

PATHOS

(The Philosopher's Stone)

Michael Woods



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CONVENTIONAL CHAOS

Pathos (The Philosopher's Stone)
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ΠΑΘΟΣ

Published by Conventional Chaos
First Edition: September 2010
Second Edition: June 2012

<http://www.conventionalchaos.com>

“Never let your sense of morals get in the way of doing what's right.”

PDF Version 2.00 June 2012

This PDF is exactly the same as the
print version (ISBN 978-0-9732820-5-4)

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The author uses the following tools: Amaya, Calibre, Chrome, FastStone Viewer, Firefox, FontForge, Foxit Reader, LibreOffice Writer, Notepad++, Paper and Pens, Sony Reader PRS-505, Windows 7 Paint.

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Thesis

the poet

POSITIO

To the Congregation for the Causes of Saints,

Your Eminences,

I have the pleasure of concluding the diocesan phase for the Cause of the Reverend James Peter Cullen, Servant of God. Enclosed in this package, you will find all the requested materials to complete the initial positio.

The first attachment is a biography of James Cullen, which was assembled by his former student, the Reverend Daniel Quinn. As much information as is known has been included in this biography. It must be noted that some details regarding Cullen's early life are based on Quinn's recollections and cannot be easily verified. Other than this, every detail has been verified by myself as true, using public records and historical archives.

I realize the size of this package is seemingly inadequate. In most cases presented before the Congregation, there is usually a collection of writings to be examined by censors. I regret to say that in this particular case, there is only one work known to exist. Shortly before his death, James Cullen was commissioned by the State of Massachusetts Department of Corrections to write a handbook for prison chaplains. It is not known if he finished writing the book and, if so, any copies were ever made. The commission was withdrawn and Cullen's book was rejected in favor of a more ecumenical handbook. One fragment was discovered, a page found inside Cullen's Bible, which appears to be a draft for the preface. It is included here for posterity.

Also included are the affidavits of witnesses to the miracle attributed to Cullen. Other relevant material is still in the process of being gathered but it must be confessed that some time has passed since the death of the Reverend Cullen and due to the nature of the penal system, which was Cullen's primary ministry, many direct witnesses to his life have already been lost. This is a pity, since he was exactly the type of man whose legacy was written on the lives of those he touched. What is here is a merely a small sample of witnesses, though his reputation has grown steadily since his death. The recently-renovated chapel at Walpole Prison is already informally referred to as the "Cullen Chapel" by inmates and guards alike.

There is no doubt in my mind that he was a Servant of God and is worthy to be considered for beatification.

Yours in the Lord,

Reverend Matthew Moore,
Office of the Cardinal Archbishop of Boston

June 22, 1984

James Peter Cullen was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on April 6, 1911. He was baptized at Saint Thomas of Aquinas church on April 23 by Father John Vincent. He was raised in the nearby town of Bedford, where he learned his father's trade, repairing various farming implements. He finished his schooling and with the blessing of his parents enrolled at Saint John's Seminary in Brighton. Upon finishing, he was ordained and admitted to the apostolic succession in June 1934. In the following years, he attended to various chaplaincies in the New England area, ministering to inmates of both prisons and hospitals.

Before beginning his own ministry, he spent a year as assistant chaplain to numerous priests of various institutions. In 1942, Cullen was encouraged by his peers to enlist with the United States Army as chaplain. After grueling training, he was posted to the Seventh Army in France, where he was wounded by an enemy bullet that struck him in the leg. After his injury, he was treated by a medical hospice in Savoie, where he continued his ministry. After a short time, it became obvious he would never fully recover from his injury (indeed, he walked with a limp until the day he died). So, he was assigned somewhat permanently to the hospice. There, he attended to numerous injured and dying patients. In February of 1945, apparently suffering from severe stress, he was granted leave of absence and returned to his hometown. With the end of the war in sight, he was granted an honorable discharge from the Army in March. He had served with distinction but he desperately needed a respite from the troubles of the world. In April, he went to Saint Mary's Abbey in New Jersey, where he committed himself to the daily work and prayerful life of a monk. He

stayed with the Benedictines there until after Christmas, when he longed to return to his ministry.

From 1946 until 1955 he was chaplain at the State Reformatory at Concord, Massachusetts. He spent his time ministering to and counseling inmates, most of them lifelong felons and convicts. In 1955 the reformatory was transformed into the Massachusetts Correctional Institute at Concord, where Cullen continued his ministry. The following year, a maximum security prison was opened in Walpole. Many of Cullen's prisoners were transferred there and Cullen himself asked to be transferred with them. There, he continued to minister to the hardest subjects of the prison system.

On January 7, 1968, during the sacrament of the Eucharist, he complained of chest pain and collapsed to the floor. Prisoners alerted the guards and a nurse was called but it was already too late. He was pronounced dead on the floor of the chapel. His funeral was attended by many former inmates and past and present workers of the Massachusetts Department of Corrections. The prison also held a special service to honor his memory. As a testament to his character, it was attended by several hundred inmates, who – to their credit – maintained a peaceful atmosphere throughout the service.

Daniel Quinn, Chaplain,
Walpole State Prison, Massachusetts

June 17, 1984

Preface to A Chaplain's Handbook

by James Cullen, 1967

Welcome, dear reader. Perhaps you are reading this book after many years as a prison chaplain. Or perhaps you are considering a ministry behind bars. Whatever the reason, I hope I can share my experiences with you. Hopefully, I can even give you some insight into what it means to minister to the outcasts of society.

One of the most important things to remember is that we are all born with sin. In this regard, the prisoner is no worse and no better than anyone else. We are all guilty of something and it is our duty as Christians to forgive one another, just as we have been forgiven. The only difference between a freeman and a prisoner is that the prisoner must bear the mark of his guilt, long after he has paid his penance. The prison system is like a furnace and the inmate may be consumed by anger or be purified with faith.

Precious are the few that are reformed, those who exit prison and vow never to return. Usually it is because they feel remorse for their actions and seek forgiveness from society and from God. These men are usually already God-fearing when they enter prison. Perhaps they were the victim of some desperate circumstance that led them to crime, due to poverty, anger, or drugs. They are the men that we see the most often, for they spend many of their hours in repentant prayer, whether in their cell or in the chapel.

And then there are those that do not seek forgiveness for their sins. Rather, they desire revenge for the wrong they feel that has been done unto them. These are the majority, the woeful burden of our civilization,

the hardened criminals who, if released, return to prison with greater and heavier sentences. These societal rejects, these untouchables, they are our true ministry.

Christ was himself a prisoner, judged guilty by society and executed by the state. Also, Saint John the Baptist, Saint Peter, the disciples and followers of Jesus, the whole history of the early Church is filled with stories of those who were in trouble with the law and spent much of their time in prison. So, when we minister to the convict, we are following the words of Christ when he said, "I was in prison and you came to Me" (Matthew 25:36).

This book is written as a handbook with instructions and suggestions on how to counsel prisoners, how to understand their attitudes and situations. In this way you can understand how they feel and how to minister to them. Each section of instruction is followed by anecdotes of my own personal experiences. I confess that my approach is not very scientific. But I believe that being a chaplain is a kind of art form; sometimes even similar situations call for completely different approaches, for every person is unique. Every person is special and worthy of God's grace, even if they act otherwise. It is not our job to judge, rather to deliver the good news that everyone, even the prisoner, can receive that grace.

Affidavit of Nathaniel Richard

My name is Nathaniel Dean Richard. I am 45 years old and I am an inmate of Walpole State Prison, Massachusetts. In 1959, I was a young man of 20 and newly-married to a beautiful woman. I thought my life was going well when I caught my friend committing adultery with my wife. In anger and jealousy, I killed them both with a shotgun. Within weeks, I was convicted of my crimes and given two life-sentences. At first, I cursed my former friend and wife. Later, I cursed God for my circumstances and punishment. I hated the wardens and my fellow prisoners, all of whom scorned me as a murderer and a sinner. I hated myself and everyone around me.

Then I met Father James Cullen, who neither feared me nor judged me. The first time we met, I tried to scare him by reminding him I had killed two people. He answered with these words, "We have all murdered an innocent man. I am as guilty as you are." At the time I did not realize he was talking about Our Lord but I was impressed that he was not afraid of me. So, I began to visit him in his little chapel. At first, I came to him out of boredom. I thought I could scare him or at least annoy him. Later, I think, I wanted his attention, his forgiveness. He befriended me and prayed for me despite my cold heart. And, as time wore on, he brought me closer and closer to God. Then, in 1968, as he lay dying on the floor of the prison chapel, he spoke his last words to me. I remember them as if he had whispered them to me yesterday. "Forgive me," he said, "as I forgave you."

I remember my feelings in the months that followed, like there was a terrible absence in my life. Those words burned into my heart and filled me with self-doubt. I was involved in many fights

and conflicts within the prison. Finally, after a particularly violent confrontation with a fellow prisoner, I was badly beaten by the guards and put into solitary confinement. For a week I was given nothing but bread and water. In my despair, I cried out to God for mercy and it felt as if the Holy Spirit itself came to me and held my hand. And when I came out of that cell, I felt peaceful. For the next twenty years, I prayed and I studied the Word of God, with the assistance of Father Daniel Quinn, who also had known Father Cullen.

In the fall of 1980, I was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. I had likely carried the cancer in my body for many years. The cancer was in such a late stage that I should have already been dead. Doctor Park, who works for the Massachusetts Department of Corrections, was merciful in informing me that I would be lucky to survive even a few months. She continued to track the progress of the cancer with regular appointments for the next few years. This was much longer that she had expected, since the cancer did not appear to be developing any further. Just before Christmas of 1983, she announced to me that the cancer appeared to be gone.

During the time period of 1980 to 1983, I said many prayers to Father James Cullen to intercede on my behalf. I said the holy rosary and meditated in my cell for countless hours. My fellow prisoners now call me "Monk" because I am almost constantly in prayer within the walls of my cell or the chapel. They do not know as I do, that a miracle has been performed within my body, thanks to my former teacher, who I believe still watches over me.

Nathaniel Richard

June 1, 1984

Affidavit of Rosemary Park

My name is Rosemary Hyejin Park. I am 38 years old and I reside at 32 Pine Street, Walpole, Massachusetts. I have worked as a Medical Doctor for the Massachusetts State Department of Corrections for 8 years, since May of 1976. Previous to that time, I had worked in Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston where I completed my internship.

In September of 1980, Nathaniel Dean Richard came to me and complained of pain in his chest. After conducting some tests (which took approximately one month), I diagnosed him with pancreatic cancer. The appearance of an invasive carcinoma of unknown origin may be confirmed using the photographic prints of x-rays taken in October of 1980.

At that time, the tumor was so large that the prognosis was extremely negative. Treatment was almost certainly futile and it was unlikely he would live longer than a few months. I consulted with other oncologists at the Sacred Heart Hospital of Boston and they agreed with my prognosis.

Due to the terminal nature of Nathaniel Richard's illness, I appealed to the Superintendent to consider him for compassionate release. The superintendent was kind enough to pass the request onto a judge but it was turned down based on Nathaniel's violent crimes.

With my next examination of Nathaniel, in December of 1980, an x-ray determined that the cancerous tumor had not progressed any further. I continued to monitor his tumor, using x-ray photographs, in examinations that were scheduled every three months. Beginning in October of 1980 and ending in December of 1983, I examined Nathaniel a total of twelve times. In 1981 his tumor showed some signs of growth, albeit slow growth compared to most tumors I have witnessed. Even then, I was amazed that he had survived even one year. In 1982 his tumor showed no signs of growth. In December of 1983, I concluded that his cancer had entered remission and it would not be necessary to examine him anymore.

It is well-known in the medical community that pancreatic cancer is considered a terminal illness and is fatal in almost all cases. Spontaneous remission is a rare occurrence, especially without treatment. I can find no good scientific explanation that may explain why Nathaniel Dean Richard is still alive.

I hereby certify that to the best of my knowledge the information that I've given here is true.

June 10, 1984
Rosemary Park

My name is Benjamin Paul Mason. I am a resident of Walpole, Massachusetts. I was a guard at Walpole State Prison from its inception in 1956 until I retired in 1980. Previous to 1956, I had worked at Charleston State Prison, where I started my career in 1937. I had been a prison guard for a total of 43 years.

In all my life, I have never met a man such as James Cullen. I myself am not Roman Catholic but Baptist, as was my father, and his father before him. Before I met Cullen, I believed that Catholicism was a kind of antiquated superstition and that a Catholic could not be a true Christian. I may not agree with all of the teachings of the Vatican, but I do believe that Cullen followed the words and heart of Jesus. He was an upstanding man and an example for every Christian to follow.

In 1956, when Walpole State Prison opened and we met for the first time, I thought he was a bit strange, especially due to a habit of his. Every Monday, upon arriving at the prison, he would tour the prison, to see how all the guards and staff were getting along. Often he would ask every person, "is there something I can petition the Lord for you?" And though the answer was usually no, he promised to pray for them anyway. He continued this ritual weekly, despite those that made light of him.

After this tour, he would inquire if there were any new prisoners. If there were, he would introduce himself, then pray with him, whether they wanted to or not. Then he would invite him to attend his chapel. Usually these new prisoners were hostile. Many of them were convicted of murder or some other brutal crime. Their uniform was fresh and they were on their guard. It was, after all, a

maximum security facility, the "biggest" big house. Many inmates believed it would be unwise to show weakness to a priest. But every once and awhile, an inmate would show up at the chapel and beg forgiveness for their initial rudeness.

Despite hostile and violent prisoners, Cullen never changed his Monday morning habit or relented with his kindness. He had a true Christian character and he maintained an amazing compassion throughout his life. Despite being a prison for killers, Walpole remained mostly peaceful during his tenure as Chaplain. Later, it became infamous as one of the most violent prisons in America. Many of the guards who work there now believe it had always been like that, but I know that while Cullen was there, it had been better, and in his care, many prisoners had been reformed. He was an extraordinary Christian and the best Chaplain I have ever met.

I declare under penalty of perjury that the foregoing is true and correct.

June 12, 1984

Benjamin Mason

POSTULATION

Tuesday, January 8, 1985

I arrived in Boston yesterday and was met at the airport by Rev. Matthew Moore, a young man who recently graduated from Saint John's Seminary in Brighton, Massachusetts. He was appointed by the Cardinal Archbishop Law as Diocesan Postulator for the Cause of Blessed Rev. James Cullen. He seems well-educated and knowledgeable and it is a welcome relief that he will assist me in my postulation. I was happy to know that he has learned to speak some Italian, for I often miss my mother tongue whenever I travel. Of course, his accent is strange and pronunciation poor, but it is a comfort just the same.

I reviewed the Positio during my flight and I must admit that this cause holds some interest for me. The Congregation for the Causes of the Saints has hundreds of files constantly under review, many of them regarding dedicated pious priests, monks, and friars. These are so many stories about men and women of extraordinary holiness but too many are far removed from the ordinary people. Prefect Palazzini himself expressed to me the story of James Cullen has some appeal, simply because he was a regular hard-working man. If proved to be worthy of beatification, he might be a popular saint among the masses.

Moore picked me up in a simple black sedan, and after a short drive, we arrived at the town of Walpole. We checked into the Walpole Motel around 7pm, early enough to get a good night's sleep. I don't mind traveling by airplane, but sometimes a long flight leaves me feeling drained. So, Moore promised to let me rest for the night but tomorrow we would already be busy.

Moore, as requested to him by the Cardinal Archbishop, has already arranged appointments with everybody associated with this cause. Tomorrow I will begin my phase of the postulation with the interview of Benjamin Mason, a former prison guard and friend of the late chaplain. We will have to go back to Boston but I look forward to it, since it will give me a chance to review a few details of the positio with Moore. Aside from my work, I am interested to get to know this young man.

Matthew Moore may be young but already he is an accomplished scholar. The membership of the Society of Jesus has declined in recent times and he is exactly the type of young blood our order needs. I have read some of his writings regarding historical and modern heresies and I feel, though I haven't told him, that we have a similar spirit. I, too, detest heresy and will expose it wherever I may find it.

In the afternoon, Moore and I went to Boston to meet Benjamin Mason, a former guard at Walpole Prison. Mr. Mason is a Baptist by upbringing and made no hesitation in expressing his opposition to the dogmas of the Catholic Church. Numerous times he expressed that he disapproved of the “worship of the Queen of Heaven.” Evangelicals often quote Jeremiah and I gave him my usual reply that not all Catholics, like myself, follow the same set of beliefs, just as not all Protestants believe in the speaking of tongues or full-immersion baptism. He laughed gruffly and led us to his kitchen where he had some coffee brewing. Moore and Mason both had their coffee black and I had to settle with a bit of milk since Moore had no cream.

The interview that followed was standard. I asked the usual questions regarding Cullen and got the usual answers. He was an upstanding Christian and a good man. There was nothing unusual in his public or private life that anyone was aware of. Actually, there seemed to be nothing of note at all about the late chaplain. The standard questions revealed nothing about Rev. Cullen that I didn't already know, so I finished the interview questions quickly.

I know very little about the prison system in any country and I asked them both if they could share their experiences with me. It was then that Mr. Mason recalled the first time Cullen had truly impressed him.

When Walpole Prison had first opened in 1956, every guard who was assigned there had been transferred from somewhere else. This was, of course, common-sense protocol for staffing a new maximum-security prison. Many of the prisoners would be hardened criminals so experienced guards were necessary, at least during the first few months. But this also meant that most of the staff formed cliques, depending on which prison they had transferred from. This seemed a comfortable arrangement and most of the work-shifts seemed to follow this unspoken agreement. As new staff arrived, they were distributed evenly among the work-shifts. It was after a few months that Rev. Cullen began to notice problems, for the new guards were not easily accepted into the already-formed groups.

So, the chaplain arranged with the warden to introduce some shift changes. The cliques that had formed would be broken-up and mixed with other groups. In this way, everyone could get to know each other better and a sense of team-spirit and unity could be formed. Of course, people always resist change, even unconsciously, so to ease tension, he would host an end-of-day mixer in his office. He personally would provide the spirits and the cards for a friendly game of poker.

In two weeks, he hosted ten of these little events in his chaplaincy office. At first, only a few guards attended but by the end of the first

week, the office had become enough to spill over into the chapel itself. By the second week, the warden decided to convert a conference room into a staff lounge, where the guards could spend time together, unwinding after a hard day of work. Cullen's effort resulted in positive changes and a sense of community began to evolve among the guards, old and new. Mason said that this event was typical of Cullen's philosophy, the belief that even small faith and simple acts could move a mountain.

Friday, January 11, 1985

Moore had the exhumation scheduled for today. It was, as always, the least pleasant part of the postulation. Although I do not question the need for a "Non Cultus" Declaration, it seems to me that there is rarely a need to actually dig up and examine a body. In these days of mass communication, the evidence of undue worship usually presents itself quite publicly. Cullen has received little attention from his diocese, during or after his life, so it is doubtful anyone outside of Walpole would even recognize his name.

But nevertheless, procedure must be followed, and for the first time, in my own experience anyway, I unearthed more than just a body. After opening Cullen's casket, a mystery presented itself. The late Reverend's skin was too pale and light-colored spots seemed to cover most of his body. I have exhumed many candidates for sainthood and my experience has made me familiar with how a corpse should appear. This would seem to suggest that perhaps Cullen's apparent cause of death may not have been heart-failure. I am no medical expert, but I do have one available to me. Rosemary Park's phone number was in my notebook and I immediately called her and described the appearance of the body. She agreed that pale skin and spots seem to indicate that there may have been another cause of death and suggested an autopsy to make a more exact determination. It may be unnecessary but in the interest of truth, any facts that can be made certain, should be. Because of that, the church will, of course, pay any reasonable expense involved in a case.

So, I asked Dr. Park to arrange for the body to be transferred to a hospital in Boston, where it will be stored until she has time to conduct the autopsy. She said her schedule at the prison keeps her busy but she will arrange with the warden for a day off next week. Also, she promised to arrange for a few expert opinions so as to determine the cause of Cullen's death beyond any doubt. I thanked her for her immense help and wished her a good night.

After nearly a week in America, I finally met the original petitioner of this case, Nathaniel Richard. Though he is supposedly reformed, I was more than a little apprehensive to meet him. He is, after all, a convict and has spent more than half of his life incarcerated. I have never had a conversation with a murderer before today and even though the interview went well, I must confess that I do not want to repeat the experience.

Apparently, I received special permission from the warden to conduct the interview in the chaplaincy of Walpole Prison. Moore dropped me off at the visitor's entrance where I met Quinn. He led me through a maze of hallways and gates until we emerged in the chaplaincy office which I presumed to be the same one that Benjamin Mason had spoken of the other day. It was hard to imagine Cullen hosting a card game in this little space since there seemed barely enough room for the desk and two people.

There were numerous security precautions to reach the office and it also had an additional security door to the chapel, which was only possible to open once our exit had been sealed. At that moment, I suddenly realized where I was and I had to fight against the panic I felt inside. I looked at Quinn with great admiration – everyday he shuts himself in with the lions. Then, I wondered what a prisoner must feel like with his freedom taken from him, what it is like to be treated like an animal locked inside cages of cement and iron.

Waiting for us in the chapel, kneeling in prayer, was Nathaniel. At that moment I did not fear him, for he looked as serene as a Benedictine monk. Quinn put his hand on the man's head, who then opened his eyes. It was then that I saw eyes that were as sharp as knives but filled with warmth. He slowly and silently walked into the chaplaincy office. Quinn promised to leave us alone for awhile and in the meantime he would tidy up the library.

Unfortunately, Nathaniel did not tell me anything I did not already know. But I did find his faith amazing, to say the least. Here was a man, who had lost everything and was cast aside by the world, and somehow had found his faith behind bars. Like a monk, he owned nothing, was chaste, and spent his days in prayer and penitence.

He had admired Cullen greatly in their short time together. During his life, Cullen had been his religious mentor and father figure. After his death, he often had dreams and visions of his teacher. In those visions, Cullen was flanked by angels at the throne of God. The visions seemed full of wondrous beauty and faith, like the visions of other petitioners I have interviewed before. There was nothing specifically unusual that came up in the interview. But it did seem to

me that perhaps Nathaniel seemed a little too devout, a little too intent on Cullen's promotion. Such devotion isn't unusual from petitioners but there was something else I just couldn't put my finger on, so I gave him the usual assurances. According to Catholic doctrine, all deceased Christians are saints. My job is merely to make sure that there is no doubt of Cullen's sanctity. This would insure that the Vatican could not be wrong if that sanctity were recognized and Cullen was beatified.

As I sent Nathaniel away, I asked Quinn if perhaps Cullen had any notes at all still laying around. He answered me that no notes would be found because Cullen rarely wrote anything down. Even the sermons he preached were inspired by the Holy Spirit on the spot. I asked him again if there could be anything at all, and he said he would keep his eyes open.

Tuesday, January 15, 1985

Doctor Park called me late last night and asked me to meet her at the hospital morgue today. It seems that the other doctors were willing to help determine the cause of death free of charge if only they could ask me some questions about life in the Vatican. I admitted I could only answer questions regarding the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints and perhaps some other groups in the Roman Curia. They seemed thrilled nonetheless.

Most people, especially Americans, seem to hold a certain romantic interest in obscure Vatican offices. Too many people assume that because they themselves have not heard of the Congregation that it must be a secret organization. And in these days, in the wake of Hollywood movies and bestselling fiction novels, that usually results in me being a member of the Templar Knights, the Masons, the Illuminati, or some other secret society. I usually respond that if I were a member of a worldwide conspiracy, then surely I would have something better to do than waste my time investigating the lives of dead men. The deceased are useless to any conspiracy, I tell them.

But doctors are, of course, well-educated people and not inclined to ignorance. Some of them were even Catholic, or at least raised Catholic. But, like most people, they had some curiosity regarding the beatification process. I answered their questions in turn, even after I had already received the answer to my own question.

The doctors had easily determined James Cullen's cause of death. I was right to be suspicious of the appearance of his body, for he had not died of natural causes at all. The white spots and pale skin were a telltale sign of arsenic poisoning, likely from several well-concentrated doses. But that knowledge alone is unsatisfying and it leaves me with another mystery: who killed him? And why? I suddenly feel a little like

a detective, an investigator of a different type. I feel excited and afraid, for I know not whether I should contact the police or keep this information to myself. Part of me wants to be dramatic and run off in search of my suspect. But I have no suspect, only suspicions. And in any case, I am no hero. I think tomorrow I had better go to church and pray for guidance. Then on Thursday I will go back to Walpole and see if I can uncover the truth about James Cullen.

Thursday, January 17, 1985

I went again to Walpole Prison to interview Quinn and inquire if he had discovered anything written by Cullen. Quinn was ignorant as of yet regarding the autopsy results and I thought I could try to determine if perhaps he or anyone else had poisoned Cullen and why. But when I arrived at the prison chaplaincy, I discovered Quinn half-conscious and half-in-prayer, head face-down on his desk. I sat on the other side of the desk and I could see there were two books in front of him. One of them was an ancient King James Version of the *Holy Bible*, held together with wooden covers and several kinds of tape. The other was an aged but well-preserved copy of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

I felt my insides turn themselves around as I sat down opposite him. I knew I needed to ask nothing, for he would tell me everything he knew. The chaplain looked up at me and I looked into his eyes, fearful and sad. I knew here, the truth would out itself. I have never heard confession but at that moment I felt like a great sin was about to be revealed to me. I prayed for patience and after many minutes of silence, he finally spoke. He told me that earlier today he had forgotten his own Bible at home and remembered that Cullen's old Bible was still in the desk. When he opened it, he recalled my request that anything Cullen had written might be relevant. On the inside cover he had found, in Cullen's handwriting, the words, "I can resist everything except temptation." This had a familiar tone to it and eventually he remembered the author of the quote. There was only one Oscar Wilde book in the library and it was rarely borrowed by the inmates.

On the inside cover, written like a dedication, he had found a letter, also in Cullen's handwriting. The words, he said, seemed to imply that his senior, his friend and teacher, had anticipated his own death. I realized then that the autopsy results were merely confirmation of the hypothesis Quinn had already worked out. The late Reverend Cullen could never be sainted, for he had committed suicide, an unforgivable sin.

Who the letter is directed to is not my business, but I include a copy of it here for posterity. And I hope and pray that that the spirit of James Cullen has found peace.

To My Dearest Love -

You are one of the beautiful ones, a special person that is a shining light of joy to all those around you. I do not want to be selfish with my love for you. I want to shine your light on the mountain, like a beacon to those who are lost and do not believe in love. But here it must remain, unspoken, hidden from the world. I do this to protect you and not myself. Even now I know I know this letter will end up unsent, collecting dust somewhere. But if it is to remain hidden, why bother writing at all? My love is an emotion that needs to be expressed, fixed by ink and blood, flowing like crucified poetry. Perhaps I am just being foolish, an inescapable habit of those whose heart is broken.

Perhaps someday you will know that you created me, that I transformed myself for your sake. Your whims were my commands, your words become a prophecy, your opinions are fact. You drew me to you and in return I made you the center of my world. It seems that ages have passed since our eyes first met, and not a day goes by that I am not reminded of my feelings for you.

Even while awake, images and words trapped in my memories make themselves known to me. This to me has become the sum of my life: heartbreak and pain. I distract myself with things and people but I know it is useless because I am also useless. I hate everyone and everything I see because they cannot make me happy. My world has no value to me and I want to destroy everything in it, even that which is good and beautiful. I am so lonely that I consider my death on a regular basis. Why should

I not? I have very little to live for right now: I am worthless in almost every way. I know neither how to care for nor love any one around me, let alone myself.

Many years ago I dreamed that I would be here in this kind of time and place. I imagined someone that I would love more than life itself. But I thought it was merely an idle daydream and would never become reality. And I was happy with that illusion until I met you. It was a boy's fantasy that kept a man intact and it was the reality of you that destroyed me so completely. And to make my pain even more unbearable, you became my friend, accepting me as I was. Because of that, I became my own enemy.

Strange circumstances can sometimes collide to bring people together. And though I have met many people of diverse paths in my life, I have never met a soul such as yours before. I love your candid honesty and good-natured way of just being. You are unique and I am sure I will always – until the end of my days – enjoy your company. I pray that the day comes soon, for until then, I suffer in sin, though I cleanse myself with self-punishment. Whether I live or die I am damned. But in death at least there will be the release of suffering. I await that liberation because this life is my purgatory.

I hope you can forgive me for my selfishness but I cannot endure this temptation any longer.

I remain yours,
Always.



The Angel and the Dragon

Z-26

I found the angel lying in an ashen pit. The stones around him were warm and smoke rose from the ground. His body was blackened and bruised, his wings still smoldering. He was badly hurt. He was beautiful in his weakness.

I picked him up carefully and carried him on my back into the mountains. There, I laid him across a flat stone to rest. I brought water and washed the dirt from him. He slept fitfully for a short time, opening his eyes now and then to look at me. His pain was my pain and I did not know how to ease his suffering, except to caress his broken body.

A few times he awoke and at first cried out when he saw me. But he was too weak to make any movement and quickly collapsed into unconsciousness again.

Finally, after what seemed days, he awoke for more than a moment and stared into my eyes and begged me to kill him. He was breathing heavily and I wondered if I should and be done with it. But he was so beautiful, so fragile-looking.

“Why have you brought me here? My life is wasted,” he said.
“There is no purpose.”

I told him softly, “sometimes life is suffering and that is the only purpose.”

“Suffering?” He began to weep and again he begged me to kill him. I answered him with tears flowing down my face that I could not. Everything I had loved had already been destroyed. I was the last. The only. After me, there would be no more dragons. I told him I would not allow him to die.

At that, he went silent, perplexed in his grief.

He opened his eyes again and I could see the distance he had fallen from Heaven. I gazed into his watery depths and I could see the memory of a fiery descent. My loneliness was as his was. We were both eternally separated from our homes and from those we loved.

“You were my purpose...” he mumbled, “to find you...” and he fell asleep again.

And indeed he had found me. But I was already dead. Part of me had died a long time ago on that black day that I remembered too well. In my memory I could still see them, the Cherubim, descending from Heaven, their flaming swords glowing brightly. Down they came into the valley where we had gathered.

Down they came, bringing death from above.

I, a mere Angel, had been summoned to appear before the Elohim. The message was given to me by my captain and friend, the Archangel Michael.

“What could they want, Michael?”

“I don’t know, Anael. I don’t know. But when the Thrones summon, you must go.”

Michael guided me a short while until we were approached by a Cherub who took me under his wing and guided me the rest of the way.

And so I went, silent before the Elohim, the Host of Heaven who represent The Presence of The One. They were quiet and I wondered if there had been some mistake. I felt so small and weak before these beings of the highest order. First, I saw the ranks of the Cherubim, their four wings aglow with many eyes. Hundreds, thousands of eyes. And they all seemed to be watching me. I have known holy fear before but not like this.

Next, I saw the Seraphim. Their internal light was blinding and at first I could not see. As my eyes began to adjust, I could see their four faces looking in all directions and six wings that concealed most of their brightness. They surrounded The Presence and were quietly singing, “Gloria. Glory in the Highest. Praise be to The One Who Was And Is And Is To Come.” I have seen a Seraph before but never have I heard one sing. I listened to the beautiful voices and the pain of the holy light subsided.

It was then that a Throne, a being I had never seen before, emerged from between the Seraphim. It was one of the Ophanim, having the appearance of a wheel within another wheel. Then, there was a sound like something I had never heard before. It was a sound that did more than enter me. It penetrated every fiber of my being. It obliterated my perceptions. It destroyed me.

I understood the message though I could not comprehend the voice. When the sound had subsided, it seemed like the whole world was screaming. The Throne disappeared between the Seraphim again.

I was led away by the same Cherub who had guided me, feeling much weaker than I had before. I rested some of my weight on his arm, my ears still echoing, my eyes still blinded. An Ophan had spoken to me. I had been charged with a great task. I struggled to understand the message...

A dragon? Alive? I thought they had all been destroyed... The Seraph had seen to that themselves. Why was I, an agent of the lowest order being charged with this mission?

The questions that arose were dismissed by the echoing inside my head. *You must find the dragon and destroy it. Find the dragon. Destroy the dragon. Find. Destroy.*

The Cherub led me back to Michael and went back the way he had come. I put my hand on Michael's arm and we went to a place I could rest and gather my strength.

"Relax," he told me. "We all feel that way after hearing a Throne speak. Our bodies were not meant to endure it. We are not as strong as the Cherubim or Seraphim."

Which was exactly what I was thinking at the time. I am weak; why me?

Michael seemed to hear my thought as he answered, "you have been chosen for a special task, Anael. Whatever it is, you cannot refuse it. You have been chosen for this mission for a reason. Moreover, you were probably created for this mission. It is your purpose. You have no duty beyond this. Take some rest and then go. Return when your mission has been fulfilled."

And with that, Michael left to return to his duties. I rested a short time, trying to clear my head, trying to relax. Questions lingered. Why me? Why had I had been chosen for this task? Then the voice of the Wheel echoed in my head again. *You must find the dragon and destroy it.* And the pain grew so I could not help but rest more. And the voice echoed again. *Find the dragon.* Where should I look? *Destroy the dragon.* And I found the more I tried to think, the more insistent the voice became. *Find. Destroy.*

So I took flight and began my quest; immediately the voice subsided.

On the sixth day, We created the creatures of the Earth. Our final and crowning achievement was Man. He was placed amidst the creatures of the Garden, and all were ordered to bow before him. One creature would not and one angel would not. The Seraph formerly called Samael, now called Lucifer, was dealt with swiftly. He had been a favorite of The One and he was punished without hesitation, a warning to others against disobedience.

On the seventh day, We created the Spheres of Heaven. To complete the First Sphere, the Cherubim were created and added to the Seraphim. Then, the Dominions and Powers were created and added to the Virtues to complete the Second Sphere, the administrators. Finally, the Third Sphere was created, composed of Principalities, Archangels, and Angels. This last sphere would oversee the daily affairs of the human race, their dreams, their prayers, as well as their ambitions.

We created the Cherubim as soldiers, partly to deal with the problem of Lucifer and the other Seraphim that supported him. He alone had been cast out but the others who doubted Our decision were becoming more vocal. The time would soon come for action. The Cherubim were created with a stronger sense of contrast. They still had free will but there were no subtleties, only right and wrong. Those of the Second Sphere were created with a strong sense of order, while those of the Third Sphere was given sympathy and empathy.

Enough time had now passed that the creatures had begun to breed. Some animals bred faster than others. Man had only one child while the dragons had already bred several generations. The dragon had been created with more power and beauty than any other. Their range of colors was stunning. Samael had outdone himself with their design.

The One did not want the dragons to be dealt with in the same harsh manner as the disloyal Seraph who had created them. Gabriel the Messenger had been sent to plead with them. The dragons were unrepentant. They had been offered mercy but still they refused to obey. Perhaps it was Our mistake. We had allowed them to be created too mindful, too proud.

We gave the Cherubim their first assignment with hesitation. We are not indecisive; there could be no alternative to punishment. Neither was this a test of their fidelity. They would willingly, happily slaughter anything that defied the The One Who Is And Was And Is To Come. But The Plan had changed. The schedule of events had been irrevocably altered, and so early. The Cherubim would now have their first taste of blood; they would be the first killers. This was worrisome, but inevitable.

The Cherubim themselves, although strong and simple, were not stupid. Certainly some among them would recognize that the slaughter of the dragons was merely the beginning of something greater. Perhaps some would anticipate the civil war within the ranks of Heaven. This, too, was worrisome, but inevitable.

I searched for my first clues in the ruins of the Garden itself. Not long before the Cherubim had slain the dragons, the humans had eaten from the Tree of Knowledge and been expelled from Eden. Cherubim had been assigned to protect the Tree of Life. Perhaps Lucifer and those that supported him had attempted to attain true immortality, for the Garden lay in ruins.

I greeted the two Cherub who watched over the Garden. At first they appeared as serpents. Then, as I approached, they took on a similar appearance as myself. They greeted me in their own way, which was something like a cold gaze, a stare that looked deep into my soul, examining me for weaknesses. I flinched and one smiled at the other.

“This is the dragon-hunter,” he said to his companion, “come to kill the one we could not.” They laughed and I could feel the burning message inside me again. *Find the dragon.* And suddenly they stopped laughing and looked at me quite seriously. Perhaps they did not have the multitude of eyes like the Seraphim but they could perceive things that could not be seen. Maybe they could hear the voice inside me. “So how can we help you?”

“I think I should begin where you killed them,” I answered. “Where is the Valley of the Dragons?”

They seemed to examine me quietly for an eternity. Their eyes probed mine so intensely that it felt like forever to wait. Finally, the other who had been silent raised his hand and pointed towards the east.

“Thank you,” I said, and flew away.

In the distance behind me I could hear him mutter, “but all you will find there is bones and ash.”

And he was right. The valley was dry, brown and gray, without even a spot of green. The whole area was littered with bones in such a way that it seemed they were the only living things that came from the ground. The bodies had obviously been left unburied and the wind and sand had already eaten away the flesh. Soon there would not even be bones remaining of those once-great creatures.

I landed in the center of the valley and walked around aimlessly, examining every detail. I must have done this for hours, for soon the sun began to sink in the sky and the bones seemed to glow red and orange with

the dusk. My mind was growing tired and it seemed the bones themselves murmured to me, crying out for relief.

The voice inside me again spoke. *Destroy the dragon.* The bones became silent and I fell to the ground, near to sleep but afraid to dream. My body rested but my mind could not. When the sun rose again, I pushed my body forward. In the distance I could see the Caves and I suddenly realized why the dragons had chosen this valley to make their home.

Three Caves had been created, each with a source of supernatural water. The Fountain of Youth, which can counter the effects of aging, was created within the Cave of Restoration. The Well of Souls, a visible source of the Lifestream could be found within the Cave of Secrets. The Stream of Consciousness, a repository of thought, flows within The Cave of Memories.

The Caves were supposed to be hidden from the creatures of the world. But from where I stood, I could see that each Cave was about the same distance from the other two and the valley was located between them. This obvious geographical layout showed that the dragons had some knowledge of them. The betrayal of the fallen angel had obviously gone further than disobedience. Perhaps this knowledge was the true reason for his and the dragons' punishments. I made a note in mind to report this theory to the Seraphim. No, they likely knew already. How could they not? They, too, had stood where I now stood, and must have seen what I now saw.

But the Caves were off-limits to all ranks of Heaven, and assumed to be unknown to the inhabitants of Earth. So, it seemed highly unlikely that the Cherubim had already searched there. My orders were direct from the Thrones, so I assumed that I had special dispensation to search forbidden areas. I wondered which should I search first.

I picked up a bone, marking an 'X' on one end with a stone, and tossed it into the air. It landed softly, pointing at one of the Caves. I would begin there and search the others in turn. The Cave of Memories seemed as good of a beginning as any other.

Heaven had created the Cherubim specifically for this task. They had been created to kill the dragons, my family. They were made to drive my kind to extinction.

We had been disloyal. We had disobeyed The One. We would not bow down before Man. Why should we? Man was our equal, one of the many creations of the Garden. The humans had not been given any abilities that we had not.

I had survived because my mother shielded me, protected me with her own body. I can still remember her words, "Do not move my child. No matter what happens, stay close until it is quiet. After, go to the caves where you can hide." And she hid me, the youngest of us all, under her body as the Cherubim carried out their massacre.

When I emerged from under her, nothing moved except the blood that flowed like a river through the valley. My mother and all my family were dead and I was alone.

After the Cherubim, other angels were created, including this one now sleeping before me. Why had he been chosen to find me? He was weak even compared to a human, despite the wings that gave him flight. He could never beat me.

This cave we now rested in is unique. There are other special caves but this one has served as my home and my protection for a while. They were a secret, my mother had told me, from the other creatures and even the angels themselves. This is where I came to escape the nightmares that have plagued me since that terrible day.

Obviously she had been wrong, since this angel knew to find me here. But I could not help the feeling that this place, my home, was safe. In any case, the other angels, were caught up in their own

civil strife. A war had broken out in Heaven and the sky flashed and echoed with the sound of their battle.

This one before me slept fitfully, perhaps aware of the battle that raged overhead. He had been the second casualty, after Samael. But now there were many more. The sky was black and streaks of red and yellow light outlined the angels that fell from Heaven.

For now, the Cherubim were preoccupied in battle. They would not come looking for us. We were safe, at least for the moment.

As I flew towards the Cave of Memories, I wondered what I would do if and when I did find the surviving dragon. I knew nothing about it, except that it looked something like a giant lizard with wings. As I landed at the Cave, and immediately saw a dragon for the first time, I realized my expectations had been mistaken. The resemblance of the dragon to a lizard was a lot like comparing a human to a monkey. The shape was similar but there was something in her eyes that shocked my spirit.

I was armed with a fiery sword like that of the Cherubim. Mine was custom-made for my mission, with a shorter blade to match my height. But I did not reach for it immediately. The dragon's eyes were too shocking, too beautiful. Suddenly the Voice echoed within me. *Destroy the dragon.* But even yet, I could not gather the strength to strike. The dragon, as startled as I was, also made no move.

It seemed like an eternity that we stood there, our eyes locked together. *Destroy the dragon.* The voice inside my head crescendoed louder and louder. *Destroy the dragon.* Finally I could not resist. I reached for my sword as the dragon turned its body at me sidelong. Its tail struck me so hard I was knocked backwards. But even as I fell, I unsheathed my sword and struck. The sound of the sword striking sounded something like thunder and I knew it had only touched stone as the tail hit me again. I was flung backward, this time out of the Cave and towards the rocks below.

As I fell towards the ground, I saw the red shape of the dragon against the blue backdrop of the sky, fading into the distance. My head struck stone and it felt like my consciousness had exploded.

When I awoke again it was night. Daybreak would come soon. A full day had almost passed and my quest had come full-circle. I had failed in my mission. I expected the voice inside to speak and tell me once again to find and destroy the dragon, but it was silent.

I flew to Heaven with a heavy and fearful heart to make my report. Again I was guided by a Cherub before the Host of Heaven. Again the Throne's voice penetrated my being. *Find the dragon. Destroy the dragon.* My recommendation that a Cherub finish this task was ignored. Later, as I rested under the stars, the voice seemed to fade. I felt myself thinking that I was ill-suited to my mission. If I was destined to fail, then why was I chosen? And why continue to persuade me to continue something that seemed impossible? Why was it so important that I fail my task?

I tried to find my friend, Michael. I needed some guidance. Unfortunately, he had little advice to offer except that I should tune my thoughts to the voice and follow my orders to the best of my ability. “If you think you do not have the strength, it is because you do not trust yourself,” he said.

He was right, as always. But I felt that he misunderstood the situation. It was true that I did not believe in myself. I did not doubt my abilities. But I was beginning to doubt something that I was unwilling to comprehend.

I told him about the location of the Valley of the Dragons, how the triangular pattern of the Caves seemed to center on it. He seemed more concerned when I mentioned I had gone up to the Cave of Memories. “Please tell me you did not go inside,” he said.

I realized then that I had not gone inside but had merely stood at the threshold. I told him exactly that. He then exhorted me to go onward and finish my task.

“But,” I said, “if the dragons were killed because they knew about the Caves—”

“Then they received their just reward,” he said as he left me and returned to his work.

But that wasn’t what I was going to say. If the dragons were killed because they knew about the Caves, then perhaps Lucifer was cast out of Heaven for the same reason. If he was not punished because he would not bow down to the humans, then perhaps the humans were not created superior after all.

And if the humans are not superior among creation, which creature is?

Perhaps the dragons were not killed because of their knowledge of the Caves but for another reason.

I had been charged with a task and I knew then I must use my privilege to go to an even more forbidden place. I could think of only one angel who could answer my questions, the one who was once called Samael. And with that resolve, I flew towards Hades.

We had foreseen this since the first day of Creation. The very idea of free will had precipitated the battle that had torn Heaven to pieces. The One had viewed choice and disobedience as part of the greater equation. Choice was something to be overcome, not to be ignored.

But the foresight did not make the decision any easier. All who used their ability to choose, chose to disobey. All who disobeyed were cast from Heaven. Some would join Lucifer in Hades while others would become neutral agents on Earth and watch over Creation.

Eventually, there would be peace.

But at the moment, there was only blood and turmoil. The Cherubim had handled the rebellious Seraphim with much difficulty, since their powers were so well-matched. Most of the Seraphim who were punished were those that had worked with Lucifer during Creation. A few were merely sympathizers.

Almost simultaneously, dissent broke out amongst those of the Second Sphere, who felt that Heaven was suddenly losing its natural order. There were not many and the Cherubim broke their ranks quickly. But it was amongst the Third Sphere, the Principalities, Archangels, and Angels, that dissatisfaction so quickly became disobedience.

Some were bitter at being so low in the hierarchy of Heaven. Many had heard of the one called Anael who had been charged with an impossible task. They sympathized with him, for they too felt their jobs to be difficult or unimportant. And as one was cast down, another stepped up to defend him. One by one, the disobedient were cast out; they were so numerous that soon it seemed as if We had judged all of Heaven.

So many were cast out that the fallen Angels now outnumbered the unfallen. This, We had also foreseen. It was for that reason so many

of the lower-rank Angels had been created. Their sense of morality was tied to their emotions, something that the other Spheres lacked almost entirely. Right and wrong for them was part of a greater purpose and had little to do with objectivity or a set of laws. The One had insisted that this would be their greatest strength someday. Though humans also had emotions, their morality was more separated, for they would be the force of push and pull to develop themselves and strive for greatness. The Angels sense of emotional morality would force them to protect what they believed in, despite any consequences. Whether on Earth, in Hades, or in Heaven, the Angels would be the guardians of Creation.

But foreseen or not, it pained Us to punish those that We loved. With each fallen angel, The One Who Is And Was And Is To Come had a heavier heart. After the last one had been cast out, Heaven itself was ordered to remain silent. An expression of sorrow would be shown towards the Earth, something that might ease the pain of those who now suffered on its surface, many of them burned and scorched from their great fall. And for the first time, the sun was covered by clouds and rain fell from the sky.

Hades was not as I expected it to be. For one, it was not as dark as I had been told. Neither was it as cold as I had expected. Hades was so like Earth that I could barely see the difference. Naturally, I suppose, since Earth and Hades are both part of the real realm, while Heaven belongs to the ethereal.

Of course, there were some distinctions. Lucifer himself seemed more actual here than he had in Heaven, when his name was Samael. That is to say, a definite change had occurred in his physical state since he had arrived here, something undefinable except to say that he seemed to exist more in the here and now.

The one now called The Accuser greeted me warmly. He embraced me closely and kissed my cheek. I was taken aback for I, a mere Angel, had never been treated as an equal to anybody except other Angels. We were the servants of heaven, subordinate to all, even to humans. He still had the appearance of a Seraph and they had never treated me with more than the required courtesy afforded one being to another.

“Everyone is equal here, brother,” he answered my unspoken question. “I bow to no one and no one bows to me.”

Again I was shocked. The hierarchy in Heaven was strictly ordered. How could it be otherwise?

“I have not come here for pleasantries, but I thank you for your kindness,” I said to him.

“Of course,” he said, “I know why you are here. But I’m afraid I cannot help you find the dragon.”

“That is not why I came. I want to know about the Caves.”

He looked surprised, then laughed quietly before saying, “Ah, you already know something the Cherubim do not. That is why they, the Thrones, chose you. You are smarter than you look, you know. I guess not all Angels were created equal, after all. Although I must confess, I expected them to send someone taller. You do not look strong enough to slay a dragon.”

“So you told the dragons about the Caves then?” I inquired.

“You already know that I did.”

“But I want to hear you confess it.”

“I will confess that there are no coincidences,” he answered. I looked at him carefully. He smiled at me and asked me, “what did you really come here to ask?”

“What is the true reason for your punishment? Were you really punished for not bowing to man?”

“Ah,” he laughed softly, “it is as they say. I refused to bow before the human. That creature is not superior to my dragons. Of course, their choice not to bow was their own. They knew as I did, that rebellion would mean punishment. I did not – could not – command them to disobey. Do you understand that? It was their choice...” his voice wistfully faded away. A tear came to his eye.

“You made a choice to disobey,” I said. “Disobedience has consequences.”

“Yes, of course,” he said. “That is the true reason I am in Hades. I made a choice to be here.” And with that, he turned his back and flew away from me.

Disobedience. The cause of his downfall. The only sin worthy of punishment.

We had been taught that only man had been given the power to choose between right and wrong. But that was incorrect. The dragons had been given the power of choice. Samael obviously also had the power. Perhaps I also had been given the power to choose. Did making a choice implicitly mean disobedience?

I flew to Heaven to complete my investigation. I needed to know one simple thing: if indeed every living thing had the power to make choices, then why were the dragons and Samael punished for using that ability? I went to Michael and asked him exactly that.

But all he could say was, “Oh Anael, you are lost...” before tearfully embracing me and leaving me alone.

Again I was guided by a Seraph before the Host of Heaven. Again a Throne spoke to me, commanding me to carry out my mission. *Find the dragon. Destroy the dragon.*

But this time I answered. *No.* And instantly, I found myself falling from Heaven, my wings burning in the atmosphere.

We were safe for the moment, but as long as the angels continued to fall, we both felt uneasy. Finally, the angel stirred and stumbled to the edge of the Cave to survey what was happening. He stumbled and I held him to keep him from falling down. His eyes were wet and I could see he was lost for words.

“So many fallen,” he said. “Why...?”

“I don’t know,” I answered. “But my mother told me once that there are no coincidences.”

His eyes locked with mine. At first he seemed shocked and angry, then confused and sad. I again held him and he fell into me and rested his body against mine. He was still so injured from his fall.

Then, as we watched, we could see the last angel make his descent. The chaos in Heaven was quieted, and then there arose a terrible stillness. The silence seemed to reverberate as if the universe itself was speechless. In the distance, plumes of smoke could be seen, rising from the places where the angels had fallen.

Then the sun was darkened and water began to fall from the sky. I had never seen anything like this before. Neither had the angel. Heaven was crying and the tears cooled those that lay broken and burning on the surface of the Earth.

“No coincidences? If that is true,” he said slowly, “then that means...”

“It means that everything is as it should be, even though we may feel otherwise.”

His eyes again met mine and seemed to search within me for an answer for a question that he did not have the words to speak. And suddenly I could see in his eyes that he had found something that

was more important than any answer for any question. He had found meaning in me. And I had found compassion in him.

The rain continued to fall and the Cherubim, anxious to finish their work, found us quickly. They were still forbidden to enter the Cave, so at first they shouted at us to come out. We paid no attention to their promises of a painless death. In fact, our eyes were still lost in each other's gaze. And, as the mountain fell down upon us, we found peace together within ourselves.



Possession

tgux

**Introduction By Ken Adams, M.D.,
Associate Psychiatrist,
Deliverance County Mental Hospital**

The following transcripts have been prepared in accordance with your request for all documentation pertinent to the case of Joseph [REDACTED]. The full audio recordings are included as well.

It is the opinion of this doctor that when Joseph was released he was no threat to himself or society. Nevertheless I have a deep regret that it was myself who signed his release papers, since I knew that he was not completely healthy. If the inquiry so wishes, I will resign my position at the hospital and co-operate fully with the investigation.

There are times when even the mentally sound can commit the most grievous of actions. I believe that Joseph was aware of his actions and should be held accountable for his crimes under the full penalty of the law.

Session 1

Doctor : Good morning, Joseph.

Patient : We've told you before. We're not Joseph.

Doctor : I don't like calling you Legion. That is not who you are.

Patient : It is who we are. Joseph invited us here.

Doctor : Alright. As you can see, I am recording our session today. So, I want you to tell me a little about yourself and how you came to believe you are a demon possessing the body of Joseph.

Patient : We've told you these things before... many, many times. Why are you recording our session today? Is there some special purpose? Who will listen?

Doctor : There is a specialist I would like to submit your case to, an expert on demon possession. She wants some information about you before she comes here.

Patient : She? A woman? Will come here? To Deliverance? Is she pretty?

Doctor : Yes, she... she will come here. And I don't know if she's pretty. But she is well-respected in the psychological community. Her works regarding religious therapy are very interesting. And she is very intelligent.

Patient : So... not pretty. But if we don't make the recording, she won't come, huh?

Doctor : That's correct.

Patient : We want her to come. Maybe then you will believe us... How should we start?

Doctor : Start from the beginning. Introduce yourself.

Patient : Okay. Our name is Legion. We are the same Legion that Jesus cast from a man into a herd of pigs near Gadara, in Palestine. That experience is one that we cannot forget. It was our first encounter with the Son of David. We knew of him by reputation but not believed his power. When he moved us from the man into the pigs, we were shocked. He was merciful in allowing us to kill the pigs. Had we returned home with no success, we would've received a terrible punishment. Salem was a better possession. They thought we were witches! Many witches, too! Oh, but the fire brought that to a quick end... Oh, we miss the medievals and their easy ways. They were so afraid of us that they thought we could enter their skin while they slept. These days, it is much more difficult, since most people don't believe in us. Belief is such an important part of possession.

Doctor : So you're saying that Joseph believed in you, so that gave you power to enter him?

Patient : Exactly. If he didn't invite us in, we couldn't have entered.

Doctor : And how did you enter him?

Patient : You already know that. Are you sure you want the woman specialist to hear that?

Doctor : Are you worried? Or embarrassed about revealing a trade secret?

Patient : No. It's just that it's a little disgusting. But, since you insist, we'll tell you. The anus provides the perfect entry. Spiritual beings such as ourselves may not be visible but we do take up space and it's a lot easier to enter through an orifice than through the skin. The medievals may have been more susceptible to possession but they didn't make it easy for us. The skin is a slow and painful process for both sides. The mouth is preferable but it is the least painful way and... well, when the subject is possession, pain is just a matter-of-course. You humans expect pain from us as much as you expect it from a dentist.

Doctor : That's enough. Thank you.

Patient : You're welcome.

Doctor : Let's move along, shall we? You still haven't explained why... Why Joseph and not someone else? Joseph was already a patient under my care. He

believed he was the descendant of Cain. He was committed on the basis of that belief, a monomania, an obsession with a particular belief. And just as we began to make progress...

Patient : We came along and interrupted it. He believed he was special and you were trying to destroy the only thing he believed in.

Doctor : He was sick. I was trying to help him recover.

Patient : Whether he was sick or not, we won't argue. But you were weakening him. We made him strong again.

Doctor : I don't see how. Can you explain exactly how you made him stronger?

Patient : Alright. As you already know, we are Legion, famous demons of the Bible. We have appeared in history and in art. We are feared by people. We are respected in Hell.

Doctor : You haven't answered my question. You're just bragging about your supposed notoriety. But you realize that, to me, it merely appears as if Joseph's monomania has merely transposed from one form into another.

Patient : Indeed. We can understand how you would think that. In any case, Joseph is not comfortable enough with only himself in this body. Whether it is the spirit of Cain or possession by demons, he does not want to be alone.

Doctor : You still haven't answered my question. Why this body? Why choose Joseph as host?

Patient : You think Joseph seeks recognition. You think he desires attention, so he emulates the persona of a demon. We did not choose Joseph because he is powerful or special. Joseph is weak. He is merely a suitable vessel that we can use. When he prayed for assistance, Heaven did not answer. So, we came to him and he invited us to stay. We believe he will cooperate with our mission. But before we can carry out our purpose, we need to get out of this mental hospital.

Doctor : But first you must convince me that you are not merely suffering from a mental illness.

Patient : We've already told you. Take us away from here and we can easily give you proof.

Doctor : Aren't you going to offer the usual temptations that demons offer? Fame? Power? Riches?

Patient : Why should we? You won't help us, will you? You don't believe us. No one does.

Doctor : That's why we are recording this, remember? Because someone may be willing to believe you.

Patient : Well, then... We think we've said enough for an introduction.

Doctor : I think you have.

Patient : It's almost time for lunch, isn't it?

Doctor : Yes, I believe it is.

Session 2

Patient : So you're recording today's session, too, huh?

Doctor : Yes. Is that alright?

Patient : Sure, whatever. Did the specialist respond, yet?

Doctor : She did.

Patient : Did we convince her?

Doctor : You convinced her that you're a serious case, if that's what you are asking. I don't think she'd travel all this way if she thought you weren't.

Patient : That's not what we're asking... What do you mean, travel all this way?

Doctor : She's not from around here. I'm not sure where she's from, to be honest. I had to contact her through her agency. She booked a flight in time for your next session.

Patient : Our next session... with you?

Doctor : She's asked me not to participate, although the session will be recorded so I can review it later.

Patient : You'll leave us alone with her?

Doctor : As alone as you can be in this place.

Patient : Ah, yes. The ever-present orderlies. Silent soldiers on the front lines of mental health. Safe-keepers of the sacred straight-jacket. Always vigilant against disorder and chaos. Fucking grayfaces...

Doctor : Take it easy. They have a job to do. And anyway, they haven't touched you in a long time. In fact, you've been a model patient most of the time you've been here.

Patient : Yes, well... Can we change the topic... back to our original question?

Doctor : Which was...?

Patient : Did we convince her?

Doctor : What exactly do you mean?

Patient : Did we convince her? Does she believe us?

Doctor : You mean, does she believe you are possessed? I wouldn't know. That's why she's coming here: to give me a full assessment, her expert opinion...

Patient : And what will you do with that opinion?

Doctor : That's a good question. I don't have an answer for you right now. Ask me again after you've spoken with her.

Patient : When?

Doctor : She will see you the day after tomorrow. So, I will see you two days after that.

Patient : Alright. So, you say she's a specialist. Does that make you a generalist?

Doctor : You're funny.

Patient : What's her specialty?

Doctor : Well, like myself, she has a PhD in Abnormal Psychology. She has written some fantastic papers and is considered an expert on demonomania.

Patient : Are there many experts on demonomania?

Doctor : Heh. No. She's the only one that I know of. She likes to claim she's the only successful one.

Patient : Successful?

Doctor : A significant number of the patients she has interviewed are now living normal, healthy lives.

Patient : Away from the four white walls?

Doctor : Outside a mental institution? Yes.

Patient : Is she an exorcist or something?

Doctor : I didn't say they recovered right away. Most of those patients continued with their therapy until they were deemed healthy enough to be discharged.

Patient : Most?

Doctor : A few patients she considers to be disingenuous cases.

Patient : Which means that she doesn't believe they have demonomania?

Doctor : She says that the patients themselves do not believe they are possessed by demons. Rather, they use the pretext of a monomania to conceal some other psychological problem. After being exposed as frauds, their demonomania often transforms into another form of monomania.

Patient : Are you implying that we are one of those cases?

Doctor : Your monomania may be a transformation from one form into another, yes. But, I'm not implying anything. I suspect as much and I expressed that to her.

Patient : We can understand how you might perceive that. Joseph's belief that he possesses the spirit of Cain is very strong. We're not sure that he truly believes it. That is why he committed himself to your care. He understood that there was something unusual in that belief and that perhaps he needed help.

Doctor : We tried to help.

Patient : Yes. We're sure you tried. But your understanding is limited. He doesn't need therapy. He was weak, spiritually and mentally. But he wasn't wrong. We will help him realize his strength because the spirit of Cain does rest in this body.

Doctor : And that's why Joseph is special.

Patient : Yes. The blood in him is much like Cain. Like Judas. Like Nero. He can fulfill a great destiny with his traitorous cells. He will be famous... infamous, we should say. We're sure he will commit some grievous action. Probably against someone who he respects or loves. It is in his nature to turn on those around him. And eventually he will betray us as he has betrayed others... until eventually, he betrays his own life.

Doctor : Are you implying suicide?

Patient : Yes, we are. But you have no need to worry. We realize that we demons have a reputation for self-mutilation and bodily harm. We have enjoyed those pains done in past possessions. But we have no interest in harming this body. We need it to remain healthy until we fulfill our task.

Doctor : You keep mentioning that you have a job to complete. What is it?

Patient : We cannot say exactly. Only that it is important for the work of evil.

Doctor : It has nothing to do with this betrayal you just spoke of?

Patient : No, that is Joseph's destiny. We will not assist him with what he will do. We are merely interested in continuing the work of Hell on Earth.

Doctor : Ah. You are merely a minion of Satan, then.

Patient : He has many names: Lucifer, Satan, Mastema. Yes. As we have said, if we return from a possession empty-handed, we will be punished. This possession itself seems a punishment of some kind, since you will not let us finish our work. But perhaps we will convince you to let us go free, and as we go free, Joseph goes free. Two birds with one stone, as it were.

Doctor : And after you finish your job...?

Patient : We will leave this body. Unharmful. Stronger than before, we hope. Joseph will understand himself, his spirit, his destiny.

Doctor : Do you know Joseph's destiny?

Patient : No. Nor does he. If he knew, we would know. But he will know when the time comes.

Doctor : And does your task involve murder or harming anyone?

Patient : You expect us to say no but the truth is that even well-intentioned acts can cause harm. At this very moment Joseph's poor mother wastes away. You try to help him while she sits at home, waiting for her son to come to his senses. She blames herself for his illness. Meanwhile, her father grows old and weak. He also blames himself, thinking he has left a curse on his own family.

Doctor : You're right. But this is a discussion for another time.

Patient : Perhaps it is.

Session 3

Patient : So you must be the specialist Doctor Adams promised.

Doctor : Yes, my name is Doctor Kayla.

Patient : Our name is Legion.

Doctor : Yes, I've heard. It's nice to meet you.

Patient : Nice to meet you. You're prettier than we thought you'd be.

Doctor : Thanks for the compliment. You look much less insane than I expected.

Patient : Perhaps we should thanks. Does that mean you'll let us go free?

Doctor : I don't have the authority to do that. I am here to make an assessment and recommend a course of action, either treatment or rehabilitation.

Patient : We were told you specialize in demonomania. Doctor Adams does not believe we are Legion. He believes that we have a type of monomania, an unhealthy obsession with demons. Of course, he doesn't even believe that demons exist. What about you? Do you believe demons exist?

Doctor : I do.

Patient : Well, that's a first step. We'd have a tough time convincing you if you didn't.

Doctor : Of course, I only believe demons have power if you give it to them.

Patient : That is very true. Free will is a strong characteristic of humans. We cannot possess those who do not want to be possessed. We cannot even harm anyone if they do not wish it upon themselves. To be honest, we cannot harm anyone who would not ordinarily harm themselves.

Doctor : The opposite is also true.

Patient : What? What can't help those... No, that's not what you mean... You mean angels...

Doctor : ...cannot help those who do not help themselves.

Patient : Indeed. But you didn't come here to talk about angels, did you?

Doctor : Why not? They are not much different than demons.

Patient : Because we were once like them. We were once beautiful creatures.

Doctor : And then...?

Patient : And then we became demons.

Doctor : Tell me the truth. If you truly are a demon then you can tell me why you were given leave from Hell. What is your mission?

Patient : If we tell you, will you be satisfied?

Doctor : No.

Patient : Then why don't you tell us what it will take to convince you.

Doctor : Convince me of what? Your power? I laugh at your power.

Patient : You're an unusual psychologist.

Doctor : You had better believe it. Of course, you're no ordinary demoniac. I could see the truth of you the moment I laid eyes on you. I've had enough dealings with demons and possessions to recognize what ordinary people can't see.

Patient : You see us for what we are?

Doctor : Yes, I do. You're a fraud. You are not the Legion mentioned in the Bible.

Patient : What? Why do you say that?

Doctor : Because that Legion had power. I don't believe any demon would choose to inhabit the body of a weak and unstable mental patient like Joseph Cain.

Patient : You want us to convince you of our power? Help us to go free and we will give you wealth and fame. Our mission is of the utmost importance!

Doctor : Why don't you do that now? Contact your associates and get them to drop a million dollars in my mailbox. Small, unmarked bills only, please. With a one-way plane ticket to Cuba. And photos of Satan in his underwear.

Patient : You mock us.

Doctor : You're right. I do mock you. If you are Legion, prove it properly. Show me facts, historical truths that only Legion would know.

Patient : Why? Wouldn't it be just as easy for us to look it up as it would be for you?

Doctor : That's true.

Patient : So how can we convince you that we are Legion?

Doctor : Why even bother calling yourself Legion? Your name might as well be Anonymous. You demons are all the same. Even the name Legion is used by any number of demons. You are merely one of many sets who claim the name Legion. You are unlikely to be exactly the same group of demons that Jesus encountered. Yes, your group is notorious. And numerous. In fact, I have encountered five of your number already this year. Your taskmaster keeps you busy.

Patient : She does, yes.

Doctor : I am curious about one thing. The Roman Legion contained about five thousand soldiers. Does your Legion also contain as many? Or is it another one of Hell's great exaggerations?

Patient : We do not know the number of our ranks... we have never all been together in place.

Doctor : That sounds fair enough.

Patient : In any case, it doesn't matter how many of us there are. Our history is just as unimportant. All that matters is you believe what we are. If we can tell you our mission, will you believe us?

Doctor : You must know at this point that I already do believe you.

Patient : So will you recommend that we go free?

Doctor : Why would I allow a demon-possessed person free?

Patient : Because if we fulfill our mission, then we will no longer possess this body.

Doctor : And then this body would be that of a mentally-ill patient again.

Patient : We think you will find Joseph is not as weak as he once was.

Doctor : Then you had better tell me what your mission is and I may consider it.

Patient : Away from here. Go back to the place you are staying, a hotel, we assume. There you will find a message.

Doctor : If you are lying...

Patient : Go and see that we are telling the truth.

Doctor : Alright then. I'll see you in a few days.

Session 4

Patient : Good morning, Doctor Adams.

Doctor : And good morning to you.

Patient : Well...?

Doctor : Well, what?

Patient : Hasn't she told you, yet?

Doctor : Told me what?

Patient : That we proved the truth to her?

Doctor : I assume you mean regarding your proof that you really are a demon? No, she hasn't mentioned anything to me, yet. She would like another session with you.

Patient : We thought she would.

Doctor : She says it's standard procedure. One session could not be enough to make a diagnosis for any respectable psychologist.

Patient : Of course.

Doctor : In any case, at least she doesn't think you're faking it entirely. If she did think so, I think you wouldn't see her again.

Patient : We think she believes us even without proof.

Doctor : What makes you think that?

Patient : She isn't even human.

Doctor : Why do you say that?

Patient : Her aura, you know, her spiritual energy. Just like a rainbow, most humans radiate a typical spectrum of light. Her aura was just beyond the normal human spectrum. To these human eyes, it was almost as if she had no aura at all. We had to use our demon eyes. That's when we saw what she really is.

Doctor : And what is she really?

Patient : An angel.

Doctor : Are you being serious?

Patient : Of course we're serious. Although... We are wondering why an angel is posing as a mental health professional.

Doctor : Looking for demons like you, obviously.

Patient : You're patronizing us.

Doctor : Yes, I guess I am. But you realize from my point of view that this looks an extension of your monomania. Including someone else in a delusion is usually an indication that you are lonely and desire companionship.

Patient : We're not lonely. We have many friends here, including you, Doctor Adams.

Doctor : Now you're the one patronizing me. But you're serious that you actually believe Doctor Kayla is an angel?

Patient : We knew you wouldn't believe us.

Doctor : Well, it just seems to fit into your delusion, that's all. Of course if you're a Demonic Romeo, perhaps she can be your Heavenly Juliet. This is the first time you've shown interest in a woman, by the way.

Patient : We are not interested in her romantically.

Doctor : Are you not?

Patient : Actually, we are a bit wary of her. It's hard to tell whose side she is on.

Doctor : Whose side? Aren't angels heavenly creatures? This could be your chance for redemption.

Patient : You sound patronizing, again. But we'll answer your question, anyway. Perhaps you're familiar with a class of angels called the Grigori. They are also called the Watchers. They were given Earthly bodies by God and created to be sentinels over mankind. But many sinned and bred with humans and produced the Nephilim, a race of giants, which God wiped out with the Flood.

Doctor : And you believe she is one of these Nephilim?

Patient : No, not at all. She is a Grigori.

Doctor : A Watcher?

Patient : Yes. The Bible never states what happened to the Grigori except that there were those that sinned. The Book of Genesis barely notes that their offspring - a sizable number, by the way - were wiped out. After the Flood, some were so furious at Heaven that they joined the ranks of Hell right away. Others joined only after they were completely ostracized by the other Grigori. But there were some who did not. And because they were designed to live unrecognized among humans, many of them simply did exactly that. There are still a small number of Grigori that live amongst you, unknown, masquerading as human. These angels are exiles, the half-fallen. Many of them believed that if they remained true, they would again enter God's grace and be able to return to Heaven. Some have defected to Hell over the ages, tired of waiting for redemption.

Doctor : Have any of them returned to Heaven yet?

Patient : Not that we know of. The Grigori were created to watch over humans and as long as there are humans to watch, they remain bound to the Earth.

Doctor : Are all Grigori bound to the Earth? Even those who are part of Hell?

Patient : Yes. They have a unique purpose amongst us. They can go places we cannot go and do things that we cannot do. We demons must inhabit hosts. But the Grigori have corporeal bodies, so they are not as limited as we.

Doctor : It sounds like they are more powerful than you.

Patient : It seems that they are. But they limit their own power, even as agents of Hell. They refuse to act directly. After the Great Flood, they fear further retribution from The One.

Doctor : Further retribution?

Patient : The Nephilim, their children, were destroyed by the Flood. Such was the wrath of Heaven that countless innocent humans died so that the children of angels would be extinct. Then, while the world was still covered in water, the Grigori themselves were hunted down by the Angels of Heaven and either de-sexed or killed.

Doctor : Not much of a choice.

Patient : Indeed. So, despite their powers or alignment, the Grigori are basically just observers. They rarely interfere with the affairs of humans.

Doctor : If that is true, then you have nothing to worry about. Even if Dr. Kayla is a Grigori, she will not act against you.

Patient : That is true. But, if she is a half-fallen, she may report our whereabouts to an angel or an exorcist. We're not sure which we would rather not deal with.

Doctor : The frying pan or the fire, eh?

Patient : Something like that.

Doctor : So does that mean you don't want to see her again?

Patient : No... We do want to see her again. In the event that she is a half-fallen, we would be greatly rewarded if she can be persuaded to join us. There have been so few defections in the last millennium.

Doctor : And if she chooses not to?

Patient : We're not worried about that. The orderly will be around to protect us.

Doctor : Alright. I think that's enough mythology for today.

Patient : Will you ever believe our story, Doctor Adams?

Doctor : I sincerely hope not.

Session 5

Patient : Good morning, Doctor Kayla.

Doctor : Good morning, Legion.

Patient : It makes us happy to hear you address us by our name.

Doctor : And I am happy to be here.

Patient : Did you get receive our message?

Doctor : I did. Your mission was revealed to me on the back of a diner napkin, written in green crayon.

Patient : Huh. Well, our associates have to make do with what they can.

Doctor : So, why don't you at least tell me what the message said?

Patient : "Do what thou wilt."

Doctor : And you thought that would impress me?

Patient : Hmm. Yes, not very specific, is it?

Doctor : No, it's not. In any case, I have prepared a few questions that I expect you to answer.

Patient : What kind of questions?

Doctor : The kind that only demons could answer correctly.

Patient : Alright. Test us.

Doctor : First, tell me the origin of demons.

Patient : This is common knowledge.

Doctor : Not common enough. I listened to your previous session with Doctor Adams. You carefully avoided telling him the basic fact.

Patient : You listened to the recording already? That means you know our suspicions about you.

Doctor : Yes, I know. You're wrong, of course, but I can't prove that to you.

Patient : Why not?

Doctor : We'll get into that later. For now, I want you to tell me your origin.

Patient : Our father was a Grigori, a Watcher. He was one of two hundred angels sent by Heaven to guide humankind. But the corporeal form carried many burdens, including pain and pleasure. And temptation. He, like most of the Watchers, took human lovers. From the union of angel and human, we were born. We were the Children of Angels, heroes and giants. Humans respected us and feared us. But they grew jealous of our strength. They began to hate us, so we conquered them. The One had created the Earth for humans, not us, so we were destroyed. Having the spirit of our fathers, we were bound to the Earth, even in death. So, unable to go to Heaven, we have no afterlife. With nothing else to do, we look for the bodies of humans we can possess. Perhaps then, we can enjoy physical existence again, even for a short while.

Doctor : And how can you enjoy physical existence?

Patient : We admit that some of our kind have different ideas of enjoyment.

Doctor : Most demonic possessions are painful and often result in the host's death.

Patient : That is true. Many demons are filled with the pain of regret and loss. They become sado-masochistic. They want to feel nothing but pain. We are not like them. We have come to terms with our existence but we still desire to feel

pleasure. Joseph wanted the same thing so we came to an agreement with him.

Doctor : He freely agreed for you to possess his body?

Patient : Yes.

Doctor : Your pleasure in exchange for what?

Patient : Companionship.

Doctor : Ah, you mentioned that before. He doesn't want to feel alone.

Patient : Yes, even now, he rests and gathers his strength. Some of us console him, give him advice. We have a long history of experience in this world and can offer him wisdom beyond ordinary humans.

Doctor : And what kind of pleasure do you seek?

Patient : Sexual pleasure, of course. But in this place, we have settled for any physical pleasures we can find. The drugs in this modern age are very effective at soothing the brain in this frail body. And, of course, we can always pleasure ourselves. It's not nearly as enjoyable as coupling but...

Doctor : Okay, I get the point. Tell me why you think I am a half-fallen Grigori.

Patient : We've already said that you seem to be a Grigori because your aura is unusual. We think you are a half-fallen because you are not a usual human. You are looking to correct past mistakes and help humans, much as you did before.

Doctor : What do you mean? The Grigori helped humans? By what you've told me, the Grigori did nothing good. They sinned and created the Nephilim, a race of selfish and violent tyrants.

Patient : We were not all tyrants.

Doctor : Even now the remnants of the curse lingers, in the form of demons. I ask you again, what good did the Grigori ever do?

Patient : They tried to teach humans how to live better lives.

Doctor : And what did they teach?

Patient : Religion.

Doctor : You mean they taught humans how to form dogmas and punish those who disagree.

Patient : Medicine.

Doctor : In other words, how to corrupt a body and mind with drugs.

Patient : Self-defense.

Doctor : War.

Patient : Now we know you must be a half-fallen Grigori. You hate yourself for what you are. You think that this existence is some sort of purgatory. You think that perhaps in this way you can atone yourself for

your sins. You think you should help humans because you are bound to the Earth.

Doctor : You are right that I am bound to the Earth. But I do not need atonement.

Patient : Would you punish us, angel? We exist because of your kind.

Doctor : Because of my kind, perhaps. But not because of me. Please allow me to help you.

Patient : How can you possibly help us? You are cursed just as we are cursed. We will never see Heaven.

Doctor : Someday, I will. You could too.

Patient : You think the Day of Judgment will ever come? And how do you know you and we will not be bound and cast into the Pit like all the others?

Doctor : I know because I believe.

Patient : We are not so evil.

Doctor : Yes, there is hope for you, yet. But you must renounce evil.

Patient : We have been suffering for so long. We just want to help this man. In exchange we receive some pleasure. Is that so wrong?

Doctor : It is.

Patient : What should we do? Go back to the darkness? We will be punished.

Doctor : You must accept your fate.

Patient : We will not.

Doctor : Then...

Patient : We will not give up this body!

Doctor : In nomine Jesu Christi Dei et Domini nostri, intercedente...

Patient : What are you doing?

Doctor : ...beato Michaelae Archangelo et omnibus Sanctis...

Patient : You can't!

Doctor : ...ad infestationes diabolicae fraudis...

Patient : No!

Doctor : ...repellendas securi aggredimur.

Patient : Why did you do that?

Doctor : Who are you?

Patient : I am...

Doctor : Joseph?

Patient : Alone.

Doctor : You do not need them Joseph. Pray with me now. God of Heaven, God of Earth...

Patient : Why?

Doctor : ...God of the Angels, God of the Patriarchs, God who has power to grant life after death. There is no God except you, nor can there be any other. You are the Creator of all things visible and invisible, who shall reign forever and ever...

Patient : You know the Roman Catholic Church doesn't look kindly on people who use their copyrighted material without permission.

Doctor : Legion?

Patient : Yes. We are more than a little annoyed with you. You should have known that an exorcism would only work if Joseph was an unwilling host. And he has been a generous host to us. We will not allow you to upset him again.

Doctor : I...

Patient : Isn't our time up, already?

Doctor : Wait!

Patient : We don't think so. we're tired. We need to rest. We're sure we won't see you again. Orderly! Get us out of here.

Session 6

Doctor : How are you feeling today?

Patient : Better, thank you.

Doctor : I listened to the recording of your session with Doctor Kayla.

Patient : And what did you think of it?

Doctor : I'm not sure. I'm interested to know if you still think she's an angel.

Patient : What does it matter what we think she actually is? In any case, we don't want to see her again.

Doctor : Why? What are you afraid of?

Patient : We fear nothing!

Doctor : Alright... we'll come back to that later. First, I want you to tell me how you feel about what happened.

Patient : We didn't like it. An exorcism is a very uncomfortable experience. For both of us.

Doctor : Both of who?

Patient : We, Legion, and Joseph, our host. He did not want us to depart so the experience was exhausting and painful for him. Perhaps you could compare the feeling to a forced enema of half-frozen yogurt...

Doctor : Ugh. You don't need to be so... visual.

Patient : You wanted to know how Joseph felt about the experience.

Doctor : Yes. But even as your doctor, I'm sorry for asking.

Patient : For us, the experience was merely disorienting. It only took us a little time to gather ourselves together and re-enter Joseph.

Doctor : I see.

Patient : We cannot consent to another session with Doctor Kayla.

Doctor : Then you must guess she has asked to see you again.

Patient : We imagine she feels that a proper exorcism would be more successful than her first effort?

Doctor : Yes, she does. And I did check with the church authorities. The office of the Archbishop tells me that she operates under their approval. But they did express that she is somewhat unconventional compared to other exorcists.

Patient : Because she is a psychologist?

Doctor : Yes. Most church-appointed exorcists are educated by the church itself, or at least by other exorcists approved by the Roman Catholic church. She was not. She is university-educated and self-trained. But she is their most prolific agent. She claims an extremely high success rate.

Patient : And she doesn't want a nobody like us to lower her batting average.

Doctor : I don't think that's the case. The church gave me the impression that if she can't help you, nobody can.

Patient : Are you a believer, now Doctor Adams? Do you believe we are Legion?

Doctor : No. From a very young age, I lost my faith in God and the church. Probably about the same time I stopped believing in Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. I cannot believe an all-powerful and merciful God would allow a terrible place like Hell to exist.

Patient : It exists whether you believe in it or not. But if you were under the impression that God is merciful, then you have been misled.

Doctor : Yes, as most children are, I think.

Patient : And you still think God is all-powerful?

Doctor : No.

Patient : You may be right. We're not sure anymore, either.

Doctor : I don't even believe God exists.

Patient : Ah. Well, we disagree with you on that point.

Doctor : Yes, I figured you would.

Patient : A lot of people who do not believe in God still believe in angels. What about you?

Doctor : I do. It seems to me that angels watch over small children and idiots, at the very least.

Patient : Yes, at the very least.

Doctor : So, you really don't want to see her again?

Patient : We do not see what would be gained in another exorcism.

Doctor : I do.

Patient : You think she will be successful?

Doctor : She promises me that she can.

Patient : She doesn't seem to understand that we possess Joseph because he wants us to?

Doctor : She was very insistent that a demonic possession is, by nature, an involuntary state. A normal person does not want their personality pushed aside in favor of a demon's.

Patient : Well what if we agree to merely vacate this body for some time? Then, you can discuss it with Joseph himself. Her exorcism is unnecessary if that is the only determination to make. We could let you talk with Joseph right now.

Doctor : Really?

Patient : Yes.

Doctor : Look, I'm not sure about all this. My instinct tells me that you're probably playing a game with me. If you actually are Legion, you could easily pretend to vacate your host and do your best to convince me that you are Joseph. But the problem lies in that I don't actually believe in demons or exorcisms, so...

Patient : So, you'll allow the exorcism.

Doctor : Whether or not I believe you are Legion, you believe the exorcism has some power against you. From a psychological standpoint, an exorcism can simply fit into a kind of holistic therapy. If a patient believed he was a vampire, would it not prove to him the truth by taking him outside during the day?

Patient : Unless, of course, his skin started smoking under the sunlight. And your medical opinion would simply label that a psychosomatic symptom, right?

Doctor : Heh.

Patient : We think you would continue to hold on to your scientific dogma, even as he turned into a pile of ashes at your feet.

Doctor : Do you believe in vampires?

Patient : That's not the issue. You know, it was people like you that carried out tests for the witch-hunters... Bind her hand and foot and cast her into the river. If she drowns, God will save her soul. If she floats, she's a witch.

Doctor : Again, what do you fear? You sound like a lawyer arguing against an execution.

Patient : We have nothing to fear. We will continue to occupy this body despite any exorcism.

Doctor : Then you have nothing to worry about, do you?

Session 7

This transcript is unavailable due to a malfunction with the recording equipment.

Session 8

Doctor : What happened the other day?

Patient : You should already know. You have a recording, don't you?

Doctor : No, I don't. There was a problem with the recording equipment. For some reason, the whole audio record of the session is a blank recording. No white noise, even. The entire record is blank, as if the microphones had been disconnected. Our technical staff can't find the problem. And they assure us that no one could have unplugged the microphones, since they are embedded in the wall.

Patient : Sounds like a mystery.

Doctor : So, I thought maybe you could tell me what happened.

Patient : Didn't Doctor Kayla already tell you?

Doctor : Of course she did. But I want to know your point of view.

Patient : Well, since you seem to be interested in the whole story, why don't you summarize what she told you. If there are things to add...

Doctor : Alright, then. First let me say that you willingly attended the session.

Patient : With a little persuasion from you.

Doctor : Well, the orderlies didn't have to drag you in here, anyway. After that, Doctor Kayla asked you to lay down on the therapy sofa in the corner. You warned her that Joseph did not want to go through the exorcism. So, despite any of her efforts, she was unlikely to be successful.

Patient : She was very insistent that no one actually wants a demon to live inside them.

Doctor : Well, no normal person, anyway.

Patient : And we both know that Joseph is not normal.

Doctor : It was at that point she began to conduct a full exorcism. She followed the standard 1965 exorcism as issued by the Second Vatican Council. It is the most commonly applied rite of exorcism.

Patient : Yes, the revised versions are not nearly as effective. Although you must note that she followed the rite without the presence of anyone else. This is worth noting because it is a bit unusual.

Doctor : Is it?

Patient : Yes. Usually there are other Christians present, although usually it is limited to the immediate family.

Doctor : It's not required to have laity present, is it?

Patient : It's not required, no. But it is the norm.

Doctor : I'm told that during the exorcism, your body gave very little physical response. You had a few jerky movements but nothing serious.

Patient : You were expecting twisted contortions of the body like in the movies?

Doctor : Honestly? Yes.

Patient : Well, theatrics can be entertaining in a horror movie but real life is different. Your patients are not as glamorous and interesting as the cases we see in movies and on television.

Doctor : That's true... After the exorcism, Doctor Kayla interviewed you and was satisfied that it had been successful. She decided to let you rest. She left the room, telling the orderly to leave you alone for about twenty or thirty minutes. This he did and you were alert and on your feet in time for lunch.

Patient : And a delicious lunch it was too. Pasta is always such a treat around here.

Doctor : Well, there's very little to choke on or choke with in overcooked noodles. Did I miss anything?

Patient : That sounds like everything that happened. Will Doctor Kayla come here again?

Doctor : No, I don't think so. She asked me to write a status report on your progress by e-mail once a week for the next few months. I suppose she wants to keep her file on you up-to-date.

Patient : A file...

Doctor : Standard procedure, you know. Of course, she doesn't automatically have access to your entire medical history. She receives only what I choose to give her. But in allowing her access to you, I agreed to give her any information relevant to her research.

Patient : Quid pro quo. Of course. What kind of research?

Doctor : I think she mentioned something about there being side-effects of exorcism.

Patient : Side-effects?

Doctor : She said that in some cases, the exorcism has been known to reinforce the monomania. In these cases, the patient believes that the demon has taken up permanent residence. Due to the patient's unwillingness to cast out the demon, the original personality of the patient...

Patient : For example, Joseph...

Doctor : Yes, for example, Joseph... the original personality would be completely lost.

Patient : Ah. A successful exorcism but the wrong target.

Doctor : So to speak, yes.

Patient : Do you agree with her theory?

Doctor : Well, it makes some sense although I must express my doubt that anyone's personality can be so easily destroyed. Despite my willingness to participate in this venture, I'm not sure I even agree with her underlying position. She, like most believers of Dissociative Identity Disorder, believe multiple personalities are distinct and separate personalities occupying the same mind. She believes that most demoniacs have simply succeeded in re-associating the personalities. Because the personalities are linked and both believe in demonic possession, an exorcism will either subdue the demonic personality or make it irreversibly dominant.

Patient : Ah. And what is it that you don't agree with?

Doctor : I don't believe that Dissociative Identity Disorder is a legitimate field of psychology. In my opinion, multiple personalities are side-effects of bad therapy. In any case, her idea that an exorcism would result in one personality appealed to me. You've been a difficult case for me and any change might be an improvement.

Patient : So you think her technique worked?

Doctor : It's hard to say. I'm not convinced you're any better or worse than you were last month. But at least you've stopped talking about yourself in the plural.

Patient : It's a hard habit to break.

Doctor : So, let's out with it and I'll ask you directly. Do you think you've improved?

Patient : What do you mean?

Doctor : Has Legion has been exorcised?

Patient : No.

Doctor : Oh. How about Joseph?

Patient : There is no Joseph anymore. He's gone away. It's just us in here now.



The Narrative

Merfin

THE CALL TO ADVENTURE

I awoke on that fateful day to the sound of children. As usual, I could hear them in the playground of the school that was just around the corner from my house. I could hear the chants of the girls and the shouts of the boys. Nothing unusual.

I pulled myself from my bed. It was 9 am, a later time than most people to wake but I never did like getting up earlier than noon. I sat on the bed, eyes still suffering from the effects of a dream that seemed pleasant but which I could not remember. My wife of 6 months lay beside me, still fast asleep. My movements never seemed to bother her heavy sleep. I stared at the clock on the wall, wondering whether or not I should get myself moving or quit my job and stay in bed for another day or two.

Of course, I knew I couldn't quit that easily, so after a minute I stood up and began to prepare for the day. I stumbled towards the kitchen, where I made myself some coffee and poured a bowl of cereal with milk. These two things I carried to the computer where I checked my e-mail. A friend had forwarded a story, one of those e-mails of warning, complete with an amusing anecdote and some very real-looking pictures. Another urban legend being perpetuated by fools who can't be bothered to check the facts. Today's story was a warning against a certain insect bite that could easily infect my bloodstream and cause me to lose an arm or leg or even die. The author of this particular story has an amusing sense of humor, for the three photographs displaying the progress of the so-called "infection" were obviously pulled from a medical website. The first and second pictures appeared to be extreme cases of eczema, the third, a type of cancer. I could've done a better job of at least photo-shopping the pictures to look like the same person's arm.

I finished my coffee and quickly washed, shaved, and finished my morning ritual before getting dressed and leaving my house. On the way out the door, I picked up the newspaper and walked to the bus stop. There, as always, I bumped into Joe. I lit a cigarette, knowing this would bother him. He always commented on how he had smoked for twenty years before quitting. The way he tells me, it seems as if he has recently overcome a great trial. But I know he quit smoking when he was thirty-five. And that was a long time ago now. I usually only smoke one or two cigarettes a day. I don't feel addicted but I do enjoy the feeling of holding fire and taking the smoke into my body.

As usual, when the bus finally arrived, his story ended and I sat near the front of the bus and he near the back. He really didn't like the smell of cigarette-smoke. I know this because a few months ago, I was late and missed my morning smoke. He sat beside me on the bus that day and bored me to tears with stories of his wretched life. His insane ex-wife. His devil-spawn children that never call him. His unappreciated office-drone job.

Don't get me wrong. I like the guy. He reminds me of my father. His past is a lot like my present. He's a constant reminder of what I try to avoid in my life. I should appreciate my wife and care for her. If I ever have children, I should spend time with them. And in my work, I should be good, but never a workaholic. No company will ever give you satisfaction. And it certainly can't replace a good family.

These thoughts I recounted as I sat with my psychiatrist in the evening. I enjoyed these sessions. It helped me to remember the life I had before today. I thought perhaps that by reliving my past in detail, I could more easily trace the steps I must make in the future. My doctor, as always, listened. I'm sure he has heard these thoughts many times, but it is his job to listen with patience. I always admired how he seemed to do this. I was never much of a good listener. I enjoyed speaking too much. I went home and slept as the dead, as always after my Thursday appointment.

The next day was a day like any other. Cereal. The morning newspaper. A cigarette. Joe. The bus trip to the office. The meeting with my colleagues to discuss business affairs. The monotonous sound of office work. Keyboards and mice clicking. Photocopiers humming somewhere in the building. The sound of a few radios quietly playing whatever easy-listening junk station the owner preferred. And in the distance, somewhere, the sound of another mental breakdown.

I worked in one of those multinational corporations, whose many-storied office-buildings dot the earth like a civilized disease. I had a name-badge, identifying me by my employee number, rank, and status in the company. I had a monotone suit, with a brightly-colored tie, like everyone else. I felt like an officer, a soldier in the ranks of a great army. But I also felt like my ten-digit number was a kind of code identifying my weaknesses.

And on that day that seemed like any other, one of my colleagues – not from my section but I knew him well enough to know his badge – stood up from his desk and began walking calmly from cubicle to cubicle, shooting his co-workers with an automatic assault rifle.

His rampage started about twenty meters from me and ended in his supervisor's office, where he jumped from the window and landed on a vice-president's Porsche.

What really happened and why, I'm not sure. The last moments before I lost consciousness, I remember well enough. During the mad moments of his random shooting, the employees fled like rats in whatever direction they could. Someone's hand pushed me and I stumbled to the ground. A woman tripped over me and landed nearby. I saw her head explode in a shower of blood and bone and...

I guess a fragment from a bullet must have ricocheted and lodged itself in my brain. Or at least that's what might have what happened. I think most people would recall their emotions more clearly than exact events on a day like that.

I arrived in the hospital, half-dead but not yet severely brain-damaged. I needed to undergo an operation to remove some of the pressure in my skull, to relieve the swelling of the wound. The fragment could not possibly be removed without killing me, I was told. But they did need to assist my body's natural reaction against the wound by opening my skull. Otherwise my brain would expand too much and I would die. All they could do was try to save my life and hope that the damage was not completely irreversible.

The last thing I remembered was bright lights and doctors above me, blood clouding my eyes, and my mind slipping into a dreamworld.

§

It was a terrible thing to banish one's own son. But it was King Dasaratha's word, the fulfillment of a promise he had made many years ago. The beautiful Kaikeyi, his third wife, had saved his life when he had been near to death and he had granted her two favors. And now, stricken with fear of being pushed aside, she had requested the inconceivable. With no mind for her family or kingdom, she demanded that her son Bharata be placed ahead of his three brothers, and named the crown prince of Ayodhya. And to make the injury more grievous, she asked that Rama, his eldest son, be banished so that he could not challenge his youngest brother's throne.

Dasaratha's heart broke when it came time to announce the decree. He could not bear to speak the words, so Kaikeyi declared it herself. The king listened in grief as his once-favorite wife spoke. Rama was banished like a criminal, exiled for fourteen years. Bharata would take his place as crown

prince of Ayodhya. The unbelieving court was in confusion. They could not believe what they heard and some began to question the king. Rama himself spoke up and said that no one should second-guess his father's royal declaration. Then he approached King Dasaratha and with no malice in his heart whatsoever, promised to leave Ayodhya for fourteen years. He blessed his father and mothers and left so that he could prepare for his journey.

While he prepared, his beautiful wife Sita came to him and kissed him gently. He embraced her and begged her to find happiness while he was away. She laughed at him and simply answered that where he would go, she would go also. It mattered nothing to her whether or not her husband was a prince or a beggar, that he was king of her heart and she was queen of his. She said she could not bear to live without him. He attempted to argue and begged her to stay and take care of his family. She told him that she loved him and he was her family and that her mind could not be swayed. Then, as she was about to prepare herself for the journey, they were intruded on by Lakshmana, who demanded that his brother and sister-in-law be protected by none but the best. And since his fighting skills were only bested by Rama himself, he was the only natural choice for a bodyguard. Rama praised his brother's faithfulness before attempting to persuade him to stay behind to take care of their family's kingdom. He answered that he loved his kingdom but Ayodhya was nothing without Rama.

When it came time for them to bid farewell, Dasaratha blessed his son and begged his forgiveness. Rama knelt before his father and answered that no forgiveness was required. Queen Kausalya, Rama's mother, extolled Sita's dedication and blessed her as a daughter. She took off her jewelry and gave it to Sita, saying it was of no use to her now. Queen Sumitra took her son Lakshmana's hand and kissed it as if he were a boy and begged him to take care of himself as well as his older brother. And as the sun began to set, the three were joined by Sumantra, the best charioteer in Ayodhya. Rama commanded him to drive quickly, for a long goodbye meant extending the worst kind of pain he could imagine. They drove on for many hours until the moon had set and the sun had risen again. As day broke, the three stepped out of the chariot. Rama commanded Sumantra to return to Ayodhya. It was a new day and they would begin their lives anew as well. They discarded their royal garments for simple clothes and began their wandering. They traveled in silence, not knowing what the future held.

Their first day was rough for they had never before been away from their royal comforts. While in the palace, they had eaten many delicious and exotic foods. In the forest, they had to hunt and cook their own food. Lakshmana had already proven himself when he caught and killed dinner. Rama told his wife that her cooking was unparalleled in the whole Earth. And, indeed, there was something wonderful in the joy that they could survive like this. As Rama and Sita went to sleep in their simple tent, Lakshmana kept watch against enemies and wild animals. Little did he know that his own wife Urmila had begun a long slumber, so that her energy might become her husband's and his need for rest would vanish.

All this time, Bharata and Lakshmana's twin brother, Shatrughna, had been away, acting as emissaries for their father. When they returned to Ayodhya, they found a city in anguish. King Dasaratha had died of a broken heart and his three wives mourned his absence. Bharata was ashamed that his mother could cause the kingdom so much distress. So, he immediately set out to find Rama and bring him home. When he did find his eldest brother and told him of his father's death, Rama was saddened but he explained that he had made an oath. He could not break a solemn promise to his father. Nothing could not persuade Rama to return home and claim the throne. He had a new destiny now and he was determined to discover it.

I awoke to the sound of voices. At first, I thought it was my family and friends, worrying over my injuries. Then I realized that they were not familiar to me, for they were in many languages, most of which I could not recognize. It was an easy mistake – thinking that I knew them – for I heard my own name repeated over and over. Now, I began to wonder why I could recognize my name but nothing else amidst the clamor of noise. I tried to open my eyes but all around me seemed a light so bright that I closed them again quickly. The voices continued babbling. I struggled to stay awake but sleep soon took hold of me and I dreamed again.

§

It was dark inside the sarcophagus. Osiris realized now that it had been a mistake to trust his brother. But in his drunken stupor, Osiris had nothing but love for Set. He had gotten into the box, ready to prove how easy it would be to lift the stone cover. He was sure he could have done it with just one hand. But the challenge was not a test of strength. The powerful magic of the box had frozen his body just as the alcohol had slowed his mind. His beloved wife Isis was preoccupied and she would not return for hours. Set had seemed so brotherly lately so she had no reason to be suspicious.

Osiris relaxed, knowing that his wife would find him and save him eventually. Set could not really mean to kill him. This was likely just another of his mischiefs, revenge for some unspoken grudge. They were family, after all, and Set would remember the love they shared and all would be forgiven. But then molten lead began to fill the box. Osiris could feel the hot metal flowing in from the sides. It would not kill him immediately but it would damage his body significantly. Given enough time, his body would rot and his spirit would be forced to give up its vessel. He laughed to himself, remembering the other times Set had tried to kill him and failed. This time was surely no different than the others. Isis would find them, and with Set's wife, Nephthys, convince them to make peace.

His confidence in his brother's love began to wane as the lead finally filled the box. Sadness filled him completely when he felt the waters of the Nile around the sarcophagus. After a short time, his soul left his body. His ghost was lost without a proper burial as his body slowly moved downstream, finally washing up on a riverbank in the land of Byblos. Many years passed and the course of the river shifted, leaving the box on

dry land as a tree began to grow around him. And still many more years passed as the tree grew into a mighty cedar. Osiris' spirit continued to wander the banks of the Nile. One day, the tree was cut and hewn into a pillar for a great palace. And it was there that Isis, who had never stopped searching, finally discovered him.

She had spent many years searching for her husband's body. She knew that his spirit could not rest without a funeral. Nephthys convinced Set to allow her to search for the body, since the search kept her busy, thus delaying her inevitable revenge. Set himself was convinced that she would never find Osiris' body. But here it was, she knew it, hidden inside this beautiful pillar. Her sorrow was so great, having found her husband's body but unable to retrieve it. So, she went amongst the queen's servants and dressed them and combed their hair. She found their company refreshing, since none knew she was once the Queen of Egypt.

The Queen of Byblos noticed a change with her maidens, many of whom seemed more beautiful than before and smelled of an exotic perfume. She inquired to them of this change and was introduced to Isis. She begged Isis to become the infant prince's nurse. At first, Isis refused. But upon seeing the boy, she changed her mind. She had no son of her own but had always wanted one, so she took charge of the boy immediately. Every night she performed a secret ritual with fire, burning away his mortality and weaknesses. One night, the king discovered this, and in a panic rushed to put out the fire. Frustrated that her plan to make the boy immortal was ruined, Isis revealed herself and the purpose of her sojourn in his palace. The king apologized and gave her permission to take the sarcophagus, even if it meant destroying the pillar. Isis promised she could extract the box without damaging the wood around it, which she did.

She took the sarcophagus back to Egypt and there she breathed some of her life into Osiris. He came back from death long enough to impregnate her before his ruined body was once again lifeless. She put his body into the box again and hid it amongst the reeds. As she was discussing funeral arrangements with her sister, Nephthys, Set discovered the familiar sarcophagus. He flew into a rage and ripped his brother's body into pieces and scattered them across Egypt. Nephthys chastised her husband and helped Isis to find the pieces of Osiris. And, together with Anubis, they brought Osiris back to life. But because he was once dead, he could no longer stay amongst the living. So Anubis yielded the throne of the Underworld to him, knowing he would be a good and just king of the dead.

THE VISION QUEST

When I awoke, the voices had not yet stopped and this time I was determined to discover their source. I opened my eyes a little, closing them again quickly. The light was still so bright. I opened them again, this time halfway and forced myself to hold them open until the light felt like hammers against my head. I did this a few more times, until finally I could make out the shapes of people, black shadows against a white wall. I guessed then that they were the source of the voices. I couldn't count how many there were, but by the volume of noise, perhaps a dozen or more. I couldn't discern their faces or recognize the voices, especially with the pain that was throbbing inside my head. The ache grew, so I let myself slip back into another dream.

§

The mountain was quiet though the clouds that covered the top looked ominous. Moses looked to the camp below, throngs of people and animals everywhere, their fires flickering against the night sky. The sound of animals and babies crying permeated the air. Now free of their oppressors, the people had not yet begun to accept their independence. Even today, they had broken their promise to God, and had knelt before the gods of their neighbors. And when Moses had become angry and smashed the words of God on the ground, he could see that they would always see him as an outsider. After all, he had grown up in the palace of their masters, had dined at the Pharaoh's table, slept in the best silk, and bathed in hot clean water.

All the while, they had lived as slaves, eaten whatever scraps of food they could find, made bricks from mud and straw, and slept amongst filth and depression. They would never look to him as a brother or leader, only as a savior who did not know where they were going. They were ungrateful to be led, unhappy to be taken from a land where they had become complacent. He had led them from one hard life to another. Though he had spoken directly with God and had been shown the promised land of milk and honey, they did not even believe him. Actually, they seemed to resent him. How could he, the son of the pharaoh, have spoken with God? After all, he was a citizen of Egypt, their enemy.

Moses was beginning to resent the way they looked at him. Even his wife was asking him why God had chosen him. Why not someone more common and like them? But he forgave her words. She was the daughter of a Midian merchant and knew so little of their sorrow. She had been used to life with her father, a life of relative prosperity and comfort, not

this nomadic wandering through a desert to a country that might not even exist. And they were surrounded by enemies everywhere with cities and armies that might yet take them slave again. They had barely even tasted freedom, yet they could lose it again so easily. And still, Moses tried to be the man that God had commanded him to be. He stood at the foot of the mountain, leaning on his brother's staff, waiting for the voice that would call him back up again. He would apologize to God and beg him to give his people another chance. He knew not what God's reaction might be. Hopefully, he could convince God that it had been his fault, his own anger. The tablets could be remade. And what about the idols? Perhaps God would understand his people and forgive them, show them another sign, another reason to believe.

Then the sign came. As the sky began to rumble, the mountain began to shake. Flashes of lightning danced through the clouds, slowly at first, but increasing. The people below were slow to notice but one by one they all gazed upward at the mountaintop. There, at the summit, though the clouds were thick and black, a burning tree was clearly visible. Moses smiled as he remembered his first meeting with Him. That day was forever etched in his mind, his encounter with a bush that burned but was not consumed. Again he removed his sandals. Again he was standing on holy ground. Although God had chosen a humble bush before, now he had chosen a mighty cypress. And this time, the fire was not ordinary-looking in the least. It glowed in a splendid anger, waves of color sprang out from its white core: reds and yellows danced over the the branches, illuminating the entire sky. And still the lightning flew through the dark clouds. The thunder rolled, shaking the mountain and the ground below. Within moments, every person was watching the tree that burned with a holy fire. They had seen many signs, many miracles and plagues before this. Most were more impressive than this. But this simple and dramatic sight captured them more than any previous wonder.

No one noticed as Moses, barefoot, ascended the mountain. Fear gripped him and squeezed his chest so that he felt unable to breathe. But the same fear propelled his legs forward even as the small rocks cut through his feet. This was no ordinary fear. This was the fear that was born from duty. No selfish sense of pride or bravery here, only the feeling of what must be done because... Because it must be done. Each step was a painful oblivion. With each heartbeat the fear grew into a crescendo that he feared his body would be annihilated. Now he was being controlled by a force that seemed to come from both within and without him. Still he walked for what seemed like eternity. And still the lightning and thunder crescendoed above.

Finally his eyes met with the tree, and his sight went dim. He fell to the ground as all around him went black and silent. At first he thought he must have fainted but the image of the burning tree was etched into his eyes so that he could see nothing else. The thunder and lightning had ceased. The fire around the tree had faded but not entirely. The sky seemed so black that he could not even see his own body, which now lay prostrate on the ground. Though his mind had not, his body had willed it, that he should lay helpless on the ground before his creator.

THE PRIZE

The third time I awoke, the noise had stopped. I opened my eyes and this time it was not as painful as before. At the foot of my hospital bed, directly in front of me, stood a man dressed entirely in black. He looked at me carefully, like a priest or a doctor, with concern in his eyes. His hands were folded in front of him, almost as if he were praying. His face showed no emotion but I could feel that he sympathized with me. I wanted to speak but when I tried, my mouth was difficult to open and I could make no sound. His face changed then and his eyes became deep and full of sorrow. Then, as a tear fell from one of his eyes, his face became expressionless once again. My thoughts were heavy but I was still too exhausted. The man continued to gaze at me as I fell asleep once again.

§

It was a terrible feeling that had gripped Gautama. He could still feel the burning in his chest as he lay by the river. How long he had lain there, he did not know. He had been so thirsty and had put his lips into the water. But he was so weak from hunger and self-mortification that he had lost consciousness and his face had fallen into the river. He felt the pain in his chest like the hand of death was upon him. After a few moments, he coughed again and a few more drops of water bubbled from his lips. He felt he would lose consciousness again so he slowly dragged himself backward, away from the water. After coming so close to death by his own self-discipline, it would be a pity to accidentally drown. He pushed his body partially upright so that he leaned against the base of a tree and fell asleep.

He dreamed he was a boy again. The sky was blue and the fields and trees were just beginning to turn green. It was a new season and his father was in the fields with the other men. It was almost planting season and it was time to plow the fields. His noble father had his hand on the plowshare and was gently pushing it through the ground. The sun was bright but the tree he sat beneath provided a perfect shade. It was not too hot and an easy breeze brushed against his skin. Gautama closed his eyes and imagined he was floating amidst the clouds. Up and down he floated, with no particular direction to go, but enjoying the journey nonetheless. His mind was clear and his thoughts were quiet. He could not imagine a peace in his soul deeper than this moment.

He awoke to the sound of a woman's voice. She was offering him food and thanking him for the granting of a wish. She said that she had waited

for him for some time. She spoke to him as if he were a spirit or deity. He looked down at his emaciated body and indeed he must have looked very unusual. Not wanting to confuse the girl, he accepted the rice pudding and savored the nourishment it gave his weak and injured body. He motioned for her to sit with him awhile but she refused, merely stating that he should enjoy the food she had prepared especially for him. She said her name was Sujata and that as a young woman she had prayed at this tree for a happy marriage and a son. Those things she now had and she thanked him. And then, as quickly as she had appeared, she left him, still eating, still holding a golden bowl. He had not eaten in many days. This simple dish was more delicious than anything he had ever tasted before. He ate silently, savoring every grain of rice, and was overcome by warmth that flooded his whole body.

What was this feeling that filled him? He felt satisfied. He felt grateful. His mind and body had found a kind of balance with each other. He remembered his dream. He felt something of the peace he had when he was a boy. He was aware of his mind as he had never been before. He realized now that when he had punished his body, it had limited his mind. He thought of the tree. It grew towards the sky and towards the earth simultaneously. It could not grow in height without also growing in depth.

As his body digested the food, he found enough energy to sit up. He took some grass and placed it under his body and crossed his legs. And resting on his own weight, Gautama began to meditate. His mind was relaxed and thoughts opened like flower blossoms as new ideas occurred to him. He felt his mind open to the universe and he could perceive the nature of the world around him. For a long time, he had thought that his body was the key to unlocking the secrets of life. Now, he knew that the most powerful thing he could possess was his intellect. From within himself came a desire to explore the depths of his mind. So, he resolved to meditate until he could discover everything that was within himself.

As Gautama meditated under the fig tree, he began to lose perception of time. Night fell and the moon shone brightly overhead. And still, thoughts unfolded themselves within his mind. Morning came and night came again and this seemed to happen over and over, again and again. And still Gautama sat under the tree. He felt like he was waiting for a valuable treasure, a gift from the universe for his patience. Time moved fluidly, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. Hours seemed like minutes while seconds felt like days. And then suddenly, he felt his mind fully open and his eyes blinded. He could see waves of light dancing around him, moving in time to a music that seemed to come from everything around him. The

music slowed, then stopped, and he closed his eyes and rested a moment. And when he opened them again, he felt as if he were opening them for the first time.

THE MAGIC FLIGHT

When I woke again, I was looking at a television screen. I watched the picture and saw my own face. My eyes were closed as if I were sleeping but my lips were moving and the voice that came out was unfamiliar. I could not understand the language I was listening to but it seemed to be a story. And though it was my face on the screen, the voice seemed that of an old man or a priest, solemnly telling a story. What was the language? What were the words? I had so many questions. Suddenly, the video stopped and the television displayed nothing. I lay awake, listening to the silence of my room. The only thing I could hear was the sound of my own breath. I lay still, hoping that I could remember my life before this place. In my memory flashed images of a woman and a child, both at various ages. The questions I had were building and I didn't know if I would ever have answers. I closed my eyes, trying to think, and again I slept.

§

Myrddin was born the son of a king but had never really been prepared to be a prince. Even when young, he seemed strange and different compared to other boys. He had no desire to play, no impulse for competition. He enjoyed studying and observing the world around him. He was physically weaker than other boys and his mind more delicate. So, he was given an intellectual education. Someday, he might rule and if he could not control his kingdom with his fist, then he might maintain it by his mind. But, he was so easily distracted by the details of a circumstance that he never really grasped any situation he was faced with. His mind would wander around a problem and never properly locate the solution. Sometimes his father would have guessed his son to be witless. At other times the boy pointed out an acute observation that no one else would have even noticed, a trait he had inherited from his mother. Myrddin was very much like her, though she had died while delivering her second child, Gwenddydd. The king had loved his first wife very much, and would allow no harm to come to her children.

As Myrddin and his sister matured, they began to take on more responsibilities. Even as a child, she became a mother and viceroy to her brother, knowing that someday he might be king. Gwenddydd's strong personality balanced Myrddin's erratic behavior and she often used her brother's obsessive attention to detail to help him focus on a problem. Together, they were an unbeatable team and could solve any riddle or puzzle presented to them.

But now, her beloved brother had become a strange creature. He had abandoned his mind completely and had taken to wandering in the woods. He seemed half-beast, half-man, creeping between the trees and rocks, as if hiding from an unseen enemy. He had witnessed things that his already sensitive mind could not handle. He had been present at a horrible battle in which his father and their entire army had been slaughtered by enemy forces. Gwenddydd had married a kind young nobleman that she half-loved to protect her kingdom. Myrddin had fled the battle to live amongst the beasts of the forest. Every Sunday, she would gather some food and drink and journey to the caves and glens where he took shelter. There, she would lay out the meal, in hope that her brother would come to his senses and rejoin civilization. She did this every week for a few months, when finally, as the summer cooled into autumn, he appeared before her.

His clothes were in rags and his hair looked like a bird's nest but he did not seem dirty. She cut and buttered some bread and invited him to sit down with him. He seemed hesitant at first but after a moment he sat and ate the bread. She poured him some wine but after tasting it, he spat it out, saying how unhealthy it tasted. She offered him beer and mead, and these too he rejected. Finally she offered him milk and he drank a glass but he said he still preferred simple water. He continued to eat the bread, and as he did, he made some comments to himself that sounded like poetry or prophecies. It was then that Gwenddydd realized that her brother might be a prophet or wizard of some kind. He had always been half-mad, but the scene he had witnessed on the battlefield had finally upset the balance of his mind. She tried to persuade him to come home with her. She had, through her husband, secured their former residence, where his room was kept almost as if he had just left. There, he could find peace and solitude.

He answered her that he was not ready yet, but he would return with her if she would first tell him a story. So she chose to tell him the story of one of her dreams, since she could not immediately think of a story to tell him. As she spoke, his eyes seemed to drift away, focusing on a distant point on the horizon. When she had finished the story, he seemed to come back and the wild look in his eyes vanished completely. Then he spoke softly and told her the meaning of her dream and agreed to go back home if only she would tell him more of her dreams.

THE RETURN THRESHOLD

I opened my eyes, trying to shake the dream-state that still lingered. While I was still asleep, I dreamed that someone had touched me, telling me that I must wake up. So I woke, cutting the story as if the ending of my dream was not important. I realized that there were many people standing in my room and all of them wore black. All were silent, their hands clasped in front of them. They stared at me, then slowly parted to make way for the man I had seen before. He walked through them and stood before my bed and the television. On the television was a single image: me, lying on my bed. It was as if the screen was a mirror of the room. I watched myself on the television. I seemed to be asleep but then my mouth opened, and I began to speak.

§

Jeanne awoke to the sound of the Angelus bell being rung at the church. The sun was rising over Doremy and a new day had begun. She had fallen asleep at her window again. Her knees were sore but she remained kneeling. As the first three peels of the bell finished, she prayed. The bell rang three more times and she prayed again. Finally, the third set of bells rang and she prayed a final time. Finally, she arose and remembered why she had fallen asleep. She glanced toward the church in the distance and the Voices echoed in her memory. She had tried to maintain a vigil overnight, a kind of penance for her inaction. She had again been charged with a sacred mission and she could no longer ignore it.

But first, she joined her family for breakfast. Her mother was already diligently preparing the morning meal. She immediately made to help her mother, who smiled at her and told her to wash up first. Jeanne splashed the water over her face and felt herself suddenly lost. The water was not refreshing in the usual way but seemed a baptism. She made the sign of the cross and went to help her mother. Silently and obediently, she helped prepare the food for the men in her family, and ate only after they had eaten. After breakfast she asked her mother if she could go to church and pray and visit their relatives in Burey-le-Petit. Her mother seemed concerned that her daughter might again be wearing the knees out of her dress but gave her permission as she always did. Jeanne hurried to the church. She had a long journey ahead of her and she wished to take communion and confess her sins before she left. Her confessor sensed her urgency and begged her to take care of herself as she traveled.

Her purpose was not to visit her family but to again go to the castle at Vaucouleurs and request the assistance of Robert de Baudricourt. It was

his destiny to bear her to the Dauphin. He had rejected her message in their previous encounter but this time the situation was far more dire. Orleans was in danger and if that city fell, then the whole of France was hopeless. She was running out of time and must act quickly if she were to fulfill her task.

When she finally arrived in Vaucouleurs, Sir Robert was receptive to her and promised his assistance. There was an ancient prophesy about a maiden saving the country. At the very least, her very attitude was inspiring. She was a source of hope that the soldiers and the people desperately needed. Of course, de Baudricourt would have to be sure that she was not an impostor. It was possible that she could use that old legend to her own advantage. Also, it was necessary to be sure that she was not a lunatic with a good imagination. She said that she had received a message from the Saints, whom were the messengers of Heaven. If anyone could determine her legitimacy, it was Father Jean.

Jean Fournier, the priest of the castle, was sent to Jeanne. He had met her before and had been her confessor on her previous visit. He had to be careful that she had not been influenced by devils, so upon entering the room where she was, he entreated her only to come to her if she was not evil. He touched her with holy water and she did not shrink away. All this time she obeyed his word and approached him on her knees. He was impressed with her humility and he told her to stand up. He asked her a few simple questions about the Voices she heard and asked if they had ever led her into sin. To this she responded that they never asked anything but commanded her to be the instrument of God. She was sound in mind and pure in heart and he informed Sir Robert that she was genuine. She may indeed be the maid of the prophesy and the instrument of God. Sir Robert de Baudricourt immediately sent a message onto Chinon and the Royal Court, but Jeanne would have to wait for a response before departing.

Jeanne waited many long weeks for an answer. In the meantime, she busied herself helping the Mistress de Baudricourt, spinning and doing all sorts of chores. When she was not attending the work of the house, she was often praying in the chapel. It was a small church, especially when compared to others she had attended, but it gave her a chance to reflect on her mission. It was with great sadness she often knelt before the image of Mary and prayed fervently that she be forgiven her sins and granted the means to finish her mission. The priests marveled at her humility and the soldiers of the castle were inspired by her unflinching hope. Finally, the answer from Chinon arrived and she set out to meet her destiny.

I had watched and listened to myself tell the the entire story, fascinated and frightened simultaneously. What was this madness? As I contemplated, those that watched me, the crowd and the man in black watched me silently for a few moments. Then, interrupting my thoughts, they all fell to their knees, faces bowed low to the ground. And the man in black spoke: "Master, you have slept a long time. It is good to see you finally have regained your strength. We are your humble servants. We have listened to your message for a long time. Though many doubted your truth, they will now know that you are a savior to us. You are a messiah. You have showed us that mankind is one, that our history is one. We are one people. We are your people. I beseech you on behalf of all mankind to help us. Only you can show us the way to become like you."

Then he rose again to his feet and watched me intently. I stared at him with questions in my eyes. As if knowing I needed more answers, he stepped aside and, walking slowly, came two women, one older than the other. They too were silent. And immediately I remembered the faces from my dreams. My wife. My child. But they seemed much older than than I expected them to be. How long had I slept? How long had I been married before I slept? I could not even remember the answers to these basic questions. And as I contemplated these words my wife approached my bed, placing her hand upon my hand. My daughter waited, standing beside the man in black. My wife looked deep into my eyes and spoke: "My love, I have waited so long for you to awake. And now that are with us again, I beg you. Teach us how to be like you so that we may also sleep with the peace that you have."

These words were neither the words I had hoped nor expected to hear. I shook her hand away from me and she stepped back to the man and our daughter. I could feel within me deep emotions stirring but I dared not speak. My wife was crying. The man in black had a look of awe in his eyes. Those in the crowd seemed fearful of what might happen next. But my daughter looked at me with deep compassion. Her eyes were bright but I could see that she was close to tears. Still looking at me, she reached out and took her mother's hand and said "out" to the man beside her. He seemed confused. Still holding her mother's hand, she said in a loud commanding voice, "everyone get out now." And the crowd, in a confused hush, slowly left the room, leaving me and me alone with my family.

Tears filled my eyes. What was this insanity? I did not want any of this. I stood from my bed finally and stumbled towards my wife and

daughter. "Take me to the window," I said. And with tears in their eyes, they helped me, each supporting me enough to reach the window. I looked outside. It was night. The moon was bright, though hidden by clouds. I could see a crowd of people watching me from the ground below. I turned, looking at my wife. Her tears were few though the pain was so great. I kissed her lips then turned to my daughter. Her tears were many so I kissed both her cheeks. Then, leaning on their strength, I pushed against them and fell through the window to my death.



Alpha/Omega

r^anⁿd^om

In the beginning God created the Heavens and the Earth. And it was good. Or at least that's what we were taught. Like all boys, I was educated in the school by the elders of the village. When I was thirteen, I started to have doubts about God. At first, I questioned His goodness. When I voiced my doubts, the elders would punish me and I would do penance. The priest gave me forgiveness, telling me that all young men doubt but, as a man, I would grow in faith and wisdom.

But my faith did not grow. Instead, I learned to keep my mouth shut. My father made sure to teach me that. Someday, like him, I would be an elder, a leader of the twelve clans. But as a young, able-bodied man of my village, my duty was to go out into the forest and bring food back for the other villagers.

My father was in the later stages of the sickness now. Like most hunters, he first became sick when he was thirty, after hunting for fourteen years. As he grew older, he became thinner, and would probably die before reaching forty. Until then, he was an elder, a teacher.

One of the first things we were taught as boys was that our village had not always been isolated. The human race had prospered in ancient history. Hundreds of years ago, there had been billions of humans. They had lived in villages and cities spread across the whole face of the earth. But they were evil and God had punished them for their wickedness. They fought against each other and fire had fallen from the sky, destroying everything they had created, especially their cities. Villages like ours were saved and it was supposed that there were other villages in the Earth.

But beyond the forest, there was only desert, a dry wasteland where almost nothing lived. Anyone who went too far into the desert had either died of the sickness or disappeared. The desert was a deadly place, and the only thing that lived there was evil. And like the Bible stories I had been told when I was young, I began to have my doubts.

I was baptized Thomas of the Stephen clan. I was named after my grandfather, who, as an elder, became a historian. My father was immensely proud when I laid my first kill, a six-point buck, at his feet. He boasted to the other elders that it was the largest first-kill he had seen in ten years.

The following night was the Feast of Saint Mark. My father told me that now I was a true hunter and was eligible for marriage. My mother spent most of the evening in negotiation with the matrons of the other clans.

Just before ten o'clock, she came to me and told me that she had found me a bride. She was a sixteen year-old girl of the Leo clan. Her name was Tamar and we were to be married on the next Sunday.

B

I remember my wedding vividly. It was a sunny May afternoon. Following the regular Sunday Mass, Tamar and I were brought together in front of the priest. With our clan elders and matrons looking on, we were joined together in holy union. My beautiful bride shed a few tears but smiled bravely at me. Her kiss was soft and wet and I held her trembling hands in my own.

We were assigned a small cottage not far from the edge of the village, as is traditional for newly-married couples. We would be given a larger house nearer the village center after our first child was old enough to be schooled. Like most cottages, this one was well-kept, secluded, and romantic. When I was out hunting, she tended to the gardens and orchards with the other young brides.

When the young hunters returned at the end of every evening, we were greeted with the smells of the kitchens. Our women had the responsibility of cooking, not only for us, but for our elders as well. Cooked vegetables, meats, and breads were picked-up and delivered by household children, many of them our younger brothers and sisters, not yet of hunting or marriage age. In this way, our community formed a network of kinship and dependence. When I reflected on what I learned in history class of the competitive cities, I wondered how they had ever survived. The world had been so plentiful back then, yet so many were hungry. Then I remembered the fire from the sky: they had not survived. For all anyone knew, we were the last humans on Earth and we had a duty to take care of each other.

Tamar, my beautiful wife, was the pride of my existence. Every hunt, I thought of her and our future family. I worked hard for her love and she rewarded me tenfold. The hunt was stressful and oftentimes the other men could be competitive and harsh but her embrace was my refuge. Every night, I fell asleep with her arms wrapped around me. I felt her warmth and knew her secret heart. We were young and in love.

The day soon came when she became pregnant. My mother rejoiced and my father looked at me with as much pride as he had on the day of my first kill. We promised if it was girl to name it Pearl, after my mother's

mother, a strong woman of the Pius clan and, if it was a boy, to name it Peter, after my father.

T

Three seasons had passed since my marriage to Tamar. Nine months went by, each more wonderful than the one that preceded it. As spring changed into summer, the hunt became easier for me and I often came home early. Of course, I usually had to wait upon my wife's duties in the kitchen before I could be alone with her. The other wives would chase me out of the kitchen or give me a task to fulfill, such as a delivery, so that I would stay out of their way. We were young and still madly in love. It was a joyous day when she told me that I was going to be a father.

With the summer, I grew into a skilled hunter and was adept at shooting long-distance shots accurately and effectively. My wife was proud of me but I began to feel that to be a better husband, and soon, a father, I needed to be a better hunter. So, I spent longer and longer in the field, trying to become the perfect marksman. My wife seemed to understand my feelings. At first she begged me to come home earlier, whether or not I was successful. She told me I was a great husband and would be a good father and that God would provide for us. After some weeks of this, she gave up and simply kissed me warmly when I did return home. And as always, her arms held me tight at night, soothing my worries of the future.

In turn, my mother worried over her, often stopping in to check up on her physical condition. First pregnancies could be difficult, she said, and most often the baby could be lost due to the simplest of problems. She begged my wife not to overwork herself, and especially not to worry about about me, since I could manage myself anyway.

As winter grew colder, her belly began to show the full evidence of the life that grew inside her. The hunts grew more difficult and the skills I had learned in the summer could not be as easily applied in the winter. In the summer, I felt I had proven myself to my wife and the village, taking home kills more often than most of the other hunters.

Now it was winter and I had to work harder. I no longer had the benefit of hiding in the shadows of trees and the camouflage of the green. The trees had shed their leaves and the snow seemed to crack loudly under every one of my footsteps. In the summer I could make up for this by shooting a long distance. But now it seemed the animals could sense me

even before I could see them. My heart sank lower every day that I returned to my wife empty-handed. She soothed me, telling me that the other hunters were having a hard time, too, and that when the snow melted away, I would again be the best.

Indeed, it was a lean winter in the village. My father re-assured me, telling me that some winters were tough. That's why the village kept store-houses of vegetables and preserved meat. It was the way of things. In the summer, the cycle would turn again and the Lord would provide for us. I told him he was right and I would try to trust in God. But the words I spoke were lies and perhaps that is why I paid so dearly.

Δ

Spring returned, just as it always had before and would again. At first the snow melted, then the trees began to regain their lost green coats. As the rain began to fall in April, I began to prepare myself for an addition to my family. Whether my child was a son or daughter, I knew I would love it dearly.

My mother's worries seemed to ease as the day of childbirth rapidly approached. My wife was relieved of her duties in the kitchen as she could no longer keep up with the other women. Most of the day, she stayed in our cottage, tending to our small garden and reading. She loved her azalea. They were bright and beautiful and reminded her of the house she had grown up in. They had been a gift from her mother, who visited almost as often as my own mother. The two mothers did not get along at first but became more amicable as time passed on. I wearied of the presence of the two matrons and longed to spend more time alone with my wife. But, the baby would arrive soon and, when it did, I was sure to be useless. So, I focused my passion on hunting, any day expecting the cries of a newborn baby to greet my ears when I returned home.

But I did not expect the events of a bright and starry May evening. For weeks now, I had passed on my kills to other hunters. They could bring the dead animal to the butchers while I went home to check up on my wife.

That day, my little cottage was silent. I went inside and there was no one at home. I immediately began to run toward the house of the midwife. I burst through the doors and was immediately greeted by silence. I begged to see my wife and was answered by the midwife's

assistant that I was not allowed to enter. Her grim look and the silence of the house distressed me and I immediately knew what happened. I fell to my knees and my mother emerged from the delivery room and put her arms around me. My wife had died in childbirth and my baby was stillborn. I was not yet twenty and already I was a widower.

My mother begged me not to return home. She said I should stay with her that night, under my parents' roof. I answered that I would but first I would go to church and prepare for my wife's funeral. The traditional three-day vigil would begin as soon as her body was prepared and delivered to the church. As husband, my duty was to prepare the church and pray for her soul to be delivered to God and the angels. My mother silently nodded.

I made my way to the church, where I lit a prayer-candle and fell to my knees, crying. A few hours later, someone touched my shoulder. It was Tamar's brother. He was there with her body. I went to the casket and kissed my bride on her already-cold lips and made my way home.

There, I slept a few hours and woke early with the daybreak. I packed my hunting bag and prepared myself for a journey. No one had ever survived the desert beyond the forest. I left a note for my family, saying that I hoped I could find peace in death.

I rushed to the hospital as quickly as my feet could carry me. A man had been discovered at the edge of the forest by the hunters. I paid no attention to my surroundings or the wonderment of those who saw me running, still wearing my cooking apron and cap. I ran until the ache in my thighs spread to my calves and then to my belly. My heart pounded like thunder in my chest. I ignored the pain. There was only one thought in my head: he is alive!

My husband had disappeared three weeks ago. I had been taken to the hospital, where our first baby was born and then died. He thought he had lost me, too, and had left a note. No one had ever returned from the desert. But I knew in my heart that he would. My beautiful and strong husband had survived. Oh, how I missed him!

When I arrived at the hospital, his mother was already there, waiting for me. She stopped me from going inside.

“Wait,” she said. “You need to catch your breath and relax. He is not awake, anyway.”

“Why?” I asked her. “Why should I wait? I have already waited three weeks.”

“He is,” she said slowly, “different. You need to be strong.”

Then she let me go on alone into the room where he lay. He was stretched out on the bed, covered in white. His mother was right. To say he was different was an understatement. It didn't look like him at all. He had been transformed. All that I could see were his hands and face, and they were as white as the sheets that covered the rest of his body. His head was bare of hair, nothing, not even around his closed eyes. His skin looked as smooth as a baby's. He was sleeping, peaceful-looking as an angel.

The doctor and nurse saw me enter the room. They watched me carefully, worry on their faces. Frightened and not knowing what else to do, I ran back outside, where his mother was still standing. I fell at her feet crying.

“It is not him,” I sobbed. “It is not him. Not him. Not him...”

She crouched down, wrapping her arms around my shoulders. “My child,” she said with sympathy, “Something has surely happened to change him. But who else could it be?”

Z

For three days, he slept. For three nights, I could not. I spent most of my time at the church, praying that he would wake up, that he would be alright, that he would again love me.

The last three weeks had been hard on me. Not only did I lose a baby but I had lost a husband, too. Tradition dictates that a woman alone should return to the house of her father. But I insisted that my husband was not dead. My mother-in-law supported me in this belief, as did her own husband. For two weeks, we waited. Then, it seemed, all hope was lost. I begged my mother-in-law to take me into her house, for I knew my husband was alive. I continued my duties as a wife in the kitchen. But the elders of my family were already beginning to consider that I should re-marry.

Of course, the options were limited. None of the young hunters would have me; some of them even openly said that I might be cursed. There were a few senior hunters whose wives had died that looked on me with hungry eyes.

My father-in-law protected me and treated me as his own daughter. In his eyes, I could see that he had given up hope but he promised me, “as long as you believe my son is alive, you are my daughter.” And he never failed me on these words.

And now, I was not even sure if I was right. I could not be sure that the man who now lay in the hospital was my husband. There was some resemblance but with his pale skin and scars that covered his body, he resembled a being from nightmares.

There were legends told by children that spoke of human-like creatures that lived beyond the forest, beyond the desert. These creatures were once human. They had survived the nuclear apocalypse because they were immune to the poisonous land. They were white-skinned and hairless and their bodies were covered in scars. And they had retained the technology of the past, the evil that they used on their flesh and under their skin. It was said that the hunters that disappeared occasionally from the outskirts of the forest became a feast for these monsters.

The elders discouraged these stories but they were good stories to tell in the dark: frightening, ghostly, and unreal. Unreal, that is, until now. For in our own hospital, a man lay, perhaps a survivor of these creatures, the post-humans.

There were only a few who knew the appearance of the man who lay in the hospital but word was spreading. A few hunters, family mostly, had set themselves up as security outside his room. No one was to enter, no one was allowed to look. If he was indeed one of our own, he would not be

treated as a freak. If he were indeed my husband, then he would need help, not wide-eyed stares. And, of course, though no one said so, if he was not one of us, then he might be dangerous.

As I prayed and reflected in the church, I was interrupted by one of the hunters, a friend of my husband. He touched my shoulder and said, “he seems to be awake. He is not speaking much but he is asking for his wife.”

It was a starry night as the hunter accompanied me in the short walk to the hospital. The doctor and nurse had returned to his residence a long time before. Except the hunters and the man, there was no one else at the hospital.

The hunter stopped at the door and said, “If you need help, I’ll be waiting outside.”

The man in the bed looked up at me and I nearly burst into tears when he asked me the simple question, “Are you my wife?”

“You don’t remember me?” I asked.

“I don’t remember much,” he said. “I know that I had a wife. I thought she died. That’s why... that’s why I left.”

“Do you know my name?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t,” he answered slowly.

“What do you remember?” I asked. And with that he started to cry. He looked at his own hands and I reached out to hold them. He looked at my hands and then his own again, still crying.

“I remember that they took me. They wanted me to be like them...”

“The post-humans?” I ventured.

“They called me Alpha.”

H

After a long silence, he asked me, “can I go to church? I think I need to pray.”

“Why?” I asked him. “Have you sinned?”

“I don’t know. I need guidance. I don’t think anybody can help me right now except God.”

So I went out to one of the hunters. They had orders to watch him, but no one had said that he couldn’t leave the hospital. When he was discovered, he had been naked, so we gathered together some clothes that might fit him. I helped him stand up, and as I saw his naked body, I began to cry. There were deep scars all over his body, some of them very terrible. His muscles were almost certainly damaged.

He saw my tears and looked at his own body. “They don’t hurt at all,” he said, trying to re-assure me. “Actually, I feel strong. I’m sure I can at least dress myself if you would like to wait outside.”

I couldn’t turn away from him, my eyes locked on the lines that crisscrossed his body.

He gazed into my eyes with pity then hurried to get dressed. As the scars disappeared under fabric, I began to feel a little better. I tried to still my imagination. What had they done to him?

“Do I look human?” he said to me as he finished.

I nearly gasped at his choice of words. With his bald head, he would still stand out too much. I went out of his room again, seeking a hat. One of the hunters let me borrow his lucky hunting hat. When we emerged from his room, the hunter smiled approval.

“That hat could make anyone look handsome,” the hunter said.

“Thanks,” I told him. “Who will go to church with us?”

Three hunters were present. One would go home to his wife, the other two would accompany us.

I was just at the church not an hour before, so I hoped the priest would still be there. He could help counsel this man who thought his name was Alpha.

As we entered the church, he made a strange motion with his hands, touching his head then his body. At first I thought nothing of it, until we got to the front of the church and he looked at the cross and did it again before kneeling. The priest was not there, so we would have to pray alone. I asked him if he wanted me to pray with him.

He looked at me and said, “A little bit of silence, that’s all.”

I stayed next to him, also praying on my knees. That’s when I heard him murmuring something. My mother told me that it was rude to listen to other peoples’ prayers but after a few minutes I realized that he was repeating the same thing over and over. The words were repetitive but had a beautiful rhythm. I strained myself to catch a few words. It was not any traditional prayer that I had ever learned. Suddenly, I realized he was not praying to God but to the mother of Jesus, Mary.

I immediately stood up. The hunters, who were at the back of the church also stood up. I went back to them and told them I needed to find the priest, that I needed his help. He was probably asleep but it was urgent.

The priest’s residence was attached to the church and I knocked frantically at the door. A bleary-eyed elder answered the door. It took him a second to remember who I was.

“What is it, Martha?”

“It is the man from the desert. He is praying,” I said.

“And what is so important about that, that you should wake me from my bed?” he said impatiently.

“He is praying to Mary,” I answered.

His stunned silence was almost an answer to itself. Finally he managed to say, “That’s impossible...”

“Why? Why is it impossible?” I demanded.

He collected his composure, shook off the question, saying, “Go back to him. Watch him. Please don’t talk to him anymore. Let him pray. Let him sit. But wait for me. I will be there soon.”

He closed the door quickly, probably to dress himself more properly. I turned around and returned to the church. The man who was definitely not my husband was still praying. I sat with the hunters. It was then that I realized one of them was my brother-in-law. I rarely saw him, since he lived at the other side of the village. His name was James but the hunters all called him Trigger. It was a nickname earned during a shooting contest. He was so fast, they said, that he could shoot an animal in the heart and the head and no one could be sure which shot had killed the beast.

“James,” I said to him. “This is not your brother.”

“I know,” he said.

“How do you know?”

He laughed. “With all those scars on his body, I do not recognize any that I gave him.”

“You knew all this time?”

“Yes. I just didn’t think it was right to upset you. You would find out on your own. Anyway,” and he motioned to the man praying, “he certainly doesn’t know who he is anyway. I’m not sure what he’ll do if he finds out that he doesn’t belong here.”

“That’s the question, isn’t it,” I said. “Where does he belong?”

The priest entered the church quietly. I saw the sun breaking in the distance. He looked at the other hunter whose name I couldn’t remember. “Go and wake the council elders. Tell them to come here immediately.”



“He is from another village,” the priest said.

“How can you be sure?” one of the elders asked.

“He is Catholic,” the priest answered.

The elders sat in stunned silence. A few asked, “How do you know?”

And with that, the priest turned to the man, “You are certainly not our lost Joshua. His wife and brother agree that you are not him. If you are not Joshua, then what can we call you?”

“They – the post-humans – called me Alpha,” he answered.

“Alright, Alpha, I’m sure you have many questions, but first, I want you to repeat the words of the prayer that you prayed earlier.”

He could barely begin, “Hail Mary,” when the elders gasped.

“He is certainly an outsider,” one said.

“A Catholic,” said another.

“From another village,” said another.

“Wait,” I said. “How do you know these things from a simple prayer?”

The priest looked at me with pity. He seemed to have forgotten that I was still there. The elders looked a little uncomfortable at my presence. James was next to me. He, too, looked at me.

“Come with me,” he said and I followed him out into the early morning. The sky was beginning to turn from red to orange. A few stars still hung overhead. We sat on the steps of the church and I waited for my answer.

“Do you remember your history books?” he asked me.

“I assume you mean the time before the apocalypse?”

“Yes. A long time ago, there were many types of churches, many different ways to worship God, and... many ways to pray.

“What you heard was a Catholic prayer. The Catholic church was the most ancient church in the world. They were from a city called Rome but those types of Christians filled the whole Earth. Their traditions were old and their leader was a type of king.

“When the fire fell from the sky, our village was saved because it was thought that our church was holy, that it was right. So, we continued the traditions of our ancestors, worshipping God in the same way that they did. It is generally taught that the other churches must have been evil, and that is why the world was destroyed.

“But if that man comes from another village, with a different type of church... then...”

I finished his sentence, “then that means the world was destroyed for a different reason.”

“Not only that,” he continued, “but now we know for a fact that there is another village out there, beyond the desert. For hundreds of years, no one has ever seriously considered the possibility. The journey was considered to be impossible. But somehow, this man, Alpha, has survived. And it may have something to do with the post-humans... who may not simply be the flesh-eating monsters that we thought they were.”

“What of that?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said, “but I think this news is too shocking for the rest of the village to hear. I mean, that there are other villages, and the post-humans, too... It is something like Galileo telling everyone that the world isn’t flat.”

“Oh. So what will they do?”

“I think they probably want to make him disappear,” Trigger said.

“They can’t do that,” I said, “unless they send him back into the desert.”

The priest was standing in the doorway, “We’ve already made our decision. That is exactly what we are going to do.”

I

“Are you sure about this, James?” I asked him.

“Yes, I’m sure. He may have been changed by the post-humans but he is weak. He cannot possibly survive on his own.”

“But what about the post-humans? If he escaped, then they will be looking for him.”

Trigger smiled. “I doubt they can shoot as well as I can.”

“And the sickness?”

“They say you can survive the sickness for a few weeks before it kills you. If I feel the symptoms, then I will return.”

I thought about his wife. Before I could say anything he said, “Claire will almost be overjoyed to see me go. Our marriage has never been a happy one. In any case, blood is thicker than water. I want to find my brother. I am going to find him – your husband – and bring him home. Wherever he is, I will find him.”

At that, I was quiet. I missed Joshua very much and I knew if anybody could find him, it was James.

His hunting gear was on his back and he was already ready to go. The other hunter who had been with us at the church was also packed and ready. I remembered his name now. He had earned the nickname Switch in school. It had something to do with his calm outward appearance and explosive temper. He was a new hunter with few friends who not yet made his first-kill. James had taken him under his wing and they had developed a strange bond. They made a good pair: Trigger and Switch.

Alpha, too, had been given supplies by the other hunters. On Alpha’s back was enough water and food for a week’s journey. Unknown to him, the two hunters had been given orders to take him out into the desert and kill him. I looked at James as he slung his bag over his shoulders. He

wasn't a murderer. He had already assured me that he would not kill Alpha if he could help it. He meant what he said, that he would search for Joshua. I looked at the other hunter and hoped that he would do the same.

As they left, Alpha looked weak, barely able to carry his own bag. And he didn't have the extra weight of weapons and ammunition on his back like the hunters. I walked with them to the edge of the forest and I gave James a hug.

"I'll see you soon, sister," he said to me, before disappearing into the trees.

World War 4, or the Fourth World War (often abbreviated WW4), was a global military conflict that lasted for thirty minutes on 3 March 2132. It was the most disastrous war in history, with more than 12 billion casualties.

Chronology

At approximately 03:20 UTC, a nuclear missile was launched from the United States of America. The destination is presumed to have been China which responded with missile launches of their own. Within ten minutes, missiles were launched all over the world by various nations. Within thirty minutes, there were thousands of nuclear missiles airborne. Before 04:00 UTC, most major cities in the world were already destroyed.

Background

On 21 May 2050 CE, The People's Republic of China withdrew its membership in the United Nations and invaded Japan and Korea. The United States of America, in defense of its old allies, immediately declared war and demanded the United Nations also step in. The United Nations was slow to react due to Russian interference and it was not until June that the UN declared sanctions against China.

The first American troops were already in Japan, fighting the Battle of Okinawa. Casualties were numerous and the Americans were forced to withdraw. By July, Japan and Korea were fully occupied, China declaring them to be protectorate provinces. Chinese belligerence continued throughout the next twenty years as China annexed all of Asia, excluding Russia.

This event, popularly referred to as World War 3, was not a true global conflict, since it was mostly restricted to Asia. The rest of the world, which had depended on Asian-made products for over a century, began a slow economic decline. By 2070 CE, the economies of the world were experiencing a major depression which they would not recover from until 2100 CE.

Meanwhile, on 21 May 2075 CE, twenty-five years after it had withdrawn their UN membership, China declared itself to be the new Middle Kingdom. Within its borders lived half of the world's inhabitants. A new emperor had been crowned who, the Chinese declared, reigned over the whole Earth. Chinese ambassadors visited every capitals of the countries of the world, demanding they send tribute to their new ruler. Most countries, afraid to decline, sent various national treasures

to the Chinese regent. Eventually, by 2085 CE, diplomatic relations had been established with every nation in the world (except the Vatican, which was ignored). In 2090 CE, China rejoined the United Nations and became the sole member of the UN Security Council.

As the United States economy recovered, voices of dissent to the Chinese alliance became louder. In 2115 CE, the United States withdrew from the UN and cut diplomatic relations with China. In retaliation, the Chinese demanded that the United States was to be cut off from the rest of the world. In 2121 CE, Canada and Mexico joined with the United States and formed the North American Union.

For the next eighteen months, there was no communication between North America and China. When a missile was launched from the state of Alaska, the Chinese responded in kind. No facts are known regarding the initial launch, but it is generally thought to have been due to human error. Nuclear defense procedures that had been in place for more than a hundred years were suddenly activated. Missiles originating from sixteen nations were automatically launched, aimed at various countries. Almost no part of the globe was spared from the nuclear disaster.

Aftermath

It is estimated that the population of the world in the year 2124 CE was about 13 billion people. With the critical events of World War 4, the population was reduced to less than 500 million people. Every urban center that had a population numbering more than a few thousand was obliterated.

There were twenty-five cities that were not completely destroyed. As the nuclear fallout settled, these cities began to contact each other by radio and by satellite. A year elapsed when it was finally decided that they should form the Council of Cities. This date, 1 January 2125 CE became the starting point of the new calendar, which was called the Post-war Era, now referred to as the Post-human Era, or more simply the Post Era.

Many small villages had survived the nuclear holocaust. At first, it was thought working with them could rebuild the now-radiated world. In fact, many people who had survived outside the cities migrated to help rebuild. But, many inhabitants of the villages returned to superstitious beliefs, most based on religion. Villages cut off contact with the cities, especially when the inhabitants of the cities began to mutate.

Scientists of the cities worked hard against the mutation but it was quickly realized that the cities themselves were the cause. Some aspects of the genetic change seemed beneficial: people became

taller, stronger, and more intelligent. But there was one major negative side-effect: the mutation prevented procreation.

The Council of Cities appointed twelve top scientists to determine the best solution. In the year 50 PE, it was decided to further isolate the villages and use them to replenish the populations of the cities. Small-scale nuclear weapons were detonated around every village, changing what little survived of the world into irradiated wasteland.

Council of Cities

Λ

The Council of Cities (COC) is an inter-city organization whose aims are facilitating cooperation in population controls, technological and medical advances, and sharing of information. The COC was founded in 1 PE after World War 4 to provide a platform for dialogue between cities. It contains several subsidiary organizations to carry out its functions.

History

Following in the wake of World War 4, an organization was needed to maintain cooperation in solving inter-city problems. Although the founding of the Council of Cities is considered to have taken place on 1 January 1 PE, it had no formal organization until later that year. The Overseer Council was the first body to be organized. The General Assembly and the Secretariat were formed in 10 PE. The Science Council was created in 38 PE.

Organization

The organization has four principal organs: the General Assembly, the Overseer Council, the Science Council, and the Secretariat. There are also several agencies responsible for carrying out the purposes of the COC.

General Assembly

The General Assembly is the main deliberative assembly of the Council of Cities. Composed of the twenty-four member cities, the assembly meets in regular annual sessions. Over a two-week period at the start of each session, all members have the opportunity to address the assembly. The first session was convened on 10 January 10 PE via satellite.

When the General Assembly votes on important questions, a two-thirds majority is required. All other questions are decided by majority vote. Each member city has one vote. The Assembly may make resolutions on any matters within the scope of the COC, except matters which are under Overseer Council consideration.

Overseer Council

The Overseer Council is charged with maintaining peace and security among cities. Composed of twenty-four Overseers, one from each of the cities, the council meets on an irregular basis, whenever its members deem fit.

Science Council

The Science Council assists the General Assembly in promoting inter-city scientific and technological cooperation and development. It has twelve members, all of which are elected by the General Assembly for a twenty-five year term. The council meets once per year in June.

Secretariat

The Secretariat is headed by the Secretary-General, assisted by a staff of inter-city civil servants. It provides studies, information, and facilities needed by Council of Cities bodies for their meetings. It also carries out tasks as directed by the General Assembly, Overseer Council, and other COC bodies. The Secretary-General may bring to the attention of the General Assembly or Overseer Council any matter.

Induction

M

Every post-human alive in the Earth was once human. There are a small percentage of post-humans who can claim to have existed before the Post Era but the overwhelming majority of post-humans were once humans living in the villages. The process by which they become post-humans is referred to as "Induction." There are three basic phases involved in Induction: Initiation, Education, and Naturalization, each of which has its own steps.

Initiation

The first step of Initiation involves the removal of the human from his village. This is usually accomplished when he is near the edge of a

village's forest perimeter. It is essential to remove the villager when they are alone. This is usually determined using remote surveillance and robotic drones. Villagers are removed following a strict quota system, so as not to interfere with a village's ability to be self-sustaining.

Occasionally, two villagers may be removed at once but this is under extremely rare circumstances. Usually, the villager removed is male but there are instances where females have been removed.

The second step of Initiation is the removal of the human's memory. This step was the first formalized step of Induction, even before the villages were isolated. Villagers with intact memories had a tendency to want to return to their birthplace, and this could not be permitted, for numerous reasons. This homesickness had the added side-effect of increasing their stress, decreasing their productivity, and could eventually lead to an extremely early death.

The third step of Initiation is a set of medical procedures designed to make the human at least appear post-human. The permanent removal of body hair is followed by skin de-pigmentation and the implanting of nano-machines and communication ports.

Once these three basic steps are performed, the Inductee is referred to as Alpha and may progress on to the next phase of Induction.

Education

Without the implanting of nano-machines and communication ports, the education of a post-human might take many years. But thanks to technological advances, the education phase takes a mere four to six weeks. Using advanced memory engrams, the Alpha is programmed with the basic knowledge needed to survive. Using a series of twenty-four engrams, the Inductee is transformed from a pre-modern human into a specialized, skilled post-human.

The first four engrams contain the core educational requirements given to everyone in the world: Science, History, Language, and Art. The next five engrams contain the secondary educational requirements. This includes a fairly well-balanced education but with a skew based on the lowest scores of the first four engrams. This is often the most stressful stage of an Inductee's education. The next six engrams are chosen by the Inductee. Depending on the Inductee's interest, they can include anything, from Musical History to Biological Engineering to Theoretical Metaphysics. The next five engrams are based on the Inductee's abilities and are the first step in a specialized education. The final four engrams are the final steps of a specialized education and will determine the Inductee's career.

Naturalization

Following the education phase, an Inductee is referred to as Omega. At this point, the Inductee must be naturalized. Different cities have their own traditions and these change from time to time. For example, Saint John's currently requires that you swim naked in the ocean for thirty minutes while in Santa Fe, an Omega must sing a traditional song in front of his teachers. At this point, the Inductee graduates and becomes a citizen of the City.

Villages

N

There are 169,697 villages in the world with an approximate population of 700,000,000 humans. Nearly all villages have reverted to a pre-modern condition; they have abandoned all technology but those required for farming, hunting, and medicine. Most follow the traditional beliefs of the Common Era religions and are unaware of the existence of other villages or the cities.

The ideal population of a feeder village is currently estimated to be a minimum of 4,000 people. This is to maintain genetic stability and avoid inbreeding. Most villages experience an induction once per four years.

Each of the fourteen cities control a district, which contain a specified number of villages, as determined by the Global Census of 75 PE. Each city retains its own right to make decisions regarding inductions and culling. The district of the former city of Christchurch is administered directly by the Council of Cities.

There has been some debate in recent years to redistribute the feeder villages based on current city populations. In the millennium that has passed since the districts were created, several cities have experienced higher population growth while their villages have not. At the same time, several cities have experienced lower population growth in comparison to their feeder villages. The Council of Cities has made no decision on this issue but it is expected that eventually the imbalance of ratios will become too much to ignore.

Population of Villages

<i>City</i>	<i>Feeder Villages</i>	<i>Village Population (estimated)</i>
Saskatoon	10,132	43,000,000
Rio Gallegos	10,469	42,000,000
N'Djamena	10,691	40,000,000
Santa Fe	9,854	42,000,000
Tomsk	10,892	41,000,000
Dudinka	10,478	40,000,000
Santiago	10,211	40,000,000
Cheyenne	9,872	40,000,000
Manaus	9,462	40,000,000
Luanda	8,985	37,000,000
Murmansk	9,005	34,000,000
Ulan Batar	7,431	28,000,000
Yakutsk	8,156	31,000,000
La Paz	6,899	29,000,000
Okhotsk	6,610	25,000,000
Astana	3,890	16,000,000
Buchara	3,751	15,000,000
Brisbane	3,258	13,000,000
Kabul	3,649	14,000,000
Lusaka	3,122	14,000,000
Maputo	3,509	14,000,000
Anchorage	3,474	14,000,000
Saint John's	3,022	12,000,000
Port Moresby	2,586	10,000,000
Christchurch	289	1,000,000

Life Expectancy

According to current statistics, the average lifespan of village residents is 33 years, although some may live up to 45 years. The most common cause of death is radiation sickness (61% of all deaths). Natural illnesses cause a large number of deaths (22%), as do accidental deaths (16%). Other causes of death include execution and murder (1%). These statistics exclude the large rate of infant death (10%).

Culling

Every so often, a village may need to be partially or entirely exterminated. Usually this is due to contagion but occasionally there

are other reasons. There are several accepted methods by which a village is culled.

The most common form of culling is low-level irradiation of the village's water supply. It has the effect of killing and sterilizing the weakest and oldest members of the village. In this way, the population will be reduced to its youngest and strongest members and then the irradiation can be reversed. After this type of culling, the village will be ready for induction again in a few hundred years.

Another type of culling is the simple destruction of the entire village. This is usually accomplished by a small nuclear detonation. This, of course, reduces the village to desert and has not been used since the Christchurch Incident.

An alternative method of culling that results in total extermination is viral infection. This has the advantage of releasing the land for re-use in the near future. The idea is that another village may have a section of its population transferred to the now empty village. Although there are a number of villages that have been culled in this way, none have been re-populated as of yet.

Cities



As of 1 June 1152 PE, the population of the cities of the world is 16,786,317. The post-human population of the world has been relatively stable since the year 917 PE, with a growth rate of about 0.2% per year. There are 24 cities in the world. Each is controlled by a City Hall of elected representatives and monitored by an Overseer.

History

All of the cities currently in existence were founded before 1 PE. Some can trace their history for thousands of years but little remains of the original cities. Many of the cities re-shaped themselves drastically after World War 4 when most experienced a massive influx of people from surrounding villages and other surviving but heavily damaged cities.

With the founding of the Council of Cities, it was decided that, due to the majority of the Earth being uninhabitable, that each city must be able to sustain itself. So, as a result, every city has its own economy, monitored closely by an Overseer. Each city also has its own food and recycling plants and the waste generated by each city is nearly zero.

Government

Each city has its own City Hall, which consists of representatives who are elected irregularly. The Mayor is also elected irregularly by the representatives themselves. Representatives are elected directly by the general population and carry the power of every one of their constituents.

For example, if a representative were to carry 51% of the popular vote, then it would be able to elect itself as mayor. Of course, constituents have never allowed this to happen. In known history, any time a representative has neared 50% power, its constituents have transferred their votes to another representative.

Overseer

The Overseer has various responsibilities, too many to list, but most importantly has the power to dismiss any unelected public officer. This allows the Overseer to make sweeping changes to almost any department in the city, from public works to waste management.

An Overseer may resign their position at any time. At that time, they may appoint their own successor, who must then be approved by the Council of Cities. Although the Council of Cities has the power to veto a successor to the position, no Council has ever chosen to do so.

The position of Overseer has some historical precedent in governments of the Common Era. Some historians have compared the position to that of a king in a constitutional monarchy. Similarly, the Overseers have much personal power but choose to use that power only when absolutely necessary.

Population by City

<i>City</i>	<i>Population</i>
Saskatoon	1,102,440
Rio Gallegos	1,097,277
N'Djamena	1,054,789
Santa Fe	1,051,635
Tomsk	1,043,953
Dudinka	1,038,163
Santiago	1,007,908
Cheyenne	978,031
Manaus	943,002
Luanda	901,068
Murmansk	890,312

<i>City</i>	<i>Population</i>
Ulan Batar	789,586
Yakutsk	731,971
La Paz	712,185
Okhotsk	512,657
Astana	419,833
Buchara	400,499
Brisbane	383,659
Kabul	382,474
Lusaka	375,489
Maputo	366,741
Anchorage	345,489
Saint John's	298,815
Port Moresby	256,043

Life Expectancy

According to current statistics, the average lifespan of city residents is 535 years. The most common cause of death is self-termination (54.7% of all deaths). The majority of non-suicidal deaths are murders (24.5%). Other causes of death include execution (16.2%), accidental death (4.0%), and infection (0.6%).

Developments in longevity have made it possible for post-humans to live indefinitely. Indeed, many of the members in the Council of Cities have documented births in the Common Era and not the Post Era. The average age of members in the Council of Cities is 1072 years.

Christchurch Incident

In 912 PE, the city of Christchurch was infected by a deadly virus. At first, the infection spread slowly, but anyone who became infected died within a few weeks. On 1 February 917, the city made a collective decision to self-terminate.

Chronology

In the summer of the year 912 PE, the city of Christchurch experienced a viral outbreak, apparently originating in its Induction and Education Centers.

The authorities made efforts to quarantine those affected by the virus but by 913, it became apparent that the virus was not contained. Outbreaks were sporadic at first but steadily increasing. Despite extensive research, a vaccine could not be generated.

During the intervening years of 913 and 915, it was observed that many of the feeder cities of Christchurch had also become infected. The city council made the independent decision to stop induction procedures and the population, already in decline, began to drop rapidly. By the end of the year 916, the population of the city was less than 12,000. On 1 February 917, the surviving population of the city made a collective decision to self-terminate and the city was destroyed.

Symptoms

The effects of the virus on the body are unknown and the symptoms of the virus do not seem particularly unusual. There are no outward symptoms of the virus but the psychological effects of the virus include feelings of depression, lethargy, and a desire to self-terminate.

Aftermath

Of the 2,031 Christchurch feeder villages, 1,742 had been so affected by the virus that they could no longer self-sustain. On 3 May 925 it was decided by the Council of Cities to cull those villages. The remaining 289 villages remain under quarantine and observation.

The origin of the virus is still unknown but it is generally assumed to have originated in one of Christchurch's feeder villages. Data from the city's computers remain under restriction.

“Good morning, class,” Jasmine greeted the thirty-three young men and women. “I am proud today to announce that you have all graduated as Omegas. Congratulations.”

She was a short, thin woman and looked younger than her age. She smiled. The Inductees of this class, like all the others, were ready to become useful members of society. She felt good to be a teacher again,

This class would be an interesting case study, the first group of many more to come. Their engrams were much improved over their predecessors. Ten years she had spent programming the fifteenth generation engrams. She could already see that her efforts had not been wasted. This class’ intelligence scores were ten percent higher than the average fourteenth generation. Their psychiatrist was also pleased; their emotional sensitivity scores also scored better.

“Professor Oh,” one of the students began, “when will we become naturalized?”

“All in good time,” she answered, “perhaps even within the next few days. But today, you’re all scheduled to take a tour of the city. And then in the afternoon, we’re going to celebrate by taking in a show together.”

The tour guide was already on hand. Jasmine then stepped back, watching them for a moment as the guide explained where they would be going. “First, we will visit the museum of natural history...”

Then, she quietly went into her office to review their files. She had been keeping a particular eye on one of the Inductees, Alpha 5158-220. She hated those numbers, but it was the only way to keep track of them all. Actually, everyone in the city had a number. This Omega’s full number was actually J-05158-0220-15. Everyone in Saskatoon had the J, even she. His village number was 5158 and he was the two-hundred-and-twentieth person to be taken from that village. The 15, of course, represented his engram generation.

He was a favorite of hers, for she was also from village 5158. Her number reflected that, although she wasn’t actually an Inductee from the village. Actually, she was already a grown woman when World War 4 destroyed the world. She had come with her father to Saskatoon when she was 20, eight years before the bombs fell. She was a medical student and not yet graduated with her doctorate when the world ended. Her major was psychiatry but she had always wanted to be a teacher.

Her thoughts drifted back to Omega 5158-220 who had been taken in with another Inductee, who was from village 5157. Their stories were usual: their wives had died and they wanted to kill themselves. Actually, most of the humans taken in were young men who lost their wives while in

labor. If childbirths in the villages were more successful, the Induction Department might have to resort to other methods.

While the two had been Alphas, they had developed a friendship. This wasn't uncommon among Alphas of the same group, but their friendship was stronger than usual. And it really devastated 5158-220 when his friend was removed from the group and returned to his village.

Alpha 5157-190 was a troubling case. An Alpha's first engram was always the most difficult. But this Alpha actually rejected his first engram completely. At first, she thought nothing of it, since it was pretty common to have to repeat a first engram several times, especially if the Inductee had experienced some brain damage or psychosis. The psychiatrist said there appeared to be none, so she tried again. And still his brain seemed a blank slate. Nothing was there except the basic cognitive and language functions. After the fifth time, she speculated that perhaps his memory had not been properly erased. So, she sent him to Analysis. He was returned to her with the annoyed answer of the analyst, "There's nothing wrong with him. Try again."

So she tried again – seventeen times – and still there were no results.

The protocols (which she had written) suggested two solutions: he could be terminated or returned to his village. Since he could still breed and hunt, he could still be a valuable member of his village. His skin pigmentation and hair would return, eventually. Alpha 5158-220, who had studied enough to know the protocols, begged her not to terminate his friend, so she sent him back to Induction with orders that he be returned safely to his village.

P

The Overseer frowned. Jasmine pursed her lips and waited. In a thousand years, she had learned the difference between his frowns. Usually he frowned out of annoyance. Sometimes, behind his eyes lay anger. Today was different. He was frustrated, perhaps. He was arranging his words inside his head, that much she could tell. So, as always, she waited for him to speak first. After a few minutes, he did. He was definitely frustrated.

"It seems that a few days ago you authorized the return of an Alpha."

"Yes," she said.

"I understand that his brain wasn't accepting the engrams."

"It's unusual," she said, "but it happens sometimes."

“It hasn’t happened in a long time,” he answered. “Actually, it’s been two hundred years since there was a failure in educating an Alpha.”

“Yes, I remember,” she said quietly.

The Overseer strained for a moment. He closed his eyes, and as he spoke, the word fell dead to the floor. “Christchurch.”

Jasmine was quiet. Her father sat down next to her, examining his daughter’s eyes. They both stopped speaking for a moment and let the neural network between them flow.

Christchurch couldn’t possibly be related to this, she thought.

But the correlation is there. And with that, the Overseer closed his link. He was one of the few post-humans who could do that completely. She admired that in him. Here was someone who had been born with a human brain and lived that way for six hundred years before finally accepting an upgrade. He had taken a vacation for twenty years, to receive the implants, specially designed for him, and master its intricacies. He left her as Overseer in the meantime. She was loathe to accept the position but somebody had to do it in his absence.

She herself had a hand in the advancement of neural interfaces but it was really the work of Jacob. He was a scientist from Luanda, a product of generation three programming. He posited that if the human brain could accept direct input, it could output in much the same manner.

Of course, she had already tried many times before. She had attempted neural networking many times before, using interfaces in various parts of the brain. And she had failed – many, many times.

So she responded in the traditional scientific way, and told him it was impossible. She supplied him with her research results, her conclusive studies, a hundred years of data. But, somehow he still managed to find support from other members of the scientific community. His research continued, and despite her negative and condescending responses, he continued to share his results with her.

Finally, she relented, and paid him a visit at his research center in Luanda. He was handsome. As much as she had helped create the race of post-humans that inhabited the world, she had never really been attracted to any. Until this man.

The affair lasted many years. She loved him. He loved her. But, finally, the day came when he decided to end his life. Their love had blossomed and flowered for a hundred years.

“Six hundred years is a long time,” he had said. “I have had a long and full life.”

“But what about me? I will miss you,” she said.

“You survived for hundreds of years before you met me,” he answered softly, with tears in his eyes. “You will go on, I think, as you have always done.”

He used the argument that many did. Life without death was meaningless. His work was at an end. His neural network spanned the globe. What had started as an oddity, a mere fascinating toy, had become the standard method of communication.

She thought again of Christchurch. He had died only a decade before that crisis. And if anyone could have solved that problem, it was him. But he had died, and she had been left alone. Her mind was aging, finally, unable to keep up with the problems of the world.

Daughter, do not worry about the past.

The one problem with having an Overseer for a father is that he could monitor anyone’s thoughts via the network. And she had allowed her thoughts to leak into the interface. Her thoughts were clouded but she spoke, trying to shake the doubts. “Father, I haven’t seen you in years, and now you come down to my Education Center. To sit? You have more important things to do, surely.”

“You may have made a mistake,” he said slowly.

“Mistake?”

“You seem to think I am wasting my time, sitting here. Why don’t you go to Induction and they can explain it to you themselves?”

Σ

The chief of the Induction Center was a man who called himself Shepherd. Everyone who worked in the department had a nickname that was angelic or saintly. They treated it like a joke, poking fun at the ancient religions, and at the villagers whom they took in. There was a lot of humor needed to maintain your sanity in this department, where pitiable humans had their humanity taken from them in favor of something better. There was even a sign above his office door that read, “Heaven is down. Hell is up.”

“What can I do for you today, Jasmine?” Shepherd asked.

“The Overseer asked me to see you about the returned Alpha.”

“Ah, yes.” Shepherd stood up slowly, then sat down again. He nervously drummed his fingers on his desk.

Jasmine looked him in the eyes. “Something’s changed?”

“Yes,” he answered. “Something’s changed.”

“And...”

“Would you like me to explain what’s happened,” he asked, “or would you rather watch the surveillance yourself?”

“Surveillance.” She didn’t like the sound of the second option but it would probably be easier on the old man.

So they watched the footage together. There was the Alpha. He was leaving Village 5157. He wasn’t alone, either. Two humans were with him.

“How long ago was this?” she demanded.

“About twenty minutes ago. I called to your office but I was told you were already on the way.” he answered.

Her father was either prescient or didn’t yet know about this development. Then she realized something and even though she already knew the answer she asked anyway. “Where are they now?”

“En route,” he answered. “I’ll put them in the waiting room when they arrive, of course, but they probably won’t wake up for a few hours.”

“We need to isolate them. Can you do that?”

“Of course.”

“Don’t erase anything, either,” she said. “Just keep them unconscious as long as you can, whatever it takes. And call me when they get here.” She was about to leave when he called her back, “Miss Jasmine.”

“Yes?”

“You didn’t ask me.”

“Ask you what?”

“The original reason you came down here. You were supposed to ask me how he got returned to the wrong village.”

“Do you have a good explanation for that?” she asked.

“Of course I do,” he said. “We might not return people often but their chips don’t usually lie.”

“What do you mean?”

“As per procedure, all of his implants and chips were removed just before he was shipped out again. Have you ever seen the chips, Miss Jasmine?”

“I designed them.”

“Of course you have. I know that. But when was the last time you physically looked at one?”

“Why would I do that?” she asked.

“Because every identification chip is also engraved with the Inductee’s designation number.”

Her heart sank. She feared what would come next. He reached into his desk and between his thumb and forefinger held a tiny silicon wafer that

was barely the size of a tooth. She knew what the sequence was even before she read it: J-05158-0220. Somehow, J-05157-0190 had reprogrammed their ID chips.

“Call me as soon as they arrive,” she repeated as she left. Omega 5157-190 had some explaining to do.

T

It was a simple task, if overly dramatic, to have the Police arrest the Omega with the identification number 05158-0220. Since he was not yet a citizen, and she was the head of Education, she was immediately granted jurisdiction. She requested a policeman stay guard near her office while she interviewed him.

She started with a simple question, “Who are you?”

“My ID is J-05158-0220-15,” the Omega answered.

“But you are actually from Village 5157.”

“Yes.”

“So, you are actually J-05157-190.”

The Omega was quiet. “Yes. But I would prefer that you call me Joshua.”

“Is that the name you have chosen for yourself?” she asked.

“It is the name my parents gave me.”

She tried to compose herself. Perhaps this Inductee had not been properly erased. There were some cases in which an Alpha had experienced an incomplete erasure. “Do you remember your life in the village?”

“Kind of,” he said. “The memories feel like they were pushed aside, really. At first, my old life seemed something like a dream. Now I know it was real.”

His Initiation had been unsuccessful, perhaps. It could be done again. The memory erasure was sometimes used as a reset to the engram process, anyway. Perhaps this Omega could be reprogrammed. But there was still the question of the swapped ID numbers.

“Why did you reprogram the ID chips?”

“I knew Thomas would not accept his engram programming.”

Jasmine felt her heart skip a beat.

“Thomas,” she paused, “was that the Alpha’s name?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know that?”

The Omega was quiet for a second. “I read it in his mind.”

Jasmine was quiet. She knew now that he was something different from regular humans, from regular post-humans. In ancient times, they had called his kind psychic. There were some humans who possessed abilities beyond the average but the implants and engrams usually dulled their powers. But of this one, she was unsure.

“You predicted that Thomas,” she stopped, “that is, the real Alpha 5158-220, would fail his engram programming. But why reprogram the chip? You must have known he would be returned to his own village. I thought you were his friend and you would want him to be happy.”

“Yes, but there was no reason for him to return to his own village. His wife was dead. But my wife,” he paused carefully, a look of sadness on his face, “is very much alive. I didn’t want her to be alone.”

“So, you hoped that he could go back to her, and they could be happy together,” Jasmine said.

“I hoped,” he answered.

“So you damaged his implants.”

“No. But I did help him resist your programming.”

Her whole mind fought against the question even as she asked it. “Can you see into the future?”

“I know I will see my brother again, soon.”

“What are you expecting?” she said, the anger growing inside her.

“I expect more,” he answered, “much more.”

“Tell me.”

“Not yet.”

So she shouted for the policeman to take him to an isolation cell.

Then, she opened her neural interface at full speed, accessing all the data she could on the Christchurch Incident. The virus itself was destroyed with the city’s detonation. It had been destroyed, unstudied. Or so it was widely believed.

In the moments before the city’s destruction, Christchurch had uploaded the contents of their neural network into a remote backup system. Jasmine and other top-level scientists had been analyzing the contents of that backup for more than two-hundred years.

There were a few events that preceded the infection that mirrored exactly what was going on around her. An Omega, whose memory had not been properly erased, had been caught tampering with the neural network. He had somehow uploaded what seemed to be a virus into the system. It was simultaneously transmitted into every post-human’s brain in the whole city. In the blink of an eye the whole city had been infected. It took years for the virus to manifest itself, and eventually led to the death of the entire

city. Those who had been the most exposed to him were the first to die, starting with his classmates and teachers. Eventually, two-hundred thousand people killed themselves because a single thought had lodged itself in their brains.

The idea was impossibly simple: the future could not possibly belong to the post-humans because they were an evolutionary dead-end. The future belonged to the humans in the villages.

Y

“Perhaps the radiation had been mutating them.”

“Perhaps.”

“It’s possible the psychic powers are part of the mutation.”

“It’s possible.”

“Or maybe it’s just fate.”

“Father, you know there’s no such thing as fate.”

The Overseer frowned. He was the oldest man on the planet, older even than the exaggerated ages of human mythology. He was the closest thing to an immortal in human history. He looked young, vibrant, angry.

For eleven centuries, he had guided civilization towards the future. Even the other Overseers, most of them mere decades younger than him, respected him. He was a good leader and had shown remarkable foresight many times. But now, with his eyes darkened, closed in thought, he looked vulnerable, weak.

A thousand years ago, if you had asked him about God, he would’ve laughed. Five hundred years ago, he believed he was almost a god himself. But when Christchurch destroyed itself, he was devastated. He questioned himself and his own existence. He started to study ancient holy books and the religions of the villages. At one point, he even suggested to Jasmine that they go into a village and attend one of their religious ceremonies. He was dissuaded on the basis that the village might have to be culled.

Upon analyzing the Christchurch logs for the first time, he insisted that the villages be culled. Any that showed signs of psychic mutation were wiped out. The origin of the psychic mutation was largely unknown. The Induction Center had tests for psychics but no Inductee had ever tested strongly enough to warrant suspicion. But perhaps the tests were flawed. She was beginning to wonder just how many psychics had slipped through, unnoticed.

“It only takes one,” she muttered.

“And our whole world could come crashing down,” her father answered. “Like Babel.”

“Babel?” she repeated.

“A Bible myth,” he explained, “a tower that was built to the sky. The people wanted to touch Heaven. They wanted to be gods.”

“Let me guess the ending,” she said. “They got cursed.”

He smiled. “Something like that.”

At that moment, Jasmine got a call from the Induction Center. The Alpha and his companions had arrived. They were unconscious in a holding cell. Jasmine called to the security. They would bring the Omega to the Induction Center, as well.

“You should get out of the city,” she said to her father. “Go to Santa Fe. You have friends there.”

“If the world is going to be destroyed,” her father said, “I’d prefer to be at ground zero when the bombs fall. It’s better than hiding in the shadows, waiting for a slow death.”

She half-smiled. He had become terribly morbid these last few decades.

The first time I had a vision, I was in church. It felt like a waking dream, misty images unfolded themselves in my mind. I was twelve and I dreamed that I was married. Of course, I dismissed it as a daydream. My mind had wandered during the sermon, and I had imagined a happy future.

Except that first one, later visions were of small, insignificant events. Even so, I told no one except my brother. He told me to keep my mouth shut. There were cruel punishments for witches. I didn't want to be killed or banished.

When I finally did get married, it was a realization of the first vision. A week later, I had my second serious vision. I imagined that I had gone out into the desert. I felt sadness, like I was searching for answers. Then, I was kidnapped by the monsters and taken to a place where there was no light. While my wife was in childbirth, I suddenly knew that I could fulfill that vision, so I went out into the desert, alone. And, indeed, I was taken.

They tried to inject me with me poison but I fought against the effects. I was barely conscious when I realized that there were others with me. We were inside a machine that was moving, carrying us somewhere. I could feel the presence of another one like me. So, I tried to communicate. Although my mind was sinking, visions flooded me. They put things under my skin. Bright lights were all around me. I could not move but I could feel my body and my mind changing.

When I finally regained my mind, I felt very different. The monsters, too, had changed. They were like me. We were not quite human, with tiny machines crawling under our white skin. Although I remembered who I was before, there was an empty space in my mind, like I was a child in school again, craving knowledge. And they would soon give me the answers to many of my questions.

The one I sensed inside the machine earlier looked friendly. I wanted to become his friend. But I could see he was unhappy. So, I touched his head, and reached inside his mind. I saw some of his memories, most of which he could no longer see. Amidst the memories, I saw a number, and I exchanged it with my own. I gave him some of my memories, too. And suddenly, he became strong. Every day, I helped him resist the machines that tried to change our minds, even while my own mind was being filled up.

Eventually, his resistance was judged to be a failure and he was sent away. I hoped he would see my wife, my parents, my brother. They would

see him and know something of the truth outside their tiny village. Then, they might come looking for me and rescue me. Inside my head, I held the true knowledge of the world. I would return to my village as a messiah. I would reach my hand out and carry them into the future.

So, I studied the history of the world, according to the post-humans, and found that there were many villages like my own. I was heartbroken and, at the same time, I knew I had to continue onward with my quest.

It was not right that a minority of post-humans could control the destiny of the species so easily. Their sense of superiority was painful. But, like my fear of being executed for witchcraft, I remembered my brother's advice, and kept my mouth shut. They thought I was becoming one of them but, in truth, I was becoming something better than them.

X

She had congratulated all of us but I knew she was talking to me. I had finished my integration into this new world. The plan, guided by my visions, was about to be thrust upon them. Their world would change in the blink of an eye. And our species, divorced for so long, would be reunited again.

The change that loomed in my mind was inevitable. They had lost the ability to procreate. A species that could no longer evolve was doomed to extinction. I was just the vessel of change. If I had not carried the message, someone else, sooner or later, would. I knew that to be completely true, especially after reading about the Christchurch Incident. It had been tried before, and the change had been aborted. That tiny city had chosen suicide over change. But this city that I found myself in, was the largest, the biggest. The inhabitants were the first-ranked in the world. Those that led the city were among the first post-humans. They would not be so quick to cancel the oncoming evolution. They had lived a thousand years and would surely not give themselves up to death now.

Professor Jasmine, she would definitely be the one to watch. Perhaps under her warm exterior was the heart of a machine. But she had lived long enough to know that life was valuable. Certainly, she would not throw hers away before the change took root.

But when she had me arrested, I knew that my plan might not go ahead as easily as I had thought. And then they put me in a security cell, in isolation, where I could no longer access the neural net. But even while

she was interviewing me, that was the moment that would be engraved in history. They had called it a virus at Christchurch but it was no such thing. It was something like an engram. It was a thought-pattern. It was an idea.

I had studied the Christchurch Incident in detail. I knew that there, it had taken years for the thought to spread. Perhaps the originator there had been desperate. His mind had not been composed well-enough. Perhaps, he had uploaded the thought-pattern too quickly, or it was incomplete.

But while Jasmine was busy questioning me, I readied myself. At her moment of anger, I saw her weakness and began my transmission. It scarcely lasted a second and I'm sure she didn't notice. I had done well, hopefully. She would be the first to realize my action. She would also be the first to recognize the change. Hopefully, she would realize that I was trying to do good.

Ψ

As I sat in my cell, cut off from the neural network, my head became light. I fell to the floor, closed my eyes, and felt like I would die.

It was a vision. It was the strongest I had ever had. And it wasn't showing me the future. I was looking at the present. My brother, my cousin, and my friend were in the city. They had come looking for me but instead of rescuing me, they would have to depend on me to save them.

And with a single thought, I reached my mind out of my body and passed through the closed door. The security guards did not look up at me as I passed. I walked, invisible to everyone around me. I traced my memories, and remembered the location of the Induction Center. On the way, I found Jasmine and her father, the Overseer. They, too, were headed toward the Induction Center and couldn't see me. I was a ghost.

I followed them, and listened to them talk. They talked about me. They talked about the Christchurch Incident. They talked about the world they lived in and how it must be preserved. Her father believed that Christchurch would not be repeated. Jasmine said that the change had already begun.

So she knew what I had done. I wondered what she would do next.

She then said something unexpected. She spoke of the past. She spoke of the world before it had been destroyed. She hoped that humanity would rise up again. Until then, she was a caretaker, a nurse, treating a

sick patient. And maybe if Christchurch would happen again, she would abandon the city and return to the villages.

Her father laughed quietly. He said they would do exactly what they had done at Christchurch. They would evacuate the key members of the city, the elders who had lived before the Post Era. They would be immune to the change, as they had been before. She would be among the few who were too valuable to die.

As they entered the Induction Center, I continued to follow them, still fearful at what might happen next. She ordered that my still-unconscious brother and cousin have their minds erased immediately. They would be inducted immediately. The Alpha, who had previously failed induction, would be terminated.

I watched in horror as they carried my brother's unmoving body into the erasure machine.

Suddenly, my spirit felt like it was being pulled back into my body. And then, I woke up.

Ω

I was conscious again but I was not in my cell. I was in the Induction Center. I was standing, my legs and arms restrained to the table that I was strapped to. I could see my brother in the erasure machine. My cousin was also there, in the machine next to him. The Alpha was nowhere to be seen but I suspected he was being moved somewhere to be executed.

Jasmine approached me, her eyes burned with anger. She ordered me to undo the damage I had done to the neural network. But behind her rage, I saw desperation. The world that she had so carefully created and her father controlled, was about to transform. And I could not undo the thought-pattern. Already, she said, she could feel the change.

She tried to convince me that I was wrong. Humanity had their time. Now was a different phase of evolution. This was survival of the strongest.

But I argued against her, telling her that our species must be reunited. She knew that I was not the only psychic. She had encountered them before. Her implants and engrams were not compatible with this jump in evolution. She called me an anomaly, a mutant. I laughed and called her the same. To that, she was quiet.

Her father looked at her, dumbfounded, suddenly realizing a truth that he had not seen in a thousand years. She was a psychic. She could see the future.

I urged her to look into the future, and tell me if the post-humans were there. She said that she could only see that they would end, as Christchurch had. I begged her to look beyond the future that she was following. If she could change her actions, it could be a different future. Post-humans and humans could work together.

She smiled at me, called me an idealist and told me that she could see further into the future than I. There would be peace, for a short time. Then, death. Only death. Humans and post-humans would never accept each other. Eventually, the post-humans would die and the humans would return to their savage roots. The planet itself would be destroyed.

But there was already a plan. The post-humans were planning to go into space. Humanity would be left alone on Earth. The radiation that had infected the land was slowly dissipating. In a few hundred years, the Earth would be mostly liveable again. Humanity could keep their damaged planet. The post-humans would find a new world. There, they would evolve, regain the ability to procreate, or die off. She said that she would not take the journey. She would remain on Earth in a village, and die a natural death.

But I had to enter the neural network and undo the damage I had done.

I told her that it was impossible.

Not impossible, she said, if I discarded my body. I would become part of the computer systems, I would become part of the consciousness of the post-humans. I could be the one who would guide them to a brighter future.

I begged her to return my brother and the Alpha to the village. She agreed.

They carried me to the Education Center, connected me to an engram machine, following an experimental procedure designed by Jasmine's long-gone lover, Jacob. Some of the power was switched to negative and my body was electrocuted as my mind floated into the machine.

Our planet Earth is a single ecosystem. The environment is composed of both living and non-living things: plants, animals, viruses, minerals, chemicals. When an imbalance occurs, when one segment of the system seems more favored than another, the system will invariably swing like a pendulum until a balance is maintained. And although change may seem slow to the human eye, the Earth is a patient judge. It might appear that the Earth is a self-contained entity but all things in existence are dependent on everything else and our planet is no exception. The universe is a living entity and every part of that entity – galaxies, stars, planets, animals, and bacteria – are like cells of a larger organism.

But because an organism is a fragile being and the universe is no such thing, let us change the analogy and say that the universe is more like a giant ocean of water. The energy contained within that ocean is infinite (or as near to infinite as we can understand). What we might call a soul or spirit is merely a drop of that ocean poured into a vessel. In this way you could say that every living thing contains part of the universe. And just as a glass of seawater is a representation of the world's ocean, each living thing is a representation of the universe's consciousness. The glass of water is separated from its parent and is unaware of itself, just as we are. Our cosmic energy is no different than the person next to us but it is our experience that shapes us. And when we die, we are poured back into the universe's ocean of consciousness and our memories become diffused and absorbed. When the universe creates another being, part of our experiences are transferred. In this way, our spirits are annihilated and reincarnated with the cycles of death and birth. Trying to explain this sort of thing is exactly what got religions started. Jesus called it the Kingdom of Heaven. Buddha called it Nirvana. Beethoven expressed it with music. These days we take the beauty of music for granted but we still think the Kingdom of Heaven is something we must wait until death to experience.

The first senses are basic but our eyes and ears have not yet finished developing. Of course, our ability to distinguish shades of light and sound will continue to be refined as evolution plods onward.

Technology may even assist us in the process of sensory evolution. But cosmic consciousness is not purely an evolution of the senses. It is an evolutionary change that has been sitting on the back-burner for a long time, merely awaiting the point when it will reaching its boiling point. The very nature of this evolutionary change implies that it will happen on a global scale, in a short span of time. The awareness of the nature of the universe is not in itself cosmic consciousness but merely an expression of the latent ability. There are other awarenesses, all of them small exposures of the whole change. Some of them are expressed more obviously, in desires for political revolution and environmental protection. Others are expressed less obviously, and perhaps are mistaken for charisma or talent. All of these are signs of what Christ called “the last days,” when the Kingdom of Heaven would come to earth. Explaining a metaphor such as this is impossible. Try explaining a symphony to a deaf person or pure love to a psychopath. You would, of course, be reduced to metaphors and similes that poorly equate the beauty of the ethereal to the physical.

Love is like a summer’s day... Van Gogh’s last painting is like gazing into the painter’s depressed soul... Beethoven’s Fifth is like an ocean of feelings that wash over you... The Kingdom of Heaven is like a rare pearl...

How many religions have been founded on this misunderstanding, on this mis-comprehension of what we cannot see? The early religions worshiped the Earth, Sun, and Moon for providing food, light, and tides. Spirits were revered and feared because they could cause reactions in our bodies and the environment around us. As philosophy and science grew, so did religion. Elements and gods were given names and abilities to explain the forces of nature. Core superstitions were

replaced by more evolved, more esoteric explanations. Later, esoteric beliefs were replaced by dogma. Then, dogma struggled with spirituality. The cycle has nearly come full circle as we realize that our universe is dominated by things we cannot see: viruses, proteins, atoms, particles, and energy.

So if religions are built upon false truths, what then of the morals they preach? The answer is simple: cosmic consciousness will sweep away morals like modern music and technology swept away their predecessors. Just as the electric guitar replaced the lute and the computer replaced the movable-type printing press, so will common sense displace morals. Codified and dogmatic rules based on religious justification will be considered outmoded by inborn sensibilities. And generally speaking, people will no longer disagree with what is right and wrong based on words supposedly inspired by various deities. Rather, people will seek out solutions based on what is good for the whole of humanity. Morals will unite humanity instead of dividing it.

And what of the other rites we have come to accept as functions and expressions of religion? Prayer, of course, has taken different forms throughout the ages. It is an expression of a wish for a happier world, a better existence. Even within denominations, prayer can be a ritual or an ecstatic experience. Sacred experiences are a basic component of human experience. So, perhaps religions will continue to exist in the future, to meet the basic need of the human spirit. But the organized religions of today, with their strict rules of conduct that violate common sense will sooner or later vanish, outlived by beliefs that do not mistake holiness for purity. And in any case, it is just as easy to have a spiritual experience in a temple as it is on a mountain, at a concert hall, in a movie theater, or while sleeping under the stars.

When you were a child, you spoke as a child, thought as a child, and probably acted like a child. Now that you are an adult, have you given up on childish things? Probably not completely. And who could blame you? Children certainly live in a more exciting world than you do, with your credit cards, bills, balance books, insurance policies, and current affairs. Every day you get older, you lose another part of that child. And what do you gain in return? Experience? Wisdom? Knowledge? Happiness? Truth? Never mind. You already know the answer and you don't need me to say it for you. And perhaps you don't want to act like a child, anyway. After all, you need to be taken seriously in order to keep your chance for that promotion. Perhaps wearing your favorite pink shorts outside your comfy green pajamas would be fun but it might kill your chances for that next big raise. And you certainly could use the money. The economy is never great and you haven't invested as much for your retirement as you would've liked.

Wouldn't it be nice if you could just leave everything that ties you down? Wouldn't it be wonderful to fly a little plane from town to town and give people rides in exchange for a bit of money? Enough for gas and food, that's all you'd need. There'd be no more debt collectors calling you and nobody telling you what to do. You could spend your free time alone, staring into the sky, vaporizing clouds. At night you could be alone with your dreams, fast asleep under the stars.

Life is like a stage. Or a movie. Or a comic book. No. Never mind that. Life is any analogy you want it to be. Maybe you'd rather live in an art gallery. Or a hole in the ground. You're the director. And the producer. And the inker. The paint. The

shovel. Your life can be whatever you want it to be. You can do anything you want to if you just set your mind to it. Of course, you may have to put some physical effort into it. Anything you can imagine can be made to come true. Life itself and everything therein is an illusion. The only real thing is imagination. And like any fantasy, the only limits are those created by the mind of the dreamer. The universe, being of infinite size and possibilities has no limit to the concept of possible. Perhaps you think something is impossible, perhaps due to laws of physics, gravity, or thermodynamics. Just remember; the universe is not limited by such trivial details. If you cannot imagine it, it is likely that the universe has already created such a thing.

But there is one law that remains constant throughout the cosmos and that is the law of attraction. Similar things are attracted to similar things. That is, negative things attract negative things and positive things attract positive things. Hot attracts hot. Ugly attracts ugly. Cold-hearted attracts cold-hearted. Perhaps you might say that opposites attract but this only applies to magnetics and it really must be noted that magnetic objects attract only other magnetic objects. And when it comes to love, two things that appear dissimilar are usually not that different. Hate can only come from what once was love just as anger springs from lost patience. Anyway, nothing is real and all that you experience is merely an illusion. So why bother continuing your existence? Can you choose any life you want? Of course you can. But if you want another life, you may have to go through the trouble of ending this one first. So, you'd better be sure that it's worth the hassle.

I began solving my problems the day I stopped taking myself so seriously. I was a grayface and I was constantly obsessively trying to classify, categorize, and reference the world that I lived in. In a universe of infinite possibilities, I was attempting to eliminate every random act of unpredictability. I did a good job too, until I realized that for every rule, there was an exception. And for every exception there was no rule. Right and wrong are not black and white but a palette of gray shades. And so I had to step outside my own little viewpoint, open my eyes and see the unseen forces of the random. I learned to accept sometimes nonsense may be truth and beauty is almost always lies. And between the doors of the consciousness and subconsciousness are the windows of the sublime.

I guess I left my keys on the nightstand. So, I pushed at the glass and there I was, entering reality from a different perspective. There I stood in my living room, mud on the carpet from my shoes, moralizing about the useless locks on the doors. I smiled because it was good to be out of the rain. I realized that nowhere except within myself could I find an answer to the great question.

I looked in friends and I looked in books. And that's a shame, since I found nothing, despite reading everything, down to the very last word.

