

At last I escape them, controlling my fear. A mass of darkness spreads across the horizon and I decide to push on to it. But first I must cross the mountains surrounding this place, cruel peaks that cut into the pale violet sky. I rise higher and higher, leaving the stench of the ravenor nest and the relentless, throbbing strain of their hunger behind.

Through wisps of cloud below I see several of them following me. They trot along, scrambling up steep banks of rock to keep up. I tease them, causing them to stumble over each other or flounder into snow drifts, and stay tantalizingly out of their reach as they frenziedly chase after me.

One by one, they drop off until I'm alone again. As I fly along, marveling at the immensity of the vast mountain range below me, a strong emotion suddenly invades my consciousness. A feeling I've never experienced here before: Euphoria. Then, just as quickly, it's gone.

I stop and return to where I think I felt it and once again encounter a burst of exhilaration. Curious, I move closer to what feels to be the source. Between two peaks there is a gorge, perhaps a thousand feet across. And fifty yards down the wall nearest me is a cave.

I descend and pause in the air in front of it. A flat porch of rock extends from the entrance and a torrent of positive emotions unmistakably flows out of it. While I watch, a small humanoid, white and gently glowing, emerges from the dark of the cave. It's roughly two feet tall and hairless, its eyes closed in a dreamy smile. It seems to be the source of the current of intoxicating delight.

I land in front of the cave and gasp as I fully experience the antiverse for the first time. I'm still adjusting to all the sensations when the doll-man begins waddling toward me on stumpy legs. I grin in spite of myself as the feeling of elation increases. "Hi there. Are you the one giving out all these happy vibes?"

It turns its little Buddha-face up to me, eyes still closed in a rapturous smile, and holds out its arms. "Aw, do you want a hug, little fella?" I step closer, but then I notice something just inside the mouth of the cave. The body of a large, leathery birdlike thing lies there on top of a pile of bones.

As I stare at it in disgust, the glowing creature hops and lands with a gentle plop on my leg. Soft and spongy, it molds itself to my calf and I feel a cold draining sensation, even as my blissful feeling of happiness increases.

I look up at a quiet rustling sound to see dozens of the smiling china dolls materializing from the darkness. They totter toward me from the mouth of the cave and crawl on its walls and ceiling. I scrape the first one off with my foot and step back in panic. My leg tingles numbly and I stumble, almost falling, before hurling myself up into the air.

When I reach the edge of the gorge a ravenor is waiting. It must have followed me. As I pass by, it leaps out at my life force and falls empty-handed onto the tongue of rock below. It lies there stunned and twenty or thirty of the little porcelain people swarm over it.

Dropping down, I suspend myself once again in the cloying stream of delight. The glowing men are dragging the struggling ravenor into the darkness, and I watch with a mixture of horror and pity as its wide mouth opens in a silent scream. A creature that feeds on fear being tortured with joy, while its life slowly bleeds away.

As I prepare to leave, the last of them turns its empty angelic smile back to me and once again holds out its arms.