



“Not Here”
By
Ion Light

Due to adult themes such as sex, a lot of sex, some gratuitous, some not, and violence, not a lot, the idea is to make love not war, (and no one dies, (well, almost no one,)) and so, consequently this book is intended for a mature audience. This is a work of fiction. Just in case you weren't sure. Yeah, some of the esoteric stuff can really take you places, far away places, sexy places, but for most, this as close as you might get, unless you have like a magical wardrobe. Or a big, blue, 1950's police box. So, let's go there: the esoteric stuff is real, explore it nonjudgmentally and with awareness, and you'll probably be alright, but if you're worried that exploring stuff endangers your mortal soul, I would like to refer you back to the religious artifact of your choice, which likely has more sex and violence than you have here. (So, for example, if Ouija boards are taboo in your world, this is probably not your book.) Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. Except where they're intentional, but hopefully respectfully and tastefully done, in a way to honor the sacred importance they played in the author's life. Again, we're adults. We are not 'untouched' by the influence of media. In fact, I would dare say, never in the history of man have there been so many 'touched!'

This is a work in progress. Any corrections, or constructive criticism for the purpose of story refinement is welcomed. If you chose to contact the author, you may do so at: solarchariot@gmail.com. Please, put "not here" in the subject line. This helps me find you amongst the clutter.

(214) 907 4070 I am not always available to take a call. I will, however, eventually, answer a text.

(not here version 1.2)

ENJOY!

Chapter 1

As with most things, it started with sex. Yes, the three-letter 'four-letter' word. It may not mean what you think it means, but then, most things are easily misperceived. Sex is by far the most powerful of all the powers, the most abused, the most easily accessed, the most damaging, the most purifying, the most redemptive, the most sinfully blissful and misunderstood of all the powers, and easily evidence by the frequency that advertiser use it, subliminal or not.

Suppression rarely works. Best case, it makes you socially awkward to the point even family gossip about you behind your back, which you sometimes sense in suddenly halted conversations or occasional queer looks, or a surprised burst of laughter when you enter the scene. Worst case scenario, it turns you into a hoarder with piles of magazine, porn or just regular old coffee table magazine stolen from doctor offices or free catalogue subscriptions, the poor man's access to 'playboy.' Or worse 'worse case' scenario, a predator.

Surrendering to the compulsion, outside of the socially sanctioned channels, rarely results in compassion, from anyone outside looking in, even if it's life affirming and about kindness. (Human touch use to mean kindness. In Japan there is a company selling cuddles and hugs. Then again, you can also buy used, female panties from vending machines. (And I always wonder if the woman in the pic is actually the one that wore them.)) In Texas, acting out on a compulsion could earn you a spot on a billboard. Yes, they will place an unflattering but obvious picture of you with a description of your crime: solicited a prostitute, shun shun shun. I suppose, as deterrents go, it works, as I have not attempted to solicit said prostitutes, mostly out of fear, but I have imagined, should I ever be brave enough to indulge, but too stupid to distinguish a crack whore from a cop, (though I admit sex can make a man that stupid,) that I request my phone number be placed on the billboard making it easier for me to find my next hook up. (If you didn't laugh at my dark sense of humor, you're not alone, but you also don't have to read further.) But like all deterrents, it tends to only promote the crime, because the greater the punishment the greater the compensation for offering the services, which entrenches it into a population.

Like 'fight club' no one talks about 'sex club,' which is more a metaphor for how my family avoided the subject of procreation. The Baptist side was the strictest, no sex talk, no dancing, no alcohol, no games with dice, and no hugs; just handshakes. Hell, even the grandparents slept in twin, "I love Lucy" type beds, which begged the question how did dad and his sister come to be. The Church of Christ side, well, they indulged in just about every forbidden indiscretions, from affairs to incest, and medicated with just about every illicit substance procurable by modern man. (One of my uncles, a prominent business man, made the cover of Texas Monthly for having the largest underground cannabis growing operation in the state of Texas, and was only discovered because another family member, disgruntled by his success, ratted him out.) It was years after childhood that I stumbled upon evidence that the alcohol abuse was a mask for generational sexual abuse. Not only did it happen, key player knew it was happening and chose to do nothing.

Before puberty, the dogma of both B and C had me staring into the sun because "if thee eye offend thee pluck it out," as if lust would cease with blindness. (To this date I am still cursed with perfect vision.) Trying to blind myself came from a fear of what I perceived was coming, because as any child of Church of Christ will tell you, if you hold these thought, you will go to hell. The girl that triggered the first response was in fourth grade. I was in first. We rode the same bus together. She had a visible and tangible aura about her that compelled me to try and sit by her and follow her around like the puppy I was, but her peers were vying for that spot, too,

and first graders tended to get stomped. I longed for the merest gaze, a smile, but would settled for even a frown of contempt. On the rare occasions that she passed me, met my eyes, touched my hand in passing, I would be overwhelmed to the point of tears, flushed from head to toe in bath of ineffable warmth and I would want to melt and lose my identity in her, because I had no concept of expressing what I wanted because I hadn't yet figured it out: I just knew I needed to share space/time with her. She was my version of the Carpenter song: "Close to you."

Death would have been preferable to being ignored. The thought of death occurred way too often in my youth, spurred by years of perceived abuse, actual abuse, and isolation from family and peers. The end of high school was actually the end... Not of life, but of ever being around a group of mostly age related folks by default. Pre-high school grad was an artificial reality, and not everyone crosses that border with soul intact, or with earned butterfly wings. Some of stay worms. And this brings me to where? Where am I?

Oh, yeah. Sex.

Spock told Stonn, in 'Amok Time,' "After a time, you will find having is not so pleasing a thing as wanting." I don't know why I am telling you that. It's a secret most married people acknowledge, and only sometimes with lament. But, it's relevant somehow. Maybe it will come to me. Or you. Readers are often far luckier than the person writing, subtexts and vicariousness notwithstanding. All those old stories people wrote and you were forced to read because some old professor told you there were metaphors and meaningful crap, well, yeah, there is that, but we authors, we usually just write stuff to get it out of our head, we don't really plan the other stuff. All of that falls into place in hindsight, and some of us may live long enough to hear other people expound on what we've written, and I hope I live long enough just to pretend that I had a clue what I was saying.

The invitation came in an innocuous envelope. At certain angles, it seemed like real writing, but at other angles, regardless of light, it looked fake- just another concealed attempt by advertisers to make you feel wanted so they can sneak into your life and get your money. Still, it was nice to have something that wasn't a bill:

"Dear Jon," yeah; it is what it is. "You've been accepted and are encouraged to sign on and attend an Orientation at your earliest convenience. Yours truly, Penny."

There was nothing further. No email address. No phone number. No forwarding address. No Sir name. Not even the apparent gimmick proclaiming a free toaster if you acted now. The whole matter left me perturbed and stuck in my brain sideways. I don't like mysteries, practical jokes, or riddles. I cracked my head, searching for anyone I knew by the name of Penny. The only Penny I could conjure up was the youngest daughter from 'Lost in Space' who was only one of a thousand in a long line of television and movie crushes that I clung to over the years, the sophistication of which morphed over time as I did. I am confident I am not the only male afflicted by such a malady, but I will say, Walter Mitty had nothing on me!

I retired for the evening wondering about it. I had no more made myself comfortable than the words from a song disturbed me: "Writing to Sky's niece Penny... Oh I wish I had a pencil thin mustache..." It occurred to me that the Parrot Head view of life was somehow more profoundly realistic than any other musician I could tolerate. "So, why don't we get drunk and screw..."

I think my pillow shook with fear. The vibration filled my head and swept down to my toes and reverberated back, and that feeling from childhood- that very first inkling of something wonderfully awful with no labels available to qualify it due to insufficient life experience

because the most alluring fourth grader sharing my bus accidentally beamed a smile my way flooding my brain with endorphins... My brain short circuited.

She thumped my forehead.

“Stop staring at my breasts and pay attention,” she scolded.

I wasn't aware I was staring at her breast until she pointed out that I was staring at her breast, and though they were fully concealed behind a blouse and padded bra that held them up and together and firm... I met her eyes. I was no less captivated than I was when I was falling through her cleavage. I became the emblematic deer in headlights, my mouth agape, clearly caught staring, fixated and unable to turn away. If I could have pegged her for anyone, it would have been the character 'Jennifer Marlowe' played by a young Loni Anderson, or a close enough stand in to be a clone or twin. (If you ever wondered what you would do if you ran head into breasts with Dolly Parton, well, start this paragraph over.)

“Do you want in or not?” she asked.

Don't answer that question don't answer that question... “I'm sorry,” I stammered. “But, can we start over from the beginning? I'm a little lost.”

Her sigh was frustratingly perfect. She pushed a strand of her hair back, wet her lips with her tongue, and shifted in her chair, and pointed to paragraphs and words on forms that I couldn't see because she filled my vision. “You applied to learn magic. We accepted. I explained the caveats. I presented you with the one and only form that is obligatory to proceed forwards. I handed you a pen. You became mesmerized by my bosom. Now, I am asking you to focus for what, a whole of five seconds, and make a commitment. Sign here, and you're in, and then you may proceed to Orientation. Sign here and you decline entry, and you return to your mundane life as you know it. Now,” she smiled, her glossy pinkish red lips drawing me in as if her inhale was the ISS depressurizing in reverse. She thumped my forehead again, right dead center. I was too stunned to feel pain or otherwise object. “Decide. Eh!” She put her finger to my mouth to stop any potential question. “Keep it simple, stupid. Sign here, or here. That's it.”

Whether it was her smile, her persistence, or the way she crossed her legs, visible through the glass desk as she tapped the 'accept line,' that inspired my signature, I can't say, but I can say, it had nothing to do with the promise of learning magic or what that even meant. She thanked me profusely, put the document in a folder, and filed it away to her left. She proceeded to get up by placing both hands on her desk and pushing upwards as if it took all her effort to stand, and in doing so, deliberate or not, exposed me to an even deeper view of cleavage, before she went erect. I couldn't help but stand with her, as I needed to rise to continue to gaze inward, compelled by an urgency to discover just how far the rabbit hole went. She reached out a hand and my hand went to hers without conscious thought. The grip was surprisingly strong, astonishing in that it felt kind and warm, even with the intimate liberty my eyes had taken.

“What were those caveats again?” I asked.

“Caveat, really,” she responded, trying to extract her hand. “Once enrolled, you cannot be un-enrolled. You can't quit or flunk or do anything but pass, even if it takes you all eternity. We have standards, here. You will continue your education until you have demonstrated a modicum of magic, provided an acceptable thesis, and passed a board comprised of professors and peers.”

I had another question, but somehow her magic led me away from her cubicle and out a back door, all the while informing me that any other questions was likely to be answered in Orientation, but if not, I would learn it in due course over the my Freshman year.

“Be happy, John Harister. Good day,” she said, patting me on the back, which seemed kindly enough, except she was really shoving me out the door and into the midst of a fairly non-

descript college campus, with an assortment of folks tarrying here and there. I turned to her. She smiled pleasantly at me, her blouse so tight if she breathed in buttons might fly, her skirt short enough that there was the same inclination to seek more information as her cleavage did, and her heels titled her ass up just enough to be an invitation to want more, only the door closed behind her and vanished, leaving an uninterrupted view of the campus, but no indication of the building I had clearly just exited.

Now that she was gone, I rediscovered how to breathe. The world turned at an odd angle and I succumbed to the weight of my own body. Before the world went dark, a squirrel foraging through the grass put a compassionate paw on my forehead, moved its mouth silently as if it was expecting me to lip read, and then blinked sympathetically, tilting its head. It turned and foraged on, showing it's butt and a quivering tail, not the least bit disturbed by the human lying in the grass.

Chapter 2

“Loxy, you’re supposed to breathe into him, not just kiss him.”

“He’s already breathing, silly,” Loxy argued. “I’m waking him with a kiss.”

“That only works on princesses in fairy tales,” a male voice chimed in.

“He’s stirring!” the first female voice said.

“I feel it.” Loxy laughed a light hearted laugh. “Can you open your eyes, Sir?”

I did. I convinced myself to maintain eye contact with her, but only because the way she was kneeling risked seeing up her skirt. I am not sure if she noticed, but her eyes didn’t waver from mine, even as I struggled to gather intel with my periphery vision and other senses. There was a young female to my right, standing next to an old man with a cane. The female was a ‘cosplay’ live action rendition of an anime in a school uniform, and the old man might have been a Chinese magician with his white beard and long, wispy mustache, except for his striped pen suit coat and blue jeans. There was another girl to my right, but she stood in the shadow and was hard to make out without devoting more eye contact. I found myself too preoccupied with the beauty of the girl kneeling beside me, hovering over me, her shoulder length hair hanging straight down. Her left hand rested on my crotch, her right hand over my heart. She smiled.

“I think you can get off him now,” anime chick said.

“Uh? Oh!” she removed her hands from my person. “Sorry. It’s just the best magic I know.”

“Getting a rise out of folks?” the old man asked.

“It worked on you,” Loxy said, playfully. “Can you sit up, Sir?”

I sat up, and she gave aid as if I were an invalid, but I didn’t protest. Her hands were fascinatingly warm, penetrating my shirt into my shoulder.

“First day?” the woman in the shadow asked.

Anime chick laughed. “If I didn’t know any better, I would say he was still under the administrator’s glamour.”

The old man knelt down leaning into his cane. “Was it Amber?”

“I don’t know,” I said honestly.

“I don’t know,” the old man mimicked maliciously. “Didn’t you read her name tag?”

“Did you?” Loxy asked, defending me, and yet, there was a playfulness in it towards the old man, as opposed to condescending.

“I got distracted,” the old man admitted, looking away, as if searching a memory.

“I bet,” anime chick said.

“We all did,” the girl in the shadow said.

“She must have fucked you good, based on your present daze,” the old man said.

I am pretty sure I flushed. The girls all laughed. Loxy was the one who figured it out. “You didn’t sleep with her!?”

“Come on lad, spit it out!” the old man pressed.

“Give him a moment,” Loxy said.

“Why? He’s what, fifty years old? He should be able to discuss sex without getting so flustered,” the man said. “Unless, you’re one of those closet wankers. Or perhaps you prefer a real doll or a servitor.”

“That’s enough,” Loxy insisted, more firm.

“Going to tell me to be nice?” the old man asked.

“I asked you to be nice a long time ago,” Loxy reminded him. “If you chose to be a cantankerous old cliché, well, that’s on you, but the mission of our group is to find ways to improve our natural dispositions.”

“Besides,” the girl in the shadow said. “It doesn’t mean anything if he did. If I recall correctly, you admitted to sleeping with the administrator.”

The old man stood up, pouting, and stepped away, staring dramatically into the breeze, his hair pushed back. “It was the only way she could break her own spell over me so I that I would have sufficient faculties to sign her damn form,” he lamented. He sighed. “And, I was much younger then.”

“Les,” Loxy said with compassion. “You’re still young, and medically, there is no reason you can’t enjoy intimacy.”

He turned to her and pointed the head of his cane.

“You will not steal anymore of my vital energy, Vixen!” he said.

“There is absolutely no evidence that ejaculation decreases either spiritual or magical energies,” Loxy said. “If abstinence has given you any gains, it is most likely due to belief or a placebo effect, but I can personally attest that abstinence has done nothing to improve your temperament. You come across as a backed up, old crazy cat woman, minus the cats.”

“Keep your pseudo-science mumbo jumbo to yourself,” he warned. “I will not be tricked or mislead again. I’ve been here longer than any of you, and you’d all be wiser if you would defer to my counsel.”

“You’ve been here longer than most of the buildings,” anime chick said.

Loxy laughed and turned to me. “Would you like to join us?”

“Now, hold on just a minute,” the old man protested. “We’re not taking in another stray.”

“Oh, Lester,” Loxy said. “We could use another male. A little more balanced than three to one.”

“I consider three to one balanced,” Lester stated.

“Unless it’s three males to one female,” the anime chick said.

“Not the point,” Lester argued. “Our nest is full. He is a noob and has to learn to fend for himself, just like we all did.”

The girl in the shadows spoke. “Lester has a point. I doubt he has even successfully passed Orientation. We’re not waiting around for him to do that.” She stepped out of the shadow. Her skin was pale, with a hint of green. Her hair was darker green. Her dress was white and airy and it allowed light to pass through, both way. I turned my gaze back to the brunette with the English accent.

Loxy stood over me, offered me a hand up. I accepted and was drawn up close to her. I became aware of her breath, and the smell of oranges. With the sun behind her, she was radiant. Her hair was shoulder length, and she had to push some of from in front of her eye, tucking it back behind her ear. She, too, wore a simple skirt and blouse, but it wasn’t necessarily a school uniform like her anime friend.

“Alisha is right. You have to get through Orientation,” Loxy said. “Come on. We’ll show you the way.”

निर्मित

The group encouraged me to enter Orientation alone. Well, Lester’s words were hardly encouraging, but was more of the line of getting it over with quick, like pulling a bandage off in

one sudden tear. I was also informed that there was no way to avoid going to Orientation, as the first doorway I entered would take me there regardless of my wanting to attend or not, and eventually, everyone steps through at least one doorway. They also rambled, or more likely bickered definitions with Lester, about how many things could actually be construed as a doorway, so deliberately going through an obvious doorway was often less disconcerting than say a random arch created by two trees entwining branches. I was so confused by their ramblings that I didn't even bother to explain that I had no clue, but rather just kind of nodded as if they were speaking intelligibly. Loxy assured me she'd wait by the fountain on the side of the building where I would have to exit.

"No, we won't," Lester said.

"Not forever, anyway," the anime chick, Keera, amended.

"No matter what happens, things will be alright," Loxy insisted. "I'm not sure why, but I think I am going to see you again."

At their behest, I entered the building and proceeded down the hall of alumni. None of them were readily recognizable, their names written in an alien script. Halfway down the hall I paused, fairly certain the portrait in question resembled an author I was fond of. I decided it best to not mention his name, in case it wasn't him, and or, in case he might be offended being known as a graduate of this particular academy. If it's him, I dare say his books of magical lands where puns tend to have an affect over reality is probably the closest fiction that would come to match my overall college experience. But we'll get to that much later.

I pushed though the double doors at the end of the hall as instructed by the group, as well as the sign that said Orientation in a script I could read. I was three steps in when I paused to 'orientate,' allowing my eyes to adjust to the dim lighting. It was as if I had walked into a theatre with the movie already in progress. There was something odd, but I was still acclimating, or, more likely, I didn't want to believe what my senses were telling me. I continued down the perceived path, slow enough I hoped my feet might find the stairs if there proved to be any. I noticed movement on my left and right, shadows bobbing. There was the murmur of indistinct conversations, sighs, and moans. I stopped.

"I smell sex and candy here..." came the snippet of a song. Then my nose was overwhelmed by the smell of spilt sperm and sweat and...

A female clutching a shirt to her chest ran by, screaming; it was a laughing, playful scream, not one of horror. She was followed by a man in a crow suit, the kind of suit you might see on the side of a road while spinning an arrow sign saying 'do your taxes here.'

I turned to exit the way I came in. Not only were the doors gone, but the man in the bird suit was doing the girl doggy style against the wall where I had hoped to egress. Regress? Regret? Egret! Oh, fuck, my mind was becoming mush, and though I had no specific female ideation, I was becoming more and more horny. I turned back towards the stage, which I could better make out now that my eyes had acclimated, and headed promptly to the front row, which seemed thankfully and surprisingly devoid of folks. I did this all the while trying to ignore the occasional hand that reached out and grabbed my arm in an invitation to join the play. The subtle and not so subtle shadowy throws of humanoids and non-humanoids was making me seasick. I wasn't disgusted, per say. Vertigo, yes. An increasing urgency to indulge, yes! But there was an equally urgent compulsion to fly.

I sat down in the front row and concentrated on the stage. A dull, aged curtain gently wafted to an unseen force, perhaps the culmination of heavy breathing from the audience. The row of chairs directly behind me squeaked rhythmically. Without a watch, the squeaking became

my measure of time. I forced myself to breathe in, despite the heavy smell of sex, holding it for a count, releasing it, holding empty lungs for a count, and repeating.

“Hello! I’m Fersia. Want to play?”

If she was 18, she was that only by an hour or so. She appeared human, with extra ‘accouterments,’ like furry ears that stuck up from the top of her head. If she had human ears, they were well hidden in a cotton candy like topping of pink, curly hair. She had an active tail that moved as if real, loosed out the back of her skirt, thanks to a slit made just for it. The skirt itself was pink fur, and her bra was pink fur, and her belly bare and taught. She wore furry pink gloves with the fingers cut so her painted pink nails were exposed. She wore furry boots, and like her fingers, her toes were exposed, revealing pink toe nails. That line delineating thigh muscle drawing my eye up towards the furry pink miniskirt made me lose my count and I struggled for air.

“I’m here for the Orientation,” I said, when I had the breath. OMG, I was horny, and if she and I were in a room alone together, I would have already been finished with the first go round.

“And I am testing your Orientation,” Fersia said with a coy smile as she in drew closer. She went to her knees and her furry, pink paws drew down over my chest and stomach, ending in my lap where she began to knead my thighs, working their way slowly back up.

A head popped over the seats from the row behind. “I told you he was gay.”

“Oh, no he’s not,” Fersia said, knowledge gained through kneading. She smiled shamelessly at me.

“Damn it,” the boy from the back seat said. He had antler stumps, not ears. “Any chance you’re bi? Can the three of us play together?”

“Um, no, thank you, I prefer females only,” I said quickly and clearly to avoid any confusion.

“Suit your rotten self,” the horned guy said, pouting as he withdrew back to his row.

Fersia crawled up into my lap, straddling me, and began licking my neck.

On the stage, a woman emerged from the curtains.

“Hello, students. If I might have your attention, please,” the woman said.

“I think we’re supposed to listen to this,” I told Fersia, breathlessly. Her tongue, like a real cat’s tongue, had backward facing barbs; cat grooming just went up on the erotic scale.

“Oh, baby,” Fersia purred in my ear. “Someone gives that same speech every two hours.” She giggled as she pawed my bald head and began to grind. The flat of her tongue broad swiped my lips and she hummed in delight.

“I am supposed to welcome you to Safe Haven University, but I feel it necessary to dispel some myths and misconceptions,” the woman on the staged continued, heedless of the orgy in play before her. Was she blinded by the stage light that had come on when she stepped out? She was professionally dressed, librarian style. Conservative, but sexy. Her long, dark hair, was in a bun. She wore 1960’s style glasses. Her dress fell to just below her knee. Stylish shoes with half heels, but the most interesting piece was her amulet, half bronze and half crystal, over top her vest. Over all, she also seemed a little off color, as if she were a host of a vintage Disney commercial, or a TV host.

“You are not the chosen ones,” the speaker emphasized. “There is absolutely nothing innately special about any of you.”

Three males rushed the stage and I felt fear for what might happen to the speaker, and I leaned forwards as if to get up, and Fersia moaned ridiculously loud, as if I was leaning into her

for her sake. My concern for the librarian was misplaced. An invisible barricade blocked the three males from harassing the speaker. Two gave up and went and amused themselves together in the corner, while the other dropped his pants there, exposing himself and beating it while aiming it at the speaker.

I looked away and found myself staring into Fersia's eyes, her hands on my shoulder. She licked my nose.

"You okay, baby?" Fersia asked.

"I'm distracted," I said.

"Oh!" Fersia giggled. Her paws fell to my belt and began unfastening it. "Me, too!"

"This is not Narnia, or Hogwarts, your father's school, your grandfather's school, or like any other place you think you may have heard of in a once upon a time. You're not here because we need you. Forget the Matrix and Neo. You're here because we have graciously embraced you, flaws and all. You are here because you are mediocre in every aspect of your lives. You're boringly redundant, unnecessary, borderline ridiculously obsolete and useless, and you lack the discipline and knowledge to even recognize just how pitiful your state actually is."

"Damn!" That was harsh.

"Oh, yeah, baby!" Fersia said, thinking she was in agreement with me.

"Are you hearing this?" I asked her.

"Don't listen to her," Fersia said, slipping off my lap and going back to her knees. "It's all lies. Depressing as hell. You're special, baby. I am special. Look at me! We, together, are uniquely special. Oh my! It's so hard!"

"The founding Mother of our University believes it is possible, given sufficient time and energy, for you to rise above your ordinariness! She believes you are all stars in the making..."

The ensuing tongue action was pleasantly erotic and unexpectedly abrasive at the same time and I had to stop her, putting my hand to her chin and drawing her up.

"What's wrong?"

"I..."

"Want me back on top?" Fersia asked enthusiastically. "Or would you rather do me from behind?" She turned and rubbed her butt in my lap, her tail brushing my face before entwining around my neck. "Oh my God, I want you," she said, mirroring my own thoughts. She faced me and crawled back on my lap. I was so hard and she so wet, it didn't take any effort or hand holding to guide it in... We became one.

"So, if you're ready to rise to the occasion," the speaker pressed on. "To step out of yourself and serve a greater cause, you will find the exit here to my left..." A door appeared against the wall where she gestured.

I stood up, dropping Fersia ungracefully to the floor, her hands catching so that she didn't go all the way down. I carefully tucked in and zipped my pants back up and was securing my belt even as I headed for the door.

"Huh?!" Fersia asked.

"It was really nice meeting you, Fersia," I yelled over my shoulder. "But I got to go."

"Really?!" she asked, astonished.

I pushed through the door and out into daylight not looking back to see if the door would disappear. I gasped fresh air as if I had been underwater.

"Well, I am not waiting any longer!" Lester was saying.

"O M G," Loxy said the letters, clapping her hands and bouncing on her toes. "I knew you would make it!" She ran to embrace me as if I had done something incredibly amazing, or as

if I were a long lost friend, and since I wasn't a long lost friend, I had to reconsider the first, but the truth was, I had only gotten out because I had been overwhelmed with fear, something primal, like perhaps my early programming of damnation and hellfire if you indulge in fornicating which was triggered by being in the proximity of an actual orgy and the personal disgust of the male jerking off in front of the stage. Had it just been me and Fersia, I would have never left, which was just an honest appraisal.

"He must suffer from erectile dysfunction!" Lester said.

Loxy hands verified her certainty, and she flashed a smile at Lester. "Nope," she said. She turned her eyes back to mine. "I want you to come with us."

Alish echoed the sentiment, followed by Keera.

"We don't even know his bloody name!" Lester pointed out.

Loxy looked to me. "Jon Harister," I supplied.

"Loxy Bliss. It's a pleasure to meet you," Loxy said.

"What's in a name? You could be inviting an axe murdered into our homes!" Lester said.

"Are you an axe murderer?" Loxy asked.

"I am not," I answered.

Loxy looked to Lester. "Really?" Lester asked. "Isn't that exactly what an axe murdered would say?"

"He's not an axe murder," Loxy said. "And I believe him."

"And, you've been out voted, three to one," Keera said.

"Umph," Lester said, pouting as he started the walk home.

Chapter 3

As we walked, the stress of Orientation slowly began to wear off. It would have dissipated faster had I access to a cold shower or a private room, but, trying to think of other things, non-sexual things, which was hard because the girls in my company were Victorian Secret quality, and it was difficult not to stare, and I am certain Loxy caught my straying eye, but only smiled, and leaned into me, and even took my arm she and I were old mates, but overall, walking brought things down a notch. Loxy's kindness was genuinely administered, as opposed to the agenda orientated kindness that accompanied a general Hooter's hostess.

"It occurs to me, I failed to introduce us all properly," Loxy said. She rambled on about how strangely at ease she felt with me, as if that alone was an explanation for how easy the rapport had come, but she was still seeking a deeper answer.

Lester grumbled something inaudible.

"So, this is Alish Forester," Loxy said.

Alish, the green hair, green skinned girl, touched my face with both hands, as was her custom. I was surprised by how cool they felt, and the texture of her skin was like silk. Her shift was also silk, thin, translucent, and revealing, and I was tempted to see if all of her felt equally silky, but I told myself, 'this not a dream you can't just do as you wish...'

"Keera" Loxy said. Keera offered her hand as if she expected her knuckles to be kissed, and curtsayed. "It's a pleasure."

"And Lester..."

The old man stropped near an oversized rose stem; there was a giant rose bud several meters up. The old man turned and came at me.

"I don't like you," Lester said. "I don't like how easy your transition seems to be. You don't question anything! You just roll right along, as if nothing fazes you. That's bizarre. That's dangerous! Look at her!" Lester pointed to Alish. "Her color doesn't strike you as odd? It doesn't bother you?"

"Why should it?" Keera asked.

"Because it just should! No one walks into an LSD psychotic break from reality and not freak out!" Lester drew even closer. "Unless, you're use to LSD trips. DMT much?"

"I don't use drugs," I said. It was neither a boast nor a lament. It probably should have been a boast, as I was the only one who emerged from my family of origin without a drug addiction.

"So, what's wrong with you?" Lester asked.

"Lester," Loxy warned.

"No! You're always helping noobs and strays, that's your flaw," Lester said. "Alish is positively ambivalent, just like a 'planimal' should be. Keera, well, if her affectation for purple were her only flaw, she might be sufferable..."

"You're really angry," I said.

Lester fell silent, his eyes narrowed and his nose flared. I expected to get hit by the cane.

"Let's see how you feel when you've been here over a hundred years," Lester said.

Lester turned to the rose stem and proceeded up, using the thorns as if they were a ladder. When he was out of earshot, Loxy patted my arm.

"Give him time to warm up to you. He is really a loving soul deep down," Loxy assured me.

"I don't see how you arrive at that," Keera said.

“You can’t be that angry and not love,” Loxy insisted.

“If you say so,” Keera said. She headed up the stem.

“I echo Loxy,” Alish said. “I recommend patience.” She followed Keera up to the bud, pushing through a specific petal.

“So, this is our nest. We have already had dinner, but if you would like something to eat before we go up, I could prepare a meal for you,” Loxy asked.

“I am okay, but I do have a question, if you’ll permit,” I said.

“Of course,” Loxy invited.

“Why are you being nice to me?” I asked.

“That’s a really sad question,” Loxy said, touching my arm. “Was it really that bad where you came from?”

I shrugged. I really didn’t know how to respond to that. “It was what it was.”

“Either you are wiser than you let on and the school made an error in accepting you,” Loxy said. “Or you’re too dismissive of your own pain, real or perceived.”

“It’s probably age, not wisdom,” I offered.

“You’re what, thirtyish?” Loxy asked.

“Forty eight,” I said.

“Wow, you look younger,” Loxy said.

Again, I shrugged. Luck. Genetics. It wasn’t my diet, which consisted of fast food and microwaveable dinners. The healthiest thing I made was homemade chili.

Loxy nodded. “I suppose, one can make a distinction between age and wisdom, but there is usually a high correlation,” she said. “So, coming up rose top?”

“You really live here?” I asked.

“No, I sleep here. I live here;” Loxy said the last part while touching her heart. She then touched my heart, my forehead, and then her forehead. “Come on.”

Loxy started up and when she saw I wasn’t following, she paused.

“You coming?” she asked.

“I, um, you...”

“Aren’t wearing underwear. You embarrassed?”

“Um, no, just horny,” I admitted.

“That sounds healthy. Now, come along,” Loxy said.

The inside of the rose bud was spacious enough for us all to exist and lay out at our own designated petal. There was no furniture. The floor of the rose was not rose like, but more like a golden dandelion, with a gentle, feathery texture. It gave off a gentle golden hue that filled the space with a warmth. There was a center style that flared into a stigma which on demand produced potable water for drinking. On most nights, Alish explained, the rose was opened to the sky, but clearly, the rose was expecting rain, indicated by not blossoming.

“So, where do you come from?” Keera asked.

It was the standard question I would have expected much earlier. “I live in Sanger, Texas. North of Dallas.” I always add ‘North of Dallas’ because everyone knows Dallas, but no one knows Sanger.

“Of course! If that doesn’t beat all,” Lester complained. “An American. A God damned American. You know how hard it to keep them fed!” Lester turned on his side, covering his full body, even his head, with a petal so as to be out of the group talk.

“What did you do there?” Keera asked.

“That’s so not the right question,” Alish said.

“What’s the right question?” Keera asked.

“Did you love?” Loxy asked.

“Sure,” I said, smiling. “All my life.”

“That’s it?” Keera asked. “Details, Sir!”

“Never married, no children,” I said. Was this really the stuff they wanted to know about the stranger that just fell into their midst? “No friends during childhood, and before completing high school, I moved as far from family as I could. There was a string of relationships, not one lasted more than four years, because, per my pattern, I would find women who were somehow broken or in need, and I would repair them, or teach them, and they would heal and once I wasn’t needed, well, they moved on, or I moved on, or both.” When I finished rambling, I was struck by the material I had shared. Either my discernment was shot, or I felt so at ease with these folks that I was risking ridicule and abandonment for being so perversely revealing.

Loxy touched my arm with kindness.

“So, what was your job,” Keera returned to a questions she could track.

“I pushed freight, with a fork lift,” I said. “Many ‘six day’ weeks, ten hour days, unpacking trucks, loading trucks, shifting weight from one area to the next, netting freight, building cans and cookie sheets for aircraft, pushing these to where they needed to be, and repeat...”

“How dreadfully monotonous,” Keera said.

Loxy drank from the stigma. “Oh, I forgot, if you need to use the toilet tree, you descend here, and there should be enough rose light to make your way to the tree we passed,” she said.

“Oh, God damn it!” Lester complained. Apparently mentioning the toilet tree produced the urge to go. He untucked from his petal, pushed through the trap door with his feet and descended the stem, his cane hooked to his arm, all the while complaining. “Why the hell did we make this thing so damn high...pain in my ass...”

Loxy showed me how to recline my petal, assuring me it would not drop me. Lester returned, grumbling, and on entering he asked for the lights to be out. They consented and Alish mumbled a phrase and the gold dimmed and flicked off. The rose petals themselves gave a faint, red light that made it still possible to see. Loxy excused herself and headed down the stem. Keera said good night and closed her eyes, her cover petal was rolled so that it was a body length pillow to snuggle. Alish sat back against her petal, sitting in a lotus fashion, as if she were going to meditate all night. Her hands rested on her knees.

I lay back, staring straight up at the ceiling, its twisted turns and folds and lines drawing the eye ever towards center. I revisited Lester’s complaints about me and felt certain he was on to something. Was I so emotionally dead that I had failed to grasp the significance of my change in situations? Could I explain it away as one too many viewings of the X-Files? Fiction and fantasy had made me immune to wonder; that seemed to fit, but I was perturbed that I didn’t feel anything akin to happiness. I always imagined if I got away from Earth I would be overwhelmed with joy. At the least, I should be feeling relief. I was free of the other life! Perhaps part of me didn’t believe it was real and I would wake up, but I had no intention of testing that or pushing that, and so would stay because here was better than there. Presently, at least.

I heard Loxy returned but kept my gaze upwards. I had lusted after her enough today. And she had been nothing but kind to me. She deserved better than an old, perverted man leering at her.

“You okay?” Her whisper was near and I could sense her beside me, but I focused ever upwards.

I nodded.

“You’re crying!” she almost broke her whisper.

I hadn’t noticed the tears until she brought my attention to it. I turned my head further away from her. She brought it back with gentle hands.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I am okay,” I said.

“Jon,” Loxy said, seriously. “If you learn nothing else today, learn this. The strongest magic is telling the truth. If you don’t learn to do that, you’ll be here longer than Lester.”

“Wow,” I said. Even in the dim rose like light, there was a brightness in her eyes, an intensity of spirit akin to that girl that got everyone killed at Troy. “You are so not Glenda.”

“Who’s that?” Loxy asked.

“From the Wizard of Oz?” I said.

“Not ringing a bell,” Loxy said.

There was a joke there, but I let it go. “Really?”

“I’m not American,” Loxy reminded me.

“But you’re English,” I said. “You should get the reference.”

“Nineteenth century English,” Loxy said.

“Really?” I asked.

“You want to see my girdle?” Loxy asked, smiling mischievously.

“No, I believe you,” I said, but not a hundred percent committed to that belief, but a hundred percent certain I wasn’t going to admit my skepticism for fear of calling her a liar.

“So, about Glenda?” Loxy pursued.

“Oh, well, Glenda wouldn’t tell you the secret to getting home until the end of the story, after you made the long journey of self-discovery, made some friends, and killed the witch,” I said.

“Why would you kill a witch?” Loxy asked, concerned.

“Oh, not me. Dorothy, the heroine of the story, a young lady about the age of nine, at least in the books, was given the task of killing the witch and bringing back the broomstick as proof in order to be granted the wish of going home by the powerful Wizard of Oz,” I explained.

“How dreadful for the witch!” Loxy said.

“Well, she was an evil witch,” I pointed out.

“And that justifies killing her?” Loxy asked. “And, what kind of evil wizard would send a nine year old girl to confront a witch in the first place?”

“Well, in the movie, she was a bit older,” I mused.

“I’m not sure I like this story,” Loxy said.

I chuckled. Trying to suppress it turned it into laughter.

“Would you keep quiet?!” Lester snapped from under his petal.

“Tell me about your tears,” Loxy asked. “Are you home sick?”

“Oh, no,” I assured her.

“Then what is it?” Loxy asked.

“I don’t know. I think I might be happy,” I told her.

“That doesn’t make sense. You either are happy or you’re aren’t, there is no thinking about it,” Loxy pointed out.

“I really don’t know why, then” I said. Was this happiness? Did something deep inside me finally shift and all the suppressed emotions of all the years was finding its way out? I hope

that wasn't the case, because there was also years of suppressed rage and disappointment, enough to drown a world.

“Shhh,” Loxy said, cuddling into me. “Shhh, you're safe here.” Her embrace was love and warmth and natural, but there was also a hint of selfishness, sufficient to erase any doubt that she was offering sympathy for the simple sake of appeasement. She did this because she wanted to. She kissed my cheek, tasting tears. Her lips met mine. I tasted my own tears, but mostly her lips, and again the faint hint of someone who had just eaten an orange.

Unlike in Orientation, I was not bothered by the fact that there were others present, nor did I feel compelled to perform. I did consider the others present, but I could almost justify their being in this space, knowing that the further back in time one went, the less likely one was to have their own private room, and so there would be a time when intimacy between couples simply didn't occur in isolation. Privacy was a modern invention that rarely existed a hundred years ago, much less a thousand years ago. Our clothes came off too easy. I watched her body move in the soft reds and pinks and shadows. The whole affair was intense and quiet and when she was satisfied that we were equally satiated, she pulled a petal over our naked bodies and dozed against me. I followed soon after, unwilling to let her go, for fear of waking her, or waking myself and finding myself back in Texas, alone. My tears kept coming.

This was joy. A light rain began to make its applause against the closed rose.

निर्मित

This next part is a dream sequence. I open with that because I don't like those cheesy moments where the movie or author tries to trick you into believing something is real that isn't and you have to piece it all together backwards, like, oh, that makes so much more sense. That's just bad writing. And maybe telling you this was a dream is bad writing, but I'm just letting you know, I'm not tricking you here, or at the end of this book it isn't going to be like Dorothy wakes up in the bed having never really gone to Oz kind of trick. I also won't tell you that no one dies, because, well, the world, even at Safe Haven, is not that safe. But this, was a dream. Also, I have had lucid dreams, but this was not a lucid dream, but it was unique in its own way.

I found myself in a private library. There was warm fire a glow in the fireplace, as opposed to anywhere else, right? And it was snowing outside. Loxy was sitting in the window seat, holding a book. She was wearing a gray knitted sweater, single piece that went to just above her knees, the sleeves were pulled up to elbows so that her arms were bare, and she was wearing black hose, and thick, knitted gray socks that came half way up her legs. I found myself unable to focus on the snow falling outside the window because she was absolutely stunning, sitting in the window seat.

The book she was reading looked familiar. I stood close enough to the fire to be warmed, but was staring at Loxy. She finally looked up from the book. The room was almost public library large, with large circular couch on one side of the room, opened to the fire, and on the other side, a scattering of lone lounge chairs with their own side tables and lamps. The ceiling was two and half floors high, with floating ladder to get access to the higher books, and a walk way half way up, with a second floating ladder for the upper walkway circling the room.

“You okay?” Loxy asked.

“Yes, thank you,” I said. “What are you doing?”

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