

MOUNT SILENUS: A VERTICAL ODYSSEY OF EXTRAORDINARY PERIL

by Petronius Jablonski

Happiest of all is the sleeping sloth. *Tharsnope saying*

Chapter One

They squeeze between amber stalagmites and squat beside a man whose patience abandoned him before his spirit. An ice axe remains frozen in his hands, its tip slathered with the red lacquer coating his face. The holes in his forehead could be mistaken for spider eyes.

“What was the hurry?” says Trevor. “I heard death by hypothermia is painless.”

“How does anyone know that?” says Gaspar. “Were volunteers assigned different ways to die and asked to rate them?”

Their breath expands and dissipates in the cave, joining frenzied thoughts long ago freed from the ice man’s skull. The flashlight summons forms from the void like a wand brandished by sorcerers. A mushroom of ice towers over them, its oak-thick stem withering below a luminescent rotunda. The shapes on the ground are not rock formations. Not yet.

“Look what some of them are wearing,” says Trevor. “I’ve only seen gear like this in old pictures.”

“They didn’t fall in at the same time. Look what else they have. Does that book look familiar?”

“What an interesting coincidence.”

“I see the beginning of a pattern,” says Gaspar. “I’d say this warrants skepticism of the remaining chapters.”

“What else would they have been reading, a book on beekeeping?”

“They should have. It’s an interesting hobby with few casualties.”

“How could waiting to die be the lesser evil?”

“No accounting for taste. Maybe they came back after going down there.”

The passage descends toward a purple light surging beneath chandeliers of fused crystals and aborted supernovas. Calcite nubs protrude from the path like hands reaching for their ankles.

“Let’s wait for help,” says Trevor.

“My survival instinct says we should be a bit more proactive. Patience hasn’t been an effective strategy here. I’ve heard of waiting rooms but this is ridiculous.”

“Dr. Zardeen was next to us when the crevasse opened. There’s no sign of him.”

“What’s the bad news?” says Gaspar.

“Gentlemen,” calls a distant voice.

“Doctor, did you notice a group of climbers in the passage back here?” shouts Trevor.

“They might need first aid,” says Gaspar, “but take your time.”

“They are quite dead. They were probably too frightened by what’s over here. Hurry, gentlemen. This is what I have been looking for.”

Strange light caricatures Gaspar’s and Trevor’s silhouettes as they approach, as if in mockery, making them appear no less fantastic and alien as the indigenous formations.

Jablonski/Mount Silenus/3

In darkness the ice men continue their vigil, rebels holed up against the army of time,
saved by an intercessor no less ruthless.

Chapter Two

If interrogators possessed in cunning what they lack in empathy they'd force captives to stand up and tell the group a little about themselves. Public speaking or firing squad: Death, where is thy sting? Fortunately, not all crowds gawk with the mirth of Romans at the Coliseum. Few speakers would be afraid to address an unconscious group. One lost in a haze of solipsism and apathy differs only by degree. This loophole beckons many to a specific niche of oration.

Trevor stands before an audience of thirty-six. His perpetual gestures, coupled with a tendency to abandon the shield of the podium, mimic confidence. "Last night you read about Simon's decision to cut the rope while his partner was still attached. This is one of the greatest passages in all of literature. Why did he make that decision? Anyone?"

"Because he was afraid of Deborah," says a young man in the front row. His gaping mouth and big brown eyes will never be mistaken for signs of abstruse thoughts.

"Please raise your hand, Dylan. That was from another book. Deborah is a mountain in Alaska. These men are climbing the Peruvian Andes. Joe injured his knee and Simon had to lower him down the side during a blizzard."

"These books are all the same," says a girl in the back row, slouched in her seat

until only a gothic Kilroy is visible. Her eyes are not the perceptual organs of a unique being but portholes to the malevolent Collective Mind feared by all public speakers.

Trevor retreats behind the podium. “You might as well say all of Shakespeare’s plays are the same, Melissa. One of the things a college prep course has to teach is how to discern literary nuances.”

“Mr. Donahue’s class is reading *Less Than Zero*,” she says, drumming black nails.

Trevor pretends to look through a stack of papers until his hands shake. He leans on his elbows to reign in the fugitives, contorting his posture. “Track three students wouldn’t understand the sophisticated books we’ve been reading, but it’s your call. *Touching the Void* or Shakespeare.”

“What mountain did Shakespeare climb?” says Dylan.

“Definitely Shakespeare,” says Melissa. “How many books about mountains can we read?”

“You’re not serious,” says Trevor. “Then we won’t read *Into Thin Air* or *The Mountain Meditations of Luigi Zerpaldi*. Your education from kindergarten until now has been a prelude to the ultimate literary experience and you want to skip it. When you’re greeting people at Walmart you’ll regret this. A great book you don’t read is a friend you’ll never meet.”

“Let’s read *Hamlet*,” says Melissa.

“He wouldn’t have lasted two days on Mount Silenus. Unlike your moping prince, Luigi Zerpaldi didn’t let profound reflections interfere with great actions. What about the rest of you?”

Different from mannequins by virtue of respiratory movements, the other students stare into different areas of space. Trevor walks to a poster of a mountain zigzagged by red lines marking the preferred climbing routes.

“I’ve read your book reports on *K2, The Savage Mountain*. The consensus is stunning. Thirty-five of you consider Everest a kiddy slope by comparison. And I had no idea there were so many Freudians here. Could someone please explain what a phallic symbol is? Not you, Melissa. Though filled with vitriol and ad hominem, your paper was commendably free of external influences. If anyone would like to come clean about their less than original work, this is the time. I enjoyed Jennifer Martin’s eccentric ideas when she took my class three years ago.”

Some students gasp. Others rub their fingers in withdrawal from texting. “You could have at least footnoted Google,” says Trevor. “On the bright side, she’s either unfamiliar with the contours of K2 or saving herself for marriage.”

“Are we going to read about Mount Shakespeare?” says Dylan.

Trevor rakes the surface of his guacamole with a jagged chip, creating a Zen garden, studying green ripples surrounding a tomato chunk, how they both exist and do not exist independent of his consciousness, which depends on an incalculable list of causes. Surely all things are not contingent in this fashion, links on a chain to nowhere.

“Don’t play with your food,” says Gaspar, taking a seat across from him.

“I’m meditating.”

“Let me know when it all makes sense. Was your morning as productive as mine?”

“The dumb ones are beyond hope. The smart ones would learn more by staying home. And you?”

“It’s feels good to teach kids what they’ll need in life. Proper weightlifting technique will come in handy in prison. What’re you doing this weekend?”

Trevor’s peripheral vision monitors every movement of Mary Ann and Jackie at an adjacent table in the teachers’ lounge. He waits for a lull in their conversation and announces, “There’s a rock wall in Madison with a five-ten level of difficulty. It’s the hardest climb in the Midwest. We’ll conquer it on Saturday.”

“Did I forget my Alzheimer’s diagnosis?” says Gaspar. “You told me about it yesterday, and the day before.”

“Some say it can’t be climbed. They said the same thing about a five-minute mile.”

Gaspar scans the room for the audience, locates her, and smirks. “This thing is indoors, right?”

“A five-ten is a five-ten,” says Trevor, scooping a dollop of guacamole.

“Shouldn’t we learn to belay first? That class scared the hell out of me. How are you supposed to do anything while you’re dangling in midair?”

Trevor’s gaping mouth reveals what a Leprechaun would look like after tumbling into a blender. He returns to Churchill mode. “We don’t have to climb the great wall right away. We can scope it out first. I have an idea for an original approach on the west side, but without seeing it I can’t gauge the logistical necessities.”

“We should go to Rockworld on a weeknight. I don’t want to get stuck again when it’s crowded. The tavern across the street has Margarita Mondays.”

“We’re not going there to drink.”

“Since when?”

“Are you guys mountain climbers?” says Jackie. “I like those posters in your room, Trevor.”

Mary Ann lowers her sandwich, turns her head, and looks in Trevor’s general direction. For this indivisible point he is the sole occupant of the oasis of her thoughts. How to stay, to emigrate? Sanctuary, sanctuary.

“We’re climbing Mount Silenus this summer,” he says in the offhand way a man would mention his plan to cut the lawn. “A little practice to hone our technique and we’ll be good to go.”

A bite of pastrami and rye prevents Gaspar’s confirmation or denial. Heretofore the bold assertion occurred in barrooms where the audience had the dual virtues of credulity and transient amnesia. Above the dreary ozone of sports banter soared declamations of surmounting this face or that, using Alpine-style or this other, just like so and such or what’s-his-face. Anyone who overheard and inquired soon found himself inching up a sheer wall of glass, huddled 20,000 feet above man and time in a scanty bivouac, not climbing a mountain but locked in mortal combat with fate itself.

“Mount Silenus?” says Jackie.

“It’s the most difficult climb in the hemisphere,” says Trevor. “But we’re more interested in its mystical allure. The greatest book of the twentieth century was written by a man who devoted his life to climbing it.”

“Isn’t that the haunted mountain?”

“Not in any literal sense,” says Trevor. “Inferior writers and third-rate climbers

resorted to nonsense to describe their awe and excuse their difficulties.”

“Is it the tallest?” asks Mary Ann.

Her words, spoken to *him*, if only the cracked jars of memory could preserve such delicacies. With a wave of his hand Trevor says, “The tallest is a glorified mound. Its outline looks nice on a screensaver, but anyone could stroll to the top.”

“Isn’t that scary?” says Jackie.

Trevor shrugs. “Not the word I would use. It’s exhilarating. You’re never so aware you’re alive. It makes the rest of your life feel unreal by comparison. When you return to earth you’re not sure if the mountain was a dream or if you’re dreaming now.”

“That’s a new one,” says Gaspar. “When did Chang Tzu have his butterfly dream, 5,000 years ago? *Ouch.*”

“I’m sorry,” says Trevor. “Was that your shin?”

“So is that why you climb a mountain?” says Mary Ann, placing an orange on the table. It pulses with meaning and beauty like a still life by Cotan.

“Luigi Zeripaldi said that when we hunt for reasons we should catch them, kill them, and then do what we were doing in the first place. It was a poetic way of saying we attach too much importance to our rational side.”

“Might as well make a virtue of your shortcomings,” says Gaspar.

“Only the wise man knows how much he doesn’t know,” says Trevor.

“Can you talk to my class about it in the fall?” says Mary Ann, the gate to her world opened, its key entrusted to Trevor.

“Absolutely. And we’ll have a blog updated weekly. Not all the time is spent climbing. There’s a lot of strategy involved, waiting for ideal weather and planning

which route to take.”

When Mary Ann and Jackie return to class, Gaspar cocks his head and smiles at Trevor. “So you’ve lost your mind. Never so aware you’re alive? Yeah, dangling upside down at Rockworld while three workers rescued me was exhilarating. I wonder if that was from the laughter of the crowd or the blood rushing to my brain.”

“Did you hear what Mary Ann said to me?”

“It sounds like you have a date with her in four months. Smooth moves, slick. And you said pickup routines were for desperate cynics. We talked about doing some hiking, maybe trying a few modest slopes. Most climbers avoid it like their girlfriend’s family.”

Trevor rubs his cheeks. “I’m going to grow a beard.”

“You’re not kidding.”

“I found another member for our expedition in the classified section of *Mountain Man*. If we’re going to be in the area we might as well try. We’d be foolish not to.”

“Fifteen percent of those who’ve tried would disagree, if they were still breathing.”

“I prefer to see the glass as eighty-five percent full,” says Trevor.

“Is this new member one of the locals?”

“Certainly not. The Tharsnopes don’t climb.”

“The people who live in the vicinity of the mountain won’t go near it. Maybe there’s a lesson.”

“They’re hopelessly superstitious, worried about angry spirits and prehistoric sloth.”

“Let’s charter a helicopter to the top, pose for pictures, and be down at the bar by sundown,” says Gaspar. “What’s the difference?”

“You are afflicted with digital nihilism. Why do anything when there’s YouTube? Climbing is the only cure. It will put you back in touch with what’s real. These damned gadgets are turning life into a shadow’s dream.”

“My sister has Photoshop. We won’t even need a helicopter. Then we can spend this summer like the last few: drinking Margaritas and *talking* about mountains.”

“A part of you wants this.”

“A part of me wants to be a neurosurgeon. The same thing is holding me back from both. No training. None. Nada. Zilch. Zippo.”

“Did Edmund Hilary have any formal training?” says Trevor. “Did he have a PhD in Mountaineering?”

“His Sherpa had already made an attempt at Everest. Does that count?”

“Our guide will tell us if we don’t have the right stuff. That’s his call. He’s been the faithful steward of numerous expeditions.”

“He’ll tell us if we have the right stuff in our bank accounts. When were you going to mention that the other member of our party is being paid to join?”

“Gaspar, please. He answered a calling. He’s not a crook.”

An undertow of excitement and uncertainty drags Trevor from the Land of Nod. On a poster above his dresser looms a mountain slicing the darkness like a shark’s fin. He hefts a Stephen King-sized tome from his nightstand. Dozens of Post-its, cigar bands, paper scraps, and thirty or so actual bookmarks signify the monumental parts. Folded corners

designate memorable but less important sections. He leans on an elbow and clears his throat and in a voice grave and sonorous reads:

“Mount Silenus is not a part of the earth but a prodigal son staying away in contempt of its lowly origins. Proof that man is not the measure of all things, it derides every notion of harmonious design. Behold this mockery of all human configurations and tremble.”

Trevor imagines Mary Ann savoring the sublime pleasure of reading his hero, repeating some verses because a cursory glance is not sufficient to appreciate a new horizon. Ignored is the possibility of her sharing Gaspar’s irreverence, laughing at his ignorant quips about Zeripaldi climbing in a sleeveless undershirt, preparing Fettuccine Alfredo at base camp, and shaking down climbers for protection money. Thousands of Trevor’s previous students would concur that Zeripaldi is an acquired taste. “Like a baloney sandwich garnished with caviar,” said one.

Trevor flips a few pages and reads a passage that has been highlighted and underlined. “Under the anesthesia of routine we slumber, impervious to life’s true nature. The constant yearning for what we lack, the urge to be free of what we loathe, chasing pleasures that vanish like dust. Are these life’s limitations or essence? Men go to absurd lengths explaining the problem of evil. In the process they sound like half-wit attorneys defending a mass-murderer. They say happenstance is a robber, free will a mixed blessing, joy more abundant than pain. Look deeper. There is a mighty force opposing our every plan, a cruel gravity smothering us, the heel of a boot grinding out the embers of our souls, a sadist cloaked in the dark fabric of existence. It is the implacable colossus of Fate. We scarcely have time to stumble onto the battlefield, much less comprehend our

plight and mount a counterattack. In a few twinklings of the sun, on a day no different than all that came before, the cosmic ogre squashes us. Those convulsive growls that rend the sky, they are not thunder. They are laughter.”

He rests the book on his chest and puts his hands behind his head. The candid tone is so refreshing compared to all the self-help and esteem-building mumbo jumbo out there. Everyone is okay and they can do anything? It’s enough to make you sick. There is a strange but abiding comfort to be found in knowing the truth when others don’t, even if it’s devastating. The appeal of lurid secrets is as constant as death and taxes.

The remainder of the passage he knows by heart. “Some say Fate cannot be fought, that it is entrapping as quicksand, omnipresent as the ether. Notice how the cleverest excuses and slipperiest arguments are used in defense of cowardice. Through capitulation to routine man dies an ignoble death long before his mortal coil makes it official. He forgets he is living. Combat is the supreme reminder. What is that putrid stench? Is it not the rot of man’s spirit, the smell of lies told to assuage the failure of those too craven to fight, smoke wafting from the languid den of routine addicts? To wage war against Fate one must locate the most auspicious outpost and launch an attack. That fortress is Mount Silenus. A battle calls. Warrior, arise!”

Trevor puts the book on his nightstand and contemplates the poster. “I can conquer you,” he tells the menacing shape, which would not be diminished by a larger wall, as though its significance is independent of any relation to a grander scheme, as though it would endure in the totality of space.

Chapter Three

The fossilized tidal wave doesn't dominate the horizon. *It is the horizon.* In its midst, as though some deluded pharaoh ordered the construction of pyramids and his servants made no attempt to point out the difficulties, angular chunks bulge, their icy patterns akin to webs spun by drugged spiders. Staring too long invites visitors. Tiny faces like rough drafts by Edvard Munch cascade down the gnarled slabs, warning those who would approach, morphing, fading, always reappearing, a waterfall of tortured specters. Which is worse, that these are properties of the mountain or projections from your mind?

Snowflakes *clack* against the window. You trace and retrace an outline of Mount Silenus like a man gazing into a crystal ball who's trying to alter its revelations. Emerging from darkness like a shard of the moon, this avatar of human insignificance evokes something worse than disillusion, something less definable than dread. Its permanence assaults you with the reminder that regardless of any Pyrrhic victories you will lose the Big Game, the waiting game. What hatched from this shattered egg, some famished devourer of man's esteem?

Buck up. Your company is exemplary. From Simeon Stylites to Thoreau, Emerson, Dillard, and Kaczynski, visionaries have sought clarity from Nature. Join them.

From this perspective you'll regard city life as more revolting than a knot of vipers slithering under a rock for warmth. Instead of spending your mornings shaving in the rearview mirror and screaming at kamikaze drivers while a vein throbs on your forehead, meditate with the ultimate elder, the mountain. One morning with this master will teach you more than any book, more than any degree. In the way physics theorems can't convey the finale of an imploding star, the immediacy of experience eludes all translators and transcriptions.

Listen. It sounds as though Nature herself has summoned you, knocking with the imminence of Beethoven's Fifth, removing a barrier between two realms to call her lost child home after his sojourn in the abyss. Perhaps her ways are only inscrutable to those who ignore them. Hear her sweet voice. Why is she speaking Spanish?

It's just the maid. You'll have to leave the room for a hike outside or to the observatory. The bar? Very well. Begin your journey back to Eden by discussing it with your fellow visionaries in a smoky gin mill. The disparity between Paradise and the inferno devised by man will seem even greater. Our bloodlust to destroy as much of Nature as possible will be exposed for what it is: the jealous rage of failed artists bent on destroying the one standard against which their tinkering will always seem derivative, tawdry, laughable, as nothing at all.

Another drink? Don't second-guess your sensitive nerves. If that's what it takes to keep those dark thoughts on a short leash, so be it. Soon you will exhaust your demons on frozen hills and exult as they die of exposure.

Don't stare at the disheveled man two stools away. As if you've never engaged in

a Socratic dialogue with yourself. He may be on the cusp of a vital conclusion and you scorn him for overstepping a mindless social norm. No small part of your quest for the Truth in Nature should involve a scathing critique of society and its discontents.

“It’s like they’ve all agreed not to talk about it, so anyone who does is crazy,” he says, chewing a fingernail that shouldn’t be harvested for at least two weeks. Eyes pink as raw salmon protrude from dark puffy lids.

He’d be having this conversation even if I wasn’t here, you realize, feeling as though you’ve wandered onto a stage with an animatronic creation going through its preprogrammed routine. But the stage includes you. What programmed it, and why?

“Is insanity determined by consensus or biology?” he says. “It’s nothing but a label, a curse they cast on folks who call attention to unpleasant truths, a blood libel against nonconformists.”

There but for the grace of God ...

Don’t tell yourself that. He chose this path. You’re not even tempted to argue with yourself in a crowded bar. (Right?)

“And people have seen it,” he says. “That’s what I don’t understand.”

No, the only thing that needs “a good bath” is your harsh judgment. Do you think John Muir bathed every day? Why should vain concerns of the flesh take precedence over the imperatives of the heart? Isn’t this the mindset you’re hoping to realign? The boy has left the city. Now the city, that defiler of the soul, must leave the boy.

“Seen what?” you say.

“The Abominable Unau. Are you pretending you haven’t heard about it?”

“I just checked in. My boss made me take some time off. I came here to relax.” *So*

I don't wind up like you.

For shame. Why has lashing out become your primary instinct? Has confinement to a cubicle turned you into a desperate predator with no prey except those you relegate to the status of losers? And this is what they mean by civilization.

“The Abominable Unau lives in a cave on the Introspection Plateau,” he says, “about a third of the way up the east side.”

Feeling the flame that burns inside each man, all of which come from the great fire started by the Primeval Arsonist, you warm to the tragic character. “Why do you call him the abominable eunuch?” *I suppose I'd be abominable too if deprived of the sole reason not to discharge a .357 into my mouth. Wouldn't life in a cave compound the misery? Jake Barnes took up fishing.*

“Unua! Abominable Unau. You just want to laugh at me like all the rest of them.”

“I'm sorry. I misunderstood. You mean it's a Megatherium, a prehistoric ground sloth?”

“One and the same.”

“How can it be abominable if it's a sloth?” *Does it smell like you?*

Callow, cruel, and demonstrative. In the way flippers once became feet, our lust to slaughter those different from us survives as a need to ostracize them. Hopefully the crimson tint of your soul will be cleansed by the mountain snow.

“It's the size of three elephants,” he says. “It came after me.”

“The mountain folklore is full of legends about troubled spirits.”

“This was a giant sloth.”

“Maybe it was the ghost of one. We hunted them to extinction. It was on the

Discovery Channel.”

“There’ve been other witnesses.”

“They probably saw an obese hiker in a fur coat. Go take a look in the lobby.

There’s ten potential Megatheriums checking in right now.”

“Smartass, just like the rest,” he says.

“How can there be only one? Does it split in two every few years? A single representative of a species can’t survive. There has to be a group. That’s why talk about the Loch Ness Monster and Bigfoot is silly.”

The bartender gives you an approving once-over. That might be the most intelligent thing she’s heard all year. Pray she doesn’t ask for an explanation. In the funhouse mirror of a stranger’s eyes you can appear as a scholar or hero, but not for long. Soon a brood of miscreants will appear, cavorting in obscene parody of your carefully sorted assessments. Is there an accurate reflection, a Real You? Wouldn’t you have seen him by now?

“Gravity is the least of your worries on Mount Silenus,” says the man. “It’s up there, watching.”

“The abominable eyebrow -- I mean *unau*?”

He glowers at you, then hunches over his drink like a mangy squirrel holding a nut.

“In the morning I’m going to climb the mountain,” you tell the mirror, as if the presence of a witness forces the future to sign a treaty of unconditional surrender. Lie on the bed and close your eyes. Enter the interstellar craft that transports you from the dying galaxy

of Today to the distant star system of Tomorrow. Has it always existed, awaiting your arrival? Ponder this well, little spaceman. Luigi Zeripaldi said that Tomorrow does not create itself from nothing any more than you did. It is the descendant of all prior days, cursed and blessed with their DNA, existing in design long before birth, its parameters already decreed, part of a vast causal nexus of which nothing stands independent. Look at your fingerprints. The minutest details of Tomorrow are no less predetermined, which means somewhere out there you have already summited or fallen. Whether you stand atop Silenus or die of exposure with bones protruding from your thighs is already writ into the fabric of things.

“Remind me why I give two shits what Zeripaldi said.”

In the darkness Mount Silenus inches closer. Ask a geologist. If you wait long enough it will come to you, to what’s left of you, to crush your bones into dust. Consider a room on the other side. The shuffleboard court and pool will postpone this for a century or three.

“I’m not hiding. It’s a big chunk of rock. I’m going to climb the damn thing when I wake up.”

Loosen your robe. Relax. Watch TV. Three *Nurses Gone Wild* leap from the screen and prance through the soundstage in your mind. The special effects team of your imagination transforms the rolls of pasty flesh under your chest into a washboard. Like a million spam promises incarnate, your “penus becomes enormus” without the use of “dangorus exercises.”

But why are you trying to impress imaginary women with radical metamorphoses? Why not create them innately desirous of your current proportions?

You, architect and artisan, hold the power to unchain the sun from this parallel world. Are its parameters good because you made them or did you make them because they're good? Resolve this dilemma or stand mute with sullen bafflement if one of the nurses asks.

"I'm thinking way too much. Need to relax. No one questions the metaphysical foundation of his fantasies. Be reasonable. It's the stress. Dr. Schlotski said it took years to get this bad and won't disappear overnight. ... Hello, room service? Could you send up another shrimp cocktail? And another bottle of that fizzy wine. Make it two bottles. And check if there's any vacancies on the opposite side, something without a mountain view."

Reasonable? That's the problem. You've put your faith in a fickle ally. Reason slaved to earn you a nineteen on the ACT. It blows a fuse filling out tax forms. Relying on it for the Big Questions requires more than wishful thinking.

"But Reason finds the truth. Dr. Schlotski said it's almost as important as meds for maintaining a stress-free life. There's a framed picture of Mr. Spock in her office."

Ask Zeno what it found. Should you trust something that can disprove the possibility of motion? Ask Sextus Empiricus and the rest of the ancient skeptics. They devoted their lives to it and became so bewildered and exhausted they resorted to following the example of brutes just to avoid the misery of making judgments: "Reason can prove anything, so we live according to custom." Ask David Hume. No one had more access to it than he: "Reason is the slave of the passions." It can't even prove the sun will rise in the east. Avoid Martin Luther for now, unless you want a longer list of indictments against the "Devil's whore." What metaphor will suffice to denounce this charlatan, this imposter, this confidence man? Reason is a she-male who seems so alluring, so perfectly

feminine before it hops in your car, before it's too late.

Never mind. You're a well-endowed patient with three nurses fawning over you. It's only stress. Be reasonable.

"The mountain is nothing more than an extra hilly hill," you say, cringing. "I was letting a word freak me out. If you don't tame their power they control you."

Positive thinking is a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup of hubris and stupidity. Try taming *cyanide*. The perils inherent to things exist independent of our descriptions and attitudes. Wolverines for instance. And Oxycodone. And mountains.

You walk on. Silenus grows faster than you'd expect given your cautious pace, as if clawing at you. An abstraction flickers to life: 15% of climbers take up permanent residence here, which means hundreds of breathing, eating, fucking, farting, laughing, beer-drinking, poker-playing men DIED here. They forever ceased and desisted from breathing, eating, fucking, farting, laughing, drinking beer, and playing poker courtesy of what you're about to commence. These were not suicides. They were trying every inch of the way to avoid this irreversible and often unpleasant transformation. Then what happens? Welcome to the concrete reality of this question.

The clouds expand and diminish and the sky sheds a grimy exoskeleton to reveal an orange heart pulsing within a vast creature of which you are a mere cell. The sun pools on the snow like orange juice. The sun, what is it? In all your meanderings and voyages you've never stopped and gawked at the bone-chilling peculiarity of this. Is the existence of Existence humdrum and self-explanatory, or do these questions open empty chambers no free samples from Dr. Schlotski can fill?

And you, what are *you*, and where? That mysterious theatre behind your eyes and between your ears, what perpetuates its dynamism?

“I’ll tackle it tomorrow when the weather’s nicer. I need to get an earlier start. Timing is of the essence.”

In a world where no consensus exists on its creation, who can say with certainty that guzzling champagne in the bath is not the greatest accomplishment in life? Return to your kingdom. Silenus will wait.

Chapter Four

Seven stories separate Gaspar's anguished face from a stained glass dome depicting a man flying below a scowling sun with wings aflame. Trevor drops his bags and cranes his neck. "It's an architectural masterpiece. This is where Zeripaldi stayed. He said it inspired him."

"To look for a Holiday Inn on the other side," says Gaspar. "No wonder he climbed the mountain."

Shielding a fireplace, mosaic glass bathes the white fur of a mounted bear in a kaleidoscope of colors. Recent arrivals take turns posing for pictures, extending the peace sign behind its head, holding their drinks to its mouth, showing its remains less respect than it would have shown theirs.

"Think of the courage it took to face it down," says Trevor.

"Aiming a rifle can be tough when you're hammered," says Gaspar.

"Did you know the bear is one of the most spiritual animals on earth," says a man beside them. His vaguely English words struggle to emerge through an eastern European shell. "This is due to the omega-3 fatty acids they consume."

"My mom takes those pills," says Gaspar. "She's always praying."

“Gentlemen, my name is Dr. Zardeen. Believe it or else, I am climbing this mountain on a scientific expedition to explain supernatural phenomena and explore the fundamental nature of man.” Acrid smoke wafts from the buxom mermaid of his meerschaum pipe.

“You must be here to study the Tharsnopos,” says Trevor.

“Indeed. By virtue of their isolation they make the ideal control group, the norm from which all others deviate.”

“I’d be curious to see undiluted human nature,” says Gaspar. “It’s a shame the rest of us watered it down.”

“What’s the connection with supernatural phenomena?” says Trevor.

“That is a separate project. On this expedition I will catch two fish with one worm. Mount Silenus is composed of special mineral deposits. With assistance from Natalia the Sibylline, I will formulate a geological explanation of the ghost stories about the Introspection Plateau -- unprecedented in scope and depth.”

“I’ve seen her on TV,” says Trevor.

“Why do you need a psychic if you’re a scientist?” says Gaspar.

“Flight, both literal and intellectual, is impossible without steady resistance. My every proposition will be opposed by her counter claims. Best of luck to you, gentlemen.”

“I assume we’re staying in the same room Zeripaldi did,” says Gaspar. “I hope they’ve changed the sheets.”

“Luigi Zeripaldi stayed in the North Wing,” says a man in line behind them. A jean jacket worn over a flannel shirt atop a wool sweater fails to feign lumberjack bulk, but climbing boots keep him safely over the five-foot mark.

“Years after Zeripaldi set out on his odyssey, one of the Tharsnopos gave his manuscript to a group of climbers,” says Trevor. “How it wound up with them remains a mystery. Their religion forbids climbing, so they couldn’t have found it on the mountain. And Zeripaldi considered them pacifists in the battle against Fate. He said they spend their pathetic lives groveling in surrender. He never would have trusted a pack of savage cowards with his life’s work. We recoil from such judgments, but in his day they were part of a paradigm few questioned.”

“Days after the climbers returned, an avalanche buried the North Wing,” says the stranger. “The opus lay under tons of ice and snow for years.”

“We’re not staying there, are we?” says Gaspar.

“Of course not,” says Trevor. “It’s still under construction.”

“For fifty years?”

“Closer to sixty,” says the stranger, “but it’s nearing completion. In honor to Zeripaldi and everything he stood for, in homage to the defiant heart of climbing, it’s on an ice ridge at the base of the mountain. The design is mind-blowing.” He thrusts his hand at Trevor. “Call me Cerebus.”

“The aardvark?” says Gaspar. “My roommate in the dorms read that comic book. He was a walking bong.”

“It’s the three-headed dog who guards hell,” says Cerebus, discarding Trevor’s hand and staring at Gaspar like he’s sizing up a rock wall.

“Actually, *Cerberus* is the dog who guards the entrance to Hades,” says Trevor.

“Are you sure your parents didn’t want you to be named after the aardvark?” says Gaspar. “He was very popular.”

“My parents didn’t give it to me. It’s a nickname.”

“So it could be the aardvark. Did you ever read Zippy the Pinhead?”

“Which name would you prefer?” says Trevor.

“Whichever, whatever makes you happy,” he says, waving a hand to dispel the subject. “So when do you guys plan to go for it?”

“It depends,” says Gaspar. “We have to wait for our g--”

“For the third *member* of our party,” says Trevor, finishing the careless sentence, which would have rent the solemnity of the moment like explosive gas discharged during a marriage proposal. “And you?”

Cerebus puts his hands on his hips. The motion scarcely registers on the topmost strata of his garments. “I’ve been here before.”

“Why not climb a different mountain?” says Gaspar.

“Let’s just say I saw something up there and I want a better look. I’m doing the Introspection Plateau.”

Trevor takes a wobbly step forward. “Seriously?”

Cerebus grits his teeth and jabs his chest. “If it was good enough for Luigi Zeripaldi it’s good enough for me.”

“Didn’t he die doing that?” says Gaspar.

“A man like that doesn’t die,” says Cerebus. “Through his *Mountain Meditations* he is more alive today than ever before.” Behind him in line, two climbers with British inflections say, “Hear hear.” Like ponds beneath a sky streaked with fireworks, the dew forming on Trevor’s eyes harvests bursts of light from the veiled fireplace.

“I’ll rephrase the question,” says Gaspar. “Didn’t that plateau affect him in a

crude biologic sense?”

“No one knows for certain,” says Trevor.

“But we can assume he didn’t build a condo up there. Someone would have seen it by now.”

“The mistakes of great men are a thousand times more important than the triumphs of common men,” says Cerebus.

“Depends on the mistake,” says Gaspar. “Christopher Columbus must have cut himself shaving and we still have nothing to show for it. You two should get together. Trevor quotes Zeripaldi all day long. Join us for a drink after you check in.”

“We’re not staying at the hotel,” says Cerebus. “I’m picking up an important package at the desk. My partner and I are camped out not far from here.”

“In a tent?” says Gaspar.

“It’s an igloo. Don’t get me wrong. This is a nice place, but there’s too many distractions for a serious climber. Your mind is a muscle too. It needs to be warmed up and stretched. A few days of solitude reading Zeripaldi are essential.”

“We’re climbing *that*,” says Gaspar, keeping a safe distance from the window in the observatory. Against a pumpkin-gut sky juts a dark graph of stock market chaos, gleaming like some shattered jug. A halo of vapor buffets the serrated peak. The currency of minutes is devalued in its presence, rendered worthless.

To gauge the normalcy of his response, Gaspar watches his friend. Compared to climbing to the top, what *wouldn’t* constitute a natural reaction to this frozen tide of doom? Could running in the opposite direction be faulted for haste or superstition? By

what standard would building an altar and making burnt offerings lend itself to criticism?

Why not fall prostrate and beg the shattered monolith for mercy?

“Won’t the snow make it too slippery to climb?” says Gaspar. Maybe it’s not too late. Someone in this pack of willfully deluded souls could be converted to sanity.

Comparing the costs to the benefits should suffice. Conquest offers, at best, survival, which they already have. Winning wins nothing; losing loses everything. Or is Gaspar missing something?

“Zeripaldi said you can never adequately describe a mountain,” says Trevor. “It’s a foundational metaphor. Like clouds, mountains are what we compare everything else to.”

“He should have spent less time in the pizzeria and more time at his desk. It looks like a huge deformed finger flipping us off. Which part are we climbing?”

“See how it resembles a sharp fang and two molars?”

“I thought you couldn’t describe it.”

“You can’t, but that hasn’t stopped people from trying. Notice the inadequacy of my attempt. The molar on the left is the Cephalopod Plateau. The one on the right is the Introspection Plateau.”

“They don’t look too bad.”

“We’re going straight up the fang.”

“For the love of -- Why?”

“It’s the best route, the most straightforward. The plateaus can be tricky. Even Zeripaldi concurred.”

“How safe is the fang?”

“Safety isn’t our only concern.”

“Does it crack the top hundred?”

Entranced, Trevor strokes the glass. The mountain flays the underbelly of the sky, gashing low-flying clouds, imparting the disorienting illusion of motion as though it’s not waiting to be conquered but stalking them.

Gaspar sits with his back to the encroaching talon. “If safety was an issue we’d stick with cross country skiing. If risking your neck is the name of the game -- and that’s the impression you get from Zeripaldi and that little aardvark -- why not do the climb handcuffed and blindfolded?”

“Don’t be obtuse. If it helps, though I would never stoop to such thoughts for comfort, remember that lesser men than you have been changed forever by combat with this beast.”

“Speaking of ice cubes, let’s get a drink. The jetlag is murder.”

“It’s only a few hours,” says Trevor, taking one last look at his nemesis. The first light of the moon seeps down the side in lacteous streams. “And could you please not use the word *guide* when referring to the third member of our party?”

“What’s the difference?”

“It’s the equivalent of wearing propeller hats.”

“Will those slow us down if we fall? Where can we buy them?”

Chapter Five

Embers illumine an igloo where Cerebus sits in the lotus position atop furry pelts. The groans of the wind fail to interrupt his trance. With hands resting on his knees palms up, he winces in concentration until something knocks at the exterior of the humble structure. A predator seeking sustenance? A desperado looking for shelter? Another wayward traveler lost in this wasteland?

“Room service.”

Cerebus puts on a bathrobe and opens the door. An icy breeze claws his face. Behind the parka-clad waiter, igloos like perky breasts swell from the snow. Some quake with techno. Each is equipped with a satellite dish. On the horizon stands the hotel like some amethyst palace. “Put it on my tab.”

The waiter remains and rocks from foot to foot.

“The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step.”

“I’ve heard that tip.”

“They don’t have to be original.”

“It’s not much of a tip if it isn’t.”

“Tall oaks from little acorns grow.”

“I don’t understand that one.”

“You have to think about it. You’ll be grateful when it hits you.”

“I hope I don’t drop your next order. I might be lost in thought.”

“Add a dollar to my tab.”

Cerebus locates the remote control on top of a mini fridge and finds the station for climbers visiting the area and devours a piece of triple pepperoni supreme. He does not hear the door open or see what enters.

Clearly the pasty creature towering over him has never been in the presence of sunlight. The fish it consumes beneath the ice must give it all the nutrients it needs. But why has it ventured this far from water? And those horns, are they for goring prey or self defense? It stands over Cerebus and makes a fearsome noise. He screams and falls on the floor. A pizza slice lands on his chest and raises the pitch two octaves.

“The look on your face,” says Gilbert, clad in a towel.

“Nice Viking helmet.”

“I got it at the gift shop. Tell me again why we’re paying \$350 extra to stay in this thing. I freeze my ass off every time I hike to the pool.”

“That hotel is Disneyworld for climber wannabes. We need nerves of steel. This sets the vibe. Attitude is everything.”

Gilbert puts on tattered jeans and a black shirt emblazoned with the name of a musical quartet, the utterance of which would have more than sufficed to have him burned at the stake a few centuries ago. “Attitude?” he says. “Gonna whack him and stack him.”

“Technically we’re not *whacking* it. We’ll be the first humans in ten millennia to

capture one.”

“And become millionaires in the process. Hey, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but everyone else staying in these igloos is male and female. These are for couples. People are gonna think --”

“That’s the least of our worries,” says Cerebus.

“Did maintenance fix the heater? It’s gotta be ninety in here. Won’t this melt?”

“It’s Polyurethane.”

“At least open the moonroof. You should get one of these helmets.”

“It might antagonize the Abominable Unau.”

“Aren’t sloths totally mellow?”

“Let’s not find out the hard way.”

Gilbert grabs a handful of shot bottles from the bar, opens one, swigs it, and emits a fiendish war whoop. “That won’t matter. Wait until you see the goods. Where’s the package?” He rips it open and dumps hundreds of little packets on the bed. A dopey green eye ganders from each of the yellow labels. “I bought 346 from Mother Nature’s Bounty and ordered another 500 online. Putting these in our luggage would have been suicide.”

“What the hell is Love Potion Number Eight? We want old-school date rape stuff: Xanax, GHB, Rophies, Special K, K-pins. Of all people I thought you’d have access to those.”

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean?”

“This thing is as big as a whale,” says Cerebus.

“The clerk at Mother Nature’s Bounty said this has hypnotic properties. She’s a

shaman or Wiccan priestess or something.”

“The patchouli sponge with eleven piercings who recommends cleansing for every problem? You trust her with our lives?”

“Why would she want me dead?” says Gilbert. “I’m a good customer.”

“If this doesn’t work and the sloth starts mauling us we can’t flush its colon.”

“She said never take more than the recommended dose or you’ll pass out. Why would she say that if it’s not a sedative?”

“Whatever. We’ve got some veggie burritos to make.”

“How much should we put in each one?”

“If it’s approximately twenty feet tall with the body mass of a whale ...”

Gilbert opens a fresh bottle and positions his beaked nose over the top and sniffs the peppermint vapors. “What kind of whale? A blue one, a great white, a beluga, one of those little dudes at Sea World?”

“I didn’t pull out a tape measure. It didn’t stand on a scale for me. I saw its outline during a snowstorm. I don’t know why I said whale.”

“These aren’t estimates; they’re wild guesses.”

“We know it’s an herbivore,” says Cerebus.

“Now we’re fucked. Ever date a vegetarian? It’s less about not eating meat than being a finicky bitch. We have to make damn sure these are good.”

“How does Love Potion Number Eight taste?”

“I haven’t tried it.”

Cerebus smiles.

“No.”

“At least open a packet and see if it has a smell.”

“I can’t smell anything.”

“Lick it.”

“You lick it.”

“Call crystal tits and ask if there’s a flavor,” says Cerebus. “Our lives are at stake.”

“She was creeped out because I was buying so many packets. I asked a few questions and she thought I was hitting on her.”

“There aren’t enough vitamins and herbal remedies in that whole store to treat what you’d catch.”

“Hello?” calls a voice from outside.

“Who is that?” says Gilbert.

“It’s the maid,” says Cerebus.

“*Amantes*,” she says with a mellifluous bounce to her voice.

“What the hell does that mean?” whispers Gilbert.

“Just tell her to come back later.”

“She’s laughing. Do you hear that?”

“We’re poised to capture the greatest beast since the T. rex and you’re intimidated by a maid.”

“*Está usted ocupado?*”

“Dammit. Hide this stuff before she cleans. She’ll think we’re in the middle of some mega gayfest.”

“Well we’re not.”

“But that’s the kind of shit biographers write about,” says Gilbert. “They’ll talk to everyone who saw us before we went up.”

“History is going to be very kind to us. I can feel it.”

Chapter Six

Raucous talk in strange languages fills Trevor and Gaspar with the humility of Ptolemaic astronomers discovering they weren't the center of the universe. "I bet Mount Silenus doesn't look half as intimidating during the day," says Gaspar. If courage is the absence of fear rather than the presence of a tangible quality, he is more courageous than five beers ago.

"Do you think Warhol did these?" says Trevor, admiring multicolored silk-screens of Mount Silenus. Every other one is upside down, creating the appearance of jagged teeth, as though the bar's patrons are trapped in the mouth of some behemoth with an insatiable appetite for crayons.

"Maybe someone fished them out of his dumpster. They're giving me a headache. I wish I had a degree in art so I understood how brilliant these are."

"This from a man whose favorite print is *The Persistence of Mammary*."

"Beauty is in the hand of the beholder."

Above the entrance, a charcoal sketch depicts a man perched on a mountain top with arms outstretched like some prophet taking his case directly to the heavens. "Who's that?" says Gaspar.

“*That* is Luigi Zeripaldi.”

“I wonder if the caricature artist gave him the choice of race car driver, mountain climber, or cowboy.”

“No Gaspar. That’s what he looked like. Not all giants can be slain with the revisionist’s dagger.”

A reedy man approaches their table. “*Gaspar Castillo? Trevor Kaczysnski?*” Wiry muscles bulge within his Aerofleece pullover. A scraggly black beard cedes an inch to mirthful eyes and returns in the form of a thick unibrow. Trevor manages the first phase of the handshake, fakes his way through several stages involving knuckle raps, but botches the elaborate closing ceremony. “My clients call me Yoda.”

“Because of your ears?” says Gaspar.

Reflexively Yoda strokes the sides of his head. “Because he trained a novice to become a Jedi.”

Trevor glances over his shoulder. “I meant to ask, is there any way you could say you’re another member of our party?”

“Not a problem my man. We went to school together, how’s that? You guys ready to mount this mother?”

“Fate has knocked on our door,” says Trevor. “We are ready to answer.”

“You took the basic courses we talked about, right?”

“We’re good to go.”

Faced with Elvis’ predicament when he forgot to remember to forget, Gaspar pours another beer. Hopefully the warm tide swirling through his head will wash away the discrepancies between the extent of their training and Trevor’s declaration. The spirit

was willing. They signed up for three courses at Rockworld. But the flesh fell prey to Margarita Mondays.

“And you have all the gear I listed?”

“George Mallory has nothing on us,” says Trevor.

Cerebus saunters into the bar, thumbs in his belt loops, upper lip arched in disdain.

“Hey Mr. Natural,” calls Gaspar.

“Mr. who?”

“You said we could call you anything. How about Marvin the Martian?”

“Let’s stick with Cerebus.”

“Cerebus, this is Yoda.” Trevor studies their esoteric handshake in hopes of memorizing it. “Cerebus is doing the Introspection Plateau.”

“You been on this stump before?” says Cerebus, throwing his shoulders back.

“Eleven times. Those plateaus are epic PITAs -- on a good day.”

“My IQ drops thirty points when I’m away from my laptop,” says Gaspar.

“Pains in the ass,” says Yoda. “There are world-class alpinists who avoid them. You’d never think to look at this mountain that going straight up the middle is the best route. I wouldn’t do it any other way.”

Cerebus’ thumbs fall from his belt loops. “Well, someone’s gotta.”

“I keep hearing that rationale,” says Gaspar. “It’s like the mountain is a security checkpoint. Who kept tabs on it before humans came along? Thank goodness it managed to survive without us.”

Splayed across the booth in lethargic ecstasy, Trevor and Gaspar are indistinguishable from the denizens of an opium den, their vow to quit smoking rescheduled to a time of greater fortitude. Yoda returns with a fourth pitcher. Or seventh.

“Guys, this is extremely important. I’m going to let you in on a secret about the nuts and bolts of climbing. No one else will tell you this and you won’t read it in any book. No climber wants to admit it. They have a vested interest in making it seem impossible or miraculous or crazy.”

“You can’t tell me the cigarette companies aren’t in cahoots with the breweries,” says Gaspar, watching a ghostly vine grow from the red seed on the tip of his Camel. “If it wasn’t for beer we would have quit smoking a thousand times by now.”

“Our culture’s obsession with eradicating tobacco has terrible precedents,” says Trevor. “The National Socialists were obsessed with it.”

“So by smoking we’re striking a blow against the Nazis? I’ll do my part to save civilization.”

Yoda watches, helpless. The conversation may as well be a tributary gouged across the territory between nine PM and two AM, its winding course determined before flowing with Mountain Rock Ale, its momentum increasing the more they consume, its terminus fixed and inevitable. How to dam or divert it?

“Do you guys play chess?” says Yoda. “It has something in common with climbing.”

“I’m very good. Despite congenital shortcomings, Gaspar is learning.”

“Trevor sucks. He doesn’t remember the rules for castling and always gets his queen out first.”

“It’s the most powerful piece on the board.”

“That’s why you don’t develop it right away,” says Gaspar. “Look at the games of any great player.”

“They’re afraid to try new things,” says Trevor. “Some day a maverick will come along and overturn the chess world.”

“What are you waiting for?”

“Computers have ruined the game. I hate being reminded that thinking can be done by a box of circuits.”

“Only yours.”

Yoda raps the table. “Here’s the secret. People who don’t understand chess think it’s about looking twenty moves ahead or being a genius. They’re wrong. It’s all tactics, a handful of basic maneuvers that take you from point A to point C with a better position: forks, pins, skewers, removing a defending piece. If you study them you’ll be better than most players. The same is true for climbing. It’s all technique. Forget the romantic, heroic stuff you hear. Think of a violinist or diamond cutter. What they do seems impossibly difficult, but each has mastered a set of very simple skills.”

Trevor’s cigarette tumbles from his lips and fizzles out in a puddle next to his elbow. “You can’t be serious. When Mallory summited Everest without oxygen, every breath he took was heroic.”

“Especially the last one,” says Gaspar. “*If* he summited.”

“The locket with his wife’s picture wasn’t found on his body,” says Trevor.

“You treat that like a mathematical proof. It’s weak circumstantial evidence.”

“He wanted to put the locket on the summit. When they found his body they

couldn't find it. Therefore he was on his way back when Fate struck him down."

Not as a serious argument, which are deflected from Trevor's shield of faith like so many gnats, but a malicious heresy courtesy of the booze muse, Gaspar says, "He brought a slingshot. When he was within 100 yards he aimed the locket, fired, and headed down."

"That's beneath all contempt. It's what you would do."

"I'd use a carrier pigeon."

"It would freeze to death you stupid ignoramus."

"Guys, please. Silenus isn't anything like Everest. Look, I'm not saying climbing isn't risky. All I'm saying --"

"When Joe Simpson left the safety of his crevasse, that wasn't heroic?" says Trevor.

"If he stayed he would have died for sure," says Gaspar. "He had nothing to lose. Lucky endings are only brave in retrospect."

"That is the greatest survival tale of all time and you dismiss it as if he had nothing better to do than spend a few days writhing down the Andes with a broken leg."

"Are you saying he wasn't lucky?" says Gaspar.

"Define luck," says Trevor.

Yoda's head goes from one to the other. If a deranged scientist put two contrarians in a cage and forced them to subsist on beer and pretzels the outcome would be identical. Gaspar's train of thought is derailed by a barbarous assault on all notions of Cosmic Justice. Cerebus has befriended *two* attractive girls at the bar, both at least six inches taller than he, making him the first man since Sammy Davis Junior to accomplish

this. In lieu of shaking a fist at the heavens, Gaspar postulates a theory involving a war-ravaged country with a wildly disproportionate female to male ratio and Cerebus having a trust fund in excess of seven figures.

“Earth to Gaspar,” says Trevor.

“I’ll put it your lingo. *Luck* is when Fate tries to kick you in the balls and misses.”

A wild laugh irrupts from Yoda. Trevor’s eyebrows ascend. “That’s not far from what Zeripaldi said. ‘Mountain climbing is the ultimate defiance of the cruel *hand* of Fate. The climber must withstand its stabs with every step. Nothing has less remorse than gravity and jagged rocks.’”

“Cave diving is more defiant,” says Gaspar. “That’s just begging Fate to mess with you. Good thing there aren’t any literary masterpieces about it. Who knows where we’d be?”

“Yoda, could you give Gaspar some perspective on how essential *The Mountain Meditations of Luigi Zeripaldi* is to a climber. Most of his skepticism is in jest, but it’s hard for the uninitiated to grasp how it’s not only great literature; it’s the climbers’ bible.”

A stifled groan and forced smile contort Yoda’s face. “Popular book. Timeless. Soaring prose. Interesting ideas.”

“But you’re a mountain climber. This is like a devout Muslim saying the Koran is a good read.”

Yoda takes a long drink. And another. “I don’t know if there are any mountain climbing gospels. It’s a brilliant work, but I’m not sure it’s the best guide for someone starting out -- and that’s a compliment.”

Involuntary spasms on one of Trevor's cheeks prevent the articulation of rebukes. In a parallel dimension, Gaspar entertains a new hypothesis about Cerebus' companions. Are they available separately or only as a package deal? Shouldn't the moral calculus that normally shuns these exchanges be superseded by the dictum to do as the Romans?

"The way I see it, the more experience you gain the more you'll appreciate his writing," says Yoda. "There's nothing wrong with a romantic view, but the technical side is what you need to focus on when starting out. Think of technique as your means. Think of Zeripaldi's ideas as your strategy, the big picture."

"In other words, ignore literal readings of the most all-encompassing book on the subject in favor of *Mountain Climbing for Dummies*," says Trevor. "Downplay the giants, the rebels, the fortune hunters, the daredevils, the explorers, the seekers. Focus on eggheads with atlases."

Yoda strokes his beard and looks at the table and doesn't mention that Trevor is paying an egghead with an atlas a handsome fee to drag his rebellious, fortune-hunting ass up the mountain. "I'm not saying he's wrong. I'm saying he's more concerned with big underlying motives. Some of us don't have them. We simply enjoy climbing. Many of the greatest climbers would be hard-put to say why they climb."

"And they are the ones he speaks for. Dispatched by a mysterious and irresistible decree, they busied themselves with harnesses while Zeripaldi deciphered the hieroglyphics of their souls. He and he alone resolved why a man climbs a mountain." Trevor stares above the entrance at the charcoal sketch. "Those solitary warriors, summoned by a bugle only they could hear, have their battle plan written with a clarity Hemingway would envy."

“Hemingway?” says Gaspar. “It’s like reading Faulkner upside down.”

“Okay, let’s suppose he figured it out,” says Yoda. “Even if he was right, you still have to get from the base to the top and Philosophy won’t do it. There’s an old chess saying that applies here. Long analysis, wrong analysis.”

“I bet you’re only acquainted with the Holberg interpretation,” says Trevor, “or that condensed monstrosity. They don’t do justice to the portions written in Italian. They make them sound stylistically inferior. And how can you abridge a masterpiece? That’s worse than chopping up a Greek statue.”

The manager of the hotel runs into the bar and shares frantic words with the bartender. Mercifully the 1980s music stops. Lights brighten. Patrons murmur. The manager stands on a stool. “May I have your attention. May I please have your attention. I regret to inform you there has been an accident at the North Wing today.” Gasps precede silence. “A worker has fallen. A memorial ceremony will be held tomorrow morning. You are all invited to participate. While you stay here you are part of our family. We are not only mourning his passing but thanking him for his work on our behalf and commemorating his accomplishments.”

“Guys, we have to go to this,” says Yoda. “We’ll set out the day after tomorrow.”

“He wasn’t a climber, right?” says Gaspar. The guilt accompanying fortuitous effects and terrible causes is bittersweet at worst.

“This had nothing to do with climbing,” says Yoda. “Let’s grab some beers and go to my room. I’ll explain.”