

Prologue

“Love,” Troy said finally, testing the fruit of his thought’s labor to the damp air of his apartment. But as soon as he had spoken the word, that word which had taken him hours of consecutive silence to find, he snapped shut his mouth, biting his tongue in careless haste. In the same motion, he bowed his head to hide the growing shame inside him from everything but himself, lest it duly turn to embarrassment. After another moment, and another eventless brush with death, he chanced a peek above his crossed arms, and lifted his chin from his knees where he had dampened his trousers with tears. He was still alone in his living room, and still nobody had come for him. *That’s just as well, because there are only two people that could possibly console me: an unfriendly friend or the stranger who knows me all too well.* Troy waited small seconds longer to let his mind loose again- just waiting for his eyes to remember that he hadn’t payed his electric bill in months- just hoping that maybe someone was waiting there for him. He looked towards the far wall where his balcony was half-covered by sagging blinds, but there was no savior.

“Love,” he said again, quieter, and with less conviction than the first. Troy could already taste the regret that came of through utterance, making such a foul thought closer to truth. He retreated back to his stale thoughts before he had a chance to realize that the taste in his mouth was blood.

It was a strange concept, that love could be felt like this. But what else could it be? Love was what he called it and love was what he felt.

It was horrible.

In a world where love only existed between a father and son, one friend to another, and maybe a master to his dog - in that world there was no place for Troy. No place for his type of love. And unfortunately that was the world that he lived in, and that was his reality.

The hot afternoon found Troy lying on his rough green couch out on the balcony. There was no breeze, never a breeze down there. His apartment was only five stories up in the darkness, but five stories were enough to kill a man.

The thin patches of the orange Veil filtered through the crisscrossing streets and highways of the higher levels but were not enough to light the lower half of the great city. To solve this problem, long rows of electric lights had been installed to brighten up the streets. God’s Veil meant nothing down in the bowels of his city. Troy had never seen the stars, had never learned to see Fade.

But that’s wrong. I have seen a star.

Her face was forever swimming in his mind, casting a dark shadow over all other thoughts. And the thoughts that were in that shadow- those were evil thoughts. There was no thin line between love and hate anymore. For Troy, everything was a blur; the only clear thoughts in his mind were of her.

And even those thoughts make no sense. The idea seemed just as absurd to him as it did last time those words crossed conscious thought, but he didn’t laugh this time. Troy was through laughing. Instead he just groaned in the agony of his depression and rolled clumsily off of the couch.

I am through with that emotion. Joy is something foreign to me.

The concrete hit him on the side two feet down with an unfelt smack. Wordless, painful noises rolled off his of tongue and escaped his mouth. The world was around him

now, screaming at him, and all the while her face, her body, her soul, *my love*... All the while she was screaming the loudest. Five stories were more than enough to kill a man...

It was earlier that day when he had last seen her.

Troy had walked the ragged lower streets of Darkhan. “The Undercity” they called it. Well, some people called it that. Most of them being people who had never even walked the lower streets. This section of the city had earned its nickname not only through its relative location but through its poverty as well. On top of that, a much higher percentage of the Undercity population were nonbelievers than higher up, so a certain distain grew between the pious and those who had never seen the opening. Although Troy had seen that great tear in the Veil above the city before, he had never believed for a second that Fade would be the one to save him. Extremists claimed it an act of God, to reveal his kingdom to humanity so that they could have a glimpse of the afterlife. In truth, technology had put it up there.

In truth there is no God and Fade was nothing more than a man. That’s the truth down here. That’s the truth that I know.

Darkhan was a ridiculous city like none other that not only reached to the clouds, but smashed through them and pushed higher. Hundreds of stories, hundreds and hundreds of stories; it just went on and on. And at the bottom of it all were the Lower Streets: The Undercity.

Like the rest of the world around him, Troy was in no hurry to get where he was going so he took his time. He didn’t even know if he even wanted to be where he was headed. *Never again*, she had said. *No more*. He had spent his entire life to control his powers, but for this that really mattered, for this no level of control would change anything. Nothing it seemed could make Rachel love. *Never again. No more.*

The district elevator building was the only place in the area that was maintained and kept clean. On his way from his apartment, Troy had passed burnt out lights and parts where the city heating didn’t even work. But near the elevator building there were more and more open shops, more plant life and more police. *A taste of the city above.*

Two police stood sentry at the entrance at the base of the tall grey building. The looks they gave this scruffy unshaven stranger who passed them by were cold and condescending.

A bitter taste, Troy reminded himself. There was no law against one of the undercitizens going up to the higher levels because that would be unconstitutional. It happened every day in the thousands. In Nyum all people were to be treated equal. But in some parts of Darkhan and across the country the poverty gap had grown so large in recent years that a certain tension was brewing between the lower and higher classes. Troy payed the toll collector a small fortune for the ride up and walked himself in to one of the pedestrian elevators. Troy had been spending all of his money lately on these ever more frequent visits to the surface. That’s what it was called, although it was the lower most streets of Darkhan that were of ground level. It cost money to go up, but not down.

After a few minutes of waiting and a few more passengers on board, the doors slid shut and the elevator jerked upward. Three walls of the little room were made up of rectangular glass panels and the whole thing was cocooned in a tall grey shaft. In a few

stops the elevator would escape the mess of the Undercity and then sunlight would reign. But for now the lighting was electric. A light flickered. *Not now...* Troy's stomach tingled and his head strained. This was always how it was when he lost control.

But I am getting better at this. Troy felt out for her in his mind now and attached his thoughts to her, trying earnestly to focus in. *I have to control it.* His powers had grown more potent ever since he had come to the awareness of Rachel's existence. Ever since the feeling started.

In the past Troy had found her by searching the world and his feelings and playing a game of warmer-colder in his mind. In this game the feeling would strike up whenever he got closer and his stomach would fold over itself and he would feel lightheaded. When this happened his world would take his example and do the same. Years had past and years of practice had not been wasted. Now as he rode the elevator, his mind was moving him in the same way. He was standing still, but moving at the same time on a preset path toward her being.

I have to see her again or I'll go crazy, he thought, exasperated. *I have to focus.* At this point the light had stopped its flickering and suddenly went out. A few annoyed glances found their stare in the direction of the dark gap that had appeared between the working lights where the wall met the ceiling. *It doesn't matter,* he thought. The lighting would be forgotten once the outside wall disappeared and the windows became the only barrier between the contents of that small box and the world. That didn't matter either though because the next stop was his.

Stumbling out in to the bustling street, Troy found himself again and took a breath. *This feeling will be the end of me. She's going to destroy me... I never knew that love could be felt like this. I never thought that love could do this to a person.*

This level was so much different than his home. Although the electric lights still were present there was sky here too, and more and more of it he knew as the city went up. There were more cars on the streets, so many compared to the odd rattling and spewing that came along every so often where he lived. But as usual, all Troy noticed were the people. *So dull, so lifeless.* Everybody was lifeless. *My life only began with Rachel. How can one live without love, true love?* It was a question that he knew nobody else in the world was asking.

And then there she was.

Walking just the same as everybody else in that lifeless manner- but not dull, never dull. She was what excited him, her body, her being alive- she was his reason for living. Her and her walk and her clothes and her groceries and her golden hair. Troy's heart beat faster now and he was pushing his way through the crowded sidewalk toward her. What would he say? What would he do? What would happen? He said her name. Rachel turned and said something which quickly turned in to a shout when she recognized who he was.

"You! I told you not to talk to me ever again. I told you that!" It was happening, and then it was over faster than it had begun. She closed her door in his face with a slam and locked the door of his life forever. *Never again, no more,* She had said. *Never again, no more...*

Five stories. Troy peered down at the nearly empty street below him. There were a couple of bums warming around a trash can fire, a woman was walking her dog. *Will I do it?* Troy gripped the railing until his knuckles turned white. He searched his mind for a reason to live but all he could find was hurt. The storm inside of his head was not subsiding. *How can love turn to hate like this?* He thought as he vaulted over the edge with both arms. His knee hit the metal railing as he went over, but he felt it this time. He heard someone grunt in pain and felt someone wince. He saw the ground come rushing up at him but when he opened his eyes... *Why is it taking so long to die? Why do I fall so slowly?*

The ground did hit him eventually, but not with the force that he had anticipated. The impact was followed by a few moments of shock and disorientation. With a groan, Troy rolled over on his back and lay there with his eyes closed. When he opened them, it hurt and the world was swirling. He wondered what had just happened. After getting up on his hands and knees, Troy stared down at a growing red puddle below him on the gravelly cement. With a touch, he found that his nose was wet and dripping. *Not enough to kill me- just enough to smash my face in.* It was at this point when Troy realized that a small crowd had assembled. He got to his feet and felt the blood drip down on to his shirt and soak in. *I can not feel.* The people were saying things to him as he staggered away down the center of the street, lights flickering out as he went. *I can not feel!*

But then he did feel and it was a hand on his arm grabbing him up near the shoulder. And he also felt the last footprints of the power that he had used to slow his fall wisp away in to nothing. "Are you ok?" someone asked in a gruff male voice. Realization dawned on him then as he pushed out of the grip and ran. There was a rush of air as the man was thrown off of him with abnormal force. *I used my power to slow my fall. I used my power to get that hand off of me. I used my power without knowing it...* But Troy had wanted to die when he threw himself off the ledge had he not? Suddenly a mad rush came over him and he began to run faster.

No! As long as there is Rachel, there is reason for living! I must get to her. I must! Love never turned to hate. I still love her, I only hate myself... And Troy was running and running even faster along the road in his mind that led to his love. Although that road was clear, the darkness of the Undercity was a blur through teary eyes. He stumbled and fell and got up again as cars honked at him. The power was within him and was more intoxicating than ever. He directed his force toward the elevator building and plunged past the guards, knocking them down without a touch. The power was consuming him, but still Troy tried to hold on to his identity. *Rachel. She is my identity. She is all that I have.* But he didn't really have her, a voice told him in the back of his chaotic mind. *Not just yet,* he responded.

Even as these thoughts raced through his mind there were people coming to force him out of the elevator. This was it; this was where it really counted. Troy could not fail. He realized now the reason for his powers and he *could not fail.* His powers were one with the world and there was nothing that he couldn't change. Troy threw back another officer before he could lay a hand on him and then guns were out. He knew that he should be afraid, should put his hands up and freeze but the beast within him continued. How could anything stop him from getting to her now? A couple bullets whizzing his way could not do that.

Troy brought the reinforced glass doors closed in an instant to stop the bullets. The glass cracked, but the bullets were stopped. And with a scream the elevator was lifting up. Slowly at first, but soon he was speeding towards the surface. At this point Troy noticed the others in the large car, scared and whimpering in the corners. *They do not matter to me.*

Up and up they went. There was a throbbing pain in his head where all of the strain was going towards. Troy closed his eyes and continued. His face no longer bothered him and the old blood went unnoticed when he opened his eyes again and saw red. That was when he let go and saw that there were skyscrapers and roads and orange clouds beyond the cracked glass. *I've gone too far up.* Broken, the elevator began to fall back towards the Earth without his powers to hold it up. *These people are going to die. But why should I care? They are not Rachel.*

And so he let them fall, hurtling himself out in to the air outside. He crashed through the fragmented glass and it shattered around him. It was not a long fall, but it took longer that it would have had he not slowed himself. Bits of glass sprinkled beneath him as he landed in the middle of a street without a scratch. *I must find a car.* Troy took the first one that stopped and honked for him to get out of the way.

With a skid he was on his way through the tangle of roads amidst the soaring buildings and towards Rachel.

When he got there and stopped, Troy rounded the front of his car, reeking of power, and headed for the house. His walk was painful and jerky. Troy approached the front door. *What am I doing here?* He thought, forgetting. *What am I intending to do?* He was lost. The painful emotion in his head was overpowering most of his thoughts until all that he knew was that he was scared. *And she is here.* The door crashed to the ground in a cacophony of splinters and he strode in, determined- although the way he moved did not show it. But his eyes did. He had willed that door to fall. He had done that. *She's here, I can feel it. My love is waiting for me. My love...*

When Troy exited the house he had left a dead body inside and was dragging a struggling woman in jeans and a T-shirt. She cried out, hitting him, but Troy did not seem to notice.

"Come on Rachel, I'm taking you with me," he murmured. "We're going away; we're going to be happy. We'll be together."

"Help..." She cried as he shoved her in to the back seat with surprising strength.

"I'm sorry," he said in a moment of reasonable thought as he shut the door and locked it with a remote. Then the *emotion* took over his mind once more. Rachel slammed her hands on the glass and her mouth made shapes, screaming, and she cried. Unhappy, Troy looked at her. Suddenly he was angry.

"Stop it!" The glass shattered inwards, giving way to his gaze and the girl shrunk backward. "We're going to be *happy!*" he screamed. Rachel looked up at him and saw that he was crying, his face red and angry. Troy was sure that he looked almost as scared as she was.

Troy heard footsteps and he turned to see an older neighbor walking towards him, maybe in his late forties. He had a scared and curious look on his face. When he heard screams coming from the back of the car, his pace quickened. Troy began to move around to get in to the drivers seat of the car and the man reached a hand for his shoulder. Troy shrugged him off, exercising some of his mental power. The universe there bended

in such a way to send the other man flying, dead away from Troy. *What am I doing?* Troy got in to the car with a worried look across his shoulder. *I hope that man is alright. I hope that I didn't kill him.* But of course, he knew that he did. Others were gathering outside of their houses, shocked, but Troy drove off before anybody else could try to stop him.

He looked back at his captive and began to weep once more. Troy was acting in a body controlled by emotions instead of thoughts. *But I don't even have control over what I feel. Or is that just an excuse...* He drove on in brooding silence, buildings rushing by, Rachel sniffing in the background.

"Shut up!" he screamed back. *Why is she crying?*

The black car raced through the streets of the city. Police sirens soon rang behind them, a few blocks away. Troy glanced in the rear view mirror. His hard face softened at the look of Rachel in her helpless fright. *Why is she crying?* He couldn't see the cops through the clump of cars, far behind him, but they were there.

"Don't worry Rachel; we're going to be fine. Rachel, Rachel we'll be alright. It'll be alright." *Why is she crying? What have I done?* "We'll get away, Rachel. We can be in love...we can love one another like we were born to..." *My emptiness has finally been fulfilled. I understand now: I'm in love and, this should be perfect...but why do still feel like something is missing? But why is she crying?*

"Rachel, we'll..."

"You're scaring me. What do you want? Why are you doing this?" She shrieked. "...please..."

"I love you, Rachel," Troy replied.

"I hate you! What do you even mean by that?" Troy shook with rage at this. A police car came in to view. Troy felt his power bubbling up in his mind again. He could not control it- cars in front of him were lifted out of his path and as he swung his arm behind him they followed, crashing in front of his pursuers. Rushing past screams and away from the sounds of twisted metal, Troy accelerated, screaming.

Troy was twisting the world around him in ways that he had never done before. The energy inside of his mind was working at new levels. Fueled by his anger, Troy felt unstoppable. It was not a good feeling.

I hate you, she had said. *I hate you... Why?!* The blaring sirens were all around him now. Troy did not know where he was going. The world flew past him on all sides. He felt his conscious self receding in to the monster that he had become. All was lost. *Goodbye world.* And then he was gone and all that was left was his rage and one memory.

Rachel sat there in the back of the car. They had passed in to an industrial district. The smells and smoke drifted through the car's air vents and the broken window. Troy didn't notice, and surely Rachel did not care. They passed by looming black buildings and roads and houses overhead and beneath them. They approached a bridge that crossed the Darkhan River.

"I hate you!" she screamed again. An inhuman cry came forth from Troy's lips. , Troy concentrated as the passion that fueled his love now turned to rage. The rage having consumed him, he was now truly an unstoppable beast. And as he concentrated, Rachel died. She choked at his will. Suffocating in the back seat she choked and coughed and he cried. All that he could see was her. All he could *feel* was her. And then all of a sudden, she was gone. *Never again, no more...*

Rachel's limp and lifeless body filled the back seat but left a void in Troy's existence. He was speeding down a busy road, unaware. Subconsciously he was using his power to make a clear path. This path left in its wake death and destruction; twisted cars and crumpled bodies. But Troy didn't know, wouldn't have cared: His love was dead; his feelings for her were slipping away, all but gone in an otherwise loveless world...

Troy's mind awoke back in to the world at the sound of police sirens. Troy felt devastated and he didn't know why. Rachel was dead. Troy hated Rachel for doing that to him. Didn't he? He also felt weaker, like the emptiness inside of him was eating away at his unnatural command of nature. He was becoming...normal. He hated that too. All he had left was a way to vent his sorrow and his anger for the world. Now even that dwindled away.

The police cars were close, in sight. Troy opened his eyes to the world; there was a road block of Special Police Action Force cars up ahead on the bridge and his pursuers were closing in around him.

"Stop the car and come out with your hands up. I repeat-" Troy did stop the car then. He skidded to a stop, tires screeching. Immediately, police dressed in black with clear plastic shields seeped forward. He felt a jolt and heard a *crunch* as a car rear ended him at the speed that he was going a few seconds ago. The car behind him crumpled and was launched over Troy's car. He caught the wreckage with his powers and threw it using outstretched hands, their grasp overreaching physical bounds. *It feels heavy...my strength...is leaving me.* Troy lay his head down on the steering wheel in resignation. *I can't even express my anger.* But he was still depressed and he was still angry. The car landed on a blockading truck. The advancing police ducked down and covered themselves with their shields.

Troy could sense them approaching. At the last moment he made a move to escape. *If they catch me, they won't kill me- I'm a freak. No, they'll capture me and test me. They'll lock me up and contain me, they'll let me live in my grief, not caring all the while...and now I wouldn't have the power to stop them.* He started to leave the car. As he left, he extended the closer hand toward the windshield. It shattered before his touch and a burst of energy was released forward. The air carried it toward the men with shields and they fell backward.

Troy was out and running for the edge of the bridge. *If I can just vault myself over, maybe I'll drown.* Then there was a sharp pain in his leg and he was down. *They...they shot me- I can't move. There's only one last action I can do. I pray I have enough strength...*

I'm sorry, Rachel, Troy thought as he choked himself to death, arms twitching at his sides. It was then in his last moments that he noticed the break in the Veil above. The opening was like a gash in the sky of perpetual cloud cover. He had heard that where the Veil parted was directly above the temple of the Grand Master, although the actual opening was so vast and so high up that it did not matter. At this distance though, he could hold it between his thumb and finger. And supposedly in that blackness sprinkled with so many white speckles or *stars* as the church had christened them, was God's Kingdom. *Why am I remembering this now? The stars...I see them...*

The choking feeling faded away in to obscurity. The final dim feeling of someone being suffocated was the last sensation that he left behind before death. He thought he

had promised, said something- one last time, but maybe it didn't come out. Promised whom? And who was he? A great sense of distress came over him. Who was he?

He remembered how reality had faded away from him and then how death had come as such a shock. *Death? I'm dead!?* He tried to cry but then realized that he didn't have a body anymore. He could feel his consciousness fading into nothing, his sense of self diminishing...

Soon he gave in. It felt...good. *It feels good to die.* The tiny shred of consciousness that was left soon found itself confronted by a second consciousness. It was immense...the final destiny of a thousand billion minds all concentrated here, filling up the void that was death. The presence there was of raw power. Suddenly there were a set of giant doors that appeared in front of him and Troy pushed through, willing and eager to see what came next. The single lonely mind entered the welcoming threshold of death, never looking back. *Never again, no more...*

Troy took the first few steps in to that great chamber and forgot who he was.

Chapter 1

Something important is going to happen. We can sense it. The future is vast with possibilities, but we can see. We can see...

And now I must act, thought Leo.

It was night. Light pollution flooded the sky and reflected off of the Veil to create a shimmering effect in the sky. In the distance the glittering shadows of skyscrapers rose in to the haze. The buildings rose all around as well, snaked with bustling roads and greater highways. In the great city of Darkhan there were few, it seemed, who chose to sleep when darkness came.

Steven awoke to a chill. *How did it get so cold?* Steven blinked his eyes open and let them adjust. The TV was still on. The breeze, he saw as the curtains moved, was coming from the open glass sliding door on the other side of the room. His wife was still sleeping next to him, her body giving him much needed warmth. The blanket that they were curled up in had fallen. Reluctantly, he rose from the couch- slowly and carefully so as not to wake Isobel. He gently rested her head on a cushion so that she was lying down. Steven covered her swollen stomach with the blanket and after turning off the TV, headed off to the balcony to shut the door. He decided that he would use this opportunity to practice his powers.

Steven had always kept his abilities secret until he met Isobel. Using his mind, Steven could change things. This wasn't the classic move-things-without-touching-them telekinesis that he had read about in Sci-Fi novels as a kid. Steven could change what was real. It was hard to do, it was very subtle, but it was also very genuine. This was another way in that he was different. *I'm a freak.* Steven thought this as he made the door closed,

not without effort. Looking outside, Steven saw that the skyscrapers in the distance looked like miniature openings, with all of their lights piercing through the black. The shimmer of the veil shone around the real opening as it reflected the light of the city.

Steven looked back to his pregnant wife. *I'm going to be a father*, he thought, on a happier note. He could not tell whether the emotion that this thought was accompanied with was fear, pride, or something else.

Steven knew that he shouldn't care so much. Nobody else would care if placed in his shoes. *Nobody else is as lucky as I am, either. Nobody else except for Isobel. Nobody has that feeling.* Other couples were couples because of an arranged marriage; they didn't have the feeling, the fulfillment of being with each other. *Unlike other couples, we have something.*

Under normal circumstances, Steven would have married a woman of his parent's choosing. But after he met Isobel, Steven defied them and married her instead. This was never done; would already have been taboo if someone had ever done it before. Of course people had defied their parents before, but not to go and marry another. Not because of love.

Ever since adolescence Steven had been different. Well, even more different that he had already been at least. He had always had the power to *change* things, apparently even as a baby. But around the age of thirteen he started to feel something else. That feeling was a feeling of emptiness. And with that emptiness came a craving. The craving was for something that before he met Isobel, Steven just could not understand. It was his curse. No body knew about it but him- not even his own parents. Steven's parents had known that he was different, but not *different*. Steven could remember the first time he met Isobel. On that day Steven's curse had become a gift...

It was dusk. Steven drove his car through the darkness towards the noise. He knew the way to Michael's house any way, but pretended that he was following the noise of the party. It was more amusing that way.

At the door, he was greeted by friend Owen. Michael would be off entertaining guests so he was no ware to be seen. Once inside, Steven noted a game of poker, a board game; some people were watching a movie. There was music, too. He followed the noise until he couldn't hear anymore. Steven stepped back outside to where the rest of the party was at. In the back yard, lights flashed different colors and a live band played at the head of a lighted swimming pool. *A live band, again. Ha. No doubt Michael got his parents to pay for this as well. Man, it seems like the whole neighborhood is here!* On either side of the pool and around it and behind the singers (Michael had a very large back yard), were people dancing, talking, drinking...Steven plunged himself in to the mess of human activity.

Michael was a very social guy. He was always having a party, he knew how to make a friend, and he was never far from a trusty can of beer. His parties were always a hit with Steven, and quite a few others besides. Also, Steven and Michael were best of friends. He passed his best friend who was throwing up in the bushes.

“Oh, hey Steve.” Michael, like Steven, wanted to be a scientist working with robotics but Steven didn’t think that he was serious enough for the job. Scientists couldn’t just joke around and get drunk. *Ha.*

After a few beers, Steven wandered further in to the moving jungle of flesh and sweat. In some places, people were arranged in rough, crowded circles centering a featured dancer. People took turns in the middle, getting shoved in by friends and strangers alike. Standing in the outside of one of these circles was a certain girl. Steven found her very...attractive.

Attractive? Attractive is not a word to describe another human being rather than it is a word to describe interior decorating or a car... But at the time, Steven didn’t care enough to ponder the implications of such a thought any further. He could just settle with the fact that he was different from other people. Besides, he was drunk.

He saw a flash of a smile and then the girl was gone, pushed in. He made his way through the wild mosh to get to her. He got to where he thought that she was standing a moment ago and looked for her. *I can feel this woman...She’s close.* He continued to follow the image in his mind’s eye of this beautiful girl...long blonde hair tied in a ponytail, the brilliant green eyes that he had glimpsed for only a second. *And this feeling.*

Steven’s heart was fluttering and he thought he was sick. He clutched his chest, didn’t know what was happening. *This feeling inside of me- I’m not sick...It’s her somehow. It feels...good, yet bad at the same time; scary.* Lost in thought, Steven stumbled in to the middle, and before he knew it, in to *her.*

Neither of them fell to the ground in the sudden commotion, but he almost did. The dancing crowd caught him and brought him back to his feet where he faced *her.* She was clearly in shock, her face had confusion and fear written all over it. She grabbed his wrist and pulled him off in the direction of the house.

“You’re coming with me,” she said, not unkindly. He could hear her perfectly; the din of the rock band seemed to just fade away in this moment as she led him inside. Inside there were more people. *How can this many people show? Michael, what a character...* Steven’s thoughts drifted as the intriguing girl led him upstairs.

“Where you off to, Steve?” Michael asked between gulps of beer.

“Cut down on those cold ones Michael, you’ll kill yourself,” Steven replied.

“Can do.” Michael poured the rest of the can (which consisted of only a couple drops) in to a potted plant.

“He’s not feeling well, I’m taking him to the bathroom,” the girl lied, obviously flustered. And then to Steven: “I need to talk to you in private...”

He had kept it secret for so long because of things like when that insane guy kidnapped that poor girl. *He could change things too. And this feeling...could this have been why he had gone insane?* Steven knew he was not alone in his powers, and also knew that if he didn’t keep them secret, people would be afraid. Fear leads to hatred and Steven never wanted to be hated. Isobel was not afraid though. They had locked the door and were sitting on a large queen sized bed, its red covers folded surprisingly neatly. They had been talking.

“So,” he said, after a long pause in conversation. *This is crazy. I finally know why I’ve felt so alone, so sad, yet...* He looked at her, even more beautiful than before. *Does she feel the same way for me?*

“Yes?”

“Could this...do you? I, I know it sounds silly, but maybe...”

“Maybe this is some new form of...love,” she finished for him, excited. “I mean, I love my family and friends, but you... I feel something different towards you, Steven. I mean, what the hell? I’m *attracted* to you!” Isobel seemed almost hysterical, but Steven knew exactly what she meant. Without a conscious thought, his arm was on her shoulder and she was leaning against him.

I know why she cries: Why now? What made her feel this way that she didn’t feel before? Right now this is the most important thing in the world for us but she never yearned for this moment like I have. She never wanted this, never missed this.

But I still love you, She thought.

It had been so many years since that night at Michael’s house and not much was changed. *Well, a few things have changed.* Michael was sober now, and successful. Steven worked with him now on the Nanobot Project. Isobel was a successful archaeologist. *All minor in comparison. My wife is pregnant.* Looking at her lying on that couch, and looking back at that awkward moment when they had first met, Steven suddenly realized what he was feeling. He was afraid, he was proud, he was happy, but there was another emotion that he felt: *Fulfillment- just like when I met Isobel. Do other parents feel this way? Or is this the same love, this same heightened experience that I’ve been gifted with?* That night when they had sat on the bed, alone in that room- that night he had told her everything. He had told her about his mind power, about the feeling that she was fulfilling...and she had told him the same except that her love was new. It had come as a sudden jolt. Never before had she felt any longing like he had. *But we were meant for each other.*

Suddenly, Isobel Stirred. *It doesn’t matter any more. At the end of the day, we’re both happy. And that’s all that counts.*

“The baby,” she said. “It’s...”

“It’s coming, I know. I can feel it too.” *I can feel it.* After helping her up and towards the door, Steven grabbed his coat off the hook and opened the door. He shrugged it on in the hallway as he walked Isobel to the elevator that would lead to the parking level.

They rode the elevator down to the garage and the two of them made their way over to the car. They rushed inside, Steven helping her in to the passenger seat. The car sped out of the garage in haste. They quickly found the onramp and sped on to the highway.

“Hurry, Steven...She’s powerful inside of me. She wants to come out- I think...I think our child is going to be like us.” *Like us,* he thought. *How can she know?*

“How do you know?”

“I know...ah!” Isobel bit down the pain. Steven reached for his cell phone, not knowing who to call. *Oh my god, she’s having the baby now.*

“No. I’m fine, honey...Just, keep driving. I’m not having her yet...” Another wince in pain. “I can feel her inside of me, she’s powerful, Steven. So strong...”

They arrived at the hospital in time and rushed Isobel to the birthing room. The doctors wondered why Steven had insisted to be with his wife while she gave birth, but they didn't stop him. *I have to be there for her.*

The room rang with screams and sighs of pain.

"I see her," A doctor announced. Suddenly, the room rattled, and then it stopped. Then it started again. *Earthquake?* Earthquake was the first thing to cross Steven's mind. Equipment was shifting and falling to the floor. Tables moved, the lights- *It's her,* he thought: *The child.* In the back of his mind he heard Isobel breathing hard and then a baby's cry.

Chapter Two

Hiding in his own creation, Leo reveled in his small victory. *Why can't they see the coming storm? They are uncountable billions, and I am but one! Does my power really extend this far beyond the grave that I can see what they cannot?!* Leo could not believe it, but it seemed to be true. He couldn't help but feel a certain pride at his own ability. *I might actually win this war.*

Of course it wasn't really a war, not in the classic sense of the word. This unconventional war was being fought on a purely nonphysical plane since near the beginning of time. *If I win this battle of Chaos and Order, then I can finally have her back. But if...if I should lose... Leo didn't know what the Communal Consciousness would do to him if. I don't even know if they'd still be in power... What if we both lose? What then? God was only one portal away from ruling once more. And if I win... what if he does come back...? I don't know. Is it worth it? Yes. Oh, Alexa...*

Percy Teroth looked down at his breakfast, disgusted with himself. He could see his failures in everything around him. He could smell the stench of his falsehood on the long golden drapes that flanked the towering windows that lined the extensive walk from the bedchamber to the breakfast hall. The twice daily walk was a blissfully tedious one. Or it should have been. Like all the other sinners that walked the Earth, Percy found discomfort in God's subtle punishments. *The discomfort speaks itself for my own evil nature. Although a punishment, tediousness is the gift of virtue and I should feel grateful for such a blessing.* Try as he might, Percy Teroth could not find it in himself to thank God for the tediousness of his own life. *All humankind are evil.*

Every day he would conduct the same old business that his station required and every day he would loathe it. This was no holy man's work. His only respite was the

sometimes hours long sessions of standing still in his Star Chamber to punish away the wickedness of the day.

Percy would every day get up and live in the embellished home of the Grand Master. The mansion sat at the top of a great artificial hill that sat square in the center of Darkhan's central park. The hill was actually a giant and elaborate building whose towering steeples rose high around the entire establishment and almost dwarfed the delicate looking mansion on top. Those steeples however, were themselves dwarfed by the skyscrapers of Darkhan that surrounded the park entirely. And above all was the opening in the veil.

The building was mainly made up of various religious offices and such, but in the inside was an immense temple. The place of worship was the only real sanctuary from the world of evil around him and the only place that Percy could think of that deserved to be so lavish. *As God is extravagant so should his temple be.* This was the heart of Fadism, but in a heartbeat Percy would just as soon have torn the rest down and preached on the streets as a common beggar to atone for his sins. But he had an image to keep up.

Percy was a pious man despite the embarrassment of the Grand Master, and he would serve his duty. Maybe if he stayed the Grand Master, someday an opportunity would present itself to exploit the position's authority so he could do some good. And so he walked the path of life that God had set out for him, blindly and willingly following his faith. *God has a plan for all of us.*

The Grand Master was supposed to speak with the voice of God. The Grand Master was supposed to be God's servant and no one else's. A long time ago that may have been true, back when religion was more than just an instrument of power. Back when peasants and kings alike feared God's mighty wrath and lived by that fear. *Back then it meant something to be the Grand Master.* The Church's decline wasn't through lack of popularity. If anything, more people than ever before were Fadist and more and more converted every day. Not that it would have mattered. *Numbers alone are no match for corruption. The Fadist Church has become a disgusting conspiracy.*

Percy had wretched up his breakfast the previous morning and the morning before that. This food was no different from the last and he knew that it would be no use to force it down.

"Is everything alright, Master?" *Don't call me that, you godless fool! The lord is our only master. It is he we serve, not each other!*

"I'm alright." A lie. Nothing was right.

"Are you sure? It's just that..." *He dares question me? I speak with God's own voice or has he forgotten? I am the Grand Master!* Over time, the Grand Master's patience had grown paper thin. He had endured long years of constant and conscious blasphemy. He had taken his orders from the government without a word of protest. He had disgraced the position of Grand Master and most of all, he had disgraced God. *I am a disgrace. But I can still pray.*

"It's just what? What is it that you think I am incapable of comprehending without the help of the likes of...the likes of a blasphemous fool like you?" Percy spat his words with fiery resentment and he knew the fear that his servant must be feeling. *As well he should. This man is just the same as all the others. They are enemies of the church, and God's righteousness will prevail and nobody can stop it. I will not spoil it.* Percy stood up clumsily, angrily. He chose not to pay any mind to the weakness in his legs.

“Master, I never...”

“Never thought to see a righteous man as Grand Master?” Percy knew precisely what this heretic thought about him and could see through every layer of his personality. Just by the shrunken look he gave the Grand Master after that burst of insolence. *It is time to change things.*

“Enough! This religious satire will end with me!” He knocked his chair over in a clumsy, grasping stumble that ended with a fall towards the table. *I’ve gotten so weak.* His vision suddenly kaleidoscoped in to a confusing array of colors. The shapes around him were moving and he thrashed out...

The room used to be a dance hall, but what would the Grand Master need with a dance hall? Whatever friends that arrived with his position soon revealed their falsity with Nyum and shrank away. Whatever banquets the Grand Master was accustomed to holding, the Grand Master did not hold. So for the first few months of his lifelong term, Percy had kept the whole gargantuan chamber a deserted one. Eventually Percy took to using the room as a silent place of worship. The drapes had been taken down, tables and chairs removed. The lush and intricately colored carpet was gone. Percy had even boarded up the windows on the west side so that the world’s impurities could not accidentally seep in. The one thing remaining was the ceiling mural of moving constellations which were the lights of God’s kingdom. Scientists had sent probes through the veil to take pictures and what they had found were the stars of Fadism, moving about like electrons in the black. *This proved to the world once and for all that Fadism was correct. That God existed.* The scientists had also created the opening in the Veil that hovered miles above the temple. It wasn’t truly an opening to the stars and God. That would not be possible, and even the scientists knew this. They did not attempt at this. The opening was truly just an area where the Veil had been made “invisible”, like a different sort of lens on a camera or telescope.

Percy’s custom would be to stand in the middle and reflect, but today he had to sit down due to his weakness. He would reflect and pray, always pray. Today’s sin was regret and Percy found himself cross-legged in the middle of that square room once more. It smelled of cold, or maybe it was just that cold smelled like this room. In any case it was cold and so the sensations that this room brought were cold ones. When the carpet had been removed they had found underneath on the tile floor a mosaic pattern of black stars with four points each. The stars would start out small near the four entrances in the corners of the room then get continuously larger until there was but one star. Percy had made it his custom to meditate in the center of this pattern.

Regret. Why did I hit that man? The thrall was out of line to be sure...but it was an ill thing to do. Thinking aloud, Percy puzzled over the events of the morning.

“I’m supposed to speak with God’s own voice, I am the Grand Master.” His voice echoed throughout the dark ballroom. “But this isn’t true, I’m a fake. Then why do I believe it if it I know it is false? Why do I persist in the belief that I’m one with God? Why did I hit that man...?” *Because it is true, you fool! God has a plan for all of us and the Grand Master speaks for him, whoever he may be.*

“God’s will is stronger than that of Man. I must remember that. Whatever happens happens for a reason and that reason is his,” Percy whispered. *The Grand Master was still chosen by the Holy Council...* “But our decision was a forced one. They threatened us, they threatened my family...” Those truthful words were uttered before

they were thought, and Percy quickly glanced around for intruders or eavesdroppers. He had expressly forbidden any intrusion on this space while he was in meditation but he looked in to the shadows all the same. *Shut up! Fool! Fool!* If he had been overheard then there would surely be trouble. Nyum had eyes every ware. There was nothing to be seen in the shadows, but then again Percy was seeing colors that he was sure weren't there. And the dizziness...

The Grand Master coughed in to that room of echoes and his sickness was flaunted before him in waves of sound. *I'm a sickly old man. A foolish, sickly old man who is just kidding himself.* This epiphany was a recycled one and was soon dismissed by clearer thought as a side effect of the headache. *But I am sick; I must face that now at least. I really should start eating.* To own the truth, Percy's memory hit a blank from when he got up from breakfast all the way until they opened the doors of the Star Room and ushered him to its center. Coughing and dizzy they had sat him down while being commanded to leave. It was embarrassing to look back at it. And that was just one of the episodes...*I need medical help. I must pray for help.*

A door opened.

The loud creaking sound came from all over but the door opened behind him. Light flooded in on a widening line and Percy was getting up, too tired to curse at the intruder aloud. Percy stood to look at the interruption. He was an obscure silhouette against the contrasting light in the other room. *At least he had the grace to wait at the door.*

"Excuse us, Master." Percy scanned the entrance hallway again with his failing eyes and saw the others, pretending not to notice the fuzzy twin of the man standing in the back. Words were exchanged and the three dark shadows walked him down the short, red-carpeted hallway towards another part of the mansion. The walls were lined with piercing reticles of electric candle light. Perpendicular yellow lines walled Percy's peripheral vision and the woman in front was a blur. There was a fall and somebody called out to him.

The Grand Master mumbled something through supportive foreign grips and stumbled again. He mumbled it over and over, a prayer. That particular prayer was forgotten in his consciousness the moment he would say it. Another fall, but the hands held firm and kept him afoot. Drifting, drifting in and out and away. Percy's Mind swam, lost in a sea of forgetfulness and decay. *What is happening to me?*

"Sir! Master! Master..." The world as he perceived it faded away in to deeper obscurity, yet somehow strength was returning. The shadows and light fell away from his vision until all he could do was wait for another stimulus.

Percy's body soon came back to him, but when it did, Percy found that he was somewhere else entirely. A set of towering doors faced him and the doors spoke to him.

"Percy Teroth. The Grand Master. Avatar of Fade..." The words seemed to come to him from with in his own body, but he could tell that they were something foreign. There was something beyond those doors, yet somehow Percy knew not to push though. Not just yet. There was an uncertainty in that voice that spoke to him. As the voice was talking to him, Percy somehow found the strength to answer.

"I am. I am The Grand Master."

“A thousand years past, the prophet Fade walked this planet. He was our creation. He would instigate the religion to save humankind from the threat that our futuresense did perceive.”

Percy was noticing the lack of sensory input that he was receiving. There were no smells, no touch, not even sight seemed real. The doors were there before him, yet the way he perceived him was something more than conventional. Percy could sense the swirling stars behind him and the encroaching blackness. Thoughts ran wild at this realization and then he remembered what last he had felt before the fall in to this sudden reality. “I am dead... Am I dead?” This was a question, but Percy was not so certain of getting an answer. But this entity, whatever it was, seemed to have some sort of interest in him. And besides, the two of them were the only things that there were in this strange new existence.

“No, Prophet. You are very much alive.” Percy did not allow himself to believe that he knew what the other entity was talking about...*prophet?*

“I am talking to you, Percy Teroth. You are my prophet.” *God...* Percy could feel himself again, and suddenly the world was with him once more. *But so is God. God is with me now. And you have work to do.*

“I’m alright,” was the first thing to escape his lips once he was back. With a wave of his hand, Percy dismissed their concern. “Send away whatever medical help you think I may have needed.” *They were right all along. I was right. The Grand Master does have a connection. God is with me. He was with me, always.* They were in the lighted hallway still, but this time around his senses did not betray him. Percy was awake and alive. *I’m alive again.*

“What is it? Why did you disturb me from my meditation?” The looks of confusion and restrained concern were deeply apparent.

“You, you weren’t breathing for thirty seconds.” They were afraid again. *I’m me again. God has cured my sickness. What would you have of me?* There were more around him now. More people had come to him when he was down. “Tell. Me.”

“The report from Nyum is here, Sir. Master.” Anger flared in his senses for a moment, but that rage was soothed by the voice of God.

Take the Orders. Take them and know that they are not what they seem. I will instruct you further.

Percy made the walk down the lightened corridor once again, passing through the breakfast hall and on to the bedchamber, the morning’s sins all but forgotten. Percy stepped inside and the door close behind him automatically. He walked over to the Bible Chamber. The door to the chamber rose ten feet from the floor and was located across the bedchamber, pure steel. The door dilated with the familiar buzzing sound for to allow him inside and he stepped through in to the round, shiny white chamber. And in the middle, on the pedestal stood the Grand Master’s Bible. As always.

Go to it.

The damn thing was an insult to Fadism, yet at the same time one of the most important aspects to the religion. It wasn’t a real bible. Not in the old sense. He wrote in his copy, and that was what was broadcasted as God’s message to all the other Bibles.

In older days, the Bible existed as a guide, as a way to help one through life. Full of inspiring stories of the presence of God and Fade, the prophet. But now the bible was a fine example of corruption. The general principal of the text was the same but instead of

it teaching what God wanted...the Nyum government was pulling the strings. The Grand Master was a secret prisoner inside of his temple, his every political action governed by the monopolizing outside nation of Nyum. Normally Percy would approach the Bible with dread but today he strode forward with confidence. Open it.

The first prophet had done his job well. He had instigated the religion that could save humankind...that could save everything.

A little over a thousand years ago, the great conscious entity that ruled the universe sensed a threat to its existence. And although that threat would come about over a thousand years into the future...

We could sense it. Although our sense of future has dwindled... We could still sense it. Our sense of future, left over from the days of the Holy Path has not entirely faded.

We have a problem in our way, Thought the Communal Consciousness.

Yes.

Our sense of future has discovered a threat. What is it? Chaos.

Yes. But we can stop it. The prophet- his religion will help like it was supposed to.

Now the time has come for the second prophet.

And now we have the perfect host...

So, Leo thought, amused. They've finally decided to fight back.

Chapter 3

Planning world domination was such ticklish business. The walk along the steps to completion was a perilous one. The steps might break or disappear from beneath you. The steps might be too soft that your footsteps leave an incriminating mark. The steps might move so far apart that there were no other options but to jump. *A necessary jump, to be sure.* Ken Harding sunk himself in to the black leather chair at the head of the glossy wooden table and swiveled a little to the right to face a room of familiar faces. All seated, all quiet and all accounted for, Ken's face began a smile and he started to speak.

"Thanks to our friend the Grand Master, human cloning is now legal." A few smiles and quiet mutters of approval circled the room. The polls had opened and closed a day ago and the results had been favorable. There was no need to lie to the public on this one. Besides, a lie of this magnitude was never any small risk in the first place. The Nyum Administration would not always get its way in the polls because that would raise too much suspicion. Nonetheless, the vast majority of the country's elections were rigged to a degree. *The sign of a working system.* The only singular people that ever influenced Ken's decisions were his three top advisors.

Ken raised his hand for silence.

"This obviously means that we can move on to the next stage of our operations. Now that we have that legal buffer for what we have been doing these past few years, we can proceed with a little less restraint." Ken cleared his throat and waited for a response. Sure enough, Staffordson piped up in his familiar high-pitched squeak.

"We can not continue to rely on this Grand Master. Even now he could be in league with Mihan, which may I remind you is the country within whose borders he resides. The senile old man is of no more use to us." *Although annoying, this little man is a wise one.* But Ken was still having some potential regrets about allowing him in on the Brain Programs. Staffordson was the chief engineer of the project and a political expert

besides, but to be immortal? Weeks ago, Ken had finally decided that it was worth the risk. Considering the potential risks of each other man or woman subject to the Brain Programs, the risks of Staffordson's immortality seemed minor. Somehow, even that epiphany did not bring a release to his apprehension. *The Perfect Government is not as perfect as its name might let on.*

"Staffordson. We do not rely on this man," Ken replied, a little uneasy. *Look at him how he smiles as if he knows what I do not. I know exactly how we rely on the Grand Master, but best it left unsaid.* Even so, Ken knew it was wise practice to listen to your subjects to be a good a righteous ruler. Listen, and consider. Steffordson spoke again.

"We rely on his silence." Suddenly Ken knew again why he had chosen this man for the Perfect Government. "A silence that I can not see him holding. The man is erratic, he-"

"He knows nothing. He will be removed once we see a threat. That is how this system works, as you should remember: we change nothing unless it is required. This is how the Perfect Government is still possible." Ken preemptively raised his hand for silence after he was done speaking.

"On to the next subject. The Summit is next up in order so it is the Summit that we must discuss." A few men and women looked confused. The Summit was still secret to a few members of the council. The Summit would hopefully bring together every major world leader; ever candidate for the Perfect Government. *If we don't get enough of the world's armies on our side at the Summit, then the imminent war will be a disaster.* Needless to say, the Nyum Administration had gone to great lengths to install favorable political figures in as many foreign powers and in as high office as possible. Still- the summit was going to be the deciding factor in the path to completion. That and the military coup that would have to take place in Nyum. A smile crept across Ken's face as he thought about the prospect of taking over one's own country. Although quite taken by the irony of it all, Ken knew that none of this would be funny. *Many will die, that is of a certainty. First the ones at the summit, then the soldiers, then the civilians.* Ken made no delusions to himself about any peaceful transition. The change would be bloody. *But the change will be for the better.*

"The summit?" asked a voice to his left.

"You've all heard of the Perfect Government that we've created. The brain programs and the clones. Certainly this must be ringing bells for you all left and right." A dull life entered the room in the form of murmurs and nods of agreement as it passed like a wave among the cabinet. "As you all know, this governing practice will be the future of our county. And thus, the so-called coup is blatantly needed. Everybody follow? Good. But the Perfect government was never intended to stay within our borders. We already have our allies...Pijerone, Motar, and Arna. These countries will form the backbone of our coalition in the war to come."

"War?" There was a few seconds where many people were talking at once, but Ken Harding continued over the cacophony and the room soon quieted. At that moment it dawned on Ken just how risky it had been to keep the upcoming war a secret from part of his own cabinet. Safety measures had been put in to place of course. In the off chance of an information leak stemming from a cabinet member in disagreement, there were easy ways to deal with the complications.

“The Perfect Government is the future. It is the world’s future. At their consent, every major world leader will be copied and put in to clones upon their deaths. The Perfect Government will stay eternal as our brain programs rule forever as a lasting World Government!”

“And if they do not consent?”

In this governing practice, the participating major world leaders’ brains would be somewhat copied on to a brain program to preserve their governing ideals after they die. The brain programs would then be programmed in to a fresh human clone so that it can keep governing. This cycle would govern the world indefinitely as a World Government. The main philosophy behind this practice is to keep the ideals of the original leaders intact but at the same time, each individual brain program would learn from the times and evolve, and be updated with each new clone. Ken thought on this as realization began to dawn on the faces of the last few cabinet members who did not know. *It is what this world needs. Too many democracies have perished under their own weight and been trampled underfoot by corruption. This will not happen here.* Ken knew of course, that the government that he was designing was not perfect at all, and the name was in fact just some more propaganda. *But it is right. It will work.*

“If they do not consent then there will be war. And most regrettably, there *will* be war.”

“Then I am a dead man,” said the Secretary of Agriculture with a voice that hinted no emotion yet had a definite air of certainty. “For I oppose this.”

Ken nodded and motioned to a guard who promptly produced a thin wire from his sleeve and wrapped it around the man’s neck from behind. Ken bit his lower lip and nodded for a few seconds. He looked over to the Secretary of Agriculture and as to a patient about to find out he had an incurable cancer, he said: “Yes sir, I’m afraid you are. A pity.” *He was always a weak man. This is no pity by my decree. The weakling lacked strength enough to even attempt to oppose me.*

Through dying eyes, the Secretary of Agriculture finally revealed his emotions and Ken did not doubt for a moment the righteousness of his own cause.

Chapter 4

The night was quiet and calm. A few silent shapes drifted the darkened streets of southern Harrin, cautious- it wasn't safe to be out at night. Patrols of ten marched along the middle of the road, shrouded in the shadows; the dimmed street lamps didn't reach across the entire street. But they could be heard, marching, always marching.

The Mihan embassy in Harrin sat directly at the center of four main roadways, creating a block all by itself. That block was completely black because the buildings outside lights were all off. Alert and wary, snipers were stationed on the roof and window openings with heat sensitive goggles. The handful of soldiers defending the embassy were instructed not to shoot until fired upon.

"I see movement. Again." One gunman said underneath the steady scope that aligned with his eye. "Damn it, I don't know whether these are civilians or military. We've had no word of what the situation is, we don't even know who our enemy is- we don't even know if there *is* an enemy..." The man continued to peer through the open window as his fellow gunman began talking, his voice soft as if to hide it from spying opponents.

"I think we know just about as much as they do, John. Although I must say, that even if we did know our enemy we'd still not stand a chance. Me personally- I think it's the Nyum armed forces we're up against. And what are we? Thirty at most, I'd say." John was stunned at this.

"Did you hear that somewhere? How? Our communications have been cut off- we've been ordered to stay at our stations..."

"Just don't shoot..." There was a grunt of pain and a whiz of sound and three bloody holes appeared on the wall behind the head of a man stationed farther down the

windowed hall. His weapon dropped with a thump, followed by his body, his head bleeding the carpet. Nobody heard the man fall under the sudden shouts and rustling movement of the six remaining soldiers on that floor. There was a second of automatic gunfire and John and the other man fell to the ground amidst the rest. Moments later a bright, circling object rocketed forward towards them. Everything in the immediate vicinity was incinerated by the blast of the rocket.

News helicopters and reporters on foot mixed with the Nyum forces to reveal the attack live to the rest of the world. From the outside there could be seen a great fiery hole in the side of the building three stories up. The smoke rose up, billowing, and was lost in the blackness of the night.

President Harding had had his breakfast, watching the horrific news footage of the attacks. *Horrific, yes- but necessary. My Perfect Government will be disagreeable with some at first. The last thing that we need is somebody in power fueling these doubts and assumptions. The last thing we need is somebody who isn't thinking for the greater good...* because what did greater good mean if not that it was good for everybody, at least in the long run? There way be some sacrifices along the way, but in the end, everybody got what they wanted...*The Perfect Government.* Sitting there, thinking, trying to justify his actions with thoughts like these, Ken decided that it was time to give his little speech.

“Citizens of Nyum, I am here to inform you that there has been a takeover. Our former regime has been terminated, and the old democracy is no more. Here, we find ourselves at a changing point in the history of our country. As many of you have witnessed first hand, and others soon will, there have been several violent occurrences happening across the country. These attacks were and are conducted under my authority and will continue until all of my enemies are dead or subdued.

I mean no harm to the general people of Nyum, and this takeover is all for your benefit. And I promise, if there is cooperation, there will be peace. If not, then know that my loyal armies are at hand. As the international community may have already become aware of, I have also isolated and contained the city of Darkhan, the capital of Mihan. Darkhan is now being held hostage to the world's cooperation. I have nuclear weapons standing by and will use them if provoked. Remember citizens that this and the coming changes are for the good of all mankind and further information concerning the new government will be announced later. For now, continue your normal lives. And remember- cooperation means *peace.*”

Ken was laughing out loud after the speech. *This was too easy. And why shouldn't it be?* Ken reclined in his soft and sunken chair deep within his guarded palace fortress. Having a monopoly on nuclear weapons, Ken Harding felt a great deal safer than one in his position should. *It doesn't matter if half the world is burnt to a crisp in the end, as long as all of the humanity that's left is ruled by our Perfect Government- that is all that matters. One day this all will come true. One day...* But for now, Ken had to settle for Nyum.

Harding had been elected for another term in office, which was helpful. All it did was buy him and his allies some more time to prepare- the coup was bound to happen. *Nothing can stop us now...* And then a head splitting voice cracked like a whip within him:

We can.

“Who are you?” He said. Once again: “Who are you?” The world opened up to his sight as an unfocused white light. He heard sounds, though from where he couldn’t say. Orbs appeared above him; shining white orbs... *Light. Lights...* And then memory came back to him.

“You’ve been unconscious, Mr. Harding. You’ve been- no, don’t get up you aren’t rested. We don’t even know what’s happened to you.” This was a doctor speaking; his image focused in as he talked.

“You said I’ve been unconscious?” Ken asked.

“Yes, nearly four hours.”

“Then I’m rested,” he replied coldly. The doctor made a move to stop him from getting up.

“You don’t want to do that.” Ken Harding gave him a threatening look and was let through. *I’m good at that, ha.* Ken was about to leave the guarded hospital bed and make his way back up to his own room where he could rest up without the world knowing. *I must seem strong- invincible. I must be invincible for the world to fear me.* But then he was visited once again by the *voice*. Ken stopped in his tracks and started feeling weak. *My legs, no...* Strong hands caught him and broke his fall. *I must think about something else... something to bring my thoughts away from this powerful presence inside my head- I have to push it away.* And indeed it did feel powerful. Every moment Ken resisted the voice’s sway, he felt weaker.

“What do you want?”

“Well, we want to help you get better,” The doctor answered- but Ken didn’t hear a word... *What do you want?*

We want you to stop this abomination from ever seeing the light of this world, the voice replied. We will stop you. Whether you cooperate or no.

No, never... And with that determined resolve, he was able to push its intruding presence away.

“Well, we want to help you get better.” *Something to keep my mind from wandering- something to keep me alert, strong.* Ken shook himself free of the doctors’ grasps. Many others had rushed to help when he had collapsed. He shook himself free of all of them, his strength back. *Strength? What strength? I’m an old man, my only strength is fear.* And this was the perfect opportunity to portray that strength. Ken turned on the man that had tried to stop him and was now lecturing him on why he wasn’t well enough to be up and about. Ken opened his mouth and the doctor stopped talking. *Fear.*

“What’s your name?” His name was clearly written on a nametag clipped to the man’s breast pocket.

“Harold, sir.”

“No, your last name.”

“It’s, it’s on my tag here,” Harold glanced down nervously at his pocket as if to check if it was still there. Maybe Ken Harding would be angry with an employee who’d lost his nametag? *Ha.*

“Name, please.” Ken was laughing inside but held a stern face on the outside.

After that was over, Ken decided to go to the *chamber* instead so he could think. The Chamber was a place where they held and monitored the Perfect Government’s brain programs. *Those asshole doctors don’t know. They think it ends at death. But I guess for them it does...there’s no way that they could know. They think I’m so frail, but I’m more powerful than I’ve ever been...a part of me will always live on!* That thought was comforting as he walked the length of the long halls with his guard. *Harold, Harold Gordon. He’ll be worried, paranoid for a while now...ha. I find that amusing.*

Ken Harding, President of Nyum had made himself known throughout for his cruelty. *He is right to be paranoid.*

Fear...

Chapter 4

A mother smiled as she watched her daughter walk in front of her. The little girl’s father guided her down the trail, back to the beach.

Sarah was three now, old enough to allow for these little excursions. The family had spent the day at the beach. They had a picnic lunch atop the grassy ridge formed in a semi circle around the beach. This involved a pleasant hike up the side of the ridge shaded by various trees where birds made their nests and could be heard chirping happily as they passed.

Sarah seemed to enjoy the hiking quite a bit, Isobel noted. Isobel was the mother. Steven, the father was holding his daughter’s hand as she walked back down the easy slope. The trip seemed a lot more treacherous coming up- treacherous at last for a three year old. The path was still just as broken by rocks and jutting roots, but this time they were walking down.

Isobel remembered their trip up the zigzagged course and how determined her daughter had been. Sarah had tripped, fallen, and gotten back up- many times. She had also refused an offer to ride on dad’s shoulders under the premise that she just had to keep going on foot- maybe to prove her strength or endurance. Isobel didn’t know, but she admired her for her determinedness. Even if it was a form of childish stubbornness, it was a good type of stubbornness.

This was their first trip like this. Although at times she did act her age, Sarah seemed to have a certain maturity to her. If not that, then her awareness of what was happening in the world around her, at least was more accurate. All this, Steven and Isobel were proud of, and they felt lucky to have something to be so proud of.

The three of them marched on. The salty, smelly air told them that they were getting closer to the beach. Sarah loved the beach.

Without warning, Steven felt a quick pull on his hand as Sarah pulled herself free of his grasp.

“Wait,” Steven called and she did not wait. Sarah ignored her father’s call as she went running down the remainder of the trail toward the sand.

“Sarah come back here!”

“Wait up!” Sarah did not wait up.

The parents weren’t so troubled about losing track of their daughter because of the openness of the trail. The trail’s zigzagged body spread across an easy slope going through leaves and relatively small fallen trees. There was just the issue of a fall; a bruised knee or a skinned finger- possibly something more serious.

So Steven jogged after her, easily making up the distance with his longer strides. Sarah giggled as her father chased her; she looked back, smiled, kept running. Steven was now frustrated and a little scared: his three year old daughter could fall and get hurt, maybe seriously hurt, and she thought it was a game. This was one of those times when Sarah did, in fact act her age- much to Steven’s despair.

Ahead of them on the path, a couple of fellow hikers were walking, chatting; a man and a woman. The woman heard Sarah running behind her and turned around. Sarah was about to burst right past them. Isobel had been left behind by now, still walking. She trusted that Steven could handle their daughter just fine. Steven was about to capture Sarah when the two of them were temporarily obscured behind a large, twiggy bush. A sensation suddenly shot through Isobel’s mind, a desperate urging to do something. The urge was of an outside force, influencing her own mind to unlock an ability no other human had done in many, many years. She fell to her knees, giving in to the power...

Steven was feeling the same thing; he stumbled forward under the force of the shocking power of his own mind. Sarah screamed and stopped. The two strangers were having the same experience. The Earth beneath them began to shudder. All of them could tell that this was of their own doing. Crawling, Steven made his way to the small shape of his daughter on the path in front of him. The shaking beneath did not cease and now bits of the Earth were falling away, rolling down the hill. Steven put one hand in front of the other and there was no resistance. He began to fall forward into the avalanche. Then the force inside of his head left, its work done.

As Steven fell, face first in to the sliding dirt, he snapped out of it, his mind free again. Steven saw a flash of his daughter falling with him. An unrecognizable body came in to his sight and grabbed a hold of his daughter, it seemed, but before he could see anything else, the two were swallowed by the crushing avalanche. His own mortal terror forgotten, Steven reached for her, and tried to scream, but swallowed a mouthful of dirt.

Terrified, Isobel ran toward the spot where they had fallen. She looked at the settling dirt and debris and thought it was impossible. The avalanche had opened a gaping hole in the side of the seemingly sturdy hill. It looked like a bulldozer had gone at it for a couple of hours. *Impossible.*

How could this be? She thought. *This hill was hardly a slope at all, how could it fall like this?* All this was thought in an angry second before she saw shapes moving below; alive.

“Sarah! Steven!” she cried through blurry eyes.

Below, Steven found to his relief that he was still conscious. He lay there, dazed. He tried to move, but couldn't. Thoughts flashed through his mind. *Where am I, what's happened? Why can't I move... Sarah- was this her again?"*

When he remembered, Steven thought maybe he had been paralyzed, a broken back or something. He must have had a rough tumble down the hill. Then he remembered to open his eyes: he was wedged in between a mountain of dirt and some rotten wood. He tried moving again and decided that his back wasn't broken after all, although his left leg was throbbing worse and worse with each passing second. He tried to *change* himself out of being stuck, but he was too weak. Steven heard voices. Somebody was calling his name, and- Sarah. *Sarah. My daughter.* Steven began to realize the reality of the situation and his eyes became watery. He screamed her name: nothing. His leg was still throbbing.

What the hell has happened? He thought, then he slipped out of consciousness.

Steven remembered little of what happened in the proceeding moments (and what little he did remember was blurred and had no chronological meaning to him.) "*Your daughter is alive and well,*" a voice had told him in his fleeting conscious moments. That was one thing that he could remember, and he was happy.

After a while he heard sirens- an ambulance. It would have to stop at the rest area beside the beach, he knew. He had been dug out from under the collapsed hillside (by who, he couldn't say,) and that took who knows how long. Isobel was there, holding a crying Sarah who seemed to miraculously have not been hurt.

After making her call, Isobel had descended the undisturbed portion of the path, making her way to where Steven and her daughter lay. The stranger, the woman was with her. It was hard for them not to hurry down, but there was a feeling that the path could again collapse on them, so the two of them tread carefully and patiently. *But we willed this to happen!* she thought, suddenly afraid. *I know what I felt and I know that somehow, something or someone influenced some power in me, used me!* Isobel had only to look at her companion to see those same thoughts on her face. When they reached the upturned base where the trees ended and gave way to sand, that was when Isobel broke in to a run. She heard footsteps close behind her.

The two of them rushed back to where their respective companions lay, maybe buried. Some others were gathering around the place where the earth had collapsed, to Uratarts at the beach. Isobel ran past shocked faces, heard them talking in gasps. Among the sparse trees, a couple of strangers were helping the other man that fell. He had been dug out of the dirt and was holding something, a *human* form. *Sarah*, Isobel thought. *Please be alive, please live.* Her prayers were answered and as if on cue, Sarah started moving. Her movements were slow at first, but then she *got up* from the man's arms and looked around, seemingly unharmed. The fellow hiker that had fallen was lying, exhausted on the floor of dirt and leaves.

Isobel rushed to him, scooping up her daughter who had caught sight of her and was running in her direction. She kissed Sarah over and over, until she found the man who, with some help from another person that she did not know, was getting up. She looked in to his eyes: "Thank you," she said.

"Sarah!" ...*Steven...* Isobel whirled in the direction of the sound. "Steven!"

Steven had been dug out by the time the medics had arrived and it was evident that there was something wrong with his leg. Then it happened again:

Oh my God, not again!

*What is this feeling inside my head?
I don't want to do this!*

A spray of Earth and shattered wood exploded from where Steven had been trapped just a moment before. Isobel covered her daughter as the spray flew everywhere. Something hard hit her back. The gathered crowd of about a dozen, every one of them was on their knees, submitting to the force inside their minds. *Somehow we are doing this. Our minds...just like when Sarah was born, just like when Steven and I use our powers...* When the noise stopped, Isobel looked over to where the explosion of dirt had been. *Yes. I feel my will in this.*

“What the hell was that?” a voice called out after it was over. The voice sounded scared. *I too am scared*, she thought. Then something caught her eye and she crept closer. “What the...that’s a human skull.”

Steven was the only one who looked like he heard her, she said it so softly. He turned his head from where he was sitting up, propped against a rock where the medics were tending to him. She was right, too- it was a human skull, buried in the dirt... *We uncovered this*, she thought...*but why?* Too curious to be scared, Isobel looked closer and saw what they truly had uncovered. “And it’s...*fossilized!*” Isobel, being an archeologist could not ignore her fascination.

The fossilized skull seemed to have been coughed up by the Earth in that last incident. As part of the archeological community, Isobel had a few calls to make before she left with Sarah. Steven would be fine, they said, and she had a feeling that this fossil was very, very *old...*

Chapter 5

Percy opened the Master Bible.

Percy Teroth could not believe what he was seeing. After deciphering the message using the vast recourses at his disposal, he could finally read it. *How can someone hope to take over the world?* But there was one passage at the end that confused him and scared him the most:

...My portion of the Perfect Government is complete. I've sent it to be stored in our containment area...

-Valarie

...Finishing the message for the hundredth time still had the same effect. Percy was overcome with a feeling of dread at these last words. *Why am I scared? Why do I feel such dread over these words...I can only assume that the Valarie in this letter is Valarie Hirsch, president of Cornassa. But what does she mean by Perfect Government? What is this Perfect Government?* Then his question was answered.

Our enemy. This Perfect Government is the mother of Chaos; we can not let it pass. Prophet- let us be your guide to salvation. Let us save order. Percy Teroth. In the name of your God I command you to stand up in the face of Chaos. End the Perfect Government... Percy could feel his body weakening, could *barely* feel his body... Be strong, the voice in his head said. We will be there to help you along the way...

We...?

Henry Kristov watched this footage in horror. The same clips kept playing on the TV over and over. The president and his advisors sat at a large and polished rectangular table in the middle of a lavishly decorated room. The screen on which the news footage was playing was set in the wall where nobody sat with their backs to. They had watched the carnage for six times already, but still the situation was unreal. *This must mean war. But Harding's strategy is curious. No declaration of war has been made by Nyum. The only official statement given by Harding was some talk of a dictatorship...and the attacks- the attacks were his doing. So...*

"Is this war he wants?" He said aloud.

"I call it war," an advisor answered. "We need to act. This is an act of war and deserves an apt response. The other countries whose embassies were taken have already rallied their troops. If we all strike at once, this is a war that Nyum can not hope to win."

That old fool, Henry thought, not with malice. *He was useful twenty years back, but I'm afraid that he's past his prime; he's done.* "Such a strategy will not be without consequences. Consider the consequences before you speak, Mr. Hill. Maybe back in your day that would have worked, but Nyum has access to nuclear weapons and we don't."

"That's foolish talk, I say. We can't let Harding lord his weapons of mass destruction over us like a scepter, scaring us in to holes while he takes over the world! This is foolish speak. We can not let democracy fail. And that, Mr. President is ultimately what is at stake!"

"Calm down." But Franklin Hill's face turned a red at this. *He forgets his place. Oh well, he's old- and so am I! God, I feel old. The last thing I need is another war on my hands. God... Maybe I'm the one who's forgotten his place? Since when was my worth as a human being surpassing Franklin's? I act as if he isn't there. My old friend...*

That night when Henry retired to his room in the Fortress he was staying at he felt tired. *Now is not the time to feel tired.* So he sat down at his computer and turned it on with a sound of his voice. Lights flashed on the screen and windows opened. There was number one up in the corner of the screen on a grey bar. *A message.* Henry ran a scanning program through the message to check for viruses and hidden traps. *Clean. Well that's surprising, considering my luck lately...* So he opened it:

Henry Kristov of Mihan, I write to you in the most earnest manner-

As has undoubtedly come to your attention by the time you receive this, the Nyum situation has taken a turn for the worst. Self-styled dictator Ken Harding has taken Mihanian hostages and is no doubt intending to use his nuclear weapons on all who oppose him- that is, if we do not act. But to act effectively in this situation is to act subtly. God permits you rally your troops but I urge you, do not march. There is another way.

I have been doing some research and it seems that Harding's goal is not conventional world domination, is not what we feared but something...different. He will call for a summit where all world leaders are threatened to attend or else. This means you, Kristov. And I urge you for all our sakes you attend and go along with whatever plan he is hatching. All will become clear once you get there. If you do not agree with

Harding, I am close to certain you will die. We need somebody on the inside if Harding's plan is to be foiled. God has spoken to me of an abomination- of some sort of heresy in which Harding and his new government is caught up in.

Please I beg of you, heed my advice; in the name of God, do as I say and we can prevent Harding's abomination.

-Percy Teroth, Grand Master of Fadism

At first glance, Henry didn't know what to make of Percy's note. The two of them had a very unusual relationship. Being a firm believer in Fadism himself, Henry had a personal disgust for the usual antics of the Grand Masters. God's word was not meant for abuse and perversion. Teroth shared this sadly uncommon view as well. To be sure, Henry's belief played a big part in his being elected as president. This meant that he, as well as Percy Teroth, would have to keep their criticism private and secretive. The two of them had frequent communication through computer, scheming and planning. Most of their effort in these private sessions was spent on the return of Fadism to its roots. So Henry was very surprised when he received a message from him claiming that: "God has spoken to me..."

The whole idea that every Grand Master could directly communicate with god was obviously a myth which Percy Teroth never believed in. The lie was so blatant that the main religious populace *had* to believe in it. *The people of Fadism jump at every chance to practice their blind faith*, Henry reflected bitterly as he slouched in his deep armchair. The room was cozy, but open. Halls opened behind him in multiple directions, upstairs and down. It looked just as it should: like some rich guy's house. But inside his little "house" one would never begin to suspect that it was located in the middle of a government fortress. Maybe because there weren't any windows, that might be a clue...*No, I have to keep my thoughts on subject. Now what was I thinking about...? Damn it, why can't I think straight anymore? The stress of running a country must be getting to me, that's all. I suppose I'll go to this summit of Harding's...that wicked, wicked man... Sabrina should be informed of this alleged plot as well.* Henry opened his private computer, and began to contact Sabrina

Chapter 7

Darkhan was in fear. There was an ominous air about the entire city- after the recent events involving Nyum, the Greatest City in the world was now a target for a nuclear attack. But as he put socks and shoes on little Sarah's feet, Steven found himself thinking again of the night of her birth.

They didn't want him there with his wife because it wasn't customary. At first he had felt frustration, then maybe some anger, maybe just a little. *They don't know what love is.* And then pity.

Steven and Isobel loved their daughter very much. So much that they were sure that it was something more than was usual. They had made her; the two of them through love had brought her in to this world. Surely the love that he felt as he coaxed his daughter in to the back seat of the car and bucked her seat belt was something more than just an instinctive obligation...*Surely. I wonder if Sarah feels it too? Oh God, please have her like us, please have her love. The world is so cold...*

But he already knew that she was unique, like them. That power that he had felt on the night of her birth had a similar flavor. *But will she love?* Steven climbed in to the drivers' seat and locked the doors, started up the engine. Looking through the rear view mirror, he noticed that Sarah had again, occupied herself with the world outside the car window. He saw her peering, trying to see above the door. He noticed her wrinkle her eyes closed and for a moment and shudder.

"Are you ok honey?" She didn't respond and stayed that way for a moment. There was a faint rattling noise, but then it was gone. "Sarah?" At the sound of her name, she awoke from whatever trance had taken her. *She's fighting to control it,* Steven realized,

not for the first time in the three years she had been in the world. *Her power, mine, it's so hard to control. And what's this headache? It's the change. We somehow feed off of each other, our energy, this flavor of thought, this pain...so familiar...She's changed something.* Steven had a stupid moment of humor as he thought about how other parents get excited over when a child is learning to change. Sarah was learning to control whatever mental energies were rampant within her. And then: *no, you fool. She's learning to suppress it. As you do. She will never control it. Do you think that you can control it? No, you can keep it from controlling you- that is different. Whatever has been changed was not by her own will- look at her, she's in pain!* But Steven could not believe that. He looked back and she smiled. Whatever thoughts were hiding in the cynical part of his mind was soon cast away and the two of them continued their drive to the dig site, Steven's mind in silence.

They had left the highway and were presently making their way along the smaller road that wound around the coast and stopped at the beach-turned dig site. The city had granted Isobel and her colleagues permission to scour the land for more traces of the ancient human remains that they found on the day of the collapse. Despite the political tensions, the scientific community was very excited about this find. When the quarantine had been imposed by Nyum over Darkhan, the Nyumish soldiers did not intervene with life within city. It truly was a quarantine, Steven thought. *Nothing in and nothing out. No physical contact.*

Otherwise all practical aspects of life were exactly the same as before the Nyum conflict. People still had food and people had shelter. The fire department was still functioning and the education system was still operating, if still not quite working. *And we all still have our lives. Lives of fear, yes but lives nonetheless.* The scary thing, thought Steven was that as he assessed those thoughts, he looked at them in quite a literal way.

Luckily, the dig site was within quarantine limits and so the archeological expedition could still be done.

Chapter 9

“...The first experiment on living organisms was a success. In the experiment, thousands of miniature robots called nanobots were released into the subject -- or in this case, subjects, since we were using crickets. Each nanobot would then attach itself to a cell of the subject. Now obviously even if we had enough nanobots to attach to every single cell in the subject’s body-- which wouldn’t be hard-- the subject would not be able to support such a vast increase in density and mass. To solve this problem, each nanobot will emit a wave of shock intended to freeze the surrounding cells in to a state of literally no movement. This way the number of nanobots needed to perform the operation is cut drastically. Also, the operation would no longer be lethal to the subject.

The result of freezing every cell in to a state of movement is that the subject will enter a kind of near-death state. Well, technically the subject *is* dead but it’s a sort of controlled death. When the subject is un-frozen it comes out of that state as it was when first we froze it, no matter how long it has been frozen in near-death. Your astronauts will emerge out of this deep ‘sleep’ at your command here from Earth.” The Mihan Space Organization officials were nodding their heads as Jessica talked.

“What are the side affects?” Asked one of the officials.

“None so far. We have yet to try our method on more intelligent organisms such as cats and dogs, so we don’t know if there will be any mental trauma. But first we need your permission to start the testing on the clones.”

It was still strange to her to think of testing on real human clones as the step below animal testing. Before the recent election there was great controversy considering that very topic. Ever since the Grand Master deemed human clone testing ethical, most the Fadist population voted for new laws which permitted these clones to be considered less than human...

“Permission granted, then.”

Michael was working late again. It was only him and Jessica left at the lab. Because Isobel was hospitalized for the time being, Steven had to leave work earlier than usual to watch Sarah after she'd come home from school.

The large room that they were standing in was triangular with curved walls. The two of them were situated on a balcony protruding one of the walls. Where the room narrowed in front of them was a flat holo screen at an angle so that they could observe it from above. The floor beneath the main balcony was so deep that the holo screen accounted for almost all of the light that came from beneath. A second terrace jutted out to the left of the first, its altitude slightly lower. There was an entrance on this one, stairs leading up to the main.

The two scientists overlooking the main holo screen stood at their panels and touch screens and talked about the nanobot project. Jessica pressed down on her touch screen and the large hologram that was being projected beneath them jumped from image to image. There were graphs and write ups that flashed on the screen. Jessica and Michael continued to look over them.

“This is exciting,” Michael said.

“I agree.” Jessica nodded her head and looked back down at the touch screen.

“Looks like the first clone is ready.”

“Remember, we're only doing one tonight.”

She nodded again, brushed the hair from her eyes and sighed. The clones were human clones created for the purpose of testing out various products without risk of real human injury, for these clones were created without a fully functional brain and therefore had no mind and no consciousness. In this case, the nanobots were being tested.

After a volley of technical chatter, the holo screen was shut off and a series of lights were activated in the cylindrical pit below; row by row turning on as the procession proceeded downwards into the darkness. Down in the pit, there now could be seen capsules containing naked human clones in liquid, each one connected to a mess of wires for measurement of physical condition in the experiments. There were hundreds of capsules, most of them empty.

The sound of machinery could be heard as the selected specimen was retrieved from the vast library of bodies below. The body container filled with its clear liquid rose slowly from the pit.

Michael produced a fake shiver that convulsed throughout his body and Jessica rolled her eyes. She had to admit though; these empty shells of human beings could be very unsettling for someone without experience in working with them. After all, it had been a while since either of them had even seen one of these.

“Are you serious?” she asked. Michael smiled, shook his head as the holo screen reappeared, this time directly in front of them, above the clone in its capsule. The screens displayed readings and measurement levels from the subject. Jessica chuckled.

The body had been infested with the nanobots beforehand. Michael walked over to the touch screen to activate them. Although the body in the tank stayed the same, the results would appear on the holo screen before them. Then he hesitated.

“What?”

“Well, it’s just...with each new step we take, it could be our last, you know? I mean, we’ve worked so hard for so long, but if this fails...”

“Then we try it again. Remember, only one for tonight, Michael. Push the button.” And he did.

After they had locked up, Michael offered to give Jessica a ride home, but she said that she could take the bus. Most of their colleagues didn’t own a car either, a lot of people just relied on public transport. It was raining again.

Michael climbed into the car and out of the rain. Once he had driven up to the main road, he set his course and could feel the acceleration of his car as the computer took over. Michael turned on the heat and the car’s interior immediately got warmer. Michael’s eyes were heavy due to lack of sleep, so he soon dozed off.

Why do I get these headaches? When I have them I feel like I’m feeling what God feels...like his pain is being passed down through our link together. And what I do feel! It doesn’t make any sense... The pain became too much, Emilio passed out.

...I’m back. What I feel...God has multiple prophets, many messengers. I am not alone... No, I was never alone, God is with me...but, how can this magnificent being in my head be God when I feel his limitations?! These headaches, I feel them because God is stretching his resources, spreading himself too thin with all of these... And then, as if to stop him from further realization, God silenced him and sent him back out of consciousness.

We must maintain control.

Yes! The many voices answered as one

What shall we do?

...Destroy some of the prophets, only leave those that are key to the success of our cause, the communal consciousness answered itself.

Emilio woke up.

I must stop thinking these heretic thoughts... More immediate problems are at hand. What is the situation that I’m in? Emilio could feel God’s pain receding.

Am I any better off than if the World Government had captured me? Who really is this man who saved me? And then he walked in.

“Good afternoon,” he said. “I trust you haven’t been waiting too long? You look a little stressed...would you like a glass of water?” Emilio just motioned his hand at him “no” and waited for some answers.

The old man chuckled at that last remark as if he had satisfied some private joke of his. And then Emilio recognized him. *What the hell? This could be bad...*

“Well, Grand Master. Looks like we have some business to attend to, eh?”

Emilio Fordan had arrived at the base a few hours earlier. Still clueless as to who was behind his rescue and what was going on, soldiers proceeded to direct him to a waiting room. They then locked it and left him there.

There was not much in this room that they left him in: A table, some chairs, a clock... And so he waited.

Chapter 11

Sure enough, the old man was still in his chamber, sitting in his deep armchair. The room was dimly lit by electric lamps and seemed cozy, comfortable almost. *A good place to die, she thought, but not a good time. Not yet.*

As she approached the old man he did not stir and for a moment she feared that he was dead. But then he spoke:

“Why did they give me water?”

“Excuse me?”

The old man gestured towards a metal and glass end table that was situated to his left. On the table was an empty glass of water and of course, the suicide pill that they had given him.

“I don’t understand,” said the woman, whose name was Sabrina.

“Sitting here, wondering if you would make it or if I would die, I’ve had time to think.”

“Think about what?”

“Life, Death.” He was still sitting there, staring at the empty glass. Sabrina didn’t have a good feeling about this.

“Why give me water to help me swallow the pill if I’ll just end up dead anyway? Were they worried I’d choke to death?” The old man chuckled at this. Time was of the essence but as always with Henry, Sabrina had to be patient.

“But if that’s true, that we’ll die whatever we do, why try at anything? Why take the time out to make that last comfort before I die? In the end I’m still dead...”

Oh no, he’s rambling, and I don’t like the way this is headed. Henry liked to spontaneously ramble and once started, it was impossible to know what decision he would make before he had reached a final conclusion.

“We have to leave now, Henry if we want to get out of this alive.”

“...Alive! Yes, we do *want* to be alive don’t we? Just like when I *wanted* to drink that water!” Sabrina glanced again back at the empty water glass. She could see now where he was going with this... Now if she could only say something to keep him on the right track. She looked again to the empty glass.

“Why did you drink the water then?”

“Perfect! Right to the point! Why did I drink the water? Why do I *care*? Not because I was thirsty, no.” Sabrina smiled and knew that the old fool would live to see another day.

“Because you’re human,” she said and he grinned. Although *he* was smiling, Sabrina on the other hand could not stand these circular conversations she had with Henry

“Right, let’s go.”

Henry rose from his chair and looked around, then back at the end table where the pill lay, then at Sabrina. He opened his mouth to say something and then stopped, shaking his head.

“Let’s go,” he said again. And so they left the room, passed a darkened corridor that lit up as they passed and continued down the wooden staircase that led to the entrance.

“Put this on,” Sabrina said, revealing a hooded garment. On further inspection, Henry saw that it was a cloak.

“Why a cloak?”

“I know it isn’t very...normal for this setting,” she said with a smile.

“It’s archaic! I see this as a deliberate slight.” Henry spent no effort at all to hide the smile from his lips as he said this.

“Be that as it may, at least they won’t recognize you.” Henry nodded and put it on. It fit easily over his head and fell down past his knees. Henry pulled up the hood and they stepped through the front doorway.

The outside was a stark contrast to his cozy, yet large house that lay within the massive central government complex. The front door opened up on to a large white oval shaped corridor extending a short ways in three directions. At the end of each was a blast door.

They met up with a rather small military escort outside of Henry’s *chosen place of death*. Henry looked over their protection for the night, wishing that there were more of them. This was only one typical guard and if anything went wrong...it wouldn’t matter, he decided. *If anything goes wrong at all then we’ve lost before we’ve even began.*

“Are you sure that all of the necessary preparations have been taken care of?” He asked.

“Absolutely, and thrice checked. Don’t worry Henry. We’ll make it.” Sabrina could only hope though.

“Shall we get going?” asked the leader of their guard. Sabrina nodded. When she looked at him, Henry’s mind was somewhere else it seemed, but he walked on with them. Florescent lights lit the way as they walked along the center corridor.

“Sabrina.”

“What is it?”

“Do you really think that all this was necessary? I mean, all this covering our tracks. It may seem a bit conspicuous, you know?”

“Henry, we both know they’ve suspected us for a while now and let’s face it, we also know how replaceable we are.”

“All too well.” Henry sighed in resignation.

“After all we’ve been through you’d think they’d trust us a little more.”

“Henry.” She said.

“What?”

“We *are* plotting against them.”

“Touché.”

They approached the blast door and Sabrina typed in a code on a transparent panel that was located to their right. After a few seconds the door started unlocking itself. Henry watched that same door open that he had seen a hundred times before. This time around though, the blast door didn’t seem like protection so much as another obstacle in their path of escape.

The small group moved on in relative silence. After another blast door, a twist in the hallway and a security check they started seeing people. They were walking about, doing their business. Some sat in circular alcoves jutting off of the main corridor. So far the journey was going smoothly. *And soon the world will know the real nature of the Perfect Government. The government that so many people despise even though they don’t yet fully understand it.* Henry shook his head. *I have to keep my thoughts on the task at hand. I have to escape.* He looked at Sabrina. *We have to escape.*

Henry, Sabrina and their escort reached a door that led on to an elevator. Sabrina used her card key to open it. In this part of the building, almost every door needed a key and there were guards on every corner. Some waved as they passed by. The door opened and the group proceeded in. One of the guards pressed a number on a panel and the elevator went upwards.

We’re almost there, Sabrina thought. On the roof of this building there should be three helicopters waiting for us. The door opened and they crossed an empty hallway and entered another elevator. *This ride should take us all the way up to the roof and our escape.*

When the doors opened, it was night out. And sure enough, there were three helicopter transports. Henry approached Sabrina.

“Thank you,” he said. Then she died.

He caught her before she fell to the ground. Her back was wet with blood. Henry ran. He ran towards the nearest waiting helicopter. He could hear footsteps behind him. The sniper was still out there and Sabrina’s death would *not* be in vain...

Chapter 12

“I have to say, Mr. Sumner, that your wife was very lucky.”

“What do you mean?” asked Steven.

“Well, remember all those other patients I told you about that had the same condition as hers?” Steven only nodded.

“They didn’t make it through the night.” Steven’s stomach churned at this.

“Not one?”

“Well, one of them still hasn’t woken up yet.”

“Lucky indeed.”

“She still complains about headaches but our machines didn’t pick up anything. If it were up to me, I’d keep her here for another day or so, but since it looks like nothing is seriously wrong...”

“Yeah, she can be stubborn like that,” Steven replied with a faint smile.

“Well, thanks for all of your help, I’ll be sure to get back to you if anything else happens.”

“Good.”

On the car ride back, Isobel was strangely silent. Steven would try to start up a conversation but she would just shrug off his attempts with a vague response. After a few tries, Steven gave up and they continued their ride in silence.

When they arrived at their building, Steven had to help Isobel out of the car. She seemed disoriented, distracted by something that only she noticed.

“Honey, are you alright?”

No answer. Steven turned her around so that she was facing him. Her body was tense and she was breathing hard. She hung her head down so that her hair was covering her face. Steven kept his hand on her shoulder.

“Isobel, look at me. What’s wrong? Do you want me to take you back to the hospital?” Slowly she raised her face. When she saw him, she pushed him away, eyes wide, trembling. Startled, Steven didn’t have time to catch her and she fell to the ground.

“Steven!” she shrieked, averting her eyes again and staring at the ground.

“Isobel, what’s wrong?!” People were starting to turn their heads.

“Stop it!”

“What?” he tried to approach her but she shoved him aside and shakily got to her feet. Then she fell into him, this time he was able to catch her. She hugged herself close to him and whispered in his ear:

“You have to stop your research, your work. It will cause ruin to this world. It will only bring pain and suffering. You may not see it now but the time will come when you will regret what you’re doing.”

“I don’t understand,” he replied, not knowing why he was whispering.

“Unless you stop now, you will be forced to understand. And then it will be too late.” She sounded angry now. Bewildered, Steven just stood there, not knowing what to do.

“Let me bring you inside where you can lie down.” Together they walked inside the building. In the elevator, Isobel seemed to regain her senses.

“Steven. There’s a voice inside of my head. I think it’s God.” At this, Steven was quite taken aback.

What? Isobel’s never been religious, has never believed in any god...but what is this? Is she kidding? No, something strange is going on.

“It told me to tell you those things. I don’t know. I’m scared, Steven.”

Inside of their apartment they were greeted by Sarah. Isobel immediately went to rest in her bedroom and that left Steven to ponder what she had said as Sarah watched TV.

“Um, dad, something strange is happening on TV- It looks important...”

Chapter 12

It was the weekend, but Steven had gone to work because he was eager to see the first animal testing of the nanobots. The others were eager too, and that apparently was why this couldn't wait until Monday. Sarah was out with some friends so that left Isobel at home by herself. Ever since the march on the Central World Government building two weeks ago, she had been just a little paranoid. Isobel had been among those that were protesting.

I didn't want to go. I felt like I had to.

By now, every knowledgeable person knew of the *Perfect Government* and almost everybody believed it. If it was true, it sure explained some previously unknown mysteries concerning the World Government.

There were more police on the streets now, more guards around government buildings. A week ago, Hitsch had delivered a public speech explaining some of the events that had happened. Apparently the other four members of the World Leaders had been assassinated by assailants sent by Henry Kristov before he died. Their Brain Programs and any related data had also been destroyed by some people left in the inside after Kristov took flight. But given the information that had been distributed by *The Truth*, it was obvious that she had given the orders herself. Yes, she had taken the time

out to read that very popular document, but she had a feeling that it was somehow because of that voice inside of her head.

God has been strangely silent since the massacre. I've just been getting these... feelings. I feel a sense of accomplishment, though I didn't do anything. We failed, didn't we? Or were there unknown consequences of that march? Why were the World Leaders really killed? Has God used us? Were those that died some necessary sacrifice?

The dog was lying down in the middle of the floor of the testing room, asleep when the automatic doors slid open revealing Steven as he walked inside. The team leader stopped to pet the sleeping dog before he looked up to Jessica and Michael who were at the computer terminal, Jessica writing down notes and observations.

“What is the infestation level?”

“We have it at ninety eight percent, just a couple more minutes.”

The dog was named Sally. There were wires hooked up to her, snaking back into the computers that surrounded her. It gave the room an almost cluttered look, but somehow still managed to seem neat because of the sterility of the rest of the room's atmosphere. Sally would be the first real animal testing besides the crickets, the first test on a thing of some intelligence. Sally didn't seem to notice as the nanobots were linking with her. Even in sleep, Steven imagined it must be a weird sensation; thousands of tiny robots embedding their selves in each and every one of your cells.

“Nanobot Infestation has reached one hundred percent.” Michael Said. He initiated the process from the terminal as Jessica took observations and Steven watched over them.

As Sally stiffened and the nanobots began to freeze her body, things got quiet. The slow humming of the computers stopped, all of the ambient sounds of the background just stopped. There was no sound. Nothing.

All three scientists looked back and forth between each other, confused and frightened. Steven tried clapping his hands and Michael buffeted the visual display unit in front of him. Jessica started shouting something but there was no sound. It was as if they were all three in a communal nightmare. No sound. Nothing.

Almost in a panic, Michael shut off the program and in turn, releasing Sally from the hold of the Nanobots inside of her. She awoke that instant and stood up, eyes wide.

“What the hell just happened?” Michael said in a confused panic. Sally was standing up now, her loud barking echoing off of the white panel walls.

“I don't know. You guys... That was... I don't know what just happened.” Jessica was more confused than scared. Whatever it was, it was over. She was more interested in the readings that were coming off of Sally's brain chart.

“Sally's brain functions are all normal.”

“What?”

“Her brain, there isn't any abnormal activity- no pain, nothing,” said Jessica.

“Yeah, well, whatever just happened, she still looks pretty freaked out.”

Steven was still silent and thinking, hand on his chin. “I wonder what Sally was experiencing... she was unconscious when the sound went off but she still seems *freaked out*, as you put it,” he said thoughtfully. He was thinking, deciding. *What really happened in that dog's head just now? Something happened- and I'd like to find out what.*

“We need to test this on someone who can give us proper feedback.”

“What? What are you suggesting, Steven?” Jessica looked at him, quizzically.

“Well, I mean just what I said. We need to test these things on a person.”

“We won’t do anything so careless,” Jessica exclaimed. “No way. If this is in fact no coincidence then we seem to have tapped into something really strange. Strange things can be dangerous-”

“But if we stopped trying every-” surprisingly Michael was the one to butt in, convinced that Steven had the right of it, but Jessica was not going to let a mere majority overpower her logical reasoning.

“Look Michael, I think that we caused this thing to happen by sending Sally into near death! What the hell kind of *phenomenon* does this anyway? Sound just *stopped*, you guys! That isn’t natural, or at least if it is, it’s some part of nature that we previously haven’t discovered. I know what you’re thinking but I won’t let you risk anybody’s lives for something that could be potentially dangerous.” No one talked for a moment. Jessica was thinking, trying to put her next thoughts into words. Michael and Steven patiently waited.

“We, we need to figure out some other way to test the animal subjects. It was clear that something happened to Sally here, but we don’t know what it was.”

“Hmm,” Steven nodded his head at this. *I’ll just have to do this by myself, maybe I can get Michael on board with me on this.* Steven and Michael usually stayed after when Jessica had left. This was due to her living much farther away than the other two. *That’s when I’ll confront him about this.*

A few hours later, Jessica was leaving. Michael had reluctantly agreed to stay late again, despite his other plans. Steven dialed the number on his cell to contact Isobel. Isobel didn’t have a cell phone so he was calling home- Sarah picked up.

“Hello?”

“Hi Sarah.”

“Oh, hey dad.”

“How was your day?”

“Good.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Good- mom isn’t here.”

“She’s not home? Where is she, do you know?”

“Well, she said that she was going to pay you a visit at your work. She seemed kinda angry...you know how she’s been acting about you work lately.”

Steven bit his lip. Ever since she had collapsed on the sidewalk in front of their building she had been acting strange. Ever since then she muttered and complained of headaches- sometimes she didn’t even seem like herself at all. *Like when she joined those religious protestors...* “Yea. Well, I guess I’ll see her then. Bye.”

“Bye.” *What a bland conversation. I suppose we do see each other every day- it isn’t like we don’t talk to each other enough, and she is a teenager...*

“Steven,” said Michael, questioning.

“Yea?” Steven drew away from his idle thoughts and realized that he had to be focused if he was to have any chance of convincing Michael. He would have a chance to talk to his wife about whatever was bothering her now soon enough. *Although I don’t know how she intends to get past security here. I don’t know, she’ll call, I guess.*

It was night and the auto-drive had been disabled because of who knows what so Isobel was driving manually. It had been so long since she had driven manually before. There had been only one case of this happening before where she had had to turn off auto-drive. Luckily though, they still taught you how to drive manually in school because of this very thing.

She could only faintly see the moon through all of the clouds; she was crossing the River Darkhan. Isobel was angry. She didn't know why or how, but she was angry...no, something *inside* of her was angry...*God*.

God, or whatever the hell this entity, this thing inside of me really is. Shit, what am I going to do when I get there? I feel all of this anger for what Steven is doing and I don't even know why...but I don't feel angry with him myself- am I even in control over my own body anymore...?

But then it was too late to think of anything else- if she wasn't in control of her own body then, then no one was because nobody was driving the car as she thought. When Isobel came back from her thoughts she felt a sensation of dizziness. The car was flipping in the air, careening off of the side of the bridge in to the river. Isobel caught a glimpse of some stopped cars on the bridge arranged in awkward locations. An accident.

The car hit the water with a crash and sent waves spurting upwards. The car's descent slowed as it began to sink to the bottom. Frantically Isobel tried to remember what she was supposed to do in such a situation, but her panicked mind drew a blank. The windows were starting to crack at the pressure of the water. *Oh my god, I'm going to die. I'm sorry, Steven...*

"Yea?" Steven said. Michael gave Steven an inquiring look.

"Right, right," Steven looked around as if to see if there was anybody spying on them, as if Jessica had stayed behind and was somehow hiding out of sight.

"I want to be injected with Nanobots; I want to enter near death." Steven didn't let Michael say anything before he spoke up again. "Michael, listen. I feel passionately about this. I can't explain why-" Steven had a sudden feeling of helplessness, that he *had to* enter near death to...to, prevent something? *To do something. It'll be clear once I witness what Sally saw.*

"I firmly believe that what Sally experienced is directly related to, to what happened with the sound. I want to find out what that is." To Michael, Seven sounded frantic, almost scared. He had never seen Steven like this, Steven's voice was wavering.

"Steven, I do too, but..." Michael searched for words. Finally he gave in: "Sure" There was a brief moment where relieve crossed Steven's face, but then it hardened in determination.

"Well then, let's do it," Steven showed a smile.

"You still up for this, Steven?" Michael asked, after they were done filling Steven's body with Nanobots. Steven only nodded and lay down on the metal bed that sat unaccompanied in the middle of the testing room. His body was then hooked up to a number of wires connected to the computers.

Michael resumed his usual spot at the control panel.

"We were going to have to start using humans with these things sometime. That *is* what they're intended for anyway." Steven replied after he lay down.

“I know that, but with that strange occurrence that happened with Sally...”

“I know what you mean.” *But I need to do this, for us. For her. But who was she? ...And why is she slipping away from me?*

As the nanobots that were already thoroughly embedded inside his body froze his cells, Steven began to lose contact with the physical world. When he awoke and a second later, he wasn't in the research lab any more. He wasn't even in the physical world.

So this is how it happened. I never would have guessed, not in a million years.

Steven saw the universe stretched out before him, all of its secrets, all laws of nature before him. It was like he could touch; even control the laws of nature. Everything was his to mold. There was no space left to think rationally, no time to ask why.

But at the same time, he felt the presence of something bigger than him, some higher being watching over him, intelligent almost. Its conscious presence had the weight of many minds, human minds.

Steven could see infinity in all of its real, tangible glory. Nature was his to control, its laws his to wield. Everything around him was more real than before. He had no physical body, this purely mental dimension that he was in had no material aspect. After the initial shock, Steven began thinking, excitedly. *This place...is nature! Sally could not control it, her mind too simple-but for a human, things will be different. For so many years, we scientists, no, the world- we've searched for such a thing. Now, this just may be our answer!*

In his infinite vision of the universe's information, Steven could see why he had been so passionately drawn to Near Death. The one that he needed to help was out there, and he reached to her, his conscious power roaming the un-trodden terrain of this newly discovered dimension. *But it has been trodden before. This great entity that I sense around me...* Then Steven found her, his partner in life, his freedom, his love. *Isobel.*

She could join him there soon, but Steven would not let that happen. *This place means death, I know it does.* And so he began to control the nature around her, pushing her away. The whole sensation was new to him, but it also felt strangely natural. *And I have to save her...*

People were gathering on the bridge where Isobel had crashed. There was a pileup of cars, pieces of cars were everywhere. Emergency vehicles had arrived; the traffic was diverted to one lane, now in a slow moving bottleneck. The injured were being taken care of; a boat was on the scene where Isobel's car had gone under, searching for any survivors. A body surfaced. The dark figure in the water was not Isobel, but he was not alone. He swam towards the nearest boat, carrying a limp human body.

The search lights coming off of the rescue boat passed over her two people and the boat moved closer. The rescue workers sent out buoys and then hoisted the two people from the water. The man was still holding Isobel. When she was brought on deck, she rolled over and sputtered water: she was alive.

“Get these two people inside! Bring them blankets!”

And so it begins.

This means we've just had a taste so far as to what is to come.

Destiny had warned us.

But we had almost won! Where did this new threat come from?

Not a threat, said Leo. Our demise. And then a solemn silence came over the ancient consciousness. Death was, for once...silent. Destiny is in my favor, they have failed to protect order: There is hope, yet...but they will fight on.

Leo chuckled to himself.

It is only human.

Chapter 19

“Well, seat at the table that Emilio was sitting at. In reaction, Emilio got up almost violently and stared at this man who he had thought was his enemy.

“Oh, don’t be so surprised, Grand Master. You’re an intelligent man, that at least I can gather from reading *The Truth*. If I was still with the World Government, you’d be dead by now- or at least you’d be treated less like a guest and more like my prisoner.”

“So which one am I here?” There was a brief pause while Kristov thought about it for a second.

“Well, I suppose when you come right down to it, you’re my prisoner...”

Brilliant, thought Emilio.

“...But I believe that you’ll be quite a willing prisoner. That is, what I have in mind for you is in your best interest, I think.”

Should I trust this man?

Yes, it answered. This man is the best shot you’ve got at a chance to rally the people against the continuation of the abomination.

What abomination, God? You keep speaking of such a thing but I do not understand.

The creation, it answered, of your enemy. You know what we are talking about.

The Perfect Government, Emilio thought. He had suspected the Perfect Government's involvement in this since the first mention of the *abomination*. Now he was certain. *But why does this voice within me always refer to itself in a plural form? Isn't God a single he, one entity? Or maybe we've just been thinking about it the wrong way all along...*

When Emilio returned from his thoughts he found that Kristov had been talking. Whenever he had these all-consuming thoughts and conversations of with God, it was like another part of his brain had been keeping track of what was happening around him while he was away mentally. Perhaps a better description would be that his conscious mind would branch off into two different paths when he talked with God. And when he was done, they would rejoin as one, both experiences remembered.

Kristov had been talking about how he had come across *The Truth* after his escape from the inevitable death that he would have to have had if he were to stay in the clutches of the World Government.

"Wait. So you *escaped* from the World Government? Why exactly did you need to do that?" When Kristov, who had informed him that he would much rather be called Henry was about to say something more, Emilio spoke up again.

"Well, I suppose that a more apt question would be: what did you do to betray them?" Although not quite comfortable calling one of the most powerful men in the world (although from what he had heard, that could very well not be true for much longer) by his first name, Emilio had become quite comfortable that he would not end up dead in the near future. At least at the hands of this man that sat before him. They had been talking for some minutes and Emilio wanted to make sure that if any bargain was to be made, he would be in some position to get a good deal.

"Good." Henry Kristov seemed more annoyed than happy about whatever he was about to say.

"At least you can see that much. I didn't want to go through this with you step by step. Yes, I did betray the World Government and am apposed, as you are to the success of the *Perfect Government* as they insist on calling it."

Instead of scolding Emilio, trying to intimidate him for butting in like that, Henry had actually remarked on how it showed good character! Emilio couldn't say that he disagreed.

"By the way, Nafari was in it with me as well, although she died rescuing me." Henry raised his hand to quiet Emilio in anticipation for him to say something.

"Listen. I'm not saying that *The Truth* was perfect. Although pretty much everything of any importance was portrayed with surprising accuracy given the secrecy of the *Perfect Government* project."

This, Emilio was glad to hear. *So, at least he respects me. Well then, let's see how he handles this one:* But Emilio's words caught in his throat. *Now's not the time, not yet.* He could not tell if that was God talking or his own thinking.

"So, what do you want me to do?"

Ken Harding watched the city outside of the window, hands behind his back. The city below him seemed calm, he was satisfied. The call had just come in and the attack

was underway. Uratar would soon fall and with Henry dead, any thought of a rebellion would soon be squandered. At first Harding had scoffed at the idea of Henry's overthrow of the World Government, or whatever he was trying to do. The *Perfect Government* was the real target, that was clear enough. But that was before he had any leverage.

Ken turned away from the window and walked up to a small remote control panel on his desk, pressed a button on it and the window turned opaque. Ken flipped through some backgrounds until he found one that he liked and turned the wall back on, this time showing an aerial view of a forest.

Kristov means to use the influence of the Grand Master to rally the people for his cause. That bastard not only released important secrets about the World Government but now he's escaped. He's caused enough trouble already. In any case, this shouldn't affect the proceedings of the Perfect Government. So what if the people know? To hell with them. Eventually they'll realize for themselves the benefits of the Perfect Government. Right now the only reason anybody has to be against us is the word of the Grand Master, and he'll be dead soon. Once he's replaced, things will go back to normal.

Then his head exploded in pain. It was happening again. And this time, Ken was really scared, because he knew what it must mean.

You fool: Nothing will be back to NORMAL. You must end this abomination before more of its kind are created! But now the voice inside his head now spoke the words he feared: *You are not the only one. You can not win this fight. Even if you kill him, he has already reached the others, and will once more before he dies. We have seen it. You can not win.*

And then it was over. Ken found that he had collapsed this time: it was getting worse. The more he resisted, the harder it became to keep control. Slowly, he brought his ancient body to his feet.

“Get out of my head!”

Soon it will be my time to go, too. Soon, the Perfect Government will recreate me as well. But right now it is time for Kristov's death, past time.

There was a great crashing sound and Emilio could feel the building shake. The overhead lights flickered and went out. A moment later the dim emergency lights turned on. Kristov was already on some sort of radio device, asking what the hell was happening.

“We're under attack.”

The plan was this: Emilio Fordan would get on camera and talk, his speech covering topics that the two of them had discussed. Kristov had access to recourses that would tune all TV sets to that signal. This live broadcast would rally the people's support and maybe, just maybe- help invoke the rebellion that both of them agreed needed to happen...

“Come on, let's get you on camera. We can hold out long enough for you to send my...our message.” *Damn straight, our message. But the most important message of all is that of God's: there are others out there like me, and we have to be united.*

Outside, the base's defenses were being depleted and World Government forces were moving in. Another missile shot got through and destroyed a small section of the base, smoke billowing out through the gaping hole. News helicopters were doubtless on their way from the nearby city of Darkhan to cover the fight.

The two men, now accompanied by guards made their way up to where the cameras were set up. It was in the most secure part of the base: even if the rest would fall, it would take longer to penetrate that section. Another blast, and the emergency lights were cut off, leaving the corridor pitch black. And as the blast hit, the shock shook the floor, leaving people off balance and disoriented in the darkness. A few flashlights had come on now from awkward places: somebody had clearly fallen down; another was pushed up against the wall, pinned by something. After more shouting and confused beams of light darting to and fro, it was clear That a section of the roof had caved in on one of the soldiers.

"Leave him!" said Henry.

"But-"

"Look, we're all dead anyways; there are more important things now: put your emotions aside and think clearly," Henry spat as he pushed forward. Then there was a flash of light and orange color and then the corridor in front of them opened up to the outside. A moment later, there were machine guns being shot nearby and people dying.

Emilio looked around him: There was blood, Henry was dead; many were dead. Then he checked to see in he was himself injured.

Just some sore muscles and bruises.

Then someone grabbed his arm and said:

"Come on sir, you're coming with me." –one of the guards.

Do not give up hope.

The two made their way through some of the less damaged parts of the base. After a few slightly dangerous detours, they finally made it. When they arrived at the temporarily secure area that they were to broadcast his speech from, Emilio's consciousness branched off again as he received his final message from God.

Emilio. Listen, and keep faith.

I am not your Lord, nor am I something evil. I am everything that you thought I was, but more; I am everything you thought I was, but less, and you will understand it all very soon. I am a single entity, but many minds together.

We speak to you as our prophet for one purpose: you must unite every prophet and all people against the World Government and their abomination. Now is your chance...

And with that, Emilio was brought back together as his mind connected with reality. He was standing at a podium at the front of the room, empty seats and a camera staring back at him. Emilio took a deep breath as the building shook around him.

"You're on!"

"Um, dad, something strange is happening on TV- It looks important. I, I think it's the Grand Master."

Steven got up and walked over to the couch, stopping behind it. It was the Grand Master. The sounds of war could be heard in the background.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know, I was watching the news and then this came on.”

And then he spoke. He seemed nervous but determined. Steven was interested, this preaching seemed nothing like the usual prattle that Fordan droned on about. This seemed real. Steven sensed a presence come up next to him and he turned to find Isobel up. He was about to say something but she shushed him and pointed to the screen:

“...I have spoken with this entity that we call God. And he says that many of you have been touched by this gift too. Why then, do we have this gift? God has spoken to me about an abomination! *The Truth!* Believe it, and you will find your answer. Speak to your God as he has spoken to you! Unite! It is your responsibility to defeat this *Perfect Government*, and mine to inspire the rebellion...”

Then they finally broke through the armored doors and it was over.

The last thing that they saw was the Grand Master get shot, then the screen went fuzzy. Grand Master. Looks like we have some business to attend to, eh?” Kristov took a

Chapter 22

The supreme ruler of the universe was a simple thing. It had to be. God was simple, the Communal Consciousness was simple; simple, if not in a mental sense, then a physical sense.

Unlike God, the Communal Consciousness was a complex, thinking thing. God had been intelligent, but only just intelligent enough to feel love and hate.

But as was the nature with such beings, his replacement functioned in much the same manner: simply. Because what intelligence could possibly be infinite enough to micromanage an entire universe? No, the Communal Consciousness, and God, needed to function at a very basic level, managing only the things most important...

So that is our dilemma.

You’re telling us that we can’t produce more prophets

Precisely. ? Interesting how the problem has reversed itself, isn’t it?

The Communal Consciousness had dug up the intellect of some of the very first humans, the *creators*. Speaking to itself, (for that was how such an entity could manage its thoughts) it continued its thinking.

We haven’t lost yet. The prophets aren’t dead.

Not yet, said Leo.

It was three years after Henry's defeat and the headaches were getting worse. *Is what I'm doing really so wrong? Am I failing to see the evil in the Perfect Government? No. I must continue. My lifelong mission is almost at an end. Nothing can change my mind. Not even God.*

Ken was spending most of his time sitting in his office, resting.

Why do I choose to prolong my death like this? My death is not like any other death, it is not my defeat rather than my success. I suppose that this is just human nature. This is what got to Henry. But he was weak... So, how do I want to die?

A small hologram of a face popped up on the desk in front of him, disturbing him from his thoughts.

"What is it?"

"Sir," it said. "There's a problem; thousands of protestors are marching on us." *Henry. Him and that Grand Master: so this is their last weapon.*

"Send me the video." Ken received the link and put the video onscreen. His wall jumped from the usual aerial city scene to a live video feed presumably from a helicopter covering the march. Ken gave a command and the wall screen zoomed in. Sure enough, the protestors were carrying religious signs and banners, crying for an end to the Perfect Government.

These fools! They hardly know what they're protesting against! Instead of using logic and figuring out the good in this...they just listen to the Grand Master.

No, the voice said. They listen to us.

Ken winced in pain as the pain in his head flared up again. He was shaking, fighting back the presence inside of him. *Oh my God, I'm going insane.*

Listen to us, Prophet. Your link with us is only a curse if you so choose it to be. Those people out there; look at them! Ken somehow managed the energy to face the wall screen once more, although it felt more like he was being forced in to it rather than by his own free will. You see. They all have us as their guidance. They've embraced us! As should you. Right now you would have us as your enemy, but you can still change that. You can stop this abomination before it goes too far.

No.

"Sir, sir are you alright?" Ken Harding came back to consciousness to find a group of familiar faces looking down at him. *Good, that means that they are of some rank.*

"Kill them."

"I'm sorry?-"

"Kill them," he said again, shaking off some help to get to his feet. "All of them. I don't care what you think, it must be done." George started to say something but Ken cut him off. He could feel his strength deserting him.

"Listen to me. This is my final wish- I'm dying; I really don't give a shit how I die anymore but this last thing is important." Ken grasped the other man's arm.

"You don't know how dangerous these people are to the success of the *Perfect Government*. If you've never trusted me before, trust me for the sake of the *Perfect Government* and kill them." Ken didn't have time to see George nod because he was dead already.

As will all human minds before him, Ken's mind fell into obscurity, his individuality fading- falling into death. And when he fell through, Ken Harding then understood:

Oh god, what have I done?

Chapter 24

It had been two weeks since the massacre but Katherine didn't know that- two weeks since her capture. The World Government forces had moved in without notice, too fast for anybody to do anything. Not that they could have done a thing. The chaos that followed was a disgusting show of how brutal human beings could be.

Before anybody knew what was happening, guns were firing and people were dying. Katherine did not know how many escaped, if any. Surely some did? If not, then their mission was already at an end. Whoever was not killed was taken prisoner.

It's going to be a big scandal, sure, and there will be public outrage...but what can anybody do about it? We are supposed to live in a free nation now, but that's just because our dictatorship says so. What happens when they change their minds?

Katherine had never been a really religious person. She was one of those people who said she didn't believe in God, but instead believed in a "higher being".

God. I believe in God. Fadism just had it all wrong, that's all. Although when he gave his final speech, the Grand Master seemed to be for once talking to me. And I believed him...I should never had been in that march.

You did the right thing. Surely there will be others that will complete our mission, then the world will be saved, said the voice inside her head.

Shut up. Just, shut up. Then she put her head in her knees and started crying.

It was all over the news: “Religious protestors massacred by World Government forces”... “Peaceful protest turns into slaughter...” Valarie Hitsch turned off the wall screen and switched it back to Ken’s old favorite. The city seemed more soothing to her than it ever could have been for Ken. But Ken was dead now, and he wasn’t coming back.

He brought this on himself. That bastard, always acting as if he was somehow more important than us. Yes, he did come up with the original idea for the Perfect Government but that gave him no right to lord over us. He had it coming to him- we were supposed to be a team...

Valarie closed her eyes and thought of how she could clean up this mess that the others had created. She would have to take the full power in had of the dictatorship that she now ran just to control the people- and Valarie didn’t much like that idea.

The World Government was not a democracy but was better than any democracy before it. While old democratic nations of the past had fallen on their principles and become corrupt, destroying the civil rights and liberties of their citizens, this would not happen with the World Government as long as it was being run by the system of the *Perfect Government*.

The World Government may be a dictatorship of sorts, but that is would it will not fail- it was run by people who care about the freedom of their citizens, and because of the *Perfect Government*, this would not change.

Of course that was the problem with the democracies, or more accurately- republics of the past: with every new leader, there was another chance for corruption. The more this happened, the more the freedoms of their citizens got eroded, the worse off that nation got.

Valarie saw this problem all too well, even with the World Government.

Was the Bloody Conference for nothing? The problem, of course was that these nations could not find a good leader and keep him or her. What use is the World Government if there are five of us with different ideas? Especially if our “leader” thinks he has the right to kill of thousands of peaceful protestors! There, I can sympathize with Kristov and Nafari...but instead of killing the perfect government, why not just try to fix it?

Yes, that’s why I killed the others and disabled their clone facilities- it wasn’t out of greed...was it?

Katherine sat there inside the cell. She had stopped crying. When the young woman who was her cell mate tried to comfort her, she had rejected her with curses. *Stupid. I could really use a friend right now...* That made her think of God. God had been her friend for so many years. For so long she had trusted in him, prayed to him, loved him. But when he had finally decided to speak back to her...*my life is ruined. And for what? What is this great purpose that God had talked about? A lie...I’m sorry.*

She started crying again. *Damn me, look at myself! I’m so weak, that’s probably why I feel like this about you, God. I’m sorry.* But Katherine was having mixed feelings now: *I feel hatred inside of me, but for whom? For God, surely. But after so long- it’s hard to believe giving up faith. Maybe I am weak; maybe that weakness is pitting me against the lord. I must not give up hope.*

Katherine had been very successful in working with developing quantum computers in her earlier life- before God had destroyed it. *And it truly is destroyed, isn't it? What will become of me? Will I just rot away my life in this cell? I certainly find it unlikely that we'll be released. Really we should be, to try and help calm down the people of the continent- for surely there must be riots and public outrage after the massacre. But at the same time, what kind of people would do slaughter so many others? Not the same people that would free me, that's for sure.*

Valarie Hitsch paced her office.

I need to free the prisoners. It was wrong for Harding to give those orders. But why did he do it in the first place...? It isn't like him. He isn't ignorant- he knew what the consequences would be! Valarie Hitsch ran her fingers through her hair, exhausted. It was a hard task, running the world. It was actually Ken Harding's office, but it was hers now- it all was. *And they're never coming back.*

It would have been close to impossible for anybody without her level of clearance to breach the security systems and get a hold of the actual brain programs. It had only been the five World Leaders who had that sort of clearance- even the security systems were computerized, every component of it checking the other to see that it was operational. *Yes, nobody else will be able to access my brain program so easily- if at all. I'm safe.*

She was searching his old office, not sure of what she was looking for. She definitely was searching for *something* though. She had searched everywhere and surely this was the last place to look. *There has to be a reason behind what he did. He had been acting strangely... I'm looking for evidence, to see if that thought at the back of my mind is correct.* She was looking for a diary. A notebook or computer file of some sort.

Valarie was searching the room physically before getting on the computer. This is because she'd feel quite stupid if she were to spend hours on the computer, searching- only to have it turn up after minutes of searching the room. The wall screen was off now. She was in no mood for any distractions. But for some reason the empty wall drew her attention even more than if it was on. The dark grey wall seemed to be soaking up shadows but at the same time it was clear- she could make out many of the superficial scratches on the metal- their origin from who knows what. As Valarie got closer to it, she felt like she was overlooking something important, like for some reason the wall was detracting from her search. But there was something about it. When she was close to giving up her search of the room and get on to the computer instead, Valarie walked over to the desk where the control lay. She turned it on, trying to think of the best setting for her exhausted mind could handle. *I'm growing weary of so much power. No matter, she thought, unconcerned- the perfect government will correct that in its evolution.*

A gigantic sun flew on to the screen, surrounded by orbiting planets and a background blanket of stars. At the moment she sat down, Valarie noticed something out of her peripheral vision, a slight disturbance on the wall screen. She shook her head and rubbed her eyes. *I'm tired.* But she felt that she had to complete her search. Something had to come up.

When she had made herself comfortable and was about to start her search, Valarie realized that she had no immediate way of getting past the security on Ken's computer.

Oops. I'll have to call someone in. How could I make such a simple mistake? Am I getting senile? Valarie frowned. Her clone would be coming into service any time now.

It was half an hour until help arrived. Valarie had gotten up from the chair at Ken's desk and was standing up, staring at the wall screen with the planets when the decoding expert arrived. Valarie frowned. There was something wrong with the screen- it was out of focus somehow. During her time waiting for the man to come and get past the security on Ken's computer, Valarie had tried to change some of the settings so that it would be clearer but something else seemed to be the matter. Valarie had had poor vision when she was younger, then got surgery to fix that. In her old age, some of those problems might have been coming back. This was what she had decided was the matter when she had given up trying to think about it.

But Valarie was still squinting at the wall when the computer expert left. And it was still almost a minute until she went and sat down at the computer. Valarie didn't know where to start searching so it took a while getting started. But after a while, she had developed a methodical system for searching the files. She didn't search all of the files, just the ones that weren't open to her access under normal conditions. Even then, after almost an hour of searching, she hadn't gotten through them all. After she was done and she hadn't found anything, Valarie got up. It was only then, feeling quite stupid like one usually does after wasting a large amount of time for something like this that she noticed the writing on the wall.

She hadn't expected to find much in the way of computer data. That was too easily hacked and accessed by those it might not supposed to be accessed by. *Like me*, she thought. Not that she was expecting to find anything at all. When Valarie got up though, she finally noticed what had been bugging her and was surprised to see how simple it was.

On the wall screen was some writing. She had to squint to see it properly but there was definitely writing scribbled on the wall in what looked like black ink. It looked like it had originated in the lower left hand corner near the desk but had spread outwards, becoming less dense. It was as if at first he had been trying to conceal it or at least make it a little bit inconspicuous but then had given up and spread out. So surprised by this she was that Valarie forgot to turn off the wall screen before walking over to have a better look. This method of recording information seemed archaic, even a bit crude- even for Ken. When she actually was close enough to read it, Valarie instinctively checked to see if she could match the handwriting with Ken's but then realized that she couldn't quite remember what his handwriting actually *looked* like, let alone what it looked like scribbled on a wall at an awkward angle. She didn't receive many handwritten documents anymore.

The background behind the writing was illuminated by the great shining sun so there was enough contrast to read it clearly. And so she began to read. It seemed like a journal of some sort. At first impression it seemed randomly written but then after reading an entry she notice dates written close to some of the corresponding entrees.

As she read on, Valarie could not believe what she was reading, could not believe that Henry wrote it. *Prophet? What the hell is he talking about? This is confusing- the protestors that we had killed or imprisoned were delivering messages about prophets and God...this all matches up but it makes no sense to me.* And as she read the journal it grew ever more frantic and the handwriting messier and messier. Ken Harding was

complaining of increasing headaches in his later writing. *I remember him always grasping his head in apparent pain...maybe this is true, but maybe he's just delusional. But if so many other people were apparently touched by this God- could this be connected? Why did he order their deaths?* Valarie Hitsch had an idea of how to find out- or at least maybe how to get *some* answers.

Katherine heard footsteps coming down the dark corridor that led to her cell. They became louder and louder, almost seeming to drown out the sound of her heavy heartbeat. There were many of them. It couldn't be any normal guard patrol. This seemed like too many. *I can't believe this has become my life. How long have I been here? ...I have to keep faith.*

Her steel cell door had but a small square window near the top at eye level but she didn't have to get up from her substandard bed to know that they were coming for her. She *knew*. Besides, the window would be too grotty for any proper usage. When the door opened, since she was sitting on her bed and it was positioned on the side where the door opened up to, the first thing that appeared was the sweeping butt of a gun. It was like a sightless killer searching, sniffing the room for life. Then came the guards and finally- the last plausible person that she'd expect to see down there in cell block eight.

Valarie Hitsch, surrounded by her personal bodyguards, entered the room silently. She wore a stern look on her face.

"You- you're coming with me," she said. Katherine was confused and apparently this showed on her face.

"I have some questions for you concerning God and our *abomination*."

The questioning, Valarie decided was going to be in Ken's office. That way the prisoner could have a good look at his writings. Since there was no real way of copying the journal or even bringing it anywhere, this seemed like the best idea. The questioning would also be just between the two of them, no guards. Valarie had a feeling that this conversation would be very out of character for her- she didn't usually deal with delusional Fadists as equals. And that was the only way that she would be able to get any real answers out of her- so no guards.

Valarie stood there in the office facing Katherine, gun in hand. The felt strange in her hands, like it was an unneeded barrier. *After all this woman has been through, the last thing she needs is someone pointing a gun in her face. But then again, I need it here for my protection. What happened to her was cruel and unfair and she might be dangerous to me because of it.* But no matter how hard she thought about it, Valarie Hitsch could not shake the feeling that the gun shouldn't be there. Even if this woman's senses were watered down by Fadism. *But that's exactly why I want to talk to her isn't it? That's exactly why I don't want the guards in here; I want to find out the truth about this supposed God.*

"Don't be afraid, I won't hurt you if you cooperate." *Yeah, that sounds reassuring.* The woman seemed timid, eying the gun.

"Oh this?" Valarie gestured with the gun; the prisoner's face hardened as she tried to build up a stronger stance. *Too late. I know you're afraid; you wont lie to me.*

“You have to understand- there aren’t any guards, you and I are alone.” The prisoner nodded at this. Valarie was readying herself to continue when she decided to take a different approach.

“...What’s your name by the way?”

“Um, it’s Katherine.” *Brilliant. Just as she begins to strengthen, she realizes her position. She’s defenseless- I could kill her in a moment and nobody would care.* After this thought, Valarie was surprised to realize that her problem wasn’t only political but ethical: *I’m in enough shit after the shooting, I thought that that was why I needed to free the prisoners.* But looking at this frightened woman standing in front of her, Valarie realized that the prisoners had as much a right to a free life as she did and she was glad she did realize this. *If I have enough of a conscience to make this decision then so will my brain program. Ken didn’t and neither would have his clone. And that’s the whole point of the Perfect Government, isn’t it? We wanted to make the world a better place.*

How ironic, Leo thought, alone in his secret conscious pocket of the communal consciousness. *How satirical that the roles have been switched. I set up this consciousness to bring my eye back to me, to bring true chaos back to this world- and oh, how it has been so long! I had thought that chaos was what the human race would want but it seems that this entity of which I am a part of is just channeling destiny into the world... Just as God did,* he thought with disgust. Leo had long since stopped caring what the rest of humankind wanted, had long since stopped thinking with his head, so to speak and started thinking only with his heart. *Have I ever thought with my head?*

How Ironic, Leo thought, *that this new entity which is the enemy of my own is working towards what I want...*

Soon after they had been awakened, both Henry and Sabrina had arrived at death at almost at almost the same time. Death was empty when they came. Like none before them save for the creators of the first entity, they were alone in death. Like the first, this Consciousness was artificial but unlike the first, it was unintentional.

“You’re, you’re going to free us?” asked Katherine. Valarie still hadn’t lowered the gun but by now both women had gotten used to its presence and so it didn’t matter.

“Yes.”

Throughout the course of the conversation, Katherine had explained about the prophets and their mission to prevent the *Perfect Government*. She had also demonstrated her complete and utter faith in God and his motives. All of this matched up to the wall writing and this was before Valarie had shown it to her. The difference was, Ken resisted. *And look where that got him,* though Valarie. More importantly though, she had decided to terminate the *Perfect Government*.

She had read *The Truth* by the late Grand Master Emilio Fordan and had thought of it only as religious rantings that needed to be silenced. She had read Ken’s journal and had become confused. But after this talk with one of these supposed prophets... *It all matches up.*

Emilio had waged a good argument but it is only now that I can fully appreciate the logic behind what he was saying: of course a machine can’t run the world! Maybe someday, but not now...maybe not ever after what happened here. No matter, The Perfect Government isn’t the only way to make the world a better place to live in. It’s hard to

admit it but its true: I was wrong; we all were wrong. Except for Henry and Sabrina. And just to think, I was ready to hand over control to the brain program, I was already contemplating a way to die! And then it really would have been too late.

Valarie's doubts had risen to a noticeable measure when Ken ordered the deaths of the protestors. That was when she truly realized the imperfections and dangers of the *Perfect Government*.

Well done, prophet. God hadn't spoken to her in so long; it was a relief to hear that he was still with her. Your work here in not yet finished though- a new threat has formed itself, more dangerous and potent than the last. But for now you can rest. Be strong, Katherine.

The two had finished talking. Katherine had seen Ken's writings. Valarie had been convinced. It was done.

There was an unexplained crashing sound and the desk on the far side of the room was uprooted from the floor, its bolted down legs ripping from their foundations. It went hurling across the room leaving a chaotic disturbance in the air behind it and came crashing down upon them, it was too late for anything to be done about it. Valarie turned her head and then they both were hit. There was a painful crack and Valarie died instantly, her limp body was then crushed underneath the weight of the desk like a rag doll. Katherine was luckier, left unconscious and with only a few broken bones.

The desk had come at them with such force that the crashing sound had alerted the guards outside, who rushed in, guns ready.

Now it truly is too late, she thought as she died, not knowing what was too late and why...and before she knew it she was already part of the whole.

The Beginning 1

It started without intention. The one great stroke of randomness had not occurred; the first universe had not yet made claim to reality and all that was, was truly infinite. It all started with nothing.

In the beginning there was no energy, no particles and no dark matter; there was no existence on any dimensional level. But there were ideas, there was *potential*. And a truly infinite potential that was. It was an infinity without boundaries, unbroken and unrealized. No universe had yet broken free of this potential to reality, but there was no void and no emptiness to speak of either- because for what was there to be empty? There was nothing.

But existence needed to happen. Without any sense of time there was infinite possibility for this to happen and it inevitably did. Out of an idea, existence spawned; the idea no one's and everything's all at once.

Swirling hot, hot, hot. The very first plane of existence exploded in to reality. Energy, particles, *chaos*...The universe was born. Born in density and energy and gasses and everything, the universe happened and there was chaos. There was no structure at all, no time, no logical set of rules for the universe to follow. The universe was small and new. This was before there was any life in the universe, this was before the establishment of any sort of order, and this is from where all things in the cosmos began: out of chaos.

But things did not stay this way forever. Small patterns started emerging amidst the chaotic particles. The first signs of nature appeared as colliding particles began to develop rules for various chance situations. The patterns repeated and eventually evolved into something more complex. These simple laws of nature were the beginnings of order in the universe. And so the arrow of time began its amazing journey, ever towards the future.

Planets, stars, nature, *order*...everything that was, happened so fast, yet took an eternity to begin. Time and order, the establishment of law in a former anarchy- the universe was taking a shape. A *conscious* shape...

Deep in space, a galaxy formed, one of many. The complicated expanding universe of seemingly infinite capacity held uncountable galaxies already, but here a new star was forming. The energetic matter swirled, hot and new, the star grew larger. The universe became ever more complex. Soon the star became a sun with rocks and gas and planets and dust and gravity. A planet formed, different; alone in the lonely blank expanse of space. This planet was blue and green- this planet was *life*.

Vast blue oceans and green continents scattered with mountain and desert covered the face of the planet. Swirling white clouds drifted through the atmosphere which ended in a faint blue haze across the planet's spherical horizon. A cratered grey moon circled in orbit around the beautiful, colorful planet. Life was here. And that life grew, and it flourished.

Deep inside of a great green forest a woman's screams could be heard. It was early morning there and the sun was not in the sky yet. Of light there was little and shadows covered the uneven ground of roots and leaves and plants and puddles. Screams of pain and childbirth rang throughout the immediate area, but were swallowed up by the dense forest. The screams were coming from a crude rock dwelling off of a cliff. The people were inside and had a fire to keep off the cold. They were naked but for the scantest animal skin garb. *Birth*, they thought. *A new member of the family. Young. It may die.* These thoughts were simple and primal; their consciousness not yet fully evolved; their minds without any tangible *power*. No need for any interference just yet. There was no need for any God...

She grunted and grunted again, in suppressed screams, biting down on a piece of leathery animal hide. The other members of the family were curious as to why she was in so much pain. *This is not normal. Birth is painless.* The child was coming out, its consciousness awakening to the world.

Different, said the All-Creature. *This one has power. It is human.* And then everything changed.

After the birth of this newer and more complex mind, the physical world that housed the galaxies and everything retaliated. A keeper of reality was needed. Order was in jeopardy...*Too complicated.*

From the edge of a high cliff several miles of green forest inland, a pair of eyes looked out across the morning world. Shafts of light were bursting through clouds, and the owner of these eyes had to conceal them from the rays. The sunrise was bright on the horizon, turning the far off clouds into a beautiful yellow-gold spectacle. The splendor of the sunlight skimmed across the ocean making that gold as well. The long, sandy beach could be seen as well, bulging out in the direction of the ocean, flanked by two steep grey

cliffs. Looking down across the land, it was hilly and uneven. The trees carpeted almost every visible inch of land in all directions, save for the river.

Another day, the creature thought as it looked out across the beautiful scenery. *I...like this look. Pleasant.* The creature's appreciation for beauty lasted only a second before its consciousness receded back into a more primal thought process. *We need food. I need to hunt.* The male humanoid withdrew from his vantage point and hopped back down towards the trees. He maneuvered around the jutting rocks and the sunrise disappeared behind him. Grass turned in to dirt and root, and light to shade as the trees of the forest enveloped him.

The way down was long and wet for it had just recently rained. The trees were dripping and the ground was slimy. Walking erect now, but slumped, the muscular humanoid treaded carefully through this terrain. He stopped at a sudden sound; a rustling in the plant life- could not tell where it was coming from. And then the sound stopped. *An animal. Food, prey.* He stopped to hear, but as to what he was listening for, there was silence. He sniffed at the air but all he could smell was wet. *No, there is something.* And then it bolted and he reacted.

The quadruped bounded away from him from where it had been hiding just a moment before. The man leapt after it. Water sprayed everywhere as the branches pushed forward by the creature's retreat swished back against the pursuer. All he could see was green and wetness and the animal ahead. The chase was short and uneventful. A fallen tree trunk blocked the path and the creature seemed uncertain of whether or not it could make the jump and slowed. As the large white-furred animal slowed in to view again, the man swung forward against a tree and with an outstretched hand and a sharp killing tool he descended upon the animal. Wet bark ripped off of the tree as he propelled forward with a cry. Water sprayed again and the animal attempted the jump, but too late.

Its fur red with blood, the limp carcass was slung over the man's shoulder as he walked back towards the family. *Pride. Satisfaction. I killed it. We will eat... What's that I feel...?* He was approaching the rock dwelling where they would gut the animal and eat it when all of a sudden something felt different. *Not physical. Real.* Scared and confused, the early human dropped his prize and ran, ran away from his home and whatever he was feeling. It seemed like all the world was feeling this change; feeling this universal retaliation. This *conscious* retaliation.

The chance child had been born, another possibility realized. *The final evolution of humankind's consciousness has happened.* Everything had changed.

The universe retaliated with such great force and power that everything conscious enough to notice, noticed in great magnitude. Where once the universe seemed infinitely complicated and of infinite capacity, now was not so evident. Infinite in physical capability maybe, but that is not all there was. Everything started from ideas and those ideas were still happening and forming. In the form of evolution they happened and at this human birth, reality shuddered. Physical truth came to pieces, particles spread out and got lost in existence, the universe was coming undone.

But the universe had been working towards this moment through the course of evolution and was not entirely helpless. It reacted to the physical realization of the power of a human mind with creation. There was creation *needed*. There was need of a warden of order, of everything real. There was need of a God. Intelligence was needed, a degree of consciousness that the universe *did not have*. That intelligence was simple, only

existing to hold together what already existed, to make sense of the concept that was order. And that was God.

God was simple, yes, but it was also supreme.

It was the ultimate representation of everything real in the universe. The ultimate representation of order and life. The universe back then was mostly chaotic again, but the little order that existed was saved, and the new God embraced it. God looked over this order and saw that it was good. It wanted more.

Slowly and surely the conscious warden of the universes' power *used* that power to nurse Earth and reality back to health, back in to *order*...

God began to create more order, working off of what it had seen and elaborating as much as its simple consciousness could manage. And that is how it was able to sustain reality. Its battle was long and hard, but in the end, order prevailed and the universe was rid of blatant chaos in all of its forms. All forms but one.

When God peered at the future, it could see nothing. Order was absent there. Time itself was chaotic. Time; the root of everything random...this would not do. So God imposed its order on time as well, taking away its spark of randomness, leaving it lifeless and dull. God composed a strictly set path for time to take as it moved forward, creating an ultimate destiny for everything. Now nothing could escape its order, and God was pleased.

This will not do, said the All-Creature. *A mistake.*

Earth evolved and life evolved- and when it did, it did according to God's path of order; God's *destiny*. Creatures lived and died. Creatures were born and creatures were killed. Animals were gone as soon as they were created, and they were just as soon forgotten. Animals lived and animals died. Everything happened in correlation to the one set path for time. This period lasted forever; the path was in every mind of every consciousness. Times not yet experienced could be remembered, time and instant were one. This was all true and was accepted and experienced by all conscious beings.

A mistake. A mistake that needs fixing...must create an antidote. These subconscious thoughts ran through the All-Creature in every channel of thought. The universe could not dwell on anything else. *This...God- it was a mistake*, it thought unconsciously. And so it began to create its antidote.

Leo walked down a dusty trail through wild grasslands of herds and predators and other nature. He had been down this path a thousand times in his mind, but now he was experiencing it for real. There was a village up ahead, he knew. *Life is just one long, infinite moment of confinement.* Leo thought this as he looked to one of the four legged beasts roaming the grasslands. He *looked*. But only for a moment and then his head snapped back in to position with the Holy Path. That's what they called it- the *Holy Path...God's wretched destiny*. It was programmed in to all of their minds, every human being knew what it was called, what God wanted them to know it as.

Looking around nervously, paying attention to different parts of his vision, Leo sensed for God's presence. Paying attention to his peripheral vision rather than what was right in front of him had become second nature to him. *For all of us, for humanity. Our bodies may be confined, but we can think.*

Leo looked around and found nothing, felt nothing. Every time he practiced free will like that, breaking off from the Holy Path, Leo knew that God might notice. That's why he never did it for long and never changed much. That, and the fact that he could not even do so had he tried. The sway of the Holy Path was too great to resist for too long. He flexed his hand, feeling the refreshing touch of freedom in that movement. Then once again, he was whipped back in to the structure of time.

Normal people could not do this. Something was missing, was not strong enough in them. *I'm just different.* Normal people could not escape. *I have this power for a reason.* Others, he knew had some capacity for such mind power, but he had a gift. *We all have mind power. That's what makes us human. I'm just a fluke.* Leo walked on for a few physical seconds in mental silence though, as ever, in his mind the time was an eternity as he witnessed the future and past of the Holy Path. And then after a while: *No. I'm an opportunity.* He continued toward the village.

The universe took that opportunity.

Alexa walked down a bustling street and down the Holy Path. *Why does he play with us like this? What use is all this? These buildings, these roads; civilization; society...all false. Our lives are all false.* The sun was up and shining on the cracked mud buildings and baking the street underneath her feet. *All of this is for nothing. He wants order, well he has it. What use is it to play with our lives, why even give us lives? Couldn't he just kill us off and not have to worry about us any more? Why do we have to live forever...? At least the bastard could have given me some bloody shoes.* And so she walked both paths for a little longer, feet burning in pain. Every now and then she would break free for a moment to relieve herself of pain and stress. *God does not notice this power that I have. He is not infinite. He can be defeated.* But the idea of defeating God was very abstract in her mind, a dream more than a real hope. Besides, when she peered down the Holy Path there was no sign of any weakness, no crack in the road.

On she walked, passing others, also slaves to the Holy Path. She noticed once again that they moved with no natural flow, did not move how she moved when she broke free. The droves of people marched on as if there was no life within them. They were all wearing familiar brown shirts and pants as to cover up their nakedness. Communication was purely of the mind, and was simple enough. Communication was minimal.

Although each and every human being knew they were the intelligence of the planet, they were still not independent. Not free to dance nor sing nor talk nor *feel*. Alexa knew that her degree of *mind power* was unique. Everybody had it, and everybody tried to harness what power was there. Whatever telepathic thoughts did pass through the minds of humans were simple enough because of this development-stifling confinement.

Our minds are free, but what good is a free mind if its body is caged like this? Our intelligence has to have some higher purpose. God is evil...yes, good, evil, happy and sad- those are emotions and thoughts that we can feel, real things that could grow in to something had we the chance. If we were free... Suddenly, Alexa felt dizzy. Dizzy? Why would God have me dizzy? Alexa did not recall a dizziness in the memory of the

Holy Path at this point...but she could not think of it through her sudden headache. It was so hard to keep track of every thing there was in destiny. So easy just to let it slip by and shut off thought...*But not me. Not with my ability.*

And as suddenly as it started, the episode passed and the thought of overthrowing God seemed slightly less ludicrous. She was still walking, but now she *stumbled* as the street turned to grass. *Since when did I stumble here!* She kept walking, outside of the Holy Path, scared- so scared that she let herself slide back in to rule and end her sudden moment of true freedom. Any thoughts of rebellion had been forgotten. *He's close though. Wait, who's close?* At first she assumed that she was thinking about God, but that wasn't right. Her chest was thumping hard and her diaphragm started fluttering. *No, something is different; wrong...wrong? But it feels good!*

Getting over his dizziness, Leo too slid back in to the Holy Path. A distant figure on the horizon started his heart faster and his mind reeling. *What is this sudden feeling? This person...how could a person evoke such a feeling. And yet I know that it is her. Her?* To distract himself from this sudden strangeness, Leo cracked his neck, breaking free. But for some reason, that only strengthened what he felt, and there was no force pushing him back towards the Holy Path. Freedom suddenly was in high relationship with this person, this feeling. *No. It is the person I care about, not the feeling...what person? Who is this woman?!* The longing for liberty and the sudden longing for whatever she had to offer were one. One longing, one feeling. *And I would so love to be free. Love, love, love...* And then he could. He could brake free if he wanted, without any effort. He *knew* he could. *It seems so easy now. So easy...* And then the two humans found themselves standing in front of each other. Standing still, yet walking blatantly away from God's set destiny, and this time unhindered.

A silent word between them and they were walking again upon the trodden path. As they passed each other their hands brushed ever so slightly and the feeling was upon them again, as potent as the Holy Path had ever been. Through peripheral vision they watched the other pass and the excitement both pairs of eyes did show was obvious.

Another day, he said, still confused.

Goodbye... And they both knew that they would see each other again, for they had foreseen it. And now they could remember that future encounter clearer than anything in the world.

Good. This must work. This will fix my being. The antidote. "Love".

The Beginning 2

My ass aches. Magnus had been sitting on the same hard rock for over a year now. Sure, the view was beautiful and at least he wasn't naked anymore (though Magnus had not a clue as to what that was about), but the rock *hurt*. Some time ago he had seen an older man hobbling up the steep path of yellow gravel that made its windy way up through grass and rock to the vantage point where Magnus sat. The old man had stopped for a moment to comment on the view as he leaned on a wooden cane. After that brief audible exchange the man proceeded to undress. Why God had him undress at that point was a mystery other than the obvious reason to donate his clothes. God's path seemed so random at times. *What is your identity?* thought Magnus.

I am me, came the reply. *This is who I am,* and then the naked stranger showed Magnus his thoughts- the only identity one could have while trapped in a body not their own. This is how a person created a name in the world: with every thought an open book. The man was called Uris. *What is your identity?* Uris asked.

I am who I am. I am me. This is who I am: My thoughts, my Ideas...Magnus is who I am.

Looking down along the Holy Path, Magnus had seen this moment and had decided beforehand that this is where he would disclose his secret. Magnus was no

normal man, he could break free. He was more powerful than a normal human, for whatever reason, he was special.

For a while he would break free as often as he could, exercising his ability, and oh how sweet that felt! And then one day...*what is the point?* He would never truly break free, never truly be separate from the Holy Path. *But then why do I have this ability? A fluke I guess.* For the longest time he had thought himself alone in this ability. Then one event in his own mind's chronology opened his eyes to two others- two others who had a higher mind power. *I can sense them with my own powers, yet they are not yet strong enough in this mind power to realize me.* Some time later in the arrow of time that existed in accordance to his own thoughts he would think: *there is a difference in those two now. They have something else...* And that was when his plan would hatch: the plan to overthrow God. But unlike God's Holy Path, the entire human race was in control of their own separate thoughts at every second and so there was no way to look forward in to what they would be thinking. And, so *that* was a man or woman's identity: his or her thoughts.

There is a difference in those two now. They have something else- Magnus thought this now. He could see some time in the future a man would come and give him clothes, for whatever reason, he would be all the more comfortable. *Why does God make us do this? What was he thinking? Does he think? Who is God...? God could be a thing, God might be part of nature, this confinement might be natural...but I refuse to believe that. This is the work of a higher being with intentions, cruel, cruel intentions...it must be.* Then Magnus realized that he had been thinking again. *What's the point in thinking right now; I have eternity to think of whatever I want. What drives us to think? What free experience do we have that merits such complex thoughts? Maybe I'll know someday, I have eternity...and then Magnus realized that that last thought was just a memory. I've thought that before. Damn.* And that's also when he remembered why he didn't like to think for too long at once: he could get lost in his own chronology and forget God's. *And I have an agenda to keep up so that just won't do. Wait, that last thought was old, that one about eternity...because if my plan works then maybe we won't have to spend forever in this horrible cycle of memories and future, maybe we can do away with this Holy Path in which we are trapped...ah, but here comes the old man now. I wonder who he is, if he will help my cause...no matter. At least I know that I'll get a chance to get off this damned rock for a bit and get some clothes on. It's damn windy up here.*

Magnus dragged his conscious mind out of these memories as he talked to Uris about his plan. *Memories within memories. Damn God, damn God and his Holy Path.* He was wearing the clothes now. Rough, scratchy fabric it turned out to be though. And again he was sitting on his rock. Sitting on a hard rock but now wearing rough and scratchy garments. *Why?* But that did not matter. All that mattered was if Uris was willing to spread the word, and of course he would be.

The plan involved the two humans known as Alexa and Leo. Magnus had never met either of them in real time, only in future memory. But he could sense them; he could sense the intensity of their power through his own. He could sense their identity in that power, could sense when they used that power. So many things he could sense, so many things he could potentially do with his powers, if only... *If only there was no Holy Path. There is just so much potential here. For all of us, for humanity.* But for now he would have to be content with his plans and his rock.

Your mind, your identity, it is so strong. So very strong, said Uris.

Yes Uris. And there are others- others like me. I know of two, I can feel both of them in my mind right now. We do have a chance if we work together! All of humanity! Together...just think about it- every human being has this power, to whatever degree- that is how we communicate. Magnus waited a few minutes to let this concept soak in. What were a few minutes in eternity? *But it doesn't have to be eternity. Eternity is a very fragile thing, not an absolute. It is a promise at best, and I must remember that.* Uris had obviously never thought of it that way before. *Not many people have, I'm sure. And who's to say that I'm right about our minds and our powers? This could all be just another illusion put forth by God!* Magnus broke free for a second to frown a bit.

You're right. We do have to work together, replied Uris. But Magnus was thinking now. *What if our free will is just an illusion? What if everything we think is also on some preset path?* After a moment of thought, Magnus broke out in to mental laughter which Uris must have overheard because he portrayed a bit of confusion in his own telepathy. Laughing, Magnus thought: *if our minds are not free and our free will an illusion then it does not matter what I think I choose to do because it would happen anyway. But if we are free...if we are free then I must go on with this.* But for some reason, this conclusion proved as comedic as the first.

Uris, he explained in open and audible thought. Uris was already making his way down the hillside in God's awkward fashion. *Uris, you must spread the word. And whoever you tell, tell them to spread the word as well! Remember- if this is to happen, then there will be a sign and it will be clear. And then you will know. At that point, break free! Fight! Fight God with all strength, and as one forceful entity, humanity will give God no chance!* Magnus watched the old man hobble awkwardly downwards until his figure had disappeared from sight behind a large grey boulder with grass growing on one side. Magnus' plan was really no more than a faith. Faith that that special something that Leo and Alexa carried within them was enough to give the collective human mind power the leg up that was needed in order to fight. *It will be enough, I'm sure of it. We will fight God, we will destroy him and his path will crumble,* Magnus thought with determinedness as well as a little hope. Uris appeared again on the grassy side of the boulder but smaller this time as the gravel path swerved away. *And he will spread the word so that the people of this Earth will not be afraid when the time comes...if the time comes. It is a small world when there is eternity, so people will know. Enough people will know what to do...*

It took forever but finally he had gotten up. Magnus didn't know how his stiff body could still be functioning after such a long sit on such a hard rock. Never mind the pain; it just didn't seem physically possible.

Step by agonizing step, Magnus made the same trip down the same path that Sophie, Cleo, and Uris before them had made, the sea wind blowing and chilling him. Two others had come up as Uris had; two more chances for people to know. Magnus wondered now where they were and how many people they had prepared. Magnus wondered if any preparation was in fact needed. It would only seem natural for a person to try to break free if given the chance but Magnus just didn't know. *Better for them to know what is happening when it happens; better for them to walk away from the path immediately and determinedly rather than stay on it out of fear.*

Down, down and down he walked. On this side of the hill was a sudden cliff face at a steep angle, but still the path zigzagged on, except this time the zigzagging was vertical. Gulls flew overhead, their noise a great and chronic blast of sound only surpassed by the crashing sea below at the rocks. Magnus would have been scared. Not scared for his life, but surely for his comfort. A great fall like that would hurt, he was sure of it. Magnus had never; could never know what real fear was. Only Anticipation, dread anticipation for something he knew would happen. Magnus would have been scared...but he wasn't.

But the path wound around again and soon enough he found more even ground. Grass appeared again and trees and animals. New smells, new sights, a new experience...yet at the same time old, as old as time itself (future and past). Magnus walked, walked, walked. He reached a beach, sand beneath his toes. *And then I will swim this wretched ocean and then I will cross mountain and desert and plains and then I will reach a town...*

The heat was a beast that tore at him from outside and inside. Thirst and hunger had been his companions for many days, or years, or weeks...*it does not matter. This all is making me stronger, stronger in my resolve to be free.* The plains had been the worst and best of his journey. The plains were where he passed water holes where animals and people alike were bathing and drinking. At least when he reached the desert he wasn't taunted with water. But God didn't want him to have a drink just then so he marched on, barefoot through dirt and dry grass. The next oasis was sheltered by blooming trees and the water was sparkling in the daylight. It was just too much. (Even if he can't die, a man does get thirsty.) And some shade would have been a nice touch as well. But there were people there and they communicated. And what they told him gave Magnus hope once more. They told him what Magnus wanted to hear, needed to hear. *They were just passing on a message, and that message was hope.*

The town before him was in a haze of heat and off in the distance. Magnus could sense the faint presence of another powerful mind. It grew stronger and grew in identity as he approached. *Leo is here.* But of course, he had known that already. Pretty soon he would be sitting on a bench talking with the man within the town square, and hopefully having a real conversation underneath that. But not just yet. Right now he could only continue to walk the path; to walk the desert landscape which the plains had turned in to. *This heat, everything physical that is happening to me and everything around me and in the universe...this is God's doing.* Magnus had decided a long time ago that God must be some sort of sadist, had decided that God was some creature filled with hate. *He'll have reason to hate after we're through with him. Oh shit, not again. I forgot about this one...* Magnus stopped breathing then. All of a sudden his chest was still and silent and yet he continued, his body as if he hadn't noticed. *I still don't know his intentions though... Not breathing hurts, damn it! I hate it when this happens. Well, at least this episode is a short one. Why does he make us do these dumb things?*

And at this particular moment God had him entering the desert town. There were trees in this town, palms and oaks and redwoods; random trees all over. There were trees in the road, growing out of buildings. There were bats too, screeching and howling and moving like a great black blob through the air. *If God really does think, then he is insane. What a peculiar notion: Insane.* Insanity was something human, nothing divine; created when a mind gives up. Sometimes following the holy path became overwhelming for the

weak. Sometime it consumed them. Magnus remembered encountering people like this in the past and cursed God once again. When he could get near enough to hear their telepathic rambling it was horrific. These were the sounds of failure. This was what happened when hope ended. *Or is it success?* That thought chilled him, although it wasn't a new thought.

Damn, this hurts...and here we go! Air rushed in to his lungs as Magnus drew in a deeper breath than he was supposed to. That time when he held his breath it seemed longer than he remembered. *Well, it always does.*

Leo should sense me now. He's very strong in my mind sense. In fact, Leo's mind was more potent in his senses than ever before. *I have to focus my mind. I must stay in the moment. No more drifting.* Before he knew it, Magnus could see him. They were walking together, and then they sat on a bench... Magnus didn't know if he was experiencing all this in the future or present, but it made no matter: they were already communicating.

The Beginning 3

"Goodbye, Magnus. I will do as you suggested."

Leo sat down on the bench alongside the mind he had come to know as Magnus. He could tell that this had already happened, because he could not physically feel the bench beneath him when he seated himself. But regardless of where on the Holy Path lay the present; Leo was enthralled with his meeting with Magnus.

Before he had walked the Holy Path far enough to see him in person, Leo could sense him. Reaching out towards Leo, the stranger called out his name telepathically, and likewise, told Leo his own. Magnus, the man who he had only so far known through memories of some trivial encounter along the Holy Path, had then shown his true self.

"Hello Leo." As he said this, the force of Magnus's mind power came as an unexpected shock to Leo, who until then had only ever encountered one other person who was as potent as himself. He allowed himself a quick, stolen breath.

How did he know who I was before I showed him? By the time Magnus had responded to what Leo had intended to be a private thought, Leo was more fascinated than shocked, for Magnus spoke verbally.

“I’ve known of you two for quite some time” ...*The woman I met earlier*, thought Leo. “How?”

“I can independently sense others, using the same tools that allow us all to communicate with one another. The same tools, yes, except that I have a mind power greater than anything I’ve known anyone to possess.”

“I thought I was the only one, up until... You say you know about the other.”

“Yes, I know of Alexa,” confirmed Magnus. “But I’ve been waiting to meet you, Leo. This moment is critical.”

“What do you mean? Critical for what?” When Magnus replied, Leo fidgeted nervously, waiting for God to appear from the sky and strike him down as he did so. *That’s peculiar. I don’t remember breaking away to do that. Is this still happening?*

“Leo, the world is not meant to be like this. This Holy Path is not what was meant of nature. Do you not feel more natural when you break away?” Although he had faith that this man was trustworthy, Leo still could not bring himself to answer. What if Magnus was not human, but only another part of God’s lifeless path. It was conceivable. The bats that ravaged the skies above the town were not alive like a human was alive. They could not think. But how could someone not able to think invade Leo’s thoughts like this?

“This is who I am. I am Magnus. I am with you, and God is our mutual enemy. Look in to me, and see the truth. See that I am in earnest.”

“Okay,” Leo resigned to his faith, and let it give him the first real fear he had ever felt. Magnus proceeded to explain his theory about the potential downfall of God.

“Every person has this power, it is what makes us unique from the bats and the trees and every other thing that lives. The power of the mind. We, however, as you know, have a much higher potency. Be it a fluke or of purpose, it is still true that we glimpse a great potential, whenever we defy the Holy Path. I have been searching up and down the Path for others like myself. When I found you, and then Alexa, I began to let myself hope that my gift was a sign of changing times. And sure enough, the both of you have already discovered and utilized a weapon of nature. I could sense it when you broke free with her...” Magnus paused for a moment or two as Leo did the same as he tried to organize his memory of the event. After the situation had come in to present focus again, Magnus continued speaking. He went on to tell him of the essentiality of communication between the humans. At some point in the future, Leo would meet Alexa again, and at that time, was an opportunity to break the Holy Path. The next moments directly following the initial break, perceived Magnus, would be most important. Humanity would either seize hold of the moment, or let it slip, depending on how prepared for it they were.

“How do we prepare for this sort of thing?”

“By doing this,” said Magnus, boldly. *“Practice your ability, and be comfortable with it, I have developed ways to achieve this comfort level in my many years. We have exactly three days before we part ways again, and I believe that I can show you in that time, and then you must pass on the knowledge to anyone you meet. They need to be expecting the break.”*

By the time Leo had recounted the whole experience for the thousandth time in his head, the people were well expecting it. He had traveled for as long as eternity allowed, and had seen likewise as many people. And now he walked barefoot through a

grove of trees, the ground covered in lush green grass. Leo took a deep, scripted breath and he felt the grass.

And as the physical feeling rushed in to his lungs, he felt out for the other. He had seen Alexa but once since the first time, and then had prepared her for the coming moment. The sun and trees overhead left nothing free of their dappled blanket of selective light. Leo noticed, movement underneath the blanket, far up ahead. *Alexa*.

He surged his focus ahead in to the future, so that he could see her better, while he still reached out for her in the present.