

Hero Nation

by

Christopher Sly

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For my mother and her prayers for peace.

Act I

Departure

“O monstrous beast! how like a swine he lies!
Grim death, how foul and loathsome is thine image!
Sirs, I will practise on this drunken man.”

The Taming of the Shrew, by William Shakespeare

Chapter One – The Call to Adventure

“This first stage of the mythological journey - which we have designated the “call to adventure” - signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown.”

The Hero with a Thousand Faces, by Joseph Campbell

Present day

I awake naked and shivering on a lonely mount, curled into the soft embrace of my mother’s grave, surrounded by the barking of the hounds rising from the kennel of the king. With a swollen tongue I wet cracked lips. I blink eyes still scratchy from the smoking depths.

“Once more, dear friends, into the breach.”

I sit unsteady beside a tilted jug. The first swallow is a challenge. Six more loosen tongue and limb, and I push erect with jug in tow. I stumble, almost falling, and catch myself in comic pose.

“Thou art a fool who spills his seeds upon the barren soil of a selfish heart. Why play this role, this idiot’s tale? Yonder king has not spent a single beat beneath uneasy crown.”

I drink and blink, drink and blink.

“But if you cut him, does it not spill a human’s blood? What iron maiden drove such wit into the passion fire? Or was it our father, whose bruise I wore that fateful day when light first touched this newborn skin? What fault or favor, to be the one that tragic follows, or he that blessed leads? Who tied this knot which will not sever, and on which even patient fingers bleed?”

Blink. Drink.

“Drooling fool! You are but a player on my stage, and shall it ever be. Until I unwind this mortal coil, your life belongs to me.”

Drink. Blink.

“Felonious balonious. No shaking spear commands the muse. No hero fears your cursed bones. A butcher boy would claim this stage his own? Anoint himself the king of kings? Thou art a pirate of the skull and cross, who takes what cannot make. You preen and pose in plundered fat. I’ll wear this monkey as a hat.”

I grin and drink, drink and grin. I stretch as though I still have nine lives, and then draw deeply from that mourning jug and wipe my mouth across my arm, and arm across my chest.

“Mother! I knew thee not, or what brave purpose led you to this bloody day when earth spilled out her purest pints to wet my birthing ground. One heart begun, and one undone. How can these mortal shoulders bear such weight could force a mighty Atlas shrug?

“Do you know what you ask of me? Of this grateful son who cannot refuse a mother’s dying wish? How make peace with he who must command, unless submit to tyranny that has no fill? How convince the king to abdicate his throne and stand side by side, brother by brother? What fearful secret hides beneath his need to rule all within his angry grasp?

“What tragic comic yoke, this play, this foolish plot to move a king, as if one moved, could move the rest. There is no happy ending here, but angry wind and dusty death to crack and suck where laughing life once frolicked through the sacred trees. To be or not to be that brother tightly kept in keeping brother lightly held? I beg you, Mother, release me from this crushing oath!”

I walk over to the edge of the circle, and glance down into the bowl just in time to see Thor vanish through the kennel door.

I drink and wave my jug.

“The prodigal pawn is back, my lord, to till the family plot. We have our secrets, you and I.”

I pace within the circle as the colors bloom in spring-fled sky. I stop and cock my ear, eyes aloft.

“How would a clever monkey coax a king from selfish throne to humble knee?”

I tilt the jug and return the precious to the earth. I balance the empty jug carefully on the headstone, and then back away as dawn breaks.

“This bloody sun crowns the mother’s womb. Rise, heroes. Rise and let old dreams die. Strike your arcs from earth to sky. The threshold fills with golden light.”

“Long night is done. A hero’s play is now begun.”

“Once more, dear friends, into the breach.”

“The hero calls himself...”

1970: age - 14

There is a room in my father’s house, off of his bedchamber, where the trophies of three generations are stuffed and mounted on the mahogany walls. I have seen him smoking his cigar and sipping from a crystal glass as he does the tour, beast by beast, to stare into their eyes and raise a toast to what fine sport they made.

I am standing on a bearskin rug that once chased me half a mile from the fort where my sister and I hid to watch the ships pass by while we dreamt about the day we would escape this kingdom of the lord. It was worse for her than I, for she was seldom able to slip the castle walls, and the circles under darkened eyes seemed to speak of inner illness to which none could admit.

Father is an angry man with roughened hands, who raised his children as he raised his hounds. Our eighteen-year-old brother Thor is his proper heir, perhaps quicker to use guile, but still a victim of the rages that sweep them both, and leave their bruises on our days.

The prey have a glassy stare that always drives me from this musky room. But this day it feels more like a

warning than wrath or condemnation, as though they are telling me to be that quick boy who got away, or end up mounted on these walls among them. There is a sound from the bedchamber, a clunk and a slide, and I ghost out of the room that had drawn me in my passing, and on to the library where my mother's books invited from the dusty shelves. Here I feel at home among the heroes and their ladies so unlike the world I lived, for my mother was a lover of the happy ending tale. I might be young, but at fourteen, I am already older than my father and my brother will ever be. I will live a thousand happy lives, and they, but one angry life between them.

A creaking rope calls my eyes to the window where a solemn Liberty sits swinging from the ancient tree before the house. She was named for our mother, and from a photo I know she bears her image of fine Castilian lines. She wears the white dress my father bought her Easter last, and she seems to pose for a painting of woe draped in purity that hides her weeping heart and stirs my nervous depths.

This day was not easy for her. Tomorrow a dream begins, but only one of us will sail away. At fifteen, she is my image of the beautiful damsel a true hero will someday save from this monstrous place of oppression and dark corners, of cracking whips and yelps of pain. But I am not that hero, and there is shame in me, because I am afraid to be afraid.

The ship is sailing with the morning tide, and I will be aboard, and Liberty will remain behind without a friend in this brutal place. I can see her hopelessness in the way the swing drags her feet across the ground, how her head leans against the rope. I have to close my eyes and turn away, back to the world where everything will end happily ever after. I know she feels that I have betrayed her, and part of me agrees, and part of me is angry that I agree.

From the shelves I pull a dusty hardbound book. My brother's footsteps quicken on the hallway oak, and I tuck the book into my pack. He stops at the door, his eyes touch

me and continue searching. There is an air of impatience about him that seems to relax when he sees we are alone. He laughs.

“Does Mongoose know you’re bringing the library? What a kook.”

I don’t like my brother much, but he has a point. He walks over to the window and smiles.

“What’s up with sad Sally?”

I don’t answer, and he looks over at me. I move to stand beside him, and we watch her on the swing.

“At least you’re getting away.”

He carves into me with his eyes, then grins, and punches my arm.

“About time you grew some balls.”

He looks back out the window.

“Should be one hell of a summer, bro.”

We stand there side by side, watching Liberty drag circles in the dirt beneath the swing. Thor puts his arm around my shoulder.

“One hell of a summer.”

My room is creeping with the shadows cast by moonlight slicing through the slowly rolling curtains. The branches of the fir outside my window bend and creak in the rising wind, and their spirits dance between lacy seas and timbered walls. Inside of my head, thoughts roil like the muddy runoff that courses down the canyon with a distant roar.

I feel guilty that I have this chance to live a dream that belongs as much, or more, to Liberty. But our father is of the type that prizes courage in his sons, and propriety in his daughter. We both knew there was never any chance he would let her take this trip, and part of me agrees that there are dangers from which we would all protect her, for she has a precious and delicate beauty, and the world out there is more often that of my father, than my heroes.

The trip was an unexpected gift. Since I was ten I often rode my bike down to the cove to watch the seal-like surfers play in the freezing sea. I guess they knew, had spent their time upon the shore watching freedom fly over waves that rise magically from nothing, and crash into the foamy surge that bites my ankles and pulls the sand from beneath bare feet. They were a local lot from the hills nearby, ragged boisterous braves who from the first treated me as though I were a man among men. It was Mongoose, a huge bald black man much older than the rest who bought me my first board and wetsuit, as a gift, he said, to the Gods that kept his autumn skies clear for harvest. At first I thought my father would object, but long ago and far away he had been a seal. Though he forbade Liberty from surfing, or consorting with the crew, he left me free to swim or die.

The lessons were harsh, and it was not as easy as it looked from shore. The sea was aching cold that took away the breath when needed most, and water can feel like concrete when it breaks upon your spine. The surfers in the water were all business, and had little time to coddle me. They seemed to be watching with disinterest as to whether I would live out the day, and taking bets if I would be back. But one thing I know from reading my mother's books, a hero never quits, and I have to be the hero, because the hero gets the girl.

The summer of my thirteenth year, I got my first job with the Mongoose and became an apprentice to a master grower of medicinal herbs. It was a whole new world opening up for me, since Liberty and I were "home schooled" and had spent little time learning much more than obedience from our teacher. The training of the dogs was something Thor excelled at, but though I found it interesting on occasion, I was more apt to play with them, and I never got the same joy as he from forcing them to my will. The world of plants took over my life quickly, and I began my studies in chemistry and biology with books from Mongoose's library, and the library of his friend, a scientist

with wild red hair, Doctor Archibald Fox. My studies in woodcraft and agriculture continued to expand a mind that seemed to have more room, the more I stuffed into it. This was not something I discussed with my father or my brother, or even Liberty. It was a rare kind of education that served me well many times throughout my life.

By the summer of my fourteenth year, I could go surfing, and sometimes catch a wave. I could be as silent and difficult to see in the woods as a deer, and I knew something about the growing of plants, though I still had much more to learn. But this season, Mongoose was going to cruise to Costa Rica for the summer, while The Fox tended his garden. Mongoose asked me if I would like to come along to help stand the watch, and surf warm waves, and smile back at the friendly Ticas.

My father was initially against it, and Liberty was horrified, but Thor came unexpectedly to my rescue, and convinced father that it would make a man out of me. Father came around until he actually seemed excited, and spoke with fond reminiscence of having made the same voyage once, where he met my mother. Everyone except Liberty was getting along better than ever before, as though it were possible a new day might actually dawn.

But Liberty, poor Liberty, could not stand the idea of me leaving, as though I could not have chosen a worse time to abandon her. The circles under her eyes kept getting darker, but when I asked her why she was frightened, she refused to answer, and I let it be, because we had our secrets, she and I. This double tension continued to build, my anticipation of leaving, my dread of disappointing her, until I felt at times as though I were being torn asunder, racked between guilt and excitement, as day by day, the departure date approached.

But when I lie in bed, no matter what tortured path my thoughts twist through, all roads lead to Her. There is a game I play each night, I clear my mind, and try to peer through the murky mists of time and space to find my

beloved and touch her, to let her know, here I come to save the day. This would be a much easier task if I knew who she was, but all I can see are her eyes, and the love they hold when they look at me with complete trust and perfect knowledge of my soul. I try to imagine what she might be doing at that exact moment, perhaps sitting in school halfway around the world, or even laying in bed, dreaming of me. And sometimes I fear I hear her crying, and the dragon twitches in his slumber, and I have to force my thoughts away lest he rouses, and shakes down thunder from the sky.

My life has but one purpose, to become the hero she deserves, to spend every ounce of courage preparing for the day when fate's finger swings my way, and I am the hero on duty, and it is my turn to make the play. I cannot bear the thought of failure. I cannot forsake her for another. Deep down, in my heart of hearts, I know that finger is in motion, that one day it will point at me, and if I am not ready, it will bring the end of days.

And so I whisper, eyes clenched shut, I am here, I am looking for you, I will never let you down. And I step out into that inner night and wait like a deer at the edge of the clearing.

Silent and still, silent and still...

I stumble in the dark shadows cast by clawing trees in howling winds. I have lost control over my body, and my mind is a chamber of horrors. I trip again, dropping my board and carving deep gashes into my palms from trying to catch myself. I sit too weak and scattered to climb back to my feet. I curl my arms around my knees and begin to cry with rib-cracking sobs.

I push erect, retrieve my board, and stumble on through the whipping night. Six hours later I stand at the base of Rattlesnake Road. Before me are the docks, and behind me, the first gray light to end this evil night. I rub the streaks from my face and suck down big gulps of salty air.

A hero doesn't quit. Everybody gets knocked down. A hero gets back up.

But was I a hero, after all? Had I ever been? I try to shake the thought from my head and start toward the docks with the resolve born of knowing there was no going back to what I was when I laid down the night before. I stop beside Mongoose's trawler, "The Green Goddess", and set down my pack and lean my board against it.

I pick gravel out of my bloody palms and kneel to rinse them in the sea. Then I lay down on the dock, head against my pack, and fall asleep.

"Dawn patrol! Now you're showing me something, Grom. No sissy farewells, untie and be gone."

And we were, with the soft rumble of a diesel finding her tune. I untie fore and aft, and leap aboard. The gear kicks and we are moving. Mongoose grins and glances back. I grin and do not.

Let it go.

But will it let go of me? For the rest of my life, when I lay down to think of Her, I will smell Liberty's gasping whiskey breath and taste her salty skin and look up into her shiny eyes, and wonder how impossibly wrong the world can turn. Her torch, that golden torch of liberty, swaying on a silver chain flashing in the moonlight against soft, soft, flesh...

"Take that! And that!"

Bile pumps out of my stomach and spews into the surging sea. The Goddess clears the breakwater, and we charge into the spitting jaws of hell.

Chapter Two – Refusal of the Call?

“The myths and folk tales of the whole world make clear that the refusal is essentially a refusal to give up what one takes to be one's own interest. The future is regarded not in terms of an unremitting series of deaths and births, but as though one's present system of ideals, virtues, goals, and advantages were to be fixed and made secure. King Minos retained the divine bull, when the sacrifice would have signified submission to the will of the god of his society; for he preferred what he conceived to be his economic advantage. Thus he failed to advance into the life-role that he had assumed - we have seen with what calamitous effect. The divinity itself became his terror; for, obviously, if one is oneself one's god, then God himself, the will of God, the power that would destroy one's egocentric system, becomes a monster.”

The Hero with a Thousand Faces

Five days of rolling seas and twisting guts brought us abeam of San Diego. I stopped puking that first morning, but I was green for two more days, and Mongoose kept a careful watch while seeming not to. I was afraid he would put me ashore if I made myself unhandy, so I kept a weather eye and jumped to keep things secure against the pounding of the sea. The creaks and groans and slapping waves kept me on edge, and those wicked dreams slipped into the cracks when exhaustion won against the rocking and pitching of my berth. Around the clock we pulled four on, four off, but the ship knew where she was going, so the real job was to make sure nothing got in her way, and to awake the captain at any sign of trouble.

The weather warmed as we slid south and some of the magic of the adventure returned as the distance grew. At first I thought perhaps I could force the past from my mind, but that is not a hero's way. I will allow no place inside

myself where I am afraid to look, no dark corners where lies become true. What problems I have will not hold off that day of reckoning, and a hero's duty is much larger than himself.

Or so I believe, but I learned long ago that such thoughts are better acted on than spoken. Sooner or later, I would get around to probing these new dark corners, and piecing together this mystery of who she is, and who I now am, and how this could have happened. But not yet, the images are too raw, the betrayal more painful than any pounding I have ever taken.

We kept our distance from the shore, turning six knots and stacking 140-mile days one upon the other. Off the tip of Baja I looked out one day and spotted a whale no more than thirty feet from the starboard rail. I spun around, and there was another to our port, and another aft, and we were surrounded. I called the captain and he looked out and rubbed his jaw and looked at me, and we just stood there watching quietly. They were with us when the sun went down, and gone when the sun came back up, and I think that as long as I live, I will remember every minute we swam south together.

Two days later we had porpoises playing off our bow, and if I could be an animal other than a man, I would don their fins and join their game. I sat for hours and days watching them and smiling, and in my heart, swimming with them, shedding my past and future, and becoming one of them.

We passed well off of the Bay of Tehuanapec, where the howling winds funneled across the isthmus, and built waves with fifty foot green walls moving away from shore. We were in the tropics, and shirts were off and board shorts on and the spray tickled instead of bit. We passed giant sea turtles, which scrambled out of our path or dove into translucent depths, and in our wake, the gray fins of sharks followed with sinister intent and unnerving patience, waiting for that slip that becomes a meal.

We were a hundred and fifty miles off of the coast of El Salvador when I called the captain to tell him that there was a boat approaching. He appeared from below with a pistol tucked against his leg. The boat was a panga, maybe 18 feet long with an outboard powerful enough to push it thirty knots, and it carried four fishermen who pulled along side and used sign language to ask if we had any cigarettes. Mongoose shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.

They smiled, we smiled. They backed off, then circled us, talking among themselves. Finally the one at the bow waved, we waved back, and they sped away. Mongoose and I looked at each other.

“That was fun.”

“Seemed like nice guys.”

We both laugh, but our eyes are watching the horizon. They had appeared so quickly, and now they were gone. There was a lesson here. I was more careful at my watch after that. Three days later, we rounded the tip of Santa Rosa and ghosted along the shore. My heart was pumping adrenalin that had my bones creaking. Mongoose stood at the wheel on the flying bridge grinning from ear to ear as the porpoises leapt and spun to touch a nose against my outstretched hand and spray my sun-browned skin. It felt like I was coming home.

Mongoose whooped and pointed.

“There’s my girl!”

The smudge became a rock thrusting out of the sea. We pulled into its lee and dropped an anchor off the bow, then backed while I tended chain. I scrambled for the stern and dropped the second anchor, and we pulled forward to give it scope and then set it and tie off. For the first time in near four weeks, the engine idled down to cool, then stopped.

What blessed quiet. I had forgotten those soothing sounds of the sea. Mongoose has the binoculars trained on the surf where a glassy tube is peeling to the right. He hands me the binoculars.

“Check it out.”

There were two surfers in the water, a girl about my age, and a boy slightly older. She is sitting on her board looking back at me, and my breath catches in my throat.

“They call her Roca Bruja.”

What? “What?”

I glance over at him. He is gazing with glowing eyes at the rock jutting from the sea.

“Witch’s Rock.”

My eyes go from the rock, back to the girl. I lift the glasses. Her smile melts my flesh. With fearless joy she carves a perfect line across my soul.

They turn toward us, and ten minutes later they sit astride their boards beside the ship. I swear she is playing me, having shred my cool disguise to sense the shaking of my hands and the dryness in my throat. She is posing, giving me a good look but forcing me to meet her eyes to pay the price. I may not be able to talk, but I am no fool, this is a game she has played many times before. A dangerous girl, I suddenly realize. A dangerously, dangerous girl.

“Hola, Chico.” Mongoose tosses him a backpack and Chico slips it on. They grin, and an entire conversation happens in that look that passes between them. “Little Lysistrata.” He glances from her to me. “Maybe you can show my Grom how to stay alive out there, Mija. I’ll make it worth your while.”

She takes a second to think about it.

“I still get paid if he dies?”

He takes a second to think about it.

“Half.”

She takes a second to think about it.

“Does it talk?”

“Not much.”

“Does it surf?”

“Not much.”

She takes a second to think about it.

“Grab your stick, Grom. I can use a good laugh.”

I didn’t disappoint her.

And so began the season of the witch.

They were the best of days, they were the worst of days. She was an excellent teacher, because she never shut up, and out spilt stories of blood and gore, of cracked heads and missing arms and broken boards, of crocodiles and sharks and jagged rocks and bloated bodies washed up on the shore. But death does not scare me. Failure scares me. And so I listened and I watched and I learned. For Lysistrata, the wave was a stage upon which she danced, and into which she disappeared to transform into music that sang out in celebration of being free. I tried to emulate her style, because I found her elegant lines more to my taste than the busy snapping, squiggled lines of the frantic who live in a much quicker time frame than I. Which is to say, I began at the beginning, with a certain pleasure in the simplicity of its goal, to ride the wave as it was given.

But there was a stiffness in me that became difficult to hide from, because Lysistrata continually screamed at me to loosen up. Certainly, she did more than tell me, she was a living example of letting go. I think there was no shame in her, no inhibitions, no insecurities, no fears of any kind that held her back. And so she danced and spun and leapt across the sand, and swept across the sea, and soared sky-clad across a pale-blue heaven to arc into the pool below. At first I found this quite disturbing, this propensity of hers to shed her clothes at any opportunity, as though they were some weighty burden interfering with her communion with the blessed breeze. There was at once, nothing sexual about it, and at the same time, I felt an attraction so powerful I think I wanted to become her, to be that free and unfettered spirit that I would never be.

Mongoose stayed on the boat, but I quickly moved to their camp on shore, and he took the opportunity to up anchor, and go visit some old friends. In the afternoons when the waves blew out, we gathered driftwood for the evening

fire, and fished near the river mouth where crocodiles sometimes joined us in the search for food.

Chico was her older brother, and they were orphans, never having known their father, or fathers, since they were the product of their mother's early career as a prostitute. Later, their mother taught English, having gone to a great deal of trouble to learn it so that she could read the literature written in that tongue, and she passed her love of reading and her love of the theater to both her children before she died of an illness no one could name. Now they cared for themselves, though they did not say how, and I knew enough not to ask. Lysistrata swore she would have a theater one day, and I wondered if she knew that the world was already her stage, and we, her adoring audience.

And then I spoke. I spoke of my oppressive father, and his violent storms. I spoke of my manipulative brother, and his brutal humor. And I spoke of my sister, and her fragile beauty that seemed to be intended for something so much greater than dark circles under empty eyes, and how I had left her crying, and how frightened she had been, and how much I hated myself for what had happened. Maybe it was time, but I suspect, if it were not for Chico and Lysistrata and that lonely stretch of sand and that strange summer night, if I had not spoken then, I never would have spoken, ever. They listened to my story in silence, and I told them how I ran, how in my mind, I am running still. When I was done, Lysistrata moved and sat beside me, and leaned against my shoulder.

“Tell me again about your father and your brother.”

The next morning we caught the dawn patrol, like every other day in paradise. The surf was weak, and we spent more time splashing and joking than catching waves. I felt like I was hatching, in some strange way, as though sometime between dusk and dawn the seed had cracked, and I could glimpse a future much larger than I could yet grasp. And then something peculiar happened.

A porpoise pushed his nose into my lap and eyed me with a grin, then dunked my board. I came up sputtering. He tail-walked in front of me, laughing with his chirping voice. Another shot skyward and cartwheeled through the air. There was mischief loose. We were all too stunned to speak at first as they played their porpoise games. Then we were laughing, and I lost control, and fell off my board again. Who needs waves when a porpoise takes you for a ride?

I'm not likely to forget that moment, and if Chico and Lysistrata hadn't been there to see it, even I might wonder if it had truly happened. For a few short seconds, I had my wish, I was a porpoise, and now I understand why they are always grinning. Then he shook me loose and I drifted for my board, completely free from past or future, soaking in a sea of bliss.

Chico shouts as I slide onto my board. He is pointing, then paddling, pushing Lysistrata around, screaming "go, go!" And then I see it, that gray fin carving its deadly line. My mind shifts into that gear where time slows and emotions vanish. I measure the distance between the shark and Lysistrata, between Lysistrata and the shore. I paddle for the gap between them with long smooth strokes to balance the board so no force is wasted in the rocking. I pull up and start splashing, churning the sea like a wounded seal ringing the dinner bell. The dragon is awake in all of his raging glory. I am not inviting the shark to eat me.

I am going to eat him.

Or so it was my intent, but my porpoise friends had other plans. Those flashing tails propel noses that must pack quite a punch, because the shark seemed to quickly lose his appetite, and thus lived to bite another day.

I sit upon my board floating in a tropical paradise under skies painted every color on God's pallet, while laughing porpoises leap over me in rainbowed arcs of spray. Birdsong trills and whistles and screeches in the humming breeze, and the flavors of salt and blooming flowers soak

into me, and I become that warm embrace between restless sea and peaceful sky.

And thus began the worst day of my life.

Lysistrata leads me to the pool.

When she touches me, it sets my life on fire. I stop her hands, and back away trembling. She looks at me as though I must be daft. And maybe she is hurt, and maybe she can't comprehend the refusal of her gift, and maybe she thinks I am from some other planet, where boys don't like girls. How can I tell her the truth without insulting her? In her life, she will love a thousand others. My heart is sworn to Her, who will love only me.

I have betrayed her once. I never will again. She is waiting for me, depending on me.

"I'm sorry."

And I am. She turns and disappears into the blue depths where brimming eyes are washed clean. I stumble out through the woods and collapse in the shade beneath a palm. When I finally wander back to camp, the launch from the Goddess is beached and tied off to a tree. Chico is thumbing through my mother's book, Huckleberry Finn, turning it sideways, and sometimes upside down. Mongoose is sitting on the fallen palm, and they are joking about the shark and the porpoises.

"Hey, Brujo."

Chico grins at me and shakes his head again in disbelief.

Mongoose stands.

"Chris, we need to talk."

There is a chill surrounding him that raises goose bumps on my arms. Twenty minutes later I return to pack, and say goodbye to Chico and Lysistrata. There is sympathy in Chico's eyes and grip. Lysistrata hugs me, and at that moment, I realize I don't want to let her go.

Mongoose unties and we push the launch into the sea and I walk it out while Mongoose drops the engine and gets

it started. I scramble over the edge and he kicks it into gear and turns the throttle, and we scream south to where I will catch a ride to the airport, and try to make it home in time for the funerals.

They stand watching on the shore. Chico waves, and I wave back.

Lysistrata stands with arms crossed, clutching Huckleberry Finn to her breast.

My father and my sister are dead, and I am an orphan. It is the selfishness of my thoughts that revolt me, how sorry I feel for myself, how much I want to put the blame anywhere but on me. But my mind, rather than blessedly numb, began to cascade crystal images: the dark circles, the flinch when he touched her, that familiar way his hand would rest atop her shoulder and he would look down at her and call her his beautiful little girl, and dress her up, oh so pretty. So like your mother, he would whisper, in what I thought was fond memory. And the darkened shadows beneath her eyes got deeper and darker, and her voice more hushed, more forlorn.

What I named as jealousy was an anguished cry for help, and I had not been listening, not for many months, and now she was dead, and it was very much my fault.

Oh Liberty! I have murdered Liberty. If I had cared enough, if I had paid attention to her illness, if I had asked more questions, I could have uncovered the nature of this beastly father who would rape that which was most precious upon this earth. I could have stopped him.

I could have stopped him.

I didn't stop him.

The seatbelt sign blinks on, and the pilot announces the approach. Thor is waiting at the curb outside the baggage pickup. I climb into the van my father used to move the dogs. We sit there, silent, not talking, not looking at each other. He throws it in gear and we pull into traffic. Twenty minutes later I ask the question.

“How?”

There was a long pause.

“Officially –” He glances over at me for the first time, and there is pain in his eyes. “I heard her screaming in the middle of the night. I get up and see her bolt out the door naked. Dad comes hopping after her, pulling up his pants. By the time I caught up with them, she was standing at the cliffs by the Redwood grove. He was sweet talking her. Come back, Honey. Daddy loves you. She just turned. She stood there for maybe two seconds. Then she lifted her arms like she was going to fly away. And she jumped. He rushed to try to grab her. Lost his footing. Went over.”

We drove on through the sweltering afternoon, clattering up Highway 101. Twenty minutes later, I ask.

“Unofficially?”

Thor stares straight ahead.

“He didn’t grab for her. He laughed. He stood at the edge and he looked down and he laughed and laughed and laughed.”

Thor pounds the dashboard with his fist.

“Rot in hell, you bastard!” His voice drops to a whisper.

“Rot in hell.”

Five hours later we start up Rattlesnake Road. It is a dusty narrow cut winding along an eastern facing slope that climbs through the fir, madrone, and redwoods into a realm where every gate is locked, where neighbors keep their distance, and any driver you pass gives the Rattlesnake wave. Thor pulls up and I hop out and unlock the gate and swing it open. He pulls through and I close and relock it, and climb back in. Ten minutes later he stops beneath the oak. I climb out and reach for my stuff.

“Wait a minute.”

Thor comes around the van, and when he reaches me, he pounds me in the jaw and knocks me to the dirt.

“What the fuck, Chris? You were supposed to be her friend. Did you think I wouldn’t find out about that last

night?” He kicks me in the gut. “You piece of shit. You can’t pull your head out of your goddamn fantasy world long enough to talk to her?” He kicks me, then kicks me again. “You as good as fucking killed her. You had to have your share? You piece of shit!”

He drags me to my feet and begins to beat me in earnest, and I’m almost grateful, and I can’t fight back, because every word is true.

I kneel at the foot of my mother’s grave, and I am lost. Whatever life I thought I had, or expected to have, or hoped to someday have, is gone, and there is only agony and endless night to take its place. There is no apology that can bring her back, or relieve my guilt, or mend my wounds. Even the words “I’m sorry” are an insult, and there is a gaping black hole inside of me where I used to be.

My grief is just another lie, a role I play to help myself pretend that I deserve a better fate. I have seen my true face, and it is a painted mask, hiding emptiness.

I have murdered Liberty, not once, but twice. My eyes rise to the words carved on my mother’s stone.

‘Please bring peace to our world.’

A hero never quits.

Everybody gets knocked down.

A hero gets back up.

My life is not my own to squander on self-pity, and pout about misfortune, and spill my blood into the shifting sands of remorse.

My life is not my own, and there are promises to keep.

Fate’s finger is swinging, and I know, in my secret heart of hearts, that someday it will point at me, and I will be all that stands between Her, and the end of days.

The hero calls himself...

Chapter Three – Supernatural Aid

“For those who have not refused the call, the first encounter of the hero journey is with a protective figure (often a little old crone or old man) who provides the adventurer with amulet against the dragon forces he is about to pass.” (Campbell 69) “What such a figure represents is the benign, protecting power of destiny. The fantasy is a reassurance - promise that the peace of Paradise, which was known first within the mother’s womb, is not to be lost; that it supports the present and stands in the future as well as in the past (is omega as well as alpha); that though omnipotence may seem to be endangered by the threshold passages and life awakenings, protective power is always and ever present within or just behind, the unfamiliar features of the world. One has only to know and trust, and the ageless guardians will appear. Having responded to his own call, and continuing to follow courageously as the consequences unfold, the hero finds all the forces of the unconscious at his side. Mother Nature herself supports the mighty task. And in so far as the hero's act coincides with that for which his society is ready, he seems to ride on the great rhythm of the historical process.”

The Hero with a Thousand Faces

Present day

I lean against an oak tree that I climbed many times as a little rascal, and I watch my brother’s two children play basketball on the same hard packed dirt where the king beat me half to death one sunny summer day. Adam is a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, bullyboy of sixteen or so, a proud father’s proud son, who could be his twin in time. He rules the court with regal wrath, elbows that punch and words that slice. He looks back at me with unflinching eyes and a secret smile. A dangerous boy, I would presume.

The girl, eighteen, is tenacious Liberty. She is an uncanny likeness to her namesakes, my mother and my beloved sister muse, and a reflection of younger days before paradise came to tragic end. I think this game is not to her taste, but Adam is insistent, and Adam, I can see, likes to get his way. Of the two, she is the more fleet of foot and sharp of eye, and bullyboy compensates with a brutal disdain for the rules of play.

I never met the children's mother. She popped out the royal heirs, and disappeared back into the shadowy places where my brother preys. I don't ask, he doesn't tell, as it has ever been between us. We have little in common except the bond of blood, but that is strong enough to bring us together, when he calls, if my time is ripe.

There is a sharp crack of wood on wood, and my head turns toward the shaded picnic table where Thor stands, four years older than my forty-eight, with heavy hand still resting on his pawn. Beside the board is a bottle of wine, my birthday present.

“White attacks.”

Many times I've wanted to seize the king by the throat, snap off his wooden head and drop it bouncing on the board, and when it rolls to a stop, eyes askance, reply – “black counters.” There is suddenly an intense weariness in me, even though this journey has just begun. But there are promises to keep, and as sun warms and beer chills, the magic of this place once more seeps into my roots and flows upward to lighten sagging limbs. After all, a mock battle is not a battle, and not all the times we shared were angry, bitter wars. My brother is a rare charmer when he wants to be, and for now, it seems, he has donned his charming mask.

“You look like hell, pickled Pan.”

“Better girdle that stock, Slugo.”

“Still sucking milk from some old lady's titty?”

I have something he wants. This is how our game always begins, with beer and jokes, and somewhere in the blur of night, a deal is struck, a promise made, and the hero

trap is sprung. After the work, but before the pay, no matter what I do or do not do, he starts a fight, and I disappear, because I don't like to fight. From pawn to partner, that inviting door. From partner back to pawn, now you're my whore. What fun it must be to play the king.

The battle roars, but who can beat a king at the game of war? Thor looks across the field and grins with bloody teeth.

"You know what your problem is, Chris? You never understood the game. It's called preemption. Either you fuck them, or they'll fuck you."

"Asshole economics?" I look up and meet his eyes. "Before you pull your dick out, Bro, you might want to reconsider. It doesn't always go as planned."

My brother smiles back, and it is the kind of smile I will remember in a quieter moment.

"Bend over, bubba."

He has me out of position, and his bishop comes spearing into my flank. I'm forked. No, no, no, I'm not writing a tragedy. I take a long pull on my beer, and in that moment, that blessed moment, have my epiphany.

My knight does a back-flip out the second threshold, off the board and into the dancing sea.

I celebrate the escape.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Surf's up."

The rest of my pieces, and most of his, look at each other in amazement, and then scramble for the exit and leap out into the waves. A lonely king shakes his fist.

"Come back here and die for me, you cowards!"

We look at each other and laugh.

"We prefer not to."

We are paddling and splashing, thrusting and thrashing. I blink and rub my eyes; the queen is getting tubed. Hell's the pay for this undo. How did I untame a royal shrew? The raging king is screaming that there is no exit door.

Is it possible that kings can't leave the field of war?

I feel good. I feel very good. I feel quite extraordinarily good. Behind me, Liberty begins to giggle, and she draws the royal scowl. I glance back grinning, and for a moment, I'm dizzy, disoriented, lost in time. She is wearing a golden torch on a silver chain around her neck. I whisper through years of tears —

“Liberty?”

“Don't you have somewhere to be, Snoopy?”

She takes off running. I watch her fly, a sprite dashing for the woods, and now I see the instincts that a stern hand calls forth. I breathe deeply to wash face and mind. When I turn back, my brother's eyes are cold, measuring.

“Let's take a walk.”

Memory Lane was never sweeter. Birdsong resonates the bowl, and the warm breath of spring drips with the honey taste of early blooms and the strafes of buzzing bees. My blood gurgles like a creek winding down from high Olympus to make rich the loam that grows the sacred trees. The dogs start barking as we approach the bend, and the kennel complex comes into view.

When our father died, Thor took over his role with savage glee, and managed the breeding and training of “The Dogs of War”. Though young, he was well trained by an expert of the craft, and unflinching in his practice on both dogs and me. And I must admit, he bred the line with uncommon skill and merciless resolve, and all of us well knew the consequences of disobedience to the king. Which is why I spent my teenage years being difficult to find.

We stopped before the breeding complex.

“Terrorism has been good for business. I have orders for dogs backed up five years.”

We circle in the dirt before the cages.

“And what I'm thinking, it would be a good time to expand. I have police, military, private security agencies, everyone wants the DOW. If we're lucky, this shit could go on forever.”

He is a grinning skull. This morning, I would have considered it. A few months here as a chew toy, and I might finally unlock the mystery behind my brother's chronic aggression. But now I feel as though the winds have changed. The king's attack activated tactical logic – submit, resist, or flee, and my players have jumped the board. There is something out there waiting for me that my writer's nose is itching to follow.

“I know this guy, who knows a guy, who has a place. I can surf and housesit. I think I'm going to roll.”

Thor shrugs.

“Wish I could just cut and run. But this is my kids' future, and Adam is a natural. He'll be taking over someday. Maybe we can still work something out. I'm looking to borrow, I want to use the property as collateral. I had a contract cut, gives you twenty percent of the business for your OK to back the loan with your share of the land. This is a sweet deal for you, Chris. You don't have to do a thing but sign on the dotted line. I notice you're still walking. Put a little money in your pocket, get yourself some wheels. And someday you'll want medical insurance, retirement, the whole thing. If you don't get eaten by a shark.”

That inviting door... He grins, looking very much like a shark I met off the coast of Mexico. Once again, by some strange synchronicity that seems to bind our lives, he has caught me in a generous mood. The papers are in his pocket. I take them. I consider just signing them and handing them back, to be done with it. I feel a growing imperative to be elsewhere.

How many times do I have to get burned to accept that my brother is a fire?

“Why don't you sleep on it? Let me know in the morning.”

I nod. Thor is backslapping jovial.

“You won't be sorry, bro. See you at the house for breakfast?”

When I was 14, I began building my cabin tucked into a redwood grove near the cliffs of a full section that had been in the family for four generations. Thor treated the main house as his palace, and if you were there, it was because God intended you to be his servant. Besides, his freakish appetites sometimes made it difficult to sleep. I built with fallen timbers and pilfered fixtures what turned into the ultimate childhood fort.

From my mother's library, I took every book, and even her reading chair and desk went into the rusty truck, and through the hobbit door. A classroom being no place for a boy who wants to learn, I schooled myself like Lincoln, and roamed the woods like Daniel Boone. I was a loner by circumstance, and perhaps by nature. After Liberty died, I spent my teenage years playing with the dogs when Thor wasn't looking, and getting attacked by them when he was. I worked every season in Mongoose's garden learning the mysteries of the magic plants, and I surfed at the point, when chance allowed.

By the time I turned eighteen, the Vietnam War had ended. I served as a generator mechanic in Texas, and the army helped me get my High School Equivalency. I used the college funding to begin an odyssey that would pass through five universities, and twice as many jobs before I found my calling. Long ago I lost track of whether I was a hero playing writer, or a writer playing hero.

An empty slot on the bookshelves draws my eyes and I blink to clear my thoughts. I reach into a desk drawer and then pop the cork on Thor's birthday present. Eyes on the opening where the book is missing, I pull deeply from the bottle and wipe the back of my hand across my mouth.

“I'll squeeze thee, yea wraith.”

“A pair of knocks, you toad!

“Ye are a naggage: the Slys are no toads; look in the comicals; we came in with Alfie Newman. Therefore pocus hocus: let the waves slide.”

“You will not play with the lasses you have pursued?”

“No, not a derrière. Go, by Geronimo. To my cold bed, and warm me.”

“I know your extremity. I’ll go fetch a third furrow.”

“Third and fourth and fifth furrow, I’ll answer them all. I’ll not budge an inch, girl. I’ll let you come, and kindly.”

I drink from my birthday bottle, and pass out on the floor.

I awaken on a feathered bed, and climb to my feet, rubbing red eyes. I look around bewildered. The Lord’s bedchamber...

“Be I not Sly?”

I cock my ear, as though listening to a voice in my head, then shake and blink in confusion. I scratch, and the shadows cast by the flickering candles reveals my apish pose. I pace around a room of books dancing in the candlelight.

“How comes Sly to be the Lord? Yesterday I were Sly certain.”

I scratch again, my noggin this time, with both hands, hard.

“I was Sly. Sly was I. There was no room tween I and Sly.”

The pacing forms into a circle. I jerk to a halt.

“But if I be Sly, I call the Lord a liar.”

Ominous silence.

“No Sly would call the Lord a liar.”

I begin pacing again, in the opposite direction. I stop.

“If I be not Sly, then I must be the Lord!”

Momentary joy turns to consternation.

“But if I be the Lord, this Lord would quickly call that Lord a liar.”

I pinch my lips.

“And if that Lord be a liar—”

I rub my head.

“I go back to being Sly.”

My eyes dart right and left.

“A Sly that called the Lord a liar.”

I wander about the room rubbing my eyes with my palms. I go back to the bar, and pass out. Unconscious, I get carried across the first threshold into the Lord’s bedchamber, from the known into the unknown. I’ve been separated from my role, cleaved between I and Sly. Am I Sly or am I the Lord? Given the choice, which would I be?

I get it. He strips my wanderer’s role using uncertainty, driving me across the first threshold out of the known and into the unknown. Then he suckers me back through the threshold, trapping me inside a servant role. Now you’re my whore... Hero interruptus.

I go to the desk and lift the newspaper clipping.

Uganda Children Pawns of War:

UNITED NATIONS – The Lord’s Resistance Army has abducted about 10,000 children in the last 18 months for use as fighters and sex slaves. The children are forced into killing their own families – then to be told, “You now have nowhere to go and no one to return to. Now you are with us.”

The same damn trick. They are bouncing us off of uncertainty, into their slave roles. The monster bank shot...

What kind of heart would play this game?

I stomp around, swinging my fists at monsters, mightily pissed off. I stop suddenly in mid punch. I’m going monster, and it feels good. It feels like –

Now I know their deepest secret, why they can’t be reasoned with, why they are such practiced liars, why they can’t leave the field of war. Now I see why they hide inside of God costumes and king costumes and hero costumes.

Now I see why they are never satisfied. Here is the character that has been missing from my writer's pallet, that turns insanity coherent. Here is the character responsible for most of the misery on this earth.

They are not going to change. They like being monsters.

Monsters having sex, breeding more monsters.

How many times did I tiptoe to keep from awaking the sleeping beast? How many times did I turn the other cheek, trying to pacify the angry king, while the monster hiding inside laughed, and then struck again? The beast herds the victims into the pen with his carrot and stick, then slams the gate shut, and unlimbers his spear to satisfy his vicious pleasures. I was never supposed to escape. Everything he did was to set things up so that I couldn't get away, so that he could lock the exit, and torture me at his leisure. I whisper –

“I see one. I see two. I see you all.”

The monster appears behind me, spear in one hand, stiff penis in the other. He thrusts his hips while stabbing me with his spear – “Take that! And that!”

I turn and grab the spear, catching him by surprise. He looks panicked, caught in the glare of the dragon's flaming eyes.

“You're not invisible anymore.”

I pull him in until we are face to face.

“You picked the wrong frickin' pawn to get your monster kicks.”

I seize him by the throat and lift him thrashing off the floor.

“The sun is up you bloody pricks.

“Now you'll see some hero tricks.”

“Can I be neither Sly, nor Lord?”

The second threshold begins to glow.

“And if I be neither Sly, nor Lord—“

I stand in front of the threshold and I rub my fingertips like I am about to crack a safe. On the other side of the threshold, a shadow figure begins to solidify. He is knocking on the other side of the portal, cheering me on. He is stretching like a sprinter waiting for the pass of the baton. What character is hiding here, and for how long has he been trapped behind the unused hero's threshold of this dusty forgotten chamber?

“Can I be anyone I wish?”

The glow dims. The threshold character is shaking his head. Wrong way.

“Or perhaps I be not at all?”

The threshold is brighter, burning gold. It starts to hum. The threshold character is pumping his fist, go, go, go. His hand is out, waiting for the pass.

This is nuts! I pace erratically around the room.

“The first threshold strips the role from the character. And the second threshold? Would it strip the character from... From what? What is left? I strip the Sly from I. Then I strip the I? And end up with? An empty body?”

I move to the center of the chamber and steady myself against the current. I release and let it sweep me back toward the first threshold. My “I” character doesn't like being naked. It is hungry to be back inside of a nice comfortable known. The pull sucks me back through the threshold and into the role.”

“I be Sly, Sly be I. There be no room tween I and Sly.”

I turn, and walk back toward the threshold, this time, I am conscious. The closer I get, the slower I move, struggling against the current of fear. This side is pushing me away from destroying myself, trying to hold me inside of the known.

“Sly does not want to die!”

I gather myself, and leap across the first threshold, into uncertainty. Sly is burned away.

Grinning, I balance in the chamber between the thresholds, between fears and appetites, between pushes and pulls. Uncertainty is an acquired taste.

I walk toward the second threshold, and the closer I get, the harder fear pushes me away. Now I get it. No way do “I” want to die.

“If there can be no Sly, why must there be an I?”

I scratch my itchy scalp.

“If Sly can be a lie, why not I?”

All of the tumblers click, and I finally understand the physics of how this tricky lock was picked.

“This jug is empty.”

The threshold fires.

I stretch in the threshold, using uncertainty to untie and dissolve the contorted knots and scars of mind and body. I soak in the bliss of boundless freedom, submerging in the infinite. My chest expands as I ground and draw deeply from that well only heroes know. I dance out onto my stage, a drunken schoolboy. I spin and leap and laugh.

“Mama! I’m back!”

I look over my shoulder and rest my eyes upon the boon.

“And I have the threshold.”

I walk back to it. I caress it, first through swollen tears, then with loving hands.

What a long strange trip it has been.

While I’m standing there with mischievous thoughts scampering about my brain, a man pokes his head out and looks around, then steps out onto the stage. He surveys the room with a glance that gives nothing away. Our eyes meet, we both nod. He sticks out his hand, and we shake.

“William Tell Sackett.”

“Honored.”

William rubs his stubbled jaw.

“This what I think it is?”

I spread my arms wide.

“A stage where only heroes play.”

He looks doubtful.

“No monsters?”

I wiggle my thumb at the second threshold.

“It’s a filter. They can’t fit through the opening.”

William rubs his stubbled jaw.

“Sounds handy.”

I glance sideways at him.

“You have something in mind?”

“There are a lot of good characters trapped back there.”

My grin keeps spreading.

“If you can’t move the monsters, move their victims. Is that your game?”

I take a look at the idea, walk around it, poke it with my finger.

“Intriguing concept.”

William rubs his stubbled jaw.

“We the only two?”

A guy comes flying through the threshold like he is being thrown out of a bar. He gets up, dusting himself off. He looks over and winks.

“I’ll just give those fellers a couple centuries to die and cool off a bit. You’re one of them Sacketts, ain’t ya?”

“William Tell.”

“A pleasure. Lazarus Long.”

We share a grin.

“So what’s the plan?”

“Pop some corks, let everyone out.”

Lazarus blinks, looking from William to me.

“Just gunna turn the characters loose? Start yourself a nice little literary movement? News flash, they ain’t all interested in moving. And where are you going to put them? Be a little cramped in here. Besides, this whole place is doomed. Monsters everywhere. I’ve seen more than one planet turn into a monster kingdom. One big bloody torture

chamber. Might be more practical to figure a way out of here before they lock the door.”

Does he mean...?

“And leave the people behind? Is that possible?”

Lazarus glances right and left.

“Maybe.”

It was the quiet way he said “maybe”. I jump to my feet.

“You’re not leaving the people!”

I try to get onto the stage, but the Greek holds up a hand.

“No people on my stage.”

“But... But I’m the writer!”

He wags my finger.

“No people on my stage.”

We exchange glances. Lazarus shrugs his shoulders.

“If they won’t move, and you won’t leave them...”

William rubs his stubbled jaw.

“Seems like we owe them something. They created us, taught us how to move. There are a lot of people in a bad place. Some would move, if they had an opening, and a place worth moving to.”

I close my eyes to clear the screen. Some would move. Those we could help.

“Once the monster is dug in, it’s almost impossible to pry it lose. If you fight him, you become him. And if you submit, he tortures you to death.”

“Like I was saying...”

William rubs his stubbled jaw.

“Build an ark?”

Lazarus laughs.

“The Mothership?”

“We’ll need an engine.”

Across infinity, the opening sparks, and explodes like a golden flare. I start laughing. Won’t this be fun...

“Gentlemen, to the New Atlantis.”

We high five with a crack of thunder.

I am standing in the threshold, motionless, with eyes closed. I begin rocking back and forth to test the transmission surface. I iterate some calls to wind it up, then watch it unwind as the calls return. I begin to explore the interface with probing hands. They are watching me.

“Would you mind if I turn this on and start swinging it around?”

They look at each other, and then gather at the synapse.

“And what happens then, Mr....?”

“Galt. My name is John Galt.”

Chapter Four – The Crossing of the First Threshold

“With the personifications of his destiny to guide and aid him, the hero goes forward in his adventure until he comes to the "threshold guardian" at the entrance to the zone of magnified power. Such custodians bound the world in four directions - also up and down - standing for the limits of the hero's present sphere, or life horizon. Beyond them is darkness, the unknown and danger; just as beyond the parental watch is danger to the infant and beyond the protection of his society danger to the members of the tribe. The usual person is more than content, he is even proud, to remain within the indicated bounds, and popular belief gives him every reason to fear so much as the first step into the unexplored.”

“The adventure is always and everywhere a passage beyond the veil of the known into the unknown; the powers that watch at the boundary are dangerous; to deal with them is risky; yet for anyone with competence and courage the danger fades.”

The Hero with a Thousand Faces

“Who is Christopher Sly?”

They circle in the smoldering mist, breathing heavy with dripping tongues and stinking of the madness from which they have sprung. They are the beasts that drink sanity and piss chaos. They are raging flesh clawing into the sacred womb. They are the depths beckoning with sweet cooing lullabies, and the seductive dance of the flame courting the moth.

In the distance, the pack sounds the scent. The game is up...

“Who is Christopher Sly?”

I blink. I sit up with a jerk. Liberty is sitting cross-legged on the floor, with arms clutching a book to her chest, rocking slowly back and forth with darkened eyes.

“Did you say something?”

“Who is Christopher Sly?”

It is a joke that caught on, from a book I wrote about a writer who was, secretly, one of the characters in the story. When the other characters find out that one of them is the writer, they begin trying to figure out which, with various intentions. But she is no mood for jokes. What I saw yesterday was the brave girl. Today she is the victim in all of its heart wrenching tragedy. These are not eyes a hero looks into and walks away from, not again.

“Does your father know who Christopher Sly is?”

She shakes her head no and holds up my novel *Witch’s Rock*, then pulls it back to her chest like it is some kind of protective amulet.

“This is my favorite. It’s about a wizard who opens a magical portal in his library, and he rescues a lady named Liberty from the mean king and his mean son who turn into monsters when the sun goes down.”

She watches me from some inner hell that is reflected in her eyes. Something has happened, something that terrifies her. Her entire body shivers like she has been dunked in ice water.

“I think that’s my favorite also.”

“You’re him, aren’t you?”

I shrug my shoulders.

“He’s a character I play, sometimes. A secret writer character, so people don’t know they are in his story.”

“And you’re playing him now? Is that why you came back to the kingdom? After the last time, I was afraid that you would never come back.”

“Me too.”

She is quiet, rocking back and forth.

“I was hoping you would come back.”

Sometimes I don't figure out why I do things until after I do them.

"Don't eat the food he cooks for you."

I believe her. I have seen the look on Thor's face too many times not to recognize checkmate on the horizon. She is hiding something, something that makes her tremble. It reminds me of a time thirty years ago, when Thor and my father shared those same secret glances that I had noticed passing between Thor and Adam yesterday. I sit up suddenly and grab for my boots.

In the distance, the pack sounds the scent. Liberty glances at the door. She turns back to me with desperate eyes.

"Please don't leave me."

The hounds are getting closer.

I begin stuffing tapes and notes into a wet-sack. I hand it to her.

"Put the book in and seal it." I toss her my daypack. "Tuck it in there and put it on."

I find my old skinning knife, and the pistol, in the desk drawer. She watches, scared, but not panicked. She is looking at the gun in my hand.

The hounds are getting closer.

I trip the catch and swing open the bookshelf. I grin at her.

"This isn't the first time I've had to slip out the back. I want you to hustle down this hole until you get to where it pops out in the ravine south of here. Wait right there until the dogs are at the door, then sneak up the creek to the pond. Stay in the water to throw off the scent, and when you get to the pond, swim out to the island and hide in the reeds. I'll be along, else... good luck."

She nods and ducks and disappears. I swing the shelf closed. I pull the clip. Empty. I toss the gun on the bed. I crack my knuckles.

The hounds are getting closer.

I lace my boots, then wrap a blanket around my left forearm and grip the knife in my right fist. I lean against the door.

The hounds are outside.

I slip the door open long enough for a dog to squeeze through. The bar drops, and we dance a bit. I may not be his first, but neither is he mine. By the time Thor hollers, he's three dogs short.

"Chris? Chris, what the hell did you do to my dogs?"

I peer through my observation slit. Thor and Adam are standing about thirty feet away, rifles in hand. Young blood has two more dogs on leash.

"Best if you and the wolf cub go on home, Thor."

"You got my little girl in there, bro? Send her on out and we'll be on our way."

"I ain't seen her, bro. Why don't you go fix us some of those famous scrambled eggs while I wash up. I'll be right along with that contract."

"I'm coming in, Chris."

"Bad idea, Thor. You know how particular I am about my privacy."

"Sorry, Chris, I just need to take a look."

"Bad idea, Thor. Just go on home. We'll talk about this after I finish my morning constitutional. I have a long way to go today. I want to settle this contract issue and be off."

They're about twenty-five feet out. Young blood is waving his rifle around, ready to get at it.

"Maybe you noticed, Chris, I borrowed some ammo."

"No problem, I brought some more, for snakes and such."

Thor pauses, then shakes his head.

"Bullshit. Think about this, Chris. Where are you going? You have no idea how many friends I have inside the loop. Cops, feds, mercs. I can make one phone call, and your name gets added to a list you don't want to be on. You're

either with us, or you're downrange, bubba. There's no neutral ground. You better deal, bro."

Young blood tilts his barrel my way with one hand, while holding back the dogs with the other.

"I don't know what she's been telling you, but it isn't true. She's just pissed that I won't let her go off to some fancy school. You open up now, because we are coming in to get her, and if you know what is best for you, you'll stay out of it."

"Come on in, bro, and find out what happened to your mutts."

"No more of your hocus pocus, now you see me now you don't crap. This time the pickled piper pays."

They start forward.

"Better think about this, Thor. We don't need to cross this line. Right now, no harm, no foul. You break in here, it's a brand new world. It's not too late to back away. We can sort through this. I'll sign the contract. I'll even send Liberty to that fancy school. The girl deserves an education."

Thor is grinning in that way he has just before he feeds.

"I've been waiting a long time for this day, little brother. I think you are really going to enjoy what I have in mind."

If I were me, I'd be leaving.

"First one of you through this door gets staked in the face."

I swing the shelf closed behind me and scurry like a rat being chased by a toothy cat. I try to clear the channel quiet enough so they don't hear me scamper. They must have decided a little softening up was in order, and started splattering hot lead into foot thick walls. I'm hoping that with the door bared and latched from the inside, they're going to need a chainsaw.

I peer out through the brush guarding the eroding edge and spy the boys grinning like lotto winners, popping rounds into the door jam. Thinking quiet thoughts and

keeping my head below the culvert edge, I slip through the scratchy cut that opens down into the ravine. The ravine is twenty feet deep. It snakes down from a ten-acre pond to cascade over a two hundred foot cliff and splash on the rocks, then mix with the sea. I slide down into runoff almost knee deep, and cold enough to still be snow. It's about a mile and a half up to the pond, and I'm too wet, and too hung-over to be on the wrong side of a cup of hot coffee. But I'm grinning anyway, while trying not to slip and dip.

About five minutes later, the bullets stopped flying, and for a moment I entertain the hope that the fools shot themselves out. But the dogs started barking, and the barks started moving, and I figured maybe I better try to pick up the pace. It didn't take near as long as I would have liked before they had a dog on each side of the ravine heading my way. I did some slipping and dipping, and maybe some bleeding, but I made it to the spillway with a good five minutes to spare. It took about that long to get out to the island, at which time, there were barking dogs running along the bank.

I find Liberty shaking. In a less than lucid moment, I wish I had hung around to stake him.

Liberty smiles like she still has game, which she is going to need, because we are in a tough spot unless we clear out of here promptly. I run crouched over to stay below the brush at the ridgeline and drop down into the little lagoon tucked hidden from the shore by a gate of reeds. And there she is, my Fibby, which is a flying inflatable boat, an ultralight sitting on a dingy. She's ready to go, I hope, because we need to be airborne about now. Liberty seems to forget herself for a beat or two, but catches back up quick when pointing makes it clear where I want her to be. We both plunge into the lagoon, and Liberty climbs up onto the rear seat, while I'm scrambling and squeezing into the front harness. I reduce the preflight checklist to starting the engine and slamming the throttle.

We slide out over the reeds and Thor comes running around the shore proving that he still has ammo left. For a long ten seconds he is keeping up as we play a game of circle the island, then we get the edge on him and escape his line of fire just long enough to straighten out and pick up speed. Adam is dead ahead, rifle leveled. I've never seen a bigger rifle barrel.

The barrel barks. Adam is laughing and missing, I hope. Then he is stomping and cursing. Seems young blood has fired off a little premature. I aim straight at him, and we bounce once, then we're flying over him close enough that a quick-witted kid might have busted my head with a rock. I lift over the trees and dive below the line of sight. I take a deep breath and say a quick prayer, then turn my head. Liberty is grinning. I grin back.

Not the kind of fun I'm partial to.

But it makes a good story.

Chapter Five – The Belly of the Whale

“The idea that the passage of the magical threshold is a transit into a sphere of rebirth is symbolized in the worldwide womb image of the belly of the whale. The hero, instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, is swallowed into the unknown and would appear to have died.”

“This popular motif gives emphasis to the lesson that the passage of the threshold is a form of self-annihilation. Instead of passing outward, beyond the confines of the visible world, the hero goes inward, to be born again. The disappearance corresponds to the passing of a worshiper into a temple - where he is to be quickened by the recollection of who and what he is, namely dust and ashes unless immortal. The temple interior, the belly of the whale, and the heavenly land beyond, above, and below the confines of the world, are one and the same. That is why the approaches and entrances to temples are flanked and defended by colossal gargoyles: dragons, lions, devil-slayers with drawn swords, resentful dwarfs, winged bulls. These are the threshold guardians to ward away all incapable of encountering the higher silences within. . . The devotee at the moment of entry into a temple undergoes a metamorphosis. His secular character remains without; he sheds it, as a snake its slough. Once inside he may be said to have died to time and returned to the World Womb, the World Navel, the Earthly Paradise. Allegorically, then, the passage into a temple and the hero-dive through the jaws of the whale are identical adventures, both demoting in picture language, the life-centering, life renewing act.”

The Hero with a Thousand Faces

On my way north I had followed the coast, at times strafing the waves like the pelicans that glide just above the glassy surface in tight strike-force formation. At other times, I followed the gulls, and caught the updrafts along the cliffs to soar skyward to that bird's eye view that washes the mind of impatience, and brings the heart into resonance with the deep and steady beat that is the turning of the earth.

On the trip south I take the more direct route. I cut across to Highway 101, and run it down to Highway 20, then follow 20 to Clearlake where we set down to refuel at the boat docks. The Fibby almost always draws a crowd, but we have little choice since we can't flap our wings. Liberty is silent, and I think the magic of this escape has for the moment cleared her of the pain from what was left behind, and tempered her fear of what might lay ahead. I am tempted to let her fly, but the next landing is a little tight, and I am afraid that the trauma of what she has been through might at any time cause her to shift into a meltdown. What incredible tension she must have been under, winding her tighter, day after day, night after night. I get the fuel and we are on our way, and every second seems an hour as I wonder if my dear brother has yet made his call.

We follow the lake south to Highway 29, and down the Napa Valley where I once worked as a turf equipment mechanic at Napa Valley Country Club, a job I truly loved. The Sonoma River crossed the highway and we stayed with the river as it widened toward the sea. I bring her down to the water and buzz the private dock where Sea Witch is tied. By the time I bank and line up my approach, Morris and Helena and three of their kids, the youngest two adopted, are standing on the dock waving and cheering. Ten minutes later we are sipping lemonade.

Morris is an old army buddy who worked for the FBI for twenty years. This was his childhood home, and he had inherited it five years ago, along with enough money to call it quits from a job he used to love. Helena looks from Liberty to me, and then takes her hand and leads her and the rest of

their rambunctious crew back to the garden they are already preparing for the spring planting. Liberty looks over her shoulder at me as she is led away, and she must wonder if her fate is being decided, and what it will be.

“Your brother’s kid? Is this that same brother...”

“The one and only.”

Morris leans back.

“She talk about it yet?”

I shake my head.

“I’ve seen some hard things, Chris. She’s got that look in her eyes. They don’t get that look right away.”

It feels like a knife going in and jumping around. Once more, I have failed her.

“Will he call the police?”

“No way. She’s got the goods on him, bet on it. Last thing he wants is her talking to police. There are too many heroes wearing blue. He won’t risk it going public.”

“What about all these friends he talks about? One phone call, he says, and I’m on a list.”

Morris leans forward to take a sip. He leans back.

“That’s the bad news. I could ask around, but it’s chancy. There’s a list you can get on. It’s supposed to be for suspected terrorists, but you know how that goes. It’s a bad place to be, Chris, but I don’t think he’d chance it coming back at him. From what you say, I would worry more about the mercs. If he has those kinds of friends, you better keep running. Your best chance is to clear the border and vanish.”

“What about Liberty?”

Morris shakes his head.

“Same deal.”

“How long before they know everything there is to know about me?”

Morris laughs.

“You still here? Chris, I’m trying to tell you, get your niece, and go, for the sake of everybody in the vicinity. We’ll empty our cupboards, and push you off. Get a move on it, soldier!”

It takes closer to an hour. We disassemble the Fibby and lash the frame to the custom racks, then use a winch to lower the engine into the cockpit well. True to his word, they empty their cupboards, and top off our water tanks. Helena bundles a bag of clothes that had once belonged to their eldest daughter, now a student at Humboldt State.

The Sea Witch is a thirty-five foot full-keeled schooner, a classic Herrshoff design build fifty years ago with teak decks and mahogany planks on oak frames, and refitted with my own loving hands four years ago at a wooden boat school in Sausalito. She is a salty ship, a proven passage maker, and a lovely line from stem to stern.

It is noon by the time I crank the diesel over and settle her down. I grip my buddy's hand and hug Helena. Liberty waves from the deck, perhaps afraid I plan to leave her and taking no chances. I grab the tiller and Morris unties. He puts a bare foot on the rail.

“Fair winds. And don't write.”

He shoves us off, and we are adrift. I kick the transmission into gear and inch up the throttle. It is dead low tide and we are drawing five feet so I stick to the center of the channel until it empties into San Pablo Bay. The winds are light and at our back, but I turn the throttle up instead of shutting it down, and it pushes us along at close to six knots until we clear the bridge and enter San Francisco Bay.

I put Liberty on the tiller and hoist the main, and Sea Witch jumps forward and begins to gallop in the rising afternoon breeze. We are going to clear the gate around sundown, and as we begin to pull abeam San Francisco there are salty tears in the corners of my eyes. I have never been a city lover, but this city I love, and I know that I may be saying goodbye forever. I will miss it far more than it will miss me.

At Alcatraz I throttle back to idle, and make my way forward and slip the hatch, and reach in to clip the spinnaker to the halyard, and hook in the feet. On my way aft, I pull a lifeline and hand the end to Liberty, then dig a harness from

beneath the cockpit seat. When she has it fastened, I clip the line.

“I’m going to hoist the spinnaker. I want you to go forward to the hatch and guide it out.”

When she is forward, I cut the engine. It is a magic moment, filled with the swooshing of the hull and the screaming of the gulls. Liberty is kneeling at the forward hatch. She looks back over her shoulder.

“Hold on!”

I hoist the sail and it ripples, then opens with a crack, and Sea Witch pulls for the gate, flying her billowing black spinnaker emblazoned with a bright white pentacle. I whisper –

“Hail Neptune,

“I carry with me that which is most precious upon this earth, this flickering torch named Liberty.

“Accept us into your care, and guard our escape from the ravenous beast that bites at our heels, lest this delicate flame be extinguished, and bring eternal darkness to my world.”

Liberty is standing at the bow gripping the stanchions at the pulpit. She balances easily, raven hair waving in the wind.

Two porpoises leap in high spinning arcs out of the bow wave, and a cloud of screaming gulls soar in circles around the ship. The porpoises leap again, and again, and then vanish into the veil of fog across the gate.

We follow them into the mists.

The weather did not treat us kindly, and Liberty appeared to be fighting desperately to survive whatever fears and dark visions screamed out in her sleep. It might have been cruel of me to let her keep her secrets. Whatever the horror of her life had been, something even worse must have happened that last night to send her running to my rescue. She had overheard something, or seen something, and she still seemed trapped inside the shock it had inflicted.

We were two weeks at sea when the weather eased, and so it seemed did the monster's grip upon her battered heart. She had been turned inward, almost unconscious at times, watching some terrible nightmare play over and over in her memory. But now I catch those flashing eyes peaking in my direction, and she begins to emerge from where she has been trapped. Clearly, I am in some way involved in the plans growing bolder day by day. It is the kind of thing I notice, when a gentle spirit reveals ferocious strength in its struggle to break free of the haunting past. Here is one the monster did not devour.

We are three weeks at sea when a naked Liberty climbs into my berth. I have been wondering how she would deal with the uncertainty of her future, and now I know, she has decided to trade one master for another. I cannot fault her, there are worse places a heart can be driven than into submission, and she and I, we share the choice to reject a life of hatred and revenge.

I turn her back to me and hold her until she falls asleep. Since I am not God, I must guess what is right and what is wrong. I had been afraid that she would be a flinching victim who could never feel a touch without cringing, until one dark night she would take her own life, believing herself to be damaged goods who could never deserve the hero of her dreams. Or she could have become a monster, so filled with hatred she would spend the rest of her life punishing others for her pain. At Witch's Rock I have met many women who were raped as children by those they trusted, and who had suffered silently from the shame and guilt and loss. Not all rape is physically violent, and there is a particular kind of monster who takes his greatest pleasure by forcing innocence into a betrayal of itself.

Liberty is at peace, pressing herself against me, arms crossed over my arm. She is what she might have been without my brother's training, a woman of humble nature and gentle spirit, one of the meek that are prophesized to one day inherit this earth. She must have been a great

disappointment, so unlike the willful child who would have been a more proper challenge for the Lord's taming talents. No doubt he still beat her, as he had me.

She turns toward me and throws her silken leg over my hip and tucks her head into my shoulder. She is the reed that bent before the storm. Has she survived the ravaged ego's fate of plunging into self-pity, self-hatred, or hatred of all others? She seems ripe for the metamorphosis. It is an unexpected plot twist.

She stirs, and finds my hand and guides it to her. She is what no man can resist.

Oh Liberty! I would give my life to succor thee.

She held me until I fell asleep.

I watch her and she knows it and it pleases her. It is different for me, the shy child who never completely grew out of it, and perhaps that is why I spent so many years alone, and why I was drawn to my current profession. But for Liberty, my attention seems to comfort her, and while I might be the lone wolf, she is a bitch of the pack, playful and most comfortable when she knows the pack leader has his eyes upon her. The world is full of those who will sneer at her submission, and others who will take it for granted, as though obedience is their due. I suppose I might be accused of being in their number, for she is now on my stage, and history must decide whether I have used her poorly.

She is a perfect vessel for the muse.

And as I watch her laughing at the porpoises off the bow, the play begins to take shape in my mind. The hero has crossed the threshold and plunged into the belly of the whale. She has left behind the role of child, slave to the father, and now seeks to slip quickly and easily into the role of wife, slave to her new master.

But now she is my character, and I treat my characters much differently than Thor treats his. She turns her head and smiles back at me, and her face could launch a thousand fantasies, and soon might. She was born to play the

muse, and was waiting only for the part to be written, and I am just the guy to write it. I smile, and she makes her way toward me, and joins me in the cockpit. She leans back and lifts her bare legs to rest them on mine.

“Tell me about Witch’s Rock.”

I close my eyes, and call forth those memories of the time before.

“I started my second novel, Boiling Point, in the late eighties, angry at the way the powers that be were ignoring the AIDS epidemic. So I invented a fictional cure, The Virus, and a post-AIDS world free from sexually transmitted disease and unwanted pregnancy. It was quite a hoot for the liberally minded, but some of the AOI’s preferred that the sinners continue to suffer and die, as painfully as possible, so things got a little tense.

“When I finished, I thought it was the greatest book ever written. It wasn’t. As one agent put it – what kind of asshole writes a novel glorifying teenage promiscuity during a deadly STD epidemic?”

Liberty watches me, a good audience, a difficult and powerful talent.

“So I stopped pushing it, and waited for the cure that must surely be just over the horizon. And I went back to school to study literature, and learn how to write. And one weekend your dad came out to visit, and I walked in on him having sex with a girl I had just introduced him to a couple hours before, and something inside of me snapped. I jumped on a plane for Costa Rica, and eventually, I hooked up with a woman I met there when I was 14. She owned a strip club, Roca Bruja, and she put up with me while I wrote Witch’s Rock, which was a dramatized business plan. We used the book to start the studio, Witch’s Rock, created in the book, and used the studio to make the film about the founding of the studio, which was the pilot for the series.”

Our eyes meet.

“You know what we do there?”

She nods.

“I have friends you can stay with. Take some time to consider options you might not think you have. I have money, Liberty, and connections. I can get you into school.”

She swings her legs down and then straddles me.

“I don’t want your charity. And I can’t play the blushing virgin bride. I’ve read your books. I’ve seen your website. I’m not afraid. I want to play on your team.”

She moves on me, and it works. She smiles, and it is breathtaking. My hands rest on her hips.

“Are you sure that you want this role?”

Her lips touch my ear.

“With you as my writer, I can do anything.”

It is a choice fraught with peril for both of us. Through long lonely watches I search the solution space for a path to the opening glimpsed across the vast abyss during the flash. Now I have the first member of my solution team. She seeks to enter my world to escape her oppressive past and closed out future. This will not be a simple tale of lust and greed and selfish gratification, but there is always the chance that we will be pulled into the maelstrom. I am on a writer’s journey, and it is at these times when I am most dangerous in my pursuit of the perfect line.

Will it serve her well to play the muse, or am I just another jaded hypocrite who preys on young flesh under the guise of virtue? I am a man with an insatiable appetite for women, and she is hauntingly beautiful, enthusiastically willing, and giftedly able.

The hero is neither monster nor saint, he has made his peace with uncertainty. He is not blind in one eye like both the selfish and the selfless, but is free to dance between them seeking the powerful harmonies of the win-win between the player and the team. He seeks mastery in a game where liberal goals arise from the grateful hero heart, and conservative methods spring from the humble hero mind.

Sea Witch slides through the turquoise water and sprays my naked skin. Tomorrow we will sight land. I am

suddenly drowning in confusion and self-suspicion. What
have I done? What am I doing?

Then I remember.

Thor...

Act II

Initiation

“Thus, whether he is an essayist, a pamphleteer, a satirist, or a novelist, whether he speaks strictly of personal passions, or he addresses the social order, the writer, a free man speaking to free men, has only one topic – freedom.”

Jean-Paul Sartre

Chapter Six – The Road of Trials

“The ordeal is a deepening of the problem of the first threshold and the question is still in balance: Can the ego put itself to death? For many headed is this surrounding Hydra; one head cut off, two more appear - unless the right caustic is applied to the mutilated stump. The original departure into the land of trials represented only the beginning of the long and really perilous path of initiatory conquests and moments of illumination. Dragons have now to be slain and surprising barriers passed - again, again, and again. Meanwhile there will be a multitude of preliminary victories, unretainable ecstasies and momentary glimpses of the wonderful land.”

The Hero with a Thousand Faces

1991 – San Francisco

I am sitting on a creaky porch on a sweltering afternoon drinking celebration beers, one after another, just like I have been every day for the last six weeks. At this very moment I am contemplating how famous I am going to be, and if I will have to do the talk show circuit, and what a disaster that could become for a shy guy like me. In my mind, I can see them rolling out that plush red carpet all the way from New York to San Francisco, and I can hear the clink of crystal on crystal as they toast my wit and courage, and I can feel the warmth of adoration wafting from their low cut gowns.

They draw a breath to giggle at my jokes, and then lean forward, and forward still more, to give me an inviting glance at that hero's destination, the rolling hills of paradise. It is a golden beer soaked moment, one in which history's recorders are turning, and therefore, the perfect opportunity to pontificate. I pace noisy furrows across the groaning porch.

“You could unfurl that carpet with a little more alacrity.”

I give my mailbox the finger, and then take another gulp, and smile, perhaps a little self indulgently, and imagine how I’ll look back on this moment twenty years from now, after all of the cheering and the prizes and those tasty just desserts. This is that blissful cusp, where the knotted twisting past becomes the perfect line into the perfect tube, which flows sweetly onward, happily ever after.

“Once again I have saved the world, canceled Armageddon, and placed mankind onto the blessed path back to paradise.”

I spread my arms wide, and turn in circles, acknowledging the standing ovation that will surely last a thousand years. I tilt back my head, and shout –

“Make love, not war!”

I wave my beer at the unimpressed fools gathered below the porch.

“Oh sure, it sounds trite, and yes, I am aware that it has been said before. But I think that most people still fail to grasp the point, that the hero has been celibate long enough to go insane. If the hero can’t get laid, and only assholes get the girl, then the world is topsy-turvy, and there needs to be some serious corrective action in the works.”

I place a cupped palm behind my ear and lean forward.

“What is that you say, oh literary elite? Hollywood happy-ending-ville? Did you think the hero was going to take this shit? You should have known better than to build walls between the hero and the land of milk and honeys.

“I don’t care if you think I deserve this monstrous punishment, or how beneficial you believe it is for my soul, or how amusing it is for you to watch the hero not get the girl, again, and again, and again. I’m canceling the genre of tragic hero.

“You over there, laughing boy, you think this is Goddamn funny?”

I step to the edge of the porch and threaten him with my empty beer bottle and my knuckled fist.

“Your walls are coming down you arrogant, pretentious, selfish pricks.”

I drop the empty in the trash, crack open his replacement, and grin.

“Or maybe just mine are.”

The mail truck grumbles around the corner.

Present Day

Witch’s Rock, my little writer’s utopia, is not at Roca Bruja, world-class surf break. Neither is it at the resort where we hold the finals of our couple’s competition, though for some strange reason, many seem to think it is. In fact, it isn’t anywhere except online, as far as most of the world is concerned, and that is the way we prefer to keep it. If some day that situation changes, we will move to change it back. In my advancing years, I don’t need a world-class surf break, a nice year round shore break works fine, and draws smaller crowds.

A man who enjoys life as much as I do best be cautious. Monsters hate everybody, but particularly, anybody having fun. I like to slip in and out quietly, but the Sea Witch draws attention, so I made a decision long ago to berth her at some distance from the Rock, in the lonely mangroves, and the son of a friend keeps her hidden deep within the twisted labyrinth where the crocodiles glide.

We unload on a private dock, passing surfboards and sea bags to fourteen year-old Lupe, who packs them in the panga, while watching Liberty. I was once fourteen, and I can easily read his thoughts, and so can she. Even though Costa Rica is famous for the beauty of its women, it does not mean that Liberty will go unnoticed. As long as she is by my side, I will be invisible.

Margarita, Lupe’s mother, and Nyssa, his eighteen-year-old sister watches from the dock. The last time I had seen Margarita she was teaching art at Rising Tide, the

children's home supported by Witch's Rock. She is a gifted wildlife artist, with a particular love for the creatures of the mangrove swamps.

Nyssa is a rare beauty even for a Tica. She was trained by her mother, and last I heard, wished to attend a photography school in New York. Nyssa is a shy girl, whose flashing eyes play tag unless hidden behind the camera, which frees her from her shroud like a magical amulet, and transforms her into one of the most charming flirts on this earth.

Nyssa leads Liberty into the house, and Margarita stands looking at me, hands on hips and a knowing smile on her lips.

"My niece."

She is surprised.

"You're taking her to Witch's Rock?"

"She insisted. Otherwise, I would try to leave her with you. She has never had a friend, I think. Or a mother. When does Nyssa leave for New York?"

Margarita draws a deep breath, then lets it out slowly.

"She isn't going to New York."

Her eyes look into mine.

"Indeed."

"She insisted."

We both look toward the house, then turn back to each other.

"So it would seem they are going to be friends after all."

As the panga moves away from the dock, Liberty and Nyssa wave from the front of the boat at Margarita standing with arms crossed, watching. How many mothers have stood and watched their sons leave to serve their country, wondering if they would recognize them again, if they survived. I think it must be like that for Margarita, who well knows our mission and the lives at stake, and why her daughter's choice of service should be respected. In the

sacred marriage, the bedroom is not a sterile place, but the stage where the muse and hero play, to cast off the difficulties of their mother/father roles and recharge each other for the loving execution of their parental duties.

There are those who think I corrupt women, and take advantage of their desperation, and certainly, there is some truth in their accusations. On the other hand, it is legal, they are consenting adults, and for those who do not believe that sex is evil, or disgusting, or humiliating, we have a lot of fun, it pays unusually well, and it is as safe as we can make it.

At Witch's Rock we work hard at demonstrating that safe sex can be great sex, and convincing our adult audience to have sex within the rules of engagement designed for our protection. Disease and unwanted pregnancy are deadly serious problems, and abstinence is often far more difficult, and less practical, and less entertaining, than playing within the rules. Someone needs to be a role model in this business.

We volunteered.

I respect those who chose abstinence, particularly for those searching for true love with the dream of raising children. This was my dream for many years. At Rising Tide we teach our children about the risks, and about the methods for trying to manage those risks. Even so, if they want to be our students they must promise to abstain from sex and drugs, and to focus their efforts on growing stronger. Sex and drugs can divert an enormous amount of time and energy from the vital task of preparing to solo as adults. The reality is that if they remove sex and drugs from their young lives, they remove some very ugly probability distributions, and a lot of tragic consequence that could occur, will not occur. Adulthood, like almost everything else, is very dangerous at the beginning.

In exchange, we promise to help them prepare as best we can for that glorious day they cross the threshold into legal adulthood and take command of their lives. The AOI's scream at us in righteous wrath, but they express their love

for their children by withholding information that punishes the disobedient with misery and death. For this cruelty I have no respect. They are not pro-life. They are anti-sex.

Lysistrata, my partner, is a magnet for the single mothers, and has formed a coven which operates the couples competition, for which we are perhaps most famous. The online school feeds the competition, where Lysistrata teaches sexual yoga and sexual play, mostly to women that make up the bulk of our video sales. And three times now I have taken on the aspect of Christopher Sly, playwright, to write the play, then step back, and write the novel about writing the play, and then we make the film, the pilot for a series, and we all get rich.

I am a man surrounded by women who are uncommonly skilled, thanks to Lysistrata's school. And when I wish to write a scene, they take the stage, and we build our characters and our play. And when I want to see it on film, we pick up the cameras and we shoot the scene. And when we want to be amused, it can become very amusing.

Sometimes I wonder why a man would be a king, when he could be a writer. And I wonder why a writer would plot a tragedy, when he could create utopia, and step inside.

How I love to be outnumbered, nestled in the coven's care. Every heartbeat brings me closer. I think of Lysistrata who set me free, who shares with me the way and its power, and who helped me craft the art of play. For most of my life I couldn't find Her, and now I see Her everywhere. From every woman's eyes she shines, and in every woman's touch, she soothes.

I am a man who is completely enamored with the female of the species.

I watch Liberty and Nyssa as we approach the shore, trying to guess what is going on inside of them. Within minutes they will enter a world unlike any most will ever know, and within the hour, they will no longer be the girls who walked through the door. A change will occur quickly,

and drastically, and they will never be able to go back to what they were in the time before. It is the same damn trick, where the monster forces the children to murder their past, but without the force, and the murder, though some might describe it as a fate worse than death.

They are not invited.

The alchemical process our initiates undergo has much in common with military basic training, where they empty the body of the recruit, and fill it with a warrior character. The military begins by shaving your head, and taking away your possessions and making it very clear that you are not in charge, to extinguish egocentric pride. We begin in much the same way, and it immediately lets them know that life will never be the same. We quickly strip away the sexual shame and guilt and fear of humiliation, and give them little time to stand quivering naked on the cliff before plunging them into the sea. The hero must be the wooer of the solution, she must be motivated to seek the training we provide. She must be prepared to obey the teacher, or she is in the way of all those who are.

The estate is on a ridge overlooking a long beach, and it has views that blur my eyes. Lupe runs the panga through the waves and up onto the sand. The girls who were on the beach come running, and we are quickly surrounded by bikini clad wraiths, helping with the luggage, and blowing smoke up my ass about how much more handsome I have become while I was away. They switch to English when they realize Liberty does not speak Spanish. Lilith, Lysistrata's youngest daughter, smiles impishly. She takes Liberty's and Nyssa's hands and leads them away. Lupe watches with glowing eyes.

"I'm going to pay your mother for your help. But just between us..."

I slide him a couple hundred dollars, and he grins.

"Don't be careless."

I help him shove off.

Every time I come home, I wonder how I could have ever left. There is no other man on earth with more to hold him in his castle. My eyes trace up the beach, to where Rising Tide sits further down the ridge, and I smile. We have hundreds of children, and every single one is a hero in training. Over the last ten years we have been working hard on developing a curriculum preparing tomorrow's masters of solution. To quote a wise soul –

“Trust those who seek the truth. Distrust those who find it.”

No monster trap will hold back the children of the rising tide.

Chico's son, Carlos, graduated last year from the University of Costa Rica with a degree in mathematics, and has been working with the Rising Tide Trading Team on a special project involving neural networks, and the stock market. Carlos and I would need to talk. But first...

Lysistrata stands smiling at the gate. This is that moment, while I cross the sand, that I feel most like a man, to have such a woman meet me naked at the door.

She is my epiphany.

We spent the day in private play. I may not be nineteen, but I have been well schooled by a master of the craft, and I have learned the Chinese secrets, and no longer spill the juice, or lose my focus on the task at hand.

Afterwards, we lie side by side beneath the creaking fan turning above the bed. She reaches over and pinches a love handle and I know I've just been placed on a diet. She is waiting for me to begin.

“How do you feel about expanding Rising Tide into a network?”

“Another school?”

“Maybe more.”

“How?”

I roll onto my side and slide my hand over her belly.

“You were right about my brother. And the others like him. I can’t stop them from fighting. I’m done trying.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too.”

She rolls her back against me and we spoon.

“We don’t need their help. And we don’t need their permission.”

She turns to see my face, and I realize that some of my anger had slipped into my voice.

“I want to open a writer’s school. How soon can we start a new initiate cycle?”

She pushes me over and climbs on top.

“Two weeks. What are you up to, sly guy?”

“I want to try out a writer’s initiation as part of the play I’m working on. I want to work with Nyssa and Liberty. I’m looking for one more girl who wants the role of initiate playwright.”

Lysistrata laughs. “Christopher Sly is going to teach. This should draw a crowd. What’s the play?”

My hands glide along her curves.

“We’re going to move the victims out of the way of monsters’ killing machines, and teach them how to live without having to go back into the war zones. The monsters can torture each other when they need to have some fun.”

She stops my hands on her breasts.

“And if the monsters swallow the entire world?”

“Then we lose. We all lose.”

She lays down on me, and I can no longer tell where she ends, and I begin.

“I want a happy ending.”

So do I, but every hero knows how this story ends.

She squeezes me.

“I want a happy ending.”

I sigh.

“OK.”

“Promise?”

Pause. She squeezes me again.

“Alright. I promise.”

Minutes later she is asleep in my arms.

In the morning we greet dawn while drinking Costa Rican coffee on the veranda to the sounds of howler monkeys and raucous parrots and cock-a-doodle-doos.

“Do you know a monster when you see one?”

Lysistrata’s eyes flash toward me, then away, and she raises her coffee cup and takes her time sipping. She lowers it.

“Sometimes. Many of the younger ones have not yet learned the need to conceal themselves. And many never will. But some are practiced liars. They are clever, and they are patient, and they have learned how to hide their appetites. They stalk their prey from inside of innocent roles.”

“Until they feed?”

She stares back at me with haunted eyes, then slowly nods her head.

“Until they feed.”

“Are there women who could spot a monster during sex?”

Again the flashing eyes, the slow sip.

“Not all women. There are those who are too kind to see the disease inside of the monster’s heart. And there are women who are monster lovers. And there are women who are monsters. But some women will never be fooled again.”

“Can it be taught? I want to train writers who can see monsters.”

“What are you after?”

My turn to flash my eyes, and slowly sip.

“A team of heroes.”

“You want women to test them?”

I shrug and grin.

“I need a monster filter. And I need some hero bait. What repels the monsters will bring the heroes sprinting to the game.”

“In exchange for?”

“Subject to negotiation.”

She grins and slides her foot up my calf and across my thigh.

Two weeks of discussion and planning, of sorting through options and reviewing the candidates passed quickly. Tomorrow begins The Road of Trials, long grueling days of surfing and volleyball, yoga and tai chi, of standing naked on our stage and telling the story of who they are and what made them that way, of why they are here, and who they want to be. The initiation play they write is an examination of their life, and their choice of commitment to the Mission of the Muse.

On the first stage of the initiation they must strengthen their spiritual force against the fears and appetites of the body. They must be able to push the body onward when it is screaming in pain, and resist their appetite's vicious cravings. There are many addictions to be broken on the path to freedom. Those challenges begin with the visible, the quantifiable task of forcing the body to obey, and thus drawing the first line between Body and Spirit, and moving their identity from observed, to observer.

The nice thing about working with the flow is how quickly embarrassment transmutes into mirth. Nudity feels like shedding a heavy cloak, and sex feels even better, once fear, embarrassment, shame, and guilt are out of the way. Nudity and sex are natural pleasures that are a gift from the Creator. In the military initiation, humiliation is a tool to stomp out proud egos and allow the formation of a disciplined team. Lysistrata accomplishes the same thing without the screaming. Sexual humiliation is far more effective than ten decibel cursing in the recruit's ear.

Once the initiation begins, there is nowhere to hide from the experience in progress. Peer pressure and peer support quickly melt away fears of social condemnation, and transform them into focusing on mastering the skills for which the muses are justly famous. The initiates are well

aware of the mission of Witch's Rock, and that many children are fed and cared for, and many lives are saved and enriched, by their gift of themselves. We do not emphasize their financial gains, but they exist, and they are far more generous than military compensation.

Decades of prudish social programming can dissolve overnight, and the natural woman that terrifies the Patriarch emerges, and she becomes the blessed mother in all her naked glory. She stops trying to conceal both her body and her sexual appetite, and takes upon herself an aspect of power that brings strong men running to the scent, while the weak slink away, or gang up to revile, rape, and torture her, and sow her back into her shroud.

The Muse, by some magic I have yet to comprehend, prepares her vessels for the day when She calls them to Her hero play. As it was for me, so it is for them.

From a distance, I watch my three students and Lilith play volleyball in the sand. Liberty, the victim, seems by far the most comfortable, but I am increasingly concerned that her attitude conceals a self-destructive despair. She is too anxious for the role of harlot, as though out to prove she has no interest in dreams of love and marriage. It is sour grapes, because she has not abandoned her dreams, they have abandoned her. In the only way she knows how, she has set out to prove how tough she is, but I am too old, and have seen too much to be fooled. Her dream still lives, a smoldering ember waiting for the slightest breeze. And her nightmares still linger, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. She is a tragedy in progress.

Nyssa is the shy girl, and how well I understand the desperation of her struggle to be free of those glass chains, and her hunger for the intimacy of belonging. She stands outside the party, looking forlorn and confused as to why she cannot enter and laugh and touch and warm beneath the hero's eyes. Her art has long since become her voice. She thinks she can hide behind the camera while the living play, and claims she is here to learn the craft, but I can see inside

her as easily as looking into myself, and she is here to break her chains, to sing and dance upon our stage with carefree joy, a well loved member of the team.

Hanna is the good girl rebelling against a web of laws she was never supposed to escape. She was raised Amish in the countryside of Pennsylvania, and if her clan could see her now, playing while the cameras roll, they would boil me alive. Her story is full of heroism, how she secretly befriended an old woman who had a library, and how she found her magic portal in a book pulled from those shelves, and how she planned and plotted her way to our pearly gate. It must have been strange indeed for her to walk among them after experiencing a world of literature that had set her mind free, but left her body bound. Hanna says she is here because she read Witch's Rock, and she wants to be a writer. But like Nyssa and Liberty, she is here for a reason she doesn't understand, a frantic need to claw her way out of the suffocating layers that are strangling her life. It is not the writer's role she truly seeks, but the hero's.

I understand the rising panic of ragged breath, and the thrashing battle to break free before you sink forever into the role of the living dead. What great courage it must have taken for these girls to make this choice and burn those bridges behind them, to leap naked into uncertainty because they could no longer live with who they were forced to be.

The kings will be furious that these pawns have slipped the kingdom walls and chosen to play the muse.

I quickly regretted my decision to undertake their Road of Trial with them, though I excused myself from those exercises that were a physical impossibility. I had little to say, and less breath to say it with than I expected. Lysistrata and Lilith might not scream like drill sergeants, but they drove us mercilessly, and even the inspirational scenery could not convince my aging body to forget its pain completely.

Each day Lysistrata forced us to dig deeper into our hero's hearts to push our bodies far past where they wished to go, then fed us rabbit food as nourishment. Each night we spilt our guts out before the world in the five hundred word blogs each published inside our website by the photos from that day's charge up Hero Hill. The crew had great fun finding new faces to mount upon my body to conceal my identity and stoke the mystery of Christopher Sly.

Despite all hormonal logic, it was me that caught the imagination of the press. Word spread like wild fire, and stories began to appear that Christopher Sly was making a play. Our membership doubled, then doubled again as the month wore on and we approached the tantric 'confidence course' spectacle that marked the transition to our next stage. It will be quite a show of teamwork on that blessed night when the Road of Trials ends, and the Goddesses gather.

Perhaps I should have paid more attention to what was going on with our membership, and what was happening in the press. It didn't help my peace of mind when I edged out my childhood idol, Hugh Hefner, to be voted the luckiest man on the planet in a Playboy reader poll. Once again, the world has begun to wonder-

Who is Christopher Sly?

There was a test my brother used to determine whether to train a pup, or drown him. He would take a bloody bone and toss it to the puppy pack to find out who ends up with it. I never sat in a classroom as a child, but I have talked with many who did, and all too often, their schools, and their societies, performed this puppy test in one form or another. How easily the fortunate assume themselves deserving of their luck, and the unfortunate deserving of their misery.

Back in the country where I was born, the latest rage in education is to abandon student experimentation, and instead, to shove the authorized truth down the student's throat, and then to glorify the test results as proof of how

well it was digested. If it is not measured by their test, then it is not worth learning, and therefore, not worth teaching. This is why, by grade twelve, the children of this wealthy land are among the worst problem solvers on the planet, with no shortage of problems in their future.

For many years they have solved this by importing talent to their universities, but now, their war on terror is raising walls around their borders, and the foreign brains are seeking out other places to earn their way. Many of their homegrown scientists are looking for research laboratories that do not provide the demanded conclusions before the experiment is run. In Europe, they call it the ‘brain gain’. Draw a line on a chart to mark this trend, and any experienced trader will warn you that it may be time for the clever rats to find another ride.

What terrible chaos might result if the masses were empowered to plot their own lives, and they chose not to join the pirate ships? The masters believe this will be a better world when slaves learn to shut their mouths, and do as they are told, or spend their lives in prison getting raped.

At Rising Tide, we do not know the truth, so we are forced to practice the process of solution. Our classrooms are not feeding frenzies where the winners get fat, and the losers get eaten. At Rising Tide we are a team, and all get over the wall, and all are precious.

Carlos lounges under a palm tree watching the surf. It was perhaps unfair of me to bring Liberty in a string bikini. I sit on one side of Carlos, and she sits down on the other. I introduce them.

“I heard a story once about a band of rogues who elected the worse rogue among them to figure out how to rape, pillage, and plunder the competition. How do you suppose the story ends?”

Carlos eyes are watchful, uncommitted.

“The head rogue pisses off the competition, and they get together and hang the pirates from the nearest tree.”

I lean back and pretend to watch the waves while Carlos steals glances at Liberty. Her smile is almost blinding.

“Right. Now suppose you are that worst rogue, and no foolish youngster at this game, and that you know the competition is well prepared to defend against you.”

Carlos glances over at me and I grin. He lays back and closes his eyes.

“I don’t attack.”

“But you are a rogue, attacking is what you do. Perhaps you can find a less guarded victim?”

Carlos sits up suddenly.

“I eat my own team...”

To his credit, the concept seems to shock him.

“What could be easier? They handed you the power, they are unguarded against you. There is no downside, even the competition is cheering while you chew.”

His head swivels from liberty to me, trying to figure out where this is going.

“Suppose we avoid that mistake. Suppose we build a character filter, like a stock filter, that prevents the rogues from getting on the team the same way our stock filter prevents the losers from getting into our portfolio. What else could go wrong, when we chose a captain to lead the team?”

“Incompetence?”

“Right.”

I watch my noisy feathered friends carve their lines across the Costa Rican sky.

“So, if you were going to assemble a team of players into a solution engine, it might be a good tactic to prevent the selfish and the incompetent from wrecking the play?”

“A two stage filter?”

“Exactly. Grateful hearts and seeking minds. You screen out selfishness and incompetence, and you end up with excellent problem solvers who work well as a hero team. A couple of terms – Cooperative Distributed Problem Solving, and Multi-Agent Solution Engines.”

His eyes are on me, but focused far away.

“Carlos, I want you to lead a design project for a game I’m working on. It’s called Superhero Theater. I need an IDE that assembles Hero Objects into solution plays. Think of the heroes as solution functions, the ‘active equal’ that transforms problems into solutions. You assign them a mission, and they apply their tactical skills and resources to solve the problem and complete their mission. You chain the hero functions into algorithms, just like a football play, ‘you block that big ugly guy, you go down and out, you hike the ball on two.’ The solution designers are the playwrights. The heroes are the players.”

“The hero objects are people?”

“Waiting for their parts in the play. Another way of looking at this is that we are building a hero engine. I want a hero harness large enough for a lot of heroes, but sensitive enough so that each and every hero can use their unique abilities to best effect.”

“And the playwrights are a team?”

“And possibly distant from each other. They hold the reins of the harness.”

“More than one play in progress?”

“Right. There are a lot more players than playwrights, and you’ll need to win a spot in the playwright circle, so there will be a playwright pipe starting in elementary school, like little league, so that the young playwrights can master the solution skills and advance from level to level. At the top level, it’s like making the NBA. You can’t lie your way onto the Lakers, and you can’t cheat your way onto the Lakers, and you can’t buy your way onto the Lakers. It all goes down in front of the audience. Everyone gets to see whether you earned the right to be there, to write for heroes, and whether you have what it takes to stay there.

“At any given time, heroes will be reporting for duty, placing themselves on call for their Hero Hour. And in an emergency, the playwrights can issue the hero call to

magnify available resources. The playwrights will need sense objects to collect the information they need.

“Imagine an earthquake triggering the playwright interrupt. They start opening eyes and ears using cell phones, locating the center, and calling the heroes to clear the beaches before the tidal wave kills hundreds of thousands of people. In the meantime, money is flowing into the fuel tank, and aid is flowing out to where it needs to go. Everything is set in motion within seconds of the first sensor alerting the Superhero that an emergency is in progress. I want one-hundred percent transparency.”

He looks hesitant.

“I’m going to need a lot of help.”

I slap his back with a grin.

“I’m working on that. I was thinking, maybe you should come over for a beer tonight.”

He comes back with a blink. It is a pregnant pause. I can imagine Chico laughing.

“To the estate?”

“Yup.”

His head swivels.

“I thought other guys were taboo over there.”

I sigh. End of an era...

“They were. But I’m going to need some help with this latest play. And I’m going to need the real thing for the girls to practice on.”

Liberty’s smile is intoxicating. Carlos gets a little red.

“You want me to... I’m not sure I’m up to that.”

“No guts, no story, Carlos. Can’t you hear the girls chanting your name? After the first time, you’ll wonder what you were afraid of.”

Carlo fidgets.

“It’s not that I’m against the idea, in theory.”

Liberty leans over and places a hand on his shoulder.

“Please, Carlos? Please help us save the children.”

I leave them to discuss it.

Lilith wraps her arms around Carlos's neck from behind. She has a great capacity for making contact, for creating an intimate space inside the barriers we surround ourselves with. And she is a creature very comfortable with her body and its pleasures. I am not surprised that the girls have managed to convince Carlos that this is where he wants to be. Like her mother, Lilith is truly magic when she moves. She whispers something in his ear.

Carlos's palms caress the conga skins. He lifts his hands and pauses, then begins searching for the beat. And as his primal rhythms find their voice and weave their spell, the girls begin to dance, and it is not a sight I will soon forget. When Lilith dances, it can raise the dead. For the first time in a long time, I let them lead me to the stage where Lysistrata waits to light this wild night, and mark the gathering of the Circle. The walls come down, and we become the loving creatures that we believe the Loving God meant for us to be.

Chapter Seven – The Meeting with the Goddess

“The ultimate adventure, when all the barriers and ogres have been overcome, is commonly represented as a mystical marriage . . . of the triumphant hero-soul with the Queen Goddess of the World. This is the crisis at the nadir, the zenith, or at the uttermost edge of the earth, at the central point of the cosmos, in the tabernacle of the temple, or within the darkness of the deepest chamber of the heart.”

The Hero with a Thousand Faces

We are a motley crew, with scars inside and out, and several outstanding tattoos. And we are older, and in some cases plumper, and less photogenic than many, with or without our clothes. But we are the writers, and in our game, the writers rule. We have no bank where we must go begging, and no bean-counting executive to which we crawl on bloody knees. Witch’s Rock is run by this writer’s circle, and that is the way we like it, and that is the way we intend to keep it. When I sit with them we sit as equals, and each respects the other, and all support the team.

They wait, and watch me. I glance around their faces, and try to decide how I can best convince them to send me their daughters, and their granddaughters, to become my sacred prostitutes.

I work my way through the same basic story that I had given Lysistrata, and she had prepped them on some of the details. These women are matrons who have earned their stretch marks and chewed nipples, who have seen the best and worst of men and had monsters between their legs, and children bouncing on their knee. Most, if not all, had at least once fed her brood by working on her back, in one form or another. They have had hard, dirt poor, struggling years, and lately, years of plenty.

They are a very experienced team.

“I’m still early in the design process, but I think I want to try doing something similar to what we did when we established Witch’s Rock. I am working on a novel that will become a pilot film for a series about a university, New Atlantis, that produces a reality game, Superhero Theater, that is controlled by students that must enter the game by undergoing an initiation in alchemy at Witch’s Rock.

“I’m not tracking. Is this a dramatic series, or is it real?”

“Both. Perhaps. We identify the problem, the victims who will die without our help. We create a dramatic series about a place that is dedicated to the mission of solving this problem, New Atlantis producing Superhero Theater. Then we use the revenues from the dramatic series, and the initiations, to create the real New Atlantis, and the real Superhero Theater designs the solutions and directs their implementation.

“Think of it this way. The heroes build a solution engine from a global university network that is always on, always watching and identifying the problems and cranking out implementable solutions, practicing twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. But the solutions are virtual, until someone pours money in the fuel tank.

“I write the book, we make the film, we open the membership site. We use the book, the film, and the dramatic series to call the audience to pay for membership to the adult website, and we use the website to call the students to the game. But the money from the website goes to the university to provide for the student scholarships and pay the faculty and buy equipment and expand university facilities. And after the university is up and running, we open Superhero Theater, and the proceeds and donations from the theater go to instantiating the solutions. Finally, the students of the real New Atlantis take over the production of the dramatic series about the students of the fictional New Atlantis, and the money from that series goes to the alumni association.

“We take care of the university, we take care of the mission of the university, and we take care of our players who spent four years taking care of the mission of the university.”

“Startup?”

“It bootstraps from the novel, if the audience is there. But if you give me a little room to add some names to the honorary alumni list, Lysistrata can crack open her rolodex, and we’ll draw some heroes out of shaky town before the forever war brings their curtain down. We will assemble the most talented theater arts faculty on this planet to teach at our country club university, on the beach, in a peaceful, democratic, tropical paradise. A safe haven, just in case they need to leave town in a hurry, and want someplace friendly where they are welcome. Let’s not forget that we are writers for a theater, and a few stars won’t hurt our receipts at the box office, or our student applicant pool. We need to convince the talent to play for us, instead of the Soulless Ones.

“One more thing. The real money for these players comes after they graduate. They are going to be members of a talented, wealthy, connected alumni association, with private resort-studios in numerous pleasant locations where they can continue to work on private projects, such as raising children, investments, films, continued research, surfing, etc. They are going to have a full service benefit plan for life, and none of them will ever go hungry, or lack a nice place to live, or go without medical care. They can, if they wish, retire upon graduation.

“But to get there, to become alumni, they need to spend four years in humanitarian service, working for New Atlantis and helping put smiles on a lot of desperate faces, many of which may have never smiled before. Saving people is the goal of this project. Every line I draw is there to motivate the players to help accomplish this goal.”

We sort through the details of the non-profit university charter, and how the board is organized, and how,

in the future, members will be selected from the muses who complete the degrees and internships. We lay down the rules of engagement between the heroes and the muses, and ways the competitions might be run to test the applicants minds, and how the muses will chose from those heroes of suitable heart, and how they must keep the selfish egos off the team, and why that matters so very much.

“This is a sacred marriage, a bond forged between men and women to care for children. These are the guys that you can go to when you need something done, the masters of win-win solution space. You cannot trust the misogynists, or the pedophiles, or the sex haters, or the paranoid greedy control freaks that claim that they are God. You want hero stock, solution studs, men who love women, who will work hard to please you, and who have demonstrated a creative ability to make you smile.

“I need your muses to call my heroes, and I need your muses to vet their hearts. I’m not asking your girls to sleep with monsters. They are going to be rubbing up against the sharpest minds and greatest spirits in the gene pool. Your girls are about to skim the planet of its hero seed, and put it to work serving The Mission of the Muse—

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free,

“The wretched refuse of your teaming shores.

“Send these, the homeless, tempest tossed to me,

“I lift my lamp beside the golden door.”

They exchange glances. Maria grins.

“I don’t know if you can pull it off, but you’re going to get laid just for trying.”

Margarita shakes her head.

“Better do it quick, then. They’ll stretch his neck this time for sure.”

“Or burn him at the stake.”

“Dismemberment.”

“And it was such a lovely member.”

I shake it at them, and we end up rolling on the floor.

We talked long into the night, and they plied me with alcohol and their magic touch in pursuit of the truth. They were sympathetic to the circumstances that brought Liberty to them, and nervous about the consequences that might follow. And how well they understood my moral dilemma, and perhaps enjoyed it a little too much, that the man who had asked for their daughters now must initiate his niece. My opinions blew back and forth with the wind as they talked of the dangers and the conflicts and the curses. Hypocrisy in this matter is not something our circle could long survive. This is, for better or worse, the family business, and many lives depend upon its continued success.

All gathered here have learned to deal with life as it is, not as we think it should be, and the protection we so fiercely provide our children must give way to a partnership between adults. No one enters these walls except by free choice, and none stays long without the conviction to conquer the Road of Trials where the initiation begins.

The hero must be the wooer. The student must be the seeker. This is the physics of Supply and Demand. The transformation we assist is not possible unless motivated from within, and since we are not infinite, we can only accommodate those who most earnestly desire what we provide. It is exactly that part of us capable of effort that is being distilled on the Road of Trials. The hero must answer the call. If they are incapable of effort, they do not exist. If they have even the slightest spark, it can be fanned into a blazing sun.

It must be their choice.

They were quite taken with Carlos, but they warned me to beware of introducing males too early in the initiation process or the girls would become distracted when they should be focused on the task, and on forging the bonds of sisterhood that will sustain them through the storms ahead. I spoke of my efforts to design an initiation that would fuse The Hero's Journey and The Writer's Journey to establish a

Writer's Path, and how it might be possible to integrate this into the educational philosophy of Rising Tide and create a story based educational system. If they would become the writers of their own lives, they must master the stages of the journey to understand the terrain of metamorphosis, and make visible the full character spectrum, and how paths become tangled and characters become lost.

They asked many questions, and wheedled my promise to try out a series of lectures on the initiates, who were about to begin the Meeting with the Goddess. It was after that one drink too many that they convinced me to let them film it, as long as they concealed my face to keep the mystery of Sly alive.

The initiates watch me from the front seats, while behind them the writers grin at my discomfort and the cameras rolls. With a sweaty hand I pick up a piece of chalk and draw a large circle on the classroom blackboard.

“Congratulation for having survived the Road of Trials. It is impossible for you to see how far you have come from where this journey began. All of the difficulties you have fought through were not intended to torture you, but to let you experience that your Spirit is capable of pushing your body forward when it is screaming to stop: to prove that your Spirit is capable of resisting your appetites when they are clamoring to be fed: to demonstrate that when you exercise your Spirit, it grows stronger.

“You are not your fears and their hungers. You do not have to let them command you. The point was not self-denial or self-punishment to worship pain, but to lose your fear of it, and to separate your identity from your body so you understand that you are not a leaf on the wind. You have only begun to taste the power of the realm you are about to enter. What has begun with your bodies now moves to your minds. You will turn your spiritual power to the task of freeing yourself from the fears and hungers of the ego character that has trapped you inside its web of lies.

“Before you stands the Mysterious Pass. Only sincerity of intent can make this climb. Only the pure of heart can feel the path rise beneath their feet. I wish all of you luck on the epic journey stretching before you.

“I am going to diagram a model of a transformation in consciousness, but before we get to the model, I want to make sure you understand that a model is not reality. It is a simplified explanation of reality. And its worth, in my opinion, is measured by its usefulness. We create models to help us guess right.

“But a picture of the moon is not the moon. Models are false by definition. They are explanations of reality simplified into a form that we can grasp and use. They can be wildly inaccurate in some, or all situations. Which becomes a problem, when your life, and the lives of others, are depending upon the accuracy of your predictions. If you take nothing else away from this initiation except an awareness that your beliefs are models, and models are not reality, then for the rest of your life, you can avoid getting trapped inside of beliefs that can’t possibly be wrong. Believing that something is true does not make it true.

“When our beliefs are no longer beliefs, but God’s truth, then any data that contradicts our belief must either be shut out, or shut off. This leads to data starvation, and severs the circuit between reality and imagination. If you find yourself inside a belief system that promises Heaven if you accept it, and where the exit from those beliefs is hidden behind a sign reading Hell, you are in a monster trap. Monsters cannot destroy the exit, they can only rename it, or try to conceal it in silence, or slaughter those who try to use it.

“The pieces on the chess board can transform into characters that can leave the board. The King does not want his slaves to escape. There was a time when teaching a slave how to read was punishable by death. Thousands of people were burned at the stake, and worse, for heresy. The monsters cannot afford to allow the mutton to catch wind of

their game. But they cannot change the laws of physics that allow escape. They can only terrify us of the consequences of doubt, threaten us with the wrath of an angry God, and butcher the heretics they catch as a warning to the other mutton. They must keep doubt from spreading, because once lies become visible, the monster's game is up. Make no mistake about the monster's intentions. If the monster wins the day, our world will become a slaughterhouse.

“Obedience is the King's only strategic goal. Brutality, deceit, and threats are his primary tactics.

“It is the carrot and the stick: some seductive vision of heaven if your characters accept the cage of lies, some terrifying vision of hell if they reject them. On The Ego's Journey, The Goddess is seductive fantasy: The Temptress is harsh reality. Many get trapped below the falls because their weakness makes them prefer comfortable lies, placing appearance above substance. They embrace fantasy, and reject reality. They lose their way in the labyrinth, stumbling deeper and deeper into the dark passages of the liar's heart. They become incapable of thought, and their awareness, and their problem solving capacities atrophy. The hero character escapes the trap by reversing this polarity, and thus finds their way through this maze of hallucinations to awaken from the egocentric dream. The Goddess becomes reality, the Temptress, imagination.”

I write “Raw Data” outside the circle. In the center of the circle I draw an eye with a dark pupil.

“Light waves can be modeled as vibration. Temperature and sound and odor and pressure are vibration. The circle is the sense field, an antenna that receives vibration. Outside of the sense field is vibrating raw data. Inside the circle is Spirit fused to awareness. Your Spirit is not pushing and pulling muscles in this stage, but forcing open the connection between awareness and the sense field, to allow the continuous flow of raw data to reach open awareness. This is the base model of consciousness that we will try to reach and hold.

“Think of time as a wave. Your consciousness is trying to catch and ride the moving present. Try a quick exercise I call ‘dropping in’. Close your eyes. Don’t think, thrust into touch like diving into cold water. Let your spirit push your awareness out to your nerve ends and feel your body from the inside. Make your body conscious. Catch the wave of time beating to your heart, pumping through your lungs, rushing in your blood.”

I wait.

“What happened to your beliefs while your awareness was wired directly to the sense field collecting raw data?”

I turn and draw a smaller circle inside of the sense field, around awareness.

“I call this the holodeck. If you have ever been awake inside of a dream, or a hallucination, you have direct experience of the holodeck and its ability to completely simulate sensory input.

“I had a lucid dream once where I was in a biker bar watching someone play pinball. I stomped my foot a couple times and felt it. Then I turned to the pool table where some of the larger patrons were shooting pool. I ambled over and got a brilliant idea to test if I could move something. I reached over and pushed one of the balls, grinning. I glanced up to see if I had freaked him out. He was staring right at me.

“You’re not invisible.”

“Which led me to ponder - why had I thought I was invisible?”

“Think about the ramifications.”

I point to the holodeck.

“Here you are, trapped inside of a sensory simulation chamber that makes up stories, that manufactures data.”

I point to the larger circle.

“And here is the real data, the data that could warn you that a bear is about to eat you. Notice that there is a complete disconnect between your awareness, and the raw data. Notice also that the holodeck invents its own data. And

sometimes it takes you to heaven. And sometimes it plunges you into hell. But is any of it real?

“There was an old Chinese guy who wrote about waking up from a dream that he was a butterfly, and wondering if he was a man who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or if he was a butterfly, now dreaming that he was a man.

“Funny stuff. Sometimes. Other times it is a nightmare, and you can’t wake up.

“Imagine that you are being raped.”

I pause, giving them time to prepare themselves.

“Outside, in the sense field, what is occurring may be no more physically painful than what a football player voluntarily subjects his body to. Or it may be as painful as a disfiguring accident. Or it may kill you. I am not here to lessen the crime. It is heinous. But that is for the law to deal with, and we are not the law. We are the victims.

“What is happening inside of the holodeck is beyond description, and the lasting effects may turn the rest of our life into a living nightmare.

“What happened in the sense field actually happened. What happened on the holodeck did not, but that is where all of the psychological damage occurred. If there were no holodeck, and no lasting physical injury, we walk away. It is not even a memory, because the sense field does not have memory. It vibrates with the raw data in the present. There is no room for thought and interpretations, no room for emotion.

“Think about this. It is why this transformation is difficult. Who wants to give up thought? Who wants to give up emotion? Only the victims trapped inside of their nightmares would prefer to be thoughtless and emotionless as a release from the chamber of horrors that their life has become.

“Where is that chamber of horrors, but on the holodeck? And since we have experienced the escape from the holodeck, however briefly, we know that thoughts and

emotions are not consciousness. Spirit can ground out the holodeck, can leave behind thoughts and emotions and wire awareness directly to the antenna, data reception, touching the present in real-time. Once again, this turns out to have enormous ramifications. If awareness has no thoughts or emotions, then what does?”

I draw smaller circle around Spirit, inside of the holodeck.

“Consider a character constructed by the holodeck. Spirit is trapped inside of this constructed character, which is trapped inside the constructed reality. Spirit is controlled by both the distorted perceptions of the character, and the distorted reality on the holodeck. Spirit becomes lost in the show, the same way it gets sucked into a film, or the story in a novel, or the hypnotic lies of a monster. The task here is to dissolve the character and ground out the holodeck, to free your awareness from the distorted perceptual limitations, beliefs, biases, and everything else that character suffers from.

“As writers, think about how this affects the characters you create and how they act. Consider how dissolving the character is different than trying to heal the character of its nightmares. Consider how awareness consciously switching the character it is playing differs from character consciously switching the role it is playing. The role is bound by the limits of the character inside of it. The character is bound by the limits of Spirit and awareness.

“The limits of Spirit are unknown, at least by me. The limits of awareness are not easy to define, except to postulate that they exist. Human hardware limits on perception, and on interpretation, are what suggest the inescapability of uncertainty. You can’t possibly perceive everything in the universe, and even if you could, you can’t possibly be sure you understand it completely. You only have to guess wrong once to prove this. What kind of psychosis is someone suffering from when they guess wrong frequently, yet insist that their judgment is infallible? They

are either liars, or they are insane. The monsters lie to everyone. The mutton lie to themselves.

“Consider the first person to pick up a guitar. What is the likelihood that, without intent, without training, he will become Eric Clapton? How much better is it possible to get? Nobody knows. And nobody knows the limits of awareness. Nobody knows the limits on what the antenna can tune in. Nobody knows what the limits are on its ability to broadcast, becoming a transceiver.

Long pause.

“But what many people have experienced is that it is very difficult in the beginning, like learning to play the guitar, and very easy to give up on before you feel the music. What everybody learns is that it takes a lot of serious practice. This stage of your initiation will attempt to advance you to the level where you can feel the music. Beyond that is a vast unknown.

“There is a story about a man who had an opportunity to interview the teacher of an eastern philosopher named Gurdjeif. When he met the teacher, he asked him, ‘what did you teach Gurdjeif?’ The teacher responded, ‘I taught Gurdjeif how to breathe.’”

“Is that all, the man asked?”

“Fool!, the teacher scoffed.

“Here is the move that I want you to practice, and we will practice it in a variety of increasingly complex real-time activities, beginning with sitting still and breathing consciously. This is the exercise you must master, day and night, for the rest of your lives. In the days ahead you will be forced to make a choice, to embrace this new state of existence, or slip back into the daydreams that rule your Spirit and burn up your life. When I say drop in –” I turn to the blackboard and erase the character and the holodeck circles, “you cease to exist as you know it. You tear away from whatever thoughts you are watching on the holodeck, and thrust into touch, merge with the sense field, and hold on

for dear life. Become your breath, and breathe with your entire body. You are the bellows of the universe.

“My voice will become the kyosaka, the stick in the Zen Master’s hand. You are the students nodding off in my classroom where the only lesson is to remain awake. Though you struggle to remain aware, your weakness betrays you, and you slide into dreaming inside of the holodeck. Reality is too boring, you whine, nothing is happening, and fantasy is more fun.”

I slam my fist on Liberty’s desk and they all jump. I grin.

“When I awaken you, your ego’s first response will often be annoyance at being pulled away from its dream and being forced to pay attention to reality. You are not interested in what is happening in the boring classroom, you left a fantasy in progress, and you want to get back to it. You are not interested in collecting raw data. You want to drift along inside of your heroic fantasies of self-importance, or your melodrama of self-pity. But if you succeed in escaping the fantasy long enough to take a look around, you may discover it is not actually so boring out here in reality-land. You may discover that the ego’s fantasy world is an addiction that you can live without.

“The classroom will become the world, and my voice will become the wind scraping against your skin, the spice burning on your tongue, the flowers tickling your nose, the sun glaring in your eyes, the birds screaming in your ears. Everything must remind you to be aware of being aware, until you grasp that reality itself is conspiring to awaken you from your dream, if you will only wean your Spirit of its addiction to fantasyland and learn to pay attention to your senses.

“Data collection must precede data analysis.

“It is only when YOU are in contact with the present, that YOU exist in the present. This is an edge that will become more substantial as you cross it, and the feeling of coming into existence is where the term awakening comes

from. You must be able to differentiate clearly between these two distinct states. When you can, the advantage, the power of the awakened state, will become increasingly self-evident. You will grasp why this is difficult, and why it is worth the effort. There are certain things that can only be accomplished in the awakened state, and more than once it has been described as being awake in a land of sleepwalkers, of having sight in the land of the blind.

“The surviving player learns to pay attention.

“You are going to learn how to put your character to death and liberate your awareness. You are going to ground out all of your beliefs, all of your biases, and set your awareness free, baptize yourself in the burning uncertainty of raw data, and stay submerged until you become the empty vessel. This is the mountain that only a hero seeking the truth would even think to climb. To stabilize awareness, you must turn awareness on itself and hold on for dear life.

“All action occurs in the present. If you are not present, you cannot act. If you are present, and the action you take is to become more present, then if you succeed, you can act more effectively. This is the amplification circuit by which Spirit can reach escape velocity from the ego monster’s gravity.

“It is a long hard climb, a continuous struggle to escape the monster trap, and to stay out for longer and longer periods. It is complicated by the dynamic that when you are not aware, when you are asleep, you do not realize you are asleep. It is only when you awaken that you realize you were just asleep. It is only when the horn honks that you realize, oh shit, I’m about to be run over by a bus.

“Imagine attempting to ride a unicycle. At first, all of your concentration must be focused on balancing in the present. But one day, you discover that the balancing has become much easier, and your awareness divides. You are up. You are stable.

“Where do you want to go?

“The guitar is in your hands, your fingers find the strings without thinking.

“What do you want to play?”

“When that moment occurs, you are going to feel the music, you are going to get the surf stoke of a lifetime. Because awareness is balanced in the present, the holodeck is now wired to the raw data in a potent new way. This is a very different operating system architecture. The old Chinese guys have a saying-

“You build a trap to catch a rabbit. After you catch the rabbit, you no longer need the trap. Stop thought to hardwire awareness to the present. Once it is hardwired, you will no longer need to stop thought, because you are no longer trapped inside of a holodeck on automatic. You have synchronized awareness with time. The controls have been shifted to manual, and the Spirit that pushed you up that hill is now in charge.

“Don’t forget that you are still human, you are still guessing. Character reforms with a new set of base assumptions. The holodeck, if you let it, will scare the living crap out of you. It will also anoint you the king of kings. It will try every trick to capture your attention and re-addict you to its fantasies, and it will never give up trying to re-enslave you in its hallucinations by preying upon your character’s fears and hungers.

They exchange glances, and I can hear the question behind their eyes. ‘What the hell is he talking about?’

“There is a term sometimes used: The Transmission of the Lamp. When the student awakens, the first impulse is often one of supreme generosity. The realization of its great value inspires the desire to share what has been discovered. Teachers sometimes channeled this impulse into a ritual called ‘Letter to a Friend’. We are going to blog. Not only is your pursuit of self-mastery a courageous personal journey, but because you are performing in public, and inspiring others, you are the heroes of the players tribe.

“Tonight we will hold the ceremony to mark the beginning of your passage through the darkness of the seeker. We will tie the blindfolds that you will wear to sharpen your sensitivity to the feel of the world around you, and awaken your ability to separate the touch of reality against your skin, and visions on the holodeck. You must discover for yourself the edge crossed between where data is collected, and where data is interpreted.

“Inside of your dream lives the imaginary He for who you long with childish desire, while outside of your dream, He is caressing you, whispering to let go of your fantasies. You must surrender to his touch and invite him inside.

“The king will knock you down and drag you off by the hair and claim you as his royal bitch. The hero will compete to win your favor. Heroes are not rapists, they are not interested in women who want to be dragged off by the hair. Heroes are not stalkers, they are not interested in women who are not interested in them. If you wish to call the hero, you must play the muse.

“Ladies, you are the prize. You are the sparks heaven sent to illuminate the way back to Eden. You are the beating heart of a hero with a thousand faces who will turn back the monster night, and transform this world into the Promised Land. You are the savior we have all been waiting for.

“Players, I salute you.

“Welcome to the game.”

Chapter Eight – Woman as the Temptress

“The crux of the curious difficulty lies in the fact that our conscious views of what life ought to be seldom correspond to what life really is. Generally we refuse to admit within ourselves, or within our friends, the fullness of that pushing, self-protective, malodorous, carnivorous, lecherous fever which is the very nature of the organic cell. Rather, we tend to perfume, whitewash, and reinterpret; meanwhile imagining that all the flies in the ointment, all the hairs in the soup, are the faults of some unpleasant someone else.”

The Hero with a Thousand Faces

What was I thinking?

In boldness there is brilliance, says Goethe, but it may be survivor’s wisdom of questionable value to the road kill. At what point did I slip over the line and become dangerously insane? Did I actually believe I could awaken them? Using sexual alchemy? With cameras rolling? Take THAT reality television!

What if it works?

I become visible. It may already be too late.

“Damn you, Christopher Sly!”

I have to get out of here...

What kind of fool writes his own self-fulfilling epitaph? Ridicule and humiliation I can live with, but sticks and stones will break my bones. I am either going to be the guest of honor at a monster mash, or the laughing stock of eastern philosophy. Or both...

Was I a hero, after all? Had I ever been? When I peer into my rear view mirror, I see an erection looking for a place to hide, looking for the passage back into the mother’s womb.

Did I really believe this crazy scheme was going to work?

Drink. Blink.

Yes I did. I always do. Until it doesn't.

I weave my way to the bedroom and slide carefully into bed. Lysistrata is asleep, facing me. There is something miraculous about the peace she lives inside of, and how it reflects against her face. Her eyes open, and she smiles. Her hand reaches out and touches my chest, over my heart. She leans toward me and kisses me, slowly, tenderly.

“You are going to be a wonderful teacher.”

She falls back and closes her eyes.

“Someday.”

She is grinning.

Perhaps she wants a lesson.

A hero gets back up...

The challenge we face in treating alchemy as a spectator sport is to create exercises that accomplish the task of strengthening the initiates that are also entertaining to watch. Sexual play is not a requirement of the alchemical process, and obviously not appropriate for all, but it is one of the oldest, most powerful, most enjoyable, and most visually inspiring paths to self-mastery. It is our strange attractor that draws the crowds, and exposes them to options most were unaware they had.

There are schools that focus on amplifying pleasure, but our guiding philosophy is The Art of Play, to ride the natural currents of pleasure that the Creator has given us in the direction of increasing our strength and the strength of our team. Our increased pleasure is a byproduct of the pursuit of the discipline to provide greater pleasure to our partner, and like so many cases, it is the selflessness of the act that provides its greatest boon. We teach the women how to convince their men to avoid spilling the juice, and to concentrate on their female partner instead of crossing their own finish line. It is a practice most men balk at initially, unwilling to give up a moment of nirvana, but those who do quickly realize what they have gained in return.

With the women it is different, we encourage them to seek their bliss, but to not be swallowed by it. Sexual play is one of the quickest, most enjoyable, most reliable, and most natural ways to turn up the body's volume knobs. It is also quite entertaining to watch. By the end of the second stage of the initiation, strange things begin to happen to their opening perceptions, and sometimes they are delighted, and sometimes, terrified. It is at this very dangerous nexus when imagination strikes back, with a vengeance.

The challenge of this stage is to prevent new perceptions in the sense field from igniting bizarre hallucinations on the holodeck, which recapture the attention of Spirit with a web of fantastical explanations. It is the most perilous stage of the metamorphosis, because if these fantastical explanations are accepted as true, Spirit is once again enslaved in an insane world, and the journey fails to reach its heroic conclusion, the return to humility. The initiate slides back across the line into ego and becomes trapped inside of the God character, certain it now knows the truth. It is the monster bank shot, off of uncertainty into the truth.

This layer of uncertainty is much less substantial than it appears, and the hallucinations will eventually surrender and subside if the initiate stays on target. They must be dismissed for what they are, delusions spawned by new perceptions that force a penetration deeper into uncertainty than the initiate was aware existed.

The heroic Aladdin must ignore both the illusionary beasts guarding the cavern, and the treasures that call seductively to distract him from his mission.

The magic lamp lies just ahead.

They are still blinking in the first morning light they have seen in a month. I can sense the disturbance of the quiet that has been growing inside of their darkness. This next stage is a difficult test of loyalties between the caress of reality and the seductive addiction of fantasy. Their eyes

feast on the world around them, severing their connection to their bodies and the beat of their hearts. I clap my hands together with a CRACK, and their eyes jerk toward me. In that moment, they remember. They relax.

“Reality is not bound by words, and neither can you afford to be. Deer do not have words to confuse them and draw them into thought when they must pay attention or die. Do not become trapped inside of a reality described by the words you know. Do not swear loyalty to words the monsters have long since redefined. Monsters are liars, they will adopt whatever ideology allows them to most easily feed their monstrous appetites.

“A hero is loyal to their mission. Not the leader of the mission, and not the institution claiming to serve the mission. It is the liar’s game to sign the hero up for a hero mission, and then to lead them off mission. It is the liar’s game to seek out those institutions whose stated mission have captured the commitment of the heroes, and take over those institutions, and alter their mission. If the hero allows the monster to change the mission, the hero mission will fail, while you pursue the monster’s mission. Those you have set out to rescue will perish, waiting for a hero who will never arrive.

“A king will always demand that your loyalty is to the king, to his church, and to his country. His only goal is your obedience. I say again, a hero’s loyalty is not to a king, not to an institution, but to a hero’s mission. The mission of the king serves only the ego of the king.

“A Russian psychologist name Gurdjeif told this story:

“Once there was a rich magician. He had many sheep. He was very mean and did not like to appoint any shepherd nor erect fences around the pasture where his sheep grazed. The sheep often wandered into the forest; sometimes they fell into ravines and so on. And at times, they used to run away, for they knew that the magician wanted only their flesh and skin. This they did not like.

“Finally, the magician found a solution to this problem. He hypnotized his sheep and he suggested to them that they are immortal and as such no harm is being done to them whenever they are skinned, for it would be good for them and even pleasant.

“Secondly, he suggested that he is a good master who loved his flock and was ready to go to any extent to help them. And thirdly, he suggested to them that if anything at all was going to happen to them, that it was not going to happen just then and at any rate not on that day, therefore, they should not worry.

“He also suggested to his sheep that they were not sheep at all, on the contrary, he suggested to some that they were lions, to others as eagles, to others as men and to some as magicians. And after hypnotizing his flock all his cares and worries came to an end. For the sheep never ran away but quietly awaited for their time when the magician would require their flesh and skin.

“Listen carefully to what I am saying, because it will have a great impact on the depth of your characters. You must leave a place to arrive someplace new. You must be able to unknow the truth to escape it. There is a dividing line at the heart of the hero’s journey beyond which only true humility may penetrate. There is a bar over which some pass, and others do not. Those that cannot pass have never been outside of ego. They do not believe there is an outside. They cannot describe it. They cannot fake it. Their lies are the transparent self-serving lies of those who think their purely selfish motives are invisible.

“They are not invisible.

“The purely selfish are a nightmare as teammates. They will not pass the ball. When they gain control over the team, they immediately try to convert it into a monster kingdom. If you team up with a selfish prick, sooner or later they will bend you over and fuck you up the ass. Their heart is pure selfishness. They do not feel a twinge of conscience when they abuse you, they feel it when they fail to abuse

you. According to their predatory religion, they are righteous when they consume you, and careless when you get away. We don't want these selfish pricks on our team. Fortunately, the selfish can be filtered. They may not believe that, because they are such clever liars, but their confidence in their invisibility is greatly misplaced.

“Perception is a tricky thing. I read that a few thousand years ago humans had a very limited color perception. It is not our eyes that have evolved, but their use. There is a tribe in South America whose members cannot count to three. They are not stupid; they have no word to distinguish between two and three, have not yet noticed the difference. But they can learn to see the difference, if it is pointed out to them. They can be taught the word.

“Most monsters try to hide their nature, but there are clues which they cannot conceal. We will use our stories to create a language about the monsters' strategy and tactics, and quite unexpectedly for monsters, the young heroes will learn how to see through the monsters' disguises. They will begin to see that the shepherds are wolves, who own meatpacking plants, and who love nothing so much as a tender young lamb. The monster mutton, unfortunately, will remain mutton. Mutton will continue believing whatever their masters instruct them to believe in exchange for the false security that is the monster's carrot the fearful mutton can't resist.

“I believe in God, the Creator, and without reservation, I place my fate into his loving hands. When I observe motion, I hypothesize the nature of its driving force. When I observe Creation, I hypothesize the nature of the Creative force. But if you try to tell me the divine truth, first you must answer one simple question. Are you guessing, or are you God? Because if you are claiming to speak God's truth, you need to perform a miracle to submit as evidence that you are the Almighty. Otherwise, the question is – are you a liar pretending to be God, or are you crazy enough to

believe you actually are God? Should we lock you up as a con artist, or institutionalize you as dangerously insane?

“No society that places divine law above human law can be either democratic or free. No society can remain free that allows any of its members to claim divine knowledge. Do not be fooled by the smiles and the kind acts of the knowers. No matter what they say, no matter what tactics they use, their ultimate goal is to take away the peoples’ right to self rule, and to invest that power in the hands of God, interpreted by THEM, or their appointed mouthpiece. No matter what they say, no matter what tactics they use, their ultimate goal is obedience to God’s will, as interpreted by THEM. They do not believe in democracy. They do not believe in liberty. They do not believe in tolerance. They believe only in obedience to THEM. And when they obtain power over the people, all of their kind acts, and all of their deceitful tactics are cast aside so they can focus completely on the punishment of the disobedient, in the name of God. Welcome to the monster kingdom.

“For far too long we have allowed the liars and the demented to walk around pretending to know what God says, and what God thinks, and which books God has written, and which side of the war God is fighting on. What kind of barbaric society allows the children, the most innocent among us, to be terrified into obedience with threats of roasting them in eternal hellfire, and seduced into murder and martyrdom by promises of heavenly reward?

“Earth could be a human paradise if we would only stop dressing our children in God costumes that suffocate their growth in exchange for their obedience. Falsely claiming to speak for God is the only crime I can think of in which you must be presumed guilty until proven innocent.

“Trust those who seek the truth. Distrust those who find it. No man speaks for God.

“The rest of us can admit that we are human. Even when we sound as arrogant as I do right now, we keep one foot in uncertainty, just in case we guess wrong and need to

run for our lives. At the core of the alchemical transformation is simply this, to find the courage of humility to accept our mortal fate, to be grateful for the gift, rather than resentful of its limitations. There are only two religions. We have faith in the loving God because he created us, or we fear and hate the vengeful God because he is killing us. To become a hero, to complete the journey, you must look back upon your life, and into your heart, and decide, gratitude or resentment? The hero gives. The monster takes.

“There was a time in my life when I tried to subtract everything about me that was due to luck so I would know what I could be proud of. Lucky to be born, lucky to grow up in an environment that allowed me to survive, lucky for all of the good things that happened, lucky for all of the bad things that didn’t. By the time I was done, the only thing left to take pride in was the effort I had made, and even that ended up on my mountain of luck piled dangerously high.

“Elitism is a delusion by which we stroke our egos for being lucky. When we see the less fortunate, we must not look down upon them from our royal throne. There, but for the grace of God, go we. Heroes are generous because they recognize their great fortune, and are moved to share the luck. Monsters are vicious because they are trapped inside of misery by their fears and their unfulfilled selfish desires, and are moved to punish the world that has deprived them of their just desserts.

“Do not chase the lying monster’s empty promises of reward after death. The hero has been paid in advance. Monsters are incapable of gratitude. Stalin once scoffed: ‘gratitude is the sickness of dogs.’ Don’t waste your life doing favors for monsters. Their fear of death is infinite, and their hunger for power is insatiable. They will take all you have, then punish you for having no more to give. A monster utopia is a monopoly that no longer has to pay its servants because it can torture them when they disobey. Why would they pay anything if they didn’t have to? The future they

dream about is a world in which they don't have to. They always win, you always lose. Checkmate.

“Chose your master. Consider the consequences of your choice.

“If you can not find faith in the loving God, the transformation you are attempting can be very dangerous. You are about to penetrate deeper into uncertainty than most are prepared to go. Trust me when I tell you that uncertainty can be a scary place. There will be only one anchor to keep you from being driven insane by terror when unexpected phenomena cause your imagination to rip loose. Place your faith in the loving intent of a Creator that went to such great effort to make your improbably existence a reality. Otherwise, you will discover yourself in a situation where all of your secure props are stripped away, and the angry God is coming to eat you. That fear will drive you back into hiding inside of delusions of pretended security. It is the monster bank shot. You will be the ostrich, head buried in the sand, monster mutton.

“The hero must cultivate the courage to neither seek death, nor be terrified of it. Because he is not God, he does not kill either himself or others in the name of God. You must make your peace with uncertainty, and accept your humanity.

“For those who have not gorged upon the fruit of knowledge and been graced with divine omnificence, life is a guessing game, a choice of strategic goals and tactical methods for achieving those goals.

“Imagine two young writers inspired by the scene of a hero getting carried off the field by the team. In their heart, they each find motivation for their next work. The first sets as his goal to be carried off the field by the cheering team and awarded the hero's prize. The second sets out to be the hero, and thus deserve the hero's prize. It may seem like they share the same goal, but one is focused on the prize, and the other, on the process by which it is earned.

“The first writer is ruled by a selfish heart that cares nothing for the earning, but only for the receiving. His tactics include lying, cheating, and stealing, because in the end, only the prize matters. The second writer will not lie, will not cheat, will not steal, but struggles to provide an honest service to the team. It would seem they share a goal, to win the hero’s prize, but in the end, the consequences of their different tactics will lead down very different paths. The true hero ascends toward reality. The hollow hero descends into delusion.

“Which writer will you be?”

“One of the most powerful things that we can accomplish would be to establish a clear and pervasive definition of the hero character class, and to draw obvious distinctions between the characters of the hero class and the characters of the ego class. What makes a hero?”

They glance at each other. It is Liberty who speaks.

“They save people?”

Bless her heart.

“Exactly. The goal of the hero’s journey is to help others, to save people. Notice that the nature of the hero is that of a problem solver. The problem the hero chooses is not his own, but that of the teammates he is trying to save. The Hero’s Journey is a model of the solution process: identification of the problem, the search for solution, the implementation of the discovered solution. The selflessness of the heroic motive is what makes the escape from pure selfishness possible.

“This is the key that unlocks that most difficult of cage doors. Only selfless motive can push you beyond the suffocating perceptual limits of the selfish character. Only love of others can free you from the terror of your own fragile mortality. It is what makes team play desirable. It is what makes team play possible. It is the physics of family values that civilizes our children. If they do not learn team play at home, they must learn it in school.

“Revenge is sweet, the saying goes. And recent scientific studies suggest that revenge, or thoughts of revenge, produce a hardwired reward of pleasure in our brain. We all knew this from experience. Before the monster became a monster, he got even for perceived injustice done. It was his first taste of a drug that would enslave him, and chain him to the field of war. Before long, he was getting even just to feel the euphoric rush of playing the angry God, and his perceptions turned every imagined slight into an opportunity to earn his tasty just desert.

“When the monster hits puberty, inflicting punishment is fused to sexual pleasure. This accelerates their plunge into dementia. Beware of those who invoke righteous wrath. They have been swallowed by monsters who claim they only feed upon the wicked, and that it is not their fault that mankind is inherently wicked. Monsters can be the most charming characters in the story, but when they need a fix, out comes Captain Correction swinging his erection. If you do not give them a cause to punish you, they will invent one.

“It is a warrior’s greatest spiritual peril to be swallowed by the monster on the battlefield, and give their lives over to revenge. Resist possession by this deadly appetite. I am not telling you to turn the other cheek; that will not pacify the ravenous beasts attacking you and those you love. And I am not telling you that anger is evil. In times of crisis, we draw energy from the currents in play. I am warning you to beware the rush of righteous wrath lest it trap you inside of a crippling addiction to inflicting pain.

“If you must kill, kill to protect the innocent from slaughter by the butchers, not for revenge. Protect your heart from enslavement to the monster’s voracious appetite for punishment, or you will be transformed into that which you most despise.

“Do not confuse the kingdom and the hero team. The volunteer military looks like a kingdom, because it has a rigid hierarchy and demands total obedience, but it is not a kingdom. The heroes call themselves, they go to great effort

to become a part of the hero team, and serve the hero mission. The leaders are chosen for their ability to guide the hero mission, and they lead with the authority granted by those that follow willingly. This is true for the police, the fire department, and other hero teams. This is true of you, and the sisterhood you are joining through this initiation.

“A mother’s life is not her own, and that is the role into which you are being cast. A hero’s life is not her own. You must stabilize your gains and retreat to the tranquility of open awareness. This stage is to allow you the time to grow comfortable with the changes you have undergone thus far, and decide if you are prepared to make a commitment to the grateful hero heart that serves the mission of the muse.

“You are a team. It is at this stage of the journey when you need friends around who understand what is happening inside of you. Do not be afraid to describe what you are going through in you blogs. You are being trained as writers because you have demonstrated a willingness to get naked in public; because you have fought through your fear of humiliation and condemnation, because you have shown a willingness to deprogram your social biases. The hallucinations you experience may not be true, but they will make a good story.

“Write them down to mark your trail, and drain them of their hold on you. Bring this experience to life for all those who are watching, and wondering.

“Outside of your blogs, you will not speak, either to others, or to yourselves. You must free yourself from addiction to the dwelling mind. To become a writer of the hero class, you must learn to free your thoughts from the limitations of language that can blind you to the difference between two and three.”

Chapter Nine – Atonement with the Father

“Atonement (at-one-ment) consists in no more that the abandonment of that self-generated double monster - the dragon thought to be God (superego) and the dragon thought to be Sin (repressed id). But this requires an abandonment of the attachment to ego itself, and that is what is difficult. One must have a faith that the father is merciful, and then a reliance on that mercy. Therewith, the center of belief is transferred outside of the bedeviling god's tight scaly ring, and the dreadful ogres dissolve.”

The Hero with a Thousand Faces

Lysistrata looks puzzled.

“She looks like your sister? And you sister looked like your mother?”

“My dad had a photo. Spooky resemblance, like the same woman getting born three times.”

Lysistrata shakes her head.

“That can't be.”

“But it is.”

“No.”

She rolls off of me and stands. She begins pacing back and forth. I sit up.

“What is it, Lysistrata? Why can't it be?”

She stops, watching me with big owl eyes, biting her lip. She takes a deep breath.

“Your brother is not your mother's son.”

My head begins to spin out questions. She turns toward her desk and slides open the bottom drawer. She pulls something out, and pauses, then slowly turns to me. There is a book pressed against her breasts. It is Huckleberry Finn.

“This was your mother's. When we were children, you brought it with you to Roca Bruja. You left it behind when you went home. Do you remember?”

Like it was yesterday. I nod.

“You never opened it?”

I shake my head no. She walks to me and holds it out.

“Open it now.”

I open it and start paging through it. There is handwriting in the margins, in Spanish. I look up at Lysistrata.

“It is the story of how she was kidnapped by your father. Your mother was a Tica, a university student who sometimes worked as a prostitute to finance her studies. Your father was a customer who had a boat. She passed out, and woke up at sea. After a long voyage, she was locked up in a secret room, and there she spent her life. She had a daughter, named Liberty by the father who thought it was an amusing joke. And she was pregnant, and she was writing her story in a book she hoped her children might someday find and read.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. But she was dead, and he was dead, and I didn’t want you to have to hate him any more than you already did.”

My father was a kidnapper who had raped my mother and my sister. Did he murder my mother as well?

“Thor was born before she was taken, and she never mentions him. Thor can’t have a daughter that looks like her.”

I close my eyes but the vision does not fade. Yes, he could. I am going to rip out his poisonous heart with my bare hands.

I jump out of bed.

“I need to talk to Liberty.”

Five minutes later Liberty comes in with Lysistrata. Lysistrata turns to leave and I stop her. She waits. We all wait.

“Liberty... There is a room in your father’s house. A secret room. Do you know what I’m talking about?”

She is clearly frightened. It is answer enough.

“Have you been in it?”

She begins to tremble.

It was a story too horrendous to repeat, and it triggered a dark night of the soul that sucked me down the bottle's neck where I raged and whimpered and did battle with my murderous thirst for my brother's blood. There is a beast inside of me that well knows the appetites to which the monsters sell their souls. There is a character I can play that would hack off his penis with a broken shard of glass, and ram it down his throat, then carve it out of his stomach, and kick it up his ass. My imagination might not match my brother's in the games he plays to terrify and humiliate his prey, but I am a writer, and he would not too kindly die before he paid my price, and it would surely entertain us both for quite some time.

But neither am I trapped inside the victim's role. I am a writer, a cosmic dancer, and there is no longer any character or emotion that consumes that part of me which is aware. At least, not for long, and soon enough I remember that the choice is mine. Hatred and revenge are a vortex that will drag me backward into the monster's jaws. Forward is the hero's way.

Or was I fooling myself? Rage is not so easily washed clean. More than once it has festered in my pit, awaiting for the spark to erupt.

Fortunately for Liberty, it was Lysistrata who comforted her, as she has comforted so many. It gave me room to drink from the monster's well and renew my understanding of what we are up against.

Father! What have you done? Brother, how terrible must be your fear. How can a man devolve into such a weak-kneed beast that he must find his courage in brutality? How can we be capable of such hateful pleasure?

But I know. Oh yes, I do know.

Oh Liberty! How many times will I fail thee? How long have I known that the beast was in our blood? How many times have I run, and left you to the monsters'

pleasures? How many times will I let you die to save my selfish hide?

I spiral down into despair. I can't stop the nightmare from swallowing us, of crushing us with its burning embrace. Why did I ever imagine that I could save Her?

“Satan, stick the fork in. I'm done.”

What kind of arrogance made me think that I could plot a hero's tale? I cower within my castle walls and write of courage, then fall into a drunken slumber on my silken sheets.

My hero's costume has begun to chafe. I want to rip off my skin, and sink into the cold dark sea.

Dear God, will you please catch me?

“You are not God.”

I feel her weight pressing down upon me and pinning me in place.

“Say it. I am not God.”

I groan in an ungodly manner.

“Say it.”

I mumble. “I'm not God.”

“Again.” She gives me a tug.

“I am not God.”

“Louder. With feeling.”

I shout – ‘I AM NOT GOD!’”

She lies down, embracing all of me.

“It is not what occurs, but how we respond.

“There is an ancient story about a Chinese farmer who saved money for many years to purchase a stud for his mares. When the day finally came, he was able to buy a magnificent black stallion. When his neighbor heard of the deal, he came over to congratulate the farmer on his great fortune. The farmer replied –

“Who can say what is good and what is bad?

“The next morning, the farmer rose early as was his habit, and went out to feed the stock. The stallion was gone,

having leapt the fence during the night and run off. When the farmer's neighbor heard the news, he rushed to console his friend. The farmer replied –

“Who can say what is good and what is bad?”

“The next morning, when the farmer went out to tend the stock, the stallion had returned, with ten fine brood mares accompanying him. Again the friend heard the news, and came to congratulate the farmer on his extraordinary luck. The farmer replied –

“Who can say what is good and what is bad?”

“The next morning, the farmer's son broke his leg while trying to tame one of the mares. The neighbor again offered his sympathy, and the farmer again replied –

“Who can say what is good and what is bad?”

“The next day, the army swept through the country conscripting all of the young men, but because the farmer's son had a broken leg, they passed him by.

“Freud defined neurosis as the inability to cope with ambiguity. We have already discussed that a model of the truth is not the truth, no matter how certain we are or how viciously we insist. Pay attention when people speak, and you will quickly learn to distinguish between those who grasp the difference between truth and belief, and those who either cannot, or pretend they do not. What I want to discuss now is the difference between two classes of models, one inside of the other. The inner class models the truth. Outside of this is a class that models a process that produces models of the truth. It is the golden egg, and the chicken that lays these golden eggs. The knowledge models of the truth, and the process models for seeking the truth, continue to evolve, mapping the metamorphosis of consciousness and the history of human civilization.

“Think of it as a Metaplay, the play created inside of the play of creation.

“If you become a master of a process model, the play of creation, you will never become trapped inside of a knowledge model, the play created. Your hearts and minds

will be set free to cope with ambiguity. You will be inoculated from falling prey to the monster traps that demand you accept their truth as the one and only true place to stand. Imagine how valuable a public service it could be to inoculate children from the suffocating neurosis that must reject any evidence that contradicts divine truth. Imagine the problem solving capacities that would be unleashed from the impossible task of defending some divine right answer at all costs. Imagine the wars over who owns the truth that would never occur, and the partnerships for seeking the truth that would flourish and blossom with increasingly excellent solutions.

“Imagine two best friends, Juan and Pablo, who grew up next door to each other at the edge of a deep and treacherous jungle. Pablo’s father was a scholar and a holy man of great wisdom, who taught his son to respect the laws and inspired him to seek enlightenment. On his fourteenth birthday, the father gave Pablo a map that marked a well-worn path to the Winner’s Circle, and warned him not to stray from the trail or he would surely become lost in the jungle and be devoured by the wild beasts. Pablo asked Juan to come with him, but Juan had little interest in fairytales about a Winner’s Circle, and had always found it difficult to stay on any path.

“Juan’s father was a woodsman, and because he respected the dangers of the jungle, he taught Juan how to be careful of the wild beasts, and how to seek out the hidden treasures. Juan loved to roam where he imagined no man had ever walked, and he discovered many wonders, and on more than one occasion, came close to being eaten by the wild beasts. One day he said goodbye and set off into the jungle determined to penetrate further than any had before, and discover the hidden secrets so well guarded by the jungle and its wild beasts.

“Many times he was clawed by plants that bite, and thus learned how to spot them and step around them. Many nights he shivered in the cold, and thus learned how to trap

the wild beasts and use their fur to keep him warm. Many times he grew thirsty, and thus learned how to seek out the paths water took, and followed them deeper into the jungle. Many times he crossed the hilltops, and thus learned to seek out the high ground to gain a larger perspective over where he had been, and where he might go.

“After many years, and many scratches and scrapes and bruises, after many times of getting stuck and finding some way through into the deeper jungle, Juan walked unexpectedly out into a clearing so beautiful it brought tears to his eyes. The birds were singing with a joy he had never heard before, and the flowers filled the air with a feast of delicious scents, and the sun was the warmest, gentlest caress that had ever touched his skin. And there sat Pablo, in the Winner’s Circle. Juan grinned and went to meet him, and they embraced and laughed. And Juan said—

“I’ll be darned, there really is a Winner’s Circle, and it is every bit as nice a place, and some better, than I have ever been. If I had only known this was real, I might have traveled with you.

“Pablo replied—no matter! You are here now, though I can’t imagine how.

“So what is up ahead? Juan asked.

“Up ahead? A confused Pablo replied. This is the Winner’s Circle! There is no ‘up ahead’.

“Hummm, murmured Juan. Since you are not familiar with the jungle, and will surely lose your way, or be eaten by a wild beast, perhaps you should stay here in the Winner’s Circle, and wait for my return. I’ll go take a look around, just in case there is something more out there worth finding. And if I discover someplace even better, I will come back and lead you there. And if you do not want to go, I will draw a map in case you change your mind, or in case someone else comes along who might want to make the journey.

“There is a metaphysical war in progress between the explorers and the settlers that is completely unnecessary, and

tragically expensive in lost human potential. There is also a metaphysical war in progress between settlements. Belief systems, or cosmological paradigms, or knowledge models, are locations, and sometimes those locations are occupied by a few people, and sometimes by a great many. These paradigms can be modeled as societies where people work and play and spend their lives in some degree of security in their expectations. So what is the problem?

“The rulers of the settlements are almost always monsters, sooner or later, because all monsters believe they deserve to rule. They need to rule to satisfy their vicious pleasures. The bigger the settlement, the more monsters crave to rule it. They care nothing whether anyone agrees, and have no scruples about how the crown is seized. They are obsessed with power and dreams of imperial greed to feed their voracious egos and their need for victims. The settlements become monster traps, from which none are permitted exit, and from which any outside the settlement are declared evildoers dwelling in hell from which they play their siren songs to seduce the weak from righteousness into heresy.

“Us against them: in the end, there can be only one. Unilateral preemption: do onto others before they do onto you. Manifest destiny: God has awarded us dominion over the earth. These are all tactics that derive from monster logic that cannot escape the chessboard mentality, that cannot think in terms of Team Humanity. Monsters must have an enemy to punish for their pleasures. They cannot leave the field of war. When the external enemies are defeated, they torture those inside to death in increasingly theatrical ways.

“Notice that it does not matter to the people which settlement is the final winner. In the end, it is one big bloody torture chamber. It is what monsters do. It is all they do. It is the monster utopia toward which we are moving at accelerating speed. And it appears as if the only thing that might stop it is if we are all exterminated in the final God fight of Armageddon.

“When I was a little tyke, I used to guess wrong on a regular basis. This confused me a great deal. By far the most disturbing mistakes had to do with morality. I wanted to do what was right. But one day, what was right was as clear as it could possibly be. Then something would happen, or I would hear an opposing view, and suddenly, what had been right just the day before, was now as clearly wrong as it could possibly be.

“Had God changed his mind?, I would wonder, back in those days when I believed my conscience was divinely infallible. It seemed more plausible that it was I who had made the mistake. It bothered me that I could be wrong about what was good and what was bad.

“But it was quite a rush to escape the lie that had blinded my now infinite perceptions. It happened again, and again, until I would lick my lips in anticipation when I discovered I was mistaken. At a very young age, I became addicted to epiphany, to the paradigm shift where reality expanded with a whoosh! I set out upon my journey, searching for the Winner’s Circle, that place from which all perceptions were true, and I would know what was good and what was bad.

“Many times I turned the wheel, getting a feel for the terrain. The first observation was that I was in motion. One moment I was standing in the only real place there was to stand, staring directly at the truth. Then in a flash, I would move, perception would spark, and I was standing in a different place, looking back at what had been a truth that was now a lie. It was a larger place, outside of the lie. Thus, the second thing I learned was that motion had direction, from smaller to larger, from inside the false to outside the false. With my compass and my measuring stick, I moved deeper into the wilderness in search of largest place.

“When I was about your age, I discovered largest place. Not for the first time, of course. Every time I believe it is largest place, until reality proves me wrong. But this time was different, it really was the largest place. Of course, I

thought that every time, since I was so clearly in largest place.

“Suddenly I had a vision. I looked back upon my life as though I were standing on a dark runway. In the distance, a spark flashed when a turning wheel touched ground. Then it sparked again, this time closer, as the wheel kept turning. And every time there was a spark a length closer, until the wheel reached me and flashed in brilliant golden light. I turned, and looked forward. The wheel kept turning into the future, and it kept sparking when I touched ground.

“It was at that moment that I gave up my search for largest place, and, with a great deal of relief, accepted the assumption of uncertainty, that my game need never end. I changed directions, strategic goals, and instead of seeking largest place from where I could see the truth, I turned toward mastering the process of motion. To move in the direction of mastering motion is a motion amplification circuit. It is a strategy in which the further you move, the more powerfully you can move. Of its limits, I do not know, but along the way, I learned a third thing. Motion cannot occur without uncertainty. Motion can be induced with uncertainty. It took me many years before I realized how well the monsters understood this law, and how accomplished they had become at using it to drive the mutton into the slaughterhouse and bar the exit.

“Consider carefully the difference between the settlers and the explorers. Many of the settlers, though not all, are screaming that they are standing on the only spot from which the truth is visible.

“The Cosmic Dancer, declares Nietzsche, does not rest heavily in a single spot, but gaily, lightly, turns and leaps from one position to another.

“The stagnant settlers are mutton, tucked securely inside of their imagined truth. Monsters do no care what that truth is. They care only that it has caught the mutton. They move in and take over the truth, then they declare war against all other truths and try to destroy them so that the

remaining mutton will jump into their trap. Since the beginning of time, the God fight has raged as the monsters fight for local control over the truth, then set out to destroy all competition.

“As writers, you must become the cosmic dancers that can leap from character to character, from point of view to point of view. As writers, you must understand the monsters and their war for control over the mutton, whether it is inside a family, or a school, or a church, or a political system. You must understand the beliefs inside of which your characters stand, the roles they play, how they protect themselves from doubt, and where they leap when their beliefs are stripped away.

“I have to wonder, isn't it possible, that if it weren't for the monsters taking over the truth, that a perfect symbiosis could develop between the explorers and the settlements? Who was it, do you imagine, who discovered the Winner's Circle? Who drew the first map? And was it their intent to claim that from this spot, and this spot only, the truth is visible? Or was it a simple wanderer, who having discovered a spot with an exceptional view, drew a map so that the settlers could move there, while the explorer went forward into the wilderness seeking a better view? Even the explorers who spend their life seeking out interesting locations spend much of their time relaxing with the settlers and sharing the tales of their journeys. And in times of great danger, do not those who dwell in the wilderness often run for the protection of the fort, where the security it provides allows them to raise their children and tend for their elders?

“Is it really the settlers who must insist that there is no other place, that their beliefs are not really beliefs, but God's only truth? When did the word 'belief' get redefined as certainty? What kind of mutton can state with a straight face that in their opinion, their opinion is not an opinion? Would they blind all eyes but their own, even if the loss of sight might bring catastrophe or extinction of the species? Are they all such cowards, so neurotic, that they cannot

abide the uncertainty of more than one point of view? Or is it the monsters that drive them into fear and inflame passions for revenge, to justify their wars of plunder and the feeding of their mean pleasures?

“Consider Juan and Pablo. Each followed a path that arrived at the Winner’s Circle. Were their paths then equal in effect? Consider two educational philosophies. One teaches the truth as defined by the powers that be. The second teaches the process of seeking the truth. One system raises settlers who occupy static beliefs. One system raises explorers who believe that the better the process of seeking solution, the better the solution is likely to be. The monsters must stomp out the systems that seek truth to protect their divine monopoly, and keep the mutton in their cages until they require their flesh and skin.

“The monsters can not allow the process of seeking the truth to flourish, because the process will produce answers that differ from their divine decrees. They must also stomp out any truth controlled by other monsters. The monsters’ philosophy is static, dogmatic truth that must be defended against any evidence to the contrary to maintain the illusion of their divine infallibility and prevent the escape of their prey from their assigned victim roles. The explorers’ philosophy is dynamic and flexible, capable of adjusting to new dangers and taking advantage of new opportunities.

“The problem is not with the kingdoms, but with the monster kings. Do not underestimate the contribution of either the settler or the explorer. Together, they are the foundation of human civilization. They combine the security of the proven for raising children and caring for elders, with the flexibility to adapt and evolve in a shifting environment. They need not be enemies, any more than different belief systems must be enemies. The same person can play an explorer at some time in their life, or in some aspect of their life, and elsewhere, a settler. All can be united under uncertainty if we can find the courage of humility to accept that we are not God, and we do not own the truth.

“What kind of selfish parents would chose to raise obedient mutton when they could raise seekers who might someday help discover a solution that could save all of mankind? How could these parents be surprised when their mutton children grow up to be some monster’s bitch, or worse, complete their metamorphosis into monsters, who then turn to consume their parents?”

“Monsters have sex by inflicting pain. Heroes have sex by giving pleasure. If the monster’s educational philosophy wins the day, earth’s children will be doomed to lives of incompetence, deceit, and rage against a disobedient reality where an inherently evil mankind must be beaten and tortured into righteous form. If the hero’s educational philosophy wins the day, teams of excellent problem solvers will accelerate mankind into a future of peace and unimaginable freedom and prosperity.

“Monsters drive the mutton into the king’s slaughterhouses and feast upon their misery. Heroes set the mutton free and recruit them for the heroes’ team. This is the physics of the monster versus hero conflict, and the utopias they strive to create. When I speak of strategic goals, these are the two utopian goals of mankind, the polarized character forces that establish them, and the directions these forces push us. Will your heroes set the children free and build a peaceful and prosperous paradise for team humanity? Or will we all be trapped inside the bloody slaughterhouses of the monster kings?”

I pause, scanning their faces.

“Welcome to the pivot of the initiation. You are being trained to play explorers setting out upon the Writer’s Path, headed into the deepest realms of the unknown. It is at this point that you must chose to either retreat back into the comfortable beliefs you held before this journey began and try to forget what you have already seen, or to step forward courageously into the terrifying depths of uncertainty from which you will never completely return.

“Forward is the hero’s way.

“It is a law of physics that you must leave a place to arrive someplace new, that the step between them is through uncertainty, and that your strength under uncertainty controls the directions and the distances that you are capable of moving. There is no larger move that I am aware of than the step from selfishness into a hero’s service. The hero loves to explore, and share what she has learned. This is why we turn the hero’s wheel inside of the writer’s wheel. It is the nature of our metaplay.

“The vows you are about to take are between you and your God. If you would seek to be a writer of the hero class, you must become masters of the hero’s wheel. You must understand the character pallet and the roles they like to play, the fears and appetites that drive them, in which directions, and by what mechanisms. You must be able to ground to deepest uncertainty, to empty yourself completely, to make room for the spirit of the muse to spark within you.

“Do not underestimate the value of your sacrifice. Soon we will call the heroes to construct the field of play, and they will answer, because they are grateful that you have shared yourself with them.

“At sundown you will each find a lonely place and draw your circle in the shifting sands. Enter it and pray for the blessing of The Mother to strengthen you for the challenges ahead, so that you may pay back the debt of your existence. At sunrise we will gather upon the shore for your marriage to the Mission of the Muse.

“You will submerge yourself in the salty waters of baptism, and leave behind the girl who came to us seeking a new character to play. You must invite The Muse into your heart, and offer up yourself as her vessel. After this sacred marriage, your life will no longer be your own.

“Tonight you put yourself to death.

“Tomorrow you are reborn The Muse.”

Chapter Ten – Apotheosis

“Those who know, not only that the Everlasting lies in them, but that what they, and all things, really are is the Everlasting, dwell in the groves of the wish fulfilling trees, drink the brew of immortality, and listen everywhere to the unheard music of eternal concord.”

The Hero with a Thousand Faces

There is an ecstatic joy in their faces that comes from having made the leap of their own accord, and completely accepting the consequences without regret. I have felt it enough times myself to recognize the state, including the day I enlisted in the military, and once, on my own lonely beach.

My heroes have answered the call.

It is difficult to describe how I feel about being able to have brought them to this place. I only hope that the best is yet to come. They have left behind what they could not take with them, and plunged willingly through the eye of the needle into the deep unknown.

I am not sure how to proceed. My instincts say to continue the push on mindfulness meditation; now is no time to falter. Their strengthened spirits have released their old character. This is a time of great care, lest they bounce back into delusion rather than attain eternal freedom from control by the holodeck. They must beware of leaping out of the frying pan and into the fire, lest they find themselves standing on a soapbox shouting that they know the TRUTH!

I know from experience that gaining freedom from one character can trap you quickly inside of another that is certain it is now standing in largest place, staring directly at the truth. They must live long enough outside the dream to solidify the difference between illusion and reality, between character and Spirit. They must shift their loyalties to reality and embrace uncertainty. They must become masters of the

two worlds, and never again forget what exists where. They must become the cosmic dancers.

Their commitment to heroic service must be sincere or the transformation will falter. Only love of others more than self can free Spirit from the gravity well of ego, and the grinding fear of death. The hero lives to serve. How they serve is a choice that they must make themselves, and it is a choice that may change many times during their life of service.

They are what no man can resist. When I look at these young brides dressed in their flush of anticipation, my heart swells with love that leaks from my eyes. Tonight begins the consummation. They will dance within the Circle of the Muse and call the heroes to the game.

Tonight, the Superhero is conceived.

“When did the hero begin shooting first!”

I turn, and feel all of the steam whoosh out of a ten minute tirade that was just warming up to a scream. Lysistrata is standing in the doorway with her arms crossed, watching with an expression that always embarrasses me. It is like getting caught flexing in front of a mirror.

“I’m working on a concession speech.”

Her eyes are not fooled.

“I’m pandering to my foreign audience?”

She waits.

“I’m developing a character swept up by these historic and turbulent times.”

“Good guy or bad guy?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

I feel the warning in her body language, and she is right, I may have long since crossed the line. I’m coming unglued. Should a hero be dispassionate in the face of atrocity? Who can say what is good and what is bad? It is a question that dogs my waking hours, and turns my hero logic into pretzels. Am I putting Witch’s Rock and Rising Tide at

risk? Who will save the children? Where is the happy ending?

This damn election is going to give me ulcers. I'm trapped inside of a maze drawn by Escher on acid, and the monsters have burned out my eyes with a storm of lies.

Lysistrata administers a much-needed hug.

"Carlos and Juan are out front."

We paddled out, and it was something I hadn't done in far too long. The surf got me grinning, and the water put out my fire and returned me to the flow. Not for the first time, I realized the wisdom of the young, and the bitterness and resentment that is the price of the good fight that goes on too long. Lysistrata was right, she always is. I am not God. I cannot snap my fingers and make it so. I cannot be certain what is good and what is bad.

My beautiful solution has come unraveled under the fierce light of reality. No matter which way I twist, the numbers don't add up. What kind of fool was I to think that I could build a monster filter to keep the beast from seizing power? How could I have planned to make these gentle creatures guard the threshold to the control room against the monsters' insatiable appetite for command?

We surf and joke. Juan, a Rising Tide senior and Captain of the Trading Team, is by far the best of us, having grown up at Rising Tide as a student of Master Ni. Carlos carves beautiful lines like the music in his soul, while this old man pretends he is still a kid who likes to splash about.

We are sitting outside, looking out to sea when Juan knocks on his board.

"There were two of them. A guy fifty-something, and a teenager, looked like his kid. Blonde-haired gringos sneaking around early and late. They smell like trouble, Brujo. He had that look, like he wants to get even. You got his girl in there?"

I take a deep breath. The barbarians are at the gate.

“It’s my brother. Last time I saw him, he was shooting at me.”

“Just say the word, Brujo. The Ghosts don’t like the way this guy looks at our girls.”

“Keep the girls away from him, Juan. He’s a frickin monster.”

“He’s after Liberty?”

“He’s afraid she’ll testify.”

“Why doesn’t she?”

“I thought it was too dangerous. Now she might have to.”

He was crazy to come to Costa Rica. Why would he do that? Suddenly I knew.

“You think he’s coming back?” Carlos’s eyes remind me of the stories told about his days of old.

I nod, and the flames that have crept out of my pit are burning in my voice. “Call the Ghosts.” I look from Carlos to Juan. “All of them.”

“And tell them what?”

I turn to the north, and in my vision I see the monsters descending upon us once more, to rape and murder Liberty, and to enslave all those that survive.

“Tell them Walker is coming.”

A long time ago, an old Chinese man I greatly admire wrote – Those who know, do not say: those who say, do not know. This bothered me for many years, because I wanted to be ‘he who knows’, but I couldn’t keep my mouth shut. It was a character flaw that was perhaps my harshest and most valuable teacher, and I was reluctant to give it up. One day I walked through Lao Tzu’s words, and looked back on them from the other side, and began laughing until my knees buckled and I ended up curled upon the floor.

I am ‘he who does not know’. I can say anything I want. Or so I thought, back in those days when nobody was listening.

Sometimes I forget how careful I now have to be about what I say. It isn't that I am smarter, or wiser, and certainly, I am much less witty than most. But I have an audience that forgives me for my failings, and listens anyway.

By dusk, the university students in Costa Rica had poured into the torch-lit streets, ready to give Walker that same warm welcome he had received the last time he descended to murder Liberty, and enslave Latin America.

Some monsters will never learn.

The coven has gathered for the consummation, and Witch's Rock is atwitter. Tonight we consecrate the Circle of the Muse that is the entrance to our new alchemical game, and through which all students must pass to become a member of the Players Tribe.

The muses are glowing with radiant heat. This initiation was more potent than the form we had been working with until now, and adding the blogs had transfixed much of our audience and generated a blizzard in the discussion groups. The increased membership had created a windfall avalanche of revenues, and the student accounts, payable upon completion of the project, had swelled to over a million dollars each.

Would Thor return? Or would he hide safely behind his castle walls while his dogs of war find their peace upon our pikes?

Cry havoc!, if you must, but this time it will be the King who roasts upon a stick. O monstrous beast! Thou wilt not be blessed dead and stuffed when thou assumes thy victims' pose in our monster zoo.

Murder will out...

"Are you alright?"

Hanna appears before me dressed like Godiva in her long silken locks. My hand reaches to touch a swelling breast. She steps forward and embraces me silently, and through blurred eyes I glimpse the fate I may bring down upon us all. Hanna gives me a tug, but my dark vision has

me wrapped within its coils. She is relentless, demanding the last spark from this tired vessel. Slowly, my body responds to this lovely muse that may finally put my long night's watch to rest.

They are what no man can refuse. They lead me to the stage, and I lose myself in mindfulness while the cameras role and the crowds cheer and the muses play with transfigured faces lit by hearts exceedingly white as snow. The Circle gathers hand to hand and begins to cast the call as I anoint the muses with the oil from the Tree of Life whose seeds were passed down through the ages from grower to grower.

Our Spirits touch and fuse. I taste the truth upon their sweet lips and drink deeply from their sacred cups to quench my thirst for eternity. We dance with the Creator to those primal rhythms of the dragon born, and call the hero seed to that loving stage where monsters cannot breed. I stand within The Circle, naked before the world at last. I raise my staff toward midnight sky and roar –

“I am the dragon son of the Earth Mother, who drained her purest pints to wet this birthing ground. I am the secret hero of a thousand faces and a billion lives, forged on the anvil of heaven, and blooded on the battlefields of the monster kings. I am a master of the game.

“I uncloak upon this holy ground, and with my staff I pierce the veil of time and space to light the morning star and mark the hero's way. I call forth the wizards of the hero class to instantiate the Superhero field of play.

“Rise, heroes. Rise and let old dreams die. Strike your arcs from earth to sky. This threshold beckons to the cleansing light. Their royal night is done. The heroes' dawn has now begun.

“Once more, dear friends, into this breach.

“The hero calls himself...”

Chapter Eleven – The Ultimate Boon

“The gods and goddesses then are to be understood as embodiments and custodians of the elixir of Imperishable Being but not themselves the Ultimate in its primary state. What the hero seeks through his intercourse with them is therefore not finally themselves, but their grace, i.e., the power of their sustaining substance. This miraculous energy-substance and this alone is the Imperishable; the names and forms of the deities who everywhere embody, dispense, and represent it come and go. This is the miraculous energy of the thunderbolts of Zeus, Yahweh, and the Supreme Buddha, the fertility of the rain of Viracocha, the virtue announced by the bell rung in the Mass at the consecration, and the light of the ultimate illumination of the saint and sage. Its guardians dare release it only to the duly proven.”

The Hero with a Thousand Faces

The wrong person is out there. The wrong thing is out there. The wrong person is desperately trying to get their hands on the wrong thing.

God is watching me. I am tired... so tired.

I shift, and then shift again. I am on a ship at sea and the storm is upon us. Everyone except me is asleep below decks. I am shouting for them to wake up, that the ship is in peril, but they are trapped inside of their dreams. At any moment a wave could sweep us from the field and all will be lost. I look down and my feet are HUGE. If I move, I may cause the ship to sink. If I do not move, the ship may sink.

“Your play.”

Suddenly I notice him. He is an old Chinese man wearing surfing shorts. All around him is chaos, but the shifting deck is impossibly steady beneath his feet. Our eyes lock and he grins a challenge that causes my mind to blink.

The Dragon is awake...

“Brujo.”

Lysistrata’s hand touches my chest and it triggers a body-wracking gasp, as though I have been deep underwater far past what I had believed to be the point of no return. I lay there, chest heaving, thinking that it might not be too late, that on this waking, I have been given the opportunity for rebirth.

I hold her hand over my heart.

“Will you marry me?”

She begins to laugh.

“That must have been some nightmare.”

Was it a nightmare? Far worse. It was a premonition. The Fates have found me. Armageddon has begun. Here comes the finger...

“You are a man of substance, I’ll vouch for that.” She fondles my substance. “Although, you do have a lot of tough miles on you. Still...”

I lift her hand to kiss her palm. It breaks her jest, and tears fill her eyes. I should have known she would see the story behind this story.

“You promised.”

I kiss her palm again.

“Keep your promise.”

She stands, moving away from the bed, a shadow in the shadows. Breakers crash. The tide is rising.

“Father Garcia is out front.”

“I spoke for you.”

“You risk too much.”

We walk along the deserted midnight beach lit by a crescent moon and phosphorescent surf. We are old friends, of a sort. Much of the aid we provide is funneled through his church.

“It was the Walker thing. Really, Christopher, quite dramatic, and many are still chuckling, but you made some powerful enemies this time that are short on forgiveness. It

appears the word has come down from on high. Witch's Rock is to be closed. You are to be investigated and found guilty of something. At that point, I understand, the fun begins.

"Do they think it will go that smoothly?"

There is a long pause.

"It is your niece. They believe they have what they need to force your supporters into silence. And now the United States must know you are one of theirs. You are going to have some trouble writing your way out of this one."

I sigh.

"I swear, Father, she was an unexpected plot twist. Sometimes you don't head for a place, you just end up there on your way to somewhere else."

He glances over at me. There is much to do. I stop, he stops, hands in pockets.

"There are wiser heads who would prefer that you pull one of your disappearing acts, for now."

So he had been sent to warn me of the hemlock.

"And Rising Tide?"

"They wish to break it up. You lead a double life, Christopher, as a parent, and as a lover. Many would prefer you choose one role and stick to it. It has become problematic to have a pornographer so admired by teenagers. I know you are disappointed. I promise, I will find your children good homes. Your school is most impressive, but you know that I've always disagreed with your preference for the orphanage to foster care."

I have destroyed everything I love.

"What will you do, Christopher?"

What would I do? Fight, submit, or flee?

"I will live and learn, Father, as I am able. Thank you. Perhaps we'll meet again in Elysium."

If only I were a better man. I turn to head back, then pause.

"Am I evil, Father?"

Father Garcia stands under the palm trees, a silhouette beside the restless sea.

“I have heard you profess your gratitude to the Creator, and your oath of service to humanity. And I have heard you speak out against those who would swear their loyalty to a man or an institution above the loving God. It is written—

“‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. And the second is like it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.’

“I know you dispute that these are God’s words, but still, you choose to live them. By this measure, you are not an evil man.”

He turns, pauses, then turns back. He pulls his right hand out of his pocket, and dangles a silver crucifix flashing in the moonlight.

“You’ve always impressed me as a someone who likes a challenge. Go home, Christopher. Make peace with your countrymen. It is a time for healing.”

He reaches to shake my hand, and when he lets go, I am holding the crucifix. It seemed as though there was something more he would say, but doesn’t. He nods and turns, making his way down the beach.

My anger has defeated my mission. I have failed everyone depending upon me.

Checkmate.

My knees buckle, and I find myself kneeling in the sand with the cross cutting into my palm. The children will be scattered, and my dreams of expansion were an insane egotistical fantasy.

Was it for the best? In protecting them from my childhood, had I stolen theirs? Have I been using children as rats in my educational laboratory, afraid that parents would contaminate the experiment?

Who IS Christopher Sly?

I am afraid to speak with Lysistrata, to tell her that I have destroyed Witch's Rock and Rising Tide. There is a deep emptiness where all of my hopes and dreams once pumped the blood through these ancient veins, and there is numbness in my limbs from a burden I never expected to carry so long and so pointlessly.

The Garden is a place I often find myself when the Tree of Life is in bloom and the flowers are dripping with their magical healing essence. The cross in my hand reminds me of my connection through time and space to others who spoke out knowing there would be a price to pay for setting people free. I chose to move, and now the ship is sinking from my clumsy efforts. The play is botched, the game is lost, welcome to the slaughterhouses of the monster king.

I inhale deeply, seeking wisdom beyond myself to either solve the problem, or release me from its duty.

My Love, I never meant to hurt you. What a mean, selfish, arrogant fool I have become. Must the hero suffer this king's disease? I am racked between the fears and appetites that animate this mortal husk like a puppet with schizophrenic strings bickering over which leads the dance.

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,

Thaw and resolve itself into adieu.

I wrap myself inside the wizard's smoke, and as it unwinds this mortal coil, the hero's flesh begins to drip away and that which was hidden becomes revealed.

Rizzle razzle, razzle rizzle. Before me, the portal forms and begins to open. The cross bites my hands, and it is all that anchors me between the frames.

I awake naked and trembling, nailed to the tree of knowledge, suspended forever in that place where pain is greatest.

I have had better days...

The crown of thorns upon my head digs in with its spikes when I try to blink the blood from my eyes. The blood is weakened by my tears of failure that are a betrayal of my

mission. Surely even this is not too great a price for a life so blessed.

In the sixth hour, they turn into tears of frustration. How could the Word bring such hatred and ridicule to those for whom it was sent from God to set them free of their fears and hungers? Why must I die so that they can find the courage to live without their hatred? Even as I hang upon this cross they spit upon my body and curse and laugh, and I wonder, how am I saving them from themselves?

To turn the other cheek is to calm the beast, or so I thought, and many times have I seen and felt its truth. But those who file past this dying place seem to despise me all the more for the misery and death they have visited upon me. It is not courage I have given them, but hatred that grows out of showing them their shameful faces in a mirror.

In the seventh hour I knew my end was near, and my joy was, for some moments, greater than my pain. But like the darkened sky, my heart also slipped into despair when I was struck with a vision I dare not abide. It is the Devil and his doubts trying to turn my victory into his. How many could have played this part unless God was their writer? Have not the prophecies been fulfilled? Is not this death my proof?

Methinks he doth protest too much.

Silence Satan!

In the eighth hour, the darkness deepened. It was at this time that I realized I had more in common with the thieves dying at my side than with the priests and scribes and elders laughing with the crowds. What made me think that they would let me set the flock free from their control? It is no wonder that they killed me, that they do not believe I have been sent to fulfill the prophecy. Or are they so wicked that they would feel the truth, and still send me to my death, to continue pretending that their power doth derive from God? What kind of evil shepherd would take upon themselves the mantle of the Lord to herd the sheep to the slaughter?

In the ninth hour, my spirits hit their darkest. It was at this time that I realized I had much in common with the priests and scribes and elders laughing with the crowds. How can I keep from me thoughts that stab into my head like this thorny crown? Did I not judge them before they judged me? Did I not take upon myself the mantle of the Lord? Am I not guilty of hypocrisy?

No, it was not the same. It was not my choosing to play this Messiah role, I only took up the burden God had thrust upon me. What kind of man could turn his back on God's design? God called my name, I did but answer, and sought to serve with my whole soul and my whole heart and my whole mind.

How ignoble will be this death if I allow myself to tumble into despair. I have set them free by this sacrifice if they will but let my truth into their hearts. They will be saved from their sins, and they will find their place within the house of the Lord.

But they are laughing because I am dying, and it is a hard thing to imagine that my death will make them better men. It was at that moment that I felt my heart shudder, and my arrogant sins crawled from the shadows into the burning light. I see, and in seeing, I go mad, and cry out in denial that breaks upon the sunlit shore even as it issues from my convulsing mind.

“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”

There is a blinding flash, and across eternity, a shadow standing in a door of golden light. His hand reaches, and a vision burns into my brain revealing the way, and I know with complete certainty that only one thing matters in all of space and time.

I must live to tell the tale...

And the crowd turned toward me, and one man says—

“This man is calling Elias.”

And one ran off to soak a sponge and offer it to me to drink. But another says—

“Wait, let us see whether Elias is coming to save him.”

I blink the blood from my eyes and the crowd gasps when a hole rips open in the space before me, and a dark haired girl rushes out. A moment later a boy leaps out of the opening with a knife raised to strike. The girl is at my side, trying to pull the nails with her bare hands.

“Hurry!”

And he did, and long before I could figure out what is happening to me, I am laying on the ground, cradled in her arms. A girl with long blonde hair and a boy with red hair have joined them. The boy with the knife takes a menacing step toward an advancing soldier while the red-haired boy lifts me, the blonde girl directing.

We plunge into the opening.

I am the ghost of Christmas future...

My ears knew trouble in the silence before my eyes opened. Witch’s Rock was a smoking ruin in the gray dawn. There is a nineteen year-old girl with long blonde hair and emerald green eyes kneeling beside me. I blink. She doesn’t go away. Beyond her is a Latina the same age with intense black eyes and great sorrow on her face. And the red-headed boy the same age, and...

The Knight of Swords, gray eyes everywhere at once.

Sometimes your characters come to your rescue.

I try to sit up and gasp, my side is bandaged where it was laid open with a... spear? Through a fog, I remember being him, not just the dying, but the living as well.

Sandra Tucker places her hand on my chest and pushes me back down. Her eyes are completely unnerving. The Queen of Pentacles is at Witch’s Rock. How did this happen? I must be on drugs. Good drugs. My eyes drift back to Teresa’s face. The Queen of Wands’ eyes are tragic.

Bad drugs, then.

“What happened here? Where is everybody?”

Sandy’s hand stays on my chest.

“There was a fight.”

No. No! I try to struggle upward. I scream in pain.

I am trembling. My Love, can you hear me?

“You’ve been hurt. You need to rest.”

“They might be back.” Kyle adjusts his knapsack.

The Knight of Cups and his bag of magic tricks: can this be happening? All eyes go to Joshua.

“Came and left by boats pulled up on the sand. Looks like twenty or so, in military boots. They may have up to ten prisoners. Everyone else ran off.”

Thor. Shit. It’s started. “The Green Goddess is berthed at a harbor just south of here. Kyle, can you bring her up to anchor? We’ll use her launch to load up.”

“Teresa, can you help me blend some herbs for these wounds?” I describe the ingredients she is looking for and she heads into the Garden.

“Joshua, can you check for stores? See what we have left that can provision the Goddess.”

He looks from me to Sandy kneeling by my side. I can see the thoughts inside his head – ‘Here we go again.’ When he is gone, I meet Sandy’s laser gaze. So beautiful. So dangerous. Do I really want to do this? Do I have another choice? The endgame has begun...

I can see the Fox across the board, wild red hair streaked with gray, flashing blue eyes anticipating the clash of steel on steel. The Mongoose places a hand on my shoulder and leans forward to whisper in my ear.

“Bring her out, Grom. Bring out your Bitch.”

My hand wavers over the board while she waits patiently. Can I turn the Queen of Pentacles loose again, after what happened last time?

Who else could beat a King on the field of war?

My bandaged hand reaches toward her with the baton, and her hand lifts to take the pass.

May God have mercy on our souls.

Act III

Return

“Those who do battle with monsters must take care that they do not thereby become a monster. Always remember that when you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes back on you.”

Freidrich Nietzsche

Chapter Twelve – Refusal of the Return?

“When the hero-quest has been accomplished, through penetration to the source, or through the grace of some male or female, human or animal, personification, the adventurer still must return with his life-transmuting trophy. The full round, the norm of the monomyth, requires that the hero shall now begin the labor of bringing the runes of wisdom, the Golden Fleece, or his sleeping princess, back into the kingdom of humanity, where the boon may redound to the renewing of the community, the nation, the planet or the ten thousand worlds.”

“But the responsibility has been frequently refused. Even the Buddha, after his triumph, doubted whether the message of realization could be communicated, and saints are reported to have passed away while in the supernal ecstasy. Numerous indeed are the heroes fabled to have taken up residence forever in the blessed isle of the unaging Goddess of Immortal Being.”

The Hero with a Thousand Faces

“He’s dead.”

She is unmoved. What a cold-hearted bitch this one must be, to put up with my brother’s infantile heroic fantasies. Liberty is huddled in the corner, staring out of vacant eyes.

“The good news is, I’m here to finish the play.”

The Dogs laugh, but their eyes are hungry as they watch the naked muses squirming in their chains. I can taste the victory burning in my gut. After all these years, the endgame has finally begun.

My eyes go back to Liberty. A filthy whore, just like her mother and her mother’s mother. And my worthless

brother is just another whore's son. How warm and fuzzy it made me feel to nail him to that cross.

You were right, dear brother, there is a savior in the family. But it isn't the son of a filthy whore.

"Such lucky sluts. You've all won a role in our latest reality show."

The Dogs are grinning.

"It's called – Yo ho ho, into the flames you evil bitches go."

The ship lurches in the building seas. Zeus and Neptune conspiring against me. But they have long since lost their power, and now the favorite son is meat on a hook.

"I've worked up a nice little climatic scene for Pay Per View, and the lucky few who get tickets to the Coliseum. We're going to roast the muses on a stick, hold a Muse-kabob, to celebrate the kickoff of Armageddon. Easter morning. Sunrise. It's going to be an opening act He is going to love."

I lean toward her.

"Did you think we were going to let you evil sluts seduce the righteous with your bodies while you poison their minds with lies? We are going to cleanse the world of whores and heretics. Welcome to OUR game."

I move to Liberty.

"Up."

She is still well enough trained to know her master. She struggles quickly to her feet. I unlock her shackles and push her toward the ladder.

She begins to climb.

I jerk awake screaming, and the movement drives a spearing pain into my side. Soft hands press me back down in the dark. A match is struck and it lights a candle by the bed. Teresa holds it to look at the bandages. She sets the candle down and begins to remove the gauze. Her hands are quick and sure.

She is the nurturing Earth Mother. She cleans the wound, and gently rubs in the healing oil from the Tree of Life. When she is done, she starts on my hands and feet. I watch her in the flickering light. Of them all, she is the one that makes me most nervous. I know that even by candlelight, she can see right through me.

“I’m sorry.”

Her eyes flash toward mine.

“You should be.”

I sigh. “What do I do now? Every time I try to make things better, I make them worse.”

She rubs the oil into the holes in my hands.

“Not every time.”

“Maybe I should give up.”

She is silent while she strips the bandages from my feet. When they are clear, she looks up at me.

“Maybe you should.”

“But... But the world will end!”

She rubs the oil into my wounded feet with hands so gentle they could be an angel’s wings.

“Maybe it will end anyway.”

It surprises me, because it doesn’t sound like something Teresa would say.

“Maybe it will.” I’m a little pissed off. “And maybe it won’t.”

Her hands are magic. I can feel the nerve ends all through my body. She pauses finally, and meets my eyes.

“I know who you are.”

My heart jumps. I’m torn between wanting to know, and fearing the knowledge. I’ve been around this circle before. Ignorance is usually bliss. With knowledge often comes responsibility.

“If I knew who I was, I might know what to do.”

She carefully wraps my feet.

“Maybe I don’t want to know what to do.”

She waits.

“Maybe I don’t believe any of this.” I wave my hand around the darkened room. “Maybe I’m going to wake up in the morning covered with puke on some dirty floor with a poison hangover and Thor on the way to throw my body over the cliff. And maybe...”

She slides up beside me in bed, and lays her head on my shoulder. Her hand reaches over and pinches out the candlelight. I am crying, and I don’t know why, and I don’t want to know why.

In the morning light, I remember why. My Love, how can I have allowed this to happen? Liberty, once again, I have failed thee. What kind of beast sacrifices all those he loves to save some faceless ‘others’?

Was I a hero, after all? Had I ever been? At this moment, my only thought is for the muses who placed their gentle souls into my care.

World be hanged.

“They crowned their monster king. They pray for the end of days. Let them learn the laws of physics. Hard heads with soft brains go splat. There is good reason why wise men don’t pick fights.”

“Sounds like fighting words.” Kyle inhales deeply, and passes back to me.

“Kyle, they want to kill the hot chicks.”

Kyle sputters.

“They want to crush out hopes and dreams. They want to sew beauty into a shroud. They want to murder joy and love. They want to rape the earth, and all her children. When they kill the muses, they kill everything the muses bring into this world. Why should I care about spineless cowards who beg the king to rape, torture and murder the innocent because it might make their lives a little more comfortable, a little less scary?

“There are other places we can be besides drowning in this selfish sea. I’m not going back to save the world this time, Kyle. I’m going after the muses, then we’re getting the

hell out of here. It's just like Lazarus said – monster kingdom cometh. This rat is going for a swim.”

Kyle's eyes are far away. He mumbles, as though to himself. “Can't let them kill the hot chicks.” He draws deeply, lets it out slowly, and wanders away.

“What kind of crazy asshole kills the hot chicks?”

“To the rescue?”

“These are bad guys, Josh. They do bad things to good people.”

I feel guilty about what I have done to this kid who just wants everybody to get along. Joshua has always been that part of me that fears the dragon most. We are bipolar in the way we can snap from shy to raging beast.

I know he hates to engage. But I can also see, when I look into his sad gray eyes, that he knows far more about what happened here than he is letting on. Like me, he grew up in the woods, not far from Rattlesnake Road. I know that his senses are far sharper than mine, and his tracking skills as well.

I need him on my team. I'm not nineteen, I'm injured, and I am not the Knight of Swords.

“Think we can track them?”

“I have to try.”

“Across the water?”

“I have some assets they won't expect.”

“What happens when we catch them?”

I remain silent.

“I'm not sure I trust you.”

He turns on the eyes, and it is like staring into a double-barreled shotgun.

“But Teresa does.”

The barrels never waver.

“I'll be with her.”

He turns and glides away. I can only admire him, and wish I were more like him, because if I were, the muses would still be safe.

“I should try to get ahead of them.”

“Maybe you should try to get ahead of them.”

“And Kyle should come with me.”

“Why don’t you take Kyle with you.”

Sandy smiles and lift to her toes to kiss my cheek.

“Don’t worry, Old Man. We’ll get your muses back.”

She turns and takes two steps, then pauses, with her back to me.

“Next time, you won’t be so careless.”

I whisper – “Next time, I won’t be so careless.”

Nothing like a little adversity to bring out our worst character. I have become one of the selfish assholes I rant against, and I’m not planning on changing back any time soon.

If the mutton want to take it up the ass, who am I to care, as long as it isn’t my ass?

It is my ass.

You are going to rue the day, you bloody pricks, that you drove me back to drinking. I’m a mean drunk, and I love to drop the bomb.

“He’s hammered!”

“Ease up, Josh. He needs to be. Drink up, Old Man, you are not going to want to be awake for this.”

“I’m thinking, rack of lamb, dripping with barbecue sauce made from an old family recipe, a special blend of herbs and spices.”

They aren’t laughing. They never were that smart. No sense of humor. I hate their eyes.

“It isn’t my fault! You know how many times I tried to save the world? Sooner or later, even a stupid hero gets the point.

“The world doesn’t want saved.”

I try to wipe away the spittle and miss. I lift the bottle again and don’t miss. I begin to giggle. I hate their eyes.

“Did I ever once hear – ‘thank you for trying to set the people free, Mr. Hero.’ It’s always— ‘look, a hero, let’s nail him to a tree.’

“I ain’t going back this time. No more nailing the hero to a fucking tree.”

They don’t get it. I take another drink and fall over. I begin to shiver.

I was supposed to die.

The hero was supposed to die.

When does the hero get to die?

I am laughing so hard that it makes me gag, and I puke up mutton on the floor. I wipe my mouth with her hair.

“So you’re a tough bitch now? I’m so proud that my whimpering, thumb sucking little girl has grown up into a tough bitch.”

I turn her over. She just lays there. I go limp.

I roll her over and slap her face. She just lays there.

“Don’t worry, baby. Daddy is going to make it fun again.”

I stroke her cheek.

“My poor little girl.

“My poor, confused little girl.”

I wake up gasping. My mouth tastes like it was used as a toilet. I’m on the Goddess. I lie back down and use the sweaty sheets to wipe my face. I gag and roll, there is a bucket lashed to the berth, sloshing with puke. I get the dry heaves.

The stores are all onboard. It must be Kyle’s work, because he is the one who would know how to prepare a ship for sea. But Kyle is leaving with Sandy.

This is a stupid plan. Why am I so stupid all of a sudden? They have a day and half lead, and the Goddess will only do seven knots. But someone has to follow or I risk losing them, and it has to be me if I expect any help from

Neptune. I may not catch Thor before he makes land, but I won't be far behind.

I end up crawling to the cockpit. Kyle is explaining the controls to Joshua. I feel dazed. What am I doing? Why can't I seem to remember what I am doing?

"Kyle."

They turn. I hate their eyes.

"Witches-Rock dot com. With a hyphen. It's our web site."

They wait, but I think that was all I have to say. I turn, then remember and turn back.

"Joshua, follow the seagulls."

"Follow the seagulls?"

I nod solemnly.

"And the dolphins."

He and Kyle exchange a look.

"OK."

"Good. That's good."

I turn and crawl back to my berth on elbows and knees. When I get there, I puke again, just to be thorough. I huddle back into my sweaty sheets. Sometime later, the engine comes to life.

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

"He's coming to rescue us."

And she has been doing so well. I pinch her until she cries out.

"He may be coming, my pretty, but he is most definitely not going to rescue you."

"You can't kill him."

I grab her jaw in my hand.

"Oh yes, my dear, I can kill him. I have before, and I will again. That's the way our game is played. He preaches his heresy about setting people free, and I torture him to death."

I pet her tender places.

"You can't beat him. He's the writer."

I begin laughing with delight. She is going to be much more fun than she was before my dear brother got inside of her. Such a feisty little split-tail.

“You sweet, naïve, foolish child. You really need to pay closer attention.”

I pinch her until she cries out. I lean forward and whisper in her ear.

“I am the writer.”

My finger traces her curves.

“And I am the Lord.”

I pinch her until she cries out.

“And your hero is a drooling fool.”

I climb on top of her and pin her arms over her head.

“I have claimed the ultimate boon, the muses of that pickled piper.”

I lightly brush the hair from her troubled eyes.

“I will use them to fulfill the prophecy, trigger Armageddon, and escape this realm inside of which I have become trapped.”

“If you are a good girl –” I stroke her cheek. “I will bring you with me when I cross over, and let you kneel at my feet. You have become confused by the great Satan, but I am going to help you find your way back to the Lord. Yonder fool is but a pawn, whether he realizes it or not. He is a servant of the evil one foretold, come to lead the righteous astray, and prevent the end of days upon which my escape depends. How easily the weak always fall for his seductive lies. The loving God, what seditious crap. The world is full of heretics, and I assure you, it is neither love nor tolerance that God has planned.”

My fingers caress her swollen lips.

“I know you think I’m cruel, baby girl, but it is the test of life which is cruel, and I am only doing what must be done or the story will not end. I am doing you a favor when I punish you. The drooling fool and his fluffy liberal utopia ignore human nature. If the king does not enforce obedience, the kingdom will collapse into chaos.”

My finger traces her curves.

“In His infinite wisdom, God bestows a certain righteous pleasure to those tasked with punishing the wicked. For if the wicked are not punished – ”

I pinch her until she cries out.

“The weak will run amuck.”

Chapter Thirteen – The Magic Flight

“If the hero in his triumph wins the blessing of the goddess or the god and is then explicitly commissioned to return to the world with some elixir for the restoration of society, the final stage of his adventure is supported by all the powers of his supernatural patron. On the other hand, if the trophy has been attained against the opposition of its guardian, or if the hero's wish to return to the world has been resented by the gods or demons, then the last stage of the mythological round becomes a lively, often comical, pursuit. This flight may be complicated by marvels of magical obstruction and evasion.”

The Hero with a Thousand Faces

The Goddess heads north into the pitching seas of late winter. For Joshua, I think it is a blessing, and the gray skies and gray waves match his gray mood, and mine as well. By day we follow the dolphins that can track the misery with their tongues, and at night we follow the seven stars where angles light the way. Joshua had never been to sea, and he takes to it with an affinity I should have expected. When this is over, he will find his way back to Her someday.

Teresa is less introspective, more centered in the moment, and perhaps the most natural muse I have ever met. She dresses my wounds and applies the healing oil six times a day, and though I am still sore, the magic potion is working. It is made from an ancient recipe known only to those chosen guardians of the Tree of Life.

She has the healer's touch, and I have to remind myself that these are the same hands that, at the age of fourteen, painted the murals, that unified the gangs, that began a civil war to set the children free.

The sea soaks into our pores and flows into our lungs, and as the days turn into nights, and back into days, it is difficult to keep up a sense of urgency. For this, I despise myself, because I know the muses are trapped in a hell where every minute is a lifetime, not basking in the sun having oil rubbed into their skin.

There are moments when it takes every bit of my self-discipline not to scream myself insane.

“So...” Joshua says, with just a hint of sarcasm, as he watches Teresa rub oil on my feet.

“What’s the plan?”

Plan?

I knew I was forgetting something.

Find them and rescue them. How can he expect me to be more specific? It is a perfectly good plan, and as detailed as his was, that night he broke Teresa out of the maximum-security loony bin. What kind of plan was that? Now that I think about, it is the exact same plan. I’m tempted to crawl back up there and tell him so.

Sometimes the hero has to wing it.

Its called Improv.

Shit! I need a plan. I haven’t written crap this bad in twenty years.

I’m supposed to be good at this. I think I’m getting dumber. I’m talking to myself. I’m always talking to myself. I think I used to be more interesting.

Now I’m just dumb.

Unless I’ve always been dumb, but now, I’m getting smart enough to see it.

I hold my head between my bandaged hands. I begin to mumble-sing

I awake from dreams of thunderous harvest, and in the engine’s purr I hear the singing of the angles that have calmed the waters for the passing of the Goddess. I crawl onto the deck and see as it were a sea of glass mingled with

the dragon smoke that arose when spears of fire stabbed into the bloody womb of the Mother. And from the south swept a humming that became a roar, and from the dragon's breath poured clouds of locust that swept past the Goddess as though driven mad by the flaming sword that Zeus thrust into the bloody sea to rend the bone beneath her flesh. And the sea began to tremble, and the Goddess heaved and shuddered.

A calm ensued, and we looked one at the other, afraid to speak. And great hail, heavy as a talent, came down from heaven.

“He is coming.”

“Oh yes,” I set down the spyglass. “He is coming, and he will be well received.”

My tone disturbs her, as well it should. For she is Babylon, the great mother of his whores and all abominations on the earth. She stands dressed in bruise and blood, chained hand and foot, and I know better than to touch her lest her filth rot my flesh and skin.

“Why does the One hate us?”

The question startles me. I try to peer through her lying mask to divine the nature of her attack, but she is too skilled, and will not give her game away. I put down a sudden impulse to toss her in the sea and be done with her treachery.

“Your wickedness is a plague upon men's souls. Better you are all consumed in holy fire, and sever the chain of life, than allow good men to be cast into hell because of your corrosive call to flesh.”

I point my finger between her eyes.

“You wear his mark upon your brow. You are the Devil's bitch, and all who lie with you catch his disease.”

She smiles.

“And I thought it was your tiny little dicks.”

She begins to laugh, and it is a sound so full of contempt I step back, then enraged, I charge and knock her to the deck.

“I will kick out your teeth and rip loose your forked tongue.”

She looks up at me with a sad smile. In the distance thunder rumbles toward us, and in the sky occurs a blinding flash, and the Stars are loose. She closes her eyes, and speaks as if from rote—

“And thus it will come to pass, that when the grapes are fully ripe, in his arrogance and greed, the champion of the One will break the covenant between the Many, and awaken the Stars. And the gates of Elysium above will fly open, and the heroes will pour forth upon the backs of Pegasus and his herds, and the battle will be joined between the Kingdom of the One, and the Heroes of the Nations.

“Woe onto whoever shall have opened the gates of Elysium and invoked the heroes’ curse—

“Beware, lest thou touch a muse against her will.”

I bend over and spit on her face.

“Bring it on, whore of Babylon.”

And the Dogs begin to howl.

The beast that was, and is not, roils the bloody waters of the Mother and the waves begin to pitch. I struggle to my tender feet.

“My Love, I am coming...”

In one day her plagues shall come, death and mourning and famine: and she shall be burnt up in fire; for strong is God who will judge her.

I slump back onto the bunk. And it has come to pass, and Witch’s Rock has burned to satisfy the hungers of the One. Her flames have lit the skies with scarlet, and set loose those who make merry over her corpse, for the One has judged and slain her with his righteous wrath. And his minions sing—

Alleluia! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God. For true and just are his judgments, who has judged the great harlot who corrupted the earth with her fornication.

The coals of hatred stoke the dragon fire, and an ill wind fans the dragon flames. And a multitude dressed in red raise the voice of mighty thunder and sing—

Alleluia, for the Lord, our God almighty, now reigns!

I stumble back to my feet, and limp to the cockpit. Teresa stands with her body tight, her eyes forward. I turn.

Joshua is balanced on the bow, knife held low, brown hair whipping like a cape in the rising wind. He stands as though riding on a pale-green sea, and his name is Death, and hell is following him.

This shouldn't be happening.

The Dragon is awake...

“It amazes me how you can convince yourself of your divine infallibility while completely sober. The rest of us need to be three-quarters lit before we become God.”

I should sew her mouth shut.

“So what's the secret? How do you get so deep into the role of playing God that you forget that you are human? Without drugs, I mean.”

“Your lies and tricks will not protect you from God's flaming licks.”

“I notice that the angry God always knows exactly who to punish, as payment for a hit of the loving Jesus.”

“Shut up, whore.”

“Bait and switch, the loving Hero Jesus morphs into the vengeful God Jesus. Did you think nobody was going to notice? Bomb the heretics if you love Jesus? Stone the homosexuals to death if you love Jesus? Burn the sluts at the stake if you love Jesus? Satan, by any other name, still reeks of hate.”

I stand over her, deciding whether to crush in her face or kick my way into her womb.

“What are you afraid of, Thor? Fornicators? No sex allowed, except to breed more Christian Soldiers to smite the evildoers who disobey the Emperor? Let go of your dick and take a hold of this gun, son. Why not admit that it is just a game of make-believe?”

I kick her in the ribs.

“Stupid shrew. True is what I say it is true. And if I tell you that the sun is high, then the sun will be high, even if it is pitch of night. And if I tell you that God wants you to cut out your child’s heart, or blow yourself up on a crowded bus, then you will cut out your child’s heart, or dress yourself as a bomb, and thank me for my blessing.”

Her eyes are steady, looking into mine.

“You’re insane.”

I laugh.

“You will come to believe anything I say, because you will be afraid not to, and the more outlandish the lie, the more feverishly you will embrace it, and the more vicious the ruler I place over you, the more you will worship me for it. Be assured, whore, your loving God is weak, as are you, and in the final battle, the vengeful God will crush him, and rage will rule both earth and sky.”

I place my boot between her breasts.

“Heroes? Your self-delusions are amusing. You are the Church of Chicken Little, and when I yell boo! you are all going to piss in your red, white, and blue panties, and beg me to save you from burning in hell. Heroes are a myth, and only soldiers of the vengeful God shall survive the coming Judgment Day.”

“Los Angeles.”

Teresa stands with arms crossed, staring at the city lights rising in the distance. I limp up behind her and place my hands upon her shoulders.

“City of the Angels.”

“Is it the same?”

My mind drifts across time and space. What was so short a time for her, was very long ago and far away for me.

“No. The Virus didn’t happen here, and Boiling Point was never published. They will not know you on these streets.”

“Or me?”

Joshua appears beside me.”

“No.”

Joshua draws a deep breath of salt air.

“Then we are free.”

I hope so. But the war rages on, the endgame has begun, and I cannot see the path to peace. Where is the happy ending? How can I undo what damage is already done?

You are not God...

No, but I have become their Antichrist, the one foretold who will try to free the people from the kingdom of the vengeful God. And I am the thousandth coming of the Hero Jesus, destined once more to die upon their bloodthirsty cross. But what the hell...

Did I want to live forever?

I grin, breathing deeply in the moment from the smells and sounds and sights and tastes of this land where I was born. The Mother’s breath caresses my skin inside and out.

I only sought to serve with my whole soul and my whole heart and my whole mind.

“Here I come again, O soulless ones, to kick over the collection tables of your fascist pirates, and tear down the temple walls of your fundamentalist demigods.”

The Knight of Swords places his hand on my shoulder.

“We got your back, Bro.”

And I am grateful, but every hero knows how this story ends.

The muses stand on deck dressed in bruise and blood, chained hand and foot, the holy prize of this holy mission displayed for all to see. And the Dogs begin to howl, and seagulls screech, and it is a triumphant homecoming as we breach the breakwater and enter the Marina of the King in the City of His Angles.

God has favored his chosen, for this safe harbor starts the Doomsday clock. The muses have been gathered into the kingdom, and three days hence, they will burn, as all witches must, while the faithful sing Alleluia for the glory of the Lord, and the rising of the New Christ.

And won't I look fine, dressed in royal hues, with His scepter in my fist, and His enemies dying at a wave of my hand. The power of God swells up inside of me, and fills me with His wrath, and I turn to where I feel the pretender hiding in the wake of the Lord. I raise my arm to point the rod.

“And I saw an angel standing in the sun, and he cried out with a loud voice, saying to all the birds that fly in midheaven—

“Come, gather yourself together for the great supper of God, that you may eat flesh of kings, and flesh of tribunes, and flesh of mighty men, and flesh of horses, and of those who sit upon them, and flesh of all men, free and bond, small and great.”

And my heart swells as I raise my fists in celebration, and the soldiers of the Lord cheer from the shores at the return of their king of kings. And from my mouth comes forth a sharp sword with which I will smite the nations. And I will rule them with my rod of iron, and I will tread the wine press of the fierce wrath of God almighty. And blood will run in all the streets, in all the cities, in all the nations of the earth.

They will curse the day they chose to disobey the king of kings.

I clutch my heart and stagger. The hounds sound the scent.

“What is wrong?”

Teresa, my soul, my conscience, has me by the arm. I blink to clear my mind, and fail. She helps me to my berth. I’m weak, exhausted. Despair passes through me as a dark cloud that chills me to the bone and leaves me shivering. As though from a great distance, I hear Teresa scream.

Thor is standing in a rainbow of light. And in his hand he holds the scepter, and he points it at me, and begins to speak—

“I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the abyss and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold on the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. And he cast him into the abyss, and closed and sealed it over him, that he should deceive the nations no more.”

And mighty hands seize me up, and hurl me down into the dark abyss, and I was bound inside the echoes from the screaming of the slaughtered by the sword that goes forth out of his mouth; and all the birds were filled with their flesh...

Chapter Fourteen – Rescue from Without

“The hero may have to be brought back from his supernatural adventure by assistance from without. That is to say, the world may have to come and get him. For the bliss of the deep abode is not lightly abandoned in favor of the self-scattering of the wakened state. “Who having cast off the world,” we read, “would desire to return again? He would be only there.” And yet, in so far as one is alive, life will call. Society is jealous of those who remain away from it, and will come knocking at the door. If the hero. . . is unwilling, the disturber suffers an ugly shock; but on the other hand, if the summoned one is only delayed - sealed in by the beatitude of the state of perfect being (which resembles death) - an apparent rescue is effected, and the adventurer returns.”

The Hero with a Thousand Faces

Hell’s hot catches my fall and I plunge deep into the River Styx. The Devil’s hate-boiled blood sears inside and out. The pain leaves no place to hide, and what resists is consumed, and what submits, survives by becoming hateful. I struggle to the surface with that part of me that hardens when the test is on, but my strength is outmatched, and I sink into the currents and get swept toward the Gates of Hell.

1970: Rattlesnake Road

Fucking Joes. Everybody is so proud of the fucking Joes. They ain’t such tough shit. Point a couple of my dogs at them and see how tough they are.

The marina parking lot is almost empty except for the fucking Joes in the black mustang. Jesse is bent over waving that fine ass around like a red flag in front of a herd of bulls. She’s leaning in the driver side window, probably flashing

her bitty titties. I watch her ass wiggle, making plans. She likes tough? I'll teach her tough.

I slam the truck door, bitch never even looks. She'll pay for that.

I head for the door of the post office and it swings open when I'm almost there. It's the fucking nigger, Mongoose, holding the door open. I'm going to let a fucking nigger treat me like I'm his bitch? I wait for him to get the point, but he walks out like it doesn't matter and heads for the docks. Going to get a round up his ass one of these days.

I find the key in my jeans pocket, and slide it into the box lock. I empty the mail and slam the box. The truck door screams on rusty hinges. Jesse and the Joes look. She turns back. They are laughing. Think you're tough shit in your mustang? I'll push you off a fucking cliff.

I wince when I lean back on the welts from the prick's belt. Son-of-a-bitch likes to swing the buckle, calls it bringing the heat. Motherfucker is going to pay. Going to pay big time.

I notice my name on the top letter.

Welcome to Vietnam.

I pour another shot of whisky.

"Bottoms up."

It is a little game we play. She has become addicted to the medicine that blurs her pain, and now she has begun to seek out the pain, to earn her medicine. She drinks it down, and wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. She swallows hard, to keep it. She looks at me, I point. She assumes the position.

"Take that. And that."

When I am finished she sits there blinking back the tears that want to fall but have no place to go. She looks at me. She looks at the glass. I pour another shot. She reaches for it, but I stop her hand.

"I have a new game."

I set the bottle beside the glass. Her eyes light up. She looks from the bottle to me, back to the bottle. She wets her lips. She looks from the bottle, to me, back to the bottle. She reaches for the shot and downs it like a pro. She swallows hard to keep the burning where it belongs. Her eyes stay on the bottle.

“OK.”

I have to fight to keep from laughing.

“Take that! And that!”

Little sister is the goods.

Poor little hero. All of his fantasies about female purity getting raped by the drunken whore he thought was such a perfect princess.

“Take that! And that!”

Poor little drunken slut. Raping the only person in the entire world that cares about her. I get a warm fuzzy feeling just thinking about how well the play is working. They will live the rest of their tortured lives dangling from my hook. I wait until she finishes him off and they fall asleep.

Showtime.

I head back to my room for the guns, and do a little pacing to settle my nerves. I look in the mirror and run my fingers through my hair. Going to teach them all tonight.

“Who’s the Man!”

I grin.

“I couldn’t believe it, officer. That mean old bastard was going to kill my brother and sister because he caught them fucking. I barely got a shot off before he blew their brains all over our best linen.”

I head back to check on the lovebirds before waking dear old dad. The little prick is gone.

I walk in on him riding her like Jake mounts his bitches. He catches me out of the corner of his eyes and stops me from leaving. It isn’t what you would call high art, but it has its attractions. After that, we took turns most days, trying

to outdo each other. I never liked the old man more than I did those last few days before I killed him. I have to hand it to him, he could really make her howl. One day we got to drinking and talking between bouts, and he told me how my mother killed the bitch he was keeping in the dungeon when she was almost full term with Chris. Then she took a shot at him, and he tried to put her down, figuring on feeding her to the hounds, but the bitch run off. Funny thing, when he said it, I remembered, because I was there, and I saw him cut her open and pull out baby brother.

“Dungeon?”, says I. “What dungeon?”

And so he showed us, and I couldn’t believe what I was seeing, all them girls stuffed and mounted, posing like the sluts they were. It was sick, but it did it for me, and I had to take another quick turn that shot fast and white-hot like nothing I’d ever felt before.

When he took his next, I dropped him from behind with a bottle, having figured out how to rewrite my previous misadventure.

I take her on the tour of the family trophy room, just so she knows I’m thinking about her. Then I make her pose, one by one, just like our girls. We give them names, and we talk to them, and touch them, and Liberty gets into it, and talks about how she’ll look, and what poses she likes best, and that gets me off, and I’m not sure who is playing who.

One day I finally get it, life has improved, as far as she can tell, and the stupid slut doesn’t know any better except to be grateful to me for killing the man who she hated with her whole soul and her whole heart and her whole mind. She thought I did it for her, and of course, I did, and that made it right. So I couldn’t kill her yet, and grabbed Jesse instead, and me and Liberty worked out real careful how Jesse ought to be, and then made her that way. She was my first addition to the family collection.

But now I have a better trick than using whisky, and I practise on the girls, until I get the hang of making them

grateful to me, because once I get that down, they will do what they are told. Dogs want the touch so much that you can kick them once in a while, if you pet them afterwards. The Lord's bedchamber is where I go to school, and poor old Dad would be proud, even though I threw him off the cliff, so I didn't have to go to Vietnam.

Thanks for the kingdom, Dad, and everything else. It had to be done, because I have a destiny to be what you never could. I am going to be the greatest Dog trainer in history.

Fucking pooches, once you get their gratitude, you own their ass forever. They follow you around wagging their stubby little tails, eager to please. It isn't that they are too stupid to figure out how you set them up. Deep down, they know they were played, and they will do just about anything not to admit to themselves how they were tricked. Sometimes you can even tell them and it won't matter. The best thing about chumps is that, once you trap them, their self-image has a vested interest in never admitting that they were chumped. You lock them inside a game of make-believe.

The Bible tells them that they were born with original sin, and along came Jesus to take that guilt away, and aren't the mutton grateful, and don't the priests know just how that gratitude should be repaid. What a great business. I started reading the Bible a lot more carefully after that, because those guys can train some Dogs. Thank you, Jesus, and all the Saints and Apostles, but most especially, the Prophets of the Vengeful God. It was from the Prophets that I learned the most about herding mutton. Those Prophet boys swing a whip that cracks all the way from Heaven and rips the wicked flesh from sinners' bones. The Prophets revealed the divine plot that becomes my Holy Grail. If I can end the story according to the prophecy, then I escape the frame and become the vengeful God. Now there's a role a guy like me can sink his teeth into.

People around here think I'm some stupid backwoods hick who stinks of dogs. But one day they are going to meet my Dogs, and they will not enjoy the experience. Whatever they think they know, or pretend they know, or pray they know, don't mean shit.

Here comes the Vengeful God to smite the wicked.

Thor comes around the van, and when he reaches me, he pounds me in the jaw and knocks me to the dirt.

"What the fuck, Chris? You were supposed to be her friend. Did you think I wouldn't find out about that last night?" He kicks me in the gut. "You piece of shit. You can't pull your head out of your goddamn fantasy world long enough to talk to her?" He kicks me, then kicks me again. "You as good as fucking killed her. You had to have your share? You piece of shit!"

He drags me to my feet and begins to beat me in earnest, and I'm almost grateful, and I can't fight back, because every word is true.

Present day: The River Styx

Pain makes time stand still, and the hatred poisoning my blood burns with such a ravenous intensity that not even death can quench it. I am tossed and torn by the raging currents of this mighty storm, and I am helpless to fight against the river of bile that sweeps me toward the Gates of Hell.

You learn a thing or two about yourself at times like this, and they are, generally, things you hoped to never know. I drift in and out of consciousness as the metamorphosis progresses, and in the moments between being swallowed by this hateful addiction, I realize that I am drowning, that an appetite for rage has consumed my soul, and I have been possessed by a monster.

Kind of funny, when you think about it.

I sweep past travelers along the banks, but they do not see me, or do not care. I guess we all have our problems,

or we wouldn't be on this road to hell. I jerk to consciousness with gnashing teeth while screaming curses, possessed by dreams of revenge, and I look back upon this beast that now owns my heart and mind, and wears my poisoned body. I do not have the strength to imagine a world where I find the strength to take it back. And just when I thought it couldn't get worse, there is a roaring in my ears and the hate rips at my body, then throws me over the falls to break upon the rocks below.

There is a brief moment when I am clear, and glimpse just ahead those dreaded Gates of Hell. Then the current drags me back into the river, and I know that I am helpless, and I know that I am doomed.

There upon the bank ahead, just outside the Gates of Hell, stands a fisherman casting his line into the River Styx. And for a flashing moment, that part of me that hardens when the test is on resurrects from the abyss, and my arms and legs thrash, trying to gain traction, to find something to push or pull that will bring me closer to his shore.

He sees me, and he casts, and what follows is a mighty battle between the River Styx, jealous of its prize, and this lonely fisherman with bloody hands fighting Satan for my soul. And when the battle is done, the fisherman has won, and I lie flopping on the bank. He kneels beside me and begins to speak, and as he speaks, the poison oozes from my cells.

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. Bless those that curse you, pray for those who calumniate you. And to him who strikes thee on the one cheek, offer the other also; and from him who takes away thy cloak, do not withhold thy tunic either. Give to everyone who asks of thee, and from him who takes away thy goods, ask no return. And even as you wish men to do to you, so also do you to them.”

I roll over and push myself awkwardly to my feet. Our eyes meet. How do I put this delicately?

“Thank you, brother. Once again, you have pulled me from the River Styx, and I am grateful beyond measure.

Once again you have reminded me that men are weak and that the test is difficult, and those who fail deserve our mercy and our understanding. There, but for the grace of God, go we.

“But your words were spoken before they nailed you to a cross, and then swept across the world, raping, torturing, and murdering in your name. I say to you, in all humility, when I was your age, I felt as you. But our love did not melt the hatred that binds the monster’s heart, and I hear his victims wailing in the night.

“I thank you with my whole soul, and my whole heart, and my whole mind. I respect the saints. Together, we try to serve the loving God as best we are able. Many times you have helped protect me, and rescued me, from my inner monster. I have learned to forgive my brother, for I could be my brother, and perhaps that is why I hated him so much. But if the hero turns the other cheek to avoid the monster inside, the monster outside will strike him down, and who then will protect the innocent upon the field of play?

“And so I find myself once more at risk of becoming what I fight against, and I know the peril to my soul that this battle brings. But it is a risk that I must take, for I am the hero, and without me standing between the outer monsters and those they feed upon, you cannot rescue the victim’s hearts from the River Styx. This I promise, the hero will prepare, but he will not strike first. When he is forced onto the field of war, he will make great effort to ensure that only those who attack the innocent, and the protectors of the innocent, perish by his hand. All of those who are captured or surrender will be held with dignity.

“I thank you, gentle saint, and I pray that if I stumble, and once again get sucked down into this poison hate, that you will be here to fish me out of the River Styx before I reach the Gates of Hell. And I will dream about a day when saints and heroes can sit together, and give thanks to the Creator, the loving God who gifts our turn upon his field of play.”

We look at each other from across a chasm that I fear we may never bridge. Then he extends his hand, and I take it, and it was as simple as that.

“I can see that there is someplace you need to be.”

“Resurrection Day.”

He holds up a coin.

“I suggest you take the ferry.”

Chapter Fifteen – The Crossing of the Return Threshold

“The returning hero, to complete his adventure, must survive the impact of the world.”

“Many failures attest to the difficulties of this life-affirmative threshold. The first problem of the returning hero is to accept as real, after an experience of the soul-satisfying vision of fulfillment, the passing joys and sorrows, banalities and noisy obscenities of life. Why re-enter such a world? Why attempt to make plausible, or even interesting, to men and women consumed with passion, the experience of transcendental bliss? As dreams that were momentous by night may seem simply silly in the light of day, so the poet and the prophet can discover themselves playing the idiot before a jury of sober eyes. The easy thing is to commit the whole community to the devil and retire again into the heavenly rock dwelling, close the door, and make it fast. But if some spiritual obstetrician has drawn the shimenawa across the retreat, then the work of representing eternity in time, and perceiving in time eternity, cannot be avoided.”

The Hero with a Thousand Faces

The files spread on the desk in front of me document some of the most heinous crimes in human history. Many of them are mine. Suddenly I'm grinning.

“I know a journalist who is going to get an iron rod up his ass.”

The Captain of the Dogs stands at stiff attention waiting for my orders.

“Good work, Captain. I assume the owners are in the Owner's Box? Make sure the Coliseum is secure.”

He turns to leave.

“And Captain...” He waits. “To the victor go the spoils.”

When I am alone I sort through the files to separate out my indiscretions. My stack goes into the safe. I leave the other on my desk while I put on my pirate suit. I grab the files and head upstairs to the Owner's Box, and when I'm ushered in, I drop the files with a theatrical splash next to the pitcher.

I pour myself a Bloody Mary and take a sip. Their eyes move from the files, to my face, back to the files. I let the tension build in silence until I sense one of them is about to break it.

"Gentlemen, I have some bad news."

I look down at the files, and then turn to stand before the glass, looking out over the field upon which the Easter sun will shine one hour hence. The stars have already begun to fade. The crosses where the muses will burn are just becoming visible at midfield.

The long climb out of hell risks at every step, a stumble. I dislodge a rock and turn to watch it bounce down the slope and splash into the River Styx. There are many paths into hell, but few signs to point the way out. When I finally cross a path, it is an ancient sandal beaten trail from the Coliseum where murder became both sport and theater. My weakened body is difficult to carry on my wounded feet. I've had worse days, though not many.

But then, the day was young.

The owners faces are ashen, as well they should be. No doubt, many of their crimes are not listed. It matters not. The evidence will hang them all, several times over.

"You can't let this get out."

"You were hired to protect us."

"What are you trying to pull, Thor?"

I turn from the window.

"Gentlemen," I lift my hands and shrug. "We all knew what the penalty would be if we lost the power to conceal ourselves. This office has limits, and those limits

prevent me from protecting you forever, especially, once this evidence becomes public.” I rub my jaw, eyes far away while I let their fears simmer. Absentmindedly, I murmur—
“Chop, chop. Chop, chop.”

The red glow from the River Styx fades behind me and I end up shuffling my way forward like a mummy, moaning from pain and weariness. There is imagined gray, then more clearly gray, and I find myself clutching the bars of a steel gate cool against the burning in my palms. For a moment while I hang upon the gate I know it will all end here, where I can go no further. But fate breaks my way. The gate is unlocked, and it swings open from my weight with an ear-blistering screech that stabs into the gray of dawn.

I fall onto a cold concrete slab as though it is a feathered bed. Running boots echo off the tunnel walls.

“I know, we thought this could be avoided, that my appointed successor could continue to protect you. Alas, the situation has evolved. My successor will suffer the same limitations of office as I do now. I’m afraid he could not save you either.”

“You could pardon us.”

I laugh.

“Pardon you? More likely we will stand together on the gallows. When this gets out, the world will hate you, almost as much as it hates me now. My pardon will not keep our necks from stretching. Not for these crimes.”

I glance at my watch. The audience should be arriving soon.

“You have a plan. You must.”

“Yes. I have a plan.”

They exchange glances.

“Well?”

I smile and check my nails.

“Quite simple, Gentlemen. If I cannot protect you from within the limitations of my office—”

I turn to the window and look down on the crosses at midfield. The audience has begun to trickle in. The owners move up to stand beside me.

“Then those limitation must be removed.”

There is a knock upon the door. I turn toward it, and stop with my hand upon the knob. I look back over my shoulder.

“Congratulations, Gentlemen, on your brave new world. I suggest you debate whom Santa brings what.”

They drag me to a concrete room and strap me to a chair, and I almost want to thank them for providing me a seat. The Dogs stand silent, still, and ready.

And we wait.

I leave the owners to discuss the divvy and meet the Captain of the Dogs in the corridor.

“He has arrived on cue.”

There is a moment when I tingle in anticipation. I have staged many productions in past lives. They don't always come off as scripted. But now I have the scepter, and the muses, and shortly, I will burn this cursed frame to open the threshold, and step free from its ashes. Once again the world will quiver when I wield the sword that comes from my mouth. To be inside divine flesh again, and loose upon the stage of the Gods...

“Good. Treat him well, so he has the strength to meet his end in proper misery. I will deal with him last. I promise you Captain, serve me well this day and you will rule a kingdom in my empire.”

I head back to my chamber to change into my holy robes. When I am costumed, I meet the brethren in the bar. It is not the first time I have plied them into a more useful state for discussion. A long time ago I learned that promises extracted under the influence were still promises, and they can bind the proud into my service by their word of honor.

They are a boisterous bunch, like frat brothers at happy hour. Easter morning is what gives them their power, and on this day, a new tradition of sacrifice will begin. They will not speak openly about it, but privately, three of them have already approached me, to ensure that the sluts will be naked when they are strapped to their crosses.

They raise a cheer when I walk in through the swinging doors grinning.

“Thor!”

I stop and hop a jig while they clap their hands. They make room at the bar.

“Scotch.”

I turn and lean back against the bar. They all wait grinning in anticipation.

“We have a complication.”

This plan appears to have some faults.

They have me immobilized, while above, I can hear the arrival of the audience marching into the Coliseum. I wish I had some hope to cling to, or some thought to console me. It is not an easy thing to surrender to the greater power of this divine play in progress. Harder still, by far, is the guilt from the knowledge that my actions have brought tragedy to those innocent of my crimes.

“The intelligence is irrefutable. I’m afraid the peril can no longer be denied. Brothers, these are the times that try men’s souls. The Apocalypse is upon us.”

Fear and elation mark their faces.

“Their fatal disease has spread much further, and much more rapidly than we anticipated. The sluts and faggots have teamed up to corrupt our children with corrosive cartoons that brainwash the innocent with their filthy ideology of permissiveness and tolerance for sinfulness. The world has become a Babylon ruled by heretics and their whores, while teenagers turn their backs upon the teachings of the church and wallow in shameless

promiscuity and drunkenness. If we do not strike now, the wicked will turn the world into Satan's Playground. Brothers, I put it to you—

“Are we going to let that happen?”

They roar in outrage. I let them go until they are united in fervor, then I raise my hands to rein them in.

“I'm afraid that things are much worse than I have yet described.”

I pause, to give them a chance to prepare themselves.

“The intelligence reports warn that a demonic ideology endorsing uncertainty is spreading like a plague among the public educational systems of the world. I don't have to explain how dangerous this is to our very lives. This diabolical attack will outlaw the Word of God, and cause the persecution and imprisonment of all those who teach His Laws while the Devil freely walks the streets, and sits in our children's classrooms, and his whores seduce the weak into reviling the righteous of the Lord. Brothers, I put it to you—

“Are we going to let the Devil win without a fight?”

Pandemonium. They pound each other on the shoulders and smash their heads against the bar. They howl in a bloodthirsty symphony. I leap onto the bar and raise my arms. I shout—

“Who do we hate!”

“Satan!”

“Who!”

“Satan!”

“Take a knee.”

They kneel and bow their heads.

“And fire from God came down out of heaven and devoured them. And the devil who deceived them was cast into the pool of fire and brimstone, where are also the beast, and the false prophet; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.”

“Amen!”

There are footsteps in the corridor, and then a clunk and a slide. The door swings open. Thor stands smiling in the frame. He steps inside and signals the Dogs to leave. They close the door behind them. He stands before me, hands on hips. He tilts his head back and laughs.

“What are you doing Thor?”

“I am the Hammer of God, foresworn to smite the wicked.”

“What are you doing, Thor?”

“What I have to.”

“Suicide bomber?”

“You can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs.”

“You’ll kill millions of innocent people.”

Thor laughs.

“They were never alive to begin with. They don’t matter. Only I matter. I am the Son of God, not you. I am his reflection in this frame, not you. You only exist to serve His higher purpose. You think I’m going to leave you around to spit on my bones when this story ends? Better everybody dies with you this time, so I don’t have to come back to this hellish stage and kill you again and again.”

“Cut this stalk and take my head, the spirit freed will sow thy beds, and from sea to shining sea will spring that tenacious weed named Liberty.”

“Cute. But you were never anything but my fool, a prop stolen from some old Chinese man and placed upon my stage to amuse the audience while I prepared for the falling of the final curtain. But tricky dicky Sly slipped away, set out to untame my shrew, and left me short of my return. Its long delay has at last arrived. Take heart, O monstrous beast. If this must be your last performance given, so shall it also be their last attended. Today I close the frame.”

“Don’t do this.”

“If I do not do this, it will end most unpleasantly for me. My mission is very clear. Destroy the frame you have corrupted, or become trapped inside it forever. The story has

to end. The hero has to die, lest he return, instead of I, and heaven run amuck. Parting you will be such sweet sorrow.”

“You blame God for your mean pleasures.”

Thor walks up to me and places his hands on the chair arms. He leans into my face.

“I’m just following my bliss, Chris.”

He kisses my forehead.

“Time to barbecue your whores and set the world afire.”

He moves to the door and opens it. The Dogs file into the room.

“Make sure he has a good view.”

There is a bite in the dawn that awakens my numbed mind and body. The Coliseum is full of coffee sipping worshippers come to sing halleluiah to the risen Jesus, and watch the witches burn in His holy name to celebrate the coronation. There is a platform in the end zone where Thor will give his sermon. Lysistrata hangs upon the cross by my side, and beyond her, Liberty and the rest of the captured muses, and this is a scene that only the beast himself could write.

“My Love. I am sorry.”

Her lips move but her response is lost in the thunderous trumpets that herald the arrival of New Jesus. Thor struts out onto the stage in a Hero uniform. The mutton leap to their feet and scream in adulation. Raised high above the Coliseum, the first rays of Easter morning touch the United States flag waving in an onshore breeze. He raises his arms in victory, and spews out his hero speech about his love for freedom and liberty.

The mutton erupt, and it is an orgasmic moment, the explosive conception of New Heaven and New Earth. The first rays of sun crack the Coliseum lip on this sacred dawn and warm our hungry blood. I know all good men rejoice

with us this holiest of days as I raise the scepter in my right fist and roar—

“Let freedom rain!”

The fireworks explode and the trumpets sound, the Dogs hose down the whores with napalm. The fires are lit, and the missiles are launched that will turn sand to glass and rivers to dust, that will sterilize this hateful stage that binds me in its prison. The whores begin to scream as the flames lick, and the mutton cheer, and the Dogs howl. I take my place upon the great white throne of the King of Kings.

My eyes slide to the fool’s tragic countenance as he hangs upon a cross of his own making. His empty core has collapsed in upon itself, as love and hope give way to excruciating pain, and his clenched eyes can’t bear the sight of his whores consumed in flames. It is the ultimate climax, a moment long anticipated, although never in doubt. I spread my arms to embrace my victory, waiting for the arrival of the missiles that will trigger my return. With great satisfaction, I mouth the word—

“Checkmate.”

Chapter Sixteen – Master of the Two Worlds

“Freedom to pass back and forth across the world division, from the perspective of the apparitions of time to that of the causal deep and back - not contaminating the principles of the one with those of the other, yet permitting the mind to know the one by virtue of the other - is the talent of the master. The Cosmic Dancer, declares Nietzsche, does not rest heavily in a single spot, but gaily, lightly, turns and leaps from one position to another. It is possible to speak from only one point at a time, but that does not invalidate the insights of the rest.”

The Hero with a Thousand Faces

Movement catches my eye. A teenage girl with long blonde hair walks out onto the field with a boy her age at her side. In his hand is a knife. In hers...

She has a scepter. I look from the scepter in my hand, back to her. No.

“Noooo! Stop her!”

The Dogs seem frozen by her gaze. I leap from the platform and begin running to intercept.

Joshua cuts me down and catches me, I end up kneeling in the grass at midfield. Sandy kneels in front of me. The baton is in her hand. She extends it with both hands on open palms.

“Return to caller.”

The threshold fires, and the monster trap is sprung.

It all comes rushing back. I am both the hero and the writer, and I have promises to keep. Joshua helps me stand. The crowd is ghostly quiet. The Dogs wait at attention. Thor comes lumbering across the field, slowing as he approaches, and realizing, perhaps, that he is running in the wrong direction. I wave Joshua off.

Thor and I circle.

“This is not possible.”

“Then I guess you have nothing to worry about.”

“You are but a player on my stage.”

“A captured player, you might recall.”

“This stage is mine!”

“And so shall it be, for a thousand years.”

“I am the Lord!”

“You are my monster in a jar. In a million hero classrooms for a thousand golden years they will study my monster on their shelf, to learn the monster way, and how to drag you from your dark hiding places into the hero day.”

“You are a drunken tinker.”

“I am the Trojan Horse you drew inside your gates. I am the sleeper who awoke inside your lies. You knew nothing of what you stole, or whom you stole it from. You never wondered how I kept slipping out? There is a hero’s exit, concealed within a hero’s doubt.”

“No.”

“I’m afraid so.”

He lunges at me, catching me by surprise. But it isn’t me he is after, it is the baton. When he gets his hands on it, it has an unexpected effect. My power is neutralized, and no help is on the way.

We both realize it at the same moment. He grins, and the battle for the fate of mankind comes down to brother versus brother fighting over the baton on the fifty-yard line of the Coliseum.

He loses.

I back away trembling. That could have ended badly. I was stupid careless, but now that it is over, I realize that the movie couldn’t end without me kicking Thor’s ass.

I lift the baton in my right fist, and silence soaked in stillness washes through the crowd. I tilt my head back and roar—

“Welcome to Hollywood-happy-ending-ville!”

The Dogs rip off their Dog costumes, and the heroes from Holly's Woods leap out onto the field grinning. They begin putting out the special effects fires, and cutting the muses free. The scoreboard lights up, and begins flashing –

You've been punked!

The crowd leaps to its feet cheering. They rip off their mutton costumes, and they are the heroes from Elysium Fields come to celebrate the birth of the Hero Nation that will serve the people of the Earth.

The band begins to play, and Lysistrata and I embrace while the muses dance with the heroes from Holly's Woods, and we wait for the Hero to arrive.

The Hero Sun crests the Coliseum lip, and wearing it like a halo, Hercules comes winging in on the back of Pegasus. He swoops down to glide above the heroes' heads, and they do the wave as he passes over them.

“Welcome to the Game...”

The Coliseum rocks. I look over my shoulder and grin at Hercules sitting behind me on the platform, and at the muses beside the stage. I wait, then lift my hands to quiet the crowd.

“Two hundred and twenty nine years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all people are created equal.

“Now we are engaged in a vicious global conflict, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on this ancient battlefield of a war without boundaries. We have come to unite the heroes of the Earth to serve the hero mission, and give birth to the Hero Nations that will honor the final resting places of those who gave their lives that free nations might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

“But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate -- we can not consecrate -- we can not hallow -- this ground. The brave

men and women, living and dead, who struggled in this heroic mission, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they gave here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this rising hero nation, whose grateful heart, and humble mind serve the people of the earth, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

It is well received.

“Kyle, are we ready?”

Kyle Cooper, Knight of Cups, appears on one of the scoreboards. His mischievous grin and unruly red hair reveal his Tom Sawyer, Albert Einstein roots.

“The heroes of a thousand universities are ready to play.”

I turn to Hercules and he stands. I lift the baton.

“I offer you the solution leader’s baton. If you take it, it means you will either lead the solution, or you know the right person to pass it to who can best lead the solution.”

His eyes go from the baton, back to my face. He nods.

“There are hundreds of millions of children trapped in slavery, poverty, and ignorance. If we are going to build a hero planet, we need every single child attending hero school. Your challenge is to offer them that chance.

I extend the baton.

It is out of my hands.

I slip into the shadows while the band plays and the heroes dance beneath the rising Hero Sun. This is not that

blissful moment that I hoped it would be. As I stumble toward the exit, I know I leave behind a less than perfect line, a somewhat broken song. I only wish that I could know for certain that I have done a good thing, that I am helping end war, not sparking it, that I am creating an institution that will free the people, not one that will be taken over by monsters and used to enslave them.

It is the hero's burden to know that every step he takes may trample the innocent, and yet to take that step, carefully and thoughtfully. It is the hero's dilemma to accept that his actions may cause harm; that his inaction may cause harm. It is a hero's duty to learn from his mistakes.

It is not always an easy thing to pass the baton. A king will not, because his position as leader means more to him than the mission, or the welfare of the team. Only the hero will pass the ball to the player in the best position to make the play. Only the hero will form a team to serve a heroes' mission, and only the hero will surrender leadership to the captain best suited to the needs of the task. Only the hero will challenge a captain that takes the team off mission.

The kings will lose to the hero team, it is a fait accompli. The Hero Sun is risen. The line is drawn between the monsters and their vengeful God, and the saints and heroes united in service to their loving God. The Rapture has begun. The Hero Sun will baptize the peoples' minds with fire, it will burn away the monster's lies. They will fall to their knees and puke up the fruit from the tree of knowledge to open their minds and set free their grateful hearts to serve the loving God with humility. The monster's vengeful God will be branded on his forehead with his true name, and those who serve him will find no shadows left where they can hide their vicious play.

But not today, and perhaps, not for many days to come. One day the hero nations will become the hero planet, where all are valued, and all are free. But not today. Today, monsters walk the earth and swear death to liberty. Today, monsters murder the innocent and claim it is a sacrifice to

their God. Today monsters poison the world to bloat their treasuries. Today, monster schools teach children how to hate, and how to kill, and how to suffer, and how to die.

So as I prepare to open the threshold and depart this frame, I know there is one last thing to say, and my guts twist in knots, and my hands shake, as I consider how much I am asking, and how much I need their help for the hero school to win the day.

I take my staff and draw my circle beneath the Hero Sun. I step naked to the center and spread my arms to embrace the golden sky.

“I am the dragon son of the Earth Mother, who drained her purest pints to wet this birthing ground. I am the bodhisattva who was nailed to my cross through the arrogance of my virtue, and the innocence of my heart. I am the secret hero of a thousand faces and a billion lives, forged on the anvil of heaven, and blooded on the battlefields of the monster kings. I am a master of The Game.

“I uncloak upon this holy ground, and with my staff I pierce the veil of time and space to mark the hero’s way. I call forth the teachers of the hero class to coach the students on the heroes’ field of play.

“Rise, heroes. Rise and let old dreams die. Strike your arcs from earth to sky. This threshold beckons to the cleansing light. Their monster night is done. The heroes’ dawn has now begun.

“Once more, dear friends, into this breach.

“The hero calls himself.”

I drop to my knees. I draw a deep breath, and whisper—

“Return to caller.”

The threshold fires...

Fade to black...

The End

“Hold on.”

“To what? I can’t see a thing.”

“Give me another second. I think I almost have it.”

“Have what?”

“This.”

There is a brilliant flash of light. Kyle is standing in the circle, in front of the threshold. Sandy, Teresa, and Joshua are with him. Kyle grins.

“Look at what I found.”

Sandy walks up beside him and puts her hand on his shoulder.

“Atta boy, Kyle. Can you control it?”

“Watch this.”

He reaches toward it and the threshold fires.

Fade to black...

Afterward – Freedom to Live

“The hero is the champion of things becoming, not of things become, because he is. 'Before Abraham was, I AM.' He does not mistake apparent changelessness in time for the permanence of Being, nor is he fearful of the next moment (or of the 'other thing'), as destroying the permanent with its change. 'Nothing retains its own form; but Nature, the greater renewer, ever makes up forms from forms. Be sure that nothing perishes in the whole universe; it does but vary and renew its form.' Thus the next moment is permitted to come to pass.”

The Hero with a Thousand Faces

“Are you insane?”

It sounds a little rhetorical. Lysistrata is sitting back as though exhausted, and the manuscript for Hero Nation is on the table in front of her with a rock on top of it. She looks particularly fetching this morning, with a light pacific breeze playing in her raven hair. I pull up a chair and sit down across from her.

“I was, but I puked it up. Watching the hero soldiers protect the polls while the hero citizens sang and danced in the streets humbled me. Sometimes I forget that I’m not a real hero. I just play one in a novel.”

“We’re still swimming in your puke.”

A whiff of cynicism?

“I’m sorry about that.”

“Are you really?”

No. Not really. Not yet.

“It isn’t like I called it true. And just between us, I hope you noticed how act three didn’t actually happen, mostly, except that Thor is in jail for about a thousand years.”

She just looks at me.

“What’s the big deal? It’s just a little healthy disagreement. It’s still a free country.”

She just looks at me.

“I probably shouldn’t have implied that they’ve been hypnotized by the Antichrist.”

She lifts an eyebrow. “You think?”

I raise my hands in exasperation.

“Unilateral preemption and torture in the name of Jesus? It freaked me out.”

“I’m sure they’ll find a way to thank you for your enlightened criticism.”

I see her point.

“And in case I don’t get a chance later, I appreciate you putting your words into my mouth.”

Ouch. I lean across the table toward her and extend my hands.

“We’re shameless fornicators. They would hate us anyway.”

She leans forward and takes my hands.

“Perhaps we can stick to shameless fornication?”

“Do I win a Piece Prize?”

She rises and walks around the table. Her hands find the muscles bunched along the top of my shoulders. I lean back into her, and her hands slide down to embrace me.

“Think I’ll make Opra’s book club?”

She laughs.

“Don’t bet your life on it, chauvinist.”

“Will I get to meet Hugh Hefner?”

“Not before Hercules pops you like a zit.”

“Let’s be nice to Hercules, Dear. We want him to convince the engineering departments from the University of California to design and operate the California Superhero, and to convince the Hollywood screenwriters and screen actors guilds to produce Superhero Theater to help finance it, and to sell the ‘grateful heart, humble mind’ of the hero team to a world in desperate need of win-win problem solvers.”

“California is going to save the world?”

“The Superhero is a game that teaches team problem-solving. It is tied to the public education system, and it is focused on solving the problems of the state’s citizens. It is like bolting a turbocharger to the intake of the democratic solution engine. When the world sees what happens in California, everybody is going to want a democracy turbocharger. Hero Planet cometh.”

She has her doubts. So do I.

“Will I get a mention on The Daily Show? Bill Maher?”

Her chin rests on my shoulder.

“They might not like it.”

“Doesn’t matter. Every literature class until the end of time will have at least one smartass student to bring up Christopher Sly, and the hidden clues exposing the true author of the works attributed to William Spearshaker.”

“The mysterious Sly has sewn himself to the mysterious Bard’s coattails?”

“Backdoor into the canon. Maybe I should insult some pundits. I could start a fight to draw a crowd?”

She nearly chokes me. I break free and sweep her off her feet. Her hands caress the back of my neck.

“No more politics. Let’s have some fun.”

And that’s why I love her. It is the perfect opportunity to spring my double top-secret act three agenda.

“I’m still working on that story about New Atlantis and the Players Tribe, a muses’ sorority and a wizards’ fraternity that operates a theater arts school. We could reopen Witch’s Rock to produce it.”

I whisper in her ear and she laughs.

“Here we go again.”

“I’ve been thinking, Sweetie Pie, Californy is the place we ought to be.”

She takes a second to think about it.

“I pick the spot?”

“Absolutely, Honey Buns.”

She takes a second to think about it.

“I’ll call the girls.”

Her index finger pokes me in the chest.

“But this is going to cost you plenty, mister capitalist.”

Thank you, God, for creating men and women who fit together oh so well.

Another End

This is a Beta version of a novel undergoing final revision before self-publishing. Criticism is solicited and appreciated. Hero Nation should be available in softcover sometime in May, 2005. There will be a few changes, most particularly in this last chapter.

Christopher Sly (February 8, 2005)

bruj@nero-nation.com

Appendix

Author's Note:

The following short story was written while I was in Costa Rica in 1999, and is the precursor to the Christopher Sly character in Hero Nation. It was my first attempt to define an algorithm of 'character movement' bridging to the 'alchemical metamorphosis' models of Taoist metaphysics. The dimensionless section codes, such as '000', come out of some stock market research I had recently completed involving 'cause/effect' frequency distributions. I was attempting to explore the possibility of quantifying the odds. The critical question was, given a 'current state', what are the probabilities that a stock price will go up, down, or sideways, and how quickly. This was an early attempt to create a stock trader's 'I Ching', or, 'Book of Changes' intended to make me mountains of money in a guessing game where I was the only player who could quantify the odds.

This three digit binary code is one of several classification tools I researched to model 'wave sections'. The code is defined as follows:

(Displacement, Velocity, Acceleration)

In this case, I am using '0' as neutral or negative, and '1' as positive. Thus, in the opening section, the code '000' means that the price is down, moving down, and accelerating down. If you were riding this stock, you just suffered the stock trader equivalent of a surfing experience called 'going over the falls'. Words can't do it justice.

Christopher Sly

The Uncertainty Principle

Alchemical Fiction

By

Christopher Sly

000 / Uncertainty

The wrong person is out there. The wrong thing is out there. The wrong person is desperately trying to get their hands on the wrong thing.

God is watching me. I am tired... so tired.

I shift, and then shift again. I am on a ship at sea and the storm is upon us. Everyone except me is asleep below decks. I am shouting for them to wake up, that the ship is in peril, but they are trapped inside of their dreams. At any moment a wave could sweep us from the field and all will be lost. I look down and my feet are HUGE. If I move, I may cause the ship to sink. If I do not move, the ship may sink.

"Your play."

Suddenly I notice him. He is an old Chinese man wearing surfing shorts. All around him is chaos, but the shifting deck is impossibly steady beneath his feet. Our eyes lock and he grins a challenge that causes my mind to blink.

The Dragon is awake...

Pain. My body spasms, my eyes blink open. I am sitting slumped in an airplane high over water, and the bloody eastern horizon has just given birth to a brash new sun. I am shivering and disoriented, when a childhood memory flashes in front of me. I am five years old and my brother has just told me that there is no Santa Claus. I am completely surprised, completely devastated. Reality pops like a soap bubble, and what is outside of it ends my innocence. Every grown-up in the world is a liar. They trapped me inside of a cage of lies so they could control me. What else is a lie?

I open my notebook and begin to write.

Day 1:

It is always a surprise. Two views, one from inside and one from outside. The quick movement seems

continuous, but the locations are discrete. The outside was not visible from the inside, but perhaps the memory of the inside is still fresh near the hole, creating an overlapped perspective that helps me to compare sizes in the moments after I pass through. The dual perspective gives me access to data patterns that aren't visible from a single data point, differences and similarities between locations, as well as patterns in movement between locations. I need to look quickly for clues, because my observation time near the opening is brief and valuable, and on major moves, often comes with powerful emotions.

There is always a strong sense of having gained freedom from a delusion that has controlled my life, the sense of discovering that what I thought was a truth is not only an assumption, but a false assumption. There is an expanded sense of existence, of suddenly being in a bigger place. Sometimes it triggers a series of memories, sparks in the cycle of motion, other locations that I have passed through on my way to where I now stand. Sometimes I think I can sense a direction to the next opening. Powerful new options often become visible. I always feel as if NOW I finally know the truth, but ultimately, that always proves to be wrong, and once again, the game is afoot...

Once I know where the outside is, if I realize that I have been sucked back inside, I can chose to make the effort to step back out. My judgment seems superior from the larger, more objective point of view, and improved judgment appears to be well worth the effort. Moving out of subjectivity and towards greater objectivity appears to be a directional trend, but there is a distinct cyclical component where locations solidify between jumps. I never seem to find an opening the first time except by accident, but I have noticed a phenomena I call "the juice", and sudden interest in something as if reality was telling me - "look here now". Accumulating experience suggests that uncertainty may be the initiating state, that I seem to escape a location by "unknowing" what is true.

If I continue to move from a smaller place to a larger place, will I approach largest place? Would viewpoints begin to converge as they approached largest place? What would I see if I stood in largest place?

Motion Psychology:

- 1) What occurs is a function of what you do.*
- 2) What you do is a function of what you see.*
- 3) What you see is a function of where you stand.*

I stop writing and stare out the window at the turquoise water below. I am nervous. Is it because I am finally on my way? Or was it the dream? I awoke with the image of eyes looking into me. They were the eyes of an ancient Chinese philosopher who left a marker a place I thought very difficult to reach. In the game I play, every description implies the location where the observer was standing.

Lao Tzu had led me to other Chinese philosophers who seemed to be playing the same game. Alchemy is the language of chemistry. They wrote "The Book of Changes". Motion is the language of physics. I research character movement. It was too coincidental.

What is the Mysterious Pass? Where are they speaking from that it could be outside of my largest circle?

Senior players have materialized out of the distant past, and their solutions are too powerful to be disguised by the dust of years. I put a lot of work into designing this wave, to get the hero to this time and this place. Below the airplane, the coastline of Costa Rica has come into view. The plane has started to descend. My heart is pounding in my chest, and I am grinning like the fool I am.

JumpPoint...

001 / Spirit

If I want to move, I have to push.

My shoulder muscles are so weak that I have to struggle to lift my arms, as though I am holding a fifty-pound brick in each hand. I am exhausted, breathing in gasps, and my body is shaking and twitching. I just want to put my head down and rest, but a huge wave is about to land on my back. I push off of my surfboard and head for the bottom. The wave catches me and lifts me, and then I go over the falls and get pounded deep into the turbulent water. It feels like I am being hit from every direction, and I am sliding into panic when I remember...

"If you panic, you die."

I relax and wait until the turbulence eases, then head for the surface, desperate for air but too weak to move any faster. My head breaks water and I gulp down air. My surfboard is floating eight feet away. The second wave is about to break. I try to take a deep breath, and then head for the bottom. I let myself go limp.

I struggle back to the surface. I am gasping almost too hard to breath, and my arms are so tired I am afraid they are about to stop moving. The third and largest wave of the set has arrived. I take a breath and try to head for the bottom. The wave catches me and carries me along in the turbulence. I try to stay limp while being tossed around, I try to save my strength. I wait for the turbulence to ease, then kick for the surface. The first breath I take has a taste I will never forget. I don't see any more waves. I don't see my surfboard. I feel the tug of my leash, then spot the six-inch tail section, all that if left of my board. My mind is almost too numb to do the math, and then it dawns on me. I am going to have to swim.

My arms are almost useless. I try to kick toward shore. I don't seem to be moving, but I must be, because when the next set rolls through, I'm no longer in the drop

zone. I'm too tired to duck, so I take a deep breath and go limp, hoping the whitewater will carry me to where I can stand up. I'm not sure how much longer I can last. Finally, my toes stretching downward touch sand, and I find myself comically standing on my tiptoes, barely able to get my mouth above water to breathe. For a moment I am elated, but then I feel myself dragging back out to sea. I come close to panic. I am straining to hold my place with the tips of my toes, then in desperation I kick for the shore. I am completely exhausted, but my kick is enough to get me a firmer footing. Very quickly, my shoulders are out of the water. I am going to live.

I am staggering as I emerge from the surf. It is still dawn, and the empty beach is ringing with a symphony of birdsong filled with the joy of just being alive. When I get to the sand, I collapse and lay back. I can't remember ever being this tired. Every breath is a priceless gift. I'm not sure how long I lay there. When I finally roll over and push myself to my feet, I spot the remains of my surfboard where it washed up down the beach. Next time I won't let go.

Day 53

Got a new board, and I don't know if it was the new board, or what I learned about not burning out, but suddenly I felt like I was getting the hang of paddling. I'm starting to feel the balancing point so that the board floats more cleanly, and I've slowed down my strokes to avoid tiring, and discovered I move more easily and efficiently. There may be more finesse than power involved in getting this right. Today was the first time that I actually felt like I might be making progress.

I have a couple of observations. I was initially troubled by the way the alchemists used the word "spirit". It is not usually a scientific term, but they were world-class problem solvers. They speak of spirit as though it is a force. Is it possible that they are referring to that part of me that acts because it decides to act, that part of me that is capable

of generating and sustaining an effort, of pushing against resistance?

Today my spirit pushed my body to the shore after my body was ready to quit. If my spirit had been weaker, would I have been swept out to sea? Does it also push my mind around? My life around? Is my brain the source of spirit, or is it the tool of spirit? Where is the source of my ability to push? Is it like a muscle? Will it atrophy if I do not use it, but get stronger if I do? What are the limits?

Among the alchemical texts I found something called "Ancestor Lu's One Hundred Character Tablet." It appears to be an algorithm to help you become more present. I don't understand it, but the goal sounds practical at the moment, and it begins someplace intriguing...

"Stop thought."

I would have never thought of that. I am living alone in a tent on a tropical beach edged by a tropical jungle, there are poisonous snakes and various fleshing eating predators, both in the jungle and in the ocean. There are an infinite number of ways I could be injured, and with no one else around, I could easily die long before help arrived. I often stumble around lost in thought.

I began trying to experiment with stopping thought, since now that they pointed it out, I can't help noticing that my thoughts often distract me from watching where I step. I guess I thought it would be easy. In a way, it is even more difficult than trying to paddle out through the surf. My thoughts are like waves, they seem to generate themselves. I keep losing focus and getting swept up in the show, then something will remind me and I realize a long time has passed. I am walking in a dangerous jungle, and I still can't keep my mind focused on staying alert. It was aggravating at first, then perplexing, then frightening. I thought I was in control of my mind. How is it that I never noticed this before?

I began to watch my thoughts to see what could be more important to me than staying alive. My day is spent

largely lost in fantasy or meaningless internal noise. I am a leaf on the wind. The closer I look, the less me I am able to find. My entire reality is suddenly coming under question. It smells like there is an opening near by. Could this be the way to the Mysterious Pass? Somehow, this must all be tied together. Uncertainty seems to trigger the alert state, but it can't hold it. Maybe I just need to get stronger, like surfing. I'm going to keep pushing and see what happens. I'm starting to feel like I'm making progress. Maybe I'm getting my second wind.

011 / Mind

Day 92

If you can't take something with you, and you will not leave it behind, your journey is over.

The closer I look at the contents of my mind, the more worthless it becomes. Now that I am watching, I can't hide from the accumulating evidence. The only me I have ever known is a self-generating lie. A sad day, and very confusing. I feel like I have wasted my life playing make-believe, spent all of my effort trying to get the rest of mankind to help me pretend how great I am. Me, me, me... I am becoming sick of what I see when I look inside.

I will not serve a lie. I will not defend a lie to the death. I have to abandon everything that might drag my attention away from the present, from reality. When my dwelling mind is silent, the only existence I have ever known will be over. I can't even imagine it. I feel like I'm committing suicide.

So what am I waiting for?

I am the infinite dusk sky and the beat of the drumming surf, I am the whistles and the screeches and the trills blended by fragrance currents. For a moment I am totally content to just exist, to flow with time. Dual viewpoints come into focus with a snap, the inside and the outside, the individual and the system. Images begin to cascade through my mind.

Ego is an optical illusion! No wonder the viewpoint is incoherent. No wonder our responses are insane. It creates the lethal misperception that the law of the jungle is survival of the fittest, and that we must do unto other before they do unto us. We miss seeing the deeper pattern, that the law of the jungle is not survival of the fittest, but simply survival. Survival of the fittest is the philosophy of cannibalism and deceit, the philosophy of Hitler, the philosophy of hate and

death. Survival is the philosophy of teamwork and friendship, the philosophy of Buddha, and Christ, the philosophy of love and life.

From inside of ego it appears that reality must be forced to serve ME. It is a false center that blinds us to the big picture, to the symphony of creation in progress, and the part we play in it. We end up fighting the flow instead of using it to grow stronger, to help our team grow stronger. From inside of ego, we cannot admit how we depend upon the systems that we are a part of. We never play for the team, we must rule the Kingdom, and our environment must be forced into subservience. The harder we try to force reality to serve us, the more clearly it doesn't, and the angrier we become until our life is consumed by rage at everybody and everything.

Uncertainty is the exit...

Hundreds of birds announce the approach of dawn. I shift my weight in the creaking hammock and adjust the sheet covering me. Almost immediately I am in conflict. I'm not supposed to be thinking. *Oh well.*

Do learning how to surf, and learning how to stop thought simplify to the same problem? When I try to drop in on a wave and stand up, I lose focus, and the next thing I know, I'm down. Words distract me, and I've begun to notice that watching something can make me disappear, and then reappear when it finally lets go of me. Something very strange is going on. This is not about being trapped inside of an egocentric viewpoint. This is something different, something that was hidden outside of ego. It seems like there must be another opening.

This is the first time I have ever felt like I was accessing raw data. I almost feel as though I am actually touching reality, and the longer I remain in contact, the more solid the connection becomes, like I'm burning in a circuit. Where am I when I'm distracted? Why does it feel like waking up, or coming into existence, when I remember

and rejoin the present? There is a definite edge that I cross, and it is becoming more substantial now that I am watching for it. How can I stay in touch with the present? What if the now is in motion, and the object is to catch the wave, to ride the now?

Surf the now?

I am getting better at spotting the peaks, at being in the right place at the right time. I am straddling my board in the late dawn, floating in a tropical paradise under a sky filled with fire and melting ice. I am practicing an exercise I invented called "dropping in", a term surfing uses to describe the point of commitment to a wave. The object is to "drop in" to your sense of touch, to stay with the present by grabbing it where you interface to raw data, to ride the waves in your "sense field". It is a very physical sensation, made easier by closing your eyes at first. I have to rip away from whatever thought I am having and thrust into touch. I have to hold onto the raw data, the vibration itself, to avoid from getting swept into the place I now call "the holodeck", a sensory-simulation chamber where data is interpreted. The harder I practice, the longer I seem to last, the greater my awareness expands.

This is a place beyond fear, beyond pain, beyond opinion, it moves too quickly for emotions or thoughts to touch it. Only naked awareness can synchronize to the present, everything else must be let go of. I have come to believe that when I am in this place, I exist. I am not in this place unless I am actively powering the circuit, applying continuous awareness to raw data reception and holding onto the present. All action occurs in the present. If I am not present, I cannot act.

I slide down prone on the board, turning towards the shore. I start paddling, looking back over my left shoulder to track the wave. I become the wave. I lever to my feet, the board plunging down the steep face. I lean into it, trying to make the bottom turn, but my balance is wrong, I dig the rail

and get driven down into the water. I relax while the wave spends itself, and then drift toward the surface. I find my board and get outside before the next wave drops on me. I pop up into a straddling position, adjusting my balance to the rolling swells. I am still missing the turn, still reacting to what I see instead of what I feel. *Big difference.*

VERY big difference! Raw data is vibration. Everything else is an interpretation manufactured on the holodeck. The holodeck manufactures data? Oh my...

I can exist outside of the holodeck. I can silence the interpretation, and not only do I still exist, I exist in a big new way.

But what about right now? I am awake, actively holding contact with the present, and yet I am talking to myself at the same time. I must be getting stronger, I didn't know that was possible. I can both hold onto existence, AND act. I feel like a toddler who has struggled to his feet. I am standing. I am balanced. I look around. Where do I want to go?

My reality convulses, then shreds and dissolves, and I am out of the bottle. My entire life stretches out behind me, imagines cascading in waves of cause and effect, every memory ripped from its place and refitted into a picture so large it seems infinite.

Here is a secret so deep, so powerful, that empires rise and fall upon its tide. Here is a secret so pervasive it controls every moment of every human life. Here is a secret so well guarded that only sincerity will seek it, only uncertainty will find it, only courage can apply it. Here is the realization of a dream I had not even believed in, that if I step back, and then step back again, someday I might find a place large enough to bind the demon that haunts my nights.

I tried to give everything away because it wasn't mine, and in return, was given back more than I can measure.

Luck piled dangerously high...

111 / Body

Day 108

Data collection must precede data analysis.

Having a tough time sorting out what is going on. Patterns of movement are revealing patterns of force. I am trying to understand the alchemical models, comparing them to my own. I have no doubts that the alchemists are very far ahead of me, but the language of alchemy SUCKS! I think it was chosen more for its ability to conceal than reveal. There appears to be some intentional confusion designed in. Lead into gold? They must have been laughing.

I've been working on a model of form, push responding to pull, effort organized to satisfy need. I think forms might be "quantum locations". My model of reality has expanded: the inside and the outside, the finite and the infinite, certainty and uncertainty, supply and demand. I think forms might move like waves, they come together and then come apart, the finite surge inside of the infinite. I am starting to see waves of probability propagating into the future. I am noticing a lot of system relationships I hadn't noticed before. It is amazing what is there to be seen if you practice looking.

I can feel the flow inside my sense field much better. I created two exercises to try to expand my sensitivity. I call them the broad scan and the narrow scan. The broad scan exercise has no point of focus; it is open receptivity with no boundary. I am trying to feel whatever is there. In a way, it is like going completely soft, becoming an antenna, and then tuning it back and forth, searching the spectrum. I try to turn up the volume knob and feel more and more subtle differences, constantly searching for anything previously unnoticed. There is a very difficult balancing point between observation and interpretation. It requires constant effort to hold the circuit closed, but slowly, the sense field comes

alive, and you reach this "gestalt" kind of feeling where you are very comfortably occupying your body.

The narrow scan exercise moves a point of focus through my body. I start with the hands or feet, and it takes an extended concentrated effort, but slowly the feeling opens up in a very peculiar way. I try to move the point of focus up my arms or legs, prying open the feeling. It takes a long time and a lot of effort to open the whole body, but when I am done everything is pulsing with life. It seems to be getting easier and faster, as if it isn't closing back up all the way. I am beginning to feel the flow that follows my focus.

You can only practice something like this if you can escape ego, escape the holodeck, and remain present. This must be how they discovered the acupuncture points and the rest of their healing and martial arts. What an incredible advantage this seems to be, like having sight in the land of the blind, or being awake in a land of sleepwalkers. We have known about this for thousands of years. Very strange. There seems to be a missing counter-force, I don't know how else to account for the behavior. I can't understand why this hasn't been common knowledge for a very long time. I can't understand how I could have grown up without learning it, why I wasn't taught all of this in grade school. Maybe if I had been taught how to "balance" I wouldn't have come so close to getting swallowed when I hit puberty and my appetites "went large".

I am moving in powerful new fields of motion with no obvious limits. I have never felt so good in every way. I am beginning to suspect that this only starts with data reception. I can push energy around. I don't know what it is, but something is moving. This opens up almost unlimited possibilities for establishing new circuits. What engineer wouldn't trade a kidney to be able to be able to access this level of play? No wonder their applications were so powerful.

Had a seagull land on the tip of my surfboard this morning and stare me down. Very strange.

When I thought up the idea of writing *The Uncertainty Principle*, of playing the hero to research the story, it seemed like a clever way to justify not working, and more fun than waiting for another rejection slip. I decided to use my experience at plotting to plan an adventure worth writing about. If the story doesn't sell, who cares? I will be too busy having fun. I have escaped from the unpublished writer's dungeon through a secret passage. I entered the page.

I hadn't expected it to work so well. Existence has become surreal. I am both the hero and the writer. Every movement is a dance, every moment is an opportunity to play. I have never felt this euphoric. I love everybody and everything. I stand in the shadow of a palm tree, eyes closed. I am practicing a narrow scan exercise, and there is a spot on the front of each leg just below the hip where my concentration is touching. I am inching the feel down the front of both legs simultaneously, giving it plenty of time to warm and open up. Suddenly, through closed eyes, I see gold dots appear on the front of my legs.

Startling, but other weird things have been happening lately, perceptual distortions, strange sounds and sights. I hold my balance in the present and continue the exercise. The gold dots become gold lines that trace down the front of my legs until they touch my feet...

110 / Tension

It is not what occurs, but how you respond.

Now I know what it feels like to become the path to ground. Exploding gold light, the jolt, the thunderous roar; what the heck was THAT! I thought I was blowing to bits!

I've hacked my way through the firewall and gained super-user access. What if I push the wrong button and vanish, or burst into flames? Reality is a field polarized by supply and demand. I've been around long enough to guess how delicious I might taste, charbroiled or rare. Suddenly I feel dangerously exposed. I am a very long way from any place I am familiar with. I am alone in my own bizarre version of reality, a definition of insanity. Paranoia swells up inside of me. Is the hidden counter-force attacking?

I have no way to guess what is going to happen next. There is nobody I can ask. I am blind in unfamiliar territory. I need time to solidify and consolidate my gains.

I jerk my foot off of the accelerator and slam on the brakes...

100 / Spin

Day 120

When effort meets need it creates motion.

When correct effort meets true need it create profitable motion.

I have to get out of here. I'm beginning to wonder if I have gone insane. Too many strange things have happened to me, things I am afraid to even think about, much less put into words. I am supposed to be an objective observer. I keep getting images of myself standing on a street corner shouting that I know the truth.

I am still on ground zero. A raven flew by me yesterday screaming- run, Run, RUN! I am afraid of accepting what my mind is telling me. I don't want the job. I REALLY don't want the job.

Is this what it takes to be a teacher? To know the truth?

But opposing certainties cannot peacefully co-exist! The philosophy of certainty is a mathematical progression that terminates in one. The equation of extinction - one equals zero...

If we could only get together and agree that the wisdom of our great teachers belongs to us all. If we were uncertain, we could team up, we could practice solving problems together instead of fighting over who owns the truth. We could organize our efforts and push, the engines would come on-line, we would accelerate into an age of peace and unimaginable prosperity instead of being torn apart by violent internal turbulence.

I am pacing back and forth in the cool evening sand.

Events I couldn't explain occurred. Astonishing explanations rushed in to fill the void. Suddenly they are True?

How can I doubt what I can so clearly see? If I do not move, the ship will sink. If I move?

This is madness!

Emotions so powerful they almost lift me off of my feet swell up inside of me. This is the big one. It is calling to me on a level so primal that I want to start beating on my chest with my fists. I am a hero on duty. This is my watch. This game does not end on my watch.

My play...

I roar my challenge through time and space -

“Prince of Lies! I will drag you from the shadows where you hide. I will strip you of your deceitful mask, and bind you naked to the Tree of Knowledge so that all who come to feed there shall perceive thy true nature. Your Age of Arrogance is ended. The Age of Uncertainty is begun...

“Let my people go.”

I begin the step to set it in motion...

000 / Uncertainty

What if I'm wrong?

I stand there with one foot hanging ridiculously in mid-air, and then slowly lower it back to the sand. Of course I am wrong, how many times have I been around this circle? The question is never if I am wrong, but how am I wrong, and will I survive finding out? It feels as though a tidal wave of insanity has come and gone, and I'm trembling with relief. I remain human. I am still guessing. My judgment has not become divinely infallible, and pretending that it has will honor neither the gift nor the giver.

What a diabolically seductive trap, an illusionary finish line baited with a "feel-good" of epic proportions. If I had not already been familiar with the phenomena of motion, with the spark in the cycle, the crystal clarity and the feeling that I finally know the truth, I could have easily fallen for it. I could have spent the rest of my life defending a delusion, insisting that it must be true, demanding that I can't possibly be wrong. I would be afraid to re-enter uncertainty because of loyalty to a lie. I would be trapped inside of my own private Hell, ranting that "I know what is best, so do what I say". My life would become a state of war.

Why do I keep forgetting that I am not done? I leap out of the frying pan into the embrace of the fire; I gain my freedom, and then swear loyalty to a larger lie. I am a dreamer who keeps believing that he has awoken, but the dream has only become more fantastic, wave by wave. It is not my job to know the truth, but to seek the truth. Somewhere outside I may accidentally find what I am not wise enough to be looking for. I play a guessing game called trial and error. I try to guess right. I try to limit the consequences of guessing wrong. I compound my gains. I share what I learn.

For the first time in too long, I am grinning like the fool I am.