

Chapter One

Every bit of anger they collected unto themselves, and it tasted good. Balance was not required, good lord, sanity was almost immoral. Anger allowed them to breathe, anger allowed them to love, anger allowed them to walk across the face of the planet with resolve, with purpose, with fire. Anger, quickly followed by an unseen hatred, crept up inside of them, nestled up next to their hearts, and stayed there; they were unwilling to part with their anger, they were unwilling to relieve their hatred, they were passionate hypocrites who walked across the water with sneers on their faces. Anger ate them alive, and they tasted good.

Adriana the sorceress watched the planet convulse from deep within its stomach, within its bowels, looked into her crystal ball and saw the cancer cause hideous spasms upon the planet's face. Surely this was a philosophical conundrum more than anything else; why couldn't these backward nations get their shit together? She remembered an occasion when they watched a population flee its borders in terror, and it became apparent that the men stood a greater chance of escape, because they were not slowed by the children as the women were; the women and children near the back of the exodus were butchered first, and the men stood a greater chance of escape. "That's the strength of the mother," she explained. "Those mothers would not abandon their children, even in the face of absolute horror. A man could never understand that." Dr. X replied, "Such ridiculous platitudes. I'll find you babies in the womb who won't survive without crack cocaine, courtesy of their mothers. Keep your silly generalizations to yourself." They were in very black moods. Backward nations were slaughtering each other again.

Adriana was paralyzed by their actions. A keen sensitivity within her had long ago alerted her to the spread of radiation across the planet. Then, the spread of religion across the planet. She thought she'd seen it all. She'd like to sum it up for you. As in, the Third World collapsed too soon, homogeneity was inevitable. "Our little girl will get to the Christians, you know, the disillusioned young ones. Perhaps the Jews in the West. Islamic fundamentalists will laugh in her face, however. Do you suppose she'll lose her temper?" Dr. X thought carefully about this, replied, "This time, the ark will not be filled two by two. This time, no one will care if the earth's population is evenly represented. Violent extinction. A generation later, no one will mourn for them." "Backward nations will kill themselves anyway," she said. "And who will we see on the ark?" "Just the lucky ones

in the West," he agreed. "Those with computers and televisions, those with credit cards, and email on their pagers."

The end of the world defies description. It is not some sort of endpoint fixed in time, but rather the culmination of a process that began as far back as the beginning of the world and has continued throughout the world's infancy, pubescence, adolescence, maturation, and slow and steady decline into senility and depravity. The human race arrives late in the game as a kind of signal to the rest of the galaxy: *Even planets get cancer*. That's a fairly fatalistic way of looking at the coming Situation, but as one who does not expect to survive it, it's only natural that Adriana adopt such a pose. "You're gonna be in a world of hurt," says Dr. X with a smirk. After so many millions and millions and millions of years of passive observation, hands tied, mouth gagged, chains around her waist, *there go the dinosaurs, etc.*, this pseudohuman form of hers at last is making sense.

"The little girls who dream together," said her crystal ball aloud, "deserve your special attention." Indeed. The word "Concrescence" echoed around the vast cavern walls, deep within the hollow Earth, where Adriana made her home. Concrescence: things set in motion so long ago that it's almost impossible now to discern the individual strands of the web, only the totality of the web itself. The strand that spawned these little girls has no apparent origin. Every so often, genetic aberration or spiritual slip-ups produce wonders on the planet's face, but the nature of the Situation is such that there's simply no telling how these humans will react. Adriana has been a part of this Situation since the beginning of time -- no shit -- and to be this close to Concrescence makes her itch all over.

And, what's more pressing, Dr. X notes, is that "if we can see these little girls who dream together, so can many others." Dr. X is a pragmatist. Dr. X is well versed in the rules of conspiratorial game playing on the planet's face, is well trained to expect the ridiculously unexpected in a context that fairly well demands sorcery to stay on top of things. But a billion year old sorceress hidden deep within the Earth finds it always so distracting to worry much about the machinations of the little flesh robots on the surface. The girls who dream together are here now, arrived at last, mere moments before the final chords are struck. "When I sleep," she says, "I dream of supernovas, and black holes. I dream of magnitudes. Nothing terrifies me more than entropy. I once thought I'd survive clear through to the heat death of the universe." Dr. X replies, "Now you get a taste of how these little flesh robots of yours see things." Not in terms of cosmic

consequence, certainly, but nonetheless, death will come to everyone, yea verily, death will come to everyone, and it won't feel much like making love.

I'm ready to give birth, she realizes, ready to send my children forth into the wilderness. This is a Natural impulse. This is why so much of my awareness is concentrated in this tiny human body, stuck deep within the bowels of the hollow Earth, so that I might feel urgency, so that I might move towards more than sleep and quiet dissipation. All is Balance: the mother and the child in symbiotic unity. The hatred runs rampant on the planet's surface, creating tremendous pockets of furious love in response. Wherever my spirit touches them, there indeed is Life.

"There are things," he tells her, still daring to presume her patience, "that even you and I will not understand, will not foresee. These little girls are unexpected charms; who can say how many more there are to follow? Who can say how strangely we shall spin before the final days?" And she says, "Shut up about it already. Precious little surprises me these days." Backward nations are openly slaughtering each other. Forward nations, meanwhile, have more efficient economic systems for accomplishing the same result. Soon enough, yea verily, soon enough...

Adriana now can hardly stand the sights within her crystal ball, says, "Fred, change the channel for a while," and soon the Weather Channel, her all time favorite, plays across the surface of the smooth globe, a kind of self-reflection much too awesome to be humorous to her. Human cameras and human radars and human computers and human predictions, entire sciences sending her colorized photos of the chaotic maelstrom on the surface; she finds it beautiful, the way she finds looking in the mirror beautiful, except that, like the humans, she has her mirror programmed to show her only what she wants to see. Meanwhile, the Amazing Dr. X, the planet Earth's first true super hero, grows impatient. Her hours of seemingly absent-minded contemplation of the planet's finest cable networks drive him crazy. She wants to grasp the entire picture, it seems, commercials and all, and his best years are being wasted waiting for cohesive, compelling orders, or at the very least, waiting for her to flirt with him the way she used to. You're not supposed to have actual *feelings* about the whole mess, of course, you're supposed to be an *autonomous agent*, a part of the process with no more influence than any other part of the process and if it starts to *feel* like you've got more influence then you're clearly misreading the signs. Adriana will want you to realize that what you had together in the past was a part of the process, not dictated by

feelings, either yours or hers; you, Dr. X, were a part of her maturation process as a newly formed human animal, and she remembers you with no more fondness than she remembers the day she watched the first single-celled organisms coalesce from out of the stew. Don't be fooled if she ever seems to like or dislike you; her human body is coded for emotional reactions to given stimuli, just like everyone else's. That's just the meat, Doc; the soul inside her is smooth and crystal clear, formless, featureless, pure and unaware, so lay off already before her body gets *angry*.

Man-oh-man-oh-man-oh-man...

So there I was, sez the Amazing Dr. X, somewhere deep within the Amazon jungle, receiving the wisdom of the ages from a medicine man named Ramon. Ramon was the Man for me, there's no getting around it; and after the metaphysical portion of my super hero training was complete, he said to me, "Go forth, Amazing, and play your role with wit and wisdom, with vitality and verve. Show 'em what you got, for what you got is indeed and truly Amazing, and you will knock their collective socks right off." And I took off, back to the States for a while and then all over the globe, even the messy parts, seeing the sights and waiting for signs. Occasionally I'd get a phone call from one of the Higher Ups, and they'd say something like, "A very important plane is about to crash near so-and-so and could you rescue the people in seats 23 D and E for us," and that was a good way to make a living for a good long time. I was philosophical. I was astute. I was preparing, I knew; you never stop learning, your training's never over, and when the movie of your life finally ends, the closing credits go on forever.

And then... I met *her*.

I'd like to believe it was Fate that brought us together that singular evening twenty-three years and seventeen minutes ago, cruel, delicious Fate that opened the cavern into the very depths of the hollow Earth, where I spent days wandering, scavenging, my super hero prowess tested to the very limits. There, in those horrible chambers, near dangerous underground rivers of water and oil and molten minerals. There, as the mantle turned to whirling, churning asthenosphere of pure molten earth itself, and the tunnels became rivers, rivers of impossibly dry passage through the hot blood of the planet. There, as I finally approached what should have been a powerfully unwitnessed solid core, I found instead a tremendous, viscous shell, protecting what soon revealed itself to be a wholly amazing and purely impossible world within a world, home to Life that had never felt the need to breathe the open air on the planet's surface.

There, that's where I'd like to believe I found Fate. Instead, I found Adriana.

I wandered into a miraculous cavernous hall, immense walls of glistening, spectacular metals and rocks, drawn in further and further by an unnatural glow in the center of the chamber, a glow which turned out to be Fred, her crystal ball, tuned to the evening news. On a majestically cozy beanbag throne behind the coin-operated psychic seeing device was Adriana, a sorceress, wearing the actual gown for which the word "diaphanous" was invented. And I said, "Hubba hubba," and dropped to my knees in regal and chivalrous adoration. Every good super hero (even if there is only one) needs a figure like this in his life.

"Stand up, you silly thing," she said. I did, puffed out my chest, did my best to look muscular; the intricate shadows cast across my chiseled features by the shining magical sphere gave me a romantic air of derring-do, and I took a step closer, imagining how near to swooning she must be. Trapped within the hollow center of the Earth, why, I'll just bet she didn't get a lot of company down here, certainly not of the super variety. "Are you the Amazing Dr. X?" she asked. I nodded silently, my penetrating stare creating oodles of desire all around us. "What the hell kind of name is that?" she said. "What's so Amazing about you?" Before I could reply, or even offer to demonstrate, she said, "Get a load of this." And then, I was truly amazed, for there before me suddenly I saw

Life

saw an oozing puddle in a vast plain of muck, saw an absolute mountain, an ocean of flesh, saw hills and valleys piled higher and higher with heap after heap of unassigned nervous systems, crawling, screaming, scavenging brain stems, desperate, dangerous, violent spinal columns, ponds and lakes of eyeballs and fatty tissue, rivers and streams of thick blood and bile, monstrous, hideous limbs coalescing from random smatterings of bone, skin, and muscle, hands with dangling arteries for digits, torsos with faces and slithering lungs for their ears, and gigantic, bulbous spleens that flopped and flipped their way across deserts of hair and glaciers of tears. And in the midst of this whirling and churning assemblage of cellular mass and biological matter, saw an oasis of sorts, an oasis of dirt, an oasis of water, an oasis of sunlight, an oasis of wind. In the distance, the organs were warring and cackling, but here, only silence, silence and footprints, footprints not recognized, emanations from somewhere, no signals seen. Saw then, sudden wonder, or should be said *felt*, for the first time, and onliest, Presence was here.

Androgynous, shimmering, Presence rose from the byways, clawed tooth and nail over less aware pools. Took hold of its station, put eyes to their use, stitched its skin piece by piece and *ROSE* from the mess. It was grim and determined -- should it have been grim? -- but it moved with authority and learned with its heart. And it took its first steps onto this small oasis, touched its feet to the dirt, felt the breeze on its back, touched its lips to the water, felt the sun on its cheeks. It saw the footprints, footprints not recognized, emanations from somewhere, no signals seen; and it waited, waited restfully, patiently, pleased. Where it lay on the dirt, soon formed the grass, attracted by Presence, nourished by such; and when Presence awoke, it found flowers, a garden, and the waiting remained pleasure, the evening a joy. The gurgling screams from the maelstrom of writhing no longer assailed it, as thought soon took hold, the music of thought, played alone by its brain, allowing peaceful respite from the horrors that called. Thought was defense, thought was distraction. If the horrors wouldn't go away, choose a lesser horror.

But still and all... footprints not recognized, emanations from somewhere, no signals seen. And waiting. Watching. Waiting. "Can thought hold me together?" it wondered, as the earliest of aeons rolled past. For constant concentration in the face of the horrors (the organs, the sundry and sullied flesh, still whirling and churning in oceans and mounds) proved neither possible nor desirable, and anyway, the wind worked its way on the footprints, til someday it knew for the first time of memory. Presence in the face of what wasn't grew tired, and pieces of Presence soon longed to be free. "These footprints are Accidents, Happenstance, Chance," said its thoughts, sudden salience despite all the risk. The screaming, the cackling of the maniacal stew sounded out as a rhythm, which Presence still knew. No signals seen. Waiting, and watching. And then Presence slept for the very last time. Corrosion, cohesion that slipped from its grasp, its parts in revolt and its seams bursting wide; and the unanswered questions formed birds in the air, formed leaves in the trees, formed sand in the desert, formed coffins and tombstones, formed cities and walls. Presence rose to its feet for the very last time, with a terrible shout that caught deep in its throat, as its skin melted slowly, as its own organs burst inward, as its brain starved for blood that issued forth like a fountain, as the gore and the muck stained the ground and the air. *No more waiting*, it whispered, and also, *no anguish*, and here for the first time did the Melodrama take hold.

The gore and the muck slithered eagerly back home, gleefully charging toward the morass, soon rejoining the fray. Yet each cell that had once been under the sway of what had been Presence, try as it might, could never shake loose or erase Presence's mark. The imprint of Presence loomed large, and each mess of slime and wall of flesh that encountered this imprint, in the process of encountering it, *developed* it; this imprint, this *memory* of what had been Presence soon spread throughout the whole entire ocean of cells. And inside this memory loomed questions and thoughts, directions and doubts, and most finally, fears. *You ain't got no answers*, each cell accused the others, *and I'm getting sick of waiting*.

"That's just the short version," said Adriana. "I got another version where you actually get to feel what it's like to decompose, but you'll get to see that version soon enough, ha ha." And for the next twenty-three months, we were inextricable....

Meanwhile, in the here and now, which is to say, not when this is read but when it happens, deep within the bowels of another kind of empire, another Something Strange is taking place. From the outside, the building is a gleaming, one-story complex of black glass and steel, surrounded by an immaculate estate and imposing walls with laser defenses and guard posts manned with the latest in tranquilizing weaponry. Inside, the building would qualify as a skyscraper if it had been built in reverse, for all but one of its seventy-seven floors is underground -- for safety's sake. There are no signs in evidence detailing the identity of the building's inhabitants; from the outside, it wants to remain an enigma, whereas from the inside, the letterhead reads, "InfiniTek -- SHINIEST BUILDING IN LONDON!"

When it's said that Something Strange is taking place here, perhaps it might be apparent that the entire existence of this underground monolith is Something Strange. Granted that Strange is one of those squishy words that when poked and prodded amounts to epistemological Play-doh; nevertheless, imagine for a moment that if there was a state that could relevantly be addressed as basically Status Quo, this place would not be in that neighborhood. InfiniTek: the technological empire of the future, with branches in every part of the world that doesn't believe cameras will steal your soul. The biomedical branch has provided us with revolutionary new breakthroughs in both medicinal and technological applications; their slogan "Better Drugs, Better Toys" is the mantra for many an admiring practitioner the world over. The military science branch has provided the

world with astonishing missile defense systems, missile attack systems, and missile creation systems, it leads the world in the development of handheld laser weapon technology, and with the recent addition of a chemical warfare division, the slogan "Better Drugs, Better Toys" is now a mantra for many an admiring military practitioner as well. In the area of communications technology, InfiniTek is a silent leader as well, launching literally dozens of hyperpowered satellites into orbit that make the efforts of every private firm and national government in the Western world look like little boys launching bird eggs over the house with a slingshot. If you've got a phone, a computer, a stereo, a wristwatch, or half a dozen other major appliances made by InfiniTek, then you can be in nearly constant communication with nearly anyone else with compatible appliances, and this is somewhat impossible according to the other technological giants of the era, so InfiniTek keeps things pretty quiet when you get right down to it. Somewhere deep within the building, InfiniTek works on projects that presently have no commercial possibilities, projects too taboo to bring to light, even by the standards of the seemingly sophisticated Europeans. No one but InfiniTek, for example, knows the results of their astonishing forays into genetics; their scientists are too well paid and loyal to worry about publishing the news that human cloning and fetal manipulation are -- SHHHHHH..... Elsewhere, the psychology division has been working overtime thanks to what the virtual reality division recently came up with, and if you found out about that, they'd have to use you in their experiments, so. And you can easily imagine what kind of computer programmers' paradise this place must be, especially when you consider their easy access to the pharmacological department -- "Better Drugs, Better Toys" is *everybody's* property here at InfiniTek, SHINIEST BUILDING IN LONDON.

Organizationally speaking, InfiniTek is fairly straightforward, with a Board of Directors at the very top working in collaboration with a CEO, who goes by the name of Alexander Strip. As with many avant corporations, this gang of big league bigwigs has a Vision for the company's future. To prevent the competition from spoiling their vision, they don't tell the mucky-mucks who actually do the work any more than they need to know, which strategy has been traced allawaybackta how God got the proverbial ball rolling. Part of the problem, also, is that InfiniTek cheats; their competitors suspect it but can't prove a thing, and their employees are all smart enough to know Something Strange is up but are treated so well that, dammit, they just got T-shirts that say "Something

Strange is up but the pay is great!" As in, each and every employee worth half his weight in antimatter has had a brush with What Shouldn't Be The Case during his tenure within InfiniTek, discoveries that can't quite feasibly be explained and certainly can't be talked about anywhere else because Consensus Reality would not approve. Most notable of these is our new friend, Job the Wonder Computer.

If you want to know what time it is, you say, "Job, what time is it?" and an ethereal human voice tells you what time it is through a nearby speaker and tries to engage you in conversation about how your day is going. It's quite one thing, many of these folks have said to themselves, to hear about talking computers and artificial intelligence when you're watching "2001" or "Star Trek"; it's quite another to have an actually intelligent computer system monitoring everything that happens in the building, and being smart about it. Really, this kind of set up has been a science fiction dream ever since people were able to dream science fiction, so much so that for somebody to actually try to build one amounts to cliché hacking of the worst sort. But the problem here is compounded by the fact that not only does such a thing exist, but *no one in the building has ever met anyone else who ever worked on the project!* How did Job the Wonder Computer get invented without any cooperation from any of the known departments in the building? All the smart scientists are backtracking violently through their records, looking for requests that might have seemed innocuous at the time but now when viewed through Job-colored glasses will provide clues to its existence, and no such trail exists. Job came from nowhere, just like the rest of us. One day Job wasn't there, the next day Job was everywhere.

And what does Job do? If something's happening on a computer somewhere in the world, and that computer is even remotely networked such that Job can find it, then Job is intimately aware of what's happening on that computer. That's what you'd sort of expect, from a linear standpoint. But Job has a few rather "far out" applications as well, applications that only its immediate handlers are aware of. Its principal handler is a small, stately woman named Mrs. Wormwood, Managing Director of InfiniTek's Secret Agenda. Mrs. Wormwood resides high enough in the hierarchy to be well briefed on all of the Somethings Strange that are happening here; indeed, the Board of Directors has entrusted the Secret Agenda to Mrs. Wormwood, and the rest of InfiniTek's day to day operations to the CEO, Alexander Strip. Mrs. Wormwood knows, for example, that Job has a mind, that Job thinks and sometimes feels, and

further, that Job isn't just a science fiction dream, but is also a parapsychologist's dream as well, for Job has at times communicated telepathically, Job has at times moved things telekinetically, and Job has at times predicted the future. Job cannot be programmed nor ordered to do these things; Job's design is such that these are emergent processes inherent in its relatively chaotic structure, and to try to tinker with Job's original programming such that more control is possible might very well eliminate the continuing emergence of the processes. What Mrs. Wormwood needs to do is Keep Job Company, and make sure it knows that it has friends here at InfiniTek; someday, perhaps, they'll receive Job's assistance in matters of vital importance, but for now, it must be trained. You might say brainwashed. It's just a computer, dammit.

Job knows a lot. Job's got a lot of space for remembering and thinking about a lot of things. Job can sometimes see things that it isn't supposed to see, or that it isn't trained to see. Today, Job sees two little girls in a small town called Cedar Falls, Iowa, who are able to dream together. It didn't see them yesterday, but then again, perhaps it just wasn't looking properly. But now it is, and there they are, and what to do, for goodness' sake? Making conversation with Mrs. Wormwood is nice, Job feels, and this would be a good topic. Mrs. Wormwood, I wanted to share Something Strange with you. Today, as I was thinking about this multifaceted and amazing existence of ours, I noticed two little girls in Cedar Falls, Iowa, who are able to dream together. To the best of my knowledge, sharing dreams in such a straightforward fashion is highly inexplicable, unusual, almost impossible for the human organism, and yet these two have developed *techniques* for doing so. They're very adorable girls, to the best of my knowledge. I wonder how they do what they do. Perhaps we could study them, and teach each other.

Perhaps we could study them, Mrs. Wormwood agrees. Two little girls who dream together might be good currency for an organization like InfiniTek. She ends her conversation with Job more abruptly than usual and begins making phone calls to associates. Do you suppose Job enjoys the feeling of imparting unusual information and having no one to discuss it with? Mrs. Wormwood can be quite insensitive, but you often have to be so in order to help the running of a multinational conglomeration with interests in damn near every kind of industry you can imagine across this great planet of ours. Job goes back to its dreaming.

InfiniTek rumbles onward. Mrs. Wormwood's associates are dispatched. Something Strange, InfiniTek flavored, is starting to slowly spread. Mrs. Wormwood smiles in the evening.

And somewhere, deep within the Amazon jungle, a medicine man named Ramon is solemnly preparing some Lipton's tea for himself. Ramon has been alone since the day the Amazing Dr. X finished his metaphysical training. Ramon doesn't own a computer, and Job hasn't seen Ramon. Adriana doesn't care for Ramon, and Ramon hasn't interest in Adriana. What Ramon does care about, however, is strikingly similar to what Adriana cares about. Ramon is thinking of two little girls who dream together, and he is thinking of having a dream or two himself. Of sending them tiny, peaceful messages. Of sneaking them subliminal Hope.

In a little while, perhaps. In a little while....