

LIMINAL

By
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This is a Safe Haven University novel that goes hand and hand with “Not Here,” “Not There,” “Not Anywhere,” and “Everywhere and all at Once.” There is a connection to all of the ‘I/Tulpa’ stories

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If you’re not familiar with my work, almost all of these stories are the product of a version of ‘active imagination’ in which the story is experienced and transcribed, more than labored over. If you are familiar with Tulpamancy, Wonderlands, or the stories of Tesla having such an overpowering imagination that he felt as if he went on long journeys to foreign lands and met people, without leaving his head... That is this. I can’t explain it better than he. I have put out some stories that felt more like ‘downloads’ but this is not that. I suspect this is similar to what Thomas Campbell, author of ‘My Big Theory of Everything’ is referring to when he discusses being able to shift realities. I don’t know. I just find it helpful, cathartic, in processing past traumas. This place, and the people there, have changed my world.

I assure you, there will be grammatical errors. I apologize in advance. I am working on doing better. I have marginally improved, which you only need read my first book made available in 2004. Feel free to email me any corrections or complaints. I am simply a modest fan of distant worlds, science, and metaphysics; someone who finds himself caught up in the whirlwinds of something bigger than himself on a daily basis.

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Chapter 1

Safe Haven University, a place where science, magic, and metaphysics can be studied in part or in whole. A place where the blending of the arts is encouraged. The school teaches both Light and Dark magic, as it is strongly held belief by the practitioners, professors, and experts in the matter that one cannot have one without the other. It is not the only University available for teaching esoteric knowledge and philosophies. It's not even the most recognized University. There are probably a half dozen Universities on the Astral plane alone offering similar curriculums. It is one of the few which is the most difficult to get in, because one only becomes a student by recommendation. Referrals go through an austere committee, and a process of debate and deliberations that is so involved that the US Congress might be more likely to pass a bill giving themselves a pay cut and increasing their hours to only do good deeds. Except on Tuesdays. They just a flip a coin.

The University exist in multiple dimensions of space/time, but the physical manifestation is on an obscure, third density planet, orbiting an ordinary yellow star, in orbit around a black hole. The black hole itself churns out a harmonic, which the uninitiated might assume a condition of tinnitus; a color pervades all space time, like a tiny cork rippling the surface as fish nibble away at bait too large to consume. It's foothold in the physical blossoms upwards through the other realms of existence, and flourishes in the imaginal realm. On the physical plane, the planet is host to score of entities: physical beings, dimensional beings, and energy beings. There is a space station. There is one gas giant with forty moons and each of the moons offers a habitat for diverse population of creatures. Travel opportunities can be made by air cars, orbital space cars, the space elevator, boats, the sailing kind, the motored kinds, and the magical kinds, intra-solar spaceships, or magical portals. There are arguments they're aren't magical, just science, tech, and wormholes, but those arguments are best left to those who don't have access and aren't in school. Safe Haven students are taught not to engage in debates of what it is, and simply taught to use what works for them. You don't have to understand oxygen to enjoy a nice breath of fresh air. Not all magic works for all people the same way. This is also true of medicines. Not all medicines work the same. That's true of foods, as well. Some people can eat bacon without an increase in cholesterol. Some people can look at bacon and their cholesterol goes up. Magic? Well, placebos feel like magic, and it really irritates the pharmaceutical people to have to do triple blind studies to rule it out. Don't believe this, test it out for yourself. Next time your Doctor writes you a prescription, ask him: "what is the Number Needed to Treat?" It will either irritate the hell out of the Doctor, or severely impress him/her. NNT is a real thing. If a 1,000 people have to take the drug before one person realizes a benefit, you should seriously consider the list of side effects and whether you want to take it. Again, not magic, but it begs the question, why does science ignore findings from the anomalous side of the science when medicines have their statistical anomalies? Paranormal anomalies are occurring, significantly more than chance, and on a continuum not too far removed from drug efficacy measures! (This statement has not been endorsed by Safe Haven, but will be frequently spouted by students in a witch trial.) Jon posed in a class: so is there a 'number needed to do magic? Like 100,000,000 before one realizes oh, there is something here?' He did not get an answer. Yet.

Safe Haven faculty and students mostly use portals. Interstellar spaceships frequent the system. There is a hub of galactic trade. There is a hub for temporal trade. There is really no way to tell you where in space-time Safe Haven resides, because it is a well-kept secret. You may be brought there by people in the know, or you may find yourself mysteriously transported there, for no apparent rhyme and reason, and simply returned when your business is completed; or their business with you, as they have no qualms about kidnapping if it suits a porpoise, or even a purpose. If you find yourself there, it's most likely because someone there has taken an interest in you. There are no coincidences. It's as easy to get there as crossing from one room to another, and as hard to get there as putting a man safely on Mars using technology from the 14 hundreds. It can be done, but you really don't want to see that NNT number.

Jon Harister, a fairly new student, sometimes felt out of place as a fifty year old male in a school mostly comprised of young people, but that feeling didn't come from not being welcomed or treated well. Most people at Safe Haven were nice people. There are students and faculty that are not nice and you simply had to learn to avoid them. Or deal with them. Dealing with people at Safe Haven was akin to a fandango. You could consider that the dance or the foolish act or both. Sex was usually involved. That's another thing about Safe Haven folks: most people at Safe Haven have an incredibly high libido, higher than average, and so statistically, young people were more prevalent. People with past trauma, bipolar, boundary issues, and or schizophrenia were more likely to be students because, quite frankly, they had access to things the average person couldn't. If you love sex, would have sex indiscriminately, on demand, only needing a willing, breathing partner, or even one not breathing, you're probably in the running to be a student at SHU.

Jon was privy to a conversation about the apparent disparity of younger males to older males, to which he was quickly educated: "Most men are not established enough to engage in education and magic till they have achieved a good many years. If you want a stable, patient, kind father for your offspring, one should always choose an older male. Magic and children are similar animals. You have to nurture both to get good results. Women always mature faster than men. Statistically, physically, mentally, emotionally, magically, and spiritually."

One does not have to reside on Safe Haven to be summoned to class. One cannot avoid class, any more than the Lewis children could escape going to Narnia if they were so summoned. (If you assume the Lewis children were not real children, you're not likely to be a candidate for Safe Haven.) Trying to go to class before your class was ready though just added more school work to your plate. By the time a student was a sophomore, they usually had given up trying to rush through their studies. One simply had to realize the Universe had its own schedule and was usually completely indifferent to your own. Jon was not on Safe Haven when he was called to class, but was comfortably passing the time at his personal home away from home, "2nd Home," for lack of creativity. He was simply passing from one room to another. All thresholds are portals. All portals go somewhere. You only think each room in your house is connected in an integral way because you have not been a Student of Safe Haven. You only think 'rooms' exist only in a house, but outside is a room. A really big room. Day and night time are rooms, and there are a million billion rooms in between this, and you can stand as still as a tree and still travel between rooms. If you hadn't notice this, it's okay. Few people do. Most people don't notice when they've exited or entered a room. Most people have an underdeveloped sense of

ambiance. Even some of the graduates of Safe Haven haven't made the connection. You're given this not to make you feel bad, but to practice paying attention. Sometimes, if you fail to notice, you return to where you were.

Jon was captured, or given a 'pass,' as he crossed over the threshold leading from his bedroom to living area. He had taken two steps before he realized he had transitioned beyond where he had expected to arrive. He took one step back, but did not go back to where he was previously. He wondered if he was still there, and suspected he was, but would have to contend with what was before him before he could return to where he was previously. We could spend the rest of eternity debating if we ever return to where we were previously. He had done this enough now to know holding his breath usually helped the vertigo to fade, and helped him contend. One eventually had to breathe, to accept. He began reading the ambiance of the room, and it was highly charged with expectation. For better or worse, he held everyone's attention. He chewed on his lips as he processed what he should be doing. He was in a classroom, consisting of a teacher's desk and chair, and fifteen student desks and chairs. There were fourteen students in their places. There was one unoccupied chair, clearly his. It was on the far side of the room to where he was now. There was a man sitting on the edge of the teacher's desk, who Jon immediately recognized.

The man, an elderly Chinese male, thin, traditional, long white beard and mustache, wearing blue jeans, a t-shirt, and a sport's coat, with off colored elbow patches. He drummed a cane on the floor.

"You're late," Lester said.

"You're the professor?" Jon asked.

"No, I am the assistant Professor, and you're wasting our time," Lester said.

Jon took the remaining seat. From his seat, the change in perspective allowed Jon to identify another feature of the room. There was a small, ordinary goldfish bowl on the other side of Lester. A single goldfish hovered leisurely, facing away from the class at an oblique angle. There were rainbow rocks at the bottom of the tank, and a tiny castle with an arch just big enough to allow the fish to retreat if it so chose. A solitary leaf of a plant to the right of the abode.

"I assume all of you know why you're here," Lester said.

"I don't," Jon said.

"Have you lost all sense of etiquette?" Lester asked.

"I don't understand," Jon said.

"Students, what do we do when we want to be addressed or ask a question?" Lester asked.

Six students raised their hands, eager to answer the question. The others likely didn't want to be recognized.

"You can't be serious," Jon said.

"Jon, I am not going to give you special treatment because we are friends and you live with me," Lester said.

"I live with you?" Jon asked.

"That's what I said," Lester said.

"You, Sir, live with me," Jon asked.

“When I found you, you were nothing more than a homeless, guttersnipe, begging for a place to live and food to eat. My friends and I took you in, out of our extraordinary kindness, in part due to your extraordinary pathetic state. And how did you repay our kindness? You fucked my friends, destroyed our home, got us kicked off campus, and so, though technically we may be residing at your place, you, Sir, are living with us, and by default, with me,” Lester said.

Jon was going to point out the flaws to Lester’s history, but Lester continued, so Jon sat quietly while Lester was ignoring him and talking on as if he weren’t there.

“Let’s begin with the class rules,” Lester said. “Rule number one: there will be no sex while in this class. Rule two...”

Jon raised his hands. Lester leaned his cane to and fro as if he were shifting gear.

“Jon?”

“You mean, here, in the classroom?” Jon asked.

“While you’re in the class,” Lester said.

“You mean, no sex while enrolled in the class, or while here in the classroom?” Jon asked.

“No sex while in the class,” Lester said.

“Is this a hard fast rule?” Jon asked.

“It’s not hard. Don’t have sex,” Lester said.

“What about oral sex?” Jon asked.

“What about oral sex?” Lester asked.

“Is that permitted?” Jon asked.

“Oral sex, by definition is sex. Rule one states, no sex while in this class,” Lester said.

“What about giving oral?” Jon asked.

“You want to give me oral sex?” Lester asked.

“No!” Jon said. “But I might want to engage in oral sex...”

“You want me to give you oral sex?” Lester asked.

“No!” Jon said.

“So, we’re in agreement, no sex, what’s the problem?” Lester asked.

“There is no way in hell I am going the whole semester without sex,” Jon said.

“I didn’t say you had to go the whole semester without sex,” Lester said.

“You said no sex while in this class,” Jon said.

“Yes,” Lester said.

“So, is that the whole semester, or just in this classroom?” Jon asked.

“Yes,” Lester said.

“How long is this class?” Jon demanded.

“Depends on how many questions you ask,” Lester said.

“What happens if I have sex?” Jon asked.

“What normally happens when you have sex?” Lester asked.

“I meant, if I violate rule one, what is the consequence?” Jon asked.

“You will die,” Lester said.

“Seriously?!” Jon asked.

“Surely you have gone without sex before,” the girl sitting next to him said. Jon stared dumbly at her. She observed his look and decided it was compulsory to explain her position: “We all went the first twenty two years of our lives not having sex. You can go a spell without.”

“You clearly don’t know me,” Jon said. He also nearly said, ‘and don’t call me surely.’ He turned to Lester. “Can we at least masturbate?”

“No,” Lester said.

“How do I get out of this class?!” Jon said.

“By completing the class,” Lester said. “Rule Two, if a Freshman approaches you to get their sex card punched, you will not only turn them down, but that student is forever on your do not fuck list, even after you get out of this class.”

“That is so un-fucking-reasonable,” Jon said.

“Raise your hand, please,” Lester said.

Jon raised his hand.

“Jon,” Lester said.

“That is...”

“Rule two,” Lester said. “Rule three, you cannot blame this class or me for not being able to engage in sex.”

“And just what excuse am I supposed to give?” Jon asked.

“Lie,” Lester said.

“To Loxy?!” Jon asked. “You know I can’t lie to her. And if a Freshman asks you for sex, you have to engage them. It’s the University’s rule.”

“Unless you’re in this class, then rule two trumps the general rule that you should have sex with whomever asks, whenever they ask. The Freshman must be so thoroughly discouraged by your excuse that they will intentionally avoid you for all time,” Lester said.

Jon got up and tried to leave the class. The door didn’t open.

“Jon, please return to your seat,” Lester said.

“Or what, you will kick me out?” Jon asked.

Lester smiled. It was creepy. “Oh, please challenge me in my class,” he said.

Jon considered the situation. Lester was pretty handy with the cane. The dance number with Dick Van Dyke and the old bamboo, well, that’s child’s play compared to Lester’s martial arts ability with a cane. Jon returned to his seat.

Lester continued with the rules. Jon was so busy sulking, he didn’t hear any of the other rules, nor did he hear the class dismissed. He only saw people getting up to leave and he got up to leave, too.

“Jon, I need you stay,” Lester said.

“Oh, fuck you,” Jon said.

“Refer to rule one and sit. The professor wants to speak with you,” Lester said.

Jon sat back down. Lester was the last person to depart the room. He closed the door behind him. Jon sat there, waiting for the professor to come speak with him. To the fish he said, ‘I know a game we can play; it’s called up up up with the fish.’ The fish didn’t laugh. “Oh, come on, it was funny. Doctor Seuss? Oh, maybe Loxy is right, I am not funny.” He put his head on the desk.

When sleep didn't come, he got up and tried to open the door. It didn't open. He walked around the room, but there was no other exit and no windows. Only the chairs, the desks, and the goldfish. Jon opened all the drawers on the teacher's desk. He found goldfish food and dry erase markers. Jon ranted, "I hate fucking dry-erase markers. Doesn't the school know chalk is cheaper? I can buy a box of non-allergenic chalk for fifty cents that lasts me five years, but a single dry-erase marker rarely lasts beyond a week and cost like five bucks a piece..." He tried to open the drawers on the student desk, but none would open for him, except the drawers on his desk, and they were empty. He sat back down. He leaned his head on his desk. He stared at the goldfish. The goldfish stared back. Its mouth made the slow opening and closings as it pushed water through its gills. It pooped. Everybody poops. Jon went through that childhood story. Elephants poop, and they need a huge kitty litter box. Goldfish poop, too. He wondered if dolphins made fart jokes. Maybe that's why the pod was always jumping out of the water and laughing. Did stragglers get hit with poop?

Jon struggled to avoid going into daydream mode. He had flashbacks to the movie "3 O'clock High," and a clock montage. He found himself entertaining a montage of the goldfish and him holding a staring contest with the camera getting closer and closer to the goldfish with dramatic music, ending with Ferris Bueller jokes. He wondered if Stan Lee would join him for a cameo and coffee. Finally, Jon's eyes started to close from boredom and just as he was about to sleep, he heard the voice:

"You're making this difficult."

Jon became alert, looking around for the professor. "Hello?" His mind was as quiet as the classroom. It was like being in an empty house and hearing a creak and suddenly even your breath stopped so you could hear the echo of what was, but you're not a bat, and you can't chase echoes, and eventually you have to breathe again. No one was there. He got up and tried the door. Locked. He looked for a camera or a speaker but found none. "Hello?"

No one answered. He stood there for a while, until he got bored of standing, returned to his chair, and again, his eyes began to shut.

"Jon," came the voice.

Jon sat back up. He was seriously attentive.

"That's better," the voice said.

Jon blinked. He pointed at the goldfish. "You're the professor?"

"My name is Frito," it said. The voice was booming, inside Jon's head.

"That's funny," Jon said.

"I was named by a child on Earth," Frito said. "It stuck. Just like your call sign 'Strangelove,' is going to stick."

"My call sign?" Jon said.

"You didn't think you'd be solarchariot, did you? Your group call sign is solarchariot, but you, Sir, are Strangelove," Frito said.

"Speaking of love of strange, I am opposed to the class rule..."

"Suck it up," Frito said.

"Wouldn't that be breaking the rule?" Jon asked.

"Not everything is an innuendo," Frito said.

"Has anyone told you that you sound like Samuel?" Jon asked.

“Expecting Morgan Freeman?” Frito asked.

“Yes, actually,” Jon said.

“I am not God. I am a goldfish,” Frito said. “And I chose the voice I thought you would most likely respond to...”

“I would have responded better to Lauren Bacall,” Jon interrupted.

“No, you would have just been distracted by sex. There is more to life than sex,” Frito said.

Jon bit his lower lip. “May I be released from your class?”

“No,” Frito said. “You have been chosen to be a Guardian of Doors. This class is designed to expand your liminal nature to the next level.”

Jon didn’t say anything.

“What part of that don’t you understand?” Frito asked.

“I don’t know enough to even ask,” Jon said.

“Fair enough,” Frito said. He began to pace back and forth as he lectured. “You, Sir, are a generalist. Most worlds hate generalists. They prefer specialists. Worlds steeped in industrial economic paradigms, they are even more loathed to generalists than other economic models. The more generalists a society has, the rarer the call for specialists. Even your world’s primary dating philosophy is to seek specialists, one partner who can meet all needs, which is a better explanation for the obsessiveness of one ring to rule them all, and why you personally suck at monogamy. You’re not a specialist. You’re a generalist. You irritate the majority of folks. They see you as useless, unfaithful, undisciplined, reckless, unfocused, flighty...”

“I got you,” Jon said.

“You are severely lucky to have avoided the diagnosis of ADHD and been placed on narcotics,” Frito said.

“Oh, I got the diagnosis,” Jon said. “But my mother used the prescription for herself.”

“There you go,” Frito said.

“What does this have to with me and your class and no sex?” Jon asked.

“Everyone is a generalist,” Frito said.

“But...”

“I said everyone wants specialists. They are even trained to believe they are specialist and they get really perturbed when they have to go outside of their domain just to function. Interestingly, if they wander out of their domain on their own accord and get called out, they will say, ‘trust me, I am specialist,’ which just confuses the matter. People are punished if they don’t specialize, and even if they do, they can still be punished because there is always something they should know, either by society or other specialist who expect others to know enough to hold a conversation with them, but get irritated when you actually do know a smidgeon of the special lore, but the truth is, everyone’s true nature is to be a generalist,” Frito said. “As a Guardian, your job is to help build bridges between worlds.”

“You’re speaking metaphorically connecting people to other aspects of their nature, or literally connecting them to other worlds?” Jon asked.

“I don’t make a distinction between the two paradigms you just espoused,” Frito said.

Jon rubbed his forehead.

“How many people do you have in your head?” Frito asked.

“Me and Loxy,” Jon said.

“Just the two of you?” Frito asked, skeptically.

“Just the two of us,” Jon said. “We can make it if we try...”

“Damn you! I will have that song in my head all night, thank you very much,” Frito said.

“Jon, you have seriously underestimated the number of personalities in your head.”

“How do you reckon? There is me. There is Loxy, my tulpa induced through a mind meld with the actual Loxy,” Jon said.

“Well, for starters, there is every age of you still residing with-in you,” Frito said.

“Oh, you mean like, that gestalt therapy where you have to heal and integrate your inner child?” Jon said.

“We don’t integrate. We increase coherency and cooperation,” Frito said. “Every age of you still exists in you. There are other tangential yous inside of you, people you could have become but chose not to, and people you aspired to be but didn’t become, and all the in between fantasies of you. Speaking of which, there is no way in hell anyone could produce your version of Buck Rogers. And then there are all the personalities of the people you know, they reside in you, that includes their actual personalities, and your perceived variation of their personalities. There are personalities inside you that you have never met. There are personalities you have only met within dreams.”

“NPCs,” Jon said.

“No! They are full personalities, autonomous, sentient,” Frito said.

“You’re saying I have multiple personality complex?” Jon said.

“DID,” Frito corrected.

“I did have multiple personality...”

“It’s called Dissociative Identity Disorder. Medical people didn’t want to give credence to the multiples or plurals so they change the diagnosis for their own comfort level, but the thing is, it’s not a disorder. Everyone has an Id. Everyone is an entity. Everyone has a super Id and a lesser Id, and plethora of others aspects and super aspects, and archetypes, and hats, and functions, and in short, identities. Your subconscious is a personality, a distinct, super personality which is always present and working in gestalt with you. You are not your subconscious personality. But your subconscious personality isn’t you, either.”

“I don’t think I am smart enough to be a student at Safe Haven,” Jon said.

“It’s not about smarts. The one thing all of your inner personalities have in common is your subconscious. You are the identified dream character that has been designated lead personality, but you are not in charge. At least, not as much as you think you are. Your personality is the goldfish in the bowl. Your subconscious is the water and the bowl,” Frito said. “There is a bigger consciousness in which your subconscious resides, but at the end of this regression, there is only consciousness. All is consciousness. All is one. News flash: you are not the student. Your soul is. You are the avatar accessing the lesson.”

“OMG, you are not Samuel. You’re Mace Windu,” Jon said. Because he led with joke, he missed how big Frito’s last statement was. “And you’re pushing your theory that we’re all one in the Force, but I am too old to start the training.”

“I thought you would prefer that to Carl Jung’s collective unconscious,” Frito said.

“I love Carl,” Jon said. “And I love Morgan.”

“Morgan is going to be harder to connect with due to the social cock blocking he is receiving,” Samuel said.

“Yeah, I am not happy about that. Maybe he is a little aggressive and persistent, but he’s not like raping people or drugging people, and if he expresses interest in you and you say no, then he just moves on,” Jon said. “But even if he was a complete ass, his work is still good. You can’t identify the characters he plays as him. And who the hell doesn’t have a dark side. And you can’t punish his work without punishing everyone who contributed to the work, because no one works alone. Like Cosby. His actions were horrendous, but his work was solid and good, and it was a team effort, and now the Cosby show is forever lost to people, and the people who participated in that have been equally blocked...”

“You compartmentalize well,” Frito said. “That’s the generalist. Iteration; most people are trained to be specialist. It took generalists to make the Cosby show, but it required a specialist to ‘make’ the show, and the specialist was taken down, his work goes with him. Most people are trained to be reductionists. They can’t see that it affects us all, not just the one. Most people are only able to see black and white. Yeah, fifty shades of gray was a hit, but not because of the content, but because of the title and the fact people know there is some truth hidden in the title and they were hopeful of finding enlightenment in the movie, and for some, it opened the doors to the possibility there may be some other worlds, some other colors even, but few found the ultimate answers. Most can’t make the leap you just did. They can only see Cosby was evil, therefore all his work is evil. No more picture pages pictures pages, time to get your crayons or your pencil. The crusade against Cosby was part of a wave that caught Morgan. This was not a crusade against all bad. There is more than enough evidence that Edison was not a good man; he stole from others, and he didn’t create the light bulb, whereas Tesla was a great man, but he was crushed by Edison’s slander, even as Edison was publicly executing elephants and stealing his work and suppressing it. Is anyone rushing to change history? No.”

“There is a movement to rewrite history,” Jon said.

“Of course there is. Written history is always skewed. It’s full of inaccuracies. Unfortunately, even the original history is as wrong as the rewrites. So is your personal history and everyone’s personal history, so why would written history be solid gold? That doesn’t mean it’s a lie. It doesn’t mean you shouldn’t write it down. Your older self may have better perspective and when it revisits the younger self’s perceptions of reality, it might have clarity. It doesn’t mean you can’t find truth. It’s like taking a photograph. You catch a moment and you assume trajectories of every object, but you will never know a hundred percent what brought all the elements together for that photon while being that photo, and you will never know the thoughts and the emotions...” Frito stopped. “You have to get out of the picture. You got to get out of yourself. Which is why you’re in my class. You need a new paradigm.”

“I don’t understand,” Jon said.

“You cannot continue to function under your old paradigm,” Frito said. “Your old paradigm served you well for the first part of your life, but now you must let go of the truths you clung to in order to greet the truths that will take you the rest of the way home. You need new models. Your old models were good enough, they kept you alive they got you here. They will not get you the rest of the way. You can learn from academic books. You can learn from fiction, because is also a model. ‘Good Will Hunting’ is a great movie for people with past abuse. Lots

of people get better in that movie. 'Death Wish Three' is not a viable option for long term health. Choose your models wisely."

"How do you let go of past truths?"

"Peacefully, with acceptance that no one was trying to take advantage of you with lies. If you hold an emotional attachment or belief, such as bitterness for being stuck in the lie, then you're still in the old paradigm. You have to let go completely. No more watching news. No more following politics. No more emotional investment in the game that you know is not the real game. Your previous game was 'chutes and ladders.' You're now playing 'go,' Frito said.

"Interesting. You're proposing that I am now playing a game with black and white pieces, when I am supposedly moving into shades of gray," Jon said.

"Okay, so, you're playing 'super go,' and the pieces are translucent, luminescent, rainbow colors," Frito said.

"Interesting," Jon said. "If all the pieces are equally colorful, how do I discern between my pieces and the opponent's pieces?"

"That's the trick," Frito said. "When you figure that out, let me know. Now, go."

"Go, or super go," Jon said.

"Just go," Frito said. "And be nice to Lester."

"Seriously?! I want out of this class," Jon said.

"Complete the course," Frito said.

"Can you change your voice to sound like Laurence Fishburne?" Jon asked.

"What, not oracle enough for you?"

"How about Omar Epps?" Jon asked.

"I chose the voice that best represents the entirety of me," Frito said.

"Can we change your name?" Jon asked.

"To the incredible Mr. Limpet?" Frito asked. Jon could be seen through the bowl weighing that. "No."

Jon got up and headed for the door. He paused.

"No," Frito said.

"But you chose your voice, so like, it has meaning and ramifications beyond the fact it fits you?" Jon asked. "Am I a Jedi?!"

"No," Frito said.

"Are you friends with Jon Travolta?" Jon asked.

"Do you want me to drop you into a fiction and beat you to a pulp?" Frito asked.

"No. I would like to know what the shiny thing was," Jon said.

"When you're ready, you will know," Frito said. "Good day, Mr. Harister."

Chapter 2

On the leaving the classroom, Jon found himself suddenly at the Campus square, near the fountain. The campus was busier than usual. Kiosks were everywhere, offering anything from portal coordinates to magical credit, which could adjust to any currency on any planet that used material bartering. Magical credit was interesting thing, more enchanting than regular credit, more coveted than bit coins, more attractive than a pirate chest full of D&D dice, with too high an interest, and no way out of paying it back; only freshman would get themselves so entangled. There were food kiosks and game kiosks and 'quest' kiosks; Jon paused at a lineup of 'kissing booths,' a kissing booth and a 'more than' kissing booth, and a variety of options including male, female, young, old, teeth or no, blonds, redheads, mermaids, puppies, mechanical tech, neuro tech, a sloth-which was usually a tease, and a donkey dancing and singing 'pick me, pick me.' Tarot readers and psychics and madrigal singers who suddenly struck a chord singing 'AHHHH' as if angels had just orgasmed light into existence, and probably subliminally connected to the puppy licking a face. That, or they were harmonizing with the 'more than' kissing booth; it was bigger on the inside. Jon made his way to the nearest portal to jump home, keeping his eyes low, trying to not make eye contact with people. He saw legs coming at him; they were probably just walking legs, but they had a provocative rhythm and it was clear the legs likely belonged to a group of Robert Palmer girls, and he didn't feel like fighting with Robert today, so he turned to avoid the women. As he turned away, he called himself a coward and to lower his negative self-response, he imagined they were actually guys, female bodies with Robert Palmer faces. He turned and walked into a pair of breasts. He backed up, and was still eye to eye with breasts. He felt fingers on his chin drawing him up out of cleavage, to a neck, and a Disney face with hair that seem like shellacked hair. If Emma Watson was an 8 foot giant, merged with Jennifer Love Hewit, this might have been her twin. He wasn't sure if she was smiling or calculating her response.

"Sorry," Jon said. 'Magic,' he thought. 'This is magic. She's manipulating you.' 'Manipulating' wasn't a negative word, just a recognition of magical, advertising influential qualities that were radiating outwards, energizing regions of his brain that lowered inhibition while simultaneously resulting in a testosterone dump.

"Sign up for credit, and I'll let you do more than run into them," she said.

"Ummm, no," Jon said, excusing himself hastily. He hurried off to the corner of the square with the coffee shop, a place he had frequented since his first days, and a place he felt reasonably safe enough to bring his energy down a little. He acquired a table just as a couple were departing it. He didn't mind that the table hadn't been bussed. He didn't even mind the partially eaten pizza slice. It was nice a tide over piece that made him want more. A young lady came to bus the table, not making comment about the fact he was eating after someone. She didn't even make a face. The female made eye contact, his esteem suddenly improved in her eye.

"I was so going to eat that," she said. "Thank you for saving my hips."

"Yeah, well, mine are doomed. Older men either get sex or gain weight," Jon said.

"Want me to help you maintain your weight?" she asked.

"It will take more than one romp to burn off this half slice," Jon said.

“I’m good for more than one,” she said. Her smile was atrocious, both teeth placement and smell. And on any other day, he would have still kissed her.

“I have an STD,” Jon lied.

“Oh, so do I!” she said.

“Um, I lied, I don’t have an STD,” Jon said.

“Want one?” she asked.

“Not today, but thank you so much,” Jon said. “That table over there needs you.”

She nodded, not offended at all, and ran off to bus another table. Jon sighed; except for her face, the rest of her fell out just fine. Even a Hollywood makeover wouldn’t fix her face, but Jon thought, this was most people, this was real, you should love real people. Real people are flawed. Fake people are really flawed.

Sabra, dressed in a wench’s costume that was too tight with buttons at risk of being projectiles, arrived to take his order. She kissed him. “Hey!”

“Hey!” Jon said. “Darkest dark chocolate you have, stat.”

Sabra pulled a bar from her pocket and handed it to him. He hurriedly peeled it and took too big a bite.

“Hey hey hey, easy,” Sabra said. “One square, melted on the tongue will last a day…”

He stopped chewing, closed his eyes, and waited for the relief. Supposedly cocoa triggered the same parts of the brain resulting in the same peaceful state that an orgasm would unlock. He preferred the orgasm. He returned to the present, folded the remaining chocolate back in its foil, and pocketed it.

“You okay?” Sabra asked.

“I will be. I thought you were working exclusively at the Harister Hall’s coffee shop.”

“I am filling in for a friend who needed off,” Sabra said. “You look like you need to get off.”

“Off this planet,” Jon said.

“Oh, rough day at school? Want a quickie?” Sabra asked.

“Um, if you’re referring to a quick cup of Joe, absolutely,” Jon said. “Chocolate blend.”

“Wow,” Sabra said. “Did you just block?”

“No,” Jon said. “I would never do that.”

“You just blocked,” Sabra said.

“No,” Jon said.

“Flirt back with me, then,” Sabra said.

“Would flirting result in follow through?” Jon asked.

Sabra leaned in, tangles of hair falling forwards. “With you, anytime, anywhere.”

“I really want that coffee, extra bitterly chocolate,” Jon said.

“Are you alright? Do I need to call Loxy?” Sabra said.

“No, just a coffee. I am just sorting some stuff and can’t provide you the full attention that you deserve,” Jon said.

Sabra was skeptical of the partial compliment. “Jon, even five percent of your attention is worth it. You’re like concentrate,” Sabra said.

“You’re persistent today,” Jon said.

“I am horny. I have been watching students hook up all day. And that damn everything booth, ‘We’re all going to die and I have never been with a man before,’ that line never gets old,” Sabra said. She looked around the campus. “And I swear, if that credit rep gets any more action I may become a rep! It must be freshman card stamping semester.”

“No one’s hit on you?” Jon asked.

Sabra sat down and began to cry. “What’s wrong with me?! Even you are turning me down.”

Jon’s first impulse was to hug her. He froze, bit his tongue, and waited. She stopped. She batted her eye lids. “Not working,” Jon said.

“I am so calling Loxy,” Sabra said, suddenly tearless.

“Just bring me a coffee,” Jon said.

Sabra stood, befuddled. She didn’t bring up the fact that they, as well as his entire commune, had a general pact that no one got denied; if they had an urge, and they wanted help satisfying it, they would get play, or they would help find someone to play. Not feeling well was not a guaranteed out. Still, she put the back of her palm against his forehead to assess temperature. Frowned, then nodded. “Okay. But you are so going to make this up to me.” She departed to get his coffee, stopping to respond to a patron.

Jon diverted his eyes from her departing thighs to the table. He didn’t recall the tables being made of iron. The metal was weaved together into a black spaghetti, Celtic mesh, and if you tracked it, which in itself was not a simple task, the table itself seemed to reflect the Universe at large. The flat fabric of space with the inner portion sinking into a central black hole that in many ways resembled the map of entangled neurons descending down the spine. The Universe wasn’t expanding; it was being flushed down the toilet of life. He wondered if he ran a marble across the table it would come back to him, or go down the drain like the coin vacuum at the mall. A voice drew him up from the table.

“Excuse me, but aren’t you Jon Harister?”

If you’ve seen the Matrix, and you remember the scene where Neo is distracted by the girl in the red dress, you have an inkling of the vision that stood in front of Jon. She had legs up to here; Jon’s mouth fell right there. Jon found himself standing, extending a hand, a ‘Don Knots’ hand in the shakiest gun in the west, incapable of speech, clearly nervous sort of hand shake. Her hair was light and layered, almost friskily feathery like Farah Faucet in Logan’s Run. Also, like that character, she had an innocence about her, with sparkling eyes and an aura. Her doey doe eyes were not innocent. She made Jessica rabbit seem like the flying nun; you still wanted to tap the nun, but you had to pay homage, too.

He cleared his throat. “Um, yes...”

She accepted his hand and pulled him in closer to her. “I have heard so much about you.”

The statement had enough ambiguity about it that it impacted her hold over him and his brain clicked forwards. “Oh?” He let go of her hand and invited her to sit. She didn’t. She showed him her sex card. Her primary image was set, a feminized and attractive bottle, smoke rising and taking feminine form. “You’re a jinn?”

“A freshman, and I want you to be the first to sign onto my sex card,” she said.

“Damn it,” Jon cursed under his breath.

“What?” she asked.

“I am sorry, but I am allergic to blonds,” Jon said.

“Oh? I am really a red head,” she said, and her hair changed and one of her blue eyes became green. It was peculiar enough he wanted to go deeper into her gaze. Her hair fluoresced like flames, orange, red, and yellow lights pushed through fiber optic hair, and he wanted to run his fingers through it, even though his fingers were likely to be singed, all the while being on top of her in a darkened room. She could have gone sang a chorus of ‘I am misses heat miser, I am miss sun,’ and he would have still gone sun diving.

“I am sorry, but I am presently unstable and your jinni energy could cause me to combust,” Jon said.

“Oh, I assure you, I can contain your combustion within me,” she said. “I’m Tippy, by the way.”

“Yeah, you probably shouldn’t be drinking until your card is fully punched,” Jon said.

Tippy laughed. “No, my name is Tippy,” she said. “By the way, I am a virgin.”

“Oh, well, that’s too bad, I am not into virgins,” Jon said.

“You could be,” Tippy said.

“Seriously, virgins are overrated, and problematic. Come back when you have some experience,” Jon said.

Sabra arrived with a coffee and a smirk. “So, you just needed some strange?”

“No,” Jon said.

“Oh! Is Sabra part of your entourage?” Tippy asked.

“Yes,” Sabra said even as Jon was saying ‘No,’ which irked Sabra into saying ‘what?’ and he quickly corrected.

“Oh, everyone knows you’re poly, Jon. You don’t have to hide your nature from me,” Tippy said.

“Yeah, Jon. Are you that befuddled?” Sabra asked.

“I am not befuddled,” Jon stammered.

“So why are you turning me down?” Tippy asked.

“Seriously?” Sabra asked. “He said no?”

“He didn’t say no as much as he gave me seriously lame excuses as to why he can’t,” Tippy said.

“Jon,” Sabra said. “What the hell is going on with you?”

Jon took his coffee and sat down. “I am tired, I am grumpy, and I want my coffee,” Jon said. There were clouds in his coffee. He frowned into it, and drank it anyway.

Sabra and Tippy sat down.

“Seriously, do I have to be like brutal to make you walk away?” Jon asked.

“Do you want to be brutal?” Tippy asked. It was definitely a flirt.

“No. I’m telling you I am not interested, I will never be interested, go away,” Jon said.

“I am really confused. You don’t like me?” Tippy asked. “You’re disgusted by me so much you won’t even fuck me once just to punch my card?”

“Jon! If she asked you to punch her card you have to engage her,” Sabra said.

“I don’t want to get engaged,” Jon said.

“Marry me?” Tippy said.

“Without an engagement?” Jon asked.

“I don’t want a long drawn out engagement,” Topsy said. “How about a quickie on the table?”

“Jon, remember when you were a freshman? Imagine if no one had said yes how frustrating that would have been...” Sabra said.

“I am still a freshman! I am stuck at this stage of life,” Jon said.

“Did you just snap at me? Are you under a spell?” Sabra asked. “You’ve been carded. You have to do her. It’s a compulsory class rule.”

“Except on Tuesdays,” Jon said.

“It’s Thursday,” Sabra and Topsy said.

“On my planet, it’s always Tuesdays,” Jon said. “The laws of physics are different there.”

“I am a Jinn. I can change my appearance and smell and taste,” Topsy said.

“Really?” Sabra said.

Jon bit his lip, nearly echoing Sabra in unison...

“Yeah,” Topsy said.

Topsy demonstrated by changing her appearance. It was like a television image flickering, a candle flickering... When her image became steady again, she was a human of indeterminate race, probably a mixture of races, dread locks, and tie dye fashion. The colors were subdued pastels, swirling like a gas giant’s surface cloud cover. It was shoulder-less, the arm holes bigger than they needed to be and hung lower than they need to, revealing more than just side boobs, was tied in the back, and may have been a just a t-shirt and not a dress, hanging just low enough to give you a view of solid thighs, but not riding high enough to know if she was wearing anything else. It was creeping up enough there was hope one would discover ‘yes or no’ calling for lingering eyes. She twirled, showing off, and sat back down.

“Still not interested,” Jon lied.

“Seriously?” Topsy asked, scooting her chair closer so she could touch his knee. Her hand didn’t stay on his knee. “I have evidence to the contrary.”

“You can’t form a conclusion based on that evidence alone,” Jon said. “The wind is blowing Sabras essence in my face. No is no.” Sabra smiled a huge smile at him. He was thinking, ‘OMG, how do I get out of this?!’ It occurred to him, though he didn’t consider her out of line, in his world of origin had he been equally aggressive he would have been the bad guy. If he had touched her and said she was wet, she wanted it- that would have been a crime. If he had touched her and she had responded by hitting him, she would be socially justified in pummeling him. Even if everyone agreed she was being too aggressive, in no world would he be allowed to hit her. In no world could he run away, or disengage, without incurring disparaging labels. This was a public place and the social rules were not the same as origin. There was a lot more socially permissible touching going on at Safe Haven. Public sex was permitted on campus. Watching was encouraged.

“May I have a rain check?” Topsy asked.

“No. My ‘no’ for you is indefinite, for all of time, even if we were the last two sentient beings in the whole universe,” Jon said. With her ability to shape shift, he wondered how he would ever be able to enforce his ‘no.’ He would eventually have sex again. She could easily trick him, and because he was actually wanting her, he could suspect it was her and still fuck her willingly under plausible deniability. In his mind, he had a short hallucination of her being the

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