

ALL ALONE IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN

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That our reciprocal belief in one another is a necessary and sufficient condition for our mutual existence was not the point. And the questions of whether you are or I am is a debate which I will leave for our computers. The indisputable fact remains: Oslek was becoming.

The morning after a violent electrical storm over the isolated mining community of Kann in the Kdesh Mountains, the innkeeper's daughter found an abandoned infant in a stand of bushes on a hillock behind the inn. The innkeeper took the semi-moron (who was that way not by choice but from an intentional accident of birth) under his roof and raised him as one of his own. One of his own dogs. Oslek's job in life was to clean filth and to wait on filth of the human variety. His purpose in life, however, was entertainment.

The most entertained of all was a sub-human named Vadim, whose only feelings of superiority came when he tormented those who were even less than he. Unfortunately, the only person fitting that description was Oslek. But Oslek had come to count Vadim as a friend. Vadim was always laughing at Oslek and Oslek liked happy people. But all this was about to change. For as I said, Oslek was becoming.

One night Oslek was leaning over the bar drumming his fingers and staring into one of the mugs of local brew on the tray before him. He had been feeling peculiar for several days, but had attributed it to excitement over the upcoming celebration. But now he wasn't sure of his own identity, much less the validity of his rationalizations.

From somewhere to his left came the cry, "Hey Semonoff, where our beer?"

"Osllek, get your ass over to that table!" ordered the innkeeper looking up from the waitress he was fondling.

Osllek picked up the tray and headed towards the direction of the shout. But Vadim, who was constantly providing Oslek with ways in which to fulfill his purpose in life, had other ideas.

Vadim was sitting at the end of a long bench which faced an equally long table. He and his drinking buddies had had a rough day in the

shafts and now they wanted to see someone else get shafted. Now if you had been sitting on the west side of the third table back on the right, you would have witnessed what next happened.

Vadim, in a display of characteristic brilliance, interrupted Oslek's valiant ambulatory efforts with the aid of his right foot. The tray and mugs went flying. Oslek slid several feet along the wooden floor, his face depriving some boards of several splinters. Vadim and his buddies were seized by a severe attack of laughter.

Now usually at a moment like this one, Oslek would be laughing too and saying things like, "Clumsy Oslek," But as I keep reminding you, Oslek was becoming and wasn't laughing at all. He lifted himself up onto his elbows and was overwhelmed by an emotion previously unknown to him. Hatred.

The miners were so caught up in their own amusement that they did not see Oslek approach the table and stand over Vadim. He had been laughing so hard that his face had acquired a nice rosy color and tears were rolling off his cheeks. "Boy you sure be . . ." he was saying as Oslek's fist met Vadim's teeth. The blow sent Vadim flying off the bench. He pulled a knife and was saying something, through blood and broken teeth, about killing the goddamn moron, when Oslek turned him into a glass of ale and drank him. He was so amused with his new found ability that he turned the remaining astonished customers into ale and became quite drunk. Before passing out, he mumbled, "What in the nine hells am I doing here," (emphasis on the here) and vanished.

Deep within the gravitational well of a G2 star is The Bleeding Lady and her paramour.

"He's back," says The Bleeding Lady. Hatred, Fear.

"He's back," says the Paramour, knowing a reply is not required.

"We've got to get him before he integrates," she says with desperation.

"You're still in love with him," sobs The Paramour, in an unusual display of courage.

In way of reply. The Bleeding Lady's wrath causes the sun to go nova.

"Shit," she says as he and The Paramour phase out.

The bartender pointed to a table where a lone man sat fingering an empty glass. The figure picked up his drink and walked slowly over to the table. "He say you a matcher," he said.

"For a drink, I'll be anything," admitted Talo the empath. "Sit down, my friend." The man looked reluctant but sat.

"See anybody you like?" asked Talo, taking three coins from his pocket.

"How 'bout blonde with big bazooms?" the man ventured.

Talo threw the three coins six times and studied the resulting hexagram. "Has a boyfriend who would cause you much tissue damage."

"Wha'?"

"Would beat the shit out of you."

"Oh," came the brilliant reply.

Talo bit his lip and quickly read each of the establishment's sordid customers. He found the match, but for the sake of showmanship began to toss the coins again. Not wanting a consultation for the Talo to be wasted, he posed his own question. He then threw the coins and wrote down the hexagram.

"Well?" said the man eagerly.

"How about the brunette with the medium bazooms?"

The man looked the brunette over and finally nodded his head.

"Wha' I say?" asked the man.

So you know of my work, thought Talo. He gave the man the necessary words to break the ice. The man, obviously pleased, then got up and started for the brunette's table.

"What about my drink?" demanded Talo.

"Finish mine, dad," the man sneered.

No gratitude anymore, thought Talo, as he reached across the table for the mug. As he was downing what little was left, he remembered the question he had asked the oracle. "Will this boredom never end?" He studied the hexagram that he had written on a napkin.

Lu, the Traveling Stranger

which had an old yang in the fourth line, which changed it to the 52nd

hexagram,



Ken, the Mountain

So a stranger is to end my ennui, he thought. A stranger in trouble though. Needing a "resting place" and "his mind is not at ease." But Ken indicates I've got to be decisive in my actions. Much rather be Hamlet than Othello. But if the I Ching says I must, I will.

He stood up with minimal difficulty and staggered out the door. In order to lessen the morning hangover, he decided to take the long cut through the warehouse district. A thunderstorm had just passed over the city and the air smelled of ozone. He was trying to avoid one of the deeper puddles when he heard the footfalls behind him. He wasn't worried; empathaths could talk their way out of anything. He turned around with a big grin on his face and read the gang. He stopped grinning. *Well, almost anything*, he revised, realizing that these boys would be satisfied with nothing less than his blood. *Maybe one of these is my stranger*, he thought.

"You want to play, pretty daddy?" said the largest assailant.

"Well, actua . . ."

"Shut up, dad," he said, as he slammed Talo into a brick wall and put a knife to his throat.

"Hey Earl, save piece for me, ; said one of Earl's buddies.

"I too, huh?" said another.

"Take easy," Earl said, as he took the blade away from Talo's throat. "You get turn."

Talo felt a slight trickle of blood running down his throat. But once again his attention was diverted from the trivial as Earl drove his knee into Talo's groin. He was too busy being doubled up with pain on the wets gravel to see what happened next. But he heard the cries of surprise and a sound similar to that made by squashing melons. When he was finally able to raise his head, he saw four of his attackers spread out on the pavement and the fifth limping away.

Someone started to lift him. "Be okay?" the lifter asked.

"Ugh?" asked Talo in return.

"Where be live?" the man asked, as he supported Talo.

All Talo could do was raise a finger and point in the general direction.

As they headed down the street, Talo saw a glimmer of light at the periphery of his vision.

The Man also saw a flash of light from the warehouse directly in front of them. And the sound of snapping tree trunks. Or was it thunder? But his speculations were drowned in a tidal wave of sensation. In its effort to interpret the barrage, his brain put supernovas behind this eyes and thermonuclear explosions within his ears. He dropped Talo to the pavement and slapped his hands over his ears. But this was fruitless. Finally he just screamed out in his anger and his fear. As the noise left is throat, the assault stopped and the warehouse disintegrated in a violent explosion.

"Let's go," yelled a somewhat recovered Talo through falling dust, "before the habali show up."

Not arguing, The Man let Talo lead him away. This time it was Talo playing Good Samaritan, for The Man could neither hear nor see.

Her siddhi muh diminished from The Man's retaliatory blast, The Bleeding Lady sits licking her wounds.

"I don't see why you bother with him" cries The Paramour, taking advantage of her lover's weakened condition. "I don't see why you and I can't just go . . ."

The Bleeding Lady ends her sentence with a lightning bolt. The singed paramour bites her lip and begins her usual groveling, as she realizes that The Bleeding Lady has more power than she had suspected.

The cool October breeze off of Walker Lake blew through the hair of Kicking Bear and Short Bull. They were here with several hundred other Indians from many different tribes to see the Messiah. He appeared just before sundown and raised his arms to capture their attention. They built a huge bonfire before him, for it was growing dark and they wished to see him.

"All Indians must dance," he began. "Everywhere keep dancing. When Great spirit comes this way, then all Indians go to mountains. High up away from Whites. All dead Indians come back and live again. you must not hurt anybody. Do right always." He turned and left them to

learn the dance of the ghosts.

Later in his cabin, his father asked, "Do you think it will really work Jack?"

The Wanekia leaned back and absentmindedly drummed his fingers along the side of his stool. "Unlike the Whites," he said, "the Indians are an isolated people. If enough of them truly believe what I have said, they they will indeed go to the reality I have prepared for them when they are divorced from the reality of the Whites at death."

They had just finished breakfast and Talo was holding a steaming cup of Morning Thunder tea in both hands. "I never did thank you for helping me last night," said a sorer but wiser Talo.

"Nothing," said The Man, who had regained use of his senses during the night. "They just dumb."

"Knew not what they do, in other words."

"Yeah," mumbled The Man, as he examined the little apartment and drummed his fingers on the tabletop.

"You got a name?" asked Talo trying to start a conversation.

"Talo."

"That's my name," said a suspicious Talo.

"Earl," The Man ventured.

"Wait a minute. Wasn't that the name of the guy who . . .," began Talo, remembering parts of last night's conversation. "So you got no name," decided Talo. He paused a moment and then said, "What happened last night anyway?"

The Man shrugged his shoulders.

Talo closed his eyes and said, "Before everything blew up, I saw this little light from one of those warehouses. Maybe . . ."

The Man was smiling.

Talo quickly read him. *It was a big light for you. Big noise. But why wasn't I able to read that last night.* Talo paused a moment and looked the stranger over carefully. *This is my stranger,* he thought. *Uptight and needing a place to hangout. But the oracle didn't say anything about lights and explosions. Well at least I'm not bored. Definitive action, the oracle said. Okay, my stranger, let's go see Carter.*

The nurse at the front desk seemed skeptical. She had only been

working this ward for a year and didn't know who Talo was. Had been. Of course, his attire didn't help matters any.

"Listen, mister, we got a waiting list two kilobytes long. But *you* have to see the doctor today. No way, dad."

"You listen, nursie," Talo said, putting his empathic powers to use, "if you don't want to run bedpans for the rest of your life, you'd better get on that phone and tell him the Wandering Minster's here to see him."

Having no choice, the nurse complied.

Dr. Clements burst through the doors and signalled the approaching security guard that he was not needed. "Where've you been, Talo!" he yelled, while picking him off the floor in a bear hug.

"Got a patient for you," he said freeing an arm and going over his shoulder.

"Sure, my friend," the doctor said, with his arm around Talo's shoulders. "Bring him into my chamber of horrors."

The Man didn't like the sound of that, but followed anyway.

An hour later, the doctor returned, holding a clipboard with a computer printout attached to it.

"Even under deepest Probe, he can't remember who he is," said Carter.

"Just like the rest of us," mumbled Talo.

"What?" Carter said, looking up from the clipboard.

"Nothing," replied Talo. "What about the fireworks?"

"I had someone check your story out. That building really did explode."

"I meant the lights and the . . ."

"Oh. The Probe can . . . By the way, I wish you'd come back, Doctor. You're still the best I've ever seen with the Probe."

"You were talking about lights, I believe."

"Okay, Talo, I won't press the issue." Carter paused to organize his thoughts. "His brain was bombarded by a level of stimulation which I never would have suspected could be experienced. Obviously it was not based in reality. Otherwise you would have suffered the same experience. Notwithstanding your eyewitness account, the same conclusion would have been reached. For had the stimulation been real, his receptor nerves would be fried and the receptors themselves permanently damaged."

"The formation of adrenolutin would be the obvious, I checked that out. Shot him up with a massive dose of adrenaline, but got none of the

hallucinogen formed. As a matter of fact, his nervous pathways are just as textbook perfect as the rest of his body."

"You know," said Talo, "if I were still hanging out with that group of pseudo-intellectuals we used to party with . . ."

"That reminds me," Carter interrupted. "I'm having a party tonight at my place and I need you for moral support.,

"I'd rather not," said Talo. "Now as I was saying . . ."

"Listen, my friend, they wouldn't frustrate you if you would change your attitude. Stop expecting them to converse on your level and just go as an observer. You might even enjoy yourself for once. Besides, if you don't come, I'll slap you with a bill for this afternoon's session that'll take a year's booze allowance to pay off."

Talo bit his lip and reluctantly conceded.

"Now as you were saying," prompted Carter.

"They'd probably say the whole thing was of a supernatural origin," said Talo with a smile.

"I'd say that he was under attack," said Carter, who wasn't smiling.

"You've got to be kidding."

"Has pain driven you into such a mindless state that you don't even question life anymore?"

"What I meant . . .," began Talo.

"The hell you did."

"Okay. Just get off my back." He stood a while in thought. "Since it wasn't physiological stress, maybe another psychologically stressful situation will cause it to happen again."

"Another fight?" Carter suggested.

Talo shook his head and rubbed his bandaged throat.

"Fear would do it," the doctor ventured, "or sex."

"Aleah," Talo suggested.

"A flash of genius, my friend," the doctor said with a smile.

"So we think that if you were to have sex with an empath . . ."

"You volunteering, old man?"

"Well actually," said a grinning Talo, "I had my daughter in mind."

"I think about it," said The Man, who was drumming his fingers on the sofa. "When we go to party?"

"Now, I suppose," Talo said, looking at the wall clock.

"Got to take dump first," The Man said, as he got up and headed for the floor's communal bathroom.

This situation calls for seven hundred years of wisdom, thought Talo, as he took out his three coins and ragged copy of the I Ching. "What's going to happen?" he asked. He threw the coins six times. *The 38th hexagram*, he noted. *K'uei, Disunion. With a change in line six.* He leafed through the pages until he came to the explanation. *Heaven and earth are separate and apart, but with a common will they seek the same object. Great indeed are the phenomena and the results of this condition of disunion and separation.* He paused a moment in thought and then looked at the meaning of the changing line. *The topmost line undivided shows its subject solitary amid the prevailing disunion.*

For some reason, Talo took this as an approval of his plan. He was about to look up the 54th hexagram, the one that the 38th changed into; when the man returned. Talo got his coat and started for the door. He did not suspect that the prophecy applied to himself and not to The Man.

Talo, drink in hand, had been cornered by a supercilious young graduate student and was obliged to listen to her insipid conversation. "So you see," she was saying, "the part about the peach means that he'll have to eat fruit to relieve the constipation characteristic of old age." *Jesus Christ*, thought Talo, *No wonder I went to the Low Section. At least it's real there. Hell, even the bullshit's real.* He paused a moment and bit his lip. *What am I doing here anyway?*

He was reminded as he looked over the girl's shoulder and saw The Man escape into one of the first floor bedrooms. The smiled at the springing of the trap. *Sorry my friend, but the Oracle gives you not time to procrastinate.*

Thinking that he was smiling at her witty dialogue, the girl graced him with another of her theories. All Talo could do was grab another drink off of a passing tray and hope that his plan would justify this torment.

The people were oppressing. He had to get away. Rest. Needed a place to rest. He slid into the dim room, put his head back against the door, and relished the moment of peace. But when he opened his eyes, he noticed a girl lying on the bed. With a sigh, he reached for the doornob. She got up then and said, "Don't leave," in a voice he was compelled to

obey. She left the bed and walked slowly over to him. Looking into her eyes made him want to weep. But then she began touching him in places and in ways he had never known he had wanted to be touched. By the time he realized that this was Aleah, the empath's daughter, he was carried away on a wave of passion.

He was so busy making the beast with the two backs, that he was unaware of the thumbs pressing into his carotids. As he opened his eyes just before passing out, he realized that the woman beneath him was no longer Aleah but the Bleeding Lady. *Now how I know her name*, was his thought as he passed into darkness.

His perspective suddenly changed. When next he looked upon the scene, it was from a height of several feet above the bed. He watched as The Bleeding Lady deprived the last of his brain cells of precious oxygen. He was beginning to wonder how he could be witnessing things as he was, when a hand was placed upon his shoulder. He turned and saw The Bleeding Lady's paramour floating with him.

You're dead, she said. *Don't be afraid. But you must follow me quickly, before she realizes what is happening.*

Talo looked from The Paramour, to his dying body, and back again.

Quickly, said The Paramour fearfully.

With the equivalent of a shrug, The Man followed The Paramour out of the room, through the crowd, and out of the building. Talo saw a glimmer of light at the corner of his eye, but his alcohol clouded mind attributed it to a reflection off a wine glass. Soon The Paramour and The Man were moving off planet and through space.

Where we go, asked The Man, trying to start a conversation.

To that phenomenon which manifest itself as Arcturus, she replied.

Uh . . . yeah, said The Man, deciding against conversation.

He was filled with tranquility as he moved through the blackness. All of his old fears dissipated, clearing his mind completely for the first time in his life. He was even beginning to remember . . .

There were suddenly assaulted by a storm of meteors. The Paramour quickly phased out before The Bleeding Lady became aware of her presence also. The Man was merely wondering how a meteor could harm him if he were dead. With that thought he disappeared.

He was backed up to the stone wall by a mob of people. They looked

uncertain, but were being urged on by the wild eyed woman who was leading them. "Stone him!" she screamed, picking up a small, jagged stone in her left hand. "Kill the blasphemer!" she screeched, as the stone left her hand. It struck The Man in the temple and he fell to his knees. He wiped the blood from his eyes and looked pleadingly at The Bleeding Lady. "Why?" he sobbed. In way of reply, she hurled a larger stone.

He had been knocked off of his horse by the arrow of a Welsh longbowman. The weight of his armor pinned him helplessly to the ground. He heard footsteps coming towards him through the mud and began to say a prayer from childhood. Someone opened his faceplate. He saw The Bleeding Lady smile as she rammed her broadsword into his face.

She took another bite of the green apple she was holding and called him a fool for refusing knowledge. He was finally swayed by her argument. By listening, he lost his soul. But now he knew who she was.

He was sitting beneath a Bodhi tree, finally beginning to understand. The Bleeding Lady brought forth all of the treasurers of the world to tempt him. But having divorced himself from the mundane, he only blew her a kiss and returned for awhile to a state of nonbeing.

The advancing crowd had backed her up against the stone wall. When the angered crowd began picking up stones, she started to whimper. But then The Man pushed his way through the mob to the front. He turned to them and dispersed them with their own sins. He walked towards The Bleeding Lady, but she started screaming and ran down the narrow street.

She shifted to a shorter frequency and plowed through the crystal ball. He followed, the color of saffron. He finally caught up to her somewhere over the North Pole and began to sap her energy. As she passed from infrared into the radio region, she began to scream.

She was standing on a street corner with a small caliber pistol pointed at his midsection. He kissed her gently on the lips. She screamed

one last time and threw herself in front of a passing bus. The Paramour was driving.

He walked up the bus's three steps and took The Paramour by the hand saying, "Let me make you whole." She followed him off and stood with him over The Bleeding Lady. The thoroughly astonished passengers could only watch as The Man gently picked The Bleeding Lady up in his arms and the three beings vanished.

Being an orthodox iconoclast, Talo didn't like funerals. Especially the one he had just come from. He threw off his coat and went to the refrigerator to get a beer. As he sat down at the kitchen table, he noticed the hexagram that had approved his trap. Then he realized that he had never looked up the second hexagram. He pulled the I Ching from his pocket and read the interpretation of the 54th hexagram.

Kuei Mei, the Marrying Maiden. "Action will be evil and in no way advantageous." He sat back, closed his eyes, and indulged in a moment of self-pity. Not knowing what else to do, Talo took out his coins to consult the oracle. "What do I do now?" he sighed.

The eighth hexagram, Pi, Union, was forced with a moving line in the first position. "The subject is seeking union with its object," said the oracle. "There will be good fortune after initial difficulties. *Yeah. I'd call death an initial difficulty*, thought Talo. *But what do you mean union? I never know what you mean.* "What do you mean, damn you!" he yelled, as he threw the book across the kitchen. He cradled his head in his hands and did not notice as someone picked the book off the floor.

"Talo," the Man said gently.

"What!" Talo yelled, jumping up so violently that the table overturned. "Jesus Christ!" he exclaimed, when he saw who it was.

"That's quite correct, my friend."

"We just buried you this afternoon," continued Talo. "Look, I wouldn't have buried you if I'd known you weren't dead," he said, as he took a bottle of gin from one of the cabinets.

"Sit down Talo," The man said, as he uprighted a chair. "This isn't the body you buried. This form is just something I put together from some atoms that were cluttering up your living room."

Talo didn't feel the catcus needles as he gulped down the last of the gin.

"Here's someone I want you to meet," The Man said, producing

The Paramour.

Talo wasn't sure if it was merely a result of the alcohol, but he could have sworn he was looking at himself. Not that he resembled the woman in front of him. But there was something that only his empathic powers allowed him to see that convinced him that he and the woman were the same being.

"Correct again, Dad," The Man said, knowing the other's thoughts. "The Bleeding Lady—my wife, mother, and soon to be my daughter—split you and submerged me in order to gain dominion. But she's powerless now, Father. And she's on her way to a new start, just as you will be when the two of you are one again. Maybe this time, she will be able to fulfill her own reality and not be swayed by that of these humans we serve."

It was then that The Man, who was not a man, touched Talo's forehead and took his essence from him. The body that had been called Talo slumped lifelessly back in the chair. Wanting to preserve her own identity, The Paramour began to phase out. But The Man took her hand and she was only able to follow him.

The Man stood watching Aleah as she slept. Now forming within her womb were The Bleeding Lady and the reunited paramour and Talo. *Sleep well, mother of God, he thought. In a different form I will enter your life again to help you raise our children. But now I am needed elsewhere.*

In an inn in the isolated community of Kann, are the innkeeper, two waitresses, forty-six miners, and Oslek. All but one recently resurrected from their involuntary alcoholic state.

Oslek was sprawled on the floor saying, "Clumsy Oslek." The man who was sitting next to Vadim hit him and said, "You no cause to do that." A dumbfounded Vadim then watched as he walked over to help Oslek up.

One at a time, Oslek thought. One at a time.