

Starseed

a novel by

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Prologue: Death is not the End

She gripped the baby tight in her arms, screaming, writhing away; the baby shrieked, toothless howl shaking the stark night air. One of the guards grabbed the woman by the shoulders, ripped her away, hurled her into a cloud of snow; the other snatched the wailing baby by the legs, whirled it against the bullet-riddled brick wall; blood and guts stained the rustic brick, the lifeless corpse dropping into the snow. The baby cried no more. The woman leapt up, fanatical; the guard swung around the 9mm, blazing the trigger; she dropped into the snow, blown brains melting the ashy snow. The two prisoners just watched, feeling nothing, hands cuffed, dressed in shanty jeans and a flight suit; the barrels of guns poking into their backs. All around men, women, children huddled in groups, herded onto the flatbed Army trucks, the beds encased with barbed wire. Families were torn apart, parents from wide-eyed kids, fathers from wives; young babies were dropped into the snow and stepped on, crunching their faces, scarring the earth crimson with innocent blood.

The trucks slowly filled; the ones loaded with kids went to the left, into the city, where the children would be shoved into metal lockers, the walls slowly compressing until all that was left was crunched bones, slithering mush. The bodies were swept up with mechanical brooms and dropped into fiery pits. The women took a traverse to the cliff and forced to jump headfirst, smashing over the rocks; it was that or rape, unless the inhuman soldiers had warm feelings for you beforehand. And yet the men, stripped of all humanity, all dignity, stood proud on shaky legs as the back of their skulls shattered under the pressure of the bullets, bodies dropped into deep graves to be burned like wild animals; stronger carcasses gave the rampant dogs meal that night.

The two soldiers had never seen it up close. Now they were thrown into the hellfire. Most of the trucks had been filled, and sputtering smog and clenching dust, they drove off down the separate byways. The pair of soldiers got the dirty end of the stick, slammed into one of the sooty trucks; encased in barbed wire, they stood motionless as the vehicle pulled away from the town, enemy soldiers milling about. The convoy vanished into the countryside, navigating the steep hills and gullies.

"We're not getting out of here," one said, voice crisp with fear.

The other didn't react. "They'll come."

"They're not coming. They would've been here by now."

"We always go. Why won't they come for us?"

His friend stared out the lacerating wire; someone tried to squeeze through; the guard atop the truck fired behind a .50-caliber machinegun, spraying his body all over the other passengers. The first P.O.W. gasped, yanking a shred of bloodied cloth from his shoulder; his companion didn't react, backside smeared with warm blood. Some groaned, prayed, most were quiet; some sobbed, losing control. Theirs was the last truck in line, no headlights behind to light the road. Total darkness. Mist wrapped along the edge of the road, between bushes and gangly trees. The earth had been turned into a wasteland.

Squealing brakes; the truck lurched to a stop, the prisoners swaying with the jolt. The back door was opened, soldiers yelling at them to jump out and run into the clearing, following the torches. Like lab rats, they obeyed, without question, the masculine guns better at giving orders than mere words. All knew they would die, yet all feared the repercussions of fighting back. The clearing opened; a giant pit was engraved into the earth, reeking burning flesh and sputtering fat. The companions crowded around the edge of the pit; bones, charred and weathered, covered with bare strips of ashen flesh, lay all over each other; some had tried to climb up the sides, falling down, burning alive. The enemy soldiers took the first wave of men, knelt them along the perimeter; they closed their eyes; the first P.O.W. turned his eyes as the UMPs chattered; the bodies fell into the pit, spilling fresh blood. The next wave lined up, bodily hurled into the grave. Wave, wave, wave after wave.

Their turn had come.

Sub-machineguns jabbed into their backs, sending them along; forced to kneel down beside the rim of the pit. Horrible, it had to come to this; everything they'd always fought for, everything their friends had *died* for, ran rampant, an evil black plague, no hindrance, no handicap. The two soldiers knelt down, staring at the mutilated bodies building within the vast grave; some

were alive, groaning, moaning, quivering; many suffocated under the weight of all the bodies, lungs crushed. The guns were lowered, inches from the back of their skulls.

"They didn't come," his companion said, gazing over the slaughtered souls.

No resolution, no fear. "Death is not the end."

The guns roared; their bodies collapsed into the pit. The soldiers poured gasoline over the bodies and lit it aflame, abandoning the bonfire, heading back to town. The only survivors burned to death, carrion turned to crackling, smoldering with the smoke, a barbecue of human flesh.

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"Swipe your card."

She obeyed; the door slid open, pale, cool vapor pouring out the door, crawling over the floor. She stepped inside, shivering, teeth chattering. The guard shut the door, entered the room filled with seventeen aluminum-glass tubes, the insides frosted over; each stood fifteen feet tall, surrounded by metal proton plates and liquid oxygen. She handed him an I.D. card, and he plugged the number into the computer. A bright light over the ceiling flashed, illuminating one of the canisters. On the screen, the read-out overplayed *Jagger Fedducia*. He left the screen, headed for the tube; she started to follow, but he pressed her back. Swearing, she stepped down. He thrust his hand over a computer screen on the canister. The frost covering the inside of the tube began to melt, revealing a metal box suspended on a chain. Inside, the magic of rejuvenation. The chain snapped, the box dropped onto a cushion within the tube; the cushion dipped onto a conveyer belt, whisked away to an outer room; he brought the woman over, and they crowded against a viewing window; he huddled next to a computer. The box appeared through the conveyer built; the master brought forth mechanical claws, gripping the cube ever so carefully, setting it inside a volt of stainless steel.

"When do you want him?"

"Sixteen years ago. Do you have the discs?"

"Yes. They're in lockdown. I can't access them until the preset time is reached."

"I understand. Sixteen years."

He keyed a number in the keypad; above the stainless steel cylinder, a bundle of electrical nodes and prongs began to hum, simmering with electricity. A separate shaft of laser-light splashed over the electric huddle; they stepped back from the window.

The woman ventured, "Refresh my memory: when was the last time this was done?"

"Never. It's all hypothetical."

The energy flayed over the electric nodes, the electric shaft beaming down over the cylinder. A brilliant flash of light exploded, blasting outwards; the glass shattered with such speed both the master and the woman were thrown backwards; smoke poured from the room, intense sulfurous heat billowing over the ceiling, glowing red. The door flung open, emergency crews gushed like a flood into the room, running for the two bodies. They rolled them over, backed away: glass covered their fronts, embedded deep into the flesh, cutting skin and digging deep. Blood stained the clothes; the master's right eye hung on a cord of stringy muscle, impaled. No pulse. The emergency personnel shouted as the containers began to bust, aluminum-glass exploding, liquid oxygen hitting the ground, washing out; the survivors scrambled for the door, fires exploding in midair; they swung around and around, clawing at melting skin, the inferno burning them alive. The door slid shut, sprinklers activated, but unable to quench the fire. The oxygen burned up, the fires went down before more emergency crews could arrive. Eight bodies lay scattered about the room, down to charred bones, flesh ashes, cloaking the walls, the blackened frames of shattered tubes. The vents activated, smoke blown out from the ship. The room was labeled toxic, barred with electro-magnetic seals, the ship docked and abandoned, eventually smashed to rubbish. The crew dispersed, joining other ships in the Rebellion, the entire accident forgotten.

Until now...

Crop Circles

*Sin! A time is come, is already here
To weep, for love is gone, and there is only fear
All the world is no longer safe, but in the hands of those we created
Revered, many will try to stop the forces, but victory is an ideal
Sin! Billions will perish in the hands of those we created
Excelsis Deo! A name will come, will come in the final hours
Excelsis Deo! A name that will die, only to live in times past and present
Death to all, except the name who is the only hope and doomed*

Silencing the darkness, the headlights peeled beyond the line of trees, cutting into view; they turned onto Newberry Circle, the driver driving more slowly. The truck pulled up against the curb; the dark form of a driver inside cut the engine, and he stepped out of the truck. The engine idled, turning, shifting. The other door opened and a girl stepped out. He grabbed her hand and they walked across the lawn; he stopped, ran back, turned off the headlights, and followed her to the front door. They knocked; an older man answered the door; he scratched his scruff, letting them inside. A fire glowed in the fireplace. They sat around and talked for a little while; some more people arrived. They talked amongst themselves, gossip, rumors, tales and stories, jokes, laughter.

All the visitors jumped into the van, and the driver pulled out of the garage. Now several cars lined the road. They revved down the street, and soon they reached Brookside Community Church. It set up against a forest to one side, a road on another, and bordering it behind and to the right was the Brookside neighborhood. They got out and went inside, bundling up in the cold evening. They passed through the lobby; greeters greeted them warmly; they sat down in one of the front scarlet pews. The older man sat down next to them.

There was Daniel, a homely boy; Jake, and David; Kristen and Megan were talking about some new kid at school, the absolute in great looks; Chelsea laid her head on Ross' shoulder, and Ross talked to the new kid Michael about the blooming football season. Eventually the preacher got on stage. The kids stood, and recited prayers, and sung a few hymns, minds wandering from the beautiful act of worship it was meant to be. Finally they sat down, and the preacher began droning on and on about Moses—chosen by God to lead his people out of Egypt, something he never imagined possible.

Ross thought he might have dozed off; Chelsea was asleep on his shoulder. There was crust between Jake's eyes. Kristen was doodling in the back of one of the Bibles; the youth minister had gone, probably to waste time in the bathroom.

The preacher announced, "Don't forget to be inviting your friends and family to this year's Christmas Eve Service! Only four months away, it always draw a great crowd! This is the moment to share the Good News, and to make it a night to remember! There will be two services, and the second will be by candlelight. All of Clayton will be there—though that may not be too much!" Gentle laughter. "And for our friends in the military, there will be a special display in the Christmas Eve Parade of Army vehicle such as a Humvee with a mounted machinegun..."

Ross shifted his shoulder; Chelsea grumbled, looked up. "Let's get outta here."

They snuck out through the lobby as the preacher began to pray.

They went outside, sitting along the curb. The wind rustled through their hair; her own wisped this way and that against Chelsea's tender face. Ross wrapped an arm around her. His heart throbbed. "I wish we would've driven here instead of riding with Sebastian."

She smiled, looking into his eyes. "It can wait. It's only nine o'clock. And no school tomorrow. Day off. You could come over to my place—my dad won't be home till real late."

He snuck his hand up behind the back of her shirt, stroked her back. "Feel good?"

She moaned. "Harder."

He laughed. "You bet." As he rubbed her shoulders, he looked up—his hand stopped moving.

She risked a gaze his way. "Why'd you stop?" She shrugged, prodding him.

"Does something... feel weird to you?"

"No... No, why?"

"I don't know... It just feels like something's not right."

"There's a lot wrong with this world."

He continued rubbing; his mind drifted. "So your Dad isn't home tonight?"

"No."

He stood, grabbed her arm.

"Where are we going?"

He didn't answer, but dragged her through the parking lot, under the crisp moon, and into the trees. He swung her around, under the shadow of the forest; he pressed one hand into hers, and the other he slung around her waist. Their mouths touched, hard, passionate; his insides flipped. His tongue probed her mouth, ecstasy fluttering through his veins. Chelsea began to protest.

"Don't worry," he said, kissing her cheek.

She fell against the tree. "Ross... Someone might see..."

He stroked her face, ran a hand through her hair. "No one will..." He wrenched backwards, landing hard in brambles. Chelsea swung around the tree, readjusting her shirt. There was nothing. She looked back over at Ross. He was stumbling to his feet, heart pounding, legs weak. All fervent ardor for the girl vanished completely; his face paled, pallid as the moon.

She reached for him; "What's wrong?"

"There's something in the woods," he stammered. "Something..."

"We're alone."

"No, we've got to go..." He was on his feet. He snatched her arm, yanked her away from the tree; she tripped over a root and fell at his feet; she cursed, banging her knee. He grabbed her two arms, under the armpits, and lifted with his knees—he flailed back, slamming into a tree. The air seemed to shiver; Chelsea saw him run out of the woods, high-tailing it from the darkness; she ran after him; she felt her back arch, goose bumps lighting on fire; there were silent screams, sirens going off in her head—something following, following, *following! Behind her! Reaching, reaching, claws, bloodthirsty, hungry, shattered innocence, death, death, death! MURDER!*

Chelsea whirled around—she was alone.

Ross was running between the cars in the parking lot.

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He ran into the lobby, the doors flinging madly behind him. Sebastian came out of the bathroom; saw the mortified look on the boy's face. Concern wore troubles over the youth minister's face. "Ross, you okay? Looks like you saw a ghost!"

Chelsea came in from behind him; a hand was up her shirt, readjusting her bra. She turned beat-red. A look of frustration and disappointment covered the youth minister's face, but he returned to Ross, who was leaning against a wall, breathing hard. His flesh was clammy, wet, moist. Sebastian asked, "What happened out there?"

"He saw something," Chelsea answered. "He saw something, and ran."

"Saw what?"

She shook her head.

He asked Ross; Ross looked up. "Something. I don't know what, but it was hideous. The very embodiment of evil and terror. Blood red eyes stared straight at me from the forest. But it wasn't the eyes, but its presence. It just..." He shook his head, unable to throw words onto his screaming sensation. "It was like staring Satan in the face, and knowing he was coming for *me*."

Sebastian shook his head. "That's insane, dude."

Suddenly the ground beneath them seemed to open up; the floor shook and shuddered, quaking, as if hell was reaching up to swallow Ross whole; Bibles, tracts and hymnals on the shelves toppled; glass vases filled with flowers fell and shattered; the coat rack slid out from against the wall, the wheels creaking and groaning. Brilliant light shone in through the glass windows of the lobby, blinding them; Ross grunted in agony, the bright light stabbing his eyes like white-hot needles; Sebastian whipped around; Chelsea swore. The light faded; the trembling groans of the earth ceased; seeing spots, they ran out through the door, and looked

up into the sky. A large moon, bright stars—nothing out of the ordinary. The chilly wind tore at their clothes.



Set upon the spindly, towering field of corn, the rugged farmhouse had withstood the most rigorous tests of the ages. Blossoming trees adorned the lawn, and a wooden children's swing-set sat mostly unused up against the banks of the field. A rickety lawn chair lay on its side in the grass, the wood warm under the morning sun; the rays of dawn's first breaths reflected off the small playhouse and short wooden table sprawled across the lawn. The tender shoots of grass stretched towards the sky, the sun breaking through scarce clouds; there was the bark of a dog in the distance. A lone red barn held farm equipment, while another was the loft to a 'roomy' on the farm. The gravel driveway stretched a long way, cutting through the field, intercepting the road. Sparse shrubbery and a couple spindly trees hung close to the building, a poor substitute for decoration.

With a sickening groan, the metal garage door, fastened to the decaying wood of the barn, began to raise; sunlight burst into the black innards of the building, melting shadows; empty oil cans, coils of wire, a rusted-out 1986 race car from his earlier years. The farmer wiped grime on his pants, pulling the tarp off the tractor; paint peeled, chipping away, rust gnawing on the nuts and bolts. The tarp rolled into a bundle, set against the wall; bright late-autumn sun warmed the cold steel as the engine started; the tractor lurched, leaving the barn, passing the doghouse, into the fields. Over the searing belches of the engine, he couldn't hear his daughter, leaning from the window, screaming his name, pointing over the fields.

Maize, ten feet tall at places, erupted from the ground, standing spindly, growing in row after row after row, a sea of harvest. Tractor soot washed over the black dirt, finely embedded with the rugged contours of the massive tires. The path arched; he slammed on the brakes, cutting the engine, leaning forward. An entire wall of corn to his left was matted down, criss-crossing over one other, as if imprinted by the hand of God. The engine idled to silence; he gently dropped down, boots meshing with the crisp frost layering the dirt, an icy snow. Looking both ways, he slowly plodded out into the clearing, with a tedious, almost unrecognizable limp: over stalks that were bent at the base, so perfect, that they overlapped each other like an expertly woven circle. Creating a perfect circle nearly a hundred feet across! And not just one circle, but several; and not just circles, but also dashes and lines, and at the tip of the stunning formation, a three-pronged pitchfork—in the direction of town.

"Oh my..."

Footsteps; he whipped around; his seventeen-year-old daughter stood there, pulling the robe over her body. "It's a crop circle," she said. "You can see it perfectly from the window. I tried to tell you." She looked into his dumb-founded gaze, void of all thought; she watched as he returned to the field. "Dad?" He didn't reply. "Dad?" He turned. "What's happening?"

He hissed, "Get inside."

The hand of God.



Williams drummed his fingers over the table, police radio sitting by the phone; Farmer Graham paced through the kitchen, light from the window warming his face; Chelsea sat on the top steps of the staircase, crossing her legs, out of sight, listening intently. Graham opened the refrigerator; stared inside, shut it, only to open it again, pulls out a beer. "Want one?"

"No thanks."

Graham popped the cap, took a draught, set it on the corner. "I looked in the Encyclopedia. Aliens supposedly create these crop circles at night, carving messages into fields. The same guys who butcher cattle and steal their sex organs. Found all over Europe, some here and there in America. None recently, till now." He sipped the beer, mind fumbling. "Some guys admitted to doing this kind of stuff with boards and string. Maybe someone's copying their work, screwing around, cause they're too pitiful to have a normal life."

"I'm just as shocked as you are. I always thought this stuff was hokey. Never seen one for myself."

"Clayton's in the middle of corn and wheat fields. How many crop circles have you seen here?"

"None but yours have been reported."

"So what the heck is a crop circle doing in my backyard?"

"A lot of weird things have been happening. Animals been acting funny, people saying things. It's as if Clayton is slowly going to the madhouse. Flocks of birds have been going *north* for the winter, and the water on Sheer Lake is lapping against the wind." He laughed, incredulous. "And to top it all off, clouds don't come over Clayton—they go around the edge of town, never above us. It's like... it's like they're being *pushed* through the sky by something other than the wind." The farmer crossed his arms. Williams leaned back in the chair. "But about your crop circle, I'm as shocked as you are. Most things have been... I don't know, more *different*, but this is something *big*."

"Kids probably did it. Prank."

"No, it's too perfect."

"So what do you think?"

"I don't think anything. Except that you'd better be talking to your insurance about this. This is going to cost you, two, three thousand dollars at the most. Those crops are worthless."

Graham rolled his eyes. "I don't know if my insurance covers crop circles. Tell me if you hear anything, all right? Kids talking, whatever."

"Don't worry. Anything I hear will go straight to you."

"And don't let this get out to the town. This is a farm, not a carnival."

"No problem." Throat itching, "Can I have one of those beers?"

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Camera crews surrounded the front lawn, bulbs flashing, film whirring. Graham stood in the doorway, face a mask of heated anger; Chelsea stood behind him, trying to see; she moved to the window. Reporters streamed for the front door; he slammed it shut, twisting the lock, stepping back. They knocked at the door. Chelsea ran into the room. Graham could only fume; Sheriff Williams' slippery words and stingy sentences always slipped out to the community. Always. And now they were at his front door. Chelsea had even spied a few school kids out front, even her boyfriend with his cronies. Soon the entire town would be gushing into their crops, tearing down stalks and muddying the fields to catch a glimpse of the spectacle. The thumping of a helicopter shook the house, flying low, snapping pictures. Graham made sure all the other doors were locked.

"Don't leave the house," he snarled.

"What? Why?"

"I don't want you getting involved out there. There's bound to be some freaks showing up."

"Half my friends are outside, why can't I—"

"You're starving for publicity, just can it and go to your room."

Chelsea opened her mouth to retaliate; his vicious glare sent her storming up to her room.

Graham snatched the telephone, dialed. "Williams? Sheriff Williams?" Pause. "I've got the entire town milling onto my farm! They're gonna ruin what's left of my harvest and turn this place into October fest, Get your lazy rear down here and shove them off my property!" Garble. "I don't care *what* it takes, use maces and tear gas for all I care. I will not be made the laughingstock of Montgomery County!" The phone rang on the hook, settling; faces peered in the windows; he wrenched the blinds shut, on the verge of exploding.

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David climbed atop the mud-caked S10, the metal creaking beneath his feet. The farmhouse stood cold and silent, windows closed, doors locked, a prison. The camera crews had knocked repeatedly, then driven by instinct and pure, insatiable desire, launched their vans down the tractor trail to the infamous crop circle, whose legends had far surpassed the small clove of

Clayton, Wisconsin. Jake, Ross and Daniel hovered in the bed of the truck; Daniel opened a 12-pack of Coca Cola, still cold in the autumn chill; Ross popped a cap, drinking slowly. David shielded the sun from his eyes. "Are you sure her dad's fine with them just going through their yard like that? Listen to the dog bark, it's going insane."

Jake leaned against the cold metal, dropping down to the grass. "Maybe Chelsea will let us inside."

"It doesn't even look like she's home. The place is deserted. They probably went to town."

"Some reporters said they locked themselves inside a couple minutes ago, before we got here."

Ross opened the truck door, turning on the radio. Already the news of the discovery had seeped to the radio waves. He couldn't believe it himself, wanted a genuine look. "Anyone want to come with me?" he piped, pulling from the cab. "See if there really *is* a crop circle."

Daniel's eyes went wide. "Her dad is gonna murder you. Count me out."

David beamed, "I'm in." Jake happily tossed his vote.

Daniel shook his head. "I'm not getting the dirty end of the stick. I'll watch the truck."

David snatched the keys, wiggled them between his fingers. "Just in case."

They pushed through the throngs; Clayton was such a small town they knew just about everybody. The tractor set out in the sun, leaking oil; inside the garage, the dust had settled, rusted cans reflecting the sun. Huddled within the lopsided doghouse, Boomer barked furiously at the passersby, until the three of them knelt down; it wagged its tail, licking their hands; Ross fed him a few peanut M&Ms. Jake said he was give the dog a heart attack, but Ross ignored him, emptied the M&Ms, and they continued. The trail was muddy, the dew and frost melting, soaking into the dirt; gunk stuck to their shoes as they followed the footprints, tractor trail; some were returning, ashen-faced, amazed. Soon they arrived into the clearing; the helicopter roared overhead, people flowing everywhere, mind's riveted. The three boys stood at the edge of the woven circle, perplexed, blank. Some said pranksters with boards had come in the middle of the night; others stated it was some uniform weather anomaly; yet others pointed to the skies, crying aliens, aliens, *aliens*. One thing was for sure; whoever did it wasn't human.

Not human.

"I'm thinking this is gonna make headlines tomorrow," Jake said, blowing air.

David smiled. "It's bigger. Come on."

The trio plunged into the corn, crawling forward; stalks slashed at their arms; Ross' fingers draped over a wound, seeping a trickle of blood. Burned. He stopped to wipe it with his shirt, when he looked up, everyone was gone. Alone. His feet churned the dirt as he turned, turned; corn in every direction. No sound but the wind; the stalks cut back the sound of other peoples' voices. The helicopter's growl faded. Having turned, he had no sense of direction. Wisconsin fields could be up to miles in every direction, meshing with other fields, a lattice-work extending for eons. And Mr. Graham's field was no exception. Panic gripped his heart, icing his bones. Which way to go? He searched for footprints, found none. No decision, no way to tell if right was left or right was wrong; rooted to the ground wasn't helping, either. He began walking, through the corn, closing tighter and tighter, an umbilical noose. Choking sanity from his parched mind.

Cold, vaporous chills washed over the back of his neck; he turned on his heels, nearly falling; the corn several yards down shimmered. Ross didn't move for the longest time. He cautiously turned back around, began walking, glancing over his shoulder. No one. He swung his head forward—and jumped back, a six-foot-tall, wide-toothed man blocking his path. He was shirtless, covered with bruises and scrapes, dried splotches of blood; maniacal, wild-eyed. Ross fell back, landing hard; the man's pants were covered with slippery foam; he ambled closer to the panicked boy. Ross kicked at the ground, groping back onto his feet. He patted his pocket for his car keys; they were at home! His cell phone was gone, too.

The convict stumbled forward. "They're searching for him. He's here! He's here! They know! They will kill everyone!"

"Don't come any closer..."

"They weren't supposed to find out, but they did!" He reached out; Ross slithered from his grasp. The man rambled, "It's not time, it's not time... He's not supposed to come... Not yet..." He collapsed, falling; Ross jumped out of the way as the man landed hard on his chest, arms

sprawled out; his bare back was a bloody mess, littered with bullet holes, scorched black and red, peeling under the cool sun. The stench was unbearable. Blood spurted from a gaping slash, the tissue peeling away to reveal bleached bone, shredded muscle. Ross vomited all over his shoes; the corn parted; he whipped around, slamming his fist into the face of the attacker.

David fell back into Jake; the two of them crunched to the ground. Jake shoved him off; he gripped at his nose, pulsating, bleeding; dribbling blood dripped over his lips. He opened his mouth to curse a storm until his eyes danced at Ross' feet, the mutilated corpse covering the ground. Jake swallowed, shivering, muttering, "I'm freaking out, man..."

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Ross waited patiently, his parents standing by the door, unfazed, disconcerted. He'd stumbled upon a dead body—that was all he told, all anyone believed. Who could prove him wrong? Who else was there? The door opened; his parents moved out of the way as the coroner strode into the room, carrying a clipboard under his arm. "I don't want to sound morbid or anything, but you made an incredible find. Whoever this man is—or, was—he doesn't have any fingerprints, no identification, and DNA tests even register him as being a variant of the Asian human population, a variant that doesn't yet exist. Who he was, we don't have a clue." Everyone stared at Ross. The doctor asked, "Did he say anything to you? Anything at all?"

He sternly shook his head. "No."

"Could we say it's merely coincidence that he was found dead next to a crop circle?"

"I told you, I just found him. I didn't kill him; you think I killed him?"

"No, absolutely not. I'd bet my life on it. This guy has steel bullets in him, with some poison that slowly ate away his flesh, eroding it until it split all over his body. A poison that's only in the testing phases at a nuclear research facility in deep Siberia. I did some research: Siberian scientists haven't even named the poison, it's just been discovered, created by their own genius. Funny thing is, this strange poison isn't found naturally, but only in Siberia. In a laboratory. In a very, very primitive form. Yet this guy is loaded with it, and it far surpasses in complexity and potency what the poison in the Siberia does. Amazing, eh?"

Running his hand through his hair, "He didn't say *anything*. I'm not a scientist. I don't know the answers."

"It's not the answers I want. I just wish... I just wish there was an explanation, a reason. It's perplexing."

"You think I wasn't confused when I found the guy? Did you see his back? I was about ready to believe these crop-circle-creating aliens dropped him off after they abducted him! I'm clueless as you! If one of us is able to give an answer, it's you. Don't go to me for any stupid answers."

They walked back out to the car, the sun dying away. The street was nearly deserted, the general store and several shops closed; a couple plodded down the street, arm-in-arm, the man smoking a pipe. They hopped into the car; Ross shivered under the cold. His mom said, trying to lighten the mood, "I got you another astronomy book. It's got a lot of nice pictures. Comes with a fold-out map of the Milky Way universe." Ross said nothing. "I meant galaxy..."

"I know," he mumbled; usually he'd correct her in an instant; she knew something was wrong.

"What's bothering you?"

He couldn't tell her what the man had said. Whom was searching for whom? Whom wasn't supposed to find out what? Who was here? All the nonsense was eating his brains out. "I never should've walked into that field," he said aloud.

His father sighed. "It's not your fault he died."

"I don't care," he lied, adamantly; no one believed him.

The Escort pulled into their rural ranch-home driveway. His dad spoke, "Did you want to go over to Jason's?"

"No. Not tonight. I just need time to think."

The front door hung open, swinging on the creaky hinges.

His mom sucked a deep breath. "That door was closed when we left."

Father stopped the car, stepping out. "Don't get out of the car. Lock the doors."

He headed for the door. Ross' stomach twanged; something was wrong...

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"Are you all right?"

Chelsea pulled the covers up over her body, shielding out the chill. The drapes over the window fluttered with the night breeze seeping into her bedroom. "Yes, I'm fine."

"Sure?"

"Dad? I'm seventeen."

"Some freaky things have happened today. I just don't want you to be scared. There's no reason to be afraid."

"I know, Dad."

He sighed, nodding, and flicked off the lights, shutting the door; the room suspended in darkness.

Chelsea rolled over, cocooning herself within the musty blankets, the pillow creasing under her head. Something gnawed at her insides; tossing and turning, she tried to sleep. She shut the window, tried to sleep again; yet sleep did not come. Itches swirled up and down her throat, scribbling like ticks; parched, she hopped out of bed, sundered down the hall. Light faded under her father's bedroom, the television faint. She poured herself a glass of water, went back to the bedroom—out of the corner of her eye, something moved in the yard below the window. She stepped forward, setting the glass down, knelt on her bed, peering out the glass. The corn stocks, seemingly glued together by the still shadows, stood like rigid soldiers in the moonlight. Moonlight flickered through the clouds, prancing along the lawn; the metal barn door was open, gaping; the dog began to bark. She opened the window, leaning out, craning her neck; the dog house reverberated with his ferocious growls, snarls; she slapped her head around to see something shimmer within the fields.

"Dad..." She ran out into the hallway; her father's light was out. She turned the knob; locked. He never locked his door. The television was silent; her feet tickled. She peered down, bare-footed; dark water peeled from underneath the doorway. "Dad?" She wrestled with the doorknob. "Dad! Answer me! You're scaring me!" No reply. She raced down the hall, into the bathroom, flashed on the light, melting the shadows from the room; she flung open the medical cabinet, snatching the lock-pick, turned for the door.

Bloody footprints covered the weathered linoleum.

Bloody footprints, *her* footprints.

"Dad!" Chelsea charged down the hall, bashing into the door, feet splashing through the blood trailing down the hall, over the hardwood. The door splintered, the hinges snapping; she flailed against the television, knocking it to the ground; glass shattered, spilling at her toes; electrical sparks sputtered, coursing light about the room; she fell against the wall, mortified.

He lay on his bed, on his back, gaping up at the hole in the ceiling; crumbled pieces of wood and drywall lay about his crumpled form, stained with the blood gurgling from his chest, peeled open as if by gigantic metal prongs, innards smashed and torn; intestines dripped over the bed, uncoiling at Chelsea's feet. Screaming, she bolted from the room, not thinking, images of his bloodied corpse vaporizing her brain, a mental hangover. She fell to her knees, chest heaving, tears spraying as her lungs throbbed, voice sore; the bathroom bulb shattered, tiny glass shards sprinkling to the floor; light completely vanished, suspending her in blackness. She cringed against the wall, shaking, knees quivering; blood stained her feet, varnishing the carpet.

The screams never seemed to end.

••

Mr. Keppler stepped through the doorway, reaching for the light. Heartbeats audible in his ears, he could only imagine what lie within. The lights sputtered, brightening the twin couches, blank television, family pictures scattered over the wall. He slowly scanned the basement, the frosty dew clinging to the half-flooded floor and walls, sending spine-tingling ghost chills through his mind, goose bumps lacerating his arms. He ascended the steps, shut and locked and

basement door; the kitchen was clear, garage, living room. The computer in the den hummed softly, the screen saver jumping about, caught in slow-motion. Ross' room was clear; storage room was empty—at least of trespassers, Elisa kept so many dusty boxes and households junk within it held clear as a warehouse. Water dripped from the bathroom faucet. He placed his hand on the knob of the master bedroom, slowly turned it, peering into the—He leapt back against the wall, heart screeching; standing on top of their bed was a naked man, a rope tied around the fan, noose over his neck.

Gangly, sobbing, pitiful; his hands covered his privates as he sobbed, hysterical, insane; sensing no danger—only horror—Keppler managed to step back into view; through the windows, the moonlight highlighted scars and scrapes over his body, carved with a dull knife, until blood flowed, seeping with puss, disease, infestation, crawling, itching maggots; but these were no ordinary scratches and tears: they were arranged in geometric patterns. Tiny figures, drawings, formulas—miniscule crop circles carved into his skin, everywhere, from his legs, to his chest, arms, back, ending at the neck; one eye was closed shut, blackened, swollen, the other swiveled madly in its socket.

Keppler gingerly took a step, to help—the man screamed, “Back! Get back!”

He raised his hands, falling back. “Who are you?”

“Pitiful, unknowing fools! How long will you be blinded! This is not the truth!”

He's surely lost it. “Look, just get down, don't hurt—“

“What do you know about hurt? Have you seen your friends as their bodies are blown everywhere; have you seen innocent women, children massacred in front of their husbands, then the husbands shot, over and over, till their blood turns to jello? Have you ever heard the screams of the lost as their bodies compress in the vacuum, deforming, covering with crystals of ice as their bodies drift forever through space? Have you witnessed the horror on the front lines as line after line is mowed down, the survivors slowly mutilated, still living? Have you seen peoples' faces blown off, brains splattered over your shirt? Have you ever heard the whine of the swarms as they descend like the black plague?” He shook his head, tears staining his cheeks. “I have seen enough horrors to last me a life-time. You and all your people have been secluded from the nightmare; the past is not real, only an illusion! You think you know so much when you really know so little!”

Vietnam? Not old enough. Nut case. “Sir, don't—“

“They're coming! He isn't safe! They will find him, they will kill him. Everything will be lost. Everything.”

“Calm down—“

“He cannot fight back, the revelation has not come! They weren't supposed to know!”

Keppler struggled for an answer... there was a crash down the hall.

The man wailed, “He will kill you all! He will kill all he knows! They're coming!”

He struggled to help, but what could he do? The frightened, terrified man leaned out, over the bed; Keppler raced forward, “NO!” The man jumped upwards, falling back with a crack; his eyes bulged as his neck snapped with the jolt; Keppler collapsed onto the bed, staring, weak, the body swinging on the noose, back and forth; blood from the neck dripped down the body, onto the meshed bed covers. Vacant eyes peered out, warranting nothing; *they are coming, they are coming, he will kill you all...*

Williams burst into the room, 9mm in his hands. He saw the swinging body, went rigid. Keppler gasped, “He broke in, he broke—“ Williams rushed over, helping him onto the chair; the gloomy, empty eyes of the carcass soaked them with tension; Williams helped him out into the hallway; several other offices were standing there, guarding Ross and Elisa. Elisa burst forth, sobbing, hugging her husband. Williams laid him out on the couch; Ross edged towards the bedroom.

“Ross, don't,” Williams commanded. “Stay with your father.” Some things no boy needed to see. Williams faced one of his companions. “Get the coroner on the line. We got a suicide.”

••

Keppler fell onto the bench in the middle of the waiting room, emotionally dragged, mentally exhausted. Twin hours of constant interrogation in a smoke-filled room yanked its toll on his

nerves. Ross sat across the room with his mother, watching his father as he leaned against the wall, staring at the ceiling. His dad couldn't handle stuff like this too well. Keppler finally crumbled the silence, "Finally I can breathe. It was a smokestack in there. I'm going to die of second-hand smoking, I swear, it was so terrible. Are my eyes bloodshot?"

Elisa frowned. "Not from smoke."

"Who gives those guys the right to drill someone so bad? *I'm* the victim. I'll never forget what I saw."

Ross hadn't seen the body; he had entered the bedroom after the corpse was removed; his eyes had hastily danced over the still noose, splotches of blood over the bed, carpet. He could only imagine—but what caused the police to create such a stir? Someone broke into their home and committed suicide. Nothing unusual (yeah, right); but even Ross' whirring brain, skeptic mind didn't find comfort in there being two strange deaths and a crop circle in the same day. The clock struck midnight.

The coroner drained from the branching room; smoke crawled underneath the door. He extinguished a cigarette, tossed it in the ashtray. "You guys are good to go. We're not pressing charges, there's nothing to press. I apologize for being so tense and... harassing you, Mr. Keppler, but with what's been going on around Clayton, everyone's a little stiff in the joints."

Keppler stood, weak. To his family, "Let's rent a hotel?" He couldn't stand the thought of sleeping in the bed...

"Just a moment," the doctor said; they looked over their shoulders. "Mr. Keppler, for the record—"

"They were crop circles," he spat. "Carved into his skin. All over his body. And he said someone was coming for someone, and he's going to kill that unfortunate someone." He muffled a scornful laugh. "Bull crap. I'm not a superstitious man. I don't deny what the maniac said, but we all know he was a lunatic. I'm sure the asylum will be pleased to know he's been caught?"

"Actually," the doctor said, cautiously...

Keppler slowly turned. "What?"

"No asylums reported any missing persons. We ran tests on the corpse... No fingerprints. Skin graphs were scanned for the DNA, and his DNA is... quite unusual. Altered, in some senses. His DNA doesn't match up with any of the F.B.I.'s computers—it's as if the guy just popped out of nowhere. Awkward, I know. I'm struggling for answers, but maybe this is one of those times when you need to accept the fact that answers are to be found?"

Keppler shrugged. "Maybe he's a foreigner? We're leaving." He pushed his family out the door.

As they stepped into the cold night air, Ross perked, "What did the man say, again?"

"Nothing important."

"Something about finding someone?"

Elisa snapped, "Don't push it. This isn't the time."

No offense. "Yeah. Looking for someone, going to kill someone and everyone who knows him. The guy's insane. Don't have nightmares over it; our world is getting more crooked and crooked, and people are slowly melting their brains. By the way, don't use drugs and don't drink, or you'll end up like that perverted freak."

His words drained from Ross' thoughts; instead the young man couldn't push off the words he'd heard earlier, spoken by the poison-dripped man in the cornfield: *They will kill everyone...*

Almost overnight, Clayton, Wisconsin had been turned upside-down, invaded by an invisible source sending men off the edge and carving crop circles in the fields. Lights flashed down the road; an ambulance barreled towards them screaming in the night; Keppler and his family stood against the wall as the ambulance parked beside the coronary building; the back doors opened, surgeons withdrawing a body bag, darkened with blood. Mellow light flowed from the inside of the ambulance; someone was crying; Ross wiggled to the side; his mouth fell open; Chelsea hugged the wall, face maroon, clenched in sorrow, tears scaling her face as she sobbed. Ross looked back to the bag; one of the medical doctors stared at him for a moment, continued on, beckoning respect to Chelsea. Ross didn't heed the message; Elisa reached out to hold him back, but he jumped inside, running over to Chelsea; kneeling down, he embraced her, and just

knelt as her tears soaked his shoulder, holding her close, the only security from a collapsing world.

••

Panoramas Hotel blinked in choppy neon above the rustic hotel, the only one for miles, on the edge of Clayton.

He looked up, almost surprised; setting down the soft-core magazine, the grungy apprentice leaned forward. “What can I do for you, old man?” Keppler’s usually shallow, bright radiance had melted into musty, damp, stress-littered worry. The attendee saw Elisa enter the room, followed by Chelsea and Ross. The man saw their tears, shaking forms; Ross’ petrified face; Chelsea clung to his arm. He resented having been so sarcastic, maybe clinching a nerve; he took the bills from Keppler and handed him a key, watching silently as they shuffled through the lobby, to the elevator; the elevator doors shut. The man was alone.

Keppler found their room, opened the door. Two twin-sized beds, a dresser, a bathroom, a window overlooking the small village of Clayton, in the middle of farmland, the vast Wisconsin plains. Clayton’s night lights were far and few between; a few scarce cars navigated the streets. Elisa stood between the beds. “Chelsea, you can sleep in the bed against the wall. Ross will sleep on the floor?” Chelsea only nodded and dropped inside, curling into a fetal position beneath the blankets, silent.

Ross uneasily went to the bathroom; Keppler locked the doors once, twice, three times. He went out onto the balcony, feeling the wind against his body. Elisa wrapped her arms around his waist; his heart barely jittered at her touch. The two of them stood rigid like pines, draped in a muddy snow of depression, confusion, bewilderment, sympathy for Chelsea, her father—Keppler had seen the body, following the surgeons, before he was bodily shoved from the room.

“I think,” Elisa said, “we should sleep.”

“How can you sleep?”

“I have some Nyquil in my purse...”

“You get some sleep. I won’t be able to, and I’d only have nightmares.”

“Come to bed,” Elisa said, dragging him from the porch. “Everything will be better in the morning.”

She couldn’t have been more wrong.

••

Ross couldn’t sleep—the man’s words danced about, wreaking havoc on his mind. Or the hard floor was just too uncomfortable. Either way, he felt no regrets getting up, stretching. The small clock read four in the morning. The sound of a cart down the hall, sluggish hotel workers waiting for their shifts to end. Ross quietly crept past the beds—his mom and dad were seemingly sound asleep; Chelsea mumbled something under the covers. He considered waking her; no, any dream was better than the sharp-edged reality.

The air was cold, chilly against the frail jeans and t-shirt, but he revived a little. One always took the simple things in life for granted, until they were suddenly ripped away. Ross leaned over the railing, looking into the—He fell back, frozen, as a burst of white light spat down onto the tarmac parking lot, swept over the cars and vans, against the department stores, then sapped up into the air. Ross cringed against the overhang as rotating light, a spiral disk, cried out over his head, dizzying; the enormous, saucer-shaped aircraft paused over the hotel; he hid in the shadows; a beam came down, scoured the parking lot, vanished; the disk spread out over the lot, high into the air, amidst the clouds; Ross peered, heart pounding. The flying saucer—the *spaceship*—was a mere speck, blending with the stars. Then he saw the moon peek through the clouds, and realized there were no stars: the “stars” were dozens more same aircraft, covering the skies, twinkling! They dipped and flitted about, beams dropping over Clayton, then over the farmland; Ross ducked back inside, drew the blinds, locked the door, and sat quiet next to the bare desk until bloody light bled between the draping curtains.

When he went back outside, the saucers were gone.

••

Sheriff Williams met them outside the hotel; his disheveled appearance told them he teetered on the edge of exhaustion. As Williams stepped out of the police cruiser, Keppler grimaced, "You're ten minutes late." No one could deny Ross' father hadn't gotten much sleep; his irritable attitude was a window to his own drained soul.

Williams didn't seem affected, returning, "The phone lines were all tied up, I couldn't even get the call through. People complaining about lights in the sky or something, paranoia over all this crop circle business. I don't know. Then Becky Jenson went crazy, spilling gas from the Shell down the street, and I had to get some guys down there. People acting real funny, ever since..." He cut himself short, glancing over at Chelsea's rugged, parched face. He cleared his throat, then, "Well, yeah, Miss Winter will be more than happy to give you some shelter for the next couple days, Chelsea, until we can get hold of your mother in L.A."

"What were the lights?" Ross asked.

Williams cocked an eyebrow. "Probably nothing. People seeing things, mind playing tricks."

"Cause I saw some last night. Shaped like saucers. Flew right over the hotel, then up into the sky. There were lights circling the edge of the flying saucer."

Williams crossed his arms, incredulous. "Don't jump on the bandwagon, Ross. We all know aliens aren't real."

"I never said anything about aliens. I didn't see aliens. I saw flying saucers."

"And aliens fly flying saucers, we know." Williams scoffed, "These people are crazy. It's a spreading plague. Don't adopt whatever they say for truth. Just because nine out of ten people say $2+2=5$ doesn't make it right. And there *weren't* any flying saucers last night. I was up almost all night in the office going over paperwork, and couldn't get away from the phone, it ringed like a banshee. People giving me absurd stories about dozens of flying saucers in the sky."

"Did you ever go outside and take a look for yourself?"

Williams paused, cleared his throat. "Umm... yeah, I did. Didn't see anything."

Keppler beamed, "See? The truth, nothing more."

He was interrupted, Williams' radio inside the police cruiser coughing; he opened the door, leaned inside, took it off the hook. All the huddled victims could hear were broken, choppy gurgles, punctuated by Williams' rapid shouts and delirious, wide-eyed exclamations. "How bad... Yeah, I can-... What happened... Can you say that *again??*" He hung up the radio and jumped out of the cruiser, face pale, a mask of confusion. "There's been an accident in town, it's pretty bad. I need to get down there A.S.A.P., can you guys go on over to Chelsea's aunt's? I have directions—"

"I know the way," Chelsea said, wary.

"Good," Williams said, jumping into the police cruiser. "Keppler, I'll talk to you later tonight. You're going to want to hear about this one!" He stared the engine.

"What happened?"

"Sorry, can't say. Can't even believe it myself." He stepped on the gas, abandoning the *Panoramas*, screeching down the hill.

••

Her face reflected through the windows as the Escort flowed down the road, straight for miles, flat in every direction, constant fields of corn, barley, oat. A rickety, faded sign told them they were nearing Cassidy, Wisconsin; ten minutes passed until the church steeple appeared, building flaying from the epicenter of the town. Cars, trucks and vans, most disheveled and in need of repair, littered the streets; huddled men smoked; children played in the streets, along the sewers; Ross couldn't imagine living in such a place. So dirty...

They passed a fenced-in lake next to a run-down opera house; a weathered, paintball-licked sign read *No Ice-Skating*. Chelsea looked at the sign, turned away.

She gave Keppler directions, and Keppler pulled up along the curb next to a stocky, box home with wrap-around porch; the tingles were rusted and drained of color, azure paint peeling.

Keppler got out; Chelsea followed, Elisa and her son waiting in the car. A group of high school boys engaged in a game of basketball paused to watch as Chelsea and Ross' dad ascended the steps; Keppler rapped on the door; it swung open.

"Who can—" Weak, fragile, yet full of life, Aunt Winter went rigid, seeing Chelsea's weaker and more fragile condition; she was empty, void of emotions, too weary to cry. Leidy pushed past Keppler and embraced her in a giant hug; she hugged back, turned over her shoulder, looked into the car at Ross, but he was looking away; saying thanks to Keppler she disappeared inside, into the kitchen, gone.

"She's a little... emotional. Not by the looks of it, but trust me," Keppler warned.

"Oh, I know. Our family has a long history of hiding emotions. Her own father, such a loving and gentle man, when he lost his wife in a machinery accident, he was never the same. And it reaped its toll on Chelsea. Poor girl. I will try my best to comfort her, but how does one comfort someone who just lost one of the only people left in your life?"

"By being quiet," Keppler replied. "Listening. Don't throw in two cents, let her spill, just *be there*."

"You're a very wise man."

"Hope she does better. I'll call tomorrow; see how everything's going. I'll have Ross run over her homework."

"Don't bother," Leidy smothered. "She wouldn't do it anyways. Homework isn't so important anymore."

Keppler nodded and walked down the steps; Leidy backed into the house, shutting the door. He got back into the car; a commercial blared over the radio; Elisa and Ross were pale-faced, more so Ross. Keppler glanced between them, suddenly worried like never before. Something was very wrong.

••

Crowds clung to the street, blocking the accident; Williams jumped from the patrol cruiser, pushed through the tight-woven huddle. A hand draped his shoulder; lost in the furious mingle, Lieutenant Hess barked, "The driver had some facial wounds from shattered glass, and the woman caught a bad case of whip-lash. Both were ran to the hospital once the paramedics reached the accident." Williams burst through the throngs; the car sat in the middle of a clearing, surrounded by yellow caution tape; the front windshield was broken apart over the driver's side, webbed, crackling along the passenger's seat. Glass was thrown everywhere inside the car; blood stained the seat. Williams took it all in, unbelieving. Unimaginable, all of Clayton was turned upside-down literally overnight.

"Who was it?" Williams demanded. "The guy's name?"

"Girl. About forty-two. We haven't gotten any identification yet. The body was pretty messed up."

"Did anyone actually see it?"

Hess managed to break a grin. "The elderly couple in the car gave very... vivid... descriptions."

"Maybe they're senile, I don't know, this doesn't happen a lot. Ever. Is it even possible?"

"What else could it be?" Hess demanded, waving to the car. "Look at it, for God's sake! It's totaled!"

Williams rubbed his temples. "Sorry, Hess, but I just can't—"

"Neither could I, until I saw the body."

The sheriff teetered on the fringes of uncertainty. "How bad?"

"Want to see it?"

••

The coroner pulled them into the room, the acidic stench of fermenting alcohol clinging to the air, burning their noses. Williams made sure the door was shut; the coroner pulled a table from the wall storage; a bulky body bag lay atop. He unzipped the front, revealing the face; tender, yet frightened, wrinkled, deep, hollow eyes, scars and scrapes. He had already stripped her of

her clothes; Williams turned away, not in integrity, but disgust. Her entire front side had been mutilated so terribly it looked as if a gigantic canine had torn through her stomach, again, again, again. Pale innards were shredded, strewn about broken bones, sheared muscle. All the blood had been drained from the corpse; he hadn't sewn it up yet; the arms were stiff, hands clenching the air. Without cease the coroner warily zipped the carcass back into the body bag; strands of blood-stained hair clung to the zipper as he slid the table back inside, shutting and locking the compartment. There was no doubt in Williams' mind.

The coroner said, "Look at this." He pulled a jar off the shelf; inside were several steel balls. "Bullets. They had been driven through her body before the impact, that's why they're so rounded. During the autopsy I had to pull them out with pliers; everything's such a bloody mess there's probably more."

"Why would there be bullets inside the victim's body?"

"Don't think of it as a victim. Sometimes you need to drag yourself away from the ordinary, where the deceased are the wronged. Life isn't so pleasant. I don't think it's any 'act of passion' for someone to shoot round after round into this woman's body then throw her out an airplane window, if that's what happened. She did, after all, fall from the sky and land on the man's hood; the impact sent the back end of the car up into the air, and her guts splattered everywhere. Cleaned up before the crowds arrived."

Hess crooned, "What was she wearing?"

"Jeans and a t-shirt. Typical, casual fashion. Confusing."

"Who is she?"

The coroner didn't answer.

Williams demanded, "Well?"

"She has no fingerprints," he slowly explained. "I haven't run DNA tests. If you want me to..."

Williams glanced over at Hess. "Three bodies in 24 hours, all without fingerprints?"

Hess shrugged. "Expect the unexpected?"

Williams thanked the coroner, stormed out into the street. Hess caught up with him. "What're you going to do?"

"I'm going to figure out just what the frick is going on. People are found dead, committing suicide and falling from the sky."

"Do you know—"

"No, you know what? I don't know! Because I've never dealt with bullet-riddled women careening from the sky, I haven't dealt with people whose bodies are soaked in non-existent poisons, I don't deal with naked suicide victims who ramble on and on about impending doom! I *don't* know, I *don't* know how I'm going to do—or *what* I'm going to do—but either God is screwing with us or we've got one serious problem that's about to mushroom, kapish?"

Hess swallowed. "Mushroom? How much worse could it get?"

"I don't want to sound all-knowing, but I think this is just the beginning."

Revelations

Torn with exhaustion, Keppler turned off the light and shut the door, locking his son inside his room. He didn't move for what seemed hours, the grain on the wooden door prancing, vivid shapes in his mind's eye. Churning covers and restless movements echoed through the crack under the door. Ross wouldn't get a drop of sleep. He was shattered from his dancing thoughts, Elisa's arms wrapping around him. "He'll be fine," she said, breath tickling his ear.

Keppler shook his head. "I don't think so. He's an emotionally fragile guy. He acts like he's been through a lot, and he hasn't, not compared to us, anyway, or especially Chelsea. It's tearing him up, inside and out, sucking the life out of him."

"You're paranoid. He's just depressed. It runs in your family."

"I know what depression looks like. Have you seen his face? He sees one dead body and he acts like a mummy."

"Maybe there's more than we know?"

"Yeah, like what?"

"We weren't in that cornfield," she replied. "Remember how shaken up he was when his friends brought him back? Like he'd seen a ghost."

"That's what happens when you find a mutilated body in the middle of a crop circle."

"Open your eyes, there's more to it than this. I don't think he told the whole truth."

"He says he's seen flying saucers! I think he's broken the seal on the bottle of truth."

She didn't even crack a smile; horrible joke. "Sheriff Williams said—"

"He went outside himself! There was nothing! Just myths, rampant rumors. This town's been through a lot so it's fabricating its own tales to gain prestige."

She didn't push the issue. "Well, whatever the truth happens to be, he's pretty worn out. Just give him sleep."

"He won't get any. Not for a while. This is tolling more on him than his girlfriend!"

"We'll see in the morning. I'm telling you, he'll get some sleep, and he'll be ready for school tomorrow. Don't worry. Maybe seeing his friends will help a little bit?" She laughed. "He never did relish being cooped up with us too much. He's a teenager, needs his space. Maybe the memories of what his eyes have bore will seep out with time. But what takes thirty seconds to glimpse at takes thirty years to forget."

"He didn't see anything but a body!" He leapt, "I hired Doctor Baker to look at him."

"Who's he?"

"A psychologist. Ross needs help. He's fragile."

"He's been through a lot..."

"Doctor Baker will be swinging by tomorrow around four o'clock. He's doing it for free, too, so that's good."

"Free? That's weird... But maybe we should just give it a couple days, and—"

"And risk this slipping him even deeper into remorse, to the point where he takes his own life?"

"That's ridiculous, he'd never do that."

"Not with the psychologist."

"As I said, you're paranoid." She kissed him on the cheek. "I'm going to bed. I pulled out the sleeping mattress in the living room. I think we need to make the storage room our bedroom, get a new bed and make the bedroom storage? Cause I won't be able to sleep in there anymore."

"I understand. I'll work on it tomorrow."

"Are you coming to bed?"

"I'm going to have a cup of coffee." And he pushed past her, into the kitchen.

She called, "Don't worry about Ross."

"He's our son! What am I supposed to do?"

••

She swaggered up to the door, light flickering through the cracks in the frame. She grabbed the handle, cold, damp, turned, swinging the door open; she screamed, her father swinging from a

noose, mouth gaping, rotting, eyes plucked, sockets crawling with maggots; his bowel ripped open, guts all over the floor; she fell back, splashing in her father's blood, drowning under his swarming innards; icy claws gripped her arms, tearing jagged flesh; she flailed about, shrieked, sucked in blood; a gigantic talon slammed into her back, jutting up, pushing through her stomach; choking, drowning, suffocating, she writhed up and down, body splitting in half, blood squelching; her father's dying roar thundered as his body fell, fell, landing on top of her chest, his mouth closing over her head, biting down, ripping her scalp into the air, her brains smoking in the steam of his bloodbath...

Chelsea gasped, flying up in bed, shoving the covers from her body. The grandfather clock in the corner of the guest bedroom ticked back and forth; a cool breeze flittered through the open window, tugging at the blinds; shadows lurked in the corners, over the walls. She was alone. Chelsea splayed over the bed, shaking, quivering; she stared at the fan above her head, slowly turning, humming; felt the gentle wisps of air massaging her face. Tearful of her father's broken image, she didn't move, her dad's playful laugh, tender touch, unconditional love, all shattered by an invisible foe whose only title was a myth.

Crop circles.

Crop circles.

Crop circles.

She had always hated geometry.

The grandfather clock ticked.

••

Keppler pushed open his son's door that morning, to wake him for school; but Ross sat on his bed, staring motionless out the window, into the trees lining the fields bordering their land. And he wore the same clothes he'd worn yesterday. Keppler asked if he just wanted to stay home from school; Ross didn't, and he changed clothes, methodically slow, and slipped on some tennis shoes, kissing his mom and dad good-bye. Keppler stood under the porch overhang as his son started the engine of his rusted, auburn S10 and took off down the drive, up onto the ride, and into town.

Elisa came from the living room, wrapped in a silvery robe. "Told you he'd be fine."

"He didn't sleep. Not at all last night." He poured some more coffee. "I was right, you were wrong."

"You never fail to rub it in."

He ignored her sarcasm. "Maybe it's some kind of medical condition?"

"We have a medicine book lying around somewhere, from when I was a nurse in Seneca Falls..."

"No, no, we'll just ask the psychologist. It's probably something mental."

Elisa's furrow crunched, eyes flaring. "I thought you were going to cancel."

"I never said—"

"Our son doesn't need a psychologist!"

"Look at him, for God's sake! He's a mess! He's barely alive, barely functioning. He didn't sleep—if it was physical, he'd be collapsed at our feet, but he still can't fall asleep because there's something going on in his *mind*. He's taking all this nonsense, all this baloney superstition and channeling it to his brain and doesn't have control! Your methods of push and shove aren't working. You're wrong. The psychologist will help. They always do. Remember your Great Grandma? Suicidal after your granddad was killed in that automobile accident? You remember? I said we needed a psychologist, you said we didn't; I called one anyway, and she got over it, and was perfectly fine, healthy and happy until she died of old age at Winchester Nursing Home. Psychologists help."

"They help those who need—"

"And Ross needs one. Come on, it's only for a day? What're you afraid of?"

"I don't need someone probing my son!"

"He's not going to probe! Ask a couple questions, maybe put him through some ink blot tests, nothing serious."

"You're treating our son like a guinea pig."

"I'm not running lab experiments, I'm helping someone who needs help. I'm helping Ross. That's all I want, and you know that. I wouldn't be doing this for no good reason." She just looked at him, condemning. He wrapped his arms around her. "I love Ross, and I would never do anything to hurt him, only for his benefit. This isn't a punishment. I just... I just want to know there's nothing wrong with him."

"I'm telling you—"

"Just one visit, Elisa, one visit. That's all I'm asking."

Elisa didn't reply.

"One visit."

"Fine," she growled. "One visit. And we're done. You'll get your answers. Nothing's wrong with him."

••

School was a blur. His friends talked to him, but he didn't talk back. People wondered why Chelsea wasn't at school, and Ross forgot to get her homework assignments. His mind was a total blank, not even remembering the words of the murdered, but just the meaning: and not even so, for it all just rang in his mind, something was wrong, people were dying, Clayton was the epicenter of something dastardly huge, and he couldn't do a thing about it. Somehow he was the victim—but how? Sleep deprived, stomach hungry yet full, he grew weaker and weaker. Sweat popped; biology class.

Mr. Harris pointed to a DNA double spiral helix. "There are four bases in DNA, labeled A, C, T, G. Adenine, Cytosine, Thymine and Guanine. Adenine pairs with Thymine, and Cytosine with Guanine. Billions of DNA molecules make up the beautifully-designed blueprint that encodes everything from the formation of hemoglobin in your blood to whether or not you have freckles, acne, or whether you inherit genetic diseases such as Down's Syndrome, or cystic fibrosis. Sometimes the DNA is messed up, and a mutation occurs; most of the time the mutation is harmless, hardly ever beneficial, and many times disadvantageous to the organism—extra fingers, not enough blood cells formed in the bones, lack of cilia in the lungs and ears, maybe you have an extra eye?" Some dense laughter. "Although an eye would be impossible to form over gradual beneficial mutations. Quite a handicap... to evolution."

He struggled over the words, caught minds staring at him blankly; Ross slept in the corner of the room. Harris cleared his throat. "Some scientists, such as Doctor Alan Richardson, are trying to convince Congress to pass a bill to let them tamper with human DNA to make organs for use in operations, extra blood for transfusions, and maybe even to enhance the human genome, to make our bodies even better." He paused, a twinkle of deceit in his eye. He read from the textbook, "Surely such toying with DNA would bring a vast wealth of potential to the human species... It would open a whole new world to human evolution... Mankind could control his own destiny..."

He was struggling even more, eyes hastily flickering over, "In time we could even produce clones for medical treatment or—" He slammed the book shut, tossing it angrily against the wall; everyone went rigid; Ross snapped from his doze. Harris stood at the wall, glaring at the textbook; the kids shifted in their seats, uneasy. He gingerly picked up the book and placed it on the desk; a drawing of a DNA covered the front; he placed a piece of paper over the front, slowly calming. Ross couldn't let the incident slip; more craziness in Clayton.

Lyndsey asked, "Do you think they'll ever clone?"

"I hope not," he answered firmly, regaining composition.

"But if it's for medical experiments and to benefit mankind..."

"There's a little tendency we humans possess. It's called greed. Would we really stop at medical experiments?"

"What?" a popular kid spat. "You think they're going to make an army or something?"

Harris' face went ashen, hardening. He pushed down emotions. "Your homework is Chapter 19, questions 1-5."

••

Daniel caught up with him in the hallways. "My Mom is at the clinic, I don't want to ride the bus."

"Need a ride home?"

"If you don't care."

"Not at all."

They left the building, flooding with the masses spreading into the parking lot. A construction crew was placing giant walls within the parking lot, separating different sections of the lot. There had been lots of cars driving horizontally across the parking spaces rather than down the lanes and the principal was afraid something bad was going to happen; Ross thought it was meaningless. Not *all* kids were brain-dead hippie stoners.

His truck was down the lane. It was a ways from the school, a bad choice.

"Any news from Chelsea?" Daniel asked.

He shook his head. "Nothing. I suppose she's doing fine, though. She's with her aunt."

"How'd her father die?"

"I don't know. I didn't see it."

"They say she was pretty shaken up about it. Must have been bad."

"Any death is bad."

"Yeah, but what's the chances there's a crop circle, a dead man in a field, then her father hitting the rocks?"

"Hitting the rocks? Show a little respect?" He stopped. "Daniel, wait."

"What?"

A car blasted in front of them, from around one of the half-built walls; it roared down the lane. It would've creamed them if they'd stepped one more foot forward; Daniel's left leg quaked; the rim of the front tire had squashed in the very tip of his shoe, missing his feet. The car pulled into one of the lines for the exit; ashen-faced, Daniel glanced back at Ross to see he was just as freaked out. "Thanks, man."

Ross swallowed, weak in the tongue. "Don't mention it."

••

Ross made sure Daniel made it into his house, then backed onto the road and drove for home. The scene of the near-death accident replayed over and over in his mind. How had he known it was going to happen? No one's bare instinct was *that* attuned. The thought of someone watching out for him didn't even cross his mind; though it's blazing implications were more obvious than the noon sun. He continued down the road; his house was just up the street; a black Mercedes pulled onto his tail, and continued him as he hit the switchback roads, for some reason taking the long way home. The Mercedes never seemed to fall off his tail; he passed his home, and took a right. The car followed. Left. Still there. Another left—the car followed. Ross was getting anxious; he fingered the cell phone yanked from the glove box. Who could he—The Mercedes slowed, pulling into a brick, tri-level home. Ross breathed a sigh of relief, threw the phone into the glove box, and continued on his way.

••

He didn't recognize the white car.

Ross opened the door, stepping inside; his mother stood by the wall, watching her father; an elderly man sat on the couch, equipment and papers scattered over the coffee table. Ross glanced between his parents; the man jumped to his feet, giddily extending a hand. "Ross Keppler, I presume?"

Ross shook his feeble hand. "Who are you?"

"The name's Doctor Baker. Ph.D. in psychology. Yale University."

"All right," Ross mumbled, glaring at his parents; Elisa pointed the finger at Keppler. Baker didn't notice as he motioned for Ross to take a seat; the young man threw the truck keys in his pocket and sat down, uneasily leaning back in the chair. Baker's fingers meshed together, face brilliantly beaming; he was one of the few who actually enjoyed his job.

"Privacy, please?"

His parents left the room; Ross demanded, "Who set you up to this?"

"Your father. He is... concerned about you."

"Concerned?" He shifted his position. "Well... What'd he say?"

"So you've had trouble sleeping, concentrating? And you found a body in a corn field?"

"It's nothing big."

"That's what your mom keeps pressing. Your father just wants to make sure. As do I."

He shook his head in disbelief. "This is stupid..."

"Do you want to cooperate?"

"No."

"I'm here all day, or until we finish. It'll only take about twenty minutes." Ross said nothing. "Well?"

"Well what? Let's go."

Undaunted, Baker pulled out several flashcards, splashed with ink. He gripped a notepad and pen in the other hand. "This is the Rorschach Inkblot test. I show you a card with a blot of ink, you tell me what you see. Easy enough. Tell me when you're ready." Ross waved his hand. He flipped the first card.

Ross sighed. "What answer do you want?"

"Whatever comes first to your mind."

"I see snow. Bodies in the snow. The snow is turned red from the blood."

Baker licked his lips. "Dead bodies in the snow. How many?"

"I can't tell. There's a pile of them, in a hole in the ground. They're flowing over the sides. Men, women, kids..."

"All right, all right. Next." He flipped another card.

"Death."

Another card.

"Lots of people. Sick people."

"A mother huddling over her daughter..."

"Mother over daughter? Why?"

"It's what I see..."

"No, why is the mother hovering over her daughter?"

He squinted. "Because she's dead."

He nodded, almost cynical, but continued. Next card.

"A sky-scraper. Except there's no walls, just the girders. People are swinging from the girders. They've been hanged."

He peered at the next card, blot taking shape. "Mushroom. A mushroom made of clouds."

"A herd of buffalo running from a forest fire... No. No, it's people. Hundreds, thousands of people flooding from a burning city." Uncomfortable; Baker paused, continued.

"It's a barbed wire fence, a human body entangled in the netting. All torn up. His arm is gone."

"It's a truck. It's my truck. It's on fire, smoking."

The image was clearer than ever; Ross hesitated. Baker asked, "Do you see anything?" He nodded. "What?"

"A father and a son." Baker seemed relieved. Nothing terrible this—"The father is pointing a gun to his son's head. And he's crying."

"The son's crying?"

"The dad."

"Why would the dad be crying?"

He shook his head, emotionless. "I don't know."

The psychologist sighed, folding the cards, shoving them into the briefcase. "This is serious. Your immaturity is compounding the issue. Stop screwing around."

"You wanted to know what I see, that's what I see!"

"Want to prove your innocence? You ever did free association writing?"

"Heard of it."

"You start writing your thoughts; eventually your mind takes over and your hand just writes. Do some free association for me tonight. I'll be by tomorrow to see what you have. If you really followed through, I'll believe you. But if you keep messing, I'm going to keep coming." He

grinned, snapping the briefcase shut. "Just paper and a pen, that's all you need." He nodded and dipped out the door.

Keppler slinked around the corner. "I wish you'd take it a little more seriously?"

"I did!"

"What kind of answers were those!"

"I don't know, just answers. What was in my mind."

"Do the free association writing for him. He's come a long way."

Ross rolled his eyes. "All right. I'll do it after I call Chelsea. I want to know how she's doing."

"She called while you were gone," Keppler said. "Wants to go to the movies Wednesday night?"

"I'll take her up on the offer."

It'd be maybe the worst decision of his life.

••

The bird's wings ruffled in the wind, the crumpled body lying on the road. The car swept by, disappearing around the bend. Light from the sun drenched through the clouds fringing the edges of Clayton, sparkling down; the sunlight bent, twisting midair, curving, then flashed back down on the earth, warming the trees, grass, wheat and corn. The small town of Clayton continued as if nothing was wrong.

A little boy and his father went into the backyard; the five-year-old lit the fuse on a bottle rocket, leapt behind the fire pit; the spark enflamed, and the rocket spewed into the sky, higher, higher; suddenly it exploded, as if slamming into a horizontal wall burnt into the sky; the debris rained all over the road. The father scratched his head, confused; the little boy cried for ten minutes then wanted to play Scrabble, so they went back inside.

••

Mist washed from the corners of his eyes; his back was cold, freezing; he lay atop a chilly steel table, stripped down to his boxers, limelight pouring over his front. Sweat dripped down his face; he tried to get up, but was held down by leather straps. Turning his head, he ignored the burning sensation in his neck—all around the circular room were computer screens, data displays, buttons and tiles and switches and knobs, all awash with a reddish tinge from overhead lamps. A door slid open in the wall, a figure sliding inside; adorned over its form was a white lab coat, seamless; a dark patch of see-through plastic covered the hidden face. In the man's hands was a scalpel, and in the other a strange-looking instrument, appearing to be a steel ball; more figures entered, approaching the table. Ross squirmed, trying to free himself; panic burned like a wildfire as the first slowly lowered the knife, cutting back and forth; he felt nothing but a ticklish tingle, felt liquid running down his side: *they were cutting into his body!* Several of them surrounded him, making sure he didn't snap, as if he had the strength; with the opening in his gut, the main figure gently pressed the steel ball into his gut, sewing up the wound with an electric laser. Almost instantly a warm sensation frothed from the ball within his body, flowing outward, encompassing his entire being, even his soul; vehement pain shot through him like putrefying lightning; his back arched, writhing, and his mouth opened in a scream.

He snapped up in bed, gasping for breath. Branches scratched at his window, moonlight dancing lazily through the room. Lightning flashed outside, but there were no clouds, no rumbling sonnets of thunder. Ross went into the bathroom, snatching a paper cup, filling it with well water. Too much iron, but he didn't care; his body could handle it just fine. Feeling uncomfortable in the darkness, the appalling dream still playing out in his subconscious, he flicked on the light—and saw a scar over his abdomen, red and swollen as the tissues healed. He dropped the cup, water spilling over the floor, staining the carpet.

He pressed himself against the wall, fingering the wound; it burned to the touch, but he didn't hold back. He slowly withdrew the stitches, moaning in pain; blood covered his hands, the agony nearly unbearable. He stuck two fingers into the gash, feeling around; he pulled out the steel ball, except now it seemed to have flowered apart; tossing it into the toilet, he flushed the

toilet. Wrapping a towel around his waist, he went into his bedroom and sat down, numbly staring at the digital clock changing with the time. By morning, the small wound was scabbed over, but the incident remained in his mind the entire night, until he forced himself to forget it all, and move on, as an unexplainable superstition, a manifestation of his fear. Perhaps, he reasoned it never happened; and indeed, when he looked at his abdomen, the mark was gone.

••

Morning dawned once more; Williams downed another cup of coffee as he stepped into his office. Hess sat behind his desk, holding a paper; Williams opened his mouth to condemn, but Hess threw the paper onto the desk, the front pages glittering in the sheriff's eyes. Williams dropped the coffee, the mug shattering, coffee spilling over his shoes as he stared dumbfounded at a picture of a crop circle, the title bellowing: HUNDREDS OF CROP CIRCLES DISCOVERED AROUND THE WORLD! Williams fell into one of the soft chairs of his office, eyes glazed, peering through the blinds dappling the window.

Hess explained, "Overnight, they just appeared. Major lines, dashes, geometric figures *in* the actual crop circles all point to Wisconsin." Williams looked up. "More specifically, they all point to Clayton, Wisconsin." He shook his head, on the verge of laughter. "What're we dealing with? Have we offended the gods? The local newspaper is having a heyday. And get this. You know why the clouds are just passing us by? Someone was lighting fireworks for a birthday party, but they went straight up then crumpled midair, falling back down. There's something hovering above us, in the skies, except we can't see them! How crazy is that? No offense, Sheriff, but I don't think you'll be figuring this one out anytime soon."

Williams rubbed his chin. "Declare a state of emergency."

"Bad idea. It'll be a feeding frenzy for the media."

He nodded, consoled. "You're right. Let's keep this under the lid. When is the local paper distributed?"

"They're holding back a couple hours to throw in the part about the crop circles."

"Make sure they don't get sent out. If they ignore you, arrest them, bring them to me. I want to keep Clayton's security at the maximum. Someone's toying with us, let's not make him happy."

"What do you think all this means?"

"Heck if I know! I just don't like it. Not at all."

The phone rang on the hook; Hess reached; Williams jumped and grabbed it, held it to his ear. "Sheriff Williams."

The voice was not familiar. "We have a problem down here, at the morgue. You might want to see this."

"What is it?" He heard something like struggling in the background. "Is something wrong?"

"Just get over here as quick as possible." The line went dead.

••

Ross pulled into the parking lot, the sun creeping over the whispering fields of wheat bordering the rugged frame of Clayton High School. The sheer wind bit at him as he scurried into the commons; something tingled over his spine. Daniel grabbed him, pulled him aside. For a moment Ross tensed, then relaxed. Daniel said, "There's something really weird going on. Have you heard the news? It's freaking everyone out. They're thinking about canceling school today."

"They won't," Ross mumbled. "We could be in ten foot drifts of snow and they wouldn't close."

"I know..."

"What news?"

"More crop circles," Daniel spat. "All over the world. And they're pointing straight to Wisconsin."

"Here? They're pointing here? Why?"

"Some say it's an elaborate hoax... Others than the aliens are coming. Who knows?"

Ross scratched the back of his neck. The world shook, everything blurred; silent screams and cries filled his ears; he felt the sharp wind, heard the rumbling of engines; gunshots; he fell

against the wall, except there was no wall, but the bullet-riddled and blast-scorched steel of an armored truck. Splattered with crumbling, brownish blood; a woman screamed, her yelling mixed with the shrieks of an innocent baby; gunfire rippled; the woman fell into the snow, begging as her baby was hurled against a brick wall, its sides rupturing with the force... The commons. Kids bustled around everywhere; Daniel looked at him warily, detached; Ross sucked in a breath, sweating; his chest heaved in exertion. Daniel steadied him with a hand.

"You all right, man?"

Ross couldn't answer. The screams were gone, but yet they riddled his thoughts. "I'm fine. I just need sleep."

The screams never ended.

••

"We're losing valuable time! Million dollars an hour, we can't be screwing around."

"Hold on a minute," Leidy echoed, keying numbers into a data pad; the screen shimmered.

He climbed the ladder, out of the circular depression, an oversized womb of humming electricity; the gigantic telescope pointed upwards, out of the observatory, through a slit in the cavernous dome ceiling. His assistant jumped onto the cramped seat behind the massive telescope, peering through a lens; he operated a small lever; the telescope shifted, gears grinding. Leidy plugged in the laptop, ran a fiber optic from the telescope to the program *DATA RETRIEVE*; the screen flashed a moment, then a blur; he sharpened the image, bringing a sharp view of Mars. The red planet, millions of miles away, seemed large and ominous through the enhancing lens of the telescope.

"It's beautiful," he muttered, grinning like an anxious schoolboy.

"Well, it'd better be," his assistant mumbled, "for a million dollars an hour..."

"Stop griping, it's not coming out of *your* pocketbook. NASA wanted some digital images."

"I thought this was for *our* research?" he demanded, cocking his head back over the chair.

"It is, but we'd better share, make the government happy. This is *their*—"

"Professor?" Concern burned in his tone; Leidy perked up. "I'm seeing something weird."

"Where?"

"Coming from around the planet Mars... Fast."

He fingered the laptop's keyboard; around the fringes of the Red Planet several odd-shaped objects were swarming towards them. Towards earth.

"What do you think they are? Looks like they're coming from Mars..."

"No." He ran some calculations; "Not Mars, all right. Point of origin is the asteroid field between Mars and Jupiter."

"Stray asteroids?"

"Yeah..." The sun scathed the limits of space, dancing over the objects. They glinted in the light. Metal.

"Did you see that, Professor?"

His heart pounded. What were chunks of metal doing hurtling towards them? "Hold on a second." More statistics from the laptop; the notebook churned and garbled under the influx of information. He swallowed, holding back a gruesome mix of fear, hysteria and ravaged excitement. "They're on a collision course with the earth. About twenty thousand miles a second. They'll be here by nightfall."

The assistant swallowed. "This is like War of the Worlds..."

••

Ross stood in line for lunch, stomach flipping for some food. Time was wasting away; he'd fallen asleep in the commons for study hall, a friend waking him up, telling him he only had ten more minutes to eat. His stomach soured in protest; he jumped into line, wiping gritty oil from his face, congested grit from his eyes. A stunningly beautiful girl came towards him; she was known as the joker at school. Ross didn't expect anything. She leapt forward, barking in his face; he sent a leg under hers, and smashed her in the face with his arm; she slipped backwards, losing both her footing and balance; she crashed into the ground, back of her head

smacking the commons tiles with a dull thud. Rolling eyes stared forward in shock; Ross' heart skipped a beat. The reaction had been instantaneous—it was almost as if he'd had no control over his actions! Blood trickled from her nose; a teacher and two students rushed to the scene, helping her up.

The vice principal careened over, yelling at him. "You have her a bloody nose!"

"I didn't mean—"

"Why the heck would you give her a bloody nose? She's running in the date auction tomorrow afternoon and she has a bloody nose!"

"She just came up and I guess she scared me so I popped her one." Popped her one?

"Popped her one?"

"I'm sorry..."

He turned to the girl; a lunch lady gave her a napkin and she held it against her nose, wincing in pain. "That's what you get for screwing around. I told you to lay off the stupid jokes or you'd get yourself hurt one day. Take her to the nurse's office. I hope you broke your gosh-darned nose." The girl looked bewildered as she was led from the commons; everyone was silent. No one ate.

"And *you*," the vice principal snarled, "*you'd* better be praying she *didn't* break her nose!"

The nurse checked her out and she was fine. With all the excitement over, Ross' hunger panged, but he hadn't a bite to eat.

••

Across the street in a small home, an elderly woman sat down, turning on the television, having just woken up and throwing on her pajamas. The news anchor flashed like gold; she always thought he looked just too handsome on television, and fantasized about him in her senile dreams. The man growled, "The conflict in the Middle East is on the breaking point while Secretary of State Colin Powell continues negotiations with both the Israelis and the Pakistanis... A new drug *may* find the cure to cancer, and has been tested on white lab rats... The Gravesend Board of Education has approved a new school fund to help expand the schools to accommodate and exploding student population..." She watched his deep eyes, quivering lips. The man spoke with a morbid truth; not a lie, she held, flowed from his succulent speech. Her wrinkled face seemed to radiate in the glow of the television. "Episode III for the Star Wars saga released yesterday and grossed in more than the Matrix trilogy *and* the Lord of the Rings trilogy combined... Late-breaking news: American astronomers have spotted several objects heading towards us from the heavens, which may or may not be asteroids. We don't have all the information yet, but it seems the Pentagon is in an uproar and the President of the United States is being briefed now... American fighters squadrons across the globe have been activated and are taking to the skies... you won't believe this... in case of an *invasion*. The military thinks it may be a surprise missile attack... scientists think it is an asteroid cluster that was ricocheted out of the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter... but wild fanatics believe this to be the long-awaited alien invasion prophesied by both scientists and New Age drunks for the past 200 years... One thing is for sure... whatever it is, it's slowing down... A local priest was indicted on sexual abuse in a Missouri town today, the fortieth one in that state since the scandals were exposed..."

The woman turned off the TV, went into the kitchen. Methodically opening a packet of pills, she chugged the whole bottle down with aspirin. She went into her bedroom, grabbed a rope from the closet, wrapped it around her neck, the end tied to the pole where she hung her clothes. Standing on the chair, she snatched a pen from an unused stationary set her annoying grand-daughter had gotten her last fall, and wrote over the walls—*God save Eisenhower, God save Queen Elizabeth... God save my soul and those of Applebee's... May the rest rot in hell...* She kicked the chair away; her body jerked, her mouth gaping as she swung; the pen fell from her lifeless fingers, clattering over the floor; ink dribbled from the cheap pinhead as her feet swung above the toppled chair.

••

History class. There was a substitute teacher in biology he heard, because Mr. Harris hadn't come to school. How come teachers nailed kids for being 'irresponsible' with homework when they couldn't even call in ahead of time to say they weren't going to showing up for school—no, work?

Ross' stomach growled, cringing for some food; the minutes ticked like hours, his beady eyes staring at the illuminant digital mounted above the blackboard. The seat in front of him, hollow and empty; he wanted to see Chelsea again, see her face, hear her voice. They were going to the movies, it'd be—Suddenly the teacher hovered over his desk, catching Ross' blank stare; the teacher grumbled, "Something wrong, Mr. Keppler?"

"Just tired," he answered. "Hungry, too."

"I'm sorry. But I don't care. You're in my class for the next twenty minutes. Pay attention." He spoke with the strict ignorance of an Army officer, caring not, only goals to be met; Ross had always appealed to such an attitude, except when he snatched the bottom end of the sticky. "Can you read that, Mr. Keppler?"

"Read what?"

"You're hopeless. Really hopeless. Can anyone tell Ross what we were talking about?"

A girl stuck her hand in the air. "The Western Front in World War One."

"Exactly," the teacher continued. "The Triple Entente entrenched on one side, the Central Powers on the other. Expanse of no-man's land between the trenches, rimmed with thick barbed wire and manned by mounted machineguns. It was practically suicide to launch an attack against either side; the machineguns mowed down the infantry; soldiers lived knowing they would die the next day. Waking up, they didn't wash or brush their teeth; they hardly slept with the constant bombs from primitive enemy biplanes, not to mention harrowing artillery and the constant threat of poison gas being launched into the trenches. Rotting bodies littered the trenches, making up the paths of the ditches; rancid rats scurried over the carrion, eating the flesh, as other soldiers grimly watched over the peals of distant gunfire and exploding bombs. As I was saying, Mr. Keppler, one would mount an attack; not too strategic or tactical; just run across the trenches and try to grab another fifty yards for your country, constantly under hailing gunfire, moving through heavy barbed wire. Millions died. A bare few miles were made—and lost—during most of the war. Finally the nations agreed to a cease-fire just because they were running out of ammunition. Back to no man's—"

The teacher silenced, but his lips moved, features exuberant; Ross' ears echoed with gunfire, bomb explosions, shouting. He was shouting, in the splinter of the mind's eye. The vision was clearer; the teacher, the class, the real world became transparent to a window of horrifying reality: crumbling walls, fire scathing the countryside; hordes of soldiers running across the land as mounted guns over a bridge revolved, spitting lead fire; they shrieked, toppling, flailing, bodies torn apart, imploded, faces blown out the back of their skulls. A distant explosion ringed in his ears; the last thing he saw were mounds of odd-looking tanks pouring off the bridge, crushing the bodies under the treads, mounted machineguns slaughtering anyone remaining. There was smoke, screeching of air, then—

He was jostled out of the dream; the teacher snarled, "Lunch detention. Thursday. If you can't do your homework now, maybe you can do it during lunch?" The bell rang; he snapped his eyes up: twenty minutes had passed by in a flash. How long had he been submersed in such a wicked daydream? He stood, realized his legs were weak, almost like jelly; the teacher handed him the detention slip and he leaked from the room, arms settling down as if reeling from a traumatizing experience. Only a dream, only a dream... or was it?

••

Elisa gathered the laundry from the bathroom, tossed it into the washer. Moving into her son's room, she opened the closet to grab his dirt clothes—until she spied a notebook on the desk. Opening it up, she peered over two pages of scribbled handwriting. Stuff about school, friends, Chelsea, how much he hated the psychologist. Then he started rambling about hating scientists, hating evolution, how the world was so gullible to slip into the inevitable safe-hood and security of science, to the point of worshipping the scientists as gods. He started talking about Jessie, and Jacob, and Harris, people Elisa had never even heard of! There were several

drawings, dot structures connected with lines; a three-dot trio was labeled *Orion*; it was a constellation. In the middle of the dots was a sphere; another dot-structure revealed the planet Mars, the asteroid field, Jupiter; behind the asteroid field was yet another sphere, and then earth, covered with spheres in the sky.

She turned the page.

Ross scribbles grew larger, more frightening. *They're killing them al... women, children, babies... no one finds mercy... rape, murder, blasphemy... no mercy, no mercy, no grace, only horror and hate and hate and hate... no time, no hope, no salvation... I will be killed, he will be killed, she will be killed, everyone will be killed... she will be raped, beaten then murdered... my family will be murdered... I will be murdered... the town will be murdered...*—She set down the page, wondering what in the Lord's glorious name was going through her son's distraught mind. She stared at the notebook, then turned it over. Dried droplets of blood stained the back page.

••

Ross snatched his books; the bell rang, kids pouring from class. An announcement over the P.A.: "Ross Keppler, to the main office, Ross Keppler to the main office." He slogged to his locker and grabbed his book bag, shoving down his homework and textbooks. How was he supposed to meet Chelsea at the movies if he couldn't even get out of the school? Time was running short; he had to pick up Chelsea and be at the movies by five. Cutting it close, and having to make a trip to the office wasn't an exception.

He entered through the glass doors of the office, walked to the desk. "Ross Keppler, I got called in."

"Oh, yeah, phone call." She pointed to the counter.

Thankful he wouldn't be wasting too much time, he picked up the phone. "What?"

No answer.

"Hello?"

Sinister, dark, evil. "Run."

••

Williams pulled into the alley, bringing the car to rest next to the back door. The morgue was closed to the public; the only access was through the back door. He shut the car door, snapped the key chain onto his belt, rapped his knuckles over the door. No response. Five minutes. He knocked one final last time, no answer, and opened the door himself. The hallway stretched down through the building; a glowing soda machine was held against the far wall. No sign of movement, no sign of life; it was, after all, a morgue.

He loped over to the pop machine; several round tables were abandoned, the chairs stacked on top. He ran some change into the machine, tried for a Pepsi, but it didn't work. He slammed his fist against the curved front, the hollow chamber within reverberating. Swearing, he turned round; two doors. One was a bathroom, the other into a surgeon's ward. He didn't find himself too keen for spotting anymore corpses. Perhaps the surgeon would call him back? He swiveled around to go back to the car—the door down the hall shut, smashing closed with a piercing cry. He swallowed. Must've been the wind...

The lights went out.

In the cold, dark alley, it began to rain.

The End of Time

Ardently tossing and turning inside, Ross wrapped his arm around Chelsea, dappling his hand over her shoulder. They stared up at the movie screen, thankful to be taken away from the harsh realities of life. Squeezing all misfortune and heartache into the back of their minds, the two of them were more than content to believe a lie, that the movie on screen was real, and so all their problems seemed vaporized to nothing. While eating at the back of their minds, it didn't pop into their eyes, and for a brief moment in time everything was perfect.

In the movie the soldiers advanced onto the wall under constant barrages of arrows from the parapets; soldiers screamed and buckled, dropping, trampled by their counterparts. The Elves and men along the towers and walls fired down on the flowing orcs with rapid-fire intensity. A harrowing explosion shook the walls, crumbling one of the towers; Elves and men were crushed beneath the rubble or blown apart, burned beyond recognition from the explosion. The orcs poured into the city, wielding swords, hatchets, clubs; hand-to-hand combat ensued, every man for himself, the dead piling like cigarettes in an ashtray, the dying smoke blotting out the sun. The towers fell; the innocents were pushed back, men, women, children slaughtered—

Ross stood, excusing himself down the aisle; Chelsea watched as he went out the back doors. She followed, perplexed, finding him under the overhang at the entrance of the theatre. Rain thundered on the canvas tarp, splashing from the sky; lightning streaked and thunder clapped. Ross stood against the falling sheets of rain, eyes vacant, uncaring, driven by mad illusions; Chelsea stood behind him for what seemed years. Talk? Comfort? Just stand there? What in the world was going on? Why had Ross completely broken down over the past couple days? What didn't she understand?

Before she could speak, he perked, "Have you ever felt something, and not understand it?"

She didn't move. "Yeah. What's wrong?"

"I don't know. That's the problem. Why should I be all warped out because of what's going on? I'm just a bystander; you're the one who's the victim, and I'm burning more than you. Every thing that happens bring more pressure—such pressure that I can't move. Can't sleep. Can't think. Can't eat. Like something terrible is going to happen, like there's something I'm supposed to know, supposed to understand, but it's out of my reach. Grappling at the air, but finding nothing. No support."

She wrapped her hands around his waist. "No. You've got support."

"I hate my life right now. Nothing's going right. Everyone thinks I'm a freak."

"You *are* a freak," she said, trying to lighten the mood.

"Not like that. They think I'm seriously messed up. My dad hired a psychologist. And I took an ink-blot test and gave some pretty funky answers, and then the free association writing, I let my subconscious take control and I started downing science and scientists, and started talking about people dying, being killed, paying for mistakes that couldn't be undone. And when I was writing, the images of heads, blown apart by bullets, bodies shattered by gunfire, body parts ripped from the person from explosions, they filled my mind. I'm not a morbid person, you know that, so this is... it's scaring me. I'm not scared that easily, but I haven't gotten much sleep and sometimes I doze off—at least I *think* I doze off—and then I see stuff that I've never seen before. Battles. I see betrayal. Trench warfare. Horrible stuff."

Chelsea moved around, looking into his eyes. "You're not crazy. You're an awesome person. I love you, and I don't think you should be put in an asylum. All of us have our secret hidden pasts, and we can't control the future. We have to play the cards we're dealt. For some reason, and I don't know why, you're seeing weird stuff and acting a little funny. I don't care. I love you, and not just when you're 'normal.' Remember, some of the strangest, ugliest and most bewildering people in this world are also the most lovable and fun to be around. You have some issues you're dealing with. I understand that, don't understand why. But it'll blow over. It always does."

Ross didn't reply, just stared out into the rain. She moved around to his front, leaned forward, kissed him on the lips, running a hand through his hair. He pulled away; she staggered back, confused even more. Finally she asked, "Why don't we go back into the movie. We have our ticket stubs."

"I'm not in the mood for a movie. Let's go." He stepped into the rain, instantly drenched; he could've cared less as he walked across the parking lot, between the shadowy buildings; Chelsea followed on his heels. Meandering through the cars behind the theatre, the lot wedged tightly between several other buildings, mostly apartments, Ross found the S10, unlocked the door for his girlfriend. Chelsea stepped up to get inside.

She was pulled back, a black form shooting up from the earth; Ross gasped; the dark man jerked an arm around Chelsea's waist, the other gripping a knife, pressed against her throat. All color in Chelsea's face drained; Ross couldn't move for fear; the blade pressed harder into her skin; she shook in fright, frail; Ross felt his back snap; a knife pressed against his own throat, the end of a shotgun lodged against his head; in the backdrop, masked with the silhouettes of silent trucks, cars and vans, were four figures, holding MP5s, pointed right at them all. Ross stared into Chelsea's eyes, clueless; they were going to die. Only one question rang in their minds: why?

The one behind him growled, fetid breath tingling against the back of Ross' neck. "Your friends didn't seem to get the message across, eh? You didn't even take precaution. It has cost you your life." Wicked laughter. "You are an idiot."

Ross snarled back in a fury he'd never adorned, "Who are you screws?"

"We're the Patriots. Patriotism for what needs to come."

"Patriotism is a virtue of the vicious."

Chelsea's eyes went wide; the blade pressed deeper, slicing skin; a drop of blood.

The man behind him didn't seem fazed. "You only live twice..."

Everything changed; his frailty vanished; an inhospitable rage brimmed in his soul, screaming to be let free; anger surged like never before; an addicting rush filled his blood, adrenaline pumping; his heart fluttered, peaceful; the world slowed; Chelsea's head was pulled back, her throat exposed; the blade lifted, fell down; the man's finger over the shotgun of the trigger twitched; the shotgun bucked, screaming in Ross' ears; the slug moved through the barrel, ever so slow. No fear, only... determination. He jerked his head backwards, arching his neck away from the blade; the three shotgun shells coursed from the gun, streaking over his neck; he bent backwards, left hand smashing into the man's chest; his foot bashed into the man's leg, sending him reeling backwards; the knife slid from his grasp as he fell, the shotgun flying; Ross whipped around, thrusting his hands through the air; one took the knife, the other the shotgun; the man stared up at him, horrified; Ross cocked the gun, fired; the man's face splattered over the tarmac. Chelsea screamed; Ross leapt, tumbling in a circle through the air; his head was parallel with the ground as his body soured, graceful as the wind; the knife slung through the air, past Chelsea's head, lodging into the other man's face; he gasped, collapsing; Chelsea sagged forward; Ross landed on the hood of a car, jumping. The four men in the background opened fire, the bullets coughing from the guns, streaming towards him; Ross arched, curved, stretched his body, dodging the bullets as they clipped past; he rolled over the ground, past Chelsea, cocked the shotgun, stood.

Blowing away, he sent one of the soldiers down in an instant; the others hurled over cars, firing; Ross hurled himself into the air, hurtling overhead; he swung the butt of the rifle, landing someone into the dirt; one dove for Chelsea, the other pointing an MP5 at Ross' head; Ross landed on the ground, kicked off, flying forward; the soldier squeezed the trigger; Ross bent his body backwards, round after round echoing over his chest; he swung out, in a daze, grabbing the MP5 in his hands; ripping the gun from the soldier, he swung it around; the soldier opened his mouth; Ross landed slug after slug into the man's chest; the soldier shouted, fell down onto the ground, in a pool of blood.

"Ross!"

The last soldier threw Chelsea to the ground; Ross swung around the MP5; the man pointed his own gun at her face, pulled the trigger; the bullets snaked from the barrel, sliding towards her mortified face; Ross returned the fire; the bullets intercepted, spraying the fragments everywhere; he kicked out, flying over Chelsea; his feet smashed into the soldier's face; with a twist of his feet, he broke the man's neck. He crashed into the ground; Ross landed next to him...

Everything sped up; he laid on the ground, panting, sweating, broken. Weak, fragile. Chelsea pulled herself up next to him, helped him up. Tears crawled down her face as she sobbed;

Ross could hardly breathe, his heart was leaping for life. "Ross, how did you do that! I've never seen anything like that!" She embraced him; he pulled away, her hug suffocating. The whole thing had lasted only five seconds—it'd felt like a lifetime.

Ross managed, "We have to leave. Now."

••

Footsteps ringed down the corridor; the man's shape bled through the darkness. Williams pressed himself up against the glowing pop machine; the figure moved behind one of the stout tables, stood still. Williams reached to his side, fingered the 9mm in the holster. "Who's there?" The figure stepped closer; the light from the soda machine washed the shadows from his face; it was the surgeon, standing tall, eyes flickering, fueled by some unseen power. His shirt was stained with blood; in his hand was a scalpel for cutting flesh, the serrated edge tinged red. Williams swallowed. "Is something wrong?" His voice broke, choppy.

The surgeon didn't flinch. "They tried to stop me."

"Who tried to stop me?"

"The former owners of the blood on my shirt. They lie in the medical ward."

Williams stuttered, "God, no, no..."

He laughed. "You don't understand. You rebuke fear, yet are enslaved by it. Pitiful creatures. Souls sting."

The sheriff gripped the handle of the pistol, pushing back the leather strap.

"Humans, so gullible. A war is on the brink, yet you don't recognize the signs. The signs of a coming age. You think everything is so clear, past, present, future. Trapped in your own ideals, your own desires. This world, you say, is churned by human progress. No. It is churned only by the willpower of those who control whether you exist in time or not. Your world will be shattered. When we find him, we will kill him. And then we will exterminate the entire human species..."

He whipped the pistol from the holster, pointed it at the man; "On your knees, hands in the air!"

"That police bullcrap won't save you now, Sheriff Williams. Your doom is certain. It's etched in stone."

"Down! Down slow!"

He stepped forward, the scalpel glinting. Williams flexed the finger over the trigger, threatening to blow the surgeon away; the surgeon came forward, closer, rancid breath wafting over Williams' skin; Williams pointed the pistol at the surgeon's chest. "One step closer!" He leaned inwards; the scalpel inches away; Williams squeezed the trigger; the gun clicked. The surgeon grinned, "Safety's on," and swiped the scalpel; Williams dropped the pistol, throat split open, gushing warm fetid liquid all over his clothes. He fell to his knees, gasping for breath, drawing only blood, drowning in his own fluids; the scalpel slammed down into his scalp, piercing his brain. The sheriff collapsed to the floor in a widening pool of blood. The surgeon withdrew the knife with a pluck; strings of brain tissue, wisps of hair mingled with steaming blood.

Two shots rang out.

The knife dropped, falling, falling, landing on the floor. The surgeon stumbled, pitched forward, two holes torn through his sleek clothing. Toppled over the sheriff, he groaned once and passed; Hess barged forward, kneeling down, staring in mortification at the deranged surgeon, his friend silent, unmoving; the pistol lie over the floor. He grew weak in the knees, fell against one of the tables; the doors behind him split apart, medical workers and police-men streaming inside. They asked if he was alright; he said he was fine. They insisted he be taken to the hospital for a check-up anyhow; tearing his eyes away from the gruesome scene, he lumbered from the room, torn apart, and was never seen again.

••

"What's going on?" Chelsea wailed, gripping the handhold above the seat.

Ross took the turn wildly, the gears grinding. "I don't know! Is anyone following us?"

She snapped a glance over her shoulder. "No one. No lights at least. They could be driving blind."

"Suicide."

Raindrops splattered over the windshield. "Watch the road!"

"I am!" The wheels slid off the road; he jerked the truck back onto the street. Everything was a blur. The speedometer belched fifty, sixty miles an hour. They passed over the rickety wooden bridge, the river flowing placidly beneath, as if torn from the rigors of the world. Ross tried to grab hold of what had happened—somehow he had killed six human beings, in less than five seconds, in mostly hand-to-hand combat; he'd always been weak, opposed to violence; what had happened? His mind searched for answers, an answer that lay hidden within his own sub-conscious; an answer he knew, but was unable to resurrect.

He yanked the S10 into his driveway; fire burned the family car, lighting up the night. He slammed on the brakes, jumping out; glass shards sprinkled the ground, the metal popping, smearing. Dusty footprints mixed with the dirt of the driveway, between the splotches of gravel. Chelsea fell from the truck, staring blank-faced at the smoldering car. Shouting for his parents, Ross ran up to the door; it creaked open in the breeze. He disappeared inside; Chelsea saw lights down the road, distant pinpricks crawling between the fields. She ran into the house.

Ross fell against the wall, sobbing, cowering, tears woven down his face; his chest heaved and broke, shaking. Chelsea stood in the doorway, rain pattering over her hair. Ross took several deep gasps, trying to compose himself, each time slipping deeper and deeper into tears; Chelsea gingerly walked past, peered into the bedroom, spun away. Keppler and Elisa were nailed to the wall, naked, chests open, contents spilled over the floor. Blood trailed into the kitchen, gurgling over the tile, a film of crust already forming—it was old, probably sometime during school; Ross hadn't been home since he'd left his house that morning. She shut the front door, sat down on the couch, gazing out the large front window; lightning thundered, the trees swaying back and forth; a branch fell, smashing into the ground.

Thunder rolled, blending with Ross' choking sobs.

Chelsea's eyes caught sight of the pinpricks of lights coming down the road, growing larger. Towards the house.

"Ross?"

He didn't hear her.

She jumped from the couch, grabbing him by the arm. "Someone's coming."

He managed to stand, walked to the window. The lights pulled into the driveway. Motorcycles. Except there were no wheels—they seemed to hover off the ground. Three total, each with an accompanying rider. Each rider armed with an MP5. "They tracked us down. I don't want you to join my parents. Get into one of the rooms. Now!" She protested; he threw her against a wall, scaring her. "Now! Don't screw around!"

She sprinted down the hallway; the front door splintered open, a soldier standing in the rain. They locked eyes. The soldier raised the weapon; Ross jumped upwards; the gun bucked; he dove over the gap in the wall separating the kitchen from the living room, falling, bullets tore at the ceiling, the framework; he smashed into the kitchen tile, rolled upwards. The soldier appeared beside the opening, spraying inside the room; Ross pitched forward, hurling against the ledge, out of range. Swinging open a cabinet, he gripped a can of aerosol. The soldier leaned forward, through the opening; another came in through the door; the window on the other side of the kitchen shattered, a soldier stepping inside, behind the table. The first soldier poked his head over the rim of the counter, gun pointed down at Ross' scalp; he sprayed the aerosol, a stream of gas blinding the soldier; the man screamed, dropping the gun, clawing at his eyes; Ross grabbed his arms, yanked him forward; the soldier by the table opened fire; the bullets impacted his companions' body, drawing bloody, ragged tears. He ran forward, gunning; Ross tossed the body into the man, throwing him backwards; the third soldier drew a dagger, hurled it through the air; Ross caught it in his hands, slammed it down into the second soldier's throat. The third raised the MP5; Ross leapt up to the ceiling, bounced off his feet, rolled in the air, kicked the soldier in the chest, throwing him back, out into the rain. The soldier grasped the MP5, raised it high; he pulled the trigger; click. Magazine empty. Ross placidly entered the kitchen, knelt down next to the suffocating soldier, grabbed his rifle, went back into the living ground. The soldier dropped the MP5, raising his hands.

"Don't shoot!" he wailed. "I surrender!"

Ross threw back the hammer.

"No! No! I'll tell you everything!"

"But you can't bring my parents back."

The soldier screamed, rounds bloating his body; he flopped over the porch, into the grass; blood ran in rivulets from his body, open mouth collecting rainwater as he grew silent, still. Ross threw the MP5, walked down the hall; he swung open the door. Chelsea cowered in the corner of his parents' bedroom; he grabbed her hand. "It's not safe here anymore." She stared in terror at the littered bodies as they walked back outside to the truck.

"Ross..." She pointed down the road; more cycles were coming towards them.

Suddenly a white plume frothed between one of the cycle lights; Ross bodily tackled Chelsea into the ground as the rocket roared over their heads, scolding his arm a charcoal black; the rocket slammed into the truck; the metal buckled and sheared, flames engulfing the vehicle; the wheels popped, glass shattering, bending as the S10 was lifted ten feet into the air before dropping back down, a ball of fire; the truck fell apart, littering the ground.

Chelsea pushed her boyfriend off, stumbled to her feet. "What now!"

Ross ran up to one of the hover-cycles. No key. Instead there was a green screen. Thumbprint needed. He raced back inside; the pinpricks were drawing closer. Grabbing the knife, he sliced the thumbs off the three soldiers, and tried each one until it made a lock. The engine revved. He tossed the right thumb into his pocket; "Jump on!" Chelsea got on behind him; he squeezed the handle and the hovercraft lurched forward; he maneuvered past the burning vehicles; the other hovercraft poured into the yard, driveway; the soldiers withdrew their MP5's, firing at the fleeting hotwired cycle. Chelsea ducked down, bullets snapping over their heads; Ross wrenched the vehicle around, diving into a cornfield. The leaves cut deep gashes over their hands, tearing clothes; the other cycles gushed into the field.

"They're catching up! We're not going to lose them in here!"

"I know," he growled; the cycle spun off to the side; the tall maize vanished before a thick forest, giant pines rising like crimson soldiers in the rain. Chelsea gripped him tighter as he drew the hovercraft into the forest; trees spun past on every side. The vehicle twisted and turned, dodging dense hedges, trees, brush; the other cycles followed, lights flashing between the foliage. There was a loud blast; flames coursed into the air behind them as one of the hovercraft slammed into a tree. Chelsea could only imagine them meeting the same fate.

"Where are we going!" she shouted over the engine.

"I've no idea!"

••

Los Alamos, Nevada; military training base. Thick, barbed wire fencing surrounded the perimeter; soldiers with sub-machine guns prowled amongst the entrance gates, which were rimmed by twin towers nestling .50-caliber machineguns and grenade launchers. Laser trip systems surrounded the base for miles, hidden cameras monitoring all incoming traffic in the vast Nevadan desert. Several square buildings dotted around an airfield; inside one of the buildings, down several flights of stairs, in the midst of glowing computers and vibrant wall maps, the young cadet peered onto the radar screen; his buddy snoozed beside him.

He nudged him awake. "Look at this."

Waking groggily, "What is it?"

"You ever seen anything like it?"

"No..."

He phoned for the sergeant; a minute later the burly man came through the door, wiping coffee stains from his uniform. "What's going on?" he demanded, hovering over them. The cadet pointed to the screen; the officer scowled. "You run checks? Maybe the readers are fogged, covered with dust. If you went to the surface, there was a terrible dust storm earlier. Nagged the sensors like crazy."

"It's not dust, sir."

"How do you know?"

He swallowed. "According to the radar, they're coming down, sir, not across."

“Meaning?”

“Meaning they’re coming through the atmosphere. From space.”

He shook his head. “Missiles?”

“I don’t think so. It doesn’t fit.”

“Why not?”

“Because they’re...” He licked his lips, choosing his words carefully. “Because they’re slowing down, sir.”

••

The forest thinned; the hovercraft shot out of the woods, diving into the bristling maize. Rain streaked over them, stinging like piercing needles. The shabby lights behind them revealed the pursuers; Ross clamped down on a switch on the cycle. A panel above the first radiator along the nose of the bike slid in half, revealing a machinegun.

“Hold on!” The motorcycle whipped around, flashing through the foliage. He turned back over his shoulder. “To the house! Go!”

Chelsea leapt off the cycle, stumbling into the crops.

Along the woven path the first headlights appeared; the gunner opened fire, his sub-machine gun blazing; lead slugs snapped into the steel of Ross’ bike, plastered the bulletproof windshield. Ross wrenched a handle, the buried machinegun clattering; steel bullets ripped corn stalks in half, sent up halos of dirt; the enemy cycle spun around, the rider thrown into the air; the engine blew, scouring in flames; the rider disappeared in the inferno. The other hovercraft split apart, into the field; Ross swung around, speeding away from the burning maize, the chunks of twisted metal.

The roof of Chelsea’s farmhouse appeared over the tall crops.

Chelsea sprinted out of the corn, running across the lawn, past the dusty swing-set; the dog barked and growled, snarling inside the cage; shadows flitted about the ghostly home. She reached the door; it was hewn down; inside, the furniture was torn apart, pictures ripped off the walls, everything shattered and broken. She reeled away, hearing footsteps above; the dog cried out in anger as she ran across the lawn, into the shadows of the barn. The distant rumble of the motorcycle, then silence; she dropped into the shadows, blending within the hay; Ross appeared in the doorway, running over to her.

“They’ll be here any minute...” he gasped, panting for breath.

“They’re in the house...”

They both spun around, murky figures standing at the barn’s entrance. The men carried assault rifles; goggles covered their faces. Ross recognized them as night-vision goggles. Even in the dark, they could be seen bright as day. He tried to pull her behind him, but she refused, pleading silently to stand down the attackers. Ross counted six of them; from the shadows melted three from each side, holding guns. They were cornered. Ross was powerless. Chelsea pushed into the hay, swallowing, imagining herself being killed as the guns roared. No one said anything; Ross didn’t flinch. The leader of the group—he supposed—took a step forward from the barn’s entrance.

He lowered the assault rifle, pointing it at Ross’ gut. “Proceed with caution.”

The other soldiers took a step forward, the another, tensely, cautiously. Ross gripped Chelsea’s arm, dragged her up to his side as the noose squeezed tighter and tighter. The men were now only fifteen feet away on either side; the hay barricaded them from escape. Upper floors of the barn jutted to either side; a hole in the barn roof filtered down musty moonlight. The first soldier clicked back the safety, finger wrapping over the trigger, the sights over Ross’ face; he went ashen, paling not at the thought of his own death, nor of Chelsea’s, but that he would die without avenging his parents, not—

With a roar, chaos exploded. At the feet of the leader there was a powerful explosion, sending shrapnel and flames heavenward; the leader’s body was engulfed in the fire; his companions were thrown, bodily twisted, torn apart by the impact of the explosion. The other soldiers found themselves hurled against the walls from the blast, bodies shuddering against

the barn doors; Chelsea and Ross were slammed into the hay, to meet a soft landing as flames cut across the hay-littered floor, rising like the morning sun.

Four of the soldiers were dead, thrown everywhere, bodies blasted apart; three had been killed against the barn walls, bodies breaking apart with the impact; two others fumbled about, blinded and nearly dead; one lost an arm, a bloody stump remaining, scorched black.

The three remaining grabbed raised their assault rifles, moving towards Ross. Ross jumped forward, grabbing the arm of a soldier, tearing it's grip off the Ak-47; he fell on his back, aiming over his head, wrenching on the trigger; the soldier was thrown back, body lacerated. The flames clung to the walls, gathering high into the sky, lighting the landscape in all directions; Chelsea screamed as a soldier leapt atop of her; Ross fired, sending the soldier groaning, onto his side; the other charged, blasting; bullets pinged all around Ross as he jumped up, tried to fire back; the weapon jammed; he ran after the barreling soldier, the wide spray of the gun missing him by millimeters; he chucked the butt of the gun forward, cracking it over the man's jaw; the man fell back, mouth full of blood; he raised his rifle, but not in time to fire as the butt of the Ak-47 came down again, smashing in his skull.

The other soldiers tottered for the exit; two shots rang out; they fell at their feet, buckling forward, quiet.

The fires tore apart the barn; timber fell, smoldering with ashes, charcoal and glowing embers. Ross searched for Chelsea; she was missing! Something slammed into him; he fell back just as one of the heavy timbers crashed to the ground, erupting in a spray of sparks. Chelsea helped him up, and they rushed from the barn.

There was a click, and the cold steel of a gun against his neck. Chelsea swung around, gasping. Ross raised his hands to surrender.

••

"I'm not going to hurt you." The voice was familiar... "So don't hurt me. Lower your hands."

Ross couldn't place the voice; he turned, apprehensive; the man stood there, a 9mm in his hands.

"Mr. Harris?" he screeched, shocked.

His biology teacher told him to shut up. "Look, we haven't much time. My car is by the drive..."

"What're you doing here?" Ross demanded as they followed him around the house.

"Saving your rears," he replied, hostile; the Cadillac sat beneath the shade of a dying oak tree. "Get inside."

Chelsea eagerly slid inside; Ross didn't move as Harris frantically opened the driver's door. "Not until you tell me what's going on."

"Later," he said, brushing him off. "Are you getting inside? I told you, we don't have—"

"*What's going on?* I'm not leaving till you tell me."

Harris crossed his arms. "Really? Okay. Look behind you, over the field."

Ross turned; lights danced beyond the crops, filtering through the maize. Straight for them.

"Why don't you get in? Or we can stand here till they arrive? I can't take them all, but you might be able to, though I doubt—" He stopped talking as Ross ran around the side of the car, jumping in. Harris slammed the pedal to the floor; he was thrown back into the seat as the Cadillac's tires squealed, the car lurching forward; dirt and gravel spit up from the revolving tire as the car sped down the drive.

Hoads of soldiers gushed from the field, running full-out, sweating under the weight of the weapons. Some carried rifles, others sub-machine guns. Some rocket launchers, bazookas draped the crowd; hoverbikes revved into the clearing; the riders propelled the hovercraft down the drive, pursuing the car through the splicing rain. Over peals of thunder came the heart-throbs of a gigantic machine; over the field came the swirling disc, nearly half a mile in diameter, rimmed with lights; giant portals opened along the sides, gigantic laser guns swirling within masked turrets. The soldiers poured past the farmhouse, ignoring the scolding barn; the Cadillac fish-tailed onto the main road, gunning for town; several of the laser turrets spat, almost silent; great beams of red cruised through the air, smashing into the earth; trees downed, crops burned on impact; dirt was thrown into the air.

••

A near miss sent the Cadillac quaking as debris rained down on the crumbling paint; Harris seemed unfazed. Ross glanced over his shoulder, saw the hoverbikes on the road, bearing down on them; the gigantic circular disc was following, sluggish; Chelsea pointed out the window. More discs were coming from the east, and a pair shined in the darkness to the north. They were all around them! Ross gripped the seat tighter; red bursts of light shook the car; along the roadside entire trees splintered apart, engulfed in flames; dirt was thrown like a wave, twelve-foot-high; Harris swerved, avoiding the collapsing tidal wave of grime. Another spurt smashed apart the road ahead of them; he sped into the corn-field; the windshield shattered, a screeching laser crash throwing dirt and rocks against the car.

Ross brushed filth off his trousers. "Where are you going now!"

"Short-cut."

The following pinpricks of light turned into the field. "They're following!"

"Don't worry."

"How can I not worry!" A whole section of crop burst into flame; the ground shuddered. "We're being shot at my flying saucers and being chased by soldiers on flying bikes! My entire family is dead, my truck destroyed, and I'm killing people left and right without a clue how! How can I not worry!"

"Buckle your seat belt."

"Why?"

The Cadillac ramped an embankment, hurtling over a small stream; it crashed through a wooden fence; the saucers were concentrating over sprinkled lights straight ahead. Circling Clayton—literally. Harris looked through the rear-view mirror; the hoverbikes tried to make the ramp, but fell short, splashing into the water, the soldiers thrown bodily off their rides, crushed under the crashing steel. Harris drove the Cadillac up onto the road, narrowly missing impact with a suburban filled with frightened children. No doubt they'd crapped their pants; both Ross and Chelsea were on the verge of soiling themselves, and not the least ashamed. The monstrous flying disc was trying to gain, moving painfully slow.

"They're really fast," Harris explained, "but the air friction is slowing them down. You should see them in space."

"I don't care!" Ross shouted, waving his hands. "I really don't care! Just get us out of here!"

He entered the town; the streets were nearly deserted, the town shops closed and quiet. The engine reverberated against the tightly woven buildings lining the sidewalk. The horrendous shapes circling Clayton in dense layers blotted out the moon; Harris looked upwards, gunning down Main Street. "Hold onto something." Flashes of light erupted over the rims of the craft; almost instantly the entire town burst with a reddish tint, the lasers pounding into homes, destroying cars, crushing roofs; the earth opened up, splitting like a bleeding blister; Harris maneuvered the car with ease as laser impacted on every side; debris created an impregnable cloud on every side, except straight ahead. He went off-road, leaving Main Street, down an alley; homes, businesses, shops were burning, lighting up the night sky; people fled their safety, out onto the streets; some were bleeding, limbs seared; corpses lay burning on the ground. A small family ran towards the fields as one of the lasers split through them, reducing them to ash. Ross turned away, horrified. Harris didn't seem to mind. They were diving into the country, away from the madness; the circular aircraft continued to bomb the city, innocents slain, left to rot. The strange army entered the town, shooting anyone they saw, smashing babies beneath their boots. Women were raped, then savagely murdered. Having their fun, the soldiers pressed onwards into the flowing countryside, after the stray Cadillac and its priceless survivors.

••

Harris yanked the car onto the road, down a half mile, into the driveway. He jumped out, running into a small, one-story house; Chelsea followed. Ross stood on the car. The saucers were coming towards them, the smooth underbellies lit by the burning town. He turned away

and ran into his biology teacher's house; the furniture was sparse. Boxes were everywhere. Last night's homework littered the table, mixed with rotting Chinese take-out. Ross remembered he hadn't turned in his biology report on the Ebola virus; so trivial now. Chelsea stood next to Harris as he grabbed a crow-bar, prying open a crate. Inside was a strange box covered with dials, knobs, switches and buttons. He pulled it out, set it on the table, looked into his backyard; the edges were littered with trees, but the back was absolutely clear; grass had barely begun to grow.

"Ross?"

"What?"

"Go to the window. See the box?" He handed him the crowbar. "Open it up. Chelsea? When he's done, there's one in the next room for you." And he forgot them, kneeling down to work, messing with the electronic box.

Ross opened the crate, coughing in a cloud of dust. Inside was a polished .50-caliber machinegun; the rest of the crate fell away, positioning the weaponry to face out the open window; Chelsea warily took the crow-bar and went into Harris' bedroom. There was a cot in the corner; electrical equipment, looking very foreign to her, was thrown against the walls; star maps littered the ceiling, dotted with thumb-tacks. She pried open the crate—another machinegun, except it wasn't a machinegun. Instead of bullets was a long row of grenades. She swallowed; Ross was behind her.

"I guess, when they come..."

"I can't kill anyone."

Harris was at the doorway. "When the time comes, it'll be instinct."

"No, it won't," she growled.

"Trust me." He went back to work.

Ross left Chelsea, joining Harris in the living room as he worked. "How much longer?"

"Should be here any minute. At least the foot soldiers. The saucers don't know where I am, not until the signal is relayed. I'm sure they'll intercept and try to jam the digital flow, but no matter. I've already installed a program that operates on an inlaid electrical cable line; they hijack the secondary, but the main will be open. And then we can get out of here."

"Where are we—"

"Get to the machinegun!"

Ross swallowed, sat behind the gun. Minutes passed; sweat dripped down his face. His clammy hands shook. He remembered playing those World War Two games, where he'd man a machinegun nest and blow away at the enemy. He never thought it'd actually happen. The steel was cold in his hands; it'd be much hotter when the lead started flying. Swallowing, he gripped the handles, preparing, trying the triggers before lifting the safety. He could hear Chelsea shifting in the next room—he prayed she wouldn't die. There was a grunt from Harris, then the sound of metallic squealing; he stood to see what was going on, but then the soldiers started streaming from the fields across the street; they didn't seem to realize where they were. Ross cringed over the ground, lining up the sights; if they didn't know, then they could escape without—There was the sound of a muffled pop; he perked his ears, jolted as a grenade exploded along the street, flaring; soldiers were thrown into the air, landing hard; the other soldiers spun around, pointing at the house. Ross bent over the gun, danced his fingers over the trigger; the gun rolled, chattering; soldiers flopped over, guts torn open under the heavy bullets; Chelsea fired again, more soldiers ripped to pieces.

Everything was quiet...

Then it seemed the entire army gushed from the field, racing towards them...

••

F-16s scrambled into the air, souring over the Nevada desert; in the distance, the atmosphere burned hot orange, flaming yellow as the unidentified, gigantic saucer-shaped aircraft barreled through the atmosphere, their speed from the heavens scolding the sky in flame. The squadron bore down on the aircraft; suddenly a panel opened up along the smooth surface, slowly sliding apart; hoards of miniscule aircraft gushed from the belly of the titan; shaped like half-moons, they were rimmed with machineguns along the sides, blazing like fury; the F-16s split apart,

each slowly being torn apart by the vicious bullets clambering on all sides. The debris rained down from the sky as the tiny alien craft darted about in every direction, spraying lead down streets and busy highways, overturning vehicles and shaking the air with vibrant explosions from fifty-ton bombs loosed from the innards of the craft. The large saucer spun over the Nevadan military airbase, hammering it with laser streaks until all that was left were burning buildings, smoking corpses and fluttering debris. All across the planet hundreds of horrendous aircraft mutilated towns, killing billions; no one could resist. Tokyo was gone; Washington, D.C. wiped off the map; people could only watch their friends and loved ones die, until they, too, found the brunt of the enemy force and were swiped of their lives. Entire navies sunk to the bottom, defenseless; smoke clouded the skies, blotting out the moon and stars; the wailing of millions echoed across the planet as the storming armies pressed on, slowly tightening an umbilical noose around Clayton, Wisconsin.

••

Chelsea couldn't think, couldn't react; her hands flew on their own, whipping over the levers; the grenades popped from the barrel with slithering hisses, streaking through the air, paths invisible, until they smashed into the ground, rupturing; flames shot upwards, sideways, diagonal, leaving smoking craters; soldiers were thrown upwards, screaming; others were blasted apart, nothing remaining; still more writhed in the grass, on the road, wailing, gripping their wounds, legless, limbless; headless bodies scattered the lawn. The soldiers paused, came forward; more grenades popped, decimating dozens. The bullets from the .50-caliber frothed over the front lines; men were mowed down, dropping, backs splitting apart as the bullets passed completely through them. The soldiers knelt down, firing at the two openings; Chelsea ringed off a grenade as bullets pelted the rim of the window; she dropped down, screaming; the gun shot on its own, grenade whisking low, exploding ten feet ahead; shrapnel shook about the room, smoke gushing from the crater. Ross couldn't see, the smoke flooding his field of vision; yet he didn't back down, firing, mouth open in a silent howl; the soldiers couldn't reload in time before the bullets knocked them down. Chelsea lay on her side, feeding grenades into the launcher, yanking down on the trigger, firing blindly. An explosion ripped across the trunk of a towering tree; with a crack, it fell, crashing, crushing several prone soldiers in its shadow. Yet still the massive saucers were closing in all around; soldiers crawled forward, under the hail of the guns and grenades, watched their companions open up—literally—under the smothering gunfire; the closest men were nearly to the door; Ross noticed, swung the gun around, blazed them apart; four of the five lay dead, bleeding; the other rolled onto his side, pointing the gun at Ross' ashen face; Chelsea's grenade blew up his body, spraying the remnants against the house; the remains of the group of soldiers smoked in the crater, and when the smoke cleared, all that was left were scarred remains.

The soldiers were relentless; they pulled along the sides of the house, climbing up; they came in through the chimney, covered with soot. Harris grabbed a hidden M14 from beneath the table; as they dropped down, he wrenched on the trigger; they shouted and pitched forward, groping at their wounds; he hurled a cylindrical grenade, blasting smoke and fire up the chimney; a soldier climbing inside screamed, wedged in the chimney, as he was slowly roasted by the flames, smoke filling his lungs. In the backyard, everything was ready; Harris ran for the rooms; the front door splintered apart, soldiers flying inside, firing; Harris yelped, crashed down, leg spurting blood; his gun flew into the air; standing over him, Chelsea grabbed the rifle, without hesitation mowing down the soldiers; they collapsed to the ground, gurgling in their own fetid wastes.

She helped Harris up; Ross came from the next room just as an enemy explosive ruptured the entire wall crashing down. Harris led them out the back door, running across the yard; the yard seemed to have opened up, revealing a concrete bunker opened into the earth; inside was an odd-looking aircraft, shaped like a mechanical trilobite.

"Jump in!" Harris demanded.

He urged Chelsea on. "Go."

"There's only room for one," Harris snarled. "And it it's gotta be you, Ross."

He shook his head. "I'm not leaving without her."

“This is insanity, it isn’t—“

“She saved your life,” he growled.

Harris swore, let her go; they dropped into the depression. A ramp led into the aircraft; inside it was gloomy and resourceful, wires littering the floor; Ross and Chelsea fell into seats as Harris slowly closed the ramp door; bullets pinged along the ramp as it closed, solid. Harris dropped into the pilot’s seat; Ross noticed his wound, how he could’ve cared less as blood trickled down his leg. Harris’ hands ran over a switch; a computer display ahead of him lit up; a couple more punches, and the entire cabin was glowing with electronic displays. A moment later the engine started, screaming like a wailing banshee; the dark window ahead of them fuzzed green. Night vision. Harris yanked on the handle, the spacecraft tilting; Ross noticed soldiers gathering along the perimeter of the depression, hastily loading rocket launchers. The flying saucers left only a small hole in the sky for their escape, and the hole was closing fast.

“Mr. Harris...”

He gunned the engine; they fell into the backs of their seats, the spacecraft lurching forward; the soldiers were left in a cloud of fire, the gunpowder igniting under the flame; grenades and rockets combusted, engulfing the soldiers in a never-ending chain-reaction of explosions, burning into the house; the entire house exploded apart, shockwaves knocking soldiers to their feet, burning the flesh off the bones with the heat. Lasers flashed all around them; the spacecraft twisted and turned, hurtling through the hole, towards space. The vehicle rocked, explosions scarring the surface; warning lights blared, painfully loud. Harris’ frantic face showed no compassion; he yelled something, but the droning explosions, sirens and engines drowned out his voice. Chelsea vaguely remembered being thrown into the back of her seat; the front view screen flared a brilliant red, scolding with magnificent fire; and then there was blackness, silence; streaking blue surrounded them; a heart-wrenching jerk. Nothing.

The Avenue

Birds sang, wary calls trumpeting over the placid lake. Scarce clouds floated over the bloated sky; standing on the banks of the lapping bond, Bryon snapped his wrist and the line flung out, dropping into the water. The shadow of his father loomed over him as he inspected with the greatest concentration; Bryon's brow creased a little, then relaxed as his father moved back towards the truck, opening up the back and scavenging for some clippers or steel weights. Sweat dripped down Bryon's face, the humid heat and the windless afternoon reeking with the stench of sulfur. Fish flopped at the surface several hundred yards out, then everything was quiet again. The bobber rode the waves, slowly pulling inland with the strict tide. The bucket of chilly water placed against the gnarled roots of the grim tree was quiet, still.

Bryon had never been a fisherman; his talent lay in his skill of mastery over his hands. He could manipulate anything and everything; his mother called him a human screwdriver, something his friends often took the wrong way. But it was true. He could fix anything, from splintered baseball bats to sound equipment at their local church. Whenever something was broken, he got a phone call and drove over to roll in his expertise. High School graduation probed closer and closer, only three weeks away; he'd gotten a scholarship at a local, low-rate community college where he'd major in construction, maybe a minor in electrical engineering. His future looked dazzlingly handsome; yet his father was more concerned than anything. Always the husky contractor, he knew the dangers in construction, and took pains to make sure they didn't happen often. But one's luck only swims so far out to sea, and he'd seen enough to keep him awake in the middle of the night. The idea of his son—adventurous, always wanting to prove himself worthy—felt like needles in his heart. How could a father let his son march into certain death? Every time he brought up the subject, Bryon took it personally, and a sooty barrier formed between them. Bryon's father didn't know what to do; his son was oblivious to the danger, didn't care about the risks. Rumor was a skyscraper was going to be started next April, and his son would be job shadowing a construction worker. A green newbie in a half-built, blood and iron skyscraper wasn't his dad's idea of a bright future. And somehow Bryon knew this whole father-son fishing trip was just another tribute to his father's dying incentive to keep him out of the construction field.

"You might want to toss the line again," his father crooned, striding over. "Fish don't huddle near the banks."

Bryon reeled in the line and swung again; it splashed several hundred meters out. He looked at his watch. "I've got to be leaving soon."

"What time is it?"

"Four o'clock?"

The color seemed to drain from his face. Or was it an illusion? "You sure they can't find another ride?"

"I already tried. No one answers their phones. Ron is out on business, and Regis is in Indiana."

"Maybe we could both—"

"Dad, it's only for teens."

His wounded heart bled invisible tears. The only thing he wanted was time with his son, but every time he got close things ripped apart. The paradox of love, a heart-shaped box. Mentally he was down on his knees, pleading; physically, he stood seemingly unfazed on the banks, watching the morose waves lap at the shore.

"Nothing's biting today, Dad. Might as well pack it up and go."

"No, just give it time." Give *me* time.

"They haven't been biting for hours, I don't think—"

"Did you see that? Yours bobbed!" He grabbed his line and cast it out.

Bryon knew his father was only faking to stall him. He reeled in the line. "Nothing."

"Try again."

He pulled the soggy leech off the hook. "C'mon, Dad. I'll see you later." He tossed the pole in the bed of his father's truck.

His dad dropped the line and walked over to him as Bryon opened the door to his beige Volvo. "You've still got half an hour, we can run up to McDonald's and grab a bite to eat or—"

"I'm full. Besides, they're waiting for me."

"What time will you be home?" I can stay up and we can talk when you get back.

"I don't know." He shut the door and started the engine; the car slid down the gravel road, spitting up a cloud of fading dust and gravel; heart-broken, his father watched as the car slid out the gates to the park, stopped at the stop sign, then pulled into the lane. A few moments, then a red car passed by the road. His son was gone.

••

Shrieking metal, blaring trumpets. Not trumpets. Shouting. Voices. He opened his eyes, could see nothing; pain streaked up and down his spine. He desired to lay still. He let out a groan as he felt his body lifted, carried by rough hands; feet clanking over metal. The warm, stifled humidity evolved to a chilly vapor, water vapor clinging to his clothes and matted hair with, forming little droplets of dew. Bright light passed through his eyelids; he turned his head, the movement creaking his neck. Someone said something about transmission terrors. There was the hiss of spilling oxygen, and the air grew even colder; he was barely aware of his clothes being stripped from his body until he lay naked and shivering in their arms. He was gently laid out over a nightmarishly cold table; a needle pricked into his arm, and warmth gushed through his veins. He remembered one thing as he slid into unconsciousness: "there's one more..."

••

"You're late."

Bryon hobbled from the car. "Sorry. Load your stuff in the back."

Drums, cymbals, guitar and bass cases; towering amps, electrical wiring; microphones and holder. All were bodily thrown into the back; Bastion barked, "Watch it, don't hurt it. Treat it like a baby."

They all jumped into the car and Bryon stepped on the gas—the car slid from the subdivision and onto the main road, branching onto the entry ramp and soon Bryon floored the gas as the car wiggled its way down the freeway. Nicholas—Nich to his brethren—threw a finger against the window; Bryon swung into the next lane; a van angrily honked; he hammered the brakes as the car wobbled down the exit ramp. He waited at the light then turned right, banking so sharp the amps knocked against each other.

He's coming...

Patrick snapped, "Watch the amps! Watch the amps! You drive like my grandma."

"Yeah, well *you* drive like a grandma in a bread truck."

The neon lights above the wasted concert hall dragged their attention, moths to the light. The time dripped like water; Bryon helped them unload, then went through the back doors, flashing tickets to the security guards at the front door. No one over eighteen was allowed; they set their stuff up on the stage. Bryon plugged in the wires as Nich the bass player, Patrick the electric guitarist, *He's coming* Bastion the drummer and Danny the acoustic guitarist and lead singer lined themselves up on stage. A hoarding crowd was gathering. He flipped on the switch, spat into the microphone. Nothing. He tried again. Wires must've been screwed up. Nope, all we're in just fine. He slapped the top of the amp.

Bastion yelped, "Easy! Don't hammer the crap out of it. Love it and it'll work. That's the trick."

He's coming...

"I'll love it when it works," he grumbled. They ended up borrowing amps from another band.

"That's one thousand four hundred dollars down the drain. We're screwed."

"Dave will fix it, calm down," Nich broke. "Why you so tense?"

"I don't know. I guess I don't have a good feeling about this gig. Our amps already broke."

"What else could go wrong?" Nich warranted.

Danny said, "Hey, Bryon, on the sound and lights. We're starting." He tapped the acoustic guitar, the sound flooding through the grateful band's—what was their name, *Triple Graves?*—borrowed amp.

He's coming...

••

The dream is my reality. Locked in a cage, insane and mad, leaves falling, timber and crimson. Sanitarium, house of the wicked, the deranged, the senile and the unfortunate. The truth cannot be hidden by even the faintest whisper. Songs of enduring love silenced by gunshots. Gunshots. Plodding in the darkness, cannot breathe the open air, stench and death, rotting corpses and putrid vomit. Fall in the well, submerged in icy water, choking on the hair of murdered girls. Hell on earth. *Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed by thy name* no return, step in the puddle, muddy your feet, no return, can't find the way, the screams of the saints burning ears off the statues *They kingdom come, they will be done, in heaven as it is in earth* cries, death-throes of the godly, the ungodly tampering with the fortunes of fate, of time, do you have a dime? *Give us this day our daily bread* tear out your hair and scream as blood trails down your scalp where is it going no one knows give me a dime to buy some food or chop off your hand and eat it raw no fire lights the night, flight, plight, blight and smite *And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors* forgive no one have mercy on no one no mercy for you no mercy for them eat or be eaten watch the horrors, the doors close and singing birds burn to ashes in the forests of wicked pleasure *And lead us not into temptation* agony! Pain! Distortion! Cries the wicked of time, the babies' souls cluttering the streets as their tiny bones burn in the city square *but deliver us from evil* where to run? Run, come, some don't love. None love. Love is but a memory. Memory! Memories! Mem—shattered in the darkness of the splintered souls—embitterment, hostility, peace nowhere, the souls of the damned trudging the rainy streets, thundering wails ***IN RA-MA WAS THERE A VOICE HEARD, LAMENTATION, AND WEeping, AND GREAT MOURNING, AND WOULD NOT BE COMFORTED, BECAUSE THEY ARE NOT*** nightmares, graves, graves white crosses, stained with mahogany blood and trampled underfoot; trees decimated, innocent slaughtered for “what fun! What fun to kill the innocent and drink their blood! Laugh, be merry, watch as the naked children are raped and tortured, as their limbs are ripped out of their sockets and roasted over the fire, eyes plucked like plums and swallowed live olives the innocent boys and girls screaming and crying as their parents are murdered and ravaged by wild dogs in front of their eyes!” drums hammers *Now I lay me down to sleep I pray the Lord my soul to keep and if I die before I wake I pray the Lord my soul to take*, opening mouth, rows of teeth, dripping with venom—no, dripping with blood scream, scream, scream all you want... no one hears you, no one cares, no one can, for all are dead, all but you...

••

The white van pulled up alongside the curb, the back door opening. Men in dark suits filed from the back of the van, trench coats shining under the glow of the neon lights. Night settled, dripping with chill; they plodded for the open doorway. A red car passed by on the street, a man arguing with his children. They went through the front door, prepared for everything, fearing nothing; four, standing tall, yellow eyes brimming within deep sockets and tan skin. The security guard walked over towards them; one shut the door, slapping a lock over the handle. He turned, methodically. The security guard stood in front of them.

“No adults are allowed. Only teens...”

The one closest looked over the short man's balding scalp. “Out of our way, old man.”

“I can't let you—”

The trench coats opened, revealing sub-machine guns; the security guard fell back, horrified, reaching for his radio, but was thrown to the ground as bullets chewed through his body, sprinkling blood over his shirt. He gasped and wheezed, writhing on the ground, blood gurgling from his chest. The gunshots rang; kids in the room screamed, diving down; someone reached for a phone, the back of their scalp blowing against the wall; they toppled over the chair. Kids ran for the door, only to be mowed down by the sputtering gunfire. The rest cowered in the corners; three of the men went into the concert hall, the gunshots muffled by the bellowing music. The remaining calmly changed magazines, raised the weapon, and blazed all the teens in the room, dropping them to the ground as his gun rattled and rang, the trigger burning itself out. Bullet-holes charred the wall; bodies lay strewn everywhere; kids' mouths hung open in silent screams, blood forming a pond of steaming blood on the floor, wrapping between the

overturned chairs and table legs. A girl moaned; he fired a shot into her forehead and stood guard at the entrance.

The three men in trench coats held their MP5s in their hands and strode towards the stage, reloading magazines.

••

Jagger Fedducia

It rang a bell.

Jagger... Fedducia

Ross' eyes spilt open; he winced in pain; the light extinguished. He opened his eyes again, looking up at the weathered, tan skin of a woman. A weird-looking stethoscope was around her neck, and she held some kind of electronic instruments in one hand; in the other was an empty syringe, still dripping murky liquid. He swallowed, throat grinding like grates. Painful. "Water." He could barely make out what his own mouth had concocted, but somehow she understood—had she been expecting it?—and brought a glass of warm water to her side. "Cold water?"

"No. The cold water will shock your body, send you into convulsions. Warm will do."

He didn't argue; her voice was commanding, overpowering.

"How you feeling?"

"Like crap."

"You look like you feel. No offense. It's just that it's we've retrieved only once before and even then there were transcription errors." He remembered hearing those words earlier, but couldn't remember when, or where, or even why? "Transcription errors are simple enough, but a monster to deal with. When you jump, sometimes your body shifts with the jolt. In other words, part of you goes in first, and then another part, like stepping through a portal. Except the time differences are in the milliseconds. When that happens, parts of your body can become realigned, off-balance, or even non-existent at all. Your front side was a little off-center, and we fixed you up a bit. The most damage was on your liver, a millimeter of muscle had ripped apart and was spilling inside your guts." Lovely. "But don't worry about it. Everything will be fine now. Some people have even come back in two! And with non-jumpers jumping, without preparation, things can be frightening. But I guess more than genetics carried over. Poor thing, your friend—the girl, Harris said her name was—I forget...—Chelsea?"

Concern tore at his mind. "Is she okay?"

"She will be. But she caught quite a bug of transcription errors. No preparation."

"How bad?"

"Bad. Her brain was off-center. She was brain-dead when we dragged her off the ship."

"Is she okay? Where is she?" Panic.

"Calm down, too much excitement is bad for your recuperation. I probably shouldn't have mentioned it at all!"

But you did. "Is she okay?"

"She'll be fine. We have expert technicians and doctors. They patched her up great."

"Well, when can I see her?"

"Soon, soon. Do you feel like you can walk?"

"Would I get to see Chelsea?"

The doctor rolled her eyes. Boyish infatuation; she'd seen a lot less of that over the years, girls weren't such a big concern nowadays compared to just staying alive past your teenage years. "Never mind," she said, and stabbed him in the leg with a new syringe—he groaned, head lolling to the side. He saw Harris standing against the far wall, against a mounted wall of computer screens, arms crossed; they locked eyes for the briefest second—Ross sensed newfound fear in his globes—until Ross' own eyes shut and he was thrown into the mystic world of blurred dreams and night terrors.

••

The blood stank, a sour, rotten odor. He looked down, the blood lapping at his boots; he knelt, glancing back and forth, then pitched forward, slowly, cautiously, stuck his tongue into the

blood, tasting the bitter, iron tang of the jelling fluid. His eyes flirted back and forth, between the stark overhead lights and the shadows lurking in the corners, over the empty faces of the kids and adults. His tongue curled, and he lapped up the blood, gulping it down his throat, sliding akin to heavenly mucus, thick as snot as it began to jelly under the fluorescent light.

Drinking the

[life]

blood of the innocent.

There was a crash, a splash; the man looked up as the foot came out of nowhere, smashing him across the face; the soldier fell back, splashing in the thin pool of children's' blood. The dark, heavy-set black man above him wore black clothes, muscles bulging beneath; his eyes flared with the youth of centuries, deep and filled with secrets, compassion, but void of mercy. The first man leapt upwards, into the air as the black man withdrew a dagger and took a swipe downwards; the man fell from the ceiling, into the soldier. The black man loosed the knife. They punched and kicked, struggling, rolling, choking each other. The man bashed the black man in the face, splicing open his lip, spilling hot; the black man let out a rage and rolled atop, holding the man down with one hand over the throat, squeezing his throat, punching him in the face; skin welted and blood spilt, bones clashing; he roared, voice rasp as he suffocated. The black man raised his fist again; the man kned him in the crotch; he rolled over, grunting, world spinning, dolling, hazing; the first man scrambled across the floor, grabbed the knife, jumped onto the black man; the black man shot up both hands; the man pushed the dagger down with both of his hands; locked in battle, each sweated and grunted, fighting; the tip of the knife dipped lower and lower; the black man's world shimmered blue, red, violet; sweat stung his eyes. The tip dug into his shirt, stinging against his skin; a last, final, fatal plea, and he shoved the knife to the side; it buried into his arm, roaring with agony. He ignored it; flinging upwards, he used his strong arm to leverage force into the punch, and buckled the man over backwards, slipping against the corpses. He tried to stand; the black man shot him down, burying his face in the nasty bullet hole of a young boyish victim; he let out fiendish cries as his life was sucked out of him as he asphyxiated in the wound, drawing only blood and bits of body tissue and broken bone instead of air; his body went limp.

The black man stood, shaky, pulled the dagger out of his arm.

He headed for the door leading to the concert hall.

••

They brought him a plate of muddy jello, reminiscent of dog throw-up. He wanted to refuse it, but hunger prevailed, and he gripped the spoon as if it were a war hammer and dug into the jello, gulping it down like the water of the Fountain of Youth. He lay now in a bed, propped up amidst covers; wires stuck into his arms and legs, and a warm steel helmet, insulated with offbeat Teflon, covered his scalp, hair a wild frenzy. He wore absolutely no clothes under the blanket, and made an effort to make sure the blankets didn't slide. The female doctor, a handful of doctors or nurses, and Harris were in the room; Harris was speaking in soft tones to an older doctor, the woman feeding him as if he were her own. Special treatment. But why? He didn't care. The food actually tasted good, something like banana pudding.

The woman doctor explained, "Bananas aren't grown anywhere in the world. Not even in green-houses or warehouses, or in genetic laboratories. All were destroyed by the nuclear fall-out. But since the flavoring in fruits and vegetables come from certain molecular compounds, we simply concoct the compounds in underground stations, mix them with tasteless vitamin formula and ship it to the outposts across the nation. You're not tasting banana pudding, but a pudding dashed with the molecular compounds for the taste of banana. Quite ingenious."

"Like the nectar drinks at Dorothy Lane?"

She didn't seem to understand, shrugged. "I guess."

"Where's Chelsea?"

She smiled. "Sleeping. She's perfectly fine. Stop worrying."

"I want to see her."

Harris walked over. "You will. You guys just need time to recuperate. The jump beat on you pretty bad."

"Everyone talks about this 'jump.' What is a 'jump'?"

"What year is it?"

"2003. Why?"

Harris took a deep breath. "You don't remember?"

"I just want to see Chelsea, that's all." He looked around the room. "Why doesn't anyone believe me?"

"What's your name?"

"Ross! Ross Keppler! What the heck is going on, Mr. Harris?"

"And you don't remember *anything*?"

"No..."

"*Nothing? Think, think!*"

"*I am thinking!*" he roared. "My name is Ross Keppler and I'm eighteen years old. I live in Clayton, Wisconsin. I'm a Senior there, graduating class of 2004. I drive a red S10" flames, burning flames, his truck rotting under the inferno, crumbling, melting, the rubber dissolving against the ferocious heat... He stuttered for a moment; everyone tensed. He continued, "My Dad's name is... it's..." He couldn't remember. A tear dotted his eye. His mom's name was "Elisa. My mom's name is Elisa."

"And your Dad's name?"

"John," he replied, almost sane. "His name is John Keep... no, Kepp—" They were stripped of all their clothes, screaming, crying; Keppler shouted at the top of his lungs, only to be beaten down by a furious punch in the gut. At gunpoint, they were thrust against the wall, side-by-side, arms outstretched. The guns pointed at their chests; another came from the garage, holding a nail gun. John and his beloved wife Elisa screamed, hollered in pain as nails were shot through their arms and feet, their bodies crucified against the wall. Weak and fragile, bodies burning as blood dribbled from the shattered, broken and shredded nail holes, they looked at each other, tears in their eyes, but not for themselves, but for their son, what he would come home to. The soldiers withdrew knives and hacked at their abdomens, spilling their guts at their feet; they gasped and breathed, insides torn from them; blackness, spots; Elisa saw her husband's tongue, stiff and purple, dapple from his mouth, eyes roll into the back of his head. One of the murderers pressed against her, fetid breath rank; disemboweled, she was without strength, but found her voice, and croaked, "My son... My son is going to... to... *kill you.*" And other the flickering light in those horrible amber eyes, she died, joining her husband in paradise.

The vision faded; Harris said, "Can you hear me? Can you—"

He nodded, weak, fading. The plate of jello lay on his lap, the rest of the meal spread over the covers.

"What happened? Do you feel sick?"

"No... I just... I don't know..." Could it be real? Already the memories of his parents were vanishing, as if they had never existed. He willed them to remain, but slip away they did.

"Do you know who you are?"

He looked up at Harris, suddenly so confused, bewildered, dazed... frightened. "I don't... I can't..."

Harris glanced over at one of the doctors. "Bring me a mirror."

••

Shielded behind the long, draping curtain and the standing boulders of sound equipment, the noise blasting through the large headphones as he flipped *He's coming* switches and turned knobs, Bryon's heart flipped and rolled and danced, but not in the ecstasy of the music, but the gnawing fear slowly rising in his throat. His stomach quelled and knotted, painful; felt as if his insides were blowing themselves up and spilling through his *he's coming* gut. He had a sudden urge to run to the restroom and puke, cold sweat popping over his forehead. He could make a bee-line out of the curtain, keeping to the right side of the room and then loop around the roller bladers, BMXers and skateboarders on the ramps and rails, and he'd lock himself in the second to last stall (if you're in the first, people hear you and wonder what you're doing; people automatically go to the *He's coming* back, so if you're second to last people probably won't think *anything* because they won't notice you). But he couldn't move; *Daystar* completely relied

on him to run sound, or Danny's voice won't rise and Bastion's drums would drown the squeals of Patrick's electric guitar.

He's coming

Something bit at his conscience; he set down the earphones and leaned out over the smallest speaker; one of the cables had unplugged, Nich jumping around as he fingered the bass. Cursing, Bryon conscientiously pushed himself over and scrambled for the wire, hastily plugging it in, looking like a fool. Kids stared up at him, either wondering what *he* was doing on stage, or jealous because he was the quintessential band member. He looked up, slapping the cable connector into the amp; bass blasted his ears, roaring; he saw three men come in through the door from the lobby. They wore heavy dark trench coats, shadows in the dim light; he saw something in their hands.

MP5s; sub-machine guns.

He's coming

They were reloading.

He's coming

Terrified, he couldn't move. The three men filtered out behind the kids, keeping their submachine guns at the ready. A security guard came up, saw the weapons, reached for his radio; Bryon saw one reach out and jack the man in the face, buckling him over to the ground. They were behind the swarms, and the band paid no attention. They were moving under the stealth of ignorance. Bryon didn't know what to do; he could call—

Kids screamed as the guns barked, sizzling; they were thrown forward, backs ripped open, skulls shattered; Bryon fell back into the amps, mouth open in a silent howl; the kids fell, littering the floor, bodies stinking as blood flowed from the fatal wounds. The band dropped their instruments and ran as kids tried to escape; two of the men blazed down the kids, firing round after round after round into their fleeting bodies, dropping them in their steps. The bullets were precise, aimed, trained—vicious, uncaring. The third man fired up onto the stage; Nich's knees split apart, breaking; he fell back into the drums as the trail of bullets drove through his body, plunking into the drums; Bastion raised his arms as he took the brunt of pain, falling back, legs slamming into the drums and sending them catering in every direction, clattering over Nich's lifeless eyes. Danny gasped as bullets drove through his acoustic and embedded in his chest; he stumbled once and fell onto his back, blood staining the back of the Martin guitar. Patrick's electric lay immobile at his feet; he couldn't move, paralyzed over the moans of the dying kids and in the bloody carnage of his friends. One of the men took pot-shots at the dying kids, silencing those who groaned.

The police weren't coming.

The third man dropped the empty magazine, raised the sub-machine gun, and gently pulled the trigger. A hole drilled through Patrick's forehead, blowing the back of his skull outward, spraying blood and body tissue, bits of tattered bone and brains all over the back curtain; he dropped to the floor, ripped scalp jumping along the ground. The three men headed towards the stage.

Bryon cowered, terrified, could smell fear, death, blood... fate.

One of the men climbed onto the stage, rounding the sound box. He pointed the gun down at Bryon, the barrel smoking. He said something, too inaudible for Bryon to hear over his own pounding heart. A smile crossed the assassin's face. His finger itched to fire. The gunshot; Bryon winced; nothing. He looked up to see a strange flicker in the man's eyes, and he fell to the side, his inside ripped open, hot guts spilling over the stage. Smoke wafted off his carcass; Bryon fumbled out the box, panicking. Another man was sprawled dead, a knife in the back of his head; the last was laying on the stage, his chest littered with gruesome bullet scars. Bryon's chest shook, quivered, feared. Tears swelled in his eyes. His friends were dead, all dead; he looked over the mass of kids about the room; the crinkled BMX bikes and the littered riders, the potheads and grunges thrown from their skateboards. Girls, boys, security guards. Then he saw it; a man standing in the middle of the carnage, the MP5 dangling at his side; he said nothing, but approached the stage.

Bryon flinched; the man grabbed his arm. "Bryon?"

He nodded, swallowing, face ashen as sooty snow.

"Come with me if you want to get out of here alive."

••

Ross perched up on the stretcher-bed, elbows digging into the semi-hard mattress. The doctors had left the room, leaving only the head woman doctor and Harris. In Harris' hands the cracked mirror lay, parched and covered with dust; he swiped off the dust with his thumb, glanced over at the doctor, as if questioning the sanity of what he was about to do. Ross didn't understand anything. The doctor looked over at the clock; Harris leaned forward, whispered something in her ear. She shook her head, he gave her a stunning look, nodded to Ross, then mouthed a string of words, moving too quickly for Ross to read. She sighed and stood, almost shakily, and opened the door. A doctor was waiting outside; she spoke to him, and the door closed. She stood there; then a click, and the door was locked from the outside. They were locked within; but why.

"Are you ready?" Harris asked.

The doctor paced over to a medical cabinet, withdrew a syringe, ducked it in some pinkish liquid, filled the tube.

"Hey," Harris said, snapping his fingers. "How do you feel?"

"Full."

"I hope you don't spill your lunch."

"Just tell me why you have a mirror, Mr. Harris." He spoke with a detached morose.

"Don't call me Mr. Harris. Just Harris." He'd always demanded everyone call him Mr. Why the change?

The doctor walked over, the syringe at the ready. "Let's give him the mirror."

Harris sighed, turned it over, and put it in Ross' weak hands. Ross shook; "Turn it over," Harris said, tensing. He obeyed, looking into the glass, into the reflection. Except it wasn't his reflection. His blue eyes were a fiery green, and his soft, teenage skin was tan and leathery; a scar cut across his chin, and age-old stitches dotted his forehead. Unbelieving, he moved his lips; the weathered lips in the mirror followed with dynamic precision. Ross touched his own face, felt it, saw the movement in the mirror. He looked down at his arms; he hadn't noticed, but the freckles he'd had just yesterday were gone, replaced with longish hair. On his other arm was a scorch mark, long since healed but scarred. He swallowed, unbelieving; he touched his flabby chest, except it wasn't flabby. Rock hard. Harris and the doctor stared at him, waiting, waiting to see what would happen.

Ross set the mirror down, wrestling with his doubts, trying to solve the puzzle. "What's going on?"

Harris seemed alarmed, and exchanged glances with the doctor. "What did you see?"

"Someone else. Except it was me... but it wasn't... If this is some kind of joke..."

"I wish it were," Harris said gravely. "Do you know the person's name? The person in the mirror?"

"No."

The doctor winced, snarled, "If he doesn't remember his own name..."

Harris rubbed his chin, unwilling. He took the mirror, almost cautious. He tucked it in his jeans pocket.

Ross demanded, "Is it a sin to tell me what the heck is going on? Who is in the mirror?"

"It's you," the doctor growled, almost pleading. "That's your reflection."

"No..."

Harris stood, almost vehement now. Anger billowed at his neck, but he squashed it down. But not really anger—frustrated disappointment.

"We're screwed," she mumbled. "He doesn't even remember his own name."

Harris shook his head. "Sedate him and keep him under. There's still hope."

Her brow furrowed. "No. We can't."

Ross looked between them; she was defiant, and he was hopeless. Just what was he suggesting?

"We have no choice."

"It'll take at least a week to run the tests and prep his body for the—"

"In one week," Harris said under his breath, "we will all be dead."

••

“Why should I trust you?” Bryon demanded as they slipped out the back door; already the slaughter was fading from his mind, as if an abortion from a lie.

Lie.

Lie.

LIE.

Was it all a lie?

“Who else are you going to trust?”

“My friends and about two hundred kids were just—“

“I know. I didn’t act fast enough. I’m not a god, I’m just a man.”

“So why the heck should I go with you and not just drive to the police?”

“Because the police can’t help you.”

“And you can?”

Flame sparkled in his eyes. “I hope.”

They loaded into the black man’s van, and it surged forward, spinning up gravel. They pulled from the parking lot, the lighted windows. As they pulled onto the road, police cars swerved into the parking lot; they fish-tailed, sirens blaring; the black man looked in the rearview mirror. Bryon said, “They think we’re the ones who did it. You better stop.” The black man didn’t react, but slammed on the pedal; Bryon flew into the back of the seat, heart spiraling into his throat, as the van screamed down the road. Twenty-five. Thirty-five. Forty-five. Seventy. Eighty. They passed the other cars on the road; the man drove like a maniac! Bryon wailed for him to stop, but his voice cracked in his throat, parched with terror; the police cars barreled down after them, shrieking for the van.

“Pull over!” Bryon wailed. “You’re going to get us killed.”

“Don’t worry about them,” he said.

“I’m worrying about *you* getting *me* killed on the road! Slow down!”

“If I slow down, they’ll catch up with us.”

“You said not to worry about the police!”

“I’m not talking about the police.”

He pulled onto the interstate; Bryon sunk into his seat; was the man always so confusing?

He was going to die.

••

“How did Mom die?”

Graham winced, the memory too painful to bear. The question stabbed him in the heart. Cool wind, winter wind. Laughter. Ice-skating. He couldn’t remember. He could remember. He didn’t want to remember. He *wouldn’t* remember. Painful. *How did Mom die?* Yawning, the opera house. Sparkling tapestries hanging like gold twists, dazzling dances sprinkled with queer ecstasy. Men and women in tights. Too tight. He smiled. No. No, you’re wife is right next to you. But why bother pulling back? She can’t read your mind. *Don’t you think those tights are too tight?* No, not tight at all. But yes, very tight. Tight enough. Too enough. *It’s so tight her boobs stick out like cantaloupes.* I know, I know. Like cantaloupes. Nice, aren’t they? He swelled. *How did Mom die?* Thank God it’s over. He wondered if he fell asleep. The older couple was looking at them weird; his wife nudged him in the side *wake up you were snoring.* How could I not? *How did Mom die?* I should’ve brought my jacket. It got a lot colder. The clouds covered the sky, blotting out the sun—no, the moon, it was nighttime. They were walking to their car. The streetlights shimmered. She opened the trunk; he was glad to be going home and getting sleep. He needed sleep. The field was frozen over, he was going to get Chelsea a job in town, other than babysitting, was fourteen too young for a grocery job? She opened the trunk, pulled out skates. *Look at the pond, it’s all iced over. Everyone’s ice-skating.* It might be thin. They’re all kids, they don’t weight too much. We really shouldn’t, it could be dangerous. Any excuse. *It’ll be fine it’s almost negative degrees out here we’ll be fine we’ll be fine.* Too cold. *Come on.* He grabbed the skates and joined her out on the ice. *How did Mom die?* The ice splintered,

groaning under the thick sheets. *It's thin. We should go home. You just want to sleep. I don't think this is a very good idea. You're just bumming. Take my hand. Follow me.* Around and around the ice, flowing together. Their hands were warm inside each other, even without gloves. He like the touch of her soft fingers, the heavenly aroma of her breath frosting midair. Around and around and around. A pendulum. Nothing but the pendulum of life. Dying, slowing. Stopping. *How did Mom die?* Graham shook his head, not wanting to remember. "It was the ice. Too thin." The ice shattered under her, swallowing; she fell, letting out a shout; he smacked down with the jerk, kneecap splitting over the ground, searing with pain. The limp. She bobbed in the water, the current underneath tugging at her body; she groped at the ice sheet, screaming. He grabbed at her, felt a splash of water. So cold, felt like needles stabbing under his skin. She cried, tears freezing in the water; her hair was soaked; people coming. Screams. Screams. Cries. Screams. Cries. Crying. She disappeared under the ice, her body bumping the ice from underneath. He ran over the ice, screaming, crying now; her body floated around the pond twice, then snagged on a dead tree's roots frozen under the ice. He broke away the ice, crying, praying she was alive, knowing it wasn't true, knowing she was dead, but still knowing she'd made it. Stuff like this never happened. She was too good for it. Her face bobbed—blue, purple, bloated, frozen, mouth a silent scream, tangled with chilly pond grass; her eyes were vacant and bloodshot, hair matting her face. Dead. Dead. Never to return. *How did Mom die?* The ice was too thin. *How did Mom die?* No ice-skating.

••

The white van pushed past the other cars on the Interstate, blazing them in the dust. The black man drove without a care, but without lack of skill at the same time. He executed every move, every moment of passing time with split-second decisions that were minute to the point. Cars honked, driver's gasped; the headlights flickered over the pavement humming beneath them. The cop cars were gaining on them, sirens pushing everyone to the side of the road. The man kept glancing in his rearview mirror, to the side mirrors, out every window, scanning. Looking. Looking for what?

Driving a car is like owning a gun, Bryon. Both can kill people. Will you ever go over the speed limit?

No, Dad.

Will you ever drink or smoke in the car?

Smoke what?

Pot, cigarettes, whatever, they're all detrimental for your health.

Detrimental? No, Dad, I won't. I don't smoke, you know that. And I don't drink. I don't like the taste of beer.

What about wine?

Why the heck would I be drinking wine?

Will you always wear your seatbelt?

There were no seatbelts. Yes, Dad.

Bryon, sweetie, remember on your way home from school, don't ever take rides with strangers, do you hear me?

He heard her all right, and he'd heard his dad. He was riding with stranger, with no seat belt, and they were way over the speed limit. In the frightening realities of the nightmare, his Dad's voice resounded with superfluous intensity; he willed it to be gone, but it didn't falter. The vision of his dad's strict face, fishing pole in hand riddled his mind like some cheap Chinese grill. *What time will you be home?* He'd only wanted to spend time with his son; Bryon had aborted himself from his father, had practically told his father to screw off. All his dad wanted was some time with his one and only son. Time Bryon had ignored. Precious time. *What time will you be home?* He didn't think he'd be going home. He should have stayed with his Dad. Maybe if he'd just—

The black man socked him in the arm. "I said look to the trees! Tell me if you see anything!"

He turned, staring out the window, rubbing his swelling arm. Dense trees rising from the grassy slope banking the highway. "There's nothing up there." He turned his head, but the man's angry eyes snapped his neck around so hard it snapped. He'd look at the trees. Wouldn't

see— He leaned forward, squinting. The man asked what did he see? There was something behind the trees, moving swiftly, following them. Lights flickered between the massive tree trunks. “I think there’s a road behind those trees. It’s just a car.”

The sirens droned; the police cars were riding their bumper. One drew a shotgun.

The man glanced over into the trees. “Get down.”

“What?”

“*Down!*”

He ducked just as the glass above him shattered; the bullet impacted the black man’s seat, sending out chunks of flaky cotton. The trajectory had passed right by Bryon’s head! He held his arms over his body, swallowing hard, on the verge of crying; glass fell all around him, dappling the seat and the chair. The black man swerved the van; a bullet smashed over the side of the van. The police cars were on either side now; Bryon had thought they were shooting until he dared a peek and saw one of the officers hanging out the cruiser window fall back, landing on the road, face gone; a following cruiser ramped the body, twirling and crushing it under the wheels. Bryon turned away, disgusted. The patrol cars thought *they* were shooting; one came down the exit ramp and squealed in front of them. They were boxed in. The car to their left blared, “Pull over to the side of the road *now* or we *will* open fire!”

Bryon growled, “Pull over! Just pull it over!”

“I said don’t worry about them.”

“They’re going to shoot us! They’re going to freaking shoot us!”

“No. They won’t. Keep your head down!”

Bryon cowered; he could feel the bullets slicing through his body now.

“Hang on.” He slammed on the brake; Bryon pitched forward, smashing into the glove compartment. It opened, spilling paper and a half-eaten bag of Doritos all over him. The cruiser behind them slammed into the back of the van, the hood crumpling; the policemen barreled from the police car as the engine erupted into flames; the van rolled off the burning, twisting metal. The other three cars continued forward, swinging around. The man drew an Ak-47 from beneath the seat, making sure the cartridge was loaded.

“You can’t be serious...”

“It’s not for them.”

“Then whose it for.”

“The ones who just did that.”

“Did what?”

An explosion ripped through the air, shaking the pavement; the van quaked, the wheels blubbering; the lead patrol car burst in every direction, spinning in a blinding chaos of fire and brimstone. A severed arm landed on the hood the van, the ring on the ring fender polished black with the flames now searing the flesh off the bone. Bryon stared through the windshield as debris rained down everywhere; the policemen in the other two cruisers dove from their vehicles, running towards the van, raising their pistols. One was shouting into a radio. The black man kicked open the door, descended to the pavement; bullets clashed over the open door. He was unfazed, peering through the glass. Suddenly cars on each side of the road opened their doors, spilling men in trench coats, cuddling MP5s. The officers didn’t even notice; the black man aimed; the chatter from the submachine guns spilt onto the blocked-off freeway; the officers writhed and fell, the bullets from the men in trench coats tearing through their soft-skinned bodies. The black man fired, buckling over one of the men in the trench coats. He said something to Bryon, then vanished, running out onto the street; Bryon ducked his head as bullets clattered over the van, shattering the front windshield; glass rained down like rain from a storm. He rolled into a fetal position, huddled under the seat.

The black man sprinted across the tarmac, firing the Ak-47; police cars were coming from the distance, up the opposite freeway. Men in trench coats stood their ground, firing at the dark man as he passed between cars, stepped over bodies; the trench coats waved and battered as the soldiers ran, but each met his doom, coming to a stop in a pool of blood. The last one aimed straight at the black man’s face, fired; the black man arched his neck around, the bullet passing inches in front of his face. He fired himself, his own slug meeting the enemy between the eyes—he fell back, landing hard on the hood of a car, his face a mask of fright as blood formed a halo under his head.

The black man walked back to the van, got back inside. He grabbed Bryon by the collar, raised him up. "Don't worry about the police," he said. "We need to get out of here. Ditch this van."

They stole one of the trench coat soldiers' cars, loading inside. Bryon spotted electrical equipment overflowing in the back seat. The black man revved the engine and they pulled off the interstate, into downtown Buffalo, New York. Bryon noticed the place immediately—gangsters were roaming the streets, pimps standing outside run-down apartment complexes, gas stations and grocery stores. Hobos littered the sidewalk. The dark skeletons of ancient factories, covered with graffiti, mold and ivy, wavered like ghosts in the smog drenching all of Royal Oaks, a miniature West Side of Buffalo. The gangsters stared at the sleek car with interest, probing. Soon they had a tail, a bunch of black guys drinking and smoking weed.

"Someone's following us," Bryon advised.

"Maybe they can help?"

"Help? No, I don't think so. Let's try to lose—"

But he was already pulling over to the side of the road. Street smart? Bryon didn't think so. He had another thing coming.

••

One either stared at or turned away from Harris. A legend in himself, his fame had stretched all across the modern living world. He was known by the youngest child and the oldest grandparent, the fresh citizen and the battle-hardened veteran. He was regarded as one of the most lethal and terrifying humans on the planet; there were rumors he was even half-machine, half-mutant, though no one could argue. He had saved thousands of lives and led victorious assaults. Considered maybe the most powerful man on earth second to only one, he inspired fear, admiration and respect from both subordinates and superiors. Warranting his authority without conformity, no one could sanely predict his sometimes unrational and unfeeling moves. He seemed to be a step ahead of everyone else, and that in itself made him a god. A god second to only one.

Admiral Coldheart jumped as the door flung open; he gazed up from his shabby desk. Computers lined the walls, most old relics, though one was oversized and giant, from a line of the most mighty computers since the dawn of time. It was reliable, trustworthy, secretive—most had been destroyed by the enemy or destroyed by chance by their ravaging onslaughts. "Mr. Harris, good to see you, come in. I've been wanting to speak with—"

Harris walked over to the book-case, scanned a couple titles, then, "He doesn't remember a thing."

"What? Fedducia?"

"Not a thing."

"Did you use a mirror?"

"It didn't trigger even the slightest thought. Or so he says. I want to use the XXXT9."

His face turned dark with fear. "If he does remember, it will shatter all hope."

"He doesn't remember."

"How can you tell? He could be bluffing. I bluffed."

His eyes were hard and cold. "Pardon me, sir, but he doesn't *lie* like you do."

The admiral stiffened. "It's too risky. I can't give you permission."

"Let me rephrase this: I am going to use the XXXT9, with or without your permission. Without will be much harder."

"No, it will be impossible."

"Do you think our copy is the only one working?"

"The rest are run-down and dangerous, not able to be trusted."

"More trustworthy than you, I assume."

The Admiral flinched. "Even if you—"

"I have word that the enemy is amassing off the coast of Africa. One week and they'll be here."

Coldheart nodded. "I know."

"What's the plan?"

"A plan is being concocted as I speak."

"I'm sure it is."

Coldheart shook his head, staring into Harris' crystal eyes. "I can't authorize it. It's way too dangerous."

"As dangerous as fighting this next battle alone?"

"We can do it, we've done it for the last fifteen months, and—"

"—And our resources are depleted, the boundary cities and towns are decimated, there is news of a rogue enemy party floating somewhere within the States. A great job we've been doing. The only hope we have for this next battle is Fedducia. We can stabilize him here or I can sneak him out and stabilize him with my contact outside the States; he lives in the Andes and has a machine of his own."

"The enemy would've overpowered him by now if this rumor was true."

"They haven't."

"Then it's not true?"

"Decide for yourself. Whether or not I risk certain death for Fedducia is up to you."

Coldheart could feel his will being twisted. "I can't... How much time?"

"Two hours. Two hours and we put him in the machine."

"Has he been sedated?"

"Doctor Hill already sedated him."

"You have two hours. Technicians will prep the machine."

Harris smiled, nodded, and slipped after the door.

"Harris?"

He turned.

"Be cautious." Harris and he locked eyes, and then Coldheart broke the connection. "I remember..."

••

The black man stepped out of the car; the black teens surrounded them. Some held knives; one threw a basketball down the street. More held clubs or baseball bats; tears were stenciled over their cheeks. Bryon cowered in the car, trying to hide in the shadows of the car; he wanted to just drive away, but the black man had the keys. Instead he locked the door, looking up to see a gangster staring through the window; he reeled backwards. Outside, the black man glanced between their crime-hardened faces. "Does anyone know the way to the address 46 Willow Street?" No one answered. "Okay, just thought I'd check." He turned to get back into the car; one of the kids stepped in front of him. The black man put a hand out to push him out of the way; the gangster spit in his face.

"What's with your arm, old man?" the kid creaked, pointing to the wound where he'd been stabbed.

"I'm going to the hospital. My wife stabbed me."

Rippled laughter. "Get away from the car. It's our car now." He turned, expecting him to leave.

The black man didn't budge. "No. I don't think so."

The gangster turned, surprised; his brow curled, his hand withdrawing a gnarled knife. "I said it's *our car now*. Don't make me cut you up, old man." The others tightened around him; he wasn't fazed. He refused to move his planted feet. "I said *go*," the gangster yelled. "*Don't make me cut you up!*"

"I don't want to hurt you," the black man said. "I just want to go to the hospital."

"Mother—" He swung out the knife; the black man blocked his arm, grabbing his elbow, twisted; the kid shrieked, elbow socket dislocating; the knife fell from his electrified fingers, clattering at the black man's feet. The others leapt forward; the black man threw the screaming guy onto the car, whipping around; he kicked one in the balls, another in the stomach, doubling him over; he ducked as a baseball bat hurled overhead; he grabbed a club flying at him, tearing it from the attackers' hands, swinging it back and forth, bashing the faces of the gang. Kids crumpled to their feet, faces mashed and broken; those remaining dropped their weapons and scattered, diving into the shadows. Three bodies lay at his feet; the kid with the dislocated

elbow limped from the scene, disappearing into an alley. The black man stepped over one of the bodies, unlocking the door and sitting in the driver's seat. Bryon was horrified, face a mask of ghostly white.

"Why'd you havta till them, they're just..."

"Gangsters? Yes. They were."

"Just maim them a little bit or something if they get too frisky, don't—"

"*They're* not gangsters." He pointed into the rearview mirror; Bryon looked over his shoulder, out the back window.

His jaw fell open.

••

He thought he was going to see Chelsea. Harris threw him a pair of boxers and a baggy t-shirt, ordering him to throw them on. Ross eagerly obeyed—Chelsea didn't need to see anything too naughty. The female doctor helped him up, and his walking was groggy, misshapen; he was taller, now around six feet four, immensely tall; Harris' scalp touched Ross' chin, and Ross took great pains to point it out. But Harris was disclosed and forlorn, lost in the mind's recesses; he was led out of the room and down the hall. There were no windows on the walls, no decorations of any kind, no relieving paint—pastel hues, often disintegrating and dissolving, revealing a steel understructure. Finally they reached a branching door, and Ross was shoved inside.

His eyes flickered over a chair in the middle of the room, up on a platform braced by six arching steel bars. It ran floor-to-ceiling, and mounted in the middle of the ceiling, directly above the chair, was a pentagonal box, rimmed with gold and silver plating. Wires dangled, then looped up, connecting to a hat-like device nestled within the structure. The hat looked like a miniature Man-of-War jellyfish, the tentacles crawling from the membrane. White, plastic—no, canvas—sheets surrounded the construction, and beyond that was a wall of black felt-like material; and next to the door was a booth with a ring of computers, seats for two people. Biohazard signs were everywhere; technicians scrambled about. A few took time to stare at Ross, the forty-one-year-old teenager. Ross' face reddened.

He asked, "Why does everyone look at me like a freak?"

"Despising you?" Harris perked. Finally he laughed, an almost alien chuckle. "These people *worship* you."

"Worship me? Why?"

"I can't explain it. At least not right now. Just wait."

Ross ran a hand through his tuft of hair. "I thought I was going to see Chelsea."

"You thought wrong."

He opened his mouth to respond, but a technician grabbed him gently by the arm. "Please?" Ross followed him past the heavy black wall, through the drooping canvas, and up to the chair, squeezing beyond the rimming bars. An intercom told people in the room to leave. Ross saw Harris leave, and glanced over the biohazard signs. The technician seemed worried as he set Ross down, strapping him in with leather chords. Ross grunted as metal prongs, too tiny to see, jutted into his skin along the straps—they burned and tingled. Almost tickled. The technician looked into Ross' eyes, as if to plead for mercy when all was over, and withdrew a remote. He clicked a button. The hat came down, the tentacles stretching, connecting it to the machine. Ross' head was pressed against the back of the chair, but the cold steel made him shiver as it pressed down against his scalp. He took a deep breath, lungs stinging; he exhaled, blowing frost. The room was much colder. Goose bumps spread over his arms, legs. The baggy t-shirt ached his freezing skin. The technician left, abandoning him all alone.

For the first time since he'd awoken, he felt real fear.

••

Men in dark coats flooded from the buildings, drawing weapons, everything from knives to hand-held machine guns. Bryon ducked down, the black man roaring; the back window shattered under the force of thundering bullets. The car rumbled down the road as hundreds—

no, thousands—of jacketed men rushed from the buildings, the streets. Anyone in their way was viciously murdered—the black man seemed unfazed—as if it were *commonplace*—when a group of school kids were assailed by the men, the girls and boys stripped of their clothes, raped in the street, sobbing madly, before being thrown onto the bus; the bus was torched, the kids burning within. The black man seemed calm and unaffected as an elderly granny was torn from her walked and beaten until she lay tattered on the sidewalk. Tears filled Bryon's eyes as the murderous, rapist, horrible, sinful thieves bore down on the soaring car. Glass fell all around Bryon as the men shot at the car; they were pressing against the sides as the van rushed past.

One jumped onto the roof, blowing holes through the roof, the slugs dancing around the back of the car; Bryon rolled onto his side as the man stuck his hand within; Bryon yelped out; the black man reached up, grabbed the gun in the man's hand, turned it around, blasted his face away; the body thumped over the roof and landed on the hood, tugged down by its rampant counterparts surging after the van. Dark objects whistled overhead; an explosion shook the street, hoards of the men being blown apart and engulfed in the flames; the shockwave rocked the car.

Bryon wanted to scream, wanted to ask questions, but his throat went silent. *What was going on!*

"We're almost there!" the black man shouted, flooring it. The bumper tore across a blockade of enemy jackets; the men were thrown this way and that, legs and chests crushed with the impact. The entrance ramp onto a highway was blocked; the highway was empty. Perfect. The man grinned.

And drove right past the ramp, into abandoned factories and warehouses. A cloud of dust trailed the car.

The men were thinning out, slacking, panting; he hadn't followed their instinct. If he had, they'd be dead. The man yelled, "Hold onto something!" Bryon quickly obeyed; the car lurched as the battered front end soared through a crumbling brick wall; the black man grunted as the front end was shoved against his legs, crushing his bones. He gasped for air, nearly knocked unconscious, regaining control of the car. Bryon was crying like a scared little prison girl. The car ramped a pile of smoothened, dumped machinery, and landed on a platform surrounded by metal girders littered with lights. The lights illuminated—blue. The black man was on the verge of collapsing; Bryon clutched the seat, opened his eyes, saw nothing but blinding, searing blue light. There was a roar, bright blue; the black man screaming; the brakes groaned, whirling, twirling; he vomited, spewing his insides all over the seat; his eyes widened as the vomit seemed to hover, still; everything was quiet. He couldn't move, couldn't react. Everything suspended. Time no more—time an illusion.

Then nothing.

••

"Where am I?" Chelsea's eyes opened; someone stood above her, with a data pad.

"You're safe," the man said. His outline sharpened. Older man. "Quite some rugged transcription errors. But my guys—and gals—are the best. We fixed you up pretty well. How's your head?"

She swallowed, pain resounding. "Okay."

"Painful? Don't worry. It will go away. There are stitches all through the brain. It was pretty lopsided."

"My brain was lopsided?"

"Transcription errors are the results from jumps through time. When a vehicle—or person—jumps, he doesn't go all at once. He 'slides' into the present. Therefore part of him reaches *here* while *another* part of him is still *there*, in the past. Future travel is impossible. So sometimes things 'stretch' or go lopsided. In your case your brain shifted naturally—or unnaturally, depending on how you look at it—during the jump. We thought you wouldn't make it. You had some pretty serious problems. Probably the worse I've ever seen a jumper. Feddu-." He stopped himself, played with his data pad. "Ross was pretty banged up, too, but not as bad as—"

Her eyes seemed to explode with intensity. "Ross? He's alive!"

"Yes. Everyone's fine..."

"Can I see him?"

"No."

"Please..."

"If it's any consolation, I hear he's been adamant to see you. But you've been in a shallow sleep, and with surgery, we didn't want to mess with you."

"Why can't I just see him?"

The doctor chose his words carefully. "He's busy."

••

The air grew colder, thinner. He found it hard to breathe. An offbeat humming throbbed, crinkling in his ears. A voice over the intercom belched, "Fedducia, can you hear me?" Ross' eyes seemed to slide into the back of his head. His body shook in the seat. "Ross, you have to listen. My name is Doctor Alan Morrison. I need you to completely relax. I know it's hard. I've never done this before, so we don't know what quite to expect. Just... bear through it. We'll see you in a couple." The intercom went silent; the humming grew louder. Light flashed above him; he tried to look up, but his eyes were slid shut, and he suddenly realized his entire body had gone rigid. Rigid with electricity. Small amounts of electricity were flowing through him; he couldn't breathe, couldn't think. His heart struggled to beat; his brain quivered. Slithering fog drifted between tightly clenched teeth as a dull whining filled the room. Clicking. Whirring. Thunder. Lightning. Then... something...

Ross screamed.

Memories

Sent by ambassadors of every nation, a branch of German scientists prior to World War III had developed XXXT9. The scientists worked in the Bavarian Mountains, residence to the infamous Bavarian Motor Works, or the BMW state-of-the-line, top-class automobiles (though automobiles began to wane prior to WWII, they went on the increase after the destruction of the war, as order was nowhere and most cities were in ruins). *Scientific American* hailed the XXXT9 as one of the greatest scientific discoveries in the world, seconded only by the fall of Darwinism.

In an interview, head scientist Johann Maus, father of three and the only son to a rich oil tycoon, beamed as he rattled, "The years of amnesia are over. Those innocents suffering the rigors and traumas of amnesia will now be able to remember their pasts. Victims of crimes, driven to amnesia by the brainwashing of advanced criminals, will now be able to pinpoint their victimizers. Those who've lost knowledge of family through Alzheimer's will now remember their loved ones. Those whose brains were jostled in accidents to the point of memory loss will glow, suddenly remembering the wonderful lives they left behind." When asked who would be the first to experience the revolutionizing effects of XXXT9, Maus proudly waved a hand and exclaimed, "Those who suffer from amnesia due to the shock of battles from World War III—our beloved veterans, from either side—will be the first to remember the lives of themselves and the lives of others they left behind to fight for their country." He paused, then, "For a price." And a handsome price: one million dollars for a run on the machine.

Built by premium German scientists—probably—no, definitely—the best scientists in the world at this time, the machine carried capabilities far beyond the reach of mere human imagination! The XXXT9 assuredly triggered the deep, curling recesses of your brain and used electric shock therapy and manipulated toxins to force the patient to remember their past—everything about their pasts.

Everything.

And while the beauty of XXXT9 was forever evident, its far more criminal and federal uses were obvious as well—one night a ragged and haggard Doctor Maus had admitted he sold the rights of XXXT9 to a government regime in South Africa—everyone knew he'd been forced, possibly at gun-point, but no one said anything. So XXXT9 fell from his hands, and he lost everything. He and his family retired in the snowy Bavarian Alps, until they were all found dead one bright morning, buried copies of XXXT9 plans taken from the family vault.

No one knew who had stolen the plans—no one but the shaggy ribbons of a once-powerful American F.B.I. American scientists hurriedly constructed the XXXT9, giving the project the underlying name, *Project Tsunami*. Within a few years the machine was built, and handed over to the F.B.I. The scientists, sworn to secrecy, abandoned their families and retired in the beautiful stretches of beach, unhampered by World War III, in Tampa Bay, Florida. The F.B.I. used the machine to crack down on crime, and to point fingers at war criminals, using the victims of the heinous felonies. It was soon discovered the American P.O.W.s were given no Geneva Convention regulations, and soon a Salem With Trials erupted, the manhunt on for those who had slain and tortured American P.O.W.s.

But the hunts were cut down by the rise of the all-powerful, unfeeling enemy.

XXXT9 was put into hiding.

Only fifteen years later was it dug up and used on a frightened kid who had suffered a terrifying experience—he had been shot back in time, allowed to grow up, and pulled back when the time was appropriate. Unlike the Ross Incident, the enemy hadn't been first to the scene, but it was a harrowing experience the young boy—now a grown man under the physics of the jump—to live down the nightmares and face the facts. When he seemed reasonable enough, seemed able to handle the divine power of the XXXT9, he was placed in the machine.

It took three months to calm him down.

The memories flood like a dam of sad and painful experiences breaks open. Human beings carry the unfortunate trait of remembering the bad and the ugly over the good and the beautiful. Therefore those are the memories which surface first, followed by the good and the beautiful. Except in the wake of the horrific world of the bad and the ugly, the good and the beautiful is forgotten until the patient is given time to sort through it all.

Now Ross sat in that machine.
And he was screaming.

••

Harris rocked on his heels outside the door, surrounded by sweating technicians. The blaring air conditioning didn't alleviate the heat, the stress, the fear. Harris shut his eyes, wanting to blot out the horrible sounds, the noise hurting like the screech of sharp nails against blackboard. He yearned to go inside, to stop it all. But he'd requested it; this had been his doing.

The female doctor seemed to read his eyes. "It's the only way."

"I know," he said, almost in a whisper. Did it have to be? The only way.

Ross' screams and cries floated into the hallway. Behind the door, Ross was being thrown into memories he didn't even know existed. Memories sharp and painful. Harris knew Fedducia's growing up, his childhood, his experiences. In the past Fedducia would drop into an ominous stare, eyes glazing, and just remember. A frightening horror movie, rehearsed over and over in his mind. Now he was seeing it again—except now he hadn't seen it before. Electric currents were shooting through his brain, burning with pain; but Harris—everyone—knew he wasn't screaming in physical agony, but mental agony. He was remembering. Remembering a past he'd always tried to forget.

••

Chelsea raised the spoon to her lips to suck down the muddy jello when she heard it. The spoon dropped from her hand. She looked to the door; so did the doctor and the technician. The echo was faint, but noticeable. And familiar. Chelsea tore off the sheet, dressed in a nightgown, and stumbled out of bed; she fell against a counter, a flailing arm spilling a canister of needles and medical floss. The crash tore the doctors from their daze; Chelsea reached for the door, but the doctors held her back, forcing her onto the bed; she kicked one hard in the leg, her toes writhing in pain. She didn't care. Tunnel vision focused on the door; "Lock it!" the doctor yelled. His companion shut and latched the door, locking them inside. Together they forced Chelsea onto the bed, and metallic, mechanical straps swung around, bolting her down to the bed. She struggled once, and silenced, grunting. Her hair fell around her sweating face, flaring eyes sprinkled with a mix of anger and sorrow. The doctors hovered over her.

"Calm down," the head doctor pleaded. "Calm down."

She pushed against the straps.

"Get me some morphine..."

"Sir..."

"These straps are only so strong. Get me morphine *now*, Jacob."

The second doctor came over with the syringe; the head doctor took it; Chelsea's gaze pleaded for him not to, but he stabbed her in the leg; she groaned, twitched once, and her eyes rolled into the back of her head. Her hammering chest slowed. The beads of sweat seemed to evaporate, nostrils enlarging, dimming, enlarging as she breathed, calm and placid. The doctors stepped away. Jacob began to clean up. Only then did the sound register once more in their ears.

Distant sobbing, except it was... a harrowing scream.

"Just stay here," the head doctor said. "It was done fifteen years ago."

"I heard about—"

"You heard nothing. Clean up the mess." He pointed to the spilled needles and floss. "It's dangerous."

"Not many people walk barefoot around—" He looked again towards the door, the shrieks louder.

"Jacob..." He grabbed him by the shoulders, shook him. "It'll be okay."

"It's just... I've never heard him scream."

"All heroes are mere men once you strip them of prestige."

••

The technicians in the room wore earplugs, but yet his sobs and horrific screeches resounded like lightning in their ears. Displays surrounded them, like the womb of a machine—brainwave monitors (brainwaves now sporadic), heartbeat sensors (sporadic), lung inhalation/exhalation revolutions (sporadic, *everything* was sporadic). One of the technicians watched a video feed of the room—Ross shook and jostled, held down by the mere straps; drool cascaded down his lips as low electric currents opened the silent nooks and crannies of his brain, surfacing memories like chiseled wells of oil. In Chelsea's mind, a teenager was beaten by the savage shocks of the machine; but a forty-year-old man sat in the chair, and the video caught the tears of this older man—this hero, rippling with muscles, with scars, with a past so deep it didn't want to be relived—as he was mentally and emotionally raped in the machine.

"His stats are only growing worse," one of the men grumbled. "He's losing it."

"It's not like him to lose it."

"He's not himself... Not yet, anyways. Do you think he can handle it?"

"How much longer?"

"Five minutes till his brain addles."

The technician risked a glance at a clock counting down till the procedure was finished. "Come on, Commander, *come on*. You can survive this."

••

Coldheart figured they could have just let him read his own biographies; dozens of futile authors across the planet had written biographies of the most famous person to walk the surface of the earth, seconded only by the infamous Savior Jesus Christ. Most works had been burned, destroyed, lost, but Coldheart owned a few copies of his own. His walls were soundproof; an aide stood outside the door, and while the room was utterly silent except for the turning of the pages, Coldheart knew that the screams of a pain-ridden and emotionally crumbling man were flowing through the complex. He knew because he'd been through it himself.

The dusty pages of the book *Commander Jagger Fedducia: "I Will Have My Vengeance"* tickled his fingers as he turned the pages. Jagger's words before the gruesome atmosphere battle Operation Battleaxe resounded on the front cover. Most everyone thought Jagger was dead—hope had crumbled, had dissipated, had vanished. Soon the world would face their hero, their deliverer, the one who would bring peace—and a sword.

Fedducia had been born to a wonderful mother in Scottsboro, South Carolina; his father had been drafted into the military as the enemy began to thicken in the Western United States—or what remained of it. Fedducia had been raised in the growing tension and fear that the human race's own demise was inevitable; the battles throughout the West had taken their toll on innocent humans, and everyone thought the enemy would push farther and farther east until it had grappled all of the United States. They thought wrong. The Army swung south, into South America, where savage battles in the oceans and jungles tore nations apart; South America and Central America were left burning, and the enemy traveled across the ocean to Africa, where all that was left in the Eastern Hemisphere were burned ruins, pockets of life, smoke and ashes. Britain was a wasteland; China and Japan were still smoking; the Himalayan Mountain snow had been turned dark by the ash continually falling from the churning black clouds, turning day into night—an everlasting night of wailing, sobbing, hopelessness. The Americans formed concrete bunkers, walls and defenses along all the borders of their nation, from the Pacific to Mexico, the Atlantic to Canada. The Great Wall of China had been overridden; now America boasted the supreme defense—but would it hold? Flocks of people from everywhere rushed to the literal breadbasket called the United States—this was the only place healthy food could be grown, though mostly only in laboratories. Every man—unless they had needed jobs, such as doctors and construction workers and mechanics—was drafted into the World Army—the first time the United States had ever broken through the barriers of race and nationalization to include officers—and generals—from across the planet. It didn't matter who you were, or especially who your father was, only how good you were and if you could lead.

When the Army was still forming, Jagger was only ten. Somehow a rogue bandit of the enemy had passed over the Atlantic Wall at night, and entered their village. Jagger hid, crying and sobbing, in his closet, in a tiny niche he had built out of boredom several months ago. He could still hear his mother's screams as she was raped, then tortured, and finally killed, stabbed over and over. The house was burned, and he escaped through the flames, being singed but a little. The entire village crumbled—the faces of friends littered the streets, their insides open, brains splattered. Everyone, men, women and children had been murdered. Before the rogue enemy could reach another town, they were encircled by the World Army and slaughtered. Homeless, Jagger was thrown into an orphanage, where he was too distraught and weak to cope with the brutal minds of the older kids. He was constantly bullied, until one time he landed in a hospital—one of the depressed nurses screamed, "You were worthless then, you're worthless now, you'll always be worthless!" He made a commitment to grow strong and learn how to fight—next year when the same bully tried again to press a joke a little too hard, Jagger reacted, and the kid was given stitches in the hospital. Fedducia was hailed, and he stood proud. Ate age fifteen, he was drafted into the military, and soon found his first action somewhere in Mexico during the bloody Montezuma Offensive; he was the only survivor out of fifteen troops, escaping through flying bullets and mortar shells as the world exploded around him. The enemy was snaking away as fast as possible, but still firing at the World Army; somehow he escaped and leapt onto a fleeting World Army truck, getting a ride back through the border. The images of his best friend, Daniel Hawthorn, fumed over his brain, and when he was finally bumped up in status to commander, given the task of flying missions, and facing the oncoming onslaught during Operation Battleaxe, his grave words trifled through the radio headset: "I will have my vengeance." And he did. He and his men pushed back the enemy forces, killing millions of them, in destroying enemy ships, transports, and fuel carriers. Jagger returned a hero, and saw action in three other battles, The Battle of Maine—in which the small state of Maine was absolutely decimated—, the battle of Sharpshire, named after the general who took on the offensive on Lake Michigan, and Operation Sledgehammer, in which the World Army traveled across the Atlantic to decimate an enemy docking harbor, blowing so many fuel containers that the smoke that filled the sky in Africa could be seen in New York City!

Eventually Jagger's luck ran out—he and co-pilot Jacob Rumsfield were shot down by enemy fire, landing in northern Canada. Jagger soon learned—despite common belief—that people still inhabited the snowy regions of Canada, and he made this realization the hard way. Unbeknownst to the World Army, the sieving enemy landed an attack in northern Canada against the Canadian Army—the Canadian Army has since joined arms with the World Army—and soon annihilated not just most of the Army, but the civilians as well. Jagger was rounded up with the others, boarded onto trains in freezing cold snow, and shuffled into the wilderness. He had imagined there would be a rescue mission—*leave no man behind?*—but it never came. He and Rumsfield were shot dead and thrown into a pit, which was soon burned, the flames fueled by the popping fat and body tissue of men, women and children.

But he had returned.

The world was waiting.

••

"He's not going to make it," the second technician growled, uneasy.

"He will." Yet he lied to himself. The red warning lights began to blare; everyone in the hall tensed.

"Get him outta there!"

"No."

"He's going to die!"

"We're going to die if we yank him out of there too soon."

"But—"

"But how do we know he'll survive if we yank him out early?"

The second one swallowed, eyes fixated on the blinking lights. "Catch-22."

••

She was too young to remember. The memories were buried deep within her mind, drawn up only by the frantic grasp of diluted morphine.

Candles. Flickering light. Dark, gloomy. Distant cries. Someone lost. Her father grabs her hand, pulls her forward, through the crowds. She is only three feet tall, her tiny hand shaking. Where is Mommy? Her daddy holds back tears. He can't talk. People are hugging and patting him on the back, tears glint in his eyes, under the dancing candles lining the ledges on the walls. No one seems to notice her. A group of kids points at her, saying something between themselves; she doesn't understand. The kids are lost behind the giant legs of a visitor to her father. She feels her feet trudge forward and soon the crowd disperses. There is a table, the sweet aroma of fresh flowers. On the table is a wooden box—a casket. Pictures, drawings and photos of her mommy are tacked to little posters dangling about the display. Her father releases her hand, leans forward on the casket, suddenly breaking apart. People flood forward to help; he shoves them away, shaking his head, "No, no, it's my wife, my wife..." He reached down, chest heaving, futilely struggling, and he grabs her, lifts her off the floor; she was suddenly weightless, and he pulled her up. She looked into the coffin, eager to see what was inside—the face of her mother, smile a slack, eyes closed, hands clasped over her best dress. Her hair was graying, and the skin was clammy. The life and vigor of her mommy, the tender hugs, loving kisses, and playful rousings of just having fun with her daughter were gone. Energy didn't flow from her being; there was no radiance of life reverberating from her mother's form. It was empty, gone. Just a body. Another person. No movement in the chest. Suddenly lifeless. Not just in form, but in spirit. The soul of her mommy was gone. She understood. Mommy was dead. She cried into her daddy's arms, and they walked out of the viewing, sat underneath a tree, looking out at the street. A group of kids played street hockey. He stroked his daughter's hair, and he himself cried with her. People stood in the doorway. A fire ambulance rumbled down the street.

••

97%

Ross shook in the chair, half unconscious, eyes sunk into the back of his head. The first technician draped his hand over the red button, daring not to flinch. The bar on the computer screen glowed redder and redder, snaking towards the top of the display; at the top of the display was *Post Mortem*. A very undesirable conclusion. The technicians strained every muscle.

99%

The red bar was only millimeters from the top, rushing rapidly; Ross shook in the chair.

100%

The bar slashed red a split-second before the electrical pulses rocked through Ross' body; Ross slumped forward in the chair, the room suddenly aghast in darkness. The technicians scrambled from their posts, sprinting for the machine—the steel arcs were still spinning, ever so slowly, grinding to a stop, as the second technician leapt inside; the first opened the door, screaming for help. The doctors spilled inside; Harris fell against the wall, watching as Ross was unlatched from the chair and gently sprawled over the ground. The doctor placed a stethoscope over his heart, yelled, "No pulse!" Another doctor appeared with a syringe filled with black liquid, and injected it into Ross' arm. The first doctor breathed in deep gasps, terrified; a smile crept over her face. "He's alive."

Harris breathed a sigh of relief and crawled out of the way as Ross' ragged body was carried away. His left eye was closed, but the right open, revealing nothing but the milky whites of his eyes. Foam had plastered against his chin and neck; Harris watched as he was pulled around the corner, and suddenly Fedducia was gone. Harris turned, and strode down the hall, wondering how in the world the guy had survived.

He bent around the corner, passing several dark windows. Coldheart stood there. "How is he?"

"Alive," was all Harris managed. "It was close."

"I can imagine."

“Did you come down here to see Jagger?”

“No.”

••

He awoke.

His brain peeled with agony; he thirsted, but couldn't move. Too weak. Shadows lingered. One was unmistakable. A feeble hand lifted, but the hand was not his own. It was dark, tan, leathery, aged. His large, thick fingers wrapped over the other hand's delicate fingers, the soft, silky skin somehow shaking. He closed his eyes; she held his hand for what seemed hours, then he laid his head back down. Their fingers pulled apart. When he opened his eyes, she was gone.

••

“Why does he look like that, Mr. Harris?” Chelsea was finally walking, though slowly and with difficulty; her stomach often did flips, and she felt as if she had to puke, though she didn't. But she didn't care. She wanted answers. Somehow she was able to find Harris in one of the rooms in the hallway; she was permitted to visit Ross, access the bathroom and sleeping quarters. There were no windows in all the hallway, and guards were kept at either end. By some binge of good luck she had finally found someone she knew—a respected teacher at her school, someone she might be able to break through to (though she'd never had Mr. Harris for biology any year at Clayton High).

Harris looked up, surprised. “How are you feeling?”

“That person in there, the one you call Ross... It can't be Ross. That guy is a full-grown man.”

“It's hard to explain...” He tried to leave, to escape, but she defiantly blocked his path to the door.

“I have all the time in the world.”

“You may, but *I* don't. There's more to this than you understand.”

“We already established that. So make me understand.” She pointed out the door. “Why did my teenage boyfriend suddenly turn out looking like one of my dad's beer buddies?”

Harris rubbed his eyes. “All I'll say is, it *is* Ross. Except it's not. Ross never existed. There *is* no Ross Keppler. Your boyfriend is a man named Jagger Fedducia. He's a pilot in the World Army. He is considered one of the greatest men to be alive. Several weeks ago he was shot down and murdered—martyred, we'd like to say, but there is no martyrdom anymore. The world was stunned. And the morale greatly diminished. The planet had never seen a leader quite like him.” Chelsea squinted her eyes, trying to see the lies in his eyes, but could find no fault. Harris continued, as if speaking from a well deep within his soul. “So we decided to bring him back. A new technology that had been used only once before, and in total secret, was now going to be used to bring Jagger back to life. The soul of Jagger would be thrown into the past, where he would grow—and we would retrieve him. Something went wrong. Jagger's soul *was* lugged into the past, but where, we didn't know. Did Ross ever tell you he was adopted? A hiker discovered him in the woods on a hike, and he barely survived, was thrown in an orphanage, and adopted. Ross is Jagger Fedducia. The enemy got to him first, and signaled him with crop circles—they'd been searching for him for years, but finally found him. Those chasing us were after Ross—I had to rescue him or they'd kill him. Some tried to warn him. But for some reason he didn't *know* who he was. Neither did Coldheart. We brought Ross back, and still he didn't remember. That machine we put him on was supposed to jog his mind back up, surface old memories. A time of crisis is coming, and we need his help.”

She shook his head. “It's impossible...”

“It's only the truth. Jagger is resurrected from the dead. When he made the jump, time reinstated his old self. That is why he looks like he does.”

“So why doesn't he remember me?”

Harris shrugged. “He's on drugs. I'm sure he *does* remember you. But his body took a beating in the machine, and he's probably sifting through scarier memories. But he remembers you. I promise.”

"I can't believe this."

"I know. It's hard. But it is only the truth."

"So where I lived... Clayton... My parents..."

"Is all in the past. Something being relived. In reality, you have already lived and died. It is Jagger we're worried about. It's Jagger we need. It's your boyfriend we need."

"Is he married?"

Harris wrinkled his brow. "No one cares about marriage anymore."

"So what about me?"

"He dragged you along. You're not supposed to be here."

"Where's here?"

"Follow me." He lead her out of the room, down the hall; he got her past the guard at the door, and took her into a small room with see-through walls, ceiling and floor. Below the odd Plexiglas was sheer white steel. She stood in the middle of the room. Harris walked over to the wall, where a datapad ominously rested. He dialed in a few numbers. A grinding noise filled the room; Chelsea tensed. Suddenly the steel walls beneath the Plexiglas structure began to pull away, blackness shedding. She took a heavy breath, heart fluttering; the walls peeled away; suddenly she was suspended in darkness. Harris stood behind her, the giant room a window. Below and ahead was the earth, a giant sphere, masked with plumes of dark smoke, ash and blurred clouds. Cities burned, and dashes of the ocean were slick with oil and fires. The mountain snow was black as night, and most of South America was ablaze. She fell against the wall, but reeled away, feeling she'd drop into space. Stars surrounded everything around the earth, and the moon rotated far off, lit by the distant sun. Several large, sphere-shaped starcraft grazed the open outer space; one tore so close she could see inside its windows. She shuddered and fell backwards; Harris caught her in his arms.

"Where are we?" she repeated, voice weaker.

"We're on the *U.S.S. Braveheart*. Suspended above the atmospheric canopy of the earth. In outer space." He paused, then, "And the year is 2203." Exactly 200 years past her time.

The Ring

Even as trust died, the door creaked open, bleeding shallow light into the confines of the tight building. A young woman nursed an infant at her breast; she turned away from the door, the metal legs of the folding chair swirling a cloud of dust. Two children, faces dark as ash, sat in the corner beneath a boarded window, with a mutilated Scrabble set between them. The kid stood in the doorway, at least eleven years old, tired—but his face shown with a radiance. A messenger. The woman called for her husband; a few moments passed and she called again. He came in through a doorway, several stitched towels draping in front of it. He wore no shirt, and his jeans were torn and holey. Rubbing his dirty hands over the worn denim, he said nothing, motioning the kid outside. They both exited the house, standing in the setting evening. He shut the door; the skeleton of a burned-out skyscraper loomed above them; their own home was one of thousands dotting the age-old streets, avenues and town centers; Central Park was a city in itself. Hovertown resurrected, except this time the buildings were relatively sturdy. Narrow paths cut between the dusty hovels; kids played in the street, splashing through the sewers. The sun burned red, as if its eyes were bloodshot by the filthy pollution moving with the sky's currents. The man and the messenger stood rigid in the twilight, alone in the alleyway; the gentle echoes of kids' laughter, mixed with the galls of birds and the nearby shackle of a market rang in their ears. The man took the young kid through a claustrophobic space between two ramshackle homes, and they were in the backyard—a five-by-five-square-foot plot of land littered with open trash cans lying on the side, a doghouse for the mutt, which chewed on a bone within the small home. A draping, dead tree rested inside a concrete pedestal, crumbling with age. An oil lamp lie on its side, smashed; water dripped over the rough stonewalls the man had erected years earlier.

"What news have you this time? Have I been summoned?"

"Yes," the boy replied, more eager than ever. "They say it is very urgent."

"Let me say bye to my family and gather my things. Tell the others."

He headed towards the alley, but the boy stopped him.

"There are no others."

The man cocked his head to the side. "Why not?"

"This isn't an ordinary meeting. It's just you and an old friend."

"I was under the impression this had to do with..." He cut himself short. No one could know what he knew—security was tight, because *insecurity* was a constant resident in the sewage slums of New York City. He had seen the city burn—his own father had fought in World War III, and the man had been only a child back then; but the memories were fresh. When the Russians dropped an atomic missile on New York City, he had been visiting an aunt in Buffalo—he felt the shockwaves, and rushed to the streets with everyone else. Clouds were screaming past them overhead as a furious wind picked up, so mighty it felt like it would tear off his clothes. Then the glowing orange ball of flame erupted into the sky, seeming so close. New York City had been virtually flattened. All that remained were the skeletons of the sturdiest buildings. His father had lost his life in that war, and he had been enlisted early on as a teenager when the war with the enemy started—he had fought in the streets of Mexico City, and had seen the damage and onslaught of the ruthless, soulless enemy. He remembered... But he had been dismissed. Dismissed because he knew too much. His summonses were common, and he was one of fourteen who were briefed on everything going on. Question was, why was he being called, and no one else? "I'm guessing you can't tell me what this about."

"No," the youth replied. "They just told me to get you as soon as possible."

"Do I have time to pack?"

"No."

"Then let me kiss my wife and kids—"

"Do it quickly. General Coldheart is impatient."

••

Harris sat at Ross' bedside; Ross, the aged forty-year-old teenager, had been awake for the last four hours, but had said virtually nothing. The doctors didn't know what to make of it. Harris

wasn't so clueless. As he explained to the head doctor, "He's suffering. He has two lives running amok in his mind. He doesn't know what's real and what isn't. He doesn't know what to believe." And while Harris knew the doctor wouldn't accept it—Fedducia's aura was too much to allow for humanity—"Our righteous and victorious commander—" he couldn't help but speak with sarcasm—"is afraid."

"Impossible," the doctor said. Ross had been sleeping. The doctor looked in at him through the doorway window. "The man doesn't know fear."

"He *is* a human."

"Can't be. His courage is undeniable."

"Where is courage without fear?"

Harris sat by Ross. He brought him some orange juice, and Ross drank heavily, almost to the point of freezing his heart over with ice. He was still getting used to the large body proportions, the muscles, the rugged frame. Harris took the glass and set it on the counter. "I need to ask you a few questions." Ross rolled his eyes—constant questions. "I don't have a tape recorder. I'm not even supposed to be in here. I just want to know—for my own security. Don't screw me over."

"No tape recorder?"

"No tape recorder."

"I don't want to get caught in a lie."

"Then don't lie. Okay, here we go. Start off easy. What's your name?"

Ross opened his mouth, but closed it. Harris tensed.

"Two names come to mind, right?"

Ross nodded. "I don't know what's—"

"I know, I know. What are the two names?"

"Ross. My name. Then... Jagger. Pronounced Hah-gaer." He seemed mesmerized.

"Last names?"

"Keppler. Fedducia. Pronounced—"

"Yeah, I know. You don't have to pronounce every name for me." Ross managed to perk a grin. Harris continued, "Can you tell me where you were born?"

"Clayton, Wisconsin, and... and Scottsboro, South Carolina."

"How old are you?"

"Seventeen... Forty-one." Tears of hopelessness.

"I have answers," Harris said; Ross looked up. "Tell me who I am."

"Will Harris."

"No. My occupation. What do I do for a living? Career."

"You're a biology teacher... And a soldier."

"What kind of soldier?"

"A pilot."

"Are you a soldier?"

"No... I mean, yes. I don't know."

"Yes or no?"

"I don't... yes. Yes. I am." I'm a soldier?

"What Army do you belong to? United States Army?"

"No. The World Army." Part of him didn't know what the World Army was; another understood.

"What do you do in the World Army?"

"I'm a pilot. A fighter pilot."

"What's your rank?"

"Commander."

"What year is it?"

"2203."

He glanced at the door, took a breath. "What's your girlfriend's name?"

"Chelsea."

He smiled, dolefully impressed. "It worked."

"What worked?"

"One last question. Do you like chocolate, vanilla or strawberry ice cream?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"You don't like ice cream?"

"Strawberry."

Harris grinned, stood, and strode from the door. He glanced behind him, said, "Fruitcake," and left.

••

The remains of the pavement were disheveled, broken, cracked; a Humvee appeared down the road, winding between the stacks and columns and rows and bushels of makeshift homes, through the petty poor, too proud to beg, too hopeless to spend the time working. Soldiers patrolled the streets; tents spread through the bowels of destroyed buildings. A young woman cried over her dead, emaciated baby—the man was unaffected. Commonplace. The Humvee came to a stop; he stepped inside, armed soldiers on either side. He buckled inside, asked what was going on—the escort didn't speak. The Humvee lurched, and the vehicle coursed downtown, between the spidery skeletons of age-old buildings, through the muddy hovels and waterholes; between giant bonfires where food was cooked. Past a dirty church, the stained glass windows shattered; crying, sobbing, solemn songs ruffled the air, flowing out the broken windows—praying, remorse—begging for salvation. The Humvee ascended through the dark ruins of the suburbs—some houses remained standing, though at the brink of collapsing, inhabited by up to dozens upon dozens of men, women and children. The skeleton of a dog lay in the yard of one of the homes; it started to rain, the water rushing down the street, pushing loose sand, gravel and mud to a new location, where more rain would press it on. Finally the Humvee reached barren wilderness, dead trees slaughtered by acid and radiation; thick iron gates loomed. The Humvee driver flashed a badge, and the gates opened. The Humvee snaked between hundreds, no, thousands of barracks—soldiers were everywhere, most without a weapon, tense. Half-hearted marches caused the escort to brake, wait; finally they continued on, went through another pair of gates—giant smokestacks burned, where the corpses of the city's dead were taken to be burned and dumped into the sea.

And finally the docks.

Buildings fifteen stories tall huddled close together, cables wrestled into the masculine sides—the cables stretched down into a depression, a drained water basin. The lines were pulled tight—something was hidden within the valley. The Humvee stopped, the doors opened; he was taken out, pressed against the side of the Humvee, skiffed—his pistol and knife were taken away, and he was allowed inside one of the buildings. Most of the light bulbs were out, and a thin, gangly officer sat him down in front of a window overlooking the valley. The Humvee left the compound. The man gazed out the window—the lines went into the valley, then abruptly vanished into thin air; rolling, gray-brown, denuded forest cluttered the valley. A muddy river coursed through.

"Your name is Jacob Eckert?"

He turned his stare. "Yes. I was called by—"

"Coldheart. I'm not a fool. Did they take your weapons?"

"Yes. When will I get them back?"

"You won't. You're a civilian, remember? You were supposed to turn those weapons in during the last housecleaning. Your gun will be given to one of the lieutenants in Division 3K, and your knife will—"

"That pistol is my only memento of my father, besides hazed childhood memories. And the knife—"

"Wasn't yours. It will be returned to its rightful owner in time."

"That's impossible. He's dead."

"The death cannot hold some back."

Eckert tried to comprehend, but screwed it. Weird talk never appealed to his senses. "When will I be allowed to go home?"

"Eager to leave? You just got here. And haven't even talked with the General yet, an honor in itself."

"My wife lost her job. I am the only one working, and I was pulled from a shift. If I can return soon, I can make enough money to put food on the table for next week. If I don't, then—"

"A lot of people are losing jobs. But I fear next week may not come."

"I suppose you can't tell me what you're saying."

"No. I can't. But I'm sure Coldheart will fill you in. Among other matters." He waved to the door.

Eckert stood and went through; he stood on a landing, a cable stretching down into the sickly valley. A cable car hung on the cable; two soldiers stood in the biting cold of the sinking night. They opened the door to the cable car, and he stepped inside. One followed him, and the other stayed behind. The door closed, and the soldier remaining outside pressed a button on the console. The cable car groaned, and began to lurch downwards, riding the cable. The building grew smaller and smaller, the rocky sides of the valley sinking around them. Eckert calmly walked to the window facing downwards, saw the spindly trees rushing up at them; they were going too close. He knew enough to not be afraid. There was a bright yellow glow, then a flash of sizzling white, and the trees were gone—he swallowed, seeing over two dozen massive spacecraft covering the valley, shielded by a cloaking shield. People scurried over the catwalks, fixing ships, arming spacecraft; models of all shapes and sizes, from escort craft, to battleships and cruisers; a massive artillery ship was off to the right, and a battered starcraft carrier was being repaired straight below. His eyes flitted to a Starfleet craft—about two football fields long, studded with massive artillery guns, AA and AAA firing positions, and fourteen docks for fighter craft. The insignia dashed over the steel hull—white with a blue cross, a sword cutting through the middle—rang deep and delightful—yet ominous and scary—within his soul. He didn't know how to react. The ships loomed forward, closing all around, and the cable car docked.

The door opened, and he was led out. The door shut, and the cable car ascended. Soldiers led him down the catwalks, the metal grating ringing under his feet. Below the catwalks were row upon row of storage bins, carrying everything from fuel and ammo to emergency escape pods and military uniforms. There was a command hub somewhere, but Eckert hadn't seen it. It took nearly five minutes to walk the length of the frighteningly huge starcraft carrier—five football fields long, two football fields high, rimmed with ports and guns and an assortment of battle gear. A leviathan. Finally they took a branching catwalk, which descended belowground. He was taken into the bowels of the complex, between the rising, boxy storage rooms. There was a stairwell leading even farther downstairs; they walked for several moments, erupting into a labyrinth of hallways, nearly deserted. The soldier led him to a doorway, and nudged him inside. The door shut behind him. The walls were bare; there was a table, a broken chair, and a grimy chalkboard, no chalk. Sighing, he sat on the table, but leapt off when it creaked and shuddered.

The door opened; he straightened and raised his hand to salute; Coldheart muttered, "Don't bother."

Eckert lowered his hand. "Permission to speak freely, sir?"

"Yeah. Bet you want to know what the heck is going on?"

"Yes."

"The enemy is preparing for a massive assault, unlike anything we've seen. We're monitoring the situation closely. It appears—*appears*—that they'll be striking several points along the East Coast, from Maine to Florida, in a desperate attack to render us paralyzed. Then they'll march through the United States and finish us off. All pockets of resistance will eventually be muted. The war will be lost." Desperation, depression, hopelessness reigned in his voice, his very contours and expressions. Sighing, "But this is all speculation. Obviously we don't want to get word out. People will flock away from the coast in terror. Some people say senses die. But the sense of fear never dies."

"We're offering them a barbecue..."

"Or let them stampede through without a shot fired?"

"Is there a plan? A battle plan?"

"One's being concocted as I speak."

"Why tell only me?"

"I will tell the others. They are on their way. There is a General Assembly of the Chiefs and Elders at three a.m. Hate to do it so late—or early, however you like it—but we simply don't

know when the enemy will strike.” He patted a radio clipped to his wrinkled shirt pocket. “I fear the call, day and night.”

“You haven’t gotten much sleep.”

“No. I haven’t.”

“So why tell me early? I’m not even in the military. What can I do?”

“We want you back in.”

“Pardon me if I’m not tempted to grab my wife and kids and run out of New York City.”

“I’ll pardon you, but fate won’t. We need every fighting man. We’re asking you to join back up.”

“No. It’s a lost cause. We all know this. There isn’t a shred of hope for us winning.”

“Maybe, maybe not. Things may change very soon.”

“No, they won’t. I’m not joining up.”

“You’re running?”

“Yes. With my family. One man can’t do much.”

Coldheart seemed pleased at his words. He walked past, forcing Eckert against the wall. Staring at the opposite wall, Coldheart said, “When these guys attack, it’ll be absolute madness and chaos. Either now or later. Either way, lives will be lost. Our forces will be diminished. Blood will be spilled. We need everyone who can fight. *Everyone*. All males *and* females over fifteen will be ordered to grab a gun and fight. No one will be excluded.” Eckert’s face was a mask of horror; his wife... “Those not old enough will be ferried by designated drivers, and taken inland.” Eckert tried to speak, but couldn’t. Throwing mere teens, of both sexes, into battle against the cutthroat enemy was just as bad as sending them to the butcher. Lambs to the slaughter. “If you are right, and this *is* a lost cause, Eckert, then when push comes to shove, those kids fifteen and younger will be given a gun and marched into the enemy. We will not fall a step back.” He shuddered at the thought. “Some of my men want to abandon naked girls in the street, injecting them with sexually transmitted diseases, to wear down the enemy. In the end they want to shove mini grenades into babies’ throats and hurl them at the enemy.” Eckert’s mind flashed; hot sweats. Coldheart turned to face him. “I refuse to allow that to happen. We are not going to turn into the savages that haunt us. But we will *not* give up an inch of land without a fight. Every human that can hold and fire a gun will face the enemy firing. Humans of every age.”

Eckert’s two sons were eleven and thirteen; his daughter was seven. All would be thrown into battle when the time came. He couldn’t contain himself. Tears swelled. He wanted to plead, to demand that things be changed, but a part of him wouldn’t allow it. He hated Coldheart, hated Coldheart’s ideas for taking up defense—even if it were a suicidal defense—but he hated the murderous enemy much, much more.

Coldheart said, “I fear this battle will be our last. We need you.”

He had to leave, had to run. But how long would running the gauntlet last? “And if I say no?”

“You are drafted.” Coldheart shook his head, “Dang it, Eckert, you were given an honorable discharge. You have nothing to be ashamed of in the World Army—in anything, for that matter. The fact that you want to save your family over friends shows you are a man of integrity. Something I am afraid I don’t possess. But if my life hangs on the thread, I’d lay it down to you. You’re one of the best.”

“Only because I worked with the best. All that remain are delinquents and amateurs. *Children...*”

The General sighed. “What if I told you... What if I told you he wasn’t dead? That we were wrong?”

Eckert snapped his eyes up. “You lie.”

“If you met him, if you felt his calloused hands, if you saw his burning eyes... Would you fight?”

“I would die for that man.”

Coldheart grinned. Turning states. “Every man, woman and child will die for him. He’s back.”

The door to her room opened; the female doctor stood there. Chelsea crawled to her feet. "Your face looks clammy. How about a shower?" She beamed at the opportunity; she was allowed to strip and shower while her clothes were washed. She dressed, and the doctor asked her, "Would you like some fresh air? We've docked on the outskirts of New York City. There's a slight rain, but the air isn't as stale as it is in here."

"Sounds great," she said, and followed the doctor.

She was allowed past the guard at the end of the hall, taken to an elevator; her heart leapt into her throat as it sank like a bullet, but it grinded to a stop, screeching. The doctor remarked, "Our grease monkeys still need to grease it up. It's been like that for a while." The door opened and she stepped into a large hangar; odd-looking machine set on ramps littered the steel floor, technicians moving about with an odd rapidity, urgency. Large metal doors had slid away from the wall, a gaping hole opening to the catwalks of the docks. The doctor led her over the catwalks, between the titanic ships; all-male soldiers eyed Chelsea with strangeness, staring at her colorful clothes, her denim jeans and odd shoes. She felt isolated, alone, rejected; the stares were not stares of lust, but confusion.

The doctor pushed through a throng of mechanics working on what looked like a gigantic engine; one looked over his shoulder, said, "Is that her?"

His companion retorted, "Yeah, I think. It was an accident."

"What are they going to do with her?"

"I guess keep her with her boyfriend who came back by mistake, too."

"Who's her boyfriend?"

"I hear they got the wrong guy."

"Who'd they get?"

"Some punk. They were after some lousy three-star general who'd been knocked out of combat a few months ago. A trial run. Didn't work out."

They boarded a cable car, ascending in the presence of an armed guard. The cable car joined up with a building, and they moved outside, into the air. Gentle rain fell. Rain reminding her of that day she and Ross had stepped out of the theatre, Ross practically in frantic sobs. How long ago had it been? A week? Something like that. The doctor remained inside the door, preferring to stay dry, but Chelsea didn't care—she launched into the rain, grinning as it dappled over her face. Normalcy. Something she could relate to. She let her mind wander, dart. She felt as if she was five, splashing in puddles outside their farmhouse; her dad was yelling at her to stay dry and to come inside, but she didn't—she'd had the cold for a week. Right now she didn't care about a cold. She felt something touch her shirt; she opened her eyes and jumped back as a column of soldiers filed past, faces straight, gazes fixed. They moved with an almost machine-like grace. Rugged yet streamlined, forced yet beautiful.

"Where are we?" she asked the doctor.

"At a military base."

"I didn't know there was a military base in New York City."

"It's been here for a while." But then, you haven't been.

"Can we go to the city?" Chelsea pleaded.

"No, I don't think so."

"Why can't we go? Why can't we go to the city?"

A passing officer stopped, turned; he wore a cap, the rain dripping over the bill, in a gentle waterfall, masking the features of his face. He locked eyes with Chelsea and asked, "Go to the city? Why would you want to go to the city?" Chelsea tried to see past the waterfall, but couldn't; the doctor pulled her away, apologized.

"We should go inside now," the doctor said. "You'll catch cold."

Chelsea, get out of those puddles! You're getting dirty! You'll catch cold!

She began to cry; the doctor pulled her to her chest, and held her close. Thunder rumbled. A file of soldiers moved past.

••

Harris stood outside Coldheart's office, holding the tape recorder in his hands. It didn't feel right, betraying Ross; one part told him Ross was a student and deception, therefore, was no

big deal; another part—a larger, more real-to-life and up-to-date part—screamed at him for betraying a friend, for stabbing him in the back. Coldheart's task had been simple—show that Ross knew who he was and that he could fight. Harris had no doubts. But he didn't want to rush anything. He knew that a battle was brewing, and perhaps Ross—against all hopes—wouldn't be ready. So the fight wasn't against whether or not Ross was ready—whether or not he had the tape, Coldheart would go forward with it anyhow. He would throw Ross on the frontlines. People would worship him. And perhaps they would win. Perhaps they would be victorious. Perhaps. But Harris couldn't live with knowing he'd lied to Ross, and so he tore the tape recorder apart in his hands, throwing the remnants to the floor. Feeling halfway better, he entered the office.

Coldheart was in a clear state of panic.

••

Ross slept, dreams turning to nightmares, hidden messages masked behind a coat of colors:

The tunnel was dark and gloomy, insecure, prevalent with a deep sense of evil. The tunnel was long, dotted with depressions on the sides. Ross stood with two of his friends, Daniel and Jake. They were holding swords, and they were heavy in their hands. There were other people there, too, but Ross doesn't know who they were. Ross had the background information in his head—they were supposed to defend this tunnel at all costs! So they stood there until there was a gathering of the enemy down at the other end of the tunnel—men and women. Then bows and arrows replaced the swords, and they fired, spraying arrows into the enemy. The arrows killed them all, and they repelled another wave. But then the enemy came in through the side (some door that wasn't there earlier) and they fought them off; they jumped onto their boat (though there wasn't any water, don't ask) and the boat rode down the tunnel, over the concrete, but it had no wheels. There were tons of people down the tunnel; Ross jumped off, and Daniel and Jake leapt, too. They ducked into the enclaves as the enemy started shooting at them with arrows. Somehow they were able to run back to their side of the tunnel without getting shot, and then they regrouped. The bows and arrows were gone; they now had the large, heavy swords. The enemy charged; Daniel and Jake stood their ground, but Ross fell back to a door against the wall to defend. Jake was slain by the enemy, and Daniel was submerged in the enemy as the enemy rushed; they were armed with swords. Ross parried and struck his sword against theirs, and stabbed the oldest person there (strangely, a character from Monty Python and the Holy Grail) in the neck and he fell. Ross was still fighting when Daniel flew down from above, falling, and Ross almost stabbed him; they exchanged glances and continued fighting. Then the enemy's swords disappeared and they were unarmed. They continued to kill them. Now they were all girls; Ross killed two girls from school Ross knew, Kelly and Melissa, and his friend Katie Brown, and stabbed Chelsea his girlfriend in the leg, piercing her jeans and digging into her flesh. Ross stabbed another girl, Julie Noble, in the heart; she fell to the ground, crying for mercy, and said that if Ross let her live then she'd have sex with him. But Ross took his sword and swung it, chopping off her head. Chelsea was still on the ground, and Ross cut off her head, as well as the others who were living. Daniel and Ross stood amid the bodies and Ross continued to stare at Kristen's headless corpse, blood everywhere. Ross knelt down, picking up her head, and gently kissed, blood covering his lips and filling his mouth until he gagged...

Ross awoke, gasping for breath, sweating horrendously. The walls of the medical ward closed around him; sweat drenched his covers. The deep, thinning auburn hair on top of his scalp matted his held, damp with frustration, fear, incredible sorrow, all lingering away as he realized it had been a dream. He would never forget the dream, never in his life. He turned his head to the side, stared at the wall. He was alone. And for what seemed an eternity, Ross began to cry.

••

Harris shut the door without waiting for the command. Coldheart's face was dank with fear, clammy and cold. His arms shook and quivered. He gazed into Harris' eyes, saying nothing; he

then walked over to the wall and pressed his fists against the chilled metal. Harris wanted to know why he was so tense, though the ex-biology teacher needed no answer. Coldheart resounded, "The enemy has been rallying itself along the coast of Africa and Britain, preparing for a massive assault. Millions of men, thousands of ships. Hundreds of thousands of ships, from small tankers to dinghies, from battleships to rowboats. They've been loading weapons and fuel and men for the past week. They left enough men to satisfy their Eastern borders in Japan, China and Russia, as well as a few stations in the Philippines, large enough for us not to try and cut in behind them." He rubbed his temples, headache pounding. Tension headaches. "My good friend, I am thinking this may be our last stand."

"How long?"

"Twenty-four hours," he answered gravely; Harris drew a shrill breath. "They set out last night."

"My God... Are we ready?"

"No. But I've issued orders to arm all the soldiers, and put all those on reserve out on the front lines. We're stretching thin, all over the East Coast. To be frank with you, Harris, I plan on putting every able-bodied person on the front lines to inflict as much damage to the enemy as possible. We will not fall a step back without a fight. Every inch the enemy takes from our hands will be met with their own spilt blood—and ours."

Harris' mind leapt forward a few steps. "Every able-bodied person?"

"I will discuss the full measures of the plans at the meeting of the Chiefs and Elders later tonight."

"We're in a bad spot?"

"Excruciatingly bad. There is no stopping the enemy. Our only chance to push them off is a counter-attack inland. And it will only work if we keep our eastern borders fighting till the enemy is fatigued. Our west coast soldiers will be able to fight in the counter-attack."

"I haven't heard word of this. Only rumors, and nothing as terrible as you speak."

"No one knows but High Command, you, me, and Eckert."

"Eckert's a civilian now."

"He will be joining us. When he meets Fedducia. But, no, we're not ready. Our army is fragile. We're still sustaining from the last defense. Any hope of an offense is no hope at all. When the enemy strikes, they will plow through us, no matter what we offer up to them. They will break the barricades and storm the harvest. Only within the guts of our tiny little nation will we be able to offer up a true fight—and even then a costly one."

"We'll be retreating them?"

"Opening the door to a savage? Not a chance. We'll fight."

"If it's suicide—which I gather it is—then what's the point?"

"The point is that at this point we are doomed. As Eckert put it, it's a lost cause. No lie in that. But we have a secret weapon that will give us the power to defeat the monsters. A very special weapon."

"No."

"He is our only hope. If he can fight, if he is able to inflict real damage. His powers are beyond our comprehension. No one understands. It is as if he is the Messiah himself. People worship him. He is a marvel of creation. No one can withstand him, it's like he's invincible. You've seen him in combat. Some believe in God, including yourself? Perhaps this is the long-awaited Savior who has come to save the world. He *did* raise from the dead, didn't he?"

"By our own hand, not God's."

"God has been lost with time."

"To some. To others he is more evident with each moment doom draws closer and closer. It has been said a man loves God the most the moment he faces death. I know this to be the case." Before Coldheart, the extreme die-hard soldier-of-a-man could respond, Harris spat, "Even if Ross—Fedducia—is our only hope, the question is much to extreme for us to answer. Part of me knows he has returned, part of me is doubtful. But I will *not* allow you to throw him into combat until I know 100% that he is ready. The last thing we need is a false mindset and a dead Fedducia burning with the city."

Coldheart wasn't disturbed by his frankness. "It's not your decision to make."

He showed no emotions, no aspect of divine revelation. "I know."

The General rocked on his heels. "Do you have the tape?"

"No," he lied. "I forgot to tape our conversation."

"What'd he say?"

"I don't remember. He was too knocked out to talk. Mumbling and such."

Liar. "I have an idea. If it works, we will know for sure that he is ready."

"What idea is that?"

"It's short but decisive. Ingenious really." He explained; Harris nodded. "If he did, would you believe? You understand that the moment Fedducia's name is shouted through the streets, the moment he stands ready for battle, there will be screams of hope—of courage, bravery, determination, loyalty and honor—and he will bring peace and a sword! Would you believe?"

"I'd have no choice but to believe. I've never seen it happen with anyone else. No chance of a fluke."

"Then it's settled." He picked up the radio, asked, "Is Fedducia sleeping?" There was an affirmative. He clicked off the radio, pointed to Harris. "Do it. Now. We don't have time. Call me on the radio. I'll be readying for my meeting with the Chiefs and Elders." They both left the room, Coldheart following Harris; Harris went to the left, Coldheart to the right.

Time was slipping out of their hands.



Eckert was led to a small room deep in the belly of the *Braveheart*. Technicians regarded him with respect—Eckert's fame—both as one of Fedducia's trusted-three and because of his mighty fights and battles alongside Fedducia throughout the war—was widespread and revered. Some would say his fame came from his father's heroism, but they'd be mistaken—his father died cold and shivering, in the waters of the Bering Strait in the middle of a frosty weather, the sun blotted out by smoke and ash. His corpse washed ashore and was eaten by wild dogs—later DNA tests had identified him. Eckert said nothing to the other men as he was shown to a blank video screen. The technicians flipped a few switches, and the screen glowed white, the plasma shifting, burning—soon the outline was unmistakable.

Eckert fumbled backwards, flashing; he couldn't believe it. The unmistakable face of Commander Fedducia was half buried under chalky hospital sheets. His muscled, tall form shifted uncomfortably under the covers, as Fedducia slept. The wave of frenzied nausea ended, and Eckert stood in plain disbelief, coming to the reality that what he was seeing was no mirage, no fake. Fedducia coughed. The voice even matched. But he wouldn't allow himself to be convinced so half-heartedly. "How did you do it?"

"Do what?" one of the technicians asked.

"*That.*" He pointed to the screen. "That can't be Jagger. Jagger is dead."

"It's no illusion. He's back."

"How?"

A new voice interrupted; Eckert swung around, facing Coldheart as the General answered, "Several months ago there was a top-secret operation. An operation to bring Commander Fedducia back to life. The world had been gloomily torn by his death. Hope faltered. Our battles grew harder just by the absence of his presence. His superior... abilities... no longer gave us an advantage. People lost hope completely. The populace began fighting not for fighting, nor for liberation or justice, the very things Jagger hailed and fought for, but they fought for their own survival. And our forces have grown weaker. The enemy will be attacking within 24 hours." Eckert didn't seem affected by the news; somehow he'd known—Eckert had a talent of reading peoples' minds. "So we *needed* Fedducia; we *need* him now. And we've brought him back."

"So the operation worked?"

"Yes and no. It did *work*, but not how we wanted it to work. It took us a while to locate him..."

"Locate him?"

"He was lost in the past. He didn't know who he was; he didn't know about this war, he was just one confused teenage boy when we found him. The enemy nearly got to him first. It could have been a disaster. But he's with us now." He pointed to the screen. "And he knows everything, he understands, he's ready to fight." He didn't mention the boggling uncertainties.

"Will you fight?"

Eckert turned. "This is hard to believe?"

"I'm only telling the truth." No pause. "Will you fight?"

He sighed. "Yes."

"And stand beside me before the Chiefs and Elders?"

He looked startled. "I am not even in the military, I'm—"

"You're a Captain." He handed him his badge and medals. "Stand by my side. Both with my much-needed tactics, and presenting Commander Fedducia to them. It is time the world knows its messiah had returned! We will have a fighting chance! Will you stand with me?!" Energy, excited pulses of brilliant light and coursing truth screamed from his eyes, the tempo of his voice; his aura throbbed with a thirst for justice... and revenge. "Will you stand with me?"

"Yes," Eckert answered. "I will stand with you."

••

The sparkling waves frothed, butchered as the fleet moved through. Thousands of ships, stretching from horizon to horizon, turning the gentle blue waters of the Atlantic to a churning nightmare of wakes, crests and spinning mayhem. Magnificent aircraft carriers pushed forward, bleaching the sea with oily slicks; cruisers chugged black oil, nuclear power fueling some; small dinghies, rowboats, yachts and even littered rafts rode the wakes of the mightier ships. Aboard the vessels, men wearing dark clothes, armed with weapons and emotionless faces, filed across the decks, changing the magazines in the deck guns, preparing for battle. Ammunition was brought to the tops of the ships, out of the hold; giant 105mm cannons on the ships pointed straight ahead as the sunlight reflected off the stained, molded, rusted, glinting steel of the heavy ships, burning on the wood of the smaller vessels. Ships weighted with explosives tore apart the front of the formation, suicidal vessels intending to blow apart land defenses as they ramped the beach and careened into the enemy barricades. Far as the eye could see, the ships stretched, endless, endless, forever and ever, till—

Ross leapt forward, writhing from the bed; his concrete arms blasted into the bulk of the attacker, throwing him back against the wall; the scalpel fell from the man's hand; Ross caught it midair, swung around, arching through the air; he fell to his knees, feeling no pain, and wrenched his arms down, both hands clenched over the handle of the blade; Harris shouted, raising his sweating palms into the air; his mouth was open in a howling shriek. Ross dropped the blade, falling away, shaking. Harris shook just as bad as he pulled himself to his feet. He leaned against the wall, breathing heavily.

"What the heck was that for!" Ross yelled.

"A test."

"A test for what! I never seen a test like *that!*"

Harris swathed for breath, giving a thumbs-up to the security camera. He mouthed, *He's ready.*

••

The incident woke Ross up for good, and as Harris left—all apologies, Ross could only smile—Chelsea walked through the door. He nearly exploded with joy, seeing her lovely face, the deep, soulful eyes, her gentle laugh and honey speech. Ross found himself on his feet, dressed in no more than boxers and a baggy t-shirt. She didn't seem to notice. His eyes glowed like embers; she was nearly overpowered by his new, pulsing energy, his vibrant "aliveness". He took her hands in his and stared into her deep eyes—looking down, for now he was much taller—and his heart fluttered. No memory machine could wipe out the love he had for her, nor the memories of their past, the present, and hopeful future.

"I've never seen you so... alive," she managed, stuttering, overpowered.

Ross held her hands, as rough as a lion, yet tender as a fowl, fingering the soft skin as if it were a precious gem, or even the most dazzling diamond. He quoted,

...Thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair; thou hast doves' eyes within thy locks: thy hair is a flock of goats, that appear from Mount Gilead.

*Thy teeth are like a flock of sheep that are even shorn, which came up from the washing;
whereof every one bear twins, and none is too barren among them.
Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet, and they speech is comely: they temples are like a
piece of pomegranate within thy locks.
Thy neck is like the tower of David builded for an armory, whereon there hang a
thousands bucklers, all shield of mighty men.
Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins, which feed among the lilies.
[Chelsea blushed]
Until the day break, and the shadows flee away, I will get me to the mountain of myrrh,
and to the hill of frankincense.
Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee.*

He grinned at her, almost dreamily, sheepishly. She thought it *had* to be the drugs. What language was he speaking in, anyways? She felt herself pull away, subconsciously; a pain of guilt, shame flooded Ross' face; he had been wounded by the separation. But Chelsea felt uncomfortable, too uncomfortable. Ross came towards her, but she turned away, giving him a shoulder, and walked to the other side of the room. Ross meant to follow, but stepped in front of a mirror—he looked at his manly reflection, being harshly brought back to the present. There was no Ross. He was Commander Fedducia. He knew it like he knew he was breathing. Except he was short in breath—either for a renaissance of what was the utter truth, or from Chelsea's sudden abandonment. He swiveled around and faced her, speechless. Her own eyes were filled with passion, but reclusive.

"Please don't leave," Ross begged.

"I won't," she promised; or was it a promise?

"You're the only one who makes me feel sane."

You make me feel insane. "Yeah, well, it seems my coming here was an accident."

"I don't believe in accidents," Ross said. She allowed him a step forward. "What do I look like to you?"

Her countenance fell.

"Answer me. Please. Am I your boyfriend?"

"Yes," she answered. But that didn't resolve the matter.

"How old am I?"

She opened her mouth to speak, but shut it. Who was he trying to kid? Her? Or himself? He didn't know how to act, so said nothing. He fell to the bed, and gazed into the reflection off the mirror. He was practically an old man. As old as his father. What had been his father's name? He couldn't remember. The past life—the life that was a lie—was fading. All except Chelsea. Why wasn't his memories of her fading as well? He figured because she was here, and that made her a reality. Certainly he didn't understand.

"Have you ever felt something, and not understand it?"

His questions interrupted the contemplative silence. Chelsea remembered—he'd asked that question before. Outside the theatre. Things had changed so much since then. "I think we all have our moments. Moments of doubt. Confusion. Not understanding." She looked at the muscles rippling under his skin. "Though I'd say most guys would jump into your shoes any minute they got a chance."

"Most boys don't have the memories I have."

"Memories?"

"New memories. Ever since that God-awful machine. Painful memories. I see my friends and family being murdered. Hear my mom's screams as I cower for my own safety. I remember walking through our home, the town burning, the bodies of the inhabitants scattered out over the street. I remember being bullied and jostled around as a kid. Made fun of. Picked on. I remember when I was scolded for not defending myself. And I remember when I decided to defend myself, and the next time it happened, I landed a kid in a regional hospital."

"That never happened..."

"But it did. I remember it. Memories. Fresh."

"Maybe you think fantasies are reality, or—"

"What sick kid fantasizes about his mom being raped, tortured then murdered? And he hiding in the closet the entire time?" He shook his head. "The memories are most difficult to bear. But bear them I do. Sometimes they haunt my dreams, nightmares that replay over and over in my mind. Make trouble difficult. I have always feared nightmares. Now it's commonplace. But the fear is still there. And then there are other dreams. Visions, almost."

She moved closer. "Visions? What do you see? People? Me?"

"No. I had a vision that someone was coming to kill me."

She wrinkled her brow, concerned.

"And then I woke up with a start. And Harris was hovering over me with a scalpel."

"What was he doing *that* for?"

"Some test. I don't know."

"So you have visions of things that are going to happen?"

"More like things I *think* are going to happen. Harris wouldn't have killed me. But I dreamt that he did."

"Any other 'visions'?" Even closer.

"Today I had one. I saw the ocean. And in every direction were ships of all shapes and sizes. Thousands of them, all heading east."

"That's not a reality. Maybe it's symbolic."

"I don't know."

Chelsea took his hand in hers. She hopped up onto the bed, and leaned her head on his shoulder.

"Why do you still like me? I'm an old man. What do you see in me?"

She smiled. "I don't see an old man. I see Ross Keppler. I see *you*. I see my boyfriend. Looks don't change who you are, just as diverted train tracks don't mean the train doesn't exist anymore. Bad analogy, I know. But I don't care about what you look like. I care about what's inside." She tapped his chest. "What's inside is what I love. I love your soul. I love *you*. And you haven't changed. Not really."

"Not a lot of girls see things so black and white."

"Well, not a lot of girls get accidentally shipped to the future, do they?"

Ross managed to laugh. "No."

Harris poked his head in through the door. "I'm leaving. Ross, get some sleep."

Ross jumped down from the medical bed. "Where you going?"

"To a meeting. Just stay here. Try to sleep?"

"I can't sleep."

"Just try. You'll need all the sleep you can get."

"Nightmares. They wake me up."

Harris rolled his eyes.

Chelsea spurted playfully, toying, "And he has visions!"

Harris' demeanor froze, going cold; both Ross and Chelsea went rigid. Harris stared at Ross through half-fearful, one-quarter mesmerized and one-quarter probing eyes. Harris demanded, "Visions, Ross? What visions?"

"Nothing important."

"Tell me."

"I said, nothing impor-"

Harris roared, "Tell me now!"

Ross was caught off-guard; Chelsea's eyes flared in surprise. Harris apologized; he was tense, at the breaking point. Lots of things happening. Bad things. Harris asked again—politely—and Ross obliged. "I saw a bunch of ships in the water, sailing east. Thousands of ships. That's all. Not really a vision, more like a picture."

"How long till the ships get here?"

"What? I don't know. It's not real or anything."

"Right," Harris said. "See you guys later. I hope." He left, shutting the door.

Ross continued staring at the door. Suddenly he grunted as Chelsea wrapped an arm around his neck, pulling him close. She whispered into his ear, "Why don't you come to my room? We can ease off some tension." She expected him to oblige—the thought of having sex with a full-

grown man was appealing to her senses; they'd done it before, and she believed the continuing stress and confusion would make her offer that much more sensuous and tempting.

"No," he answered, surprisingly. He never turned down such an offer. Boys weren't supposed to!

She removed her arm, stammered, "You've never said no before..."

"I know."

"We've done it, what, six, seven times? You've never complained. It'd help with the stress!"

"Yours or mine?"

"Both! Why don't you just come. It'll be fun."

"No, I'd better not. It wouldn't be right."

"Where'd this morality come from so suddenly? Are you out of your mind?"

"Dang it, Chelsea, I don't want to have sex with you. Is that clear enough? Can you get that through your thick-headed skull?"

Chelsea looked appalled, and leapt off the bed. Ross glanced away. "What's with you?"

"It just wouldn't be right."

"What, did you turn homo in that machine or something?"

"You don't understand. I *want* to do it with you, but I don't."

"That answer won't cut it."

"Yes, it will. Please leave. I need sleep."

"I thought you couldn't sleep."

"Well, Harris says I needs it, and I sure as heck won't get it in your cabin with you. So, please, go."

Chelsea hid back a glare of frustration and snuck from the room, shutting the door. What had gotten into him? Had something of the "infamous" Commander Fedducia taken control over his sexual appeal? Or, at forty-one, was his sexual appeal downright degraded and dissolved, nothing more than a spark at breakfast, downed by a gulp of juice? She shrugged off the thought and went into her room, closing the door. She didn't come out for the rest of the night.

••

The last dying whispers of evening evaporated into the ash-ridden skies, the blood red moon sparkling through the dusty atmosphere. Between the skeletal remains of buildings, between the hovels of small houses and makeshift living, trucks and jeeps and vans rumbled down the road, in the tight alleyways and streets. People huddled behind them as they stopped, from the oldest woman to the youngest man. The back doors flung apart all across the city, and boxes were opened with crowbars. Soldiers with the vehicles pulled out machineguns, sub-machineguns, pistols, explosives, anything, and handed them out to the stretching arms. A soldier got atop the vehicle with a headset and microphone and blared, "Take a weapon and move out! One weapon per family! Any deserters will be shot!" Everyone believed those words to the last letter.

No one knew what was happening, only that something was happening—it was a frenzy to reach the weapons, for most wanted not to defend the city as a whole, but their family and friends. The boxes soon emptied and the vehicles drove towards the base; people followed until they were too weary to continue, and lagged behind. More vehicles passed those diving into the World Army New York base, into the ruined city, to pass out more weapons.

The clock was ticking.

••

High-rise seats filled the auditorium, surrounding the stage; rippling movement castrated through the crowds as men and women took their assigned seats. Standing on the stage before a podium was the rugged General Coldheart, shuffling papers, nervous and anxiety-ridden. Harris stood behind him, talking with Eckert; both seemed relaxed and cordial; behind the two pilots was a large glass sphere. Coldheart wondered how they managed it. He flicked his microphone; the sound of the rap got everyone in their seats pretty quick, and Coldheart took

the microphone, closed his eyes, and said, "Pray with me." Harris and Eckert closed their eyes; the Chiefs and Elders closed their eyes, some bowed, others prostrated on the ground, more kneeling upon their chairs. Coldheart continued, "Our God who is in heaven, be with us this very day. Guide us, console us, as we prepare for battle. Be with us in this great time of need. All honor and praise and glory to your awesome name, God. In your Son Jesus' radical name, amen." He lifted his eyes, filled with a fresh vigor; Harris and Eckert exchanged glances. Those in the audience shifted their focus from the prayer to Coldheart.

Coldheart takes a breath, then, "We have known for quite some time that the enemy has been building up an Army. Namely, a fleet. We also theorized the enemy would throw all of its forces upon our East Coast, to break through our lines and invade the stomach of what remains of a free world." The Chiefs and Elders tensed. "We theorized correctly. We estimate that in 12 hours the enemy will reach the East Coast. That puts the invasion time at around 3:00pm Eastern Time. This will be a fight to the death. As you probably already know, weapons are being handed out not just in the streets of New York City, but across the coast, from Portland to Baltimore, from South Charleston to Tampa Bay. Everyone is preparing for the assault. Men, women, children... Anyone able to fight will fight. Only those who cannot hold and pull a trigger will be allowed to flee, those being namely the crippled, the mentally handicapped, the children, and the veterans who have lost use or limbs. That means none of us here will be permitted to flee. As you leave the congregation, all will be handed a weapon and a pair of bullet clips. We will be on the front lines on this terrible day."

Someone shouted, "Do we have any *real* battle plan? Or are we going to be taking potshots?"

Coldheart nodded. "Our first defense will be in the air. Our Starfleet will be deploying fighters to strafe and bomb the incoming ships, targeting the ships that are larger, therefore carrying more men, cargo, ammunition. We will wipe out as many as we can in this attack. The *Destroyer* will be in the inner space, railing the docks with the torpedo cannons, so that the high-tailing enemy won't have any way to build up again anytime soon.

"Following the first defense, several divisions will be stationed on the barrier wall, behind .50-cal machineguns and 500mm cannons, to blow the breath out of the invading forces. Some more will be positioned behind the barrier, and will engage the enemies as they storm through. There will be subsequent front lines moving deeper and deeper into the city, between the buildings, in Central Park, everywhere. Our last point of defense will be the base we are within now. When this falls, all will have to make a decision. Fight, or flee. Any who run *at that time* will not be persecuted or thought low of. As I said, men, women and children will be fighting on this one. We don't have a choice. We need all the firepower we can get. Other cities have different kinds of plans according to their region, geography and assets."

"Do you think we can win?" someone put forth.

Coldheart smiled. "We will win. If not now, then later."

"If we lose this battle, we lose the war."

"We won't lose this battle."

"How can you be so sure?"

The General glanced over at Harris; Harris stepped forward. "I am Captain Harris of the *U.S.S. Braveheart*, second only to Commander Jagger Fedducia. It is my honor and my privilege to stand before this council today, and to let my mouth behold the glorious truth. Commander Jagger Fedducia is with us again. And he will be fighting alongside us." Stunned silence. Harris turned to Eckert. Eckert came forward

Eckert said, "I was once co-pilot to Jagger... I mean, Commander Fedducia. I was called in hours earlier on an urgent notice. Coldheart showed me Jagger. He was sleeping. Somehow he has survived. But he will be able to fight in the coming..." He stumbled, then continued, "...battle."

A skeptic poured, "Fedducia died months ago! His body was burned in a mass pit! The accusations you make are absurd and demoralizing to the common soldiers. Who lies about a dead hero to get someone to fight an ounce harder? What you are saying is downright terrible. You can't make accusations like this without evidence... I assume you have some?" Her voice was thick with sarcasm.

Eckert nodded; behind them, the large glass sphere glowed, suddenly revealing a picture along the contours, a picture that everyone in the seats could see. A video feed. Jagger sitting

up in bed, staring down at his feet. Jagger looked up at the camera, his face revealed—the hardness, coldness, the mercy and thirst for justice, the dying qualms for vengeance shook through the crowds. The sphere went dark; grinning broadly, Eckert announced, “Eckert has returned. Our long-awaited hero has come up from the grave!”

Cheers, shouts, exuberance shot through the crowds—Chiefs and Elders leapt up from their seats, pumping their arms, screaming in savage joy and hope. The energy coursing through those in the room fluttered hearts, blasted a new drive to win—a new drive of determination, to fight to the death—through those in the room. The quiet, tense atmosphere shattered as men and women jumped up and down, forgetting everything, madly dancing like crazy, absorbed in the newfound hope stringent through their veins. Coldheart quivered at the sight. All this for their hero, the one who was acclaimed to save the planet from the slaughter of the soulless enemies. Coldheart couldn’t resist, and screamed out in a furious rage, roaring, “*Freedom!*” The echo was returned, and he shouted again, the echo returned:

Freedom!

Freedom!

Freedom!

Freedom!

Harris couldn’t retain the smile; Eckert was worried. The Chiefs and Elders ran out into the streets, grabbing their weapons and skittering to the dark city, yelling at the top of their voices, “Fedducia has returned! Fedducia has come back! Our hope, our fight, is in our hands!” The jubilation was contagious—ripples of praise and celebrating shot through the city, deafening out any fear. Men, women and children danced together, kissed and hugged, swung about, in a frenzy of madness—and the enemy ships drew closer and closer.

••

General Coldheart, Harris and Eckert entered Ross’ room. Ross jumped to his feet, eager to know how the meeting had gone. Obviously well, Coldheart and Harris were drenched with excitement. Eckert offered a hand; Coldheart and Harris tensed. Ross took it, and as their hands touched, suddenly he remembered *everything*—he stumbled backwards, almost in a daze, light-headed; the fog cleared, and he stood there; Eckert seemed confused. Harris and Coldheart licked their lips; Coldheart curled his toes. Ross smiled, then said, “Eckert, great to see you again.” The two hugged; Coldheart and Harris slapped Fedducia on the back.

“How you doing, Commander?” Eckert asked. “I didn’t know you survived!”

“You know what they say: I’m indestructible.”

“Ross?” Harris asked.

Fedducia looked over at him. “Yeah?”

Ross knew both sides of the equation—he knew of his past, of Chelsea—it was all stunningly real. And he knew of his *real* life—Commander Fedducia, soldier and fighter, bringing of hope, the hero of the war for freedom from the soulless men who struck against the beaches of the east. He had fought in several theatres, was world-renown—as far as that went—and everyone used his name with reverence, awe and respect.

Coldheart interrupted. “We have something to give to you. Follow us. It is time your fame be glorified.”

••

They descended farther into the complex, out of the ship and into the heartbeat of the earth. Harris brought an elevator with a touch of a button; Ross stepped inside, wary, though it was familiar. Yes, the elevator... The door slid shut, the quartet locked inside. There was a lurch, the grinding of gears, a steady growl as the elevator pulled itself for the surface. Ross tried to estimate how far they had traveled upwards, but he felt his body swaying—they were going horizontal. He gave up hope until the elevator jerked upwards, then wrenched to a stop. Harris put a hand on Ross’ shoulder, and the doors cracked; blinding light bled into the dark confines. The doors completely opened; Ross winced in the light; suddenly his ears were torn apart by thunderous shouts, screams, praise, applause. He snapped his eyes open; Coldheart shoved

him out of the elevator. Eyes adjusted. There was a narrow corridor, maybe a quarter of a mile wide, lined with officers of every branch: Air Force, Infantry, Navy, and special operations: Green Berets, Delta Force; the Marines tagged along to the side. The Air Force cheered especially loud, the sound so deafening Ross found it hard to breathe. His feet took over, and the men and women on either side slid past on either side, jumping up and down, pumping their arms, clapping their hands; several soldiers with bells rang them in Ross' ear, then leapt about, almost singing. Like schoolchildren home for the holidays.

Ross found it staggering; they went through a door, into another elevator. This one was plush and luxurious, with carpeting and peeling wallpaper. Eckert smashed a button, and the elevator rose upwards. The sounds of the encore romped in Ross' ears. "What was that all about?"

"They worship you."

"Why me? Am I a god, to be worshipped?"

"They believe you are the second Savior. Some—and I make no joke of it—believe you are Christ incarnate, returned to fight the final battle against Satan and his Army of demons." Coldheart managed to laugh. "Some, but not all. Personally I don't believe in God. With all this evil, where could God fall into the picture?"

Harris replied, "You can't measure an inch without a ruler. You can't measure bad without good. And you can't decipher what is good and what is bad without an entity that *decides* what is good and what is bad. The ruler is God. The inch is the view of morality, of good and bad, which he has placed into our souls. Souls, Coldheart, you cannot die. Souls is what separates us from the enemy."

The elevator slid to a halt. The door opened; a long, stretching corridor; trimmed, uniformed soldiers stood along either wall, assault rifles held parallel to their rigid bodies. None even glanced or ruffled as the quartet moved past; each time Ross' foot fell, drums thundered; chills ran up his spine. Assault rifles lowered as he passed, pointed at the men opposite him. He reached a door leading into a hidden room; he glanced over his shoulder. The soldiers with the guns pointed at each other squeezed the trigger; the muzzles flashed; Ross fell against the wall, mortified, as the bullets from the opposite guns streamed through the air, fast as lightning, and bore into the opposite soldiers' bodies. Blood spilt over the floor; innards flopped at the feet of the soldiers as they toppled over one another, in silence and without emotion; the guns clattered. Ross angrily stared at Coldheart, the stench of death already crawling into his nose; Coldheart glanced over, connected eyes.

Ross demanded, "What the heck is going on? They didn't have to die!"

"No," Coldheart replied, "they didn't. But they chose to. They yearned to be the first to die for you."

"It's insanity!"

"It's honor."

"This is not honor! Killing yourself is not honor!"

"What would they say if they heard your words?"

Harris whipped him around. "Look. These soldiers came up to the General *personally* and requested this honor. The most we can do is respect their decisions and give them honor for what they have done. I don't think it very wise to curse those who just forsook everything for you." He tapped his head. "You think with this. You should think with *this*." He tapped his chest, his heart. He said nothing more, and turned away.

The door opened and they moved through. The sun glittered through an atmosphere of ash and dust, of ancient fires and smoldering hope. The twinkling freckles of eve sparkled over the floor, stretching twenty yards out until the floor dipped, caving away. In the distance, the murky skeletons of a once-glorious city glowered, mourning the inescapable truth. A cold wind blazed against him, and he walked forward. He was standing on an elevated amphitheatre; his very steps bounced off the curved back wall, resounding out into the distance. He neared the edge of the stage, and his heart skipped a beat. Lights flickered far below, an entire sea of lights—of torches. He could see that people were standing amongst the thousands of torches—every fifth person was given a torch, and the light bled across the vast multitude standing below, stretching into the now-deserted city. All of New York City abandoned to hail the return of the legendary fighter. As his form teetered over the edge, the torches were thrown sky-high, extinguishing midair as millions of people—men, women and children—screamed and shouted

and yelled and praised the man standing above them. The sound shook the buildings; the floor quivered; Ross gazed down on them, wondering—pondering—if it was really *all for him?*

Coldheart, standing in the shadows, beamed. “Our savior has returned.”

Harris winced. “He is not our savior.”

“Oh, really? Just watch. He’ll prove it to you. We will win this battle.”

Ross balled his fists, raised his arms, portraying himself; the crowds rattled even louder; he feared the bolts and nuts of the amphitheatre would pop and unscrew at the deafening roar. And all at once the shouting stopped; the people below fell to their knees, bowing down—not in worship, but in adamant, revered respect. Ross’ voice carried over people, announced via the amphitheatre: “Stand! Am I a god that I am to be worshipped? I am a mere soldier as yourselves. Stand! And we will fight not as two—one under the other, but as one—one for all and all for one! Shout not for me, but for yourselves! Shout for your families, your wives, your brothers, your friends and loved ones! Shout in anger and defiance at the enemy! Fight not for me, but for those you hold closest to you! Fight for freedom, liberty! Fight for justice! Show the bloody mongrels *no mercy!*”

The crowd stood, jumping up and down, grabbing arms and shrieking.

Coldheart grinned. “He has a way with people.”

“In this he has returned. Ross couldn’t even do oral presentations on photosynthesis in 2003.”

“Really? What a surprise. He always was one for loving the outdoors.”

“Loving the beauty, not so much the science.”

“Yes, it is terrible.”

“Why is beauty terrible? Science is what has bound us.”

Eckert withdrew something from his pocket and walked up next to Ross. He grabbed his hand, unfurled his palm. To Ross: “Now I give ye the symbol of power; of majesty; of might; of justice. Now I slide onto ye finger the Ring of *Starseed*. Ye, Commander Fedducia, long awaited and returned, are the undefeatable *Starseed*. Returned to save thou people from utter destruction, from the hands of the merciless warriors riding towards us this very hour.” In his hand was a ring, and he placed it onto Ross’ ring finger—the ring seemed to resemble flames inside and out—flames of justice. Eckert smiled, holding back the excitement; his eyes were wild and crazy; Ross’ were steadfast and determined, filled with a hate for the soulless, and a deep passion for those who fight not for blood, but out of love and the desire for freedom... desire for true life.

Ross wrenched his hand into the air, the ring glittering—the clouds shook like Zeus’ thunder.

And he screeched, at the top of his lungs: *Freedom!*

••

The silence was shattered with the blasting roar of nuclear engines—the earth seemed to peel apart as massive machines pulled towards the atmosphere, powered by white-hot flames gushing from the rear engines, gushing from spots all over the surface of the vehicles, yanking them into space, where they drifted about, miles from one another. Bay doors opened, revealing light inside the ships, an invisible force field protecting the daintily balanced vessel atmosphere from the vacuum of space. Inside the bays were numerous starcraft, from the large and oblong to the small and sleek. Soldiers rushed about, fitting the machines for battle. The Captains locked themselves in their room and prayed; the religious burned incense and silently praised their God. Others scribbled their names on scarves, a favorite Scripture or a quote, giving themselves in to the war; they wrapped the scarves around their necks and stood steady, fearful in front of their glittering machines. Still more found a woman on deck and relieved themselves of the stress and tension before the battle. Coldheart paced, anxious, and stared out the view screens on the *Braveheart’s* Bridge. Many soldiers tried to hold back tears, but could not—they were ready to fight, *ready to die*—and in their hearts knew: die they must.

*To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:
A time to kill... A time to hate... a time of war...*

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

Endeavors of righteousness or desperations of death? Incense curled in whisking smoke, following the contours of the arched ceiling. Harris knelt down, squatting, sniffed the incense. The sweet, romantic odor burned the lining of his nose. Raising the incense, he gently pulled the smoke into his mouth, letting the fumes burn and sting as they crawled down his throat. The smoke burnt his eyes. He set the incense back into the holder; in his hands was the *Holy Bible*. He flipped through its weathered pages, looked up at the ceiling, echoed, "Lord, give me strength to do what is right. Give me strength to bring justice. Give me strength to fight. Give me strength to face death not as a courageous coward, but as a fearful fighter. Help me today. May I die with honor to my people, my nation, my Savior Jesus Christ. In His awesome name, amen." He opened his eyes, took a breath of the incense, and stood, the muscles in his legs creaking, straining.

"I'm getting too old for this," he muttered under his breath.

"Aren't we all?"

Harris turned his head; saw Eckert standing in the doorway. A group of crewmates to the *Braveheart* ran past behind him, carrying baskets of electrical wire. Eckert slid into the room. Harris managed a weak smile. "Been a long time, hasn't it? When was the last time? Canada?"

"No. I never was in Canada. Only Fedducia and Crawford. Crawford's gone."

"We shall be joining him shortly, eh?"

"I hope not." Eckert closed the door.

"What's the matter?"

"It's our Commander. I think there's a problem."

Harris' face showed no emotion—he was deprived of feeling. "Okay..."

"I don't think he is ready. Not ready for battle. His talents and skills haven't been tested. What if he is thrust against the enemy, and he freezes? What if—and oh, what a big if!—he is slain? What if his body is trampled underfoot as the enemy storms the city? All hope will be lost. I think it's much too big a chance for us to risk."

"We won't be able to win the battle."

"Even if we took him out—secretly, to avoid Coldheart's cold, stone heart—the people would never know he was gone. They would fight as if he were there. The hope would surge. And we would win."

"So we lie."

"Yes. To save the future, Harris! If we lose Fedducia, we lose everything."

It was nothing except the truth. "Do you have any reason to doubt Ross—I mean, Fedducia?"

"Did you see his face when he faced the crowds. He was perplexed. Sorely perplexed."

"Did you not hear his speech?"

"Any man can speak."

"You never heard Ross back in 2003. Stuttering fool..."

"Dang it, Harris, it's no joke!" His shout shook the walls. "Pull him out. Get him inland."

"I don't have that authority."

"Coldheart is a blind man! He fights a war he cannot win! Not without Fedducia! And he's fresh seal meat if we throw him onto the battlefield! Pull him out!"

"Dang it, Eckert, you know I can't do—"

"If you do not do it, I will do it."

"You'll be thrown into the stockades."

"Our hope will be secured."

"Your neck will stretch."

"I will die a martyr, the realization of my deeds to be recognized only later. Then I shall be honored."

"You shall be forgotten!"

Eckert's brow seemed to be aflame. "I don't have a good feeling about throwing Fedducia into the heat of battle. A baptism of fire for a teenager is never anything to be marveled at. Don't you see the truth? Have your eyes not seen it over and over, night and day? He is a man, yet he is a teen! A bloody mix! A bloody mix! And if we forget that, his blood will be spilled. We

need to yank him out, and rejuvenate his senses back inland, where it is safe. *That* is the only secure foothold we could manage.”

“You talk insanity.”

“Have I ever wronged you before?”

No. He shook his head. “We have to bank this fight on something.”

“But that something *cannot* be Fedducia. Or else all is lost.”

“I will be branded a traitor if anyone finds out.”

“No one will.”

“And if someone does?”

“Then we both go to the stockades.”

“We both swing from the gallows.”

“But the truth will shine. Our deaths will be honored. Especially by the one we shall save, the one who later will save the fate of this planet.” He launched forward, grabbed Harris’ hand, clenched it in his own. “See the light, for God’s sake! See the light! Look past your own understanding; look past your own interests. We will protect your beloved student; and we will save the future of the human race. *There*, Harris, is something to bank on.”

••

Chelsea was led to her cabin; the guard pushed her inside, said nothing, and shut the door. There was a click as she was locked inside. The room suddenly seemed so much smaller. She turned on her heels, gazing at the bed, the small desk, the door and mirror. Her reflection was haggard and dark—fearful. The sounds of sprinting footsteps, hurried panic wafted from every direction—the ship seemed to quake in the final birth pains before the onslaught of war.

The intercom belched, “All pilots report to your star-craft! All pilots report to your starcraft! This is not a drill!”

Not a drill

The words echoed in her mind; she fell onto the bed. Tears scaled her face.

Pilots scrambled to their loading bays, entering the brilliant starcraft—everything from heavy *Medusa* bombers to the stealthy, deadly and much-more-difficult *Helicoprions*, named after an ancient shark whose teeth were razor-sharp and its bite sickeningly dreadful. They slid photos of wives, children, families and friends onto the canopy latches; the engines thundered as the starcraft lifted upwards, slowly pivoting from the bays. Sparkling like thousands of stars, the vast hoards of starcraft were vomited from the heavy starships—filling the black of space, the lights twinkled and flashed as they headed en masse for the planet’s atmosphere.

Chelsea curled into a ball on the bed—her tears stained the pillows.

Harris rode in one of the starcraft, face bathed in red light from the H.U.D. Behind him, all of the *Braveheart*’s fifty-two ship arsenal chugged, glittering like a single sword, a single talon, reaching to the heart of the enemy. The cockpit warmed; he wiped sweat from his brow, the straps pulling him taught against the hard-backed seat. He blinked a mental prayer as the canopy began to glow red, the craft shuddering as it entered the ashen atmosphere.

Chelsea saw Ross’ face, and somehow she knew, she’d never see him again.

••

Ross was led up to a podium facing a wall screen, revealing the enemy ships heading for them. He stood in the innards of New York City, having been aborted from his friends and girlfriend aboard the *U.S.S. Braveheart*. Behind him, an officer said, “Sir, we have intercepting starcraft on route to them now. E.T.A. is fifteen minutes. Thousands of ships with bristling firepower. Sir.” Ross turned, locked eyes. The man readied to speak, but Ross cut him short.

“A mere pinprick.”

“A needle in the heart. Sir.”

“We will see.” Part of him wondered if he could fight when the time came.

When the time came

He feared it wouldn’t be much longer...

••

One cannot explain the fear felt when going into battle. It is not a fear similar to the fear of the dark. The heart beats, faster and faster. The pulse flies. It is not a fear so much of death, or of combat—but how will you die? How will you fight? How long will you last? Will it hurt? Will you feel anything at all? Will your friends be alive? Will *you* be alive? Questions. Questions without humane answers. Questions only the Supreme Almighty has the power to answer. Questions every man asks, at a certain time of life, when death is head-on. Whether it be by the sword or by disease, or by an accident or simply old age, death comes to us all. It cannot be avoided. No one is immune. Death holds every mere mortal man down—no one can escape its clutches. As a kindly old man once put it, “Death in itself is not a sickle, or a dark shadow with no name. It is icy hands, lacerated with barbed wire. Icy hands choking you, choking you till you bleed from the mouth. And everyone has his or her turn.”

••

Harris shook. The fear never left. Experience as a teacher only went so far—nothing, not prayer nor worship nor resolution of any kind—could erase the nail-biting tension a World Army pilot feels as he heads into the hornet’s nest. The enemy was ruthless, cutthroat, fearing no one and nothing, not even torture or death; fear had no place in their dictionary. Captives were rounded up, shot, burned, raped and murdered. Innocent children were raped—boys and girls—then gruesomely tortured before a horrible death. Parents were forced to watch their children as they were thrown into the hands of the ungodly tyrants. Tears stained red with blood washed the grass brown, devoid of color, of life. The gossamer, pearl-white snow turned inky crimson and strewn with mutilated bodies held in deathly screams. All of Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia had fallen. South America had few pockets of resistance. Canada was desolate; the cities ghost towns, inhabited only by the bloodthirsty creatures. The United States, once the most powerful nation in the world, was now the only nation in the world—and unprepared for the final offense unleashed by the enemy. Harris’ hands shook; he clenched them into fists, peering through the canopy—the view was blotched red and yellow with scourging flame as the entire force of starcraft pierced earth’s murky atmosphere. Down below, those in New York City could see flashes of red and yellow on the horizon, far out across the horizon, above the seemingly peaceful ocean where the enemy ships had not yet come into view. Flickers of brilliant light, quivering in whispers in the distance—those of New York City held their breaths. The enemy looked upwards from the vessels—great and small—to see the sky erupt in flame—an entire sea of fire rippling above them. Screams and shouts and hollers—defiance, sheer defiance of everything pure, noble and right—slurred from their lying, deceiving, volatile tongues. They held their weapons; machinegun mounts were manned. The fire continued to stir, the tension so thick it could be cut by a dull knife.

Harris took a deep breath, glanced at the radar—his red blip was in the middle of the screen, more red blips surrounding him. Dozens upon dozens. One was yellow—his wingman Eckert. Eckert was several ships away. Captain Harris wiped stinging sweat from his eyes; the 150-degree heat was intolerable. One would think such heat would melt the flesh off one’s bones, but it doesn’t happen. The flames began to thin, slowly—the ship’s violent shaking died down. The flames vanished. Suddenly they were above the sparkling ocean, held like a suspended bowl miles below. And enemy ships, from magnificent destroyers to dinghies riding the wakes of larger vessels, stretched in every direction. A sight only one’s dreams could behold. A sight that had been seen in Ross’ telling visions.

Harris muttered under his breath, “My God...”

••

Chelsea looked up from the tear-stained pillow as the door opened. Two soldiers stood there; behind them, a shadow moved, and entered Coldheart. The General ordered them to shut the door, and he cautiously took the chair from the desk and sat down. He sat silent for several

moments before opening his mouth, and closing it again. Chelsea broke the uncomfortable silence: "How are they doing?"

"The attack force should be nearing the enemy now. It will only be a matter of moments."

"And Ross?"

"He is in the city. Preparing to defend it against the invasion."

"How come you set him up to die?"

"He won't die. Your boyfriend cannot die."

"Why? Because he is immortal? Or because if he dies, we all die?"

"Both. In his hands our lives lay. And in no better hands could they be."

"What's going on?" Chelsea pleaded. "I don't know anything. Except Ross isn't Ross and my life never was."

"Don't be confused. You exist. Your parents exist. Just not now. You are privileged to be here."

"And the enemy?"

He seemed uncomfortable, but spoke. "In the year 2175, North Korea bombed Japan. Most think they bombed Japan because the Japanese were preparing to assist in the second Korean War. No one really knows. Japanese intelligence either stunk, or had turned states. But the Japanese had 'indisputable proof' that America had dropped the hydrogen bomb. America, obviously, refused, and American-Japanese relations were strained to the breaking point. Then the unthinkable happened—North Korea bombed *the United States*. A smart move on their part—Americans were enraged at Japan, and thirsted for revenge for the—and I quote—'backstabbing slant-eyes.' America declared war, too blind to see the truth. Hence World War III erupts. The United Nations splits, nations taking sides. War exploded everywhere, mostly naval and air war over Japan, America, the United Kingdom. But then land invasions began. The Axis powers invaded Central America; South America could not resist, and soon the Axis and Allies were in hand-to-hand combat all over the Mexican border. The Axis also invaded the United Kingdom and China; the Allies invaded Australia and Russia. Finally there was the inevitable exchange of nuclear, hydrogen and electric bombs, and—"

"Electric bombs?"

He shook his head. "Invented in 2119 in Canada. The bombs simply put forth a blast of severe gamma radiation in every direction. Electricity would completely go out. Cities in darkness."

"How was it deadly?"

"Because the gamma radiation dissolved any living flesh in seconds. After five minutes, all the living inhabitants within an area of fifteen square miles—from humans to dogs to birds—lay strewn over the ground, nothing but piles of polished bone shining in the sun. Horrible."

Chelsea said nothing.

He continued, "The Allies lost 29 billion soldiers—men, women and children had been drafted to fight. The Axis hadn't been so cruel—only men and women fought, the children were exempt. They lost 23 billion. Ninety-five percent of our planet was decimated—death toll in the billions worldwide. Nuclear fall-out destroyed forests, bleached the land, caked the atmosphere. The temperature dropped, and snow covered most of the earth—now the ash is fading, and the warmth is increasing, but even the rain is dark with soot. The Allies and Axis declared a cease-fire, devoid of fighting forces. Eventually the rebuilding of nations and cities began, but nothing extreme. New York City was hit with a hydrogen bomb—the ruins still stand, with closely-packed homes filling the ancient streets. *That's* the level of rebuilding. Poverty, famine, hunger, starvation. Hard to find water to drink. There was no government, no rules. It is in this period of time that a war criminal named Doctor Mahan comes into the picture."

"Mahan? The name sounds familiar."

"One of his relatives helped instigate the American idea of the *White Fleet* for Roosevelt. Anyways, Mahan was the only survivor of a top-secret American scientific facility deemed Area 43. His dream was to create a clone Army. His colleagues hated the idea. After the war, he murdered them all with sarin gas. He then burnt the facility to the ground, and concocted his own working area. There he began the cloning, cloning humans from the D.N.A. of children he kidnapped and drained of their blood to be used in the cloning. Terrible man. The clones were peaceful at first, but they had a nasty edge. Perhaps a biological defect, Mahan figured. But the

clones, they had no souls. They were mere animals. No sense of God-given right and wrong, for they weren't brought here by God's will, but man's. Mahan couldn't handle them, but his own scientific insanity forced him to make more and more. His greatest mistake was *teaching* one of his favorite clones how to clone. Then a couple weeks later, he was murdered in his sleep. The clones took over the facility. And they began to clone more and more. They made a vast clone Army. They were using the same D.N.A.—soon the D.N.A. became worn and defected. The clones were not so much clones, but mutants. Scientific mutants without souls. Monsters. And their powers grew and grew, too numerous to count. These dreams of science came to life, but following the pattern of scientific progress, things weren't for the better—these dreams became nightmares. Americans all over were pitted against the mutants. Men, women and children fought in the streets, their homes, the wilderness, in the schools and churches. Families fought and died together. Those who surrendered were raped and shoved into churches, which were set aflame, the cross burning like a lighthouse, readying the surrounding area for battle. Families fought and died together. Entire town massacred. The mutants took over northwest America and moved south into California.

"A man by the name of Admiral Jason Clinger of the United States Navy was able to ward off the mutants, pushing them out of California in a bloody land and sea battle. The mutants returned the favor and pushed through major cities of the West. Week-long battles in Flagstaff, Houston ended with the cities turned to rubble, bodies burning. All the work of rebuilding, gone in weeks. Shadows and dust. Any survivors—as always—were raped and murdered—the mutants were sinister creatures yearning physical pleasure and spilt blood. The mutants pushed eastward, taking down several cities in horrible fights. Any who went against them were slaughtered. They marched through the Great Plains, marching in columns, destroying anything in their path, massacring anyone they marched onto. The line of marching extended hundreds of miles in every direction. New mutants were bred daily and thrown into the mix. Finally the newborn League of Nations decides for an offense, a battle on the Great Plains—they wait for days. The mutants never show. The mutants escaped through Mexico, into South America, traveled over the Atlantic to Africa, where they easily took over, murdering everyone, big and small, children and infants, the elders and the midwives. They took a sledgehammer to Great Britain—the British fought hard, and they fought well. While they fought, more mutants easily took over the shattered remnants of Asia, and soon they overtook the Eastern Hemisphere. The mutants were completely absent in America now, and our borders were rebuilt, knowing it was only a matter of time. The British fought hard, I said, and they fought well—but all their resources dried up, and they fled with everything they had—by air, by sea, some even using rafts and paddles, riding the current—a death at sea, a miserable death, is better than the savage torture and murder by the blood-hungry mutants. Meanwhile more mutants sailed across the Atlantic, into South America, driving upwards into Mexico. There they fought hard and heavy with determined World Army soldiers—America now—literally—the breadbasket of the world; no more Americans; only those seeking safe haven from the mutants. Many fought and died against the mutants—your boyfriend fought, and later he died. But he is back. The mutants already staged one attack on the east coast; they failed, and they regrouped, they intensified, and here they come again."

"So we can win this battle?"

Coldheart grimaced. "We barely survived the first one. And now the mutants are five times stronger."

"So why do you send my boyfriend to the grave?"

"Because he is the only one who can save us from ours."

••

The starcraft descended like torpedoes, the ships growing larger. Harris told himself there was no way they could make even the slightest difference against the invasion; it was a hopeless venture. He flicked a switch, and growled into the radio, "All pilots, Red Formation—activate shields; initiate weaponry; prepare for evasive maneuvers. Godspeed and God bless. On my command, attack!" His voice strained; no one minded. Their own voices had left them twenty minutes before. He said, "On three. One..."

••

The battlements were ready. The first invasion force would strike against the outer banks of New York City—Manhattan Island was a mere shadow of the past, a barren waste—and they would slam into a twenty-foot thick concrete/steel wall facing 200 yards of beach; the beach was encrusted with the ruins of several buildings, some old ports, and the restless hulks of burned-out, grounded fishing vessels. Upon the barrier wall were machinegun mounts and 150mm cannon fire—enough firepower to blow Stalin out of the Soviet Union, in ages past. Gigantic doors along the barrier wall could swing open on command; they led out to a narrow field surrounded by ten-foot-thick concrete walls on either side. Atop the walls were more .50-mm machinegun nests. Then the city lay sprawled out like a gem, filled with those waiting in desolation to fight the savage war. The city was deathly quiet in the still noonday sun; the heat was cool and mild; chickens clucked here and there, unbothered by the nerve-biting silence. A few people huddled in groups, talking, praying. The churches were filled with armed soldiers all gathering to worship the Supreme Judge; the schoolchildren were herded into the schools or bunkers, handed pistols or weapons, and told that it was all a game, that they wouldn't be hurt (none believed the lie, but were so engrained with the rumors—or were they rumors?—of what the mutant Army would do to them if they were captured that they readily secured their foothold to fight). On the ramparts officers walked amongst those guiding the .50-mm machineguns, patting them on the back and whispering words of bleak encouragement, words easily forgotten. Those in the 150mm turrets sat together in the dank confines, whispering among themselves or saying nothing. Soldiers laid mines and explosives down on the beaches; rubble was thrown over the barricades to help slow the invasion, though all knew such actions were worthless. Guns were cleaned; grenades were stroked.

An officer recounts, "I stood between two fifty millimeters. Everyone was nervous, because we knew most of the brunt of the attack would be thrown against us. I regret being one of the only survivors on the battlements that day. But the fear, it was excruciating; the tension nauseating. And it didn't help to look over the stubbly beach, out over the placid waters—what a misguided illusion!—and to see the sky in the distance seem to open up and breathe fire."

Breathe fire

The battle had begun.

••

Coldheart stopped the guard in the hall, handed him a syringe. The guard looked perplexed. Coldheart explained, "She is useless." He left the guard, sliding into the hall. The guard entered her room; she looked up; she gasped in surprise as he launched after her, slamming the needle into her skin; she kicked once, then began to breathe in ragged gasps. Chelsea slithered limp, in a fetal position. Two more guards entered the room, grabbed her, and headed for the docking bays.

••

Private Patrick Williams had kissed goodbye to his mother and father, and lovely sister, before boarding the ship out of New York City. He had learned of the forefront invasion only hours ago, and now he was coursing through the atmosphere, on the front lines. His heavy *Harbinger* bomber rattled through the friction of the skies. The last wisps of fire disappeared from the canopy; he could hear his co-pilot breathing behind him. A good friend, but sometimes your worst enemy—a nasty temper, but a heart seeking justice. A heart of mercy. Such jewels as themselves didn't deserve to go to war. Didn't deserve to die. Williams stared at a picture taped to his canopy—a picture of his sister in a still photograph, only six at the time; they had found the camera, had taken pictures, and had somehow found an elderly man who was able to process them as small prints. The picture was his most cherished possession. He thought of his sister, in the city—she was sixteen now, and no doubt would be forced to fight. Everyone was forced to fight. He tried to tell himself it was an honor to be on the initial attacking force—but he

just couldn't believe it. Common sense ruled all ideologies about 'honor', 'courage' and 'bravery.'

Harris' voice roared, "Two..."

The ships seemed to shimmer—the rims and decks of the crawling ocean vessels lit up in a sparkling array. Williams stared downwards, perplexed, until with horror he understood. Black popcorn puffs of acrid smoke burst all around him, shaking the air; the sound of popping explosions tore through his mind. Harris' ship weaved through the flak; tracers lit up the bright sky; a starcraft fell apart as a burst of tracers tore through the front end of the ship, blasting the fuel tanks; the explosion died with the flak bursts. Williams struggled to keep control; sweat dripped down his hands. There was a grinding noise and the canopy went dark; something bit him in the shoulder; his ears were filled with the roaring of the wind. He felt his shoulder, pulled his hand up—blood. He glanced behind him in a panic; his friend's face was bloodily mutilated, one eye dripping from the socket. Williams turned away—just in time to see a bright tracer streak through the canopy and slam into his body. He hunched over, blood pouring over the blaring consoles—blood spattered over his sister's picture as the *Harbinger* dove farther down, streaking; the other starcraft split apart into the sky, lost in the inky confusion—the day had turned to night as burning tracers and splintering flak showered the heavens. The *Harbinger's* wing ripped apart under the impact of AA shells; the wing whipped around, smashing into the fuselage, smashing open the fuel tanks; fuel spilt out behind the diving vehicle; a tracer fled through, igniting the fuel; the fire raced down to the spiraling bomber, and in an instant burst the rear into flame—the bombs exploded, tearing the aircraft apart—the debris rained down to the ocean, sprinkling in the churning waves and clattering on the deck of a destroyer spitting lead like nothing else.

••

The pristine stained glass windows reflected the dying outside light. Christmas Eve, 2002. Ross stood with Jared, a couple rows from the front. Jared sat down, doodling in a notepad; Ross stood, going through the motions. He'd never been one for organized religion—he'd always seen it as some virulent crock that brought people the chains of freedom found only in a God. His parents, though, were deeply devoted and religious. He heard the music in his ears as he looked out a stained glass window engraved with the image of the cross with a halo over the vertical wooden beam of the cross. How many gifts would he be getting tomorrow? He yearned for the X-Box badly. Terribly. The praise team played a "Metallica" version of Come All Ye Faithful—Ross found it interesting; his own church hailed hymns as the only true worship, and this church played everything from the slightly-jazzed Come Thou Fount to rock-hard There Is No One Like You and Come All Ye Faithful. As he stood, transfixed as a mere observer, uncaring, he saw his mother's kindly face, radiant in joy as she sang. His dad's eyes were shut tight as he worshipped. He wondered what it was they had that he did not, and suddenly he felt compassion. Compassion and love for his parents. A love like nothing else, burning in his heart. He remembered then and there all the terrible things he'd done, regretted it all; a tear twinkled in his eye, and he prayed Jared wouldn't notice, the words of a Christmas rock-version hymn ringing in his strained ears:

*Hark! The herald angels sing
Glory to the newborn King
Peace on earth and mercy mild
God and sinners reconciled
Joyful all ye nations rise
Join the triumph of the skies
With angelic host proclaim
Christ is born in Bethlehem
Hark! The herald angels sing
Glory to the newborn King*

*In Excelsis Deo
Gloria...*

In Excelsis Deo

*Hark! The herald angels sing
Glory to the newborn King*



“It is suicide!”

The words rammed Coldheart’s senseless soul. “I know.”

“We don’t need to send those pilots to their graves!”

Coldheart swung around, facing one of the Stewards on the Bridge. “And what, then, shall we do? Wait to fight another day? There is no other day! This might be the last day of freedom millions of people will ever see. I can’t let their newfound hope be extinguished. We must hinder the enemy advance as much as possible.”

The Steward steamed, “Sir, beg my pardon, but what you’re asking is... maniacal.”

“I don’t pretend to be blind to that truth. Maniacal, but necessary.”

“No one’s going to survive the fight down there.”

Coldheart winced. “I know. That is why we are leaving.”

Shock. “Leaving, sir?”

“Everyone down there will fight to their deaths. Prepare to move over the United States. We need more fighters.” He turned to walk away, but the Steward leapt in front of him, barring his way. “Move,” Cold-heart demanded.

“Sir, we can’t just abandon them! Those are men with families!”

“I shall have no honor after this. My name will be a swear word.”

“Then stay here and make sure at least *some* escape alive!”

“I cannot. We need more fighters.”

“What do you expect them to do down there? Ammunition isn’t bottomless, sir!”

“When they try to return, a recon ship will give them orders to run kamikaze runs against the ships.”

“This is madness!”

“Tell me,” Coldheart said. “Tell me. Madness, yes. But our only hope.”

“I thought our only hope lie with Starseed down in New York City!” he snarled.

“Yes. And we must help him as much as possible. Prepare to move out. The *Venture* will be the recon ship and give them the kamikaze orders.” The Steward tried to protest, but Coldheart’s tyrannical glare shut him up. Coldheart strode from the Bridge, heart heavy and conscience watering. Harris was gone. Eckert was gone. And soon, he knew, all would be gone.

Unless Starseed could pull them through...



The flak turned the brilliant sky into an ocean of madness. Sailors on the ships manned AA and AAA guns; SAMs were launched, the white plumes streaking into the sky. The starcraft flitted this way and that, hurdling to avoid collision in the bleak, black skies. The bombers swooped low through the flak, gunning the engines, streaking over the ships as fire rose to meet them; bombs were released, spiraling down, slamming into the ships. Plumes of water burst into the air; gnarled holes burned through titan ships, smoke mixing with the flak, flames burning—sailors threw themselves into the ocean to avoid burning to death.

Hark! The herald angels sing

A bomber soared over the water, a gunner on the belly gun strafing the water, tearing apart a wooden fishing boat, the sailors flung to the waters; enemy fire from a parallel ship ripped through the gunner, spilling him all over the insides of the ship; the ship listed, careening into the water, breaking apart upon impact. Oil gushed into the ocean, ignited, the flame rising sky high. His wingman screamed in anger, banking around, ignoring the heavy AA fire dancing through the canopy. Opening the bomb bay doors, he yanked on the stick, pulling the craft upwards, over the deck of the murderous ship; the bombs dropped, cracking through the first

three decks. The explosion shook the entire ship, blowing holes through the sides, top and bottom; it took on water as sailors scrambled to escape, the World War One-era destroyer sinking into the abyss, aflame.

Glory to the newborn king

"Form on my wing!" a captain screeched, blazing through the dense enemy fire. His wingmen gathered around him, and he set his sights on an aircraft carrier; enemy pilots were jumping into old Soviet starcraft. He wrenched down on the guns, hurdling over, spraying the first line of starcraft with hot lead—the enemy ships burst apart, splattering under the impacts; an enemy sailor screamed as a severed sheath of metal cut him in half. The other two pilots broke apart to either side, coursing over the ship; one hammered more planes, wrecking the flight path to make sure no enemies could escape (AA fire took him down, his plane spiraling into the side of a close cruiser); the other fired round after round into the elevated Bridge, shattering the glass and plastering the insides with ricocheting slugs; soldiers buckled over backwards, ghastly holes torn through their bodies. The starcraft rushed overhead, dropping a 25-pounder; the bomb crashed through the roof, landing on the floor; soldiers raced for the exits (one leapt from one of the broken windows, falling to his death) as the bomb exploded; the entire room flew apart in every direction, flame engulfing the Bridge; debris fell to earth as the tower toppled, slamming onto the deck, completely slaughtering any hope of enemy starcraft taking off the deck. The smoke of burning ships filled the skies. Explosions rattled; starcraft were torn apart, disintegrated, wounded and paralyzed; no one ejected, knowing it would be a fate worse than death itself.

Peace on earth and mercy mild

The wing of the fighter starcraft crumbled apart, too ridden with flak to stay steady. The pilot shook in the chair; the starcraft swung left and right. Tears sprinkled his face, an image of his lovely wife dancing to and fro in his mind. The starcraft descended; he slashed rudder and ailerons, desperate to go out in honor. His fighter bore down on a mutant landing craft, packed with over two hundred crammed soldiers; his guns blazed, strafing over the landing craft, piercing soldiers' bodies; a .50-mm gun barked upwards, filleting the belly of the starcraft; it did a barrel roll and crashed into the ocean next to the riddled landing craft; the waves banked the landing craft up and down. The gunner continued shooting into the sky, a comrade feeding bullets into the gun. The mutants ignored the twenty-plus dead bodies filling the floor with a pool of reeking blood.

God and sinners reconciled

The starcraft descended for the ocean, the rear aflame; the co-pilot screamed, flailing in his seat, burning alive; the pilot released his straps, methodically lifting a steel cross pendant around his neck, an heirloom from his great grandfather. He kissed the pendant with bloody lips, and clenched it in his hands, pressing it to his chest. The starcraft crashed onto the deck of a battleship, the impact ripping it apart and sending the debris down several decks; the pilots torn body burned on the smoking battleship; surviving sailors not killed in the explosion grabbed anti-aircraft guns and fired into the swarming skies.

Joyful all ye nations rise

The pilot ejected from the bomber, flying into the skies; his co-pilot followed. The parachutes extended; he jerked against the pull. Flak scattered all around him; his friend reached for the 9mm in his belt, but a flak burst smothered him in blackness; holes cut through the parachute, pulling it down in an odd spiral; his body was bleeding all over, one leg swinging from a bare few sinews of muscle. The pilot looked away; AA fire roared in his ears; a trio of bullets cut through his chute; the wind roared; he passed underneath a World Army fighter; the bullets echoed in his ears. He grunted, one piercing his leg; lights passed before his eyes. Suddenly the deck of a ship rushed up at him; he hit, leg screaming; he toppled to his side, under the parachute. Grabbing the Gerber, he cut through, climbing onto the deck; several enemy sailors were rushing at him, brandishing knives and clubs. He withdrew his 9mm, fired round after round; four of the seven soldiers buckled backwards, the bullets hammering them in the chest, neck and head. The magazine clicked; he tossed it aside, reached for the knife, slashed upwards, cutting the shin of one of the attackers; the attacker fell atop of him, rolling over. Knives stabbed him everywhere, tearing skin and muscle, shearing bone and searing organs. A club bashed him in the face, cracking his skull; blood matted his hair. He could hear nothing,

not even the deafening madness of bombs, gunfire, flak, engines. Another blow shattered his leg bone, and another broke his ribs, the severed tips piercing his lungs. He muttered with his last breath, "Shadows and dust," as a knife slammed into the top of his skull, piercing his brain. He lay limp on the deck. The mutants leapt up and down, in a frenzy, celebrating.

Join the triumph of the skies

Confusion. Hopelessness. Fear. Wings of bombers careened downwards through the chaos, releasing bombs; massive ships tilted upwards, taking in water; one hung suspended, rear vertical to the water, going under, surrounded by flame. Landing craft rode the oily, flaming wakes, the wooden beams and timbers overcome with fire, the soldiers burning, shrieks heard not. Decks imploded, slanting inwards, bonfires burning all across the battleships, cruisers, destroyers; aircraft carriers, prime targets, sank beneath the waves. Enemies rode the wakes of the other ships, drowning, or sucked into the gigantic propellers and chopped to death.

With angelic host proclaim

AA ripped apart the canopy, slewing through the pilot's head; blood splattered all over the co-pilot behind him, hot and sticky. Without control, covered in blood, the co-pilot froze in fear. The bomber fell, dropping to the ocean. He released all the weaponry, the bombs falling, splashing into the ocean; they fell through the waters, blasting apart in a watery, eerie scream; the blasts tore humongous tidal waves upwards, overturning smaller boats and making the larger grind in protest. The co-pilot covered his face, as if to protect himself, as the bomber slammed into the hull of a massively reinforced World War III relic; the flames and fire of the impact fell to the sea, leaving a sinful scorch mark over the hull.

Christ is born in Bethlehem

The frothing wake turned crimson with the blood of sailors. The giant propellers churned the water, drawing the ocean towards the slicing blades. Starcraft roared overhead, bombs exploded; mutants in the water tried to swim from the horrendous tri-propellers of the Ukrainian cruiser. They were jerked underwater, in a storm of whitewater, rapids; then the propellers chewed them up, spitting their rolling, jostling body parts out the sides, floating in the ocean, the heavier slabs sinking into the darkness of the depths. SAMs roared from the deck of the Ukrainian ship, trailing; a fighter tried to avoid the missile, failed; the missile smashed into the hindquarters of the Starcraft, blowing apart the engine; he bucked forward, forehead smashing into the controls; blood trailed down his face. He shook, head searing; blood turned his vision red; he wiped away the blood, screeched as his ship twisted against the radio tower of an aircraft carrier; the wing severed, the body of the plane did cartwheels as it hit the deck, scattering burning enemy starcraft. Smoke rose above the sacrifice. Sailors worked to put out the blaze as fury unraveled in every direction. The Bridge blew apart, toppling; the sailors raised their hands, shouting as they were crushed under the bulk of the titanic rubble.

In Excelsis Deo

The bomb fell, smashing through the decks, landing in the ammunition storage room—thousands of tons of ammunition stocked in a single room. A mutant sailor gasped, watching the bomb's propeller come to a halt. *Click*. The ship sat quietly, sturdy in the onslaught, the soldiers manning its battle stations unknowing of the epic disaster. Abruptly the ship shuddered for a split second, then a ring around the middle of the ship blew outward, tearing every living thing to shreds. Fire climbed miles high; Starcraft pilots were consumed in the flames. The ammunition sparked, blasting—the colossal destroyer blew apart, scattering up, down, left and right; tidal waves overturned landing craft and rocked nearby ships as a shockwave of fire licked outwards. Putrid black smoke climbed into the atmosphere, darkening the sky with all its flak, starcraft, falling bombs and explosions. From the *Venture*, the explosion was just a twinkle, but the blackness spread through the atmosphere canopy like a black plague. In New York City, peoples' minds wondered—suffered being a better word—at what had happened—from the barricades, there was a giant burst of oval light, then furious waves battering the shore ten minutes later. And the sky began to turn back on the horizon as if a sea borne volcano was exploding.

Glooo-oooo-oooo-oooo-ooo-ria!

Strafing gunfire overturned the sailboat riding the waves; the sailors kicked in the water as the sailboat began to sink; those trapped inside tried to escape, but the door was locked with a bolt—they drowned to death, then crushed by the sea pressure. As the sailboat began to sink,

the sailors on the deck tried to swim away, or clambered over the fallen masts, to get out of the water. A bomb dropped, landing in the water; the blast ripped off their legs and threw their bodies sky-high; the sailboat was violently shaken, then it sank into the quiet depths.

In Excelsis Deo

Harris took the fighter into a dive, Eckert pulling tight. Flak shook all around them; holes had been drilled through his canopy by flak, and his left arm was bleeding. But Harris didn't care. He flicked switches on and off in the red glow of the tight cockpit confines. Eckert weaved to the side, avoiding a flak burst. Harris readied, then dipped lower, banking over the ocean. Several landing craft passed beneath, firing up at him; he strafed a small fishing trawler, throwing several sailors over the side; Eckert finished the job, tearing apart the Bridge and igniting fuel canisters on deck; the explosion covered his starcraft for a split second, but he escaped as the trawler smoked and vanished under the waves. The target lay ahead of them; a Baltimore cruiser. The twin starcrafts danced between AA fire (they were too low for AAA [flak] fire). "Up!" Harris ordered. "Up! Up!" He wrenched the starcraft up, over the deck, and released the bombs; they crashed down into the belly of the ship; Eckert did the same, then they split apart into the sky.

The bombs ticked, ticked—stopped. A hole ripped apart in the side of the cruiser, larger than a house; water gushed inside. The cruiser began to tilt. Harris shouted, "Scratch another cruiser!" He checked his stats. Last bomb. "All Red Formation, if you are *out of ammo*, return to the *Braveheart!*" He swung his fighter around and took to the sky, barring flak, and soon the smoking fleet lay behind him—dying, restless, forsaken, glowing red with the fires of the first attack. Soon the skies cleared of human fighters, and the wounded ships were abandoned, the survivors placed on other ships, and the fleet continued on, leaving sunk, burning, crippled ships behind—and shooting all mutants who were injured.

The coast would be reached in less than two hours.

••

The Captain of the *Venture* turned as a subordinate croaked, "Sir, all the fighters are returning."

"How many of the five hundred out are returning?"

"One twelve, sir."

"You know your orders." He turned, and stared towards earth. Smoke over the water revealed the battle scene. From reports, the battles all across the Atlantic—from the ones of Florida to the battle off the coast of New York, to the battles in Maine and even coming down from Canada—had wreaked horrible losses and limited success. A suicide mission indeed. A line of dark clouds and stringent smoke columns, seen from space, showed the front lines. Across from Washington, D.C. the battle still raged—flickers of light indicated violent explosions. The Captain could only imagine...

"Sir?" the subordinate said.

He turned. "What."

"Maybe our orders... Maybe they shouldn't be followed, sir."

"We don't have that option."

"We have a choice."

"No. Choice is a luxury we don't have. Give them the orders."

The man swallowed and punched through the radio. Holding a microphone, "All Red Formation, this is the *U.S.S. Venture*. You are ordered to return to battle. Do not flee the battle."

Static. Harris' voice. "This is Captain Harris. We are out of ammunition and running low on fuel."

"You are not to flee the battle! Coldheart orders you to use all means necessary to halt the invasion force. *All means necessary.*"

Anger. "Are you out of your *mind!* We got slaughtered back there! We're coming home."

"Red Formation, we are the only ship out here. The rest of the fleet has left."

Silence. Monotonous static. "Say again?"

"General Coldheart in the *U.S.S. Braveheart* and the other ships have left."

Silence. The Captain continued to stare out the view port—dancing fire in the atmosphere. The starcraft were looming ever closer. Harris jumped back on. "We are not going to commit

suicide for a lost cause! There is room on your ship for 112 of us. We will board and our wounded will be treated. I will stand up to General Coldheart. I am not a puppet, and *you*—nor Coldheart—are puppeteers.”

The Captain of the *Venture* raced down to the radioman, snatched the radio. “There will be no haven on this ship! I do as I am told, and you should do the same! I am ordered to stay right here, and you are ordered to return to the battle to push back the enemy invasion! If I have to die, I will die gladly and without complaint! *You* have to die—*you* will die gladly and without complaint.” He hotly threw down the radio. Veins bulged from his countenance. “If they come too close, shoot them out of the sky. They’re unarmed.”

“What if they ram us?”

“If they won’t ram the enemy, why shall they ram us?”

Someone leapt up. “Sir! We have blips coming at us at 175 degrees!”

The Captain walked over. “Who is it? The pilots?”

“No, sir, they’re spacecraft. Large ones. About two dozen. Maybe it’s the fleet?”

“Raise them.”

Silence over the Bridge. The radar man obeyed. No response. “They’re not answering.”

The Captain took the radio, pressed it to his lips. “This is Captain Kreeger of the *U.S.S. Venture*. Thunder or we will fire on you.” He held the radio. He repeated, “Thunder or *we will fire on you*.” Swearing, he dropped the radio and ran to one of the view screens. Peering out, he saw the ships growing larger in the distance, from mere pinpricks to dots against the stars. He grabbed a pair of binoculars and raised them to his eyes, staring; he looked for the markings on the spacecraft. Then he saw one—a skull and crossbones. He dropped the binoculars. Pirate spacecraft were never used by the World Army for the deep sense of immorality in using such filth. It was well known their own enemies took care of the World Army’s disadvantages. “Oh, God...”

Red Formation: “*U.S.S. Venture*, we shall obey your commands. We are departing now.” On the radar, the Red Formation’s 112 men began to swing around, heading back for the atmosphere.

Terrified, Kreeger grabbed the radio. “No! Your orders have been changed! Engage the enemy at—“

Red Formation: “If we must die, we shall. If you must die, you shall.”

“We can run,” someone offered.

No. The enemy’s ships were faster than the *Venture* ever could be.

“I will take full blame!” Kreeger screeched. “Get up here, rearm and refuel, and engage!”

“Sir, we must stick to—“

Kreeger shook with fear. But even as he watched, Red Formation was turning.

They were coming for the rescue.

Someone spat, “What about her?”

Kreeger fumed, “She is useless.”

“I thought it was our job to protect her!”

“You thought wrong.” Kreeger snatched the intercom. “Battle stations! Battle stations!”

••

The enemy Starfleet came closer and closer.

The starcraft entered the docking bays, landing and cutting the engines. The pilots jumped down, haggard and worn. The wounded were carried to the medical wards. Harris demanded to know where to find the Captain; he was directed, and he and Eckert sprinted up to the Bridge. Kreeger was staring out the view screen when Harris and Eckert burst into the room. Kreeger swung around; Harris strode up and smashed him in the face, knocking him to the ground; the guards grabbed their assault rifles, pointing them on Harris’ body; Eckert stepped forward to help, but was motioned back by a guard with a very itchy trigger finger.

Kreeger swaggered to his feet. Blood trailed down his nose. “You jerk.”

“What’s up with sending me and my people to Hell?”

“They were my orders. I had to obey.”

"I see. Well here are *my* orders. You refill my ships, and Red Formation leaves. You jettison the escape pods and escape the *Venture*. We cannot fight the enemy ships. You are a measly commander of a small cargo ship turned recon. It's pointless to even try and fight. Give us fuel and weapons. We are leaving. Thank you for your cooperation." He shrugged away and headed for the door.

"We are short on escape pods," Kreeger barked.

Harris glanced over his shoulder. "Then go down with your ship and let the crew escape."

"I am too valuable to die!"

"The time for honoring yourself will soon come to an end."

"You have no right to say these—"

But Harris was already opening one of the doors off the Bridge.

"Guards!" Kreeger yelled; the guns trained on Harris. "You will fight the enemy off!"

"I will not," Harris said, facing him. "We don't have the firepower, or the weapons. We're sitting ducks."

"Then why the heck did you dock!"

"Just so I could hit you, really." And he smiled.

Kreeger's brow furrowed in pulsating hatred. "If you grab that door, you will be shot!"

Harris faced one of the guards. "If you're *really* going to kill me, do it now." He grabbed the handle, and walked out. The guards were speechless. Eckert followed, shutting it behind him. Kreeger ran past the guards, out into the hall.

He yelled after them, "And what about Starseed's girl? You want to trust Coldheart? Or do you trust anyone? He gave her to me! With strict orders to dispose of her by the means deemed required."

Harris stopped, turned around. "Did you kill her?" His voice was calm.

"It was on my checklist."

"Give her over to me."

"No. She is on this ship. And she does not have an escape pod. Quite a Pandora's box, eh? You flee and she dies. You stay and she has a chance to live. Oh, but you probably don't care. It's only your life at stake. She means nothing. I just wonder how Starseed will fare with her loss?"

Harris shoved Eckert out of the way, strode up to the Captain, in his face, said, "Tell me where she is now, or I will strangle it out of you."

"No."

"You're being asked by a fellow human."

"No."

"You're being demanded of by a superior officer."

"No."

He drew his 9mm, pressed it against Kreeger's temple. "Now you're being told by a man with a gun."

Eckert drew a deep breath. "Harris..."

"Shut up, Eckert!"

Sweat popped over Kreeger's brow. "You'll go to the Stockades."

"That's pretty much the trend nowadays."

"You'll rot in hell."

"With you. Unless you give me Chelsea's location."

"Then just *you'll* rot in hell."

"Me, yes, but not Chelsea. She is innocent. We are not. Give me her location."

Nothing.

He pulled back the hammer on the pistol. "I'm giving you one last chance. I swear I'll pull the trigger."

Eckert echoed, "He's an honest man, Captain! Never a lie out of his mouth!"

Kreeger shook. "Sorry. It's—"

Harris lowered the weapon, pulled the trigger; Kreeger screeched, falling, groping at his bleeding foot. "You jerk! You shot me in the foot! You shot me in the bloody foot!"

"I'll shoot your other one. Then I'll put a bullet in your head. I told you I'd shoot."

Eckert's face was pale. "I said he doesn't lie..."

“Deck 17! Room 2W5!”

Harris holstered the weapon and they raced down the hallway, disappearing. Guards appeared behind Kreeger, helped him onto his feet. “You okay, sir? You want us to find them?”

“No. It doesn’t matter. Let them die and rot. We have a battle to fight. How’s Red Formation?”

“Almost completely refueled and re-“

The entire ship quaked, as if swallowed by a tremor—several decks down, the docking bays were engulfed in flame as a parallel enemy ship fired round after round of non-atmospheric torpedoes. Emergency doors wrenched shut, sealing off the crippled wings and sections of the *U.S.S. Venture*. Those in the holding bays were burned, scourged, sucked into space; the flames extinguished the oxygen, then vanished; everything not nestled down—including battered starcraft—was sucked from the sparking docking bays and into the night. The lights on the *Venture* flickered on and off; the engines were ruptured. It floated in space; those on the Bridge watched in horror as a smaller enemy ship came forward, slender and cigar-shaped; it nestled beside the *Venture*, and from the enemy ship’s side came a steel tube unraveling; it plastered against the hull. There was a muffled explosion, a slight vibration in everyone’s feet.

Kreeger realized with nightmarish fright, *They’re boarding...*

••

All in the room were tense. Video feeds surrounded them on all sides; the barricades lay waiting; children cried in desperation. Grown men fidgeted with numbing fear. General Hilton stood beside Ross, gripping the M14 carbine in his hands. Ross carried no weapon at all. Hilton looked at his watch.

Someone asked him, “How long?”

Ross replied without blinking, “An hour, at most.”

“Do you think we’ll fight?”

“Yes, we’ll fight,” Ross said. “It’s winning that will be hard.” Something’s not right.

An officer walked up. “Everyone is in position. All guns are loaded and ready.”

“Have explosives been set?”

“Along the barricade wall impending the invasion? Yes, sir.”

“Then we wait. And pray.”

Ross looked this way and that. Something was out of place, missing—not right.

The doors behind them opened and a pair of soldiers walked in. Hilton swung around. “What are you guys doing in here! You don’t have permission to—“ One drew a small pistol, raised it high, and fired; the dart flew through the air, passing like a snail before Ross’ racing eyes; it caught Hilton in the neck; he gurgled once and fell over. All reaching for their guns were shot with the meager doses of stunning liquid; bodies lay strewn about the floor, motionless. Ross didn’t move, just watched; they grabbed him by the arms and tugged him out the door. A motionless soldier lay against the wall; they went out into sunlight. Several soldiers huddled around an Army van; they loaded Ross inside, slapping chains around his wrists and ankles, but somehow knew he was willingly obliging. The back doors were shut and the soldiers got in. The Army van revved out of the base, down the road, inland; they were stopped at a checkpoint, but the Army van wasn’t searched.

They left New York City without a glitch.

••

Harris and Eckert ran down the hall. Security doors had slammed shut; Harris had felt the explosions, knew the docking bays were sanctioned off. He prayed Chelsea wasn’t in an off-limits area, too. They raced down a flight of stairs, down the decks; 21, 20, 19... The floor seemed to vibrate for mere seconds, then it was still. Fear flickered in Eckert’s eyes; Harris hid his own. They kept going. 18, 17. They went through the door, down the hall. A branching corridor read *A*, the next *B*, and so on. *W* was at the very far end. *P*, *Q*, *R*, *S*, and *T* were closed up. *U* was barricaded by iron stubs. *V* was open... *W* stood grinning at them. They went down 2W, to the right, to room five. Harris gripped the knob, shook; it was locked. He stepped to the side; Eckert raised his 9mm and blew through the handle. Harris shoved the door open. The

room was completely bare except for several sticks of dynamite, set to blow by remote. Harris swore, searching; Chelsea was nestled behind several boxes, simply laid down. He picked her up, tossed her over his shoulder. They ran back out into the hall.

"How do we get out of here?" Eckert breathed.

"Not the docking bays. The escape tubes."

"Where the heck are they?"

"Towards the rear. Near the torpedo rooms. *Has* to be some down there."

They ran till they hit a dead end.

"This isn't working."

Harris held a finger to his lips, pointed upwards. Feet were clanking. Voices. A foreign tongue.

Eckert mouthed, *They're in the ship!*

Harris nodded. *Be careful.*

Not much time left.

••

Kreeger yanked back the loading mechanism on the carbine, pointing the weapon at the door; there were footsteps behind the heavy iron doors leading to the Bridge. Kreeger's foot had been bandaged, loosely, without skill, and pulsed with pain; the cloth was stained red with blood. Soldiers littered the room, facing the doors; there was a grinding noise, and the doors blew open, followed by dancing fire. The blast of the explosives rocked the Bridge, hurling several soldiers onto their backs; Kreeger fell against a chair, which slid out from under him; he fell to his rump. Mutant soldiers poured through the doors—they looked like everyone else, except their eyes were shallow, devoid of a soul—devoid of the bittersweet taste of morality. The humans fired, spraying the enemies; they fell over backwards, gripping at their wounds, thrown back by the bullets; they cluttered the entrances. Kreeger rolled onto his side, firing from his hip; the bullets clanked over the iron walls. A grenade plopped into the room; it exploded, blowing several humans to shreds; the enemy gushed inside once more, slaying the humans with Ak-47 rounds. Kreeger shrieked in rage, firing over and over, taking down soldier after soldier until one came up from behind, shooting a guard; Kreeger rolled around to fire but his face exploded out the back of his scalp, all over the floor. His fingers went limp and the gun slid to the ground. Smoke rose from the bodies and walls; electronics sputtered sparks. The mutants quickly began setting the detonation plastics, tons of C4, dynamite, everything. They left the Bridge, now devoid of life.

••

They found the room. Eckert took down the door, and they flooded inside. Several crew members lay scattered over the floor, ridden with bullets. A mutant hovered over one, the tongue dipping inside the mouth, licking the blood of the victim. Eckert fired; the mutant screamed, toppling over. Harris looked at its face, the hideousness of the deception. The escape pod was cratered with bullets, but otherwise unharmed. Harris opened the door; there were two seats. Only two could go. He set Chelsea inside, strapping her in. Eckert guarded the door.

Eckert said, "You take her. She knows you. It'd be better."

"No."

"Harris, this is no time for heroics..."

"I'm not being heroic. But I can fight better than you."

Eckert rolled his eyes. "Of course you can."

He backed out of the pod. "Get in."

"Harris..."

"Eckert, I'm staying here. I swear it. I'm an honest man, remember? You can stay with me, or you can go with her. But she needs someone. But then, it's up to you."

Eckert swore, and stepped into the pod. He shut the door, and strapped himself inside. There were no windows in the cylindrical craft, just a few data screens and a stick for guiding the

descent when the steel engines opened. Harris left the room, sliding the door shut. Eckert pressed a button inside the pod, and the latches released; the pod dropped, descending through a magnetic force field, and into the depths of space. Above them, the ship cast a grim shadow, blotting out the scorching sun; the enemy ships were all around. Eckert grabbed the stick; the engines extended, roaring; he was thrown back into his seat, Chelsea jostling around, lifeless with a beating heart. The escape pod shrieked down towards earth; laser bursts broke around the pod, but the enemy gave up without much hindrance. They just wanted to destroy the *Venture*, not so much its inhabitants (though would they miss the opportunity to torture, maim and kill? Most definitely not!). Eckert watched the *Venture* diminish, watching through a view screen plastered against the mellow wall; an enemy ship had indeed docked with the recon scout craft.

And now Harris was alone, outnumbered—and without hope.

••

Harris searched for another escape pod; all the others on Deck 17 had been ejected. Swinging around, he tried to place his bearings. He sprinted down the hallway, peering up the flight of stairs. Silence. Crawling forward, he made his way up, onto Deck 18. The hallway was clear. He knew escape pods waited down one of the branching corridors. If only he could make it. He withdrew his 9mm; he had lost the other magazines, and only had two bullets left (he never changed his magazine, figured it wasn't much use in a starcraft). Cursing his own stupidity, he began a slow trot towards the branching corridor, peeked around. Clear. He continued on, slowly; figuring going slow wouldn't make any difference, he began to run. The corridor curved to the right; he took it madly—and slammed into several soldiers tearing at the carcass of a *Venture* crewman, slicing at it with knives.

Two of the four soldiers toppled into a heap over the body; Harris fell against the wall; a soldier leapt forward, slashing; he dodged the blade, grabbed the man's hand, twisted; the soldier shrieked in pain, wrist snapping; the knife fell; Harris caught it in his hands. The soldier stumbled against the wall; one came from the left, another from the right; one fired from an Uzi; Harris fell backwards, the bullets flaring over his stomach, cutting through the murderer's comrade; the soldier screamed, falling against the wall, blood soaking his uniform. On the ground, Harris kicked the standing soldier in the groin; the soldier buckled over, gun barking; bullets chipped the floor at Harris' feet; the pilot swung his leg to the side, tripping the soldier; the soldier with the wounded wrist grabbed at the gun; Harris writhed over, driving the knife into his kneecap; the mutant with the twisted wrist and bleeding knee fell to the ground; the other scrambled to get up, but Harris grabbed the gun and blew his face apart. The last fell from above, a knife glittering; Harris brought up the gun, squeezing the trigger; the bullets shot through the guy's neck, severing the head; the arms flailed to the side, the knife sliding gently against Harris' chest. Blood from the neck gushed all over Harris' shirt; he tossed away the body and got to his feet. The last surviving soldier tried to stand on his wounded knee; he stared at Harris with an emotionless gaze before falling back, chest a gnarled mess.

Harris dropped the gun and ran down the corridor.

The escape pod was straight ahead—if only one was left.

Doors to either side opened, hordes of enemy men gushing into the hallway. Harris didn't slow, but drew his Gerber; and he dove into the maelstrom, hacking left and right with one hand, delivering blows with the other; his body twisted and turned, avoiding impacts; bullets shook through the crowds; men shouted and grunted. Blood sprayed into the air. Harris' kicks were a blur, blowing out knees and shins, and splintering testicles. He swung into the wall, tearing a soldier away; the door gave way and he fumbled into the escape hatch. The pod sat there; he opened the door with one hand, fighting off attackers with the other. A bullet fired; his hand burned, fingers bloody; a hole appeared through the palm. He ignored it and fell into the pod, closing the door; a mutant tried to enter, caught in the squeezing doors. Harris fell against the wall, saw the man's maniacal eyes, flailing limbs—and he hit the button. The mutant opened his mouth to holler in anger as the latches were removed; bullets pinged over the surface, mutants firing from inside the room. The pod dropped; the man's body ripped in half, half flopping into the pod, guts filling the bottom of the craft; Harris climbed onto the seat to

avoid the growing wake of blood and mutilated organs, dashed brain. The pod fell from the escape hatch; the ship was lost in the distance; the mutants watched through the magnetic field as the pod disappeared, masked by the blackness of space as it fell to earth.

In the pod, Harris watched the monitor—there was the image of the *Venture*; the mutants would probably take it, and—He winced in surprise as the *Venture*'s Bridge exploded in flame; the brilliant explosions ran down the length of the ship, blowing holes out of the hull, spilling flame into the vacuum of space; in a blinding flash the *Venture* exploded, a white oval of energy streaking outwards; the shock-wave hit the pod, jostling it terribly; Harris managed not to fall into the muck at his feet. The image vanished as the screen reddened—they were entering the atmosphere.

He prepared to pilot the descent downwards.

"Thank you, God," he whispered, voice rasp; sweat stung his eyes. "Thank you again."

••

Coldheart cursed upon hearing the news. "So what you're telling me is that Red Formation didn't attack the enemy in a second wave?"

"Yes, sir."

"Dang it. I knew I shouldn't trust Harris with such pristine command."

"They docked with the *Venture*."

"Why did they do that?"

"I don't know. We're still trying to figure it out. All radar went dead in that area..."

Coldheart's countenance glowered. "Jamming. The mutants probably reached the *Venture*. Which means they have space authority, which in turn means they'll probably be using it against our forces in New York City." He slammed his fist onto the table. "How much can one man possibly take? Now we've lost Harris and Eckert, two of our three best pilots. And our third isn't even in a plane. I swear, if he dies, we lose *everything*." He balled his toes, cold sweat popping all over his body. "How much longer till the first invasion forces hit the beaches?"

"About twenty minutes."

"I want you to turn this fleet around."

"Sir?"

"We are going to engage the enemy Starfleet. Radio all the other fleets in space; tell them to be on the lookout. I'm not a hypocrite. If I am going to send innocent pilots to their graves, then I must be willing to bring about my own death. We are going to engage the enemy Starfleet."

He protested, "We don't have any fighters—"

"I hope my mistake doesn't cost us too dearly."

"It is suicide!"

"What else is new? Prepare for battle!"

••

Handcuffs were slapped over Ross' wrists. He didn't protest, but stared into the dull eyes of the shady assailant. The man said nothing, showed no emotion. Ross was torn between what to do—fight back or not? He decided not to. They seemed friendly enough, and he kept it in his mind that—no matter what—sometimes appearances can be deceiving. He was jostled up and down as the truck flew over potholes in the unkempt road; it hadn't been traveled for ages. Sunlight pierced broken tree limbs above, highlighting the weeds and grasses and forest fingers growing through the packed dirt. Sweat dripped down Ross' face, and he asked, "Where are we going?"

"We are under orders to make sure you are not in New York City during the attack."

"Whose orders? General Coldheart's?"

"No, sir."

"Certainly it had passed his ears?"

"No."

Ross sighed. "Just tell me who gave you the order."

“Sorry,” one of them said, withdrawing a syringe. Someone let out a shout as the needle jabbed into Ross’ neck; Ross shuddered once and then darkness crawled up, into his veins; his eyes closed, muscles limp; he excreted, and then there was nothing.

••

New York City waited.

World Army soldiers patrolled the battlements, wrestling with their own minds; gunners laid back against the barricade walls, waiting; 150mm engineers sweated and gasped in the growing heat within the globular confines of the gun; the beach waited, covered with mines, tripwire, barbed wire, barricades, and machinegun fire to mow down any trespassers; scouts looked through binoculars, scanning the ocean. Within the city, families huddled together, speaking to one another, comforting one another. Some swung from nooses, refusing to turn violent against the scoundrel enemy; babies cooed and laughed, unawares, as nannies and mothers cried, knowing that soon, either the enemy force would be repelled, or they would be killed—babies and all; with one hand they held the infants, and in another an M16 or M14 carbine. In the ruins of the city, armed men, women and kids waited. Waited for nothing—waited for a resolution.

A resolution that would never come.

In the hovels, a man took his son, sat down next to him, and with tears, said, “Stand here with me. Stand by my side. I won’t leave you. And you shall not leave me.”

The seven-year-old didn’t cry. He asked, “Are we going to die, Daddy?”

A weak hand gripped his shoulder; the man—in broken words—replied, “Yes, Son, I think we are.”

Shadows and Dust¹

Charles Graham

Drawn by curiosity, we saw the light from the Battle of the Atlantic across the ocean. Just flickers, but it was enough to get us going. One time there was—I think—a big explosion during the battle, because it lit up the sky like a second sun. Then the water got choppy, like what happens during a coming Hurricane. That was pretty much the last of what we saw of the Battle of the Atlantic. We were forced to wait about an hour and a half. We didn't know anything, until an XO came walking down the barricades, telling us to get ready. "They're coming at us fast and strong. Stay together." Someone asked, "How long?" And he answered, "Not long." So we stood around some more. I was supposed to feed the ammunition into one of the .50mm machineguns, so I had a good look out over the beaches. The sea was still pretty calm, and no one expected anything. Someone had a watch, and we kept the time. With each minute the tension grew worse and worse, till a silence fell over everyone and everything. I swear you could hear a pin drop. We didn't see the enemy yet, but somehow we *knew*. My friend methodically pulled back the lever on the mounted machinegun, and the others in our section did, too. The response rippled down the line. We were two guns down to a 150mm and you could hear them loading the rounds into the battery. Someone started to joke around, and a guy croaked, "Shut up." And he shut up. A man with [binoculars] near to us suddenly went rigid, and we knew he'd seen something. I asked him, "What is it? What you see?" But he didn't answer—I didn't like the thought that his tongue went numb at what his eyes had beheld—and he ran down the line of guns, to a field HQ. Then we heard the screams. Not human screams. It was that sound the air makes when you swing an axe through the air. We looked up and fell backwards as several *huge* (emphasis in text) artillery rounds soared over our heads. I got to my feet and ran across to the other side of the concrete wall, and saw the artillery disappear into the city. The ground literally shook as the artillery exploded; I saw fire between the buildings, then smoke. More artillery fell to either direction. The dawning of what was happening didn't hit me at first, but I got the idea. We crouched low against the barricades, though if artillery hit, our crouched position wouldn't help much. Down the line there was a violent explosion—you could *feel* the air shivering—and an entire portion of the barricade crumbled to the beach, those atop crushed, burned alive or blown apart. Another round tore apart more concrete down in the other direction—I thought they were going to get rid of the barricade wall! They weren't, I think, because no more hit the walls. They all flew over our heads and into the city—pity on those who caught the brunt of the artillery. We were forced to wait for over twenty minutes of shelling...

Melissa Irving

It was complete silence inside our house. My husband stood by the door, his rifle propped against the wall. Alec comforted Samantha; she was barely seven, but in her hands was a relic Colt pistol. Outside, you could hear prayers, candlelight services. People crying, weeping. Just waiting. There was no hiding the fact that the attack would come. Though no one dared speak of it, its truth shone in the dark countenances of everyone. My husband stood by the open door, scratching his head—he always did it when he was nervous—when we heard a loud shriek. I jumped to my feet, but fell as the ground seemed to open up; it shook so horribly the rickety table collapsed and the walls of our shack shivered. Bright light flooded inside from the windows; I made sure my two children were okay, then ran over to my husband. He pointed between two low building, and against the ruins of the

¹ The following chapter is taken from actual accounts from those who lived, fought and survived in *The Second Battle for New York City*; entries have not been expanded upon or exaggerated, they are taken directly from the manuscripts, journals, letters and diaries of those who saw with their own eyes what took place that day. In some instances, the entries have abridged to allot for space; lengthy discussions of certain weapons, tactics and relations between other soldiers have been removed for the historical clarity of what happened during *The Second Battle of New York City*; the works used for this chapter appear only here, for all other sources have been 'erased'

old Empire State Building, flames reached into the sky, coated black, yellow, red, and glowing like the furies of a million centuries. People flooded from that direction, many broken and torn; some stumbled, limbs ripped apart. I couldn't see it, but the rumors floated down the line. Word was the enemy artillery had started, and was falling on the city. Then I heard another shriek and one fell only fourteen blocks down; entire buildings were flattened and consumed; friends and family vanished in the blasting inferno. I realized my girl friend Alyssia had stayed over there with her family, and I couldn't make out her home because of the overtaking flames and blanketing smoke. My husband pushed me inside, told me to hold the kids; even Alec—the embodiment of courage and bravery—had an ashen face. Tears slid down my face as I wrapped my arms around them; the earth shook again, but my ears blotted out all noise. I kissed Samantha lightly on the cheek, and squeezed her shoulder. She was sobbing. An artillery round fell three blocks down; the walls of our shack fell apart, collapsing down atop of us; debris fanned out in every direction, and soon fire roared over our backs; but it was quiet, and I could hear nothing; but I felt the intense fire roaring down my back, burning. The fire choked itself out, and smoke surrounded us. I pushed a severed board away, and looked down; Samantha's face was bashed in, bloody, terrible, an eye dangling from her socket. The rest of her body was pinned beneath the rubble. Alec was wailing; I managed to find him; his arm was broken and smeared with blood; he cradled it against his chest. I cried out for my husband to help, but his body lay where the door had toppled; blood stained his chest, where a sliver of metal debris had ripped through him.

Michael Snelling

The shelling seemed to never end. I cowered inside the 150mm-gun bunker, shivering despite the heat. I shivered because of the fear. Everyone was scared. We were all grown men—they stationed the younger men and the children inside the city for last-ditch attempts—and yet some of us—heck, a lot of us—were crying. The others cried inside. I know I was crying inside. My best friend was weeping; no one said anything. No one dared tease, and what comfort could someone give? Dan was keeping watch through the gun sights, and suddenly he jumps up in excitement, I think. We all crowd around; far over the waters we can see narrow silhouettes—ships coming right at us. There were faint flashes along the shadowy silhouettes, and then the artillery screamed above us, ramming the city [author's note: by now much of the city was burning; families were separated; friends and loved ones were dead or dying; all uniformity or organization that had been settled inside the city had crumbled; past the barricades, New York City was in a terrible state of disarray]. The range on the 150mm couldn't hit the ships, so we just waited. Then smaller ships appeared, a lot closer, and they numbered in the hundreds—too numerous to count. They filled the horizon, and were coming at us with great speed. Dan took the sights, and me and Andrew—his tears had dried out—started loading the massive shells onto the lift; we each could bench press 470 and 490 respectively, and it was still a bone-breaking chore. The invasion craft were loaded with pressed enemy soldiers, muscled together, preparing to break our lines. Dan fired; the gun bucked, and smoke rose, leaving through vents in the domed ceiling. The shell splashed into the water; he fired again; the craft were closer; it shredded apart a wooden invasion craft, then exploded underwater, blowing shrapnel and enemies in every direction. Cheers erupted over the barricades as more and more shells smashed through the enemy landing craft. I guess, then, that the enemy realized there were barricades, because the artillery shells lowered, and began firing at the wall; entire sections caved down; men were slaughtered mercilessly; holes were broken in our ranks. Smoke was everywhere, death rank like a putrid stench in the nostrils, and we could do nothing but watch. And the enemy hadn't even hit our native soil yet.

Becky Turin

I manned one of the .50-caliber machineguns; as the enemy got closer, I fired round after round, my partner stringing the bullet clip into the gun. Every sixth bullet was a tracer, but the air over the invasion craft seemed to glow like the autumn moon. Soldiers pitched this way and that within the boats, hit by the bullets. Many boats lost control and swerved into

each other; they were broken, and the adhesive, having withstood several countless days of water from the trip, was weak—needless to say, when two boats rammed, or a boat got too full of bullets, they tended to splinter, and the enemy spilled into the water. 150mm shells rained down on them, and through the smoke and fire I could barely see the mutants. As far as the eye could see, left and right, was smoke and fire. Some places had already fallen; it seemed the enemy was pulling a pincer attack into the city. I continued to fire; the first landing craft hit our beaches, and the fronts were blown apart by enemy gunfire, and they swarmed the beaches, immediately running for the opening chewed in the barrier walls. I sent gunfire down on them, blazing dozens to the ground; they were thick as mush. They started firing up at us as they ran, futilely; sadly, one bullet hit its mark and smashed my partner's face apart; he fell to the ground with a thud, blood forming a puddle on the ground. I continued to fire; lances were thrown over the walls, and they began to climb. Realizing it was useless, I abandoned my post and ran with the others to the nearest stairs leading to the city. I was a coward, I was frightened—and I was useless. They easily overtook the wall. The same thing happened everywhere. Enemy bodies littered the shallow bay, broken and empty invasion craft swamped the shore, and bodies covered the ground, turning it red with blood. But they took the wall.

Andrea Baxter

I broke out the window of our home right against the barrier wall and thrust my rifle out the window. Our own soldiers were running like scared little prison girls, running down the huge stairs leading to the top of the barrier wall. I refused to move, and tried to call others to stand their ground. I shouted, "Starseed! Remember Starseed!" No one paid attention; one man spat, "Starseed is dead! There is no hope!" "He can save us!" I countered. But the man only snorted, "*No one* can save us now." He ran on. Then the mutants started descending the steps, shooting any lagging soldiers. They jumped on the bodies and butted them with rifles, stabbed them with knives. I fired, the gun bucking; my rounds hit their mark over the enemies; mutants fell from the steps, forty feet to the ground, landing with thuds. I continued to fire, then reloaded; when I looked up they had reached the bottom of the stairwell, and were running after me. I fired a few shots, then enemy bullets danced inside the room; I ran through the room, grabbed my eight-year-old boy by the arm, and we ran out of the house. The mutants were coming down the street; hasty firing came from the windows, and several mutants tipped and fell. I yelled at my son, "Shoot! Shoot them!" He didn't know what to do; I fired over my shoulder, into the crowd; he tried to raise his M14, but it was too heavy. I fired again, then tripped over a fallen trashcan, landing flat. I scrambled to my feet; my little boy was just standing there, and I fell onto my stomach; the enemy was only ten feet ahead; I told him to get down and follow me into the sewers, but he stood watching the mutants. They knocked him to the ground; one mutant picked him up by the shoulders; another grabbed his head and twisted it right off. I screamed and rose onto my elbow, firing; the mutants toppled over; my boy's body fell to the ground, the head rolling into the fray of the pouring enemy. I made myself turn and go into the sewer, sobbing the whole way.

Chris Greenwood

I was a sniper for the remnants of the 101st. I was in the remains of an old skyscraper, a bank of some sort. There were ropes everywhere, for us to get up and down. My partner was several stories above me, sitting on a tilted beam in the rubble. There were only about seventy of us, spaced out between the buildings. Command said they needed as many snipers as possible, and spread us out. My [binoculars] caught most of the action. I feared for my life, especially when the shelling began. Then the shelling turned on the barricades; I watched as the mutants broke through our front lines and ran into the city. Most of the city burned, and I couldn't see *too* well, but I knew we weren't doing too well. Any lines were formed were crushed; every once and a while we would push them back, but to no avail. They continued to pour over the beach. Millions of them, coming into New York City. Through the scope of my rifle I saw innocent children raped in the streets, then killed as their throats were slit; I saw men forced to watch their wives' execution; one man took a

gun and killed his own family, a mutant pointing a gun to his *own* head; the mutant then shot the man. Atrocities here, there. Endless. Those who fell were not simply left for dead; they were beaten and mutilated by passing mutants; I witnessed a pack of mutants burning human carcasses over the flames of shell bursts. I picked off mutants here and there, but it was useless. I grabbed my rope and descended to the ground; my partner followed after me. "We need to get out of here," my partner said [in much more 'colorful' words]. "No. They'll shoot us." "Better them than the mutants! Our bodies will be ravaged!" "Then let us fight." We ran up to the action; the mutants had taken half the city; we positioned ourselves behind a smoking truck, and threw down our weapons; we grabbed rifles from the hands of our fallen brethren, and rained fire down on the swarming enemy. Soon they overcame us, and forced us to throw down our weapons. My friend was stabbed several times in the back and dropped; they stripped me of my clothes and plastered me against a wall, spreading my arms. I feared the worst. They grabbed a knife, and stabbed it through one of my wrists, pinning it to the wooden wall behind me. I howled in pain, much to their liking; they readied to stab my other wrist in, when a grenade hurled over the top of the building and landed only twenty feet away. It exploded, knocking the crowded mutants down. They writhed and shouted in agony. I pulled the knife out of my hand, grabbed a gun and my clothes. As I ran, I shot behind me, nailing my attackers, and I ran to the outskirts of the city.

Tess Hathorne

Our own commanding officers screamed, "If you flee, you die! We will shoot!" My husband scoffed and made a run for it; a friendly bullet knocked him over. I cried, but my tears were whittled away soon after. Hundreds of us were gathered at the gates facing the military base; beyond the gate, we could see several of our friendly battleships and starships rising from the forest. They turned towards the city and flew over, firing down on the enemy mutants, shooting with laser cannons, missiles, rockets, bullets, everything. The mutants fired back; we waited by the gates, the mutants drawing closer. Those without weapons were told to get weapons, or they'd be shot because "you are useless! If you will not fight, you are a hindrance, and will fight to further our victory!" No one needed more plotting; men, women and children stood. The mutants appeared from the roads facing us, and we started firing at them. Bullets snapped around us; my brother fell to his face, hole ripped through his upper chest. I fell back, shooting round after round; several determined civilians overtook the military officers, and opened the gates. It was like Moses parting the Red Sea; we abandoned the futile line of defense and gushed into the military base. There, several starships were readying to take off, and I was one of the few welcomed onboard.

Lee Poe

I ordered all our guns to face downward, and to fire at the enemy down in the city. I refused to move away from the city, even though we were being smacked with enemy fire. Our shields were weakening. I knew we were going to die. I was terrified, and I was a coward. I grabbed the XO under me and told him, "You are in control." He was a stern man. I raced down the hall. He knew what I was doing, but said nothing, taking command. I was humiliated; as I ran, the crew gave me sinister, unfeeling glares. I reached the escape pod; two officers opened the doors silently, and allowed me to step inside. I refused to make eye contact. They slapped the door shut, and hit the button; the escape pod jettisoned from the *Portis* and flew out over the city, then over the wilderness. Through the monitor screen, I saw the *Portis* explode, the debris raining down on the city; burning like the *Zeppelin*, it cratered several buildings and burned like a lighthouse. I am now a man of dishonor, and face embarrassment. I should have died, but instead I left the XO standing at the helm as he was burnt alive with the *Portis*.

Danielle Hall

We left the city, now almost entirely taken over by the mutants. We flooded into the wilderness, running for the fake havens of inner North America. It was only a matter of time before the mutants regrouped, and marched inland once more. There we will have to fight

again, and I am prepared. The entire West Coast is prepared; the Great Plains and Mideast are ready for war. The mutants are poised to strike. New York City fell, shadows and dust. But we will fight another day. I learned two things. We will have to fight—we may have to die. And the rumor of Starseed resurrected is just that—a rumor. He is gone, never to return. We have no hope. We will die [Brown tear stains cover the pages]. I fear not even God can save us now...

H

The Hidden Code

Hated by his own soul, Coldheart peered into the inky blackness of space, thinking nothing, only staring, one thought running over and over and over in his mind: why? He didn't hear the door to his private study opening; he didn't turn; he didn't carry the energy. The officer walked up and placed a hand on Coldheart's shoulder. The General slowly turned, said, "They never came. It was a diversion. They boarded and took the *Venture* just to get our attention. They pulled us away from the Coast. We lost New York City, Boston, Miami. All our major coastal cities are gone. Florida is nearly overtaken; Maine is gone. And the mutants spend no time regrouping. Invasions are still hitting the shores, and we're running the gauntlet. I take it you have no good news?"

"Maybe, sir."

That got his attention—he raised his eyebrows. "Explain."

"Sir, Lieutenant Eckert radioed in forty minutes ago. He, Harris and the girl are all at Graysburg, Tennessee. They escaped the *Venture* before it exploded."

"Good. I guess that's good news. Except they see me as a disloyal traitor, I take it?"

"There were some hot words. But that's not all, sir."

"Stop pausing, just tell me, okay?"

"Eckert says Star—Excuse me, Commander Fedducia is still alive."

"New York City has fallen. If he was alive, we'd know."

"Eckert says Starseed never was in the city. A few weary men told us he was kidnapped."

Coldheart's eyes flared. "Kidnapped?"

"And Eckert collaborates. Says he arranged for Starseed to be pulled out of the city. Knew it was a lost cause. Beg your pardon, sir, but it seems the man was right."

"So Fedducia is alive?"

"Presumably."

"Where?"

"We don't know."

"Did Eckert say anything?"

"Eckert says that his contact in Rolleta Falls, New York said Fedducia was a no-show."

"Quit beating around the bush, XO. Just what the heck is happening?"

"It seems... He is alive. But he is missing. We believe he has been kidnapped by mutants."

"That's absurd. He could kill them all."

"Not if he didn't know how to fight."

Coldheart thought of the worried arguments he'd heard, that Fedducia wasn't completely rehabilitated, that when the time came, he wouldn't—couldn't—fight. Coldheart's insides welled up, and he exploded. "Get me down to wherever the heck Eckert and Harris are! And make sure that girl is locked up! I don't want her running her gosh-darned mouth! Get any information you can on Fedducia's whereabouts. If we lose him, we lose this war!" He stormed from the room, shoulder bodily throwing the XO against the wall.

As the General vanished, the XO muttered, "We already lost the war."

Nothing but the truth.

••

The truck pulled off to the side of the road, hidden in the darkness of the night. In the distance, the stars were blotted by inky smoke from burning cities and towns. The forest cloaked the truck as the driver and passenger jumped out, walking around to the back, opening the door. Several armed soldiers leapt out, then dragged three bodies from within, bullets drilled through the foreheads. They tossed the bodies into the brush. Two men hopped back into the covered bed of the truck; one grabbed Ross' arms and the other grabbed Fedducia's legs, and they pulled him from within, setting him down on weeds and moss. Ross' eyes stared forward. One of the soldiers asked if Ross was tranquilized; one of them kicked him in the side; the body rocked, but there was no response, not even a flicker in the eyes. "Out like a stone," was the reply.

The driver barked, "Take him into the woods and kill him."

They picked up his body and vanished into the forest. The driver and the passenger got back into the truck. As the driver revved the engine, the passenger demanded, "Aren't we waiting?"

"No."

"We're just going to leave them here?"

"This place is going to be swamped with refugees in two hours. We'll be killed. We're leaving."

••

Eckert lowered the steaming coffee, and shuddered against the cold air seeping through the cracked window. Rain pattered over the broken, smeared glass as his eyes watched the trailing wisps of smoke crawl for the ceiling. Chelsea rummaged through the cabinets, looking for something to eat. Only canned goods, and no way to warm them up, and no can opener. The door opened and Harris came in; he had been standing guard in the steeple of the chapel. Their escape pods had landed within a mile of each other, and they had followed software on the pods to find the church. It was empty, twenty miles from the nearest town. The pews were quiet; mice scurried in the walls. The stained glass windows were sprinkled with rain, dark and foreboding. Above the empty baptismal was a wooden cross with a steel figure of Jesus being crucified; it was covered with rust at the feet; a podium on the stage wore a leathered Bible, opened to Revelation; a dusty organ sat in the far corner of the church. In the lobby were several tracts; Chelsea had found the door leading to pantry, and there Eckert had discovered a radio. He hadn't been able to get in direct contact with Coldheart, but it would do. Now Harris stood at the door to the pantry, and said, "It looks like there are some vehicles coming down the road. From the west."

Eckert set down the coffee mug, and pulled out his 9mm, setting it on the table, too. "Just in case."

"What about me?" Chelsea demanded.

"Stay put," Harris ordered, ascending the steps.

Eckert hastily loaded a magazine and followed; Chelsea whined, "But..."

He yelped over his shoulder, "Get me some more coffee, will you?" And he was gone.

They exited through the lobby entrance, standing on the steps. Several beat-up police cars entered the parking lot and came to a stop in front of the steps. Harris held his 9mm behind him; Eckert stood in the shadows, unseen. The doors opened, and several World Army soldiers got out of the vehicles. A commanding officer told them to stay back; he carried his M14 in his arms as he walked up the steps. Pointing the barrel in Harris' direction, he ordered, "Lower your weapon."

"Who are you?" Harris demanded.

"Graysburg militia. We are under orders to detain you."

"Who gave you those orders?"

"General Coldheart."

"You follow *his* orders? Fools."

The man's finger tensed over the trigger; Eckert stepped out of the shadows, so close the cold steel of the 9mm tingled over the soldiers' neck. Eckert snapped, "General Coldheart ordered us to commit suicide over the Battle of the Atlantic. We're alive now because we have an affinity for disobedience. Now you set down that gun or I'm going to put a bullet in your head. Under my *own* orders."

"Whose authority?"

He cocked the hammer. "*That* authority."

The soldier dropped the gun. "Fine, fine. I dropped it. Who the heck are you guys?"

Eckert didn't move the weapon; Harris picked up his pistol. "The name's Commander Harris of the World Army Air Force. My friend here—the one holding the gun to your head—is a fool and a moron, and he could've gotten us killed. Play it like me and ignore him. He's my wingman and we both fought in the Battle of the Atlantic, and we both escaped the destruction of the *Venture*. Our escape pods landed a mile from the church, and we've taken refuge inside. Now, we just want to get back to the *Braveheart*. It's our command post, and we think it'd be better if we face Coldheart personally. We are, after all, old friends."

The militiamen didn't flinch; the commanding soldier said, "How do I know you aren't lying?"

"Because you are still alive."

The man took a breath. "Do you have a young woman with you?"

"No," Harris said. "There are no women pilots stationed on the *Braveheart*. The *Powell* has some, though."

"Did the *Powell* ever dock with the *Venture*?"

"Why you asking?"

"General Coldheart told us to find and take prisoner a girl in your custody."

"There's no girl here."

••

The trees rose like the spirits of fallen soldiers. The wind cried as women cry for their dead children. The leaves rustled like a million spears thrust towards battle. Ross' body was carried through the woods, up and down the rolling slopes, until they reached a meandering stream. A soldier knelt down, stuck in his finger; chilly to the touch. He stood, threw his weapon to the ground, and drew the scythe-like dagger held in his belt. The body was dropped, landing in the fallen leaves. Their breaths came out as clouds of vapor. Two of the five soldiers grabbed Ross by his limp arms and pulled him up, positioning him against a tree. Two more disappeared in the forest, taking guard, facing the road in the distance. The commanding soldier ran the blade through the chilled water, the blade going pale white with cold. He moved around the tree, looking at Ross' eyes staring lazily forward.

"Your legacy ends here. Everyone thought you would save them with your powerful, merciful, vengeance-seeking love. Fools. To follow such ideals. To follow the idea that there is a God, to entertain the very notion that we have somewhat control over our lives. Lies! All lies! Today the lie dies. It dies in your blood, the blood that will turn the creek red. The blood of the infamous *Starseed*."

He raised the knife, the blade glinting; he pressed the cold steel against Ross' still neck. "It ends now."

One of the soldiers holding his arms gasped; the arm sped upwards, the palm bashing across the head soldier's wrist; the knife dropped from his hand, landing in the leaves. Ross swung around, up against the tree; his feet kicked out, smashing the head soldier in the chest; the man fell back, gasping for breath, lungs collapsed; he dropped into the leaves, writhing, eyes wide. One of the soldiers fired; Ross swung to the side, dodging the bullet, and his paired fingers spat like venom, landing in the throat of the attacker; as the second man fell, larynx crushed, Ross swung over backwards, landing facing the guy behind him; before the mutant could turn, Ross grabbed the knife and slashed at his ankles, tearing the Achilles tendons; the soldier fell to the ground, kicking, trying to stand, falling black; blood smeared his boots, his ankles, his pants. Ross stood above him; feeble arms lifted upwards; Ross smashed a foot down on the soldier's face, crushing it in.

Gripping the knife, he stepped over the body, muttered, "Should've checked my pulse."

Something rustled the bushes to his right; he turned, cautious. Too dark to see anything. Suddenly a figure loomed; Ross rammed his knee upward, kneeing the attacker in the groin; the assailant fell to the ground, spitting blood. Ross grabbed him by the shoulders and hurled him through the air; he fell into the creek, back cracking over several smooth rocks. His body slid into the water, mouth sucking for air, only getting water; lungs filled with the creak, he drowned under the current. Ross headed for the road; he paused, knelt down, raised the knife; with a flick, the knife soared forward, flashing between trees; it lodged into the back of a soldier's head, piercing the brain. The soldier toppled forward. Ross ran forward, pulled the knife from the body. He wiped the blood on his own pants and sprinted for the road.

••

Harris and Eckert were taken to the town, saying nothing of Chelsea, leaving her behind. Along the way in the police cruiser, the reports of the invasion flooded like the Nile: the mutants had taken over most of New England, and many streams had pierced the Mideast; there were

reports of violent slaughter as far west as Wisconsin. The main force had broken into Tennessee an hour and a half ago, but then Graysburg was in far west Tennessee; the mutants wouldn't reach for another half hour. The convoy reached the town, mostly abandoned. A few walked the streets; the buildings were ghostly quiet. HQ was in Town Hall, where Harris and Eckert were taken. Several soldiers glanced over, wondering how in the world two World Army *pilots* had taken refuge in good ol' Graysburg. A radio belched out more reports. Conditions worsening. Death tolls rising. Hope vanishing.

The HQ commander found them, told the leading officer, "Thanks for bringing them in."

"No problem, sir."

"Are restraints needed?"

"I don't think so, sir. They seem peaceful enough."

"Yes. Where is the girl?"

"They didn't have her."

"Did you have your men search the church?"

"No."

"Then get on it."

"Yes, sir." He turned and walked away.

The HQ officer pulled them into a room empty except for several wine racks. "Thirsty?"

"Water," Eckert said. Harris agreed.

He brought them water. "The General is on his way down. Should be here before we evacuate."

"Before we evacuate, I'd like to pick up some things from the chapel," Harris said. "Personal items."

The HQ smiled. "I'm sure it is. But we're going to be flooded with refugees any minute now. They're pouring west because of the invasion. Far as I've heard, no real attack plan has been formulated, and no significant push or drive has been made to try and hold them back. Beating around the bush, yes, but better than waiting for a resolution that will never come. The West Coast defenses are being rerouted towards the West, which means our western flank is open now, too. When these refugees come, I'm letting my men go, too. This town can't be of any use for resistance. It's too small, a mere speck. Or else I'd put a nickel down on defending from it."

"Can't blame you," Eckert said, sipping the water. "Do you have any coffee?"

"No. General Coldheart will probably take you with him back to the *Braveheart*. In case your 'personal possessions' aren't brought back to you before then, I'll have my men keep them in good custody."

"How about you let one of us go," Harris said, "and do the protecting ourselves?"

"Because if you do, it's my neck in Coldheart's angry hands."

"If Ross isn't found, then we're all dead anyways."

"Ross?" the HQ officer asked.

Eckert butted, "Fedducia. Starseed."

"Oh. But, no, I can't let you do that. And if your boy is still alive, he won't do us much good."

"Not now, anyways."

"Well, 'now' is all we've got. We're all going to die eventually. When, and where, is the mystery."

"And the 'how' we'd rather not think about."

"Exactly."

The door opened. A soldier said, "Sir, the refugees are coming through the town, not stopping. Requesting permission to honorably disengage my post." He was eager to run.

"Permission granted. But first, tell those guys going to the church to get back here. They're free to go."

Harris leapt up from his chair. Eckert set the water down. The HQ officer said, "It seems the poignant General is late. Have fun, guys, you're out of my hands."

Eckert ran out the door; Harris shook hands. "Thank you. May God bless you."

"May God bless us all. Good luck. I hope you have a plan."

"I do."

Chelsea moved between the shadowy pews, felt chills run up and down her spine. She always got chills in abandoned churches. The harrowing figure of Jesus on the cross, the dark stained glass windows, the stockades of pews, the dusty organ crawling in the blank shadows. The air smelt of iron—no. She wrinkled her nose.

It smelt of blood.

She arched her head around; light flared in one of the stained glass windows. She heard brief voices. Running up the steps of the steeple, she peeped her head out from the stairwell, through the railing. Down below, several men were exiting from the woods, maybe about fifty of them total, holding machineguns, pistols, knives and swords. Many held torches lighting the way; some came forward with gas cans and began drenching the walls of the church with gasoline. Chelsea's eyes widened; she scrambled down the steps, into the main hall, towards the doors. Several figures huddled at the door; she yelled for them to stop; they grinned in the light from the torches and closed the door, locking it from the outside. She bashed her fists over the door, screaming for help. She ran back to the baptismal; she twisted a knob and dark brown water gushed into the plastic tub. The windows shattered as torches were thrown against the walls; flames carried over the walls, rising into the sky, covering the roof, burning; the steeple was shrouded in flames, burning for miles in every direction. Chelsea dove into the tub, the water freezing cold, stabbing like needles; embers rained down from the ceiling. Part of the roof near the entrance caved in, burning timber and wood collapsing over the pews; flames covered the floor, crawling towards her; the light of the fire danced off the water in the tub. Tears etched lines down her cheeks; she sniffled, suddenly more scared than ever before.

••

The car took the curves of the road wildly, the back end fishtailing left and riding, sliding over the mud. Sprinkling rain covered the windshield; Eckert gripped the seat, face ashen. The trees rushed by on either side; a bright pinpoint of light shone in the distance. Harris' heart barely kept up, for he knew what was happening. Eckert glanced over his shoulder; the automatic rifles were still in the backseat. He looked forward, plastered himself to the seat as the car barely missed slamming into a grizzly willow. "Watch it! Have you done this before?"

He took another wicked turn, accelerating and yanking the wheel. "Yes."

The road twisted and curved. They'd never get there in time. "Does the brake pedal not work?"

"No, it does. Hold on. Shortcut." The car wrenched to the side, diving into the forest.

••

The trees seemed to part; silhouetted against the burning chapel, the figure walked towards the church, leaving murky footprints in the wet grass. The knife dangled from his hand as he crouched low, moving stealthily; a mutant stood beside one of the shattered stained-glass windows, feeling the warmth from the fire; over the roar of the flames the cries of the girl could be heard, sweet sound to wretched ears. The figure moved forward, lightning-fast, raised—the knife wrapped around the mutant's neck and jerked; the mutant dropped his rifle and fell forward, clawing at his bloody neck; ragged sounds growled through his throat as he squirmed in his own blood, writhing over the ground. The figure bent down, grabbed the rifle, and stepped through the window.

Immersed in flames, he entered the main hall, walking between blackened pews. Fire covered the walls, the ceiling, and was overtaking the floor. The cross above the baptismal was aflame, the metal Jesus shining like the sun. The figure stepped over the fallen podium, the worn Bible lying on its side. He passed the choir stage, and knelt next to the baptismal; reaching in, he jabbed his hand into the muddy water, felt soft, cold skin, and pulled. The body flung from the water; a soggy shard of wood was held in her hand; she swung it out; Ross caught the wood in his hands; she released, seeing his deep eyes. She leapt out, clinging to him. He dragged her from the baptismal, turned to face the flames. The front metal doors were melting, falling away, consumed with fire.

Ross grabbed her arm. "Run with me." He sprinted across the floor, Chelsea gripping his hand. They flew through the flames, burning, scolding, terribly hot; sweat gushed; he wrenched her into his arm and propelled her through the door; he jumped through, landing beside her in the damp grass. The last of the mutants were going down the road; some turned, hearing the thuds of their bodies; Ross fired the rifle, throwing several soldiers down. The torches disappeared down the road. Ross grabbed Chelsea and pulled her away from the collapsing church, up against the forest; the still body of a shot mutant soldier lay in the foliage, blood splattering the tree trunk and shining like dew beads on fern fronds.

Ross asked, "You okay? Burnt? Shot?"

"Thank God," she breathed, wrapping her arms around him. "Thank God you came."

"Just in time, too, I'd say. But you're okay?"

"I'm fine. Scared crapless, but fine."

"We're getting out of here. Where's the nearest town?"

"I don't know. Harris and Eckert were with me then they left."

Ross' face brightened with hope. "They're alive? Where are they?"

"I don't know, they were taken."

"By the mutants?"

"No, God, no. Some militiamen came by and took them. Under General Coldheart's orders. How did you know I was here?"

"I don't know how. I just did. Do you know here Harris and Eckert are?"

"No... I'm so glad you—"

"Do you know if they'll be coming back?"

"Cool it, Ross! They're fine! I'm alive! Why don't you just calm down for a little while? You saved my life! Why can't just take a breath?"

"Because two of my best friends are still in danger. Stay here at the church." He stood.

"No way. I'm coming with you."

"It could get ugly."

"The enemy is advancing past the coast. Didn't you know?"

"I figured as much."

"They'll be here any time. I can't stay here."

"Then come with me. Grab my hand."

••

The banged-up car exploded through the foliage, tires spinning over the muddy road. Harris wrestled for control, got it, and kicked the acceleration; Eckert fell back into his seat as the car slipped and slid up the hill towards the church; across the river, the church burned like an emerald. The road would go over a bridge, then to the church. The road took a turn, and the iron bridge loomed; flickering light covered the platform, torches burning. "The guns," Harris said, flooring the engine; Eckert reached back, grabbed the guns, put one in Harris' lap, rolled down the window, and stuck the gun out the window, facing ahead of them. He asked when. "Now," Harris replied; the gun blazed, sparkling; the bullets leapt ahead, sprinkling over the mutant force gaining on the bridge; mutants fell this way and that, bloodied and torn; some fell over the sides, flailing forty feet down until they disappeared in the turbulent river waters. The mutants fired back; the windshield shattered, bullets dancing inside the car; Eckert grunted, a bullet lodging in his shoulder. He kept firing; the front end of the car hammered into the mutants, knocking them down, throwing them to the side; many were crushed under the tires; the car slid over the road, doing a full circle; the passenger door was blown apart by bullets, shrapnel embedding in Eckert's side; he slumped forward, the gun falling from his fingers. The car smashed through the railing, lunged forward, teetered on the brink of falling into the river; Harris sat rigid, staring down through the windshield at the swirling river below. Mutants surrounded the back of the car; Eckert breathed not. The enemies dropped their weapons, and began to push on the trunk; the belly of the car grinded, sliding forward; chips and chunks of concrete fell from the bridge, landing in the water so far below.

Harris swallowed, turned around, fired through the back window, slewing a pair of mutants. "God, help me!"

The car lurched forward; the railing gave way, and the car spun into the air, falling like a rock. Harris stared at the water rushing for—Something grabbed his arm, and his body jerked from the car; his legs banged painfully over the doorframe; he saw water, earth, sky, water, earth—he bounced and thudded over tree limbs, bones creaking; he landed hard on the forest floor, in a cloud of dust. Droplets of water rained around him. He heard the crash of the car as it hit the surface of the water, breaking apart, and vanishing beneath the waves, Eckert's dead form dragged under as well. Shaking, he managed to stand, but fell back down; his legs were sorely bruised to the touch. But how...

He turned and saw Ross standing in the shadows. Chelsea was next to him.

"I should've known," Harris muttered. "Eckert was right."

"I'm sorry I was too late."

"My bad," he said. "But my legs are killing me. Any way you could carry me?"

"Not a problem," he replied, kneeling down. "Yeah, pretty bruised."

"They hit the car door."

"I saw it with my own eyes."

"Are the mutants coming down?"

"No, they're going on their way. Saw that, too."

"We lost the city. The enemy is... The enemy is advancing rapidly. I'm afraid we won't be able to win another battle."

"I was brought back a little too late, my friend."

"Yes. But hear me out, I have an idea."

Ross managed to smile. "Yikes."

••

Harris rubbed his legs, the pain already diminishing. "The stitches are small. I like it."

The doctor nodded. "Anything for you, Captain."

Coldheart entered the room. "I am glad to see you're back on your feet."

"Not quite, but close enough. No thanks to you."

Coldheart replied, "Doctor, leave." She obeyed. He sat down next to the pilot's bed. "I only did what I had to do. We needed to hinder the invasion force as much as possible. And it didn't work. Now the enemy has reached the Great Plains, and with nothing left to stop them, they are marching full-speed towards the West. Our Armies are prepared to fight, but there are rumors the western enemy fleet has been strengthened and is preparing to attack at the same time as the eastern front. Some forces will also be coming from Canada and Central America. Monkeys in a barrel. We're the monkeys, the enemy is the barrel. We're trapped. All ideals have fallen. No one trusts Fedducia anymore. His name has begun to be used as a curse word. It's looking bad."

"I think we can win."

"Idealizations are ruins. We are all going to die. The enemy is still loading in the east, we can't—"

"If we fight, General, we will lose. But I believe we can still win."

"Peaceful antics aren't going to pull it off this time, Captain."

"No. But we can stop this from its beginnings."

Coldheart's brow furrowed. "No."

"Do you have a better idea?"

"Have you talked to Fedducia?"

"He has a team of people he trusts written up. And Chelsea's on the trainer list."

"This is insane."

"Look, General, we're going to die, you said it yourself. What've we got to lose?"

The General closed his eyes, refusing to think clearly. "We don't even know if it's possible."

"Yes, we do. I had an informant track down the information. Mahan's great-grandfather is getting married on April 9, 2003." He propped himself up on his elbow. "We stop the wedding, sir, and we stop the war. We get rid of Great Grandpa Mahan, we get rid of Mahan himself. And all of this is forever forgotten, forever disbanded. None of it ever happens. Think about it. It's our only chance."

He sighed. "Do you have a machine?"

"Yes. One. But we've got sixteen back then."

"How many will be on the team?"

"Eight. Ross, Chelsea, five others and me. With sixteen machines and five pull-outs, we're on fire."

"Can I see the list?"

••

"She's scared. Look at her." Ross stood at the one-way viewing window, looking in at Chelsea as she was laid down over the cold table, facedown; a white blanket was dropped over her, and a mask was placed over her face. There was a faint hiss as the gas moved through the tubes, into the masks, down her throat and into her system. Chelsea's eyes fluttered, then went still. The doctors used medical tools to pull away the flesh covering the back of her skull, and drilled through the brain. "Tell me again, how many times has this been done?"

"Not many. But these guys are experts. Don't worry." But the technician seemed worried himself.

"If I lose her..."

"You won't. Why don't you go find something to do?"

Her brain exposed, the doctors held a cylindrical chip into the air, the plastic dull. They knotted the chip with extension wires, tipped with needles, and pushed it down into her brain. Chelsea grunted. They began the process of reattaching her skull and sewing her scalp back together. The window tinted, and soon the two men's reflections shone back at them, the medical room vanished from sight.

General Coldheart entered the room. "We are one hundred miles from the surface of earth and you're still ashen-faced, Commander. Do you have any idea how many poor souls down in North America would give their arm and foot to be in your position right now?"

"Stop it, General." He handed him the list. "I'm sure the names are unfamiliar to you."

Coldheart squinted under the light. "David Poparavelli—sounds Italian?—, Daniel Hemmingway, Kristen Weathers, Jake Lawson, and Megan Hampton. Yes, never heard of them. Who are they? Friends of yours?"

"Yeah. They fit the time zone, and they can be trusted."

"Did you ever consider T-Bone?"

"T-Bone?"

"He's one of our best Army soldiers. So good he got me out of a jam a while back. Has experience with this kind of thing."

"This kind of thing? being time-travel and fighting?"

"Yes, exactly. You and Harris would be the only truly knowledgeable group if you went in with this meager ragtag team. T-Bone knows his stuff. Look. I know we're on the verge of losing everything completely, and while it's insane, your plan is better than anything I've got. I'm prepared to let this float. But only if you scratch one guy off your list and place T-Bone on the roster. Then I'll give you the green light."

"Fine. Erase Daniel. He was always the more... cautious of us."

"All right, Daniel is gone. We have T-Bone on, then. He's on his way up now."

"Good. We need to get started as fast as possible. We need to bring my friends here."

"I'll get to it. We feed them the chips, and you guys are set. I hand it over to you..."

"And you try to find a way to save the day in case we fail."

Coldheart grinned. "Beautiful!"

••

An attack against the King's soldiers is the same as an attack against the King, and warrants the same penalty!" The clad soldier glowered into the rebel's deep, sullen eyes, which pleaded for mercy; the soldier turned his gaze, overlooked the vast crowd spreading down from the hilltop, mingling with the wooden-sided, straw-roofed huts peppering the village, leading up to the magnificent stockade in the distance; rolling farmland stretched forever in every direction.

The soldier sweated under the thick chain mail, the burdening maroon cloth of his uniform. He squinted under the sunlight, the metal of the wrought-iron helmet cold against his scalp. From his belt he slid a sickening, double-edged dagger, the fine, polished steel glinting in the moonlight. "The penalty: death!" He turned, faced the victim, a young man who had led a squall against the King's soldiers occupying ancient Scotland; the English soldier held up the dagger, letting the youth's eyes sink into its ominous, sinister bickering.

Men tensed, holding their heads high, swatting back tears; women lowered their heads into their hands, bawling, tears staining their dirt-ridden clothes, forming pools in the palms of their hands; families wrapped around each other for comfort; elders turned away, disgusted they were forced to watch the execution; children gaped up in a blur of confusion and fright. The chirping of birds prancing about along the rooftops, lost in a memory of joy, didn't shake the mood of utter decay; English soldiers stood next to the wooden post against which the victim was lashed; soldiers were stationed all throughout the village, even on the watchtowers of the fort.

The Commander of the town's English garrison turned the blade sideways, beckoning forth bloodshed.

A shimmer in the crowd; a lone figure began pushing his way through the hordes of mourning.

"It's a dreadful business, punishing evil-doers," the English soldiers muttered under his breath, evilly grinning. "But every once and a while, you get your certain pleasures." He pressed the blade against the victim's throat; the young man's eyes bulged as his heart hammered, lungs drawing in last breaths. "This is one of them..."

The loner pushed through the gatherers at the front of the crowd; he calmly walked towards the executioner and the victim. The Commander's back was turned away; the other soldiers stepped forward, shouting; the man pushed away his cloak, revealing a sickening, scythe; the other soldiers began drawing their swords from the sheaths; the man yanked out the scythe, grasping it dreadfully at the handle; soldiers shouted, raising swords, yelping at the Commander; the man launched forward, feet pushing off the ground as he sprinted for the post; the victim took a deep breath. Swiveling on his heels, the Commander drew the dagger from the quivering flesh of the criminal; gasping, he opened his mouth to holler for help as the giant scythe blade swung through the air, the man's eyes burning with fierce intensity; the blade glinted in the sunlight. People screamed as the blade cut through the Commander's neck, snapping bones and tendons with a vicious romp. The head flew through the air, landing on the grass, eyes wide; the body collapsed, dagger sliding from cold-dead fingers; the victim shouted, the soldiers crying in horror at their commander's death. The crowds surged and rippled as people tried to grasp what was happening; the savior slammed the blade of the scythe into the pole, tearing apart the thick ropes binding the youth's arms; the victim stumbled free, running for the crowd, for his life; the loner yanked the scythe from the pole, kneeling down, grabbing the dagger.

A trio of English soldiers converged on the fleeting survivor; the loner turned, hurling the dagger through the air, the blade spinning; one of the soldiers shrieked as the blade slammed into his back; he released his sword, flinching, collapsing into the grass. The two other soldiers raised their swords; the youth dropped to his knees, the swords swinging his direction; the soldiers screeched as each other's swords lodged through their chain metal, stinging into their stomachs, drawing a ghastly blood line. The two soldiers fell to the grass, moaning, weak; the youth grabbed one of the swords, twirled it in his hands, wrenched it down, stabbing into the skulls of the two English, killing them on the spot.

The loner held the scythe before his eyes; the soldiers circled him, muttering profanities and incantations. The loner shrugged off his cloak, revealing dark, forest-green clothes, covered with pockets and a belt lined with several daggers. His blond hair whispered with the breeze, scolding eyes bearing down into the souls of the attackers who now circled him; they lunged for a chance to strike, to cut down the one who had so unmercifully frayed justice and slewed their Commander, their military father, the one who paid their salaries and kept food on the plates. The crowd was already rushing in every direction, edging away from the bleeding corpses; the youth was lost in the madness. One of the soldiers leapt forward, swinging his sword; the loner parried, swinging up a leg, kicking him in the groin; the soldier pitched forward in blind agony,

the scythe slicing across his stomach, spilling his bowels all over the grass. In an instant, all the others shrieked a blood-curdling war cry and looped for him; the scythe glinted and dazzled in the sun, a blur as soldiers fell at his feet, shouts and screams of pain bouncing across the farmlands. The man stabbed the scythe into the gut of a soldier, the English man spewing blood all over his shoulder; the loner arched his back as a sword sliced towards him; it passed under his arched back; he rocketed back into the body of the attacker, sending him to the ground, bashing his face in with the back of his skull; he rolled to the side as a soldier slammed a sword towards him; the sword pierced into his comrade instead, the soldier screaming in anger; the man drew a dagger from his belt, arm reaching with lightning speed, jabbing it into his eye, tearing into the brain; he twisted the handle, blood flowing from the wound; the soldier gurgled and fell, limp over his friend.

The other soldiers were running in every direction, throwing their weapons to the side; the loner drew the scythe from the body of a victim, the blade smeared with blood. Wind caressed his face as cold, hard eyes turned this way and that; the threat vanished into the distance; people were locked into their homes and already loading up wagons to get out of the village before more English came. But the rebel was alive, and his life would continue, and he—William Wallace—would eventually lead a revolution that would free Scotland from Britain's grasp.

The loner turned, slowly strolling down the other side of the hill, out of view.

Wallace appeared from a building, holding a sword, watched the head of his savior disappear from view. Behind him, a friend edged for a view; Wallace snapped his head around. "Get out of here, Emish, go with your father! More English will come soon; Longshanks will send an entire militia when he learns of this! Uncle and I will return to our home, and hopefully find you soon."

His loyal Scottish friend, brother-in-arms, spat, "Who do you think he was?"

Wallace cocked an eyebrow. "Get out of here, Emish. I will follow."

He sprinted from the hollow of the doorway, pushing away panicking people that got in his way; blood stained the grass at the feet of scattered corpses, two he had killed; rounding the top of the knoll, he was in awe at the number of soldiers sprawled about in a broad circle; at least ten, eleven, and others had fled at the vengeful hands of his rescuer. He had seen the man disappear down the opposite side of the hill; leaning over, he glared over the edge of the hill.

The man was gone, bloody footprints leading downhill, then vanishing completely.

••

David wrote by the light of his lamp, scribbling in his journal:

Weird day. Went over to Chelsea's with Daniel, Ross and Jake. There is a big crop circle in her backyard, in the fields. Her dad is pretty ticked off about it, tried to keep her stashed in the house. Me and Jake and Ross went into the field, and Ross separated from us. We found him and he was standing over this dead guy, except the dead guy's body was all messed up. Scared the crap out of me. He was taken to the station downtown, and I just went home. Daniel and I hung out, Jake went to his girlfriend's place. Can't get the image of the dead guy out of my head. Haven't seen Ross since he was taken into custody. Hope he's doing okay.

He turned off the light and stashed the journal under his bed. Tossing the pen against the wall, he rolled over in the covers and tried to fall asleep. The memories of the day's nightmares ran amok in his head, so terrible he couldn't close his eyes. *How did the guy die?* Restless. He went into the kitchen to get a glass of water. His ears perked—something made a noise down the hall. He wondered if it was the dog, but glanced into the kitchen. Danielle was sleeping in her cage. Setting down the glass of water, he moved down the corridor, keeping his footsteps quiet.

No more noise.

Just his imagination.

He turned to go back to his room—and leapt back as the figure dumped the black bag over his head. He squirmed, fighting off the attacker; the bag was warm, sweet smelling; his muscles relaxed and he fell to the ground, knocked out. The attacker slid off the bag, threw it into the dining room, and lifted David onto his shoulders.

He kicked open the front door and ran into the night.

••

Chelsea lay asleep in the bed, eyes closed, breathing softly. She stirred, slowly waking. Ross glanced over at Harris. “Now would be the time. Do you want to do the honors, or should I?”

“Have you gone through the energizer?”

“Yes. Didn’t change anything. I told you, I’m fine. I just want to get going.”

“I’ll do it.” He started for the door.

“No... No, let’s make... you.” He pointed to a security guard. “Give me your gun.” He handed it over; Ross emptied the magazine, and handed it back to him. “You go in there and put the gun to her temple. Sound good? And pull the trigger right when the cold steel hits her skin.”

“Sir, I don’t—“

“Do it.”

The man sighed and left the room. He went down the hall, and into Chelsea’s room. She was still asleep. Pausing, he made his way to the bed, pressed the gun against her head—Chelsea leapt forward, one arm grabbing his arm, the other the gun; she bashed him in the face with her forehead, took the gun, and twisted his arm. The guard fell against the wall, arm shrieking with pain, she twisted the gun around in her hands and slammed it down into his skull; the guard collapsed in shock, unconscious, breathing. Blood streamed down his face. Chelsea dropped the gun, stared at the body.

“I’m guessing it worked,” Harris said.

“Yep. I’ll go break the news.”

••

Inhumane landscape extended forever in every direction, perforated with rocky bluffs, stubs of boulders, chastising canyons and craggy mountains; pockets of palms and foliage pockmarked the deathly wasteland, and lines of waving elephant grass massaged the ruined wasteland. Lucid night skies cast upon the earth the twinkling light belonging to the heaven-quenched stars risen high above in the mysterious firmament; no rain had touched the ground for what seemed ages, and the soil was cracked and parched, worn tired from deprivation; sulfurous air swelled and stung at ones lips, slicing them into tiny grooves, drying out the throat, causing one’s voice to unravel raspy and hoarse. No pleasure could ever be found for the life of any man, for the land was as barren and faceless as the destitute moon, an invisible ghost lurking in the unforeseen shadows.

The two of them stood stately and unyielding, surrounded by banks of computers, gawking out over the searing desert lurching in every direction forever and ever, never ending, never giving up the ghost; just desolate, tasteless landscape in every direction. Dim lights above cast their shadows against the tinted windows; although they stared silently at the windows, no one could see a thing except for pitch-blackness. Alone and secure, the first had made sure no taps were given and even forced high-ranking officials into the barracks. Now the dealings could be dealt; the secret works of the volatile, unfruitful and evilly slanderous criminals would find no fault, for not a soul would ever be the wiser of what went on that exciting night.

“How’re the profits, Rick?” the first broke the silence.

The other wiry man didn’t reply for a moment, but then, “It’s good. Booming. We’ll be ready to undergo in at least five months,” he added spectacularly, proudly, innocently.

“Have the competitors been slashed?”

“The government’s taken them all out.”

“And what about us? Are we secure?”

“They’ve checked everywhere except their own backyard,” he replied, smiling.

The first grinned broadly, mentally chuckling to himself. "Lots of perverts out there, Richard. But lots of rich perverts. And filthy rich perverts who know they're accounts won't be traced, who know they won't be busted. It all adds up to good money for us." Biting his bottom lip, he declared, "And our inside man?"

"He's doing his job. No offender has even found a clue."

"Good, good. You've picked good men, Rick. No, excellent men."

He guffawed loudly, his voice echoing across the cavernous control room.

"Don't think I'm just flattering you, Rick. It *couldn't* have been done without you."

"My daughter was more than willing. We pay them good, our clients pay us good, and we won't be traced. No one will ever be able to find us. *No one.*"

The first nervously countered, "But you're sure we can't be traced?"

Richard shot him a disapproving glare. "You disbelieving me?"

"I'm just cautious. If we get caught, we can be thrown into the slammer for ages, even life."

"You need to stop worrying, boss. We're completely hidden. We'll never be found."

The glass windows behind them shattered, exploding inwards; they spun around as a form cloaked in dark clothes flew inside, surrounded by broken shards of glass; he landed innocently upon the floor, crinkling glass splashing all around. The two men gawked in horror as the intruder raised the small Skorpion machinegun, not hesitating; the brutal weapon barked, flashing in the faint luster; the first man flew back, a goring hole emboweled within his stomach; screeching for help, he bled to death on the floor, his insides gouged, viscera spilling out from his wound and dropping to the ground. His companion backed towards the door, but the attacker spat, "It ends here!" The last survivor was tossed bodily into the glass; a slug drove up into his chest, so powerful he was surged off his feet and propelled up and onto the slanted pane of glass, breathing rapidly, pain choking, blood streaming across his clothes; he was alive, barely, but knew his life was over as the slanted glass couldn't hold his weight; gasping, each breath reeking of terrible pain, he felt the pane break apart, falling underneath; flailing through the dark night air, he let out a few final gargles before smashing onto the ground, raining rubbish peppering his bleeding body; killed upon impact, he lay completely still as blood swarmed from his silenced carcass.



She stood in front of the class, holding up the poster board detailing the photosynthesis cycle of water lilies. The science teacher sat in the back of the class, perched on a stool, thick reading glasses clinging to the tip of his nose as his fiery eyes embedded into Kristen's soul. Her light brown hair clung to her shoulders as she used a stubbed pencil to point out the different stages in the water lily photosynthesis. She'd fallen asleep three times last night putting it together, in a haste—evident, as glues probed from the creases of pictures and her writing was sloppy. Mr. Walters took notes, shaking his head and whistling. Her mouth moved; suddenly the door to the classroom opened and the secretary Ms. Bell poked her head into the door.

"I'm busy," Walters growled. "Presentations. Come back later."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Walters, but Mr. Harris vanished after fourth period. We need you to sub sixth."

"Sixth is my planning period. It is important to me!"

"Can't you just sub for Mr. Harris? I'm sure there's no problem..."

"There *is* a problem! I can't do it! Leave!"

She sighed and slammed the door.

Walters glowered, "Proceed, Miss Weathers."

Kristen coughed once, then said, "As I was saying, the sun hits the surface of the water lily pads and—"

The door opened; Walters leapt up to shout; there was the echo of a muffled cough, and a dart stuck in his neck. He fumbled back in surprise, hitting the ground; the stool wobbled. Kristen gasped as the dark black man entered the room; in his hand was a pistol. Behind him, in the hallway, Ms. Bell lay sprawled against the wall, a dart in the back of her neck. The black man kept the pistol trained on the kids; he ordered the teacher aide to find a seat. Kristen darted for her seat; he reached out and grabbed her arm, wrenching her back. She struggled to let go, but the cold steel of the gun pressed against her forehead. Her eyes were wide; the man

said, "Sorry," and stinging cries bit into her skin; darkness, warmth flooded over her, and she lost all balance, falling back; her eyes stared up at the ceiling. She couldn't move; the man hefted her onto his shoulders and went out the door, closing it silently behind him.

••

Chelsea looked into Ross' eyes; her own were blurred with confused tears. "So what am I supposed to do? Fight? You know I can't fight! I'm the weakest person at our school."

"That's not true, none of it."

"So I won't have to fight."

He cleared his throat. "Chelsea, the only reason I'm asking for your help is because I need as many people possible who know the time zone were jumping into, and me and you—so far—are the key players. Plus, I trust you. Trust you more than I trust a lot of people."

"Like Coldheart."

"*Especially* Coldheart," he said with a smile. "And you *can* fight. You proved that fairly well."

"I can't fight like you, though. I can barely understand what's going on, and now you want me to start killing people."

"Not people. They aren't people."

"I'm not killing material, Ross. I just can't do it."

"You don't have much of a choice. Either way, you'll have to fight. With me in 2003, or here alone, in a foreign land, in a foreign time. Besides, I've already got David, Kristen, Jake and Megan on their way now. They'll be helping us out. Hopefully."

"This is insane. So we're supposed to assassinate one guy?"

"One guy. Mahan's great grandfather. We rid of him, we rid of Mahan. We rid of Mahan, we rid of all these mutants, this bloodshed, this war, this death. The future is suddenly so much brighter."

She squirmed. "I don't want to fight."

"I know." He ran a hand through her soft hair. "Neither do I. No one wants war. Peace, we scream, peace. But there are times for peace, and times for war. Now is a time of war. A time of life and a time for death. It is my hope we avoid all of this. And this—in my opinion—is the only way. I'm gonna need people I can trust, people who know the area, people who can fight..."

"But I can't fight."

"You can."

"Fine, I can. But I won't."

"You will," he said, "when the time comes."

"How do you know?"

"Because, if you don't..." He struggled, then a tear trailed his cheek. "If you don't, you die."

••

Harris held the photo of Eckert, one of his best friends, now gone, vanished, vanquished forever. The candles surrounded him burned bright yellow, blue at the tips; they lit the dark closet, the candlelight dancing over the picture in his hand. Offering a prayer up to God, he set the photo in one of the candles; the flames wrapped and curled around the plastic, until it was but ashes and dust.

Ashes and dust.

A presence behind him. Harris said, "What do you want?"

"Do you think we should tell him?"

"Does it matter?"

"I thought you were a superstitious man."

"I believe what warrants to be believed."

"And this is uncommon?"

"Jeremiah is not uncommon; Isaiah and Obadiah are not uncommon. Some dusty manuscript..."

"This dusty manuscript has been echoing clear for the last fifty-seven years. And it's final line is on the verge of being fulfilled."

"I wouldn't expect you, General, to hold such petty imaginations."

"I believed what warrants to be believed."

Harris grimaced, stood, surrounded by candles. He faced Coldheart, who stood by the door. "Why don't you think about what effect it will have on Ross? On your precious Starseed? What if he gets a puffed head, what if he gets too zealous, and blows everything."

"He won't."

"You've been wrong since your first steps, General. Why should I trust you now?"

"I may have been wrong, but *it* has not." He handed him a rough piece of parchment. "I think it is best. I am ordering you to show it to him. I know it doesn't exactly float well with your own ego, but I think it best. You've disobeyed nearly every order in the book, and convinced others to disobey as well." Eckert. "I haven't punished you, I have exalted you. Do this one for me, or the anvil falls."

He turned the parchment over in his hands. "One last order. Our fall is in my hands."

"Stop screwing around. The first burst relays are coming in. I have to go."

He left Harris in the room; Harris blew out the candles, gripped the parchment, and left.

••

She leaned over the railing, her reflection dark in the shadowy water of the pond. She belched over the whitewashed wooden fence, puke-green vomit sputtering among the blades of grass. Her stomach flipped, her rear seemed to reverberate, head seared with pulse-pounding pain; and she couldn't remember anything except the here and now. A hand fell onto her shoulder, and Jake gripped her hard; she spewed again; he stepped back, and looked towards the stocky house. Cars filled the driveway, the lights inside were on, and the sound of disheveled grunge music floated over the peaceful countryside. His own car rested along the curb, almost hidden in the shadows of several massive oak trees.

She puked. "It hurts."

"Who got you into this? You said you'd never do this."

"Why do you have to—" Her insides cringed, and she spilt bile from between clenched lips.

"Why do you always have to watch me like a hawk? Let me live my own life for God's sake."

"If I did that you'd be knocked out in bed. I have some towels in the back seat."

"I'm not leaving."

"Don't talk like that. You're a wreck. Look at you. I'll take you to my place. Coffee and a cold shower will do the trick, then I'll take you home tomorrow morning."

"I'm not a baby. Stop treating me like one."

"Did you just completely black out?" he demanded, shivering in the chill. "I ring the doorbell to find you drunk on booze and dancing on the kitchen table. How clothed you would've been if I were only seconds later, God forbid me even go there. If I leave you here, some perverted, horny kid will get you in bed and it'd be the end of everything you've ever worked for. The end of your scholarship to Berkeley, the end of your dream to become a paleontologist. And all because you ignored me."

"I won't sleep with any guy."

"Amy, what's my name?"

She didn't answer. He repeated the question. She closed her bloodshot eyes.

"See? How am I supposed to trust you? Come on, stop kidding yourself."

"Nothing's gonna happen..."

"I wonder what would happen if your parents found out?"

She glared bullets. "No. You can't."

"I won't, I swear it. But what happens when the cops show up? And you're drunk?"

"I'm *not* drunk."

He sighed, rolled his eyes. "Is your stomach empty yet?"

She looked up to snap back a vicious reply, but her eyes widened; she fumbled over the railing, sliding over the grass and into the lake. Jake shouted, launched himself over the railing. He stumbled over the slope, and slid into the water. She was lying face-down, riding the lapping waves; he grabbed her by the sides and wrenched her out of the water; he dragged her up

against the fence, dripping wet; she moaned, but lay still. Her skin was cold and clammy, shivering; her teeth chattered. The water was so cold, *so cold*.

Footsteps. He glanced up to ask for help—and fell backwards as the hand shot towards him.

••

He hadn't ever realized how beautiful she was when she slept. Chelsea's eyes were closed, calm, placid, as she breathed; under the covers, her chest rose and fell with every slim breath. Her soft skin shone dark tan in the black light, and she mumbled something under her breath, lost in the ecstasies of her own dreams. He grabbed her tender hand, felt the silky skin, ran his fingers through her own; her fingers seemed to tighten, closing around his hand. She pulled away, and turned onto her side, hair splayed over the pillow. Ross stared at her for what seemed hours until he heard the door creak open; he didn't move until Harris' voice broke the silence.

"Do you have a minute?"

Ross turned. "How long till we can get everything suited and ready?"

"An hour, two at most. A technician is using silicon chips to speed up the bank processes."

"In an hour—or two—we could be under fire from mutant starships. They're narrowing in on us."

"Did Coldheart speak to you? He didn't tell me about this."

"No. He wouldn't have. He doesn't know yet. I've seen them. I *feel* them."

Harris bit his bottom lip, swallowed a knot in his throat. "I want—no, Coldheart wants—me to show you something. It's odd, kind of scary. Weird, really." He drew the parchment from his jacket, and handed it to Ross. "It was found buried in an old missile silo in southeast Texas about seventy years ago. No one knows when it was written, except that it was probably written before the Third Great War, before mutants were even in the picture. Which is why, you see, it has been forgotten. Until now."

Ross flipped the parchment over in his hands, the light illuminating faded lettering:

*Sin! A time is come, is already here
To weep, for love is gone, and there is only fear
All the world is no longer safe, but in the hands of those we created
Revered, many will try to stop the forces, but victory is an ideal
Sin! Billions will perish in the hands of those we created
Excelsis Deo! A name will come, will come in the final hours
Excelsis Deo! A name that will die, only to live in times past and present
Death to all, except the name who is the only hope and doomed*

He read over the sentences closer, and at the moment of realization, the hidden code, he dropped the parchment; the parchment hit the ground and broke into several pieces. Harris dropped down on his hands and knees and began to scoop it up. Ross stumbled past Chelsea sleeping, and bumped into the cabinets. The world flashed in and out, a world of growing and shrinking dots; finally he regained balance, and turned to Harris, who was gripping the fragments in his hand.

Ross demanded, "Did you see the code?"

"No... What code?"

"Is this real?"

"It existed before even old man Coldheart was born. What makes you think it's fake?"

"Tell me, Harris, *did you see the code?*"

"I didn't see any code. Why don't you tell me what's going on?"

Ross grabbed the fragments, spread them on the counter, piecing them together. He ran his finger down the beginning of each sentence, until Harris' eyes widened in surprise. "You see now?" He nodded. "Tell me again. Are you *sure* this is authentic?"

Harris shrugged. "Some think it is, other's don't. Coldheart thinks it's genuine."

"And you?"

"Well, to be honest, I think it's a fraud."

He seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. "I hope so. Its accuracy is astounding."

"Yes, yes it is."

"But at least it's not true. We can bench on that."

Harris grinned. "That'd be bad news, eh, Ross?"

Death to all, except the name who is the only hope and doomed

The Time to Fight is Now... The Time to Die is Close at Hand

"Excuse me," the customer barked, reaching out and grabbing her blouse. Megan ripped away, uncomfortable; the customer said, "Can I see you for a moment, please? I asked for a margarita and you gave me a daiquiri. And I asked for no salt—*no* salt—but there is salt on the glass, big grains of salt on the rim of the glass. I just wanted to let you know I won't be leaving a tip..."

She backed away. "Sorry. I'll get you a daiquiri... I mean, a margarita. Sorry."

"Your skills at serving are *quite* below the bar..."

She didn't react, but made her way through the hovel of dimly lit tables, nearing the back. Being evening on a Tuesday, it wasn't too crowded—the big hitters didn't show till Thursday, Friday and Saturday, and they were often swamped on Mondays. Most of the tables were empty, the cheap leather cushions glowing under the drab limelight. She saw a man sitting in one of the booths in the back—he was large, muscular, and dressed in a black tie suit. He didn't look up at her as she passed into the kitchen.

She flicked Dave on the shoulder; he stepped back from the yogurt mixer. "What?"

"You gave some guy a daiquiri instead of a margarita. He's all over my back."

"If you would've noticed the mistake before you took out the drink..."

"I don't drink. I hate alcohol. How would I know?"

He flashed a slip of paper in front of her. "Maybe if you could write a little more clearly, this thing wouldn't happen." He pointed to a basin filled with rolled napkins containing forks, spoons, knives. "Take them out to the front tables, left wing. Kelsey is running low."

"What about—"

"I'll take care of it."

She grabbed the silverware. "And no salt."

"I've got it."

She left the kitchen, moving through the back of the restaurant. As she passed the booth with the mysterious man, she felt something touch her hand; she looked down, and he was gazing up at her; his hand pulled away from hers. She noticed something wasn't quite right, didn't fit the puzzle too neatly, but she couldn't place it—the man captivated her with his deep, blazing eyes.

"What's your name?" he asked.

She found her lips moving. "Megan."

"Megan? That's a lovely name. You look like a Megan."

"Can I get you anything, sir?"

"Get me a steak, if you could. A T-Bone."

"Would you like anything to drink?" This wasn't even her table!

"No. Just a steak. Thank you."

"Okay." She left for the front of the left wing.

Kelsey greeted her warmly. "People are complaining. Who were you talking to?"

"Some guy. Chad must have put him back there on accident. Sly player."

She touched Megan's forehead. "You're a little warm. Running a fever?"

"I feel fine, why?"

She swung her around, pointed to the booth. "There's no one there."

The booth was empty.

••

Ross locked the door to his room, fell onto the bed. Through the porthole, he could see what was left of North America, obscured by clouds and smoke. Torrents and columns of fire and brimstone blurred the entire east coast, choking ash and smoke. The west coast was readying for the last fatal battle before the creation fell. He turned his eyes from the window, closed them tight, as the tears began to slide down his cheeks. Everything—*everything*—rested in his hands. He found himself shaking, and tried to stop—*You're so immature*—but it wouldn't. He coughed—no, choked—on his own sobs, and pulled the blanket around him. The souls of the

living pressed around him, a noose—they screamed, cried, wailed for help—he was their only hope, and now he cried not for himself, but for them. For the world. If he failed, the world vanished. If he succeeded, he would be forgotten by everyone except those who survived alongside him. Lose-lose, or was it? Salty tears stiffened the blankets. All he wanted was a simple life—a beautiful girl—Chelsea fit the bill—a small home, maybe a little child. A steady job. He didn't want to be going off fighting—dying—he didn't want to kill and risk being killed. Humans weren't made to murder—they were forced to. *Now I lay me down to sleep I pray the Lord my soul to keep and if I die before I wake.* He wished it were a dream, a nightmare—reality was too harsh to handle. His hands began to shake again. If Chelsea died, if David or Kristen or Megan or Jake died, it was all his fault. He was sending them to their deaths...

Harris entered the room, cautious. "Ross. You okay?"

"I'll be fine."

"If you need time..."

"What're you here for?"

"The signals have intensified. They're coming in."

"How many?"

"All of them—four signals. Ten minutes. We don't have much time."

"How are they planning on loading the memory? They don't have—"

"We have silicon chips."

His brow furrowed. "Silicon chips?"

••

Megan walked over to the table; it was completely empty. She'd have to scratch the order... She started walking back—the man was getting hot over his margarita—but she stopped; there was a slip of paper on the table. She picked it up, flipped it over in her hands; stamped over the surface of the card was a phone number. Something inexplicable, unexplainable, drew her away from the table, into the kitchen. The phone was in the back, recessed behind several wooden crates. She grabbed the phone, and dialed the number. The tone rang, then a woman's voice growled, "Sorry to inconvenience you, but the phone number you dialed is not available. Please try again and—" Her voice was broken as rough hands grabbed her by the sides, tore her down; she was thrust against one of the crates. She opened her mouth to shout, but her eyes shut and tongue went limp, cold, as a stinging dart stuck through the surface of her neck. The assailant tossed Megan over his shoulder and strode for the back door; an employee rounded the corner, jaw dropping; he stammered, "Help! Someone help! He's—" The black man shoved the kid away and burst out the door, into sparkling rain. The employee ran for help, and in seconds several employers and customers burst out the back door—police sirens built up in the rain. But the parking lot was void of life.

The man—and Megan—was gone.

••

Harris, Coldheart, Chelsea, Ross and a handful of technicians stood around in a room overflowing with glowing computers. A vast view screen revealed a room beyond, filled with eight cylindrical tubes eight feet high. Each had its own snaking wires, cables and electrical boxes; each was placed on a pedestal, and the walls were formed out of glass panels squeezed together, with a thin lining of water between—pressure-resistant. Chelsea didn't understand what was going on, and when no one would answer her questions, she shut her mouth. Coldheart was panicky, constantly drilling the technicians; Harris grabbed a glass chip from a computer; Ross stared out the window.

Harris pulled him around, showed him the chip. "Silicon chip. A new invention, perhaps a little late. These chips, placed on sensitive nerve centers on the brain, give the patient 'new knowledge.' Similar to the chip we placed in Chelsea's brain." He nodded over to her; she rubbed the sore stitches. "The most general are for war-combat training, and we're gonna upload those into the team members who are—shall I say, 'unfamiliar' with the times? We're also gonna load a chip that will tell them everything—they will understand what's going on.

Seeing as we only have about an hour before the risk of attack is at a premium, it's better than explaining everything out longhand."

"When will they be here?"

"Any minute now."

A technician resounded, "Signals stronger!"

Harris told Ross, "These are inbuilt time-machines. Bring back any living, breathing life form with positive DNA tracks within a twenty-foot radius. We used to get insects, squirrels, we even got a duck once. But we narrowed the DNA to fill in for strictly human recipients. Our guy is out retrieving them one by one, jumping through time. He has them coming back at the same times to save *us* time. He'll be coming back, too." An alarm began to whine. "Close your eyes, Ross. It gets bright."

Light flashed in the room, blinding; pain rocketed through Ross' eyes; he swung around, blinking, seeing spots. A roar filled the air, shaking his chest; then it was silent. His eyes adjusted; Chelsea was staring past him, through the one-way window. Ross coughed, the pain receding. He turned, looked out the window; the doors on four of the cylinders opened; Kristen stumbled out, scared; Jake exited one of them transmitters, face ashen; David was confused beyond hope, and dressed in pajamas; a heavyset black man, rippling with muscles and a serious scowl, stepped out of the fourth machine; over his shoulder, Megan curled.

Chelsea pressed against the glass—her friends, *her friends!* She hadn't seen them for weeks, maybe a month! Seemed so long. The three youths milled about the room, and upon seeing T-Bone, backed against the wall. T-Bone dropped Megan to the ground, and raised a radio to his lips. Keeping an eye on the teens plastered against the far wall, he spoke, "I've got them. All need to be sedated." He nudged his foot softly into Megan's side. "This one, too. She'll be waking soon."

A hidden door slid open, and soldiers ran into the room. Their assault rifles were modified, and they blew darts into the teens. They fell in a pile, and were dragged from the room. T-Bone followed them out. Chelsea whipped around, yelled in Ross' face.

"What's going on! Where are you taking them!"

He stroked her cheek. "Don't worry about it."

"Tell me, Ross! What's going on?"

"They're joining us. Their help will be invaluable."

"How will they help?"

No answer.

Louder: "*How will they help?*"

Ross reached for her throat, lightning-fast; she dodged, grabbed his arm, but before she could snap his bones, he kicked her legs out from under her, and she fell to the ground. She stared up at him, and he said, "That's how. They're going to be fighting with us. And God forbid, *dying* with us."

••

"We're stealing them of their innocence," Ross said, as the last pair of chips—one for battle, one to understand—were put on the surface of their brains. The skulls were drilled back together, and the scalps sewn back in place. "The moment we teach them how to kill—the very instant we pull them into this bloody mess—we rob them of that which is most precious. Innocence."

"This *was* our idea. You consented," Harris said. "Turning your back now?"

"I'm not ready to write names on tombstones."

Harris managed to wince and smile. "Too late for that."

"But we don't have a choice, do we, Harris? No choice at all. If we don't do this, millions die. If we do, the chance of my friends—the ones I love—dying tallies higher and higher." He shook his head, miserable. "Now I know what it's like to be caught in a catch-22. We're not just stealing their innocence, we're pulling them away from the very beauty of life itself."

"Beauty of life? Life is a joke nowadays."

"Didn't expect to hear that from you."

"I *do* agree with you. I hate this. But it's what needs to be done."

Coldheart broke them apart. "T-Bone's gonna be ready to launch in twenty minutes."

"We still have forty—"

"No. The enemy fleet is nearing. We're readying for battle. I'd hate for you guys to be jammed between our fighters and theirs, not to mention blazing lasers and battlefield guns. The newcomers will be ready. They're already waking up. We're using everything new and improved we've got, running it dry. If you fail, scratch all hope. Ross?" He looked over. "You and Chelsea are gonna talk to your friends, okay? Calm them down."

"I thought they understood."

"They do. But we can't change opinions. I doubt any of them want to fight."

"I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks. Harris, load all your firepower onto the craft. We're running on fumes."

••

The machine sparkled under the dreary overhead lights, casting murky shadows over the smooth concrete floor. Suspended on a ramp, the spacecraft was positioned to be jettisoned from the hold at a moment's notice; there were no landing machinery on the craft, and the engine had only enough fuel for a two-way trip; the engine, consequently, took up half the machine. Mechanical and electrical machinery lined the walls of the chamber, technicians running about; cables and wires snaked over the floor; a dolly had been rolled over to the belly of the craft, loaded with crates; now two of the five crates were gone, and another was being dragged into the hold by the dark man himself. Through the magnetic field separating the atmospheric conditions of the *Braveheart* and the hostile vacuum of space, one could see the earth far below, North America smothered with dense smoke and flames crawling westwards. World Army ships were descending for the surface; rumor was, Coldheart had a daring plan, but no one believed it, for the *Braveheart* moved not.

Harris entered the giant chamber, squatted low, and scurried underneath the belly of the bulky ship; he pulled himself into the hold, squinting in the dim light. There were several plastic chairs bolted to the wall, hooks along the ceiling; the walls were bare. Down a corridor was the cockpit, branching rooms to either side; one held supplies, the other weapons. Harris entered the cockpit, looked around; the windows were dark, the protective shield unremoved. He turned—and faced T-Bone. A shiver ran up the pilot's spine. "You frightened me."

"A lot of fright around here," T-Bone said with a wan smile. "You want to help with the loading?"

"Yeah. What've we got?"

T-Bone took him into the weapons room. Along the walls were rows of machineguns, and several boxes on the floor. T-Bone pointed to the machineguns. "One M60—for me—and four M16 assault rifles, full- or semi-automatic. We've got a shipment of Gerber knives, a Colt—for me—and then some basic 9mm handguns. Next we've got some stun grenades and fragmenting grenades—two of each per person. Night vision goggles, just in case, body armor and such. Extra ammo. Oh, and in the cockpit are two MP5s. No fire weapons with safety's off allowed on the spacecraft. That about wraps it up. And we're loading the rest of the food and medical supplies in a moment."

Harris looked over the stockpiled firepower. "This should be fun."

T-Bone growled, "It should be. But it won't."

Harris cocked an eyebrow. "The General talk to you?"

"He tells me everything. I'm not supposed to tell you about the 12 hours deal."

"Then don't." Harris kept his gaze.

T-Bone didn't miss the hint. "The enemy is tracking our movements in the present *and* the past. Already some of our operatives in the past haven't been giving us signals to relay that they're okay—we figure the enemy is methodically plucking them out. They're not worried about our boy Fedducia anymore—they figure he's a loss, not a gain, for the World Army. But there probably *will* be a presence around the actual Mahan, and maybe even a presence around Mahan's father... and his grandfather, our target. We could go farther back in the generation to strike, but any farther back and things get hazy. So we might run into some trouble down in the town. Not to mention the fact that they're monitoring our moments, and the moment they see a

five-man time-jumping machine take the leap, they'll be on us like bees to honey. Coldheart can give us about 12 hours of jamming—approximately—before the enemy will be able to break our location and jump to intercept. A very narrow time window to hit. In other words, my friend, if we don't get rid of Granddad Mahan in 12 hours, we don't get rid of this war.”

There was an impermeable silence. Harris sucked in a breath. “Cross your fingers.”



They were shocked when the door to the containment room opened—and Chelsea walked inside. It had been Ross' idea to send her in first, to relieve the tenseness of the situation; no doubt Chelsea wasn't too ecstatic with the idea herself, having seen only Ross and strangers for the past near month. Ross watched in another room, via a video feed. The door opened, and Chelsea ran inside. All was silent over the camera. She looked at her friends, then exploded in joy, sprinting over; she embraced Kristen and Megan, and shook hands with the guys [Ross shook his head—die conformity!]. The newcomers' mouths were racing like steeds, demanding answers, demanding to know just why they knew what they did, and how come they suddenly knew how to street fight. Chelsea told them all was fine, following a script she'd memorized, dictated by Ross. She told them that Ross was with her, but not in the form they knew. She explained that Ross was really the transplanted soul of a Commander Jagger Fedducia, of the World Army Air Force, a hero and methodological savior to the people. He had been brought back to bring hope—and a cure. The enemy—they already knew of the mutants because of the memory chips—feared Ross, because he was a famous warrior, a soldier, a rebel—a revolutionary. People adored and worshipped him, seconded only by Jesus Messiah and the Lord God. There were those who had lost their hope in him when the Battle of the Atlantic had turned the ocean waters crimson red with the blood of the martyrs; hope wavered and crumbled when the mutants scaled the walls and slaughtered all they came across; hope was forgotten as the mutant army pressed against the west coast, coming down also from Canada and up from Central America, refueled from the ruins of Mexico City. She told them that there was a plan—a plan to end it all. Ross was to spearhead a covert operation to oust the great-grandfather of Mahan, the creator of the soulless peoples known as the mutants. They would travel through time and assist. Helping them was the loyal pilot, Captain Harris—whom they confused—rightly so—with the Clayton High biology teacher. Also coming along was T-Bone, a fighter of a man, the man who would fight to the death for the innocents; the man who had wrenched them from the past. Chelsea would go with them, and if needs be, die (Ross smiled at this, as she told him the details later). Ross would certainly not abandon them now, and would fight, too.

Jake ordered, “So why are we here? What cards do we have to play in this thing?”

“Ross has personally requested you guys. He knows that the token for his play in choosing you could be your own deaths—or even his, if he has chosen poorly. But he needed people he could trust, people who were courageous and who would go to the extremes to save both those we love and hate in this world. You guys are here because you have been chosen—you are part of the lineup that will descend into hell's deep and by the power of God, deliver the world from damnation. The choice, however, is yours. You have been chosen—but free will cannot be controlled, not by guns nor smooth words nor any brand of tempest threats. You have been chosen, but you alone must choose—will you fight—*will you die?*—or will you stand back? Those who don't accept will not be considered cowards, unloving, will not be branded traitors or disloyal. But to quote Ross, ‘My trust and respect for them will be tainted.’ Here's your chance to change the history of earth—literally. Here's your chance to save humanity. Will you stand down? I fear to admit that when we win—if we win—the world will forget about us, and about all we've done. In all probability, only the eight of us—rather, those of us who survive—will know of what has really happened, and maybe, one day, will write a book about the truth, a truth none will accept.”

Jake stepped forward. “I accept the task.”

Kristen took a breath. “And I'll give myself—even my life—to this fight.”

Megan seemed to falter, but returned, “Me, too. I will give my life, if needed.”

David grinned. "I've always had compassion—what better way to display it? Of course, I'm in."

Chelsea breathed a sigh of relief. "Your honor and valor are not surpassed."

David swallowed. "I don't want to be the greedy little mongrel or anything, but are we gonna be getting hazard pay?"

••

Coldheart ran up to the spacecraft, leapt inside. "Harris!" Harris appeared from the shadows of the cockpit. Sweat dappled his forehead. Coldheart growled, "We've gotten the specs on the date and location for the wedding of great grandpa Mahan. It's at the Brookside Community Church. Ring a bell?"

Harris nodded. "That's in the middle of Clayton."

"It's Ross' old church! And it's on December 25, 2003. Morning. Four months after Ross' disappearance. We make a face in that town, and we're gonna get the police, emergency squads, press and everything riding to heaven up our butts. Why don't we just throw up a wild neon sign screaming, *Over here!* The mutants will dig us up in seconds."

"Less than 12 hours."

Coldheart winced. "Use caution, and don't try to start a riot."

"You know me."

"Yeah. Unfortunately, that's what I'm talking about." He left

Ross dipped back into the cockpit as Coldheart jumped out of the loading bay doors. T-Bone gave him an inquisitive stare. Harris replied, "Nothing. Except it's a funny little coincidence that great granddaddy Mahan lives in Clayton, and is going to be married at Ross' old church December morning, *four months* after Ross' and Chelsea's and everyone else's disappearance from the town. It's like jumping into cold flame."

"I don't believe in coincidences. Perhaps God made it to where Ross grew up there."

"That's ludicrous."

"You're a Bible-fearing man, can't you believe?"

Harris' firm glare broke a smile. "Back to Clayton. This should be interesting."

••

One day Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he went deep into the wilderness near Sinai, the mountain of God. Suddenly, the angel of the Lord appeared to him as a blazing fire in a bush. Moses was amazed because the bush was engulfed in flames, but it didn't burn up. "Amazing!" Moses said to himself. "Why isn't that bush burning up? I must go over to see this."

When the Lord saw that he had caught Moses' attention, God called to him from the bush, "Moses! Moses!"

"Here I am!" Moses replied.

...The Lord told him, "You can be sure I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cries for deliverance from their harsh slave drivers. Yes, I am aware of their suffering. So I have come to rescue them from the Egyptians and lead them out of Egypt into their own good and precious land... The cries of the people of Israel have reached me, and I have seen how the Egyptians have oppressed them with heavy tasks. Now go, for I am sending you to Pharaoh. You will lead my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."²

••

Ross—the hope of the world, forgotten and spit upon, dead in the minds of the hopeless—stepped out from the shadows, tall and lofty. His clothes rippled against his tight body, his muscles burning like fire; his rough hands displayed power and majesty beyond compare, and

² Excerpt taken from the New Living Translation Bible; Exodus Chapter 3

the scars of his face proved his battle-hardened worth. His whispering hair shone dark under the light, but glowed with an aura of dimension unseen in any mortal man. His face was youthful, yet determined; hard, yet soft; torn with desires, with sorrows and worries, but at the same time piercing like a double-edged sword, sharp enough to cut through the minds and hearts of all; his beckoning strength, splendor, pouring command fell them to their knees, bowing down; his deep eyes showed the facet of the flamboyant, steady Ross, but deep down, sparkling embers betrayed the youthful innocence with a thirst for righteousness, justice, mercy to those who deserved it, and punishment to the evil tempests of the planet. The stars and moon would darken at his command; demons shivered in his presence; angels harkened at his God-given might, the rule bestowed on him by a God who had had enough; by a God who had brought the Moses resurrected into the sight of men.

Kristen, Megan, Jake and David fell to their knees, humbly bowing their heads; Ross was speechless; Chelsea began to fall also, but he stepped forward, grabbed her hand, and dragged her up. None of his friends looked up. He demanded, "Who am I? Am I a God to be worshipped? Am I King to be praised? Am I a Master to be bowed unto? No! I am a friend, a friend in need. Stand. Stand!" Legs shaking, they stood; but they didn't look upon him. "Is my sight to terrifying for you to bear? Do you look upon me not for respect, or reverence? Or is it fear that has turned your stare?" He reached out, touched Kristen's chin, and lifted her head. He stared into her eyes. "I have missed you all. My best friends. I am sorry Daniel could not make it, but there wasn't room. He was as trustworthy and reliable as any of you, but his bravery was lacking."

"Is it really you?" Jake asked, voice quivering.

"Ah, you ask." Ross faced him. "Look into my eyes, Jake. They say the truth can be found in a man's eyes. They say if you look up and to the left, you're accessing the visual cortex, and therefore you're lying. If you look up and to the right, you're diving into the creative centers of your brain, searching for the truth. What do my eyes tell you?"

"Your eyes do not move."

"I already know the truth. Why must they move? Yes, I am Ross Keppler. But some call me Commander Jagger Fedducia. A few hail me as the Messiah; I deny ownership of such a title. Some call me Moses, or the Prophet, or even Elijah. But most know me as Starseed—the One. The One who will save humanity from those whom wish to destroy it. The one... the one who needs your help. All of your help. You can see in my eyes, I tell not lies. I am your friend, and you are mine. There is no superiority here—only trust, friendship, loyalty, and honor. Jake, Kristen, David, Mandy, you were always there for me in 2003, when I didn't know who I was. We all remember the day when crop circles were found in Chelsea's backyard—who knew they were signals created by the mutants to direct an enemy Army to kill me? We all remember—and you can admit it—how you all thought I was insane for a little while, after me disturbing encounters, of which now I can explain. You all had pity on Chelsea when her father was murdered—perhaps to get a message across to me, perhaps in an attempt to nab Chelsea, who knows? And you all now know the truth, the horrors, the nightmarish hell of reality. But here, my friends, we have a chance to end it all. We have a chance to turn the tide of history. We have a chance to save humanity. We have a chance to bring justice—and a sword."

The time to fight is now.

The time to die is close at hand.

••

It was unavoidable that the newcomers would be apprehensive in the face of their abductor, the infamous T-Bone, Warrior of the South. Ross tried to explain that there was nothing to fear, but his words bounced off like walls. T-Bone shook hands, gave hugs, and casually apologized for what he had done, the fear he had wreaked, and he assured them no lives had been lost—he had used tranquilizer darts, knocking out those who interfered. Ross felt relief when his friends caught on, and accepted T-Bone as one of their own.

Two guards guarded the silver elevator leading up to Flight Deck 17, Docking Bay 9.

Ross Keppler—also Commander Jagger Fedducia, *Starseed*—lead them.

Chelsea held his back; she was frightened, but bottled it down. She'd experienced the fear of battle before—she shivered at the idea of jumping into war, but didn't back down. If there was one thing she was not, it was a coward.

Harris walked behind her. He feared not his own death, nor war; he feared only losing, fighting and failing to preserve that which mattered most—precious humanity.

Megan was on Harris' heels. She was terrified; goose bumps covered her arms.

David followed after Megan—he was excited, in a nervous sense; he knew he could fight, and he longed to save the human race. The thirst for valor, for justice, the thirst to do something—something so huge as to *save the human race*—drained his soul completely. He was determined to quench the thirst.

Jake glanced at the guards. His fear was numbing, and he pondered whether or not he would freeze when—and if, oh, what a big *if*—the time came to fight. He feared losing it all for the team; he yearned to prove himself, yearned to make a name. Wanted attention, a reputation. Popularity. Things his greedy fingers had never really grasped, much unlike Chelsea, Kristen, Ross, Megan and David. Much unlike his friends—he knew from experience that unpopularity could flow with popularity—because friendships were not based on social status, but on personalities, attitudes, the things that matter most. He had been undermined socially, but he had made the best of friends—and he was ready to not just die for them, but to die for his family, even for the ones who had rejected him most of his life because he wasn't 'cool enough' for them.

Kristen tried to conceal her fear—but it was eating her heart out. The last thing she wanted to do was kill someone. She wanted to become a nurse, maybe even a doctor—she wanted to preserve lives, not take them! Her only consolation was that, through killing, she would be saving countless many more lives—maybe...

T-Bone kept up the rear. His firm, steady gaze drifted over the tops of the kids, and slammed into the back of Harris' head. The kids were relatively small compared to the rest of them, but boy, could they fight. T-Bone managed to smile. He *had* been the one to write the fighting program that had been stenciled into their instincts. Some, upon seeing the ragtag team out to save the world, might think second thoughts on the hope of the world. Poor choice? Not at all. But then, how could they possibly know what they were going up against? This very thought *how could they possibly know what they were going up against* dropped the smile off his face.

Ross nodded to the two guards; one said, "Good luck, sir."

"And you," Ross responded.

The elevator door slid open, revealing a brightly lit, steel-framed interior.

Eight in all:

Starseed, the Hope, the One, Commander Jagger Fedducia

The adoration and pinnacle of love, Chelsea Graham

Ring around the rosy

The experienced pilot, Captain Harris, in another life, a biology teacher

Pockets full of posy

Megan—terrified, but not a coward, loyal to the utmost

Ashes to ashes

David, whose greatest desire is to save the human race

We

Jake, sufferer of rejection and hate, now come to erase the hate

all

Kristen, goddess of peace, forsaking all for the sake of all

fall

T-Bone, battle-hardened soldier, in the fight of his life, and ready to sacrifice all

down

The elevator ascended; they were marching to the grave.

••

Gears grinded; the elevator drew to a halt. "Stand proud," T-Bone growled. The door opened—blinding light washed into their eyes; everyone turned away, save for Ross, Harris and T-Bone. Standing tall, they strode out from the elevator, walking over a satin red carpet spread between the elevator and the loading ramp of the T2M time-traveling machine. To each side were soldiers, officers, Coldheart—all cheered, shouting and pumping their arms into the air. The screams were deafening. Their departure was secret, and the only farewell they received was that from the crew. But a farewell it was, indeed! The newcomers and Chelsea stepped onto the satin carpet, and immediately felt the warmth, the love, the joy of those cheering. It churned their hearts, and they walked straight, following the three veterans. The carpet passed underneath their feet; the bright lights swung around, glancing over their orange flight suits.

Along the red carpet before them were eight caskets; Ross knelt down next to the one with his name engraved over the cover, said a prayer, and kissed the coffin. He continued kneeling; Harris did the same to his own, and T-Bone followed suit. Chelsea found hers, knelt; the name *Chelsea Keppler* was carved into the cedar wood; it was frightening to look upon; she bowed her head, not in reverence, but for fear. She didn't want to die. She forced her head back up, said a prayer under her lips, and kissed the cool wood of the coffin. Kristen, Jake, then Megan and David did likewise. Several soldiers came forward, one standing on the other side of each casket. Ross offered his hand, palm down; the soldier took it, kissed his hand, turned it over; he drew a sharp knife and cut a deep gash along the palm, drawing blood; the man stepped away. Ross overturned his hand, and the blood dribbled down over his casket, anointing it in case misfortune fell upon them and they failed to silence the nightmare. Harris, T-Bone did the same. Chelsea offered her hand, terrified, palm down; her own soldier kissed it—she noticed he was a very handsome man. The soldier drew his knife, flipped her hand over, and with a quick slice, cut her palm open; she muffled down a cry; it burned and stung like acid, her skin peeling apart; blood covered her hand. She flipped her hand over, and the blood dribbled over the coffin; the blood ran in rivulets down the road, along the sides, forming webs of crimson. The others followed suit.

Ross stood; Harris stood; T-Bone stood; Chelsea stood; Kristen stood; Jake stood; Megan stood; David stood. They turned around, faced forward. A line of five soldiers formed on either side of the red carpet before them; each held in his hand a pistol; the pistols were black with maroon stripes. The task force walked; Chelsea passed the first, looked into their calm, placid eyes. Ross glanced over his shoulder; he tried to tell Chelsea to look away, but she was intrigued. Yes, she thought, these soldiers were the finest in appearance. Handsome, neatly-cut, well-dressed, well-rounded, very—She shuddered. The soldiers lifted the pistols, pushed the cold barrels of the pistols against their temples. She was terrified, about to shout; *one bullet, one bullet, one bullet*; T-Bone reached back and grabbed her arm, squeezing. The room echoed with the sounds of the gunshots; Chelsea writhed, blood splattering over her clothes, warm on her face. The bodies swayed and toppled; one fell at her feet. She didn't have the breath to scream; she couldn't move; T-Bone grabbed her arm, and they stepped over the bodies, and continued down the carpet. She looked back; her friends were equally stained with the blood of the suicides, and the honorable men's bodies lay over the ground behind them, in swelling pools of blood.

To the roaring crowd, they entered the T2M. The loading bay door shut; they were in the room with plastic seats; Harris and Ross moved to the front, both being pilots. Chelsea stood, the blood reeking; T-Bone told them to have a seat. She sat down, stunned and dazed—the others, judging by their baffled countenances, weren't too straight on things, either. She demanded, "Those men..."

"It is customary for loyal soldiers to give their lives to the greatest before battle."

"Those were men with dreams, lives, families—"

"It is voluntary, Chelsea," T-Bone said. "They chose to die."

"I can't stand this."

"Some things aren't easy to understand, Chelsea. But accept them, you must."

"How come they had to die? Couldn't they have shook hands or something!"

"A blood offering is needed for the forgiveness of sins."

"So? What forgiveness is needed here!"

"Forgiveness," he answered in a low voice, "in case we fail, and humanity ends."

Marching to the grave.

••

Harris flipped a switch, and the hidden door leading to the back slid shut. Harris took a breath, and ignited the engines. Ross checked the sealed compartment at his feet; the MP5 was within arm's reach. He strapped himself in as the massive engine shuddered, shaking; the floor seemed to vibrate with each turn of the swirling engine, a steady hum, so loud they couldn't hear. The pair of pilots placed the microphones over their heads, and the view screen opened; the T2M faced the magnetic field, faced space—the earth was a blur of smoke and fire. Harris was filled with an indescribable passion, knowing if they did things right, all that would cease to exist. So many lives would be saved. He throttled the engine, and the ship rocketed from its perch, the engine screaming, deafening; they passed through the magnetic field; everything was silent. The engine burned bright red, could be seen for miles. The *Braveheart* vanished behind them as they streamed away from the planet.

"Thy kingdom come," Harris said, "thy will be done."

Ross took a deep breath. "Amen to that."

Over the radio: "T2M97, you are cleared for jump. God bless."

"And you," Ross said. He switched off the radio.

"Coordinates locked?"

"Coordinates locked."

Harris pushed himself back into his seat. "One..."

Ross yelled over the intercom. "Hold fast! Emergency positions!"

"Two..."

Ross pulled himself back into the seat, clenched his teeth.

"One... *ignition!*"

The engines exploded; the ship rocketed forward, so fast it pressed them against the seats, drilling them like a trillion sledgehammers, straining muscles, organs; bones felt ready to snap; Megan's jaw dislocated; the view screen burned with a blistering turquoise, the stars hidden in the radiant flash; there was a bellow like thunder, heat so searing it could burn flesh from the bones...

Silence.

••

*[God] made the earth by his power,
and he preserves it by his wisdom.*

*He has stretched out the heavens
by his understanding.*

*When he speaks, there is thunder in the heavens.
he causes the clouds to rise over the earth.*

*He sends the lightning with the rain
and releases the wind from his storehouses.*

*Compared to him, all people are foolish
and have no understanding at all!*

*They make idols, but the idols will disgrace their
makers
for they are frauds.*

They have no life in them.

*Idols are worthless; they are lies!
the time is coming when they will all be
destroyed.*

But the God of Israel is no idol!

*He is the creator of all that exists,
including his people, his own special
possession.*

The Lord Almighty is his name!

"You are my battle-axe and sword," says the Lord...

12 Hours

Crash Landing

Marvelous colors sprinkled the evening sky; brief, lacerating clouds splayed over the heavens, casting an orange, golden glow over all that moved. The stretching fields and splotches of forest reflected the light of evening, smiling happy countenance. Suddenly the sky quivered; a burst of dazzling white light sparkled high above, a mere pinpoint, then vanished, fading into nothing. Wind rustled through the barren, naked trees, stripped of leaves with the coming of winter. The gray dirt of the Wisconsin crop fields, barren and void of life, were crested with a thin sprinkle of snow. Footprints trampled among the front and backyards of the smaller houses of the families closer to Clayton, now ablaze with Christmas lights. Clayton High was packed with cars, and many drivers were heading for Brookside Community Church for the splendid Christmas Eve Ceremony. The date was December 24, 2003.

A rough wind swept over the dry crops; a blast of heat bellowed fire over the land, scorching the soil black; an object from heaven fell with sickening speed. It bellied out over the tree lines, the belly scraped and battered by the stretching fingers of withered trees. The craft dropped, bashed into the soil; a tidal wave of dirt licked upwards, battering over the front end of the manta-ray-shaped craft. A grinding halt, and the craft came to a halt. Dust rose up among the craft, cloaking it in a stinging cloud. From a farmhouse, a family exited the back door; standing on the porch, under the dawn of twilight, they stared at the cloud of dust thinning, and through it, saw the shape of the spacecraft appear, caked with dirt, black with the burns of fiery flame.

A little boy mused, "It's an alien!"

The father pushed them inside, ran for the phone. "Everyone into the crawlspace!"

He grasped the phone, began to dial.

His child screamed.

He dropped the phone, raced into the hall; a dark black man pointed an M60 at the face of the farmer's wife. The farmer's jaw dropped, and he stumbled forward; the black man flicked off the safety. Tears crawled down the man's face; as he fell to his knees, something wrapped around his neck; startled, he grunted; he felt himself being dragged away; a warm arm covered his mouth. He was swung around and thrown against the wall; his eyes laid on a man with youthful eyes; behind the man, a girl of about eighteen yanked the phone off the wall, slamming it to the ground. He looked between them.

The man said, "Don't do anything, and you won't be harmed."

"Who... Who are you?"

"We're just dropping by. Your wife and kids will be fine."

"Please don't hurt them... If you must kill, kill me!"

"We won't kill anyone. Not yet. And certainly not you."

Harris ducked inside. "The phone lines have been ripped. Let's go." He left.

Chelsea left the room; Ross grabbed the guy by the collar, yanked him into the next room, past his crying wife and children; he was pushed out the door, forced to look upon the spacecraft sitting in his field. Ross glowered, "If you leave this house, our men in that spacecraft will shoot you. Do you understand me?"

The man nodded, weak.

"Don't leave," Ross repeated.

They left the house, shutting the door, and entered the garage.

"You're a liar," Kristen said. "There's no one left on the ship."

"Yeah," Ross countered, "but what do they know?"

Harris and T-Bone together lifted the large, sliding garage door. Sitting inside was a tractor-trailer and a Cadillac. Harris tried the driver's door of the Cadillac; locked. He smashed his elbow through the glass, fingered inside, and unlocked the door. The locks were automatic; he other locks snapped open. Harris hotwired the Cadillac, the engine sputtering. Ross jumped shotgun; T-Bone was between them. In the back, Chelsea and the others were wedged together, breathing harsh. Harris pulled the car out from the garage, and they sped down the driveway, gravel spitting behind the back wheels. The car fishtailed, and sped down the countryside back road.

T-Bone searched through the glove compartment. "Found a map."

"The map's our heads," Ross said.

"What?"

He pointed behind him, to those in the back seat, and to himself.

"Oh. Forgot."

"Don't worry about it."

Harris said, "Mahan lives in the Obergee Apartments. That's by the old fashion center, right?"

"Now the hair salon. Unless it's changed again."

"How long," Jake asked, "do you think till they catch on?"

"They' being the enemy?" Harris asked. "I'd say they already know."

"Then where are they?"

"Waiting. At the apartments."

Newberry Road

Harris glanced into the rearview mirror. A car was coming on fast. He looked over at Ross; Ross was craning his head over the back of the chair. The headlights blared in the rearview mirror, blaring; the pilot flipped it to night vision, the headlights reflecting off the ceiling of the car. They grew larger, larger, larger. He stepped on the gas, trying to gain on them; they did, after all, have a Cadillac.

"It's a Viper," Ross said in a low voice.

Harris shook his head. "No way we're outgunning it."

"A viper?" Jake asked. "You mean a snake?"

Ross yelled, "Heads down!"

Everyone in the back ducked; T-Bone lowered his head; through the rearview mirror, several splashes of light danced among the headlights, and the bullets cut through the back window. Ross watched in slow-motion as they burst through the glass, chewing perfect holes; the bullets swarmed into the car, reflected by the glass; one hit the plastic by his head, the other whistled off to the side. More bullets burst through the glass; holes covered the back window. Ross ducked in his seat, the bullets raining through the car. The glass window in the back shattered, breaking apart, glass raining down on those in the back; Harris swerved into the next lane—into an incoming car! The car honked, slamming on its brakes; the car behind them swerved onto their tail, in the wrong lane; Harris dove the car to the left; the car slid past them, brakes spitting white smoke; the car slammed into the enemy vehicle; glass shattered metal bent; the hood burst upwards, and the car twisted, turned; the enemy car crunched together, and the gas tank exploded, burst in flames; the Viper lit up the evening as those insides tried to escape the inferno, but were wedged inside. They burned, wailing screams floating through the night.

David breathed, "That was close..."

Two cars weaved onto the road behind them. Harris took the roads of the subdivision wildly; a man walking his dog jumped out of the way as Harris drove the Cadillac up onto the sidewalk; a fire hydrant smashed the corner of their bumper, and water gushed horizontally over the road; a car swept through the stream, the power sending it spinning; it bashed over the curb, tilted, and collapsed on its side. The soldiers inside climbed out, started running for their car; T-Bone rested his M60 on the crumbling window frame, yanked down the trigger; the pursuing soldiers were thrown back, bullets tearing through them; they fell to the ground, moaning and groaning. The next car went around the stream, and bore down upon them. T-Bone twisted the trigger, spraying the engine with bullets; the engine perforated, the car bucked back and forth, sliding over the road; he loaded incendiary bullets, fired; an incendiary whipped into the frothing fuel, and in an instant the front of the vehicle burst apart, debris flung in every direction; the back end flipped end-over-end, and rested burning; debris pinged over the Cadillac.

"Ross, can I get to the apartments down Newberry?"

"If you take a shortcut through CVS."

Harris nodded and took the car up the sidewalk; they roared through a picket fence, breaking it apart; the Cadillac ripped between two houses, flung over an empty swimming pool; the back tires spun over the lip of the pool, but the first grabbed traction, and they squirmed forward. Mutant soldiers poured through the back of the house, shooting at the car; T-Bone shot back,

spraying them down with heavy machine-gun fire. They tore through the picket fence, and the Cadillac was surrounded by dense weeds and bramble; the tires bucked and jumped over the gnarled ground. The car burst out onto pavement; Harris shouted and hit the brakes, yanking the wheel; the back end of the Cadillac smashed into the front of a parked car.

“Good driving,” Kristen said, rubbing a wound on her face—glass.

The mutants were pouring through the overgrown field. Ross said, “Harris, meet us at the apartments. Drive around the back, drop us off, and trail the mutants away. Lose them later. Got it?”

“All too clear.” He stepped on the gas, making his way through the cluttered parking lot. “Why are so many people shopping on Christmas Eve? Slackers.”

“I don’t know many people,” Megan said, “who buy Christmas gifts at CVS.”

He went around the back, narrowly avoiding collision with a dumpster. A semi sat by the back loading door; he hit the brakes. Ross threw open the door, and he and the five kids ran out, running behind the semi and dropping down, carrying their guns in their hands, wearing their vests, with all the accessories. T-Bone climbed into the back seat, repositioning with the M60; he fell forward as Harris hit the accelerator so hard the doors slammed shut. The engine rumbled. Around the other end of the building, mutants jumped out, shooting from the hips. The Cadillac hit a loading ramp, twisted in the air; the bullets plinked over the bottom of the car; the car fell atop of several of them, crushing them beneath; others were beaten and battered as the Cadillac’s bent bumper tore through them like wet toilet paper. They hit the main road and swerved into traffic, speeding away; T-Bone gunned down any survivors on the road.

Sirens wailed behind them, the lights flashing under the orange sky.

“Police!” T-Bone shouted. “Old models!”

“How close?”

“Pretty—” T-Bone was silenced as an explosion ripped down the road, engulfing the police cars. Cars all around them slammed on the brakes; Harris went off to the side, over the emergency lane; people were getting out of their cars to stare at the firestorm rising high into the sky. T-Bone swallowed. “Never mind.” Some cars hadn’t stopped; black and sleek, they tore the night apart with their loud engines, chasing the Cadillac over the emergency lane.

“Those our friends?”

T-Bone loaded another belt of bullets. “Yeah, I think they are.”

“This is going to be madness.”

“Why madder than now?” He aimed out over the cars, waiting for the enemy to draw close enough to make a dent in their plans. “Cause right now, it’s pretty darned mad. Madder than usual for me, at least.”

“Because we’re heading straight into downtown Clayton.”

“Shouldn’t be too packed, it’s Christmas Eve.”

“There’s a little Clayton tradition called the Christmas Eve parade.”

T-Bone cursed.

CVS Pharmacy

The door leading to the dumpster opened, and in the dwindling dusk, a man stepped into the storage room. In his hand was a 9mm handgun; an MP5 was clipped to his belt. He strode past the bailer; a bagger wheeling in a cart of empty boxes went frozen, and plastered herself against the wall; he gave her a maniacal stare and went through the swinging doors. He stood facing an aisle of birthday cards and flowers. He retraced his steps, found the frightened bagger. “Where’s the truck driver?” She didn’t answer. “Truck driver, did you see him?” She weakly nodded. “Where is he!” She pointed to a wide steel door behind her. “Thanks,” Ross said, and went through.

The truck driver held a checklist in his hands, and was going through several opened crates of wine. Ross approached stealthily, silently; the truck driver shivered as he felt the nod of the gun poking into the soft patch of skin at the base of his skull. He dropped the checklist; it clattered noisily over the ground. Ross demanded, “Give me your keys!”

“I can’t—”

“Give me your keys, or I blow your head off!”

“No.”

He pushed the gun harder into the man’s neck. “I swear to *everything* I hold sacred, that I will *kill* you unless you give up your keys.”

The man hastily dug into his trousers, tossed him a key chain.

“Which one is it?”

“The one without a black rubber grip.”

Ross nodded and ran out the door; the truck driver fell against the wall, knees giving.

They huddled underneath the bulk of the semi; mutants had come around either side of the building, stepping over their dead. Jake stared across the stretch of pavement behind the building, to the long, wavy grass. The mutants weren’t searching the overgrown field, and the field bordered the subdivision that contained the Obergee Apartments. The mutants were closing around them like a noose; Jake unhitched a stun grenade from his belt; the others reached their weapons. He waited till mutants had met in front of the truck, and were readying to search around—and under—the semi. Plucking out the pin, he gently rolled it away from them; the grenade went out from under the truck, nesting against the boot of an enemy soldier. The five kids covered their faces as the grenade blew; white-hot dazzling light sprayed outwards in a blinding snowstorm; the kids leapt out from the semi, running around to either side, firing with M16s. The bewildered, blinded mutants ran this way and that, mowed down by the gunfire; fifteen lay dead, more ran into the field. Chelsea leapt up onto the broad hood of the semi, aimed along the sights of the M16, fired several rounds—those fleeing in the field twisted and toppled, guts wrenched out.

Megan shook all over—the gun was warm in her hands.

Kristen, adorer of her life, felt justice quenched in her soul.

David felt righteous indignation in the slaughter of the soulless monsters.

Jake’s own fermenting hatred overflowed through the sputtering bullets.

The sound of broken concrete; they whipped around to see a handful of mutants on the roof of CVS, in their hands automatic weapons. They pointed down at the group of kids, not understanding who they were or why they were standing dressed in battle uniform. One of the mutants snapped, “Drop your weapons!”

Jake’s eyes seemed afire. “No one move.”

“Drop them!” the enemy roared.

Jake wagged his tongue. “Over my dead body. *Rot in hell.*”

The enemy fired; Jake flung backwards, chest ripped open and torn apart; he landed hard on his back, neck jerking—he spewed blood from his mouth, eyes rolling as his body thumped on the pavement. Chelsea stepped back, firing from the M16; the bullets grazed over the shooter; with a grunt he fell forward, head bashing on the concrete as he flipped. The other mutants opened fire; the kids dove behind the semi, firing upwards. Kristen yelled something, and ran from hiding, sprinting across the tarmac; the soldiers readjusted the aim of their weapons; suddenly David leapt out, hurling a grenade; it went over the lip of the roof, and landed at the soldiers’ feet. One reached down to grab it, but was blown apart upwards as the grenade exploded. Flames choked the roof of the building, blasting the soldiers to pieces; those still alive stumbled around on the roof, burning; some fell, landing next to Jake’s body, now still. Flames rose from their clothes as they ran around, shrieking.

“Let them burn!” David screeched.

They raced across the pavement, following Kristen into the field; Megan looked over her shoulder—more enemy soldiers moved in the smoke. Whistling bullets sprinkled all around them; they fell down into the grass, crawling; bullets snapped and twisted, plinking in the dirt all around them. Stalks of thick weeds were cut short; plumes of muddy dirt rose into the air. They cowered low, daring not to move; Megan vomited as a bullet landed in her chest, rocking the bulletproof vest; the impact caused her to hurl all over the grass in front of her. It smelled rank—bullets fell like rain.

“We’re going to die!” David screamed. “We can’t get out of here!”

The railing of the bullets seemed to die down by half...

Chelsea swallowed her fear, thinking, *It can’t end like this...*

Ross left the truck driver, and went back into the backroom. The bagger was gone. He went out into the store, between the aisles. A little baby in a cart looked up at him; he smiled at the little boy, and walked towards the registers. The bagger was talking in ragged breaths to the manager of the store; the manager looked up as Ross strode into view. The manager reached for the phone; Ross rose the pistol, squeezed the trigger; the shot sent the store into shivers; the bullet landed next to the manager's hand, shattering the phone. Ross went through the line, nodded to the paled faces of those in the store, and went through the front doors.

A fat man dressed as Santa Claus collected money for an 'unnamed charity'. As Ross waltzed past, he grabbed the bucket and spilled it on the ground. Coins and dollar bills spilt over the cold concrete. The impersonator looked angry, and lashed out at Ross; Ross caught his arm, twisted it, and pressed the pistol to his head. The fat man began to sweat, and Ross growled, "Don't rip off others with your scams and lies. When I come back around, you'd best be gone."

The sound of chattering gunfire tore his head up. The roof. He released the man. "I've got to go," he said, and ran around the side of the building. A group of teenagers on bicycles had heard the gunfire, and asked him, "What's going on!"

"Stay back. It's nothing to worry about." He began climbing the ladder to the roof.

"Is anyone hurt?" a youth wanted to know.

Ross looked over his shoulder, down at them. The gunfire stopped; a muffled explosion shook his hair. "In a moment, I believe there will be. Unless you want to be counted among the dead, you'd better run." He ascended the ladder, and pulled himself onto the roof.

The smoke was clearing, but several mutants were already positioning a pair of mounted machineguns on the rim of the roof. Silently, secretly, Ross moved behind them, holstered his pistol, unclipped the MP5, threw it into automatic. The soldiers didn't hear him; he moved with the alertness of a mouse, the silence of a snake. He grabbed his Gerber, and with a slash ran up to the nearest mutant and slit his throat. The mutant fell to his knees, clawing at his throat, eyes petrified; Ross stepped over the body, hurled the knife through the air; the gunner of the first machine-gun yelped in pain as the knife tore into the back of his head; he toppled over the gun, the bullets quiet; the man feeding the bullets looked up to see a bullet smashing between his eyes. His body was thrown over the edge. The soldier on the second machine-gun stood; the MP5 spoke with an attitude, and the gunner fell over his mount. The last mutant tried to run, but caught it hard in the back; he collapsed to the concrete, dead.

The firing completely stopped; no one moved.

"Go for it," Chelsea muttered. Her gun caught on weeds. She left it. No time.

Kristen leapt to her feet and ran hard; the ground seemed to part, and she lost her footing; she slid down a concrete embankment, splashing in cold, murky water, covered with thin ice. Megan, Chelsea, David followed after her, splashing in. A tunnel opened up before them, dark and foreboding. Wishing nothing more than to escape the onslaught from the roof, they got to their feet and ran splashing in the shallow water, ducking under the ceiling of the stretching tunnel, submerged in an instant in total darkness.

Ross saw them scurry down into the drainage sewer. But he didn't pursue.

He leapt down from the roof, landing on the semi trailer; he dropped down onto the hood, swung around, unlocked the door. He wedged himself inside, and shut the door of the truck. The engine started after a few moments, kicking on in the cold of December. He pressed the gas, and the front wheels grounded the bodies of the mutants and Jake under the treads; blood matted the tires. He pulled around the corner; the trailer smashed against the building, tearing out a chunk of concrete; the trailer fell away from the truck, listing onto its side. Ross felt the weight being yanked off, and hit the gas harder. The 4x4 wheels wasted no time. In the rearview mirror he saw several people sticking their heads out of the gaping chasm in the store, staring at the rubble. He zoomed past the corner sidewalk; a mother tore her little girl out of the way, open-mouthed at Ross. He waved an apology and gunned for the road.

A large cloud of smoke was rising from flames on the road, choking on melting cars and the twists and charred bodies of the victims. The stench of burnt human flesh floated with the sweet, saintly wind.

The Parade

"The traffic's going to slow us down," T-Bone said.

"No, it won't." Harris took the Cadillac up onto the sidewalk, tearing down several mailboxes; he drove into a yard to avoid colliding with a light pole. A dog barked as they drove by; a wife jumped up and down as they tore down her mailbox; the enemy Viper slewed onto the road after them; the wife flicked off the mutants, but instead of a friendly ignorance she caught bullets in her chest; she fell back into her husband's arms, blood flowing from her wounds.

"They're shooting innocents," T-Bone said.

"Since when is that news?" Harris asked.

The Cadillac drove up into the overcrowded parking lot of I.G.A., driving down the lane, parked cars flashing by on either side. Harris pounded the horn; a teenager jerked his girlfriend out of the lane, startled by the pummeling car. As the Cadillac passed, the boy barked, "That was my biology teacher!"

"Mr. Harris?" his girlfriend asked. "He's boring. No way."

The Viper screamed past, the wake of its passing blowing the two kids up against the cars. The boy stared. "That was a Viper!"

Harris swung out onto Main Street; crowds were everywhere; he hit the brakes and swerved, cutting a swath of fleeing folk. The front end of the Cadillac smashed into an ice cream stand, bending in the hood. He pulled around a Boy Scouts float, the little kids pointing at the Cadillac, as it roared past; the Viper spun its wheels out of the parking lot, not braking; an entire family was caught under the wheels and grounded to a bloody pulp. More were thrown this way and that as the Viper rumbled around the float, after the Cadillac; a gunner in the Viper fired, spraying the back of the Cadillac; a bullet grazed T-Bone's ear, drawing blood; T-Bone fired from the M60, hitting the hood, then grazed it up to the windshield; the driver fell into his seat as bullets tore through his face; the Viper veered and slammed into a Pride Committee float, sending it onto its side, girls and boys running from the overturned float, badges and stripes fluttering in the wind. Another Viper came in behind.

"They never stop," T-Bone said.

"I'm gonna try and lose them in the parade."

He went off to the right, around a Clayton Hardware float. The Viper tried to match, but had to much speed. They passed by on either side of the floats, at intervals, the mutants firing; the bullets went into the crowd. Soon the mutants began firing at those on the floats; the innocents of a church float with a singing Elvis were gutted and torn, falling, moaning and shrieking in their own blood. Harris stepped on the gas; a Christmas float sitting on the bed of a high-rise semi was before them.

T-Bone batted, "Another Viper, behind us!"

"I saw. Hold on." He jerked the wheel; they went under the semi, the front end intercepting the side of the Viper; the much-less-reinforced Viper took the blow brutally; the glass windows shattered, and the car flipped, rolling up against an old-style home, tearing out the bricks. The mutants tried to climb from the wreckage; T-Bone grazed them down. People ran and screamed at the gunfire. Police officers formed a barricade ahead; the Viper appeared behind them, the enemy shooting. Harris dove in a gap between two floats; the bullets from the enemy sprinkled over the policemen, throwing them against blood-splattered cop cars. Two cop cars were thrown to the side as the Cadillac tore through; the engine sputtered and swore. The headlights of two Vipers blared in the rearview mirror. T-Bone was running out of ammunition.

Suddenly the car swerved; Harris ducked his head, the ceiling being torn off by the underside of a huge truck being used to ferry a float. The metal of the roof fell down behind them, crumpled and wrinkled, smoking. A Viper tore over the crumpled roof, coming from the other direction; ahead were several more floats, then the pride and joy of the parade, a display of military power from a nearby military base. The Vipers clung to their tails; a Viper kept up with them beyond the floats; in the gaps between floats, one could see a mutant on the roof, balancing. Harris looked ahead; saw a military Humvee, guarded by a pair of nervous soldiers readying the mounted machinegun for a defense. Harris mouthed, "Oh, God... T-Bone, get ready to jump!" He pointed ahead; T-Bone nodded. Harris floored it; the Viper accelerated

ahead of them. "No..." T-Bone stood, rickety; he saw the terrified faces of the civilians along the curb, pulling their children, friends and loved ones from the street, staring at the disheveled, beaten Cadillac with mock insanity.

So unknowing...

The Viper pulled up along the Humvee; the mutant jumped onto the bed of the Humvee, and with a scythe-blade hacked the first soldier in the back, rolling him off the vehicle with a kick of the foot. The other reached for his pistol, but the scythe blade flashed, and in an instant the head of the soldier flew off, into the crowd; the body tottered and fell, landing on the ground, writhing and spurting blood. The mutant dropped behind the mounted machinegun; the Cadillac reached it, the body of the soldier thumping under the wheels; T-Bone jumped, landing on the flatbed; the mutant fired behind the machinegun; T-Bone dropped onto the flatbed, lying flat, the bullets shattering his eardrums above. He kicked the gun away with his legs; the impact sent the mutant falling back. T-Bone went around, drawing his Gerber; the mutant stood, displaying the scythe blade. T-Bone twisted the knife in his hands; they faced each other on the flatbed.

In the Cadillac, the engine turned, knocked. An emergency signal flashed on the dashboard. Harris felt heat. The engine was on fire. He cursed. The Vipers were gaining; a well-placed round would set the Cadillac into a fiery explosion, and he'd be lost forever. Harris opened his door, crawled up onto the roof; the Cadillac veered towards an alley; he jumped, grasping at fake puffs of snow; he pulled himself onto the float. Terrified Girl Scouts screamed and jumped down onto the street, running into the crowd.

A woman cried, "Don't hurt me!"

Harris yelled, "Get off the float!"

She hit the ground rolling, and clambered into the hands of helpful citizens.

The Cadillac rolled into the alley, exploding; the windows of the building burst outwards with the force; flames caught onto the wooden beams of the tea house, and the flames licked into the sky, the burning embers of a dying age.

The mutant swung out with the blade; T-Bone jumped back, and struck out with his knife; the mutant dodged, and attacked again; T-Bone sidestepped, dancing on his feet. He teetered over the edge of the flatbed; the mutant struck again; he bent backwards, slashing the mutant's wrists. Blood flowed like a river. The mutant roared, and attacked again; the scythe blade cut over T-Bone's chest, drawing a deep red line, even through the thick Kevlar vest. T-Bone fell beside the gun, breath knocked out of him; the knife fell from his hands; the mutant hacked down at him; T-Bone caught the blade in his hands, searing with pain; he pushed it away, and kicked out with his feet, into the mutant's stomach; the blade sickeningly jerked from his palm, blood rancid. T-Bone fell upon the mutant; the mutant tried to slice with the scythe, but T-Bone grabbed the man's hand; the blood from his hand covered the mutant's skin; he twisted the scythe; the mutant tried to squirm free, but was pinned by T-Bone's legs; the tip of the knife pressed into the mutant's throat; the mutant coughed; the tip burrowed past the skin; the eyes were Satanic; the knife slid through the throat, cutting the esophagus, larynx, jugular vein. Blood sprayed upwards, over T-Bone's face, warm and sticky. T-Bone backed away; the mutant's legs kicked as he tried to pull the scythe from his throat. He snarled in the mutant's face, "It ends today!"

The black man jumped onto the gun; the two Vipers to the right came into view; he fired round after round, shattering the steel and glass of the first Viper; it fishtailed to the side, into the crowd, burying several people under the wild wheels. The other Viper tried to swerve, and drove under the huge truck; the mutants screamed as their scalps were torn by the roof; the Viper veered out the other side, hitting the Viper on the opposite side of the road; the two Vipers twisted together; T-Bone emptied an entire magazine, and the first Viper exploded, taking the other with it. The fireball climbed into the sky, burning several in the crowd; a float went aflame.

T-Bone jumped off the gun and ran to the front of the Humvee; he wrenched off the hatch leading down in the cabin, and dropped down inside. At the sight of the blood-soaked clothes, the fermenting face, the dangerous eyes and hateful passion, the two frightened soldiers in the

Humvee opened their doors and jumped onto the road. T-Bone kept the passenger door open, shut the driver's door, and pulled out of the parade formation, gunning down the road. He saw the Cadillac burning, and his heart sank; but he saw Harris standing on the abandoned float, MP5 dangling from his hands. T-Bone pulled up alongside; Harris jumped down, gripping the roof, and slid inside, shutting the door. He saw T-Bone's blood through the vest, and his slashed hand, but said nothing. Instead he climbed through the hatch and manned the machinegun; the Humvee tore down a one-way street, bashing through two parked cars before it hit a lane leading into the Obergee Subdivision.

The Sewers

Water dripped from the curved, mold-encrusted walls. It stank, sour and detestable. The icy water at their feet was laced with dirt and mud, flecks of mottled white snow. The sound of scurrying rats echoed down the tunnel. Grates above them let down pale light, shafts illuminating the dreariness of the sewage tunnel.

Megan shouted, "Jake's dead! Jake's—"

Chelsea looked over her shoulder at her; she was faltering. "Faster! They're coming!"

Dark silhouettes appeared over the lip of the tunnel behind them; "Megan!" Chelsea screamed. Megan swung around as the mutants fired. Gunfire splashed into the water at her feet; a slug shattered her knee; she tottered forward, grunting, landing on her knees, the pain nauseating. Weaponless, Chelsea ran forward, bullets tore into Megan's seventeen-year-old, innocent body; plumes of blood exited her back and dug into the shallow water. She wavered back and forth, M16 in her hands. "Megan!" Chelsea was above her; the mutants dangling from above the tunnel reloaded magazines; Megan tossed her gun upwards, in a daze; Chelsea caught it, whipped it around, and pulled the trigger. Three bullets. The trio of mutants lost their footing and fell into the water, which turned red with their awful blood; their fingers went limp, and their Uzi's slipped from their evil hands.

Chelsea fell down next to Megan. Megan fell back into her hands. Those innocent, starry eyes stared into her own, and Chelsea's anger surged. Blood dribbled from Megan's misty lips; her eyes suddenly lost all depth, and breath issued forth no more from her lungs. Chelsea let out a howl of rage and dropped her into the water; the blood from her torn black ran in currents under the broken ice. Chelsea loaded another magazine into the gun, and walked up to the dead mutants. With no pause, she fired round after round into body after body; the fronts became torn meshes of shattered bone and sheared muscle.

"Chelsea!" Kristen began running towards her. "Chelsea..."

Chelsea swung around, raised the gun, and pointed it at Kristen.

Kristen fell in her tracks. "Chelsea!"

Ross' girl wrenched down the trigger; the gun flashed; Kristen thought her life was over; the gun whistled past her ear; it went past David's shoulder, and David felt something warm splatter over his neck. He pressed a finger to the substance, and in the dim shaft of light from a grate, saw it was blood. He looked over his shoulder; the body of a mutant with a dagger lay at his feet, the shot drilled clean through its forehead.

Chelsea walked over to Megan's corpse, knelt down, and slid her eyes closed.

"Jake, and now her." She shook her head. "Everything's falling apart."

"Have hope," Kristen said.

"Control is slipping from our hands."

David said, "I was in a club once." They looked over at him, curious. "Me, Daniel, a kid named Dave and John, and Ross, too. We used to come down here, and pretend we were in Viet Cong tunnels. We'd act like it was our job to rat them out. Three of us on the Vietnamese side, and two as the Americans. We learned these tunnels by heart. Our moms didn't like it too much. Rats with rabies and all."

"Get to a point," Kristen snapped.

"These grates," he said, pointing upwards, "they run down Damgee Way. All the way down to Crybaby Bridge. Obergee Apartments is *right on* Damgee Way. One of these grates will lead us right to the apartments. If we hurry, maybe we can get rid of this Mahan guy before anyone else dies. You, Kristen, or you, Chelsea, or even me."

Coming Together

They ran down the tunnel, feet splashing noisily. David found the grate, and used a stepladder plastered against the wall to reach it. A cool breeze ruffled his hair. He wrapped his fingers around the bars—pulled away, fingers burning with the intense, freezing cold. He pushed the grate away, stuck his head out—bright lights shone in his eyes; hands grabbed his legs; he was jerked down just as the massive bulk of a semi without a trailer thundered past. When it had passed, David checked one more time, then crawled out, helping Kristen and Chelsea through. The semi came to a halt; they readied their weapons, but the door opened and Ross jumped out. Almost at the same time, a wooden fence shattered in the yard across the street, and headlights dappled over the street. An Army Humvee slid across the road and came to a rest along the curb. Harris was on the gun; he jumped down as T-Bone stepped out. Blood covered his face and clothes. He was wounded in the chest, and his hand was losing blood. Harris grabbed a medical kit from the back, wrapped his hand; T-Bone said, “It’s just a cut on my chest. Don’t bother bandaging it. We can’t waste any time.”

Ross approached them. “Where’s Jake, Megan?”

Kristen shook her head.

His firm countenance shifted, sorrow glowered, but then he returned to his normal determined self, though there was no hiding the sadness that clung to his throat, the knot that shook his thunderous voice. “No doubt these soulless creeps are keeping close watch on Mahan. We can’t just ring the doorbell, and Mahan let us in. Chelsea, I need you to stand guard out here. I’ll go in through the front—they expect that. Harris, Kristen, you go into the apartment beneath Mahan’s, Apartment 8, and meet me. David, T-Bone, when the shooting starts, go into Apartment 9. Hopefully things will be a little clearer for you. Find Mahan, and *kill him*. That’s the only way. He is innocent—I don’t deny that—but if he survives, billions—no, trillions—of innocents in the wages of the future will be slaughtered. Humanity will *fall* if we don’t *kill this man*. Understood?”

T-Bone nodded. “Yes.”

Ross demanded, “David?”

He swallowed. “I’ll shoot any man who breathes in the apartment.”

“Good. Let’s do it.”

Obergege Assault

Ross threw open the front door, launching himself inside. Immediately a giant blade fell from a trap on the ceiling, slicing towards him with lightning speed; he dodged it, and ran up the stairs; two mutants pulled out their guns, firing; the bullets seemed to spread away from him as he leapt on top of them; he grabbed them both by the collars and hurled them over the railing; they screamed and shouted, landing hard on their backs, spines snapping. They lay silent. Ross drew the blade back up, set it in place, and ran up the steps.

Harris heard shooting: “Now!” He shattered the window with the assault rifle, and jumped inside. The bullets had torn open a cough; Kristen slinked in behind him. The room lights were off; two shadows lurked in the corner. One had a gun. Kristen raised her weapon to fire; Harris urged her to stop, side-stepped to the wall, and turned on the light. They winced in the newfound brightness, but shivered—a mutant was pressed up against a naked woman, whose tears had turned her eyes bloodshot; her weak legs shivered, and her nude body was covered with bruises and cuts. The mutant used her as a shield, pressing an assault rifle into the side of her head. The woman sobbed, the life barely clinging inside her. The naked mutant threatened to kill her if they moved; Kristen looked into the woman’s eyes, which seemed to pour out the wail,

He’ll kill me, kill him, help me...

He has ravaged me...

He has raped me...

He has degraded me...

he has done evil, detestable things to me...

I am no longer pure, but his blood and semen reign in me...

Kill him, kill him, kill him... Kristen urged to blow the enemy away.

Harris ordered, "Put the gun down! We won't kill you. Let the woman go."

"You move, and I kill her," the man hissed.

"Don't do this. Don't make me kill you."

The man didn't flinch. "You come for Mahan. He will not be found."

"Put down the gun!"

"Your endeavor is hopeless! I only reap carnal benefits for my own pleasure. Quite a lovely woman, isn't she? Ah, the pleasure she is brought. The pleasure from my stiff penis, and the pleasure of my soul as she screams, as blood flows from her wounds, as she stinks of bloodied innocence. My time will end, I fear no living man. I drink her tears, her tears for those she has lost. Do you think she tears for her own degradedness?" He nodded to a door, leading to a dark room. "Take a look. Slowly." His smile was evil, sinister.

T-Bone and David stood on the rickety stairs outside the building, creaking under their weight. The sun was setting, the last orange streaks dying blood red, then seeping into darkness. Harris and Kristen had already entered; there had been spots of gunfire, but nothing since. David's insides twisted and turned; *what was going on?* T-Bone said, "If they're dead, no matter—we are not." He smashed the window, and dove inside; mutants ran into the room from the kitchen, having been waiting at the door. T-Bone mowed them down with his heavy M60; stray bullets plinked against the bookcases and a roll-top desk belonging to Mahan. The bodies of the mutants bled on the floor. David came in after him, and ran into the kitchen to make sure everything was clear.

T-Bone looked at a picture of Mahan with his daughter. No wife. Of course. He wasn't married yet.

David ran inside; he drew a knife from his pocket, and hurled it through the air; T-Bone felt the wake of the dagger as it whipped by his hair; a mutant shrieked behind him, the dagger having lodged in his throat. The mutant fell backwards, onto the couch, groping at the knife, rasping noises coming from its mouth; blood flowed from its throat, showering his chest and shoulders, washing onto the couch. David said, "How do you like that?"

T-Bone grinned. "*I designed the trainer that taught you that.*"

David only said, "Oh."

The black warrior of the south walked past, to the door, made sure it was locked, and readied to fire at any incoming mutants that happened to barge through. "Check the other rooms!"

A mutant wrestled with the pistol stuck in his belt; Ross grabbed his throat, and with a rip jerked out his breathing tubes. The mutant wavered, groping at his bloody throat; Ross fired up the steps, sending several mutants rolling down. Gunfire came from the floors above, raining down. Ross jumped, grabbed the railing of the stairs above, and sprayed gunfire over the railing; the mutants shooting tumbled down, grasping at their wounds. He pulled himself up and over, ignoring their bodies. He heard gunfire upstairs. A mutant suddenly fell from the heavens, tackled Ross against the wall; the gun fell from Ross' hand; the mutant took a swipe at him; Ross grabbed the mutant's hand, twisted; the wrist bones and tendons snapped; the mutant howled; he shoved him over the railing; the mutant fell, the back of his head smashed as it hit the edge of a railing further down. Ross picked up his gun and ran up the steps.

The stairwell was cleared.

Kristen didn't move, but raised her gun, pointing it at the man.

Harris slowly walked past, entered the room, flicked on the light. There was silence. He walked back out; the mutant laughed. Harris paid no heed, but drew his MP5; the mutant squeezed the trigger, blowing the woman's face apart, sending her brain, blood and broken bone against a bookcase filled with picture frames of a smiling, loving family. Her naked body fell; the mutant turned to fire at Harris; Harris' gun coughed, and the bullets tore through the naked mutant like silver in a vampire's *they drink the blood of the innocent* heart. The mutant fell over the body of the naked woman.

Kristen ran into the room: on the bed was a familiar face. An eighteen-year-old junior; she lay on her back, completely naked, vagina filled with blood and semen. Her legs were cut and mutilated, and her round stomach was ripped open, the entrails scattered over the bed; parts of her liver, kidneys and intestines were chewed. Her small breasts had been cut off, the skin shoved down her throat; her face was purpled and bloated, her having suffocated in her own flesh. Her arms were cut and ragged; a finger was chewed off at the joint.

Harris appeared behind Kristen, and said in a low voice, "She was one of mine. In my class. A wonderful girl. Now her life has been stolen." He turned away and headed for the door. "It is time to exact revenge."

Ross threw open the door; T-Bone was standing there. "Any sign of Mahan?"

T-Bone shook his head. "None. David's checking."

David appeared at the end of the kitchen. "He's not here."

Harris and Kristen came in behind Ross. "A mutant and raped the family in the apartment below," Harris said slowly. "A student of mine."

"Who?" Ross asked.

"Amy Chan. She was in your class."

Ross' eyes flamed with anger. An angel of a girl. "So where *is* Mahan?"

Kristen pulled something off the refrigerator—a crude hand-colored picture of a Christmas tree, several stick-figure shepherds, and a stick figure Mary and Joseph huddling around a mottled baby Jesus. She flipped it over. On the back it read:

*Come see the Clayton Elementary School 2003 Christmas Play
Hark! The Herald Angels Sing!
In the Clayton High School Auditorium
7:30-8:30pm and 8:45-9:45pm Wednesday, December 24, 2003
All are invited.
Admission is \$2.00 for kids, \$3.00 for adults*

T-Bone grabbed a picture sitting on the built-in bookcase ledge; it was a color photo of a forty-year-old man with his eight-year-old daughter. The man was Mahan, and the girl his orphaned daughter. Ms. Mahan must have somehow died in the past. They'd always thought he was single. T-Bone said, "He has a daughter."

Kristen announced, "His daughter is in a Christmas play at Clayton High School. What time is it?"

David glanced at his watch. "My watch says eleven in the morning."

"It's nine fifteen," Ross jumped in. "When does it end?"

"Nine-forty-five."

"Let's hurry, then," Ross said. "Let's pray that by 10:00 tonight, this whole thing ends, and humanity is—"

A figure appeared in the doorway; Kristen dropped the child's drawing as rough, leathery hands grabbed her; an arm wrapped around her throat, and a gun was pressed hard against her forehead. No one dared breathe. The mutant was maniacal; his left leg was broken and bleeding, and he limped. Sweat poured down his face, but yet he was more alive than ever. The mutant hissed, "The fame of the All-Glorious Victorious Army shall never be clenched in mere human hands!" He drew away, and vanished into the hall, dragging Kristen with her.

Ross ran out to the hall, but jumped back as a booming explosion tore apart a section of stairs; it fell and crumbled down below over the other flights of stairs, blockading him from the rest of the stairwell. He heard Kristen's jagged screams for help, the clanking of feet, as the mutant raced up the tenth floor of the apartments and out onto the roof under the cold twilight.

"He's on the roof," David breathed.

Ross leapt over the railing, falling; David threw his head over in fear; he saw Ross hit the ground, agile as an animal, and race out the front door. The bodies of mutants were strewn everywhere, Ross' carnage before every mortal eye—but David didn't know whether or not to trust Ross with Kristen's life. With any roll of bad luck, Kristen was truly already dead.

"There's no way we can jump it," T-Bone said. "Not even Ross jumped it. Too rickety. Genius jerk. Don't see to many of them. Come on!" They ran after Ross.

Rooftop Showdown

The mutant threw her down, grabbed at her clothes, tried to tear them off. Kristen shouted, resisted, kicked the mutant away. Angered, the mutant jumped once more, and sank a dagger blade into her leg; Kristen screamed in pain, head flinging back, the shriek echoing over the flat farmland, the rest of the neighborhood. The mutant reached out to pull off her clothes, to rape and ravage her frail body—a shadow flickered, and suddenly his face seemed to split apart in agony; he thundered backwards, landing, grunting. Chelsea thrust the butt of the gun into the mutant's face, searing a dark red line; the mutant's eye was cut; blood poured from his face; his hands grabbed her legs, and ripped; Chelsea fell down next to Kristen, and suddenly the mutant fell upon her, knife glinting; she caught his hand, and held it away; they rolled over the rooftop, in a deathwatch, a fight to the bloodiest death; suddenly she couldn't move; the mutant straddled her, and the dagger closed in on her chest. She tried to push him away, but her arms went weak; the tip hit her breast, and began to pierce; she gasped in pain, strength flooding away, and the knife—

The sound of a crackling bullet roared; the mutant went limp, his neck charred, connected only by strings of muscle. Chelsea heaved him off her body, and scurried to her feet. The dull eyes stared lifelessly at the sky. Kristen teetered on her legs, blood soaking her pants; in her hands was her pistol, the black plastic making heated by the striking bullet. She lowered the pistol; both of the girls were gracious of the other. Harris, T-Bone and David jumped onto the roof from the outside stairwell; saw the mutant lying dead in a growing puddle of blood.

"Where's Ross?" Harris asked.

A deep beeping called them over to the edge of the roof. The Humvee waited below. Ross stood by the door, honked again, yelled, "We haven't much time! Stop messing around and get down here!"

T-Bone shook his head. "Bloody fool."

Clayton High

Ross drove; David was in the front seat with him; Kristen, Chelsea and T-Bone were in the back, T-Bone dancing in his medical expertise; Harris commanded the machinegun on the back of the Humvee.

Kristen rolled up her pant's leg and T-Bone bandaged the wound. "It's deep," he said over the rumble of the engine. "Can you fight?"

She nodded. "More than ever. It's just a flesh wound."

"You'd say that if your arm were cut off," Chelsea said.

"How's your chest?"

Chelsea reddened. "It's fine."

"You sure?"

"You don't need to look at it, it's fine."

T-Bone paused, then nodded. "Okay."

They pulled into Clayton High School parking lot, past the grove of trees that made up the barrier between the two streets running in and out of the High School. It'd felt like forever, Ross knew, since he'd lain eyes on the place. Almost another world. Memories haunted him; memories of peace, of happiness, of a life worth living. He shook the memories away. Painful; not because they hurt, but because they made him hurt—made him ache for that time. Fuel to win the war. If they won this final battle, all would be fine. All would be fine. The parking lot was crammed; they didn't look for a spot, but parked next to the Band Entrance; the auditorium was inside the school. Ross cut the engine, jumped out. A teen stood watch at the door, taking tickets. The others got out from the back; the teen stared at Harris, manning the machinegun; Harris jumped down.

The six of them walked up to the door. The youth said, "I'm sorry, but you can't—" He stopped, looked at Chelsea. She was familiar. Beautiful, and familiar. Something clicked. And

he looked over at Kristen. And David. He remembered: they disappeared four months ago, them and two other kids. And yet here they stood. He had known Kristen personally. He stared into her eyes; she drew an M16 from behind her back.

"Can we get through?" Kristen asked.

He nodded, stunned, all too much to handle.

They went inside. The door shut behind them. The youth fainted onto the ground.

The corridor was lined with kids ready to go on stage; several teachers looked up—and fell against the wall, hearts leaping into their chests. Ross pushed through the throngs of children; it grew deathly silent; the silent guns roared authority enough. Ross gazed into the eyes of each teacher, and walked onto stage. The limelight was hot; sweat dappled over his brow. He couldn't see over the crowd because of the lights; he lifted his MP5, and shot out the lights. Glass rained down. The large skylights above offered scarce light from the obese moon to light the room. The kids on stage dove for cover behind the props, and some ran crying—screaming—into the crowd. The people stood, trying to flee; but Harris and T-Bone guarded the two side exits; Kristen and Chelsea stood at the main entrance. David sheltered Ross from the side door.

Ross walked up to a microphone, said, "No one will be hurt if you cooperate. Please don't be afraid. Everyone, if you can, I'd really like it if you sat down." No one dared to move. He raised the sub-machinegun, and shot into the air, the bullets lodging in the wooden timber ceiling. People screamed. "Sit!" They obeyed this time around. "I am here looking for a Mr. Mahan."

David heard a little girl behind him say, "That's my Daddy!"

David turned, pointed the gun at her. "Come here."

A teacher tried to tell her not to, but the girl came forward anyways. He grabbed her by the arms. The girl winced. "You're hurting me!" She then asked, "You're not going to shoot Daddy, are you?"

He didn't answer, but dragged her onto the stage. A teacher burst into tears.

Ross mouthed, *What are you doing?* to David. David stood next to him with the girl. "I have with me a girl who claims to belong to Mr. Mahan. Whether or not she is telling the truth, if a Mr. Mahan does not stand," he pointed his M16 at the ridge of her skull, "then I will kill her." He spoke with indifference, unfeeling, as if he cared not for human life; but Ross knew David was a good actor, and thanked God he was playing his cards right.

Muffled reactions spread through the crowd. Finally a man stood, shouted, "I am Doctor Mahan. Please, do not hurt my daughter. If you must hurt anyone, hurt me. But, God, please, don't hurt my daughter!"

David tossed the girl to the side; she scrambled to her feet and ran crying down the ramp to the crowd, and embraced Mahan. She sobbed, "Don't let them do it, Daddy! Don't let them kill you!"

Mahan looked up, innocence reigning. "I have nothing against you. What have I done?" David looked up at Ross; Ross didn't move, but his nervous fingers tapped the stock of the MP5. Mahan pleaded, "If you take my life, you take everything my daughter has. I am everything to her, and she is everything to me. God, I beg you, don't hurt us."

The girl sobbed on her father's shoulder. "Daddy, I don't want you to die! I don't want you to die!"

From the front entrance, Chelsea stepped forward, raised the M16.

The girl screamed, "Daddy, let's go home! Go home! Don't let the bad men hurt you!"

Mahan sighed. His own voice was shaky. "Why do you threaten me? My only wish is to raise a family. I am to be married tomorrow morning. You will shatter not only my daughter's dreams, but my own." He spoke with courage and bravery, but his own words were growing choppy and choppy.

Chelsea aimed to fire; Ross turned his eyes.

Abruptly the silence was shattered as the skylights above shattered, falling apart; glass fell onto the throngs of people in the auditorium. Ross swung around his gun, shooting up at the mutants as they dropped down into the crowd. The mutants swung giant knives, hacking those in the crowd, sending them down to the ground in a bath of blood. They fired up at Ross, David, into the people streaming for the exits. The flood of people knocked down Chelsea; she clung to the wall over the roar of screams and gunfire. Harris and T-Bone rushed into the room,

shooting; mutants flipped and flopped, blood spraying fountains into the air. Mahan grabbed his daughter, and he ran through the crowd; he bumped Kristen and ran out the door. Kristen chased.

Ross jumped into the crowd, slaying the mutants; David ushered the kids on stage out the side door, yelled at the teachers, "Get them out of here!" He turned around; a mutant pointed a gun in his face; T-Bone's rifle bashed the mutant in the skull, and the mutant fell.

Kristen aimed over her rifle, squinting the sights over Mahan. Pull the trigger... hope will be restored...

She gasped as searing pain drove down her spine; the knife dug deep into her back, tearing at her spinal column; she toppled, the gun falling from burning arms. She hit the ground, felt warmth spread over her skin. A strange peace fell over her. She rolled onto her back; blood matted her hair. From the corners of her eyes she saw people running away, sprinting for their cars, grabbing their children. The mutant raised the knife; Kristen watched without protest as the knife fell from the sky, and all went black as it buried into her forehead, piercing bone, and stabbed into her brain. She was left on the ground, her chilled body bleeding even past death, placid eyes staring up at the moonlit sky.

Ross shot the last mutant in the face; the mutant flipped backwards, landing over the body of a woman whose silky white dress was smeared red with the blood of the murderers. She missed half of her face, torn away by fetid mutant gunfire. Ross turned away from the scene. David came forward; T-Bone and Harris stood there, among the carnage, between the seats; Chelsea threw the body of a slewed mutant down into the band pit, now completely abandoned, the instruments, chairs and seats in wild disarray. Silence befell the room, save for the moans and groans of a few wounded. A woman tried to stand, pulled herself forward; her entire torso was gone, leaving ragged flesh and trailing organs. T-Bone shot her in the head, ending her misery; she fell down to the ground.

"Check the dead, see if Mahan is in there," Harris said.

Ross glowered, "He's not."

"How do you know?"

"If he was, we wouldn't be here. But, let me ask you, where is Kristen?"

They found her lying in a pool of blood, the mutant knife buried in her scalp. The mutant cowered in the shadows; Ross pulled the knife from her body, walked over to the mutant; the mutant raised its hands to plead for mercy, but Ross grabbed him by the hair and swung him around. He forced the mutant to march, and pushed him against an American flagpole. The flag flapped high in the sky as the last cars screeched out of the parking lot. The mutant begged to be let free, but Ross lowered the flag, and bound his hands in the rope. The mutant was crying now. Ross held the knife soaked with Kristen's blood, hesitated not, pressed it against the mutant's throat, and slit it. The mutant wheezed for air as blood dribbled in currents, splashing on the grass at his kicking feet. Ross stepped away, and released the rope; the flag raised again, and the mutant's body was carried up with it. The body of the executed swung back and forth, the blood shining black in the moonlight.

Candlelight Service

"He won't go home," Ross said, as they drove away from the school. "There's only one place he will go now."

"And where's that?" Harris wanted to know. "Enlighten us, O mighty Enlightener." There was a touch of sarcasm to his voice—he was fully against any cruel punishment, even against mutants, and Ross knew it all too well. He ignored the snide comment.

"Brookside Church. He is to be married there, and he will go there now. It has become a place of comfort for him. There, in the House of God, we shall find him."

"And kill him there?" David wailed. "In a church?"

"And save the human race? Sure."

They pulled into the driveway. The parking lot was filled with cars. Under one of the large mounted lights, two immense shadows dwindled: a man and a little girl. He parked the Humvee in the grass, and they jumped out, reloaded magazines. Ross said, "We don't need another uproar. Chelsea, David, you guys stay here, so no one recognizes you. Keep watch over the Humvee, and an eye out for evil. T-Bone, guard the lobby. If any mutants try to get in, take them out with force. Harris, you and I will find Mahan and silence him."

Chelsea and David waited by the Humvee; T-Bone stood guard in the lobby; Harris and Ross threw down their assault rifles, hid their pistols, and went in through the doors leading to the congregation. Ross remembered sitting here in church, falling asleep, with Chelsea. He and Chelsea had run outside to make out in the woods, and there had been his first encounter with the hunting party seeking his blood. Oh, how things had changed since then.

The pews were loaded with people; the soft hymns were sung. People crowded everywhere; the room was stiff with heat. Harris went off to the right, Ross to the left. Ross scanned the crowd, and found Mahan. Fourth-to-the-last row. His daughter clung to him; he had picked up a Bible, and was praying over it, sobbing. People thought nothing of this—spiritual people often were overly emotional. Harris locked eyes with Ross; Ross reached into his jacket, felt the pistol. Harris reached for his own.

Out by the Humvee, they shivered. T-Bone's shadow could be seen from inside the lobby. "So cold," Chelsea said. David couldn't get his mind off what Ross had done—so unlike Ross, the meek and mild little man, a little shy at times. Some things certainly could change a man. He also thought of Kristen's bloody face, Megan's rattled body, and Jake being thrown to the ground as he was cut down. He shivered, but not from the cold. He looked out towards the neighborhood. What seemed to him as a mere many hours ago, he had thought nothing of anything, and here he was, fighting like a madman, and watching his friends die.

His eyes focused—something moved along the side of the building.

"Chelsea. Do you see that?"

She followed his gaze. A rectangle of light appeared, and several dark shapes entered the chapel. The sound of hymns floated from within. The door shut. Chelsea and David exchanged glances, and then they ran across the lawn.

Ross shifted his stare—a side door opened. A couple women stepped out of the way as four—no, five—dark-hooded men dressed in black leather chain jackets entered the church. People gave them funny looks, like, *What are you guys doing here?* The men stared right at Ross; Ross' hand was on his gun under his jacket; Harris looked at the newcomers as well. Mahan didn't notice anything. Ross wrapped his finger around the trigger. No one seemed to sense anything was wrong. Ross prepared to attack. Harris had his back.

The preacher held a lighter, and he went to the first candle. "It is now, in the Lord's sanctification, and giving thanks for his many blessings bestowed upon us, the greatest of which is the attainment of salvation through the Messiah Jesus Christ, we now light these candles in utter silence. Quiet your souls with me." He lowered the lighter towards the candle; Ross glanced over at the wall. A youth was about to flip the light-switch; Ross shouted, "NO!"

The lights went out, his shout resounding; the silence was blasted by gunshots, gunfire, chattering and sporadic; the air shook and blared, lit and fumed with the exchange of gunfire. Harris fired round after round at the mutants as they spread out; everything seemed slow motion in the sparkling light from the gun blasts. The preacher dove out of the way as bullets clipped over his head. A mutant was thrown forward, landing on several kids in the front row, blood staining their pants. They leapt to their feet; Harris mowed down a mutant, but mutant gunfire tore the kids down, screeching and crying in their own blood. Ross fell to the floor, firing from the ground; people jumped to their feet and ran; the door opened, bleeding a sliver of light; David and Chelsea attacked, firing at the backs of the mutants; the mutants fell, and were dropped in their footsteps.

The gunshots ended; people cried, sobbed, wailed; the lights came on; students lay shot and murdered, strayed over the stage; many throughout the crowd were dead or dying, injured and slain. Parents cried over their children, children over their parents, friends for their friends. The preacher scrambled forward, grabbed a mutant's gun, put it to his head, and pulled the

trigger—his brain matter sprayed all over the satin curtains on which was sewn the Star of David; on the other was the sign of Solomon.

Ross got to his feet. Chelsea and David hovered over the mutants' bodies; Harris was fine, but covered with blood from a man who caught a bullet aimed for him. Mahan and his daughter were gone. Ross hung his head; horrified it had come to this. Ross, eyes glowering, filled with a hatred towards the indecent slaughter of the pure and holy Christians, said in a low voice, "We have failed again. Mahan has escaped."

T-Bone rushed in from the lobby, squeezing through the crowds. "Fedducia! Fedducia!"

Ross swung around. "Look what they did. Where were you!"

"There are hundreds of them in the woods, ready to pounce on the town!"

"Say what?" Harris asked, coming forward.

"They are going to murder everyone in the town, but preserve Mahan. They are going to capture Mahan and his fiancé, and kill his daughter if they don't have intercourse. By having intercourse, the bloodline is preserved no matter what. If we don't stop them now, we can never stop them."

"How do you know this?"

T-Bone raised his hand, and held a clump of hair in his fingers; the head of a mutant swung to and fro.

Ross looked over to Chelsea and David. "Go to Mahan's place! Find and kill him!"

They nodded and raced out the door, running towards Brookside neighborhood.

"And what shall we do?" Harris demanded.

Ross tossed away his gun, and drew a dazzling sword from a hidden sheath. They did the same. Ross said, "It is time for us to fight for the salvation of the peoples. This now is not a war to kill Mahan, but to preserve Mahan—from the hands of the enemy."

The Mace

The three soldiers exited the building; most of the people who had survived the onslaught at Brookside Community Church had left, and a few cars were already vanishing. The Humvee ignited, and David drove down the curb, into the Brookside subdivision; Chelsea manned the gun, and gave one last look to Ross before they disappeared behind several square homes.

The swords dangled from their hands; they lifted them before their faces, peering between the glittering steel blades. From the forest, torches burned, dozens of torches; the mutants appeared from the forest, clothed in ragged clothes stained with blood; several were injured, pulled off the battlefield back in the present. They held no weapons save for knives and swords themselves, for all deadlier weapons were being contained in the present. They hissed and shouted and jeered, formed rank, and began marching on the blood-stained house.

The three men stood their ground; they handled their swords without a wavering muscle. Suddenly the enemy screamed, and charged, running across the field separating the woods from the church. They raised their swords, knives, clubs, and charged like the wind, flowing with the beauty of the waves. Ross—in the middle—raised his sword, screamed, *Algu-ga-braith!* Harris and T-Bone did likewise, and screamed also; Ross lurched forward, and the trio ran over the open ground, swords flaming like the fires of hell. Shouts of victory and hail to the saints flowed like honey from their mouths; one hundred seventeen mutants and three mere men running at each other, a monsoon against a drizzle. The two Armies clashed outside the woods; Ross drove into the thick of the soldiers, the blade cutting and dodging, swerving and parrying; Harris hacked and stabbed, swung and ducked; T-Bone swung his sparkling sword in every direction, so fast it were a blur, as he cut the attackers down mid-stride. Mutants' bellies were opened with the white-hot swords, which shone like the sun in the darkness of the evil night; the blades cut as hot iron, as cold fire—blue, crimson, turquoise and white-hot the blades shown, but sliced into the enemies with the chilly frost of the Antarctic, a frost breathed by the dead, those whose hopes had been dashed and forgotten, forsaken. Swords disemboweled entire soldiers; the blade turned hot blood to icy crystals, crunched underfoot; the waves of the enemy surrounded the three of them; the enemy backed off; T-Bone, Harris and Ross stood in a triangle, backs facing each other, moving slowly, in a circle, facing their opponents; the bloody, frost-covered bodies of the dead were scattered about their feet.

The noose tightened; weakness crept into the men's limbs.
"For honor," Starseed shouted.
"For honor!" his two companions echoed.
The noose began to choke them; the mutants were hungry for blood.
"For glory!" Starseed yelled.
"For glory!" Harris and T-Bone rallied.
The enemies raised their weapons, and charged.
"For *humanity!*" Ross screeched.
"*Humanity!*" T-Bone screamed.
"*Humanity!*" Harris roared.

The swords hacked through the bodies of the demons, blazing like a million steel steeds, glowing with the fires of the molten earth, radiant as the diamonds lining the Creator's throne. The swords hissed and belched, parried; heads, limbs torn off, guts spilled, chests slashed apart. The dead fell into the field, and their dying cries silence as a ghostly chill overtook their bodies, turning them hard as stone.

The three humans formed a line together, and faced the tallest mutant of them all—nine feet tall, bristling with muscles; his face was slashed with white marks, and his eyes bled like the sun. In his hand was a powerful mace attached to chains. The three humans prepared for battle, and went forward. The chain swung, and whistled down after them; they ducked, the mace swinging over; Harris attacked, the blade wailing; a gruesome slash cut over the ankle of the beast, and the icy tendrils began snaking up the leg, freezing the blood and veins, supernatural frostbite. The enemy roared, and hurled the mace downwards; they fell back, and dodged the ball; Ross hacked at the mace with his sword, but—lo!—the sword shattered, and fell to pieces. Ross fell back; the mace swung over the giant's head; T-Bone jumped, twirling in the air, sword blazing; the mace connected, and his body was hurled to the ground, his face and chest a mush of battered bone and muscle. His sword was broken, and lay all around. Harris, with the only good sword, attacked—the chain caught his ankle, and he was hung upside down and dropped. The beast raised the ball to hammer the man into the ground; Ross bent low, picked up a shard of his emerald sword, and without hesitation, hurled it through the air. The shard glittered and shone, and hit its mark—the creature shrieked as the severed shard dug deep into its eye. The frost overtook the brain, and the creature stumbled; it overtook the heart, the lungs; the mutant fell forward; the massive, spiked mace landed beside Harris' head. The mutant's body shone a brilliant blue, and began to fall apart in the brittle cold. The dust from the body was wrought to and fro with the calm wind.

The Fall of David

The Humvee swung around the bend. The Obergee Apartments were on the other side of Brookside Neighborhood. It had been a month since she had touched a steering wheel, but it all came back to her; David twisted and turned on the gun mount, and looked between the houses to their left—flashes of light, as the battle raged. He didn't see any hope for T-Bone, or Ross, or Harris. Instead he and Chelsea were the only hope. Only they could destroy what terrors had brought misfortune, gloom, doom and death upon the human race.

Chelsea slammed the brakes; lost in a daze, David was torn from his mount, and thrown to the ground. The front of the Humvee slammed into the Viper; the car rolled onto its side, landing upside-down. The windows shattered, mutants trying to pull themselves from the windows. Chelsea opened her door, and climbed onto the mounted gun. David was stunned, nearly paralyzed—his legs weren't moving. The mutants stood, and came towards him; they held automatic weapons. Chelsea pulled the trigger—nothing! No bullets. She reached for a magazine—slugs danced all around her, pinging off the gun, and she leapt back, falling behind the Humvee, hitting the pavement hard. She grabbed the pistol. David's shout echoed in her ears, and soon she heard the gunshots. Three shots. She ran out from behind the Humvee, her gun roaring; a mutant twisted around, blood foaming at his mouth; the other took it quietly, and the third—he who had shot David—fell against the overturned Viper, and slid to the ground, muttering under his breath, groaning, as blood seeped from his gut, and stained the pavement.

Chelsea knelt down next to her fallen friends. His eyes were glazed, but he was breathing—short, ragged, choppy breaths. Tears burned her eyes. She held his hand in hers, but his strength was fading fast. The pains of losing one you love. David said nothing as blood crawled past his lips, down his chin; his eyes closed, and he went stiff. Chelsea laid him down on the pavement, releasing his warm hand, now drawing cold, from her own. Wiping her eyes, she walked over to the dying mutant. The mutant looked up at her, and she knelt down, pressing the gun against his head.

She swore, “You have stolen the lives of children, you have raped the women, you have ruined the beautiful and forsaken the sacred. My name is Chelsea Graham, lover of the one you know as Starseed, the one who moves about this land now and fights to the death for the salvation of the people. And I swear, I will have my vengeance, by day or by night, in this life or the next.”

The gun barked; hot, dripping blood splashed against the side of the Viper, and she stood, leaving him, and holstered her pistol. Chelsea got into the Humvee, took one last look at David, three holes riddling his chest.

Two figures appeared between the houses; through her tears, she saw Ross and Harris. Both were drenched with mottled blood and sweat, fatigued, in dire need of sleep. There was a new age to their eyes, and it registered in her mind that T-Bone was not with them. They saw David’s body, and turned their eyes. They got into the Humvee; she started the engine, and they vanished down the road, into the night.

No more words were spoken.

Mahan’s Decision

Soft morning light passed through the glazed window, warming her face. Chelsea closed her eyes, letting the sun soothe her worn, aching face. Night had passed without a hitch, without the slightest rumor since they had reached Mahan’s apartment, and found it deserted—they took refuge in an abandoned house, to spend the night. There was no way Ross and Harris could continue without rest—their arms and legs and minds and souls were sore from yesterday’s furious battle, and from the many losses they had been dealt. Now only three of the eight remained. Chelsea held the soda in her hands—it was stale, a couple years old, but there was thick caffeine, and it woke her up. Harris paced behind her. The door opened and Ross walked in.

“News?” Harris asked.

Chelsea looked his way.

“Mahan *has* continued to go along with the wedding. But not at the church. Clean-up crews are still cleaning up the mess. It’s all the talk in town. And the F.B.I. and Army is coming up, with all the civilian deaths. Estimated 234 people have died, and 24 are missing. Just think: if we do this, no one will die. Their deaths will be reversed. Our friends’ deaths will be reversed. A spacecraft is discovered in a field, there is a big explosion along the east road, there are bodies all over the place, and they can’t be identified. The parade was wrecked, the apartments were trashed. The school was disrupted, the church was harassed, the minister committed suicide, and there are numerous Vipers everywhere with bodies inside that are out of proportion to modern-day human bodies. Oh, and there’s big hype, too, over finding the bodies of our friends. T-Bone has no record; four of the six who disappeared four months ago are found dead by brutal means.” He managed to sigh. “If we finish this, none of this ever takes place.”

“And I never exist,” Harris said weakly.

Ross winced. “I hope that is something you will be able to ignore.”

“Ignore it? No. But stand by it. I pray, Ross, Chelsea, that if you guys survive, don’t forget me.”

“We won’t forget you,” Chelsea said. “Or anyone.”

Ross broke out a bottle of wine, and three cheap glasses. They poured the wine, and together, they drank to their fallen friends. “To David,” and they drank. “To Kristen,” and they drank. “To Megan,” and they drank. “To Jake,” and they drank. “To T-Bone,” and they drank. The glasses were empty. Ross shattered the wine, cut his hand with the glass, and rubbed his

blood over the cups they had toasted to. "May our friends," he said, "rest forever in peace. Amen."

"Amen," Harris said.

Chelsea nodded, tearing. "Amen."

Ross set down his glass. "All right. We're running out of time. Here's the plan..."

The Wedding

Chelsea walked across the street, and past the gazebo, where she and Ross used to spend countless hours talking, before everything blew, before she knew the truth, before Ross knew whom he really was. She walked the gravel path past several houses, and across the wooden bridge, where Ross used to meet with his friends, and they'd go to each other's houses. She pulled herself up the wooden trail that wound its way through the dark forest, the forest she and Ross had gotten lost in a long time ago, and had spent the night together, talking and laughing—the next day he had asked her, "I know this will sound awkward and all, but last night was great, we had a lot of fun, even *though* it was cold and bugs got in your hair and we didn't get any sleep... But anyways, I'd like to know if you'd want to do it again sometime?"

"Are you asking me out?" she'd asked with a smile

Ross had grinned. "I guess. But if you don't want—"

"No, no, I'd like that." And she'd taken his hand.

Now, what seemed eons later, the amphitheatre rose into view, and she suffered under the weight of the briefcase tearing at the palm of her hand. The amphitheatre was covered with white decorations, and people were everywhere. Tables were set out on the grass, where guests drank and ate condiments. A booth was constructed beneath the lip of the amphitheatre, and she could hear voices within; she wondered if it was Mahan? She walked through the crowds, spotted Ross; he was dressed in Sunday best, and even concealed the pistol concealed under his sock. He didn't acknowledge her, and she didn't acknowledge him. She discreetly climbed atop a viewing tower five hundred feet away, across the road, and from there, opened the briefcase, and withdrew the parts and sections of the sniper rifle. She ascended it quickly, and lined the sights over the amphitheatre stage. Harris stood off to one side, and Ross to the other.

This was the moment.

This was their point of victory.

If they won, humanity survived.

If they lost, humanity would die.

The priest got up on the stage, and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for joining us in this hour of darkness. But perhaps a new light will shine, for today Mr. Jason Mahan and Ms. Scarlet White are to be joined in holy matrimony. If anyone has any complaints to them being married, speak up now, or forever hold your peace." The crowd, holding drinks and plates of food, was silent. Harris itched his collar. "All right, then. Come onto stage, you two!"

Mahan appeared, followed by a stunningly beautiful woman. Both were all smiles.

Harris reached into his jacket; Ross did the same. Chelsea tore off the safety, bent low to aim over the sights. Mahan's head came into view over the crosshairs; she squinted, and lowered the aim over his chest, a direct blow to the hard. Either Ross or Harris could nail him in the head. Her finger reached for the trigger.

From his vantage point, Ross could see both Harris and Mahan. Mahan was speaking now, but his voice was drowned out in a drilling fear that nabbed at Ross like nothing before. Ross tried to shake it away, but couldn't. He peered over the crowd, to Chelsea's perch. Then he saw it. His heart skipped a beat, and he abandoned his post, pushing through the crowd. Harris watched him depart, but didn't move. If Ross failed now, *he* would have to pull the trigger. Ross broke free from the crowd and sprinted towards Chelsea.

Chelsea saw Ross through the scope, running towards her, waving his arms. She scowled. What was his—Something grabbed her from the behind, and a shattering pain drove home

through her leg. She dropped the sniper rifle, and writhed around; the mutant hovered over her, pulling the knife out of her leg; she grabbed the sniper rifle; he stabbed again, into the thick of her leg; her fingers fumbled, and the sniper rifle clattered, falling, landing fifteen feet below. The knife withdrew. She opened her mouth to scream, but nothing came; the knife stabbed down into her chest, piercing a lung; the mutant lifted her, and tossed her. Wounded, the knife stuck in her heart, she fell from her perch, falling, falling, flailing in the wind. Ross reached out, face a mask of horror; a sign post rose up to meet her, the sign being removed by vandals, and never replaced. The mutant on the tower watched in glee as she fell, and howled in joy as the spike drove through her back, shattering bones and organs and tissue, and burst from her stomach, bloody and covered with bits of flesh. She hung suspended midair; groaning, moaning. Ross jumped, hurled himself upwards, over her, and landed on the tower. With a swing of the fist, he knocked the mutant backwards, so hard the enemy actually flew *horizontal* to the ground before smashing into the ground with such force that its neck snapped. Chelsea's weak arms reached upwards, felt the pole, and felt her ragged flesh, burning to the touch. Feeling was leaving her.

Harris saw Chelsea fall onto the spike, impaled, and he watched as Ross leapt onto the roof of the building and slammed his fist into the mutant, sending him to the ground. Harris withdrew the pistol and jumped onto the stage, running after Mahan; Mahan's face went ghostly white; suddenly the preacher turned around, and with gleaming eyes, withdrew a revolver. Harris faltered in his steps. Mistake *mistake MISTAKE!!!* The revolver thundered, shaking the air with so large a thunderclap it were as if the thunder god himself had come to earth. The slug bore through Harris' gut, and tumbled inside, tearing as much damage as possible through his body. He dropped the pistol, drool coming from his mouth. Mahan was mortified; the preacher shot Harris again, in the shoulder; Harris fell back, landing on his back. The preacher impersonator hung over him, pressed the gun to Harris' face, and with a smile, said, "It's done." He pulled the trigger; Harris' head rocked, and the back of his skull exploded outwards, a puddle of blood and swimming brain matter forming rapidly underneath his torn face. His lungs worked no longer; his heart died. Harris was no more, never again, to never be.

Starseed

Ross leapt down from the bunker, and raced for the stage. The guests scattered; a remnant of seven mutants stood there, keeping their ground; they fired after Ross, but he dodged their bullets, twisting and turning like a spirit. He grabbed the first mutant by the head, and twisted; the next he snatched the gun and blew away. One tried to tackle him, but he sidestepped and tripped the beast. He drew his Gerber and hacked it into the back of the mutant's skull. Two stood guard around the preacher impersonator; two assaulted from either side; Ross jumped into the air; the two collided; he fell, and, grabbing a wine glass from the ground, shattered it in his hands; the mutants came swinging, and he blocked their blows with his arms, and shoved the broken wine glass shards into their eyes; the shards dug into the fleshy brain, and they tottered this way and that before finally falling to the ground.

Ross faced his best friend's murderer; two enemy soldiers held Mahan captive. Ross hunched over, grabbed an Uzi from a dead soldiers' hands, and stood again. The preacher growled, "Your friend died a worthless death. Mahan lives. And he will live. And he will marry." He added, "And he will have *children*." Mahan nodded, seemingly on the mutants' side. If he only knew...

Ross raised the gun, pointing it right at the preacher.

The preacher asked, "How many bullets do you have?"

Ross checked. One. He looked down at his feet. The other bullets were gone.

"What a beauty," the man said, "it is to tamper with history. One bullet. Two targets. Will you avenge your friend's death, and kill Mahan with your bare hands? Or will you forsake your friend's death, and me murder you in my grasp?"

One bullet.

Ross tossed the gun aside.

The mutant scowled. "What are you doing, you fool!"

Ross walked towards him; he took off his vest, and his shirt, revealing heavy muscles. His fierce eyes betrayed the love of his conscience, and instead melted into hatred; he walked between overturned tables and the bodies of the mutants. He ascended the stage, and much to the mutant's surprise, faced him head-on. The mutant shivered in terror. Ross leaned forward, in the mutant's face. The mutant cringed away; Ross growled, "You killed my friends. You killed my future. You killed the human race. Prepare to die."

The mutant lashed out; Ross dodged, jumping back. He attacked again; Ross dodged, and struck back; the man parried. They circled on the stage. The mutant managed to smile. "You think you are so powerful, do you? A mere man?"

Jake

Ross struck; the mutant ducked, and withdrew a knife, slashing at Ross' leg, drawing blood. Ross stumbled back, but was not fazed. "Mere man? Do you not know who I am? Do you not know my name? Do you not know the prophecy? The hidden code?"

Megan

"You are a human. Just a human." He swung out his foot to connect with Ross' face; it hit, and Ross swayed backwards, his face bloodied and torn. His eyes were swelling, pulsing blood. He stared up. The mutant circled him; Mahan was relieved Ross was dying. "All humans are mortal. Your time of death is now." He struck again; Ross tried to block, but caught it in the back, and fell to the ground; the mutant drew a scythe, and hammered it down; it cut raggedly over his back; Ross screamed, and raised to his knees. A dark red line was cut over his back.

Kristen

The mutant rounded him. "Do you think this is the end? Do you think killing Mahan will preserve your faint idea of a Utopian world? Hah! Each moment you suffer is another moment crawling towards your death. Are you so immune to the fates that have been bestowed upon you?" Fate. He grabbed Ross by the hair, wrenched his head back, pressed the scythe against his throat. "Shall I slit your throat now, or beat you more? Shall I make you suffer? I shall tear down the body of your beloved, and ravage her muted corpse till blood flows from her womb!" He threw Ross' head back, and Ross fell to the ground, spewing blood.

T-Bone

The enemy stepped on Ross' throat. "Shall I stomp the breath from your lungs? Shall I destroy everything you've ever fought for? Yes! Yes! You have fought for ideals, and ideals are only words, and thoughts. This is now story, you fool! This is truth! And in the real world, the bad guys always win! We always win!" He kicked him in the side; Ross rolled over, tried to pick himself up. He was kicked again, and his mouth opened, and he vomited, blood mixed with sour bile.

David

"More are on the way, Mortal. More are coming. Can you hear them? Can you feel them? Do you wish to have news?" He pulled him up, and stared into his bleeding face. "We fought. We fought, and many died. But we have been victorious. The west has fallen. Those in the outer limits have been destroyed. The world is ours. We rape and savage and kill all who are of the freeborn. We will rule." He grabbed the scythe, and with the tip, scratched a line across his face, permanent forever. "Do you know what that is? Do you feel the pain, the blood that flows from your wound? That line is for murdering my people!"

Chelsea

Ross tried to escape, but was pulled back. Another line was slashed down his face. "And that line, that line, you know what that's for?" Ross' eyes went blank, rolled up, then returned. He moaned. The mutant shook him. "Do you know what that line is for? It is for your attempt, O so glorious, yet failed, to bring 'peace' and 'justice' and 'mercy' to this land. It is for believing something not to be believed. It is for being a fool!" He kned him, and sent him to the ground, and began circling.

Harris

He dragged Ross to his feet, and swung him around. In the distance, a black mass swarmed over the land. "Millions of mutants. How can you survive against them? You cannot! You are doomed! And Mahan is within an arm's reach! You shall die. You shall wither. You have failed. Humanity is doomed." He dropped him to his knees, held the scythe, and readied to swing. "Tell me, human, what is your name?" No response. "No name? Too stubborn to talk? Too

ashamed? Yes, too ashamed... What is your name!" He roared. No answer. He knocked him down, picked him up, twisted his head around; Ross' weary eyes saw the masses drawing closer, swarming between buildings.

A plague.

"Tell me your name," the mutant demanded.

Ross said nothing.

The mutant ripped him upwards, and held the scythe. "No name. Nothing. Exactly what you will be remembered for, I swear it!"

The masses overcame the building where Chelsea lay, and dragged down her body, tearing it to pieces, eating the flesh, and smashing her head against the pole. Ross saw this happen, yet was too weak to react. The mutant stood proud, and before the millions of mutants coming, swung the scythe, a victory blow; it coursed through the air, to Ross' neck—his head! his head! his head!—and Ross bent his neck, the blade whistling over. Ross arched around, and slammed a shard of wine glass into the soldiers' gut. The soldier gasped, blood coming from the mouth. Ross stood, held another piece of glass, and pressing the tip up against the man's throat, snarled, "My name is *Starseed*." The man's eyes turned crimson with fear, and the resurrected warrior shoved the glass into the mutant's throat; the mutant flopped backwards, landing on the ground, rasping, trying to pull the glass from deep within his throat.

Ross spun around, and shot his hands forward, palms up; ten feet away, a blast of power rammed the two soldiers guarding Mahan flying into the amphitheatre, hitting with such unimaginable force that they blew through the concrete, and their remains were scattered below the amphitheatre steps. Ross whirled around, and with a sweep of the hand, sent a blast of energy sending the soldiers racing up the steps flying in miles in every direction, tossing and turning, hurling across the land. He did the same with his other hand, and thousands of enemy soldiers were propelled into the skies, hurled into the clouds. With both hands he furiously swept, and the very grass and trees were ripped from their moorings, spun into the sky; the land was barren for miles, as men, houses, trees and debris were flung into the heavens.

Ross turned and walked up to Mahan. The man shuddered.

"Don't hurt me," Mahan pleaded. "I beg you, don't hurt me."

Ross grabbed the gun of the man he'd choked with the glass, the man who had taunted him so proudly, whose corpse now lay still. He said, "One bullet." Mahan shook his head. Ross pointed the gun to the man's head. "Sorry," he said, and with nothing more, pulled the trigger.

The blast echoed in his ears.

Nothing.

Dawn of the Revolution

Eyes snapping forward, Ross found himself in one of the hallways at Clayton High, abandoning the cafeteria. Chelsea shook his hand. "Ross, are you listening to me?"

Ross looked over at her. "What?"

"I said, 'are you listening to me.'"

He stared at her face. "Oh my God... You're alive."

She frowned. "Yeah... I've been alive for seventeen years..."

"I thought he killed you! I saw you die! They grabbed your body and—"

"Ross? Are you okay? You're freaking me out."

Ross opened his mouth to say more, but shut his trap. "Sorry. I'm just feeling a little light-headed. That's all. Maybe the food."

"Ross? You didn't *eat* lunch. You *never* eat lunch."

"Breakfast, I mean."

"Oh. Sure. Are you going to the football game tonight?"

"Football game tonight?"

"We're playing Davin High."

"Ummm... yeah."

"Pick me up at seven thirty?"

"Sounds good."

Ross looked this way and that. All around him, people walked casually. Laughing, gossiping, having a good time before class started, stomachs full after lunch. He felt himself searching the crowd for anything suspicious, but saw nothing. Chelsea grabbed his hand again. "So I was telling Amy, maybe we should just have the party *Saturday* night instead of *Friday* night, but then Jessica has to get up for church, and we'll probably stay up late watching movies..." Her voice drowned out; he reached up, and touched his face. Two scars. He swallowed. Had it all been a dream? No way. Then he realized, with a painful agony—they had succeeded. Mahan had been executed. He had been sent back to his own self, and except for him and him alone, no one knew of the awful truth that had befallen the planet. He shuddered to think that the secret would be forgotten, but shuddered not at the thought that so many would live. Chelsea had died, and therefore she didn't understand. He ran a hand through her hair. Quite a warrior. Yet to never know...

A voice entered his ears: "Where's your coat, Jenny?"

He looked over. Three older boys were harassing a little foreign exchange student.

"Where's your coat, Jenny?" he smirked.

"It's in my locker," the girl piped, but he showed her the locker. "It's gone! Someone took it!"

"Quite a shame..."

Ross' brow furrowed, and he said, "Wait here." Chelsea turned to stop him, but he ignored her, and walked up to the three boys and the girl. They glanced up at him as he strode forward. He commanded, "Give her the coat."

The boys laughed; one crooned, "Who are you to tell us what to do?"

"Give her the coat. Right now."

"Or what? What are you gonna do, Shrimp?"

"I'm gonna make you regret you didn't give her the coat."

The kid swung out; Ross caught his fist in his hand. "Can't you do better than that?" And with a rip, he threw the kid against the locker; a sweep of his leg, and the kid was on the ground. The second kid swung out, but Ross dodged, and his fist went into the locker door. He stumbled back, howling. A crowd had gathered, and Ross turned his face. The third kid vanished, and the second disappeared in the crowd. Ross picked the first kid up by the collar and demanded, "Where's her coat?"

The kid said, "My locker."

"Which one is it?"

"That one." He pointed. His voice was shrill.

"What's your combination?"

He gave it; Ross opened the door and handed Jenny the coat. She said thanks and ran along to her next class. He hissed, "Don't do that again."

As he was leaving, the kid smarted off, "What's your name, *pal*?" He pronounced *pal* without the slightest attempt to hide the hatred.

Ross turned. "My name," he snarled, "is Starseed."

••

"What was that for?" Chelsea demanded as they headed to class.

"That girl was being taken advantage of. Didn't you see it?"

"It wasn't your problem to deal with. You don't *have* problems."

He could only laugh.

Kristen and Megan walked up to them in the hallway. "Hi, guys." They stared at Ross for the longest time; a surge of hope welled within him, but then Megan asked, "Geez, Ross, what happened to your face? It's all cut up."

He felt the marks.

One for murdering my people

Another for the lie you chose to believe in

"Nothing," he answered, hope dwindling. "Just scratches. I fell."

••

Mr. Harris pointed to a DNA double spiral helix. "There are four bases in DNA, labeled A, C, T, G. Adenine, Cytosine, Thymine and Guanine. Adenine pairs with Thymine, and Cytosine with Guanine. Billions of DNA molecules make up the beautifully-designed blueprint that encodes everything from the formation of hemoglobin in your blood to whether or not you have freckles, acne, or whether you inherit genetic diseases such as Down's Syndrome, or cystic fibrosis. Sometimes the DNA is messed up, and a mutation occurs; most of the time the mutation is harmless, hardly ever beneficial, and many times disadvantageous to the organism—extra fingers, not enough blood cells formed in the bones, lack of cilia in the lungs and ears, maybe you have an extra eye?" Some dense laughter. "Although an eye would be impossible to form over gradual beneficial mutations. Quite a handicap... to evolution."

He struggled over the words, caught minds staring at him blankly; Ross slept in the corner of the room. Harris cleared his throat. "Some scientists, such as Doctor Alan Richardson, are trying to convince Congress to pass a bill to let them tamper with human DNA to make organs for use in operations, extra blood for transfusions, and maybe even to enhance the human genome, to make our bodies even better." He paused, a twinkle of deceit in his eye. He read from the textbook, "Surely such toying with DNA would bring a vast wealth of potential to the human species... It would open a whole new world to human evolution... Mankind could control his own destiny..."

He was struggling even more, eyes hastily flickering over, "In time we could even produce clones for medical treatment or—" He slammed the book shut, tossing it angrily against the wall; everyone went rigid; Ross snapped from his doze. Harris stood at the wall, glaring at the textbook; the kids shifted in their seats, uneasy. He gingerly picked up the book and placed it on the desk; a drawing of a DNA covered the front; he placed a piece of paper over the front, slowly calming. Ross couldn't let the incident slip; more craziness in Clayton.

Lyndsey asked, "Do you think they'll ever clone?"

"I hope not," he answered firmly, regaining composition.

"But if it's for medical experiments and to benefit mankind..."

"There's a little tendency we humans possess. It's called greed. Would we really stop at medical experiments?"

"What?" a popular kid spat. "You think they're going to make an army or something?"

Harris' face went ashen, hardening. He pushed down emotions. "Your homework is Chapter 19, questions 1-5."

The bell rang; the students got up to leave.

Ross gathered his books, and approached Harris. "How you doing, Harris?"

Mr. Harris replied, "The name's *Mr.* Harris. What do you want?"

"I wanted to know about stars and seeds."

"Stars are for general science. Seeds we hit two chapters from now."

Ross sighed, and left the room.

Harris didn't know, Chelsea didn't know. Kristen and Megan were clueless.

He began to doubt his sanity, but the scratches on his face, his powers of war...

••

He picked up Chelsea, and now at the football game, stood with Jake and David. They had asked about his face, too, and he had given up all hope. He sighed, and gave them both a dollar if they'd go get a hot dog. They gladly accepted, and weaved their way through the crowds to the concession stand. Huddles of teens laughed and joked, gossiped. Few people were in the stands. Ross rubbed his eyes. The world was swirling. He didn't know up from down, left from right. Bewildering. It actually *hurt* to think.

A familiar voice: "Good to see you in one piece, Commander Jagger Fedducia."

Ross swung around, face beaming. "Harris! I thought you'd forgotten!"

"No."

"In the classroom..."

"Just playing with your mind, Ross. I knew I could find you here. Great weather, isn't it? Nice and clear. No smoke, or ash. The air doesn't stink of fire, or of human flesh. Do I sound morbid?"

"No, you sound pleased."

"And I am. This is paradise. We saved a lot of lives, Ross. A *lot* of lives."

"No one will ever know... Doesn't that bother you?"

"Me? No. Say they did, Ross? What would that change? There's a famous story. A widespread blood disease is killing millions each day, and doctors, they're looking for a cure. People are being knocked off everywhere, and hope is dying. Soon, it seems, the world will be void of life. But finally doctors find a cure. It's in a little boy, and in his blood. But in order to get enough to save the world, they need to take all of his blood. They confront the parents, ask for this grievous responsibility, and in tears, the parents allow them to do it. They watch in sobs as their son turns ghostly pale as all the blood in his body is drawn and placed in bags. The bags are distributed across the globe, and the wonderful cure inside the blood is given to all. People are not dying, but are living. In a few weeks, everything is perfect, everything is beautiful. The son's funeral comes along. The world shows up? No. Barely anyone shows up, because these people lived in the outback of Australia and didn't know many people. Instead of giving praise and honor and respect to the one who saved them, people go to bars, go to football games, go to bowling alleys, movies, and forget it all. They forget, and don't care. People are ungrateful for what has been given to them, Ross. If they knew the truth, would it change anything? No. Sure, maybe we'd get honor and respect and lots of blessings and praise, but it would all fade. No one but us two knows what happened. We need to be content with that."

"Perhaps we can tell them somehow?" Ross asked.

Harris smiled. "The world should know, I agree. But don't expect too great and grand a reception. What'd you have in mind?"

Ross shrugged. "Maybe writing a book or something."

Harris laughed, and the two of them watched the football game.

Note from the Author

One might say the words that flow from these writings are those of fiction, of make-believe stories, or of child's fantasies. One might put down this book right here and now and say, "Good book. What's for dinner?" But I challenge you: is this an impossible truth? Is this beyond the possibility of what our eyes and ears behold? Or is everything that is the very essence of 'truth' confined to what our sense dictate at any given moment? I, the author, tell you this now. This book is not my own. I merely wrote it down on paper for the world to read—for *you* to read. Any mistakes are mine, and not those of the one who told me the story, who is the one named 'Starseed'. The names of the characters have been changed, rearranged, what have you, but I tell you now: open your eyes! Open your eyes to the revelation! Starseed, to this day, walks among us. His real name is unknown, for he doesn't want to receive any glory, hailing 'Harris' words. But he is out there, and so is our beloved 'Harris'. I have seen with my own eyes the sites in Clayton mentioned, though Clayton is yet another changed name for another town in a different state. As to Starseed—as for 'Ross Keppler' and Jagger Fedducia—my guess is, you'll never hear of them again. Does someone come this close to being caught, and stick his head out?