

# Entranscing



a novel

by Robert Stikmanz

The Second Book in *The Hidden Lands of Nod*

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## CHAPTER 3.

### IN WHICH BAD JACK IS CONFRONTED

STANDING IN READY POSTURE, SHE REMAINED loose but balanced as her perisenses swept resonances emerging from the pleroma. Her search was simultaneous and methodical as she made herself open without bias to patterns from beyond the nullity, sweeping carefully from high to low in search of a remembered template. Despite her thorough probe of adjacent consensa, the signature she hunted remained unfound. The search, as day by day it bore no results, was approaching fixation. Meg was determined to track this particular demon. A taint of frustration crept from the pit of her belly, fogging the perisensual streams.

“No good! No good!” she exhorted herself.

Breaking stance, she shook out her arms and pivoted her head, trying to will tension from her neck. She inhaled deeply. Using both hands, she pushed away the frustration as she let out her breath. It had never taken this long to locate the signature of a past encounter, but—she affirmed—that did not matter. Whether the search took long or not was immaterial.

Two factors made this sweep more difficult than others. The first was that her encounters with the individual she sought had never had replete consensual groundings. Always, the connections had bridged his reality and her own. His overtures had drawn her only far enough into his world to mess with her, not enough to provide a lucid reading of his environment.

The second factor was that the contacts had only taken place during moments when she was weak, even unto death (“the little creep”), and she had been unable to muster enough attention to produce accurate memories. These things, she told herself, should not matter. Unique patterns of his vibrational signature should resonate with her plumb of being’s interlay.

Drawing a line behind her unsuccessful efforts, Meg paced the main room of her tiny house. The structure was only slightly larger than her hut in the meadows of the Thrm, but the layout here was more conducive to pacing—plus the house had a closet and pantry. Set back from the road in a pecan grove, it was visited by the muted rumble of her neighbor's Apache pickup on the laddered surface that was their shared track as the sound drifted across an old pasture growing up in juniper. A surging burst of words trailed back from the vehicle's radio, "...top of the hour with the late, great Patsy Cline...."

Passing the dining table that separated living room and kitchen, she absently scooped up the set of oracle dice sitting next to an unfinished mug of tea. Walking and turning, walking and turning, she alternately rolled and rattled the small solids in the cup of her palms.

The fourth or fifth time she drew even with the table she paused and dropped a hand, spilling the dice onto its surface. A full moon and a new moon, the Odd Die naught. Even before taking up her copy of *Nod's Way*, she remembered the auspice. *Trust*. "The Dark of the Moon and the Bright." Riffing pages, she found it quickly, number 2, in the Moon House: "Trust that what is seen and what is unseen are as one." Portents being what portents are, she could not have asked for one more apt.

Again Meg assumed a ready posture, opening to seepage from infinite possibilia. This time she deliberately shed expectation, suppressing even the assumption that contact had come from an adjacent consensus. Breathing into the sweep, she gradually neutralized, one after another, her superficial constructs of self. Eventually, even the Brownian mumble of her inner voice faded, leaving her an open conduit for the polyvalent backwash of being.

When she finally encountered the signature it was so faint she was unaware at first that she had found it. Realizing she had teased out the thread several minutes earlier without noticing, she amplified the vibration by perisensually conforming to its frequencies. Oddness pervaded the experience. The signature was marked by metacolorations unlike any she had experienced previously in her growing range of transconsensual encounters, and this, she was sure, had much to do with why it had eluded

her. Even as her grip on the spoor sharpened, her heart thrilled at the prospect of a new mystery to explore. The years through which she had labored to develop these skills had not dulled her wonder at a strange ability discovered when her girlhood was ending. Much food for later thought, but in this instant she had at last connected clearly to her target. Unhesitating, she pushed toward contact.

At the verge of the target's local reality she paused, present only enough to see his world as a gauzy interlay with her own. He inhabited a largish room in a cluttered but not untidy apartment. Ficus trees in pots shielded the windows. Long afternoon light came through the leaves from her right in a dapple scattered across living and dining areas, and onto the counter drawers of the kitchenette. A calico cat, small but plump, slept curled in the middle of the floor. The little man whom she had hunted so long thumped at a spinet, plunking out chords as he sang, "Dust-o-Phage! Dust-o-Phage! When you want not clean but sterile!"

It was Jack Plenty. Even though she had prepared for the identicalness, it still unsettled her. Jack Plenty, beyond any question, even clad in an outfit as unlikely as black beret and white t-shirt, his tai chi pants tucked into black lace-up boots.

It was not, however, her friend, her ally, her sometime co-conspirator, Jack Plenty. Before her unawares sat a demon emerged from attractors of infinite variation to hound her desperate moments. "Bad Jack," she thought of him, and here he was, alone in his lair. She pushed through the interlay.

"Ho, what! Baby! I'd've picked up if I'd known you were coming!"

Bad Jack jumped straight up from the piano bench, skinning the fronts of both legs on the instrument and sitting right back down. He rolled off the seat, landing on his knees. The winsome smile he offered turned to double take when he saw who had materialized in the living room.

"Whoa, mama, aren't you a sweet sight for sober eyes? But you're looking a little peaked after traveling wherever you came from. Why'dn't you let me help you out of those confining fabrics and administer some restorational therapies?"

"I'll show you therapies."

Meg grabbed, but he dove under a table, pulling chairs into a barricade between them. She dropped to hands and knees.

"Get out here, you filthy, groping pervert. I've tracked you to your source, so you can face me now or keep facing me every time you turn around."

He cleared his throat, obviously pained by either alternative.

"Ah, well, um, ah, baby? Ah, just how, ah, how *much* do you plan to hurt me? As a matter of, whachacallit, curiosity."

She considered. Briefly.

"That depends. If you're honest, forthcoming, and keep your hands to yourself, I may just break every bone in your body and let it go at that."

Grimacing, he snatched the beret from his head and passed a hand over his scalp. Visibly paler than before, he replaced the cap.

"So that would be like saying not honest or forthcoming—or maybe the case of a misunderstandable gesture of what could only be exuberant affection—might mean considerably more hurt. Right?"

"Get out from under that table now!" she commanded.

He scrambled out, but on the far side, out of reach. Meg glowered down from the full advantage of her height. The table between was wide enough she could not reach him without leaving the ground, which meant he would probably be under it and gone before she made it across. She glanced right and left looking for a convenient weapon. Nothing was at hand.

"For years, every time I was weary to the bone, fevered or at death's door, there you were. Naked. Wagging your penis at me. Groping me with your mind."

She spoke softly, but in a voice pitched to carry far or strike close. With each phrase he winced. Both his hands came up to wave away her accusations.

"Whoa, hey, baby! Mama, you got me wrong! I only acted because we are meant to be. It's in the cards. It's the nature of things. I could feel you calling across the divide for an episode with Master Jack's amazing inflationary whale. I was honor bound not to fail you, baby!"

"I see," she scoffed. "That explains why twenty years ago when I lay emaciated and critically ill you manifested, waving your willy like a wand and trying to pull off my blanket."

"Baby, you're just misinterpreting my enormongous enthusiasm for your assets. That's all. I never waved any willy manifesto deliberato in your direction except when filled with the vision of how beautiful we can be together. Really, baby, see what I'm saying?"

Her angry face was set harder than she felt. It gave the grin lurking around her mouth a more scornful air than she might otherwise have mustered, which was good. She wanted him uncomfortable. His squirming was already informative.

Bad Jack, moving to sudden inspiration, snatched a small leather cup from the table and emptied its contents into his palm.

"What do you think of this, baby?"

He rattled his hand and cast dice onto the table. Meg ignored them. She spoke with precision.

"If you call me 'baby' one more time I'm going to get physical."

"Physical, yeah!" Bad Jack exulted. "That's the stuff, and I know how to stuff it! Don't let the stature fool you. I've got the package to match your rackage, and, sweet mama, you have one tasty rack."

"Hands on the table, now!" she roared. "If I even think you're trying to sneak a grope I'll break your fingers." Then, as if struck by the thought, added, "I may do that anyway, just to save the worlds from your jingles."

He staggered theatrically, a hand clutched to his chest.

"Oh, mama, zounds! You wound me! Secret knowledge I'm offering and you answer with threats. Look! Look at the bones. Here's your chance to tap the secret teachings of the hidden *Nod* and all I ask in return is a tap or two of your own sweet juicy."

Cautious about taking her eyes off his wandering extremities, Meg glanced at the dice. Then she looked again harder. The Companions, the two identical eight-sided dice, featured the engravings familiar to her, a fact confirmed by a quick flip of each with a finger. Even a glance, however, told her the Odd Die was markedly different. She picked up the cube, holding it at eye level so she could watch the figure across the table as she inspected its markings. Unlike any other she had seen, this Odd Die had only three blank faces. On a side bridging the typical Ring and Bar emblems was engraved a stylized skull.

"What is this?" she asked. "Where did this come from?"

"Secret knowledge, like I told you, sweet mama. Not like the fractured crack you find in the bag of that hoity-toity slack Jack from the world you call home. This is the real deal and you have to pay to play. If you'll just slide on over here I'll slip my provider in your pocket for a down payment on Lesson Number One. What do you say?"

She found his come-on genuinely amusing, so much so that the warmth coloring her chortle abashed him. Head sunken onto his shoulders, this mirror Jack peered at her from under thick brows, ready to spring to or from, depending on how chance might break.

"Don't get your hopes up, little man. I'm not prepared to take your word on anything, yet. Especially not any claim that involves servicing your provider. If you didn't cook up this die yourself there's still no reason to assume you didn't have someone else do it for you." Meg pocketed the cube before favoring him with a smile. "Perhaps if you convinced me this esoterica is authentic we'd have a basis for discussion."

Bad Jack jumped up, distress clear on his face.

"Wait, sweet cakes! Whatcha doing? You can't carry off my master caster! Come on, baby. Give it back."

She cocked her thumb and jabbed an index finger square at his nose.

"This is the last time I'll warn you about calling me 'baby.'"

"Wait, wait! No offense meant! I was, like, well, overwhelmed by your pulchritudity. Uh, mama. It was a slip of the tongue on the run, I was so upset to see my apparatus disappear!"

"And, of course, you don't have another..."

His shrug told her more than his reply.

"Well, maybe one or three. But that's the best! Pre-charged and potent with Jacksong jingles. I'm on my knees and asking, hand it back, please and sugar?"

He came around the table, palms up in supplication.

"I'll return it later," she said with finality. "You have my word. Let's say I'm intrigued enough to believe this warrants investigation."

"So, come on, mama, let's investigate. We'll just divest ourselves of these encumbrances and then I'll investigate the savor of your nectar. Then you can investi-..."

"If you drop those pants I'll kick your crotch so hard you'll walk on tippy-toes the rest of your life!"

Even through gritted teeth her words arrested him. His hands bounded back from his drawstring as though scorched. Slowly, she relaxed her attack stance, straightening the leg she had cocked to strike, allowing her foot to settle back onto the floor. Bad Jack, knowing he was bested, played his most winsome face.

"Easy, mama, no offense. You know I was just proposing an option. The fact is I'm all twisted up with multiple disordered anxieties about you slipping off with my cryptic double triptych and I have no idea what I might be doing. Hand back that Odd one you've got in your pocket and all sorts of charm and smarm will ooze from my glands."

Suddenly, she was weary of him. Weary of his proximity and weary of his blather. As she stepped back to put space between them, her foot came down on something unexpected and animate. The screeching yowl of a cat in pain cut the room as Meg jumped off its insulted tail a hair ahead of a vengeful swipe.

"Booty!" Bad Jack yelled as Meg spun away from both man and cat. Hissing and spitting at the woman who hurt it, the animal arched its back. Every hair along its spine stood up in a calico crest.

"Booty Queen!" the little man bawled.

In a blur she would have thought impossible, Bad Jack was between Meg and his kitty. All sign of his earlier intimidation was gone, as he bobbed and wove, pistoning the air with his fists.

"Back! Back! Hoo! Foulness!" he shouted at her. Wrought up, nearly tearful, he crooned over a shoulder to his cat, "Booty! Booty Queen? Did'ems hurt'ems? Oooooohhh!"

"You know," Meg observed, "this is a side of you I never would have imagined. I think I like you better for it."

"Cat killer! Thief!" he spat, but danced back to swoop his frightened pet into his arms. "Thief!" he cried again as the last

surge of righteous ferocity drained away. Defeated, hugging his cat, he mumbled accusatively, "Stepped on Boot and snatched my very best bone. My favorite Oddity. Big, stupid human."

"I told you I'll return it when I'm done with it. For now, I'm taking it to a place with resources I can use to investigate."

Some of his former energy returned. He released the cat in order to gesticulate as he spoke.

"Taking it, see, that's the thing that quails my bones and darkens my soul." His hands danced in a semaphore of underscoring and emphasis. "Taking it is against, oh, see, about thirty or forty paragraphs of the oath sworn by puissant and masterful initiates, one of which I think you are even not. Nothing against your character, mama, but it's like it's against the rules to let it leave my person. Word gets out, there'll be all kinds of restrictions on my liberties."

"Will there now?" She smiled. "It sounds to me like a favor for the universe if you are sharply restricted. I'll leave you to think about that. Sorry about stepping on the puss."

She verged into a neighboring consensus, similar in content but ten minutes behind.

"Ho, what! Baby! I'd've picked up if I'd known you were coming!"

She gave no heed to this Jackanapes Plenty. Her entire awareness concentrated on the tether back to her consensus of origin. Through the course of twenty years she had honed her transconsensual skills, her ability to exist in varying degrees within multiple consensa. She had come to know well the sensation of the tether, the orienting tie to the world she knew as hers. The feel was so tangible she extrapolated an appearance for it, a her-shape stretched into a band dissolving into the consensual interlay. By sidestepping from this encounter as she had, she gained something like perspective on the tether anchoring her now. Rather than dissolving into the interlay, it felt-looked like a ribbon stretching away straight into the sky, disappearing eventually in a point arrowing toward infinite distance.

She marveled at this unprecedented sense-form a heartbeat before understanding what it implied. Her difficulty finding Bad Jack's signature, and the strangeness of the transition

toward him, suddenly made sense. Through the interlay she had traveled not to a different consensus, but an immeasurable distance in the space-time of her origin. She was momentarily daunted by the fact of a single reality in which not one, but two Jack Plenties were active.

The moment passed, and she took stock. With a quick eyeball up and down, she dismissed the third Jack Plenty mouthing words at her indifference, and pushed along the tether, taking the shortcut through the interlay toward home.

