

A Madman's Tale

By Nick Hayden

Once, there was a scientist who invented a portal to alternate dimensions. Now, this was no ordinary scientist. He was, in the accepted terminology, a *mad* scientist. It should go without saying that such a scientist must be mad, since ordinary scientists are abundantly content with making mice glow in the dark, or growing human ears on the back of mice, or making cotton candy grow in the place of fur, without bothering with all the mess of space-time and 11-dimensional sub-sub-atomic particles, and all the rest. Because, you see, the ordinary scientist (being ordinary) believes making an edible, phosphorescent mouse with ears the size of your uncle's is utterly mad, but the mad scientist (being mad) finds such experiments only pitiable.

The mad scientist, on the other hand, has a special knack for making the wildly improbable and largely impossible fantasies of his unstable mind come to pass quite by accident. This is because the mad scientist, in strict opposition to the ho-hum, run-of-the-mill variety, cares nothing for the Laws of Nature. If the sun rises, he is surprised. He sees no reason why the sun, having risen some supposed billions upon billions of times, must do so today. And he waits for the day when he can prove his strait-laced brethren wrong.

It should be noted that since the mad scientist cares nothing for the Laws of Nature, the Laws of Nature care nothing for him. It is an arrangement beneficial to both parties.

Now, the particular scientist under examination, one Victor von Victorstein the V, created the before mentioned trans-dimensional portal sometime between lunch and his afternoon teeth cleaning. (Victor von Victorstein is fanatically and obsessively concerned with his teeth.) How exactly the portal was formed, no one can say, nor was Victor von Victorstein particularly interested to learn when he discovered it. He stepped into his living room, his hands in the lab coat he had purchased at the

precious age of 13 – and he saw it, the unholy vortex of anti-stuff twirling voraciously above his favorite footstool. His favorite thinking recliner, now ablaze, added a delightful sense of doom to the scene.

Victor von Victorstein, perplexed, first surmised that he had invented a rather efficient method of cleaning house. The old dishes, test tubes, and half-dissected pigs he had been meaning to pick up had been sucked through the chthonic cyclone of destruction and now his cheap framed prints of Einstein, Feynman, and Bohr were flying off the wall. Well, it saved him the trouble; and he had doubles of the pictures in his bedroom. On further consideration, however, Victor von Victorstein noticed in the fiery perturbations of the hellish depths of that ominous anomaly a striking similarity to certain freehand fractals in his notebook, “Doodles in Pursuit of a Unified Theory of Everything.”

Thus noticing, Victor von Victorstein, armed with tongs, lab goggles, and a rather hodgepodge collection of sealed test tubes (some put in his lab coat pockets when he was only an *irritated* scientist), jumped through the tragic, consuming tear in the fabric of reality.

It should be pointed out, in defense of all sane scientists, that the proper response to the cataclysmic conjunction of improbabilities that filled the apartment of Victor von Victorstein with smoke is not to leap blindly into it. No, the proper procedure is to send a mouse or two through the portal, preferably mice that have had video cameras wired through their eyes; then to wait three years, processing data; then to file a report; then to ensure that other scientists – equally well-funded by a different company or political party – throw doubt on the authenticity of the first report; and so on, and so forth. It comes quite naturally, unless you are mad.

A moment after hurling himself into the void, Victor von Victorstein found himself elsewhere. After counting fingers and toes to ensure he had arrived in one piece (9 and 10, due to an accident once while splitting atoms), he surveyed the world

he had dropped onto. The land before him was dry, desolate, dreary – downright dismal. Dark clouds barred the sun and stars like iron gates. Lurid light leapt from deep chasms. The stony ground, churned, presented sharp edges at every step. Nothing grew.

Victor von Victorstein, undeterred by something as trivial as hostile terrain, searched and discovered bones strewn about, shards of what appeared to be building material, and, the crown jewel—an inscription in foreign letters. Victor von Victorstein copied the symbols onto his hand (he had forgotten his “Doodles” notebook) and returned through the gaping gateway.

“Bwhahahaha!” he thought upon his return. He rubbed his hands in ecstasy. “I have discovered a new world. Thousands more lie at my fingertips. Every second countless possible realities spin off from our own. Every choice creates a new world. Yes, that is surely the way of things. I must find a world of gold, a world of beauty, and a world of ideas. Then, I will be as a god!”

And he laughed as he had been taught in his four-week Internet course, “Expressing Yourself: Intermediate Maniacal Laughter and Other Mad Gestures.”

By the aid of booming thunder, courtesy of the sound machine on his night stand, he constructed a cunning device by which to control the portal, which he now called Lord Uxtonthik, a name of his own invention.

“My Lord,” he said, manipulating dials, plugs, and keyboards, “you will now usher me into an Age of Wealth.” Lord Uxtonthik winked conspiratorially, and his color deepened to crimson. A bit of carpet, long flapping, tore from the floor and disappeared into the Abyss. Victor von Victorstein followed suit.

He found himself surrounded by dark water; he swallowed a cold, fetid mouthful in surprise. Panicked, he swam desperately for the surface, though, in his panic, he had no clear sense of direction. His grasp of gravity changed so quickly that the desired surface seemed to spin around him. Somehow, he could tell he was blacking out,

though the water was as dark as senselessness. He struggled to return to his world.

Lord Uxtonthik vomited him out, sopping, onto the crusty carpet of his apartment. Regaining consciousness sometime later, Victor von Victorstein, undeterred by something as trivial as seeing his life flash before his eyes, programmed new commands. "Lord Uxtonthik, take me to an Age of Beauty!"

Again, he arrived in darkness – but Victor von Victorstein, having taken note of his last incident, produced a jar filled with phosphorescent mice from his pocket, which he held like a lantern by a wire attached to the lid. He was not in a cave, unless the walls and ceiling were remarkably distant. The ground was flatter than Kansas, which is, so ordinary scientists have concluded mathematically, flatter than a pancake. Victor von Victorstein walked for miles in every direction, he stayed the night, but the darkness never lessened and no boundary rose before him. Frustrated, Victor von Victorstein returned to his apartment. He redirected Lord Uxtonthik a third time. "Take me to an Age of Genius!"

Ash choked him; sulfur burned his eyes. After several minutes lying prostrate on the warm, tough ground, blinking and coughing, he rose and placed his lab goggles firmly over his eyes. Through the gentle snow of charred earth, he saw a wild pillar of flame pierce the leaden sky – it illuminated the whole expanse of the world for a lurid moment – he saw nothing but the crimson outline of millions of flecks of ash. The pillar disappeared, an angel of judgment slipping through the folds of creation to leave the earth formless and void. Victor von Victorstein waited for another such flash, his disposable camera retrieved from an inner pocket, but he waited in vain.

Returning through Lord Uxtonthik, he collapsed in a bean bag, causing white peanuts to burst from the seams. After an hour of intense cogitation, he remembered the inscription on his hand. For a day and a night he labored upon the inscription, directing the bulk of his Mensa-certified brainpower to the problem. This proved to be not a little unhelpful, since, when translated by a calculator specially reprogrammed

for the purpose, it read, "In honor of Jira Trimola Iaqu, Mother, Daughter, 3387-3452."

Thus buffeted, and by such buffeting driven to extremity of dedication, Victor von Victorstein sold his patent for sustaining the life of a severed head in a bowl of jelly, paid his rent a year in advance, and began a rigorous process of randomization. Hour by hour, day by day, Victor von Victorstein, driven to the full of extent of his madness by his curiosity and inexplicable desire to discover the inexplicable, hurled himself bodily into one world after another. With bruised shoulders and tattered lab coat he landed on shrapnel-shredded worlds, pits of everlasting stench, fiery peaks, oily depths, lunar deserts, vast vacuums, islands of waste, earthen chambers of immense pressure – a kaleidoscope of the most horrible, hammered, inhumane locales of any dimension or time, unsuitable for humanity – or for any other creature, even mice.

About 17 months into the process of randomization – I say *about* because Victor von Victorstein had long stopped keeping precise records, which were a great annoyance to him, even under the most favorable conditions – a most singular event occurred. He tumbled headlong onto a world where something like the sun still shone, where something like grass still grew, and where something like men still lived. Victor von Victorstein met them almost immediately after landing on their world, for they seized him and dragged him into town. They threw him about in the most furious way and kicked him and punched him and treated him rather unlike he was used to, except during those years in middle school.

They threw him to the ground. "He is a demon. We must kill him! Kill him!" And everyone seemed in agreement with this plan. (Victor von Victorstein had some time before constructed a universal translator for just such an encounter; well, not for *just* such an encounter: he had envisioned buying entire nations for a handful of corn chips, not being sacrificed to some pagan deity.) They began to pick him up but

dropped him suddenly, becoming quiet. Victor von Victorstein, looking about, found that he wasn't dead. A man was speaking to the crowd, and to him.

“Let this man go! You fools! The end is here! God Almighty is coming with fire and wrath! Look! Look to the east! We have been prophesying to you, but you have not listened. Look, he is coming!”

It is important to note at this juncture that mad scientists possess powers of observation in equal degree to their nansy-pansy counterparts, but that it has a tendency to lose effectiveness in moments of extreme agitation. Therefore, Victor von Victorstein saw the blaze but not the object of the kindling. He heard the screams but not the triumphant victory cry. He ran to Lord Uxtonthik's cradling arms, pursued by the mob, who in turn believed itself pursued by something greater. Victor von Victorstein, at the last moment, turned to view the world he was leaving; he saw tongues of fire descending from the sky to lick the earth in conflagration and smoke belching forth like geysers of water.

In his apartment, Victor von Victorstein allowed himself a few minutes to recover. It was the only time in his life he would meet other living creatures within the ravenous jaws of Lord Uxtonthik. He ate cereal in a dirty bowl before settling in for another trip – he would continue to chase dead worlds his entire life.

For the sake of completeness, it should be noted that there was, in fact, an Age of Wealth, an Age of Beauty, an Age of Genius, and even, some claim, an Age of Grace, to be found. They lay not through the malicious maw of Lord Uxtonthik, but through the door leading out of the apartment.

Victor von Victorstein, as mad as he was, was not quite mad enough to notice.