

Twisting dimensions came differently, this time. He hadn't finished drawing the circles—he hadn't even formed a clear picture in his mind where he wanted to go, or what he wanted to see. Somewhere in his heart, despite the warnings that flashed through his mind like beacons, Floyd resolved to go, to satisfy his drive to know. And with that resolution, he held the spear before him, looking at its tip, thinking: *Who made you?*

Then the implement seemed to compel his hands, and the circles began to form in outline against paper on the table—but Floyd was already sliding through the world. Melting away. Feeling the entire universe tilt, feeling the floor disappear. He was in the air, falling over the Earth, watching it spin incredibly fast beneath; watching clouds form and reform and disappear and change shape and color—he was watching continents wind their way around the globe...he was *above* the world, on the cusp of the atmosphere, skirting it like a shuttle on re-entry, the entire planet spread to either side of him such that he could see its curvature.

And then it was covered in blue, and white, and darkness. Then there was water, water *everywhere*, and the nature of the exterior atmosphere, which he seemed to skip through like a stone on a glass lake, hardened; and froze into what indeed seemed like glass—and then he was crashing through that glass and seeing different colors, all seeming to filter through a faint pinkish miasma; and he was hurtling at unimaginable speeds between suspended clouds; feeling like a pint-sized surfer in the hundred-foot pipe of an incomprehensible tidal-wave; shredding on pure air.

Floyd felt his eyes water, but at the same time he *couldn't* feel himself. He couldn't feel his arms, his legs, his mouth, his throat, his eyes—yet he was *there*. And not there. A half-man: half in and half out of the world—for the window-seat was still

under him, and yet he could feel air thick as molasses above a primordial jungle his body soared through—

*IMPACT—!*

Floyd slammed into a head three times the size of his own and covered in finely braided hair a shining scarlet. The collision came with such force the spear was ejected from his hand and tumbled away into soft grass, out of reach.

The person made a low-pitched sound and went down, Floyd riding atop falling shoulders the size of an oak. There was a crash as the giant hit the springy foliage on a kind of road Floyd had never seen before, and then he was rolling away, standing, running for the spear—

The giant darted a look at him and collected the glinting implement before he could get to it, holding it out with a surprised look even as massive eyes turned to Floyd and both parties surveyed one another warily.

The giant was actually a *giantess*—a true Amazon, sunset hair falling past gently curving shoulders that rested on a slender frame no less than nine feet tall. Floyd remembered looking women up and down. With this woman the process took twice as long, and he made no effort to keep his jaw clamped shut. Sure, she was beautiful—but she could dropkick him like a poodle and he'd make a field goal over the horizon. He was the size of a child to her.

Perhaps it was this thought that reminded him of the .45 holstered at his back, which Floyd surreptitiously rested his right hand on under his jacket. He doubted a bullet would solve the problem and get him the spear back, but he suspected he would need the gun soon.

The giantess looked as surprised to see him as he her. Big green eyes regarded him, eyes tilted in a manner decidedly feline but not so pronounced as oriental epicanthic folds...and her features were such that Floyd briefly wished he were big enough to court the woman. Such beauty...

“Well, I don’t know what I expected,” he said, fishing a finger in his ear. His ears kept popping, and his head felt like it was being squeezed. He blinked once or twice and opened his jaw wide, hearing a snap-crackle-pop. Then there was sharp pain and both ears equalized suddenly. He yelped, but by degrees felt better. He wondered how many atmospheres this...*place* was at. In the military there was a course on underwater breathing apparatuses; he had to take it for reasons that were hard to recall, now. But Floyd recognized the pains in his head as air coming to equilibrium through his sinuses. Feeling moisture he brushed at something wet on his upper lip, and his fingers came away with the slightest suggestion of blood from sinus pockets immersed over-quick.

The massive woman’s eyes narrowed when he bled, and she looked suspiciously from him to the spear that appeared a toothpick in her hands before singing something at him. Her voice was a low contralto that buzzed; but all the same was feminine. “That’s very pretty,” he said, sniffing. “Me Floyd,” he indicated himself and opened his mouth wide: “Floy-oyd...Floyd.”

His body was tense. He didn’t know what else to do, or what else to say. *So you impersonate Tarzan. Nice thinking. Very suave. If she eats you she’ll think you were only retarded.* “Floy-oyd,” he said again, patting his chest—whoops! There was the gun. He looked at it and blushed, thrusting it behind his back again and smiling at the giantess.

She didn't quite know how to react. There was a sound in the jade foliage beyond, like an elephant doing jumping jacks; and the ground shook. Her eyes narrowed, and she glanced around quick—no one else was on the road, which seemed to be a manufactured split between the large trees...the *very* large trees. Floyd's gape increased as he began to look up...and up...and up—it was difficult to see where the trees ended and the sky began, but there was a very narrow strip of light blue high above. Something was off about its color...as though it were filtered through a haze.

The giantess made a movement and Floyd's eyes rounded on her. He noticed she walked barefoot on the path, and its composition wasn't actually grass; but some tender foliage vaguely *reminiscent* of grass. Ferns and trees larger than life stretched away on either side, and the road continued on. It extended eternally behind the giantess and ahead of Floyd.

He kept his stare centered on the massive woman, truly realizing his position and feeling a coldness in the pit of his stomach as he watched her examine the spear.

Had he looked closely at anything but the giantess who wore flawless curves, he may have noticed the leaves on the ferns lining the road were larger than *he* was by a substantial margin. That the crashing in the underbrush on either side, as of great beasts prowling headlong through, was relatively constant—and he might have seen the dragonfly that buzzed overhead like a helicopter on the prowl.

But he only had eyes for the giantess.

And a sneaking fear she might just eat him. Floyd was surprised to find himself externalizing this: “You're not going to eat me, are you?” He laughed nervously.

She didn't return his chuckle. Instead, she continued to regard him, squinting in a way he couldn't really decipher. Then she bent over, hands on her knees, bosom taught against a garment of a stately grace, yet somehow effortless and informal. It was a single-piece garment, almost like a toga but cinched tight at the waist and tailored so that it ran across the woman's front leaving little to the imagination, then swept around her waist and ended just above the knee. It was red as her hair.

Lips big enough to chomp a melon opened and sang at him.

Floyd blushed. "Yes, well, be *that* as it may...where is this?" His gesture—still holding the .45—took in the world. He hoped his eyes didn't betray the interest he held for the spear she had recovered.

She sang again while turning it left-to-right in her massive hands, cocking her head to one side and raising an eyebrow.

He exhaled raggedly. "I don't understand," he said.

Her eyes widened, and a short barked laugh escaped; as musical as anything else that came from those licorice-length lips. She sang at him again. "I'm sorry," he said. "I don't know what you're saying...who are you? Me—I mean, *I'm*—Floy-oyd...you?"

"Floy-oyd?" She parroted, then shook her head, looking sternly at him, holding her finger in a way that reminded him of his mother. She sang at him again, and this time the song held a suspenseful melody that promised uncomfortable times ahead. Floyd began to sweat. *Was* she going to eat him? He wasn't *that* small, she was only nine feet off the ground. Huge, yes; but from that elegant garment, she couldn't have been a *cannibal*. Man-eating Jack-and-the-Beanstalk stories were only that: stories.

GIANTS were only stories! Dimension-warping devices of unknown-manufacture providing endless *Deus-ex-machina* were only stories—

“Listen, I don’t understand,” Floyd murmured, backing away, every hair on his body rigid, the gun pointed at the ground but ready to bark. He could feel adrenaline coursing through him—it felt like combat. He had killed men and been shot at; he could keep his head in the face of a beautiful giantess singing frightening melodies at him in a world that didn’t exist. Though, knowing as much didn’t make things any easier.

“That—that you’ve got there. Mine,” he pointed.

She looked at it, held it out, said something quizzical then crossed her arms.

“Well...let me think a minute. I’ll get it back, count on it, miss.”

She sang something that ended in her perversion of his name, the accent in the wrong place and the word stretched to two syllables.

The air was *thick*; he almost felt he could drink it, and his breathing—though it came easy—felt very...*moist* to him. He felt like he was in the middle of a sauna, though at best it was eighty-five degrees. And with each breath there was energy, a terrible kind of energy that made him feel he could run forever. And the sunlight—something was wrong with it. It was warm, yes; but the heat was...different, he couldn’t explain it. Like a lamp in an auditorium, but not of that fluorescent quality. Yet he couldn’t escape the suspicion he would be able to stand under that light all day and never get burned. It filtered down between the towering foliage on either side and bathed Floyd, silhouetting the woman colossus. And somehow it was...*pinkish*. Nothing neon, nothing feminine; just a kind of salmon-pink. Like there was a pink fog, or something—way up there, amidst a blue in the sky that was so light he was hardly able to decipher it. Maybe it was

because the sun appeared to be setting? Which would mean he was facing due west...maybe. Maybe the sun was rising, too. He couldn't tell—

The giantess sang at him again, standing up to her full height, uncrossing her arms.

It could have been that strange air, or the strange sunlight, or the giant creature that should not have existed, but Floyd decided ignorance might just be bliss, at this point. “I don't want to know,” he breathed, and flipped the toggle on the safety. “I don't wanna do this now, missy,” he said, “but I'm gonna have to. I'll aim away first. Just to scare you. Again, I'm sorry...maybe you'll drop it.”

Eyes the size of peaches widened interestedly, and quite suddenly hands large enough to smash basketballs extended toward him, reaching out. He didn't know what he said, but apparently it attracted her. And she nearly got him, too; but Floyd fired two loud shots at her feet. He missed on purpose as he had said; his design just to scare her—

A bird that made the giantess seem like a pixie roared from the trees and flapped wings large enough to support a Cessna. Floyd's mouth gaped and his eyes squinted. He put his hand in front of them to protect against the wind. The bird howled, sounding angry and frightening Floyd in the same instant. The giantess whipped around and growled a low note in a minor key, calling up at the bird—the very *strange* bird.... The shape of the head, the shape of the wings—it looked more like a bat than a bird, Floyd thought. It was a silhouette in the sunshine, and he couldn't quite make it out. The wingspan was so large it extended to either side of the path, the tips of the wings almost lost among the trees.

Then the stupor left. Floyd turned and began to run. Had he seen the glint in the creature's eye, he might have stayed still—as it was, his instincts took his feet and wouldn't be dissuaded.

“First a giant, now a pterodactyl—”

It was louder now, and Floyd risked a look over his shoulder down the path—the creature wasn't ten feet away, gaping maw screeching eagerly, razor-sharp teeth glinting in the sunlight. Floyd emptied his clip at it and with each report there was an ululation, and then the thing was on him, and Floyd tripped, fell on his back—

A deep voice yelled something—sang something, rather—and the beak/maw never touched him. The pterodactyl—for now there could be no doubt—pecked *at* him, making confused noises and hovering above the path in acrimony. But every time it struck out, it seemed to encounter resistance, the deep voice bellowing; and ultimately the creature was unable to catch its Floyd-shaped steak. It howled once or twice more, then flapped higher, and turned into the setting sun, soaring away with a depreciating screech that was likely a pterodactylian curse.

Floyd pushed himself to his elbows, watching—what was that on the creature's back?

Was that a...that couldn't have been a *man*—?

Before he could wonder further the Giantess caught up to him and wrapped a thick arm around his waist. Floyd pointed the gun at her and growled. The giantess flinched, but when Floyd's finger tightened around the trigger and there was only an impotent “click”, the clip empty, she knocked the gun away like an offensive gnat. Floyd beat at her hands with the effectiveness of a toddler, the woman had to hold him at arms'

length as though he were a mischievous cat, palms under his armpits. She shook her head and pursed her lips so humanly for a moment Floyd wondered if he might have merely shrank. But no, his suit would have gotten smaller too. But maybe it shrank with him?

She sighed, looking around with a very stern expression and saying something to the trees—possibly an injunction admonishing them to keep any excitable pterodactyl-riders from disturbing them again. Her admonition cut off his thoughts, and with her sigh came a wind that smelled like bad breath always does and tousled Floyd's hair. He flinched, turning away and wrinkling his nose. He used what little mobility he had in his arms to wipe spittle from his face, grunting his discomfort. She then sang something that sounded like "*spoiling headcheese gargles*" in C-Major, threw him over her shoulder, and was sprinting down the grassy path with a gait at least thirty miles an hour; possibly using half the effort it took a regular man to get up off the couch.

Behind the woman—as Floyd's head was over her shoulder, and his hands were hanging free—he could see the path stretching away for miles, further than the eye could take in. It didn't curve, it didn't lose or gain altitude; it was flat as a board and simply faded into the distance.

He struggled intermittently and was rewarded with an encyclopedia-sized palm that swatted him on the bottom hard enough he had to cough. Like it or not, he was heading wherever this woman was taking him.

But at the moment he couldn't see any impossibly-sized anachronistic reptiles following in the distance, and though his heart by this time had been pounding so long he wondered if it wouldn't explode out of his chest, there was some small comfort in that thought.

## II

“I don’t *know* if you’re real! I can’t *remember*—” the fist that cut Chase off was well-knuckled, but failed to dislodge any more teeth. And for a change, it wasn’t Pike’s. Pike had hit Chase’s jaw at an odd angle and dislocated a knuckle. Even standing at the back of the room while the goons smacked the loony at his command, he shook his right hand with a grimace that wrinkled his beard and almost reached his sunglasses.

“Tell me, do you feel pain in this fantasy of yours?”

Chase smiled, mouth red. “I do. ...but this...too, shall pass.”

If blood could be seen to boil beneath the skin, it would probably look like Pike’s face, whose flush a passerby may have attributed to allergy. He took a deep breath, let it out, grabbed a chair and straddled it.

“Déjà vu,” said Chase.

“You seem to have a lot of that.”

“No. Yes. Well, I remember this. When *this* nightmare began...” Abruptly his head came up: “What are the ‘Black-eyes’?”

Pike grabbed the young man’s jaw and held it tight, staring down Chase with predatory malcontent. Chase winced and struggled, pulling at bonds that held his hands behind his back on a chair that could have been a twin of the one Pike had. As he pulled at the bonds, the legs of his chair clattered against the cement and echoed through the room—which was rather large, and devoid of any furnishing. For a brief instant, Chase

wondered just where they were. What kind of place was this—was it *only* for interrogation?

Pike was wetting his lips, and the sound reminded Chase there was a hand on his own mouth, and he turned his eyes back to that incomprehensible face, bearded and hidden under unremarkable sunglasses. Something in the set of Pike's jaw...he couldn't place it, but *something* was wrong. Maybe with the man's *attitude*? It all seemed in some degree forced; as though Pike were under great strain and trying not to show it.

Then the impression was gone; in an instant—and the beard opened into a slit which said: "I'll ask the questions, Sandburg. *You'll* give the *answers*."

Something snapped, Chase began to cry. Hard. Tears, snot, the whole nine yards.

Pike stared unflinchingly at the schizophrenic for several moments, then turned his head half away and nodded to one of the goons, who silently left the cavernous room.

A new voice spoke from darkness across from the chair and the harsh light under which Chase was bound: "You may as well leave off. You know he doesn't know anything. Not about...what we need to know."

"It's what he knows by accident that I'm interested in," Pike replied over his shoulder. There was a slight tremble to his words, as though he were saying something he remembered from years past—a line from a movie, maybe.

"Old smooth-voice," Chase muttered absently, all trace of tears gone. His emotions seemed to come and go without his authority.

"Smooth-voice?" Pike looked toward the shadows, then back at Chase. He seemed normal again—that is to say: plain. "You've heard this man before? I told you

he was awake earlier, Moehler,” Pike turned fully around and took a step toward the darkness outside of the small circle of light under which Chase was bound.

“You were correct.”

Abruptly the goon returned, tossing a thick-built sack into the light. The sack was opened to reveal a frightened orderly Chase dimly recognized as Bill. Bill was in the middle of a frantic monologue: “—I just seen something standing there, and then it disappeared, like. Gone. Like a ghost—*was* it a ghost? Who are you guys? How’d you find me—?”

“He’s the one that saw my fantasy,” Chase said.

Pike stood from the chair. “Yes, yes he is.” He crouched in front of Bill. “Your schizophrenic-depressive patient over there—albeit under a will not his own—spoke of a member of the hospital staff sharing his...fantasy—”

“It was a skinny guy what looked kinna’ like him,” Bill nodded toward Chase from the floor, “and he was drawin’ somethin’ on the wall and just disappeared, like, and that’s all I seen. I don’t know *nothin’* else, I swear—”

“Well, Chase?” Pike stood and turned. “Have you ever seen a man die?”

“All the time. But they weren’t there in the first place.”

Moehler stepped from the shadows and bent over Chase.

Moehler was a man of very handsome features with well-manicured hair and teeth, and a perfectly symmetrical visage. He wore the kind of suit a politician might, and there was a dark-and-fierce intelligence behind his slate-grey eyes that made Chase squirm. “I think we should consult the heads of the Organization; have them look into his mind. I do not think he holds out on us purposefully, Pike.”

“I don’t want them knowing what it is we’re up to just yet—”

“Organization? Who’s the Organization? Like some big secret Organization? Like some conspiracy type thing, like?” Bill tried to push himself up on one elbow.

Pike sighed and nudged Moehler, who removed a gun from inside his jacket, cocked it back—

“No—no no no no *no*—” The cry came in staccato screams suddenly silenced by an ear-shattering *BANG!*, the sound exacerbated by the chamber’s largeness. Chase slammed his eyes shut and began to cry again.

“That type benefits from being re-admitted to the lifestream early,” Pike muttered.

“Well, now we’ve...we’ve...uh...we’ve...” Whatever Moehler had planned to say, whether a tactic of intimidation or merely an observation, trailed into nothing as he began to shiver such that talking wasn’t possible. An aura of darkness and trepidation suddenly gripped the chamber.

The goons unclasped their hands and sprinted past Chase with mongoloid cries of fear, clattering footsteps and a slammed door climaxing their exit.

Chase blinked, sniffing. There, his emotions had reversed again. And everything seemed blue, as though he were suddenly wearing sunglasses with dark indigo lenses. “A Night-man...”

Here came another emotion, one that made him shake worse than Moehler.

Pike swore loud and unapologetically, but what little expression showed on his face around the sunglasses—mostly in the set of his jaw—held no arrogance. Moehler rubbed his forehead and sank into the chair across from Chase, and Chase began to

ramble, terrified: “I can feel it—let me go, I can *feel it!* It’s there, it’s *there!* Oh, let me go, let me go—”

As the temperature in the room dropped further and gooseflesh sprang upon the living, Pike murmured from the shadows: “Aza—Aza—” and fell to his knees, hands holding his head, the stutter unable to complete itself.

Chase’s eyes were locked on the darkness before him as out of it a pale visage moved slowly forward, appearing in retreating layers of grey that soon revealed a triangular face whiter than leprosy and surrounding two black eyes so lightless they seemed to suck the barest shimmer into them.

“I pledge allegiance to the one that is all, whom all shall become; to the world that we see which reflects what will be—” Moehler had fallen from the chair and lay prostrate, head-in-arms, repeating the rhyme with now only a slight tremble in his smooth voice.

Chase continued to struggle as the leprous face came closer, soon moving from the shadow, leading a head the size of a man and entirely devoid of hair atop a body robed in darkness above soundless feet. Chase only noticed the feet when one came down on the dead body of Bill and crushed it.

“Leave me, Night-man! You don’t have any authority in me! You don’t have any authority in *ME!*”

The face, that utterly inhuman face of infinite smoothness without ears or eyebrows; the face with the long nostrils that peaked slightly over lips pale as the rest of whatever this creature was; the face whose forehead had wrinkles giving way to a deviated cranium that stood to either side of the monster’s head and would make a heart-

shaped shadow; the face haloed in a blue luminescence that promised tranquility which simply was not *there*—that face did not move as words seemed to echo through the room. The lips did not part, the chin did not tremble; and yet inside every mind came this message: *“Fools. No-breed half-brained fools! He is a dreamer. His soul has seen what is, and knows what is not. It is only by the dark arts that even now he suspects fantasy in truth, and truth in fantasy!”*

“My lord, I had no part—”

*“Albrecht Moehler, I know your heart and your mind. They are as full of love for yourself as my own love tends toward the Oneness. This loyalty I respect and cherish. But do not lie to a liar...and Pike!”* The huge head turned—Chase ran frightened eyes up and down the body of the Night-man, whose height was such its heart-shaped skull came just under the single flickering bulb in the room. The creature had to be *at least* fifteen feet tall—it was a very high-ceilinged room. And the suggestion of hyper-thin limbs beneath the flowing dark garment that adorned the Night-man was impossible to ignore.

Pike, on hearing his name, began to shake in a way so contrary to his previous arrogance it would have been funny in any other setting. “Yes, exalted one,” he shuttered.

*“We have been on careful watch for the one that will supply the Lens. For generations! Before your own No-breed ancestry deviated from the original man-forms of Noash. In this one’s life, we have made the preparations—I have made the preparations—such that his coming will render him unto our own convictions. The very insanity in this lunatic, his only surviving kin,”* here he indicated Chase with a spindly limb, *“Is our doing. And...”* The mind-voice stopped. *“There is little time. In pursuing*

*the Thief of Ages, it became necessary to liquidate his parents in concert with other means we have devised—but new tactics must be employed in the wake of...misappropriations. And it is no help that you come here, ignoring our careful dictates and striving to accomplish your own gains—do you not hear as this creature calls Us by a colloquialism? He knows Us. And we know him; though we shouldn't. His fate, ever confused between what is and isn't real, will be yours!"*

“Exalted one, I was merely hoping to find where this...man who will supply the...the *Lens*, as you said, is hidden; to aid in the *cause*—!”

*“Silence, half-breed! Or your mouth will forever be closed.”*

Pike put his head back down and returned to his trembling.

The creature moved toward Chase, and Chase felt thoughts trickling into his mind as hands large enough to squeeze his torso, with spindly fingers like spiders, came and gently held his head, forcing his eyes to peer into those gaping black pools that lived far recessed in the head of the Night-man. A Night-man bigger than Chase had ever seen. And as he struggled and wept and screamed, feeling himself drawn into those eyes, he saw the blackness ferment and change, slowly forming into two yellow spheres the size of grapefruits and slit top-to-bottom like the eyes of a wicked cat—

And the world was spinning. One of the fantasies—like the most recent he remembered, sleeping in a hotel room after the funeral of his parents. His life was unveiling before him and re-spooling to be unrolled again. The hotel had been silent, none but him in the room. He had been on the thirteenth floor, which was labeled “fourteen” for reasons of superstition. He remembered the clock on the median—it had

said: “3:33”. He remembered because the numbers gave him nightmares weeks, months, even years later.

Watching that clock, Chase had felt the entire room go cold, and he had seen the blue. Like when he was a child, and the nightmares would come. In the bed, wrapped in the covers, he had felt chills taking him. His hairs were on end, and he could not stop them—an inexplicable fear gripped his body, and looking to the window he had seemed to see an owl. A white-faced owl, with slanted black eyes staring at him solemnly. The owl was not flapping, and he couldn’t see where its claws gripped the sill. It merely stared.

The room had begun to glow with a radiance purely blue. *Tranquility*, voices said. *Be at rest...at peace...at calm. Clear your mind, open your mind, clear your heart, open your heart, there is no fear, there is no need...* The mantra continued but did nothing to allay Chase’s fears. Buried memories from childhood—memories hidden in the deepest realms of the subconscious, of things that go bump in the night and seem bent on inflicting naught but pain to the viewer—surfaced and clouded the blue scene, even as the owl seemed to move through the window.

Click.

A door opened, silent footsteps—Chase felt himself rising off the bed, but he was paralyzed and could not move. His limbs were stuck to his sides, and the gooseflesh rippled up, down and all across his body. With supreme effort he had managed to turn his head to the side, toward the door—

He didn’t want to see the door.

He didn't want to see what was coming through it, what was intent on him, what was coming to steal him away—

First one...then another...then a dozen—all naked and pale, with no mouths, no noses, no ears, only black eyes and heads shaped like an owl's with pointed chins. They came, they looked into his eyes, they thought blue thoughts—

That had been the most recent time, after his parents' funeral. But more memories surfaced in rapid-fire succession, leaving just as quickly. Of before the funeral, of after the funeral—all pushed to the back of his mind by dint of disbelief; all called to the surface once again and relived, now. Each time one came, it enveloped Chase and he experienced that moment again; he swam through the terror and the pain, the fear, the confusion—

Then there were moments of lucidity that served to undercut the horror and remind him this was no fantasy—here, looking into pools of yellow that dredged his past, Chase was fully conscious of himself and the world around. And yet...this wasn't the real world, either...there was hope—

The thought was suddenly taken, and there were only those eyes, yellow and wicked, drawing him into them, pulling at his soul—

No.

He had to resist.

He had the power, he was a *man*, and this thing hated him for that, as it could never *be* a man. It could never have the freedom of choice; in a bid for godliness it had chosen its lot and was forever doomed to maintain it—yet in every second of present-tense, Chase could change, and learn, and love, and hate, and do good, and evil—

Abruptly the eyes faded to black, and the hands withdrew, and Chase found himself hyperventilating and sagging against his bonds so much he toppled over and took the chair with him, landing heavily and bleeding onto the cement.

Everything was suddenly quite clear.

He began to remember who he was, who he had been, where he had been before the Night-men came again—it was as though a veil were lifted. By resisting that...creature, that Night-man, he was beginning to remember himself. The insanity was, for the moment, lost in his head. Buried within. He was Chase Sandburg, and his younger brother was alive, and hiding somewhere. Somewhere they could not find him. And if Chase could only keep them from *finding* Floyd—

*“I have had to open his eyes to find what I seek. Fools, they will not be closed again,”* Azazel growled audibly and turned back to Chase, staring: *“His younger brother has learned half the secret of the Lens, and may be anywhere. When I looked into the younger Sandburg’s eyes so long ago...by this time, from what I saw, he should be living in the summer domicile whose possession would otherwise revert to this simpering thing I’ve let fall to the ground. This is why there is no public record of the structure, Pike. And yes, the artifact he utilizes is of Our manufacture. It is, indeed, the Lens. Only, Floyd Sandburg has not found that it is called the Lens because it merely magnifies a power all are entitled to—and if you follow my commands, Pike; if you do as I say—it will stay that way. Then, only then, you—and your entire miserable race—will be saved.”*

“Yes, Exalted one,” Pike bit out from his position on the ground.

*“No half-breed defies me, Pike.”* The creature bent and lifted Pike’s chin, staring into his sunglasses: *“If you want the brethren of Terra to live, you must accept Our salvation.”*

“Your words are truer than God’s, oh great Azazael.” Moehler groveled from the other side of the space, turning the great monster’s head.

Azazael seemed to purr, and good sensations rippled through the men in the room for a moment before they were snatched away. *“I sense your sincerity, Albrecht. But you do not need to fret over your worthiness for reward.”* The head turned back, and Azazael crouched before Chase on the floor, looking ever more like a spider.

Chase was no longer trembling. There was something in his mind, some recollection that he knew would save him... words—he only had to say them, and *mean* them! What were they?

*“You will not die yet. Instead of the prey, you are now the bait, my little insane one, and if you choose correctly, you may even live...”* Azazael’s mind-spoken thoughts echoed through Chase’s head, and he wished unconsciousness would come.

Azazael stood. *“We will make haste for the summer dwelling,”* and as simply as that, like a ghost through sheetrock, he faded into the darkness and was gone.

### III

As the giantess slowed from a thirty mile-an-hour jog to a brisk walk, the path fanned out and widened; foliage suddenly stopped as though it were standing on the cusp of an invisible barrier. And yet there were no signs of deforestation Floyd could see, hanging over the shoulder of the giantess as he was. It was as though the trees had merely

decided they didn't feel like growing anymore, and had surrendered themselves to an ever-widening glade.

Floyd had the sense there was something absolutely immense behind him—which was the direction he was being taken. He couldn't quite tell what it was, however he turned himself over the woman's shoulder, because she held him very tightly. And now there were other giants, too. Men and women. Their proportions were as one might expect them to be; men being several sizes larger than the women. Thusly Floyd discovered the redheaded giantess that had captured him was actually short, when compared to her peers. If she were in Floyd's world, she would have been about five-foot two. The big guys were around fourteen feet—and he was discovering something he hadn't ever considered, beholding a fourteen-foot tall giant for the first time: they weren't just two-and-a-half times the *height* of a linebacker, they were *proportionately* taller. That meant the heads of these giants were as immense as their tree-trunk limbs and snow-shovel feet. And they were all thickly built, and wearing clothing that “breathed”, for lack of a better word.

Most of the men Floyd saw as his captor bounced through the clearing wore only a kind of richly adorned kilt, and were naked from the waist up. They all kept their hair long, and their beards longer. And though their faces held fewer wrinkles than most teens Floyd knew, the eyes of the giants seemed to hail from countless years. In fact, there was a kind of agelessness about the men and women—Floyd saw grey heads every now and again; but there were no age-spotted raisin faces. All were taut as his own, if not more.

As the clearing widened Floyd saw more and more people; several came up to the short/giant woman holding the strange elfin creature with the wide eyes and the flinching cries. Once or twice the woman stopped, and Floyd was forced to submit to curious prods and jabs while beards were scratched and basso laughter echoed up the path. The woman would say: “Floy-oyd,” and the others would repeat it and laugh musically, then tell musical anecdotes and prod him again. Floyd tried to take this with dignity, slapping at cucumber fingers and cussing a blue streak that threatened to contaminate the pink air and made the giants marvel; singing back and forth between themselves, utterly dumbfounded at his language. At one point a great giant nodded, gesturing in the direction Floyd's captor-giantess had been heading. For the first time, he caught sight of their destination.

A pyramid—a pyramid larger than any building he had seen in his life—stood half a mile away, raking the sky and gilded from base to apex with shining brilliance. Pink-silhouetted clouds wreathed its top, and from this distance Floyd estimated the height of the thing to be fifteen hundred feet.

As they came nearer the pyramid, the foliage grew in controlled patterns, the likes of which reminded Floyd of some epic garden; and soon his perspective changed as the giantess turned around and continued toward the massive building, whistling and singing to other giants—most of them men—who waved and laughed as she continued purposefully onward.

Then Floyd saw two things that blew his mind further than anything else yet.

Firstly, he saw men twice as high as any of the giants that moved across the manicured garden at the foot of the pyramid like passerby on Times-

Square. These...these *Über*-giants were standing in perimeter around the space, holding what were likely guns—though they seemed to be about the size of palm trees. Floyd hated to think what the payload of such a weapon would do to a man his size. And these *Über*-giants weren't shaped...normal. Their eyes were blacker-than-black, even if the faces were filled with pink human skin and covered in normal hair or beards. Few wore beards, however. Most kept themselves shaven and cleanly groomed—and they all wore garments any ape could recognize as uniforms. But not togas or kilts or wraparounds: pants and armor, what one might expect a modern soldier on Earth to wear. Yet the clothes weren't what attracted his attention. It was the strangely shaped giants that Floyd bugged his eyes at. Besides the fact they were giants among giants—and he had been somehow transported to a realm that, contemporarily, he was beginning to believe was another *planet*—those creatures standing there were utterly alien. Some had multiple limbs—all *human* limbs, yes; but more than normal. One fellow had six arms, all covered in what looked to be standard-issue fatigues. Another was covered in eyes; wherever there was open skin; eyes, eyes everywhere. A lion's snout pointed from beneath a helmet that would look comfortable on a United States infantryman. One massive being had wings like a great eagle, and they hung down to his ankles, feathers the size of bed-sheets fluttering in a warm breeze filled with the cloying pinkish air of this place.

And following those feathers to the ground, Floyd began to notice a stench almost as cloying as the air; a musky, sweaty smell that wrinkled his nostrils and came mixed with an odor of roasting, seasoned meat. And he began to notice a kind of beat, a

subsonic vibration that reverberated through his frame and was underscored by a simple spastic melody. And then he saw the second thing that blew his mind.

At the feet of the titans was a writhing human pile of moans and lust. The lesser giants would walk toward it, strip their garments off, grab another giant—

Floyd flinched and moved to look away, but the corner of his eye caught yet one more thing that brought nausea: there was a pole in the middle of the writhing horde. A thick, tree-sized pole, and impaled atop it was another giant. A giant no different than the lesser-giants in the pile below—for they were all of a uniform skin-color. None were black, none were white, none had epicanthic folds or red skin. They were an amalgamation of the colors Floyd was used to, entirely uniform—just like their murdered fellow dripping blood from the spire in their midst—

Finally Floyd wrenched his eyes away, feeling bile in his throat.

He saw Über-giant warriors on the other side of the perimeter, and noted that they kept their eyes forward and their composure collected, hardly noticing the nearby debauchery.

Then the giantess holding Floyd smacked him firmly across the bottom, and he dropped back down. He hadn't realized it, but he had been using the top of the woman's substantial derriere to push himself to a position where he could see more than the bouncing ground or the extended path in periphery; and apparently she was offended. Or so he supposed. The propriety of her peers made him wonder.

They had gained a small following—the lesser-giants who considered blood-lust sexuality passé were all around, trailing the red-haired woman who held Floyd, calling his name with the accent in the wrong spot, staring curiously, pointing, coming

closer. She would sing something at them every now and again that held them back, but Floyd had no idea what it was.

They must have been traveling thirty minutes, now; and yet only moments had passed in Floyd's mind.

He worked himself around to the side, trying to catch another glimpse of the pyramid. The giantess cuffed him gently, but not before he saw the edge of the structure moving into view—and then they were jogging again, loping up stairs as high as his knee.

She wasn't even breathing hard.

He began to grow cold inside, as the higher they climbed the more Floyd could see of the clearing, and just how large it *was*. It must have extended for miles, and he realized the single scene of savage horror he had been privy to was only one of many. Dozens—hundreds—of poles extended beyond the pyramid, all with a flesh-colored mound at their base, all accompanied by rhythmic drums and human musk.

Abruptly a vision of himself on a sacrificial spire thrust his cold innards into a realm usually reserved for things like liquid nitrogen, and Floyd started struggling like a cat in a bathtub. In response, the giantess sang a song with a few atonal notes in it that was decidedly negative. Floyd ignored it and tried to make like a snake and wriggle out of her grip, so she grabbed him in both hands and wrapped an arm around his shoulders, then looped the other through his elbows and carried him in front of her, his head upside-down toward the stairs and his legs at a cockeyed angle so they wouldn't smash into her exposed midriff as he struggled—amazingly, she was still jogging up those gargantuan steps with the ease and grace of a gazelle across a prairie. She hadn't missed a stride.

However, this meant Floyd could see much more than he had been able to before. Now he could see the inhabited sky, swimming with enough flying machines to short-circuit the imagination of any eleven-year-old boy. There were monstrous wedge-shaped vehicles whose gargantuan shadows Floyd had taken for low-hanging cloud-cover. What could only be described as Zeppelins also swam through the thick air near the wedge-shaped sky cruisers, and flying in formation in and amongst them were what looked like flapping airplanes. His initial perception was that these smaller flying devices were manned pterodactyls; but he discarded this notion when he noticed the precise formation with which the bird-like vehicles accompanied varying zeppelins—almost like traffic cops, or sheepdogs in a grazing field—making sure traffic patterns maintained some level of synchronicity and guarding against air-collisions.

The ballet in the sky nearly made him forget the giantess that held him fast; but then his eyes caught the monstrous stairs they were ascending, and he remembered himself. Floyd shook his mind from the dazzling sights of this new and strange world of savage giants whose technology conquered the skies, and began to struggle anew. He was heedless of his body or voice, making every effort to break free of the arms that held him—and the back of his mind was briefly satisfied to note the giantess grunting to restrain him. But this satisfaction came at the expense of exhaustion, and soon Floyd's world began to grow black. He was screaming loudly, blood rushing to his upside-down head, and though his perspective was reversed to encompass the sky, he could still dimly see the trailing giants below—so far below—looking up quizzically and singing amongst themselves; doubtless wondering if they'd need a normal-sized spire to impale him.

His voice was screeching, now. Shrieking hysterically to no one in particular as he knew the aide these demon-giants could render wouldn't be something he wanted. But what else was there to do? What else, but bellow and howl: "*Help* me! Somebody *help* me! Please! No! Don't let them—don't let them—God, please, forgive me, don't let me die, don't let them...*HELP!*"

But it was all too overwhelming. The thick air, the altitude that changed with their ascent up the Mount Olympus pyramid, being manhandled like livestock and prodded like a piece of scientific flotsam at a symposium—

Floyd remembered noticing a kind of perfume on the giantess for the first time before the edges of his vision collapsed in on themselves and he lost consciousness.