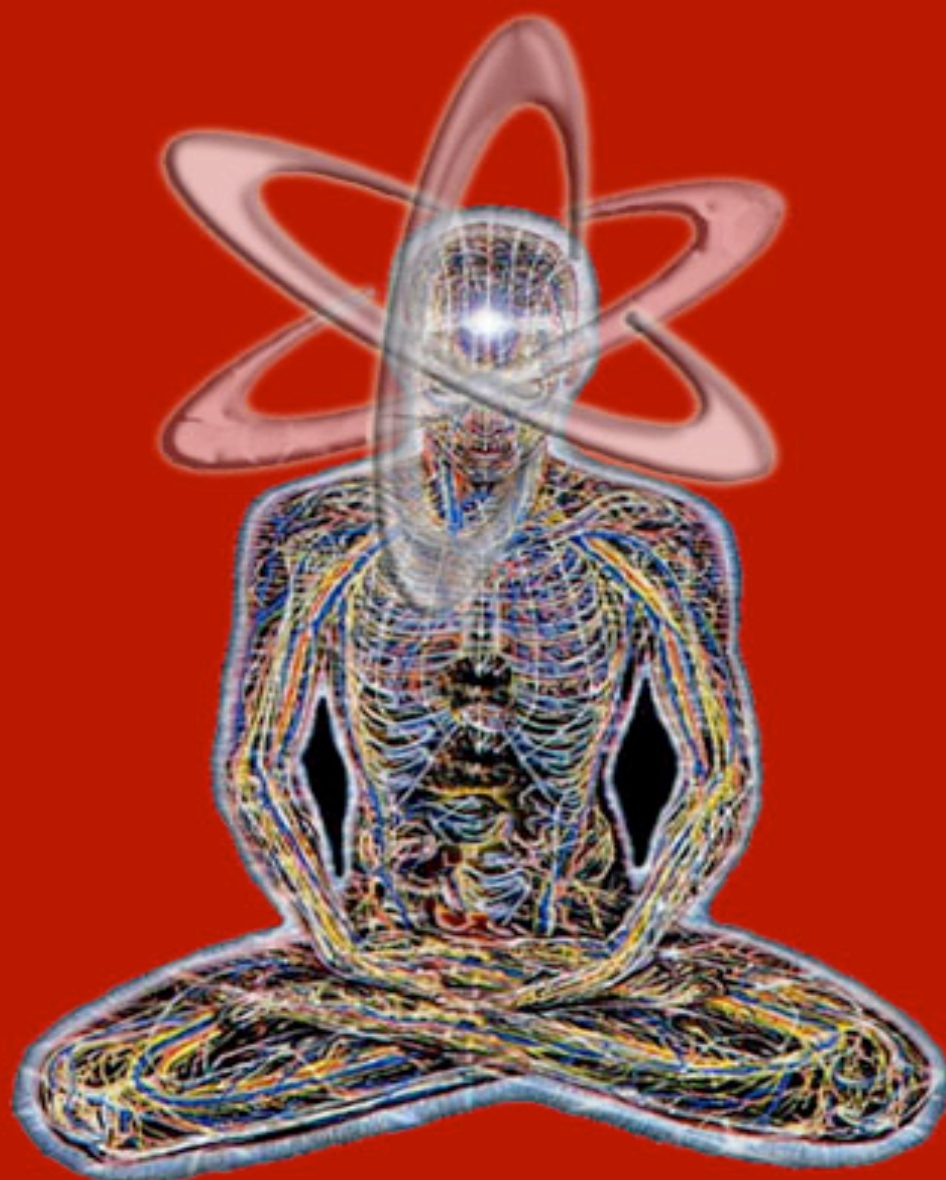


jaebi

The Alchemist



Anything is Attainable

PART ONE

Uatu, do you tire of the council?

Orlaxt, this universe is a tireless existence, but we know the dangers of restlessness.

And of answering questions plainly.

Mmm.

I have seen the logs you keep. Even now, you still monitor the events of Earth 616.

So often is that particular universe the epicenter of tidal change across the multiverse. Earth 616 provides compelling evidence to support the Great Framework theories. For this reason, I study the planets' developments. Not due to the nostalgic lure of gazing.

Well done. In some time, your rebuttal should even convince your own consciousness of that argument.

Thus is the making of a higher being.

Your mind is always for the betterment of our people. Still your heart has led you to break our oath more than 400 times!

How far did you read into the record of Earth 616?

Far enough to suggest that you place great value in the lives of those human beings. Perhaps you prefer living to watching.

The value lies in its multidimensional significance, not in any I might place on it. Even now, the destiny of Earth 616 intertwines with another, Earth 494E9C.

Is this worth listening to?

If not, we'll jump back.

Go on.

Contrary to what you have stated, my interests peaked when reviewing my replacements records—not due to my own observations.

Exonerated, yet again. Hurry with this tale before I am bored.

A curious manhunt has begun for a being on Earth 616 born with control of the power cosmic.

Truly?

Yes, but as is often the case of that species, he imposes upon himself the limits of his environment. But now a species from an alternative earth—

Earth 494E9C?

Correct. The dominant species from Earth 494E9C are closing in on their target. These hunters aim to capture the power cosmic in hopes that they can use it to maintain

their waning oppression of their worlds' sub-species. The very same species of their target.

Fascinating. The earthlings of 494E9C wield cross-dimensional technology.

Inadvertently. They intended only to travel along the fourth dimension, in reverse.

Amusing. But it seems premature to think there is any significance of these happenings beyond two star-crossed worlds. Even with the power cosmic involved.

The power cosmic, dimension entanglement, enlightenment between two latent and competing species, revolt against oppression, a fight for survival. I have seen these ripples of change before. A tidal wave approaches.

Now I am bored. With you, not this story.

Then let us watch.

#

"Taylon, how much longer must we stay in this place? Their stench is beginning to cling to my skin."

"What do you expect, they have free roam in this world," Taylon responds, maintaining his focus outside the wall-length mirror. He closes his eyes, a hand to his pulsing temple, the other flat against the windowpane.

"I can't take it."

"We are comfortable enough here. It will not be long now. Though faint and casual, he uses his power daily. Have I not gotten us this far?"

"Just not close enough for me to use these," Grasp snarls. He holds his arms up, squeezing his hands into fists. Only one hand might be considered normal among juggernauts. The other is a massive gray paw, resembling the hoof of an elephant in size and texture.

Grasp plops down in the oversized leather wingback. His wide gray body sinks into leisure with a rumbling sigh. "If the craftsmanship of these Sapiens is of any indication, this Seer maybe as powerful as Maestro. Explain to me again why we should not just kill him to be safe."

Taylon breaks his form and turns from the window. His sand brown coat hangs regally from his tall frame. Broad shoulders hunch with significance as he rests his forehead on the tip of his fingers. "Because, Grasp...us being safe here has no conceivable bearing on anything happening home."

"You are not an astrophysicist. How can you be so sure?"

"There is no need to be a scientist of any sort to know that nothing can be known for sure beyond the instant of occurrence. But as it has been painstakingly clear for

both you and I, Homo Geniens are the most advanced beings in this world and we are the only two."

"And when we return to our world, we may find that things have progressed in our absence and the prophesized reign of the Sapiens has come to pass."

"As absurd as it sounds, yes, Grasp."

"Forgive me. The Omni-present musk of these Sapiens is crippling my mind."

"Some times you remind me of them with your constant need for reassurance. I *have* heard of half-breeds."

Grasp laughs, a deep gargling sound fills the room as Taylon turns back toward the window resuming his concentrated pose.

"Speak to me, my savior. Let me feel your power."

#

Jasir opens the valve on the Bunsen burner, twisting so the maximum amount of air permissible flows through the conical stem. A blue flame roars directly above the opening, a tight neon blue cone burning within a slightly diluted hue surrounding it like a glowing aura.

Jasir places a ringstand and wire mesh directly over the flame, then sets a beaker full of water atop the mesh.

The flame tip spreads around the bottom of the beaker heating the bottle first. Jasir retreats for the quiet within, leaving his body for an uncompromising peace. His gaze becomes a trance and the irises of his eyes become a milky haze focused on the minute matter of the beaker and its contents. His gaze penetrates the visible, extending past the glass, past the water, beyond solid matter.

The rigid glass molecules break into a language of excitement all their own before translating their intentions by slamming like pool balls into the calmer molecules.

The water molecules absorb the energy of excitement one by one until they all succumb to the infectious dance. A Magnus Opus of trillions of symmetrical bonds formed by the union of two of the worlds' most abundant elements.

H₂O swivels and collides endlessly--one central orb attached to two smaller spheres like a Disney silhouette. The intensity of collisions increase inside the rigid molecular enclosure Jasir recognizes as the beaker's crystalline walls. His gaze is focused a level deeper.

The water molecules speed furiously like watching a hive of bees sped up a millions times, a scene of ever-constant motion.

The climax begins with just a few molecules, those nearer the surface of the water. Their clones push them so violently from below they rebound and snap like stretched rubber to break free of liquid form.

The molecular orientation warps like a car bumper in an accident, completely altered while still recognizable. H_2O vapors and mingles in the gaseous medium of air.

The floodgates open, thousands of vaporous molecules begin to exit through the lips of the beaker. Jasir squeezes his eyes shut and shakes his head. The shape of his iris and pupil blends into the milky white of his eyes. They flush into a lime green with hazel streaks.

Jasir grabs an empty beaker and fills it with water from the lab faucet. He preps an identical setup for his experiment sans Bunsen burner. Instead he braces himself to act as a flame without heat.

"Be the fire," Jasir whispers, leaning in toward the second beaker trial. He relaxes the muscles in his body relieving control to his mind. Quantum consciousness balloons from a spot in his mind formed in the womb to make this one thing possible. Jasir's inner consciousness pursues oneness, a supreme calm, an ultimate control. He exhales tightly and his eyes glaze to a pure white as the room temperature molecules burst to relevance. He zooms

past the rigid crystalline enclosure to the meandering H₂O molecules.

Vision is elementary. Control requires entering a space within space, a mind within his mind where nothing moves and the sensations of the visible world become the void.

Silence envelops Jasir and his body numbs to normal touch and sight. The world just beneath solid matter flutters to life. Atomic particles scream like beacons, twinkling like stars that nourish Jasir's intellect with the Supreme language. The glow of the particles becomes sight. Their spin and revolution supplant hearing. Their inclination to form and resist bonds with matter tingle the skin. Each particle's uniqueness taste and smell like no other.

Like a fit of inspiration Jasir's atomic senses combine into a sixth. Jasir extends his will from the void, a definitive strike into well of Quantum consciousness. A torrential force gushes from the well, extending influence over the H₂O molecules in the cool beaker. The molecules burst into a maelstrom of activity, boiling instantly.

Too quickly, the molecules in the second beaker out pace those of the first. H₂O molecules strike the crystalline structure in a fit of survival. Jasir retreats his influence without reversing its effects. Something splits, as solid as a stone and breaks through the energy field of

the crystalline arrangement. A fault line forms in the glass beaker, the entire vessel shatters in the next moment, spewing scolding water and jagged fragments.

Jasir guards his face with his lab coat. The scattered molecules begin to slow. Dismayed, he grabs his Flip:

"Eleven-fourteen-oh eight. Trials at influencing the state of water continue to be unsuccessful. It is suspected that the unique properties of water are the cause of the resulting instability." Jasir glances at his watch, stunned. He swings off his lab coat as he bolts up the stairs from the lab, two at a time.

#

Jasir's car screeches into a vacant space in the faculty dining parking lot. Jasir shakes away the loose molecules dancing between his fingers like millions of tiny stress balls. The void dissipates as his eyes return to their normal hues. Jasir jumps from the car hastily and catches the door before it shuts closed, the keys still in the ignition. He smiles from a splash of nostalgia.

It has been nearly 8 years since he locked himself out of that 69 Camaro. He had arrived home late, happy and wasted. Having avoided wrapping the car around a tree, the more daunting task of getting past his parents without scene became his goal. The moment the driver side door

slammed shut, he remembered the keys in the ignition. Later, he would make a point to inform the designers of their negligence that made this atrocity inevitable—everyone puts their car keys on the same ring as their house keys. Jasir nearly vomited at the prospect of ringing the house bell. He wouldn't get past the foyer the way he wreaked of beer.

Drunkenness hanging heavy on his shoulders, Jasir leaned into the driver side door and lowered his eye to the keyhole to see what could be done—an alcoholic's hope. His right eye squinted while the other stretched wide, straining into the darkness. When the sensation of light rushed into his iris, he thought he'd popped a vessel.

Jasir jumped back, palming his face. The wine, he thought, as he leaned in for another look. He strained for clarity. It came as a burst of light rushing into his eye. The intensity seared his cornea, but he would have rather gone blind than sacrifice such glory. When the flames subsided a luminous glow remained appearing as bunches of orbs like grapes on a vine. The orbs spun and twirled around one another but there seemed a logic to the chaos. A cluster of orbs was sequenced in a jagged line that held constant even as the orbs themselves vibrated wildly. They appeared unique in relation to orbs meandering freely

around them. The scent reminded Jasir of the times he tested the charge on a battery with his tongue. He reached for it, summoned by the glow of the copper. A small movement, then stillness like stalked prey. He reached further and the orbs shifted. The locks clanked open and Jasir knew he was different. He learned he was a mutant.

The faculty dining hall is filled with the normal Friday afternoon buzz. Service staff dart this way and that with trays of water, entrees, and double that amount in cocktails. Even molecular biologists and astrophysicists appreciate a glass of pinot at the end of a grueling week of trials, lectures and bureaucracy.

"Hey Jasir," calls a familiar voice. Jasir's shoulders perk when he recognizes Calli. Her velvety voice sounds like it belongs in a smoke-filled jazz lounge.

"Calli, how are you? Hey, did you happen to see--"

"Yea, I was just going to say, there's a party of two waiting for you."

"Two?"

"Yes, and she's amazing. Over there."

Jasir follows Calli's finger, nods in agreement and then starts for his guests. "Thanks so much," Jasir says, over his shoulder. It's relieving to have another preoccupation

so he isn't overcome with feeling self-conscious around Calli.

"So sorry I'm late," Jasir says, throwing his jacket behind his chair. He extends his right hand, "Professor--"

"Please, call me Charles," the paraplegic says, extending his hand and a warm smile. "And this is my colleague--"

"Yes," Jasir says beaming. He realizes what Calli meant by 'amazing'. The woman's sky blue eyes gleam brightly in stark contrast to her creamy mocha skin. She glows like a goddess. It makes him uncomfortable. People know who she is. What she is. Anyone looking at the two of them standing side by side might cause some to ask Jasir questions he likes to avoid. "Your reputation precedes you--What a pleasure it is to meet you both."

"The pleasure is ours, Professor Cohen," says the goddess.

Jasir feels heat fluster around his face as he takes his seat next to two of the most powerful people in the world. The goddess became a household name due to her work at the International Summit and of course, the fiasco that ensued after she rejected the ill conceived mutant registration system. Her snow-white hair is slicked back into a billowy ponytail of curls that stream down the back of her neck. He can't remember the eastern African country the strong

symmetrical features hail from. "I hope you haven't been waiting too long."

"Not too long. Besides, we've been looked after," the paraplegic gestures as Calli sashays over stopping into a half curtsy as if the compliment had been timed.

"Now that you're all here," Calli says, toying in Jasir's direction. "Here are your menus. We have a special today—a seared roast with your choice of potato. I'll give you a moment to decide."

"She is quite lovely," the paraplegic says, as Calli walks away.

"Indeed," Jasir says, wary of the man's wording. Jasir hadn't thought about Calli just then so perhaps the paraplegic spoke of his own thoughts. "When we first spoke, you said you had business in the area?"

"Yes," the paraplegic says. "Scouting mostly."

"For teachers?"

"Precisely—our head science teaching position has gone through some—evolution. Four of the top ten graduate programs in core sciences are in California."

"Absolutely. Kellogg is in the top three. Arguably number one."

"I suppose it all depends on the criteria used for comparison, does it not? You can break the criteria into a

multitude of derivatives, but at its most basic level an institution of learning is comprised of three key elements: It's faculty, its facilities and the belief in its vision by every single member of that community. Frankly, Keloggs facilities may not be the best, but this campus thrives because of the quality of the faculty that leads and inspires this community. Faculty like yourself, Professor Cohen, give all they have for excellence."

"As can only be spoken by the visionary behind the School for Gifted Youngsters."

The paraplegic and the goddess share a knowing look and smile. "I don't mean to be more dense than is polite, but I'm finding it difficult to imagine there's a place for me at *your* Institute."

"You're much too modest," the goddess says. "You hold a leading voice in the scientific community. Your thesis, *A Matter of Principles*, has achieved what no other study or trial has been able to. I only think your theorems of atomic influence in the universe have been so underscored because they are clearly ahead of their time."

"That's quite a compliment," Jasir blushes.

"Of course, I don't pretend to understand half of it, but at the School for Gifted Youngsters, you will have the opportunity to inspire students that do—"

The goddess pauses as if an idea suddenly came into her mind, wholly different from what she was just then saying. Jasir cuts an eye toward the paraplegic who only smiles casually.

"We both think you'd be a great addition to the Institute," the goddess finishes.

"Jasir," the paraplegic says. "I don't want to belabor the issue. We would be lucky to have a man of your talents at the Institute. Please, do me the honor of at least considering the offer. Once you have, we can discuss any arrangements necessary. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough, Professor--I mean, Charles."

"Ah, right on time," the paraplegic says, as Calli brings a bottle of Jasir's favorite wine. Even after the entrees arrive, the conversation between Jasir and his party hardly breaks. They share ideas on everything from astrophysics to biochemistry and the role they play in mutant abilities. It quenches a thirst Jasir doesn't often realize he has.

"--yes, but by far the largest impediment to our advancement in the medical field is our continued focus on the cellular level. Even though we know the atom and subatomic particles exist, we default to synthesizing

processes and treatments of materials that can be seen with the naked eye. As if the other world doesn't exist."

"Indeed," the goddess says, "Even nano-technology takes place at the cellular level. I suppose it's more approachable."

"Precisely," the paraplegic says. "But what mankind lacks in aptitude for change, we make up for in pure luck."

"A mixed blessing," she says.

"Agreed," the paraplegic continues. "Take mutant abilities as an example—thrust upon our world through a fault in nature. I can tell you Jasir, that there are worlds where the people manufacture mutant-like abilities."

"Gentically," Jasir asks?

"Atomically."

"That kind of technology is light years beyond 99% of our capability. Even our imagination."

"Quite literally," the goddess smirks. "Lilandra's empire is some hundred million light years away."

"You both have been there," Jasir asks, leaning in.

"Then why wouldn't you bring that technology back—we could study their techniques—"

"Jasir, as a child of the atom you can imagine better than most why that would be ill advised."

Jasir sits back in his seat, eyeing the paraplegic curiously. "You don't trust us?"

"Quite the contrary. I have given my life to the idea that we can be a better people."

"So we are both men of great faith."

"And both men of science. I am forced to hold superior the likelihood of events occurring over my faith in them coming to pass."

"Just as well," Jasir concedes. "Very little I need to do, and I doubt that I could do anything, in order for my faith to be rewarded."

"Perhaps," the goddess begins, "that means you don't fully know your faith."

"I think that I do."

"Well then, it means that you shouldn't sell yourself so short."

"Have you been talking to my mother?" The three of them laugh.

Before they take off, Jasir promises a final time to consider the paraplegic's offer. He watches while the oversized vehicle drives itself away, the goddess in the passenger seat and the paraplegic in the rear with his fancy wheelchair.

It isn't until the car pulls out of sight that Jasir allows himself to wonder if it had been the paraplegic somehow guiding the driving system. *Wired* had showcased psychic receivers designed by Stark Industries a few years ago.

His mental guard down, Jasir casually suspects the paraplegic of snooping in his mind at some point. It's always a possibility. Kelloggs complimentary psychic training gave him some technique to corking the shrieks of subconscious thoughts. It helped prevent even weak psychics from 'invading' private thoughts unless they shut their own mind off, which would be like a person with 20/20 vision walking with their eyes shut. Jasir has no defense for a mutant with intent however. So he did what he knew best—exercised extreme confidence. Second-guessing, insecurity, confusion and suspicion are spikes in neural activity. To a telepath, it would look like the Fourth of July over his head. A confident mind is a private mind.

Jasir doesn't think the paraplegic would have gone so far, at least without cause or invitation. Regardless of what anyone thinks of mutants, the paraplegic is a man of honor—a good man.

"How was your date," Calli calls, emerging from the rear entrance of the hall. Her dark brown hair bounces around

her shoulders in harmony with the buoyancy of her breasts. The black turtleneck peaking from beneath her jacket match her knee-high boots, which click the asphalt—mostly carbon bonded with hydrogen and sulfur--loudly.

Jasir consciously avoids his molecular geek out as Calli's hips, snugly wrapped in blue denim, sway toward him with flair.

"Look at you, all cleaned up—is today my lucky day?"

"You never know. So how did it go?"

"Oh, that? Fine I guess. Kind of a meet and greet—he's really interested in my work here."

"Wow, that's really cool", Calli says. She stops an arm's length from Jasir and flashes a bright lipstick-red smile. "So, guess what?"

"Hot date?"

"Har, har—no. I picked up your book—saw it, I mean I didn't buy it but I picked it up," Calli gestures with her hands.

"And?"

"I opened it and then I kinda don't remember what happened next, my brain numbed out right while I was looking at it."

"Funny you say that because that's sort of the state of mind I was in when I wrote most of it." Calli bursts into

laughter, her tightly set shoulders rocking her torso. She throws a hand on Jasir's shoulder playfully and lets it fall again.

It's funny because it's true. He laughs with her, embarrassed by his mistaken admission rather than the joke she thinks he made. Her comfort inducing effects on him are scary. Telling her would be easy but her reaction is an unknown. She seems knowledgeable, somewhat traveled and pro-Obama. Her great-great grandparents Japanese culture isn't completely lost on her either but she's an all-American girl. Her friends and even the losers she dates are white, black, whatever. Still, in a universe of quantifiable data, human emotion remains a mystery. Alluring and risky at once.

The problem is not everyone see Gifted as plainly as ethnicity. Now that the x-gene is pervasive throughout society, ethnicity has earned a stark comparison to race. There's the Human race and the Gifted race. It may have derived from a slur but Jasir prefers the term mutant to gifted. At least 'mutant' implies a stronger relation to humanity.

The good news: Calli didn't bat an eye at two of the most well known mutants sitting at one of her tables. In fact, she seemed impressed. That's a good sign—sure she might be

a bit freaked out at first but if things ever progressed--*I am really over thinking this!*

Jasir switches his attention back to Calli as her shoulders throttle down on the ending edge of her laugh. He naturally says the thing that comes to his mind right then. "I love your laugh."

Calli smiles. Her body barely moves but manages to warm towards him. Jasir has never poured his emotions so intentionally into her. And she likes it.

Jasir imagines the atoms in her cheeks spreading wildly, electrons pulling toward the nuclei as her skin warms. Deeper, her blood molecules are suddenly mingling with slightly different versions of what they are. Hormones.

"Wait a minute—you're taking classes now?"

"Surprise."

"Wow. That's awesome."

"It's not like I want to wait tables the rest of my life. I want to make restaurants and design food." Jasir shakes his head in deep understanding. "It's a dream, but I would be stupid not to go for it. I get a great break on tuition as long as I work in the Faculty Hall. And I make money and I have to be there twice as much as everyone in my school so I'm getting twice as much experience."

"The odds are stacked in your favor. And you were made to do this—that Banquet you catered--"

"The Alumni Banquet."

"Yes. That was incredible. And best of all—you can enroll in one of my classes."

"Only for an easy A! Don't forget, I've seen your book." Jasir enjoys the way she laughs again but doesn't make it as apparent.

"So what are you all dressed up for?"

"Going to meet some people for drinks."

"Any friends I should like to meet," Jasir teases.

"I don't know about you and my friends."

"I could use a drink, kind of an exciting day." Calli makes a pondering hum. "Aw don't worry, as long as you're there to watch over me, I'm sure they won't pounce on me too hard."

"That spark of egotism flairs without warning. Fine, I am early—and you'll be awesome at making me not look like a loser while I wait for my girls. You are the brilliant Professor Cohen."

"Excellent. You mind following me back to my place first. I could use a change of shirt, I'm close."

#

Jasir jumps out of his Camaro leaving the engine running as a mnemonic for a swift return. Calli pulls her car in behind Jasir's as he climbs the stairs to his bedroom, two at a time. A red shirt shines amongst the others in his closet. The wisdom of the void has shown him why it affects the senses so poignantly many times. The atom breaks life into its basic elements where everything from Jasir's shirt, to the dash of cologne he spritzes on his wrists hold more meaning. It comforts him in a way that the mundane world is incapable of which is why it's not uncommon for Jasir to spend days on end caved in his lab where no one can see the whites of his eyes. Jasir's fascination with his ability began with the discovery of self. Like a child he came to know the particles of his meat and bones by the gift of his naked eye and the inspiration of an inquisitive mind. Labs and instruments aren't necessary to discover the world at the fingertips. Over time, he realized the particle world to be a universe. But every inclination in his being tells him the atomic world is *the* Universe.

Jasir sprints down the stairs, remembering a final touch to his ensemble—one of his favorite fitted jackets. He recalls leaving it in the lab and heads for the door, left

ajar carelessly. Far too many of his experiments are dangerous even for uninvited guests.

Jasir descends into darkness, surprised that the labs motion sensors don't activate the lights. The circuits of his short-term tinker must have finally given.

Fortunately the Universe is never dark as a whole. Jasir embraces the void casually as one might reach for an object across a desk. His green eyes become white orbs and Jasir's view explodes revealing the great truth of existence. Everything that is, glows, spins and revolves as orbs. Like an alignment of stars, compounds reveal uniform arrangements. Jasir walks amongst the shining orbs and they dance beneath his shoes like stardust. Nitrogen and oxygen wash across his skin like mist.

One composition of compounds stands out of order. Behind the horizontal layer of the latticed silicon and aluminum based compounds that comprise the granite countertop. There, the molecules of life—carbon and hydrogen flow in the pattern of a man wearing a hat and coat.

Jasir cautiously steps backwards, grabbing the banister behind him as the figure of living molecules rounds the edge of the counter. Jasir's heart jumps as he pivots and climbs the stairs to the main level. A growl stampedes

behind him and a sudden realization overcomes him that the lights have been broken purposefully.

Jasir bursts through the basement door, slamming the stampeding pursuit up the stairs behind him. The silver laced skeleton key clanks a lead bolt. Jasir releases the void just before a sea of molecules waver, his normal vision blurs as something enters his peripheral.

Enormous, a leather wrapped fist careens toward his face. Jasir pushes hard against the basement door, barely dodging the fist as he slams into the opposite wall. The behemoth of a man throbs past Jasir like a Mac truck passing a pedestrian.

The man's back is a rounded and rippled slab of meat like an ox in clothing. Hulking shoulders buck as he regains control of his swing and pivots toward Jasir. His arms are like a stocky wrestler but still incongruent with the size of the leather-clad fist. A square leathery face reminds Jasir of a rhinoceros. Patchy brown skin covers deep ridges brooding over eyes intent on malice. Slick black hair lays flat against a square head.

The behemoth releases a bull's snort and moves quicker than he should for his size. The leather clad fist opens and rams into the wall behind Jasir, pinning his body against it. Wood panels splinter into Jasir's back as the

hand squeezes around his torso. He pries but the rigid tree trunk fingers refuse to budge and the brute impresses his mass over Jasir letting him know resistance won't be tolerated.

Jasir's limbs begin to numb, life seeping from his pores. Desperate, he spears his hand into the tiny spots beneath the brute's deep brow ridges. Liquid seeps from the man's eyes but his vice grip only tightens. Agony stabs into Jasir's brain as his ribs splinter. He aims again, perhaps his last opportunity, putting his shoulders behind the blow. Blindness is his goal. Jasir's wrist snaps at the edge of the blow. The brute's muscle and bone squeeze in protection of the soft inner eye. Jasir stabs again into the first, his form perfect.

The behemoth hollers, finally loosening his grip allowing Jasir to wiggle free. As a reflex, the giant fist swings wildly. The hall leaves little room to maneuver and a wild swing makes contact, crunching Jasir's arm into the rest of his body. Another bone splinters.

Jasir lands a few feet away in the kitchen, his broken pieces reminiscent of self-induced injuries made from playing with his bone molecules. The external forces are somewhat harder to bear. Consciousness begins to slip and

it is the basement door shattering to splinters that recharges the light in his mind.

A blurred image of the man from the basement approaches Jasir methodically. Intent fills the eyes beneath the brim of the dark fedora shrouding the man's face in shadow. He pulls something from underneath his long brown overcoat hanging from his broad shoulders.

"I'll kill him," the large one roars, still clearing his senses in the hallway.

"He is everything Maestro is. Which is why we need him alive. You should not have underestimated him. I have him."

The sound of sizzling oil follows the thin man's voice as Jasir manages to hoist himself to the kitchen countertop, his legs beginning to feel useful again. He uses his back to hide the knife he pulls from the kitchen counter.

"Please, I don't know what this is about, but I'm not who you think I am--"

"I am not interested in who you are, Seer" returns the man, his voice is deep and raspy. He approaches like a cat stalking prey.

Jasir looks over his shoulder into the man's cold brown eyes. If he is a mutant, the evidence is buried deep in his bodybuilding frame or his skin which doesn't appear to

shed cells. A lasso crackles, dropping from a handle in loops.

"The pain will be greater if you resist."

"Please—" Jasir swings the knife in a gaping arc. It slices in a near miss. The man neatly avoids follow up attacks, his agility is impressive. Exhausted, Jasir releases the blade mid swing.

The fedora clad man snatches the blade out of the air with his free hand. In a fluid motion, he reverses the direction, flicking it toward Jasir's chest. More than swift, the move is unexpected. It becomes clear that a live capture is only a preference for these men.

Jasir manages to react allowing the blade to sink halfway into his shoulder. Fear and disillusion rapture his mind. The void, usually within an arm's reach, becomes a speck of dust in a sea. Jasir's blood drips onto his carpet as he staggers through the common room, the sliding door exit to the backyard his destination. His feet fumble taking him to his knees. The grunting approach of the behemoth looms nearer all the less nice for the trouble Jasir has caused him. His mighty fist comes down on Jasir's jaw and its tissue tears like paper.

A shrill sound fills Jasir's ears and his vision blurs again as he falls face down. The knife handle drives

against the ground slicing deeper into his arm. Broken and stabbed, he lies still.

"Grasp," shouts the smaller man. "Secure him." The behemoth kneels beside Jasir and presses his palm flat against Jasir's head. Darkness shrouds him.

Jasir searches for the void, unsure of what to do when he finds it. The sizzling of the lasso comes nearer.

"I have him, Taylon," Grasp rumbles. "Take him so I can finally flee from this maddening Sapien stench."

A singular sensation of heat moves across Jasir's torso. In the next moment his body hoists from the ground, bound suddenly. He squirms like a snared fish and every inch of his body burns. He abandons his search for the vast inner space of the atom as a migraine sets in. Raw emotion compels Jasir to resist but the lesson of the lasso intensifies. Fire burns across his mind and body obliterating the reasons to care for an escape. The void shrinks like the beam of light on an old television set and Jasir hangs from Taylon's lasso conquered.

"Quickly, Grasp, he is a learner."

Grasp hulks toward the far end of the living room, near the exit and drops a metal cube. It lands densely. Grasp depresses the top ledge of the cube then hulks backwards, keeping his eyes on the device. Taylon jerks his arm

upward cocking it to suspend Jasir off his shoulder like a duffle bag primed for quick transport.

There—the void, in the distance. Jasir races toward it, his mind moving like lead feet.

Electrons flee from the device and are pulled back by force. Lightning stretches outward and back like balls on a string. Bolts dance violently in every direction from the device. Each time the electrons manage to move an inch further from the device but they never escape. They appear more rapidly each time until the differential is unnoticeable. The sparks become a solid ball of lightning sounding like a large spinning hard drive.

“Jasir,” Calli screams!

Jasir doesn't open his eyes but places her at the edge of the kitchen, behind Grasp and Taylon. He feels his captor pivot in her direction. Foolishly she followed clear sounds of danger and she will probably die because of it. Because of him.

Jasir race to the void has been too casual. His approach softened from its embrace, so easily attainable most times. The process is untrained and spoiled by leisure. Feet cannot carry him through the space of his mind quickly enough to help Calli. Jasir elevates. His consciousness rises from a black surface and at once he sees there has

never been ground holding him in the first place. He soars as a missile toward the embrace of the void.

"Run," Jasir screams unconsciously. Somewhere he knows his words are too late. Somewhere he senses Grasp already bearing down on Calli, a murdering maniacal mass.

Grasp growls, "This one is pretty. I propose to you, return as my concubine or die on this pathetic carbon copy."

"Do not tempt fate with another unknown variable, Grasp, end her and let us go."

Grasp takes the time it takes to glance at Taylon to decide Calli's fate. "He has a point, pet--"

Grasp swings his arm, pulling Calli's body like a doll and aims for the wall.

Jasir finds the missile a lumbering mass of unrefined transport. His mind sheds its confines and heaps of steel fall away and shatter. Fragments become dust and dust becomes particles. The particles fuse into a string becoming a path of light. Instantly Jasir connects with the source and touches the void. He whispers, "I Am."

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