

## Chapter 1

“It’s all the same. Every day I wake up, shower, get ready, eat breakfast, drive to work—work my job—drive home, eat dinner, maybe watch a movie, drink a beer or something, and finally sleep. Wash, rinse; repeat. Even the weekends have lost their flavor. What happened? I had dreams! I had expectations! I went to college! But here’s my lame excuse of a life.” Jack sighed, as he explained his feelings to a psychologist. Rain splattered on the window panes of the corner office. Sometimes it helps to have a conversation with a professional about the problems of life.

“What would you like to do to overcome those feelings?” the psychologist asked.

“Well that’s the thing, I don’t know! I still want to apply for graduate school but that would require more loans. I don’t like my job—it feels beneath me. I want to do more, but I don’t know how. On the bright side, I guess my coworkers are alright. I wish there was something more to life than just this.” he said, emphasizing his frustration with a circular hand gesture.

“Last time you mentioned you were seeing someone, are you still seeing her?” he asked.

“Vicky? Well no, not really. I’m ‘too serious’ she said. I spend too much time ‘questioning the meaning of life’ and how she doesn’t want a relationship with a ‘cynic.’ That was last Tuesday, and I haven’t talked to her since. She was superficial anyway.”

“And how do you feel about what she said? Do you think you’re too cynical?” he asked.

Jack frowned and shrugged his shoulders. “I probably am. I guess this sort of thing happens when you work in a call center and listen to other people bitch and complain all day. Life seems to lose its sense of meaning—Jesus Doc, my life is a page right out of *A Catcher in the Rye!*” he said as he faked a cynical smile. “Have you ever read that novel?”

“I can’t say I have.” the psychologist said, and he thought, *“I hear enough problems during the day from my patients; I don’t want to read about it in my spare time.”*

“Oh.” Jack only said and thought, *“how are you a psychologist without reading that book, I thought that’s standard reading or something? Odd.”*

“Are you getting enough sleep?” the psychologist asked.

“Yeah I guess so. But when I wake up, I still feel exhausted. As if I didn’t sleep at all. Which reminds me, I’ve been having bizarre dreams again, like the kind I used to have as a kid, you know, after the accident? Not every night, but almost every night, it’s the same dream.”

“Is it a nightmare?”

“It’s disturbing enough to wake me up.”

“What happens in your dream?”

“I’m lying in a narrow bed. There’s a dim light directly overhead. I crawl out of bed and look to my left and see identical beds occupied by other people. I look to my right and there are just as many beds and people. Everyone else is asleep except for me.” There are thousands and thousands of beds that disappears into a thick haze in every direction I look.”

“I hear something—or someone—and every step it makes vibrates the beds surrounding me. I turn to look and discover a set of giant golden eyes staring at me through the haze and I have the impression that whatever it is knows me—really knows me—as if it knows my thoughts.”

“The golden eyes emerge from the shadows and I’m pretty sure it’s a dragon. Tall, scaly, massive, but those eyes beaming down at me! I turn around and run in the opposite direction.”

“I scream at the other people, ‘Wake up! Wake up!’ but no one moves. I look back over my shoulder to look for the dragon, but I trip and fall into blackness.”

“Normally I wake up when I’m free falling, but this time I didn’t. Instead I crash on the dirt floor of a large cage—hard. The cage has rusty cross bars and I’m not alone. Something is in the cage with me and it’s not the golden eyed dragon, it’s something far worse and I’m scared because whatever it is, feels evil.”

“I look and there’s a demonic looking man in black and red robes. I try to scream for help, but I can’t. His face is dark and twisted and he’s laughing at

me. His laughter is sick and maniacal. I back up against the bars of the cage but there's nowhere to go and I'm trapped. The man approaches and reaches out for me with his long sickly hands."

"Suddenly out of nowhere the golden eyed dragon returns and is hovering over the cage and flapping its ginormous wings."

"The man hisses, 'no, this one is mine!' and lunges for me, but before he reaches me the dragon engulfs the cage with fire. The shadow man screams, I'm burning alive and in pain, and that's when I wake up."

*Beep-Beep!*

The internal phone rings in Jack's headset indicating a new caller is on the line. A profile pops up on his computer monitor and he sets down his doodle pad. Jack is sitting in one of a hundred phone bank cubicles.

"Hi thanks for calling, this is Jack, may I have your full name please?"

"Monica Lopez" the caller said.

"Ms. Lopez, for security purposes may I also have the last four of your social?"

"1626" she answered.

"Thanks, and how can I help?"

"Why have I been charg'd with three overdraft fees?! Dat's my money and I want it back!"

*"It's going to be a long day,"* Jack thought to himself. "Yes and let's find out why."

Jack finished the call and took several more regarding issues or problems that people were having with their bank.

Working at the call center is not a bad job, someone has to do it, and the benefits are surprisingly good for what it is; however, Jack longs for a more satisfying career, and more than a just a job at a call center phone bank.

*Beep-Beep!*

“Hi thanks for calling, this is Jack, can I have your first and last name please?” No profile pops up on the monitor. “*Great, I hope the system isn’t down again.*” he thought.

“Jack—listen to what I’m about to tell you.” A feminine voice said on the end. All voices are different, albeit most have certain underlying traits and accents in relation to their geographical location and social classing. Unlike the rest, however, her voice was unique, with a sense of royalty, but Jack couldn’t place the accent.

“Yes Ma’am? Can I have your name please?”

“Jack, your life is in danger. Stay out of the shadows.” she warned.

“I’m sorry, but are you threatening me?”

“No. Don’t go anywhere that has a negative vibe. Listen to your inner intuition.”

“Is this a joke?”

“No Jack Ross, this isn’t a joke. Just remember to stay out of the shadows and whatever you do, don’t get high tonight.” she said.

“How do you know my last name? Who are...?” Jack started to ask, but the caller was gone. *That was different. Did it really happen, or is it starting again?* Jack worried.

Marcus, one of Jack’s coworkers and close friend, approached from behind and Jack nearly jumped out of his chair. Marcus laughed. “Shit bro didn’t mean to startle ya, something up?”

“Oh, um, no; I’m okay. Just a really weird call is all.”

“Tell me about it, seems like all the weirdoes call on Halloween. Speaking of which, you coming to Rachel’s warehouse party tonight?” Marcus asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t have a costume.” Jack said.

“Don’t be lame bro. Just throw on an old shirt and fake blood. Ya can’t go wrong with a zombie dude,” and he leaned in, whispering, “plus I’ve got some dope herb that you’ve *gotta* try.”

Jack momentarily thought about it. He didn’t have anything else to do and no girlfriend. It is Halloween after all.

“Okay, sure why not. Maybe I’ll bring some whisky. “I’ll come over to your place when I’m ready.”

“Cool bro. I’ll be ready by eight.”

“Right on, see you then.”

Jack thought about the mysterious caller. *“How did the caller know my last name? Did I say my last name? Maybe the call was a prank and someone in the center crank called. That would explain why the computer didn’t generate the*

*caller's profile. That could happen right? But if so, why would she say, 'don't get high tonight'? This is too uncanny.'*

Jack handled the rest his work day with the typical call routine; some people wanted their balances, others needed to transfer funds, some called to report they had lost their debit card and needed a replacement, and of course, the occasional irate caller asking if the bank could waive overdraft fees. (*Why should the bank reward people for poor money management?*)

Jack stopped at a state liquor store after work. It was raining again, and he pulled up his jacket collar around the nape of his neck as he crossed the parking lot from his car. He passed the double glass doors and barred windows and once inside, hurried to the whisky section. "*Hello Jameson.*" he thought and selected the familiar green bottle of blended Irish whisky goodness.

On the way to the cash register, a new selection of imports diverted his attention. *Absente—Absinthe Refined*. The liqueur box had a distorted Van Gogh with three heads printed on the front and a free sugar cube spoon included. Jack picked up the Absente, looked to the Jameson, looked back at the Absente, and put the Jameson down on the shelf.

He was a man on a mission, determined to drink and forget about work, ex-girlfriends, and the mundane problems of his boring life.

Marcus answered his apartment door for Jack. "Nice outfit bro, but what are you, a cowboy?" he asked, jokingly.

Jack was wearing a black felt bowler, vest, wrist gizmo with gears, and a holstered steampunk blaster. “Don’t tell me you’ve never heard of steampunk.” Jack responded, as he walked in from the rain.

“Oh, is that what you call *that*? And to think that some people call me a nerd. I thought you said you didn’t have a custom?”

“I lied, sue me. And what are you supposed to be?” Jack retorted.

“John Doe.” Marcus grinned.

Jack chuckled. “Alright Mr. Doe and guess what I found at the liquor store?” he said as he proudly displayed the bottle of Absinthe.

“Sweet bro, I say we start the night with a round of shots.” Marcus said.

“Right and we should probably call a taxi.” Jack said.

Taking turns, they poured the green absinth over sugar cubes, added a splash of water to each glass, and enjoyed the intoxicating and complex flavors of spirited anise and wormwood. They complained about work, talked politics, and—after three glasses of absinthe a piece—buzzed and en route to Rachel’s warehouse party in the backseat of a taxi.

Cover at the ‘private party’ was twenty a head, but only ten if you brought something to share. The twenty Jack paid was worth it. The warehouse owned by Rachel’s uncle was packed with people, most of whom Jack didn’t know. There was plenty to drink—beer (in chilled kegs), vodka Jell-O shots, a mystery punch that tasted remarkably close to jungle juice, and shots called zombie-aid. Halloween themed snacks, chips and dip, and whatever else people had brought

for munchies filled a few tables next to the beer and alcohol. A local band played rock covers and Jack thought their version of *Poor some Sugar on Me* was surprisingly good, but then again, he was far from sober. He mingled around, partied, danced, and had a few more drinks. It wasn't quite the rave he had hoped for, but it was the next best thing.

Jack had nearly forgotten about the mystery caller when Marcus approached and opened up his palm to disclose a tightly rolled joint. "Say bro, want to step out back and smoke this with me?" he asked.

"What are we waiting for, let's go." Jack responded.

Out back on a loading dock, they fired up.

"Oh wow, this *is* really good." Jack said, straining his voice and trying not to cough, passed the 'J' to Marcus.

"Yeah, it's tits."

"Okay man, I think it was you and I got to ask, but who did you have crank call my line this morning?" Jack asked.

"What are ya talking about?" Marcus asked back.

"Don't bull shit me, you know something."

"Want to fill me in? I don't have a clue what you're talking about." Marcus asked, puzzled—as he blew his drag and passed the 'J' back to Jack.

"A woman with an accent I've never heard before called my line, she knew my full name and warned me to stay out of the shadows and that whatever I do, 'don't get high,' is what she said. It was weird." Jack said.

"Bro, that's a sick joke, but it wasn't me."

Jack looked skeptical.

“I’m serious it wasn’t me.” Marcus said.

“Sure, but if not you, then I wonder who?” Jack said, as he passed the joint back to Marcus.

Suddenly something moved out of the shadows and Jack tensed up, but what emerged were only a couple zombie dudes holding hands. “Here’s your boogie men out of the shadows, scary.” Marcus and Jack laughed. Marcus puffed and passed what remained of the joint back to Jack, “Do you want the last hit? I have to pee.”

“Yeah sure,” Jack said, as he took it and inhaled. “*This weed is fantastic... must be Sativa.*” he thought.

Around the corner in the ally, Marcus supported his weight with one hand against the cool brick wall and held his manhood with the other. The ally was lit by a single yard light on the corner of the drab warehouse. The light flickered off. “Oh great,” Marcus murmured to himself.

Something moved in the shadows and made a *Swish-thump* sound. “Jack? Is that you?” Marcus asked. *Swish-thump*. He tucked away and zipping up his jeans, turned around. Marcus looked up to the abnormally tall man shrouded in a hooded cloak. “Jesus Christ dude. What are you sneaking up on guy peeing for?” Marcus asked.

It said nothing and took a giant step forward. What little light trickling into the alley highlighted the face of the cloaked man, but it wasn’t a man at all. Under the cloak hid a ghoulish skeletal face with dark holes for eyes.

“Oh my god...” Marcus said and tripped backwards. The cloaked entity lunged.

“AGHHHHH!”

Jack flicked away the dead roach and heard the deathly scream.

“Marcus?” Jack went around the corner and entered the dark ally. He couldn’t see a thing. “Marcus?” he asked again as he waited for his eyes to adjust. He could barely make out the outline of a dumpster and few crates to his right. “Marcus, where are you?”

“Over here.” he said, or at least what sounded like Marcus, but his voice was gurgled.

“Where? I can’t see you.”

“Keep coming, just a little farther.” Marcus said.

Jack approached. Marcus stood just beyond the dumpster. “Real funny with the scream Marcus, I’m so scared...”

But Marcus didn’t look right—he looked contorted and limp. His hand twitched and flopped as he waived for Jack to approach. Jack realized what he had neglected all night, a sense that something was wrong, that something wasn’t—*right*—and the feeling sat heavy in his chest. The hairs on the nape of his neck stood out. He wondered what was wrong and that’s when he saw the cloaked entity standing behind Marcus.

“Oh shit...” Jack said as Marcus and the cloaked entity moved out from the shadows. A bone white and claw-like hand gripped over the top of Marcus’s

head with its fingers buried deep into each eye socket. Marcus's head looked like a bowling ball. The cloaked entity stepped forward and Marcus jerked in step. Jack was frozen solid. "The master will be pleased," it said through Marcus, who was only inches away from Jack, "he's been waiting for you." With that the cloaked entity reached out and wrapped its boney white fingers around Jack's throat.

The cloaked entity released Marcus and his lifeless corpse collapsed to ground. "You fucking bastard" Jack managed to squeak out. He tried to fight and kick but his efforts had no effect against the cloaked entity, who only tightened its grip around Jack's neck as it placed the palm of its other boney hand on Jack's forehead. Jack's exposed skin started to burn, but it wasn't a fire burn, more like the burning coldness of solid carbon dioxide. Jack screamed in pain; locked in the crushing, vice-like grip of the cloaked entity.

A greenish glow sparkled around Jack and the cloaked entity. His head throbbed in pain, and, in sync with the cloaked entity, he started to fade out of existence.

Just when Jack thought he was going to die, a woman appeared in the alley. Tall, mysterious, and with a clear and bombastic voice, she said, "Let him go Nihili."

The fade out from existence stopped, and the cloaked entity—having lost its concentration—turned its head and screeched in her direction.

“Outstanding, have it your way.” she said as she raised her right arm. A brilliant light flashed from the end of her outstretched arm, vaporizing the cloaked entity. Jack collapsed, unconscious.

The mysterious women walked over and checked Jack’s pulse. Glancing around to make sure they were alone, she placed her other hand on his chest and in a blue flash the two disappeared.

Jack woke only to find himself in a bed, in an endless row of beds, in a place he frequently visits when he dreams. He yawned, scratched his head, and moved out of bed when the person in the bed next to his stirs awake.

The person turned to face Jack and its Marcus, but with two empty eye sockets and his cheeks are streaked with dried blood. Jack gasped, “Marcus? What happened?”

“Dapper, I know. But never mind my eyes. The master is coming for you bro. Sooner or later he’ll get you, just like he got me. Don’t become close with anyone, because it only gives *him* a chance to get to you through them, just like he tried to get to you through me. And now look at me—I’m a dead, eyeless freak.”

“I’m sorry.” Jack sympathetically expressed.

“Hey bro, it’s not your fault. Well, okay, maybe it is your fault, after all someone did warn you, but I can’t hold that against you. Don’t trust anyone—especially *her*,” and with that Marcus pointed in the direction behind Jack. He turned around and looked at the golden eyed dragon.

“Better watch your back Jack.” And with that Marcus leapt forward from the bed and snapped Jack’s neck from behind. Jack fell to the floor. Marcus grinned and with a gurgled voice, said, “Wakie, wakie.”

“Jesus,” Jack mumbled as he jerked straight up in bed. “*What happened last night? That was one hell of a dream, but I don’t remember coming home.*” He rubbed his eyes and realized that he was not in his bed, or for that matter, his apartment. The bed was white with a white duvet. The room had three solid white walls that looked similar to plastic. Matching white furniture, two lounge chairs, a sofa, and a round coffee table were in one corner of the room. The entire room was white with the exception of the fourth wall comprised of solid glass.

Jack stumbled out of bed and walked to the glass wall. On the other side was a Japanese Zen garden. He wasn’t sure if it was a Japanese Zen garden, only that there was a blossoming cherry tree and several other exotic plants, shrubs, and trees. “*I’m still dreaming,*” he thought.

“Glad to see you’re awake. And no, you’re not dreaming Jack.” a woman said. Startled, Jack turned around quickly.

The woman (who wasn’t there before) was wearing a fitted, long sleeve navy blue tunic with yellow outlays and stitched trim. The collar was t-shaped with a mid-cut front and slacks that matched and she was attractive. Jack realized he was wearing a similar tunic, but a solid light gray without the fancy trim.

“Tea?” she offered.

“Am I—am I dead? Who are you?” Jack asked and still confused, “Wait, and how did you know what I was thinking?”

The woman smiled. “Never mind the latter for right now. As for the former, you’re quite lucky to be alive. I’m Athena.” she said and slightly bowed.

Jack, awkwardly, returned the social greeting, “Thanks, I guess.”

Athena walked over and handed Jack a cup of tea. “Please have a seat and drink this, you’ll feel better. I promise.” Jack sat in the lounge and took the cup from Athena, but he didn’t drink.

“So last night really happened?” he asked.

“What occurred last night definitely happened; it was an unfortunate trans-dimensional phenomenon,” she paused, “and I’m sorry about your friend. I was unable to prevent a Nihili from expunging him; however, I did warn you.”

“So, you were the one who called me.” Jack trailed off and said nothing for a moment and looked down at the cup of tea. He took a sip, which was surprisingly good, but he was solemnly thinking about Marcus.

“That thing, a Nihili, was controlling Marcus like a puppet on a stick. What was it?” he asked.

“A Nihili, or better known in your mythology as the grim reaper, is a death machine sent from another universe to do someone else’s bidding. It’s very uncommon to see a Nihili in your world, but when you do, the results are never in your favor.” she said factually.

“I can’t believe this. This is crazy. The grim ripper? Another Universe? Impossible!” Jack rejected.

“I can understand your disbelief, but as phenomenally improbable as recent events may appear, they are most certainly real, and there is much, much more than just your universe and existence on Earth. I’m not entirely certain who sent that Nihili after you, but I have a hunch. Tell me, what did it say to you?” Athena asked.

“Something about ‘the master will be pleased’ and then it said ‘he’s been waiting for you.’ What does it mean?”

“The Master? Are you sure?” she asked alarmed.

“Yes.” Jack snorted.

“Incredible, he’s been powerless and dormant for centuries. How did he regain power?” she paused and closed her eyes. Jack waited with curious intent. She responded to her own question and said, “Unless... he found another source, yes of course—oh that tricky bugger. Someone else must have helped him, I don’t know who—yet—but I know someone who does.”

Athena sprung to her feet.

“Come along Jack.”

He stood up but didn’t follow. “Right, sure, I’ll just follow you. And I suppose you’re going to tell me you have a space ship and that we have to track down some demonic dude who lives on Mars.”

“Not exactly no, specifically we’re,”

Jack interrupted, “You’re pulling my leg. This has got to be a reality TV show. That’s the only reasonable explanation. Where’s the hidden cameras!” he demanded. Athena calmly sat back down.

Jack spun around nearly dumping his tea and on the verge of hysteria, said, “You know I don’t appreciate being abducted without consent. Is Marcus in on this? He’s not dead; he’s probably in the other room laughing about this right now. Come on, that was one hell of a scare last night and I have no idea how I got here. Did you guys drug me? Will I get paid for this? I don’t want to participate unless I’m compensated. And where’s my iPhone?” What show is,” he stopped in mid-sentence and threw aside *his* iPhone in utter disbelief. Shocked, he starred at his iPhone, which, only seconds before had been a tea cup.

“How did?” he started to ask, but only managed to point at the iPhone on the plush white rug as he looked up to Athena and then back at his iPhone.

“Again, I understand your disbelief, but this isn’t reality TV, Marcus is unfortunately dead, and there is someone very powerful and dangerous who is after you.”

Jack collapsed in the lounge. Nearly in tears he asked, “Where am I? How did the teacup become my iPhone?”

“Without divulging into the intricate physics of how your iPhone appeared, and to put it simply, you wanted your iPhone and it appeared.” with that Athena smiled, “Welcome to my Sanctuary. It selectively reads your mind and whatever you objectively need, the sanctuary apparatus for your use and benefit.

Thirsty? A glass of water will appear. Hungry? Just imagine what you want to eat and the food will appear on the table. Of course, if you enjoy cooking, you can always use my galley.”

“You see Jack, we’re not on Earth. In fact, we’re not in the same Universe. I know this a lot to take in and I apologize; usually I gradually prepare people to avoid the exasperating shock of this alternate existence. However, the self-proclaimed ‘master’ is after you and you’re not safe without my help.”

“Why?” Jack asked.

“Tell me, do you ever have dreams that come true?”

“Yes, but,”

“I see, and do you sometimes have a sense of Deja-vu about events or places you go?”

“Yes, from time to time.”

“That’s because you can see into other moments of time and space.”

“How?”

“Walk with me,” Athena stood up and walked towards the glass wall which instantaneously opened to the Zen Garden. Intrigued, Jack followed.

“What you think of time isn’t linear—it’s a complicated affair. A point in Spacetime is relative to every other point in the universe; past, present, and future—all of existence—and not just your universe, but multiverses.”

“Right now, we’re in a bubble universe that is only accessible to me and whomever I choose to bring along.”

“In the great multiverses of the cosmos, different events and times exist simultaneously. I’ll explain Spacetime once you’re capable of understanding relativity and hyper-topological-dimensional calculus. But for now, you don’t need to understand the messy details of Spacetime, multiverses, or trans-dimensional phenomenon.”

“Quintessentially, you have a gift Jack—an ability to peer into different times and other universes. That’s why the master wants you. I have to stop him, and at the same time, protect you from harm.”

“Why? What are you?” he asked suspiciously.

“Good question Jack. I guard the Spacetime continuum from other—*sentient beings*—that desire to alter Spacetime for their own personal gain or amusement.” she paused and looking at Jack from under the blossoming Cherry tree, a hint of gold flashed in her eyes, “I’m a Dragon.”