

PROLOGUE

Hagia is an old woman now, a living saint revered among the Old Ones on her planet. There is no word for “I” on Decrylicon, so it will not be used here, but remember as you read the following report that Hagia shares her own and her mother’s memory banks, as they have merged with many others over the scores of first sun rotations. So the “I” is Earthly human folly; there is no “I”, there is only consciousness and the merging of memory banks. To take credit for the help of others is as foolish as the notion of birthing one’s self. This is a thing that is learned by Earth beings; it took a long time for The Me to learn this, as you will discover.

The Joe is resurrected, of course, and lives among the Chasers as The Painter. He has shared his memory banks in this report as well, in the same way that Hagia has not used the “I”. This was not due to any Decrylicon traditions, though, but due to The Painter’s boundless humility. He sees no “I” that is separate from The Muse that followed him to this strange planet, who sometimes appears without warning to slink among the trappings in his little room aside mine in the Governor’s mansion. As always, he paints every night, after the Chasers have closed their eyes to the ever-shifting sands of the planet.

The Story Gatherers of Decrylicon trace its history through the Dearth Days when the Angorath were slaughtered to control their food source, and then into their own renaissance of the Color Age. The Player, The Me, is The Painter’s close assistant, who cares for his every Earthly need, and shares my memory banks with him to keep our skills sharp. The Me also entertains the children – yes, there are young girls (and even a few boys) on Decrylicon again – with the smells and tastes of the The Painter’s colors. The Me has become quite skilled in providing just enough to entertain them, but not so much as to bring about their ruination. You

will come to understand this as you read this report, that The Me has managed to smuggle into your world and translated into your language.

The Fixer, Flow Rinse, comes and goes as she pleases, as she has always done, but transported by the Wayfarer, her trusted companion. Instead of being hunted and haunted, she is challenged with great feats of escape and sought for her tales of adventure. She cannot help chasing adventures, as the Chasers of Decrylicon once pursued the newly-born, but now she must find them elsewhere in the galaxy. Occasionally her adventures bring her by my room. The Joe pretends not to hear; but his big ears betray him.

What follows here is a merging of Hagia's, The Joe's, and The Me's memory banks with yours, so that you may merge yours with others. The birth of the Color Age on Decrylicon begins with the birth of Hagia, but Hagia has urged me not to begin this report with her, and not with The Joe, but instead with The Player, The Me, who had been summoned to a small white building on Earth, in the Appalachian region of Ohio, so many first sun circuits ago.

It is with those memories the merging begins . . .

CHAPTER 1 (first 8 pages)

I had never met Joe, nor Hagia, nor the Wayfinder, when I arrived at his white building in the heat of late July that Appalachian summer.

Yes, I say I. I, I, I, I, I. Hagia does not like me to use that word, but in my own memory banks and my part of this report I can use any word I damned well please. I, I, I. There. Let's move on.

The man, the artist, collector, and local eccentric Joe Healy had been missing for twenty-eight days by the time I arrived. Gone without a trace. He lit brightly before he disappeared, though, with wild stories about strange lights on the hill, a dancing girl, and an exploding church window no one could explain. His bright yellow Road Runner with the high spoiler, the only one like it within at least a fifty-mile radius, had been seen tearing away from the scene at high speed. That was law enforcement's only clue.

The investigators tried to explain the explosion, though. First, they said it was an explosion, not an implosion. Where the shards of glass were laying, how they were arranged on the concrete steps in front of the church, the size of the pieces, all said explosion to them.

One physics professor at Ohio University thought that Joe had built some kind of radio wave device that vibrated the window at just the right frequency until it exploded. Since the frequency range was ultrasonic, it was above the threshold of human hearing, so none of the neighbors heard a thing until the glass shattered. It left only twisted metal, a really difficult thing to do with our limited knowledge of sonic energy.

No one had ever found such a device, though. And even a thorough analysis of the electronic components in Joe's workbench did not give any indication that he had the plans, the parts, or the wherewithal to build such a complex device. He only had a seventh-grade education, after all. However, the robots he was building at the time of his disappearance were impressive, though perhaps a bit behind the bleeding edge of technology.

What local law enforcement did find, though, were charred circles. Two of them, each with a gutted fawn in the center.

There were plenty of deer. Such slayings, though tragic for animal lovers, did not endanger the species. It just seemed strange to the officers, sheriffs from the two counties and their deputies (a long story as to why two counties had to be involved – a tale of wandering boundary lines) that anyone would create those circles and slaughter those young deer in that way.

There was talk, behind closed doors, about devil worshipping and the occult. The investigators had found, among his belongings in that white building, over a hundred books about paranormal events, flying saucers, cryptids, and pyramid power. In fact, he had even built a few model pyramids, including the two-by-four frame of a large experimental one that still stood in his yard a short distance from his building. There were no books about dark magic, though, or satanic cults, or any of the like.

An investigator checked with publishers who produce such drivel, and though they were hesitant to look up the information, they grudgingly did under subpoena, and indicated he had purchased none of that esoteric material from them.

Plus, charred circles require an accelerant of some type, and the fire department investigator took a sample and determined it was neither gasoline nor kerosene nor any of the common fuels. He could not determine the chemical particulates, because there were none.

Another mystery. That was three by my counting.

And the girl? The unknown silent girl that he mentioned to the authorities, that he had seen dancing up on the hill, and whom he claimed had sat outside his door the night before he disappeared? No one had heard of her, no one else had seen her, even the neighbor kids, with

whom he said she was temporarily living. When questioned at length, the neighbor girls said they liked to visit him, but was pretty far out in the head. The authorities left it at that.

Another mystery. That makes four. Four questions.

I was there to find the answers, if I could.

You see, I was pretty good at finding answers to cases no one else could solve.

There were two kinds of investigators of these kinds of cases. The first usually came in like a flash, hit the clues hard, questioned everyone, tried for a quick solve, and then moved on to the next big case.

The second kind came in, stopped at the local diner first for a bit to eat, wiggled their fingers in the creek for a while, talked to a few people, came back from time to time to talk to a few more people, and then eventually roasted the case long enough to pronounce it cold. Then filed it away in a box and sauntered over to the next one.

I preferred a third way, to live in the case. Live where the persons of interest lived. Eat their food. Follow their routine. In any possible way, to live just like they did. Talk to the same people they talked to. Go to church where they went to church. Take a shit where they shat.

A person learns a lot about another person when he shits in the same place.

Sometimes he learns enough to solve a case.

I'm technically a Forensic Scientist, with a degree from Ohio University. Joe's brother, Jim, finally called me up, all panicked and disheartened, as a last-ditch effort to find his missing brother.

“You know, if he didn’t run off on his own accord, he’s probably dead,” I told him up front. Sometimes loved ones have to be hit in the head with a two-by-four to see the reality of their situation.

“I know that. Just. Please. Find him.”

His brother was retired from the fiberglass factory, with a meagre pension and bad benefits, so he could not afford me.

“Tell me about him,” I asked.

For an hour, Jim told me about Joe Healy. About how kind-hearted he was, about how gifted he was as a painter, though Jim did not know if Joe’s stuff was good or not. About how he was always working on robots that Jim did not understand. About the “pictures” he made, fine candid photographs of marching bands and beauty queens during the Moonshine Festival parade.

For an hour, Jim said a lot of things, but told me nothing, really, about Joe Healy.

Still, I was intrigued. No one understood this guy. Not even his own brother, who lived over the hill from him.

I decided that somebody needed to understand him. One person should understand him. At least enough to write a good report about his disappearance, and to think about where a guy like this might be and, if possible, to find him.

He had disappeared on a quiet Sunday afternoon, with neighbors out and about, and a Sheriff’s deputy just down the road counselling two rebellious girls who had stayed out all night, but mostly lecturing them about how, if they ran the Appalachian hills at night, they would end

up as prostitutes or dead. Their mother had seen him drive by in his Road Runner, slow a bit by their house, and then speed up at the sight of the Sheriff's cruiser parked near the house.

Then poof. Gone.

The next day, when Jim had tried to call him but got no answer, he went down to investigate. Joe was gone, but his car, his cats, his cameras, his entire life was intact. Only he was gone.

Sheriff's deputies scoured the place, lifting tree branches and dodging poison ivy in the tree line and trampling the fields and every bit of yard around the house. Someone from the local diver's club even put on waders and splashed around in the creek across the road, but no one came up with a body.

Some decided he must have walked away. Maybe fell into one of the strip pit ponds. Such a thing happened occasionally, but usually the body eventually bobbed up to the surface in front of a local cat fisherman.

Others thought maybe he hitchhiked out. Left everything. That he is currently living in Cincinnati, sipping soup kitchen coffee by the fountain square with the other bums.

Others said he was taken up in some flying saucer that had been drawn in by the pyramid in his yard. That he was communing with aliens, showing them how to paint with acrylics. If we got him back at all, we'd get back less than what was taken up.

I thought differently. Reading all of the accounts in the *Athens Messenger* for a week, each reporting the same facts as if they pointed to something new, it struck me again and again. This guy never got too far from his building. Never. He was there. Somewhere. He had to be.

The other stuff, the reported sightings, the charred circles, the “book” on where people went when they disappeared, were all distractions and diversions.

If he was anywhere of his own volition, he was there. Right there. In his building.

They just didn’t look hard enough.

I had told Jim I would visit. Look around. Maybe I’d see something that could help.

Jim’s wife, shouting behind him into the telephone, asked how much it would cost.

Jim put his hand over the mouthpiece, but too late.

“More than your wife will let you pay,” I thought, pretending not to hear.

This guy, this Joe Healy, intrigued me. I just wanted to get into his head for a little while, more out of curiosity than anything else.

“First visit is free,” I said. “Consultation. To see if I want to take the case.”

The phone line became muffled again, and all I heard was “. . . yeah, right.”

I told him I’d be there next morning, and we hung up.

It was late morning, and though Jim wouldn’t expect me until the next day, I knew if I left soon I could make it there by late afternoon. Sometimes you learn a lot when you show up earlier than you are expected. So I threw a sleeping bag and toothbrush into my old Jeep, pulled down all of the cloth windows to let the wind in, and drove there.

I stopped in New Straitsville, the closest town to his place, and asked directions.

“Oh yeah. Old Joe Healy? Lived on Kaolin Road. Just stay on 93 here out of town, when you cross the creek turn right. His place is up there on the left after a little bit. Building down by the road. Old house up on the hill.”

The old man who gave directions had stubble for a beard, and looked dry, mighty dry, like one of those characters who might do something impulsive and rash at any time, day or night, for a shot of whiskey.

I drove the final two and a quarter miles, past the old clay plant – yellow bricks and tiles stacked about, with some strewn on the ground, broken and scraggly. I drove over the hill that threw my stomach into my chest, making that ill-advised burrito I ate in Nelsonville even iller-advised. Past the holy roller church on the right, in a clearing and set back from the road a bit, like a stage.

Sure enough, the road narrowed to a concrete bridge over a creek and there was Kaolin Road, a gravel-turned-tar with lots of potholes that danced a pas-de-deux with the creek.

I turned and followed it.

To the left as I drove, a house near the road with a barn behind it. That wouldn't be it. The old man said the house was up the hill. I paused in front of that house, though, and it spoke to me.

“Get the fuck out of here.”

Okay. It didn't speak to me. It yelled at me. I did what it said. I moved on.

Another house squatted along the right side of the road, next to the creek. A young woman sat in the dirt, in shorts, drawing down with a stick. She looked up at me as I drove by, then jumped up and ran into the house, leaving behind the slam of the screen door.

Then, across from that house, on the left, Joe's building. White with a whole wall full of windows, and a basement with a garage door tucked underneath. The old house stood up the hill a bit, just like the man said.

I decided when I eventually drove back through town I'd set the man up with a half pint of his choice. Get his day started. Others would have to take over from there.

I pulled up into the driveway. I could have driven on down the road a little, found some place to hide the Jeep, and then snuck back to avoid notice. Something told me, though, that it was impossible to avoid notice in those parts. Might as well be upfront about your motives.

Mine were solid. To find a missing man. Who could argue with that? I found out later that many could – and did.

There was only a narrow place to pull over in the driveway; the whole arrangement begged me to pull all the way up to park behind the house on the hill. That made me nervous, parking for the first time where I couldn't see my Jeep from inside the building. I was able to pull over close enough to the building that anything but a monster truck could still get by.

I shut the Jeep off and climbed out, stretching a little. It was late afternoon in late July, and there was no wind to speak of. It had been a hot day, but the sun showed hints of cooling a little as it ducked behind the treeline.

The building stood silently in front of me. The windows were all shut tightly, the curtains drawn all around, and I did not hear an air conditioner. It had to be at least a hundred degrees in there, I thought. And I have no key. Do I really want to go in?