

Reality School: In the Entropy Zone

by

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Reality School: In the Entropy Zone

As we walk through the entropic boundary, I expect to feel...I don't know what...some startling physical sensation. Instead, it's more like walking into the shadow of a towering building. A draft of cooler air passes through my blouse.

Then everything changes...

*

Looking back, it seems almost impossible to believe. Reality School, from matriculation to retirement, was supposed to fill seven of my best years--years of learning and challenge, and perhaps even occasionally danger. The time I actually spent cannot be measured; it was a time in which the world almost changed beyond recognition--and I changed into something, someone, I hardly know.

*

For my first day at school, my parents had gotten us up at dawn and piled me and my older sister into our ancient station wagon, Woodie. We drove for a long time, before turning into the entrance to the school. I remember this clearly, even though I was a girl only six and a half at the time. My parents told me later that I'd complained so much about the length of the trip that they very nearly turned around and drove me back home. They wouldn't have, of course; they knew how important the reality school was--not just to us, but to the whole world. Why else would they have put me through all that testing, and cried when I was accepted?

I remember this, too: my complaints vanished the instant we passed through the reality school's continuum-bubble. A great shock wave hit the hood of the car and flashed past the windows in rainbow colors, and suddenly everything around us changed. Everything--including Woodie. Our station wagon was transformed from a sagging road-barge into a shining fuselage, powered by glowing fusion thrusters and floating on a magnetic cushion. I screamed with joy and amazement, deafening my mom and dad. Marie was screaming just as loudly. At the same moment, the school grounds changed from scorched desert grass to a fairyland setting of whipped cream lawns, cotton candy trees, and gingerbread buildings. I hopped up and down with delight.

It was all window-dressing, of course--not just for the kids, but for the parents, who were preparing to leave their children with a school that few of them could really hope to understand. The parents believed in the school's mission, or they wouldn't have been there; but it probably helped to have the special effects to ease the transition. The effects had little to do with the *real* function of the school, of course, but it would take us a while to understand that.

Daddy drove up to the parking area, where a centaur with an armband directed him to a space that looked as if it had been saved just for us. We all piled out, Daddy warning me not to touch the fusion thrusters, whose glow was slowly fading to chrome silver. We had a good laugh, walking around our gleaming spaceship-car. Then a team of whinnying ponies drew up, pulling a cart for my bags. We loaded the cart and headed into the administration building.

*

I have no memory of registration, but I vividly recall the "reality-view" posters that glowed in the walls, and the clots of strange kids gathered around gawking at them. The posters looked like moving holograms, and at first I thought they were just pictures made by artists. It turned out they were actual images of reality-threads that "shapers," as graduates of the school were called, had encountered and safely sealed off from our timeline. Marie and I gaped at a world where everyone lived in clouds, where the whole *world* seemed to be clouds, and nothing looked quite solid, including the people. "Wow," I said, feeling the kind of thrill that I got from my favorite stories.

Then we turned to an image filled with stalactites and stalagmites that flickered and slowly changed color as if under a black light. That one stumped us, until an older boy stepped up and explained that it was microscopic metal crystals: a world where everything was solid-state, and all life took the form of electrons and photons. Phew, I thought. Why bother?

The boy, though, seemed to actually *like* the idea, the way I'd liked the clouds. He grinned, and told me his name was Ashok. And I began to wonder if kids like him were about to become my friends.

*

It was only a little later, at the dorm, that Mom and Dad and Marie had to say good-bye to me. I flashed from giddy pleasure to tears, and starting bawling, "I don't want to stay! I don't *want* to! I want to go *home!*"

"Alexandra, we've been planning this a long time," my dad started to say, all rationally. Only he couldn't get it out; he started crying, too, and turned away so I wouldn't see. You'd think it would have been Mom crying, but she was the one who tried to calm me down, "Honey, the tests said you were one in a million. Now, you go show them how you can do this! It's *so* important--"

No no no I don't care...!

That was when the school's departure routine kicked in. My dorm room suddenly blossomed out into a beautiful little sun porch, where some of my favorite characters--Peter Rabbit and Eeyore and Maxine the bunny and Berlioz the bear were all having tea together, and one after another, they beckoned me to join them. That broke the cycle of tears, for the moment; it was enough to make me let my parents go.

And from then on, life was never to be the same...not even in the ways we'd expected.

*

I am utterly alone--in a steaming jungle. Animals shriek in the distance. Where has everyone gone? "Rober-r-r-ta?" I cry, shivering. "Lisa? Danny?" I stumble back the way I came, searching for them. But where the entropic boundary stretched a moment ago, a jungle now goes on forever.

I teeter on the edge of panic. If I'm to find my world again, I can only plunge ahead. I have a job to do. An adult's job, even if I am only six and a half. I have already grown beyond my calendar age.

But I seem to have forgotten what exactly I am supposed to do.

*

Lisa Hoopner, my roommate, became my best friend right from day one. She was just a few months older than me, and one of the things I liked about her was her laugh, which was a kind of whoop that came out at the funniest times. Another thing I liked was her *Bahhston* accent. We didn't talk with accents in California, I said; and every time I said it, she gave a whoop and talked to me in a bubbling *upbeat* voice that was supposed to sound like people from around here. I didn't think it sounded much like me, but it made me laugh anyway.

Lisa and I were both pretty homesick, but it helped having each other to be friends with. For one thing, we both liked Berlioz and Maxine, and we both thought Mr. Playstead, the head teacher, was nice but kind of stuffy, and we both liked Mrs. Randolph because she made us laugh, and we both thought the cafeteria was awesomely yucky. Once we'd agreed on all that, everything else seemed pretty minor. Oh, and we both liked Danny Hutton, a boy from Iowa who we could tell was putting on a brave front, even though he was obviously even more homesick than we were.

Most of the kids were pretty nice. We had a lot of counseling sessions, some by ourselves, and some in groups where we talked about the things that we liked, and the things that scared us. That helped us get to know each other, I guess. I understand now that they'd selected us not just for our imaginations, but for a certain sociability and a certain toughness of mind, not that I would have put it that way then. They didn't want any wild-eyed or selfish individualists getting hold of the reins of reality. It was risky enough with the people they did choose.

The teachers had lots of activities to help us get to know each other--games and stories and plays. But the main activity was learning to *shape reality*.

*

In the beginning we shaped storybook landscapes and scenes. Try to imagine a roomful of six-, seven-, and eight-year-olds bubbling with imagination, perched under strange helmets of silver and glass, with visions of stories taking form right before their eyes. (None of our creations were permanent, of course--and they were strictly confined within the shielded training rooms. But if a leakage had occurred, the continuum- barriers around the school grounds would have kept anything we did from reaching the world outside.)

We learned right away that our mind's eye views of such magic places as Oz, Middle Earth, Peter Rabbit's forest, and Barsoom differed wildly from one another. Sometimes that caused arguments, which we were supposed to settle among ourselves. But other times we just had fun building one vision upon another, castle upon cloud upon ocean upon desert--until our landscapes grew into something that was as much *us* as it was the stories that had inspired us. We were learning to create. Later, we would learn to *choose* realities from the crazy chaos that the universe offered up to us. But in those days, we were consumed with *building*.

We were also learning to share...

One day Lisa and I worked together on a special play cottage made of clouds. It was delicate, puffy, and ethereal--and it had lightning bolts flashing across the doorways, and only Lisa and I could make the lightning go away to let us in. Even so, we made sure the point got across by patrolling the area in our

helmets, telling everyone else to stay out. Mr. Playstead came upon us and planted himself in my path with a scowl. "Alexandra," he said sternly, "this space is for everyone, not just for people who appoint themselves queen for a day."

I was stunned, and suddenly ashamed. I didn't know quite what he meant by "queen for a day," but I *knew* we were supposed to share our creations with everyone, and not keep them to ourselves. I felt my face get hot as I looked at Lisa. Mr. Playstead hadn't said anything to her yet. She looked away guiltily. I knew we were both in for a special counseling session later, after Mr. Playstead reported this.

I was ready to let the cottage dissolve back into a cloud of smoke, taking me with it. But Lisa was quicker. She caught Tommy Harte's eye, and with a look invited him into the cottage. When Mr. Playstead saw that, he nodded approvingly. Lisa cheered up right away. Before I knew what was happening, she'd opened the cottage into a big pavillion and told *everyone* to come in. I stood there, burning with humiliation, as Mr. Playstead watched Lisa being so generous.

I stalked away, refusing to look at her. Finally, I sat down in a far corner of the room to make shapings by myself. The only trouble was, no ideas came. Nothing at all. I was getting madder by the minute. I heard Lisa come up behind me, and I glanced her way sullenly, ready to say something nasty.

"*Meow.*"

She was holding a pair of little grey tiger kittens, offering one to me. I glowered. But I took one of the kittens anyway, and after Lisa had gone back to play, I hugged it carefully. It purred and strutted in my lap, and as I petted it, I began to feel better.

When the counselor asked me about it later (in my regular session--Mr. Playstead didn't send me in for a special visit, after all), I told her that I knew I shouldn't have done that with the private cottage-making, and I wouldn't do it again. She peered at me through her big, wide glasses and said, "You mean you've learned something about not being selfish?"

I shrugged, uncomfortable under her stare. "I guess so."

Dr. Shelby nodded carefully. "Have you forgiven Lisa for being quicker, and cleverer about changing what she was doing when you both got caught?"

The question surprised me. I didn't think Lisa *had* been caught. But yes, the kitten had helped me forgive her.

I nodded.

"You know, it's a pretty tall order to learn not to think just of yourself," Dr. Shelby observed. "But this thing between you and Lisa *could* be a valuable lesson. If the time ever comes when you have to reach deep inside yourself for strength, deeper than you think you *can* reach, I hope it will help you to remember this."

I stared back at her in alarm. Although she said it nicely, I could feel the weight of seriousness behind her words. Anything that would make me remember *this* in a good way, I thought, was something I didn't want to face. But I didn't say that; I just nodded.

Dr. Shelby peered at me. The light glinted off her glasses as she looked at the clock and said our session was over.

*

I walk, alone and lonely, through the pellucid green light of the jungle. After a time, I step through

a hedge...and my surroundings change utterly, to a world of astonishing precipices and ravines, illumined by lightning flashes. Another reality, joined to mine like a soap bubble? Or is this my world, after entropy has ravaged it like a marauding beast?

With a shiver, I back away from a terrifying precipice. "Where have you all gone?" I whisper to my missing friends. "What am I supposed to do here, all alone?" Even as I ask, I know the answer: Find the reality-thread that belongs to us, and bring it back to our world.

There is no one here--just a few winged creatures, soaring off the cliffs, pterodactyllike. Still, I feel--I cannot say how--that Lisa is out there, not in this place of cliffs and ravines, maybe, but somewhere, across some gulf that I cannot even see. I cry out to her in a tiny voice, barely a whisper.

I struggle to think. It is not just the world gone mad; it is me, too. I am no longer the person I was, not a six-year-old girl, or even a twelve-year-old. I look down at my lanky, bony body and flex my leathery wings. What have I turned into?

I peer down into a ravine. Lights twinkle in the darkness below. Cities? I feel a surge of hope. Perhaps down there are people, some connection...

I launch myself from the cliff.

*

We grew up fast in the reality school, and not just fast, but *differently* from our sisters and brothers on the outside. I guess our parents knew that could happen, and thought it worth the risk. What we had to do was so dreadfully important, and it could only be done by people who started very, very young. People with plastic minds, who could learn to visualize (*discern*, they called it) different levels of reality without blocking out what they saw with denial. People with blazing imaginations, without the layers of preconceptions that adults have, who could be trained to pick out entropic changes at a distance, and visualize appropriate responses.

That's adult-talk. Sorry; what they needed was young people with unbridled hope. People like us.

We learned about this gradually, over time, absorbing our mission not so much through our heads as through our pores. When we graduated, it would be up to us to "maintain the order." Even now that sounds ponderous to me--almost pretentious. A few years ago, it would have been preposterous. But of course that was before the entropic rift opened, before the Earth became a place where reality "fluttered" from day to day, and moment to moment.

*

The first time we got to see real shapers at work was, undoubtedly, the turning point when I really began to feel in my bones what we were doing. The teachers led us single-file into a shielded observation room that overlooked the actual Reality Shaping Center. This was where the best of us would work, after graduation. It was the only such center in America, one of three in the world. We were electrified with excitement, and whispered and hissed to each other while our teachers frowned over the group. I sat between Lisa and Roberta Kisnet, and we held each other's hands tightly, trying to keep from bursting with anticipation.

The shapers were four or five years older than us, which seemed a lifetime. They wore silver helmets which, surprisingly, were smaller and simpler-looking than our training helmets. A few of them walked around, but mostly they stayed seated, their gloved hands waving in the air as they gestured and probed at whatever realities they were viewing in their closed universes.

They were not actually *journeying* in other realities, we were told--but viewing them through tiny windows opened in the continuum by the shaping amplifiers. They were watching for reality-threads that threatened to intrude upon our own...like radar watching for enemy airplanes.

We saw the other realities on monitors, along with the adult supervisors. About half the center was filled with consoles, where the supervisors coordinated everything that was happening here with the centers at CERN and Kyoto--a lot of frowning adults with headsets studying computer consoles. But the other side, where the shapers were working...*wow*.

We saw a dramatic episode almost right away. On one of the shapers' monitors, a strange scene came into focus: a mountain range melting under a big red sun. I stared open mouthed, as a teacher explained. It was *our* sun, diseased and swollen, devouring our Earth--in another reality. I sat frozen, not sure whether to be fascinated or terrified. We heard the voices of the supervisors calling additional shapers into the circuit, and explaining exactly what was wrong. "... *We've got to calm that sun down, give us a nice cool breeze...that's it...and hold the mountains together with your hands....*" And we saw the shapers stirring in their seats, turning to one another and working together with murmurs of agreement. We saw the mountains being held in place by ghostly, virtual hands--and we saw icy breaths cooling the sun.

I scarcely understood what I was seeing; but the image-crafting of three or four shapers, working in harmony, was pushing away that dangerous reality-thread. There was something almost mystical, and very personal, about the shapers' joined struggle against the forces of entropy. The scientific staff didn't explain it that way; they talked of *synergistic field-configurations* and *Lang-Lawrence contractions*. But as far as the shapers were concerned, there was an *enemy* out there. And by creating their images in concert, they were able to defeat the enemy, or at least to push it back out of range.

Were they actually *cooling* that bloated sun in the other reality, changing what existed in another thread, or were they just weaving a spell to prevent the thread from intruding on our own? In a practical sense, it didn't matter. What mattered was that they were closing off the danger from our own world, keeping the enemy at bay however they could. It was like virtual reality--except that any one of those threads could have come swirling up out of the netherrealms of chaos to overwhelm our world, if the shapers had not been there with their fingers in the dike, manning the ramparts, battening down the hatches of reality.

I didn't know then that the really dramatic perils were the easiest to detect at a distance, and the easiest to defend against. Most of the dangers were more insidious--shifts in climate, or in ecological balances, or even changes in human history. The shapers often sensed a change--and then had to wait, like bloodhounds on leashes, while the supervisors conferred about what courses of action to follow, or even about which reality-thread was the right one. There, we learned, lay the subtlest perils to our world.

We beginning students were far more interested in the vivid dangers. To our satisfaction, before we left the center that day, we saw spidery aliens marching through the streets of St. Louis, enclosing buildings in strange cocoons. As one, we felt a great, gasping pulse of fear before the aliens faded in a shimmer of heat--as a group of shapers focused their thoughts together and wove a web of protection that banished the aliens from our reality.

When our observation session was over, I could hardly move. I was trembling in my seat, and my fingers were white from clenching Lisa's hand so hard. I looked at Lisa and she looked wide-eyed back at me.

I had never in my life been so scared. Or so excited.

*

I soar, spiraling down into the darkness of the ravine, praying that the twinkling jewels below me

are civilization. I am breathless with fear. What have I turned into, that I soar on leathery wings? Am I not still human?

"Yes, I am!" I cry, and with that, my wings are gone, and I am falling. The sparkling points below me are not cities but...stars. My heart pounds. I want to scream, but my breath will not leave my chest.

Is anyone else alive in the great void of stars wheeling around me? "Lisa?" I whisper. "Roberta? Danny? Ashok?" For a heartstopping moment I see their faces in the stars, luminous faces. I imagine that they are calling out to me. But I am helpless to answer. There is a power blocking me, a darkness called Chaos. I imagine the entire population of the Earth, all of humanity, floating out there, calling to me.

I am supposed to save them.

Weightless, I fall...

*

We continued to spend a lot of time with the counselors, doing group exercises and letting off steam and trying to understand the meaning to *us* of what we were training for. But I don't think, really, that there was any way they could truly prepare us for a job that was, essentially, to hold the world in our hands.

Eventually the gravity of our teachers' words began to reverberate like bass drum beats--not so much in the classrooms as in our minds:

"...the sorting of entropic realities demands the talents of children your age..."

"...must do what older people, even experts, can't..."

"...when adults try to focus through these windows, it turns to mud...adults resist...we're never sure, the layers of ambiguity are too great..."

"...as you learn to *feel* the difference between realities... must learn wisdom, yet through a lens of innocence..."

"...might last until you're thirteen...only one has worked past fourteen, by the calendar..."

By the calendar. We were already aware that we were growing older at an accelerated rate, our intellects and emotions veering ahead in an alarming, zigzag fashion. It all had to do with entropy.

I never really understood entropy, not the way the scientists talked about it. We learned about disorder, of course, and something called "the laws of thermodynamics," which were undergoing some late revision. It might have been the work of theorists that had brought us to this plight in the first place. Not that they'd meant to; they were just fooling around with fusion implosions and micro-singularities, and trying to learn how to control entropic folds in space-time...not on a world-wide scale, but on a quantum level, a subatomic level. What harm could there possibly be in that? But somehow there *was* harm in it; somehow they caused, or at least allowed entry to, the rift that put us where we are now.

Many of them denied that. It was entropic drift, they theorized--a natural phenomenon, swirling just below the apparent calm of our spacetime continuum. It may have been chance that it intruded into our world when it did; and without the developments that made the shaping amplifiers possible, we would have been defenseless against it. But whether it was a natural phenomenon or an artificial one was irrelevant now. Either way, it threatened to destroy our world as we knew it. Not that it *meant* to; it wasn't living; it didn't know us, didn't care about us one way or another. It just followed the laws of

physics. But the laws of physics changed, from one reality thread to the next.

What the shapers had to know was how to sort through the many possible realities that floated like tangled seaweed in the ocean of entropy, and how to follow the one strand that belonged to our timeline and our lives. Not just our lives personally, but the life of the world. The job of the shapers was to preserve reality, guided by the supervision staff, according to guidelines agreed upon by the joint policy committees...

"...what you will be doing is a privilege, and a responsibility. You will be honored for doing what no one else on Earth can do..."

*

Not everyone honored what we were doing, not at all. Many people were only vaguely aware of the reality schools at all, and didn't much care about us one way or another--except maybe to object to the government funding that kept us going. They thought--I don't know, that we were doing nothing real at all--casting illusions in the air, mirages, New Age miracles, who knew what for, maybe just for our own entertainment.

How *could* they believe that, when we all knew--despite the best efforts of the shaping centers--that changes were inevitably creeping into our continuum?

Were people just stupid? At first I thought so. Later, I understood better. It's called *variable persistence of memory*. Simply put: different people remember the past differently...for a while. Every time our reality-thread changes, there is a collective adjustment of memory. But not all at once, or at the same time. An extreme example: If I wake up one morning, remembering that Unimerica has fifty-seven states, and the capital is in Toronto, and you remember that it's only forty-seven states, and the capital is in Washington--and the history books at the library disagree with each other--that's variable persistence of memory. A few weeks later, we'll all remember the same thing. But which way will it be? And which was the original? The staffs at the shaping centers are supposed to know, but their memories change, too. So whom do we believe?

What a lot of people believed was: nothing has changed.

My example may have been a poor one. Nothing that dramatic had happened, that we knew of. A more realistic example might have been something like this: a subtle shift in global climate, or in population patterns of the tsetse fly. Then you have the supervisory staffs arguing over what *was*, or what *should be*.

And it's those questions that set off the people who opposed us. They were in the minority, we were told--but they were everywhere. We were opposed by elements of the religious right, the humanist left, the Islamic center, the Russian capitalist resurgency, the South African whoknowswhats, and a whole lot more that I've mercifully forgotten. Some of them opposed us because they didn't have shaping centers of their own, and they felt disadvantaged; others opposed us because we were "treading where mankind wasn't meant to tread."

We were just kids. We were too young to understand--thank God, or Allah, or our lucky stars, take your pick--that there were groups that would have liked nothing better than to close us down, or even kill us if necessary. The extremists were a small minority, and we were well insulated from them.

The plain truth was, most people didn't understand what it was that we did--or why. Some thought that we deliberately *changed* reality, a bunch of meddlers altering the natural order of things according to our own whims. Early on, before the U.N. committee was formed and guidelines established, there might have been those who tried that; but those people were stopped after they tried to eradicate the mosquito,

and changed a hundred ecologies by accident. No, we at the reality school were closely supervised; and the coordination with the Euro and Japanese groups was intense, with several major universities involved. There were the occasional policy disagreements, but those were minor. Or so we were told.

At the time, they didn't say too much to us about the rumors of other nations hurrying to build their own shaping centers, outside the control of the U.N. committee. Or about the bombing in Baghdad of what was supposed to have been a munitions plant, but nobody really believed it...

The hardest opponents for *us* to hear about were the ones like Reverend Patwell and his church, right in the next county, who claimed, not that we were favoring American interests over others, but that we were defying God's will by imposing our order onto His.

That was nonsense, of course. As far as I was concerned, we were helping God hold His world together. Okay, *maybe* humans had caused this mess in the first place. But without us--or people like us--who knew what might have become of our world, our reality?

I can talk about it with a certain clarity now, because I've seen what happened when it went wrong. I've seen what happened when the school, the neighborhood, the whole fix on the reality that was our world began to dissolve.

*

The voices and faces have faded. I sense a planetary surface beneath me, and the hazy glow of an atmosphere. I have come to rest, pressed against a rocky surface, stars twinkling overhead.

Where am I what am I who am I...?

I live I breathe I think I feel...

In the gloom of an unearthly dawn, I curl my fingers in front of me, and I can just make out their webbed, bony shape.

Terrified, I shut my eyes, and imagine a place of darkness where Chaos lives and reaches out to destroy this universe...and I begin to feel that this Chaos has needs and wants of its own, and it is insatiable. And somehow it is testing me.

I hear a rumbling groan...of something living, something in pain. I stand and look around. I am on a tiny island in the midst of a green sea.

I am halfway up a small, rocky knoll, and I climb it on my webbed hands and feet. I peer over a ledge and see a bloated, toadlike monster, bellowing to the sky, bellowing...

*

It was May, and out on the playground some girls were practicing unamplified "makings"--little cloud castles floating along the hedgerow separating our school from a convent on the grounds behind us. There wasn't much that could happen with unamped makings; it was more like projecting little holograms, using the outdoor landscape programs. Except this time something did happen--something terrible.

I was in the cafeteria with Lisa and Roberta. We heard the yelling and ran outside. Across the playing field, kids and teachers were gathered around someone on the ground. Some of the kids were screaming.

"Who is it? Who is it?" Someone was running beside us-- Tommy Harte, I think.

"You children stay clear!" shouted Mr. Playstead, turning to wave us back. We crept close enough to see

that they were all gathered around the still form of a child. At first we couldn't see who it was. Then Lisa cried, "It's Judy Keller! It's Judy! Is she *dead*?"

Of course she isn't dead, I thought. But then I took a good look at Mr. Playstead's face--and I knew at once that she *was* dead. For a long, breathless moment, I wasn't so much scared as curious: Why was Judy dead? What could she have done that made her dead?

And then I felt fear and grief rush over me, in a great crashing wave.

It soon became obvious that the teachers were wondering the same thing I had wondered. Mr. Playstead raised his voice through the yelling and confusion. "Kids, *listen up!* This is *important*. I want you all to stop any shapings *right now*--even little ones. And I want to know, did anyone think, or imagine--even for a second, *even in play*--that Judy might die?"

"No!" "No!" We all frantically proclaimed our innocence, terrified of being blamed for Judy's death. All, that is, except poor Ellie Cottman, who burst into tears.

"Ellie?" Mr. Playstead asked, straining to make his voice gentle when you could tell he wanted to scream. "Did you...think about Judy dying? Or have some sort of *feeling* about it?"

Ellie nodded, sobbing. "Playing, we were only playing--" she babbled, and I looked at Lisa and she looked at me, agreeing with our eyes that *we* would never have done something so awful, and at the same time knowing that we could just as easily have done it. Then we all had to get out of the way, because the school infirmary people were there with stretchers and emergency gear, and they were trying to resuscitate Judy and they wanted us out of the way *now*.

I had a fleeting thought that maybe I could do something to help Judy--maybe some sort of a shaping that would restore her to life. It wasn't that I wanted to be a hero or anything; but I was so scared at this new thing, death, that had invaded our school that I would have done anything to drive it out. I was about to raise my hand and tell Mr. Playstead, when he seemed to sense my thought--or maybe what a lot of us were thinking. He suddenly barked, "Whatever happens, I don't want any of you trying to *think* Judy back alive! Is that understood?"

He turned, glaring, and that was when I saw the ground shifting and bubbling around the stretcher that Judy was lying on, and I realized that someone had already tried to do just what I was thinking. I followed Lisa's gaze and saw that it was Danny Hutton--you could tell by the crestfallen look on his freckled face--and Mr. Playstead probably saw it, too, but he didn't say anything. He began herding us forcefully toward the buildings, saying over and over, "We have to find out what happened...my God, what could have happened...?"

*

The beast looks up at me with fiery eyes, its breath hissing like a great steam engine. Behind it, something is thrashing in the water. The beast roars in anguish and scrabbles helplessly at the edge of the cliff overlooking the sea. The water erupts. A second creature bursts into the air, struggling...and crashes under again. The first beast claws helplessly at the ledge, and glares up at me with eyes that are not threatening, but pleading.

I look at my webbed hand, and shudder with understanding. No no no no...I'm terrified of deep water...the thing is huge, how could I possibly...?

The creature's roar shatters my thoughts. I don't know this creature, don't want to know it, don't know the rules here, don't know what is happening.

Through my cowardly shame I see, or imagine, a squirming patch of darkness in the sky. Entropy. Chaos. Feeding on my fear, my inaction.

I climb awkwardly over the stones, scuttling past the creature, burned by the pain in its eyes. I gaze down and see its mate, a blotch deep in the green water, sinking.

I hesitate a long moment before I leap.

*

By the time they got us all gathered for a meeting in the school auditorium, I knew that the world had been altered in some new and terrible way, that something had torn us loose from reality's moorings. The meeting was hopeless, just a lot of whispered conferences among the teachers and school officials. Once in a while they turned to the kids to comfort us, or ask something, or sometimes just to gaze helplessly over the room. They admonished us not to use our powers until they learned what was going on. We could smell their fear. They didn't know what had gone wrong, but the implications clearly went beyond the death of one student, however awful and shocking that might have been.

I sat in my seat, cloaked in a strange, foggy calm. Once in a while, the numbing fog swirled, and I trembled in helpless terror. But whatever had happened, the older shapers would take care of it; they had to. We should just sit tight until they found out what had gone wrong, and fixed it. That's what the teachers kept saying, and we tried to believe it. Lisa, beside me, chewed her knuckles, and cried softly over and over, "Judy's dead, Alexandri...she's dead...Alexandri, what are we going to do...what are we going to do...?" I don't think she actually looked at me once the whole time; she didn't look at anybody.

Despite the warnings, a lot of kids were having trouble keeping their imaginations in check. The auditorium kept trembling with little quakes of suppressed shapings, imaginary beings and objects flickering in the air, then vanishing. The teachers must have announced a dozen times that we were about to move into the shielded training rooms, where even our random shapings could have no permanent effect. The first few times, I felt reassured--*something* was being done--but there was always some delay, and we stayed in the auditorium while maintenance people rushed about trying to put up temporary shields.

The teachers themselves were looking more and more panicky, and we all wished that we could *hear* them talking among themselves--and I guess someone finally wished hard enough to make it happen. We suddenly heard Mr. Tea's voice boom out into the auditorium as he whispered to Miss Jennings: "--A NEW ENTROPIC FOLD--THE SHAPING CENTER IS *GONE!* IT'S VANISHED COMPLETELY! CERN AND KYOTO, TOO. WE HAVE NO ONE LEFT BUT THE STUDENTS. GOD HELP US!"

And that was when Mr. Tea realized that *everyone* was hearing him. He closed his mouth and turned pale, as the auditorium fell dead silent.

*

The sea crashes around my ears. I am breathing water. I blink, and my vision clears. This is the element my body was made for, not the harsh rocks of the island.

I cry out, and hear my voice booming out in great echoes over the seafloor. Rolling, I peer downward and see the base of the atoll slanting into the shadowy depths, and far below, the drowning creature. I plummet in pursuit. By the time I come alongside it, I am swimming in a twilight world. I hook the being's arm, circle around it, and find myself squarely before its eyes--dark and sightless. I have come too late...I waited too long, too fearful...

I release her body to sink into the abyss. And the grey of the undersea world closes in around me.

*

No need to belabor the bedlam, the near breakdown of order in the school, the disappearance of the counselors and most of the teachers.

No need to belabor our panic, when four of *us* vanished, swallowed by a wall of fog that materialized in the courtyard, neatly dividing us as we were walking back, in exhaustion, to our dorms.

No need to belabor our helplessness.

Had one of *us* somehow caused this? There was no reason to think so. And yet... Judy had died, and I could think of many times when I'd thought mean things about one or another of my classmates, or teachers--and any one of those times might have caused the same thing to happen.

Outside the school, it took a few days for the world to catch up with what had happened. What Mr. Tea had said was true, but, as we soon learned, only part of the truth. Apparently a *new shaping center* had come on line, somewhere in China, without any coordination with our center or the ones at CERN or Japan. The result was some sort of conflict--*disharmony*, they called it--in the shapings from one center to the next. No one knew exactly what the conflict was, but the result was that all four centers vanished, shapers and all, into a newly created entropic fold. And our school hovered right at the brink of the fold. The continuum-bubble provided some protection for the outside, but ripple effects were being felt all over the world: freak storms, unexplained computer failures, bridges collapsing...and all being blamed on us.

The political uproar was incredible.

A lot of people called for us to be shut down at once. We weren't really *doing* anything at that point, since it was just the students and a handful of teachers left, and no shaping amplifiers; but that didn't stop them from calling for our heads. The school perimeter was physically sealed off, though we still had electronic communication, and we were dependent upon supplies and electric power from the outside. Security for the power lines was beefed up right away. The integrity of the continuum- barrier was essential; it was the only way to keep whatever terrible thing had swallowed our people from swallowing the rest of the world, too.

The scientists said that the new fold in the entropic zone appeared to have produced a strange doubling over of the continuum-bubble that enclosed our reality school. Something similar must have happened in China and Japan and at CERN, but there the folds had closed in upon themselves and vanished, swallowing the shaping centers whole. The training school at CERN had vanished, too; the one in Japan, located farther from the shaping center, was reportedly safe, but isolated from the fold. Only we were poised at the very edge of the entropic boundary.

There were rumors that a manmade singularity floated somewhere deep in the entropy zone, wreaking havoc, but our scientists said there was no evidence for that. To us kids, it was a meaningless question; we just knew that what was happening was bad. And there seemed nothing to be done about it. We were the only ones left. But what could *we* do--especially without the amps and our helmets?

Someone pointed out that Judy's death had happened just *after* the disappearance of our shapers--the result of a stray thought on the part of a student. So whatever had gone wrong, it meant that we students could exert more power than before. And that meant...bad things could happen even without the amps. But perhaps *good* things could happen without them, too.

That thought gave us hope. Not much, but it was something.

*

The days that followed brought ever more frightening news from the outside world: earthquakes, civil unrest, solar flares, threats of war. There was little doubt now that it was connected to the entropic folding. At least people believed now that what we did here at the school was real. And it was some consolation that the rest of the world still *existed*. One of my nightmares was that the entropic bubble would just swallow the Earth whole, the way it had swallowed the shapers, like a serpent devouring its tail.

Like everyone else, I phoned my parents and sister, and afterward cried for hours. My parents wished they'd never enrolled me at the school, and they wanted to take me home. But that was impossible, of course--and not just because of the continuum-bubble that enclosed us. Outside our perimeter, we were now effectively quarantined--not by the civil authorities, but by a growing army of protesters.

We first learned about it on the TV news. The Robert Patwell church had gotten to us first and formed a human blockade around the school property. They were praying and singing, and Reverend Patwell himself was out there with a microphone calling on us to give up our pact with the devil. Never before had I seen such naked hatred directed at *me*. Other groups were out there, too, maneuvering for position. Environmental groups were cheek-by-jowl with foreign agents, claiming we were destroying the world in the name of protecting the American way of life. Some were making noises about cutting off our power and water. Fortunately for our sanity, the school grounds were wooded *inside* the perimeter, and that kept the protesters mostly out of sight. We could just see one clot of them, way down at the end of our driveway.

We watched a big argument on TV between Reverend Patwell's people and some nuns from the Catholic convent over the hill from us. Apparently the nuns thought we were a hazard to God's Kingdom, too; but they thought we were victims, not perpetrators. They didn't go around using names like "servants of the darkness." And they didn't take too kindly to Patwell leading his throngs over the convent grounds like an army invasion, setting up their human chain. Once Patwell had done it, all the others followed suit. The sheriff's department was out there, and the National Guard, and we were grateful to see men with rifles standing watch under the high-tension power lines that fed our bubble.

"Jesus," said Harvey Snowden in disgust. He was one of the older boys, but he'd gotten too close to the wall of fog, and it had changed him. He now looked like a scrawny twenty-year-old woman. It scared the rest of us just to look at him. "Isn't it bad enough, without all these religious nuts going at it with each other?" Harvey was an atheist who wished they'd all go away.

That set off Danny Hutton, whose dad was a Congregational minister. Reverend Hutton had visited the school chapel once and preached to us about how the reality school was a special kind of service to God--and if the scientists who had gotten us into this were guilty of meddling pride, so were certain church organizations. I tried to take comfort in those words now, but it wasn't easy. "Not everyone who *believes* is crazy like *them!*" Danny snarled. He stormed away from the TV--mad at Harvey, mad at Reverend Patwell, and mad at the gnawing zone of entropy that was eating our world alive.

"You'd think," said Lisa, quivering in front of the TV, "that people would try to behave a little better, what with the apocalypse on us and all." She got up to try again to call her parents; she hadn't been able to get through to them yet. She was worried that they'd already disappeared. Physically, Lisa looked to be about ten now, but something was happening; she was becoming a young woman. She was even starting to gravitate toward the boys for comfort, especially Danny Hutton. It was three days since the entropic fold had taken Judy and the shapers.

Apocalypse? I thought stupidly, and realized with a shock that all this really did have serious eschatological overtones to it.

Eschatological? Where the hell had I learned to use words like that? And know what they meant?

*

What is happening to me? I am in a desolate wasteland of ash-choked craters and volcanic eruptions. Is it punishment for my failure to save the creature in the sea? Is this what it all turns into, when we fail, each one of us, to save the other? I hack for breath in the smoky air, and stagger forward.

I can feel the flux of entropy burning around me like an electrical discharge, threatening to destroy not just the world but my own mind and soul. If I don't keep moving, I will die here. And I will have helped no one.

I trudge among volcanic vents that steam and smolder. What could my puny thoughts do to change this? Somewhere there must be a toehold on reality, a leverage point. It is what we came here, all of us, to find. "Give me a place to stand, and I will move the Earth," Archimedes said. That is what we must do, to push back the tide of entropy. And yet, flames of doubt lick at me.

The ground shudders, a low rumble in the earth. A moment later, a peak in front of me explodes. I fall to the ground as a column of smoke towers into the sky. Blazing lava rains down onto the earth. A river of blood-red magma streams toward me.

Am I about to be incinerated, buried in final failure? As my mind seethes, the tide of burning earth drives toward me. And a thought slowly comes into focus: it was my own doubt that brought the volcano into being. My own fears. If I allow them to, my fears will swallow and destroy me.

I remember the creature who died in the sea because of my hesitation. And yet I know: I am not powerless. I still have my being, my spirit, my will. I am a shaper. I blink, remembering that, as the lava sweeps toward me like a tidal wave of flame.

*

"They're at the power lines! They're trying to cut the power lines! Tell Mr. Playstead!" Roberta tore out the door of the TV room, running to find someone in charge.

I stood open-mouthed, watching her disappear around the corner. I ran into the TV room, where a few of the kids were watching the special report. On camera, a utilities truck was pulled up to an electric tower, and a man was maneuvering himself in the cherry picker toward the power lines. The camera switched to Reverend Patwell, who was rejoicing loudly. It looked to be protesters, not the electric utility, doing the deed. *Where were the security forces?* "My God," I croaked. "If they cut off the power--"

"There goes the continuum-bubble," Harvey rattled hoarsely. He was trembling with rage.

"But don't we have some kind of...backup?" whispered Lottie Gerns. "A generator? Something?"

Harvey laughed like a man about to commit mayhem. It made me shiver, coming from someone who looked like a woman. "For the lights, yeah--but not the bubble. It takes too much power. Why do you think we have those high tension lines coming in?"

I swallowed, watching the man in the cherry picker. He was peering down, and the camera shifted to a knot of people gathered around some sort of control station. The man on the truck was waiting for the power to be shut off, so he could cut the line down.

"Then--" I said "--there won't be any containment at all." Whatever effects had leaked out till now, the

worst of the entropic influence was contained within our bubble.

"You got it," said Harvey. "*Mr. Playstead--you see these jerks?*"

Mr. Playstead was breathless as he ran into the room. "I just talked to the sheriff," he gasped. "He said they'd stop it. They don't know what happened to the security people--they seem to have vanished."

We watched, petrified, as the cameras panned to the flashing lights of the sheriff's cars pulling up. There was a lot of shouting. Finally the crowd gave way, and a couple of tough-looking deputies with high-powered rifles took up guard posts. After a short argument, the utility truck drove away.

I nearly collapsed with relief, my heart pounding. Where was Lisa? She hadn't seen this; I had to go tell her. I ran from the room, looking for her.

She wasn't in the cafeteria, or in the dorm. I finally found her outside behind the main building, huddled on the grass under some trees. Not alone. With Danny Hutton. I ran up, yelling, "Lisa! Danny! You won't believe what--" before I saw what they were doing. They were kissing. No, more than kissing. They were *groping*. Frantically.

I staggered to a halt, the words still tumbling out of my mouth. Lisa shrank, glaring at me with murderous fury. "Would you get the hell *out* of here?" she snapped.

I stood there, dumbfounded and humiliated. "But--" I choked, not knowing what to say next. I was appalled--but was it because she was doing this when the whole world was at stake, or because I was jealous? And who was I jealous of--Lisa or Danny?

Lisa seemed unable to say anything else; she just glared. Danny looked away from both of us, in acute embarrassment. In the end, I fled back to our room, hardly remembering why I'd been looking for her in the first place.

*

That night, a loud concussion woke us all up and sent us running to the TV. It took a few minutes for the backup generator to come on.

Someone had managed to blow up the power lines, after all.

*

The lava parts like the Red Sea, a river of fire on either side. I watch, stunned, as walls of glowing earth rise around me. Can my own belief have such power? I descend into the earth, flaming magma cocooning me.

Volcanic heat rages against my skin. I feel chaos plucking at me, magnetic fields streaming through me. I am floating in a firestorm of magma, like a spirit swimming in the fires of creation. It all begins to blur, then comes back into focus. It is not the Earth I am floating in, but a lake of luminous red, with a flame burning brightly at its center. It is an enormous candle, a sunken lake of wax, the light of the flame glowing through its translucent walls. It seems impossible.

But not as impossible as the voices.

The human voices, all around me.

*

"Alexandri!"

I heard my name called, and didn't want to answer. I was holed up in my room, weeping into my blanket. I was no longer six years old, but--what? Thirteen? Thirty? My breasts hurt, and I'd gotten my period--just after the miserable cold breakfast we'd all had together, after the loss of the continuum-bubble, after a nighttime vigil waiting for protesters to invade us, protesters who never came. I'd complained to Lisa about my cramps--we'd sort of made up, because with the whole world falling apart, what was the point of staying mad?--and she'd grunted, "Well, about time it happened to you, too! I don't know how much more time we'll have! Enjoy it while you can."

I'd stared at her, bewildered. I wasn't even sure exactly what she meant. After seeing her with Danny, I figured she meant sex. But it was all so alien to me, so unreal. It wasn't bad enough what was happening to the world--did we have to grow old in these great, uneven jags?

We were just *kids*, damn it!

I heard my name called again. But I didn't want to talk to anyone. If there'd been any counselors left in this place, I wouldn't have talked to them, either. I especially didn't want to hear about Lisa and Danny Hutton.

"Alexandri, come see what's happened outside!" It was Lottie Gern, and she was frantic. She ran back out of my room, and on to Roberta's room, shouting.

I cursed and went outside. I found Lisa and Danny and most of the kids, plus Mr. Playstead and Miss Jennings, standing on the front lawn. We'd kept sentries there all night, ready to call out at the first sign of intruders.

The forest had rolled up like an army, right to the front of the administration building. All the desert-grass-covered mountain slopes, across the little valley from the school property, were thick with dense woods.

There was no sign of any of the picket lines, or of any human life out there at all.

*

Faces begin appearing in the candle rim...faces like luminous glass, to match the voices. Danny...? Roberta...?

*

Later that day, Harvey Snowden came running in yelling that the woods were dying. That was the first we knew that a total ecological catastrophe had set in.

"What do you mean, dying?" I yelled back from the rec room/battle center. A group of us had been trying to *will* reality back to normal, without effect. We'd just been listening to the TV for any mention at all of protesters, or of *us*. But all of our opponents, including Reverend Patwell, seemed to have vanished from the face of the Earth.

"Dying!" He glared at me as if I were an idiot. "Don't you know what that means?"

"I know, and you don't have to yell!" I shouted. But his wild, reddened face scared me. Clearly something had scared *him*, and badly. "What did you see?" I asked, as the others gathered around.

"Dead trees--a *lot* of them--all dried out, like it was winter or something."

"It's not winter. It's May. Or June, maybe," said Lottie Gerns, sneezing for the hundredth time that hour. Poor kid had come down with allergies, bad, and the infirmary had no more medicine.

"No foolin'," said Harvey. "But look down in the valley, and you'll see a lot of trees that don't know that." He waved his delicate feminine hands in the air. "It's weird. Way down in the valley, it looks like fall--everything's all red and yellow and brown. But closer up to us, everything's just dead. Shriveled."

"What's it mean?" asked Lottie.

"How the hell do *I* know what it means? But it isn't right. And whatever it is, it's coming from here." He looked at each one of us in turn. "And it's spreading out into the rest of the world."

*

We learned more about it on the one staticky channel that remained on the television. The forests were indeed dying, and the effect was spreading rapidly. A wave of forest and plant death was rippling outward from our location. The trees first turned fall colors--and then, instead of going into hibernation, they died.

It had something to do with their chloroplasts. Plants everywhere were losing their ability to photosynthesize. It was spreading like a virus, or a plague, but much faster. No one knew what was causing it or how to stop it; but if it wasn't stopped, it would spread over the whole planet. And if photosynthesis stopped, well, that was it. Not just for humanity, but for everything that lived on the Earth. Except maybe for some bacteria that lived on the bottom of the ocean and lived off nothing but chemicals from volcanic vents. Except for them, nothing. Not even the cockroaches would survive.

*

Our world was fast disappearing. We could no longer reach anyone by telephone, because the phone lines were gone. I'd last talked to my parents two days before, and I felt a terrible emptiness inside; I wondered if they were even still alive in this reality. Mr. Tea and Mrs. Randolph took a car to venture down the mountain into town, to try to buy food and learn what was happening. They didn't return.

The rest of us met to decide what to do.

Mr. Playstead suggested, and we all finally agreed, that we had no choice but to go out into it, straight into the heart of the entropic fold. The disturbance seemed to emanate from a bank of fog that kept advancing and retreating within the woods flanking the school. We had been afraid to venture near it, wary of its unpredictable effects, fearful of dying for nothing. Without the shaping amplifiers, we had only our own powers, and those not fully developed. But everything we'd tried from outside the entropy zone had been futile. Perhaps from within, we could do more.

It was a terrifying prospect--but as Ashok pointed out in his quiet voice, if we didn't take the risk now, while the world was still recognizable, then our own reality-thread would just move farther and farther away. Soon it would be too late for us to have any chance at all of regaining it. Whatever the risks, this was our only hope.

Mr. Playstead stood before us, tugging at the frizzy grey beard he'd sprouted in the last three days. "For what it's worth, I'm going to go with you. I don't have your skills, but I can't just stay out here waiting for you to return. Perhaps...my experience will be useful, somehow." He hesitated and glanced at Miss Jennings, who nodded silently and stepped up beside him. She was not about to be left behind, either.

Mr. Playstead cleared his throat. "I want to emphasize one thing to you all. When the shapers were lost, we think it was because of a conflict with the other shaper teams. That must not happen again. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

There were some murmurs of assent, and some of impatience.

"I'm saying, we have to work in harmony. Whatever we find in there--and I don't know what it will be, but people--" and his voice was strained as he searched for words "--if we're going to defeat this thing, we have to do it together. Any one of you alone might not be strong. But the combined strength of a dozen shapers, in the fold--" He paused for breath, but then he seemed to run out of words, and he shrugged. He looked very old to me, and tired.

I turned to look at Lisa, and her eyes met mine for just a moment. She was scared, but soberly so. I was stunned by the maturity I saw there in her gaze, and wondered what was wrong with me that I wasn't so grown up myself. I was still petrified at the thought of not being a kid anymore. And terrified of what we had to do. I felt an impulse to grab her hand and hold it, the way we had that first time we'd seen the graduate shapers at work. But almost as if something in her had sensed my urge, I saw her reach out and find Danny's hand, on the other side of her. I saw Danny squeeze back. Stung, I looked away.

The decision to go was unanimous. We began joining up to go out in pairs. We would fan out in force, but each of us would have one primary buddy to watch out for. I looked at Lisa, and saw her eyes searching Danny's, their hands gripping each other's tightly. Humiliated all over again, I turned to see who else needed a partner.

Roberta, eyes full of fear behind her glasses, looked at me questioningly. I took a breath and nodded back.

*

We all walked into the dying forest together, abreast in a line. There was very little talk, just the rustle of leaves and the snapping of twigs beneath our feet. When we came to the wall of fog that marked the boundary, Roberta and I exchanged final glances.

Mr. Playstead raised his hand, surveying our lineup. "Godspeed," he said.

As one, we stepped through...

And I stepped, alone, into the steaming jungle.

*

We are gathered in the circle of the candle now... like swimmers facing inward from the edge of a pool. Some of my classmates look like fire elementals, rising from the molten lake, while others are extrusions of the walls, their waxen faces bulging. Danny, Roberta, Judy...(isn't Judy dead? I wonder)... Dzaou, Ashok...not everyone has made it here, but a lot of them have. I don't see Lisa. Or Harvey, or Mr. Playstead, or Miss Jennings. Those who are here look human, but clearly all have been through wrenching changes. Some look like children, still; others like adults tempered by experience; and a few look...indescribable. Children's faces with ancient eyes... or eyes bright with youth surrounded by wrinkled and weary skin. I wonder what I look like.

It is a strange reunion: all of us gazing across the glowing lake at each other, but no one speaking. My feelings are indescribable. I know, without asking, that each of them has been through a terrifying journey--nine faces, nine harrowing trips through the corridors of chaos, struggling against...what? A dark master, on the throne of entropy? Or the meaninglessness of random decay? I know that we all meant to *do* something, but I'm not sure what. I wonder if any of the others know.

Someone begins singing, softly. It's Judy, I think. She's alive, and I wonder if it's because she never really died, or because we somehow brought her back to life. I don't quite recognize the song, but it has the sound of a lullaby. Then someone else, Danny, starts humming a hymn from church--a familiar tune, though I don't know the name. It's beautiful, and moving in a way it never was for me before. On the far side of the circle, half-hidden by the flame, I see the movements of someone dancing. I think it's Ellie, but

can't be sure. But I imagine that Ellie, who thought Judy into death, has more reason than anyone to rejoice at her being alive and among us now.

The flame begins flickering brighter, hissing. It seems to be gathering power from the songs and the dance. The flame, I suddenly realize, is *our* expression, not entropy's. It is a kind of shaping, a way of reaffirming who we are--of saying, *yes, we are still here, still human*. I'm not sure what to do, but I feel memories bubbling up within me.

A bunny named Maxine appears in the air before me, and a donkey named Eeyore, and a bear named Berlioz. These are my friends who played with me in my first days at the reality school, when I was just a child. But there are other memories that want to come up, too--painful memories that ring with disharmony in my mind. My selfishness with a shaping...my rejection by Lisa...my cowardice... I don't want to let them come, don't want my failures and shame brought into the light. I struggle to hold them in, but I cannot. My shame begins to bubble out.

The faces of my friends are turning transparent. They take no notice of my shame. They begin moving about the circle, passing through one another; three or four of them are singing, their song swelling the flame. I see other people's memories taking form like ghostly photographs in the air, and I realize that I am not the only one who has experienced failure. It comforts me a little.

But now everyone seems to be looking *up*.

*

New faces, overhead, gaze down from the haze of the outer nothingness...faces peering like ghosts of haunted pasts.

It takes me a moment to recognize those faces...even Lisa's. She is trapped, they are all trapped, in a nothingness outside the warmth of the candle flame. They seem to be prisoners of the devouring entropy, while *we* somehow are regenerating our reality here in the shelter of the candle. There is a gulf dividing us, and they cannot cross it. They cannot join us.

"Lisa?" I whisper.

Her eyes turn slowly to meet mine.

*

Help me--!

I can hear the plea, unspoken. And I cannot answer it. If they cannot cross that gulf, how can I help?

I want to call out to her, to tell her to do it herself, to come to this place where we are gathered, singing. I want to tell her to come out of the darkness into the fire.

Help me--!

Lisa's eyes, pale and frightened in the sky, will not release mine. But I don't know how to escape from that darkness any more than she does.

Or do I?

My mind reverberates with memories: of our play together at the school, the excitement and fear we shared, learning to be shapers. *Shapers*. The memories flash in my mind, fiery with the flux of entropy. Something in that entropy does not wish me to remember. *We are shapers*. I remember her choosing Danny over me; and even now, I tremble with anger and hurt. So much time has passed. Must I still be

angry? I tremble with the memory of my aloneness, of the times I sensed her presence across the infinity of space and time, and could not speak to her.

Was it that I could not, or would not?

We are human. We are shapers.

Out there in the darkness beyond the fire, my friend is trapped. Perhaps she *could* come here, into the light of the fire, if there were a space for her. I am aware of Danny gazing up at her in desire and anguish, and I wonder, Can he not help her? And without quite knowing why, I know he cannot. It is not his anger that keeps her out. A space must be made in the circle for her, and it is not Danny who must make it.

The flame of the candle beats hot with the singing, with cries of, *We are shapers! We are!* coming from the others here with me...and I almost imagine that I hear the voice of God Himself saying, *I am who I am!* from the flame.

I am suddenly certain that there is no room for any other here, unless *I* make it myself. And how can I possibly make room, unless I take Lisa's place out there, in the void and the darkness, in the chaos?

*

The songs quicken with urgency. A hundred memories shimmer and dance in the air. I am not alone in my anguish. The others face similar choices. But only *I* face *my* choice.

A memory looms before me: a monstrous-looking being dying in the depths of the sea, because I was afraid to save it. Because I was afraid.

I am a shaper.

Help me! whispers a gaze from across the gulf of darkness. Last time, you let me die.

Electrified with fear, I make the decision. I begin to move away from the light...rising to challenge the hissing chaos. To trade places with Lisa.

*

The transformation takes forever, hurting hurting hurting. The candlelight recedes in the darkness, but not quietly. I feel the darkness and light shuddering, clashing; and I am caught between them, the dark fires of entropy flashing around me, charging me with despair. Will I die here? Or live in the darkness forever?

*

I feel Lisa's presence passing me, on its way into the light. My anger burns all over again. Why have *I* given my life, when it was Danny she wanted? Why?

The chaos swirls around me. I am being swallowed by the anger. I have tried again to forgive, and failed. I wail into the darkness, "Help me, please!" and my cry is wrapped in silence.

And yet...

I sense Lisa's presence, not fleeing to the candle and safety, but returning for me. "Go!" I scream. "Go to him before it's too late! Damn you, go!" And suddenly my anger disintegrates, and I find myself shuddering with pain, and crying to Lisa to save herself, and this time I mean it without any anger at all. *Lisa, go! Why do you think I did this?*

In that moment, the distant light flares brighter, reclaiming power from the darkness. Light and darkness

clash in a fury. The energies of chaos flail about me, defying the light's power to reclaim me. But I have made my peace. My anger is gone, *my* battle is won...and it is the chaos fighting the rearguard battle. The darkness begins to shrink, hissing.

And I hear Lisa's voice whispering, "Come back to the light, Alexandri, come back to the light. You are a shaper...we can shape together..."

And the light blooms around us both.

*

It is a breathtaking sight, the flattening out of the entropic fold like an enormous soap bubble. I can see the candle, with its light and all of its faces, slowly distorting with the refraction, transmuting into a crazy, stretched-taffy image. The singing changes, brightening into strange and beautiful harmonies.

And around me, I hear the hiss of Chaos fading...and I hear Lisa calling me, and Danny.

Whatever I have done, I am not the only one. I hear other voices of gratitude...other victories claimed alongside mine. I watch as the memories clustered in the air above the candle slowly come together, like a backwards explosion. *And the entropic fold flattens and vanishes...*

*

"Lisa?" I murmured, blinking, feeling the grass under me. I looked around, stunned by the bright sunlight on the playground, the sky so blue it made my eyes ache, the whisper of a breeze cooling my face.

"Alexandra!" she cried. "You're safe! Thank God!" I gazed at her in wonderment, but before I could ask what *she* remembered happening, she threw herself into my arms, and we hugged and cried like grown women, like best friends who had not seen each other in years. And then we turned and wept with Danny, and Roberta, and *Judy*...and we all ran laughing across the school yard to see who else had returned.

*

Most of us made it back, but not all. We never saw Ashok again, or Lottie, or Harvey, or Mr. Playstead, or Miss Jennings. Mr. Tea and Mrs. Randolph were here when we returned, and a couple of the counselors. But none of the graduate shapers.

Why? We have no idea.

I'm sometimes asked if that is fair. And I ask in return, what does *fair* have to do with war? We waged war against Chaos and we won. But those people were casualties. And there will undoubtedly be more casualties, the next time we have to wage this war. And we will: we have not eliminated entropy from the universe, though we seem to have closed this rift. Is there still a micro-singularity floating out there somewhere, waiting to cause more mischief? No one knows. And so we vow to maintain our watch.

How many others vanished from the Earth that we don't know of? I can't even guess. I find myself wondering sometimes: didn't I have a younger brother once, in another reality? Marie doesn't remember, nor do my parents; but they don't have my perspective, either. Everything to them is as they think it was.

How much has the Earth itself changed? The sun seems a little cooler. I know that the political climate is different; I remember living in a nation called "the United States of..." I cannot seem to remember the rest of the name. I dream sometimes of orbiting space stations glinting in the night sky, and I think perhaps it is more than just a dream. But we have not yet gone into space, and the sky is full of stars, and the two moons, but no spaceships.

Variable persistence of memory. I feel my own memories slowly slipping and blurring, and I wonder--will these words, tomorrow, accurately reflect reality as it is then?

I can only guess at my parents' feelings at seeing their child a grown adult--and not just an adult, but an adult tempered by fire. A soldier. I am physically and emotionally almost their age, perhaps even older in some ways, and they don't quite understand why. But with Lisa and some of the others, I sit on the oversight committee of the Reality School, training those who will follow us in maintaining the integrity of our existence.

And I ask myself: What qualifies *me* for this job? What qualifies *any* of us to decide what reality is the real, or right, one?

I wonder who I have become, and I think of a little girl who rode a fusion-powered turbocruiser into the school yard not so long ago, jumping up and down with glee.

That was only a few months ago, wasn't it?

A few months ago...by the calendar.

An eternity.

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