2020’s Descent

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You are about to embark on a journey. It will be difficult, and it may be triggering. You will guide your own personal 2020 through the underworld. I hereby bestow upon each and every one of you the ability to walk into the underworld and come back out again. You will lead your own year of 2020 to its final resting place where it will remain until the end of time.

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You are standing at the mouth of a giant cave, next to you is the year 2020 standing to your left. They are old and ragged and dressed in layers and layers and layers of tattered cloaks, and coats, and garments of various sorts that completely shroud somebody hidden underneath. They are so old, so frail. They lean on a stick and shuffle along, bent with the weight of time. You know you’ve got to begin. There is no sense in waiting any longer. It is time for 2020 to die. You start walking towards the cave opening. You are walking down a small slope and you hear the click clack of 2020’s cane behind you. You know They're coming; They are following you.

You walk into the entrance of the cave and there's a moment where the light of the outside world and the darkness of the deepest of shadows meet. Once you pass into that darkness, you will not see light again for a long time. 2020 has caught up and is now by your side again, and together you step into the pitch black.

You are walking down a path; your eyes have not adjusted to the darkness but somehow you can see. This is a darkness beyond earthly darkness. It is a blackness beyond mundane blackness. There are still slight cave sounds around you. Maybe that was dripping water, you're not sure. Maybe there was a scuttling somewhere but you're not sure. There is still the sound of stone as 2020’s cane keeps time with each step you take.

Now it feels like you've been walking for a very long time. You're not exactly sure what you're going to encounter, but you know this is going to be a difficult journey. Yet so far nothing's happened and this waiting is kind of getting to you. As you continue to walk, somewhere far ahead there's something in the distance that begins to appear. It seems to swirl and shift, but it hasn't taken shape yet. There's just a movement in the darkness. You can still hear and feel the presence of 2020 next to you and you know you're going the right way. As you get closer that shifting starts to take the shape of a massive, unbelievably large gate. It's not made out of anything you could particularly imagine. It's not exactly rock. It's not exactly stone or cement but something that keeps shifting and moving and crumbling, like tiny earthquakes and rockslides that perpetually disrupt the structure from the inside out. You walk closer because you know you have to. This is the only path, the only way forward, and you’ve got to pass through that terrifyingly large gate. But as you walk closer, you see that the gate is shut without any noticeable way to open it or to go around it.

Now, what do you do? You glance at 2020 and They are still kind of plodding along under all those heavy cloaks. You sigh and look back at the gate. You notice that the giant statue in front of the gate is in fact looking back at you. That’s not a statue at all! This stops you in your tracks and the Being swiftly moves toward you, blocking your path with a large menacing lance.

“Who are you? Why are you here?” says the Being.

You say your name and you hastily explain that you are leading 2020 to the Queen of the Underworld to lay Them to rest. Azazel, for that is the name of the guardian of the first gate, looks back at you and says, “You cannot pass through the gate in the state you are in. You must leave something behind.”

Your attention is caught by an unexpected shifting of the rocks that make up the gate. Pieces crumble from the heights and fall to the ground just behind Azazel. In your heart of hearts, a deep knowing speaks out to you. You know you and 2020 stand before the Gate of Turmoil. The Gate of Turmoil is never solid. It is consistently shifting and changing. It is never at rest. It is never at peace.

Azazel looks down at 2020 and bellows, “2020! Drop your garment in order to pass!” A little shocked, you look over at 2020, and suddenly the first layer of clothing that you see starts to become that same shifting moving turmoil of the gate. 2020 is wearing the Cloak of Instability and it must be left behind. This cloak is the the uncertainty of our lives and of our situations. It is civil unrest. It is economic depression. It is the loss of people’s homes and the loss of their jobs, the loss of their paychecks and health benefits. It is the uncertainty of how they will feed their families tomorrow.

The fabric starts to shift and move in a way that makes you almost queasy. And Azazel says again, “2020, drop your garment.” And They finally do. They let the cloak fall to the ground and it shatters, turning to dust. And out of that debris, you barely notice that a tiny glimmer of light floats up and away. Up it goes into the darkness and disappears. You have no idea what that was and you kind of question if you saw it at all. While you're starting to ponder what on earth it could have been Azazel opens the gates and nods that you should pass through. You and 2020 continue walk through the gate and continue down the path towards your destiny. You notice that 2020 seems to be a little lighter, still walking with a cane, but walking a little more sure-footed. You are grateful for this little bit of fortune because the terrain is getting harder and harder. It's a stone path but it's a difficult path. And all you know is you just have to keep putting one foot in front of the other over and over again.

After a very long while of nothing but the darkest of darkness, you begin to catch a hint of something in the distance.

"This must be another gate," you think but of course you know you are right. As you get closer you see that this gate emits cold, frigid, heart stopping light. The closer you get the more you can see that it is in fact a gate of ice, completely frozen and terrifyingly cold. It is also incredibly large, towering in the heights of the unending darkness and its ramparts extending impossibly far in either direction. A large Being stands just to the side. And as you approach, you know in your heart of hearts that this is the Gate of Isolation. Asderel, the guardian of this gate, gestures that you come forward. You slowly step up and explain why you're there. You are leading 2020 to the Queen of the Underworld so she can finally lay Them to rest, and on que, 2020 shuffles forward.

Just as before you look over at 2020, and the top layer of clothing that They're wearing, the Mantle of Loneliness starts to freeze and crackle and become just as frozen as the gate before you. It is the garment of solitary confinement, of being cut off from contacts, frozen rivers of ice that threaten to leave you stranded without any hope of humanity ever reaching you again.

Asderel looks at 2020 and says, “You must leave that behind. You cannot pass wearing that.” “2020 drop your garment,” he commands.

As Asderel spoke those words, 2020 threw off Their cloak. It drops to the ground and like a thousand tiny icicles, it bursts into countless shards. Out of the shattering ice came the tiniest little speck of light and just floats off into the darkness. Did you even see it? Asderel beckons you forward and lets you pass through the gate and you and 2020 walk on into the darkness once more.

2020 seemed a lot lighter of step, They did not need the cane quite as much and could almost walk with a normal gait, shuffling a bit here and there, but keeping up. You are grateful because you are really hoping that this is not going to take that much longer but, boy, are you wrong. Just keep going, one foot in front of the other.

It seems like you rounded a corner in the darkness because suddenly a smell, an unbelievably awful smell greets your nose. This wasn’t just any kind of terrible smell, but one you could feel through all of your senses, the kind of smell you can feel in your eyes. It was awful. It was horrible. It took everything you have not to just retch onto the ground right then and there, it was that bad. And then you realize that in front of you was a giant gate of indescribable awfulness. Was it garbage? Was it rotting flesh? It was hard to tell. It was all of these things. It was terrifying because you had to approach it and you didn't want to. And you could almost feel 2020 faltering as well, but you had to press on. Towards the scent you had to go.

As you get closer, you feel the deep knowing in your heart of hearts that this is the Gate of Corruption and the guardian of this gate is named Tamael. Tamael beckons you closer which is the last thing you want to do because it all smells so bad, but you have no choice. You urge 2020 forward and begrudgingly They step closer as well. Tamael speaks to 2020, “You cannot pass through like that. You have to leave something behind.” 2020 moves with a lot more ease of motion than you've seen Them do in the past, starts to unbutton the Coat of Lies and Misdirection.

This is the coat of political jargons and distrust, of fascism and of deliberate misinformation. The coat was putrid, rotten, and unbelievably gross things are falling off and crawling all over it. Tamael speaks, “2020, drop your garment.” They did. As that coat hit the floor, it liquifies instantly into unspeakable filth. Yet it seems again that a tiny speck of light floats off into the distance, vanishing before you could really perceive. Tamael opened the gate, getting your attention and ushered you and 2020 through. There was no dilly-dallying at this gate. You had to go. And gratefully, as soon as you pass through the gate the stench is gone. You realize 2020 did not need Their cane anymore and was walking completely free, keeping up so that you didn't have to alter your pace. Now together, you could walk confidently forward.

After an unknown amount of time, you could hear what sounded like yelling, like crowds and crowds of people yelling, bellowing, screaming. It was such a din. It rattles your bones. As you approach it, it got louder and louder. And the sound was so loud you could barely think. In your heart of hearts, you have a deep knowing that this was the Gate of Outrage and the guardian of this gate was named Kokarel. As you approach the Gates of Outrage, Kokabel’s deep bellowing voice rose above the din. “You cannot pass! You must leave something behind!” You look over at 2020 and suddenly the coat They were wearing was made of chains.

The Gate of Outrage was made of all of the voices yelling, screaming, whaling, protesting all of the inequalities and injustices that were committed this year. This Cloak of Chains, some broken, but all heavy and burdensome, was the weight of racial injustice, of brutally murdered individuals and of systemic racism. The links that made up the chains were made of inequality and deep-rooted fear and shame.

Kokabel bellows, “2020, take off that garment!” and over the incredible din when that cloak hit the ground, you heard the chains ring out, piercing through the sounds. When they fell to the ground, every single one of them broke, and a tiny glimmer of light floats up, floats past your face and disappears into the darkness. Kokabel’s voice sounds out once more, “Go through this gate and be gone.” Gladly you and 2020 pass through and the moment you get to the other side of the gate, all was quiet and utterly dark again.

After an incredibly long time of walking, you feel your limbs becoming heavy. There was a perceptible sadness hanging in the air that was physically heavy. You knew you were coming to the next gate.

As it began to appear in the distance, you see it was made out of something clear, something that was liquid, something that moved and swirled slowly like giant droplets. Just then you knew with a deep knowing that you were looking at the Gate of Loss. As you get closer, you see the guardian Baraqiyal, standing next to the gate. When you finally stand in front of the guardian, you explain just like you had done every other time that you were there to take 2020 to the Queen of the Underworld so that she may lay Them to rest for good. Baraqiyal sang in a low soft voice, “Oh, 2020, you can't pass like that. You have to leave something behind.” You look over to 2020 and They are wearing the Mantle of Tears. It was made of all the grief, all of the pain, all of the fear and confusion from every situation that has happened all year. All of those countless tears were on that cloak, collected from all of the deaths, from all of the atrocities, from all of the helplessness.

2020 struggles to get out of this particular cloak the most so far. For being made out of tears, it was unbelievably heavy. As it falls to the floor it instantly turns into vapor. But from within that vapor a little glimmer of light floats away into the darkness. Baraqiyal sang, “Pass through these gates and be gone.” You are glad he did because as you walk forward the feeling of heaviness, the sorrow, the grief that was so heavy you could feel it in your fingertips suddenly let up as soon as you pass to the other side. You and 2020 plunge back into the darkness, continuing on your journey, deeper and deeper into the underworld.

As you and 2020 keep walking for what seemed like an imperceptibly long, long, arduous time, you begin to perceive a heat growing from somewhere in front of you. And you think, “Well, I am in the underworld. There should be fire here somewhere, right?” Even though you couldn't see where the source was you could feel that radiant heat swirling in the air the closer and closer you got. You knew the next gate was up ahead.

A giant gate appears in the distance, finally giving a source for what your senses had been feeling for a long time. Wide as the eye could see, as tall as the eye could see, this gate is made of billowing fire. Its ramparts are made of black smoke. Black smoke like that only comes from death. And as you get closer, the heat gets so intense you could barely breathe. Your lungs feel like they're being burned with every breath you take. This is the Gate of Dissolution. Amasras, the guardian of the gate, calls down at you, “What are you doing here?” You say your name and state the reason of your journey with 2020. Amasras nods once but as he turns his gaze towards 2020, he glares. “Not like that! 2020, drop your garment.”

As you look at 2020, They are wearing the Cape of Ash. Emerging from the ash you see corpse after corpse of burned animals, of tree stumps, of insects, of people, of ruined lives. This is the cloak of the devastating fires that started the year in Australia. This is the cloak of the fires that raged in the Western United States. As 2020 drops this cloak to the ground, it goes up in a puff of dust, spreading into the air and causing you to cough. You think you see a tiny glimmer of light floating off into the distance. Hmm. Might have just been the ash though. Amasras spoke, “Go through this gate and be gone!” You are glad because this gate was particularly awful with the unbearable heat and choking smoke. It was all gone the moment you and 2020 came through the gate to the other side.

Even though you are surrounded again by darkness, you walk confidently forward knowing, sensing you are almost there. You travel for a really, really long time. It could have been years. It could have been minutes. There was no way to tell. Time started to act very different. Your internal clock was completely wrong or off or confused. Were you walking in circles? You had no idea. All you knew is 2020 was still right there next to you walking and you had to press forward, or what you hoped was forward. Then finally, off deep in the distance you see a shadow, a shadow of the darkest dark you could possibly imagine. That shadow isn't solid. It isn't still. It looks like a veil of black chiffon gently blowing in the wind at midnight.

It is so ethereal and so terrifying. As you keep getting closer, you find yourself hoping that something would crystallize out of it. But no, the closer you get the more ethereal, the more nothing it became. It was just a shifting of shadow over darkness. This, you knew, as your heart sank to the bottom of your feet, was the Gate of Unknowing. Samyaza, the guardian of the gate, was equally shrouded in something that was imperceptible, something that shifted and danced at the corner of your mind that you couldn't quite catch. And while you look and hope that something would materialize, that something would land, you knew that at the Gate of Unknowing, nothing could be known for certain. Samyaza spoke in a deep, low voice, asking who you were and why you were there. And you repeat again everything that you've been saying to all the other guardians. And there was a long silence, and you aren't sure that Samyaza would let you through this gate. This was the last gate after all. And they had to be extremely careful who they let in to see the Queen. But after a long while, Samyaza said, “2020, drop your garment. You cannot enter holy land looking like that.”

You look over and 2020 is wearing a cloak that somehow was made up of the same shifting nothingness that was in front of you. This was the Cloak of the Pandemic. It is made up of many different parts, many different experiences, many different realities, many different agendas, many different truths, and many different lies. Almost like quicksand, it shifts, it moves, it is never still. Nothing could be clear. Even as a virus itself moves, shifts, evolves, this cloak could not be witnessed in any wholeness. As 2020 drops this cloak to the ground, it hits and freezes instantly into black ice, unseen, deadly, and unclear. But from this frozen darkness comes a glint of something that rose and skitters off into the distance. By this point, your senses are shocked into openness. So much have you endured and so much have you seen. Standing before the Gate of Unknowing nothing was certain, and everything could come into question. Samyaza speaks again with his deep bell-like voice as he opens the gate and ushers you through, “Now, go. I don't ever want to see you again,” and gladly you and 2020 walk through the gate.

Now, finally, this last gate opens onto the throne room. The room was vast. No ceiling can be seen but it feels cavernous. The room was filled with thousands, upon thousands, upon thousands of dead souls lining a path that leads straight to the queen’s throne where she sits, noble and in command. The souls glow in a ghostly, ghastly pallor, and their light and the small flicker of torches at the very far end of the other side light your way. You know these are all the souls that died this year. They have come to see 2020 off as well. 2020 weeps bitterly with each step They take forward.

You notice now that 2020 was completely naked, scrawny, extremely old and bare. You walk together down this long corridor of souls towards Ereshkigal, the Queen of the Underworld herself. As you get closer, you see her take shape more and more before your eyes. In the light of the torchlight, you see she's wearing a great crown made of bones. She's terrifying and beautiful all at the same time. Somehow she shifts between looking like a corpse and looking like the most beautiful woman you've ever seen. Her garments of black velvet and brocade cascade down passed the throne and over the steps that lead up to where she sits. She has two giant gargoyles sitting on either side of her throne in front of the two large torches that are lighting the room with the flickering of their fire.

You stand now at the foot of the steps that lead up to her throne which you now can see is made up of obsidian crystals and blackened bones. You bow low, and 2020 kneels on the ground bowing so low, prostrating Themselves completely in front of her. She beckons that you stand up and 2020 stays bowing down.

She looks at Them coldly and she speaks in a voice that is both the whisper of death beyond the grave and the twinkling of angel’s bells, “It is time for you to join your siblings. It is time for you to sleep. The sleep that you shall never wake up from. It is time for you to be done. And it is time for you to die.”

In tears 2020 looks up, sits, and slowly stands to face her. She holds out her hand, points at 2020 and with a slight flick of her wrist, makes a cutting motion. Just like that, in a split moment, 2020 fell to the ground, utterly lifeless. All that was left of 2020 was a bag of skin, no insides, no skeleton, no muscular structure, nothing, just a flayed bag of skin crumpled on the ground next to you.

Ereshkigal speaks, "I pronounce 2020 dead."

The two gargoyles pick up the flayed skin of 2020 and take it over to the left side of her throne and hang it on a hook. You follow them with your eyes, and you noticed there was a hook right next to the one 2020 was hung up on. That was 2019. The one next to that was 2018. As you kept looking, there were flayed skins on hooks for as far as the eye could see. This is how the year ends. Every year, they come down here and sacrifice themselves to the great Goddess of Death. Every year they enact the same ritual and are hung as reminders of the dual nature of time.

Ereshkigal turns to you, “You've done well,” she says, “but you cannot stay here. This is not your home.” You nod and bow low with gratitude. The Queen of the Underworld just gave you praise after all, something she does not do very often.

She holds out her hand towards you, a hand that is both bony like a skeleton and smooth and soft like a fairytale princess. In her hand is a small ball of light, glistening and glimmering.

“This light is all that remains of your own year of 2020,” She says in her chimeric voice. “This is all of the blessings, the love, the learnings, the lessons, the friendships you have gained this year. This light will guide you back out of the underworld.”

You are staring at the light and think to yourself, “Gosh, I thought I had a better year than that. It’s so tiny!”

Ereshkigal seems to anticipate your thoughts and says, “It is only so small because it is so very dark in here. Take it and let it be your guide home.”

With that you take the light and bow, thanking Ereshkigal for her kindness.

You know it's time to leave. You turn and you start walking back out of the throne room. The light in your hand gives off a warm glow like the glow of a small candle, yellow and comforting. As you walk, you realize that all the landscape, all of the souls, that whole room, everything is gone. All you see is that little light in front of you and you just keep walking. The light is keeping you on the path, is keeping you moving forward, and is guiding you back out. You do not walk past the gates, you never see them again.

After a short time, much shorter than what it felt like going in you realize you're almost out. You start seeing something in the distance, the cool glow of the sun. It's daylight still outside. And you know that's the mouth of the cave. You want to run and just leave but you can't. The light does not let you. You have to just keep walking as slowly as you've been walking. You need to take your time; you cannot rush this. You will be outside in a minute. As you walk that light gets closer and closer, and you feel as if you are going to burst at the seams from being done with this ordeal that you've just been through. This last bit of walk seems painfully long, but you know this too shall pass.

The moment you step outside of the cave, that light in your hand begins to glow even brighter. It shimmers and glimmers, and it glows and grows out of your hand and floats down onto the ground. On the ground, it starts getting bigger and bigger and bigger and it starts to get blindingly bright. Within that brightness you can see a shape taking form. It has grown into an egg shape, a giant egg, almost as big as you. The light, this egg-shaped light starts taking form and fleshes out. The light dims to a crystalline brilliance and you can see that there is a physical egg sitting on the ground in front of you. It glitters in the sun like a jewel and with a deep knowing you know that this egg will hatch exactly at 12:00 AM, January 1st, 2021. It will birth the new year, your very own new year into being.

You suddenly think back to Ereshkigal’s words, “This light is from your lessons, your joys, your learnings, your friendships.” And you remember the tiny sparks of light that were omitted every time 2020 dropped Their cloaks. Those tiny specks of light made up the light she had given you and now make up this egg.

With your deep knowing, you realize that from the Gate of Turmoil came new support systems and collaborations and survival in the face of necessity.

From the Gate of Isolation came new ways of connecting and communicating, setting up global networks, new friendships and communities and deep connections.

From the Gate of Corruption came the need to discriminate and participate in democracy.

The Gate of Outrage brought change and allyship, images of black joy and cultural introspection with a step in the right direction though there's still a long way to go.

From the Gate of Loss came new depths, new compassion and deeper and deeper wells of strength you never knew you had.

From the Gate of Dissolution came environmental urgency to listen to native elders and a new way of forest management and you could suddenly hear the songbirds in the trees singing.

And from the Gate of Unknowing came survival, strength and equanimity to the uncertain forces of this world and the knowledge that though you are being tested, you can survive.

These sparks of light are globally birthing 2021. But these sparks of light also mean something very specific and personal to you. This is the accumulation of the light in your darkest hours that has shone luminously onto your brightest ones. It is from these moments, from this light that you have tended all year within yourself that the container for 2021 has been created. And from this light, your 2021 will be born.