

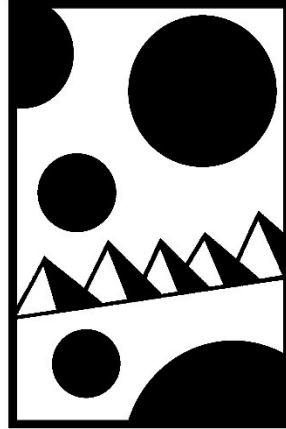
# The University of Mars

Michael D. Smith

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by Michael D. Smith

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For my wife Nancy,  
so much a part of my writing journey  
including the long gestation of this novel



## CHAPTER ONE

### The Confessions of St. Carnation

Monday, July 20, 2065

A fuzzy baby rhinoceros curled up in tall yellow grass by a pond at dawn. Zeke adjusted the poster as Earl lurched in from the back room. “Get those damn DreamPosters unloaded yet, mate?”

Zeke swiveled on his stool and pointed to the array of baby animals dreaming about the GodFlower. “Sure, man. The displays are all set up and the rolled ones are right there.”

Earl snorted through a stack of checks; Zeke recoiled from the rancid beer breath. “Piss on it,” Earl muttered. “Where’s that freakin’ St. Sebastian check? Damn thing was due three damn days ago.”

“I just got a call from ’em an hour ago. Said it was in the mail.”

“Aw, *crap* on it, Zeke. You *know* they’re a bunch of goddamn liars. They think private schools are immune somehow. Damn ’em to hell!” Earl stomped back to the storeroom, calling over his shoulder: “Ring those mothers back up and tell ’em we need the five percent late fee or we’ll cut their goddamn balls off!”

“Uh, hey, there,” said a skinny young man with placid blue eyes and a wispy mustache, setting thirty books on the counter.

“Hey.” Zeke set a bookmark in *The Confessions of St. Carnation* and got up from his stool. This was the same guy who’d tried to convert him last week. Where had he said he was from? Plasma Divinity?

Zeke scanned the books. At least this stupid register had a scanner. The Holy Craps allowed that much, at least. He broke from Plasma Divinity’s searching eyes. This jerk had badgered him for half an hour last week. Thank God there was a line behind him now.

“That’ll be \$569.94,” Zeke said. The divinity student wrote out a check. A paper check. Zeke still couldn’t believe that. The tech rules here were insane compared to Chicago, and that was saying a lot.

“Thanks, man.” He punched it up on the register and added the slip to his pile for tomorrow’s deposit.

“Uh, listen,” the student said, holding up a glossy paperback, “I think you’d really like *The Devils Crawling Inside*. It’s a great introduction to everything *wrong* with our souls.”

“Uh, right, right, I’ll put it on my list.” Zeke slid the books into an OverLord One bag and caught the eye of the girl next in line.

“No, really, remember what we were talking about last week? I was *so* disturbed to hear about the state of your soul, sir.”

“No, really, there’s no trouble, everything’s fine. Uh, next?”

“Yes, just this,” said the girl behind the student, laying down a rolled rhinoceros poster. Cute. Definitely. These Aussie accents were so cool.

“Well, that’s good to hear,” the student said, elbowing past the girl for his books. “We’ll talk more next time. I’d be interested in the American point of view, especially after all that mess in Texas. We’re so lucky to have the UWC, we really are.” He disappeared into the mall.

Zeke rang up the rhinoceros. A woman bought several UnitedWisdom greeting cards and the ever-popular *The Carnationist Cosmology*. A guy with a lopsided face and wild long hair set several books on the counter: *The Benevolence of the Carnationist Police State*, *Techno-Disaster and Carnationism*, *The Taoist Uprising in China and What We Did About It*, *Reaming the*

*Texans, 2057-2059, and Now That We Have World Government.*

“Hey, I was just looking at *The Taoist Uprising* the other day,” Zeke said. “I’m surprised it got published. It’s much more favorable to the Chinese than you’d think.”

“Uh, maybe. I mean, no, uh, not really,” the guy said, looking over his shoulder and shoving several Australian twenties across the counter. “Hell, no, I mean, look, I’ve got this Chinese history class, and that’s all, really, please. No offense, really. Look, I’m in a hurry.” He grabbed his change and rushed out.

“Wow, man,” Zeke said, then turned to the six-foot-three Earl struggling up with six boxes of books. “Say, need some--”

Earl let the boxes slam to the floor. One slid sideways and sent the UnitedWisdom rack screeching across the red tile. Everyone in the store looked up. “Damn, damn, *damn*. Clean this goddamn crap up, will you mate?”

Was Earl already drunk? It was only 3:30. Zeke came over to set the rack upright and knelt to gather dozens of cards and envelopes.

“Zeke,” Earl said from the counter. “When you’re through with that crap I’d like to see you for a sec.”

Zeke jammed the last bent cards into their slats. “*Man ...*”

“These checks. You’ve got to enter the voucher number on each one to jibe with the ticket.”

“What numbers? What ticket?”

“Good God, you mean to stand there and tell me you haven’t been writing out the *tickets*?”

“What tickets?”

“The *tickets*! The damn *tickets*, Zeke!”

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, that’s obvious! You say you’re a college student, huh? You think you know more than me about running this goddamn shop, huh?”

“What’re you talking about, man?”

“Man, man, now he calls me *man*. Look, *man*, for one thing, you’re supposed to write up every single *goddamn purchase* that comes through this *goddamn register* on the *goddamn ticket pad here*.” Earl flung open a drawer and pulled out a mealy carbon ticket pad. “And you write the *entire goddamn thing down* and you *stamp it with a number*. Where the hell’s that numbering machine? Whatcha do with it?”

Earl tore through the drawers behind the counter, flinging rulers and staplers to the floor, finally ripping the cash drawer out and yanking the numbering machine from the rear tray.

“Wow, I never knew what that was for.”

“Dammit, Zeke, there’s *no* way we can keep track of our *goddamn crap* unless we have a copy of the *ticket*, with the proper *number*. Crap the Carnation, how long has this been going on?”

“Well, nobody’s ever told me about the numbers *or* the tickets.”

“You’ve been working here *three weeks* and every transaction through this register while you’ve been here has been *screwed*? Look here--see, Sally wrote all her tickets down yesterday. Just like *so*. Goddammit to *hell*, Zeke! You mean Irma never told you about the tickets?”

“Uh, no ...”

“*Goddammit!*” Earl ran his fingers through the ticket book, then through his thinning hair. “Sally’s keeping records, so is Susan, but not you or Irma! Dammit, Irma knows better!”

“Well, maybe she realizes it’s not necessary.”

“Damn you, Zeke, it’s *absolutely* necessary! Irma’s just a lazy twit, and now she’s taught

that to you! Don't you *dare* try to tell me what's necessary or not in my own goddamn shop! We're *ruined!*"

"Aw, screw this, man."

"*What the hell you say to me?*"

"I said, screw all this *crap*. This is a stupid way of doing all this. All these stupid numbers and checks. We had *electronic money* in Chicago. Nobody had to mess with all these stupid checks and tickets."

"Well, mate, the Holy Craps won't let us *have* electronic money here. *Our* goddamn cash register Era Code is 1996. I don't give a flip what Chicago's is. Get me? So we do the best we can! And we keep proper goddamn records or the goddamn business goes goddamn *under*. Do you understand me?"

Zeke looked out to the echoing shopping mall. He fought the urge to toss a few Carnationist propaganda records through the windows and call it a day. The Craps had wound this damn country back a hundred years. Vinyl record albums. Handwritten checks.

Earl rifled through the register. "Well, at least goddamn Irma wrote in the notebook of items sold."

"Yeah, I do that part."

"Well, maybe it isn't so bad. Just hafta spend a few damn days comparing our deposit slips with what we sold that day. Hafta look up all the prices over again, though. Zeke, don't ever forget to use the damn tickets again!"

"Excuse me," said a girl moving past Zeke to the counter. She held several Sammy Zarathustra and the Shades records and a book, *Carnationist Contraception*. She was tiny, with long oily light brown hair falling over little breasts which threatened to slide out of her low-cut green dress. She carried a giant purse from which protruded a sketchbook, its pages wrinkled with bright watercolors.

Wow, a sensitive girl artist. She had that aura. Zeke bet she drew flowers in that sketchbook or wrote poems about all the guys she went to bed with. Sensitive artistic poems.

She presented her purchases to Earl, who cocked his head and motioned Zeke over.

"You ring this one up, mate," Earl said, pushing the ticket book and the numbering machine at Zeke. "Let's see what you've learned today."

"Uh, sure, man," Zeke said, then, to the girl: "This be all?"

"Yes, thank you," she said, pulling a floppy checkbook from her purse. Zeke carefully wrote down the names of her purchases on the items record, then on the ticket, and then he stamped her check and the ticket. Her check designated her as Tansley Harrison of 2245 Creamery Lane, wherever that was. Zeke didn't know Sydney well yet. He probably couldn't find this shopping center on a map.

"Those Sammy Zarathustra records are pretty strange," he ventured. "I heard a couple of 'em back in Chicago."

The girl glared as she shoved the records and book into her purse. "Listen, this is *real music*," she said, hurrying out the door.

Earl leaned against the counter. "C'mon, Zeke, don't alienate the customers." He grinned and dug Zeke's ribs. "Not much meat on that one, mate."

Zeke hid his smile. "Uh, right."

"She works down on the second level at the candle shop. Her father was Randy Harrison. He owned several shops here until he flew his jet into a mountain a couple years ago. Her mother got most of the money and took it to Europe with her. But Tansley inherited the candle store.



Between you and me, she's a ball of snot. She's not old enough to manage that shop by herself, but she won't hire any help. We all know it'll go under any day now."

"Huh." Well, at least she had a nice accent. He checked the hideous clock above the door: 3:50. Two hours and ten minutes to go.

Beyond the glass doors the vast SongMall thundered. Strobe lights arced through blues and purples and reds. Zeke shuddered.

"So how's St. Carnation going?" Earl said, pointing to *The Confessions*. "Think you'll finish it by tomorrow?"

## CHAPTER TWO

### Underneath the Entire City of Sydney

“Well, I’m getting there,” Zeke said, pointing to his six-hundred-page copy on the counter. He could feel Earl sizing up the yellow bookmark a quarter of the way in.

“Huh. Report’s due tomorrow, you know.”

“Yeah. But I’m really warming up on it, and like one big push tonight oughta do it, y’know?”

“Look, mate, the Craps don’t like to give extensions. And it better be the full ten pages. You gotta have it tomorrow morning before we open, so I can walk it over to ’em, get it stamped and in the mail.”

“Yeah, sure, man.” Was this guy serious? Did he really care about the regs? Zeke was only reading three pages an hour on that mother. He knew he’d never finish it. Then the paper, on a *manual typewriter*. What was the Era Code for typewriters in Australia anyway? 1940? Sheesh. Maybe they wouldn’t care if it was rough draft with a lot of typos. Zeke could crib stuff from the intro and spew something out in a couple hours.

“Well, it’s good you chose one of Carnation’s shorter books, mate. And look, I know it seems unfair. All Sally and Irma and Susan had to do was type a couple hymns up, but hell, Zeke, you’re my Sacred Clerk and they’re just pre-clerical.”

“I know that, man, it’s okay, I’ll get the report done.”

“And especially since you’ve got that year of college from the States. All I can say is, we have to follow the letter here. All I need is for some Crap functionary to decide our case is special and ream me for it.”

Zeke shook his head in wonder. This guy ran an official Carnationist business, but he kept calling them Holy Craps? He definitely had balls. Maybe Zeke could use him as a character in a story. Running a Carnationist bookstore with his keg in the back room.

“You don’t know it, Zeke, but the reason I decided to hire you was the way you picked up *City of Outrageous Mindblow* and turned it round and round and said *that* was the book you’d write your Sacred Labor Report on. I knew you were the one from that moment. Bet you’re glad I switched you to *The Confessions*, huh?”

Zeke shuddered at the idea of St. Carnation’s *City*. It was such a beautiful paperback edition, but well over two thousand pages. What had he been thinking? Thank God for the shorter *Confessions*.

“Well, I’d just got off the ship that morning. I was sorta dazed, I guess.”

Earl slapped Zeke hard on the back. “You’re my man, mate, you’re my man. Just get the goddamn report done tonight and we’ll feed it to the Craps tomorrow morning and everything’ll be squared away, righto?”

“Uh ... yeah.”

“Look, Zeke, suppose you just grab your book and take a break? An official United World Carnationist break, eh, mate? Just sit out on a bench there for an hour if you like, plow through some more of it. Sounds good, huh?”

Zeke eyed the chaos outside OverLord One and flinched. “Well, if you don’t mind, maybe I could just, like, sit here and read right here. I mean, I can do it between customers and all.”

“Sure, whatever suits you. I’m sure our customers are impressed with the sight of you reading Carnation. Just make sure to get the sucker done, will ya?” He went into the back room and squatted before his keg with a plastic cup.

Couldn't they slide those damn doors shut? All those screaming kids out there, and the muzak. Zeke couldn't believe this place. Why had he come to a nightmare underground shopping mall for a job? Because it was the only thing in this country that seemed like home? What fun to work at a religion store until something else opened up, right?

But he hadn't counted on this place killing off his soul. He was supposed to sit out in that insane mess and read a book? He got lost every time he went out there. He could barely find his way back after lunch.

Earl returned from the back wiping his lips. "Anyway, sorry about the report, Zeke. We just have to do what we have to do, that's all."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Sure, people don't like having the GodFlower rammed down their goddamn throats, and that's the bloody truth. Before the Craps took over, church was like a six-pack for most people. They'd come in my store and get plastered. And that was all right by me. But now people are so full of it they could puke. That's what your West Texans did. What a bloody mess."

"Well, I really don't remember all that much about that." Zeke was still surprised by the Australian obsession with West Texas. He'd just been just a kid at the time, and in Chicago anyway. Why did people here think every American was a Texas terrorist?

"Just between you and me, Zeke, because I can tell you're an intelligent guy and know this already, they just *think* they've got the entire planet."

Zeke stared. Earl had never spoken anything this close to treason before. "Uh, well ..."

"Got the Reaming DoomBastards holding out north of us in Indonesia, they could swoop down any day, Zeke, any day. And those mothers are the *real* fanatics."

"I--I had no idea ..."

"Damn right, my man," Earl said, thumping his knuckles on the counter. "Well, nothing we can do about it, is there? Get that book read and we'll be in shape, that's all I can say."

"Sure, sure, I'm on it, man," Zeke said. He opened *The Confessions* and strained to tune out the deafening temper tantrums outside. He was underground. Trapped in this insane shopping center. There wasn't a single right angle in the entire place, and the levels were always changing, two to three to four. It was enough to drive anyone crazy. All those corridors snaking all over the place. That was how he'd gotten lost at lunch yesterday.

"You right there? Look a little *woozy*, my man. Carnation putting you to sleep again, eh?"

"I--I guess ..."

And that dream he had last night ... that the shopping center extended underneath *the entire city of Sydney*. How did he know that wasn't really true? He'd never come to the end of it, and for all he knew it might really be one big basement underneath all of Sydney. Corridors and courtyards and staircases and escalators stretched forever. When was the last time he'd even walked on the street? He just took the train to the mall and took the train back. Dark both ways. Winter in July. He hadn't seen blue sky in weeks.

How on earth had he gotten residency as an architect student? He didn't know squat about architecture, though he'd had that intro design course at Megastructure. Probably some immigration bureaucrat had noticed that Zeke had checked that on the form, so now he was in. Except that he'd dropped out of Megastructure because he couldn't stand it. He'd hated that design course. He'd come all the way here because he couldn't stand that kind of crap.

But didn't this shopping center demand an architectural resolution? Shouldn't he study this place? Rigorously and all that? Take some architecture courses at some university here? Wouldn't that be the most important contribution he could make? To what? To the human race?

What about that poem he wrote back in May, after he'd gotten stoned with Jerry and Box Barton before the CrumbleDuck concert? He'd spent two weeks and nine more poems flushing that scary stone out of his head, then deciding to chuck everything and get out. Get to Australia and write poetry. Wasn't poetry a higher calling?

"Hey, you've got a customer, Mr. Zeke," Earl said, standing back.

Zeke stood dizzily. Blurred shapes pushed in all around him. He was at his idiot OverLord One job. Customers everywhere. He was trapped.

But didn't something else have to open up for him? Somehow? With a shopping center underneath the entire city of Sydney just full of jobs?

## CHAPTER THREE

### The West Texas Gateway to Infinity

The old man looked seven feet tall to Zeke. He had wrinkled, tightly stretched skin, long frizzy silver hair, and a matted gray beard. His greasy denim had gone out of fashion decades ago. He carried a giant khaki backpack and a motorcycle helmet.

At his neck was a large blue star or cross. Zeke strained to read the tiny writing on it. The guy plunked a book down on the counter: Diamond Wotanda's heavy black *Converting Nazi Germany to the Holy Carnation Via Time Travel*.

"We--we've had a lot of calls on this book," Zeke managed. "Nazi Germany really seems to be coming back into fashion these days."

"You've read the mother?" came shovels of thick German accent.

Oh God, an actual German. Had Zeke just offended him? "Well, I just read part of the intro, really, but I have this other project to finish." He held up *The Confessions*.

The German sneered. "*That's* crap. You should read *this* book. You are familiar with the outlines of Wotanda's argument?"

"Well, maybe just a little. It's fascinating, I guess and all."

"It's *nonsense!*" the German thundered. "If future humans create a *time-traveling GodFlower Information Cloud*, tell me, if you will be so kind, *why hasn't it returned here yet?*"

Zeke fumbled the book across the scanner, vainly trying to get its barcode to register. He punched at an override code to no avail. "Well, I don't really know, I guess." Earl had moved away. "I mean, I wouldn't want to, uh, hazard an opinion, you know."

"*You are too cowardly to hazard an opinion?*"

"Well, I mean, I'm, like, just an employee here and all."

"You seriously accept Wotanda's thesis that the entire problem of evil has *already been corrected by this idiotic GodFlower cloud*? That evil has *never existed*, that to perceive evil is simply to be making a *metaphysical mistake*?"

Zeke blinked. That sounded somewhat logical. Maybe this guy wasn't such a crazy old coot. "I guess I'm really not paid to, you know, have an opinion about everything in all these books here," Zeke gasped, waving his hand at the entire bookstore but especially at Earl, over by the Sacred Relationships section and chatting up a woman with a frilly plunging neckline.

"You do not have an opinion that *this fool Wotanda* thinks some idiotic GodFlower is going to come back as an *information cloud* that will travel *backward through time*? That will *rewrite history* and cleanse all human epochs of *sin*? Do you seriously believe this nonsense?"

Zeke strained to follow the tumbling guttural singsong. He could not tear himself from the German's clear knifing eyes. "Like, whatever you say, sir."

"And to think he was once one of my most trusted lieutenants!"

"Uh, who ...?"

"Wotanda! He *assisted* me. Now his mind has turned to *mush*."

"*Assisted* you? You mean--the author?"

"Of course! What happened to his *mind*? That he could write this *trash*?"

"Well, I thought the book might be, you know, interesting, I mean, like his *other* book, y'know." But it was illegal to even hint at *The Rise and Fall of the West Texas Reich*. Who knew who might be listening? How had this old coot gotten Zeke's guard down?

"To commit *this* insanity to paper proves that everything he wrote in *Rise and Fall* was a sham from the beginning! *Damn it all to hell!* Ring this book up immediately before I puke all

over it!” He slammed the thick volume on the counter three times. The frilly woman turned, but Earl kept smiling eyes locked onto her chest.

Zeke stared at the register. “You really don’t have to buy it if it upsets you, you know.”

“Damn right it upsets me! *Wotanda!* Can you believe it? How could he write a thoroughly factual history of my revolution, and then this rambling collection of *merde*? Ring it up, ring it up! Do I look like I have all damn day?”

Zeke still couldn’t find the right keys. “No sale” seemed the most appropriate one. He hit it and the drawer hurled into his stomach. “Ooof! I guess I thought his book on the information cloud might be good because his other one was so good?” Zeke stared at the malfunctioning register. God, had he actually said? In public? He had to ring this guy up, get him out of here. What was Earl doing back there? Why wouldn’t he save Zeke? Where was Approval 443 on this mother?

“Of course Wotanda is nostalgic for the old Internet, which your Holy Craps have declared illegal, haven’t they? Except when they need it to snoop and spy on everyone. But Wotanda expects it to develop *on its own* into some *sin-cleaning information cloud!*”

*More* treason. Was this damn store monitored? Damn, the scanner was unplugged. Zeke must’ve kicked the cord out. Where was the plug?

“So you *agree* with Herr Wotanda that we shouldn’t worry about the occurrence of *any* evil whatsoever? Ja, I see it now!” the German cried. “Because this GodFlower Cloud will always travel back to the source of the evil and *instantaneously correct it*. Have I got that right? Is that how your mind works? *Your simplistic American mind?*”

“Yes!” Zeke screamed back as the man seemed to ooze over the counter to where Zeke finally plugged in the scanner. “I mean, of course not! I haven’t read the book! *How did you know I’m an American?*”

“You’re afraid to bring up Nazi Germany, aren’t you? Afraid to even *mention* the title of the book. Because you think it will insult *me*, a native German from the Saarland. Well, ask me if I give a damn!”

Zeke stood up. “Look, all I’m saying is that, yeah, I did read *The Rise and Fall*, like, like it was for school and all, y’know, but it was so good that I was interested in his *next* one.”

Idiot! *He’d just admitted everything to the cameras.*

“He told the *truth* about West Texas! He was my *loyal minister*. And then his mind breaks down! Disgusting!”

“Earl!” Zeke called. “I’m having some problems with the register!”

The German briefly scanned Earl yakking with his low-cut conquest, then whirled to Zeke. “The entire book is *about* Nazi Germany! Did you happen to use your *pitiful American mind* to read the dialogs Wotanda wrote between Hitler and the information cloud, Goering and the information cloud, and so forth?”

“N-no ...”

“Each dialogue supposedly written precisely how it would *logically have to occur*? Since the computer programs *are the result of logic*? Since Wotanda claims to prove that Carnationist Scripture is nothing less than *the computer programs for the future GodFlower Cloud*?”

“Look, I’m sorry about this register, I mean, now I can scan the book, but I can’t get 443, I just get 19, it’s a signal error of some sort!”

“And you believe that any second now the GodFlower Cloud will materialize right next to us and *correct all our sins*? In fact, that all sins have already *been* corrected? That Nazi Germany had already *been* corrected by this *idiotic Carnationist claptrap*?”

“Well, you have to admit it’s an interesting idea, in a sorta science-fictiony way, I mean.”

“*Nazi Germany will never be corrected by the GodFlower Cloud!* Do I make myself perfectly clear?”

Where was Earl? In the back room again, filling up another damn beer?

“Look, just take the book. I’ll ring it up later or something. Earl won’t mind. Please, just take it.”

The biker nodded. “I can tell you’re an American by the terrible way your mind works. You have had enough. I see you have had far too much. So good day. I will pay for this volume another time.” He jammed *Converting Nazi Germany* into his knapsack, swiped his motorcycle helmet off the counter, and tromped out of the store. Zeke stared at his bad limp. The guy stopped outside the shop, leaning against the balcony railing.

The register whined.

CONVERTING NAZI GERMANY TO THE HOLY CARNATION VIA TIME TRAVEL.  
CODE 443. APPROVED. \$35.99. CONTINUE?

CONTINUE?

CONTINUE?

“Problems with the register, mate?” came Earl’s shadow across the display. He put a key from his pocket into the side of the machine. The beeping stopped. “Next time remember to take some *actual money* from the customer.”

“He said he’d bring it sometime.” Zeke pointed out the doorway. “I’m sorry, Earl, but that guy’s *crazy*.”

Earl grinned. “Yep, Krautie has that effect on people. Don’t worry. He’ll pay up. Always in hundred-dollar bills. I’ll make sure we have some extra change on hand. Just don’t rile him is all we can do. He’s not all right in the head. A year ago he tore apart an ice cream shop downstairs. Spent a few months in the slammer for it.”

“You *know* him?”

“Sure, everybody knows him. We don’t know his real name. We just call him Krautie. Cause he’s a damn Kraut. I guess that’s why he bought that book on Nazi Germany. He just hangs out here all day. He’s a biker of some sort. Surprised you haven’t seen him before. Guess I should’ve warned you.”

At the railing, Krautie inspected the shoppers two levels down. “He’s a biker?” Zeke said. What was the strange blue cross the guy wore? Shouldn’t a German biker of all people have the standard biker Iron Cross? “But that guy must be at least sixty years old!”

“Zeke, that guy claims to be something like a *hundred fifty* years old. Claims he got one of those DNA rejuvenation treatments way back when.”

“Well, it sure didn’t work,” Zeke laughed nervously. “I mean, he *looks* a hundred fifty. And where would he get twenty million bucks for rejuvenation anyway?”

“Look, mate, don’t piss all over the guy. Even if he *is* crazy. I mean, that guy’s really nuts. We have to go easy on him. Like, did he start in on *being* your Klaus von Boldtmann?”

“What? Is that what he meant when he--when he--”

“Yep, he claims to be von Boldtmann himself. Can you believe it?”

“At first I thought he was making some sense about that book, but then he started talking about *knowing* Wotanda.”

“I guess it’s like, von Boldtmann was a Kraut, and *he* got rejuvenation treatments, so naturally Krautie thinks he’s had rejuvenation too. He’s delusional. He’ll even talk about his dad being a World War I fighter pilot, just like von Boldtmann.”

“That guy is really crazy enough to think he’s *Klaus von Boldtmann*?” To Zeke’s alarm

Krautie, out in the mall, turned to glare at Zeke. Then he limped out of sight.

“See? Don’t antagonize the guy,” Earl said.

“I just don’t see why anybody would claim to be *that man*. I mean, he was going on and on about all the evil in the world and all, but *God*.”

“Hell if I know. Probably just wants to put a scare in people. Like if you tell someone you’re the Hitler of West Texas, come back from the dead.”

Zeke shook his head. “He doesn’t look a thing like--look, I don’t know.”

“Sure it was crazy and evil. but you know, at least *someone* was trying to develop some new technology.”

“Who ...” Zeke whispered. “Not ...”

There really couldn’t be any Carnationist spy cameras in here, right?

“Sure, the West Texans. It was crazy they got themselves von Boldtmann for a leader. But some of their thinking wasn’t so bad, really. *You* know, mate. You’re an American, after all. I mean, is wanting some real technology really so bad?”

“I ... wouldn’t really know,” Zeke said. Mostly for the cameras, he added: “Anyway, the UWC took care of them. They were crackpots, really.”

“Yeah, maybe. Still, somebody was *thinking* for a change.”

“Well, maybe.” Zeke had to shut up. They probably did have cameras, especially in a Carnationist bookstore. Sure, he’d read *The Rise and Fall*. Three times. It was a banned book but they had it at Megastructure. And what an apocalyptic end, with the United World Carnationists closing in on San Angelo and von Boldtmann and the rest trying to escape in those old bombers. He’d seen it live on TV when he was a kid. Twenty bombers blowing up right over the goddamn Pacific.

Wasn’t it obvious the UWC controlled just enough tech to always stay on top? Why shouldn’t they have cameras and voice recorders everywhere?

“Well, I don’t know,” Earl said. “As for Krautie, he looks like an old geezer, but I’m sure he could easily beat the crap out of you if he wanted. So I never fool with him. He just hangs around all day. Doesn’t have a job. Don’t know where he gets his money.”

Zeke sat back on his stool. “That’s just so *weird* about that guy.”

Dammit, he could *not* afford to admit to anybody he’d read that book.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Zeke Sludges

Zeke stumbled through the doorway. Stood blankly in the center of the small shop. Hundreds of scents blended into one uniform sickening stench. Banana candles, cherry candles, jasmine candles, bayberry, honeysuckle, coconut ... cat candles, castle candles, owls, fairies, dwarves. Giant green balls, formless slabs of black and yellow. On one wall thousands of tiny colored glass cups bathed in painful white light.

Tansley Harrison broke off talking with a slim rich woman at the counter. "You there. Please don't handle the candles." To his shame Zeke registered that his right hand, dripping with white slush and brown syrup, had fastened onto a bright orange wax kitten.

"Wow, like I'm so sorry," he muttered. "Had to eat it with my hand, y'know. They didn't give me a spoon."

"Please just put the candle down, will you?"

"I'm trying, but it's *stuck!*" Zeke shook vigorously and the kitten hurtled across the counter, bowling a dozen other kittens to the floor and decapitating a shiny green owl.

"*What?* What on earth are you *doing?*"

"Look, I'm really sorry. But these stupid food shops are *disgusting.*" He waved at hundreds of shoppers outside.

"*What's going on here?*" Tansley said, marching over.

"Man, that stuff hits you *hard.* Kinda *sludgy,* y'know? I can *feel* it spreading through my bloodstream!"

"You're on *drugs!* I knew something was wrong with you! I *told* Earl something was wrong with you!"

"Naw, I'm like a *vegetarian,* y'know? Can't stand all that *crap* they feed you out there! You can *smell* it!"

"Get away from my candles! Leave them alone!"

"Naw, I can pick 'em up. Pick 'em right up like anything, like, man, 'course I can't *think,* man, what d'ya think they put in all that ice cream?" He found the two parts of the dead green owl. "*Damn!*" he grunted, jamming the creature's head onto the body.

"Give me that! Stop that!"

"No, look, you can kinda melt the two parts back together, pressing 'em, y'know, like forcing 'em together, generating enough *heat* to--*ooof!*" The head smooshed past the body, the body snapped into two more pieces, and more animals toppled. "*Goddamn!* I'm so sorry!"

"And we don't allow cursing in here. You're going to have to pay for the candles you broke and then leave."

The rich woman gaped. "You!" Zeke cried. "You're one of those *chicken eaters!* Where the hell's the damn *Outback,* that's what I wanna know. Why's everyone hanging around this stupid shopping center eating *chicken?*"

Just then the straps on Zeke's knapsack, weakened by his own copy of *Converting Nazi Germany to the Holy Carnation Via Time Travel,* gave way and the heavy pack plowed into a display of cylindrical candles. They flew everywhere. Zeke lunged for the book, slipped on the rolling candles, and went down. "Aw, goddammit!"

The rich woman edged out the door. "Uh, see you later, Tansley."

Zeke flailed amid the smashed candles. "Oh wow, oh wow! Got any paper towels?"

Tansley reached for the telephone by the cash register. "You're one of those bloody

Americans! I'm calling the police! You'll pay for every candle!"

"Now look," Zeke said, pulling himself up across a counter. "I'm sorry, I'm really like *totally* messed up. On this ice cream, really. I know I can't handle the stuff."

Tansley dialed. "Shut up. Don't get near me with your *drug breath*."

"*Damn ...*" But on the counter lay what he'd been searching for all along. He grabbed the towel and dried his hands. "Now look, I can explain. Feel a little better maybe. Look, I got real messed up on some ice cream. Just got off at six, I was hungry, but all they have here is *meat*. But I needed something, I was so *wasted*, so I got this ice cream, but they didn't give me a *spoon*."

"*Damn* you! You got syrup all over my *embroidery*."

"Uh, *wow*, I'm sorry! But, like, I really *needed* this towel."

"Mall police," came a tiny voice from the phone.

Zeke pulled the phone out of Tansley's hand and hung it up. "You can't turn me in! They'll *deport* me. Look, I'll pay for all the candles. I'm really sorry. I sold you some stuff at the bookstore, don't you remember?"

Tansley eyed the syrupy handset. "And pay for my embroidery too. Yes, I saw you in the bookstore. I *told* Earl it was a mistake to hire Americans, but would he listen?"

"Man, I *musta* walked twenty miles just trying to find my way out of this place. I just wanted to get to the train station. Then I found *this* place. What time is it now?"

"It's 7:30. Now if you'll please--"

"Man, that ice cream must do *time dilation* too! It feels like *three weeks*. I can't believe I got so *wasted*."

"Get out with your drugs! Or I *will* call the police! I know you don't have enough money to pay for these candles. You must've done five hundred dollars' worth of damage right here."

Zeke said, looking the candles over. "No way, really." But then he noted the price tags: fifteen, twenty, twenty-five dollars. "*Damn*."

"Here's your stinking five hundred." Zeke turned, heart in disarray. That awful voice. That German accent. It was Krautie, in his dirty denim, smelling like gasoline, laying five Australian hundred-dollar bills on the counter. "That cover it?" he sneered.

Tansley backed away. "Well, yes ... yes, it will."

Krautie moved off to check the candle shop out with a mocking smile. Zeke stammered: "But look, I can't let you do this." He reached for the bills.

Krautie snapped his fingers in Zeke's face. "Touch 'em and I'll rip this place to hell. Got that?"

"Look, do as he says," Tansley said, shoving the money into the register. "He's ..."

"*Crazy ...*" Zeke finished, but now Krautie opened the dual carburetors of his eyes. Unbearable horsepower churned straight into Zeke's gut. Zeke staggered back. "God, why are you *doing* this?"

"None of your damn business." Krautie picked Zeke's knapsack off the floor with the protruding *Converting Nazi Germany* and hurled them at Zeke's head. Zeke snatched them before they took out a shelf of crimson eagles. Krautie merged into the crowd outside.

"He really *is* crazy," Zeke gasped as Tansley gathered broken candles. "Why'd he *do* that?"

"Don't ask me," Tansley said. "He's a total nuisance. He'll buy sofas and washing machines with cash, then leave them sitting in the middle of the mall. Once he wrecked a motorcycle on the central sculpture on the first level. And the police won't do *anything*."

"And he thinks he's Klaus von Boldtmann from West Texas! Can you believe that?"

Tansley winced. "Watch your step. I don't want you breaking any more candles."

"No, I feel much better now. I really can't handle sugar, is all. But I think I'm okay now."

"Good." Tansley set the ruined merchandise on the counter, then added up the prices.

"\$468.95. That's how much your friend saved you."

"Wow. But shouldn't you give him his change next time he shows up?"

"He won't come back. And he wouldn't take it. I can put it to good use."

"But, look, I really *am* lost. Can you tell me how to get out?"

Tansley blinked. "The door's right there."

"I mean out of this whole shopping center. I'm lost. I need to get home."

"God, you're a *child*. I'm surprised anyone could get lost down here. Look, just follow that corridor to the right until it opens up onto Mall Thirty-Five, then follow that until you come to a split. Take the right leg and then up the escalator to the third level. Then you come to Mall Twenty-Seven. That one merges with Mall Twenty-Five and you have to go down to the first level again and to the left at the third crossing corridor. Then you come to another escalator and take that up to the street."

"Damn, does this shopping center go on *forever*?"

Tansley considered the black telephone again. "Of course not. It has definite boundaries. But it's always expanding outwards. Everyone knows that."

"You mean this shopping center *really does go underneath all of Sydney*?"

"Shhh! Look, it's not right to talk about this so lightly. If you'd *really listened* to Sammy Zarathustra and the Shades, you wouldn't say such things."

"What are you *talking* about?"

"I keep forgetting you're an American. How long have you been over here?"

"Uh, three weeks now."

"Well, then, you've got to listen to Sammy Zarathustra *immediately*."

"But why? I'm *lost*. I need to get *out* of here."

"Look," Tansley said, pulling out *Shattered Mindsticks*, one of the Sammy Zarathustra records she'd bought from OverLord One. She pointed to the first song on the second side titled "Big Shopping Center." "Now there's a line in this song. It's in code and it goes: *Your shopping center runs underneath the entire city of Sydney*. Don't you see what that means?"

"God, that's just like this *dream* I had. Are you telling me this shopping center really does go underneath the *entire* ..."

"Don't be silly. It's only a metaphor for the expanding glory of the GodFlower. But only a few very special people are really *onto* it. Like Sammy Zarathustra. You really ought to get this record. He has some other songs with shopping center references."

"I--I will." He looked outside at the mall again. "I can't believe this. But look, I don't have a record player. Maybe I could come over to your place and listen to it on your record player?"

Tansley studied him. "I ... don't know."

Zeke shivered at the rush of the mall outside. "God, how did I ever get *into* this?"

"I think you'd best be going," Tansley said with a significant glance at the telephone.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Poem

It was past ten and the place was still packed. This madhouse did extend forever. Zeke couldn't get back to the candle store, or OverLord One for that matter, if his stupid life depended on it. Were all these people really crazy, to be wandering around at ten PM?

Ms. Tansley Harrison apparently couldn't give instructions worth a damn. He hadn't seen a single exit. His feet were dead. His head hurt. He'd wasted all his money on GodFizzes and the stuff tasted like vomit anyway. It polluted him with even more sugar. He'd just wanted the caffeine because he knew he was about to pass out.

Maybe he'd never get out of here. Maybe the only thing to do was take out his notebook and finally write a poem. He hadn't been able to write a single poem in Australia yet, but there was a bench up there where he could sit and write the one that would express everything.

The incline was so steep. Why would they engineer such an obnoxious hill? He was exhausted. He could hardly move his concrete legs. This brick was so well-waxed that nobody could walk on it. He just had to make it to that bench and write that poem.

He couldn't handle all the shapes. Squares, circles, pyramids. Lines, dots, squiggles. All senseless. Everything was *puffy*. He could feel weird volumes in his throat. He could hear them and taste them. They were killing him. This shopping center was eating his mind away. He was so tired. He'd never make it to the bench. The damn shapes were *mocking* him.

And every shape was part of his mind. He was struggling uphill on his own slippery brick mind. These shapes had been here forever. The shopping center had been here forever.

The bench. Thank God. Made it. Stupid store in front of him. "GRAND OPENING AUGUST 5TH. MALL 72 CHEMIST." Right, "chemist" meant "drugstore" here. Idiots. Why couldn't Australians use English properly? How had he gotten to Mall Seventy-Two?

He was scared. Overrevving. The puffy shapes came right down his throat. Could he even breathe? Was he really hallucinating all these shapes and all these ideas about shapes just because he couldn't find his way out of the shopping center? Would writing the ultimate poem save his goddamn life?

"Day Twenty-Two." That was the title because today was the twenty-second day he'd been in this godawful country. Was that okay with all these mindless shopping twits?

Now he was coughing. The shapes scratched into his throat and he couldn't stop coughing. He'd thought he'd conquered the stupid cough he'd had over the weekend but it was back, now, when he needed to get that poem out. But so be it. Write the damn poem. Now.

he saw the shapes  
he saw the shapes as he climbed the hill  
shapes of himself--dogs barking--  
dim lamps--endless hallways--

Well, that sucked. More coughing. Did this cough really want to wreck his poem? Well, he still had his bottle of cough syrup in his knapsack. It hadn't fallen out when Krautie threw it.

Krautie. Was it possible he really existed? And did *he* know how to get out of here?

Coughing. Dammit. Yeah, here it was, Flexmoor's Extra Strength Codeine. One teaspoon the recommended dose.

Coughing. Well, he didn't have a damn teaspoon. Take that. Half the bottle, damn you. Try

to cough your way out of *that*.

Coughing. Coughing. Write, dammit!

the white arches floodlit  
beyond, the specter of the fjords at midnight  
train station deserted now  
he buys his ticket and climbs on  
half an hour later the train is

Pathetic!

so he walked, and the shapes marched  
across black hills glowing with civilized lights  
as lightning in distant suburban clouds called to

Utter crap! And now he was falling asleep as the goddamn cough medicine sent his mind sideways.

Coughing. Coughing. So poetry was impossible in Australia after all. He'd failed again in this rotten country. No poem on the night when he needed it most. The best and most beautiful poem. How he'd felt the primordial surges as he staggered through this lurid, hateful SongMall. Now it was all gone. The codeine had turned everything he'd ever felt in his life into mush.

Then everything *roared*. Everything blew orange. Zeke was blasted to the slick tan brick. "Ow! *Damn!*" Had that skylight exploded? Maybe a close thunderclap?

The orange blazed at the apex of the brick slope. To Zeke's astonishment it lit up a row of glass doors. He rubbed his aching knees and it seemed he crawled a steeper and steeper slope toward those doors. Past sawhorses, workbenches, and bare drywall. Past power saws and wrenches and hammers.

Man, they were expanding the shopping center *everywhere*.

But did he care? For this was the way to the surface. He pushed through a heavy door into fresh night air. Thank God.

People were shouting, glass was everywhere, and steam rose from a shattered automobile. It had slammed into the building across the street. Had it exploded? Overexposed orange flared, then slowly faded.

Someone's horrible luck. The mangled front and the smashed windshield told Zeke the driver had just been killed. Nevertheless this doomed car had pointed the way. Had the purpose of that guy's whole life just been to lead Zeke out?

An ambulance pulled up. Half a block beyond the smashed car loomed Zeke's normal train station. He was too weirded on codeine. He'd been lost for so long. He had to buy a ticket and get home.

But that poor guy. Wasn't his death a better poem than anything Zeke had ever written?