

## Assimilation

**Synopsis:** Within a post-apocalyptic Earth, a man embarks on a quest to unravel the mysteries behind the world's downfall through visions of someone who existed before the apocalypse.

### Characters:

- David
- Ohan
- Earl
- Carter
- Charon
- Stephen
- Adam
- Ole Bob

### Plot:

#### Prologue

One morning, while hunting in an edenic forest, Stephen notices an eerie water well amidst the trees, a sight new to him. He raises his rifle and slowly walks towards it but then recollects a voice telling him, “Dare not gaze into the well. Like **Hvergelmir**, it harbors evil.” Stephen remembers these words with strong apprehension and thus backs away, fearing what he might find inside. After killing a deer, he goes to a forest retreat in the middle of nowhere. There are no signs of civilization at all, just a strange sense of serenity and quietude. Whilst showering, he is joined by his wife and they make love.

#### David

It is nearly midnight but the sun hasn't set yet; the darkness of the night simply doesn't exist here. Stephen's wife sleeps peacefully whilst he goes outside for a smoke. A figure emerges from the trees and it turns out to be David, leaving Stephen utterly stunned. David asks if the mere fact that he appeared before him makes Stephen question what's real or not. But he retorts that as long as he's living happily with his wife, he doesn't care, quoting **Immanuel Kant's statement that happiness is not an ideal of reason, but of imagination.**

David comments how Stephen's world can be likened to **The Ironclad** since they are both prisons shielding them away from reality. He says there's no purpose to be found in paradise, only boredom and placidity, which is why **Eve** ate the **forbidden fruit**. David begs Stephen to never forget his origins, aka The Ironclad. Stephen asks him about where David is currently residing and if he somehow got back to his sister. He cryptically answers that he wasn't as lucky as Stephen and he is just a manifestation of Stephen's guilt and doubts. Before dissolving away into nothingness, David asks one final question, “How did I taste?”

We are now inside The Ironclad, an underground complex kilometers beneath the surface. It was built to protect people from the fallout of an asteroid impact, which ravaged the surface of the Earth decades ago and rendered it inhospitable. The Ironclad was constructed to ensure the preservation and continuation of the human race but the conditions inside are dreadful. People live amidst rampant poverty, a dark and excruciatingly hot environment, and all kinds of diseases, leading to innumerable deaths. Much of the food and water produced are contaminated, nonnutritious or simply lacking. Groundwater is often used for drinking and oxygen production through electrolysis.

The Ironclad is ruled by the **APS (Alpha Point State)**, a regime which combines **militarism**, **authoritarianism** and **totalitarianism** to control its population. Through **historical denialism**, life as it was before the apocalypse is unknown. **Propaganda** messages claim the omnipresence of freedom and diverging ideologies pre-apocalypse resulted in devastating conflicts which almost threatened to end the world way before the asteroid impact. They believe the impact was a blessing in disguise; an opportunity to rebuild a better civilization by uniting everyone through thought suppression and ideology enforcement. Intellectuals are either eliminated or kept under close watch. Religion is banned: anyone believing in some divine entity and practicing acts interpreted as religious are promptly eliminated as per the laws enforcing **state atheism**. Likewise, anyone criticizing the regime is executed.

Religion is ironically labeled as a tool for control in the pre-apocalypse society. Artworks with political or religious undertones are confiscated and destroyed, same for any books dwelling on subjects deemed inappropriate or offensive by the regime. Through mass surveillance, all the inhabitants are kept under close watch such that any potential uprisings can be quenched before they can even begin. The labyrinthine nature of The Ironclad as well as how deeply buried it is ensure that no one is able to escape to the surface without the much coveted plans of the complex.

The elders (engineers and workers) who built The Ironclad had their memories forcefully wiped in their earlier years inside. It is unclear who really rules the APS and if they have any knowledge on what came before the world's demise. Scientific exploration is limited only to survivalism since The Ironclad is starting to deteriorate and it's only a matter of time before it will no longer be able to sustain life. When this became apparent to the public, the APS revealed that humans have also ventured to distant stars before the impact to rebuild their civilization and an **interstellar ark**, under the command of an outer space democratic republic, will soon arrive to rescue the survivors before The Ironclad collapses.

Not everyone trusts the APS. Their persistent denial of the world before the apocalypse and their relentless persecution of anyone who even questions what's on the surface lead many to speculate what secrets they might be harboring about the true history behind the world's downfall. Thus, six men (David, Ohan, Earl, Carter, Charon and Stephen) will attempt to escape The Ironclad and make their way to the surface in search of the truth. David is a military colonel who stole the plans of The Ironclad and arranged frequent meetings with the other five by finding blindspots and bribing officers under his command to fool the APS's mass surveillance efforts.

Months before their escape, the six men meet in a brothel reserved only for the military. David bribes those who frequently visit the place for their silence whilst the other five men wear military uniforms to mask their true identity. David, a frequent client here, pays the Madam to allow them into her private room for each of their meetings. Everyone, besides Earl and Ohan, shows little trust in David, with Stephen strongly resenting him, since he is a member of the APS's military. David explains his regrets for the horrendous acts he was forced to commit under the regime's command and he believes he'll find **redemption** by finding the truth and exposing it to the people. Stephen suspects all this to be a sting operation to expose the regime's dissidents but Ohan argues it was David who reached out to them in the first place and the mere fact that he expressed anti-APS thoughts would have sent him straight to public execution.

David reveals what made him disillusioned with the APS: During Dearth Season, a great famine which lasted almost a decade, he was forced to eat his own dying sister when the military failed to provide him with food and medication, since he was just a lowly private back then. The APS's inhumanity made him reconsider everything he stood for. Whilst Stephen also searches for the truth, he expresses doubts on what they'll actually find on the surface. He still believes that the interstellar ark will save them by transporting them to a more prosperous planet where the APS has no control. But David reveals this is all a lie. There is no ark; humans never ventured to distant stars due to their own technological limitations. The promise of an ark is just a colossal lie to preserve morale amongst the people. David, having witnessed firsthand the APS's management of resources, blames them for the plight of The Ironclad's inhabitants. The APS prioritizes their mass surveillance and propaganda endeavors significantly more than their almost non-existent efforts to improve the population's quality of life.

David directs the discussion on what will happen once and if they manage to reach the surface. Ohan reveals that his schizophrenic son, Earl, has developed extrasensory perception (ESP) linking him to the skull of Ole Bob, which David, Earl and Ohan stole from the APS's warehouse of pre-apocalypse relics. Carter, a cold and calculated scientist, doubts Earl's reliability and his alleged psychic connection to Ole Bob's skull which is supposed to guide them to a Temple on the surface. Earl told them this Temple is the abode of truth where they will find all knowledge about the world as it was before. To validate Earl's claims, David reveals that he stumbled on countless classified papers on the APS's studies into ESP phenomena although it is unknown what exactly pushed them to conduct such a pseudoscientific research.

After months of weary and hungry journeying, the group of six adventurers discovers, to their dismay, that their path through the tunnel is blocked by an immense barrier of rocks and stones. Having navigated these underground passages for weeks, they find themselves nearly out of supplies. Stephen wants to give up and return but David argues they've come too far to back away now. Thus, they begin excavating the rocky blockade using the equipment they have with them. Their flashlight batteries are almost depleted, prompting David to ignite a kerosene lamp, unaware of the coalbed methane permeating the area. When David strikes a match, it triggers an explosion. Days later, David develops gangrene on his legs after they had been crushed by rocks during the explosion. This leads the group to amputate his legs.

David is in excruciating pain and close to death. Carter, after examining him, determines that infections will be rapidly spreading throughout his body and that David doesn't have much time left. Faced with this dire situation, Stephen suggests a mercy killing to end David's sufferings. With their supplies completely depleted, the group is driven to the extreme measure of cannibalizing David for survival, a difficult but desperate decision.

## Ohan

Carter wakes up in cold sweat inside a luxurious penthouse situated on top of one of the many skyscrapers of a thriving and bustling city. He goes about his day as a big shot CEO for a major bank but he lives a mostly lonely and introverted life. When he returns home, he finds a small jet black box on his bed. He recollects a voice telling him, "Refrain from opening the box for it harbors evil. Do not make the same mistake as **Pandora**." He hides the box under his bed before encountering a ghostly apparition of Ohan.

Ohan asks if Carter is satisfied with the truth. Carter admits the truth was ultimately not what he had hoped for but pretends to be content with his current life. Ohan sees through his lies and reveals how even after death, he still doesn't know who he truly was since Ohan's and the elders' memories were wiped after they built The Ironclad to prevent them from passing on the truth to their descendants. He feels immensely guilty for its decaying state and wanted to find out about the surface to see if it is now hospitable. If this was the case, he would have brought The Ironclad's inhabitants to the surface and saved them from certain death. When Ohan asks Carter where his brother is, Carter doesn't know what to answer to which Ohan says, "I understand. I hated my son too, even when I was defending him from you." These words send shivers down Carter's spine as he realizes his current reality is not what he had hoped for.

Inside The Ironclad, Ohan takes care of his son Earl in their mucky and dilapidated apartment. Earl is suffering from schizophrenia and Cotard's syndrome and repeatedly tries to kill himself to prove that he cannot die since he is already dead according to him. Caring for Earl is both tiring and an emotional burden for Ohan, who hides him from APS patrols out of moral obligation but also secretly longs to get rid of him. When Earl reveals he has some kind of psychic link to Ole Bob's skull, Ohan is initially skeptical. He knows about a skull originating from the surface, baptized Ole Bob, as recounted by his friend, Charon, but doesn't know where it's hidden. When Earl reveals that he can locate it and that bringing it with them will lead them to a Temple bearing the truth on the surface, Ohan refuses to even remotely trust Earl's words. But one day, Ohan's friend, Stephen, visits their apartment and makes shocking revelations.

Stephen claims these ESP phenomena shouldn't be taken lightly since he too began experiencing weird psychic phenomena linking him to someone who existed before the apocalypse. These visions are blurry, confusing and quasi-nonsensical but he reveals that on the surface, these visions might become clearer. This is because when Stephen once infiltrated the upper levels of The Ironclad, the frequency of his visions increased even though he still can't make too much sense out of them due to their fragmented nature. He reveals people on the upper levels are richer and live a more decent lifestyle, hence contradicting the APS's claims that everyone is equally living a miserable and impoverished life. Ohan is baffled to hear all this. He teams up with David, both guided by Earl, to steal Ole Bob's skull from one of the APS's warehouses.

At another meeting in the brothel, Carter questions Earl's reliability and his alleged psychic connection to Ole Bob's skull. Ohan, David and Stephen believe in Earl since he somehow led them straight to the skull amidst the huge APS warehouse. On the other hand, Charon is ambivalent, reluctant to admit his belief in such a farfetched thing. Carter berates Earl's mental illness as something which will lead to the failure of their journey to the surface, but Ohan steps in to defend his son claiming he is inoffensive and that he will do anything in his power to prevent Earl from compromising their endeavor.

The group, in hazmat suits, finally reaches the surface, where there is a full-blown **nuclear winter**. This is the first time they're seeing what the surface looks like and needless to say, they're considerably disappointed. Ohan genuinely believed the fallout of the apocalypse would have dissipated by now. Carter realizes the high radiation levels are indicative of a nuclear war, NOT an asteroid impact. They were right; the APS lied to them. Earl produces a map which shows where The Temple is located, based on Ole Bob's instructions. Suddenly, Stephen falls unconscious and the group argues on whether to abandon his body or not. They rest for a few hours by his side and fortunately, Stephen manages to wake up as if nothing happened and they pursue their journey.

On their way to The Temple, the group has to cross a river. In the water, Ohan's suit suffers a tear and water fills in. Mutated flesh-eating microbes quickly devour him and blood splatters on his helmet's visor. They remove his suit and Ohan is now a skeleton covered with some blood and flesh. Earl is completely oblivious to his father's death and insists they proceed with their journey. Carter interprets Earl's emotionlessness as another proof he isn't sane but Charon has a change of heart, after previously doubting Earl, and says Earl is the key to the truth.

## Earl

In a snowy mountain range, Charon lives peacefully with his mother in a lodge. Outside, he notices Earl building a snowman near a river. A confused Charon reveals to his mother that this river didn't exist before thus making its sudden appearance greatly puzzling. As he approaches Earl, he remembers a voice telling him, "Do not gaze at your reflection in the river. Like **Styx**, it bears evil." Earl thanks Stephen for standing up for him after his father's death. Charon reveals he initially didn't want to believe in Earl's powers due to its heretic nature but later reconciled Earl's claims with his own beliefs.

Charon is an APS censor, curator, and historian who read religious/philosophical books before they were destroyed by the APS. He became enamored by the ideas and values in those works and developed **deistic** beliefs (along with **deus otiosus**) over the years even though he had to be careful not to reveal any of that to anyone. Charon reflects on pre-apocalypse humanity's inability to accept change and their complicated relationship with an omnipotent God and its associated **omnipotence paradox**. He says Earl's psychic powers to communicate with God was why he was so persecuted, due to man's fear, denial and anger at things beyond their cognitive reach. Earl ponders on the destructive nature of the human species before decapitating his own snowman to demonstrate that he too can be quite vicious. Charon asks Earl if he's dead in the "real" world and Earl says he has always been dead, time is just an illusion, and that true reality awaits Charon someplace else.

In *The Ironclad*, Earl converses with a voice stemming from Ole Bob's skull, after having stolen it with the help of David and Ohan. Ole Bob warns him about the numerous risks and potential losses they might face on their journey to the surface, but he remains adamant that with the right choices, their journey will lead them to enlightenment and a deeper understanding of themselves and their post-apocalyptic world. Earl tells Ohan that his ability to converse with Ole Bob, a dead person, is what convinced him that he's dead too, hence explaining his Cotard's syndrome. Ole Bob then recounts the mystifying appearance of "eggs" all around Earth during pre-apocalyptic times...

After the deaths of David and Ohan, the group stumbles on the wreckage of a B-1B bomber. They find the aftermath of a Mexican standoff between the crew members of the aircraft which left all four of them dead. At the center of the standoff, we find a bluish object resembling some kind of **egg** bearing a notch halving it, allowing anyone to open it. Carter and Charon are genuinely unaware of what this egg is but Stephen and Earl seem to possess some kind of knowledge unbeknownst to the others. Earl dashes to open it but Stephen grabs a pistol from one of the pilots' corpses and threatens Earl to hand him the egg, which he reluctantly does.

Carter steps into the wreckage and finds a single nuclear bomb in the plane's bomb bay. Upon seeing the bomb, Earl suffers a mental breakdown. He goes on a rant about humanity's self-destructive behavior, the cries of the dead which he constantly hears, and the unwillingness of mankind to learn from its mistakes as demonstrated by Stephen's cravings for something he doesn't even understand. He refuses to continue their journey, forcing the other three to abandon him. After they've departed, Ole Bob telepathically tells Earl that now that he has told him about the purpose of the eggs, it is time he knows what caused the end of the world. We don't hear what Ole Bob tells him but afterwards, Earl removes his clothes and despite the cold, he hugs the bomb stark naked and rubs his penis on its casing. He then proceeds to activate the bomb, triggering a countdown.

## **Carter**

In this penthouse, Carter is visited by Charon, who ponders on their search for truth and meaning. Carter argues now that they have lost their ultimate purpose in life, the search for truth, everything is stale but Charon insists that his current life with his mother in the snowy mountains is everything he had hoped for. They discuss Aristotle's work, *Nicomachean Ethics*, specifically the search for **eudaimonia**. Charon finds Carter's life devoid of **virtuosity** and relationships since Carter leads a mostly egotistical and **hedonistic** lifestyle. Carter retorts that both Charon's and Carter's are devoid of rationality since he considers all of this to be an illusion and the choice they made is irrational due to its surreal implications.

Carter admits that he is underwhelmed by his paradise. A bronze statue of **Achilles and the tortoise** stands in his penthouse, depicting **Zeno's Paradox**, a constant reminder that he is living in an illusion. Charon says that their current lives are a different kind of reality and warns him that the box he received might contain the monsters of his unconscious mind. Carter comments he didn't reunite with his brother so this can't really be his heaven. Charon says that heaven represents what we desire most, meaning Carter never really liked his brother, seeing him more as a burden. But Carter has trouble accepting this most repressed thought.

Being a scientist, he rejects the dreamlike aspect of their current worlds but Charon insists science can't explain all the mysteries of our universe and this is how faith in a superior being comes into play, to rationalize the absurd nature of existence. Carter parallels the subjectivity of truth in The Ironclad, constructed by the APS, with the subjective nature of their current reality, as constructed by **Mana**. Charon retorts with Plato's **allegory of the cave** whereby climbing towards the surface was a means to escape the "cave" (aka The Ironclad) and see the true nature of their world. Similarly, their **assimilation** into Mana led them to another reality, a truer and more accurate depiction of what the universe is composed of. Carter rejects this notion, still vouching for Earth as their ultimate reality. Carter's mindset can't be altered and upon realizing that, Charon decides to let him be. Carter then grabs the black box from under his bed and leaves.

Inside The Ironclad, Carter is shown taking care of his horrifyingly deformed and mutated brother, who can barely speak. He announces he will soon leave but his brother begs him not to. Carter realizes no one will care for his brother and if the APS finds him, they'll kill him anyway since they are known for eliminating disabled and sick people. Ergo, Carter tearfully suffocates his own brother with a pillow as a mercy kill.

The team makes use of Earl's map to find The Temple, which turns out to be a Deep Space Communication Center (DSCC). Inside the center, Stephen incomprehensibly suffers a seizure and falls unconscious, again. **Two other** bluish eggs are inside the center, as if someone put them there for Carter and Charon. Ole Bob's skull seems to fit in a casing installed on a set of apparatuses. They activate the center's emergency power system and connect the skull to a set of wirings allowing both Carter and Charon to make contact with Ole Bob. Ole Bob speaks through the center's loudspeakers and tells them the truth:

Over half a century ago, a mysterious event happened, causing a series of bluish eggs to appear randomly around the globe. Anyone opening them will be given a choice: transcend and **evolve** into Godlike beings or remain on Earth. Transcendence meant a sort of **apotheosis** where the mind of the person who opens the egg is assimilated into a cosmic **hive mind** (called **Mana**) whilst their subjective experience is transferred into a **pocket universe** shaped by what they desire the most. The appearance of these eggs changed the social construct of society with many choosing apotheosis over staying on Earth. Governments opposing this event tried to suppress it by sequestering these eggs but when the eggs started appearing literally everywhere (in buildings, houses, fields, etc), it became evident there was no stopping their arrivals. As a result, extremist humans, against **posthumanism**, built The Ironclad to preserve the remaining pure humans after it became obvious these eggs couldn't appear kilometers underground. To rid the surface of these eggs and to stop any humans from reaching them, they nuked the surface of the planet. Later on, surviving humans fought for the depleting resources, which also involved the use of nuclear weapons, thus worsening the nuclear winter and rendering the surface inhabitable for centuries to come. This continued until the nuclear winter became so deadly that all remaining humans on the surface died. The use of nuclear weapons even after the apocalypse further demonstrates mankind's stupidity and the length they're willing to go for resources and victory.

Ole Bob explains that reality as we perceive it is dependent on the mind, as per the ideas of **transcendental idealism**. He elaborates on Plato's **theory of forms** and how assimilated posthumans could perceive these true



forms as they appear as universal truths. Posthumans could see the **thing-in-itself** and reality as it truly is, devoid of the constraints of time and space, which are just illusions as interpreted by underdeveloped human minds. Ole Bob reveals that they no longer have to live on Earth if they choose to abandon the material world and live in an entirely immaterial reality (**mind-body dualism**) based on their mental construct of paradise. They just have to open the eggs they found.

Charon is initially doubtful due to Ole Bob's claims conflicting with his deistic beliefs. But after interpreting Ole Bob's affirmations as proof that God still has faith in humanity and is willing to help them evolve, Charon accepts to join Mana. However, Carter is more reluctant since he likens the assimilation to a loss of individuality and the acceptance of an illusion outside of material reality. But greatly regretting what he has done to his brother, he hopes he'll reunite with him in his "paradise". He thus caves in. But Ole Bob warns them that even in heaven, they'll have the choice to return to Earth if they look at the evil within themselves, which in Charon's case is found in a river whilst for Carter, it's found in a box. Doing so will prevent them from ever joining Mana again, regardless if they open other eggs later. Ole Bob also warns them of "ghosts" which will occasionally taunt them to return to Earth. These ghosts aren't real and are just manifestations of Charon's and Carter's own doubts and the memories they have of the dead. The two open their respective eggs at exactly 15:30 and their minds are assimilated into Mana.

## Charon

Back at the lodge in the mountains, Charon admires some paintings in his own dedicated art gallery, particularly *The Triumph of Death* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. He sees parallels between the army of skeletons vanquishing the living in the painting to the hive mind successfully convincing humans to leave their material selves. Carter arrives into Charon's pocket universe and carries with him the dreadful black box. He frantically tells Charon that they need to leave the illusion after his own mind failed to accept an unreal and immaterial existence.

Charon tells him if Carter decides to abandon his heaven, it's his choice and he should look into the box (note that if Charon looks into the box, it'll have no effect on him). But Carter egotistically wants Charon to gaze into the river as well so that they can both abandon their paradise and Carter won't be left alone in the post-apocalyptic world. Obviously, Charon refuses, whilst lambasting Carter's selfishness. Carter suffers a mental breakdown, lamenting on his brother's absence and his regrets for sacrificing his individuality since his true consciousness has been assimilated by Mana and is now part of a hive mind. Charon doesn't understand what's wrong with that, since they're both in heaven now, and believes Carter's own internal conflicts (such as his repressed hatred for his own brother) ruined his paradise. Carter has to make peace with himself to finally accept his pocket universe as his heaven. In a fit of rage directed towards Charon's submissiveness and obliviousness, Carter grabs a sculpture and bashes Carter's head with it, rendering him unconscious.

He drags Charon's unconscious body to the river and points his head towards the water. Once Charon wakes up, a grotesquely deformed merman, resembling Charon himself, grabs him and pulls him into the river. Carter looks into the black box and a hand grabs his head and shoves it inside the box. Charon witnesses his mother's death and feels somehow liberated and ecstatic afterwards. She was a burden and Charon always repressed his



desire to see her die so that he no longer has to take care of her. Similarly, Carter is enraptured after suffocating his brother. They are confronting their most repressed **unconscious** thoughts and darkness.

In *The Ironclad*, Stephen visits Charon in his apartment to return back a book Charon secretly lent him: *The World as Will and Representation* by Arthur Schopenhauer. Fascinated by **Schopenhauer's aesthetics**, he wants to see the artworks found in the APS warehouse which Charon endlessly reveres. Aided by David, they enter the warehouse and Stephen becomes entranced by the myriad of books and paintings which are scheduled to be destroyed in a giant furnace. Charon expounds how the primary purpose of art is to offer respite from the suffering and strife of existence, which Schopenhauer attributes to the ceaseless striving of the 'Will', a relentless and aimless drive within everyone. Schopenhauer saw aesthetic experience as a way to transcend the Will and achieve a state of pure, disinterested contemplation. For Charon, this means admiring a work of art shouldn't involve succumbing to personal desires or interests (such as the desire for wealth, truth and a better lifestyle) but instead appreciating the artwork for its own sake.

Stephen relates to Charon's statements; that's exactly what he feels whilst admiring these paintings and reading the books. Charon has a surprise for him; he pulls an ancient vinyl record and plays it on an old gramophone. The musical piece is none other than Johann Sebastian Bach's *Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor*. The surge of emotions engulfing Stephen while hearing this is simply indescribable. This is the first time Stephen is listening to a genuine piece of music. He hugs Charon and thanks him vehemently for introducing him to all this.

In a later conversation, Stephen asks Charon what he learned from reading religious texts/books. Charon is fascinated by the Bible and wonders if Judgement Day/the Second Coming already happened (Was it the apocalypse?) or if they're about to happen once *The Ironclad* collapses and all of humanity is dead. He likens Ole Bob to the Wandering Jew due to his inexplicable immortality through the preservation of his skull. Charon's continuously evolving knowledge and his quest to find the answers to all his questions are what strengthen his desire to survive in an otherwise harrowing world where hope seems to be nonexistent.

Upon returning home, Charon is met with a heart-wrenching request from his ailing mother: to assist in ending her life through euthanasia. Suffering from brain cancer and in the final stages of her life, his mother can no longer endure the immense pain and suffering. Charon refuses but his mother begs him to euthanize her, having even prepared a syringe containing concentrated pentobarbital. Knowing her son will soon go on a journey and she might die while he's away, she wants to die by his side. Unable to see her suffer as such, Charon caves in to her request. He injects her with the pentobarbital and holds her hand as she dies peacefully.

In the DSCC, Charon and Carter brawl on the floor. It's still 15:30 as if all the time Charon and Carter spent in their pocket universes was nothing. Stephen finally wakes up and suffers a nervous breakdown where he continuously screams, "I'm not him! I'm not him!" before he manages to regain his composure. Carter embraces their apocalyptic reality since he knows it's real by seeing it and knowing it's really here. Stephen pulls out the egg he took from the B-1B wreckage and ponders on whether to open it or not. Charon insists he does it to at least give Stephen a chance to find his paradise but Carter adamantly believes this heaven is all a lie, a fallacy and a poor imitation of reality.

Carter tries to stop Stephen but Charon flings Carter to the floor and gouges his eyes out. Carter took away his paradise; Charon took away his sight. As a bewildered Stephen gazes at the scene in horror, a voice in his head tells him not to open the egg. Ole Bob, on the other hand, speaks through the center's loudspeakers to convince Stephen to open the egg, claiming his wife is waiting for him. Stephen, longing to reunite with his deceased wife, opens the egg at 15:40 and is assimilated into Mana.

### **Stephen & Adam**

We connect to the beginning of the story: After David's ghost vanishes, Stephen's respite is interrupted by Adam, the man from pre-apocalyptic times he occasionally dreams and has visions about. Stephen doesn't understand how someone who existed over half a century ago hasn't aged and somehow met him in his pocket universe. Adam says that time is just an illusion, much like Stephen's current world. He begs Stephen to look into the well and break free from this fallacious reality but Stephen insists he is now happy, illusion or not.

Stephen reveals he saw through his visions what Adam did to his own wife and he knows it was Adam who caused the end of the world. Adam then claims he'd rather live in a harrowing post-apocalyptic reality than a fake comforting illusion where individuality is lost and where humanity as we know it no longer exists. Stephen knows Adam is lying and he's saying all that because in his pocket universe (after Adam opened the egg), Adam wasn't reunited with his dead wife (unlike Stephen who reunited with his deceased wife). Stephen argues this is a proof that Adam actually hated his wife and that's why she is absent in his ideal reality. Adam cannot bear to hear all this and just as he is about to attack Stephen for provoking him, Stephen shoots him. Adam's body disappears and Stephen goes back into his retreat to reunite with his wife.

They kiss passionately and his wife utters, "I love you" to Stephen. This, for some reason, greatly perturbs him. Later, he goes hunting and these words echo through his mind as if his wife uttered some forbidden words which she never would have. This accentuates the fact that the woman in the retreat is NOT his wife despite looking and behaving (mostly) like her. He stumbles on the well again and his curiosity and recent experiences prove to be too overwhelming; he has to break free. He gazes into the well and a deformed doppelganger tainted in muddy waters emerges out of the well and pulls him into it. He finds himself inside The Ironclad facing his wife being killed by an APS military commander. He subdues The Commander and takes a drastic step in his vengeance. He grabs a knife, cuts The Commander's genitals, and shoves them into his mouth.

Ole Bob tells Stephen that the well contained all the darkest and the most repressed parts of his unconscious/id. To allow humans to live in paradise, all the evil inherent in them had to be contained somewhere. Now that Stephen has made contact with his own evil, his paradise can no longer exist. Stephen begs Ole Bob if somehow he can make Stephen forget his dreadful life in The Ironclad and travel to pre-apocalyptic times since time is just an illusion after all. Ole Bob says that's indeed possible and agrees to satisfy Stephen's demands.

Stephen and his fiancée tie the knot in a private ceremony. Still, his wife has to prostitute herself to the military for food rations and money. Her most frequent client is The Commander. In a candid conversation with Stephen, she confesses that she'll never say "I love you" to him, feeling it would be dishonest because she feels like

she is betraying him through her actions, despite their marriage. To complicate matters, she developed feelings for The Commander, even though she still has love for Stephen. She is later impregnated by The Commander but suffers a miscarriage rendering her infertile. When The Commander visits them afterwards, he callously states that she is now useless to him as she cannot contribute to repopulating the Earth. Despite Stephen's desperate pleas, The Commander coldly shoots her dead. Stephen never saw The Commander again but he continuously fantasizes on what he would do to him if ever he could be left alone with him.

Later, **Stephen begins experiencing random visions of Adam**, which are unclear and fragmented. Only when Stephen fell unconscious on the surface did the visions begin to form a more coherent narrative. Here it is: Adam, before the apocalypse, is the leader of a quasi-cultist weapons manufacturing organization based on an island in the Pacific Ocean. The organization is fiercely against posthumanism and are borderline extremists in their approach to prevent humans from being assimilated into Mana. Adam, being a Christian extremist, believes Mana to be a creation of the Antichrist. When more eggs started appearing, his wife hides one for herself. Adam was constantly abusive towards her all throughout their marriage and one day, he discovers the egg whilst rummaging through her belongings after suspecting her of adultery. She confirms his suspicions and says she is tired of their marriage and wants to be finally free of him. The egg offers her an opportunity to not only find her paradise but also get rid of Adam. Just as she is about to open the egg, Adam shoots her dead in an excess of rage and destroys the egg. Just then, Adam suffers a nervous breakdown where he repeatedly screams, "I'm not him! I'm not him!" before regaining his composure.

Stephen wakes up from this vision and continues to advance in his journey to The Temple with Ohan, Earl, Carter and Charon. After Ohan's death and Earl's breakdown, the remaining of them enter the DSCC where Adam falls unconscious again and experiences another more coherent vision: Governments' and religious fanatics' attempts to prevent the assimilation have proven to be futile but unbeknownst to most people, Adam has ordered the construction of a massive nuclear doomsday device salted with cobalt beneath the island. **Adam begins to experience visions of Stephen** and these visions give him an idea on how to construct and structure The Ironclad (and the APS), a place for surviving humans where they will have no awareness of the eggs and all the posthumanism shenanigans. Over the next few years, the doomsday device and The Ironclad (found someplace else) is completed. Some people were forcefully taken to The Ironclad to have their memories wiped before they could open the eggs. Adam activates a countdown on the doomsday device that will culminate in an explosion destined to bring about the end of the world.

Devastated by what he's done to his wife and facing certain death, Adam demonstrates his hypocrisy by opening an egg and hoping he will be reunited with her in his version of heaven. However, his wife is nowhere to be found. Ole Bob reveals Adam's repressed hatred for her is what prevents her from materializing into his pocket universe. Adam demands to know more about Ole Bob. Ole Bob (previously known as Robert) was the first human to receive an egg by Mana and he was the first to be assimilated. His brain was later studied but when that proved to be useless, his skull was stored inside The Ironclad, as a relic of pre-apocalyptic times. Mana studied humanity through Ole Bob, which is why each individual's paradise often contains mythological and religious references (such as **Pandora's box, River of Styx, Hvergelmir, etc**). In Adam's paradise, it's the

infamous **Tree of the knowledge of good and evil** which bears fruits forbidden to Adam. Eating them will make him confront his evil and send him back to Earth, which is about to be annihilated any time now.

Adam cannot fathom a life without his wife and he feels increasingly regretful for triggering the apocalypse. Now that it's too late, a desperate Adam eats the fruit and confronts his evil by revisiting the day of his wife's murder, a day wherein he feels a shocking ecstasy. A few minutes before detonation, Adam begs Ole Bob to allow him to forget his wife and be sent to a time where he doesn't have to deal with the consequences of his actions. Ole Bob accepts to satisfy his demands but again warns him that time is just an illusion. Adam seems to understand what this means and tries to prevent Stephen from opening the egg through his psychic link with him but it's too late:

In an inconceivable turn of event, Adam's consciousness is transferred into Stephen hence explaining his nervous breakdown when he woke up in the DSCC. After Adam realizes to his horror that he is in post-apocalyptic times, the memories of Stephen invade his mind such that now, **Adam BECOMES Stephen**.

Similarly, Stephen's consciousness is transferred into Adam right after he murdered his wife. This explains his breakdown, which is palliated when the memories of Adam replace his own memories such that **Stephen BECOMES Adam**. Why did Stephen receive visions of Adam and vice-vice? Because they became each other. How did they become each other? Because they were connected by these visions. This brings out a paradox where causality no longer applies to the strange phenomenon linking Adam and Stephen.

Moments before the bomb's detonation inside the B-1B wreckage, Earl asks Ole Bob why he convinced the group to come to the surface knowing very well it'd end in tragedy. Ole Bob reveals his job is to be a truthsayer and beam messages to convince anyone listening to find an egg to trigger their assimilation into Mana. Even if this fails, he still needs to succeed in showing everyone the truth about their world's downfall. Moreover, the past, present and future already happened as per the theory of **eternalism** and this specific sequence of events had to happen to preserve continuity. Even though Mana can be considered a deity due to its **omniscience**, the hive mind is still bound by the constraints of the B-theory of time, thus negating **free-will**. Ole Bob asks if Earl wants to be assimilated and Earl readily accepts. A new egg appears before him and he opens it.

The doomsday device detonates, sending a colossal amount of radioactive materials all throughout the globe. The nuclear bomb from the B-1B also explodes. Stephen has woken up and it's still 15:40. Carter howls in agony and Carter breaks down in tears outside the DSCC whilst gazing at the mushroom cloud's formation. Stephen goes to comfort Charon. Fortunately, they are far enough to not be directly affected by the explosion even though the nuclear fallout might lead to future health issues. The shockwave from the explosion makes Ole Bob's skull fall on the floor and almost instantaneously, flowers grow all around it. Now knowing the truth and having ruined their chances at residing in paradise, Stephen and Charon realize they only have their post-apocalyptic reality to accept as their world. To this, Stephen says, "Though it's not heaven, it needn't be hell."

**The End**