



**MICHAEL'S
IVY**

KEITH BINGHAM

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Dedicated to Jeff Burnsides

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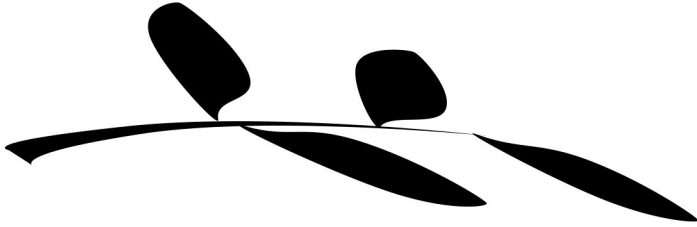
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CHAPTER 1



There are four main points of which I am sure of in the progression of my life:

I am a criminal.

I will stand trial for crimes against humanity.

I have no defense, I will simply state the crime humanity appears to be.

All things are subjective.

I am accused of being a terrible inter-dimensional drug dealer, of destroying the fabric of society and tearing apart the veil of life that governs existence, of passing around a poisonous plant like so much candy and condemning otherwise innocent lives.

You would think, having done what I've done, I would understand the length and breadth of my actions.

Since there are questions on Earth I won't answer, I will be shipped back to Horizon, which is the dimension this drug comes from. I have been asked repeated questions. Where in Horizon did I find Bloodleaf? Who helped me bring it to Earth? Why in God's name did I do it?

Earth has yet to adopt laws governing what I've done, so I will be sent to Horizon for trial, which, again, is an infinite new dimension and a brand new world. I am to serve as an example, it seems. Humanity is earnest to have me answer for my crimes as long as I am alive.

The plant Bloodleaf is instantly and terminally addictive upon ingestion. There is no experimenting with Bloodleaf. You can't take the drug for recreation. When you dose, your body will grow into a perfect and pristine state of health. Old scars will fade, any wounds you have will heal and you will be physically healthier than you have ever been and ever really could be otherwise.

However, a few days later, your blood will boil inside your skin if you do not take it again. Your flesh will start to fall away from the bone over the course of an hour or so. You will die painfully, in agony, as long as you are still breathing.

I've seen, and so know, this is a terrible way to die. Since I will be needed alive for a trial and my conviction, Global Security and Safety is allowing me to continue to take a plant they have officially classified as a poison.

Life, itself, is a terrible poison and none of it ever mattered. I made no choices about what I was born into. I make no claims that existence is not the product of some horribly massive heat death or some other powerful energy to which life desperately clings.

There are no Gods, there is no secret goodness guiding us through life, there is no gated community at the end of a bright blue tunnel. Mankind continuously searches for meaning, blind to the reality of their own mind as they speak it, dying in search of their own vision as they make it.

We were launched into a playground of physics and given nightmares for brains, constantly seeking support in an otherwise meaningless existence, one where our best societies are determined by the suppression of others. We inflict upon each other our own internal psychoses, our own thoughts and feelings, which have no value other than how much they are supported by others. Even in this, we only paint a picture of a world as we would like to see it or believe it is. It is an illusionary function, yet still, millions die without any support for their views, or the ability to support others. They die in the name of disease, starvation, or war and we call it 'evolution' or 'Darwin's Law', or whatever convenient name we can come up with.

One of the tricks I face from Bloodleaf is it's hard to ever really die from anything. You heal every time you eat it, so I will live as long as I take Bloodleaf and only die if I stop.

I will be forced to take it once I'm imprisoned. It can literally be shoved down my throat for as long as I have one and I will live. When I am sentenced to life imprisonment, you had better believe it will be served. It simply isn't enough that I've committed a terrible crime, I will be punished and made to answer to the human race.

Horizon is a dimension that has only recently been discovered in the dark and murky history of mankind and Bloodleaf is native to it. A group of Earth scientists, through the proof of the atomic nature of existence and the subsequent research surrounding it, hypothesized that our own reality was woven and nestled into the fabric of another dimension.

They published their research detailing their work and pointed to tantalizing clues left within other leading scientific publications in support of this new and radical idea.

Before you could say, *Black Helicopters*, the entire research group and the actual scientists themselves simply might as well have not existed.

If anyone had looked into what had transpired, they would have found certain companies quietly purchased, dissolved and shifted in other directions through various funding channels.

Simply put, several governments on the planet knew of this new dimension's existence. Specifically, several groups of key individuals within these varying

governments were already aware of the dimension's existence and working on the issues involved.

During the next few decades, the research organized around the existence of this new dimension was kept hidden from the general population, even among the collaborative efforts between the respective groups and governments as well.

That might be as long as the human race can keep a secret from itself, a few decades. Other groups and individuals started to theorize, understand, and eventually prove the existence of this inner or outer world, and before long, the cat was simply out of the bag for everyone. Hallelujah.

It was Switzerland who made the first official public declaration of the existence of a new dimension and the stance they adopted in regards to it was, unsurprisingly, neutrality.

Of course, this political position towards a brand new frontier became a hallmark of the human race and it subtly, quietly, and universally changed the ethos and principles of the dominant nations on Earth. It fundamentally altered the collective unconscious of all living generations from that point forward, for one simple reason: The people of Earth had finally discovered what they suspected all along, of all the planets, the solar system, the Milky Way, and all the universe as we could perceive, conceive, and prove, we were only a very small part of a much larger place.

Through a worldwide and political stance of neutrality, we were shown the nature of being confronted with the thought of freedom and a new land. We were hypnotized, cold, and calculating.

There was another realm behind or inside the mathematical curtain of our existence. The physics of our universe were ultimately shown to be a series of Russian doll sets nestled within themselves. They were nothing more than the eternal layers of an onion, any which way you sliced it. In spite of our fears, it proved there was no deviation in our fated lives. All of time existed in its entirety in our universe.

Life in our dimension grew its way in and out and all around this unchanging fabric. It suffered and wept for change from its unchangeable nature. Our math reflected it, our art reflected it, and our very lives reflected this. We were imprisoned, sensed it, and couldn't tell how.

What could be beyond this curtain of an infinitely repetitive reflection, an eternally unchanging world of energy, and plants, and rocks, even life? The truth of existence. Earth and our universe were only a captured image of an outer plane. We were a reflection of something much greater, but worse, we were some kind of fragment of a larger piece, only a breath of life on it.

The ground did not wrap back around itself in this new dimension, like it does on Earth. It teemed with flora and fauna and other mysteries that had never been conceived. This dimension, where we would eventually set foot, would be called Horizon.

I have never understood why most of the people I've spoken with about Horizon were fearful, apprehensive, superstitious, or even angry under the

surface. As I eventually came to find out, it wasn't Horizon they truly felt these emotions for, it was other people. Their thoughts trickled through a hazy filter of power and disbelief and this was how myths were born.

We didn't discover a way out of our imprisonment until recently. Somehow, a gateway was built on Earth, and it was there you could exit out of the dimension we were in. You couldn't fly, you couldn't swim, you couldn't wish it so, but you could take a boat to an island called 'Avalon', in honor of a story from Earth's history, long ago, and if you made it that far, you could use a gateway.

It wasn't that easy, at first. A field emanated from the gateway with the distinction of making your deeply held thoughts and emotions start manifesting in reality before you ever reached the gateway on the Earth side.

This startling phenomenon initially made finding the island, much less getting anywhere near the gateway itself, a challenge. A researcher hired by a military convoy is considered to be the first person to set foot on the island.

He stated a large creature was telling him it was a friend to the original creator of the universe. It also said there was, indeed, such a gateway that allowed one to leave this dimension, but warned it would broadcast an energy field where thoughts and feelings of anyone nearby would manifest themselves into reality. The scientist went on to say the creature held a striking resemblance to a stuffed toy he'd cherished as a child. One he kept with him until the day it became lost during a move into a new home. As a child, he eventually imagined it had gone off to be with God and then the man went on to say he had always wondered what God looked like, and after having said this, the transmission with the crew ended.

Despite early evidence to the contrary, it was later established that the ocean and land around the gateway would manifest a reality based on the thoughts and feelings of individuals nearby. After some time, the American government discovered a way to get to, and through, the gateway on Avalon.

Certain people, called Dreamers, had a particularly unique set of characteristics which heightened their empathy to almost superhuman levels. They felt so much and to such a great complexity, their thoughts and feelings would envelope those of others around them, and only the Dreamer's internal reality would be reflected when near the gateway.

This allowed groups of people to travel safely to the island without fear of everything dissolving into a chaotic and uncontrolled nightmare of individual neurosis.

Dreamers were highly sought. When found, a Dreamer would be cast into a new "liberated" type of indentured servitude, since their abilities were priceless. The Dreamer, and their families, were removed from the burden of providing for their own care or needs and were honored throughout the entirety of the world.

Their brain structure, nervous system, and other essential biological and physiological traits were carefully analyzed and measured for how many people could safely travel in their presence. They were kept in containment on the decks of ships and given chemicals and drugs so the very cells of their bodies and minds would hum and vibrate in a blissful and calm purgatory, ensuring the world

surrounding the gateway would reflect back seas that were quiet, tranquil, and calm. The island would do no harm and passengers would make it safely through the gateway to the other side, without fear.

Over the years, as the number of Dreamers grew, a loose consortium of traveling ships arose, bringing the cost of travel into the realm of the idle rich. Several ships were available for passage, each with its own Dreamer. The elite, the richest, the cream of the crop of all of Earth's societies would eventually be afforded passage, or be invited to travel, on a somewhat regular basis.

They would bring back to Earth tales of wonder, new technologies, thoughts and ideas, and would be rewarded with highly prized social esteem and loyalty.

Maybe that's why I did it.

I was asked how I had learned about the drug, how I brought it to Earth and who else had taken the plant, or had access to one. Since I would not answer questions to incriminate myself, I would be sent to New Civ for trial.

New Civ is the first settlement built in Horizon. It is geared largely as a resort area and center of operations for wealthy travelers to assist with funding and building within Horizon.

Several interest groups have established themselves in New Civ and are somewhat unified in their efforts of studying the surrounding area and developing the city. A hired police force keeps protection and assists with rescue efforts in the area. There is also a small serving class of restaurants, theater, entertainment, and whatever else money and limited seating entices people with, all in a strange and unknown frontier. It is a prim, little city, with a relaxed set of laws.

I was informed I was to be sent on the first available ship traveling to Avalon, so I asked for freedom to move about the ship, asylum during my travel, and a pony.

It didn't matter what I asked for, I had no options. The soldiers tasked with arresting me had aimed their rifles and loudly told me to get down on the ground and put my hands outward because I was an unsolvable monster who had damned the human race.

A weapon was never much out of my sight during the time after I was apprehended. I don't believe anyone would have used one, considering I was to be kept alive for what would be a public trial.

I had challenged and invalidated humanity's souls and salvation because I could never die and I had given the plant to others who would also not die, as long as they had access to the plant.

Political machines jumped into action after my arrest. The American government classified Bloodleaf as an addictive poison. With the help of Global Security and Safety, I was to be tried for crimes against humanity.

I was dragged through the media as a monster. My words were twisted so that I was shown and proved to be dangerous. Whatever my objection, I was dangerous, and through my actions I had brought danger to society itself.

The public merely wished me death, but this was impossible by now, from them or for myself. What manifested towards me, instead, was a deep, black, instinctual fear. I would need to be convicted of a crime and put to death under proof of guilt, according to the law. Any time they wished, I could have Bloodleaf taken from me, but this was paramount to ending my life.

Keep talking, Michael, the officials cooed. Keep eating those leaves, buddy.

The people wished me strung up, they wished to fire arrows into my heart, but most of all they wanted justice, which meant men needed to understand the gravity of the situation and create new laws regarding what I'd done and what I had introduced into society.

Horizon was immensely important to everyone and I was the first to introduce something tangible and unexpected from outside of our dimension.

In a way, again, anyone's idea of compassion, and what it might mean towards me, wanted nothing short of my death, but more importantly, humanity wanted to be free of me, innocent of any guilt they might share, while convicting me of my own personal tragedies.

By sending me to Horizon for trial, a precedent could be set for both worlds. I was to be given a life sentence, remain on Bloodleaf, unable to die, and serve as a reminder to humanity of the consequences of the actions I had taken.

They placed me in a part of the ship with a group of people who were artists, painters, and other aesthetic craftsmen. They had been commissioned to experience the new world and return to share it with others.

Bloodleaf has another side effect which I alluded to earlier. You can read the minds of others soon after dosing, usually for ten minutes to half an hour. You could even see through another person's eyes for a length of time, should that person take Bloodleaf as well.

This was how I knew what the officials of Global Security and Safety had planned for me, and what led to my refusal to answer questions, my solace in the Fifth Amendment, a right which would be taken from me in a new land.

It was thought that artists, being more "sensitive" to their own mental processes, would make good trustees and were informed to alert anyone if I should begin to exercise my ability to read minds in any capacity to try and free myself either through mental manipulation or coercion. This was a confusing issue, as it was thought I could manipulate minds, and this tactic was used during the political process to promote fear of what I had done.

I reclined in my cot, chewing lightly on Bloodleaf, and let my mind wander and fuzz as it opened to the dim thought-chatter of the cruise ship. I could see a total of 327 people aboard. I've always known this easily, and as far as I know, I've been the only one with this gift to accurately know the number of people in my range. Many were crew members, judging by the shared content of their thoughts. I continued as my psyche spread throughout the ship, opening to their minds. Surprisingly, or not, in the room directly above, two travelers were

passionately embracing and making love. They were married to other people. I could see they each thought the other was traveling alone as they spun each other thoughts of other lives and other identities.

Lying back, my awareness spread to its limit and my body tense like a drum, a whisper appeared in my mind.

"Save me," the voice said. The waters of my awareness smoothed and funneled, making room for the words.

"You. You can save me," the voice said.

I had never been reached this way.

"Please. I sensed you just now. The guards believe I am more induced than I am. We're entering the field of the gateway. The effects of my stasis are not as strong and I am more aware than normal. I had thought for... I've influenced the guards into mild dreams... daydreams... but now they are asleep. Please, come up here. You can, safely. All you need is to enter a password nearby, it's the lock to my stasis. I don't want to be here. I can't live the rest of my life like this and I believe it will not be too long before I am put under. You are my only chance, please."

A wave washed over my consciousness and splashed into my soul, heavy with despair and annihilation. A deep misery and sadness with a dull, blind ache of narcotics and I knew it was the Dreamer of our ship. Despite the haze, the thoughts and words that came into my mind were strong and sophisticated in presence. They pierced me, yet they were as slippery and feathery as a short and oiled stiletto knife. Her feelings were of long isolation and absolutely no perception of an end or freedom.

I quietly thought of choices. Here I am, on my way to stand trial for a life sentence and she wanted me to free her from her own.

So, I carefully got up and made my way out through the main door, my consciousness stretching thin and brittle, my limbs and muscles tense and taut. She was a fellow prisoner. Who am I to refuse a plea for freedom? What could I lose?

As far as my mind could reach, I could sense the passengers and crew falling asleep or already sleeping. The passengers were entering their dreams, their minds were soft, my own was eased.

Quickly, I found my way to the deck. The boat was near enough to the island that the field from the gateway was stronger, enveloping the Dreamer's reality more so. I went through the door I needed, seeking and feeling her, stopping at the large containment unit at the end of the room, against the wall.

Placing my hands on the capsule, I peered through the glass. She was beautiful, with tanned skin, dark black hair, her eyes held a vaguely Asian cast, and her face was splashed with freckles. The capsule uttered gentle beeps and in the soft glow she appeared to be wearing a paper gown.

"Please," she thought. Her eyes were heavily lidded, and she was breathing in short, shallow breaths. "The password is 'KOJI'. Press 'Medical Care'."

The guards were still asleep. I found the terminal I needed, the screen showed

nothing more than a blank white entry box and a few selections to the right of this. I entered the password on the keyboard and pressed 'Medical Care' on the screen.

After that, there was no time. I believe I watched her for hours, in that moment, although it passed in the span of several breaths. The capsule opened as my vision seemed to come from a tunnel that was yards away. Somewhere in there, she shrieked and writhed while engulfed in flame. She was a phoenix. She shot out of the capsule, through the ceiling, and she was gone. I reeled and realized manifestations of emotion and thought would soon become reality with her escape. She had been our only tether to a safe existence. The Bloodleaf was beginning to fade and my awareness started to slowly retreat to the safety of my own mind.

I believed everyone to still be asleep. I heard one of the guards mutter and sigh as I hurried out through the door. The moon hung large overhead, bright and white, reflecting its light on the water which sang and danced back to the sky in a cadence only the ocean and moon know.

Walking on the deck, I started to hear screaming from the sleeping quarters of the passengers. I heard glass shattering and watched several winged shapes drag a woman through a broken window and take flight. She struggled as they pulled at her limbs, tearing at her body and dropping her into the ocean. I looked for the door that would lead me back below deck and heard a shout, "Marsha, how could you? My son! My son is dead!" Several more screams and the ocean began to churn as I heard something loud and heavy crash against a wall. I felt the wood and metal beneath my feet ache and groan as voices set the air ablaze.

Oh, God. The Bloodleaf had left me dizzy. I took another step and fell to the floor as people ran by, the terrors of our own minds as real as the darkness of the night.

In hindsight, I guess all of our underlying fears along with the isolation of the Dreamer had manifested itself into one solid reality, with all of us being so close to the gateway and now unprotected. From the floor of the deck, I saw an immense form begin to rise out of the water. I recognized a head and shoulders, and through the darkness, a single eye. An ethereal weave reached from each of us on the ship and flowed back into that eye. The moonlight gleamed off of its face covered in horns and its teeth curved back for rows as it opened its mouth. A snake-like tongue slit out, polished and cleaned each horn, playing across them in a macabre spiderweb dance. Each horn tied to another fear of a passenger, and we knew this because it knew this.

My teeth chattered and I could not turn my head. I could see its shoulders were heavy and looked as long as the ship. Its skin was translucent through the light of the moon, as several of its organs glowed. It had ropes of immense golden chains and large gemstones hanging from its neck. I covered my face and heard weeping as it began to speak. As it raised a wet dripping fist towards the ship, screams and terror-filled shouting rang out into the night. Its hand and arm were laden with yards of wet, black hair. Its voice was both deep and resonant, yet

shrill and high-pitched, piercing our minds. The force of its voice blew the boat back and I rolled. Its tongue moved sharply and whipped as it trilled and chirped in a language older than time. It shrieked of evils done and of horrors untold in countless worlds. Evils that never saw the light of day, cursing all that was alive with a splattering of black cruelty, too unbearable to die, wither, be forgotten, and go where these things go.

Dear God.

I cannot remember anything else. I heard one word out of everything it spoke. It was Michael. It was my own name. I went black. It was the last I could remember.

About the Author

Keith Bingham has been traveling the dimensions of space and time for a little bit now, putting virtual pen to paper in the light of fantastical ways. At a clear attempt at rationality and reasoning, or perhaps an unbidden desire to be a world-class writer, Keith has lent his imagination to the idea of living forever and what that might mean for the people involved. Keith lives in beautiful Tennessee, after relocating from the cold and snowy state of New York and he says he likes it. Whether this means he likes leaving New York or likes living in Tennessee, it remains to be seen. Currently working on his second book, Keith enjoys the time he has with his family and two small dogs.

Visit the Author's Website
<http://www.bamkaboom.com>