

Chapter 1: Down the Rabbit Hole

It was such a small, little thing, but his dealer had promised Jeremy that this square piece of paper held another universe. Turning it over in his hand, the teenager noticed there was a green infinity symbol printed on the other side and scoffed. The community for his preferred internet forum told stories of acid and mescaline covered in anarchy and freemason symbols, even the star from Super Mario, so the infinity symbol seemed like a lazy signature. However, if this truly *was* Escape, it could have a diseased penis on it and Jeremy wouldn't give a damn.

So, skeptical and scared out of his mind, Jeremy placed the paper on his tongue and stood in his kitchen.

This was the first time Jeremy had done anything so serious, he had tried mushrooms once and almost threw them up, but Escape was supposed to be the ultimate hallucinogen. *Supposedly*, a dose of Escape allowed the user to imagine and live in the world they wanted. Jeremy was skipping a few tiers of drugs and going straight for the hard stuff, DMT was the only thing that was even close, but he thought it was worth it. The way the online community talked about it, there was no going back to real life after the first dose, and it would not be much longer before law enforcement would crack down on it.

But as he stood there in the kitchen, rapping his knuckles against the fancy countertop of the kitchen island, Jeremy was getting impatient. He had read it took twenty minutes or so to kick in, for the chemicals to alter his brain, but he had already waited so long just for the package to arrive. Taking a much bigger risk than he had wanted to, Jeremy had purchased a full sheet of Escape from someone on an online forum and, even though he had paid for two day-shipping, it had taken a week for it to get to his house, smuggled in the belly of a hand puppet.

It was still sitting there on the kitchen island, a green, somehow adorable version of C'thulhu of Lovecraft fame, and it made Jeremy smile. He hadn't had a chance to read any Lovecraft yet, he was only sixteen and preferred to play video games, but he liked the idea of the Old Ones. He loved the idea of gods dwelling just outside the realm of sanity, just beyond his ability to perceive them.

However, as much as he liked the puppet, that was not what he had bought; that was not why he took such a big risk. Right now he was supposed to be looking at an altered version of this world, but he still saw the same, shiny, barely-used kitchen. Sixty percent of the time Jeremy lived off of frozen food, the other forty percent was fast food, and as a result the kitchen looked like it belonged in a model home. If she was ever around, his mother would only bother to scatter bottles and glasses of wine that would eventually be cleaned up by their housekeeper.

Most of the time it just looked like the rest of the house; sterile and abandoned.

His mother was gone again, of course; she was always gone during the week. Another important something or other must have come up, because she hadn't even called Jeremy to say that he should make his own dinner. At this point he was used to it, he had already made a pile of chicken nuggets and washed them down with the unhealthiest soda possible, but it certainly did not make their relationship any better. Part of him felt awful for it, but Jeremy had given up on his mother years ago.

Starting to get angry, Jeremy stomped away from the kitchen to find something to distract him, but he turned around once he remembered his drugs were still lying out in plain sight. After shoving the sheet back into the hand puppet and throwing it into the cardboard box, Jeremy walked through his empty house with the box under his arm, through a living room large enough to hold thirty people, and climbed the main stairway two steps at a time. Even if it winded him slightly, Jeremy was too impatient to go any slower. Once he got to his room and threw the box on his bed, he immediately turned around and went into his bathroom.

“C’mon, you bastard, just work already,” he muttered, setting his hands against the counter and gripping the porcelain tightly. What he saw in the mirror was disappointing for a number of reasons, his weight, his acne, the way his ears stuck out too far, but he had learned to ignore most of them over the years.

The only reason he was staring at the mirror was to see if anything was changing in his perception. He remembered one of the coolest parts of taking mushrooms was seeing his own face shift and distort in the mirror, growing and shrinking, becoming someone else’s face while he watched. Of course, there was more to the experience, he remembered feeling a surge of pleasant emotions and getting the giggles at more than a few points, but he thought that a drug like Escape would perhaps manifest first as a shift in perspective.

But ten minutes into setting the infinity symbol on his tongue, Jeremy was left seeing his pathetic reflection as always. He was still the same, pudgy, pasty white kid other teenagers would mock every day. He was still the same rich kid who didn’t have any friends, resorting to using drugs to escape his world.

“Goddamnit,” he said before sticking out his tongue and seeing the wet paper clinging there. This was how he supposed to do it, or at least that was what he had read. After closing his mouth, Jeremy glared hard at his own face and shook his head. The stranger on the forum had promised the real experience, but Jeremy was starting to doubt his integrity. “If that bastard ripped me off...”

Grunting, Jeremy turned from his reflection and left the bathroom, heading toward the stairs with his head down. The open space around the staircase had always made him feel small; the architect had loved the idea of the house wasting as much money and space as possible. Jeremy couldn’t walk through the house without feeling like he didn’t belong there, that he was on display, and it was just another reason he resented his mother. Not only did she push away his father, but she had to go and buy a gigantic house with the settlement and make Jeremy feel even smaller.

“This is bullshit,” he grumbled turning at the end of the staircase and walking back to the massive living room. After falling onto the leather couch they had brought with them from the last house, the only one Jeremy liked, he picked up the remote and turned on the giant television hanging on the wall. After the display warmed up, the sound system erupted into the chaos of people talking over each other on cable news.

“I just can’t understand how this is even a question,” a dignified woman with short, blonde hair said on the left side of the screen. Displayed underneath her picture was her name, Lynn Stafford, but Jeremy already knew that. It was hard to ignore anyone trying to be the next Nancy Reagan.

“It’s *not*, that’s the thing,” her opponent responded from the other side of the screen, an overweight man wearing an oversized suit. This one was an unfamiliar face, but Benjamin Childress was written underneath his part of the screen. “It’s an

individual right, Ms. Stafford, an individual right to treat our bodies the way they want, and I certainly don't want the government to infringe on my rights."

"This has nothing to do with rights, Ben," she replied, shaking her head and giving a condescending smile. "It is an abusive substance, a substance which leads to addiction, leads to self-destructive tendencies, to *violence*, to criminal behavior! It's a well-known gateway drug and it is becoming more and more difficult to keep it away from our *children*."

Fucking hypocrite, Jeremy thought, seeing the talking head trying to hold back his own reaction. As nice and dignified as she seemed, Jeremy knew that Lynn Stafford was no angel; it was practically public record that she had a number of prescriptions that were abused regularly. Still, they were legal, so the woman got to keep her soap box.

"Couldn't you say the exact same thing about alcohol?" Childress asked, hoping to argue logically with the senator. "Every link you've established there, even if there *isn't* one, could be said of alcohol. What we're proposing is to introduce marijuana into the system legally and tax it, which would lead to more revenue which *we* could use, Ms. Stafford, to improve the state of our nation. As a member of Congress, I would *think* that would be one of your priorities."

Damn straight, Jeremy thought with a smile, forgetting for the moment that he was waiting for his own drugs to kick in.

"What would you say to that, Ms. Stafford?" the host of the program asked, trying to sneak in a word between the two opponents. Rolling her eyes, the woman threw up her hands before leaning forward.

"What I would say to that, Chris, is that it is not only an absurd argument, but it is morally irresponsible to consider the idea—"

"Absurd, what's so absurd about—" the other man tried to interrupt, but the congresswoman put up her hand and continued talking.

"— it is *morally irresponsible* to consider the legalization of marijuana and perpetuating a drug culture. The citizens of this country are hurt every day from the advent of this drug and the absolute *last* thing I would want is for our *children* to grow up thinking that drug use is acceptable," she said, tearing up on cue and staring straight into the camera. "If my child turned to drugs, if he threw away his life, I would be devastated."

"Do you drink, Ms. Senator?" Childress asked, ignoring her emotional plea entirely. Leaning back in her chair, the senator tried to dismiss the question with a slight shake of her head.

"That has little to do with it—"

"Do you *drink*, Ms. Senator?" he repeated, and Jeremy was pleased to see her eyes flash with anger.

"I have the occasional drink, Ben, but that is beside the point," she said, at which point the overweight man wagged his finger.

"It is the point, actually. There is no real difference between your occasional drink and the occasional smoking session of a recreational user of marijuana. There are certainly people who abuse it, but there is more than enough evidence to show that alcohol abuse is—"

"It's illegal, Ben, that's what it is, and for good reason," she interrupted, causing Jeremy to growl and pick up the remote from his chest.

“Will you let me speak?” Childress asked, drawing a scoff from Stafford.

“I’m just not a fan of listening to nonsense. There are studies that show the harmful effects of marijuana, and no matter how many states legalize this drug, I would never allow such criminal activity to invade my state and my home,” she said triumphantly, the host of the program enamored as he listened to her every word.

Although Jeremy could see Stafford’s opponent bristle with anger, he also knew that Childress would not be able to get another word in, so he changed the channel until cartoons were on the screen. Even though he was not particularly interested, it was better than watching that televised circus. After a few minutes, he remembered why he was watching television, why he needed a distraction.

“It’s fake, it has to be,” he said as he looked at the ceiling, admitting his failure. Whoever KilgoreMKUltra was, he had obviously stolen Jeremy’s money. Seeing that laughable name on the forum, Jeremy should have been more skeptical, but he had been desperate. He had wanted something more than this life; he had wanted more than this loneliness. A few hundred dollars seemed like an even trade for true escapism.

Closing his eyes, Jeremy thought about Allison.

She would never be with him, no matter how much he liked her. She was pretty, with blonde hair that fell past her shoulders, and she had a perfect smile. Not only that, but she had always been nice to Jeremy in class and in the halls. They didn’t have anything in common, Jeremy had almost nothing in common with anybody at school, but she gave him a smile every once in a while.

It was more than anybody else would give him.

Opening his eyes with a sigh, Jeremy turned to look at the cartoons blaring from the television. It was a dumb show about a talking fruit, and Jeremy could only look at it for a few seconds before wanting to hurl something at the screen. Picking himself up so that he could sit on the couch, Jeremy turned off the TV before throwing the remote to the side. He had already lost all that money; he didn’t need to punish himself by watching that crap.

Burying his face in his hands, Jeremy thought about what he was going to do next. Escaping to another world had been his entire plan for the night, even if he had school the next day, and there was nothing exciting happening in his gaming communities. Even the games he *hadn’t* played held no appeal; he had bought dozens of them and hadn’t even started half, but he knew it would give him no satisfaction. What he wanted was to *be* in another world, not just another night of pretend.

Frustrated, Jeremy lowered his hands so that he could turn the TV back on, but then he saw something which changed his entire night. Leaning forward, he tried to understand just how it had happened. Sitting there on the coffee table was a crystal vase with a single rose inside, which would not have been so remarkable anywhere else in the house.

Except that it had not been there before he had closed his eyes.

Reaching out with a trembling hand, Jeremy tried to touch the rose and was surprised to see it shift before his eyes. The rose crystallized and sparkled as light from a nonexistent source shined through a hundred different facets. Jeremy could only gape in wonder as he looked at the crystal rose, pushing himself off the couch so he could look at the mysterious object from a different angle.

“Oh, that’s fucking cool,” he said, a giant grin on his face as he reached forward again, abandoning his fear completely. However, as soon as he touched the rose, the

entire room changed and caused him to fall back onto the couch in shock. Spreading from the vase holding the rose, every surface in the room was covered in brilliant crystal, and Jeremy laughed as he looked at his new house.

“Incredible...” he muttered, standing up and looking at the brilliant purples, violets and light blues of his walls, seeing the different crystal formations covering the walls and the floor. Crouching down, Jeremy ran his hand along the carpet, which was covered in a million tiny crystal projections, and for a moment he forgot he was under the effect of a powerful hallucinogen.

For that moment, as he ran his hand along the ground and felt the cool touch of crystal, Jeremy thought he was in another world.

“Shit! Shit, keep it together,” he said as he jumped back up and looked at his living room. It was amazing and he would have been content with this on any other drug, but this was *Escape*. This was supposed to be the world he wanted; the world in his imagination.

Closing his eyes, Jeremy tried to imagine the world he wanted to experience. On the forums, he had read that the only limitation was that his hallucinations were layered over reality, so he couldn't imagine that he could run around forever unless he wanted to run into a wall. So, keeping his house in mind, Jeremy tried to will into existence another world.

When he opened his eyes, Jeremy was so shocked that he had to cover his mouth. Fantastic, otherworldly plant life had exploded into life in that instant; neon blue vines hung from fuchsia tree limbs, brilliant red ivy wrapped around the gigantic emerald tree trunk that had sprouted out of his carpet. Walking forward, Jeremy ran his finger along one of the leaves and felt the velvet texture, laughing as he saw another world.

“Oh my god,” he said, could not stop himself from saying, and he was shocked to find a small insect land on his outstretched finger. When he brought the insect up closer to inspect it, he found that its wings were made out of diamonds; that it looked at him with great, big black eyes.

“Oh my god,” the insect repeated, lifting up its torso to reveal a face that looked remarkably like Jeremy's own. “My god. Our god.”

“What? What the hell?” Jeremy asked in shock, whipping back his hand and causing the insect to take flight, flapping its diamond wings so fast that it hovered like a hummingbird.

“No Hell. Hell is gone,” it said before it flitted away, leaving Jeremy to marvel at the world surrounding him. Before his eyes, a magnificent jellyfish lowered from the sky, pulsing with soft, yellow light, and Jeremy's jaw went slack as he saw it hit one of the outstretched branches of the tree and then split into a dozen smaller, identical versions.

“Hell is gone,” he repeated under his breath as the jellyfish scattered around his living room, bathing his vibrant surroundings with pleasant light and heat. It felt like the entire world was wrapping him in a warm embrace, and Jeremy looked down to find little animals munching happily on blue roots beneath him.

Crouching down, Jeremy put out his hand to one of the animals, a bundle of purple fur, and it looked up at him once it felt his touch. It seemed like some distant, blue cousin of a ferret, and it instantly started to purr once his fingers were buried in its soft hair. Before Jeremy knew it, it climbed up his hand before wrapping lightly around his upper arm, settling its head on his shoulder before continuing to purr. Using his

other hand to pet its forehead, he saw the creature smile and close its eyes, almost falling asleep on his shoulder.

“There, there,” he said, remembering the old days when he had pets. He missed the affection and the warmth, even if he didn’t miss the responsibility. Smiling, Jeremy was about to pry the creature off his arm when it seemed to take a mental cue, climbing up his arm until it could perch on his shoulder. Leaning down to nuzzle against his ear for a moment, the animal then leaped off to grab at one of the neon vines hanging from the nearby tree.

Jeremy watched it go with a hint of sadness, but eventually he was distracted by a large beast coming from what should have been the hallway to the stairs. Stepping over the archway of tree limbs Jeremy had left to signify the hallway, the creature looked like a massive wolf, but when it turned to look at him, Jeremy saw it open its mouth and roll out a green tongue before approaching him like a loyal dog.

Lowering its head in reverence, it set its forehead against Jeremy’s body and radiated with love. It was all Jeremy could do to wrap his arms around its massive head, and he stayed there burying himself in its coarse hair before realizing that he did not want to spend his entire trip cuddling with animals in a neon rainforest. Closing his eyes, Jeremy said goodbye to the creature before imagining another layer to his reality.

He tasted the salt air before he even opened his eyes, but Jeremy was still excited once he was able to see the chain of airborne islands connected by suspended rope bridges, and he jumped in excitement as he climbed onto a nearby boulder, what he realized was probably his couch. From his vantage point he was able to see cascading waterfalls coming from the source of a distant mountain, but he was also able to see the water pouring off cracks between the islands of his new home.

Jeremy had put those cracks there to signify the walls of his reality, but he had already started to forget that there *was* a reality. This new world had been part of one of his favorite games growing up, he would hack and slash his way through bushes for money, days at a time, and Jeremy instantly felt like a little kid again. Making his way to the robe bridges to his left, Jeremy ran through his house at top speed before climbing up the steps etched into the rock formation that led up and over his current island. He only vaguely remembered that these were actually the steps of his house.

Taking the steps three at a time and not bothered by the exertion at all, the world shifted around him like an MC Escher painting, and Jeremy was unable to think rationally in the moment. To him, this was the new normal; this world could not be questioned. When he made his way to the top of the stairs, he quickly turned left and right, forgetting momentarily where he had been going, but then he remembered that he was searching for his room.

Not bothering to close his eyes this time, Jeremy watched the world change around him, the island adventures from his youth replaced splinter by splinter with a sleazy, apartment building mashed together from dozens of dystopian science-fiction stories. He knew he was not prepared to face any of the anti-heroes from his favorites, but he grinned widely as he considered what it might be like to run into a replicant, fight aliens on a spaceship or even imagine that he was on the surface of Mars. Instantly, his world started to turn into a red wasteland, but Jeremy put a stop to that by lifting his hand.

Laughing at the sight of his own arm as the world reverted to the dystopian building, Jeremy could not help but shake his head as he saw gnarled, alien fingers.

Somehow, he had become someone else entirely, and he looked at his legs to find that his knees were now bent backward. Setting that discovery into the back of his mind, Jeremy let his own self image become dominant and he turned back into a sixteen-year-old teenager, but he knew it would not be long before he experimented again.

“This is so awesome,” he said as he pushed into the dingy apartment, seeing trash and body parts scattered around what was supposed to be his room. He was momentarily shocked, he did not expect his imagination to get away from him like that, but he was here for a purpose. Hopping over to a chair attached to a futuristic interface, complete with five monitors and several peripherals he did not recognize, Jeremy tried to focus on reality just for the moment.

Suddenly, the computer monitor in the middle reverted back to what he knew, and Jeremy saw a window into his old world. Displayed on his computer monitor was the Escapism forum, and Jeremy eagerly clicked through the menus so he could return to his personal thread.

Guys, this is amazing, he typed. I only dosed half an hour ago and I'm already seeing incredible stuff. Seriously, I had no idea it could be like this. Big fucking thank you to the community, because I've already been to three different worlds. It's SO FUCKING AWESOME.

Clicking on the button to submit the post, Jeremy leaned back in his chair and let his fantasies wash over him. Forgetting about the dystopian apartment covered in blood, Jeremy allowed himself to think he was on the bridge of a starship that was open to the vacuum of space, watching a nebula undulate before a star went supernova in front of his eyes.

If it was real life, he knew that it would spell trouble for his ridiculous spaceship, that it was probably not possible in the *first place*, but this was just a show he had created. He let the heat and stardust wash over his open cockpit and felt joined to the universe, only remembering that he was talking to people online after a few moments. Turning his attention back to reality, he leaned forward just as the window opened back up and clicked the refresh icon on his browser. There was already another post, but Jeremy found that the other user had said what he already realized on his own.

Fantastic, man, but don't waste your time on here when you're about to peak. Just enjoy it.

Smiling, Jeremy nodded and tried to follow the stranger's advice, leaping out of his chair and running through his doorway. When he got into the massive room holding the staircase, Jeremy let the stars fall away and be replaced by rolling fields, by wisps of clouds flowing through the air. More importantly, he let a person solidify at the bottom of the stairs, more beautiful than he remembered.

“It's about time, Jeremy,” Allison said, her light hair falling past her shoulders in loose waves. A warm breeze flowed against her in that moment, causing her hair to flow behind her just like the red dress that covered her perfect body. Unable to speak, to even breathe, Jeremy just watched as she brought up a hand to keep the hair out of her eyes, looking up at him with a knowing smile.

“You didn't have to do that. Come down here,” she said lightly, beckoning him with her other hand. Looking down, Jeremy found that his stairwell was made entirely out of golden light and, more surprisingly, he was not himself. At least, he was not the pudgy, pasty white boy he had been just a few minutes ago.

What he saw was an idealized version of his own body; tall, thin but muscular, and covered in magnificent plate mail. Without his knowledge, he had transformed into the knight in shining armor he always wanted to be. As happy as a teenager could be, Jeremy had to stop himself from running down the steps to meet the girl of his dreams.

"I'm coming, Allison, I'm coming," he said, mustering fabricated confidence as he made his brilliant entrance from the sky. "You're pretty impatient, you know that?"

"Only because I see what I want," she said, laughing softly as Jeremy came down to join her on the ground. "Though I think I'm going to have to wait a little longer."

"Oh, and why is that?" Jeremy asked, giving a crooked smile and giving his best Han Solo impression. "I'm right here; there's no reason to wait."

"But I'm a lady, *Sir* Jeremy, and you're a knight, even if you don't act like one," she teased as she walked forward, setting her fingers on something attached to Jeremy's neck. When he looked down, he realized it was an amulet of a snake eating its own tail, but that thought was pushed away when he caught her scent.

"It's pretty difficult to act like a knight when you're around," he said as he brought up his hand to caress the back of her neck.

"I'm sure it is, but you know that a knight only gets his lady after he slays a dragon," she said as she looked up to his eyes, and they were interrupted by a loud roar. Turning with her still in his embrace, Jeremy saw a gigantic lizard breathing out fire just past a steep valley, waiting for him to meet it.

"Well, I guess I have to be a knight after all," he said before turning back to face Allison, who was looking up at him with doe eyes. "Tell me, though, is there any way I can get a kiss before you send me off?"

"Hmm, it's against the rules, you know," she said, tilting her head slightly, "But since you're about to save my life and all, I don't see why not."

"Perfect," he said, leaning down and pressing his lips to hers. It was just like he imagined it, love and warmth flowing between them, and it was hard for him to stop. Upon hearing the dragon roar again, however, Jeremy pulled back and withdrew from her embrace before drawing his sword. "Now I have the courage to fight."

"Off you go, my good knight. Kill 'em for me," Allison requested with a wink, and Jeremy found all the courage he needed.

Turning around, Jeremy ran through the steep valley, his blade shining brilliantly in his hand. By the time he met the dragon, Jeremy was yelling, completely lost in his battle, and he could not stop himself from feeling like this was where he was supposed to be. Even though he was fighting a hallucination in his living room, this was more of a home than he had ever known.

With the aid of just a small piece of paper, Jeremy had found a way to Escape.
