

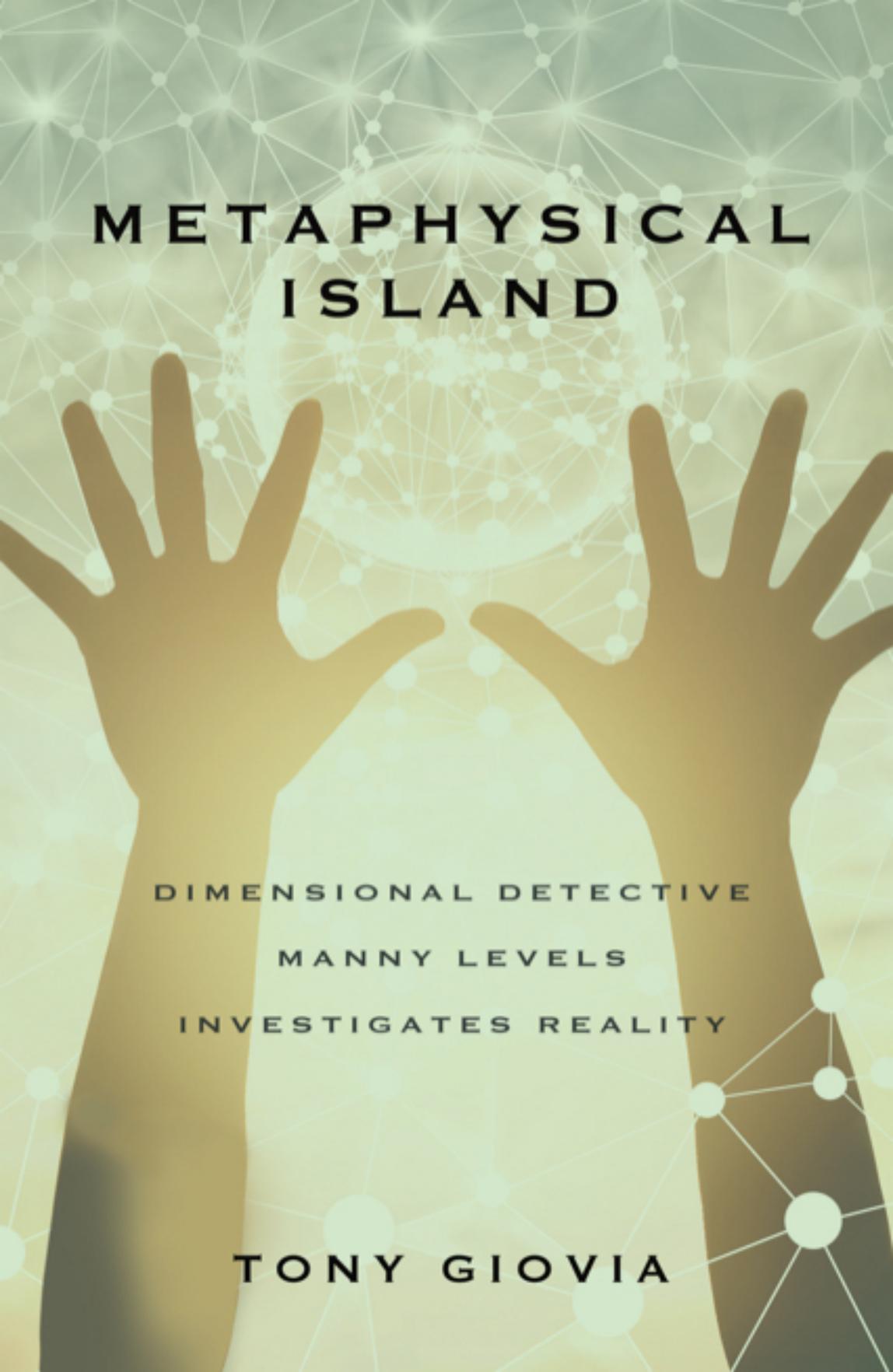
A hard-boiled dimensional detective, a Princess and a robot embark on a curious adventure in search of Reality and The Meaning of Life.

Metaphysical Island: Dimensional Detective Manny Levels Investigates Reality

By Tony Giovia

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METAPHYSICAL ISLAND

DIMENSIONAL DETECTIVE
MANNY LEVELS
INVESTIGATES REALITY

TONY GIOVIA

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"Jingle Bells" lyrics by James Lord Pierpont.

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INTRODUCTION

*"Deep without wide is longitude without latitude.
Wide without deep is latitude without longitude. Do
the math."* Excerpt from *"Mentalos! The Musical"*

I opened the Dimensional Detective Agency after working fourteen years at the National Science Foundation. The NSF hired me to troubleshoot malfunctioning computer networks, but I had my own way of doing things and soon enough the repairing of human networks was added to my job description.

It was in the latter capacity that I learned of a powerful entity who called himself Bandwidth. He set forth a fundamental principle that integrated science with art, unity with diversity, and substance with spirituality by identifying a relationship between physical objects and ideas.

It took multiple encounters with Bandwidth to understand even a fraction of what that principle implied. As far as I know, (1) Bandwidth has directly communicated his true identity to only one person on earth, and that person is me, and (2) Bandwidth visits our world sporadically, at times and places and guises of his choosing.

In December 2017, Bandwidth dropped in for another visit. What follows is a report of that encounter.

Manny Levels *March 20, 2019 21:58*

PREAMBLE: METAPHYSICAL ISLAND

IT WAS HOT AS HELL OUTSIDE, but I had a thermostat installed on each floor of my multi-story office suite, courtesy of a righteous landlord. A year ago his daughter turned off her brain and joined a mind control cult, and I galloped to the rescue before she became one of The Living Dead. Since then the landlord is holding to our deal of free rent and utilities, and it's warm in the winter and cool in the summer.

My name is Manny Levels, and the sign on my door says Dimensional Detective Agency. Got a problem with vampires, UFOs, the Cambrian explosion, alternate universes, Yahoos, the composition of dark matter, Bigfoot, out-of-body experiences, werewolves, Illuminati conspiracies, dragons, The One Great Mystery of Quantum Mechanics, elves, ghouls, college professors off their meds, apparitions and other nuisances? I'm your guy. I've got a corner on the market, but I'm not as busy as you'd think. Maybe I need to advertise more.

Last December I was in my office thinking about which McDonald's hamburger I would get for lunch when the phone rang in the anteroom. A while later Legs Nordic, my receptionist, walked into my enclave without knocking. Her real first name was Astrid, but she had a way with skirts. A nickname Nylons or Rack would work too, take your pick.

My feet were on my desk, and she pushed them off and took the cigar out of my mouth and doused it in the paper cup of holy water in her hand. Yup, holy water. Before you get too far into assumptions, let me say that she is the most uncomplicated girl I have ever met. Her heart was always in the right place, because she wouldn't know where else to put it.

She turned on the exhaust fan, confirmed there was appropriate content on my computer monitor, and then lightly sang along with the holiday song serenading through the speakers:

*"Dashing through the snow
In a one horse open sleigh
O'er the fields we go
Laughing all the way."*

In case you are wondering, Legs and me had the kind of relationship that once it started it wouldn't stop, so it hadn't started yet. The next move was mine.

Legs looked around the room, surveying the miscellaneous objects garnishing the walls and the shrunken head hanging from the ceiling. She straightened up a few things and then took down the head and put it in a drawer in my desk.

I muted the speakers. "Must be important."
She took a seat. "A potential client called."

"Does it sound interesting?" I made some money in the market, plus my fees were high, so I could pick and choose my cases.

"I don't know. She said she was referred by Netto, so I told her to come in. She'll be here any minute."

Netto was my boss when I worked at the National Science Foundation. When he got fed up dealing with slippery politicians and bureaucratic absurdities he left to run a Fortune 100 company. I declined the desk job he offered and started this agency instead.

Integrity is a big deal with me and Netto; without it, there's no there there. Long story short, I'd go to war with him anytime.

"Okay, buzz me before you bring her in."

Legs went back to her post. I texted Netto for confirmation, and he responded with "From a Royal House I do business with. Sharp game player used to getting her way. Help."

I sent back, "Okay, I'm warned."

I was reading about abstract missing links when there was a clatter and muffled voices from the anteroom. My phone buzzed and Legs entered with two grim faced men. One man was short, with a derby, a broken nose, and a body like a bowling ball with appendages. The other was taller and thinner and quicker, wearing a loose open overcoat that could hide anything. They wore thousand dollar suits, burnished orange for Bowling Ball, and

blue/black for the taller one, who also had a cool .50 caliber Browning Machine Gun bullet holding his squiggly tie in place. They positioned themselves on either side of the door.

Legs switched on the lights and then lowered the shade—lithographed with a NASA picture captioned "Sunrise on Mars"—on the gigantic window behind me. Then she shut and locked the door to the upper floors of my suite, and turned to our guests.

"All right?"

The Bowling Ball walked over to the locked door and tried it, and then initiated a perimeter check, tapping the walls and scanning for bugs with a miniature RF detector. Legs looked at me and I nodded her back to the anteroom.

The other man came up to the front of my desk and glared at me with one raised eyebrow above a surly facial tic. A black Gothic watchband sporting two watches—one analog, one digital—gripped his wrist. I say Gothic because the band had miniature spiked fences, the kind you see around cemeteries, running along each edge. It looked as strange as it sounds. I pointed to it, and then with a little spring into his ticking face I said,

"Boo!"

He took a half-step back, and Bowling Ball spun around on his axis. There was a moment, and then the Watchman stepped forward again and raised

his other eyebrow. Bowling Ball spun back to his business.

A few minutes later the inspection was complete, ending the standoff between me and his partner. Both men returned to their posts, the Watchman walking backward, narrowing his eyes to slits as he went.

Bowling Ball had somehow worked up a sweat, and he mopped himself down with a handkerchief before leaning into the doorway. The client made her grand entrance, followed by Legs. Two more bodyguards wearing white suits over splashy Hawaiian shirts looked in and around, but they stayed in the anteroom.

I could see that Legs was flustered by all the firepower, but her voice was steady for the introductions.

"Ms. Tierra De Arcana, this is Dimensional Detective Manny Levels."

I leaned over the desk and shook Mystery Woman's languid hand, and motioned her to a chair. Legs returned to the anteroom, closing the door, and the two goons in my office stayed put.

I gave the client the once over. She was dressed in light and dark shades of red from top to bottom, along with a veil that covered half her face. Exotic perfume wafted over. Her bag was crusted with glittering stones that no doubt were real diamonds; they formed a spider web pattern designed to match her necklace. The web pattern

was repeated on the backs of her cashmere gloves, completing the trifecta of money and elegance and trouble. Other than that, not much to see except for the curves and a pair of bright burning eyes.

"Pleased to meet you," she said, looking past me to the shaded window.

Game on. I smiled. "Same here."

"I apologize for the security measures. Papa insists. You were referred to me by a Mr. Netto, to whom I was introduced through a relative. Mr. Netto said that if anyone could help me, you could."

There was a pause. "Go on."

"He also said you are very particular about the cases you take."

"Mr. Netto referred you. That's good enough for me."

"So it is like that."

"It's like that."

She shrugged her shoulders. "I see you are a man who doesn't waste words." She took off her gloves and massaged them into her purse, and then lifted a cigarette from a jeweled wooden box. The Watchman came over and lit the cig, and I slid my ashtray toward her. The bodyguard glared at me again, his tic ticking away, and out of her sight he opened his overcoat to show me the handles of two guns before retreating back to his post.

"You look vaguely familiar," she said.

"I have that kind of face."

"Are you sure we have never met before?"

"I wouldn't forget meeting you."

She started to say something, but thought better of it and stopped. Instead she took a drag on her cigarette and got down to business. "Mr. Levels, I have searched inside and out, in every direction, for the answers I must have. Many have tried to serve me, but all have failed. However, I may have found a man with the answers I seek. I would like you to talk to this man."

"If you're so interested, why don't you talk to him?"

Her eyes flared. "It is not something that I do."

"Maybe you should."

Another flash.

"And while we're at it, should I call you Ms. De Arcana, or Tierra, or just plain old Princess?"

The two bodyguards stirred. Bowling Ball grumbled, and the Watchman smacked his hands together in a way that didn't make me think of applause, so I didn't take a bow.

Ms. De Arcana held up her hand to silence them. She gave me the once over a couple of times, and then paid attention to her cigarette. When she got done debating she demurely lowered her veil, revealing a *la dolce vita* face juiced by the most luscious lips I ever saw. I thought: here it comes. And it did. She tossed her hair and treated me to an expertly delivered coquette smile.

I laughed.

She gestured to my custom Stetson hat perched on a rack next to the window. "Are you a gaucho, Mr. Levels? A cowboy?"

"Sometimes." I have noir clothes too, just like Bogey.

The answer seemed to serve her. She put out her cigarette and glanced at the decor populating the walls. "I see you have a lot of toys."

"That's one way of looking at them."

She decided to do some examining. Her first stop was a stone Mayan calendar; she tested its heft and scrutinized it, I guess to verify it wasn't a fake. When she put it back she said, "Disappointed the world did not end?"

"Maybe that day was the beginning of the end."

"Or maybe it was the end of the beginning."

She went on to browse African and American Indian tribal masks, Beowulf's sword, a plank from The Ship of Theseus, a magnet from Faraday's lab, Merlin's wand, pieces of limestone from the temple at Delphi, Mendeleev's original sketch of the Periodic Table, a Druid beryl ball, and my growing collection of Intel processors, starting with the 4004.

She paid special attention to things labeled with explicit warnings. She smelled the tips of poison darts like she knew what she was doing, and wrapped strands of her hair around a voodoo doll before twisting one of its arms.

"No pain, no gain," she said cryptically.

She made her way to the bookshelf and paged through four books: Jaynes' *Origin of Consciousness*, the Amplified Bible, Hofstadter's *Godel, Escher, Bach* and Castaneda's *The Fire from Within*.

"You're an underliner."

"I like to get to the point," I said.

She checked the rest of Castaneda's books, and said, "All in order, from first to last." She swayed back to her chair, and then glanced at the walls again.

"No shrunken heads?"

I opened the drawer that Legs had put the head in, and held it up for her. "And he makes two," I said, pointing to the Watchman.

She turned to her bodyguards, taking them both in, and dropped the formal act. "Leave us."

They looked at each other, and then at the client. Bowling Ball said, "But Your Highness...."

"Go."

Bowling Ball turned and left pronto, but the Watchman gave me a parting scowl, this time baring his teeth and grimacing as hard as he could. I guess he had a whole repertoire of funny faces.

The Princess waited until the door closed and then turned back to me. "I see why Mr. Netto recommended you. You may be just the man for the job."

"I may be. So what's the job?"

"I have made inquiries—extensive inquiries—in an attempt to answer two questions. Science.

Philosophy. Religion. They offer partial answers. I need complete answers. I hunger for those answers." She leaned forward.

"My questions are simple. What is Reality? And what is my place in it?"

I scratched my neck. "Did you say simple?"

"I want to hold in my hands and in my mind the unifying fabric of the physical, the intellectual, and the spiritual realms." Her eyes were pools of heat. "I am very serious."

"I know you are." My eyes took a break and cruised the ceiling.

Eventually I said, "For a little extra I'll give God your regards."

She didn't smile. "Do you still want the job? Was Mr. Netto right in referring me?"

She was giving me an out. But frankly, this is the jackpot of what I do. I wanted the answers as much as she did.

"Mr. Netto was right in referring you. Let me think." I leaned back in my chair and cruised the ceiling again. I was hooked and knew it, but I also knew I'd need some sensible parameters for a gig this size.

"We'll need some ground rules," I said. "For one, I'll need a time limit."

"The time limit shall be decided by you. Investigate until you succeed or fail."

"Second, I decide what success is. My idea of success may not be your idea of success."

"Agreed."

"Third, there are no refunds."

That drew a smile and a low rocky chuckle.

"Agreed."

"Okay. Tell me about this man you want me to see."

She relaxed her posture and sat back in her chair. "One of my agents was told a story about a remote monastery in the Himalayan Mountains near Nepal's border with Tibet. A monk there dedicated his life to studying the great minds of history. He shared many brilliant insights with his fellow monks, until one day at the dinner table he shouted "EUREKA!" and abruptly departed the monastery.

"A year later he sent a letter to the monastery, explaining he had found, quote unquote, 'The Soul of Reality'. The letter said the Soul necessarily exists in each monk, and he advised them to recall the insights he had given them, saying they were the clues that would lead them to a Profound Perception. The letter ended by telling them he had retired to an island to build out the implications of his discovery. According to the story, the monks never heard from him again.

"My agent followed this lead. He located the monastery, but it was abandoned. We can't prove, so we can only assume that the monks realized their own Eureka moments based on the clues left to them, and something in that knowledge

motivated them to go out into the world. In any event, they have disappeared and could be anywhere. And all we know of the original monk is that his letter spoke of an island in the middle of the middle."

Her face hardened. "With that information, I went to work. I assembled a team to identify and chart all the islands of the earth, and I sent agents to explore each one. I endured many disappointments. Many discouragements." She took a deep breath. "And then, six months ago, my seismologist detected activity he could not explain or ignore. He had found the island."

The intensity of that moment shined through her. I didn't know what to say, so I didn't say anything.

She continued. "Not knowing how to approach the monk, I sent a religious leader to the island to speak to him. He had a satellite telephone, but he never used it. After a month without a response, I sent a prominent philosopher to the island, with the same result; I lost contact the first day, and whether he is alive or dead I do not know. I hesitated for many weeks, and then I sent a scientist to the island, with the exact same results. Three preeminent men, all loyal to me, all lost on that island."

The plot was thickening. "Sounds like it's time to send in the troops."

Metaphysical Island

"Certainly an option, but one that could ruin my chances with the monk. What if my men are there voluntarily, learning the secrets as we speak? Before I send an army, I want to first send one soldier. A soldier who has marched the paths of philosophy, science and religion. A soldier who can weave the threads when they are laid before him. I want to send...", and here she slowly pointed a finger at me,

"...you."

I regarded her finger, and then looked over my shoulder at the Mars landscape behind me.

"You know, I'm not really from Mars."

That drew another hard chuckle out of her, then me.

"I guess I can't refuse now," I said.

"Yes, it is too late. I am good, am I not?"

"Better than good. But to be clear, I am not a preacher, or a philosopher, or a scientist, or a soldier. I have one hat. I'm a detective."

She looked at my forehead. "It is a big hat. I have eyes, I can see."

She opened up her purse and took out a checkbook, but I stopped her.

"I don't accept paper money." I pushed a button under my desk and a spring-loaded drawer snapped out. My Colt .45 Peacemaker sat on top of some paperwork, and I handed her one of the sheets.

"My daily fees are on there, along with instructions for sending gold to my depository."

She skimmed the prices and didn't wince. "Let me see the contract."

"In my line of work there are a lot of variables. My word is my contract."

That was a problem for most clients, and it fazed her, but only briefly. "No written contract. Interesting. You assume trust. Know that I don't expect perfection, but I do expect your best."

"You'll get it."

Another brief interlude, and then, "Very well. Do you have a business card?"

I opened the drawer again and flipped through a few choices. I handed her the one that says "Have Saddle, Will Travel", complete with an etched horse's head, spurs and phone number. She smiled and put it in her purse along with my payment info and her checkbook. "Your advance will be deposited within hours. When can you start?"

"Immediately."

"Excellent. A limousine will pick you up tonight at six o'clock in front of this building. It will take you to a private airport. The flight will last all night."

She took a black and white photograph out of her purse and handed it to me. It was an aerial photo of a land mass, and with difficulty I could make out trees planted in the shapes of letters. The letters spelled "Metaphysical Island".

Metaphysical Island

"Not visible in that picture is a narrow offshore island. It has a landing strip."

"You said you lost contact with the three men you sent to the island. Did the pilots of those planes just leave them there?"

"Each plane had a crew of one pilot and one copilot. All are among the missing. The last message I received from them is that they landed safely. Then, nothing."

"The second and third pilots—did they report seeing the other planes when they landed?"

"No, but that is not surprising. None of the pilots knew of the other flights, and only leased commercial aircraft were used; after all, we were uninvited guests, and military planes might have alarmed the monk. The pilots were given strict instructions to land, accompany, and return with their passenger; nothing more. I felt the less they knew, the better. I didn't want any undue interference."

I smiled. "So you set the pilots up."

"In hindsight I should have given the second and third pilots more information. Now you know all that I know."

I bet. "Where is the island?"

"It is in the middle of the middle of the ocean."

"Which ocean?"

Mystery Woman kept that a mystery. She stood up and re-wrapped her veil, and then turned and

left with an impressive sample of highborn hip action.

"Hold up," I said, walking over to her. I never had a real Princess, and I wasn't going to miss my chance. Standing in front of her was like standing in front of a prize made with me in mind. I looked deep into her combusting eyes, as deep as I could without getting burned to a crisp. Then I pulled her close.

She pushed off and slapped me. "There are four armed men on the other side of that door."

I pulled her close again. "Not enough."

She gave me that low chuckle. "We can discuss alternate forms of payment when I debrief you."

"Debrief me? Is that what they're calling it now?"

She chuckled again, and this time it came from so far down and so wide across it was downright spooky. She looked over her shoulder as she went through the door.

I have a pint-sized Maker's Mark Bourbon flag jutting up from one corner of my desk, and a Stars and Stripes on the other corner. Two little fans were positioned to set the flags flapping. I turned on the fans.

Legs came in after our guests had cleared. I could see in her face she was glad they were gone. She sat down and huffed and said, "How did it go?"

"The usual. Another chance to see what I'm made of."

I filled her in.

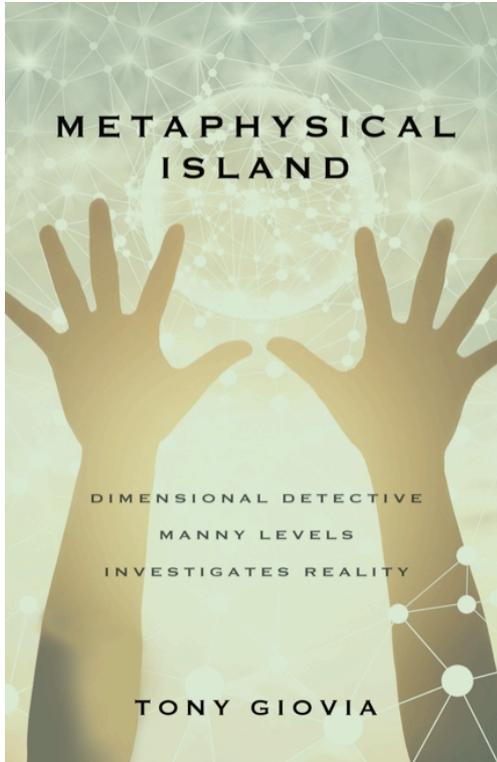
She didn't look too happy. She knew the die was cast and there was no talking me out of it. She responded with a mild, "How do I reach you?"

"This is locked down pretty tight. I'll wear the special ops GPS watch, but for anything else you'll have to go through the client." In these situations Legs prefers candor to sugarcoating, so I told her what she likely was already thinking. "There's a good chance I'll be making my own way home."

She nodded and said as convincingly as she could, "You'll find a way. You always make it home."

Legs went back out to her office. I watched the flags for a few minutes, and then texted Netto, "Did you know about the island?" He answered back, "What island?"

I pressed the desk button again and took out the Colt, and then took my low slung belt and holster out of a side drawer. I checked the .45 for the second time that day, knowing full well I'd need more than a gun for this beauty.



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