

# Act I

## Hell Incorporated

*“I saw Death rising from the Earth, from the ground itself,  
in one blue field, in stubbled colour.”*

– Philip K. Dick

[01 Scintillae]

Under the circumstances, it takes Nathan Habu a surprisingly short period of time to realise he has died and is now in Hell.

The understanding of his situation is unequivocal and washes over him smoothly as he rides a bicycle at high speed through the night. The air is coldly crystalline and his breath is transformed to dew in his stubble. On the horizon, the greenish outlines of cranes hunch like sinister surgeons over a massive construction site, their backlit ghosts frozen against the illuminated ferroconcrete skeleton.

The peace of the night, the cold wind as he hurtles down the hill, the city lights – a skyful of self-luminous jewels scattered over the crumpled blanket of the landscape – it's quite beautiful, antithetical to damnation, and completely bizarre. Hell, in popular understanding, is a pit of fire, eternal torture, very very painful unrelenting bullshit of the worst order. But this... at this moment, it doesn't seem so bad.

*Purgatory is different things to different people, says Aais. And your persistence in calling it Hell is not very accurate.*

In the manner of dreams, it doesn't strike him as particularly unusual that he did not generate this comment himself. He learns the words as if reading them, and associates them with a woman's voice. He can't put a face to it, but there is power behind the voice, and it has a burr edge. It's as if below a certain threshold of volume she would not be able to engage her voice at all, only whisper.

Distracted by the artificial starfield, he rides through the first flake of Scintillae without looking at it, and experiences a momentary flare of information and energy.

*What was that?* he thinks to Aais.

*A Scintilla.*

*Well that explains everything.*

Then there is a fine scattering of them, and he sweeps through these too. They go partway through him like subatomic particles, but stop before exiting and unload their charge to him. His nervous system flickers for an instant as they ground out, and he shivers.

*Scintillae are fragments of God. Infinity divided into photons. Individual units of the currency that will buy your passage to the Next World.*

*Why didn't you just say that to start with?*

## Purgatory

*First you needed to know their name. The true name of a thing can be more important than descriptions which will never precisely identify what is being described.*

It seems so self-explanatory to Habu to be having this interior dialogue that he doesn't even question her identity. He's in Hell—

*Purgatory. Not Hell.*

—and talking to a woman in his head, one he suspects to be infinitely intelligent.

*Hell is close enough.*

*Except your damnation is by no means eternal. There are things you need to do. One of them is suffer. Another is learn. Everyone here must do these things. But your final test will be to remember your own death.*

Habu thinks hard about this, and realises that he cannot. In fact, he's having a hard time recalling much about his life at all. He remembers moments from childhood. He remembers happiness, love, but has trouble placing actual events into a linear framework. He remembers seeing foreign lettering and knowing what it means, but not how to read the words. He remembers being injured in warfare.

*It will not help you to try reaching out for it like that. You need to learn how to use information before it will be given.*

For the remainder of his ride into town, Habu ponders on how he has ended up here, why it's so pain-free, tries to remember other moments from the World of the Alive. As he enters the business district of Hell, he's stopped at a set of lights although there's no traffic anywhere else to be seen. In an adjacent alley, he sees a skinny woman, about forty, shaking and whimpering quietly. She squeezes off photo after photo from a cellphone camera, and she seems too traumatised and engrossed in what she's doing to notice him there.

There is some thick, distant laughter and a noise like a carcass being dropped to the ground. The sound is repeated. Some words drift to him but he can't really understand what's being said. Habu, mindful of the traffic, tries to triangulate between where the woman is pointing the lens, and the sounds which are reflected between skyscrapers in a misleading way. His vision eventually finds a lit doorway; the sign above it proclaims the establishment to be The Swinging Bat Hotel, and there is stylised cricket imagery on the crest for emphasis.

Slightly off to the side of the doorway, he sees a long and narrow teenage boy on the ground, curled up with his wrists crossed before his face, hands open and palms outward in a pathetic defensive reflex. There are three huge bouncers, verging on large enough to be Sumo, periodically giving him a kick. They appear to be muscular as well as simply fat, and Habu wonders if their uniforms are only made in size XXXL, because nothing else is big enough to generate the required intimidation. There are trails of blood streaming down the youth's face and his mouth looks somewhat mashed. Even at this distance, Habu can see maroon smudges and drops on the floor, so he guesses they've been at it for a while.

One of the giants notices the cyclist watching them, and is quick to holler, "Hey, you. The lights have gone green."

He is correct, and Habu pedals on, wondering if a similar fate will meet him. Or worse. He speculates about whether the bouncers are untouchable demons or simply other souls who are going to stay here longer for it. Eventually the main street becomes a bridge over the river, and just on the far side he hangs a right and hops onto the sidewalk. He makes his way down to river level along what is theoretically a pedestrian walkway, or maybe a wheelchair ramp. In practice, it's just as useful for bicycle travel.

Habu coasts along the strip of closed-up shops and cafes, locks his vehicle, and takes a service entrance up to Shell Hollow Seafood Bistro where he works. The restaurant's colloquial name probably originated from a translation into the language of a drunken bastard: its workers know it as the Hell Hole Sonofa Bitch.

Out the corner of his eye, he sees the lights of town reflected on the surface of the river. There is something asynchronous about the way they move, and he turns to look. Among the melted sparkles of light, he sees brilliant flakes of electricity, moving along with the surface tension in the slow continuous exhalation of the river.

He realises they are Scintillae, not actually floating on top of the river, but levitating along just barely above it. They look like small points of perfect blue, radiating a roughly circular aura of light. As they move through the air, they oscillate back and forth, flattening and disappearing before reappearing again rapidly. Habu has the impression that they are two-dimensional, and they vanish at points in the cycle when they are on edge to his field of view. They do not fly in a straight line, either. The path of each Scintilla describes something like a stretched zigzag or an angular waveform. They move

## Purgatory

briskly, animated slivers of internal reflection caused by fracture lines in opal. Visible, invisible, visible, invisible, excited.

Each time his eyes focus on one of the Scintillae, his head is pierced with a pleasant retinal overload, a swarm of arcwelders in the distance. His eyes register the optical avalanche of emerging from darkness into sunlight, at an intensity just short of the pain threshold.

And as soon as they go through his eyes, they are gone. All their power discharges at his optic nerve as his irises shiver in delight.

*You wasted those ones, says Aiis.*

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