtailing suspicion from the outside world. Julie didn't seem to care all too much, and she believed it was a phase *any way*... for when he eventually moved to a big city again. She knew bank statements got him mad even back in Las Vegas because he commented about how they all “looked the same”!! A broke-ass lad had the same paper output as billionaire in *high heaven*. There was no “bragging rights”... and there was hardly an incentive to “add” to the ink when all the bills were paid and all the necessities taken care of—the *car*, the *home*, and the *lady*. He didn't care how it looked.

Homicidal thoughts wavered in Ira's head with each passing day, and Julie Liqueet looked to him like a piece of furniture at times. He could feel in his gut when things would be good—he could always *do* this—and he knew it wasn't time to move, yet. The video monitoring, when he was in LA, taught him about nuances. He knew when people were happy, and he could even tell when the *Lakers* won a

basketball game without even tuning in to check a score... just by checking out people's habits on the *streets*. He knew when the economy was going bad... because people would order less food than what seemed *extravagant*... and he knew when it would turn around again... because they would take that same food and seem to *murder* it under surveillance cameras. He knew cadences, and he knew it was not *time*.

He did not know a thing about economy *totally* bailing out because it was theoretical, it was outlined in history basically in rudimentary ways, and it was only portrayed in fiction in sparse ways. *Soylent Green* was one of the dystopias he could remember from early on, but he couldn't remember if it was rooted in the manner by which people spent money. He knew people died, and he knew they turned into the food that other people *ate*.

Ira Best tried to push a lot of the dreariness out of his head. He thought of how it would be if people would choose to storm his cabin in order to try to take his gold. He would fight them off with a machete which he kept hung on the far end of his living room wall opposite of the front entrance. Gunfire, he believed, would invite death. A sword fight, on the other hand, would send confusion to the people aggressive enough to maraud his acreage. That would give him hope that they would leave before any fatal blows. And there was always the *radio* he could use to send out distress warnings to potential helpers in the area. There was the *plane*, if he had time, as well.

When Ira felt pragmatic, he wasn't far removed from the "paranoid nut" kind of mentality which enticed him to store seasons worth of food in cabinets throughout his lot. He still drew diagrams, silly as they were, of contingency plans to invade Los Angeles or New York with craft from Warren Air Force Base... just in case "it happened"!! They were cartoon in nature, and they were meant to spread good will to nearby residents just in case they should come over with a casserole instead of pitch forks and shovels. They were loaded with nuclear explosions, and they had sections of real estate portioned off which were deemed as "The Ira Best Country"... and "Julie Liqueur Kingdom"!! He had his original wife floating away in sea, presumably dead from atomic blasts, and he had castles lined along Interstate Eighty, and Interstate Ten. He knew he could make it work into a full-length cinematic movie if the attention was given... but he didn't have that much of a drive.

Sex between Ira and Julie came and went, and it wasn't much different to Ira than bringing in wood for the fireplace. For Julie, it was like cooking meatloaf.

\* \* \*

Ira Best remained in Wyoming a year longer than expected. His wife from Los Angeles didn't creep into his head as much as he thought she might, but turns of behavior in the social sense were noticeable and dumbfounding. Every now and then, Ira would travel to a library in Cheyenne and check upon the company he once worked for. He knew there was a new "chief" there, and he knew the guy had biases toward the Democrats ever since taking over. Ira tried to remain unbiased in his service of video

feeds for the public, but this guy—the *new* one—seemed to cater to the glamorous ladies of the Bel Aire region, many of whom were retired liberal actresses from theatre days of long ago. The Republicans refused to give credit to the company, and even blamed Ira's former place of employment for their loss in a recent election. They compared the facility to the *LA Times*, and said they were *more* left-winged... in a lot of ways. Ira didn't care... except that the businessmen started pulling their funding out of the area in favor of Arizona, Nevada, Utah... and even *Wyoming*. They didn't want to deal with a "communistic regime"... as they often put it. Ira was fed up with the politics, but for practical reasons, he had to keep tabs on the happenings. California reverberated attitudes, and even their economic market was hard to ignore. They were the seventh strongest monetary system... if they were a *NATION*. France was ahead of them, Ira recalled from memory, and a couple of others.

Parts of Afghanistan broke completely off of the traditional trading system since the "War On Terror" began, years back. They bartered, and it was questionable whether they would come back. China was known to go through fluxes, and parts of former Soviet republics had apprehensions about G8 rules and guidelines. It was fragile, in a lot of ways as Ira saw it, and it was like skating on thin ice. Ira knew it could blow. It could be that one day, everyone decided to give up. Ira thought of it like King Midas, and he thought of it like winning the game of *Monopoly* on a grandé scale. If a guy could manage to attain all the money in the world—every last dollar, every last *colon*, and every last peso—he would not be rich. It would be a matter of time—*days even*—that people opted for a different system of survival. The guy that grew bananas would give goods to the lady whom slept with half the town. The guy who picked *cocoa beans* would give part of the product of his labors to the chap whom fermented brew from barely or fruits. The lady who knitted matts would give her output to the man whom could pull teeth... as a *favor*. The *TAX MAN* would not be a factor, and G8 would be out the door... not to mention GATT, NAFTA, and every other treaty that meant things to faraway lawyers and legislators... but not to local inhabitants. Life had to be livable, and when the authorities came to confiscate land, they would be met with bullets instead of signed documents which rebutted claims. Common sense would rule... and Ira knew the world could be on the *cusp* of it.

Ira had been weary of *all* the stories he ever heard... but outside of Vegas, he had a policy to "err on the side of *caution*"!! There was nothing wrong with making sure that there was enough food. There was nothing wrong with sleeping with a mistress here and there in case his long-lost bride never came back. There was nothing wrong with talking to other people around the country via radio and *telegraph*... in case the unordinary happened.

Ira cleaned his cabin a lot... and he prepared. He went skeet shooting a lot as his memory of the Coast faded. He broke down, in a lot of ways, and became a "backwards-ass hick"—something he swore he would never do. Julie didn't love him... but she didn't hate him, *either*. She knew there was nothing better for her in the near future so she held on to Ira's fears, and they became her own... in roundabout ways.

## BRIDGE

\* \* \*

“That Mario Lopez guy was in a gay relationship with the *TROLL DUDE* from Back To You!?”

“And you think that matters to *any* of us?!” Corvette Jones took a bite of a tuna melt.

“It’s not the point,” Twisty Combs said. “I could *sell* half these stories ‘cause...”

“Hey... Listen!! I already know what you’re goin’ to say!?” Corvette threw bread sidings into a waste basket. “You’ll never be on *BROADWAY* if you’re perceived as a NARC!?” He looked toward Twisty. “And you think bein’ a stagehand on *Mike and Juliet* is your ‘launching point’ somehow!?”

“You can live in the *CITY* for a million years and no one would know your name!?” Twisty continued to speak, but he looked past Corvette... and out through a third-story window. “*BROADWAY!* That’s where you make a NAME here!?”

Corvette Jones wanted to leave. He wasn’t due for a break until noon but there had been lighting problems backstage of the filming studio where they prepped numerous nuanced props and set optics which regular people would scoff at understanding the details of shadow subtleties. Corvette spoke to Twisty, not because he liked him but rather because they were on the clock at the same time.

Twisty continued on. “I can *bone* that BITCH!?”

“Careful!! They can hear us if they chance to come to this part of the building!?”

“I can *bone* that bitch!! And the only thing that stops me is MONEY!?” Twisty watched Corvette shake his head in disagreement. “She bones seven guys a *week* from what I understand!?”

“You’ll never be a *TALK SHOW HOST!* You’re wrong about Mario Lopez bein’ fag... and I *bet* that Juliet Hardy is celibate as they come!?”

“I want a shot at *BROADWAY!*” Twisty said. He looked onto the city street below. Cabs rolled by. The air chilled his skin to goose mounds.

\* \* \*

Corvette Jones found himself drinking Samuel Adams lager with Twisty Combs in Twisty’s sixth-floor apartment at six thirty after work. “You say that you got your nickname from *dreads* you had in college, *huh?*! I like that!! It’ll make it to *Rent*, you know?! The name, I mean!! You gotta have talent...

an' that's what you've gotta work on!!"

"So I was sayin' to my priest the other day that *God* doesn't exist!!" Twisty glossed past Vette's last statement as if it wasn't said. "Actually, that's not what I said!! I was in *CONFESSION*, and what I told 'im was that we are in a *DREAM OF GOD*!!" Vette looked up at him. "I told him that at any given time, things can *change*!! The EARTH can flatten again!! Men can raise up into the sky and fly around like *THE GREEN LANTERN*!! The mountains can rise out of the ground... *and make themselves known*!!!"

"You want to get out of CHURCH, *don't you*?!" Vette sipped his beer.

"I said that Africa sent South America away as recently as two hundred years ago!!" Twisty went to his living room window. He looked out. He was drawn to the outside moreso during his recent life than he had ever remembered. "I said *THAT THE MAPS SHOWED IT*!!"

"You're talkin' 'bout California bein' a mystical Spanish *ISLAND* an' the like!!" Vette went to Twisty's fridge, got a couple of beers, and helped himself to some Oreos without asking for permission.

"I wanted to get a rise out of him—*yeah*—but I wanted to know why I was at *CHURCH* at *all*!!" He grabbed some of his own Oreos when offered and he grabbed one of the beers from Vette's hands. "I mean... my *mother* pays for half of my lease here... *so long as she sees me at Saint Elizabeth's* every week!! But it's more than that... because we're expected to believe in miracles at the same time that we're *not*!! It's crazy... *and*..."

"You wanted to see where the priest would draw the line?!"

"*No*!! Not completely... because the people on the big stages don't have religion like we do!! They go to *Kabala*... and all that *NEW AGE CRAP*!! But they don't stay with the Catholics!! Very few do!!"

"*Mel Gibson* is one!!" Vette popped his beer open with the backside of a can opener.

"*Yeah*!! But they are *few*!!" Twisty passed his beer back to Vette to be opened. "I wanted to know how far I can *think*!! What can I get away with?! Can I say I believe in *SPIDER-MAN*?! Is he from the *DEVIL*?!"

"Hey!! Listen!! I like what you're sayin' about the world bein' like we're characters of *GOD'S UNIVERSE*... or somethin'... but I know how things work with *MIRACLES*!!" Vette loved that Twisty showed interest and handed him back an opened bottle of brew. "You can watch jugglers... *and they're goin' to mess up*!! The scientists do that!! They watch a pattern and believe it has always happened!! The California coast slides away at four inches per year!! And they figure that it must have taken *billions* of years for South America to slide from Africa!! But the jugglers mess up... and if you're stupid, naïve, or careless, you're bound to believe that it goes on *forever*!! Ozzy Smith had a near-perfect glove!! Ninety-eight percent fieldin' average... *or somethin'*!! Then we watch Bill Buckner let it slide between 'is legs on game *SIX*!! And they don't forget it in this town!! A *TEE BALL* player could've made that play and *Boston* would've been full of glory in eighty-six... *instead of us*!! But we see it!! And the miracles don't usually show on camera!! They are in the cathedrals with the bleedin' statues... *and that kind of thing*!!"

Vette popped a couple of cookies into his mouth. “I know what you’re sayin’!!”

“I don’t think you get it!! I’m not sayin’ it’s goin’ *ON!!* I’m sayin’ I don’t have control... *and I’m sayin’ to the priest that he doesn’t have all the answers any more for the world we live in!!* I am MAX HEADROOM’S cousin!! I swear to the MOON and everything that matters that I put it on my *blog* that way!! Everyone has to realize that what is believed comes to fruition!! I’m not sayin’ we’re goin’ to see flyin’ men out there... *in tights...* or we’re goin’ to see a lady in red, white and blue flyin’ with the aid of a glass jet!! I’m sayin’ that this is Iran right now!! You have to check with all the guys that play *Civilization*—the one with WARLORDS an’ all!! They play this system like it’s ancient Persia... and the threats from *Washington* on TV at night are inuendos that a secret mission is bein’ planned to hit us!! Another *TOWERS* incident!!”

“You’re way too paranoid!! You have to understand that people play our area like Britain!! And some play us as *Africa!!* You got it right that some people conceptualize the land different... and *Vietnam* was really a code for takin’ over the West Coast... *but I don’t buy...*”

“*Hey!!* I don’t know where to go!! That’s all I’m sayin’!! They asked me to ‘think outside of the box’ at the *SHOW!!* That’s the only way I can get promotions!! But at what point do I wind up in a paddy wagon?!”

Vette socked Twisty in the arm. “You have *years* to go!!” He tossed a cookie at him. “They still haven’t taken *Geraldo Rivera!!*”

\* \* \*

“*Daddy Day Care* was what?!” Vette sat next to Twisty in a cab. They traveled to work early in the morning. Fog made its way into the mid city.

“*Mall Rats!!* It was the same chick, *right?!?*” Twisty ate licorice.

“No!! They were different ladies!! And the woman that was in *Rats* is goin’ to be on the set today!! Bet ya’ can’t talk to ‘er if you *tried!!*”

“*Slippin’ inside... Slow castration!!*” Twisty sang—a reference to a song by one of his favorite bands.

“*Yeah!!* They’re doin’ it to *ALL* of us!!” Vette hit Twisty in the arm. “But only so long as we haven’t paid our *DUES!!*” He looked high into the urban sky. “You keep thinkin’ you *can* work on Broadway... an’ you’ll be there someday!! High in one of *those!!*”

“Do you think Juliet pimps off her guests to wealthy pricks in those penthouses?! I mean... when Mandy Moore was on the program last week... she was dressed like... Ah!! It doesn’t matter!! ‘Cause Jessica Simpson said she was a *Christian...* an’ she got divorced!!”

“None of ‘em last!!” Vette observed. “You’re sayin’ you’re insecure that you won’t have so much as *four months* with a decent chick!! Not at the wages *we’re* paid!!”



“Yeah!! An’ the guys in *Burger King* are jealous of me, *right*?! That I even get to *look* at the stars from behind the sets!! I bet they would *KILL* to be where I’m at!!”

“And you’re tryin’ to be *Mike Jarrick* of all people!!” Vette shook his head. “He’s not *LUCKY*!! He has to show up every day... and he can’t cuss on the air!! And he gets bossed aroun’ by executives you *DON’T SEE*!!”

“And they’re owned by who?! ‘Cause I want to know where it stops!!”

“You have to be what the *guests* are!! That’s the best I can guess!!” He thought about the situation as their destination neared. “Then again, maybe they have assistants like *US* who don’t think they’re so lucky *too*!!”

“Okay!! So it’s futile!!” Twisty shifted in his seat. “But there’s a guy in Wyoming you can see from surveillance photos which are featured on my blog!! He wrote ‘*S.O.S.*’ with logs he cut from local trees!! It reminded me of the ‘*S.O.L.*’ episode from *Gilligan’s Island*... an’ I was thinkin’ that they couldn’t get away with that in *California* any more!! I have an aunt who lives in Lake Tahoe!! Surveillance photos taken from the *STATE*!! They care more for trees than *people* up there!! They make sure you don’t cut down your own timber!!”

“And you can’t extend your harbor once the water has receded!! I ‘member a conversation we had ‘bout it!!” Vette tapped Twisty on the shoulder to prepare his half of the fare. “It’s a *messed up world* in some places!!”

“But the guy in *Wyoming*... Maybe ‘e has a clue!! Maybe that’s where it’s at!! Not execs!! No bosses!! No code!!” Twisty pulled a ten and some ones. “That place or *Yukon*!! I need to be there before I retire!!”

“But we can’t *all* be there!!” Vette handed some cash to the cabby. “Pragmatism says that ya’ *GOTTA* prepare to be ‘ere!!” Vette got out of the vehicle.

Twisty stepped out. “But I have to *DREAM*!!” He looked toward the building where he worked. “I have to *dream*!! I have to dream!!”

\* \* \*

“*There’s an urchin livin’ under the streets*!!” Twisty sang as he climbed the fourth level of stairs in brownstone at six in the afternoon.

“*Hard case!! That’s tough to beat*!!” Vette sprang from behind. He heaved as he made his way up.

“*You’re a charity case!! Buy me somethin’ to EAT*!!” Twisty belted.

“*YOU’RE* the charity case!!” Vette said. He was near Rhonda Carrier’s door at last. “This city is *livin’*!!”

“It’s more than *GHOSTBUSTERS*!! An’ it’s more than *Cloverfield*!!” Twisty knocked. “There is

*some*thin' in this city that no one else believes!/" He waited. "There is SOMETHIN'!/"

Rhonda Carrier opened the door. She was in a bathrobe. "What?/" She smiled bleakly. "You didn't have enough of me at the *set*?/"

Twisty gleamed. "No!/"

Vette said, "*You're the first boss that didn't fire me—us!!—for drinkin' on the job!*/" He caught his breath before letting himself in the door behind Twisty.

"I have more about that guy you blogged, *Twisto!*/" She handed him photos printed from her bubblejet.

"Twisty!! They call me '*Twisty*' when I'm away from the *PLACE!* Not Charles!! Twisty!/"

"Okay... *Twisto*, but the guy is a millionaire!! Won big bucks in Vegas!! Runnin' from 'is wife!! Set up with a *hooker*—that's the most we can make of things—from one of the Vegas night clubs!/"

"*Nah!!* I checked that part!/" Vette exhaled. "She was the daughter of an auto dealership owner!! She doesn't care 'bout life any more than 'e does... but I couldn't figure out the distress call!! Sincere o' *JOKE?*!/"

"*Not sincere!!* That's my take!! No one does stuff like that!/" Rhonda put more photos on the table. "The lady is startin' to build a treehouse near their cabin!/"

"So he's a joke!! But Twisty figured that we could go *there...* for vacation... if you think 'e's not dangerous!! And if *Mike and Juliet* sponsor us to go there!! For a 'behind the scenes' look at how *MOUNTAIN MEN* live!/"

"It doesn't pan completely 'cause 'e's from *LA!*/" Twisty said.

"*Yeah*, but you can still focus on the transition!/" Rhonda said to Twisty. "It's even better that way 'cause everyone in New York wants to *leave...* at some point!/"

"*Yeah!!* I can't believe you listened to our *STORY* today!/" Vette marvelled to Rhonda. She was one of the brighter assistant writers on set. She hadn't been around long enough to care about convention. She wanted the 'rough stories' to make a name for herself. "We can go there... and bring 'em to the Big Apple eventually!! Reintegration!! If 'e didn't go 'primal' on us!! Don Coryell from the Chargers became a mountain man years back!! I don't know 'e made it back!/"

\* \* \*

Rhonda Carrier decided that the guy in Wyoming was too mysterious for their liking. She wrote a story regarding ubans myths. She took a liking toward Twisty and Vette. She traveled with them to Florida. "*CHUD* stands for what?! *Somethin'-Somethin'-Underground-Dwellers!*/"

"You'll have it mastered by the end of the day!/" Vette said to her. They were in the sky in a charter plane just entering everglades. "*Twisty*, here, has it mastered!! I'm great at mikes!! I'm good at lightin'!! Twisty knows how the *stories* are gonna be spun!! He usually tells me the angles people are right

with!!”

“Yeah!! But this time... *I don't have it figured out!!* ‘Cause the gators came back to the CITY... an’ they were flushed, *no doubt!!* And scientists say that they could live underground for... *Hey!!* It’s legacy what we’re left with!! I wanted to do the guy in Wyoming... but ya’ have to make your start *somewhere!!*”

“*Mike and Juliet* are gonna like it!! I’m sure!!” Rhonda said. “You’re goin’ to make it as a producer at the rate you’re goin’!!” Rhonda said to Twisty.

The trio was accompanied by other assistants but remained distant except when interviewing rangers, doctors, and travelers. New Yorkers on vacation were questioned about whether or not they would bring back crocks... or any other belly crawler. They wound up in the Keys and had the time of their lives celebrating with locals. Fun. It’s what was demanded of them. They ran a light show.

\* \* \*

Rhonda Carrier defied superiors for the first time in her life. An assistant from the home studio demanded that her exposé be cut short. They still had two days left allocated from the original agreement. She pretended not to get the notice. She went one further. She took off to LA with Twisty and Vette to find Ira Best. Word was that he was back on his way to the City of Angels. He looked like a mountain man—*like enough of an urban myth to be confused with tales of Grizzly Adams*. She was going to take her stab at a promotion. “I might get rich, I might get busted,” she said to Vette on their flight as they reached Phoenix air space. She wasn’t for singing, but she relied on lyrics to get her by.

“Yeah, and I have a shot at *BROADWAY* if the piece is good enough!!” Twisty said. “The pay isn’t quite that good at the show so that I can be *happy!!*” he confessed. He ordered a couple of drinks. At the age of twenty-two, he was barely starting to feel like a citizen of the *WORLD*—a global resident.

“You don’t have a shot for a few years, *guy!!*” Vette said to him. “You have to pay your dues!! But you can make it if you see this as a step!!”

“The pilot came back and said the borders expanded over *California!!* I think ‘e was jokin’!! I think ‘e was pokin’ fun at our piece!! Did you tell ‘im what we were coverin’!?” Rhonda asked.

Vette said, “*He might ‘ve!!* He likes to blab!!”

“That’ll be good in a few years!!” Rhonda said. “This industry *relies* on gossipin’ flakes like the ones we work for!!”

“*Yeah!!*” Twisty said.

Rhonda, Twisty, and Vette were called up to the cockpit of their small charter airplane. The pilot spoke to them as he pierced through clouds. “I have reports from the *National Weather Bureau* that the EARTH has expanded to the size of Jupiter!! Cows are ballooning from the midwest to Canada... *according to morning talk radio...* and NASA has said that the Sun appears to be SPARKING!! Venus is on

its way out of the solar system... and galaxies are spinning out of control a *hundred* times faster... than regularly expected!! The Air Force denies it all... and it'll make for good footage for a story... if it's hoax!! If it's not a coordinated prank, I believe I'm goin' to quit my job when we land... *and drink nine straight martinis!!*"

"Thanks for the info!!" Rhonda said. "*NOTED!!*" She patted the pilot on the back. "We're goin' to stick to the 'mountain man' story 'cause it's what we're prepared for," she said to Twisty and Vette as they headed back to their seats. She admired quick flashes of lightning from dark heaps outside from their vantage point.

\* \* \*

As the plane neared LAX, Twisty looked out of his window. The clouds were rainbow-colored. There were no apparent rainbows in the sky. It could have been an illusion... but it seemed that the clouds themselves were *painted*. It wasn't superposition. It was color *on* the clouds... from Twisty's vantage point. "There was this party I remember long ago," he said to Vette. "It seemed that it was goin' on for *hours!!* I mean, it must have only been midnight... an' I was there for only a couple o' hours... but it seemed like I was there for ten or *twelve* hours!! There was dancin'... an' I was thinkin' like it was the same as the rest... except that all the rest had the *FEAR!!* Fear of the cops!! Fear of fights breakin' out!! Fear o' women leavin'... or not showin' up!! And I was dancin' like there was no tomorrow... an' then it *happened!!*"

"The party was broken up by the *fuzz!!*" Vette said. He looked out toward the colored stacks outside.

"No!! Someone grabbed cake, smeared my face... an' said I was *in!!*"

"I 'member that!! I couldn't be there 'cause I was in Louisiana checkin' with locals... but they said that's when you got the job!! When you didn't yell at 'em!! You had..." Vette looked at Twisty's clothes. "You had your best *suit* on!!"

"This one!!" Twisty smiled. "*Yeah!!* And I was thinkin' that was how life was!! God could change anything, *anytime!!*" He looked to Rhonda, asked for the peanuts which sat in front of her for hours, then kept going, "The floods in the Midwest, for example!!" He looked back outside at the clouds and smirked. "The world changes... an' I tried to *fight* it!! The telekinetic guests at our show!! I believe *they* believe they change things!! I caught myself lookin' at branches an' believin' I was makin' 'em move!! An' then we get an architect who's supposed to be designin' the next *TOWERS!!* An' everything's numbers!!" He patted Vette on the shoulder. "I told you I got my name from *dreads* I had!! It wasn't that!! It was the TK guy!! He called me 'Twisty'!! He said I could have the power!!" Somberness crept into his belly. "He said I could bend spoons... an' the whole ten or eleven yards!!"

"You have to treat 'em all the same, you know?!" Vette grabbed some of the peanuts in front of

Twisty. “You have to *respect* ‘em!! An’ ya’ have to entertain ‘em all that they’re all *correct*!! The architect can put up a buildin’... an’ the *illusionist* can...” He noticed that the clouds turned white suddenly. “The illusionist... can...”

Twisty was waiting for Vette’s sentence to complete. He looked at him patiently. “The illusionist?! Yeah?!”

“No!! I can’t say it’s *Clive Barker*, but...”

“Yeah!! Magic!! Don’t call the illusionists by their name!! Call ‘em ‘magiciains’ or they get mad!!” He pushed the rest of the peanuts Vette’s way. “You never told me why they named you ‘Vette’!?”

“The first car I’m supposed to get when I’m not a stagehand anymore!!”

“Ah!!” Twisty figured there was probably a back story to it similar to his own nickname.

\* \* \*

Getting through LAX was tougher than the group expected. Denise Richards was being mobbed by photographers. An unknown businessman was being detained for smuggling marijuana. A mugger tried unsuccessfully to rip off luggage. Cab drivers were yelling at one another over right of way. Police officers stood around as if a riot would break out if they tried to fix all the cracks in the damn at once.

Ira Best was at a *Comfort Inn*. Rhonda Carrier managed to contact him via cell phone right around the time they touched down. Her contacts led her to believe that Ira was willing to fly to New York to be a guest on the *Morning Show*. He reportedly conveyed that he had an interesting backlog of celebrity video files. Rhonda did not want to waste time. She managed to meet him at a hotel as soon as possible.

“Did you see that fag blond dude from *TMZ*?!” Twisty asked Vette as soon as they entered their cab.

“The choppy-hair lanky one?! Or the wavy-haired surferlike caricature?!”

“The taller one, I think!!” He looked over his shoulder at the terminals as they traveled away.

“They don’t have *CLASS*!! I mean... They have a different demographic!! They cater to kids comin’ ‘ome from school... an’ they have to show the Disney kids a lot... but they are *IN THEIR FACE*!!”

“No *CLASS*!!” Vette chortled.

“We have soccer moms who stay at home!!” Twisty smiled. “That’s *better*!! We can slow down!! Those punks have to step on your toes *literally*, sometimes... to get their shots!! We let our stuff *come* to us most the time!!”

“You would’ve been like that if you were a *teen* when you started workin’!! Instead, you have the ‘*high and mighty*’ degree from *college*!! Where’d you go?! Purdue?!”

“I dropped *out*, asshole!! It’s not the same!!” He looked at the sky and noticed that the clouds seemed normal... except that it was beginning to become overcast. “I’m still hip like the kids... and I *don’t* need to be in people’s faces when...”

“Hey, man!! Don’t cry for ‘em!! The celebrities?! They need that attention!! If only soccer moms watched ‘em on our show... or pervert fags late at night on *Letterman*, we’d have a different genre!! A different *vibe*!!”

“I worry ‘bout ‘em!!” Twisty said.

“*Wesley Snipes*!!” Vette said. “Yeah, it gets real!!” He rubbed his head. “You have to dot the i’s an’ cross the t’s!!”

“*IT SUCKS*!!” Twisty yelled.

Rhonda turned around from the seat in front of the two young men. “Get that rage out *now*!!” She noticed that Twisty’s mind wasn’t with him. “You want to be back there *filming* Denise Richards from two feet away!!” She shook her head. “That’s normal!!” She reached for his knee. “You do your job right now...”

“*Yeah*!!” He looked at Vette and felt shame. “I’ll be with her on *BROADWAY* someday!!” Somehow, he didn’t believe it. Somehow, he knew that Rhonda missed what was going on in his head. It was the clouds—*not the strange celebrity*—that occupied his mind.

\* \* \*

Ira Best swam in a pool twenty yards from where Vette and Twisty spoke. Rhonda was inside the Comfort Inn hotel lobby registering for three separate rooms. Vette held a papaya daquiri in his right hand. The left hand clutched suntan oil which was nearly completely gone. Twisty’s chest was becoming red. He never used oil. He never wanted to be tagged as phony. Somehow, using suntan oil was “faking it”... and he would deal with burn in the morning in order to feel better about his situation.

“Voodoo, man,” Vette said to Twisty. “That’s all this is!!”

“I don’t understand,” Twisty said. His *piña colada* arrived seconds later from a lady he met minutes before. She overheard them talking about the *Morning Show* and offered drinks in order for a healthy exchange of information—“*tips on how to make it in the business*”—as she suggested.

“Hegel!! I want to say that’s who it was in junior college!! I was learnin’ film—*of course*—but I got caught up in psychology ‘cause of politics!! Psychology led to sociology... *which led to philosophy*... and I wound up holding mikes over rich people’s heads!! But Hegel said that all knowledge—*all good and relevant knowledge*—is from firsthand experience!! Don’t pay attention to mountains of work!! One philosopher figures somethin’ out!! Then another comes an’ takes it on a tangent!! Then some dude says he thinks the *other* knows what he’s talkin’ ‘bout... *almost*... and formulates a theory of his own!!”

“You believe the clouds are movin’ without wind, *don’t you*?” Twisty inquired.

“NO, *BITCH*!! I watched an ol’ movie in film class!! Moses, I think it was, was in the movie...”

“*When the BULL is in the sky*?” Twisty asked.

“The BULL is in the sky—*yeah*!!—and Willard Scott... or *anyone else*... is not...”

“You might’ve been thinkin’ o’ Freud instead o’ Hegel!! The ink blotches!! ‘Cause I know what you’re sayin’ about those clouds!?” Twisty thought of the colors he saw on the plane. “It *looks* like people... and you want to say that they’re dancin’... but...”

“Hey, *man*!! Marty McFly, *okay*!! If you see yourself ‘in the future’... *the time-space continuum is supposed to collapse*!! I’m sure that’s the way it goes!?” Vette doused his forehead with some of his daquiri. He sucked on ice cubes.

“It was overcast at the airport... *which is fine*... and now the Sun is searin’ down on us like...”

“*No*!! The weather has nothing to do with it!! The holographic universe I was tellin’ you about before we got here... There was a book I was told of...”

“You said a *moron* told you about that book,” Twisty noted.

“*No*!! Not in retrospect!! Because it happened!! Uncomfortably, but it *HAPPENED*!! They say ‘self-fulfilling prophesy’ happens all the time!! Ten thousand girls around the country sayin’ they’re goin’ to be the first woman president!! But there can’t be *room* for ‘em all!! We can only have ONE ‘first female president’... *if even that*!! But the bet is that it’s self-fulfilling prophesy when it happens!! She TALKS herself into position... *to varying degrees*!!”

“I said my mom made me go to *CHURCH* an’ I was givin’ the priest a hard time about *GOD*!! I don’t think it works that way with the *DEVINE*!!” Twisty drank from his cocktail. It was one of the sweeter drinks he had had in recent times.

“You have to understand what I’m sayin’!! Max Headroom is our *PRESIDENT*!! I am not a dualist!! I believe—I *know*—that it matters in cyberspace!! Katie Holmes starts off with an absurd crush on a megastar hunk, *Tom Cruise*... and the goofy little teen puts him on ‘er blog... or as one o’ ‘er *links*!! And BAMMO!! They’re married with children years later!!”

“I understand what you mean,” Twisty said. He had an urge to call for five more drinks.

“It doesn’t make sense, *though*!! That’s supposed to happen with people... *and with social situations*!! You’re supposed to talk your way into bein’ a manager at *K-Mart*!! Or, in your case... *into bein’ a BROADWAY star*!!” Vette noticed that Twisty absently mouthed “Broadway star” along with him. “That’s why I bring up *HEGEL*!! Or whoever it is!!”

“You’re sayin’ that *TK* is goin’ on ‘cause our conversation on the plane!! It sounds stupid, I must say!! I am ‘*TWISTY*’... and some fruitcake noted that I might bend spoons someday!!”

“Yeah!! But I started thinkin’... And I remembered *SKITTLES*, the candy!! And I was seein’ the clouds outside!! I haven’t smoked pot in a couple of weeks... *and the clouds turned to rainbows*!!”

Twisty froze. He didn’t want to volunteer that he had perceived the same dyed array from outside of their charter window.

“And *why*?! ‘Cause we’re goin’ to see some *MOUNTAIN MAN* and we have to have a back story to tell ‘im about!? I have to imagine a world greater than the one I’m used to?!” Vette looked over to Ira swimming away. Ira turned and waved. He yelled for a drink. Vette resumed his thought, “But now...”

*YOU ARE SEEIN' THE SAME CLOUDS ABOVE ME!!*"

"I have to tell ya' that... *Ah!!* They look like people!!" Twisty couldn't bring himself to tell Vette that he wasn't out of his mind. He saw the hues. He believed the clouds above resembled people. "They look like people!! Yeah!! If we get strunk by lighting before interviewing Jim Cavesal... *I'll TRIP REALLY BAD!!*"

"*Taboo!!* I get it!!" He watched Ira Best get out of the pool. "Waitress!! A DRINK!!" The poolside girl acknowledged him and waved. He marveled at the waves in the pool. They oscillated abnormally. He felt beckoned. He felt wind on his skin. He couldn't tell if Mother Nature was crazy. It was cold. It was *cold*. All of a sudden, it was becoming cold again. In the sky, a rainbow stretched for as far as the eye could see.

"*Cyberworld is fuckin' your HEAD!!*" Twisty enticed. "You need to stop playin' those games where you BELIEVE..."

Lighting struck across the sky.

\* \* \*

Jude Harker approached Ira Best as he was toweling his hair. Rhonda Carrier brought a round of drinks. "What you are about to feel like is that you're in a 'reality TV' program!! The guys are going to be filming you!!" She pointed to Vette and Twisty. They waved. "They are going to walk around you... *as if you aren't here!!*" She motioned to them to begin rolling. "You are in a piece called '*EXACERBATION*'!!"

"I don't *masturbate*, lady!!" Jude jibed.

"I *told* you 'e was an asshole!!" Ira said. "And my wife? Is she comin'!?"

"No!! We can't get a hold of..." Rhonda gestured for Vette to raise the microphone so that Twisty's camera could not detect it. "You're goin' to have to do *better*, Vette!!"

"I don't want to sit near this man, if possible!!" Ira said about Jude.

"*No!!* You have to sit near him..." She waved at the poolside girls to bring the tray of drinks which rested on a white wrought iron table. "You have to know that across America, bosses are working near employees whom they really don't like!! Ladies are in marriages which they don't want to be part of!! You are not Ira Best today!! This is not Jude Harker... *who indirectly is responsible for your fortune!!* You are Mister *BOSS*!! You are Joe Generic Boss... an' Jude Harker is Mister Lowly Ingrateful Employee!!"

"*Yes!!*" Ira said. "I got it!!"

"You have to tell him... *AND AMERICA*... what it is like to be fortunate and rich!! You have to tell them how you wanted to *smash* Jude Harker... but refrained!! You have to tell them... *that walkin' away was better than anythin' else you could've done!!* You have to let them know that violence was not the answer!!"

"And my divorce?! Do you want me to touch that?!" He looked to Jude and noticed trepidation.



“I mean, I *might* have strangled this guy if I didn’t feel so lowly!! Another straw on my back might’ve broken me!?”

“And you wound up *RICH!!* That doesn’t work in most places—*America likes losers as of late, you might know and early morning talk is full of people who can’t get things to work*—but you had to struggle!! You had to go to the backwoods to find out what you’re about!! Mountain *MAN!!*”

“Hey!! I really liked it out there!!” Ira said.

“You don’t have to tell America!! Lies do not have to become us!! We have sponsors... and they like *Survivor*... but if they believe you are...”

“Blitzo in the *brain?!*” Ira asked.

“*Yeah!!* It’s not goin’ to take!!” Rhonda smirked.

Ira Best sobered up. “What makes you think...?” He had only drank a few gulps of his drink. His head felt dizzy. “What...?”

“*Millions* want to know...” Rhonda interjected.

“*Listen!!*” Vette said. “This is goin’ to be edited!! We already went to the Florida Keys!! We have an ‘urban tales piece’ which none of the other networks can compare to!! *FOX* is not that hard to deal with!! Loose!! Please stay loose!!” Vette approached Ira. “My job is to make you look *good!!*”

“Closeups!! Snapshots intermingled!! Captions!! Got ya’!!” Ira said

“*Roll, baby, roll!!*” Rhonda decreed.

“I was in *Las Vegas*...” Ira started. He gleamed at Jude. He smiled at Rhonda. He sparkled to invisible people in *TV Land*.

\* \* \*

“So the piece wrapped up nice!!” Twisty beamed to Vette. He held a cold can of Tecate on his stomach. Rhonda checked out a room out for him of his own yet he was more comfortable laying on Vette’s bed reflecting.

Vette sat in a chair nearby. “I got what Miss Carrier was saying about *EXACERBATION* and all!! The kids from the swamp take an alligator—somethin’ they shouldn’t do!!—and then they lie about it!! A bad situation becomin’ worse!!”

“You don’t comprehend what she was sayin’ ‘bout *IRA BEST*, though!!” Twisty drank heartily from his can. “That guy could’ve ripped Jude Harker’s *throat* out!! Jipped for a dollar?! I might’ve done so myself!! Flight gonna leave soon?! Wife ruinin’ your life *AS IT IS!!* And then some cabbie says ‘e’s *GOD*, essentially... an’...!!”

Vette cut in. “He’s a rich man!! Yeah!! But you missed it!! ‘Cause I’m the CAB DRIVER!! Every day I have to tell you my secrets... *so you can wind up on BROADWAY!!* It makes no sense!!”

“Yeah!! And I guess I’m Ira Best!!” Twisty rubbed the cool aluminim can on his face. “I got

lucky!! Yeah!! I did!!”

“Okay!! She’s a genius!!” Vette reached for cubes of ice from a bucket and popped a few in his mouth. He slurred, “She knows her work!!”

“But you don’t understand the implications!! I’m outta my mind... but if Jude Harker lets Ira Best ride for bein’ a dollar short, we don’t wind up on the West Coast right now ‘cause there’s no story of a rich guy goin’ ballistic into the midsection of our country!! We do the *EVERGLADES* piece an’ turn around!!”

“No!! You have that wrong!! Subtleties!! There could be a chance that one of the ladies who knew Ira was goin’ to screw ‘im any way!! Mountain man in Fresno instead of the Midwest!! He said so ‘imself!! And Cynthia Lennon!! I liked what ‘e said about Cynthia Lennon!! She was left behind at a train station when the Beatles went to India!! If she made it—*there was a mad mob there*—John and Cynthia stay married, the Beatles break up *sooner*, *I guess...* an’ EAST DOESN’T MEET WEST in the form o’ an international union involvin’ *YOKO*!!”

“You’re a *cock*!!” Twisty belted. “That would’ve... *Yeah!!* I think you’re assessment’s accurate... *but...* IRA BEST WAS NO JOHN *LENNON*!!” Twisty waved at his face with a semi-folded brochure.

“You just don’t recognize the nuances of social dynamics!! You can’t say that LA would’ve had the same history if Kirk Gibson was kept out of the first game of the eighty-eight World Series!! I mean... Rodney King might not have been beat up!! Maybe he was an A’s fan!! Tommy Lasorda put Gibson in for *ONE AT BAT*!! He was injured, conked a doozie into the deep seats... and set the tone for things to come!!”

“Too much thought!!” Twisty resigned. “Let’s think about how we’re goin’ to handle our jobs when we get back!! Twenty-five percent chance we’ll get reprimanded!!”

“Rhonda on ‘er whims!! Make or BREAK!!” Vette looked out their third-story window down into the pool near where they drank liquored concoctions and interviewed nutty people of the world. “This time... I think it’s *MAKE*!! For our job’s sake!!”

“Yeah!! And I bet we wind up in the background of the TMZ spot at the airport!!”

\* \* \*

“The *DEVIL*’S greatest feat of the modern era was to persuade HUMANKIND... that *he doesn’t exist*!!” Twisty spoke to Vette like a professor to a student.

“*SHE* doesn’t exist!!” Vette assured Twisty. “I’m pretty sure of that fact!!”

“And I was in this bar talkin’ to this guy from *ROLLING STONE*!! He wanted to be on the show an’ thought I processed booking!! I told ‘im...”

“Yeah!! *Yeah!!* Here comes Rhonda!! I think she’s goin’ to tell us what’s up with our flight!!”

“Okay!! But the guy talked about Starship—the *Grace Slick band*—and the song was ‘Miracles’!!” Twisty looked over to Rhonda. She was sweating and entered casual speaking range. Twisty finished, “*I might have to move heaven and EARTH... to get to ya’, baby!! We could exist on the STARS!!*”

*Never say never!!* And the words are all messed up in my head... *but they believed it!!* Astral projection!! Journey's covers displayed foreign worlds!! Boston launched from this planet in a guitar!! A city guitar!!

"That's all nice!/" Rhonda spat. "They say New York is not there anymore!/" She looked around. "The *pilot?! The one who brought us here?! I can't find him!! Called him five times!/"* She felt paranoid. "The agent—the *travel agent*—said Honalee exists on the EAST COAST!! But no New York!! And Utopia!! We can stay there for two nights if it's an emergency... *and...*"

"Hoax!/" Vette said. "It's gotta be a *HOAX!*/"

Twisty patted Vette on the chest. "He was convincing me yesterday that the clouds above were *people!*/"

"No!/" Vette rushed to anger. "I feel insane... *and that's okay!*/" He looked at Rhonda. "What about Jude Harker!! You talked to him this morning about a ride in his van to Vegas!/"

"Private cab!! Yeah!! A minivan which could accomodate us, our luggage, and equipment!/"

"Call him *NOW*, Rhonda!/" Vette said. "I don't like the feelin' here!/"

"*Yeah!*/" Rhonda said. "I'll call!/"

\* \* \*

It wasn't far past Twenty-Nine Palms that Rhonda felt comfortable enough to tell Jude Harker about the strange happenings. There were helicopters in the sky and they seemed to dance like bumble bees. Rhonda was reminded of the Joni Mitchell "*Woodstock*" song in which planes were turned into butterflies. She told Jude, "I think it's goin' on!/"

"The big *change?*/" Jude asked. Vette and Twisty were both asleep in the seats behind them. "Big Log" played from the van's CD player.

"*Yeah!! But not economics!!* Ira Best said that he believed God was mad at us!! Moses?! I remember 'im sayin' somethin' about *MOSES!* And how we had too many laws, now!! And how you should've let 'im go on a dollar... *'cause the STATE LAWS were bad enough to remember, let alone the secret ones of companies like yours!*/"

"I would've let 'im slip if he had better legs an' a nice breast!/" He looked to Rhonda and noticed that she wasn't amused. "I would've paid the dollar myself!/"

"But you were willin' to let 'im go back to LA *broke!*/" She shook her head. "He would've lost his pride after missing his flight!! He was goin' through a divorce... *so there was no wife to help 'im!* And luck had it that he *won!* He took twenty dollars and won millions in slots!/"

"*Fascinating!*/" Jude said. "He was a punk!! He ordered me around!! I saw a bully's face in his!/" Jude teared. "I got picked on in junior high by..."

"*Those kinds of people!* Right?/"

"*Yep!*/"

“So it’s not revenge... *but...*”

“In Las Vegas, we knew it would end!! That’s why we took their culture!! The castles!! New York!! Pyramids!! Paris, even!!”

“But it’s more than I can say!!” Rhonda turned around to verify that the stagehand duo was still conked out. “I’ve seen *PUNK’D*!! An’ I’ve watched a lot of shows that...”

“*Yeah!! Hope!!*” Jude guessed. “But you can never really know when...”

“*Listen, Jude!!*” She grabbed his shoulder. “I feel for you, *too!!* America wants to see the ‘success stories’ though!! You were on the verge of greatness an’ were part of a credit scandal!! America likes the extremes!! The heroes... or...”

“*The LOSERS!!*” Jude said. “I rode the middle for so long that...”

Rhonda yelled to the couple of sleepers in the back. “It’s *happening AGAIN!!*”

Vette looked out of the window to his left. A mountain rose out of a desert plain. Twisty scratched at his eyes. “*What’s going on again?!*” He rubbed eye gooze out from under his lids. “Did I miss somethin’ big?!”

“You could say so!!” Rhonda said. She shook her head then turned up a Robert Plant song she had never heard before. She was in a daze.

\* \* \*

Twisty had no idea where he was at. He opened a map and guessed that they must be near Victorville. There were loads of cars and he was guessing that traffic was backed up for miles. Jude took a turn off the main highway. Rhonda let him know that there were “group hallucinations” going on. There were no psychedelic drugs in the vehicle. It seemed that “something was going on”... and she wanted to know if he could help makes heads or tails out of the circumstance. Someone had said something about “the last straw”... and it agitated Vette into offering his own two cents. “*God is mad!! Yeah!!* We get that in the Old Testament!!” He looked to the mountains. “They...” He looked to Rhonda. “The laws of *GOD*... have been suspended, again!! Nine point eight meters per second squared?! I think gravity does not matter as of now!!” Winged donkeys flew in the distance. “You don’t understand...”

“The laws of *Newton* were observed!! Not made!!” Twisty bolted.

“*Yeah!!* But they break down!! The BIG BANG violates the first law of thermodynamics!!”

“*Yes!!*” Twisty said. “The last straw could’ve been what *you* did, Jude!!” He thought about the parties in New York. “Someone spills somethin’ on fresh carpet an’...”

“*FUCK YOU!!*” Jude said. “I know what you’re sayin’!!” He looked into the sky. “We’re imbeciles!! God is punishing us for...” He noticed the same thing that Twisty and Vette had observed before. Clouds in the form of people. “Hey!! I adapt as well as anyone!!”

“You’ll have to!! That’s an OASIS ahead!! It’s not supposed to be out here!!” Twisty pointed

toward a blotch of vegetation in the distance. Camels walked alongside the road.

“We stop!! That’s my vote!!” Jude declared. “We face the fuckin’ bullshit right now!!”

\* \* \*

The lake at the isolated vegetation was wide but narrow. Palms scattered the lot. A unicorn drank from the crystal-clear water. Jude was surprised to see an iron-vested lady approach the cab. “The universe has folded,” she said. “You will be wise to unpack your bags and spend a couple of nights here!!”

Vette and Twisty rushed outside of the vehicle and unstrapped their luggage from atop the roof. Rhonda stood outside and pouted. She stomped the ground. “I *knew* it would come to this!!”

“You forfeited, lady!! I am *Lora*!! That is my companion!!” She pointed to the drinking miracle with one horn.

Vette said, “I knew it would come to this, *too*!! I mean... this world was SHIT for a while!!”

“*FUCK YOU!!*” Jude said from behind the wheel. He sat mesmerized.

Twisty slouched to speak into his ear. “You have a guilty conscious!!”

“You don’t know that you had it well,” Lora said. “Lord *Zues* gave you laws!!”

“*Bullshit!!*” Twisty screamed.

“You did not pay attention to the signs!!” Lora sourly speculated. She focused upon a palm which may have been twenty-five feet high. It’s high branches lit to fire. “This is how it will be!!”

“I know the game!!” Vette said. “*WALL STREET!!*” he yelled. “Hostile takeover!!”

“*No!!* Not so hostile!!” Lora said. “I’m merely showing you what is goin’ on!!” She looked to the unicorn. “*Come!!*” she said. “You will know that there are greater powers than mine!!” She looked to Vette’s cold face. “They will not have good intentions toward you!!”

“*Oh!!* I’m supposed to be scared!!” Twisty asked.

“You watch too much television!!” Lora offered.

“*No!!* I am television!! Me and my friend...”

Lora lit another palm on fire. “You will be good to not anger me!! I will teach you the ways!!” She looked to Vette. “*WALL STREET*, huh?! You think it’s as easy as goin’ from CBS to *FOX*, huh?! You think...” She saw him weep. “The laws are different, and I’m not talkin’ ‘bout old California penal code!! I’m sayin’ *ZUES* is back... or one of his *FRIENDS*!! One of his companions has pushed aside...”

“You listen to me, lady!! This is not my friend!!” He pointed to Twisty. “He is my ‘brother in arms’!! I have been tellin’ him that...”

“Your ideas are no good at this point!! Your memories are useless!! Your first trick to is to create a swell in that pond!! *DO IT!!*”

Vette looked toward the water. A jetted fountain of water rose more than thirty feet into the air.

“You are good enough to make it!!” Lora said to Vette. “Your *friend*—‘brother in arms’ or

whathaveyou—is goin’ to have to learn!! He has no confidence in the ways of enchantment!! We will have to be shapeshifters if we are to survive!! It’s no different than the LA riots!! The rules have changed instantly!! And there are people out there that know it as well!!” She saw tears roll down Vette’s eyes. “They will be after us!!”

“The Oklahoma *SOONERS*, lady!!” Twisty said. “I *know* what you’re talkin’ about!! Some people are goin’ to skip the rules and bust in!!” He felt ashamed. “We have to play by the commands, *huh?*!!”

“You want to have sex with me right now!! But you won’t ‘cause you’re afraid of my power!! You’re young body *cries* for sexual contact!!” She moved over to him and ran her fingernail down his stomach. “But if you can use that energy to secure us a *KINGDOM*!!”

“I don’t trust you, quite honestly!!” Vette said. “You want him as much as he wants you!! Your plated armor doesn’t fool me!!” He looked to her legs. She wore a black bikini bottom from the waste down. “You stop preachin’ about *moral codes* as soon as we’re up to par with you!!”

“Deal!!” Lora said.

“What about me?!!” Rhonda asked.

“You have no use!!” Lora returned. She laughed.

Rhonda threw up her arms. “A *joker*!!”

\* \* \*

Two days after meeting Lora, Twisty and Vette spoke to one another near a campfire. “Even before this bizarre alteration of our lives, I wondered where the edge of the UNIVERSE was!! Last night, Lora told me that our world is an endless plane, again!!”

“I don’t trust her!!” Twisty said. “I turned into a white mouse for three hours yesterday!! When I know what I’m doin’, I’ll be able to turn into a cougar!! Creatures of all kinds are out towards Vegas, accordin’ to what she said!!”

“I don’t buy it!!” Vette said. “She doesn’t know!! She is speculatin’ just like the rest of us!! She watched the same movies!! She read the same magazines!! And she’s guessin’ what’s out there!!”

“Yeah!! It’s weird!! *Enchanted Garden* or *Neverending Story* gave her the idea...” He looked to Vette and noticed that he was lost. “Hey!! I can hold fire in my palm!!”

Vette said, “That’s nice!!” He looked at a suspended ball above Twisty’s upturned hand. “You will throw *large* ones someday.”

“You don’t understand that it’s all not a supernatural prank!! There are a *thousand* Frankenstein movies... but only one book on it written my Mary Shelley!! There are a lot of *DRACULA* flicks!!”

“I got it!! This universe is wakin’ up!!” Vette cried. He couldn’t believe that he couldn’t hold back tears for minutes on end since the changes.

“It is pickin’ our MINDS!! But it is allowin’ new things as well!!”

“The floatin’ car!!” Vette said. “I guess Mary Shelley couldn’t have seen that one comin’!!”

“We will *win* against that force out there!!” Twisty pointed to the distance. “I understand what she was sayin’ about the *riots*!! Once you can’t trust the authorities, you can hardly trust your brothers!!”

“Shit rolls down hill!!” Vette said. He looked to the van where Rhonda Carrier was asleep. “They don’t have a clue that the order is bein’ formed!!” He looked to Lora crashed out on the floor. “We can let her lead us... *OR WE CAN TAKE CHARGE!!*”

Twisty shook his head. “I’ve been through this too many times on the set back home!! Pretty girl smiles!! You think you have a chance... then *BAM!!* The bomb or the move!!”

“I’m goin’ to find a sword!!” Vette said. “I know how this works!! ‘Karma’ is not even the right term!! ‘Intelligence’!! That’s more like it!! We can choose to use our *minds*!! We have to rely less on firepower!! If she lit up trees with thoughts, *men are out there grindin’ each other up with ideas as well!!*”

“I want to bone ‘er!!” Twisty said. “But I get what you’re sayin’!! Use the mental game!!”

“*Not the cock!!*” Vette said.

“Until we’re SETTLED!!” Twisty growled.

“*Done deal!!*” Vette said. He went to look for Jude Harker in the surrounding desert. He found him sleeping near a thorny cactus.

\* \* \*

Three days after deciding a route of action at a campfire, Twisty took off into the desert alone with Lora. “Do you have a last name?! Were you a cat before all this happened?! I mean, did you shapeshift?!”

“No!! The name doesn’t matter!!”

“Vette is homosexual!! I’m sure of it!! I mean, a lot of the people are in the entertainment industry... *and he was tryin’ to have me leave you behind!!* I think he wants somethin’ ‘special’ between us!!”

“Oh!! You noticed!!” Lora said. “I don’t have anybody!!” She looked at her unicorn. “I can’t have sex until we’re secure!! You keep lookin’ at *ME!!* And I can’t live alone!!”

“I understand, *LORA!!*” Twisty said. “We need to get them!!” Twisty rose into the air ten feet as Lora raised her arms. “We need to knock it out *quick!!*”

“The evil is in your friend’s heart!!” Lora said. “He lusts for you *and* me!!” She lowered Twisty down. “He thinks he knows more than you... *‘cause he worked at your place of employment longer!!* But that makes him stupider!! He is set in his ways!!”

“Ah!! A fresh mind!!” Twisty said. He rose his arms into the air and climbed five feet without trying too strictly. “If I can remove my lust for you... *I can fly the same!!*”

“You will feel the rush, my friend!!” Lora said. “The joy in your spine will be better than sex

when you achieve!/"

"I have to kill!/" Twisty said. "That's the scary part!! Everything I'm taught to not do!! I can feel them comin', though!! I can feel them wantin' my power!! I can feel them resistin' losin' their own!/"

Lora thought momentarily of breaking Twisty. She thought about Vette and believed he was the lesser of the duo. She thought about Jude Harker. They sent him on his way a couple of nights before. They said that it was a bad hallucinogenic trip brought about by tainted food. He didn't question anything... then left.

"You will be my bride... *if I need you to be!*/" Twisty said to Lora.

"*That was awkward!*/" Lora said.

"I just need to keep you on your toes!/" Twisty said. He decided to leave the group. He believed chancing an encounter with a mysterious band of nomads was the best choice. The shift in her eyes told him that she couldn't be trusted for too long. Did she belong to a powerful lord? He didn't know. Was she crazy in spite of magical powers? It didn't matter. Was she more interested in Vette? It didn't mean a thing. It was like the dream of Broadway. He planned to part with Vette sooner or later. He felt that sooner was better. Twisty took off into the night and did not say goodbye to anyone.

\* \* \*

A full day of traveling left Twisty in a small town. Somehow, he knew he was not in Calico or any other traditional ghost town. As a matter of fact, it felt thoroughly European. There were ware shops and horses riding along a main road. A tavern was near and rowdy men could be heard. He approached a smith hammering a steel rod into a long sword. "My sir!! I need to know how long this will be!/" Twisty pled.

"I will not make us into fools!! The LORD of our world has ruled against you!! You are incorporated!/"

"Lora?! Do you know of a Lora?/" Twisty asked.

"No Lora!! An inn is nearby and..." The silversmith tossed a few coins at Twisty. "This will *start* you!! WAR is on the horizon!/"

"I KNOW, sir!/" He bent over toward the scruffy man. "Lora!! Her name is 'Lora' and she has put a spell on me!/"

"Your fate is months away!/" He tossed a few more coins at Twisty. "You will die if..."

"*If I am hung up?*/" Twisty asked.

"Prepare!/" the man said. "I am Solstice!! I build swords, shields... *and compasses!*/"

"*You?*/" Twisty asked. He ran off toward the tavern. "Tell them I'm from California!! Not New York!! 'Twisty' is my name!/"

"What a dupe!/" the man said. "He will last as long as his curious method is alive!/"



\* \* \*

Twisty found himself laughing heartily in a place which wasn't quite a saloon but was neither a European pub. He hollered to a patron, "The BITCH said she was goin' to saw off my nuts!! I knew I had to get *OUT!*!"

"You will be fine, LADDY!!" a gruffy brute snarled.

"'Lora' was her name!! And before long, I'm hurlin' fireballs at trees in practice!! And weildin' a sword!!" He drank heftily from his mug. "Go figure!!!"

"You California kind are all the same when you get to this side!!!" He tapped Twisty on the head. "This *felt* map will do ya' good!!!"

"You sound like a thug... but I'm growin' on ya', *huh?*!" Twisty asked.

"Your magic is too strong for me!! You did well to focus on mental defense!! Kill doze demons, *ah?*!"

"You got it!!!" Twisty said. "And there was a guy who followed me from Old York!! 'Corvette' is what they called 'im... *but 'e wasn't much o' a mate!*!"

"You may meet 'im in a duel!! Weird the way things turn out over 'ere!!!" He ordered another couple of drinks. "The LORD 'ere of *Turn Point* prefers to manage relationships in this parts!! He puts ya' with yer worst enemy sometimes!! But yer a LORD O' YOUR *OWN*, it looks!!!"

"Yeah!!!" Twisty calmly said. "I'm hooked up at Yodel's Inn down yonder!!!"

"You *need* to visit the guild about trainin' for fightin'!!!" the ruffian said.

"No!! The lady..."

"*The WINCH!*!" the toughy howled.

"...said that I need to learn on my own!! She seemed like a whore!! And she shifted!! She felt me, though!! I know she's right!! NATURE will show me!!!"

"You have a problem with *MAGIC* already!!!" the barbaric drinker alleged. "You are under the spell of a *lady*!! You will not win the fight against... *a champion!*!"

"Not until I learn... *what?*!" Twisty asked.

"If you have to ask *me*, you're TWO steps behind!! Know in your heart that the curse must be broken of this lovely lady... and know what your inner person is tellin' ye!!!"

"You sound like a weirdo... *but I like ya'!*!" Twisty rustled the stranger's hair then left to his inn room.

\* \* \*

A winch by the name of Susan followed Twisty to his hotel. "I like you... but you treat me like

nobody!./”

“Gal!! I have hordes to fight in the future!./” He looked at the scrawny barmaid as if she was propositioning him. “You would be fine on my travels!./” He thought about asking her to join him in the bedroom but decided against it. “If you know magic *half* of what I have learned... Can you tell me where the clerics are?./”

“Clerics?! I do not know what you speak of!./” She looked at Twisty and wanted to volunteer carnal service. “I have a magic of my own!./” She got near Twisty’s chest and started to rub him gently.

“You do not know what you speak of!./” Twisty pushed her away. “I feel like I’m in a bad *BEWITCHED* rerun!./” He looked at her legs. “You do not have a last name, either... Ah!! You guys are truly from another world!./”

She turned around and walked a few feet from him. “I will be back!./”

Twisty went to his bedroom alone. He thought about what was to come. There were no telephones. There were no televisions. A felt map he had been given suggested that townes could be explored in the region. Not long before dusk, he could hear a vibrant crowd starting to conglomerate not far away. He went to his window. A theatre was being set up. He hurried outside to check on the occurrence. A man dressed up as ghouel danced around. A lady tried to calm him. The costumes were exaggerated. A lute player tinkled from the right side of the stage. A crazy-looking man appeared from the left. They fought. They argued. They talked of faraway lands. They spoke of changing times. And they spoke of the end of their towne to a blizzard of snow.

There remained a strong urge to leave within Twisty. He visited a swordsman’s guild daily for a week. He learned of enchanted potions. He read through scrolls of scribes. He hung out with the winch from the bar. He longed for his home in New York... but he was pleased with a new start.

Right before sleep every night, he thought about Lora and Vette. He wondered what became of them. He thought about the daily theatric displays in the village centre. He believed it could be a lot different than the map he was given on the outside. Victorville was most likely wiped away by the mind of whatever *DIETY* controlled the new makeup fauna. He did not believe he could return to Los Angeles if he struggled to do so. The world he belonged to was once spherical. It became flattened for parsecs in all directions. It could disappear as well, he supposed. Twisty drank at the tavern regularly. Everything was habitual.

\* \* \*

Corvette Jones spoke to Ira Best at the oasis where many bewildered people took refuge. “We got to this place *FOREVER* ago!! Jude Harker was takin’ us to Vegas where we figured we had *no* problem at catchin’ a flight back to the *EAST COAST*!! And the supernatural started happenin’ with moutains comin’ out of the ground and oasises springin’ before our eyes!./”

“Yeah!! I haven’t seen a lot of it... but there was a herd of sand turtles traveling not far from here. A *hundred* or so!! I know somethin’ strange is goin’ on!!” Ira Best looked at his cell phone. “I’m gettin’ *amazin’* coverage!!”

“My friend, *Twisty Combs*, took off into the arid expanse a few evenings ago!! Lora of the Desert —*that chick over there tryin’ to cut needles from cactus to eat*—taught us some magic we can use!!”

“That’s a great *magic*!! Findin’ food from *CACTUS*!!” Ira said.

“I think she was a druggie before all this started!! I think ‘er mother was some *NEW AGE WEIRDO*... an’ she started practicin’ things on *chance*!!”

“Like turnin’ people into *frogs*?!?” Ira asked.

“I guess you can say that... *but*... Jude Harker figured you had the answer!! That’s why we called you!! The luck must have been beyond normal in Vegas!! Lora believes telekinesis could move numbered foam balls in wired bins!! Your purported luck, she believes was rooted in your *WILL*!! Bingo winners with a proactive choice of monetary return!! Craps players dancin’ dice with their *minds*!!”

“It sounds stupid!!” Ira Best said. “But I don’t have a lot of choice!!”

“You can still go back to LA and be part of that *circus* goin’ on there!!”

“I’m dead to LA, *partner*!!” He looked to Vette and hoped he could understand. “My wife ripped into my soul!! I can’t travel anywhere without thinkin’ o’ ‘er!!”

“So you thought this could take your mind off your problems!! Jude guessed right!! The same as the backwoods!!”

“I can give you better ‘*magic*’ than that *kook* over there!!” He pointed to Lora. “I know how to start a fire with stones and branches!! Just like Cub Scouts!! I can probably even arrange a better meal from our vegetation if you give me a chance!!”

Lora could barely hear the men speaking. She could not make out their words. If she could hear the insults, she may have shown Ira Best her powers. She developed an ability to rip a palm from its base. It took a complete day’s energy to summon the strength... but she could do it. She ventured into the desert to find Jude Harker when she gathered enough of the succulents to feed on.

\* \* \*

“I was a *Reagan Republican* durin’ the eighties!!” Ira Best said to Jude Harker. “Back then, everything was fine with merit!! If you worked harder, *you got more*!!”

“You fuckin’ idiot!!” Jude screamed to Ira. “You guys are the ones who *fucked everything up*!! My father was an air traffic controller!! You put his shit out of work!!” He took a few seconds to eat from Lora’s dish. “Nopales” is what she called the feast. “I had to start life *earlier* than I otherwise would have... ‘*cause of dicks like you*!!”

Corvette Jones was in awe of the dueling men. “You guys are tryin’ to figure out why we’re in a

mess!! I saw it in LA before comin' out 'ere!! The people in the cars were *zombies*!! SUV's drove by—*most of 'em had only one driver per vehicle*!!—and they looked lost!! Money is a religion!! I knew it was comin'!! *Liz Habib*—a local news broadcaster—came through this area lookin' for Susan Hirasuna!! Last night!! Cameras!! The whole thing!! And I don't think they have a clue!! They interviewed me an' I talked about Charles 'Twisty' Combs!! Lost hiker is what they chalked it up as!! They said a cult formed in the desert an' the... *Hey*!! They're not doin' it for ratings!! They lost a reporter into that same *abyss* as where Twisty took off into... *however long ago*!!”

“Money is a *RELIGION*!!” Ira Best yelled. “I like that take!! My name is *BEST*!! I know 'bout ‘*BEST THINGS*’ everywhere!! The best car for safety?! Volvo!! Even now!! The best steak on the market?! New York!! No one would deny it!! The best quarterback in history!! Johnny U!! Head and shoulders above his peers for his generation!! And Harker here knows all the arguments!! He knows what I'm goin' to complain about when I'm over!! He knew what I was goin' to say in the cab!! I didn't argue with 'im 'cause of it!!”

“You have to understand that things have changed!!” Corvette said. “Money is a religion... *but a dyin' one*!! That lady...” He pointed to Lora. “She is gold!!”

“I know what you're sayin'!!” Ira said. “I dabbled with *role-playin'* games when I was a kid!!” He looked around the fire. “I hoped this would happen!!” He cried. “I never thought it *would*!!”

“*Fantasy*!!” Lora finally said. “There's a difference between science-fiction and fantasy!! L. Ron Hubbard—*writer of Battlefield Earth and Dianetics*—explained it well!! Science fiction is a trip to *MARS*!! It could happen!! We have the technology!! We don't have the will or organization!! Fantasy, on the other hand... *defies convention*!! A man floatin' into the air!! A fireball comin' from a lady's palm!! A tree dancin' to *music*!!”

“You guys have said too *much*!!” Jude Harker spit. “We need to take what we have... WE NEED TO TAKE WHAT WE *KNOW*... and we need to find Twisty Combs!!”

“*Stale*!!” Corvette Jones said. “We can't go *STALE*!!”

Lora of the Desert picked up her plate and left. Far away, Twisty was meeting with Susan Hirasun and Liz Habib of *Fox News*. They had dispensed of their cameras. They wore medieval garb. They drank beer. And they assumed new identities.

\* \* \*

“*With a wave of her hand... nobody can deny that there's somethin' there*!!” Twisty belted. He had sparred with another sword guild member. By chance, he sliced his midsection the length of a fingernail. The guy smiled. He said to Twisty that towne centre hosted many mages whom could heal his wounds in no time flat. *Liz from the North* approached the duo and Twisty sang. “*THERE*!! Runnin' my hands through 'er hair!!”

“*Each of us thinkin’ how good it can be!!*” the sliced member sang. He looked down into his fragile chained vest. “I’ll have to pay for another!!”

Twisty ran his hands through Liz’s mane. “I was *SAVED* by this girl!!”

“I came from *LA!!*” the lady said.

“I’ve heard of her!!” the bleeding guy said. He smiled. “They call it ‘*Camelot*’ now!!”

“*It’s hard to get back there!!*” Liz said.

Twisty held Liz tight. He saw Susan approach from around the corner. “You have *FISH!!*” They ate well on the guild floor.

\* \* \*

The oasis seemed to be expanding where Jude Harker, Ira Best, and Corvette Jones held nightly meetings. Once per evening, they would investigate the surrounding area. It would change. Victorville was no longer there. An English town stood in its place. They mapped the new areas. It made no sense, sometimes. Once in a while, subtleties would be noticed. A barber shop turned into a ware’s place. A gas station turned into a brothel. *CITY HALL* gone in place of a ranch. Theory was that people *willed* it. God complied... or whatever *DIETY* there was. “I knew this about *TAROT*, by the way!!” Jude Harker said in the middle of a dinner. *Crows*. They were eating *CROWS!!* “If you believe strong enough, the *READER’S* will quite often comes true!!”

“*BULLSHIT!!*” Ira Best exclaimed.

“It goes beyond what you can figure!! Las Vegas had a lot of gimmicks!! When you felt poor, you went to a reader for the luck!! Ira *BEST* here obviously was beyond that!! But you had cards laid out... an’ they’re supposed to be upright... but if ya’ accidentally cross one upside down, the *readin’* still goes!! The psychic is readin’ the faces of the people as much as the *cards*, though!! You see *DEATH!!* And you smile!! Cartoonists know nuances of facial gestures!! Your lookin’ to beat the big *DEMON!!* You see the lady!! You draw back!! You might’ve had a bad relationship!! And you figure that you can *peg* a moment... *like street rappers!!* The best freestyle!! They don’t wait for a rhyme to soun’ good, *write it down...* then come back to the street *CORNER!!*”

“*So you’ve been had?!!*” Ira Best asked.

“I went... *and I lost!!*” He cried. “She knew I lost my business!! I didn’t even tell ‘er somethin’ was wrong!!”

“You thought it was a ‘pimp’ situation in *VEGAS!!*” Ira sighed. “You thought you could fool ‘er that you needed money, she’d *refer* you to a casino owner... *an’...* Hey!!” Ira noticed Corvette shaking his head. “You got *BEAT* too!!”

“Right before the show... *I thought I could have Mike Jarrick’s job!!*” He cried. “I’m not good... but they were lookin’ for *RAW!!*” He wiped his tears. “FOX is not the same as everyone else!!”

“I don’t have to listen to this!?” He put his hand on Jude’s shoulder. “You have to have *STOPPERS!!* Your mother!! You have to think of things!! Why are you...?”

“No!! That’s the point!! DESTINY!! It takes you or it does’t!!” Jude got up.

“*Light bends!!*” Ira watched Jude turn away from him but continued speaking. “You can see the same star on opposite sides of the *SUN*... ‘cause light is pulled by gravity!! Physicists consider time and space to be the *same!!* TIME-SPACE is what they call it!! And if light bends, *space folds*... then TIME can bend as well!!” Jude turned around. Ira appreciated a stern look on his face. “The *psychics* know that TIME CAN *CHANGE!!*”

“You have it wrong about the light!! We percieve light in two places!! It’s the same star, right?!” He wiped his face. “In the distance, it’s the same *star!!*”

“I’m tryin’ to figure this out like *you!!*” Ira said. “I can produce flamin’ spheres the size of cottonballs on my palm!! I do it consistently!! Lora of the *DESERT* is out there findin’ Twisty Combs... or she’s makin’ a life for ‘erself!!” He stood up and kicked dirt at the campfire. “I have to *LEAVE*, soon!!” Ira Best didn’t have it in his gut to remain with people decaying. He had thought the world was ending while in Laramie, Wyoming. Now? He thought it was beginning.

\* \* \*

For three days, they traveled. Just the same as Twisty Combs, they followed the *North Star*. “I wonder if it’s still over the Arctic Circle...” Lora of the Desert pondered. “I mean, they say the world has flattened for as long as a person could imagine...”

“It doesn’t matter,” Jude Harker said. “The *gods*, or whatever they are... have chosen to guide us this way!! My van would not start!! We are meant to be on foot!!”

“I mapped this area a couple of weeks ago—*palm trees seven stories tall in some places*—an’ it’s changed a bit!!” Ira Best contributed.

“*Three days ago*, tops!!” Lora of the Desert said.

“No!!” Corvette Jones said. “It’s been three *WEEKS!!*” He walked ten yards behind the other three.

“*You’ve lost all sense of time already!!*” Jude Harker said. “That could do us good!! I played a simulation game on PC a while back!! You could test your friends’ *nerves!!* And each house had a different day!! Tuesday at one place!! Saturday... at another!!”

“Drove ya’ crazy!! Those are TWO *THINGS* you have to know if authorities pick ya’ up!!” Ira Best coughed after ingesting blown sand from an approaching dune. “Mental *HEALTH!!* Troy Aikman thought the Super Bowl was goin’ to be played in his home towne once!! Concussion!!”

“Exceptions!!” Corvette Jones interjected. “There are always *EXCEPTIONS!!*”

A thrust of fury ran down Ira Best’s back. “I’m goin’ to challenge you to a *battle!!*” He walked up

to Corvette's face. "*FAITH!!* We need faith... that we can get by this!! And the exceptions... *we need!!*"

"*Fine!!*" Corvette thundered. Without asking, he turned his back to Ira. Ira backed to Corvette. They walked ten paces from one another... as if they had *rehearsed*. Ira let out a fireball toward Corvette. Vette returned with a hefty stream of rain. The blaze persisted for a couple of seconds... but was doused. Vette hucked a hail ball at Ira's head. It hit him in the forehead... and he fell to his knees.

Vette ran to Ira. "I *CAN DO THIS!!*"

"We will damage our enemies together!!" Ira coughed.

\* \* \*

As Corvette Jones, Ira Best, Jude Harker, and Lora of the Desert made their way into the town of *Meld* where Twisty Combs had stayed, Susan Hirasuna and Liz Habib prepared for a trek back to *Los Angeles*. They did not know if it was possible. They met in a saloon and discussed how it could happen. It was agreed that *desire* had something to do with it. *Liz from the North* would have to assume her old identity. *Susan the Winch* would have to behave like a newscaster again. Amongst the group of newcomers, Ira Best was the only one that *wanted* the "Old World" he came from. He had money. He had unresolved issues with female companions. He had drive. He had *dreams* he hoped to touch in to.

Twisty Combs housed the rest of the group. He became a cottage owner. He granted items to Lora, Corvette, and Jude. A necklace for the lady. A shield for his old pal. A spear for the dude he met at poolside. They were symbols of change. They were messages of what was going to transpire. Ira Best would be on his way back to the *BIG CITY ON THE COAST*... if he was lucky. It would still be the same if the fates granted the wish. He would part with the newscasters when they reached their familiar safe zones... *if all went as hoped*. They would go back to their professions... and Ira Best would rendezvous with Julie Liqueur.

The space program was in shambles. Julie Liqueur had become an astronaut. A lot had happened. The government *fell*. Russia became dominant. Ira made it back to the *City of Angels*, somehow, and he believed he could save American *decency*. He sept back into his ways with Julie. She was happy to see him. A *lot* of things had been modified *everywhere*.

"For want of a nail a kingdom was lost" was said over and over. The third millenium was already well underway when everybody realized that Americans couldn't pay their debts. "Multi-trillions" might as well have been "*SUPER-ZILLIONS*"!! No one cared what America said. They lost respect. They lost credibility. They lost everything they had prided.

Secret plans were underway. Russia had thirteen ships ready for the sky. China had one. The United States managed to get its own. With every passing year, the masses became more duped. With every passing year, the groups of elite prepared for something better than they had. Jude Harker was suppressed deep into Ira Best's memory. As the days went on, Ira remembered him simply as "*Blurt*"—a

slob who wouldn't cut slack for a needful man on the street. Ira thought it was ironic. If *Blurt* wasn't such a jerk, Ira wouldn't feel great. He wouldn't have a beautiful companion. He wouldn't be on his way to outer space. The other guys he met at the *Comfort Inn* barely registered as thoughts. *Lora of the Desert* was chalked up as an absurd construction of his imagination.

Plans were laid out by the Soviets during the nineteen fifties. They were contingencies for heirs and ancestors to the *Czarist* families. The KGB was allowed to participate, and all was not as heated as record books showed in later dates. Americans, ironically, were part of the plans... *except for the wealthy*—Carnegies, Fords, Du Ponts, and so forth—but it was not extensive, and it was not extended to the population as a whole. *When* nuclear war broke out... they were going to be saved by great “ships in the sky”—*an outlet for scientific minds*. They did not believe “WORLD PEACE” was eminent or *possible*. When American economies bottomed out across the land, there was no choice but to revert to hidden plans.

Ira Best ran a service. It was in *Los Angeles*. It had been years since he had run it. He dealt with *egos*. He dealt with fragile minds. He was welcome because of his experience of forcing rich people to put aside differences. He made the absurd look delectable. He made the *arcane* seem trivial. He made a lot of things seem implausible which were previously not considered to be difficult. He had many talents.

On the *EARTH*, there was an irony going on. People were becoming more “backwards”—more “*archaic*”—and the signs were in all of their programs. John Edward spoke to the *dead*. Others looked for simplicity in *Survivor*. People knew that if competition was not possible, minimalist perspectives had to be taken into account.

The world was in denial... and Ira Best had a front-seat view of all that mattered to him... at a time. He watched it come apart.

A world away, he watched other things come together.

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Victoria Best was shaken by “divorce talk” from the very beginning of the dreary dialogue sessions. She had a mean streak. She *would* have pursued her husband, *Ira*, if she knew he had another woman. She bordered on a mental breakdown but pulled out of it fine. While Ira was in Wyoming with a new mate, Vicky thought about all the “contingency plans” Ira had talked about while living in their *LA* home. Ira had the scoop on the celebrities, politicians, and upscale people of the area. He even had the lowdown on drug lords and prominent *scientists*... but that hardly played into the equation for practical reasons. Ira had told Vicky that if it ever got “bad”—*if the economy ever folded and they needed to control mass mobs when they looked for food and shelter*—his company would have to play a major role. He would have to scan people for intentions. He would have to evaluate their behaviors. He would have to make recommendations about what *ought* to happen with their groups.

Vicky thought it was odd about what Ira said. He told her that landfills would be used like giant



graveyards. He said that the garbage bins would be used like traditional movies’ “*bring us your dead*”... and the deputies would be turned into executioners. She thought it was fancy talk about extrapolated ideas which would never come to fruition. But Ira never came home from *Las Vegas*. He had told her that there was talk at the college he had went to about “singling out trees” for harvesting. Loggers and lumberjacks had practiced “clear cutting” in the past... but it was ruining forests and it couldn’t be kept up without permanent loss of forests. There was a method to go into woodland areas, cutting down selected arbor specimens, and pulling them out. Ira told Vicky that it was a *military* plan as well with allegorical innuendos. He said that “the brass” spoke of people like this... *but it couldn’t be discussed openly in class*. That would do more than raise suspension—*riots would be forthcoming*. But there was an understanding that *before* whatever final crash was coming, people would be selected from the populous, pulled out by the CIA or another government agency, then taken to “special places”... and the end product resulted in *CONTENGENCIES* for controlling everyone whom was left.

There were three levels that were offered. The elite were to be taken to foreign countries. The mid level was to remain in America as *wardens* and officers. The lowest level was to be duped for years on end.

Vicky thought to track her husband when he never came back. She thought that their conversations were more than “*hoopla*” when he disappeared for an exaggerated period. A new man—*Don Burleson*—took over Ira’s post when he failed to show for work. Ira had the “contengency plans” laid out in his desk. He showed them to his wife at times when all was fine between them. Don kicked them into action.

\* \* \*

No one knew when the United States fell apart. No one knew when the United Nations dissolved into nothing. No one knew when world organizations ceased to have function or meaning in practical ways. Some people thought it was as recent as Don Burleson’s memo’s to business associates to refuse to pay taxes. Some people thought it was during the period when Clinton was being tried for impeachment. Some people thought it went back as far as *Nixon’s* lapse in office when the president refused to speak to the press... an’ the president subsequently resigned to the humiliation and disgrace of many. Depending on how far “*in*” one was regarding insider information, there was a *degree* of belief pertaining to the strength of national government and international understandings. Some people saw it like *hues*—they saw one by one business fold in America for the preference of locating to Asia or a Pacific island. It didn’t matter to Jude Harker at all. He remained in Las Vegas.

Jude Harker managed to track Ira Best’s *ghost* somehow. It was not his literal ghost, but “foot tracks” would be a poorer description of how things unfolded. He received an email. Jude Harker had found himself back in the Old World and *Twenty-One Cab* was doing well. He was at work. The email

featured Ira in space and Jude dismissed it as an obvious sham. Las Vegas was peculiar in United States' history. Aside from the obvious gambling distinction from most of the rest of the cities, there was a *stage* built not long before the *MOON LANDING*. A contingency existed that *if* the astronauts from America were not prepared for a lunar arrival, there would be a mock representation done not far from the Vegas night life. The astronauts, as a matter of fact, were *seen* days before the launch around Fremont and some of the other high-profile places. Conspiracy theories existed that they did *not* touch down on the Moon—*rather*, they staged it all—but the reality was that all lined up. Everything was “go”!! There was no need to hide in dishonor from the Russians. The contingency was to save face if *need* be.

Jude Harker was loaded with “contingency plans” because he drove a cab and heard all the “outs” if people bottomed out at the casino tables. He received an email from Ira Best... *or one of Ira Best's people*. It looked like a fake. Jude thought it could have been taken at the same stage where the *NASA* space pioneers were reported to be if their rocket did not test to fulfillment. The email read “*BLURT...YOU LOST OUT!!*” and Ira was featured in a large space helmet.

Jude was taken by the photo and dropped a customer off near a pool supplies retailer when he noticed something strange: *The helicopters that usually flew people around in getaway tours were gone*. He had owned the service years before. In their place were hoverplanes. They did not don air force insignias, but combat soldiers circled them possibly inspecting for defects or imperfections. The *STRIP* seemed barren of regular traffic. There were squirts and hisses of motorists here and there, but it did not appear to be the regular jubilant crowd of an early Friday morning.

Jude shook off the thoughts in his head. *BLURT*. The name rang. He thought to go to a lampoon house in order to crossdress as a dancer. One of the features of his “great desert oasis” was the motto and belief of “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas”!! He thought he could be “Blurt” on the floor... *and make some side money*.

Jude blinked his lazy eye and rubbed his overflowing belly. He decided to check out a topless club, whack off in a slummy hotel after, and try to make sense of the nutty emotional vibration in the air. By the end of the night, Blurt—*formerly Jude Harker*—wound up sucking a cock. His dark mustache dripped of a creamy substance. He felt good to let his life slip into something different. He drove a rented piss-yellow Volkswagen Beetle that night, drove it home, and he thought to leave the city. He was chubby and his breasts were large. He even gave thought to a sex change.

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Ira Best was in outer space. He forgot about *Meld* and got used to a new life. There was a plan to get to Jupiter. That was farfetched. It had to be kept in mind of what was *possible*. Mars talks had taken place throughout the decades. Satellites were flown to the outer reaches of the solar system. A Mars landing *could* be done... but the cost would've been astronomical. It would have taken slavery and an

overthrow of *government* to get it done. In a world where legislation took months or years to pass, there was nothing in the *public* record aside from wishful thinking. After the Soviet Union dissolved, there was talk of a joint mission to Mars for the Columbus quincennial of when Spain departed for the Americas... but that unfolded. Secretly, tycoons grew to disdain the lower and middle classes. They believed they were too rowdy, ignorant, and useless for personal goals. They were wrought with unions and whining behavior. They had a plan to leave *EARTH* and the symbols were in cinema. As the years progressed, the masses believed it was *less* likely because of outrageous story plots. Behind the scenes, it became *more* possible.

Don Burlson was the man who forwarded the message to Jude Harker which proclaimed him as “BLURT” and exhibited Ira Best in outer space. Don believed *he* ought to be in the heavens. He believed Blurt could help him. He calculated the facts on the ground and fifteen spaceships was *nowhere* what was possible for a mass defection of the elite to outer space—*two hundred ships* was more like it. Popular Mechanics long before showed “escape velocity” aircraft. They were built in Russia and China. The single plane that America employed was built in Canada. Don believed a slew of new ships would be on horizon. He believed he could be next.

Blurt had a sex change—a *he-she* for a practical reasons because of vestigial lingerings. He could not be contacted in Vegas any longer.

Don Burlson tracked Blurt. With the help of reamaining *CIA* members, he framed Blurt on a crime, had him imprisoned, then questioned him about Ira Best’s ability to break away from the atmosphere. Blurt started to crack in his head when he realized what was going on. While he was a youngster coming into adulthood, he wagered a large sum of money on the Buffalo Bills versus the New York Giants for *Superbowl XXV*. By the skin of his teeth, Jude Harker lost a bundle of money. He could have retired early if the final kick sailed a few yards inside through the uprights. Instead, he had to work hard in the tourist trade. He thought about it a lot when he was in his cell. He also thought that he would not be in the predicament if he had allowed Ira Best to skate by for one thin dollar eons before.

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Don Burlson hired a sidekick by the name of *Mitch Donoho* to help understand and administrate anything and everything that had to happen in order to make “the next cut”... *as he phrased it*. Mitch was a scatterbrain who spent a lot of time in Sri Lanka and Singapore. He became fascinated by treasury transactions. Singapore had been the *only* country in the world to operate in the black—they *were never in debt*—and they managed their country like a business. That was the way he explained it to Don when he was interviewed. Mitch believed he could get to the “real” United States. He said that there were people formerly in the *Council On Foreign Affairs* and the *Trilateral Commission* who were not Jacksonian in creed. In other words, only *WEALTHY LAND OWNERS* had a say concerning *important* events of the world. They never deviated. They nestled themselves in mountain cabins and along beach strongholds.

They could not be trusted by “average Joes” and they would not budge about their plans. Mitch gave Don perspective. “You said that the *Blurt* kid was running from you... an’ he *knew* he was going to be caught by us and that’s why he had the sex transformation?!”

“*Yes!*!” Don grabbed for his hot tea. They were high in a Los Angeles suite. “I said I was in the *NSA* of all things—a *lie*—but he said he already knew what was goin’ on!”

Mitch walked around. “You said he started mumbling about the *D-Backs* barely beatin’ the *YANKEES!!!* An’ you said that the Angels *should not* have won against the Giants!! You said ‘e was goin’ along like a *MAD MAN!*!”

“*YES!*!” Don drank from his tea. It was cinnamon in flavor. It tasted good to the buds. “But the reason I tracked ‘im was because o’ our national *problem!!* ‘E had answers and I *KNEW IT!*!” He looked to Mitch for confirmation. “He *knew* that Ira Best was going to be getting out of the country... an’ he wound up on a *SPACE FLIGHT* near the *MOON!*!”

“Okay!! I’m still shocked from some of this because it was *taught* to me... and I’m going to have to see more video to be convinced in the *mind!!* The Titans and the Rams were almost deadlocked... but a receiver was *one yard shy* of sending Superbowl thirty-four into overtime!! I was in the South Pacific for many years and I *KNOW* what’s goin’ on!”

“*What?!*!” Don felt stupid. “It hardly makes sense!” He placed his tea on a decorated wooden coaster.

“*The SETUP!!* It’s always the setup with the women and diversions!” Mitch drank from Don’s tea. “Ira was in Vegas with *hookers!!* He was about to divorce his wife!! He left plans with *YOU...* for when the change was going to take place!! It has no *trail*, you see?! They look for him in Vegas!! His wife referred you here for *what?!* So you can be in *SPACE* with him!? *NO!!* So you can take care of ‘phase *TWO’!!* It is going to take a lot of *slavery* to get done what we need done!! We are goin’ to have to wipe people out!! The landfills are going to be filled with people who just can’t hack it anymore!! The Arabs are doin’ their jobs by keepin’ petroleum in the stratosphere!! The FDA is doin’ their jobs by recallin’ all the food!! What *SEEMS* to be government is a big *SUPERBOWL* show!” Mitch looked thirty-five floors down to walking people who looked like bugs to him. He gestured for Don to join him looking down to the street and sidewalk. “You have to see them like *ANTS!*!” He looked into Don’s eyes. “If you can’t see them like ants, the next phase will never happen!”

Don wanted to cry inside. He felt this way before games during high school football. He became a champion quarterback for Fountain Valley—a *regional private school*. “There’s no turning back!! It’s me or *THEM!*!”

Mitch calmly affirmed, “That’s the way it is!! Do or *DIE!*!” He looked across the room. “The economy has collapsed an’ only three percent o’ us know about it!!

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Debbie Chatsworth ran a television repair shop a few miles away from downtown Los Angeles. She heard rumors on the streets. “Everything is *OVER!*!” a vagrant customer told her one night. It rattled in her head. She watched *Fox’s* “Jail” show which was a spinoff of their “Cops” series. She watched Jude Harker being booked for vandalism and loitering without knowing the connection to Don Burleson a few streets away. She thought about *Fahrenheit 451* which she had read in high school. A robotic spider scampered to catch misfits in that novel. It was spin-chilling to believe it was finally happening. She saw a few news telecasts during the prior weeks which were interesting. *Thorough National Vice* landed a contract to combat “LA’s hooligan element” and subcontracted a Japanese/ Korean firm to supply California’s border patrol with fifteen hundred “Cyberlegionnaires”—three-and-a-half-foot-high *robots* equipped with the ability to meticulously traverse virtually any terrain, shoot suspects with irregular tasers, and videotape avenues with sharp infrared scoping for miles on end. They were likened to the Predator aircrafts used in various spreading Asian conflicts but without the ability to soar.

Debbie didn’t think a whole lot of the gossip that everything was over. Half of the VCRs she repaired seemed to have bootleg VHS tapes in them. The underground market seemed to do *well* around her... and it didn’t matter what was reported on TV. Government was going to work in Washington, DC; Los Angeles City Hall; or the back allies of darkened suburbs... *but it was going to work*. “The players might be different... but the game is the *same!*!” Debbie said to an RCA in front of her. It was a old fashioned piece of crap that she believed was not worth fixing... *but she went through the motions anyway*.

On TV, *Blurt* was getting slammed to the concrete for resisting arrest. He-She was dressed in a mixed-pastel sari. Debbie was visited by Vicky Best that night. She did not say a word about her misgivings and apprehensions. Vicky did not know she was bringing a malfunctioning DVD player in to a woman who could help her find her lost mate. It was the same place that Ira used to bring his broken monitors. Debbie traced him all the way to Wyoming before he mysteriously disappeared from her radar.

Vicky Best received a “bonus DVD” with her repaired machine. It was marked “FALLACIO *EXTREME*” and featured characters resembling Gray Davis—*booted governor of California in times passed*—and Bruce Willis. Debbie did not ask if Victoria was involved with Ira—*she always had a secret fascination with him*—but chanced that she might want to see special footage of when he arrived in the *MIDWEST*. The content included babbling about “California’s energy crisis” and “the falling apart of legislative power”... but it spanned a few years in the making. It was evident because of the clothes worn; the cars and billboards in the background; and the *language* of transference of power structure systems. Ira could be seen traveling to Houston for training in a *NASA* seminar. Vladimir Putin could be seen giving speeches to Russian citizens with curious English subtitles. Ralph Nader could be seen traveling on city busses and mumbling about public policies. It was eccentric. It was uncanny.

It was *trash*.

Vicky Best decided she didn’t need any more of her husband.

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The peculiar DVD which Victoria Best received as a bonus upon return of her disc player wound up in Don Burleson's hands within a week. It was a blessing for him. He had contemplated leaving Los Angeles for Europe the day before and was glad that he didn't make the move. The DVD featured Cybill Shepherd yelling about the auto industry in Michigan. "We don't *need* you!!" It was surreal. It was obviously a private creation. "We have all we need from *Japan!!*" Don recalled that she had been featured in BMW ads. He thought it was strange that she was touting Oriental vehicles. "We told you to make something *better...* and you didn't!!!" She went on to tell people in a room that she planned to leave the country—*Asia* treated her like a queen still—and she would see everyone in space!!

Don watched the recording. He looked down at the people walking on the sidewalks. He called Mitch Donoho for a personal conversation. He began to think he was tricked—that *all the changes were exaggerated*—but it was hypnotizing how *strong* the video was at the end. There were astronauts taking off into space. It was mock and handled with obvious computer graphics... *but he knew it had to be done*. He had to call the next contact to make the next move. People were alive on the streets, but it looked staged. There was a vibrance, but it seemed forced. Don started to believe he had to put people out of their miseries if they couldn't handle the "next level"—*he put it that way over and over to Mitch an hour later*—or they had to work on their next projects.

Texas, New York and California became nations. For all practical reasons, that's the way Don conceptualized the situation to Mitch. Everything else was just "land" and "territories" as it had been in the beginning of American population growth. California, as a nation, would control its citizens. They would have elite in outer space. They would not allow defectors. Too many dreams were going by the wayside. Humanity offered too many problems. Mitch Donoho provided capital which was needed for the projects. He provided connections to international politicians. He made more in a day than the governor or president made in a *year*. Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars was pocket change to him. Nobody would stand in his way... *if he became convinced that Don's dream—his vision—was fullproof*.

A week after the discussion, the plan went into effect. Hospitals got rid of their elderly. Prisons discarded their direly grim situations. Deputies and national guardsmen rounded up drug users and general oddballs. People were shot on the spot. News programs spewed propaganda at an unbelievable rate. The people in the "territories" were not alerted to the reality of the circumstance. Fewer people meant more breathing room. Swifter action meant stronger respect for the law enforcement. Firefighters *lit* blazes around troubled areas... in order to push out dissidents. They put them out and looked like heroes in front of television cameras. For three weeks, California operated like a *country*.

Then it backfired.

Mitch Donoho could not get along with Don Burleson any longer. Don's plan called for the

erasure of Mitch's worst family members. Mitch could not go along with the plan. Don had already ridded himself of cousins and uncles. There was a fight behind the scenes. Sacramento retook governing duties while the clandestine ruling duo hashed out differences. On the floor, it didn't matter. People were happier. Troublesome weirdoes were done away with. It took time for guilt to set in, but residents from San Diego to Eureka believed they had no other choice.

Don Burleson felt out of his mind when he put his head to his pillow at nights. He wished for an answer. It never came without sacrifice.

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Debbie Chatsworth joined Mitch Donoho and Don Burleson high in a downtown LA skyscraper. "How did you *do* it?! One third of California is *gone*!! And all of the former states between us and Texas are afraid to come in!!"

"Word is that *New York* is trying to join European countries in a partnership a lot like *NATO* used to be!! It was easy!!" Don Burleson punched Mitch Donoho in the arm then continued to speak while he walked around the large office, "The checks were bound to crash!! If you remember an *asteroid* movie long ago about the human race endin', you'd know it was *deterred* by spacemen from a shuttle mission!! Make-believe aside, projections were that Social Security was going to break midway through this century!! I got on the phone and I talked to *REALISTS*!! I said to get the army involved!! I told people at the Pentagon that the plan is going through either way!! I said that it could be *stronger* if they were onboard!!"

"And if they didn't listen?!" Debbie asked. She was seated on a deep-brown, leather swivel chair.

"We had a list of two hundred girls!! We run the best porn in the land!! We *showed* a couple of flakey people in the CIA, ATF, and NSA what would happen to their daughters, exwives, and sisters!!" Don cued Mitch. Debbie watched a wall TV with a cousin of a former head of state slammed by an older man in mean, raw sex. The lady's eyes rolled back. Only whites could be witnessed. "The people that had *cold feet*... didn't take a lot to convince!!"

"And you think I knew *Ira Best* well enough to get on that *SHIP* that he's on!!" Debbie felt dumbfounded by the video. She was aroused and tried to hide it.

Mitch shut off the television.

"You don't know what it's like to go down the *streets* anymore!!" He looked to Mitch. He nodded in agreement. "They *trap* us—even the best of us—and they call federal officials from three thousand miles away if we have *cocktails*!! And we go to *dungeons*—LA County is like that unless you're lucky enough to be sent to the newer satellite modules—and you're in there with one-eighty-sevens, *kay-fours*, *kay-elevens*... and so forth!!"

Debbie didn't know what he was talking about but pretended to. "*Go on!!*" she said. She

motioned for him to continue.

“I can get *raped*!! I am a multi-millionaire and I am sent with people who have *not one dime* to their name!!” He looked to the flourecent light above him. “I have *one* DUI... and...”

“You’re trailing off, *Don*,” Mitch said.

“The point is we can’t be governed by people who don’t know this *state*!!” Don said.

“*Former* state!! It’s a *nation*, now!!” Mitch declared.

“*Yes*!! This place, though... I can *manhandle* you right now!!” Don said to Debbie. “But I *won’t*!!”

Debbie took offense, but she summoned that she knew what he was talking about. “You think *they* would do it!! The people that lost their land, cars, wives, and... *pride*!!”

“*Yes*!! I could do it too, though!!” Don looked out through the window. He settled down as he turned to Mitch. “I was on the *verge* of it, *MAN*!!”

“I *know*!!” Mitch consolled him.

Debbie got up from her seat. “I don’t need to hear any more!!”

“You have to know the chain reaction before you head back!!” Don offered. “They cut off the checks!! The news went on like *normal*, though!! Army wasn’t gettin’ paid!! Veterans weren’t gettin’ paid!! We *showed* the violence and injustice before we started to do any of our own!!”

“Then they *caught on*?!?” Debbie rubbed Don’s arm, but she was still confused.

“They had to protect our borders while we took care of a problem which was *inevitable*!!” He looked to Mitch. “I *TRIED* to help them!!”

Debbie accepted his reasons the best that she knew how. For a split second, doubt crept into her mind and guilt sept into her belly. “You guys are like *news reporters* who don’t save the victims in front of your *faces*!!”

“For the greater *good*!!” Mitch inserted.

“And I accept you!!” Debbie watched Don shake his head as if he was scolded. “The slums are like this!! Adult worlds are *like* this!! There are no easy ANSWERS sometimes and you have to cut your losses!!”

Don shook his head some more.

Mitch relieved them the best he could. “I grew up watchin’ *HOLOCAUST* videos in public schools!! I never wanted part of this!! At a certain point, you have to ask yourself if you want to be on the winning *side*!!”

“You chose the winning side, *alright*!!” Don said. He patted Mitch on the shoulder.

“You’ll not know ‘til you meet your *MAKER*!!” Debbie said to Mitch.

Mitch tendered suspicion. “I don’t know that I *will* meet my MAKER!!”

Don booed him. He said, “Let’s get some coffee and figure out what’s next!!”



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Deep in outer space, Ira Best flew in a vehicle which held the capacity of five aircraft carriers. It was a public misnomer that shuttles could only travel into space a few times per year. When the millennium rolled around, the Russians and Chinese ran secret missions defying conventional thought. The United States was lost in a “Global War On Terror” and was *grossly* distracted from continued launches. The purpose was simple: Build the International Space Station as soon as possible. Plans were already drawn up decades in advance. Nuclear war was not eminent—*that’s what surprised Ira Best the most*—and the reason things were kicked into action epochs before expected was that it was *possible* to do so with America divided over world situations. Tons of metal resources were shipped into outer space. Engineers were tested and sent. *Artists* made their ways into the heavens. Politicians sent scattered messages to avoid uprisings. An o-ring—a *simple o-ring*—sent the American space system into shambles. That’s all it took to send *Discovery* all over parts of the Atlantic Ocean. A flattened o-ring which let out explosive gas.

Ira Best thought about all that was happening. He sent correspondence to America. He positioned himself for Asian diplomacy the best he could. He *thanked* Jude Harker night after night by sending messages to the Los Angeles area knowing that the sentiment would spread. Ira heard about the unrest on the ground. Armies were seizing people. Citizens were scared. In places, *people were being tortured and killed*. This was not new in world history... *but it was relatively new to the Americas for white descendents*. Ira Best let it go as spilled milk. No use crying.

Julie Liqueur was good to him. Ira settled disputes between conflicting factions. Yoga was good for celebrities in the Hollywood area. It was good in outer space. In a matter of fifteen years, *twenty-five full stations would be built*. The next trek was to skirt across the solar system. There were no boundaries after that. Miles below, Blurt rested in a jail cell. The *he-she* wondered why *he-she* didn’t cut Mister Best a break on a cab fare. HE-SHE believed the world would be a lot different if leniency was allowed.

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The system was clear in outer space. There were fifteen circling shuttle crafts. At any given time, *three* of them could hook up to the International Space Station for recreation, unwinding, and small-scale repairs. Three of the Russian crafts were hooked to the ISS when Ira became weary of closed quarters. The crafts were named *The Rialto*, *The San Bernardino*, and *The Colton*... after three California townes which could not get along with the central federal government. They aided in moral support, logistics, and engineering technology. The Russian cosmonauts were grateful... and they pulled out for three new crafts to dock. Ira met with one of the commanders during change-over and he was surprised at the *sternness* of the man. It would be impossible to avoid the Russians any longer... *unless the rumored California, Texas, and New York ships were built before a final blast to deep space*. Ira Best docked with another Russian

craft, *The Blitzkrieg*, and the sole Chinese craft, *The Samurai*. Ira thought it was odd that they paid homage to German and Japanese words... but thought again after realizing that a *lot* of the technology came from those areas.

Ira exercised by running circles around a large cylinder. It was thirty-five feet in diameter. He felt like a kid from a science-fiction movie.

On the Earth's surface, Don and Mitch controlled events well enough to appease large groups of people. Media outlets were monopolized by exploding their numbers. It was a lot like the Associated Press feeding everyone their daily inputs in different guises... *except that it came from a Los Angeles building*. It was like Clearchannel deciding listening habits of radio music... *except that it was from a Los Angeles building*. It was like the FCC censoring erratic uprisings... *except that it came from a Los Angeles building*... and the crux of it was centered around two men's gut instincts.

Don Burleson kept a picture of *Blurt* on his bathroom wall within his office suite. It was to remind him that order could be kept. *Blurt* wore purple eye shadow and hints of black eyeliner. His pudgy brown face smirked with an eye winking abnormally in an offset manner. Don put a typed phrase below the mug —“*Control Can Happen*”—and he had the cell number of a special agent from Washington whom could get him into and out of prisons for interrogations if necessary. The government fell as regular people knew it... *but there were remnants left*. These people lived off of trust funds and filtered money from banks who commanded that “the ball keep rolling” in order to avoid a perpetual stand-still.

Californians worked hard on ships which could fly into the air and reach escape velocity. Texans worked on traditional shuttle models—*they planned to build five of them*. New Yorkers worked with the European Space Agency to catch a shot at humanity's first *real* quest to reach beyond the Sun's practical influence. The race was on. All people in between prayed that they wouldn't get mowed by another military strike on purported quasi-insurgents.

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Droids were sweeping the remains of California streets. In the territory of Minnesota, inventions were being tested. Rumors had come out that the Russians, Chinese, and *select* Americans were in the heavens already. Scientists were put off by a fallen bridge, years back... *and they believed Washington had something to do with it*. There was no trust. Military troops scanned the area for rebel factions. Money no longer mattered. People did things with *honor* schemes... but there was coercion behind it. An enormous machine called *The Discombobulator* was built to burrow into the ground. It was to do the *opposite* of what the Americans—the *few Americans*—were doing in outer space. It was to set up a colony underneath the soil. Thirty miles down, a fortress would be built. Ducts would rise to the heavens—the *surface*, actually—and they would provide glimpses of genuine sunlight. They would provide *air*. Technology would provide the rest. Nuclear power was used to fuel *The Discombobulator* and there was no longer any

regard for the “upper world”... all the while *geothermal* energy would be used under the ground. The nuclear power was a means to an end.

Minneapolis and St. Paul were sold to the New York nation. They were satellite townes. All areas in between were becoming evacuated. Any mad inventor who felt overlooked or blatantly discounted used their ideas. The *EPA* no longer mattered. OSHA did not matter. If there was an idea in *Popular Science*, it was tried. Bureaucracy was a thing of the past... and the *Minnesotans* became a sect of humans not moved by heavy artillery... nor were they people docile—*running the mill*. When they believed the United States was no more... *and the military would back off*, they dug into the Earth... and city by city, they formed palaces, governments, and diverted havens.

In a Nevada jail, *Blurt* had an amazing isolated jolt of magic and willed a penis back onto his body. The former *he-she* whacked off to Old Navy commercial advertisements. He was allowed two and a half hours per day of watching television... and used it to fantasize about what life would have been like if he gave Ira Best a break.

He betted it would be a lot *different*.

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The Northwest Territories no longer soley consisted of a formerly obscure part of what had been Canada. They subsumed what had been Washington state and reached to what was again *Oregon* country. Off the coast of Oregon, a monumental effort was taking place. They found that if technology was used for the betterment of humankind in general, the *military* stopped slaughtering seemingly helpless people. *Zero Population Growth*—a radical quasi-environmental group—had delivered Don Burleson’s orders to martial figures from coast to coast. They had *always* been concerned with curtailing the world’s populations and adhered to *many* contingencies to do so. The Oregonians took the cue from the Minnesota area. They were not sure if they could build a personal *Atlantis*, but they were going to be damned if they didn’t at least try. ZPG threatened areas of the *world* with famine, drought, conventional military strikes, plague... *and the neutron bomb*. Rumors had been hot during the nineteen eighties that *as Ronald Wilson Reagan* proposed SDI—*Strategic Defense Initiative*—it was already high in the sky. The diversion tactic worked. No one suspected that the program was functional. The *reason* Reagan had to come open to the public was that *lookiloos* caught on that “something was going on” and needed an explanation. The NEUTRON BOMB project was about the same thing. Public magazines reported that technology was being *researched* to destroy citizens of a city without harming the walls of buildings. The reality was that it *worked*—it wasn’t just researched—and it was hidden with clever tests which conveniently failed in public arenas. Scientists invited from the private sector were given the equivalent of a “smoke and mirrors” run-through of what it would have been like if the *money* didn’t flow in. But the money flowed in. People behind the scenes wanted people *disintegrated*. They wanted the buildings to stand all the while.

Atlantis was begun on a dare. Drunken technologists pondered the methods to end social unravel. Aerospace was not strong enough in their land to hold ground against breakaway camps of batallions and squadrons. *Promise*. That's what they needed. The ones armed with guns and fighter jets needed to believe there was something *worth it* when all was said and done. Atlantis could be constructed with walls of glass fifty fathoms wide—*roughly the length of a football field*—and the silicon was no problem to get. They *lived* over it. Pumps, temporary concrete walls, and series of destructions and reconstructions were the key to structuring the conurbation together. The Indians had great foresight administrating architectural innovations relating to arches when erecting the *Taj Mahal* into the vertical distance. The same arches had to be used in putting together an undersea metropolis.

Ironical as it seemed—*stragglers were being cut down by robots and military men throughout the land*—it was a great time to live. All the assurances of idealistic social intermingling were put to the test. Potential energy became kinetic energy. Sometimes, inhabitants felt insane. Other times, they felt like geniuses.

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Genetic engineers in particular had a great time after the fall of the traditional United States of America. In an area that had previously been Arizona... and at a place that had been the *University of Arizona*... there was a social module known as *Outpost Headquarters*. It entailed not just the campus of what had been a school, but also the surrounding homes and small businesses. They manufactured ants to be more than twelve inches in length and six inches in height... and they manufactured a *lot* of them. They produced Venus flytrap plants which were sensitive to human pheromones. They excreted a casual poisonous gas-like liquid upon reaction with human presence which could numb the tallest of men. They shrunk elephants to be the size of doberman pinschers and they allotted them to local children and teenagers. California wanted a *war!!* They knew it well. The Pacific was blocked off and androids were known to be mowing foreigners down like moths in purple fluorescent zappers. Security around downtown *LA* was said to be cutting outsiders down like *turkey sandwiches*—cold turkey SANDWICHES. Surveillance cameras filmed the blood squirted from thrusting javelins like *eezing-ozings*. Ants would be the answer. *Large* ants dropped into strategic locations. The Venus flytrap could be used *if it could be brought up to speed*. Numbness was not enough. *Full-on blackout* was necessary. And the elephants—the *miniatures*—were safer for kids than horses or mules. Petroleum was hard to come by anymore in the desert. Afghani children were practically *required* to carry firearms... and that was why it was impossible to capture bin Laden as planned. *Desert children* in the United States knew they had to protect themselves and their parents.

It looked like a circus-gone-wrong... *but nothing else was working*. Kids practiced on cactus in remote sand mounds. They awaited something “final”... but they held on to hope that the *West* would come

together again as it had been long before.

\* \* \*

Civil war broke out again. This time, it was in outer space. *For want of a nail, a kingdom was lost.* Ira Best thought about it over and over. While in bay at the International Space Station, Julie Lique and Ira Best humored a cosmonaut with a traditional *wives' tale*. Ira said that Julie had started to leave the top off the toothpaste roll. In actuality, there were no toothpaste rolls as on *EARTH*—they were replaced by a wall outlet similar to soap dispensers in commercial restrooms—and paste was replaced with a slimed gooey *liquid* substance... but the couple let the cosmonaut know that *divorces* had taken place because of such idiosyncrasies. It was also mentioned that the toilet roll going over top or coming from underneath was a major conflict. Cosmonauts spread word in jest. There was a *real* conflict brewing over nationality, administration of food priviledges, and the *naming* of a couple of the crafts. *Gorbechev* was a craft... and so was *Brezhnev*... and *Podgorny*. Arguments were made about the greatest of Russian leaders. Arguments were made about *Ivan the Terrible's* rule on Earth. Arguments were made about the role of *Eastern Bloc* countries before the re-embrace of Western diplomacy. One commander left toilet paper hanging from bottom-reach position... and it *angered* a lietenant whom believed it was *standard* to replace top-over paper. Vodka was engulfed weekly during celebrations at the *ISS*, and one night, there was a blow-over. *The Blitzkreig* left its position as scheduled... but the commander would not have part with a “babbling baby”—*he boarded the Chinese craft*. Once aboard, he made a momentous decision. There were no lasers supplied for his craft... *but rumors were that additions could be made within five or ten years from the ground*—enough time before the “final launch” into *deep* space... and strong enough to knock out asteroids. The commander had his *steering stick*. He had no *will* to go on. He directed his craft toward *The Blitzkreig* when given control... and slammed into the side of it. Mutiny was demanded by five other Russian crafts. A string of events led seven cosmotic vessels *smashed* into one another in an unexpected and surreal derby.

Ira Best did the only thing he knew how to do. He offered Julie Lique as a prostitute to appease what he believed to be a spiked male hormone drive. Shame crept withing the eight ships that were left. No one believed it should be done. There was silence for twenty-four hours in their heavens.

\* \* \*

On a sultry and strange autumn day near California's southeastern border, twelve hundred and fifty hang gliders came into “Prohibited Mojave Realms”... and each glider held a specially-developed large ant in a cage. The job was to reach Barstow and release the mutated insects into densly-populated streets and avenues. They were to drop douses of honey on doorsteps, if possible, and squirt back to *Outpost*

*Headquarters* undetected by heading north... *then* southeast in travel.

The ants did not take to the honey as quick as expected. Instead, they found themselves herding toward an abandoned tangerine garden arboretum. There, they burrowed into the ground and created *more* mutated ants. It was weeks before they would encounter humans.

Don Burleson and Mitch Donoho fought off homosexual instinctual inclinations. Testosterone rode high with *Cyberlegionnaires* thrusting, prodding, poking, stabbing and shooting. Don Burleson began to feel *inferior* to the android workaholics. He chose to pursue bionic surgery. In Beverly Hills, “*plastic augmentation*” was on the way out—“bionic enhancements” were on the way in. A week after devouring ants started attacking junior high children in Lenwood not far from where they were initially dropped, a doctor implanted steel rods in Don’s left and right arms. They were mechaized devices which allowed him to curl seven hundred and fifty pounds without a problem. Mitch believed it was a good choice. He had automated aids installed in his legs. They fought ant mauraders. They were one with the androids. They *won* their battles.

Don and Mitch found themselves at the top of their downtown LA building quite often. They felt bad for the people that “had to die”... but they knew the world would never be the same ever again. They went to nightclubs and Don quipped a corny line to the women, “This is my favorite *pickup* joint!.” He would lift pool tables off the ground with ease and it was a pun which received moderate chuckles. A “silver spine” had been implanted at the same time as the arm-strengtheners. He believed he would never have to worry about lower back problems for the rest of his days.

\* \* \*

The California nation had a great victory over the hysteric ants... *and Outpost Headquarters felt foiled*. The *Sandroamers*—the people who had previously adhered to Arizona/ Nevada/ New Mexico citizenship—believed they had a few tricks up their sleeves. Genetic mutation worked well with insects. The *Human Genome Project* was really a *front* for what was understood behind closed doors. *Jurassic Park* the movie was full of misconceptions as far as genetic engineers at *Outpost Headquarters* were concerned. They did *not* have success pulling genes from fossils and making them into successful living beings. Instead, they had *great* success applying what was known about human deoxyrybonucleic acid and applying it to various species. A *bat* was made into a practical *pterodactl*. It was even wangled to present a beak-like face. Many of them were bred. Experiments showed that they would fly to the same tangerine garden arboretum toward Barstow if delivered close enough. Contrarily, *Outpost Headquarters* learned that these “humongous bats” deterred themselves from certain airwaves... and they could *manipulate* their flying directions to varying degrees.

The hideous flock was let loose. The *Sandroamers* sought to re-engage in *all* Southwestern political actions. They believed it would *not* happen until enough of the California inhabitants were upset

with splendor from beyond. Once again, there was a fight in the golden nation's midsection. Don Burleson and Mitch Donoho fought side-by-side with *Cyberlegionnaires*. Once again, they were victorious... and the residents of surrounding areas found them to be heroes of sorts. The battles had a cost. A *neopterodactl* gnawed off Mitch's right arm to a pulp. It hurt him *bad...* but he lived on.

The two were proud. They were ready for yet another phase of California's development.

\* \* \*

Mitch Donoho returned to the Beverly Hills doctor whom had installed hydrolic legs within his body. He received a *canon arm* the next time around. It held ten rounds of rapidfire ammunition and it sported the latest laser technology. A plutonium microcore insulated with robust lead shielding planks provided the energy. Laser technology was no longer difficult to find nor develop. Patents were uncovered and "garage scientists" flocked to the money of the Los Angeles area before the crap hit the fan everywhere. The fruits of their labor were finally shown.

Atlantis was coming along fine. The third of the walls was put up. Like the Panama Canal, *channels* were released. They allowed constructors to fill bubbles which acted collectively as an "antipressure" device. In other words, *Atlantis* was to be full of water until the last of the sphere curved grips were laid into place. It made for an enthusiastic time.

New York had its own problems. As its own country, it dealt with the *British* again. There were issues regarding taxes and security. Not much had changed since the *Declaration of Independence* had been signed. It was as if the place had fallen asleep for a wee over two hundred years. Struggles were made to acquire "*true*" independence... a second time around.

The Texas nation became severly *polarized*. That was the best way to explain what happened. Along every border there were Humvees, jets, and contemporary, state-of-the-art, well-equipped troops. Within the interior, barbed wire was torn down. It was rolled into gigantic twine balls. Pavement was *shattered* to allow horse travel. Buildings were left in tact in Dallas and Houston... *but locals preferred to head back to ranches and simple living*. Wooden fences were fine, but not encouraged. Herders took to the fields again. Cattle drives were prepared.

In outer space, Ira Best experienced calm. He looked down to the Earth and had little idea that Minneapolis and St. Paul had a *triplet* city... under the soil. They called it *Grandé Drey*.

\* \* \*

Two hundred escape velocity jets were produced in California and China—*Pacific trading still occurred*—while five traditional space shuttles were assembled in Texas. New York had difficult times

prodding the European Space Agency to construct anything that could reach the *International Space Station*. A second and third station were added with surprisingly relative ease. A fourth and fifth were in the works. The *original* was dubbed *Disaster City* after the incident involving fallen Russian cosmonauts... and it skirted to a rotation emphasizing the dark end of the *Moon*. Don Burleson and Mitch Donoho were two of the first to unite with the eight remaining circling crafts. They brought a *surprise* with them: *Ira's original mate*, Vicky Best. She befriended the LA television repair lady, *Debbie Chatsworth*, enough bring her along too much. They didn't particularly get along together, *then again...* Vicky didn't get along with *any females* very well. Ira Best became commander at *Disaster City* and welcomed his former lover with surprising comfort. Julie Lique began to become stir crazy for a while and didn't mind the additional company. She wanted to *sleep* with Vicky Best to attain her "secrets" of what Ira was like before all the strange happenings and dominoes of events. Vicky was the kind of lady that needed cigarettes lit for her in bars. She was the kind of lady that Ira had to open her passenger door for when they began dating. She was the kind of lady that would yell at Ira... *then blame him for starting a fight*. She did not want anything to do with Julie Lique... but she faked it the best she could.

In California, "*The Big One*" finally hit. Freeway overpasses were sent to the ground. Cyberlegionnaires were crushed in tall buildings while making arrests and performing raids. Baja California was extended a hundred and twenty-five miles *NORTH...* due to a sudden and dramatic shift in plate tectonics. Tsunamis slammed coastal fronts. Fontana became prime real estate as beachfront property. Territory sixty miles inland experienced a developing culture much like *Venice, Italy*. California as a nation ceased to be. Chaos existed near the Havasu region... but everyone else settled into a new social atmosphere.

In Texas, *whore houses lined the newly formed dirt roads*. Treaties with Mexican provinces allowed food, ammunition, and other important goods to be traded. At last, their shuttles were sent into outer space. A lottery system was scrapped in favor of a "*RODIO OF ALL RODIOS*"... and the agreement was to not engage in established politics above. The Texans would create their *own* worlds above. If diplomacy was initiated from the Russians, Chinese, and prior Americans, it would be taken with a grain of salt. Texas had a plan to travel into the heavens... *but they did not feel the need to leave the solar system... as others wanted to do*.

In the Minnesota region, an aura of *Camelot* could be sensed. The underground dwellers lived in harmony and rotated with the people above. They heard that *Atlantis* was near completion. Scouts prepared to be sent out into what had been midwestern regions of the United States... *all the way to the Oregon area*. If the military ceased to mow down public civilians, they would send *envoys* to the great underwater city when it was complete. They would exchange hopes and dreams. They would prepare for a future without jackasses running everything.

In the sky, there was a giddiness about preparing for a final push into deep space. Not far from *Outpost Headquarters* in what had been "the Old West"... *Blurt sat alone and wondered where everyone*



was. Ira Best felt consolidation that his nemesis from Las Vegas was behind bars. It didn't matter to him that entrapment was the method which put him there. After all, the country broke into chaos during that era. Ira sent emails to the Earth. He sent other correspondences. He hoped Blurt would stay put... *and not try to join the newly rediscovered space race.*

\* \* \*

Extensive talks took place via video conferencing from the many ships in space concerning the plan to launch toward the boundaries of the solar system. There was cold feet everywhere. Only Ira Best and his close associates were *primed* to travel beyond the planets. Weightless agriculture had been perfected. Actually, it was *beyond* perfection. No gravity meant the vegetables and fruits grew larger and healthier than normally on Earth. Ira took off with Julie Liqueur, Vicky Best, Don Burleson and Mitch Donoho into the deep outer reaches. Their plan was to travel past Mars then reassess the feasibility of traveling to a distant star before reaching the Asteroid Belt. After getting to Jupiter and circling it a few times, another plan was regarded to inhabit *Titan*—a moon roughly the size of Earth. That plan was tossed. Don Burleson realized that the *other* crew members circling around his native planet were not joining the rest. They could have provided an escape vehicle... but their prepared space liner, *Disaster City*, had no ability to land nor take off once grounded. The crew decided to doubleback to Earth in order to rule it as “heroes from the constellations”... and they made sure to take many photographs with Jupiter far in the background. Saturn was visited and the same thing was done. Uranus and Neptune would have been next... *but the group became weary.*

Earth was slated. A grandé return *voyagé*. Nothing but good times expected.

Blurt began to get raped in his jail cell on the mother planet. Deputies sent word that Ira Best was the man whom had the he-she jailed. This entity, *formerly known only as Jude Harker in Vegas*, tried to escape. The bulk of the roundy's mass left the he-she apathetic. In a strange twist of fate, former pop singer Britney Spears engaged in a sex change as well and wound up at the jail where Blurt seemed so perfect for authorities. She wound up in a solitary cell *next* to Blurt. They spoke together through yelling. It became a trend of sorts. Sandra Bullock's head was severed in an android war... *but medical breakthroughs allowed her to function with a cyborg head.* She kept fighting and was eventually jailed in the cell next to the former pop singer who had become a man.

Football fields were still employed. They were used for *combat jousting*. It was the return of the Roman Empire in extravagant form. By the time *Disaster City* reached orbiting distance, *other* ships had already gone to the Moon and Mars to colonize. Atlantis was complete. *Grandé Drey* was thriving and accompanied two sister cities below the floor—*Superfluous Lair* and *Astounding Den*. They were linked by corridors and causeways which boggled the mind. Peace was nearly a reality, once again, and traditional calendars were no longer used. Instead, years were counted from the time when the United States

dissolved... *and British imperialism became nonexistent.*

\* \* \*

The year was 250 ME—Modern Era—and a battle was finishing versus remnants of Insurance Battletechs. The companies who *had* been Prudential, State Farm, and All State conglomerated to control the *New Society*. They reprogrammed androids to prohibit Atlantis and various elaborate projects. They attempted to make the *cost* so great to guarantee citizens of their safety that they became irrelevant. They did not *realize* the point behind the great ventures in the first place. That was to break of all conventional norms. Everything had become anal retentive. Don Burleson and Mitch Donono *fought* the androids upon return to Earth. They became great in the history books. The insurance companies hid in nestled cultures throughout the land hoping for a fall of the new regime. Every now and then, they would *resurface*. The Insurance Battletechs were their last countenance—their last *form*. They tried to sap originators of breakthrough sophisticated governances of their ideas, strength, and newly-created wealth. It took two hundred and fifty years to dissolve them with all ease. Atlantis thrived... and the new trend in what had been America was to flood the streets as in “ancient Venice”—*this was done in many places*—and people lived with true freedom.

A charter was drawn up... *then discarded*. Before it was forgotten, it was laughed at. It was an *anticonstitution*. It spoke of the consequences of freedom and private enterprise. There was an observation that the government which *had* been the United States isolated ideas onto paper... *but they couldn't be practiced in actuality*. The framers of the “ANTICONSTITUTION” realized that words went by the wayside—*motives were forgotten*—and they ought to put out a facade in order to *run* from a dystopian collapse of the expressed written form. Wherever the document existed, it would be a cue where *not* to live or reside.

The *New Society* existed... and there were regular bouts of togetherness coupled with moments of isolated awe. Pyramids were built larger than the *Luxor* hotel had been—they *dwarfed* the original stone enclaves, as a matter of fact—and in other places, *spherical zones* were implemented. Every man, every woman, and every *imagination* was put to the test... *two hundred and fifty years after Atlantis was begun*... and they were expressed into physical fruition.

Ira Best made it into the latter history books as a commander of a large ship. His mates often were omitted in particular detail... *but the world became centered around many of his ideals*—the ideals that “chance can win”—and sporting events surfaced into the sky. Air races by jet planes. Balloons which reminded people of the past. Helicopters which took “regular people” to the tops of mountains for ski adventures. The world was in bliss for twenty full years.

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It had been traditional in “Old America” Before Modern Era—*BME*—to name children after biblical heroes and characters: Jacob, Isaiah, Rachel, Joshua, Ruth, Mark, Elizabeth, and so forth. The tradition of the *New Society* was to name children after their place of birth... and a *number*—*Atlantis1372*, for example. Boys were named with *even* digits, and females were named with odd integers. At the age of fourteen, a “coming out” festival was planned. Each child was able to choose hers or his own name. It became customary to choose historic figures of the *late American civilized culture*. “Atlantis1372” became “Elvis Presley”... “SuperflousLair98133” became “Christina Aguilera”... “Texas11353” became “Prince Charles”... and so on. These people carried traditional ID cards to provide background information when they traveled from place to place... *but they were not required*.

Christina Aguilera met Elvis Presley not far from *Outpost Headquarters* and they discussed the history of their newly conceptualized place. “This place has only been around for a hundred *years*, you know?!”

“You’re an ignorant *bitch*!?” Elvis told her.

Christina felt apprehension. She wanted to climb into a shell. “Did you know Don Burleson is the reason we can live in *freedom*?!”

“Elvis Presley was a *faggot*!?” Elvis said. “The ‘*real*’ Elvis Presley!?” Elvis looked around. “My *dad* made me pick this name!?”

“Isn’t that the reason we started this whole *program* to begin with?! So that our parents can’t control who we would become?!”

Elvis looked around in shame. “*Yes!!* You’re right!?” He held Christina Aguilera’s face with his palm. “I want to be known as *Chris Cornel* from this point on!?”

Christina Aguilera shrieked away. “What makes you think *he* wasn’t a faggot as well?!”

“I don’t *know*,” Elvis said. “I guess you can still refer to me as the *King of Rock ‘n’ Roll*!?” They took off to the interior of *Outpost Headquarters* and *mutated cats and rabbits to be the size of small people*.

## REINTEGRATION

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Ira Best found himself at the city outskirts of *Meld*. He was dead to Los Angeles. Squirts of memories shot through his brain. A deathbed. Tubes. Ladies—*two of them*—at his side. Jude Harker had sought him out. Ants were roaming here and there. Robots were killing each other. Life in *OUTER SPACE*. But he found himself looking for *Lora*. He tried to explain many things to himself while with Julie Liquet but found it futile. Meld was no longer a towne. It had become a city. Vicky's face flickered in his head a bit. He had been in Meld for maybe just moments in the grander scheme of things... *but it's where he longed to be*. The ways of magic would return.

Twisty Combs and Corvette Jones became *LORDS*. Lora ventured off to fight a menacing tribe of bandits on the outskirts. She was a great warrior. Corvette doubled as the city's mayor. He met with Ira Best in the old towne hall. "We monitored your life when you left," he said. He walked to a crystal ball. "These things are useless... *but they do give incredible visions once in a while!*" He dusted off his shirt. He was caked with dark brown soil and burgundy clay from wrestling at the local guild. "Your world went into *CHAOS* when you left!! Space race!! Battles with *INSECTS*!! A future of underwater cities... *and isolated communities resisting transformation*!! We are not that different in spirit!! Our strength of *WILL* has allowed us to hold time in its place, though!! No gunpowder!! Even the thieves at the outskirts use daggers!! The marauders in the near distance *rape* our people if captured!! They are the worst ones!! They have food... *but they don't have pride!*"

"*Lora is OUT THERE!*" Ira asked.

"She is the *ULTIMATE BAIT!*" Corvette Jones said. "When the men are drawn to 'er, they are often *ambushed!*" Corvette laughed. "Twisty Combs was sacked to the ground durin' a skirmish far away... *an' he found out how little couth those guys have!*" The man atop him pummeled his leg!! He was stabbed in the back by Twisty's aid... but Twisty was traumatized for a while!! We have *CODES* 'ere... and that's what keeps us thrivin'!! If we turn to *THEIR* ways... it would be a matter of blinks before we kill an' maim one another!!"

"So you have figured out how to stop the *violence!*" Ira Best mused. "You learned from your anger... *and mine!*" He remembered being bolted with a hail rock. "Don't kill, don't maim... *WHAT ELSE HAVE YOU SET UP?!*"

Corvette Jones shook off Ira Best's accusation. He knew Ira inferred that Corvette didn't belong in leadership's ranks. "The CODE is simple!! Don't kill, *yes!!* Not in city walls!! You *MUST* kill is what they adopted!! If you leave our barriers, you must bring the head of a slain enemy!!"

"*Good code!!*" Ira said. "What makes you think it's not goin' to backfire!!"

"*This!!*" He lifted up his sleeve. "This mark is what we have given to the *cattle* outside!!" The symbol was a square with four grids. A five-pointed star was in the upper left as well as the lower right. "We separate our kings!! We recognize *EGOS*... to use a word from our departed land!! We know that clashes exist inside!!"

"*Wow!!*" Ira said. "I'm ready for mine!!"

Ira Best expected a hot iron to be produced from the next room or from the livestock stall outside. Instead, he felt a warmth on his skin. Corvette Jones focused just below Ira's right shoulder. Ira could feel bubbles of blisters. He lifted his shirt and could see the beginning of what would be a decorated scar.

\* \* \*

Lora rested in a tent. Six men guarded her. Their distance was a half day's travel from *Meld*. They cleared the forest of looters. Unbeknownst to the group, bandits could see them from the night's darkness. A traveler happened upon them while seeking sanctuary in civility. Anger spoke to him, "*DRANE* they call you?! We all call ourselves after accusations!! Pride, right there, was removed from *MELD*... for not ceding authority to a new power!! Envy, here, followed around the mayor like a lost dog!! Duncie?!" He looked to a man gnawing on a bone long after meat had been chewed off. "No need to explain *his* calling!! And Fright!! They believed he lost *battles* for 'great ones'!! He bolted from warriors before a victor could be determined!! 'Anger' is what they call me!! It's a quiet rage, *I agree!!* But *CHARITY!!* The sheriff has a daughter named by a virtue she has nothin' to do with!! And *FAITH!!* The only thing they have *FAITH* in is that they run down minor brigands!! Desire was a nice lady in a bar... *until you TALKED to 'er!!* An' now we're left with the labels they didn't want!!"

"We can take Lora!! She hardly understands that we founded the town!! She came in when I left!!" Envy said. "We can show her our *hands!!* We built the walls!!"

"*No!!*" Anger said. "This traveler, *DRANE*, has a good idea!! If we can charm the new mayor, we can divide the city!!"

"That won't work!!" Duncie said. "I don't know a lot... *but division is what killed you!!* You never stop!!"

"Yes!! I have you categorized *into...*" Anger noticed Lora coming out of her tent. She looked beautiful with firelight flickering at her waist and hair. "I will have *her!!*"

"*LUST* was killed by that woman three nights ago!!" Pride reminded Anger.

"*Yes!!*" He paused. "You are right!!"

By the next morning, Anger and his crew were decapitated. Five new heads to bring into Meld. The traveler was spared. Lora's insight became keen in judgment. Drane meant civilized inhabitants no harm. He would make a great brewer. He was confused at the method rooting out disidents... *but he accepted it*. He took the *Mark of the Grids* on his arm. It reminded him of Panama's flag. Long ago, in a life far away... he had been a sailor. He could remember that much, but not much more.

\* \* \*

Meld's compass-maker, *Solstice*, alerted citizens for the annual meeting. At dusk, Corvette spoke to a crowd of a hundred people. Hundreds more, indifferent to city policies and alterations, remained in their homes. Corvette spoke, "We have cleared the forests of most of the thieves and raiders!!" He waited for cheering to cease. "*Cyberspace*, my friends... is why you are in peril!!" Crowd patrons looked at one another with mild confusion. "My land—the world where I come from—is wrought with a magic you do not know!! Some of you have *traveled* here from *MY LAND*... and understand the power of a fiery abacus!! It calculates traveling rates!! It predicts the weather!! It estimates food allocations!! But it determines *DEATH*!! The keepers of these instruments have sent fighters into our outer perimeters!! I have become your mayor because I *KNOW THE MAGIC*!! It is a self-defeatin' magic!!" The crowd roared. "We will travel this year... and we will plant!! We will toil into the outskirts... and we will harvest!! Your men will take wives!! We will need to grow!!" The crowd silenced. "When *THEY* come... we will need judges!! Like apparitions, they will arrive in the far reaches!! Ira Best, *here*, is my assistant!! He will tell you what they are about!! Killing?! Settling? Stealin'?! Passin' through?!" The crowd shifted. "He is a man... *who knows your fears*!! The gunpowder!! They have gunpowder... once in a while!! Ira can take them!!" The crowd thundered. "He is trained in *THAT MAGIC*!!"

\* \* \*

Corvette Jones spoke to the point of exhaustion. The crowd understood the dangers. They understood the hopes. They understood the possibilities and perils. The next night, Corvette set up shop with Ira Best in a cabin outside of the city's edges. "*Invisible*!!" Corvette shrieked. "You have to understand..."

"*THE DEMON*!!" Ira said. "I come from the *STATES*, too, Vette!! And I learned at the same schools!!"

"You studied celebrities from situated cameras!! I was right there *with* them!! Mikes over their heads!!" He calmed down. "*In-visible*!! Two words!! 'In'... *meanin'* 'in'!!! 'Visible'... *meanin'* 'visible'!! Inside your head, you have a *VISION*!! You equate the word with 'nonexistence'!! You knew

when your wife was comin' *home*, though!! A vision!! You could see her inside your head... even though she had yet to open your door!!”

“So you’re sayin’ we must prepare for a war... when you haven’t seen the bandits we’ll be *fightin’*!!” Ira pondered.

“IN... *VISIBLE*... bandits, yes!! And they have tanks!! And we must fight them with magic!!” Corvette put his palm on Ira Best’s face. “You were in Wyoming too long!! You have no clue that it started!!” He walked away from Ira and stared out a glassless window. “The tanks will come... *because they know we’re ‘ere*!!”

“PARADISE!!” Ira said. “Everythin’ we wanted from our Old World... an’ nothin’ we believed should be left behind!!”

“But we watched the movies, Ira!!” Corvette said to him as he faced him again suddenly. “We can’t speak to *MEDIEVAL LADIES* like they know what we’re talkin’ about!! You have a problem with that!! The ‘fiery abacus’ as the modern PC!! Our TV’s as giant crystal balls!! We have to speak to them... *in their terms*!!” He turned back toward the window. “The chariots!! We must avoid talkin’ about the chariots... ‘*cause they killed us*!!”

“*The automobiles*!!” Ira Best announced. “‘Auto’ meaning ‘self’... and ‘*MOBILE*’ meaning ‘moveable’!! I get what you’re sayin’!! Ninety percent of the ones out there are from *RENAISSANCE* times or sooner!! Some are from Africa and South America!! They do not know what we speak of... *in a lot of cases*!!”

“I’m glad you accept me as a mayor!!” Corvette said to Ira. “You are my special assistant—*that’s what I told the people*!!—but I see you as my unofficial sheriff!! The guy holdin’ the jails... *is a local favorite*!! You knew how to handle the GREATEST CITY ON THE *WEST COAST*!! Speak of it to them!! Angels!! Call it ‘Angels’ and not by the Spanish translation!! That’ll be best for everyone!!”

“Yes, MAYOR!!” Ira Best said. “And when we grow large enough, I would like to lead a new city!!”

“*Arranged*!!” Corvette said. “You could have been in *my* place if you didn’t take off to tend to business so long ago... but you’ll have your aspiration if the fates so choose!!”

\* \* \*

Meld grew with **proper** farms and precise irrigation. Long before expected, Ira Best prepared to begin a commune. He went to the mayor’s door and thought again. A rush of adrenaline fueled his stomach. He went through the mayor’s door. “I have twenty people, *your royalty*!!” he said to Corvette Jones. “We will take off tonight!!” He waited for a response.

“*Thirty people left three days ago without permission*!!” He looked to a feather pen on his desk. “I’d like to give you *FIFTY* people!!” He shook his head. “I do not have the luxury!!” He wrote

something on an opaque scroll. “You have immunity for five years!! If the seasons should start as normal again, *that is!!* Otherwise, you have until the youngest of your children has grown into adulthood!!” He stood up. “An alliance!!”

Ira Best hugged Corvette Jones. “*Thank YOU!!*” He knelt.

“You are proclaimed *MAYOR!!*” He produced his sword from his side. “You are vested with the authority of *MELD...* to grow a community!!”

“*New York is in the distance!!*” Ira said.

Corvette tapped Ira on his left shoulder... then right. Ordination. “The rumors are prevalent!! A great city in the forest!! Cottages of stone reachin’ to the *SKY!!*”

“I will face New York on my own terms!!” Ira said. “I never *liked* ‘em... but I like marauders less!!” He stood up.

“*Ruse!! Prank!!* It could very well be a deliberate tall tale from one of our own!!” Corvette Jones handed his sword to Ira Best. “This will be yours!! I received it from Solstice when you left!!”

“*FLUX!!* We have a new city name!! When you hear of FLUX... you will know an ally is alive!!” Ira laughed. “What shall we call our *KINGDOM??*”

“*No name, yet!!*” Corvette said. “The inhabitants will think of a name... and they will dub us!!” He turned to a parchment on his wall. “You cannot fight their whims sometimes!!” He reached to a book on his desk and another on his shelf. “*These!!* This is what our foundation will be!! Expectations!! Plans!! Science!! One of your inhabitants will copy down the information!! And you will return the books!!” Corvette handed them over. “Thus, we can keep growin’ from this post!!”

“You’ve forgotten where you came from... *and I like you better for it!!*” Ira declared. “FLUX will thrive... and if you need me, I will be one full-day’s travel due northeast!!”

“*Thank GOD for Solstice!!* Without him, we would be wanderin’ lost!!”

“A motto, *sir!!* Give a motto!! We need cohesion!!”

“Life in the *FRONTIERS!!*” Corvette said.

“*Yes!!*” Ira said. “Life in the *FRONTIERS!!*” He shook his head and gathered himself. “That way, we can *grow!!*”

\* \* \*

Twisty Combs became a tavern regular. Corvette Jones wanted him to desire his own townships. Instead, Twisty ventured to believe he ought to open his own saloon. *Meld* grew to house more than eight thousand people. Mathematicians were trained on the traditional abacus and they incorporated an economy Ira Best left them with. Every season, Meld would harvest crops and send between five and ten percent in the direction of *Flux*. Ira rarely corresponded via mail... *but when he did*, he allowed Meld to experience the “Great Frontier” through graphic allusions as to developing habitats. He gave pictures handwritten in



black-and-white. He sent hopes. He sent dreams. If destiny would have it, he would send new technologies and understandings.

*Lora of the Desert* managed the first bank in Meld's history. She oversaw finances. When she arrived, the town operated in barter and good will. As they grew, "fairness" was spoken of... and "objectivity"... and a few other *key words* for locals to toss in their minds. She believed she could become governor of the kingdom if it expanded quickly enough. Twisty would have to want to win as *mayor*... somewhere else. And Corvette would have to maintain ties with Ira Best. She taught them what they knew about wizardry in the elementary sense. She thought that she could unify a greater existence: *One barren of fear from outside marauders; one lacking the fear of "the great stone city"; and, one of intercity thriving commerce.*

Lora slept alone at night. She wished for a man. She was surrounded by boys in aging bodies. When they tasted victory against a formidable foe, they would become men.

\*                      \*                      \*

It took testing, patience, and memory to build Flux's first clock. Ira Best took with him a blacksmith trained under *Soltice*. Ira Best built a clock for his seventh-grade science project. Water trickled down from a milk container in his original setup. It spun a miniature reel below. Thin boards from that wheel stopped when they encountered the master peg. An arm rotated along with the wheel separated by a circular face of roman numerals.

The blacksmith allowed Ira Best *precision*. Ira was known for punctuality. He came unto his riches in *Las Vegas* because he timed his winnings. He made sure he had just enough left to catch his flight. If it wouldn't have been going well at the roulette wheel, he would have spent time at the nickel slots. As it turned out, *twenty-one* caught him and he was nearly ruined by Jude Harker. *Not because he couldn't manage his time.* It was the money. He cut his wallet too close. He left Meld with a "cushion system" and he believed it would work. He wrote in a letter to "*Mayor Corvette Jones and the People of Meld*":

*Time is what will keep us together!! The gods have decided to separate us by different ideas. This clock will work to order you to synchronize your actions. If we will it strong enough, the gods will comply!! The seasons will be normal, again!! We can number our years and track our relations!! In the world I came from, clocks secured military victory!! Clocks allowed organization of labor forces!! Clocks allowed lovers to meet with one another when city administrators demanded their presence elsewhere!! Clocks are not the perfect thing to keep!! They will keep you working worse than the ant drones in your fields!! They will make you into targets of enemies coordinated by the animals of the fields!! But they can turn us into GREAT CITIES... quicker than anythin' I KNOW!!*

The letter was sent with a time device which had to be hauled by a cart. Three jugs were held upside down. One wheel was pulled by a rope which utilized gravity as a force. A stone was fastened to the lower end. It pulled while water trickled along miniature cups. The cups, when full, would tip to release water. They would become upright again because of a counterweight. A sundial rested atop the contraption, both to verify time during lit hours, and as a reminder of art and primal human inclinations toward simplicity.

Ira Best hoped it would help the new kingdom. When he first reached Meld eons before, Twisty Combs instructed him to bury his watch and any other “modern apparatuses” he might have. Locals were brutish. They suspected outlandish mechanisms to have sinister applications. Simplicity was the key... *but the marauders convinced Ira that the old ways needed to be reinvented.*

\* \* \*

Jude Harker happened upon *Flux*. He scratched his head and looked for the towne centre. He met with Ira Best. “I was *raped* in jail!!” Jude said. “You prosecuted me for *WHAT?!?*!”

Ira Best clapped his hands twice. His assistant hurried outside of the room. Moments later, two brutes walked in. Ira said to one of them, “I met this man in a towne called ‘*Vegas*’!! He followed me to *ANGELS!!* He is here, now, after tracking me to *Meld*, the great city in the *SOUTHWEST!!*” He motioned for the other man to apprehend Jude Harker. “The relationship is high and low!!”

“We will have him put in the *TRUTH CLAMP* for two hours, sir!!” the head guard said.

“*Yes!!*” Ira said. “Make sure he is coherent, if you can!!”

“He will be fed when he learns to...” The guard had to restrain Jude from struggling away. “He will be put in the Detaining Quarters when it is done!!”

“*New York*, for *SHIT’S SAKE!!*” Jude yelled. “It is really out there!!”

“*Let ‘im speak!!*” Corvette told the guard.

“I died after bein’ released from jail!! *New York!!* *New York* is where I wound up!!” He struggled to loosen himself from the guard. “And I died of natural causes, *I believe...* but I wound up in *New York* of *THIS PLACE!!*” He was let go. “Fifty miles to the west!! *New York* exists in the middle of a dense *forest!!*”

“You think it was fifty miles!!” Ira stated.

“I walked three miles per hour on average per day for two days!! Ten hours per day!! I’m guessin’ fifty miles!!” Jude screamed.

“*Could be twenty-five?!*” Ira asked.

Jude looked down. “I *guess!!*”

“Take him to the pen!!” Ira Best ordered the guard. “The ‘people pen’ is where you’ll be goin’!!” he directed toward Jude.

Jude Harker was detained and given cold food. From behind jail bars, he spoke to one of the guards. He pled to be released, but it was to no avail.

\* \* \*

Elvis Presley and Christina Aguilera traveled two days from *Outpost Headquarters* and stumbled upon Flux. “Church and *STATE* are long forgotten!?” the girl said to the winded man. “This is *WEIRDSVILLE!*?”

“Yeah!! And science?! You would think the *SCIENCE* we were part of... *could have saved us!*?”

“*Mutated bunnies and kittens!*?” Christina howled. “You would’ve never guessed that everything fell to *crap!*?”

A guard was on patrol at Flux’s south rim. Christina and Elvis were crouched behind a shrub. Jude Harker sent word that New Yorkers would be on their way. The guard mistook the lost wanderers as enemies. He sliced their necks. He took their heads to Ira Best.

“*These are fine!*?” Ira said to the guard. “You are promoted!?” He took the heads by their scalps. “There is a proclamation—you know?!—that I am workin’ on!! There will be a day that vandals on the outside are *washed!*?” He put the heads on a shelf to be thrust under by spears. They would be positioned by the road leading to the towne. It was primal in Ira Best’s estimation, but it had to be done. “*Flair!!* We will remember *FLAIR!*?” Ira said. Flair was the name of a warrior lost to ruffians two nights before. “The New Yorkers might venture this way!! We need to let them know... *to be on their best behavior!*?”

“Word is that Lora has prodded Twisty, *your brother-in-arms*, to begin a colony south of *MELD!*?” the guard tendered. “We have prepared five of our inhabitants to...”

“*Yes!*?” Ira Best barked. “Make it ten!! Ninety people we have here, *now!* We can spare ten!?”

“*GREAT TOKEN!*?” the guard called.

Ten of Flux’s people were prepared. They gathered fruits... and Ira Best delivered the two great books which gave the towne its stupendous start. One, dubbed *Lost Science*, was heavy in agriculture. The other, *Forest Spirit*, was laden with lore and magic. His copies were complete. When he duplicated those, they would be sent to Meld. His scribe was quick and accurate. Things looked up.

\* \* \*

“There are two ways to defeat a person!?” Twisty Combs said to a young girl. “You beat their mind... *or you beat their body!*?”

“You can do *both*, you know?!” she said. She was sixteen-years-old. She sat next to Twisty in

Meld's main tavern. He realized he would not have to open his own saloon. Ideas came to him when he was drinking whiskey. The young girl hadn't been around long. She continued, "You have to be *good*, though!/"

"No!! I don't take that approach!! I assess my situation... *then I take what the condition calls for!*/" He sipped from a shot glass. "It makes things easier for the newbies... *like yourself!*/"

"I am insulted... but I want to know why you are building a colony without bein' physically present!/"

"*You have to understand humankind... the way it developed around me!*/" Twisty ordered another couple of shots. "I have never seen the *PRESIDENT!*/" He pounded the bar table for hurried service. "We had this... *crystal ball*... known as a television!! And I saw our leader through..."

"I'm from *Los Angeles*, dude!/" the girl said.

"*Okay!! Very well!! I speak in my own language!*/" He drank two more shots of whiskey and thanked the barmaid for swift service. "You understand how they *ruled!* Without bein' *AROUND!*/"

"I get ya'!/" the brood said. "And your friend, *Corvette Jones*... He made a mistake?! He travelled with his colonists!/"

"No!! That is part of the rapport!! Without his adventure, I could not do what I'm doin'!/" He felt like a cheat. "They think I am in Flux securin' diplomatic ties!/"

"*'NETHERWORLD'*... They are callin' the new place '*NETHERWORLD!*/" The damsel appraised the maple surface in front of her and Twisty. *Immaculate finish.*

"Honey!! What is your name?/" Twisty asked.

"*Jane!*/" the girl giggled.

"*Sounds generic!* I bet in *LA* you were... *Nancy*... or somethin'... an' you have a new start!/"

"You think they'll change the name of your new city... *when you get there?*/" the girl wondered.

"I would like to call the place *Charlesville*... after my birth name!! But I would lose the people!! They have to settle!! They have to figure out what the place is!! *Netherworld* is great... as a runnin' gag!! But they will have character different than they have 'ere!/"

"They will name it somethin' they see... like '*Rock!*'! '*Mountain!*'! '*Ocean!*'!/"

"They will name it '*Twistypolis*' if I order them to do so right now!! But I would lose 'em in a year or two... *when they find out I'm no different than the average guy!*/"

"*They don't care anymore!*/" Jane said. "It didn't *WORK!*/"

"You sure *SAY* that a lot!/" Twisty growled. "You were sayin' that aloud when I first came in to *drink* today!/" Twisty made his way out of the tavern. He knew he would see *Jane of Meld* again. Perhaps in *Netherworld* when he left the home city. Perhaps on the road somewhere. Twisty decided to leave Meld, though. He wasn't certain where he'd go... *but he knew it was time to leave.*

\* \* \*

*Jane of Meld* had been a wanderer before meeting Twisty Combs. Like so many people in the Old World, she disappeared from an American urban city. Her father was mean. He yelled. She went into her closet... wished to leave... then found herself in the middle of a forest. A lathargic man was near a stream when she opened her eyes. He was fat, beating his wanker to sheep, and crying that he was going to fuck people in the butt. *Jane of Meld* had mixed reactions. *Run from the crazy thug...* OR... *befriend a potential bodyguard*. She decided to befriend the masturbating slobering tike... at least until she could find *civilization* of some kind.

*Fuck 'em in the ass!!* is what the guy said. *That's my motto!!*

*You'll need to change when we meet outsiders!!* *Jane of Meld* told him. *I used to be a lute player... in Los Angeles!! I meet people like you!!*

*If someone gets near ya'...* He screamed. Coming from behind the woods were archers.

*You made the RULE!!!* one of them yelled. He bent over the brute and had his way.

*Jane of Meld* reflected on it after watching Twisty Combs leave. *The ironic happened, there!!* she thought. *The guy was goin' to assault anyone who touched me... with the dinky 'e was whackin' to livestock!! How weird!!*

Twisty Combs walked down Meld's main road. He spoke aloud. "That bitch tried to *curse* me!/" He reflected on women he had known from the old *New York*. "She tried to tell me that somethin' didn't work... *in order that I cough up inside information?! I* was supposed to spit out somethin' about city government or travelin' in this *godforsaken* place!/" He scratched his head. "How crazy!/"

*Jane of Meld* ran outside of the tavern where she spoke briefly to Twisty Combs. "I'll have 'em all whackin' off to ya' in *NO TIME!!*" She had been more than a lute player in *Los Angeles*. She was a rock star.

\*

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\*

"*Otis*" was the running name of the township which had been dubbed "Netherworld" before construction of buildings had began. The inhabitants worked hard... but they missed Meld. Word was out that the "*Prime Settler*"—Twisty Combs—was a flake. The mayor pro-tem christened the place from an *Otis Redding* song he listened to before being lost at sea outside of Seattle's main harbor. He was sure that Twisty Combs would change the name when he arrived. Rules were made.

*Do not talk bad of Twisty Combs.*

*Defend yourself from Meld transients unless gifts were brought.*

*Share all grain... except for yeast and hops.*

It was common knowledge that Corvette Jones was tight with Twisty at a time. Most of the

inhabitants were from lost times... *and not from the Twisty's second millennium*. They were instructed in agriculture and not much more. A few produced arts. A couple mastered construction techniques. One was able to brew beer.

Ten people arrived from Flux. They were incorporated into the city. A tradition had taken place to abandon formerly-used second names. *Twisty Combs* was now referred to as *Twisty of Otis*. *Corvette Jones* was now *Corvette of Meld*. The second week of settlement, a child was born. *Corvette of Otis!!* It was strange to some, but it became welcome.

Twisty Combs was followed by a curse put on him. *Jane of Meld* sought revenge for what happened to her in *Los Angeles*. She was always left out of the action. She was undersized, the internet controlled many people at that time... and she would figure out what gay guy would harrass what straight rich dude. *Extortion*. She tired of Meld and travelled to Otis. The cities were growing quickly. Twisty Combs went to Flux to explain his misdirection. Ira Best was set in his ways, there... *so Twisty left meet his new countryside*. He became accustomed to the rules they set up... and he accepted "*Otis*" as his location's name.

\* \* \*

*Dear Mister Twisty Combs:*

*Bad situation, you fucked with me!! Worse situation, you became angered by me sending you on away!!*

*Before founding Flux, I was involved in a video piece called "EXACERBATION"!! A lady, Rhonda Carrier, explained what it was all about!! "Pot callin' the kettle black" is the best way to sum it up!! TMZ was a show in the Old World!! There were photographers, famous from TV exposure, makin' fun of FAME!! The fat vato guy was punked in the ass, she reported... an' repeatedly!! The blimp had as many "hidden problems" as the people he reported!!*

*I did that piece because of RHONDA!! Then a couple of numbskulls show up at poolside!! That was you and Corvette Jones!! Long story short, I don't need your shit!! I ran a video program of my own... quite well since the eighties!! Clandestine!! A lot more CLASS!! You are "in your face" like those kids reportin' around the so-called "THIRTY MILE ZONE"!! We will have a thirty mile here!! You let me know before you show!! I sent emissaries to help found your town!! How humiliated I was when you came unexpected!!*

*Grow up, Twisty Combs!! We can live in this world together!! Do not make a bad situation worse by insultin' ME!!*

*With Wishes..*

*Sir Ira Best*

Twisty Combs read the letter while defecating in an outhouse. He thought about wiping his ass with it. He thought about *Otis* and the settlers he met whom had arrived from *Flux*. It was a good gesture from Ira Best. He had it right. As Twisty thought of it, his generation was a lot more “in your face” because of cell phone and internet hookups early on. Ira Best did not touch a computer until graduating from high school. Twisty grew up with them since preschool. There was an age difference... and an attitude difference.

Twisty wrote back...

*Sir Ira Best...*

*Greetings for better life on the FRONTIER!! I apologize for the mannerisms displayed during my visit!! The printing press!! If I must make an excuse for my actions, it is that!! The lack thereof, I should say!! If I had a printing press, I could have given out charters!! I could have given out orders!! The nonviolent residents of our forests would have invitations!! And I would have founded OTIS... alongside the carpenters whom built the walls which shelter me from the elements!! Word of mouth, my friend!! That is what I relied on!! The images sent on the internet in our Old World... were often given by lonely people!! The theory is that if your image is someplace, your body does not have to be there!! You must take “INFLUENCE” into account!! A general manager of a chain of fast food eateries!! The superintendent of a school district!! They run the show BY NOT BEIN’ THERE!! They do not harrass their employees in such a way!! They avoid students except for emergencies and special occasions!! I am of that school of thought!! I am famous in the Old World’s New York!! Yea, I say unto thee... that I was merely a stagehand!! But I have enough photos of celebrities bein’ behind me in pictures... that I was a hit in taverns... and on the internet!! What was Robe Lowe like?! What was Avril Lavigne like?! What was Jackie Chan like?! I had regional fame because I could answer those questions!!*

*The fat guy from TMZ whom took it in the ass?! Do not threaten me with such inferences!! It does not become our new vaulted status in relative terms!! I did go to college as well as you... yet I dropped out!! I have the capacity for thought... but New York taught me something beyond!! Survival!! Trees?! It doesn’t matter!! The will to live is strong in all city folke... even those of you from the West Coast!!*

*Do not touch my borders without permission!! Your request of written foreknowledge is registered and reciprocated!! We shall have a feast some day!! The Hetfields and McCoys DID NOT KNOW whom started their feud!! Let us not be so*

*STUPID!! Let us not be so suicidal!! There are a lot of opportunities!! Magic is dyin' in the people around me!! We are turnin' to tools, again!! Please don't make things harder than they have to be!!*

*In Consternation,  
Twisty of Otis*

Twisty sent the letter with two soldiers. They delivered fruits, a map of Otis' surrounding area, and a few compasses. He implored the traveling officials to respect diplomacy. He sought to have regular correspondence. If all went smoothly, the soldiers would return with equal gratitude. A civil war would not do the blossoming kingdom any good. The idea of a fat TMZ reporter becoming the victim of his own contraption sent shivers down Twisty's spine. If it took extremism, he would play Ira's game. Vanity would do no one any benefit.

\* \* \*

*"I'm addicted to love... I'm addicted to FOOLS!! Shit!!"* Twisty said to Salt. "They don't know what's goin' on over here!/" Twisty befriended Salt quickly because of their discovery of minerals together. "That fool... out there in FLUX!! He doesn't realize how bad the peasants had it!! Raped by LORDS!! So ladies would have allegiance to the KING!! An' men stabbed in their eyes when... out to battle!/" He threw his hands up. "No gender survived!! The women complained of loveless relationships!! The men cried at losin' their lives to pointless skirmishes!/" He dipped his hand into a bowl of salt. "And now we rediscover... *what we knew!!*"

*"Before I arrived at this point... I was a lad in a kingdom north of London!! Fags!! Lotta fags out there!! The sticks on the ground!! They were like the people!! Easy to break!/"*

*"Yes!! Faggot twigs, of course!/"* Twisty held back laughter. "But you constructed a catapult which was used..."

*"No!! We constructed!! You must say 'we' more often... if you are to survive... a war!/"* Salt tossed sodium chloride over his shoulder. *"Superstition!/"* He winked. "When you have no answer... *CREATE ONE!!*"

Twisty pointed his finger out, then looped it counterclockwise. He pointed in the middle of a circular motion. "I watched it on a television!! Do you know *TELE-VISION!!*/"

*"Telepathy of vision, I would presume!/"* Salt stated. "The crystal ball... *and the mirror!!* They are the best televisions I have seen!/"

*"Of course, Salt... my dear friend!! You had televisions!/"* Twisty smiled. He spoke into a mirror. Ira Best had built the realm's first clock. Twisty constructed the first glass window... *and the first mirror.*



Silicon was plenty. He would produce many windows over the years, *if the fates cooperated*. He thought to send Salt accompanied by a couple of more soldiers to the direction of *Flux*. “I should have given *Sir Ira Best* this... along with the gift basket!! Tell him that we will be watching the television *often*!!” He was pleased to see Salt chuckle. “He will be cheerful!!”

\* \* \*

“The *TMZ* fat kid was makin’ out with Carlos Amezcua!!” Twisty said startled.

“Liz Habib had taken off to find Susan Hirasuna after you took off to the wilderness!!” Corvette explained. “We were all bunched up in that... *oasis*... waitin’...”

“I remember Amezcua from NBC!!” Twisty said. “I met *Susan* when I came to *Meld*!! Back then, they called it ‘*Turn Point*’!!”

“*Yeah*!! And you almost started a war with Ira Best!! I have sent him a hundred more people to help him on his way!!” He looked around. “*Otis*, here... is not lookin’ bad!!”

“*Susan told me somethin’ interestin’*... when I met her in a tavern!!” He waited for Corvette’s eyes to stop scanning the newly-developing towne square. “She said that *Fox* was doin’ a piece on gangs a while back!! ‘Clicks’ was the name of it!! ‘*They’re not quite gangs!! They’re CLICKS!!*’ I remember ‘er tellin’ me ‘bout how people couldn’t get together in *LA* anymore!! In New York, it’s impossible!! Our towne was built *UP*!! Horse carriages dominated!! They gave way to pedestrians... *more than the auto*!!”

“*But LA was doomed by the timin’ of it’s growth?*” Corvette asked. “My first nickname was ‘*Stingray*’!! Can’t remember if I told you!!”

“No!! *LA* was not doomed!! It’s a blessin’ an’ a curse!!” Twisted stated. “But I was thinkin’... they’re cuttin’ down *GANGS*... an’ now they tried to cut *CLICKS*!! What was next?! Couples?! You an’ I talkin’!?”

“An’ the *Bill of Rights* went out the window!! Militias are advocated!! In the name of domestic tranquility... *they can be good*!!” Corvette shook his head. “They forfeited their world!! Our people are draftin’ rules for a new kingdom!!”

“We can’t do what *they* did!!” Twisty said. “*Dystopia*!! I swear to *God*... or whatever *POWERS* are out there... you need to make it... *so we live down to it*!!”

“*Robbin’ an’ lootin’*?! They already had charters ‘bout death!! You had to kill a vandal... *to get back in city walls*!! They scratched it... ‘cause there’s enough friendly people outside!!” He grabbed Twisty by the shoulders. He looked into his eyes, “As soon as they’re comfortable, those dawdlers are gonna start up again!!” He let go of Twisty. “We know from livin’ in *New York*... that complacency sets in!!” He kicked dirt. “They’ll be back!!”

“That’s us when we were younger!! I know it!!”

“*You sympathize too much*!!” Corvette said. “We have to work on treaties so we don’t kill *each*

*other... more than we worry about citizens killin' vagrants outside!/"*

"*Yep!/"* Twist Combs said. "Ira Best is a great man!! He thinks like old people!/" He put his arm around Corvette. "*Blessin' an' a curse!!* Just like the cars of *LA*" He walked away. "I have to guard that he doesn't govern me from *Flux!!* He was pissed that I didn't settle with my first load of people!/"

"*I questioned it myself,"* Corvette said.

"*And Lora?!"* Twisty questioned.

"Jude Harker gets the fourth colony!/" He turned toward a well which had yet to be completely constructed. "He will be our *Switzerland!/"* He wondered how much water was underneath his feet. "He knows about construction fine!! He knows about survival... but he does not get along with *Ira!/"*

"*Sir Ira!/"* Twisty said. "You have to make sure the inhabitants understand our..."

"*New privileges!!* I know!! But *Lora* is too comfortable!! She runs the tavern in *Meld* as well as the bank!/" He looked to the sky. "The fifth colony will be *hers!/"*

"I look forward to this kingdom!/" Twisty said. "I give to you *now...*" He presented Corvette Jones a hand mirror. "This will be our gift!/" He smiled and teared. "We will have *commerce!/"*

\* \* \*

*Corvette of Meld* arrived in Flux a few days after meeting with Twisty. "We invented *this!/"* He handed an instrument to Ira Best. "*The HELIOTAPH!!* It's like a barometer... except that it incorporates mercury to decipher temperture and humidity factors!! Better crop yields!/"

"*I'm sorry about Twisty Combs!!* I came with ten people to found this place!! You sent fifty in a matter of time!! And he showed up when I was givin' orders!! I felt angered." He observed the heliotaph. "I was afraid for our future!! I felt spied on... an' there were thugs in the north!/"

"You thought Twisty was raisin' an army against you!?" Corvette laughed. "I met with him... *and all is settled.*" He changed his tone. "The *magic* is dyin', you know?! One of our guys is from MIDDLE AGE England!! He said it happens!! Population grows, knowledge dilutes... *an' you're left with science if you're lucky!/"*

"*Self-fulfillin' prophesy!!* I can still fireball once per week!! And the seasons have started to come aroun'!! The *SUN* sets at a lower point on the horizon every day!/" He handed Corvette a map. "This is the most recent mock up!/" He smirked. "New York is *NOW* two days' travel away!/" His face blushed. "I don't know if the original pioneers had it wrong... *or if it's drifting!/"*

"*Jude Harker?!"* Corvette asked.

"*Yes!/"* Ira Best said. "He's a nuisance!! '*Harkerville*' is his new establishment!! Egoist!! I believed he would name the place... *Ah!!* It's good to be rid of him!/" Ira Best spat on the ground. "I had 'im jailed a couple of times!! He comes at me like I owe him somethin'!/" He turned from Corvette. "He does not know *GAMBLING!/"* He turned back to Corvette. "He would have had me on the *streets...* for a

dollar!! I jackpotted, had a good life... *an' now 'e wants a cut!!*"

"*Twisty Combs* fears you, Sir Ira Best!! And Jude Harker does not trust you!!" Corvette Jones handed Ira a treaty. "*This... you will sign to establish our kingdom!!*"

"*Now the LABELS!!*" Ira Best said. He looked over the treaty, not to read but rather to gauge how many hours were spent drafting it. "You run the kingdom quite well... *for a man versed in helpin' TV shows!!*"

"The document is meant more for the inhabitants!! And, yes... I used to be student body president in high school!! I knew diplomacy a bit!!"

Sir Ira Best scaddled to his desk, grabbed a pen, and signed without a lot of trepidation.

Corvette Jones noted, "You have *Otis* in the far south!! Meld is in the middle!! Flux is in the northeast!!" He shook his head at Ira's geographic drawing. "New York is in the upper left corner!! Dallas has been spotted?!" He mused. "A half day's walk from *New York!!*"

"We have not traveled from the cities!! Jude Harker claims to be from New York!! That was 'is portal!! They coul' be aberrations!! Like the *OASIS* was supposed to be!! But one day, we'll be settled... *an' we'll fit in!!*"

"You also have a couple of villages I have not 'eard of!!" He looked closer and witnessed tiny symbols relating to resources. "These are friendly places?!"

"*They have to be!!* We let out an edict into the wilderness!! The worst of the brutes were murdered, I have to say!! They raped a couple of guards on their stronger days!! We had to get rid of them!!"

"We will reach *CIVILITY* when the pen becomes mightier than the sword, again!!"

Ira Best hugged Corvette. "*Yes!!* I am my own worst nightmare... *for now!!*" He let Ira Best go. "I fear waging war on you!! When we become strong enough, the inhabitants'll call for it!!"

"*You must trade swiftly!!*" Ira Best said. "We must be a brother city!!"

"You are wrong in your philosophy!! We must war now!!" He pounded his arm on his table.

"Giants and Jets!! Rangers and Islanders!! Coexist... *but war!!*"

"I will construct an auditorium between our two cities!! We will have venues to fight!!"

"I will draft rules!! Our most pitiful warriors—*when they have ridded the last of the bandits!!*—they will meet your men to destroy you!! Aggressions!! Can't disappear!! Sport!!"

"I request somethin' different than football!!"

"*Yes!!*"

"The sport is circular!! Def Leppard used to perform in the middle of arenas!! Machismo out the door!! In design, women have to love *SPECTACLE!!* A ball is in the middle!! Four teams situated in opposing corners!!" Corvette whistled. "We will have a whistle blow or a drum pound!! The contestants run to the ball... and their goal is to return it!! A goal!!"

"*Four teams!!* I like it!! Corvette, Ira, Twisty, and Jude against one another!! Chinese checkers

on the field!! We could play with two-to-six teams... *when we have expanded!!*”

“*And time?! Do you want there to be...*” Corvette started.

“*No!! Timeless!! Like baseball and tennis!!*” He felt excited. “We control time!!”

“*Not a device!!*” Corvette said.

\* \* \*

“*If a tree falls in the forest, does it make a sound if no one is anywhere close?!*” Ira Best asked Twisty Combs. He handed him a gift basket, a new map, and a heliotaph.

“*Yes!! I know it does!!*” Twisty cried with pride.

“*We are on the same page!! My towne has reached two hundred and fifty people!!*” He looked down to the floor. “I am *sick* of it!! The tree makes a sound... and they say it does not!! Chicago has appeared north of New York!!” He pointed to an updated drawing. “Dallas is to their south—*our west*—each spaced by a half day’s foot travel!! And people come from Chicago!! Unenchanted!! Not knowin’ that the trees sang to us!! They are lost... *an’ they are usin’ outdated philosophies to get by!!*” He turned to Twisty’s wall map. “This place has grown!!”

“The Chicagoans!! Booze, right?! Probably lookin’ to make gats with the metal?!”

“*No!! They are inner-city fellows lookin’ forward to the new franchise!!*” He handed Twisty a charter from his pocket!! You are to build a stadium between Flux and Otis!! We will defeat the logic of the United States as it was!! This is expansive!! We will fill in cracks with *theatre...* sports!! We’ll give them a reason to travel... aside from maraudin’!!”

“I like the idea!! But you’re serious about...”

“*Leavin’!! ‘No CROWN FOR THE PRESIDENT’!! You remember that?! FDR?! I will leave Flux to start a new colony in your southwest!! Horses, by the way!! Discovered in our northern areas!!*”

“I will give you fifteen people right now!!” He looked to the ceiling. “*Meld* has thousands... and they have vowed a hundred people per season to each city!! No less!! This instrment of yours?!”

“*A heliotaph!! Farmers will use it!! We have figured out from history’s mistakes and comparin’ thoughts!!*” He handed Twisty instructions regarding the heliotaph’s use. “We have biologists—*not machinists*—developin’ an auto!! Our system evolved!! We produced an engine not knowin’ we would put it to wheels!! Faster production in textiles, and that kind of thing!! Everything was components!! And then we have a shitty *Chrysler* which couldn’t run!! Japanese runnin’ circles around us!! ‘Cause they had the luxury of learnin’ *LATER* of car design!! The ‘whole’ was considered!! So biologists are thinkin’ of the auto as an organism!! A hand not existin’ without an arm!! A head designed to compliment a neck!!”

“No more *parts*!! The starter and alternator as one device... *off the bat*!! A fuel injector without havin’ decades of caburator frustration!! No *executive* sayin’ that ‘it’s always been done this way’!! Freedom... *and intelligence!!*”

“But the treaty we signed with Corvette Jones!! We have agreed for *five years*... to share all technology!! After the third year, a supermajority of three-fifths of the people could nullify the program!! We have the best engineers, *Twisty*!! They came straight from Chicago!! Meld is way larger... *but they are centered around agrarian thought an’ settlement of the region!*” He produced a final piece of paper from a sack. “*These are our drawings!*”

Twisty marvelled at the detail. “You know how to build an *airplane!*”

“*We can build an airplane...* but we have to perfect the automobile!! We have to be safe with one another!”

“The assembly line automobile and the invention of the airplane *COINCIDED* in the Old World!” He scratched his head. “*Why not start together?!*”

“The *FIRST WORLD WAR*... followed soon after!” He socked Twisty lightly on the left arm. “We have to learn from *THEIR* mistakes!”

“A sports team shall be formed soon!” He looked to the new map. “We recognize *Harkerville* by Otis as legit!” He marvelled at the heliograph. “Fifteen settlers will be ready by nightfall!”

\* \* \*

*Salt of Otis* was sent to be the new mayor of Flux. Sir Ira Best shot to the southeast of Otis to form *Sack*. His compatriots had carried their belongings on their backs, thus the name. His sidekick was a soldier called “*Brain*” and Ira could not tell if he was dubbed in sarcasm. He spoke, “*Juliet Hardy!* The boss of *Twisty* and *Vette*!! She has been spotted west of Flux!! A witches cove!! The institute is called ‘*Spitzer*’ where she teaches!! No one is sure!! Villagers... Information from strangers!! But curses loom!! Men are frustrated with women!! *Rape!* A lot of fear of *rape!* The women have taken off!! Coves in the forests!! Outskirts!”

“It’s inevitable!” *Brain of Otis* declared. “The men?! Horny!! They get horny!”

“*Reward!*” Ira said. “They... *Listen!* Vegas is like that!! You go to these *coves!*”

“*The curses*, sir?” *Brain* asked. “What’s the nature?”

“*Sexual disease!*” Ira said. “I come from a time... *Listen!* Leprosy was herpes or *gonorrhea!* I’m sure of it now!! And the ladies!! They are out...”

“*They have these diseases!*” *Brain* said. “*Pain!*”

“A lot of pain!” Ira Best said. “Showgirls and *masturbation!* That’s the only way to clear oneself of the effects!”

“*Rape no more!*” *Brain of Otis* said. “I will give the orders... but they’ll not listen!”

“They are suicidal or *stupid!*” Ira Best said. “We will hang the worst of them!! We cannot afford to lose *women!* Currency is barely bein’ developed an’ accepted!! Women are our *VALUE* at home!”

“*For now!*” *Brain* said. “Until they turn into witches!”

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\*

*Dear Sir Corvette Jones...*

*Salt of Otis is erring in his ways!! First, he refuses to shed Otis from his calling. "Lord Salt of Flux" may be the proper change for his residents. Second, he is demanding homage of liquored brew and fancy clothing from his countrypeople!! I did no such thing in FLUX!! As an assistant, the man was ten percent of my regular world!! He told me I was nearly "everything" to him!! That was before I sent him to be leader of the town I founded!! I know he has connections, now, and a different way to administrate!! I need to know what bottom lines we may have!! Should we start asking for homage from the drifters on the roads?! Will it start war?!*

*I do not favor a strong central power... but I admired codes which do not reek the inside of my mind!! Those were my friends in Flux!! I must allow their memory to fade!! It pains me to think they are bein' demanded of them things they did not have to do for me!! Three ladies and two men have left Flux for our city, Sack!! I am proud to have attraction... but I need to know that Salt of Otis, if his calling shall remain thusly, will not invoke duress upon pupils whom I have mentored!!*

*The heliotaph is workin' fine, Corvette!! We have found a way to distill saltwater from our eastern boundries!! The Europeans could have thought of it sooner... an' it's not as efficient as models I had read about in Omni magazine in America... but it works!!*

*Sincere Corespondance,*

*Sir Ira Best*

Corvette Jones had thought that being governor of a rising kingdom would be great. He was not *officially* a governor, yet, but the letters came to him sooner and more often. He was more of a *CONFESSOR* early on. He could not believe he was becoming what Twisty Combs feared in New York. He decided to send *Lora of the Desert* to find out if Juliet Hardy was practicing witchcraft toward the "Three City Range"—the lost cities of America. He wrote back to Sir Ira Best to not put codes on naming. "Salt of Otis" was fine to run Flux, and he should remain such in case he founded a new colony. Changing names often would cause confusion. The contraption to distill saltwater would do all districts well if it was efficient and large enough. He was proud to feel like a king... but he knew it would end when the municipalities became large enough. He sent a letter to *Salt of Otis* to absolve him for three months of any of Ira's accusations. He informed him that it would cause strife for all leaders if Ira's apprentices were

treated inappropriately. A standard would be set. A mayor—*any new leader*—would have three months grace. Thereafter, criticism was expected to wane. Ruling the kingdom was not easy. *Spitzer*, presumably named after Old World's *New York*, would be investigated. Before coming to *Meld*, Corvette Jones knew about the power of perception. Jurassic Park made it possible for people to believe dinosaurs existed. For fleeting moments, belief was suspended. The same happened with mayors and governors. Having the edge of working on a major show, he knew the public saw five to ten percent of what was important... *if even that*. Computer simulators—the same guys who created *Jurassic Park*, the *Terminator* series, and the *Matrix*—implicated heavy hitters behind the scenes. Video so real!! It could not be deciphered by experts!! Governors taking falls!! Others being cleared by exaggeration!! Juliet Hardy could be a major player in this alternate world!!

Corvette called for *Lora*. “There is a lady whose power is *greater* than yours!!”

“*Mirror... mirror on the WALL!!*” *Lora* said. “I have already heard of it from patrons at our tavern!!”

“*No!!* She is versed in deception... *worse than me!!*” He held *Lora*’s wrist. “I am mayor of our *KINGDOM’S* largest city!!” He let go. “*New York* will take over *this* realm... like it took over the Old World... *that we came from!!*”

“Maybe we need new leadership!!” *Lora* spat.

“*We have sovereignty!!* You do not let go of *SOVEREIGNTY* when it is in your hands!! *UNLESS INVADED!!*” He turned to a mirror on his wall. “*New York* has a power to move people... *to worship other people!!*”

“*Ah!!*” *Lora* bellowed. “And your friend, *Lord Ira Best...*”

“*Sir Ira!!*” Corvette said. “I see what you’re sayin’!!”

“It’s *happenin’*, Corvette!! You are worshipin’ one another!!”

“You will go into the forest to defeat the *greater good!!*” Corvette felt dizzy. “That sounds absurd... but it’s *what we must do!!*”

“You do not *govern* me, Corvette!! I taught you... *your magic!!* You are the mayor of our city!! Someone to be spoken to by traveling strangers!! City council!! You oversee a council!!”

“*You do not know the danger of allowin’ a witch to overpower a mayor!!*”

“I am a woman, Corvette!!” She felt sorry for him. “We will give you love... but you have to open your heart to *strangers!!*”

“You think I’m freakin’ *sexist!!*” Corvette said. “I believe you are witches in a power struggle regarding *gender...* while I am battlin’ the elements of our frontier!!”

“*Life in the FRONTIERS*, Vette!!” *Lora* said. “Remember our credo!!”

“Yes, *Lora!!*” He said to her. “You are right!!”

*Lora of the Desert* did not seek Juliet Hardy. She prepared an army of fifteen people to *meet* Juliet if she should come to *Meld*. She practiced magic at a stream... and hoped *Juliet* would come to meet her.

Corvette presided over the town with frustration. He was grateful to have a woman as radiant as *Lora* to calm him from rash decisions... but he wanted war. He wanted to live out childhood dreams of domination.

\* \* \*

Rhonda Carrier had last been seen by Corvette Jones when they were in the oasis on the way to *Las Vegas*. He hadn't thought of her. A lot went on in his head. *Lora of the Desert* left his mayor's room and he was surprised to see Rhonda come in. "*You look good!!*"

"I got lost... *Wound up in Detroit!!* It's west of Chicago, now!!" She held Corvette. "I heard you scream about *Juliet*, our old boss!! I walked up as you finished talkin' to... *the lady!!*"

"*Yeah!!* It is strange what is happenin'!!" He let go of Rhonda. "*I fear goin' to the cities... 'cause they'll turn me into a peon again!!*"

"*You rule a good kingdom!!*" Rhonda said. "As I went to Chicago on the way to this place—they *have maps of your existence*, believe it or not!!—Detroit fell before my eyes!! In the distance... then gone!!"

"I don't know the rules of the gods as they stand!!" Vette said. "Apparently, magic is good... *for only people from the forest!!* Once the people get acclimated to a town's way—their *vibe*—they lose all power!!"

Rhonda lifted papers on Vette's desk without trying. "I will *marry* you, if you wish!!"

"We have no customs for marriage... *right now!!*" He took Rhonda by the hand. "When we stop growing... *we can slow the pace of our lives!!*"

"It'll be natural, I'm sure!! And we can forget about *Mike and Juliet!!*"

"*No!!* They will not be forgotten!! Word is that Juliet has a coven between our place and the *New York* of our forest!! She practices..."

"*I know!!* I knew her well before taking you to the *EVERGLADES!!* She has a magic of morphing idiots into great people!!" She looked to Vette. "She also takes mayors and turns them into..."

"*Regular guys!!*" Vette shook his head. "I felt her power *THROUGH* Lora... and I don't... *She makes me feel like a child... even from my office!!*"

"You will give up power in five years!!" Rhonda said. "I will take you into the forest... *and we will start a place of our own!!*"

"*Done!!*" Corvette said. "Do you need that in writing?!"

\* \* \*

"Michigan is one *PUSSY-ASS* state!!" Rhonda said to Ira Best. "They are the ultimate sore



losers!!”

“I can’t tell you the half of it!! I laughed when you said that Detroit vanished into thin air!!” He rubbed his chin. “I worked on the West Coast!! Lotta Japanese!! Lotta Mexicans!! I’m not a union buster... *but they infer that you’re tryin’ to break ‘the union’ when ya’ don’t buy one o’ their cars every two years!!* An’ I worked with a *GUILD!!* The SCREEN ACTORS GUILD!! That’s a fuckin’ union!! I supplied video to stars before *TMZ* started whorin’ feeds to the general public!! An’ the gall of those faggots in *‘MOTOR CITY’!!* I lived on the frontier then as much as do now!! Detroit into nothin’!!”

“There was a horde of bandits on their way to Detroit as I left!! Rumors of course!! It disappeared... but smoke stacks could be seen from... *over where it was!!* And Los Angeles?! It’s here again!! North of Chicago!! Rumor, of course!! I have not seen it!!” Rhonda handed over another updated map. “This one has grids to show the equal distance!! Detroit in the south!! New York above... *two spaces!!* Chicago above!! Two spaces, again... then Los Angeles... *three spaces!!* Perfectly ordered!! And this map was given to me by...”

“Yeah!! We get ‘em!! Travelers in the forest!!”

“But this guy was tryin’ to convert me to *HINDUISM!!*” She produced an amulet. “He said it’d be great for relations between our...”

“*KINGDOMS?!*” Ira Best asked. “It sounds weird!!”

“It’s strange!!” Rhonda said. “They are buildin’ granaries in all of your brother colonies, by the way!! Large ones!!” Rhonda passed a drawing to Ira Best. “They look like large *cocks!!* The Hindu missionary recognized us as *Islamic*, of all things!! He said soldiers had three to four wives each, he noticed... *an’ the rest work as drones in the outer reaches!!*”

“The buildings... *They can be designed better!!*” He waved Rhonda off. “We need to build schools!! Tell my men to get started on one!!”

“*Yes, sir!!*” Rhonda Carrier returned. “I will do so!!”

\* \* \*

Ira Best went over to *Sack’s* budding saloon. Rhonda met with him after he managed to drink a couple of shots of bourbon. He ordered a couple of beers when she sat down. “*Tell me that I’m not under hypnosis, Rhonda!!* Tell me that I am the mayor of a city!!”

“I’ll have a whiskey with my beer!!” Rhonda said to the bartender.

“Tell me that I’m not under sodium pentothal... *and I’m blabbin’ all the things in my mind to you at the poolside of a Comfort Inn in Los Angeles!!*”

“You are fine!! Your architects are designin’ schools right now!! Your carpenters are layin’ the groundwork!!”

“*Metaphysics!!* First *PRINCIPALS!!* Ultimate *REALITY!!* I need to wash... *Juliet Hardy* from my

mind!! Detroit!! I need it gone!/" He looked to Rhonda. "*Ghosts!!* They are phantoms!! How can I design a future for my town... *when I'm hung up on the past?!*"

"The curse from the *Spitzer* coven is strong!/" Rhonda said. "Women have a way!! Legs!! Breasts!! Subtleties!! An' they dance in your head!/"

"But!! It is real!/" Twisty drank from his beer. He grabbed Rhonda's whiskey when the bartender sat it in front of her. He dropped it in his lager. "*Cadillac!!*" He drank the whole thing in a couple of seconds. "That's what they call these things!/"

"*Juliet* was designed to slow the war, Ira!! Soldiers were comin' back to the United States!! They needed a pretty face in early mornin'!! You got along with 'er 'cause she has an affinity for men who don't hit on everyone!/" She smiled at him. "You... *She thought you were gay*, probably... an' hired you!/"

"I was workin' my way... *to the top!!* Twisty was goin' to be on *BROADWAY*, you know?/"

"But she has a curse... *as well as a blessin'!!* She can't be everywhere!! An' when the soldiers stopped watchin' 'er show... *they went to find her!!* Secret government mission!! They find perverts... *that way!!*"

"They create perverts by puttin' a girl so pretty in front of everyone... *an' allowin' none...*"

"*Hey!!* She's not all that!! For the rich, she was a gateway!! You could find prettier girls in the penthouses... *if you made 'er happy!!*"

"*Cause she couldn't be everywhere?!*"

"*Close!!*" Rhonda drank her beer. She ordered another couple of whiskeys. "You've entered a *comfort zone*... if you're drinkin' in front of..."

"I learned from *Twisty!!* Don't be a jackass!! Be like them!/"

The bartender offered advice. "You can't do it all the time, *sir!!*"

"*Four* more whiskeys!/" Ira Best yelled.

\* \* \*

Ira Best resided in a humble cottage. At dusk he was met by knocking sounds on his door. His head throbbed from the beginning of a hangover. Rhonda Carrier and *Lora of the Desert* were together in front of him when he opened the wooden front entrance. "*Juliet* is the real deal!! *Juliet of Spitzer* is angered that she did not fit into city life— and she does not like your *KINGDOM!!* She openly practices magic!! She is from the *BELLLL!!* If you remember your apocrapha, *Bel and the Dragon* was a story... Hey!/"

"That lady!! Different '*BELL*'!! New York!! The *BELL CURVE!!* Wilderness!! I look into my mirror... an' I see a monster!! *Scales!!* She's gotten to me!/"

"That is one of many spells she has!/" Rhonda Carrier said. "*Your ass!!* She has a heat-seekin' mechanism for locatin' the top o' your *ASS!!*"

“Makes ya’ feel that ya’d ‘get it in the ass’ by one o’ ‘er thugs!?” Ira asked.

“*She has no thugs!!*” Rhonda said.

“*I went there!! Potions!! Stew!! Fire!!*” *Lora of the Desert* produced fire in her palm. “She is better than me!?”

“Why’d she end up in our kingdom?!” Ira Best asked. “It doesn’t fit!?”

“*I know!!* She has attraction in New York... *of the Old World...* and you would think she would run from people whom worked for ‘er!! Set up settlements on the west side of the *Three City* range!?” *Lora of the Desert* offered.

“*It’s now four cities...* with Los Angeles!?” Ira interjected.

“*Yeah...* but she seems to be seekin’ you!?” *Lora* said.

“I worked for her... for *six months!!*” Rhonda watched Ira shake his head. “I want to say this is a dream!! I hate my job!! This is my subconscious sayin’, ‘Get up in the mornin’ an’ go to work!! *Your boss likes you!!*”

“*No!!*” *Lora of the Desert* alleged... and watched Ira Best pinch Rhonda in front of her as if prodded. “You felt that!?” *Lora* said to Rhonda.

“*Menial tasks!!*” Ira said. “I cannot do menial tasks... *sometimes!!*” He thought about *Juliet of Spitzer*. “I can ‘ear Juliet yellin’ into my head!?”

“*Then it’s happenin’!!*” Rhonda Carrier said. “The end of *OUR WORLD* is gonna occur again!?”

“I am not hearin’ Corvette Jones tell me to build this... *or that!!* Juliet has taken over!?”

“*Not that easy!!*” *Lora* said. “We can win!?”

“But we have to have a *REASON!!*” Ira felt befuddled.

They looked at one another... and then decided to take off to *Flux*.

\* \* \*

“*This SPITZER PLACE...* where Juliet Hardy is!?” Ira Best walked along a road with two pretty ladies. In a day, he’d be talking to *Salt of Otis* about what was going on. “It is *DEMONIC!!*”

“They kick ya’ when you’re down!?” Rhonda Carrier said. “We programed them to do it!! The *EVERGLADES?!* We couldn’t have done a story there when *two teams* won national championships!! We waited ‘til one o’ their students was tazed by a government official!?”

“*You guys can’t be that bad!!*” Ira Best said. “I watched the *Morning Show* from Los Angeles!?”

“*EXACERBATION!!* You remember?! I was there to ring you!! Juliet yelled at me on the set!! I keep it in!! But I feel the forest!?” Rhonda stretched out her arms. “There’s an intensity outside!?”

“I know that *well!!*” *Lora* said.

“Bad situation was that you were goin’ to leave your wife after winnin’ a *JACKPOT!!* Worse situation, we were goin’ to expose you for stalkin’ ‘er with your money!?” She looked at dark clouds in the

sky. “But the interview did not pan as planned!! You happened upon your success!! Your wife was as crazy as you!!”

“*Urban myths!!*” Ira Best looked at what seemed to be a storm coming in. “I remember the piece!!”

“And I wound up... *in the desert!!*” Rhonda Carrier said.

“*Yeah!!*” Ira Best said.

“*Science is takin’ over in MELD, people!!* I have a theory that the magic Corvette Jones left behind... *was granted to Juliet by ‘THE POWERS’!!*” Lora of the Desert said.

“*Yeah!!* And in Flux, the state is comin’ into bein’!!” Rhonda said. “If Juliet gets crazy, we have to *stay* out here!!”

“*Then we have a fightin’ chance!!*” Lora said.

“Juliet’s tactics were to stigmatize, distort, and ruin!!” Rhonda opened her palm to falling drops from the sky. “Out here... *where magic is more pronounced...* God knows *what* she is capable of!!”

“We can’t turn a mole hill into a mountain!!” Ira Best yelled.

“*She’s already turned you into a child!!*” Rhonda said. “You don’t care about your job as mayor, your tasks as an overseer... *or your place in your kingdom!!*”

“*Let’s deal with her briskly!!*” Lora said.

Thunder pounded from the sky. At noon of the following day, they arrived in Flux.

\* \* \*

*Salt of Otis* could not be found. His aids said that he went “looking for trouble” in the forest. Ira Best, Lora of the Desert, and Rhonda Carrier sat around at Flux’s western entrance. They ventured into shrubbery. Night fell quickly and clouds proceeded to cover the sky. “I know what is happenin’!!” Ira Best declared to Lora and Rhonda. “If I am right, it is no use talkin’ to you!!”

Lora said, “*Go on!!*” She looked at the *Moon* through rips of clouds.

“I feel it, *ma’am!!* It’s happenin’ again!! Just like my childhood!!”

“Don’t be so mysterious!!” Rhonda said.

“*Scapegoat!!*” Ira said. “Just like my childhood!! Just like my wife!!” He looked at the *Moon* then saw the hairs on his arm stand up. “Juliet is lookin’ for a scapegoat!! We did not show to her program!! You in particular, *Rhonda!!* She wanted the video of *EXACERBATION!!*” Cool wind chilled the trio. “And this happens!!” His hair got thicker. “*THIS HAPPENS!!*” He snarled a bit. “We build your kingdom... *and you take it over!!*”

Wooooooo!!

Wolves in the night howled.

“*Rharhhh!!*” Ira growled. “My dreams are comin’ TRUE!!” His hair became longer behind his

neck. His muscles flexed. He turned to Rhonda with yellowish eyes. “You *BITCH!*” He howled. “You did it again!?”

*Lora of the Desert* backed away. “I am not your WIFE!! I am not Juliet Hardy!?”

“*The females always do it!*” Ira called. “You turn us into *ANIMALS!*” He approached *Lora*. “But your time will come!?”

“*I know!*” She was scared.

“*This is not like the movies!*” Rhonda noticed.

“*We have a choice... even now!*” Ira Best said. “The *MOON* beckons... AND IT’S HARD TO *RESIST!*?”

“*Please!*” Rhonda begged. She backed toward *Lora*.

Ira Best took off into the wilderness alone.

\* \* \*

*Lora* and Rhonda made it into Flux’s center without a problem. *Lora* looked to the sky on occasion. The *Moon* did not look full!! It was almost full!! It did not look full!! “I thought it was automatic business with bein’ ripped up!?” she said to Rhonda. “*They have mercy!*?”

“You don’t know that Ira hasn’t changed into a full beast out there!?” Rhonda said.

“I taught them this trick!! I’m talkin’ about Twisty Combs and Corvette Jones in particular... when we were in the oasis!! Firethrowin’!! And I told them, nearly in sarcasm... *not to hit the nads of one another!*?”

*Rhonda laughed.*

“You hit the top of a limp dick... *and it makes people pissed!*” *Lora* said.

“*Cops do that in New York!*” Rhonda said. “They have ways to make people commit crimes—*people they don’t like*—but no one admits it!?”

“*Stop mockin’ me!*” *Lora* said. “I’ve given a power to *homos!*” She smiled. “Fantasize about jerkin’ off to your enemies!?” She looked into the sky and wondered where Ira Best was. “Somehow, they find out!?”

“*There’s no way!*” Rhonda said.

*Salt of Otis* came running to the gossiping girls from around the corner. “Ira is one of *THEM!*?”

“*What?!*” *Lora* asked. “*What?!*?”

“A *warewolf!* And only a fool believes you ought to stab ‘em in the heart... *to kill ‘em!*” *Salt* wiped his brow.

“You think... *he*... Uh!! Wait!?” *Lora* said. “You think LOVE kills the spell!?”

“*No!*” *Salt* said. “He has taken off to murder... *Juliet of Spitzer!*” He spat gooey phlegm onto the ground. “She has a power greater than yours combined!?” He regained his breath. “She turned him

into a WAREWOLF!!”

“*Okay!*!” Rhonda said. “Why can’t we just ignore the dike whore and get on with our lives!?”

“She is after all of us!! Ira was the best mayor in the kingdom!” He checked their faces for discontentment. “He founded *FLUX*... and Sack!! Corvette Jones is a fine man... *but he is a facilitator!*!”

“You think she has a mob of homos jerkin’ off to Ira Best... *and somehow, he’s supposed to ‘just know’!!* And that’s supposed to drive him to sacrifice his kingdom to ‘er?! I don’t buy it!”

“You would be surprised the way things work in *FLUX*!! More black magic ‘ere... *than in Meld*!! But we go outdoors to do it!” He looked to the western horizon. “Between this place and New York... is *Juliet’s cove*!”

“You sound like an idiot!! But I have seen flyin’ donkeys!” Rhonda said. “I believe... you know *WHAT* things are!! But why?! No!! I don’t trust your judgment!”

“*Very well!*!” Salt said. He raised his sword... and his body disappeared into the night. Vanished. His clothing fell to the ground.

\* \* \*

Rhonda and Lora travelled on a road to Meld. The clouds were heavy in the sky. A torch lit their path. The *Moon* was hidden. “There’s another trick,” Lora said to Rhonda. “*Sodomy* was practiced around my house!! We found that men were prone to homosexuality if you can get them to enjoy a woman’s *ass*... early on!! What’s the difference, right?! A woman’s or man’s ass has no variation that’s significant!”

“That’s why the *BIBLICAL* people stopped it!” Rhonda said.

“*So if you can charm a man you’ve had relations with into hatin’ your enemies... you can scare your adversaries into believin’ they’ll be plugged in the butt!*!” Lora said. “You have to make sure you know where your enemies live!”

“*Homophobia!*! You have to stigmatize them with ‘HOMOPHOBIA’ as a label!” Rhonda advised.

“Of *course* you have to do that!! In the Old World, you have to do that!” Lora said. “The fags are out there!! They do it for little money!” She looked at Rhonda as they walked. “You give ‘em a few thousand dollars... *and they could scare celebrities into hidin’ in their rich mansions!*!” She shook her head. “I am *Laura*... Not Lora!! ‘Laura Chance’ was a screen name I had!”

“*They sound the same!*!”

“Of *course!*!” Lora of the Desert said. “How foolish of me... but I changed it in writin’... *to please the geeks you brought to my desert!*! I wrote it for ‘em!” She smiled at Rhonda. “*Lore!*! I said I was into *LORE*... and that’s why I could practice magic!”

“I have tricks of my own... but they have to do with skirt lengths!” Rhonda said. “You have to make men feel like *pussies!*! If you know security is around... *shorten the skirt!*! They feel like pussies in

the crowd!! Family reunion?! Wear it past your knees... or you'll be called a slut!!"

"I didn't realize it was a *GENDER* thing to you!!" Lora said. "I mean, you had two male assistants!! I thought you were with them... *sexually!*!"

"No!! Not in New York!! Twisty would talk. I would be fired... *and...*"

"*But...?*!" Lora asked.

"*Not Corvette*, either!!" She looked to the sky. "I am a social climber, I must admit!! Gender?! Not on my radar when everything's goin' acceptable!! Twisty and Corvette have *CLASS!*!" She raised her torch into the air. "*That matters!*!"

"I believe we can rule this realm... *with Juliet!*!" Lora said. "I can hear..."

"No!!" Rhonda said. "That goes sour!! Backstabbin' an' catfightin'!!!"

"*Okay!*! I'm done with men as saviors!! Play your game!!" Lora suggested.

Rhonda twinkled at Lora then roared. She transformed into a cheetah on all fours. She whispered in a sultry rasp, "*The forest is MAGIC!*!"

The *Moon* made its way known from above.

\* \* \*

Lora and Rhonda arrived to *Meld* as a bear and a cheetah. The *Moon* became covered by clouds and they changed back into ladies of the regular human variety. "This was done!! I listened to what you said about Juliet Hardy and other popular TV personalities!!" Lora was ashamed to be nude. "*Zig zag!*! Like a bear!!" Her clothes had been ripped from her transformation into a warebear. "You run away from bees!! And you said Juliet Hardy drove in *zig zags* down the street sometimes... to outrun her fans!!"

"You're a *WEIRDO!*!" Rhonda said. "Twisty told you that story... an' I think 'e was makin' it up!!"

"You use his words against him, *though!*!" Lora said. "I remember you said to treat him like a man!! And he became a man as mayor of *Otis!*!"

"He ain't SHIT, now!!" Rhonda said. "New *ORDER!*! There is a new way!!"

"I used to be afraid of pyramid schemes... *when I was datin' stupid guys!*!" Lora said. "They all wind up as queers yankin' one another's chains!!"

"Figure of speech?!" Rhonda asked.

"We played this game with hundred dollar bills... *when I was datin' a gas attendant!*!"

"*Yeah?*!" Lora asked. She became comfortable with her nudity.

"He was positioned above a lawyer, of all things... and that guy was above a school teacher!!"

"Did the scheme get busted!?" Lora inquired.

"Not until three months had passed!! We got our money 'cause the level broke off below us that needed to be filled... and..." She saw amazement on Lora's face

“*A LAWYER UNDER A GAS ATTENDANT!?*” Lora yelled. “What were you ON?! Drugs!! That’s why the Republican Party folded!! Shit like that!! And you have to kiss ass of some cocksucker ‘cause he was initiated first!!”

“*Bitch!!*” Rhonda said. “Don’t make fun of *REPUBLICANS!!*”

“They rape women more than Democrats, you know?!” Lora cajoled. “They’re more secretive about it, though!!”

“*You don’t know shit!!*” Rhonda hollered. “What are we talkin’ ‘bout politics for, any way?!”

“Well... You were a cheetah... and I was a *BEAR!!*” Lora said. “I’m tryin’ to normalize my mind!!”

“*Fine!!* Go get date raped in that bar over there!!” Rhonda pounded from her lungs. “We can find some clothes... *and do somethin’ else!!*”

“*Yeah!!* Clothes!! We need to avoid the bar ‘til we find... *clothes!!*”

\* \* \*

It took three hours for Lora and Rhonda to master the ability to hue their transformation. Part lady, part cheetah in Rhonda’s case; part lady, part bear in Lora’s. They arrived to *Meld’s* tavern without much thought. “*This should be interestin’*” Rhonda said to Lora as they entered.

Nothing could be further from the truth. They entered to find Ira Best with the head from *Juliet of Spitzer*. He was sulking in a corner. He was also partly transformed. “We are in the *COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS!!*” he yelled to the ladies. “Carl Jung!! We are at the whim of the *BELLLLLL!!* I know it now!!”

“You buy that concept!?” Rhonda demanded of Ira. “*That sounds stupid!!*”

“It’s the only thing that can explain it!” Ira Best yelled. “*Society!!* What they want... *is happenin’!!*”

“*So we’re not in a dream of God!!*” Rhonda demanded. She played with her whiskers. “All of a sudden... *SOCIETY* has a collective dream which we are in!!”

“*Yeah!!*” Ira Best said. “Juliet told me... *right before I gnawed at her neck!!*”

“So a thirteen-year-old is on some playground!! And they’re imaginin’ what Juliet goes through!! And the kid just watched a warewolf movie!! And he got on the internet and told the whole world that...” Lora couldn’t complete her sentence. Ira raised *Juliet’s* head and she was stunned into silence.

“*You don’t know!!*” the head said.

“It speaks!!” Ira Best said. “I talked to me all the way over here!!”

“Video games, asshole!!” Lora said. “Some kid—*some influencial kid*—has stopped playin’ *CIVILIZATION*... and has popped in *Guild Wars!!*”

“We are in her *BRAIN!!*” Rhonda said. She looked at Ira. “I know you in real life!! You’re that



jackpot winner that left his wife after..."

"*I DON'T BUY IT!!*" Ira Best yelled. "We have the chance of a lifetime!! Concentrate on blowin' up that wall!!" The wall exploded after Rhonda looked at it. "*Lora!! The drinks!!*" They floated toward the trio. "We are in her brain—*that's what we'll go with*—but we can live out our fantasies... until she snaps out of her trance!!"

"Or his!! Until the kid has to be picked up for soccer practice?!" Lora asked.

"*Until she or he... plays the Electronic Arts Games FIFA... version of it!!*" Ira Best inserted hysterically.

"And you think you're in REM right now!! Deep sleep!!" Rhonda asked.

"*Why not!! It's happened to me before!!*" Ira Best stated.

"*Don't count your chickens!!*" The bartender surprised the group. "We could be here for hundreds of years!! You get to work as a mayor!!"

"It makes sense that we are in another's dream... but why can't I remain in magic?!" Rhonda asked.

"The rules are governed by THE *UNIVERSE!!*" the bartender said. "These potions you call 'cocktails' have been around *LONG* before me!!"

"*Yeah!! Spirits!!*" Lora said. "I remember now!!"

"*Don't puss out, CRAZY FUCK!!*" Ira Best yelled at the bartender. "Give us more!!"

"I will travel with you to defeat the *EVIL...* if that's what it takes!! But... I... was where you are!! You'll be tellin' these tales to drunken kids, *someday!!*" The bartender cleaned a glass then turned away.

"*He's an asshole!!*" Lora said. "Let's go!!"

"Go on your own, whore!! I have unfinished business!!" Ira Best scampered off.

## BUILD

\* \* \*

*Twisty of Otis* stood alone in deep night. He was in the towne square of the municipality he had founded. He did not feel like a mayor. Voices spoke to him on the wind. He could not see people. *The change has happened... again!!* he heard. Sounded like Ira Best. *Go back to Los Angeles... if you can!!* Sounded like Corvette Jones. *Meow!!!* He heard Rhonda. The wind whistled. It bolted him back a few feet. Sand whisked into his mouth. *The worst is yet to come!!* Roar. A roar. Sounded like Lora.

In the Old World, Christine Devine interviewed Susan Hirasuna and Liz Habib. They had traveled to the *oasis* where Twisty Combs had last been seen with Corvette Jones. They could not be believed. *Magic in the air.* Wind. A lot of wind. Ira Best... appeared in a Los Angeles alley. He was furry. The *Moon* shone above his head. He knew it would have to be soon. His wife. He would have to find his wife. As a beast, he could know if she had cheated on him. As a warewolf, he could kill her lover... *if she had one.* As a man... he could win again. *If he knew the truth.*

Ira scampered into the Mullholland hills. If luck would have it, he could be a nightcrawler until dawn. If the power of the city was strong enough, he would be a man in only moments... *naked on a Los Angeles street.* The cops would be close by. If his luck was nil, he would be in a jail in hours.

Christine Devine sent Liz Habib to check on a story regarding the battery of an obscure producer. She would travel to where Ira Best's childhood sweetheart lived—*the one he tried to leave behind.* Susan Hirasuna was relieved for the night. Christine Devine could hardly believe that... "*CHANGES*"... were taking place of the supernatural variety. Fox news reporters were a little different than the rest in the city. They were younger. They were more aggressive... *and they were open to more bizarre stories.*

Ira made his way through the city streets. Once in a while, he would climb a roof and travel on the top of city structures. He was swift. He was mobile. Liz Habib made her way to the same neighborhood as Ira Best in a *Fox* news van. Victoria Best spoke to Debbie Chatsworth on the phone. She wore a

nightgown. Her conversation regarded a DVD she had received—a *peculiar one*. Ira Best was vaguely cognizant that time folded. He had been in this situation as a regular man. He went into a nothingness where zilch made sense. He regained a human's logic but was tainted by the adrenalin of a monster. He approached his wife's place. High above the valley.

Fox had a way of treating their reporters. *Rotation*. Liz Habib had been an anchor on occasion. She reported sports. She reported at political events. Now, she was going to cover the antics of a deluded producer... *except that she saw Ira Best as an animal*. Her cameraman was preparing his equipment when Ira rushed to her. "You!!" Ira said to her. "This is my wife's place!!"

"The news is of a Hollywood producer!!" Liz said to him.

"Lies!!" Ira screamed. He howled into the *MOON*... partly because it felt good... and enough of his humor remained to screw with her head. "My wife is in that building!! Across from you!! Find her!!" Ira raised his arms into the air. He stood seven feet tall in transformation, and his arms stretched twelve feet toward the heavens. "I will rip her... if she's with..."

"You don't scare ME!!" Liz Habib said. She watched the spell end. Ira turned into a man. Birthday suit. Nothing more. "Get some clothes on!!"

Ira ran to his wife's side entrance. If all went well, he would be undetected. Vicky Best was in the restroom when Ira broke into the kitchen entrance. He crawled into the bed which Vicky had covered with throw pillows. He hoped it would work. He willed himself back to *LA* but he did not know which stage of his relationship with Vicky he had as she entered the room. "Where have you been?!" she supplicated.

"A dream, lady!! Cyborgs!! Mitch Donoho!! Have you been speakin' to a queer arms dealer by the name of *DONOH*?!" Ira licked his lips as if he had cotton mouth.

"Vegas!!" Vicky cried. "You took off to VEGAS!!"

"My credit cards did not work!!" Ira pled. "Did I enroll in the space program?!"

"You haven't been smokin' pot, again?!" Vicky demanded. "The winnings!!"

"I know!!" Ira Best said. "Jackpot!! Long story!!"

"But we have no money!!" Vicky said. "The BANKS!!"

"If you leave me alone... I can figure it out!!" Ira Best said. He watched her walk away.

Victoria Best brushed her teeth in the other room. Nervousness. Calmness. Sea of emotions. Acceptance. Confusion. Bitter memories. *Loss*. Compromise. Apathy. Hope. She entered the bedroom. Ira was curled over, *still nude*. Victoria climbed in. Warmth. Power. Apprehension.

\* \* \*

*Twisty of Otis* stood in his towne square. He could see Ira in his mind. A warewolf across the fauna. He looked for Rhonda Carrier and *Lora of the Desert* but saw wild animals near a lake instead. He ran into the forest.

“*Babe...* Do you believe that we can avert divorce!?” Ira asked Vicky in the morning when they woke up. “If we believe hard enough... *do you believe we have a chance!?*”

“We have financial difficulties!?” Vicky said. “And your *GAMBLIN’!*”

“If we will cyborgs into this world... *do you believe we can have robots workin’ for us!?*”

“Sounds strange, but yeah!?” Vicky went to retrieve a strange DVD given to her by Debbie Chatsworth. “Don Burlson has taken over for you at the office!?” She looked at the disc. “I was goin’ to give ‘im this if you didn’t return!?”

“*Don!! Yeah!! I know how that turns out!! Robots in the street shootin’ each other!?*”

“*What!?*”

“Jude Harker!! He winds up in jail!! Thinks I did it!! Nothin’, babe!?” He took the disc from Vicky’s hands. “Just contemplatin’ how things would be if...”

“*I want you to know... that it’s strange in places!?*” Her eyes looked glossy as if she was close to tears. “Our rental!! I wound up HERE!! I can’t stand downtown!?”

“*The race relations?! I know what’s goin’ on!! In the desert!! An oasis!! Peculiar thoughts!! Realizations!! An affair!! Regret, yeah... but I know why... I know WHAT is goin’ ON!?*”

“Your thoughts are jumbled, *honey!?*” Vicky said. She held Ira’s arm.

“I stepped in their shoes!?” Ira Best said. “I know the... *FEELIN’...* that they have!?”

“*You... mean...?!*”

“Proposition 187... 209... 227!! I can’t remember!! *Time-space!! Continuum!! Mass deportations!! Immigrants!! But they were here first!?*” He walked over to a picture on the wall. “*Lupita!?*” He looked at a photo of their housekeeper. “Lupita... *told me!! The Mexicans were here first!! Mass deportations!! Us!?*” He looked to Vicky. “*US!?*”

“*CRAZY!! You talk so crazy sometimes!! You don’t explain yourself!?*” Vicky soothed his arm.

“*We can stop it!?*” Ira Best said.

*We have to push them to the border!! The Old Mexican BORDER!!* Vicky thought. Ira ran a business. She hid her thoughts from him. His pride took over sometimes. “You can’t bite off more than you can chew!?”

“I met people... *far away!?*” He looked at the TV. “When that thing is on... *you can see Jeff Michael scared...* on the Fox news!?” He looked around the place. “There are no more white people left!?”

“You wanted it this way!! Cut throat *REPUBLICANS*, you remember?! Cheaper labor!?”

“But Carlos Amezcua is a *fag boy*, I come to find out!! Was John Beard that much worse?! One by one, we’re replaced!! Subtle death!! The worst kind!! Jeff Michael is a sorry excuse for a fill in!?” He turned toward the gaping glass window. “The *jacuzzi!!* We pay for that fuckin’ thing!?” He shook his head. “*Three years since I had a good time in there!?*” He turned back toward Vicky. “Body snatchers!! More than just a movie!?” He gave the disc back to Vicky. “I’m a victim of my own industry!?”

“*I know!!* Gray Davis was in this video—*strange video*—and it’s sexual, no different than

Clinton!! You'll be hung by your own mechanism!!" It was not a threat—a *warning*. "Go to Don and straighten things out!!"

"We ought to take off!! I have gold bars!!" He grabbed Vicky's arms. "*Magic!!*" he said. "There is still *MAGIC* out there!!"

"The world has collapsed upon itself, Ira!!" Vicky said. "Brad Pitt can't outrun the press... *and he's rich!!*"

"No!!" Ira said. "If we *BELIEVE!!*"

"Yes!! Just like in the beginnin'!!" She dropped the DVD disc onto her nightstand. "*Wish that I had another... stab at the undercover...*" Vicky sang. "Remember?!"

"Yes!!" Ira said. "But they forget!!"

*Twisty of Otis*, guided by instinct, found Rhonda and Lora. They were changed into beasts. *Twisty of Otis* had enough of his alternate reality. He was ready to find home. He went into the forest to seek New York. In the distance, it was there. If he was lucky, it would not be a mirage.

\* \* \*

"Twisty Combs and Corvette Jones are fine people!!" Rhonda Carrier said to *Lora of the Desert*. "I had other people come in for their jobs—*stagehands*, they were, and they knew about cameras, mikes, and lighting—and they were *fanatical!!* 'I know how to make Keanu Reeves *SCREAM!!*' one said. The goof had tried to get work with that *TMZ* show which hounds celebrities everywhere!! 'I tell 'im that I whack it to 'im... *every time 'e comes out o' his penthouse!!*' And the guy had no more that Handycam experience!! He knew nothin' 'bout shadows on people's faces!! Couldn't tell electronic hiss from wind in the background!! Didn't know 'bout croppin'... an' the guy was a *GOOF!!*"

"So Twisty and Corvette became kings out here for havin' an edge in the Old World!!" Lora said. She still had bear hair outside of her face. She admired Rhonda's black spots over her golden fur.

"But it goes beyond that!! 'Exacerbation'!! It became our mantra before we set out!! The imbicile kid who couldn't get work over Vette and Twisty... *went lookin' for celebrities!!* Bad situation was that 'e didn't know a fraction of show business needed to *REMAIN!!* Worse situation was that 'e threatened *ME!!* 'I'm goin' to find George Clooney... *an' I'll spit on 'im if it's what it takes!!* To get my shot!!" The kid figured 'e'd provoke a star, film the reaction, then make bank by sellin' it to one of the sites which feature high-profiled personalities on the *WORLD WIDE WEB!!* But that's not how to *STAY IN PHOTOGRAPHY!!*"

"You don't know that!!" Lora said. "You're older than me... an' you were raised with TV!! I had computers my whole life!!" She howled at an oversized eagle in the sky. Wing span must have been thirty feet across. "They treat you like shit, *you know?! You can't look at them on the set!!*" She growled at bees approaching—*large ones*. "You're ordered, *as an extra*, to not make eye contact with a-list people!!"

“So you think these guys are doin’ it for revenge!?” Rhonda paraphrased.

“No!! They play video games—*too many o’ them*—and they’re not acclimated to humanness!! They believe it’s okay!! Church is gone!! All is in their brain!!”

“I don’t think it’s that far!!” Rhonda said. “Competition!! Industry left our world!! Selling images!! That became more important than widgets!! An’ the guy that came in... *He didn’t have experience... which was okay if we needed people!!* If we were short, we could *TRAIN* ‘im!! But cordiality!! Even if he could run the machines!! He had no couth or etiquette!!”

“And that’s why we’re in the forest!! ‘Cause you found people strong enough to film aligators... *but gentle enough to let beautiful screen actresses walk by?!*”

“Exacerbation, keep in mind, is what that other guy span into!! A rift!! A gulf!! Tailspinnin’ into nothin’ as quick as Twisty was on his way to *BROADWAY!*!! Civility turned into rogue mentality!! Then jail?! Who runs the show from underneath!?”

“The strata broke!! That’s the best way I could say it!! Eddie Vedder sang that there wasn’t goin’ to be a middle any more in ‘*PORCH*’!! The rich have always been enchanted!! The poor have periodically been barbaric!! The middle class allowed an *EVEN FLOW*, if you will, between their world and ours!!”

“You’re not that rich, are you?!” Rhonda asked Lora. “You don’t look...”

“*Porn!!* I made money in porn... *and on paper, I was rich!!*”

“So if the middle class suffered a ‘final blow’ while we traveled to Los Angeles... *for the interview with Ira Best...* the rich could have casted spells... which removed the middle people from equations across the board!!”

“It’s happened before!! Stock market crashes effect widespread populations... *but the ultra rich are unharmed most the time!!*”

“You think I’m on opium right now?!”

“No!!” Lora produced sparkley stardust from her palm. “We are *ENCHANTED*, again!!”

\* \* \*

It took six days for *Twisty of Otis* to reach the outer rim of New York’s influence. On the map, it seemed that it should take merely a couple of days... but the city slinked back every time he approached. *Further in the distance.* Sliding to a different area.

A man wielding a halberd stood at attention on the side of a dirt road which would seem to allow entrance into the city. He wore chainmailed armor, and a silver helmet which protected his nose with a drooping shiny thin plank. His head was not *Trojan* in appearance, but rather donned a circular brush from the top.

Rhonda Carrier had written a thesis paper dubbed *The Noah Syndrom* while studying journalism. She told Twisty and Vette about it during their trip to Florida. *You are lucky!! You made the boat!!* she had

said. *There will be many screamin' to be let inside!!* Twisty of Otis thought about Rhonda's words as he headed toward the guard. "Sir!! I beg entry into the city of my upbringing!!!"

"*You are too late!!*" the man bowed before Twisty. "A spectacle!! A phantasm!! The city has a personality... *an' spits people out!!* At times, I travel into her... *and no one is there!!* Horses on certain days!! Chariots without beasts of burden... *at other times!!*"

"I want to chance it... *if you can tell me the secret!!*" Twisty looked into the city. No cars. "Will it disappear if I..."

*New York was gone.*

"You willed it to be there!! A bad date, my friend!!" The soldier relieved himself and began down the road. Twisty had no idea where he was traveling to.

"Insecure!! Motherfucker!!" Twisty could not believe his eyes. "What city can I travel to?!" he yelled to the guard as he walked away. "*Detroit?! Is that gone for good?*"

"No!!" The man turned around. "Eighty days to the southwest!!"

"*Fuck this SHIT!!*" Twisty said. He headed north. Los Angeles was there, somewhere.

\* \* \*

Twisty passed *Chicago* without stopping or trying to enter the city. In this crazy land, he wouldn't have been surprised to meet *Kelly Bundy*. He kept north to Los Angeles. If his map was correct, he would be there in no time. He thought about other ways to travel. *Portals*. There could be a way to find a special tree with an entrance to a far-off setting. When he was younger, his father had given him an Atari set. He told Twisty that it was a gift and it would be worth a lot in the future as an antique. *Pitfall!!* was one of the games. A jungle traveler could find an underground passage to a different terrain. Crocodiles. Vines. *Gold bars in the middle of nowhere*. Nintendo had a game in which Mario jumped into pipes. Once again, *portal travel*.

No portals made their way known no matter how hard Twisty searched or concentrated.

Twisty arrived to Los Angeles without becoming tired. No gas in his viens. No pain in the muscles. Wishes. A lot of wishes. *Get me back to poolside at the Comfort Inn. I don't care if Vette is givin' me CPR an' I've drowned from too many daquiris!! Get me back to Los Angeles... so I can...*

Los Angeles disappeared.

Twisty was now wandering alone without hope. He thought of *Mad TV* skits. Bizarre. Out of the mind. If he could become delirious enough to forget his surroundings, he could *zap* into a different place. Maybe on the set of *Friends*. Maybe he was already in the mind of a director. *Chicago* was filmed in Canada, of all places. Academy awards. Saved money to build a set elsewhere. Someone *willed* it to happen. The *Steelers* had won a Superbowl recently with a young chap at *QB*. Started off his career with amazing numbers. Slavery had ended in the *SOUTH* with a proclamation. Words mattered. The correct

*chant* might stumble upon a spell. Japan had risen out of the ashes to beat *US* auto makers in auto sales. The *Fox* news channel in Los Angeles, before *Twisty* had left to the Old World, featured hardly any caucasian acnhors. Things changed in the world with hardly any warning. New York was taken to its knees after terrorists' attacks. Unforeseen events. Mind-altering occasions. Nancy O' Dell had to be *Polynesian*... but her name was Irish. Some things defied convention. Canada was larger than the United States but held one tenth the number of people. Some places, people don't want to go to. *Batman* was successful with Michael Keaton... but casting agents insisted on changing the star in nearly each installment. Shows like *Jackass* and *The Real World* made idiots into heroes... and shows like *Montel* and *Jenny Jones* made celebrated people into buffoons. Things changed quickly, and it was hard to know where anyone would wind up pertaining to status. *Costco* sold in bulk to the masses, gave out tiny treats to customers... but was criticized for fostering cult mentality. *Twisty* thought of a hundred ironies. None of them made sense on the surface, but if he could speculate on the right one, he could be out of the forest and back on the set with *Mike and Juliet*.

He traveled to a stream. *Arthur*. King Arthur had met a lady under the water. He could find a diety whom could give him guidance.

*Twisty* looked for hours. He prayed, pouted, and pounded trees. *Nothing*. He slept in the wilderness.

\* \* \*

"*Okay!! Here's the trick!!*" Lora said to Rhonda. They walked upright along a path to *Otis*. They still had outward fur, but walked as humans. "You come on to *Twisty* when we get back!! You sleep with a guard in front o' him on the streets!! It'll drive 'im insane!!" She put her arm on Rhonda as they moved along. "I've done it to *plenty* of guys!! You meet 'em in bars, invite 'em to the set of a *porn shoot*... then wind up screwin' an enemy o' theirs in front of them!!"

"*Boogie Nights!!*" Rhonda said. "I watched that in..."

"*AGE OLD!!*" Lora said. "If you're lucky, you'll get 'em to sign 'homosexual waivers' before invitin' 'em!! They wind up on the floor with another man!!" She laughed. "Insult to *INJURY!!* EXACERBATION!! To use your word, the *ULTIMATE* in makin' a bad situation... *worse!!*"

"*Okay!! They hit on you in a bar, threaten you with nuisance-like behavior... then YA' RAPE 'EM!!*" Rhonda asked. "For all practical reasons, you're seducin' *EM TO RAPE!!*"

"It's the only way, *Rhonda!!* An insane man will do a lot more than someone waitin' for someone else to show 'im the *answers!!*" She stopped and looked at Rhonda. "*Twisy needs to be blasted out of his norm to get things done!!*"

"We can't stay 'ere forever!! But isn't there a gamble?!! What if the guy *stalks?!!*"

"We have that covered!! A guild!! Many people makin' sure... *it doesn't happen!!*"



“*Okay!!* But what if I become a slut!?” Rhonda asked. “I’m *not* that easy!!”

“What if we stay here forever?! What if we have to eat grains with worms crawlin’ through ‘em!? What if the rain soaks through our hay roofs... *an’ we can’t repair ‘em in time for a hurricane?!*”

“Alright!! I’ll do what it takes!!”

By chance, Twisty woke in his mayor’s quarters. He was woken by the two women whom looked animalistic. He said, “I have a plan!! I know it’s goin’ to *WORK!!*”

\* \* \*

“I dozed off near a stream far away!! I could see my body from above, like a *near-death* experience!! An’ I said to my body... *‘prepare a new place... but not in HEAVEN’!!* I traveled to Los Angeles an’ saw Ira Best with his wife!! I came to *Otis*— right here, as a matter of fact!!—and I said to the bed, *‘RECEIVE THE BODY FROM TWISTY OF OTIS!!’* Cooperation!! I watched it in *Phenomenon*... an’ I gave it a chance!! The bed rattled, and like the *Star Trek* episodes, I could see my body comin’ into bein’!! Right here!! And I jumped in!!” He looked at confusion on the couple of beasts’ faces. “And that’s when you walked in!!”

“*So if we ate poison berries*—enough to get us to sleep... but not so much to die from *permanently!!*—we could travel back to our Old World!!” Rhonda Carrier mused.

“Yes!! But we have to do it together... *if we want to be together on the OTHER SIDE!!*” Twisty exclaimed. He pounded his fisted hand to his palm.

“Rhonda was goin’ to seduce you then have a guard *RAPE* you!!” Lora said to Twisty. “I think this is the better idea!!”

“I was not goin’ to *rape* him, Lora!!” Rhonda said. “I was goin’ to seduce ‘im into lovin’ me... *then sleep with a bitter enemy in front of ‘im!!* In order to drive ‘im insane enough to think o’ creative answers for us!!” She snickered. “I’ll still *seduce* you!!” Rhonda ran her fingers through Twisty’s hair.

“*No thanks!!*” Twisty backed away. “Let’s get home *FIRST!!*”

“They say I’m personable!!” Rhonda Carrier said. “You did not hit on me *once*... this whole time!!” Rhonda noted to Twisty. “I’m *proud* of you!!”

The trio set off into dense vegetation. They ate berries forbidden to the children. They were in *LA* an hour after selecting their method of transport.

\* \* \*

Jude Harker found himself sitting in an *Applebee’s* in Los Angeles. Ira Best was next to him. They drank domestic beers from frosty glasses. “The calendars still say it’s *2008*,” Jude reported. “I talked

to Susan Hirasuna from *FOX* local news!! She said she vaguely remembered goin' to the desert—the *oasis*—and reportin' on Corvette and Twisty!!” He looked at a dampened cocktail napkin in front of him. “Everything’s the same out here but the races!! Jane Yamamoto came in to interview me!!” He looked to Ira after taking another drink. “I told her I understood *CHINA*... an’ I knew why the Tibetan protests did not go as planned!!” He looked up at the banners. “The OLYMPICS will be aroun’... an’ I think they are heavy in their *ASIAN* portrayals of everythin’... but why did Tricia Takasugi come in next to tell me that... *I didn’t have enough information?!*”

“When you came in, Twisty and Corvette were with you!!” Ira Best said. “Susan remembered them... *and thought she had a story!?*”

“*She’s in denial?!* Because on the streets, word is that they run their own time frames!! CBS is locked in the sixties!! NBC has nothin’ but *EIGHTIES* stuff... from when they were the best network!! ABC?! A lot of seventies vibe!!” He looked up to the television monitor. *ESPN* was featuring billiards players. “And *FOX* is the only one that seems to have integrated beyond... *what the hippies* said would happen!!”

“*In the future?!* McLuhan!! Global village!!” Ira drank. “Microchasm of all that’s out there!!” He ordered a dark beer then continued, “I got back together with my wife!! I talked to a girl—*Christina Aguilera* is what she called ‘erself... but I think she was a look-alike—and she claimed to be from ‘*THE FUTURE*’!! The distant future... and Elvis Presley was her buddy!! I was from ‘*THE PAST*’... an’ my company started robotic wars which changed the human race!!” He shook his head. “*LA!?*” He pounded his fist on the bar. “Hollyweird looms in ALL directions!!”

“*You’re in denial, aren’t you!?*” Jude asked. “You don’t believe *WE WERE THERE!?*”

“I’ve smoked some pot in the past... an’ I know about laced *stuff!?* Dran-O!! That kind of thin’!!”

“You think... *we were hallucinatin’ together!?*”

“I’m in *DENIAL!?* I’ll admit that much!!” Ira looked Jude in the face. “Until I need to tell my wife that I was a *warewolf*, I need to stick with the story!!”

“There was this kid on the news—*NOT FOX*—whom I was talkin’ ‘bout before you came in!! Some guy said ‘e was a BF Goodrich salesman!! ‘Jay’ was ‘is name!! Sold to *Discount Tires*, and the like!! The kid on TV ‘e was tellin’ me about!! Murder accusation!!”

“*The eye of the storm closes!?*” Ira noted.

“Yeah!! And pressure from all angles!! But desparate people are different!!” He looked out the window and witnessed what seemed to be a lunch rush forming. Three vehicles hurrying into the parking lot. “And the kid looked like ‘e was on *DRUGS!?* ‘Wigger’ is what Jay called him!! Shotty eyes!! Unfocused!!”

“*But...?!*” Ira asked.

“The kid had been given a scholarship to a decent school—*common story*—and wound up killin’ the baby of a new wife!! That was the accusation!!”

"*I get it!!*" Ira said.

"The 'wigger eyes'!! We had them!! When we were on the '*OTHER SIDE*'... we weren't sure of what was goin' on!! Wild eyes!! You fucked my life!! You won a jackpot... and could've helped me!!"

"*You could've given me a ride to the airport and bit it on a dollar!!*"

"But this is what we go through!! The Superbowl's over, trainin' camp is forgotten, *two-a-days* a thing of the past... and we have to integrate... *INTO THIS FUCKIN' WORLD!!*" Jude screamed.

"And you think that it's that easy for *ME?!?*" Ira demanded.

"*That wigger kid* that Jay talked about... He had what I have!! But he was bein' led on 'is way to prison!! A lost world in the *MIND!!* Somethin' that relates only to the *SELF!!* A story no one else woul' believe!!"

"So that's why you got a hold of me... *AGAIN?!?*" Ira gulped his drink. "We know the jackpot schism!! And we know how to handle *ludicrous* surroundings!!"

"There are times that I'm around this area... *and I think I'm a producer!!* I think I got caught up in a script!! Seven days since I was in *Meld* lookin' for you!! And I think they desensitized me!! Decompression, *if you will!!* And I think they hypnotized me... *into believin' that this is reality...* but the truth is... that I'll be on the set of a *Greek* movie in a couple of weeks filmin' the gods of Olympus... and so forth!!"

"Yeah?!" Ira asked.

"And I wound up in West Hollywood after walkin' aroun' the towne... and there are these *crazy* guys on the corner of Santa Monica decked out in ladies' dresses and all... and I started wonderin' 'bout *personal realities!!* What does it take to get that far?!" He pulled out money from his pocket to pay for the tab. "I thought that they must've been dropped off as a *joke!!* I'm burly!! I'm a cab driver grapplin' with thinkin' that I was a *producer...* an' you paid for it!! I'm figurin' that these guys were let off... *as a joke!!*"

"And you can't figure out what reality is... *even when we're away from Meld, Flux, and Otis!!*" Ira pulled out a couple of ones. "I'll get the tip!!"

"*Yeah!!* I said I'd treat you to a couple of beers... *'cause I want to make up for bein' cheap in VEGAS...* but I have to know you... for a couple of years!!"

"You ought to be a poet!! Beers an' years!! You just rhymed!!"

"I have to know what Twisty's goin' through!! All of us are back on 'this side' now!!"

"I'm scared, *Jude!!*" Ira's eye's looked at a stinciled mirror advertising a lager. "I'll admit that I don't like you... *even now...* but you have a good idea!! For the sake of sanity... we need to keep in touch."

\* \* \*

"How can we tell what really *happened?!?*" Vette asked Twisty. They sat in Corvette's New York apartment. "*Rhonda* is fine... Lora took off back to Victorville... an' I talked to Ira ten minutes before on

the *cell phone!*!”

“Jude Harker make the renzevvous with ‘im?!” Twisty ate a club sandwich.

“Rhonda is goin’ to talk to *Juliet Hardy* about EXCERBATION!” Corvette wiped his forehead. *Sweat*. A lot of sweat. “We have footage... *that’ll take!*!”

“But it’s like the Twin Towers!” Twisty said. “Some stuff ought to be left behind!”

“We have to reintegrate!! Even Ira Best said so!” He grabbed Twisty’s sandwich, ripped it in half, ate from his piece, then handed the rest to Twisty. “Julie Liquet was his mistress in *Wyoming*... and Rhonda spoke to her with a couple of new interns that were hired... *while we were gone!!* An’ it’s like the TWIGHLIGHT ZONE, *man!!* I can believe the Meld stories that we go over... *but I can’t believe we were replaced for defied orders!*!”

“You make it sound like we were fired!”

“They panicked when we were in *LA*... an’ to the best of my knowledge, they don’t know we took an ‘alternate route’!”

“The city kept disappearin’... an’ a *mage* came from the sky!! ‘Look to the clouds!’ he said. And within forty-five minuets, *Rhonda found the tree!*!”

“I walked into that thing,” Corvette said, “and I thought it would be the same!! Magic was wearin’ out!”

“But here we are!! Universe!! The universe decided to put us in my *closet!*!”

“And I’m waitin’ to wake up—I’ll admit that much—but after the fall of the buildings... *I’ve come to believe anything!*!”

“We willed those buildings into existence!” Twisty Combs walked to the open window. “Someone willed that a few should be gone!! *Fight Club!!* Not the only movie!! Art as a reflection of life!” He pointed outward. “Someone hated those buildings!! Bein’ trapped by invisible cameras!! Yellin’ from people ya’ hardly know!! Ants!! We were treated like ANTS!”

“But equilibrium, *my friend!*!” Corvette walked next to Twisty. He admired the scanty view. “Those are the *pride* of the world... when we must believe we’re civilized!”

“I don’t know!” Twisty said. “I have to go back to work... *and you know we were somewhere else besides New York!!* But I look at the faces!! They act like... *it’s all the same!*!”

“Maybe they *believe* it’s all the same!”

“Denial!” Twisty shouted. “He was in denial!! Ira Best spoke to you like we did the interview at the *Comfort Inn*... and nothin’ more!”

“*Yeah*, my friend!” Vette said. “Barbara Streisand!! Though a goofy, whacked-out beaknose, she had a point!! ‘*What’s too painful to remember... we simply choose to forget!*!’”

“You’re a sluff!” Twisty retorted. “I had a good time in *Meld*... and I had a great time in *OTIS!*!”

“My friend... You have to understand jealousy, envy, rage, regret, and disbelief!” He looked down to pedestrians. “They don’t want to hear that you were mayor of an alternate city... *somewhere*

else!!”

“So say we played *Dungeons and Dragons*... and it’s a joke?!”

“We’ll get picked off!!” Corvette said.

“That’s fine, *Vette*!! But I have to know YOU BELIEVE... we were there!! If we are goin’ to work on the set, I have to know you *remember*... what we went through!!”

Corvette changed the subject. “Jerry Liquet!! That guy’s worth talkin’ to!! The *EXACERBATION* piece’ll do fine... if we include his testimony of Jude Harker!! Our jobs are secure!!”

“I feel it!!” Twisty said.

\* \* \*

“What if nuclear war does not end our *WORLD*?!” Jude Harker asked Ira Best. “What if we wind up back around Meld?!”

“I came here to get over it all!!” Ira Best sipped a coconut cocktail poolside at the same *Comfort Inn* where Rhonda had interviewed him before all the zaniness kicked in.

“You said that Mitch Donoho and Don Burlson were workin’ on plans to destroy civilians of Los Angeles!! They contracted with Japanese... *when you arrived again*!!”

“*Yeah*!! I laid out those plans!! Landfills!! Mass graves!! But you have to understand that you have to have a plan—*back up plans*—if you’re goin’ to run a successful business!! Numbskull workers have to believe that their work runs deeper than what ya’ tell ‘em!! Projection of confidence!!”

“And your wife had a dream of you goin’ into outer space... *an’ a cyborg war*!!” Jude scratched at his skin. He wished he had bought suntan oil before meeting up with Ira. He never had problems in the Nevada desert but felt chapped under the Los Angeles sky.

“Vicky Best!! *Yeah*!! I’m glad we didn’t get divorced!!”

“Deluded, you guys were!!” Jude said. “I think you started the prodedings to stay married to ‘er!! Same as the Hollywood couples you document with video!!”

“You could say that!! It’s hard to escape perceptions!! But I figured that we’d come back ‘ere to tie loose ends!! They say to keep your friends close... *an’ your enemies closer*!! But I never bought into it!! In LA, ya’ send ‘im into tailspins!! That’s why I sent Mitch and Don to Wyoming instead of firin’ ‘em!! You can replace *Mitch* if ya’ really want!!”

“We need to stay together ‘cause of the *common experience*!! But if nuclear war happens, we’d wind up in Otis debatin’ the issues of the *OTHER WORLD* we came from!!”

“Theodor Herzl said that if you will it, it is no dream!! Calvin believed everythin’ was predetermined by... *GOD*!! ‘The will to do, the soul to dare’!! Walter Scott. Ira Best drank his cocktail. He waved to a passing lady.

“So *Kim Jong Il* is out there with nukes... an’ I’m not afraid!! Fade to *BLACK*?! Not anymore!!

I'll be with ya' aroun' Meld, I'm pretty sure!/"

"Don't count on it!! Universe!! Everythin' is controlled by factors we have no grasp of!! Worm holes!! If the will is greater that we move on beyond one another, it will happen!! Rhonda called me from New York!! All's well!! An' she talked to my *ex*, Julie Liquett!! I just wanted an affair!! An' Macaulay Culkin was in that place!/" Ira turned around and pointed to the hotel. "He was playin' a video game!/" Ira Best shook his head. "Rhonda said that's what 'er sources gave 'er!! Runnin' from the press... *in there before all heck broke loose*... an' playin' on 'is laptop computer!/"

"You think 'e willed us... *to the oasis*!?" Jude Harker lowered his sunglasses to get a better read on Ira's face.

"I think it's more than that!! Their generation... *THEY HAVE PLANS*!! They grew up with Russian friends... *on internet*... an' they had Iranian pals!! They play us in simulations... an' I believe I can *feel* it sometimes!/"

"More than what we experienced?/" Jude Harker poked Ira in the side.

"I'm talkin' 'bout *before* it all happened!! Why I went to Vegas to begin with!! I piss off a kid on the street... an' I come home to my wife readin' an email from someone I don't know!! Me superimposed with *Elizabeth Shue*!! That kind of thing!/"

"I think the *UNIVERSE*, if it has a will... chose us to leave the mundane for a while!! I don't fear the nuclear war, like I said!! I fear Meld!/" He rubbed his belly. "I know I'll end up there!/"

\* \* \*

Twisty Combs and Corvette Jones walked along a semi-crowded sidewalk on the way to work. "Urban legends" became the topic as they dressed and re-engaged in regular social activities. Twisty asked, "When you were admitted to *Julliard*, what did it feel like?! You thought you were goin' straight to BROADWAY, *right*!/"

"Don't ask!/" Corvette said. "I wound up at community college!! Lack of funds!/"

"But you don't forget the stories!/" Twisty looked to the apartment tops. "I always wondered where *Spider-man* was attaching 'is webs!! Bottoms of helicopters? Julliard has a better story!! Street dancers!/"

"*Yeah*!/" Corvette shook his head. "Dejected!! I got crammed with shit I didn't need!/"

"*Family emergency*!/" Twisty asked.

"Yes!! I told you a while back!! Your trip with the Catholics was similar!! Family tellin' me to *dance*... and I had my uncle dyin'!/"

"*Couldn't concentrate*!/" Twisty waved at a gruffy man passing them.

"I get these feelings that the whole city is *WIRED*!/" Corvette looked around. "Sometimes, it feels like a hydra!! No brain!! Just action!/"

“And we’re back!?” Twisty yelled into the heavens. “No leaders!?”

“Juliet’ll cuss us out... *if that’s what she’s prone to doin’!*?”

“*Rhonda* prepared a good piece!?”

The duo got back to work. They watched video. “*Exacerbation*” went well—almost too well—and Rhonda managed to get a hold of Jerry Liquet’s family members. Rhonda Carrier showed how things change *five degrees away* from an incident. She showed Ira Best at poolside before their grandé adventure. She showed Jude Harker mulling over “what could’ve been” if he had given Ira a ride for twenty dollars worth of chips. She showed Julie Liquet, her father... *and some of their family members*. They had felt guilty about not allowing Jude to purchase a limosine in spite of having credit worthy of a financing. Their policy changed to one of flexibility... and they wound up thriving due to improved customer service. The piece elicited a “Mr. Destiny” feel to it... and they showed Ira Best as he may have been had Jude Harker let him skip on a dollar’s deficiency. He would not have become a mountain man. He would not have met Julie Liquet. He would have gone back to Los Angeles and stayed at the *Comfort Inn* while hammering away at matters with a wife whom wanted to split with him. The segment concluded in the Florida Everglades. *Mike and Juliet* spoke of aligators rumored to be in New York’s sewers... *still*.

Weeks went by and neither Corvette nor Twisty could tell in all certainty that reality had changed. They rented movies—“*Less Than Zero*”, “*Animal House*”, and “*Dazed and Confused*” were a few—and they contemplated cinematography. They wondered about drug problems portrayed in motion pictures, and they questioned if it was “*wacky tobacky*” which led to their memories. Nothing in life seemed better than what they had. Corvette Jones was sure he would have *Rhonda’s* job when she was finished. Twisty Combs believed he would be around for another year, tops. “*Bring In ‘Da Noise, Bring In ‘Da Funk*” was something he had been impressed with in the past. He wanted to be there.

The winter was incredibly wet. Corvette Jones took Twisty Combs into his apartment as a roommate. They decided at the New Year to make a move at their dreams.

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“*One...* You do NOT fuck with my exgirlfriend or my exwife!?” Ira Best shouted.

“*Soon-to-be* exwife,” Victoria Best said.

“*Two...* You do not do that homosexual stuff!?” Ira said. He looked to Twisty and Corvette whom were sitting comfortably on the stage floor. “You stage people are *FULL OF IT!*?”

“I’ve not fagged off with ‘im *once!*?” Twisty said. He socked Vette on the arm.

“*Three...* You do not talk to my enemies!?” He pointed to Jude Harker whom stood in a shadowy corner. “I’ve been around that guy long enough... *that I trust him, now!!* Don Burlson and Mitch Donoho have been fired from my company!! We sold!! If they seek me, it is to destroy me!?”

Julie Liquet spoke up. “*Rhonda* has given us a good deal!! Three years!! Like *Friends*, we’ll all

make the same amount!! ‘EXACERBATION’ went well!! ‘Sitcom meets *REALITY TV*!’” She walked behind Twisty and Corvette. “I talked to these guys!”

“It’s goin’ to work!” Vicky Best said. “I have some *issues*... with Ira!” She looked at Julie. In a burst of déjà vu, she was sure she had been in outer space with her... *and a feeling of vertigo came and went.*

“But we might stay married... *if*...”

Ira Best was cut off by Rhonda. “Save it for the *camera*!”

“Meld” was the name of the show. Chicago housed the set where they would shoot. Twisty’s dream to be a Broadway star was replaced with ideals to become the next *Harvey Levin*. He was young, but he believed he had “staying power”... and he thought he could make a run if Corvette stayed around as an accomplice.

Corvette Jones bought a sixty-nine Stingray as soon as he signed a media contract. He missed *Mike and Juliet* but he knew it was time to move on. He made a personal rule to himself about celibacy. He knew that the “big money” was in squeaky-clean images... *if it could be maintained.* “Lookin’ California and feelin’ Minnesota” was a lyric he went with. He wanted to feel grimy enough to win audiences... *but he did not need the smut rumors off the bat.*

Victoria Best grew close to Julie Liquet. Ira Best faded from their lives in a private way. Jude Harker became a sidekick of Ira’s... and the ladies could not understand why he would be. *THEY HATED EACH OTHER.* Rhonda set up a show that would play on their emotions, their memories, and their experiences. In *Meld* as a show, they were able to get over their collective dread of having to lie about ordeals relating to irregular circumstances. Julie and Vicky were not in the Meld, Otis, or Flux as experienced by the others and they were robbed of an “alternate world” in the heavens... but they were allowed to play out their “fantasies” in the form of storytelling, nonetheless. Vicky believed her husband was a great man with a solid imagination. She did not know where he received most of his thoughts which seemed to be of the occult in fundamental nature. She figured he must have nearly gone completely insane in Vegas or Laramie. Julie, on the other hand, lived with Ira in the backwoods. She knew Ira had luck like no one else. It did not matter to her *WHY* they were still together. She would win a Grammy if all went well.

Debbie Chatsworth was forgotten during the casting of “Meld” as a television show. Rhonda Carrier reached in to human reserve of potential life players and asked her for consulting material. Debbie aided when she could but remained in Los Angeles.

The show went well. It was featured on *Lifetime* and the crew grew snugly together. They would have cocktails and shoot the breeze after every shooting. Twisty tried to tell Julie Liquet that *Meld* was a real place... and they had traveled to a distant land through a bizarre portal. She would have nothing of it. Ira did the opposite most the time. *Backwoods!! I was in the BACKWOODS the WHOLE time!!* Victoria Best was always skeptical of him. Corvette fell in love with Rhonda as a producer... but began to lose interest in the project as a whole. He was mayor of Meld in another *REALM!!* This set in Chicago did not



scratch the surface of what he had experienced.

The group loved one another. They yearned that the filming would go on forever.

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“Meld” was a show which relied on the premise of simplicity. A time-traveler zipped back to the nineteenth century and managed to join the *Electoral Commision of 1877*. Essentially, the presidency was in dispute. Samuel Tilden of *New York* had beaten Rutherford Hayes by two hundred and fifty thousand votes nationally in the popular election of 1876. Nonetheless, traditional history had Hayes falling short of an electoral college victory by one vote. A bipartisan commission was set up to resolve the issue. Complications allowed Hayes the bare minimum to acquire office. Tilden retired from politics. In the “Meld” world, though, Samuel Tilden beats Hayes... *and changes the course of humankind*.

William Marcy Tweed, *known as “Boss Tweed”* to Tilden, was a rough man and part of the Tammany Society. He was involved in New York City politics and caught for embezzlement. He becomes a nuisance in “Meld” from the onset. President Tilden is racked by his foe from his home state. After Tweed is released from prison, Samuel Tilden passes laws to “maintain the integrity of the great city of New York”... and passes laws which require one mile of paved road to be matched with one mile of dirt road. One horse is issued to every American at the age of seventeen. The tradition carries well into the future. As Henry Ford primes the country with automobiles, Tilden insures that horses are provided in accordance. A mix of primal standards with modern execution of public policy. Tilden, *known to be on railroad boards before becoming elected to the Whitehouse*, also makes sure that every American is provided one travel ticket per person... *per year*.

The nation develops into one at the cusp of any emotional and intellectual zenith as any other around. “Meld” takes place in the early twentieth century when the first World War is averted by mere policy-making decisions alone. Transfer of technology to Europe emphasizing growth over destruction prosper peace and security. Ira Best depicts the mayor of Meld... *unlike the real experience which had Corvette Jones running the show*. Vette and Twisty are towne drunks. The ladies run a burlesque home. Jude Harker is the nemisis of Ira... *and rustles cattle and women*. The show works on many levels and is presented as a situation comedy in spite of the authentic peculiar encounters behind the scenes. It comes across as a “weekly *Blazing Saddles*” according to certain critics from coast to coast. Ira and Jude grow to admire one another as people... *and the jackpot is soon forgotten*.

Vicky Best agreed from the beginning to avoid “divorce talk” until the show wrapped. As fate would have it, she would not be believed about plans by her husband and others to send cyborgs into their cities. As an actress, she performed well. As the subject of national interviews, she was hardly taken seriously.

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Corvette Jones was never a materialistic person. “Mind, body, and soul” culminated with him being the mayor of an alternative town in an aloof place. While shooting “Meld” as a show, *Corvette* came to grips with “the real world” in pragmatic terms. He decided to invest in a chain of *saloons* with Twisty Combs. “*Castle Nook*” was to compete with *Applebee’s*, *Red Robin*, and *Carlos O’Brien’s* in selected markets. It featured medieval attire, silver stein mugs, and shields decorated around a dimly lit sports bar setting. The duo did not know a whole lot about finances, but Ira Best was able to refer his accountant to them. Ira was actually good with money when he wasn’t battling Vicky over domestic issues. He raised a company out of nothing regarding photography and video of Angelino celebrities... *and he figured it was the way*. Twisty Combs waited for “the magic” to come back... *but gave up* as “Meld” entered its second season. He thought that “they might come back”... *and disturb the whole project*. Weirdoes mounted on horses wielding lances and swords. He believed that *THEY MIGHT COME BACK...* and give him new duties. Maybe that of a WARLORD!! He believed they might speak to him in dreams... *but they stayed away*.

Vicky Best became sexually involved with Julie Liquet. Ira Best remained steady with both women but became withdrawn carnally... *and emotionally*, to a certain degree. He shot the shit with Jude Harker at Applebee’s a lot before the first *Castle Nook* was opened... and he came to believe that it all had to work out this way.

Rhonda Carrier produced a good show. She couldn’t wait for “one hundred”—that would be in the fourth season at twenty-six episodes per year—because *sindication* was where the money was at. Twisty Combs came to her about additions to the show. He was able to convince her to have the screen characters travel to *New York* for sweeps. “Meld” was set in the early twentieth century... *and theatre was coming into its own*. Twisty was able to live out Broadway aspirations, to a degree... *and he felt better*.

Fame never affected the group. Critics maintained that the program was a “reality show gimmick with a simple storyline structure”... and they were treated no different than *American Idol* contestants on the streets. They planned for many seasons... but every now and then during camping trips and beach jaunts, they talked of the outlandishness they experienced together. Corvette Jones compared it to what he imagined *football players* went through on the road to Superbowl seasons—something that is experienced and can’t really be effectively recreated. Twisty thought it was like an epiphony or peculiar phenomenon—*a comet crashing to the Earth near a load of partying frat kids*—and it most likely wouldn’t happen again due to statistical probability. Jude Harker went into denial. He was rejected for the purchase of a limosine, *years back*, by Julie Liquet. Bad things happened. He rationalized it. He went past it. It was hard to believe the “regular things” let alone the *freak* ones. Ira Best never spoke of *Meld* as a place of actual travel. He was able to channel his thoughts into the studio set. It helped him cope with alterations in life.

Rhonda Carrier watched the show grow. Every now and then, she would think to talk to *Juliet* or

*Mike* again... but she believed it was like going home to the parents for weekends during the freshman year of college. *You just don't do it!!* she thought.

As the third year of “Meld” came into filming, almost all was forgotten in everyone’s conscious mind. They were not cognizant of people they had talked to. Light laughter filled the rooms of *Castle Nook* across five Illinois and Indiana cities. They spoke of knights... but they were the bartenders in the saloons. They spoke of “magic”... but it was in the drinks—“*Daquiri Magic*” was one of the better ones. They spoke of travel... but it was to and from the sets. *A lot of TRAFFIC!!*

Corvette Jones and Twisty Combs opened themselves to marriage as they became more famous and affluent. For some reason, something would not let them commit. It was *cliché* to hear of men whom could not pledge themselves to ladies for longer than a few weeks... *but it became their lives.*

## FINALE

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“*Right when all this started happenin’... I noticed the commercials changin’!*” Twisty drank Beck’s from a twenty-four-ounce shiny toby mug. “Round Table advertised a crossbowman shootin’ a car from atop a house!! Explosion!! An’ in Los Angeles, a man had been *murdered* from a bow and arrow shooter!! The *NEWS*!! All of it!! And I guess it’s always been goin’ on!!”

“We see it now... *’cause we’re in it!*” Vette toasted Twisty.

“I guess Tonya Roberts noticed this kind of thing—*remember ‘er from That Seventies Show?!*—when she did *BEASTMASTER*!! But *Castle Nook* is a success, ‘Meld’ is close to syndication... *and I’m gettin’ that strange feelin’ again!*”

“Like... *THEY’RE COMING’!*?” Vette proposed.

“*No!!* Like they’re already here!! Waitin’ to pounce, if necessary!”

“I forgot ‘bout a lot of it!! Ira Best doesn’t talk about it *AT ALL*!! I drink with Jude, *now and then*... and he hardly remembers bein’ jailed!! Ira called ‘im *‘Blurt’* once... and expected a comeback!! Jude Harker waved ‘im off!”

“*Rhonda wants in!*” Twisty exclaimed. “She wants to be part of the hundredth episode!”

“It’s hard to come from behind the camera... *but that would be a good time to do so!* She’s been a great producer!! Can’t imagine workin’ for a better person!”

“And I was thinkin’ o’ this girl I was dain’ in *high school*!! My sophomore year!! *Zits!* I had zits!! She didn’t care!! But I was Catholic... *and that was a drawback!* She was Pentacostal or *Seventh Day Adventist*—somethin’ *UNORDINARY!*—and she was tellin’ me that angels aren’t in *HEAVEN*!! They’re on *EARTH*!! Her boss?! An *ANGEL*!! Sixteen years old, we were... *and I hadn’t gotten a job yet ‘cause of theatre class*... and she said it was that way in ‘times of old’!! Harp players in the middle of town!” Twisty rubbed his chin. His eyes rolled back a bit as he thought of the vision. “*Wings!* Like

head dresses from Indians... *but on peoples' backs!!* They had wings as decorations!!”

“It’s hard to believe... *but I don’t doubt it!!*” Vette toasted Twisty again.

“And I was thinkin’ it was like a forgotten myth!!” Twisty scratched the top of his head. Vette toasted him again, and it started to get on his nerves. “They probably did it with *Trojans!!* If we didn’t have artifacts—*steel helmets with brushes on top*—we might not believe... *that either!!* But ‘angels in town’ made sense... *and I thought they didn’t fly until recently!!*”

“I think of perverts when I think of ANGELS!!” Vette noticed that Twisty became startled. “*Naked boys on plates hung on walls!!* No manners!! Showin’ off their bodies like... *lunatics!!*”

“Yeah, that’s the imagery in a lot of places!! But Catholics robe ‘em in powder blue attire!!” Twisty shook his head. “She gave me a *BIBLE VERSE*, of all things!! ‘*Let mutual love continue!! Do not neglect hospitality... for through it... some have unknowingly entertained ANGELS!! Be mindful of prisoners as if sharin’ their imprisonment!!*’ The passage goes on!! Thirteenth CHAPTER of *Hebrews!!* And I was thinkin’ that *DEVILS* existed as Vikings!! I think I talked to ya’ ‘bout that in *Meld!!* Horned creatures!!”

“Yeah!!” Corvette said. “It could be anythin’!!” He looked around the dim bar they jointly owned. “If you think they’re comin’ back, *ya’ let me know!!*” He looked to the shield on a wall near him. “That insignia... *It reminds me that we went on JOURNEYS!!*”

“Camp fire!!” He looked at the polished shield. “We need to get back to the *mountains...* if we believe it’s goin’ to *HAPPEN AGAIN!!*”

“Yes, *my friend!!*” Vette said. He toasted Twisty a final time, and this time it felt “right”—*like the proper thing to do.*

\* \* \*

“*Rhonda finally made it on to screen!!*” Corvette yelled. The crowd cheered. Rhonda raised her arms in enjoyment. “She is the *best boss...* in the *WORLD!!*”

“*The fifth season’ll be our final one!!* The network is not pickin’ us up again!!”

There was silence. Ira cut in, “We have the *best* cast in *AMERICA!!*”

“*Yea*, I say unto thee... *that ‘Meld’ will live on forever!!*” Twisty said. He admired *Julie Lique*. Everyone had grown intimate. Vicky Best was pouring lager into all empty mugs. “And some *day...*” He thought about spilling the beans but refrained. Julie Lique and Vicky Best still believed “Meld” was an invention of *Rhonda’s mind*. Ira Best had been drunk at times and finally tried to convince them otherwise—that the group had really travelled to an enchanted land—but the girls would not take it. Twisty said, “The gargoyle outside!! On the day ‘e speaks to me, *I will travel to ‘the real Meld’ on his back!!*”

The girls went into hysterics.

Corvette said, “I will be a *knight* in your army... *should you need one!!*”

“Here, *here!*!” Julie said. Spirits were high. Vicky giggled. Julie announced, “I am marryin’ Ira Best... *so ‘e doesn’t have to divorce you, Victoria!!* If Charles ‘*Twisty*’ Combs takes us to a substitute world, I’m sure they’ll *allow it!*!”

“*You’re a WHORE!*!” Vicky declared. “And he’s not *WORTH* it!”

“My father sells cars in the desert still... *aroun’ RENO!*!” Julie looked around. “We can have limos, *now!*!” She thundered with excitement. “He will offer us *three!*!”

“He’s doin’ that *WELL!*!” Jude said. “He could’ve given me one *YEARS* ago... an’ saved a lot o’ hassle!”

Julie Liquet looked at Jude Harker sharply. “*You aren’t goin’ to live it DOWN!*!”

“My sour demeanor is ‘cause o’ ya’!” Jude poured himself some beer. “Ira Best would’ve had a way different life... if my credit passed... *which it should have!*!”

“*Rules!! Rules, rules!*!” Julie screamed. “If ‘ifs’ were worth a nickel every time I ‘eard one, *I’D BE THE MILLIONAIRE!!* Instead of *IRA!*!”

“He didn’t cut you anythin’ while in *Wyoming!*!” Vicky Best mused. “*THAT’S IRA!*!”

“Hey, *listen!*!” Julie Liquet stood up and raised her glass. “*To Rhonda!*!”

“*Cheer, cheer!*” was heard from everyone practically in unison.

“We owe you *A LOT!*!” Julie said.

“*For keepin’ us together!*!” Vicky added. Mugs chinked against one another. *People drank.*

“Life in the *FRONTIERS!*!” Ira contributed.

Vicky did not know what Ira was talking about... *but she smiled and drank heavily.*

\* \* \*

The fifth season wrapped. Twisty Combs became reclusive again as he had long before in the oasis outside of Victorville. An “after party” was scheduled for the cast of “Meld”... *but Twisty decided to venture into the wilderness on his own again.* Lora was on his mind. Corvette was getting on his nerves more and more as the days passed. Rhonda Carrier spoke of returning to *Juliet Hardy* to work with her again. Corvette Jones wanted nothing more than to return to New York to visit with family. Ira Best and Vicky Best flew to Los Angeles. *They believed divorce no longer made sense.* Julie Liquet had become great pals with Vicky... *and they had a social agreement that worked.* Jerry Liquet had bestowed three top-of-the line limosines for the crew... *but wanted them back upon the show’s wrap.* Jude Harker was lost. He had money from acting in a great series... *but longed to drive a taxicab again.* He thought that he could hook together with HBO to participate in their “cab confessions” curriculum but didn’t feel he had the patience to listen to people.

Twisty Combs went back to the area around Victorville. He knew he could meet *Lora* there. On his skin, he felt tinges of lucidity. Glowing. *Scales.* He thought it could be hallucinagenic, but deep in his

memory, he *knew* it all was real. He *prayed*. He went into the desert and prayed. He begged for Jim Morrison. He contemplated passages. He wanted a way back to *Meld*. He retraced his footsteps... but they did not lead to alternate lands. He meditated on lizards. He focused on snakes. He parched himself to the point of lunacy... *then it happened*.

Knights came from the other side. Nine hundred of them. Twisty thought it would be the other way around. He thought he would go back into *their* world. They mounted horses. They pulled catapults. They clutched torches. They chanted hymns. One spoke to Twisty, “Your world is in *DANGER*, Twisty of Otis!.” He pulled out his glistening iron weapon. He tapped Mister Combs on each shoulder, *left then right*. “We have not forgotten you, *MASTER!!* And we have work to do!.”

The knight’s companion pulled out a long blade from his side and offered it to Twisty. “You *WILL* need this!.” A trebuchet was being hauled behind the warrior by two elephants and six horses. “*Denny’s* is the *PROBLEM!!*” the sidekick injected. “We *WILL* BREAK IT OPEN... *an’ free prisoners!!*”

Twisty looked behind the massive equipment. Men yelled.

Two and a half hours later, the mob reached Victorville’s center. Police had been dispatched due to reported “gang activity”... and a helicopter flew in the sky. Twisty knew that there was no turning back. He yelled to the original knight whom had redubbed him as *Twisty of Otis* and asked for a bow with arrows. “I’ll take ‘em!.”

“*Sire!!* Coldflong!! Give this man, *OUR LEADER*, some arrows!.”

A servant handed over his arsenal. He saved a dagger for himself.

The original knight spoke again. “Call my name—‘*Dark Thunder*’—if we should become separated!.”

Twisty looked into the distance. The restaurant was fifty yards away. Clouds hid the *Moon* which otherwise would have been three quarters full. Three squad cars blocked the entrance in a *zig-zag* fashion. Cops stood outside of open doors.

*Twisty fired at the first and missed.*

“*CHARGE!!*” his first mate bellowed. “*DARK THUNDER IS ON THE WAY!!*”

The men charged. Three lady warriors were in the group and yelled along. They stampeded. The three squad cars were no match. Police shot off rounds and hit as many of fifty of the men. Twisty could not see a single one of them go down. *Dark Thunder* was hit in the arm but continued. “To the *MASSACRE CENTRE!!*” he yelled.

The lone trebuchet made it’s way to the diner’s entrance. It pounded away at the roof. Elephants smashed their way through glass windows. Cops were reached and knifed. The coptor in the sky sped away. Twisty found himself near the kitchen in a matter of moments... *wondering why an eatery was targeted to attack*. He wielded his weapon and took a fry cook prisoner. He yelled to Dark Thunder, “*This is THEIR KING!!*”

“Yes, *SIR!!* His crown is strange!! White!! Floppy!.” Dark Thunder listened to thuds from

boulders launched by catapults. “He will be our *HOSTAGE*... until his world... *makes* amends!!”

Twisty watched a massive rock fly through a glassless pane next to him. “We need to *LEAVE*!!”

“His warriors have a strange *magic*!!” Dark Thunder called. “The *gunpowder* you spoke of, *Sir Twisty*!! We have not forgotten *YOU*!!”

The group began to scamper out. Dark Thunder organized a quick circle of battlers. “We must run into *Meld* with all our *FORCE*!! Twisty and I will remain with my closest companions!!”

“*Yes SIR*!!” one yelled. They took off into the night.

Dark Thunder watched police cars roll toward the scene. He hardly knew what he was watching. Twisty spoke to him, “*Those are the elephant chariots I was speakin’ OF*!! *Elephants captured under a box*!! *They run the wheels from inside*!!”

“*Yes*!!” Dark Thunder recalled. “Tiny *ELEPHANTS*!!”

“We will shoot three arrows in their direction as a sign of our *POWER*!!” Twisty lit one of his arrows from Dark Thunder’s torch. “They will know to not follow us into the *abyss*!!”

“*Twisty*!!” Dark Thunder yelled. “Time is short!!”

Twisty shot off three flaming arrows into the approaching six squad cars’ direction. He mounted the horse of one of Dark Thunder’s accomplices. Dark Thunder fastened the fry cook to a chariot behind him. The man made no sound. Blindfolded, he hardly squirmed in order to witness the spectacle of Twisty’s life culminating in a struggle for ultimate sovereignty. The group trotted off toward the night desert. Black-and-white autos arrived at the *Denny’s*. As if charmed by an astonishing illusion, they refused to chase the catapults and the mounted units. Twisty was held in disbelief. He cried as he zipped through an undetectable divider... and into the real city of *Meld*.

\* \* \*

“*Three BOOKS*!!” Twisty roared to Dark Thunder at *Meld’s* central tavern. “*THE BIBLE*... *a mythology one*... an’ somethin’ a high school kid had given us ‘bout chemistry!!” A row of seven whiskey shots were lined in front of him. He drank the first one. “We did a theatre... *ON THIS GREAT CITY*!! *Corvette of Meld* could not make it... *for this trip*... but ‘e remained a companion... *o’ mine*... for five seasons!!”

“*Yes*!!” Dark Thunder acknowledged. “Good *Corvette*!!”

“And we kept ‘em to remind us what we are *NOT*!! The Bible played well for a while... *but we experienced a stranger world*!! The chemistry did not hold accurately enough!! *Mythology*?! That ran us in circles!!” He looked around the tavern. “It’s like readin’ a book on the *presidents*... and thinkin’ that’s all ya’ need to know ‘bout *AMERICAN POLITICS*!!”

“*PRESIDENTS*?! *AMERICAN*?!” Dark Thunder asked. “Those are useless terms, *here*!!”

“*Yes*, of course!!” Twisty said. “But we had mythology in our viens... *of our own stories*!!



Putnum would not touch us!! Viking did not know who we *WERE!!*”

“Putnam?! A knight?! A VIKING?!” Dark Thunder begged. “You must be clear!!”

“Yes!!” Twisty said. “I have to acclimate myself back... *to the great CITY OF MELD!!*”

Game players in the back of the pub screamed with joy. “*MELD!!*” one of them yelled.

“Well, let’s say that not all good stories are *WRITTEN!!*” Twisty announced. “I know now!!”

“You are a fine man... and *MELD* missed you!!” The knight hugged Twisty at the neck. “You will be our governor if Corvette does not join us in a week’s time!!”

“*Yes!!* To control Otis and Meld... *I got it!!*” Twisty was filled with pleasure. “And a princess shall be mine in a year’s time... *or five years!!* But I will LIVE here!!” He cried. “I will DIE *here!!*”

“We will masturbate to you and your glory!!” Dark Thunder revealed.

“*What?!*” Twisty asked.

“We will threaten you with rape in our jails... *should you fail us!!*” Dark Thunder countered.

“Huh?!” Twisty coughed. He slammed another shot drink.

“And if you should take off... *TO THE OTHER SIDE*... we shall not save you AGAIN!!” Dark Thunder said. He watched the gamers in the back. They saluted him.

“I missed that badly!!” Twisty observed. “I almost forgot what *true couth* is!! Honesty!! Jest!! Fantasy!! And you will bang my princess in front of me... *if I do not lead you on crusades which reap us women and wealth!!*”

“That’s a given, *sire!!*” Dark Thunder felt warm inside. “I watched you, *you know?!* From the shield!! *Castle Nook!!* I was there behind the red and orange flame!!”

“That’s how you knew to come!!” Twisty marvelled. “I needed you more than *life!!*”

“*Just as well,*” Dark Thunder stated. He watched Twisty drink the rest of his shots. “A bed shall be prepared for you in your ol’ quarters!!”

\* \* \*

Cory Smith was a resident of Victorville. He had heard the ruckus down the street from his house on the night that Twisty arrived back into *Meld’s* dominion. He ventured out alone toward the place where rumored hordes of men were rumored to have vanished. It was night. Creepy electrical shocks pulsed on Cory’s arms. He searched through shrubs. He looked along the hot desert sand. He strutted through a portal... *and to Meld’s front entrance.*

Twisty of Otis had already taken off toward the city where he had been mayor. Dark Thunder took over as lead of *Meld*... but he was more of a travelling warrior. He did not wish to lead a city—*any municipality*—for too long. Cory Smith came into the towne square dazed. He looked at the people around. A lyre rested upright next to a tired man sitting with his back to a waist-high stone wall. Cory asked to play the instrument.

*Meld* did not have proficient lute players. Their instrumentalists were barely coming into their own. *Cory* could play well. If *Twisty* was still there, he might have guessed that *Guitar Hero* was being played by whatever dynamic kid controlled his world— maybe *Rock Band*. *Cory* played on... *and was chosen as the leader of Meld*. *Dark Thunder* heard of insurrections in the forest. He took off with his people... *and tried to purge the forest of unruly brigands with only energy to pillage and maim*. It was still policy to get to them before they would get to the city. *Dark Thunder* was a great leader... *and commanded better away from traditional buildings and customary rules or laws*.

*Corvette Jones* missed *Twisty Combs*. He knew where he was at. *He believed* he knew that *Twisty* arrived back at the place they loved—the *place that allowed them to be strong, powerful, and respectful*. He recalled the way *Meld* had received people. People prayed from New York City closets... *and found themselves in the forest*. He took those people in when he was the mayor... *so long ago*. *Vette* went to his wardrobe cubicle when he had enough of his family and chums—the *ones he had known from childhood*. He meditated on *Meld*. He cried a little. He chanted.

*Corvette Jones* awoke to find he was in *Yodel's Inn*.

*Meld* was experiencing a renaissance of sorts. *Cory Smith* was lauded... *but not worshipped*. His motto was proclaimed as “Our chain is as strong as our weakest link”... and the performing arts center became the focus of social activity. *Corvette Jones* was dismayed that things had changed. The *tavern* was where the gossip was when he was in charge. *Meld* was growing, and it seemed like the place to be. *Cory Smith* acknowledged *Vette* as a strong man... *and a leader*... but urged him to control *Flux*. *Vette* felt shaken. *Flux belonged to Ira*. He couldn't grasp that everything was not the same. *Twisty* was able to become mayor of *Otis*... *once again*. Why could he not step into the spot in *Meld*?! *Corvette Jones* reluctantly took off toward *Flux*. In what seemed like a bad game of musical chairs, “*they*” came. *Ira Best* showed up with *Vicky* and *Julie*. *Jude* was not far behind... *and he was accompanied by Julie's father, Jerry*. *Ira* wished to be back as *Flux's* head... *but had to start a towne of his own*. *Jude* wished to not rule anything... but they sent him off in an expansive effort. The ladies served as liasons and diplomats. *Jerry Lique* absorbed the *vibe* of the place... *and became a horse dealer*.

\* \* \*

The *Denny's* fry cook became the overlord of the *Meld* region. He exerted jurisdiction over *Meld*, *Flux*, *Otis*, and eight other growing settlements. He presided over three provinces and governed with a chilly coolness. He was chosen by *Twisty* and *Dark Thunder* due to the coolness he showed under pressure while in the land, *Victorville*. The areas got along, the forest folk never rose against the sprawling conurbations as forcefully as commanders believed they might. New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles remained in the distance... *in the same verticle setup that baffled everyone from the Old World*.

Then, one day... *it happened*. They realized the game was coming to the end. They could hear the

“voice from the sky”!! *I am sick of my VIDEO GAMES!! They are all callin’ me a LONER!! My movies have got to go!! I need to find friends!!* Twisty looked into the sky from Otis. Cory looked into the heavens from *Meld*. Vette looked into the clouds from *Flux*. Julie and Vicky chitchatted. Ira Best scratched his head. Jude Harker kicked at the mud. *Rhonda Carrier*, barely aware of the men whom had left her, took a shower in a New Jersey apartment.

A child star from Hollywood gathered her games. She put them into a potato sack she had kept from when she was younger. *She had won first place in a hopping race.* She collected her movies. “*To the SALVATION ARMY!!*” she yelled. “*Twisty... I loved you!!*” she said under her voice. She wondered how her parents would react. She looked into her mirror. *Hello Kitty* was decorated around the parimeter of her reflection. She *wept*. She witnessed her blooming breasts poking through a sheer white t-shirt. She admired them. In two or three years, they may be full. No *boyfriend* would tolerate a geek playing with games all day.

“Void,” the girl said. She walked down her stairs. “*Void!!*” she said again. “Something’s gotta fill the *VOID!!*” She walked along her sidewalk. Her neighbors waved. She looked into city trees. “*Birds!!*” They jubilantly sang. “I’ll become a pet owner!!” She walked along her city street. “*Twisty!!*” She thought about the hampster she would buy. “You will not have to kill yourself in *OTIS!!*” She cried. The sack felt heavy.