

THE ROSE OF SHARON

“I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys.”

- Song of Song 2:1

Anthony Barnhart

And I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy.

And the beast which I saw was like unto a leopard, and his feet were as the feet of a bear, and his mouth as the mouth for a lion: and the dragon gave him his power, and his seat, and great authority.

And I saw one of the heads as it were wounded to death; and his deadly wound was healed: and all the world wondered after the beast.

And they worshipped the dragon which gave power unto the beast: and they worshipped the beast, saying, Who is like unto the beast? who is able to make war with him?

And there was given unto him a month speaking great things and blasphemies; and power was given unto him to continue forty and two months.

And he opened his mouth in blasphemy against God, to blaspheme his name, and his tabernacle, and them that dwell in heaven.

And it was given unto him to make war with the saints, and to overcome them: and power was given him over all kindreds, and tongues, and nations.

And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.

If any man have an ear, let him hear.

He that leadeth into captivity shall go into captivity: he that killeth with the sword, must be killed with the sword. Here is the patience and the faith of the saints.

- Revelation 13:1-10

Chapter One

"Who are we? We find that we live on an insignificant planet of a humdrum star lost in a galaxy tucked away in some forgotten corner of a universe in which there are far more galaxies than people." – Carl Sagan

I

It is like being awakened in the middle of the night, picking up the phone, and letting it slide to the ground, unwilling to believe but knowing you cannot turn your back. Some things creep upon you, and in the tragic wastes left behind, there is no room for thankfulness that they did not come upon you as a storm. Yet sometimes we are not so lucky; it is in the best of times that the worst of things happen; it is when we can lean back in our comfy leather swivel chairs, smile and say, "Life is good," it is then when the world seems to laugh in silent mockery and throw a cadence of evil and misfortune into our faces. It is a poor state in our sublimely human existence; the pursuit of happiness is commonplace, rooted as eternity in the human soul, and yet who can truly experience a happy existence? Even when the sun smiles upon us, a dark shadow looms, a shadow of chance, a shadow whispering our names, and so we are unable to enjoy the tiniest graces afforded us. The reason the rich are never as happy as they expected to be while in a poorer state is because they realize how quickly their wealth can be taken; "Do not store up treasures here on earth," the old proverb goes. The unspoken tag-line: "Because it can be taken away in a heartbeat." Lives are lost every hour, every minute, every second; tears coat the earth in an ephemeral haze. We all know there is so much more, and we aim our eyes to the sky, hoping to catch but a glimpse, and our hearts jump in expectation; but the stars only shimmer, and vanish in the morning, forgotten in the traffic.

Is our answer to be found in the stars, in the vast swirling galaxies, in the supernovas and globular clusters? Is our answer hidden in the secrets of black holes, spawned in the births of brilliant stars, hidden in some distant, unreachable section of our wonderful and elegant universe? Or is the answer much closer, so close as to be just under our skin? Is the answer a breath away, tickling our tongues, daring to be spoken, but refused? Is this that haunts our every living day the answer to our question? Is life, then, filled with purpose – or truly meaningless? Pleasure is hard to come by in this world; one's life is a tombstone, the days etching the lettering in the marble. No one can deny our fate, no one can dare believe we will fare any different than those who have passed before us. All figures in ancient history have but vanished; maybe their names are written in textbooks, but no one really knows them anymore. Such is the fate of humanity – we fade away, vanish into oblivious, lost. It is all so utterly meaningless.

All he sees is his reflection; his own tired eyes stare back at him, and for that grim moment in time, perhaps the planets themselves align, and he knows the deepest and most utterly depraved emotion that can never be put into words. Henry David Thoreau speaks in bitter honesty when he says, "All men live in quiet desperation." We can try and hide from it, we can deny it, we can do all we can to make it work around us: the three great moral depravities in our worldly institution are but frantic grabs at happiness, marked by sex, money, and power. Three great diseases rooted in us all, crying out for acceptance, fingering our hearts and souls and making us choke on our own effuse. He stares into the screen, realizing that despite all he's done to preserve happiness as best he can, it has eluded him. The American Dream is his to own: beautiful wife, two beautiful girls, white picket-fence house, small dog in the garage, an SUV parked on the curb. He reads the newspaper every morning with a bowl of cereal and waves *good morning* to the neighbors as he unlocks the door to drive to work. He slaves eight hours a day, locked in a world of spinning databases and clicking pen caps; his existence can be defined by a number, a social security card. He graduated from a class of seven thousand, streaming from a massive state university. He has no specialty about him; he is a run-of-the-mill, factory-produced, American-Dream-striving human being. He is twenty-four, and he feels the weight bearing upon him even now. He wonders if he will even be able to stand. The meaninglessness of it all haunts him in his own reflection; *I will be dead in two hundred years*, he tells himself. *How will I be remembered?* The unuttered underscore: *WILL I be remembered?*

He feels sweat upon his brow, and his hands fly over his papers and computer. He pushes away from the desk, feet throbbing in black suede shoes. The computer asks if he is sure he wants to log-out; with one hand he taps the mouse and with the other shoves papers into a leather briefcase his father bought him upon graduating college. The computer shuts down in synch with the snapping briefcase, and he rips it from the counter, falls to his feet, and looks over the walls of the cubicles surrounding his own. It is five thirty-three; everyone is finishing up. He can beat the traffic. *What's the point?* He nods to his boss, will see him tomorrow *what's the point* and weaves between the Saturns and Impalas and Escalades, discovering his forest green Envoy with ease. The engine starts easily, and he rests into the arm chairs, turns on the heat, the dead of autumn gnawing at his bones.

He waves to a co-worker unlocking his clumsy Escort, and then he is on the road, driving through downtown, taking his eyes from the people on the streets and the towering skyscrapers whose dark-tinted windows reflect the breadth of the city itself. The highway is no challenge, and he rides it with ease, listens to the radio, the sky pale and dipped in puffcorn clouds mixing with the sunlight in an orange haze. The smog rose from the city in blankets, whispering against the SUV. The highway makes its way through several towns, alive with children in the parks, dressed in their heavy coats, hoping for a snow day tomorrow. He pulls off the interstate, glances at all the fast-food restaurants: Wendy's, McDonald's, Long

John Silver's, Lee's Famous Recipe Chicken. The Envoy enters a subdivision where every two-story house looks alike, and where every husband is a doctor or accountant, and every wife either looks after the children or works as a nurse at the hospital downtown. The streets are aligned like a grid, and every now and then a tree sprouts from the grass. Businessmen are exiting their cars in their nice expensive suits, embracing children and young wives at the doors. Dogs catch Frisbees and lawn mowers feast. The short driveway of his own home cuddles the SUV, and upon stepping out, he feels the cold again, and it makes his heart ache. He is not greeted at the door, but opens it to hear one of his daughters crying and the other coloring in the living room, awash in the light from the bay window. She jumps up and runs to him, feet kicking and spilling the Crayola crayons everywhere; he takes her up in his arms and kisses her, and the feeling of her close all but makes him forget the weariness that had captivated his entire being just moments ago. Her brown curly hair rubs against his face and the smell of lavender burns with the scent of spaghetti.

His wife comes from the kitchen, leaning in the doorway, arms crossed, face smiling, blond hair falling around her. She watches him swing the little girl around and set her down; the girl runs back to the Elementary Street coloring-book. He tosses his briefcase against the door and embraces his wife, holding her against him, never wanting to let go. She strokes his hair and pulls away, the spaghetti boiling over the rim of the pot. She addresses the issue and asks what is bothering him; he says nothing, a tiny voice whispering, *Liar*. She turns down the heat on the spaghetti and tends to the sauce. He walks around the round table, looks at the paper, the President touring in the Middle East. The baby is still crying in the other room. He asks why she is ignoring her. She says it is a temper tantrum, and he shrugs. The woman raised their first daughter and did quite well. He asks if babies can even *have* temper tantrum, and she asks why they wouldn't be able to. He shrugs again. He just always figured...

She turns from stirring the sauce. "Have you talked to the Johansen's, about Friday night?"

"The ski trip?"

"Yes."

"No. I was bogged down in work, I didn't get the chance."

"Their son is engaged."

"Becky?"

"He proposed last night at the lobster restaurant. The one downtown?"

"I know the one." He hates this conversation; it is meaningless and empty. He is wasting his life.

"What's bothering you?"

He is standing over the table, head bowed, and he raises his head, finds that she is looking at him; her one hand drapes the spoon in the sauce and she has quit stirring. The eyes speak words that need not be said, as he can feel them running

through him like barbed-wire silk. He does not take his eyes from hers, but just leans forward on the table, breathes slowly. "I can't..."

"You can't... tell me. Is that--"

"No. No, I can't. I can't tell you because I don't know. It's just--"

"Maybe we should talk to a doctor or something."

"I don't feel sick. I don't..." He shakes his head, at a loss. "I was just working, and then out of absolutely nowhere came the worst feeling I've ever experienced. Not a feeling of fear or dread, not something painful. I don't fear for you, or the children. It's nothing like that. It is a strange feeling. I feel... Hopeless. Lost. Out-of-place. Something isn't right. *I'm* not right." Now he laughs, quietly, mocking himself. "Listen to me, will you? I'm crazy. I just need to sleep." He leaves the table and enters the hallway.

She leans forward. "What about dinner?"

"Put mine in a Tupperware container or something. I'm not hungry."

She is standing alone in the kitchen. The baby starts crying.

II

She awakes, rising quickly from the bed. The cool breeze fluttering through the open window, the gentle clock ticking on the wall, the hum of the air conditioner all betraying the vibrant emotions rising within her, emotions screaming in silent rage. She looks at her arms: they are shaking. She turns, eyes scanning the shadows, and pats the bedside. She feels him sleeping under the covers, but cannot be sure. She leans over him, pulls the lip of the comforter from his face, and sees his breath sliding in and out, oblivious of everything, even oblivious of her. She does not wish to wake him; it took long enough for him to fall asleep. She lies back in the bed, crossing her arms, feeling goose bumps crawling up and down them, and she watches the window, does not close her eyes, fearing to do so. She imagines men in shiny silver suits coming through the open window, men with large heads and big eyes, bristling with equipment that she dare not mention. She imagines them taking her husband, and she being unable to scream; her husband looks at her, eyes representing forsakenness, and she wants to tell him that she did not authorize this, did not approve it or give it her seal of approval; but instead she can just look on and pray he would understand. This vision haunts her and she stands, closing the window. As it locks shut, he rises from the bed, rubbing his eyes, then rubbing his arm as if it were both sore and itching.

"Why are you closing the window?" he grumbles. "It's going to get so cold."

She feels so much better with the window closed. She returns to the bed and sits beside him. "I had a bad dream."

He leans up on his elbows, blinking quickly to erode away the sleep.

She feels him probing, and explains, "I dreamt some weird-looking men came and took you. They wouldn't let me protest. They wouldn't let me do anything. I

just watched as they took you. And then I woke up. It's just one of those dreams that stick with you, you know?"

He continues to rub his arm. "Yes. Of course. Everything's okay now."

"I was being foolish when I closed the window."

"No," he said, putting a hand on her bare shoulder. "No, not at all. It's a badge of honor. Let's keep it shut for tonight, okay? No more bad dreams tonight. What time is it?" He looks at the ticking clock with the see-in-the-dark hands. "Three fifteen? Sunrise comes soon. Dawn will break and all of this will be forgotten. Rest in that knowledge and your dreams won't be scary."

She kisses him on the cheek and rolls over, burying herself in the cover.

He looks at the clock again. Three fifteen. He vaguely remembers falling asleep at nine forty, and he does not remember any dreams. He usually remembers dreams. The man rubs his arm in the darkness and stares at that closed window for ten or twenty minutes before sleep comes. The bedroom is quiet as the sun awakes and the little children are up making pancakes and waffles.

The little girl pours syrup all over the pancakes, but drops the bottle, and syrup runs off the edges of the plate and onto the floor. The wife is telling her to let her do it next time as the dog runs up and tries to lick it off the floor. The wife is scrambling for some towels as the little girl hops off the counter with her three tan pancakes smothered in blueberries and Maple syrup, and she sits down next to her father, who has scratches at his arm and drinks his orange juice, lost deep in thought, eyes staring out an open window, feeling the cool breeze through the screen, hearing the birds and the ever-distant throb of a lawnmower somewhere in the neighborhood. He has not dressed yet, and sleep still clings to his eyes. He has thrown on a white robe they received on their honeymoon vacation to Mexico, and he wonders what he will wear for work that day. His wife is hunched over, wiping at the syrup, muttering how it only smears.

The little girl forks some raspberry pancakes and stuffs them in her mouth.

Her father looks at her. "Smaller bites, Honey. You're going to choke."

Blueberries cover the sides of her mouth. She opens her mouth, revealing mush.

He turns, shakes his head, "Don't do that." He pushes the orange juice away.

She swallows and forks at another piece of pancake.

The wife stands, rubbing her back. "Twenty-seven and experiencing back pain."

"Take some Ibuprofen," her husband suggests, looking at his orange juice.

The little girl dangles a trio of forked pancake slices before her mouth, looks at her Daddy, says, "Does it itch?"

He looks at her. "Does what itch?"

She points with her fork, pancakes dripping all over the tablecloth. The wife grabs the towel and rummages in the cupboard for a spray bottle. He follows the path of the three-pronged fork and turns his arm over; he has never seen anything quite like it before. He raises his arm before him and stares at the swollen dime-

sized lump; yes, it itched, he'd been scratching it all the while. It was too big to be a spider bite. How about a mosquito bite?

"Honey, that's huge," the wife says, coming over, setting the cleaning supplies on the table.

He is just staring at it. "I didn't have it last night..."

"Something must've bit you in your sleep. Does it hurt?"

He tenderly brushes a fingertip over it. "It is a little painful. It mostly itches, though."

She crosses her arms, staring at his. "You really ought to go to the doctor."

He sighs. "If it doesn't get any better, I will. I promise." He stands, pushing the chair away from the table. Her daughter's wide eyes follow him as he stands, her mouth swirling with food, some dripping from the corners of her mouth. The orange juice wobbles but does not fall.

His wife asks, "Don't you want pancakes?"

"No. I'll be okay."

"You didn't eat last night--"

"The orange juice filled me up." He kisses her on the cheek. "Sorry about bed-breath."

He turns the water on once he gets in the shower, and falls back against the linoleum sides, the freezing water cutting through him. He somehow stays rigid without hollering and the shower-head begins to steam as hot water gushes out. He rests against the linoleum, letting the steamed water sprinkle his back, carving rivers down his flesh. He rests his eyes, listening only to the water coming from the faucet, the gurgle of the pipes, and the water sprinkling around his feet. He bends over to grab the soap and realizes how sore he is. He forces his arms to bathe him, surprised at how tired he was. It feels like he'd been awake all night, but he had slept like a worn infant. He runs the soap over the bite and it throbs; he sets the soap down and lets the water rinse him off. He takes this time to examine the bite, and setting his finger upon it, he finds that the bite can shift back and forth, side-to-side. He finds this interesting but not interesting enough to warrant much thought.

He washes his hair, turns off the water, steps out and dries. His wife enters the bathroom, called by the noise of his shower ending. She is undressing and he wraps the towel around his waste, hugs her tight, kisses her gently on the lips, and walks out to the bedroom. The sound of her shower begins and he hears Cartoon-Network playing downstairs. He grabs his clothes from the closet, irons his shirt and tie, throws them on, grabs his briefcase, yells, "Goodbye!" to his wife, and crawls down the steps to the front door.

The little girl is sitting in front of the television. He pauses at the door, watching her young eyes absorbing Dexter's Laboratory. "Have you brushed your teeth?" he asks. He dwells on how beautiful she truly is. She nods her head. "Are those the clothes you're wearing to school?" She nods again. "Is all your homework done?"

She looks at him, folding her arms. He smiles and holds up one hand in defense. "My apologies," he says. "You are the most responsible one in this house. Watch over Mommy." He blows her a kiss; she blows it right back. The door shuts behind him. She continues to watch Dexter foil Febee.

III

He tries to enjoy the ride, but finds it is impossible. He is looking out the windows, at the well-manicured lawns, the pretty flowers behind white-picket fences, the full-bred Labradors and golden retrievers playing Frisbee. He sees men dressed in suits with ties hugging their young wives goodbye, kissing them on the cheek, and walking to the car, whistling as the keys swing around their fingers. He sees them smiling, so young and desperate, and he sees himself modeled in their eyes. He's worked for six years, his home evolving into a cubicle where he sat seven hours a day, facing a computer screen filled with charts and data. He wonders where their lives are going; he sees a pregnant woman and remembers when his wife was pregnant with their first daughter, the little pancake monster, and he aches for those times, when he did not feel so empty, so hollow, so deprived of life. He feels bad for wanting this, because he thinks he is willing to trade his daughter in for a comfier and more secure lifestyle. The question haunts him and he tries to push it away: would he give up his daughter for a life filled with meaning, security, purpose? He is frightened by the possible answers and tries to rid it from his mind, but it simply will not leave.

He pulls into the parking lot, flashes his I.D. to the well-dressed guard, gives his name, and the guard lets him through. He joins a long line of expensive cars, trucks and SUVs making their way to designated parking spaces. He does not wait long; his space is in the back since he is relatively new. He locks his SUV and enters the building, avoiding eye contact with everyone wearing smiles. He cannot believe they are actually happy to be here, happy to leave the beautiful spring outside for a muggy room with no windows, a room where there are no birds singing, only the hums of computers, the plucking of keyboards, and one-sided conversations on telephones.

He shoots a hand into his pocket and wraps his fingers around a bottle of aspirin; the thought of another day makes his head hurt. He stands in the bathroom, looking at himself in the mirror, and he tells himself that he is the most pathetic creature to ever walk the earth, the most useless human being to ever prostrate before a cubicle. He understands that he is a waste to the environment; his consumption and his taking up of space hinders the full development of earth's ecosystem. He eats the aspirin, cups water in two hands, and drinks it down. He hopes the aspirin helps but his head is beginning to shriek with every feeble and insignificant heartbeat.

He leaves the bathroom and sits down at his cubicle. Workers are entering the room, setting their coats on racks, turning on their computers, gathering mail and

opening it. He pulls out a yellow slip of paper from his miniature mailbox, hating how the designers tried to make it look cute. Now he wants to break the mailbox but knows he will be fired. He reads the message on the memo paper and crumples it up. He turns his back to the computer, looks at the giant clock on the far wall, at the hands slowly ticking, sand in a sieve. It is not yet 8:00. His day has not yet begun. The crumpled yellow paper is mocking him as he stands and leaves his cubicle.

He knocks three times on the door and waits. He waits for several minutes before the door opens and Mr. Haines is pulling him inside. Our man looks at the furnishings on the walls, takes his eyes over the plush leather seats, admires the dark-oak desk with its swivel chair and fountain pens. Haines sets him in one of the chairs and then he proceeds to sit on the edge of his desk, moving some papers out of the way. Haines is a gentle, wry little man; he started the business in his twenties and at eighty-seven is not about to give it up. But despite the child-like, animal-loving, tree-hugging grandpa before him, the man could feel the aura of power floating off him. Whatever this man said, *that* was what went. Sweat beads in the man's armpit and he looks at the old man, waiting. The man just looks at him so the man opens his mouth to speak.

"How are you doing?" Haines asks before the man is given a chance to speak.

He scrambles for words. "I'm fine, thank you. How about you, Sir?"

Haines folds his hands and sighs. "I'm worried about you. You have always had a tremendous work ethic. It's been going downhill for a month now, right?"

"I am sorry for that, Sir. I have not been trying—"

"My friend, you are a hard worker. Please. I promise I will not fire you. You are one of the most dedicated young men I have. A few more years and you'll be climbing to the top." A wry laugh. "I may have to watch my back up here."

The man bounces for words. "Sir, I would never compete for your job."

"I know that," comes the response as the man stands and begin pacing around his desk. "Your failing work ethic *is* a concern, especially in this company." The man tenses, drawing a deep breath, waiting for the critical blow, mind screaming, *How could this happen right now of all times?* Haines smiles at him. "*But* your work here is like a relationship. Remember your first day here, what you were taught? Don't see your job as a duty, but as a relationship. A horrible wife who tries to make you miserable. Of course we don't voice *that*, but you can't get around it. Office jobs aren't too exciting, and sitting in a windowless cubicle is a bad way to live. Unfortunately for us, it is the only way. Efficiency, my friend. I love my wife very much. She is the center of my existence. Sometimes, however, I just want to break away, I just want time alone. All relationships are like that; healthy relationships, anyway. Do you understand what I am telling you?"

The man nods. Of course he understands. He has a job he wants to keep.

"Your working for us is a relationship. There will be times when you just want to give up and stop working hard. These times come. It is understandable. But usually they pass. These are horrible seasons to go through, often met head-on

with depression and paranoia. They can last up to a week. You, my friend, have been suffering for over a month. It is taking a toll on your soul. I can tell just by looking into your eyes. You are tired, and it isn't getting any better. You need a break."

A break? Are those fancy words for saying, "Pack your bags?"

Haines nearly read his mind. "Your job is not in jeopardy, I promise. What is today?"

"Wednesday, Sir."

"Ah, yes. Why don't you take tomorrow and Friday off, try to get reoriented. Spend some time with your wife and kids. We all deserve breaks here and there. These will not count as vacation days, nor will they count as sick days. A special gift from me. I will clock you in at eight o'clock and clock you out at five o'clock. I have had to do that a few times myself. Does this sound good to you, my friend?"

He nods, smiling. The image of him sleeping in and being with his wife and children makes his insides swirl. "Thank you, Sir." He stands and goes to the door. "Are you sure about this, Sir?"

"Yes," the man says with a smile, then he playfully cracks, "Now get outta here! I got work to do!"

The man leaves the room and walks to his cubicle. Someone he knows taps him on the shoulder. "What was that all about?"

He smiles and just keeps walking.

She stays near the back of the group and has forced herself to let her little girl run around with her friends. The chatter of the four-foot-tall children bounces over the tiled and stone walls of the museum. They have already investigated the *R.M.S. Titanic* exhibit, as well as the *Dinosaur Zone* and the *Our Wonderful Universe* dome. Her stomach growls and she is thankful they will be eating shortly, and since her legs are beginning to hurt, especially at the knees, she decides it is a good thing that after lunch there is an IMAX showing of the outlay of the Milky Way galaxy. She follows the group through two stone pillars and reads *The Evolution of Man* on the entryway; on one wall are artifacts dating to 30,000 years ago, and on the left are skeletons and manikins illustrating early man. There were models of *Homo habilis*, one of the first human ancestors, from two to one and a half million years ago. Two hundred thousand years ago the *Homo erectus* roamed the lands, and during the Pleistocene Ice Age *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis* took the scene. Around thirty-five thousand years ago, *Homo sapiens* became dominant and continues to be dominant. She admires the artifacts and sculptures and is thankful she has evolved, as they are hairy and they are not attractive at all. The tour guide takes them on to early stone-and-dye cave paintings created by the *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis*.

She looked over the heads of the little kids at the painting; it was only a bunch of colors swirled together. The tour guide announced that what the painter was trying to capture was not totally clear; most experts believe it is the aurora borealis

or aurora australis. The only problem with that was that the location of the cave painting was not a place susceptible to the northern or southern lights. Other ideas revolved around the painter being drunk or high, though it seems they were not smart enough to make drugs. The conservative tour guide announced that it was most likely drawn to represent something seen in the sky or in the water.

One of the children raises her hand and asks, "When do we eat? My tummy is making noises."

The tour guide laughs. "Let me show the way."

The woman looks at the painting for a while, the vibrant swirls and splashes of ancient paint, and follows the children, pushing it out of her mind forever.

He abandons the hopeless white-washed walls of the business complex and walks down the street, bathing in the warmth of the spring afternoon. His skin tingles and his lungs inhale; a flurry of flower petals driven by the wind rounds about him and he turns with them, almost laughing. He has not thought of anything but what it will be like to go to sleep beside his wife, sleep with her, and make it wholesome for once; he is always deprived and hanging loose because of the depression that never seems to go away. For once he is feeling fine. For once things seem to go his way. And he waits at the bus stop, coins jingling in his pocket, listening to the birds dancing among the trees of the sidewalk.

A slight shiver runs through him but he ignores it. Another drills through his spirit and he is forced to turn, and he looks into the eyes of a pale young man. He has slanted eyes and is only four feet tall, very thin and nimble. He smiles, a big toothy grin, and he seems overjoyed to look into the man's eyes. The man faces him, cocking his head to the side, completely bewildered. The man jumps back, opens his arms, and begins to dance. The man smiles. How ironic. The bus is coming up close. The young foreigner is dancing. The coins rest in the man's hand and he feels sorry that he will not have enough to give this poor guy any money. The bus rolls up, smoke gushing from the angled exhaust.

The foreigner continues to dance in circles; the man leans forward, says in a loud voice, "Good job!" and begins to board. As he is leaving, a hand clasps his shoulder and pulls him back. The dancer whispers in his ear: "If you will die in three days, what will you change?"

The man rips away and stumbles onto the bus, dripping money into the box. The bus driver takes off and the man maneuvers down the aisle, stepping over peoples' feet, and sees the dancer, wearing a grim face, pointing at him. The man feels horrible and sits down; when he looks out the window, the foreigner is gone. The bus turns around the corner. Suddenly he does not feel so happy.

She sits in one of the seats, eyes closed. She can hear the announcer speaking to the crowded IMAX theater, but she doesn't dare to look. When she opens her eyes, she feels like she is spinning in a vortex and the food is crawling up her throat. She closes her eyes and feels fine. She has decided that it was not a good idea to eat

right before the IMAX. She is already prophesying some innocent little kid puking all over his shirt, pants and shoes.

"The Milky Way is the galaxy which is the home of our solar system along with at least four hundred billion other stars and their planetary systems." The announcer tries to say this enthusiastically, but she is aware enough to know that he, too, is bored out of his mind. "Thousands of clusters and nebulae inhabit our galaxy. Stars from nearby galaxies have even entered our galaxy. Isn't this amazing, children?" Some children yell, *Yes!* "Most of the stars in our galaxy are located in the Galactic Center; an image of our galaxy shows a giant yellow ball surrounded by smoky arms. The giant yellow ball is actually composed of billions of stars pressed closely together."

She is wondering what her husband is doing. She looks at her watch. He is on lunch break.

He is sitting in the back of the bus wishing the bus had air conditioning. He is sweating under the two-hundred-dollar suit. He looks out the window, and as the bus rolls to a stop, he is fascinated to see the little children on the swings and tires and jungle-Jim at a school across the street. They are laughing and giggly. He wishes he is them. He stands and gets off the bus, thanking the driver, receiving no response. He stands on the sidewalk as the bus drives away; to his right is a spaghetti diner and to his left is a burger trolley.

He is deciding which one he wants when he feels someone staring at him. A fear splices through him and he imagines the foreigner coming at him with a blood-covered scythe blade. Instead he turns to see a thin, small woman pushing a baby carriage. He watches her pass in front of him, and she stops. She slowly looks up at him, brown hair falling around her head. She smiles and speaks. "There are four hundred billion known galaxies, and each galaxy has billions upon billions upon billions of stars. Most of these stars have their own planetary systems. Is it really so unbelievable that we are not alone? Is it not arrogant to assume that we *are* alone? It seems most plausible that we are *not* alone. What does your heart tell you?"

He breaks away and walks in the other direction.

The woman abandons her carriage and is following him. "The universe is huge, but it is connected. We are *all* connected. One civilizations' decisions across our galaxy affect us whether we know it or not!"

He is walking faster. The burger joint is around the corner. He will walk past it if he has to.

"We all have a role to play!" the woman yells, stopping at an intersection. "You have to ask yourself, 'What is mine?' And when you get your answer, you must decide if you have the courage to act upon it!"

Her words are lost and he rounds the corner. He waits, expecting her to come around, but she does not. He peeks around the brick wall and sees cars driving up and down the street, a couple holding hand down the sidewalk. The woman is

nowhere to be seen. The baby carriage lays sprawled by the bus stop. He runs over, dodging the couple, who look at him with scorn. He kneels down next to the carriage and rights it up, and reaches inside for the baby. The baby is firm in his hands; he moves a corner of blanket from the baby's face and stares into wide porcelain eyes.

She hopes it is almost over. The announcer's irritating voice drones on. "The Milky Way is just one of three large and over thirty small galaxies in a local group. Our galaxy is the second largest in the local group, seconded only by the Andromeda Galaxy; we are, however, the most massive member of this group. The Andromeda Galaxy is about 2.9 million light years away, but it is the nearest large galaxy; many smaller galaxies are much closer, such as satellites or companions of the Milky Way. The nearest galaxy is a dwarf galaxy, the Canis Major Dwarf, and its nucleus is only 25,000 light-years away from us and about 45,000 light-years from our Galactic Center."

These numbers are making her head hurt. It means nothing to her. She rubs her temples.

When will it end?

He shuffles away from the burger trolley, hands empty. He has lost his appetite. When he left the carriage by the bus station, he caught condemning eyes from those around him. He is glad that is over as he walks in the shadow of scattered skyscrapers. The sun glints off the giant black windows and he feels the glare blinding him. He walks across the street, dodging traffic, and enters a coffee shop. He reads the list of options and orders a frozen mocha with caramel swirls, crunchy chocolate toppings and whipped cream. He thanks the woman behind the bar and sits beside the window, looking out to the street, sipping his cold coffee through a straw and wishing he had cinnamon.

He does not notice the old man at first. Most people notice when he walks in the door. He catches the murmurs of a couple beside him and looks up to see a monk ordering a coffee. He looks ecstatic. The man watches him, not allowing the awkwardness of curiosity to hold him back. The monk takes his seven-shot cappuccino and walks between the tables, bowing to those watching, cracks a joke with a little girl, who laughs. A peaceful aura surrounds him and the man feels at ease even as the small old man with wizened eyes sits across the table from him. The man sips his coffee and the monk just stares at him.

The monk breaks the silence. "Let me ask you a question. Should we participate in war?"

"We?" the man asks. He feels quite calm. "You mean us as Americans or you as a monk."

The man takes a whisk of espresso and scratches his beard. "Monks."

He does not know too much about monks or monasteries or the sort, but he did go to Sunday School as a kid and remembers a few things, such as the Sermon on

the Mount, where Jesus said, "Turn the other cheek." The man responds, "For a monk, I think it would be wrong. But I really don't know."

"Why would it be wrong for a monk and not for you?"

"We live by different standards. Your standard is 'turn the other cheek.' The world is 'eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth.'"

The man smiles. "Ah. You see, this is where you are confused. Christ tells us to turn the other cheek when we are being insulted. But war results not from you being spit upon, but *others* being spit upon. There are no individual wars. When others are in jeopardy, we, as followers of the Master, must be eager to respond, even sacrificing our lives. We who are monks have a great responsibility to righteousness and justice. So it is a matter of obedience when we raise our swords in response to injustice and oppression." He sips his coffee, tenderly asks, "What kind of coffee is that?"

The man tells him.

The monk leans back in his chair. "I see something in your eyes. You look... disgruntled."

"I feel fine, really."

"Do you need some time to relax? Some time to wind down and contemplate life?"

The man cocks his head, trying to understand. "We all need that. Time does not allow it."

The monk laughs and slaps the table. "You are right! We all need it and time is our enemy. Time, such an awful thing." He says in a rising voice, climaxing in a yell, "Clocks, clocks *everywhere!*" The man is tense, all eyes on them and the monk leans over the table. "I cordially invite you to stay at the Beauville Monastery. Not for life, dear me, no! Not everyone is called to a monastic life. But come just for the weekend, just to spend some time with us, away from electricity, away from the noise of the highway, away from all the busyness of daily life. We do not hang clocks on our walls. You will sleep quite soundly, and have much time to relax, enjoy yourself, and contemplate your life."

The man shakes his head, laughing. "No, no. I don't think it's for me."

"Just for a night-"

He stands. "I'm sorry. I just have to go. My work, the bus..."

The monk does not move. "Please. Take my card." He digs into his tunic and pulls out an ivory card wrapped in spindly fingers. He hands it to the man, and the man finds it quite strange to be receiving a card from a religious, zealot monk. "There is an address and phone number. You can call ahead or just show up. It doesn't really matter. We have many rooms open."

The man numbly says, "Thank you," and begins to walk away. "Nice talking to you."

"God bless you and your travels," the monk says.

The man disappears out the door, tossing his paper cup in the trash on the way out.

The monk rubs his temples, staring out the window, the brilliant yellow sun baking the tinted windows. “May the King bless us all.”

She had fallen asleep and her stomach calmed. The kids watched the IMAX screen, entranced by the way it felt as if they were moving through the galaxy as the young man behind the micro-phone continued to read off his script, every now and then making an effort to sound ecstatic. “Our home, the solar system, is situated within the outer regions of the Milky Way galaxy, well within the disc of the galaxy and 28,000 light years from the Galactic Center. Kids, think about this: if a model of the Milky Way galaxy were to be constructed using a pinpoint for every star, and if this model were to be accurate, it would stretch across the entire Continental United States! We have explored hardly a speck of the galaxy that we know, and what lies beyond our scope is no doubt wonderful, majestic, and incomprehensible. Are we alone in our galaxy or are there others, other civilizations seeking higher knowledge, higher truth, and unity? We do not know at this time, and we may never know. But maybe, just maybe, one or two of you kids in this room will be the ones to discover intelligent life co-habiting the Milky Way galaxy with us.”

IV

She cradles the phone in one hand, leans against the counter, and looks to the floor, long strands of hair forming a curved waterfall around her head. He lets the front screen door snap shut behind him, peers down the corridor lit up by evening sun coming through the sky windows, and he sees her set the phone upon the hook. He sets his briefcase down onto the floor by the wall, looks into the other room to see if his daughter is there: she is not. Slowly he walks towards his wife; she sets the phone upon the cradle and rubs her eyes, then runs her hands through her dark hair. He is upon her, and he touches her with one hand. He had been excited to tell her the news—a four-day weekend to spend together!—but he can tell something has happened. He feels her cold skin beneath his finger, and she suddenly turns, forcefully embracing him, squeezing tight, arms wrapped around him. She rests her head against his chest and snuffles; he takes his nimble hands and puts one on her back, feeling her shallow breaths, and the other he places upon her head, running her hair between his fingers. The hair smells of lavender.

He does not ask what has happened. He knows she will tell him. He lets her fall into his arms, and he lets her spoil his tie with sparse tears. A fire engine blares in the distance. She backs away, leans over the table, palms against the wood. She draws a deep breath into her nose and he walks around the table, standing between two chairs, waiting. She stands, and he expects her to speak, but she does not. Instead she walks to the window, the light coming between the trees wrapping around the soft contours of her silhouette. She speaks into the glass, and he hangs on every word. “Willis called. She never calls.” She leans her forehead against the

cool glass, looking at her disgruntled reflection. "Mom and Dad were in an accident. They just... slid off the road, I guess. No one knows why. They are in critical condition. Thank God, though," she says, turning, looking at her husband. "Someone came upon their car. It was wrapped around a tree. Both were unconscious and no one knows how long they were there. They're in the hospital now."

What does one say? Is "sorry" ever enough? Is saying "it'll be all right" a statement from the heart or a statement of politic? Does anyone hear us when we tell them we're sorry; does it *mean* anything anymore, or is it simply a Hallmark card awaiting to be fashioned, perhaps formed into business cards to be passed out to those carrying a wet tissue? Impersonal? How personal are our thank-yous, pleases, and good-afternoons? The world is littered with impersonal remarks that are meant to come from the heart, but they do not mean anything. He stands looking at her, and he knows this, knows nothing he can say can possible help.

So he walks around the table, pulls her to him, and he holds her. She cries again. He does not let go, only holds her tighter. She pours her soul into him, and for a moment he can feel the anguish, the despair, the hopelessness. He has known this only once, when his mother succumbed to cancer. Now he feels it all again, wants to cry, but does not; instead he takes a finger, puts it under his wife's chin, raises her head, and he kisses her passionately. Their tongues entwine and he tells her what words never could. He promises her more and he pulls her into the living room. The baby is sleeping and the little girl is at a friend's house. They fall upon the couch and, for a moment, he does the greatest comfort he can imagine, and he does it well. She falls asleep in his arms.

"I have to go to Nashville," she says as they stand in their room. He is opening the drawers, pulling them out, and setting them on the king-sized bed, the striped maroon comforter bending to the heavy drawers. She zips open several leather travel bags she'd discovered in the closet, and ran her hand through them to open up the folds and crinkles. She grabs clothes and throws them in, for once not caring whether or not they were wrinkled. She has stopped crying, the sorrow replaced with resolution. "I'll take the Honda. It has better gas mileage. And better traction. We'll be passing through the mountains."

He rummages through a drawer and pulls out a locket. He opens it, finding nothing inside. "Where did you find this?" he asks.

She looks at what is in his hands. "Molly gave it to me, two years ago. Birthday gift. It's a cereal-box special." A slight grin comes over her face, something new and warming. She snatches it from his hand and throws it in her bag.

"There's not even a picture in it," he says. "What good is a locket without a picture?"

"Whose picture would I put in it?"

He kisses her tenderly. "Mine, maybe?"

She smiles and returns to packing. Her mind returns to her mother and father and her packing slows. He quietly nudges her to the side and does it for her. She sits down in a wicker chair against his dresser. She looks out the window, at the bare linoleum tile of the market-stock house beside them. He is packing when he offers, "I can go with you. Mr. Haines gave me a four-day weekend."

"No," she says firmly. "My weekend will be spent in a hospital. Yours does not have to be."

"The hospital is not appetizing. I care about your parents, too. And I want to be with you. And Molly."

"We will be fine. Besides, the decorator's coming Saturday, and we hired him three months ago. Someone has to be here." She is calming herself. "Willis says things are looking brighter. They aren't in critical anymore. They should be out in a week or two. Even if they have a cast or two, they would be lucky. I still don't see what they were thinking. Why would they just swerve off the road? It isn't like them, not at all."

He draws a deep breath, zipping up a bag. "Are you sure Molly should go? I don't know how being in a hospital will affect the emotional state of a developing little girl." She does not laugh and he realizes how horrible a joke it was; could it even be considered a joke? "How about she stays here. It would give you more time with your parents. Isn't that what you want? I can take her to the zoo or we can go swimming. Isn't she still in school? If she misses a day, she can't exempt exams."

"Our daughter is in third grade. She doesn't know what an exam is. No, she's coming, okay? She really wants to come. She loves her grandma and grandpa. She loves her cousins and aunts and uncles, and she loves Tennessee. We don't have many mountains up here. It is something new and special for her."

"I don't know if her seeing grandpa and grandma in bloody wraps is--"

She looks towards the floor.

He curses himself. "I'm an idiot." He throws the bag against the head of the bed and kneels down beside her. He looks up at her and speaks quietly. "You're the most beautiful person I've ever seen, you know? Even when you're crying, you are beautiful. Let me kiss you?" She nods her head and he proceeds. He draws away. "Everything's going to work out fine. Your dad was in World War Two, remember? Flew the... whatever, some kind of plane. He's a tough guy. And he was forced to bow down to your mother in secret." She manages to breach a smile. "Listen, Claire, everything's going to be okay. Take Molly. Try to have fun. Enjoy the gift of life, a gift that won't be taken anytime soon. Come Christmas, we'll all be laughing and enjoying your mother's sweet potato casserole."

She breathes deep, filling her lungs. "Don't ever leave me."

"I never will." He kisses her again. "I promise."

Molly gets into the car as Claire tries to shut the trunk of the car. A suitcase is preventing it from being shut; he helps rearrange and shuts the trunk himself,

makes sure it is locked. He looks at his wife, says nothing; she knows what he is thinking and he knows what is going through her mind. She gives a fake smile but he doesn't return it. She knows she is still worried; many people entered the critical condition, slipped out of it, and rapidly returned to it. She'd seen accidents where vehicles wrapped around trees; she could not believe her parents survived, and for this she is thankful, but the fear does not evade. He tells her to just concentrate on the road and get she and Molly there in one piece; they do not need another accidents. She says she will and kisses her husband one last time. She does not know it is the last time they will kiss. She waves goodbye and gets into the car; he steps onto the grass as she pulls the small car from the driveway, and, as she pulls away, Molly blows a kiss to her Daddy. He catches it in one hand and sucks it up with his mouth. Molly places her palm on the glass and frowns. He waves at her. The baby in the backseat is crying; she wants her bottle.

The car disappears around a curb and he is left to the scattered dog barks and lawnmowers in the neighborhood. He enters the house through the garage, shuts the door, and sits on the couch. He thinks about turning on the TV but does not. His life has taken a plunge again; he is given a chance to spend the weekend with his wife and children and is denied. He does not want to watch TV, he does not want to eat. The silence of the house breaks him, and he aches for her so bad. He aches for the laughter of his little girl and the warmth of Claire snuggled against him as they watch the newest episode of C.S.I. He wonders if he should watch C.S.I. but knows it would not be the same. He gets up from the couch, looks out at the twilight coming through the skylight, and trots up the stairs, ready to take a bath and go to bed.

V

He does not wake to the alarm, not this morning. Instead he had cracked open the window before bed and came awake the manila sunshine and the sweet sonnets floating through the trees, robins and hummingbirds and ravens flitting through the limbs. He eats a breakfast of two eggs, toast with jam, and a bowl of Corn Flakes, not drinking much of the orange juice because it tastes too thick for him to like. He throws them in the sink, grunts, and puts them in the dishwasher. The silence absolutely kills him and he turns on the radio, but it does not help. He sits in the chair by the unused fire-place, gazing at family pictures on the mantle. He wonders why he has been so cursed – the gift given has been taken from him just as quick. His fists ball and he feels a thread of anger and sorrow run through him. The sound of the scratchy radio blending with the grave quiet about the house is enough to drive him crazy; he does not even dress before he goes out to rent a movie at the video store in town.

As he drives, he feels as if he is being watched. He looks out the windows and sees the faces of neighbors and a big yellow bus rolls by. Kids peer at him from the tented windows, book-bags thrown over their shoulders, packed lunches held

in tiny hands. He makes the right turns and parallel parks beside the wide front doors of the video shop. He gets out, locks his door, shrugs an odd feeling off his shoulder, and enters. The bell on the door rings twice and he waves to the girl at the desk. He browses the titles: science-fiction, fantasy, romance. He considers getting a romance movie to remind him of his wife, but only laughs at himself: he would be bored. He picks up an action title and hands it to the girl; she asks how his day is and he tells her it is fine. In his mind, he plays out a conversation:

"I've got one movie," he would say, and he would set it on the counter.

She checks it and begins grabbing the movie. "How is your day today, Sir?"

"Excuse me?"

"I asked, 'How is your day?'"

"Why would you care?" he asks her.

She is knocked cold. "Sir?"

"You ask because it is political. Just give me the movie."

After a moment of failed comprehension, "Sorry, Sir." She is silent as she finishes the transaction and hands him the movie. "Have a nice day, Sir."

"Whatever," he says as he takes the movie in his hands and walks out the door.

Instead the girl gives him the movie and says, "Have a good one, Sir."

"Thank you and you too," is his actual response, and his enjoyment in the store ends.

The sun is getting quite warm, rising high, and the humidity, despite the spring, crawls all over him. He finds his car unlocked. He does not enter, knowing he locked it, but sets the video-tape upon the hood of his car and looks around. Cars honk because he is just standing in the middle of the street; he ignores them and looks up and down the street sidewalks, taking glances between passing vehicles, and he looks inside the shop windows. Epic skyscrapers raise in the distance. He does not find any answers to the mystery, and so he gives himself a quant curse and slides into the seat, shutting the door. He inserts the key, turns on the engine, and as he is ready to pull into the stream of traffic, he sees someone sitting in the backseat, a small man with long braids. The man hurls a stream of cusswords and flies around in his seat, the seatbelt ripping off, and he screams at the man to get out of his car before he calls the cops. He has never seen this man before.

The stranger eye's are wild, lost in an ephemeral sea, as he leans forward and cries out, "Do not go! You must not go! The life of your mother and two children hinge--"

One of the man's hands flies over the seat and grabs the man by the collar. "Don't mention the names of my family, you self-serving creep! Get out of my car!"

He rips the man's hand away. "Listen to me! It is a trap! It is a trap! You can't--"

Across the street, men and women who had been walking look at one another, then dart across the street, run up the sidewalks. A driver lays on his horn as his brakes squeal, a tiny woman running up to the parked car with the stranger and the frightened man. The woman grabs the back door and rips it open; the other door

opens in the hands of a small man. Other tiny men and women surround the car and they are moving their mouths yet issuing no sound. The man in the back gapes from side-to-side with horrific surprise as the woman leans in, grabs his arm, and begins ripping him off the seat.

The stranger rants to the driver, "Do not go! It is a trap! A trap!"

But he is gone, accosted by two people and quickly moved away from the car. The man is looking between the strangers who had helped him. They shut the back doors and one raps pale knuckles on the man's glass window. The window rolls down and the stranger, a perky man with a wild uni-brow and Irish cap, says, "Sorry for this disturbance, Sir. This man escaped from a mental asylum several days ago. We have been looking for him. He is not quite right," he says, tapping his hat, "in the head. I need to ask you a few questions, okay?"

The man finds it weird the Irish man has no Irish accent. He swallows. Mental asylum? "Okay."

"Thank you. What, exactly, did he tell you?"

"He told me not to go."

"Not to go where, Sir?"

"He didn't say."

"Could he be talking about your home, Sir?"

"No... He said it was a trap..."

"Okay. Did he mention anyone you know?"

"My family," he says, eyes flashing with severity. "Are they in danger?"

His voice turns cold. "It seems as if he knew who you were, which means he followed you, most likely from your home. Are your wife and daughters there?"

"No. They're in Tennessee. No one is home."

Relief rushes through the stranger. "Thank the King. I don't suggest returning home."

"No?"

"He escaped with one other man still on the loose. Keep your family in Nashville and find someplace to stay, with a friend or something, okay?"

The man nods. "Okay."

The stranger pulls away. "Thanks for your cooperation. Drive safely."

"I will." He pulls into traffic and leaves the small man behind.

He does not realize that somehow the little man at the window knew he has a wife and two kids, and even more, that they are in Nashville. All he thinks of is his family, and is very thankful they are in Tennessee. He does not return home but goes to the bookstore, keeping the video in his car. He searches for books, sits down in an oversize chair, and reads a horror anthology by H.P. Lovecraft. He reads through it all, but he cannot quote any of it; his thoughts turn upon his family, and then upon his own welfare. He realizes he needs to find a hotel, someplace safe. The thought of going home and discovering a psychopath in the refrigerator makes him shiver.

Two men in tan suits exit the hospital room, a manila envelope under one man's armpit. She hugs Molly close to her as the men stride past. She tries to make eye contact but they do not respond; cold and quiet, men of business. She watches them go down the hospital wing; a dainty nurse flirts but the young men do not return it. She feels broken and weathered. Claire sighs, takes Molly by the hand, draws a well of breath, and enters the hospital room.

Her mother and father are in separate beds, the separating curtain between them draw away so they could speak to one another. Her mother lay to the right, feet propped up in a cast, and her arm swollen purple; a plaster cast wrapped around her abdomen. Dozens of IVs were embedded into her father and a neck brace caught his plump face. Upon seeing their daughter, they brighten. Claire's single brother, a lawyer from across the state, nods to both his sister and niece. Molly's little eyes widen into the size of saucers; Claire gives her a push and she runs over to her grandma, kissing her on the cheek. Grandma smiles, stroking her hair with a bruised hand. The grandpa taps Molly on the shoulder and she spins around, embracing him; he grunts, neck brace shifting to and fro.

Claire walks over to her brother, whispered, "Where's Willis?"

"She left this morning," he tells her. "She had a conference in Bloomington."

"So they're going to be fine?" she asks, looking at her parents.

"Define 'fine.' They're going to be in these beds for a week or two before being released. Dad won't be able to continue his factory job, and we're unsure on whether or not they'll pay him for his retirement. Claire... They don't have much saved up. Their recovery is the least of our worries."

She looks over at Molly talking to both her grandparents. She wonders why this happened. The windows displays the hospital parking lot, people entering and exiting. She watches as a mourning family exits the building; a man falls against a car, breaking apart. She turns away from the window, asks her brother, "Who were those men walking out? I didn't recognize them."

He shakes his head, showing he doesn't know. "Don't you know it, we have the F.B.I. on the crash case."

"F.B.I.? That doesn't make any sense."

"I know."

"What kind of questions did they ask?"

"They asked if they remembered anything before, during and after the crash, anything out-of-the-ordinary. But they were unconscious and didn't know anything. Thankfully; those men were colder than an Eskimo's broomstick and I'm thankful they're gone."

"No Vacancy" signs cover every hotel in the city, people gathering for the Flower Festival; a few are open but way out of his price range. He stands at the corner in downtown, amongst the shadows of skyscrapers as dusk begins to settle, and he sticks his hand in his pocket for his keys, but he feels something else. He draws it out. It is the card from the monastery. He thinks monasteries are ridiculous, for

people who are either crazy zealots or poor enough to survive on their own in the real world. But he can't throw off the spectacular aura of the monk who came to him, and for a moment he considers it. But instead he throws it out on the street, wondering how he could be so possessed as to actually *consider* it. He gets in his car and just drives, aimlessly, through the city and surrounding suburbs and even into the hills, the mountains glowing orange in an unfathomable distance.

She is going back to her car, exiting the hospital, when the two men she had seen earlier stepped in front of her. She instinctively drew her daughter close to her, and the men smiled, flashing their F.B.I. badges. One fished out a children's sucker and gave it to the little girl. Claire asks what they want, and they reply, "We just want to ask you a few questions."

"I don't know anything," she rallies in her defense. "I just got here. Can we go, please?"

They exchange glances; Molly is unwrapping the sucker. One of them asks, "I assume you know, ma'am, why we are on this case at all?"

She wants to leave but she is rooted. Molly plops the sucker in her mouth, flavor bursting through her. "Indulge me," Claire finally responds.

"Your mother and father," the shorter of the two began, "crashed on a narrow road out in the country, a place of farms and creeks and plow-fields. There was no reason for the crash. Both your parents were sober, both were quite wide awake, and both had driven this road many, many times, to and from their church. They were driving in twilight—not complete darkness, ma'am, you understand, but the evening light. They just missed a curb with many warnings, broke through the fence, blasted down into a creek, rolled out and hit a tree. Part of the car was on fire and someone saw it, called it in, and ran to the wreck. When they got there, the car was simply smoldering, glowing embers, you see, and water was splashed everywhere. It was a clear day so it had not rained. Your parents were completely unconscious. We are investigating this matter because someone doused the fire. Someone saved your parents' lives. We would like to know who; the entire town wants to know. They ought to be honored, you see. We were wondering if you would know who this 'Good Samaritan' is?"

She sucks in the information, then shakes her head. "No. I don't live down here."

"You have no idea?"

"I grew up here. But I've lost contact with anyone in the town."

"Does anyone with a... helper's spirit... know your parents personally?"

"How should I know?" she says calmly. "I imagine. They go to church. It's a small church, but they learn a lot. She always told me to help others without letting my right hand know what my left is doing. Maybe someone helped, saw another person coming to the scene, and dashed, not wanting to be found? I don't think it's a big deal. If they want to be anonymous, let them be. They obviously do or they would've been there. Whoever did this didn't commit a crime..."

"We're not sure," the taller one says. "Here's our hypothesis: someone is in the road for whatever reason, and your father, who was driving, knows that if he turns he will hit them. They are doing something odd, so he simply smashes through the fence. The person who caused the distraction feels guilty, so he does what he can to help, then runs when someone else is coming towards the car. He knows he's screwed if he's seen so he jets, maybe even hearing the sirens of the ambulances and fire engines coming from the town."

"You're talking about a prankster."

"Yes. Something like this. Probably a kid."

She sighs. Molly is sucking her sucker, just watching with kiddy eyes, engulfing it all, listening to the stories, attempting to understand. "I don't know anyone, certainly no kids. Have you asked the people near the crash?"

"All the farms are run by old folk. We're thinking a hired hand may have done it; college kids on spring break."

"I hope you find them. I really do. I'm sorry, Men. I really don't know anything."

They can read the sincerity in her voice and step aside. "Rest well, ma'am. Your parents are going to heal just fine. They're lucky to be alive, and much luckier to be as well-off as they are. Don't worry about a thing. Take that cute little girl out to dinner and go to a movie at the dollar theater. Everything's fine on this side of the river."

Claire says thank you and walks away, hand-in-hand with her six-year-old daughter. The men watch them go, then turn and face the three-story hospital on the outskirts of the Nashville suburbs; forest-carpeted mountains rose like natural skyscrapers all around them. One draws out a cigarette in the swirling humidity, lights it with a Zippo, and puts it to his mouth. Smoke flows from his nose as he asks, "Nice story. Now what?"

"We have to convince the family that some kid did this."

"Why can't we tell them the truth?"

"The truth?" He laughs. "Who wants the truth anymore?"

"We don't mention the sightings?"

"No, we don't mention the *lights*. Not sightings. No one saw anything."

"But something made the old man drive straight off the road... And something doused the fire."

"Maybe it went out naturally?" He throws his cigarette on the ground, snubs it with his foot. "Leave it alone, Carl. Don't mess with a dead squirrel. The old man and his woman are going to be all right, we don't need to spread gossip and rumors and get all of Nashville singing about this. It is an accident with a mysterious prankster, and the local cops are keeping the case open. It is beautiful."

"What do we do?"

"We act like this never happened. Make up a story. Atmospheric disturbances."

"Will they buy it?"

He smirks. "We're surrounded by hicks. Of course they'll 'buy' it. Most of these guys are hardcore conservative; they'd laugh at us if we told them what we know."

"Or what we think we know but really don't."

"Exactly."

VI

The country road twists and turns, concocting a rabid uphill spiral threatening to hydroplane the car. He eases back on the gas and turns around another tight curve as a burst of lightning arcs through the sky, splashing down between the trees. He gapes as fire stretches through the limbs, turning a split tree into a wicked, fiery scarecrow screaming white smoke. He turns his eyes back the road, the firelight dancing oddly through the windows, and he sees the burning tree lying across the road, broken and snapped branches twisted in thousands of directions, natural spikes just waiting to pop the tires. He slams the brakes but the water catches the wheels; he sees the woodlands fire spinning around him and his body is tugged against the seat; he is thrown forward into the steering wheel as the car lurches to a stop. He is facing the wrong direction, the headlights splayed all over the road and into the dense trees opposite the lightning-ignited furnace. He hears a strange sound on the roof of the car, the sound of dropping needles, and then rain is coming down all around him, pouring. He sits in the car, waiting for it to lay-up, telling himself to just hold on until the fire engines come. It isn't long before he realizes he is out in the middle of nowhere and the mini forest fire is being extinguished in the downpour. He angrily drums his fingers on the steering wheel and takes up his time by thinking of his first date with Claire, how they met during a school project and he almost died in a bonfire by splashing around gasoline; how her father knocked him away in the last second and she was laughing so hard.

He realizes the rain is letting up; of course it would. The raindrops were large, and large rainfalls, unless one lived in the tropics, ended quickly. He decides not to wait too long before it comes again, and gets out of the car. He walks around to the back, sees the back bumper lying crooked, the two back wheels nestled into the twisted fibers of the fallen tree. Some of the rubber had been scorched in the fire before the log had been snuffed by the rain. He kneels down and notices the back right tire is completely flat; a thick stick went right through it. He curses, realizing he has nowhere to go, realizing he will have to wait forever to find someone to take him home, and he remembers that those men said there was another psychopath running around.

He gets back inside the car. And locks it.

She sits out on the back porch of her grandparents' home; they have the place completely to themselves. Molly sits between her legs, leaning back on her mother's stomach. Claire takes up her hand in one hand, and using her knowledge of yesterday's museum excursion, she points out the big dipper and tells her

daughter about the Milky Way. She is surprised when her daughter decides to take over the conversation, but she digs up from the recesses of her brain that children, while not as wise and fully-learned, have a better capacity for short-term memory. After the discourse, it is getting cool, and thunder rumbles over the mountains. The insects buzz in the trees rising around them, the branches spread out over the sides of the balcony, and her daughter is staring at the stars.

“So those stars are billions and billions of years away?”

“Traveling at the speed of light,” Claire says, “Yes.”

“How fast is the speed of light?”

“Fast.”

“How fast, though?”

“Very fast.”

“So we’re seeing something very far away.”

She shifts her daughter’s position, grunts, “Kind of.” Feeling better. “Say that star right there-“

“Which one?”

“See where I am pointing your finger? That star. Let’s say that star is a billion light-years away. The light we are seeing is actually light it gave off a billion years ago. It’s taken a billion years just for that light to come and greet us here.”

“Wow.”

They remain outside. Claire thinks it feels good – tender warmth, zero humidity.

Her daughter pipes up, “Are there more of us up there?”

“In the stars?”

She nods.

“Maybe. Did you know most of those stars have their own solar systems with planets?”

“Yeah, Mommy.”

“Well. Maybe one of those planets has people like us, but different somehow. Maybe cuter.” She laughs. “Or uglier?”

The little girl grins at her mom. “Really? Do *you* think there are any others up there?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. It’d be a waste of space if there weren’t, don’t you think? Maybe, right now, at this very moment, one of the planets revolving around one of those stars has a mommy and her daughter, and they are looking up, seeing our star as one in a thousand stars in the night sky, and maybe the little girl is asking, ‘Mommy, are there any others out there?’ and maybe her mommy is saying, ‘I don’t know. But it seems like a waste of space if we’re all alone, doesn’t it?’”

The rain continues. Lightning arcs beautiful signatures across the sky, reflecting through the rain-streaked windows, creating ghastly stained-glass shadows all over the seats. The man twists in his seat to see if there is a flashlight in the back when a lightning burst shatters overhead; out of the corner of his eye, he sees something

down the road, something off to the side. He climbs over the seat, finds a flashlight, and peers out the back window, waiting. He has the time. The lightning returns with its brother thunder, and he can see a fiendish gargoyle setting upon battered stone steps leading up into the trees. He finds its horrid features and crumbling marble horrifying; he cringes away and sits in the front seat, tapping the turned-off flashlight in the palm of his hand. He cannot help it. He must go.

The rain stabs at him like white-hot pinpricks, and he covers his arms with a leather jacket and hangs his head low as he walks. His jeans are soiled by rain and scarred with charcoal as he steps over the partially-burnt log. He abandons the car, completely unlocked, and creeps up the road along the side, the fingers of plants brushing his shoulder, whispering nonsense into his ears. He turns on the flashlight and raises it into the woods; they are dark and forbidden, the beam losing track only three or four feet in. He swings it around to the steps, trails it to the gargoyle, and is fascinated by its open maw, the crumbling teeth, the vicious eyes. As he draws nearer, a faded inscription in Latin rests beneath the statue, engraved into the marble base; beneath that is a plaque that repeats the Latin words, then translates: "Flee from evil, lest ye be tempted." He shines the flashlight up the stone steps, and upon a tall rise it rests: the Beauville monastery, a labyrinth of cells, walkways, gardens and farming.

He begins walking up the steps, the water making them slippery; his tennis shoes slip and slide. He passes under a wooden sign that reads, *The Beauville Monastery*. The steps reach a level and he walks past several withering potted plants and stands before the large oak doors, the rain falling all around him, and he considers returning to the car. But something else draws him, something not simply found in a monk's kind words, and he feels compelled to knock.

Molly is sleeping in the guest bedroom and the baby has been laid in the playroom cradle. Claire closes the door to the master bedroom. She looks over her parents' made bed, remembers her mom yelling at her as a child to make her bed because it was proper in the daytime. At the time, she'd thought her mother crazy, and was taken aback when she demanded the same thing in her own household, and even became depressed when the covers weren't made. She thinks of her husband, how he never does laundry, never makes the bed, never cleans his messes. She knows, unless her husband changes, the house will be a wreck when she returns. It isn't that he's lazy; he simply doesn't care.

She picks up the phone and dials. The digital clock on the dresser says it as a few minutes after midnight. Clicking sounds fill her ear, then there is ringing. She sits on the bed, legs dangling over the side, and waits. No one answers the phone. Typical, she thinks, and sets the phone on its cradle. He is probably sleeping downstairs, the television on and a bowl of melted ice cream on his chest. She hopes he will clean it up if that ice cream falls. She pulls into the covers, closes her eyes, and lets the soft sound of thunder coming over the mountains lull her to sleep.

Come morning, she would receive a phone call: “Ma’am, your husband is missing.”

The great wooden doors open, swinging inward, and he cautiously enters. The room is small and dark, the stone walls covered with grime; upon stone ledges dozens of candles burn, their smoke trailing to the ceiling and assimilating into the air as if they were prayers of the Saints. He hears steps behind him and turns. A short, stocky old man is shutting the giant doors, closing off the rain; the man backs into a flame and jumps away, but doesn’t move too far, as the candles warm his shivering body. The monk fastens the door with a crowbar and walks over to the man; he takes his hand in his, and the man feels a strange surge of energy run through him. The monk smiles and says, “Welcome to the Beauville Monastery. We have been expecting you.”

He bites the inside of his cheek. “Expecting me?”

“We saw you crash below, and we saw you were okay. The King led you here, to us. You are meant to be here.”

“Did He have to total my car to do it? My back wheels are locked up and one is broken.”

The monk sighs, patting the man on the shoulder. “The King works in mysterious ways. Do not hold onto the things of the world, for we are meant for the world of the next.” He quietly nods his head to this statement, then pulls the man deeper into the heart of the monastery, through winding passageways lined with doors into dusty libraries, prayer rooms, cells with cots and small dressers and candles, and the man stole a glance into the large congregation room, where dozens of pews faced the front, where a cross hung over a baptismal, and the stained glass windows lit up with each snap of fresh lightning. They continue until the man can hear voices, laughter, the tinkling of glass and plates. Warm light comes from an open doorway and the two of them enter; dozens of monks look over from a long table and they stand, rushing forward in glee to congratulate the newcomer and to smother him in graces.

The other monk backs off and begins whispering to another as the others shake the man’s hand, throw him compliments, and offer him food. The man walks over to the table and accepts a roll or two, and one of the monks butters it for him. They ask him all kind of questions, and as he eats, as the warmth overtakes and the food fills his stomach, he feels more cheerful, more open, and instead of just answering their questions as if it were an interrogation, he asks them questions and they hold intelligent conversations. He is awed at how they never miss a beat in their words, how everything is eloquently put together, and he is amazed at how young some of the older men look, and he decides it is because the stress of the world has left them alone; secluded in this small little corner of the earth, they are left to themselves, and they age in seclusion, living with others like them and living with their God.

After a little while a monk stands, “A toast!” he declares.

The man recognizes the monk as the one he'd seen in the coffee shop.

A monk gives the man a glass of wine and he takes it. The other monks raise their wooden goblets and prepare to drink.

The coffee shop monk says, "To our friend, and his journey. May grace follow him through his days, and may the power of the King rest upon him. May he serve the King with courage and might, and may he make right what is wrong. Our blessings upon him!" He drinks.

The man drinks with the other monks and they are all laughing. He laughs, too, for the drink is good, he is finally enjoying life, but he is beginning to feel tired. So much excitement and running around for one day. He thanks them all for their hospitality and feels bad he is asking for a room to sleep in; the monks tell him not to be sorry, that every man must sleep, it is the way the King designed them. The monk who greeted him at the door began to escort him away, but the monk who had made the toast took over and had the man follow him through the dank passageways lit with scattered candles.

"We are very simple here," he says. "There is not much stress. Stress accompanies a life of business and complexity, and materialism does not help it at all. We are completely anti-materialistic. We own one set of clothes, but we are also allowed a Holy Book, a collection of Kingly books if we so desire, and a notepad and pencils for journaling. Journaling is recommended here. The King often speaks through our own hands; it is a favorite method of His." They stop and he begins unlocking a door with a curved top. "I am thankful you showed up. The King told me to invite you, and we were all waiting for you. We are so excited to see you, but none so much as I. I have waited for this moment... for a while. We all have."

"Am I that special?" the man asks with a wry smile.

The monk looks at him, smiles back. "You haven't the foggiest idea."

He opens the door, revealing a cot and dresser and a small closet in the tiny stone room. Several quilts and a pillow adorn the bed and a single candle flickers, as if they knew he were coming. The monk tells him to change if he so likes; his clothes would be dry by morning. He wishes the man pleasant dreams and leaves.

The man stands alone in the cold room, in the silence; he finds it unnerving, but is not frightened. He knows this place is safe. He goes to lock the door but discovers it only locks from the outside. He figures this is because monks don't want other monks doing naughty things, so they make discovery a very real possibility. He grins at the thought and strips of his clothes; feeling cold again, he snuggles into the heavy quilts, cocoons them around his body, and as his head rests on the pillow, he looks up at the ceiling; in the bitter silence he thinks of his wife and daughters, and he falls into a deep sleep.

He dreams of angels coming and taking him to Heaven.

Chapter Two

"The man wakes from the final struggle of death, in absolute loneliness—such a loneliness as in the most miserable moment of deserted childhood he never knew. Not a hint, not a shadow of anything reaches him. All is dark, dark and dumb; no motion—not the breath of a wind! Never a dream of change! Not a scent from a far-off field! No sign of God anywhere. God has so far withdrawn from the man...he is in God's prison, his own separated self." – George Macdonald

I

He is alone, locked in a darkness he can taste, a darkness darker than the most awful silence, a darkness that makes prison seem full of radiant light. He does not know if his eyes are opened or closed; the darkness saturates every part of his eternal being. He props himself up on the bed, and feels cold. He realizes he is in his boxers and his blanket and pillow have disappeared. One hand traces up to his head, which pounds as if an angel has embedded his brain with a spiked mallet and continues to twist it around until brain matter comes from his nose and ears. He leans forward but it makes the sensation worse; he falls back on his elbows, then retreats even more into the confines of the bed, laying spread-eagled, staring into the darkness, goose bumps carving pathways across his frosty skin. Moments pass but it happens; he begins to see. His eyes widen and he consumes the room, the shadows merging and melting; he sees the familiar stone and it is still covered in that layer of grime. The mirror on the dresser was shattered and covered with a thick layer of dust; the candle has been knocked over and is strewn with cobwebs. He looks into the corners and sees insects crawling; a rat scurries across the floorboards and disappears into the wall. The man winces, trying to get up. He manages to sit on the edge of the bed, bare feet on the chilly stone floor. He rubs his eyes; the room has changed somehow, but not just the room. The entire atmosphere has been distorted: the very taste of the air, the smells hiding in the walls, and the decrepit silence roaring like an unstoppable hurricane. He had fallen asleep and the air had been like honey; now it shivered in a poisonous decay, strewn with whispers of mildew; he had fallen asleep to the quiet smells of candles and incense; he had fallen under with the sounds of laughter and prayers and Gregorian chants still clinging to the walls; now only silence, a bitter silence unable to be touched. He dares not breathe, for dare erupting the forbidden tranquility; the noises of the earth fell and no voices spoke upon the face of the deep.

He stands. He can feel the ache in his bones, gnawing at the marrow and seducing his veins, causing his eyes to slide close, his spirit to desire sleep. He fights it off, doesn't feel right, feels as if something is wrong, something out-of-place, not quite right. Ice travels between his toes as he stumbles in the darkness,

grasping the dust-stricken door handle. He twists it but it does not turn; with slight recollection he remembers that the door only opens from the outside. The monk had locked him in. Oh, the headache; he thinks the monks spiked the drink. How typical. He steps back. They spike his drink, he knocks down their door. A fair trade. He looks to the side and sees his clothes in a neat pile upon a broken chair. He does not remember setting them there, but the headache is bogging down his mind. He quickly dresses and returns to the door. His foot splinters through the door and cool air blows in, dripping with the stale sighs of broken bones. He reaches his arm inside, grasps over the door, flips the lock open, and stepping back, he calmly swings the door open.

The darkness of the corridor pervades and it takes his eyes many moments to adjust. The bare stone walls are laced with grime, and the candle mounts are empty, strewn with feathery cob-webs. He does not look at the floor, feels no need to, only runs one hand against the wall as he walks. It is not long till he feels something crackling under his feet. He cannot see and so he continues walking; it feels as if he is walking upon fortune cookies. He comes to an open door and sees faint light coming from a boarded window; the light laces through the spindly dust, breathing chalk on the walls. He steps upon a broken chair, grabs the wooden board, and rips it down. It comes free in a sea of dust and he falls back, the chair shifting; he lands on his shoulder, the wind sucked from his lungs; the wooden board breaks upon his opposite shoulder and the brilliant light burns his eyes. He lets it waft over him and slowly he opens his eyes; the light brings edges and colors and contours to the grey room.

He is looking into the hollow eyes of a skeleton covered in moss.

He reels backwards, a scream rising in his throat, and he throws himself up against the wall. The light reveals the atrocities of the room; skeletons lie everywhere, most covered in furry moss and eroding clothes. The room stinks of flesh and carrion beetles crawl over the walls. He leaps to his feet, afraid to move, terrified to breathe, the world spinning a million songs of death. The skeletons seem to rise, to move, to reach for him with bony fingers. He kicks a skeleton away, the bones falling apart under beetle-crawling cloth, and he throws himself into the hallway. The light from the exposed room hit into the corridor and splurged in every direction, illuminating a sea of decomposing bodies. The entire hallway is filled with corpses; he stumbles through them, as if he were wading through shallow water, and he breaks down a door leading to the room where he had dined just the night before.

Dust covers the stained glass windows, bathing the room in a brownish haze. The table is no longer covered with food or dishes, but bodies in contorted positions, metallic instruments embedded in the bones. The floor is bare except for the far wall, where piles of bodies of all shapes and sizes have been heaped together. Scorch marks covered with wall upon which the piles lay. The man falls against a chair, the very chair where he had sat the night before, and he collapses

upon the table, right next to a skeleton, tears carving oceans down his purple cheeks.

Leave.

The voice beckons. He has never heard such common sense. He has awakened in Hell. Claire and Molly and his little girl fill his thoughts; he throws away the table, angrily overturning it, and the impaled bodies break apart in a cloud of acrid dust. He storms from the room, leaping over the tattered skeletons. He passes the sanctuary where corpses lay hunched over the pews, and the cross had been burned. He enters the foyer where he had gathered the day before and it is wide open, broken timbers lying at its side, as if someone had broken in when it was barricaded. He leaps down the many steps, past the gargoyle statue, and is surrounded by several vehicles that had not been there before, vehicles of all makes and models, some he had never lain eyes on. He runs from them, running down the road. All the trees are burnt, no more than charcoal remains of what life used to look like. He stands in the middle of the road, where his car had wrecked last night, but the tree is gone and all signs of his car have left. He falls to the ground, listens to the sounds of nothing.

No wind, no birds, no cars. Only his breathing, and now, his crying.

A force that is not the man carries him, turning him back the way he'd come, back amongst the ivy-crawling stone steps with the smirking gargoyle, the gargoyle that seemingly mocked his desperation and confusion; up the steps a force carried him until he stood amongst a graveyard of vehicle skeletons, eyes staring into the innards of the monastery. The windows along the outside are boarded with burnt boards and the stones are engraved with all kinds of seeping russet moss. He turns his back to the monastery and feels grim chills, the darkest corners of his mind showing him ungodly visions: the skeletons arising, cloaked in tattered cloth and ribbons of skin crawling with maggots and beetles, and in the vision they are coming up out of the shadows of the monastery, reaching after him with those knobbed fingers, staring at him with those hollow eye cavities. He turns around, almost with a shout and a swaggering jump, and he sees the monastery sitting still and quiet. No creatures coming from the walls, no one and nothing coming to him. He is completely alone, more alone than he's ever been. The only organisms he knows are the ones feasting on the bones of the dead, and he is not fond of their company.

He seeks his car amongst the lot but it is nowhere to be found. He is surprised that most of the cars are unlocked, many with doors still open. Keys rest in some of the ignitions, and it takes him several tries to find a car that will start. The engine turns over slowly, and he pulls the automatic truck out of park and drives to the road. The roar of the engine is incredibly loud as he presses down on the gas, leaving the monastery in all its wickedness far behind. It is only him and the truck and he begins to feel relief. Soon he will be home. Soon he will see his wife and

his two baby daughters. A strange weekend, he recounts. And he thinks the forest fire must not have been completely put out.

All the trees are drenched in a gray ash, stripped of bark and leaves, limbs twisted in sharp, unnatural angles. No vegetation crawls up from the ground. It is too warm to be winter, as it feels like spring. The forest itself seems too dead to be in a state of winter; even in the clutch of the deepest snow, the trees are able to hold onto vague images of life the seasons before. But these trees seem as if they have been dead for many seasons, too many seasons to count. No bird nests, no foxholes, no deer tracks. All life has been drained from the woods and the air seems to quiver with an aurora of crimson hopelessness. He begins to feel it, too, and tries to take his mind off it, working the radio.

The radio picks up nothing. No music, no voices; no A.M. and no P.M. Not even static.

It is as if the entire world has died.

The country road twists through the dead woods. He remembers driving these roads just the day before; the headache is all but forgotten in his mindless confusion. He is surprised when he passes a highway cutting overhead the road, built on strong pillars and laced with graffiti; the paint on the pillars is faded and he can see the crest of an overturned car upon the highway. He is alarmed and stops the car; he gets out, locked in the silence, seeing the overturned car. He is not thinking clearly as he climbs the slope rising underneath the bridge, grabbing at dead trees to make his ascent. He reaches the road and runs onto the bridge; the highway is vacant in every direction except for the overturned car. He kneels beside the window and falls backwards, a shrill scream lost on his throat. A young woman's scorched face is staring out the window, her melted and fortified eyes glassy in the limelight. His heart hammers as he sees the burnt corpse dangling from seatbelts; in the back of the car, barely visible, are the skeletons of two young children, fingernails stuck in the glass as they had tried to escape.

The man stands, whirls around upon the highway, and stumbles over to the railing, tossing his head over, puking all over the pavement below. It takes him several lunges to empty himself out, and he falls against the concrete railing, knees tucked against his chest, arms wrapped around his legs, head resting upon his knees and eyes staring at the corpse who has not moved, looking into those empty eyes, wondering what the woman had seen that cost her her own life and the lives of her two children. The sight of the yellowed and decaying bones in the back draws his thoughts back to his own daughters and his own wife, and he is traumatized to see his wife in the front seat, burnt a charcoal black, and his two little girls left to thirst to death in the back of his car. An immeasurable dread overcomes him and he fears for the life of his family; the monastery, he realizes, is no freak accident. The woods speak volumes, telling him something horrible has happened, something immeasurable that passed in his slumber.

He slumps to his feet, filled with a frightening energy, an energy propelled by the silent cries of his beloved wife and children. He turns away from the car and looks over the bridge, across a sea of dead woods, to a black lake and the town in which he lived. The town lay completely quiet, void of the noises of cars and the laughter of children. Amidst ash-pasted mountains lay the great city of skyscrapers, most of them now leveled, the others turned into pillars of burnt iron bone. The great highway is covered with accidents and skeletons lay upon the crop fields in the valley.

The man was forced to abandon the car and now he walks down the road he had traveled only the night before, but something tells him more than just a night had passed since his awakening; for now the road is chewed up as if it went through the teeth of a grinder, and the rails are all twisted and torn and covered with rust. The broken skeletons of abandoned vehicles adorned the roads, forming long lines snaking away from the town, many holding burnt corpses within the locked doors. He tires of seeing all the bodies and jumps off the road, instead walking along the other side of the rail, feet splashing in mud where once stood a beautiful park with giant trees and wavy grass and couples kissing on the park benches, fishing at the pond: now the man-made pond lay dried up and the trees withered into shivering stalks, the benches falling apart. The town comes into view and he soon finds his feet stepping from the icky mud and leaving tracks upon jagged asphalt.

His eyes sweep over the small town that bordered the big city miles away. He refuses to look up and into the gates of the city, for the sight of the fallen and decrepit skyscrapers makes his shoulders scrunch and his throat the carrier of vomit. Not that the sights of the town offered him any less. The windows in the shops were busted, lying sprawled and discolored over the sidewalk. Cars lay toppled upon the sidewalk, the windows broken. Manholes covers were on their side, the dark cavities of the subterranean smirking as he walks past. Many of the buildings are caving in, the stylish bricks offering no residence; he seeks skeletons inside the shops and burnt corpses layer the street. He steps over a young child with a melted basketball sewn into charcoal flesh.

The man enters the video store he had entered “yesterday” and steps over piles of strewn videos, the covers hidden by a layer of dust. He stands at the desk where he had spoken with the young girl, and he struggles to see her face, but it is so hard. He feels as if she is staring at him from across the counter so he leaves, standing out on the street, where a wind is beginning to pick up. Dark storm clouds are moving over the mountains, their ashen plumes blending with the spiral skeletons of the once-infamous and wonderful skyscrapers.

He fears remaining in the town as the storm descends, and he fears even worse finding a dry spot amidst skeletons that mock his own depravity. He watches the storms coming over the mountains and knows there is only one place he desires to be, one place that will satisfy his thirst and answer his most burning questions. Lightning dances behind the mountains and he breaks into a run, leaping around

scattered cards and dodging massive cracks in the earth as he makes his legs carry him out of the town and down a flurry of roads with falling-apart houses on either side. He believes he has been spared, so his family must be spared, too. He does not ask questions, does not try to understand, only sees their faces, smiling and charming and wonderful, and he runs faster.

II

It is not at all as he remembers it. The green manicured lawns are overgrown with sulfuric brown weeds, and there are no songs of birds nor the hums of lawn mowers, though he sees on his way a lawn mower overturned in the weeds, the blades rusted, falling apart and covered in stringent moss. Most of the two-hundred-thousand dollar homes are in a state of disrepair, the shingles on the roofs crumbling, broken windows, doors off the hinges. He notices boards over the windows of many homes, and must pause once to see if his eyes or deceiving him or if there really are scarred bullet-holes running along the side of one of the homes. Some of the houses have caved in and other have burnt to the ground, weeds choking at the foundations. Cars remain in driveways and there are ancient accidents upon the road. He meanders the avenues and streets as he does every day on his way for work, except now he is walking.

He closes his eyes and listens, hearing only the breeze picking up and the sonnets of thunder coming over the mountains. His memories overtake him and he hears the laughter of children playing in the street, the sound of women greeting their husbands as they step out of expensive cars after a day at the office, the familiar scenes of little girls with their hopscotch and hoolahoos and the stay-at-home mothers growing cabbage and tomatoes in the small gardens behind the sunrooms. He wants to stay in this memory forever, for the memory takes him to his home, where his wife grabs him and kisses him, and his little girl is coloring in her notebook; it may be a Star Wars coloring book or it may be so subtle as Sesame Street, but her crayon marks and the colors she uses never changes.

The memory is sapped from him as he trips over a tiny human bone on the sidewalk, a plastic play-ring around the finger. The charred remnants of a hoolahoop lay in the slithering weeds.

The thunder is closer and when he looks up he can see dark storm-clouds swirling. He's almost home.

He makes his way down two more streets and finally stands before his house. The garage door lays on its side, and the windows are completely boarded up. The front door is lying face-down in the pantry, and there are crusted dirt footprints all over the hallway. He does not scent a breath nor anything to tell him his family has been spared.

He moves against all hope, against the grain of everything he knows to be true, or believes to be true, for when all is said and done, he knows absolutely nothing: only he fell asleep, and when he woke up, everything was different.

He wades through the weeds and stands upon the front deck, looking inside.

This is where she would always wrap her arms around him, hold him tight, and their lips would meet. This is where all the trials of the day were forgotten. This is when he first started to really, truly, enjoy life.

A ball rises in his throat.

No. It cannot be.

A raindrop sprinkles his cheek. He steps inside.

It is no warmer or cooler inside. The man steps over the collapsed door and eyes the spot where he would set his briefcase down every night, and his eyes pull themselves to his right, into the living room where his little girl would be watching television or coloring with worn-down Crayola crayons. The television is blank and covered with dust, and the chair and couch are overturned. The coffee table is smashed, and a hand flutters to his mouth, and he feels quite feminine but does not care. A splash of dried blood covers the far wall. A silent scream emits from his throat and a horrible vision passes before his eyes: his little daughter raised up by unseen hands, and as she screams for her daddy, she is thrown against the wall, over and over, until her little head ruptures and her brains smear the wall.

The man collapses onto the overturned chair and rolls onto the dirty floor, horrified that such a thing could've passed before his mind. Tears slide down his cheeks and his chest heaves; the world spins and thunder crackles and he realizes, suddenly, how alone he really is. There is no one, absolutely no one, no one whom he can touch, whom he can kiss, no one with whom he can speak and seek solace. He is alone, completely abandoned, forsaken by the greatest reaches of eternity. He turns his eyes upon the wall again, at the dried blood-stains, and as he curses himself he tells himself that it is not her blood. No. There is too much of it for one little girl. He feels evil saying it, but he would rather it be his wife's blood than the blood of his little girl.

He does not know how it happens, for all memory up to this point leaves him, but he is standing in the kitchen. The rain is coming down harder and the thunder echoes through the house, shaking the walls, sending torrents of dust from the furniture. The man leans over the counter and tears the wooden board from the window, and he looks out at the backyard, illuminated by the last rays of evening light and by the flashes of radiant lightning. The swing-set is gone and now there is an in-ground pool, except the water has evaporated and all that remains within are the shriveled veins of withered leaves.

He turns away from the window and looks at the twin French doors where he and his wife had argued just a few days prior. He cannot believe that only a few days have gone by; he wishes it were true, for therefore his family would be in Nashville, away from this mess. But he cannot believe this because so much has changed. The very air seems different.

The man leaves the kitchen and approaches his study, surprised to find that a chair sits in front of it. He moves the chair to the side, stirring up a choking cloud

of dust, and when he tries to open the door, he cannot. It is padlocked. He goes into the garage, and through the risen garage door can see the rain coming down in waves, blowing into the garage, drowning the weeds and running down the street as a river. Lightning dances and the light enters the garage, tingling upon his face. He is deafened by the thunder as he grabs the bolt-cutter and returns inside where it is try. Under an orchestra of thunder he breaks open the padlock, and tossing the lock and the cutter to the floor, he pushes open the door and enters his windowless study.

Almost nothing has changed. His desk still holds papers from business transactions and the walls are still covered with his awards from high school track, college, the math league, as well as some plaques he'd acquired here-and-there over the years. These are covered with only a thin layer of dust, indicating the room has been cut off for a while. He does notice something different. Upon a calk-board where he would keep receipts there are no receipts. Under the thumbnail tacks are faded newspaper clippings. And on one of them is his smiling face.

He steps nearer, touches the paper with his finger, and begins to read.

A young wife and her two children arrived home to find the place abandoned, no sign of her husband anywhere. She waited for a day and called the police, worried. The police told her they had found the car of her husband, the young and successful Micah Freeman, abandoned upon Beauville Road after it supposedly hit a tree fallen in a storm. Police combed the area for Mr. Freeman, even thoroughly searching the long-abandoned Beauville Monastery, but no traces were discovered. After months of organized and volunteer searching, the police and residents of Spring Valley were forced to conclude that, as Gordan Freeman nor his body were discovered, he probably ditched his family and ran off.

The article was dated September ninth, 2005. Three months after... yesterday.

Micah stares at the article, then he moves his eyes over to the other articles. They are all about him as well and the ongoing investigation into his disappearance. The dates keep getting later and later, and the oldest one is almost fifteen years after the day he fell asleep at the—abandoned?—monastery: November 2020.

He stands in the windowless room, sweat popping over his brow and descending across his face, swelling in seas at his neck and armpits, just listening to the thunder and the rain and the creaking house, mind dancing. He senses the first twinges of bile climbing in his throat, but fears nothing, for his stomach is already emptied. The headache is returning harder than ever and he turns away from the pegboard, staring at his desk, at the pens he always used, and seeing that she had not touched it, he feels a twinge of comfort knowing she did not believe the gossip and rumors of his running off. He would never do that and she knew it.

Knows it. He cannot speak of her in past-tense. He knows she is alive. She has to be. And she is within this house.

Fifteen years.

“No, it can’t be-“

His wife would be thirty-six years old.

Molly nineteen.

Little Nicole seventeen.

Fifteen years.

“Oh my God-“

III

The stairway coughs dust as he runs up, ears ringing with the peals of thunder and the rain on the roof. He runs over the top step too fast and hits his shoulder into the far wall of the corridor, smashing in the crumbling drywall. He yanks away, running to his little girl’s bedroom; the door is open a crack and he throws it open, stepping inside. He scans the room quickly, horrified at how much it has changed. Her little girl’s bed is gone, replaced with a Queen-sized bed with moldy mattresses. Many of the shelves are bare, covered with nearly an inch of dust; where it is not bare are picture frames but he cannot see the picture because of the dust. He grabs a frame and smudges the dust with his finger and stares at the smiling face of a beautiful girl in cap-and-gown. A tear sprinkles his eye and he stares at the picture. He knows it is her. He can see it in her eyes. The camera could even capture it. He sets the picture down and rotates about the room. The shelves are bare. He understands. She’s gone off to college. So maybe she’s okay? A flutter of hope within.

Nicole.

He leaves Molly’s room and walks down the hall, takes a breath, and pushes the door into the infant’s room open. There is no crib, just a twin-sized bed, and there are colored-paper hearts all over the walls with taped photographs in the center. He sees a slightly wide girl with glasses hugging a punk rocker with a blue Mohawk. He can see the happiness in her eyes and is thankful for that. He looks about the room and sees nothing really out of the ordinary except the thick layer of dust. And then it hits him.

Dust.

It’s been fifteen years... No. It has to be more. The last article is dated fifteen years past yesterday.

But since when has this dust grown?

And why has the dust grown?

He is left without answers, and any warmth he’d discovered with the hope of Molly being okay and Nicole being happy just “moments” ago is wrought from him. He sits upon his daughter’s bed, the stained satin covers bulging beneath him. He picks up a little stuffed animal from the bed, one he knew because he and Claire gave it to her last Christmas. Now the stuffed animal was ragged, torn, a ragamuffin. She had kept it. He believes she kept it because it reminded her of him, reminded her that she was not a bastard child, but that she meant something

to some man, someone who'd been torn from her life, someone she knew only from photographs and her families' stories of Micah Freeman. He realizes he never got to know his daughter; he never got to read her stories before bedtime, was never able to hold her hand as they walked through the park, never able to kiss her before she got on the school bus or drill her boyfriends she brought home from school (the punk rocker, he acknowledged, looked quite suspicious, but it did not bother him one bit).

He sits upon her bed and wonders what he's missed, wonders what has happened, wonders why there are bodies everywhere, why the town has been a ghost town for so long.

Most of all, over the thunder and rain, he wonders why he's been spared.

The storm continues to rage. He stands before the closed door, his hand upon the knob, heart hammering upon his ribs.

His daughter is gone—where has she gone? No answers come forth.

He fears *she* will be gone, too. No more greetings at the door, no more kisses, no more wintry nights lying naked against one another.

His fear makes him feel even sicker and his heart even colder.

The door must open. He shoves it wide, takes a violent breath, steels his soul, and enters.

Like all the others, it is empty. The bed in which he had slept so many nights is against the other wall, and the countryside paintings on the wall are now gone. The walls have been left bare, the paint peeling to reveal the chalky drywall beneath. Sparse furniture fills the room; a chair here and there and an overturned dresser, the drawers pulled out and the contents scattered all over the floor, tossed about as if they had been searched by greedy hands. There is no sign of his wife anywhere. He calls out her name but only hears his echo; the sound of his own voice frightens him even more so he is quiet.

Something pulls him away from the room, to the bathroom. The door is splintered open, shards of wood lying on the ground. Lightning flashes enter the room from there, as all the windows about the bedroom are boarded up. Micah Freeman moves around the striped chair and almost trips over bundles of blankets on the floor; he steps into the bathroom and is almost blinded by the vigorous lightning coming through a small rectangular window above the sink. He used to brush his teeth, comb his hair and shave at that sink while listening to the songs of the early birds coming through the window. Now there were no birds, only the thunder and rain; no morning light promising a bright and new day, but the steady flashes of lightning promising a life of heartache.

He turns away from the window and sees the shower-curtain dangling over the bathtub.

Light from the lightning reflects off the curtain and snakes around it, illuminating a single shadow.

There is something in the bathtub.

He swallows, a small little voice in the back of his head telling him to go downstairs, sort his thoughts, turn around now and shut the bathroom door; don't come back! But we never listen to that little voice; we shove it aside, call it insanity, mock its words and tell ourselves we know better. Micah Freeman is but a man, and this is exactly what he did to the little forewarning running amuck in his conscience. He disregards all frantic pleas of sanity, grabs the curtain, and with a brilliant flash of lightning whose burst sends sparks flying outside the window, he rips the curtain back.

And he screams.

IV

He falls upon the tile, back slipping against the sink; his hands shake and his body convulses and bile stings at his lips. His maniacal eyes stare into the bathtub and the room echoes with his barbaric scream. What words can describe the emotions tearing at this man's soul, threatening to stop the very beating of his heart? Were it not for destiny and the breath of the King the man would have died right there, never knowing what had happened, never knowing his place in the universe. Even now I pause, wondering what I could tell you to convey the ancient emotions surging to life within him. No words can really serve justice to such a paramount discovery that riddles a man lifeless; should I even dare to describe? I think not. Instead let the scream that echoes and the screams resounding within speak their own message; let the face drained of color, the urine spreading in his jeans, the bile crawling down his face write their words upon the wall. For now he sees, really sees, an epiphany that brings the wall of Jericho falling upon him. He leans against the bathroom sink and just stares, seeing it over and over, closing his eyes, hearing the screams, seeing it there, and oh God! he wants to holler, curse, condemn, murder. He wants to lose his life, he wants to take it with his bare hands, wants to rip open his jaw and let it lie in the sink as he gropes up into his brain with trembling fingers to end this nightmare. He wants to scream and writhe and dance and make his body awake to the soft Gregorian chants and the smiling monk. Has a demon given him a lap-dance, locking him in this cruel nightmare that knows no end? He bites his own tongue, tastes blood, feels pain, were it not for the spots before him he would have hewn it off then and there and let it lay convulsing upon the floor, spewing blood like a broken pipe. Now he heaves over, onto his hands and knees, staring at the grimy tile, lightning mocking him from the window, and goblets of thick golden bile stream to the floor amidst the speckles of blood from a tongue that quakes with each stagnant heart-beat.

He cannot look. He cannot raise his head; it is too heavy, filled with lead, the lead of regret and sorrow, the lead of shame and hopelessness, a lead that never leaves, a lead that weighs one down like a stone in the sea, only to drown in broken memories. It will never leave him, will remain upon him as a brand, burning deep into the night, stinging him upon the run, and driving him forward to

his destiny. A brand that will haunt every dream and underscore every movement. A brand that inspires love, devotion, hatred, blood-shed. A brand whose cornerstones are love and hate. A brand that will not pass with death but will journey with him to the grave even after the casket is closed.

She will never kiss him, she will never groan underneath him, she will never whisper in his ear and never smile from across the table. For here she lies, a contorted skeleton masked in a fetal position within a porcelain bathtub long stained with the brown weeds of ancient blood; a blood-encrusted kitchen knife lies at the knobbed skeletal feet and there is a locket around her spinal column, dangling into an open rib-cage; her skull stares at the window, the eyes of his beloved lost forever, the jaw hanging slack.

He pulls himself from the bathroom, his feet tearing down the shower curtains with a rush, and he wades through the twisted blankets, climbs onto the bed, and curling into a fetal position, seeking the warmth of the womb—a warmth of innocence that knows no fear, no death, no betrayal—he cries himself to sleep.

Sleep is no reservoir transporting him to another dimension to appease the gods of sanctity. In sleep he does not truly awake in the most realistic sense of the word, for any hope to be granted good fortune and awake in the confines of a sleepy monastic cell are left for ruins hidden under a sea of black mystery. There is no escaping the truth that Micah Freeman is alone, that Micah Freeman is, for lack of a better word, a survivor. Fate—or misfortune—has spared him and the gods do not grant him sanctuary even in the worlds that sleep conjures, worlds where one can escape for reality, if just for a blissful moment. The gods play upon his mortal mind and he dreams.

He dreams he is in his bed once more, and his tender wife is next to him, breathing softly. He dreams she is there beside him, and he dreams everything is normal. He has to go to work tomorrow. The digital clock tells him it is 9:36. In the dream he is not spared ignorance of what has happened, for he feels the soft flesh of his wife's arm. He moves his hand under the covers, feels over her blouse, the soft curves of her breasts, and her tummy rising up and down with each breath. Life is within her. He stares at her in the sublime darkness and looks at her hair falling about the pillows. She sleeps, locked in dreams shedding no taste on reality, and he wants to believe she is really there, that if he strokes her cheek with his finger and she awakes, she will know it is him and she will know because she exists and life is still *within* her. A part of him desires to believe this is reality—that he fell asleep hours ago on the couch, she pulled him up to the bed, and now he awakes, groggy after a horrible dream, and she sleeps beside him, not a skeleton but a human being with hopes, dreams, fears, loves. 9:37. He thinks now of his daughter. It has to be a dream and she has to be sleeping in the other room, cuddling her stuffed animal. The infant is sleeping in her crib. No. His heart tells him it is false. He looks down upon the bed and realizes he *is* upon the bed, this is no illusion, but the room he sees now is not the room that is true. This is a room of

order and peace and hope; on the other side, where reality reigns, there is a room of chaos, destruction, unsolved answers, riddles soaked in blood. 9:38. He realizes this is not reality; the confines of the room are not sharp, they are misty. The shadows hide secrets to be exposed if he walks towards them; in dreams you think you know what is happening, you think you know what is around the corner, but you never do. It is an odd truth: one cannot map out the pathways of his own brain, his own thought-processes; it is a maze that no navigator can conquer. So it is in dreams: no hope of understanding, everything is an illusion, and you are strapped upon the table, forced to submit to its every whim, to see what it wants you to see, hear what it wants you to hear, feel and taste and smell what it desires you to smell; and maybe you will taste who—or what?—you really, truly are? He cannot turn his eyes from his wife sleeping upon the bed, for when he looks to the wall and returns, she may be something different—she may be gone, or a monster, a zombie, a corpse, a skeleton with a knife against the wrists and a locket speckled with blood. 9:39. There is something about that time, something that draws him, and something inside him moves quicker. The blood moves through his veins faster, his lungs begin to asphyxiate, his heart resembles mush in an insane asylum. He is paralyzed to the bed, next to his sleeping wife, and he sees the ceiling swirling in a mix of gray and black colors. He stares at that ceiling with a dread never to be touched again, and the ceiling is swirling faster and faster. Some-times the human psyche can be affected in such a way that time slows down; and if a child is lying upon the bed, and looking at the fan, the fan goes slower and slower, till each rotation of the fins makes his heart and head heart; and when his father enters the room with a basket of clothes and speaks, his voice is hollow and distant, and the boys hand is larger than the entire room, and he just wants to get sick. The man feels this now as the ceiling swirls and buckles and bends. The room shrinks and enlarges all at the same time and his wife grows farther and farther from him until he stretches out his hand and cannot touch her. 9:40. She sleeps, lost in dreams, and the ceiling opens, revealing a cavern of brilliant lights. He sees them—O God, he sees them now, and remembers why he is so fearful!—; they come from the ceiling, the demons robed in light, their eyes staring at him and arms moving. He opens his mouth to scream but all the oxygen is sucked from his lungs and he sees them all around him, vibrant lights spinning as if he were a child with cotton candy on a carousel manned by demonic heathens going out-of-control. His arm burns like acid and screams of fire but he cannot scream. He cannot scream. O God, they surround him, they are speaking, their voice is like nails, he hates them, he hates them, he hates them...

V

He has dressed. He doesn't remember actually doing it; all he knows now is that he is going down the steps, lost in a world of numbness, seeing the skeleton in the bathtub, running on autopilot through his head with no sign of slowing down. He

wears new jeans and a new shirt and he does not feel the urine stain slapping at the insides of his legs. He thinks he must've woken up sometime, dressed without really thinking, and now he is going downstairs. He wonders if he has not done it out of instinct: locked in the ways of the past, he maneuvers within his daily routine. His stomach isn't hungry but he is entering the kitchen and going through the cupboards, searching for something, anything. He pauses for a moment, touches his arm; it is no longer sore as it had been yesterday... or fifteen years ago. The bread is stiff and moldy, everything in the refrigerator has soured and stinks since there is no electricity. He looks through some half-eaten boxes of cereal and sees they are swarming with maggots; disgusted, he throws them against the wall. As the boxes fall and the maggot-infested cereal spills out, a strike of brilliance hits him in the head like a blunt axe and he jumps onto the floor, grabs the cereal box and raises it up, cereal and maggots spilling over his arm. He searches the box, frantically turning it over and over, until he finds what he is looking for. Under a fading image of Tony the Tiger he finds it: BEST IF USED BY SEP2621

September 26, 2021—not fifteen years, *at least* sixteen years.

And time for the decomposing: all the skeletons, the corpses, the ghost town.

How long does that take?

He remembers his father was a forensics scientist across the States, and the department of forensics had a body farm: bodies dedicated to science were left in the wilderness under varying conditions in a governmental study of how the human form deteriorates. The man had never been there, but his father often spoke of it with his wife, telling her he didn't want her to dedicate her body to science despite some of the tax thrills. He didn't want her to ever look like that. The man remembers his father once said that it takes a human body in a casket about forty to fifty years to entirely decompose; above ground was a different story: could take only a few years, or even less than a year depending upon the conditions. When someone's heartbeat stops, the tissues and cells of the body are deprived of oxygen and begin to die. The brain cells die in three to seven minutes, but the skin cells can survive up to 24 hours after death and may continue to reproduce within the corpse. Decomposition for a corpse in the open air is twice as fast as if it were underwater, and four times as fast as if it were underground. A rule of thumb: corpses are preserved longer the deeper they are buried. The human intestines swarm with millions of micro-organisms that don't die with the person, but actually keep feasting on the human body, breaking down the dead cells of the intestines; other bacteria such as clostridia and coliforms start to invade other parts of the body. Enzymes and other chemicals released by the dead cells continue to break down the human corpse; the pancreas, full of digestive enzymes, rapidly eats itself. Dead bodies release green substances and gases, which make the skin turn lime and sapphire, and blisters erupt upon the flesh, beginning at the abdomen. The front of the body swells and the tongue often protrudes and fluid from the lungs oozes from the mouth and nose. The smell of the terrible gases—hydrogen sulphide stinks of rotten eggs, and methane and traces of mercaptans underscore

the horrid odor—is enough to make any normal human being puke, but attracts carnivores and scavengers (in the tropics, a decomposing body in the wild will usually be a mass of swarming maggots in less than a day). This stage of decomposition is reached, as an average, after some four to six days. If a corpse is let aboveground, insects and animals, bluebottles and carrion fly maggots not excluded—will aide the decomposing process. If no animals are present to scavenge the body, hair, teeth and nails become detached within a few weeks; after a month the tissue becomes liquefied, and the main body cavities burst open. Some tissues such as tendons and ligaments are more resistant to decomposition, and the uterus and prostate glands may last several months. When the body is in the open air, within a year all that is generally left is the skeleton and teeth, with traces of the tissues on them.

He has seen the skeletons outside—in his own house!—and comes to the conclusion that whatever had happened, be it disease or war or whatever the darkness hides, it happened no later than two years ago, and the place has been left untouched. He places the date somewhere around 2023. The month he cannot tell except for the warmth, which feels like spring, and the thunderstorm felt like the thunderstorms the valley experienced in the spring months when the children would run inside and air-to-ground lightning would sap power, smoke trees, and every now and then put a person in the critical ward at the nearby city hospital. One cannot tell by looking outside for everything is dead, dry and bleak: the earth has been scavenged by the scythe blade of death: no trees flourish, no grass grows, the pond is decrepit and layered with the bones of turtles, fish and frogs; no deer run in the forests, but the fawns lay under skeletons of their mothers. The only life is the carrion flies and their god-awful and senseless maggots, and the wild brown weeds whose sides are sharp with bitter thorns.

The man lets the cereal box fall to the floor and he stands in the kitchen. When he closes his eyes, he can only see the skeleton and the dried blood in the living room. He cannot even force the sweet memories of Claire—her sarcastic laughs, her wry jokes, the gentle smile and the long hair that made his palms sweat. He cannot remember sleeping with her, cannot remember dating her, cannot remember proposing or the wedding or even the first sex during honeymoon—did they stay virgins before marriage? This he can't even tell. All he knows is the skeleton in the bathtub, the locket hidden behind a prison of ribs, the bloodied knife with which she drew Xs across her bare wrists and bled to death in the tub, thinking of him, thinking of the girls, hearing the screams outside and knowing there was no rest for the tired and embittered soul. The man cannot remember giving Molly the stuffed animal; he can't remember when he first found out Claire was pregnant, cannot remember Molly kicking inside her mother, can't remember Claire giving birth and his wild and jubilant smiles, can't remember their first night back, lying in bed, the baby sleeping in the other room, knowing how blessed they were and sensing good fortune smiling upon them. He cannot remember Nicole for the life of him; no memories touch him, and now he weeps because he

knows he will never get to know his own daughter, the flesh-of-his-flesh. He was taken from her, and before he could return, she was taken from him. He will never hear her voice or talk to her about her problems, he will never take her out shopping for dresses or talk to her about s-e-x, he will never be able to kiss her on her Prom night and make fun of her music just to tease her. He thinks of this and he cries. He falls upon the couch, is lost in a cloud of dust and a spider scurries up the wall; he rolls over, stares at the quiet television, and he cries.

VI

He awoke to going down the steps. Now he is retracing his steps, entering the hallway, seeing the open door far down the corridor, the door to his bedroom, the bedroom with the bathroom, the bathroom with the bathtub, the bathtub with the body. He is not drawn by curiosity but by fear; as fear draws someone deep into a dark and mysterious house where chainsaw-killer stalk; as fear draws us to take chances, to take risks, to love danger; as fear makes us watch scary movies even when we don't want to. Fear draws the man now down the hallway and his legs carry him where he does not want to go. His arms stretch and he feels the nails against his palms; they tell him to leap off that cross, and he can, but he won't. He knows what he must do. He must not cry. He must not die. He enters the bedroom. He looks up to the ceiling, the mosaic of splattered plaster; no one comes down, no demons robed as angels of light. Now he stands across the room, staring at the open door, seeing brief flashes of pale light from the window and the sound of placid rain on the roof. The door beckons him, whispers his name. He steels himself and walks.

Common sense denies experience more than not, but experience reveals darker and more horrible secrets than common sense ever could. Where common sense fails, where it falls under the pressure of truth, experience makes sure the human psyche understands. He has seen the skeletons, he has seen the wasteland; he has seen the blood on the walls and he has seen the skeleton, and soon he shall touch the skeleton. This reality is cleaner than any reality he has ever known, sharper than a double-edged sword and ten times more painful. Yet it is reality and we must accept reality even if it doesn't make sense; we must accept reality even if everything we've ever known—or believed to know—goes against it. He knows this is no dream; for in this dream he has slept, and dreamt a nightmare, and awoken. He did not awake in the monastery, he did not awake with his wife next to him, holding his hand, stroking his hair, whispering to him that everything was okay. He awoke in a bed with a skeleton fifteen feet away; he awoke in a mold-engraved bed in a crumbling house that is but one of hundreds in a town that is deserted bordering a city that is infested with death. This is reality. He is but a survivor by some odd twist of fate; he must look it in the eyes, and despite his fear, move on. He must figure out what has happened. He must explore. And he must face his fear: he must tell her good-bye, tell her that he never left her, tell her that

he doesn't know what happened, tell her that all of this is a frightening dream more real than anything he's ever known. He must make amends. For a moment he wonders if he has not died and gone to Hell—no, for Hell is paradise compared to this. An empty world with no voices except his own, no hope to be discovered, all love extinguished in the blackest of nights.

The man stands in the bathroom, bare feet upon the cold tile stained with blood from his tongue and bile from his stomach. His feet move, avoiding the slick swirls of bodily excess, and his neck arcs back; he forces himself to look at the twisted skeleton in the blood-splurged tub and the blood-stained knife at her feet. He falls beside the tub and stares at the skeleton, tears threatening to seep from bloodshot eyes and stream down blood-infested cheeks. He does nothing for an eternity and just stares at her, forcing his heart to beat, forcing his head not to scream, forcing his lungs to inflate and deflate and bring oxygen to his heart. He speaks to her, in rambling words he cannot conquer, and tears are sliding down his face, and as he speaks the memories return, coming back, and he sees her not as a skeleton, but as a person, a beautiful goddess, the epiphany of his existence. His words soothe him and he believes, even if it is a far-off belief with no foundation, that she is there, she sees him, she embraces him, she kisses him.

"I never... I never left... I swear by God I never left you... They told you lies, they told you... They told you I'd abandoned you... They told you I'd run off... Please don't believe them. I pray to any God who could ever put up with this... devastation... that you don't believe them... Why didn't you let me go with you to Nashville? I would rather... be here in this tub with you than standing here now looking at you..." He wonders how things would've changed had he gone to Nashville; he would be dead, but he doesn't know if being dead is better or worse than this, and at least he would have answers. "Why did you... why did you slit your wrists? What did you know... that made you do this? What did you... what did you see that drove you to this? I don't know what's going on, Claire..." He says her name and he cries for several minutes. Tears he never knew existed came out in a geyser and he felt his body shriveling, deprived of water. "I don't... I'm so scared... I'm so terrified... I woke up this morning... And all I knew was this... The whole place was full of skeletons... And there were skeletons on this table... Like they were... Like they were being..." He cannot continue. "Oh God, Claire, I'm so scared." He takes her hand in his and finds comfort. He does not hate the hand but adores it. He kisses its cold, bony fingers. "I don't know anything and I'm so scared..."

He presses his lips to the hand and pulls away, lets it fall back into the tub. He is breathing hard, choking on his sobs, and he takes a shaking hand between her ribs, grabs the locket, and pulls. The chain is rusted and snaps easily without disturbing the skeleton. He brings the locket close to him and leaves his wife sleeping. He clutches the locket in one hand, rusted chain dangling between fingers, and he tells her how much he loves her, how much he wishes she were here, how he didn't love her enough, didn't lavish on her enough, how he was a horrible husband even

though he weren't; and he tells her he has to find out what has happened. He has to know what she knows even if it is so horrible. He must stand and leave, leave this house and take only the cherished memories to be visited in his sleep. He must scale mountains and city walls; he is a survivor, there must be more. He tells her goodbye and leans against the sink. He closes his eyes and hears the soft prattle of the rain against the window.

His palm opens, revealing the locket, and the fingers from his other hand unhinge the latch. The locket snaps open. He opens his eyes. He remembers she took it with her to Nashville; he remembers it was empty. Now there are two images, faded, but still decipherable as the locket has been closed and kept from the deterioration of nature. He looks at the two images and he feels something inside him burn; to the right is a picture of his daughter in her cap-and-gown, and in the other frame, his wife.

He looks up at the skeleton, understanding gnawing.

"Oh God..."

Life epiphanies are rare, yet they change everything.

This changed everything.

The man lurches against the tub, watery eyes dancing over the bones, dancing over the dried blood on the broken bathtub walls, at the bloody knife lying at the skeleton's feet. The epiphany roars through him, a freight-train with no brakes, threatening to run him down, to end everything, and suddenly the reality has grown more dark and sinister. He grabs the bony hand in his own and icy shivers snake through him like the vigorous lightning of the ending storm. He is a dry well that can excrete no tears, but his heart's valves are ripped to pieces like a human body in a hurricane. His eyes probe the skeleton as if it were a gold mine and he realizes he is staring at that which is him, the flesh-of-his-flesh, he exists in those very bones—and he abandoned them, left them, and she knew nothing, was mocked as a bastard child and left hollow and empty when the other kids brought their father's to school on a particular day in June. He hugs the edge of the bathtub, clutches her hand in his, but can find no words. She never knew him and it is his fault; his own decrepit complacency drove them to this; he entered that monastery and left her. He was not taken there by angels; his own two feet moved him forward amongst the rain and thunder, and he ate with them and slept beside them. He left her.

The man begs forgiveness. Not in words, for the skeleton cannot hear. His heart floods over with burnt compassion, and he weeps in his soul; he kneels against the bathtub, but in the fiber of his being, where the heart flows either as a fountain of living water or a cesspool of inky-black tar, the man is lying prostrate, humbly, screaming from every pore, taking the nails and driving them into his own hands, exposing his back to be whipped, and taking the pain with delight; he likes the pain, for it is punishment for all he's done. He abandoned them once and now he must go.

Now the man is standing. He holds onto the locket in his hand, kisses the skeleton upon the cool fore-head, and retreats from the bathroom. He tosses one regretful look to the tub where she lay, and he shut the door, sealing her in a coffin she always deserved. He pulls a chair and sets it against the door, locking her away from the predators and stalkers of the night. He sits upon the bed and stares at the chair until he knows he must go. He stands and walks to the boarded window and peels the boards away, revealing the street with broken homes, abandoned cars, skeletons and weeds, the ashen mountains and the skyscrapers hidden by fog. The rain continues to come down, though lighter, and he closes his eyes, tries to hear the whisper of life, but there is no denying it: he really is alone. His family is gone. Nicole lies in the bathtub behind him, taking her own life with four slashes and bleeding into milky nothingness as Hell reigns around her. He is clueless, and he must find answers.

The man stands below in the living room, keeping the blood on the wall from his sight, only happy that it did not belong to his daughter. Nicole took her own life—this is more comforting than her life being taken from her. The young girl was in control- He chokes up. How old would she have been? He can't even do the math. Late teens. He had seen the pictures she had in her room—Oh God, he could never enter that place again and keep his soul sane—and she was so happy. He was thankful for the boy, even if he had a blue Mohawk, because he made her smile. She had been so happy. What happened that made her so frightened, so hopeless, that she would take her own life in the bathtub. He looks at the blood soaked into the wall. Whose blood? What happened to his wife? What happened here? What happened seemingly everywhere—could it be global? His heart pounds at the thought: could he be the only human surviving?

His fear exists but it is dowsed under mystery. His sorrow reigns, but it is tamed. Now he only desires understanding, wishes to know what has happened. He holds photographs in his hands and looks at them, each of them, smearing away the dust and running the questions over and over in his mind. He is in some of them; this comforts him. His family did not forget him, did not abandon him, did not believe the lies. Claire knew better—she knew his love, she knew his devotion, she knew the depths of his heart—and dared to believe what no one else did. She was told by her friends to accept the truth, to move on, to find someone else, but she did not listen. What did they know? He smiles and laughs at some of the pictures, for now the memories return, clear and beautiful, and he believes the spirits of his loved ones have graced him this comfort: to be, amidst the sorrow and despair and confusion, somewhat human again. He remembers his family with many pictures, and forms new memories with others. Pictures showing what happened while he had simply... vanished.

He sets the pictures down. He cannot live under a cloud of confusion. He must search, seek, discover.

What happened to his wife?

What drove Nicole to suicide?

Where is Molly?

And the question that now begins to haunt him: *where have I been?*

The thunder is picking up. He thinks the storm had passed but guesses he is wrong. He is staring at the pictures when he realizes something is quite odd with the thunder: it doesn't stop and it gets louder. He stands in the living room, listening, and his ears begin to hurt as the noise is terrifyingly loud.

He remembers a dream as a child: he was standing outside at an amusement park and lightning was striking the ground everywhere and people were screaming and being electrocuted, and all the while he simply stood there, staring up, and the thunder made him fall to the ground.

Now the same sound rushes over him and the walls begin to shake, to tremor, and dust falls all around him. The pictures on the shelf wobble, topple, fall to the floor, glass shattering. He stumbles back against the wall and is gaping at the ceiling, locked in a house with no windows, left only to the screaming thunder. A heart-wrenching clap sends him to the ground, his chest hollowed out as if he had been standing next to an amp turned all the way up at a rock concert where the bassist just thrums the top string over and over.

He grits his teeth and can resist it no longer. The walls shake and threaten to collapse; he swaggers to his feet and runs up the steps. One of the steps breaks underneath him and his leg falls through; he wiggles from the capture and launches up the steps, slamming against the far corridor, and running into the bedroom. The house is shaking so much the giant bed is sliding and the air around seems to vibrate with malevolence. He falls to the floor and is afraid it will open up and engulf him. The cupboards in the kitchen are swinging open and plates and dishes and China are falling and shattering but the man can't hear it because the noise is so loud.

He crawls across the ground and pulls himself up against the wall, wraps his fingers around one of the planks against the window. He pulls himself up and looks through the hole as dust stings his eyes.

Chapter Three

“Nothing is lost yet, nothing broken, and yet the cold blue word is spoken: say goodbye now to the Sun, the days of love and leaves are done.” – R.P.T. Coffin

I

The entire earth seems to split apart, the foundations of the heavens crumbling, and he is at the epicenter of it all. Any other human being would curl up and cry out to the rocks, “Fall on us! Fall on us!” to end the misery of the quaking surface. But this man is drawn by something different, something other-worldly, a lust for answers and a curiosity demanding their discovery. He lifts his head over the bottom rim of the window and tries to see through the blurred dust falling in his vision. He sees cracks splitting in the earth and fences wobbling back and forth; the weeds in the overgrown lawns billow like the ocean’s waves; a house nearby crumbles and a blast of dust spits over the fences and washes across the window. For a moment he fears that his own house will crumble and he in it; yet it is not the fear of dying he experiences, but the fear of never knowing what has happened, never knowing what happened to his family, never knowing what drew his daughter to take that cruel cold blade across her wrists. He yearns for the dust to settle and for a moment it does; and as the sounds of the earthquake and the tremors of its touch boom in his ears and make his bones split... It ends. Silence. He can hear the creaking of the fences as they return to position, the groaning of the house. He hears a picture frame upstairs fall and shatter. And there is nothing save for the roaring silence in his ears.

He slides down to the ground, back against the wall, feeling the grainy touch of wind drawing into the room. He takes several breaths and finds that he is shaking all over. He did not notice it but now he feels weak and vulnerable. He needs food and he knows it. He has never experienced an earthquake before, but he tells himself this *is* California—isn’t it?—and he shouldn’t be surprised. He decides to get up and eat something, to inspect the damage, and to formulate a plan for discovering the truth of where his life had gone—and, now, where it was going. As he prepares to stand, the silence is interrupted. A strange noise from out the window. He brings his eyes back over the edges, grips white-knuckled onto the window frame, and through the settling dust, can see something that defies all imagination.

Had someone demanded him to tell them what it was he saw, he would no doubt be found empty of words. He may have found himself akin to Daniel, seeing the fortunes of the future, trying to piece them into words that would make sense, but inherently failing. Or Moses, who is given a vision of the past, the creation of the worlds, the spinning of the galaxies and molding of the planets, and locked in his ancient mind, must downsize the massiveness of his vision into a mere week. Or

perhaps he feels like the apostle John, the one beloved of the Christ, forsaken on an island and seeing the fall of the Roman Empire—how could he explain such a thing, how could he even understand it? Micah Freeman cannot understand, cannot comprehend, cannot even tag a name on what he sees.

First, it seems to be alive, pulsating and breathing. It looks oddly mechanical, yet it appears to be covered in a fleshy membrane; it looks like a backwards-pointing fork, with the three prongs serving as—engines?—and propelling the front part, the handle of the spoon, forward. He sees it is airborne because it is hovering over the street; the air shimmers behind the three engines, indicating spewing hot vapors. He can see no windows or doors, only the shimmering and pulsing membrane covering the skeleton of the aircraft, and the odd sounds—grunts, cries, squeals—coming from within. It is the size of a small airplane, and looking left and right, he can see another of these strange vehicles gently falling to a hover over the main street of town, and another circling overhead. The man feels something unmentionable wafting from the aircraft, and comes to identify it as fear. Yes, fear. His heart is cold, his blood thick, his knuckles snow-white.

The noises intensify, the squealing of a flaying pig, and then it changed into a low growl. He watches in fearful intrigue as the bottom of the aircraft begins to open, the fleshy membrane disintegrating upon the sides, and a door slowly formed a ramp to the ground. The insides of the machine are pitch black and untouchable by his eyes. There is silence for a few moments. The other aircraft flies overhead, the building shakes but a moment, and he looks up to see it flying towards the burnt-out city; he returns his eyes to the hovering aircraft to see several men exiting the aircraft, grouping on the street.

The men themselves are something out of another world. They wear completely black clothing, with a silver-laced black backpack. In their hands are what appear to be shotguns with larger barrels and scopes. He decides they must be soldiers, and thinks about calling for help, but something inside whispers, “No.” Yes, the fear. Mind the fear. He lowers his head but keeps his eyes at the bottom rim of the window. The soldiers are gathered together; he counts them quickly: eight. They are talking with their backs to him. Now they are splitting apart, grouped in twos; one heads for a home across the street, another to the neighbors’ home, two more head up the street in the opposite direction, and the others come down the street towards him. He looks at the pair coming towards him and sees that their faces are covered by what looks to be a charcoal gasmask. They turn and enter the home right across the street from his own; he keeps his eyes upon his neighbors’ home, watching as the soldiers knock the front door down with their foot, and aiming their weapons inside, enter. He hears their voices faintly through a broken bottom-level window: mechanical. He sees them slowly pace through the living room across the street; one of them opened a door with his foot and aimed his rifle inside; this gave the man the feeling that they weren’t on a rescue mission. He had to keep low, keep out-of-sight. Yet he keeps his eyes on the neighbors’ home, fixated, and the soldiers disappear from view.

Two houses down, he can see the soldiers standing in the roofless top floor, picking through the remains of an ancient bedroom. One of them picks up a stuffed animal, and they laugh and throw it onto the lawn. They leave the room, disappearing down a stairwell, vanishing.

A sudden noise in the neighbors' home makes him duck down so hard he bashes his forehead on the window. He fears the noise he made but it isn't a big concern. His hand reaches to his forehead and he feels for blood, but blood is absent. He peeks back over the rim of the window, ever so slowly, and can see the neighbor's balcony door is opened. One of the soldiers stands on the balcony, looking towards the street, gun hanging loose. The other appears carrying something; before the man can make a positive I.D. on the object in the soldier's hands, the soldier throws it over the balcony. It lands on top of a dumpster and splits apart, spraying the rusted metal with an affluent mix of orange, red and green liquids. The stench comes to him, unbearable, and he realizes with terror that it is the half-bloated corpse of a recent deceased. The soldier on the railing laughs and the two of them enter the building, shutting the balcony door.

The man moves from the window and sits with his back against the wall, short-of-breath. He tries to make sense of the situation and tells himself that these are Americans, the gasmasks are to prevent disease, and they are looking for survivors who aren't infected. The survivors would be kindly taken into hospitality, but anyone infected would be killed. This, for a moment, drew his hopes, as he certainly showed no signs of sickness, and therefore proved no threat. Yet this did not explain his "miraculous" disappearance nor the suicide of his daughter, nor the bloodstains on the wall downstairs. Nor did it explain the way the soldiers were so flippant with the sacred.

He crawls away from the living room window and enters the hallway, running towards the open door. He can see soldiers in the house next door, exiting. He sees them and quickly shuts the door, the noise roaring in his ears. He runs up the steps, down the hall, and into the bedroom, where the bathroom door is shut. He falls to the ground beside the bed and crawls over to the window, peeking over across the street, just in time to see a soldier pass out of view as the pair reaches his front door. His mind reels in terror and he yanks himself from the window, poised in nothingness in the room. He hears the splintering of wood downstairs and able-bodied men entering. He squirms across the yellowing carpet as quietly as possible, slowly opens the creaking closet door, gritting his teeth in pain at the noise, and slipping inside, he shuts the closet door, curls up into a fetal position, and prays.

II

His breathing thunders and he wishes he could slow it down but he can't. It escapes his control, lungs expanding and contracting and expanding at an alarming and horrifying rate, causing him to gasp and pant. He squeezes his hands into fists

and tries to focus on something—anything!—to calm himself down. But he hears not only his speedy breathing but also the soldiers going through the house. He can hear them in the kitchen, wading through spilt dishes and soiled foods. He can hear them opening doors and closing them. Then he hears them on the steps. He screams at himself, *Calm down! Calm down!* He realizes the more he mentally screams, the more his heart beats faster and his brain boils. So he thinks of his daughter, his wife, their memories; playing on the beach, his daughter at a carnival and laughing at a man on stilts. These thoughts calm him down, sweep him away. His breathing is controlled as he sees his little baby girl being born in Claire's arms. Precious, so precious-

They are on the upper level. He cowers in the closet but does not feel ashamed for it. He saw the ripped muscles beneath their tight clothing and the sinister appearance of those god-awful gasmasks rendered him mortified. He can hear them rummaging through the bedrooms, sifting through the furniture, looking under the beds, searching. For what? *Searching for me.* The house shakes as an aircraft flies over. He uses the noise of the shuddering walls to shift his position, and by the time the noise returned to its dull silence, cut apart only by the moving of the soldiers, he has changed his position and is more comfortable. But physical comfort doesn't bring him much peace; he saw them open the closet door across the way and can hear them searching the bedroom closets. They'd come to his bedroom and they'd search the closet and they'd find him. Then what?

Kill him.

The footsteps near. He shuts his eyes despite the perpetual darkness within. Their feet stop at the open doorway and he can feel their eyes looking about the "abandoned" room, searching for his presence. He prays they do not find him and—oh!—that mechanical rasping, that ungodly breathing, the cycles of respiration coming from those heinous masks! They make his skin crawl and he hears them enter the room, slowly moving about the furniture. One walks right in front of the closet and pauses. The man realizes he is not breathing but doesn't dare counteract the fact. After a moment, the footsteps move around the bed. The other soldier walks over towards the bathroom door, blocked by the chair, and falls short.

The mechanical voice, unlike the tone of any living man: "This room is blocked."

The voice from across the room: "Move it."

There is a pause. "This chair has been moved. See the indentation on the carpet?"

The other: "Recently moved." He hears the click of one of the fiendish weapons.

There is the sound of shoving and scraping and the chair falls away from the door. The bathroom door opens with a creak. There is yet another pause, an eternity in the man's mind, and he hears the soldier in the bathroom remark: "There's no one in here. Only a skeleton."

"Recent?"

“No. An original.”

Micah Freeman doesn't understand anything they say, but hasn't the mind to raise his hand and ask. There is silence about the room, then he hears the door closing. He is thankful his daughter's body was not messed with. He hears the soldiers exchange some garbled words across the bed, then the one from the bathroom leaves, vanishing into the hallway, scouring the other rooms once more. The other sits upon the bed, placing his gun over his lap, and stares at the crooked paintings on the walls.

And then Micah Freeman's luck changes: a cramp develops.

At first it is just a quiver of pain, completely bearable, and he doesn't worry. But in a few seconds it grows into a maelstrom of agony and he cannot resist; he shifts his body with a silent gasp, moving his tender muscles, and the pain subsides. He gently rests his head upon the wall, but not before brushing the tip of a coat hanger with his scalp. The hangar rocks for a moment, then, decayed by time, the top crumbles and it spins through the air, clattering against the door. The soldier upon the bed turns his head at the noise, takes his gun, and stands. Micah Freeman stares at the coat hangar, and through the light coming beneath the door, he sees a swaying shadow approaching. The soldier stands before the door; Micah Freeman expects the door to open any minute, and he expects to be dragged out and thrown overboard like that neighbor girl. Except he wouldn't burst. No, he'd be fresh. A delicacy for vultures too dependent on the rotting corpses of a trashed earth.

But the door doesn't open.

The man begins to wonder if the soldier has gone, perhaps drawn by a deeper force, but any relief to be found in such a conjecture is sent to the grave as the door splinters into several dozens holes; Micah's ears roar as bullets streak through the door and enter the closet. He falls against the wall and feels the bullets ripping through him. And it is over before it even began. Silence drenches him in its ephemeral murkiness. He opens his eyes, feeling only his heart pounding against his ribs, and feels he is unscathed. Shafts of light wash over him from the door, the shafts breaking and reappearing as the figure beyond moves. His ear burns as a bullet had passed right next to it; yet he remains untouched, the wall strewn with bullet holes to his left and right and above him. A lucky twist of luck or the cruel hand of fate?

The silence is interrupted. The gun is making clicking noises.

Micah Freeman understands. The soldier is reloading.

Yet he understands something else as well.

If you want to live, you must make it happen.

He leaps up in the closet and throws himself against the door; the bullet-ridden door flies open, slamming into the dark-clothed soldier, throwing him down on the floor between the bed, one leg propped up, his gun skewed at the foot of the bed, eyes wide beneath the shadowy mask. Micah Freeman stumbles from the closet, into the brilliance of the room, and is blinded. The soldier leaps to his feet but Micah Freeman is faster; he grabs the abandoned gun and swinging it by the barrel

hits the soldier broad in the mask, twisting it upon the soldier's face. The soldier falls backwards under the blow; the defender throws away the gun and jumps atop of the soldier, but the soldier easily throws him up and onto the bed. As the soldier stands, the owner of the house rolls off the side of the bed, lands hard on the floor, head slamming into the bedside table, knocking it and the lamp over. He is amazed the lamp didn't break but his thoughts are discontinued as he is brutally kicked in the gut; he rolls over, gasping for breath, and the soldier falls on top of him, pinning him to the ground. Micah's arms are pinned by his knees and he can only watch in terror as the soldier draws a scythe-bladed dagger, a smile written underneath the mask. Micah wriggles his arm and gets one free. The soldier raises the dagger; Micah's hand flails to the side, wraps around the neck of the lamp; his other hand is free! The blade comes down; Micah catches the soldier's wrist in his left hand, allowing the tip of the dagger to hover right over the soft of his neck. He swings the lamp upwards with his other hand, bringing it into violent contact with the soldier's face. The man flails back off of him and drops the knife but the lamp is still unbroken. The soldier is now against the bed, weaponless, and Micah moves on him, swinging the lamp again, knocking him to the ground. The soldier reaches out to grab Micah but Micah angrily smashes the lamp into the man's face; the lamp shatters under the impact, breaking into thirty-odd fragments. The force of the blow caved the man's skull under the mask and blood traced between the mask's contours.

Micah looks down at his hands and sees they are covered in blood. Horror fills him, a subterranean dread. *I have killed a man...*

His thinking is broken by the shouts of the other soldier downstairs. Micah throws his eyes to the empty doorway leading into the hallway. The other soldier is running up the steps and from an angle Micah can see him reaching the top landing, holding the gun at the ready and turning his gaseous face towards the bedroom. He dives over the body, rolls across the bed, and falls to the floor. He grunts in brief shock and when he looks up, sees the butt of the man's gone just inches away. He scurries forward and grabs the gun; he takes up a fallen magazine and, hovering behind the bed, jams it in, surprised he knows how it fits.

He can hear footsteps entering the room; with a lurch he rises and swings the gun around on the surprised intruder; the gun speaks a vibrant language and he can almost see the soldiers' wide eyes behind the mask. The gun flashes a brilliant yellow along slits in the barrel and he sees the soldier's chest erupt in mottled splotches of red; the soldier falls against the doorframe and slides down, head drooping and mask staring at his chest riddled with bloody holes. The roar of the gunfire does not die down before Micah is stepping over the second corpse and running into the hallway. He is about to go down the steps when he hears the garage door burst open with the sound of an explosion; the house shakes and smoke rolls into the hallway below, curling up the steps. He hears shouting and running feet.

III

He abandons the top of the stairwell and runs down the hallway, into his bedroom. He skips over the body of the soldier by the door and running around the bed, peers out the window to the street below. He can see several soldiers running under the shadow of the hovering aircraft, running for the house; in the distance, an aircraft is rising into the sky, slowly turning to head his direction. A curse exudes from his lips. He hears them upon the stairs. He runs from the bedroom, mind screaming. He sees his daughter's bedroom across the hallway, but the corridor passes before the stairwell. He screws his fears and runs; his body flashes before the stairwell, but by the time the soldiers see him and raise their weapons, spraying bullets into the moldy drywall, he is gone, leaping over his daughter's bed and throwing himself at the window. The glass shatters all around him, splicing his skin, but he doesn't care about the pain. The world spins, a kaleidoscope of confusion, and he pitches forward, landing hard on the sloped tiles of the roof. His body rolls over a rusted nail and he screams. The soldiers enter the bedroom and run to the window, broken glass all over the floor. One of them points their gun out the window just as Micah's body falls over the edge; several shots echo over the refugee as he falls, slamming into the rain-soaked grass, soaking his clothes. The soldiers are shouting and clambering onto the sloped roof from his daughter's bedroom window.

He gets to his feet and takes off towards the fence that had been swaying with the earthquake. Water splashes up at his feet as he runs from the soaked grass; the soldiers shout and start firing. Steel bullets sizzle past him and plunk in the grass, fountains of water marking their touch, and they plunk into the wood of the fence, searing massive, smoking holes. The man jumps against the fence and starts climbing. A bullet clips his shoulder, drawing blood, and he hollers, almost falling, but he crawls over the side. He flips over the other side and lands hard on his back, seeing stars. Bullets tear through the fence, splinters raining all over him. He wrenches to his feet and takes off stumbling through the neighbor's yard; the stench of the burst carcass washes over him and he almost collapses. He risks a glance back and sees the last soldier jumping off the roof; looking backwards, he doesn't notice the fallen and rusted swing-set: his feet tangle over the bars and become trapped in a web of chain. He falls face-forward into the grass. He tears his leg free with a curse and is up as the first soldier is coming over the fence.

Run! a voice screams in his head, over and over, not relenting: *Run! Run! Run!*

He takes off around the side of the house; the first soldier falls to this side of the fence and fires at him, but the bullets clip the corner of the house. Micah barrels into a rotted fence door and it falls to the ground in shards. He takes off to the right, running parallel to the street, the great aircraft hovering just a few hundred feet away. Two soldiers across the street see him, shout, and kneel down, aiming their weapons. The man turns and darts into a house; bullets trail him as he runs down the house's parlor hallway. It is a house just like his own, identical in every

way, and he sees several nooses in the living room, skulls and spines dangling, with bones lying at their feet. Mice and rats scurry, hissing at him. Bullets echo around him and shatter the glass back door; he takes the advantage and launches out of it, landing on the patio. The back deck is broken in several places, giving him a clear run through another backyard and eventually to another street.

The soldiers that had been firing at him now stand and run towards the house. The soldiers who gave chase in the man's own home entered the building before them; one fired of a potshot after the man but missed. By the time they exit through the shattered back door, the man is at the opposite street, running between abandoned cars. The soldiers shout and one runs back outside, waving his arms at the aircraft and screaming. The aircraft begins its ascent.

The man dives behind a car as the soldiers enter the street. He hunches beside the tire, crouched low. They stand still, aiming their weapons, scanning the street, searching. He knows they can't see him. They think he's run. They are lowering their weapons when a noise echoes down the street, something sounding like a falling metal garbage can. The soldiers raise their weapons and take off; Micah slowly makes his way around to the other side of the car as they vanish down the street, then he runs into the charred remains of what had once been a home, picking his way through crumbling walls and collapsed ceilings. He comes out of the back and sees another street. A low rumble fills the air and a shadow falls before him; he dives back into the darkness of the burnt home and sees the aircraft shrieks overhead, shaking his eardrums raw. He keeps low in the remains and watches it slowly turn and fly to the right, where the noise had come.

He moves forward as the aircraft slips away. He passes between a hole in a fence and runs around the side of a house. He has no clear idea of where he is going but knows it is the opposite direction of *them*, whoever they were. He is beginning to breath easier when a bullet streaks past his ear and sends into his face burning stone from the impacted house. He breaks into a run and looks left; a single soldier is running after him, holding the gun low, just trying to keep up. The man is so busy looking behind him that he doesn't see a line of dead bushes. His legs tangle in the twisted and decaying brush, and he falls forward into the bush, flips over, and finds that he is falling upon a car. He hits hard and rolls off, smashing into something malleable, taking both himself and it to the ground. His eyes swim for a moment and he sees that the bushes lined a ten-foot ledge that led right to a broken-down red Camry. He looks over and sees a woman standing there, a scythe blade in her hand; he screams and scrambles backwards; the woman brings the blade down, but it falls short of striking him. He follows the blade with his eyes and sees it cut across the throat of a dark-clothed soldier, a wallow of blood gurgling.

The other soldier appears at the end of the alleyway, raising his gun.

The woman with the bloody knife stands completely exposed, hunched down, cowering like a squirrel trapped in the headlights.

The man grabs the gun in the knifed soldier's limp hand, and raising it up, squeezes the trigger. The woman flinches, thinking she's been hit, but it shocked to see the soldier at the end of the alleyway collapsing. She looks down and sees Micah on the ground, breathing hard and pouring sweat, muscles tingling. He looks at her and sees she is dressed in jeans and a t-shirt; the t-shirt is stained with days-old grime and the knees on the jeans are worn to bare threads. Her face is covered with dirt but yet her blue eyes seem to sparkle. He can't move as she grabs his hand and hollers, "Get up! Get up!" He doesn't move. "What the heck is wrong with you?" she cries. "*Come on!*"

He picks up on the urgency and manages to stand. She begins to run and he follows her, holding the heavy weapon in his hands. He fears its weight will weight him down but he seems able to follow. He hasn't ran since High School track, and then he didn't run very fast, but it seems to come naturally now. Adrenaline, he tells himself. It's the adrenaline fueling you beyond normal capacity. She takes him down the twisting and curving alleyway, snaking between several ancient cars. Soldiers run into the rear of the alleyway where they'd been, infuriated at the scene of two dead soldiers. They give chase. An aircraft roars overhead; the woman looks up in its shadow and the man sees fear in her eyes. Around a bend the low alleyway slopes up to a street filled with abandoned cars.

She runs up the way and he follows; behind them, the soldiers appear, shooting; he doesn't think about firing back; she grabs him and throws him behind a car. She looks at him with hate, takes the gun, pokes her head around the corner, and throws off several shots. He lowers himself onto the slick pavement and, looking under the car between the wheels, can see the soldiers scattering behind cars and barrels in the alleyway as bullets sprinkle between them. One soldier falls to his knees, raising his gun, but the next moment he pitches backwards; a fountain of blood sprays from his neck as he falls. The gun clicks and she leans back behind the front of the car. She grabs a magazine from her jeans pocket, and loading the gun, demands, "Why won't you shoot back???"

He doesn't know what to say.

She curses and leans back out, firing. The soldiers had tried to advance but now they retreat back behind cars and barrels. One of them doesn't make it. She returns back behind the car and says, "This is all I have and there will be more of them. Come on. They're pinned down and won't move up just yet. We've got time. You coming?"

He nods and follows her down the street at a quick run. He has been down this street many times before. He sees the restaurant that has the best Greek food, he sees the oriental buffet, a loan and quick-cash office—all empty and falling apart, windows smashed. She takes him across the street and through the broken front window of a US Bank. He follows and looks back to see if the soldiers are coming but sees that it is empty. She jumps atop the counter, slides across it, and falls over the other side. He tries to do the same but simply rolls off the counter.

She throws her long, dirt-slicked hair and lets out a laugh as she focuses the gun on the window. "Find us somewhere to hide, okay? There's going to be more. I'll cover the windows."

IV

The roar of those horrible aircraft blows dust in from the street; the woman turns her eyes from the blast and so does the man. The building shakes upon its foundations and in a moment the sound dissipates into a gentle massage as the aircraft turns its eyes upon the outlying subdivisions. The woman wipes dust from her face with one hand and says, "Look, will you?" The man nods and turns, wipes his own face, and abandons the counter. There are several offices, some with broken windows revealing yellowing books and blank computer screens. As he moves towards the side of the building, he finds a tall table covered with brochures. He shakes his head at the irony and opens an office door; at the same moment his bones cry out. Lying in the suede leather chair is a grotesque skeleton, a hole drilled through the temporal lobe. He sees bits of bone sticking into the felt wall behind the chair where a bullet had incised its path ages ago.

He is caught in a moment of frailty, staring at that skeleton. He sees himself lying face-down in the grass, a bullet through his skull, empty eye sockets staring meaninglessly into space. The thought sends shivers up his spine.

A sudden voice behind him, making him jump: "This is good."

He turns around. The woman is standing in the office doorway. "No," he says, swallowing hard. "No, I think we should move. Another office. There's lots of offices--"

"What's wrong with this one?" she demands, shifting the gun in her arms.

"Too close to the door," he tells her. "If they come in-- Who *are* they?"

She shoves him out of the way. "Close the door. If we're quiet, they won't know we came in here. They're going to be combing the subdivisions for a little while. Give us some time to breathe." He stares at the open doorway and she lets her eyes fall upon the skeleton in the chair. She risks a glance back and sees his head turned to the side, as if his ear were probing. She sets the gun upon the dust-laden desk and, grabbing the skeleton by the ribs, yanks it clattering to the floor. The man spins around, horrified. She pushes the chair at him and he catches it. "Take a seat," she tells them. "*And close the door.*"

He gives her a bitter stare but she doesn't back down. He closes the door.

She hops upon the desk, taking the gun in her hands. She nods to the chair. "Sit down?"

He shakes his head.

She sighs. "Okay. Whatever suits you."

The man walks around the desk and leans against the wall. He does so to keep the skeleton out of view. He still can't get over the way she simply desecrated something so sacred--

"You act like you haven't seen one before." She isn't looking at him.

He stares at the back of her head, the filthy auburn hair. "Seen one what?"

She points the gun to the floor and throws her eyes back to him. "One of those."

"I'm sorry," he tells her without sympathy. "It's not everyday you wake up and see skeletons shot through the head in national banks." *Nicole. Nicole.*

She laughs quietly to herself. "What are you, an amnesiac?"

"I don't even know what that is," he flatly tells her.

She nods and stares into space, stroking the gun with her finger. The man sits down in the shadow of the desk, running his hands through his hair. A movement in his arm makes him wince in pain. He turns his head and sees a bloody tear on his left shoulder underneath the loose shirt.

She sees him fingering the wound and gritting his teeth. "Can you manage?" she asks.

He nods. "It's okay. Thank you." There is no sincerity in his voice.

An aircraft flies low overhead, the building groaning, dust falling from the ceiling. Both of them stare upwards and the man gulps. The noise deadens down as the aircraft continues its search. The man stares at the woman and says, "By the way, you're welcome I saved your life."

She shakes her head, laughing. "No. I saved *your* life. I can tell from the looks of it that you aren't from around here." She swivels around on the desk. "Simply, you're too innocent."

"Innocent?"

She nudges her head behind her. "Since when is a skeleton something special?"

He crosses his arms over his folded legs. "I live here. Or *did* live here."

"You've been hiding out all this time?" the woman asks. "Somehow I don't believe you. No one's survived here."

"Really?" the man sarcastically quips. "Then who are you?"

She smiles. "Just a pilgrim passing through... So who are *you*? You a pilgrim, too?" Her own sarcasm is thicker than his. "We didn't have time for introductions."

He casts his eyes away from hers. "I don't feel like talking."

Her response is abrupt: "I don't care. I saved your life. Now answer my question."

He doesn't look at her. "Micah Freeman." Now he looks at her. "There. I asked who you were first and you threw the question over your shoulder. I told you, now you tell me."

"Are you with the underground?"

"The what?"

"The resistance?"

He raises his arms in defeat. "I don't have any idea what you're talking about."

She wrinkles her eyebrows and pokes his soul. "You really *are* clueless."

"Well, thanks for making things clear. Really appreciate it."

"I'm with the underground," she says. "I've been with them since the beginning."

"That's nice," he says. "Beginning of what?"

She looks at him as if he's crazy, and waves her arm outwards. "This! The beginning of this!"

An aircraft flies over the building again and she points upwards as it passes over. Dust sprinkles all around her. "We're resisting *them*. When they came... All of this happened. There's not many of us. We're far outnumbered and they keep killing us off. Hear them flying over?" How could he not? "They're looking for me." A laugh. "They've been on my tail for days. This is the closest they've gotten so far, and to be honest, I'm kind of disappointed."

Now *he* looks at *her* as if *she's* crazy. "*Disappointed???*"

No hesitation. "I've warranted a bigger reputation than just three search parties."

"What exactly have you *done*?"

She jumps off the desk with a chuckle. "You little innocent boy, if I told you, you'd probably cry."

"They were chasing *me*—"

She defies his logic. "They found *you*. They were *looking* for *me*."

"And they're after you because you're part of this resistance?"

She flashes her eyebrows. "It's a tad more complicated than that—"

He folds his arms and closes himself off. She takes the hint and gets off the desk next to the skeleton. She stares at it upon the floor, then throws her eyes over to the man. She shakes her head, thinking. He really is something else. She'd never seen anyone quite like him. She would've sworn he was simply an amnesiac, forgetting everything, but there was a clarity about him, a genuine confusion, that riled her soul. He was an unexplored and unopened mystery.

She says, "Are you rested up?"

He looks up from his thoughts. "I thought we were staying here."

"Not forever. This place is hot. If they don't find us, they'll have two thousand troops here combing the buildings. They're in the subdivisions now, but if things don't work out... Look, we need to get moving, okay?"

He stands, brushing his pants free of dust from the ceiling. "So where are we going to go?"

"Underground," is her reply. "Just stay close to me. We're going to be all right." She gets ready to open the door. She looks at him. "You're looking kind of pale. Are you sure your arm is okay?"

He nods. "I'm just... exhausted. I went to sleep and everything was normal and I woke up and—"

She throws a finger to her lips and he is silent. The silence is all but suffocating but they can hear something within the foyer. A dull humming noise, clicking. She looks at him and using the gun, waves for him to get down. He crouches behind the desk, kneeling in its shadow, and she remains beside the door. She reaches to the gun and puts her finger on the safety. She had turned it off earlier. The

humming is growing louder, but now it is retracting, pulling away. The man's heart is thundering. She can't see anything through the fogged and murky glass, nothing at all. The humming is distant, the clicking all but nonexistent, so she clicks the safety.

The humming continues but the clicking in the distance stops.

The man clenches his hands and his shoulder burns.

The humming begins to grow louder again. It's coming their way. The woman's back is turned to the dust-engraved window. The man peeks his eyes over the desk and can see her staring straight ahead, muscles quivering. A shadow falls over the window. He wants to tell her but doesn't want to make the noise. She looks over at him and sees his wide eyes; taking the hint she dives to the floor just as the glass behind her shatters; a screaming blade covered with spikes swings out over her in an explosion of glass. The man shouts and falls back behind the desk. The woman leaps to her feet and with a shriek of rage slams the butt of the gun into a dark, round object from whence the blade had extracted. The object sparks and flies against the wall, the blade spinning madly; she leaps through the broken window and charges the black sphere; before it can rediscover its balance, she swings the gun at it again and sends it careening against the counter. Sparks sputter from its broken spherical seal and she slams the gun down on it again. Its humming ends and sparks become its waning death-throes.

Her shadow drapes over the dying machine as the man opens the door to the office and comes around, face glowing ashen in shock. "*What the heck was that???*"

She turns and looks at him, eyes wild. "We've gotta go *now*."

V

She takes him out the back door, through a broken doorway and into an alleyway lined with dumpsters. The cloudy sky casts murky shadows over everything and the man looks back into the bank but the woman is already off, climbing atop a dumpster to climb into another building. He follows her up the dumpster, feet slipping and sliding over the sleek steel; she smashes a window through and crawled inside, her legs kicking. As Micah Freeman stands on the dumpster the earth begins to shake and quiver, the echo of those awful throbbing engines snaking towards him. His face falls and he gapes up at the sky, expecting the beast to slide over the roof of the bank at any moment. The woman's hands come out and grab him, yanking him through the window. They both topple into a room full of unopened boxes as the aircraft thunders overhead. They are shielded in the shadows.

"Why did you stop?" she demanded, getting to her feet. "We don't want to be in the open!"

His arm throbs. "I'm sorry..."

"Apology accepted," she tells him. "Just don't do it again, all right?"

The man doesn't promise everything, but speaking words would've been futile; she is already leaving the office. He brushes himself off, takes a quick snapshot of his bleeding shoulder, then follows her out into a hallway lined with broken glass and empty offices. She doesn't know where to go and so takes him through a maze of conference-rooms stinking of rot, past the copying room where printers and fax machines lay all over the place; there are holes in the glass roof and nests within the printer covers and such. Birds fly up and through the holes at their passing, squabbling. She throws open another door and stops. He comes around and peeks over her shoulder: several skeletons lay sprawled at the far wall, the drywall marked with hundreds of bullet-holes. Shells lay upon the floor on the opposite side of the room. The man gulps hard and remembers the blood-stain inside his own home. He doesn't have much time to think about his beloved family before the woman shuts the door, grabs him by the shirt, and tugs him on.

They reach the lobby and she tells him, "Keep low." She cautiously walks to the window, the gun at the ready. The building shakes with an aircraft passing over them, heading to their right, and she kneels down until it is gone. His heart speeds as she sticks her head out a broken floor-to-ceiling window, looks both directions; she beckons him forward and he runs over. She runs out and stops behind a car across the street. She turns and waves him on. He takes off and-

The aircraft screams overhead. In his dizzying anxiety he had not heard it, nor had the woman. He looks up with horror as its shadow befalls; the woman dives to the ground and rolls underneath the car she is using for cover, but the man just stands gawking at the sky, horrified. Its fleshy underbelly vibrates and churns and it curves and vanishes; its engines continue to rev close-by. There are several gurgling and cranking noises coming over the rooftops.

The woman rolls out from under the car and looks at him through the car windows. She motions to him to get down and he does so, sweat drenching his arms. She stands and, half-hunched-over, begins walking down the street, keeping to the sides of several shopping marts in disrepair. CVS, Drug-Mart, a Mexican joint, Dairy Queen—all long-forgotten, relics from a distant and forsaken past.

The man is watching her this entire time and sees her freeze; she raises her gun. She turns and takes off towards him, running full-out, shrieking, "GO!" She runs past him but he doesn't move. He looks back to where she came from. She curses, runs over, grabs him by the shoulder where it burns, and rips him up. He cries out and falls to the ground, groping at his shoulder. "UP!" she screams. "GET UP!"

From around an intersection several black-clothed soldiers appearing, raising their guns. The roar of their weapons cut past them in sizzles. The echoes of cracks in the air tells them bullets are snapping right past. The woman is half-dragging the man with one hand and shooting back potshots with the other, making the soldiers dive behind cars and the ruins of a crumbled Pottery Palace.

The man scrambles up and she releases, knowing he is following. She runs to the nearest building, a structure with twelve stories and painted in mud-red brick, dotted with perfectly-aligned shattered windows with empty windowsills. He

hovers behind a Toyota as she breaks the door in with her one foot. “IN!” she hollers, the sputtering of her gun making her yell. The man dives from cover into the corridor, hitting the wall, and she finds glee as a soldier falls against a car, leaving a deep red stain. She backs inside, shooting, then the gun clicks. The man is standing and she curses. She keeps the gun; at least it will look intimidating if they get near.

Swinging it from her hand, she tells him, “Move! Stairs! Here!” She points out a stairwell and the man starts running up; she follows. They follow the stairs up several flights of stairs and hear the soldiers begin their pursuit, feet clanking on the iron stairwell. Bullets snake up between the spiral stairwell, spraying into the wall close to them a few times. The man flinches and the woman encourages him on.

Above the roof, an aircraft hovers, the machine working, a ramp descending, not touching the concrete. Soldiers rope down, blow open the doorway into the belly of the apartment, and begin the pursuit to cut off the pursued. Micah Freeman and the woman hear the explosion above and for a moment falter. The woman says, “Screw it, come on!” and takes the lead on up the stairwell. The soldiers above them run down an apartment corridor and exit onto the stairwell two flights above them. On the tenth floor, Micah Freeman and the woman hear their entrance and are met with a blast of gunfire. The woman bashes a door open with the butt of her useless gun and Micah Freeman crawls in after her. They run down the hallway. As they turn into an intersection, a soldier reaches the stairwell entrance and fires. A bullet snaps past Micah’s ear and burns a smoking hole into the drywall. He stumbles for a moment and she hollers, “Forget it! Come on!”

The hallway passes several closed doors then turns to the right. The woman flies around it and the man is behind her when the door at the far end of the hall splinters open, soldiers pouring inside. The woman yelps and leaps backwards, into the man. The soldiers are surprised to see them and are drawing the beads of their weapons upon them as they scramble up and around the corner; gunfire lights up the end of the hallway and bullets trace into the drywall. The woman cries out and falls; the man looks back in terror to see her groping at her foot. Smoke comes from a hole in the soles of her feet. It only burns and she’s on her feet, pushing him along. “Find a room! Find a room!”

The soldiers behind them are nearing the turn and the ones that had been pursuing them from below *and* above in the stairwell are pouring onto the floor straight in front of them, shooting. The man lurches against the door and it falls beneath him, the hinges rotted; he falls to the ground atop the door in a cloud of dust and rolls. The woman leaps over him and is on her feet before he can stand. “Let’s go!” she cries out, begging him forward. “Get up!” He stands and follows her into a living area that had been in pristine condition before its eternal vacancy. She leads them into a side-room, tearing through doors and leaping over furniture. The man’s heart races and his adrenaline surges through his veins; he feels as if he is running a triathlon. There are several skeletons in a room and a hole in the wall;

she shuts the door, locks it, and they go through the hole, into a bedroom that is strewn with more skeletons and bullet holes.

The soldiers are pounding on the door. It breaks down and they storm the bedroom just as Micah Freeman and the woman dart out the door and to the right. A soldier raises his gun and fires into the wall. In the next room, the wall erupts with spitting metal. Micah dives behind a couch and the woman falls to the floor, covering her head as bullets rain all around them. The man's mouth moves in a shout and then the bullets end.

The woman's legs lay in the doorway. A soldier runs out and she trips him, writhing around; she bashes him with the butt of her gun, takes his, and raises it, firing into the other room. A soldier two feet away is flung back, chest opened up in sprays of steaming blood. The other soldiers dive out of the way. The woman screams to Micah, "Into the hall! Into the hall!" She stands and moves backwards towards the door, gun hovering over the two fallen bodies, waiting for the next intruder. The man leaps to action and opens a door leading into the hallway. He beckons her on and, giving a few more shots, breaks into a run after him.

He finds a concrete stairwell where the door is wide open and they rush up into what feels like brilliant daylight. The dark clouds throw the ruined wasteland that had once been a vibrant and pulsating town into a mottled shadow. An aircraft flies several streets down and one is hovering over the roof of the apartment building; the woman gapes at it and yells, "Follow me!" He follows her as she leaps from the apartment roof, flails over an alleyway, and lands on the next roof. A fleshy turret upon the aircraft is swiveling towards Micah; he takes a deep breath and runs towards the edge; the woman is already standing. Below, several soldiers see Micah jump over and shoot at him. The bullets scream vertical around him and he lands upon the roof, but falls short, legs dangling over. The soldiers are all reloading, yelling at each other; the woman drags him onto the roof before they can riddle his legs with steel slugs.

"Stay low!" the woman shouts, and he follows her behind a raised platform covered with broken glass. An aircraft is coming towards them, the air behind its engines shimmering like a trio of desert mirages. The woman high-tails it across the concrete roof and the man is right behind her; they pass through a gap in the platform and the turret of the aircraft across the way on the apartment roof opens up. Massive bullets the size of corncobs thunder and throw chunks of concrete all over the place. Micah hollers as burning debris embeds in his skin. Soldiers on the roof across from them kneel down and start shooting, the bullets spitting everywhere; Micah covers his head and the woman fires back. One of the soldiers catches it in the front of the mask, the back of the head exploding in a mural of skull and brain-matter.

"Jump!" she hollers and she disappears off the edge of a roof.

The man curses and leaps, the ground coming up; he braces for impact, hits, knows pain, and is rolling. He lies on his back, staring into the sky, world spinning. His body reeks in pain and he wants to vomit. A hand grabs him and

drags him behind a car as an aircraft passes over, the shimmering turrets firing. The woman grits her teeth and closes her eyes; the car vibrates with the thundering of the bullets. She feels several pass by within centimeters of her face. The aircraft discontinues its shooting. She opens her eyes and sees holes the size of basketballs chewed into the metal of the car. The man sees the holes, too, and almost has a panic attack. The woman leans out away from the car, looks down the street, then is looking the other way when she catches something in the middle of the street. A crooked smile creases her lips and she tosses the warm gun into Micah's hands. "Any of them show up on the roof, you shoot them, okay?"

The man nods, breathing hard; she leaves the cover. He raises against the car and aims the gun at the rooftops. He can hear them running above. The woman kneels down next to a manhole and, grunting, grabs it by the holes and lifts with all her might. The titan chunk of steel groans and slides off. She jumps to the other side and, sitting down, pushes it completely off using the balls of her feet. Soldiers appear and the gun laughs; the soldiers dive down as bullets clip over their heads. An aircraft is returning.

The woman shouts, "Over here!"

He leaves his cover and runs over, preparing to dive inside.

She rips the gun from him. "This is mine." She nods to the darkness below. "Move!"

The man slides inside, feet-first, and raising his hands, disappears inside. Moments later there is a splash. Soldiers appear on the roof and fire at her; she returns fire, sending one crashing over the edge, landing hard on his back in a puddle of blood. The aircraft is just about upon her; as its turrets flash she jumps down, landing hard with a splash, feeling the acrid stench and warmth of the liquid. She picks herself up and wades into the darkness, away from the shaft of light from the open manhole, carrying her gun with her. The bullets from the aircraft tear through the concrete above and open up scattered shafts of light, revealing the man moving away, sloshing through the water. The bullets that had passed through the thick concrete above their head send up sprays all around them and she pushes on, keeping the gun aimed on the entrance.

The aircraft fire ceases and a soldier jumps down into the muck. Her gun barks, the shadows melting in the brilliant flashes. The soldier's body flails and lands in the muck, sinking to nothingness under the weight of his equipment. The woman keeps pushing on.

Moments later there is a splash. She looks back and sees the large shaft of light dwindling.

And she knows.

Her head swings around and she screams, "Micah! Under!"

She dives down, immersing herself in the muck and excrement that no human being should experience, and the next moment her world turns into a blazing hell-storm. Heat like nothing she's ever experienced rushes over her, burning every

part of her body, and she wants to scream, wants to raise up, but refuses; her lungs rage and her eardrums burst.

And then it is over.

She writhes from the water, choking and gasping for air. She has lost the gun. The sewer is illuminated by scattered patches of flame burning on the wavy slosh. The woman looks around and can't see the man anywhere. Terror and shame grips her, but a voice draws her from the horrid conclusion: "I think this is yours?"

She turns and the man hands her the gun.

"Thanks," is all she can say.

VI

The rolling flames riding atop the stagnant waste illuminate their path, the fires stretching into oblivion. She takes the gun and leads the way, wading through the green filth. Micah covers his mouth and tastes bile building in his mouth. "Breathe through your mouth," she tells him, her own voice wavering, on the verge of spitting out her bowels. "It's easier to handle that way." As they slosh through the imperviously rank liquid, the breaking of the crusty surface erupts gaseous wells that poison the very lining of their nose. The man falls against a wall and draws several deep breaths, spittle dripping from his throat. The woman hears him stop and turns and holds her gun close.

"We can't stop now. Do you *want* to rest in this place?"

He is shaking his head. "Just give me a moment, okay?" He closes his mouth and his throat wobbles.

She lets him puke and wipe his mouth, then says, "Come on."

"A moment, okay?" he demands, glaring at her in the firelight.

Her reply is quick. "No. Not a moment. You're hurt. You're in shock. Mentally and physically. You've been running off adrenaline and it doesn't last forever. You're going to collapse. Micah." She touched him gently on the arm; he flinched and stared at her with loathing. "Micah. I'm not doing this to hurt you." She nodded to the surface. "They think we're dead. They dropped a bomb in here and are *convinced* we're dead. We escaped; now do we fall down here and die, suffocating in this..." She splashes the muck with the barrel of the gun. "Micah. *We have to go.*"

"Okay," he breathes, nodding. She sees his arms are shaking. "All right."

He doesn't have much time. "Hold onto my arm, okay?"

He grabs her hand and she begins to move. He follows her easily but she has to half-drag him.

"Can we stop?" he asks. "Just let me lean against the—"

"No, no, no." She urges him on. "Just a little more ways."

They wade on farther down the tunnel lit up with flames. She isn't surprised at the immensity of the explosion. Had they not been submerged, they would've been

burned alive. The sides of the sewer tunnel are scarred and burnt from the blast. And she could not see the flames dying down anytime soon.

The firelight illuminates a ledge against the wall, where a small ladder runs up to a covered manhole. She wades over and helps Micah up onto the ledge. He curls into the corner and brings his knees up, wraps his arms around his folded legs, and rests the crutch of his chin between his kneecaps. She pulls herself up and is delighted to see that the smell isn't so bad; it seems to crawl along the surface of the waste, sputtering upwards with their movement. She sees the slosh is sluggishly moving to their left and they're on the left side of the tunnel. So it's flowing... south? She really doesn't know.

She looks over to the man and says, "Good job. You did good. Now rest for a little while."

"How long?" is his only question.

The woman leans against the stone wall and props the gun beside her. "As long as you want."

He closes his eyes. She watches the burning waste, then watches his eyes sliding shut. She sees in a few moments that he is sleeping, and shaking her head in bewilderment, she mutters, "Who *are* you?" But he's asleep so he can't answer. Yet even if he *had* been awake, she believed, he couldn't have even answered the question. It seemed not even *he* knew who he was.

Coldness. This is all he knows, all he is aware of. All is dark, dark and empty. He tries to put a tab on it but fails, tries to recollect himself but cannot. Then feeling spreads into his limbs, snaking through his veins like juices from an IV, rejuvenating the muscles and bringing them to life. He coughs, a horrid cough, and his fingers curl. He feels paralyzed but the feeling is vanishing. He tries to lift his head but it feels like lead. He opens his mouth and discovers how thirsty he really is. There is no water, only the darkness, only- No. There is light. It begins right before him, twin slivers of light, and as they widen, the calm and tranquil honeydew light reaches in and kisses his soul. He is upon a bed and in the light finds that he is looking straight up into a mirror. He sees himself, but his eyes are fresh and blurry; it takes him a moment to focus and he sees that he is lying naked upon a cold, silver bench, arms and legs, chest and forehead held down by iron clamps. He does not ask questions, simply accepts this. The sight should bother him, but oddly, it doesn't. He finds himself at peace, at one with what he now sees, and he doesn't even fear when pale blue snakes come into the mirror and begin moving about him. He does not know what they are, but some of them carry odd-looking equipment. One snake hovers over his bare stomach and drools on him; it pulls away and another snake wipes the drool over the exposed skin. His mind questions the feeling, a strange tingling, and then an arm with what looks to be a curved, scooped blade enters the scene. His eyes narrow and he sees that awful blade and his stomach muscles tighten. He cries out, the fear invading like a black, insatiable plague, but his own rants and raves are met with a litany of words he

cannot explain. Then he feels the pain, that all-too-familiar agony, as his skin is ripped open and left to burn and buddle in the scalding manila lights.

The man awakes with a start, startling the woman. She looks at him and he raises his head, eyes wide. She sees he is shaking. She says nothing but looks away. He repositions himself and stares down the tunnels. The fires are waning. "How long has it been?" he asks, voice cracking from lack of water.

"A couple hours," she tells him.

"Has anyone come?"

She shakes her head. "I told you: they think we're dead. How are you feeling?"

Awful. "Better."

She nods, licking her lips. "Good."

The fires are dying out. "It's going to be really dark in here."

"Don't worry about it," she tells him.

He can hear from her voice that there's no pretense. "Do you have a plan?"

She nods and looks at a digital, glowing watch on her wrist. "You can get some more sleep if you want. We have some time to spare."

"No, I feel fine. I've had enough sleep."

She feels like she's treading hallowed ground; "Bad dreams?"

He shrugs. "Better than what's really happening."

They sit in the darkness for several more moments. The man stares down the tunnel over the smothering fires, thinking of his beloved family. He remembers proposing to Claire at the foot of Niagara Falls, and he remembers taking Molly to the park down the street with her friend Emma. The park, he had seen, had now been reduced to a chalk-white wasteland with gnarled, leaf-less trees, tombstones written by nature. He remembers Nicole in the crib and in a flash he sees her in that tub. He blinks tears from his eyes.

The woman says, "You really don't know what's happened, do you?"

He shakes his head, thankful that he has something else to think about. The memories of his family bring too heavy a burden for him at this point in turn. "It's like I told you. I went to bed last night and when I woke up... Everything was different. The town was destroyed. I've seen the bones of the residents in buildings, in cars, out on the streets. My own family..." He doesn't tell her about Nicole. "I don't know what happened to my family. Our house is empty."

"I envy you," the woman says bluntly. "Anyone who can think freely has been numbed by all this."

"I just keep wishing," he continues, "that this is all some dream, some nightmare, and I'll wake up in bed with my wife."

She sighs. "I gave up on that dream a long time ago."

VII

The flames had completely died down what seemed to be hours ago. The man doesn't move for fear of things hidden in the darkness, and the darkness only makes his daytime nightmares more vivid and clear. He is frustrated and terrified, and he can't get the images—Nicole's skeleton, blood all over the wall, neighbor casually thrown from the window to rupture and spill her organs—out of his mind. His train of thought is broken, however, as light burns his eyes; he winces and raises his hand and it takes him a few moment to be able to see with the brilliant light from the glowstick the woman had lit. An odd, black light illuminates their little hovel, dark and yet bright at the same time.

"How are you feeling now?" the woman asks him.

He looks at his shoulder. "It's not as bad. It's not bleeding anymore."

"Good. We'll have to pump antibiotics in you." She points to the muck below. "This stuff is probably years old. Who knows what kind of microbes or bacteria could've gotten into your body. You could be sicker than a drunk horse and not even know it."

The man touches his cut and it burns. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Come on," she says, sliding off the platform and splashing into the water.

The man just looks at her. "What time is it?"

"Time for us to go."

Micah Freeman slides into the muck. He wants to vomit again and she can see it on his face.

"Breathe through your mouth, remember?" She turns and holding the gun in one hand and the flare in the other, she leads the way through the winding tunnel.

"Do you even know where you're going?" the man asks her after they've walked for fifteen to twenty minutes.

The woman doesn't answer him, keeps moving.

"Excuse me?"

She glances over her shoulder. "I have a general idea."

"So you *don't* know?"

She looks forward again. "What do *you* think?"

"I think we should try to figure out where we're going instead of wandering in this slime for—"

She turns around and holds the flare before his eyes. He winces in its light and looks away. She stares at his profile and says, "Do you want to lead?"

He shakes his head. "No. I'm just... Interested in us getting out of here. My arm really hurts."

"And we'll get it looked at, but we have to keep moving."

"Oh, God, what is that smell?" the man moans. "I breathe through my mouth and I can still smell it." Who would've thought the stench would become so unbearable?

He had thought he'd smelt the worst of it when he crashed into the filth from the open manhole, but in just a few steps a greater and even more potent, reeking stench corrupts his nose and sends his brain doing somersaults. His vision fades in and out and his knees become weak.

Oh, God, that awful smell!

The woman pauses, then brings her flare before her, cutting light off from the man's view. "Micah? Are you behind me?"

He is breathing hard, drool twisting upon his lips. "Yeah..."

"Grab on to my shoulder and hold on, okay?" She lies, "The flare is losing its light."

He stumbles forward and grips her shoulder, squeezing her shoulder blade between his fingers.

She feels it and continues moving. The stench almost overpowers him but somehow, focusing on holding to life itself, is able to continue on.

An eternity, or what feels like one in the god-forsaken and pitch-black sewers, eventually passes, and moments later the woman says, "My torch is gaining its light again. How strange." She brings the flare off to the side and allows its light to waft over Micah, the walls and ceiling and nastiness wrapping around their legs. Nothing has changed. But the stench is gone.

A light up ahead, sending shivering ribbons across the muck.

"Thank God," Micah breathed. "We're almost through."

He never saw the hundreds of bodies embalmed in the filth behind them.

The filth dissipates into a stream, and under the blurred stars honed out by storm-clouds, the man and woman wade onto the bank and lean against trees, aching knees crying out in pleasure. They gulp the fresh, clean air and taste the iodine of the recent rainfall. The woman breaks the flare in half and the particles vanish into the stream, dissolving into the water. She tosses the empty canister behind her shoulder, leans her head back, and closes her eyes, thankful for just a few moments of-

The earth begins to shake and the man and woman look up into the sky. The trees are swaying back and forth and ripples are covering the stream. They look up just as the hazy stars are blotted out by a colossal aircraft, red and yellow lights spinning upon its fleshy hull. The woman doesn't move but the man curls up, gawking in terror at the titan. The aircraft flies over them and streams of vaporized water suck up towards its engine before falling back to the earth. A giant spotlight shines from one of its turrets, splashing light over the forest and farmland beyond the river, all denuded and dry of life. They watch the lights grow smaller and watch the aircraft turn and fly to their right nearly three miles away. By this time the earth has stopped shaking beneath its harrowing engines.

"They're searching," the woman tells him. "They don't suspect our death."

"They bombed us," the man contemplates. "If they bombed us--"

“Maybe we’re not the only ones they’re looking for?” She lets the words hover in his mind. Thunder erupts above and a gentle rain begins to fall, the rain washing the waste from their bodies. She stands in the rain and tells the man, “Okay. We’ve got to keep moving. This place isn’t safe. They’ll be here soon.”

The man stands. “How long do we have to run?”

“Until we’re safe,” she says. “And that could be a while.”

They walk along the winding stream, following its gurgling to their right. They try to avoid the bushes, so as not to make much noise, and more than once they enter the stream and wade so as to not leave a scent that can be tracked by hounds. Micah Freeman hopes morning will come, but every time he gets excited at the concept, he is reminded that it is barely one in the morning. The sun has just fallen and won’t return till several hours. He is freezing, he is tired, he is emotionally, mentally, and physically drained. He doesn’t know how long he can go on but he doesn’t bring this to the woman’s point—whose name she’s not yet graced him with—because he doesn’t want her to snap at him again.

Suddenly she stops in her tracks and he nearly runs into her. She turns and gazes over his shoulder, then she kneels down. “In the grass,” she says. “*Hide.*”

The man scurries into the weeds and cowers down. Water drips from his body. The woman is but ten feet from him. He is wondering why she has made him lie down. Then he hears them.

Footsteps. The sounds of scraping metal chain. Sniffing and growling.

Hounds.

The man’s heart quickens. His veins throb. The adrenaline returns, bringing with it horrible prophetic images: his body being discovered, rolled over and shot in the face. Or the dogs being leashed from their chains and ordered to tear him apart, rip him limb-from-limb as his screams fill the dead night air. He is breathing hard so he squeezes his eyes shut and tells himself to calm down. *Family. Think of your family!*

The dogs are so near. He can hear their pants and growls over the gurgling stream.

How close?

Nicole. Molly. Claire. His heart wept. The emotional tears slow it down. He can breathe again.

The dogs are right next to him. So close...

Annoyed, mechanical voices: “There’s nothing here! This place is empty. I told you.”

Another voice. “They want us to comb the area. We do what they say.”

He is frustrated: “This is stupid. We should be checking in the sewers. Why don’t we check in the sewers?”

Rabid laughter. “The sewers are filled with nothing but corpses. If they’re there, they’ve joined them.”

Micah Freeman’s mind runs races. *Corpses? In the sewers? Then, The stench!*

The 'leader': "Continue downriver. I'll return to town. Tell them we've seen nothing."

"And if I find something?"

No hesitation. "Kill it."

Micah doesn't move, nor does the woman. The sound of the hounds and their carriers dissipate in either direction. Several minutes later, when they are submerged in silence, the woman low-crawls through the weeds over to the man, frightening him.

"Thank you for not making noise," she tells him.

He swallows hard, desiring not to question. "Corpses in the sewers?"

"Come on," she says, ignoring his question. "We're going to cut cross-country."

What had once been a thriving apple orchard had been reduced to a graveyard of spindly and bare trees wallowing in mud. Their feet slosh through the marsh-like earth as they follow the rows of dead trees. The woman leads the way in silence and the man continues after her, pondering once again the coming of the sun, and the stench in the sewers. It terrified him to think of bodies in the sewers; his mind kept returning to his daughter's brilliant blood stain, and he imagines her lying down in that sewer, an unforgiving grave, and it chills his blood, and he can barely breathe. The apple orchard seems to continue on forever, until they hit a road filled with potholes and cracks, and after they cross the road, another apple orchard, just as corrupted of life.

An aircraft flew far to their left, several miles, but they could see the spotlight dancing over the ruins of a nearby town. The woman shakes her head and says, "I remember that town. It was just like Amberlin. Then they ran it to the ground." He doesn't understand a word she says but doesn't care. With each step his feet shriek as if white-hot needles are being jabbed into his skin. He just wants to lie down, wants to sleep. The woman says, "Amberlin is over the mountains. That's where we're headed."

He speaks. "Will we reach there tonight?"

She shakes her head. "No. We have to rest. I know how bad a state you're in. I would've stopped by now, but what point is it to rest, then find yourself shot come morning?"

"What's Amberlin?" he asks.

She doesn't reply for a little while, then, "An image of the past."

VIII

She knows such things exist, but hadn't expected to actually stumble across them. 'They' had been performing such exercises for two years now, and everyone knows that, one day, it'll be their turn. Yet even with *knowing* what happens, *knowing* what exists, no one can really fathom what it is like to actually *experience* it. She had experienced it; she worries for the man, however, who, as she so

eloquently put, is so innocent. He is unscarred by the years of war, unscarred by the brutality and Hell that had swept the planet off its axis. She realizes he has no knowledge of at least the last two years, for he really cannot relate *in any way* to what he has seen. The moment she saw genuine fear written on his face upon seeing that skeleton in the chair, she knew there was something special with him, something she couldn't quite put her finger on. Skeletons *used* to bother her, but now she's grown accustomed to them. They're as common as trees—rather, unfortunately, even *more* common.

Were she not with him, she would've been able to walk on past. But even in the dismal rain and the fog lurking amongst the remnants of an ancient, technological world, somehow he is able to see them in the mist, and horror drives him forward. The woman has noticed them in her subconscious and for a moment wonders where he is going. Then it clicks and she is after him, calling his name, beckoning him back. But he doesn't listen. He runs across the patched earth, stumbling over dead roots, and he scrambles down the low bank to the dried up creek-bed. The woman stands above him with the gun, watching in empathy as he gapes at them all.

She once stood in his position. She knew what he was feeling.

It had to happen. Everyone had a first time, everyone's innocence was broken sometime.

She hoped his innocence would break now. It would make everything so much easier.

But yet she hoped his innocence would remain; it was his innocence that drew her to him.

The man collapses upon his knees before the dried up creek-bed, eyes crawling in festering terror, a nightmare coming to life before his eyes. His hands shake and curl into balls and he wants to scream. He rocks back and forth, taking it in, and squeezes his eyes shut, mentally hollering, *Awake! Awake! Awake!*

The woman says, "They're safe now. They won't be touched."

The man writhes around, points at the creek, and screams, "*What is this?!*"

The woman flinches at his voice. "Keep your voice down—"

The man scrambles up the bank, storming towards her. He reaches her and throws a punch. She dodges, grabs his arm, and flips him to the ground. She puts her foot on his chest. He is punching her legs, tears streaming down his face, blending with the rain. He is ranting and hollering, his death-throgs echoing across the countryside, so she flips off the safety and points it at his face.

"Micah." Her command.

The man lowers his arms at the sight behold him but continues to weep, gasping for air.

"Breathe," the woman tells him gently. "Breathe."

He is half-suffocating. "They're all- They're all—"

"I know," comes her soft voice. "I know."

He stares at her with maniacal bloodshot eyes. "What- What happened?"

"It's genocide."

"This is California..."

"It doesn't matter. This is earth, too."

His head rests upon the water-clogged dirt, swathed in mud, and he breathes deep. "Why?"

The woman doesn't have an answer. "Come on. We can't stay here."

"I saw one..." the man pants, "I saw one, and she... She looked like... Molly." She has no idea who Molly is. He tells her, "My daughter."

Micah Freeman somehow composes himself and leaves the creek-bed behind. For nearly an hour they walk in pitch darkness with slicing rain. Thunder echoes but lightning doesn't touch the face of the earth. There is no light; only the sounds of her footsteps to guide him.

They climb over a fence and pass several pieces of broken-down farm equipment. Tractors, hoes, trailers. The rain drums lightly upon the vacant metal and the rust erodes day-after-day. Micah looks at one of the falling-apart tractors collecting rain and sees an image of several children dancing around it as the farmer starts the engine. The children are laughing, and- And he is back in the darkness, soaked and cold, following the woman's footsteps. The image is painful and the residue aches like a migraine.

A building looms before them; a small barn with a broken-in roof. The woman opens the door with a creak and steps inside. Half of the barn is dry. She nods for Micah to enter, then closes the door. She turns her back from the hole where rain enters, and bringing out a glowstick, ignites it and casts black-white light all over the barn wall. Rusted equipment hangs from nails and bales of hay cover the far side of the barn, some wet and soggy from the rain. There is a horse skeleton in the corner, the wide and empty eyes gawking at them. The man grinds his teeth when he sees a rat stick its head from one of the sockets, then vanish back inside, hidden for eternity.

The woman stands staring at the bales of hay and a smile creases her lips. "Help me." She sets down the glowstick on the floor, the light casting over the bales of hay. She begins moving them. He stands in her shadow, watching, clueless. As she drags a bale of hay out, she looks at him, sees the confusion in his eyes, and tells him, "We're going to make a hole inside, and we're going to plug it up. It'll be warm and hidden. We can sleep in safety. We're miles from the town. I doubt they'll bring hounds or troops this far, but in case they do... We'll be okay."

He likes the idea and proceeds to help. The activity wears him down even more and he is ready to collapse when the tunnel is dug out to a hole, all made out of hay bales. "Go in first. Curl up and sleep. I'll plug the hole."

"Thank you," he tells her, sincerity drenching his words. "Really." He crawls to the hole.

The woman grabs her glowstick and throws it into the tunnel, extinguishing the light. She crawls inside and uses the bales of hay to stuff herself in. When all is

complete, all that could be seen was a rickety barn collecting rainwater, with useless farm equipment, a pile of rotting hay, and a horse skeleton crawling with rats.

The man drifts to sleep and the woman leans against the hay barrels, submerged in the wallow light from the glowstick. She pulls something out of her pocket, something the size of a bullet, and putting her thumb upon it, orange lights along its side begin to beat. She breaks the glowstick, extinguishing its flame, and sits in the darkness, staring at the homing beacon in her hand. Help would come in the morning. They just had to wait out the night. She knows she should sleep, but sleep is elusive. Questions run through her mind, jogging over her brain, and it almost hurts to close her eyes and just dwell upon them.

Who is this man? Where is this man from? But most of all, Where has this man been?

She dares to think it and her heart quivers. Could this be the man Shadow is looking for?

No. Shadow's mind is filled with games and ideas that have no foundation in reality.

He is wrong.

But she looks at the man, and deep inside, she *hopes*.

Her thoughts are torn away when she hears, through the rain sprinkling upon the hay bales and the occasional palls of thunder, the door to the barn creaking open. She brings the beacon towards the man's face and sees that he still asleep. She prays he remains so, and sitting in the darkness, hidden completely from view, she listens as several dogs sniff the area. Their sniffing goes throughout the barn, eventually leading to the hay barrels. A mechanical voice cracks: "They've been here."

"How long?" another voice.

"I cannot tell. Ten minutes? Ten hours? The hounds' noses are strong."

"They obviously aren't here."

The dogs and their carriers leave. All she hears is the rain on the roof.

The man asks in the silence, "Tell me now: what has happened?"

She is surprised he's awake, but she doesn't answer.

"When I went to sleep," the man says, "everything was perfectly fine. And when I wake up, everything is... *This*. The town is empty, there are skeletons everywhere. The town used to be known for its aesthetics. I go to my house..." His voice drops, low and gloomy. "I go into my house, and I find... There's blood on the wall. And in the bathroom... Nicole. My daughter." The silence is choking. "I never found Molly or my wife."

You never will.

Finally the woman speaks, defying her own skepticism. "You need to speak with Shadow."

“Shadow?”

She looks at him in the blackness, and feels they’ve locked eyes, even though she cannot see him. “Tomorrow. We’ll see him tomorrow.”

Chapter Four

"It is far better to grasp the Universe as it really is than to persist in delusion, however satisfying and reassuring." – Dr. Carl Sagan

I

He awakes, eyes burning when they open. He lets them close again and just lies there. His headache is all but gone, only now can he feel brief traces that seize him in frail moments. He simply lies there, eyes closed, suspended in darkness. He can hear nothing, only silence. He tries to remember where he is, and the images come to him, brief and forlorn. He sees them inside the sewers, he sees himself huddling in the grass, hears the vicious panting of the dogs, and he remembers the woman.

Yes. The woman.

She hasn't told him who she is and he burns to know. She has kept protecting him from danger for the last several hours, so it's not his place to demand her name. Yet he wishes he were to have a name to call her, if it were only to add a little serenity to the chaos. What he really wishes to know, however, is what he's longed for this entire time:

What happened?

And she refuses to tell him.

He opens his eyes and ignores the burning that draws tears from his eyes. He is folded into a fetal position underneath several bales of hay, and when he stretches out to crawl through the open tunnel, his body screams in pain and he just falls still. To move sends shards of pain shooting through him like velvet lightning. He makes small moments for several moments, gritting his teeth and working his muscles so the tension wears off, and when the pain is minimized, he squirms from the fortress of hay and stands in the middle of the barn, the ground soaked and muddy, the horse's skeleton hovering in silence, dog-prints and boot-prints entering then leaving. He looks around at the decrepit barn, at the rotting boards and the mice in the walls.

She is gone.

For a moment he feels abandoned. Anger rushes through him.

She brings me this far, then dumps me.

He wants to scream, he wants to rant. She is gone, and he feels...

Fright.

There is a noise behind him. He swivels around, ashen-faced, and is relieved to see the woman walking towards him from outside, where the morning sun resurrects mist upon the broken farm equipment and desolated fields. She rubs her hands on her jeans, spreading dirt, and says, "He should be here any moment."

The man nods, color returning to his face. "What time is it?"

"A little after nine," she answers stoically, walking right past him. She sits upon a bale of hay and says, "I got up on the roof this morning and looked around. It's completely abandoned. No life whatsoever. I didn't see—or hear—any aircraft, either. I think they've considered us as good as dead."

"I'm thankful," the man says, "that they're wrong."

"And you have *me* to thank for that," she says. "I'm also the one who's arranged the meeting."

He looks at her oddly. "The meeting?"

She returns the stare. "You have questions? He has answers. He'll explain everything."

Two hours pass. As eleven nears, the man's line of thought turns upon food, guided by the gentle massage of his stomach. He and she are sitting out on one of the broken tractors, breathing the fresh air brought up by the mist, and since they aren't talking, he has time to think. He dwells on fat-laced boiled pork, rice drenched with butter and herbs, and he smiles upon the thought of the orange chicken from the Chinese joint down the street. His mouth is salivating. With all the adrenaline and exhaustion of the last night, he'd had no chance to become aware of how hungry he really is.

The sound comes, gentle at first, then grows louder. The woman looks over to see the man beginning to get fidgety, and she tells him, "Wait here," and jumping off the tractor, she runs around the barn. He hears the noise grow louder till it is nearly upon them, and then he hears the noise cut off. Driven by curiosity, he forgets his stomach, and crawling down off the tractor, walks around the side of the barn to see the woman talking to a biker-looking man with a cream mustache and beard, dark leather clothes, and behind him is a truck covered in dust and grime. His eyes are drawn immediately to the tires where splotches of red are intermingled with the mud.

The driver of the truck looks up and sees the man. He pulls back his shirt and is drawing out a weapon. Micah Freeman freezes, raises his arms. The man continues drawing the gun, hate in his eyes.

The woman reaches out, touches the biker's hands. "No," she says. "He's with me. He's with me."

Micah Freeman doesn't move. He keeps his hands in the air. After all, the man still has the gun pointed in his general direction.

The biker glares at the woman. "We can't take him with us."

"No. We have to. He needs to talk to Shadow—"

"For all we know he's a spy," the man snarls, and he hurls her back, raising the pistol.

Micah Freeman falls to his knees and yells, "No spy! No spy!"

The woman leaps in front of the biker. "You want to kill him? Shoot through me."

The man stares at her for several moments. "Sarai. Listen to yourself. We can't take him."

"You want to kill him?"

"We *have* to kill him," he tells her. "We can't risk it."

"There's no risk," she tells him. "No risk at all." Then she leans forward and whispers into his ear. His eyes glaze over, and he lowers the pistol. Micah Freeman breathes easier. He begins to lower his arms but the pistol comes back up. He shoots his arms into the air and takes a step back, backing down. The woman glances at Micah, then continues whispering secrets into the biker's ears. Eventually the biker steps up against his truck and puts the pistol underneath his jacket.

The biker walks around the truck and gets in. He tells the woman, "Throw him in the back."

The woman beckons Micah over. He lowers his arms and joins her. "He almost killed me."

"It's okay."

"He almost killed me."

She nods to the bed of the truck and says, "Get in."

He peers in and sees red stains everywhere, some splotches so thick it looks like jello. He shakes his head. "No. Not in there."

"Fine." She points to the barn. "In there, then?"

He curses under his breath. "Look, there are three seats in the cab. Why can't we all just—"

"Because he doesn't trust you," she tells him flatly. "Be thankful you're not dead right now. And show a little common courtesy by obeying him. Now." She nods again, this time more forcefully. "Get in."

They follow the dirt road the way he'd come, leaving a twin trail of dust and dirt sprinkling behind them. The bare mountains, once rich in greens but now shrouded in the stink of death, grow nearer. The man huddles in the back, wrapping himself tight. The valley is warm, but as they drive and because he is in such a state of hunger and shock, he doesn't feel warm at all. He wishes he would've grabbed some clothes from the house before hitting the street, but knows that is foolish talk.

They come to a small town completely abandoned, looking just like the one they had abandoned last night. All the homes are falling apart and desolate, skeletons lie on the sides of the road, in the fields, and all the buildings are empty, inhabited only by the rodents and vultures that circle the effervescent plain of death. The vehicle slows down and the man feels himself sliding into the back because of momentum. He leans to the side, turns his head, and peers forward. The truck is pulling beside an abandoned gas station. The driver puts it in idle and gets out. The man squirms to the other side of the truck to stay away from the man. The woman gets out, too, and says, "Come on, Micah. Stretch your legs. It's still a ways."

They have been driving for nearly forty minutes and the far mountains lay before them. His town lay upon the other side of the valley, and it is an hour-long drive between the eastern mountains and those of the west. From the back of the truck, among three empty yet closed barrels, along the drive he could see that the devastation was everywhere. No signs of life to be seen.

He gets out at her bidding.

“Don’t wander off,” she says. “We’re leaving once he fills up.”

He sees the man walk over to one of the pumps, then kneel down with odd-looking equipment. A drilling sound filled the air as he began disassembling the pump. “What’s he doing?”

“Getting gas,” the woman beside him answered. “He was a gas station manager before all this happened. He knows what he’s doing.”

The biker looks up from his squat as he pushes the pump over. It lands upon the cracked pavement with a shatter.

Micah observes, “Not so gentle, is he?”

The man hollers to the woman, “There’s a grocery a quarter mile down the road. Why don’t you get some food for us? Canned goods.”

The idea of food stirs his gut. Micah puts forward, “Can I go with her?”

The man answers quickly. “No. Stay here.” He pats his jacket. “Got it?”

He swallows and nods. “Got it.”

The woman smiles and begins walking off. Micah watches her go, yells, “Be careful.”

She doesn’t look at him but yells back sarcastically, “Thanks.”

He sighs and rolls his eyes.

The biker hollers, “Cowboy! Get in the cab of the truck and find my siphoning tube.”

The man nods, walks over to the truck, opens the door, and leans inside. He brushes through some messy piles of clothing, searching, and his hand brushes something cool. He thinks it’s the tube and brushes off the clothing and his heart leaps up into his throat when he sees the pistol lying there. It was the same pistol the man had threatened him with. Micah is too frightened to touch the pistol and is locked in emotion. He doesn’t know why, but sudden fear grips him. He wants to take the pistol and keep it close so that-

“What’s taking you so long?” the biker hollers.

That shocks Micah from his dwellings. “I’m... Look... I can’t find it.”

“Have you looked in the glove-box?” he snaps.

“No,” he replies quickly. He opens the glove-box. Its contents spill out over the floor of the cab, mixing with the clothes. He curses and leans over quickly to pick it up and hits his head on the dashboard.

The biker shakes his head. “Hurry up!”

He grabs the tube and stumbles from the truck, rubbing his head. He walks over to the man and holds it out. “Here.”

The man takes it, saying nothing, and gets to work. Micah Freeman feels awkward so he begins walking back to the truck.

Then the man speaks: "Sarai's told me all about you. The whole way here."

Micah Freeman pauses, staring at the truck. "So her name's Sarai."

The man sticks the long end of the tube into the hole in the pavement and begins leashing it downwards. "She seems quite taken with you."

Micah Freeman turns. "Taken with me? I'm a burden to her. I'm not blind."

"You're a burden, yes," the man says. "But don't let that confuse you. Had she been completely in her element, she would've killed you."

"Killed me?" *Like you were going to kill me.*

The man holds the tube out. "We have to be careful. We're spread too thin." He begins sucking on the end of the tube.

"The resistance?"

He pulls away from the tube. "Yeah. Can you get me a bucket?"

Micah Freeman nods and runs to the bed of the truck. He'd seen one in there. He pulls it out under the noonday sun and drags it to the man. The man thinks him and begins sucking again. As he is sucking up stagnant gasoline, Micah Freeman ventures, "What did she tell you about me? I mean, in the truck."

He abandons the tube and gas begins to spill into the bucket, splashing around. He lets it flow for a moment, then as the bucket is filling up, says, "She told me what you told her. Waking up and everything being different. Not having any idea what's going on. Being completely clueless." He laughs. "I don't see how it's possible, but whatever. I will trust her. She has good judgment. Just be thankful that it wasn't *me* who found you. You would've caught a bullet in your forehead."

He grins. "Did she tell you that she was at gunpoint when I fell in? Kind of saved her life."

"No," he says. "She didn't tell me that."

"I didn't think she would."

Sarai returned to the truck with several old paper bags filled with canned goods. Under the sun, after the man had filled up the truck, they ate at the gas station, inside upon the abandoned bar. The biker had gone through all the different wines, looking for one suitable, and finding one, he popped the cap, took a drink, grinned, and grabbed three dusty plastic cups, wiped them out with a crumbling napkin, and filled them to the brim with wine. He passed them to Sarai and Micah and they feasted on Ravioli and Spaghettios.

As they ate, Micah had asked the biker about the graves. The biker just looked at him with fallen, even shameful eyes, and said, "Don't worry about it, okay?"

But Micah couldn't *not* worry about it. He kept seeing his little girl lying in the bodies.

Oh God, the memories. They ate through him.

The biker had stood and went to relieve himself behind the station, leaving Sarai and Micah alone. Sarai turned to him and quite flatly said, "The graves are nothing, okay? They're being nice nowadays, sparing us the torture."

"Torture?"

"Do you have to go the bathroom? We're leaving and we're not stopping. We still have to navigate the mountains."

He shook his head. "No. No, I'm fine." *Torture?*

Now he rides in the back of the truck on the winding roads of the mountains. All the trees were completely naked, devoid of any life, stripped of all the green. His head hurts just to see the devastation. And as he stares into the blur of the dead pines and oaks, all he can see is his little girl, lying contorted in a dried-up creek-bed, blood lining a jagged hole in her head.

And in the silence and security in the back of the truck, he does it again.

He cries.

The wind from the driving took away his tears and it wasn't long before he was left to simply stare at the dead forests, deep in thought. The road would wind into the mountains, sometimes even cresting the tops, where from his perch in the back of the truck he could look across the valley, see the barren desolation of scattered towns, rotten fields, and the remnants of the city on the far side of the valley. Then the road would drop down again, and then go through a valley for some time before reaching the next mountain. Many of the roads were destroyed, blown apart and left in fragmented pavement eaten through by weeds.

As the truck descends into a small river valley between the mountains, the man looks from the bed of the truck and can see a bridge off to their right. The truck plunges into the naked forest and eventually reaches the bridge. It is one of the antique bridges, made out of wood and supplemented with steel. As they pass through, he can see many empty nooses dangling from the metal girders; he looks down into the muddy-brown river and can see bones, yellowed and stained with dirt, collecting on the sides. He looks away and they are off the bridge, winding up the next mountain.

As they come down the next mountainside, into a valley that had once been home to a stately mansion, but was now just a pile of charred ruins, the man's body, massaged by the rocking of the vehicle, began to slip into a throttled sleep. Who knows for how long he slept before he was awakened. It wasn't the sunlight or the vehicle's stopping that drew him from his sleep, nor some noxious nightmare that made his brain melt, but it was the vehicle bumping up and down as if they were going off road. The man looks up groggy-eyed and sees that they are still on the road; parallel trees are running by on either side.

It is when he leans over the side to look ahead of the truck to see what is happening that his eyes fall across the road. He is absolutely horrified and falls back into the bed of the truck.

They're being nice nowadays. Sparing us the torture.

The thumping stops and the truck rumbles up a mountainside. Leaving the road with all the fresh corpses far behind them.

II

Evening is coming on and the truck is pulling onto a dirt side road winding into the side of a mountain. The biker stops the truck and gets out. Micah Freeman leaps out of the bed, glad to stretch his legs, and the woman joins him. She is holding several bundles in her hands. She thrusts one into Micah Freeman's chest. "Quickly. Dress in these."

He opens the bundle and stares at the clothes he'd knocked over earlier. "Where do I go?" he asks, looking at her.

She gazes at him as if he's crazy. "Where? I don't know. I don't care. Just do it, and fast." She walks around the truck and he sees her beginning to take off her shirt. At that moment he sees his wife smiling at her and his (broken) promise: "I'll never leave you." Guilt and shame invade his soul and he turns. The woman is nearly topless and putting on a shirt when she hollers, "Why are you still standing there? Get moving!"

He curses and enters the woods, walking a ways until he reaches a hill. He goes down the opposite slope about twenty feet and stops in a grove of bare pines. He hangs the new clothes on the branches of the tree and quickly strips. He forgets that he has pictures of his family in his pant's pocket. He can hear the woman yelling at the top of the hill for him. The biker is talking, too, loudly. The man hurriedly finishes dressing in the loose trousers and button-up plaid shirt. Grabbing his other clothes, he makes his way up the hill, cresting the slope. The woman and the biker at the truck see him coming through the trees. The woman raises her arms in frustration.

"You didn't have to go to the other side of the world," she tells him as he reaches the truck.

"Sorry," he says. "I just wanted some... privacy, is all."

"Give me your clothes," she says.

He hands them over. "Why'd we change?"

She hands the clothes to the biker and told him, "They're looking for people wearing those clothes. We need to go through a checkpoint, and if we're wearing them--"

The man lets her voice trail off and watches the biker heading towards the woods. "What's he doing?"

"He has to destroy the clothes. We're dead, remember? If they find our clothes, it means we're *not* dead."

He nods, understanding. "Okay."

The biker throws the man's clothes and the woman's clothes into a patch of dead earth and begins sprinkling spare gasoline atop of them. He brings out a Zippo and

flips it open, igniting the flame. He is about to throw the flame atop of the clothes when it comes to Micah Freeman.

My family.

Except for memories, everything he has of them rested in his clothes, nestled innocently in the pockets.

His identity is in those pockets.

His family is in those pockets.

His reason for existence is in those pockets.

“Wait!” he hollers, running after the biker. But the biker has already touched the flame to the gasoline-sprinkled clothes. A large flames stretches over the muddy linen. “No! No, no, no-“

The biker swings around, confused. The woman watches in shock.

The man dives towards the fire. The biker tries to stop him, but the man squirms away. He thrusts his hands into the fire. The biker and the woman just watch, beyond words. The man spreads the clothes, gritting his teeth in agony from the snapping flames. He sees his jeans and flips them out of the pile. The pant legs are on fire. He stomps them out, covering them with dirt, then kneels down and begins inspecting them. The cloth is scorched.

“Oh God, oh God, oh God-“ he mutters as he rips into the jeans.

The biker looks up to the woman, and she shrugs at him. *I don't know.*

“Thank God!” he exclaims, pulling out a couple pictures. He takes a deep breath, looks over to the biker, then to the woman. “This is all I have. All I have of my family.”

The man nods, understanding the innocence and sanctity of Micah Freeman’s words.

“Come on, Micah,” the woman says gently. “Get in the cab.”

As they drove away, Micah Freeman clutched the pictures in his hand, refusing to let go.

He’d almost lost his family. Forever.

As they fall from the mountainside and emerge from the desert of craggy trees, the landscape changes dramatically and Micah Freeman is astounded. Where there was desolation, now there is life. Where there was fear, now there is joy. Where there was hopelessness, now there is optimism. The earth sprouts to life again, the trees flourishing with vibrant spring color, opening up their blossoms to the setting sun. The grass is thick and green and a small stream gurgles through, transparent and laced with minnows and crayfish. Even the air seems to be tainted with the wonderful scent of hope. He is peering through the cab’s windshield and in amaze at it all when they overcome a small hill and hit a slope leading down into an even lower valley. This valley, like the first, is abundant with life. Several deer scatter across the road. The man can scarcely breathe. All he’s known since the monastery has been death, destruction, loss. This is... overwhelming.

Then a town comes into view. Several houses just like the one he left behind, with manicured lawns and children playing in the sprinklers, a grocery store with people walking out holding bags of food and drink, even a soccer game going on with a referee and cheering fans. The man's mouth drops open. What's happened? The biker and woman say nothing.

In fact, they look disgusted.

He is about to ask why when the hill dips even lower and he sees the one entrance to the town.

At that sight, all his ideas of perfect utopia and harmony are lost to the wind, ashes in time.

A towering twelve-foot wire mesh wall surrounds the town, barbed wire with sparkling tips doing loops along the top. At the entrance is what the man can only equate to a cross between an air raid shelter and an above-ground bunker. There is a slit from the bunker and there are several gun barrels sticking out of it. A huddle of dark-clothed soldiers stand at the gates, those vicious guns in their hands. Pairs of soldiers walk the walls in thirty-meter gaps.

The very sight of the soldiers curdles Micah Freeman's stomach. "Oh God—"

Sarai speaks without looking at him. "Relax. We're fine."

"They're going to kill us," he mutters. "Oh God, they're going to pull us out and shoot us and—"

Now she glared at him. "Listen to me, Micah. We're clean. Got it? There's a few things you need to know right now."

But he isn't listening. He spins his head to the biker. "Turn around! Get us out of here!"

The woman grabs his arm hard and yanks him around. "*Micah*." She speaks his name with power and with passion. "*You are fine*. You're dead—remember?" They are nearly up. Soldiers are raising their guns, waving them forward slowly, telling them to stop when they reach the gates. "If they ask, you work with a mop-up crew. You were working on Stanley Road. Act casual. Act normal. Even friendly."

"*Friendly*?" he gasps.

"Yes," she tells him sternly. "*Friendly*."

The guards are waving them down. The biker slows down the truck and rolls down his window.

One of the soldiers is standing there. In that mechanical voice that makes Micah want to vomit—*Nicole, Molly, Claire*—the soldier orders: "Papers."

The biker pulls down the sun-shade and withdraws a yellowed piece of paper. He hands it to the soldier, who takes it in one hand and reads over it. He hands the paper back to the biker and says, "Who are these with you?"

Micah Freeman wants to scream. *Oh God! Oh God! Oh God!*

"Mop-up crew," Sarai tells him.

Micah finds himself able to speak. "Stanley Road."

The woman looks at him, a smile in her eyes. Her face remains placid.

One of the soldiers in the background said, "Stanley Road is filled with them. We had some crews stay there till nightfall."

"Nightfall?" the interrogator echoed, looking up into the sky. To the biker, "Why you back so early?"

The biker's mind ran quickly and smoothly. "Our commander relieved us."

"The last relief was four hours ago. It's a one-hour drive." He looks intently at Micah and Sarai.

"Yes, sir," the biker responds. "But we had car trouble. Had to stop at a town and fill up."

The soldier pauses for a moment, still looking at the two passengers.

Micah mentally balls his fists, praying to an unknown god. The woman is calm and serene. He is amazed that nothing can seem to move her sometimes.

Finally the soldier backs away. "Proceed." To the other soldiers, "Raise the gate!"

Twin soldiers take their place at two machines and activate the gate. There are several loud clicks followed by gurgling hisses and the gate is rising upwards. Micah sees that there are several cast-iron spikes welded into the bottom that drive perfectly into the ground. He figures that if someone is trying to slip under the gates, they can quickly release the gate and impale them with the metal spears.

Imprisoned utopia. Wonderful.

The soldiers beckon the truck forward. The driver puts it in gear and they enter the town.

Sarai draws a sigh of relief and slaps the man happily on the back. "Welcome to Amberlin."

III

The Chevrolet truck passes through the front gate and is inside the town. A faded sign leans against a beautiful tree beside the tree: *Amberlin*. Amberlin, Micah sees, is a small town, with a single church, a small strip of general stores, and a school. Houses ring the town. They pass the school and he sees that the windows are covered with dust and some of them are broken. He sees bullet craters upon the concrete walls of the school; and ten feet away, several teenaged kids throw a basketball back and forth and make three-point throws. Ignorant of the bullet-splatter; six white kids laughing and hoping it up. Little kids play in the sprinklers and there's even a roller-hockey game going on in the middle of the street; the juveniles part to let the truck through. Micah looks at them and sees their eyes. They are vacant and yet full. Through the windows he hears something that resurrects memories; he hears the soft hum of a lawn-mower. He turns his eyes in the direction and sees an older man mowing the lawn while listening to a CD player. An elderly woman is trimming the garden while wearing a frilly pink dresses. The dog lazes out in the evening sun.

What's wrong with everybody?

He wants to scream at them, wants to slap them around.

Skeletons everywhere. Desolation paramount. Corpse in the bathtub. Blood on the wall.

Have they forgotten?

"Here we are," the biker says, pulling up to a Ranch-style home in whitewashed brick. The windows are open, letting in the cool evening breeze. He turns off the truck. He opens his door and the woman does the same. To avoid squeezing between the steering wheel, Micah follows Sarai out and shuts the door behind him. Submerged in the cool but warm California spring evening, he looks at the primp house before him. And behind the house is the wire mesh fence being patrolled by bloodthirsty soldiers with automatic rifles.

"Come inside," the biker tells them. He walks up the stone pathway and pushes the unlocked door open.

The moment Micah enters, his heart breaks.

Pictures on the walls. Cozy furniture. Laughter from another room. The smell of spaghetti.

Home.

Again: *home*. A ball of sorrow wells within his throat.

I need answers.

The biker motions to Sarai and Micah. "Please. Take a seat. I'll get them." He walks down a hallway and disappears around the corner.

The woman sits down in a plush couch and leans back, hair falling behind her. She sinks into the cushions. "Can you smell it, Micah? Spaghetti." She grins.

Micah doesn't move. He can't stop looking at the pictures on the walls. Across the room is the dining hall, without a wall to separate them, and through the French dining hall doors he can see two guards walking past the wire mesh fence.

"I need a shower," she says. "They have hot water. You can take one, too."

The laughter in the far part of the house vanished. He hears feet coming towards them. He turns and looks at Sarai. "I want answers," he tells her. "I've come all this way."

"And you'll get them," she says, looking into his eyes.

He is insistent. "I don't want to wait. I *can't* wait."

Several shadows enter the room. The man swings around. A man in his late forties takes Micah Freeman by the hand and shakes vigorously, teeth forming a shining halo within that captivating smile. His eyes are burning blue torches and his presence is invigorating, even though he's wearing a plaid night-gown. Behind him are two little girls. Micah Freeman sees them and his heart stops. One of them looks so much like her. So much like Molly. But any joy is dashed on the rocks—he sees the skeleton in the bathroom, the blood on the wall. He winces, turning his head. The memory strikes a painful chord within.

"Hal Greenstone," the man introduces himself, taking Micah's hand. His smile fades. "You're really cold. Are you sick?"

He tells him, "I'm sorry. No. No, I'm not sick... I'm... I don't know."

“Speechless?”

He nods. “Yeah.”

“Hungry, too?”

Micah nods. The spaghetti reminds him of Claire’s dishes. He doesn’t know if he can eat it.

“We’ll get you some spaghetti,” he says, turning to one of his girls.

But Micah interjects. “No. No. I’ll be okay. Really. I just... I just want to know what happened.”

The man looks at him. “What happened? What are you talking about?”

“This,” the man says. “This. I want to know *what happened*. Can *anyone* tell me?”

Greenstone is perplexed, trying to find a handle on the stranger’s words. “How can you not-“

Sarai leaps up. “Hal. I need to talk to you.”

He eyes the stranger, then turns and says, “What?”

“In private,” she says. “And I need to talk to you now.”

“What about? Can it wait? Supper’s almost ready.”

“It’s about *him*,” she says, pointing at Micah. “And, no, it can’t wait.”

Greenstone leads Sarai to his study, ushers her in, and shuts the door. She stands beside the big window and peers between the blinds. The game of roller hockey continues. An aircraft flies over, shaking the house.

Greenstone blocks the door, crossing his arms over his chest. “I’ve never seen him before.”

She doesn’t answer at first. He calls her name. She turns and says, “I found him.”

“*Found* him?” he asks, anger tinting his voice.

“Well, no. He found me.”

“*What?*” He clenches at his hair and spins around between the shelves of books and the desk covered with papers and expensive pens. He stops and glares at Sarai, his hair a muffled mess. “Why is he still alive? Sarai! Why is he still alive!?” She doesn’t answer, has nothing to say. For once she is silent and inferior. “You know the rules!” he exclaims. “You know why we *have* the rules! He could be working for *them*!”

Now she speaks, jumping in quickly. “He’s not.”

“Really? Wow. That’s a relief. How are we supposed to know?”

“Have you looked at him? Have looked into his eyes?”

He shakes his head, bewildered. “His *eyes*? His *eyes*, Sarai?”

“He is *clueless*,” she tells him. “His story-“

“The perfect guise,” he replies with confidence.

“No,” she rebels. “No, it’s not a disguise. He’s real. Even David saw it.”

“I’ll deal with David later,” Greenstone says, turning towards the door.

Sarai leaps forward, grabs him by the shoulder. He spins around, throwing her against the window. It quivers beneath the impact, the blinds scrunching. "Sarai. Stay back," he orders. He reaches up above the door and flips open an air vent. He is watching her as he feels inside. He draws out a 9mm. "I'm going to do what you should've done the moment you saw him. You've endangered the entire resistance. For God's sake, Sarai, you ought to be excommunicated."

Her eyes burn with hatred. "Give him a chance," she pleads. "Please. One night."

"One night? One night and this house will be gone. And my daughters with it. No. No, it has to be done *now*."

She curses. "Hal, do you think I'd bring him here if I didn't think there was something *significant* about him? You know me. I work alone. *Only* alone. I hate the extra baggage and I kill anyone who tries to interfere. It's the rules. But I didn't kill him, Hal. And I dragged him with me for nearly twelve hours as we ran from them. He protected my back and I protected his. For the love of God, he killed a few of them."

"Murder is a meaningless word in their vocabulary."

She speaks softly now. "Hal. Listen to me. I've been your most loyal servant ever since the day this began. I've protected you *and* your family for two years. Just give me this one request. Give him one night. Please. One night."

He opens the door and still has the pistol. "No."

He is gone before she can react.

Once Sarai and Greenstone leave the room, the little girls point to the couch. Micah smiles at them, walks over, sits down. He immediately sinks into the cushions. His eyes flutter. He closes them, as if tasting the sweet honey of gentle sleep, but all he can see is his little daughter. Molly is playing with her dolls in the family room when several dark-clothed soldiers storm inside. She screams and gets up. His wife runs towards her but the men shoot and she is thrown into the kitchen. Molly screams at the top of her lungs, "*Daddy!*" as a soldier picks her up by the legs and swings her into the wall where the back of her skull erupts into a smear of blood.

One of the girls is saying, "Sir? Do you want some spaghetti, Sir?"

Micah's heart is pounding. The image is transplanted in his mind. *Oh God-*

"Sir?"

"No," he tells her, answering as fast as he could. "No. I'm... I'm fine, really. Thank you."

The little girl wraps her arms behind her back and rocks on her heels. She smiles and bats her eyelids and says to Micah, "I'm Laura."

The other girl jumps in front of him. "Hi, I'm Danielle."

The man returns the smile, though his heart is black and cold.

Will it ever beat warm again?

"My name is Micah," he tells them.

“Where are you from, Micah?” one of them asks. Laura, he remembers.

“I’m from... Over the mountains.”

She looks confused. “You’re not from here?”

He shakes his head. “No. No, this is my first time here.”

“I’m glad you can spend the evening with us,” the other girl, Danielle, says. “Daddy is making the best spaghetti. It’s *sooo* good. Are you sure you don’t want some?”

He laughs. The first real laugh in... how long? Years? His heart is frigid at the thought. “No, I’m fine. Thank you, though. You girls are very nice.” He looks past them and sees a picture on the wall. There is Greenstone, though he looks much younger, and his two girls. They look the same age, but he knows little girls don’t age much between the ages of six and ten. There is someone else in the picture, too. He points and asks them, “Who’s that?”

Laura says, “That’s Mommy!”

“Is she here, too?” he asks without thinking.

He sees their eyes fall and instantly regrets it.

“No,” Laura tells him. “They took her a long time ago.”

Danielle adds, “They’re going to take everyone eventually. Do you want some spaghetti?”

Greenstone comes around the corner and freezes. He sees his two little girls sitting on Micah’s lap; there is a photo album in his lap and the girls are giggling and turning the pages. He is smiling. The smile, Greenstone notices.

Do *they* smile? A hideous thought.

One of the girls turns her eyes towards him; he instinctively swings the 9mm behind him, out of view. “Daddy!” she exclaims. “We’re showing him the picture book! The picture book!”

“That’s great, Honey,” he says, voice weak.

The smile.

Micah looks up at his voice and the smile falls. He quickly closes the books and stands. Danielle, the quiet one, slides off his lap. He sets the album on the couch, awkwardly. “I’m sorry...”

“It’s all right,” Greenstone says quickly.

A shadow is behind him and the gun is removed from his hands. Sarai smiles behind him.

Greenstone clears his throat. “Okay. Girls, go set the table, all right? Add a chair. Micah, David will show you to the bathroom. You need a shower. He’ll provide clean clothes. How’s that sound? The water’s hot, I promise.”

Micah doesn’t show any emotion, but does say, “Thank you.”

David comes from the kitchen and waves Micah down the hall. Greenstone watches Micah intently as he walks past, following David down the hallway. The little girls are laughing in the kitchen.

The biker leads him down the hallway; Micah is thankful for the green paint. Color. He'd been lost in the deserted wasteland for too long. Micah asks, "On the way here, everyone was... Just living their lives. How can they--"

They reach the door and as the biker opens it, he tells him, "Ignorance is bliss." He opens his palm to the shower.

"How can the people live like this?" Micah asks. "I mean... They know, don't they? Over the mountains?"

"Know?" the biker asks. He laughs now. "Of *course* they know. *Everyone* knows. Don't be surprised that people can live like that, though. Did you think America was *not* ignorant at the height of its power? Americans mowed their lawns, ate at their fancy restaurants, and drove shiny cars while people living halfway across the world starved in slums and were being thrown in ditches, victims of civil war genocide. Everyone's ignorant. It's just when you come from the other side of the world—and believe me, Micah, over the mountains *is* the other side of the world for these people—that you see the ignorance, see it in all its spectacular beauty. Here, Micah, in our quiet town of Amberlin, the townsfolk go to movies, eat at their restaurants, go to church, kiss on the park benches, play computer games and decorate their homes for Christmas. Last winter there were even Christmas carolers. The only difference between this town and those from the old age are the rations. No one can drive without a special license, and the food is doled out in whatever quantities the occupiers deem appropriate." He rips open the shower curtain. "Here. Please shower. We can't eat till you join the table."

Micah takes off his shirt and as he throws it on the toilet seat, he asks, "You, you drive. How'd you get your license?"

The man's smile falls. "The truck is essential to the resistance..." He says that as a disclaimer before, "I help them collect and dispose of the bodies."

The biker leaves, shutting the door behind him, leaving Micah all alone. He stands in shock for a moment but then runs on autopilot, taking off his clothes and stepping into the shower.

Collecting and disposing bodies?

Bodies in the sewers.

Bodies in the creeks.

Bodies on the road.

Bodies in bathtubs.

Bodies everywhere.

He turns on the water. It comes down nice and warm. An aircraft flies over, shaking the building, and the water sputters for a few moments, then comes down steadily.

Greenstone stands before the dining room window looking out across the well-manicured back lawn, only to intersect with the wire-mesh fence. As the sun is almost set, he can see his reflection growing sharper in the window. He sees a reflection behind him but says nothing. The woman says, "Thank you."

“One night,” is all he says. “One night, Sarai, and then he’s gone.”

“Tomorrow I’m taking him to see Shadow,” she says slowly.

Greenstone shakes his head. “A waste of your time. That old man is nothing but a hopeful bag of air. All the others of his kind have already seen the back of David’s truck. Spend your time wisely, Sarai—find him a way to the next town. Because he won’t be in my house this time tomorrow.” He begins walking into the kitchen and throws over his shoulder, “And forget Shadow!”

IV

Micah feels awkward as one of the little girls pulls out a chair at the table and asks him to sit down. As he obeys, he sees that the table is set for six people. The two girls, their father, the biker, Sarai and himself. As he gets comfortable, and tells the little girl, “Thank you,” Greenstone shuts the blinds on the dining room backdoor. No need to see the fence. Maybe, for once, they can pretend life is normal, and everyone’s gathering together after a long day of work to just enjoy life together, worry-free. An illusion, to be sure, but it is what all of the town is submerged in. A culture of ignorance, a culture of denying, a culture where the truth is substituted for pleasant little escapes. Teenage pregnancies are on the rise, pornography is at its height, and some people—though not all—have completely forsaken going to church. Some don’t want to pray and worship God because they don’t think He exists; others pray and worship God because they want Him to deliver them, the remnant of a devastation-torn earth.

Everyone sits down around the table, except for Greenstone, who is bringing the large bowl of spaghetti with chunks of meat over. Before he sets down the bowl, he scoops spaghetti onto the plates of his daughters. Danielle urges, “More, more... Okay.” “Is that fine?” he asks her, and she nods, says, “Thank you, Daddy.” As Micah watches the exchange he can’t help but remember the little girl’s chilling words: *They’re going to take everyone so eventually...*

He wonders how a little girl can so complacently accept her fate. Have they been desensitized?

He remembers Sarai’s words as they were on the run: skeletons don’t bother anyone anymore.

De-sensitized.

Once again the passion arises, almost evolving into an audible question: *What happened?*

The biker reaches for the spaghetti.

Laura pipes, “Aren’t we going to pray, Uncle David?”

Greenstone looks up. “Laura. We don’t pray at this table. Understand?”

Sarai looks down at her plate, then over at Micah, who is shocked that a father would say such a thing.

Inspired by Sarai’s downcast eyes, Micah speaks up. “Why *can’t* we pray?”

Greenstone glares at him. "Because this is my house. And I will not pollute it with prayer. I made that mistake one too many times. And now she's gone. He didn't help her."

A ball rises in Micah's throats; he's treaded holy and revered ground.

Greenstone says, "David, help yourself. Everyone else, just eat."

The girls don't argue. They pick through their spaghetti as David scoops some onto his plate.

Sarai takes her portion, then says, "Micah?"

He thanks her and takes the bowl, dousing his plate in spaghetti. He passes it to Greenstone.

As Greenstone dishes out some noodles, he asks, "So, Micah. Tell us about yourself."

Micah seems stunned at the question. Sarai glares at Greenstone.

He asks again, "Well? Come on. Indulge us. What do you do for a living?"

Micah licks his lips. "I don't understand--"

Greenstone's words form slowly: "What is it you do, *Micah*, for a *living*?"

His fork spins within the noodles. "Well... I work... Worked... in a cubicle."

"A cubicle?" Laura crooned. "What's that?"

Greenstone's eyes don't diverge from Micah's. "What's your interest in Amberlin?"

"What?"

"Why are you here?" he snarls.

Sarai glares at Greenstone.

Micah rummages for words. "Look, Sir. I'm sorry if I'm being an inconvenience. Do you want the truth? You want the honesty? I'll tell you where I'm from. I'm from a small little town in the valley, a beautiful place, where I have two beautiful girls and a wife who is more beautiful than any. I work in a cubicle, pulling eight-hour days so we can live in a boring home in a boring neighborhood, so we can live boring lives. But a few nights ago everything changed. I woke up and the town was destroyed. My wife was gone and my oldest daughter's skeleton was in my bathtub. Why am I in Amberlin? Because *she* brought me here. *Why* am I here? Because I have nowhere else to go. My world is ruined. Does that satisfy your craving for truth?" He angrily stands from the table, turns, and leaves, throwing open the door and disappearing into the street.

Sarai swears and stands. "What's your problem?" she growls at Greenstone, and then she's gone.

The girls watch her go, then look at their father.

Greenstone rubs his face with both hands, and seeing them, orders, "Eat!"

The biker munches on his food as well, lost deep in thought.

The man walks across the street, stands before a bench, turns, and falls upon it. Three little girls run by, laughing, with a dog on a leash. He closes his eyes and leans back, staring up into the darkening sky. He hears footsteps coming towards

him; looking down he sees Sarai coming up the street to sit down. He scoots to the other side of the bench and she takes a seat. He looks at the stars and remembers.

"When Claire and I were married," he told her, "we were married under these stars."

Sarai chooses her words carefully. "What was she like?"

"I don't know," he says, finally smiling. He laughs. "She was... She was amazing. She taught me... She taught me that beauty wasn't something you saw, but something you felt." His smile falls as he realizes she is gone. Gone forever. He doesn't have any hopes of seeing her again. The only hope he has is a hope for answers. But she is gone. Molly is gone. Nicole is gone. He will never see them again. It renders his heart acidic.

Sarai says quietly, "I'm sorry, Micah. I can't tell you why you're here. God knows I can't tell you why you've been gone so long. And you want to know what the crazy thing is? I don't think *your* crazy. It's just... When I look at you, I see something different. When I look in your eyes, I don't just see honesty or integrity. I see... I don't know. Divinity, I guess."

"Divinity?" Micah laughs. "All right."

They sit in silence on the bench for several minutes, watching the setting sun.

Sarai shifts her position. "I'm sorry for how Hal's been treating you. He's a really nice guy, he really is, but ever since they took his wife..."

"They took my wife, too," Micah says slowly. "And I don't even know who *they* are."

"You want to know what happened, Micah?" she asks.

He looks at her. "I don't care how bad it is. I look around and... I just need to know."

"All right," she nods. "All right."

V

"I guess it really started in 2007. I mean, nothing bad was happening then, but if I had to give a date for the whole... beginning... of this... invasion... I'd put it around 2007." She chooses her words carefully as she speaks, as if weighing each one for balance and precision.

"It was that year that scientists discovered signals from a distant star. Intelligent signals. I remember, because even though I was seven at the time, our school had a special presentation about the possibility of aliens, induced by the discovery. It took about three months but the scientists were able to decode the signal. Now, by this time the signal was old news, because newer and fresher things were popping up all the time, but they were able to cipher the message. In the message, the senders—whom were designated 'foreign intelligent entities'—politely requested any intelligent life to reply. This was, as we know now, a trap."

She shakes her head in bewilderment, perhaps at the ignorance and stupidity of the human race; hindsight is a beauty and a curse. "Excitement just exploded over

the message and the scientists were more than eager to reply, so they did, using sophisticated technology explained in the message. We sent the signal and waited for a reply. We didn't have to worry about the time distance because the instructions the alien gave us operated on a digital format that transcended time and space."

The man loses track with what she says. "Wait. Transcends time and space?"

"It basically means the message gets to the aliens faster than light."

"Oh," he says, nodding.

An old man walking his dog passes and coughs. Sarai waits till he has passed to continue. "We humans waited for a year. Then two years. By the time 2015 rolled around, when I was in High School, we'd completely *forgotten* about the message. Well, not forgotten, I guess, but we'd slighted it and treated it as gossip and rumor. Perhaps we were embarrassed that intelligent life considered us too dumb to mess with. Eventually the whole thing caught the label of a hoax and that was the end of it."

"Something so big and massive became known as a hoax?"

"Well, think about it. Who was there to receive the message? A handful of scientists. Who was there to send the next message? The *same* handful of scientists. Do the math, Micah. The scientists staged the entire thing."

"So did they?" he asks.

Sarai shakes her head again, leans back in the bench and looks into his eyes. "No." And she is silent.

Micah prods, "So..."

"It was December," Sarai says. "I had just turned twenty and was a junior at the California State University. Early Childhood Development major. I had a nice-looking husband and two little boys. I married early," she explains. "Mom invited us to Christmas dinner. The snow was thick and the roads were slick. We almost spun out on the drive there. And it was such a crisp, cool night, all the stars were so radiant. On the way to her house, my boys, Ethan and Caleb, kept looking out the window and laughing at the different Christmas decorations. You know, the lights on the roof and the Christmas trees and the light-up Santa Clauses and Reindeer. All the usual stuff you find in a middle-class white American suburb. We had already opened presents and the boys were playing with the toys. My husband was with the men in the den smoking cigars. I was in the kitchen with my mom and sister, setting out the food. She was pulling out the chicken when... When the lights started to flicker."

She is speaking slower now, chewing on each word, contemplating. It hurts, and the man can see this as her eyes sparkle with the first signs of dew-tears.

She continues, "As the lights were flickering the men started complaining downstairs. Mom just told us to ignore them, the flickering would be over in a moment. Then the house began to shake. At first it was just a little tremble, a tremor. But it grew and grew. I remember when the table legs began to bang on the tile and the Christmas tree fell over. I stared at my mom in shock, then ran into the

family room, yelling for my boys. My husband and the men were coming up from below, yelling at us to get in the door-frames. We thought it was just another California earthquake. We get bad ones, you know.”

Micah nods.

“I was clutching my boys to my chest and standing underneath a doorframe when a hole was punched in the roof. Something the size of a basketball and burning fell through and landed on the Christmas tree. The tree caught fire in an instant and, through the shaking, the men ran forward and put it out with blankets. We saw that it was a piece of ice. Just as we realized what it was, more pieces of ice began to smash through the ceiling. My little boys were crying and, frankly, I wanted to, too. Then the door to the garage flew open and Mom ran out. I yelled after her to get in here and ran out the door to get her. She was standing beside the van, by the open garage door, staring out into the street. Giant and small chunks of burning ice were smashing into the snow, throwing up snowy sheets that wafted into the garage. I yelled at Mom to get inside but she yelled, ‘Outside! Look outside!’ But her words... They...” Tears are forming. “One of the pieces of ice hit outside at an angle and bounced inside. It hit her... Hit her in the stomach... And she fell down. I fell beside her and tried to help her but blood was coming from her mouth. She left me, then, and then, driven nearly insane, I rushed outside, into the street. It is amazing that I wasn’t flat-out killed by the debris. But when I looked up... I have tried to forget, Micah.”

“It’s okay,” he tells her. “Please. I need to know.”

She nods, biting her lips. She wipes away a tear. “There were hundreds of comets in the sky. Meteors. Burning in the atmosphere, falling towards earth. They rushed overhead... One landed several streets away and engulfed several homes immediately, carving a crater. But these were small compared to the big one. It was... It was the size of a city, Micah, and it rushed overhead. It was probably miles above but I could feel its heat. A tail of black smoke followed it all the way to its destination: San Diego. The city was lost in the debris and I saw a giant cloud of smoke rise up in the distance. Moments later I was swept off my feet and thrown twenty feet by a big gust of wind, and then the earth started ripping apart. I nearly fell into a crevice but was able to cling to a tree for support.

“And then it stopped. Everything just *stopped*. The falling ice stopped, the meteors were gone, the earth stopped shaking, the winds vanished. All that could be heard was the crackling of fire from where the small meteors had hit, and you could see the dissipating trails of smoke in the sky. In the distance, the cloud of smoke grew thicker and thicker and closer and closer.”

She stops. Micah gently touches her arm. “Come on.”

“I went back inside. Everyone was safe. Except Mom. She was... She wasn’t with us. We laid her on the couch and covered her with a blanket. My boys cried softly as they sat together in one of the chairs. The men moved the chunks of ice outside, surprised at how cold they were. People milled into the streets and everyone was trying to figure out what had happened. Lots of people were dead. In

the distance we heard sirens, but all our electricity was gone and I couldn't make phone calls. Eventually we were able to find a radio signal, where we were informed that a meteor shower had somehow blanketed the entire earth, day-side and night-side, and that most major cities were destroyed. It was at this time that the air started to get thick with the dust wafting east from San Diego. It chilled my blood: billions of people dead.

"That night I laid my boys down to sleep downstairs. I told them everything would be okay. But I didn't know what was going to happen. The shock of Mom's death hadn't even reached me yet." She stares into space. "This wasn't a meteor shower, though. This was *them*. It just looked like a meteor shower because of the way the atmosphere burned against their spacecraft. And their spacecraft came in so fast that the heat made ice crystals in the clouds combine and fall with the weight. With all the devastation, they struck us blind. The entire world was in the dark.

"Within hours of the destruction, from the mouths of the craters the small 'meteors' created, crawled these death machines that massacred anyone who came into view. It was... Kind of like *War of the Worlds*, except, instead of vaporizing people, they just shot them dead with metal bullets. The same weapons we experienced yesterday. Men. Women. Children. Pets. Everyone and everything found was destroyed. The death-stalkers were the size of small buildings and easily trampled through buildings. Nothing could stop them. Except this was just the beginning.

"Bigger machines came after them. They would slowly march across the land, hundreds emerging from the ruins of each big city, spreading out like far-reaching tentacles. Every mile or two they would deploy... soldiers. The soldiers you've seen... They aren't the real soldiers. They're the enemy, yes, but they're not... *Them*. They *work* for them, but they're not them. The invaders, the aliens, whoever they are and whatever they're called, I can't even explain to you. They look simply *hideous*. And they would come off the ships. They wore silvery armor that couldn't be pierced and had shields over those; and from each finger came deadly claws with which they would cut down anyone who resisted. They went from home to home, rounding people up, killing some, capturing others. You never knew what they were doing. This was going on worldwide.

"I did the same thing so many other people did. Or tried to do. I hid with my family. Eventually, though, they found us in the hidden room of the basement, and dragging us out, they—" She stops now. She stares forward, then lowers her head, snuffles, wipes a tear from her eye.

Micah feels awkward, but he must know. He pleads for her to continue. Her story frightens him, chills the marrow of his bones, turns his greatest strength into perpetual weakness, but it doesn't matter, because *he must know*.

"They took Caleb... And they slit him open right before us. They did the same to my great uncle. And I saw them... Kill anyone who was elderly, and they would cut the heads off the infants and dangle them around their slender necks. God,

Micah, if you were only there,” she says, staring at him. “If you only could’ve...” Her veins bubble with rage and impenetrable sorrow. “God, Micah. God. How could such a thing *happen*? On *Christmas*?”

He doesn’t have answers. He only knows as much as she does.

“They loaded us up into their machines and carried us to the sea. There I was separated from Ethan. I was sent to a work-camp. He was boarded onto another ship that flew away, into the sky, vanished forever, destination unknown. Some say that the aliens sent them to their home-planet, or perhaps to other planets to serve as slaves. Who knows? The aliens don’t tell us anything. They just worked us to the bone. Hardly any food, hardly any sleep, hardly any water, constantly working. Constantly. When they executed a man I’d befriended, I said to the grave with life and ran for it, hoping to be shot. But they let their guard down, and I escaped.

“I was able to rest in a village for a little while, but then lots of human soldiers came. We thought they were on *our* side, but then they packed us into a church, surrounded us with their guns, and told us, in that god-awful mechanical voice they have because of the respirators, ‘You will join us or die.’ See, the aliens cannot fight all the humans. There simply aren’t enough of them. So they recruit humans to serve in their puppet armies.”

Micah interrupts, rubbing his arm in the evening chill. “So they knew what had happened... They’d seen it with their own eyes... and some people said O.K.?”

“The aliens were smart. For those who served in the armies, when they were off-duty, they were hooked up into these machines that sent shocks into the brain, stimulating the pleasure senses. It’s like a continual orgasm. Almost all the men joined; it was either that or death and they figured there was no resisting the invasion. Earth was, as many had decided, doomed. Some resisted, though, and they were killed on the spot. I agreed to join them... But they had taken my family and no amount of despair would drive me to become one of them, so I ran away. I thought they’d pursue me, kill me—that’s what I wanted! But after firing a few shots, they refused to follow. They couldn’t abandon the new recruits. One new recruit came after me. I know because I heard a single gunshot, and then the sound of a body crashing down a hill.

“I ran for several nights, eating berries and such from the mountains, also grabbing food from abandoned, scorched plantations. I crawled to the top of a mountain and when I looked over, I could see thousands of alien ships conjoined in the valley, using the forced labor of human slaves to build giant cities. Escapees tell us they produce weapons and such inside these massive cities, and each is two times as big as New York City and its suburbs.

“I kept running, and came to Amberlin. It was there that I heard about the resistance and joined.”

“And that,” Micah breathes, “is where we are now?”

She nods. “There are millions of people in the resistance worldwide. It seems like a lot, but we’re stretched so thin... There’s only six of us here. Greenstone,

David, a woman we call Jasmine, Shadow, and the Butcher. None of us have ever been involved with a resistance of any sort. I was in college to become an elementary-school teacher when this happened. Greenstone owned a car dealership with his wife at his side. Jasmine was a stay-at-home Mom, Shadow served as a bagger at a grocery store, and the Butcher was a preacher.”

“Why is he called the Butcher?”

The woman smiles now. “Because he’s killed so many of them.”

VI

She opens the door to the house and peers inside. It is quiet. The pictures on the wall reflect little light, leaving room only for shadows, as she enters. Behind her comes Micah. The stars glow strong in the twilight. They can hear the mechanical voices of nearby guards as the door is shut. She takes him into the living room and points to the couch. “You can sleep there, okay?”

Micah nods. “Okay.” He looks at her. “Thank you.”

She feels horrible. There is no more innocence in his eyes; it has vanished. It has been stripped from him, and while he may feel an odd relief, she feels nothing but guilt, shameful and condemning guilt. She doesn’t say anything except, “Good-night,” and walks down the hallway, heart burning in damnation.

He watches her go and sees a door shut down the corridor. He waits a few moments and then enters the dining room, walks to the door-window, and peels back the blinds, peering out. He can see searchlights upon the walls, casting mesh shadows, and a pair of soldiers passes, the sights of their fiendish guns glowing red with laser pointers. He slowly lets the blinds close and shuts his eyes.

As Sarai had told her story, he’d seen it all, lived before his own eyes. He had put flesh and blood on her words and now it came to haunt him. His heart wept at the thought of his beloved family going through it. Now he understands what would drive Nicole to suicide. He understands where the blood stain on the wall may have come from. But he doesn’t know what happened to Molly or Claire. Executed in the streets? Worked to death in slave camps, forced to build gigantic cities, or shipped into the heavens, destinations undecipherable? Were they locked in graves made of corpses or strewn heavenward, completely cut off from earth and all knowledge of home. He hopes they are dead, for he cannot bear the thought of Claire or Molly being forced, brutally, to work at the hands of the... tyrants.

“Aren’t you going to sleep?”

He spins around. Little Laura is standing there in pajamas.

He apologizes. “I’m... I’m going to bed. In a minute.”

She walks forward and sits down in the chair. “I’m sorry Daddy was mean to you.”

“It’s okay,” he says. “I can understand.”

“Sarai says you’re going to help us,” she states matter-of-factly.

The man blinks. “What? No. No, I can’t help you. I can’t help anyone.”

“Are you going to join the resistance?”

“No,” he says. “No... I don’t... I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“Daddy doesn’t think you’re going to help us. He doesn’t trust you.”

Micah nods. “I got that feeling.”

She gets up. “But it’s okay.” Now she comes forward and hugs his legs, squeezing herself up against them. “I think Sarai is right.” She pulls away, grins at Micah, then darts into the hallway, vanishing into a bedroom. The door slowly shuts.

Micah glances back to the blinds, then lays upon the couch.

He stares up at the ceiling, seeing Sarai’s world running over and over in his mind.

It is misty. The ground is wet and spongy, and he runs across it barefoot. This is a pristine world, covered with ice that is warm to the touch, his face reflecting as if in a thousand mirrors. Two suns gently warm his body, and he can hear their laughter behind them, the glee and joy, the echoes of little children. From his hand comes something of his own invention, a trapezoid flap of paper held together by light aluminum poles, connected to his hand by a roll of long string. The little children dance around him as he runs. They laugh and he smiles and they run in the field of a thousand mirrors. He looks down and sees them.

They aren’t children.

The children look at him, open toothless eyes, and start shrieking.

He is torn awake, the world screaming into his ears. He tears off the covers and can feel the house shaking. Lights flicker on and off. He rolls off the bed in fright, collapsing onto the ground, muscles dead and burning. He looks up and sees from the hallway David throwing on some clothes; Sarai in a bra and panties runs into the girls’ room, and he can hear them screaming. David yells out his name, and Greenstone appears at the end of the hallway, falling against the wall. Pictures fall from the walls and shatter on the ground. David reaches down; Micah takes his hand, and David pulls him up. The earth seems to be convulsing beneath him. David’s face is ashen. Sarai comes out of the room with the two girls on either hand; Greenstone yells and the little girls run to him. The front bay window burst apart, glass flailing into the room; David ducks and Micah is knocked to the ground as a terrific blast of putrid-hot air sweeps him off his feet. Flames enter the home for a moment, bursting it into a golden glow, and then they retreat. The little girls’ eyes are saucers and they clutch onto their father with an eagle’s grip.

Micah hollers from the ground, “What’s... What’s going on?!”

“A round-up,” David says, brushing glass from his chest. “Collecting people for transport.”

“Transport?!”

“Death-camps,” he glowers, sweat beading on his brow.

Greenstone snarls at Sarai, “Get him to the safe-house! He’s led them straight to us!”

Sarai grabs a coat from a fallen coat-rack and throws it on. She grabs Micah by the hand and wrenches him up. “Follow me!” she hollers and tears for the door. He is quickly on her heels. She throws open the door and they stumble outside. Dozens of spacecraft are flying overhead. Bullets whiz down and hit the pavement, spewing up chunks of concrete. The night comes alive with violence. An entire house falls apart, screams deadening inside. Something the size of a Volkswagen falls from above and slams into the earth beside them; Sarai is thrown into the air, twisted like a rag doll, and Micah is hurled against the bench they’d been sitting on only a few hours earlier. The bench breaks beneath him and he finds himself submerged in moist weeds. Sarai is picking herself up; the odd-looking, thick pencil-shaped pod opens at the tip, light glowing outwards from its crater. Sarai lunges up and screams his name.

Micah crawls to his feet and runs after her. More pods are raining down all around, carving craters into dirt and pavement. A car is burst to pieces as a pod crashes right into it. Three little girls are running through the park as bullets strafe them down; Micah watches in a complete trance of overwhelming terror as the little girls’ bodies are torn to bloody pieces by the bullets, laid to rest in scattered pools of blood.

Chapter Five

"We are the product of 4.5 billion years of fortuitous, slow biological evolution. There is no reason to think that the evolutionary process has stopped. Man is a transitional animal. He is not the climax of creation." – Carl Sagan

I

He stares at the twisted heap of childish body parts gushing crimson blood all over the well-manicured park grass. The sounds of the metal pencil-shaped pods entering the earth, the sounds of the chattering gunfire from the spacecraft, all the noise that could be heard, save for the beating of his own heart, the screaming agony of his own pinched soul, became background noise as he stared at the smoking limbs and members. Half of a little girl's face stared at him, the other half lying five feet awake, smoldering.

The woman grabs him and tugs him. "*Micah!*"

He is torn away from the gruesome sight and is running along with her. Bullets strafe beside them but they keep running. A massive aircraft flies overhead, flying so low its undercurrent flushes them into the ground. Micah is wedged against a tree bent halfway over under the gushing hot air. The aircraft hovers several hundred feet away, and the air quivers with the god-awful sounds, the clanking and groaning, the fleshly sides shimmering as they split apart to vomit a ramp.

"We have to get inside!" Sarai hollers. "Inside!"

He crawls over the ground towards her. The earth between them is chewed apart by several heavy bullets; dirt sprays into Micah's eyes. He claws at them, the pupils and retinas burning.

"*Micah! Forget it!*"

He is crawling blindly towards her.

The aircraft ramp is descending. It touches the street several feet away.

He reaches her. She takes his hand and commands, "Hold on!"

"I can't see!" he hollers. "Oh God, I can't see!"

"Just *hold on* to my hand!"

There are shapes coming down the ramps, dark shapes flitting against a beautiful landscape dotted with fires and craters from the fallen pods. Micah's eyes flutter open and shut as the woman drags him across the street; he sees the top of one of the pods breaking apart in a glaring azure light, and he can see something—no, *some things*—crawling from within, the size of basketballs, except crawling on eight legs with sharp spines riding along the backs. They are streaked gold and bronze and the eyes glow neon green. He sees a man running across the street, and one of the spider-like creatures scurries over in less than a blink of the eye, leaps onto his neck, and drills a tube into the man's brain. The man shrieks and falls, contorting upon the ground, as the creature sucks out his brains.

Micah sees grayish liquid spurting all around the mouth of the creature. “Oh God-“

Sarai yanks him onto a cobblestone path.

The soldiers are descending the ramp and breaking into pairs, the laser pointers on the machine guns splattering all over Amberlin’s structures. More ships are lowering and deploying soldiers throughout the town.

Sarai breaks open the door to a home and they cave inside. She throws him against the wall and shuts the door, locking it tight. She doesn’t turn on the light. The walls vibrate slightly as the gunfire from the ships has ceased. The blinds on the window wave back and forth. Sarai presses her back against the door, breathing hard, diamond beads of sweat caressing her brow.

Micah gropes at his shoulder, the wound from yesterday burning sullen.

“The closet,” Sarai says quickly, leaving the door. She walks past him, into the hall, turns round and round, as if disoriented. Then she walks past him in the other direction and opens a door to a closet filled with coats and boxes of winter shoes. “In here.” The man doesn’t move. “Micah!”

He isn’t listening, as his eyes are drawn between the blinds, and he sees it happening outside.

An elderly couple is dragged from their home. The man wraps his arms around his wife and whispers into her ear. She smiles and nods as tears crawl down her cheeks. The soldier behind him points a pistol to the back of his head and squeezes the trigger. The metal bullet passes through his skull, into his wife’s, and out the front of her face. The pair of bodies collapses to the ground, to lie still in a pool of blood, bones and brains.

Several little kids are dragged from a home and forced to line up on the street. They do not resist, for they have accepted their fate. The gunmen mow them down and their corpses bleed into the sewers.

Accepted their fate.

Nicole had accepted her fate, and she’d underscored it with slashed wrists.

The man’s brain surges with adrenaline. *I want to kill them all!*

Sarai’s voice reaches him. “Micah!”

He looks at her. “The closet. Now. They can’t find you. They’ll kill us both.”

“But they’ll find me,” he protests. “They’re searching the homes!”

Gunfire in the distant. No screams.

Accepted their fate.

Sarai looks past him, out the blinds. “Oh God, they’re coming! Quickly! The closet!”

He moves over to the closet with her on his tail. As he squeezes inside, he blocks the door shutting with his foot. “Promise me that if anything should happen, you don’t know me. Okay?”

She shakes her head. “They won’t find you-“

“Promise me,” he orders, not moving his foot.

She looks at him, amazed. “I can’t do that. I can’t just leave you to them.”

He peers into her eyes, searching, feeling. “You think I’m here to help you, somehow.”

“Yes.”

“Then let me help you. *You don’t know me.*” He moves his foot and shuts the door.

The door to the house bursts open. Twin soldiers pour inside. She stands tall, meeting their eyes.

“Residence Number Forty-Two.”

The mechanical voice broke her ribs; she nods.

“Sarai Harper.”

She nods again.

“Is there anyone else in here?”

She shakes her head.

“And you are aware of the punishment if you are found to be a traitor?”

She nods. Yet she doesn’t consider herself a traitor. *They* have no rule over her.

The leader says, “Search the house,” and stands with his gun on the woman.

The other nods and moves room-to-room, searching, throwing items about, tearing up cushions, making a mess, not caring a bit. These people—no, these *creatures*—have no morals. They are robots, puppets. They are controlled by an invading force and told they have freedom, when really they are more enslaved than anyone.

She looks into that charcoal mask and feels... hate.

Nothing lies beyond but the ruined soul of what used to be a man.

Who was he? she wonders. A plumber? A preacher? A fireman? An accountant?

You never can really tell. They all look the same now, no matter their veiled pasts.

The soldier searching came upon the closet. He tried to open it. “It’s locked,” his mechanical voice droned.

The soldier looking at Sarai gazed past her. Sarai didn’t move, but stared forward. Had he looked at her chest, he would’ve seen it thumped with each mad heartbeat. “Try again.”

The soldier tried once more. “It’s locked. From the inside.”

The soldier’s eyes squint. “Shoot it. Shoot the door.”

Sarai’s eyes close. *I was wrong...*

The soldier raises his gun to fire, and as he brings it to bear, the door flashes open, swinging into him, knocking him flat; he lands hard and the gun hits the ground, spitting steel. Sarai falls to the ground with a shout as the bullets ricochet around the room, tearing holes in the drywall and shattering the glass on picture frames. A grandfather clock splinters in several places. The other soldier lets out a crisp holler as the bullets spread through him, ripping bloody holes. The gun is so close that the bullets enter and exit his body, sending sprays of blood against the wall as he falls. The other soldier rolls over and picks himself up, pointing the gun at Sarai.

“Die, Traitor!” he growls.

He is tackled from the side; he throws the assailant off and tries to stand. Micah grabs the gun of the downed soldier and brings it around, firing a single round. The bullet pierces the face-mask and the body crumples to the ground.

Sarai gaped at him. “Oh God... What have you *done*?”

He is gasping for breath, shaking all over, adrenaline pouring from his eyes. “Sarai-“

“They’re going to kill us all!”

They heard soldiers coming up the path.

“Hit me!” she hollers.

His eyes go crazy. “What?!”

“HIT ME!”

He understands; she falls back under his blow and he is up and running.

The soldiers enter the house, aiming their guns at her.

Laying on the floor with a bloody gash above one eye, she screams, “Kill him! Kill him!”

The soldiers raise their guns to fire but are met with shattering glass and a fleeting figure outside the dining room window. They fire several roaring shots but the figure is lost in the darkness. Sarai is laying on the ground, hand pressed to her forehead. Soldiers mill all around her. One of them says into a small handheld yellow radio, “Young male running towards the fence. He has killed two of my men.”

A soldier points the laser-sights of his gun over Sarai. “What about her?”

“Leave her be,” the leader snarls. “Save your ammunition. We’re going to tear this demi-god limb-from-limb.”

II

Glass clings to his clothes as he runs, feet pounding over the clumps of grass. He can hear the hum of the electric fence, surging with thousands upon thousands of joules of electricity; one hair touching the wire-mesh will ignite him into smoke and leave nothing save for a pillar of salt. Micah runs parallel to the fence, legs carrying him; he is lost in a daze, running blindly, knowing only that his right side is to the fence and his left towards the innards of the town. An aircraft flies low overhead, and he nearly falls but is able to stumble along and keep going as it passes over several Ranch-style homes, giant spotlight swinging over the street, illuminating the remains of the assault, soldiers running around, and people being hoarded towards the ramps. Several people see Micah running, and pointing, they shout out in surprise from between two homes. The soldiers abandon the people and run after him. Micah goes around the back of a building so they can’t fire at him.

He is lost in the shadow of a home and trips. He lands hard and picks himself up to find his foot snagged. Cursing, he twirls around and from firelight in the

distance he can see that his leg is caught in the armpit of a thirty-six year-old woman with a clean shot through the head. The wall beside him is stained with blood, and he sees that there is the body of a man and a teenage son. Horror lurches into his throat and he somehow is able to stand. He runs to the next home down the line, passing an opening into the street, where several soldiers fire potshots that scatter all around him. Behind him, the soldiers ignorantly trample the corpses and fire shots at the man in flight. The bullets clip around him, snapping like firecrackers, and acting instinctively, he throws himself into the door of the house beside him; it splinters open and he sprawls inside.

He is picking himself and on the run, feet quickly dragging him through a living room. He passes a corridor and hears several thundering shots; brilliant light from twin guns illuminates the end of the hallway where the soldiers had kicked open a bedroom door and fired inside. The man's ears reverberate with screaming; the soldiers turn and see him and bring their guns around; he dives into the kitchen and crawls to the front door, hurling himself out before they can come around and kill him.

As he runs out into the street, realizing he's exposed, a ship two streets down turns its turrets towards him and opens fire. All color drains from his face as he feels the wind from the bullets passing around him, the distance causing them to scatter all around him. He takes off towards the ship, and the bullets follow him in a spitting trail of broken, smoldering concrete. He twists himself around and runs behind a house, the bullets punching through and leveling an entire wall of drywall and puncturing the opposite wall with dozens of holes.

Micah's heart spins within him. He has no idea what he is doing, where he is going.

He only knows this: Run.

Run or die.

A soldier comes around the side of the house, as if preparing on sneaking up on him. The soldier doesn't expect him to be right there, so the man decks the soldier into the wall with such force that he crumples down, dropping his gun, vomiting into his mask. As the man runs away, the soldier tries to take off his mask as he slowly drowns in his own vomit, coming to rest in a spasmodic contortion.

Micah can see the entrance. It is surrounded by guards but he knows it is his only escape. While the gate is lowered, he can see a ladder climbing into a watchtower. From the top of the watchtower he could propel himself over the other side of the fence and lose himself in the mountains, and live a life of hiding.

No. He would kill himself.

His only resolution was to not let himself be killed by them.

Nicole took her own life rather than fall to their brutality; he would honor her by doing the same.

He hears the entrance and the guards see him, kneeling down, taking aim.

Micah doesn't slow, keeps pumping.

The soldiers prepare to fire. Dozens of laser lights fall over his chest.

He sees them and doesn't care at all.

Their fingers reach for the triggers.

Then Micah's world is turned into a hellfire. A pod from the sky crashes down between him and the soldiers; the pod lands only five feet away and its torturing blast flips Micah over backwards, and he is lost in a frenzy of dirt and dust thrown up by the impact. He lands hard in a cloud of smoke and crawls to his feet, submerged in hazy darkness. The haze suddenly becomes brighter and brighter, and looking behind him, he can see through the smoke the top of the pod splitting open, the spider-creatures with spiny backs crawling out and racing towards him.

The sight of them makes his blood churn brackish. He is half-frozen in fear at the bulbous, greasy eyes and the pincers working back and forth, the small tubes hidden within their gut. He remembers the man whose brains were sucked out and now he's running again away from the pod, away from the entrance, away from the ladder of salvation.

The spider-creatures are faster.

One leaps through the air and clasps onto his shirt; another onto his leg. He can feel their spindly legs crawling outside his cloth, sharp talons pricking into his flesh. The one on the leg is scurrying upwards and the other is doing the same; when the one on his legs reaches his hind-quarters, the one on his back crawls onto the back of his head. Micah gives off a shout, can feel it lashing on for the feast, so he turns and bangs the back of his head into the electric fence. The creature screeches and fries, and its chemical compositions keeps the current from traveling into the man. The man leaves the fence quickly, and the creature falls to the ground, rocking back and forth, legs crawling in over its stomach, and as it shrieks it bursts into smoldering flame, insides completely charred.

The other creature comes around on his gut and looks up at him with wild, unreadable eyes. Micah reaches down, grabs it by two legs, and rips them off. The creature screams from between its pinchers but holds on, moving towards his face while dripping blood from the torn apertures. Micah takes the creature in his hands, ignoring the stinging hair fibers, and squeezing into its fleshy form, wrenches his hands apart. The spider-fiend makes a strange noise as it is ripped in two. Sapphire liquid sprays all over the man and he tosses the halves to the ground and keeps running behind the houses.

He turns the corner of a house and sees a line of soldiers kneeling in the street, aiming at him.

"Shoot me!" he screams, and he runs after them, stark-raving mad. *"Shoot me! Shoot me!"*

He wants it to end, this nightmare to be over. His family is gone. This is all so foreign. It is all so horrific. Corpses, brutality, brain-eating spiders. A nightmare that never ends.

He keeps running towards them but they do not fire. *"SHOOT ME!!!"*

A single shot echoes and he is thrown back, body convulsing upon the ground. He feels as if his insides are being eaten alive and his body is out of his control.

His head bangs against the side of the building and his teeth clench shut. His lungs open and close and he can hardly breathe. For a moment his heart stops, but it continues again. His muscles burn and he wants to scream. Then it is over. He lays there in the grass, completely immobile, muscles aching like they'd never ached before.

Soldiers run over and viciously rolled him over, pressing his face into the earth. They pinch steel handcuffs around his wrists and place shackles around his ankles. One of the soldiers kneels down next to him and says in a foreboding mechanical droll, "A simple gunshot to the head won't do. The traitor must die in pain." He laughs and stands, giving orders. Micah can't follow; the world is a dark wasteland and he feels like he is watching it from afar, as if he isn't in it at all.

Soldiers swing their guns around their shoulders and drag him across the grass.

"Why don't you walk, Traitor?" someone snarls.

But he can't walk. His muscles aren't working. He is completely paralyzed.

A soldier shoves him down. He falls head-first and must experience all the god-awful pain. His heads sears in agony.

"Pick yourself up, Traitor!" the soldier demanded.

But Micah doesn't move.

The soldier drives the tip of his foot into the prisoner's crotch. Micah gasps in pain. The soldier smiles and delivers another kicks.

The captain turns and hollers, "Enough! He will suffer what he deserves. Get him onto the ship!"

The soldiers obey, carrying Micah up the ramp and into one of the ships. Micah sees a blur of maroon and azure colors as he is carried into the hold, and then he passes several rooms and hears several strange sounds. Then he hears the engine roaring in his ears, feels it shaking as it rises above the town, and as he laid upon the table, he is injected with a milky white serum.

His eyes slowly close and he can't control them. The sounds of the throbbing, turning engine shakes the table and massages his battered and weary body. As unconsciousness crawls through his veins and breathes deceit into his heart, he sees his family before him, smiling, and he cries out their names. No one hears. He is all alone. Again.

III

They had left her alone in the house, abandoning it quickly for the pursuit of the renegade. As the last soldier left, she had crawled from her position on the floor, hand pressed to her bleeding forehead, walked to the bathroom, and began to wash it. Tears crawled down her cheeks and splashed into the sink, mingled with the blood smeared on her fingertips and the raggedy wash-cloth. She had stood before the mirror, looking at the cut slowly beginning to clot, and seeing the dark, hollow eyes looking back at her, tried not to lose all hope as the sound of sporadic gunfire came.

She left the bathroom and walked to the window, peering between the blinds. She could see the masked soldiers hoarding citizens onto the ramps of aircraft, and many aircraft were pulling away from the smoking town. The spider-creatures lurked in the shadows and she knew many would fall to their devices. The spiders were from off-planet, a little treat the invaders gave the people to keep them in check. Children who had survived the night's round-up would be told to stay indoors until the men could scout out the town and destroy the spider-creatures. Some children would risk it all and end up being taken outside in the trucks. It always happened.

As the last aircraft ascended and vanished, leaving the town, people began to come out of their homes, armed with wrenches and crowbars to ward off any possible spider-creatures, and they huddled together, sobbing, seeking comfort, and carrying the dead to the center of the town, where they would say silent farewell addresses and contemplate the coming days, knowing their own time was marked. As the woman left her own home, a hammer in hand, she could see several women hovering over the remains of the children who had been torn apart by the turret guns; they rocked back and forth, shrieking in agony. Someone walked the streets, head low, head bowed, deep in reverent—fearful—prayer.

Why do you pray? Sarai wanted to ask him.

She reached Greenstone's house and he let her in.

"Is everyone okay?" she asked as he shut the door.

He nodded. "They didn't get to our house before they found him."

And this is where the story now stands. The woman hears those words and looks at Greenstone, and letting the hammer slide from her fingers, asks for clarity. The man reaffirms what he has said: "They found him."

A sniffle rises within and she chokes it down.

Greenstone's eyes are laced with pity. "Sarai."

"I'm okay," she lies, holding back building tears. "I just thought... I don't know."

"Just get some sleep. Take a break."

She shakes her head. "Where is he?" She wants to see his body, know for sure.

"They took him," he says. "You know that when they take them—"

"I know, Hal," she says. She sits down on the couch where Micah had been sitting only a few hours earlier.

"Your forehead."

"It's okay," she says, absentmindedly staring. *I thought he was the one.*

"It really looks bad."

Sarai says nothing.

Greenstone peers down the hallway. "Danielle, can you get the medicine box from the bedroom?"

She nods and walks away.

Sarai curses under her breath. "It wasn't supposed to end up this way."

"But it did," Greenstone says quickly. "Let's move on, okay? We still have a lot to do."

"We're never going to win, Hal," Sarai says quietly. Danielle returns with the box; Greenstone thanks her and excuses her from the room. As he digs for some antiseptic and gauze, Sarai laments, "There's not many of us here anymore. They're going to come once more, maybe twice—and everyone's going to be gone. Me, you, David." She looks down the hallway, sees Danielle's shadow walking away.

"It's not about winning," Greenstone says, dabbing antiseptic on some gauze. "Here."

She takes it and presses it against the cut, wincing. "You really need to get out of here with the girls. Play dead and get in David's truck, and—"

Greenstone's eyes narrowed. "This isn't like you, not at all. So... pessimistic. A few hours ago you were bouncing off the walls."

"Some things," she says, looking at the blood on the gauze, "aren't always what they seem."

Greenstone leans forward, whispers into her ear: "And maybe *that's* what you need to remember right now."

IV

Dizziness. Confusion. Disorientation. Pain. He finds that he is laying upon what feels to be a hovering table, and when he looks to his left and right, he sees that he is surrounded by a sphere of silvery steel. Above him is what looks to be a Plexiglas bubble. From his position sprawled beneath, he can see hundreds of pods similar to the ones thrown into the city, except these are spinning above him at increasing speeds. He forces himself to lean forward, but it takes much effort. He realizes gravity is being forced upon his front-side as whatever it is he is in is racing along at incredibly fast speeds. He is able to pull his head up and peer through the glass bubble. The sight that greets him is one of awe and amazement.

There are hundreds of pods all around him, all spinning in zigzag patterns but never getting a scratch from one another. He realizes his own pod is going all over the place, but he is captivated not by the view of the dancing pods, but by the view of the planet far below, a celestial sphere, a giant arc taking up half his view. He can easily make out the oceans and land masses and the clouds; he sees flashes of light somewhere over what used to be New York City and realizes it is a storm. A hurricane brews in the Mediterranean. The planet is smashed against a background of thousands upon thousands of stars, and the sun shines from the opposite direction, casting the earth into its radiance.

Then all of a sudden the view changes as the pod dives downwards at a 90 degree angle. He sees that there is a massive, octagon-shaped starcraft right below, and the pods are filling into streams and plummeting towards its surface. It feels as if he is falling for an eternity, and he realizes the spacecraft is miles away, the pods

stretching to nearly vanishing point. The gigantic spacecraft grows larger and larger, and then they come.

At first it is just a slight nudge at the brain, but it develops further. His eyes twitch. A hand reaches up. Then he falls back onto the floor, back arching in agony, his mouth opening in agape shock. His head splits apart with millions of screams and he sees souls twirling around in an eternal hellfire, smoking and crying out for help. He wrenches himself forward with a shout and sees that the spacecraft is almost upon him. The streams of pods are entering gigantic rooms filled with fire; somehow he knows—yes, he *knows*—that nothing pleasant awaits within the space-borne furnaces.

The screams. The fire. Oh God, how terrible!

The man moves forward and hunkers down, fingering at the bottom of the pod.

What am I doing? He demands of himself, but there is no answer.

His fingers work away. A panel is lifted up, revealing dozens of wires.

His eyes fall upon the enlarging furnace. *We don't have much time...*

The wires wrapped around his fingers in an electrical dance.

The screams. All the screams. So many screams.

He cuts a wire. Sparks fly everywhere. He tries again.

Men. Women. Children. *Screams.*

A second wire is severed; suddenly the pod veers to the right and plummets off to the side, towards the other streams of pods. The man straightens up just as a control panel appears from the perfectly smooth side of the craft. He thinks he knows how to use the touch pad, touching his fingerprints to the surface, and the pod reacts vibrantly. He brings it away from the pods so as to avoid collision and finds himself flying solo above the turrets and torpedo chambers and fleshy protrusions upon the face of the massive spacecraft. He guides the pod easily, the tiny cylindrical sphere nearly vanishing against the vastness of the station.

As he flies by he can see, through the bubble window, into several lit windows. He can see shadows within the room, shadows that look like several angled shadows thrown into one being, moving about the walls and huddling together. Just the sight of those ominous shadows, those creatures of the darkness, makes his bowels squeeze. The spacecraft flies between several pillars, and upon the pillars are X-shaped starcrafts, each laced with red and black details with a single bubble glass window revealing the empty cockpits. He is nearing a precipice of the spacecraft and sees gigantic windows showing the insides of caverns within the belly of the beast. These caverns are filled with machines that work nonstop, and he can see shadows guiding—no, forcing—tiny humans—at least they look tiny from his height—into awaiting shuttles.

The precipice nears, and he rockets over it.

And his breath is taken away.

The earth is far to his left and to his right is a swarm of beautiful stars, yet right in front of him are hundreds—no, *thousands*—of spacecraft, encircling the planet. There are huddles of starcraft flying patrols and one comes close to him but they

don't react. Tremendous fear erupts inside him and he knows he won't last long out here; he swings the pod around and points it to earth.

I hope the pod can handle the atmosphere, he thinks with a sullen grimace.

He is almost out of the spacecraft formation when an alarm goes off within the pod. He looks down at the radar; two little blips closing in on him. He twists around and peers out the back of the bubble, along the crest of the pod, and sees twin X-shaped starcraft coming towards him. On each X are a series of weapons and he can see them flashing. Steel bullets snake past him in silence. The guns on the starcraft flare in absolute quiet. There is no air in space to illuminate their sound. All the man knows are the alarms and the bullets whipping past on either side.

A steel slug hits the fuselage and he can hear a hissing sound.

A diagram before him appears, fleshed into the wall, and he sees an oxygen readout going down. *Oh my God, I'm going to suffocate...*

The world around him begins to tingle with light as the earth looms closer and closer. He finds himself staring straight ahead and seeing the barren desert wastelands far below, studded with mesas and canyons, half-hidden by passing clouds. The bullets continue to stretch past and another slashes the fuselage; the pod spins out of control a moment, then gravity grabs the nose and brings it pointing straight towards earth. The world fills with fire and smoke as the atmosphere wreaks its havoc upon the small pod.

The starcraft pilots can feel their own ships shaking with re-entry. Suddenly the pod several hundred meters ahead is surrounded by erupting flame, so hot so as to melt the bullets that were being fired. The starcraft pilots cease firing but continue the pursuit, their own craft burning up on the outside as the flames engulf them.

David is standing outside the front door, looking at the park, where the people are carrying the bodies. He closes his eyes and feels his gut weigh him down as if an alien were burrowing inside. He can feel Sarai at his side. She has come from inside the house. The little girls are running around in the lawn, ignorant of it all—it is how Greenstone has taught them to be, for their own good—and Greenstone is with his little girls, falling down in the grass, laughing and tickling them. David looks past them, across the street, and sees the bodies being lain down. Someone is carrying a bludgeoned spider towards a bonfire being constructed.

"I'm going to have to leave in a few minutes," he tells Sarai. "Do you want to come?"

"No," she tells him, shaking her head.

"Okay."

The bodies will need to be dumped, and he's the one with the truck. The only reason he isn't gone—like the rest of his family—is because he is critical to the invader's disposal of the corpses.

Critical. But only for now.

Suddenly Danielle points skyward; Laura follows her gaze. Greenstone sees that they have lost interest in the tickling game and follows Danielle's spindly finger. His eyes are taken over the roof of the home, past the electrified fence, and out over the mountains, where, high in the opal blue sky clear of all but a few stray cirrus clouds, are three comets heading straight for earth.

He hasn't seen anything like it since the invasion. "Sarai," he says. "David."

They walk out from the shadow of the house and see the three comets sparkling on their way down from earth. They appear to be moving slowly from such a difference, but they are marked with balls of fire and churning trails of smothering smoke.

"Wow," Laura breathes. "Are those fireworks, Daddy?"

"No," Greenstone says, stroking her hair, eyes narrowed at the meteors. "No, they're not."

"They're meteors," David tells the girls. "From space."

But Sarai can't agree. Meteors? It doesn't sound right. Something inside her cries out.

Hope.

Warning signals blare within the cockpit and suddenly the ship is slowing down; the computer has read the ground rushing up and ignited emergency forward rockets. The burning ends as he nears a mountaintop; suddenly he can see the stretching, dead forests and the bleak stone, scattered towns where no movement lives. The G-forces slow, enabling him to regain control, but he keeps the pod plummeting earthwards, praying to God—any god!—that the pod will react in time. Behind him, the pursuers fade from the flames and follow him down, their quartet of mini-guns flashing. Bullets sprinkle all around his pod and he takes it in a spin, gaining speed, and just as the ground nearly hits him, he yanks the craft back; he is thrown into the back of the pod, back aching in pain, but the bottom of the pod is scraping the tops of trees, but otherwise unharmed. The other two pursuers pull up and are flying right over the trees several hundred meters behind him. He crawls to the controls.

A town comes up and he forces the pod down into one of the streets. The crumbled sides of buildings pass all around him and the shadow of his pod passes over skeletons and ruined cars. He agilely swings the pod onto another street and is rushing past general stores; he takes it up another street as if it were a canyon, the fighters not giving up, their bullets tracing all around him, tearing down building walls and even exploding a gas station. The pod passes through the fire and brimstone of the explosion and quickly turns around, heading towards a mountain pass.

The fighters emerge from the pass and realize they have lost their target. They quickly use radar to find him and are on the chase, yet have lost ground. The pod flies over the mountain and a sea of sand and rock lies before him. The man stares at it with resolute disbelief, wondering how he can ever lose them in the desert, but

then he remembers something, and trusting fate, presses the engine harder and lower, until he is streaking five feet over the desert floor, the blast of the engines throwing up clouds of dust and turning the sand into liquid glass. The fighters are behind him, shooting, but because of the spray of the dust, the bullets either miss or are thrown off by the millions of grains. Micah sees plumes of smoke arise in front of him from bullets being overshot.

Where is it? Where is it?

“Where are you going?” David asks as Sarai begins walking away.

She turns and walks backward. “I don’t know. It’s just... I don’t know.”

He knows how distraught she is. “Don’t do anything stupid, okay?”

“I won’t, I promise,” she says, and then she is lost in the crowds of mourning people carrying their dead family members.

“Where did the meteors go?” Laura asks her Daddy.

Greenstone shrugs. “They landed somewhere, Sweetie. Come on. Let’s make peanut butter sandwiches.”

He sees it. *Thank God*. The land is flat for an eternity, but then there is a break. He thrusts the pod down and to the left and is submerged in a canyon, flittering between the beautiful rock walls of painted rock. The starcraft follow in after him and he leads them on a wild chase in the mile-deep canyon of which the ancients called *The Footprint of God*. He knows this canyon by heart, has visited it many times with his parents and has read books on it, and now uses that knowledge to his advantage. He navigates the red and yellow and orange canyon walls, flying along the surging Colorado River. The starcraft behind him fire, their bullets sprinkling into the water and carving chunks out of the rock. He pulls up and spins towards a rock bridge; the starcraft fire at him and the bullets chew at the rock. As he passes under, the fragmented rock snaps and falls, a cavernous tower of rock breaking apart along the sloping edges of the canyon as it crumbles towards the Colorado River. One of the starcraft avoids the surprise but another slams right into it, exploding in a fiery fireball that shakes the sand of the desert and echoes for decades throughout the canyons.

One more.

He heads straight for the cliff face before him, increasing his speed. The enemy increases, too.

He counts down the seconds. He knows how long he has. Or, at least, he *hopes* he does.

In a heartbeat he kills the engines, throws on the counter-thrust, and points the craft downward; the ground vanishes beneath him as the ship rises into the sky in the witty maneuver; the agile yet speedy starcraft is not enabled with the same kind of maneuverability, and while the pilot—whatever he—or she—looked like—tried to pull up, it could not be pulled off, and the remains were scattered all

over the canyon floor, washing into the Colorado River, some being lodged in the muddy banks.

Micah swings the pod around to the west and throws on both engines.

He uses the GPS to find his way, but knows his time is running out. It isn't a matter of fuel; it's a matter of oxygen.

As the pod flies west, he sees something glimmer far to the south.

Driven by curiosity, and skirting with fate, he turns the pod in that direction.

Sarai stands before the solid oak doors, but doesn't go in.

It has been an eternity since she tore herself away from silly superstitions and accepted the truth.

But what, she wonders now, is truth? She realizes she doesn't even know anymore. She's accepted truth, but only because it hurt. Is truth always so painful? Or can truth be hope, too?

A woman in a prayer shawl stands beside her. "It is of no use," she says in a wispy, escaping voice, a bare and groveling whisper. "There is no tomorrow. It's all going to end soon. What will we do? They took him. They took him last night, into one of their ships. He's going to be a slave, here or there." She nudges her chin to the brilliant blue sky.

"Who?" Sarai asks quietly.

She points to the doors of the church. "Him, of course. The priest." She shakes her head. "There is no such thing as hope any more. The doors should be boarded up. There's no use in praying. There's no one listening. *No one* listening."

The city stretches below him and it takes his breath away. His grandmother lived here when he was a child, and they would often visit her and take trips into the "big city," awing and oohing at the magnificent buildings, the glowing neon signs, the countless casinos and bars and the never-ending nightlife. He had come here with Claire on their honeymoon. Now he looks down at the remains, the landscape that looks like the charred remains of some ancient, cryptic beast. He sees the street once lined with palm trees is now covered in charcoal. The buildings are all lowered and there is a single crater in the center of the city.

They knocked out all the big cities. Wiped us blind.

He sees by the intersection where he and Claire had stayed. There is no hotel anymore.

Only ashes. Decay.

The Bellagio is a pile of ruins, the Eiffel Tower sprawled over the street, the great neon hot air balloon now shattered all over the Strip. The suburbs lie in smoke and waste, wrenched to pieces by the impact. Cars are flipped over and no roofs stand. The remains of countless, long-extinguished fires dot the landscape. The ruins stretch forever to the Rocky Mountains.

"Oh God," he breathes inside the cockpit. "Oh God..."

He never knew. He never could've imagined.

The stories. Sarai's story. All true. He had not believed it. He had wanted to, but he had not.

Now he does.

And it hurts worse than ever.

Sarai kneels beside an empty pew. She feels nothing, no sense of spiritual power or presence, no inspiration of words. She feels even emptier as she kneels down and clasps her hands before her, wondering what position to take. She had been Catholic once, an eternity ago, before this was all happening and when she looked at the stars for granted. Now she forgets and tries to fake it, and tries to summon up some special and weighty words to bring down the grace of God—if, she knows deep down, He even exists.

She wants hope. Wants it more than air, more than water, more than life itself.

"Help him," she prays, tears forming in her eyes. "Help him... Don't leave us alone... Not now."

Her words are cheap and archaic. She had so many words walking in here but now her mind a blank page with writer's block.

"Just... Help us. Help us all. You've left us to rot. Now intervene. Help."

She repeats the words over and over, and tears slide down her cheeks:

"Help us. Help us. Help us. Help us."

He is in the mountains, using the GPS to home in on the Amberlin. He guesses at the coordinates but thinks he is correct. Something inside of him—no, from the outside but now inside—tells him his guess is correct. He keeps the pod pulsing between the mountains, screeching over mountain valleys, covering miles in seconds. He is sure he is in California by now, Las Vegas and the Grand Canyon forever lost behind him, a mere memory.

Alarms ring in his ears. He risks a look down at the read-outs.

Oxygen: 2%

And then, 1%

How long does he have? He tries to breathe slower but he cannot. He is too nervous and his lungs and heart refuse to listen.

The alarms blare and suddenly the read-out says oxygen is gone. He continues to breathe but begins to feel light-headed. And then it is harder to breathe. And harder. He is seeing spots.

Almost there.

His face is turning blue and the world is growing dim, dark.

He tries to activate the landing controls but his muscles are choking and refusing to listen.

I'm going to die. I'm going to suffocate to death here in this pod.

And he loses consciousness with that last thought; he slumps forward and his fingers glide over the touch-screen. The pod dives for the earth. As he is pressed against the window, body gasping for air but refusing none, the spacecraft tries to

slow down but slashes the side of a mountain, being thrown this way and that by breaking trees, and it falls into a lake, submerged in water. The glass shatters and water gushes into the cockpit; the surge yanks the unconscious man from the pod, and as the pod dwindles into the darkness, the man is brought towards the surface by unseen hands, hands driven by the quiet prayers:

“Help us. Help us. Help us. Help us.”

The church door opens and David enters, seeing Sarai kneeling at the altar. He feels uncomfortable but vows to do what he had vowed to do before he entered the church. He walks over to her and kneels down beside her. Her lips are moving slowly now, tears caressing her tender cheeks. He puts an arm around her and squeezes her close, a brotherly hug.

He whispers into her air, small comforts that are hollow and meaningless, but she breathes easier.

“It’s going to be okay,” he says. “I know it’s going to be okay.”

“It’s never going to be okay,” she sniffles. “How can you think it’s going to be okay? They’re killing us, enslaving us, they’re destroying our species. How can you think it’s going to be okay?”

“Sarai-“

She interrupts. “They killed my family. They killed your family, too. This won’t stop. We’ve survived till the end, but that’s what it is, David: *the End*.”

The biker tells her sternly, “You ask me how I can believe it’s going to be okay. I’ll tell you. Because, for some reason I can’t explain, there’s this feeling inside me, this little spark of hope, and it whispers into my heart, ‘He’s alive.’”

V

The truck is parked beside the creek, the back of the bed hanging open, the front door cracked. The biker walks around to the back of the truck, pulls out the bodies, and carries them one-by-one to the ditch. A mask is over his face to protect him from the bacteria and rot. The corpses in the creek are bloating and covered with flies. Maggots burrow under the skin and the water becomes murky brown from the decomposition. He sees men and women, and as if that doesn’t bother him, he must also carry a little girl to the creek and dump her. He thinks of his niece and almost loses it; he sits down beside the back left tire and holds his head in his hands, the sobs coming. He is able to quiet down, and thankful for the seclusion. No one knows but he always cries on these runs. He is not stripped of emotion; a little innocence still clings. He cannot make himself enjoy the torturous task of taking the dead to the creek, where they become skeletons lost in anonymity. He wishes all could have a grave with a headstone, but those days of honorable burial are done. He takes several buckets and carries them to the creek, and setting them on the ground, he tips them forward. Blood gushes out with an assortment of severed body parts; the water bursts red and the body parts stick up among the

corpses. Three buckets are disposed and then he throws them into the back of the truck. He doesn't look back at the creek as he shuts the back of the bed and climbs into the cab. He sits in the cab and waits for his hands to stop shaking. He looks over to the creek as if he can feel a million eyes condemning him. Now he starts the engine and drives away, leaving a settling cloud of dust.

The truck pulls around a bend. The biker is composing himself again, putting on the fearless-leader, do-what-needs-to-be-done, grit-your-teeth-and-bear-it façade, and he is relishing the thought of sleeping in his own bed and letting these be memories so he can-

"Holy God!" he breathes, slamming on the brakes.

The truck fishtails; he is thrown against the door and it threatens to give way. He opens his mouth in a brilliant grimace as the truck swerves around and around upon the road; dust fills the windows and he can imagine the truck slamming into the dead trees and exploding. Then the truck stops and he is thrown to the other side of the truck, sprawled beneath the dashboard. He pulls himself up and peers over the dashboard; there is a man standing in the middle of the road, hunched-over and dripping wet. The dust is clearing, but the dust also cakes the man in an earthen, muddy glow.

He recognizes the man. "Oh God--"

Sarai has felt completely empty. All the arrangements and positions she's tried don't get her anywhere. The faded stain glass windows let in shattered light and the Holy Mother before whom she bows is silent. She wants a tear, even a tear from the Holy Mother, any sign to tell her that her prayers have been answered. But the statue is silent and even decaying under time. She stands, feeling even more hopeless than when she answered, and walking out of the empty sanctuary, she whispers, almost scornfully, "You've never helped us. Why should I think you're going to help us now?" And she slams the church door behind her.

The biker edges up to the figure. The man stares forward, as if lost deep in thought, but the eyes are vacant, eerily empty of life itself. The chest moves in and out with each stagnant breath, and his muscles quiver. The biker wonders why he is wet, and says, "Micah? Micah? Can you hear me?"

But Micah doesn't respond. The biker moves before him and waves a hand in front of his eyes. No response. The pupils, he notes, are dilated. "Micah? It's me. David."

Nothing. Not even a brief acknowledgement.

He was out of it. Completely. He had gone.

The biker notices the muscles shaking. And then sees how wet he is. "Geez. You're freezing. Come on." He walks toward the truck, gets a Mexican blanket from the cab. Micah hasn't moved. "Of course you can't," the biker mutters, striding over and draping the blanket around him. "I'm going to take your hand,

okay? Come with me.” He takes his hand—and Micah grips hard, squeezing the life-blood from his fingers, turning his knuckles white. The biker grimaces and struggles free. “Okay. I’ll just guide you from the shoulder, then, all right?”

He leads him to the truck and opens the passenger door. He picks him up, grunting under the weight, and sets him inside. He makes sure the blanket is tucked around him and shuts the door. When he gets around on the other side, he can see Micah’s teeth are chattering. The blanket isn’t doing anything. The biker revs the engine, maneuvers the truck back to face the right direction, and hopes he can get Micah someplace warm before he leaves them for good.

They are nearing the town when the man begins to speak. It is unintelligible; the biker is surprised and asks, “What? Say that again.”

He doesn’t.

The drive continues around a mountain and Micah speaks. “Abwun d’bwaschmajai. Nethkadaschschmach Tete malkuthach. Nehwe txejjanach aikana d’bwaschmaja af b’arha. Hawyland lachma d’sunkanan jaomana. Waschbolan chauben wachtahen aikana dag chnan schwoken l’chajaben. Wela tachlan l’nesjuna ela patzan min bischa. Metol dilachi maktlutha wahaila wateschbuchta l’ahlam almin.”

The biker shakes his head. The man is insane.

But as he drives, he can’t get the question out of his head: wet, out-of-it, speaking some god-forsaken language no one knows; what happened to him?

The little girls are sitting outside in bathing suits, playing clapping games while jumping through the sprinkler. They look up as the truck pulls beside the road; the engine stops and they see Uncle David—not really his uncle, it was a pet-name of theirs—get out. There is someone in the cab wrapped up in a blanket. They jump up and run to him, giggling, but he doesn’t laugh back. He demands, “I need to see your daddy. Is he inside?”

They know that something’s up just by the tone of his voice. “Who’s in the truck?”

“I need to see your daddy,” he repeats, gently yet urgently.

They take him inside and call his name. Greenstone comes from the kitchen, a depressed look upon his face. He brushes his hands on a *Barbecue-Dad* t-shirt. He smiles at the sight of David but it falls when he sees the stone-cold look etched over the man’s face. “What is it?”

David had a speech planned but in the moment it fails him. “I found him.”

Greenstone furrows his brow. “Found who?”

“Something’s... Something’s wrong with him, I don’t know...” He stumbles for words.

Greenstone’s mind whirls and he comes up with a hypothesis: “Micah?”

David nods.

“No. No, that’s impossible. He was taken... No one ever comes back...”

"He's in the truck," David implores.

They run outside and David opens the passenger side door, helping him out. Micah can stand easily enough, but he still peers forward with those emotionless, glassy eyes. Greenstone stands before him and tries to get a reaction. Some people across the street sitting on the park bench laugh. Laura and Danielle watch from the grass, the sprinkler occasionally drifting aimlessly over them.

Greenstone keeps looking at Micah. "Has he been like this since... Where did you find him?"

"On the road. He was standing in the middle of the road. I almost hit him."

"Just standing there?"

"Staring into the woods. He was really out-of-it, like he is now."

Greenstone speaks to Micah: "Can you hear me? Micah?" He looks to David. "Can he talk?"

"Yeah," David says. "But he just speaks gibberish."

Greenstone can read David's lie. "It's not gibberish, is it?"

"I don't know what it is. It sounded... Like I don't know what. Not American."

Greenstone steps back and looks at Micah. He's crazy, but "He's alive."

"Maybe he has amnesia?" David throws out.

"Maybe. Why's he so wet?"

David shrugs. "He was wet when I found him."

"So he gets taken into one of the ships... And then we find him dripping-wet, speaking in what sounds like (intelligent) gibberish, and he may be suffering from amnesia. Is this a little strange to you?"

"The human race is almost extinct by alien invaders. What *isn't* strange?"

Sarai is walking down the sidewalk, head low, eyes trailing her feet; her thoughts ramble and present no orderly account, a sea of confusion and disbelief drowning her. She doesn't even struggle, doesn't try to resist. *What is the point?* She wonders. She sees her own son being killed before her own eyes. She sees all her dreams shattered in a night. And she sees all hope vanishing in an instant. Why smile? Why laugh? It's all ephemeral, there's no point to it. None at all.

A shadow falls over her; she looks up and sees Laura, eyes an eclectic blend of fright and excitement. Sarai kneels down in front of her and puts her hand on her shoulder; with no lack of compassion, demands, "Laura." She has to know. She has never seen her like this. Not since that one time... The time they entered the house and almost took her father... "Laura."

She is breathing hard, panting, chest heaving. She makes out a few words. "Micah... House..."

"I don't know what you're saying," she tells her. "Calm down. Breathe. Is your father okay?"

"It's Micah," she says.

Sarai stands, back straightening. "Micah?" Hope.

"He's at the house," Laura says, getting herself under control.

She shouldn't have believed him. It made not a shred of sense.
But somehow she knew it was true.
Laura stands alone on the sidewalk, Sarai a fleeting figure down the road.

"Something's wrong with him."

Greenstone speaks the moment she enters the house. She pushes him aside and says, "Where is he?"

He doesn't take offense at her brashness. "He's in the kitchen."

She moves away; Greenstone grabs her by the shoulder; she looks over her shoulder.

"Something's wrong with him," he warns.

She tugs away and enters the kitchen. Danielle is sitting on the counter and David's face is to the window overlooking the dining table. She sees Micah sitting in one of the chairs at the table; a threaded Mexican blanket is wrapped around him and he stares forward, glassy-eyed, right past Danielle's head.

David hears her enter and turns. He weakly smiles when he sees her. "I was right."

She tosses her glance between him and Micah, then, "What's wrong with him?"

David shrugs. "He's been like this since... Well, since I found him."

"Is he cold? What's with the blanket?"

David's hands go into his jean pockets and he shakes his head. "I found him just standing in the middle of the road, soaking wet and with that blank stare." As an afterthought, "I almost hit him, actually."

"Does he talk?"

"Yes, but nothing we can understand. He said something in the truck on the way here, but it sounded like gibberish. Well, it's not. After we sent Laura off to find you, he said it all again. All the gibberish in the truck, word-for-word." He shakes his head. "It's not English."

"So they take him... And then we find him here, soaking wet, and speaking not English?"

"It amazed Hal, too. And I'm clueless."

Micah's voice shatters the silence and he spoke, word-for-word, what he'd said twice already. As he speaks, Sarai moves around between him and Danielle and kneels before the table, looking into his glossed eyes. When he finishes speaking, a puzzled look comes over her and she looks to David. "You're right. It's not gibberish."

"See? I told you."

"It's Aramaic."

David pauses. "Aramaic?"

"An extinct language."

"Well," he mused, "it makes sense now."

Sarai stands, hands on her hips. "Why does everything have to be so confusing?"

Greenstone enters the room. "We'll put him in the church. It's the only place they don't look."

"Not tonight," Sarai confronts. "He'll stay with me tonight."

He objects. "If they come back--"

"They won't. It'll take them a day or two to process--" Process. What a morbid way to describe it--"the others. We have at *least* one night."

Greenstone looks over to David. "What do you think?"

"I don't think they'll come back," he answers. "And I don't think he's dangerous."

"We don't know anything," Greenstone says.

Sarai sighs. "Gentlemen. He's *sick*. He needs sleep."

David grimaces. "Weirdest sickness I've ever seen."

She tosses her eyes between the two of them. "Let me look after him, okay? At least for tonight. Tomorrow we'll see what he does, then put him in the church. If it's their last time coming, they'll check the church... They'll check every where... But then it won't matter where he is."

Greenstone raises his hands. "Your call. This is on your playing field. He's your discovery."

David throws out, "What a wild few days, eh?"

Her sleep is broken, the rough dreams severed with a shrill scream. She throws off the covers and fumbles from the bed, scrambling in the darkness to the door. She claws at the handle and tears it open, surging into the hallway. She can hear breaking glass in the guest bedroom. She screams out his name and kicks the door open, flicking on the light. Her eyes take in the room: the bed is half on its side and there is broken China everywhere; the large mirror lies in glistening fragments. The man is lying in the corner, collapsed into a fetal position, dressed only in his boxers and his hands clawing at his ears; blood comes between his fingers and he whimpers under his breath. "Micah," she breathes, leaping over the bed in the middle of the room and falling beside him. She takes his hands, saying his name over and over, and removing his hands from the side of his head, sees that the skin around the ears is raw and bleeding. "Micah... Micah..." He quiets down, tears sliding down his cheeks. Then he looks at her with bloodshot eyes and cries out in a soft and sullen whisper, "*Get them out of my head...*"

Chapter Six

“Destiny is not a matter of chance; but a matter of choice. It is not a thing to be waited for, It is a thing to be achieved.” – Francis Crawford

I

Greenstone is lost deep in sleep, lying in the empty bed made for two, reduced to one occupant over a year ago. Sometimes he would wake up in the middle of the night and find himself clutching a pillow; he would have dreamed he was holding her, his face in her hair, smelling her sweet perfume; and when he awakes, and sees it's a pillow, his heart crumbles, it weeps, and he clutches the pillow even tighter, living in the moment, remembering it all. Tears accompany his memories, and he can see her smile—and then he sees her shot in the back, he hears her screaming as she falls, and he sees the white faces of his little girls as they watch their mommy choke and gurgle in a thickening pool of blood. These are the memories that haunt the residents of Amberlin. In the daytime, perhaps in ignorance, they can exist, and even smile, and function as if there really was a bright a beautiful world outside the wire-mesh fences. But at night, in the still and quiet, the memories return, and whisper, “It's all real.”

Greenstone jolts asleep and turns his head to the window. The darkness of the room blinds him but he hears something on the window. He pushes aside the sheets and stands, walks across the room, and opens the window. Sarai is standing out there, face glowing like an angel.

“Sarai? Why didn't you just walk-“

“It's Micah,” she says, voice jittery.

Greenstone rubs his eyes. “Is he okay?”

“I think so,” she says. “I don't know. But... But I think you need to see this.”

Morning has come and the sun is shining down on the little town. Everyone acts like the world is perfect and some kids play kickball outside, ignorant of the fact that their first baseman is gone, taken in the assault. They just play as if he never existed. Sarai hates this, it fills her with contempt for the remnants of humanity, and sometimes she wonders what she is fighting for. As the kids laugh and run the bases she wants to scream. She holds her coffee cup in one hand as Greenstone and David sit across the table from her, talking it over.

David tries to sum it up. “Let me get this straight: he wakes up and claws at his ears until they bleed. He says there are voices in his head and asks Sarai to get them out. Am I right so far?”

Sarai is watching the kids. Someone steals a base. Everyone is laughing.

Greenstone nods, sipping the black coffee. “Yeah.”

“And what he heard,” David continues, “is Aramaic. And he still hears it?”

“Apparently.”

“Does he even *know* Aramaic?”

Sarai shakes her head, returning to the conversation. “He hasn’t a clue what the voices are saying.”

“Is he schizoid?”

Sarai curses. “David.”

“Look,” David defends. “I say the simplest explanation is the right one.”

“A schizoid does *not* hear a perfect foreign language in his head, especially one he doesn’t know.”

Greenstone seems lost in thought, then he says slowly, “This happened before. In the Bible. The people started speaking a foreign language. They spoke a foreign language when... When the Spirit of God came over them.”

David raises his eyebrows. “Are you saying Micah’s been... anointed?”

“I’m not *saying* anything. I’m just pointing out that it’s happened before.”

Sarai counters, “Speaking in tongues isn’t exclusive to Christianity. Documents of speaking in tongues have been found from all kinds of ethnic groups. Eskimos, Africans, Indonesians, Malaysians, Spaniards, Haitians, Iraqis, the Chinese, the Japanese, Aborigines, Ethiopians... And religions, too, claim speaking in tongues. Voodoo, Buddhism, dervishes, Islam, Mormonism, Shamanism, even Peyote cult activity.”

Greenstone defends himself, “I wasn’t claiming to have the answers. Just saying it’s not totally ridiculous.”

“If,” David says, “the Bible is correct.”

“That’s outside our realm,” Sarai says quickly. “I just want to know... How do we help him?”

There is silence. Then Greenstone says, “I don’t think we can.”

Sarai can’t settle for that. “So we just... abandon him?”

“No. We take him to Shadow.”

II

He is dressed in some of David’s clothes as David and Sarai walk him across the street, past the bench, and beside a low row of trees and shrubs. Greenstone and his two girls, one on each hand, are following behind him. Micah’s eyes are closed; when they left, he gasped at the incredible brightness. Now he lets David and Sarai guide him down the right streets until the church is before them again. The wide doors are opened, darkness enshrouding the cavern within. They walk up the steps and enter; the pews are empty, the stained glass windows reflected scanty light, the statue of Mother Mary still in the quiet. They walk between the rows and Greenstone has his daughters sit down; he shuts the big doors and locks them.

“Sit here,” David says, showing Micah to a seat. He obeys.

Sarai is walking away. She disappears down a snaking corridor.

Micah hangs his head low, skin quivering in shivers. The little girls stare at him, little eyes trying to figure him out. Greenstone moves to the pew behind the girls and sits down; David stands at Micah's side, eyes rolling over the dusty monuments and the ancient podium at the front of the church. He felt it, too—not the emptiness, the evil. He finds it strange, feeling evil in a church; it's the last place you would expect to find it. But now it hovers all around him like an omnipresent spirit; he tries to tell himself to calm down, but he cannot. The deep sense of evil evolves into an ever-present and gnawing fear. He is cursing his own stupidity when he looks down and sees Micah's staggered breath frosting before him. He can hear the little girls climbing over the pew's back and sitting next to their father, clutching him close. The hairs on the back of his neck prick up.

A sound from the corridor makes his toes curl. Sarai appears. She is walking in when she stops, as if she has hit a brick wall. There is a pause, as if she is trying to convince herself of some surrealism that science and all logic has defined impossible. But she keeps walking, and her breath fogs, and the words come: "He'll see him."

David takes Micah by the hand. "Can you stand?"

Micah stands, says quietly, "Yes."

"Come with us," Sarai says.

As the trio leaves, Danielle says to Daddy, "Can we leave? I'm scared..."

They descend a cryptic stone stairwell. It reminds David of the monasteries he used to visit as a child. He could see monks marching down the hallway holding plain wax candles and chanting Gregorian hymns. He could almost feel their presence, feel their eyes, hear their warnings. The hallway reaches a small door that was open, revealing a stone room, the four corners draped in ominous shadow.

They guide Micah within and have him sit down in the middle of the bare concrete room.

A craggy voice speaks from the shadows: "Leave us."

David looks at Sarai, but she nods, and they depart. The door shuts tight, suspending the man in absolute blackness. He can hear broken breathing, coughing, and then a voice: "What is your name?"

The man doesn't want to answer, but something propels him forward, takes control of his organs and arouses a response, smooth and tranquil: "Micah Freeman."

"Micah. Freeman." The voice chews over those words. "Micah. Freeman. Freeman. Michael."

Micah groans, "Who..."

A quick answer: "Babylon."

Micah is on the verge of collapse, the cold overpowering. "Need... Need them out..."

"Voices. Voices inside your head."

"Ropheka. Elohim. Rose... Sharon."

The voice pauses. "Rose of Sharon?"

Micah is leaning forward. "Speaks."

"Speaks to you. Speaks to you in the quiet."

"Whispers. My name. Says—"

"What does he say, Micah? What does the Rose of Sharon tell you?"

The sense of fear is nauseating. "Claire... They took Claire... Nicole... Molly..."

"Who is this? People dear to you?"

"Everything."

"They are everything to you."

Micah wants to vomit. Oh, the entrenching fear! "My life."

"They *were* your life," the voice says, now taking the initiative. "It is not that way now."

"Still..." He is almost out of it.

The voice is sudden and foreboding: "No."

"I can't forget..."

"You cannot forget," the voice affirms. "But you must fulfill your destiny."

The little girls want to leave, but Greenstone doesn't let them. He has decided to stay with David and Sarai. Sarai paces before the statue of Mother Mary, and David lets the glow of a stained-glass window fall over him. Their breaths are fermenting into crystals before them, and the urge to leave is overpowering. But it is this very same threatening feeling that causes him to stay, that roots him in place.

There is commotion outside but he doesn't even notice.

Micah is curling up into a ball, seeking warmth.

The voice continues: "This is why you were made. You wondered why you could never find satisfaction, you wondered why life seemed so meaningless and empty, rote ritual, you saw the world around you and you felt like it was the most depressing situation ever. You wanted to escape. You wanted to leave, but you didn't know how. You felt that way because you were being shirked. Shirked of your purpose, your reason for existence, your created function, your eternal destiny."

"I don't.. No one... No one has a destiny," Micah breathes.

"We all have destinies. But it is not something to be waited on. It is something to be grasped!"

At first it is a slight twinge in the air, but it grows. Dust falls from the titanic rafters and the stained glass windows rattle. Sarai stands beneath the shadow and stares at the girls, her face ashen. David moves away from the window, perhaps thinking it will bust. From outside there comes shouts and screams and cries. Greenstone turns in his seat and stares at the door. David runs across the floor of the church, but a great blast of movement sends him scattering to the floor. The

little girls scream as all the windows in the church shatter with a cataclysm of choked air.

Micah's entire body is shaking with an eclectic blend of fright and fear. "Lie."

The voice is graver, sharper. "This is why you were made. Here. Now. All the events of your life come to this point in time."

David scrambles to his feet and throws open the door, sunlight filtering inside the room, breaking the darkness. The little girls look outside and scream. Several drop-ships are hovering over the town, lowering down. People are scrambling for their homes, running in terror. One of the ships down the street has already landed and is lowering its ramp. Sarai stares in absolute terror. If they find them outside of their homes... Oh God, the girls!

"Hal!" David screams. "Get them out of here!"

Greenstone grabs his daughters and runs for the doorway.

David is running out, too, yells, "Sarai!"

She looks to the hallway but bolts out of the church.

Micah is on his own.

Out of the darkness of the corner of the shaking room comes a figure, stumped in a deep robe with knobby features. Micah looks up and sees him, recognizes the face—the monk! The monk! Now the nimble, gnarled hands reach for him; Micah screams, tries to pull away, seeing the man's face grow and contort, turning a silvery gray, the eyes widening into charcoal-black saucers, the fingers elongating and smoothing. He tries to writhe away but is rooted in the frost. The man—the monk—the creature—grabs him by the raw ears; Micah's head flies back, his mouth opens in a gruesome scream, and the monk shrieks, "See! See!"

III

The trees are being blown sideways, leaves and nettles scattering. A car alarm is going off. Greenstone tugs his daughters down the street, half-dragging them, the home coming towards them. David is right behind them and Sarai is running off to the side, to her own home. One of the aircraft flies over, the shockwaves of its engines knocking Sarai flat on her face; she is smothered in grass for a moment but then she is running again, onto her driveway, nearing her door. She turns and sees Greenstone and his three girls, David on the trail, running after them. The drop-ship's ramp is lowered and soldiers are running off, bringing their guns around to face them. Sarai's mouth opens in a silent scream; David jumps into a stand of trees. Greenstone swings around, clutching his two girls. Soldiers are running up to him. He is shaking his head; Sarai can see that he is pleading with them. She knows what will happen, knows she should go inside, but she is rooted, planted on the porch, five feet away from the front door.

Micah screams as the man's fingertips send shockwaves through his brain, electricity burning through the electrodes and rewiring his circuits. As the electricity moves around neurons and shifts the jelly of his mind, memories come back to him, sweeping over him like some distant thought far-off coming to hit him in the face with a stinging punch. He loses knowledge of everything but that which comes to him, comes to him so fast he cannot comprehend it. Voices. Shouts. Noise. Hectic. Screams. Laughter. Joy. Fulfillment. Knowledge. Oh God oh God oh God...

A soldier rips Laura from the Greenstone's clutches and throws her to the pavement. Greenstone protests but finds the end of a gun up to Danielle's face. Tears slide down his face as he pleads with them. David weeps in the bushes, trying not to make noise, heart exploding. Sarai can't watch but she can't turn her eyes nor close them. The soldier says something to Greenstone, then moves the gun down to the girl. Laura is crying, "Daddy! Daddy!" as the gun roars. A fountain of blood bursts from her throat. Greenstone screams and dives into the soldier, knocking him down. Laura's body shakes and quivers on the ground, blood spurting from her throat; gurgling and suffocating noises come from blood-soiled lips. Greenstone is pulled off by two other soldier and thrown down beside his daughter; they all lower their guns and fire round after round into his body, carving it into a masterpiece of gore.

Micah's brain feels like it's on fire. He can think of nothing else, can take his mind nowhere else. All the memories, the understanding, the intricacies... Light. Brilliance. Touch. Fear. Hope. Love. Giggling. Redemption. Purpose. Heroism. Valor. Kingdom. Plague. Horror. Sadness. Screams. Rebellion. Destination. Arrival. Confusion. Awakening. Terror. Blood-stains. Claire. Molly. Nicole. Seventeen years. Amberlin. Nightmares. Here. Here. Here!

The soldiers leave Greenstone's body smoking and, grabbing Danielle, board the aircraft. Sarai is screaming tears as she runs inside the house; David crawls from the bushes, takes Laura, and crawls back behind them before the soldiers descend down the ramp again. Behind the bushes, he is crying harder and harder and knows they are coming. Laura's eyes are leaving, growing dim, faint, and she reaches a feeble hand up, touches his shirt, her eyes speaking a lullaby of deliverance. He takes her hand and whispers, "It's going to be okay, it's going to be okay, it's going to be okay..." And then she is gone, the pupils widening, her breath giving out. Blood covers his hand and her shirt. He remembers her laughing and playing and running through the sprinklers, giggling. He stands with a shout and lunges through the trees at one of the soldiers; the soldier swings around and delivers a blast into his forehead; the body pitches backwards and a stream of blood and brain drips from the tree limbs. Sarai, watching from a window inside her home,

falls down on the floor, breaking apart, knowing *this is the End this is the End this is the End*

The door to the church is laced with shadows and soldiers enter, running between the pews and crunching the glass underfoot. They can hear shouts and screams downstairs; they take off, laser pointers dancing over the curved cobblestone walls. They come to a closed doorway. A creature stands outside, long and skinny, with bulbous eyes, tendrils for fingers, a simple grimace and an oval-shaped head. The creature looks at them and they stop in their tracks, stunned. One of them orders them to kill it. As they raise their weapons, the creature tells them matter-of-factly, in a high-pitched and foreign tone, "Every one of you is going to *Hell* for being a traitor to righteousness!" The guns shut the creature up and it collapses onto the floor, green, sticky blood oozing from the several smooth wounds, filling in the cracks on the cobblestone. The soldiers step over the silenced corpse and reach for the door to the hidden room.

Sarai crawls up to the window and sees David's body lying half submerged in the blood-laced trees. She can see Laura's legs sticking out between the tree trunks. The sight terrifies her but somehow she is able to look out and see that all the ships are dropping. There is an explosion somewhere and she knows this is it. There is no hiding it, no forsaking it. Their time had ran out. Everyone was being killed or shoved up the boarding ramps, destined to die in work camps or be shipped to the distant, starry heavens for an unmentionable existence.

The soldiers open the door and enter. There is a figure kneeling down in the middle of the floor, back facing them, hands sprawled before him, as if he is ready to prance. They fill in behind him, and had they stood before him, they would have looked upon him and felt their blood run cold, chilled to ice inside their veins. For his eyes glowed a purple yellow and anger seethed in his breath. The monk's words ran over and over in his mind: *Every one of you is going to Hell for being a traitor to righteousness!*

One of the soldiers speaks: "Stand."

"As you wish," the figure growls.

Sarai staggers into the kitchen, the world a daze. She knocks over several glass goblets and they break into hundreds of fragments upon the tile floor. She lunges over the counter and picks up a knife, knowing she must move quickly, before they can get her. She will not let them take her, nor will she let them even touch her body. She will take her own life, it is the only honorable way to go. She holds the knife in the kitchen, letting the light from a blown-out window sparkle over its blade. She imagines it slick with her own blood, but the scary thing is, the thought makes her smile. "Why couldn't you have helped us, Micah?"

The soldiers at the front of the church turn upon hearing a noise, and are shocked to see the figure of an ordinary man walking between the pews. His white clothes and jeans are covered with dark blood and his eyes smolder with a subterranean hate. They raise their weapons and he says, "Kill me now. But I am the One you are looking for. Kill me—or take me." The soldiers look at each other, then two of them go forward slowly. He offers his hands and they clasp an electronic lock around his wrists. They spit on him and knock him down to the ground; he says nothing. They curse and kick him in the gut. He falls onto his side but still says nothing. A soldier yells at them and they lift him up and, shoving the tip of a gun into his back, march from the church, towards the awaiting drop-ship, where three corpses lie.

Sarai enters the living room, to the window, wanting one last look at her home. Smoke rises over the trees from some explosion across town; she can see several people being herded into the drop-ship that held Danielle. As she places the knife to her throat, the blade pressing deep, her eyes draw left, and she sees a quartet of soldiers marching a single man whose formerly-clean clothes are stained crimson. She drops the knife in shock; the man looks at her and those eyes cut through her, splice into her, carve a niche within, and she knows—somehow she knows—that this is not the End. She leaves the knife on the floor and watches as he is boarded into the drop-ship. He disappears inside with the soldiers and the ramp is shutting when her front door bursts open and several soldiers rush her; she hollers out as they bind her and carry her across the street, past the bodies of her beloveds; she feels the warmth of the drop-ship's engines, with Danielle and Micah and a dozen other lost souls onboard, as it took off and climbed into the sky. She is forced to join a line of about thirty people being herded onto a drop-ship in the middle of the park, the swings on the swing-set rocking back and forth.

IV

The inside of the drop-ship is bathed in maroon light; the humans are shoved to the front of the ship, right next to the cockpit, and the guards keep their guns trained on them. The floor shakes and waves and roars beneath him and everyone is contemplating the future: the horrors and terrific mysteries that await. They have all heard stories, and although they've tried—tried so hard—to forget, they know what comes. Death camps where one is worked to death in the brutally hot desert sun, or slaving in slave cities deep in the snowy ice banks of Alaska and given no way to warm oneself. The men stare silently forward in resolute abandon; the children sob and weep and cry. One of the soldiers laughs and grabs Danielle from the group of people, bringing her out. She is whimpering as he places a knife to her throat. He says he will demonstrate to the prisoners what will happen if they try anything: "I will kill all the children, the girls first, and throw their naked and

bloodied bodies to the dogs!” He tenses his muscles to draw the knife across her throat. Some are even jealous of her.

A figure steps forward. There is a fire in his eyes. “Let go of her,” he commands.

The soldier looks surprised. “Fool,” he snarls. “Now I will kill her and another.”

One of the other soldiers grabs another little girl named Danielle. He puts his gun to her head.

The girl sees the man and shrieks, “Micah!”

The soldiers stare at the man, who looks deep into Danielle’s eyes, and says, “Don’t be afraid.”

The soldier holding the first girl throws her to the ground, hurls his knife to the ground, and draws his gun up, pointing it at the man. “You know this little girl?” he asks in that mechanical, senseless voice, nodding to the sniffing Danielle. “You will enjoy watching her die, then. And you will enjoy watching *everyone* die. I will be unloading a load a *corpses* for your insolence. You will be the only one still alive, and destined for an eternal life of slavery and misery.” He turns his head.

“You,” Micah tells him calmly, “are the one enslaved. We shall never be. None of us.”

The soldier ignores him. “Soldiers! Aim!” All the soldiers raise their weapons and the crowd of a few dozen screams.

Micah steps forward. “Tell them to lower their weapons or you will be the first to die.”

The soldier mocks, “Do you not understand? Do you not know who I am and the power I hold over you?”

“The only power that you have,” Micah breathes, “is the power that has been given you. And it is I—Michael!—who has the power and authority to take it away. It is I who to this point is unknown. But all your kind will tremble at the mention of my name: Michael, the One who frees man.”

The soldier opens his mouth to give the order. What the crowd sees is but a blur, a flash, and roaring noise, and then silence, but for Micah it is woven into an eternity, a never-ending thrust at the jugular. He leaps off the ground and twists his body to the side; one outstretched hand impacts the throat of the soldier holding Danielle hostage and his feet collide into the captain, knocking him backwards. The soldier hit in the throat releases his gun and begins falling backwards, too; Micah lands on his feet and launches forward, two outstretched arms hitting the faces of two guards so hard that the facemasks shatter and the fragments are driven into their brains; his two feet plant beside the last guard and this guard is pulling the trigger as the man lands; the bullet is snaking down the tube of the gun; Micah thrusts his hand upon the soldier’s gun, pushing the gun up and around, so the barrel points between his eyes; there is a vibrant flash and a burst of brilliant, eternal light, and then the bullet pierces the facemask, drills through the temporal lobe, slices a clean cut through the jellies of his brain, and exits the back of the head with an entourage of blood and brain matter.

The crowd ducks at the sound of the gun-blast; Danielle falls to the ground, covering her ears and screaming; when they look up, they see the soldier struck in the throat wriggling on the ground, choking for breath; they see the captain squirming, too, blood foaming at his mouth from several organs ruptured in the kick; and they see, beyond the two sprawled corpses, a trail of blood over the raised ramp and the twisted corpse of a man. And standing in the middle of the carnage, calm and complacent, a single man, eyes lit up like the King of the gods, chest heaving in adrenaline surge.

Micah walks past the bodies and the crowd splits for him. He knocks on the door leading to the cockpit; moments later it opens and he delivers a lethal punch inside, hurling the co-pilot across the seat and into the controls. The pilot turns around and shouts as Micah takes his head in both hands and violently snaps it. The pilot hunches forward, body sliding over the controls, and the drop-ship careens down, towards the flat desert below. Micah picks up the body and throws him onto the other seat, and taking the position, man-handles the controls, swinging the drop-ship around, pointed towards the snow-capped Rocky Mountains in the distance.

A shadow enters the doorway and Danielle asks, "Micah?"

He looks over his shoulder, gently says, "Come here."

She cautiously moves forward, eyeing the bodies. People nervously crowd the door behind her. Micah looks into her eyes and with a calm serenity, in a tender-loving voice, he comforts, "Everything is going to be okay. Don't worry about it." And with a smile he rubs her head. "I'm going to make sure that those people who hurt your daddy don't live to see tomorrow. No one else has to die today."

Someone is protesting, screaming that they don't want to leave. Sarai watches in pity as the young teenager tries to convince the soldiers to let him run away. They throw him against the side of a drop-ship and shoot him several times. His body crumples down onto the ground, blood flowing from multiple laceration. His pupils widen and his face turns ashy white. His girlfriend falls down beside him and is weeping. The soldier points the gun to the back of her head and squeezes the trigger. Blood sprays all over him and she pitches forward, lying on top of her dead boyfriend. Sarai winces, the gunshot echoing in her ears. *Please God... Please help us...*

Micah moves into the hold; everyone grows silent. "Listen to me! We're returning to the town."

The people don't react well; they shout and plead with him not to:

"Take us anywhere but there!"

"They will make us all suffer! We will be sent to their slave camps!"

"Let us run and hide! It's the only way we'll survive!"

Micah cuts them off. "Do you want to live?! What kind of living is hiding? What kind of a life is always wondering if you will see tomorrow? What kind of

life is a life without a future? I am going to return to Amberlin, and if anyone is going to stop me, let them come to me now." No one moves. "Then join me. Let us purge Amberlin of their presence!"

Someone steps forward. "We will go with you. But we will never go with you."

A woman cries out, "It is a curse on us and our children! You don't understand!"

Micah speaks. "I understand that we are the remnant. I understand that everyone here has lost loved ones. I understand everyone here has seen more horrors than have been seen in *any* of earth's civil wars combined. What I *don't* understand is how you can suffer so much, how you can be treated with such contempt and evil, and when you have the chance, *do nothing!*"

"We will die!" someone hollers.

Micah looks him in the eye and terror grips him. "Then you will never really live."

The line has stopped. They are running out of room on the drop-ship and can't carry everyone. She overhears the soldiers talking.

One growls behind his facemask, "We cannot leave them here. They will run."

The other: "We cannot load them on the ship. The weight is too great. It will crash."

A taller soldier comes near them and gives the command. "Fill up the drop-ship. And then kill the others."

The soldiers nod, a wicked smile unfolding behind their masks.

A few teenage boys step forward. "We will join you," they say. One adds, "They killed my sister before my very own eyes. I had to watch as they shot her in our kitchen. I had to watch, with a *gun to my head*, as she cried out for me, asked me to help her." His eyes are bloodshot from tears, but now they sparkle with hatred. "I will give my life for even something as small as an *opportunity* to pay back what they deserve."

Micah smiles, then to the crowd, "Is there no one else???"

No one moves. Micah enters the cockpit where Danielle is watching the autopilot. There is a locked case mounted on the curved wall; he busts it open with his fist and yanks the metal plates off. Inside are several of the machineguns used by the soldiers. He grabs the bundles and throws them to the crowd. He joins them and says, "They're loaded. You do not want to fight now, but perhaps you will change your mind when they try and take the ship." Men, women and children take up the guns, feeling the weight in their hands.

Micah calls over the boys. "We are over the mountains now. Amberlin is only a half minute away. Listen to me. There are three corridors branching to the engine docks. But they don't lead to the engines, they lead to turrets. Each one fires one hundred caliber bullets. They shouldn't be locked nor manned."

One of the boys asks, "How do you know all this?"

Micah isn't deceptive. "I've no idea. I only know what I now must do."

Sarai hopes and prays she will be boarded on the drop-ship, but her luck runs out. They raise the ramp, and she and sixteen others are herded to the side of a building. The soldiers back out about fifty meters and raise their weapons. Sarai doesn't try to run. A little boy is crying in his mother's arms. She closes her eyes, remembering her life, her family, and wondering if anything lies beyond this current life. She imagines she will find out soon enough. A low growl fills the air and it makes her open her eyes. It grows louder and louder and the scrubs at their feet begin to quiver. The very earth seems to be shuddering. The soldiers beyond them all look up in shock and raise their guns; moments later comes the sound of chattering gunfire, and bullets sprinkle the earth at the soldiers' feet, chewing up huge chunks of dirt. Bullets pass into the soldiers and tear them limb-from-limb. Bleeding body parts fall scattered to the ground as the dust settles. The prisoners have knelt down and covered their heads, all except Sarai, who stands firm as the drop-ship flies overhead, swings around, and then heads back into the town. Guns blazing. Everyone is trying to make sense of what is happening when Sarai runs around the building, towards the guts of the town.

The teenagers on the guns maniacally laugh as the guns shake beneath them. They watch the trails of bullets as soldiers are scattered and broken. They concentrate their fire on the cockpits of the drop-ships, lacing them bullets; one of the drop-ships is raising off the ground, ramp rising; the blast of the bullets cuts through the cockpit and the ship swerves to the side. The teenagers can see figures leaping out of the hold and landing on top of buildings and cars, running for cover. Soldiers in the streets are firing up at the crazed drop-ship, lacking all understanding and belief.

She knows it is Micah. Something inside her *screams* his name. She runs around a car and over several broken soldiers, some moaning behind their facemasks. One reaches up and grabs her by the leg, as if pleading for help, and she stomps his face in. The hijacked drop-ship flies overhead, the blast of wind knocking her down, the roar of the guns breaking her eardrums. She sees several soldiers running beside a house, then the wall is riddled with so many bullets that it falls outward, crushing them to death. Sarai grins, gets to her feet, and keeps running.

Fire is gushing from the cockpit in one of the downed drop-ships. The soldiers are driven by fear, and the commander is screaming, "Kill the prisoners! Kill the prisoners!" But the soldiers don't listen, they just try to lower the ramp. The commander is swinging around in a sea of prisoners, screaming, "Kill them! Kill them!" The prisoners leap atop him and beat him to a bloody pulp as smoke builds within the drop-ship. The other soldiers ignore them and wrestle with the ramp, fearing the thought of burning to death. The people are choking on the smoke.

Micah lowers the drop-ship, extending the ramp as he lands in the park. He abandons the cockpit, tells Danielle, "Stay here!" The people are pointing their guns to the lowering ramp. He runs through them and leaps up and through the crack between the lowering ramp and the top of the hold. The people all look at one another, throw out some forsaken curses, then follow him, guns-and-all. The teenagers on the machine guns continue to pelt rooftops and spray bullets to groups of soldiers.

She is running past a house when a soldier comes out after her. Sarai turns next to a broken mailbox as the soldier rushes her with his knife. She grabs the fallen mailbox, and wielding it like a club, swings it into the soldier. He is thrown back. She switches its position in her hands and brings it down like a sledgehammer upon his chest, breaking his ribs and searing vital organs. The man is writhing on the ground as she drops the mailbox.

From inside the house come frantic screams. Sarai runs inside.

A soldier ripping the clothes off a young girl. Sarai grabs a tall mirror and brings it down on top of him; the glass shatters and his body comes up through the back. He is pinned and struggling. The girl rushes out of the room and Sarai kicks him over the bed; he is trying to get out of the mirror when she grabs both ends of a dresser and shoves it down atop of him; his legs thump beneath.

Sarai runs into the hallway and the girl breathes, "Thank you."

Sarai nods and runs out the door.

Micah jumps over a low ridge of shrubs and sees a drop-ship's doors wide open, the soldiers yanking out the prisoners and getting ready to shoot them. The pilots are in the cockpit trying to fix the sparking controls, damaged by gunfire. Micah clothes-lines a soldier, knocking him flat, then rushing into the drop-ship, drives a punch into one soldier's chin that is so powerful his head detaches; Micah takes the gun and fires several well-placed rounds, leveling the soldiers inside. The pilots rush him, pistols blazing; Micah slowly turns, aims, and fires. His bullet and theirs pass beside each other; he leans a little to the side and the bullets streak past his face. The bullet from his gun tears through the throat of the pilot, then, thrown off trajectory, laces the chest and abdomen of the man behind him. Both the pilot and co-pilot collapse against the wall.

Sarai turns down a side street and sees a mob of people wielding guns run to one of the drop-ships chugging black smoke from the cockpit. Sarai breaks into yet another run and joins the people just as the ramp lowers. Smoke gushes out and there is the sound of morbid coughing and choking. Light illuminates the ashen interior, shining on the bodies of the humans squirming on the ground, gasping for breath; there are several soldiers with guns who, when blinded by the light and unable to react quick enough, are caught off-guard. Their eyes adjust as the smoke

exits the hold and they see all the guns pointing right at them, controlled by those with faces of absolute hate. The soldiers lower their weapons in surrender.

A figure comes through the crowds, a man who holds a gun and whose face glows like an angel. The man walks up the ramp, grabs the soldiers, and throws them down into the crowd, where they are taken and dragged across the street. The man asks for help as they withdraw the choking from within the hold. As the people suffering from smoke inhalation are laid out and given help by those who used to be doctors or nurses, there are several bursts of sporadic gunfire. The surrendered soldiers lie in pools of blood across the street.

Danielle rushes up and leaps into Sarai's arms. Tears burst from Sarai's eyes and Danielle is clutching for dear life, sobbing. Sarai strokes her back and rocks back and forth, whispering, "It's okay, it's okay, it's okay," into her ear over and over.

Danielle manages, "He saved us."

Sarai bites her lip, almost in disbelief. "Micah."

The little girl nods, and before crying again, says, "He saved us all."

He appears from the crowd, walking towards them, gun displaced. His eyes are not normal, yet they are not filled with hate. She has only seen his eyes when they've been the harbinger of fear and confusion. Now there is a deep season of tenderness, kindness, determination.

"Are you all right?" he asks quietly.

She nods. "Yes. I'm fine."

He nods. "Good."

She returns the favor. "And you? Are you... okay?"

He shakes his head, looks off to the barren mountains. "I need some time alone."

V

Sarai stands over the bed, watching her sleep, watching the blankets slowly move up and down. Danielle had asked, "Can you stay with me until I fall asleep?" Sarai had responded, "Of course," and as they listened to the crickets outside, Danielle drifted off to sleep, somehow blessed with peace-of-mind.

Micah stands in the doorway; he is holding a gun and dressed in some of David's clothes.

Sarai doesn't look to him, says only, "You can't."

He says, "I have no choice."

She says nothing, only casts glowering eyes upon the sleeping child. "These people, Micah... These people *need* you."

He knows he can't convince her. But, "These people will be fine. They'll be okay."

"They're going to send troops," Sarai says softly. "They're going to come back. They'll kill us all." She can't bare to look at Danielle. "What's the point of saving someone if you're just going to toss them to the wolves in the next breath?"

Micah enters the room and walks over to her, his shadow falling over her. “Look. I don’t know what’s going on. But when that man touched me... I don’t know. Something came over me, and I was driven—I had no other choice—to do what I did. I saw no other options. It was as if... as if it was engrained within me. I didn’t know how to fly that drop-ship, Sarai. But I did it anyways. I’ve never learned how to do what I did. But I *did* it. Now I can’t explain that, but it makes me accept that there might be more to this—more to *me*—than what I know. And I have to find out.”

Sarai says coldly, “Even if that means leaving me?” She nods to the bed. “Leaving her?”

He’s adamant. “When the man touched me, Sarai—”

“I don’t care,” she breathes, “about what you felt or what you saw or what you experienced. It is all meaningless. Because tonight or tomorrow or the next day, they’re going to come back. And if you’re gone, what will we do, then? I believe with everything that I am, Micah, that you’re here for *us*. You’re here to help *us*.”

“But how can I do that,” Micah asks, “if I don’t even understand?”

There is bitter silence, then Micah turns his eyes and heads out the doorway.

Sarai cruelly barks, “So that’s it?”

He pauses. “I’ll be back. I know that much.”

“You don’t even know where you’re going.” He says nothing. She prompts, “And what do you want us to do?”

He replies, “Whatever you have to.”

And he leaves Sarai and Danielle alone.

Chapter Seven

“Whatever you are from nature, keep to it; never desert your own line of talent. Be what nature intended you for, and you will succeed; be anything else, and you will be ten thousands times worse than nothing.” – Arnold Toynbee

I

Sarai stands on the porch of her home, world a chaotic cesspool of hopes and fears, confusion amidst stoic determination. She stands alone under a velvet carpet of stars, and is almost, for a time, ignorant of the crumpled drop-ships and the bodies being burned outside the walls. As she stares upwards, there is a burst of light, and a meteor, except it is traveling away, growing smaller and smaller, leaving a small cloud of ash, and then it is gone. A memory. Something within her stirs—and dies.

Danielle, who has awakened, tugs at Sarai’s pants. “Is he gone?”

She closes her eyes, the girl’s words ringing within. “Yes.”

“Where did he go?” she innocently asks.

“I don’t know. He doesn’t know. No one knows.”

The girl pauses. “Will he be back?”

All conscience told her *No*, but she fought it off and replied from her heart: “He’ll be back.”

It is all a faint memory, a cordial whisper, a hesitant idea clinging to the back lobes of the brain. If they form any intellect, who can tell? If they have meaning, who can decipher it? If there is something to be seen and felt and experienced within them, who can interpret it, who can engage into it? For the whispers, the memories, the... images... rush at him as he is suspended in a brilliant white sphere, surrounded by particles of a million generations. His eyes are not open and yet he sees. He does not know of such a thing as eyes. He knows nothing about himself, knows only that which is. It surrounds him, comprises him; that which goes before him, out of sight and yet full of it, *is* him. He sees a blur of colors, hears the spin of metal, hears the whine of a gentle creature, feels as if the world is breaking apart, and suddenly he is suspended in a world of a million tiny white dots. This is all he remembers; this is all he sees; for memory in itself may be only an ideal, as now he just is: no past, no present, no future. Only now. And only now if time is something to be grasped. Or does time exist?

Four walls. Two on his sides, one above, one below. Walls shimmering like water-laced spider-webs, droplets sparkling like the honey dew on the sides of scarlet mountains. He finds the walls floating by on either side, and he looks down, or seems to look down, and sees bloody footprints on the wall beneath his feet. The footprints descend down the corridor. He lets himself be pulled down the hallway, the diamond-dazzled walls sweeping by. The corridor seems to run a

million miles, an eternity, and he feels like time is slipping away, moving slowly; going so quickly but so slowly at the same time, as if his atoms are being pulled apart and reformed in a matter of seconds that equals years.

Then there is something. A door. A small rectangle, growing larger, larger.

It is coming before him.

The bloody footprints lead right to it.

He reaches out his hand; it seems to stretch a hundred feet, fingertips eons away. He wiggles his fingers and it looks as if they are as far away as Saturn is from the Sun.

The door is near him. He reaches for the handle. There is a glass window on the door.

He reaches—and the glass explodes outwards, a brilliant flash of color and blinding light, and there is a shadowy form coming towards him, laced in fire and malice, reaching now for him. Terror enters him and he falls backwards, landing amongst the bloody footprints. The figure is gone and the floor is tilting; now he is lying on the ceiling.

He crawls along the ceiling, now upside-down, and sees a figure at the end of the hallway.

It is a little girl.

Laura laughs and skips, dances in the hallway. She waves at him and laughs, the laugh ephemeral and all around him. Is this a dream?

He calls out her name.

She dances above him on the floor, her clothes and body defying all gravity.

Or is *he* defying gravity?

Is gravity even a reality?

The little girl leaps and bounds and says, “Yeshua! Yeshua come!”

He calls out her name again.

She keeps singing the name “Yeshua! Yeshua! Yeshua comes! Redeemer! Savior!”

Her names runs off his lips.

“Johannon! Johannon! Johannon be dippin’!”

His voice is slow and cumbersome; it takes so much energy to speak.

“Yehuda? Yehuda are you? No Yehuda! No Yehuda!”

She makes no sense. He wants her to make sense. Wants her to make sense so much...

She glares at him and shrieks, “Mihael!” That word chills his soul. “Mihael!” she cries. “Arise!”

And everything changes.

The world comes back to him. The hallway ends, the chants of the little girl die, but yet the voice of her laughter run over and over even as reality bears in. “Mihael! Mihael! Arise!” *Yeshua. Yehuda.* It all makes sense but he is still confused. His vision is blurry but coming into focus; he finds he is surrounded by

electronics and realizes he is inside the drop-ship, now abandoned. All the memories of yesterday flood to him. Leaving Sarai, the girl—he hopes they are doing fine. He stretches his body and looks outside the front view-port. All he sees are stars, a vast panorama of stars, mixed with cloudy vapors and swirling galaxies. It reminds him of the pictures he used to see in science class textbooks.

But there is nothing else. He is in the middle of nowhere, a vast expanse of space. And he feels so alone, yet so complete. He has always imagined space to be just so... boring. But now that it is before him, now that he is immersed within it, he realizes how vast and beautiful it really is. A panorama of exquisite beauty. Seeing the great swirls of cosmic dust and the gorgeous array of blazing stars, he finds himself yearning to return to a time when wonder and magic and fantasy was all he knew.

Then the stars seem to fade from below, as the drop-ship is twisting through space.

And then he sees it.

“Oh my God,” he breathes, heart spinning.

A massive planet fills his vision, an entire planet that is half submerged in darkness and half exposed in light. Three suns rotating around each other light and darken the planet as the planet rotates around the trio. The surface of the planet in the darkness looks to be a perfect sea of black glass, and the right shimmers and shines and twinkles and flirts with a million shades of shifting light. It sparkles like a strobe light before his very eyes. It is not unlike a planet of diamond dancing with gold and silver. It is more breath-taking than anything he’s laid his eyes on.

The ship shudders. A red light illuminates before him.

A voice fills the cockpit and it makes him jump. An alien, high-pitched voice. A pure voice.

The voice of the monk.

Tender. Warm. Concerned and loving.

The voice quiets.

He opens his mouth, stammers, “Hello? Hello?”

The voices come again, more this time, more excited.

Then a voice of the same caliber, except in smooth English. “Please identify yourself.”

“Where am I?” he demands.

“You are being pulled into the atmosphere,” the voice tells him. “Speak your name.”

He doesn’t respond. “Where am I? Who is this?” He leans over the controls, staring at the twinkling planet.

“State your name,” the voice urges.

His head begins to hurt. He falls to his knees, surrendering. “Please. Tell me what’s going-“

“Name!” the voice demands.

He hollers, head throbbing, “Micah Freeman! Micah Freeman!”

A pause, then the voice speaks, and it makes his heart skip a beat:

“Mihael.

Mihael!”

And he hears, unless he is mistaken, cheering.

The planet grows larger before him.

The drop-ship descends into the atmosphere, the sparkling glass covering the planet’s surface filling the view-screen. As the aircraft descends lower and lower, slowly so as not to arouse much friction and fire, he can see the outlines of structures throughout the glass, and sees mountains arising and great dazzling forests. There are massive cities stretched before him and he descends towards one of the cities, towards millions of buildings with domed roofs, spectacular arches, golden streets and magnificent statues. He can see... children... in the streets. He can’t see them very well as the ship moves horizontal and enters a docking bay; the walls are made of tempered steel and are laced with snaking blue lines that never seem to halt. The ship swings around so it points towards the Bombay doors now grinding shut with ease. He feels the aircraft shudder, touching the platform, and he moves into the hold. The ramp is descending all on its own, brilliant light bleeding into the eerie darkness.

The ramp lowers but the light is so bright that he cannot see. He feels pulled, feels urged to step down the ramp, and as he is fearful one moment, he is serene the next. The ramp echoes underneath his feet and he steps off; his eyes adjust and he sees, with a blend of horror and awe, that he is not alone.

Four-foot-tall men with grayish-blue skin and bulbous heads with wide saucer-eyes lined the room, clutching strange spear-like weapons in their nimble, azure fingers. Each is adorned with a small slit for a nose and a tiny mouth, and their bare chests inhale and exhale with ease. They stare at him and he feels their eyes chewing through him, exploring him, sensing him, discovering him. They stretch on both sides, carving a far line to a golden archway, where inscribed is, he would learn later, *The Throne of Yeshua*.

A humble man comes behind him, two feet lower than him, and his tiny fingers wrap over Micah’s. The sensation of those childish fingers in the palm of his hand speaks volumes and he knows, somehow knows, that it is safe. The humble servant’s eyes seem lost in a milky sea as he peers over the human form, and then he turns his head, and draws him towards the arch, moving slowly. The soldiers all kneel as Micah passes, and kneeling, they bow their heads and speak in their tinny voices: “Mihael. Mihael. Mihael.”

The chant echoes throughout the room as they pass under the golden arch, into a vast room of pillars holding the visions of laughing children, these children only two to two and a half feet tall, dancing and singing and laughing.

The pillars lead to a giant throne, on which sits a glorious figure. A gray robe drapes around him, hiding his form, and underneath the draping hood is an opaque shadow split apart by two pure aqua eyes, alit in a sea of mystery. His very

presence commands respect and Micah's knees want to buckle. The servant releases him and walks away, leaving them alone inside the chamber, surrounded by the echoes of laughing children coming from the ghostly pillars.

The figure stands, his form stretching eight feet tall; he is twice the height of all the others. He steps down from the throne and moves towards Micah; Micah's blood runs cold and he forgets to breathe. The King approaches and stops short, and with a voice commanding reverent fear but yet dripping with the peace and love of a gentle whisper, he says, "Speak what you will."

Micah says nothing for an eternity, only sees those consuming blue eyes. Then: "I'm so confused."

The figure seems to smile in the shadows of his face. "You seek understanding." His mouth is dry and his voice crackles. "Yes."

"Seek, and seek with all your heart—and you shall find it!"

II

"They await you."

The figure turns and walks between the pillars. Micah moves behind the sweeping gray robe. The figure stands before a gigantic door of wrought silver. With a gentle touch, were it even only a spoken word, he cause the door to open, and once again Micah is blinded. The figure exits the door into the searing light, and Micah follows him blindly.

"Understanding you seek," the figure says as Micah's eyes continue to adjust. "You have no idea who you are, why you're here, only that this is your destination. There is much for you to learn, or rather, learn again. You are caught in the middle of a galactic story, Mihael. Now. Open your eyes, and may your quest for understanding begin!"

In a flash Micah's eyes adjusted and he saw they were on a balcony overlooking a beautiful city that defies all his imaginations. Only one description comes to mind, one point of recollection, one way to describe the glory and the power and the pureness he sees before him:

Her brilliance was like a very costly stone, as a stone of crystal-clear jasper. It had a great and high wall, with twelve gates... The city is laid out as a square, and its length is as great as its width... fifteen hundred miles; its length and width and height are equal. The material of the wall was jasper; and the city was pure gold, like clear glass. The foundation stones of the city wall were adorned with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation stone was jasper; the second, sapphire; the third, chalcedony; the fourth, emerald; the fifth, sardonyx; the sixth, sardius; the seventh, chrysolite; the eighth, beryl; the ninth, topaz; the tenth, chrysoprase; the eleventh, jacinth; the twelfth, amethyst. And the twelve gates were twelve pearls; each one of the gates was a single pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass. — Revelation 21ff

The golden streets were hidden by the millions—billions!—of people standing upon them, all jumping up and down and cheering at the sight of this human. The creatures—for now, seeing them spread beneath him, he was forced to ponder “Are these really people at all?”—shook the city walls with their choir of cacophonous merriment. The creatures are of all shapes and sizes, mostly unclothed, some wearing wonderful jewelry and others carrying the spear-like weaponry. The children were lifted on their parents’ shoulders and they waved their hands in the sky. Overhead, several scythe-shaped vehicles screamed overhead, billowing out over the city in acrobatic dances. The entire city came alive with celebration, thronged with rejoicing.

The King steps out behind him and the people all fall to their knees, bowing in reverence.

Micah’s knees quake and he begins to fall. Micah knelt before the King but the King gently pulled him up. “You are not mistaken in bowing. But you are my comrade. We are together.” The creatures all stood and began cheering and dancing again.

Micah has to yell over the vivacious cheering. “I don’t understand!”

The King comforts, “You shall...”

“Why do they celebrate me?”

“Why?” A pause, then, “Because they remember you. You inspire them, Mihael.”

Micah had been led from the balcony to the Throne Room. Tables had been brought out and placed before the throne. The King had descended to sit with Micah at the table, and when the doors opened, the hall flooded with creatures.

Goblets were passed around a pure white substance poured within. The moment Micah felt the angelic wine touch his lips, warmth snaked through his veins and warmed even the most bewildered heart. He sat and drank as servants brought all kinds of platters of food. Somehow he knows which he liked and which he didn’t before he even tried them; some are large and others small, some meat and others vegetable, most of them are eloquent deserts with which he greedily fills himself.

As the feast continues, he is showered in adoration and love. Elderly, grandmotherly creatures kiss his cheeks, children barrage him with all kinds of questions that he cannot answer because he can’t understand what they are saying, and the teenage girls hide in the shadows of the room, peering behind the spirit-drenched pillars, and looking at him they giggle and hide. Others mill about, watching him, whispering amongst themselves.

The King explains, “They remember you.”

He protests: “How? I’ve never been—”

A little girl creature comes up to him, and with pale blue fingers hands him a stuffed animal of what looks to be a cross between a sea turtle and a rabbit. The

blue on the face is shifting colors as she blushes and summons the courage to ask him to do something. She holds the toy out.

The King says, "She wants you to bless her toy. Touch it with your hands. This is all she desires."

He doesn't understand but does it anyway. The girl grins, laughs in glee, and runs away. A bunch of other little girls and boys join here and they run between the pillars.

"You feel it, don't you?" the King asks.

Micah looks at him. "I don't know what I feel."

"Your heart," the King says. "It beats for these people."

Micah says nothing.

The King smiles in the shadows under the hood.

Micah is shown to a room by one of the creatures, who opens the doors and says in tattered English, "This is your room. You see the bed? The sink? You know these?" Micah nods. "I will come to you when the suns rise. We have much to do over the next few weeks. Much preparation. Soon you will remember. Soon you will know who you are."

Micah protests, "Can I ask a favor?"

"Certainly," the creature quips.

"I may sound like a fool, but... Who are you? I mean, who are these people?"

The creature laughs. "You know us but you do not."

"Please."

"We have visited you many times. Even before you were born. But you denied us. It is okay. We do not need recognition."

His question is not being answered, and he cuts the creature off. "I don't--"

"We are Grays," he says. "We are The Shining Ones. And you have come to help us."

"Help you? There is nothing wrong with you--"

"No. But there is danger lurking at home. You will help us. And we will help you. The King has allowed it." He turns to leave.

Micah reaches out, touches him on the shoulder. "Wait."

The creature turns. "This is all I can tell you. The rest will come to you later on."

"Tell me one more thing. Where am I?"

"You are on Nova Galatia. In your language."

"English."

The creature nods. "Good night--"

"No," he says quickly. Almost blushing, "I mean, that's not what I meant. *Where* am I?"

A pause, a clever smile. "Not at home." He turns to leave.

Micah steps forward once more. "How far?"

"The distance," the creature says, "is too vast for numbers. We measure it in time." Then, "You are seventy-five thousand years from home."

III

Over the next several days, the man's time was consumed by the people. It seemed he awoke, spent time with the citizens, shared his meals with them, engaged with them, then slept. The King vanished from sight, perhaps locked inside his Throne Room, and Micah was left to fend for himself, with a personal guide to show him the beauties of the city and the beauties of the countryside. This world, this strange planet, was quite unlike anything Micah had ever seen or imagined. The city itself seemed to be a picture of Heaven, and the countryside was covered with grass that sparkled like beautiful stones. He saw a vast array of creatures his mind had never imagined, all docile and harmless; he would run through the fields with the children, playing with the strange animals, and they would ride on the animals' backs and he would run alongside. He was taken on many hiking adventures to discover sacred grounds, sacred groves; he visited the Sea of Glass, as he interpreted it, where the water was so clear that even two miles beneath its surface, the seabed could be seen. As he rode a wide-bottomed boat carried by dolphin-like sea creatures, he looked over the edge and thought that, had he jumped out, he would've fallen for ages before splattering on the rocks. It was easy to forget the water was five feet below, except for the waves cut by the boat and the splashing sea-ox.

Micah spent much time indoors with the grandmothers, who barraged him with questions. He sat in restaurants and ate strange foods while smoking pipes with the grandfathers. The smoke made his head spin and he felt high but yet in control at the same time. He attended sporting events with the men, surprised at the vast array of sports that he had never imagined of, including some that looked like a cross between football, baseball and soccer, and something that was very similar to *American Gladiators*. Except performed by four-foot-tall, blue-skinned Grays. The men would take him to sporting events, and afterwards the women would escort him out on picnics. One group of women took him to a mountaintop and he looked over the city, in awe at its vastness, the suburbs sprawling everywhere, life lived to the fullest under the three suns. Aliens—could he call them such?—working at grocery-marts, harvesting crops, going to school and church.

Wherever he stepped foot, there were always visitors and admirers enthroning him; the girls would reach out and touch him and giggle, and try to hit on him—or at least that's what he thought they were doing—and he disappointed the boys when they asked him, "Please! Teach us to fight!" in their own tongue; his translator gave him the message, and Micah opened his arms and said, "I'm sorry: I can't!" They seemed disappointed and said, "We will follow you wherever you go. We're at your service."

One time he was even dressed up as an alien version of a clown and attended some noble child's birthday party. All the kids grabbed onto his hands and cheered in their high-pitched voices, laughing. He came to fall in love even with their short

stature, the saucer eyes, the bulbous and glistening heads. At night there were always big celebrations all across the city, with torches and fireworks and dancing. The fireworks exploding in the sky would reflect in the glassy landscape, creating a mirage in every direction; it was simply beautiful beyond description.

Micah came to adore the Grays each and every day.

He relished their simplicity, their joy, their love for one another. *This is a people whom know nothing except happiness and joy*, he thought. He yearned for such an escape.

He was invited to a wedding, and he was gifted with sitting in the front row and watching the two Grays exchange vows, then bow, and place their heads together. His heart beat faster and faster at this sight and he saw—literally *saw*—his own wedding. Saw Claire standing opposite him, smiling under the charming white veil, the people clapping their hands and cheering at the kiss, his parents crying in joy. He remembers hearing the words of the priest droning over and over in his ears and just looking at her, thinking, *She's so beautiful. She's so beautiful. She's so beautiful*. And then when they kissed, he could've sworn electricity ran its circuits all the way through him, for his heart exploded in radiant joy. It was as if the world had gone from black-and-white to brilliant color in just a moment, and he thought, *She is mine. And I am hers*. And that night, as they laid in bed naked, wrapped in each other's arms, and looking into her eyes, he knew—beyond a shadow of a doubt—that *this* was where he was supposed to be. An entire lifetime ahead of him; he told her, "I want to grow old. With you. Get a little house in the mountains. We can sleep in and go fishing and hiking. We can watch the sunset and lay out under the beautiful stars." She smiled back and said over and over, "Oh God, I love you. I love you so much." He remembered, after she had gone to sleep, he wept in that bed. Quiet tears streamed down his face, sliding along the curves of a grand smile.

All that night he lay in his bed seventy-five thousand years from home, and he thought of nothing but her. He remembered nothing but their wedding, holding her in his arms, thought of their first home, their first child. He thought of their first Christmas when they didn't have much to spend because of meager money. He thought of dating her, the first date and then he thought of when he asked her to marry him, and handed her the engagement ring.

She broke down in tears at his proposal.

And he cried himself to sleep that night.

A well-respected elder died and he attended the funeral. As they placed the body on a pyre, reminiscent of the ancient human Greeks, he felt the warmth of the fire and the sorrow of the people. Yet the sorrow was met with a joy he could not understand.

"He will come back," someone told him. "When they are gone, he will come back. Everyone will come back. The King will welcome him home."

He closed his eyes, feeling the fire on his face, and immediately he heard the laughter of Molly, and the gentle crying of Nicole in her crib. He saw Claire fixing spaghetti, and telling him she had to go to Tennessee.

And then he saw the skeleton in the bathtub. He saw the bloodstains on the wall. He left the funeral, holding back tears, under the confused gaze of hundreds.

Now he throws open the door the Throne Room and enters, storming between the pillars. The guards lower their spears, but seeing who it is, retract them. Micah falls onto his knees before the pearl throne and sobs, "I have to leave. I have to go home. Please. Send me back! I must return. There are people there... My family... I have to go home..." His sentences break with sobs, and then the tears form a waterfall around his face that enables him to speak only a word at a time. "Must... Home... Please... Claire..."

The King ushers the guards to leave them. Micah doesn't hear them leave under his terrific sobs. When the room is empty, the King speaks, and a great comfort swells over him. Micah is sniffing as the King dangles something in front of him; "I believe this belongs to you?"

Micah reaches out and takes it. "Where... How..."

"You were meant to go that funeral. I arranged it. I feared you would forget. I feared you would forget about Sarai... and the precious little girl, Danielle."

Micah stares at him in shock, tears holding off. "You know of them?"

"I know of many things," the King says. "At the funeral, you remembered them?"

"No--"

"You remembered your family. Your beautiful wife. And daughters."

"They were taken from me..." He begs: "Will I see them again?"

The King smiles. "Yes. But not now. You must wait a little longer."

"I don't want to wait," Micah stammers.

"They are watching you," the King says. "They are very proud of you."

"Why can't I see them?" Micah demands, gritting his teeth. "Give them to me."

"I have them, but I cannot give them to you."

Micah leaps up, charging the throne. He is screaming: "Give them--" He hits an invisible barrier and falls flat on his back, the breath knocked out of him, lungs trying hard to breathe.

The King stands from the throne, eight feet tall. "Mihael. My prince."

Micah begins to cry again, groveling on the floor. "I need to see them--"

The King kneels down and touches Micah's forehead. "And you will. I promise. I am not wicked, cruel taskmaster. You will come to know me as your friend. Your family requests you not see them. I have spoken to them personally."

Micah gapes at him. "Why don't they want to see me?"

"Oh, Mihael," the King tenderly says, "they do! They want to see you. Your daughters want to embrace you, and your wife to kiss you. But they see more of

this than you do. Their eyes are open to what, at this time, you possibly cannot see. They see it, Mihael—and they are *proud*.”

Micah is breathing a little easier. Sarai. Danielle. “No. My time here is up. I must go... The people need me...”

The King corrects him, “Wrong.” Micah glares at him as if questioning, *What?* “Your time has not yet come. But yes, you must return home. And yes, your people need you.” A smile creeps underneath the King’s veiled hood. “Stand. I must show you something.”

IV

The Throne Room is abandoned, left only to the two occupants and the ghostly laughter from the near-transparent pillars. The King’s cloak swirls behind him as he moves around the majestic throne; drawn by curiosity and determination, Micah is able to pick himself, up on his feet, and follow. Behind the throne is a plain wall; the King stands there and says without looking at him, “Micah, stay where you are. You cannot come in front of me; it is not my time. Do you understand this?”

Micah nods and doesn’t move.

The King’s hand goes to his cloak and it opens. Micah’s eyes are met with a searing blast of dazzling white light exuding from beneath the parted cloak; the harsh light washes over the wall and illuminates a hidden door. Micah must turn around for fear of being blinded, and he reaches his hands up to claw at his eyes, but in the very next instant he is lost in darkness. He opens his eyes and slowly turns; the King is standing, veiled in his cloak, face hidden, and ushering one hand towards an arched doorway leading to a hidden chamber.

Micah looks at the King strangely and follows the path. He finds himself inside a circular room made of bare stone; it looks muddy and dirty in the dim light, a stark contrast to the beautiful and clean, pristine and pure world outside. In the middle of the dirty, cobblestone room is a single sphere of stone, and sticking out of the stone is the handle of a sword. The King’s presence swirls around Micah and he approaches the stone; he takes the hilt in his hand and pulls. There is the sound of wind and fire and then the sword is in his hands, the blade glistening a cool sapphire. The King turns it over and over in his hands, face somehow glowing in the shadow of the hood. He speaks:

“This is the Sword of the Shining Ones,” he begins. “As long as it rests in the hands of the Rose of Sharon, the righteous have a future. It has seen an insurmountable amount of bloodshed, ever since the conception of time. It has seen numerous sins, visited many dark and mysterious worlds, been witness to the cold of many moons, has plunged into the depths of the greatest oceans and spilt blood on the most beautiful Mountain. It was forged by the very breath of God and rests in the hands of His Son.”

All of Micah’s energy vanished and he felt ready to collapse.

The King looks at him.

Micah falls upon his knees, feeling the incredible power, humbled by the presence, terrified by the knowledge.

The King gently says, "Please. Stand. You have nothing to fear from me. Yes, I am powerful. Yes, I am full of wrath. But look: I am also compassionate, understanding, gentle and humble. I am a servant and a King. I give you permission to stand."

Micah numbly gets to his feet.

The King holds out the sword handle towards the fear-agape man. "Touch its blade. You seek understanding, do you?"

Micah's mouth is dry. The sword forged by the breath of God...

"Touch it," the King says, "and see what kind of story you find yourself in."

Micah reaches out, obeys, and the tips of his fingers brush the cold steel. In a moment the cool blue explodes in a fiery cerulean burst that sends electricity through his arm. He feels his arm go numb and then pain erupts within his head; before he can scream, he is lost in a sea of visions, a harvest of prophecy, that he cannot remember who nor where he is.

Darkness. Unperturbed darkness. Loneliness. *Nothing*. Light. Brilliance. Power. Explosion. Particles. Light; oh God!, so much light! A burst of radiance surrounding him, the humming of a million years; chunks of dirt clinging together, spinning around; matter condensing, glowing. Stars. Small. Medium. Large. Gigantic. Chunks of rock smoothing out by erosion and friction, the pull of gravity, lurching around the gravitational fields of the stars. The planets shake with volcanoes and ice; and then some burst with color, all kinds of shades and hues, and from the dirt arises creatures and hope. Life! Life flourishes, abounds everywhere. Different life on different worlds. The galaxy forming, contorting, evolving. Life breathing, producing, evolving.

A brilliant creature, whose face glows like the sun and whose arms glisten like bronze pillars. A beautiful creature who smiles—but behind the smile is deceit. A beautiful creature who takes up his sword, and with billions upon billions of followers, storms across the glass-lit surface, and throwing themselves upon the others, there is great war. Blood stains half the planet and many are lost in the struggle. And then a figure appears, in his hand wielding a single sword covered with a bluish mist; he takes the sword and leads the counter-charge, driving through the enemy, throwing them back and slashing them open. His eyes burn like charcoal and his breath rains sulfur. The rebels are thrown back; and then the beautiful creature faces the man with the glowing sword, and the beautiful creature retreats, raining down curses upon the man with the sword, and promising vengeance. There is great flight, much fear, and yet at the same time much celebration. But the man with the sword stands and stares at the heavens, blood clinging to his clothes, and knows: it is not over.

He sees beautiful and horrible landscapes. He sees pristine oceans filled with all kinds of marine life he has never imagined; he sees forests carved of rock, and he sees the sky filled with galaxies and supernovas and all kinds of galactic spectaculars. He sees sandy beaches, sparkling rivers, great canyons and breathtaking forests. And he sees charred wasteland; he sees the remains of civilization; he sees ghost towns on hundreds of world, and he hears their screams—oh God!, the screams tear through him—and all the screams cry one word, one name, resonating within, driving him crazy: “Mihael! Mihael! Mihael!”

He falls back from the sword, landing hard on the floor, eyes rolling into the back of his head.

V

Light comes in through the windowsill when recollection returns. He groans in slight discomfort and turns an aching neck; a little alien by his bedside makes a surprised noise, makes a movement, stops, then bolts from the room, knocking over his—or her—chair. It is hard to tell who is who in this culture. The man turns and looks out the window to a great day with a cool trio of the suns—the seasons are different here and are determined by the alignment of the suns; when all are in sight of the planet, it is warm; when they all line up in a row, it is cold. As the suns rearrange themselves in an archaic dance, different seasons fall upon the people of this world.

The King enters, says hello to Micah, picks up the chair, and sits down. “Beautiful morning.”

Micah coughs, “Yeah.”

Micah’s hands reach up to his eyes.

“No, no,” the King says, keeping Micah’s hands back. “They are bandaged.”

“Bandaged?”

The King laughs. “You have seen the glory of the King. It is a small price to pay.”

“I don’t understand...” He asks, “Why can’t you just answer my questions? My family...”

“What you saw,” the King says, “is not prophetic. It is past. You saw the creation of the worlds, spun from my Father’s hand. You saw the Great Rebellion... You will learn of this later. And you saw the many places the Rebel has taken hostage. So many lives lost...” He looks at Micah’s hard profile. “And you heard their voices. Voices crying out for vengeance.”

Micah looks at him. “What is Mihael?”

“Mihael?” the King asks. He pauses, then replies, “Mihael is *you*.”

It takes a moment for the revelation to register. “Me?”

The King shifts in his seat. “Yes. You.”

“I don’t understand—”

Laughing, “Not yet. You know it all. Your amnesia is holding it back, for now.”

“Amnesia???”

“It is from the travel. And to be expected. The speed at which you were traveling nearly bordered the speed of light. The nerves and such in your brain move at the speed of light. Since they are slowed down during travel, there will sometimes be some... problems... during the flight. It all rearranges itself, though. It is how I’ve designed them.”

“Designed? You?”

“Haven’t you been listening? Yes. I am the Son of God, and I am the one who designed everyone and everything. It is I who brought this world—this great universe of swirling galaxies—into existence. It is I who names the stars and names your souls. It is I who created the Grays with the spoken word, and it is I who formed your people out of the dust of the earth. And I am the one who has come to redeem my world—the world brutally snatched from me.”

“The beautiful one,” Micah says.

“Yes. He was a great one. One of the best. But that is another story... You must rest.”

“I want to see my family,” Micah interjects.

The King is compassionate. “I know, I know. But that time has not yet come. Sleep well.”

And the King leaves him.

A few days later Micah is able to stand and walk around. One day when he is in the courtyard, the King approaches him, almost appearing from nowhere. “Are you healthy enough to walk?” he asks.

Micah looks over at him in surprise. “Walk? Yes. I’ve been walking for nearly a day now.”

“It is quite a walk. Are you up to it?”

Micah stands. “Where are we going?”

The King leads the way. “The catacombs.”

Chapter Eight

“A human being is part of a whole, called by us the ‘Universe,’ a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest--a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.”

– Max Frisch

I

The corridor reminds him of the hallway whence he had passed before coming before Shadow, the wizard-god. His eyes dance over the walls and his insides curl like incense, and if he closes his eyes he can see the corridor back home, he can feel Sarai at his side, he can see the door approaching. And then he can hear the gunfire on the other side of the door, and he remembers the brutal emotions that swept through him, the engrained desire to take life, to rip the soldiers limb-from-limb, to paint a Leonardo da Vinci with their steaming blood. He can remember how the world changed—colors lighting up in the shadows, the soldiers glowing with an ephemeral heat, the way his eyes burned and gasped at the same time, the way he moved—so stealthy, as if dislodged from time; time became a nonexistent reality and he moved outside the realms of physics. All of this returns to him as they descended the sloping corridor, and the King looks over and sees the man’s eyes turning ember-red, muscles bulging, steps becoming more precise.

“You feel it, don’t you?” the King breathes. “You feel your destiny.”

The corridor floods into a courtyard, the cobblestones pure onyx; a diamond fountain in the center of the courtyard held a single tree, its outstretched limbs dripping with honey-like veils. They pass under its shadow and enter another door; finally they reach two guards who bow before the King and let him pass. A great door of stone is slid open, and after they enter, it is closed behind them. The smooth stone walls become irregular and disjointed, and water and lime drip from the ceiling, splattering on their heads, on the King’s cloak, and the water runs between the jagged cracks in the eroding stones. For minutes they walk, navigating a labyrinth of pale green stone. Finally they emerge into a massive circular room with several entries; coming out of the ceiling is a round rock obtrusion, designs and swivels and symbols carved into its face.

The King turns, looks at Micah. “These are the catacombs. Within the walls are the prominent and deceased former leaders of the Shining Ones. From the beginning of their evolution up to only a few hundred years ago, this planet was controlled by the Grays and Grays alone—they had their good leaders, their

righteous leaders, but also their corrupt and atrophic leaders.” He speaks now in a sullen tongue, as if lamenting former age. “The history of their existence is stenciled in these walls.” He swings a cloaked arm up to the protruding global stone. “The history of the universe—from its conception to nearly present age—is written here. It is at the center of the planet’s history, for the Grays understand that they are not the pinnacle of the universe. They are but one grain of sand upon a stretching beach, one atom in a world of molecules, one fish in an ocean of unfathomable depths. This history you know, but you’ve forgotten. Do not fear; you will be redeemed. If you wish to see, seek, and follow.” He begins walking around the stone.

Micah follows after and the King stops before some of the stone, pointing his gloved hand to a pictograph. It appears to be crude and indistinct, but the King brings meaning out of it. “This is the beginning. Before the universe existed, before there was time or space, there was Him and Us. He existed in three separate entities—the King, the Master, the Breath. They existed together outside the realm of space and time, and they existed in balanced harmony. Joy was the nature of their beings. But they decided to do something. Decided to bring the universe into existence. So they did.”

He moves to another pictograph. “This is creation. A moment was born—the very first moment—as the Breath spoke. The Breath’s command shocked the universe into existence. Space expanded in a cosmic boom, sending trillions upon trillions upon trillions of atoms—the King’s design—into the spreading physical world. Over millions of years, these atoms joined together and formed stars. Galaxies were formed. Chunks of stone gathered together, wrenched into place by gravity—the idea of the Master—and planets were formed. The Breath hovered over these planets and spoke life into them. Life flourished upon their faces, guided by the Master’s hand, and over billions of years the Master was delighted to see a vast array of life. Civilizations rose and fell, millions of times over, before the dinosaurs on your own planet even came into existence. This is the Great Work of the God-Head: a beautiful universe with such intricacies, complexities, and diversity. It made Him smile then, and it makes Him smile now.”

Another pictograph. “In the beginning, there was harmony. The planets and their civilizations lived together. Death was not something to be feared, but something to be embraced, a herald into the next world, the next plane of existence, fashioned by the Master’s hand. A paradise. The worlds traded and practiced commerce and celebrated together. There were no weapons, no warfare, no violence. It was perfect, as it was meant to be.” His voice fluctuates with emotion. “How we loved that time so much.”

“But times change,” he says gravely, moving to yet another pictograph. “The Shining Ones are the oldest civilization; it has existed since the beginning. It was on this planet that dissention first showed its ugly face. In this very room.” At his words, the man’s heart chills, and he can feel a hovering evil settling over his shoulders. The curved exterior of the room seems to close in, suffocating him. The King continues to speak: “There was one of them who rose to power and named himself the Son of the Morning, the Daystar, the Son of Dawn. He mesmerized the people... But his heart was wicked. In secret he rose up an army of followers, and was determined to take the place of the King. He was deceived by his greed, and with his Army of rebellious Shining Ones, prepared to assault the Mount of Zion, forty-three miles from this very room. In this room he made out his plans, and it was in this room from whence he set out one night with a third of the Shining Ones at his hand, convincing them the universe would be under their control once they kicked the King out of the Throne.”

His voice turns from one of deep sorrow to one of anger and malice, something new to Micah. He has seen the King as a tender and gracious King, and now there is something else in his voice. Something... almost terrifying. “The Son of the Morning leads his army to the Mountain, and there launches an attack against the Throne. The other Shining Ones who did not turn to his control resisted, and there was war all across the planet. Billions of lives were lost. When it looked bleak for the righteous of the Shining Ones, the Son of Dawn marched into the Temple, and with his sword in hand, attacked the Throne. He did not get within ten feet of it. For the Master met him there, and fought him; and he single-handedly banished him from the presence of the Shining Ones, him and all his followers with him. He sent them to an uninhabited and hellish planet, the planet of Hades in the Anubis System. There the planet is one of fire and brimstone, of unimaginable heat and torture.”

There is a pause and he speaks again: “Enraged by his defeat, the Daystar decides to take advantage of the weakened strength of the Shining Ones. He once more subdues his followers, and they build a city and ships, and thus begins the Great War. The War has lasted for billions upon billions of years. It began with a small planet called Debutin. Upon its watery surface were an ocean-dwelling people, a pleasant and peaceful people—they were enslaved, murdered, destroyed. The Son of the Morning and his followers—calling themselves the Sirians—took control of the planet and built up strength. They were determined to rule the entire universe. Their wickedness, however, did not leave them unscathed. They became as crooked creatures, their former look dissolving to that of horror. They are mere shadows of their former selves, and with each passing hour their wickedness and greed grows stronger and stronger.”

Micah interjects. “And now they have turned to earth.”

The King sadly nods. “Yes. Some time ago, the Sirians turned their eyes upon earth. The Grays had been trying to protect it... But it did not work out. Our forces were spread too thin. We were already taking back several planets. We just didn’t have the power to take back earth.”

“And now you do?” Micah asks, heart aimlessly hopeful.

The King smiles at him. “Yes. Because now, we have *you*.”

Micah doesn’t understand, cannot comprehend. The King explains, “There is an unwritten chapter upon this stone, a period in history that has yet to come into existence. The time for it to be written is at hand.”

Slowly, under his breath, the man begins to understand. “I write this chapter.”

The King touches his shoulder and fire rushes through him. “*We* write this chapter.”

II

“You humans are newcomers on the galactic scene. While other civilizations have flourished about the Milky Way galaxy, humans have arrived only recently, in the last few hundred thousand years. As humans first began hunting and gathering and inventing languages, the Sirian-Gray war raged all around the galaxy. Ancient humans watched in awe as the night sky above them lit up with a billion colors and meteors fell to the earth; in the morning, one Paleolithic woman discovered the rock to be smooth and polished with odd stencils; inspired, she designed her own stencils, which became the first written language on planet earth. The brilliant lights had been a decisive battle between the Sirians and the Shining Ones; the Shining Ones intercepted a Sirian fleet preparing to colonize earth and destroy all life-forms. The last time they had all but succeeded; most of the life-forms had been destroyed by the Sirians before the Grays arrived; before the Sirians could succeed, the Grays encircled the battered planet and blockaded it from attack as the dinosaurs below suffocated in the remnants of a Sirian assault. The Grays recognized promise in the humans, and fought bravely to protect them; the Sirians backed off and the Grays kept constant watch over the humans, studying them and at the same time protecting them from the Sirians. In the earthen year 2005, Sirian forces had drawn the Gray forces thin across the galaxy; the Grays were protecting too many systems, and were forced to draw some forces away from earth. But before they did, a stealth team was inserted and a young man, the chosen one, was drawn out. Years later, the Sirians finally invaded earth and enslaved it.”

Micah feels a burn ignite within him. “I am this young man.”

“Yes. The Grays and Sirians have had their eyes on you humans for a long while before you knew of them in the late 2000s. Life-forms swelled right after the Precambrian Explosion when the Sirians destroyed the green planet of Mars during an epic battle. At this time in history, earth was just filled with poisonous gasses and the only life were small proteins and bacteria. The Sirians won, completely

decimating the planet Mars in their wrath, and the planet turned into a ball of flame for nearly a billion years; when all was said and done, all traces of the alien presence were virtually erased. A small contingent of fleeting Martians placed some of their wild animals on earth; you know them as the first animals from the Precambrian Explosion. The Sirians did not know about this, and did not pay attention to your solar system as earth life-forms grew and evolved. A Gray scouting ship discovered life on the planet, near the beginning of the Triassic Period, and protected it, watching the progress of earth's life-forms. As dinosaurs began to flourish in the Jurassic Period, the Sirians found out about our earth and tried to take you over; the battle ended in much of the life-forms – such as dinosaurs – being wiped out, and only the smaller animals existing. The Sirians smirked at the Grays, but the Grays discovered something beautiful: the rise of the mammals. Creativity, morality, imagination flourished as the humans arose. Angered, the Sirians thrust an attack against the Grays 200,000 years before modern-day; they did not break through, but the entire sky of the planet was covered with a massive stellar battle; the animals were frightened and the early humans mesmerized. When it ended, debris littered the earth in a shower thought to be meteorites, and the incident was never recorded. As the humans evolved, the Grays kept their presence to a minimum; sometimes they would scout out the people at night, and even shift into human form and walk the earth to see how things were going. All the alien sightings were results of the Gray interaction. The Grays decided to set up a zone for studying the humans, studying their weaknesses and strengths and wondering how long until they would be fit for battle against the Sirian threat. This area became known as the Bermuda Triangle, where stealth Gray ships captured humans. Contrary to legend, the humans experienced wonderful things, and fell in love with the hospitality of the Grays and the Gray home-planet. Many became warriors fighting alongside the Grays in distant battles.

“The Sirians (known as the Orions on earth) have one goal: power over all of the Milky Way galaxy. They do not fight all of their own battles, but instead force the citizens of the desired planet to turn against friend and family; this is done by the use of drilling a hole into the base of the subject's skull, and while they are not on duty, submitting the pleasure sensors of the brain to experience pleasure thousands of times more intense than orgasm. They also experiment with genetics, especially interracial breeding. As they invade earth and enslave its citizens, they force the slaves to build weapons of war for their galactic war against the Shining Ones, the only civilization who has been able to hold their own against the original invasion in ages past. In the year 2022, human beings were resisting the Orions in small numbers, oblivious to the great galactic war in which they were only one of many planets being invaded and taken over. The Orion-Gray war continued far from planet earth, and even now battles are being fought, lives are being lost, and unknowing planets are being fought over.”

The King rubs his hand over the smooth stone. “There are planets in this Milky Way, Mihael, who do not know anything of what is happening all around them. They are submerged in war and yet they haven’t a clue. They live their peaceful lives and go shopping and eat their food and live in complete ignorance. Even on earth, no one—*no* one—knows that there is a battle where earth is but one of thousands of civilizations to be enslaved.”

He sees Micah’s jaw drop and says, “Yes. Earth is not special in one sense. There are thousands of other civilizations; earth has fallen to the Sirians and is almost wiped out. Its inhabitants are spread throughout the galaxy as slaves. There are planets who will be invaded tomorrow, next week, next year. And they have no clue. It is a desperate situation. But earth *is* unique in one sense, Mihael. Because earth spawned you.”

III

“The Grays are tiny little creatures, standing between four and five feet tall when full-grown. Their pale white bodies almost glow in the darkness, and their brilliant eyes shine a hue of different colors depending on their mood. Their nimble fingers are designed for toying around with objects and experimenting; they are highly intelligent and gifted not only with extreme intelligence, but also a mind rich in compassion, love, mercy and a desire for peace. Before anyone calls them pansies, they must also know that the Grays are furious fighters; they are highly skilled in the arts of war, design the best weapons, and have the best war machinery. However, their stance is completely defensive, although they have turned to the offensive in the war against the enemy who enslaves earth and countless other hundreds of planets. They are on the defensive, Micah, because the Warrior has not arisen. Not yet.”

Micah wrestles with acceptance. Doubt plagues him; he wants to believe it isn’t true.

“Yes. Let your heart guide you, it won’t lead you stray,” the King says. “The Warrior is one being who was prophesied far before the Precambrian Explosion. This being was to arise and free the Milky Way from the terror who claws at its throat. Mihael. *You* are the Warrior. You have arisen. The world holds its breath. Don’t you see why these people love you? For billions of years there has been word of your coming, and now you have come! These people know more about you than you do, and are thankful you have returned.”

“Returned?” Micah asks.

A chuckle, then, “Yes. *Returned*. Do you remember the monastery?”

Micah nods. “The monks—”

“The monastery was abandoned by humans, refurbished by the Grays. The Grays drew you within, drugged your drinks, and while you were sleeping, took you.”

“Took me from my family.”

“I ordered them to take you. My Father told me to. He designed you. You are a divine creation.”

Micah’s heart grows cold. “You took me from my family—

“Your family,” the King says, “is the most honored family throughout all the universe. Your wife, your parents, your children. They hold places of honor. You will not fully understand until you see them again.”

“In the afterlife.”

“If that is what you desire to call it. But what is the afterlife? What is ‘Heaven’? You humans think you have everything figured out. Heaven is simply another universe. A pure and undefiled universe where the cultures live in complete harmony. It is here that your family waits for you. From this universe they can see you, even now, and they are overjoyed at your true name.”

“My true name...”

“At birth, you were called Mihael. And you came to know the name Michael before you came here. But on the way, you first heard it: Mihael. Who is Mihael? *You* are Mihael. Mihael is your Aramaic name; in English, your name is Michael. Michael the Archangel. You are the God-Head’s chosen instrument, chosen by the Creator, the Sustainer, the King. The God-Head is set against the Sirians for their wickedness, and He is allied with the Shining Ones—and all who resist, whether they know this grand story or not. The Shining Ones are His redeemed children, and they await glorification when the Sirians are absolutely vanquished. Micah. Michael. Mihael. You are the Warrior of God; you are literally indebted with the Warrior Spirit, the Warrior Breath, of the God-Head. He has granted you the power to save earth, to redeem earth, and to bring the Kingdom of the King—the Kingdom of Heaven—to humans everywhere—and to stretch its beauty throughout the entire Milky Way galaxy.”

IV

“But your story,” the King says, “does not begin here. At first you remembered only a single dream: taken by angels within that monastery. As the story unfolded, you have had more and more dreams coinciding with the revelations of your being the chosen one, designed by the King to redeem humanity and bring justice against the oppressors; the prophecy is thousands of years old, spawned from twisted prophets in ancient Babylon. You begin to learn that on the night you disappeared, you were not taken by angels, but abducted by aliens quite unlike those who would rape planet earth and its inhabitants. These aliens had been studying human anatomy and ability for thousands of years, and had chosen you through the King’s counsel to be the one to bring redemption to humanity and justice for their own. These aliens had transplanted a dream in the old yet wizened Babylonian prophet, and over the course of seventeen years, the aliens took you to their own home planet—here!—, where you were told the truth. You could not deny it, and out of your love for your family, you underwent training and schooling, learning the arts

of ancient and modern war; you also learned how to operate alien machinery, including how to pilot alien aircraft. This explains, does it not, how you were able to pilot the pod and drop-ship without any prior experience? In earth's year of 2015, you participated in an epic war between the good aliens and the bad aliens, piloting a starship across the galaxy. You were comfortable around these aliens and felt at home. When you learned earth had long ago fallen into enemy hands, you were devastated, and desperately wanted to see if your family was all right. You had seen the devastation on other planets and knew it unlikely. You had been told you were the one to bring redemption and justice, and asked permission to travel to earth. Permission was denied, and in your sleep, you were drugged, boarded on a stealth spacecraft, and returned to the monastery. Your memory was temporarily wiped to protect you from just going all-out against the enemy. We knew you would have to integrate slowly if you were to truly be the harbinger of what was deserved. We knew he would do fine, and awaited the chance to strike at the enemy when the Sirians were weak. They only had to wait on *you*."

Micah soaks up his words, struggling to understand. "The way I fought... During the assault..."

"You were acting off instinct. It is buried deep within you. It only needs to be resurrected."

"All of this... It is like a dream. It's like I'm not really here. It's like a movie or something, and I'm right in it."

"It won't be that way for long. All of this is new to you—but the circuits of your human brain will be spun back to normal and you will remember everything, crystal clear, and will be adequately prepared."

"Adequately prepared for what?"

Underneath his hood, the King grins. "The counter-invasion of earth."

Chapter Nine

“The most beautiful things in the universe are the starry heavens above us and the feeling of duty within us.” – Indian proverb

I

The golden arch reflects his face as he walks underneath and enters the cavernous room. The walls are pure silver, sparkling with the sun against their backs, and the skylight lets in wan morning light. The light falls across a crescent table, the bow facing away from him; along the bow of the table, facing him, sits a host of Grays wearing chest armor of pure steel. Micah stands before the table, the King behind him. The Grays stare at him for the longest time, then one after the other, in a rhythmic sequence, they slowly kneel down, lowering their bulbous heads towards him. Micah feels power shimmering in the air and the hairs on the back of his neck prickle.

Micah glances over his shoulder, throwing a dumbfounded look to the King.

The King lowers his head and says, “They are at your service.”

Micah turns his head around to see one of the aliens standing. The alien’s wide calamari eyes are as dark and bottomless as an ancient tomb, and as he speaks Micah’s breath is taken away. “I am Lu’Neluray. I am the leader of the Gray Army, segment Alpha.”

The alien at the far opposite end of the table stands, drawing Micah’s attention. “I am Je’ChaChuChug, leader of the Gray Army, segment Epa.”

The aliens continue to stand, each presenting his name and title.

We’Beshufaph, leader of the Gray Army, segment Omega.

Ge’Farufuth, leader of the Gray Marines, segment Alpha.

Mu’Wemivir, leader of the Gray Marines, segment Epa.

Pho’Niphicak, leader of the Gray Marines, segment Omega.

Lhi’Kucighoz, leader of the Gray Squadrons, segment Alpha.

Xu’Thiecec, leader of the Gray Squadrons, segment Epa.

Va’Heguchub, leader of the Gray Squadrons, segment Omega.

Quo’Quedanami, commander of the Gray Army

Yo’Dishosav, commander of the Gray Marines..

An alien now stands, whose very presence draws Micah’s attention, an open doorway demanding exploration. Micah mentally probes the creature as he speaks, searching, exploring, attempting to discover *why* this creature draws such divine attention. And as the creature speaks, once giving his name and giving his title,

Micah understands. His eyes grow wide as the alien says, "I am called Pi'Zodakan. I am the commander of the magnificent Gray Squadrons."

Micah raises a finger. "You..."

The alien smiles, global eyes twinkling. "I am at your service, Master."

"That day..." Micah is saying... "at the bus stop..." The memories return, a torrential flood. "The dancer--"

The alien smiles and says, "We were watching you for quite a while."

"What's your name?" Micah asks again.

The alien grins wider, and in the squeaking voice: "Pi'Zodakan."

Micah lowers his finger.

All the aliens resound in one voice: "We will follow where you may lead us."

The meeting goes underway. The King brings out a seat for Micah and sits him in the bow of the crescent table, a seat of honor. All of the aliens lean forward on the table, and through their nearly-translucent skin Micah can almost see their massive brains stirring and growling. Each alien presents their own battle plans. Micah sits through them all, one after the other, giving each warrior his say. The warriors pull out flat digital screens that include ideas for the recapture of earth. All, Micah notices, are "rather cautious."

One of the aliens fidgets. "We cannot rush into this. We rushed into a planet a few years ago. We nearly lost all our ships."

Micah is oblivious. "You are telling me that we're going to land on a remote part of the land and colonize a base before even sending out skirmishing troops?"

The aliens look at one another. Pi'Zodakan grins, but tries to hide it. The aliens respond, almost hesitantly, "It's the logical--"

"No," Micah says.

The King, hiding in the background, raises his eyebrows underneath the hood.

One of the aliens cocks his head to the side. "No?"

"No," Micah firmly repeats. He pushes the chair back, standing. "I have not walked through the blood-stained hallways of my home to go into cautiously. I have not found my daughter's skeleton in the bathtub just so we can go in cautiously. I did not run in sewers filled with muck so we could go in cautiously. No! Did the Sirians come in cautiously? Did they give any kind of warning? Were they subversive in any way? Then why should *we* be?" He looks at every one of them, the fiery light behind his eyes casting their gazes away. "Why are we to let them have the upper-hand? Why are we to treat them as if they are better than us? They are *fallen* creatures. They are *fallen* Grays! They were, at one time, you."

One of the aliens stands and growls, "Blasphemy!"

The King strides forward. "Sit down, Quo'Quedanami." His voice forces Quo'Quedanami into his chair. The King stands behind Micah, his seeping gaze sweeping over all those present. "He speaks the truth." There are muffled gasps; Micah wonders, *How could they have not known?* "We like to think it is myth. We like to think that the Grays could never be such vile creatures, that the Grays could

never do such horrific things. We like to think we are above that. But you are not. The Sirians are the Grays at their worst. They are just as powerful as you, only their powers thrive on wickedness, not righteousness. Their goal is stealing, killing, destroying, but your goal is life. Life here, in the civilization of the Shining Ones, and life through the universe. The time has come. The time has come for the Final Battle to be fought. And it starts with earth. We will take earth. We will rid it of the Sirian presence. But, Friends, we will not stop there. There are countless hundreds of planets enslaved under the Sirian rule. Every one shall be redeemed. We will push the Sirians back to Hades." He draws a deep breath. "And even fight in its fire and brimstone hearth."

The pale blue of the Grays' skins shifts a pallid white for a moment, then returns to hue, the shock absorbing.

The King begins to pace. "This is not just another planet we have strategically chosen to redeem. What is so important about earth? Its oceans are polluted. Its atmosphere is eroding. The humans have treated earth as if it were a wastebasket. So why do we choose to start with earth? Why have we chosen a representative of earth to lead, alongside me, the battles of my Father? No answers? On earth, there is still *hope*. The humans have not given up on hope. They fight, and will fight to the death. To most of them, surrender is an unthinkable choice. And this is why we start here. An uprising is happening at this very moment, and we will bring that uprising into redemption. That uprising is the first of many. This universe will be brought back into harmony."

The King slinks back into the shadows, leaving Micah and the aliens alone. There is an unperturbed silence for six lifetimes before one of the aliens, in a crackling voice, weakly puts forth, "What, then, are the terms of surrender for the Sirians?"

Micah glares at the alien, his eyes burning as perpetual incense. He is astounded and mocks the very idea. "There will be no quarter given. Every last one of them is to be destroyed."

Pi'Zodakan looks down at the table, a grin widening in the shadows.

The alien who had asked about the surrender treaty coughs and says, "Very well."

Pi'Zodakan stands. "Sir?"

Micah looks over at him, feels a certain comfort in the eyes of the warrior. "Yes?"

"When do we depart for earth?" All the aliens look up at this question, itching for the question to be answered.

Micah glances back at the King, who remains unstill. He returns his focus to Pi'Zodakan: "Prepare the troops. We depart tomorrow morning."

II

Micah is alone inside the chamber, eyes throwing themselves against the dozen or so scattered doors. The King had placed him inside the chamber with one command: “Remember! See!” The door had closed and now Micah stands absolutely alone, the chill biting into his bones, his breath fogging before his face in vanishing ice crystals.

There is a grinding noise and an alien enters, a white beard growing beneath his chin. The alien’s ancient eyes hide great secrets and treasures to never be explored. He approaches Micah, raising nimble hands.

Another door opens. And another. And another. And another. Elderly aliens, dripping with wisdom, power, and intellect, enter the chamber and slowly walk towards Micah; they all slowly raise their arms horizontal to the ground, then twist their wrists back towards them, so that the palms face the bewildered human being.

They speak their names as they approach, and each quiet name sends electricity through him.

Isaiah
 Jeremiah
 Ezekiel
 Daniel
 Hosea
 Joel
 Amos
 Obadiah
 Jonah
 Micah
 Nahum
 Habakkuk
 Zephaniah
 Haggai
 Zachariah
 Malachi

One by one their tiny fingers envelop with Micah’s soul, probing deep within, and their touch sends shockwaves through him that parallel the most ungrateful bolts of electricity to ever strike earth. His head flies back and he begins to cough, to choke, his soul heating, warming, as if dipped into a sauna, and he cannot react, cannot resist, but is held captive, forced against his will. He struggles for breath but finds none; his lungs open and close but fill only with sulfur. His lungs scream, enraged, and the voices of the aliens—oh, those ancient prophets whom the religious murdered, sending them to their destiny!—echo one another and chant in a foreign tongue which Micah knows only from his dizzying subconscious; they chant Aramaic and it grows louder and louder, stronger and stronger, until Micah

feels as if his insides are melting, his blood bubbling, his own eyes steaming into gaseous form under the burning, insufferable heat.

The world around him abruptly grows dark and cold and he finds himself bathing in a sea of tingling mist. He feels the worries of a million generations slide into disillusionment, and he finds himself, for once in eternity, at peace. Utopia. Nirvana. He is swimming in a sea of nothingness; stress, anxiety, fear, all vanquished. And then the world around him begins to take shape. The mist begins to conform into shapes and textures and become three-dimensional. He watches in amazement as he finds himself standing in a field of whispering wheat, the sun on his shoulders, the birds singing in the trees. He kneels down and brushes his palms over the wheat, can feel the buds brushing against his nerves. *This is real.* The scent of the wheat takes him back to a time when, as a youth, he would go to the winery with his uncle and he would walk through the rows of grapes ready to be compressed.

And then he hears laughter; at first he cannot believe it, or refuses to believe it, but the laughter grows louder, and then it calls out his name: "Daddy! Daddy!" He wrenches his head up and sees a young girl running through the wheat; she is nineteen years old with deep chocolate hair flowing behind her. A beautiful dress clings to her as she runs; Micah brings himself up and surges through the wheat, and meeting her in the field, embraces her tight, swinging around. The girl kisses him hard on the forehead and they fall into the wheat, rolling and laughing. She gets up and runs; he picks himself up and runs after her, and grabbing her up in his arms, swings her up into the air. She laughs and giggles, and turning around in his hands, falls upon him, embracing him tighter.

He pushes her away and strokes her hair. "I'm so sorry..." he breathes, tears sliding down his face. "I'm so sorry..."

The girl grins. "Daddy. Daddy, it's okay."

"I'm so sorry... Oh God, I'm so sorry... I never... I never..."

"I know now," she says. She tugs at his shirt. "Daddy. Please. Don't cry. I understand now. It is wonderful. It is really wonderful!"

But he can't stop crying. He brings her close and holds her again. "Oh God, I've wanted to hold you. I've wanted to hold you like this for the longest time. All I wanted was to see your face again. To hear your voice. To hear your life. You are all I have thought about."

The girl squeezes her daddy and whispers in his ear, "It's okay. Daddy. It's okay now." He sobs into her shoulder for an eternity. She says, "They want to see you, too, Daddy. They want to see you, too."

He pulls away, and looking at her with bloodshot eyes, manages through the tears, "Who?"

"Mommy and Nicole."

He turns and looks across the wheat field, can see them standing in the foreground of a magnificent villa with courtyards filled with gardens and trees. They wave at him. He looks over at Molly with wild eyes.

His little girl says, "Go to them, Daddy! We've been watching you. We've wanted to hold you and kiss you, too. We've wanted to hear your voice. We've wanted to feel your touch. We've wanted to hear your laughter."

The man kisses his daughter hard, and holding her hand in his own, refusing to let go, sprints across the wheat-field. His daughter is laughing behind him, almost being dragged along. He reaches Claire and Nicole and throws his one arm around them both, tugging them to him, and the four of them hug.

Micah's heart bursts and he falls to his knees, crying uncontrollably, the tears staining the earth. His family falls beside him, whispering sweet-nothings in his ears. He looks at Claire and feels as if everything is complete, this is his destiny.

He looks to Nicole, and seeing her, the daughter he never spoke to, and hearing her say, "Hi, Daddy," just sends him back down, and he grabs her with both arms and yanks her against him. She laughs and cries, too, and the tears of joy flow like rivers of living water. He kisses her hard and can feel her breathing, the flesh-and-blood daughter of his own, not a skeleton but a girl with hopes and dreams and passions, laughter and love.

She kisses him back and he says, "I'm here... Finally... I'm here... Thank God..."

The girls stop laughing. Claire takes him by the hand. "Micah... Micah, you can't stay."

He glares at her. "What? No... No..."

She smiles weakly, clutching his hands tight in her own. "You have to go..."

Then another voice, one that is familiar: "I was wrong about you."

Micah turns his head and sees Hal Greenstone coming towards him, David on the right and the little girl Laura on the left. David smiles at him and Laura waves. "Hi, Michael!"

Hal Greenstone says, "Sarai was right. You are the One. It is the destiny that has been handed to you."

"No," he says to Greenstone. "No..." He looks over at his wife, his daughters. "I can't go. No. I have to stay here--"

"You have to go," Nicole says. Molly echoes it.

Claire says, "You make us so proud."

Micah's voice is quivering with tears. "No, please, no..."

His wife kisses him sweetly, then waves a hand out. "These people need you."

He follows her hand and suddenly the landscape in all directions is filled with people. Billions upon billions of people.

His voice goes dry. "Who are they?"

"The ones whom the invaders took," his wife answers. "Your calling is to avenge them."

And then the people start cheering. The cries of their cheers shake the heavens and the birds fly into the sky. The earth quakes beneath him and he is thrown back. All the people, from the men to the women to the little boys and girls, even the elderly, are all dancing up and down, screaming his name, applauding. It feels as if the ground is going to erupt and swallow him whole.

But Micah is indignant. He wants his family, and his family alone. This place... It's so perfect...

Claire leans forward, as if reading his mind, and placing her hand on his heart, says, "Then see, and let's see if you don't change your mind!"

Everything changes. He is wrapped in the bubbly mist of splashing and splurging quantum foam, a scotch concoction that swims through him like an ephemeral virus. He cries out for his family, for now they are lost, memories once again, and the world departs, and he leaves that perfect and sublime universe; transported through time, he now sees his own house. He can see the windows are open and the streets are clear. The lawn is freshly cut. It looks picturesque—but over the mountains a growling menace grows, a deep cloud of dark dissention. The city in the distance is engulfed in flames and the highways are clogged with traffic. Giant machines crawl the land, blasting apart vehicles and sending any breathing creature to the dark and unknown dimensions.

He sees people now running in the streets, and now he is inside his home. He sees Claire peering out the window; his two daughters stand behind her. Molly is pacing back and forth and Nicole is numbly staring at the door. Claire is speaking but Micah hears nothing but an uneasy silence. Molly sits on the couch, rocking back and forth. Tears begin to stream down her face. Nicole continues to stand in the middle of the room and Claire is at the window, words rolling off her tongue, face clenched tight.

The house shakes; dust falls from the rafters and everyone looks up in terror. Nicole creeps towards the front door; Claire abandons the window and runs after her. Molly is watching everything from the couch. Nicole is grabbing at the door; Claire is fighting her off, yelling at her; suddenly the door bursts open, hitting Claire in the face; she falls against the stairwell banister and crumples to the parlor floor.

Mortified, Nicole scrambles up the steps. Dark shapes enter the room and they are carrying the same guns that had targeted upon Micah so many times. Claire reaches up and one of the guards kicks her down; Micah screams at him but can't hear a thing, not even his own voice. Molly shrieks and leaps up, running after the soldier; the soldier aims his gun and pulls the trigger. The bullet drills through Molly's brain and erupts out of the back of her head, splattering the wall with a corselet of blood. Her body crumples forward, landing hard beside her mother.

Claire is screaming at the bored hole in the back of her daughter's head. Micah falls to his knees, a screeching banshee. Claire fights against the intruders but they pin her down; one of them runs up the steps.

Micah climbs onto the stairwell and follows after the soldier, yelling at him to stop. The soldier doesn't respond. The door to the master bedroom is locked; he kicks it down and enters, firing all throughout the room, scattering bullets everywhere. There is no movement. He can hear something in the bathroom, but the door is locked. Micah throws himself at the soldier but passes right through him, slamming into the wall. He writhes around just as the soldier kicks down the door. He jumps into the bathroom, throwing his body between the soldier and his precious daughter. The soldier stands there in the doorway for an eternity before turning his back and leaving. Micah slowly turns and sees his daughter's eyes going wide and face growing cold; her wrists are slashed and blood covers the porcelain tub. He falls down to his knees again, but is driven mad by the sound of his wife screaming. He runs out of the bathroom, through the bedroom, into the hallway, and down the steps. His wife is being dragged into a drop-ship along with dozens of other people. She is screaming for help; he can't reach her in time. The ramp closes and the ship lifts away.

The bubbles swarm around him and he feels himself contorting. He keeps seeing Molly's brains splashing against the wall, keeps seeing the bathtub filling with his daughter's blood, keeps seeing his wife screaming as she is forced into the drop-ship. Now he sees a vast land of sand and stone, an entire planet overcome with excruciating heat under a quartet of suns. He sees thousands of humans slaving in mines, bent over in exhaustion and deprivation, mere skeletons, working off two hours of sleep a night. They are dropping dead in the heat, unable to carry themselves. The weak are executed by senseless guards in mechanical suits. He sees his wife in a tunnel, driven to a cold and desolate ending, lost in a sea of regrets and painful memories, nothing to hope for, nothing to look forward to. He sees the load she is carrying fall, and he sees her slide against the wall, crumpling down. A soldier comes by and yells at her; he picks her up and carries her to the surface. Prisoners numbly watch as she is thrown against a wooden pole and given a quick slash to the throat with a scythe razor. Barely any blood comes out and she is gone before the blade touches her. Micah falls prostrate in the sand, kissing her bare and knobby feet.

He finds himself once again a traveler in quantum foam. Except this time he is taken to a world so desolate and hopeless that his heart melts at the sight of it. A world of broken rock and fiery chasms of fire. A world of lava geysers and infernal canyons of magma. A world of screams and cries and the whippings upon the tortured. And he sees a labyrinth carved of stone, with wicked spires and gray steeples, and he sees a throne of charcoal, and sitting upon it a creature so foul, so rank, that the very gaze of those burning red eyes makes Micah shiver inside his own skin, makes his heart freeze over and cease to beat. An ungodly creature who stands six feet tall and wears a cloak of black, and in his hand carries a scythe blade covered with blood. Flames surround this creature of the darkness, and from

its dark precipices exudes the most chilling sound, a horrendous shriek that would make the most ghostly of creatures shrivel in shame. A scream that causes Micah to cry out for death itself.

And then he is surrounded by the aliens, who withdraw their hands. The world spins around them, he sees their bulbous eyes and can almost read their thoughts. He pitches forward; the aliens scatter and let him fall on hands and knees. Spit and bloody dribble slides down his chin and he hacks up bile. His entire body quivers and is speckled with cold sweat.

The aliens quickly depart, leaving Micah alone. A figure enters, and the King kneels beside Micah, taking his hand. The mere touch brings healing. Micah looks up at the King, chest heaving, fighting for breath. "Who... Who was... Who was that?"

The King solemnly answers, "The Son of the Morning. Now the 'Son of the Mourning.'"

Micah stares at the ground, slowly regaining control. "When he looked at me... I couldn't..."

"His essence is pure evil," the King says. "There is no good in him. Not one iota."

"Please tell me... Please... I don't have to fight him..."

The King grimaces. "No. That honor is left to *me*."

Micah maneuvers himself into a sitting position.

The King cocks his head to the side. "How do you feel?"

"Different... But the same."

"Except now you understand. Now it all makes sense."

"Yeah."

"It doesn't negate your experiences. You are still Micah Freeman. But you're also more."

"I am Michael the Archangel."

The King grins. "Yes. Yes, that you are."

A pause, then, "I always knew, I guess... But I'd never... Never *seen* it." His eyes close as he ponders, searches for the right words. "When they touched me, I saw them. I saw my family. I *talked* with them. They were fine. They were... okay."

"You were graced to cross the planes to the pure and undefiled universe."

"Heaven."

The King nods. "Yes. Whatever you wish to call it."

"So my family is safe?"

"Perfectly safe. No one can take them now."

Micah finds comfort in the words. "I saw all these people--"

"You do not fight merely for your own vengeance. You fight for the vengeance of others."

His strength is returning. "King... I saw what they did to my family... I saw them kill my daughter. I saw them take my wife. I saw my daughter... driven to cut her own wrists."

"The sufferings in this life," the King says, "are mere ills when compared to the grandeur of the next."

"I don't care," he says with arising passion. "Do you know what my greatest fear was, growing up? I used to think my greatest fear was being alone. Never having a family of my own. But I came to realize that, no, that wasn't my greatest fear. The fear above all others was having a family—and then having them taken away from me, especially by the hand of another." He looks at the King, pure passion steaming in his bones. "*No one touches my family.*"

The King smiles. "And what are you going to do about it, Mihael?"

"I'm going to kill every one of them."

"It's time," the King says, "to unleash the bowls of the Father's wrath."

Micah gets to his feet. "Change of plans: we depart for earth tonight."

III

The twin suns are setting in opposite direction, sending shimmering rainbow corsets of light over the raised platforms scattered throughout the magnificent city. Upon these hundreds of platforms are hundreds of ships, loading up with supplies and soldiers. The ships carry themselves into the sky, ranging from the sizes of football stadiums to Manhattan Island. Micah steps onto a platform through a rising glass elevator and lifts his head to the sky to see thousands of ships lifting off and disappearing in the golden atmosphere, combining in the starry heavens above, awaiting the moment to open the wormhole.

A sleek ship rests upon the platform before him, the hide shimmering like polished silver. A set of three ramps are down; alien troops armed with their spears are entering the vessel on the two side ramps; the middle ramp is observed for Micah, and upon it stand several aliens who wear bronze armor and leather-strapped helmets. They carry two spears and kneel before Micah as he approaches; Micah tells them to stand and they do so. Micah knows each and every one of them intimately, and he kisses them on the forehead and embraces them as brothers.

The King beckons Micah back, and tells him, "I will see you on earth." Micah bows before him; the King says, "Go with my Father's favor."

Micah turns and faces the twelve men before him. He meets their eyes and says, "This is what we have been waiting for. This is what we have been training for. In what will seem like a few moments we will enter earth's atmosphere. My friends, I ask that you fight with me—and if the need calls, die with me. Can you do this?"

One by one they echo, "We will fight and, if needed, die for you."

Micah grins. Micah walks past them and up the ramp. "Then let's prepare ourselves."

The aliens turn their eyes from the platform, and bowing before the King, turn and follow their commander.

Shimon Kefa, the great warrior who would die rather than see the King disgraced.

Skippo Gato, the one from distant lands who had become a Shining One at the bidding of the King.

Andreas, the brother of Shimon Kefa, whose heart beat for all of the Shining Ones.

Yaakov the son of Zavdai, who with his brother beside him, Yohanon, would make the heavens split and buckle under the fiery of his wrath.

Filipos, the warrior who spent his free time writing poetry and song.

Bartalmai, the warrior who had fought in the farthest reaches of space, and even been present in the dining hall the day Micah was taken to fulfill his destiny.

Toma, the one who cannot not touch anything, whose curiosity drives him to peril.

Mattai, who for a time knew the treachery of the Sirians as their captive, but escaped in a bloodbath performed by his own hands.

Yaakov the son of Halfi, a quiet and soft-spoken fellow, but whose voice with the spear was known to all Sirians everywhere.

Taddai, the one who owned a small house and filled it with all kinds of creatures, who in his spare time on distant planets, filled notebooks with stencils and diagrams of the picturesque wildlife.

Shimon the Zealot, who would sometimes travel to distant lands and fight segments of the Sirian population just for the thrill of the hunt.

And Matthias, who had joined the band only a few years earlier, when Yehuda of Keriot turned his back on the Shining Ones and embraced the degraded cruelty of the Sirians.

Twelve soldiers with Micah at the head. The point force for a swift blitzkrieg invasion with millions of troops deploying simultaneously across the planet.

Micah finds the room where he has been called, and sits down. The ship is still taking supplies when an older alien woman enters. She smiles at Micah and shuts the door, then says, "Tell me, Mihael: do you remember who I am?"

Her voice demands his thoughts. "I don't know..."

"We have not met... Since that day... So long ago."

It comes to him...

The woman laughs. "Yes, yes, you know!"

"You were the woman with the baby carriage. The baby doll!"

"Yes, it was me. I was making sure you were... Ready. Anyways." She turns her back to him and fiddles with some machines. "We have to make sure your human blood isn't coagulating, or you could be in for a very long trip."

"What's that mean?"

“We’re entering a wormhole,” the woman says, pulling out a metal paddle, slowly maneuvering it before him, listening to the beeps. “Earth is seventy-five thousand years away. We say years because the distance is just unfathomable to even our own large brains! A year is the equivalent of a light year, or the distance light travels in a year. Light travels two hundred ninety-nine million, seven hundred and two thousand, four hundred and fifty-eight meters a second. In a year, light will travel is... well... we can’t comprehend it. The Milky Way galaxy, as you call it, is 100,000 light-years across. The nearest star to earth is 4.3 light-years away. The distance to the Apollo Galaxy is 50 million light-years away from earth. And we can see 18 billion light-years into the past, so we know the age of the universe is around 18 billion years old.”

Micah is struggling to understand. “What’s that have to do with us going to earth?”

“If we were to travel to earth in, let’s say, a straight line, from here to there, it would take us seventy-five thousand years traveling at the speed of light. Granted, we cannot travel at the speed of light because at that speed, we cease to exist. We fall apart. We travel slightly under it. A wormhole is a tear or stretch in the space-time continuum that lets us get to earth on a different route. So instead of seventy-five thousand years, it takes us seventeen-thousand years. Of course, to us, it seems like about seventeen minutes because the speed at which we travel slows down our bodily functions immensely. In other words, Mihael, our travel to earth will take up seventeen years earth-time, but seventeen minutes for us!”

Micah is beginning to understand. “That means...” He looks at her. “When I came here...”

“It took seventeen years,” she said. “But you were passed out so it didn’t even seem like seventeen minutes. But earth aged seventeen years.”

“And by the time we get to earth...”

“It will have aged another seventeen years.”

His mind goes hollow, blank. *Sarai*. “I had a friend...”

“She will have aged... what?... thirty-five years. How old was she when you left?”

“I don’t know. Twenty-nine? Thirty?”

“Then she could be sixty-five years old.”

The woman tries to tell him gently. “We don’t know what to expect. We don’t know if there are even humans resisting, much less left. But there are always pockets, whether or not they are resisting. We *will* find a minor population, and when we redeem earth, they will be redeemed and the Sirians vanquished, and-“

He interrupts her. “I just... I just can’t believe...”

“I know it’s hard to understand,” the little alien says. “But sometimes these things are difficult to grasp. They are... astounding physics.”

“She has probably lost hope that I am returning.”

“Maybe,” the woman says. “But it doesn’t change the fact that you *are* returning.”

“I wonder,” he says, “if she will remember me?”

“Oh, if she’s there, she will remember you. The question is: will you remember her?”

He throws her a glance.

“She will look much different. Perhaps, however, you will see her heart.”

The twelve await in the view-port, strapped down into their seats. Micah takes his seat. An alien comes by, handing him two spears. Micah looks at them and suddenly knows how to use them. He understands they are deadlier than any human weapon ever forged. The alien dresses him in armor even as he sits and places a Viking-like helmet upon his head. The alien steps back and smiles. “Even to your allies, you are frightening to behold.”

Moments later, hundreds of thousands ships watch as the fabric in the space before them opens, blotting out all the stars, a chasm of swirling blue and green clouds. One by one the ships enter the wormhole and screech into near-light-speed. Micah sees the cloud swirling around him and feels himself pressing into the seat as the jump is made.

They are swimming amidst a sea of beauty. Thousands upon thousands of ships.

Behind them, the wormhole is closed.

Micah is shaking in the chair. He keeps seeing Sarai’s smiling face.

“Come back to us,” she says. “Please come back to us.”

He looks at her and promises, “I will.”

A minute passes. He knows that a year has passed on earth in that one minute. A year of heartbreak, a year of death, yet another year of hopelessness.

“We’re coming, Sarai,” he swears under his breath, gripping the steel spear. “Hold on. We’re coming.”

And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war.

His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself.

And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God.

And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean.

And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God.

And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.

And I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the fowls that fly in the midst of heaven, Come and gather yourselves together unto the supper of the great God;

That ye may eat the flesh of kings, and the flesh of captains, and the flesh of mighty men, and the flesh of horses, and of them that sit on them, and the flesh of all men, both free and bond, both small and great.

And I saw the beast, and the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against him that sat on the horse, and against his army.

- Revelation 19:11-19

Chapter Ten

“The stars which shone over Babylon and the stable in Bethlehem still shine as brightly over the Empire State Building and your front yard today. They perform their cycles with the same mathematical precision, and they will continue to affect each thing on earth, including man, as long as the earth exists.” – Linda Goodman

I

A thunderous roar shakes the earth, the very dust quivering between flattened blades of shriveled grass. Birds fly towards the football stadium, over the rows of long-abandoned and broken homes, the great sprawl of glistening and charcoal-black buildings forming a mosaic shadow behind them. Their wings carry them in the satin-blue sky laced with broken cirrus clouds, and their beady eyes sweep across green landscape to the ocean against what remained of the ancient city of San Diego. The football stadium is beneath them, and their flight breaks as the ripples of the cheering and excited feet-stomping travels vertically. They look down and see the stands shimmering in a million colors; men clap and women cheer and children wrap their hands around the railings and, giddily laughing, looking down upon the stadium floor. The hawks begin to circle, examining the great scene below; thousands upon thousands of people jumping up and down and crying, “Bring them out! Bring them out! Bring them out!” In the center of the field are several men dressed in bronze armor and swinging maces and handling crude swords made of tempered steel, the blades glistening in the afternoon sunlight. There is a grated gate where the football players would’ve run out long ago, and at this gate are several guards armed with machineguns, wearing respirator facemasks. The men in the center swing the maces and toss the swords between both hands; some turn around and pump their hands into the air, drawing up the thunderous cheering to painful decibels.

The hawks discontinue their circling and make their way out of the realm of the football stadium. They dive low, gradually, until they are flying above the streets, above the buildings with blossoming lawns. There are people mowing their lawns and children playing with the dogs. The hawks fly over tiled rooftops and smell the all-too-pleasurable-scent of sizzling barbecues. The hawks see kids playing roller-hockey in the street and ladies drinking ice-tea and eat crumb cake upon the wooden porches. The hawks rise into the air before passing over the twisted steel gates of the city, the towering walls covered with parapets and towers, with spotlights and machinegun nests. The hawks fly between what used to be banks and shopping malls, now converted into barracks for the slaves. The hawks fly between rebuilt-skyscrapers; where once had been offices decked in Christmas apparel were now giant ironworks factories where the slaves work twenty-hour days and existed on rice, bread, cheese and water. The hawks see streets filled with

hovels and people who looked like skeletons hovering over fires or wrapped in blankets; the hawks fly through a pillar of deep-black smoke stinking of burnt flesh, and sees soldiers with gas masks pulling bodies out of floating carts and carrying them inside. The hawks see a basket of babies being carried inside, and several children screaming as their father is torn from them, hands placed onto a mallet, and then hammered into a pulp. His screams drift up into the sky and the hawks fly over the rolling aqua-green waters of the ocean.

Light comes through the slits in the grated iron gate; the light diffuses in the dusty atmosphere, sliding beside the concrete walls and touching the faces of those closest. Several dozen humans, from men to women and even a six-year-old boy, are standing together. Each carries a small dagger, a puny club, or some other blunt weapon. The men wear mere ragged loincloths and the women wear only enough clothing to cover themselves. This is so the people in the stands will be able to differentiate between the warriors and the barbarians. The people huddling inside the tunnels sweat gushing from their faces, hearts writing novels inside their chests, brains hotwiring millions of cars, and instincts crying out for deliverance, were the barbarians, the uncouth creatures who had decided to go against the deliverance of the oppressors. They are the ones who dared to resist—and the ones who were captured. They are the ones who refused to bow down and be granted pardon, and for their iniquity imprisoned. They are the ones who, even after imprisonment, refused to slave in peace. They are the ones who were condemned to die before the thousands of pairs of eyes of cheering spectators, those who had tossed in their freedom and morality for just a *taste* of what had once been. It is disgusting—people bowing down to the Beast of the Heavens, taking the mark upon their chests, the mark of bitter salvation. It is disgusting—the lives of ignorance never lived so deep, eating fine meals and seeing fine movies and going for walks in the park underneath the stars. It is disgusting—becoming puppets en masse, controlled by the brute of another world. These in the tunnel are the ones who would not deny their freedom, who would not surrender, who would not accept that awful Mark of the Beast. They are the ones who had to die.

They can hear the throbbing crowd. The earth beneath their feet shakes and the concrete structures fright to collapse. One of the women near the front turns, and looking over everyone, raises her dagger and cries out, “Remember your friends! Remember your parents! Remember your children! Remember the days that once were—Remember this, and even death can’t take your freedom!”

Some of the people offered up shouts. Some cursed. Others turned their faces, downcast.

Their numbers lessoned each day. *She* has survived so far.

There is a great sound of metal-against-metal and the creaking of rusted chains. Light floods in at their feet as the gate begins to raise. The woman turns and faces forward, gripping the handle of the crude kitchen knife in one hand, the other holding a broken plank of wood as a shield. She closes her eyes and remembers

her mother, her grandmother... And then, with the sound of a gunshot and the chorus of the cheers, she opens her eyes, lets out a fiendish screech, and rushes forward, into the stadium, and the dagger sings.

One of the maces comes at her; she ducks, the mace flying over, and she drives the dagger up into the throat of the attacker, the tip bursting out of the back of his neck. She draws it out and spins around, using the shield to block the blow of a sword; the sword sticks into the wood of the shield; twisting the shield, she wrenches the sword from the attacker. The attacker raises his hands in defense but is powerless to stop her as the dagger draws deep wells of blood into the air.

It began small. A word here-and-there, rumor of a Saviour who had disappeared to foreign lands, a Saviour who had ascended to the sky. Her grandmother started it all. All she knows of the beginnings comes from legends passed on to her. She knows of the beginnings of the movement, the first several battles. She knows many lives were lost. The tide turned with the breaking-in and redeeming of a slave camp; all the prisoners, thousands upon thousands, eagerly resisted the Sirians, driven by their torture to fight to the death. The resistance enlarged across the West Coast, engulfing the realms where she fights now. Her mother was young, a little child, and before her enslavement, told her of the life on the run. She told of how her own mother would organize the attacks; and whenever anyone would despair, she would bring their attentions to the One, and those who had witnessed the One came and told of the miracle they'd seen him perform. This always drew more followers and more support. She continually promised that he would come soon. Her mother said that she would wake up every morning and run outside to see if he had come. He never had. Many years had passed and now the woman felt on her own.

The 'barbarians' flood from the tunnel, sprinting into the arena, staying in bunches. The enemies with their weapons moved upon them, hurling their maces in giant arcs and flashing double-swords. The woman sees a man's head go flying as a pair of swords violently crosses at his neck. She sees a soldier falling under the vicious stabs of a dozen dagger-pricks. She sees a woman with a club swing it in the face of a soldier, smashing in his face and knocking him down. She raises the club to strike again but is stabbed in the back by another soldier. The woman defends herself with her shield and uses a knife dripping with blood to carve hate and malice into the flesh of all who accost her.

Her mother had found love at sixteen. It was in a young man who had been imprisoned for most of his life. The two met during one of the excursions into enemy territory, and pairing together, they were able to relate even in the worst situations. A minister married them one Christmas day and they were allowed a honeymoon for a weekend in a heavily-fortified fortress in the mountains. It was in

that first week that the woman was first spawned, and she was raised by her own mother and learned to speak, perform mathematics, write and think from her own mother's hand. She made friends with the others being raised by the resistance. It was at this time that things were starting to break apart. Division was spreading through the ranks; the Sirians were beginning their program of worship: all who bowed before the Sirians and pledged allegiance to them would be spared, no matter their past. The lands were being cultivated and homes being rebuilt. There were no taxes for those who obeyed, only lives of self-indulgent and ignorance. Many turned traitor to the Cause and bowed in worship before the Sirians. Against all logic, the Sirians kept their promises. This severely crippled the resistance. The woman remembers when her mother and grandmother would speak in quiet in the night, speaking of how the Cause was falling apart, crumbling under turncoats, and they constantly pondered: "When will he return?"

The little boy who has been given a wooden mallet drops it in fear and runs around, crying. The woman sees him running along the side of the field; people in the stands are throwing rocks, buckets of feces, trash and junk at him as he runs. He falls onto his knees and is sobbing into the grass. A pair of soldiers runs towards him; the crowds are getting louder. The woman grits her teeth, and slaying a soldier, pursues them, steam billowing from her nostrils, blood soaking her shield and dagger and bare skin, speckling highlights in her hair.

The Cause fell from the inside. A turncoat who was given a palace, countless girls for slaves and whores, brought it down like a house of cards in a blizzard. He had been influential in the movement from the beginning, but drawn by greed abandoned his morals and values and turned in the leader, her daughter, and all those who pledged allegiance to the Cause. They were dragged before the Sirian Leaders to stand trial.

The crowd is standing, applauding, screaming, thunderous. The soldiers are nearly upon the boy; suddenly one of them shrieks and falls, a dagger in his back. The crowd roars as he falls and rolls in the bloodied grass. The boy screams; the other soldier turns in shock and sees the woman as she leaps atop of him, knocking him down; he tries to pierce her with his sword but misses; she grabs a stone and proceeds to bash his face in with it, smearing the stone with blood and covering her hands likewise. The crowd is enraged, screaming hell and damnation; the boy is weeping; she looks the boy in the eyes and sees her own self, as a little child, swinging on a swing-set and playing with other children. The boy would never have this luxury.

All those of the resistance were aligned before the Sirian leaders, the great race of aliens who had fallen from Gray prominence, whose presence inspired fear in the hearts of all. There they were told to bow down and pledge loyalty before the

Sirians. The overwhelming evil and fear drove many to their knees, but the most prominent of them stood forward. Many all over the authority-ladder of the social resistance didn't bow, and neither did the woman of a mere 16 years old. Those who bowed down were taken away and given pardon, given estates with land and a banquet of food. Those who refused were enslaved and sent to the city to work for the rest of their lives. The leader of the resistance was condemned to life in a dark prison, absent of light. Her daughter was condemned to die, and her daughter's daughter—the very woman who fights in the stadium—was sent to work in a sweat-factory producing weaponry, sleeping three hours a day and working the other twenty-one. The resistance had completely fallen. No hope was left. As they were hoarded out, the woman condemned for life in a towering dungeon snarled, "When he comes, every one of you will pay with your wicked blood." They mocked her publicly. The new converts to the Beast even mocked her and spit in her face as she moved past to be escorted to the room where she would spend the rest of her days.

II

The small planet hovers amidst a sea of stars, its lone sun burning brilliantly in the distance, shedding its light over the alien blockade, casting shadows upon the atmosphere that diffuse before reaching the surface. The beings inside the blockade ships, numbering into the hundreds, think of nothing. They know of the war. They know of the Grays. But they have grown distant to it all; the Grays have not launched major assaults in decades, and they would *never* dream of touching this homely little backwater planet. The Sirians stationed on Penal Colony 7 as earth is so-called consider it a disgrace to be so far from the breath of the war, here on the fringes of the galaxy, where nothing of excitement is known. It is now only routine. So they think of nothing and expect nothing. They lead their lives, bent on their wickedness, dreaming and lusting over when they will next be able to rain havoc. Plans are being made for invading and destroying an ice planet a few stars beyond, where the populace lives in small dwellings and are merely tribal in the way earthen civilizations are concerned. It will be a slaughter-fest, no real resistance, and so the Sirians are thrilled.

As afternoon touches the face of what had once been the United States of America, the sun is suddenly blotted out by thousands upon thousands of glistening silver stealth-ships heading straight towards them. The mortified Sirians look upon it, trembling, knowing what is happening. There is a few moments of quiet confusion and disbelief before the alarms are sounded and the troops race for their starcraft.

Micah un-straps himself from his seat and stands. One of the pilots look over at him. "Please sit down. It will become a little violent here in a few moments." He doesn't listen. He stares at earth, feeling his heart beating. He sees the blockade,

sees the swarms of alien starcraft coming towards him, the same kind of starcraft he had escaped so many decades ago... And yet it only seemed like less than a month! He feels the blood inside him crystallizing at the sight of earth. Every ounce of his soul is on fire, begging to move. He turns and growls, "Why is this taking so long?!?"

The alien winces. "We cannot just blast through them! We must take out their fighters first."

"We're wasting time!" he snarls. He looks back to the earth. "I can feel them. I can feel their tears. Their sorrow. Their anger. I can feel it... Like it's *inside* of me..." His tone drastically changes. "And here we are, just gliding above, and they have no idea."

"We have to get rid of the fighters," Johannon, one of his comrades, says. "Or it will be like flying through an asteroid field."

The alien pilot retorts, "Please. Sit down."

"They are weeping down there," Micah says, but he obeys, and sits.

All around them the Gray fighters and rocketing past, numbering in the thousands, a black hoard bearing upon the enemy fighters approaching them. Those inside Micah's transport watched the burning embers of the Gray starcraft grow deeper and deeper towards the face of the planet.

The Sirian fighters bore upon the Grays and the Grays upon the Sirians. The distance clenches tight like a noose, and suddenly the space between them is bitten apart by billions of tiny daggers of lead being spit in either direction. The lead pierces the hulls of the spacecraft, disabling the systems and breaking the airlocks; pilots freeze immediately, their skulls bursting; starcraft break apart and explode. This is how it always is: the two lines bear on one another, unleash a volley, resulting in a display of brilliant, noiseless explosions quickly snuffed out by the vacuum of space, then the millions of fighters blend together in a gruesome foray in the silence of space.

Micah watches from inside his hold, watches as explosion after explosion creates a dazzling display of fireworks that never ends, all suspended in the pure quiet of space. A gruesome ballet with shambled speakers. He closes his eyes and can feel the fear of the Sirians—and the bitter anger of the Grays. He can hear the screams and the cries and the hoorays. When he opens his eyes, he can still feel the fear of the Sirians, and knows their resolve is weakening.

He looks to the pilot. "Engage the engines!"

The pilot looks at him, crazed. "It is not time!"

"Engage the engines!" he orders, louder. "The Sirians are retreating!"

"Sir—"

The radio spurts the King's voice: "All drop-ships advance. The Sirians are running."

Indeed, their blockade ships could be seen, through the explosions, fleeting. The Gray fighters danced among the enemy blockade, firing away. Several of the blockade ships, lit up with fire, slanted and slid into the earth's atmosphere.

III

The soldiers are closing in around her. She guards the boy, taking up the swords of the fallen soldiers. She holds them before her, daring them to come close. There are three of them and they edge in. The crowd is shrieking, "Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!" and they are throwing junk at both of them. The woman looks to the boy and says, "Don't worry. You're going to be okay." There is a sparkle in her eye that quiets his soul. He looks back to the crowd and flicks them off. They are even more enraged. The woman manages a smile just as one of the soldiers runs forward; she blocks his blow, kicks him in the groin. He falls to his knees and she swipes off his head with her sword. The head rolls and the body falls over, bleeding a lake into the soft earth. The other soldiers rush her; she leaps in front of the boy and fights them off; two go down quickly and she paralyzes the other, cutting off his leg. She proceeds to cut off both his hands and his remaining foot, leaving him powerless. She spits in his face.

Even when she was forced to see her own mother condemned and killed, the woman would not lead a submissive life as a slave. She refused her work, and when accosted, slaughtered several guards. She was taken and condemned to death in the stadiums: the stadiums were new at this time and the hottest thing on the market, drawing in people from all around. The Sirians used it to control the masses. She accepted her token of fortune in silence—and in the first battle, came out victorious, sheathed in the blood of her opponents. All of the people in the stands were absolutely stunned. This had never happened before.

The girl grabs the boy and picks him up, carrying him away from the stands where the people are beginning to throw whiskey and beer bottles. The soldiers have all been massacred, except for a few, who are hemmed in and throwing down their weapons. Knowing they would be shown no mercy, the 'barbarians' quickly slaughter them, bathing in their opponents' blood. None of them notice the hazy fireworks that seem to be igniting high in the sky. The crowd is booing and crying out for the guards with the machineguns to wipe them out. The woman kneels beside the boy and parts his hair as he snuffles, stinking of feces. She rubs his forehead clean and kisses it. "We're okay," she tells him. "We're okay." She asks him why he is here. He tells her, "I killed a boy who was going to turn me in for writing bad words about them in my bedroom." The girl smiles. "No more noble thing could've been done."

She won the first game; and the second. And the third. She became a spectacle. The Sirians used her as an object of fame, and many times tried to kill her publicly, either with other soldiers or even with wild animals from Africa. She always survived, sometimes against such odds that made her seem like a goddess in human form. The people loved her—and hated her.

The crowd is screaming, “Kill them! Kill them! Kill them! Kill them!” The boy’s knees are knocking together. The woman reassures him: “They won’t. Don’t worry. They never do.” He says that he’s been to these before. He had once bowed down, but on the Sundays when they had the worship gatherings, he would skip out. He felt bad for bowing down and had decided he didn’t want to be on their side anymore. He said he’d seen them get executed. She tells him, “I’m here. They won’t kill me.” The boy’s mouth opens. “You’re *her*?” She grins. “We’re okay for now.” But the crowd is still screaming for their blood to be smeared in the grass.

This wasn’t what she had elected to do, but it became the only way for her to unleash her hate. Every time she stepped onto the field, she saw her mother, heard her cries, saw what they did to her. This drove her to murder. It drove her to killing. She acted, crazed and beguiled by insanity, and through her anger found an outlet: the deaths of those she hated so much! She relished each moment to feel their warm blood on her, she savored the taste of their broken flesh in her mouth. She became a wild creature, though compassionate with the children, and loving towards those who refused to bow before the Sirians. She was hard to describe: a lamb one moment, a lion the other.

The crowd is still hollering for their downfall. That’s when the sound changes. People start looking up and the noise dies down. Awe sweeps over them. The woman is stunned by the quiet and the boy looks up with his mouth open. The woman peers at the others in the stadium, her comrades covered in blood, and sees that they are slowly turning, craning their necks upwards. She begins to feel the air around her tremble, growing warmer. She draws her eyes in the direction everyone is looking and feels shock run through her. One of the Sirian blockade ships is careening through the sky, breaking apart as it falls amidst a wreath of fire and squelching smoke. The people in the stands panic and begin running for the exit; the spacecraft flies overhead, roaring in everyone’s ears, the deafening sound of ripping air and cackling flames. All that is left is a plume of acrid smoke until it impacts the earth in the distance, sending a wave of dust over the stadium. The earth feels like it is falling apart and the woman falls to the ground, unable to keep her balance. The boy is teetering back and forth. The stands threaten to collapse. In a few minutes it is all over, the stands are quiet, the people are still, the smoke from the burning ‘comet’ is disintegrating. The woman picks herself up, blood stained with the tide of soil, and the boy rubs his eyes.

The remnants of the battle bang against the side of the drop-ship as they pass through where the Gray and Sirian forces had met. Micah has undone his belt and is hearing the sound of metal clanking and scraping on the outside of the ship, is looking at the earth growing beyond the debris. Broken hulks of starcraft flutter past, and there is even the crystallized body of a Sirian pilot that hits the view-port and bounces away. Micah pays no attention. He is focused on the planet.

Shimon Kefa stands and approaches him. "Mihael," he breathes, turning the commander's eyes from planet earth. "It is time."

Micah grins. "Yes. Yes, it's time."

Shimon Kefa turns and announces, "Prepare for war!!!"

The eleven all holler their approval and grab their spears, igniting the small force fields that protect them from obstacles. Shimon Kefa brings Micah his two spears and hands them to him, kneeling. Micah takes them and ignites them. A bluish field glows along the poles, spreading along the spear shaft, and eventually dissipates from view, although it is still very present. Micah grips the spears as the spacecraft begins to shake. They, one of thousands, are entering the atmosphere. The edges of the view-port glow yellow, then orange, then a fiery red, and he takes his seat, strapping in. The starcraft begins to shake.

He closes his eyes. "We're here, Sarai. We're here..."

As things are just getting under control, the sky above them seems to open up with fire. The people begin to scream again, crushing each other in a mad dash from the stands. The woman brings the boy close, tells him not to be frightened, but feels her own voice quivering. The heat washes over them as the sky seems to be alive with fire. From the city come the sounds of sirens, a sound never heard in the ears of the humans, a sound signaling all the Sirians in the area for battle. The woman's heart leaps into her throat and attempts to burst forth in song. She refuses to let it, for she has all but lost her faith. This goes against everything she's come to believe. The sky is burning and then from the fire come tiny dots, more and more, until the fire is blocked out by a vast swarm of black heading right towards them. She thinks of the plague of locusts, God raining down judgment on the Egyptians, and now she understands. Yes. Yes, she understands! Judgment is going to fall on the Sirians.

The ships are drawing near. Shouts ring out from the soldiers with the guns. They are advancing on the 'barbarians,' rounding them together at gunpoint. The woman grabs the boy and flees the guns. They are rounded into the center of the blood-soaked grass as the ships grow larger. Fear is written over the faces of all the soldiers. The commander is staring up at the sky, fumbling for his words in an alien dialect. She knows the language, was taught by her mother during the resistance.

They are going to kill us.

The King rides in one of the smaller transports, and feeling the hearts of the innocent throbbing, relies upon his Father and cries out, "Activate the artillery!"

Although they do not understand, the pilots nod and fire. From the lip of the drop-ship are fired two missiles that streak down towards the plains of California.

One of the pilots looks to the mystery-enshrouded King: "Do we send the command through the fleet?"

"No," he replies. "No. Two is all."

The Gray pilot shrugs and says, "Very well. We will reach the planet surface in..."

The King, knowing all things, finishes his sentence: "One minute and fourteen seconds."

In an instant comes the sound of screeching air and the world around them is clothed in the stench of burning flesh and broken earth. The sides of the stadium collapse in a splendid explosion that engulfs several of the fleeting worshippers; their bodies are sent to smoke and ash in seconds. The shockwave draws up a great hovel of dust and sends it across the stadium; the soldiers are knocked down, their guns sprawled, and the woman and boy are knocked off their feet, rolling, dust stinging their skin. The woman picks herself up, vomits dust, and through the haze can see the boy crying. She leaves him, knowing what she must do. She stumbles through the deepening thickness and sees the outline of a soldier reaching for his gun. She kicks the gun away and kicks him in the face so hard that his head flaps back and neck snaps. She steps over the body, walks over to the gun, picks it up, and trying to hide her eyes from the dust, she moves on.

The King points to where the artillery had burst: along the sides of a stadium. "Land there."

The Gray pilot looks over at him. "That is not where we planned--"

"Land there," the King says again, gently. He turns and faces his troops. "Prepare for war against the Beast."

IV

The soldiers fumble around, grasping at their face-masks pierced by thousands of dust particles. Many of them are suffocating, unable to undo the straps; others rip them off and breathe the dust-choked air, revealing rotting mouths with crumbling teeth. They can hear the sound of gunfire as a mysterious shadow moves amongst them; one soldier sees a shadow beside him and then knows nothing more, the echo of a gunshot ringing around him before silence takes over and all he knows is fiery blackness. The soldiers are shouting at one another and raising their guns in the dust; but they can't see anything in the haze, and before they can react, she is upon them, the gun bursting brilliant sparks in the haze; the soldiers fall over and the dusk envelops them.

Yet the dust is clearing. It grows thinner, thinner; and suddenly she is exposed. Just as she breaks open the back of a soldier's skull with a gunshot, carving a hole through the facemask that fills with blood, they surround her and scream at her to throw down the weapon. In the vanishing mask of dust, she knows no other course of action; if she values her life, even one more iota, she will respond.

Everything inside of her says to rebel, but something inside yet foreign makes her throw down the gun. She can't understand it; it's as if an invisible force has taken her hand and forced her to her knees. For to her knees she falls and a gun is placed at the back of her head. She can feel the barrel pressing into the base of her skull, and she grits her teeth.

The other prisoners are forced to watch. The little boy is quiet, eyes filling with dusty tears.

Through the acrid smoke of the burning stadium stands a giant ship emerges, thundering in front of the woman and the soldier with the gun to her head. The soldiers all look up and train their guns upwards; the woman's heart alights with hope. The soldier with his gun pressed against the back of her skull grimaces and curses her in English. His finger moves towards the trigger.

The air erupts with the chatter of gunfire. Plumes of snaking dust erupt before her as metal bullets drill into the earth; she twists to the ground in an instant and a single bullet explodes the head of the soldier; he collapses on top of her and she squirms away, kicking at the dust to escape the waterfall of blood. Brain and skull matter fall like rain. The bullets carve a double wake around the prisoners, ripping ghastly holes into the bodies of the Sirian puppet-soldiers. Giant holes the size of basketballs are torn through them and their bowels exuded all over the stadium floor. They topple over, releasing their guns.

The gunfire ceases, the dust thinning and blown by the engines of the drop-ship.

The woman crawls to her feet as the drop-ship lowers into the center of the stadium. She and the others crowd together, inching in, feeling a blend of fear, hope, and excitement. The drop-ship settles and the engines idle. There is the sound of grinding metal and the ramp begins to lower; deep maroon light bleeds from within and she can see a single, eight-foot-tall figure descending the ramp as it touches the earth. At the sight of the pure-white cloak and the scorching fire-eyes hidden in the shadow of his face under the snow robe, she feels something inside of her melt and solidify at the same time. She and all the others fall to their knees. They know no other course of action.

The man approaches them, but even as he moves, almost detached from the world but immersed completely in it, she knows this is no Man. All of the people prostrate themselves, driven down by an unseen power that turns their hearts to stone yet turns them into hearts of flesh. They don't even dare look up. The woman is on one knee and when the figure stops before her, she is gripped with

supreme terror, yet know he is not here to bring harm to her, but harm to those who had raped the earth.

Her mouth moves, crisp with dryness: "Hail... King of Kings... Lord of Lords..." She bows her head low; it suddenly feels so *heavy*.

He reaches out a gloved hand and, tucking her chin, draws it up. His touch sends electricity through her. As he draws her to look at him, all the blood rushes from her face, and it is left even whiter than his robes. She can feel the smile underneath the cloak as he says, "My child, my servant."

She chokes: "My Master."

He slowly turns his head to the side, looking deep into her. She can feel his eyes probing her soul, uncovering every loose stone and exploring the depths of every cavernous ocean. She feels his eyes expose all the moments of resistance, all the joy she'd discovered at the slaughter of the evil ones, and for a moment she feels shame, a whisper in her heart. But then he speaks and calms all consternation. "Well done, my good and faithful servant."

At this very moment a drop-ship roars overhead.

V

The smoke thins before the view-port as the drop-ship soars over the stadium where the King is standing before rescued prisoners. Shimon Kefa stands before Micah who peers through the reinforced glass bubble of the front of the craft, eyes drooping over the land. Drop-ships are landing amidst the buildings and Gray troops battling it out in the streets. Worshipers of the Beast run into their homes and grab their children, but the Grays enter and take them captive. Explosions rock the earth where the battle is intense; a Gray troop-ship is smoking and twisting, then bursts into flame, knocking out several homes and engulfing refugees. Where the battle has passed, the Gray troops are taking those with the Mark of the Beast and ferrying them into the drop-ships, bound and cuffed. Micah stares ahead as they fly between and through columns of smoke, rushing over the tops of the homes, many aflame. The great slave city is before them. Gray troops are launching assaults against the gates, and they smash through as the drop-ship flies overhead. The sticks sing *glory!* in the chaos and Sirian corpses litter the ground. The Sirians rush through the complexes, trying to kill the slaves, but the slaves revolt, taking them down. The Grays enter the buildings and take the stairwells, fighting off the Sirians whose fear drips with malice.

Micah's drop-ship maneuvers between the renovated and evil-infested skyscrapers; in the open windows he sees slaves cheering in rooms filled with machinery or cots or food stations. The Twelve are preparing for battle in the back of the drop-ship, running over the course-of-action. Micah closes his eyes and lets his spirit guide him. He opens them and points to a skyscraper with a landing spore sticking out of the side. Several Sirians are rushing to scattered starcraft atop of it. "There," Micah tells the pilot. "Strafe it and land."

The pilot relays the order. The drop-ship is bearing upon the platform as twin artillery snake from the gun shafts. They leave no trace as they impact amidst the Sirians boarding their craft; the explosions tear through the starcraft and incinerate the pilots. The fire is quenched and smoke covers the landing pad. The drop-ship swings down and settles into the smoke, landing amongst smoldering debris. The pilot announces: "Landing complete."

"Lower ramp," Micah commands.

The pilot flips the controls. "Ramp lowering."

Micah grips his spears. The Twelve are gathered. He cries out, "Immortality is yours! *Take it!*"

The smoke curls around the glowing engines. The ramp lowers, blowing the smoke away, revealing broken debris melting from the heat and the pale white bones of the forsaken Sirians. From the glowing embers of the drop-ship come a march of soldiers: twelve Gray aliens and a leader before them, whose bio-steel suit glistens with the souls of a thousand angels. His steps are firm and precise, his eyes cold as the vacuum of space but hot as the giant blue stars; he moves with the confidence of a million generations, and his lungs inhale and exhale, driven by the cries for vengeance of a billion quiet souls. He sees Claire, Molly, Nicole... He hears their laughter, remembers his presence in the new universe... and he remembers: "Go."

The smoke swirls around them as they march; the side of the skyscraper comes before them and a door opens, Sirian soldiers rushing out, raising their guns and firing. Micah swings his spears in front of him, the shields shooting the bullets away. His mouth opens and a sword of wrath departs: "Yeshua!"

The Twelve reiterate the call: and charge.

Micah swings the spears back and forth, and the great tips burn like melted diamond; everything they touch melts and bursts apart. He drives it through the guts of a Sirian, spilling vile liquid, and uses it to swipe off the head of another. As he leaps into battle, tearing through the Sirians ranks, the Twelve beside him on either side join into the fray, and through the thinning smoke there can be seen the flash of gunfire and the sweeping arcs of burning spears. The bodies collapse to the ground and then the Twelve stand alone, covered in the blood of their enemies, muscles salivating for more.

This is what they were born for.

Micah runs into the skyscraper; the Twelve follow.

They are inside a stairwell. Micah closes his eyes and feels the draw of the Father. He takes the stairwell up, the Twelve running after him. His feet clank upon the steel stairwell. He reaches the next floor; it is empty. The next floor; still empty. The Twelve are not tiring. The stairwell continues to rise for eons into eons. Eventually they reach a door and the stairs continue no more.

Micah kicks it open with his foot and launches inside; there is a scream and he sees a rocket racing towards him from down the hall; he kneels and holds the spears out before him; the rocket hits the spears and explodes, but the shield keeps the fire from engulfing him. His arms quake at the force of the blast but it dissipates in rancid smoke. The Twelve are shocked, wide-eyed; Micah leaps up and barges through the smoke, unleashing Hell upon the Sirians at the end of the corridor.

As they are fighting, a hidden door on the ceiling several meters down the hall behind them opens and several Sirians drop through, rushing at the back of the Twelve. Mattai falls to their brutal assault and Andreas turns and fights against them, but they overpower him. Micah hears the scream and swings around; he shoves the Twelve out of the way and brings the penance of blood upon the Sirians; they collapse all around him as if it were a picturesque bloodbath. He stands alone, chest heaving under his bio-steel armor. Mattai's eyes have gone quiet, and Andreas' breath is growing ragged.

Micah kneels beside him. "Oh my God--"

Andreas spits blood. "Mihael... Mihael..." He grabs at Micah's armor-clothed arms. "Mihael..."

"I'm here," Micah tells him, tears wallowing in his eyes. "I'm here..."

"Mihael..." His voice grows weaker then ceases altogether.

He has breathed his last.

Micah clenches his eyes shut, curses, stands. The Twelve stare at him.

Shimon Kefa says, "There is only one more level."

"I will take it," Micah growls, shoving past them.

Shimon Kefa stands in front of him. "*We* go."

"Out of my way," Micah commands. "Your stubbornness has no place here."

Shimon Kefa refuses. "Mihael--"

"No more need to die today!" Micah hollers, shoving past him and racing up a side stairwell.

At the top of the stairwell the corridor is empty. It leads to a single door. Micah kicks it open and enters. His eyes fall upon a throne made of the bones and skulls of the trudging-upon and taken-advantage-of. In the corner of the room are several cages filled with the corpses of naked teenage girls, their blood forming puddles at their feet. Micah's anger erupts at the grotesque sight.

A voice: "You are too late."

Micah turns and looks in the direction and sees a scraggly Sirian standing beside a marble pillar. The moment Micah's eyes touch his, the Sirian is knocked to his knees, ripping his cloak in two. Micah turns and faces him, eyes glowering like the torches of the gods. The Sirian wails: "No! No, it can't be! It is *you*! It is *you*!"

Micah casts the spears to the floor and approaches, moving calmly, quietly, stoically.

“No,” the Sirians pleads in his ragged clothing. “No... In the name of the Father-“

“*Don’t use His name!*” Micah shrieks, grabbing the Sirian by the head and pushing one foot into his chest.

The Sirian’s eyes are wide. “You have come to destroy us,” he says weakly.

“Yes,” Micah snarls, and he proceeds to pull on the head and push on the chest. The Sirian’s head is clasped in his head, the broken neck spurting acidic blood. Micah leaves the body convulsing on the ground, and giving a last and troubled look to the bodies of the female slaves, he exits the Throne Room.

The hatchway to the roof opens and Micah climbs out, dragging the head with him. Walking atop the tower, he feels the warm wakes and hears the throbbing engines of the Gray starcraft flying towards the ocean. From his perch upon the tallest tower, he can see the Sirian oceanic fleet taking away into the ocean, being strafed and blown apart by Gray gun-ships. The streets below are littered with corpses and the captives being redeemed by the hands of the Grays. The Worshipers of the Beast are being taken captive and loaded onto Gray drop-ships. Micah looks over what was once San Diego; it had become a slave colony, but now is redeemed. They have come. He looks up and sees the giant transport ships of the Gray fleet entering the atmosphere; many are already beginning to land in the fields and deploy their soldiers, technicians, their social workers, unloading supplies needed for the construction of a base and the beginning of a war.

Micah walks over to an antennae and shops the head into one of the spikes. He steps away, admiring his handiwork.

A voice: “Very well done.”

Micah doesn’t move. “How did I know to come here?”

The King stands behind him. “You know much more than you think you do. You just haven’t come to accept it.”

Micah says nothing.

The King walks forward and joins him. “This is only the beginning.”

Micah nods, admiring the success of the invasion. There are distant explosions. “I know.”

“Much will have to be done.”

“I know,” he says again.

“There will be many more battles. Many more lives will be lost.”

“But we will win.”

“Yes,” the King says, patting him on the back, fingertips conveying power. “Yes, we *will* win.”

VI

Drop-ships are soaring overhead and starcraft are beginning to land and refuel, the pilots embracing one another in celebration of victory, toasting to lost comrades.

The bodies of the Sirians are being thrown into giant pits of fire, and fresh Starcraft are disappearing over the western ocean horizon, to harass the fleeting Sirian ocean-going fleet. Micah remains upon the roof with the Twelve, dragging their two fallen heroes to the roof and lying them down, facing the setting sun. The King is with them, and promises that he sees them now walking the beautiful gardens of the new universe. Micah watches as the former slaves are given food and drink. He watches as Sirian captives are marched into buildings where they will be mercilessly executed. None will be spared. *None*.

The King, a shadow underneath his cloak and gloves, speaks: "Someone has come to see you."

Micah turns his eyes over his shoulder and sees the woman standing there. When he looks into her eyes he feels something *familiar*, even though he cannot, in any way, shape or form, place it or peg an emotion to it. He is simply driven to turn completely around and approach. The remaining Ten, who sit mourning Andreas and Mattai, watch in curiosity. Micah notices that the woman seems frightened, almost... fearful. He is a few feet from her and she begins to shrink away. He stops, feeling her fear, and raises his hand. "It's all right."

She raises her hand, fingers twitching, nervous.

He smiles, knowing what she's doing. "It's okay."

The Ten are mesmerized. The King crosses his robed arms. The woman leans forward, neck arching away, chest thundering under loose tan clothes, and her fingers touch the flesh of his palm. She begins to relax.

He steps closer. "See?" he said. "I'm just a human. Like you."

She doesn't want to believe it. Hesitantly, "You're... You are... *Him*."

He nods, but returns the favor: "Who are *you*?"

She finds herself at a loss for words, as if it is some great honor to speak her name before him.

The King steps forward and speaks for her. "Her name is Cara. She doesn't know her last name. She doesn't know if she has one."

He runs the name over his tongue. "Cara... Cara..." It is a sweet name.

"You knew," the King says, "her mother."

Micah looks over at him. At first he doesn't dare to believe, but he foregoes: "Sarai?"

"No," the King answers quickly.

Micah is confused.

"Danielle."

Danielle. The little girl.

Micah looks over at the woman. "I knew your mother... She was just a little girl... When I left... When I left, she was... She was sleeping next to Sarai. Sarai didn't want me to go. She feared... She feared for Danielle."

Cara somehow found ease, as if it enveloped her from the presence of the King. "Sarai took in my mother. She became her god-mother. That makes Sarai my grandmother."

Micah closes his eyes, lowers his head.

The woman asks what is wrong.

"So much..." He shakes his head. "So much has *changed*. Everything has changed."

"But she was right, wasn't she?" Cara protested. "She was right. About *you*."

They spend the afternoon together, leaving the roof and descending down to the street. As they walk he greets the slaves and kisses their foreheads, blesses their children, holds their hands. All of the Grays salute him in honor and kneel upon one knee; he touches their bluish heads and tells them, "Well done," and "Good job," as well as offering up encouragement: "Many more battles will come." "Now the Sirians have reason to fear us." "I can't wait to hit them again." They grab some food from one of the Gray stations and he finds a quiet place under a tree where they can eat. He asks her what has happened since he's been gone, and she tells him the whole story: the growth of the resistance, the birth of the Cause, her own conception, and then when things looked dreary, the Sirians bringing 'paradise and pardon' to all those who would take the Mark of the Beast. "It decayed from the inside," she says. "Turn-coats turned in Sarai and my mother... As well as myself." She speaks to him of the trial, of how Sarai was banished, and is certainly dead—this news makes Micah hang his head low—and she tells him of how she resisted even after her mother was executed.

"Danielle," he asks. "Your mother... What was she like? I mean... As a mother?"

She smiles under the evening shade of the tree. "She was perfect. She was the embodiment of what it meant—really *meant*—to be a good mother. She grew me up in the way of the Cause, taught me the history of the earth, taught me how to read and write and even how to deal calculus. She was a genius. She taught me how to fight, too. Sarai had taught her how to fight, and then she taught me. She was perfectly wonderful. Oh." Her eyes lit up. "And she always spoke of you. Always mentioned how you were coming. Sarai never lost hope, either. She was *convinced* you were coming—she just didn't know when. When she was being led away to her punishment in the dungeon, Sarai told them that you would come... and you would kill them all."

"Your mother," Micah asks, tenderly. "I mean... If you don't mind... How did they do it? How'd they... take her?"

Cara takes a deep well of air.

Micah puts a hand on her shoulder. "Please... If you don't want—"

"No," she protests. "No." Another breath. Micah doesn't resist. She begins: "They took her to the stadium. This was before there were ever games. I was forced to watch with all the other slaves as she was led to a pole and stretched." Tears are beginning to form in her eyes, but she continues, bearing through it: "They stretched her limbs out in an axe, stripped her naked, and allowed those she had trusted, those who had turned her in..." Knots form in her throat. Her words

come in broken sentences. “They... They... God... They *raped* her. They did it... Over and over... And we were forced to *watch*... Couldn’t even turn our *heads*... My mother... She cried as they did it... She cried so much... She was bleeding a lot... And as they took the chainsaw, and turned it on, despite the pain and the suffering and the tears—“ Her tears are many but her voice is strong “—she tells them that when he comes... when *you* come... they will be paid in full for what they’ve done.”

“And what did they say?” Micah demands.

She shakes her head. “They mocked her. Spit on her. They thought she was crazy.”

“They killed her.”

She nods, sniffing. “Yeah.”

“Well,” he says, squeezing her arm and probing her eyes with his own, “Sarai was right. And so was your mom.” Casually, flippantly, matter-of-factly, “I’m going to kill every last one of them.”

VII

“This is not wretched,” the King says. “This is not cruelty. It is *justice*. When these people turned traitor to the Cause, they turned traitor to the Father. They embraced one of the greatest evils of them all: ignorance laced with hedonism. They receive what is due. Their time of happiness has passed. They beg for pardon, but they will not find it. The Mark of the Beast is on them, and it shall go with them to the grave.” He turns and looks at Micah from under the hood. “Anyone and everyone associated with the Sirians must be destroyed. There can be not even one surviving anecdote or iota of the Sirian race. These peoples’ home is with the Sirians—in a wasted, miserable life of fire and brimstone, for that is where they depart.”

Micah and the King, along with the Ten, stand in one of the glass boxes of the stadium, watching as thousands upon thousands of people are herded onto the stadium floor, packed like cattle. Men, women, children are all frightened. Some are crying, others cursing. Micah scans the seats of the stadium, excluding the stands that are charred and gnarled by the King’s artillery, and sees several machinegun emplacements being set up, Gray technicians and soldiers working fastidiously, servants dragging up crates of ammunition.

The King is quiet, then, “Do you know what sometimes bothers me?”

Micah looks over to him.

“Back home with the Shining Ones, I am the gentle, lowly, meek, childlike grandfather who plays with the children and tells fantasy stories to the little ones. They begin to see me as this nice wizard who could never hurt a fly. They don’t understand, Mihael. They don’t understand that there are two truths. Do you know what these two truths are, Mihael?”

He shakes his head. “No.”

“Love,” he answers. “And hate.” He pauses for a moment, looking over the crowd, and says, “The two go hand in glove. It is because of my love for goodness that I must hate. And this is what I hate—when people forsake all they’ve known for some security and safety, ill-begotten of course, and become turncoat to those who have trusted them just for a few rounds of pleasure. I hate that, Mihael. In my love, back home, my deeds are visible: gentleness, joy, meekness, humility, laughter. The King who wouldn’t touch a fly. Here, Mihael, things are different. My love for goodness, my love for the Shining Ones and the beloved of my father, these very humans who were enslaved, draws my hate for the Sirians deeper—and my hate for all who follow them. My love has fruit, Mihael, and so does my hate. But the fruit of my hate makes others shiver and wonder how such a cruel creature could exist. They simply don’t understand, don’t see things as I do. The fruit of my hate is vengeance, bloodshed, cruelty. As they see it. But, Mihael, they can’t see! They don’t see what I see. If they saw what I see... They would not be so keen.” He glares at Mihael. “Do you doubt what we are about to do?”

Mihael shakes his head. “No.”

“Do you wonder why we are going to do what we are about to do?”

“I know exactly why we are going to do it.”

“If I told you we were going to call it off, how would you respond?”

Micah replies, “I would follow you.”

“That is because,” the King says, “you do not see.” He slowly takes off his glove, revealing a hand that shines like the stars! “Take my hand, Mihael, and look at them. Take my hand—and have your eyes opened.”

Micah’s heart begins to skip beats but he does not back down. He offers his hand. Before he can reach the King’s hand, the King reaches out and grasps his wrist. Micah feels as if all the oxygen is ripped from his soul and his body is being electrified, billions of volts running through him. He cannot breathe, cannot think; it feels like his brain is being fried and scrambled. His eyes swim in their sockets and he sees the Ten glowing like moons, the world all around them swept in shadow and darkness; the Ten are moving slowly and he can see inside of them, can see their bones and tendons and blood vessels, their organs and muscles and swelled brains. His head twists to the side and he sees the King—standing tall, the robe suddenly vanished, revealing a masculine, manly figure alit with a texture of bronze, with dark eyes that burn like twin suns. Fire gushes all around him and his voice radiates with the voices of a thousand angels. Micah feels his eyes burning at the sight of the King, as if acid were dipped inside and stretching to his brain. He yanks his head away from the painful image and looks down upon the stadium floor.

There are no people.

They are creatures. Monsters. Goblins. They drip with evil slime and their skin is scaly and boiling. Mosquitoes and gnats and hornets and locusts fly from their mouths as they scream, and they writhe together as if it were a giant vat of pestilence. Their eyes are dark and loathsome, and even the children have the

appearance of demons; he sees in their eyes their gluttony, their greed, the joy at the games; he sees the most wicked of their sin, sees the insatiable rage and iniquity that pervades their entire being. They swim in a sea of evil and think of nothing but evil. They open their mouths and shriek silent screams that drive like a saw in one of his ears and out the other. He closes his eyes and can hear the screams of all they murdered with their ignorance and greed; he gasps and suddenly falls to the floor.

The world returns to normal. The King's hand is withdrawn.

He collapses onto his side, breathing hard in the box. The Ten stare at him, perfectly normal, clothed in their armor and holding their spears. The King kneels beside him in his robe. Micah stares up at him with fear, but the King speaks calm into him, and his breathing returned.

The King says, "Now you see what I see. Now you understand."

"Yes..." He chokes for breath. "Yes..."

"And you do not question."

He is getting onto his hands and knees, bile falling from his mouth. "When I saw them--"

"You saw them," the King answers him, "for what they really are."

He leans against a table. "How could that be?"

"There is much more to a person than meets the physical eye," the King says. "A man's wickedness or righteousness shines forth like the sun or like the pits of blackness to those who are enabled to see."

A door opens and a humble alien servant enters. "Masters... We are prepared to begin."

Before the King can reply, Micah snarls, "Commence. Massacre the whole lot of them."

The signal is given and the machineguns open up. Millions of steel bullets rip down into the stadium floor where these very people had watched in glee the deaths of many. Blood went up into the air like ancient Greek and Roman fountains, awash like the wine of the Egyptians; the roar of the gunfire swept over the town, over all the homes where the redeemed slaves were given beds and meals. People close their eyes at the sound of the gunfire and the screams. Little children stare numbly towards the stadium as the echoes of the dying throbs under the pulsating gunfire dissipated into mere history. In the box, the King, Micah, and the Ten watch in quiet consolation as the stadium is littered with ten thousand corpses. The blood forms a lake that soaks into the ground and engulfs the bodies. Micah stares at the sight and feels relief that they are gone. Some are squirming atop the sea of bodies, reaching out with bloodied limbs and broken joints. Gray soldiers along the parapets surrounding the stadium aim rifles and fire, blowing apart heads and splitting torsos in two and dismembering limbs. The sea goes from a writhing mass to a silent grave.

The King closes his eyes. "And this is just the beginning."

Micah quietly turns and leaves the room.

VIII

He is leaving through the stadium entrance, flanked by the Ten, when she jumps in front of him, tears crawling down her face. Bloodshot eyes glare at him and she violently shoves him in the chest, throwing him back. The Ten raise their spears; Micah stumbles back and commands, “Lower your weapons.” They hesitantly do so. The woman clenches her fist and rushes at him, hammering them against his bio-steel armor. Tears carve ravines through purple-red cheeks bloated in whispering sorrow; he wraps her arms around her. At first she struggles but then she submits, sobbing into his chest-plate. He imagines himself holding Claire and his heart breaks.

The thirty-year-old woman snuffles and asks in a weak, flimsy voice, “How could you do it?” Her Adam’s apple bobs violently. “How could you... Children! There were *children*...”

He speaks calmly. “They weren’t children—”

“I *saw* them,” she protests. “I *saw* them—”

“No,” he corrects. “No, you haven’t seen them.”

She pulls away, shaking her head. “I thought you were different than them. But you’re the same, just a wolf in sheep’s clothing.” She gives him the cold shoulder and surges away into a sea of redeemed people and Grays blended together. His heart melts like cryptic wax as she disappears; he turns his head to the side and stares at the ground.

Yaakov, the son of Halfi, says, “She doesn’t understand—”

“I know,” Micah says quietly.

“She doesn’t know what’s going on. Her mind is so... Earth is the center to her. The center of it all. She doesn’t understand... Doesn’t understand, Mihael, that earth is *not* the center, but it’s just a lonely backwater planet where the King decided to begin the counter-attack. She doesn’t know how things really are. She doesn’t know the power of the Sirians—and how their wrath transfuses not only through blood, but spirit as well. And how when they bowed down before them, the whole host of them, the Sirian spirit entered them, even subversively. Mihael: she does not understand this.”

He doesn’t say anything. “Go do something for a while, okay?” And he loses himself in the crowd.

It takes him a while to find her. He doesn’t know where she’s been stationed: all the redeemed are being escorted to their new homes. Only a few hours has passed since the first ships passed through the atmosphere, and already those who were slaves were discovering warm beds, hot meals, and beginning to enjoy life—really *enjoy* life—once again. Every Gray Micah talks to doesn’t know where Cara is stationed. He finds one of the rosters and searches for her name. He doesn’t know

what her last name is; Harper? No, that was Sarai's name. He pauses, thinking of Sarai. *She died without ever seeing me again.* His heart weeps: *I promised her I'd see her again.* Whether he promised it verbally or emotionally, he knew—and she knew—that was what he had meant. He tries to think of Hal's last name—Greenstone, was it? Yes. He finds Greenstone. There is *Cara Greenstone* on the roster. He clicks his fingers, finds the address, and thanking the Gray in charge, he darts away.

The house is a low ranch with a blown-out garage door. He sees couches inside the open garage and several children playing an old *Jumangi* board game. He enters the garage, lost in the shadow of the ceiling, and the children stare at his bio-steel. He asks if a woman named Cara is here. They don't answer. He shrugs and passes through them, and reaching the garage door, pushes it open. Both the kitchen and dining room are full of people; they have rolled out blankets on the floor and table and underneath the table, not to mention on the counters and on the kitchen island. People are sprawled out everywhere in the living room. They acknowledge him but don't *acknowledge* him. He finds it strange: here he is, their blessed Savior, whom they have forgotten... And here they are, rescued by his presence, and they don't even know it. He sees hopelessness replaced with hope, he sees sadness replaced with joy, he sees bitterness replaced with love, when he lays his eyes upon them.

He creeps up the stairwell and looks in the first bedroom. It is locked. He knocks and there is an answer, an elderly woman whose frail form almost denies walking ability. He asks if Cara is there; she points to another door: "She is not in a happy mood, I am afraid," she says in a raspy voice. He thanks her and she shuts the door.

He knocks upon Cara's door. A moment passes. And another. He knocks again.

The door creaks open; he sees a slice of her face, a half-eye draped with hair. He jams his hand into the opening and she shuts it hard; he curses and draws his hand out, cradling it. He kicks the wall and gropes at his finger. He is turning around, testing the bones, when she opens the door again. "Come in," she says. By the time he turns around she is already backing into the room. He ducks inside and sees that the room is bare, filled with boxes and crates, and he sees that she has a small nook carved into the boxes, littered with blankets and a smothered pillow. She is sitting on one of the crates, arms behind her. She stares at him: "Why'd you come here?"

He looks around the room and points to a crate. "May I?" She says nothing. He mutters, "All right," and takes a seat on the crate, facing her. "This is nice," he says. "It's really quiet."

"I was sleeping," she tells him. "You woke me up."

"I can understand," he says, "why you're not too... embracing of me right now."

"Really." The sarcasm is so thick it can be cut with a dull knife. "That's rather calming."

"Cara..." he begins, searching for the right words. "I remember your mother."

She cuts coldly, "Don't bring her into this."

"I remember when she was a little girl. Did she tell you how her father died?"

She shakes her head. "No. She never denied it happened, though. She said she didn't know."

"She lied," he tells her. "And I don't blame her; she was right there when it happened."

"Micah—"

"Please," he says. "Listen. Her father was taking her to the house because the Sirians were sweeping in to do a round-up. They were carrying everyone to the death or work camps. He almost made it... But the Sirians beat them to their house. They took his other daughter—your aunt—and they killed her. Your father, enraged, leapt out at them. They killed him, too. Your uncle, David, maddened by your sister's death, acted foolishly and lost his own life. Sarai was forced to watch as you were loaded into one of the drop-ships. She wanted to help... But she knew she would die. She planned on taking her own life rather than fall to the Sirians and be transported off-world."

Cara is saying nothing, just soaking it all in. "She said my grandfather died of old age."

"No," he says. "He died trying to protect the memory of your aunt... Did your mother tell you what happened next?"

"This is all new to me," she says quietly, almost detached.

Micah feels that he is allowed to continue. "I was loaded into her drop-ship. I proceeded..." He remembers it all so vividly, as if it were happening before him even now. "I killed all of the Sirians, all their puppet soldiers. I killed every last one of them. They were going to kill your mother. She was only eight years old or so, so her death would mean you never existed. I killed them and saved her life. And then I took the town again. And that was the beginning of the Cause."

Cara closes her eyes. "And then you left them."

Micah's heart goes stone-cold. "I had no choice. I had to go. Or else I could never return."

"You left Sarai all alone."

"I didn't want to. God," he groans, "I didn't want to."

"You saved my mother," she scolds, "but you couldn't save my family."

He raises his eyes and glares at her. "I would've. I swear I would've."

She shakes her head. "Why are you telling me this?"

He answers swiftly: "The Sirians didn't land, Cara. They didn't come to that town. Humans, humans who had bowed down to the Sirians and surrendered their souls to them, were the ones who came. *Humans* under Sirian control murdered your aunt and grandfather. Those people today... They were no different. Sure, I know, on the outside, they look like you and me. But on the inside they are... they are *things* with no name to describe it. When they bowed down to the Sirians, they surrendered their souls to the wickedest, most vile creatures in the universe. And in doing so the evil of the Sirians passed into them. A small mustard seed at first, but given time, the Sirian spirit would grow and evolve and transform them... It

happened once, billions of years ago... Cara, those people were like white-washed tombs filled with maggots and rotting flesh on the inside.”

“Stop-“ she begins to protest.

“No,” he orders. “No. I was with you. I didn’t want it to happen. But the King-“

She glares bullets at him. “The King would never do *anything* like that. When he touched me-“

“He is a just King. He saw what was inside them. He knew what had to be done.”

“Micah-“

“I didn’t think it was the right thing to do, either, Cara! But the King showed me. He took off his glove, and when his bare skin touched mine...” His throat knots up at the very remembrance. “Cara, *everything changed*. The world became dark, amidst with shadows, but I could see the life-forms all around me. The Grays radiating like stars. The King... He was indescribable, a creature of infinite glory and majesty and power... And when I saw the people in the stadium, the worshippers of the Beast who bore His Mark, I saw... They looked like creatures spawned from Hell.”

“That’s crazy,” she says.

“The King showed me what *he* saw. He sees... He sees the heart of every living being. I saw the hearts of those people. I saw either beauty... or horrific evilness.”

Over the next few days, he spends more and more time with Cara. She goes with him to dinner with the King, and he tells her the same thing Micah told her, except he elaborates on it and explains how it happens, how the Sirian Way is to diffuse into their worshippers and so spread their power. “We must contain the Sirian threat,” he tells her as they eat ham and mashed potatoes served by Gray chefs. “We must purge earth of the Sirian threat... Either foreign or domestic. It is total war. But it must be done this way.”

Sarai says to him, “So you’ve come to redeem earth. My mother... Sarai... We always knew you would come.”

“Not just earth,” the King tells her. “The entire universe.”

Confusion is swept over her face.

Micah leans over his plate. “Earth is just one of hundreds, even thousands of planets with civilization. We’re recent—the Shining Ones, the Grays that are with us, are billions and billions of years old. The Sirians have just recently touched us, too. They are enslaving countless planets across the galaxy. They are even planning on spreading their influence beyond our galaxy, to other galaxies with other civilizations completely untouched by the Sirian’s wickedness. The Father will not allow this.”

“The Father?” she inquires.

“God,” Micah tells her.

“Oh,” she says quietly. “He’s real.”

The King laughs. “Of *course* He’s real. He is angry with the Sirians, how they are spreading their greed and evil. It is His good and perfect will that the Sirians be destroyed. Not subdued, not contained: *destroyed*. Earth is the first planet to redeem, the first planet to purge of their evil. We will continue, planet-to-planet, through the galaxy, redeeming all who have fallen under the Sirians, and destroying all who claim allegiance to the Sirian Way.”

IX

Many days pass before Micah gets the heart-inspiring word. By this time the base in San Diego is well-established; Micah and the King attend many meetings to figure out how the invasion will continue. The plan evolves into staking a protective barrier zone across the Pacific Ocean and along the barrier between North and Central America. The Grays will continue their thrust East, taking the former United States back; then they will carve north into the upper regions of North America. Once North America is taken, they plan on moving south into Central America. Gray ships are blockading the planet, disallowing any Sirians to flee, so the Sirian Leader has no idea what is going on. He will catch only rumors of earth’s downfall long after it is over. The Sirians are kept in a vice, slowly suffocating, and threatening to collapse from the inside-out.

Micah’s taken up residence in a small office space in a renovated skyscraper. He and the Ten have the floor completely to themselves; the King remains with the blockade most of the time, joining the meetings and discussions via way of holographic projection. Micah is sleeping when there is a heavy rap on the door. He rolls out of bed, rubs his eyes, looks at a digital clock. It is three fifteen in the morning, he notes as he stumbles to the door in mere boxers. He opens it and rubs his eyes again, seeing a Gray blur before him. “Yeah?”

The Gray stutters, “Commander... We have found... We think you should see this.”

Micah sighs. “Can it wait till morning?”

“No,” he says quickly. “No, it cannot.”

“Fine,” Micah says. “Wait a moment, okay?” He leaves and quickly dresses.

The Gray leads him out of the skyscraper and they walk along the street, now clear of refugees and patrolled by soldiers. They acknowledge him as he passes. The Gray messenger says, “You know how we have been exploring the tunnels beneath the city? The mines where the slaves worked day and night?” Micah nods. “We have been working constantly, around the clock, rain or shine, daylight or night. The tunnels are so extensive... We always find something new. We found something... That might be of interest to you.”

He leads him into what used to be a bank, then they descend into a shadowy tunnel alit with electric torches. Their shadows cast against the concrete and dirt walls. Micah feels as if they are walking for an eternity.

“Where is this?” he demands. “We’re probably out of the city by now—”

“We are out from under the city,” the Gray says.

“We’ve been walking for about an hour,” Micah complains. “Why couldn’t this wait till morn—”

“Here she is,” the Gray interrupts as they turn a corner to see several Gays sitting next to a crooked doorway.

“She?” Micah asks. He looks at the Grays who scramble to their feet in reverence. There is a steel door with melted sides lying against the far wall.

The Gray messenger says, “We found her about midnight. It took me some time to find you. Your whereabouts are hard to come by.”

Micah shoves past him and enters the room.

There is a single electric torch flowing light. She lies on a bed, a small blanket over her. She looks like a child, she is so thin and bony. He runs towards the bed and falls to his knees beside it. The woman opens her eyes, the dark sockets seeping of joy. Her wrinkled, dirt-laden and disease-infested skin reeks but he doesn’t even notice. Knobby bones stick out from her skeleton-face. A tear trickles down his face. “I’m here...” he breathes, trying to control himself. “I’m here...”

A hand snakes out from under the blanket, tiny like a child’s. He eagerly takes it. “You’re so cold.”

The messenger stands in the doorway. “She is too malnourished to move. There is... Nothing we can do now.”

Micah ignores him. “Sarai,” he says. He repeats her name over and over. “Sarai. Sarai.”

She smiles weakly. “It is you?” The voice is almost nonexistent.

His heart bursts and tears trail down his face. The Grays are taken aback—the soft spot of the Warrior revealed.

She smiles, a movement that takes all of her energy. “Don’t cry... It’s okay... It’s okay...”

“I took so long...” he moans. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“You kept your promise,” she tells him. “You kept your promise.”

“Sarai...”

“All I’ve wanted,” she tells him, “is to see you again. I’ve wanted... To see your face. To know you were not a mere myth of my imagination.”

“You’re going to be okay...” he tells her, releasing her hand and standing. He turns to the Grays. “*Get a doctor!*”

Sarai grunts, “Micah... No.”

He looks at her incredibly. “You could... You could die...”

“I have lived... a blessed life. I am ready... Ready to go.”

“Go?” he questions. He kneels down beside her again, knee into the dirt floor. “No. Not go.”

“Micah...” She reaches out a finger and brushes his smooth cheek. “Look at you. You’re still a young man. Look at me. I am an old woman. I have lived many

years. I have fought many battles. And I have seen redemption. You will win, Micah. You and those with you will win. You've returned for the enslaved peoples of earth—and they will not be let down. This has been revealed to me through many dreams, many visions.”

“Sarai...”

She leans back in the bed, staring at the ceiling. Her breathing is growing more and more ragged.

He leans over her, peering into her eyes, pleading for her to stay. “You’re the only human I have—”

“No,” she says. “You have another.”

“No—”

“Cara,” she says. “Remain with... Remain with Cara. She needs you now. You are all... All *she* has.”

“Sarai... We can be together... All three of us...”

But she doesn’t hear him. Her eyes are closing.

He grabs her frail hand and squeezes it. “No... No...”

The Grays, uncomfortable and sensing a deep aura of reverence, leave the room.

“Sarai—” he says, and her name floats over his lips not once, twice, nor three times, but forever. “Sarai—”

And then she speaks: “It’s beautiful.” Her eyes are closed but her face is glowing. “Oh! It’s so *beautiful*...”

She breathes her last.

Micah falls back onto his rear, the life sucked out of him. There are no tears. Tears cannot fathom or hold the sorrow that races through him. He feels a presence in the room but does not acknowledge it. Hidden in the shadows, the King speaks: “There was nothing you or anyone could do.”

Micah grits his teeth, staring at Sarai’s body. “Why did you let her die?” he demands. He swings his head around and begins crawling to his feet. “*Why did you let her die?!?!?*”

“Mihael—” the King protests, stepping forward.

He curses the King. “*What the \$#%#@ is wrong with you?!?*” he demands. “*Is the death of my family not enough?!?!?*”

The King tries to calm him down. “Listen—”

Micah screams and rushes at the King. He is not two feet away when he is driven into the ground, lungs exploding.

The King towers over him, the slits in the robes and the gloves glowing with ineffable fury. “*Do not curse me!!!*”

Micah remains on the ground. And now the tears come.

The King’s fury diminishes and he kneels down beside him, taking him into his arms, holding him. “She wanted to go.”

“She suffered... How long... In here *alone*?”

“She wanted to go,” the King says. “She willed to go. She knew what awaited. She walks there even now.”

“I can’t... So many... How many have to die?”

“Not many more,” the King answers. “It is good that you have seen her.”

“Why?” Micah commands.

“Because now you know there is no limit to their cruelty. Now your hatred for them and your passion for their destruction deepens. It is time.”

Micah begins breathing easier. “What is your will... Master?”

“It is time,” the King says, “to begin the Great War.”

X

Micah stands before the Ten as they are gathered upon the rooftop of the skyscraper where he had driven the Sirian captain’s skull into the antennae. All of them are armed to the teeth with armor and weaponry. Micah’s bio-steel is upon him and he wears a helmet of pure chrysolite. He swings twin spears in his hands and speaks over the roar of the thousands of troop-ships taking off and heading east for the next great attack: the sweep East.

“My warriors,” Micah says. “It has been an honor to serve with you. We go to battle again. We have lost two beloved friends—Mattai and Andreas. Let us honor their memories by slaying a thousand of our enemies each!” The Grays shout, “We are with you, Master!”

A drop-ship appears over the lip of the rooftop, blowing dust in their faces. It hovers before them and a ramp lowers.

Micah says: “I will join you on the ground. My agenda lies elsewhere now. My grace and peace go with you all!”

He watches as the Ten board the drop-ship. He closes his eyes to avoid the dust as the engines roar and the drop-ship carries away, the ramp rising. He can see the Ten looking at him from the back of the drop-ship as it joins the thousands of others flying east.

Micah turns his back to the east and descends into the skyscraper.

He is descending the stairwell when he hears a shout. He turns and sees Cara racing towards him from above him. “Wait!” she cries. “Wait!”

He freezes, waiting for her to join him. She doesn’t say anything but embraces him tight, squeezing the air out of his lungs. The skyscraper gently shakes as drop-ships fly past and overhead. She pulls away, tears crawling down her face. “I’m so sorry... Everything just changed... Changed so fast...”

“It’s all right,” he tells her, wiping her bangs out of her watery eyes. “It’s really okay.”

“I was just confused, is all,” she says. Her ears pick up the distant noise of engines and the slight vibration in the stairwell. “So you guys are heading out again?”

He nods. "Yes. In a month North America should be ours. At least the former Continental United States..."

"It's hard to believe," she says, "that you're really here."

He nods again. "I know it. I know it."

She bites her lip. "You're not going to leave us again, are you?"

"No," he says. "No, I'm here for good."

A smile crosses over her face. "Good. Good. Then I guess... Then I guess I'll let you go." She turns and begins to walk up the stairwell.

Micah turns and proceeds to descend, but then he hears Sarai's words, as if whispered into his ear: "Cara... You are all she has..." He swiftly turns and shouts her name up the stairwell. He sees her pause and look back. He says, "We're going to be establishing a base in the remains of New York City," he tells her. "When it's completed... I'll have a transport fly you over."

She grins even brighter. "Thank you. I'd like that."

He nods. Again. "Okay. All right, then."

"Well, go on!" she urges. "You have a war to fight."

Chapter Eleven

"If the whole universe has no meaning, we should never have found out that it has no meaning: just as, if there were no light in the universe and therefore no creatures with eyes, we should never know it was dark. Dark would be without meaning." – C.S. Lewis

I

Many days pass and they turn into weeks. The earth twists around the sun, which shines oblivious to the chaos thrust against the planet's surface. The Gray blockade monitors the troop movements as they sweep across the Continental United States. The Gray armies stretch across the vast panorama desert and snake through the ruins of the cities once adorning New Mexico, Texas, and then up north into the vast pinelands of Colorado and Montana. The Gray forces constantly went up against and beat back the Sirians, fighting in all the major cities' ruins. The Sirians would retreat, build up their forces, harass, and retreat. They are being pushed to the Atlantic Ocean, and will probably retreat in Africa. The Grays are relentless and merciless; all the worshippers of the Beast are slaughtered and the Sirians given no quarter.

Mihael the Archangel's fame increases with each battle. He and his Ten, riding a drop-ship, always deploy and assassinate the leader and his bodyguards, therefore crippling the resistance. All of the leaders cowered underneath the power of Mihael, breaking even before he touched them. Two more of Micah's loyal warriors were lost: Johannon and Toma. The remaining Eight vowed never to leave Micah's side, vowed to fight even to the bloody end. Micah's true face becomes more and more known: a warrior of epic proportion. Sometimes he would lie awake at night, think of his family, and think of where he had come from. A cubicle desk-jockey shoving papers and wearing out pencils. Sometimes he doubted if this were all real, but the ache of the times and the weeping of his heart would not allow him to dream and believe such things. He would awake in the morning, take the report of the troop movements, eat with his comrades, then prepare for the day's assault.

Three weeks into the advance, the Gray front meets the Mississippi River, or what is left of it, as it is dried up and littered with dusty banks, rocky outcroppings and the eroded cartilage skeletons of doomed fish. The battle is two days long and the Gray body count skyrockets. But the Sirians retreat and the Grays pursue them; the chase is on and the Sirians hole up in a small river valley surrounded on all sides by either hills or a thick river spanned by broken bridges. A city called Cincinnati, Ohio.

The drop-ship's engines glow a manila sulfur as it hovers above what used to be a highway. A broken and faded sign reads *I-75*. Grays troops marching towards the city part to make space for the drop-ship, and the captain lowers it down. Micah stands in the front of the ship, looking at the ragged skyline of decrepit buildings and the rubble of collapsed skyscrapers. Dust covers his view as the drop-ship nestles to the ground. The pilot lowers the ramp and Micah makes his way to the back, descending to the long-abandoned highway. A Gray soldier meets him and says, "It is an honor to have you meet us here, Mihael."

"The honor is returned," he says. He blinds his eyes from the swirl of the dust. "How are things going?"

"Our troops are setting up a defensive position around the city. We're holing up on the other side of the river, in what you know as the top of Kentucky?" Micah nods, urges him to continue. "To the east and west are hills, and we are setting up camps at the base of them. We are lining up our troops for the invasion." Micah asks about the northern part of the city: is it to be fortified? The Gray nods. "We have them completely hemmed in, sir. When we make our moves, we will move in synch... Slowly suffocate them like a noose tightening around their throat."

Micah says, "Okay. Do you know the whereabouts of their command center?"

"It is unknown," the Gray says. "Either the leader is very stealthy... or he is very frightened."

Micah smirks. "Let's hope the latter... Where are you holing me up?"

The alien points a scrawny arm towards the west. "On that hill there is a nice little spot overlooking the city. When we invade tomorrow morning, you will have the perfect view."

Micah's teeth grind together. "I didn't come here to *watch* a battle."

"Unless we know where the leader is... Then you have your orders."

Micah shakes his head. "I'm being pushed around by a grunt."

The alien laughs. "If we were not such good friends, I would be offended. Don't you know it is the grunts who win these wars? It is just *you* who gets the glory."

"How do I get to this nice little pretty view?"

"I will take you there," the Gray says, walking past him and onto the ramp.

Micah sighs, turning around. "All right."

The drop-ship lifts away from the earth and flies over the ruins of the western sprawl of the city. Micah looks down and sees several crumbling homes, a falling-apart winery; a train lying on its side with a hobble of skeletons tossed out the windows and lying on the tracks. The train station itself is blasted apart. The renovated children's museum is left in shambles; a school-bus is crushed under heavy tokens of a surprising invasion. The drop-ship gains altitudes and flies over murky treetops before the remains of a small college along the edge of the hill come into view. The Gray says, "Ah, here we are, Commander." The drop-ship slows, flying overhead, and Micah sees an assortment of polished drop-ships for the various captains of the military, the captains he had met back on the planet of

the Shining Ones—literally years ago. He sees the cracked sidewalks and overgrown, weed-infested lawns crowded with crates of equipment; Grays carried materials into the abandoned dormitories, into what looked to be a chapel, and then into a library and a larger rectangle-shaped building. He could see telescopes and outlook posts being constructed for a nice view over the city.

The Gray says as the ship descends, “I am sure it was a pretty place at some time, no?”

“Yeah,” Micah says. “At some time.”

The King, Micah is told, is on the way. He and the Eight are shown to their quarters: past what used to be a green-tiled chapel, down several broken steps, and into a dormitory with four wings. They took a stairwell up to the top floor, so Micah could see the city outside the windows. Gray soldiers are breaking down doors and investigating; searching for Worshippers of the Beast and Sirians themselves. Micah and the Eight travel down the corridor; the Grays acknowledge them with tucks of the head. Micah can see weariness in their eyes, but the weariness is underscored with eagerness. They reach the end of the hallway and the Gray leading the entourage proceeds to knock down the door, revealing a room full of dust. There are two beds to either side and books covered with grimy film, as well as two broken laptops and an overturned television with a cracked screen. There is a hole in the window and bird nests adorn the bookshelves. The Gray enters and pulls back the covers on the beds. The first is empty, but the second contains a skeleton wearing ragged, moth-eaten clothes. The Gray gently picks up the skeleton and leaves the room, telling Micah, “This is yours. Your soldiers will be given their own quarters. Make yourself at home.”

Micah looks at the decrepit conditions and thinks about asking if he can just stay on the drop-ship. But then he notices how quiet it is. In the drop-ship, he knows, the noise of the hankering mechanics at nighttime is sometimes unbearable. He steps into the room and sits on one of the beds; Yaakov moves to the other bed and sits down, facing him.

“What do you think?” he asks in his mousey voice.

Micah shrugs. “It works, I guess.”

“As long as it will do for you, Commander, it will do for me.”

“It will do for me,” Micah says.

A shout comes from out in the hall, followed by scuffling. Micah and Yaakov exchange looks, then dart out to see what’s going on.

A woman is being dragged from one of the rooms by Gray hands; she is resisting, cursing them in Spanish. They tell her to calm down but she can’t understand their broken English. Micah sweeps past, grabs the woman, and speaks to her in Spanish: “Calm down, ma’am. We’re not here to hurt you.”

The woman is breathing hard, glaring at him with bloodshot eyes. Her skin sticks to her bones.

"You need food," Micah says. He looks to one of the Grays. "Bring a canteen and a meal pack."

The Gray leader of the operation intervenes. "She may be one of them."

The woman hollers, "I am *not*!"

"She's not," Micah says.

He is not convinced. "We need to check--"

"She's *not*," Micah says. "Trust my judgment. Water. Food."

The Gray nods and leaves.

The woman looks at all the Grays around her, shivering at the sight of their ghastly oval-shaped heads. Micah gently touches her shoulder and moves her back into the room. He sees that there are several blankets, a rusted pillow, and an assortment of iron pipes. He has her sit down and he sits down across from her. He asks her, "What's your name?"

The woman doesn't answer, as if her tongue is tied.

"You *do* have a name?" he asks. One of the Eight is peering into the room. Micah looks over at him: "Leave us." He disappears. Micah returns his gaze to the woman, repeats, "You *do* have a name?" in Spanish.

The woman nods. "Felicia."

"Felicia," he repeats. "Felicia... What're you doing here, holed up like a rat?"

"I ran," she tells him. "I ran from... I ran from them."

"Ran from the Sirians?"

"The invaders."

"Why did you run?"

"I was a slave. And I couldn't be a slave no longer. Nor could my daughter."

Micah cocks his head to the side. "You have a daughter?"

"I named her... Immanuel. God is with us."

"I know," he says. "I know. Where is she now?"

Tears are building in her eyes. She looks away. "There was no food... Nothing to eat..."

Micah tenderly reaches over the bed, touching her arm. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"There was nothing to eat," she groans. "Nothing... No food..."

Micah is whispering in her direction, "It's okay. It's okay. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

She looks up at him. "I didn't have a choice," she weeps.

"It was out of your control," Micah says. "Some things like this... They just--"

"I ate her," the woman says. "I ate her raw."

A knot hardens in Micah's throat. Her words run over and over inside his mind *I ate her raw. I ate her raw. I ate her raw*. His tongue is twisting over itself and he slowly moves his hand away from her. She buckles over, weeping, shedding salty tears all over her bare, cut and blistered feet. He stands and leaves the room, world swimming, horrified at such an act, but even more horrified by the atrocities that

would drive a woman to do so. The Grays stare at him from out in the corridor. He glares at Yaakov. "We begin the attack tonight. Is that understood?"

Yaakov considers, "That may be too early for our—"

"Tonight!" Micah hollers, and he storms down the hallway, leaving the building.

II

He can almost hear them: the soft whisper of laughter from students huddled in groups, the gentle clicking of fingertips on laptop keyboards, the whine of humming database computers, the whisper of flipping pages, muffled coughs and pens rapping on the tables. He can almost see them: a boy and girl smiling at each other while pouring over homework, kids listening to quiet CD players while doing their research, the librarian chatting with a customer as he or she rents a stack of psychology books. He can almost feel it: the sense of innocence, a bright future, a brilliant sun and a world full of hope. But when he opens his ears he only hears the crunching of the ground beneath his feet, stepping over scattered books and fallen shelves. When he opens his eyes he can see the thin layer of dust over everything, he can see the skeletons lying crooked all around, gunshots riddled into the walls. And then he can hear what happened: the screaming of the students as they entered the school, the crying and sobbing as they are shot one-by-one and left sprawled over desks and the floor to rot and be lost for all eternity. Now he stands before a dust-covered window, and swiping his hand across it, receives a smeared view of the ruined city stretching from beneath the campus. He hangs his head low and draws a deep breath.

"There's no doubt," a voice says, "that it is hard." The King comes from the shadows. "We're met with more and more atrocities each day. This is fuel to keep us going. Energy to keep us moving. The rage, the anger, the wrath you feel—it is the imparted ferocity of the Father."

But Micah doesn't want to listen to him. "Why do you always emerge out of nowhere?" he groans.

"Am I interrupting you?"

"No," he says, shaking his head. "You're not."

The King hovers over a skeleton. A gloved hand reaches down and brushes the bruised fingers of a skeleton. "His name was Jonathan."

Micah slowly turns around, facing him. "What?"

"He was a seminary student. He held a job in northern Kentucky. A ministerial job."

Micah just stares at him, wondering what's going on.

The King nods to another skeleton with half the skull sheared off. "She was questioning her major the day the invasion came. She wanted to serve God..."

"How do you know this?" Micah demands.

"Don't be surprised," the King replies. "I know a lot of things. I know everything."

“Everything?” Micah asks, disbelieving.

The King sighs.

“Then you knew this was coming,” Micah says. “You knew... You knew these people?”

“They were my brothers and sisters,” the King answers. “I knew them very well. I talked to Samantha the day she died.”

“You *talked* to her?”

“I told her not to be afraid. I told her everything would be okay. Six hours later... She was embracing her family in the new universe, and she went swimming with dolphins with her little brother Timmy. He died of abnormal cancer her freshman year in High School.”

Micah slowly approaches him. “Why didn’t you stop it?” he demands. “Why didn’t you... Didn’t you help them?”

The King faces him; Micah feels the gaze turning his strength to cider. “My ways are not your ways. My thoughts are not your thoughts.”

Micah doesn’t back down. “You could’ve helped-“

“You’re right,” the King says, cutting him off. “But let me tell you something, Mihael. You think you have everything figured out. You think you see the entire picture. Don’t you understand? You see what I *let* you see. Don’t question the way I work. Don’t question my motives. I know exactly what’s going on. My will and the will of my Father is completed in the fullness of time.”

He snarls, “Was it too early for you to help your brothers and sisters?”

The King turns towards the shadows. “You will never understand. You must accept it by faith.”

He shakes his head. “Listen-“

But the King is disappearing into the shadows.

“Wait-“ Micah urges, but the King disappears into the shadow. Micah runs forward and slams into a bookshelf, dust floating over him. He stumbles back. The King has vanished.

The mounted lantern swings back and forth in a stale breeze; Micah clutches his hands together in the cold whispers of Fall, and imagines the trees bursting with the radiant colors of the season. But the trees are all dead and the landscape is unmoving, littered with the skeletons of foxes and birds and empty nests. Micah sees his breath fog into ice crystals in front of him and for a moment, watch his breath dissipate, forgets that he stands upon the View, surrounded my milling Grays, and he forgets the thundering engines of the drop-ships flying overhead, laden with troops. For a moment he is forgetful that at this very echo in time the Gray forces are being ordered to move forward. He does not see the Grays running between the buildings with their spears, he doesn’t see the drop-ships firing their missiles into the city, he doesn’t hear the distant shouts and cries of the battle. All he knows is the Fall. And then there is an explosion. And his eyes open. And he

sees a great wall of fire blowing out the windows of a factory department as a drop-ship strafes it with a mini-gun.

The Gray beside him, peering through a small telescope, says, "The Army is pushing on all sides."

Micah glances over to the far right, down the hill and to the river. The bridges have fallen into the icy banks and he sees Grays riding motored landing craft across, climbing over the remains of the city. The Gray craft carried mounted machine-guns that strafed Sirian positions on the Ohio bank, which lit up with dozens of spectacular explosions. Micah crosses his arms, can feel the energy of the Shining Ones as they tighten the noose around the city.

A Gray proudly announces with a wide smile, "The city, like all the others, will be ours before nightfall."

Micah doesn't answer right away. "They aren't resisting too much," he says.

"They are weakened," the Gray intervenes. "They are--"

Micah turns and walks away.

He enters what used to be a cafeteria and sees that they have established the Command Center. He pulls aside one of the head Grays. The building shakes under the shockwaves of distant explosions. "I thought the Sirians had all fled to this city?"

The Gray nods. "Yes. They fled here."

"Define *here*."

"This area."

"Wait. Listen. This *city* or this *area*."

The Gray shrugs. "Does it matter?"

"We're sending all of our troops into the city! Of *course* it matters!"

The Gray is perplexed. "I don't understand--"

"All of our troops are *there*," he growls, thumbing to the east. "And we're *here*."

The Gray's face flushes from azure to ghostly white. "Oh no..."

Micah hollers, "Get some of those drop-ships to fly around the area and *back off the city!*" He rushes from the room.

He is running down the hallway, heart pounding into his throat, when someone calls out, "Mihael! Mihael!"

He swings around and sees his trusted servant, Yaakov, running towards him. "What is it?" he demands.

"The King," he says.

"What about him?" Micah asks. "Is he hurt? What's going on?"

Yaakov's mouth is dry.

"Speak!"

"She's here! We don't know how, but... She's here!"

Micah curses, shoves Yaakov into the wall, and stealthily moves in the other direction.

Drop-ships are soaring overhead towards the city as he runs across the lawn between Grays loading up drop-ships. "Where is she?" he shouts to them all. A few look at him with puzzled expressions. He repeats his questions until he gets an answer. He runs through the middle of the cryptic campus and enters what at one time had been a worship building. One of the doors to the sanctuary is open; he bursts inside to see her standing with the King in front of a hanging wooden cross.

"Cara!" he shouts, running towards her. "Cara!"

Both she and the King turn around. Cara's face lights up and she runs over to him, embracing him.

Micah lets her hug him, but eventually pushes her away. "What're you doing here?" he hotly demands.

Cara gapes at him. "What? It was a surprise. We thought that you--"

"What? *We*?"

She thumbed to the King. "He ordered me to come."

"What?" he snarls, glaring at the King. He grasps her by the shoulders and stares into her eyes. "You have to leave."

She squirms under his grasp. "You're hurting me--"

"You have to get out of here!" he hollers.

She writhes away. "What's wrong with you?" Her hands reach up and grasp her throbbing shoulders.

The King steps forward, intervening. "She'll be safe, Mihael. She needs to be here."

He turns his attention to the King. "Listen to me. I have a *really* bad feeling right now--"

"Everything will be okay," the King comforts. "Trust me." But this time his words are hollow and empty, having no impact on Micah's heart.

Micah turns and glares at the open doorway. "Can you hear it? Can you hear the explosions?" He faces them. "We're marching into a giant city with barely *any* resistance. Now you tell me *how*."

Cara's at a loss for words. "I don't see how this has anything to do with--"

"You're so blind!" Micah hollers, and he moves away from them. "Find someplace safe to hole up, all right?" And he's gone.

Cara looks up to the King. "He seems upset."

"He is."

"Why?"

He doesn't answer.

Micah makes it to the View in less than a moment.

A Gray soldier looks at him and grins. "We're already into the downtown ruins! Sirian corpses line the streets!"

The news finds no smile on Micah's façade. "How many wearers of the Mark have been discovered?"

"None," he replies. He boasts, "They fled in terror!"

Gravely, "They fled, all right," His voice turns bitter. "Listen to me. Pull back half the troops, move them to us."

At the sound of his command, several soldiers look at him with suspicion. "What?"

Someone put forth, "We almost have the city!"

Micah violently hollers, "Forget the city!"

The soldiers glance at one another, trying to make sense of their Commander's words.

"Now make the order!" Micah orders, marching over to the radioman.

The Gray with the radio fidgets.

Micah slaps him across the face. "*Do it!*"

The Gray's mouth mechanically moves, searching for something to say.

Micah opens his mouth to repeat the command, but his voice is drowned out the screaming slice of air, and in a moment his world is shattered.

III

It begins as a roar but becomes a deafening silence. He feels like his limbs are being ripped from his body, his insides carved out with a spoon. His skin burns as if he is walking through the unquenchable fires of Hell, and his eardrums feel like they are bursting open and spraying blood. He feels the ground leave him and all he sees are snapshots, all laced with fire and the breaking apart of mechanical instruments and the uproar of a heavenly explosion. The ground comes up and he doesn't even feel it, only realizes that he is lying on his side, staring into the eye of a Gray. There is only one eye, as the rest of the head is slashed away, revealing burning and smoking brain matter. Blood lines the round contours of the eye. Micah coughs and props himself up on a bruised elbow; he sees the crater in the ground where the missile hit twenty feet from his former position; debris is raining all around him and the smoke forms halos around everything that rests and moves. Carcasses of Gray soldiers are all over the place, but some of the bodies are moving, crying in this field of smoke and ash.

Micah crawls to his feet and lunges forward, lungs scalding with the burning sulfuric air. He emerges from the smoky haven and sees Gray soldiers running all about, drop-ships taking off from the lawn. His eyes focus on what was once the chapel, and his legs begin to carry him. He looks over to his right and sees hundreds of white-plumed arcs rising towards them from the sky; some fall in the distance to the west and others scream overhead. One snakes down and hits the library, engulfing it in a cacophonous explosion, the shockwave tearing Micah off the ground, tugging him towards the explosion, then vomiting onto the greens. He tangles in a tree and falls hard on his back, the breath knocked out of him, smoke and dust rushing all around him, burning his eyes. The roar of the engines of rising drop-ships meets him, mingled with the panicked orders of crazed Grays and the

dreary calls of the wounded. Micah's head swells with like a bursting drum and he wonders if this is the End for him.

Something keeps him moving. He is driven by the image of Cara implanted on his brain, and he knows: *She must not be lost*. He staggers out of the smoke storm, but has to fall into the grass to avoid a drop-ship flying over the ground. He turns his head in the warm wake of the craft to see it rise above the drenching smoke and fire from what had once been the library; a missile slams into the ship, burrowing into the hold; the Grays inside are given no chance to react, no opportunity to realize what has happened, before the shell bursts inside the hold and blows the craft apart from the inside, showering the sky in a fireworks display with burning nuts, bolts and metallic panels falling along the bankrupt hillside.

Micah ignores the sky-flower and runs between the Grays. He runs around a spaceship and sees Cara standing in the door of the chapel. A missile drills through the roof and bursts in the sanctuary, a wave of fire rushing towards her. She swings around; he tackles her and covers her as the flames rush over them. He screams in agony as the fire rips his back into burning lacerations; the fire chokes itself out and they are lost in the smoke. He rolls off of her; she is rocking back and forth, face a contorted mask of pain, wretched and writhing. She coughs hard; he grabs her by the hand and half picks her up and half drags her out of the crumbling building. A missile rushes over their heads, descending into the city. Micah risks a glance and sees the city filled with columns of smoke; an entire skyscraper plummets to the ground in an ocean of dirty debris.

Cara vomits ash all over the grass. She doesn't say anything. He says, "Up! Get up!"

She looks at him with weak, desperate, pleading eyes.

A missile strikes the far side of the campus, on the slope of a hill. A wash of dirt swings into the air. He turns to avoid broken pebbles and stones.

The hill.

He wrenches her up, ignoring her weakness. He drags her down several concrete steps into a long-abandoned patio now filled with cowering Gray soldiers. They turn their eyes from him as he passes through and begins descending the hill to the dormitory where he had found the Spanish woman. He can see Gray soldiers setting up anti-artillery machines on the rooftop; he is going to yell at them to get down before a missile engulfs them and caves in half the building. Cara turns her eyes, horrified.

The hill abruptly hits a road, and the point of intersection is steep, almost forming a ditch. Micah throws her down and cowers down next to her. She is crying, so he holds her close and whispers into her ears, telling her everything is going to be okay, they are safe here; the missiles can't touch them on the opposite slope. He sees the Eight running around inside the dormitory and he blasts her ears yelling at them to get down and join them. His voice is drowned out by the dormitory at the top of the hill being hit by a shell. Debris falls down the hillside and Micah covers her; the smoke forms whispering tendrils around them.

The Eight are running across the street towards him, appearing out of the smoke. Two are carrying one.

Micah sets Cara down. “You’ll be okay, I promise!” he tells her before running over to them. “Who is it?” he demands.

“Yaakov,” Bartalmay replies. “He was trying to get the woman out... And he was hit with shrapnel...”

Micah takes him into his arms and leads the Eight to the hill. He nestles down, holding Yaakov’s frail body in his hands. It is amazing that such a small creature could be such a beast on the field of battle. “And the woman?”

Filipos scowls. “She caught the worst of it.”

Micah swears under his breath. “Our pride at our successes led to this. Pride... *Always* the downfall!”

“We will still win,” Taddai says as another explosion shakes the ground beneath their feet. “Right?”

Micah nods to the city now laden with explosions. “Can you imagine the carnage? Can you smell it? Can you taste it? Is it all about winning? Is it all about the final victory? Think about all the lives lost! Think about all those who are suffering! And for a miserable little planet—is it all worth it?”

The Seven stare at him in shock. Shimon the Zealot—not Shimon Kefa—hotly mutters, “Blasphemy.”

Micah shakes his head, looking at Cara. “What in God’s name was he doing bringing her here? The fool.”

Taddai swallows hard. “Say it now, lest Yaakov hear it.”

Micah violently spins around and grabs him by the throat, squeezing, threatening to crush his throat.

Tomas draws his spear, pointing it at Micah.

Micah throws down the alien. “Get that \$#@%&\$# spear out of my face.”

Tomas can’t respond. Because at the conclusion of his words, it is over.

They hadn’t seen it. They hadn’t watched as the King had walked onto the scorched campus, lifted his hands into the air, and without a word spoken, redirected the missiles to their homes—immediately obliterating the enemy. The city quickly fell into their hands and now the march east is slowed by the brushing through the debris to retrieve the dead and wounded. The victory is small, and the loss great; Micah’s heart pains at the very mention of *victory*. He finds Cara a comfortable and warm place to stay, and tells her to rest as he goes about his duties. He and the surviving officers not destroyed by the campus, now almost completely leveled and run-through with smoking ruins, organize the rescue effort in the city.

“How long until we’re able to keep moving east?” Micah asks. “How long until we’re cleaned up?”

The Gray in charge shrugs. “Who knows? A few days? A few weeks?”

Micah curses under his breath and finds the King. He asks for privacy, then derails: “You had such immaculate knowledge of every living being that existed in that library. Why couldn’t you help us out?!”

The King raises his hands, trying to calm Micah down. “Your ways are not the Father’s ways—”

“And my thoughts aren’t His thoughts, I know!” Micah hollers. “Enough with that metaphorical, symbolic B.S.”

The King seems utterly complacent. “It was I who repelled the attack—”

“Sure, once everything was lost! What about all those *lives*? All those righteous *lives* that you care so much about?”

The King glowers, “Don’t question my ways.”

“Really? Fine. Then let me walk in blind submission, even if that leads to my grave.” His temper is flaring out of every word he speaks. “Tell me, O Great and Wonderful King—” he doesn’t make any attempt whatsoever to hide the sarcasm—“what would you have me do? How many lives would you have sacrificed? How many lives ruined until you are happy? Can I ask you a question, King, honestly? Do you even want to win this war?”

The King is trying to calm him down, voice quickening, urgent: “Mihael, Mihael—”

“Do you *want* to win this war?” Micah repeats. “Or are we just some \$%&\$#@ pawns in an inter-galactic game?!?”

The King turns his back to him. “You need sleep. Go get some rest.”

“No,” Micah growls. “No. Don’t just walk away like this. Listen to me!”

The King spins around and spits, “I *am* listening! What do you *want*? Do you even know what you *want*?”

Micah’s face burns red as the sun’s flames. But he can’t find an answer. Then, “I want to win this war.”

“No,” the King says. “No, that’s not what you want at all. And that may be why you fail.” And he leaves him alone.

Micah finds Cara sleeping. He sits on the bed and strokes her hair. He thinks of her as a child. A third daughter. When he saved her from the fire, he felt something different inside. He had originally felt protective of her because she belonged to Danielle and, in some mystical way, to Sarai as well. And Sarai had even commissioned him to watch over her. But he did not save her because of commission nor obligation to an executed woman; he saved her because he feared for her with all that he was. And now he sits on the bed, feeling those emotions again, as she begins to wake.

She is startled at his presence and jumps. He puts a finger to his mouth. “Shhh...”

She rolls around in the covers, propping her head on a pillow so she can look at him, blond hair falling around her eyes. “What’re you doing here?” she asks, voice awkward because of her scrunched vocal cords. “Shouldn’t you be helping—”

"I'm taking a break," he says. "The King... Well, the King suggested it."

She smiles. "He's a great man. He saved us all, you know."

His heart burns. "Yeah," he says. Denying all his emotions. "I know."

She doesn't say anything, just stares at the ceiling. Then, "What do you remember of my mother?"

"Your mother?" he asks. "Oh. Well. Lots of things. I remember how she was really quiet. Her sister, your aunt, Laura, she talked so much. She was a chatterbug. Do you know what that means?" She nods. "Danielle sure was something, though. Your grandfather loved her so much. He would've died for either one of you, and ended up losing his life in his passion for your sister. I remember... I was a prisoner with her on the drop-ship. They threatened to kill her." A small smile crawls over his lips. "I killed them." He looks into her absorbing eyes. "I saved her life."

"And guaranteed mine," she says quickly.

"Yeah," he says, thinking. "Yeah, I guess so."

More silence. They can hear drop-ships flying overhead, carrying supplies here-and-there, transporting the wounded from the critical zones or taking medical troops into them.

Micah fidgets with his fingers, biting the fingernails every few seconds. "Why do you think I fight this war, Cara?"

"Why?" she asks. "Why does 'why' matter? As long as you win?"

"I don't know. But the King... He says my motives... Well he didn't *say* this... He *implied* it..."

"Come on," she urges.

"My motives, I guess, might have something to do with whether or not we win this war."

"What?" she asks. "That doesn't make any sense."

"I know."

"It's not like it all rests on your shoulders."

"I know. But the King... He acts like it does."

"Well... What's your motivation?"

"I don't know," he says. "Honestly, I've never really given it much thought."

"Well," she muses, "you have some time."

"I know what it is," Micah says, facing the King out on the lawn. "My motivation. It's my family."

The King smiles. "What about your family?"

"I want to avenge them," Micah replies from the heart of his being.

"Is that all?"

"No. I want to see them again."

The King taps him on the sternum. "And there it is. The reason why you may not win this war."

A knot forms in Micah's throat. "I don't understand."

The King wells in a deep breath. "The air is clean. Take a walk with me, will you?"

As they walk between the milling soldiers and the pup-tents springing up for various field rescue operations, and under the setting sun of the third day after the devastating counter-attack, the King speaks absent of eloquence, only with simplicity. "I consider you a friend, Mihael. I really do. Sometimes you might doubt it. I'm rash with you. I make you see things you don't want to see. I've rested such a huge responsibility on your shoulders. These are all the lace around the friendship. You are still a treasured friend of mine, Mihael. I want you to know this."

"Why are you telling me this?" Micah asks slowly.

"Your motivation," the King begins, "is corrupt."

"Wait," Micah interjects. "Corrupt? How is my love for my family corrupt?"

"Because it's selfish," the King answers.

"Selfish? Who cares? It's a noble motivation, I think."

He is surprised at the King's response: "It doesn't matter. The root of the matter is selfishness, except it is laced with the beauty and goodness of your family. Please. Don't misunderstand me: I'm not frowning upon your family at all. But when the motivation is selfishness... Things can go wrong."

"You're crazy," Micah says, shaking his head, a crooked smile spreading over his face.

The King growls, "Have I ever lied to you before?"

Micah sighs. "No..." Whether out of genuine interest or his own desire to end the awkwardness, to appease the King, he asks, "What would you have me do?"

"Examine your motives. Redeem them. Pray for help."

"Pray. Of course."

"Don't sleight this, Mihael. I'm serious."

"So am I," Micah says, cutting away. "Chill out. I'm not killing the rebellion. I'm leading it, remember?"

The King watches him walk away, and he shakes his head in shame.

This had happened before.

IV

The war continues. Over a thousand Gray corpses had to be carried away to the home planet of the Shining Ones, and many more were left incubating for better health. Micah orders the war to continue and they violently flush through the Appalachians, and as the first snows fall, they find themselves taking the valley town of Gatlinburg. Micah walks among the ruins laced in snow, the skeletons of people and Sirians and Grays alike, picked apart by scarce vultures. Drop-ships fly over the mountains and the snow is lifted up in plumes by their wakes, then settles down on the earth again in a pearl-white sheet.

Behind him she walks, following in his footsteps, taking in the scenery. She bundles tight in her coat and watches her breath fog into ice crystals before her. He won't let her out of his sight; ever since she was endangered in the Cincinnati attack, he has refused to let her stray too far from him. Now as he walks through the town to clear his mind, now moving between the skeletons of cars and admiring the frozen river running against the side of a mountain, he can feel her behind her, and he feels warm. She has been nearly the only human with whom he's had a conversation for two months now, as the war for the North American Continent is taking longer than expected. He has come to love her voice, her sensitive touch, her presence. His depression and anxiety melts in her presence.

"Everything's dead," she says, feet crunching in the snow.

The walk in the shadow of a building; inside a broken window he sees several empty nooses, with broken skeletons lying on first-floor landing. He turns his eyes and looks to the snow. "It won't always be, though. We're going to change all this. Can you feel the snow? Can you see how it makes everything so... white? We're going to wipe the black stain of the Sirians off this planet, Cara. We're going to wash it white as snow. Twenty years from now, we will return here, and we will see that people are beginning to flesh out a living. Trees will be growing again and mountain lions and bears will be roaming the hillsides."

Cara is almost hesitant. "We?"

He stops; she nearly walks into him. She walks to his side and he looks over at her. "Did I say 'we'?"

She nods. "Yeah."

He bites his lip, then continues walking, she at his side. "Does that bother you?"

"Bother me?" she asks. "No. No, I don't think it does."

Her voice is so beautiful. His heart flutters and his bowels twiddle. "Okay."

They keep walking for a while. She eventually puts forth, "It's getting colder."

He steps behind her and wraps his arms around her, his face pressing against her neck. "How is this?"

She feels his warm breath tingling the back of her neck. Her own heart bursts. She has never known... Never understood... Never *experienced* this... "It's good," she says, voice cracking. They stand there in the middle of the empty street, hollow buildings on either end, a broken sky-light sprawled before them, a carriage spilling twin child skeletons. She closes her eyes to know it no longer. She feels his arms around her waist, pulling her in, his breath tickling her neck.

In the Command Center, the King monitors the progress as Micah enters. He turns, his cloak swinging, and he says, "Where have you been?"

"Cara and I went for a walk," he replies. "What do the scouts have for us?"

One of the Grays at a glowing hologram display says, "They've fled to the Atlantic and are crossing."

Micah hovers behind him, feeling the King's eyes. He asks the Gray, "Destination?"

"Africa. Or Europe. We're not sure."

"We'll need to move, then. Take out their forces at New York City, strafe the docks. We don't want them to conglomerate again."

The King interrupts. "Mihael, can I speak with you?"

Micah ignores him, still giving orders. "Let's also begin strafing runs as soon as possible. I want those docks knocked out."

The King touches Micah on the shoulder; Micah feels a burst of pain and pulls away. "What?"

The King glowers, "You took a walk with her?"

"Yes. We went down into the town--"

"You can't do that," the King says.

Micah is taken aback, fumbling for an ounce of understanding. "I'm sorry... It was just a walk... There was no danger..."

"The danger is not from the foreign enemy, but the domestic."

"Why do you always speak in riddles like that?" Micah asks. He turns to leave. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"What about the gathering tonight?" the King asks.

Micah pauses, curses. "I forgot about it. I'm sorry."

"You can't come? We're going over the battle strategies and handing out rewards... You need to be there."

"I can't," Micah says. "I already have plans." He heads for the door.

The King steps forward. "You *must* cancel them!"

"Can't!" Micah hollers before disappearing into the corridor.

The Gray smiles. "He's a rebellious one, isn't he? Quite a feisty spirit."

The King closes his eyes, feels the emotions all around him. "Yes he is."

She sits across from him, the candlelight spreading over the smooth contours of her face. He looks upon her and can almost see Claire looking back at him. He feels as if he's on their honeymoon, when they sat on the beach with the candles and the Arabian waiters. His heart longs for that time, for a moment when the romance kindles and there is nothing else to be known except the insatiable love between two individuals. He hears her laugh and it sparks something inside of him that he cannot define; but it makes his heart thunder against his ribs and spots fly before his eyes. They eat their gourmet steaks and talk about the war effort, but the conversation turns towards their lives, towards their stories, and he learns more about her, and she learns about him. She learns of his first days in the 'new world', his running from the Sirians, leading up to the day he left Sarai and Danielle alone. She says she is proud that now, instead of running from them, he is making them run. He likes her wit and humor and he asks her if she would like to take a walk under the wintry stars.

The stars light up the snow as they walk through Gatlinburg, milling about the streets. The radiance from the snow almost make it seem like daytime, but only in an odd and mystical way. The cold is all but unbearable and she clings to him.

They speak for a little while, but then silence envelops them. They only know one another's company. Soon she says, "It's getting too cold... Let's go inside somewhere." So he finds the doorway to a souvenir shop and enters. Dust is everywhere and the shelves are knocked over, contents spilt here and there, but the room is quiet. And warm. They sit on the counter and kick their legs back and forth, looking through the dust-pale windows, seeing the snow-light reflecting into the store. "It almost makes you forget," she says, "what the world is really like."

She leans into him and he feels the soft parka rubbing against him. She leans her head on his shoulder, her blond hair brushing against his cheek. He feels his mouth go dry as she wraps an arm around him, squeezing in even tighter. He holds her hand, feels the warm blood coursing through it with each heartbeat. He can sense that her heart is increasing in rhythm. She raises her chin, and he turns his head, staring into her eyes. *Almost makes you forget what the world is really like.* He leans down and she presses up, and their lips touch; their mouths open, and their tongues entwine, and his bowels scream ecstasy and he feels ready to pass out from pleasure. Their mouths move in synch but then she pulls away, gets down, then crawls upon the counter, on top of him, hovering over him, their tongues dancing together. He sends his hands up underneath her coat and sweater and feels her warm back, fingers groping along the ridge of her spine. Her mouth opens in ecstasy and the two of them roll onto the floor; she is on top of him, moving back and forth, and their tongues sing sonnets that have never touched the ears of innocence. Her shirt comes off and she is upon him, and moments later they are one, and know nothing except themselves, wrapped in each other's arms and entering into one another.

Snow falls outside and drop-ships line the sky, soaring towards the Atlantic.

The Seven gather and the drop-ship lifts away from the snowy mountains; Micah stands before the view port as they climb into the sky, mix with the clouds, then fly above them, the clouds forming a carpet beneath their feet. Hundreds of drop-ships surround them as the Gray forces march east towards New York City. Micah doesn't notice the clouds, though; his weariness catches up with him, and sitting down in his seat, massaged by the gentle rumble of the oceans, and driven forward by the monotonous drone of the Seven chatting amongst themselves, he slides asleep.

In his dream she comes to him. His heart begins to pound hard, but he doesn't see a smile on her face.

She is before him, depression and resentment and sorrow etched over every line of her face. "How could you do this?"

"Claire-" He says. "Claire... I don't know what you're-"

"How could you replace me like that?" Her voice is riddled with distrust and pain.

"Please," he pleads. "I didn't replace you."

“Don’t color it up,” she commands. “Your loyalty to me faded. And you replaced me with another.”

Tears are welling in his eyes. He reaches out to touch her, but she pulls away, growling, “Your touch hurts me.” He is stumbling for words but finding none. Then she says, “But how could you replace your *daughters* like that?”

“My daughters?” he croaks. “They will never be replaced.”

“She is pregnant.”

He is awakened by Shimon the Zealot, shaking him. His eyes open and he sees the bluish oval heads all around him. Shimon the Zealot asks, ploddingly, “Master... Are you all right?”

He speaks, noticing how dry and decrepit his mouth is. “Ummm... Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.”

Skippo Gato says, “You were... You were crying, Master. We just want to know... if everything is okay.”

“Everything’s fine,” Micah answers. “Really. I’m fine.” One of them began to speak, but Micah interjects, “Can I just get some time alone? Please?” They nod and return to their seats, throwing out brief conversation. Micah watches the carpet of clouds passing below, lost deep in contemplation.

He is beginning to realize what he has done. The moment he took Cara in his arms, he sent his relationship with Claire to the grave. She wasn’t with him, but she could see him. This sends shockwaves of pain right through him—*She saw me when we were on the floor with each other*. And not only Claire, but Molly and Nicole. Watching as he kissed and fondled and groped and gasped. His heart melts in sorrow. His family has been all he has fought for, and now he has all but abandoned them for some poor little girl. He wants to vomit, wants to puke, but doesn’t move. He just stares ahead, far across the sweeping cloud panoramic, and for once doesn’t want to fight anymore. He doesn’t care about earth, he doesn’t care about humanity... He only cares about his family: Claire, Molly, Nicole.

And he has forsaken them.

V

The city is wreathed in flames.

For three days the battle has continued, a reenactment of the fall of Stalingrad in World War Two. The waterways are choked full of blistering and bloating corpses, staining the waters a hellish red with their spilt fluids. The devastation of burning vessels and rifting bodies on the waters make the ancient battle of Salamis look like child’s play. Within the city, the Grays and Sirians battle it out yard-by-yard, fighting house-to-house to secure the city. Now it has come down to Manhattan Island, and the battle has begun. Drop-ships send missiles into the heart of the city while other drop-ships precariously land on the edges of the island, deploy their troops and equipment, and pull out. The air is filled with sky-flowers:

Sirian anti-aircraft fire that throws burning incendiary explosions in every direction.

Micah's drop-ship heads towards Manhattan Island, the Seven standing with him, spears at the ready. They watch the explosions between the buildings, and see one of the skyscrapers collapse into a cloud of blanketing dust. Micah closes his eyes, feeling with his soul, and discovers it. He looks over to the loyal pilot: "Land on that building there." He points to a low skyscraper. "That's where he is."

They fly over the waters overflowing with bodies.

Micah turns and faces his men. "The war for North America ends this very hour!"

The Seven echo with verbal applause.

"Let's not forget those who have left us—let's honor them by spilling blood on our spears!"

The Grays are thirsty for blood and they let it be known in their cacophonous cries.

The pilot cries out, "Sky-flowers, on the way up!"

Micah hollers, "Brace for impact!"

Moments later the ship rocks back and forth. One of the Seven collapses to the floor. He starts to laugh.

Micah grins. "They can't stop us now. Can you sense their fear? It's all around us."

The drop-ship flies over Manhattan, the pilot maneuvering for the skyscraper. Below, in the streets, the Grays advance with their spears while the Sirians fire their weaponry. The streets come alive with the sparks of bullets, the bluish splashing of shields, the spilling of alien blood, and the roar of coughing explosions. They pass through a veil of thick smoke that stretches tendrils over the view port before they come upon the skyscraper.

"Go for the roof," Micah says. "We're going to descend atop of him."

The drop-ship gains altitude and hovers over the concrete rooftop.

"Descend," Micah gives the order. To another Gray engineer, "Lower the ramp!"

The Seven file towards the back as the ship and the ramp descend. Micah gives one last look out of the view-port to the island being beaten and bloodied, then he follows the Seven, reaching the hold just as the drop-ship settles onto the pavement. The Seven are already running off of the drop-ship, gathering on the roof. Micah joins them, and together they kick in a skylight, the glass raining down inside an abandoned indoor courtyard filled with dead trees and rotting flowers. They leap inside and storm the doors, and the hallways once again light up with the fierce displays and shouts of battle, blood staining the walls and the Righteous Ones forcing their way through, leaving a wake of carnage in their path.

Micah fells a Sirian warrior and moves over the carcass, searching the room that is vacant of doorways. The Seven behind him are completely mesmerized; one wonders, "Where did they come from?" Micah sees a flicker of movement along the floor of the hallway far down the way; he cries out, "Follow me!" and runs forward. A looming hole appears leading to the floor before. "This is where they came through!" Micah shouts, thoughtlessly lunging down inside. Filipos follows him down; they land in a room facing the Sirian Throne. A smile creases Micah's lips; Filipos is leaping to his feet as Skippo Gato begins to enter; at that moment the sound of buzzing electricity burns behind Micah and Filipos; they spin around to see the opening laced with crisscrossing layers. Skippo Gato makes no noise as he falls and is consequently turned into several hundred scolding pieces landing in a pile, his spear casting off sparks. The Five inside the upper corridor back off, hearts mortified at the glowing lasers. Micah scowls and swings around; Filipos does likewise, bearing his twin spears.

Filipos swallows a knot of rage and looks about the empty room; his blood steams for revenge.

In an instant the room goes dark; Micah's eyes pierce through it as if it were day, and he sees a shimmering movement and then a shout behind him. He swings around just as the light returns, blinding; he staggers back and falls against a pillar, rubbing at his sockets. Upon opening his eyes he sees Filipos' headless body gushing blood; he looks down and sees Filipos' empty eyes staring up at him. Micah stumbles away, gripping his spear in white knuckles. He has never seen anything like this before.

The lights are flickering. From above, one of the Five calls out, "What's going on?!"

Micah hollers, "Find another way in!" He can hear their feet scampering away.

The lights are flickering, then they go out. His eyes adjust and he raises the spears; there are twisting shadows about the room. He feels something stirring *within* him; and then the lights return, and the feeling is gone. It is replaced by an irrational and unfeeling fear. He swings the twin spears in his hands and cries out, "Show yourself! The One commands you!"

The lights are extinguished, and bending about the soft shadows of the room is a tainted whisper: *I know who you are. I do not fear you.*

He circles in the darkness, eyeing the shadows. "You ought to fear. I've come to destroy you."

You? Destroy me? Laughter. You are gravely mistaken, 'Mihael'.

"The wrath of the Father descends on you at this very moment," Micah warns. "Show yourself and you will be shown mercy."

Do you not know why I am? the voice demands. *Do you not know the name I carry?*

"Your name means nothing to me. *Nothing.*"

I am Beliel. The servant of the Son of the Morning.

“You are a liar and a thief,” Micah sneers. “You’ve sealed your fate by taking one of my men.”

Me taking one of your men? Hah! But it is you who killed him!

Rage is all Micah knows. He wants to beat the voice’s far-off body to a bloody pulp. “You dig your grave.”

How, then, do you explain the blood on your spear?

Micah looks at his spear and sees blood on the tip. His eyes harden and narrow. “Liar. Thief.”

Can you feel me inside you? Can you feel me inside your heart? Working? Whispering? Moving?

“Beliel, I command you, come out!”

The moment you kill me, you become me.

The lights turn on and a Sirian alien with deep burning eyes is running after him. Micah spins around and lowers the spears just at the right moment. Twin bursts of sizzling light exude from the spears and slice into the alien, tearing open his bowels and leaving him smoking on the ground. Micah smiles as the blood from the corpse runs about the slope of the Throne Room. He has never felt satisfaction quite like this.

Micah waits on the roof as the drop-ship lands. The King descends the ramp and approaches him and his remaining Five.

“We’ve won the continent,” the King tells him. “All the Sirians are fleeing to the African coast. We’ll begin setting up our policies here and then plan our assault on the African continent.”

Micah bows before him. “It’s been an honor, my King.”

The King stares at him. “Tiger? Or a lamb?”

“Excuse me?” Micah asks.

The King shakes his head, disturbed. “Nothing.”

“Can I see Cara?” he asks. He has decided he isn’t going to tell her she’s pregnant. At this point in time... There’s no way she would know.

“Of course,” the King says after an ephemeral pause. “You’ve... You’ve worked hard today.”

“Thank you,” Micah says, boarding the drop-ship. “I just want this god-awful day to be over.”

The King watches as the drop-ship departs and hangs his head low. One of the Five asks, “Why so sad, Great and Wonderful King? You are right—we have won the continent!”

The King struggles through building tears. “But we have lost so much more.”

He walks away, leaving the Five mesmerized.

Chapter Twelve

“In some sense man is a microcosm of the universe; therefore what man is, is a clue to the universe. We are enfolded in the universe.” – David Bohm

I

The next few weeks were a living Hell for Micah; the Gray armies didn't move at all. The King took control and ordered that the Gray forces hold back and establish footholds in North America. Every day Micah's blood surged with adrenaline to soar across the Atlantic and strike the coast of Africa, raining fire and damnation upon the Sirian cutthroats. More than once he questioned the King's wisdom, sometimes even publicly, much to the surprise of the reverent Grays. The King seemed tolerant, to a point, and allowed Micah to voice his opinions. But the King's decision, despite Micah's rants and catcalling, never changed. They built strongholds in North America before even planning the invasion of Africa. Micah sometimes wondered if the King even knew what he wanted; was he after destroying the Sirians or not? His loyalty to the Cause, Micah sometimes contemplated, may not have been what it needed to be.

Micah had returned to earth to punish the Sirians and redeem humanity. He knew what was happening all around the world. Slave colonies in Europe and Asia and Africa, death-camps out on remote island, the worst possible environment for any human being. And while people suffered, the King did *nothing*. Micah's heart grew hard towards the King's blindness and more than once he contemplated taking a drop-ship and single-handedly dealing death to the Sirians; that was his destiny, wasn't it? Take it! Grasp it! Seize it! Just don't *squander* it, something the King had no quarrels with doing. Micah just couldn't stand it.

His heart grew cold and dissension mounted. More than once, upon his lonely walks, he would muse, “Since I am the One, I need to be in control... If the duty were given to me, this planet would be ours and the Sirians would be weeping... The King is poor and needy when it comes to leading this war.” And whenever the King would say, “Your ways are not my Father's ways, and His thoughts are higher than your thoughts,” it didn't bring relief but only more frustration. Once, alone, he even danced with blasphemy, muttering, “Does the Father even *exist*? Because I haven't seen His touch anywhere on this world. He is far-off, aloof, unperturbed by the trials and tribulations of humanity. *I am the Father.*”

His relationship with Cara reached a stalemate. His dream over what he had done riddled him with sorrow, and cropped up every time he saw her or even heard her delicate voice. He began to distance himself from her, and when asked why, he simply replied, “There's so much work to be done.” But she saw through his veil and began to live a life of solitude, often staining her pillows with tears. There is no feeling in the world like utter loneliness in a sea of people.

Eventually the King wised-up and ordered the move on Africa. Micah and the Five eagerly boarded their drop-ship and led the way towards the African coast. The trip would take nearly three hours, and when he fell asleep, he could see the weeping faces of his family; his wife torn apart by sorrow, his children wondering why he had left them. He squirmed in his chair, moving his mouth as he slept, eyes twitching in a flurry of veiled emotion. And then there is a voice from the mouth of Claire, although it is not Claire's voice: the voice says *You know what you must do if you want the forgiveness of your family. You must make things right.*

When he awakes, as the African coast is coming into view, he knows what he must do: control must be his and his alone, and in order to warrant forgiveness from his beloved family, he must take out the baby growing in Cara's womb.

II

It isn't a jungle anymore. It has been turned into a craggy plain of broken dirt and withered bark. The ground is soiled with carbon from tremendous forest fires and the broken hulks of the towering trees lay sprawled in every direction. As the drop-ships take territory in what had once been the rolling, mountainous jungles of the Congo, now they have to hover above the earth and let Gray engineers snake down cable ropes and proceed to navigate the slick climbs and falls of disjointed and twisting tree-corpses. The engineers then blast open a landing zone for the drop-ships and about six hundred grunts are brought down and pitch up camp. At any time there are several hundred encampments scattered through the Congo, beginning to make its way into the mountains.

It is one of these encampments that the tide begins to rise, and indeed, the shape of the future begins to find itself being molded. One certain camp holds a distinguished man named Micah Freeman, also known as Mihael the Archangel. He is stationed with Five of his henchmen, and they rest inside a steel tent the size of a drop-ship. Inside Micah directs the day-to-day activities of the African invasion. A passing Gray soldier and his buddies may often hear the ranting and arguing of Micah as he speaks with the King; then the King leaves, unsettled, boards his drop-ship, and disappears into the evening sky. Sometimes Micah will come out and yell at them to get to work; other times they won't see him at all.

This time Micah stands outside the tent as the King's drop-ship ascends into the sky and disappears over the 'tree line.' He smiles and backs into the tent. The Five are awaiting in a separate chamber. He quickly comes to them and asks them to sit down. They obey and he stands before them all. They can see lightning behind his eyes, but a deep presence of unspeakable emotions settles across the room, worming its way into their hearts.

Micah says, "We could've had this planet three weeks ago. But we're being held back."

One of them puts forward, "We've been working hard, Master, and--"

“No,” Micah says gently. “No, it is not your fault.” His eyes glower. “It’s the King.”

The Five look at each other, then one cautiously asks, “The King? Master?”

“Yes,” Micah says, seeming to grow darker and taller, more menacing with each moment. “You heard me correctly.”

One of them swallows and mutters, “I don’t... I don’t see how...”

“He’s organizing this entire show poorly. He is a disgrace to those who suffer on this planet. How can we sit around idle, hacking at trees and underbrush, when men and women and children are being tortured, raped, and murdered halfway around the world?! He spends his time pouring over maps and talking to his ‘Father’—and I’d like to know where *He* is in all of this. Please. Listen to me. I don’t blame him for this. He’s simply not the one responsible! I am the Chosen One. *I* was chosen by the gods to lead the great battle for earth—and eventually all of the Milky Way galaxy. He had his show on each planet, bringing them into his Father’s Kingdom, but this is *my* territory, not *his*.”

One of the Five demands, “You’re speaking evil.”

“No! No, being *blind to the truth* is the only evil! The evil to be found here is us leaving humanity to rot and die because we’re not slow enough to act! We need to take control. You. Me. All of us. We need to take the power that is *rightfully ours!*”

One of the Five leaps to his feet. “This is blasphemy.”

“No! It’s what must be done! It’s the way it must be! This is our destiny!”

“You know who you sound like?”

“The King had his chance. He blew it. It’s *our* turn.”

“Mihael!” the alien screeches. “Do you know who you sound like?”

Micah glowers at him.

“You’re sounding like the Dawn of the Morning.”

Anger wells up within him and he surged forward, bursting: “Don’t you even \$#%&@&\$ say that!”

The Gray cringes back, but doesn’t lose his ground. “What’s *happened* to you? You’ve become someone else—

“I’m who I’m *meant* to be!”

“You’re completely out-of-line!”

“*You’re* out-of-line!” He glares at them all. “You’re all \$#%&@&\$% out-of-line.”

Another of the Five stands. “What you ask of us... We can’t accept.”

Micah glares at every one of them, but none of them move your eyes. “I considered you *friends*.”

“And we considered you with us,” they echo.

“Fine,” Micah growls. “Have it your way.” And his body begins to take a different shape, evolving into some huge beast with sulfur eyes and rancid rage. The Five quiver underneath his presence and cry out to the King, but the very breath of the creature before them makes them fall to the ground, squirming and crying out; their mouths open and expel slimy worms, and their bodies are eaten

inside-out. Their faces are masks of contorted horror, and it is only moments before it is over.

Micah looks over them. "Everything is about to change," he snarls.

A Gray guard at the tent turns to say something to Micah as he exits, but Micah reaches out, grabs his head in both hands, and twists it off, spraying blood all over him. Some soldiers playing a game with three dice look up at the noise and leap to their feet with shouts, but Micah is already taking up the spear of the fallen Gray and going to work.

The drop-ship flies over the ancient jungle graveyard, the King standing before the view port, his cloak wrapped around his legs and hiding his face and hands. He closes his eyes and can feel it still. The anger. The wrath. The malice. The evil.

"We're nearing the encampment," the pilot tells him. "It's odd, though: we're not getting any signals."

The King doesn't say anything. "Just bring us down and land us."

The morning sunlight filters in through the view port, blinding the eyes of the engineers. Moments later smoke can be seen on the horizon, rising wispy into the air. All the Grays crowd the view port, wondering what has happened. Had the Sirians attacked? Had something exploded? The King is silent. The entire site is covered with smoke so that the ground cannot be seen; the King orders the ship to land. The pilot obeys and drops it into the smoke; he lets the data on the computers lead him down and finally comes to a rest. The smoke is so thick that they can't see outside the view-port. The King orders the ramp to be lowered, then retreats into the back, some of his officers following.

As the ramp descends, smoke fills the hold; the Grays begin to cough. The King raises his hand and the smoke blows aside, creating a funnel stretching from the ramp, exposing the ground and revealing its hidden terrors.

The blood drains from the officers. One of them drops his spears.

Another gulps. "Oh dear King..."

The 'parting of the smoky sea' has revealed the gnarled and bloodied bodies, broken tents and spilt blood. What had happened is unclear... But there is one certainty: there are no survivors.

"The entire camp..." one mutters, shaking his head in bewilderment. "The entire camp..."

The King suddenly takes off into the skeleton-forest, cloak flailing behind him.

III

Her pleasant dreams are interrupted, and her eyes open. She stares forward into the darkness above, feels the cover wrapping around her. Something is different, something... in the air. It tingles all around her, bathing her in its fiendish presence. She tilts her head forward, chin over the blanket, weary eyes fastidiously dancing through the shadows. She can hear only the wind against the side of the

cottage here on the African coast, far from any of the battles. She can't fathom why she feels this way, and then her eyes adjust; she sees him. At first it scares her, a mere shape coming from the shadows, but when she recognizes it's him, she settles down. Clouds pass across the moon and leave it bare in the sky; the window lights up with its light and as the clouds pass, the schism of light crawls through the room, eating away the shadows. She is about to smile and ask him why he is here when the light falls over him.

His bio-steel armor is stained with blood, his hair is a mangled mop of human fluids, and a bloodied knife hovers in his hand.

And his eyes! Oh God!

A barrier rises between them and she finds herself kicking the bed, slowly pushing away from the man—no, the *creature*—at the foot of her bed. Her mouth moves, daring against all knowledge: “Micah...”

He raises the knife, a sinister and crooked smile sliding across his face.

She strangles the blankets up against her. The drop drips blood on the comforter at the end of the bed. “What’re you doing...”

And then her world becomes slow. She sees him leap into the air and fall upon the bed, bringing the knife down towards her stomach; she writhes away, the blankets twisting around her. She rolls off the bed as the knife stabs into the comforter, ripping a gash. Micah is drawing the knife out and glaring at her as she is crawling towards the open window. He steps down beside her and grabs her blond hair, pulling her up; she kicks him in the shins and falls against the wall, the small cottage shaking. He curses her and charges; she raises her leg and kicks him hard in the gut, throwing him over the bed. He is getting to his feet and she is picking up a wooden chair; he comes at her from around the bed and she swings the chair into him. It shatters into several pieces and he fumbles against the end of the bed and trips to the ground. The knife slides underneath the bed. Cara turns and dashes for the door; Micah screams at her and leaps through the air, almost flying, and lands directly in front of her, his arms coming up, hands clasping around her throat. She is stopped short as his icy, bloody fingers squeeze against her trachea. Her hands come up and scrape at his, but they are iron. Steam comes from his nose and his eyes are twin pools of putrid evil. Her face is bursting blue and her eyes bulging; her brain feels like a saw is slashing it apart. Shivers run up and down her as she chokes for air, eyes watering in sullen tears.

The door suddenly bursts open, and the King in his cloak enters; in his hands is a sword with a shimmering blue blade, and there is the sound of sickening, tearing flesh. Micah's face twitches and his hands release; Cara fumbles to the ground, hands groping at her throat as she coughs up blood. Her dizzy eyes fall across Micah's gut, where the tip of the sword protrudes. Blood stains the ‘impenetrable’ armor. The sickening sound returns and the sword withdraws; Micah falls to his right, landing hard on his shoulder, bile crawling down his throat. He squirms towards the corner, dragging himself, blood coming from his mouth. The King

holds the Sword of the Shining Ones in both hands; Cara falls to the ground, curling into a fetal position, breathing hard between ragged, bleeding breaths.

The King moves around the bed and faces Micah holed up in the corner.

Micah stares at him in horror. He speaks, his eyes flooding with hopelessness. He looks at his own hands, and with blood sprinkling his chin, weeps, "What have I... What have I *done*?"

Cara sobs hard, pressing herself against the bed. Tears coat the floor.

The King doesn't answer his question. "You've done this to yourself." He lets the sword drop to the floor.

Micah closes his eyes, looks away. "Don't let my family... Don't let them know..."

The King's hands reach to the fringes of his cloak. He stares at Micah. "Cara. Close your eyes."

Cara's eyes aren't open, but squeezed shut with the cacophonous sobs. She suddenly feels a sizzling heat but her eyes do not open. Her eyes begin to burn and sting like it never had before; her hands went to her eyes and she opened her mouth to find all the spit evaporate. And then it is over. Her parched mouth burns as if engrained with sand. She opens her eyes and looks over to see the cloaked King staring at her.

Behind him is a pile of ashes and a polished skeleton cloaked in melted bio-steel.

Cara looks down to the ground, her breathing becoming more regulated. "So is it all... Over?"

"No," the King says. "It's just beginning."

"But he was..." She protests, "He was the One."

The King shakes his head. "He was not the One."

She stares at him through tear-soaked, bloodshot eyes. "But..."

"His offspring is the One." He points to her stomach.

She looks down, rubbing a hand over her bare stomach. "Oh my God..." She looks up at him. "What about Micah?"

"He will sit at my right," the King says, "and you will sit at my left, when all is complete and renewed."

She doesn't understand; he just tried to kill her.

The King knows her thoughts as he knows all men's thoughts. "His debt is cancelled, for he acted under the shadow of the Sirians, and the Spirit possessing him, the great Sirian Beliel, now rests in eternal torment and agony on a distant planet with no hope of better days." He turns to leave the room.

Cara protests: "Wait." He turns. "What about... What happens now?"

"Let the road carry you," he says with a smile. "All is a brighter future now."

She wipes more tears from her eyes. "My child--"

"It will all be taken care of," the King says, "for I am the Rose of Sharon, and I have spoken."

Epilogue

“For behold, I create new heavens
and a new earth,
and the former things shall not be remembered
or come into mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever
in that which I create;
for behold, I create Jerusalem to by a joy,
and her people to be a gladness.”
— Isaiah 65:17-18 (ESV)

Time slows; Micah stares up at the King, and mixed with his tremendous sorrow is yet another emotion, something bordering on... delight. An insane calm, peace, tranquility and happiness comes over him—the portal to the next world is opening, its atmosphere washing over him. Bright light fills the room and his entire body tingles, a gentle warm air and salty breeze rushing past him. He suddenly realizes he is no longer pressed against the wall, blood seeping from his wound. An indescribable feeling rushes over him, much more intense than orgasm or even being high on drugs, and it pervades everything he knows and is. He is standing, except now he is full and able-bodied, perfectly sculpted and lacking any imperfection. He looks down to his gut and sees that it is smooth and without scars. He is whole! He spins on his heels in the dazzling light, confused yet excited at the same time. He feels as if he is rushing through a wind tunnel; his eyes fall upon the walls, and he sees his life flashing by on either side, everything from birth till now, the good and the bad. His sorrow over the loss of his family is gone, as well as the shame of his rebellion. All the mistakes and sorrows and pains he has known vanish; and then it is over, the whiteness sharpening into a corridor, a corridor stretching forever. A door appears on the horizon, rushing at him, and suddenly it is right before him, so close his forehead almost touches it. His hand instinctively grabs the doorknob; it seems to pulse in his grasp and warmth floods through him. An earthen glow comes between the cracks in the door, and he hears the laughter and singing of his family, the songs of birds and the crashing waves of the ocean; the scent of flowers in mountain pastures; the doorknob twists in the palm of his hand, and as it swings open, a wave of energy washes over him. Beyond the door... indescribable.

And he knows: he is home.

And I saw an angel come down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand.

And he that laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years,

And cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal upon him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years should be fulfilled:

and after that he must be loosed a little season.

- Revelation 20:1-3

