

Seeing Nonsense

by Jack McBride

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Prelude.

Sky Above Me.

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Eric.

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Eric was sitting with his legs dangling off the bow of his ship, still docked when it happened for the first time. It was like a power outage. But power outages don't happen outside on cloudless, midsummer days in Florida. He calmed himself after the shock and shrugged it off. It was only a split second, he figured that he imagined it.

Still, something within drove him to go back and check on his wife. He decided not to go out on the water that day.

"Jess, did you notice what happened earlier?" Eric said as he entered quietly, catching his wife unaware.

She started before turning around, "Oh my gosh Eric, you scared me. No, what happened? Aren't you going out on the boat today?"

"Hmm" Eric thought for a moment and then decided it must have simply been a kind of mirage. Best to put it out of mind.

"No, I just decided I'd rather spend the day with you." he replied.

"Oh, you are so sweet." Jess replied and walked up to him. "I've been wanting to see that new movie - Brooklyn, want to go to dinner before?"

"That sounds great." Eric replied. He put his arm around his wife and walked her over to look out the large patio windows, over the neighborhood and the water beyond. As he rubbed her back he felt strange, but good. Satisfied.

His wife rested her head on his shoulder, "I'm so happy. I was starting to worry you loved that boat more than me."

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Thomas .

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Thomas woke up, cold and miserable. Before looking at his clock there was no indication it was truly the morning - he was in Fairbanks on the shortest day of the year. The sun wouldn't rise until around 11 and even then, it would be up a meager handful of hours. He had gone to law school to help native peoples, but that didn't make him enjoy the weeks of Alaskan darkness he'd lived through.

As the Senior Tribal Policy Adviser for Region 10 under the EPA he knew the area fairly well and was on his way to convene with several northernmost tribal leaders. He hadn't been up here for a while and was looking forward to talking with these men and women again despite the dark and cold. They had the presence of politicians in D.C. with none (well maybe not none, but at least a lot less) of the ego.

He did his morning routine: shave, shower, pick out a fitting outfit. Always a suit, but he was very particular about what combination of pieces best suited the day's audience. Some would call it anal, but the joy he took in doing it separated it from neurosis.

Feeling well prepared he stepped outside carrying a coffee from the complimentary hotel Keurig. He still had a few minutes until his cab arrived, but enjoyed using the brisk air to get his gears turning.

He was lost in vaguely defined thoughts when it happened. He slowly noticed that it was much brighter than it had been just a few minutes before. More than that, it was warm. Quickly becoming too warm to be comfortable in his heavy suit and cap.

He removed his cap and wiped his brow. Then shifted his eyes skyward, and froze.

His hat fell softly to the ground, its landing an almost inaudible rustling into snow. He never noticed it leave his hand.

His gaze was transfixed above.

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Adam.

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President Adam Victor of the United States of America stood at the oval office windows, hands clasped behind his back.

An adviser walked in, "Sir, you should really take a look a--"

The President cut him off, "Not right now." and didn't move from his position.

The adviser stopped and let go of his posture, half-consciously allowing a shiver of resignation to pass through him. He quietly exited the room.

The President stood alone, wrapped up in thought. He had run a campaign on fear. Many believed that his conservative, old-fashioned values had captured a populace put on edge by the recent 'meteorological instances.' But when it came down to it

he didn't know what to do about them - and just recently they'd been occurring more frequently.

We couldn't tell why, but they all seemed to be focused around the sun or other stars. When running his campaign, he saw them as a tool. Not something to truly worry about, but now he wasn't so sure about either of those things. They hadn't had any truly negative effects for a long time, the tides may be shifting slightly and the chemical makeup of the atmosphere was apparently increasing in helium but these seemed like they could be natural phenomena to him. As usual liberals were putting the blame on fossil fuels so he had ignored them outright.

But the unease had always been there, in his gut, impossible to fully ignore. It is hard to ignore the sun flickering like a basement lamp, or what looked like raging fires amongst the clouds.

Now he was wondering whether the scientists were right about it all. Perhaps they had destroyed the Earth and the repercussions, or an angered God, were destroying the Sun in revenge. The public had slowly lost their faith in him when the incidents kept increasing, especially when the most disturbing phenomena happened - a sharp increase in spontaneous human combustion, starting with someone in the front row of his second State of the Union Address.

And now, he had lost faith in himself.

He thought of the reports on the desk behind him. They came from the EPA and were labeled increasing degrees of urgent, must-see, potentially catastrophic. He wondered whether his adviser had been bringing him another one. Perhaps this time from the UN or the UK or some concerned Governor trying to show his state he was going to get to the bottom of whatever this problem was 'even if they have to go right to the top!'

He put his hand over his face and tensed from the biting pain behind his eyes that had become all too common. He felt small and misplaced, as if he had been dropped into a vehicle with completely foreign controls and was expected to pilot it through a crash.

It felt much hotter suddenly, the President tried not to look up - but he never could resist it. He lifted his eyes upward and saw it.

It was the most impressive display yet: tongues of orange, red, yellow, and even blue danced raucously in the sky; casting a shifting color filter over the entire landscape.

Looking down the President saw a small group of tourists who shifted their eyes from the sky and towards the White House. He smiled unhappily. Right now it was the red, white, and blue house.

Before his eyes a figure ran out towards the tourists - for a moment he couldn't tell with how color-shifted all the ground

was - but quickly he saw that the figure burned brighter than the rest of this picture.

A secret service guard quickly collapsed into a burning heap in front of the group.

Their cameras flashed repeatedly.

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Part One.

Earth Below Me.

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Sam.

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A form writhed and curled in the darkness, sheets were thrown off the bed it laid upon. It was the figure of a man. As the sheets fell to the floor a second figure was revealed lying beside the first. The woman sat up with urgency.

"Holy shit!" She looked around frightened and saw her husband's terrifying movement. She reached out to touch him, "Sam, wake up! You're having a nightmare."

The man shot up to an erect sitting position and looked with wide eyes around the room. He blinked a few times, "Oh my gosh Jackie, I just had an awful dream."

"Oh no I'm sorry honey, was it the falling dream?"

"No no this was...different. And way worse."

Sam was visibly shaken so his wife pulled him into her arms. "Oh, dear I'm sorry, do you want to tell me what happened?"

"It was so strange. Kind of hard to describe. But it was all these people who were coming to me for advice. But it was about all these horrible things. Killing and attacking and bombing. And I was telling them all how to do it! Not even, like, watching myself do it but actually doing it. For some reason it just made sense."

"Oh honey, that's terrible. It was just a dream, not the real you." She ran her hand through his hair. "Let's just go back to sleep, we have to be up in a few hours. And who knows if Alex will wake us up before then."

Sam didn't look very comforted, but only said, "Thanks Jackie, you're right. I love you." With that, Samuel and Jackie Nyler laid down to sleep. Sam wouldn't sleep for the rest of the night, fearful of what might happen if he were to dream.

He hadn't told his wife the end of the dream: a hooded, older man who looked both foreign and familiar had told him to choose. Sam assumed he meant between the future he dreamt and something else, but he wasn't sure what. The man had held both hands out wide. In one was a knife dripping blood. In the other

was nothing but a flame using the hand as fuel but leaving the skin pink and unburnt. Sam guessed the knife was his dream; but he didn't know what was scarier. That, or what lay in the hand of fire.

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February 2nd, 2135

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The map of North America in 2135 CE would look almost unrecognizable to a viewer from the early 21st Century. Throughout much of the former United States and Canada new societies had splintered off from these two great powers - Cascadia to the Northwest, including Washington, Oregon, Northern Canada and British Columbia. Much of the Midwest was now small, unnamed provinces connected loosely to the closest remaining urban centers: Vegas, Salt Lake. Texas split - much of its southeast now part of a newly formed North-Mexican feudal-revolutionary society called Nuevo Reino, the New Kingdom.

The border of Old Texas and Nuevo Reino was a place of no small conflict, especially because both states had seen a relatively large number of the new 'sun-cults' which had sprouted up so shockingly around the world. New England had

consolidated itself, extended down to D.C. and regrown strong ties to Old England - Britain - in attempts to coordinate themselves as political leaders through this crisis: a largely failed enterprise, due in part to the fact that these areas had some of the highest profile, and most destructive, cases of sun-madness. A political bent seemed to go hand-in-hand with many of the inflictions.

Although North America's border-lines have been changed in a rather conspicuous way the rest of the world was by no means unchanged. The old colonial lines drawn up in Africa by the European powers-that-were had dissolved almost entirely. Most states had split into smaller, varyingly autonomous societies similar to Somaliland; South Africa was an exception - unfortunately through strengthening of totalitarian practices it had maintained state strength and territory boundaries. Europe looked similar from a satellite view, but its societies had changed vastly in character.

The fortunate populations had the character of visionaries, especially laden with artists, and had avoided the worst of the destruction. Though all were afflicted by the losses to suicide, spontaneous combustion, insanity and cult tendencies. One example of a relatively fortunate state, perhaps surprisingly, was Ireland: the small step taken in the early 21st Century of introducing philosophy to all public schools from a younger age

had laid a foundation for survival. The populace was reared such that when the crisis came some were prepared to reflect, observe and adapt rather than panic, fight and passionately destroy. Not to say any nation made out unscathed, the great dogmatic nature and religious conservatism of many in this same nation led to great strife, and substantial disaster. Further, some of the nations that fared the worst had populations that did well. Pockets of people, as small even as specific individuals, handled the crisis in stride even as their communities burned.

It was this world that the fires became normal - a world that burned but kept turning. In it, people lived daily, wondering whether the sun might choose not to shine that day, whether anyone they knew might go up in flames, whether they themselves might hear the voices of the sun-cult in their heads. This was the world that humans had to endure, had to make work. The only way to do that, was to change.

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April 23rd, 2144

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Studying the bodies and minds of sun-cult members, people who had gone insane, or were currently self-immolating had

issues both obvious (fire) and less obvious (identification, escapes, threats from the cults). For much of the crisis' beginning these things had taken a backseat to the endeavors of maintaining crops, attempting to keep society intact, and generally surviving.

One fact had not escaped the attention of psychologists, anthropologists, and others who studied the human mind though. This was that multiple people were reporting dreams that not only sounded oddly similar to other's dreams and to real events - but, if taken as accurate, had happened in advance of the event itself. They were shockingly accurate premonitions.

One noteworthy example is that of an extended network of people who dreamt of a friend or relative sitting cross-legged and bursting into flame. They had found each other online and made one of the largest specialty online forums which eventually expanded to include anyone who wanted support dealing with the troubling events.

This forum came to rival social media websites in membership over the course of a decade or two. Its initial core - the members of which became leaders and emotional pillars for communities online and in-person - was so charismatic and bonded due to their shared dream experience. For some of whom it ended up in varying stress disorders and panicked episodes around fire. It was later determined that these dreams were all

associated with the largest sun-cult suicide event, and largest group suicide of any kind. Everyone who appeared in the dreams is believed to have been there, at the group suicide, though many of the corpses were unidentified.

The connection between the dreams and the event itself were to be a topic of philosophical, scientific, scholarly, and imaginative inquiry for centuries.

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The Master.

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The Master stood offstage, his face blissful and mind at ease. He was wearing the robes prepared especially for tonight. Flowing out behind him, crimson with trimming of yellow and a plume of blue across the chest. A heavy hood obscuring the entire top of his face, making it so none could see his eyes. He was the Lord of Cinder and his followers had worked tirelessly for weeks on his regalia.

Someone came up to talk to him, "Master, do you need anything? All the crowns have been distributed and everyone is in their positions. All the lines are set and the vents have been opened and..."

He silenced the man with a look. "Worry no more about the preparations, I can feel that all is in its proper place." The man was blessed to receive one of the Master's rare smiles. The Master's eyes shone. He clasped the man's hands, "Today we will start our ascendance, we will finally see the great plains of stardust, the rolling seas of energy, we will be destroyed and reborn in the pillars of creation." The man was finally freed from his speechlessness as the Master let go of his hands and used an arm to grasp the man's shoulder. He found his tears welling and tried to stifle them.

"I apologize Master, I do not mean to..." the man tried to apologize.

"My son," The master stopped him. Pulling him into an embrace, "now is a time for joy. All that we have done will be fulfilled." The man was overcome by emotion in the Master's embrace, but now he found no tears coming. He felt overwhelming joy. "Now go find your position my son. We must begin." The Master said and pulled away.

"Yes Master, right away." The man hurried away. His face shone with bliss, eyes seeming to find something beautiful wherever they looked.

The Master felt love for his young follower. *'I am so happy my message has reached so many beautiful souls.'* He allowed

himself a moment to feel giddy with excitement, and pride, then stepped onto the stage.

"Hello my fellow men and women of the faith. I am overjoyed to come before you on this day. We have put in so much work to get here and I am so grateful that all of you have joined me here and now." He paused to allow the crowd to congratulate themselves.

"When the Universe began to speak to us many humans took it as a grave omen. A sign that portended the destruction of civilization as we know it. Today I say to you: they were right. What man had built was sick. A terrible affliction has taken over the very life-cycle of our planet. The Universe looked upon the Earth and saw in it a poison, a poison so bitter and so powerful that it threatened everything." He looked up and gazed into the eyes of his audience. Despite his hood all met his stare with reverent fascination, ever respectful. But even the faithful had become a little impatient, how eager they were for the promises of the day to unfold. *'Only a short time more my beloveds.'*

"The Universe knew it must cleanse its child of the poison that had overtaken it. It brought a great fever. The heat grew in intensity as the fiendish men who devoted themselves to corruption were cleansed first. The fever would rage and the flames roar until the Earth was once again pure. It wasn't until

I came face to face with the divine influence that I realized the truth of this. Humanity is a failure. In order to think about truth, we gave up our ability to live it. Some tragic turn, some unfortunate consequence in humanity's history, evolution, a fatal flaw in our very makeup - was the source of the poison."

He began to raise his voice, projecting it all the way to the back of the auditorium. "I was touched by the flames!" He threw back his hood, exposing the raw and bumpy flesh of his scalp. The audience gasped in awe and finally could truly meet his gaze. A very select few had previously had the privilege. His eyes were milky and white without iris or pupil, he looked blind but slowly met the gaze of many in the congregation. The crowd buzzed with reassurance that the flames had given clairvoyance. "My family," he started slowly. "I have asked much of you but the day has come where you will be saved, your sacrifices paid back, with something more valuable than anything in this world. There is no place for humanity in this Universe, but those of us that have kept the faith, stoked the curative fire, have been assured a place in the great aether of eternity. We have crusaded long. We have done things that as humans make us feel cruel, vicious, even evil, but now we may leave that pain behind."

As he spoke the room began to shimmer, heat lines rose from the floor and distorted all sight. "The time is here. Our wait is finally over." With that he stopped and the audience began to gasp and cry out in joy and pain. The room was sweltering, from his eyes it looked as though he suddenly had regained his irises. Instead of brown they were red and instead of circles they were flickering flames. The fire that had led him here returned, it covered his eyes, then head. Soon he was a figure masked in flame but he stood immobile, resolute and at peace. The flames spread around the audience. Many were igniting and standing, flailing and screaming but none running for the exit. The Master would have been so pleased with the sight but instead he was transfixed by the same swirling beauty that had engulfed him that day years before.

Somewhere far away Jackie dreamt of her estranged husband, Sam, for the first time in a while. She saw him far away, sitting cross-legged.

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December 25th, 2161

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A perhaps even more confounding event was the dreams of a small number of people which take the form of 'impossible conversations.' Sometimes the people describe having long conversations with their fathers or mothers, usually long dead. They claimed to be learning things that were true but they'd never been told in life. Hearing from a living parent, aunts, or uncles that it was truth they'd dreamt.

Other times it is more mundane, a conversation with a friend, but the next time they encountered one another they are surprised to have had word-for-word the exact same dream.

The strangest of all are dreams involving mysterious older figures, giving advice or warnings. Or simply talking nonchalantly about a seemingly innocuous subject; which usually ends up being important shortly after the dreams. Looking in the mirror and some of the people who have already aged a bit since one of such dreams has led to only one conclusion. They're talking to their older selves.

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Part Two.**The Fire Within.**

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Alexandra.

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Alexandra Nyler strode hurriedly through the halls of the Physics-Astronomy Annex at James Springston University. It was early Fall, her favorite time of the year and she was invigorated by, what she hoped her professors would confirm was, a somewhat revolutionary realization. There weren't many research institutions left in the world, but the Springston creed, 'The only thing that may expand knowledge is the mind. The only thing that may expand the mind is knowledge.' had apparently stuck with most of its faculty, many of its alums, and a large part of the graduate and undergraduate student body through the trying times (a Diet-Apocalypse her friend had named it).

She was only an undergrad still, but the University had really opened its discourse and facilities to anyone with some talent and perseverance. Alexandra was one of those, she was very young and many of her professors thought that her youth allowed her to see the crisis in a different light. Having gone through developmental years during the solar events made some think these young adults were best fitted to see a solution. If given both training and support, and most importantly some license to think freely. One who thought this way and had encouraged Alexandra specifically was Professor Vanderbilt, the

head of the Astronomy department and an advocate of opening academia to all. Especially now when cooperation was so necessary.

He was an aging and esteemed man. A writer, researcher, and occasional philosopher - shortly after the crisis started he published a lengthy article describing the ways in which we can respond to these events. Titled "How to Deal with Saturn", it used a lengthy allegory comparing the solar events killing humans to Saturn's devouring of his children, which was drawn from a popular cult-esque religion that seemed to astoundingly spring up in numerous locations independently. It was widely read but criticized for offering little to no practical solutions while firmly criticizing many in academia for 'relying upon stagnated ways of thinking,' 'bringing ego into survival,' and seeking 'to overpower the universe itself.'

She made it to the conference room where they usually had coffee and brainstormed before the experimentation of the day. "Hello everyone! I have something I'd really like to share before we start today." She started, holding up her notebook with a sheet of hastily done hypotheses and potential procedures - she had woken to these ideas in a hot sweat at 2 am and had immediately scrambled to write them down. Scanning the room, she couldn't find Vanderbilt. She'd wanted to talk to him about how to present these ideas. "Where is Professor Vanderbilt? I need

his help to say this in a smart way." she said and gave an amicable laugh. Her laughter quickly faded when she finally took a second to absorb her surroundings. Everyone in the room looked grave and Vanderbilt's oldest colleague, John MacLeod, was sitting across the room, facing out the window.

Alexandra saw that there was an unfolded sheet of paper on the table his back was towards. Someone else spoke up, "Vanderbilt left notes for you and Professor MacLeod. I have yours here." and handed Alexandra an envelope with Vanderbilt's handwriting on it.

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Dear Alexandra,

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I've known this was coming for some time but put off writing this letter for too long. Now that it comes down to it and my time has come I find myself unable to articulate what I want to say. Alexandra, I am very proud of who you have become. In you I finally saw the evidence of what I had hoped humanity's response to our greatest, most existential and overwhelming threat would be.

Unfortunately for a long time now I have seen visions in the sky. I have heard the commanding, fatal voices in my head. I have desired to tell this to you, and to everyone. To convince

you all humanity's death is necessary, that in the beauty of the flames I saw PROOF that we are corrupted and beyond saving.

I know this is not the case. When I talk to you I can convince myself of that. But now I cannot get the fire out of my eyes, the heat out from inside my head, the voices are screaming at me and I can't argue with them any longer. I do not want to be a threat to you or all that we've done here. Neither physically nor through demoralization. I know that, with you and the other amazing people at this facility, the future is bright with hope and I go easily knowing that.

Please look after John, this will likely be hitting him hard too. Especially if he has been suffering anything like I have. I love you like a daughter, be well and enjoy the life I know you have ahead.

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Jack Vanderbilt

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January 6th, 2200.

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The generations that were born after the solar age had begun showed greater resiliency to some of its more disastrous

effects: so much so that for the first time someone survived a spontaneous combustion event. Although this was coupled, at least in these early generations, with a much higher proportion of quiet, solitary suicides. As time passed these kinds of responses became the norm. Generally, if the fire of the mind overtook someone, they no longer preached destruction to others. Nor, as was more than sometimes the case in the early times, tried to take others with them by force.

Some worried that this was the real sign of the end times, an insidious sterilization of energy, of the human spirit. For over a decade this idea circulated without an adequate rebuttal, and in this way it may have served as a self-fulfilling prophecy. People who were driven, and could only handle the situation by thinking the problem could be solved and the solar age would end and things would return to as they were before increasingly began to succumb to ennui so pervasive that they often simply chose to stop trying. Not all of them killed themselves. And those that didn't often found that as the years passed their encounters with the fire, and their feelings about this new world, changed.

Eventually a breakthrough did occur, but already people had started to realize two things. One, it didn't seem like things would ever go back to 'normal' and, two, maybe that wasn't a failure, or entirely a bad thing. Since the event no major war

had happened, some might say this was due to the distraction of the flames and society's breaking up. This doesn't capture the whole picture though.

The breakthrough came from a famed researcher and her team at Springston University. Her mentor had been victim of the words of the flame, and had taken his life while she was a student. She eventually turned this tragedy into opportunity. Turning the work they had worked on together into a holistic theory: 'Symbolic Reality.'

They had long talked about how a person's spiritual, emotional character seemed to have the most significant effect on the way the flame touched them. It wasn't until she had started to have recurring dreams of talking with him, after he had died, that she thought of a way to ground that idea in something more tangible.

She slept many nights inside of fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) and eMEG (enhanced magnetoencephalography) machines. They found a most startling fact, during the nights when she dreamt, these important dreams with her old mentor or of things that seemed plausible to be the future, her brain completely 'shut down.' All activity ceased. The first time it happened they pulled her out and woke her up immediately. When she told them she'd just been having a dream of talking to her mentor was when they realized 'dream' maybe

wasn't the right word. The researcher herself had started to expect this already: when some of the dreams were conversations with her late, and long estranged, father.

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Remy.

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The sun began its steady ascent on a crisp spring morning. Light began to peek over the horizon and the current Chairman of the Federation for the Advancement of All Life, FAAL, was up to greet it. He was sitting with a cup of coffee and looking out of his office's bay window. He had woken up early from a strange dream and decided that getting up and going to work was the best thing he could do. He had almost totally lost the dream despite his efforts now to recall it, and the oddest part was that he couldn't quite remember whether it was very joyful or very melancholy. Perhaps it was both. As the body of the sun started to crest into view he felt the heat in his thoughts, and for a moment swore he saw tongues of flame leap up from one of the documents at his desk. He turned his head and looked at it.

PROPOSITION TO DEVELOP AN URBAN CENTER FOR THE RAPID CREATION OF

PLANETARY-MANIPULATION TECHNOLOGIES AND HOUSE ALL NECESSARY
PERSONNEL.

He turned fully, shifting his body, the sun continuing to rise above him as he sat and considered the proposal he had looked over many several times already. It had a lot of support: proposing a *temporary* exception to the rule of 'biodiversity first, economic concerns after' to produce more rapidly a technology that may open whole new worlds ripe for the expansion of life into the Universe. It wasn't in his nature to go against the desires and will of so many but he felt feverish heat now, considering the proposal going through. It allotted up to a decade - a whole forest disemboweled for a decade, irreversible damage if not destruction for many of the human and other animal family groups living there now.

He stamped the proposal, REJECTED BY THE CHAIR. Sighing, he was happy he had a few hours before he had to tell anyone. Before he became chair of this organization he had been many things, but he considered himself to be a designer at heart. He had helped create the current model for society's infrastructure: much taken from his centuries-old idol Finn O'Connell's (who had himself been inspired by that seminal piece: "How to Deal with Saturn", by Jack Vanderbilt) masterwork, "The Weave of All Being." The tiered structure of man-made abodes such that they could intermingle with animal

habitats, even dangerous megafauna. So, he sat down with the budget and methods of the now rejected proposal alongside his holo-tablet. He began to create diagrams and paragraphs rapidly, his stylus able to finish sentences and simple sketches for him after so many years of learning his hand.

'This may be important, but we have to do it our way.' He felt the heat in him, encouraging him now. Invigorating him more than coffee ever could. *'Doing it wrong would defeat the whole purpose.'*

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Epilogue.

New Forms.

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Aldwin.

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Aldwin sat atop his MantaCruiser, the water gently rocking it back and forth. The winged vessel looked perfectly at ease in the ocean. The sun was still low in the East but he looked at his Dreamer 2.0 personal companion watch and saw that it would soon be time for him to return home.

He lived in a small sanctuary, only one hundred humans shared the space. Primarily a coastal biome, the space was characterized by lowland forests and rugged coasts; with rain much of the year. Many centuries ago a people had thrived here due to the abundance, despite having possessed only the most rudimentary of technologies. Aldwin momentarily wondered at how anyone could have ever thought masses of concrete and metal were an improvement.

He stood, turned, and descended into his ship. An opening appeared seamlessly on the top and closed as he stepped down. He strode toward the angular front of his ship, across its transparent underbelly. From a distance the lightly glowing interior of the Manta looked like an eerie and beautiful aura around him, magically keeping the water away. A gleaming orb surrounded by deep blue.

Aldwin readied himself to pilot the ship using the command display - lifting his hands and adjusting his focus to activate the sight and gesture based controls. As he prepared to move he was distracted by heat behind his eyes. No matter how many times it had happened it still felt mysterious. The heat was difficult to fathom, having caused great tragedy but also great change. Change that led the world away from one path and onto another.

The heat grew and he closed his eyes, allowing it to flow through and over him. He felt fear and pain, wars starting

amongst growing civilizations on freshly terraformed planets. Sensed newly strengthened connections tested as some left Earth and suffered on their own. Saw centuries of bonds torn, lifestyles changed, connections lost, newly born species rapidly pushed to extinction. For a moment grief and pain swept over him, dominated him. Rage began welling inside, threatening to overtake him.

He pushed deeper, shifted his gaze. And soon found that which brought him back. No matter how far into these manifestations he went, always the flame of life still burned. Increasingly abstracted and incomprehensible but never extinguished. Never had he seen what he feared most - an eternally dim and cold place.

In these episodes, both waking and while asleep, Aldwin had comforted people sitting in gray, concrete buildings of times past that there was a future - if not for their children then for their children's children. He had also *been* comforted by beings who, whether it was their form or some sort of apparel, were hardly recognizable to him and who comforted not by speaking but by a warmth he could feel throughout him.

The world still wondered at what was happening with these correspondences, at how it could be possible. Many hoped it meant time travel existed somewhere in the future but, so far as anyone could tell, actual people traveling to different times

was still impossible. There was only some part of the human existence able to be anywhere, at any time. Aldwin always felt comforted by this, in some way all of humanity existed eternal in the flame.

He opened his eyes, needing to think for a second about what he had been doing. Upon remembering he smiled, ready to return. Tomorrow was the Celebration of the First Flare. It was born in part to celebrate the finding of humanity's new path but also as an homage to those passed in the transition, and as a sign of respect for the immense power in the universe. He started up the manta and sped off, coasting nearly silent through the water.