DISCOVER TOMORROW

Nichole Haines
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self published</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discover Tomorrow</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discover Tomorrow</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lonely In The Void</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3780</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perfect Pony's</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LABOON Chapter 1</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LABOON Chapter 2</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LABOON Chapter 3</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LABOON Chapter 4</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuppel Park</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Book</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bot Babies</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forbidden Life</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You Can't Escape From The Future</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rex</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author Photo</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PART I. DISCOVER TOMORROW

1. Summary
   Nichole Haines

2. Discover Tomorrow
   Nichole Haines

3. Lonely In The Void
   Nichole Haines

4. 3780
   Nichole Haines

5. LABOON Chapter 1
   Nichole Haines

6. LABOON Chapter 2
   Nichole Haines

7. LABOON Chapter 3
   Nichole Haines

8. LABOON Chapter 4
   Nichole Haines

9. Kuppel Park
   Nichole Haines

10. The Book
    Nichole Haines

11. Bot Babies
    Nichole Haines

12. Forbidden Life
    Nichole Haines

13. You Can't Escape From The Future
    Nichole Haines

Rex

PART II. AUTHOR PHOTO
Easily turn your manuscript into

**EPUB** Nook, Kobo, and iBooks
**Mobi** Kindle
**PDF** Print-on-demand and digital distribution

PRESSBOOKS.COM
Simple Book Production
I wrote this second book Discover Tomorrow to warn people that Satan is using advanced Technology and Artificial Intelligence to set up his Kingdom. He must use Technology to fool people. Please feel free to read my first book The Dome City also. As I stated in my first book The Dome City I was born with a mild case of Cerebral Palsy and I have two daughters. None of my daughters have Cerebral Palsy. I was a Computer Science major in college, but I never got my degree. I tell you in both my books The Dome City and Discover Tomorrow what I did for occupations when I worked full time jobs back in my 20’s and in my late twenties. I worked in a call centers as an inbound Customer Service representative and sat in front of a computer for eight hours a day talking on the phone. I worked at call centers for a total of six years and worked at an amusement park as a ride operator for a total of four years starting in May and worked until the end of October. I operated most of the bigger thrill rides in the park including most of the roller coasters. Some days I worked twelve hours a day. After I gave birth to my first daughter I mainly did work at home jobs after that. Once again like I stated in my last book the Dome City I had to list this book in the Science Fiction category. I want to stress also that God, Jesus and Satan are NOT FICTIONAL THEY ARE ALL REAL. In my personal opinion AI shouldn’t be listed as Science Fiction anymore. They are Science Fact now along with a lot of other advanced Technology. Although this is a science fiction book some of these fictional stories could actually come true. Everybody has their personal opinions about AI if you don’t totally agree with me that AI is evil that is fine. My father committed suicide in 2009 and his name was Joe Meeko. He was a well known bodybuilder back in the 1980’s. He was Mr. Universe, Mr. America and Mr. USA. If you know anybody who is suicidal please get them help as soon as possible.
David dreamed of a beautiful ocean and the coastline around him. He stood on a grassy bluff and it seemed that the world was open out before him. Everything was peaceful, everything seemed serine. However a sound of rumbling began to echo around him. David instinctively looked around but it seemed to be coming from every direction at once. The ground began to shake, the very earth seeming to rebel. The water began to turn white, the waves going in the opposite direction as the massive rocks and ground of the shoreline shook and pushed against it. David struggled to keep on his feet, looking around as massive cracks began to form in the coastline, looking like the very area around him was detaching and moving toward the sea. He fell to his knees, the motion too much to handle. He held on for his life as the area around him came apart, shaky ground under his feet, giving way to the feel of falling as dirt and debris swirled around him in a maelstrom of chaos.

David sat up in bed, the scene that had happened just moments before feeling far too real. He instinctively looked out his window, reminding himself both that he was not on the coast and the ground was still firmly in place below him. The dream still hung in his head as he got ready to go out. It was strong in his mind and despite the knowledge that it was a dream, it still felt very real. Most dreams feel really profound when you dreamt them, then as you awoke and your mind began the task of processing actual reality it became less and less real. However, David felt as though he was there, the ground had come apart beneath his feet and there was real danger. David forced it out of his mind, he was meeting up with his friend Kira and decided that he would let dreams stay as dreams.

The pair met up in a coffee shop downtown, sitting under a big tv that showed news stories and current events. It was the kind of thing that you mostly just watched in the background while you waited for people. David tried to focus on Kira as she talked about a movie she had seen but his mind kept being drawn back to the dream and the earthquake.

“Hey you with me David?” Kira asked, waving her hand in front of David’s face. “You seem preoccupied…did you not get enough sleep?”

“No, I got plenty.” David said as he snapped back to reality. “In fact the reason I am so out of it. I had this very realistic dream that I was on the coast and an earthquake hit, tearing large chunks of the land out to sea.”

“Your joking, right?” Kira suggested.

“What do you mean?” David asked. “What about that is so hard to believe?”

“Look!” Kira said as she pointed to the screen. David turned to look up to see a new and breaking story was unfolding before him. David’s heart skipped a beat as the image that he saw was something completely familiar. It seemed that less than half an hour before an earthquake had begun on the
west coast and vast amounts of land were breaking off of the coast and falling into the ocean.

“That is it!” David commented. “That is exactly what I saw...even where I saw it.”

“Well that’s impossible.” Kira commented. “You woke up hours ago and this is currently happening. It is just coincidence.”

“Are you sure?” David asked. “It is precisely like what I am seeing.”

“There is no chance you somehow saw this.” Kira commented. “Just relax, they got rescue people and scientists and such out there...there’s nothing we can do about it.”

David nodded, ultimately Kira was right. I was just a really big coincidence. It was unreasonable to think that it was connected. Perhaps there was some kind of report the other day about the dangers of erosion or something and he subconsciously watched it and dreamt about it. The actual quake was just the culmination of it. David fund himself calmed by the logic and soon began to focus on his friend and the rest of his day.

That night David lay down to sleep, the earthquake had caused a lot of damage but luckily very few fatalities. He was worried that he would again dream of the earthquake but decided that it was fine...dreams were not real and things that happened to him while he was asleep weren’t real. Soon he nodded off and comfortably began to dream.

David found himself walking down a street in rural area in a city. He could see taller buildings further off but where he was seemed quiet. He looked at a street sign but found it impossible to read. David shrugged it off and kept walking. He did not quite know what he was heading toward, he just felt like he should be walking. There were other people on the street, an older man was walking his dog. David said hello and the person looked back at him, saying something he could not understand. David shrugged this off and continued. Soon, he was interrupted by a booming sound from the sky above. He looked up to see some kind of object streaking through the sky, leaving a long trail of smoke behind it. The item came closer and closer and people began to panic. The item streaked like a bullet as it got closer, skimming over the tops of trees and striking a warehouse at the end of the block David was walking. Everyone seemed to be running away but David felt the urge to run closer. He went to a jog toward the warehouse as smoke rose to the sky. He reached the front door, straining against the doors and opening them. He looked through the smoke as it began to clear...then he saw it... the object that had fallen from the sky.

David woke up in the morning with what he saw still vivid in his head. It was just as real as the coastal earthquake but this dream had no real danger or loss of life. He did not feel nearly as disturbed and found it rather easy to push it out of his head. He went to work, sitting at his desk and not thinking too much about his dreams and the former coincidence that resulted. It wasn’t until people gathered by the water cooler that he took notice that something was up. He walked up as he saw a news report on one of the
computer screens.
“What’s going on?” David asked as he tried to make sense of the chaotic scene on the screen.
“Meteorite or something in Russia.” One of his coworkers answered. “Came down and crashed into a warehouse.”
David paused, remembering in his dream that he could neither read the signs nor understand peoples words. It did look like Russian on the signs now that he thought about it. David began to feel a cold feeling crawl up his spine. Not only did he dream about the thing falling from the sky...he dreamt where it would be. David signed out of work early and texted Kira...he needed advice and now.
Shortly Kira met him at a café, looking confused to the emergency. She had a sketchbook out and was drawing some manner of fantastical bird for her webcomic. She looked up as David took a seat.
“So what is the emergency that we both had to miss half a day at work?” Kira asked.
“The thing that fell from the sky in Russia.” David began. “I dreamt about that last night,”
“This again?” Kira asked. “There is no chance of that...you know this!”
“I dreamt that this was going to happen and I can prove it.” David admitted.
“Really now?” Kira asked. “You are going to have to come up with something pretty profound to make me think that my best friend can see the future in dreams.”
“Ok!” David said as he turned to the cafes screen. It showed scientists in protective suits emerging from the warehouse and talking to the people gathered around. “They are discussing what the thing is...they are about to reveal it was in fact not a meteorite at all.”
“We are getting reports that they have identified the fallen object.” The newscaster revealed. “We have a live worldwide exclusive and we are getting information now.”
“It is a prototype satellite.” David said as he watched. “Launched by a company called Chaotech.”
“We are hearing that the meteorite is in fact a fallen satellite.” The newscaster revealed. “Likely the same prototype GPS satellite launched by Chaotech not one year ago.”
“How the hell did you do that?” Kira asked. “How could you have known not just the fact it was a satellite, but the company that launched it?”
“It was all in the dream.” David replied. “I went in the warehouse, I saw the satellite and the logo on it.”
“You are really freaking me out.” Kira admitted. “That was way too close to be a coincidence.”
“I know.” David admitted. “I wanted to believe that it was just a fluke but there was too much detail...I knew what it was because it wasn’t just like I had a dream about it...it was like I was there.”
“Well we need to look at this scientifically.” Kira admitted. “We are going to
operate on the idea that you are somehow indeed seeing the future. Whatever you dream tonight, I want you to get up and write down every detail. We will compare it all and see exactly how intense it is. Can you control your dreams at all?"

“Like lucid dreaming?” David asked. “Not at all. I tried it once and it’s like no matter what I do…what happens in my dreams happens.”

“Well we then need to focus on the details.” Kira commented. “You could be like a superhero, a person that can see disasters coming and warn people.”

“I don’t know how that would work.” David admitted. “The earthquake happened pretty early in the day so I had maybe a couple hours on it. Also…what could I have done…who would believe me? Hey there…you need to evacuate the western seaboard because I can see the future in my dreams and dreamt of an earthquake.”

“That is why you need all the details!” Kira insisted. “That stuff about the satellite is what convinced me. You need to prove it to others and you will need more.”

“Ok, I will give it a try.” David said with a sigh. “This is happening to me anyway, might as well try to make some sort of reason for it.”

“This is an amazing opportunity.” Kira said as she continued to sketch her strange bird. “This could be some kind of new phase in human evolution, a fire that could ignite a new kind of existence where reality and the will of the human mind are one and the same.”

“Ok, now you are freaking me out.” David admitted. “This is like a science fiction nightmare and I just want to wake up.”

“You know how many people would kill for your abilities?” Kira asked. “Just sit back and enjoy the ride…you are seeing the future after all.”

“I guess.” David admitted. “I will try and find the fun in it…at least for the visions where no one is hurt.”

By the time David got home and ready for bed he had to admit that he was feeling part of the excitement. Kira was treating what was happening to David like it was some kind of grand miracle. Though David still had his reservations, he could not help but feel caught up in the excitement. Kira had given him a writing pad for him to write down all the details of what he dreamed and he set it up next to the bed. He laid down to sleep, wondering what amazing thing he would see and be able to witness unfolding when he awoke. Soon David found himself in a city, it looked very familiar and soon determined that it was in fact his home city. David felt comforted by the familiar and knew he would be able to read the signs and understand people. In front of him was a fantastical bird, unreal and colorful. He vaguely recalled seeing it in a sketchbook, possibly Kira’s. David had issues recalling his day, the realm of reality fleeting while one dreams. The creature was immaculate, seeming to move around as David looked at it as if displaying it’s splendor. It made a cry, calling out three times before spreading its wide wings, the under feathers lighting up like neon lights. It took off, swooping toward the sky and disappearing toward the darkness above. David shrugged this off,
knowing that his dreams were a sort of prediction but knowing that no such bird exited in anything other than his an Kira’s imaginations. He focused on seeing the details around him.

David saw the sun hanging low on the horizon, the red glow of the sunset framing the area. However, David also became aware of a red glow coming from the opposite direction. He turned, seeing massive flames devouring buildings and black smoke climbing high into the darkening sky. A sense of fear and dread came over him but he was compelled to run toward the fire. He had to see it, he had to see it, he had to have the details. He saw one of the shopping centers of downtown, a place he had visited many times. It was starting to catch fire. It seemed that the massive blaze had happened suddenly and was spreading faster than anyone could. The building was lit up within moments, screams coming from inside. There were probably hundreds of people inside, all caught unaware and unable to evacuate in time. The roof caved in and flames erupted out, hungrily calming more buildings around it. David shielded his eyes, the heat and smoke overwhelming.

David sat up with a start, he was sweating and his hands were clenched into fists. He looked to the writing pad he had put next to his bed and instead of using it he knocked it off onto the floor. He did not need help forgetting what he had seen, he would not so easily forget it. Despite the wonder of what he had seen before, the implications of his dreams...this was one that he did not want to see come to pass. The future was scary and if he were to be wrong about one...this would be the one.

David tried to push the images he saw the night before out of his head. The earthquake had been a ways away and not many people hurt, the satellite had hurt no one. The last dream was in his city, the fire clearly killed hundreds before his very eyes. David ignored the facts, the precedents and instead tried to forget it. He did now want to know if it was real, hoping that if he disbelieved it...maybe it would not happen. He went to work, writing away on projects, all the while the dread of what was going to happen tugging at his mind. He kept opening news websites for the city, trying to find some evidence of what he knew would happen coming. He kept being relieved when he saw nothing...but he knew deep down that it was indeed coming. He closed the window yet again, desperate to take his mind off of anything related to the fire he knew was coming. He tried to think of how he could warn people but with all the details of the fire, none of it related to how it started. When he saw it the blaze had devoured whole city blocks. Any calls that he would make would just bee to vague and not taken seriously. At best they would think he was a crackpot, at worst they might think him an arsonist.

David’s boss, Peterson came over to David’s desk, an excited look on his face.

“I just got a call from a friend at the harbor front.” Peterson commented enthusiastically. “Apparently there is some strange animal species he has
found down there. I want you to take your camera, get some photos, and take the guys statement. We are going to crack this one.”
“You want me to go right now?” David asked. “I got other projects…and things going on.”
“You are my man on the street!” Peterson replied. “Get going, I will text you the information.”
David did not know what was going on but he really needed some fresh air and a distraction. It was dropped on him like it was something he was meant to do. He tried to think it was a coincidence as he grabbed his camera and headed out of the office. Whatever he saw it would not be as bad as what he was terrified was coming.

Peter tried to rationalize everything as best he could, afraid of this future that seemed to be getting worse. He found himself thinking of all the bad things in the world, all the famine, all the wars, all the disasters and he just ignored them. Was he now seeing glimpses of what bad things were to come? How could he rest, knowing he would get a front row seat to such terrifying things that were to come. “No! These are just glimpses of things beyond my control. I am not responsible for any of it and it is just the same as if watching it on the news. It is not my fault and it is not my responsibility to do anything about it.

David arrived at the waterfront by cab to meet the contact. He half expected to get there, and it was just a malformed duck or filthy Pidgeon. However, as he got out of the cab a birdwatcher was waiting for him and ushered him to follow him.

David set up the camera and readied it as the birdwatcher took him out onto the wharf. What Peter saw next took his breath away. In front of him was a tall peacock type bird but with feathers that were semi translucent and seemed to glow against the lights around it. It was fantastical and miraculous but seemed as if it were natural. Peter could not help but be overcome with emotion as he held the camera up to his face and took picture after picture. “It just showed up a little while ago.” The birdwatcher replied. “I have been studying birds for forty years and I have never seen anything like it.” “No one has.” David replied as he snapped more pictures. “At least not in this world.”

This was not just a bird that looked unreal and out of dreams it was in fact a bird born of dreams. David wanted to think it was not the bird from Kira’s sketch but it was it in every detail. He had seen it as she drew it the day before and he dreamt it. He dreamt of a bird that did not exist yesterday and here it was today. David was not just seeing the future...he seemed to be shaping it. A thought drifted into David’s head, a phrase that Kira has dreams about him igniting some kind of new wave in thought. He admitted he was thinking about fire after that and it bled into his dream. He saw the bird and it became real, he saw the fire and it would become real. His dreams were somehow shaping reality and this was so much different than just seeing it. It was not like watching the news at home...it was like he was
making the news! David had to talk to someone about what was happening, someone who would not be cryptic about it and help him evaluate what he had. Because to David, it seemed like he had the power to change reality and he had to figure out what it was. He texted Kira to meet him, she was the only one that would believe him. She always proved a voice of reason and if anyone could help him put things in perspective…it was her.

David waited for Kira in a downtown park. He figured a little but of privacy was a good idea as he would be telling her some fantastical things and turning what they had figured out right on it’s head. He knew that the most recent developments would be hard to swallow, but he knew he could back it up.

Kira showed up with her hands in her pockets and seemingly unconcerned about the cloak and dagger message or meeting place. She simply asked what was up and waited for the answer.

“This is going to sound very hard to believe.” David began. “But I am not seeing the future in my dreams…the future is formed by what I dream.”

“Yeah, that is pretty crazy.” Kira replied in a skeptical tone. “Despite everything we have learned already…that one is a bit too far out there.”

“What do you mean?” David asked. “Two days ago I told you that I could dream the future and that seemed impossible then until I showed you proof. Now I have proof that it is much worse than we thought.”

“You are right about that I suppose.” Kira commented. “I presume that you have something to show me that will immediately put this all in perspective. Proof, like the satellite that will leave me absolutely no doubt.”

“Oh yeah.” David commented as he took out his camera and readied a picture on the screen of the fantastical bird he had shot earlier. “This will make the satellite seem like nothing,”

“That’s a bold statement.” Kira admitted as she looked at the picture. Her eyes went wide and she went silent for a moment. She seemed like she was trying to debate it, trying to find some manner of way to disprove it. However, it seemed to become clear that there was no possible explanation for what she was seeing on the screen. “That...is some pretty amazing proof.”

“I saw it in your sketchbook and I dreamt it.” David explained. “My dreams, my thoughts both dark and good are coming true.”

“Do I want to know what you dreamt about last night?” Kira asked. “Please tell me it was just the bird?”

“No.” David said with a sigh. “I dreamt of a big fire, one in this city and it destroyed the mall.”

“Ok!” Kira said as she looked around. “We gotta call someone, we gotta evacuate the mall!”

David looked around and noticed the sun was beginning to set. He heard an explosion come from the distance and his heart knew that it was too late.

“There’s nothing that we can do. My dreams dictate reality and it showed it as happening...there is nothing we can do for this now.”
“Then what can we do?” Kira asked as she looked over, seeing smoke begin to rise off in the distance. “Can we control your dreams? Maybe we can stop things, maybe we can get better dreams.”

“No.” David said, his mind and heart seeming to resign to what was happening. “My dreams have always been dark, it is a thing I have always experienced. I cannot control them and if I keep dreaming I will keep manifesting these horrific scenes.”

“There has to be something!” Kira insisted. “Something we can do to prevent this.”

“There is.” David said as he opened a bottle of caffeine pills and poured a bunch into his mouth like candy. “I can never sleep again!” He ate all the caffeine pills that he had in his possession, but unfortunately it killed him with a massive heart attack and he died. Once he died everything bad that was happening in the world stopped.

The End
Evan Payne had never been one for amusement parks. All the rides, the spinning and the going up and down and around... all they did was make his stomach feel like it was dancing. For similar reasons, he didn't like elevators. He took the stairs whenever possible, which had resulted in many late arrivals at important meetings over the years. Heights in general bothered him and he could scarcely walk across the top level of a parking garage without falling to the ground and hugging it like a long lost lover.

Because of these quirks, his employers had decided he was the perfect man for a certain job. They had offered a large sum of money, twice that of his usual fee. When Even asked what the job was, exactly, he was told that such information would only become available once he accepted. Being the morbidly curious idiot he always had been, of course he said yes.

They came the next morning, right on schedule, whisking him away in a sleek black car with tinted windows. They were tinted on the inside too, at least in the back section which he occupied, and so he could see nothing. Finding an intercom button on the door, he pressed it and spoke aloud.

“Excuse me. Have I just been kidnapped? Is the job even real?”

“It’s real, Mr. Payne,” a garbled, staticky voice returned. Whether from the driver or a mystery passenger he didn’t know. “The reason for the secrecy is simple and innocent, I assure you. Technically you have not signed any agreements yet. Technically you can still back out of this arrangement at any time. And we very much want you for this job. It’s an important one, and you are the best fit for it. We don’t want you to see too much yet, because we don’t wish to encourage any undue fear.”

Evan was a man for whom fear was the natural state. The basal level of his existence. Fear made him the best at his job, which was to travel the world and appraise any business endeavor that could possibly be deemed dangerous. His usual truck was theme parks, how he loathed them, water parks, which were a little nicer, and also those private companies that took people up in hot air balloons or hang gliders or skydiving planes.

This was something different. Something new, he was betting. Otherwise they wouldn’t be offering such huge payment.

His first inkling that the job would involve high places came after an hour or so of driving. By now he sensed that they were well and truly into the boondocks, though the boondocks had a different meaning nowadays. Thirty years ago they would have been the unwanted swamplands, the state hunting grounds, the forgotten farm fields. Now they were the scattered slums, the hastily erected shantytowns in a world gone mad and stuffed to the gills with an over breeding race of apes who were just smart enough to
be very, very stupid. 
At least that was how Evan saw it. And he couldn’t see that any other opinion could exist. Not when you paid a visit to those places, and saw the filth and the lawlessness. Not when you realized that the government had had to pull back three quarters of its military just to guard these places and prevent their awfulness from spilling into the rest of country.
From beyond the tinted window, Evan heard the shouts and cries and primal banging of metal drums that were the trademark noises of the shantytowns. He was very happy when the car kept going and the sounds faded away behind them.
At one point the car coasted to a stop. He heard distant conversation, as of the driver talking to someone outside his window. Then there was the whirring of an electric motor, and a gate sliding open. The car drove forward again, and stopped after another few minutes.
His door was opened and he saw, in the middle of a field ahead of him, a helicopter.
“Not again,” he said. “Last time I was in one of those, I left my lunch on the pilot’s lap.”
The driver reached in to him, offering a hand. “So we’ll put you in the back. Way in the back. Watch your head.”
Evan got out, and saw the person who had been sitting in the front passenger seat. The one who had spoken to him on the intercom. She was a severe looking woman, tall and elegant with a decided lack of any feminine features. She looked, he decided, somewhat like an android. Or an alien in human skin.
“We haven’t met before,” she said. “My name is Alina.”
“Cool,” said Evan. “You know who I am, obviously. Do I get to know what I’m out here for now?”
Alina smiled. “Not yet. Let’s take a ride.”
They went to climb into the helicopter.
Despite Evan’s best efforts to avoid such vehicles at all cost, he knew a good bit about them. They were part of his business. This particular bird had been fitted with some rather odd external apparatus. There were probably some internal pieces, as well. He asked Alina about them.
“They allow for flying at a much higher altitude,” she responded. “Get in, Mr. Payne.”
He really didn’t want to. But he liked money, so he got in. The car driver came in behind him, followed by Alina. The former showed him to his seat and helped him with the harness and buckle.
“Oh, great,” Evan said. “More tinted windows.”
“You won’t be able to see that you’re even flying at all,” Alina said, shouting over the growing whine of the engine and rotors. “It will be like a motion simulator.”
“I hate motion simulators.”
“You hate everything, Mr. Payne. Which was why we needed you.”
He shrugged.
Alina got strapped in, and then the driver hopped out and went running back across the field.
The helicopter co pilot came back to shut the doors, blocking out every bit of light, and returned to his seat.
Without further ado, the helicopter roared to full life and lifted upward. Evan tried not to scream. Not because he didn’t want to frighten anyone, but because he knew that, if he opened his mouth, more would be coming out than mere sound waves. He had learned from experience that your usual breakfast foods don’t taste nearly as good when they come up again.
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Up and up and up. The helicopter stayed surprisingly stable, until it reached a certain altitude and started to bob in the wind. Evan started to imagine that he was just on a tall building somewhere, riding an elevator with a flaccid cable that allowed for more bouncing than it should have. But that didn’t help. Not one bit.
It seemed like they were going up forever. They had gone so high that they must be on the edge of space by now, poking through the thin upper layers of the atmosphere and entering that strange, ghostly, windless place of stark light and silence.
Then, at that point, the rotor and engine noise began to wind down. In a moment they were gone, and the helicopter stood in total silence.
“I can see that you are about to scream,” Alina said, her voice sounding strangely loud in the sudden quiet. “Don’t do it. If you will notice, we have not begun to plummet back to Earth. The helicopter has merely attained the maximum traditional altitude. We are now drifting further upward using other means.”
“How does it work?” Evan asked, launching himself into inquiry to distract his mind from rising nausea. “Let me guess – you’re not at liberty to tell me.”
“Oh, I am at liberty to tell you everything, Mr. Payne. But you are not at liberty to hear it. Not yet.”
There was a sound of groaning metal, and Evan looked around.
“This isn’t an airtight cabin,” he said. “I mean, it’s not pressurized and sealed. Not like a space shuttle.”
“We’re not going to space, Mr. Payne. Only very near to it. The cabin is quite adequate to keep passengers alive.” She sat forward, stretching her harness.
“May I ask a personal question, Mr. Payne?”
He laughed. “You’re telling me you don’t already know everything there is to know about me?”
She raised an eyebrow.
“Sorry,” he said. “Sure. Ask away. Silence is golden, they say, but gold’s obsolete.”
“Are you a religious man?” Alina asked, ignoring his nonsense words, perhaps seeing them for what they were; a nervous tic enhanced by fear.
“Do you practice any religion? Christianity, Judaism, Islam, et cetera?”
Evan smiled. “Hinduism. Buddhism. Yadda, yadda. No, I’m not religious. Never have been, never will be. Why do you ask?”
“Just verifying what I already knew.”
“Which is?” asked Evan.
“That you’re the perfect man for the job.”
“I don’t see how religion has to do with anything we’re doing.”
Alina sat back, clicking her tongue. “Religion is a word that only relates to humanity. It is to spirituality as science is to nature. A way for us to learn, a means to an end. A way to see what has always been there. It is spirituality that I’m really talking about. And if you really think about, everything has something to do with spirituality.”
Evan shrugged. “Speak for yourself. I’m just a guy trying to live as long as he can.”
“By making a living flying in helicopters?”
Evan shook his head. “This isn’t going to kill me any faster. Unless it’s in an accident, and those can happen just as easily to a man walking down the damn sidewalk. I understand that my fears are irrational. That doesn’t make them go away, but it helps me to get on with what I need to do. Like what we’re doing now.”
“But perhaps the word ‘irrational’ doesn’t mean what you think it means,” Alina replied. “Perhaps an irrational fear is just a fear outside of its own time.”
“Like a fear of lions. Right. There aren’t any lions left, so it doesn’t make sense to be afraid of them.”
“But if one showed up now, right in front of you, the fear would be very rational indeed.”
“Exactly.”
“And if this helicopter started to fall out of the sky, your fear of heights would be rational, too.”
“Sure. But I rather you didn’t say stuff like that.”
Alina laughed, unbuckling her harness and getting to her feet. She came over to Evan and unbuckled him as well.
“Up,” she said.
He wouldn’t normally get to his feet in a helicopter, because he wasn’t an idiot, but this ride was so smooth that he decided to risk it. Especially since the woman who was supposedly paying him had asked him to.
She took his arm and walked him toward the door. He expected that she might somehow offer him a glimpse beyond now, at whatever they had come up here to see. So he was very surprised when she hauled the door wide open.
Immediately the howl of wind buffeted in his ears. The dense, pressurized air inside the cabin rushed out, sucking at him like a giant vacuum hose. He screamed, grabbing at whatever was closest. But Alina was already grasping the only available handle.
Out Evan went, at first screaming in the wind and then, somehow, blessedly, he knew peace for the first time in his life. The calm of surrender.

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Maybe the stories were true. The stories about seeing bright lights and your life flashing before your eyes. Because for a long time Evan lay in a very bright place and, since he couldn't move, the only thing he could do was go back through his memory and relive old moments.

Finally he felt reality, or whatever dream world he had come to, solidifying around him. As though he were in a simulation run by an ancient and ponderous computer, taking its sweet time in building the environment he was meant to inhabit.

He got out of bed and walked down a long, narrow hall. It just kept going and going, and when he thought he was near the end it would suddenly stretch forward again like a telescope. He couldn't help but go back to the simulation idea. This seemingly infinite hall as a sort of loading screen, a place to keep him busy while work was being done behind the curtain.

Finally he turned a corner and saw a door dead ahead. He opened it and stepped through into a brilliant nighttime scene. Ancient looking cobblestone streets awash in gently swirling green and purple hues. An aurora filled the sky above him, waves of color washing over stars that burned more sharply and lucidly than any he had seen before.

He looked left and right, seeing distant pedestrians carrying lanterns. Hearing distant music, played on a harp or some similar instruments. The idea of a simulation vanished and he was now fairly certain that he was lost in a painting by some forgotten master. If not for the thin air, and the lack of any features on the horizon, he might have said he was in ancient Rome or Greece.

Taking a few steps forward, he turned to look behind him. The building he had exited, going off what he had seen inside, ought to be huge. But it was just a tiny thing, squat and dark. When he tried to open the door again, it wouldn't budge. It felt as if the whole thing, jamb and door and the hardware of knob and hinges, were all one single piece with no moving parts. A solid wall masquerading as a useable portal.

With no other choice, he turned in a random direction and began to walk. He realized now that he felt... great. Like a new man, one who had not experienced the bumps and bruises and broken bones of thirty-nine years lived semi-dangerously. He felt light. He felt almost inconsequential, intangible, but in the best way possible.

Soon he came to a public garden where a few dozen people had gathered. They all looked like they felt as feather-light as Evan did, and all were dressed in glowing whites. They drank wine, ate fruit and cheese, and watched the performer in the center as she strummed her harp and made beautiful music.

Music to make the angels weep.

Evan turned in a circle, looking all around, and came to a conclusion that
should have filled him with dread but failed to do so. He was in Heaven.
That solved the mystery of how he had survived the fall from the helicopter. He hadn’t survived at all. He had died and now he was in the afterlife. Though he had never been religious, as he had told Alina, some force had deemed him worthy of being here.
He fell to his knees, staring up at the aurora and reaching toward it. Now was the time to rethink his ideas. To apologize and atone for the mistakes of his perception.
“God,” he said. “My God…”
“…won’t hear you from there,” a voice said behind him.
Evan twisted around. It was Alina, standing there in the street, now dressed in the same glowing whites as everyone else. Still with that android, alien look about her.
“Is it true?” Evan asked. “Am I in Heaven?”
“That’s up to you to determine for yourself.”
But he wasn’t listening. He stood up and launched himself at her, grabbing the front of her robes.
“You killed me!” he said. “I shouldn’t even be here right now. I should be alive!”
“Do you feel dead?” Alina asked.
“No,” he replied. “But that doesn’t mean-
“Look around,” she interrupted. “What do you see? A beautiful, harmonious place. A place where you can find peace or anything else that your heart desires. And what don’t you see? I’ll tell you; you don’t see shantytowns, starving children in the street, corpses in the waterways. You don’t see hospitals, overfilled and understaffed. You don’t see mass graves, necessitated by a lack of space. You don’t see a dying world, Evan. Even if you are dead, you can see that you truly have come to a better place. And you’re still aware, you see and hear everything.”
“My body has died but my soul has not,” said Evan. “But I still have my body. My hands. My mind and memories. I’m still me.”
“Your soul was designed to be human. To inhabit a human body. Where’s the sense in alienating you from your natural form?”
Evan nodded. “Good point. But how did I end up here? I’m an atheist.”
She touched his arm. “Ignorance is bliss. And Heaven is all about bliss. But you have pointed out a flaw, that you have not earned it. Not in the usual way. Unfortunately, I must pull the wool from over your eyes. We have a job to do.”
She turned and started to walk away, under the impression that he would follow. For a moment he considered defying her, letting her go on alone, but in the end his curiosity got the better of him and he ran to catch up.
“This is all for the job?” he asked. “You killed me for it?”
Alina nodded. “Pretty much, yes.”
Evan frowned. “I did it for the money. What good is that, now?”
“It’s as good as it ever was. Money has always been fundamentally useless. Its worth isn’t inherent; it’s in what you can get in exchange for it. Quite a paradox, but one that has conquered the Earth. Seeing as you have everything you need up here, Evan, you can erase the concept of money from your mind. And take immediate comfort in knowing that your next of kin will still get it back on Earth.”

“Well,” said Evan, “that’s a relief. Wait a second! You’re here too. That means you’re also dead, right? Did you fall out of the helicopter as well?”

She shook her head. “I’m not the one you were talking to. The one called Alina. My name is Molly.”

“Ah-hah. Twin sister, then.”

“You could say that. We were both born consecutively.”

“Pardon, Molly, but nothing you’re saying makes complete sense. It makes just enough sense to fool most people, but not me. If I’m here to do a job, I kind of need to know what it is I’m meant to be doing.”

Molly looked over her shoulder and beckoned him forward. Evan ran ahead so that he was now walking side by side with her.

“I’m not trying to hide anything from you, specifically,” she said. “Who knows who might be hiding behind a pillar, overhearing us? There is little they could do if they knew the truth, because they’re stuck here forever, but I wouldn’t want them spreading it around and ruining the experience for others. Heaven should be enjoyed, not scrutinized.”

“But my job is to scrutinize,” Evan said.

“Right. Which is what you are here to do, and why you are not an ordinary denizen of Heaven. You will not be able to enjoy it as others do, I am afraid. But that’s the price we pay for our curiosity and our thirst for the truth.”

“The truth?” Evan asked. He looked around, seeing solid ground and solid walls and distant revelers, bobbing along in their pools of lamplight and on their tides of pretty music.

“Heaven is not what it seems,” she said very quietly. Even if someone had been walking three feet behind, they would not have heard it.

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Heaven was large enough to provide some good walking opportunities, and a plethora of sights that would take some time to absorb entirely, but not nearly the size Evan would have thought. According to Molly, it rested on a square platform about three miles across. The original plan had been for a circular shape, but a square was much easier to add onto and it would become necessary, if the project was a success, to expand quite a bit.

She said little more during their walk. After about fifteen minutes of snaking their way through wide avenues and narrow alleys, they reached the center of Heaven. A tower rose here, similar to a lighthouse in that it tapered toward the top and had a spiral staircase inside, winding along the wall. They entered and climbed through dark emptiness.

“What is this building for?” Evan asked.

“Observation tower,” Molly answered. “It will grow taller as Heaven expands
in size. Denizens are only allowed to enter when in the presence of a Superior.”

“Is that what you are? A Superior?”

“I didn’t pick the name,” she said, evidently hearing the distasteful tone in his voice. “But yes, that is my title.”

She walked on, climbing the steps two at a time with her hands crossed behind her back. Evan followed, huffing and puffing by the time they approached the top. His legs burned. He was ordinarily a fit man, but the altitude made things difficult.

“Now we can talk as we wish,” Molly said, gliding effortlessly upward. “You have a job to do, and it is the most important of any you’ve had before. You must convince my masters – half of them, anyway – that this project is the right thing to do.”

“Half of them, huh?” said Evan. “What do you mean, like the women? The ones with blue eyes? What are we talking about, here?”

Molly didn’t answer. They had reached a hatch in the ceiling and she climbed a short step ladder to swing it up and open. She climbed through and after a moment Evan followed, rising into open air. The wind here was thin and cold. He could feel himself drying out with every lick of desiccated air. There were none of the good smells of Heaven up here, none of the music. Heaven stood below them, its limits now clearly visible. It was indeed a square, stretching through the sky and then abruptly ending. Seemingly unsupported by anything.

“It’s anchored in place from above,” Molly said, as though reading his mind. “Though not by any tangible structure. It’s something like magnetism, though it operates differently. That isn’t the important thing, though. Come over here.”

She led him to a spot in the railing around the platform they stood on. There was a looking glass there, a telescope fastened to the rail.

“Look through it,” Molly instructed.

Evan did so. The telescope was currently focused on the roof of a building about halfway toward the edge of Heaven. The image was blurry and he could see no details.

Molly put a finger on the end of the telescope, pushing it upward so that he was looking into the sky. He could now see clearly.

“Focus your vision beyond the aurora,” she said.

“I can’t,” Evan replied. “There’s nothing there to focus on.”

“Alright. Using your left hand, reach backward along the shaft. Like that, yes. Do you feel the button there? Press it.”

He pressed the button and the image changed, as though flicking into a different spectrum of light. The aurora washed away like watercolor paints swirling down a sink drain. He was left staring at a glowing object, somewhat oval in shape, which stood in the sky much further up.

“What is it?” he asked.

“The closest thing to a god you’ll ever see,” Molly replied.
He drew back from the telescope, staring at her. “Tell me.”
“In the beginning there were three things,” she said. “The formless mass of
the Universe’s accumulated matter, as well as the two intangible but
everlasting forces which guided its gradual evolution. These forces have no
true name, only the titles which mortal beings could come up with for them.
To humankind, they are called good and evil.
“Complex life evolved in various places across creation, guided by the two
forces which clashed eternally but which existed in symbiosis. But the first
life forms to evolve were manifestations of the two forces. The forces of good
and evil. These two original life forms have battled through the eons, holding
their own dominion over the cold universe and nurturing whatever small
shreds of life which grew there.
“They exist in projected form on all worlds where intelligent life has evolved.
To various religions, they are God and the Devil... the first life to ever exist in
the universe, risen from chaos. At some point in the evolution of every
intelligent race, they must choose which force to serve.”
Molly nodded up into the sky, toward the oval shape which was now invisible
to Evan’s naked eye.
“They have already chosen,” she said. “Like good missionaries, they are
spreading that choice far and wide. Bringing it to every world they can. Now
they have brought it here.”
“Is it a ship?” Evan asked.
Molly nodded.
“And it isn’t human?”
She shook her head.
“What is it, then?”
“You won’t see them,” she said, “so you will have to use your imagination.
Suffice it to say that their guidance and assistance has been critical in the
construction of this false Heaven...”
“Wait,” Evan broke in. “False Heaven? Can you please just tell me what’s
going on here?”
“I’m trying to. Just listen, Mr. Payne. They came here hundreds of years ago.
They have been with us ever since, waiting and watching. Trying to pick out
the best time to make direct contact. They finally did so, about ten years
ago. They saw that we were in need of some kind of outside help – starvation
and overpopulation were problems that once plagued them as well, and they
nearly went extinct. Only their full committal to the forces of so-called ‘evil’
saved them from the grave.”
“They follow evil,” Evan said, mouth hanging open. “They follow Satan?”
“Easy, Mr. Payne. An hour ago you thought such things were fairy tales,
barely worthy of putting into a cartoon for toddlers. Let’s not be too quick to
judge, now. Not until you truly understand.
“They got into contact with human governments and the first plans were
made. And what you see now, stretched out below you, is the beta version.
The Earth branch of a collection of Heavens. Solutions to a problem that
pervades worlds that have trusted in the power of ‘good.’ A means to an end.”

She nodded, as if that said everything. Before Evan could respond, she lifted her wrist and pressed a button on a bracelet she wore.

It was like a reset button. A switch that brought a change of state to some computer operating system. All of Heaven changed, the walls and roofs of the buildings turning to ghosts. Going transparent. Now Evan could see everything beyond the surface, the hidden circuitry and electronic components, as well as all the milling denizens, going about their Heavenly activities.

“It’s all a hologram,” Evan said breathlessly.

“Sort of. It’s more complicated and advanced than that. Holograms aren’t solid. They don’t offer sensations, smells and tastes and sounds. It’s a perfect illusion. Until a Superior like me chooses to blow your mind, you will assume and believe that you are in the true Heaven.”

“Then there is one?” asked Evan. “A true Heaven?”

Molly chuckled. “Of course there is. What would be the point of all this, otherwise?”

“And a true Hell, I suppose.” Evan looked down at the ghost-world below. He looked far enough down that he saw the base of the tower he now stood on, the only solid-looking thing in a city of phantom light that stood so far above the Earth that he couldn’t even see it.

Feeling dizzy, he drifted away from the railing and lay flat on his back in the middle of the platform. He shut his eyes and concentrated on the feeling of the floor under him.

“Explain,” he said.

He heard Molly come over and lower herself to the floor beside him with a sigh.

“First I will tell you who and what I am,” she said. “Biologically speaking I am mostly human. In other ways, I am a cybernetic being. Manufactured and mass produced for the purpose of acting as emissary to humankind. We all came from the same machine, born from the same mother of metal and wire, but we feel and think as you do. We are simply… enhanced.

“When I say ‘emissary’ you probably have a clear image in your mind of what that title means. The one you met in the helicopter, Alina, does something rather different. She searches the Earth for people who would be a good fit for the project, and she brings them here. They die, as far as anyone on Earth can tell, and then they come here to stay forever.

“One half of my masters are from elsewhere in the universe. They are an alien civilization. Alien to you, anyway. As I have said, they serve the force you call evil. And every soul they bring here, and trap forever in their false Heaven, is another soul whose boundless power and energy are given over to their own master. And that is the being you call Satan. Not a he or a she but rather an it, a formless entity who sometimes affects the illusion of form for certain tasks.
“The other half of my masters are human. They are the government officials and scientists who have done the grunt work of building this place. And they have done it for what they felt was a noble purpose, to shuffle worthy people off the face of a devastated world. This would allow them to thin out the surface population in increasingly greater numbers as Heaven grew in size, making life better for those who remained on the Earth.

“At first it was not in the plans of my alien masters for the human governments to know the truth. But humans continually prove that they are curious to an incorrigible degree; no truth can remain hidden from them forever. Now that they are learning the truth, the human powers are growing reluctant to continue the project. You’re here to watch, to learn and understand like no human has yet been allowed to. And then you will be asked to offer your opinions and advice to your fellow humans. Nothing more than that. A simple job.”

“And then what?” Evan asked.

“And then you stay here, living out eternity in whatever way you see fit. I’m afraid it all may seem a little hollow to you, since you know the truth. But you can at least feel better knowing that everyone you interact with here is real.”

Evan stood up. He felt dizzy still, but above all he felt deeply disgusted. He walked on wobbly legs back to the hatch and started to climb down.

Molly’s hand suddenly fell on his arm, holding him there with inhuman strength. He hadn’t even seen her get up from the floor.

“Where are you going?” she asked in a sweet, innocent voice.

“To get some fresh air,” he responded, wrenching his arm away.

She let him go, but her voice echoed and followed him in his lurching descent of the stairs:

“You need to know everything, Mr. Payne. Otherwise your opinion can’t be considered valid...”

He thought he lost her. About halfway down, he looked up and saw that the stairs were empty. She was not following.

But when he came out of the door at the bottom, onto streets that were once again solid and opaque, she was there waiting for him. Or maybe it was another twin, operating out of a hive mind.

“This Heaven isn’t for everybody,” she said, as though no interruption had occurred. She fell in behind Evan, following as he jogged through the streets.

“The people who end up here would have gone to Hell, otherwise. They would have gone into the dominion of the force of ‘evil’, a place where individuality and emotion and love and all other hallmarks of human life cease to exist... isn’t this better, Mr. Payne, that they spend eternity here? Where they retain their bodies, their minds...”

Her voice faded as she fell behind. Evan kept going, moving randomly through the streets, darting up alleyways and under trellises where grapevines grew.

She appeared ahead of him suddenly, stepping aside to let him pass.
“You would have gone there too, once you died,” she shouted out loud. “We’ve done you a favor, bringing you here. Bringing you to this place where your wildest dreams can come true. It’s a place far too fun for anyone else. The true believers cannot come here. Those who believe in the force of good, those who follow the entity you call God, they cannot be tricked by the illusion. But we don’t want them, anyway.”

Evan didn’t say anything. He just kept going, driving away from the strange woman at greater and greater speeds. He felt that he had a destination, some fate ahead of him, but he didn’t consciously know what it was.

He went by houses where the denizens of this holographic Hell were engaged in the pursuits of the flesh. Now that he could see, now that his eyes were open, he perceived the wickedness that unfolded everywhere. The blood, the horrors, the screams barely masked and drowned out by the music of harps. This was a playground for evil, the evil that is inherent in all intelligent beings. But here it was not suppressed, filtered, controlled in any way...

She was there ahead of him yet again, just as surely as the sunset each morning.

“You’re here forever, Mr. Payne,” she called. “You will not awake from this. You are dead, for all intents and purposes. There will be no return to Earth nor salvation in ascent to the true Heaven... You cannot go there, now or ever. There is no use in fighting, in struggling, in giving yourself undue pain. Acceptance is the only way to happiness.”

Evan kept going.

“How do you accept the unacceptable?” he called out to no one in particular, knowing she would hear wherever she was. “Trick question; you don’t. You tell the unacceptable to take a hike. So that’s what you can do.”

She stepped out of a doorway ahead of him. She was no longer wearing white robes. She was wearing nothing at all. Her naked body was that of a doll, blank and featureless.

“What can I do?” she asked.

“Take a hike, I said,” Evan told her, blowing past. “Get lost. Put an egg in your shoe and beat it. Go to Hell.”

Around them, shutters were being pushed aside. Doors were opening and the bloody, hedonist denizens of Heaven were coming out into the street. One by one they fell to their knees or straight onto their faces. Some wailed in despair, perhaps finally realizing what they were.

“They heard you,” Evan said, looking back at the naked doll who followed him. “You shouldn’t have been so loud. They see that they’ve been fooled.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said, though she looked quite troubled. “They can’t leave. They can’t do anything.”

“Except make your life more difficult,” said Evan. He saw, ahead of him, his destiny delineated and he headed toward it, increasing his speed. “But I’ll just let myself out. And get out of your hair. How’s that sound?”

“No!” she screamed.
But it was too late for her to do anything about it. Evan approached the edge of Heaven and dove into the thin, empty air beyond. Her screams, and the lamentations of damned souls, faded above him as he fell into howling wind.

Fear disappears once you resign yourself to it. Evan was falling and he could do nothing to stop it, and so he wasn’t afraid. He fell for a very long time. He fell through darkness, alone but for the cold wind. And then he fell through high clouds, already too numb with cold and too faint from a lack of oxygen to feel anything at all.

And then the Earth sprawled below him. Things looked bad from the ground, that was undeniable, but up here it was hard to believe any of those things were real. The world seemed at peace. The oceans crashed eternally toward the shore. The clouds drifted lazily along, waiting to dissipate or drop their burdens of water upon some unlucky piece of land or sea. Nothing much seemed to be the matter.

The world was seventy percent water, but Evan saw that he was going to have the good fortune of hitting land.

He closed his eyes as the ground rushed upward, gaining dimensionality and opening wide to swallow him. When he opened his eyes again, devoid of pain or anything else, he realized that he no longer had a body at all. He was in a dark and vast place, an infinite labyrinth of shadow. And he had the unmistakable sense that something huge was moving overhead, a hovering entity so large it made galaxies look small. It looked down upon him... but he was far too tiny, too inconsequential, to be seen.

Evan had been given a choice between false Heaven and true Hell. In the eternity of suffering ahead of him, he could at least take comfort that he been courageous enough to pick the latter.
The first view Shafer got of his new world was a bad one. But before he could have that view, there was procedure to go through. First, he woke alone in the dark, shivering with cold even though air grilles were already blasting him with dry heat. He saw steam rising off him in curtains, sucked into ceiling vents. His hair dried so quickly he could feel it tightening, pulling back across his scalp.

He looked around, trying to remember where he was, how he had got here, why he was here. There were no friendly faces, no people at all, to answer any of his questions. The tiny room was empty.

He had been lying on a table. But now the table rose up, inclining forward, so that he was dumped onto the floor and forced to stand under his own power. He stumbled forward. It was a conscious effort to tighten the muscles in his legs and prevent himself from falling. But once he had gained his balance, he was able to keep it without any effort. Whatever state he had just risen from, his body was coming back to its normal functions with incredible speed.

He wished he could say the same for his mind. He still had no idea what was going on. He only really knew his name – Shafer – but didn’t know if it was a last name, a first name, a middle name. He knew he was a white man of about six feet in height, and a bit too skinny for his own good. Other than the tufts of lanugo hair that had sprouted from his malnourished body, his skin was smooth. He wondered if he was just hairless by nature, or whether he hadn’t yet reached sexual maturity. He had no idea. But a quick check, reaching down the front of his underwear, revealed that he was at least sixteen years of age.

Sixteen? No, he was older than that… The number thirty kept popping up. Maybe that was how old he was.

While he performed his self-checks, he noticed something funny about his fingers. There was a tattoo on each of them, imprinted directly on the pad on the tip of each finger. Numbers. They started at 1 on his left thumb, and ended at 10 on his right. They were black ink but fuzzy around the edges, distorted a little, as if they had been done by an amateur hand. Homemade tattoos. He didn’t know why he had them.

A voice startled him out of his thoughts. It echoed, sounding tinny and robotic, from little speakers along the top of the wall. It was a human voice at least. The first sign that he was not completely alone.

“The door will open ahead of you,” it said. “Walk through as slowly as you can. Put one foot in front of the other, touching your heel to the tip of your big toe each time. This will allow us to decontaminate you properly. Don’t worry; it won’t hurt.”
Like the voice said, a set of doors slammed open on the far wall of the little room. Beyond, Shafer saw a long, narrow hallway with a glass floor, glass walls, a glass ceiling, looking into a darker, larger space beyond. He walked along the hall, in the same way he had been told to do. At intervals, little sprayers in the wall misted him with various foul-smelling compounds. A UV light shined up from below, cleaning the soles of his feet. The part about it not hurting had been a lie. He could already feel the sunburn developing. But it was tolerable.

About two thirds of the way along, a huge fan turned on and blasted at his back, drying the damp compounds and pushing his weak body forward. He nearly slammed into the door at the end of the hall, but it opened it time for him to go stumbling through. He grabbed the first thing he saw, which happened to be a man wearing gray sweats. Shafer grabbed the man with both hands, pulling himself closer. He stared, studied, waited for inspiration to come.

“I don’t know you,” he said.

The man, tall and black and middle-aged, smiled and shrugged. “No, you don’t. But I know you. Or rather, I know of you. And so does everyone else here. Please... come this way. It will take some time to orient you. My name is Bertram, by the way.”

All across the huge space they were standing in, lights started to come on one after another. They were dim, yellow and flickering with age. The room was a hangar, large and mostly empty, other than the igloo-shaped structure Shafer had come out of and a scattering of rusted old machinery. They looked like parts to a spacecraft.

“We can’t leave the lights on for very long,” said Bertram. “The waste of energy is untenable, now more than ever. And we live in fear of even a single fixture burning out... a small event, but symbolic. The beginning of the end.”

“Excuse me,” said Shafer.

Bertram turned, ready to answer a question, but he merely chuckled as Shafer bent low and vomited through a nearby drain hole.

“That will wear off soon,” said Bertram. “Maybe it will take a little longer for someone who has been... asleep as long as you have. But soon, I promise.”

They continued across the hangar and exited through a broken set of doors which were now propped eternally open with a cinderblock. The hallway here resembled something you might see in a school. Squeaky floors, big windows. But the windows had been blacked out, painted over. Beyond them, Shafer heard an indistinct hum of noise.

“Lazenby!” Bertram called, striding forward. Another man, small but regal, came to meet them. He was wearing glasses, one lens cracked, and carrying a weird, paper-thin electronic device that was Shafer’s first clue at just how long he had been “asleep”.

“I’ve come to check on him,” said Lazenby.
“His body is sound,” Bertram replied quietly, gripping the other man’s arm. “But his mind is reeling. Lost. Before you go sticking any needles into him, I’d like to get him up to speed.”

“Crash course or slow reveal?” Lazenby asked.

Bertram sighed. “We only have time for the crash course.”

Lazenby nodded. “Of course. I’ll leave you to it.”

He left, going back the way he came. Bertram returned to Shafer, and they continued down the hall in the other direction.

“The year is 3780,” Bertram said. “This facility—”

“I’ve been asleep for a thousand years,” said Shafer, almost puking again.

“A thousand and twenty-seven, to be exact,” Bertram replied. “I’m glad you remembered that. It’s a good sign.”

“Please,” said Shafer, feeling his own pulse to make sure he wasn’t about to die of a heart attack. “Continue.”

Bertram nodded. “As I was saying, this facility is the permanent home of seven scientists. You’ve met me, and you’ve met Lazenby. There are five others. And that’s it. We are the only working scientists left on Earth. The rest were killed, executed because of their abject failure to save the species. We have to hide everything we do, or we’ll be the next to die. And the last hope for the species dies with us.” He started marking off a list on his fingers. “Overpopulation. Starvation. The failure to develop new medications. Superbugs. You can probably blame politics for the failure of science, but the fact remains that the advanced spaceflight tech and terraforming techniques that science promised the world would have saved us all, if they had come to pass. But they didn’t.

“And the more people died, the more humankind threw away science and technology and reverted to the ways of the past. A new dark age spawned, one that was to last a lot longer. It’s an age that humanity may never awake from. A decade before you were frozen, the world population reached a staggering sixteen billion. It fell sharply after that, down to six billion within thirty years. But just as soon as the Earth began to recover, we exploded again. Right now, in the year 3780, there are almost twenty billion people on the planet. And no food or room left for anyone. Unless we do something drastic, the die-off will begin anew and this time it won’t stop until we’re extinct. We are in the ashes, Shafer. And we’re not going to rise from them, not without a damn miracle.”

He stopped now, falling against the wall and leaning his head back. He stared at Shafer, trying to smile but failing.

“You’re here because you were also a scientist,” Bertram said. “Because you created a miracle of your own. But you knew it wouldn’t be safe to use. And you didn’t want anyone else to know what it was. So you locked it. You made it so that only you could use it. And then you hid yourself away, knowing you would eventually be found. Your only hope was that the right people would find you. And so we have. Welcome, Shafer.”

“What did I build?” Shafer asked. “I can’t remember.”
Bertram kicked off the wall and continued walking. “The only thing that can save us. But we’re too far gone to be saved. No matter what we change now, the species is doomed. We went over the brink centuries ago. So, we can’t think about what to do next. Instead, we have to think about what we’ve done in the past.”

“Time travel,” said Shafer.

“Your own creation. No one knows anything about it, other than that it supposedly works. We haven’t been able to verify that. But we do have the machine here. And we’re ready to use it, now that we have you.”

“But I don’t remember anything about it, Bertram.”

“Doesn’t matter. Your biometrics will still be able to activate it. After that, we can send you through on a quick scouting mission. It may take a few trips to calibrate and get us right when we want to be. After that, we can start the real work.”

“Which is?”

“Planting information. Giving it freely. The energy and materials no longer exist to build spaceships or to terraform planets. But we have the techniques. We’ve perfected them. Working in secret over the centuries, science has found the way to do these things. Theoretically. All we need to do is give them to the past. To a time in history when it was still possible to launch ships.”

Shafer nodded. His mind turned now to the classic problems of time travel. What would happen to this world, to Bertram, to Lazenby and the others, if the past was changed? Maybe it would all be erased. Bertram would cease to exist. Or maybe, the universe would split into two paths, one leading to a promising future and the other to the bleak vision Bertram now occupied, where he would be stranded forever. Either way, he would never see the fruits of his labor.

But looking at the man, seeing the desperation and fear and exhaustion in his eyes, Shafer knew that none of it mattered. All Bertram wanted was a chance.

After their talk in the hall, Bertram guided him deep into the bowels of the facility. They walked along a subterranean tunnel, far out past the building. And when they had reached a safe distance, they climbed a ladder and poked their heads out through a hidden hatch.

The world stretched to every side under a black sky. It was not a storm cloud above, but something else. Smog, pollution, a solid mass of death. Something sinister.

The city had taken on monstrous proportions, additions added onto every building like ugly tumors, quickly slapped up to allow space for more residents. The area directly around the place where they poked their heads out was filled with brambles and trash. No one walked here. But elsewhere, there seemed not to be a single square foot of empty space. A human ocean washed over everything, flooding the Earth like a tidal wave. They were in
every window, every alley, every door, all crammed in like a commuter train at rush hour. And not a single one of them looked healthy or clean.

"It’s all the world,” whispered Bertram. “It’s like this everywhere. Cities have had to spread out, grow so wide, that they have overlapped one another and formed what we call metropolises. All natural resources are gone. The damn redwoods were even bulldozed so that new apartment blocks could be built where they stood. Floating cities, cities on the ocean, began construction but never finished. They ran out of building materials. You’re looking at the end stages of a disease called humanity, infecting the body of its host. There’s nowhere to go from here except down into the grave.”

Shafer looked around, trying to see whatever building they had come from. “How do you keep it secret?” he asked. “You can’t just have an empty building. Not when there’s this many people who can’t find a place to stand.”

Bertram, smiled, and started back down the ladder. “Remember Chernobyl? They put a giant sarcophagus over the whole reactor building. We’ve done something similar. Put biohazard symbols all over. No one comes near. Especially after what happened in 3318.”

“Nuclear war. Come on down, before someone sees you.”

Back in the facility, Bertram led them to their final destination. It was a small space, probably a class room in the deep past, and all the facility’s occupants were here. Lazenby immediately came over and strapped a blood pressure reader onto Shafer’s arm. The others looked at him reverently, full of hope. Shafer began to feel truly nervous, then.

In the middle of the room stood an enclosure shaped like an egg standing up. A hatch was open in the side of it, big enough for a man to squeeze through. Beyond it, Shafer saw a seat with a harness that looked to have been ripped out of a fighter jet. Or a rocket ship.

“Is that the machine?” he asked, though he already knew the answer. In truth, the sight of the thing tickled his memory. It was vaguely familiar. Like a face from a forgotten dream.

“This is it,” Bertram said proudly. He walked over and slapped a hand against the side of the thing. “Perfectly insulated to protect the outside from the entropic lattice. In short, to keep the whole outside world from being sucked in and overwriting the past, turning itself into a paradox... I’ve so wanted to study the thing, to penetrate it with radio waves and see just what sort of material you used. But I didn’t dare risk any damage.”

All this information, all these ideas, flowed easily into Shafer’s mind and stuck in place. Like tiny pieces to a giant puzzle, slotting in. He knew that they belonged. And they did not shock him.

“Where am I going?” he asked.

“Just up the street,” said Bertram.

“When?”

“2020,” said Bertram.
“That’s a hell of a long way.”
“And just a guess. You could end up in 1999 or 2025. It’s approximate. We’ll pull it forward for the next scouting mission. With a goal to end up somewhere in the middle, as we calibrate. Our tests and work have shown that 2590 may be the perfect year. A lot of pivotal stuff happened then. So that’s our final goal.”
There was a loud crash from somewhere far away. An explosion somewhere in the city. Once upon a time it would have been followed up with sirens and flashing lights in short order. But not now.
“We’re wasting time we don’t have,” Shafer said. “I’m going in.”
It was like falling asleep and waking back up.
Now Shafer was sitting in a bus stop just across the street from a convenience store. The sidewalk was thronged with people, but there was actual space between them. They generally avoided bumping into one another. And they looked healthy and strong.
There was a newspaper on the bench next to him, giving him the date. Even in the year 2020, the newspaper was a dying form. But apparently it was still clinging to life.
Shafer got up and looked around. He saw nothing in the vicinity but businesses. Commercial enterprises. Normal, average people on their way to wherever. Consumers. Target markets. People who were too busy with life and too distracted by technology to think so very hard about the effects of their indifference.
Shafer walked a little ways, turned, and walked a little further in the other direction. He didn’t know what he was supposed to be looking for. Something important, maybe. But there was nothing.
Remembering something, something that not even Bertram knew, he looked into the sky and clenched his hands. This would wake him up... it ought to kick him right back into the egg, in the room with Bertram and his friends. But instead, he was in a dark place. A doctor’s office, or a lab. All alone, yet again. He sat in a chair and stared at a mirror. At himself.
But it wasn’t a mirror. It was another version of him, wearing a lab coat, clean cut and healthy looking. Not starved and scrawny, covered in bruises. The other Shafer stood up and approached, brandishing a scalpel. Without a word, he grabbed Shafer’s hand and cut a strip of skin away from his left thumb, erasing the number 1. Shafer screamed in pain, woke up in the egg, and realized he couldn’t feel anything.
He looked down at his hand. The number 1 was gone. Only smooth skin remained.
“Bertram!” he called.
The hatch opened.
“Any luck?” asked Bertram.
“What?”
“Did you plant the stuff or not?”
Shafer looked down, seeing the sheaf of papers sticking out from his jacket. He shook his head.
“There wasn’t anywhere good to put them,” he replied.
“What year was it?”
“2020, like you said.”
Bertram grinned, clapping his hands together once. “Hot damn! I guess our calibrations are good. We’re going to try and put you in the year 2900 for this next one.”
“That’s after I went to sleep,” said Shafer.
“Think you can handle it?”
“One way to find out.”
“Good man. This time, don’t even try to plant anything. Waste of paper. The goal is to overwrite this future, remember. Well, in you go.”
Bertram shut the hatch.
Shafer opened his eyes. Someone was barreling toward him, sending trash and broken glass flying along the street. The person was bloody, their clothes were tattered. And they slammed into Shafer, sending both men to the ground.
Shafer quickly crawled out from under the other person. They were heavy and motionless. Dead, as a matter of fact. A knife was jutting from the back of their neck.
Looking around, he saw no one in the street but a quickly retreating figure dead ahead. Sprinting into the dark between the dying street lamps, vanishing from sight.
Shafer examined the dead man. He was about forty years old. A professorial looking type. He was wearing an ID badge. In his jacket pocket was a stack of shrink-wrapped flyers. UP WITH SCIENCE they read in bold letters. FORWARD TO THE FUTURE!
The city looked much different than in the previous trip. Window glass was missing on many buildings; they were boarded up. The buildings themselves were in an entirely different style, something that had looked shiny and new and awesome once. Now they were dusty, bombed out... seemingly abandoned.
Shafer stood from the ground and dusted himself off. He walked a little ways, shifting his eyes to see in all directions. He didn’t feel safe. This was a dark place he had come to. A place that seemed more like a surreal nightmare than a time that had truly come to pass.
It seemed that making these journeys through time came with a case of brief amnesia. Suddenly he remembered that this was just a test; he didn’t have to linger here long enough to risk being stabbed. So he did his trick again, looking up and clenching his fists.
Just as before, he found himself in the dark lab. His other self walked over, frowning and narrowing his eyes.
“Wait,” said Shafer, trying to get up but realizing he was strapped in.
To his surprise, the other him stopped.
“I can’t help you,” the other man said. “I don’t remember any more than you do. I’m just trying to do my job.”

“What is?”

“You put me here to try and remind us both of something. Hopefully we can shake something loose. Make you remember. If not... Well, I don’t know what will happen. That’s for you to find out.”

Without another word, he suddenly grabbed Shafer’s hand.

When he woke in the egg, the number 2 was gone now. What could it mean? Was he going insane? Should he tell Bertram?

The hatch opened. Bertram’s face appeared, looking expectant.

“I don’t know what year,” said Shafer. “But it was real ugly. Everything blasted and dark. People getting murdered in the street.”

“Sounds like we got it about right,” said Bertram. “Bang on the year 2900. The first one was luck. This one was a bit of luck and skill. The next should be a sure thing. We’re going to put you in the year 2275. If we get this right, we can go ahead and move on to the next phase. Make sure you figure out what year you’re in before you come back! Verify it. And find a place to stick some of those papers, too. We need all the help we can get.”

Shafer had no idea what the year 2275 looked like. When he opened his eyes and saw nothing but green all around him, and dead, mulching leaves underfoot, he couldn’t say for sure whether anything had gone wrong. It was quiet, for sure. As he walked, trying to find a building or a person or anything, he noticed the silence right away. A bird was singing, the wind was blowing through the canopy high above him, but that was all. No, this certainly wasn’t right. Beautiful, but all wrong. The city should be here. The city had always been here... at least as long as white men had been.

A twig cracked behind him. He turned around in time to dodge the tomahawk that was swinging toward his head. It lodged in a tree just behind where his forehead had been, splitting the green bark in two. An expert throw.

Someone came gliding out of the trees. Shafer took one look at the person, not even long enough to determine a gender, and turned to run. He ran as fast as he could, trying to find a place where he could see the sky. The shouts were already going up in the forest, all around him, as he stumbled out into a clearing and a warm shaft of sunlight.

“Hello again,” the other Shafer said.

This time, he was ready for the pain. And unsurprised to see that his left hand no longer bore the number 3.

As always, Bertram was there to distract him from the mystery.

“How did it go?” he asked.

“Fantastic,” said Shafer, rubbing his head.

Bertram frowned. “Is that sarcasm?”
“You bet it is.”
“How far off were we? Three years? Five?”
Shafer laughed. “Try five hundred. Probably more.”
Bertram stood up straight, punching the palm of his hand. “Damn! What went wrong? What did we do?”
The question was rhetorical. And a good thing it was, because no one had an answer.
“Why can’t we just go into the future?” someone asked. “We could check and see if we succeeded.”
“If you want to see the future,” Shafer called through the hatch, “you’ll just have to wait for it to come around. The machine can do two things; it can send you to the past, and it can bring you back to the present. That’s it.”
Bertram nodded. “Exactly right. I’m glad you’re remembering.”
He reached through, offering a hand.
“Might as well step out for now,” he said. “We’ve got to run a few tests before we send you anywhere else.”
As Bertram’s scientists fiddled with the machine, he and Shafer sat to the side and had a snack of canned rations.
“You built two machines,” said Bertram. “One that could send you to the past. And one that could put you into suspended animation. That was the only way you could get to the future. But of course, it was dependent on someone being there to wake you up.”
Shafer nodded. “Sounds about right. But I don’t remember what I did.”
“Well, do you remember how you did it? Anything at all? It might help.”
“Some bits and pieces remain. I remember it had something to with an entirely unrelated technology. Something that was being used in spaceships... something theoretical. The suspended animation was probably meant to be used on astronauts. But the trick of getting to the past was something else. I have no idea.”
Shafer climbed back inside the egg. It was time to try again. This time, they went for something conservative.
“We’ll just get back to 2020 for this,” said Bertram, peeping through the hatch. “Back to where we started. We’ll see how far we get this time.”
It went well. Once again, Shafer was at the bus stop. Not inside of it, but nearby. The newspaper wasn’t there, but everything looked just about the same. It wasn’t the same exact moment; it probably wasn’t even the same day. But it was at least the same year, in all likelihood.
Once he verified this, he once again returned to the future. Or rather, the present.
He woke up without the number 4. That was starting to worry him, but he still had no idea what it might mean. A countdown to something.
“Success,” he said as soon as he saw Bertram’s face.
The man was back to smiling. “Great! Now we go forward. How did you like the year 2900?”
“Not very well at all.”
“Too bad. Back you go.”
But it wasn’t the year 2900.
The street was not filled with trash. No one was getting murdered. The glass
of the windows was intact, mostly. Army barricades and force fields stood at
the end of the street. A shuttle flew low over head, bringing in supplies. It all
looked terribly familiar…
He had lived in this city. He had been born and raised here. He considered it
to be his home, and he loved it. No matter what happened, no matter how
bad things got, he would not turn his back on his home. No matter what, he
would stay here.
Just down the street, between here and the force fields, was his home. He
started moving toward it, as though attracted by magnets. As though being
controlled. He wanted to see it again, even if just for a moment.
He made it all the way upstairs, to the door of his apartment, before he
stopped. Seized by a sudden terror. What if he saw himself? What would
happen then?
As he stepped away from the door, the floor creaked under his foot.
Apparently, the man inside the apartment – Shafer – was either expecting
company or paranoid. A storm of footfalls came rushing toward the door. He
was going to come through, and confront whoever was lurking outside his
apartment.
Shafer turned and ran as fast as he could. He felt some of Bertram’s papers
sliding and falling through the bottom of his jacket. His foot landed on one of
them, slipped, and sent him tumbling. He righted himself and went around
the corner just as the door to the apartment opened.
As soon as he was back out in the street, he woke himself up.
“I’m starting to remember, I think,” he told the other Shafer.
He woke without the number 5.
“Bertram!” he called. “Bertram, I remembered something!”
The hatch opened. A man looked through. But it wasn’t Bertram. It was one
of the other
scientists. Shafer didn’t know his name.
“Bertram,” he said again. “I need Bertram.”
“Who?” the man asked.
“Bertram!”
“I don’t know any Bertram. There’s no one by that name here, Shafer. Maybe
it’s someone from your past? Someone you’re starting to remember? That’s
good. I’m glad you’re remembering… But what about your trip? Did you
arrive when you were supposed to?”
“What?” Shafer asked. “What are you talking about?”
The man smiled patiently. “The year, Shafer. We were trying to get you back
to 2900. Did you make it?”
Shafer unbuckled the harness and got up. The scientist helped him out,
looking concerned but impatient.
“We should continue as soon as possible,” he said. “As soon as you’re ready, of course. You seem to be confused…”

“No.” Shafer strode forward, over to the table where he and Bertram had been eating just a little while ago. The rations weren’t there. “No, I’m not confused. I’ve started to remember. Bertram was here. Don’t you know him? A tall, black guy. About fifty or so. His hair was starting to go white. Don’t you know?”

The scientists shrugged. Everyone else in the room looked equally unmoved. Lazenby was there, at least, but he showed no sign of knowing the name that Shafer kept saying.

“Something changed,” said Shafer. “The timeline. But I guess it doesn’t matter. I remember, now. The invention, the time machine, it wasn’t my own.” He pulled a few pages from his jacket. “It was these. I came out of my apartment one day, and I heard someone running. These pages were on the floor. One of them had a footprint on it. I used them, the new techniques, and I did what I could. What a single, solitary man could do, without support. Without friends. I set up an insurance policy, to be redeemed in the future.”

He turned, staring into the egg.

“It’s a closed loop,” he said. “I don’t think there’s anything I can do. All of this has already happened… and we have no way of knowing what will come of it. But…”

He showed his hands to the room. All the tattooed numbers on the left hand were gone. But those on the right remained.

“We have five more tries to do as much as we can,” he said. “In my work, I discovered that time travel is possible, but only within reason. Spacetime can only handle ten aberrations. That is the number I came up with. Any more than that, and you risk doing permanent damage. Damage that will render the existence of the universe… of everything… impossible.

“I tattooed numbers on my fingers to help remind me. But they’re not ink. They’re something else. All it takes is a thought, an idea, and they will vanish. I set a contingency up, a subconscious state where a fictional version of myself waits. A double-pronged effort. I guess it worked. I remember now.”

The scientist who had helped Shafer out of the egg looked totally flabbergasted. But he quickly regained his composure.

“This helps,” he said, nodding and licking his lips. “The more you remember, the better off we are. If we only have five more goes at this, we’d better make them count. No more scouting missions. No more tests. We have to go straight for the jugular, so to speak.”

Shafer walked back toward the egg. There was still much that was unclear to him. And this would probably end with him stranded in the year 3780, on an Earth that stood on the verge of death. But if that came to pass, Bertram at least wasn’t here to see their failure.

But where was he? He still existed, in Shafer’s memory, so he must be out there somewhere…
Maybe Shafer would find him somewhere along the line. And find himself, too.
“If you’re all ready,” he said.
There were nods all around. Shafer climbed back inside the egg and shut the hatch.
This time around when he opened the hatch he realized just as he thought he was stuck in the year 3780 forever.

The End
The biggest lights on Christmas Eve, 2029 did not come from the neighbor’s house. They also did not come from the public park, where the city put on a show each holiday season which seemed to grow more ridiculous with every passing year. The biggest light also did not come from the strip of trees on the median in front of the post office. Those lights had been put in the trees years ago and never pulled down. They were just unplugged on New Year’s Day and plugged back in after Thanksgiving.

The biggest lights did not come from any department store. It was already past nine in the evening. A gentle snow was falling, ice was forming from the day’s thaw, and every last business was closed except that one Chinese place. All windows were dark, doors locked, grates pulled down and CCTV switched on to catch any ill doings in ultra high resolution, including automatic retinal ID of everyone involved.

The biggest lights came from no source that could be considered jovial or jolly. You would not walk your kids down to see these lights, in a effort to tire them out so they would actually get to sleep in time for you to put all of Santa’s presents under the tree.

Just like the lights you know and love, these lights came in a few different colors. Red. Orange. Black.

In a nearby home, a child woke from the sound and ran to the window to see if she could spot Santa Clause. She avoided slicing her feet on shattered glass due to the slippers she had received from Santa the previous Christmas.

Taking one look outside, she sucked in air and turned to run for the phone. Her mom and dad were in the basement wrapping a few final gifts and they didn’t hear her. Because of the slippers, again.

911. The numbers that stick in the head of anyone who’s been alive for more than a couple years. The girl dialed them and held the phone to her ear.

“I think Santa’s sleigh crashed,” she said.

That was the first anyone heard of the latest attack, except for the unfortunate souls involved in it.

It happened at 9:14 PM. Christmas Eve, 2029.

A few hundred miles east, and a little south, certain figures in the government gathered in a small room. The President had glitter on his t-shirt from where his daughter had slapped a sparkling bow on him. The Secretary of Defense had a bandage on her finger; she had cut it on the serrated teeth on a roll of tape.
“Just when I thought we might make it a whole day,” said the President, rubbing a hand over his face and catching his wedding ring on his lower lip for a moment, pulling it down and showing his teeth. “All I wanted for Christmas was a day. A gift from… whoever it is that’s doing this. Well, let’s see what we have this time...”

A hundred inch screen turned on behind him, showing a vast grid of shrunken camera feeds. One by one the screen cycled through, showing each feed in enlarged form on the bottom right.

“I know one of you saw something,” the Secretary whispered, staring with her hand in a fist under her chin. “One of you did...”

The attacks had started three years earlier. It took about four attacks for people to accept they were happening on a daily basis. It became a guaranteed fact of life that, at some point during each twenty-four hour cycle, some small area on Earth would be subjected to a brief moment of Hell and all who stood on that spot would perish. It might happen in the next county over, or on the other side of the planet. Or it might happen right where you were standing.

One news station gave the phenomenon a name which stuck; the Daily Dirge.

The first thing anyone did when they woke up in the morning, usually even before visiting the toilet, was to turn on the news and find out if an attack had happened already. If it had happened after midnight, Eastern Standard Time, which authorities had determined was the time zone the unseen enemy was operating on. If an attack had already occurred for that day, you could relax, knowing for certain you would be safe.

If an attack hadn’t yet occurred, well... you got in the habit of looking up into the sky at every chance. Looking for that weird swirl of light which some people said preceded each attack by a few seconds.

There was nothing you could do but wait and hope that someone else figured something out. No government had a clue what any other government was doing to combat the threat. It was a worldwide problem, no one was exempt, and yet everyone was paranoid and ready to put the blame on some other country. No one trusted anyone else, and no one shared what information they had.

The US Government did have a plan. A crazy plan, scraped together from the remnants of failed experiments. An idea that they might catch something that someone didn’t want them to see.

The fire trucks weren’t here yet. Nor were the ambulances or the police. It was Christmas Eve, and the response time would be a little slower.

Clyde folded up the tripod, stuck it in his backpack, and walked forward to survey the wreckage.

Not much had been caught in this one. A single SUV, carrying a family of four. The hatchback had blown open; further back along the street a pet
cage stood, dented and scratched but otherwise unharmed. Some creature moved restlessly inside, letting out a series of pathetic noises.

Clyde approached the SUV. It had been red once, but was now stripped of all color. The paint had become a mist and settled in a red circle around the vehicle, growing fainter as it spread outward. Every plastic component inside the vehicle had melted, flowed into some Dali-esque version of its former self, then solidified as it cooled.

A clean hole had blasted through the car and deep into the street, utterly destroying everything that stood in between. A foul, rising smell said that some damage had been to the sewer system down below street level. Unfortunate. Someone was going to have to come out here and fix that, once the police took the bodies away. On Christmas Eve, no less. Or maybe on Christmas Day, depending on how long everything took.

But that wasn’t Clyde’s problem.

He looked briefly in at the family. Two parents, two kids. He couldn’t tell who was who, or which gender they were, because nothing remained but smoking bones and a few curls of melted hair.

Funny, how different it looked in real life. The news stations loved their shock tactics – they pretty much showed everything – but it was still different, looking at it with your naked eyes. A lot more visceral. More abrupt. When you just saw the aftermath on the news, you had no way of sensing how fast and sudden these attacks were.

The SUV had been travelling at thirty miles an hour, flying right through a green light with no one else on the road. But it had reached a speed of zero in the space of a nanosecond, skewered in place by an immaterial blade. The stop had been so sudden that bolts in the engine compartment had sheared off, causing the entire engine block to shift forward, deforming the hood and pushing out the front grille.

Clyde had seen more than he needed to see. He straightened up, grabbed his gift off the top of the car, and walked away.

The animal cage was starting to move around as the creature contained inside grew restless.

The miniature pony was too small for the carrier it had been crammed into. Fine for a quick ride home, though. Clyde, using every bit of strength, was able to carry it along. The pony sniffed and snorted at his hand. Its silk-soft mane tickled his arm.

A two for one special. He was going to be the hero this Christmas, for the first time in his life.

It was her daughter’s last Christmas. Kelly wanted nothing more than to make it a good one. But she had already put every last shred of money available into her car, into the fridge, into the utility bills. There was nothing left. She thought about asking Corey if he had anything. To him, Jenny was as good as his own daughter, though he and Kelly weren’t yet married. But Corey was strapped. She knew that. He was already working two part-time jobs and going to classes on top of that. Trying to make a life,
something good enough and impressive enough for a woman like Kelly. A woman he loved. She had no idea where he had gotten such lofty opinions of her. But she was glad that the world was still capable of making men like him.

Kelly finished folding her last load of laundry. She picked up the basket and carried it upstairs, navigating the tricky turns of the basement steps without banging an elbow or a knee. That was an accomplishment in and of itself. With skills like that, she would make one hell of a housewife. Which seemed to be her destiny, if Corey had his way.

To reach the bedroom, she had to walk by the living room. Corey and Jenny were in there. She was asleep, using his leg as a pillow. His hand, which had been scratching her back, was now frozen. He was staring at the muted TV.

A security camera had captured the brief, burning fireball of the most recent attack. The location was displayed at the bottom of the screen. Kelly stopped. This was less than a mile away. She drove through that intersection twice a day.

Corey spotted her. He stood up slowly, lifting Jenny against his chest. Instinctively, unconsciously, he put a hand to her chest and an ear to her mouth. Checking if she was still alive, still breathing. That was the type of habit you got into, when you were taking care of a child who had months or maybe only weeks to live.

“I’ll hook her in,” Corey whispered, moving past Kelly down the hall. She followed, and started to put laundry away as Corey set the little girl in bed and slid the IV line into the permanent plug on her arm. Reaching down the front of her shirt, he attached two pads which would monitor Jenny’s heart and, in the event it stopped, attempt to restart it.

When Jenny was squared away, Corey came to help with laundry. When they finished, the two adults moved into the hall, shut the door quietly, moved to the other end of the house, and only then did they fall into each other. They collapsed, turning to mountains of dust that fell toward one another, locking in place.

“It’ll be OK,” Corey lied.

Kelly nodded. She knew there was no hope of getting Jenny out of her mind tonight, but it was worth a shot.

“How about that attack?” she said. “How many people?”

“Family of four in an SUV,” Corey replied. “No one else. I guess it was lucky that it came when it did. That intersection would have been jammed full of traffic a few hours ago. The chain fire would have burned through all of them.”

“It could have been us.”

Corey held her tighter. “No.”

“It could have been.”

“But it wasn’t. Just don’t think about it. Think about me. Think about Christmas.”
But that wasn’t a comfort. Because everything led back to Jenny, and the simple fact that she was dying.
Clyde touched the latch on the garden gate, then sniffed his hand. The metal was slick and oiled. Freshly lubricated. It wouldn’t creak. It was funny how much better things looked around here with a real man in the house.
He opened the gate, slowly, quietly, and hoisted the cage through. He carried it a few meters, set it down, went back to close the gate. The blinds were down on all the windows, but he could tell from a pulsing, color-changing light beyond that the TV was going. A shadow kept passing back and forth. Kelly at her chores. Always at her freaking chores. She never did anything else. Too nervous for anything.
Clyde strode into the dark, deeper in the backyard, and crouched behind a bush. He reached into his coat pocket, made sure the ampule was still there, and nodded to himself. It was all worth it.
There was a strip of pebbles along the foot of the fence, running around the perimeter of the yard. A defense against weeds. Clyde grabbed a cold handful. One after the other, he tossed the pebbles toward the animal cage ten feet away. He dialed in his aim, and kept hitting the pony in its flank. Every time it would prance around, as much as it could in its confinement. It would try and rear back, whinnying like its more majestic forebears. But it was nothing like them. It was a munchkin, a genetically modified freak. Designed to be the perfect plaything for children. It would never grow larger, it would never kick, it would never defy being ridden.
They were all the rage this year – all the pet stores had them. It was not a gift that Kelly could afford. And Corey, no matter how much of a gentleman and a handyman he was, could never afford it either. Clyde grinned as he tossed his stones, feeling giddy.
Finally the dumb animal got the hint and made some real noise. It crashed and banged against its metal cage, letting out a high-pitched whine.
A shadow approached the window. A finger hooked the edge of the blinds, pulling them back for a quick peek. But it was too dark in the yard to see much.
Corey would come. He would be the one to check. There was no way a guy like that would let his woman go alone into the dark to investigate a strange noise.
And, right on schedule, the back door soon unlatched and swung open. Corey came through in slippers and pajama bottoms, a zip-up sweater hastily draped over his shoulders. He held a flashlight and a baseball bat. He turned the light on and played it toward the source of the noise. But all he could see from his angle was a dark cage; he couldn’t tell what was inside it.
“Shut the door, idiot,” Clyde muttered to himself.
Corey shut the door. No way he would let the heated air out, not when the two of them were so utterly broke. He crept toward the cage, narrowing his eyes. When he saw what was inside, he made a noise that was either surprise or disgust.
“Another piece of stolen property, Clyde?” he mumbled to himself.
In the other pocket, Clyde’s hand found a knife. He strode forward, as quiet
and untouchable as a shadow.
Kelly came out into the living room and realized two things at once. First,
that she hadn’t seen Corey in a while. And there was a cold draft, blowing in
from the direction of the back door.
“Corey?” she called.
No answer.
She went to grab the baseball bat, the one he kept tucked in the kitchen
pantry. It wasn’t there. And neither was the flashlight. So instead she
grabbed a knife from the kitchen. Keeping it hidden, tucked up against her
forearm, she walked slowly toward the back door.
Clyde was there, hoofing a huge metal cage through, letting in a sparkling
drift of snowflakes.
“Wanna give me a hand?” he asked.
“No, I don’t,” she replied, turning away, heading back into the kitchen to
grab her phone.
“It’s for Jenny,” Clyde called. “Just wait. Don’t call. It’s just a present for
Jenny.”
Against her better judgment, and every instinct available to her other than
the motherly one, Kelly turned back. She ducked down, looking into the
cage, and found a tiny equine face staring back at her with perfect doll’s
eyes tucked in a blanket of chestnut hair.
“You didn’t,” she said. “Clyde, this isn’t yours. So it can’t be hers. This is
stolen.”
“No,” he said. “I don’t have the energy to explain, but it’s not. I’m just trying
to do one thing good here. I know all the kids want these things…”
“It’s all Jenny’s been able to talk about,” Kelly admitted. “Where did you get
it? How?”
“That’s not anything you need to think about. Just take it. Help me get it in,
it’s freezing back here...”
Kelly stood and grabbed one end. They lugged it through, digging up carpet
fibers, denting corners, but neither of them cared. Clyde didn’t care because
he had never been capable or caring about anything. Kelly didn’t care
because her girl’s impossible wish had somehow come true.
“Where’s Corey?” she asked.
“He went for a walk,” Clyde replied. “I had a little talk with him. Asked him a
favor. Asked him if he would let me be the hero, this one time. Can I see
Jenny?”
“She’s asleep.”
Clyde nodded. “Well, can I still just see her? I won’t wake her up or
anything.”
Kelly shrugged. They shut the door and carried the pony as far as the living
room, where there was room to actually walk around the cage. Quietly, with
plenty of shushing motions from Kelly, they made their way down the hall. She opened the door, held it there, gestured for Clyde to take a quick look. “There,” she whispered sharply. “Happy?” Clyde pushed in past her, nudging her arm aside.

For a moment, panic seized Kelly and eroded her away. Broke her down until she was a helpless little girl, squatting and absorbing his abuse. Coming up with stories to explain away the black eyes, the split lips, the obvious hand print on her neck.

Then she came back to herself. The strength she had built up, that Corey had helped her to build up, came surging forward. She grabbed the back of Clyde’s shirt and yanked as hard as she could.

Inside, she was ready for a fight. Ready for the filthiest, bloodiest scrap imaginable. Because that was what she secretly hoped it would come to. She wanted a chance, now that she was strong, to hurt him as much as he hurt her. She wanted to scratch his face, shatter his teeth, gouge his freaking eyeballs out.

But instead of fighting, Clyde moved with the pull and turned to face her. In place of a choking hand on her throat, he just touched her arm gently. Tapping it, like a wrestler throwing in the towel against a superior opponent. “Sorry,” he said. “For everything I did. I guess it probably doesn’t mean much, but it’s all I have to give. I got nothing else.”

She looked into his eyes. They were as beautiful as ever. Just as capable of mesmerizing her. She had no love for the man behind them anymore... but she would never shake off the power of their hypnotic spell.

She found herself nodding, shrugging, smiling, like everything he had done to her could be explained away with mere words. Like actions didn’t matter. But he had gotten the pony. That was an action. He wasn’t doing it for her, but Kelly was thankful nonetheless.

“I just want to see my girl,” Clyde added. “I just want a minute alone. How about it? A Christmas olive branch, for old time’s sake?”

“Okay,” Kelly said, letting out her breath. “Just one minute. Then you have to go. Understand?”

“I understand,” he replied. “One minute.”

He went into the room and shut the door. As soon as he turned away, and his eyes no longer fixed her in place like spotlights, logic returned to Kelly and she realized her mistake. Lurching forward, she grabbed the door handle and twisted. But it was locked.

Clyde ignored the jiggling handle and the quiet entreaties of the woman on the other side. No matter what she thought, he had no ill intentions. There was something broken inside him, he knew that. Up until Jenny was born, he thought he would never be capable of loving anyone other than himself. To him, other people were... figments. Entities in a simulation. They weren’t real, not like him. But Jenny was different. She was real, because she was part of him.
He knelt by the girl’s bed, pulling the ampule out of his pocket. It was tiny, the size of a jelly bean. But contained inside it was a miracle. Something impossible. But miracles are a matter of perspective. To a human living a million years ago, the electric light that burned overhead would be a miracle. But to Clyde, it was commonplace. Something he barely noticed. So it was with the ampule, to those who had created it. No skin off their backs. Jenny slept on. The sleep of the sick and drugged, deep and motionless. It was not the excited, restless, half-sleep of a child who knew the next time they opened their eyes it may well be morning, and time to run out through the halls and find the pile of presents waiting...

What was she dreaming about? Clyde tried to remember what he had dreamed, once upon a time.
Death was, in a lot of ways, the same as falling asleep.
Clyde had lost everything. His wife. His daughter. His home and his marriage. Even his job. He had ten bucks in his wallet and he used it to buy a bottle of vodka. He walked for miles in a summer rain and finally lay to rest in the wet grass of a park, drunk and full of the darkest thoughts.
It was easy to take the leap. Mentally and physically. All he needed was a high place and an unwillingness to live. The second part was already taken care of. The high place was all he needed.
Luckily, such places are easy to find in a city.
In the dark blue light of early morning, he scraped himself off the ground and wandered toward the tallest building he could see. His head pounded with hangover.
The building was a hotel. He could see the sign from here. Excellent. They would have a staircase or an elevator that went to the roof. Getting through the roof door might set off an alarm and bring security running, but that wouldn’t matter. By the time they got up there, he would be gone.
One last fall to the bottom. Nothing he hadn’t seen before.
He was in the crosswalk, heading across to the hotel, when he was suddenly incapable of moving. A car, making a right turn behind him, squealed and lurched to a stop. It was something up above, a light that was solid. Clyde looked up, straight into the funnel of a tornado made of light. Less than a second later the fire of death flashed down out of the sky, destroying him.
As far as Clyde could tell, his skin was pulled up into the heavens on the backwash of light as it was once again swallowed into its source. They took his skin, along with his genetic material, and they remade him over a metal skeleton. Retracing his life, they built his brain and his memories. He was reborn. They made it clear, in various ways, that he had a choice; he could become their living toy, and they would save the person he loved most. Or he could say no, and he would return to that dreadful blackness of nonexistence from which he had only just woken. He would remain there forever, knowing his daughter would soon join him.
A moment after he died, Clyde reappeared on Earth. He stumbled away from the burning wreckage, a survivor of the Daily Dirge. In a few hours, as his mind cleared up, he remembered the instructions he had been given. It had all led to this. He was going to get it all back, starting tonight. His life, his wife, his daughter, his house... his mind. It was coming back around. All because of a little death and a burning SUV filled with four skeletons. Who were they, the ones who had resurrected him? He didn’t know. He didn’t care. As long as this worked, what did it matter? He had never been an inquisitive man.

And he had never been all that smart, either. He wouldn’t have known what to do with the ampule, if they hadn’t told him. It was just a bit of liquid contained in a canister of what seemed to be glass. Scrounging through the shelves full of medical supplies, he came up with a sterile syringe sealed in a pouch. Apparently, his minute was up; Kelly was banging at the door, twisting the handle in earnest. He looked over, watching with mild curiosity as the cheap, hollow core door bowed inward. It flexed in the light, rattling against the jamb.

He just needed another minute. Then she would see.

In its cage, the little horse was finally starting to calm down. It was back in a relatively peaceful environment, after the drama of being launched from the SUV and the hell of its spawning in a distant laboratory. The cold out on the street had been numbing. The pain of the pebbles, glancing off its flank, had been sharp. But now it was here. Warm and safe in what would be its home. The horse did not know what it was. And neither did any of its brethren.

The plan had been concocted in the febrile minds of some government laboratory. In order to solve the problem of the Daily Dirge, they first had to know who or what was causing it. And for that piece of information to be gained, the government would need to watch even closer than it already was.

But how do you convince an already paranoid populace to accept more surveillance into their lives? The answer was simple enough; you trick them. You get them to bring the cameras and microphones into their homes without know what they were. People started throwing around the term “Trojan Horse”, and then some wacko got the idea to stretch that to its literal limit.

It started with commercials. The most expensive advertising campaign of all time. Over the space of a few months, the Perfect Pony was known to every child in the country. And, by extent, to their mothers and fathers. The Perfect Pony came with quite a price tag... but it was arranged that certain pet shops would leave certain cages unattended for certain lengths of time, a guarantee that low-income families would have equal access. A lot of money was made, and a lot of eyes were put in a lot of homes. The government had access to new information, private conversations, private moments laid bare for them to see. If they said they didn’t enjoy getting a
look into the more intimate moments in the lives of the citizenry, they would be lying. Thankfully lying was part of the job, and the main purpose of the Perfect Pony Project was to find out just what the hell was going on. History had shown that such a large scale attack as the Daily Dirge could not be pulled off without its ground troops. The government knew instinctively that someone down on their side had to be facilitating things. It made sense to use common folk; they were less likely to be suspected, to be caught. Every other tactic had failed, every last billion dollar plan had been rendered useless by a lack of data. This was a last ditch effort.

For a year they had seen nothing much. Just a lot of families doing what families do. But it was the Christmas holiday they were banking on, when the number of Perfect Pony’s would explode past all earlier projections. On Christmas Eve, right after the Daily Dirge, they finally saw something. The first troops to arrive on scene found a pool of blood. And a trail of it, leading off into the dark. They already knew about the man being stabbed and dragged away. They knew that, going off the length of the blade and the position of the thrust, he had a ninety-nine percent chance of being dead. So they ignored the blood, moving silently to the back door. It was unlocked. The man at the front opened it with a black-gloved hand. They moved inside like a dark wave, a silent serpent gliding efficiently through the house.

Clyde dropped the used syringe in the trash. By the sound of the banging, the door was getting ready to splinter. And it was starting to bother Jenny. She was starting to move, stirring as her brain activity grew strong enough to engender dreams.

Clyde opened the door, stepping through and forcing Kelly backward. He slammed her into the wall. There was terror in her eyes, a scream rising up her throat, but before it could come tearing into the open Clyde kissed her. He kissed her the way he used to. Because Corey was out of the way now.

“I love you,” he said, pulling back from her. “I’m sorry for before...”

Kelly glanced into the room, where her daughter was thrashing under the blankets.

“What did you do?” she asked.

Clyde lifted the empty ampule, showing it to her. “I fixed her. You’ll see. She’ll get better now. It’s easy for them. They can cure anything.”

He saw the scream coming up again. It was just like her, to expect the worst. She was also so high-strung.

The lights went out. Clyde felt a hand on the back of his neck. He thought it was Kelly’s, until he was shoved to the floor and held face down against the carpet. A green light glowed down at him, from the face of some shadowy monster.

“Got him,” came a muffled voice. “I have the target.”

But they really didn’t. All they had was a dead man.
Clyde looked at the ampule, sparkling in the green light on the carpet beside him. Empty. All of it injected into the arm of his baby girl. At least he had done that right. A Perfect Pony Christmas and a Happy New Year. A moment later, his owners repossessed what was theirs. “All the air went out of him,” the leader of the task force said later, during a taped debriefing. “That’s what it was like. His skin just collapsed like a sheet falling flat on a bed.”

The task force had observed, on the ceiling just above the skin sack that had been Clyde, a vaguely man-shaped hole burned through the ceiling. Somebody had wanted him dead before he could talk. But they did find some curious apparatus in his backpack. Namely, a metallic tripod which seemed to be some kind of triangulation point. It had apparently been placed at the scene of the Christmas Eve Dirge. With that piece of information, it may be possible to reverse engineer the tripod and trace the path of whatever signal it received.

Meanwhile, Christmas morning dawned and children across the country woke up to the perfect gift. A gift that would never grow bigger, would never kick or resist being ridden. A gift that would never stop watching.

The End
Other than a 92-mile, dead-end stretch to the town of ‘Izabelle’, there were no other roads leading in or out of the Satanic city of Laboon. There was an ocean flowing outside the city and the mouth of the ocean, which was called Redzier, was more than 2,800 miles away from the main entrance of the city. The city was surrounded by a huge thick forest which followed a huge wall. The sound of the birds scattered in the forest for the whole day while at night, frightening howls of wolves and owls ruled the outer surroundings of city of Laboon. Sometimes, very cold breeze blew from the ‘Redzier, the ocean’ which when rushed through the trees and passed between the branches, would produce a loud howling sound. The people of city believed that air brought the dead souls of those people back who had died during their quest to reach the other side of ocean; the side where deadliest of demons ruled and aliens controlled those demons. Mostly, it happened so that whenever someone; so rebellious a soul the city or even to the other side; however, even if he made it, somehow to the other side, he would get killed in the outside world by the aliens and the demons but those who died so, gret to live in eternity with God if they die in the outside world. The city of Laboon consisted of many small towns that were called ‘smart cities’ All the citizens of the world had to live in smart cities to stay safe in the city. Smart cities were very unique as they contained a mixture of past and present. The past was very conventional, it revolved around the demons, angels, gods and Satanic creatures that were coming to the human race since their first appearance on the planet. On the other hand, the present world revolved around the robots, aliens, virtual reality, gadgets, machines and technology. A very advanced technology. A technology that would allow you to communicate with the souls of those who were dead relatives with the help of virtual reality. Previously, in the past, a scientist and engineer, invented this gadget, called the ‘yoke’ which would allow you to talk to the souls of dead in a dark chamber. The yoke was a band that was clipped on the forehead and tied on the back of skull. A red light glowed when the connection was established between the living and the dead, then violet colored specially designed glass were used to see the dead in front and the both could talk to each other for hours. It was also a time when Mars had already got rings like Saturn a hundred years ago since now. The moon of Mars, which was called Phobos, got closer and closer to the red planet’s surface and broke apart into countless tiny bits, which continued to orbit forming those splendid rings. People of smart cities could also communicate with their thoughts. The had developed a mechanism to Pick up thoughts of a person and relaying them to another brain with the help of a small chip inserted under the skin of almost every individual of the smart city. It was a
microchip that directly connected the brain signals from one brain to another which was then manually controlled by the individuals themselves. It was called ‘brain texting’. With the help of cloning technology, real time dinosaur zoos have been developed in the smart cities where all kinds of dinosaurs were kept in special cages and under the influence of special lights that would keep them calm and to some extent, hypnotized. Robots with artificial intelligence have been developed which could draw, paint, write, sing, serve, act and compose far better than humans ever would have been. With gaining about 1.7 milliseconds every 100 years, now but their roots were of dust. They were basically made up of dust and called dust spies. They could convert to any form or state but ultimately, when their batteries would finish, they would convert to a pile of dust. The dust was highly magnetic. Each particle of dust had a count of all the other particles and it knew how to attract the remaining particles of pile even if it scattered a thousand miles away. Robotic earthworms used to gobble up their garbage. There was developed the interplanetary Internet that would allow the people on earth to directly connect with the space stations set on other planets. These smart cities had very strict rules to follow, but as long as you stay in the smart cities and follow the government’s rules, you were safe. The government was run and controlled by ‘Satan’s people. They were called ‘Old Nicks’. The people of the smart cities had everything they could wish and dream of. But they COULD NEVER go out of their cities. Out, across the wall, behind the forest, where the ocean laid and to the other side of ocean. Some people of society wanted to know what was on the outside of the smart cities. But strict Government rules and very careful surveillance by the dust spies almost made it impossible for the citizen to escape and find what was lying there, outside from their closed world. Probably Old Nicks knew what lied on the outside. But they never revealed anything to the citizens........
Tick Tock.. Wake up. It’s time to wake up. Good Morning! Good Morning! Wake up Alan! A big mouthed robotic alarm rang loudly in Alan’s ears. Alan woke up. “Morning”. He said with a certain glimpse of boredom on his face. Washed his teeth. Wearing the same clothes as scheduled as if he had been made destined to wear. Taking himself into the daily robotic lifestyle that now felt too grotesque. Again, the day had been started as a per schedule. A schedule to do everything according to preplanned routine. It all looked like a life, where he lived as if walking through some pre-designed memory. ‘Why is there no outer world outside this damned city? There must be one. All I need is to find it and make my own world out there This was the first thought that used to come to his mind every morning he woke up. Alan had heard from his grandfather that Q was previously called Atlantia until the midst of year 2073. It was the remotest and far away city from the rest of the world, surrounded by huge glaciers and harsh environment where humans didn’t dare to dwell much. Then the whole rest of the world turned to ashes and devastation by war. Very few survived and escaped who were now called the ‘Old Nicks’. They had developed in themselves a gene, that had almost made them immortals. The rest of the people used to call them Satans as they were extremely cold hearted creatures. The cold had really turned their emotions to hard ice. They even changed the city name from Atlanta to LABOON and started a whole new world there. It had become a city where people did not have many emotions. They didn’t know what to feel, how to feel. They only knew how to follow the pre-scheduled things like get awake, start work as daily routine and eat. With the day ending, go back to sleep to repeat the same things day after day. Week after week, month after month and year after year. Alan thought that he had been leading such a boring life there which contained nothing but Old Nicks useless rules. They couldn’t do anything against the orders or rules of Old Nicks. There were strict policies and regulations and laws to follow. The people mostly just talked about science and technology. They didn’t talk anything else rather than the genesis revolution. The robotic way of life where living life before all that happened, was beyond people’s imagination. You have to work clockwise and follow the rules. Nobody even talked to each other. They would rather engage with robots. They only talked to each other when much needed and it’s quite rare that ever happened. The outside world was something where live was not guaranteed. The government would say, “there is no living out of LABOON city boundaries. The very next step you take to cross the border, you’ll be dead. There are aliens, demons and other such like creatures that would eat you up in single bite!! “ And there were literally ads that played in holograms throughout the city to stop people from going out there. People
who didn’t want to follow the city rules and never wanted to become a part of this revolution, denied and even rebelled against it. They were most of the time discouraged and even if they continued to show their rebellious nature, they were put in dark cells, which were situated underneath the city, on the far edge of the city. The government would later announce, “They are not civilized and can’t be. This city has no place for those who don’t want to be a part of this city, this culture, and do not respect the holy laws. These were some basic fundamentals rules of living in the city. If you believed in God or engaged yourself in waiting for a miracle to happen that will change everything, you were a criminal. The Old Nicks would say “You denied the greatest gift of this scientific era and you disgrace the technology that serves us. That’s the greatest ever invention of our scientists and people who devoted their life for the betterment of future. You are doomed if you think you can create any chaos here. People hated them. But there are exception to everything in life that ever exists. Mr. Henry was also an exception. He was one of the most lovable and dear Old Nick to everybody. He was the one who was fighting hard to make amends to what the nasty and creepy minded rest of Old Nicks had done to the city and people. He was a scientist and a human clone. He was also the most intelligent scientist who was born as a result of Human Cloning, a technique in which you can produce the exact copies of a person by inserting his nucleus in a fertilized egg cell by destroying its own nucleus by using Rays and then incorporating that cloned cell in a human womb or even in an artificial womb, where the exact replica of the donator of nucleus was born. They say that the donator was as dumb as hell but during the whole process, some mutation occurred in the donator’s chromosome and Mr. Henry was born with some extraordinary skills that were quite opposite of the donator. For example, he could go on without sleeping for consecutive three days, without even showing sign of tiresome. He could eat a whole buffalo at a time and still looked like Abraham Lincoln. Some say he could also see the future and past in his head, but only a few were sure about this. He was very impressed by the ability of citizens of LABOON who had survived the most dangerous era of human history which had vanished the rest of their race and still they were here. He respected each and every citizen, but he also didn’t want them to go outside this world. He wanted to do something more well for humans. There was a thing about him. He was very much impressed by the insects. Especially the ants. He was amazed by the fact that how their bodies were capable of bearing far more pressure and weight as compared to their body size, than any other creature on our planet. He was amazed by their way of coordination beside the fact that they had no eyes, their amazingly fast speed in proportion to the size of their legs and how their sense to walk in a perfect queue. One day, Mr. Henry had this crazy idea that if somehow, he could turn the ants bigger size, big enough to reach the size of a horse, they might also be trained to be used as an alternative and cheap way of transportation for underprivileged and poor people. So, he started...
experimenting on ants, injecting different serums in their bodies and even using different rays on their bodies, but nothing worked. He worked and worked but nothing could make his dream come true, not until one day when he was baking a bread. Yes! The Bread. It happened so that he was baking some bread in his oven when he observed how flour went from a little piece to quite a huge and bigger bread. At that moment, he knew that heat and some yeast must be a solution. But the problem with the ants was that they were living and they could die with excessive heat, instead of getting bigger. So now he started working on the yeast that he was going to inject in the bodies of ants, in an amount that might ferment them enough to the size of a horse without affecting their abilities. While he was experimenting, he used rays on yeast to get the desired results. So one day, as an experiment, he injected the yeast in the bodies of ants that was heat resistant and put them in an oven. The oven was big enough to contain 10 horses at a time. So the baking started and ants grew bigger and bigger in size. Luckily, they only reached the size of a goat but it was a big achievement for him. He was immensely happy.
Alan wanted to escape from the LABOON city.... He wanted to revert all of that to the previous old version of the world where there was far less chaos, according to him. He always kept on thinking ways how to escape, get out and find a way to create a new world. To end that devastation. Yes, according to him, the world was now a devastation. He was only 21 years old boy who neither had any powers nor had enough resources to end all of this. Though the Q city was entirely safe, no beast or disease attacked the people. Only those things were now attacking people which people or scientists have created out of their mistakes. Like those oversize ants known as ‘little devils’. The ‘little devils’ kept on eating people on and off whenever they would get a chance. The Old Nicks were also helpless in controlling them. Though they had succeeded to some extent. There was a state of constant fear in the eyes of elders and children remained silent most of the time. There laughs were suffocated as many had witnessed their loved ones being devoured by these horrible creatures. The city was doomed. There was an annual grand event that happened in LABOON when summers ended and winters would begin to start, all the people of city would gather in a big stadium situated in the center of the city and pray to the god of wishes; the ‘zeeliehh’ while holding each other’s hands. Though people were not allowed to believe in one God that had been a question and source of worship for their ancestors, now people believed in gods of emotions only. They would fulfill the souls of people. Especially in this era of advanced technology filled with robotics and strange machines, people would find peace while worshiping these gods. Alan had gone to that event too. He wished from the Zeeliehh to grant him enough courage to escape from this city. He had started a closed group chain where people like him thought they would be happy outside this city and where finally they would feel the real happiness. So, they, together had made a plan to escape from the city. Alan, murphy, xandra, Yogi, and Lama. They were five friends. They had been planning now for months to escape to the forest, through the great vastness of long long road which led to the great ocean, the Redzier and finally across the ocean to the other side of the world. They had picked a specific day. They were about to leave the city at midnight when dust spies would least suspect any suspicious activity. They had also been talking to the soul of Yudha with the help of yoko, the device which helped to talk with the dead. Yudha was the oldest soul that has died centuries ago and he knew a lot about almost everything. They had been taking guidance from dead Yudha’s soul. ‘There are these crazy thoughts which I get every morning but I’m not allowed to discuss them openly with anyone. If anyone ever found out, it will cost me my life. But I guess death maybe a better option than to live in such a
miserable place." Alan thought to himself while preparing for the day. Lama was also a girl who loved nature. “Our world is so much devoid of pure nature. It feels like we are trapped in our own dome that can create nature and make oxygen for us to breath. To fulfill our living needs and to feel fresh. Though it’s only a use of technology. Nothing here is truly made of nature. Everything is created by humans.” She would often say. Murphy was a boy who loved the concept of spirituality. “By our ancestors who go against God. Against the nature and created their very own residences. Where no life is free to feel the presence of God. Only civilized people are meant to live here.” He would say. Alan sometimes wanted to share all his messy thoughts with his friends. How he had come to think of escaping. How he had developed that vision? They only knew what he told them. And that was only half the truth... ***
Why did he want to visit the outer world. To explore what was true? Or to make the truth his reality? He didn’t know if he was thinking wrong or right. False or true. It could only be tested after crossing the LABOON and reaching to the other side, but how? “How is it even possible for such a person like me?” He would often think. A person who have a mind filled with only strict satanic rules of Old Nicks to follow and systems to follow. And what about the wall!! Any person who wants to go outside or wants to come inside had to climb a wall that was much higher than the old world ‘statue of liberty’. And there was only one high gate to the city from where people could enter and leave. Since the establishment of LABOON, nobody from inside has ever successfully made it to the outside world. Sometimes rumors were heard that someone tried to come inside from the outer world but by doing so, they lost their lives. Nobody could cross that high security. And if someone was caught while crossing, he would be thrown to a big ground filled with deadly ants; the ‘little devils’ who would eat him up in a bit of second. Such high ground security with a free hand to kill anything if it’s suspicious. The dust spies spied and recorded every single moment around the wall and in the city. There were robots who would immediately fire and extinguish anything, anytime if it sounded suspicious. They had an eye from every angle. Satan was everywhere. You couldn’t hide, you couldn’t fool them. If you did anything wrong, you will surely die. Who could dare to pass such a high security gate and a system that catches you, instantly. But..... What if someone from outside comes inside the Satan city and changes the way of living here. The way the people think, the way they see outer world. Alan had these questions in his mind ‘Do aliens or monsters or even other humans really exist outside the wall? Surely, there is life beyond Satan’s rules.” ‘Don’t know what life it is beyond this box we are living in. Where to find it and how it actually looks like’ He would often think to himself. ‘Maybe someday I get a chance to go and visit the other place.’ He often imagined. “Sometimes I think are we even humans anymore or we have also been converted to some sort of aliens, because what we do here and how we live, looks like we are not humans. We are not alive. We are just designed to live like humans. No emotions and no such feelings.” ‘Someday I will do what my heart wants me to do. I will not listen to any high priest of Satan’s.” ‘I was once among one of the ordinary people who live a robotic live in a place where life is a machine. You are born, you grow and you die eventually. Nobody knows what happens with the dead bodies in Satan’s city.” Once a person died, they were taken up by the Government Agency. They were never told where they were taking the dead body. ‘But it all started when I saw that girl. She was definitely someone from the outer world and I realized only after a while. She was so beautiful that I lost my thinking. Everything
pre-designed in me just lost track. I felt something inside me that was so alive, so different. I felt my heart. The next time I saw her, I felt my heartbeat. And probably she felt the same way too. Never thought anyone like me would ever have such feelings. But I came to realize I’m not a machine. I’m a human. There’s a human inside me that’s still alive. I wanted to talk to her. Love has no boundaries, and she made me feel loved. To go beyond this damn city and hate what is not meant for me. We literally never spoke to each other for a while, but we always stare at each other all the time. She lives in the same building where I live. I never thought such a girl is living this close to me and I never got to know. She makes me believe in God.” Alan was writing his diary in a silent evening. I have feelings for her and for something that is a crime to feel in this Satan city. Love I feel like someone is controlling and living inside me. Driving my soul to do such things that I never wanted to do. Even my whole life, I have been living the best of me in my busy routine, but suddenly everything changed. Feel like I’m not meant to do this anymore. My true purpose is something different. I’m not meant to follow such robots and do what they ask me to do. I can’t ignore the facts that the benefits of being alive in Laboon. Nothing messy here, nothing to be worried about. It’s wrong to criticize what I don’t like. Most people like living here. They are happy and they even feel happiness by doing such things that sound robotic. It’s about interest. It’s about passion, maybe. Maybe I’m a defective product of this system. This girl, Mary made me think like this. Mary and I wanted to feel love. The love outside from this place. Their eyes get stuck when they see the other person and start feeling love. Developing emotions, feelings, love, hunger to live on, not following something robotic or to do something that’s make us feel nothing like a human. They both communicate with their eyes, their hearts listen to each other. What is other person is saying? What’s inside ourselves? I sometimes think I should talk to her, and ask would you like to visit me outside from this place. To see the life beyond these limits and feel the heights and sites of the outer world. In Laboon, they say you’ll die if you step outside from this city. The environment is too different from here and our body can’t adjust. But my thoughts are different. If I can feel love, feel emotions, I can surely go outside and explore life. I believe in God and angels. To me, the girl I’m in love with is an angel. She makes me believe in all these things and she also feels the same. I can clearly see into her eyes what’s inside to her. Soon I’m gonna ask her to come and visit me outside this place. No robots or technology give us a life, they only modify it. Change the living standards but can’t change the human nature. It can’t change the heart. The heart does what it wants. It wants what it wants. It feels what is wants to feel. You realize at some point in your live. Even you’re pre designed model of a robotic generation. In a technological Era. But the heart makes you feel something different. Something that can’t be transferred or made by any machine. By any technology. Love makes you feel the way you never felt. It
is somethings extraordinary. To me, it was unknown. But eventually it happened.” He closed his diary, closing his eyes too....

The End
Most days, Paul Ford was happy with how his life had gone. Being a contractor wasn’t so bad. You got to travel for free and see the most chaotic and ugly sections of every country you went to. Busy airports became a home away from home. Watching the stressed reactions of your fellow travelers became your prime source of entertainment, after you had exhausted all the cheap thriller novels and the movies on tiny screens.

Highways, overpasses and underpasses sort of blended together, forming the different scenery panels on the carousel of life. The road markings and signs were different. In some countries you drove on the left, and in others you drove on the right. Some places had roundabouts every two seconds, and others didn’t bother with them. Some had toll roads, and you had to use a slightly different coin to pay for them. But other than surface details, the fundamentals of travel and commute were exactly the same no matter where you went. And you met the same archetypal drivers; the angry one, the reckless one, the slow one, the one who can’t make up his mind which speed they want to go, and the one who never uses their blinkers.

Thankfully, there was usually some unique experience to be found at the other end, once all the nonsense was out of the way and it was time to actually work.

Paul held a position that most people probably would never think of. And if they ever happened to hear about it, they would be jealous. His official title was entertainment consultant. When he first heard about the gig, he thought it sounded like a lot of meetings and conference calls. A lot like his previous job, except he might actually talk about something interesting at said meetings.

But it was much more hands-on than that. What he actually did was fly and/or drive to various entertainment venues. They could be music halls, arcades, zoos, museums, theaters or amusement parks. Whatever the case may be, the owners of the establishment would pay someone like Paul to come and spend a day, or however long, touring and then using the facilities much like an ordinary customer would. He would then write up a detailed report, which would go out to various publications.

His reports had been make or break for many new businesses. Over time, he had gained a reputation. He was no longer hired by any business that wasn’t already one hundred percent confident in itself. But that just meant that he got to visit a lot of cool places, places that already ran like well-oiled machines and basically wanted to use his reputation as a type of advertising campaign.

Nowadays he pulled in at least ten grand per small gig, and about fifty K for
bigger jobs, of which he usually took two or three per year. The result was an easy and fairly exciting life that involved a lot of hotels and flights. It could be worse, he knew. He could still be sitting in a cubicle, answering phones and staring longingly at his wasted journalism degree.

Paul’s reports at first had been strictly businesslike. All hard details and cold facts. But they had evolved over the years to run a bit more in the direction of entertainment. Personal opinions and colorful phrases. He was writing about fun places, so why not have a bit of fun in the reports? The result of this change was that his readership had skyrocketed and he now had to turn down over half his job offers simply because he couldn’t fit them into his schedule.

Sometimes, though, a deal fell through or was delayed for whatever reason. The latter had just happened twenty-four hours earlier, while he sat in a hotel room in France and flipped through TV channels. The park he was supposed to be visiting ran into some mechanical problems. Now they wanted him next month, when everything was ready. Paul found himself in a foreign country with nothing at all to do, so he booted up his computer and started scouring through emails.

There were many offers. Most had already been rejected by him, or else they had expired unread. But there was one that had come in just a few hours before.

It was a place in Germany. In the countryside, strategically positioned between major cities. An attached photo, in high resolution, showed a giant space-age dome structure rising far above the rolling hills and deep, fairy-tale forests. A parking lot the size of some national parks stretched between the camera and the dome itself. At the time the photo was taken, the vast lot was probably about twenty percent full. A ticket booth and gate were visible in the distance, dwarfed to specks beside the dome itself.

Paul had heard of the place. It was called Kuppel Park. A brand new water park, entirely indoors. The dome was large enough, supposedly, to maintain and support its own weather systems. It had been open to the public for almost two months, and already was making a healthy profit. As the email claimed, they were having no real trouble, just the occasional growing pains of a brand new park as they adjusted to real-world traffic. Other than a few “sensitive guest incidents” they were having no problems at all. They simply wanted to offer the esteemed Paul Ford a two-day pass so that he could witness the state of the art wonders of their park. He wasn’t even obligated to write about it, but the email implied that they would very much appreciate it if he did.

Paul had planned on visiting the place anyway, with his own money if need be. They would fly him there, drive him there, pay for his tickets and food, and drop a thirty thousand dollar sum into his bank account on top of everything. It was the easiest yes he’d ever given.

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By the next afternoon, he had already been in Germany for a few hours and was starting to learn some things. For one, it wasn’t unusual to have beer with breakfast. Two, the beer was the best in the world, but it was never cold. If you wanted cold beer, you’d better find a fridge to stick it in yourself. But don’t let anyone see you.

Mostly, he learned that the German people were just as freakishly civilized as the citizens of so many other European countries. He had nothing but good experiences as he navigated the city he had come to.

The Kuppel people came to get him themselves. The driver was a big guy who wore sunglasses and didn’t say much. The one in the passenger seat was smaller and never stopped smiling, showing the gap between his front teeth.

“This is the most splendid place you will ever see,” he kept saying. “You will love it, Mr. Ford. You will be like a child in wonder... When I first stepped inside the dome, I couldn’t speak for a whole hour! I could just walk around, pointing and gasping at everything... You will love it!”

Paul was sure that he would.

Having beer for breakfast, along with the inevitable jet lag and the strangeness of being in a country other than his own, combined to form a deeply surreal feeling. Paul floated along as if in a dream. He could not think of anything to say so he made an excuse that he was tired and closed his eyes. A second later he heard a carbonated drink can popping open. He opened his eyes again, and saw that the man in the passenger seat was handing him an energy drink.

“Have this,” he said. “Get excited for it, Paul. We’re almost there. Here, take it. Drink. My name is Wilhelm, by the way. I know, such a stereotypical German name. Were you expecting Hans, maybe? Or maybe Wolfgang? Ha-ha!”

Paul sipped his energy drink and smiled along.

Soon they were caught in traffic. Wilhelm and the unnamed driver began whispering to one another in German, making sharp hand gestures. Finally the driver pulled a move that was probably illegal and got them onto an exit ramp.

A half hour later, they finally arrived at the dome. The driver parked as close as possible, which wasn’t very close at all, and they walked through cold German sunlight toward the dome. Paul finished off his energy drink; the driver took his empty can for him, then turned back once they reached the ticket booth.

Wilhelm waved to the guard inside and ducked under the barrier. Paul followed, nearly bumping his head. He was starting to realize that this would not be an ordinary gig.

The front doors, sliding apart to let them through on a current of cool air, led into a staging area. A gift shop stood off to the left, selling t-shirts and coffee mugs and snacks and drinks and stuffed dolphins. There were aquariums in the walls, displaying a thousand different species of fish and even some
aquatic turtles. Families stood all around. Babies in covered strollers, older children staring at phones, fathers squatting down with their cameras in search of the perfect angle.

“Welcome to Kuppel Park,” Wilhelm said, turning in a circle. A few people waiting by the bathrooms gave him a strange look, until they saw Paul’s press badge and the ID card which dangled from Wilhelm’s neck.

Before the German could say anything else, he was approached and pulled aside by a severe woman with a big mole on her cheek. Wilhelm listened to her quiet words, then cast a worried look toward a door labeled Sicherheitsbüro. Paul didn’t know much German, but by the looks of the heavy lock and the camera on the wall outside it probably had something to do with park security.

“Danke, Andrea,” Wilhelm said to the woman. She went off toward the sicherheitsbüro and Wilhelm returned to Paul. “More guest trouble. Nothing to do with how we operate our park, I assure you. This way, please.”

He led off through the entry hall. Soon they entered a tile corridor, complete with locker rooms. Wilhelm led them into one of these, offering Paul a choice between a simple waterproof coverall or a change into a full-on wetsuit. Paul took the wetsuit, knowing he would not be able to resist the temptations of the water attractions waiting inside. Wilhelm also put a wetsuit on, stuffing his ID badge inside of it so that it stood out in a subtle, rectangular bulge.

As Paul changed, he looked around the room and decided that there was no one else here. It was safe to talk candidly.

“What sort of trouble are we talking about?” he asked. “Anything I need to be aware of?”

Wilhelm shook his head. “I don’t think it’s anything, really. It’s not even against the rules, per se. But some of our guests have been getting into this annoying little habit. You see, as a new park still getting off the ground, we like to keep track of guest time and movement through the park. You know, where they go, where do they spend the most time at, how long do they spend in the park. It’s all helpful information...”

“Sure,” said Paul. “That’s standard procedure for most businesses these days. A lot of people think it’s a violation of their privacy, but they don’t understand that no personal information is stored. Only raw geographic data.”

“Exactly,” Wilhelm said. “We just want to understand what guests like about our park and how to get them to stay longer. And give us more money, of course. That is how business works. So, what do we do? Well, to see where guests go we just have to watch traffic at the various attractions. To see how long they spend inside the park, we have made it sort of like a hotel lobby. You check in to enter, and you check out before you leave. There are two exits and two entrances. At each we have a booth where you hand your day pass back and it is scanned.”

Paul looked at the pass he had been handed earlier. It really was like a keycard for a hotel room. It looked just valuable enough that the park might
miss it, but not valuable enough to steal. Plus it had some exposed circuitry that, to most people, might look like something that could trigger an alarm if you tried to leave the park with it.

“We have a unique system here,” Wilhelm continued. “Once you buy your pass, you can of course go on any ride or attraction. But, if you choose, you can pay an extra little bit to be jumped to the front of the line. You do this just by swiping your card, and then an attendant guides you into a different queue. When you leave the park, you stop at the exit booth and pay for whatever line jumps you have used. But also, if you don’t make any line jumps, you are given a few for free when you scan your card, to be redeemed the next time you enter the park.”

“Do a lot of people go along with his?”

“Oh, virtually all of them do,” said Wilhelm with a smile. “We try to build the illusion that they do not have a choice. That this behavior is compulsory. We do this with signs and whatnot. It works very well, and we get all the data we need to keep improving our park. These policies will most likely change in the future, but for now they are working well for us.”

Paul nodded. “You said virtually all.”

“You are good at your job, aren’t you? Very observant. Yes, we do have some problem children. It seems like two or three times a week it happens. And it is always with someone who has come to the park alone, so it’s not like we have family or friends that we can talk to about it. These mystery guests never check out, as it were. We noticed this phenomenon shortly after opening and we started to look into it. First we identified which guests were missing from our checkout database by name. Then we looked back through security footage to watch them at check-in, to find out what they looked like. We sent guards out to explore the park after hours, to see if they were still inside, hiding somewhere.

“But we never found them, so we knew they had left. They just didn’t go through the trouble of re-scanning their cards. We were happy to leave it at that. Until one of the family members of a missing guest filed a report with the police. It was a woman whose brother never came home. At that point we started to get worried. Police came to the park and looked around. We answered all their questions, turned over our footage. The police scoured it, watching to try and find the missing guest. If they actually saw the man leave, they would at least know that he wasn’t somehow still inside the park.

“But they never saw him leave,” Wilhelm said, shaking his head and staring at something far away. “He was not captured on camera, leaving the park through either of our regular guest exits.”

“Isn’t there a staff tunnel?” Paul asked. “Other exits that he might have used?”

“Yes, but these are also monitored. He was not seen to leave through any of them, either. The police have searched the park up and down, Mr. Ford, but were unable to find any trace of the missing man. The only piece of information they found was his last known location.”
Paul swallowed. “Where was it?”
“The wave pool,” said Wilhelm, laughing at Paul’s expression. “No, he didn’t drown. His body was not pulled out of the water. In my opinion, the police must have missed something. They made a mistake in their investigation. And so what if the sister hasn’t seen him? Is it rare to go a few weeks without seeing your sibling? I don’t think so. Anyway, I’ve said quite enough. We have passed all our safety inspections, no guests or staff have ever been hurt, and whatever happened to that young man, we and the police are confident it had nothing to do with Kuppel Park. Shall we go and see it, now?”
Paul nodded. “Absolutely. But first, I have to ask... when that woman approached you out in the entry hall...”
“Andrea,” said Wilhelm. “We had another ‘missing guest’, yes. Someone who did not check out. I asked her to tell me every time it happened, just as a precaution. In case something else happens, you know...”
The German started shifting on his feet, looking uncomfortable. Impatient. He wore a frown on his face. His eyes were distant and glazed. It was easy to tell that, though he had accepted that he was not responsible, the disappearance of the young man still bothered him greatly. Wilhelm seemed like a good man. A genuine sort of fellow. Paul decided not to pester him any further.
“Let’s go,” he said. “I can’t wait to see this place.”
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It was a wonderland. When Paul stepped out of the tiled hallway and into the grand dome, he knew that the theme park industry had changed forever. The bar had been raised to an impossible height. Out of every country or city on Earth, the only place that came to mind that might be able to top this would be Dubai, in all its extravagance. Or maybe Singapore.
When he heard that Kuppel could maintain its own atmosphere, he hadn’t really believed it. Mostly because he couldn’t picture what it would look like. But he saw the truth of it now.
The ceiling of the dome stood far overhead, in criss-crossing beams and girders that held up the outer skin. Between here and there, and almost entirely obscuring the view, were banks of gray cloud. They swirled and roiled and drifted just like any natural storm front.
The curtain of water that fell on Paul’s head as he came through into the dome was not from some fountain or sprayer. It was from the clouds themselves. It was actually raining inside the dome. The surfaces of the dozens of pools and lazy rivers and water features were chaotic, battered to a boil by the downpour. There was wind, cool and electric. People ran to and fro, laughing and diving into water or taking shelter in open-walled bungalows.
“I’m glad I picked the wetsuit,” Paul said, shouting to be heard above the storm. “How is this even possible?”
“Easy,” Wilhelm replied. “We just had to build a big enough structure, put a
lot of water inside of it, and warm the temperature to a tropical level. Then we had to wait. We actually used a lot of theories and ideas that were originally formulated for the process of terraforming alien worlds... they had a cheaper, more practical use here.”

Paul looked around, at this artificial paradise. It was essentially an island resort under a fake sky. There was even beach sand everywhere. It covered just about everything apart from the pathways and the footprints of some rides.

“This must have been expensive,” he said.

“You can say that again! Very expensive. You don’t even want to know. We had to take investors from a dozen different countries. It was risky... it could have ruined the finances of everyone involved. But it has worked out. Already we are making more money than we spend on maintenance. Our passes aren’t quite so cheap as going to your local water park for an afternoon. But what do you get for coming here? A tropical vacation for a day, or however long. You don’t have to travel very far. And even if you are coming from Spain, or maybe even Russia, you spend much, much less than flying to some tropical island and renting a room at a resort.”

Paul nodded. It made perfect sense. Even if a day pass for Kuppel cost five hundred dollars, it was better than the tens of thousands you would spend just to fly somewhere fancy for a week.

Wilhelm started to walk, and Paul followed. They went past a covered area where a few drenched park goers were grinning and laughing and steaming under heat lamps. A robotic bartender at the back was busy blending up tropical beverages. Paul saw bottles of rum, fresh fruit on chopping blocks, huge chests full of ice. Laughter echoed from everywhere, the universal wordless shrieking of people having the time of their lives. He could get used to this.

“There are other advantages to coming to Kuppel other than the monetary,” Wilhelm went on. “It is a closed system. We don’t have total control over the weather, but still it is quite predictable. Our private meteorologists do not have the same trouble as normal ones in building the forecast here. They do not have to contend with the same levels of chaos. Also, our park is jammed full of rides and fun experiences ready to be enjoyed. When you come to Kuppel, you know you are going to get the exact same experience as everyone else. You won’t have your vacation spoiled by a hurricane, by political unrest, by anything else that plagues traditional vacationers... Wait here a moment.”

Wilhelm had apparently noticed Paul drooling over the drink vendor. He went in and purchased two beverages, using an override code on the robot bartender to alter the recipe. They were sweet, full of coconut and pineapple, and very heavy on the alcohol.

“Usually it is not so strong,” Wilhelm said. “But we are special, right? Cheers.”

They drank. Paul held his hand over the top of his cup, with the straw
sticking out between his fingers. The rain was clean and pure, but he didn’t want such a beautiful drink to be watered down.

***

One stereotype about Germans was true. They could drink like no one else. Paul and Wilhelm had been walking through Kuppel for the better part of an hour now. So far they were just drinking and talking and observing. They hadn’t gone on a single ride yet, or taken a dip in anything other than a puddle, and yet they were having an excessive amount of fun. It probably had something to do with the alcohol.

Paul was a drunk mess, singing and laughing like an idiot. Wilhelm was much more composed, answering questions and telling stories about the various attractions with all the poise and energy of an eager tour guide.

“Lemme ask you a question,” Paul said, trying very hard to control his mouth but not quite succeeding. “All this alcohol... you trying’ get me drunk on purpose?”

Wilhelm smiled. “We’ve only had two drinks, Mr. Ford. At least now I know, you cannot handle much alcohol.”

“Touché,” Paul replied. “Hey, I said that word right.”

“Indeed you did.”

Wilhelm looked up into sky. Paul followed his gaze. The clouds had thinned and whitened. The rain had died to a thin sprinkle. A huge skylight had slid open, letting the sun in. The pathways of Kuppel were steaming now, much like the park attendees under their heat lamps.

“Now would be a good time to visit the wave pool,” Wilhelm said.

They walked onward, headed straight toward the far edge of the bubble. Soon a familiar sound drifted into Paul’s ears. It was the whisper of waves crashing on a beach, tumbling and rolling over to lap at the sand and pebbles. Soon they stepped around a hotel building, a place where you could actually pay to spend the night in the park and roam it under the light of street lamps.

And then they were at the wave pool. It was indistinguishable from an actual stretch of beach, as though Wilhelm and his colleagues had sliced a bit off from an island and transported it here. The water was beautiful, a light aqua blue. Shimmering circles of refraction swam over white sand too perfect and uniform to be real... except it probably was, brought here by helicopter or plane in some ridiculously expensive endeavor.

The segment of ocean ahead of them stretched about two hundred yards and terminated against the wall of the dome, where a waterproof barrier had been set up. The waves originated from that area, some machinery beneath pushing them outward. At the moment the waves were small and gentle. People were just starting to get back in, now that the rain had stopped. A few toddlers played in the shallows, buoyed by inflatable rings and watched by hawk-like parents. A lifeguard sat on his high perch, staring out over the fake slice of ocean. He was a robot as well, though it took a moment to see it. He was covered in a synthetic skin, to make his inner electronics safe from
“ Remarkable,” Paul said. “ Isn’t it? ” Wilhelm stood proudly, hands on his hips. “ Especially since it was never meant to be a wave pool... ”

Paul collapsed drunkenly into an empty beach chair, letting out a sigh. “ What do you mean? ”

Wilhelm sat beside him, drilling the bottom of his drink cup into the sand so that it wouldn’t fall over. “ There are many mysteries at this park, Mr. Ford. Maybe we will solve them all one day. Maybe not. It is a complex system, many contractors from many countries have been involved. There will inevitably be... discrepancies. Inconsistencies. ”

Paul looked around. “ All I see is a beautiful park. I can hardly even believe we’re indoors, right now. What kind of inconsistencies can there be? ”

“ Other than the mystery of the ‘ missing guests, ’ we have the wave pool. ” Wilhelm gestured outward, toward a group of people who floated and bobbed along near the back wall two football fields away. “ Originally this piece of beach was designed as a simple reservoir. A place to hold excess water, a way to maintain the right humidity in our closed environment. Secondly, it was to be a relaxing place for our guests. Somewhere apart from the frantic chaos of the other attractions. We didn’t even want a wave pool, because we thought they were a bit cliché. But now I guess we have one. ”

“ Excuse me, ” said Paul, “ but how the hell do you just end up with a wave pool? ”

Wilhelm shrugged. “ Some accident of communication. One of our contracted builders must have installed it at some point, by mistake. The strange thing is that we cannot find any evidence of the necessary machinery. A wave pool should draw a significant amount of power, because it has to be able to push massive weights of water. But none of our circuit panels have a lead than can be traced to this pool. There is no power draw that cannot be explained by our many other machines... In short, there is no evidence that we have a wave pool at all. ”

“ It must be wired to some other power source, ” Paul said. “ The city grid, or something. Hopefully not anything illegal. ”

“ I doubt that very much, ” Wilhelm said quickly. “ The real mystery is that we have gone diving and searching under the water at the back wall. And found nothing. No pistons or pipes or high speed turbines. No inlets or outlets. Nothing. We’ve brought people in, experts in wave pools, and they have not been able to explain why or how we have wave action here and why we cannot control it. Why it seems to act on its own whims, growing choppier or calmer with no apparent rhyme or reason. For all appearances, the wave pool has a mind of its own. And the sourceless power to carry out the desires of that mind. ”

“ But of course that isn’t possible. Water has no mind. ”

“ We can’t explain it, ” said Wilhelm. “ So we let it be. Would you care to take
“a swim?”
Paul had been looking forward to getting in the water for an hour now. He hopped up and ran down the beach, stumbling drunkenly and flopping belly first into the surf. He slammed painfully against the bottom but came up laughing, spraying water out of his nose and milling his arms clumsily to drag himself further out. He only noticed, after swimming ten or twenty yards, that Wilhelm had not followed. The German was still in his chair on the beach, sipping his rum drink and staring up into the “sky” of Kuppel Park.
No matter what Paul didn’t want a guide. He was happy to swim freely, without a care in the world. The water held up his weight somewhat, making him feel much closer to sober than he really was. The sun was getting warmer and he realized, when he was about a hundred yards out from shore, that the waves were getting higher.
They were swelling now, rising up far above his head. Churning to foam, crashing to their own rhythmless music. Paul rode up along their smooth flanks and then, at the last second before they folded over his head, he would plunge through the middle and try to make it through to the other side. But always the wave would crash down, flattening against the water surface, and he would be pushed against the soft ocean bottom, leaving the fuzzy imprint of his body in the sand.
Paul was a good swimmer. He would even say he was great, at least when he was trying to be. And he had been in rougher waters than this. Real oceans with things like undertow and riptides, and aquatic plants that threatened to wrap around your ankle and hold you under. He had gone swimming in the ocean during a storm after drinking an entire twelve-pack of beer. That was on his twenty-first birthday. And he had survived to tell the tale.
So he was not worried, not one bit. This was, as Wilhelm had implied, a stable environment. Always the same experience and never any problems. He wasn’t even concerned when his head came above the water for a brief moment and he heard the shrill call of the lifeguard’s whistle. This wasn’t a real ocean. There were no sharks or tidal waves.
Sucking in a huge breath, he plunged underwater once again and swam through the swirling back drift of a passing wave. He held his eyes open, marveling at the lack of salt sting. He could see for many yards in all directions. The water was as clear as glass. Or at least as clear as glass that was in slight need of cleaning.
There was a dark shape dead ahead. Another brave swimmer, crawling along the ocean floor. Drifting was a better word, really. They lay stiff and straight as a board, bouncing along the sandy bottom and letting the deeper currents carry them where they may. And they seemed to be carrying the figure away, toward the back wall. They seemed to be tugging it along with a single-minded purpose.
A formless worry started to grow in the far back of Paul’s mind. Using his strong swimmer’s form, he lanced through the water toward the other
person. Once he got deep enough, he was exempt from the surging power of the waves on the surface. He entered the peaceful domain of the bottom, feeling very little in the way of current or flow.

Yet the other swimmer was being pulled away from him in a linear direction, as though a line were attached and a gear was turning somewhere, reeling him in.

Paul couldn’t catch the man by swimming. So he started digging his hands and feet into the sand, using a hybrid of crawling and paddling to increase his speed.

By now he was running out of oxygen. He was starting to feel the strong compulsion to breathe. A growing anxiety, an overwhelming need to find light and open air, but he kept going. He knew from experience that, until his body started taking involuntary gulps and his vision began to speckle, he still had time.

There was a muffled splashing sound from somewhere nearby. Paul looked up, seeing the red board and kicking feet and bubble trail of the robot lifeguard, moving with unnatural speed and efficiency. Then he saw another figure, lying face down just at the surface of the water. The lifeguard was headed toward that one. He probably didn’t even know about the man at the bottom, drifting helplessly along.

How long had he been down there? How much longer did he have to live? The lifeguard was already on his way back with the other person, motoring toward shore.

And how much longer did Paul have, really? He couldn’t be of much help if he started drowning, too. So he put his feet into the sand and launched upward. The water thinned, the sunlight grew brighter and his heart began to sing as he breached, coughing and spluttering and drinking the air.

Someone was screaming back on shore. He thought he heard Wilhelm as well, calling out, but the waves were still crashing and there was too much noise for Paul to pick out any words. And anyway, he had bigger problems.

He gave himself ten seconds to breathe, and then went back under. He swam down at an angle toward the back wall, trying to compensate for however far the waves had pushed him during his brief stint on the surface. The other swimmer was there, a faint smudge in the distance beyond dark, swirling water. Paul began moving toward him again with the same technique as before. But moving even faster, with fresh oxygen in his bloodstream.

He saw the back wall rising up like a shadow. The other swimmer was suddenly lost to sight. But he must still be there, bobbing along the wall, knocking lifelessly against it.

Paul swam on, into darkness. At some point the ocean floor slid away under him, falling into gray murk. He saw nothing now, and heard nothing but the hum of crashing waves far above his head.

And then he found a sand bank again, strewn with smooth rocks and small, conical shells that bit into his hands. The slope led upward, toward the
surface of the water. As if he had somehow come back to shore, without ever turning around. Even though he should have hit the back wall of this fake ocean long ago.

But by now he was running out of oxygen again. Getting more air became his sole purpose, the only goal in mind. He crawled up the sand bank. The dark water parted and let in the light of a hot, tropical sun, swelling as it fell toward the horizon. He came out onto the shore of a tiny island. More of a sandbar than anything. A small cluster of palm trees grew in the center. A gang of crabs walked sideways along, moving through a huge pile of bones and the shreds of sun-damaged and seagull-torn wetsuits.

The other man lay on the beach nearby where he had washed up. His feet were toward land, his head still in the surf. White foam washed over his pale face and his dead, numb expression. More out of courtesy than anything, Paul grabbed his ankles and dragged him onto land. He tried CPR, to no avail. The man was gone.

Paul sat and looked around. The stench of bodies and brine were strong, stinging his nose and making his eyes water. Other than the trees, the crabs, the corpses of stranded park attendees, there was nothing. Nothing at all but the boiling sun.

There were signs of erosion at the island’s edge. Stumps of old trees, sticking out of the water. It was as though half the island had sunk into the water. Or as though half of it had been dug up, stolen away, brought to a new home under a giant bubble in Germany.

Maybe everything had a soul. Maybe islands did, too. And when you took part of it away, the parts remained connected in some way. Paul shrugged. There was no use trying to answer these questions. He had better things to worry about.

There was a ship on the horizon, its lights blinking in the falling dusk. Not close enough to ever see Paul. But maybe the next one would be. He looked over at the dead man, still warm, still fresh, and started laying a plan for how he was going to make it out of here alive. He knew what he had to do and that was to shut down the wave pool and cover it up with concrete since it was never supposed to be there in the first place. This wave pool had to have some kind of power source so he could shut it down. He swam all the way down to the fake ocean wave pool floor with scuba gear on and found a big red button with a photo of a satellite above the big red button. He knew it! The fake ocean wave pool had a power source after all! It was controlled by artificial intelligence using a satellite up in the lower atmosphere of Earth. He pushed the big red button to turn off the satellite that was in the lower atmosphere of the Earth the wave pool shut off. A few minutes later Paul saw the lifeguard robot stop working and turned off. He began to walk out of the enclosed dome and noticed hundred of UFOS approaching the Domed amusement park in the sky. Paul quickly started running as fast as he could, but everything in time and space came to a
complete stop as the UFOS began to land outside of the Dome. Paul couldn’t move his body or talk, but he could still think and breathe. The sky began to turn black and a big huge black floating cube landed on the ground and destroyed the entire park and wave pool. Paul prayed to God at that very moment for help. The black cube disappeared along with the Domed amusement park and everything was free again in a big open beautiful field with green valleys and mountains. Paul had plans to rebuild a park that wasn’t enclosed and free.

The End
The sun was beating fiercely through the break in the trees. Ro paused, panting, and leaned on her hiking stick. She removed a water bottle from her backpack and took a few sips. She poured a little water over her face before closing the bottle and returning it to her bag. Onward, Ro thought to herself as she wriggled her legs and then continued her ascend of the mountain.

The water had cooled her enough that she did not feel as hot as before, but she did feel gross as the sweat on her head began to dry in place, like great, invisible, globs of salt that lined her pores. Perhaps, Ro pondered, I should have chosen an indoor hobby. She smirked at the thought. She might feel gross and tired, but there was nothing, in her mind, that could compare to the beauty of fresh air. Nor could anything match the squelch of mud beneath her feet or the sound of birds singing their love songs or the many hues of sunrise and sunset. Ro picked up her pace as she thought about her mission: to reach the top of the mountain before sunset. Jupiter would be visible amidst the streaks of lilac, daffodils, and deep ocean blues that danced each night above Rockland Peaks. Ro had seen many pictures of the Peaks before, and had gorged her sights on the many videos that other trekkers had taken of the forests that surrounded it. However, copies on the Internet were a far cry from the true grandeur of the forest as she marched through its depths until the summit of the mountain she was climbing came into view. As she got closer to the top, however, strange sounds met Ro’s ears.

Ro looked around for the source of the clearly-human utterances and the distinctive sounds of turning-pages that accompanied the utterances. Ro did not want to miss the sunset, yet she was curious about the other person who had climbed to this spot. Ro wandered off the path, following the sounds, and occasionally tripping over the rocks and high roots that were hidden by the thick brush of the forest. Ro was used to forests, though, and to injuries — the price of a wanderer’s wandering mind — so the tiny cuts and bruises she received as she waded through the forest did not bother her at all. Finally, she spotted a man sitting cross-legged in a small clearing between the trees. The man was reading softly from a large book, one so massive that it could have contained several Oxford English Dictionaries, yet he held the massive book with such ease that it may as well have been a pile of feathers sitting in his hands.

The man had curly white hair, with traces of its once-black color by his part. He had white sideburns which seemed to merge into a beard (she was watching him from a rear angle, so her view was not perfect). She gazed at the man, at his tanned skin, only slightly-wrinkled, despite his advanced age.
The man was wearing a simple, maroon sweater and denim jeans. Ro smiled; the man reminded her of her grandfather. Her grandfather had been a trekker, too. He used to climb to the quietest, most tranquil spots to read and write. Without him, Ro would certainly have never become a trekker herself, nor would she ever have happened upon this literary man in the woods. Ro stepped softly towards the man, not wanting to disturb him, yet wanting to hear what he was saying.

“Sorry!” Ro bit her lip as she eased her foot off of the twig she had just snapped beneath her boot.

Ro, more cautiously than before, made her way into the clearing and sat down on a log, finally in view of the reading man. There were more lines on his face, particularly around his eyes, then there were on his neck or hands. He had thick glasses which were fogged over.

“Do you need glasses cleaner?” Ro asked.

The man did not answer. In fact, he did not miss a beat as he continued to read.

Ro fiddled with her boot awkwardly.

“Well, it was nice to meet you,” said Ro as the man began reading about a university mathematics professor. “My name is Rochelle, though I greatly prefer Ro…” Ro’s voice tapered off as she stepped out of the clearing and walked back towards the main forest path. She continued her ascent, finally reaching the peak of the mountain just as the first droplets of dark, fiery orange coated the sky. Soon, the darkness would grow, and Jupiter would glow beside the setting sun.

(One Hour Later)

Ro began to walk down the mountain, holding her flashlight in one hand and her walking stick in the other. She paused as the reading man’s voice came back into earshot. Ro did not intend to go all the way back down the mountain tonight… she had brought her sleeping gear with her. Perhaps she could have some company in the form of a grandfatherly storyteller.

Ro pointed her flashlight at the forest floor, walking carefully, so as to not step on a tiny critter in the darkness. She made her way to the clearing. Her eyes widened as they fell upon the man. He was in precisely the same position as earlier, and he had no flashlight, no source of light, save for the twinkling stars and planets, so far away. It was a new moon, so there wasn’t even any moonlight to guide his reading.

“Sir, would you like my flashlight?” Ro asked. When he did not respond, again, Ro moved closer, sitting back down on the same log as before. She held out her flashlight to him. “Take it. It isn’t good for your eyes to read in the dark. I don’t even know how you can see those words…” Ro’s voice trailed off as her eyes and the light of her flashlight fell upon the pages of the book.

The words were so tiny that they looked more like squiggles than words. What was more, they looked as though they were in motion. Ro fell silent,
quieting even her own breath, as she listened to the man. He was no longer
talking about a mathematics professor, but, rather, about someone receiving
a phone call from their mother. Ro jumped as her own phone vibrated.
“Sorry,” she muttered, though she had now given up the hope of a response.
Ro shook her head as she removed her buzzing phone from her backpack
and read the screen: Call from Mom.
As Ro turned her phone on and whispered, “Hi,” the man seemed to be
saying something about a girl in a forest greeting her mother and
whispering, a confused expression on her face, as she stared at the Reader
before her.
A chill ran down Ro’s spine. “Hey, mom. I’m fine, but the reception here isn’t
good,” Ro lied. “I’ll call you in the morning when I’m back at the lodge.
Yeah. Okay. I love you.” Ro hung up the phone. She cleared her throat. “Are
you mocking me? Or playing games here?”
The man remained in the same position, though his finger was curving
around the corner of the paper. He turned the page. Ro got off the log and
knelt down, inching closer to the man. As she got closer, she heard
something very strange: it sounded as though not one voice, but hundreds
were speaking. It was as though there were hundreds of invisible people
with identical, soft voices that seemed to merge into one. They were not all
saying the same things, however.
Ro scowled as the creeping chill on her spine grew even more unsettled.
She moved away and began to get to her feet. Then, she heard shouting.
Oh no. Ro thought as she heard shrieking laughs and ear-shattering
bubblegum pop music. Teenagers. Well, she was almost right.
She stood up and watched as a bunch of college students, guys and girls,
came into view. They all had Greek letters stamped across their shirts and
bags.
“Hey guys, what’s that weird noise?” yelled one of the guys. The group
quieted down, though Ro could still hear muffled giggles.
“Wanna come with me?” She whispered to the man. Again, he did not
budge, so Ro turned away and shuffled quickly behind a large tree. She
knelt down behind the tree and the tall bushes just as the college kids
entered the clearing.
The group made no attempt to be quiet, though in their stumbling, slurring-
words states, Ro doubted that they were capable of silence. She inched
further away as the kids neared the man.
“Hey, you okay, man?” asked one of the guys.
One of the girls piped up, “What book are you reading.”
The man, as usual, remained in his position, reading away as though he had
not heard the students.
“Hello!”
“Hello, can you hear us?”
The voices of the college students were so loud that birds flew out of their
trees in fright and a rabbit that had been hiding near Ro’s knee scrambled
deep into a burrow. Even Ro sank deeper into the underbrush. She felt a little creepy, hiding in the bushes, but she had hated school, even college. It wasn’t the learning. Learning was fun, but people were not always fun. Ro had always stood out. She talked too much, especially about her favorite books and the overabundance of obscure references in her brain, and she drank and partied too little. It never really bothered her, though, that she didn’t fit in. She had a few close friends, her almost too closely-knit family, her imagination, and mother nature. She found a lot of comfort in the company of trees and animals, in places where the only other people were usually as odd as she was. She wondered what the college students were doing in Rockland Peaks. There certainly weren’t any dive bars nearby. Ro was snapped out of her thoughts as the college students grew louder. They had begun waving in the man’s face, and one was even kicking the book. Forgetting herself, forgetting that she had been creeping on them, Ro sprang up, yelling. For a moment, the college students scattered. They ran in different directions, some tripping over their feet as the arrival of a new person startled them. They quickly regained their bearings, though. “Who are you? Where did you come from?” asked one of the girls, suspiciously. “I was by those trees. I was going to camp there overnight, but then I saw you harassing this poor man. Why don’t you leave him alone and go on your way?” Ro said in a voice that grew ever louder and sterner. “We’re not harassing him! We were just having fun,” said one of the guys as he flashed a dimpled smile. One of his fellow companions nudged the old man with his foot as he downed the last few sips of beer from the can in his hand. He chucked the can towards the man. It hit the top of the old man’s head and bounced off. Ro could feel her face burning. “STOP! What is wrong with you? You can’t throw things at people. Imagine if this was your grandfather? Would you be okay with people throwing garbage at your grandfather?” The guy who threw the can burped loudly. “Well, my grandfather’s kind of a jerk, so I don’t think I’d care.” He chuckled as he bit down on his lip. Suddenly, he kicked at the book with all of his might. The man finally moved. Ro watched, as if in slow motion, as the man’s mouth opened wide and sounds, like hundreds of screams, erupted from him as he reached towards the book. The book flew forwards as some of the college kids, scared by the noise, took off running. Some, including the guy who had kicked the book stayed. The guy who had kicked the book was doubled over laughing, too drunk to care about the screams that were far too plentiful for the few people who were in that part of the forest. “Steve!” exclaimed one of the girls who remained standing. “What’s that noise?” asked another girl, the one who had asked what book the man was reading.
Tears began to well in Ro’s eyes as the world shook. She leaned against a
tree to balance herself, thinking that she must be dehydrated. Then, the
world shook again.
Someone screamed, “Earthquake!” But this was no earthquake. Suddenly,
Ro fell sideways as the tree that she had been leaning on vanished. She
crashed down to the forest floor as the bushes and other trees began to
disappear as well. She looked over as the man struggled to his feet.
“What’s happening?” Ro cried at the man.
He did not speak, but merely looked at her with eyes so sad they felt like
daggers piercing her heart. Fresh tears welled in Ro’s eyes as she crawled
towards the book. Suddenly, she felt the ground beneath her knees give
way. It was as though the very earth was vanishing beneath her. Ro did not
understand what was happening. All she knew was that she needed to get to
the book, to give it back to the man.
The book. The book. Ro thought as she heaved herself upwards and leapt
through the air, just as more of the earth began to disappear. In the
darkness where the ground once was, Ro could make out the twinkling of
millions of stars. Yet, even as they twinkled innumerable, she noticed that it
looked like they were diminishing. A pang of fear, quite unlike anything she
had ever felt, shot through her body as she realized that many of the stars
were flickering off. As the final bits of earth gave way, Ro’s outstretched
fingers grasped the book.
All of a sudden, it felt as though she were being tossed around a tornado.
The book was shoved into her hands as the world spun around her. She
slammed into the ground and found herself seated, in a cross-legged
position, holding the book that the man had been reading. She felt a rush of
urgency as she looked down at the words and began to read…
(Centuries earlier, in a small village near the Rock land Peaks…)
A young man seemed to fall out of nowhere, crashing into the forest floor.
Long, black curls draped the man’s head, falling past his shoulders. He stood
up slowly and looked down at his body, feeling his taut muscles and the
deerskin pants he was wearing. He looked around. There was no more book,
no more teenagers, no more brilliant, endless tales of the universe. Someone
else, a young woman named Rochelle, had taken up the mantle of “Reader.”
She would read until the next “Reader” appeared to defend the book and
relieve her of her duty, possibly after centuries or even millennia. Then, the
universe would spit her back out where she started, just as it had spit Jus
back out at the very moment, the very edge of sunset, that he had begun
reading. Yet there was no one else there, save for the voices of the others in
the village hunting party. Jus sighed. He was grateful to be home, yet he
would miss the freedom and certainty of the knowledge to which he had
grown so accustomed. As he walked towards the sounds of the other
hunters, he decided that he did not need the stories of all of the universe.
The most important story of all was the one that he would live, not the ones
that he would dream.
The train shook as it barreled beneath the city. Dust fell from the ceilings of the tunnels, as the occasional rat plumped onto the top of the train, rolling off and down to the tracks. Claudie clutched her bag to her chest, biting her lower lip as her stomach churned. She had ridden this subway hundreds of times, yet she feared she would never get over the motion-sickness it induced in her. She stood up as the train slowed. She lurched forwards as it stopped, hiding her face from the people who stared at her — this strange creature who couldn’t stand in the subway without clutching the dirty metal bars with all of her might.

Claudie coughed as she disembarked, holding her scarf up to her nose to block out the stench of trash. She held her breath as she rushed towards the escalator. The escalator was out-of-order, but Claudie still followed the waves of people clambering up it. When she got to the top, she gasped for breath, gulping the slightly less-smelly air as she scanned her ticket and exited the station. She stepped out into a crowded narrow street and looked up. There it was.

Claudie gazed at the newly-polished letters that were plastered halfway up the building: ‘The Tessa Initiative.’ Most of the other people on the sidewalk were also gazing up at the building or pushing their way through the crowd to the security guards by the door. Claudie dug her hand into her bag and pulled out her camera and lanyard. She placed the lanyard around her neck before snapping a few pictures of the building and the crowd. Claudie then made her way across the street, keeping her camera at the ready. When she neared the building, Claudie moved her scarf to cover her ears, partly blocking out the shouts of the few protesters who had managed to worm their way through the crowd. One of them waved a sign, nearly hitting a man in the head with its makeshift wooden handle. The sign read ‘Real Babies not Bot Babies!’ Claudie clicked her camera at the sign as she shuffled towards the doors. She snapped another photo of a protester who was handing out pamphlets (if throwing them at people’s faces counts as ‘handing them out’). Claudie caught one of the pamphlets as she lowered her camera. The pamphlet was salmon-colored with dark blue, Comic Sans lettering. Claudie didn’t have much time to look at it, but she was able to glimpse the headline: ‘Robot Babies are the dawn of the Robot Uprising!’ She sighed as she showed her badge to one of the security guards.

“You can go in, ma’am, but you will need to turn off your camera,” said the guard. His handlebar mustache twitched in the breeze.

Claudie frowned. “No, look,” she moved her bag closer to his face. “I have camera privileges.”
“It’s a last-minute policy change, ma’am. Only Tessa Initiative PR representatives are permitted to take recordings of this event.” The guard’s voice was monotonous.

“That's absurd! How can anyone trust the information that Tessa Initiative is putting out if they only allow –”

The security guard held up his hand. “I don’t make the rules ma’am. I suggest you put that camera away now, or you will not be allowed into the building.” His voice remained hollow, yet it grew slightly louder as his eyes narrowed in annoyance.

Claudie rolled her eyes and turned off her camera, shoving it into her bag, along with the pamphlet. She made her way into the building. As she reached the metal detectors, one of the security personnel made an announcement:

“Any cameras or other devices capable of making recordings, including cell phones, will need to be placed in one of these bins. We have stickers. One sticker will go on each of your items, while the matching stickers will go on your badges.” The security guard said as she placed sticker sheets on the tables beside the metal detectors.

Claudie grumbled but decided against arguing. All she needed were her pens and notebook. Claudie placed her camera and phone into a bin and placed a sticker on each before placing each sticker’s twin on her badge. Then she walked through security, clutching her much-lighter bag to her chest. After what felt like ages, and security check after security check, Claudie made her way into the vast lecture hall.

The hall was shaped like an egg, with curving ceilings and walls. There were a few seats on the ground, but most of the seats were in ascending rows that stretched to the very top of the room, where Claudie was now standing.

“Move!” snapped a voice behind her as a pantsuit-clad blonde woman pushed past her. Claudie grasped the railing, not wanting to fall down the stairs, and slowly made her way to row G, seat 18. She scooched down the line, apologizing again and again as the heels of her stilettos kept coming down on people’s toes. Finally, she made it to her seat and plopped down — too hard, for the cushions seemed to be merely for decoration. Claudie’s bottom hit the seat with such a force that her eyes watered. She was sure that there would be a bruise on her butt cheeks by that night.

Claudie let out a breath as she pulled her notebook and a couple pens from her bag. She also took out the pamphlet. As a journalist, she was supposed to remain unbiased about the subjects on which she was reporting. Nevertheless, every time she thought about the Tessa Initiative’s new project, a sense of dread filled her chest. Now, sitting in the main lecture hall of that very company, her heart was pumping faster than ever.

Claudie closed her eyes, gripping her pens tightly in her sweaty fist, as a voice came over the loudspeaker.
“Please, find your seats everyone. The presentation will begin in five minutes,” said a crackly voice. The voice gave a few coughs and then the loudspeaker went silent.

“Claudie!” exclaimed a voice from behind. Claudie jolted out of her reverie and turned around. Her face lit up. “Roxy! How are you?”

“Ah, you know... grinding away, hoping for that promotion one day,” Roxy gave a half-mirthless laugh.

Claudie nodded. “Yeah, same here. So, how’s Kay?”

Roxy’s smile grew. “She’s fine. Hoping for a sibling, but no luck so far,” Roxy replied as she patted her lower abdomen. “What about you? Have you and Justus thought of having a kid, yet?”

“Oh, no. Actually, Justus and I broke up,” Claudie replied.

“I’m so sorry sweetie,” Roxy said. “I had no idea. I thought you had such a strong relationship.”

Claudie shrugged. “It was strong once, but we grew apart. It’s not a big deal.”

Roxy nodded as the lights in the hall dimmed. Claudie waved at Roxy before turning around to face the floor where most of the lights were now centered. The people around her began to clap. Claudie pushed her hands together thrice before dropping them and opening her notebook.

“This was not a play, even if the main participants would surely be putting on an act; it could be the beginning of a new era. Only time would tell whether that era would be good or bad...

A man, dressed in a designer suit with glasses and shoes of the same brand as his suit, walked out of a small door in the side of the room. His footsteps were loud as he walked towards the front of the room.

“Welcome ladies and gentlemen, curious citizens and news-folk nuisances, alike. As you all know, TI has spent months developing and testing a great new project, one that we hope will bring joy to a lot of people. In fact, it has already brought joy to some people. I would like to welcome some of our beta testers.” Dr. Tonnes smiled again and clapped a few times as the side door opened again. Out walked two families: a father and mother, each, and in the arms of each mother, a little, quiet bundle. Dr. Tonnes introduced them as Isobel and Louis Graham, who were both dressed in green Tessa Initiative sweaters, and Felicia and Frank Meringue, both of whom were dressed in purple Tessa Initiative sweaters. Each couple also had a baby, but not just any baby. These babies were Bot Babies: the project that Tessa Initiative had been working on for more than a decade. Isobel cradled her Bot Baby, named Charles, in her arms as Louis looked fondly over her shoulder, a rattle in his hand. Charles was wrapped in green blankets and was silent, except for when his father shook the rattle, and he laughed. Meanwhile, the Meringues’ Bot Baby, Courtney, was snoozing in her blue blankets, a pacifier in her mouth.
“The Bot Babies are designed with the utmost care and perfection. They do not cry, unless you want them to, just as they do not need to eat or poop, unless you would like them to. No more diapers, no more late nights, and no more nannies,” Dr. Tonnes said. “We have spent over a decade, and nearly $5 billion, developing these babies to be true, sentient beings. They are not baby dolls; they are not even mere feeling-less robots. They feel, they grow up, and they can think for themselves…” Dr. Tonnes continued.

Claudie frowned as she scrawled in her notebook: How do you know that it is sentient? Is it ethical to create beings that are sentient, yet can still be treated like robots — programmed to your liking and preferences and turned off with the push of a button? What kind of adults will these ‘babies’ grow up to be?

(One Year Later…)

Claudie fumbled with her apartment key, wiggling it in the lock until, finally, the knob turned and she was able to open the door. She trudged inside, yanking her key from the lock and slamming the door behind her. Immediately, she slid down to the floor, her back against the door and the handles of her grocery bags wrapped around her elbows. Tears slid down her face as a piece of paper fell from one of her hands. There were many words on the page: ‘We regret to inform you that, due to the content of your article criticizing the work of the charitable and humanitarian organization, Tessa Initiative, we have to let you go. We cannot align ourselves with biased and untruthful writers, such as yourself.’ The only ones that really mattered to Claudie were ‘let you go.’ Claudie kicked the paper, ripping it and sending it sliding across the floor. A loud yowl sounded in the room as Claudie’s cat, Candy, strolled into the hallway and sat down on the paper. A buzzing noise came from one of Claudie’s bags. She ignored it and continued to stare at the ceiling. It buzzed again, and then again. Finally, Claudie grabbed it out of her bag.

Claudie answered it, trying to even out her voice. “Hey, what’s up? Oh, right... um, I’m not feeling up to it... Yeah...” Claudie rolled her eyes. “Fine, I’ll come to dinner tonight. Happy? See you then.” She hung up and tossed her phone across the room.

It seemed like childish behavior, yet it was satisfying to let go of some of her anger.

Slowly, Claudie heaved herself off of the ground. She picked up the grocery bags, though she let her arms dangle at her sides as she walked to the kitchen. Candy followed her, yowling and walking towards the food bowl. Claudie went about her chores like a zombie, sobbing at each stop, even as she showered and got dressed for dinner. Each time she touched something, each time she looked at the grime-stained walls of her apartment and its sinking ceiling, she wondered how much longer this would be her home. Her bank account was on its last leg. Next month, she could be out on the streets.

Claudie shook her head as she pulled on her coat, wondering how much she would get if she sold it online, and walked out of her apartment. Claudie
held her arms tightly across her chest, huddling over to block out the cold. It may have been spring, but the air was as bitter as ever. Claudie turned the corner and walked towards the subway station. As she neared it, her eyes fell upon a makeshift orphanage that had emerged on that block. Most people strolled along the sidewalks, laughing and talking on their phones, unaware, yet, of the changes in the city, but Claudie was a reporter. She had noticed the very first makeshift orphanage and the second and the third — the results of too few foster parents and a sudden influx of children. Claudie rushed down the escalator as the breeze from an incoming train blew her hair. She scanned her ticket and rushed to board the train. She jumped inside just as the doors were closing.
The subway was packed with people venturing out for their Friday night dalliances, so Claudie was forced to stand, clutching one of the sketchy straps that hung from the ceiling. Two women beside her were talking loudly. One was holding the hand of a toddler who seemed intent on chewing his mother’s coat. She kept batting him away, shooting him annoyed looks, but not bothering to break from her conversation.
“It’s been a blissful few weeks. I’ve never known a baby to be so quiet, so calm. Certainly not this one,” the woman nudged her head towards her child. “He would wake Mike and I up at 2am, 4am... and the cost of babysitting is so great. I love both of my kids, but you’re honestly making the best choice ever.”
The second woman replied, “Yeah. I mean, we were hoping for a biological child, but it wasn’t meant to be. We did think about adopting, but –”
The first woman piped up, “No, no. Why would anyone adopt anymore? You can customize your Bot Baby to look however you want, to have whatever intelligence you would like. They don’t need babysitters, they rarely need doctors, and, when they get older, you’ll never have to yell at them to do chores. You’ll never have to ground them for going out because you can pre-program their bedtime.”
Claudie wrinkled her nose. She caught the toddler’s eye and winked. The toddler hid his face playfully, giggling as he peaked out from between his fingers.
(Three Months Later...)
Claudie sat on a moth eaten pillow. The pillow was lumpy, yet it was a nice change from the hard floor upon which she had been sleeping. Claudie stretched, brushing her fingers along a small picture of Candy. When she was evicted two months earlier, she had had to give up Claudie. Luckily, she found a sweet, Bot-less family who had given her a few hundred dollars in exchange. That money had afforded her this place, a room in the basement of an office building. The company went out of business, so the owner of the building was renting out rooms until she could find a better deal. Claudie made her way to the tiny bathroom. Her face had numerous pimples, and her hair was frayed and greasy. She rubbed soapy water from the sink into the nooks-and-crannies of her body, cleaning herself up as best she could.
Once she was as clean as she could get with a lone sink, Claudie went back to her room, grabbed her wallet and notepad, and headed upstairs. When she reached the lobby of the building, she instantly felt as though something were very wrong. People were gathered around, watching the news on their phones. Claudie went outside and was met with the same scene: people gazing at some sort of announcement. Claudie’s hand instinctively went to her pocket to retrieve her phone, but it closed on air. She had sold her phone months ago.

Claudie inched towards the nearest person. “What’s going on?” she asked. The man she had asked jumped, coughed, and then walked away. Claudie rolled her eyes. She approached another person. “I don’t have any money,” said the woman she was walking towards. Claudie scowled. “I don’t want your money. I want to know what’s going on.” The lady threw Claudie an annoyed look before responding, shortly, “A whole lot of babies are getting sick.” The woman walked away.

Claudie frowned. Perhaps there is a bad strain of the flu going around? She thought, though a feeling in her chest led her to believe that this might not be an ordinary illness at all. Claudie turned around and walked back into the building. At least, in here, no one would assume she was a beggar or judge her for her shabby state — they, mostly, didn’t seem to blame her for her current predicament. All she had done was told the truth...

Claudie walked up to a group of three people — Stacey, Ethie, and Arnie — who were all looking at the phone in Stacey’s hand. Claudie cleared her throat and the others looked up, solemn expressions etched on their faces. “What is going on?” Claudie asked in a weak voice. “Thousands of kids, all under the age of 1, are getting sick. Hundreds have already died in this city alone,” Ethie stuttered. Claudie’s throat seemed to clench. “Human kids or –” Stacey nodded. “Yeah. Human kids. Bot Babies aren’t susceptible to biological infections, only to computer viruses.” She dabbed her wet eyes with a tissue.

“Well, what kind of illness is it? The flu?” Claudie asked, her voice growing higher in both pitch and volume. “They don’t know.” Arnie shook his long, matted hair. “That’s what’s messed up. They’re saying it’s like a poison, a new poison, but where could it have come from? I say the government. I’ve been saying it for years: the government has been putting nasty chemicals in our water as some form of population control...” Claudie turned away. Arnie was always talking about his conspiracy theory ideas. Normally, she brushed them off as ridiculous, but, currently, her own line of thinking felt very much like that of a conspiracy theorist.”

(Three Years Later)

Claudie pulled hair out of her comb, throwing away the strands of grey-brown hair that she had just groomed out of her head. She heard a knock at
the door and a little voice calling, “Claw! Claw!” Claudie smiled as she got up and opened the door. She looked down to see two little girls smiling up at her. She looked down the hallway and saw a third girl smiling mischievously while concealing her hands from view — no doubt from another painting mess. As Claudie walked out of her room, the floor rocked. She peered at one of the circular windows, but it was always impossible to see more than a few inches outside of the submarine. Every night she went to bed wondering about what was happening at the surface. It had been 3 years since she sat in that lecture hall, and nearly 3 years since she awoke one day to the news of an epidemic. Yet, it was not an epidemic. It was poison — the product of a war that humans had unintentionally started. They had created sentient beings and then forced them to conform to their own ideals, rather than allowing those beings to develop on their own. The Bot Babies were incredibly clever, though small. They had developed the poison that wiped out more than a third of all humans in the United States. They had started with the children, but the poison they had weaponized was uncontrollable. Claudie fought back tears as she recalled her journey to the submarine, to guardianship and motherhood over three children whose siblings and parents had all perished. Claudie loved the girls with all her heart, and it pained her that one company’s shortsightedness had cost them a normal childhood.

The End
“What’s my fault? Can’t you see my condition; I can’t walk? I need to get my prosthetic replaced. They are itching me. I can’t even sit or sleep properly. Do you think a poor man like me can pay such high price for these prosthetic from his empty pockets?” Aidan almost cried as he spoke to the clerk at the hospital.

“So what do you think, this my fault?” The clerk whose name was probably John Eton; as written on display card hanging from his neck, spoke with utmost rudeness. “Ask the government. The lame government which has shut down social security benefits. Do you want me to pay for your bills and your stupid prosthetic from my pocket? The clerk shut down the window, with a bang.

He was probably right. It was not his fault at all. He was probably already messed up about his own job security.

It was history’s biggest government shutdown which had effect everybody’s social security benefits which were cut off especially those of physically disabled. The government could no longer provide for the sick and physically disabled.

And as if this wasn’t enough.

Aidan still remembered that evening when the news broke out. It had imprinted in his memory like some sort of negative déjà vu.

“Breaking News”

“Government in agreement with the Aliens”.

“According to the details, an alien ship landed in the suburbs of the city on 14th October, 2048 and not only aliens really did emerge out of a ship but they were also were so smart to persuade our government into an agreement. The details of the agreement have been kept in secret by the interior ministry and ministry of defense, but it seems that aliens would live among us but in underground cities. The construction of a small underground city has already begun in the northern areas of city and soon these aliens which are calling themselves the residents of planet ‘Nemia’, will be shifted in those cities. We are not yet aware of their motives on earth but it seems that these are the only survivors of their species who were able to escape from the war in their planet. They call themselves Nemeans……”

The news was still running through Aidan’s mind as if it was yesterday’s broadcast.

It was now August, 2050.

Since then, an underground city has been built and set up. Local people were not allowed to visit the city.
But it was for the disabled people, the aliens have created a center there. It was a kind of liaison between the government and the aliens. The Nemeans have asked the government to help them and the government did by providing them the shelter in the form of city. In return, they were willing to benefit the people, especially the disabled ones. They had offered a cure for all disabled persons of any kind. Initially the government rested the matter on the willingness of disabled persons if they wanted to volunteer for treatment by the aliens. Then Adrian visited the city. The city which was called ‘Ulva Fina’

It was a tiny subterranean town north of Sacramento, California. The city was built by cutting rocks and small mountains. There were some secret passages to get to the city which consisted of tunnels or some were hidden by placing them just before the eyes of a viewer, like through the public space of any of the buildings connecting to them, and sometimes have separate entries as well. The city consisted of a series of linked subterranean spaces with a network of tunnels that connects buildings beneath street level. The government had turned it into to a perfect place for living, working or shopping; with a unique transit system; mausoleum; storage cellars; cisterns or drainage channels. It filled the purpose of a full fledged defensive refuge.

It had office blocks, shopping malls, metro stations, theaters, and other attractions that were offered to the aliens as a gift from humans and as monument of human-alien agreement to help each other. There was extensive tunnel system from one end of the city to the other end. There were some tunnels that had been abandoned.

There were two small cabin trains that ran in those tunnels for special traveling of human visitors into the alien city on earth. These trains were called ‘cavalcade’. Aidan was also taken to the medical facility in one of those cavalcades.

They heard that government had further planned to build a sky way and Ulva Fina was to be linked by that sky ways or above-ground corridors rather than underground.

Back then when Aidan had visited the alien center for disabled, they equipped him with the prosthetics and put a serum on his yet fresh bleeding wounds that he cured from his wounds really fast. They had given him time for a second appointment to cure him completely where he would be able to walk without prosthetic but that chance never came in his life. During that time, the government shutdown started and it had fallen like some oversize hail on the bald heads of people, especially the disabled ones. The government could no longer provide for the sick and physically disabled. It was heard that the aliens were working on some secret plan and experimentation.

And the government knew this. But the government had turned so fascist since then, that it was giving poor disabled people to those aliens to be under their control.
Aidan had heard that the aliens were micro chipping all the disabled people and senior citizens and forcing them to swallow a pill that was genetically modified. They were telling that one such pill will give them all the calories they need in a day. Aidan knew that soon he would also be forced to go to Ulva Fina; to face his miserable death. He knew that those creepy aliens were doing something more than micro chipping people. They were using those poor people as some experiment tool, like some kind of lab rats. But why? Aidan wanted to find the answers to such questions. A storm of rage and anger had gathered up in his heart and soul against the government and those aliens. It was just like any other day when Adrian was driving back home from his office. 

He was 27 years old man, strong built, with blondish black hair and 6’2 ft height. He had fiance and soon he was going to get married. But he didn’t knew what life awaited him with. He was just entering the intersection when he was about to be blindsided by another car which was going way too fast. As if fate had already written his destiny, he met his worst accident of life. His car accident left him bedridden for months and just when he was still learning to cope mentally with what happened, this news broke like hell on his twitching nerves. He won’t be able to move or walk again on his legs as one of his legs had to be cut off from his body as it was too damaged bones were crushed in such a way that they were left with no choice but to leave him without one of his leg. The trauma his spine had suffered during the accident left him completely immobile for months. After some time, his spine recovered to some extent that he was able to sit but he couldn’t walk. He had to rely on wheelchair for the rest of his life. Even after six years, when he was still dealing with the accident, the government cut off his social security benefits. His fiance had already left him two years ago. She simply couldn’t bear his agonizing attitude and left for good. His savings had already finished as there was not any source of income left. He had only grandma as his parents died in his childhood but she was also living in a nursing home. He had no choice but to give in. To give in his own body to the government, to the aliens or demons. “After all, what I am going to do do even if I am alive. I am useless” His depression was getting the best of himself. He had come back from the hospital. His prosthetic were hurting him. Their inner safety covering had broken last Friday when he was taking them off while sleeping. They just fell and broke. These prosthetic were given to the government by the Nemeans. They had built a factory where they built these special prosthetic. They were directly
attached with the nerves by an inner stream of electrical signals. Such technology has not yet been built by the government.
Aidan got one previous replacement a year ago, but back then he lost them. A special facility center has been set up in major hospitals for the provision of replacement of prosthetic. The cost was high so previously his medical coverage covered the replacement. This time the clerk refused bluntly. It has been a while when all the disabled were taken back all the benefits from which were previously provided by the government.

He knew what was going to happen next. He would be taken to the Ulva Fina by his own government officials where the less fortunate citizens like him were kept. Once, some disabled person was taken into the city of aliens, his name was marked blue in the government Identity center and even on his I.D card. He was even issued a blue I.D card. Once you got the blue card, you were not allowed to leave Ulva Fina ever. He was fed by the aliens but in return his body was used by Nemeans as their experimentation tool. Many died from experimentation. However, there was a way out. Every person down there was given two choices; either be lab rats for the aliens every day to be fed or if he or she considers himself worthwhile enough, then take the ‘virtual reality mega challenge’

Finally, the day came when his name also appeared on the blue list. First they took him to a medical facility where all his medical tests were taken to find what other medical sickness he suffered from as he had no active lifestyle since long. It was a fair chance that he might be suffering some hidden inborn infections or mild allergies. He had to wait in the lobby for a while. When his medical report came, he was not allowed to see them. He was just pushed into a car from where he was moved to the nearest passage to the city which was hidden in Sacramento mountains. The passage led to a large abandoned tunnel. When the tunnel ended, the city started. The city of Nemeans, living underground like rats!

He was taken to a facility center specially built for humans like him. When he reached the big hall, escorted by Nemeans, he saw a dozen other humans like him already gathered there. All disabled, poor, helpless souls with a wave of terror on their faces and agony in their hearts. Soon they were all instructed to seat themselves as there was chief coming who was going to welcome them, followed by a small orientation of what and how they had to live in Ulva Fina. First of all, they were quick with introducing themselves with each other. Partially because of the fact that they all were nervous about what was going to happen to them. Who was going to help them? They didn’t want to die
miserably here. At least they deserved to die between other humans, their loved ones.

There was Adam- a short chubby bald middle aged man with both his arms amputated; Derrick, he was very reserved and looked extremely depressed, half of his face was prosthetic and an arm too. Then there was Gary-immobile since childhood due to genetic defect in his spine. They were sitting there waiting for orientation to begin.

Soon a Nemeans scientist appeared in the hall.

He spoke English quite well.

His skin was blackish blue with obvious scales. With Elf like ears which were pointy and bent backwards and then downwards, one pair of small horns on the forehead, he looked nothing less than a devil.

He told them all about how they will be living here. How they should free themselves from everything between 11:00 AM to 2:00 PM when they would be taken to the lab to experiment on their bodies. They were told that the experiments were to make them complete humans like other of their kind, to cure their disabilities. But they all knew that it was not the truth.

“I would like to apply for virtual reality mega challenge’. I don’t want to live here like a lab rat. Taking refuge from us, from our land, and playing double cards on the ones who saves you gave you protection.” Adrian roared.

The scientist turned his head toward Adrian.

They all started whispering.

“Please calm down everybody. You must all know that we are not here to harm you. You can have all whatever you want. You are only not allowed to go out until you are well enough and gained your missing organs back. It is for your own benefit. However, if you want to take the challenge that your government has created in liaison with us, we would completely assist you in each regard. You must know that whoever, wants to leave Ulva Fina with his disability without being experimented, he must solve a series of mind-bending math puzzles in order to go outside, back to your normal but still disabled life. You will get privately funded money by drug companies to live with everybody, because these math puzzles are also designed by them. Whoever wants to take the challenge may contact ‘Z’aee’ and he will assist you to the maximum.” The scientist ended the orientation.

Aidan knew that he could take the challenge.

But the only problem in escaping was that the puzzles were really mind bending puzzles.

They were, in fact, designed that nobody may solve them and escape the city. If the citizens couldn’t solve the mind bending puzzles, their brains were fried and killed off by the Nemeans and the point of joke was that their senseless government was watching all this.

Not only watching, but letting it happen, too.

‘Z’aee’ was the chief of ‘mega challenge game’ He handled all the problems and procedures of the game.
Aidan was instantly registered under the program for participating in the game. The next day he was taken to the practice area where he was provided with sample math puzzles in an attempt to make him ready for real time puzzles. First he was given simple riddles. Like: –

- Two fathers and two sons are having breakfast together. They sat down to eat eggs for their breakfast.
- They ate exactly three eggs, while each person had only one egg. Find how?

The riddle was shown in the form of a big hologram that almost depicted the whole scene, showing breakfast table and even three eggs at the table but the person sitting were kept in darkness. It took Aidan two hours to solve the riddle.

“I have found the answer”
One of the fathers is also a grandfather so, the other father is both a son and a father to the grandson. Therefore, they are all three persons and not four.

“Congratulations, your answer is correct”
The hologram appeared in front of him through the screen.
Next day was also practice day.
He was given another three puzzles which he solved. But they were all practice puzzles. He knew the real puzzle was going to be very tough.

He was never very good at mathematics. But now his life depended on this. And when your life starts depending upon something, you have to make that thing run into your blood so that it may support your life.

He didn’t sleep for three days as he ordered all the books of mathematics that he could absorb and let his mind run into the valley of understanding mathematics and its hidden formulas.
Soon, the day came.
When he was given real puzzle of his life.

The puzzle was a ‘Monty Hall Simulation’

The classic Monty hall riddle! That not mathematics book taught him.
Aidan was given three doors with a question mark on each door.
He was asked to pick one of the doors on a hologram with the following instructions.

First Choice
You are confronted by 3 doors. Behind one of them is your way out, behind
the two others, you will only see a goat. And that goat is you if you fail this
riddle. (only in the form of steak)
Now, if you correctly pick your way out, you win!
Otherwise, if you get one of the two goats, you don’t win.
So, pick any door.

Adrian picked door #2 but as he did this, the door to his left opened and
their appeared a goat. It means the door which he had selected either
contained a goat or ‘his way out’
His heart was beating.
But as he was going to click his choice, a voice on hologram appeared.

Option to switch
Now, after you have picked your door and before finding out what is actually
behind it, you have been shown a goat behind one of the other doors
Let’s say you choose door #2, as you already have. At this point you are
being given choice to switch.
Do you want to keep your choice or you want to switch?
Two option showed.

- Keep
- Switch

And as if the hand of God had been guiding him, he clicked ‘Switch’
The door opened, and there was a key behind the door.
The key to his freedom.
The hologram buzzed clapping sounds.
Monty Hall Simulation had saved his life. He was going to go research on it
further.

Further process was easy.
The only next mission remained was to destroy Ulva Fina and send these
filthy aliens back to where they had come from.
He was thinking to invent his own simulation.
This was the least he could do, for him, and for his people.

The End
It was a beautiful morning with mild cold breeze blowing and light sunshine shining above. The Ainsworth family was sitting in their lawn outside their big villa, waiting to devour their favorite breakfast; the pancakes, black coffee and fresh orange juice.

Selena, their beloved maid was serving hot pancakes while pouring steamy coffee into their mugs.

“Ah! It tastes like Heaven.” Lucy Ainsworth closed her eyes and sniffed the smell of coffee deep into her lungs like some hungry polar bear sniffs a fish. The family has been living in Downtown San Francisco since many decades. Their grandfathers and the grandfathers of their grandfather have been living here.

Lucy Ainsworth; her brother Badger Ainsworth; her mother Lindsay Ainsworth and her father Harlan Ainsworth.

Today another member of their large family had also joined them. Their little cousin Hades. He had come from California to visit them in his winter vacation from school.

He loved the company of Lucy and Badger. Though there was a big age difference, he still loved to hang around with them and in each of his vacations, he would prefer to visit them instead of his other cousins. They also loved this little guy.

“If you could go anywhere on vacation, where would it be?” Badger asked Hades while devouring the juicy pancakes.

“I will go straight to the Disney World, buy a small igloo there and live there, forever” The twelve year old boy was crazy about amusement parks and rides.

Mom and Dad both laughed at his innocent wish. Which was of course never going to be fulfilled because once he grew up a little more, he was going to laugh at his own wish.

“Let’s go the park. We have a great park here. Mom do you remember when I told you I bought membership for ‘The new future Land park’ along with my friends. That I actually bought by thinking about Hades. Why don’t we go there, together? It has all kind of rides, from thrill rides to family rides. We can also go to the animal section there too. They also offer featured educational programs. It was actually through such a program that I bought a membership for. Yes! Let’s go there.” Lucy became a little girl herself while talking about the park.

Indeed, a little child lives inside every person no matter how big or elder he gets.

Lucy was 23 years old girl with curly blonde hair and a lot of freckles only on her nose. Her skin glowed with a pinkish hue and when she laughed, her
cheeks bent inside to form the most beautiful dimple. With dove eyes, she was the apple of the Ainsworth family. Everybody loved her. In fact, the whole Ainsworth family was famous for care and compassion for each other. Soon they were all set to go to the park. The driving distance between Future Land was almost 35 miles. It took them 40 minutes to drive from their place to the park. Badger couldn’t join them because he had an already had a basketball game planned with his friends. He loved basketball. He apologized Hades for not being able to join him and promised that he would take him for Ice-cream in the evening when they will come back. Lucy knew it less about his match and friends than his girlfriend ‘Rebecca’. She winked at Badger who grinned. Lucy was driving the car while dad was sitting on the seat beside her. Mom and Hades were sitting in the back seats. ♪, ♩ I don’t know where I’m going’ But I sure know where I’ve been Hanging on the promises in songs of yesterday An’ I’ve made up my mind, I ain’t wasting no more time Here I go again, here I go again Tho’ I keep searching for an answer I never seem to find what I’m looking for Oh Lord, I pray you give me strength to carry on ‘Cause I know what it means to walk along the lonely street of dreams Here I go again on my own ♪, ♩ ‘Here I go again’ by ‘Whitesnake’ was being played on the radio.

Soon they reached the park. The park was filled with people. Mainly because it was winter vacation season and everybody had come to visit or brought their little buddies for some adventure there. The first ride they took was Boomerang Boost a small description banner showed these words. A mega-ton steel train hurled at 935 feet of track at nearly 50 miles per hour in this ride. It was an ultimate thrill ride. Both Lucy and Hades got thrill rushing to their bones when they looked at it running. But mom and dad were too scared to take the chance. So the former two bought the tickets under membership discounted rates. There were total 28 seats in the train. Lucy and Hades both were made sit in the long, sleek train. The safety belts were fastened by the attendant there. There were cameras fitted in the front where they could choose to telefilm of themselves. When the ride started, their hearts started beating fast, both with excitement and some fear too. Lucy was a little bit afraid of heights.
When the ride started the train yanked them up to a dreadful height of 120 feet in the sky. Then it let them hang out up there for a second, to catch the momentum, then, just like that it released powerfully forward down the track.

It was that point when both Lucy and Hades shrieked as if they would blast their lungs. Their heart pounded in their chest and they held each other’s hands. They were then hurled on a double inversion cobra roll which flipped them upside down, and then up again. It was so fast, that it took them totally out of breath. It was kind of an Instagram Boomerang. Now they were going all the way back to the beginning, the same way back they came—only this time backwards.

Another round of shrieks and cries in the boomerang and the ride ended. Both Lucy and Hades faces were red and pale. When they got down the ride, mom and dad held them and asked if they were ok.

They both looked at each other and laughed hard.

‘Yes mom and dad, we are perfectly fine. It was fun’ Lucy said between heavy breaths. Now her face was sweating.

They took a little ice-cream break. Then they were ready to take another swing.

But this time, they didn’t want to leave mom and dad behind.

Especially Hades insisted them for taking a ride with him.

They were left with no choice.

They turned to the section of family rides and there they left the choice on mom and dad.

At least, after much thinking they choose a ride called ‘THE PENGUIN ride’

THE PENGUIN ride was like the classic teacup ride. They got their own cup in which the four seated themselves. Their cup faced-off with eight other boats that rotate on a circular floor atop a pool of water where the classic ride took an exciting twist. As the ride began, the floor of the cup lowered into the water until it disappears below and their raft spun in circles while the other boats twisted around them. To their amusement, each seat on the boat was armed with a giant water to play water battle. Hades shot his pistol at other riders as well as at Lucy, mom and dad, soaking them with bursts of water. Everybody laughed.

But after Lucy and Hades had gone through in the first ride, it was a bit boring for them. Though for mom and dad it was very thrilling.

The poor souls. They didn’t know the meaning of thrill.

So, for now, Lucy chose a thrill ride.

She chose the Contra roller coaster’

It was an Inverting Coaster!

Again mom and dad refused to take on the ride.
The ride looked like a perfect balance of anticipation and suspense, as they couldn’t see it running. When they came, it was in stop condition. Lucy’s gut feeling was telling that this ride was a flood of unbridled thrills. Her adrenaline rushed to take her to new excitement levels. The ride was a maze of continuous inversions leaving you wonder where it started and where ended.

As Lucy and Hades jumped in the Contra Coaster, they were sitting face-to-face to each other and back-to-back with other riders.

The ride started and the coaster grabbed the momentum looping full speed around the single circular track which was reaching up to seven stories high. Lucy was a bit frightened this time. She didn’t know why.

She felt her head spinning.

Hades was sitting in front of her, laughing wildly. Or was it really Hades?

Hades face seemed to turn into a devil’s face which then enlarged and enlarged until it was big enough to seem to cover the whole sky. Two cobra’s slid from each ear of devil’s face which also grew bigger and bigger and lurked towards Lucy.

Lucy grabbed her face with both her hands and bent her head while a huge shriek escaped her mouth.

‘Lucy what happened? Are you OK?’ Hades asked her loudly but in the crowd of voices, his voice was pressed.

Lucy didn’t open her eyes till the end of ride.

When finally, the ride stopped, she got out of coaster.

Her face was white.

Hades told mom and dad that she got scared in the ride. They immediately left the park.

Dad drove this time while mom held Lucy in the back seat. Hades was sitting beside dad.

Lucy was still very silent. Little Hades also seem to be worried.

As they reached home, mom made soup for everyone.

Lucy went to her room to take a nap.

When she woke up, she was feeling much better.

Badger had also come back and now dad, Hades and her dad were watching TV while mom was preparing dinner.

She was preparing to grill some mouth-watering, delicious steak with baked potatoes.

A heartwarming aroma of baked potatoes was filling up the lounge when Lucy entered. She sat on the floor cushion that was placed beside the couch. Lucy dragged the cushion near to where dad’s legs were and put her head in the lap of sofa while her head of turned towards TV.

A film was being played on the TV where Disney world amusement park was being shown.

Hades was fully engrossed in the show.
Badger was texting on his phone while dad was patting Lucy’s hair, affectionately. Suddenly, the Contra Coaster appeared on the screen. Lucy jerked. A shriek came out of her mouth. Her dad was trying to calm down, Badger left his phone and came towards Lucy and Hades looked frightened and as they were all coming to calm her down, she was again back on the Contra Coaster sitting face-to-face with other riders. Shrieking loudly. The ride was swinging at its full speed while Lucy grabbed the handles so tightly that her fingers turned red. Her mind couldn’t understand what was happening. She was right there in her home. Mom was cooking. The sweet aroma of those baked potatoes was still fresh in her nostrils. The clicking sound of Badger’s phone keyboard, while he was texting was still echoing into her mind. How did she come back here? ‘Somebody please stop this ride. Stop!!!! She yelled to her lungs. She was very confused. Did it happened that she didn’t reach her home the first time? Was she dreaming all this? Maybe she was hallucinating. She was seeing things that were not actually there. Then as if some light bulb glowed in her head. If she opened her eyes and Hades would still be sitting in front of her, then it must be her hallucination that she got home. Maybe too much thrill rides were affecting her mind. She opened her eyes to look at Hades. But he was nowhere. In fact, the whole ride was empty. She was the only one riding the monstrous ride. Her face went blue with extreme terror and with the sense of loneliness. It seemed that the whole park was empty. She was the only one there. She closed her eyes so tightly and jerked her head. Suddenly, her surroundings were filled with voices. With laughter’s, murmuring, and gossips mixed in with voices. When she opened her eyes, the park was filled with people who were walking around like nothing happened a while ago there. Lucy’s head was spinning. She got off from the ride. She tried to get help from people the other people around her. But as she approached a couple, and tried to ask what time of day it was, they looked at her as if she was some ghost and turned away from her watching her with skeptical looks. She couldn’t find a single face whom she knew or who might have known her.
She ran to the parking lot and her car was still there. She got in her car and her breath was very fast. Her heart beating at abnormal rates. She drove home very quickly. The house looked very empty and even devoid of all the furniture. She was wondering where everybody was and why the house was empty. Have robbers emptied her house. “Mom! Dad! Where are you?” as she spoke, her voice echoed through the halls. Suddenly she heard something. As if swing was swinging back and forth. The sound was coming from the backyard. She took very slow steps towards the backyard. As she looked outside, the Contra roller coaster had been fitted there somehow. How did the roller coaster come to her home? Her heart raced as if it would come out breaking her rib cage. She ran inside the house calling mom and dad loudly. Suddenly she stumbled and fell down straightly hitting her head with the shelf. Her eyes got closed as blood seeped through her forehead, slowly transmitting her into a state where her senses abandoned her. When she woke up, the blood on her forehead and side of her cheeks had dried up and she was sitting in the Contra Coaster, sitting face-to-face with the other riders. The coaster was looping full speed around the single circular track which was reaching up to seven stories high. Everybody was yelling. But she couldn’t see their faces clearly. They were hidden in some kind of foggy mist. She could only hear voices. She still remembered how she fell down and her forehead started bleeding. If she hadn’t gone back to the house, and it was all just a dream, then what the clotted wound doing at her forehead. As the ride stopped, Lucy cried. She was stuck in some kind of time defect. As if God’s watch had turned out of order. This time, as she ran to her car, she didn’t think of going to her home. This time she was going to travel to Oakland California. She wanted to see if Hades was there. She started her car and turned her car on the road towards California. She was driving as fast as she could. It was four hours drive from San Francisco to California to the house of Hades. Lucy was so tired and mentally confused, and she lost blood. But she drove and drove only taking short breaks to eat and using the restroom of the restaurant that came in her way.
When she reached Oakland, she got a bit relaxed as California was now only half hour drive from here. She decided to take a little break there and turned on the radio the in car and was enjoying coffee. While taking deep breath, she placed her head on the neck rest of car seat. She felt relaxed and dizzy at the same time. Soon, her eyes closed and she went to deep sleep. Her eyes opened by an extreme level of noise and shrieks that surrounded her. She opened her eyes only to see herself in the Contra Coaster, looping at full speed around the single circular track which was reaching up to seven stories high. She yelled and shrieked and cried. She had again ended up back at the same amusement park.

Her effort to escape, she was somehow forever stuck there. But what she had done? Why was this happening to her. The questions were like crazy wolves, barking at her, ready to tear her apart. Only she didn’t want to give herself up to those wolves. How could she get out of this? Was she stuck forever in the hellish devious ride? If this was her forever fate, to revolve around this ride, then she didn’t want to live anymore. Yes! That was it! A light bulb lite in her head. She was stuck in a hellish computer simulation. A constant computerized loop so no matter where she traveled to in the world she would come right back to the amusement park at the ride.

What if she gets herself killed in the ride, then maybe she could get out? But what if she died for real then. Then what was the use of this life, such a lonely life. She looked at the sky and as if she reached at some conclusion. This time she went to the Contra Coaster and went straight to the operating room. She set the ride to the longest ten minutes. It had an autopilot control on it so it could run itself without a human operator. As she came out, she ran herself towards the coaster and almost jumped in while it was starting off. She didn’t bother to fasten the safety restraints. As Contra Coaster was looping at full speed around the single circular track reached up to seven stories high, Lucy let herself fall to the ground.
As her body was falling, she heard people shrieking and crying. She hit the ground hard, her blood splashed everywhere. And then her eyes closed.

When her eyes opened, she was on the bed of hospital, with no visible wounds on her body.

Her mom told her that she collapsed during her ride at the Contra Coaster and they had to bring her to the hospital.

She hugged her mom as if it was her first or last chance to hug her.

“Everything is ok sweetie.” I never thought you would be as much afraid of rides. I am never going to let you to an amusement park again.” Mom smiled as she patted her back.

‘Yes, please don’t let me go there ever again Mom. Lucy then closed her eyes.

THE END
Chapter 1
I woke up to a very dark sky, full of clouds, as I helped myself out of bed. I was feeling a bit tired, maybe because today I could not sleep to my satisfaction. It was only 6:00AM. May be the dark weather outside forced my sleep cycle to go crazy. I made myself a hot cup of coffee while getting dressed and opened my laptop to read daily news. It was my long built habit now, to read newspaper the first thing in the morning. As I was reading the daily news, my phone buzzed, and I quickly looked at the new notification which had appeared on my mobile phone screen. It was an urgent message from the US government. “It is hereby informed for the sake of safety of citizens, that nobody would no more be able to use the Internet unless you have a micro-chipped embedded underneath your skin. Everybody is required to go to visit your local government offices where special centers have been created to fulfill the purpose. Go get yourself micro-chipped and enjoy extra fast internet. However, if you refuse to get yourself micro chipped you will have to face severe consequences and the government will not be responsible for the consequences of your choice.” The message had finished there.
I put aside my phone and began to panic. This was insane. My whole life revolved around activities associated with the internet. At the same time, I didn’t want this chip inside my body. I turned off my laptop. Soon, the WIFI services went dead. I really didn’t know at this point, what I should do. I went to my living room and started thinking. There was no way I was going to let this crazy thing happen to me. I had heard rumors that this thing is going to happen. But I thought when it would happen, I would be ready with a plan. But now when the day has come, I realized that I wasn’t ready at all.

I felt disappointed as well as panicked. One thing was sure that I could never let this happen to myself. The government had really turned fascist. They were going to force everybody to chip themselves. I knew that after a while, they would be searching for me and then I would be forced to be embedded with the chip, anyhow. “No, I can’t let this happen to me” I said to myself.
I hurried up to my room and took out the bag from underneath my bed and my backpack too. I quickly filled in all the basic necessary things in my backpack and some blankets in the back pack. Through the back door of my house, I stepped out and began walking down the street, with my backpack on my shoulder and trolley bag pulling behind my back. I saw other people walking on the street who also looked as if they were in panic. I knew they were also not happy with the new fascist scheme of government and thinking about trying to escape the government like me. The weather was very cold with dark heavy clouds filling up the entire sky. It was soon going to be heavy rain. I had my winter jacket on, but still I was feeling chill of cold running down my spine. I shivered as the cold breeze blew across my ears. I tried to ignore the fact that it was really chilly outside and I should be sitting in my cozy sofa wrapped in my blanket, watching my favorite season on TV. I already missed my sofa and my blanket. The cold air made me miss them even more. But I kept walking. I knew a secret place which I had kept as my ultimate refuge. It was a small cave in the woods. The woods were almost five miles away from my house. At this time, it was the only place that came to my mind where I could possibly hide in. I quickened my pace as fast as I could to cover the sizzling cold span of both time and distance. Ultimately, I reached in the woods, my breath shaking, my lungs felt filled with tiny crystals of ice. By then, the rain had started. It was also getting dark as evening was pacing into the night. I had to find the cave before it was too dark. I had already left my phone and laptop back at home so that they may not track me down by the sneaky devices. I found the cave. It was covered with the trees and branches of nearby trees. I jumped up and grabbed a twig to step in the cave. I sat on the ground. It was cold and wet though, still it was now a place I had to hide myself for a while. My teeth were clicking with each other vibrantly as I shivered. The sky was getting darker. I assumed it would be about seven or eight o’clock. I looked down at my watch to check the time. The clock showed 9 PM. I got my blanket out and tried to cuddle up on the cold, hard floor. It was very hard to fall asleep especially on such hard-cold ground. I have never slept on the ground.
The only thing that reminded me that I could do it was the remnants of those fragments of genes of my ancestors who had lived and slept on such ground, their whole life, probably.
I slowly drifted into light sleep which turned to deep sleep.
Suddenly, I was woken up by a loud noise that was coming from the outside. I got up really quickly and sat up. I realized that it sounded the noise of an airplane.
I ran to the opening of the cave and looked up in the sky. It was really an airplane which was flying very low. It was dark blue which looked hanging up in the sky and it looked like it was going to land right below the cave.
I retrieved myself into the cave to hide my body, while still looking outside at the plane to watch where it was going to land. Then I saw the plane lowering a bit, only to disappear into the air. That was strange.
Where did the plane disappear into the air?
I dipped myself deep into cave and hid for a while until I was sure that plane wasn’t going to reappear again.
I drifted off into very deep sleep once again on the cold hard ground. I woke up in a dizzy state of mind, but I felt I wasn’t in the same cave where I fell asleep.
I was lying on top of a clear cube which was floating and drifting upward into the sky, like some hot balloon, up into the fluffy white clouds. The cube kept taking me higher and higher into the sky, above the thick mat of clouds, until it reached a point where there was a big gold city placed on a big fluffy pile of cloud. A very big transparent glass dome was covering up the whole city from the top.
The clear cube which was taking me up, landed on the cloud where the city gates were located and then suddenly disappeared from around my body. My feet dunked deep as I stepped onto the fluffy cloud.
The gates of the city opened automatically as I walked through them. There was a side walk that was also made up of glass on which I started walking. As I walked on it, it lit up with green lights.
I made my way through the side walk into the city where I met a blue robot at the entrance of the city underneath the dome.
The blue robot immediately tied blue colored futuristic bracelet around my wrist and directed me inside a black cube building.
I followed him down to his office where he asked me to sit down in one of the chairs that were placed in front of a huge glass table. The chair also blinked and lit up as I looked down at it.
There was a small screen on the table. My name KELLY popped up on the screen along with a number ‘5342’.
The other chair from across the table swung around. There was another blue robot with black eyes sitting on the chair. The only difference between the former robot and this robot was that it didn’t have a mouth.
“Kelly, welcome to the ZILO city. My name is Ben. The band you have been equipped with has given to you as an identity of this city. You are special citizen of this city. You can buy anything in the ZILO city with the help of blue bracelet. You are provided with a beautiful house which is located in Meema Court. Here you are going to live with your partner, you can also call him your husband in your language. His name is Rex. Rex is half human and half robot, like us and like you, with human body parts, but with a computerized brain. I hope your stay here at Zilo city will be wonderful” The robot named Ben stopped talking finally.

“Why have I have been brought here? And why? Have I been kidnapped? Is this some kind of dream? What is happening?” I asked Ben, the robot a lot of questions.
The AI robot just stared at me with emotionless still eyes and said nothing from his already mouth-less face.
It was like someone had shut his speech part off.
At last, I also got tired of staring at him like a robot myself and got up from the chair.
As I got up from the chair, probably to look up for another robot, who might give me the answer to my questions, I met a man with long blond hair in the hall way.
He smiled at me and said
“Hi my name is Rex. You must be Kelly. I am your partner hair. You can say we are married and you can proudly call me your AI robot husband here in domed city of Zilo.” He said.
The skin on his face looked like real human flesh, but his blue colored eyes looked still, mechanical and artificial.
It was kind of hard to look at him and think of him as my husband because inside I knew he wasn’t fully human.
Neither I was ready for some forced marriage that lacked any ceremony of marriage.
It sounded more like some ‘verbal husband’.
A flying vehicle landed in front of the main entrance of the building as we both got out.
Rex guided me to the flying vehicle and we both got in.
There wasn’t any driver who drove the vehicle.
The vehicle drove itself automatically and flew into the air.
REX gave the command to the vehicle and directed it to take us to 1356 Meema Court.
The vehicle followed the instructions and took us to a small house that was also domed by glass.
“Kelly, your blue bracelet is connected to the Zilo computer system and it controls everything including buying and selling food and other products for daily life. You must always wear the bracelet if you want to buy and sell in the Zilo city. Do you understand” Rex asked me in his half human, half robotic voice.
“Why I have been brought here to your city?” I asked Rex. He looked at me with his creepy bionic fake blue eyes and gave me a kiss on my forehead which creeped me out. I retrieved a bit from his circle of approach to me. “You have been brought here, my dear Kelly, to make you reproduce with my sperm, of course, to make a half human-half AI robot baby, just like me, using your human DNA.” Said Rex. I looked at him and said, “Have I been brought here to have sex with you?” I knew my eyes stretched full wide with shock. “Why yes! My love, why not, Indeed. You are a smart girl.” He said with a devious smile on his robotic face. My worst nightmare was coming true. Having been forced into sex with an AI robot, so that my human DNA would be misused to make a hybrid baby. REX seemed interested with t mating right away, but I stopped him. “Look Rex, we should get to know each other before we do this.” I stopped him right away because first I wanted to to get past looking at his fake electronic bionic blue eyes, without freaking myself out. How was I supposed to look at his eyes while having intercourse with him? I just couldn’t absorb the idea that we had only known each other about forty minutes earlier and he already wanted to mate with me to have a hybrid baby. I felt myself like some prisoner. But like a worst prisoner, where not only I was being kept as captive but also forced to have hybrid babies of the captives. “Rex, I need to tell you something. I have a neurological disability which is called Cerebral Palsy. I can’t have sex with you or it will be transmitted to you or even the baby. The poor little baby.” I thought that telling him this was going to change his mind about having sex with me, but instead he looked at me with some concern and said, “Don’t worry we can replace damaged part of your brain with Artificial Intelligence brain parts. After you gave birth to our baby, I will take babies’ brain out and replace it with an Artificial brain. Here, we then can make upgrades to your body also.” “Wait, are you saying you are going to take our baby’s brain out. But why?” I exclaimed with a look of terror on my face. “You see, before coming here, we all were humans. But we all were upgraded with AI robot parts to become super humans.” He said, “If you refuse to comply with becoming a super human, you are going get killed in the AI games.” “AI games?” I asked. “Yes AI games, where the half human AI robots like me are made to fight with complete humans like you. We have to kill humans to win the game.” I looked at Rex and began to cry badly. I asked REX where the Earth was.
“The Earth is in another dimension and we were very far from Earth, It’s another dimension, you see. There is no way you can get back to Earth because until now, it must have been destroyed by a massive nuclear war. It may look like a joke to you Kelly, but remember you are in another dimension where the time span has different value than on earth. Here one day makes a thousand years on Earth. And you are almost eight hundred years in future by now, if you are sent back to Earth.” Rex said. “why, it can’t be. I don’t remember the Earth being destroyed” I said while crying. “As I told you are in another dimension. Plus, your memory was wiped out before you were brought here in Zilo.” He said. “Why you are not fully human?” I asked him “I was converted to half human and half machine because those blue robots threatened to kill me if I refused to obey them. They wanted to convert me to a super human. So, I had to. I had no choice” “Where is God?” I asked “God?” Rex looked at me with questioning eyes. “Yes God.” “Zilo is the creator and master of this City. He made all the AI robots and he converts all the humans into super humans and takes their brains out and upgraded their brains out to upgrade them with artificial ones and eyes too.” “Who created ZILO?” I asked Rex. He looked at me, a bit confused and didn’t answered first. “I guess he created himself.” Finally he spoke. Then Rex pulled me close to himself and began kissing me gently. I couldn’t look at his creepy bionic blues eyes, so I closed my eyes tightly and tried not to look at his eyes. His lips and mouth felt completely human, because those parts were still all human and not artificial. He placed me gently on the oval bed which seemed to be floating in the midair. The automatic curtains lowered on the windows and the room was filled with only a bit of dim light. I was afraid to see what kind of body he had underneath his clothing, but it turned out that his mid-section was still human. His arms and legs were just metal, but his reproductive parts were still intact as human parts and fully functional. After he made love to me, I still felt creeped out that a super semi robot, that didn’t even had his human brain anymore had mated with me. I turned to other side of bed and quietly cried myself to sleep.
Chapter 2

_Six weeks later._

I discovered I had become pregnant with Rex’s baby. He was very happy about our pregnancy, but I was not happy because I knew what was going to happen to my baby once it was born. The poor baby’s body was going to be experimented upon and modified so that it had no longer human brain or human eyes. Rex used to leave the house periodically for his job during the day, although he never explained what his job was actually.

I felt like I was living my life as a nightmare or maybe I had died and as a punishment to my earthly sins, I was living in hell. Was Earth really destroyed or was Rex lying to me?

I decided to follow him to work secretly one day to see where he worked. I got into his car before he left for work and hid in the back seat, so that he couldn’t see me. The car stopped at black cube building. It looked like it was main headquarter of the domed city Zilo.

REX walked in the building. I followed him.

I quickly ran into the building and hid behind a desk. I heard people talking outside the building and as I turned my head to look, I saw some twenty blue robots walk in with twenty human women. I saw one of those disappearing airplanes that I had seen at the cave. It landed in front of the building and as it landed it turned into a solid silver UFO.

Those airplanes were probably camouflaged with some sort of cloaking device to disguise as UFOs.

After a while, a few grey four-foot aliens walked in with human women and shut the door behind them. Some of the girls looked as if they were under some sort of trance. I sneaked in through the window.

Rex went to the women and took them to another room. The grey aliens followed him.

Those were the women who appeared to be in a trance. Rex directed them to flat marbled table where he laid them down on the table. Then he took a device out from his bag. It looked some sort of laser blade. He cut their skulls open and took the women’s human brains out of their head and replaced the brains with an AI brain.

Rex then took the human brains to another room. I felt so sick after witnessing all that. My stomach ached and I began to cry.

So, Rex left with the four grey aliens, so I quickly ran to the room where the human brains were taken. I saw thousands of human brains in clear glass containers with name written them. Rex’s human brain was placed in a somehow, bigger container, so his must be special for some reason.
There was a computer system in the room where all the information of human brains was fed in a software, so I quickly looked at the computer and looked on the screen. I clicked on the touch screen to see what information I could find on this computer about Rex.

I discovered that REX was in the US military before he converted into superhuman with Artificial Intelligence in the year 2050 when Satan took over the planet Earth. Rex joined forces with Satan’s Artificial Intelligence hive mind network and Satan’s mind was transferred into Rex’s altered AI robot body.

I knew I wasn’t on Earth anymore, but where was I? If Satan took over Earth in 2050 then why wasn’t I in Heaven with God? So, it appears that Satan is inside of Rex’s body and artificial brain. I was in complete shock that I just mated with Satan and I’m having his child. I quickly looked at the computer screen to see if Rex was forced to be turned into a Super Human with Satan’s soul or if he willingly did it.

As far as I was able to read Rex was captured by one of the grey aliens and taken off to a military base in North Carolina where his body was altered without his consent. They also implanted false memories into his artificial brain to make it look like he willingly connected to Satan’s hive AI mind network.

If he was forced to be altered and given false memories, maybe there was a chance that his human soul could still be saved by God. There had to be a main control grid that would shut everything in the Zilo city and Satan’s controlled world but where was it? I went back to the house and found Rex already sitting there on the couch.

“Where have you been, Kelly, my sweetheart? He asked “I went for a walk around the block for a little while to get some fresh air.” I said.

He believed me, at least, I thought he did. Rex walked up to me and placed his hand on my belly. “You will soon meet your super human AI father and your all human fleshly mother. You will then also be transformed into a super human just like your father and your mother will also be transformed once you are born.” He spoke as if he was also in a state of trance.

I quick ran to the bathroom and began to cry because I knew I had to save my baby from Satan’s evil world. I also had to save Rex’s body from the evil hands of Satan for good. I only had to find out where the main control grid was to shut everything down in the city. If all these women and men had false memories implanted into their AI robot brains and their consciousness was uploaded into the AI brain, it wasn’t their fault that Satan and his demon army tricked everybody by giving them false memories. God would also forgive all the humans that were altered into an AI superhuman with artificial bodies.
I got into Rex car again the next day and went back to the headquarters and went back to the room where all the women were still laying there in a trance like state.
I looked at the computer system screen again and noticed a woman named Leslie Smith hadn’t had her human brain taken out yet or input with false memories.
It said on the computer screen that she was a computer engineer. I slapped her in the face a few times and she woke up and began to scream loudly in shock.
I told her to remain quiet before Rex and the aliens noticed us.
I asked her if she knew how to reprogram artificial intelligence robots and she said yes.
I explained to Leslie that all the women in the room had their brains removed and they all now had AI brains inside them with false memories.
She was shocked.
I told Leslie to reprogram the system so all the women would have their true memories restored.
I also told Leslie to restore Rex’s true memories. She reprogrammed the entire computer system, but she also told me that even with everybody having their memories restored didn’t mean that it is going to shut down the main control grid.
I asked her where she thought the main control grid was?
She said she thinks it’s either on Earth at a military base or in lower Earth’s orbit somewhere.
I told her that Rex told me that Earth was destroyed by massive nuclear wars.
She looked at me and said that it was a lie.
I asked her if we weren’t on Earth then where was it.
She looked at me and said in another dimension of course. We are in Satan’s kingdom right now away from Earth she said.
“How do we get back to Earth to shut off the main control AI grid” I asked.
“Maybe, we can use the UFOS that disguise themselves as jets” She gave an amazing idea.
Leslie and I heard the grey demon aliens coming back into the room with a few of the other AI half-human robots, but Leslie noticed a lot of the AI half human robots hadn’t changed after being reprogrammed.
“Why didn’t they get their true memories come back?” I wondered
Leslie concluded that those AI robots might not be forced to be altered and that they willingly decided to join Satan’s kingdom without being tricked into being altered.
I quickly went back home to see if Rex’s memories had come back after Leslie reprogrammed everything at the headquarters. Once again Rex was sitting on the living room couch waiting for me to come home.
He ran towards me and attacked me with his half human body and threw me on the ground.
“Where were you again Kelly?” He roared with anger.
“I went for a walk again” I said.
“You are lying to me!” He said.
“How do you know I’m lying to you?” I asked Rex.
“Because my real Earthly memories are coming back! Somebody hijacked
the system, didn’t they?” He said.
“Rex! Do you understand that Satan stole your human body without your
consent? He gave you false memories in your artificial brain when he
transferred your consciousness into the AI brain? Satan forced you take the
upgrade against your human will and gave you false memories to think Earth
has been destroyed and that you willingly took the super human upgrade. I
noticed that some of the AI super human robots didn’t change meaning they
weren’t tricked and forced to take the upgrade, unlike you, meaning they
truly have given up their souls to Satan. We must get back to Earth and
destroy the main AI control grid.”
Rex looked at me and began to cry.
“I want to be completely human again. Is that possible?” He asked.
“Leslie said if you get your consciousness and your human brain gets
transferred back into your body. Yes! You can”
I quickly got into one of those UFOS.
I hid so they couldn’t see me in their cloaking device. The Aliens got into the
plane and we took off.
I couldn’t see where we were heading because there weren’t any windows to
look out of, but it felt like we were going through portal with the intense G-
Forces I felt.
We landed, and I waited for Satan’s demons to get out of the craft.
It looked like we landed on an Army base somewhere.
As I got out of the craft, I noticed some army men in their army suits lining
up.
One looked exactly like Rex except him looked completely human.
It doesn’t look like he has been tricked into making AI upgrades to his human
body yet. I ran up to him in a panic and asked him if he knew where the main
control grid was
“Who are you and what control grid are you talking about?” He pulled his
military rifle out and pointed at my head.
“You are coming with me what are you doing on this top-secret military base
with these aliens.” He put me into a restricted area army building that had
more round silver UFOS inside. He made me get inside the UFO with him and
told me to sit tight.
Chapter 3

The UFO took off at hyper speed and we went through a portal again this time it looked like we landed on a space station of some sort. The main control grid was somewhere on this simulator space station. “Why are you so interested in knowing where it is at?” He asked. “I’m not telling you why I want to know.” Rex looked at me and smiled and said “I already know why you want to know.” I looked at him, confused and said “how do you know?” He said “I can read your mind and I know who you are and where you come from. You still have your bracelet on from Satan’s kingdom, so I can read your thoughts here on Earth because the hive AI system here on Earth is in its final phases for all humans here on Earth to be connected the Artificial Intelligence system.” “Do you know where Satan is now” I asked? He looked at me and said “I suppose he is still trapped in the kingdom where you came from, but once the AI main control grid is turned on here on the Earth, he will have complete full access to this world.” I love you Rex, don’t join forces with Satan and ruin your human body and soul. I have your baby inside me and if you turn on the main control grid on this space station your baby inside me will be forced to be turned into a super human the minute it is born. I can tell that Satan has already possessed you with his soul.

We then got news that the control grid on Earth was completely destroyed and that it was blown up. Rex was back to his normal human self no longer in the hands of Satan. Rex lost his AI robot body parts and got his human body parts and human brain back into his body and we were able to live happily ever after together.

The End