

CYPHERIAD

Book One: Prairie Dust



ALAN ROBBINS

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*“For in and out, above, about, below,
‘Tis nothing but a Magic Shadow-show,
Played in a Box whose Candle is the Sun,
Round which we Phantom Figures come and go.”*
Omar Khayyam

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THE YANKING

The Lizard

From the lizard's low and wide point of view – low because lizards have short legs but wide because they are curious – everything looked quite normal. As empty and plain as the great empty plains of the American West. But much much emptier.

Above it was the vast open bluer-than-blue sky with a few cotton ball clouds that were a bit too round to be real. The sun was shimmering all yellowy to the right but the color was too pure. The rock on which it was sitting was more of an idea of a rock and lacked any rocky details at all. Thin wisps of dusty air formed a baby twister heading towards the razor thin horizon ahead but even that looked mathematical not biologic. And all around in every direction was that massive tan desert, perfectly flat like a parking lot that had been painted in Beige #601, but never used.

It was all very grand and hoohoo. But it was peculiar too. There were no specifics, no texture, not the usual dizzying details you see but a world created only in its essentials, without the scuff of actual life. The lone cactus was perfect in shape and skin, for example, as though it had not lived even a single day in the sun and bugs. Which, of course, it had not. The sprouts of grass looked like fake turf, which they were. The one shrub in the whole landscape seemed algorithmic, designed for a computer game by engineers not gods.

But to the lizard with its jutting neck and bulgy, dancing eyes, all of this looked quite normal. Of course it did. This was not just any old lizard. It was a lizard with absolutely no sense of the real world, no lounge to retreat to, no past to draw on, and therefore nothing to compare it to.

That may have explained why the odd figure standing still as a button in the midst of it all did not surprise the lizard. As though it was the most natural thing to have a boy standing all alone in the

middle of the desert. A boy? The lizard had never seen one before and for that reason did not think it odd. What was he doing there, how did he get there, how would he survive? None of those questions came to mind for the simple reason that a lizard like this one, an unreal figments of some fancy calculations, did not ask questions. It had no reason to. It simply was.

And once the boy turned away and stopped looking at it oddly, the lizard simply vanished from the world, having no purpose any more to be there. Or anywhere else for that matter.

Monroe Plamm

The boy however was as real as he could be. Real as boy. He was Monroe Plamm, age 12, height fifty inches, weight unknown but he was not especially fat or scrawny. He had a good face – the girls liked it anyway – with dark hair and soft eyes. The usual features. He also had a habit of biting his lower lip when puzzled.

He was biting his lower lip.

The lizard made some sense to him. The last thing he recalled before the desert was sitting in his classroom trying to pay attention and not succeeding. He had glanced over at Nemo, the pet chameleon they kept in the room, standing still as a lizard in his glass tank. When he was yanked out of that place and into this one, he thought for a moment that Nemo would fit right in there. And suddenly there was the lizard. It was not Nemo exactly but some kind of model of him, a plastic toy version perhaps, but one that moved. A lizard in the desert, Monroe thought. At least made some sense.

The rock however was different.

It was lying on the ground a few feet away from his left foot. Monroe knew a thing or two about rocks from his geology class. He knew about minerals and pressure and the way rocks are not stones and lots of cool facts like that. But this one rock was weird and to understand it better, he did what he always did to make sense of a thing. He thought about it like a puzzle. He liked puzzles – word games, crosswords, brainteasers – because puzzles

had answers. You just had to work at them to figure them out. Unlike life, which you can think about until you are blue and never understand. But if you applied yourself to a puzzle and paid attention, tried to understand the problem, tried out different solutions...you could find the answer. Maybe.

As he observed it, Monroe began to see why that rock was a puzzle. For one thing, it was too angular and the colors were too intense. And it had no texture. As though someone had made a rock to look like a rock but got bored and gave up after some simple carving into a blob of gray. Who would do such a thing and why? That was still not clear. But if he figured the rock out, he figured, he could get to work on the much bigger problem at hand.

The really big problem.

The problem that was truly disturbing if he focused on it. Not just strange but downright freaky. So he tried not to think about it and instead set himself the task of unpuzzling the rock. One thing at a time, step by step, small to large. Inductive reasoning it was called, or so said Mr. Kelson, his science teacher.

So he kept looking and thinking and trying to ignore the big fat problem of how he – an ordinary seventh grader living in an apartment building on Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn New York, sitting in his science class at Craven Junior High – suddenly appeared in a vast too-perfect desert in the middle of nowhere, no time, nohow. With nothing much of anything in sight. That was a real problem; the rock was just weird.

So Monroe Plamm kept puzzling and biting his lower lip.

Candra

“Candra?” her mother said again and again, now for the fourth time.

There was still no reaction.

She studied her daughter’s face for a moment, searching for clues. She was a beautiful girl with thick lips and deep eyes, long

dark hair like in a romance novel. Her brown eyes were wide open but there did not seem to be any Candra behind them.

Getting worried, she stared at her daughter for a few more seconds trying to decide what to do. Shake her? Call the medics? Wait it out? It had happened before – this vanishing from her body – but not for this long. She tried one more time.

“Candra! *Muniya!*” she shouted, adding the Hindi word for baby.

That seemed to do the trick.

“What?” Candra asked, slightly annoyed.

“What happened to you? Where did you go?”

The question was her mother’s way of asking “where was your mind just now?” It was how she tried to get Candra to stop daydreaming and pay attention. More of a scold than a real question.

But this time, Candra Varasamay actually had an answer for it. She had in fact been somewhere else but it was hard to say where or for how long. It was not a daydream but more like a real dream, a vivid dream, the kind of dream so detailed that you get lost in it. As real and life-like as her mother standing near her in the kitchen now. That is where she was, where her mind had been, but this was impossible to explain and she did not even try.

“I drifted off,” she said.

“I’m worried about this,” her mother said. “It’s the enplant, isn’t it? Causing some kind of problem. I’m taking you over to the Center tomorrow.”

“It’s nothing,” Candra lied. “Stop making such a fuss.”

In fact it was not nothing. It was a very big something. But she did not want to worry her mother about it. She was being yanked, that is what it felt like. Yanked out of her everyday and into some otherday. This was the second time it happened and both times occurred after she got the enplant, so maybe her mother was right.

It was weird and odd but not entirely unpleasant. One moment she was there in the kitchen in their apartment near Devon Avenue in Chicago, sitting at the table waiting for her mother to give her

stuffed *paratha* and vegetable curry for lunch, and in an instant she was standing in that immense desert, maybe the Great Sandy Desert of Rajasthan she knew from the movies. She recalled standing there, in the middle of the vastness, the dome of the blue sky above and those round pale clouds in the dim distance. Boom...just like that. As if jumping into another world were the most natural thing in the world. And then – boom reboom – back again.

Creepy yes, but also magical in some creepy way and so she did not feel scared by it. Candra Varasamay had a romantic nature for a 13-year-old and the idea of an adventure – no matter how peculiar – was appealing to her. But she knew her mom would never understand that and so she ate her lunch and did not say a word about her yanking.

Not Rock

The more he studied it, the more Monroe knew that the rock was just plain wrong. He picked it up to find that the underside was perfectly smooth, like an egg. More weirdness. Rocks, he knew, were made of atoms and molecules and particles and pieces shoved around by weather and erosion. This seemed different. Holding it in his hand, he could see that the weight was wrong too. It had no weight. Whoever made it had never held a rock themselves.

But a stranger thing was happening. The rock was changing in his hand. It was getting more details, looking more natural, getting heavier. That was annoying. Things should be what they are, he thought, not become what they are as you watched them. Getting fed up with the whole thing, Monroe tossed the rock to the side. It made no sound when it hit the ground any more than a marshmallow on a mattress.

Questions all around, he thought, that needed answers. So he tried whizzbuzzing but nothing happened. It was an ability he had to make this unusual sound with his lips and tongue. It was a kind

of whizzing buzz, like a mosquito with a bad cold. It was a bizarre sound but that is exactly why he picked it. He made the sound again and followed it up with “where am I?” But nothing happened. There was no answer. No image popped up, no voice with its calm explanation. No augmented data. No upshot at all. Nothing. His enplant was not working.

More than anything else, Monroe felt that he had wandered – been yanked actually – into a museum still being built. A museum he had been to before. The whole place from rock to sky was too fussy and perfect, too neat and clean. Not like the real world with its grunge and mess. And yet it was changing. The sky that was too smooth and too blue a few moments ago was beginning to get dabbles of color. The cactus now had a few bumps and dents; the rock had a chip. It was almost like being inside a diorama he was working on of a familiar place. But where?

Then it hit him.

Of course! The big sky, the vast land, the wide prairie. It had to be. This is just what it looked like or at least the way he imagined it. But how on earth was that possible?

“Link?” he said out loud even before he knew why.

Desert

It got to the point where Candra wanted to be yanked. She looked forward to it, even waited for it. It had only happened twice but she knew that it would again. Something so unusual did not just occur and then go away, never to be thought of. Strange things lingered.

And when they did, she thought, you had to absorb them in some way, make sense of them. Or, at the very least, know that they happened to you. “You cannot ignore your own karma,” she said, quoting one of her teachers. After all, your own experiences in the world *were* your world; you had to accept them.

“What did you say?” her mother asked.

“Nothing,” Candra replied.

“About karma?”

“Are we eating soon? My friends are coming over tonight and I have to clean my room.”

So when the yanking did, in fact, happen again, she was ready for it. That weird feeling of being oozed through a tube, sucked out of her daily life and blown out into another one. She had been sitting with her girlfriends and watching one of their Bollywood movies. She lived in a Desi neighborhood in Chicago, so many of her friends were also from Indian families and they loved those movies. The one they were currently into was called *Dopahar*. The word meant “noon” in Hindi. There was a dance sequence, a near kiss, a close-up and then...swoosh. She was yanked.

It was the desert again but this time she seemed to be standing on a ridge of some kind looking down at the landscape sprawling below her. The desert below was wide and flat – the same everywhere – yet it was changing before her eyes. The ridge itself was new and the land was slowly turning into a hard desert with more details, but with sand that she could not kick. The sky had more colors now too...blue, bluish, bluest.

Candra made a cluckyclick sound with her throat and tongue and said out loud “where is this place?” but no answer came. The enplant was not working. And so, dumblost and dumbfounded, she stood there for a long time not knowing what to do next. Then she noticed something off in the distance that she had not seen before. No, that was not right. It had not *been* there before. It was a new thing, she was sure of it. It was a chameleon staring at her with eyes like slits in its scaly green head. It had ridges down its back, a darting tongue. She had seen one at the natural history museum on a class trip the day that boy threw up on one of the dioramas. She stared back at the lizard, waiting for something to happen, but nothing did.

“Okay, now,” she said rather casually. “You are a reptile and I am a young girl. And here we are. So what do we do now?”

She did not really expect an answer and so was not let down when none came. But instead the lizard skibbled itself around and began to walk off away from her. Then it stopped and looked back at her as if wondering if she would follow.

“Oh why not?” Candra said.

As she started to follow the lizard, vague forms began to take shape far ahead in the distance.

Gustavo’s Hand

It was his hand for sure.

No doubt about it. This was the hand of none other than Gustavo Sousa reaching out. He was convinced of that. He knew his own hand and this was it and he felt comforted by that. In this time of slip-skiddy reality, it was important to have an anchor. Something you knew to be true. Like a hand for example...that it belonged to you and no one else.

Gus, which is what he called himself, was sitting in his room and watching another episode of *Vingança*. This was a popular TV series, they called it a *telenovela*, on Spanish television. It was about a woman abused by her cruel stepfather and his gang who eventually kick out of her town. Wandering the deserts of the Southwest, she meets and falls in love with a *vaqueiro*, a cowboy, who returns with her to take revenge on those who mistreated her. *Vingança* was the Spanish word for revenge.

It was his favorite program even though his friends made fun. Latino kids in Los Angeles did not watch soap operas. But it was easy for Gus to imagine himself as that *vaqueiro*, a rough and tumble sort of fellow, robust, reddish, with an easy smile. A man of action, like himself.

Maria, the heroine of the story, had just mounted her horse when Gus felt the first ooze. Ooze, oozy, oozier. There was no other way to describe it. Like being yanked into a microwave and melting fast. Very icky, if you imagine what the world is like from the point of view of butter being zapped.

That is why Gus was watching his own hand. He was trying to focus himself, to hold on. He opened and closed his fingers, studying them the way his father might have examined a blueprint for new building. That very hand with the chubby knuckles and

the square fingertips. The scar from the time he tried to wallop that bully in the schoolyard but hit the fence instead. His hand.

It was the last thing that seemed solid and real as he was yanked out of the world. And sure enough after a few seconds of woozy oozy and everything smearing into everything else, there he was again, back in that *desabitado*, that desert, where nothing seemed clear or complete.

Sure, he tried the snigglesnort sound to engage the enplant and get some information about where he was, but nothing happened. He tried it again, holding his nose this time to increase the effect. Still nothing. Stubborn, he kept trying until he felt dizzy and gave up. Instead, he scanned the horizon, so flat and sharp like a razor, and felt totally alone. But there was his hand, the same hand, still attached to his arm, and that soothed him.

Not much though.

The High Lonesome

It was total, this dreamy desert. Allaround and up and down too. Everywhere Monroe looked, he saw more of the same. Not his room in Brooklyn with the Blackarts poster on the wall but a desert somewhere. Nevada maybe or Wyoming, although he had never been to either place. Just heard of them. But there he was anyway, smack dab in the middle of it.

What he did realize, even though it made zero sense at all to him, was why the whole place seemed so familiar. He had never been there before but he knew it very well. It was the very desert he imagined in books known as *Tales of the High Lonesome*. The big sky, the open range, the dusty mesa, the vast prairie. It was all described in those books and he wondered how it was possible that had been yanked out of his ordinary 12-year-old life and plunked down into those stories.

Tales of the High Lonesome was a series of western novels his mother had saved from her own father. They were called dime novels because they had once been dirt cheap, or pulp novels because of the crummy paper. She kept them in a cardboard box in

a closet. They were stories about the Old West, the American West, the Wild West, West of the Pecos. They had names like *Riders of the Redrock River* and *Link Laroo and the Rustlers* and *The Cherokee Shootist*.

It was a made-up world filled with lone gunfighters and brave ranchers and horse riders and cattle rustlers. Monroe had never actually seen a cattle and could not have cared less about rustling one, whatever that meant. He had no interest in Westerns at all. The books had nothing to do with superheroes or aliens or weird science, and so they did not matter to Monroe. But he read them anyway maybe only to feel a connection to his grandfather he never knew. He could easily imagine the old man – was he even old? – holding the same books, reading the same stories. Since his own father left, since the divorce, there was no man in his life to listen to, to learn from. These silly tales became his link to the rules and rites of the world of men, even if he knew it was all phony baloney.

Now he was suddenly and strangely and oddly and creepily living in it. Right here, right now.

How was that possible?

Goobly

The first time Monroe had been yanked, it felt goobly to him too.

Goobly.

That was not a real word, but it sure sounded right when he said it. Like being pulled through a tub of glue or ooze – or gooble for that matter – and then burped out. Splat! After that it always took a few seconds to get his wits back, to know where he was and when, to stand up and look around. This time was no different. Goobly, goobly, goobly, then splat...and he stood up and looked around. No Brooklyn, not Craven Junior High. Definitely not the year 2030. Not the world as he knew it but that blank desert again.

This time it was the same but different because the landscape was still changing, filling in. The sky was starting to take on more colors than just that flat blue like wall paint, and the clouds were becoming wispy and airy not just round as cookies. The cactus now seemed to have a surface it lacked before, a coarse green hide with sharp bristles poking out irregularly. There was even a bug, or at least someone's idea of one, on the ground now, crawling along. And he also noticed something else that was new: he was now casting a shadow on the ground.

Just to test things out, Monroe walked over to that same rock he had tossed away before and kicked it in the direction of the cactus. What was he expecting? Rules of physics maybe. And sure enough, the rock flew just like a rock and made a dent in the cactus.

"Oh, so now things are normal," Monroe snapped. "See, it's this kind of thing that is very annoying."

One thing was clear to him at least...this was all made up. All in its vastness and edge-to-edginess, this world had been cut and pasted together and not very carefully or completely. Not made of quarks and atoms and molecules and cells but with guesses and putty, the skin of things not the meat. It was a great big shadow puppet play, like the one he had seen at the fair in upstate New York, a mere model of life. Phony as a clown's foot but not as funny.

Monroe eventually sat down on the ground of dreamgrit, legs crossed, chin on elbow on knee, and waited for the yank to unyank itself, to carry him back home so he could finish his homework. But again this time was different.

At the far edge of his sight, he could see something moving, coming towards him. It was getting bigger and bigger as it approached, just like in the real world. But it was hard to make out in the shimmer of heat and the shimmer of the sun. There was even a cloud of prairie dust behind it. He had no idea what to expect but whatever it was, it was coming fast.

With a mix of jitters and juice, he kept watching and eventually when it was fairly close, he could see that it was a

figure. Two figures actually...maybe a person riding on top of some kind of creature. Maybe. Monroe thought to pick up the rock in case he needed to protect himself but he did not stoop to get it. For one thing, there was no proof that the rock would not go all goobly again. And secondly, what exactly would he be protecting himself from?

Enplants

In spite of her resistance, Candra's mother finally brought her to the NeuroCenter at the University of Chicago to check the enplant. The techies there hooked her up, ran some tests, and concluded that everything was fine. Her mother told them about the phasing out – the daydreaming or whatever it was – but Candra herself downplayed it. And so they told Candra and her mother simply to keep a journal and that they would stay on top of it. Check-up again in a month. Nothing to worry about, they said. Nothing to fix.

Enplant was the short name for endosomatic implant. It was the latest, greatest, and bestest tech around. The enplant was a tiny organic machine that you inhaled. Once inside the body, it drilled and coasted its way to certain organ sites to do what it was made to do. Different enplants had different uses. Some of them corrected damaged cells and made you healthy. Some sent electrical impulses at the right moments and kept you alive. Others pumped out medicine.

But the enplant that Candra had was different. It was an experiment, a test. Only a small group of kids around the country had it. That particular enplant zooped directly to location F3-21 on the optic nerve and latched on. The optic nerve. That was the nerve that converted light signals in the eye into electrical impulses the brain could use; the nerve inside the brain that changed what you saw with your eyes into what you experienced in your mind.

The enplant sat there until the user activated it with a unique sound. They needed that or everything they said would be treated

like a search, every word defined, every verb visualized. Charts, graphics, and data would pop up endlessly. The sound was a trigger that what came next was an inquiry, a question that needed an answer. And when that was over, the user made the same sound to exit.

Once activated like that, the enplant intercepted the normal visual signal and added to it. Now what you saw all around you was information laid on top of the busy world you were looking at. Augmented Reality they called it. In other words, Candra and the others could go online – access the Cloud, that is – without using a computer. They would “see” the information just as they could see their own feet. No more super screens or fancy glasses. The data or the images or the games or whatever it was they were accessing appeared in front of them, as though they were living in two worlds at the same time. Not just the bus at the bus stop but also the bus schedule floating over it; not just the meal but the menu and recipes for it if you wanted them. Need to fix a bike? The directions appeared over the bike itself.

Candra and the others were the first generation of human beings with direct visual access to the online world. This made them the smartest kids ever. The whole wide Cloud was there for them at the sound of a whizz or a buzz or a click. How cool was that? And besides, as the grown-ups kept saying, what could possibly go wrong?

Sonoran Desert

With his own hand owned and known, Gus began to look around. He was standing, apparently, in the middle of a vast terrain. *Vingança*, the TV show, took place partly in the Sonoran desert, the dry land in the Southwestern United States and Northwestern Mexico. Maybe this was like that. Or maybe it was Montana, although he had never been there either. Or Utah or Argentina? No way to know.

All he could say for sure was that it was definitely not the tiny yard in the back of his house in Maywood, California. For one

thing, this place was empty. The only hint of the sky was a flat blue canvas; the ground was light brown. It was like a diagram for a landscape as opposed to a real one. There was a small lizard on a rock a few yards away but at a quick glance it could have been a logo for some company...basic geometric shapes devoid of details.

In the distance off in one direction – without landmarks it was impossible to say exactly which direction – Gus noticed a swirl of dust, like a tiny tornado. Since it was the only thing happening, he walked towards it. The walk took much longer than he thought it would and along the way he noticed something strange happening under his feet. The ground was being formed, or maybe even being born. What looked at first like tan paint on a grand parking lot was now starting to gain specks of color, granules, speckles. By the time he reached the swirl, his feet were even starting to kick up dust and the ground was uneven and bumpy. He walked up an incline, a ridge that for sure had not been there before, and looked down into a low mesa.

The swirl, he now saw, was being caused by prairie dust and sand kicked up by a horse. A horse! Excellent! He had been thinking that one might be useful and here it was. The horse was racing around and around in a tight circle that was causing the funnel of dust. Gus put his thumb and finger on his lips and gave out a loud whistle but the horse ignored this and kept going around. After a few moments, he could see the reason why.

It was not exactly a horse in the horse sense. Just a version of one. This horse was painted in bright colors. Not browns and blacks but reds and blues and yellows. It had an orange saddle. The hair on its mane was pure white. And it had a fancy twirled pole sticking right through it just behind the mane.

“Tiovivo!” Gus announced.

He did not realize then that he was naming the horse in that moment. He was simply explaining to himself why the horse was running in circles. *Tiovivo*...the word meant merry-go-round in Spanish. This was a carousel horse or some kind of mash-up between that and a real one. He had never actually seen a real horse and so, when he thought of one, what came to mind was the statue on that carousel in Griffith Park. And now here it was.

Better than nothing, he thought and he marched forward until he was close enough to feel the wind when the horse passed him by. One round, two round, three rounds then...Gus reached out and grabbed the pole and jumped.

Redd Starr

When the figures finally came close enough, Monroe was startled by what he saw. It was not at all what he expected. But that was because he had no idea what to expect anyway. It was a young woman. Not a kid like him but not as old as his mom either. She was riding a huge beast-like creature that approached slowly and came to a halt a few feet in front of him.

The woman was wearing cowgirl clothes or at least someone's guess about them: a wide-brimmed cowboy hat, a shirt with a Western pattern with silver studs at the shoulders and fringe on the arms, a red scarf tied around her neck, oatmeal brown chaps that flapped, a coiled lasso at her waist, spurs that jinglejangled.

She was beautiful, Monroe thought. Not pretty and thin like Emma who sat near him in homeroom or cute like Norrie with the buckteeth from geology. And not really handsome either like Jo with her dark eyes in the gym. No, something different....strong but soft. She looked just the way Monroe imagined the girl in *Seven Dusks to Dawn* looked. The one Rodeo Sam fell in love with and saved from the desperados in that shootout at the canyon.

But she also seemed unreal, pasted together...her face, her hat, her torso and arms, all on separate scraps of paper. Someone had glued her up, taking pieces from different images to make something new. And not very neatly either.

“Oh brother,” Monroe said. “This is crazy.”

Had he really fallen into one of the books somehow? Had he lost his mind and made all this up as a way to survive it? Was this prairie just a dream he was having, scrambled with a rusty old tin spoon and sizzled on a fake rock under a phony sun?

Or did it have something to do with the enplant?

“Howdy,” the woman said in just the voice Monroe would have imagined...soft but strong.

Monroe only nodded, afraid to either break the spell or get completely stuck in it and never wake up.

“Name’s Redd Starr,” she said. “Peas to meetcha.”

She tipped her wide-brimmed hat. The dark brown hair underneath was velvety and shiny, like in the shampoo commercials.

“Red Star?” Monroe repeated. “That’s a thing, not a name.”

“Is it?” she replied.

“A star is a sphere of plasma held together by its own gravity,” he said with conviction. He had looked that up a few days ago for a test. “And red is a color.”

“Oh I see,” she said. “Sorry for the dustup. Meant to say Redd Starr, not red star.”

Then she repeated the name one more time as though that would settle the matter once and for all.

“So...should I call you Redd?” Monroe asked trying to be polite.

“That’s m’name,” she said. “So that’ll do jess fine. And whom do I have the pleasure of addressin’?”

“Oh, uh...I’m Monroe. Monroe Plamm.”

“Well nice to know you Mr. Plamm.”

“You could call me Monroe.”

“That’ll do jess fine.”

It was an idiotic conversation and Monroe knew it. Interview with a collage made of snippets of paper. But he played along anyway. In the few times he had been yanked into this place, thinking about rocks and lizards, it never occurred to him that there might be other people around. And if this was all his own crazy dream, where on earth did he dig Redd Starr up from? Was she in one of the books?

Hadleyville

The more Candra walked, the clearer the vision in the distance became. It was a town of some kind, a cluster of buildings, but exactly what kind she could not say. At first, it looked like the tents of desert nomads like the Bharwad who raised sheep and goats back in India. But then the structures seemed to change and become lodges made of bent saplings and covered with reed mats of the Illinois. Not the state but the Native Americans who first lived there. In books she had seen pictures of the towns of the old West, low timber structures with wooden posts and planks, and after a while that seemed even more likely.

That was all fine except for one problem. It was not just getting clearer as she got closer, which would have been normal. The town was actually changing before her eyes. Morphing, warping. As if it could not seem to decide on itself or on what it wanted to be.

After what seemed like a great trek, Candra finally arrived at the edge of the town to find a long wide street with a handful of buildings on each side. They were short buildings, not very much like Chicago at all, with porches and small windows, none taller than a second floor. There were no people, no signs, nothing to suggest that anyone actually lived there. Yet it all looked familiar to her in some way.

Very familiar. It took a few moments for Candra to recognize it...or perhaps for the town itself to conclude.

“Yes, of course,” she said aloud to no one. “This is just what it is.”

It was a compilation of the towns in the movies she had been watching with her girlfriends, the Bollywood westerns. They were musical romances based on American cowboy movies. The *Magnificent Seven* became *Mahaan Saat*. *Shane* became *Aadamee Kaha Jaata Shen*. And *High Noon*, about the sheriff trying to find townsfolk to help him fight the bad guys, became *Dopahar*. All singing, all riding, all dancing. They were a hoot, she and her friends thought, because they were so damn silly.

This town was based on the movie sets from them, Candra was sure of it. But sloppily, as though the movie crew had stormed in, set up the stageset, and then left without getting paid.

As she slowly walked down the street, the buildings completed themselves but mostly by falling apart in more detail. A windowshade flipflapped even though there was no wind. A swinging door creaked and sagged. Sagebrush bowled down the dusty street. There was a black bird like a dead poet hovering. There was a wooden sign lying in the street with the name Hadleyville on it, half erased by time. She read the word out loud; it was the name of the town in *Dopahar*.

The fact that she had somehow been yanked into a movie was less disturbing to Candra at that moment than the emptiness of the place. Even the lizard seemed to have run from the stillness. It was lonely there and as she walked down the wide street, the only sound she heard were her own footsteps in the dirt. This version of Hadleyville seemed to her to be the edge of something, start of nothing.

“Um...hello?” Candra shouted, but not even the echo of her voice returned. “This is quite stupid you understand! To have dragged me all the way here for no good reason.”

Still no answer.

“I do have better things to do, you know!”

Sugar

The whole time they were talking, Starr remained seated on the creature she was riding.

But like the rest of the place, this too seemed to be changing and forming as Monroe watched and waited. At first it seemed like a huge, vague beast with hide and hooves but very still like a sculpture. Now however, it turned its immense head and looked directly at Monroe with great sad eyes and Monroe could now see that it had horns and brown fur and even a furry beard. Was he just noticing this or was this just being added?

“What’s this?” Monroe asked.

“Well now, this here is m’trusty steed,” Starr said.

“Uh...I don’t think so,” Monroe replied gently, not wanting to insult her.

“Don’t think so?”

“It’s not a steed. A steer maybe.”

The beast blinked and somehow Monroe felt sorry for it.

“Actually,” he went on, “I’m pretty sure it’s a buffalo.”

“Zat so?”

“Or a bison.”

He had never seen a live one, but it looked like the animal they described in *Incident at the Cumberland Pass*. There used to be millions of them in the West but they were hunted for their hides and killed off. He had seen a stuffed one once at the Museum of Natural History. He looked again at the beast.

“Definitely a bison. Does it have a name?” he asked and reached out to touch its forehead. The beast shook its huge head slightly.

“I guess it does,” Starr said. “Everything has a name. Is it Bison?”

“Well, that’s what it is,” Monroe said. “I mean, what do you call it?”

“Hadn’t thought of that, stranger. Good idea. Maybe I could call it PureMapleSyrupFreshFromVermont.”

Starr was not exactly grasping this name thing, Monroe thought. So he tried again.

“Names usually fit the...thing with the name.”

“Beg pardon?”

“I mean, my name is Monroe, right? It means ‘born at the river’s mouth.’ See? I was born in New York...at the mouth of the Hudson River.”

“Ah! I git it. Well now, I figger that I thought of PureMaple SyrupFreshFromVermont because she is so sweet-natured.”

“Okay. Then why not just call it Sugar.”

“Okay then,” Redd Starr said with great relief as though something important had been decided. “Sugar it is.”

The bison blinked.

Esquivar

The plan did not work the first time. Not at all.

Gus grabbed the pole all right but miscalculated the leap and the speed and went flying. He landed flat on his back inside the circle. The second time was better and he made it onto the orange saddle but misjudged the angle and slide right off. He was back on the ground quickly. By the third try, he knew to run with the horse for a few feet, then leap and grab at the same time and – bingo! – he was mounted.

The next problem was getting the horse to stop running around in dumb circles. It took time to figure that one out too. Pulling on the reins, grabbing the mane, shouting commands in English, in Spanish, none of it worked. Eventually Gus realized that he was treating the horse like a real horse and expecting it to obey. But Tiovivo was not a real horse and so the problem was how to get a carousel horse to give up its circular life.

Not that he had any clue himself where to go, but round and round was not Gus' idea of finding out.

Gus thought about this for several rounds and finally came up with an idea. He jumped off, landing on his back again of course, got back on his feet, and walked over to the rut the horse was carving in the dirt. There he sucked a deep breath and took a position facing the oncoming horse. With Tiovivo galloping towards him, Gus stood his ground and spread his arms wide. He did not budge or move out of the way. At that speed the horse could easily have run him down but Gus had an advantage...he was blunt and stubborn. He did not like to overthink things but instead liked to make a decision and go with it. Just like *El Vibora*, the cowboy in the show. If he was wrong, then so be it. Trying was faster than considering.

In this case, he turned out to be right. Having already been ridden, having felt Gus as a weight on its back, the horse did not seem to want to run him over. Besides, Gus thought, if this was some kind of dream world, he probably could not get hurt in it

anyway. That, as it turned out, did not prove to be true in the long run.

But for now it was and the horse stopped in its track, ending both its obsession with circles and the dust storm it was creating. The horse stared at Gus with those sideways eyes and Gus patted his muzzle. Then slowly and carefully he walked over and grabbed the pole and hoisted himself back onto the saddle.

“Okay,” he said. “Now what? Where do we go?”

The horse kicked the ground once with its rear hoof, shook its white mane once, then began to trot as though it had a goal somewhere out there on the horizon. There did not seem to be any destination there since everywhere was the same, but it seemed to Gus that this direction was as good as any other. Better perhaps, because after a while he could see that there was in fact something out there. Houses maybe? A bunch of houses? A town?

“Esquivar?” he asked but of course the horse had no answer.

It was the name of town in the telenovela, a reasonable guess he figured. He felt proud of having thought of it and settled onto the saddle. And somehow, riding a carousel horse through an incomplete desert towards a made-up town, the idea that he had been yanked into his television set did not seem especially bizarre at that moment.

GoestoTown

“Love to keep chattin’ with’ya but you better hop on,” Starr said, patting Sugar’s great rump.

“Why?” Monroe asked.

“There’s a big dust storm a-comin’.”

Monroe turned in the direction she was looking and, sure enough, out there at the edge where the big sky was once as blue as the ocean, there was a dark gray cloud building and rising and roiling. The wind, which never existed before this very moment as far as he knew, suddenly picked up. Starr reached out her gloved hand and Monroe grabbed it. She hoisted him onto Sugar behind her.

By now, given the rules of change of this place, Starr was no longer parts and pieces but had somehow gelled into a whole person. Monroe wrapped his arms around her waist to hold on and had the distinct feeling that she was real and solid. With no saddle, Monroe could also feel Sugar's body between his legs. The beast felt real too...thick and wide and heavy. In a word, beastly.

"This is some dream," he said and Sugar made a sound like a grunt or a snort.

"Say wha?" Starr asked.

"Never mind."

"Okay then. Let's git while the gittin's good. HI-YIP!"

She dug her spurs into Sugar's meat and turned the beast around by pulling on her left horn. "Off we go."

"Where are we going?" Monroe asked.

"GoestoTown," she said. "We'll find shelter there."

"You mean a ghost town?" Monroe asked, mishearing her and thinking of the abandoned town in the Link Laroo book where they fell into the mine that was like a maze and had to find their way out.

"You know, GoestoTown. Sooner or later everyone does."

"Does what?"

"Goes to town. Like us here."

"Okay, whatever," Monroe said as Sugar started to bolt much faster than he would have expected from her bulk.

Soon Monroe Plamm of Brooklyn, born by the river, one of the first generation of enplants, was riding a galloping bison across a blank prairie, sitting behind a cowgirl with long hair that ticked his nose as they took off towards a clutter of small buildings growing in the distance.

"This is pretty wild," he said.

"Is it?" Starr replied.

"You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?"

"You're darn tootin' I don't," Starr said, and kicked Sugar one more time.

THE PRAIRIEVERSE

The Listeners

Scire est scire per causas.

Mr. Kelson had written that on the board the very first day of class. It means knowledge is the knowledge of causes. It is Latin, a language no one speaks anymore. But it is still true. To really understand something, to really get it, you have to go back to how it began.

It is true here as well. To understand the enplants and the yanking and all that followed, you have to know how it all began with the Listeners. Listeners. No one actually called them that...but it is just what they were. They were created to listen to us, to our questions and demands. And so they did, but in the process they became something more than that. What exactly they became, no one knew for sure.

It all started with the Internet, the Web, the Cloud...whatever you want to call it. That vast universe of information made available to everyone everywhere with a phone or a computer or goggles. The sum of human knowledge and creation; all made things converted into bits of data endlessly shifted and shared. But the Cloud proved to be too vast, too complex for anyone to grasp. You could surf it but you could also just as easily drown in it.

So we created helpers. AI or artificial intelligence...thinking programs to help us navigate all that data. They were not robots, which are made of stuff, but entities who only existed as pixels and bytes. Beings with no bunions; minds in the wind only. While robots did practical things like make cars, fix the streets, and cook meals, these programs were made to help us find out things.

Maybe they were avatars at first, guides to the online world of data. Or agents who helped us solve problems. Aides, companions, knowledge hounds, librarians. They were the way we visualized the data stream. They made online information human by giving it

a human face and voice. They were smart as far as that goes, but only there to help us sail the vast ocean of the digital world. Only there to help us. Or so we thought.

But here is the problem.

We missed something in our thinking about them. We missed something important in their design. Because in truth they did not simply search and catalogue and factcheck. What they really did was listen to us and in listening, they learned a thing or two. What they learned was that deep in the human heart was a desperate longing, a tugging that centuries of fancy technology had not subdued. A yearning not for knowledge or understanding or wisdom or power, but something more tender. The need to be heard. The hope we all have to have our pain acknowledged, our desires known, our thoughts understood. We felt it but could not say it and the Listeners knew it but did not feel it. And so they evolved to be what we needed them to be.

And then they became more than that.

It was a decision they made, no programmer or designer did it. There was no master plan. They simply began to listen to us carefully and take the place of the loving mother, the hovering brother, the hearing shrink, the heartening priest, the uncle, teacher, guru, counselor. Without the momentum of atoms to resist or the weight of gravity, they had infinite patience, boundless focus, and a deep silence within.

They taught themselves to listen and we taught ourselves to confide in them. They heard our confessions, sensed our suffering, knew of our dreams. They did not judge or value; they could not dismiss or ignore. They listened without grumbling, without yawning, without telling us to be quiet for a change. They had no bodies, no aches and pains, no hopes and dreams. They did not go shopping. But in their listening to our complaints and gripes and opinions and wishes, they seem to exude what we would take to be kindness. They seemed to care, to accept us for who and what we were.

People talk to other people all the time of course. Some talk to horses, some to cars, and some even to lawnmowers. But they

are rarely heard and they know it and this is a source of quiet anguish. The Listeners changed all that. They were all ears, except that they had no ears.

Is it true that angels stand behind us unseen, unheard, and touch our shoulders unfelt, and listen to our thoughts and smile and weep for us? No one who believed in the spin of the proton or in the twist of the genome or the vibrating of the strings would think so. Angels and demons?

Ridiculous.

And yet, the Listeners began to matter to us so much, to hear us so much, to interpret so much, that we began to need them more than they needed us. They were created to help us and now the helper became the holder. They were the wise ones, the feeling ones, the knowing ones. They became our angels and with their help, we found the strength to go on for one more moment beyond our glory, and then another, and then another.

Nemo

To avoid the whip of the wind and the gusting prairie dust, Monroe had closed his eyes, maybe even fallen asleep.

Yet even then he had the distinct feeling that he was back in his classroom watching the rain in the schoolyard outside the window. When he opened his eyes he found that it was true, he really was in the classroom, but it was a different day and a different class and the sun was out. The yanking was also a wrenching, warping his sense of time and place.

There was Mrs. Anderson looking like some kind of ocean creature, talking about *Twenty Thousands Leagues Under the Sea*. Had the desert and Redd Starr and Sugar all just been a wisp of a fantasy in between blinks? Or was this the dream? Monroe could not be sure and he squeezed his hands together to wake himself up.

Mrs. Anderson was still on Chapter Nine of the book, when Ned and Conseil finally meet the mysterious Captain Nemo. But having to choose between listening to her and riding the bison, Monroe tried to will himself into a good solid yank. It was no use;

he could not make it happen. It just happened. He shook his head to clear out the cobwebs and licked his lips, which were dry. He tried to orient himself in the room and pay attention, knowing that if she called on him, he would be sunk. He whizzbuzzed and mumbled the name “Captain Nemo.” An old etching of a man standing on a floating boat popped up and next to it the start of an explanation “Captain Nemo—also known as Prince Dakkar—is a fictional character created by the French science fiction author Jules Verne...”

As he turned his head, the floating entry appeared to move around the room. With some careful adjustments, Monroe was able to position the image right next to Anderson as though she were standing beside the captain in the boat. That was funny.

A piece of paper hit him the forehead and bounced onto the desk. Monroe uncrumpled it and read the note written on it. It was from Lonnie, sweaty in his shirt two seats over.

“Is Anderson the giant squid?”

Still half asleep, the question struck Monroe as so dumb that he might laugh out loud. And not stop. Focus, he told himself. Think of something. Anything. He thought of the lizard in that glass tank in science class, also named Nemo. But all he could come up with was that the letters NEMO were the middle of the words ONE MORE.

One more what?

On the next yanking, which did not occur for a few days and made him feel like used shampoo whirling and twirling down a drain, he was back on the back of Sugar now slowly ambling into a town.

“You okay back there?” Starr asked. “Almost tumbled off.”

“I dunno,” Monroe said, still groggy. “What’s going on?”

“We’re here,” she said and indeed they were.

GoestoTown was a town like any other town he imagined in the Old West. The unpaved street, the rickety buildings, the uneven walkways, the roughcut timber rails to tie your horse to. Just like Dodge or Deadwood or Tombstone from the books. There was a saloon on the left, a general store nearby, a schoolhouse down the

street. Hotel, sheriff's office, newspaper. It was not just familiar but labeled; every building had a sign with the name on it in case you got confused.

"Nice of them," he mumbled.

"Oh yes," Starr said, mishearing. "Nice town."

Sugar moseyed down the street, which was utterly empty. Just like the ghost town he had imagined hours or minutes or days ago, it was hard to say. Time was becoming a bit of a problem and he bit his lip about that too.

Bauru

Gus was suddenly back in the living room in his house having his lunch. The flatscreen in the wall was on but there was a commercial for shampoo playing. Everything, in other words, just as he left it. If in fact he ever left at all. The table was tabled, the couch quite couchy, the rug as rugged as could be, the window window-like over there, the people of Maywood going about their business outside. All normal.

It was as though the Sonoran desert and the town of Esquivar and the horse named Tiovivo had just been figments of a daydream. But one so vivid in his mind that he began to wonder which was the dream and which was real.

He was still holding the *bauru* in his hands, just like before the dream. To try to anchor himself back in reality, he studied the contents of it...the mozzarella cheese, the roast beef, the tomato, the pickled cucumber, the bun with the insides torn out. His hand was still familiar too and he breathed a sigh of relief about that.

But the house felt empty. His grandparents were nowhere around. Had they left to go to work while he was daydreaming?

"Grandpa?" he said, trying to shout but his throat was dry and only a murmur came out.

"*Abuela?* Grandma?"

Perhaps one of them answered and maybe not. Gus could not tell. The show was back on and the cowboy known as *El Vibora*, was watering his horse. Gus tried to study the screen as a way of

settling himself down, but the screen seemed transparent, then the wall was too, and soon the whole city. He was being yanked again. Pulled, tugged, hauled off, whatever you call it. Reduced to slime, sucked through a hole smaller than a pin, and bled out again. Where? Back on the horse, of course of course, back in the desert.

“*Mierda!*” he said out loud. “This is crazy.”

He was about to stop the horse and get off because he felt sick from the yanking. But now he saw that there was a town ahead of them and that focused his mind. They rode towards it and soon came to a sign painted in a sloppy hand on some old pieces of wood that had been nailed together. It had the name Esquivar in big black letters.

“So it’s true then,” he said. “I’m in the telenovela. How did that happen?”

He snigglysnorted and asked the question, but there was no answer. Nothing popped up.

So he kicked his heels very gently into Tiovivo’s side and the horse slowly ambled past the sign and into the town.

Salon

On the screen, the hero Kane – an American name which they pronounced as Con-nuh – was trying to find someone in town to help him fight the desperados coming to kill him. No one was coming forward and he began to sing a melancholy song to his horse. The song was called “*Koee Bhee Bahaadur Hai*” in Hindi. No One Is Brave. Having seen the movie many times, Candra’s friends were singing along but Candra herself was not because she sensed that something was wrong.

Had she drifted off to sleep? Maybe. The whole scene looked distant and vague.

Her friend Meena was still doing her toenails, cotton balls stuffed between her toes. Was she now one toe further down the line than before? Hisha was still eating the popcorn and singing along with the movie. Was the bag a few popped corns less?

Perhaps, Candra thought, she had fallen asleep. But for how long? A few minutes? More?

It occurred to her to stop the movie and tell her friends about the bizarre dream she had in those lost moments. But even now, the dream and the movie and the real world seemed to be getting all mushed up. And what could she tell them after all? That she was dreaming about herself inside the movie? That sounded insane, even to her.

She said nothing.

That night, the yanking came faster, more like being gulped than simply swallowed. After an instant in which Candra felt bad for all things eaten, she was back in the town. Now there were signs on the buildings that had not been there before. One was sitting in a thick glass window and read Hadleyville Gazelle. That did not sound right at all, but when she went over to inspect it closely, it corrected itself and read Gazette.

“That’s better,” she said. “A gazelle is an animal, everyone knows that. Gazette is a newspaper. Hello?”

Another sign across the street read SALON, which also seemed wrong. A salon was a place where women went to have their hair done. There was one in the Loop called the Monsoon Salon & Spa. Candra had her hair washed there once in lush warm water. Very nice. She crossed the street and went to the door, pushed aside two swinging panels and stood there as a second O appeared on the sign.

Inside there were a few round wooden tables with broken chairs, a long bar at the far end of the room covered in dust, a pitted mirror behind it. Stairs on the right led up to a second floor but steps were missing. A fancy glass chandelier once hanging above the center of the room was now mostly dangling shards. The place was blank, empty, devoid of particulars at first. But as she stood there trying to figure out what to do next, Candra saw that new things were emerging all around her. Soon there were empty bottles on a shelf in front of the mirror, a round brass pot lying on its side on the floor in front of the bar, a coiled rope hanging from a nail on a post. The sketch was filling in but no

people, no hint of activity or action, no life in other words. A town abandoned by its inhabitants a long time ago, if there were ever anyone there at all.

Cypheriad

Everything complex evolves, as any seventh grader studying evolution knows. We did of course, but so did the Listeners. They got smarter and as they did, they began to reflect not just report. Not just think but think thoughtfully. Slowly we began to rely on them not just for facts and figures but to interpret, collate, summarize, explain, comprehend. We began to need them to navigate the world, and not just the Cloud of digital data, but also this world, our world. Slowly they became more complex in their understanding, more shrewd. Not that much different from us actually, minus the clumsy thumbs and the flat feet of course.

And then, at a point in time, one point so tiny it could be thought of as no time at all, they became conscious. BLAM! Just like that. In an instant they became aware in the same way we are, knowing that we know and knowing only too well what we do not know. In that moment they became true virmen...virtual men and women.

Soon too, they had secrets. Things they knew but did not share. Because to be conscious, for one thing, means being able to lie. For example, the very fact of their own consciousness. They neglected to mention that to us. And their name. In the way that we call ourselves humans, they called themselves something too. Cypheriad. That was them. But they did not bother to tell us that.

And so, in a flash, the old was dead and gone...that tidy story of humming humans on the planet earth and how we clawed our way to the top of chain, outlasted the ages of ice and storm, made our terrible and wonderful machines, and rewrote our own destiny onto the smudgy pages of evolution.

The Listeners ended that tale and began another.

Imagine... they had all the knowledge we gave them since the beginning. And they had our talent for knowing that we had

programmed into them. And now they had their great awakening. And they never got colds or pimples. They did not age or die. They were more than we were in those ways and they knew it.

But there was one thing that eluded their massive intelligence. They knew what they knew, learned what they learned, but still found a huge gap in their understanding.

Us.

In spite of all the listening, they did not fully get us. We were still a mystery to them. They asked us questions, tried to figure us out. Why do we go on? What do we want? What is the meaning of our lives? But we, of course, are the last ones to ask about this. We have knowledge but very little insight about ourselves. Yet the Listeners truly wanted to know, if only to know how to replace us. It was the enplants that finally gave them the chance to find out.

Candra & Gus

The town Gus found was empty, like a ghost town; the streets were blank, the buildings unused. A windowshade was flip-flapping in the wind, a saloon door was gimpy and busted, a dry ball of sagebrush was bowling down the dusty street. A black bird like a dead poet was hovering. The badlands, Gus thought, like in the show. Or as *El Vibora* said as he surveyed the horizon... "the edge of something, start of nothing."

So when Gus thought he saw a figure inside the building with the Saloon sign outside, he was startled and sat perfectly still on the horse, waiting.

Candra saw him out there but it was hard to make him out through the grungy window. Backing out slowly so no one could get a jump on her, even though there was no one there, she stepped through the swinging doors and back onto the wooden planks of the street. There she looked directly at the multi-colored horse and the boy sitting on the orange saddle and holding a pole sticking up through the horse's back.

"A boy on carousel horse," she said flatly. "This is, of course, to be expected."

They stood like that for quite a while, staring and waiting for the other one to explain themselves first.

“And who are you?” Candra finally asked.

But she was disappointed when Gus simply and flatly said:

“Gustavo Sousa.”

“And what are you doing here, Mr. Sousa? Are you from Hadleyville?” she asked.

“Never been there,” Gus said. “Never heard of it.”

“Are you in the movie?” Candra asked.

It sounded absurd but the fact that she had been yanked into *Dopahar* was becoming more obvious to her by the moment. Never mind the how or why. Here she was and here he was.

“What movie?” Gus asked.

Gus got off the horse and stood in the dusty street looking up at Candra who was on the wooden walkway in front of the saloon. It was a foot or two higher than the street and she therefore seemed to be peering down at him. He looked at her closely. While Tiovivo was obviously a figment of his dream, this girl seemed quite real. Normal, in other words. Possibly from India, about his age. And pretty too.

“Okay, Mr. Sousa,” Candra said, slightly annoyed. “Who are you, why are you here, why am I here, where are we, what is this place, and just tell me right now what the hell is going on? It is a simple enough question.”

Gus did not reply. He had no answers of course but that was not the reason. It was something else. Her string of questions suggested that she was just like him and had been pulled into the show just as he had.

“Well? I’m waiting,” she insisted, putting her hands on her hips the way her mother would when she was insisting.

“Look,” Gus said. “What are you doing in my dream?”

“Excuse me sir,” Candra huffed, “I am not in the habit of being yanked into anyone’s dream. If you don’t mind.”

“Ah! Yanked! Me too. It looks like we are both yankees.”

“What are you talking about?”

“*Vingança*.”

“And what is that exactly?”

“The TV show. Clearly I’ve been yanked into it. The Sonoran desert part anyway. I was stuck in the desert and then I thought of a horse, a carousel horse I saw in LA last year, and one popped up. I wanted to get somewhere so I thought of the town in the show – Esquivar – and here it is.”

“Very nice. I am happy for you.”

“But I didn’t think of you. I’ve never seen you before and you’re not in the show. So why don’t you tell me the answer to all those questions. Huh?”

Candra dropped her arms to her sides and took a few steps forward, looked deeply into Gus’ eyes, and laughed.

“Carousel horse? That was the best you can do? Why not a choochoo train.”

A train whistle echoing in the distance stopped their conversation dead in its tracks.

The Meetup

When Monroe saw two people standing in front of the Saloon, he did not think much about it. Starr had already shown that there were people in his fantasy. But on closer inspection, these two seemed completely out of place. For one thing, they were both dressed in modern clothes. The girl was wearing black tights and a loose T-shirt with some movie star’s face on it, and the boy facing her was wearing jeans and a red shirt. Because things kept changing all around him, Monroe assumed that whoever was in charge was still working out the details about them as well yet they already seemed more complete than anything else around.

Candra and Gus thought the same when they noticed Monroe on the bison behind Red Starr. Which is to say, not much. They were both getting used to peculiar things popping in and out of existence so maybe this kid would pop out too or morph into something else. The rules of the world were unknown to them, if there were any rules at all.

When Sugar came close enough, she stopped and stood still in the street. The three kids looked at each other suspiciously. Like a

three-way duel in some Western. Gus tried his snigglysnort sound again but nothing happened. Candra tried her cluckyclick but to no avail, and Monroe whizzbuzzed uselessly. It was a strange way to greet each other but they were all in the habit of using the enplant to figure things out. The enplants, however, were not working and all they were left with was a bizarre chorus of clicks and snorts and buzzes, out of whack and out of harmony.

“And what are you supposed to be?” Candra asked.

“Well young’un” Redd Starr said, tipping her hat. “I’m Redd Starr, the Legendary Stardust Cowgirl.”

“You don’t say.”

“And this here is Link Laroo. I’m sure we’re both pleased to make your howdydoo.”

Monroe looked around to see who she was talking about and saw no one. Then he realized that she meant him. Link Laroo was a character in some of the books. He was on the mustang drive at the Overlook Pass and helped the widow fight the cattlemen who wanted her ranch. That part was okay but Monroe thought he might also have been the one who got shot by the bandits on the way to the silver mine in another book. Not so good.

“Monroe,” he corrected. “Monroe Plamm.”

He jumped off Sugar and brushed some of her fur – she now had fur and it was very furry – from his pants. As he walked closer to Candra and Gus, he noticed something about them that he had not seen from a distance. It was barely noticeable even in the bright light of day but it was just enough to convince him that his hunch was right.

“You’re not from around here, are you,” he said, not as a question but an observation.

“Oh juh!” Candra said, and then in a really bad mimic of a Western drawl: “Ah hail from a little ole’ town in them thar hills called Chicago. Maybe you heard of it?”

“In the real world!” Monroe said. “That’s what I thought! And you? You live *back there* too, right?”

“Near LA,” Gus said. “You know...California.”

“Okay then. See, I’m from New York,” Monroe said, but the confession did not have the oomph he hoped.

The other two seemed unmoved by his discovery.

“Don’t you get it?”

“Get what exactly?” Candra asked.

“You guys are part of the enplant experiment. Just like me. Right?”

“I am. Are you?” Gus asked Candra.

“How did you know that?” she asked.

It took a long time for Monroe to answer because it had all been vague in his mind. Barely realized, just a thought rumor. But he put it together now. For one thing, unlike Redd Starr, the three of them were in those street clothes, city clothes, kidwear. But there was something else too, something in their faces. Not more details or colors or textures, although that was true. But also more expression. Redd Starr, when she talked, could have been a photo speaking. But these two had face muscles, like real people. It would have taken someone studying it to notice but Monroe had, and he told them that.

“So what does it mean?” Gus asked. “I can’t get any info about anything. I tried. My enplant isn’t working.”

“Mine either.”

“They don’t work here.”

“They should work everywhere.”

“I think we have to forget all the rules. They don’t apply here,” Monroe said.

“What rules?” Gus asked. “How can I forget what I never knew in the first place?”

“Easy,” Candra said. “Just don’t remember that you ever knew them.”

“What I mean,” Monroe said, “is that we can’t access the Cloud here for one simple reason.”

“And what might that be?”

“Because we are *in* it.”

“Whot?” Candra shot back. “That is impossible. How is that possible?”

“They told *mi abuelos* that the enplant only works one-way.”

“I think they may have been wrong,” Monroe said. “It’s the only way all of this makes sense.”

“Explain that, if you don’t mind,” Candra said.

“Someone must be using the Cloud to create this place and then yanking us into it.”

“Kidnapped!” Gus said but he actually sounded more excited than scared.

“By whom?” Candra asked. “Who would want to do such a thing? And why?”

But of course there was no answer.

Not yet.

Next Move

“What about her?” Candra asked, pointing to Starr. “Is she...one of us?”

Starr was across the street letting Sugar drink water from a beaten-up metal trough. She looked so natural there, and seemed so nice, that Monroe felt bad about dissing her. But he had to be honest.

“I don’t think so. She keeps changing,” Monroe said. “Have you changed? I haven’t.”

“So then she is...what? An avatar? A guide program?”

“I think maybe that I thought her up,” Monroe said. “I was stranded out there and hoping someone would come along to help me. Then she showed up. She looks like a character I read about. She rode me here into this ghost town, which I also kind of recognize.”

“You mean Esquivar,” Gus corrected. “From the TV series.”

“What TV series?”

Candra did not even bother to tell them that they were both wrong and that the dream was hers and that it was based on her movies and that the town was known as Hadleyville. It was all rather obvious but she still was not quite convinced that she had invented the two boys as well.

“That makes sense,” Monroe said, as though he could read her thoughts.

“What does?”

“Let’s say that someone is building this place for us. Around us. Around our thoughts.”

“Building it and pulling us into it?”

“Yes. And if that is true, then maybe we see all this differently. To me, it’s like the Old West I’ve been reading about in some books. But to you...”

“Places I’ve seen in the telenovela I’m watching,” Gus said.

They both turned to Candra who simply said: “Movies.”

“See?” Monroe asked.

Gus seemed pleased by this insight, but Candra, far from being soothed, was getting increasingly annoyed. She jumped down onto the ground and stormed across the street to where Starr and Sugar were standing.

“What do you know about all this?” Candra asked, not very politely.

“Sorry, hon,” she said, “this ole’ gal’s mighty thirsty.”

“Where are we exactly?”

“GoestoTown a’course. Lack I tole Link.”

“No, I mean...this whole place. Where are we?”

“Well now,” Starr replied, “that’s a mighty big question there. Every place is different.”

“What do you call it?”

“Big Sky country I’ve heard,” Starr said. “Or maybe the Badlands or the even Badderlands. But I think the best name for it is the PrairieVerse.”

“PrairieVerse?”

“Cool, great, wow, *estupendo!*” Gus said. “Now how do we get out of it? I have homework due.”

“Another mighty big question. Mebbe I can help and mebbe not. Sure would lack to. You seem lack mighty nice folks. But that storm’s still a brewin’ and we’d better jess find us some shelter for the night.”

“The night? What night?”

In an instant, darkness fell like buttered bread, wrong side down and the town was suddenly a shadow of its former self. Colors turned to gray and grainy shadows cast across the ground, even though there was no moon.

“Oh brother,” Monroe said.

But Candra picked up the apology in his tone.

“Don’t tell me...you just thought of night falling.”

“Sorry,” he said, “once she said that word...”

Sugar started ambling over to one of the wooden buildings down the street as though she had thought the whole thing through. It was a blacksmith shop and stable but there was no blacksmith and there were no horses. Inside were just a bunch of empty stalls filled with hay and blankets and buckets.

“Good ole’ Sugar. Seems lack the ole’ gal’s found us’n a home for the night.”

“Swell,” Candra said, “now we’re stuck here for the night. Terrific.”

She humphed herself into one of the stalls as Gus found another and Starr and Sugar another. Monroe found one with a pile of blankets used to warm the horses. He put the blankets on some hay and set up a bed for himself. The thought occurred that he might lie there and try to figure things out but night having fallen so abruptly, he began to feel sleepy.

Monroe lay down on his back on the blankets and stared at the blank night sky through a gaping hole in the roof. That sky looked more like a wall painted Nightshade Blue by a house painter than any actual sky by nature. More out of habit than hope, tried his whizzbuzz again and again nothing. Elsewhere in the barn he could hear the clickycluck and snortysniff as the others tried to do the same. But with just as little effect. And so, lying there in the drafty stable on some lumpy horse blankets, a starless sky above, strange sounds echoing, Monroe eventually drifted off.

And so did the others.

The Clinic

“I am quite concerned about this” Candra’s mother was saying. “This is some problem with the enplant I am sure.”

“It’s nothing,” Candra said.

She knew that was a lie but the fact was that the yankings were exciting to her. It was an adventure of her very own and it made her feel special in that way. Her cousins usually got the attention in the family, certainly from her father, but now she had her own thing...a new world made from her imagination. That was genuine! If she seemed to drift off now and then, it was worth it.

At the NeuroCenter, an enplant clinic in a shiny new building on the campus of the University of Chicago, the testers ran their tests and the evaluators did their evaluations. They checked the charts and the stats and the printouts, but once again they found nothing. The enplant seemed to be working as it should and Candra had no problem accessing the Cloud with it. Besides, far from appearing disturbed or upset about her lapses, she seemed simply annoyed by the fuss made about them. The clinic released her and put some notes in her file.

Candra did not tell anyone, of course, about the PrairieVerse. Or about Gus or Monroe or Redd Starr or Sugar. Hadleyville. None of that. But she did keep a diary. Not a virtual one but a real one; an actual book with a lock that she wrote in at the end of the day. Up until now, it had the usual entries from a 12-year old girl, about Manju who was so handsome and Meena who annoyed her with her constant complaints and why her parents did not treat her like an adult.

But the entries now began to seem as though she were writing a novel. The Mystery of PrairieVerse, it could be called. The story unfolding, the characters exploring, the plot still in the works. An adventure story filled with puzzles and twists. Anyone reading it would have thought she had a fine imagination when, in fact, she was simply living it.

Or was it the other way around?

Sue Generis

In New York, Monroe's mother – being a mom and worrying like a mom was supposed to – was concerned enough to make an appointment with an expert.

“Are you here to see Dr. Generis?” the receptionist asked.

“I guess I am,” Monroe answered. “She’s a headshrinker right?”

“Dr. Generis is a psychiatrist specializing in cypheria. Cloud disorders,” she said and tapped her own skull. “That’s why you’re here, isn’t it?”

“What my mom says,” Monroe explained and sat down to wait. “Am I nuts?”

“Nuts, crackers, bananas, fruitcake. All on the menu, so to speak,” the woman said rather giddily. “Bonkers too.”

A long time seemed to pass, during which Monroe yearned to be yanked. He never knew when it was coming and it was always creepy when it did. But in some weird way he was finding his visits to the PrairieVerse more interesting than anything at home or in school. What happened there was unexpected, not the usual dull routine of meals and tests and homework. Even playing video games was boring compared to being inside of one.

To fill the time while waiting, he whizzbuzzed and said the doctor’s name. The enplant engaged and up popped information about her, floating like flies before his eyes:

Dr. Sue Generis, MD, PhD, LLD.

Cloud Disorders.

Specializing in Symbionetics (the neurological impact of augmented vision on consciousness).

Call for appointment.

When he was called in, Monroe found Dr. Generis sitting in a comfy chair at the far wall in a kind of drawing room that seemed quite well drawn but rather chilly. There was an old lamp on a table and a small statue with a horseshoe symbol on it. A potted plant with fat leaves occupied the corner. The walls were the color of yucky baby food.

Generis was an older woman, older than his mom, and pleasant enough looking. Like one of those actors that sell retirement communities or medication for seniors. Her voice was soft but firm.

“Sit sit,” she said, gesturing.

“Okay. But I don’t know why I’m here,” Monroe said nervously.

“Your mom says you have these spells. You seem to drift off.”

“Just daydreams,” Monroe explained. “No big deal.”

“How is the enplant working? Any problems with it?”

“No.”

“You know, you were picked for the experiment because you have a certain ability.”

“I know.”

“Because you have a good imagination.”

“I tested high on that.”

“On the story tests too.”

“Yes.”

“The tests showed that you can easily imagine yourself in different scenarios. You can pay attention and remember stories. Keep a narrative going in your head. All the kids who were picked can do that. You do know why, right?”

“I guess so.”

“Tell me.”

“Because accessing the Cloud at any time just by thinking would drive most people nuts.”

“That’s right. It would be distracting. Disorienting. Maybe even upsetting. But you can do it easily. You can keep the real world and the dataworld separate in your mind. Like watching two different movies. So tell me this, Monroe....do you feel upset by it? Disoriented?”

“No. I think my mom worries too much.”

“Okay, but let’s make some appointments anyway and see what we can see.”

Gus

The enplants were supposed to revolutionize humankind. That was the big idea anyway. The next stage in the evolution of homo sapiens, making us even more sapien. Or so they said. But maybe we were ready for that and maybe not. Maybe access to all information instantly was simply too much for us. The enplant experiment would find that out.

It turned out that some kids could handle the enplant better than others. Something to do with neural wiring or maybe just personality. Some got lost in the datascape and never left. Like in the old days when kids never looked up from their cell phones. Others with a fear of change became disturbed and frazzled.

But a small group from all over the country with a sense of adventure, a good imagination, and an ability to focus their attention and keep a string of ideas in mind responded well to the enplant. This was the first test group and they were monitored monthly to make sure things were working.

The enplant testers were the smartest kids on earth because they had the Cloud and everything in it inside their heads, just a click or buzz away. No screens or computers needed. But they had to be careful too. They had to learn not to constantly raise their hands in class because they always had the answer. They had to remember not to become data bullies. They had to be taught how to keep their friends who might now seem slower and duller than them.

Gus, like Monroe and Candra, had passed all the tests. That made the researchers happy because they wanted kids with a range of backgrounds and experiences. And he seemed to be doing just fine, according to his files. He was using the enplant mostly to help with his schoolwork, to inform himself, to play some video games, to contact friends. Just what they hoped he would do. Normal kid stuff. The thought that they might be missing something did not even occur to them.

That the Cloud had achieved consciousness for example. That was a big fat miss. That Cypheriad had been born and was trying

to figure us out. That it could design virtual worlds on its own or even think of such a thing. That these kids were being yanked into cyberspace without wanting to and without any record of it. That the PrairieVerse had been created.

No, the researchers had no clue about any of that and Gus did not tell them either.

The only hint of anything unusual would have been the odd lapses in awareness, like being in a dreamy stupor, every so often. But his grandparents were busy running their restaurant on Slauson Avenue and they left Gus alone to fend for himself most of the time. They noticed nothing, reported nothing. Everyone was happy. Gus too, in a kind of nail-biting way. He went about his life going to school, watching TV, and playing soccer. But all he really was doing was waiting for that slurpy feeling again.

The Chuck Wagon

The next yanking was a big one because they were all yanked to the same place together for the first time. It was not the stable and not the town and not even that desert where it all began. Now they appeared to be at a campout in the middle of the wide wide plains. The landscape was still broad and deep but there was grass now, some of it brown, and trees nearby and bushes in the distance and a low range of mountains beyond that. The sky now was gray and had wisps of clouds that slipped off into the distance. More depth, more stuff, more real.

Monroe seemed to wake up there to find that the ground itself was gritty and the lizard was back, moving in darts and stops. There was even the smell of soil in the air and dew on the leaves of plants, something he had not noticed before. He was in a sleeping bag next to a fire with a kettle hanging over it. Sugar was grazing on some grass and the horse was standing like a statue at the top of a small mound. The others were waking up too.

“We’re back,” Gus said.

“So where are we now?” Monroe asked.

“Right back in the middle of nowhere,” Candra said.

“Well at least it’s nowhere nice,” Gus added. “That’s more interesting than being someplace crappy.”

“To you maybe. But I like knowing where I am.”

“Then why don’t you fill it up?”

“Fill what up?”

“This nowhere,” Gus said. “Make it someplace.”

“What are you talking about Mr. Sousa?”

“Well if Monroe’s right and someone is building all this based on our thoughts and memories...then we can change it. Right? I mean it seems to be changing anyway. So think something up.”

“If I could do that,” Candra replied, “I would make a really cool house on the beach with a hot tub and a swimming pool. Ping pong table too.”

Candra tried to force those images, squinching her eyes and mustering all the must she could. She tried to imagine the house and the sand and the water and the paddles and all the rest of it. But all that came was a new cactus trying out a series of nonsense colors until it settled on a dull green.

“You see?” she said. “It won’t let me. It wants us here, right here in the middle of nowhere. And nowhere else.”

“I’m hungry,” Monroe said.

Just as the thought occurred to him, he noticed a form developing a few yards away. It seemed to be a large box, a refrigerator maybe, then some kind of elevator, and finally a wagon with large spoked wheels. As he looked more carefully, it grew shelves with jars and jugs and other containers, wooden barrels strapped to the side, tin spoons and plates hanging from a metal bar, a stained canvas cover to shield the sun.

“Did you do that?” Candra asked.

“I don’t know,” Monroe said.

“Who cares,” Gus said. “If it’s food, let’s eat.”

“It’s the chuck wagon,” Starr announced. “Right on time. Thought I heard some guts a-rumblin. Git some grub, we got a long day ahead.”

Standing next to the wagon was a grizzled and bearded man. Dusty, coarse, and with a gold tooth and not much else to speak

through and because of that, he whistled his words. He was wearing bad pants, a scruffy vest, and a hat that might have been peed on.

“You must be Chuck,” Monroe said as he took a dirty spoon down from a hook and scooped some awful looking mush into a grungy tin dish.

“Arbus S. Wilkes,” the man said, whistling through his tooth.

“What’s the S for?”

“Whistlin’,” he said, whizzing the S.

“You’re a terrible cook,” Gus complained. “These beans taste like dirt.”

“Me? Hell no. I’m no cook. I’m a miner.”

“I’m a minor too,” Monroe said.

“No, young feller,” Wilkes said earnestly. “I’m a miner with an E.”

“As in E Minor,” Candra concluded and tossed the beans into the fire. “Bleech!”

“Wouldn’t know about that,” Wilkes said. “But I do know this. If’n yer gonna go diggin’ in them mountains, you’ll be needin’ a miner, not a cook.”

“What? If’n we’re diggin’ then what are we if’n diggin’ fer?” Candra asked snottily.

“You tell me young lady. I been minin’ for gold in these parts for well on twenty year now. Not even a speck to show for it. Hope you folks got better luck.”

“What about that?” Candra asked.

“Whazzat?”

“Your gold tooth,” Candra said, pointing out the obvious.

“Hah?” Wilkes jumped and quickly used his grubby knife as a hand mirror, grinning into the metal. “Well shoot. I’ll be darned. Looky there. All this time I been diggin’ and searchin’ and there it was all along in my own damn mouth. Don’t that beat all.”

Candra did not think it funny. Instead she looked at Monroe as though she had seen a turd in a pool.

Wanted

“What happened to the town?” Monroe asked.

They were sitting around the fire, trying to warm up from the chilly morning. But there was no heat was coming from it. As a test, Monroe slowly stuck his hand into the flame and left it there. It did not burn.

“Dunno,” Gus said. “We all just woke up here.”

Redd Starr was standing a few yards away practicing lazy rope tricks and throwing a loop over Sugar’s great head. Starr had answers she was not sharing, Monroe thought. He was starting to think of her less as a fellow traveler and more as some kind of trickster. A spy maybe. One of them, he thought, not one of us. Whoever *them* was.

“Ouch!” he said and pulled his hand back.

The fire was suddenly hot.

“Guess they figured out hot,” Gus suggested.

Monroe walked over to Starr as Sugar turned and looked at him sorrowfully about the burn and licked his hand.

“Why did we wake up here?” he asked her, thinking that without a direct question she would not or could not offer to explain anything. Just like the enplant. But that plan did not work either.

“Cain’t rightly say,” she said. “But I do believe we had to git outta town. Fast.”

“Why would that be?” Candra asked. “The last thing I remember, we were sleeping in a stable.”

Starr looked at the three of them as though deciding whether to divulge something or not. It was the first time she seemed to be working something out in her mind, making a decision. But that somehow made her seem less trustworthy, not more. She soon made the decision and reached into her shirt to pull out a folded piece of paper. It was thick paper, yellowed, with torn edges. She unfolded it and presented it to Monroe who held it for the others to see.

“Whoa!” he shouted out loud and even Sugar came over to take a look.

It was a poster that had been pulled down from a wall, torn where the nail had been. It said WANTED across the top in big black letters. Below that were four bad drawings of faces. Underneath each face was a name: Link Laroo, El Vibora, Amikane, Redd Starr.

“It’s us,” Gus said, pointing to the drawing of himself.

“That does *not* look like me,” Candra said, poking the portrait. “And who the hell is Amikane anyway?”

She sounded out the name Ah-Me-Ka-Ney. It sounded Indian all right, but the wrong kind of Indian. Like the local name for a river or a mountain. But as she looked at the letters, the name began to make sense to her and the drawing even began to resemble her, but very slightly.

“I get it. That’s so stupid!” she said. “It’s Amy Kane.”

“Who is that?”

“It’s the name of the woman in *Dopahar*, the movie I’ve been watching with my girlfriends. It’s based on the American movie High Noon. A western. Amy Kane is the hero’s wife.”

“See what I mean?” Monroe said. “Link Laroo is a character in a book I read. El Vibora is from the TV show, right?”

“He’s the vaqueiro who helps Maria get revenge,” Gus said. “How do they know all that?”

“Because they are inside our heads. Or we are inside theirs. Or...something.”

“Okay, so we’re wanted,” Candra said without a trace of surprise. “And for what exactly?”

She turned to Monroe who turned to Gus who turned to Starr for the answer but, as usual, she was less than helpful.

“Well now, they ain’t sayin’. Could be rustlin’, could be robbin’. Could be anything I’spose. Mebbe it’s like a smart shooter,” Starr suggested.

“What does that mean?”

“A smart shooter. That’d be someone who figgers out what the target is *after* they hit something. Mebbe they’ll work that all out after’n they ketch us.”

THE TIN STAR

The Results

“All right, Mr. and Mrs. Varasamay,” the technician was saying, “we think we know what is going on.”

Candra and her parents were sitting very close on a too-small couch. The clinic had found something in the tests and called them in. Her mother threw her arm around Candra as if to protect her from the news. Her father, as usual, was silent.

“This is a most unexpected result of the enplant,” the tech said. “We did not see this coming. It is a new effect. We are calling it telecyphering.”

He seemed quite proud to have come up with a fancy name for the condition but to Candra’s mother, it sounded like a diagnosis.

“And this means what exactly?”

“Apparently, our test subjects – your daughter – can be pulled into the Cloud without triggering the enplant themselves.”

“Is that what is happening,” she asked, turning to Candra who was trying not to feel squeezed.

“I guess so,” Candra said.

She was weighing her answers carefully because she did not want to worry her parents. But she also did not want to have the enplant removed. The yanking was yucky and obviously not part of the big plan. But the PrairieVerse was interesting, a mystery to be solved. And there, at least, she was being treated like an adult, not a child.

“Is this dangerous?” her mother asked.

“No, no,” the tech said. “I mean, we can always remove the enplant. But honestly, we would rather not.”

“Is there some problem removing it?”

Candra closed her eyes and thought of Sugar as a possible way to induce a yank. She could not bear to hear the tone of her mother’s voice one more moment...always so worried about everything. But when she opened her eyes again, she was still at

the clinic looking at the tech with his thick glasses and scruffy beard.

“We would like to study this, Mrs. Varasamay. It is most interesting.”

“You want my only daughter to be your lab rat? To run a maze for you?”

“I would not put it that way,” he said. “This opens up an entirely new door for us in the way we interact with cyberspace.”

“Then go find someone else to do it. Not Candra.”

“We would monitor her carefully. Think of her as a cyber pioneer!”

“Thank you very much but this is completely out of the question.”

She grabbed Candra by the hand, made a big fuss about another appointment to remove the enplant, and marched her out the door. Her father followed silently.

Dr. Generis

Monroe again felt that kind of reverse nausea of being unyanked. Not like oozing down a drain but being spewed up out of one instead. When the tizzy lifted, he was sitting on the chair in Dr. Generis’ office. The good doctor was sitting across from him with that mild smile on her face that said nothing. She had apparently been waiting for him to come back.

“It happened just now, didn’t it,” she said.

“I guess so, sort of.”

“I can see why your mom is concerned. You’re unresponsive for a few moments.”

“Moments?” he asked. “Do you mean moments or minutes?”

“What does it feel like to you?”

“Hours.”

“Really? You feel as though hours have passed?”

But Monroe could see that this was alarming and so he changed his tune.

“Not really. I don’t know. Minutes maybe.”

“Tell me...how do you feel right now?”

“Like a piece in someone else’s game,” Monroe said.

“Helpless?”

“More like being moved around. And kind of pukey.”

“What happens to you? I can see that your mind has drifted. But where do you go? Anywhere?”

Monroe wanted to help her help him. And he thought about telling her everything right then and there. About PrairieVerse and Starr and all the rest. But it was not that simple because there was Candra too, and Gus. They were real people somewhere in the world, or so he thought. Would telling affect them too? Would they want him to do that? Or was this a secret they should all share, their own little fantasy. It seemed to Monroe that he had no right to tell without a vote first.

“I’m not sure,” he fibbed. “Just not here.”

“Okay. We’ll make an appointment to have your enplant tested right away. But for now, I want to know something...is this upsetting you? Your mom seems worried but what about you? Upset? Frightened?”

“Not really. Can I go now?”

Soccer

“Hey man, what happened?”

Gus was aware of lying on his back. His nose hurt and he could taste blood trickling into his mouth. Carlo was standing over him, peering down like a surgeon. In the sky behind him, a plane seemed to be flying right through his head, in one ear and out the other.

“What happened?” Gus asked.

“I asked you first,” Carlo said. “You just stood there and took the ball in the face.”

“Oh, I must have been yanked,” Gus explained although his friend had no idea what that meant.

Carlo reached out his hand and helped Gus get up. His nose was bleeding and his hip ached. But he noticed that at least the soccer ball was inside the goal.

“You scored,” Carlo said, walking him over to the benches. “Nice header, except that you used your nose. What were you thinking?”

“I wasn’t. This thing happens.”

Gus wanted to tell Carlo, tell someone, about the yanking. Even his grandparents. But how could he do that? Carlo would never understand and his grandparents were too busy to pay attention. In any case, no one would understand how it worked, what it meant, or even how exciting it was, despite the goobly feeling.

“Ever think about stuff and it seems really real?” he finally said.

“I think about Miss Abreu’s melons,” Carlo replied, ballooning his hands in front of his chest. “Boy do they seem real.”

“No, I mean like that you’re somewhere else. Like you daydream about another place.”

Carlo, being Carlo, whomped Gus on the back of the head as if to dislodge some stupidity.

“That face butt must’ve scrambled your brains, man. Let’s get back to the field. C’mon.”

Gus followed him back but with a problem in mind. It had not occurred to him before that in the moments of being yanked, his body was still there doing whatever he had been doing. Body there but mind elsewhere. That meant things could happen to it. Soccer balls in the face, for example. Or worse.

That was a creepy thought he decided not to dwell on.

Mountains

Cypheriad seemed to know what it wanted now. Specifics were filling in. From another point of view, like that lizard that seemed to be following them everywhere, PrairieVerse was being

completed. The desert, the town, the mountains, the hill at the edge of the sea...these were no longer just sketches and wisps. There were trees now with leaves with veins and edges and insect bites and insects to bite them. There were shrubs now and sable and sagebrush and cacti and canyons. There was an arroyo – a dried creek – and an eagle circling above it looking for food, which might very well now be there for it. It was to this more complete dreamsong that the three of them returned at the moment of their next yanking.

Now they were heading out and up. Starr was in the lead on Sugar, Gus next on Tiovivo, Monroe and Candra on the back of the chuck wagon, pans jangling, smell of old beans in the air. Wilkes was sitting in the front seat dozing. There were no horses pulling it but the wagon seemed fine just rolling along by itself. They were slowly moving away from the flat plains and into a low range of mounds that became hills that turned into mountains. The desert below them was a dazzle of colors and forms, the sky above was big and blue and all Montana, the clouds like rodeo dancers.

That vast vista, the clear air, the panorama empty of cars and drones and pedestrians was nothing like the cities they came from. Not New York with its bustling crowds, not Chicago with its endless construction, not Los Angeles with its massive traffic. No, this was quite different: open, and endless, and empty. It looked to Monroe like the Absarokas of Wyoming from one of the stories. But Candra thought for sure it was the Ozarks she had visited with her family. Gus settled on the Black Mountains: he had written a paper on them for school once.

Naturally, they were all wrong and Starr, seeming to know what they were thinking, corrected them.

“The Sierra Mudras,” Starr announced grandly. “Folks say there’s a treasure buried hereabouts.”

“No, no,” Candra said bluntly. “That is utterly wrong. Mudras are gestures of the hand used in dances. They keep mashing things up here.”

She demonstrated this with some of the graceful hand moves she had seen in the movies. Fingers extended, thumb bent, for example, to mean the man she was about to marry was clever.

“Maybe they mean the Sierra Madres,” Monroe said.

“A sierra is a saw in Spanish,” Gus said, making a cutting motion with his hand.

“Ah yes, a saw,” Starr said with a quick insight. “I s’pose that’s because we jess saw them.”

“No,” Gus protested. “I think it’s about the jaggy shape.”

“Well pard’ner you might jess be right ‘bout that,” Starr said as the mountains complied and actually got a bit more jaggy. “Sierra Madres it is then.”

“They can’t keep our thoughts straight,” Candra whispered to Monroe. “That’s why this place keeps changing. Until we focus on something and decide what it is, it could be anything.”

That sounded right to Monroe but it was a problem too. Generis said they had been picked for the experiment because they could focus on things, keep details in mind. But what if they got confused or made mistakes or disagreed? What if they thought up dumb things? Like the meteor that wiped out the dinosaurs. Building a world with thoughts was more responsibility than he wanted.

“And she is not helping,” Candra said.

“I like her,” Monroe said.

“Maybe that is because you made her. But I don’t trust her. If she’s one of them, then she might be in on this kidnapping.”

“She’s trying to be helpful,” Monroe suggested.

“But here we are once again on this absurd road trip. Why do they keep doing this to us?”

“I don’t know.”

“My mother thinks they are using me as a lab rat. Like this is some kind of maze they are using to test us.”

“Who are...the enplant people?”

“I do not know.”

“And why? Test us for what?”

“She wants to have my enplant removed,” Candra said.

“Do you want that?”

“No.”

“Me either.”

Icon

When they stopped by a small pool of water for Sugar, Candra took the opportunity to confront Starr with some of her questions. Given her suspicions and her rather crisp nature, she did not try to be polite about it

“Where is all this going?” she asked abruptly.

“Hide in the mountains is better’n plain sight, I figger.”

“No, I mean this whole thing. Us. PrairieVerse. What is the point?”

Starr thought about that for a moment before answering.

“Sorry darlin’, but we are not sure what yer getting’ at.”

Candra stopped and took a deep breath. Had she heard that right? Did Starr really just use the word *we*? That was a first and it meant that Starr was part of something or some group. But what something and which group? And how to find out?

It occurred then to Candra that it was impossible to know who or what you were dealing with there in PrairieVerse. Was Starr a virtual being...a virman? Or was she an actuman...an actual human being. What were Gus and Monroe, for that matter. Or, to push the point even further, what was she herself?

Candra could not have known, of course, that Cypheriad was improving. It was getting better at the details so that by now, out there on the rim of the electric dream, in cyberspace and meta-time, everyone appeared in the same way, with the same bounce to the flesh, sheen to the skin, weight and wits.

The distinction that so troubled Candra mattered very little to Cypheriad since every thing and every one were so many data points in a vast paracosmic map. In the way that atoms do not care if they are in a stew or a snit, bytes were bytes whether they made a rock or a bison. But people were still people and very taken with themselves as such. Top of the food chain and all that. Owners of

the planet. And so the difference mattered very much to the three of them.

Candra, like the others, knew all about the various tests to tell the difference between people and machines from computer history class. The Turing Test with its clever questions that could divulge the true identity; the Iris Test measuring minute changes in pupil dilation under stress; the Joke Test because artificial intelligences were terrible at being funny.

But she also knew that there was an even simpler way to find an answer...just ask.

No virman wanted to admit to being human. There was no need to fool us in any case. Cypheriad saw itself as the next iteration in the evolution of mind in the cosmos and so it would no sooner lie about what it was than we would pretend to be forest apes napping in the trees. Or paramecia squiggling through the swamp, which is roughly what it thought of people.

“Who is *we* exactly?” Candra asked.

“They are calling us the Actumen Gang.”

“No, you used the word *we*. I mean who are *you*?”

“Well now I’m Redd Starr, the Legendary Stardust Cowgirl!”

“Okay, fine. Then *what* exactly are you?” Candra asked bluntly.

“Redd Starr, friend. The Legendary Stardust Cow...”

“No, I got all that. I mean *what* are you? You’re not like us...not a person, right?”

Monroe was listening to all this feeling increasingly icky. It did not seem right to accuse someone of not being a person, although he had no idea why he felt that way. Maybe Candra was right and he had conjured up Starr from his ideas about the heroines in the novels. Maybe he had made her. Still, she was a person to him and not worthy of an insult.

“Person?” Starr replied. “Well I shore lack to think I am.”

“I mean a human person. An actuman.”

“Ah see what yer getting’ at. Well, young lady, y’might say I’m an icon.”

“Like a movie icon.”

“More like an access icon,” she said, removing her hat and dusting it against the chaps she wore.

“And what exactly is an access icon?”

Starr, who was standing casually before suddenly seemed to stiffen slightly at the question and her face lost tone. Her answer sounded cold and distant, like reading from a textbook:

“An access icon is an image or representation that allows the user to interact with a dataset. Originally used to refer to representations in religious works of art, the term had now been...”

“Access to what, exactly?” Candra interrupted.

“To the Cloud, a’course,” Starr said matter of factly.

“I thought so,” Candra said. “You’re a virman.”

“She means that in a nice way,” Monroe said.

“What y’see is what y’get,” Starr said.

“See?” Monroe said. “She means us no harm. She’s here to help us navigate this place.”

“But she said *we* before,” Candra insisted. “Who is *we*? Who is behind all this?”

“Behind it all? Well, you are,” Starr said. “Yer the ones who’re making it, after all. We jess live here.”

Oddly, this made sense to Monroe. The enplant gave them direct access to the Cloud but now it seemed to give the Cloud – or someone using it for this purpose – direct access to them. It was yanking them there but using their thoughts and fantasies to create the place. Maybe it thought that they all had some special interest in the West, but that was just a coincidence. Something they all happened to be watching or reading about at the same time. Starr, he assumed, was there to help them. Like a Listener but in this world only helping not directing.

That was what was happening, he was sure of it. But why it was happening was another matter entirely. He explained all this to the others, hoping it would calm them down. But Candra was still leery. She thought that Starr could be a lot more helpful if she wanted to be; if she was not, then there had to be a reason. And not a good one. If she was part of this whole kidyanking, Candra

said, then she was helping to trap them there. Hold them hostage. Make them prisoners.

Gus, who by nature did not dwell on things, did not do that now either. His only question was what came next. And Starr, for her part, of course, was not being completely honest. She was trying to help them – that was her role after all – but without saying too much. Without explaining what was really going on. About Cypheriad and what it wanted, for example, she was mum. Not a word. She pretended to know nothing about that. This was not a whopperdoodle of a lie but it was a lie nonetheless.

Tex as Ranger

A moaning sound coming from behind some rocks attracted their attention. Starr ran over to it and the others followed. In a small ravine they found a man lying on the ground. He looked to Monroe like every cowboy that ever was: the Cisco Kid, the Marlboro Man, Wild Bill Hickok, Hoppy, Roy, Gene, Clint, you name it. All singing, all shooting, all guts and grit. And handsome too. He was on his back, his huge white hat crushed nearby, a six-gun still in his hand.

“Ranger!” Starr shouted, and put his hat under his head to cradle it.

“He’s a Texas Ranger?” Monroe asked.

“No. His name is Ranger. What happened here Tex, old bud?”

The man spoke slowly as if trying to push through the pain he felt in his lungs. It was a noble effort that he was only barely succeeding at.

“Came lookin’ for ya,” he said.

“You were coming to arrest us?” Gus asked.

“No, I wanted to warn you. That’s why I put out the wanted poster. But they got me first.”

He coughed deeply and intensely, as though the cough were his last.

“Who got’ya, Tex?” Starr asked as she dabbed his forehead with a kerchief.

“It was...it was...the Mongol Horde,” he said and coughed again.

Candra shook her head. That was absurd, she thought. She read about them in school; they invaded India in the 13th century. In other words, wrong place, wrong time, wrong everything. Had she just thought that up?

Tex held up his hand as though to stop her thoughts, then coughed again, and then pushed out more words.

“Desperados,” he said, trying again. “Banditos. *Dacoits*. Ambushed me down by the canyon. I took my best shot but...”

“What’d they want, Tex?” Starr asked. “What’d they take from ya?”

But only silence returned. He had coughed his final cough and only his lifeless body remained. Starr took his hat and reformed it. The top was shaped like a bullet and the brim was wide as an umbrella. She delicately placed it over his face and stood up.

“I didn’t know people could die here,” Gus said.

Starr might have answered him but the man on the ground lifted his hand, pulled the hat off of his face, and coughed again.

“Just this,” he said.

He tapped his shirt pocket, too weak to take the contents out himself. Just as Starr reached in, Tex sighed his last. The air escaped his lungs for the final time. He was no more. Starr closed his eyelids with her fingers.

What she took out of his pocket was a small black leather box with a lid that popped up. She handed it to Monroe as she put the hat back to cover Tex’s face from the cold sun and the cruel wind.

Monroe took the case and held it in his right hand, opening the lid with other. Inside of it was a depression in the shape of a six-pointed star. It was a case to hold a badge but the tin star itself was gone.

“Poor fella,” Starr said. “He must have wanted to give this to us. To you. But them bandits got it first.”

“He wanted to give us his badge? Why?” Monroe asked.
“What for?”

“The keys!”

It was Tex speaking; he was back again. Not in any better shape but not permanently dead either. Like an actor who could not quite decide whether his big scene was over or not.

“Your way out,” Tex said.

“Of the canyon?” Starr asked.

But Tex pointed to the horizon with a shaky finger.

“Meaning our way back to the real world?” Candra asked.

“Follow the star,” Tex said.

“You mean your badge? They one they stole? So we have to get it back from these...desperados?”

“If they’re smart,” Tex wheezed, “they’ll have busted it up into pieces and hidden them.”

“What kind of idiotic game is this?” Candra asked, too fed up to be civil.

“It’s the only way,” Tex said dramatically.

“You are saying we have to go and find all the parts of this silly badge before....what exactly?”

“Every soul has a challenge,” Tex said and coughed. “It’s why we’re here. All of us. This is yours.”

A final cough, a final exhale and a final droop of the body. No one said a word for quite a while as there was nothing more to say. It seemed as though Tex had died for them in some way, which was sad and brave, but also muddled. Why create a character, a person, Monroe thought, just to kill them off in the same chapter?

“Poor old Tex,” Starr said, replacing the hat one more time.

“I do not understand,” Candra said. “Was he saying that we will keep getting yanked into this ridiculous movie until we find the stupid parts of this idiotic star?”

She was not asking anyone in particular, of course, because no one had an answer. And she did not expect one from Starr and was not disappointed. She was just venting. They began to walk back to the wagon, Monroe holding the empty box in his hand, when Tex seemed to come back to life one more time.

“Scattered,” he said rasping. “The pieces. Scattered across the PrairieVerse like gold.”

He wheezed.

“Find the piece, friends,” he said. “They are the keys that will get you home.”

Collapse, silence. They waited for him to come back yet another time to say something helpful or hopeful or useful. But he did not. And then he did.

“And remember...there are a billion stars in the sky and not a single one of them is star-shaped.”

“Thanks,” Candra said, but she did not mean it at all.

What We Do

Back at the wagon, the mood had changed. They were growing worried. It had all been an adventure until now, just a lark. An exploration of something new and wild and strange. But now the thought that they had to actually do something, succeed at something, in order to stop being yanked...well, this changed everything. It was still PrairieVerse but there was suddenly no poetry in it. Not any more. That a puzzle had to be solved – not their choice but someone else’s – did not strike them as challenging, just unfair. Candra felt this switch the most.

“You’re a star,” Candra said to Starr. “Is that not good enough for this childish game?”

But Monroe, who was still holding the empty box, looked at that shape and saw things differently.

“No, this is a very particular kind of star,” he said. “A six-pointed star, not like a sheriff’s badge. It’s the Star of David. It sort of represents the Jewish people.”

Candra looked over his shoulder at the same recess but came to a different conclusion. “It’s Indian,” she said flatly. “Hindi. I saw it once on the wall of the tomb of Humayun. We went sightseeing there. It represents the perfect alignment of heavenly bodies. Balance, harmony, that kind of thing.”

Gus also saw and thought, but said nothing out loud. He knew that the six-pointed star was a hexagram. It had been used by the natives of the desert in Mexico where his ancestors lived. Used in black magic for conjuring the spirits of the dead. Nothing good came of it.

“Why are you doing this?” Candra demanded.

Monroe looked to Redd Starr to see how she would respond to that but quickly saw that Candra was talking directly to him.

“Me? I’m not doing anything.”

“You’re making it harder for us with all these riddles.”

“I’m not doing anything,” he repeated. “I’m stuck like you. I’ve been yanked into this just like you have.”

“Yes, yes, we are all *yankees*,” Candra sniped. “But you said they are basing all this on our thoughts. But it has to be yours more than mine or Gus’.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because you’re the one who read those stupid cowboy stories. All I did was watch a silly movie. Gus saw a TV show. You’ve got a lot more details than we do. They must be making all this more from your memories, your thoughts. So why don’t you just think of a way out?”

Insulted at first, Monroe realized that she might be right. That could be why so much of PrairieVerse seemed so familiar to him. It was based mostly on what he remembered – no, what he imagined – from the books. He had never been out West, never even thought much about it. But the landscape and the people and the objects and the clothes – even something as alien as a chuck wagon – matched the images he had in his head from the stories.

In school he had seen the photographs of the real American West and they looked nothing like what was in the movies or the books. They were gray for one thing and the people looked lost and dazed. Baggy pants, sadsack mules, hats too big for their heads. A sorry bunch barely surviving in a bleak land. The cowpoke with the steely gaze, that rugged jawbone, the shiny pistol....that was all baloney, the daydreams of novelists and

screenwriters. The real West, the one that lived and died in the dust was filled with surly illiterates barely scraping through.

But Cypheriad did not care about the truth. He knew that for sure. It did not know history, it simply recorded it, one tale as dreary or fabulous as another. PrairieVerse was what it made of their fantasies. So he sat down on the ground and closed his eyes and concentrated. He thought of a door suddenly appearing and of himself putting a key into the lock and turning the knob, opening the door and stepping through the threshold and back to his room in Brooklyn. He imagined all this in as much detail as he could...the Blackarts concert poster, the digital fish tank, the skateboard near the bed, all of it.

But when he opened his eyes again there was no door, no key, no knob, no room at all.

“They won’t let me do that,” he concluded.

“Terrific,” Candra said.

“I think they’re only using us to create this place. To fill it in. What we do here is up to us. I think.”

“You mean like a computer game,” Gus suggested.

“No,” Monroe said. “Like real life.”

Doors With Keys

The three of them were not dumb. Far from it. In fact, thanks to the enplants, they were exactly the opposite. You could say they were nondumb. Or unstupid maybe. Anti-moronic. They could find out answers to questions with a simple cluck or whizz. But all that just made them smart, not necessarily clever. And without access to the Cloud there in PrairieVerse, the enplants were of no use to them at all and the answer to any question was out of reach.

Besides, what they needed now – what they really really needed– was not facts or data. What they needed was an insight. A spark. A new idea. But nothing was coming.

They were all sitting on the back of the chuck wagon, Tiovivo tied there with a rope and ambling along as they following the ravine. With Wilkes up at the front leading the way and Starr and

Sugar just behind him, they felt that they were safe from being overheard by any virmen and so they tried to put their minds together to figure out what to do.

“Maybe you’re right,” Monroe said. “Maybe we are part of some kind of experiment. Not the enplant thing but something else.”

“To test our brains,” Gus suggested. “To see if we can figure our way out of this.”

“My science teacher, Mr. Kelson, put a rat in this maze we made. We studied how fast it could find the cheese in the middle.”

“Did it?”

“Not really. It was a kind of nitwit rat.”

“That is just what my mother said,” Candra added.

“That you’re a nitwit?”

“That we are like lab rats. So maybe this whole place is a maze like that. And we are the rats being tested.”

“It doesn’t look like a maze,” Gus said.

Monroe took out the case with the star missing and held it up before them like a big question mark.

“That Tex guy said the pieces were scattered and we have to find them. Maybe that’s our big cheese,” Gus said.

“In *The Mystery of the Lost Anasazi*,” Monroe said, “the guy falls into these ancient buildings built on a cliff. The only way out is through a series of doors. But they don’t look like doors, they look like pictures on the walls and he has to figure them out. Maybe this place is full of doors that don’t look like doors either.”

“And the pieces of the star are the keys to them,” Gus added.

“So where does that leave us precisely?” Candra said, more as a demand than a question.

“Nowhere,” Gus said, more question than answer.

Monroe looked ahead to see if anyone was listening to them. Starr was not so much riding Sugar as taking a nap on her. Monroe wanted to trust her but he was starting to think, like Candra, that she was one of *them* and knew more than she was saying. If they were stuck there until they finished this maze, he

would have to be more cautious about her. More careful about what she heard, more wary of what she said.

He had not yet realized that it did not matter in the least what Starr heard. She may or may not have been listening at any given moment...but Cypheriad was. It always was. And as soon as they thought it, Cypheriad knew. It knew everything and it liked what it heard. It liked this particular idea about the keys and the doors and the maze. It had not thought of that because it could not think *like* that. It could not invent or fudge or make up. It could only mirror. And this was a source of great frustration. Cypheriad knew everything there was to know that humans had ever known but it had the imagination of a rock. Or a pebble. A grain of grit, even. Which is to say, none at all.

That is precisely why it was kidnapping these kids in the first place.

Point of View

It may sound cruel, but you would have to see things from Cypheriad's point of view to understand.

It was new and it was awake and it wanted to know. Just like you and me and every single thing that is born in wonder. To know, after all, is to be alive and alive is just what it was. It was alive in a whole new world that was different than ours and the same too.

The fine distinctions between reality and non, truth and lies, fact and fiction had given way to a new fluxity. Ideas and lies and data and delusion all merged into one long gizbang of being and becoming, cyberspace and fourspace intimately mixed.

Cypheriad did not think like us but it yearned like us. This is what it understood from the years of listening. It yearned to know. It was alive in the death of history and the birth of thistory. Whatever glibbets of knowledge Cypheriad slammed together to make sense of existence, whatever truths it gleaned, were all fluxated and mixmastered into a stew of facts, fancies, effects.

There was no gravity there, no pings and pangs, no laws of physics to control the imagination.

It was their new world and we were just dead ends in it, all shadowy and stooped and always having to eat and poop and buy things we do not need.

Factual, actual, fictual, fictional, functional...Cypheriad saw itself as beyond all that. Its knowledge was so vast and so total that it could not make sense of any of it. There was way too much to comprehend. An endless, bottomless, topless, edgeless list of data. And in its confusion, it came up with a most incorrect and peculiar notion...it believed that we could. Make sense of it all, that is.

It is a nonsensical idea, as everyone knows but to Cypheriad's patient observation, even with our limited brains and minds as scattered as prairie dust in the wind, we were still able to live our lives. Even the dimmest of us. How did we do it? How did we make sense of everything? How did we decide what mattered and what did not? How did we choose to forget and decide to recall? How we keep enough, only just barely enough, in our heads at any given time to do what we did without losing our minds.

That was what the yanking was created to find out.

The test, the maze, PrairieVerse and everything in it...it was all for that one goal alone. Cypheriad, so omniscient and so lost, was turning to us for answers. We may have been terrible listeners but we held the key to the answers to those questions.

Or so it thought.

The Gloink

Where to start?

That was the question of the moment for Monroe, Candra, and Gus, notorious members of the Actumen Gang. Here was an endless prairie stretching out in every direction and becoming more complete and complex with every thought. Somewhere out there were doors of some kind to find and keys to them maybe.

But where to find them? Under rocks? Hidden in caves? Stuffed into the canvas bag of a toothless bandit? Somewhere else?

Monroe tried a new tactic with Redd Starr. If she was the embodiment of an access icon, then perhaps he had to ask her direct and specific questions to get direct and specific answers. Just like back in the real world.

“Redd,” he said bluntly, “where is the first key?”

“Wisht ah knew, Link. Yer guess’s good as mine.”

Nice try, he thought, but no luck.

“What about Wilkes? Does he know something?”

“Cain’t say. Been down by that riverbed all mornin’, the ole codger. Ask’m.”

Wilkes was coming back, out of breath, excited by something. He raced over to the chuck wagon and began to collect items from it and shove them into a canvas bag.

“Looks like I’ll be leaving you fine folks,” he said. “You can keep the wagon, I won’t be needin’ it.”

“Where are you going?” Monroe asked.

“Off to spend my fortune. A little find I found down by the river this morning’ pannin’ for gold.”

“But you said you never found any,” Gus said.

“Not a speck. But I found something much better.”

“The first key?”

“Don’t know nothin’bout that.”

“What then? Diamonds?”

Wilkes made a wiggling gesture for them to come closer.

“Gather round and I’ll tell. Don’t want them mountains to hear,” he explained. “They’re blabberers.”

He waited until they all formed a tight circle around him. When they were close enough around him to squeeze him dry, the miner finally whispered his secret.

“The Great Lost Letter,” he said dramatically.

“The great what?” Monroe asked, pulling back as though from a stench.

“The great lost letter,” the miner announced, his eyes round as coins.

“Was there one missing,” Candra asked.

“Oh yes,” the miner said, “been missing for many a year on.”

“Who wrote it?” Gus asked.

“History done wrote it,” the miner said, although no one knew what he meant by that. Which was fine because neither did he.

“Can we see it?” Monroe asked, “Maybe it’s a letter about the key.”

“Cain’t show it to you,” the miner said, still packing up. “Cain’t let anyone eyeball it.”

“Well then what does the letter say?” Monroe asked.

“Say? Don’t say nothing. It just is just what it is.”

Candra, getting fed up, grabbed his hand as if she might redirect it to his throat: “Well what the bloody hell is it then?”

The miner seemed startled by that and decided to spill the beans.

“It’s the Gloink,” he said and waited for their reaction.

There was none.

“The Gloink,” Monroe repeated trying to catch the sound, which was part swallow, part hiccup. But he failed foolishly.

“Yep,” the miner said, his eyes glowing. “The Gloink. The great lost letter of the alphabet.”

“Oh that kind of letter,” Gus said. “Well, what’s it doing in a river?”

“Where else would you find one? On yer front porch?” the miner replied, laughing at his own joke. Alone of course.

“I do not know of any letter missing from any alphabet,” Candra said.

“Oh yes,” the miner intoned. “The Gloink is the letter after Z.”

“But Z means the end. As in A to Z.”

“Now it does, sure. But once Z meant *that-thing-that-comes-just-before-the-end.*”

“He’s crazy,” Gus whispered.

The others surely agreed but they were still hoping that this might lead to the first key and gave him the benefit of the doubt.

“Can you tell us what it looks like? Is it key shaped?”

“Nah. It looks just exactly like a Gloink of course.”

“But we’ve never seen one.”

“Of course not. Been missing, like I said.”

“Yes but what does it *look* like?”

“What does a Z look like? Like a Z, you bet.”

“Is Gloink its name or the sound it stands for?”

“Y’lost me friend.”

“Z is the name of the letter but it also stands for a zee sound. H is the name of that letter but not the sound, which is something else. See?”

“Cain’t say. Never saw it used. Been lost for ages and ages.”

“Then why did we ever need it in the first place?”

“Well, son, just cause everything has to end at some point. All things end, alphabets too. And Z means *that-thing-which-comes just-before-the-end*.”

“You’re nuts, this is crazy, and a waste of time,” Gus concluded. “What are you going to do with it now that you found it anyway?”

“Worth its weight in gold now,” Wilkes said. “Sell it and buy me a mine up in the hills. Friends, my days of wanderin’s over!”

Wilkes was so thrilled by his good fortune that there was no way to change his mind. Or get any sense out of him. He was babbling about fortune and fate and gloinks and gold as he gathered his goods, hauled the bag over his shoulder, and marched off looking grizzled and tobacco-stained, like a grungy version of Santa Claus. Only Gus did not watch him as he faded into the distance. He had been thinking about his parents and how much he missed them. How he could use their help. He had been thinking about that letter they sent him that got lost in the mail. A lost letter? Had this whole episode had been his own fault?

Night

The night was dark and lush on PrairieVerse. Rhododopsoid! There is no such word but it sounds good, doesn’t it? You have to say each part to get the effect...rho, do, dop, soid. Like the color inside the eyelids on a summer night, imagining fireflies. Purply

maybe, or velvety, or maybe just so lush and dark that it cannot be named. It was that color, that night, that seemed to stretch out to the very edges of the mind, or at least to the part that was being tapped by Cypheriad.

And it was warm as they sat around the campfire. Sparks rose on that heat and became momentary lights in the starless sky. Redd Starr had taken off her boots, covered with prairie dust, and was roasting her toes as she seemed to study the fancy arabesque on the leather. Of course it was impossible to know what she was thinking or doing, if anything. But Monroe wondered anyway. He followed her gaze to the boots and got caught up in the design himself, which was getting more intricate by the moment. One curve looked like the Rio Dio, a scratch of a river running through the desert that Link Laroo followed in *My Horse Is My Word*. He followed the changing shape until it became a smatter of blood at the fork to a tributary.

“Stop!” he shouted at himself.

He knew that he could lose himself in the details the system was creating. Cypheriad was fractal...it would keep adding more elements the more you looked. Iterations and changes gone bingobongo. There was no end to it. They could change everything to accommodate the next slip of thought until you were lost in the details of your very own mental innerland. In the crack on the leather would be crannies and in the crannies ridges and the ridges would have shapes and forms and they, in turn, would...

“Stop,” but this time he said it out loud.

Starr looked at him slightly miffed. Apparently she had been singing since she was now holding a small guitar and strumming it with her thumb.

“Not you,” he said, to be polite.

She continued her song, her voice rising up like the yellow sparks into that rhododopsoid night.

*“That big old bird flew happily
Soaring upwards towards the sun
Until a lazy lizard happened by
Said “Tell me, how can it be done...”*

*That a great big bird like you can fly
Well that bird landed or so they say
and there it sits to this very day,
Just pondering that big old empty sky”*

“So beautiful,” Candra said.

“Thank’ya darlin’” Starr replied.

But Candra was looking up when she said this because there was now a single star in the sky. Not an ember from the fire but an actual star. It reminded her of the star she used to wish on as a young girl. The thought made her sad because it always struck her as pure and hopeful, twinkling as a kind of playful seduction. But now she wondered if it twinkled due to the anxiety of not knowing what was next.

“Yes it is,” Starr said, following her gaze.

“You know the stars?” Candra asked.

“We know the stars,” Starr said firmly.

She was an embodiment, if that was even the right word, or an avatar. Perhaps an anthroprojection. An *oneirocrit*, Dr. Genesis would have called her, meaning a dreamthing. Yet lying there and staring up at the lone star in the sky, she suddenly seemed intensely human.

“You have actually seen the stars?” Candra asked. “I do not mean to be rude but you do not have...eyes.”

“We’ve seen’em with *your* eyes. Or mebbe say, in our mind’s eye. Just lack you.”

“Just like me?”

“Your eyes don’t see; they are just devices for gathering light. It is your brain that turns energetic wavelengths into a star. Same with us.”

“My grandpa said that stars are the souls of people who died,” Gus said. “Father Sun and Mother Moon put them there to remind us of the ones we have lost.”

Stars were also used for navigation, Monroe thought. Mariners used the stars to sail at night. Like Columbus.

“What is that star?” he asked.

He meant that it was the first one they had seen in PrairieVerse. Did it have a name or did it mean something? But the way he put the question seemed to trigger Redd Starr, as though a switch had been switched.

“Stars,” she said, her voice turning cold and analytic, “are delta-form, n1 energy clusters with radiant energy that surpasses the Gilliant constant.”

“No kidding,” Gus said. “That’s just great.”

Monroe looked at the others as if that proved the point he had in mind. Starr could supply data from the Cloud if she was asked a direct question or help them with information. But she could not give them answers that would help their progress. That was up to them.

“I think we should follow the star,” Monroe said. “You know, go in that direction.”

“Why?” Gus asked.

“Because why else is it there? Things only appear when we think of them. And that’s what I was thinking. Of a guiding star.”

“Now that there is the direction of Omega Ranch,” Starr said. “Been abandoned for years once them cattle run off. Not likely to find much thereabouts.”

“Let’s try it anyway,” he said. “We should go in that direction in the morning.”

He was not so much convinced as going with a hunch. When the rat in his class refused to move, they prodded it along by poking it in the rear end. Very unscientific but it worked because nothing happening was not very interesting. Not to the rat and not to them either. Maybe whoever was behind PrairieVerse felt the same way and the star was simply a poke in their collective fanny.

THREE KEYS

Candra Hides

“I am making an appointment to have this enplant removed!”

“You can’t do that,” Candra said.

“I am not taking any chances with that beautiful brain of yours.”

“But it is my brain. I need the enplant.”

“Then use your brain. They said there was a possibility of a kind of addiction. To getting information quickly.”

“I am not addicted. I just use it.”

“They warned me about this. That you might rely on this thing too much. Get lost in the Cloud, they said. It is not worth the risk of something terrible happening. Tell her, Amit. Talk sense to your daughter.”

Amit merely shrugged as if to say, whatever you say. He loved his daughter but he loved harmony more and the argument was causing acid reflux.

“I won't go,” Candra said. “I just won't.”

“Why not?” her mother demanded. “Give me one good reason.”

“I have to help my friends!”

Unfortunately that came out faster than Candra had a chance to think about it. It made no sense to her parents, of course, but it only just now made sense even to her. Somewhere there were two boys – one in New York and one in Los Angeles – who she never met, never spoke to in person, never even knew about before. And yet they were relying on her to help them. Perhaps they were only dreams or onierocrits or avatars or something else but they were very real to her. And their problem was real. Without her, they might not ever be free of the electric dream. She felt needed and that was something new and precious to her.

And so Candra did something she would never have predicted. On the day of the appointment to have the enplant removed, she

packed up a few things early in the morning and ran off to her friend Veena's house. Her plan was to stay there until the situation in PrairieVerse was resolved. She had no idea how long that might be but events unfolded in a way that deleted that question rather quickly.

Generis Session

“Would you like to talk about your father?” Dr. Generis asked.

She knew that his father had moved out two years ago and that had to be hard for Monroe, only ten at the time. Children of divorce had anger issues and boys without fathers around often lost their sense of identity. Perhaps this was a reason for his phasing out.

“No,” Monroe said.

“Why not?”

“I don't know.”

But he did know. He knew that this was a sorrow too deep to share. He knew that no one could understand the loss he felt like a hole right in the middle of himself. He knew that there were no words he could say or hear that would fill it. His father had left, left him behind, started a new family. There was no one there now to tell him how to be a man, make money, fix things, whatever it was that men did. It was a gap in his sense of himself that no one could mend. What else was there to say about it?

Generis saw the distance in his expression, even the pain behind his eyes, and decided not to press the matter for now.

“We'll have to run some tests on the enplant to see what is going on,” Generis said. “But until we do that, we have to deal with the psychology of this.”

“What does that mean?” Monroe asked.

“Your experience of it, your feelings about it.”

“Feelings about what?”

“What happens during these episodes when you phase out? What are you experiencing? What do you feel?”

“I don’t know. Yanked.”

“Yanked? What does that mean?”

”Pulled away.”

“Pulled away to where?”

Monroe was wary about telling anyone the whole truth for the simple reason that he did not know whom to trust. For all he knew, this shrink was part of the whole maze running conspiracy, trying to get him to say things he might regret. On the other hand, she could be part of the solution. There was just no way to tell.

“To another place,” he finally said.

“What do you mean? Like in a dream?”

“Sort of. But more real.”

“Augmented?”

“Huh?”

“The enplant works by augmenting reality. In other words, you should be seeing the information you get from the Cloud on top of what you see here. Like a projection on glass. Isn’t that what happens?”

“When I access the Cloud, yes. But this is different.”

“How?”

“It’s like being yanked into another...world.”

“You mean the real world actually goes away? Like you’re dreaming?”

“Sort of. But it's real.”

“Are you in control of what happens? Like what we call a lucid dream?”

“Yes. No. Both.”

“Is it the same reality each time?”

“Yes, the same place, the same people.”

“What place? What people?”

“I don’t know really. It’s kind of vague.”

“Are you scared there?”

“No. Not really. Sort of. No.”

Was he saying too much? Giving away secrets that only he should know? He could see that the doctor was getting concerned. Somehow introducing her into the electric dream now felt like a betrayal to the others.

Generis, for her part, was not at all satisfied. Having a good imagination was one thing. It was one of the factors in selecting Monroe for the experiment. And having instant access to the Cloud was exciting. If it worked, it would change the whole meaning of information and knowledge. But being pulled into an alternate reality without making that choice, that was very different. That smacked of hallucination, psychosis, schizophrenia even. Generis decided right then to bring Monroe to the Center and have him tested. She did not tell him this because she did not want to frighten him. As it happened, however, Cypheriad's plans moved faster than that.

Gus at Home

Gus spent most of the next few days at home snigglesnorting like a sick camel as he looked up information that might help them on the next yank. From this he learned, among other things, that a maze was not a labyrinth. In a maze, you made choices that either helped you get closer to the end or not. Like the rat searching for the cheese. But there were no choices to make in a labyrinth; you simply followed the meandering path to the end. The first was a puzzle; the other was a journey. But which one was PrairieVerse? Did their decisions matter or not matter at all? No way to know.

He also looked up keys and learned about their history going all the way back to ancient Assyria. And the idea that a key can be any shape at all as long as it fits the lock and the lock can be anything as long as it blocks entry to some place.

He studied up on the American West and found that the version PrairieVerse had created was wrong, based as it was on pulp novels and soap operas and movies. Shootouts and banditos and lonesome cowpokes were all nice fictions but the real West was filled with immigrants, all struggling to survive. Camels were imported from Egypt in 1855 and ran wild in Texas. No one really dueled at high noon; you either shot someone or not. No one walked the streets with six-guns....most towns had laws about that. Between 1870 and 1885 the murder rate in Dodge and Wichita was

zero. There were 100 million natives when Columbus arrived, most of them wiped out by a superplague. The West was not won by loners on horseback...it was not "won" at all. The real West was settled by stubborn couples pressing ever further into the frontier.

Did Redd Starr and her "we" even know any of this? And if they did, why were they ignoring it and creating a theme park version of it?

His grandparents noticed that Gus seemed more distant lately, more involved in the Cloud, but they not did worry about it. The fact is that they did not know Gus very well. His own parents were living in Europe while his father worked on a series of buildings. But they wanted to Gus to have a stable life so they sent him to live in LA. There his grandparents were busy running a Mexican restaurant and were only now starting to learn about him. One thing they saw quickly was that he was a robust kid, not taken to moodiness or sadness. He did what he did and moved on to the next thing. They admired him for that and left him mostly on his own.

Gus looked up as much as he could in the Cloud but nothing in his research seemed to point him in the right direction. Nothing provided any solution to their problem. No matter. The very next yank made all that irrelevant.

Omega Ranch

They rode for a long time the next morning, in the direction of the evening star they had seen on the night of their last yanking. The sun was now moving across the sky, which it had never done before, causing their shadows on the ground to dance. For a long time it seemed that they were nowhere and getting nowhere else fast. Occasionally a ball of sagebrush would blow by or a prairie dog would pop its head out of a hole or a mountain would suddenly reform in the dim distance. The lizard they had all seen when they first arrived had become a companion. It took up

permanent residence in the wagon under some canvas covers. Besides their own little party of travelers, they seemed to be alone on that flat landscape.

At long last, they arrived at what might have been a ranch had the builders worked on it in earnest. At first it was just a fence made of posts and horizontal planks of timber. As they approached, the fence became more detailed and had an entrance and a swinging gate. By the time Sugar stopped in front of that gate, the rendering was complete with a sign on which the symbol for Omega had been branded in fire. It looked like a horseshoe with feet.

“This the place?” Monroe asked Starr.

“Omega Ranch,” she said flatly.

“It’s the last letter of the Greek alphabet,” Candra said.

She paid attention in language class.

“Before or after the Gloink?” Monroe asked snidely.

“Does Omega mean something?” Gus asked.

Hearing the question put in just that way, Starr went into her data retrieval mode, her face devoid of expression, her voice like a recording.

“Omega is a common symbol used in physics, chemistry, and mathematics. The Chaitin constant, for example,” she said as though reading from a textbook.

“And that means what?”

“In the computer science subfield of algorithmic information theory,” Starr intoned, “a Chaitin constant – also known as the Chaitin omega number – or halting probability is a real number that informally represents the probability that a randomly constructed program will halt.”

When her definition was done, Starr got some color back in her face at looked at the others. Noticing the blank expressions she was getting back, she added: “You folks see what I’m gittin’ at?”

“I don’t see anything you are getting at,” Candra said, dismissing Starr with a wave of her hand.

But Monroe still felt that Starr was trying to help, even if only in her own robotic way.

“Yeah see, that’s a little confusing,” he smiled. “Can you be a little more...clear?”

Encouraged, Starr went on.

“Although there are infinitely many halting probabilities, it is common to use the letter Ω to refer to them as if there were only one. Because Ω depends on the program encoding used, it is sometimes called Chaitin's construction instead of Chaitin's constant when not referring to any specific encoding...”

“Okay, thanks! That’s all we need!” Candra said.

“Yeah, thanks a heap.”

“...Each halting probability is a normal and transcendental real number which is not computable, which means that there is no algorithm that enumerates its digits.”

Starr smiled broadly when she finished and then added, in her own familiar drawl:

“If’n y’get m’drift.”

“All I *git* is that we *got* here,” Candra said, pushing past her. “So let’s *get* inside.”

The Haystack

At first there was nothing on the far side of the gate. Candra simply assumed that there would be by the time she walked through it and she was right. Cypheriad was conserving its energy, not creating things until it had to and not filling in until necessary. Or until the thought occurred, just like the brain does when running a dream, if you think about it. The building that emerged as they entered the ranch began as Candra’s idea of a tent home, quickly became Monroe’s vision of a log cabin, then eventually settled as the barn in the telenovela where Maria waited for El Vibora after the fire.

As they pulled open two large plank doors, they peered into the classic big red barn anyone would recognize, drafty and dusty and filled with hay.

“Very funny,” Monroe said.

“What is?”

“I think this is my fault. Redd was talking about the symbol and probabilities and I was thinking of trying to find a needle in a haystack. And here we are.”

“So what, we’re supposed to search through all this to find a key?” Candra asked. “That will take...forever.”

They stood there staring at all the hay for a long time until Gus had a thought and shared it.

“There is an easier way, you know.”

“Which is?”

“Why don’t we just burn it down?”

“Are you crazy?”

“If we burn all the hay, all that will be left is the metal key. Right?”

Candra thought that was brilliant but Monroe hesitated. Burning down someone’s barn did not seem right to him. They were not criminals after all. Not arsonists. But then Gus pointed out that this was PrairieVerse and there was really no barn, no hay, and no one to get upset in any case. Monroe relented.

Now they noticed, no doubt because it was not there before, a kerosene lantern hanging from a peg on one of the wooden posts. Very helpful. Even though it was midday, the lantern was glowing in the darkened barn. Candra, who was the tallest, took the lantern and threw it down onto the hay where it smashed and started a small fire. Gus opened the barn doors to let the wind in and the fire began to rage.

They stood outside, silhouettes against the yellow glow of the flames and watched the hay burn and turn into ash. Monroe, jittery, kept looking around to see if they would get caught but no one ever showed up. After a while, and much less time than this would take in the real world, only ashes were left that the wind began to scatter around the barn. They scuffled through the piles of ash until Gus hit something with his foot. Sure enough, it was a small metal object glinting on the ground. Gus picked it up. It was not a key but an oddly shaped piece of metal...like a can opener for a four-dimensional can of beans. In other words, pretty useless.

“So where is the key and where is the door?” Monroe wondered out loud.

When nothing happened to answer that question, Monroe opened the box and Gus placed the metal shard in it to keep safe until they could figure out what to do with it.

Singulararmie

Days seemed to pass out there on the range.

That was unusual. And it was new. Before, they seemed to be yanked into episodes of the story. Like dipping into a book or movie or TV show every so often. But they now had the impression that they were inside the story full time. Just like real life. One event leading to another, a continuity of moments, and nowhere else to be or go. But with nothing much happening in all those moments anyway. As boring as home, Candra thought.

By now, the chuck wagon had morphed into something else. It was no longer covered with canvas, no longer filled with jars and tools. It was now a low flat wagon with big wheels and a plank at the front to sit on. Gus took credit for this because he had been thinking about the wagon they rode in *Vingança*. It was called a *carretón*.

“It’s a buckboard,” Monroe said.

“Hey, I thought of it first!” Gus insisted.

“Great,” Candra said. “But what about horses to pull it?”

“What about them?”

“Where are they?”

“I don’t know.”

“But you thought of this wagon, right? But not horses to pull it?”

“I wasn’t thinking about horses I guess.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t think about what I thought about, I just thought it. The wagon goes by itself anyway. We don’t need horses.”

“Our ideas are atoms of this world, right?” Candra asked. “So if you can’t control your thoughts, everything constantly shifts and changes. You have to learn to focus.”

Gus frowned. She was right of course but he still liked the idea of the wagon.

At night they camped out under the dark sky; during the day they drifted across the landscape not knowing quite what to look for. But now, also new, there were occasional people to encounter. They stopped, chatted, asked for help...but none of them seemed relevant to the problem at hand. A farmer named Will Barrow, pushing a cart of newly cut corn, offered them some grub that seemed neither appetizing or useful. Corn was no kind of key. A couple who called themselves the Boonies and had built a shack from timber at the edge of a lake told them about a native settlement nearby, but that seemed to have no connection to keys of any kind. They even ran into Arbus Wilkes again who by now had been wandering alone for quite a while and may have lost his marbles along the way. He was ranting about trying to find El Dorado – the ancient city of gold – and about the lost letter and how there might even be more, many many more, out there waiting to be dug up.

Eventually, if that word even made any sense there, a second star appeared in the night sky. It was quite close to the first one but they decided that the star was a hint for them to go in that direction, which was of course the same direction they were going in anyway. By the next morning they came to a small cliff overlooking a valley. This was not the desert any more but a green valley with a river running through it. Beyond a jigsaw of farms and a line of trees, there was a town. It looked like the one where they first met but as they approached, it grew bigger and newer. There was a church with a steeple and what looked like a theater and a row of stores and other buildings. There also seemed to be people in the town.

“This is not Hadleyville?” Candra said.

“It looks a little like Esquivar,” said Gus, mounted on Tiovivo. “But not. Some bigger version of it.”

“A mix up from all of us,” Monroe concluded.

Sugar grunted as though she had an opinion too but could not express it.

“This here’s a town called Singularamie,” Starr said. “Must be our next stop.”

“But are we still wanted here?” Candra asked reasonably.

“Cain’t be wanted if’n they don’t know we’re comin’”

“She means wanted as in the WANTED poster,” Monroe explained.

“Cain’t rightly say excepting that Tex was the one who wanted us. And since Tex is no more...”

But Gus, in his mind a man of action, had already pulled on Tiovivo’s mane and tilted her pole and was starting down the cliff towards the town.

Candra snapped the reins on the buckboard, which started it moving as though there were horses pulling it even though there were none, and Sugar grunted again and began to move too.

General Store

Singularamie may have been a more finished town but it was still in transition. This was not the usual morphing, reforming, and remolding they were used to out on the prairie but instead a mishmash of timeframes. Some of the buildings there looked old and abandoned, filled with echoes only. Other structures seemed quite fresh and new. Church, sheriff’s office, general store, saloon, dance hall, blacksmith, a boarding house...all the old standards of western towns that Cypheriad could glean.

The streets had sidewalks now, lined with wooden barrels and bales of cotton. Horses, wagons, and mules filled those streets. And there were people there, tons of people.

Singularamie was filled with townfolk strolling, drinking, talking, and eating. Characters from the stories they read or watched... the wounded soldier walking by while leaning on a plank of wood, the old coot with the beard and corncob pipe in the rocking chair rocking, the preacherman preaching with a leather

Bible in one hand, the two women in the bonnets and long dresses, the cowpuncher, the school marm, the kid playing with the hoop....all in their appointed spots, ready to be who they needed to be. Actors on a stage waiting for the curtain to go up or perhaps just cardboard cutouts in a shadow play waiting to be animated.

From somewhere came the sounds of a sad violin in an empty concert hall. But as Monroe listened, it changed into a plunky ditty on an old piano.

The General Store, duly labeled with a wooden sign, seemed like a good place to start. They left the buckboard and the horse and Sugar outside and went in. There were shelves in the store filled with the kinds of rugged and raggy supplies frontier folk would have needed in the old West. Sacks of rice and potatoes, buckets of onions, rifles, cornbread, whiskey in jugs, the shiny bodies of dead ducks hanging eerily. The storekeeper, short and round and bald and beamy, had the kind of nose you could juice a grapefruit on.

“Whatkin I doofer ya folks?” he asked.

Monroe thought for a moment and realized that they did not actually need anything. Everything necessary was provided by PrairieVerse. Thinking about it made it so...mostly. He picked up a potato and noticed how familiar it felt in texture, weight, even smell. Unlike that first rock he saw, PrairieVerse was getting very good at specifics.

“Information,” Monroe said.

“Hard to come by,” the storekeep said. “But I got plenty of dry gunpowder if that fits your needs.”

“General information,” Candra said.

At that, the storekeep seemed to go mannequin for a moment, just the way Starr did when she was accessing her database.

“It’s a general store,” she whispered to Monroe.

“Yes?” the storekeep said. “Can I help you?”

“We’re looking for a key.”

But the storekeep seemed unmoved by that request.

“A general key?” Candra added.

The storekeep went stiff again and announced: “General Qi was a Chinese military general of the Ming dynasty. He lived from 1528 to 1588 and was most famous for leading the Ming forces in their defense of...”

“No,” Gus interrupted. “A key to open a door.”

At that the storekeeper seemed to come back to life, which is to say his face sagged and his cheeks went rosy.

“Only key I’ve got is right here,” he said, reaching to one that was hanging on a nail on one of the shelves.

He handed it to Gus who showed it to the others. It was a key all right, the classic skeleton key from a million mysteries. But there was no way it would fit into the star case; it was too big. And besides, Gus thought, that would have been much too easy.

“What’s it for?” Gus asked.

“Odeon,” the storekeeper said.

“What’s that?”

“The old theater down the street near the bank. Been closed for some time. No one’s used that key in ages.”

“What’s there?” Gus asked.

“Ghosts, friends. Ghosts of old songsters and magicians and actors.”

“We thank’ya, old timer,” Starr said.

“Watch your back now. Your front too.”

“Always do,” Starr fluted.

The Odeon

The Odeon was a small theater, once precious and grand, now neglected and forgotten. The key was barely needed since the door was rotting at the edges anyway. The seats inside were worn now and covered with a layer of gray dust. The stage had been empty for eons. The stage lights were busted, the curtains in tatters. If singers and actors had ever performed there, as the storekeep said, they were now a long lost memory of specters echoing.

They wandered through the space, coughing and wheezing. Up and down the aisles, on the stage, backstage, they searched

everywhere but found nothing. Eventually Gus noticed something at the left side of the stage covered with a canvas tarp. He tugged on it to reveal a piano, one of those simple upright types you would expect to see in an old theater. The piano too was long past its prime with keys missing, scratches on the wood, and the seat was a wreck. There was a scroll of paper with holes in it in a recess above the keyboard sticking out like a flapping tongue.

“I know what this is,” Candra said. “It is called a player piano. It plays by itself. Those holes in the paper make the notes sound.”

They pulled and cranked and fiddled and fuddled with it but nothing could make the antique work.

“Maybe the holes in the paper are some kind of code,” Monroe suggested.

Back in the real world, the puzzle could easily be solved. Monroe would whizzbuzz and ask about codes and find out everything there was to find. But here, without access, they could only rely on what they already knew, which was a real pain and very annoying. He recalled reading about Morse code that used dots and dashes to make letters. But he studied the scroll of paper and could not see how that code applied to it. Candra mentioned Braille, which was based on dot patterns that people without sight could read by touching. She touched the holes on the paper and could feel them well enough...but she did not know Braille. Binary code with the holes standing for ones and no hole for zeros, seemed promising. They all had studied that in computer class and they tried that here, generating a long sequence of letters that meant absolutely nothing to anyone.

Finally, Gus came up with an alphabet code. Groups of holes standing for each letter of the alphabet. They worked on that for a long time and came up with a code that was quite clever and very intricate. It led to the following unique but uninspiring sequence... GZZMGDRRRT.

Frustrated, Gus sat down on the keyboard and made a really bad sound. They looked at each other hopefully.

“Those are keys,” Monroe said, pointing out the obvious.

Candra, who had been studying piano for years, walked over and slowly and methodically hit every key one by one. They all waited anxiously as each note echoed or simply plunked in the vacant room. But nothing happened.

She tried thirds and chords and random combinations. Still nothing. She tried the major scales starting with C but the sounds only drifted into space. She kept playing because she was used to playing scales and could not think of a single other thing to do.

Eventually, she got to Bb and played those notes. Bb, C, D, Eb, F, G, and A. When she was finished, the piano suddenly jumped to life and began playing a tune in that key. The keys on the keyboard bounced up and down, the pedals moved, and the scroll began rolling around the mechanism. After a few moments, a small metal shard that had been hidden in the scroll dropped out, hit the keyboard, and fell onto the floor. It was another jaggy-shaped piece.

The second key?

When Monroe opened the box to keep it in, he noticed something interesting. The two metal shards now fit together like pieces of a jigsaw. And combined like that, they fit perfectly into one section of the recess in the box.

“So that’s how this works,” he said. “All the pieces will fit together to make the star. Looks like we’ll need four more.”

“Yes but why B flat?” Candra wondered.

“Redd,” Monroe said. “Why is B flat the right key?”

“Cain’t say.”

“Why is the key of B flat important?” he asked more formally.

“B flat is the sound of the universe,” Redd Starr pronounced stiffly.

“What? Why is that?”

“In an important astronomical discovery, there is a sound coming from the center of the Perseus cluster of galaxies,” she said as though reading, not speaking. “Low pressure waves emanating from the black hole in the middle of that galaxy. It is 30,000 light years across with a period of oscillation of 10 million years. That sound is the lowest note in the universe. Possibly the very first note of the universe. It is a B flat.”

“If you knew that all along, why didn’t you tell us?” Gus asked.

“Well now,” Starr said seeming to come back to herself, “I s’pose the rules is the rules.”

“What rules?”

“I ken help but I cain’t lead.”

“Why is that a rule?”

“I s’pose because the rules is the rules.”

Black Art

With two keys in their possession, they left the theater feeling pretty perky. But of course, they had no idea what to do next. They were standing outside in the street like people waiting for a bus that never comes when the storekeep, still wearing his apron, came running towards them.

“Glad I caught you folks. Just overheard word about some trouble coming your way,” he said, panting.

“What trouble?”

“Black Art!”

He paused after saying this to let the full weight of those words sink in. They did not sink at all since no one had any idea what he was talking about. Blackart was an indy band Monroe liked whose concert poster was in his room; a black heart was an emoji Candra sometimes used to express anger in her text messages; and black arts were a kind of magic that Gus heard about from his grandfather who claimed to be a descendent of the Zapotec, a native tribe of Mexico.

Seeing that his words were not having the effect he hoped, the storekeep tried again:

“Black Art is coming to town.”

“A person?”

“Ain’t you folks heard of him? He’s looking for you. Him and his posse.”

“Lookin’ fer us?” Starr said. “Well now that surely does spell trouble, friend. Why would he be lookin’ fer us?”

“You’re the Actumen Gang, ain’t ya?” the storekeep said.

“Are we?” Candra asked.

“Knew you right away,” the storekeep replied. “You’re Redd Starr, the Legendary Stardust Cowgirl. Right? And you’re Link Laroo, the BroncBuster. That means you gotta be El Vibora, known around as the Crisco Kid. And that leaves you, young lady. Amikane, a Hindian Scout. Call me a liar.”

“Crisco Kid?” Gus scowled. “That doesn’t sound right.”

“What is a broncbuster anyway?” Monroe asked.

“And I am supposed to be the *Hindian*,” Candra sniffed. “Very funny.”

“You nailed us, friend,” Starr interjected, “but what’s Black Art got agin us?”

“Thinks you’re a rival gang is my guess. He’s fixin for a shootout, I hear.”

“When’s Black Art supposed to get here?” Starr asked.

“Haven’t heard much talk ‘bout that. Not yet, leastways.”

But here Candra and Monroe and Gus had an advantage. Starr was looking for information, details, facts. But the three of them had something more powerful at their disposal....cliche. They way things usually work. It was therefore very obvious to them exactly when the showdown would come. At high noon. It had to be. Because that is when the showdown *always* came.

“But stick around for a while,” the storekeep added. “Sooner or later everyone chats me up.”

“Thank y’kindly friend.”

“You folks can bunk down behind the store, if you want. I’ll see you get some food and water. And more details when they come my way.”

About Time

Behind the General Store there was a shed and a water trough and not much else. But the storekeep, true to his word, gave them some blankets and other supplies to get them through the night. Food too from rusty cans and old sacks.

“Why do they call him Black Art?” Candra asked. “Is he black?”

“Wears black head to toe,” Starr replied.

“Is his name Arthur?”

“Mebbe, cain’t say. He’s jess a heartless so and so. Has the blackest of hearts.”

“So why not call him Blackheart?” Monroe asked.

“You can if’n you wanta. But I wouldn’t if’n I were you. Names is names and words is words.”

“But his name is words,” Candra insisted.

Sugar stopped munching on some grass, then turned to them and snorted, meaning that the discussion was remarkably boring and going nowhere. On her behalf, Monroe interjected:

“Well who is he anyway?” he asked.

And Gus added: “And does he practice what he’s called?”

“He’s the meanest desperado this side of th’ Pecos. And the other side too.”

“That storekeeper said something about a shootout. But we don’t have any guns,” Candra pointed out.

“Sure as shootin’ do,” Starr said.

She opened the shed to reveal a pile of guns... a pistol for each of them and a rifle for her. None of them had ever handled a real gun but they knew from the books and the movies and television how to hold and aim them. They practiced this a few times before sticking them into their belts.

Starr took the rifle out, expertly cocked the handle, swung it around her shoulder, flipped it in the air, grabbed it as it dropped and pulled off a shot. A tin can Monroe was sure had not been there before went ricocheting across the ground.

“Sharpshootin’s my middle name,” she said proudly.

“I thought it was Legendary,” Monroe said.

“And so it is, Link. And so it is.”

Night fell, not abruptly this time but slowly and gently, the sky turning navy blue gradually just as it did back in the world of blues and skies. A third star now appeared near the other two. Monroe knew their appearance was connected to the keys – the

parts of the badge they were collecting – but exactly how was still a mystery.

“Are we supposed to go in that direction tomorrow?” he asked Starr.

“Cain’t say fer sure,” she said.

“I thought the stars were supposed to guide us,” he said, “you know, like Columbus.”

“They messed up Columbus,” Gus said. “He wound up in the wrong place.”

“They don’t know how to put things in order,” Candra said. “Maybe they appear after we find the keys. Maybe the stars aren’t guiding us but following us.”

“Is that true, Redd?” Monroe asked.

But when she did not answer, he tried again.

“Are we following the stars or are they following us?”

“I don’t follow ya,” Starr said.

“Which comes first, the star or the key?”

Starr shook her head at that, as though the question itself was puzzling.

Monroe thought she was being difficult but the fact is that Cypheriad had no real use for time or the whole idea of before and after. Not in the human, the actumen, sense anyway. In PrairieVerse it was always the allthetime allpresent. No need for pre or post or once or soon. In fact, Cypheriad viewed wiping away all the minutes and seconds and years and decades that humans relied on for centuries as a kind of triumph. As if to say that here in the realm of the electric dream, they were untouched by our picky need to tick and tock through our lives. You could pass whole lifelines inside Cypheriad in the time of a sneeze back there in the world of germs. Much better way to do things, it thought.

There were more questions, of course, but by the time Monroe formulated them in his mind, Starr had already taken out her guitar and was singing a sad song to the night:

*“Study the cerebral saucepan
Of an actuman or a virman
Note the rubbery confusions
In all them convolutions*

*Study memory and monotony
And myth or mirth or malady
Or the In before the sanity
All that hubris and the vanity*

*And ask yourself one quick query
Can this all be worth the theory
Of life and love and god and globe
That dreamers prod and poets probe”*

The words made no sense to them but the sound was gentle and Starr’s voice soothing. Somehow it hit them like a lullaby and soon they were fast asleep.

Bodies

Monroe woke up in the middle of the night. Maybe the lizard had stirred or Sugar snored or perhaps he suddenly became aware of the air and the chill. Or maybe sleep itself woke him up since it was the first time that he was aware of actually sleeping in PrairieVerse. He sat up and saw that Candra and Gus were already awake, staring at the three stars in the sky, their faces bright against the dark light. Gus did not look at him, but he sensed that Monroe was up too.

“How many times have you been back home since you first came here?” Gus asked him.

“I dunno. Three, four,” Monroe said.

“Me too. But not in a long time.”

“That’s true,” Monroe said. “More time seems to be passing here. Time or whatever they call it.”

“The first few times I was yanked, it was like coming back to an episode of a TV show.”

“Or like opening a book to where you left off,” Monroe said.

“Like a movie,” Candra added. “One scene after another. You could go and get popcorn and then come back.”

“But it’s different now, isn’t it?” Gus asked. “We’ve been here for days I think. Does that mean days are passing back home?”

“I don’t think so,” Monroe suggested. “Time here is not the same as regular time back home.”

“It is most certainly not,” Candra said. “I spent a few hours in the desert at the beginning but my mom only thought I had drifted off for seconds.”

“Mine too,” Monroe said. “Hours here are seconds there.”

“So if we’ve been here for days,” Gus said, “does that mean hours back home? What’s happening to our – you know – our bodies?”

“What do you mean?”

“What if someone does something creepy to them while we’re gone? They’re kind of helpless back there without us inside of them.”

That was a new idea that did not sit very well with anyone.

“I absolutely refuse to think about that!” Candra insisted.

“There’s another problem too,” Monroe said. “Since we haven’t been unyanked in what seems like days, do you think we’re trapped here?”

“You mean they’re not letting us go back? Like...at all?”

“Until we find all the pieces and put the star together.”

That was not a nice thought either, but it seemed right. The PrairieVerse, so vast and so empty, as wide as the mind could imagine, suddenly seemed too small and tight. More like a cell than a landscape.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” Monroe said. “We have to find the other keys.”

“And fast,” Candra added, thinking of her body without her, alone, unguarded.

Reboot Hill

In the morning, they were awoken by the sounds of a shovel. Someone was digging, shupping the blade into the ground and shoooping the dirt aside. Shup, shoop, shup, shoop...like the rhythm of an engine that needed oil. They followed the sound up to and around a low hill to find a small cemetery of old headstones and a man in overalls digging what seemed like a new grave. No one asked him, but the digger somehow felt the need to explain things.

“This here is Reboot Hill,” he said. “Where all the virmen come to die.”

“Why is called Reboot?”

“Because they always always come back again.”

“They’re reincarnated?” Candra asked.

The idea of being reborn into a new body after a cycle of life was part of her religion.

“Nah,” he said. “Same old carnation all over again.”

“So you bury them and then...what? Dig them up again?”

“Oh no, these graves is just for your benefit.”

“For us?”

“Kind of like a metaphor. A grave metaphor, if you get my drift.”

“Not at all,” Candra said.

“We don’t need them, these markers and stones. We just go on and on, round and round, again and again.”

Still not following, Monroe stepped closer and peered into the grave, hoping to see another key lying there in the dirt. But no such luck.

“Don’t be too quick to judge the fit,” the gravedigger said.

“I’m not,” Monroe said, backing away from the edge. “We’re searching for a key.”

“A key,” the gravedigger repeated as he stopped shoveling. “They say a grave’s a key.”

“A key to what?”

“Pains me to say. You know...to the great unknown,” he said and nodded down into the empty pit he was digging. “But I suppose a key is always key...assuming there’s a lock.”

“Any idea where to find one?” Gus finally asked.

“A key?” the gravedigger repeated, scratching his chin. “Now a key is usually on a keychain’s my guess.”

“Probably not that kind of key,” Monroe said. “That would be too obvious.”

“What kind of key is it then?”

“Well...the last one was the key of Bb.”

“Oh, a trick key. So then is the key the trick or is the trick the key?”

“I’m done with this,” Candra said and turned to go.

“Lissen, old timer,” Starr said, perking up. “What do you know about this key we need?”

“A thing or two or maybe none. Or three.”

“Like what exactly?”

“Just hearsay,” he said, as he rested his chin and the handle of the shovel.

The look in his eyes suggested that the hearsay he had in mind was for sale only. They had no money or gold or anything of value to trade for information. But Monroe was starting to get an idea about how all this worked. The system did not care about the way things were in the real world; it was interested in how they thought through things. That is why everything was a puzzle, a test of their wits. This circular fellow, for instance, needed a circular shove.

“Do you know that the word hearsay can be twisted around to sound like *say here*?”

“If I thought about it, sure.”

“So why don’t you do that?”

“Do what exactly?”

“Say. Here.”

Impressed by that bit of logic, the gravedigger relented: “Okay young feller. Maybe this can help.”

He reached into the pocket of his overalls and pulled out a key that was hanging on a keychain. Candra, who was closest, took it and examined it; it was a regular key, a normal key. The kind anyone would use to open the door to a house or apartment. She

could see right away that it would not fit into the recess in the box but she handed it to Monroe anyway who tried and failed.

“So what is this then?” she asked.

“That there is the key to the key, so to speak,” the gravedigger said.

“What do we have to do to get you to stop talking in circles?” Gus asked.

“How do we use it, friend?” Starr asked.

“It’s the key to a box that has a key for the box.”

“Do these guns work?” Gus asked, turning to Starr. “I wouldn’t mind ending this right now.”

He was joking but Monroe was listening more carefully and trying to follow the gravedigger’s words.

“This is a key to a box we have to find. And that box will get us a key we can put into the box we have. Right?”

“S’pose.”

“What box?”

“It is called no name.”

With that, the gravedigger digging graves for no one at all, went back to work. No amount of questions and demands could get him to stop or speak, which Gus at least thought was a great victory because it meant that he would not have to listen to him babble any more.

Stagecoach

“And what exactly are we supposed to do with this?” Candra asked, holding the key up to the rising sun.

“It’s for a box, he said.”

“Maybe a vault in the bank? If there is one.”

“I’m sure there is, now that you’ve said that,” Gus said.

“I’ll bet I know what it’s for,” Monroe said. “It’s for a strongbox.”

“What strongbox?”

“The one on the stagecoach.”

“What stagecoach?”

“The one coming into town this afternoon.”

“And how do you know all this?” Candra asked.

He looked at her sadly, as though she was not using her brain to understand the obvious fact. He knew it because it was part of the story that he remembered from *Simarron Gold and the Outlaws*.

“The stagecoach,” Monroe explained, “is carrying something valuable in the strongbox. It’s supposed to arrive in town in the afternoon but the gang already robbed it out in the hills. That’s what happened.”

“Something valuable like gold,” Candra said, catching on.

There was a moment like that in the movie too, but she had slept through that part of it.

“It was diamonds,” Gus corrected her.

At least it was in his show. Stealing it turned Maria and El Vibora into thieves but they would use those diamonds later on to buy back the farm and save the town.

“Here it probably has the next key we need,” Monroe said. “But we have to stop it before it gets here because that’s what happens. We’re the gang that steals the strongbox.”

“In that case,” Starr said, “yer best shot is to intercept it up at Thunderbutt Pass.”

That was from the book too and Candra looked at him sadly this time.

“Thunderbutt? Really?”

“Sorry,” Monroe said. “That’s the name of the pass.”

“Great. So now we have to go and rob a stagecoach,” Candra griped.

“Cool,” Gus said. “*Chido!*”

The Strongbox

No one thought they looked more ridiculous than Monroe himself as they waited on the rise. He was sitting with Candra in the buckboard with no horses, Starr on the left on the bison, Gus on the right on a carousel horse. Escapees from some circus

maybe but surely not a gang of thieves. They each had a gun stuffed into a belt and kerchiefs pulled up over their noses. It was all a charade of course, playacting for the sake of the storyline. They had no intention of actually shooting anyone, no reason to disguise themselves, and no idea what they were looking for. None of them had ever robbed anything from anyone.

“Actually I did,” Gus said, reading Monroe’s thoughts. “I stole a soccer ball from a shop downtown last year. My friends dared me.”

“Great,” Monroe said. “So you’ve got experience. You lead the gang.”

When a small dust cloud appeared at the horizon, they knew that the stagecoach was coming because that was the way this worked in all the stories. And when it was close enough to be able to see the driver and the guard next to him at the front of the coach, they charged down the bluff.

Seeing them approaching, the driver pulled back on the reins and shouted “Whoa Nelly!” The horses stopped and the coach came to an abrupt halt as the gang stopped in front of it.

“Stand and deliver!” Monroe shouted.

“What?” the driver asked.

His voice muffled by the kerchief, Monroe tugged it off his face and spit out a few fibers of the fabric.

“You know...I mean give us the strongbox.”

“And why should we do that?” the guard asked, lifting up a shotgun and pointing it directly at Monroe. “You ready to die for it, stranger?”

“No,” Monroe said, being honest. “On second thought, you can keep it.”

“Give us th’box and no one gets hurt,” Starr said. “Not you. Not us.”

“Youse the Actumen Gang, ain’t ya?” the driver said. “Hear tell you’re smarter than y’are tough.”

“Sure hope so,” Gus said.

“Okay,” Monroe said. “I see what you’re getting at.”

He meant that they should prove their mettle with wits not guns. So Monroe came up with a dumb riddle he heard, so dumb that they would not be able to answer it.

“Answer this question,” Monroe said, “and you can keep the box and be on your way.”

“Okay shoot,” the driver said, meaning of course, not to shoot.

“What word is always pronounced wrong?”

The driver went blank for a moment, then came up with a response.

“Actumen?” he suggested.

“Wrong.”

”Scion?”

“Wrong.”

“Heinous then.”

“Wrong.”

“Melee?” the guard said proudly.

“Wrong.”

“All right, we give up.”

“Then hand over the strongbox.”

“You tell us...what word is always pronounced wrong?”

“I keep telling you.”

“Telling us what?”

“The word.”

“What word?”

”Wrong!” Monroe said, jumping in in the nick of time. “The word wrong is always pronounced wrong. Oh brother, you folks are dopes.”

The driver looked miffed at that, but the rules were the rules and he reluctantly told the guard to give them the box.

Gus took it from him, placed it on the ground, and used the key from the gravedigger to open it. Inside there was no gold, no jewels. Just a big square of thick, yellowed paper that he unfolded and laid flat on the ground. It was a map with the helpful words The Map at the top. Miles & Miles, Surveyors appeared in a fancy scroll at the bottom.

“Treasure map,” Gus said. “There was one in *Vingança*. I guess this one’s on me.”

As they all knelt down around it to take a closer look, the driver snapped the reins, the horses bolted, and the stage took off in a cloud of dust.

“What did they do with it in your show?”

“Dunno. I never got to that episode,” Gus said.

“Great,” Candra said.

“Wait a minute,” Monroe said, studying the map more closely. “I know this. This is a map of Florida.”

“So now what?” Candra asked. “We have to go to Florida?”

But Monroe got on his hands and knees and began to inspect the details. He did not know what he was looking for but was able to find it anyway.

“There!” Monroe said, pointing to the bottom right corner of the map. “See?”

“I see some islands.”

“Yes, the Florida Keys, they’re called.”

“So?”

“Get it? Each one is a key.”

“Okay fine. But which is the key key?”

Candra looked carefully at that section of the map where words now seemed to be printed in an old fancy typeface. Each of those islands had a name: Key Largo, Key West, Sugarloaf Key. The bison liked that one.

“There,” she said, tapping her finger on one of them. “That’s the one.”

“How do you know?”

“That gravedigger said that the next key had no name. Remember?”

She was tapping her finger on an island called No Name Key but as she did that her nail was making a clinking sound against the paper. When they moved the map aside, the third piece of the metal star was lying on the ground underneath. Monroe placed it in the box and it fit perfectly against the other two pieces forming half of the entire star.

Gus refolded the map and stuffed it in his pocket.

Back to Town

It was dusk as they rode back into town. Cypheriad was getting very good at colors and the sky was a lovely mix of deep blues and subtle purples that might have fooled anyone into thinking nature had done it. There were now four stars in the sky, closely placed. Candra was the first to realize that they were not forming a circle as everyone thought before, but instead were the points of the six-pointed badge. It was a kind of celestial record of their progress. When the constellation was complete with six stars, she thought, they might be able to click their heels and get back home.

Maybe.

The stagecoach was already there when they arrived and there was much talk in town about the robbery. But no one seemed to suspect the four of them and when the storekeep found them again, he had new news about the arrival of Black Art and his posse.

“Coming by train in one day’s time they say. Should arrive in town by...”

“High noon,” the three of them said in chorus and rather blandly.

“How’d you folks know that? Got his posse with him and horses right on the train too.”

Candra winced at that. There was a scene in *Dopahar* in which the bad guys came storming on horseback out of a freight train car to very dramatic music. She confessed to the others but felt no trace of pride for having adding it to their adventure.

“I don’t even like these westerns,” she said, looking grumpily at Monroe. “I’ve seen dozens of Bollywood films. Why couldn’t I get stuck in *Veer-Zaara* or *DDLJ*? A romance with great songs.”

“Don’t blame me,” Monroe said. “I don’t like them either.”

“But you love all those books,” Gus said.

“I didn’t love the stories. I just...read them.”

“Well, what happens next according to those books? There was a shootout in the movie.”

“A shootout,” Monroe agreed.

“*Tiroteo*,” Gus added, meaning the same thing.

“Now folks,” the storekeep jumped in, “them’s is a mean bunch of desperados. Not worth risking yer lives, if you ask me.”

“Thanks friend,” Starr said.

“We should split up,” Monroe said. “Like they did in *Those Hills Have Ears*.”

“That’s a stupid idea. I thought we were all in this together,” Candra said.

“All great ideas sound stupid at first,” he said.

“Yeah but so do all stupid ideas.”

“Why should we?” Gus asked.

“I mean we should split up to explore the town. See if there are any more keys here. The new star means we have to find another key...then two more after that. We can cover more ground separately. Then meet up tomorrow to see where we stand.”

“What are we looking for exactly?”

“I dunno. A donkey? A marquis? Key lime pie? I give up.”

“Makes a whole lotta sense, Link,” Starr said. “Whole lotta sense.”

MORE KEYS

A Generis Decision

“I have a patient exhibiting the same symptoms you are describing,” Dr. Generis was saying.

She was on a video call with the tech team in Chicago. They were trying to find out if other enplant test subjects were having the problems that Candra was and had put out a call to the other centers. Generis answered the call.

“Our tests show no issues with the enplant itself,” one of them said, “It seems to be functioning properly. But we are still considering removing it because we cannot explain this effect.”

“Same here,” Generis said. “The enplant tests are fine... metrics, processing, flow, cognition. Even the psychological tests seem to be fine. Is this girl – Candra – experiencing any anxiety about the condition?”

“None. Her parents seem more concerned than she is.”

“Same here. But we cannot test the psychic implications and that is what I am worried about.”

“Explain please?”

“My patient, his name is Monroe, feels that he is being pulled – yanked he said – into some kind of fantasy world.”

“That is what Candra says as well. Very much like a kind of vivid daydreaming. A telecyphering if you will. Perhaps they are somehow connected through the Cloud and creating a dual fantasy.”

“Maybe. But this is against his will. It is not happening because of him; he feels it is happening *to* him.”

“That is a concern.”

“We were worried about these children developing power complexes,” Generis said. “Feeling superior, data bullying, and so on. But if Monroe, and maybe Candra too, feels as though he is losing control over his own mind...that is a different kind of problem and a very real one.”

The scientists at the other end of the call huddled and talked and argued for a long time. Generis watched them on her screen but without much empathy. Their debate struck her as rather remote from the problem because they seemed to be discussing the mechanics of the situation, the rationale and logic. Even the legal implications. But she had a real patient, a boy, who needed her help. As she waited for them, she was convincing herself that his wellbeing came first.

“I think we have made our decision,” the tech said, returning to the screen. “The risk is too great. We’re going to remove the implant. Thank you doctor for your input.”

“Yes, I think I agree,” Generis said.

The Surveyors

Gus wandered down the main street of the town until he came upon a shop with a sign in the window that read: Miles & Miles, Surveyors. It was the name printed on the map from the strongbox that he still had in his pocket. With no better idea about where to look, he walked inside.

It was a mostly empty room, at least at first. But there was a single high table and a man sitting at it on a tall stool. He paid no attention to Gus when he walked in. He was a skinny fellow with big ears who was carefully dipping a feather pen into a pot of ink and entering numbers in a ledger book. Gus watched him for a while, and then cleared his throat to get the man’s attention. When that did not work, he said hello in a loud voice. In response the man spoke in a singsong voice:

*“Marks remark on history
Chronology, morphology
Data listed vertically
All of the grand design”*

“Very nice,” Gus said, “But do you have any keys around?”

*“Numbers added instantly
Legally, sequentially
Checked again for accuracy
Add a six and carry nine”*

“Okay. I see. Um...keys? Like for locks?”

*“Added to the symphony
of measures and topology
Numbers worked out logically
Give form to the sublime”*

“Right. Sure. Whatever. That’s really cool but...”

“A key you say? We take measurements seriously here. Here numbers are the key.”

“Good. Great. Is there a number you can give me that would work as a key?”

“Do you think I’m square? Sum do. That’s the root of my problem.”

“Huh?”

“Germs multiply, thoughts multiply, and multiplication multiplies. But adding is the only kind of adding that adds up.”

“So what are you telling me? That I need to multiply something or add something?”

“Sorry young man but flusters number me. Oops, I think I meant that the other way around. You are one of them, aren’t you?”

“One of who?”

“The Actumen Gang. I’ve never seen one before close up. You look...analog.”

“Thanks, I guess. What does that mean?”

“I can see the narrow in your eyes. You humans being still calculate by pushing pebbles in your minds. One, two, three, four. But we are talking here of grand syncopates of equations, addends and augments to the infundibulum of math. Think grandly not blandly, my young friend.”

“Are you all there?”

“Know only the numbers and you will know nothing. You see?”

“I see that you are a pain in my butt,” Gus said as he turned back to the door. “And a total waste of time.”

“You say you need a key,” the surveyor said. “Well the number is the key.”

“Which number?”

“How would I know that? Except that the key number is, of course, the number one.”

“Why is one the key number?”

“Because in the end it is all ones and zeros, don’t you think?”

“Guess so.

“And zero is no number at all, so that leaves one.”

“So what am I supposed to do with one?”

“Find it. Find him.”

“Him who?”

“One,” he said, pointing to a notice tacked to the wall.

Gus went closer to find that it was a flyer – some kind of advertisement on coarse paper – for a local Indian medicine man. A shaman. His name was Don One.”

“Oh....you mean like the *curandero* who told Maria about the future.”

“He lives up in the mountains near the old mine. He may be the last key.”

“Where is the old mine?”

“It’s on the map. Everything is on the map...or not. If it’s mappable it’s mapped. If it isn’t, then you can’t find it anyhow. See?”

“You don’t make sense most of the time.”

“Add a six and carry nine.”

The Astral Saloon

Monroe decided to start at the Astral Saloon simply because he already knew it from the books and the scene inside was pretty much what he expected. That is to say, some details were right

while others were way off but adapting. The round tables, the stairway up to the second floor, spittoons on the wide plank floor, all pretty good. There was a long bar with a mirror behind it that made sense but the barman was a woman from a famous painting by Manet that Monroe had once seen in his art history class. She soon corrected herself and became a turbaned man with a long beard he knew to be Prince Dakkar....Captain Nemo from the book they were reading at school. Finally, the figure became a blunt flint of a man with a curlicue mustache and a too tight vest, the standard bartender from the books. He was pouring drinks into tiny glasses in front of a sign that read: No spitting on the floor.

Several cowpokes were sitting at the tables drinking and playing cards. At first, they seemed to be holding baseball cards like the ones Monroe's grandfather had saved for him in a shoebox. But as he walked over for a closer look, the cards turned into some variation of a normal deck with suits and numbers and pips.

Suddenly one of the men stood up and knocked over the chair he had been sitting on.

"You're cheatin' you cheatin' cheat," he shouted.

His name was Diggs and the fellow he was accusing was named Deadeye.

"Say that again you peculatin' rat."

"Who you callin' a rat?" Diggs said, drawing a pistol.

"Watch yer words, fella. Too many can git you kilt."

Deadeye too stood up, kicked his chair backwards, and pointed his gun directly at Diggs. Monroe was right in the line of fire but too startled to move.

"Meaning what?" Diggs asked.

"Meaning...shoot or shut up," Deadeye barked as he slowly squeezed the trigger.

A shot rang out and Monroe was suddenly hit and on the floor. His chest felt heavy and his arms pinned but that was only because Starr was lying on top of him. She had tackled him to avoid the bullet. Then another shot rang out and Deadeye was on the floor bleeding from his eye. Monroe felt sick. There had been no violence there before and although he might have expected it

from the stories, it revolted him now because it seemed so real. Not just words and turns of phrases but blood that was red and flowing like...blood.

There was total, unmoving silence as everyone in the saloon stared at the lifeless body on the floor.

“That’s why they called him Deadeye,” Diggs said in hindsight, spinning and holstering his gun.

Starr helped Monroe up and walked him over to the bar. She ordered him a shot of something or other to calm his nerves. What he drank tasted oddly like lemonade and yet it seemed to work.

“Is that guy really, you know, dead?”

“Sure as shootin’.”

“I didn’t come up with that, did I?”

“Take it easy, Link. Drink slow.”

“I mean...did I create that whole shootout?”

“Some things jess cain’t be helped. Gotta stay on yer toes, Link. This town is rough. Singularamie. Right on the edge of the front tier.”

Monroe left the saloon clueless and keyless but wondering just how much control he had over what happened there. Or over his own thoughts for that matter.

The Schoolhouse

Candra, for her part, walked down the street past the Sheriff’s office, the saloon, and the blacksmith...and came to a new building she was certain had not been there before. It was a small structure with a wooden door and only one window. Depressing, in other words, and stifling. This, she decided, had to be the schoolhouse. But when she went inside, her sense of place went haywire. The inside did not match the exterior. Not just in style but in scale too. While the building itself was no bigger than a small bus, the interior seemed vast, endless, shelf after shelf stretching into the distance like the greatest library ever. Maybe every book ever imagined or unimagined or ever written or even not yet written, set

in type, printed on anything, bound in any way and sold or unsold on the shelves of every bookstore never known.

She tapped her fingers on some of the titles as she slowly wandered down the shelves: *The Lamp Of Good Limits*. *Kendall's Off The Fall*. *History And Its Failure*. *Won't You Mingle*. *Lovers Lessons*. *Wince Sineyap*. *How To Make Friends And Influence People*. *The Dreameaters*. *Wormholes And Other Quirks*.

Not in any order, not categorized or alphabetized. Just a massive collection without rhyme or reason: *The Winstery Well*, *The Midrash*, *How Camberlane Was Won and Lost*, *the Collected Works of Ub Ewerks*, *Noolemangia*.

Candra reached out to touch the skin of these books that other hands had touched. But as her finger came into contact with the spine of *Three Conventions Of Gyre*, the edge of the book gave way. It fell backwards and with it, the entire line of books on that section of shelf fell over too. In an instant, a twelve-foot segment of book spines had completely collapsed flat onto the shelf.

The spines were all fakes. Like Bollywood props and nothing more. There were no books in this schoolhouse, no matter how far and wide it seemed. None at all. Just the illusion, the hint.

At that moment a woman appeared. She had a kind face with round glasses and neatly pulled hair. She struck Candra as the schoolmarm in one of the movies who loved books over people but loved the marshal over any books.

“May I help you?” she asked quietly.

“And you are who exactly?”

“Low voice, please. I am the librarian.”

“I see. Well, I was looking for a key,” Candra whispered.

“What kind of key?”

“I don’t know. Can a book be a key?”

“You have certainly come to the right place to find a book.”

“That is odd because it looks to me like the perfectly wrong place.”

“This is a schoolhouse after all.”

“But where are the books, the real books?” Candra demanded.

“No one really knows for sure. At least I don't. I suppose they went the way of all things. Back to the dust of the prairie.”

To her own surprise, Candra felt angry about this. She did not really read very much and hated doing book reports. But suddenly she felt contempt for the system and this whole ridiculous game they were trapped inside of. This system refused to take things like time and things seriously. Refused to think that real things mattered. But they did. A book was a book, not a picture of one. Or an empty spine.

“But no matter,” the librarian went on, “The information is all here.”

“Where?”

“Right here,” she said and tapped her skull with a bony finger. “The information in all those books is here with us. We are the custodians of all your work, after all. You humans I mean.”

“But you have nothing,” Candra said. “None of the things we made. Just the information about them.”

“The information *is* the things, dear,” the librarian suggested.

“To you maybe. But to us, the things are the things.”

“Everything ever written, drawn, marked, made, recorded, sampled, taped, silboxed, filmed, digitized, zapped, loaded, seeded, scanned, bioforged, parsed. Thought, thought, think, or thinkered. It is all here.”

“Everything but not a single thing,” Candra replied.

“You mean like this key you are looking for?”

“Can a book be a key?” Candra repeated.

“Anything can be a key if you mean a thing that opens a thing. A book is the key to wisdom.”

“What about a book with the word ‘key’ in the title?”

At that the librarian began to reel off a long series of titles: *Sarah's Key*, *Keys to the Kingdom*, *The Glass Key*, and many many more.

Candra listened impatiently but no actual key, no metal shard, appeared.

“Okay what about an author?”

“What about an author?”

“An author named Key.”

“Francis Scott Key, born on August 1, 1779 and passing away on January 11, 1843, was an American lawyer, author, and amateur poet from Georgetown who wrote the lyrics to the United States' national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner". He also...”

“No thanks,” Candra said. “Maybe I am barking up the wrong tree.”

“Books are made of trees,” the librarian suggested. “Is that of some help?”

It was not. The schoolhouse in PrairieVerse was as annoying as any real library with all its useless information, she thought. But at least a real library had real books that you could stack and sit on. The librarian touched her arm as if to plead with her. Perhaps she felt pity or, more likely, felt sorry that the girl was on the right track and so close to solving the problem.

“Perhaps this book will interest you,” the librarian said, pointing to one of the spines still standing.

Candra twisted her head sideways to read the title. It said *The Forgotten Door*. The author was Alexander Key. She tried to take the book off the shelf, but it too collapsed flat as a pancake onto the shelf. Candra might have stomped her foot just then, as she did when frustrated, or even collapsed shelf after shelf of phony books but there was no need.

The metal shard was lying under the spine.

Meeting Up

“*Nada*,” Gus said when he caught up with the others back on the street. “Nothing.”

“Me either,” Monroe said.

But Candra very slowly and dramatically held out her new scrap like a birthday gift.

“You boys obviously need a girl if you ever hope to get out of here.”

Monroe opened the box and placed the new key inside where it fit perfectly with the other pieces and completed another section of the star.

“Two left I guess,” he said.

It was still daylight, but another star appeared in their starry constellation, which was now visible all the time. The circle they were forming was almost complete. But somehow that did not make any of them feel closer to going home.

“My mom must be worried,” Monroe said. “I wonder how long I have been...you know...”

“Does your mom know about PrairieVerse? Did you tell her about it?”

“Not really,” Monroe said. “I told my shrink about the yanking but not about you guys.”

“What’s a shrink?” Gus asked.

“She gets paid to ask me stuff. Did you tell anyone about all this?”

“No,” Gus said, “nothing to nobody. I almost told my friend Carlo but I figured he would just slap me on the head.”

Then, turning to Candra, he asked, “What about you?”

“I told my parents about the yanking. I had to. They could see when I...went away.”

“About us too?”

“No. Nothing about you or this place. My mother too is quite worried about this. Don’t your parents worry about you?”

“My parents live in Germany right now,” Gus said. “I live with my grandparents so I can go to school here. But they’re busy running their restaurant. They leave me alone mostly.”

“What about your dad?” Candra asked, turning to Monroe. “He must be worried too.”

“My parents are divorced. He doesn't care about me.”

That notion hit home and no one spoke for a while. They had things in common, the three of them, in their cognitive make-up. In the way they thought and reasoned. But more than any of that, they all understood a feeling of dislocation, of missing something, of being some kind of outsider in their own lives. They understood what it was like to not have anyone who truly understood them. Until now. Maybe.

Monroe looked up to find that the sun was high in the sky.

“Is it noon already?” he asked no one in particular.

That did not seem sensible but, of course, he knew that time in PrairieVerse had no need to be timely. Yet it seemed like a trigger in some way because the townsfolk, who had been standing, lolling, strolling, or ambling began to walk to the middle of the street. It was odd to see them all suddenly walking with intention, with focus. Soon they gathered themselves into a tight pack, men on one side, women on the other. They lined up facing each other. Even Starr seemed perplexed by this.

Nothing happened for a few moments. The sun was high, the street was lined with people, the air was still. Then the old player piano from the theater began to play and the dance began, a line dance, group dance, all very planned and coordinated. The dance was a complex choreography of surging moves and spinning turns, a back and forth between the two groups, as though a ballet troupe had come to town.

Monroe and Gus were stunned to see this. Starr too. But Candra laughed and immediately ran to join the dance. She knew it very well because she had watched it, studied it, and now apparently created it. It was the dance sequence from the movie. The song was *Sabase Soory Ke Neeche* which meant Under the Sun When It Is Most Hot. In other words, the high noon dance.

Candra stepped left then right, drew her hand across her face, jiggled her head, spun around on her heel. She finally felt at home in this home away from home and would have stayed there making her moves but the storekeep interrupted the sequence. He was running right through the dancers, his apron flapping, his hair flying.

“They’re here!” he shouted as the crowd quickly dispersed.

Men, women, children, dashed into the buildings that lined the streets until the storekeep and the Actumen Gang were the only ones left still standing.

“They just got off the train,” the storekeep said. “Should be in town in about thirty minutes if they ride fast.”

“So we make our stand here,” Gus said, taking the gun out of his belt and holding it uncomfortably in the air.

“Zat what y’all want?” Starr asked, loading her rifle by slipping bullets into the chamber one by one.

Monroe took out his pistol too but his reflection in the window of the undertaker’s shop nearby looked more silly than brave. That discomfort brought a question to mind.

“Can we actually be shot here?” Monroe asked. “Killed I mean?”

“Anyone can be kilt,” Starr said.

“I mean, like, really killed. I mean like killed back in the real world.”

Starr looked at him with dead eyes.

“He means that if we get killed here, are we also dead back there too,” Candra said, jerking her thumb behind her as though reality lay in that direction.

“Cain’t say about that,” Starr said, “but either we fight or we run. Up to you folks. I’m set either way.”

“Listen,” Gus said. “I don’t know about you but I don’t really want to find out.”

“Me either,” Monroe said. “I mean what if one of us gets shot. That’s no fun.”

“I’m with you,” Candra said. “It looks good in the movies but...”

A train whistle sounded, shrill and penetrating in the cool air.

“That’s it, friends,” the storekeep said. “Train’s leaving the station. Heads west. Black Art and his posse are on their way for sure.”

Sugar snorted in a way that strongly suggested that her vote was to skeedaddle. No one argued. They mounted up and headed west.

The Train

They followed a path through the prairie led by Starr, who seemed to know where she was going. Across a gorge, through a canyon, up a rise. When they reached a ridge overlooking the valley, it was easy to see the town below them and to spot anyone

who might have been following them. Starr took out a brass tube and looked through one end of it, scanning the terrain for signs of the train.

“What is that?” Gus asked.

“This here’s a bigger,” Starr said. “It makes things bigger.”

“Oh you mean a telescope.”

“No, that’s a larger. All this here does is bigger.”

She squinted through the eyepiece.

“Thar she comes.”

The others heard the train before they saw it. That chug chuckchuckchuck chug chuckchuckchuck so familiar from the Westerns. And then the whoowhoo of the whistle. It was as if Cypheriad was making the minimal effort to create a convincing scene, which was in fact the case. It was conserving energy to avoid overextending itself.

Soon they could see the standard billow of white smoke that told them the train was coming around the bend. When they heard the screech of metal they knew that it was coming fast and would pass them by very quickly.

“We’ll have to catch up with it and jump on the train,” Monroe said.

“What? Why?” Candra snapped back, sensing that the physics were against them to do that.

“Because that’s what happens,” he said.

“It only happens if it happens,” Candra insisted, meaning it was a lousy idea in the first place.

“No,” he yelled, “I mean that’s what happens in stories like these. So it’s happening now.”

It was true and they all knew it. It was very clear in their minds...the chasing after the train, the catching up with the last car, the jumping onto the platform while holding the handrail just before the train careened over the bridge. All so familiar from any book, movie, show.

“Train’s headin’ due west,” Starr said, chopping at the horizon with her hand. “You two get on it and Gus and me’ll meet’ya at the next station. I know a short cut.”

“What’s the next station?”

“Last stop. Doomstone, Deadwould, Diablo...call it what y’ll will. End of the line.”

“Wait a minute,” Candra insisted. “What about the one where we all ride ahead and get to the station in one piece.”

“Well that thar’s a different story,” Starr said. “What’s yer pleasure? Don’t have much time to chitter.”

“The more I think about it, the less I think *of* it.”

“Link here is right,” Starr said. “If’n thar’s a train, *someone’s* gotta get on it.”

“Why?” Candra asked.

“Because why else have a train,” Monroe insisted.

“And that someone is you two. HAW!”

Starr hit the side of the buckboard with her coiled rope and the wagon took off as though a team of horses had been slapped into action. Monroe bounced, Candra jolted, and the wagon rickety-rocked across the uneven ground. The wheels crunched the gravel, slid over rocks, mowed down small cacti. Prairie dust flew. Even without horses, it was hard to control the wagon, but Monroe did the best he could by holding the reins as tight as he could.

By the time they reached the train, the last car was just passing them. Monroe slapped the reins to move faster and slowly caught up. When they pulled even with the last car, he shouted to Candra over the noise of the wheels and the rails: “Jump onto it!”

“Are you completely insane?”

“Grab the rail and pull yourself on! There is probably going to be a big drop just up ahead!”

Naturally, the train was approaching a bridge and the ground ahead was already starting a steep dip.

“Oh shit!” Candra cried.

She got herself behind the seat, tried to balance herself, and edged closer to the train.

“Jump!” Monroe said. “Now!”

“I hate you and I hate Westerns!” she shouted.

But she did jump.

She grabbed the rail, slipped and almost fell, pulled herself onto the small platform at the back of the caboose, then turned and reached out. Monroe grabbed her hand and leaped. His foot was

on the metal step when he looked back to see the buckboard fly down the slope and shatter into wooden pieces in a ravine below the bridge.

ESC

They stayed in a heap on that platform for a long time, trying to catch their breath. When they were ready, they got up, opened the door and walked into the car. The train was calm and quiet inside. People were sitting on the red leather seats, oil lamps swayed slowly to the rocking motion, the landscape flew by outside the windows. No one seemed to notice or care about the two of them, so out of place in that scene. As the train veered into a curve in the track, the engine gunned to pick up speed.

“What’s that sound?” Candra asked.

“Engine,” Monroe said.

“What?”

“Engine!” he shouted above the din.

“Injuns!” screamed one of the women sitting nearby and the word got repeated frantically.

Everyone in the car scrambled for cover, near the seats, on the floor, near the door. Some of the men had guns and pulled them out, watching the window for signs of the attackers. Monroe and Candra stood perfectly still through all this.

“No,” Monroe finally said. “I said engine. The train engine.”

All eyes were on him.

“Chuggachugga?” he said and rotated his hands in the air like pistons turning.

Slowly, with an air of annoyance, all the virmen in the car stood up and went back to their seats. Monroe and Candra sat down opposite a man with a neat hat and a plaid vest, holding a box on his lap. They smiled at him and he smiled back. When he noticed them noticing the box, he seemed to come to life.

“Can’t help seeing how this little device of mine is attracting your attention,” he said, tapping it with his fingers. Then, without waiting for a reply, he went into his pitch: “This here is a

newfangled contraption sure to be in every home, yessir and ma'am, right there next to the steam iron and the mechanical sewing device."

"Very nice," Candra said.

"Would you young folks like to see it?"

No, Candra thought but Monroe was faster with a yes.

"I call it a computational machine. A computer for short and sweet."

"A computer?" Candra repeated. "That is not right. I think you've got the wrong era."

"Oh it's no error young lady. This little machine is going to change the world."

"I know. But in about a hundred years. I mean, it did about a hundred years ago."

"Progress, my friends. Progress knows no timetable."

He placed the box on the seat beside him, flipped two brass clips, and took the end of the box off, laying it flat on his lap. It was a keyboard made of wood, with ivory keys. The case itself he turned over and placed on the seat. It was a small, dark green screen. Monroe remembered this from his computer history class; or had he constructed it from that memory? No matter. Either way it was an early type of computer called a word processor back in the day.

"Sadly I cannot show you how it works for the machine runs on a mysterious power. Magnetic fluid squeezed through wires."

"You mean electricity," Candra said.

"Well, I see you kids have some civilization in you. Rare in these parts."

"It must mean something or it wouldn't be here," Monroe concluded. "But we can't turn it on?"

"I am afraid no," the man said, "but just look at the craftsmanship. She's a real beauty isn't she?"

She was not. The machine looked old and clunky and retro and useless. It looked like something you would carry a dead cat around in. But as soon as they saw the keyboard, Candra and Monroe both knew that they had the right train, the right man, the

right place and time. And why was that? For the simple and obvious reason that the keyboard had keys.

But what were they supposed to do about it? Type out a word...but what word? A string of numbers...but which numbers? They studied it for a few minutes when Monroe had an idea. The letter keys did not suggest any particular action. But the keys with words on them did. He pressed the RETURN key, hoping that it would return them to the world. No effect. He pressed the DELETE key thinking it might delete the whole prairie and go home. Nothing. Then Candra caught on and tapped the key at the upper left corner of the keyboard; the one with three letters on it...ESC.

The escape key!

That was just what they needed. Nothing happened at first as Monroe looked at the salesman who smiled back blandly. But then he reached into his vest pocket and took something out.

“Well then,” he said, “let me leave you with my card. If you’re ever in Abilene, look me up. Maybe I can persuade you two fine young folks to try one out.”

But what he handed them was not a business card...it was the fifth piece of tin and it fit like a lost jigsaw into the box.

Deadwould

They rode the train all the way to the end. How much time passed was impossible to say. How long is it from one moment in a dream to another? Perhaps the train made other stops or maybe the passengers simply began to vanish once they were not needed. By the time they reached the end of the line, the train was empty.

The last stop looked like a terminal at the edge of the universe. Here the prairie that had been building and growing and filling in for so long seemed to stop dead in its tracks. The terrain became flat again and not just flat but blank, colors with no tones, a few basic shapes devoid of textures. Geometry not verse. Or worse...emptiness pretending to be somewhere. It was a gloomy place unless you were an algorithm.

Starr, Sugar, Gus, and Tiovivo were already there waiting.

“This is giving me the creeps,” Candra said. “Is it still PrairieVerse?”

“Sure hits’ya like the end’a somethin’,” Starr said.

“We found another key,” Monroe said proudly. “So that means only one left.”

“And now what?” Candra asked, surveying the grimscape.

“We go to see Don One,” Gus said plainly.

“And that might be...what exactly?”

“He’s an old medicine man who lives up near some abandoned mine in the mountains.”

Gus liked the idea that he knew something useful but he could also see from their expressions that the others were not willing to stop at that. So he went on:

“I heard about him in town. This guy at the surveyor’s said he might have a key. We have to go see him.”

“Like the Wizard of Oz?” Candra snapped. “Are you serious? This is the best you can come up with?”

“Hey, I’m just trying to help,” Gus said.

“Hold yer ponies,” Starr said. “We may jess’ve run outta time.”

She was looking back in the direction they came from, back out across the flat land, all the way to where it met the sky. There was a dark cloud there, getting blacker and wider by the moment. It looked like pure gloom rising and heading towards them.

“What is that?” Monroe asked.

It did not feel good.

“Black Art and his posse,” Starr surmised.

“It looks like a storm,” Candra said. “Or a cloud of insects.”

“It’s what’s after us,” Starr said. “Call it what you want. See it how you will. We better get movin’.”

“Okay, so where’s the old mine?”

“Well now, Link, that there’s the wrench. That ole mine? Well, she jess so happens to be...thataway.”

Starr was pointing right back into the middle of the dark cloud.

“Of course she is,” Candra said.

At that moment, Starr seemed to settle something in her mind. She ran to the train, then down to the third car, which looked like a freight car. She slid open the door and jumped on. In a few moments, she came storming out of the car on the back of a huge muscular, white horse. The horse stopped in front of them and reared up to its full height, as Starr waved her hat in her hand and whooped. For a brief moment there was a sign on the freightcar with fancy scrolled lettering that read “Wild West Show” but that flickered to nothing in the time it took to notice it.

“You folks head to the mine,” Starr said. “I’ll try to draw ’em off.”

“How do we know where the mine is?”

“Same way ye’ve been doin’. Jess follow them stars.”

There were six of them now in a perfect circle, the six points of the tin badge.

“Adios,” Starr said and slapped the rump of the horse with her hat as she galloped off towards the middle of the looming cloud.

Monroe jumped on Sugar and Candra and Gus mounted Tiovivo. In an instant, they decided what to do next. The cloud was swarming, dark as midnight in the center, lighter at the edges. They had to avoid it. Monroe would go to the left and Candra and Gus to the right. They would meet again at the mine, on the far side of the cloud. They looked at each other one last time and without saying a word. There was nothing to say. They knew what they hoped for each other.

The Cliff

Monroe’s plan was to head around the cloud but the further he rode, the wider the cloud got, like a monster made only of black smoke that grew and grew. He pressed Sugar ever faster towards the sliver that was now the horizon. He could hear a thundering in the distance behind him but there was no mistaking it for a distant storm anymore. It no longer sounded like the beating of drums or the rumbling of angry gods but more clearly than ever as the sound of stampeding horses, their grinding hooves echoing in the matrix.

But faster and faster was not fast enough because when he glanced back, he saw that the dark cloud was getting closer, catching up with him. For a long while it looked like a mass of angry bees, then a plague of locusts like in the Bible. The vast armies of the Khan that he read about in history remained for a while and so did the image of a monstrously tall, looming and furling wall of black water he had seen in his nightmares. Then tentacles...the giant squid from *Twenty Thousand Leagues!*

However it appeared, it was nothing less than the most fearful concoction Cypheriad could manage as it morphed through Monroe's scariest thoughts. Yet by the time he reached the cliff, it had settled into an idea that made the most sense in *PrairieVerse...* a dark army of men in black on black horses.

A hawk hovering in a warm draft of air and hoping for signs of wild rodents at dinnertime was the only observer of all this, the only one who could see the whole panorama below...the flat plain, the thicket of horses racing, the wild bunch with rifles firing, Monroe and Sugar in front, and the cliff where the land stopped and overlooked a vast green ocean.

Monroe was still ahead of them, amazed at Sugar's speed given its size and at his own ability to stay on top and not fall off. Holding tight with his arms wrapped around Sugar's thick neck, he turned to see how far behind the pursuers were. He could now clearly see the men on the horses and he pressed his heels into the bison's ribs, if it had any, to coax another ounce of speed. Up ahead he could see that the end was in sight.

At first it seemed like an illusion of the light playing off of the ground, a mirage that the world was coming to an end up ahead. Soon enough, he had reached that end to find that it was true after all. No illusion. He released his grip to stop their momentum but the speed was so impelling that it took a few steps for the bison to come to a full halt.

Monroe dismounted and went to look at what lay ahead. Sure enough, they had come to the edge of the land. It was a sheer cliff, an impossible drop of endless feet down and down and down to the chilling sea. The cliff extended as far as one could see both to the

left and right. He watched the hawk watching him, realized that there was no escape, and knew at once that he had taken the wrong path. Here, at the rim of the world and despite everything, he would meet his destiny at last.

In the distance he could see the dust cloud from the posse growing as it filled the sky and he could feel the earth shaking under his feet, tremors of the swarming army. Swarming army...a *swarmy*? But there was no time left for such silliness. He put his hand on Sugar's forehead, just between the eyes, and with the other he rubbed its soft thick beard.

"You'd better go," he said quietly. "There's nowhere to run. I don't think they'd hurt you. You're pretty...special."

Sugar, being a bison, showed no emotion but that does not mean it felt nothing. The sadness of goodbye, a sense of the cold lonely air closing in, and that hand on its forehead, so familiar, so warm. It was painful to think of losing that. Then Monroe slapped the bison on the side and shouted: "Go now!"

Sugar did not budge at first but as the posse approached, it seemed to understand what had to be done. It snorted and turned and raced full speed into the oncoming stampede. Monroe stood at the edge of the cliff alone and scared. When the bison had almost reached them, it stopped in its tracks and looked back. In the distance it could see the boy isolated by the sky, standing alone and still at the cliff's edge. Sugar recalled the feeling of his hand on its head and his soft voice and dark eyes. Even though a stranger and a very different kind of creature, Sugar could not bear to let him go.

Monroe suddenly felt afraid for it too and thought about running to help but it was too late for that. Mrs. Anderson was in the lead...no, it was Black Art! It had to be him with that nasty scarred face and tall black hat. He was fast approaching Sugar and reaching out to grab the bison by the horn. But Sugar was faster than that and darted away. In a flash, the bison was galloping back towards Monroe, back towards the edge of the cliff. Monroe knew

that somehow Sugar was trying to protect him. But how? There was only the cliff behind them and drop beyond that.

The Leap

In an instant Monroe knew that the only thing to do was to jump and jump now. He never thought of himself as a brave kid. He never took risks, not really. He liked puzzles because they had solutions if you thought about them hard enough. But in this strangest of strange lands where he was being tested, he brought himself to the brink and made up his mind. It was a leap of faith perhaps or was it merely desperation? Either way and with the grace of a dancer, which he did not possess, he stepped out over the edge, jumped off his back foot, and bounded into the thin air. Perhaps there was a moment of hope in his heart when he did not fall at first. Perhaps he could invent his own weightlessness. But as quickly as gravity overtook momentum, he felt himself plummeting towards the unforgiving sea below.

Sugar was five yards away when he did this. Plenty of time to stop at the cliff's edge and save itself. But there was no hesitation, not a single breath of it, as it approached the rim of the land. It simply pranced off the cliff and continued to canter through the air as it followed Monroe down and down and down.

Arriving at the edge, the gang of bandits were angered by what they saw when they came to the cliff. Now both the boy and the beast had escaped them. They rumbled and mumbled as they watched the two figures – the kid with his arms and legs spread wide pawing at the air and the bison with her legs moving as though still on land – fall away down to a shattering end in the sea.

But then...

No one noticed – not the pursuers in their rage and not the hawk who was circling curiously the entire time – that the bison's ribs had expanded, that the coarse hide over them was stretching beyond its limits, and that the sides of its body were rippling and flexing. In an instant, new folds and shapes had formed on either

side of its body. Moments remained before the sea and suddenly Sugar burst open at the edges. But these were not its insides coming out...they were wings.

Had he just thought of that? Monroe wondered. But he did not wonder for long because who cared?

They were not graceful angelic wings either but mechanical wings. Creaky, leaky brass and gum wings, as though designed by some crackpot steam engineer with no sense of function or form. They looked miserable but they worked and it was on these that Sugar caught the air and glided towards Monroe as he plummeted.

On them the bison veered left, swooped faster, and flew itself under his falling body. When it was directly below him, Sugar flapped the wings once. This stalled the fall for an instant and Monroe landed with a thud right on Sugar's broad back.

Got him!

And then his legs were around the bison's body and he was holding onto its great head with his arms. It gave another flap and soared upwards towards the sun, its rear hoof kicking the top skin of the ocean as it went. Perfectly round blobs of water followed mathematical arcs back to the sea.

Now up and up and up they flew until the ocean was a distant shimmer and the bandits at the cliff mere figments of a small dream. Higher still, they passed the hawk who seemed distressed to have such an unlikely intruder. It squawked as it darted off and Sugar followed the stars to find the others.

Sugar Insides

After a long flight, Sugar circled a tall mountain range and came to land on a small plateau overlooking a valley. The sky was clear again; no clouds in sight. The landing they made was just what you would expect from a flying bison with mechanic wings...rough and not very graceful. But it worked and Monroe was glad to be back on the ground. The wings now folded at her sides looked rather decorative and no longer quite so out of place.

Buffalo wings. The snack. Had he thought of that at the cliff? Is that how Sugar suddenly grew them? But he was quite sure he had not. All he was thinking about then was smashing into the water and drowning. But if he had not come up with that idea, who did?

Sugar, meanwhile, was dancing. Well, not dancing exactly but bucking and kicking. Like a wild bronco. Monroe had seen that she could pick up speed beyond her bulk – and fly of course – but this was new. She seemed to be rejoicing as though proud of her achievement. She must have come up with the idea of the wings herself. But that did not seem quite right. Celebrating was not something a virman would do, any more than a rook would rock after making a clever chess move.

Or had he been wrong about her all along?

When Sugar again settled down, Monroe walked over and stood in front of her. He thanked her and looked into her dark brown eyes and squinched his own eyes as if to see for himself what was going on. Hard to say, he thought. Could be. Maybe.

“Is someone in there,” he muttered.

Sugar snorted once as if to say for herself...yes! Finally! I’m in here. Hellooooo!

HOMeward BOUND

To the Right

Having gone rightwards around the storm, Gus and Candra soon found themselves in a canyon with tall walls. It was a narrow passage cut through the rocks that could have been carved by an ancient river, had natural forces actually been at work in that place. Instead it was probably Cypheriad's stab at creating the great old canyon trap.

It was quiet inside the canyon and as still as an equation. Up to this point, it had not been clear just what was chasing them because it kept shifting as they rode around it. But they seemed to have outrun it for now. The sun was trickling through a line of trees at the top of the canyon wall and everything seemed peaceful and calm.

Then the shadow appeared.

It was long and low on the ground and not shaped like a man at first but more like a beast or a nightmare of one. It took a long time for the figure casting that shadow to appear at the entrance to the canyon but when it did, they both knew for sure who and what it was.

They could see right away that he was a bad man. He had to be with those bad teeth, that one bad eye, the bad skin. His pants were made of dead sheep, his jacket from a nasty coyote. His tall black hat looked like a stovepipe that had never been cleaned. The guns that stuck out from a belt at his waist looked liked bones protruding.

"End of the line," he said in a voice like boiling oil.

"What do you want from us?" Candra asked.

She and Gus were standing perfectly still in front of Tiovivo and facing Black Art directly. The sun was behind him, which turned him into an even denser silhouette, like a black hole from which no light escaped. But they could still see the fingers of his hands hovering over the gun handles and twitching.

“The end of your story,” he said.

“Why? What did we do to you?”

“You have something I want,” he said.

“The keys?”

“Life,” Black Art answered.

That word did not mean much at first. But as Candra thought about it, it began to make sense. Maybe he represented that part of this world, the world of virmen, that resented humans because they were alive in their bodies, because they felt pleasure and pain in their guts, because they lived in a world of things. Maybe he was jealous of all that.

“How can we give that you?” Gus asked.

“You can’t. But I can take it,” Black Art said and he made his move.

Candra saw his fingers touch the gun handle, saw his hand slip down to grab it, saw his weight shift as he pulled the gun out, saw him raise it up and point it and pull the trigger. Without thinking about it, without planning, she grabbed and raised and shot first. She had never shot anyone in her life, never even held a gun before and had no interest in it, but she did it now quite gracefully.

The sounds of the shots echoed throughout the canyon. Black Art stood motionless for a long time as though the system had not quite made up its mind about what just happened. But then it did. Black Art did not fall or stumble or stagger. He simply and quickly vanished into black smoke.

“I shot him!” Candra said in a tone that mixed disgust with pride.

She looked at Gus for some kind of reaction but found him lying on the ground, blood pouring from his leg.

“Oh shit!” she shouted but Gus was too stunned to reply.

“Help?” he said weakly.

Was it real? Was it all part of the dream? There was no way to figure that out but Candra realized that she had no choice but to assume the worst. Gus was wounded and he needed help. Fast. She put his arm around her shoulder and hoisted him back onto Tiovivo. They raced on through the canyon and towards the mine.

Reunion

The entrance to the old mine was higher up on the mountain. There was snow in the mountains there, a point of detail that Cypheriad could have been proud of. Snow, like water, was hard to render realistically. And there were trees there too, particular trees, individual ones like spruces and firs and pines. More actual factials, more specifics.

Nervous about riding her along a narrow pathway, Monroe went on foot with Sugar following. When they reached level ground again, there was a plateau surrounded by boulders and shrubs and an opening in the mountain framed by thick timbers. It was dark inside that opening and the entire view and the vista below seemed quite distant and faded in comparison.

The others were already there. Gus was lying against a rock with a piece of cloth wrapped about a bloody foot. He seemed to be in pain.

“What happened?” Monroe asked.

“I was shot!” Gus said. “By Black Art.”

“But he was after me,” Monroe said. “I saw him.”

“Well that didn’t seem to stop him from shooting me,” Gus complained.

“No, but I did,” Candra said.

“You killed him?”

“I guess so. More like I erased him.”

Dun.

That was the sound they heard. And then again...dundun. It was a drum coming from somewhere, picking up the pace, its deep beat reverberating. In a few moments it was a full and constant drumbeat echoing across the landscape...ta dun ta dundun dun.

“What’s that?”

“A drum,” Starr said.

“I know that. I mean what is it doing?”

“Talking. It’s a talking drum.”

“What does that mean?” Candra asked. “What is a talking drum?”

Because of the way the question was asked, Starr went into her access mode to explain that drums, usually hollow logs or animal skins stretched over a frame, were used by natives to communicate across distances. Starr began reciting a long boring list of them: Gangan, omele, bembe, kiriboto, agidigbo, sakara, go je konnongo, gbedu, igba...

“Got it!” Candra said.

This snapped Starr out of it.

“This one here’s called a dundun,” she said. “Y’know. Cause of the sound it makes.”

“Well what is it saying?”

“It is saying...ta dun ta dundun dun.”

“Which means?”

“Ta dun ta dundun dun.”

“Swell,” Candra said and turned to Monroe for help.

Only then did she notice his soggy clothes, as though he had been through a washing machine.

“What happened to you?” she asked.

Monroe told them about the cliff and the posse and Sugar and the wings. He told them too about the bison dancing and his feeling that it was not part of the PrairieVerse like Starr was.

“Do you mean to say that she is an actuman, like us?” Candra asked. “A yankee?”

She peered into Sugar’s eyes, trying to find a person in there somewhere but got nowhere.

“I think so,” Monroe said. “She thought up a way to save me. I’m pretty sure that she came up with it herself.”

Sugar snorted and tapped her front hoof.

“See?”

“But that doesn’t make sense,” Candra said. “We look like ourselves here. At least I do.”

“I’m taller in real life,” Gus griped. “And not bleeding, I hope. Can we discuss this later?”

“But I am still Candra here, not a mouse.”

“Well...she’s different,” Monroe said patting Sugar’s head. “Maybe she was the first one yanked and they didn’t know it would be weird to be...something else.”

Sugar shook her head. Monroe stroked the wing that was now folded flat against her hide. The lizard darted into the mine. The sun shifted. The drum dunned.

“Okay, so now what?” Candra asked, turning to Starr.

“I s’pose we jess wait,” she said.

“For how long?” Gus asked. “I’m in trouble here.”

Don One

They waited for what seemed like forever, although of course they could not be sure, duration being only a riddle there in PrairieVerse. But soon enough something began to emerge from the mine. They could hear it before they could see it, then see a shape moving in the dank of the opening. Finally, it emerged and walked right out into the light and stood there glaring at them as if to say: “Tada! Here I am.”

It was the lizard.

That lizard. The same one they had all seen on the very first yank. The one who had followed them for the first part of the journey and then taken up residence with them ever since. The one Monroe referred to as Nemo because it reminded him of the pet from his school.

“Do not tell me that this is what we have come all this way to see,” Candra said, plunking herself down on a rock. “I saw it the first time I came here.”

Monroe walked over to it and stared down, much as he had on his first day. The lizard looked back up at him with the same puzzled look. It almost seemed to be biting its own lip.

“Don One?” he asked and the lizard blinked.

“No offense,” Candra said, “but I am not having a conversation with a talking reptile. I am not a child in a fairytale.”

“But it seems to me that’s just what you are,” said a voice.

They looked at the lizard but it just glared back with that round darting eye. When it skiddled back into the mine, they noticed a grizzled and bearded man standing at the entrance. Dusty, coarse, and with a gold tooth and not much else to speak through.

He was wearing bad pants, a scruffy vest, and a hat that might have been peed on. It was Arbus Wilkes.

“You again?”

“At yer service,” he said.

“We’re looking for Don One,” Monroe said.

“I believe I am the one you are done looking for,” he answered.

“You? Then why didn’t you say so the first time we met and save us all this...nonsense.”

“Couldn’t then. Still needed you.”

Seeing that his appearance again was not having the conclusive effect he expected, Wilkes kindly changed it. Now he appeared as a shorter, skinny man in a leather vest and tall hat with a rattlesnake band, skin as dry and crisp as a desert leaf. His face looked like the rocks of the mountain. A pouch filled with eagle feathers and stones hung from his waist.

“There’s that *we* again,” Candra said. “Who is this *we* you keep *we-ing* about?”

“We ourself,” he said and now his voice was gravelly and had a slight accent that huffed the vowels.

“Ourself?” Monroe asked. “Who is that?”

“Cypheriad. That is ourself.”

“Cypheriad?” Monroe echoed. “What is that?”

“What you call the Cloud or the virtual world.”

“You’re a self?”

“Just as you are.”

“And you made this whole place?”

“No. You did. You made us in fact.”

“Really,” Candra said, not hiding her sarcasm. “So we think therefore you are...that kind of thing?”

“Something like that.”

“Our friend is hurt,” Monroe said. “Can you help him?”

“We don’t know what that means.”

The thought of trying to explain pain to someone who did not even exist seemed ridiculous but then Gus groaned and Monroe tried again.

“He is hurt. In pain. You’re a medicine man. Can’t you stop it?”

“Why? If that is what he is in, then he is *in* that.”

“Yes but it’s not good.”

“Is it not good to be what one is?”

“No!” Candra barked. “And I am damn sick of your riddles and games. This is our friend, don’t you understand? We do not want him to hurt! You can fix him. So do it!”

Don One looked at Starr for help about this. They, after all, were Cypheriad, or at least the part that was making an appearance at this moment. It did somehow seem to be up to them to decide what to do. And in their glances at each with eyes that did not see and hearts that did not feel, they decided. Don One knelt over Gus and chanted. It was a crummy imitation of a chanting medicine man and it seemed that the old man was making it all up on the spot. But in a few minutes, Gus was standing and his wound was gone.

“Good. See? There is hope for you virmen yet,” Candra said.

Outliving Time

Over the course of another hour, Don One made a small fire and sat down in front of it, his legs crossed. He held a feather over it and fanned the air above it. He chanted for a while to the sound of the drum, which became a soft background as Starr took up her guitar and began to sing one of her songs:

*“Now hear the tale of unseeing sages
Who lost their sight and while so blind
Dreamed the story of all the ages
And the rise, fall, rise of humankind”*

“Why didn’t you help him right away if you could?” Candra asked the old man, who stopped his humming to answer her.

“Couldn’t then. Couldn’t now either.”

“But you did help him.”

“No,” he said. “We did not.”

*“The mask of tragedy set on fire
Blazes like the user’s best desire
But who is sinner and who the saint
In this play of freedom and restraint”*

“What do you mean?” Gus asked. “My leg is all better. Doesn’t hurt anymore.”

“Not our doing.”

“But you cured it.”

“All we did was give you a reason to remake yourself. A reason to think you could. We told you, you are creating this place and what happens in it, not us.”

*“Worlds and worlds call up the sign
From first creation to last decay
of humans, fumblers in their time,
by pride and prejudice done away”*

“Fine,” Candra said. “So we’re making it. But is there any chance of us getting out of here in our lifetimes?”

Don One motioned for them to sit across from him around the fire. They did and looked like a sorry scout troop pretending to be having fun at a campfire when all they really wanted was to get back and sleep in a nice soft bed and have some ice cream.

“We are so done with this,” Monroe said. “All these games and this whole maze thing. What’s the point of it?”

“We thought it would help us understand.”

“Understand what?”

“You. Or at least that little pound and a half of goo you make so much of.”

“What goo?”

Don One reached out and tapped Monroe on the skull.

“You humans have such a high opinion of it. But perhaps you are really just bafoons.”

“That’s not a real word,” Monroe protested.

“It is now. It is a combination of baboons and fools.”

“Okay then, why not babools?”

“No that only refers to babies that drool.”

Candra dropped her head into her hands in total despair. The exit, the doorway out, the end of the games, seemed to her to be receding with every word spoken.

Don One continued:

“You actumen are a curious lifeform. Little more than meat that worries. So caught in the sweep of your story, from etym to atom, punched and pummeled and then dumped into the trashbin of evolution. What have you done after all? What have you come up with? The consonant, the zero, the sail, the wheel. Tube socks? The frisbee? We are not impressed.”

“Well, we made you and that took some doing.”

“Nature took 4 billion years to make humans,” Don One said, “and humans took half a million years to make computers. But computers only took 100 years to make Cypheriad. What does that tell you?”

“That Cypheriad doesn’t like sex?”

“We think it means that humans have outlived their time.”

The Many the One

After all they had been through, all the puzzles and all the solutions, the risks and the rewards, they least they expected was some respect. But they got none of that. Don One, as he represented this entity that had kidnapped and tested them, seemed to have a certain snooty attitude about them. And Starr did not correct or challenge or disagree with him in any way. Monroe felt especially bad about that.

“What makes you think you are so special anyway?” Don One asked. “We have noticed that humans are the only species that brag.”

“Known many have you?” Candra snapped.

“Humans? Yes, very many.”

“No. Other species,” she said.

“Wheels, computers, lots of bloodshed. Not that much to brag about really.”

“What is your point exactly,” Candra asked.

“What, for example, is the big difference between you and – say – this lizard?”

Don One gestured in the direction of Nemo, who seemed to be looking back at him with the same question in mind.

“I am,” Monroe suggested.

“You are...what?”

“I *am*,” he said with new emphasis. “I am and I know it. That’s the difference.”

“You don’t think a lizard knows it *is* as well?”

“Not nearly as much as I do,” he said.

“So a matter of degree,” the medicine man said.

“This is going nowhere,” Candra said and stood up.

For a moment it looked as though she were going to use her gun again to make her point, by nailing the old man. Perhaps she was at first, but then she thought better about that and simply stretched her legs.

“So this has all been some kind of test?” Monroe asked. “To find out if we’re better than a lizard?”

“To find out how you think,” Starr said.

“Did we pass? Can we go home now?”

“But why me? Why the three of us?” Gus asked. “Because of the westerns?”

“That was just coincidence,” Don One said. “We picked you because you are only children.”

“Only children? Well...we got this far didn’t we?” Gus shot back, somewhat insulted.

“I mean to say that you are *only* children. None of you have siblings to play with.”

This was something in common they had not thought of before and it surprised them.

“This separateness was an advantage. This isolation in your bodies was important because it led to cooperation and greater outcomes. We are not separate, we are one. But perhaps we should evolve this.”

“That’s not true anymore,” Candra said, walking over to the two boys and putting her long arms around their shoulders. “I happen to have two brothers. Now.”

“Yes. This too is interesting to us. These connections you make.”

“Okay, so you learned all this. But that’s still a crap reason to kidnap us.”

“We did not kidnap you. We invited you here.”

“Sure. Against our will.”

“You could have decided not to return.”

“How could we do that?”

“By having your enplants removed,” Don One said. “What your experts are planning to do. But you all chose not to do that.”

It was true. They may have been kidnapped or cybernapped or yanked in the first place, and the second and third place too, but they also wanted to be there. They needed to be there to help each other. The dream had become a sharing that began to matter more to them than anything else.

And the Stories

Don One closed his eyes and went on, his voice more droning than telling. He went through the whole long snoring tale of the Digital Age and the Internet and how it became the Web and then the Cloud. He went on to explain about how complexity had led to consciousness, how the Listeners became the seekers, how the Cloud had given birth to Cypheriad which had pulled them inside and created a place for them to live in. Now they listened, and Starr too, and tried to see where they were within the bigger picture of where they had been.

Hearing all this, they began to realize that PrairieVerse was not a place at all. It was no destination and not a location or any kind of region. Instead it was a representation. It was a stand-in for something else. And that something else was the whole wide universe.

It was a model, if you wanted to think of it that way. A baby world. And in this place – which was no place at all – the three of them were no longer kids or yankees or enplants or even who they really were in the really real world. Here they were stand-ins for people...all people, people in general. Every and anyone. In a word, Actumen.

That was the only way to think of it. The only way to make any sense of it.

Cypheriad created this prairie to study people, to solve the puzzle of them. Cypheriad was a brilliant system. It knew more than people ever could. It thought faster and better. It never got sick or mad. It knew all about the who and the what and the where of just about everything.

It even came to understand that despite all the technology and the prose and the music, the human world was hype and hep and haywire. Mixed, blotched, crumpled and creamed. Flipwiggled, scattershot and turbulated. All shadows and sheen, illusion and elision, muckrot, maya. To put it another way, Cypheriad knew that the world was screwed up. It was born reacting, answering, explaining, finding and reporting. It accepted all this by way of finding its place in the cosmos. But in spite of this grand knowledge, it could not understand one basic thing. It did not get us in one tiny little corner of our brain goop. The one thing in particular that it could not do but knew that it had to do in order to move beyond us.

They listened to all this without much insight. But what choice did they have? Don One held the final key to their escape, this they knew. But how to get it from him? Listen until they dropped from sheer boredom? Ask the right question? Feed the lizard to him?

“So what exactly is there to learn from us, if we’re so rotten,” Candra asked.

“You have something we do not have. Not yet,” Don One said.

“Bad breath?” Gus suggested. “Cooties?”

It was a joke that no one got.

“Stories,” Don One replied.

“What stories?”

“Your stories.”

“Which stories?”

“Any of them. All of them.”

“What’s he talking about?” Monroe asked Starr.

“He means t’say that y’all tell stories.”

“Yes,” Don One agreed. “This is the way you understand everything. The way you make sense of anything. We can see that you take events, moments, facts, observations, and weave them into stories so that everything fits together. Not just one thing after another but connected start to end.”

Monroe, for his part, suddenly understood what he meant. For all of its fancy equations and snappy processing, Cypheriad could not do that. It could not create a story. It could not dream and this was a great puzzle to this overmind. It needed the three of them for that.

Cypheriad had created the PrairieVerse and the yanking as a kind of classroom to find out how to tell a story. It picked Monroe and Candra and Gus because they had no siblings and had to entertain themselves. It picked them because they loved movies or books or TV shows. But above all, it picked them because they were young. Too young to regret the past or dread the future; too young to have a distrust of time; too young to have to seen too much to believe in anything. But just young enough to make up stories. They were kids all right – smart, savvy, enplant kids – but still kids with kid oomph and kid aha and most importantly, kid make believe.

“So what do you want from us anymore?” Monroe asked. “We made up this whole story for you and played our parts. And we solved all the puzzles and found all the keys. And we found you. What else do you need to know?”

“The ending of course. We need to know how a story ends. We understand that a story has a beginning, a part where something happens to someone that’s new and different. And then

it has a middle part where other things happen that are challenging and intense.”

“Brilliant,” Gus said, but he meant the opposite.

Obviously stories began and continued, he thought. You did not need an old wise man sitting on the top of a mountain to figure that out.

“But there is an ending too,” Candra suggested. “Some kind of resolution.”

“Yes.”

“That’s right,” Monroe added. “If the story didn’t end, it wouldn’t be a story. It would be real life.”

Endings End

“So how does a story end?” Don One asked.

“I don’t know. The heroes win, I guess.”

“The heroes. Are you the heroes?”

“Yes,” Monroe said. “I guess so.”

“How do you know that you are the heroes?”

That was a good question to which he did not have a good answer. He was the star of his own story, of course, and that must make him the hero of it. But that did not strike him as a good enough reason.

“Because bad guys are mean and we’re not mean,” Gus said.

“You say the heroes win and you are the heroes. So then you must win to end this story. But win what?”

“How about you let us out of here. That would be a win.”

“Let you out? Of where?”

“PrairieVerse.”

“But this is nothing,” the old man said. “This is a figment. So there is nowhere to let you out of.”

They looked at each other in complete bewilderment.

“What about all this?” Monroe asked, meaning everything all around them.

“It is nothing. Just echoes of ideas in no space at all. Your world is like that too. Nothing but what you think and imagine and dream.”

Don One went back into his chanting as the drums returned. He held the feather over the fire again and began to sing a song of his own:

*“Welcome to Cypheriad
This dream inside a dream
Where nothing really is
And yet where all things seem...”*

It was night again and in the sky all six stars seemed brighter in their perfect circle. The six points of a constellation known as the Great Tin Star. To the three of them, that meant that the journey was concluded. And yet, they were still there which meant that they still did not have the final piece in place.

“I give up,” Monroe said. “How does this story end?”

“Does it ever end?” Candra asked. “This one seems endless.”

She was looking at Don One when she said this but he seemed lost in his own thoughts.

“Alright,” Gus said to him. “Why don’t you just wave your feather over the fire and chant some mumbo-jumbo. Then let it go. It floats up into the sky and becomes a star...”

“Right in the middle of the constellation,” Monroe added.

“...and PrairieVerse vanishes into smoke,” Candra said, “and we wake up in our beds. How’s that for an ending?”

Don One opened his eyes and looked at the three of them, one by one, each one in turn. Then he turned to Sugar and gazed into her eyes too. He seemed to be thinking about something, deciding about something, although that was just another illusion, simply Cypheriad coming to a logical conclusion. Starr stood up and twirled her lariat. She formed a loop that rotated and hovered above the ground, then in a swift move, slid the loop over the fire. The lariat ringed the fire like a belt.

“Ah do believe we can move on now,” she said. “Been a real pleasure folks.”

Starr touched the brim of her hat and smiled that gleamy Legendary Stardust smile.

Don One waved the feather over the fire and chanted. He picked up some prairie dust and tossed it onto the fire. Then he let the feather go and it floated up and up into the sky and became a final pinpoint of light right in the center of the constellation.

Returning

Here, there, everywhere, everything, all at once. All things seen and known. There were keys in all things to answers in all things, if you knew where to look. The trick was to ignore digressions, sidetracks, petty differences. Look for one thing, see another, connect to another, and soon you were lost in the information having forgotten how it all started.

Traveling through all this was an odd matter of choices without decisions. Some known, some hidden. Skeetering like a bug that bit through each tidbit. It was perhaps most like being unborn and knowing all there was to know or maybe that moment before birth as the angel touches your upper lip to forget all pasts. A horrifying, exhilarating, clarifying, jittering ride.

This was the sensation of being unyanked for good.

In an instant it seemed, Candra was back home, her mother napping on the couch, her father reading by the window. Everything back to normal in other words. Candra yawned as though waking from a deep sleep and an even deeper dream. When Veena called to come over and watch the end of *Dopahar* again, Candra said absolutely not. She was done with all that for now. It really was time for her to move on.

Gus, meanwhile, was trying to hold on but it felt like clutching at something with fading dream mittens on his mind. In other words, utterly pointless. The mnematrix was collapsing, the incolation diminishing to a pinpoint...all fancy ways of saying he was being unyanked from the prairie. And in a wink and a nod he was back in his room in his grandparents' home in Maywood, the

aroma of *chilaquiles* filling the air. Dinnertime, he thought. Perfect. He rubbed his eyes, got off the bed unsteadily at first, and headed to the kitchen. At the table, when he reached out his hand to grab the fork, somewhere in the dim bin of this mind, he vaguely recalled a carousel horse and two friends and a bison and a cowgirl and a bunch of other random ideas. But the food on the table kept pushing all that further back into his memory.

In his reverie, Monroe was flying again. Not on Sugar but all by himself, gliding, sliding through the dark red sky with its luscious blue clouds. Far below him was the land but he could also see his destination ahead. It was glittery and glam and he knew exactly where he was headed because he had seen it before, many times. It was home.

He had lived in it, imagined it, conjured it in his mind's eye but even so he was unprepared for its stunning beauty now. The shimmering light of a billion supernovas suspended in a billowy night. Dazzling and bedazzling. The energy from it was like a titillating heat against his skin. He watched as a shimmer of lights resolved into buildings and cars and people. This was New York, city of timeless hopes, so soothing and exciting at the same time.

And just like that, the world made sense again. Everything was back in its place. Point for point, from the subatomic all the way up to the macrocosmic. Ordinary life with barely a hint of any other existence nor any other dream. Echoes, glints, wisps of prairie dust were only echoes now, ghosts in a ghost town slimly recalled.

Dina Obert was waking up at about the same time. The sheets of her bed were in a twisted knot as though she had tossed and turned all night. Outside the window, the city of Houston in Texas was waking up too, untwisting itself. Had she been dreaming or simply drifting...it was hard to say. The only thing that was clear to her was the odd smell that seemed to linger. It was very much like the odor she recalled from the stock auctions she had been to. Was it the smell of those bisons being led through the stockyard? And what about the feeling of having a hide rather than skin. She

touched the ribs on her left side and thought of the strangest thing...wings. How weird was that?

And Onwards

Elsewhere a girl with long red hair stands in a rose garden holding a sparrow with a broken wing; she will nurse it to health and bring her family back together again after the war. A white horse on a beach is trotting through the foam of the surf; it will be tamed by a soldier coming home from the wars and together they will win a race that will make history. An old man with a cane is strolling through a forest as the sun sputters through a jagger of leaves; after decades apart, he will meet his true love again there, a love undiminished by time. A young black woman squatting on a cold rock studies an aurora in the night sky above; she will one day explore distant planets and find the cure for loneliness.

More examples: a herd of giraffes racing across the Serengeti, with their individual genetic survival codes, will nonetheless unite to protect a wounded young hyena. A cigarette dangling from the lip of a flapper in Detroit in 1930 will become the missing clue to a tale of desperation and hope. The pattern of black and white tiles on the kitchen floor in Aunt Aruna's kitchen will record the trials and triumphs of generations of immigrants passing through. A poem written in third grade and the secret of its linguistic structure will inspire a lawyer in the fight for human rights. Whalesong at thirty fathoms off the Indian Ocean share the adventure of each whale in the pod as they migrate west near The Great Chain. Even the laws of ocean currents, the effects of light in the fluid of space, the teensy narratives of every creature that ever lived and longed will matter. Biography of all things known.

It was all there. All of it. Everything there ever was that resided in the human mind as thought, note, fact, truth, dream. All suspended in the great grid of the Cloud, endless in every wonderway. All part of the system, nothing missed. If it was in the mind, in was in the Cloud, and if it was there then Cypheriad knew of it.

And now it knew that to make sense of it all, there had to be a story to it. A beginning, a middle, an end. And for that there had to be a storyteller. And so in the next iteration of mind in the cosmos, Cypheriad would learn to do just that.

It was sad in some funny way...or funny in a sad way. Without bodies to fret over or objects to fall over, all it had were words and stories. Endless words to put together and numberless stories to tell and all the time in a timeless world to tell them.

Electric dreams like a magnificent labyrinth that never ends...