

Jed Hark

He crouched in the weeds, head angled off-kilter, eyes cast upward, the power lines above him strung against the clouds. He was large-headed, his hair roughly cropped by scissors, his features small -- a child's face staring from a bowl. Shedding his clothes, he'd gone leaping through the dusk like a spark thrown hissing, came to ground here. Now he was listening. His ears stood out from his skull, capturing the hum and snap of a language without words.

Their voices were coming off the wires. They talked and sang in the currents that swam wildly in a storm. Megahertz bird squeals, low frequency growls, the rush of static from the lonely reaches of space. Jed Hark was nine and believed in angels but they didn't have harps and wings. His angels were wavy things, features vaporous, electricity sheeting off them. When they appeared they warped the ether.

They lived in the stratosphere. He had drawn what they looked like and those drawings disturbed the adults. He's good with a crayon, Arlene Hark told people. Scribbles all kinds of jagged things that scare the Jesus out of you. A doctor told her no child could observe electromagnetic activity, but she'd seen the way her son bent his eyes toward a dark sky. Lon Hark looked on the boy and saw only how his own life had backfired. He uprooted the family regularly, but like iron fuzz to a magnet, the normal kids still found Jed Hark. They threw rocks at him, pushed his face in the dirt. He wasn't one of them, or made like they were. They knew how to make loud noises, were good at injuring things, but they would never be kin to electric angels singing magnetic songs.

Jed Hark had brought a toy with him. Once soft and furry, he had stripped it of sentiment, reduced it to an armature of wires and plastic gears. He'd discarded the friendly head, soldered in its place a five watt bulb. It was a game he played, to place the toy at the foot of the transmission tower, then watch the onrushing clouds.

Lightning flickered across the gravid sky. The boy breathed in the tang of burnt oxygen, tasted the metal of ozone. Thunder boomed, wind coursing. Hard pellets of rain fell, pocking the dirt. The air swelled, he looked to the thrumming power lines. The thrumming became a scream.

He held his arm out, the hair raised from it.

The toy was on the ground in front of him. Current loaded it, activating the motor. The tiny bulb gleamed, gears whirred, his creation tilted crablike across the ground.

His eyes held the light of the toy. He searched the clouds

The angels were coming down. Through the flurry of rain he saw the voids of their eyes, the chasms of their wailing mouths. He knew their names. Kilowatt, with crazed blue hair, Voltac, the dark one. Ohm, her shrilling sharp as needles. Proton, Electron, Dynamo -- brothers bearded by fiery sparks.

Father Lightning waited above them all. He would one day reach down his crooked white arm and touch the boy, and the boy would take into the shell that contained the real Jed Hark the storm god's power. Father Lightning would send that fury through the boy's blood, his brain, his heart. He would shatter the human husk the boy lived in and Jed Hark would blast free and join with the stratosphere and the stars above. He would exist among the angels, the children of Father Lightning. He would know the communion of family.

Thunder clattered. The boy reached out to touch the tower's leg. He was ready to make connection. When the bolt drove down, lancing the steel, they would all be one.

But the faces of the angels, their squeal and roar, were fading away.

He stared at the clouds, shadows racing over him, the storm sweeping on.

The toy on the dirt went still, its bulb dead.

The light in Jed Hark's eyes vanished. The rain pattered to stop. A chained dog barked from the muggy distance.

The boy looked across the field to a small house framed against the twilight.

Headlights glimmered.

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Lonnie Hark's battered pickup slammed through puddles and came to a halt in the front yard. He sat staring past the hot drizzle caught in his lights to a three-room rental with stucco walls. The place was temporary, Lon told his wife and son. Just a footrest on the rungs of life's ladder. But even so, sorry quarters.

The boy had sprinted to the edge of the yard to watch the man who was his human father, a poor substitute for the one in the sky. Jed Hark was good at keeping records in his mind of the two people who owned him, their movements, their words. Lon had been talking to Arlene about a new plan he'd hatched. He called it Jumping Ship and Arlene said she didn't want to hear it. The boy heard it, though, and knew it brought nothing good. Ships couldn't jump.