

STRANGE ANGEL

Episode 101:
"Augurs of Spring"

Written by

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Based on the book STRANGE ANGEL by George Pendle

NETWORK FINAL

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EXT. DENSE FOREST - DAY

Still, except for the HUM of insects. But then, a FAINT CRUNCHING of a footstep. A TREMBLING of a shrub.

A HUNTER emerges, stalking through the brush, bow-and-arrow at the ready. He sports an Errol Flynn MUSTACHE, dressed in CHINESE HUNTING CLOTHES.

He comes to a stop behind a rocky outcropping. A CHINESE SERVANT arrives next to him. The hunter puts a finger to his lips to quiet him, then points.

A GIGANTIC TIGER drinks from the river just up ahead. Majestic and terrifying.

The hunter arms his bow and draws, the string whines with tension. He takes careful aim with one eye... and releases.

The arrow shoots through the air like a rocket and PIERCES into the tiger's side. The beast ROARS with pain. It turns in their direction.

The servant flees but the hunter stands his ground. Unafraid.

The tiger rushes towards him and leaps, fangs bared. It lands on top of the hunter, then goes STILL.

The hunter crawls from underneath the tiger's massive weight, pulling a DAGGER from its chest.

The hunter wipes the blade on his pants, solemn, unmoved by his brush with death. His spooked servant tiptoes back.

CHINESE SERVANT

(in MANDARIN, subtitled)

*Master... why did you not run? If
you had missed his heart, surely
you would be dead.*

The hunter responds to him, likewise in PERFECT MANDARIN.

HUNTER

*I came close. But not close enough
to glimpse what lies on the other
side.*

Disappointed, he sticks his dagger back in, and begins skinning the slaughtered beast.

The image suddenly freezes and transforms into:

A COMIC-BOOK ILLUSTRATION.

INT. ATLAS CHEMICAL COMPANY - LOS ANGELES, 1938 - DAY

The illustration is contained inside an issue of AMAZING STORIES, a pulpy adventure and sci-fi magazine of yesteryear.

It's being read by the man we saw hunting, his gaze intense and penetrating. This is JACK MARVEL PARSONS (late 20s/early 30s). Genius. Romantic. Dreamer. (Indeed, imagining himself as the protagonist of the story he's reading).

His supervisor, HUMPHREY (50s), appears in front of him, breaking Jack out of his reverie.

HUMPHREY

Must be one heck of a story, Mr. Parsons.

He nods to the mostly UNTOUCHED SANDWICH in front of Jack.

HUMPHREY (CONT'D)

You'll have to finish on your own time. Break's over.

JACK

Got ten more seconds, according to that clock.

Humphrey glares, unamused. Jack jams the rest of the sandwich in his mouth, indignant, and heads out.

INT. ATLAS CHEMICAL COMPANY - DAY

INDUSTRIAL VATS, BOILERS and MIXERS fill the dim space, residue-caked windows barely allowing in any daylight.

DRONE-LIKE WORKERS mix chemicals in precise quantities. On every machine, the same sign is posted:

PRACTICE EXTREME CAUTION

Jack pushes a LARGE BROOM through the bowels. He looks beleaguered, the menial labor beneath him.

INT. WASTE ROOM - DAY

Jack enters carrying a DUSTPAN. He makes sure no one is watching, then removes a MASON JAR from his jacket pocket.

He taps out the contents from the dustpan, filling the jar with BLACK POWDER. Jack seals it and puts the jar back in his pocket. He dumps the remainder of the dustpan into a metal bin labeled COMBUSTIBLE.

INT. ATLAS CHEMICAL COMPANY - LATE AFTERNOON

WORKERS line up in a single-file line, punching TIME CARDS one by one, creating a monotonous CA-THUNK.

Jack stands in the middle, craning his neck. He finally gets to the front of the line and stamps his card. CA-THUNK.

EXT. ATLAS CHEMICAL COMPANY - LATE AFTERNOON

Workers pour out of the entrance of the plant, located on the fringes of the nascent metropolis of Los Angeles.

Jack slaloms through the exodus, like he can't leave fast enough. He reaches a rundown MODEL B PICKUP and hops inside.

INT./EXT. JACK'S PICKUP - EVENING

Jack starts the ignition, the engine chugging to life. A knock on the window distracts him. Jack sees his colleague, MURPHY, and rolls it down.

MURPHY

Guys 'n me are hopping over to Del Monaco's...

JACK

Got a different sort of rendezvous planned this evening.

MURPHY

Oh yeah? She got a name?

JACK

Uh huh. Destiny.

Murphy looks puzzled. Jack puts the car into gear.

JACK (CONT'D)

For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the BLAST!

Jack hits the gas, kicking up a cloud of dust in his wake.

EXT. JUNK YARD - LATE AFTERNOON

Mountains of human detritus, far as the eye can see.

Somewhere in the middle, Jack searches for lost treasure, his shirtsleeves rolled up, face covered in sweat and grime.

He muscles free a sheet of ALUMINUM, METAL PIPE, THIN PLANKS OF WOOD. He throws the items he wants in one pile, what doesn't pass muster goes back on the heap.

EXT. JUNK YARD ENTRANCE - LATE AFTERNOON

Jack opens his wallet to pay a WATCHMAN for his haul. The loud sound of BARKING overlays the scene.

JACK
Plus a little extra, for letting me
in past closing-

WATCHMAN
For Christ's sake, shut it!

The watchman throws a rock at the JUNKYARD DOG, chained to a post. The BARKING pauses briefly, then picks right back up.

JACK
Can't say I blame him, chained up
like that. Not even knowing what's
outside this fence.

The watchman eyes Jack, wary.

WATCHMAN
What you do with this stuff anyway?

JACK
If I tried to explain, you'd think
I was crazy.

Jack gives him a wink and gets into his truck, slamming the door behind him.

INT. JACK'S GARAGE - NIGHT

A mad scientist's lair, crammed with salvaged materials and re-purposed containers filled with god-knows-what.

Jack pours the black powder he stole from his work into a PAINT CAN. He mixes in an UNLABELED COMPOUND from a soup can and a COUPLE DROPS from a tincture bottle.

He stirs the EXPLOSIVE MIX all together, face lit by oil-lamp, shadows dancing on the ceiling above him.

INT. JACK'S GARAGE - LATER

Jack pours the gummy mixture out from the paint can into an ALUMINUM CYLINDER. He drops in a wax-covered fuse. It looks like he's built some kind of PIPE BOMB.

INT. JACK'S PICKUP - NIGHT

Jack zooms down a highway, the sparse city lights behind him.

His flickering headlights illuminate a SPEED LIMIT SIGN for 45 MILES PER HOUR.

A little beyond it, Jack spots a POLICE CAR parked off the side of the road, lying in wait.

Jack smirks to himself and presses down the gas pedal, *speeding up instead of slowing down.*

The speedometer goes past 50... then 55.

Jack stares in the REARVIEW, seeing if the cop car is going to give chase. It stays put. Jack deflates, strangely disappointed.

EXT. DESERT - NIGHT

Jack's truck cuts across the landscape, headlights the only thing piercing darkness. Above, the glorious dome of the night sky.

EXT. ARROYO SECO - NIGHT

The truck arrives at the edge of a DRY RIVER BED. Another car is already parked there, a YOUNG MAN with thick glasses waiting beside it. This is RICHARD FORMAN (late 20s). Thin, soft-spoken, and keenly intelligent. Literal to the point of bluntness. Nowadays, people would call him "on the spectrum," back then they'd just think he was a dick.

RICHARD

You're late.

Jack ignores him, heads to the back of his truck to unload.

EXT. ARROYO SECO - NIGHT

Jack and Richard lug something heavy across the dry river bed. Their shoes sink in the sand. Desert animals scurry away. In the distance, coyotes cry their eerie cry.

EXT. ARROYO SECO - NIGHT

Richard finishes stacking a pile of SANDBAGS, barely able to manage the weight. He removes a notebook and a sextant.

Jack crouches next to him and readies a ZIPPO (engraved with the initials MHP). They meet eyes, a bit trepidatious.

JACK

Ad astra...

RICHARD

Per aspera.

Jack flicks the lighter.

RICHARD (CONT'D)

Wait.

Jack looks at him.

RICHARD (CONT'D)

Did you follow my specifications?

JACK

More or less.

RICHARD

An error could be the difference
between us living or dying.

JACK

We're in uncharted territory, Rich.
The time for caution has long past.

Jack lowers the flame to a FUSE. A SPARK OF FLAME ignites,
and starts to zip along the desert floor.

Jack rises to get a better view. Richard tries to pull him
back down for safety's sake, but Jack brushes him off...

His eyes widen, seeing the spark approach his creation:

An IMPOSSIBLY LARGE ROCKET SHIP, towering over them, gleaming
in the moonlight.

The spark disappears into it. An instant later, the rocket
engine COMBUSTS, shooting out a plume of smoke and fire.

The rocket lifts into the air. Jack's gaze turns skyward. We
move into his captivated eyes, closer and closer until one
fills the screen. The iris and pupil transform into:

THE EARTH

As seen from space. A tranquil blue orb, until the ROCKET
pierces through the atmosphere, blasting towards us...

BACK ON THE GROUND

Jack smiles at the thought. But then his expression grows
worried...

A ROUGH-HEWN, DINKY MODEL ROCKET--not at all what he was
imagining--sputters out and falls back down to earth.

It lands on the ground and smashes apart.

Jack looks to Richard, questioning. Richard finishes working out a math equation in his notebook. Richard seems disappointed by the answer.

Jack grabs the notebook to see it for himself. 43.27ft is written and circled in pen.

Jack meets Richard's eyes, incredulous.

JACK

That can't be right.

RICHARD

You can check the math if you want.

Frustrated, Jack rips the page of the notebook out and lights one edge with his Zippo. He tosses the paper on the ground.

The unwanted answer--and all the surrounding math equations--blacken in the flames.

MAIN TITLES

A swirling kaleidoscope of SCI-FI VISUALS from the 20's and 30's--Rocket ships, laser guns, Martians, galaxies, space men, Amazon women, robots...

Interwoven with images of the OCCULT--Pentagrams, demons, animal sacrifices, seances, Masonic iconography, hieroglyphics, tarot...

The occult imagery increasingly dominates, taking the sequence away from innocent wonder towards something far more sinister.

INT. PARSONS HOUSE - NIGHT

A TALL WOMAN in her 30s sits on the edge of a bed, holding a well-worn BIBLE. She has serene, elongated features like a Modigliani painting, focused intently on the passage she's reading, her mouth moving along with the words.

As her finger moves down the page, we catch glimpses of text:

LET US CAST OFF THE WORKS OF DARKNESS AND PUT ON THE ARMOR OF LIGHT.

LET US WALK PROPERLY AS IN THE DAYTIME...

NOT IN SEXUAL IMMORALITY AND SENSUALITY...

AND MAKE NO PROVISION FOR THE FLESH, TO GRATIFY ITS DESIRES.

The woman looks up, troubled.

She hears the front door opening and closing. She quickly shoves the bible underneath the mattress and goes to meet whoever's come in.

INT. PARSONS HOUSE - NIGHT

Jack enters his cramped, working-class home. Everything spare and worn, but in its proper place.

He looks around, disappointed that it's so dark and quiet. But then he sees the tall woman emerge from the bedroom, his wife, SUSAN PARSONS (early 30s). Strong but nurturing, equates being needed with being loved, and, fortunately for her, Jack has many needs.

JACK

Sorry. Hope I didn't wake you.

SUSAN

You didn't. You know I have trouble sleeping with one side of the bed empty.

She helps him off with his coat, removing his CIGARETTE CASE.

SUSAN (CONT'D)

How'd it go?

JACK

Every time I think we're making headway, we take a step back.

She gives him a sympathetic smile and heads to the wood-burning stove. She uses a BELLOW to blow air on the glowing embers, reigniting them.

SUSAN

Did you remember to eat?

JACK

I'm fine. I will take something to drink though.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Jack goes to stand in front of the fire.

Susan returns with a CAN OF BEER. Jack takes a long gulp.

Susan sits on the sofa and opens Jack's cigarette case, filled with USED BUTTS. She extracts the remnants of tobacco from each one, creating a small pile inside a rolling paper.

Jack watches as Susan rolls a FRESH CIGARETTE. She licks the paper to seal it. Simultaneously sexy and proficient.

She hands the finished product to Jack. He takes it, smiling. Reaches into his vest pocket for his Zippo and lights up.

SUSAN

Want to talk about it?

JACK

Don't need to bore you with the details. Let's just say we made it about a thousand feet before...

He CLAPS his two hands together, making her jump a little.

JACK (CONT'D)

We've hit the limit of what we can do with the resources at our disposal.

He holds out the cigarette. She takes an appreciative puff.

JACK (CONT'D)

Speaking of, I need to borrow a couple dollars to put gas in the truck. Supplies cost a bit more than expected.

SUSAN

Jack... we're nearly two months behind on the mortgage.

JACK

I know. Just gotta keep the bank at bay a little longer.

SUSAN

They've given us plenty of leeway already on account of my step-father, the last man I want to be taking favors from.

JACK

I know, but we get our answer tomorrow, remember? Once the proposal's approved, Caltech'll start covering expenses, with a paid position for yours truly.

SUSAN

What does Richard think?

JACK

About?

SUSAN

Of your chances. Does he think you'll be approved?

JACK

Why do you care what he thinks? You don't trust my word?

Seeing she's offended him, Susan relents and grabs her purse, removing a few dollars.

She holds them out, as a peace offering. Appreciative, Jack takes them and kisses her.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Jack and Susan have sex. He has a healthy libido, moves with vigor. In contrast, Susan looks beyond him, her gaze far away, like she's not quite in her body. Tolerating the act more than enjoying it.

Jack works himself up to climax, which snaps Susan out of her trance. He looks at her with a flicker of worry.

SUSAN

It's okay-

He pulls free and orgasms face-down on the bed.

He turns over, breathing hard. He looks at Susan. She hands him a HANDKERCHIEF with a sad smile.

JACK

We've been over this.

SUSAN

I know.

He uses the handkerchief to wipe the wet spot on the bed.

JACK

Between our jobs and my project, we hardly even have time for each other, let alone a child.

SUSAN

Jack, I didn't say anything.

She lies back down, faced away from him.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Susan is fast asleep. Behind her, Jack stands at the window, smoking a cigarette and staring out at something.

OUTSIDE (JACK'S POV)

A STRAPPING MAN removes a box from the trunk of his car. Begins carrying it into a RUNDOWN HOUSE across the street.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Susan stirs awake, sees Jack by the window.

SUSAN
Trouble sleeping again?

JACK
Someone's moving into the Weller's
old place.

Susan gets out of bed and joins him. Sees what he sees.

SUSAN
We'll have to go introduce
ourselves.

JACK
Who moves in the middle of the
night?

Unconcerned, she takes his hand to lead him back to bed. Jack takes one last look out the window, curious, then follows.

EXT. CALTECH - NEXT DAY

The recently built campus glows in the desert sun, looking like a large Spanish Villa, with its red-roof tiles and courtyards encircled by portico walkways. The quad buzzes with STUDENTS and FACULTY making their way to and from class.

Jack cuts across the green, standing out in a dark THREE-PIECE SUIT, as though there for a special occasion (or maybe just overcompensating).

He scans the faces of people he passes. They represent some of the brightest scientific minds in the country. Noticeably, all are men. Jack hears snippets of their conversations, jam packed with esoteric JARGON.

Jack smiles, a bit intimidated, but then suddenly stops in his tracks, disoriented. The STUDENT walking behind narrowly avoids a collision.

JACK

Sorry, just a little turned around.
Where's the Galcit building again?

The student points. Jack heads off in that direction.

EXT. GALCIT BUILDING - DAY

A foreboding four-story building, home to the Guggenheim Aerospace Laboratories. Jack approaches the back entrance, where a large ramp leads to the interior.

He walks up the ramp, gazing at a strange WINGED-SYMBOL carved above the entryway. Feels more like he's entering a temple than a lab, and in a way he is--a temple of science.

INT. GALCIT BUILDING - DAY

Jack gets inside, eyeing a MASSIVE METAL CYLINDER that runs through the center of the room.

He scans around the vast space, awestruck. The room is lined with laboratories and classrooms and filled with equipment devoted exclusively to aeronautical engineering. Everything brand new and cutting edge (for the time anyway).

Jack's eyes land on a ladder leading to the TESTING PLATFORM.

He looks towards a GROUP OF RESEARCHERS conversing at the far end, their words inaudible over the loud HUM. More importantly, none are looking in his direction.

Seizing his chance, Jack heads for the ladder.

INT. TESTING PLATFORM - DAY

Jack appears at the top of the ladder and pokes his head into a void-like tunnel. A MODEL PROP PLANE hangs in its center as a MASSIVE FAN whirls at the other end. The powerful blast of air blows Jack's hair and smashes cheeks against cheek-bones.

MAN'S VOICE (O.S.)

Excuse me?

Jack either doesn't hear or pretends not to.

MAN'S VOICE (O.S.) (CONT'D)

EXCUSE ME?!

Jack looks, sees a TECHNICIAN at the base of the ladder.

TECHNICIAN

Are you a student here?

Jack doesn't answer, but clear that he's not.

TECHNICIAN (CONT'D)
The wind tunnel is only open to
authorized students and personnel.

JACK
I know. I'm about to be.

Jack comes down the ladder.

JACK (CONT'D)
I was supposed to be meeting
Richard Forman. He's a doctoral
candidate.

TECHNICIAN
Why don't you check out front? He
probably meant for you to meet him
outside the building.

Sheepish, Jack nods and quickly walks away, feeling the
technician's eyes bore in the back of his head.

EXT. GASCIT BUILDING - DAY

Jack comes out the front. Sure enough, Richard stands there,
surprised to see Jack coming from that way.

RICHARD
What were you doing?

JACK
Don't see what all the fuss is
about. Just a big metal pipe.

Jack keeps walking. Richard skips after him.

RICHARD
That "big metal pipe" produces
winds of over 200 miles an hour.
Every aviation company in the
country uses it...

Jack makes a face, pretending to be unimpressed.

EXT. CALTECH - DAY

The two men walk across the quad.

JACK
Just hate walking in there without
any sense of what he's going to
say. How do you feel?

RICHARD

You know how I feel.

JACK

I realize you didn't think we were ready to submit, but I had no choice. Susan's had it with me spending our money on this.

RICHARD

I don't blame her, it's literally going up in smoke.

Jack looks at him, unamused.

RICHARD (CONT'D)

The problems we're encountering aren't just a matter of resources. Sometimes the rocket reaches 60 feet, sometimes it doesn't get off the ground, sometimes it explodes. The results are completely random and we don't even understand why. Is it the size of the chamber or nozzle? Is it the fuel? Or maybe it's the oxidizing agent?

JACK

That's the point of the project. To figure those things out.

RICHARD

Yes, but what if Ulam approves our proposal and we *still fail*? Only difference is that the head of my department will be watching.

JACK

Have a little faith, Rich. Think of all we've accomplished *without* this place's support. With it, we'll be able to clear those hurdles and then some. You'll see.

Richard nods, hoping he's right.

INT. PROFESSOR ULAM'S OFFICE - DAY

A man in his 50s sits behind his desk in a wood-paneled office, unkempt white hair poking out from under a beret, a cigar lodged in his mouth. This is PROFESSOR KARL ULAM. Hungarian emigre and head of Caltech's aeronautical program.

ULAM

It is absurd.

Dismissive, he tosses the TYPED PROPOSAL to Richard and Jack, seated across from him.

ULAM (CONT'D)

You wish to build rocket capable of taking meteorological equipment into ionosphere?

JACK

Oh, well, that part was Richard's idea.

(Richard shoots daggers)

He thought it sounded more practical. Our ultimate goal is to create a rocket capable of taking man into space.

Ulam chokes on cigar smoke, surprised.

ULAM

Professor Goddard only managed to launch rocket 90 feet *maximum*. Ionosphere is 25 miles! Piros hó esik, man into space? It is comic book fantasy.

(to Richard)

He is not student here, but I am expecting more from you.

Richard avoids his gaze, ashamed.

ULAM (CONT'D)

Remember what I say, in first year seminar? About crossing river?

RICHARD

Stepping stones.

ULAM

Everyone forgets small advances needed before big ones can be made.

JACK

What if we're not content to be someone else's stepping stone?

ULAM

Richard tells me you never completed your undergraduate degree, Mr. Parsons. I'm starting to understand why.

JACK

I had to drop out to support my family.

ULAM

I'm sorry to hear that.

JACK

Don't be. A degree's just a piece of paper. I'd just as soon not have all these protocols weighing me down.

ULAM

You are trying to work in a field that does not even exist. If you don't proceed with caution, you will fail or worse, blow yourself up.

Ulam gets up and starts putting on his coat.

ULAM (CONT'D)

Now, if you excuse, I must attend talk on aluminum alloys. Nothing that makes papers, but advances are real and they are significant.

EXT. FACULTY BUILDING - DAY

Dejected, Jack and Richard exit Ulam's office and head down the hallway. Richard gives Jack a dark, "I told you so" look.

JACK

That wasn't how it was supposed to go.

Jack glances back towards Ulam's office, gears turning.

RICHARD

Leave it alone, Jack.

Jack ignores him, struts back towards Ulam's office.

INT. ULAM'S OFFICE - DAY

Jack pops back in as Ulam is about to leave, to his surprise.

JACK

Professor, I was just thinking: You should come see one of our launches for yourself.

Richard appears in the doorway, horrified by that idea.

ULAM

I gave you my answer.

Ulam tries to step around Jack. Jack blocks him.

JACK

Richard and I have been building rockets since we were teenagers. Some words on a page can't convey what we're capable of.

ULAM

They should.

JACK

Well they can't. When you were developing the PUZ-1, did you rely on a written proposal to demonstrate its feasibility?

ULAM

No, but-

JACK

Because helicopters didn't exist. Because people didn't even believe they *could* exist.

ULAM

That is slight exaggeration. There were precedents.

JACK

Point is, you had to prove naysayers wrong by *showing them* it could work. Next thing you know, your prototype takes three men in the air and you change aviation history forever.

ULAM

(flattered)

Well, another slight exaggeration.

JACK

All I'm asking for is the same chance. You don't believe we can back up our claims? Let us prove to you we can.

Ulam considers, ever so slightly persuaded.

EXT. CALTECH - EVENING

Richard rushes off campus, Jack hurrying after him.

JACK

I don't get why you're upset. He said he'd come.

RICHARD

The point was to get approval to build a functional rocket motor.

JACK

Yeah, so?

RICHARD

You were talking like we'd done it already!

JACK

Because he rejected us! Now we have a chance to change his mind.

RICHARD

How??? None of our tests have broken 70 feet! That will only prove our incompetence.

JACK

We'll figure something out between now and then.

RICHARD

What?

Jack opens his mouth to answer but stops, stumped.

RICHARD (CONT'D)

This is my *career*, Jack. The most gifted aerodynamicist in America is going to think I'm an imbecile and a fraud.

JACK

So? You'd prefer we just give up?

Richard looks at him, torn. Sees how much this means to Jack.

RICHARD

I just wish you'd stick with the facts.

Richard keeps walking. Jack stares after, worried his friend's commitment to the cause is wavering.

INT. KITCHEN - EVENING

Susan removes a loaf of BANANA BREAD from the oven.

SUSAN

I don't understand. You said you'd be getting an answer today.

JACK

That's what I'm trying to tell you. We basically did. The professor just needs to make sure we can back up our claims.

SUSAN

And if this demonstration goes well, then you'll be approved?

JACK

That's right.

Susan seems a little skeptical, but doesn't press him.

EXT. PARSONS HOUSE - EVENING

Jack and Susan approach the porch of the house they saw that man moving into. Susan holds the banana bread as an offering.

JACK

Let's make this quick, okay? I should be getting back to work.

SUSAN

Jack, try to be civil. We might get on with them.

Susan KNOCKS on the door.

JACK

We spend plenty of time socializing as it is.

SUSAN

All that time you spend with Richard, I'm not "socializing" with anyone.

The door swings open, revealing the strapping man Jack saw moving in, now holding a BABY GOAT under his arm. This is ERNEST BAXSTER (30s), staring at them with suspicion.

SUSAN (CONT'D)

Hi! We're Mr. and Mrs. Parsons, from across the street.

ERNEST

Okay.

SUSAN

We saw you moving in and just wanted to come introduce ourselves.

A long, awkward pause.

JACK

Normally when people introduce themselves, you're supposed to give a name in return.

SUSAN

Jack...

ERNEST

It's Ernest.

The goat tries to wriggle free, lunging for the banana bread.

ERNEST (CONT'D)

Let me take that from you, 'fore he gets it.

SUSAN

It's just some banana bread. Home baked.

Ernest takes it and disappears into the kitchen.

ERNEST (O.S.)

(calling out)

Am I supposed to offer you a piece?

SUSAN

No, no. It's for you.

While they wait, Jack leans to take a peek inside the house. Susan pulls him back onto the porch with a chastising look.

Ernest reemerges from the kitchen.

JACK

Is it just you here?

Ernest looks at him, questioning.

JACK (CONT'D)

You're wearing a ring...

ERNEST

I have a wife. She isn't in.

SUSAN

Well, we look forward to meeting her too. In fact, we were thinking of hosting a little gathering once you all got settled.

Jack shoots her a questioning look. News to him.

SUSAN (CONT'D)

To welcome you all to the neighborhood.

ERNEST

That'd be great.

Ernest gives them a forced smile.

EXT. PARSONS HOUSE - EVENING

Susan and Jack head back towards their front door.

JACK

A party? Since when?

SUSAN

I wanted to welcome them, and you were being rude.

JACK

I was being rude?

She gives him a "come on" look.

JACK (CONT'D)

You didn't sense anything off about that guy?

SUSAN

So he's a little eccentric. Some would say the same about you.

JACK

He was more than eccentric. He was...

SUSAN

What?

Jack glances back across the street, unable to put his finger on it.

He finds Ernest standing at his living room window, STARING RIGHT BACK AT HIM.

INT. PARSONS HOUSE - NIGHT

Conservative and working-class NEIGHBORS congregate inside the living room. A rough-hewn one named CHUCK is in the middle of telling a joke:

CHUCK

'Lil Audrey was hardheaded, she kept playing with matches, no matter what her mama said. One day she set her house on fire, burnt the whole place down. Her mama says: 'Oh 'Lil Audrey, you are sure gonna get it when your father comes home!' But 'Lil Audrey just laughed and laughed, because she knew her father had come home early to take a nap.

The neighbors chuckle. Jack hovers on the fringes of the circle, not amused.

CHUCK (CONT'D)

Okay, here's another one. 'Lil Audrey and her granny...

JACK

She went out to grab a quarter and got flattened by a steam roller. 'Lil Audrey laughed and laughed 'cause it was only a dime.

CHUCK

Hey, you telling the jokes or am I?

Jack turns away from the group, scanning for Susan. He finds her among the prim and proper WIVES, carrying a tray of hors d'oeuvres. She senses Jack staring and meets his gaze.

He puts a finger to his temple, as if trying to communicate telepathically. She smiles, message received, and heads over.

JACK

It's been over an hour.

SUSAN

He said they'd be here.

JACK

Why don't I go see what's keeping them? I don't know how many more of Chuck's jokes I can take.

Jack heads outside before she can protest. She faces the room with a strained smile.

SUSAN

Anyone need their drink refreshed?

EXT. EDMONT STREET - NIGHT

Jack exits and takes a deep breath, savoring a moment alone, before continuing across the street.

But Ernest's house looks dark. Just to be safe, Jack goes up to the front door and KNOCKS. Silence.

He KNOCKS again. Still no answer. Jack shakes his head--vexed--then turns on his heels.

INT. PARSONS HOUSE - NIGHT

Jack comes back in and the guests turn to him, questioning.

JACK

They're not home.

Everyone reacts, baffled and offended.

JACK (CONT'D)

If you all want to take off, we understand.

CHUCK

Guess they don't care much about being a part of the neighborhood.

People murmur their assent, begin gathering their belongings. Susan meets Jack's eyes, vexed. All he can do is shrug.

INT. JACK'S GARAGE - NIGHT

Jack sits at his workbench, sketching a design for a rocket inside a NOTEBOOK. He scratches out the drawing and rips out the paper. It joins a growing pile of crumpled up paper on the floor. Jack puts pencil to a fresh piece of paper, to start again. He hears a faint BUZZING, like the sound of his mental gears trying to turn.

His eyes drift to a strip of FLY PAPER pinned to the wall. A STILL-ALIVE FLY flaps its wings hopelessly. Jack can relate.

The sound of an ENGINE steals his attention. Jack's gaze goes to the open entrance of the garage, in time to see ERNEST'S CAR roll past.

EXT. GARAGE ENTRANCE - NIGHT

Jack exits as the car pulls into Ernest's driveway. It veers off course, coming to a stop partway on the front lawn.

The driver's door opens, and Ernest stumbles out. Drunk.

JACK

Who do you think you are?

Ernest looks at him, sincerely stumped by the question.

JACK (CONT'D)

We threw a party in your honor, and you didn't even bother showing up?

ERNEST

Oh. Didn't feel like coming.

JACK

You didn't *feel like it*?

ERNEST

That's what I said. I'm trying to find my path. How can I do that if I'm talking about lawn mowers?

JACK

(weirded out)

I guess you can't...

ERNEST

There. That's what I mean. Just say what you're really thinking.

JACK

What I'm really thinking? I think you're drunk and even if you weren't, you've got a screw loose.

Ernest smiles, more amused than insulted.

ERNEST

Yeah. Maybe.

(eye-line shifts)

You ever been up there?

Jack follows Ernest's gaze, looking at a nearby HILL.

JACK

No.

ERNEST

How long you all live here?

JACK

Four years.

Ernest shakes his head, admonishing. He begins walking.

ERNEST

Well, come on.

JACK

You're gonna go up there now?

ERNEST

What's the matter? Past your
bedtime?

Ernest continues walking. Jack stares after, vaguely
insulted. Ernest starts chanting, dirge-like.

ERNEST (CONT'D)

A ka dua. Tuf ur biu. Bi a'a
chefu...

Jack reacts, wariness tipping over into intrigue.

CUT TO:

EXT. HILLSIDE - NIGHT

Jack follows Ernest up a winding road, passing recently
built, luxury bungalows.

JACK

What is it that you do, Ernest?
(no answer)
You do, do something?

ERNEST

Everybody does something.
(beat)
What is it you do?

JACK

I work at a chemical mixing plant.

ERNEST

That's about as awful an answer I
could've imagined.

JACK

It's not all I do. I'm also working
on a research project on the side.

ERNEST

What kind of "research project?"

JACK

On rockets.

ERNEST
(impressed)
Like Buck Rogers?

JACK
Uh huh.

ERNEST
Didn't know people worked on those
for real.

JACK
Not many do...

Jack trails off, seeing a MOUNTAIN LION standing on the hill not far above them, staring at them with reflective eyes. At once majestic and terrifying.

ERNEST
Take a look at that. One step
outside your yard, no telling what
you'll find.

They share an appreciative glance. Ernest holds his hand out shaped like a gun.

ERNEST (CONT'D)
Bang!

The lion spooks away, disappearing into darkness.

EXT. LOOKOUT - NIGHT

Jack and Ernest arrive at the top of the hill. The lights of the young city twinkle below. Ernest goes right to the edge, dangerously close to the drop off.

ERNEST
View's even better from out here.

JACK
I'm fine where I am.

ERNEST
(like a chicken)
Bawk bawk bawk.

Egged-on, Jack takes a step closer to the edge.

ERNEST (CONT'D)
So, tell me about these rockets.

JACK
What do you want to know?

ERNEST

Why you wanna work on something so nutty?

JACK

I guess, I've always wondered what it'd be like.

ERNEST

What *what* would be like?

JACK

I don't know. To be up there instead of down here.

ERNEST

That would be something. Then again, always one thing you can never get away from.

He gives Jack a pained smile.

ERNEST (CONT'D)

So how these rockets work?

JACK

You familiar with Newton's third law of motion? For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction?

(Ernest is blank)

Well, you burn some kind of fuel in a chamber and the gases produced by the combustion shoot out the only exit available. Gases go one way, the rocket goes the other.

ERNEST

So, there's a part trying to burst out and a part that needs to keep it under control?

JACK

More or less.

Ernest nods, like he can relate. He plops a cigarette in his mouth. Feels his pockets for something to light it.

Jack pulls out his ZIPPO.

JACK (CONT'D)

Here.

Ernest cups Jack's hands to block the wind as he lights it. Their eyes meet at the slight physical contact.

There's a flicker of something in Ernest's gaze. Attraction? Menace? Something between the two?

JACK (CONT'D)

Think I should be headed back.

EXT. WINDING STREET - NIGHT

Jack walks downhill. He hears Ernest catching up to him.

ERNEST

My teacher says there's two kinds of people.

Jack looks back at him, questioning.

ERNEST (CONT'D)

Those that are happy to abide the rules and those that wanna break 'em.

JACK

What kind of teacher is this?

ERNEST

The only one ever taught me anything worth learning. Take these houses, with their walls, trying to keep us out. Who's to say we have to obey?

JACK

The law does.

ERNEST

Whose law?

Jack is confused, thinks it's obvious. Ernest suddenly veers off the road, headed towards a Mediterranean-style house.

JACK

What are you doing?

Ernest reaches the back yard WALL. He looks over it, sees something, then looks back at Jack, a glint in his eye.

ERNEST

There is no law beyond: Do what thou wilt.

Ernest HOPS OVER THE WALL. Jack stares for a moment, struck by his parting words.

He heads towards the house and quietly slips along the side.

JACK

Ernest?

He gets no response. He reaches the backyard wall and peers over it.

The yard is empty. No sign of Ernest, like he's disappeared completely.

Jack blinks, bewildered. It's like he imagined him...

He checks all around, making sure no one's watching, then HOISTS HIMSELF OVER the wall.

EXT. BACK YARD - NIGHT

Jack walks around the yard, searching. His feet come to the edge of a SWIMMING POOL. The water unlit, nearly black.

Jack kneels and scans the surface, noticing AIR BUBBLES floating to the top.

He pinches his brow, a thought occurring. He puts his hand into the water.

But then he looks back at the air bubbles, realizing.

JACK

Ernest?

Jack looks back at the house, then calls him again, trying not to wake the inhabitants.

JACK (CONT'D)

Ernest. Get out of there.

(no response)

You trying to get yourself drowned?

Then it dawns on Jack, maybe that's *exactly* what he's doing.

JACK (CONT'D)

Hey, come up already. Come up!

Jack starts pacing, getting worried. Then he stops and looks at the water, knowing what he needs to do.

JACK (CONT'D)

Sonovabitch.

Jack takes off his coat, and DIVES IN.

EXT. UNDERWATER - NIGHT

Jack looks around, frantic. And then he sees Ernest. Calmly floating. Looking right at Jack with a BIG SMILE.

Jack swims over to him, grabs him under the arms and pushes them both up to the surface.

EXT. POOL - NIGHT

They break through. Ernest sucks in air. Starts LAUGHING.

JACK

You think that's funny?

ERNEST

Figured you'd either come get me or you wouldn't.

JACK

And what then?

Ernest shrugs, nonchalant at that possibility. Pissed, Jack starts to get out. Ernest grabs his arm to keep him there.

JACK (CONT'D)

Get your hands off me!

ERNEST

You wanna hit me?

JACK

Let go.

ERNEST

Gonna hafta do better.

Jack pushes him. Ernest pushes back. Turns into a shoving match, faces close.

Jack eventually loses it and SNAPS Ernest in the face with an elbow. Ernest finally lets go, clutching his nose.

JACK

Is that what you wanted?

Ernest drops his hand, BLOOD flows from his nose.

ERNEST

It's what you wanted.

Ernest puts his fingers in his mouth to taste the blood.

JACK

What's wrong with you?

In response, Ernest starts HOWLING at the moon. The LIGHTS in the house turn on.

JACK (CONT'D)

Shut up.

Ernest HOWLS even louder. Jack gets out of the pool and *runs*.

EXT. EDGEMONT STREET - NIGHT

Jack keeps running, his shoes SQUISHING on the pavement. Ernest's howls fading in the distance...

INT. PARSONS HOUSE - NIGHT

Jack hurries inside. He gets the door shut behind him and locks it. Breathing hard. He takes a moment, trying to wrap his head around the outing he just had.

SUSAN

Where on Earth have you been?

He faces Susan, staring at her sopping wet husband with a bewildered expression.

Jack shakes his head, not sure how to explain.

INT. OPULENT BEDROOM - NIGHT

Jack fucks a CHINESE WOMAN on top of a massive bed. When he's done, he rolls off of her and stares at the ceiling with a dark expression. After a long pause...

CHINESE WOMAN

(in Mandarin, subtitled)

It was to your liking?

(he's silent)

It was my first time. I will get better.

JACK-AS-CHINESE-ARISTOCRAT

(in Mandarin)

And yet, the ecstasy will always be fleeting.

INT. LONG HALLWAY - NIGHT

Jack exits the bedroom in a silk kimono. DOZENS OF OTHER WIVES poke heads out of doorways, filling the hallway with their hopeful faces. All are Chinese save for one--Susan.

Jack walks past them all.

JACK (PRE-LAP)
That night, like most others, Wan
Hu slept alone.

INT. HOLLYWOOD BAR - NIGHT

Jack sits at the bar, regaling two young ASPIRING ACTRESSES.

JACK
Neither the thrill of the hunt, nor
the pleasures of love could satisfy
his restless longing.

ACTRESS 1
How many wives you say this guy
had?

JACK
Over forty.

They exchange a scandalized titter.

JACK (CONT'D)
This was five hundred years ago *in
China*. Polygamy was normal practice.

ACTRESS 2
Nothing about those people is
normal.

JACK
The point of the story isn't that
the man's Chinese.

ACTRESS 1
So what is the point?

JACK
He wanted to glimpse the sublime.

Blank stares. Jack might as well be speaking Martian.

JACK (CONT'D)
Think of it this way. It's the same
thing we're doing here, with less
of a headache in the morning.

RICHARD (O.S.)
Jack?

Richard has just entered the bar, looking very out of place.

JACK

Richy boy! Right on time! What can I get you?

RICHARD

A tonic water.

JACK

He's the one guy I know who thought prohibition was a good idea.

The actresses giggle. Richard reddens, feeling made fun of.

RICHARD

I thought we were meeting to talk about your "big breakthrough."

JACK

We are. Booze might make you more receptive.

(leans in, talks low)

Makes some other things more receptive too.

JACK (CONT'D)

(facing the actresses)

Ladies... I'd like you to meet my good pal Richard.

The actresses hold out their hands. Richard gives them a very formal looking handshake.

RICHARD

Nice to meet you. And you.

They GIGGLE. Richard doesn't understand why.

JACK

They're women, Richard, not vacuum salesmen...

Jack takes one's hand and kisses it to demonstrate.

JACK (CONT'D)

It's been a pleasure.

ACTRESS 1

Likewise.

JACK

Richard here's a promising student at Caltech and extremely eligible, unlike yours truly.

ACTRESS 1
(to Richard)
So, you another genius like Jack here?

RICHARD
Well, I've never had my IQ officially tested...

ACTRESS 2
We don't get to meet a lot a smart guys.

RICHARD
I'm not surprised.

She blinks, vaguely insulted.

JACK
What Richard means is-

ACTRESS 2
It's okay. I know what he means.

ACTRESS 1
(to Jack)
Too bad this ain't 500 years ago in China.

She and her friend turn away, sending a clear message.

JACK
(to Richard)
You sure you don't want something to drink?

Richard gives him a hard look, embarrassed.

JACK (CONT'D)
It's not important. Let's go find somewhere quiet to talk. I think I might have cracked it!

INT. HOLLYWOOD BAR - LATER

Jack smashes his fist into a BOWL OF PEANUTS, looking across a table to Richard, sipping his tonic with a dour expression.

JACK
See?! No matter how hard we pack the fuel, there's gonna be pockets of air.

He tilts the bowl so Richard can see.

JACK (CONT'D)

Those pockets of air lead to uneven combustion. One flare up, and either the whole thing explodes-

He tosses the peanuts at Richard.

JACK (CONT'D)

Or all the oxygen gets eaten up and the damn thing falls to earth.

Jack drops the bowl to the table with a loud clank.

JACK (CONT'D)

You wondered why we keep getting such sporadic results? Well, I give you the solution.

Jack removes a piece of paper from his jacket pocket.

JACK (CONT'D)

It occurred to me while taking a dip in a pool.

He unfolds the paper with a flourish. Inside is a detailed drawing of a ROCKET WITH TWO OVALS attached to its side.

RICHARD

No, no. Liquid fuel is too volatile.

JACK

I knew you'd say that, but with liquid, there's no pockets of air.

Jack holds up his glass right in front of Richard's face.

JACK (CONT'D)

See?

RICHARD

Where would we even get it?

JACK

Bet you could nab some tanks of liquid oxygen and methanol from the chem lab at Caltech...

Richard is resistant to the idea. Jack holds up his fist.

JACK (CONT'D)

Roshambo to decide?

RICHARD

I'm the only one who can check out supplies from Caltech, so it's my decision to make and I say no.

JACK

You don't just get to decide that. We're partners, remember?

RICHARD

The entire demonstration was your idea, which you didn't so much as run past me.

JACK

Then what are you suggesting? We just launch the way we always do and hope for the best?

RICHARD

No.
(with difficulty)
I think we should call the whole thing off.

JACK

What? Why?

RICHARD

To save me any further embarrassment. I can go back to work on my original thesis.

JACK

Characteristics of goddamn propellers???

RICHARD

Of braked, locked and free-wheeling two- and three-bladed propellers.

Jack groans, disparaging.

RICHARD (CONT'D)

It doesn't have to be exciting. At least it's *feasible*. And there will be gainful employment waiting for me at the other end.

JACK

Gainful employment?
(he points to bartender)
He's gainfully employed.

(MORE)

JACK (CONT'D)
I'm gainfully employed. Do either
of us look happy?

RICHARD
You know what I mean.

JACK
No, I don't. We're talking about a
way for man to break free of his
confines and travel among the
stars, but you'd settle for a job?

Richard is silent. Frustrated, Jack changes tact.

JACK (CONT'D)
Remember how we met?

Richard groans. Jack has never let him forget.

JACK (CONT'D)
I beat up those kids picking on
you, not cuz I was bigger, but
because I wasn't chickenshit.

Stung, Richard looks down at Jack's sketch, UPSIDE-DOWN from
his pov. His expression changes, struck by something.

JACK (CONT'D)
You want that to always be the
difference between us?

RICHARD
That could work actually...

JACK
That's what I've been trying to
tell you.

RICHARD
No, not liquid fuel. This.

Richard spins the coaster, so that now Jack's looking at the
sketch upside down. Jack looks back at Richard, questioning.

RICHARD (CONT'D)
What if we did the launch inverted?
(off Jack's confused look)
And static... supported by a brace.

JACK
Why?

RICHARD

So we can measure thrust by the
push on a pressure gauge!

Richard is excited. Jack decidedly less so.

JACK

We're trying to send something into
space, and you wanna aim it at the
ground?

RICHARD

Yes! In order to collect some
actual data. You heard what Ulam
said, about stepping stones? This
would be a way to show him we can
work in a controlled manner with
measurable results.

Jack's silent, processing.

RICHARD (CONT'D)

You have to admit, I have a point.

JACK

What choice do I have? If I
disagree, you'll just call the
whole thing off.

Richard can't help but look a little smug, a rare victory
over his headstrong friend.

INT. JACK'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Jack lies on his back, staring up at the ceiling, too
agitated about his meeting with Richard to sleep.

After a long beat, he slips out of bed, being careful not to
wake Susan. He goes to the window and peers out.

Jack sees that the lights are on in Ernest's house. Once
again, the two of them the only ones awake on the dark block.

Curious about what he's up to, Jack retrieves a pair of
BINOCULARS sitting on top of the dresser.

JACK'S POV (INTERCUT AS NECESSARY)

Through the magnified pov, Jack spies on Ernest's lit up
windows, but can't see any sign of him.

After a short beat, the front door swings opens.

Ernest comes out, carrying a KNIFE WITH A CURVED HANDLE and a large metal bucket.

Jack reacts, just when he thought his neighbor couldn't get any stranger.

Ernest walks into his detached GARAGE and closes the door firmly shut behind him.

After a brief silence, Jack hears a high-pitched SHRIEKING. The unmistakable sound of someone scared for their life.

EXT. JACK'S GARAGE - CONTINUOUS

Jack hurries down his driveway to investigate. The shrieking comes to an abrupt stop. Whoever was screaming, *silenced*.

Jack stops in place, keeping eyes and ears peeled. He can only hear crickets chirping.

Ernest's garage door re-opens. Jack ducks behind his truck to stay hidden.

Ernest emerges, hands covered in what looks like BLOOD, carrying the bucket, now heavy with liquid, his knife, likewise slicked crimson.

Jack's eyes widen. Did he just witness a murder?

Ernest puts everything into his car's trunk. He slams it shut, then glances in Jack's direction.

Jack ducks down. He waits, heart beating. He hears footsteps, then a car door opening and shutting. An engine starts.

Jack risks a peek, in time to see Ernest's car driving away.

Relieved, Jack stands and looks back at his house, then back at Ernest's departing vehicle. He's torn between going back inside and seeing what the hell Ernest is up to.

He hops into his truck, the mystery too compelling.

EXT. WINONA BOULEVARD - NIGHT

Ernest's car rolls to a stop in front of a large, dilapidated CRAFTSMAN HOUSE.

A few blocks behind, Jack's truck pulls over, having followed Ernest here, trying to keep a safe distance.

INT./EXT. JACK'S TRUCK - NIGHT

Jack watches Ernest collect the bucket and knife from his trunk and lumber up the walkway to the house.

WELL-DRESSED PEOPLE congregate out front. They greet Ernest. He says something back, then goes into a side-entrance.

A strange, high-pitched drone begins reverberating from inside the house (like the sound created by a Tibetan singing bowl). The people out front begin filing inside, as though summoned.

JACK

What in god's name...

All the people finish entering and the strange drone stops. The house sits silent, containing all its secrets.

Jack can't stand it. He opens his door and hops out.

EXT. LARGE CRAFTSMAN HOUSE - NIGHT

Jack stays close to the outer wall, keeping low. He reaches a ground floor window and takes a cautious peek inside.

INT. KITCHEN (POV)

A SWEET-LOOKING WOMAN, donning a house dress and apron, pours RED LIQUID from a measuring cup into a bowl of BATTER. She stirs, blending it all together into a reddish paste.

EXT. LARGE CRAFTSMAN HOUSE - NIGHT

Jack ducks back out of sight. No idea what the fuck he's stumbled upon. Then, from above, he hears STRANGE CHANTING.

Jack looks around, spots a car parked outside the GARAGE.

EXT. GARAGE - NIGHT

Jack climbs onto the hood of the car and, once he has his balance, leaps towards the roof of the garage. He grabs the edge and pulls himself up.

He walks along the top of the garage, scanning the house. His eyes land on a BEDROOM BALCONY, within arm's reach.

He checks that no one's watching, then grasps the bannister. He gets one leg over it. Heaves himself the rest of the way.

EXT. BALCONY - NIGHT

Jack peeks into a DARKENED BEDROOM. It's empty. Doesn't see anything of note. His eyes drift to the hallway beyond.

A SHROUDED FIGURE IN BLACK moves past the doorway. Jack's heart lurches. But just as fast, the figure is gone.

Jack blinks--like his eyes are playing tricks on him. Then he hears a deep, MUFFLED MAN'S VOICE, ring out from above like the voice of god.

MUFFLED MAN'S VOICE
DO WHAT THOU WILT...

Jack's eyes widen, recognizing the phrase.

GROUP RESPONSE
SHALL BE THE WHOLE OF THE LAW!

Jack looks higher, to the awning of the roof.

EXT. ROOF - NIGHT

Two hands appear, grasping the edge. A moment later, Jack comes into view, muscling himself onto the pitched roof.

He walks at a slant, towards the front. When he gets all the way there, he lies down on his stomach.

He maneuvers himself forward and then carefully leans over the edge, so he can peer into the ATTIC WINDOW.

INT. ATTIC (POV)

From an UPSIDE-DOWN VIEWPOINT, Jack sees a MAN IN A RED VELVET ROBE on a makeshift-altar covered in candles. He's surrounded by an audience of ABOUT TWENTY PEOPLE, kneeling in a circle around him.

MAN IN A RED VELVET ROBE
(British accent)
I, Priest and King, take thee,
Virgin pure without spot.

He says this to a BEAUTIFUL WOMAN standing next to him, wearing a translucent gown.

ON JACK'S FACE:

Enthralled.

INT. ATTIC (POV)

The priest raises a dagger high above his head.

ON JACK'S FACE:

His expression shifts to horror.

INT. ATTIC (POV)

The priest swings the dagger down toward the "virgin."

JACK

Don't!

Congregates whip their gazes towards the window.

EXT. ROOF - NIGHT

Jack stands, reeling. He hears VOICES yelling at him from inside the house.

He rushes back towards the way he came but his foot SLIPS on a loose shingle.

Jack slides down the pitched roof towards the edge. He just manages to stop himself before falling off.

Dangling over the edge, he risks a look down. It's a twenty foot drop into some DENSE SHRUBBERY.

Objects start BANGING the walls from inside (Fists? Broom handles? Something worse?) Either way, feels threatening.

Jack closes his eyes, like he's saying a quick prayer, and LETS GO. He falls, landing in the shrubs below.

EXT. LARGE CRAFTSMAN HOUSE - NIGHT

Jack emerges, clothing ripped and filthy. He sprints towards his truck.

INT. JACK'S TRUCK - NIGHT

He dives in, starts the engine and hits the gas, peeling out.

People start to STREAM OUT of the front door, staring after the fleeing vehicle.

INT./EXT. JACK'S TRUCK - NIGHT

Jack navigates the dark, serpentine streets, escaping back to his own block.

His veins course with adrenaline. He takes quick glances over his shoulder to make sure he isn't being followed.

EXT. PARSONS HOUSE - NIGHT

Jack pulls into his driveway. He shuts the engine off, but he stays put, processing everything he just witnessed.

A bemused smile grows on his face, strangely exhilarated.

INT. JACK'S GARAGE - DAY

A metal SAW cuts through a SHEET OF STEEL, wielded by Jack. He looks up at Richard, watching from across the garage.

JACK

Come check. Want to make sure it meets your specifications.

Richard checks the dimensions with a measuring tape.

RICHARD

It's a few millimeters shy.

JACK

That won't do. Lemme recut it.

Jack smiles, acting uncharacteristically obsequious today.

Jack SAWS another piece of metal. He looks to Richard.

JACK (CONT'D)

Better?

Richard checks it and gives him a circumspect nod.

JACK (CONT'D)

Good. We can't afford any errors.

RICHARD

That's right...

INT. JACK'S GARAGE - DAY

Jack fuses the sheet with a WELDING TORCH. Sparks fly in all directions.

At a safe distance, Richard reads a dog-eared COMMUNIST MANIFESTO. He looks up, studying Jack. Jack catches him.

JACK

What?

RICHARD

Nothing.

Jack sets the finished ROCKET CHAMBER into METAL SCAFFOLDING--
pointed downward.

EXT. JACK'S GARAGE - NIGHT

Jack steps out, gazing at the night sky. Richard joins him.

RICHARD

You aren't still sore about doing
the test this way are you?

JACK

Why would I be sore?

RICHARD

It's my design. And I shot down
your liquid fuel idea.

JACK

You were right. Better safe than
sorry this time around.

Richard can't tell if he's being sarcastic. Jack holds out
his hand as a show of goodwill.

JACK (CONT'D)

No hard feelings.

Richard takes it. Jack pulls him into a HUG, much to
Richard's discomfort.

JACK (CONT'D)

I know you're sticking out your
neck to do this. I really do
appreciate it.

RICHARD

(thrown)

It's okay. Never would've gotten
this far without your persistence.

They break apart, sharing a friendly smile.

RICHARD (CONT'D)

Remember what you always made us
recite, before each launch?

JACK

In spite of the opinions of certain narrow-minded people, who would shut up the human race upon this globe, as within some magic circle which it must never outstep...

JACK AND RICHARD

We shall one day travel to the moon, the planets, and the stars, with the same facility, rapidity, and certainty as we now make the voyage from Liverpool to New York!

JACK

See you tomorrow.

EXT. JACK'S GARAGE - DAY

Jack waves as Richard backs out of his driveway.

Soon as Richard's car is out of sight, Jack pulls his other hand out of his pocket, holding RICHARD'S WALLET. The hug just a ruse to pick his pocket.

INT. CALTECH CHEMISTRY LAB - DAY

Gleaming, filled with research equipment and materials. A GRAD STUDENT walks along a shelf, taking inventory.

A KNOCK at the door distracts him. He turns to see Jack waiting by the door with a DOLLY CART.

JACK

Need to check out some tanks of liquid oxygen and methanol.

GRAD STUDENT

Uh, are you a student here?

JACK

No, I'm Harry Houdini.

Jack takes out Richard's wallet and pulls out his STUDENT ID. He hands it over to the PHD STUDENT.

GRAD STUDENT

(reading)
Richard Forman, aeronautical engineering.

JACK

That's me.

He gives him a grin, like the cat who ate the canary.

EXT. FIELD OF POPPIES - DAY

Two figures move through the vibrant field. Jack, dressed in fine silk, alongside Richard, in servant's garb.

RICHARD-AS-CHINESE-SERVANT
(Mandarin, with subtitles)
*But Master, what you are attempting
is very dangerous.*

JACK-AS-CHINESE-ARISTOCRAT
(Mandarin, with subtitles)
*I have no choice. Every other
method has failed me.*

They reach a CLEARING, where a THRONE-LIKE CHAIR awaits. SERVANTS busily attach large FIREWORKS to the frame.

JACK-AS-CHINESE-ARISTOCRAT (CONT'D)
How many are they fastening?

RICHARD-AS-CHINESE-SERVANT
Fifty, as instructed.

JACK-AS-CHINESE-ARISTOCRAT
*Have them add two more. Fifty-two
is a more auspicious number.*

His gaze shifts to the sky above.

JACK-AS-CHINESE-ARISTOCRAT (CONT'D)
*Once they ignite, I shall leave
this realm by traveling into the
heavens directly.*

RICHARD-AS-CHINESE-SERVANT
What if you never return?

Jack gives him a look--as if that might be the point.

SUSAN (PRE-LAP)
Rise and shine.

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

Jack stirs awake, the AMAZING STORIES issue still in his hand, open to an illustration of the Aristocrat sitting on his FIREWORK-LADEN THRONE--the source of his dream. Susan stands over him, anxious.

SUSAN
Shouldn't you be getting ready?

INT. JACK'S PICKUP - DAY

The voice of British Prime Minister NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN crackles through the car radio.

NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN (V.O.)

This morning I had another talk with the German Chancellor, Herr Hitler. And here is the paper which bears his name upon it as well as mine.

Driving, Jack looks over at Richard in the passenger seat, re-checking calculations in his notebook, mumbling to himself.

JACK

I found this in the garage while I was loading.

Jack pulls out Richard's WALLET and hands it over.

JACK (CONT'D)

Must have fallen out while we were working.

Richard opens it to confirm that all the cash is intact.

RICHARD

Must have...

NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN (V.O.)

(on radio)

We are determined to continue our efforts to remove possible sources of difference, and thus to contribute to assure the peace of Europe.

RICHARD

Hear that? Perhaps it's going to be a good day all around.

Richard smiles at Jack, optimistic for a change.

INT. HOLY TRINITY PARISH - DAY

Susan kneels in front of the altar, hands clasped. She opens her eyes and stares at the CRUCIFIED CHRIST.

She hears a MAN'S VOICE, as though in response to her prayer.

MAN'S VOICE

Susan?

Susan turns, finding the parish priest approaching. FATHER SHELBY, 60s, sizable gut straining against his cassock.

SUSAN

Yes, Father.

FATHER SHELBY

You're here early. Choir practice isn't for another couple hours.

SUSAN

I'm not here for that. It's an important day for my husband. Thought he could use all the help he could get.

FATHER SHELBY

He's lucky to have you looking out for him. Though, might be more effective if Mr. Parsons said his own prayers once in a while.

Susan's smile falls, feeling chastened.

EXT. ARROYO SECO - DAY

Jack's truck arrives at the testing site. Jack and Richard get out and go to unload.

JACK

There's something I need to tell you before we start setting up.

RICHARD

What?

JACK

You're going to be a little ticked, but promise you'll let me explain.

RICHARD

I can't promise. I don't know what it is.

Jack pulls off the tarp, revealing tanks of oxygen and methanol. Richard faces Jack, livid.

JACK

Liquid fuel is going to give us a better result. I'm certain of it.

RICHARD

(seething)
We agreed.

JACK

No, we didn't. You decided.

RICHARD
How did you even-

Jack hands him his notebook, hoping to distract him.

JACK
I fitted the rocket motor with
pressure bearing hoses. And took
the liberty of working out
Tsiolkovsky's equation.

RICHARD
But you're terrible at math!

JACK
Then check my work, before Ulam
gets here.

RICHARD
(checking)
No, no. This is completely wrong-

JACK
Listen to me, if the motor misfires,
there won't be a next time.

RICHARD
And if it blows up, we'll all be
dead!

JACK
It's not going to blow up. This is
our chance to turn this into
something real, and we won't get
another one. We have to take the
risk.

Before Richard responds, they hear a CAR PULL UP. Ulam sits
in the passenger seat, chauffeured by a GRADUATE ASSISTANT.

Ulam exits, squinting in the bright sunlight, like a mole.

ULAM
Let's make this quick gentlemen.

Richard looks back at Jack, trapped.

JACK
Do what thou wilt.

Richard cocks his head, no clue what he means.

ULAM

Do you have something to show me or not?

Jack waits for Richard to answer.

RICHARD

(begrudging)

Yes, professor. Be right there.

Jack breathes, relieved.

EXT. ARROYO SECO - DAY

Jack checks the fuel lines running into the rocket, which has been set on scaffolding. Richard talks through the salient features with Ulam.

RICHARD

(nervous, to Ulam)

The spring mechanism will give us a measurement of thrust. In future tests, we can use it as a baseline, using different fuel mixtures, chamber and nozzle dimensions, trying to zero-in on the optimal combination of variables.

ULAM

I appreciate methodology, but chemicals you are using are quite volatile, no?

JACK

You have nothing to worry about. Richard's worked out all the mathematics...

Richard eyes Jack, could kill him.

ULAM

I hope so. Pogroms gave me healthy fear of fire.

INT. PARSONS HOUSE - DAY

Susan heads up the front pathway, returned from her trip to church. She suddenly stops in her tracks, seeing something.

A FOLDED PIECE OF PAPER has been pinned to their front door, stuck in place with a CURVED-HANDLED KNIFE.

EXT. ARROYO SECO - DAY

The group gathers behind a stack of SANDBAGS. Hoses from the rocket run to TANKS of oxygen and methanol set there. Jack puts his hands on the VALVES.

RICHARD
Maybe I should do it.

JACK
I'm the chemical expert remember.
(beat)
On my count. One. Two...

Jack eases the knobs open. Liquid hisses into the hoses, but the exiting air-pressure blows the FUSE out of the rocket.

JACK (CONT'D)
Sorry. Need to secure it.

Jack turns off the knobs and trots to the rocket.

ULAM
Not promising start.
(Richard looks at him)
Do you really trust this to work?

Before Richard answers, Jack returns to his position.

JACK
Should be all set.
(looking between them)
Did I miss something?

RICHARD
No.

Ulam isn't sure if that answer is meant for him or Jack.

JACK
Okay. On my count. One, two...
(opening valves)
Three!

Richard strikes the ZIPPO LIGHTER.

EXT. FIELD OF POPPIES - NIGHT

The CHINESE SERVANT uses FLINT to spark the fuse--52 strands wound as one.

EXT. ARROYO SECO - DAY

The spark crackles along the length of fuse, finally reaching the entrance of the rocket motor.

Jack and Richard wait with bated breath.

A TINY FLAME comes out. Truth be told, it's pretty pathetic.

ULAM

Congratulations. You have made very elaborate cigarette lighter.

Jack winces at the insult. He turns the knobs counter-clockwise, injecting more fuel. The flame grows HIGHER.

RICHARD

That's enough...

JACK

You can't know what's enough 'til you know what's more than enough.

Jack turns the knobs all the way open. The FLAME shoots high into the air. Roaring like a proper rocket. Richard just stares, dumbfounded.

JACK (CONT'D)

Check the gauge!

Richard snaps to. The needle has shot way up.

RICHARD

(amazed)
Over 200 pounds...

JACK

(to Ulam)
Given the weight of the rocket, that would be enough thrust to reach the ionosphere... if it were pointed in the right direction.

ULAM

(reluctantly impressed)
Perhaps I have underestimated you.

Jack gives Richard a smug, "I told you so" look. Richard has to smile, but then his expression falls...

RICHARD

Uh... Jack...

Jack follows his gaze. Fuel has fallen *outside the rocket*, covering the whole contraption in FLAMES. The rubber hoses melt in the heat--creating BLOW TORCHES billowing fire.

Sensing what's about to happen, Richard grabs Ulam by the arm. The graduate assistant reacts a moment later, trying to get away as fast as possible.

Only Jack remains, staring at the flames. Enthralled.

EXT. FIELD OF POPPIES - DAY

We pull back from those same eyes to find Jack-as-Chinese-Aristocrat, gazing up at the heavens, likewise enthralled.

All at once, the 52 fireworks attached to his throne IGNITE.

EXT. ARROYO SECO - DAY

Simultaneously, the rocket contraption EXPLODES!

Jack stands there, haloed in fire. He peers through the haze... glimpsing a FIGURE on the other side of the flames, shimmering like a mirage.

The CHINESE ARISTOCRAT.

Jack blinks, not quite believing what he's seeing.

The aristocrat draws a bow and releases an ARROW.

It shoots through the air... transforming into a JAGGED BLACK OBJECT hurling right at Jack.

Someone KNOCKS JACK TO THE GROUND, just as a piece of SHRAPNEL zips by his head and embeds itself in the dirt.

EXT. FIELD OF POPPIES - SUNSET

The smoke clears. The aristocrat and his chair have VANISHED. His servants look into the sky, awed.

EXT. ARROYO SECO - DAY

Jack faces the man who just saved his life.

RICHARD

What's the matter with you?! You
trying to get yourself killed?!

Jack is stunned at first, but then starts LAUGHING. Richard looks dumbfounded, like he's staring at a mad man.

We drift up, with the SMOKE rising from the wreckage. Ulam and his graduate assistant pick themselves off the ground. Shaken, but otherwise okay.

We keep rising, higher and higher, Jack's laugh echoing through the vast desert.

Our gaze tilts upwards, to the sky above... A pale FULL MOON sits alone, far away and yet tantalizing close.

EXT. PARSONS HOUSE - EVENING

Jack pulls up, HONKING. He hops out of the truck before it's come to a complete stop and trots towards the door.

INT. PARSONS HOUSE - EVENING

Jack gets in and looks around, but the house seems empty.

JACK

Susan?

He continues down the hall and into their bedroom. He finds Susan sitting on the edge of the bed, faced away.

JACK (CONT'D)

Didn't you hear me calling?

She looks at him, ashen faced.

JACK (CONT'D)

We did it!

SUSAN

The test was a success?

JACK

No. A disaster. But we proved it could be done!

SUSAN

(darkening again)

So, you still haven't been approved?

JACK

It was a bonafide *breakthrough*, whatever Ulam decides. We need to celebrate! What do we have to drink?

SUSAN

Someone left something on our door.

Jack sees that she's holding the note and a CURVED HANDLED KNIFE. He feels a chill, recognizing it. He takes the note from her and unfolds it.

Inside is a PENTACLE, surrounded by NUMBERS and SYMBOLS, drawn in what appears to be BLOOD.

SUSAN (CONT'D)

What could it possibly mean?

Jack has no idea. We move into his eyes, closer and closer, the pentacle reflected in each pupil. Drawn to the symbol and the mystery it contains, like a moth to a flame...

END OF PILOT