

Connor stood out in front of his house as the car carrying his friends came by the sidewalk. The magician had been waiting for this day, after all, and it would not do to treat the occasion with irreverence. Things looked to be fun.

Daniel's sedan came up to the curb quickly. While the man got to work shutting the car off, Simon took the opportunity to hop out of the car. Almost literally so, in fact. Connor's eyes narrowed a little as Simon walked up.

“Well then. Guess we're ready for some OOB provocation?” Simon walked over towards Connor with a smile, playing a little at cracking his knuckles.

“I'd hope that would be obvious.” Connor said. The smirk came a moment later. “The launching pads are all ready. I *do* hope you've been training for this, too. Astral projection isn't exactly known for its ease.”

“Hey, unprofessional as it may be, sometimes the parapsychologist can play at being the subject. I'm just saddened we won't be having the necessary equipment for really testing what could be going on here...” Simon tutted.

“Oh, if you could get a university to sign onto a study in *this* informal environment, trust me, I'd be all ears.” Connor shook his head, but smiled.

“Just sayin'!” Simon shrugged. “Just don't come complaining to me when you want to do it again and can't replicate it.”

While the two friends faux-bickered, Daniel finally walked up to the squad. He was tall, albeit familiarly so to the two other plantmen who had been his friends for most of their lives. Still, they found their speech dwindling as his aura of solemnity asserted itself.

“I take it we're getting started?” Daniel asked Connor.

“...Yes. Come in.” Connor nodded.

Connor mostly thought to himself as he guided the pair into his house and towards their prepared rooms for tonight's operation. They had already gone over the necessary techniques long before this, of course, and so he mostly just went over how they should attempt to “link up” after projecting. Simon had been the most skeptical about the matter, predictably, albeit in the sense that something literally left the body in that fabled technique of astral projection. It had also taken him the longest to actually learn the proper mental techniques and interior meditations that would be necessary to make the attempt. In comparison to the two others of the squad, he had always been the scientist as opposed to the mystic. Even if his field still revolved around the supernatural.

Daniel, on the other hand, had taken to the technique easily, though he remained as impenetrable as ever regarding his thoughts on the matter. For a while Connor had even feared that he wouldn't want to partake of it, seeing it as a childish siddhi that wouldn't lead any further to liberation. But he did agree to participate in the whole operation, though he did not share much more of his opinions regarding it. Inwardly, Connor hoped that he did see the true transcendence within everyday magic.

Ah, *magic*.

That was a word Connor was very familiar with, and one he could actually bet he knew more about than most people. He had been the one to propose and arrange the whole thing, after all. It was sorcery that had always captured his mind, and led him to become an occultist where the others chose parapsychology and monkhood. Beyond the occult rigmaroles that he had faced when he actually began to slog through serious study, there was just a vivaciousness to the topic that could not be denied, even if the rest of the world wanted to deny *it*. He could let the others disregard it; priests, scientists, monks, men. But he had found the real God, and he would never cease in being It.

Ah, but there was still work to do.

Connor steadied his mind and drew out of his reflections. After having assured that both of his friends were secure in each of their respective guest bedrooms, he wished them luck and traveled to a small office space he had set aside. His bedroom proper was cluttered and impure for the task, and so he had set up a small makeshift bed in the location. It was there; with grey walls and vague sunlight filtering in the through cloth, that Connor's mind began to find ease. He went through all the standard body relaxation techniques, then the sigilizations, and finally the monotonous, reflexive feeling-thoughts that would draw a man away from his frame. It was in this comforting, alien limbo where Connor found something strange. For an hour or so in, as he felt that world-rending *break* that signified release, the next image was not that of his own body.

Instead, it was black.

When Connor came back to, he could an orange glow before his eyelids.

The man jumped up then, for the light had not been strong enough to produce such an effect when had last been lying down.

When his eyes actually opened, more questions appeared than answers.

Set all around him was the atrium of some mall, blindly banal in its structure. Most importantly, though, it *felt* real. It was nothing like the typical astral vision, or even one of those rare, illuminating out-of-body trips he was able to make on occasion. No, Connor realized as he spun around to himself. It was just like a damn mall.

Connor counted his blessings that his astral projections seemed to have a reach a new height in lucidity, and cursed to himself that they seemed to have paid for it in mystic insight.

“Welcome to the land of the departed.” Daniel quipped.

Connor heard it and spun around, though his gaze went vacant as soon as he did so.

Before him *was* the source of Daniel's (off-key) voice, he knew. It was just that it was coming from some preteen who still had the mint-green tint of youth to him. The boy was dressed in the garish colors of children, to an extent that really just seemed anachronistic, he thought. Connor made gestures in his mind, but the grade signs were not returned and the banishings did not take effect. The figure spoke again.

“Not me, I'm afraid. Though I do think you're right in that we're not alone.” Daniel said. Connor bought

him as such when he was able to say that damn sentence while maintaining that perennially stoic expression.

“Goddamn Dan-what the hell?!” Connor's speech contorted mid-sentence.

“You were left in a younger form as well, or however the appearances of the mental realm manifest. It's unbecoming to act surprised.” Daniel released a small sigh.

Stilling his speech, Connor bit the bullet and began to examine his frame. Predictably enough, he seemed to have been left the same size as Daniel, appearing as a child of perhaps 12 years, in all respects. His clothing was similarly tasteless, though he supposed that it mattered little to those only a decade or so into their incarnations. He swore under his breath regardless.

“Okay, whatever. We need to gain our bearings. I distinctly recall that we-”

“Did not plan for this. We had all intended to mentally connect once we had successfully performed the astral projection routine.” Daniel spoke.

“Y, Yes. And I don't recall ever maintaing awareness long enough to actually commit to such an act before we wound up...here.” Connor said, head craning around to take in what was now evident as a food court. “Wait, you said something about not being alone?” Connor's head shot back toward Daniel.

“Yes, but I think we should handle Simon first.” Daniel spoke, pointing toward a body on the ground that Connor had only just now noticed. A tad sheepishly, Connor noticed the movements and groans coming from what must've been Simon's form.

“...I get the feeling that something went wrong.” Simon was able to make out, eyes still closed and face contorted.

“We're figuring that out.” Daniel said.

Taking each of his arms, Daniel and Connor helped Simon to his feet. The once-man's eyes fluttered open and began to assess the scene.

“Huh. You know when you said, 'like a dream,' I wouldn't have imagined it to be so literal. Though the fidelity is certainly better than normal lucidity.” Simon spoke with composure that surprised Connor, and somewhat shamed him. That being said, if his uneasy, flitting eyes were anything to go by, he was still somewhat shell-shocked by his friends being decades younger than they were supposed to be.

“I can't say I've ever seen something like it myself.” Connor mused. “But it's all too convenient that this place and our forms is...themed so.”

“Astute.” Daniel said. “Now that Simon's awake, we can turn to our first order of business.”

With only a light flourish, Daniel produced a note. As he swung it over to his friends, Simon's head started to crane toward it eagerly, with narrowed eyes.

“Hail, vagabonds! If you're reading this, then it's likely that you're utterly confounded about what just happened to you. In the interest of preserving sanity, I can tell you that there is nothing to fear. You

have ended up in the Mall, as I have so unoriginally named it. I apologize that the invitation seems so crass or confusing, but the eddies of the ol' astral plane are hard to tame. Nevertheless, you can make yourselves feel at home. There are tons of attractions all around the place, and you can rest assured that the realm will cater itself to you. Me and my friend will be hanging around the place if you need us, so don't be afraid to holler! I can't say that I'll be able to greet you in-person, but I can provide you with help anywhere in the complex, given a little time. My friend will be roaming around the halls, and I will warn you that he may be off-putting at first glance, but don't fear! He's just there to make sure you stay safe. With that being said, have fun out there, and thank you for joining us!"

- A.

P.S. Don't stay in the halls too long, it may make my friend antsy.

Simon's gaze eventually turned back up toward Daniel, eyes narrowed.

"That told us just about nothing." he said.

"Breadcrumbs will do at times." Connor shrugged, beginning to pace around a little. He could actually like this sort of thought.

"So...we have some at least reasonably cognizant being with us, or one feigning such an attitude. To be quite, frank, they actually seem less mystically-aware than us. The innocence before probation, perhaps." Connor mused.

"The most likely culprit is a ghost of a worldly individual." Daniel offered. "The real question is why they've done this."

"Some weird isolation thing or something?" Simon interrupted. "I mean, I'm going to go out on a limb and suspect that there's an element of coercion here. I don't remember 'agreeing' to any invitation, and it seems awfully convenient that this guy's 'friend' doesn't like it when we stay outside of whatever attractions this place has. Really, the way he was writing made said friend sound more like a monster." Simon looked between his friends, who were now responding in kind. "I mean, assuming that we're really dealing with external entities and not some telepathically-shared dream."

"Would expect nothing less from Simon." Connor smirked. "Good to get the normal man's common sense in though, I suppose. I'll wager we'll have plenty of time for spiritual rumination later."

"Fair enough. In any case, we should get to actually confirming these speculations. I would say that we might want to get our first glimpse of this 'friend,' to start things off, but I also don't really want to know what he meant by that last comment in the letter." Daniel spoke.

"We can get to that." Connor nodded, gaze now flitting between both of his friends. Even reduced in stature and age, he could feel a certain dignity just speaking like this. "How about we find our first 'refuge' in this place? At the very least it would give us a safer place to think things over."

"...Are you really asking us what kind of mall entertainment we'd like to see?" Daniel's brow furrowed.

"Oh to hell with your paranoia, I'll pick the place!" Simon just shook his head smiling. In an instant he started a jog down the hall and away from the food court.

“Make sure it ain't a lotus eater den!” Connor shouted, laughing to himself as he started to catch up with Simon.

Daniel just sighed and began to follow his friends.

The group's eyes danced over glittering store names and the rich interiors of stores as seen through spotless glass. Emerald and aquamarine and every other shade of color with a multi-syllable name assaulted their perceptions. It had been many years since any of the three had visited a mall for any length of time. In fact, the last deliberate visit to a mall that any of the three had made was when they had still been preteens in the flesh. Before they grew out of the few shops that had aroused any interest in them. Before visits were solely for movies for the family. Before garishness fully stamped out any sense of genuine joy that one could find on the grounds. And yet that was where they were presently. On the astral plane haunting their own pasts. Connor would have found it poetic, if he wasn't mostly annoyed by the search. Currently Simon was travelling somewhat ahead of the group, by some awkwardly placed planters and benches. The corridor was all bright and white and shining, really almost hard to look at. The almost glassy marble beneath their feet didn't help. Nor the hells of clothing stores that surrounded the three.

“...Perhaps we should just settle for the shoe store. We don't really need it to actually be...entertaining...for us to be able to discuss things.” Daniel spoke up, brow a bit furrowed.

“Nah. If this ghost wants to play with us, they'll get it alright.” Simon semi-shouted back.

While Simon's head floated over stores, Connor himself began to come into greater awareness. There were...cameras on the walls, he noticed. Of course, given the nature of the place, he had no reason to expect this place had to run on natural laws. Hell, none of the cameras even had the little blinking lights that would indicate that they were on. And yet...

“Hey, wait...look over there.” Connor gestured for Simon to return and pointed at a camera further down the hall. Despite the short notice, the eyes of all three gathered on it after only a few odd stares.

There was a violet miasma surrounding one of the cameras.

After a few seconds of staring, the cloud vanished.

Simon blinked a little.

“...What?” he made out.

“Your guess might be as good as mine.” Connor commented. “We really have no frame of reference for how this plane works, though it does seem have some common laws beyond the 'merely' mental. That being said, it's pretty damn suspicious that there just happened to be a cloud around only one of the cameras in particular. You notice how none of the cameras had any lights blinking?”

“...Are you trying to say that purple gas is how we can tell which one of these things is working?” Simon's eyes narrowed on Connor.

“Not what *I* would have picked, but it's not a bad guess at the moment.” Connor shrugged.

“So, it's possible that we've been spied upon by our mysterious note-sender. And they made mention of a 'friend' that patrolled the halls. And it all seemed quite suspicious.” Daniel spoke.

“...We should get moving, shouldn't we?” Simon “asked.”

“It wouldn't be a bad idea.” Connor said.

Simon immediately started a sprint down the hall, towards a different section with lots of flashing lights. Connor followed, and Daniel bit his tongue as he did so as well.

“Screw it lads, arcade it is.” Simon shouted back.

As all three ran, Connor felt his mind process an unmistakable feeling. On empirical tests with Simon, the man hadn't demonstrated any greater psi functioning than the average person. And yet he had performed an operation of Yesod a week ago, to improve his astral sight in preparation for the formerly-upcoming projection. Gingerly, Connor looked back towards where he had had *felt* someone staring at him.

At the far end of the hall, Connor made out a craning, pseudopodlike form of static-blackness. It was alien but not overly so, like Negative Existence poorly filtered through Yetzirah. Two white orbs at the end of the tubular mass were oriented toward him like eyes. Then Connor saw hints of a wall of darkness appearing from beyond the corridor's bend, and positively *ran*.

“...You...saw something, didn't you?” Daniel made out as he noticed Connor's increased pace.

“Yes. It'll look conventionally frightening...but everything can be understood and phenomenal existence doesn't matter, yada...” Connor made out some speech in the traditional sort of defensive irreverence. Though, he supposed that would actually be real holiness on the higher levels...

Connor's occult considerations and more immediate fear was taken from his mind as he noticed the arcade drawing closer. Some sales counter and large display machines hiding arcade cabinets and mundanity in the back. The magician did not turn his head and heard nothing, yet he could see in his mind the silently gliding form of the strangely familiar *being* behind him.

“Last leg boys...let's hope this potential kidnapper is true to his word!” Simon shouted through exhaustion.

The parapsychologist was the first to make it into the arcade, going in with a leap and tumbling onto carpeted floor soon after. Daniel was not far behind, though he was able to slow down such that he didn't hit the counter too heavily. Connor had just made it to the wide, open entrance too, when he suddenly felt something. Some knowledge, some *memory*, of something from so long ago and yet of so much significance. Really, how, how could he have forgotten tha-

The temperature behind Connor suddenly dropped. Before Simon started to shout, Connor's pace returned and he darted through the entrance. The boy caught himself with his arm before he collapsed on the floor, and turned back with a feverishness only matched by Simon and Daniel's stunned vigilance.

Before the two, plainly, was a large being composed of something approximating liquid shadow. The structure of the body was mostly horizontally-oriented, and faintly bulbous, though it was actually not too large. The legs were multiple, and shifted ever so slightly, like the proportion of material being allocated to them constantly changed in minute ways. Closest to the three yet staying firmly behind the entrance was what had to be the “head,” a small little bulb with two white lights for eyes, positioned on a thin stalk that jutted out from the main body of the being. It stared at them, and made no noise. Before the three could think to interact in any way, the head-mass retreated into the rest of the body, the eyes becoming fixed to the torso, which was now turning away. A few more legs sprouted down, and the being started to turn away and move down a new corridor, one that was to the group's left. Through the glass walls of the gaming center, the three could see the entity placidly move down the hall. When it had receded to the point of the eyes being obscured, speech began.

“What the hell was that?!” Simon shouted.

“The 'friend,' clearly.” Daniel's gaze still rested on the retreating being.

Connor kept silent for a few seconds, caught in something between a daze and a trance. He had been wrong, before. The being couldn't be alien, not when it was so *familiar*.

“I...I have some ideas.” Connor eventually made out. “But I'll need time to reflect. And hopefully more data to collate.”

“What, what do you me-” Simon was interrupted.

“It was clearly manifest, yet it had the seeming of the unmanifest beyond the Veils.” Connor spoke. “I, I don't know how to say this, but that form felt, familiar. Palpably so. Just seeing it, I could practically feel that body vicariously. The only problem is that if we're in the astral, presumably we're dealing with the dead or gods.” Connor walked around a bit, mostly to get his bearings back.

“You...haven't died before, right Connor? Or been a god? Because it *seems* like that's what you're suggesting. Or at least some sort of reincarnation.” Simon gestured a little, sighing.

“I...” Daniel spoke up. “...there's another possibility. I just, can't seem to recall it at the moment.” Daniel's face shaded into a paler greenness. Pensively, he began to look downwards slightly.

“Well I hope you can remember soon.” Simon sighed, shaking his head.

“At the very least we have a new lead from that experience alone.” Connor more clearly, beginning to exit from the altered state that had characterized his past few minutes.

“Well, I hope we'll be able to turn that lead into something substantial soon.” Connor said, now looking around the arcade with impatience. “I mean, we still don't know about the logistics of all this. I *assume* that we'll be able to wake back up out of our trances and come out of this none the worse for wear. I don't know what kind of real stakes this could have.”

“And yet we act, do we not?” Daniel interjected. The faintest hint of a smirk made its way onto his face.

“I don't fear much for our 'real' safety either, Simon, but the fact that this trip doesn't match the typical

profile of an astral projection does have me wondering. At the very least, it couldn't hurt to investigate this matter with rigour." Connor spoke solidly.

"Well then, let's have at it, shall we?" Simon turned back toward the "men," with a grin. His arms gestured further into the cloying confines of the center.

After a pause, the mystic pair nodded.

For the most part, Daniel hung by the snack bar that was tucked further into the arcade. From his vantage point, leaning on the counter, he could spy an enthusiastic Simon pointing out some games, all while Connor's mouth moved fast enough to confirm that he was engaging in esoteric rambling again. Not that he felt *too* much perturbation at the levity, though. If anything he was more annoyed by the candy and chips he had been satiating his (apparently still-existent) appetite with. But even that would draw one out of passionlessness, and so he examined the rollings of the mind-mechanism and moments carefully.

With Simon and Connor, on the other hand, events were far more lively.

"Okay, so our main options are: wake up fine, go into a coma, die, or have our bodies disappear as well." Simon said off-handedly, as he played a musical rhythm beat game. Connor watched as the cartoonish character on-screen moved in tune to the correct notes.

"I'd hesitate to say that the last one is likely, but it's one of the ones one can come up with." Connor said.

"You need to work on your comprehensibility. Not in esoteric terminology, just in putting together a sentence that flows decently." Simon said cleanly, eyes still focused on the game. The tune wasn't too loud, Connor thought.

"Well in any case, those are the possibilities I can think of. With most astral trips you do 'come out' of it after some period of time. Off the top of my head I can think of our bodies being left in a vegetative state in the absence of higher mental functions. Or dying." Connor shrugged.

"Dying seems to imply that the mind is some kind of animating force though. At least in the occult contexts where one would typically come up with that kind of presumption. I think a more parsimonious interpretation would be to conjecture some sort of psychokinetic activity used to kill off the body due to some unconscious mental identification with having only a single sense of body. These things *feel* like normal bodies, so maybe the psychical mind would treat them with more ownership than dream bodies." Simon said.

"So, I take it you buy super-psi as well?" Connor couldn't help but let the smirk come, shaking his head.

"Never said I *bought* anything. Just an interpretation of the data..." Simon winked, before he remembered about the stakes of his game and returned to its playing.

"I feel like that theory would be more suitable for science-fiction than describing what may be going on here. But I suppose we'll have to escape this situation before we can find out about what has really happened to us." Connor spoke. Just then, his eyes turned back towards the glass window-wall to the

outside that the two had spied earlier. It looked just like a normal city, but...

“So, do you think we should just meditate or whatever in here? I mean, if that's how we got in this mess in the first place. Honestly, the fact that I don't seem to have dream lucidity powers is part of what's convincing me that something really strange is going on here. Unfortunately it also seems to mean that escaping will be trickier than waking up.” Simon spoke.

Connor's mind came to again.

“I was considering that. The only problem I can think of is that it may be hard for us to accomplish without a more relaxing environment. That and the possibility that that being from before will figure out what we're doing here and actually come into wherever we're hanging.” Connor said, looking off. “Granted, I don't even know what sort of harm it can do to us, but I don't really want to take my chances in finding out.” Connor sighed.

“That...was kind of insane back there. Guess I forgot to even ask if you were alright...” Simon said.

“It's, it's fine. Not much inquiry can do to help anyway.” Connor said. Even as he said it, though, he brought back to life that old memory from before, of that strange familiarity. Thinking of it like that, he was not able to muster much of a fear for his experience with who-knew-what.

“Well, we're always wishing each other well regardless.” Simon said, taking the time to look away from the screen. Simon nodded.

“That's one thing the fellowship has always been good at, I suppose.” Connor let the smile come.

“True, true.” Simon felt his maw become similarly infected. “You've used up your warm-hearted moment though; we're going to have to face more serious things before you can play that again.” he lightly shook his head.

“Glad you're keeping me to our traditional dignities.” Connor smirked. His gaze fell away from the window and more toward the game Simon was playing. The song looked to be reaching its end.

“So, any leads?” Simon asked.

“In all likelihood, our captor is a ghost. That of a man, to be specific. The mind seems to be too mundane.” Connor spoke.

“You can surmise that just by going off of the letter?” Simon asked.

“It's the only data we have on hand currently. By all means, our theories are open for revision.”

“Alright then.” Simon said, falling into play a bit more as the game reached its climax. “What of the shadow monster?”

“Don't know. Right now we're left with them being a ghost, a god, or whatever else Daniel was trying to remember.” Connor said rather plainly. Vacuously. For some strange reason, he really felt like the first two had been incorrect.

Simon let out a bit of a huff. When Connor looked back, he noticed that Simon had reached a B rank in his game. His hands swept off of the controls and began to rest on his sides, expression newly toughened. At least as much as his youthful features could. Connor stared a bit longer than he had expected himself to. The last time he had seen his friend like this, their conversations hadn't reached such rarefied heights. Connor felt a bit of contentment in the remembrance of simpler times. And unease at the ignorance such innocence harbored.

“Then it just comes back around to us needing more data. We'll need to head back out there in some form or another.” Simon sighed. “At the very least perhaps the thing has wandered far enough away that we'll have more time to get...somewhere.”

“And where to? Trying to investigate this is fine and all, but I can think of precious few places that might give us any clues. Unless you mean that we should scour every last corner of the place for where 'A' could be hid-” Connor was cut-off.

“Twofold answer.” Simon stated. “First, we can just try to escape. Maybe once outside we can find some way to escape the plane or whatever. Maybe there's even a portal or something.” Simon spoke and Connor felt his voice raise. Almost immediately, Simon had raised a finger and brought silence. Yes, I know you're going to call that video-gamey or whatever, wizard-man. But it's clear that whatever happening here is beyond normal occultism. We need to consider other possibilities.”

Connor internally rolled his eyes, but nodded for Simon to continue.

“Secondly, you saw that active camera. Assuming that this individual isn't just remotely operating it or getting the feed in some other way, they must be using the surveillance room. If we can find that, we can find our man.” Simon said.

“...And we'd run a good chance of him seeing our approach and running off. Hell, do any of us even know where those kinds of rooms are?” Connor spoke.

“This is the only sort of confrontation plan where we would have anything resembling a leg up on them. I'd say some is better than nil.” Simon's gaze hardened. “You'll have to make a choice, unless you can propose a better idea.”

“Hmm.” Connor grunted a little to himself. “I suppose we can kill two birds with one stone. I'd vote for the escape plan; we have no idea if we'd be able to *do* anything to the guy given that this is the astral. Or learn anything significant. On the way, we can try to...catch a better glimpse at that entity again. I get the feeling like the memory could become sharper if I could just get close to them again.”

“...And risk getting caught or whatever the hell else that thing was going to do?” Simon looked askance at the boy briefly.

“A risk I'm willing to take.” Connor shrugged.

“Wew...” Simon shook his head, but shrugged. “Quite the business we've got ourselves involved in. Whatever though. As long as we can make it work.”

As the two's speech stilled, Daniel began to approach the pair. He had that same composure and calm expression as he almost always did, but the effect wasn't quite...coming out right. Not when he looked

like he was playing at being a scene kid.

“Have anymore plans?” Daniel asked.

“From the sounds of it, getting the hell out of here and having Connor get closer to that shadow monster so he can remember whatever the hell he was in a past life.” Simon spoke. The irreverence was traditional at this point, Connor supposed.

“Inadvisable in regards to the latter, but it's your decision I suppose.” Daniel mused.

“Indeed.” Connor spoke up. “Well, now that we have some direction, I suppose we can hea-”

“I, was thinking about making a detour before we acted, actually.” Daniel coughed a little. The two looked on at him solidly, then, for he had interjected and looked to be playing with his collar. This could be good.

“Huh. Alright then. Where exactly?” Connor asked.

“The...clothing store?” Daniel eked out. His eyes shot between the two with less rhythm than was par the course.

Simon tried to hold back his expression, but only Daniel would want to go shopping for something *less* vibrant...

“I, guess we're not exactly starving for time.” Connor blinked oddly for a few moments. “Sure, we can head there first.” he shrugged soon after.

“Thank you, guys.” Daniel awkwardly nodded with a light incline to the head.

Connor began to walk, and he felt glad to have his friends wing slightly behind him as he did so.

They hadn't done that in a long time.

The group wended their way past the machines of the arcade and approached the entrance in short order. There was no sight of the shadow-being, and so the three exited the place swiftly. Simon spied what looked to be a workable clothing store midway through the hall; the hall that the entity had walked down after they found safety in the arcade. With speed but not quite approaching a jog, the group headed in its direction.

While Daniel and Simon began to talk among themselves for once, Connor thought. Or rather, recollected some more. Both, perhaps.

It had been unique, so wonderfully strange. And he *knew* that it was a memory, in that taste of gnosis. But there was something yet obscuring his perceptions. He knew, now, that he hadn't been a spirit of the dead, or a god.

So what had he remembered being, before he had been a man?

Despite the mild fearfulness of the group, they reached was now clearly a decent clothing store without

any sighting of the entity. Connor could feel slight dejection at that, but Daniel and Simon were far too busy scrambling around racks of clothes to feel similarly.

“Oh, there's stuff in our size over here!” Simon shouted back to Daniel, having rushed deeper into the store.

“Duly noted.” Daniel nodded, entering a light jog towards the spot.

Connor's attention began to return to his friends, and he managed quite a strange feeling as he looked back on at their browsing. Simon had started going through shirts, pulling some out occasionally and comparing them to his current (frankly quite kitschy) one. Daniel was doing similarly, but privately, and with far plainer garments than the eyesore he was currently wearing. It was utterly inane, really. Pointless and especially strange to be seeing from them. And yet, he couldn't really work up disgust at it, like he had expected a magician of his caliber to do. That especially scared him, for to fail to see a perversion of Netzach would take exceptional blindness. The dangerous kind. But still he looked on as though in a trance, seeing two kids play with clothes as though unaware of the existential danger they posed. He wondered, briefly, if this is how his Dad had felt, but he realized soon after that the man had probably not been thinking like this at all.

With perhaps some knowledge of parenthood acquired, and suspicion of parenthood unabated, Connor shook himself back to attention and began to walk toward the group. Really more for the sake of group cohesion, if anything else. He could afford to think about magical paranoia when he didn't have a group to work with. A group of equals.

“So, found anything?” Connor asked, having reached the place of their search.

“Oh, take a look a for yourself.” Simon appeared from behind a rack. The boy was sporting the type of immortal, nameless grey hoodie that he had worn all the way through high school. From what he could see of the neckline his shirt hadn't actually changed, but it did cover the thing quite nicely. And traditionally. Simon just smiled to himself. Connor could have sworn he was about to make the ironic hand sign any second now.

“Takes me back.” Connor nodded.

“Well hopefully not *too* much back, we're going to be needing to get out of here.” Simon's speech briefly took on a serious tone unusual for him. “But yeah, it's comfortable.” he nodded.

“And, you the-” Connor turned to Daniel, and saw clearly enough.

Daniel's color-vomit shirt was gone, replaced by a logoless, plain black shirt and regular blue jeans. They looked to be proportion well to the body, not sagging or appearing too tight. Convenient to move around in. As expected. Daniel himself just stared on at Connor, seemingly unaffected by the assessment of his new clothing.

“I am ready for the rest of the trip, now.” Daniel spoke.

“Can't argue with that.” Connor made out a smirk. “I guess we-”

“Oh c'mon man, you're not *really* going to leave us hanging like that, right?” Simon asked, almost

commanding in his plead. The eyes focused on him, and there was a certain smirk.

“What exactly do you think I'd wear?” Connor just looked puzzled. “This isn't exactly high on my list of priorities.”

“Frankly I don't care much for what you wear, just that you wear *something* new, man. You'll ruin the whole ambiance. If we came all this way to the astral plane I'm going to make you actually do stuff, man.” Simon said, shaking his head.

“The vanity would be of a different sort than the kind you're fearing, Connor.” Daniel shrugged.

“If it'll get you off my back, sure.” Connor just sighed, hands beginning to rest on his hips as he assessed the scene. “Can't guarantee you it'll be anything better than what I have one now.” Connor said, taking the opportunity to look down at his own clothes for once. They didn't actually look too bad in comparison to the ones his friends once displayed, he thought.

Still, though, he held to his word. After a brief search, Connor found a nice canvas jacket, a brown one. He slipped off his club kid shirt and donned a clean grey-white one, wearing the jacket as soon as he was done. He didn't bother to zip it up, but left it hanging.

Heh. If he had actually done this 12 years into his incarnation, he probably would have played at acting like a The Secret World character or whatever else he had thought modern mages were like at the time...

As Connor held there in the memory-feeling, his eyes alighted on something in the window, far past the clothing-racks and away from the gazes of his friends. The object, strictly speaking, was familiar, if still awe-inspiring. And scary. But for the moment, it was the sign on top of the object that caught him the most.

There, on the ink-blackness of the entity's frame, was a sigil. Or more properly a hieroglyph, an Egyptian one, that Connor faintly remembered. The sign of the Sun, as the Egyptians and the Hermetics knew it, along with three little lines on the bottom with barbs coming down from them, all evenly spaced out. Connor remembered that they were alleged to be sun rays, but he always thought they looked different, somehow. The image was constructed of white light, and right above the hieroglyph were the white eye-lights of the being. They stared at Connor. Not with anger, hunger, or even simple-mindness, but with a certain intensity and unwavering nature. There was concentration, something pushing through endless shores of alien being to come to the cognizance of man. In an instant Connor felt a terrible pit in his gut, and not for himself. God, he thought he saw *yearning* in the gaze.

At a certain point Connor saw the eyes shine brighter for a moment, and the being moved away from the window with a speed he had not seen before. Simon had just then noticed Connor zoning out, but turned to where he was staring a couple seconds late. Connor held in a web of thoughts.

“I take it you're *not* alright? Connor?” Simon approached.

“I, just give me a second.” Connor eked out. He was still coming to grips with the speed of movement and the fact that the being had practically ran away from him for once, to say nothing of a revelation that was still raping his mind to think about. He had thought, for a moment, that the entity was like an

animal, trying and crying in its failure to reach the sublime nature of man. The painful part was that it wasn't the entity that was the animal...

"...I take it you have a clue, Connor." Daniel's voice was plain. Like a statement of fact.

"It's, Hammemit. Hammemit is the word." Connor's mouth moved. His mind operated of its own accord, and he himself was lost in some strange realm.

"Hamme...what?" Simon's brow furrowed.

"The hieroglyph I saw. The entity was watching us. It had the hieroglyph of the Hammemit." Connor said plainly, still distant.

"I see." Daniel spoke.

"Are you guys going to like, warn the rest of us when something as creepy and important as *that* happens? I...oh whatever, don't even know why I bother at this point..." Simon sighed. "In any case, you haven't explained what the word refers to anyway." Simon looked back on at Connor, expression softening.

"It is the name the Egyptians gave to the unborn generations of men. The pre-existent souls." Connor spoke, gaze void but words forceful. "We've been barking up that wrong tree this whole time. They're not a god or a ghost. They haven't even *lived* yet. That beautiful being wants to *be* us." Connor's voice held steady, tears flowing out silently. The man shook a little, and in some ancient instinct, Simon backed off.

"That, that was what I was forgetting." Daniel trailed off. He half-looked at Connor, in less of a daze but still feeling strange catharsis-emptiness.

"I...don't know what to say." Simon mumbled. He closed his eyes briefly, recuperating strength, and then looked back up with a stronger voice. "We have more information now, though. It's behavior might be able to be predic-"

"Goddamnit, don't you see?! They're a person! A spirit of splendour who has been reduced to this, roaming a god-forsaken mall, watching men and hungering for their mode of existence. Not even realizing what they're losing..." Connor shook his head to himself. Not slowly, or languidly, but with speed, madness. "I can't even imagine what their purity of mind used to be like. Even in this fallen state they're beautiful, and they've fallen all the way from their Godhead. I can remember it so clearly now..."

"Connor, be cautious. The reflections are true but they are of no use to our liberation now." Daniel spoke up. His gaze was fixed firmly and lucidly on Connor now.

"How can I stop? How can I let this soul be corrupted, just like we were? God, Daniel, *we* were there. So taintless and innocent and pure..." Connor rambled on, but with coherency.

"And still are. Nothing can change that. Now, we have Work to do." Daniel spoke firmly, loudly.

Connor just held to himself for a while. There was silence, but not release of tension. The magician

focused mostly on wiping his face at the moment, while Daniel held vigilant and Simon just looked on in anxious confusion at the whole situation. Eventually, though, Connor's head lifted up.

“He has to have done this. Whoever this 'A' character is.” Connor said quietly. His face was hard.

“Are, are you sugg-” Simon spoke up.

“No. We'll still hold to the escape plan. Especially now that we've seen the full extent of his depravity. Even though that bastard is responsible for turning this Hammemit into a lusting pet. I'm a weak, sorry bastard now, after all. Perhaps once we're safer we can look into exorcising him or whatever.” Connor said. He breathed in and out measuredly.

Daniel and Simon were quiet for a few moments. Connor could tell from the latter's breathing that he was holding something in, but nothing came out and Connor couldn't be bothered to care. Quickly, Connor started to move.

“I...okay I guess we're heading out just like that.” Simon followed along, Daniel joining as the group started to head for the entrance. The group passed out of the store in short order, and ended up back in the marble-floored halls of the mall-plane.

“I'm still going to be honest and say that you're making some presumptions. We cannot be entirely sure about A's motivations.” Simon said.

“It is irrelevant in any case.” Connor said, eyes scanning the halls and coming to an intuitive judgement of the front one a moment later. “I'd hate to stay here any longer, and I hope you feel the same.”

Without waiting for a response, Connor began the path down the hall. He could hear the others follow in suit, however reluctantly, and went over the layout of what they had discovered so far in his head. Returning to the food court was one possibility, as an entrance laid there. But this A character would likely pay more attention to the area, and he did not desire an encounter. The group hadn't travelled far enough to spy any other exits, but given his memory of malls, he assumed he could find one of the smaller ones down a side corridor or something. Passing by pretzel stands and drink machines, Connor took a sudden right at the next intersection. Above, the atrium's skylight revealed a cobalt-dusk sky.

“We should be keeping our eyes out. I'll cover the back. Connor can naturally get the front and Simon can handle the sides, if applicable.” Daniel spoke succinctly and suddenly. His position in the corridor switched to the sideways walk that can flip to either side on the turn of a dime. His eyes held in the back, as proclaimed.

“Well, at least we haven't split the party, eh?” Simon fished a little in his words. There was precious little for him to look out for in this new corridor, after all.

“...To be honest, I wish I could find that reference more entertaining than I do find it.” Daniel spoke, surprisingly. Connor remained silent, eyes fixed between the cosmetics stores to what appeared to be the rim of the building. That was a good sign.

“Worth a shot, then.” Simon shrugged, though his eyes shot back open a moment later. “Wait, since this is the astral plane and all...do you think we could actually have, *classes*, in a way? I mean the physics seemed to have been working pretty normally thus far, but maybe Connor could be the wizard

and you can be the monk. Have you tried using any powers yet?” Simon looked toward Daniel.

“...Simon, what the hell are you talking about? Is that *really* what you're thinking about right now?” Connor shot a glance back at Simon with a scowl.

“Well, *have* you tried doing stuff? Jokes aside I think that would be pretty useful if we're going up against a ghost and huge Hamme-whatever.” Simon spoke.

“I, still don't think we've confirmed the nature of A, but he is making a decent point. At the very least Connor already knows some exorcism techniques, perhaps they could be of keener use here.” Daniel spoke up.

“Hmph. I'll employ such methods if necessary, though I still believe that avoidance will be our best strategy here. If there's any other sign of magics being enhanced, I suppose we'll have to wait for a situation that will actually call for their use.” Connor spoke and returned his attention to his search.

The group had reached the end of the corridor – with still no sign of the Hammemit – and scanned both ways. One end seemed to pass restaurants and the like; vaguely old, niche kinds that had survived in the confines of the American mall. The other seemed to lead towards more commercial shops; electronics stores, a buildable plush place or two, and gaming venues. Frankly Connor found that end a bit juvenile, but down it he saw something very important.

“The map.” Connor spoke almost without thought. He extended hand pointed to a luminous sign with trceries of rooms and text that was undiscernable at this distance. The other two's eyes alighted on the scene, widening, and the pair quickly joined the practically hypnotized Connor in his jog toward the sign.

“Holy hell...” Connor panted as he finally reached the location, the others still a fair ways behind. After the briefest of recovery times, Connor looked up and took in the light-map. Eyes dancing towards the “You are here” dot, Connor saw what he needed.

“Perfect. It's just up ahead.” a faint smile made its way onto Connor's face. Just as his friends finally caught up to him, the magician began a new run. An actual run, this time.

“Goddamn man...I'm kind of surprised fatigue even matters up here...” Simon panted, jogging even slower as the new race started.

“I...take it that you found an exit corridor right by here?” Daniel shouted down the hall, maintaining a better pace than Simon.

“YES.” Connor shouted without turning his head back.

The occultist found the spot marked by the sports store and made an immediate right. Down there in the hall, heralded by a bathroom sign midway down, were the automatic doors of mall exits. Hints of a parking lot were visible in the twilight beyond.

Connor continued his dash as madly as he could. Behind him he could hear the clacking footsteps of his friends. By the time he reached the bathrooms, he could figure that his friends were about to crest the bend. He didn't have time to reflect upon the matter at all before he reached the automatic doors of

liberation, their gateway to freedom.

The doors did not open.

Connor felt an immediate upwelling and fall inside of him, but he looked around for buttons regardless. He found none, and slammed on the glass. By the time his friends had made it to the bathrooms themselves, they clearly spied that something was amiss. Simon slowed down to a walk.

“Really.” he caught his breath before sighing.

“Goddamnit.” Connor swore lowly, out of breath and feeling strangely empty. He. He really should have considered the possibility of this, all things considered. How far did A's control extend?

“Maybe it was reverse psychology? Maybe he anticipated that we would think the food court was too obvious, and locked the other doors instead?” Simon offered absentmindedly.

“And would have no reason to not just lock all the other doors, in that case. Now that we know that he has that power...” Connor sighed.

“Your findings may be premature. This could simply be part of the plane's nature. But furthermore...” Daniel spoke, walking up to the door. Connor looked at him a bit askew then, before he noticed where Daniel was looking. A solitary finger traced the frame of the doors. In the glow and angle, Connor could see the faintest hints of irregular shining on the metal of the doors.

“Huh. Interesting technique. You're probably right, actually.” Daniel mused.

Now positively confounded, Connor brought his head up towards the doors. He saw the shining a bit more, and quickly came to realize the nature of it. Embossed on the frame of the automatic doors were small silvery sigils. Geomantic ones, he recognized.

Of Carcer...

“Well damn. We're dealing with another wizard.” Connor spoke sort of vacuously. His gaze tightened a few seconds later, however.

“I...what?” Simon cocked his head.

“The door is ringed with the sigils of Carcer, the geomantic figure of restriction. You know, 'incarceration,' all that lovely Saturnian business.” Connor shook his head. “However, that does at least leave us with an option. It'd probably take way too much effort to efface the sigils, but I wager I could try a working to counterac-”

When the speakers tuned in, everyone jumped.

“This is your mall operator A speaking! I, uh, appreciate your enthusiasm for exploration, but I'll have to strongly advise you to return to an establishment soon. My good friend is patrolling a corridor right by yours, and they might, well, see you...” a voice said with all the deftness of a teenaged retail worker at a weirdly high pitch.

Connor remembered something and immediately scanned the corridor. Sure enough, he saw a security camera at the far end of the corridor, enveloped in a distinct cloud of violet vapor. Connor felt his chest tighten.

“You can stop calling your slave your 'friend,' you know. Unless you just like to listen yourself lie as well.” Connor spoke but his brain was slow and he didn't know how to cleverly express how much he hated this monst-

“I...okay I'm sorry for drawing you guys in here but this is serious.” the voice suddenly dropped. “I don't know how to control them and I fear the effects of Hammemit contact will be distasteful for those who still have a physical body...” the voice faded out.

“Wait, so we are still alive down there!” Simon exclaimed, a grin developing.

“You trust this thing?! They broke that Hammemit's mind and trapped us in this hell!” Connor turned back toward Simon and shouted. Daniel's brow furrowed at the scene.

Just then, the voice went silent. A moment later, the purple cloud surrounding the security camera vanished. Connor blinked at the sight for a moment, but quickly returned his attention to the doors. A slightly strange sensation took over the three, one they recognized from their other encounters with the Hammemit.

“Whatever is going on, I doubt they were lying about the Hammemit, at least.” Daniel said, expression pensive.

“Clearly.” Connor sighed. “I'll work on counteracting the effect of the sigils. I think things may be quicker given the state of being on this plane. Just-”

Connor's speech stopped as he caught a glimpse of the end of the corridor. They had come silently and now looked on silently. Ink-darkness punctuated by brilliance. Relieving and confronting in equal measure.

Slowly, they lumbered forward.

“I...Connor, you know what these things actually do, right?!” Simon spoke, voice raising. Daniel recognized panic.

Connor started to shake his head as his trance broke, though he didn't appear disturbed. So, when Connor began to look back at the doors, making old hand signs and muttering older Hebrew, Simon instead turned toward Daniel. His eyes pleaded for him.

“...Stay back here, Simon.” Daniel said simply, and began to walk toward the being. Simon stumbled backwards a bit, but the tone and conciseness placated most of his mind.

Daniel stilled the thoughts that were cursing Connor and instead brought another rhythm to life. Connor had taught him some rites, and his own research brought him more knowledge regarding the matter.

It was, of course, nothing in regards to Connor's own knowledge of banishings and exorcisms. For the most part Daniel only needed to fight off the demons of the mind, and the coarse works of magic were

not something he cared much for. But the siddhis did have a purpose, he knew. Now more than ever.

Concentrating in not-thought, Daniel began the Bornless Rite.

“Thee I invoke, the Bornless one...”

Connor could hear Daniel begin the invocation, but didn't look up. He was far more intent on ensuring they could actually escape. In his mind he held the little sigil he had developed long ago, the one that helped to maintain his magical trance in situations where meditation and freedom from distraction were unavailable. Quickly and carefully, he went through banishings of Carcer and Saturn.

The Hammemit advanced, but Simon could notice that the already slow pace had slackened further. Not that it was much consolation to the bystander. The Hammemit had travelled a fourth of the way to the bathroom, and after that they wouldn't be very far from the doors. Petrified and feeling as though without recourse, Simon just watched.

A few lights flickered as the being continued. Daniel kept moving back as the entity's pace demanded, and by now had reached the barbarous names of evocation. Connor could hear that he had skipped and improvised a great deal of the working already, and so he didn't hold up much hope for Daniel's efforts to be much more than a stop-gap solution. Not that his own attempts at exorcism would likely be much better, Connor thought to himself. His greater skill in the area likely didn't mean much when the being was so untainted and powerful.

Connor's work continued as quickly as it could. His body and mind had entered into a certain insulated rhythm, and he felt like the problem was less one of effort and more one of possibility. Given enough time he would be able to break the subtle power of the seal, in all likelihood. It was unclear of whether or not there would *be* enough time, however, at least if the rising blathering of Simon was any indication. This did not bother Connor much, though. The being's movements were incongruous; enormous size coupled with silence. They had invoked memories that were calming in their strangeness. And of course one does not really grasp disaster until the last possible moment. So, in his exhaustion, Connor simply did his Work.

Daniel, on the other hand, found his side of the challenge far more effortful. The Hammemit had reached the bathroom, marking the the final stretch toward the group. Simon stood between the exorcist making his stand and the magician seeking freedom. In his more coherent thoughts, he simply wished he had something to do.

“Hear me...” Daniel muttered.

As Daniel went through the last of the names, he felt a sudden, tingle, go through his consciousness. Daniel had felt such shifts before in his meditations, and they were usually inconsequential or distractions. In this circumstance, Daniel paid more attention.

Daniel stopped retreating from the Hammemit. Instead, possessed by an alien impulse, the mystic began to walk toward the void-seeming before him. Simon was saying some words but Daniel was feeling a crescendo, some upwelling of glory that the staid traditions of his heart had never taught much about. Daniel figured he'd have to learn very fast.

Just as Daniel reached the Hammemit, and felt an unutterable coldness all about him, he found

something else hiding in the innermost core of his mind.

I am He! the Bornless Spirit!
having sight in the Feet:
Strong, and the Immortal Fire!

Connor was actually impressed when he heard the words, at least when he wasn't terrified. Except for vague intimations, Simon only felt the latter. Daniel, for his part, was utterly lost in rapture. Beyond all that he thought he was, the I inside Daniel spoke.

I am He! The Truth!

I am He! Who hate the evil should be wrought in the World!

Daniel continued on in the identification sequence of the rite in a holy trance. While Connor recovered his senses enough to continue in his work, Simon just looked on at the sight developing before him. Even more than before, Simon could see the Hammemit's movements still. As though the being was moving through molasses. Right there, a good seven feet off from the fevered working of Connor, the being sputtered to a standstill. As Daniel completed the rite in Greek, the Hammemit stood utterly frozen.

“BINGO!” Simon heard a shout.

Turning his head back feverishly, Simon found the automatic doors parting at Connor's presence.

“Congratulations and thanks, Daniel, but we have to move!” the magician looked back on at the friends, mind recovering at the successful holding and lack of magical work to accomplish. Though still really quite out of it, Daniel felt enough presence of mind to join his friends.

The three all sprinted out of the doors. Around them they could feel cool air tickle the skin, and an inexpressible relief at seeing open sky. Granted, said sky was dark, and they were still surrounded by the parking strip and other concrete accoutrements of the mall-complex, but freedom was freedom. Connor led the run down the steps and towards the empty parking lot, aiming for the sidewalk beyond. Simon wasn't too far off in his efforts, and Daniel was at least able to keep up. Street lights and the general glow of the city were enough to guide their way. Really, the place seemed almost normal beyond its lack of habitation.

After a jump through some long fuzzy plant stalks that every mall seemed to like, the three made their way to the sidewalk. A certain extra relief came upon the three then, as though hitting the city proper somehow signified true escape. Connor remembered his earlier prediction, however. While Daniel's accomplishment was truly remarkable, he was not sure if the Hammemit would stay in place for long. Especially if the being hadn't vanished wholesale.

Simon led the group onwards now, energy now unstultified by the appearance of danger. Lither legs and reflexes than he could normally claim guided the three across the street, towards some stretch of nameless commercial buildings where he figured they might find routes home. The other two saw Simon run towards the empty intersection, turning toward where he might get a better view of the aimed-for street. And they saw him stop dead, right there in the middle of the road.

By the time they had reached him in the center of the intersection, they could see why.

A little ways down the road, the world terminated in blankness. Nothingness. Nada. Zilch. Buildings and objects simply fell away against a vast void, a chasm of blackness. Like a map hadn't been finished. Simon just looked on emptily.

Really, what had he been expecting? Was there really going to be a magic portal there, ready to take them home? Was there any other option other than stretching their minds in meditation like they had done to arrive? *Could* they have done that back in the mall? They had already discussed these things, of course, but they had still acted. Acted like this was a game.

Hah. These damn bodies had got them there.

Simon just crouched down from exhaustion as his other two friends began to engage in fevered speech. Realistically, there were still some avenues. Maybe they had to jump into this void or something. Or 'die,' like in a dream. Or just talk to whichever guy was running the show. But he would have been hesitant to try any one of these other possible solutions. All of them probably would have been. And so they had gone on in some grand quest rather than soberly confront the mundane and disquieting options that stood before them. Even now they were mostly just hanging here, instead of discussing this situation rationally and not role-playing.

Gingerly, Simon got up on unsteady legs. He turned to his friends, but found that they weren't looking at him. Or at each other, for that matter. Instead, they were looking back toward the mall, and the sidewalk just beyond it.

Immediately, Simon recognized the Hammemit. What he did not recognize was the figure right beside them.

Resting there was a boy around the group's current age. He was dressed in a bright blue but otherwise simple shirt, as well as a pair of jeans. The leaves were unkempt, but somehow not in the endearing manner seen in youth. As the two grew closer, and as Daniel had to hold Connor back, Simon could see more, there under the streetlights of the intersection. There were faint darkness beneath the eyes, and the sort of vague wrinkling at the edge of the mouth that are the sign of frequent, placid smiles. Nevertheless, the figure nodded.

Simon and Daniel didn't have the energy to run, and Connor only had the energy to fight. He struggled a little with Daniel, but the latter's grip was stronger.

The Hammemit stood still beside them all, shadow-body quiescent in the darkness surrounding them. Their idle movements seemed gentle and rhythmic, and though the being didn't appear to look anywhere in particular, there was an aura of contentment that was nigh-hypnotic. Slowly, as Connor looked upon the calmed being, his struggling abated.

"I, well, I'm the guy I guess." the boy started. He appeared as casual as ever, but continued his speech quickly enough. "The name's Ace, and I sort of...run this little plane. Ever since I found it."

"Found it?" Simon asked.

"Well, err, or manifested it. It's a bit hard to describe. I guess it was kind of like dreaming for a while,

and then I was able to make the thoughts more solid. Now they're practically a world.” he said. There was an automatic, weak smile. His eyes fell through Simon. “I suppose you want to talk about other things, though...”

“If you think you're going to get away with this by acting like a disassociated weakling, you're not.” Connor stated. He stared at the boy simply and hard.

“Well, that's fair.” Ace gave a little nod, before looking down slightly. “I do owe you a mountain's worth of explanations.” the figure sighed, beginning to pace around a little bit as he looked more towards the city. His brow furrowed.

“I am at fault for trapping you. And I have no excuse for that. It only lasts until your astral trip would normally be completed, and so when your bodies wake back up, you'll be plopped right back into them. I was actually going to come out earlier, but it was just, sort of, stage fright I guess...” Ace trailed off.

“Duly noted. Cut to the point.” Connor stated through gritted teeth. He was glad to hear that their entrapment was temporary, and felt a bit guilty for tearing through him like that despite the news. But he had to do it. If not for himself, than at least for the principle of justice.

“I...kind of wanted to hang out with someone. Besides Ocu, that is...” Ace shot a quick, but warm glance back toward the Hammemit. “But when you guys arrived, you were just so...real. Your interactions with each other. You were a circle of friends, legitimate...I just don't really know how to put it.” Ace looked off. He breathed a little to himself, and paused.

“I just felt like a degenerate, basically. I kind of voyeuristically watched you guys when I could but things were pretty much screwed from the beginning. It's kind of hard to describe the regret you feel. In fact I really want you to leave right now, if you don't mi-” Ace's wavering speech was cut off.

“You explain yourself and explain what you've done to 'Ocu.' Damnit, you've even given them a name...” Connor shook his head, disgusted.

“Connor, shouldn't we just-” Simon started before Connor held a raised hand to his face.

“I...they asked for it...” Ace mumbled weakly, but soon recomposed himself enough. “I, wanted some friends. Some friends that were a bit more down to earth than many of these, spirits up here are. It was an inherently immoral act, trapping you guys here, and I apologize.” Ace bowed his head forward a little. “As for Ocu...well. They were one of the first beings I met after...arriving here, and after some initial fright, they turned out to be really nice.” Ace nodded on to himself, looking as though in recollection briefly. “I, take it that you think I...did something to them, but they were already interested in mortals and stuff before I met them. They helped me get acquainted with the otherworld and I taught them more about the Earth, I suppose...”

“Glory.” Connor held his eyes closed and drew back his head slightly. He felt a pit in his chest again, but pushed through the sensation to speak. “You fed right into their addiction. Words cannot express how unholy your actions were.”

“I'm...sorry, I don't know what to say. They seemed earnest, and...I don't know. I'm sorry, I'm not too familiar with spiritual matters. I guess in hindsight it's kind of messed up.” Ace said.

“Don't try to defend yourself.” Connor spat.

Just then, Daniel spoke up.

“You said you...arrived, did you not?” he asked.

“...Yes.” Ace made out after a second.

“And you evidently have knowledge of Earth. Normally I would say that I'm being rather forward with you, but in this case, explication is to be expected. Now, given that, can you tell me if the name Ace Veranda rings a bell?” Daniel spoke.

Connor and Simon alike looked toward Daniel then, but neither was able to speak before Ace did.

“Y-Yes.” Ace said. Connor looked back on the boy then because the tone was different. There wasn't the sniveling weakness behind it. Or the vapid, earthly ignorance. Instead there was a certain steadiness, the kind of lucidity that can cut through any mind. On one hand Connor was glad for that, and on the other hand he felt the same instinctive fear that anyone does when that power comes to the fore.

“Then I'll take it you can guess where my line of questioning is going, because Ace Veranda died in 2009.” Daniel said simply.

Everyone, *everything* went silent for a moment. Briefly Connor felt some difficult to place emotion, and immediately hated himself for it, but Ace began to speak soon after.

“Yeah. You're right.” Ace said simply. There was a solidness to his voice now, one that Connor could guess would be more lasting.

“The thing is, Ace Veranda was 17 when he died in a car crash, solidly a teenager. I remembered seeing your picture on the screen when I snuck into my parent's room for the news in my elementary years. Yet right now, you look about the same age as us, 12 or so.” Daniel went on. He was pacing about, and clearly in the grips of some confidence despite his mental temperance. But his words stuck true. “I suppose my question is this: why?” he said, and looked at Ace straight in the eyes.

Ace's expression blanked itself. What creasing was present before had vanished. The eyes grew steady and his maw was left a small slit rather than a hanging mess. Connor could recognize this kind of expression, because it was the one he currently wore. Ace breathed for a little while, eyes turned away from the group, though this time due to thought rather than shame. Eventually, though, he turned back.

“It's like has been seen before on the Earth. Believe me, I know it. I wasn't aping *Catcher in the Rye* or thinking of any other media when I came to my conclusions. They just came. I'm sure it has happened to other people.” Ace said without much emotion. There wasn't even much coldness, Connor realized.

“I didn't like it much. High school, adolescence. The whole shebang. I know that in and of itself this isn't new, but that doesn't mean that it's not a legitimate emotion people can come to. I'm sure its been around for as long as industrial society has.” Ace spoke. He was pacing now instead of Daniel.

“Music. Riding around. Drinking. Dates. Parties. It just wasn't fun. It's not even like I grasped for a

purser form of pleasure afterwards, after seeing some sort of shallowness in that culture. It would have just been role-playing for me to pretend that I liked it. Nothing more and nothing less.” Ace spoke. His movements slowed and he looked back at the trio.

“I kept quiet about it then, of course. It'd be difficult for someone to understand, and even moreso for them to understand that this was a pragmatic decision of legitimate enjoyment and not one of feigned innocence or whatever. I just liked when I could hang out with friends. Talk about games and worlds and whatnot. And to be able to be *with* friends, and not just standing by them at some social function or in the company of their significant other. Call me an Epicurean if you like, but I liked to keep things simple.” Ace looked down for a moment, before returning to his aimless pacing.

“*So*, for my afterlife. I figured I might as well stop with the pretenses. Sure I could have done this without actually walking around as a 12 year old, but if you *can* do that, why the hell not?” Ace looked up. There was a certain spring to his voice. A certain conviction that Connor found refreshing in light of his previous spinelessness.

“Same logic went into deciding your bodies, though in that case it was clearly immoral, and I apologize for that. Given that this is the astral and I'm not some powerful deity or whatever, I'm sure you can actually return your bodies to normal via will, like any other astral trip. Unless this plane has some weird effect of its own or something; you're the first I've brought here and all.” Ace shrugged.

Connor briefly closed his eyes and imagined. After he opened his eyes to find his body was the same, he assumed the latter statement was applicable.

The magician looked back at Ace. His response came quickly.

“*That* is what this was all about?”

The words were clean and straight. Ace looked back on at him. There was confusion, but not quite the obsequious sort that he had displayed before.

“I mean, really. We've been trapped in a mall plane in the form of 12 year olds over a fixation that only earthly society and terrestrial biology could produce. Mind you, it's not even really the fact that you chose preteens in particular that's a problem; the fool decries 'Peter Pan Syndrome' when he himself just worships the false sacredness of the secular life. Any age would have been a tie, a fetter to mundanity. Look at me in the eyes, friend.” Connor spoke, and in that final word Ace stared into his orbs with a fervor a mystic could match.

“You were never a child, and you were never a man. Age doesn't exist. It never did. The form of the body means absolutely *nothing* in comparison to the eternity of the soul. Look at Ocu, for crying out loud!” Connor shouted and pointed at the Hammemit.

Ace looked on at his friend. At the light-eyes that currently danced along their surface. At the memory of the strange being who helped bring him to his senses when before he had only known a crash and sudden, looming darkness. One who hadn't even lived before...

Ace pulled back his gaze and looked back on at Connor. He was feverish, but lucid in the only way that mattered. Connor smiled madly at the sight.

“We astral projected to see sights, friend, and to be quite honest, we've found them. I've seen with my own eyes a Hammemit today, and remembered a glorious, mysterious existence that most don't even care to think of. I would not trade this for anything, and I only hope that you can say the same. There's so much you can...do, Ace! If anything you know more of that than I do.” Connor spoke, and panted toward the end.

Ace was silent for a little while. Whatever practiced expressions he had held before had vanished, even the effortful blankness he had maintained before. For a moment, he just seemed to, live. Curiously, Ace look on toward the distance.

“I...guess this was all just kind of dumb I guess.” Ace said. Simon and Daniel looked at him askance, but Connor kept on listening.

“I mean...there aren't even really any consequences to this. And since there's eternity, I guess even me wasting time didn't matter. Huh.” Ace just kind of said.

Simon and Daniel both looked at each other then, with hints of sheepishness but mostly just neutrality. Acknowledgement perhaps.

“Y'know, I guess I was fishing for some kind of, resolution here? But I could have just been making that up in my mind. Sorry if this is vague, I just don't really know what to say...” Ace trailed off.

“Nah, you're fine. Fit in just fine with these two.” Simon gestured toward Connor and Daniel, shrugging.

“It's rare that you can see fetterlessness. Enjoy it and don't overanalyze it.” Daniel quipped with a certain venom only knowledge can bear.

“Well, yeah I suppose. To be honest I've been dead long enough, it'd probably do me well to actually see all the other stuff that's out there. I'm...not quite sure what I'll see of Ocu, though. I suppose I'll have to wait and see.” Ace said, seemingly still coming to grips with his sudden clarity. Ocu's head-mass extended outwards briefly again, seemingly in examination of the three, but they returned to normal soon after.

“Sounds like a plan.” Connor said.

“Indeed.” Ace said. He and his Hammemit friend seemed to flicker beneath the streetlights.

“Oh, and I'll let you guys go ahead of time. Sorry, I guess this is going kind of...fast for farewells? Everything seems to be going fast right now...nevermind. Anyways, I apologize again for the astral kidnapping. It won't be happening in the future, needless to say.” Ace said.

“As you said, didn't really matter.” Connor shrugged.

“...Are you really going to enable spiritual abduction?” Simon looked on at Connor with probably the most accusatory look of the evening.

“You should be able to predict Connor's emotions by now, Simon.” Daniel just shook his head.

Ace smiled a little at the sight. Then he remembered another thing, and let that little sight sit alone in its own silence.

Ace cut them out quickly. The three were cast back into that strange state of mind they had occupied before, visionless and beyond the contours of mundane thought. They were, however, unable to reorient themselves into the current after having occupied a similitude of the mortal world. Quickly and inexorably, all three were drawn back to waking consciousness.

Simon was the first to land home, and moved out of his launching room to slap Connor to wakefulness soon after. After excitedly comparing his memories to a disgruntled Connor's, he was glad to find that the trip had at least been shared. In a way, though, even this had been a force of habit. If he was like Connor, he would have used the term *gnosis* to describe his surety that he had visited another world with his friends...

“So, just like that I guess. Y'know it actually kind of reminds me of some of those admins on the servers we played in, remember Simon?” Connor spoke absentmindedly, currently sipping from a glass of water in recuperation.

“Farewells wouldn't have been good for any of us. To be honest even that last bit was rather overdone, Connor...” Daniel grumbled a little, walking into the room.

“As you said, you should be accustomed to my taste for theatrics at this point.” Connor sipped a little more. “Really I only break it out on rare occasions.”

“Just sayin'. Might want to reconfirm your Practicus initiation.” Daniel commented and began to trudge towards Connor's kitchen for some coffee.

“So. What now?” Simon asked. He was sitting on the armrest of one of the chairs in Connor's room. His terribly dark room. He'd really need to get to fixing up this place now that the projection was over...

“What do you mean, 'what now?' We did what we set out to do. I even got some...remarkable insight out of it.” Connor stared forward, in thought. “Ah, let's head to the living room. More sunlight there.” Connor said, and swiftly swung off from his seated position on the bed.

Simon followed as Connor traveled to the living room. As they entered they could see Daniel in the kitchen getting the brewer set up. Connor opened up the shades, letting light and the images of the world outside come into view. Connor stood in front of the window, and Simon behind him.

“I...kind of meant more in the implications, man. I mean, seeing a ghost. Some pre-existent soul that looked really damn weird. I can't exactly submit any of this to a journal for obvious reasons, but it's still something important. Spectacular. We can't let it fall to the wayside.” Simon spoke.

“We won't let it fall to the wayside.” Connor spoke clearly. “Beyond that, I don't know much about what we'll do with it.” Connor said. He was looking out toward the lawn, and the bees that were flitting from flower to flower.

“Frankly I don't have much more of a clue than that guy did. And with many kinds of knowledge, it's not really flashy when you 'do' stuff with it. Mind you, I'm not being obscurantist, just realizing that it's kind of hard to 'weaponize' ghosts and other uncreated souls.” Connor said.

“...You're being at least somewhat obscurantist.” Simon looked at Connor unflinchingly.

“Well, I probably am. I do like to listen to mystic badassery, after all.” Connor smiled as he looked back. “But we'll see what we can do with what we know. Hell, I can't wait to see another Hammemit...”

As magician and parapsychologist fell into conversation, soon to be accompanied by the mystic, another day passed on the Earth.