

THE CHANT OF THE MANDALA

by Tony Giovia

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People were disappearing. It's a little hard to explain. At a small art gallery in Minneapolis, one of the works is a 10-foot ball of wire with a "door". The idea was that people would walk into the ball and get an artistic experience from the enclosing architecture.

That was the idea, anyway. What was happening, though, is that once you went in you never came out. So far 9 people and one dog were MIA, including 3 cops, a police Doberman, a fireman, and two members of the city's SWAT team. All lost inside a 10' ball.

My name is Manny Levels, and I am one of seven troubleshooters at the National Science Foundation. It was sure enough that one of my group would be tapped to investigate this, and sure enough it was me that got the call.

* * *

Netto is my boss at the NSF. His office is sparse, considering his position, but there is one luxury - a superior mahogany desk, complete with leather chairs. I sat down in one.

Netto finished writing something, then put his pen down carefully. He templed his fingers, and craned his big bald head up, holding me with his eyes. But he didn't say anything.

I waited patiently, then said "The suspense is killing me."

He looked to the side, then back at me. "This is as dangerous an assignment as I've ever given." He was stone cold serious. This from a man who had sent me way out beyond Pluto, in a fair-to-say untested spaceship. Where, in case you don't know, I landed on the 10th planet of our solar system and contacted the inhabitants.

Netto cleared his throat. "You know the general outlines?" His voice lost its emotional charge, and he was back to business.

I nodded. "An artwork titled 'The Mandala' is a one way door. Art lovers and cops walk in but don't walk out. Most of the rescue workers were hitched to steel cables and given radios and video cameras. But all signals stopped once they went inside, and the cables were pulled out with their ends cleanly cut.

"The media is playing it as a Star Trek transporter, a People Zapper, and as art striking back - whatever that means. The song "Purple People Eater" has made an overnight comeback, with new versions by Pat Boone and Sting." I paused. "A gangsta version by Michael Jackson is due any day. That's the one I'm waiting for."

Netto rarely smiled, and he didn't then. But he almost did. He grunted and said "The fellow who created this Mandala is also missing. Maybe inside the artwork, maybe not. Nobody really knows."

Netto turned a little and pointed a VCR remote at a TV built into the wall. He narrated the pictures.

"After we lost more people than we should have we sent some probes inside. These are the results. Video is pure static. Sound is a simple hum. Heat sensors return no temperature readings. Here are a few sensors NASA has been playing with. No data returned."

He turned the video off and swung back to me. "Bottom line, the Special Committee is at a standstill. They want one more person to go in. You're the one. They want you."

I didn't react, except to gulp. Maybe my eyes opened a little too.

"That's our plan?"

"You know the Special Committee is composed of the best brains we've got. If this thing is sending people to another dimension they want one of our own there." Netto's face hardened. "The rules haven't changed. This is still a voluntary assignment. Don't decide now. Sleep on it. Let me know tomorrow."

All my assignments are voluntary, but I have never turned one down. I figured, or really just sensed, that once you get bored or lose your nerve it's time to change jobs.

"Let me go down there and look it over. Then I'll decide."

Netto knew me, knew I meant yes. He grunted, stood up, and shook my hand. Then he said good luck, something he had never said to me before.

* * *

Tristater is one of the people who run the world from behind the scenes. He has his hand in everything, is friends with everybody, and gives more than he takes. He is neat to know, and I know him. Officially he's my field controller, but personally he's my source when I need a place to start on a tough problem.

I was at the airport when I dropped the dime - or more accurately, dialed the twenty-odd numbers on my calling card.

He answered on the first ring with "You are screwed!" instead of "Hello". Then he laughed.

"I prefer the word 'challenged'."

"Different folks, different strokes."

"So you want me to go into that thing?"

"Hey, not me, buddy. I voted no." Tristater, of course, is a member of the Special Committee. "When it came down to it, nobody was happy about the decision. They just figured the upside could be enormous."

"I figured the same thing, only in reverse. My plane leaves in 8 minutes. Any ideas?"

"Ahhhh, Minnesota in February. I envy you. Here's what I see. I keep looking at it, and I keep coming back to the same thing. The artist Raskali chose wire mesh as the medium. At his level, he probably had multiple reasons for choosing it, apart from its malleability."

"OK. And?"

"The multiple reasons. That's where I would look."

As usual, he aimed but he didn't explain. "When I get back from this trip"

"Lunch is on me. This looks tricky. Good luck." He said the last quickly and lightly.

"OK." I hung up, not feeling too good. Like Netto, Tristater never wished me luck.

* * *

It was cold and snowing as I drove to the Main Street Gallery, which is located on Frontier Avenue. It turned out to be little more than a fancy storefront in a strip mall. Reporters were cordoned off across the street, and the police were abundant but relaxed. I was passed through after one call.

The Mandala was sitting right in the middle of the gallery floor. There were three uniforms in the room, along with a suited lieutenant who had opened the door for me and checked my credentials. A man and a woman were sitting near a wall, on a bench made of television sets; the looey told me they were the owner and his wife.

Even at a distance of 20 feet I saw that the Mandala had a layered construction of fine mesh screens. It looked as much like a cage as a ball of wire. I took a closer look. It was possible to distinguish some of the upper layers, and I could see that each screen was a series of interlocking geometric forms - circles, rectangles, triangles, and polygons of all kinds. I thought about Tristater's advice that the artist had many reasons for choosing wire mesh. Nothing clicked.

I walked the perimeter until I came to the door, about 7' high and quadrant shaped. A lone yellow police tape barred entry. I looked in but all was dark. I think I heard a hushing, hungry breeze.

"Mr. Levels."

The gallery owners were standing behind me, wearing expectant expressions. The man was portly, middle-aged, with dyed orange and yellow hair streaked to make his head look like it was

on fire. The woman was petite, dressed in a smart blue suit, and wore glasses that magnified her eyes.

"The police gave us your name. They said you might want to speak to us." The man stuck out his hand and I shook it. "My name is Joseph Main. You're the one the government sent?"

"Manny Levels. Yes. Your name is Main?"

He actually blushed. "Yes, Main's Street Gallery, Main Street Gallery. Get it?"

"I get it."

"This is my wife Althea. Say hello, dear."

"Pleased to meet you." We shook. Her gray eyes were enormous.

"I know you have told the story of the artist a hundred times. Could you tell the story to me?"

"Certainly, certainly," Main said energetically. "Well, to begin at the beginning. Three weeks and 4 days ago the artist Raskali - that's what he called himself, but in my experience many artists make up their names - like movie stars - anyway, he pulled up the Mandala on the back of a flatbed truck. Well, I am always on the lookout for new artists - I discovered Philip de Philip, you know - but at first I said no, it's too large for the gallery.

"Well, let me tell you, this Raskali is a very persuasive talker, so I finally gave in and got up on the truck and went into the Mandala. It was incredible. I was so impressed I had Althea go in, and she was impressed too."

Althea nodded here, two big eyes bobbing up and down.

"Well, let me tell you, I put it on the floor the next day, clearing out an exhibit of Iceman Doe sculptures to make room." His voice trailed up, like this was a big thing.

"Yeah. Obviously, you both got out safely."

"We have both been in there at least a dozen times each," said Althea. "Not a single hair has been mussed."

"Uh huh."

"Apparently we are protected, because we brought this masterpiece to the world," added Main.

"Uh huh. It's been reported that about a hundred people went in and out safely before the first person disappeared. Have either of you been inside since that happened?"

"No, no." Main actually stepped in front of his wife to get the first word in. "Neither one of us was here when the first - actually, the first 3 people - disappeared. Our assistant Marsha was watching the store with her boyfriend George. Marsha had gone in after the missing customers, and when she didn't come out George was afraid to follow her. He called the police."

Main hunched forward, and lowered his voice. "George is not an art aficionado." He said it like it was a crime. "The authorities were here when I and Althea returned, and they did not allow us to go back into the Mandala."

"Do you want to go back in? You said you feel protected."

Main stepped back. He didn't say anything, which said it all.

"OK. Can you describe the inside of the ball for me?"

Main found his tongue again. "It's impossible to describe, except to say it is incredible." Althea bobbed her eyes in agreement, then added "All kinds of light twinkles through. It changes as you look at it."

"The walls look thick. How big is it inside?"

"Room for one." They answered in unison, as though they had rehearsed it. I was looking at Main, but from the corner of my eye I thought I saw one of Althea's eyes wink as she said it.

I froze. I had seen that slow and sly wink before, the last time back in the summer of '97. It was signature wink of Ms Terry, companion of Bandwidth, the ruler of the 10th planet. I had run into both of them there, and since then here on earth. I knew from experience they could change their physical appearances. And the Mandala, as an international sensation, was absolutely their style.

I stared at Althea, but her expression did not change.

I took a shot. "Long time no see. Where have you been for the past 3 years?"

Her face reflected authentic puzzlement, which told me nothing.

"Excuse me", said Main. "Have you met my wife before?"

As I turned to face Main, Althea winked again.

That did it. I was 90% sure now that Althea was Ms Terry, and 90% sure that Main was Bandwidth. That made me 100% sure I wanted in. Don't get me wrong, I was committed the minute I shook Netto's hand. This was just the kick that got me going.

I looked hard at Althea, then at Main. Without any extra thinking I walked to a coat rack, hung my overcoat on a hanger, and then turned around and walked directly into the Mandala, tearing down the police tape as I went in. The last thing I heard was a shout from the lieutenant, cut off in midstream as I entered.

The doorway was dark, but it was bright inside, almost brilliant, and it took a second for my eyes to adjust. Multicolored points of light sparkled from all directions, restlessly piercing the gray infrastructure of screen mesh. It was absolutely silent. A warm current of air brushed my face like breath.

As I swung my head around I felt bewildered by the intensity of the lights. It was as if each beam was illuminating a part of my mind, each was trying to tell me something, each was

competing for my attention. Defensively I raised my arm to protect myself, and I accidentally brushed the interior wall of the Mandala.

The effect was like dropping a rock into a pool of water. Waves rippled out from the point of contact, and the action revealed the structural depth of the walls. What looked like layers of independent screens was actually one unified composition. Countless bands moved in step with each other in a liquid motion.

More and more points of light were revealed and replaced, revealed and replaced by the elastic swaying. Depending on where I looked, I saw a galaxy of stars effervescent with three-dimensional constellations, or a jungle of convoluted ... paths ... adrift in a sea of darkness, or linked spectacles whose depth and breadth could not be grasped by a single thought.

My awareness expanded as each tableau knitted itself into my mind. Soon I could glimpse the totality of the events around me. My attention was shattered but alive, I was everywhere at once - yet all my parts were connected, so I felt centered. I began to sense a pattern of symbols within the percolating images, and common to them all. Like a strengthening heartbeat the pattern of symbols rose and fell, rose and fell, a vaporous web trying to will itself into visibility. Trying to will itself into birth.

"That is The Chant of the Mandala."

I had a delayed reaction, then the voice hit me like a fist. I was literally thrown up and back, hitting my head on the top of the Mandala. I crumpled to the floor, unhurt. A shadow blanketed me and I looked up. None other than Bandwidth, the leader of Mentalos, our 10th planet, was towering over me with a toothy grin.

I wasn't surprised to see him there. In fact, it was almost a relief. His physical appearance was as I remembered it from Mentalos - big, bold and ready to rock.

You may know that Bandwidth is the author of what has become known as the "Message from Mentalos", an observation that ideas are composed of energy, the only known substance of the Universe. By Einstein's theorem energy and matter are equivalent, so the thrust of the Message is that ideas must exhibit the same properties as material objects, making the Universe as metaphysical as it is physical. Since my visit to Mentalos I've run into Bandwidth three times here on Earth. Including today.

He extended his hand and pulled me to my feet. There was more room in the Mandala now as the walls appeared to have receded to accommodate us. I still felt the connections in my head to all the light sources, but they were subdued.

I didn't bother to thank him, or greet him. "So the Mandala is your idea."

"It is my biggest idea." His voice boomed, as usual. "It is **** THE **** idea."

I waited. He'd explain it soon enough.

"Examine the construction of the Mandala - the intricate combinations of geometric designs, where each design is part of a larger picture. Each design is a polyvalent context that links with the designs in its own layer, and also with designs in the adjoining layers.

"The power relationships among all these designs are the fabric of the world. These relationships are the definition of the world. Everything in the world materializes from these relationships."

I tried to get my mind around this, but every time I got a grip another insight ballooned out from the middle and pushed me off. I tried again and again but couldn't hold it. "This is too much for me."

"Then let me state it simply. You are standing within the whole of Consciousness - the entire revealed structure of ideas." Then he laughed, a loud boisterous laugh that cascaded through the Mandala in a hammering echo.

It felt like something was stabbing me in the head. All I wanted to do was leave, go home, and sleep. Then from the depths a realization emerged - maybe I wasn't leaving. No one else had escaped.

"The Mandala has swallowed 9 people. And I'm the 10th?"

"The Mandala hasn't swallowed anyone. They are all here, just like you, and just like everyone else. We are all part of the Mandala. Don't you listen when I talk?" He laughed again, crushing me again.

I held my head against the noise. I was ready to strangle Bandwidth, or die trying.

"Take the visitors when you leave."

The twinkling lights suddenly intensified, and my mind was again drawn to the hypnotic effect of multiple mental pathways. I don't know if I generated it, or if it was given to me, but the most obvious question of all floated up to me.

"Are you saying the entire world is inside the Mandala?"

Bandwidth backed away from me, somehow taking two full steps before contacting the wall and igniting a dazzling panorama of flitting images. "The Mandala is the medium, and the message. The form, and the function." He took another step backward and merged into a phantasmagoria of lights.

Moments later the door I had entered through flooded with a searing white glare, blinding me and blanking my mind. I shielded my eyes and stepped out.

Nine people and a dog followed after me.

* * *

It was late, nearly nine o'clock. Netto rubbed his eyes with both hands. "You are saying the gallery owner was Bandwidth? Who was also Raskali, the artist."

I nodded. In hindsight it made sense that the Special Committee had chosen me for this job, because of my previous encounters with Bandwidth. But in reality they could not have known that Bandwidth has made a surreptitious return. You see a lot of strange things in this business, things that you can't explain, and on the surface the Mandala case was similar to a couple of UFO abductions I'd investigated.

"Well, he's long gone. Along with his wife." Netto tossed a file over to me. "The others who came out after you have been debriefed. You're their hero, of course." The press was calling me "The Houdini of the Mandala".

Netto continued. "In short, the victims remember nothing after entering the Mandala, except for a series of dreams - vivid, unique, intense dreams. According to your preliminary reports, that's what you experienced. Except the victims didn't get a visit from Bandwidth."

"Too bad." I meant it. I would have liked someone other than me to have seen Bandwidth.

Netto knew what I meant and grunted. "You'd like another witness. Don't worry about it, just do your job. Nobody who matters thinks you've got the imagination to make this up."

I blinked. "Is that a mixed compliment, or a mixed review?"

Netto shrugged.

I flipped through the "victim" reports. "Very clarifying. I see one of the art patrons says he was quote unquote 'dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before.'" I looked up and smiled.

"Yes, Poe's 'Raven'. Every single prisoner of the Mandala waxed poetic, experiencing but not analyzing."

"Not unusual. They don't have a bridge between feelings and science. Two different worlds."

"You do have a bridge, so you tell me. What was the point of all this? Apart from a publicity stunt?"

I took a second. Tristater's insight that the artist had many reasons for choosing mesh as a medium had been growing in my mind, and I let it loose now. "The 'Message from Mentalos' again, this time stated materially. Bandwidth is saying the physical meshing of the metal bands composing the Mandala is no different from the physical meshing of ideas in the Universe. The physical relationships - he calls them power relationships - among all ideas define the actual structure of the Universe. He called that structure Consciousness."

Netto thought about it. He started to say something, then stopped. Then he said "Ouch."

"Yeah. I try to handle it in small pieces. What I focus on is that ideas are composed of energy, and energy is equivalent to matter, and matter has a physical form whose topology can be described in geometric terms. Any grouping of ideas creates a viewpoint, a context that is a string of geometric designs. Those designs are both the meaning and the actual physical definition of the context. That actual physical definition exists as part of the Mandala. All the definitions of all the contexts define the Mandala."

Netto grunted. "So definitions are a key result." His head leaned up, and his eyes searched the ceiling. "Like a mathematical formula defines numerical relationships, contextual designs define meaning."

It was a good angle. "I'd agree. Definitions are the building blocks."

Netto grunted. He banged his pipe clean on an ashtray, stuffed it and lit it. He was above the law when it came to smoking in public buildings. "Any other earth-shaking tidbits?"

"Something Bandwidth called The Chant of the Mandala. But I haven't got it organized in my mind yet."

"Then it will be hard for me to understand too. Get it together and put it in your full report." Netto's mood lightened. He lofted some huge, perfectly formed smoke rings. "So Bandwidth is back. The Ivy Leaguers will be beating their chests again."

I smiled. The political types across the street never did figure out how to control Bandwidth. Now the bees will be buzzing again. I changed the subject. "The door of the Mandala closed up after the dog trotted out. Did we get it open again?"

"No. We pretty much know where the door was but the seams have disappeared. The engineers are going to cut it open, but"

He didn't have to finish. If Bandwidth wanted to leave a memento, he would have.

Netto relaxed in his chair and mused. "We are all part of the Mandala. Waiting for Bandwidth to show us around."

"That's about it."

Netto grunted. The phone rang and he answered it. I heard, "Yes, thank you, send him through ... Hello, Congressman Petty ... yes, good to hear your voice too ... long hours are part of the job ... certainly ... certainly ... we'll get something right out to you ... same here ... my pleasure ... yes sir ... no, glad we can help ... all the best to your family ... thank you"

Netto hung up. "Perfect timing. Congressman Petty is re-opening hearings on the Hill. He is convinced that Bandwidth has bad intentions, and he wants my analysis of what Bandwidth is likely to do next." Netto's eyes were dancing. "Any suggestions?"

Petty is a certified idiot. Put a television camera in pig sty and he'll jump in with bells on his ears. I testified at the Bandwidth hearings 3 years ago, and Petty praised my "extraordinary courage" in public while calling me a liar in private. When the public got tired of his posturing, Petty shut down the hearings and concluded that "more study is necessary".

"Any suggestions?" Netto said again. He was enjoying this.

I got some feelings off my chest. "Tell Petty that Bandwidth is the leader of a metaphysical Universe, and he has come to conquer Earth. Tell Petty to prepare for a war of syllogisms. Spell it for him if you have to, and you'll have to. Tell Petty to prepare for the unification of the physical and mental sciences, and the end of the world as we know it."

Netto burst out laughing before I finished. When I realized what I'd said, I laughed too, just not as hard.

THE END