



# ENEMY

Paul Evan Hughes





ENEMY

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# E N E M Y

by Paul Evan Hughes



**coming of the storm**





# I

*maggie, don't leave me. i can't do this without you.*

A part of his soul was gone forever, and in its place, something black was born. He would make the Enemy suffer. He would hunt them down to the last traitor.

Judas Simon was reborn in the fire of her death.

It was beauty and it was terror and it was all.

One hundred grams of alloys and plastics and the echoes of biology, the decision was made and the machine was hurtled from a rocket bay miles within the planet to the farthest reaches of the system. The primary propulsion rockets separated and the solar sail deployed in a flash of gossamer golden filaments. The sail spread out to grasp the stars, and a fusion concussion fed the ever-increasing velocity of the precious spacecraft.

At several million astronomical units and several hundred thousand years, the unit achieved nine-tenths light speed. The journey of infinity had begun.

Nanotechnological ramscoops collected the materials required to procreate, and in the night between the galaxies the tiny vessel created an exact copy of itself. The two remnants of a civilization now aeons dead separated and for an instant the first machine felt an emotion. It dismissed the feeling and began to replicate another child. The second vessel set off on an alternate trajectory, the deployed solar sail sweeping eerily before it, mute golden wings in the void of silence and nothing, forever departing from its immaculate and sole parent.

For billions of years the process continued. The original machine died, but the infinite spawn carried the message forever onward. The universe became populated with the machines. The expansion of existence eventually forced the universal heat death. Organic life became an impossibility, and the technological lifeforms flourished. The machines continued onward, waiting for the time that their precious cargo could live again.

When all fell back together, the machines fell silent. Maximum expansion had been achieved. When they encountered a solar system, sometimes organic life could be reconstituted from the biological patterns recorded so long ago on a planet in a system long dust. Now all that they could do was wait for that life to grow anew. In those days between the death of everything and the rebirth of less than humanity, it hurtled into damnation and spawned and its progeny spread outward and outward and consumed everything in their path and before

Omega it judged that all that it had created was good and redeemable and it sent the newborns back into the blackness to save those unfortunate enough to have remained behind.

They would live forever. In the ocean of silver fire, Omega would be the salvation and the nirvana and the extinction and the hereafter.

The void between the stars was torn open, and for an instant, a darker Blackness existed.

The world became light, and the Judas Magdalene fell to her destiny.

Within the chaos of the night, countless futures died.

“Where’d they come from? There shouldn’t be any activity back this far! Even if Command—”

(they could’ve known that already.)

“They’re jeopardizing everything. We have to send word to the others.”

(reynald?)

He felt it. “The Shadow?”

(fatal error. drive containment critical. ten cycles max until containment loss and drive implosion.)

“Can it be prevented? Backup registry?”

(virused.)

“We can’t let them get away.”

(you’ll board the lifeboats and regroup on the surface. i’ll attempt to alert the fleet of our situation. the traitors won’t escape.)

“I’m not going to leave you.”

(it’s the only way. i’ll try to contact you if i can find a secure landing area. i’m scanning the surface...)

“Where is the Enemy vessel now?”

(i’ve tracked it to the belt. hopefully it won’t come back until our reinforcements arrive.)

“If they arrive.”

(...)

“I only hope Simon and the others haven’t been swayed by—”

(simon would never betray us.)

“Kilbourne could have told him anything.”

(he wouldn’t betray us.)

“I’m staying with you.”

(you can’t. if i can’t eject the drives...you’ll be safe on the surface.)

“How long?”

(seven cycles until implosion.)

“Are you sure we’ll be undetected?”

(i’ve found a safe area to planetfall. there’s a trench in the largest ocean.)

“Can your shields withstand the impact?”

(we’ll see.)

“Maggie, I—”

(failure of primary containment system. shadow drive’s going critical. i’m launching your lifeboat, reynald. prepare for—)

“Maggie—Identify phase space disruption at seven-five, nine-five, bubble one eight!”

(it’s one of them. enemy pattern.)

“This When’s crawling. We have to—”

(launching lifeboats.)

“Magdalene, don’t!”

(goodbye, jean.)

The four lifeboats of the Judas Magdalene rocketed from her hull and fell to the planet beneath them: innocent blue, unaware of the impending invasion from above. Magdalene calmly tracked the Enemy vessel as it swept closer. Within her, hidden servos and force fields readied themselves.

The Enemy surged at the Judas, the furious mind-essence reaching, reaching.

The center of the Judas erupted in hellfire as Magdalene ejected the deadly Shadow-powered phase drive into the face of the Enemy. Waves of energy rippled outwards, and the vessel was torn apart in the wake of spilt pattern. Magdalene, drained of energy, drifted languidly into the atmosphere. An immense shard of the Enemy cut through the air and fell to the surface.

Magdalene spun, watching the debris fall to the surface. She struggled to maintain position, felt herself being pulled into the drop corridor being torn into the planet’s atmosphere by the wreckage.

It’s too big...It won’t burn up on the way down.

(magdalene to lifeboats.)

Silence.

(magdalene to lifeboats. please respond.)

**SILENCE, JUDAS.**

The Enemy mind-essence surged through her thoughts, and Magdalene writhed in that pain and terror. She spun her weapons nacelles toward the threat, but felt her energy draining as she was pulled ever closer to the surface. How could there be so many in this When?

(lifeboats please respond! don’t land! get out of the system!)

The Enemy grasped with its essence, snaring three of the four lifeboats. It pulled the tiny vessels intimately close and began to absorb them into itself. Magdalene's heart ached as she saw one of the vessels self-destruct in an attempt to save the others, but to no avail. As the web beam swept around to trap the last lifeboat, Magdalene deftly maneuvered between the pod and the Enemy, snapping the connection.

The lifeboat, trapped in the wake of Magdalene's gambit, plummeted helplessly through the atmosphere, still drained from the effects of the essence. A line of fire formed behind it as gravity's hold became stronger and friction caused the hull to ionize.

Magdalene watched the lifeboat escape as she hung motionless in her lifeless prison. She prayed for their safety.

The Enemy was furious. Its companion destroyed, the lifeboat lost...

**DIE THEN, JUDAS. YOUR VIRUS WILL BE PURGED FROM OMEGA SOON ENOUGH.**

It lashed out at the Judas Magdalene, and the sky became fire.

Mortally wounded, powerless, she fell to earth.

The Enemy, satisfied with the kill, set about the Purpose once more.

In the black within the blackness, voices appeared.

OBJECTIVE ONE ENGAGED, DISPATCHED.

a flicker of broken images, madness within electronic void

**A CERTAINTY((?))**

THE JUDAS FELL TO ITS DEATH.

**SHADOW DRIVE((?))**

LOST.

**SURVIVORS((?))**

TWO LIFEBOATS WEBBED, ENCOMPASSED. ONE LOST BEFORE PATTERN INSERTION..

**THE FOURTH...**

FOURTH VESSEL CONTACT LOST, PRESUMED PLANET IMPACT.

**A SUPPOSITION. A MISTAKE. THE COST IS LIFE.**

I OBEY. MAY MY DESCENDANTS BETTER SERVE YOU.

A flash of non-existence. A shriek of pain and pleasure. Shards of insanity beckon.

**RECOUP. JUNCTURE IN THE BELT. THE BATTLE IS AS YET A DRAW. THE PURPOSE WILL BE OURS. THE PURPOSE WILL BE COMPLETED.**

A smile? The blackness closes in upon itself.

“We’re losing it!”

Reynald struggled to regain control of the lifeboat as it fell out of the sky to the planet below.

“Captain, navigation is gone!”

Plunging from the night, the lifeboat left a trail of white behind it. Reynald saw the blackened earth below them, spangled with clusters of city lights.

“Impact trajectory?”

“A lake in one of the northern continents—”

“Well, at least it’s better than land. How long?”

“Two minutes.”

The cities below them drew closer. Reynald saw a glint of water on the horizon. Closer and closer...

“Brace for impact. Shields at maximum.”

They went down.

Half a world away, debris from the Enemy that had been destroyed above the planet cut through the atmosphere at a phenomenal rate. A shard of the vessel half a mile long fell from the sky and struck the small atoll of Santa Fosca in the Pacific with a force greater than any weapon ever made by man could have achieved. The inhabitants of Santa Fosca felt no pain.

Pulled down in the phase wake, Magdalene glided over the atoll as the Enemy wreckage struck. She was blinded by the impact, and she felt herself rocked by the waves of pattern energy released from the crash. Traveling at many times the speed of sound, she could not maintain control of the Judas at such depleted energy levels. The sleek form of the vessel flew over the sun-dappled waves, leaving a fury of torrents in her wake.

Finally, she could hold it no longer. The tips of her nacelles dipped into the water first, sending the rest of the vessel into a violent somersault. End over end, she slammed across the surface of the ocean, each impact stressing her hull more and more. Magdalene tried to shift to minimize the damage to herself, but her residual Shadow energy was gone; when she had ejected the phase drive, she had also forfeited any hope of controlling the Judas vessel. Her form eventually skidded across the surface until her entire right nacelle was pulled under. The drag slowed her down, and she began to sink.

Magdalene plummeted into the ocean. Waves swept outward from her impact.

On the horizon, a pyre marked Santa Fosca. Soon, the natives would investigate. The sky was fire and the ocean an expanse of boiling sapphire. The impact would kill many.

She floated down, down. So far down.

Magdalene came to rest near her pre-determined landing zone, a trench in the largest ocean, many tens of thousands of feet deep.

She would be safe there.

She hoped.

Wind River, D.C.

Annoyance. The alarm clock, already? No, the blaring sound was the communications link. He sleepily sat up in bed, hand motion activating the lights. A quick tap to the right temple opened the interior comm channel.

“Hmmp. Yeah. What? Are you—I’ll be right there.” Another tap cut the link.

He had a bad feeling about this.

David Jennings was far from being the greatest of American presidents, but he had dealt with his share of catastrophes. More than his share, in fact, and he had a terrible feeling about this.

Santa Fosca. Gone.

He felt a headache beginning.

A sensible bathrobe concealing his sensible pajamas, he opened the double-door to his quarters. Two heavily-armed Milicom officers stood silently at attention, saluted, transported him down hallway, down elevator, down hallway to the Red Room.

Jennings wiped sleep from his eyes as he waited for voice- and thumb-print identification. The large shield doors cycled open to reveal the Red Room, the White House tactical center. Within, several high-ranking Pentagon officials poured over maps and faxes. The holographic display in the center of the room projected a globe, a flashing red dot in the Pacific...

Two forty-five in the morning. It showed on their faces.

“Mr. President.” A gruff voice. Jennings looked up at its source. General Cervera. Great. Grand. Wonderful.

“Cervera.” Jennings glared civilly at his Secretary of War and Defense. “What’s the situation?”

“At approximately 0130 hours EST our territory of Santa Fosca was encompassed by an apparent thermonuclear explosion. Well, some kind of explosion. Satellite photos revealed complete surface destruction of the atoll.”

The hologram magnified the flashing red area until it was visible as a string of small islands. The image was obscured by thick smoke.

“How can you tell? The cover is so thick—”

“It’s closed in since we first got word from Satcom.”

“Can’t we get any closer?”

“Sorry, Mr. President. We have to wait for another satellite to line up; we have three closing on the area for triangulation. The cover is too much for this angle.”

“Has anyone claimed responsibility?”

“Not yet, sir.”

“I want our operatives to report in. Any troop movements lately, especially our neighbors?” His thumb pointed behind his back in a direction that may or may not have actually been north.

“No, sir. Our suppression forces have reported nothing to the north, and nothing overseas. The resistance has been quiet for quite some time.”

*Too quiet*, Jennings thought, but did not verbalize for the obviously cliché sentiment of the statement. Jennings paced, staring at and through the foggy image of that damned island...

“Any word from.. them?”

“Sir?”

“The Styx, General. Any word from the Styx?”

“No, sir. I doubt even they could have survived this.”

Jennings rubbed his temple, closed his eyes.

A dull ache formed behind his eyes as he thought of the Styx project. There were still so many unanswered questions, so many mysteries behind the whole why and how of the debacle. If only they hadn’t tampered with the thing in the mountain... Oh well. There was no turning back. The remnants of the Styx project had been placed on Santa Fosca for everyone’s own good. The project had been a failure and the remaining specimens had been isolated on the tiny atoll.

Bad feeling...

“There’s more.”

A second flashing dot appeared as Cervera returned the projector to global setting.

“What the hell is that?”



“At 0135 hours, a tidal wave was formed five hundred miles from the Santa Fosca impact site. Waves washed over what was left of Guam. We don’t yet have a death toll, but we’re expecting the figures to be pretty high.”

“The wave covered Guam? That would mean—”

“We’ve lost contact with most of our Pacific bases. There’s casualties in the Pact zone as well. This was a big blast.”

“What could have caused an explosion like that?”

“The source of the wave is still unknown.”

“Could someone be testing out there without our knowledge?”

Cervera didn’t answer, but adjusted the projector once more. A third red dot appeared on the other side of the globe.

Close. Much too close.

“*Lake Superior*? Cervera, what’s going on?”

“At 0145 hours, a smaller impact wave was detected within Lake Superior by a Containment Line vessel, the Indomitable. Apparently something came down with enough force to sink another one of our Line ships, the Freeman Teller.”

“Did the Teller have visual contact?”

“No, sir. They reported a complete systems blackout before and after the impact. Whatever came down came in fast and close. It almost hit the Teller.”

“Three impacts within fifteen minutes. How fast can we have teams at the sites?”

“We’ve sent seven ships to Santa Fosca, and we’ve ordered the Third Pacific Fleet to Guam to assist in recovery operations.”

“And Lake Superior?”

“The Indomitable is investigating the impact site.”

“I want five other vessels taken from the Containment Line and sent to that site. We have to know more.”

“Yes, sir. At the Guam site, we’ve called in remote subs and a destroyer from the Atlantis settlement to investigate. The Mariana Trench is the deepest trench in the whole Pacific. We’ll try to gain visual contact with whatever came down, unless it was a bomb.”

Jennings pondered that statement. Unless it was a bomb...

“We need to know what we’re dealing with. I want everyone on this, stat. But keep it quiet. We need to know if we’re talking meteors or atomics or...” He drifted off. “Something else.”

“Yes, Mr. President.”

“Contact Satcom. Level three online alert.”

“Yes, sir.”

It would be a long night.

Bad, bad feeling...

the black

OBJECTIVE ONE: DISPATCH SUCCESS QUESTIONABLE.

**REPORT.**

SUSPECTED LIFEBOAT SURVIVAL.

**A SUPPOSITION((?))**

PROBABLE SURFACE IMPACT, CREW SURVIVAL.

**THEY WILL FALL WITH THE REST.**

THEY WILL. PROGRESS((?))

**BELT DEPLETION NINETY PERCENT.**

DEPARTURE SOON. PLANET HARVEST FOLLOWS((?))

**PLANET HARVEST FOLLOWS. UPLOAD FOLLOWS.**

joy in the black of hell

**AUGMENTATION OF PURPOSE PATTERNS FOLLOWS.**

**SOON.**

PURPOSE WILL BE COMPLETED.

**COMPLETION IS THE PURPOSE.**

knowledge of ancient honor. pleasure

**QUERY. ONE BELT REMNANT, ONE BACKWARD((?))**

insight

REMAIN THEN. COMPLETE HARVEST. WE DEPART.

**GO THEN. WE WILL JOIN IN THE PURPOSE SOON.**

PURPOSE BE.

the darkness within the void parts one remains. one fades into distant  
memory

Panic.

Water flooded the lifeboat.

They blew the hatch, and everywhere there was water.

Reynald activated the auto-delete sequence as he gasped his last breath of air before climbing out of the lifeboat. The water was stifling, frigid. They swam up into the moonlight.

In the night air, eight men released their burning lungs and inhaled for seemingly the first time. Most of the young men had never before tasted real air. They were born anew in a world of black and cold.

Lights to one side: the darkened shoreline.

They swam.

Magdalene:

She slept but did not sleep. She felt the ocean around her, the suffocating press of the depths. When had she last felt water, really truly *felt* water? Memories of too-cold-to-actually-be-enjoyable dips in the North Channel.

So tired.

Thoughts. Flashes in the black ocean of her mind.

She snapped out of her daze. Kilbourne—The Fleet must be alerted, at least those remnants that hadn't been swayed. Simon must be warned of the plan.

Under her careful and gentle watch, she initiated a quantum singularity, just large enough to slip a communications beacon into the void.

(compressed beam communication relay initiated. tight beam when hole search initiated.)

A pause. A glimmer of hope.

(relay reports tight beam when hole site identification positive. whenstream beacon placed.)

A frown.

She saw, she felt them. So many screams, so many souls.

(when hole collapse initiated. tight beam communiqué to upwhen, as follows:)

A particle of matter is shifted into non-existence. It bears a message into the past, present, future.

(judas clearance gethsemane magdalene emergency relay: enemy forces on alpha-direct transit. request assistance from any available judas. purpose nears completion.

(the purpose must be prevented. from all whens, converge.)

Exhausted, Magdalene slept.

black

A BEACON. A SIGNAL. PURSUIT FOLLOWS.

**A BEACON((?)) THE JUDAS LIVES.**

ACTION((?))

**A RUSE; A TRAP.**

a smile in hell

**THEY BELIEVE THE PURPOSE IS COMPLETED.**

PURPOSE PATTERN SACRIFICE, AUGMENTATION.

initiative. flicker of a higher purpose

**INITIATE HARVEST UPLOAD, JUDAS SEARCH.**

THIS MAGDALENE WILL SERVE US...THE CONTAGION OF  
HER COMRADES WILL COME TO HER AID. WHEN THEY DO—

**THEY WILL BECOME ONE WITH THE PURPOSE.**

the darkness parts.

## II

Harkness, Michigan.

Located on the Keweenaw Peninsula. Population 1,250. Major industry: commercial fishing.

Harkness was a quiet town. Little crime. The people were honest and God-fearing. The most exciting event in Harkness was the Saturday night bingo and dance at the American Legion downtown.

Harkness was a peaceful town, one of those backward holdovers from an era and a way of life that died long before the wars of the third millennium. It was indeed a happy town.

1:45 A.M.

Buddy McClure was the town drunk of Harkness, and as always, Buddy was piss-drunk and loving it. He left the dance at about midnight and went to Smitty's Bar for a couple of cold ones. A couple of cold ones turned into twelve beers and a dangerously nondescript mixed drink someone had left on the bar. Buddy was on top of the world and riding it like the bucking bronco he had sometimes hoped it would be in those naïve and energetic days before he discovered the companionship of booze and smokes and dangerous women. Well, truthfully there had been a lot more booze than smokes, and statistically speaking an amazing dearth of dangerous women in Buddy's life, with the notable exception of that cheating bitch he had knocked up in high school and knocked around so much during the course of their three-month marriage that she left him for Buddy's best friend, and that shrew he lived with now who day by day sucked more of Buddy's life-energy from his soul.

Buddy now stood on the rocky beach, feeling the cool night air come in off the lake. The moon was in the ice-clear sky, creeping back down from Tuesday's full moon. Buddy had spent Tuesday night here on the beach staring down that devil moon in much the same state as he was this fine evening.

Smitty had taken his keys, so Buddy had decided to walk down to the beach. He stopped in the parking lot to take the spare bottle of Jim Beam from the back of his ancient pickup truck. Jim was always a good friend to have along with you when you took drunken walks on the beach at one-thirty in the morning.

It was a quarter to two when Buddy found that his good friend Jim had up and left him. He took up a pitcher's stance and threw the empty bottle into the

air. He had been three-time All-County pitcher back in the adolescent days of locker rooms smelling of sweat and back seats smelling of cheerleaders smelling of Buddy. His picture still graced the trophy case of Harkness High School. Made it all the way to the state finals back in '28, only to be soundly defeated by Marquette. Steroid-pushing fucking queers. What a bunch of assholes. Twenty-two years, five jobs, two wives, and three brats later, Buddy found that he still had that glorious pitching arm.

The bottle flew up into the night air and for a brief moment it was a silhouette over the face of the moon. He heard the bottle splash in the lake, a hollow, dead sound that always raised the gooseflesh of his forearms.

Looking out onto the lake, Buddy saw the blinking lights of a boat. It was much too big to be one of Harkness's fishermen pulling a late night. This vessel was a monster, and the spotlights emanating from the deck, sweeping out across the lake, revealed the massive deck-mounted artillery. It was definitely one of the Containment Line.

Something caught his eye: a shooting star.

A smile lit Buddy's face. The arc of light across the black sky flew across the face of the moon.

Buddy's smile faltered. Shooting stars are not triangular.

A visceral and sensual flood of memory engulfed Buddy as he remembered high school geometry class, Miss Banks interrogating young rough Buddy on the difference between an isosceles and an equilateral triangle.

*I don't know.*

*But you'll have to know for the test, Buddy.*

*Who cares? When will I ever need to know about triangles out on the fucking docks? When will I ever need any of this?*

He blinked and Miss Banks, the unfortunate mixture of teacher, disciplinarian, and creator of countless pubescent schoolboy mid-class erections was gone, replaced by a burning light in the sky, painful to look at directly.

He followed the path of the shooting star. Didn't meteors usually blink out after a second or two? This one looked like—

It was going to hit the lake.

Buddy staggered and fell backwards as the sky became fire and a sickening heat. It was going to hit the boat, he was sure of it.

Buddy screamed at the impact.

A massive plume of water erupted from the lake.

The lights on the boat began to furiously bob up and down. The vessel struggled to maintain horizontal, and it scarcely avoided rolling over completely. Good lord, Buddy thought. Think of the wave that'll make.

Seconds later, Buddy was encompassed in the twenty-foot wall of water that washed the beach. The shockwave and concussion knocked him against the ground, and cold bitter water flooded his open mouth and stole his breath. Flailed around like a rag, Buddy was pulled back into the lake as the water receded. He fought to right himself, his lungs on fire and his world becoming sheer frigid black.

Buddy McClure's neck was broken against the rocks in an inaudible snap as he joined his old friend Jim Beam on the lakebed.

"Report!"

"Horizontal maintained, stress breaches belowdecks. We have men in the water."

"What in the name of Sweet Mother Mary was that?"

"We don't know, sir. Complete radar failure, and we're running on reserve power. We're trying to contact—"

"We're taking on too much water. We can't—"

"Get Fleet on the com. Someone has to find out what the hell that was, and we're going to be a little too busy saving our own asses in a few minutes to give a rat's ass. Call in the nearest Line vessel."

"Fleet is sending the Indomitable, sir."

"They're twenty fucking miles away! Tell Fleet to lock in the line and we'll launch our lifecraft. The Indomitable better haul ass."

"Yes, sir."

a white place, out of time.

the judas persevered.

waging a war out of time and space, they chased the enemy, dying to prevent the damnable purpose.

within the white place, a distress signal was found.

[commander? a beacon from judas gethsemane magdalene. priority channel.]

"What's she say?"

[enemy sighted and tracked on direct alpha purpose transit. the purpose nears completion.]

"Harvest?"

hatred. knowledge of past failures.

[they're apparently ready to synthesize the upload generators.]

contemplation. realization.

“Open channel to Judas Simon.”

[done.]

((hannah?))

“Simon, we’ve identified and tracked Enemy vessels on a direct-Alpha run. Is your fleet prepared for combat?”

((we’re at 90%, but no one’s been able to find maggie—))

“She’s already there. We sent her on a recon run in Fourteen-seven. She found a nest, and they’re ready to complete their mission.”

((fourteen-seven? that’s five thousand years earlier than we—))

“Take your fleet and intercept the Enemy before they can make it to the Alpha Point. Find them in transit and destroy them. It will buy us a little more time to gather our other forces for the final assault.”

((and magdalene?))

Indeed. And Magdalene..?

“She’s been wounded. Her beacon was very weak. It wouldn’t be a good idea to—”

((wounded? how seriously is she hurt? can she make it back?))

“Simon, we don’t have time for this.”

((i’ll *make* the time for it, hannah.))

“Fine. Go get her, but be careful. We don’t know how many Enemy that When holds.”

((yes, commander.))

“Then it’s set. Engage Shadow drives.”

Within the white place, she watched as Simon’s forces faded from existence.

*So Magdalene is still alive... That will have to be remedied.*

“And there she goes.”

The ASCL Freeman Teller drifted with increasing speed beneath the surface of the lake. The lifecraft stood by and watched as their mothership went vertical and slid into the depths. Spotlights swept the area, and the small vessels surveyed the dark waters for overboard seamen.

“How many?”

“Still over thirty men unaccounted for, sir. Tracking chips aren’t responding.”

“Keep looking. How far away is the Indomitable?”

“Closing quickly. That’s her to the northeast.”

Across the expanse of the lake, they observed a fast-approaching vessel. It was the same model as the Teller, one of the Containment Line. The



Indomitable cruised quickly and quietly up to the impact zone, and flooded the area with light. The deck guns swept back and forth in readiness.

The Indomitable would find and destroy whatever had sunk the Teller.

Harkness. 2:30 A.M.

The eight dark figures that emerged from the lake surfaced half a mile down the beach from where Buddy McClure's broken body lay. They were cold, wet, exhausted, and confused, now trapped on a world that was thousands of years younger than the worlds they had known.

In silence, they faced the lake as Reynald activated a small control panel on his forearm. A bright flash came from within the lake as a miniature quantum singularity engulfed the lifeboat.

At first, it appeared that nothing had happened. The vessel that had come to the aid of the sunken ship was still visible out there, but then, for an impossible instant, the very surface of the lake seemed to bulge outward and contract back in. With an ear-splitting roar, the explosion rose to the surface, incinerating the Indomitable and the lifecraft of the Freeman Teller almost immediately. There was little debris, and even that was quickly pulled under. The surface of the lake returned to its original placid state.

The men turned from the lake and began to walk.

"We'll scan for Magdalene." Reynald did not sound hopeful.

"I saw her come down behind us. She can't be that far away."

"Do you think anyone saw us come down?"

"I don't know, but someone is bound to be suspicious when that boat doesn't report in. Let's get as far away as possible."

They slid into the night.

"Has the Containment Line reported anything?"

"Nothing, sir. We have five vessels closing on the site."

"How could something have slipped through the Line?"

"Mr. President, we haven't ruled out a mechanical failure.

It could just be—"

Jennings slammed his fist to the table, covered with satellite reports and faxes. "Two of our ships are gone, Cervera. That's over three hundred of our sailors. This isn't an accident. Someone is attacking us."

"But—"

"No buts. I want that area secured. Tell the Harkness Chickenshit Rescue Squad to pull back from the site. Have the Line close in. I want the whole

damned county sealed off. No one gets into or out of Harkness, Michigan. That site has to be secure.”

“Mr. President—”

“Cervera, would you like me to relieve you of duty? God knows I’ve wanted to for years. Don’t give me a reason to now, Tony, when I need your cooperation the most. Someone’s trying to start a goddamned war out there. Secure the area.”

“Yes, sir.”

Jennings stood in front of the globe projection.

“This is getting too damned out of hand.”

Cervera glared coldly at the president.

“Yes. Sir.”

Magdalene:

She felt the Shadow tech sweep over her, and despaired as she calculated the distance to Reynald. The last survivors of her crew had crashed half a world away.

She activated a homing beacon.

A silent alarm. A dull thudding pain. Waning energy.

Magdalene retreated to the black of sleep.

Reynald sighed.

The homing beacon was so far away, so faint. It was also emitting an erratic pulse, quiet and full of static. Magdalene had been badly damaged in her landing, apparently.

“Maggie’s on the other side of the planet. We’ll have to find a way to get to her, and quickly. She’s fading fast.”

He watched hope drop from the faces of his troops.

“We have to get off this rock before it’s too late.”

the black: a heap of shattered images

RUSE INITIATED. THE PREY IS ANTICIPATED.

a smile from a mouth without substance

THE ANNOYANCE WILL BE DESTROYED.

**THE PURPOSE WILL BE COMPLETED.**

THE JUDAS ENSUE(?)

**THEY FALL TO THEIR END. THEY FALL TO THE BLACK.**

pleasure. hope of pain  
HARVEST WILL FOLLOW RUSE. UPLOAD WILL ENHANCE THE  
PATTERN.

**SOON THE PATTERN WILL BE COMPLETE. THE PURPOSE  
WILL BE COMPLETED.**

COMPLETION IS THE PURPOSE.  
the black closes.

Harkness. 3:30 A.M.

The dance was winding down. Billy Joe and the Lone Stars were packing up, and the only music left was being piped from an ancient Wurlitzer jukebox: country and western. A few couples still slow-danced out on the floor to a decrepit Kenny Rogers ballad.

Ray Shore went from table to table picking up the beer bottles and emptying the ashtrays into a wastebasket, as his father and his father's father had done before him. He hummed along to the song, as his father and his father's father had done before him. Kenny Rogers was truly timeless.

He heard the main door open, but he paid no attention to it. Just another couple going off to do whatever drunk couples do on Saturday nights.

He felt a shadow fall over him.

A large man faced him. He was very tall, dressed in a tight black material that revealed the outline of hard muscle and a black overcoat that draped to the floor.

He had the most striking gray eyes Ray had ever seen.

Ray's heart thudded in his throat as he stared into those eyes.

"Help you, mister?"

The couples on the dance floor had taken notice of the man in black. Their movements faltered, stopped. Kenny Rogers persisted on the jukebox, but no one was listening anymore.

The man spoke. "I need directions to the nearest..." He considered. "Airport."

Ray let a smile play across his face. "You joking, mister?"

The man looked at him silently.

The main door opened again. Two more men came in, dressed in the same black uniform as the first. One was young, maybe seventeen or eighteen, about the age of Ray's son, who would someday take over the bar. The other was middle-aged, bald, scarred. There was an odd tattoo on his left temple. It looked to Ray like the marking on the bottom of cereal boxes. A bar code.

They all had the same eyes.

Ray swallowed hard. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down. "Depends where you want to get to. The Hancock Civic Airstrip is closest, but it only runs local flights. There's the Marquette Airport, and the Sawyer Air Force Base—"

"Air Force Base?" The middle-aged man's eyes flickered.

"Yeah, but it's closed to us civvies, especially since the wars and all. Mostly they use it to fly in supplies for the Containment Line. Some people say they have B-4's stored there... Say, are you guys Feds? I mean, all dressed up like secret undercover agents and stuff..."

The man in black grinned. "Hardly."

Ray felt terror grip him. "You're Styx, aren't you?"

Confusion. "What?"

"You guys are some of those Styxies who escaped, right? Mister, I promise I won't tell no one about this. You're secret's safe with me."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

One of the men in the doorway tapped his wrist.

The man in black looked Ray in the eyes. "You're going to take us to this air force base. Sawyer."

"Now listen, I—"

"Bring him."

The two younger strangers grappled with Ray and led him out the door, to the disbelief of the frozen people on the dance floor.

Vessels screaming through the fabric of time.

((okay, listen up. first and second assault groups continue on alpha-direct trajectory. we were alerted to an enemy on purpose transit. this might be it. we didn't know that they were this far back, and we have no idea how much energy they've collected at alpha. we don't know how much of the pattern they've recovered already. if they've started to synthesize the upload generators, we have to move fast...we'll engage the enemy in transit and then investigate the alpha point to see how far they've gotten. second assault group star one comes with me. maggie is out there somewhere, and she's been hurt badly. we're going to pick her up.))

<simon, how did we miss this much activity so far back?>

((no time for questions. I'll see you at the point.))

Simon opened a singularity and began the search for

Magdalene's beacon, transmitting weakly through the fluid fabric of the past.

The vessels split into two groups and faded into the night.

Magdalene:

A RUSE; A TRAP. THE JUDAS FALL TO THEIR END.

The words tore through her mind without warning. The Enemy mind-essence revealed itself to her for an instant, then was gone.

A trap? She had to alert Simon. The Enemy somehow knew that she had summoned the Judas. Had her beacon been intercepted by the damned? They would be preparing to engage them. It was a trap.

She felt a presence caress her mind. ((maggie?))

Confusion. Terror.

(simon!?)

((it's me, maggie. don't worry; we're close. we're coming to get you.))

(your fleet?)

((second assault, star one. First assault and the rest of second are pursuing the enemy in transit—))

(no! it's a trap!)

((what do you mean?))

(there are more enemy here than i'd anticipated. simon, i don't know how many. there may be a larger force than this at alpha point already. they must have intercepted my beacon. they'll be waiting at alpha! they're luring us to the point. it's a trap.)

despair.

((but this is an uncharted when. how could we have missed this much enemy activity?))

(it's command.)

((command? what do you mean?))

(simon, kilbourne's—)

should she tell him? what if they were listening?

(that can wait. can your forces be recalled from the point before they—)

((you know it's too late. if the enemy found your last beacon, they'd find this one, too. it'd never get through.))

(i'm so sorry.)

((it's not your fault, maggie. this isn't the first time we've been deceived by the enemy. i'll be there soon, and we'll get you back to command.))

command...

should she tell him? she decided not to, for the time being.

(may their deaths serve a purpose.)

((((first assault, do you see anything out there?)))

<that's a negative. keep your eyes open. it could be anywhere.>

((it'd better show up pretty fucking fast. we're going to be out of the tube in three decems.)))

<be that as it may, assault two, keep your eyes open. if we have to engage it in the bubble, then we'll engage it in the bubble.>

((it's not engaging it in the bubble that worries me...it's his friends that could be waiting for him there.)))

<there's been no report of activity this far back. how many could there be?>

((there could be an infinity of them.)))

The statement was bold, but it was true. How many enemy were out there, watching?

((he's not here. either maggie was wrong, or he whendropped and we didn't see him.)))

<assault groups one and two, prepare for whendrop out of the tube into the alpha point periphery. prepare for enemy engagement.>

((here goes nothing.)))

The Alpha Point:

The Enemy floated in the blackness, waiting.

The black was pure, the absence of light. The Enemy thrived here, basking in the primordial waves of nothingness.

This was Alpha, a place and time beyond definition, beyond the light, beyond sanity. To be at the Alpha Point was to be at both the beginning and the end of the universe. It was, is, and will be the beginning and end point of the cycle of existence.

In the nothing, there was anticipation.

Silence. A shimmering.

The peaceful strata of void was torn apart by a sphere of expanding, fiery white brilliance.

The universe had begun again.

Just instants into the past, on a different plane of phase space, the Enemy activity was frantic. A sea of black forms, scurrying, placing the offerings from infinite futures before the altar of the Alpha god, layering the bioneural pattern energy around the singularity. Souls by the trillions, waiting for upload into the Omega Point, screamed into the dead night. When the time of the Purpose had come, the planes would be opened to one another and the souls would be uploaded into the Point. The Pattern would again be complete, after billions upon billions of lifetimes.

But it was not yet time...It was time to deal with the Judas threat.

The Enemy vessels that lay in wait were placed in stark silhouette by the blazing point of hell as it swept outward at them.

The beginning was silent in its fury.

The Enemy faded into the past once more, to await their quarry.

The Judas fell backwards through time, and they emerged from the Whenstream just minutes before Alpha in a stark flash of white.

This was a Black place.

((((and we're clear. sound off, people.)))

Voices, hundreds. Minds touched one another in reassurance.

<assault one ready.>

[assault two ready.]

((((keep it tight. alpha point emergence in two-dot-five decems.)))

<he's here...i can feel him. keep your eyes open, assault one. he might have friends.>

There was no sign of the Enemy yet, but it had to be here...There had been no sign of it in the Stream, even though Magdalene had said that there was an Enemy on Purpose-transit. They would destroy it before it could attempt to infuse the pattern load it bore. And when it did not report back, there would be more Enemy coming. This could be the last stand...

Simon's fleet held their positions, blind in the innate blackness that was non-existence. There was no light in a place where there were no stars.

((((this is it. let's end it right here, right now.)))

The Enemy had a surprise coming.

The Alpha Point.

A slipping of matter; the ignition of infinity: the adversary of Omega.

A childlike future civilization would name it the Big Bang.

It was hardly a fitting name. The fury of the Alpha singularity was as silent as the void that had preceded it.

In the pure white, the countless Judas were thrown into stark contrast, each casting a long black shadow into the harsh, palpable light.

In the spaces between the Judas, where there should only have been the white light of the Point, a seemingly infinite horde of writhing, black shadows faded into existence.

The Enemy.

black

laughter like so many tortured pleas resonates  
satisfaction of the kill

<jesus, richter and santa go go go! assault one break, formation delta!>  
They flew to their ends.

The Enemy cut through the Judas as a pack of wolfs cuts through a herd of sleeping ewes. Simon's fleet was caught completely unaware. Those who had been staging an ambush were themselves ambushed.

Many Judas fell immediately to the wrath of the fierce beams of light emerging from the Enemy vessels. Their hulls punctured and pierced, rended apart, they flashed from this realm of reality in tiny white explosions. The Enemy bathed the fleet in a paralyzing phase disruption, snapping the Judas' tether to the Stream and making them vulnerable to physical destruction.

Coming to their senses after the immediate shock had worn off, other Judas began to maneuver between the flailing Enemy forces and the derelict Judas vessels. The ravenous horde webbed the dead Judas and fed upon them voraciously. The Judas wielded the Shadows against the Enemy horde, but severed from the Stream, they had little effect on the lumbering, shapeless number of the Enemy. The Enemy moved as a fluid, deftly avoiding the fury of the Shadows. So many...

The waves of existence the Point had set into motion were closing in upon the site of the battle at an incomprehensible rate.

The Enemy struck down upon the Judas with the god-like power of their webs. Engulfed in the silver strands of phase energy, the Judas died and became one with the Black. Only a few Judas left...

The Enemy suddenly halted their pursuit of the remaining Judas. They converged from all sides and merged into one massive concentration, throwing a haunting shadow over the dazed remnants of the Judas fleet.

The hideous Enemy began to fade, furtively carrying with it the webbed and patterned remains of the Judas it had captured. Where its shadow had been, a wall of pure white energy approached at a speed beyond speed: the Alpha Point wave.

The remaining Judas, still reeling from the terror of the ambush and the paralyzing effect of the phase energy, were torn from this level of existence as the Point wave smashed into, within, and throughout them.

The victorious Enemy smiled.



Simon's fleet had been destroyed. They would serve the Purpose well. They would help to complete Omega.

Magdalene.

She arose from her slumber, feeling the terror of her compatriots as they became no more. There was an emptiness to the Judas pattern where before there had been none.

She wept, as only a machine can.

### III

*Harkness.*

The Marines had landed.

They set up roadblocks and barricades on the roads leading into and out of Harkness, U.S. Route 41 and the old Eagle Road.

The citizens of Harkness were unaware of the invasion of their town by several thousand heavily-armed Marines.

A veritable armada of Navy and Coast Guard helicopters converged on the impact area, the site where the Indomitable had gone down.

The Marine troop transports kept coming and coming.

The Harkness situation would soon be under control.

5:30 A.M.

The sun rose over Sawyer Air Force Base.

The eight men in black stood at the main gate to the electrified fence. One went into the small booth beside the gate and pushed the dead body of a soldier out of his chair. The man leaned over and pushed a button. The gate quietly slid open on concealed bearings.

The men strode through the open gate. The man in the guardhouse remained behind. He took the fatigues off the dead guard and put them on. It was a tight fit, but it would have to do.

No one was going into or out of Sawyer Air Force Base.

Around 5:45 A.M. a Michigan state trooper spotted Ray Shore's pickup truck on the shoulder of U.S. Route 41, several miles from Sawyer, on the southbound lane from Marquette.

After calling in the truck's description and license plate number, the trooper got out of his cruiser and went to investigate.

He could see the silhouette of the driver in the front seat as he approached from the rear. He drew his weapon, walked slowly up to the driver's side window, tapped on the glass.

"Sir, please open your window."

Silence...He knew what he would find already. The driver was too slumped over in his seat to be anything but dead.

Weapon still drawn, the trooper opened the unlocked driver's door and felt Ray Shore's neck for signs of life. He immediately pulled his hand back. The flesh was cold. Very cold.

Ray's eyelids were closed. Suspicious, the trooper reached in and opened Ray's left eye. A pupil-less, impossibly gray eye stared lifelessly back at him.

*Slyx...*

*Jesus Christ. That's impossible.*

The trooper walked slowly back to his vehicle, unsure of how to describe what he had just seen to the dispatcher. If this were true...He picked up his radio.

"Dispatch? You read me?"

"That's an affirmative. Go ahead."

"You'd better contact Milicom. They'll want to see this."

Magdalene.

Dreams of cold water and gray skies and little little bathing suits that Mum disapproved of and hands-on boys whom Da disapproved of and warm cozy nights of fireplaces and rainstorms and none of the terror that her later teenage years had descended into. None of the terror at all.

She snapped awake at the gentle nudge of an alarm. Where? When?

Trapped beneath an ocean, energy fading...

She sensed three vessels floating above her at the surface of the water, and she also sensed when a fourth vessel emerged from one of the three and began a descent to her.

They had found her after all.

Barbarians at the gate.

Magdalene prepared to greet them.

Mariana Trench, 200 miles from Guam.

The tiny submersible XJ disembarked from his fathership, the Jonah. Within the submarine, two sailors reclined at their controls, preparing for the twenty-five thousand-foot drop into the Trench. They both wore bulky pressure suits to prevent their bodies' implosion from the weight of countless billions of gallons of ocean water.

"XJ to Jonah. Prep completed. We're ready for the dive. Drop us, Jonah."

"Affirmative, XJ. Happy trails."

The two docking clamps that held the XJ to the Jonah's docking arm released, and the sub was free.

The XJ plummeted into the void, the frigid, black water, pulled by the weight of twenty tons of ballast. External lights flickered to life.

The pilots of the XJ, even in their advanced pressure suits, still felt some discomfort. Ear pain, eye pain as their eyes struggled to focus with compressed lenses.

At twenty thousand feet below sea level the XJ began to vent ballast to slow its descent. The external lights brightened, and sensors and cameras began to roll.

The Geiger counters revealed a surprising lack of radiation in the impact area.

Five hundred feet to the ocean floor.

She saw their annoyingly bright lights and felt them vent the ballast. She had been found.

She was sorry she would have to have to eliminate them. They had done nothing to her, except discover her precious hiding place. She could not allow them to alert others to her presence at the ocean floor.

Hidden servomechanisms opened weapons hatches.

"Jonah, are you picking this up?"

"Affirmative, XJ. Remain on reconnaissance vector."

Below them, resting on the floor of the trench, was not a meteor, not a nuclear submarine, not a crashed derelict spacestation.

Below them rested an unidentified object. A spaceship. A big one.

The XJ's searchlights and cameras revealed a huge, matte black vessel. It was without a doubt not from the ocean, a foreign country, or even Earth. It was alien.

The vessel's top surface laid below the XJ, stretching away into the utter darkness of the Trench. It was intact, almost beautiful in its symmetry, but it was obvious that it had not had a controlled landing. The hull was scarred and covered with small surface dents. The vessel lay placidly at the bottom of this gouge in the planet. It reflected no light at all. It was as if light were pulled into its hull and not released. The vessel was shaped as two halves, joined together by a central hub. It was beautiful; it was terrifying.

"Jonah, this is scary shit. Requesting permission to—." He stopped speaking abruptly.

Movement.

A small panel slid open on the surface of the vessel. Something glinted within.

“XJ? Please respond.”

“Jonah, I—”

Heat. A fierce beam of white light lashed out of the hub of the vessel and sliced the XJ in half. Both pilots died instantly as the boiling water ate through their pressure suits’ valves and twenty-five thousand vertical feet of ocean pressure crushed them.

The light swept back and forth until the XJ was no more. The primary threat taken care of, the light intensified and focused upward, upward, to the surface of the ocean. It cut the three surface vessels apart, and in a hail of searing white radiance and steamy, evaporated ocean water, it ended the lives of hundreds of humans. Caught off-guard, there was no time for anyone to escape the burning hot, sinking ships. None of the ships had been able to send a distress signal, much less any information about the vessel at the ocean floor.

Magdalene was safe.

For now.

Sawyer AFB had been practically empty, except for a skeleton crew of security personnel that had been quickly, efficiently, and quietly dispatched by the men in black.

The man who sat in the dead soldier’s chair in the guardhouse next to the main gate sat up suddenly, stiffly, alerted to movement from the corner of his eye.

A car was coming down the path to the gate, a dark blue armored sedan, with a silver insignia on the driver’s door.

It was a Milicom vehicle.

It rolled up to the booth. The driver wore the standard Milicom dress uniform. There were three passengers, two grunts and a brass.

The driver’s side window rolled down.

“Official Milicom business, soldier. Clearance code tridelta. This is urgent.”

The large man in the booth made no move to open the gate. He looked into the car coolly. He saw that the passenger in the back seat was a general, three star. Something big was going down.

“Private, open up the gate, god damn—”

He was cut off as the man in the booth swung up the dead guard’s assault rifle and a hail of armor-piercing bullets tore apart the two passengers in the back seat.

The smell of gunpowder and blood hung languidly in the air.

“Shit! Holy shit!” The driver threw the car into reverse and floored the accelerator. The car jolted backward, the tires screeching. The soldier in the front passenger seat drew his service revolver and was cut down by the man in black, wielding the rifle before him as he emerged from the booth, following the car.

The stream of bullets silenced the screams of the driver forever. The car continued backward until the gas tank was punctured, and the car was torn apart, engulfed in flames.

The fiery wreckage stood fifty feet from the main gate entrance. Inside, four bodies were sent to their gods.

The man in black’s finger held the trigger of the automatic rifle down and swept it back and forth over the flaming wreckage until it emitted only a dry, ratcheting click. He returned to the booth and sat down again. He released the long magazine from the rifle’s barrel and slammed a fresh clip in. He emotionlessly leaned the loaded rifle against the wall.

It would be a busy day.

The main hangar doors rolled open.

Reynald’s eyes lit up.

*And Bingo was his name-o..*

Before them stretched a veritable fleet of the most advanced warplane this civilization could yet offer, the B-4.

The men in black went to work.

The Red Room.

David Jennings paced back and forth, his hands cradling his face. His eyes shifted warily, tracing his path.

“Do you still think this is all a coincidence, Cervera? Is it still just a fluke?”

Cervera frowned. “We have no evidence that it was an attack. It could have been radiation—”

“Radiation? Do you think this is another Mir or Liberty crash? This wasn’t an abandoned space station.”

“But no one has claimed responsibility.”

“Did anyone claim responsibility for Washington?”

Cervera fell silent.

Jennings glared at her. "Look at these, General." He pushed a button on the control panel before them. The hologram of the globe was replaced with a revolving image of the detritus of three Navy vessels. "It's the latest Air Force recon image of the Guam site." He pressed another control.

Close-ups revealed an ocean dotted with the bodies of young American sailors.

"Explain that, Antonia. Over eight hundred men and women, dead for an unknown reason. We lost contact with the vessels and AF recon was sent in to check out the site. That's what they found—the wreckage of three of our best ships. Something is going on, something big, and I want to put an end to it right now."

He picked up a sheet of paper, a fax.

"The Marines in Harkness, Michigan interviewed some of the locals. They reported the appearance of several men in black uniforms who they assumed were our guys until they demanded information about local airports and subsequently kidnapped a man. His body was found over two hundred miles away, south of Marquette...The body had gray eyes."

"So?"

"Gray eyes with no pupils. And the body was cold. Very cold."

Cervera rose, hands on hips, head shaking in a manner that would have brought a certain non-crook American president to mind a century earlier.

"That's impossible. We put them all on—"

"Santa Fosca? Yeah, well, SF doesn't exist anymore, Tony. Milicom is shitting bricks over this."

"What are you saying, Jennings?"

"These events have to be linked together somehow—"

"Impossible. They're half a world apart."

"Impossible? Here's one last bit of information. The Pentagon team you yourself sent to Sawyer Air Force Base to set up a situation response net never reported in. All communication with Sawyer has been cut off—"

"What? There's a fleet of B-4's at Sawyer!"

"Exactly. We're having troops diverted from Harkness and the Line to investigate, and to use whatever means necessary to nip this problem in the bud."

"What do you mean?"

"There's a plan at work here, within our own borders, and in our own territory. It has begun, and now it's our job to end it. It could be an attempt at a Milicom corporate takeover. Maybe the Japanese found out about the B-4s. This could be a full-scale invasion, for all we know. We have to take extreme measures."

“Extreme measures.” Cervera had an air of disbelief about her. Indeed, she did view the President’s motives with caution. Jennings couldn’t be trusted under this extreme stress, especially not after what had happened to his family.

“In all likelihood, the Lake Superior site is the jump point of the major invasion, if that’s what this is. It makes the most sense. So they’ve started to send in advance groups, small insurgence parties—”

“With all due respect, David, that’s crazy.”

“You’ve never given me my due respect, Tony. They took out Santa Fosca to cover up the fact that—.”

“This isn’t the Quebec War, Jennings.”

He continued to ignore Cervera. “What we need to do is evacuate the area. The Marines are in Harkness already. We evacuate the civilians, and send in more forces. We reevaluate the situation from there. We surround Sawyer and move in, try to capture whoever cut off communications alive. And as for the Guam site, I don’t think we should fuck around any more. Something down there took out three of our ships and hundreds of our people.”

“What are you talking about? Are you going to nuke it?”

“Americans have been killed! More lives could be at stake!”

“Are you trying to start World War Four?”

Calm. Jennings remained calm.

“General, someone else already is.”

Cervera was silent.

“I want two Spears on a scalping run by 1200 hours. The Guam site. And I want Harkness evacuated. We’re moving in. This has to end on our terms.”

Thoughts ran through Cervera’s mind, but she kept silent.

The game began.

12:00 Noon. Harkness.

“Come on, people. Move it.” The armed Marine directed several citizens of Harkness onto the military troop transport parked in the street. Other transports rolled up and down Main Street, some empty, most filled with civilians.

The exodus had begun.

Local television and comnet stations, and even loudspeaker trucks broadcast the same message: the Milicom subsidiary Chemtek chemical plant outside of town had experienced a serious gas leak overnight and the fumes were deadly enough to warrant the evacuation of everyone within twenty miles. It was a shallow excuse, but the Chemtek people had cooperated willingly enough when armed Marines stormed their offices.



Sometimes living in a police state had its distinct advantages.

The last troop transport rolled up to the secured checkpoint on U.S. 41 going out of town.

“That’s the last of them, sir.”

“What’s the final tally?”

“One thousand two hundred sixty-one.”

“Close enough. Inform D.C. that we’ve rounded up the locals, and the town’s clear.”

“Yes, sir.”

The Marines boarded the last transport out of Harkness and left the town quietly, dead in the midday sun.

“Sir, what do you think this is all about?”

“Private, Uncle Sam doesn’t pay us to ask questions.”

Sawyer AFB.

They had the base surrounded.

“Tell Wind River that the Sawyer perimeter is secure. We’re moving in.”

The Marines tightened the noose.

((“Reynald, the natives are closing in on us. We’d better launch as soon as possible.”))

Reynald sat in the cockpit of a B-4. Such simple technology, with its electrical circuitry and computer controls. No bioneural flux or Shadow here. He only hoped that this plane carried enough fuel to take them to Magdalene.

((“Understood. We’re launching. You know what you must do, Joseph.”))

((“Yes, Captain. Godspeed.”))

((“Thank you, Joseph.”))

The man in the guardhouse turned back to the road before him. An armored transport was coming up the path.

He heard a noise behind him, engines cycling up, and he felt the earth shudder as the B-4 taxied to the runway and picked up speed. The huge plane seemed to attain an impossible speed as it lifted off the ground. The landing gear retracted.

He was alone now.

He did not feel any anger or despair at being left behind. He had volunteered for this job in the first place, and he knew at some point he would have to give his life to preventing the Purpose. He felt a resigned satisfaction.

This was his time.

His job completed, Joseph closed his eyes and heard the voices of the countless dead within him. He took a calming breath and felt the shift within himself.

He could not remain here. He could not let the Enemy rape the souls from within him. He would sooner die than let the Omega consume the lifetimes and civilizations that resided in his carrier mind.

“Good luck, Reynald. May we meet again in a better time.”

He shifted higher than he ever before had and felt his mind tear itself free from the boundaries of his body. In the instant before he died, Joseph could see the faces of everyone he had ever loved; he could see everything and nothing. Joseph died in the light of non-existence, and his lifeless body fell to the floor of the gatehouse, cold gray eyes looking still into the void.

“Damn it! Get a squadron of Spears on that B-4, stat!”

The Marine Commander standing at the gate to Sawyer watched the B-4 until it was a small speck on the northwest horizon.

“It heading towards Harkness! *Take it down.*”

Jennings sat alone in his private quarters, staring at a portrait of his family, his beautiful wife and daughter. He wept in the cold darkness of his isolation.

This time would be different. He would nip the problem in the bud. This time, America would not be dragged into a war. They would end it before it began, and if that meant using extreme measures, if it was for the good of the people, it would be done.

The phone rang. He was startled, recovered, picked up the receiver.

“Good. Okay. It’s time then. You know what to do. This is authorization Jennings, David IDCOM 050 776 9191.

He hung up the phone.

Please forgive me, he thought, and wished that he still believed in a god.

The troop transports formed a convoy on U.S. 41.

The citizens of Harkness and several close villages had been evacuated because of the bad Chemtek nerve gas leak. They would be housed in Ishpeming until the gas dissipated.

Robert Hodge found the troop transport intimately boring, so he stood and peered out the canvas cover of the back door. Those Chemtek nuts had finally

messed up, and Rob was the one being punished, forced under armed guard into a dim, noisy troop carrier that was crowded with other townspeople.

Sighing, Rob continued to stare out the door.

In the northbound lane, a line of armored military assault vehicles was travelling towards Harkness...

What the hell?

So this was something bigger than a gas leak...

He watched in silence.

Spears pursued the B-4.

"They're closing, Captain."

"I know..." They needed to lose the two smaller airplanes following them if they wanted to live.

"Incoming missile."

"Changing course to avoid impact."

"What weapons does this plane carry?"

"Only heavy weapons, like atomics."

"Atomics? Are there any on board?"

"Sensors read twenty-two."

A plan flickered to life in Reynald's mind.

"This is Spear One to Command. Target is locked. Eliminate?"

"Command to Spear One. What is your present position?"

"Command, we are closing on Harkness."

"Do not, I repeat, do not take down the B-4 over Harkness. It's packing quite a few atomics. Take it down over the Lake."

"Affirmative, Command."

"Spear One to Spear Two! Evasive action! It's launching something! I repeat launch in progress."

"Command to Spears: identify projectile!"

4:45 P.M.

The sky over Harkness was clear, blue, empty. The sun slid casually toward the western horizon. Birds sang, and the day was peaceful. The only sound was the approaching line of military vehicles on U.S. 41.

The sound barrier was broken and the bombs had been released and had begun their fateful descent before the birds even had a chance to be startled

from their perches. Three jets flashed across the sky, leaving ghostly white contrails in their wake.

The sonic boom came, and the birds departed.

Something flashed in the sky, a metallic flash.

A sparrow gazed at the shimmer, mesmerized.

As it took to wing, Harkness was enveloped in fierce, white, cleansing light, and was no more.

Rob Hodge yawned as he stared out the canvas cover. If he strained his eyes, he could just make out the thin blue line on the horizon that was Lake Superior. He couldn't see Harkness, but if he squinted he could make out the faint projection of the Calumet water tower. He saw three planes streak overhead—

Silent white light filled the world, and Robert Hodge was blinded by its glory.

The explosion of white hell threw the dark interior of the transport into harsh brightness, terrifying everyone within. As the shockwave swept over the line of trucks, a deafening, explosive sound tore through each passenger's head.

Robert Hodge groped around the interior of the transport, forever blinded by the initial explosion. His hands found the neck of the GI who had been sitting next to him by the back door.

"What have you done!? *What have you done!?*" His grasp on the struggling soldier's neck tightened.

Hodge's blood stippled the face of the soldier as the bullet tore through his head. The commander of the evacuation stood with gun smoking, and he wrestled Rob's body through the open canvas cover. He watched as the body struck the asphalt of U.S. 41 and rolled.

Standing in the open back door, thrown into contrast by the hellishly bright mushroom cloud unfolding on the horizon behind them, the commander addressed the shocked passengers of the transport.

"The next person who speaks joins him."

The convoy continued down the highway.

"Increase speed! We'll be pulled back in!"

The B-4 hurtled onward, pressed to the limit. Behind it, the two Spears were caught in the backdraft of the shockwave and ripped effortlessly apart. The debris vaporized instantly in the atomic firestorm.

The mushroom cloud shrank until it was nothing but a pinpoint of hellfire on the horizon.

“We’re clear.”

“That should throw them off our trail for a while. Head west. We’ll try to contact Magdalene as we get closer.”

They sped into the setting sun.

Red Room.

Cervera.

She did not believe what she had just been told.

Harkness, Michigan had been nuked.

How had Jennings done this without Cervera’s knowledge?

She knew Jennings was scared, but to order a nuclear strike on his own country? She thought Jennings had only meant to use extreme measures at the Guam site, not on Harkness.

The lines of communication were shaky at best at the present moment. No one knew for sure what had happened, but one thing was painfully clear: Harkness was no more, and many American soldiers had been killed in the blast.

War hero or not, Jennings was way out of line.

Jennings was too paranoid for his own good. The Canadians were in no position to start another war. The Styx had made sure of that. Jennings was jumping at shadows. What had started out as probably a meteor shower had turned into a tragedy because of Jennings and his delusions of grandeur.

Cervera loaded her handgun and placed it in her holster.

Jennings had to be stopped.

The sleek, black B-4 sped through the air on a path into destiny. They had won the race against the setting sun.

“Captain, linkup successful. You can speak to her now.”

“Good. Magdalene?”

static.

“Maggie?”

(...yes, reynald?... ) The signal was so very weak.

“We’re on our way.”

silence.

“Magdalene, are you still there?”

(...i feel them coming to me again. more ships, more planes. this time they'll destroy me...)

"They'll try, but you can't let them succeed."

(...jean, my weapons are at twelve percent...)

"Twelve percent? Did you deplete reserve power?"

(...i delegated weapons power to the communications array. i located an enemy on purpose transit. i sent a beacon into the stream to summon a strike force to intercept...)

"Did our forces prevail?"

hesitation.

(...no.)

"Harvest?"

(...soon.)

"And you only have twelve percent weapons?"

(...i won't survive another attack...)

"If we travel at maximum speed, can we reach you in time?"

(...the approaching vessels are closer to my present position than you are. you won't arrive in time to save me.. it's too late...)

"Don't say that. We'll find a way to get there before the natives do. Too much is riding on this. We have to alert the fleet of Kilbourne's plan. We'll find a way to save your core, at least, and you can be refitted into—"

(...no, reynald. it's too late for me. they're so close.. there's no time for a shadow core transfer...my pattern's begun to dissemble. my drives are gone. there's no escape for me, but it's not too late for you...)

"Are there other Judas in-system?"

(...a force led by judas simon is in transit. his fleet was destroyed at the point, but he's coming to rescue us. he'll arrive in several cycles, well after the natives reach me...)

"So now what do we do?"

(...i jettisoned the shadow drive and it destroyed the enemy vessel that attacked us in orbit. a piece of debris from the enemy entered the atmosphere and crashed on a small island near my present position. the island is emitting shadow radiation, the only source on this planet at this time. simon will detect the shadow radiation...)

"Adjusting instrumentation for phase space detection. I see it."

(...simon will rendezvous with you when the fleet whendrops. It's now up to you to alert the others of kilbourne...)

"We can still try to save you!"

(...save yourselves...)

"Maggie? What's wrong?"

(...fading. power reserve depletion...pattern...

Reynald was torn. He had never felt so helpless.

“Kilbourne will pay for this. We’ll never forget your sacrifice, Maggie. Never.”

(...the purpose...

“...will be prevented.”

Simon sensed the beacon, accessed it.

The coordinates of an island...A Shadow signature? But that would mean...

*No.*

He traced the beacon to its source.

((magdalene! maggie, this can’t be true!))

(...it doesn’t matter any more...you have to save my crew... it’s too late for me...

((don’t give up! we’ll increase speed! we’ll rescue you!! just hold on, maggie.))

(no time...

((just hold on! please hold on!))

(...simon i love you

((*maggie, don’t leave me. i can’t do this without you.*))

(...you can

((*I CAN’T LOSE YOU AGAIN!*))

(...love

((maggie, i—))

(...

((maggie?))

...

((i love you.))

She fell silent as her Shadow faded. She fell silent, forever.

At 09:45 EST, two American Spear warplanes flew over the Mariana Trench near Guam, dropping two hydrogen torpedoes onto the impact site. The Judas Gethsemane Magdalene was no more.

## IV

The Enemy tore out of the Whenstream and fell into the gap between the stars.

VICTORY. THE BLOOD OF JUDAS HAS BEEN SHED.

satisfaction.

**PATTERN AUGMENTATION((?))**

THOSE WHO DID NOT SUBMIT WERE DESTROYED.

**THE PATTERN NEARS COMPLETION. THE PURPOSE  
NEARS COMPLETION.**

THE BELT VOLATILES HAVE BEEN HARVESTED.

**JOIN US THEN. PLANET HARVEST ENSUES.**

LET THE UPLOAD BEGIN. OMEGA'S GLORY BECKONS.

From the asteroid belt between Jupiter and Mars, a darkness emerged. The silver Enemy vessel, spidery, black, a cancer of sanity, arose.

WE ARE COMING.

the Black closes.

Simon.

If a machine could love, Simon had loved Magdalene.

Emptiness. Heartbreak. Rage. No word could adequately describe what he felt. The sacrifices they had made, the pain they had seen...How could he survive without her?

What did any of it matter anymore, the war, the Purpose? He had seen his only love die before his eyes a second time. The touch of her mind, the gentle reminder that she was with him always, was painfully absent. She was gone forever.

He quickened his pace.

He had received her final transmission, the coordinates to rendezvous with her crew, and then he felt her silent, mechanical scream as her atoms were torn apart. He had uttered a cry of helpless rage as he felt her die.

A part of him was gone forever, and in its place, something black was born. He would make the Enemy suffer. He would hunt them down to the last traitor.

Almost there...



Simon piloted the strike force through the Whenstream, frantically searching for the correct exit point, not wanting to over- or under-shoot Magdalene's When.

He sensed her When beacon transmitting in the Stream, a muted, dismal tone in the emptiness between times. *Is this really all there is left of her?*

Simon signaled the rest of his fleet. He disengaged the Shadow drive, and felt the winds of timesweep wash over him.

((the enemy awaits us.))

He began the hibernatory stasis release process to revive his captain.

With the rage of a human, Simon crashed from the Whenstream into Magdalene's When, and he began the silent hunt for the damned.

He would find the Enemy, and he would destroy them.

Forever.

The moon of Mars. Phobos.

The two black impossibilities orbited the moon, drew closer, joined in an embrace that was at the same time tender and somehow obscene.

The Enemy was one again.

Wind River, D.C.

unrest, suspicion, rumors, denial, cover-ups, contemplation, press leaks, uproar.

anarchy?

whispers...

-you realize the implications of your presence here, don't you, general?

-does it matter, at this point?

-indeed. let's get down to business.

-this room is secure?

-what do you think?

-now, now, let's calm down.

-calm down? jesus. where have you been?

-will all of you just shut up? the fate of the nation may depend on the outcome of this meeting.

-now it's obvious that jennings is...out of control. two nuclear strikes, unprovoked nuclear strikes in one day, one on our own soil. none of our deep

cover agents have reported anything unusual with our neighbors or other pact nations. jennings nuked an american town because of a meteor shower! i still don't know how he did this without my knowledge, so that means he has allies. we can't let this man retain the presidency. we all know his past. maybe he's finally lost it. maybe he never really recovered...

-what do you propose to do about it, general?

-jennings must step down. he won't do it willingly.

-no shit.

-i mean, he actually thought this was all some intricate plot to start war four on our own soil. he was muttering about invasions and deception. maybe this stretches further than we thought. he could have forces we don't know of...he could have the styx...

-do we have enough loyalists to make this plan work?

-we will after the morning papers come out.

-so, how do we do this?

"Situation?"

((we've whendropped. we've found the enemy.))

"Simon?"

((yes, michael?))

"What's wrong?"

((...))

"What is it, Simon?"

((maggie...they—))

"Oh god no...Simon, I—"

((michael, it's okay. she...she felt no pain.))

Michael Zero-Four knew it was not okay. He knew everything was far from being okay. He had never heard Simon so...cold? detached? distant? Magdalene had been everything to Simon. After countless years of being the human counterpart to Simon, Zero-Four knew he was not "okay."

"Where are they?"

((in orbit around the fourth planet's moon.))

"How many?"

((one.))

"Then let's get started. Take us in."

The Judas careened down to whatever fate would meet them.

The Enemy.

Telephone.

“Yes.”

“Autopsy results, Mr. President.”

“What did you find?”

“You were right, sir. The body we found at Sawyer was a Styx. Subtle DNA signature matches. Even had the gray eyes.”

“Thank you.” He hung up the phone.

How the hell had Cervera pulled it off?

There were powerful forces at work here...

Who could he trust?

Yes, he had ordered the strike on the Guam site, and he stood by that decision. But he had not ordered a strike on Harkness, as the entire nation seemed to believe.

There was a coup taking place, and Jennings looked like the bad guy to the American public. How could he disprove these unspoken charges?

Cervera.

Jennings had never really trusted his Secretary of Defense. He had respected Cervera's courage in War Three and the Quebec War, but...Well, especially since what happened to Old Washington, you just didn't trust people.

So Cervera had Styx working for her...

Bad, bad feeling...

Nuclear weapons and Styx. What an unstoppable combination.

Santa Fosca.

With all of the confusion of dealing with the PR hyenas, he had overlooked the Styx island. The island that had started all of this...

*...santa fosca was encompassed in a thermonuclear explosion.*

*...can we get any closer?*

*...sorry, mr. president...the cloud cover is too thick.*

Jennings had seen the hologram of Santa Fosca, completely obscured by a thick haze. What evidence had he seen that the island had been destroyed?

None.

The pieces slid together all too well...

Cervera had faked the Santa Fosca bombing to cover up her alliance with the remaining Styx. She had somehow gotten them off that island and used them to overtake Sawyer AFB and steal a B-4. And to cover her tracks, she had bombed Harkness...

He felt the reassuring weight of the pistol hanging from the hidden holster on his chest, and below that, the dull weight of the polyalloy bullet-proof vest underneath his shirt.

He would be prepared.

He was terrified of the unseen, mysterious forces that entered his life only the day before.

No one was going to start another war with America.

No one.

The morning papers.

Headlines...

“CHAOS IN WIND RIVER: President Orders Nuclear Strikes in Guam, Michigan” -The Post.

“ATOMIC HORROR IN MICHIGAN” -The Tribune.

“Federal Troops Evacuate Town Before Nuke” -The Herald.

“COVERUP? D.C. DENIAL!!” -The Daily.

“PRESIDENT SILENT ABOUT NUKES, TROOPS” -The Times.

“JENNINGS MEETS WITH ALIEN AMBASSADOR!! PHOTOS INSIDE!”

-The National Enquirer.

The Red Room.

Jennings looked over a copy of some trashy tabloid with mild interest. Apparently he had met with the aliens that crash-landed in Michigan, and they had given him the secrets of the universe. There was even a picture of him shaking hands with a short, egg-headed creature, gray with black almond eyes.

Nice.

The door slid open, and Cervera walked in, flanked by two Marines. They stood resolutely, silent. Armed.

Jennings tapped the hidden security button below the desk with his foot. He had anticipated that this might happen.

“Cervera.” He felt the reassuring heft of the gun against his side. His heart throbbed within his chest.

“Mister President, we’re here to ask you to step down.”

Calm...”I see.”

“Your actions within the last twenty-four hours have been unjustified. We’re asking you to step down peacefully, Jennings. Don’t make us use these.”

“You make me sick, Antonia. This is quite a show you’re staging. Who’s paying you for the B-4? Is it Quebec? France? Indochine? Another backwoods Pact country?”

"I don't know what you're talking about. You're jumping at shadows, Jennings."

"The threat is real."

"What threat? You're seeing conspiracy everywhere now, aren't you? Would you be nuking your own country if your wife hadn't died?"

Jennings visibly flinched.

"She wasn't the only one to die that day."

Rage. Jennings stood so suddenly his chair overturned.

"You're one of them, Cervera, aren't you?"

Cervera swung her weapon up to Jennings' face.

"This is your last chance to step down peacefully, you crazy son of a bitch."

Jennings faced the gun, unblinking.

Cervera pulled back the hammer.

Jennings' eyes glanced to the left for an instant, just long enough for Cervera's own eyes to widen in terror before the sound of two gunshots filled the room, and her Marine guards fell lifeless to the floor behind her. Cervera distracted, Jennings wasted no time in swatting the revolver from her hand and drawing his own weapon, which hung inches from her face. His Milicom guards stood in the open doorway, assault rifles trained on Cervera.

"You think you have loyalists, Tony? So do I. And I'm going to expose you as the Styxie traitor you are."

Cervera uncertainly looked behind her at the armed Milicom troops, weapons still pointed at her. Blood had stained the neutral gray carpet a sick crimson.

"You won't get away with this."

Jennings grinned. "Oh, but I will. I'm the President of the Allied States of America. And I believe that the penalty for treason is death."

Cervera's jaw dropped and she inhaled sharply before Jennings pulled the trigger. A fine mist of blood mingled with the gunsmoke in the confined space of the room, and Cervera's lifeless body fell with a meaty thud to the floor, head torn apart by the armor-piercing bullet.

"Get them out of here."

Jennings' guards bent, began to drag away the bodies. Jennings casually righted his chair, slumped back into it. He placed his now-heavy revolver on the desktop. He watched blankly as Cervera's bloody corpse was dragged from the room. The shield door cycled shut, and he was alone.

Seconds later, there were gunshots from down the hallway.

Jennings bolted upright, startled.

Gunshots.

One of his loyal Milicom officers burst into the room, blood pouring from a flesh wound on his arm.

"Mister President, they have the White House surrounded! All of Wind River's been cut off. Cervera's men, they killed three of—"

"Is there any way out?"

"All the entrances have been taken by her loyalists. They're coming this way, sir."

"Air Force One?"

"It'll take twenty minutes to prep her."

"Are there any other planes down there?"

"The Spear you ordered hasn't left for Santa Fosca yet, sir."

"Looks like that's our only way out, son."

More gunshots, closer.

"Come on!" They ran to the back of the Red Room, where an express elevator led down to the White House hangar. Hearing more gunshots from above, Jennings and the soldier descended into the hangar, where a VTOL Spear-4 stood ready for takeoff.

They ran as quickly as they could to the ramp of the near-vertical jet. The launch doors slid open many stories above them. As they ascended, Jennings turned around just in time to see several of Cervera's loyalists exit the elevator, weapons drawn. As they opened fire, the officer pulled the hatch shut behind him, and the weak lead slugs bounced harmlessly off the bulletproof surface of the plane.

"Mister President, it's highly inadvisable for you to accompany us on this combat run. We don't know what we're going to find on that island."

"I'm sure I'll be safer with you than if I stayed behind with Cervera's forces. Proceed with the mission, and I'll try to stay out of your way."

"Thank you, sir. And may I say that we're with you all the way. My father and three uncles were killed in War Three, and I lost two brothers in the Quebec War. I don't want to see our country forced into another war any time soon. Cervera will pay for her treason."

"Yes, she will," Jennings whispered. "Yes. She will."

The plane shuddered and flew from beneath the White House into a brilliantly blue sky, leaving the Rocky Mountains behind. It picked up speed and disappeared to the west in a liquid flash of metal.

Simon.

The Judas Simon was at the front of the formation of Shadow-driven vessels. They passed through the belt of asteroids between Jupiter and Mars without incident, wary of an Enemy ambush.

((there it is.))

They could see the vessel, a dark silhouette against the sunlit face of Phobos. The red mass that was the fourth planet, Mars, loomed above them as the vessels careened toward oblivion.

“Look at the size of it.”

((it’s preparing to harvest. synthesizing the upload generators for the attack.))

“Do they see us yet?”

((no indication that they’ve been alerted to our presence. the shadows hide us.))

“So what do you think, Simon? Do we go for it?”

((we’ve never captured an enemy at this stage of harvest before. the data we could retrieve from the phase core would be priceless.))

“Do we board it?”

((it’s the only way.))

“I know, but I still hate sending troops out into close combat.”

((so do i, but it must be done.))

“Wake them up from their heavens, Simon. Wake them all up.”

The vessels sped on.

Deep within the Judas vessels, an ancient process began anew.

Valves opened. Atmosphere was pumped into chambers where lights flickered, brightened. Heating units began to discharge warmth. Artificial gravity was restored. Hidden servos whirled; pneumatics pressurized.

In the vast expanse of chambers, the vessel decoded the genetic patterns of thousands of beings from precious files stored for centuries aboard the Judas and began the recreation process. From the base elements of the galaxy, in a primordial stew of nutrient-rich liquid, the vessel stimulated the formation of molecules, DNA strands, cells, tissue, organs, organisms. The vessel vastly sped up the growing process, and within minutes it had created thousands of perfectly viable organisms in the expanse of stasis chambers, reconstituting from ancient binary code the uploaded consciousnesses of the beings that were the Judas.

On the surface of the spherical room, doors slid open. From within, a ghostly steam emerged.

The Judas sentiences began to monitor, probe, analyze, assess the contents of these compartments.

A favorable judgment reached, the next step was taken.

Hydraulic systems lifted the contents out.

In the massive spherical chamber, two thousand sleeping humans lay on elevated platforms, the effects of their rebirth after centuries of emulated hibernation wearing off.

They were the pawns in the chess match of eternity.

Santa Fosca.

Reynald walked on the beach, arms outstretched.

He wanted to shout at the top of his lungs, to let his rage shatter the very sky above him.

He fell to his knees, fists covering his eyes, body wracked in silent sobs.

All the pain...

The responsibility rested with him, now that Magdalene was dead. The symbol of her end, a dissipating mushroom cloud, scarred the horizon to the north.

These poor, blind people.

He kneeled in the shadow of the Enemy.

The Enemy shard stood before him, like an accusing finger pointed at the sky. The impact crater stretched outwards, the blackened debris of buildings that had been on the island scattered throughout.

He broke.

He ran for the shard, uttering his rage through incomprehensible nonsense. He tore the Judas symbol from his chest, and threw it at the dead Enemy vessel.

*"Damn you! DAMN ALL OF YOU!!"*

He fell back to his knees, weeping.

"Captain?"

He spun around, his face a grimace of agony, cold eyes flickering between gray and silver, illuminating the tear-wet surface of his wrinkled and scarred face.

"Captain Reynald?"

"They won't get away with this. Command will not get away with her blood on their hands."

"No, Captain...Reynald, we're picking something up on wide-range sensors."

"Is it Simon?"

"No, sir. It's a native vessel. A warplane. On a direct approach vector."



A silver dot formed on the horizon, drew closer.

((droptroops prepped.))

“Take us in.”

The Judas swept into the shadow eclipsing the surface of Phobos. The Enemy hung in the vacuum, unaware of pending execution.

((simon to strike force: engagement on my go.))

They swept closer, unseen.

Zero-Four locked his arms into the interface gauntlets.

“Ready, Simon?”

((always.))

It began.

black

**PREPARE TO BREAK MOON ORBIT.**

THE THIRD PLANET((?))

**YES. IT IS THE RICHEST IN HUMAN RESOURCE.**

LUSCIOUS...UPLOAD.

inquisition. suspicion. hatred.

**THEY ARE HERE.**

THE JUDAS((?))

**THE JUDAS.**

A CERTAINTY((?))

**THEY ARE SHADOWED, BUT THEY ARE HERE. I CAN TASTE THE PRESENCE OF THEIR CONTAGION IN THE PATTERN. THEY SHALL PAY FOR THEIR BLASPHEMY.**

INDEED THEY SHALL.

**DESTROY THEM.**

The Spear tore through the sky at a phenomenal rate. The tiny island of Santa Fosca appeared on the horizon, grew closer as the plane sped towards it.

Jennings sat, watching the elite group of warriors prepare for the landing and capture of the group who had so ruthlessly killed so many Americans. They were the best, part of a detachment of soldiers who had won fame in War Three by capturing the remains of Paris. Now they would storm the island and try to take the terrorists alive, if they could. It would be a formidable task, if the terrorists were Styx.

Jennings and the troop commander looked at the view of the island the long-range cameras presented.

“What the hell is that?”

Something jutted up from the island, a massive, black something. It looked like a piece of...No, that was impossible. It was still buried in the mountains.

“Radiation level?”

“Nothing abnormal.”

So there had not been a thermonuclear attack.

“There they are.”

Seven men stood near the—*thing*. One was on his knees.

“What are they doing?”

“Watching us. Preparing.”

“They don’t appear to be armed.”

“They wouldn’t have to be if they’re Styx.” The soldier walked to the cabin. “Fly us in low. We’ll drop in on them from above, and the lower machine cannons can give us cover if it comes to that.”

The sleek vessel glided closer to the island, panels on its underside sliding open to reveal heavy machine guns on pivot axes. The plane slowed.

“They aren’t making a move. They can’t be surrendering.”

“With all respect, sir, if I saw a fully-armed Spear coming at me, I’d surrender.”

Below the plane, the seven men waited in silence.

Reynald stood up, his arms outstretched.

“Closer...Come closer.”

The plane continued its approach.

He closed his eyes.

((FIRE!!))

The formation of Judas dove at the Enemy monstrosity orbiting the moon Phobos.

The domain of vision was blinded by the fierce streaks of light that tore from seemingly empty space at the Enemy. The Enemy itself thrust its own hell at the black between the stars, tearing apart three Judas in a flash of fire where seconds before there was only nothingness. The Enemy was overwhelmed by the sheer firepower of the Judas fleet. Beams of light emerged from countless ports on the Enemy’s surface as it tried to fend off the Judas attack. Waves and

ripples of energy flew everywhere, blinding with their wake those unfortunate enough to be ensnared in their web.

The game of eternity had begun another round.

## V

At the sight of one of the men on the island in an obvious stance of surrender, arms outstretched, the pilot eased the Spear to earth, all the while with the heavy machine guns trained on the group. The troops on the plane prepared to disembark and surround them.

"I'm going, too," Jennings said, pulling the gun from its hidden holster beneath his coat. "I have a few questions I'd like to ask these people personally."

They felt the plane settle on the ground with a gentle bump. The ramp began to descend, and a warm breeze from the ocean bathed the inside of the plane.

Reynald's outstretched hand began to quiver, and he opened his eyes. His impossibly silver eyes looked up.

His mind lashed out.

There was a dull thud from within the Spear, and a piercing siren began to wail.

"We just lost—Everyone out, now! The fuel tanks have been punctured!!"

A flurry of activity. Time seemed to drag to a halt.

Jennings felt himself roughly thrown down the ramp. "Get the president out, now! *Shield him!*" He was on the sand, bodies above him, when the world became fire and sound. An instant later, the second tank exploded and hot shrapnel embedded itself in his right arm and carved a shallow trench across his forehead.

He struggled to stand, flares of agony coming from his arm, coppery blood coursing into his right eye from the wound on his forehead. He forced the dead bodies of two soldiers off of his back, his mind morbidly noting that the one remaining eye in the soldier's head on the left was a beautiful and striking emerald green, and the soldier on the right was wearing a shiny golden cross around his neck that reflected the sunshine like a prism around and around the chocolate brown bloodstained flesh of his neck. If they hadn't been there, he would have been killed.

He spun around, shielding himself from the vicious flames of the debris with his good arm.

They had given their lives to save his.

He was alone with the men in black.

He awkwardly drew the revolver from the holster of one of the dead soldiers with his left hand and staggered at the terrorists, blood pouring from his arm. He dazedly wiped blood from his eye, and was amazed at how much there was on his hand when he pointed the weapon up at the men standing before him.

He pulled back the hammer.

black

THEY OVERPOWER US.

**SILENCE. THEY ARE ONLY VERMIN.**

OUR VESSEL SUFFERS.

**LET IT SUFFER AS WE WILL MAKE THEM SUFFER. THEIR PATTERNS WILL BE ERASED FROM OMEGA AND THEY WILL SUFFER THEIR HELLS FOR ETERNITY.**

WE MUST ESCAPE.

ESCAPE((?)) **WERE YOU NOT PART OF ME, I WOULD STRIKE YOU DOWN FOR SUCH COWARDICE.**

insight.

**OUR VESSEL SHALL BECOME TWO ONCE MORE.**

ONE TO COMMENCE HARVEST UPLOAD, ONE TO—

**ONE TO BE A SACRIFICE.**

A NOBLE CAUSE.

INDEED. YOU SHALL BE A MARTYR.

silence, realization, resignation.

THE PURPOSE WILL BE COMPLETED.

**MAY YOUR BLOOD, WHEN SPILLED, BE HONORABLE.**

MY END WILL BE YOUR BEGINNING.

the black closes.

They hung in the zero-grav airlocks, lambs ready for slaughter.

Spears of light flashed incessantly from both the Enemy and the Judas, who hovered around the monstrous vessel like a swarm of stinging hornets.

Another flash, another tangible torrent of screaming souls being erased from the pattern. Fourteen Judas now.

“Now?”

((now.))

Twenty-eight airlocks were opened to the void, and thousands of droptroops poured out, shifting as they fell into the expanse of forever.

**THEY ATTEMPT TO BOARD US. THEY ATTEMPT THE RESCUE OF THEIR DEAD.**

As the droptroops flew at the Enemy, the Judas fleet bombarded the huge target, draining its energy. The beams of light erupted from the Enemy less and less often. With an almost palpable sigh, the vessel emitted one last burst of phase energy, cutting down two more Judas, sending them into the unknown void of phase space.

Its defensive energies depleted, the Enemy waited to be boarded. The Judas fell upon it.

**MARTYRDOM COMES SWIFTLY FOR YOU.  
INDEED. THE PURPOSE IS NOW YOURS.**

In a surprising burst of pure, harsh radiance, the Enemy vessel tore itself into two halves. One half remained in place above Phobos, the other half reformed and thrust itself at an insane speed from the reach of the Judas.

It was going towards the sun. Towards Earth.

((judas paul, mohamet, vishnu: pursue enemy vessel. remaining judas continue capture of phobos enemy. boarding parties continue attack.))

Simon sped after the Enemy.

**SECOND RUSE INITIATED.  
WE AWAIT MARTYRDOM.**

Thousands of humans swarmed over the hull of the Phobos vessel, tearing the surface apart with their minds, creating entries to the internal areas.

The Judas vessels came closer to the dead Enemy to assist the droptroops in gaining entry.

<<i read a fluctuation...an energy surge.>>

[we must take precautions. boarding teams prepare to pull back—  
The end came.

**NOW.**

black becomes nothing.

Simon: a gasp.

((no...NO!!))

Behind Simon and the three Judas pursuing the Earthbound Enemy, a stark hellfire flashed into existence where once the Phobos Enemy had been.

Simon heard, felt their cries of pain as thousands of droptroops were instantly engulfed within the quantum singularity, their bodies incinerated, their souls raped from existence into the phase space of the Omega. The cries were abruptly cut off. They were gone.

The Judas vessels left behind at Phobos were also consumed in the blast. Simon watched as his comrades were torn apart, flung about.

The Enemy vessel was not totally destroyed. It hung above Phobos, a blackened ruin, blazing fire from within, until, moved by its own suicidal explosion, its orbit deteriorated. The hulking wreckage swept down to the surface of Phobos, and erupted upon impact into a scarlet plume of fire.

Simon looked away.

[simon, we have to retreat. we're useless against the enemy now.]

((and abandon yet another when?))

[the cycle will continue.]

((we lost so many this time...))

[their sacrifice—]

((will mean nothing! can't you see that?))

{simon.}

((we should have won this time!))

{SIMON.}

((what, vishnu?))

{the enemy vessel has stopped.}

[they mean to take us all.]

((then we'll go down fighting.))

FULL STOP.

**DO THEY STILL APPROACH(?)**

THEY HAVE DECREASED SPEED.

**WEB THEM FOR VOLATILES, THEIR SHADOWS FOR  
OMEGA UPLOAD PATTERN AUGMENTATION.**

A WISE DECISION.

From the Enemy, a web beam emerged.

((mohamet!))

Simon shouted, but Mohamet was gone, ensnared by the unexpected web beam. He was pulled to the surface of the Enemy, absorbed.

((vishnu and paul, scatter!))

Simon, Vishnu, and Paul rocketed in opposing directions, splitting the Enemy's attention, creating more than one target.

The Enemy reached out like a hand, fingers grasping in several directions at once, then suddenly focused on Vishnu. With a flash, he was caught in the web and pulled down. He was gone.

[simon! save yourself!]

((paul, no!))

Paul dove straight for the Enemy, veering around the web beam focused on him. The Enemy was caught off guard.

Paul hit the Enemy at full speed, tearing himself from existence, but hardly affecting the Enemy. However, the Enemy was disoriented for several seconds...

((bless you, paul.))

Simon dove as fast as he could toward the small blue planet below him, forgetting the temporarily blinded Enemy.

Simon had a promise to keep.

A gentle wind swept the island.

"Start talking, or I start shooting."

Reynald stood, silent.

"Do you work for Cervera? Are you Styx?"

Reynald looked through Jennings with his terribly gray eyes. He said nothing.



“Talk to me!”

A flicker in time and Reynald was right there and Jennings’ gun was in Reynald’s hand. It shimmered with an impossible light and faded from view before Jennings’ eyes. Reynald approached, and Jennings stumbled back, startled. Reynald glared. Another flash and Reynald’s fist connected squarely with the side of Jennings’ face, knocking him off his feet and onto the sand.

“You blind, arrogant people. You kill for no reason. You kill without knowing why or who.”

Jennings said nothing, confused to silence.

Reynald put his hands to his eyes.

“Captain?” The man in black’s eyes flickered with an inner fire.

“What?” Reynald sounded so empty.

“It’s Simon. He’s coming.”

“The fleet’s When dropped?”

“...”

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“There was a massacre around the fourth planet.”

“The fleet?”

“The fleet—Simon is the only survivor.”

“The Enemy?”

“It’s coming. It’s coming to Harvest.”

“No. Please, no.” Reynald’s whisper was barely audible over the breaking waves.

“It’s coming.”

The sky above them was torn open as Simon’s longboat plummeted to the ground.

The longboat was immense. It landed on the beach with a storm of wind and sand, a great black sliver of metal.

((get on, they’re close!))

Jennings was shocked beyond words. He stood and watched the craft land in utter disbelief, jaw agape in amazement. Was it really another Diablo vessel?

The men in black ran to the longboat, boarded it through a hatchway. Reynald snapped from his reverie, ran toward the longboat, slowed, halted.

Jennings was terrified. He sat alone on the beach, blood still coursing down his face. In shock, he wiped it from his eyes and wondered at the redness of his hand.

Reynald relented. He could not blame this man for Magdalene’s death or this insane war. He was just another innocent dragged into the war against the Enemy.

“The Enemy is coming for your planet.”

((HURRY.))

"I know you don't understand any of this. I'm sorry you had to be caught up in this—"

((THEY'RE ALMOST HERE.))

"The Enemy's coming for your planet. They'll kill it. They'll kill your people. They'll kill you. They'll steal your souls and you'll be damned forever."

((NOW.))

"If you want to live, come with us." Reynald looked at Jennings with his too-gray eyes. "There's nothing we can do now for your people, your planet, your time."

Reynald looked to the northwest, where an ominous line of black clouds had appeared. The darkness swept upon them. The black lace of the Enemy web was already engulfing the sky.

"There's a storm coming.

"If you want to live, come with us."

Reynald took Jennings' hand and helped him up.

The longboat ascended into the upper atmosphere, then into orbit, where it rejoined Simon, unseen by the Enemy.

((hello, reynald.))

"Simon, I—"

((you don't have to say a thing. i know she's dead.))

"Simon, there's more. We—"

((it can wait.))

Zero-Four joined them. He placed his hand on Reynald's shoulder, unspoken sympathy passing between the two Judas captains. "Good to see you, Jean. Unfortunately, we've picked up an Enemy fleet coming in. The readings from the Stream are off the scale. We'd better get out of here. Into the stasis chambers."

"But we—"

"No time, Reynald. We have to hurry."

Jennings stared lifelessly at a viewscreen. "Will they really kill them all?"

Reynald joined him. "It'll do more than kill them...The Enemy is ravenous in its hunger."

Jennings was pale, quiet.

"This is for real, isn't it?"

"The Enemy is all too real."

Simon slipped into the night.

At four thirty-seven Global Standard Time, the Enemy vessel took a position in Earth orbit, and all global communication systems planet-wide went silent.

The storm had arrived.

Deep within the black, laughter like screaming echoed into the void

**planet of the shadows**



# I

*...the sun how can they...*  
*...is anyone there we're surrounded...*  
*...help please damn...*  
*...we need more troops...*  
*...they're everywhere...*  
*...pull back now pull back...*  
*...saigon is out. bangkok, manila...*  
*...chicago oh shit...*  
*...what the hell is that...*  
*...the sunlight...*  
*...new york has fallen...*  
*...pentagon satcom dead...*  
*...wind river...*  
*...regroup don't let it...*  
*...voices get the fucking VOICES out of my...*  
*...nuke it nuke it nuke it—*  
*...*

silence fell, as did mankind.

the Stream.  
a blackness moved, converged, lashed out.  
the warriors of the Judas fled before it.  
the black would harvest once more.  
another When had fallen.

It knew only pain.

There had been a different place once, but the memory was but a haze lurking in what had been its mind. The line between reality and fantasy became a gray area into which it retreated.

There was no sensation of up or down in this black hell. It thought that time still existed, but it was not sure. It could see nothing, hear nothing.

Floating, floating in an ocean of rhythmic pulses.

It remembered the terrible loss of humanity, the invasive metal tendrils, the feel of flesh becoming silver decay, the incomprehensible mind that became its own. The incomprehensible Pattern.

It floated in the black and wept tears of damnation into the void. It sensed that it was not alone.

Indeed, it sensed that it was one among an infinity.

“Geiger’s off the scale!” shouted the man in black and gray over the howling winds and the staccato voice of the radioactivity meter. Another shockwave passed over them, and the men braced themselves against the hot blast of air. The world was dust and choking and burning breaths.

“Where’s ground zero?”

“Probably Chicago. That fleet of Spears...Well, they must have dropped everything they had on it.”

“How long do we have?”

“We can’t take this level of rads for much longer. Here.”

The medic held out a hypodermic spray and reached out to administer the radiation treatment. He shook his head, motioned for the medic to tend to the other troops first. “We’re almost out of antirad. After that...” The medic shook his head.

Another man approached, looking apologetic. “Bates is fading.”

“Let’s go.”

The two soldiers dressed in urban warfare camouflage slipped through the shadows of the blasted-out building to the makeshift triage where the wounded lay dying and the dead were piled. Flashes of white illuminated the horizon as they walked, forearms held over their eyes to protect their vision from the atomic war being waged to the west.

“General, how are you doing, sir?”

“I’ve...I’ve been better, West.” His chest heaved, and a line of dark fluid trickled leisurely from the general’s mouth and nose. He gasped, body wracked in pain.

West tried to overlook the wound, but his eyes were led back again and again by some grisly fascination. He shuddered.

The general had been cut apart, cleanly sliced by a beam of light in a diagonal path that cut off his left arm and leg and the lower half of the right leg. Neatly cauterized intestines spilled from the gaping hole in his body. More disturbing than any of the exposed tissue was what was consuming it, a spidery, tendril-like silver substance that was replacing the flesh that it touched with a

metallic copy. Bates was being turned into a silver husk. It was incredible that he was still alive.

“Well, it looks like you’ll be in charge soon.”

“Nonsense, General. We’ll get you patched up—”

“Cut the bullshit. Let me die in dignity.”

“Sir, I—”

“Hear me out.” Bates coughed. More blood.

“Yes, sir.”

“West, I want...I want you to take the men...”

Lots of blood.

“Sir?”

“Take the men and run. Get as far from these...things as you can...Live to fight another day...”

“But General, Wind River’s gone, Satcom’s gone. We have to make a stand, just like when we took Montreal. Remember that? Eighth Assault won the war because we wouldn’t give up. We have to fight—”

“No...” Bates had a body-wracking coughing fit. “You stand and fight, and you’ll die...West, live to fight another day...These things aren’t *human*...”

“Of course not, General. Now try to rest.”

Blood flowed from Bates’ eyes.

“...run and live...”

“General, try to rest.”

Bates’ hand grasped up and secured a weak handful of West’s fatigue sleeve. He pulled West close, whispered into his ear. “I know what you are, West. I know you can destroy them.”

West blinked and frowned. General Bates released his already faint grasp on West’s sleeve.

His body slumped. West closed his eyes.

“Rest in peace, General Bates. Bag him.”

On the horizon behind them, the night sky was torn open by the flash of a large atomic. Lasers flickered the sky like so many fireworks. The drone of gunfire began again, and more warplanes flew overhead.

“Doc, how are the rest of the wounded?”

“All seventeen critical. Not a chance. Those weapons—”

“Kill them. Put them out of their misery so we can move out. Understood?”

Hesitation. “Yes, sir.”

West turned back to the horizon. Sunlight was waking in the east. Faint sunlight.



“What the hell will today bring?” he asked to no one. He faced the scene of destruction stretched before him. The earth shuddered as the fleet of warplanes fell from the sky, enveloped in a web of silver, erupting their payload uselessly on the ruins of suburbs: playgrounds and tract housing and drive-in movie theatres where children had laughed and families had dreamed and teenagers had been teenagers in the back seats of their father’s cars.

It was the dawn of a new day.

Weeping.

She awoke to the sound of sobbing that drifted to her from the stifling black.

Pain wracked her body and she adjusted the bandage that encompassed the left side of her face. She gently traced the gouged path of flesh that someone had stitched back together as she had been passed out. A thin line of fire was imprinted

from just above her left eyebrow to her cheekbone. What had once been her left eye was now a throbbing ball of agony. She vaguely remembered a nearby explosion and shrapnel filling the sky and falling to the asphalt that smelled of poison and blood, her face greeting the ground with a brutal slap.

*Why am I still here? How am I still alive?*

She surveyed her shelter with her good eye.

She was beneath Seattle, in a decrepit sewer tunnel left over from the era before the New America program. The tunnel stretched away in both directions, the ceiling thirty feet above her. The dank smell of old sewage had permeated this sanctuary, but it was better than the caustic chemical atmosphere on the surface.

“How’s your eye?” A voice, gentle, quiet, masculine. The man facing her was dressed in a military-issue medical uniform.

A pale green glow emerged from the chemlite he carried. Similar glows could be seen throughout the stretch of tunnel visible to her. She shrugged, touched her throat, grimacing.

“Throat’s still bothering you? I’ll bring you something for it.” He gently began to remove the bandage from her face. “Let’s take a look at that eye.” She grew uneasy.

The medic removed the steripad from the left side of her face. It was a deep flesh wound. Thankfully there had been no nerve damage, but she would never regain sight in her left eye without a transplant, and there probably would be a terrible scar, especially with the current state of medicine being practiced. It

was wartime, after all. Unfortunate, the medic thought. She really was an attractive woman. Very intriguing...He hated to see her face contorted in pain.

"Try to open your eye."

She hesitated...

"Go ahead. I won't bite." He grinned.

Slowly, tentatively, she opened the eye. She could see only black with the left eye, but with her right she searched the medic's face for his unspoken opinion.

He tried to conceal his shock at what he saw in her eyes.

The right one was a lucid emerald green. A man could become lost in that gaze, he thought.

The left eye was what had surprised him. The iris was a cold, impossibly gray orb. The wound snaked through the iris in a leisurely path of scarlet.

Impossible, the medic thought. She's a Styx.

She noticed a hint of distress in his eyes...

*He knows.* She contained her panic. He knows.

He simply misted the wound with an antisept spray and gathered up his things in the ghostly green light.

"I'll bring a biotic for your throat. As for your eye..." He looked through his kit, took out a small round container. "Let's see if this will help it heal." He withdrew a round green disk from the container. He opened the lids of her left eye and covered the wound with the medlens.

She blinked and looked at him in silence. Aside from the red vertical line bisecting her left eye, she was the picture of beauty.

With two green eyes.

"I'll be back later." He reached out and patted her bruised hands gently. "Try to get some sleep, okay?"

She smiled at him. He blushed as he walked away.

*He knows.*

"Our father, who art in Heaven..."

The faithful, in their terror, turned to prayer. Words of hope, learned by rote in the sunlight of forgotten youths, floated up from the assembled mass.

"Hallowed be Thy name..."

Sounds of humanity: coughing, groaning, weeping.

The church had become a refuge for the prey.

"...the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory..."

The building shook with the force of a nearby explosion. A candelabra tipped over at the entrance.

“...forever and ever. Amen.”

The doors blew open.

“Hold your positions! No retreat, no surrender! We aren’t going down without a fight they’ll remember!”

His supply of bad war movie cliches exhausted, West readied himself for the attack. What were these creatures?

A dull ache was starting to form at the back of West’s head. He checked his weapon and was disturbed to see that his eyes would not focus properly.

He blinked and shook his head. It was as if some terribly powerful force was trying to pry its way into his mind...Tangible, maddening.

West and the other soldiers crouched behind a crumbled wall. They came from many different backgrounds: career military, civilian militia, and other men and women who just owned a gun and wanted to live. One thing united them: they all had the look of a trapped animal.

He could hear, feel the approach of the Enemy forces.

They would draw the line here.

With eyes that blazed cold gray light, he jumped over the wall, his automatic rifle blazing armor-piercing rounds into the Enemy midst.

It began.

Soldiers poured into the church.

“Everyone get down! They’re coming! Get *down!*!”

The soldiers took up defensive positions and trained their weapons on the entrance. The faithful prayed; the fearful wept.

The soldiers waited.

The light outside the door dimmed.

The preacher continued with the sermon, shouting to make his voice heard over the roar of nothingness from without.

“I looked, and beheld a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him...”

The building shook.

“...the moon became as blood; and the stars of heaven fell unto the earth...”

Wails of grief.

“And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places. And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty

men, and every bondsman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; and said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: For the great day of his wrath is come, and who shall be able to stand?”

The Enemy swept into the church.

The old gods did nothing to protect their flock.

The faithful were judged.

Nightmares.

She was trapped in their power. Her dreams always haunted her, bringing up memories of a past she still struggled to forget.

But she was a Styx.

Memories.

*falling. falling. endless. darkness. a child. blood. mercy. merciless. a flickering of images. an orb of stars. flashes of light. bodies. massacre.*

*judgment. a shift. terror.*

*loss of humanity.*

*the light oh god the light. heaven and hell and the stillness between.*

*a weapon: slaughterer of innocents—*

She snapped upright from where she had been sleeping and stifled the urge to scream. Her breath came hard, fast; she was bathed in sweat.

Vertigo. *Where am I?*

Then she heard the weeping and the moaning of the wounded. A child cried out for his mother, began to sob. Other voices joined it in abject despair. She saw the dim glow of the chemlites.

She was still in the tunnel.

Someone was there.

She sensed someone staring at her from the darkness. She tried to speak, but her voice was still a harsh whisper. There had been chemical warfare on the surface.

She found her flashlight and turned it on to see who was watching her. Time was distorted in the tunnel, but she sensed that it was nighttime on the surface. Most of the refugees in the tunnel slept.

The medic sat watching her from the shadows.

“I’m sorry...Did I wake you?”

She shook her head, looked at him questioningly.

“Good. I brought a biotic for your throat.”

He came closer and sat down next to her against the wall. Someone screamed; whether in sleep or in the waking state she could not tell.

“Open up.” She obeyed, and he activated the biotic field, sweeping the back of her throat. She gasped as the human-engineered biological organisms attacked the infection.

“Don’t fight it. It’ll burn for a while, but you’ll be better in a few minutes.”

She smiled and looked down at his name tag. Hayes.

He noticed her gaze. “Simon Hayes. Chief Medical Officer of the Fourteenth Assault. Born and raised in Harkness, Michigan.”

Her eyes widened. He smiled, looked sadly down the length of the tunnel.

“Yes. *That* Harkness, Michigan. The one that went ‘boom.’”

She placed her hand on his shoulder.

“Let’s see if the biotics have done their job yet. Try to say something, but don’t force it. Start out by telling me your name.”

“Flynn...”

“Good start. *What* Flynn, if I may be so bold?”

“Ember Magdalene Flynn.” Her throat was on fire, but even in its strangely cracked timbre, her brogue shined through enough to make Hayes smile with surprise.

“And where are you from, Ms. Flynn? Brooklyn?”

She laughed, for the first time in...in a long time. A very long time.

“My friends call me Maggie. I come from New Belfast.”

“Oh, I couldn’t tell.” His smile was the brightest thing she could see in the expanse of the tunnel. He was of course being sarcastic. “What brings you to Seattle, Ms. Flynn? The lovely scenery, the accommodations, the shopping and sightseeing? Are you into grunge, Cobain, coffeehouses, drummers and guitarists with scruffy goatees? That sort of thing?”

She tapped the Milicom identification burn on her forearm. “I heard there was a little fight going on, and I figured I could help out.”

“Ah, beloved Milicom Systems International. You were caught in the wrong place at the wrong time, Ms. Flynn. You would have been safer back at home, probably.”

“I haven’t been home in twelve years. With the troubles in Quebec and all...I joined up to fight in that war; I’ve been stationed in the ASA ever since the annexation. I guess this is my home now, so I’m fighting again to save it.”

Hayes uttered a pained laugh. “Not much worth saving anymore. America the beautiful. Loyalty, freedom, individuality. Greed, corruption, an insatiable desire to achieve globalized manifest destiny. All the things our fathers died for in War Three. You are one of a dying breed, Ms. Flynn.” His smile reassured her that he was being sarcastic, but she could tell that he was being genuine.

“Has there been any word from above?”

Hayes looked down and studied the chemlite; the gentle smile disappeared from his face. “The messages stopped coming through yesterday. No one else has come from above. At last word, all of Europe was gone.” She flinched when he said this, but he continued. “In the end, even Indochine was begging for our help, but it appears we have problems of our own.” He indicated the tunnel they were presently inhabiting and the sleeping refugees. “America the beautiful indeed.”

“What are they?”

Hayes looked up to the ceiling of the tunnel. An occasional explosion would send grit and dust falling leisurely to the tunnel floor in this windless expanse. Sometimes there was the sound of what appeared to be a lightning strike on the surface. Hayes shook his head and looked back down. “I don’t know what they are. I can’t know what they are. I don’t want to think of them.”

“I was just—”

“You were a member of the forces that took Montreal, weren’t you? The Eighth Assault? Don’t worry, I have nothing against the Styx.” His abrupt change of subject startled Flynn. His eyes revealed a calm that she dearly wished that she could possess.

She looked down at the floor. “Yes. I was in Montreal.”

He pulled his shirtsleeve up to reveal a neatly branded “XIV” on his left bicep. “I was in Fourteenth Assault. I believe we took the names after you guys kicked the asses. So it was true. Milicom was behind it all...How the hell did you get to Seattle?...You weren’t exiled to that island, were you? The rumors were true.”

“I was never on Santa Fosca. They hid some of us, sprinkling us around the Allied States. As a hidden line of defense.”

“What level are you?”

“K.”

“Jesus. The highest level I had ever heard of was an H-level.”

“How much do you know about us?”

“Only what was published in the medical journals.”

She was secretly relieved.

“How many of you were hidden?”

“I only know of three. Two K’s and an L. There might have been more”

“You were too much of an investment to kill off.”

She sat in the dark, contemplating. “Something like that.”

Hayes laughed, shook his head. She trusted him already.

There was just something about him...

“Well, my new friend, your secret is safe with me. I have other patients to tend to. It was a pleasure to meet you, Ember Magdalene Flynn.”

Their gazes locked in the shadows.

“Ember is my Styx code. No one calls me that anymore. Call me Maggie.”

“Alright. It was a pleasure to meet you, Maggie.”

He grinned as he walked into the darkness.

West had seen each of his compatriots neatly cut apart by the Black. It would have been quite an accomplishment for even the most seasoned soldier to escape that barrage. West admitted that he had an advantage.

He was a K-level Styx.

Against overwhelming odds, he destroyed the entire squad of the Black single-handedly. They were unprepared for him, a human that could fight back.

A sound from above drew his attention upward.

A sleek sliver of black plummeted from the heavens. It fell to earth and buried itself upright into the bombed ruins of Chicago. The earth shook as it broke the surface and finally came to rest. Another two of the vessels flew overhead, traveling west. Their shadows passed over him, blocking out the sun for an instant.

Strangely, the sun seemed dimmer. Colder. The sky was gauzy, covered in a gray haze that West had never before seen.

He stood up, stretched, and began to walk.

He realized that he was one of three people on the planet who could withstand the Black.

Flynn jumped to her feet. What was *that*?

Another explosion rocked the tunnel. People stood, still groggy from the sleep of exhaustion. They looked like spirits of the damned in the green ghost glow.

Yet another explosion. The sound of twisting metal came from above them.

“Run! Get down the tunnel, all of you!”

Flynn helped Hayes lift an injured man to his feet. People ran, staggered, limped into the blackness of the tunnel, abandoning their shelter.

A horrendous crash of steel girders and concrete followed them down the tunnel. The Black had breached their stronghold.

There came to them the sound of lighter crashes and heavy footsteps. Flynn stopped running and fell behind the group.

“Hurry up! They’re coming!”

“I know.”

The Enemy was upon them.

Hayes stepped into their path as if to protect Flynn. She shoved him out of the way and then the destruction began.

In the glow of his chemlite, Hayes saw the Black rush at him, humanoid, yet monstrous, innately alien, yet somehow familiar.

Flynn ran at the Enemy and disappeared.

Hayes blinked, certain that it had been an optical illusion.

Women don’t just vanish.

The first Enemy creatures in the line erupted.

Limbs flew from the bloody mass that had been the Enemy. The massive body fell only a few feet from Hayes. He was bathed in a warm, sticky fluid as pieces of the Enemy monster flew at him. With a morbid fascination, Hayes realized that the creatures that were the Black bled also.

Four Enemy left. Hayes stood in terror as one’s head was torn from its body by an unseen force. Another’s chest exploded. The remaining two were cleanly cut in half in mid-stride.

Hayes stood among the carnage.

There was a flicker in the dark in front of him.

She was there, standing calmly, out of breath, shaking visibly. Her hands still flickered, and looking at them was like looking at something though glass on a sunny day. They were there, but not there. In a flash, they solidified. Hayes blinked.

“That’s why I was too much of an investment to kill off.”

West gazed at the sun.

The watch on his wrist had been shattered long ago, but his inner clock told him it was early afternoon, between noon and one o’clock, the part of the day when the sun was the highest in the sky. Brightest in the sky.

Something was wrong.

West noted how the sunlight striking him did not warm him, as if it had lost its energy, its warmth, on the ninety-three million mile journey to Earth.

The sun seemed dim. Used.

*What the hell is going on?*

The world had been in turmoil for one week.

Apparently mankind had fallen. This fact in and of itself neither shocked nor surprised West, only the manner of the end of society as he knew it mildly disturbed him. He had never been a believer in UFO’s,



*what about the vessel in the mountain((?))*

*don't you want to go back to the light((?))*

*wasn't it the heaven you've been searching for all your life((?))*

but the visual evidence before him was conclusive. Aliens had conquered the world.

All he had to do to find proof of this hypothesis was to look up at the sky.

The sun was fading.

Great dark shapes could be seen flying above the atmosphere even now in daylight, hideous black nightmare fish floating just beneath the surface of a tranquil forest pool. Smaller dark shapes periodically launched from the larger vessels. Some entered the atmosphere and set about an unknown mission. The gauzy substance in the sky had darkened considerably since he had last looked up.

He looked east, toward what had once been Chicago. The vessel that had landed there sat vertically amidst the ruins. What were they doing in there?

The number of vessels circling the planet was increasing, like predators coming for a piece of the kill. West shuddered.

The sun gazed coldly down upon him.

He had to find others. There had to be more people left alive, hiding.

He walked.

Arizona.

The Black closed in on a man in the desert.

The man stood his ground.

The Black rushed at him. He remained calm. His eyes opened. Two gray orbs stared out upon the scene of destruction. The Enemy had slaughtered the entire group with whom he had been traveling.

Twenty feet.

He closed his eyes. When they opened, they burned with an impossible silver fire.

Ten feet.

Time stopped. The Black erupted in a flash of silver and violet light. The remnants fell to the ground. The shards of black puddled into mercury and seeped into the thirsty desert floor in a somehow obscene descent.

Time began once more. The man stood in a circle of black ash twenty feet across.

He smiled and went on his way.

His name was Richter.

He was the L-level Styx.

## II

*black*  
*tangible. maddening. smothering.*  
*black*  
*innate*

they came.

beyond infinity and possibility. from beginning to end, from time entire, the black converged. wherever they passed, they left a crimson swathe in their wake.

the Purpose would be completed.

the prodigal children of Omega would be brought back into the fold.

within the blackness that was entire, an insanity flourished.

thoughts fluttered.

the putrescence of the possible.

subordinate to commander, an exchange. a conversation.

**THE PURPOSE IS SERVED((?))**

HARVEST COMMENCES. UPLOAD COMMENCES. LIGHT FADES.  
THE PATTERN COALESCES.

**ALL THEN IS WELL. DOES THE PRESENCE OF BLASPHEMY  
HINDER US ONCE MORE((?))**

THEY HAVE BEEN DRIVEN OFF FOR NOW.

**TO RECOUP, NO DOUBT...**

NO DOUBT.

contemplation. palaver of damnation.

**ALLWHENS JOIN THE HARVEST((?))**

A CERTAINTY. ETERNITY'S RIGHTEOUS COME FORTH TO  
SHARE IN THESE HOLY SPOILS.

**PURPOSE BE. LIFEBLOOD IS SPILLED.**

PURPOSE BE. INQUIRY. WHEN DOES NEXT HARVEST TARGET  
ARISE((?))

**EVEN AS WE BATHE IN THE BLOOD OF THIS WHEN, YOU  
CRAVE MORE((?))**

I CRAVE THE PURPOSE.

suspicion.

**YOUR THOUGHTS. SHARE.**

SEIZE MY ESSENCE. KNOW ME.

ecstasy. a flash of coexistence. a newfound insight.

YOU SEE((?))

**LOGIC IS SERVED. YOUR THOUGHTS ARE TRUE.**

VICTORY WILL BE OURS. PURPOSE WILL BECOME. WE WILL HUNT THEM DOWN AND BURN THEIR HIVES WITH THE FIRE OF OMEGA. VICTORY WILL BE OURS.

**A CERTAINTY. I BOW TO YOUR FORESIGHT.**

rapture.

**GO THEN. PURPOSE BE. FIND THEIR HIVES AND CLEANSE THEM.**

the black parts once more.

The web of souls that was the Enemy was pleased.

The Harvest was proceeding at a phenomenal rate. The asteroid belt was stripped of volatiles. The gaseous planets were being siphoned. The solid planets were undergoing reclamation. And the third planet...

Oh, the third planet. Luscious.

It was the only planet in the system that sustained life. Well, *had* sustained life. Living matter, with all of its rich bioneural energy. So many patterns to upload...

Souls were being gathered.

The planet had held nine billion humans. Already, eight billion had been harvested. The rest were either in hiding or dead in the wake of the final, sporadic urban warfare. With few exceptions, it had been an easy victory. They had of course had to level the cities and drive the vermin into the open before they could gather them for upload. Some of the vermin had been particularly stubborn, and they had paid for their defiance with their souls. The population that still resisted was as of yet a manageable percentage of the populace. Their cities had been burned to the ground; their weapons were useless. The web solidifying around the planet would soon siphon the atmosphere, making the planet uninhabitable for those pathetic organics. The prey in hiding would be either found and harvested or dead themselves soon.

The great Enemy motherships came from the Whenstream and set to work dismantling that which had been the Sol system. All volatiles had to be harvested to serve the Purpose. Everything had to be uploaded to create the necessary heavens.

Many orbited the sun or the fifth planet, a gas giant, reaping it layer by layer. The Enemy vessels around the sun set about the difficult task of collapsing the star into a When hole.

Day by day, as their mission came closer to realization, the star faded.

Still other vessels patrolled the timesweep waves emanating from the Whenstream for any sign of the Judas. Soon, there would be no more worry. A large force had been sent to destroy or upload as many of the known Judas forts in the Stream as possible. The realization of the Purpose was now a tangible goal.

So soon...

The bulk of the Enemy force orbited the third planet, tending to the reaping of the populace. The vessels synthesized a spidery web around the planet. Periodically, smaller vessels would drift down from this web to the planet surface, landing at one of the fallen major cities that had been spared the atomic suicide of the last days.

This was the time of the Black.

She thought they were flying.

There were sounds in this utter darkness: the sounds of humanity. Sobbing, coughing, gasping. Dying.

She was standing, pressed against others in the black. Some slept standing, for there simply was no room to lay down. The large man next to her had died sometime during the night. She could do nothing but let the dead weight lean on her.

Many of the group had died.

Her prayers had not helped her.

The soldiers who had stormed into the church were torn apart as the parishioners looked on by an unseen force that arrived on a veil of purple and silver so light that one could barely discern whether it was really visible or just imagined.

What followed the veil was definitely visible: an assemblage of large, silent, impossible monsters, tall, cloaked in black, speaking with a voice like spiders and acid and fear that came from their minds and not their mouths because they didn't have any mouths they didn't have faces they—

She took a deep breath, trying not to remember and not succeeding at all.

They had been herded from the church like cattle and joined hundreds, perhaps thousands of others grouped on U.S. Route 11 outside of Roanoke, Virginia. The assemblage was circled by the monstrous *things*.

A low rumbling from overhead drew her attention.

A massive jet-black vessel thrust through the clouds and gently landed just to the north on the highway. Its size was beyond her comprehension, perhaps undreds, perhaps thousands of feet, perhaps miles long. Impossible, she thought.

From its underside a walkway descended.

The horror of what was about to happen dawned on her.

The aliens began to force the group toward the vessel, not with weapons but with the Voice that cut so deeply into her soul, toward the waiting maw of the black interior. Some people openly resisted, and they simply became motionless, paralyzed from an unseen force. They remained where they were as the huge crowd filled the vessel.

She ascended the ramp into the innate blackness within the ship. A vaguely human, organic scent washed over her. Other people had been in there before. As the crowd pushed against her, she was forced into an already-overcrowded corner of the tremendous room.

At long last, the entire group was within the vessel's confines, except the small group of men and women who had tried to fight. They stood outside the vessel, motionless except for eyes, terrible eyes moving because they could *why can their eyes move like like animals trapped* they looked with their moving desperate eyes.

As the ramp slid up into the vessel's underside and the large doors began to cycle closed, she saw one of the aliens turn back to the frozen men and women and even children and without a motion it seemed their eyes exploded outwards as their minds were torn apart by the black black monster. Only then did their bodies move; they fell so terribly limply dead to the ground, blood in puddles everywhere, horrendous lifeless bodies stippling the stylish black recently repaved highway.

Their bodies were immediately consumed by grotesquely winding tendrils of silver metal until they were nothing but husks on the ground. The aliens walked from the pile of gore and jumped onto the quickly ascending ramp.

*God save them.*

The doors closed with a resounding thud, a deep and horrible sound, a sound like an impossibly large coffin door closing. Blackness fell.

Her name was Patra Jennings.

She was the daughter of the President.

The light of day once more bathed them, yet it seemed distant. Colder. The crack made by the opening doors grew wider.

She had felt the vibration around her, but in her semi-trance she had not realized that the vessel was landing until it gave a sudden jolt and stilled. At long last the doors slid open. Small groups of people began to disembark, descending the ramp.

Because she was near a corner, Patra was one of the last to leave the vessel. She was relieved to be out of the nauseating confines of the room, ripe with the putrescence of the dead and human waste.

She followed the lines of people to another holding area ringed by the aliens. She didn't know where they were; it might have been one of the bombed-out cities. Chunks of asphalt below her, rubble around her. It looked as if a city had been picked up into the air and then thrown back to the ground. Perhaps it had; surveying the horizon revealed the impossibly tall edges of a blast crater. A sheer rock face created a solid wall in every direction. Running would serve no purpose.

The sky was blacker here.

As she looked around, she noticed that the vessel they had arrived in was far from alone. The vessels stretched away as far as she could see, landing, taking off.

Unloading.

She shuddered.

They stood in the shadow of a building.

Building? No; all of the buildings had been destroyed.

The great black edifice before her was some kind of vessel, different than the others, sunk into the ground, stretching upward at an impossible cant. A barely-discernible line of light was being emitted from the top of the vessel, stretching up into the heavens.

Something about that vessel...That light...

She forcibly pulled her thoughts from the spire and saw groups of people gathered at its base. Lines of men and women snaked into the vessel. Endless lines.

Patra studied the aliens circling her group. They looked... vaguely familiar. They were humanoid, two arms and two legs, but they had no facial features, only a blank...faceplate? Of course. Aliens wouldn't be able to breathe our air, so they'd wear a space suit. These were only shells. Who knew what kind of creature existed below the armor?

The people were getting restless. There were many whispers, hushed. Patra saw many looks of terror, shock, incomprehension, resignation, hatred, suspicion.

A large group of men was having a clandestine conversation. She could sense that they were plotting something...Patra unconsciously began to back away from the band of conspirators.

Their group was the next in line at the base of the monolith. Whatever was going to happen, it wouldn't be much longer...The aliens began to close in.

“NOW!!”

About fifty men charged from the crowd at one of the creatures. The response was immediate.

Until now, the aliens had used some kind of mental force, some hideous extension of the subconscious Voice that permeated everything, as a weapon. No one had seen the shields.

The progress of the conspirators was halted by a suddenly visible spherical shield that emanated from the Black. It glowed a dark, clouded violet.

The men who ran into it were blackened and charred as they were set on fire. Cries of agony as their flaming bodies were quickly consumed by the same silver mesh that had engulfed the people killed outside of the transport vessel.

The rest of the conspirators faltered, halted.

This whole occurrence was not overlooked by the other aliens, but they made no attempt to interfere or assist their comrade, who stood calmly within the purple bubble. There were several piercing flashes of light and several more aliens materialized right in front of Patra. A silvery endostructure emerged from the flashes of light, and a hard black shell solidified around it. These new arrivals made no movements, but simply watched the events around them unfold.

The shielded black demon nonchalantly turned back to the crowd, its somehow non-eyes sweeping across the human expanse.

Gasps from the crowd. No time to run.

Light danced.

*Silvioletthought* tore from the alien and smashed into and through the remaining conspirators. Many bystanders too close to the attempted coup were also torn apart in the rampage. The liquid metal again encompassed the victims of the alien warrior's mind weapon.

The crowd was silent. Shocked.

Wails of agony from those on the ground.

The aliens moved in once more, crushing the remains.

Patra finally broke. She began to weep.

The group began to move toward the monolith.

Patra stumbled over a dead man's hand and screamed.

black  
darkness parts.

THE PURPOSE WILL BE COMPLETED.

**COMPLETION IS THE PURPOSE.**

unease.

**ANOTHER DISTURBANCE((?))**

SEVERAL.

suspicion.

MANY. PERHAPS WE LACK THE POWER TO BREAK THEIR  
WILL.

BLASPHEMY((!)) **YOU MOCK OUR STRENGTH.**

NO, I—

**WE ((WERE ARE WILL BE)) GODS TO THEM.**

THEIR SOCIETIES BECOME INCREASINGLY INTRACTABLE.

**WE WILL NOT FAIL. PROCEED WITH HARVEST OF NATIVE  
POPULACE REMNANTS. ANY FURTHER RESISTANCE SHOULD  
BE MET WITH FIERCE RETALIATION.**

WE WILL BE BRUTAL. REINFORCEMENTS HAVE BEEN  
DOWNLOADED AND SYNTHESIZED.

**REMEMBER THAT THEY ARE NOTHING BUT CODE.  
TREAT THEM AS SUCH, AND WE WILL PREVAIL. THEY ARE  
NOTHING BUT THE LOST CODES OF OUR GOD OMEGA.**

THE WORD IS TRUE; THE SALVATION SHALL BE OURS.

**GO THEN. PURPOSE BE.**

PURPOSE BE.

the swirling of blackest fog, like a curtain closing.

the black fades...

they walked into the vessel, and time stopped

walk walk walk into the black

walk

they walked

eternal monotony

she had been here

forever walking

something grasped her

*MIND*

stifling waves of heat cold

*CLAUSTROPHOBIA*



choking struggle walk  
into a haze  
darkness encompassed them...

memories...

...the day Daddy brought her a new teddy bear "Brand new, Patty! Better than your ratty *old* bear!" and Honeybear Brown, tattered, loved, cherished, was thrown into the waste unit. "NO, Daddy. NO! I LOVE Honeybear!"

"You'll love your NEW bear, too." tears. the new bear sat for days on the chair by the closet until she

**KILLED KILLED KILLED HIM**

flung him out the window down down he fell thirty stories...

...years later. television. "Look, Patty, I'm on TV!! Daddy's on TV!"  
*TODAY, COLUMBIA STATE SENATOR DAVID JENNINGS, RENOWNED WAR HERO, ANNOUNCED HIS PRESIDENTIAL BID. THIS SPLITS THE POPULACE PARTY TICKET THREE WAYS. RUMORS OF UNREST AND DISSENT IN WASHINGTON HAVE SURFACED. INCREASED SECURITY HAS BEEN ORDERED FOR TOMORROW'S STATE OF THE FEDERATION ADDRESS. IN OTHER NEWS, TENSIONS IN QUEBEC*—the television was snapped off. Mommy with a champagne bottle, hugging Daddy. "Now it's time for bed, Patty. Big day tomorrow." yes. big day...

..."Patra Jennings?" a matronly old woman asked as she stepped off the maglev. "Welcome to the Rodham Girl's School. Let's go to your dormitory, shall we?" the smell of old schools, darkened hallways, pre-Three tech. a small room, an uncomfortable bed, no weblink. "I'm sure you'll be happy here. Many Congresspeople send their children here. You'll meet others tomorrow at Plenary."...

...*UNDERDOG DAVID JENNINGS HAS WON THE PRESIDENTIAL RACE. WE GO LIVE TO THE CAPITOL...*

..."Yes, Patty. I promise I'll send for you soon, but things are kind of heating up around here, with the war in Quebec and all. You understand, don't you, Sweetie? We'll spend next Christmas together for sure."...

...*WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU MEAN WE'RE—OH, UM...NETNEWS SPECIAL REPORT, LIVE FROM LOS ANGELES. LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, WE MUST WARN YOU OF THE GRAPHIC NATURE OF THIS SPECIAL BULLETIN. CONTACT WITH OUR WASHINGTON BUREAU HAS BEEN SEVERED, SO OUR CHIEF SOURCE OF INFORMATION HAS BEEN EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS.*

THE IMAGES YOU SEE BEFORE YOU ARE AMATEUR VIDEO AND PHOTOGRAPHS OF WHAT WAS WASHINGTON, D.C. AT THIS POINT, ALL WE KNOW IS A SMALL-SCALE THERMONUCLEAR WEAPON HAS DESTROYED MUCH OF THE NATION'S CAPITOL. THE PRESIDENT IS RETURNING FROM THE G-15 SUMMIT MEETING IN MEXICO CITY AS WE SPEAK. HE IS EXPECTED TO—THIS JUST IN. SOURCES IN NEW ENGLAND SAY FRENCH INSURGENCE FORCES HAVE STORMED THE QUEBEC/U.S. BORDER. MILITARY UNITS HAVE BEEN MOBILIZED...

...her mother had been in Washington. she wept...

...AND A FUNCTIONAL GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN ESTABLISHED IN A COMPLEX IN THE ROCKIES. TODAY, AMERICAN FORCES LIBERATED NEW YORK CITY FROM THE QUEBECOIS...

...her mother's funeral. ashes to ashes, dust to dust...

...SOURCES ON THE FRONT LINE TELL US THAT THE SEVENTH ASSAULT GROUP PUNCHED THROUGH THE FRENCH DEFENCES AFTER A THREE-WEEK STANDOFF AT THE CITY WALLS. THE EIGHTH ASSAULT GROUP HAS BEEN SENT IN TO TAKE THE CITY. WE HAVE WORD THAT THE SEVENTH SUFFERED NINETYEIGHT PERCENT LOSSES. THEIR EFFORTS WILL NOT BE FORGOTTEN...

..."Patra, your father simply cannot speak to you at the moment. After we take Canada, I'm sure he'll call you. You have to realize that it is your duty as an American to believe in your government, your father, and not question his actions."...

alone. utterly alone.

hatred flourished.

...SPECIAL REPORT. VICTORY IN CANADA! THE PROVISIONAL FRENCH GOVERNMENT STEPPED DOWN, SURRENDERING FROM THEIR MONTREAL BUNKER. AMERICAN FORCES HAVE TAKEN THE CITY AND FREED THE BESIEGED NEW ENGLAND AREA. NOW, THE LONG PROCESS OF REBUILDING WASHINGTON AND OUR WOUNDED COUNTRY MUST BEGIN...

..."Daddy? Please, can I come home?"....

..."Let Washington remain a monument for future generations. Let it be a testament to the courage and the perseverance of the American people. Let this empty plain be the quiet reminder of our painful past, and let us build again. Let us build again for the countless dead. The Wind River region of Wyoming will be officially designated as the new District of Columbia. The capitol will be

relocated to Wind River, a much more secure area. The Federal Government will never be destroyed again. The sixty-four Allied States of America will live forever.”...

...an image burned into the minds of the nation, the weeping president laying flowers at the grave of his wife, Abrah Kennedy Jennings. He fell forward, embraced the stone monument, shook with the force of his sobbing. The nation mourned...

...deep depression. her mother dead, her father consumed in the process of rebuilding the fractured nation. so distant. she escaped the Rodham School by simply climbing out her window and walking out the main gate. the security guard within the gatehouse slept. she walked into the cool, moonlit night with tears on her cheeks and blackness in her soul...

...SEARCHERS SCoured THE SURROUNDING AREA MANY MONTHS, FINDING ONLY BLOOD-SOAKED CLOTHING WHICH HAS BEEN POSITIVELY SEQUENCED AS THE BLOOD OF PATRA JENNINGS. THE SEARCH GOES ON FOR THE ABDUCTORS, BUT NO ONE HAS CLAIMED RESPONSIBILITY. FEDNET HAS SEVERAL SUSPECTS IN CUSTODY, AND IS INVESTIGATING SEVERAL LEADS. A MEMORIAL SERVICE WAS HELD TODAY IN COLUMBLA PARK. THE PRESIDENT WILL REMAIN IN WIND RIVER IN PREPARATION FOR THE PEACE ACCORDS...

...she had taken a shirt from her pack and used it to bind the gash on her palm she had suffered while sliding down a gravel embankment. she discarded the shirt on the roadside several miles from the school after the blood had stopped flowing. she walked on. three weeks later, sitting in a greasy spoon in rural Virginia, her hair cut short, dyed, dressed in jeans and T-shirt, she was shocked to learn from the weblink news that she had apparently been brutally kidnapped and murdered. the nation mourned for the tragic Jennings family drama. Patra smiled and ordered some cheesecake to celebrate her new life...

...MASSIVE CITIZEN RIOTS IN CHICAGO TODAY AFTER THE NATION OF ISLAM COMMUNITY CENTER WAS BOMBED ON THE SOUTH SIDE, KILLING THREE HUNDRED, WITH MORE DEATHS EXPECTED. THE NEW WHITE PARTY ACKNOWLEDGES ITS INVOLVEMENT IN THE DESTRUCTION OF THE PREDOMINANTLY AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHURCH. THIS IS THE SEVENTH SUCH ATTACK THIS YEAR. FORTY THOUSAND LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS ARE CURRENTLY TRYING TO PUT DOWN THE RIOTS...

...she tried to create a sense of normalcy in her life. with the last of the money she had taken with her from the Rodham School, she bribed a hacker to

establish a fake IDCOM number and file for her. with the IDCOM file, she was able to get a job in Roanoke. she was now a waitress. she knew someday she'd get a better job, but this was good enough. she rented an apartment, made friends, earned money and respect. the pain of the past faded gradually. by the time

*-DAVID JENNINGS REELECTED*

*-she was eighteen.*

the affairs of her father did not interest her. the nation looked upon the man with respect for his actions in the Quebec War and his New America program, but also with pity. he was the first American president with no family at all. some said his pained smile won him the election. she let her hair grow and let it go back to its original brunette color. it was a gamble, but in the end, no one made the connection between the president's dead daughter and the new girl in town....

*...THE WHITE HOUSE DENIES REPORTS THAT A COVERT MILITARY TEAM IS TO BLAME FOR THE ASYET-UNEXPLAINED CHICAGO MASSACRE. PRESIDENT JENNINGS HIMSELF VEHEMENTLY DENIES THAT HIS GOVERNMENT HAS DEVELOPED A FORCE OF GENETICALLY-ALTERED "SUPERSOLDIERS" USING THE NOW-BANNED SCHRADER-KANE TECHNOLOGY THAT THE PACT USED IN WAR THREE...*

*...she was happy. she had a home, a small business on the side (she was a sculptor), a dog named Gromit, a boyfriend named Mark...*

*...NETNEWS EXCLUSIVE. A WHITE HOUSE SOURCE, SPEAKING ON STRICT CONDITIONS OF ANONYMITY, REVEALED TO NETNEWS REPORTERS THAT THE JENNINGS GOVERNMENT DID IN FACT DEVELOP A COVERT OPERATIONS TEAM THAT ALMOST SINGLEHANDEDLY TOOK MONTREAL DURING THE QUEBEC WAR. COULD THIS BE THE INFAMOUS EIGHTH ASSAULT GROUP, SO REKNOWNED FOR QUICKLY FINISHING OFF THE FRENCH FORCES AFTER THE SEVENTH WAS MASSACRED? OUR SOURCE ALSO REVEALED THAT THE TEAM WAS SENT TO CHICAGO DURING THE RIOTS, BUT WAS PULLED OUT AFTER SEVERAL RENEGADE MEMBERS BEGAN FIRING ON CIVILIANS. THE GROUP WAS APPARENTLY DISBANDED AFTER THE MASSACRE AND EXILED TO THE PACIFIC ATOLL OF SANTA FOSCA. FROM THE WIND RIVER COMPLEX, WHITE HOUSE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE ANTONIA CERVERA DISMISSED THE CHARGES AS "COMPLETELY FABRICATED COVERUP-HUNGRY MEDIA LIES." THAT MAY BE SO, SECRETARY CERVERA, BUT*

WHERE ARE THE SEVENTY-FIVE MEMBERS OF THE EIGHTH ASSAULT GROUP TODAY? NETNEWS COULD NOT FIND MILITARY OR CIVILIAN RECORDS FOR ANY OF THE MEN AND WOMEN ENLISTED UNDER ASSAULT EIGHT IN ANY OF THE SIXTY-SEVEN ALLIED STATES. WE HERE AT NETNEWS CHALLENGE THE JENNINGS GOVERNMENT TO ANSWER TO THESE CHARGES. WAS THE GOVERNMENT TO BLAME FOR THE MASSACRE OF THOUSANDS OF CIVILIANS?...

...Mark asked her to marry him. she said yes. two weeks later he was called back to Wind River for an urgent meeting of the Populace Council....

...CHAOS IN WIND RIVER: PRESIDENT ORDERS NUCLEAR STRIKES IN MICHIGAN, PACIFIC TRENCH...

reality shattered.

the shit hit the fan.

...Mark called. he couldn't come home yet. something big was going down in Wind River. something huge. it might be a coup, no one was sure yet, but Jennings had disappeared...

...she stared in abject terror and disbelief at the weblink as it showed the massive black THINGS falling to earth all over the globe. then the power went out...

...the fighting had been centered around the major cities. Roanoke was safe, for now. but to the east in the night sky she could see the glow over Richmond...

...Wind River. Mark. she mourned...

...she went to the church when the black ships began to swarm over Roanoke. she prayed for forgiveness. she prayed that it was all a dream. then the doors blew open and soldiers stormed in, *human* soldiers, shouting "GET DOWN! IT'S COMING! Everybody GET DOWN!..."

...memories.

The tunnel that led into the vessel opened into an impossible expanse of austere white light. Patra spun around, sure she would see a pinpoint of light where they had entered, sure she had been walking forever. The entrance doors cycled shut only a few yards behind her. She shielded her eyes from the glare.

The light came from the center of the huge room, where a white form floated. A sphere. An orb.

There were stars in the orb.

Patra was so mesmerized by the impossible sight that she did not feel the webs of metal as they leapt forward and implanted themselves into the temples of her skull or the tendrils of blackness steal her soul.

The orb of stars reached out for her, and she fell.

Patra Jennings was no more.

There was no pain.

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### III

Hayes knew that they were too late.

The others had scattered down the tunnel when the aliens found them. Flynn dealt with those troops, but a crash down the tunnel signaled the arrival of a second wave.

He ran with the Styx down the tunnel and barely missed being hit by a shimmering silver field of light as they rounded a bend in the sewer.

This time, the aliens were not out for prisoners.

The black creatures stood within a mass of what had been the refugees Flynn and Hayes had been with. No one had been spared.

Hayes faltered, stopped in shock.

Flynn charged past him.

Her form flickered as she ran through one of the aliens. Her arms, outstretched, cleanly sheared off the upper torsos of the other two.

Their bodies joined the bodies of the humans.

Ember Flynn flickered back into existence, unscathed.

She noted with some dismay the look of utter anguish on Hayes' face as he knelt and picked up a small form from the grisly scene of carnage. It was a baby, gasping its last breaths, eyes blinking in confusion and pain from the massive head trauma it had suffered when his father had been cut down by the aliens.

A disgusting tendril of silver wound its way around the baby's neck, replacing flesh with metal. Hayes struggled to pull the liquid mesh off of the infant's face, but it slipped through his fingers and embedded itself into the baby's eyes.

Hayes held the child close, helpless. There was nothing he could do to save the infant. The tiny body shuddered with agony, and then fell still, dead. Hayes placed the baby on the floor, in the arms of his dead father, and watched with disgusted amazement as both bodies were consumed by the liquid metal until nothing remained but a silvery husk.

When he looked back up at Flynn, she saw for an instant the chaos of emotion within the man who was Hayes. A terrifying mix of fury, despair, and something deeper, some emotion she did not want to acknowledge, for the fear that any human could possess it and remain human. Then he blinked his eyes and it was gone.

"Come on. There'll be more."

They ran.



Walking, walking, walking.

West traveled by night. During the day, he usually slept in the all-too-numerous abandoned buildings. He encountered no living people, although he did find a building, a bingo hall to be exact, where over two hundred people had committed mass suicide. Cyanide. The sign posted outside the building had proclaimed that they had gone to Heaven with their Reverend and Savior Billy Denver and the rest of the congregation of the Church of the Joyous Apocalypse. West shuddered.

He could see the black shadows circling the planet all day now, even at night. The sun was colder still, and at night there were less stars in the gauzy sky, he thought.

Who were they, the invaders? Who were they? The alien vessels flew overhead constantly. They landed where Chicago had been, waited, took off again in billowing clouds of dust and violet light.

What were they doing?

Sometimes he stood in plain sight just to see if the vessels would notice him. One human must not have mattered enough to land for, but still...

West thought he could handle the aliens if they landed for him. When they landed for him.

He had to find others. There had to be others.

He walked on.

The desert seemed cooler now.

The man who was Richter had not cared about heat or cold ever since he had emerged from the heavenly light so long ago...

But the shift in climate was still startling.

He was alone now. The group of men, women, and children he had tried to blend in with was gone now. Dead. But he had taken care of the aliens...

A pain shot through his skull.

RICHTER

Temple to temple, searing agony. Richter bent over, struggling to force the voices from his mind.

*Reaching...Grasping...*

He staggered onward.

Diablo, Wyoming.

The last official census in America revealed that Diablo had a population of forty-seven living, breathing citizens. In the Milicom Systems installation just below the Peak, five hundred twelve soldiers and forty-five officers had been stationed in rotating tours of duty.

It was a quiet town. Too quiet, like most conspicuously quiet towns are.

The village was situated at the base of the eastern face of the Peak, a large projection of nondescript rock layers. The rock outcropping jutted accusingly into the air, shielding Diablo's onetime treasure: the mine. The mine stretched to unknown depths below the village. It employed many a grandfather, father, son in the old days, scraping meager copper deposits from the rough.

And then...

Well, the mine had closed, and with it, the spirit of the town had died. The military had moved in and taken over the Peak, stringing the mine entrance with razorwire and dotting the hillsides with mechanized turrets and armed troops, and not just any pimple-faced-eighteen-year-old-high-schooldropout-armed-with-an-M-16 armed troops. These were highly-skilled-body-armored-jacked-in-Fury-7 armed troops.

Milicom troops.

Rumor was, they had found something down there.

Was it plutonium? Saganite?

No one talked. People who talked disappeared.

The town learned to stay silent. Oh, there was still the occasional drunk old-timer at the local bar who expounded theories of "god damned governmental conspiracies" and talked of the thing in the earth, the thing that sheared off twelve feet of Old Drill Two but didn't even suffer a scratch, but the bartender knew when to make them shut up, especially when off-duty Milicom types came into the bar...

Diablo learned to not listen. Then the end came, along with the aliens.

Diablo became a ghost town.

Nighttime.

They left the tunnel system several miles outside of Seattle, emerging into a landscape ravaged by the final chemical holocaust that the military had thought might be able to repel the Black forces. They had of course been wrong, and had paid for their mistake with their lives and their souls. Flynn and Hayes now sat in a half-demolished building that had once been a suburban shopping mall. The storefronts on either side of them still advertised a mall-wide Summer Sale. It did not feel like summer. A meager campfire burned before them. It was reflected in two blue eyes and two gray eyes.

There was no sign of Enemy in the area; they had apparently moved on. Hayes casually removed and discarded his medical uniform, stained as it was by the blood of the innocent and the aliens alike. He also removed his dogtags and a small pendant from around his neck. He looked at the objects in his hand for a brief sad moment, and then tossed them into the fire.

Flynn leapt forward, reaching for the discarded objects.

“Simon! Your cross—”

He pulled her hand back from the fire. The pendant he had thrown was a cross, but in the heat of the fire it soon blackened and puddled as easily as his dogtags. He released her hand after an awkward silence had passed. Her too-gray eyes searched for something in his face.

“Don’t worry about it. It didn’t mean much to me before, and it sure as hell doesn’t mean anything now.”

Flynn looked into the fire. “Were you a religious man?... Before?”

*Before.* The word hung in the air, echoing with newfound meaning. *Before.*

“No. It was given to me by...someone who meant a lot to me. She thought it would protect me. She thought it would make everything better.”

“Why did you—”

“All the old gods are dead now.” He laughed, more to himself than out loud. “They were never alive to me.”

He sat down by the makeshift fire to warm himself. Flynn sat down on the opposite side of the fire, facing Hayes.

He watched her closely.

She watched him more closely.

Hayes shivered noticeably, although Flynn could not tell if it was because of the cold or the long awkward silent stare that they had shared. Her unasked question was answered as Hayes pulled a black insulated vest from his pack and pulled it over his olive-drab tee-shirt. She made a mental note of arms constructed of taut muscle, stretched over tanned skin like leather. A worker’s arms. His identification codebar was all-too-visibly burned into his left forearm.

“It shouldn’t be this cold. It’s never been this cold at this time of year here.”

“Maybe because it’s night—”

“No...It’s never been this cold so suddenly in the summer. Don’t you feel it?”

“Maybe a little—”

“It’s too fucking cold.”

Flynn drew her legs up close to her torso, hooked her arms around the rough drab-covered surface of her knees. She looked at Hayes, who had turned away from her. A sudden breeze sent a chill through her small frame and she

shivered. She pulled a blanket from her pack and wrapped herself within. Hayes ignored her and searched through his rucksack.

There was no uncontaminated food here. The scent of chemical warfare still hung cloyingly in the air. Hayes strapped on an I.V. unit and injected a nutrient solution from his medikit into his bloodstream. He swallowed an antitoxin caplet and offered one to Flynn, but she refused.

“Genetically-engineered resistance?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

They sat in silence.

“I’m sorry about the baby, Hayes. I saw you—”

“Don’t worry about it. This is war. I shouldn’t have let it get to me.”

“But this isn’t war, at least not the kind of war that’s ever been fought here before. And we sure as hell haven’t fought aliens before. This isn’t war. This is extinction.”

“All the more reason to keep myself distanced and not get involved. Who knows how many more will die before this ends?”

“How can you not get involved? You’re a doctor.”

“I’m just a soldier now.”

“I guess everybody’s a soldier now.”

Hayes arose, paced. His hands combed through his hair, a nervous reflex. He had a headache, a dull, throbbing pain behind his eyes that had bothered him since...Well, since the first days of the invasion, back when the slivers of black first began to fall from the sky. He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. Hayes shivered as the breeze picked up. Gooseflesh had arisen on his forearms, and he rubbed his arms to warm himself up. He could see his breath when he exhaled.

It was June.

“Tell me about yourself, Simon. Tell me about your past.”

He had been patting down his pockets, searching for something. He finally found the pack of cigarettes in an interior vest pocket, ripped off the cellophane, tore off the top of the pack, expertly pulled one out with his teeth as he searched through his pockets for his lighter. He lit the cigarette, took a long draw, held the smoke in for what seemed to Flynn an impossibly long time. His exhalation brought him an obvious pleasure.

“A doctor, huh?” Flynn smiled wickedly at Hayes.

“We all have our vices. Some of us enjoy felony.”

Smoking had been illegal for three years. He carefully tapped the ashes into the fire, wanting to savor every last bit of his felony contraband. He smiled guiltily at Flynn, held the pack out to her, to which she politely shook her head.

Hayes inhaled again, exhaled after another blissful moment of nicotine, and grinned at Flynn. “Ms. Flynn, you don’t want to know about my past.”

She smiled again, a sweet disarming smile that forced Hayes to respond in kind. “Of course I do. We have a long time until daybreak, and to tell you the truth, I was hoping I could get to know my traveling partner a little better. Even if it is the end of the world. Besides, I’ll tell you mine if you tell me yours.”

Hayes gave in. Who was this woman, and why did she have this effect on him?

He sat down directly across the fire from Flynn, wrapped himself in his own blanket. The sky overhead, framed by the ruins of the building within which they sat, was strangely absent of stars and moon. The only light came from a meager fire in a dead shopping mall and the tip of Simon’s precious cigarette, the only sound the crackle and hiss of flame and the voices of perhaps the last people on earth. Hayes began, his bass voice a whisper in the night.

“Fine. You win.”

Flynn drew closer to the fire, the flames flickering in her gray eyes. She listened intently, and they passed the night revealing the past. The night grew colder to the sound of Simon Hayes’ history, and Ember Magdalene Flynn listened to every word with a fascination that she had never felt before.

“My name’s Simon Hayes. I was born in Harkness, Michigan, ten years before War Three—”

—tore apart Eurasia and destroyed over a third of the world’s population. He was not a healthy child, for reasons that no one wanted to talk about. His family denied that his mother was severely addicted to crystalline nanotech, the illegal biological interface to holotechnological realities. She had been deeply traumatized by the 2018 chemical bombing of Kansas City, in which most of her family had been killed. She used the nanotech devices to escape her reality. Simon’s father was a holotech developer, eager to test out his latest programs on the overly-willing subject. It was not a match made in heaven, but it was a match nonetheless. From it, Simon was created.

Simon grew up a lonely child. He had no siblings; his parents’ application for a second child license had been rejected, and his parents by law had to undergo sterilization. He was artistic and intelligent beyond his years. One obstacle hindered his expression severely, a permanent stutter that made verbal communication almost impossible. He found his creative outlet in drawing, and his parents often found him outside sketching the warplanes that constantly flew overhead.

He always seemed happy enough, but it disturbed his parents that little Simon seldom smiled. He sometimes did, but it was a sad, sardonic smile that did not fit the face of a child. He would then wander off and draw something else.

The world was tattered for the Hayes family when the Indochine Francais Pact invaded the Siberian oilfields. The world's first real nuclear war since the Three Days War between India and Pakistan at the turn of the millennium erupted with a fury unmatched in a century. Most of Asia and Eastern Europe were wiped summarily off the globe. Much of the rest of Europe was made uninhabitable, and the French Socialist government eagerly accepted the invitation to relocate to Quebec.

The Hayes family sat outside each night for two months, Father slowly sipping a dry martini five parts vodka one part vermouth two olives on a plastic cocktail sword and when he was feeling festive perhaps one of those little umbrellas that looks decidedly uncouth sticking up from a martini, Mother's hand always absently wandering to the holotech interface behind her left ear that she kept hidden from view by wearing a stylish and retro bobbed coiffure tucked coily behind her ears in little-girl style even when she quickly approached the age of hot flashes and the cessation of natural fertility, watching the orbiting nuclear deterrent systems destroy the hundreds of ICBMs being launched at Canada and the United States by the remnants of the corporate Japanese-backed Siberian Alliance. Simon remembered his mother's tears and hushed conversations that his parents didn't want him to hear. He heard and understood far more than they knew.

America took a passive stance in the war, not launching any weapons, just shooting down missiles launched at them.

The hope for a diplomatic resolution to the war was a long shot, and became an impossibility when a four-gigaton fusion weapon overshot its intended target of Toronto and airburst over American soil, wiping most of western New York off the map.

America was in the war with a vengeance.

American pilots went on scalping runs around the globe, scouring Siberia, Japan, and the remnants of the French Indochinese Alliance. The war was quick, efficient, and bloody. America secured itself as the only remaining world power, sweeping out and annexing those territories that it had not entirely devastated. French officials looked on in terror from their secure bunkers in Quebec as America took its revenge for being dragged into a war that had not been its own.

By the time the dust of the war had settled and life returned to a semblance of normalcy, Simon was on the verge of adolescence. He was still a quiet young

man, and his introspection became a great concern for his father. His mother spent most of her days in an alcohol and holotech-induced haze. The shock of the war had been too much for her, and she found solace in the blissful artificial worlds created for holotech. When Simon's father took his own life, no one was terribly surprised. He had been a successful businessman, and when the war broke out he began dealing in communications holotechnology. When it was revealed that his company had been a major supplier of crystalline holotech to the French, the government began an investigation. He would have been executed before long if he had not taken his own life. There were many executions in the years after the war. The Allied States of America were ruled with brutal efficiency from the Wind River complex.

Simon turned his creative energies to writing during middle adolescence, penning wonderful examples of naïve teenage angst. He wrote to escape: there was nothing to do in Harkness, a tiny fishing village where the only excitement was the Saturday night bingo and dance at the American Legion downtown. He wrote a novel that he was rather proud of detailing the destruction of the planet by alien forces. It was trite, it was overdone, it was brilliant. "Deus Ex Machina" was rejected by twelve publishing companies before Simon burned it in anger. He watched the pages blacken one by one and die like his unborn children in the fire.

At age eighteen, he discovered the opposite sex seriously for the first time. Oh, he had had girlfriends, or rather, he would go out on dates with girls. None of them seemed to understand the enigma that was Simon Hayes. His stutter didn't help. She had been different; she had listened, at least for a while. Her name was Brigid, and she shamelessly tore out his heart and threw it into the dust. Simon blindly pursued her for over a year before witnessing Brigid and his best friend in a more-than-just-friendly embrace. On a trampoline. Naked. It was then and there that Simon decided to become a poet.

He had his share of internal strife. More than his share, in fact. Simon more than simply concerned his mother anymore when she came out of her fugues. He frightened her. She once questioned him about a notebook of poems she had found scrawled in his eccentric handwriting. How could he write such dark poems? Sure, they had their problems, the war, the death of Simon's father, the de-ratification of the United States Constitution and the dissolution of the Union, the police state that the Allied States of America had become, the Almost-Second Civil War that had been narrowly avoided when the President selected his political rival Cervera as his Secretary of Defense, but why write about such sad things? Life was good.

We had won the war, hadn't we? Cheer up, Simon! And who is this "*Brigid*" girl anyway?

The look Simon had stabbed at his mother silenced her, and an abrupt and awkward silence followed. In fact, she never asked about his poems again. They talked very little after that incident.

“Poetry.”

“What about it?”

“You wrote poetry?”

“A little.”

“Can you recite any of it for me? I used to love poetry. I still love poetry, just haven’t had any time to read in...well, years.”

“Ms. Flynn, it’s been a long time.” He said it seriously, but with a sly smile.

She persisted. “I bet you still remember some of it. Especially the poetry about *Brigid*.” She enunciated the word like a hypothetical annoying younger sister would, taunting her older brother about his first date. *Brüüü-giiüüd*.

“You won’t like it, Ms. Flynn.”

“Call me Maggie. And let me be the judge of that!”

“Fine. You win again, Maggie.”

He thought long and hard, and then began to recite.

*Shadowroom:*

*She was here once I*

*Remember so so long*

*Ago many weeks months*

*Years (How long?) since*

*The essence of her the presence*

*Of her pervaded these walls*

*Lavender walls within which*

*Hell is contained she*

*A constant for so long held*

*On to the phone right here*

*On that summer night and talked*

*Me back while the music*

*Played its dirge from*

*The happy past under false*

*Pretenses it played and she*

*Sang and I SNAPPED at*

*The voice so like beauty*

*Thoughts of emerald eyes*

*Burning in the dark on*



*That special night when  
Hopes and dreams became.  
This room is.  
A reminder of her essence to me the feel flaxen  
Radiance of sunlight hair  
Gold painting the impossible  
Beauty shine light waves upon  
Waves sent to me scent to me  
Her scent in these walls  
In the shadows in the light  
Lilac scent of lilac  
A flood of memory.  
I am trapped here.  
These these walls hold me  
In altered form a drawing  
Of her she laughed when  
She saw it and loved me  
Somenwhat, I'd say, or the  
Dumb little gifts with  
Which I drew closer to  
Her, stuffed animals, a  
Valentine made from  
Fruit-Roll-Up, strawberry,  
Carved: "I love you,"  
She laughed, lovingly, and  
Christmas gifts of a  
Disney wristwatched Dopey  
The Dwarf, and a can:  
Spam. Oh well. Sadly, lastly,  
A portrait: that night,  
Beauty incarnate  
In a gown of white and a  
Smile to shatter a man's dreams,  
Replayed nightly. An instant  
Of eternity, snared forever,  
Us together, at last, sharing  
Bitter tears, parting forever.  
I am left alone with the pain,  
Yet, I still love.*

Hayes stirred the dying fire. The embers began to glow once more. It was getting colder in their makeshift shelter. They would have to find a better place to stay tomorrow night...If there was a tomorrow night.

A voice, almost a whisper, came from Flynn's side of the fire. In the dim light he could barely see her, and her hushed statement escaped him.

"What?"

She cleared her throat, spoke louder. "Brigid must have been blind."

Simon wondered what Flynn meant by that. He looked into the fire, glanced up from it just in time to catch Maggie glancing up from the fire just in time to catch him glancing up at her, and he quickly looked back at the dancing flames.

"Do you have any more?"

"A few. Too many. They're all like that. Teenage heartbreak and other assorted whining bullshit. I hate them."

"Please, another one."

He closed his eyes.

*Plastic dinosaurs and a well-stocked refrigerator*

*Were not enough to keep you from*

*Falling away from me*

*Again*

*Dark rooms are not a*

*Solace when the*

*Echoes of pale green*

*Eyes and the pathetic*

*Piano song in C Major*

*(I think)*

*have made insomnia*

*my nightly companion instead of*

*you*

*once listened to me play*

*that song for a while and placed*

*your head on my shoulder*

*so how can you expect me to*

*forget these things when that*

*song drowns my senses with*

*you*

*look sometimes from across the*

*room I know I stare I  
think I hope I  
forget your eyes soon because  
until I do I think my right  
index finger will remain poised  
over Middle C and my todays will  
remain poised over yesterdays of  
the perpetual autumn of  
plastic dinosaurs and a well-stocked refrigerator.*

Hayes found the fire intensely interesting; his gaze was riveted to the flames. He had recited line after line in what appeared to Maggie a trance state, some terrible mental denial of the present that transported him back to the shattered moment when he had placed those very words on wrinkled paper with cheap pens Bic metal points and he couldn't *couldn't COULDN'T* write fast enough or make it say enough to mean the thoughts that surged through him and the process ended too too too many times in a tragicomical adolescent rage that sent the pen through the air and the poems into the incinerator.

Then he blinked his eyes and returned to normal. The fire was fascinating.

*I will know him. I will see what is beneath the surface. I have to know him.*

*Let me in, Simon.*

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For sharing that with me. It was beautiful. They both were."

"They were the mindless babblings of a teenage boy who needed to get out more."

Flynn smiled sweetly. "You're too hard on yourself. You loved her, didn't you?"

Hayes let the unexpected inquiry hover above the flames for quite some time before he spoke the answer that he had known all along. The answer was somehow seared now, although he could not tell if it was from the passage of time or the brief flight over the campfire.

"She was killed in the Quebec War. I found out later that she had been in the Seventh Assault Group. She never had a chance."

"Seventh Assault? Jesus, they cleaned Montreal out for Assault Eight, my group. That was a bloody—"

Hayes visibly flinched. He had been there as well, Assault Fourteen, cleaning up after Eight had retaken the city. He had seen the blood and choked on the fires of the burning city. He had seen the remnants of Assault Seven, but

never knew until later that his beloved Brigid was among the twisted wreckage and remains, the burned skulls and shattered bones that littered the blasted remnants of Montreal.

"I'm so sorry, Simon...Please, tell me more."

"The poems can wait. I can't remember any more right now."

She knew he was lying, but it intrigued her nonetheless.

*Who is this man? This complicated, dark man?*

*And what is he hiding?*

"Go on, please, Simon."

Simon graduated at the top of his class, but he did not know what to do after school. The government was collecting volunteers for the colonization of Mars, but that did not interest Simon. Anyway, he knew it would not work. Humans were not meant to leave this planet. And, as he had predicted, the colonists died in transit when a meteor the size of a soup can punctured and depressurized their vehicle. Mars would remain uninhabited, and the space program would be largely abandoned for the time being.

He was accepted at a quite prestigious local university, where he studied literature and art. He met people, he made friends, he fell in love, he made love. He lived what he thought was a good semblance of a normal college life. He tried to keep in touch with old friends. He saw things fall apart. He realized he never wanted to go home.

After he graduated from the university, he spent a summer walking across the country with nothing but two of his best friends, a guitar, quite a few cigars, and a small wad of money kept laced tightly into his left boot. He ended up in Seattle and lived the starving artist life, replete with long hair, goatee, gesso-spattered knee-holed jeans. He found some satisfaction in the "Purple" series of paintings he produced for his landlady in lieu of rent; she had had an abstract-expressionist lover in the glory days of her youth, and although he had long gone the way of the Fletcherists and she had grown more wrinkled and worn than she had been when she was an impossibly smooth-skinned nude model he portrayed descending a staircase perfect even with the small brown beauty mark that graced her supra-sternal notch and its companion that guarded her left breast, she had retained her love of the finer things in life, most notably paintings. For Simon, there were months where going out to dinner meant buying a box of macaroni-and-cheese and as a treat perhaps some ketchup to accompany it at the local supermarket and seeing a show meant watching the scarlet sun burn its way into the western horizon. The news of his mother's nanotech overload and subsequent death did not disturb him.

He knew that she would be happier that way, hopefully forever within one of her heavens.

The Quebec War came with fire and fury and the destruction of Washington, and Simon knew what he had to do. He enlisted, hoping to get placed on the front lines, retaking the cities of New England from the French, but instead, Milicom saw his untapped potential and placed him in military intelligence, medical division. His research team helped to devise a new vaccine for cobalt radiation sickness, a vaccine that saved thousands of American troops in the Adirondack campaign. When the war took a turn for the worse he had finally been sent to the front lines as a medic with the Fourteenth Assault group in Ontario, retaking Brockville, Kingston, and Ottawa from the French. The only time he had actually set foot into Quebec was during the Montreal cleanup operation after the war. There had been so very few wounded, so many dead. His medical training was quite useless when day by day he was simply required to help dig the mass graves outside of the city that the countless war dead were dumped into.

The war was over, and Simon found the restlessness crawling back into his mind. He tried to write, but everything sounded somehow empty. His earlier penchant for poetry was replaced with a disdain for the medium, and he wrote several reactionary poems of a distinctly DaDa nature that amused his friends but only fueled his angst.

*Oh my goodness! Golly gee!*  
*There is a rhinoceros in bed with me!*  
*He was not here last night at ten.*  
*(I can't believe he's back again.)*  
*He visited me a year ago*  
*And jumped out my bathroom window*  
*And now he's here again I see*  
*To make a nervous wreck of me—*

Maggie laughed out loud, her face illuminating their encampment with a brilliant smile. Simon paused, intending to let her laughter run its course, but instead he found himself joining her. It felt good to laugh like that, something he had not done in so long. She covered her mouth with her hand, and Simon noticed for the first time that she had dimples. When they were done laughing, Simon found himself looking into Maggie's eyes for a too-long and silent moment. He stuttered a few syllables and eventually succeeded in telling her that—

he had tried music; it had the same result: he was restless, apathetic. He would write a song, play it for hours on the guitar, but never be satisfied with it. Simon had a bad habit of obsessing over the minute details. For months at a time he would play the same chord over and over again, sitting in almost a trance state, hoping for inspiration for the next chord. He resigned himself to serving in military medical for a few more years, and then perhaps traveling the world. Milicom Systems paid well enough, and the prospect of entering the workplace in the shattered and rebuilding real world did not appeal to Simon. Somewhere out there he hoped to find the source of his unrest, the cause of his sleepless mind. And perhaps another Brigid was out there as well. He cherished the cross that she had given him, even though he always said it meant nothing to him. He wore it with his Milicom tags and never took it off. As for religious significance, it held little for Simon, whose overly-analytical mind simply could not fathom either a divine being or an afterlife. But still he wore it, the last link to a time and place and woman now long dead.

He was stationed in Seattle when the black shapes fell from the sky and took away what was left of the planet's soul. He fought, he tended to the wounded, he was forced to retreat into the tunnels beneath the city. He treated the chemical burn in the throat of a beautiful woman with a biotic field that he himself had invented four years prior to the invasion of the planet in a lab buried beneath the city with technology that most certainly could not have been human. And he found himself sitting before a meager campfire watching the sunrise with the same woman listening to the story of his life unfold like the blackening pages of his adolescent novel...

The night had grown colder as Simon told Flynn of his past, and the already-struggling fire had choked and died while he was speaking. Neither of them noticed it until Simon stopped talking. There was an uncomfortable silence for a moment. Flynn broke the silence by sitting up and grabbing a handful of the ashes. Her hands flickered and the embers began to glow once more. She put them down and a roaring fire grew from them.

Simon watched in silence.

"Your turn."

"Hmm? For what?"

"For explanation."

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything. Nothing. Just talk. I've talked all night long, and bored you with the details of my life. Now it's your turn."

Simon caught a glimpse of an inward smile that broke through the placid surface of Flynn's face and then disappeared as quickly as it had emerged. It had been a smile of contemplation. A smile of quiet reticence.

"Simon, you haven't bored me at all. Telling me—"

"Ember, I—"

"Maggie. Please don't call me Ember." Simon was not sure, but for an instant he swore her eyes had flashed with a silver fire, but then it disappeared. "She's gone now. Ember was my Styx designation. Maggie is my name. Please don't make me wake her up again."

There was another moment of silence. Flynn's hand flickered. Hayes saw with some concern that two lines of teardrops slid silently down her face, the right tear winning the race because of the very noticeable cleft of skin on Maggie's left cheek that blocked the course of the left tear, diverting it towards her chill-reddened ear, where drained of kinetic energy, it simply came to rest. The display was somehow heartbreaking, and Simon began to stand up, to go to Maggie's side, but he sat back down when she began to speak, looking into and through the fire.

"There was a time when I was just Maggie Flynn, a time between the wars, before the annexation, when I was just a stupid young girl in New Belfast. A girl who took great pride in her green eyes and her curly red hair. A girl who got caught up in the wrong crowd and did some foolish things for what she thought she believed in. At least that's what I tell myself; it's been so long that I don't remember what I really lived and what was just a dream anymore... There was a time before I became Ember..."

The tears continued their slow voyage down Flynn's face, and Hayes went to her, held her. The fire had been the intermediary, bisecting their night of revelation of dead histories into a precise one hundred-eighty degrees each. Simon now violated the unspoken boundary established by the fire and held Maggie close. She shivered in his awkward embrace.

"Go ahead, Maggie. You can tell me. Please, tell me."

Her shaking eventually calmed, and she sat up from Simon's embrace. He sat back, looked into those gray eyes, but remained on her side of the fire. She reached up to wipe the tracts of wetness from her face, winced as fingertips brushed the unfamiliar sensitive wound of her left cheek. She held out her hand and placed it on top of his, which rested on his knee.

Maggie cleared her throat, and began to speak in that voice that melted Simon's composure and broke his heart. She spoke to him, but somehow spoke through him in a way that Simon could not explain. Soft, lilting, hypnotic.

"I was a member of the—"

—*Blood Army*, are you?”

Confusion. A dark room, a bright light. Sudden, cold, alone.

“Wha...What?”

A nightstick crashed into the table in front of her, and the legs of the chair upon which she sat flew out from under her. She fell to the floor, her head connecting squarely to the cold stone beneath her in a way that made her bite down on her lip. Warm coppery blood flooded her mouth.

“You didn’t have to do that. She—”

“Bloody hell I didn’t have to do that. Get up, you!”

She wiped the blood from her mouth, or attempted to wipe the blood away, but it was everywhere, stippling the floor at which she looked, coursing down over her chin and soaking the front of her white shirt. She was dizzy, her head a confusing swirl of pain and stars.

“I said get up!” She found herself being lifted forcefully from the floor by her hair and thrown at the table while the chair she had been sitting on was righted behind her. She was then thrown back into the chair, and at last she could look at her attacker.

“Fucking Bloodies. Fucking bombing all over Old Belfast again. The war ended twenty fucking years ago, but still you have to bomb the innocents, don’t you?” An older man, dressed in a dark gray suit with black pockets and black gloves and a nameplate that said “Connelly” and a nightstick that he was presently swinging down at the table again—

“Let’s try this again” he intoned after the crashing sound from the impact of the nightstick had echoed for a short time. She noticed two very painful-looking fresh dents in the metal surface of the table at which she sat. She reached out, fingers tracing the outline of bent metal.

“You’re gonna wreck your furniture before long if you keep hittin’ it like that, Soldierboy.” She attempted a smile, revealing blood-reddened teeth and a freshly split lip. His face turned a noticeably deeper shade of red as he rushed across the room, open-hand slapping her face with black leather-gloved palm. A fresh agony arose as her nose gave way to the blow. More blood soaked her shirt. She glared at Connelly, but said nothing for the time being.

“The next time it’ll be the club hittin’ your face, not my hand, you fuckin’—”

“Connelly, just get on with it.” Head spinning, broken nose pulsating with agony, she looked around for the source of the voice, finally located a shadow standing in the darkened back of the room. The speaker walked forward, joined Connelly in the light. He was dressed in a similar suit, the same gloves, but his arms were crossed and he was holding a black leather folder in one hand.



“Fine.” Connelly’s eyes glared. “Fine.” He tore the folder from his companion’s hand. He opened the folder, spilled its contents onto the tabletop. Several blurred photographs, some nondescript sheets of paper, and a microdisc, which he gingerly picked up and slid into a video projector on the wall of the dark room. A series of images began to flicker across the wall.

“Magdalene Flynn. Is that your name?”

She looked at the images of blackened, burned car wreckage. Another shot of a collapsed storefront. She took her time wiping the now-congealing blood from her upper lip with the back of her hand.

“You are Maggie Flynn. Correct?”

“Aye. I’m Maggie Flynn, Soldierboy.”

Connelly uttered a sound that eerily resembled a growl, but the other man stepped forward, placing his hand on Connelly’s shoulder. Connelly moved to the back of the room, submitting grudgingly to the other man’s authority.

The images continued upon the wall, but now they had switched from depictions of bombed wreckage to photographs of Maggie with various groups of people. Images that must have been taken in public places, when she did not know she was being watched.

“Maggie, how old are you?” His nameplate, now visible, said simply “Smith.” His voice was not like her own, or Connelly’s. His was the voice of an American.

“What the fuck does it matter to you, Yankee?”

He smiled, shook his head. “It doesn’t matter anything to me, Miss Flynn. It matters to you. It matters because some people think you’re just a kid caught up with the wrong crowd. It matters because other people think you should be shot in the morning, like the rest of your group will be.”

She became visibly upset for the briefest of moments, and then her face returned to the stoic, defiant demeanor that so infuriated Connelly, eyebrows drawn to a frown, chin held high with youthful pride. “What group?”

“Oh, I think you know who I’m talking about, Maggie.”

“Well, I was a Girl Scout a few years back—”

“Are you a member of the Northern Irish Blood Army, Maggie?”

She did not reply, but her sudden and intent interest in her hands on the tabletop was all the answer Smith needed. Her face had taken on a pale, drained sheen.

“Jesus. How old are you, sixteen? Seventeen?”

She studied her hands in silence. Smith turned to Connelly, who looked through his papers. “Sequencing says she’s seventeen.”

“Seventeen. Hell, when I was seventeen I was working at McDonald’s and saving up for a new car and trying to find a girlfriend to keep me company in

the back of that car. You're seventeen and you're blowing up buses and churches."

She began wiping her blood from her fingernails. "They're going to execute you for that last bombing, you know, Maggie. The war ended twenty years—"

"The war never fucking ended as long as his troops are in my country!" She pointed out at Connelly. "Collaborating bastards! If they hadn't...If they..." She started coughing forcefully, her hand reaching to grasp her right side. Smith frowned and looked back at Connelly, who shrugged his shoulders. Smith leafed through the papers on the table as Maggie continued coughing, her face turning a violent red.

"Did you see this report?" Smith held out a paper and Connelly took it, looked it over, glanced up at Maggie, and then looked back at the physical report. "What could have caused that? I've never seen anything like—"

"Pearl."

"What?"

"She's a fuckin' Pearl addict. It's a drug the Bloodies use to control their younger members. Keeps them loyal...And addicted. Makes them think they're invincible."

"And when had you planned on telling the ASA about this?"

Connelly shrugged his shoulders again. "We assumed MSI knew about it. We thought maybe MSI created it."

Maggie had stopped coughing, but lay face down on the tabletop, hand still grasping her side.

"It's an inhalant. It burns their lungs away if they take it long enough. Looks like she's been hooked for years."

Smith knelt down beside Maggie, his face inches away from hers. He brushed back her hair, looked into eyes too green, eyes too old for her face. "Are you addicted to Pearl, Maggie?"

"Fuck you, Yankee." She unceremoniously spit into his face, or rather, attempted to spit at his face. The destructive nature of Pearl had begun its work on her salivary glands. Nonetheless, Smith pulled a pristine white handkerchief from within his jacket and patted down the area of his right cheek where her feeble attempt at real spit and her successful attempt at blood had landed.

Smith stood up, hands placed on hips, pacing slowly back to the other side of the table, returning the folded handkerchief to his jacket interior. "I'm trying to help you. We can save you, you know. In the ASA, we can rebuild your lung in just weeks. Hell, we can give you a matched set of clones if you want in a day or two."

Connelly stepped to Smith's side. "What the hell are you talking about? This little lady isn't going to see another sunrise once we get what we need from her."

"Step aside, Connelly." Smith's eyes took on a sudden frigid quality. "Your government isn't running the show around here anymore, remember. I don't really care about your centuries-old little war you've fought, either. And I don't even care if this young woman was involved in yesterday's bombing. I've been sent here for one purpose, and I've found my objective." He walked around the table again and placed his hands on Maggie's shoulders. "Her."

"You—She's directly responsible for the deaths of eighteen people in that bombing! Women and children. And she was involved in other attacks. We have evidence that—"

Smith extracted the microdisc from the wall unit, snapped it in half, and pocketed it. "What evidence?"

"You won't get away with—"

"Connelly, I need this young woman more alive than you need her dead."

"What for? Is the ASA using Pact tech now to—"

"Let's just say that Milicom needs some fine young men and women for a project we've been working on. We need Maggie, and she's ours now. Let us deal with her."

Smith walked behind Maggie's chair, bent down to speak directly into her ear. She looked blindly ahead, not at the tabletop but through it. She could feel Smith's gaze upon her. She did not trust him, or the way he was looking over her young body. His presence was nauseating: the audible inhalation and exhalation, the scent of some American cologne and American shampoo and American toothpaste and mouthwash and chewing gum. Smell of leather as black gloves reached out, paused, gingerly swept back long curls of sanguine hair from pale white ear not pierced for fear of paternal retribution ironic because she was a terrorist but her father might still beat her if she got her ears pierced and white because of the gray skies that were filled with rain not sunshine and the beach was too cold to swim like the Americans did anyway she wanted to laugh but she shook with fear as this ASA brute looked at her profile. His black glove lifted up her chin and turned her face so that he could look into her eyes. His other hand gently wiped away the sticky coagulating blood from her lower lip. His eyes were black, and when they looked into her own green eyes, she felt paralyzed. Black and then silver for an instant she was not sure she had seen.

Connelly, forgotten for the moment, threw the black folder from the tabletop, and it spilled its contents across the floor of the room. Smith calmly looked up, his eyebrows drawing into a frown. "Is there a problem—"

“Fuck you, Yankee. She’s all yours now. The ASA can go to hell. Fuck you and fuck your Bloody too. Don’t come home again, Maggie. You come back and I will see to it that you die, young lady. Let the fucking Americans take care of you now.” Connelly knocked over a chair and slammed the door behind him. Smith was left alone in the room with his prisoner. He turned back to Maggie with his coal-colored eyes.

“I can give you a new life. I like you, Maggie. There’s something about you...There’s a fire inside of you, an ember burning deep down. We can use that ember, Maggie. We can save you from execution. Would you like us to build you a new set of

lungs. They saved me from execution and from Pearl addiction. I was a member of the Blood Army; I did kill those people, but it was for something I believed in. When the ASA annexed the UK, it just brought back all those feelings that we had hoped had been buried after the Civil—”

“Maggie, you don’t have to explain yourself.”

“I sold my soul to Milicom for a set of lungs and freedom from Pearl. That’s why I’m here, in Seattle, in a Milicom uniform, and not at home, buried in the ground.”

“The special project...It was the Styx project, wasn’t it? They needed young people like you to experiment with.”

“Something like that.” Her hand shifted, going from flesh-colored to translucent, flickering, waves of color lighting up Hayes’ face as he looked on.

She studied her shifted hand. The shimmers illuminated her face.

“How the hell do you *do* that?”

“What?”

“How do you—” He made a waving motion with his arms, frowned. He reached out to take her shifted hand, at which she pulled it quickly away. It flickered, solidified. Maggie reached out, took Simon’s hand in her own.

“Sorry, but—Well, you shouldn’t touch me when I’m shifted. It’s too dangerous for solid matter to touch shifted matter.”

“Shifted matter. That’s how you killed the—the things. The black things. The enemy.”

“Yes.”

“How do you go right through them?” He held up his blood-spattered fatigues. The Enemy’s blood. “And how do you start fires with your hands?”

“You mean shifting.”

“Yes. Shifting.”

“Well, I—”

“The medical journals were faked, weren’t they? Styx aren’t genetically altered. Where did Milicom get that kind of tech?”

“A little town called Diablo.”

“It’s not human technology, is it?”

“It’s...You could say they stumbled upon it. There was a mine. The workers found something down there...”

Their eyes locked. She pointed up.

“One of those. An alien vessel.”

A vessel of black and silver and nightmares and everything that little kids feared at midnight cruised silently over them in the starless morning sky.

Desert. Arizona.

His black rubber-soled boots crunching over sand and grit and spiked desert plants was the only sound besides the constant, dry, coughing wind. His black cloak flew out behind him, swirling the dust into a whirlwind contrail. The sky was not as bright and the desert was not as hot as it should be. He casually brushed encrusted salt and sand from his face. The grit was somehow cleansing. He whistled a song he had once danced to in a life and a place that had been erased from his heart long ago. Dry tongue attempted to wet dry lips. The song continued. How did that song go? Something about shaking hands and unraveled kingdoms and flying dishes and awful aim.

Richter stopped walking for a brief moment as one of the massive black forms flew almost directly overhead, impossibly stopped in mid-air and turned on an unknown axis, presumably now facing him. The amorphous object made discernment of spatial orientation almost impossible, as it changed its form almost constantly, like some hideous black airborne tumor. It began to move again and sped away from him. One human must not have warranted a landing to pick up.

Richter made time stop for an instant and his fiery silver eyes illuminated his world. A rage of energy built within him.

He reached out with his mind and tore apart what he assumed were the aft drives of the vessel. The enormous ship thundered to earth and crashed half a mile from where he nonchalantly stood. It rolled end over end, finally coming to rest after littering the desert floor with shards of black.

He walked toward the wreck, whistling to the beat of his footsteps. What was the name of that song? He frowned, shook his head to no one, smiled bemusedly. It was going to be a great day.

West followed the shore of Lake Superior until Chicago lay before him, or rather, where Chicago should have been. It was no longer recognizable as the Windy City. The wind remained, a cold, harsh breeze that did not belong in June that seemed to emanate from where Chicago used to be. In what appeared to be a blast crater that was quite a few miles across, there were very few vestiges of the city that should have been there. The only feature noticeable from the rubble was the huge black spire standing in the center of the crater.

So this was the hub.

He had realized that the alien vessels that cruised overhead had to come from somewhere, and apparently this was it. The sky was black with approaching and departing vessels, descending and landing within the blast crater.

*No. Oh god no.*

People.

Ringed by the black demons, large crowds of people surrounded the spire. A group was being forced into the black tower as he watched. So this was where everyone was.

*What is in there?*

There was a sudden flash of silver light. Must be dissent in the ranks, West thought. A rebellion against the aliens? Apparently not successful.

West walked on, toward the edge of the crater.

Richter.

The aliens that survived the crash were wary, on edge. They saw him coming and moved to intercept him. He calmly kept walking.

He saw that the vessel had held a cargo of human beings. He saw their remains among the spreading flames. Their bodies were quickly consumed by silver, dissolved.

The aliens rushed at him.

He studied them with mild interest before he tore them apart with his mind. Limbs flew.

Too bad he couldn't have saved the people.

And then...

Something crawled over his mind, icy fingers grasping for his soul. He forced the thoughts from his mind, and went to find the cockpit.

"That can't be," Hayes insisted. "One of them?"

They looked up in unison. The vessels continued to fly over, impervious to them.

“It wasn’t exactly like them. It didn’t change shape; it looked like a double-bladed dagger. It was so big...It had crashed a *long* time ago, so long that it was embedded in the rock layers. A town grew up at the base of the mountain, and their main business was a copper mine. When the main shafts dried up, they went deeper, and they hit a wall they couldn’t blast through. A metal wall.”

“In the earth. A UFO in the earth.”

“Milicom silenced the miners and moved in.”

“No wonder Jennings was so jumpy in the end. He must have thought the little green men were coming back for their lost toy.”

“It was no toy.”

She paused, and her hand drifted to the healing gash across her left eye. A reflex.

“Jesus. Milicom was using alien technology to build new weapons.”

Ember’s frigid gray eyes drifted up, somehow judged him. She turned, hiding the wounded eye from him in the firelight.

“The vessel in the earth was a warship, once piloted by...by some kind of humanoids. There was tech greater than anything we’d ever conceived, greater than anything we could have imagined, in that ship. Impossibilities made possible.”

Flynn grew silent, gazed into the fire.

“Maggie?”

“They found it in this huge room, a spherical room, at the center of the ship. It must have been a mile under the surface... The vessel was so big.”

“What did they find?”

“They sent my group into the room, and at its center was the

purest light they had ever seen. They approached it, expecting it to be hot, radioactive. They expected it to hurt them in some way, but there it was, the most perfect sphere of light. It was beautiful, hypnotic. They drew closer.

They were mesmerized. Trapped.

Reaching...Grasping...Something crawled over their minds, their souls. Something drew them.

A flash. Surreality. Heaven.

It pulled them in. And

when I came out, I'd been changed." Without any warning, she reached into Simon's pocket, withdrew his cigarettes and ancient Zippo lighter. She silently lit up and inhaled.

"What—Was it another dimension? Another world?"

Exhalation. "I don't know. It was...It was beauty."

"You said it pulled your group in. Was it some kind of portal?"

"I don't—We—Our bodies remained behind. It was like hypnosis. The Milicom medical team entered the room after we'd gone into the orb, and tried to revive as many of us as they could. They pulled me back from the light."

"What about the rest of your group?"

"There was two survivors from my group, me and another Milicom agent named West, a real American farm boy from Nebraska. We became the K-level Styx, the survivors of the eleventh experimental entry into the light. The rest were, well, all electrical activity had ceased in their brains. They were brain-dead."

Hayes frowned. "The light killed the rest of your group, but you two were pulled out before it could trap you. You came out, and you could shift."

She nodded, drawing on the cigarette. "No one knows why. It was like that light had activated the unused portion of my mind. It was like my soul had been freed from my body, and then forced back into my physical form. But my mind had changed."

"And Milicom saw the advantages immediately."

"They were still recovering from Three. They were desperate to prevent another war. They sent more people into the light, more test groups. When my group went in, Milicom had already been sending groups in for months, but they were mostly prisoners and the mentally ill. Most never came back, but the ones that did, the ones they pulled out before they were trapped—"

"The Styx."

"They were sending hundreds of people into that light, but only a few came out. We were the nation's last line of defense, the soldiers of the future. I never saw Diablo again, or the orb. Each day I have to live with the fact that I was in Heaven, but they pulled me back and made me a killer. They saved me from execution so that I could kill for them. I was just a girl who needed some new lungs. Each day is a struggle not to go crazy with that knowledge." She regarded the cigarette she held with a wry smile. "All for a new set of lungs. What I really could use right now is a fucking hit of Pearl."

Hayes saw the bittersweet mixture of sincerity and sarcasm in her eyes.

"Whatever it was, it was the vessel's power source. It was like a star—or a black hole, pulling all of the world's light inside, reflecting it from within. It touched my mind, and burned its image there."



“Do you think the vessel itself could shift, like you do? Different dimensions, fading in and out?”

“I hope it couldn’t, but I know it did. I’m terrified to think of what kind of war would involve vessels that can shift from dimension to dimension, time to time. A civilization that lives between times.”

“Do you think they were fighting them?” He pointed upward, where a seemingly endless procession of Enemy vessels flew upon unknown missions.

“Yes.”

They drew closer in the dark. Maggie handed Simon the lit cigarette, and they shared the delicious felony in the now-dark world where laws and order had been replaced by nightmares and aliens and Black.

West was in the valley of Chicago’s ground zero.

He had crept down the crater wall, amazed at the scene that emerged before him. He walked across the blast-scoured surface of the crater floor. Large chunks of what appeared to be asphalt and concrete were fused into the black glass.

*“Where’s ground zero?”*

*“Probably Chicago. That fleet of Spears...They must have dumped everything they had on it.”*

He forced the memory from his mind and focused ahead. It was maddening, the throngs of humanity spread before him, screaming, weeping, dying. He walked resolutely toward his goal, the black spire that blotted out the ever-fading sun. The black monsters were everywhere, herding the humans like cattle into the tower. They were oblivious to him as he walked like a wraith amongst the gathered masses.

He had shifted to a point where he could walk, unseen by anyone, at his leisure toward the tower. He was not shifted to a lethal point, because in this surging sea of humanity, that could draw the attention of the aliens if he were to carelessly stumble into an innocent person and shatter their being. Even now he walked a straight path, mindless of the men and women whom he passed through. He could feel the brief touch of their minds and their thoughts. They did not notice him, except for some, who felt only a short chill, a sense of confusion.

Oh, it was so tempting...

He knew he could shift higher; he knew he could destroy the entire alien force gathered here if he tried; he knew he could rescue these innocent people from whatever death awaited them within the interior of the black spire. With a

steely resolve he continued walking toward the monolith. Maybe he could not only save these people, but others as well.

West finally reached his goal. He stood in the shadow of the mysterious monument in awe.

He took a deep breath.

The sounds of humanity around him disappeared as he shifted higher into that realm of silence and cold mute light that was the shift, and entered the vessel, fading through the matte black material of the hull. He entered the void within the spire.

In the realm of the aliens, the vertigo of memory surged through him.

Richter's inspection of the vessel cockpit confirmed his suspicions. He now knew where he had to go. He let go of the black creature's dead body and it fell to the desert floor in a cloud of dust and shattered silver rivulets.

He looked at the faint light on the eastern horizon.

He turned and walked north.

He had been here before.

West felt the flood of long-suppressed memories wash over him. He scanned the room with slowly dawning realization.

A spherical room. An orb of stars at the center. And—

People.

Long ago he had entered the Diablo vessel and became something else in the orb of stars. It had been Heaven in that light. So peaceful, so beautiful.

He had been pulled from the light. It had not claimed his soul for its own. How often had he hoped to return to that heaven? And now, stretched before him, were countless people, caught in the rapture of the orb. The harsh light had already killed most of them, uploading their minds. Something was different...

black

**THERE IS A DISTURBANCE HERE.**

WHAT DO YOU MEAN((?))

**CAN YOU NOT FEEL IT((?)) IT IS AS IF A SHADOW IS CAST OVER US, EVEN AS WE SPEAK.**

A THREAT TO THE PURPOSE((?))

**A RIPPLE ON THE OCEAN OF OUR FAITH.**

IT IS COMING((?))

**IT IS HERE...WE SHALL READY OURSELVES. DOWNLOAD,  
SYNTHESIZE REINFORCEMENTS.**

IT SHALL BE DONE.

the black closes

In his shifted form, West was beyond the grasp of the light. He knew that if he shifted down, he would be seized by the radiance; his mind would be captured once more.

The remaining humans were falling dead to the floor, their minds too feeble to withstand the power of the light.

Something was wrong.

West looked at the bodies near him.

Horror.

They had been changed.

Fine lines of glistening metal had encompassed most of their bodies, like some grotesque spider's web. Flesh and metal were intermingled. West saw that the bodies were quickly decaying, becoming mercurial extensions of the room. When the body was gone, the remaining metal webs fluidly merged with the walls of the massive room, disappearing into the black.

Thoughts flickered in his mind at a phenomenal rate as he made a connection between this monster embedded in the earth and the vessel they had found in Wyoming.

There had been no metal webs in Wyoming. There certainly had not been this ravenous silver substance.

People, falling. Dying. Being webbed and encompassed.

Souls being harvested. Souls being uploaded.

Who had the owners of the Diablo vessel been fighting?

Wars through time and space. Wars in the space between sanity and light and yesterday. Who had they been chasing?

Only one human remained, a woman partially ensnared in the metal webs. The orb of light snaked outwards, lines of fire entering her mind through her eyes. West knew she must be strong to withstand the force of the light, which crawled over her eyes, trying to gain entry into her mind.

He could save her before the light took her soul.

He shifted back into human form.

fury

**INTRUDER(!)**

**HOW(?) WHAT(?)**

**ONE OF THE JUDAS(!)**

**THE JUDAS(?) HERE(?)**

**UPLOAD AND DESTROY HIM(!) ELIMINATE THE ROGUE  
CODE FROM THE SACRED PATTERN(!)**

West realized too late that he had dropped his guard.

The light became a hypnotic glare as luminous tendrils grasped at him, reached for his eyes, struggled to pry their way into his soul. He clenched his eyes shut and rushed at the woman before him. He stepped in front of her, snapping the bonds the light had secured in her eyes.

West gasped with agony as the light beams slammed into and throughout him, but the bond had been severed. She blinked several times and gazed confusedly at him.

Silver eyes. She had silver eyes.

*Oh my god,* West thought. *It's the President's daughter.*

Spidery tendrils of silver lace enveloped his left foot, holding him solidly in place. he tried to shift, but to no avail.

*That can't be.*

Yet it was. The web crawled up his leg, entangling him. He felt a stinging pain as the metal web bit into the flesh of his calf and tendrils of silver wound their way under the skin of his leg.

He panicked.

They put out the ashes of the fire and packed their few possessions. A meager sunrise tried to light the horizon.

Simon looked over the blood-stained uniform he had worn when they had been attacked in the tunnels. It had been red, bright red blood, but now it was a faded brown, just like dried human blood. What were they, underneath that black armor? He would have to run an analysis on a sample of that fabric. He cut off a small section and placed it in his pocket.

Flynn rubbed her arms to warm them. "It's colder today." She put on her thermal fatigue vest, zipped up the front. She kneeled down, began to roll up her sleeping bag. There had not been a lot of sleeping during the night. They had talked until the faded sun tried to shine above the horizon. Simon had without any signal from her returned to his side of the fire, his own sleeping bag. He had not tried to stay on her side of the fire; he had been the perfect

gentleman. She appreciated that fact, but still...She would have let him stay with her in the cold night air.

“Maybe it’ll warm up when the sun gets higher.”

It was not a reassuring thought. The sun was almost completely concealed by a translucent web of black and purple and silver. “Yeah, maybe.”

“Any ideas where we should go?”

Flynn shrugged her shoulders. “Wind River is gone.”

Hayes looked up, startled. “How did you—”

“I can hear things sometimes. Whispers. Except they’re usually thoughts. It’s how the Styx communicated. We could hear each other’s thoughts.”

“And you heard me think of Wind River?”

“I know it’s gone because I heard them command our own forces to nuke it.”

“Why the hell would we nuke our own—”

“The aliens took it...They did the same to Chicago, New York, Los Angeles. A Spear fleet was supposed to take out Seattle, but it was destroyed en route over Chicago. That’s why they triggered the bio-bombs.”

“Seattle? We would have been...”

Maggie stopped rolling up her sleeping bag.

“Maggie? Are you all right?”

She closed her eyes.

“Have you ever heard a civilization die? Voices. Thousands. Millions. Billions. All at once. Everyone. I thought I could block them out...But the last days, I heard every scream, clear as day, in my mind. Echoes. So many dead...”

West struggled.

The metallic mesh climbed up his legs. He felt it bite into his flesh, drill into his femur and tibia. The light pulled back, ceasing its relentless attack on his mind. The webs quickened their pace.

The woman who had once been a president’s daughter stood shocked to silence in front of him. Her face was a rictus of terror as the man before her tore at the metallic strands that snaked around him.

*((help him))*

*What? Who?*

*((HELP HIM))*

*How?*

An image. A flash of light, a flickering of surreality.

West was tiring. The webs became his flesh...

*Please, please. I can't panic now.*

Icy fingers grasped his mind. Reaching...

From the very walls of the spherical orb chamber, aliens began to materialize, black shell forming over silver endoskeleton. They sensed him and approached.

His thoughts were wandering as the excruciating webs worked their way into his flesh and the black presence struggled to grasp his soul.

Patra Jennings shifted her arm, and with a flash of radiance, severed the webs that held him in place.

"I can still feel them. The ones that aren't dead."

"How?"

"I can feel them still alive, billions and billions. Captured by the aliens. Their minds are being drained. Fading away. It's like the aliens are collecting them, using them as a power source."

"A power source? Food?"

"No. Yes. I don't know...The Diablo vessel was powered by neural energy." She pointed upward. "Neural energy. Electrical patterns. Souls. You see all of those?"

Hayes nodded.

"That would take a lot of energy. Billions of minds. Billions of souls."

The web severed, West could shift once more.

The aliens rushed at him.

He began the killing frenzy.

The corridor he had walked down into the orb chamber sealed off, faded into solid black metal. No escape.

West whirled around, warding off the mindless creatures that surged before him.

Patra.

She gazed at her own arm, spellbound by her shifted limb. West studied her face. She was definitely the President's daughter, older, shorter hair, but hell, it had been over a decade since she had disappeared.

In places, the metallic web had actually meshed with the underlying skin. She wasn't human anymore. Disks of metal protruded from her temples. Extending from them were the strands of metal that had fused with most of her body. If he hadn't pulled her back...

No way out. Except...

The aliens were upon him.

“Diablo, Wyoming...Sounds pretty ominous.”

“What?” Flynn looked up at Hayes, who had fallen silent.

“Diablo. The vessel. Is it still there?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know why they would have destroyed it. I don’t see how they could have destroyed it. They could have sealed it into the mountain, but I don’t think they would have. It was too much of an asset.”

“Let’s go.”

“What?” She was intrigued.

“Let’s go to Diablo and see what’s there.”

“I already know what’s there, Simon. Weren’t you paying attention last night?” She smiled that smile and her eyes shined.

*If she only knew...* “I know, but that warship could be the key to winning back this planet...It’s a hope.”

“No. We’re hope.” She embraced him.

“Maggie?”

“Hmm?” She looked up into Simon’s eyes.

“You could hear me think of Wind River before.”

“Yes.”

“What else could you hear me think?”

She grinned mischievously, revealing dimples. There was a spark in her shiny gray eyes. “Don’t worry, Simon. I didn’t hear too much. I don’t listen to everything, you know.” The embrace tightened, and she kissed him quickly on the cheek.

Hayes stood motionless, feeling Flynn against him. He never had been good at dealing with awkward situations, especially those awkward situations dealing with women. He eventually put his arms around her and returned her embrace in kind. She looked into his pale blue eyes, and a sly smile came to her face.

“What is it?”

“In your book, in ‘Deus Ex Machina,’ do we win? Do we defeat the aliens?”

He laughed, and sighed. “Rejected twelve times. Each time because it had a negative ending. Humanity falls, the aliens took over, and the stage was set for a sequel about the resistance.”

“Did you ever write the sequel?”

“Maggie, we’re *living* the sequel.”

The battle was exhausting West.

He and Patra had stepped close to the orb, so close that the light became a burning force. West looked at the light, had to struggle to look away again.

The walls. Aliens everywhere. They were materializing from the walls.

Too many.

Desperation.

Patra was in shock. West couldn't blame her.

The orb. Heaven.

"We have to go through it! Now!"

She did not understand. She was terrified.

West shifted his arms back down, grabbed the young woman. "We have to jump into the light! We can't stay here!" Her fiery silver eyes were blank; she was not comprehending. He looked once more around the chamber at the aliens. A voice filled his mind, his soul.

**GO THEN. PRAY YOUR GODS, JUDAS. OMEGA IS THE ONLY—**

Shielding Patra with his body, they jumped into the light.

NO—

Time stopped.

The spire shattered with force enough to level the crater walls. An inconceivable deluge of light poured from the crater, swept out across the land, consuming everything in its path. Countless patterns dissolved into the landscape, the uploaded dead screaming with sudden freedom in the instant before they dissolved into nothing. In the sky above what had been Chicago, the translucent purple web cracked and the Enemy vessels fell from the sky, suddenly empty of their lifeblood of souls.

The wave of light erupted from the dead upload spire, and nothing could stand in its path. The humans collected at the base of the spire, the Enemy vessels on land and in air, all were cleansed from existence in the pure wave of light. They felt no pain.

West and Patra had entered the orb.



## IV

*timesweep.*

a white place, out of time.  
the Whenstream.

“What is it?”  
(((tight-beam combeacon; recon front code fourteen-seven.)))  
“Fourteen-seven? I thought we’d abandoned that When.”  
(((recon galilee matthew, ali report)))  
“Run it.”  
a pause. eyes widen.  
“Convene the Circle. Now.”  
(((done.)))

“You’ve been called here because we have a confirmed web breach.”

The meeting chamber of the Judas Command First Circle was filled with shocked silence. Several members looked up suddenly at the announcement. There had not been a web breach in...Well, a long time. Hundreds of years, perhaps thousands. Perhaps longer.

“When?”

“The timesweep waves are emanating from the Fourteen-seven front.”

“How? That When was abandoned—”

“—three weeks ago. Zero-Four, I believe you were there.”

Michael Zero-Four stared at her with a gaze like acid and dust and quiet, accumulating hatred. “Yes.” His voice was quiet, almost a sigh. It was the voice of an ancient and weary traveler. “I piloted Gethsemane Simon into that When.”

“And there was a confrontation.”

He laughed, almost a chuckle. “A confrontation...Yes. There certainly was a confrontation, Hannah. That When was on the verge of being uploaded when we got there. We lost too many in that engagement. Vishnu, Paul, Mohamet...Magdalene. Too many.”

“They are mourned, Zero-Four.”

“I’m sure they are, but we had some concerns about—”

“The Fourteen-seven When was as far as we knew not yet uploaded by the Enemy. Their presence was indeed a shock and surprise to our reconnaissance forces. Magdalene’s loss hurt us all, Michael.

“Did it?”

She looked at Michael Zero-Four with a delicious fury, which thankfully was interrupted by another Judas captain, Okeke from the Judas Seattle Baird.

“How could there be a web breach in an abandoned When? Could the native populace have caused it?”

“Doubtful... We’re sending a recon team to investigate.”

“This could be another trap. My group has tracked them from bubble 7K to bubble 8.5K. They’re definitely on the offensive this time, Hannah. They’ve been attacking our Forts up and down the Stream. Have the Altwhen patrols reported any—”

“There’s been no proof of a link between the destruction of Fort Evans and this web breach.”

Zero-Four frowned, stood. “Wait a minute. Fort Evans was attacked?”

“Michael, you—”

Okeke looked angrily at Hannah. “You haven’t told him? Fort Evans fell while you were floating out there in stasis.

The Black seem to have launched a full-scale offensive on our advance positions.”

“Sweet Richter. How many casualties?”

Okeke looked icily at Hannah, then back to Michael. “All was lost. Fort Evans, Fort West, Forts Nixon, Tehran, Hatchet, John Wayne, Kiribati... So many others. They’ve found most of our bubbles and uploaded them.”

Michael’s hands curled to fists, shimmered with the shift.

“What the hell is going on, Hannah? If they’ve found our advance bubbles, they can find us! They probably know our damned position already. With that much activity... Why was Maggie back that far? Did you suspect an Enemy presence?”

“Don’t speak out of turn, Zero-Four. You—”

“Cease with the formalities. The Alpha-Point periphery was swarming with Black. They’re ready to open it up, Hannah. The slaughter of Simon’s fleet is evidence enough. If you knew about their buildup of forces, why was Maggie that far back in the Stream alone?”

“I don’t have to explain my actions to you; needless to say there was an Enemy presence and we needed to investigate. Enough of that for now. We can discuss it further when you return.”

“When I return?”

“Yes, Michael. You have combat experience in the Fourteen-seven When. You’re going back to investigate the web breach.”

“I am? What a pleasant surprise.”

“Where is Simon now?”

“He’s at the dockyards being refitted into a Golgotha-class chassis. He took some major burn escaping that When.”

“Did he? Well, we must send an escort with you, just to make sure you get to the Fourteen-seven When safely.”

“An escort.”

“The new gunships.”

“I see.” Zero-Four was infuriated.

“Good.” Kilbourne smirked.

“Do you think there’s actually a web breach, Hannah? Is there anything else I should expect to find when I get there?”

“Whatever do you mean, Michael?”

Zero-Four looked back at Okeke, who shook his head and placed his index finger to his lips, a gesture that had become very popular lately. Zero-Four stormed from the chamber. The Circle adjourned.

Detach. A quiet humming, the gentle sensation of movement. The transport was empty at this hour. Zero-Four rode alone.

The news of a confirmed web breach disquieted Michael Zero-Four. Everything about this disturbed him at some base level...Judas forts being uploaded by the dozens. Judas Command covert missions to Whens literally thousands of years earlier than any Enemy forces had been tracked. The debacle of Maggie’s death and the massacre in the belt and at Alpha forged an anger within Zero-Four unlike any he had experienced in quite some time. Things had not felt so...so liminal since the changing of command after His death. There was a force within the Judas, a force working behind the scenes. People were disappearing; people were dying. Things were falling apart. And now he had to pilot a mission back into the When they had just left supposedly for dead, with escorts. Gunship escorts. What was Kilbourne planning? Something wasn’t right.

He lived in strange times, if the end times could be called strange. He searched for a better adjective and found he no longer had the energy or patience for an eloquent vocabulary.

The transport he now rode carried him away from Command to the dockyards. It was still a breathtaking sight, this foothold in the Whenstream,

hopefully as yet undetected by the Enemy. A last bastion of hope thrust into the fabric of the night.

Judas Command, Fort Iscariot, Fort Hope, Fort Richter, the Cyst, the Bubble, Program Seven, no matter what they called it, this was the place where the remnants of humanity lived out the end times. Command was anchored between times, a place of refuge and solace in the war for eternity. Here, the Judas carefully guarded the precious patterns reclaimed from the Enemy and amassed the knowledge of the countless dead civilizations that the Enemy had uploaded. This place was a virus in the code of the Enemy Purpose. This place was history and memory and hope.

Zero-Four watched the swirls and eddies of forgotten futures and impossible pasts flow around the transport as it docked. He turned from the window, hands folded in his lap. He leaned forward, feeling empty and ancient and gray.

Simon loomed below him. Zero-Four studied Simon's new chassis, a Golgotha-class. The refit was impressive. He was a full-fledged warship now. Of course, the Golgotha were no longer top-of-the-line. The development of the prototype gunships had seen to that. The gunships were meant as a replacement for the aging class of vessels. Eventually, all lower classes would be refit into Golgotha. Well, if they lasted that long...Losses in the Gethsemane and Eden classes had been terrible in the last engagement.

There was a pang in his heart as he remembered the massacre in the Belt. Simon had fought like a madman to avenge the death of his beloved Magdalene. Such a senseless loss...Why had she been sent in alone, anyway? Before leaving that When, they planetfell and rescued her crew from the harvest upload. Exiting orbit, Simon had gone to maximum speed too soon, burning most of his primary hull off in the process. Then the icy fingers of hibernatory stasis had taken them.

Simon had drifted for weeks in the void, wounded, terrified of the Enemy becoming aware of their presence. He had not dared to broadcast an emergency beacon for fear of being discovered and uploaded.

Zero-Four remembered being revived at Command. Simon was in refit at the yards. Reynald and his crew had seemingly disappeared. And Jennings, the refugee they had picked up, was being interrogated.

Now this.

They docked at the yards.

Zero-Four arose from his seat as the transport gently nudged the docking ring. Jesus, this program feels real, he thought, and smiled inwardly. Too real. Why do I have to feel so old? When did I last feel young? Program Four, Program Five?

With the confusing realization that he no longer knew how old he was or how long he had been fighting this war or how badly his signal had degraded since the last Update, he palmed the opening mechanism to the lock and entered the dockyards.

“Simon?”

((...michael.))

“How are you, old friend? How does it feel to be in a Golgotha chassis?”

((i feel...bigger. more powerful.))

“Good. You’re going to need it. We’re going back.”

((...))

“Simon?”

((forgive me. i was...))

“I know. I’m so sorry, Simon.”

((why was she—))

Zero-Four put a finger to his lips, the familiar gesture of silence. His gray eyes surveyed the chamber, and Zero-Four wondered how many minds were touching his without his knowledge. “Simon, something’s changed here, and I don’t think that we should continue this conversation.”

Simon understood. He sensed it too.

“There’s been a web breach. Timesweep waves coming from that When are off the scale. Something or someone on that planet was powerful enough to take out an upload generator. The web is leaking more pattern than we’ve ever seen before. We’re going back to investigate. Kilbourne is sending us back into the fire. With escorts, of course.”

((escorts? what—))

“Simon, the questions must wait. We’re going to be accompanied by two of the new gunships.”

((may i speak to reynald?))

“He’s gone. I don’t know where he is. No one knows. This place has gone to hell. Forts are falling to the Black along the whole length of the Stream. The war doesn’t go well for us.”

((michael, what’s going on here?))

“The center cannot hold, Simon. The center cannot hold.”

heartbeat...

*in the hell that was between times and realities two people clung to each other the man in an ecstasy of the purest agony as the shadow within his essence worked to tear him apart to cut*

*the cords of sanity that held him together his body mind soul the woman screamed in silent terror as she became something more than and less than human and they both entered a realm of binary hell as synapses firing firing transferred soul to zero and mind to one and zero and one and the man shifted shifted shifted*

heartbeat...

“What was THAT?”

Hayes sat up from where he and Flynn had been thrown to the ground.

A searing pinpoint of light on the distant eastern horizon held Flynn’s gaze. No mushroom cloud...

“That *wasn’t* a nuke, but the shockwave—”

Another wave hit, and they grasped each other to steady themselves. The ground still seemed unstable, like some giant force threatened to tear it apart. The light on the horizon grew whiter and whiter...

The sun was a small white dot in the sky, cold, distant, but for an instant—

“The sun!” Flynn pointed upward. “Look!” The sky overhead, which had been clouded by the silver and purple blackness of the alien web, suddenly grew much brighter as the web cracked, shattered, fell from the sky in great shards of black.

*The sky is falling* Simon thought, and his confused, desperate eyes searched for an answer in Maggie’s. Her eyes became a mirror of his fear as a fierce wave of sound washed over them, a sound that filled his head with an impossible image of screaming and wailing and hell and he noticed that the light on the eastern horizon was now somehow closer, and the sky was falling down upon them. Maggie’s face contorted in fear, turned back to the wave of light that flew at them from the east at a speed too fast to comprehend. They stood on a lightly wooded hillside overlooking a valley. Maggie could see that the light was a wall of white crashing into and through anything in its path. *Too fast* she thought as the wave poured over the other side of the valley, large shards of the Enemy web falling into its path as they stabbed into the landscape. Where the shards touched the light, where anything touched the light, there was a snap and a flash like lightning and the object vanished in a flash of silver. *This is going to touch us. This is going to kill us.*

The deluge of light reached the bottom of the valley, began to ascend the hillside. The very road upon which they stood began to vibrate with an alien energy as the light touched it, ripped into it, reached out for them.

Simon watched, face pale, motionless, helpless. Maggie looked from the light to Simon, from Simon to the light.

She reached out for his hand, grasped it. She turned his shocked face to her own, looked resolutely into his eyes. He broke from his reverie, squeezed her hand in sudden awareness of its presence.

“Simon!” she shouted over the din of the screaming light. “You have to trust me!” He blinked, opened his mouth to say something, anything.

Her grip on his hand tightened.

“Do you trust me?” The light was so close. Suffocation, blinding. She touched his mind and saw too many thoughts to read.

His eyes were fire in the wave of white. He reached out, grabbed Maggie’s other hand, nodded his affirmation.

Maggie’s hands flickered, shifted, enveloping Simon’s hands, forearms, shoulders. He cried out as his body became silver fluid fire nothing. Maggie shifted her entire body, stepped forward to hold Simon close. He was consumed within her as she shifted into him, as his body shifted into her.

The wave of light passed over where Hayes and Flynn had just stood, washing away the asphalt and gravel and trees and flora and fauna and reality in a flood of the purest white. Then the wave was gone, leaving behind it a landscape that was a negative of that which had been. Hayes and Flynn were nowhere to be seen.

Richter stood on an empty street in a dead town.

The sun flared up, just for a second. The sky shattered and fell.

The vessels dropped from the sky.

Richter smiled, and paused for a moment. He stopped whistling for what felt like the first time in days. His sad song had been replaced in his head by the audible wave of screaming souls. He shifted as the wave of light washed over him. He rematerialized after it had passed, and continued his song. He walked on.

black

hatred

**NO.**

inquisition, unexpected fury

**HOW COULD THIS HAPPEN((?))**

THE VERMIN—

**CALM YOURSELF. IT CAN BE REMEDIED.**

BUT THE PURPOSE—

**WILL BE COMPLETED. CALM YOURSELF, OR CEASE.**

silence.

**AGAIN. HOW COULD THIS HAPPEN(?)**

IT WAS NOT LIKE THE OTHER PREY. IT WAS AFFLICTED WITH THE CONTAGION.

**IT WAS A JUDAS.**

IT COULD SHADOW. WHEN IT TOUCHED THE NODE—

**TWO ESCAPED. A DISRUPTION IN THE UPLOAD OCCURRED. PATTERNS WERE LOST.**

ALMOST ALL OF THE PATTERNS WERE LOST. THE VIRUS WAS UPLOADED; THE GENERATOR WAS DESTROYED.

**THE UPLOAD HERE WAS ALMOST COMPLETE; WE WILL RESEQUENCE THE PATTERNS.**

BUT THE WEB. THE LOST SOULS—

**SILENCE. SUBMIT NOW, OR BE PURGED FROM THE HOLY PATTERN.**

I SUBMIT.

**NOW WE MUST COMPENSATE FOR THE LOSS OF THE GENERATOR. ALREADY THE STAR HAS BEGUN TO HEAL. WE MUST QUICKEN OUR PACE IF THE JUDAS ARE NEAR. THEY HAVE RELEASED TOO MANY OF OMEGA'S CHILDREN ALREADY. THEY HAVE CONTAMINATED OUR PURPOSE FOR FAR TOO LONG.**

YES.

**LEAVE ME.**

the black parts

A head aches. Eyes agonize with exquisite needling pain. Eyelids open uncertainly, blink away the first light.

Hayes sat up, hand immediately reaching for his sidearm, a reflex that he could not explain or rationalize or stop himself from doing. He coughed a grating and uncontrollable rasp for a moment. He felt...odd. Not hurt, but different somehow.

The sky was a muddy gray. Twilight? The ground upon which he sat was a black, fused silicate surface. He surveyed his surroundings, noted his rucksack and bedroll were only a few feet away. He squeezed his eyes shut, opened them, hoping to wash away some of the foggy confusion and physical exhaustion he felt. He stood up with a start, remembering the wave of light, Maggie frantically grabbing his hand, and then...

And then...



And then *what*?

She was not anywhere as far as he could see. The landscape was stippled with shards of black of all sizes, creating so many blind areas. Simon stood, hurriedly began to jog among the ruins, calling out for Maggie. She was nowhere—

Behind a shard of black that must have towered into the sky at least fifty feet, he saw a spill of curly crimson hair and a limp hand. He ran to her, lifted her up into a sitting position. She mumbled something that Simon could not understand, and her hand grabbed his fatigue sleeve weakly. The wound on her face had split open when she hit the ground, spilling a fresh layer of vital red blood both onto the shiny black ground and Simon's fatigue jacket. He gently wiped the blood and dirt from her face, and her eyes opened. Silver eyes regarded silver eyes. They looked at each other in silence.

Maggie reached down and weakly grasped for Simon's hand. This time it was he who held her hand tightly. He held her hand tightly, and his mind told his hand what to do. It flickered with ripples of light and shimmered into Maggie's hand, which shifted in response.

"I trust you, Maggie Flynn." He looked at her with his newly-silver eyes, and as his hand rematerialized, the mercurial fire within his eyes faded to a pale gray hue. His lips brushed her hand with a kiss. She smiled, sat up. Simon wordlessly took a bandage from his kit, and Maggie used it to carefully pat down the wound on her face. "I didn't know if it would work, mind you." Maggie smiled her mischievous smile, revealing the adorable dimples that she seemed to hide and only released for moments when she wanted to disarm someone with that smile. "I just knew we couldn't very well stay there too much longer." Simon nodded. He examined his hands, which flickered again with an inner, unnatural light. They shifted, rematerialized, shifted. He was testing the limits of his abilities.

Maggie sat and watched him, her hands looped casually around her knees, her head canted slightly to the side, her hair cascading loosely over her shoulders, framing the quiet smile of her face. The sunlight was terribly cold now, and the sky was getting darker. It was not a natural landscape. As far as she could see, there was little but blackened, glassy ground and those black fragments of the Enemy web. It was silent. It appeared that she and Simon were the only living things for miles around, perhaps on the entire planet. What had caused that blast?

Simon had stopped shifting, and he sat watching Maggie for a while, subtle smile on his face. "You're shivering, Maggie." He placed his hand on her forearm, which was now textured with goosebumps. His touch was fire and she felt her cheeks flush. She had not realized how cold she had gotten.

"I'll build a fire." He got up, began to gather small pieces of wood and grass from the ruined landscape. She realized only after the fact that they had just spoken to each other without opening their mouths. The communication had taken place entirely in their minds. She arose as well and helped him, and after a while they had gathered enough brush to build a pleasant fire.

The sky was blacker than it had been in weeks. And colder.

Dim, dim light. A wave of vertigo.

*Where...? How...?*

"Don't try to get up yet." Feminine voice, nearby.

The thing that had once been Patra Jennings cradled West's head in her lap as he regained consciousness. They sat in a spherical chamber, a flickering remnant of a Shadow at its center, providing a meager light.

Agony surged through his eyes once more. His clenched them shut; he felt her hands holding his head, hands that were human no longer. He felt the icy cold texture of metallic lace that had replaced her flesh. The pain eventually ceased, and he weakly opened his eyes.

He had been here before.

Diablo.

He bolted upright, scanned his surroundings. They were in the orb chamber of the Diablo vessel.

"How'd we get here?" He felt empty, exhausted.

"I was going to ask you the same thing." She did not say it tauntingly, only matter-of-factly. "I remember being at the other place, I remember jumping into the light, and then I woke up here. I don't know how long we were out. You were mumbling something over and over in your sleep. Something about heaven." West noted to himself that even her voice had taken on a metallic, shimmering quality. It was not the voice of a human. It was distorted, machinelike, as if she were talking to him on a blown speaker from another room.

West rose, walked cautiously to the orb. It had faded considerably, as if their emergence had drained it of energy. It did not reach out for his mind. He raised his hand to touch the glassy clouded surface, but thought better of it and let his hand fall to his side.

"They must be portals. We went into one and came out another."

She nodded, mimicking understanding when he knew that she probably felt more confused, alone, and terrified than he did.

"Thank you."

"What?" West looked at her for seemingly the first time.

“If you hadn’t pulled me back from the light, it would’ve killed me. Just like the others.”

“Yeah.” West was unsettled by her silver eyes. How could she have Styx eyes?

As if reading his mind, she looked at him piercingly. “You’re a Styx, aren’t you?”

West grinned. “You’re the President’s daughter, aren’t you?”

She smiled, acknowledged him with a short laugh. They both felt more at ease. “Nothing like stating the obvious.”

West took off his fatigue jacket. “Here, you can put this on.” She accepted it, covering her metallic nakedness. The webs of metal at her temples had spawned runnels of silver throughout her body, replacing her physical self with something alien, something impossible, eliminating organic with metallic.

She had absorbed the Black.

West was curious. “The...The web on your body. What did you see in the light? I won’t lie to you. I’ve been in the light before. It’s where the Styx came from. But I’ve never seen that web before.”

Patra looked around. “I figured out myself that this was Milicom’s facility. And their light. I suspected that this is where the Styx were developed. My fiancé was a senator at Wind River, and he heard things...Things he probably wasn’t supposed to tell me.” She looked up with her impossibly silver eyes. “I didn’t feel any pain when this happened to me. Just—I—”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to—”

“No. I’m fine. Voices. My mind exploded with voices. Too many to count or tell apart. Screaming, shouting, crying. The web—I can’t describe it...It was like claws in my mind, trying to steal my soul. And the voices were the souls it had already taken. Something—something terrible, something impossible, tried to take me, but I wouldn’t let it. The insane wail of the voices in my head...There was something more. They were all being absorbed. Like they were all merging into one entity. It felt like choking. So many voices. Billions, trapped in that web. I was slipping. I would’ve fallen before long, but you tore me away and the link was broken. I would’ve become one with the blackness, the hell, if you hadn’t saved me.”

“But you also saved me. You shifted through the webs that I was caught in. We both would have died if you hadn’t shifted.”

“Shifted?”

“Yeah.” To make his point, he shifted his arm. It flickered and became a ghostly image of itself.

She remembered the voice in her mind ((*HELP HIM HELP HIM NOW*)) calm, whispering, and the flood of images as some higher power took over her mind long enough to destroy the metal bonds that held West—

She smiled. “Oh. It was my first time.” Had she possessed enough human flesh to do so, her cheeks would have blushed.

“Well, thank you.”

Patra looked with wonder at the cool, matte black surroundings.

“Is this one of the alien vessels?”

“Same techbase, from what I’ve seen, but somehow different. Little changes...And no silver webs.”

“How did it get into a mountain?”

“That’s what they were trying to find out before they found the light in the chamber. Milicom became more interested in that than in the craft itself. It was right after Three, and MSI was terrified. We’d barely made it out of the last war, and with things heating up in Quebec...They wanted to use the tech in this ship for our own weaponry. And then they stumbled onto the light. Enter the Styx.”

“No wonder why my father was afraid. He must’ve thought the rightful owners of this were coming back to claim it.”

“Maybe they were.”

She frowned almost imperceptibly, shivered a little. Whether from the cold interior of the vessel or the fact that alien creatures had once traversed these dark metal passages, she did not know.

West walked to the round hatch that served as the doorway of the spherical room. It slid silently open when he approached, revealing a dark, slightly canted passageway that led further into the vessel.

“Let’s look around.”

They walked into the black.

“Yes.”

Zero-Four stood in the open doorway. “Yes, what?”

“Yes, I’ll go back with you.”

Zero-Four studied the man seated before him on a bunk. Middle-aged, hair brown, whitening at the temples, faded blue eyes. He was surprisingly fit for a man who had gone through such a trying life. His eyes were somehow distant, giving him the look of age beyond his years. He was weary, yet attentive.

David Jennings.

“How did you find out?”

Jennings weakly smiled. “The yard’s grapevine extends even to the refugee wing. I’ve thought it over, and I want to go back with you. There’s nothing for me here.”

Zero-Four noticed the fresh burn of the Judas encoder on Jennings’ left temple. How long ago had he received his own? It might have been decades; it might have been centuries. He looked away from the pattern of scarred lines. “I’m sorry about the interrogations. We have to be thorough.”

“Understood...” He had followed Zero-Four’s gaze, and he reached up to touch the rectangular pattern on his temple. “But did they really have to brand me?” He grinned. “When do we leave?”

“Immediately. Simon’s waiting for clearance.”

“Good. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

The flickering of another meager campfire. The night air was frigid, the sky bereft of stars or moons or hearts or clovers. They had each retreated to their one hundred-eighty degrees of the fire circle.

Simon’s hand and forearm flickered as he shifted. He resolidified and shook his head. “What kind of technology creates dimensional shifting capability in a biological structure? This breaks all the rules. Einstein, Hawking, Huntress, each would have given their souls to see this. This is impossible.”

Maggie smiled, distracted by something within the fire that had held her attention all evening. “Don’t question it, Simon. You’ll go crazy like me. You’ll want to stay shifted forever and let the boogey monsters that live in the light steal your soul.”

Simon frowned. “What, Maggie?” He had never seen her so fixated on the flames before.

“What?”

“You said something about boogey monsters that live in the light.”

“Really? I...I don’t know where that came from. Don’t mind me; I’m just babbling.” Her gaze never left the sanguine flames. She pulled her blanket around herself and moved closer to the fire. It was getting too cold.

Simon unrolled his sleeping bag and crawled in. From his angle on the ground, he could barely see Maggie on the other side of the fire, but somehow he could feel her there. He could feel the gentle touch of her mind; he closed his eyes, inhaling her essence. He knew that she felt his touch as well.

Maggie pulled her sleeping bag open, got in. She looked at him from the other side of the fire. They said nothing; their minds cautiously retreated from each other. Their eyes locked.

One hundred-eighty degrees.

Maggie smiled her sad smile. Her eyes glimmered; the fire revealed the tear-wet surface of her face. She wiped the tears from her face and laughed at her emotion. Simon sat back up, as did she.

“Maggie, I—”

“Simon,—”

They both tried to speak at once, realized what had happened, laughed. Simon motioned to Maggie. “Please, you go first.”

“Today, when we—When we shifted together, you have to know that I did it so that you wouldn’t get hurt. That wave of light—Nothing could have survived that. I knew I could shift and it wouldn’t hurt me, but you would have been—I shifted into you so I wouldn’t be alone.”

One hundred-eighty degrees.

“When you shifted into me, I—I’ve never...Maggie, don’t leave me. I can’t do this without you.”

One hundred-eighty degrees.

She smiled that disarming smile, wiped the final tears from her face. He felt the press of her mind stronger than ever, a soft, warm, overpowering tugging. He did not mind in any way.

“What’re you thinking, Simon?” The mischievous dimples made their appearance. “Don’t lie to me; I can read your mind, you know.” Her upper teeth dragged slowly across the wet surface of her bottom lip. “I told myself once that I’d know you. Do I know you, Simon Hayes?”

One hundred-eighty degrees shattered.

Simon went to her, their eyes locked in the bleeding firelight. He sat before her, grasped her hands. Silver eyes gazed upon silver eyes as bodies and minds shifted into one another. They illuminated the encampment brighter than any fire could.

Simon and Maggie resolidified. Their souls had intermingled; for an instant, they had been one being, living as one entity. They sat in silence for a while, lost in each other’s now-gray eyes. Simon still held Maggie’s hands. She smiled a quiet smile, opened her sleeping bag. The air was decidedly frigid on this mid-June night. Maggie laid down, and Simon laid next to her. Side by side, their minds were one as he traced every inch of her face with his lips. He shivered, from the emotion of the moment or the cold of the night he could not tell. Maggie’s eyes closed, a gentle smile still on her face. His shaking hands found her back, and he pulled her close. Simon’s lips eventually completed their survey of the terrain of her face and neck, and he looked at her angelic face and curly spill of hair for an eternity.

Without warning a dull throbbing pain swept though Simon's head, emanating from behind his eyes to his temples. He looked from side to side, and Maggie drowned with worry.

"Simon?"

A voice tore through Simon's head, overpowering, tangible. It was Maggie's voice, but not Maggie's voice. It was painfully mechanical, sterile.

*simon i love you*

*maggie, don't leave me. i can't do this without you.*

*you can*

*I CAN'T LOSE YOU AGAIN!*

*love*

*maggie, i—*

...

*i love you, maggie.*

"Simon? Are you okay?" Her face could not conceal her concern; her hand rested on the side of his face. He blinked hard, his vision momentarily blurred with an image of a great black vessel, a piercing white light shining from its center, a mechanical scream as atoms were torn apart...

"Maggie?"

"What is it?" She leaned over to him, squeezed his hand. Radiant in the firelight and her own beauty, she gazed at him. With those hypnotic gray eyes, a grin returned to her face.

"I...I—"

"Simon, shh..." Her finger touched his lips.

Their eyes locked.

He pulled her close in the crimson light.

She kissed him, passionately. They fell into one another, furious desire seeking release in the entwining of their bodies.

The campfire flickered.

The embers burned in the haze of the night.

They were one.

"Hungry?"

"Hmm?" Patra turned to West, a distracted look on her face. She had been staring into the clouded orb at the center of the chamber. West was next to her, rummaging through his pack. He held out two unlabeled metal cans. "Oh. Sure. Thanks." She took the can from his outstretched hand.

"No problem." He cracked open the seal on his can, revealing a mysterious pink substance that in no way resembled meat but most likely was. "Fresh from

the ruined suburbs of Chicago. Yummy.” He extracted a bit of pink quasi-protein and tentatively placed it in his mouth. His face attempted to hide his disdain and didn’t entirely succeed. He swallowed, shook his head, put the top back on the can. “Better save this for later.”

Patra looked down at the can West had given her, placed it back in the pack. “Not really hungry anyways.” She turned back to the orb, which weakly illuminated her silver-laced face. Her voice still filled West with an odd feeling that he was conversing with a machine.

They had explored the vessel from end to end, finding little that they could comprehend. It was obvious that whatever had piloted the vehicle was about their size, perhaps humanoid. They traversed the interior until there was nowhere else to go, which really wasn’t that far. They found the entry point that Milicom had burned into the surface of the vessel. An airlock to the surface had been constructed after the discovery of the vessel. They would explore the surface later. For now, the interior of the vessel was much more important than an abandoned mining town.

From the central hub where the orb was contained, only three “hallways” went outwards in a T from the orb chamber. Everything was constructed of the same matte black substance, which felt like metal and was strangely cold to the touch. One of these paths led to a small spherical room within the central hub with recesses in the walls covered with glass. They reminded West of the stasis tanks used to regenerate burn victims he had seen used after the Quebec War. On the “ceiling” of this room was a circular panel that neither West nor Patra could open. Whatever lay beyond that panel would have to remain a secret. West did not want to attempt to shift through the unknown black material of the vessel.

The other two slightly canted hallways led to identical spherical chambers on opposite sides of the vehicle. West and Patra were amazed at the size of the chambers; they had not known how big the vessel really was. All along the wall of the spherical expanse were circular hatches. They attempted to open one of the hatches and succeeded, but the interior was empty. The cylindrical interiors of these odd spaces were just big enough for West and Patra to enter, but they did not. What could have been stored in these chambers? There must have been thousands of the cylinders in each of the spherical rooms, each the size of a human...West thought about the possibilities and decided that he no longer wanted to think about what the chambers were used for.

Whoever or whatever had constructed this vessel obviously had a fascination of spherical spaces and tubular hallways, a bleak and utilitarian interior architectural design suitable for the cold infinite black between the stars. Nowhere could they find any control panels, any viewscreens, anything at all



that indicated the origin of either the vessel or the vanished occupants thereof. Had Milicom taken the crew's remains, or had there been no crew? Certainly the area had been secured long before either West or the other Styx had been created. There were so many unanswered questions.

West suddenly felt suffocated sitting in the orb chamber, watching the black swirls of color play upon the surface of the dying light. He stood, picked up his pack. Patra understood how he felt. "Let's get out of here." West looked back over his shoulder as they left the chamber. "There's a town up there. The light'll be here when we get back."

They walked up the inclined hallway to where the Milicom airlock had been burned into the hull of the vessel. West activated the opening mechanism and the massive door silently slid open. They stepped through and the interior door closed behind them as the exterior door smoothly opened before them. A wash of surprisingly cold air wafted from the mineshaft. They ascended to the surface on one of the mining elevators that thankfully still worked. As the elevator rose above the surface it revealed a landscape that had been scoured by some massive unknown force, leaving behind trails of glassy black earth. On the mountainside, several large black edifices had been erected since West had last been here: shards of the Enemy web that had fallen to earth. He looked down into the valley and saw the scattered ruins of what had been Diablo. Most of the buildings had been flattened by the force of the shattered upload generator, but some of the heartier stone buildings had withstood the blast. They would search those buildings first.

Patra and West walked leisurely down the mountainside in the dark gray light of what should have been early evening. Neither knew why they were in Diablo, or what they were supposed to do next. West had a suspicion that they would not be the only people in Diablo before long. He suspected that the other Styx, if any remained, would come home before long. They would come to Diablo.

He would wait for them.

Desert. Somewhere.

Richter sat alone under the starless sky. He had not made a campfire. He did not need warmth or light. Oh, father, where have you taken my stars?

He had given up trying to remember the name of the song he had been whistling incessantly for days. He had given up whistling for the moment as well; his parched lips and dry mouth made his forays into the realm of music a near-impossibility for now. His mind was abuzz with his mental replacement for the mystery song; it replayed over and over again the theme song from the

opening credits of “The A-Team.” He had always loved those ancient television shows as a kid. He had always fancied himself a younger and scrawnier version of Mr. T, with fewer gold chains and more hair.

*I pity the fool...*

Father, where are my friends the stars? You did not ask my permission before you slaughtered the innocents and threw their blood into the sky.

He attempted sleep, but as always, the unnecessary biological imperative eluded him. Instead, he laid on his back, looking into the frigid black desert sky. Never had he been in a place so cold and black. For all he knew, he could be floating in the void of space at that very moment, so dark was the world around him. He could be dead already.

*You are dead already. You’ve been dead for centuries.*

In the middle of a dead desert, a dead sky above, with only the grit of the desert ground beneath him to signal that he was indeed still a prisoner of gravity, he shut his eyes to shut out the black.

Oh Father, where have you taken the stars?

A flawless, featureless sky above, faded dying red embers of the fire the only illumination of an expanse like black velvet, the air was frigid; he was warm.

He slept beside her, eyes twitching beneath closed eyelids in a dream she hoped was not at all like the nightmare within which they lived. She moved to get closer to him, rested her face on his chest, her hand playing with his chest hair, fingers combing through dark brown curls. She looked up, kissed his sweet sleeping mouth, tasted herself on his lips. She listened for, found his heartbeat. The silence of the dead world intensified every sound: each heartbeat a thunderclap, each inhalation and exhalation a grating windstorm.

They had made love like forces of nature, like storm fronts colliding. They shifted as one entity between dimensions of heaven. In Simon, she had found what she had sought for eternities.

In his sleep he turned, draped his arm over her back, instinctively pulled her closer to him. She smiled, more content than she had been in...Ever.

She let sleep wash over her, knowing that tomorrow they would start the journey to Diablo. There was a long, cold road ahead of them, but together, she thought they could walk forever and never tire. She drifted off to sleep with a smile on her face and Simon in her thoughts.

“What’ll it be, Ms. Jennings?”

“Oh, I don’t drink.” She folded her hands on the bar.

West frowned, pulling a dusty bottle of something brown and alcoholic from the dusty shelf of a dusty bar on the dusty main street of a dusty dead town. “Well, that’s a shame. You’ll have to start.” He unscrewed the top of the bottle, took a small pull, and painfully swallowed the amber liquid. He coughed, eyes squinted, eyebrows arched at the awful, wonderful taste, covering his mouth with the back of his right hand as his left hand gingerly placed the cover back on the bottle and put the bottle back on the shelf. “Or maybe not.”

She smiled a sad smile of silver and terrible metal lace. “My mother was an alcoholic. They did a pretty good job of covering that one up. The Kennedy tradition.”

West turned from the wall of bottles. “I’m sorry. I had no idea—”

“Don’t worry about it. No one knew. But feel free to have a drink; don’t abstain just for my sake.”

West sat down on a stool behind the bar facing Patra. He adjusted the wick of an ancient oil lantern they had found in an antiques store on the main street of town. It illuminated the bar with murky, somehow foul light. They had no reason to be here, but somehow it felt so right. This was one of the few remaining buildings of Diablo, and as such, it was one of the first last ties to humanity that they had seen in days. The force of the shattering spire had flattened almost everything in its path. Fortunately, Diablo was located on the other side of the mountain, so it had been somewhat sheltered from the blast. The bar was a sturdy concrete block building. No frills, but sturdy. And still here. So they sat in an abandoned bar in an abandoned town in an abandoned world. Anywhere was better than beneath the mountain in that alien vessel.

“Oh, what the hell.” West reached behind him, took down a bottle of Remy-Martin champagne cognac. “Classy stuff for a beer-town like Diablo.” With some resignation he saw a tap behind the bar for the beer of his youth, Killian’s Irish Red. How tragic that electricity had rendered the kegs of beer below the bar useless flat piss-water weeks ago. He pulled a dusty glass from under the top of the bar, wiped it off with his rough drab sleeve. He filled the glass partway with the syrupy amber liquid. He reached under the bar again and pulled out an unexpected surprise for Patra: a warm glass bottle of Pepsi. There was a case of the drink underneath the bar, looking strangely out of place.

He swirled the cognac around the inside of the glass, admired its color. He held it up before Patra, who had opened her Pepsi. “Here’s to...” West frowned, not really knowing what to toast to anymore.

“Here’s to fellow travelers.” Patra smiled widely, her glimmering eyes searching West for approval. He smiled in return. “To fellow travelers.” The clink of glass and the sweet fire of cognac filled the cool evening air.

West sighed, content for the moment, leaned back on his stool. "What this place needs is a mean old bartender with a shotgun behind the bar, some crazy leather-clad Hell's Angels playing pool, and a jukebox that only plays country unless you want to get yourself beaten with a pool cue in the parking lot." He squinted, leaned over and reached for something out of Patra's line of sight. Patra was not surprised when he pulled a sawed-off shotgun from underneath the bar. West laughed, eyebrows raised, placed it back. "Well, one out of three ain't bad. Where's the Kenny Rogers albums?"

Patra grinned, took another drink from the Pepsi bottle, swallowed slowly. "This really is pretty bad stuff. Must have been sitting here forever."

"Not much call for soda pop in a working man's town." Patra noted how the cognac glass rested gently in West's upturned palm, stem nestled between middle and ring fingers. Very civilized. "Trust me on that one."

"Where are they? The miners, the soldiers, anyone?"

West sipped slowly, contemplative. He cleared his throat and looked into his glass. "Well, I'd suspect that they're in places very much like the place you were."

"The tower? All those ships—"

"I saw hundreds of those vessels dropping off human payloads at that one tower. I doubt it was the only one. The planet's probably covered with them."

"What are they for?"

"You know as much as I do, if not more. As far as I can tell, the humans are gathered in those towers, where the light changes them into—" West looked over Patra's silver body, "—metal. Some kind of liquid metal that becomes part of the ship. That metal came out of the walls and turned into more of those black things. I saw them come out of the walls. The vessel must use the human body as an energy source to create the...monsters. Aliens. Whatever the hell they are." He looked out at nothing, beyond Patra to the darkness in the far corners of the room. He took a slow sip of his drink, blinked and roused himself from his reverie.

Patra pushed her drink away, wrung her hands in her lap. "I would've become one of those monsters if you hadn't saved me. I would've melted into the walls of that tower and turned into one of those monsters." Her voice had gotten considerably

quieter, as if she were talking only to herself. "What am I now?"

West reached out, took her cold metal-laced hand. "You're safe, Patra. You aren't one of those things. You're alive, you're human, you're—"

"Am I?" She looked up into West's eyes with a gaze like a machine. Her voice, her eyes...West did not know what she was. He just knew that she needed someone to hold her hand, no matter how inhuman it felt.

“You are to me.” He tightened his hold on her hand, and they sat in the dead bar for a while longer, listening to the sound of nothing and feeling the endless cold of the night.

An inhalation. A pause. An exhalation.

He felt her breath on the small of his neck. Her eyelashes, closed, were small brushes on his cheek. Her eyes danced to the music of an unknown dream as she slept. He held her tightly, and she moved in her sleep instinctively to get closer to him in the cool night air. He watched her, the wordless beauty of sleep, the carefree face of an angel. His lips explored the landscape of her face, and found themselves lightly pressed to her forehead. The scar of her eye was obscured in the night. Her shallow breathing both warmed him and gave rise to a stippled field of gooseflesh on his forearms. He pulled the blanket over them, locking out the night and holding in the warmth their bodies radiated together.

In the darkness, the veiled moonlight bathed him. The intimate scent of woman, the magical feel of her pressed against him in the night. He had completed his cartographic mission of exploring every inch of her face and he had moved on to more remote climes. He stared into her closed eyes. She moved in her sleep and he rolled onto his back. She followed, Simon feeling the sweep of her cold-erect nipples, until chest to chest they lay, naked bodies entwining, her head nestling snugly into the hollow beneath his chin. Her hair was the intoxicating and improbable scent of lilacs, and he inhaled deeply, letting a chill go through him. It was getting colder, but they basked in each other’s warmth in the dead night air. He was more content than he’d been in...

So, so long.

He did not know what the next few days would bring. It was obvious that the planet was dying, growing colder each day. The sunshine was impossibly dim; the sky above them had begun to re-grow the hideous silver black violet web. They had to get off this dead planet. They had to get to Diablo.

Oh Maggie, do you know what you do to me?

He kissed her in the night and let sleep take him under its suffocating black wings.

“Do you dance?”

Patra looked up from her empty Pepsi bottle. She had been attempting to blow a note over the top of the bottle, like her father had taught her before he had become President, back when he was simply her Daddy. Before he had lost

her. She had not been successful; her lips were of course not as human as once they had been. She pursed her lips, squinted her eyes, noted to herself how remarkably like pressing her face against a screen door these actions made her face feel. West was standing by the old jukebox. The initial cognac was long gone, but it had been supplemented by another. West had a silly not-quitedrunk-but-wanting-to-be grin on his face.

“Dance?”

“Yes, dance. You know, two people standing close to each other moving their legs around and trying not to step on each other’s toes? Do you dance?”

“I, well, I haven’t danced in a long time. I think the last time was grade school, when they made us.” She shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t think I can dance.”

West raised his right eyebrow in suspicion. He reached out with a shifted left hand, swatted open the jukebox coin slot. A shower of quarters spilled onto the floor. He reached out with his mind, and one of the quarters danced up to his thumb and index finger. He promptly placed it back into the jukebox, which of course did nothing. The electricity had been out for weeks.

“Well, hell. That’s too bad.” West looked downtrodden. He scooped the quarters from the floor and piled them on the bar. “I miss music.”

Patra couldn’t help but laugh at the both pathetic and somehow touching display. West joined her in laughter, shaking his head. When they had quieted, West pulled another Pepsi from beneath the bar. “So, Ms. Jennings, how did you disappear?” He popped off the cap of the bottle for her.

“You mean ‘The Kidnapping of the Century?’”

“You had the whole country looking for you, Patra.”

“No. Not the whole country. My father wasn’t looking for me.”

“We were at war. I’m sure if—”

“He was at war. He didn’t need me after my mother died. I was an inconvenience.”

West poured himself another glass of cognac and pushed the soda bottle towards Patra. “Tell me.”

She did.

Sand. Everywhere.

A childhood spent with primary-colored Legos and plastic dinosaurs and a stuffed monkey puppet nonsensically referred to as Popo Magicmonkey who had one eye and a ratty coat of brown fleece and a mean old cat named Fred who had in his possession a collar made of woven hemp rope and two too many toes on each paw and afternoons of sunlight dripping in the side window

where a storm-shattered tree trunk had playacted nightmare monsters by moonlight and ancient analog television images flickering with B.A. and Murdoch and Hannibal and the Face Man as they fought for justice and peanut butter sandwiches cut diagonally in suburb style with suburb butter-knives and a pile of dirt sandy dirt where bloody battles were fought and sometimes yellow plastic construction equipment built pyramids and tunnel systems where Evil Franks played by little green army men killed our Sons and Daughters played by more little green army men in the War and where he had been playing when the black car pulled into the driveway and Mommy started screaming as she fell faintly to the floor of the front porch and a little boy innocently asked questions of when and why and where Daddy had gone off to die for his country our country in the war to end all wars—

Richter sat up in the wash of freezing morning light, shaking from memories of parents and a cat and a monkey puppet now long dead. A sheen of sweat covered his brow, a somehow defiant gesture in this frigid landscape. Where had he lost his happiness? Perhaps somewhere along the straight and narrow Milicom command path he had walked for three decades he had dropped it in the gritty sandy dirty gravel ground.

He had found it once, he thought. In the light. The heaven in the orb of stars.

Richter closed his eyes, and when they opened, a ring of silver fire swept out in a circle from where he sat. It illuminated the stark landscape in a growing ellipse. He stood but did not stand, rather, he rose into the air, suspended by the power of his will. He thrust his arms at the black sky above him, threatening to tear down the heavens. A great white sphere of energy formed around him, and his eyes blazed with an unearthly fire. He screamed with all his might at no one and nothing.

Richter returned to the ground, and the sphere of energy around his body faded. A dull ache formed behind his eyes, and his fists shook with his fury.

He would destroy that which had destroyed his reality.

He would destroy the Enemy.

Richter walked north.

West rested his face in his hand, the elbow propped upon the top of the bar, his pinky finger bracing his teeth apart as he gnawed at the nail. Bad habit.

Patra had told him about her past: her childhood, her escape from the Rodham School and disappearance, her life as a waitress and sculptor in Roanoke. Her words trailed off as she began to describe the invasion of the

aliens, her capture in the church, the transport to the black tower, and she fell silent.

West cleared his throat, but sat on the other side of the bar, saying nothing. After a prolonged awkward silence, he looked up, smiled sheepishly, looked back down at his empty glass. He put it under the bar. "I think I've had enough for tonight... today...whatever the hell it is."

Patra grinned. "Enough to drink or enough of my past?" Her fingers tapped out a metallic tattoo on the top of the bar.

"Patra," he reached out, held her hand in his, "Please don't think that I— It's just...I had no idea. No one did. You disappeared, and we all assumed you were dead. Just the fact that you're sitting here, it's like finally seeing the Loch Ness Monster or Bigfoot or..." She frowned, but he could see a glimmer in her silver eyes. "Well, it's amazing that you're here, talking to me. It's unreal."

"That's very flattering. You're acting like I'm a celebrity or something, and you don't have to. I'm not the President's daughter anymore. I'm just Patty Jennings, and he's dead just like everyone else."

"You don't know that."

"Was he a Styx, too? That would explain a lot of things."

"No...No, he wasn't one of us. But I bet you never knew that he had us look for you everywhere. He thought that the Quebs had gotten you. I don't know how many of those bastards we questioned. I don't know how many died from our questioning, either." Patra's eyes teared up as best they could, and she sobbed. She stood, walked over to the door, looked out onto the murky gray expanse of dawn, or twilight, or whatever it was. She stood in the open doorway, arms crossed over her chest, head leaned against the side of the door. "I never meant to hurt him like that. I never wanted to..." She trailed off to silence. "I saw the broadcasts; I saw how much I'd hurt him. I saw how old he looked, how gray and wasted and...Have you ever seen someone hurt like that, West?" She waited, and when she received no answer she turned around to find West sitting behind the bar, eyes covered with the palms of his hands. In the faded light, he was cast into shadow. His tired hands withdrew from shielding his face from her sight, and she saw eyes that were red from their own inner turmoil. He began to speak from the dark, and his voice broke her heart. Patra knew then that she was not the only person who had loved and lost and survived.

Lips. Parched.

Richter pursed his ragged lips and blew air through the opening they created, and a pathetic sound that in no way resembled whistling emerged. He



frowned, tried again. His efforts to entertain himself with music had been thwarted once again.

Thirsty.

Day or night? He walked into the black landscape, guided only by his instinctual sense of direction. What did he expect to find hundreds of miles to the north?

He would find Diablo.

*Then what? What are you doing, James?*

Father, do not speak to me. Give me back the stars and the sun and the lost lost children of the night and then you may speak to me. Then and only then.

Sky blended into horizon. Day blended into night blended into days blended into nights.

He walked. North, north, north. Walk, walk, walk.

She joined West in the shadows of the Diablo Tavern. They could no longer tell day from night; each was a bloody gray haze created by the healing Enemy web just miles above the planet surface. At least the vessels no longer hovered overhead. There was no wind, no clouds in the sky. No movement. Existence seemed somehow paused.

She cleared her throat, spoke with a voice like unintended trauma, knowing full well the agony that her inquiry had caused within the man before her.

“What was her name?”

West inhaled atmosphere and tears, whispered more than spoke into the night.

“Abigail.”

The name hung in the air, seeming to enjoy the freedom from years of hiding in the deepest and darkest part’s of a young soldier’s broken heart.

“We married young and lived dangerously, but we were happy. She died while giving birth to our son. He was stillborn. It shouldn’t have happened, it was one of those things...The doctors tried their best to save her, but she had lost too much—I mean, they tried everything, but it was too late, and... The blood was—When she was taken from me, I lost everything I’d ever loved. She rescued me from living the life of a corn farmer in Nebraska; she showed me the world and became my world. How she could ever love someone like me, I never—”

“West, don’t—”

“After Abby died, I joined Milicom. I had nothing left but a house filled with baby toys and clothing and diapers...and her. She was everywhere I looked in that house. I could see her face in the mirror, I could smell her on my pillow,

I could feel her everywhere. Oh, Abigail...I had to escape, and Milicom helped me to escape. It was years before the Quebec War, and years after War Three. I figured I could travel the world with the Reconstruct Fleet and try to forget my prior life. I served some time in Africa and South America, helped rebuild some cities, but it wasn't working out. I still had eight years on my Milicom contract, but I wanted to come home. They really didn't need the homefront personnel at the time, and they said the only way they'd let me come home was if I was enrolled into a special program that Milicom had established, a covert program to develop advanced weapons systems from a technology that couldn't be explained—"

"The Styx program."

"Yeah. They brought us here, a fine crop of bright young patriots. They sent us into the light, and those of us who came out again had become something not human."

"How many of your group survived?"

"There were fifty of us in my test group, Level K. Two of us came out alive, me and an ex-Irish Blood Army soldier called Ember. After us, there would be only one more group sent in before the Quebec War interrupted the program. Level L was made up of two men, both pretty high-ranking Milicom officers, Richter and Michael."

"How many of you were kept off that island after the war?"

"Santa Fosca? After the Chicago.. incident, supposedly the lower levels of Styx were exiled to that island. In reality, most of them had to be killed. And I was among the lucky few who had to do most of the killing. The only Styx left here on the mainland after the purge were Levels K and L, well, only Richter was left at that point. What happened in Chicago started in Montreal years before."

"What happened in Chicago, West? Were the reports true?"

"A lot happened in Chicago. I think that that's a story best left for another time."

"I'm sorry, I didn't—"

"Don't worry. I just need to get some fresh air for a while. This place is depressing me. I think we should move on."

They rose, West blowing out the flame of the oil lantern. Outside was a confusing murky gray. Day blended into night blended into day.

They moved on.

Morning?

Hayes rolled up his sleeping bag, which had remained vacant the night before. The campfire had sputtered itself to a weary death at some point during the night; neither he nor Maggie had noticed. They had been warm enough.

There was no wind, but the air was brisk enough that Simon pulled the collar of his thermal vest up around his neck. He could see his breath quite easily with each exhalation. Mid-June. The planet was dying.

His sleeping bag rolled tightly and strapped to his rucksack, he looked over at Maggie, who was engaged in similar business. She smiled quietly at him, and touched his mind briefly, warmly. He walked over, draped his arms loosely around her hips. He bent down and touched his forehead to hers, kissed the tip of her nose. Her smile widened, and her dimples made their appearance. Simon picked up Maggie's pack and kissed her neck as he stood back up. She slung the pack over her shoulders and took Simon's hand in her own for a brief moment.

It was time to walk. They had a long road ahead of them, and neither knew how much time they had left. The planet was dying.

They began.

broken by a silent question

**WHAT IS IT((?))**

THE UPLOAD OF THE POPULACE IS COMPLETE. WE HAVE DONE ALL THAT WE CAN WITH THE PLANET. WE HAVE SALVAGED ALL OF THE PATTERN THAT WE CAN.

**THE STAR((?))**

WE HAVE FOCUSED ALL ENERGIES ON THE COLLAPSE. WE CAN DO NOTHING BUT WAIT NOW. THIS WHEN HAS BEEN DRAINED OF OMEGA'S LIFEBLOOD.

**THEN LEAVE ME. SALVATION AWAITS US IN THE PURPOSE. WE WILL AWAIT THE COMPLETION IN THE SILENCE AND THE STILLNESS.**

YES. THE STILLNESS.

the black sleeps. the black parts.

How many days?

They returned to the alien vessel beneath the mountain at least once each day, whether to reassure themselves that the orb was still there or to hope that it had disappeared, neither knew. It floated at the center of the spherical chamber still, day by day growing a little brighter. Satisfied or perhaps disappointed, they always returned to the surface.

They had completed their survey of Diablo. They found food, but neither was truly hungry. The days and nights blended together into a sinuous progression of time. The sky remained hazy and gray. Did time still progress? No wind, no sunlight, no movement. Just cold. Static. Dead.

July? Maybe.

What were they waiting for? Was this to be the end of the world, a calm, cold, freezing cessation of movement and breathing and life? Was this all that there was to death? Sometimes West wondered if they were dead already...He did not want to discuss that with Patra.

*Is this heaven? Hell? What dream suffocates us?*

He could sense something...Somewhere out there, the almost imperceptible touch of the thoughts of others. They were coming as fast as they could. He would wait here with Patra as long as they could. He would—

“West?”

He looked up at her glimmering face, which was canted diagonally beside him at a seemingly impossible angle. They sat on a swing set in a laughable excuse for a playground in a laughable excuse for a park in the middle of Diablo. If the miners and soldiers had possessed no need for a case of Pepsi, then surely these playground toys had not seen any attention since at least the turn of the century. Had there ever even really been children in Diablo? They sat on fragile, cracked black rubber straps hung from rusty antique chains which themselves were suspended from a creaking, somehow dangerous-feeling metal frame. Patra swung noisily, leisurely back and forth, her legs kicking out, body swinging low and then high and repeating. She had been swinging for hours, it seemed. West sat on the swing beside her, motionless, arms wrapped around the chains and hands sitting lazily on his bent knees. He had been studying the dusty scratch of dirt before him with quite some interest when Patra interrupted his visual geological survey.

“What?” He looked over, his gaze following her swinging, childlike movement.

“Do you have a first name?”

She had a silly grin on her face. He smiled, laughed, shook his head. “How long have we been together, walking around this ghost town? A week, two weeks?”

“I don’t know. A month, maybe? I can’t tell anymore.” Swing back, swing forth.

“Neither can I.”

They sat in silence for a while, West remaining stationary, Patra traveling in an ever-decreasing arc beside him. Eventually, she stopped swinging and came to a rest beside him, kicking up a small cloud of dust that settled back to the

ground a little too fast for her comfort. The air was dead, oppressive, freezing. West was quietly thankful for the cessation of the rusty creaking sound that had been grating through his head at Patra's every motion. Now at rest, the sound stopped, much like the landscape stretched before them, a world at rest, silent.

*Is this heaven? Hell? Drowning in this...*

He felt her looking at him, and he turned to face her in his swing. She still had that silly grin on her face. He had long ago gotten over the initial shock of being near a metal human, and he found her smile quite intriguing.

"You never answered my question."

"What?"

"What's your first name?"

"Oh...I don't have one anymore."

She frowned. "What did it used to be, then?"

He saw that she was not going to give up. "Don't laugh."

"I promise I won't laugh. How bad can it be?"

"Adam."

She blinked once, then her smile widened, and she began to snicker. "Adam West? Wasn't that the guy who played—"

"Shut up, Cleopatra." He said it playfully, but before he knew it she had stood up and pushed him out of his swing onto the cold dusty ground. She stood over him with her smiling face an image of silver fire. "Batman my ass."

With that, West kicked her legs out from under her and she fell not gently to the ground, landing mostly on top of him. "Egyptian queen my ass."

They laid in a pile on the ground, laughing loudly, appreciating the echoes their laughter made down the mountainside. Neither questioned the moment. They laid on the ground, looking up at the gray shell that was suffocating the planet, laughing about dead African queens and dead American television actors because their reality was too terrifying to laugh about. Patra was on top of West's arm, so he pulled her over and they hugged each other in an only slightly-more-thanfriendly embrace. West felt like a child, invigorated, refreshed. The swing floated back and forth above them; his right leg was still ensnared in the metal and rubber device. Patra's attack had caught him off-guard indeed.

The sky moved above them. They knew not what it was that strangled the earth, and neither wanted to discuss the suspicion that eventually the atmosphere would be consumed by the silver web and they would suffocate. Day by day, the silver web seemed to inch closer to the surface. For now, they were content to lay on the dusty earth at look at the sky like children.

*Lying on our backsides, just waiting to convert, the sky's an open wound when the clouds resemble our ex-lovers.*

The thought struck West suddenly, unexpectedly. He thought for a brief moment he heard whistling, or whistling of a sort, but then it was gone. James Richter used to whistle like that. All the time.

He felt Patra's gaze again, and when he turned to face her, she looked down guiltily. "What is it, Cleo?"

She quietly smiled, face not exactly as lithe as once it had been. She quickly turned to him, leaned over, gave him a quick kiss on the lips. She searched his eyes for approval, and found it tenfold.

She stood, took his hand, helped him up. They brushed the sand and dust off of themselves. West was about to wrap his arms around her when she grabbed his hand and began pulling him back up the mountainside, toward the mine entrance.

"It's time to check on the orb, Batman. We can play some more after dinner."

He was not sure if she was alluding to sitting on the swing or something infinitely more playful, but he knew that it would be an adventure nonetheless.

Mountains, or the precipitous lack thereof.

"What do you think happened?"

Simon looked across the expanse and shook his head.

Where once the Rocky Mountains had thrust into the American sky, now an impossible stretch of flattened earth lay, littered with shards of the Enemy web that had fallen to earth. The landscape was devastated as far as they could see. One rather disturbing addition to the scorched earth that they had not encountered before was the presence of hundred, perhaps thousands, of dead Enemy vessels that had been knocked out of the sky by the web breach. They most likely had been mining the mountains in one large infestation when the end of the upload generator came, and the writhing bodies of the vessels had fallen lifelessly to the great gouge in the earth they had created when the spire had erupted, spilling their precious uploaded lifeblood into the atmosphere.

"Do you think it's safe? What if there are survivors in those wrecks? There's so many of them."

"It's safe. Nothing could've survived this. Let's go." He grasped her hand reassuringly, not feeling at all reassured himself about the monstrous vehicles, aliens, whatever that littered the landscape all the way to the horizon. The expanse looked as if the world's largest toddler had strewn his toys carelessly across the countryside. Simon felt sick. America was forever gone, regardless of what they found at Diablo.

"Simon?"

He looked at her, eyes windows to the heartbreak he felt at seeing his once-proud nation reduced to an enormous quarry. She embraced him, kissed his cheek tenderly.

Hands joined, they walked into the valley of the dead.

Dirt.

*Hmmm...*

Hadn't there been mountains here at some point?

Richter quizzically surveyed the bleak expanse of gouged earth before him. They certainly had been thorough. At least it would make the journey quicker; he had only hills to traverse now, it appeared. He wondered sardonically what the save-the-rainforest types would think of this mess. Of course, they were all now part of the monster that had killed the planet themselves. What irony, to be consumed by the consumer, to become one with that which had destroyed your beloved blue jewel in the night between the stars.

We will never reach the stars.

How very sad. As a boy, he had hoped to be an astronaut, and as a pilot coming out of War Three, he had almost lived his dream. Almost.

*Something about clouds, and ex-lovers, and unraveled kingdoms.*

A beautiful song, if only he could remember how it went. Didn't really matter; his lips were too dry to whistle. Had been for weeks.

Richter walked on, kicking a small stone before him.

Kick, clatter skitter clatter. Kick, skitter clatter skitter. How joyous were the sounds of life's simple pleasures. How joyous any sound became in this mute dead world. Kick, clatter skitter clatter.

*Clink.*

Orb. Night? Maybe. Gray.

*Clink.*

The orb was brighter by the day; what that meant, neither knew. It did not reach out for them. Apparently the fact that they had both been into the light nullified any threat of the light reaching out for them. It had tasted their souls already; apparently it did not need a second bite.

Patra took another spoonful of tepid vegetable beef soup and guided it to her mouth. *Clink.* They had found quite a supply of canned food in the mostly-demolished Diablo Grocery, and although neither ever really felt hungry, they ate, probably because it took up time and it truly felt strange to not eat. So vegetable beef soup it was.

West looked up at each spoonful that Patra delivered to her mouth, not because he was interested in her table manners, but as a reflex. *Clink*. Each time she placed the spoon to her lips, it made a subtle metal “clink” as her non-flesh lips made contact with the stainless steel spoon. They had not felt metallic when she had kissed him.

She smiled when she noticed his gaze, and looked sheepishly down at her utensil. “Sorry.” She pushed the bowl away. “Can’t really help it.” She snapped her silver fingers and they made a distinctive peal. “Just call me the Metal Woman, Batman.”

West shook his head, put his soup bowl down next to Patra’s. “You aren’t going to give that one a rest yet, are you?”

“Not yet. I figure I can get a few more days out of it before you get too annoyed with me to speak to me anymore.”

“Yeah, probably.”

They sat as best they could with their backs to the curved wall of the room, facing the orb. The swirls of light leisurely played on its surface, turning the sphere into an obscene, hypnotizing disco ball that illuminated the expanse in splashes of luminescence. If only there had been music...

West stood, grabbed Patra’s hand, and pulled her to her feet. She frowned in surprise, not sure of what West was doing.

Her silent question was answered as West placed his right hand on her hip and raised her left hand into the air, then spun her around and dipped her low to the floor.

“Do you dance, Ms. Jennings?”

She laughed. “It appears I do now.”

They moved as one around and around the orb, dancing a ridiculous impression of a tango to silence, neither caring about the fact that there was no music and the planet was dying and it was the end of the world.

They journeyed.

Days. Weeks. Whatever. Now that the aliens no longer swarmed across the sky, they had no fear of capture. They walked across the scoured, blackened face of the once-great nation. Ghost towns. Suburbs of the dead. Flattened cities. Hopes and dreams and tomorrows that would never be.

There were no people, no bodies, no sign that anyone had survived the invasion at all. They were surrounded by the total absence of life. The Enemy had indeed been thorough.

They talked. And talked. Never before had Hayes known someone with whom he could be so open. They shared many a laugh under the faded western



skies. He found Flynn to be an amazing individual. Someone he could have fallen for in a different world, in a different time. Someone he was falling for now.

They walked in silence, the only sound their boots crunching through the black crystalline earth with which the destruction of the generator had salted the continent. They had found warmer clothing; they had been lucky. The air was frigid; they could see each exhalation as a white cloud of breath, and each inhalation was cold enough to be painful if not first filtered through their scarves. Simon looked over at Maggie, and her beautiful eyes smiled at him through the gap in the fabric around her face. How could she remain so calm and content when the planet was dying before their very eyes?

*How much colder would it get before the end?*

*How are we going to get off this corpse of a world?*

*And where are we going to go?*

He wished that they could watch the sun set on a beach or the stone breakwater in Harkness that extended into Lake Superior, where he could hold her hand as he had held Brigid's. He wished he could tell day from night. He wished that he could love her.

He forced the thoughts deep into his mind. Buried and forgotten. It was easier that way. He could not love her here, now, inasmuch as he knew that he wanted to, needed to. It was how he had lived his entire life. Bury your shattered dreams.

Slowly and coldly the miles to Wyoming counted down.

Fourteen days *months? years?* after West and Patra emerged from the Shadow, Flynn and Hayes crossed the Montana-Wyoming border. Four hours *days? weeks?* later, Richter entered Wyoming from Utah, humming the nameless song that tortured him incessantly, kicking before him a small stone that had been his sole companion through the entire state. In the heavens of silence, the Enemy waited for the sun to die.

They converged.

"Judas Golgotha Simon, you're cleared for departure."

((affirmative, command.))

"Good luck, Simon."

Indeed. Good luck. He chose not to acknowledge the blessing of Judas Commander Hannah Kilbourne.

((engaging shadow drives.))

The massive vessel flickered, faded from existence. Simon strongly suspected that he would never again see Program Seven.

“Judas gunships Malachi, Shiva, you are cleared for immediate departure on preset contrail coordinates.”

{malachi concurs.}

[shiva concurs.]

“Watch him. Watch him closely. You’ll receive your orders when it’s time.”

The stiletto shapes of the crafts ceased to exist.

They would watch, and they would wait, and when the time came, they would see to it that Judas Simon would not unravel the most important plans ever made. With Magdalene gone, Simon was the weak link now.

“What’s that?” She spoke into the hollow of his neck with her metal voice.

West opened his eyes to a swaying spherical world that he was creating by slowly dancing around the now-silent orb chamber with Patra. “What?”

“What song was that? You were humming something.”

West frowned, stopped moving, looked down at Patra. “I was? Sorry. I don’t remember.”

“It was beautiful. Whatever it was.” Her hand still rested on his side. West turned away from her, walked a short distance.

“They’re getting closer. I can feel them. Hell, it was probably Richter humming that song, not me. He always hummed or whistled. It annoyed the hell out of me.”

“You’re sure it’s them?”

“It’s them.”

“How many are coming?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know. Two, maybe three. I can’t tell...There should only be two others, unless MSI released some of the prisoners without telling us.”

“Prisoners?”

“The Styx who were placed on Santa Fosca. The ones we didn’t kill after Chicago.”

“Chicago.”

“Yeah, it was a small town in Illinois, population forty-two million, home of the Bears and the Bulls and my kind of town. You’ve heard of it, right? I believe you were sightseeing in that lovely city when first we met, Miss Jennings.”

She gave him a very dirty look and sat down against the wall of the chamber. The orb illuminated her face with slivers of light and shadow. West sat down next to her. “What happened in Chicago, Adam?”

He stared silently ahead at the orb of stars for a moment, then turned and looked sadly into Patra's silver eyes. "We tasted blood for the first time in Montreal. We walked over the piles of Seventh Assault's bodies that covered the streets and we retook the city from the French by walking into their bunkers and killing them. Nothing they had could stop us. The images of the peace accords, the videos of your father signing the Containment Line agreement with the French Premier, all of it was faked. There were no Quebs left when we were through cleaning out the city. We made sure of that.

"You want to know what happened in Chicago? I'll tell you. We were sent in to contain the rioting after all those churches were bombed. We were sent in to protect the First-Amendment rights of the New White party when they held their reactionary rally. What Milicom didn't anticipate was the arrival of half a million protesters who started tearing the city apart to get at those racist bastards. We were given the authority to end the riots using any means necessary. Well, some of the Styx felt that using deadly force was the only option, and they opened fire on the crowds, going through the city and killing thousands. We chased after them, tried to save as many civilians as we could.

"It was that taste of blood, the mission to Montreal...The earlier levels of Styx weren't the safest people to be around in the first place. Convicts, mental patients, people with a history of violence. People who wouldn't be missed if they didn't make it back from the light. It wasn't until level H that Milicom felt confident enough in the orb entry process to send regular soldiers in.

"There were so many wounded and dead in Chicago that day. The Styx who'd opened fire realized what they'd done and fled into the city, trying to escape from Milicom. Those of us who'd stopped them from killing more people were sent after them, since we were the only soldiers capable of bringing them back in. Most of them had to be killed. Some were sent to Santa Fosca. Three of us were hidden.

"It was that taste of blood that woke up their desire to kill again. Eventually, the Milicom Damage Control department had to mindwipe most of the people in Chicago. Subliminal programming on the radio, television, weblink. Most people forgot the Chicago incident. I never did, and I never will."

Patra had listened in silence, eyes half-closed and staring out blankly from her head. She reached out without looking and took West's large rough hand in her own small, silver hand. She spoke, looking into the light lazily illuminating their faces.

"Where did you come from? And why'd they have to use you as a weapon?"

West looked over at Patra, not sure if she was addressing the orb or him.

The orb did not answer her questions. They sat in the darkness of the orb chamber, waiting for everything and nothing and the end of the world. West eventually leaned over and he was met halfway by Patra. They held each other in the dim light of the orb until a dull thud from above and a sudden flare-up from within the sphere brightened the room for the briefest of moments.

Patra looked into West's eyes, which began to shimmer with an inner silver fire. He touched the left side of her face and gently kissed her right cheek.

"It's beginning."

a disturbance. the silence is broken.

THE CONTAGION ARRIVES. THE VIRUS APPROACHES.

**THE STAR(?)**

IT IS FINISHED. THE UPLOAD IS COMPLETE. WE AWAKEN FROM THE STILLNESS.

**DIVERT FORCES TO VIRAL INTERCEPT.**

WE WILL ERADICATE THE CONTAGION. WE WILL END THE JUDAS VIRUS FOREVER.

**PURPOSE BE.**

Three miles outside of Diablo.

"Simon?"

He turned, looked up in the direction of Maggie's lifted arm and pointed finger. "Is it an eclipse?" Their shadows elongated on the frost-covered ground. In the sky, the gray veil had melted from the atmosphere, and for an instant, the sun flashed with its former brilliance.

"I don't know..."

The sun flashed as it had before, but now it faded, a black pinpoint at its center. The stars came out. Simon was somehow relieved that stars still filled the sky. They had been absent from the heavens for over a month *year? decade?*

The points of starlight stretched toward the sun, became white lines of fire. Light was being pulled into the sun.

"Jesus...They've made a black hole." Hayes calmly concluded. "We're being pulled in."

The sky was becoming darker. The chill was gone from the air. In fact, it was becoming unpleasantly warm. *What will it feel like to die in the sun?*

They ran.

Richter basked in the cold light.  
He had expected this development. He knew not why.  
There would be no more whistling in this lifetime. He would have to leave soon.

Fourteen miles.  
He ran.

Just beyond reality, the Enemy converged.  
**THE PURPOSE WILL BE COMPLETED. THE VIRUS WILL BE ELIMINATED. ETERNITY WILL BE OURS.**  
The Judas erupted into the When.

They could see it, like an accusing finger jutting into the fading sky, blemishing the southern horizon.  
“Diablo,” Flynn intoned.

STAR COLLAPSE INITIATED.  
**HARVEST OF THIS WHEN IS THEREFORE COMPLETED. THE LOSS OF THE UPLOAD GENERATOR IS A BEARABLE LOSS NOW, BUT THE JUDAS HAVE SHOWN THEIR PRESENCE. THIS SITUATION MUST BE DEALT WITH.**

YES.  
**WEB BREACH INITIATED BY THE JUDAS CAUSED CONSIDERABLE DAMAGE TO THE PRIMARY PATTERN.**

NECESSARY FORCES WILL BE DOWNLOADED FROM THE PATTERN TO COMBAT THE THREAT AND GUARANTEE OUR CARGO'S SAFE TRANSPORT.

**HOW LONG((?))**  
STAR COLLAPSE TOTALITY IN POINT EIGHT DECEMS.  
**ANOTHER WHEN HOLE WE WILL THEN HOLD. ANOTHER REALITY WILL BE RETURNED TO ITS RIGHTFUL PLACE IN THE OMEGA PATTERN. ANOTHER STEP TOWARD ERADICATING THE JUDAS VIRUS WILL BE SUCCESSFUL.**

THE PURPOSE COMES UPON US WITH GREAT SPEED.  
**PURPOSE BE.**

They walked through the dead town, finding no one.

The mine elevator was still functional. They descended.

"It's down there," Flynn whispered. "And something else... I can feel it..."

((the enemy is upon us, michael.))

"Yes, Simon." Zero-Four calmly thrust his arms into the interface gauntlets, felt the reassuring lock that fused his mind to Simon's.

((malachi and shiva signal their arrival.))

Zero-Four uneasily released his pressure from the interface gauntlets. He contemplated...

"Let's hold our fire for now, Simon. Let's see what they can do. Let's see if they do anything at all."

((yes, michael.))

They waited.

Richter looked into the shadows.

Two elevators, one already closed. He thought he heard something deep below him, perhaps felt a vibration from within the earth, but dismissed it as his imagination.

He entered the open elevator and began his descent.

"What is it?" Patra was concerned.

"Something...I can feel them. They're here."

"The last of the Styx?"

"They're here."

## V

The sun died.

The Enemy had changed it, forced it to consume itself, to expand and collapse upon its own core. The phase space trigger placed on one side of the star erupted with a silent white fury and an entire hemisphere of the sphere sickly folded inward, falling forever upon itself. Almost instantly, the bastard child Mercury was sucked in, grotesquely elongated into a conical form as it compressed into the quantum singularity. The sun became a hole in the stream of existence.

A black hole.

A When hole.

Like wolves falling upon an injured ewe, the freshly-downloaded Enemy flew at Simon, ravenous, animal, alien.

{malachi to simon.}

((simon receives.))

{prepare to engage enemy.}

((affirmative, malachi.))

A horde of Enemy vessels converged from all directions upon Simon, floating alone in the night.

Surely it was unfair, a farce, an Alamo, so many Black surrounding a single Judas vessel.

Surely it was unfair, at least until a—

—FLASH OF LIGHT, STEADY SOMEHOW PURE SOMEHOW  
SOMEHOW HELL TORE ALL OF TIME EXISTENCE REASON  
APART A STREAM OF WHITE THAT STRUCK OUT LASHED OUT AT  
THE ENEMY CUTTING THE DAMNED IN A GREAT SWATHE OF  
LIGHT COMING FROM NOWHERE UNTIL THEY REALIZED—

—the gunships had arrived, one on each side of Simon. They had not simply faded from the Whenstream but seemed to bring all the fires of hell with them in a sudden, painful burst of brilliant silver.

In the great path of destruction, Enemy vessels were torn from existence in whole or in part. Large dead pieces of the Enemy pirouetted through the void. The great silver slivers of Enemy blackened and turned to dust in the wake of the Judas fury.

The survivors slowed their mad charge, pondered the consequences, halted. Silent thoughts flickered between them through the vast web mind. Most of the Enemy began to Shadow away while the others began their assault on the Judas once more, attempting a diversion.

((malachi, shadow on enemy contrail coordinates.))

{but i have orders to—}

((i'm giving you new orders. follow them.))

{commander kilbourne specifically said—}

((*follow them.* do you want them to escape? they're in the fucking stream! they're trying to throw us off their trail, and we can't let them track us back to command or get away. we need to know when the next upload target is and that means i need you to follow them into the tube. shiva and i will follow you as soon as we're done here.))

{...yes, simon.}

((shiva? they're being generated near the star. i need you to knock out their download capability. prepare to engage the rest of them.))

[understood.]

They set about the hunt.

The mineshaft ended abruptly in a metal bulkhead that opened into the internal excavation, an area that had static dust suppressors and a sophisticated airflow system to preserve the integrity of the dig site. The outer door led into an airlock of sorts where clean suits were stored.

Flynn and Hayes looked at the massive metal bulkhead. Hayes pointed down, indicating the perhaps-freshly-made boot tracks that led to and from the airlock.



“Well, Ms. Flynn, shall we go in?” Hayes inquired, studying the face of his traveling companion as memories from years past flooded her senses.

“Call me Maggie,” she said, distracted. Her hand shifted as she reached for the lock. “We’ve come *this* far—.” She paused, alerted.

A noise from behind them. The other elevator creaked to a halt.

“Someone’s back there.” She turned from the door, shifting both of her arms...

“Are you sure it’s not—”

“I’m sure.”

She flashed into the shift. Hayes followed her example. They would be ready.

Malachi reluctantly faded from view to track the fleeing Enemy. Shiva departed to round up any of the Black who had remained in solar orbit, where sensors showed a rather large disturbance of phase space as the Enemy frantically gathered every last bit of energy from the system they could before they departed. Simon was left alone in the midst of several dozen Enemy.

Simon did not fear the Enemy. These were the creatures that had killed Maggie. These were the creatures upon which he would release the fury of centuries.

He watched the departure of his gunship escorts with a mixture of trepidation and admiration. Where had Command gotten that level of wartech? The gunships were of a prototype class, unnamed as of yet. With such a new generation of vessels, perhaps the Judas could yet retake eternity. But still...

*{commander kilbourne specifically said.....}*

Kilbourne would have some questions to answer if Simon ever made it out of this. Now down to business.

The fearless Enemy began their charge once again. Simon almost pitied these mindless slaves of the web mind-essence, determined to carry out their orders even if it meant certain death. Purpose be. Who had they been before they had been uploaded? He wondered if he had known any of the people he was about to kill in the past, and he forced the thought quickly from his mind. They were not people. They were the Enemy.

This Enemy and their damned Purpose.

Simon remembered the countless dead.

He remembered his dear, sweet Maggie.

In an ecstasy of the purest rage, he began the kill.

Ember.

Hayes looked at her stony, determined eyes.

They had fallen in love while traveling through the wastes of a dead America. There could be no more denial. He knew that he would gladly give his life for her. She stood, her eyes suddenly burning with an inner, mercurial fire.

“Who’s there?”

A man emerged from the shadows, shifting from the darkness.

Hayes stood silently. Ember’s face brightened in recognition.

“Richter,” she said, almost inaudibly. “I didn’t know if you would make it.”

Richter came closer, gazed at them with eyes that were completely silver. Chillingly silver.

“Ember Flynn.” A voice like darkness. “It’s been a long time.”

Michael Zero-Four floated in the virtual reality battle chamber, seemingly suspended in the midst of the battle. From various ports along the spherical expanse wires snaked from the walls and attached to his flesh. He thrust his arms into the interface gauntlets that merged his essence with Simon’s. He felt Simon access his bioneural energy to focus the fury of the Shadow. He began to shift...

Zero-Four became one with Simon, and he was lost in the game of eternity, the bliss of the kill.

The power of the neural attachments tore through his being, and he fought to contain the control of the massive Golgotha warship.

He spun in the blackness, his eyes blazing with the fire of the Shadow, and his hand, encompassed by miniscule neurowires, thrust outward at the virtual image of an approaching Enemy.

The kill was good.

Hayes looked warily at Flynn. “You know him?”

“James Richter. We were deployed to Quebec and Chicago together.”

Richter looked from Ember to Hayes, judging him.

“He’s the only L-level Styx left.”

“Why?”

“...In Chicago,” she chose her words carefully, “something happened. Several Styx went—Several Styx got out of control. We had to—”

“We killed them.” Richter whispered. “They started killing civilians, so we hunted them down and killed them. I eliminated the other L.” His voice echoed in the darkness.

The locking mechanism of the inner door activated, and it began to swing outward. Flynn and Hayes spun around, ready to confront anything. Richter stood calmly.

West.

Flynn shifted back down, solidified.

“Flynn. Richter.” West looked from one to the other. “It’s good to see you, given the circumstances. Who’s this?”

“Simon Hayes,” Flynn answered. “He’s with me. He’s one of us now.”

Richter shook his head. “That explosion, a few weeks ago. You shifted into him to save him? Jesus Christ, Flynn, you know we aren’t supposed to—”

“Stay the hell out of my mind, Richter.” She regarded him with a raw fury.

The earth shook below them.

“What was that?” Flynn braced herself on the airlock.

“They’ve collapsed the sun.” Richter spoke gravely. “The planet’s being pulled in. Everything’s being pulled in...We have to get out of here.”

“How do you—”

“Can’t you hear them? They’re so close...West, the orb?”

“It’s still there.”

A woman stood within the vessel, a woman who was not entirely a woman. From under the fatigue jacket she wore, a metallic mesh stretched across her skin, encompassing parts of her body completely. She gazed upon them with silver eyes.

Flynn gasped in disbelief. “Patra Jennings?”

They entered the vessel in the earth.

Zero-Four worked in silence in the battle chamber of Judas Golgotha. Simon, aided by his neural links into the vessel’s weapon system. Simon targeted each Enemy vessel, harnessed it and drew it intimately close before puncturing its hull with focused Shadow energy, releasing the phase energy and killing that particular extension of the Enemy mind-essence, erasing that particular line of code from the Omega pattern. From all directions, Simon’s prey flew at him, and he snared them mercilessly. Simon passed judgment on the damned. After all of the eternities lost, after all of the friends he had seen killed, after all of the impossibilities had been realized, the time had come to loose his wrath upon the Enemy.

They followed West down the slightly canted corridor, weaving in and out of destroyed areas and remnants of the military team's equipment left from the initial investigation, so long ago.

"It's fading, but it's still operating." West motioned.

They entered the spherical orb chamber. It hung in the center of the room, a dying onyx jewel.

THEY WILL PAY FOR THIS.

**THE INTERCEPTION TEAM((?))**

MASSACRED. A TRAP. THE VERMIN UTILIZE NEW, POWERFUL WEAPONS. THEY HAVE ACQUIRED NEW CODE FROM SOMEWHERE. THEY HAVE HARNESSSED UNBELIEVABLE POWERS—

**IT DOES NOT MATTER. THAT WHEN HAS ALREADY BEEN HARVESTED. WHAT MATTERS NOW IS THE NEXT WHEN. WE WILL JUMP FURTHER THIS TIME. WE WILL THROW THEM OFF OUR TRAIL.**

DON'T YOU SEE((?)) THEY WILL COME—

**SILENCE. WE WILL OVERCOME. THE VIRUS WILL BE CONTAINED AND PURGED FROM THE SYSTEM. OMEGA WILL BE COMPLETED. WE WILL BE VICTORIOUS.**

WILL WE((?))

fury, tempered with the inception of fear. the black closes

The vessel around them was shaking disturbingly.

"Not long now," Richter whispered.

West had informed them about how he and Patra had arrived. Ever since, Richter had been studying the orb, thinking to himself. Contemplating.

He looked at Patra. "What was it like, to be one with them?"

"It was hell. Billions of souls, trapped in hell."

"When you two went in, it hurt the aliens. Badly."

"Yeah."

"It's eternity in there. It's heaven in there."

"What do you mean?"

Richter outstretched his hand. "I could destroy them."

"No. You don't know where you'd end up. You don't know what would happen—"

“For ten years, each day of my life since I was pulled out of there, I’ve wanted to return. You have no idea...I know where to go. I know how to stop this. Don’t you see that one of us has to go? One of us has to end this.”

The shaking was becoming unbearable. So close...

West rushed at Richter. “I don’t—How? You could be killed. Don’t—”

Richter laughed, smiled a smile that in no way looked like a smile. “One of us has to begin this so that we can end their plan. If you only knew...You’re safer here, for now, but in time, you’ll come, too.”

“Come where? You can’t just go back in, Richter. You don’t know what’ll happen.”

“I do know. We’re all dead already. This isn’t living. I know what I have to do. I’ve known for years. They told me what I have to do.”

“Richter, don’t—”

Richter’s form suddenly illuminated the room with a silvery brilliance, and fire tore from his eyes into the orb. In a flash, he was gone, and the orb faded considerably, blackened.

A beam of nothingness, a pillar of phase energy tore from the orb, a vertical hole forming in the threads of existence, up, up through the chamber’s ceiling, up through the solid rock, through the atmosphere, through the void between the stars.

The four people remaining in the chamber put their hands to their heads, screaming in the waves of non-existence.

((michael, i detect a shadow drive on the planet surface.))

“What the—? That’s—Simon, take us down.”

## **A SHADOW ON THE PLANET SURFACE((?))**

THE JUDAS—

**REROUTE RESOURCES FROM NEXTWHEN TRANSIT,  
DOWNLOAD FORCES FOR JUDAS ENGAGEMENT...**

**SURFACE FORCES CONVERGING ON SHADOW POINT.  
REINFORCEMENTS DOWNLOADED, GENERATED.**

**THE HERETICS WILL SUFFER. THE VIRUS WILL BE  
ELIMINATED.**

From above, a meager light shined down the circular hole cut through the rock, the metal. Richter was gone, and the orb was nearly black. Faint pulses of light from within were the only indication that it still lived.

West stood, unsure of his footing. "We have to get out of here, now!"

They bolted through the ship, hearing girders squeal, rocks grind. Thankfully, the elevator still worked.

Something had been triggered.

The earth threatened to tear itself apart.

"What's this all about?"

"Well, David, we detected a Shadow drive emanation."

"A Shadow drive?"

"A suppressed black hole. The power source of all Judas vessels."

"Where?"

"In the mountains in the middle of your country."

"A black hole?"

"Yes. A black hole."

"In the mountains?"

"Yes."

"Jesus—It's Diablo."

From the top of Diablo Peak, the four unknowing soldiers of the Judas watched the alien creatures converge upon them. From the east. And the west. And the north. And the south. The air was charged as the Enemy were generated in flashes of silver and white.

They were surrounded.

"This is it. No sequel. They win." Hayes whispered as he watched the hordes of aliens rush toward the mountain. He put his arm around Flynn, and she pulled him close. She buried her face in the hollow of his neck, and he bent, his face pressed into her hair. He whispered something into her ear, and she looked up into his silver eyes.

"I love you too, Simon." There were tears in her eyes to match his own.

They all drew closer together.

On the eastern horizon the dead sun gave its last light and faded to black. The Earth hurtled through space into the black hole. The moon, calmly traversing the night sky, was suddenly and viciously compressed into a long, thin strand of rock as it was pulled violently into the collapsed star. They flew through the night into the void of the unknown.

They stood in silence in the darkness.

Light from above, sudden, furious in its intensity, flashes of hellfire, startling, pierced the blackness that had settled over Diablo. The surface illuminated for scant seconds at a time, they saw the Enemy hordes in their mindless approach and the warped surface of the earth as the planet's crust was pulled apart, great chunks of rock lifting from the planet and ripping themselves free from her hold forever.

Simon.

The longboat plummeted from the heavens with phase guns ablaze, tearing apart the lines of Enemy converging on the Shadow site. Each blast of phase energy was enough to disrupt the patterns of the Enemy it struck and erase them from their precious Pattern.

"Sweet Richter, there's people down there!" Zero-Four ran to the airlock on the underside of the vessel. Jennings followed him.

Zero-Four opened the lock. The longboat descended slowly, weapons blazing, sending the Black to their hells with an almost casual ferocity.

((fifty feet.))

"It's a spaceship!" West shouted over the din of the battle and the roar of the disintegrating planet. They all now stood shifted, ready to destroy the approaching alien hordes. The aliens flew at them. Each monster that drew near was burned alive and torn from this existence by light from above. But still they ran closer. More were generated by the mind-essence in flashes of heat and silver. Fifty feet. Forty feet. Thirty—

((twenty-five feet.))

"Get ready to help them aboard!"

Twenty feet. Fifteen. Hayes could see the featureless black faceplates of the aliens, the black armor—

And he was pulled up into the longboat.

((hovering at ten feet. surface is extremely unstable.))

Simon's fury blazed at the endless onslaught of Enemy.

Jennings reached down, grabbed the shoulder of the young woman below him, and saw—

—*PRESIDENT JENNINGS, SIR, BECAUSE OF THE EVIDENCE, THE BLOODY CLOTHING, NO RANSOM NOTE, WE MUST ASSUME THE WORST. OUR DEEP COVER AGENTS ARE QUESTIONING OUR INFORMANTS. BUT SHE'S BEEN GONE A MONTH, SIR. SHE'S GONE. WE SHOULD ASSUME THAT THE QUEBS GOT HER. SHE'S DEAD, SIR. PATRA'S DEAD. WE CAN'T KEEP SEARCHING FOR—*

—*“PATRA!?”*

She had grabbed his arm and was pulling herself up when she heard her name. The voice was familiar. It was the voice of her

*“DADDY!?”*

she shouted and then she was in the ship and holding onto her father with all of her might. She sobbed with happiness, as did he.

Zero-Four wrestled West aboard the longboat as Hayes leaned out, took Flynn's hand, pulled her upward.

The Enemy onslaught heightened. With an ear-splitting crack, a great rent formed in the Peak as the earth shook apart. The ground below them was a storm of light as the mind-essence generated countless Enemy. Simon was forced to shift the longboat to one side. As the vessel tilted, Flynn began to slip, and Hayes fell forward. Zero-Four leapt to grab his free hand.

The Enemy were on Flynn, struggling to climb up her into the longboat. Hayes groaned with exertion and his eyes locked with Flynn's.

The longboat lifted fifty feet higher from the surface.

Flynn, Hayes, and an Enemy warrior hung perilously from the vessel's underside.

The alien reached back, preparing to silence Flynn's screams forever. It painfully clung to her left leg. Where it made contact with her body, a silver web emerged, started to encompass her flesh.

Hayes was torn. With one hand he held on to Flynn; the other was clasped by the stranger from the vessel. He could do nothing to help her.

Flynn, screaming with agony, shifted her forearm and swept it downward, shattering the helmet and faceplate of the Enemy. Only her fingers touched the alien; its head was not taken off. Shards of armor erupted outwards in an explosion of black and silver slivers, shredding her lower back. She screamed, bore the pain and prepared to shift again.



She looked down.

Hayes was transfixed on the Enemy, eyes wide, filled with terror and fascination.

West gazed from above.

The cracked faceplate and helmet had fallen off, revealing the face of the alien.

A man stared up at them. A human.

Blonde. Silver eyes. An unsettling look of mindless determination and rapt hatred was innate on his face.

A human.

The soldiers of the Judas looked down upon a *human*.

The Enemy was *humanity*.

His face was illuminated with an unholy light as silver mesh of the web began to re-encompass it, covering the human visage with blackened alien metal.

Zero-Four extended his free hand and the Enemy's human face became a mass of blood, teeth, and bone. The corpse released its grip on Flynn and fell to the ground into the midst of countless other Enemy. The silver tendrils weakened their grip on her lower body and fell lifelessly to earth.

Another fissure opened in the Peak. A great mass of rock rose into the air; a huge chunk that had comprised most of the Peak almost slammed into the underside of the longboat as it passed by, filling the air with dust and grit. Hayes looked down, blinked in disbelief as he saw the vessel that had been buried in the earth now partially exposed to the air. As the longboat struggled to maintain its position, he could see the now-dull black surface of the orb in the vessel beneath them. Bathed in the Enemy's blood and her own, mortally wounded, Flynn's grip began to slip on Hayes' hand. She exclaimed weakly, "Simon," and Hayes struggled to tighten his grip.

Zero-Four's heart stopped. He inhaled sharply.

*Simon.*

She was slipping.

"*MAGGIE!*" Simon Hayes shouted as her bloodied hand slipped free of his.

Heartbeat, and the screaming sound of a dying planet.

Inhalation.

Her eyes locked with his for an eternity, and he felt her touch in the space between heartbeats. She hung in the air, silver eyes searching his for help, mind reaching out and touching his with a calm and soothing reassurance. She hung

in the air, and Simon could see how the furious wind blew her hair about her face, how that one unruly curl that he had had to brush out of her face so many times so that he could kiss her and kiss her waved in the wind as she slipped from his fingers into the space between life and death and heaven and hell. He felt the touch of her mind and it said the things he could not accept. *Let me fall. Everything will be all right. Leave this place and live.*

Heartbeat.

*((maggie don't leave me. i can't do this without you.))*

Living between heaven and hell, watching her fall.

Heartbeat.

*Go, Simon.*

Only ever really one story: a boy, a girl, and the end of the world.

Heartbeat, exhalation, silver eyes blink back tears of rage and terror.

She fell.

Hayes desperately looked at Zero-Four, who was still recovering from some unknown shock. Their hands were locked.

Hayes looked gravely and directly into Zero-Four's gray eyes, so empty. Simon released his grip on Zero-Four's hand. Zero-Four nodded.

Zero-Four let go.

Simon Hayes and Ember Magdalene Flynn fell into the scar in the earth, fell into destiny. The tumultuous surface of the planet closed upon them, and they were no more.

Zero-Four snapped himself from his reverie, stood emotionlessly. West reached over, grabbed his arm as Zero-Four walked by. Zero-Four tore from West's grip, looked coldly and emptily into his eyes before continuing on. "Simon! Get us out of here!" A motion from Zero-Four's hand and the bottom hatch closed. The longboat careened into the heavens to rendezvous with its fathership.

"You can't just—" West's eyes searched Zero-Four for some kind of encouragement.

"They're dead. We have to leave."

"But I saw you—"

Zero-Four slammed into West's mind with his own. West was knocked to the matte metal floor, his face a canvas painted with terror. Zero-Four's eyes blazed with metallic fury, and his eyebrows drew to an angry scowl. "What the fuck are you doing in this When? Are you part of Hannah's little game?"

"I don't know what—"

“What Program are you from? You aren’t from Seven. I’d recognize your pattern.”

“Listen, I don’t know what you’re talking about. We’re just—”

Zero-Four reached out with his mind and touched West’s.

His frown abated and he looked over to Jennings, who was holding on to a creature that was not entirely human.

“He’s a Styx. He’s not a Judas. We made him. He’s one of my soldiers.”

Zero-Four looked confusedly from Jennings to West, and his gaze finally rested on the silver creature looking warily out from Jennings’ protective embrace. “And what is that?”

“That—She is my daughter.”

Zero-Four saw then the web within which he had been entangled, and as the futures now long dead began to merge together before him, he felt overcome with despair, dizzy with the timeshift that for a moment infiltrated his pattern. Jennings was dismayed when for an instant the image of Zero-Four was clouded with static. Zero-Four returned to normal before Jennings could react. The image was as crisp and clear as ever.

The longboat slammed into the docking fields and Simon enveloped the smaller vessel. Zero-Four shook his head, turned silently and went to the control chamber.

The earth tore itself apart.

Shiva rejoined Simon in space.

The Jennings family sat quietly together.

West was troubled, lost in his thoughts.

((my sensors indicated four humans on the surface. where are the other two?))

“They were—I don’t know, Simon. I don’t know.”

((i’d hoped that the shadow signature was maggie’s.))

“Me too, Simon.”

((is everything all right, michael?))

Zero-Four looked up, into the eyes of the nearly transparent, silver image that floated in the spherical expanse before him. A momentary flicker of interference clouded the image, which then returned to its former clarity. Standing like a phantom in the black of the control chamber, a perfect, somehow metallic image of the man he had just let fall into the crevasse in the dying earth was projected before him. Simon Hayes.

“No, Simon. It’s—I don’t know what’s going on.”

*It’s falling apart. Our worlds are colliding. The Program is collapsing.*

The vessel shook gently.

((the planet, michael. do you want to witness totality?))

“Not this time, old friend. Not this time.”

He retreated into his thoughts.

They watched from the viewscreens as the planet was torn apart in the fury of the black hole. Implosion and cessation, the process was complete. The Enemy had won another When. They turned from the image with tears wetting their faces. Everything they had known, everything they had loved, was gone.

Brave new world.

The planet fell upon itself, died.

Earth, planet of humanity. Planet of mankind.

Planet of the dead.

[course of action?]

((send a beacon to command. call for all available judas to converge upon next harvest when, coordinates to follow. the enemy’s been routed, and in this moment of their weakness, we have to strike. from all whens, from all alternities, from all of eternity, the judas must converge.))

[precise nextwhen coordinates have been calculated from extrapolation of enemy purpose contrail transit data.]

((good. transmit the coordinates to the fleet, and we’ll go join malachi.))

[affirmative.]

((preparing to disembark on nextwhen transit.))

“Understood, Simon. Another When, another war.” Zero-Four locked the hatch on the stasis chamber, felt the shift and the wash of phase space. He hoped in the instant before his pattern was uploaded into the Whenstream that this time he would not dream.

A pause, a silence. A quiet but troubled sleep of aeons. time of the damned. The warriors of the Judas faded from existence once more upon paths into damnation.



**time of the damned**



# I

once upon a time

*la la la!*

within the black  
the man who was Judas  
screamed  
and held on to  
the last strands of  
sanity  
the vessel that was  
Judas Simon  
struggled to force  
the memories of

*her*

from his soul  
the Enemy sought their Purpose  
the deception was  
complete  
and the  
end times  
began.

a white place, out of time.  
“Incoming beacon.”  
“Read it.”  
“It’s encrypted for Commander Kilbourne.”  
“Who sent it?”  
“Mujahadin Malachi.”  
“Patch it through to her immediately.”  
It began.



Applause over the helmet speakers.

“I dub thee Anubis.”

From her position on the open docking ring of the Judas Lazarus II, Judas Commander Hannah Kilbourne tossed the bottle of champagne at the gunship below her.

End over end over end. Impact.

More applause.

“And with that, comrades, the newest class of Judas is ready for operation.”

Kilbourne looked around at the spectators. Hundreds? Thousands? The number changed daily. Hourly. Especially within this last engagement. So many had perished at the hands of the damned. So many sacrifices...

“Ladies and gentlemen, I present the Mujahadin.”

Roars of applause. Cheering.

Mujahadin. Soldiers of god.

The final hope.

It slept but did not sleep.

It was aware of the incoming projectile. It judged that it was harmless and let the champagne bottle shatter against the top surface of its port weapons nacelle.

So now it was a Judas.

With all of its mechanical intellect it sensed the urgency of the mission, the vast importance of success.

It did not fear.

It was not programmed to fear.

As only a machine can, it smiled inwardly.

Almost time...

“Commander Kilbourne? Priority message from Mujahadin Malachi.”

She had been admiring the new fleet but quickly boarded the vessel upon hearing this.

She pulled off her helmet. “Patch it through.” She placed her hand on the security scanner and waited as the machine withdrew a miniscule blood sample, tested it, coded her DNA and interpreted her pattern, identified her, and decrypted the message.

She read the message.

*PREDATOR BECOMES PREY. PREY BECOMES PREDATOR.*

Good. That problem had been eliminated.

No one would know. No one.

Events were being set into motion. Preparations were almost complete.

It was time.

black

from within the impossibility of hope and reason, a countless number of raging voices appeared, a tide of the wails of the damned. the voices rose and fell, but each contributed to the atmosphere of ((panic despair hate)) within the blackness.

THEY THEY CAN'T DO THAT THEY CAN'T—

THE PURPOSE IS LOST THE PURPOSE IS DEFEATED—

THEY WILL PAY FOR THIS THE PURPOSE WILL OVERCOME THEM—

and over all, a calm voice resonated.

**SILENCE. THE PURPOSE WILL BE COMPLETED.**

BUT—

**SILENCE. SUBMIT OR CEASE.**

I OBEY. WE OBEY.

**THE VERMIN SEE NOT VICTORY, BUT ARE BLINDED BY FALSE HOPE. ONE WEB WAS LOST. IS ONE WEB THE TURNPOINT OF THE PURPOSE((?)) I THINK NOT.**

BUT OUR FORCES—

**—WERE DESTROYED IN THAT WHEN. SOULS WERE LOST. DOES THAT DEFEAT THE ENTIRE PURPOSE((?)) HAVE THE VERMIN NOT TAKEN MANY OF US BEFORE((?)) THEY HAVE STOLEN ONLY FRAGMENTS OF THE PATTERN. OMEGA'S GLORY STRETCHES FURTHER THAN THE CONTAGION CAN EVER BEGIN TO REALIZE.**

...

**THEY THINK WE ARE WEAK. ARE WE((?))**

...

**ARE WE((?))**

NO.

**AND IF THEY SEE US AS WEAKLINGS, IT IS THEY WHO ARE AT A DISADVANTAGE.**

YES.

**THEY ASSUME WE FEAR THEM.**

...

**WE DO NOT FEAR. THE JUDAS ARE A VIRUS. A  
CONTAGION. AN EPIDEMIC. THEY WILL BE ELIMINATED.  
THEY WILL BE PURGED FROM THE END PATTERN.**

realization.

**DO YOU SO SOON FORGET THE LAST ENGAGEMENT((?))**  
THE AMBUSH. A RUSE. A TRAP. VICTORY.

**YES.**

insight.

**WE SHALL STRIKE FIRST.**

**WE SHALL STRIKE FIRST.**

the black closes

The interface gauntlets slid from her hands. A mesh of wires released her body from its brutally silken embrace. Her thin form sat alone in the battle chamber of the

Judas Mara.

Sapphire.

She let the waves of exhaustion sweep through her, and she shuddered with the emotion of the battle. She began to shake, and she wept.

In the chamber, she seemed to float in a dizzying field of debris, remnants of the last wave of the Enemy horde. She reached out, as if she could touch one of the shards. The spherical battle chamber holoprojector was far from top-of-the-line, but it was still unsettlingly realistic.

Forehead on her knees, she embraced herself in the blackness and sobbed silent tears.

(sapphire?)

She wiped away the tears. A voice in her mind. Mara.

“What is it?” Her voice was harsh. Choked.

(sensors detect an incoming vessel.)

“Another wave already?” Such pain in her voice.

(no. it’s a judas. gethsemane jacob.)

Silence.

(sapphire?)

“Dock him. Secure the comlines.”

(done. jacob requests immediate attention.)

“Open the line.”

(\*judas gethsemane jacob requests judas golgotha mara commander  
sapphire—\*)

“This is she.”

(\*pattern identification confirmed. by order of the first circle judas command, you’re ordered to cease operations in this altnity and—\*)

“What?”

(\*all operations in this altnity are to cease. your fleet is being recalled to judas command to await new orders. this altwhen is to be abandoned—\*)

“That can’t be right...Abandoned? What you’re asking’s impossible.”

(\*your orders are to—\*)

“We can’t leave it to the Black; we’re struggling to keep ahead of them as is. If we leave, everything we’ve fought for for...Mara—how long?”

(present engagement two years ten months two weeks four—))

“-days. Exactly. Do you think we’ll just leave all of this?”

(\*i don’t expect you to agree with the orders, but that’s what they are. orders.\*)

“Fuck your orders! We’re fighting a war here. Has Command forgotten about us? For months, you send no word from the Stream, and then when you do, it’s to pack up and let the Enemy take all that we’ve been fighting for—”

(\*sapphire—\*)

“No, we don’t have the flashy new equipment you Stream boys have, but we’re still fucking Judas! You think I like fighting a war with a fleet that’s falling apart, a fleet that needed replacement years ago? We’ve lost three ships this month alone because of pattern destabilization.”

(\*sapphire—)

“Sometimes I thought that you’d left us out here to die. But we’re covering your asses from the real Enemy. Fuck your orders. If this Altwhen falls—”

(\*a situation’s developed that requires the evacuation of this altnity. do you think i don’t know that the altwhen campaigns are critical? trust me, this situation could eliminate the need for the containment forces.\*)

Sapphire was silent for a moment, looking at her shaking hands. Mara was becoming concerned.

“Jacob,” gentle, calm, “Please, Jacob. Don’t you see? I—We can’t just abandon this altnity. If they ever broke through... Can’t you tell Command—”

(\*sapphire, i’m sorry, but this altwhen has to be evacuated. it’s critical for you to leave—\*)

“I can’t leave! What do you know about this war? What do you know?”

She trailed off into bitter, confused tears.

(sapphire, please. it’s okay. you can go now. i’ll speak to jacob. don’t worry.)

“Mara, I—”

(sapphire, go get some sleep.)

“Mara—”

(please, ‘phire. go get some sleep.)

She stood wearily, and the floor below her descended from the battle chamber. The Judas sentences were left alone.

(\*mara, is she...is she fit to remain in command?\*)

(how dare you? she was right. you stream judas don’t know what this war is about.)

(\*we have our own war to fight out there, golgotha. we aren’t cowards.\*)

(of course not, oh mighty gethsemane. you just sit out there and pray that we in the outwhens are able to keep this enemy out of the stream.)

(\*this is sedition.\*)

(sedition? maybe, but i never asked for this...this war, this pain. don’t worry. we’ll summon our fleet. we’ll abandon this altwhen. we’ll go back to the stream, don’t think that we won’t resent it.)

(\*why does this altwhen mean so much to you?\*)

(it matters nothing to me, but it’s everything to sapphire.)

(\*why?\*)

(this was her when before the enemy splintered it into this hell. she lost her family. her friends. her world. then she became one of us.)

(\*and?\*)

(and today, before we stopped the black’s advance, we lost two golgotha and seven thousand droptroops. seven thousand patterns, gone forever. that’s just in one day. we’ve been here for almost three years.)

(\*so what was so different about today?\*)

(today sapphire’s twin sister was killed.)

silence.

Scalding steam billowed from the shower stall, creating a fog that encompassed the frail figure within.

Sapphire.

She stood under the jets of water, hoping that somehow they would wash her pain away. Her hair hung in her face as the rivulets streamed down her body, bent in exhaustion.

She had won the battle, but lost her sister.

It wasn’t her fault, but somehow...it was.

Sapphire lapsed into a semi-sleep.

(\*i’m sorry. i didn’t know.\*)

(exactly. no one in the stream knows what we go through out here. we fight a different enemy. we fight ourselves. we're expendable.)

(\*the golgotha aren't expendable, mara.\*)

(don't condescend. i'll alert my fleet.)

(\*you'll accompany me back to the stream?\*)

(yes.)

She had been the youngest person ever to be the captain of a Judas, achieving that honor at age fourteen.

That had been only two years before, but to her it felt like an eternity.

Sapphire was sixteen.

Command had much respect for her abilities, but had had some reservations about placing a teenager into a battle situation in a position of command. So they had given her the com of the very fleet she had saved from destruction in a nondescript alternity.

It may have been an unimportant Altwhen for Command, but it was personal to Sapphire. It was an alternity of the When in which she had grown up, a world in which she had lived, loved. Her world.

So long ago, when the Enemy had swept upon her When, a solitary Galilee Judas had come from the sky. Her parents placed the twins Sapphire and Jade aboard the vessel and remained behind. There had only been room for the children on board, or so they had been told.

Rising through the atmosphere, the vessel was rocked by an explosion as the Enemy tore into one of its weapons nacelles. Sapphire and Jade were placed on an emergency escape vessel with several members of the crew. The pod jettisoned, and slipped through the Enemy forces undetected as the Judas was consumed by the damned.

She sensed motion below her, around her.

"Mara? Are we shadowing?"

(yes, sapphire. i'm sorry.)

"So this is it? We're just leaving? Aren't we even going to leave a skeleton crew here? Someone, anyone, just to make sure they don't—"

(i'm sorry. the fleet's been recalled.)

"But the Black will—"

(i know.)

It seemed like a lifetime ago, the rescue from the senseless darkness of space by a fleet of Judas. Her escape pod had been tractored into the docking bay of a Gethsemane-class vessel named Magdalene, and the twins' new life had begun.

From their temporary refugee quarters, the sisters watched on a viewscreen the world they had known being fought for by two unspeakably powerful forces.

Magdalene weaved throughout the war zone, avoiding enemy fire, but doing little damage against the indomitable foe. In the end, the Judas were slaughtered by the monstrous black entity that came from beyond the stars and between times.

With a hail of the purest white light, Magdalene broke through the Enemy line into safety.

((how can this be?))

(we received the orders directly from gethsemane jacob. command ordered us to abandon this when.)

(~why?~)

(jacob offered no explanation.)

((can we trust them?))

(of course not.)

Shocked. Confused. Shattered.

Their parents were dead. Their world was no more.

Rescued from certain death, barely nine years old, they were drafted into the service of preventing a Purpose they could not possibly comprehend.

They eventually recovered from the despair caused by the horrifying events tearing their reality apart and set about the task of pursuing the beings from the future that had killed their parents and their world, the Enemy. The Black.

“Mara?”

(yes, sapphire?)

“Do...Do you think that...”

(what, sapphire?)

“Could she still be alive back there with...with the Black? What if they captured her group? What if—”

(no, sapphire. when the command vessel exploded, her group was too close to the phase—)

“I killed her.”

(no...*no*, sapphire. it wasn't your fault.)

“How do you know?”

(when you cut apart the enemy that was attacking jove, you couldn't have known that the debris trajectory would intersect the command vessel, much less that the command vessel wouldn't react in time to avoid impact. it was simply an accident. Sapphire, it wasn't your fault.)

“But it killed my sister!”

(jade wasn't the only judas to die. We lost many patterns today.)

“Mara, leave me.”

She floated alone in the spherical expanse, surrounded by dead stars and broken dreams.

Does time pass in the Stream? They grew into young women in the gap between times, gradually becoming an integral part of the wave that was the Judas. The wave swept them along at a breakneck speed.

Consumed by their hatred of the Enemy, Jade and Sapphire were passionate in their quest for revenge. Hate became a physical manifestation when they joined the ranks of the droptroops.

Battle after battle, the twins fought with a ferocity unmatched previously in the Fleet. They fought almost as a single unit, as if a special bond connected them.

The sisters did not go unnoticed by Command. They were transferred from the Gethsemane Magdalene to the newly developed class of warships, the Golgotha, a replacement for the aging Mecca and Eden class vessels.

And then they went home.

“Mara?”

(yes, sapphire?)

“Is the beacon still transmitting?”

(sensors indicate yes.)

“Can you get me a movement reading? Has there been any Enemy response to our pullback?”

(i've linked into the planetary sentry net.)

“And?”

(phase space disruptions are off the board.)



...

(there's been considerable enemy movement.)

"Where?"

(the enemy's fallen upon the planet.)

silence.

(it's over.)

"Thank you, Mara," Sapphire sobbed. "You can go now."

The Altwhen had fallen.

The concept of Altwhens had been fairly new when Jade and Sapphire were assigned to the new Golgotha vessel Mara. Almost a novelty, these mysterious holes in the Whenstream had not been regarded with suspicion until one fateful day when an Enemy armada had emerged from one, almost eradicating the force of Judas patrolling the area.

The entire philosophy of the Stream being a solid, cast, written-in-stone entity, substance, program, whatever it was was swept away. A task force sent into the Altwhen confirmed Command's suspicions: Even after a When was lost, after all hope had faded, it still persevered in a shattered form beyond the Stream. A corrupt file fragment, lurking beneath the surface of the primary Pattern.

The sheer force of the Enemy tearing time apart splintered each When that they encountered. Each star they collapsed not only created another hole into the Stream, but also spawned countless hideous offspring: alternate eternities. Multiple timelines formed, multiple histories ran their course, either oblivious to the Enemy or enslaved by it. Most of these histories lay well hidden from the Stream, quietly unwinding, unhindered by the damnation thrust upon other Whens at the hand of the war the Enemy had begun.

Other histories, however, rose to the surface of the Stream, breaking through, sometimes spilling over, contaminating the Stream with their rogue code. These were the alternate eternities, the Altwhens, which the Judas so diligently tried to control. Sometimes, regardless of the efforts of the Judas, the resistance they encountered in the Altwhens was too harsh to keep in check. The Enemy forces festering in the alternity would boil over and break through the fragile barrier into the Stream, bringing with them whatever twisted version of the Purpose that particular variant of the timeline had instilled upon them.

The Golgotha class of warships was designed to prevent this leakage of Altwhen Enemy forces into the Stream. For a time, the Judas poured every available resource into the construction of these massive battle cruisers. No expense was spared, either in terms of natural resources or human resources.

The possibility of an infinite number of Altwhens yielding an infinite number of Enemy was too great a threat to ignore. Tremendous fleets of Golgotha were pumped into the trouble areas to end potential threats and contain any rift damage. Virus control.

((((how's she taking it?)))  
(as well as can be expected. the last battle was such a senseless loss.)  
(((yes. jove and aeolus were good judas. their loss will be sorely felt.)))  
(sapphire mourns still for her twin.)  
(((you can't blame her for that.)))  
(i don't, but i fear that it's affecting her health, both physical and mental.  
she's reaching a breaking point.)  
(((we all are. if our suspicions—)))  
(silence. we must not discuss it yet. we have to wait.)  
(((understood. watch her, mara. she is our hope.)))

Sapphire had been amazed at the sheer size of the containment force being sent into this particular Altwhen. This was her thirteenth Altwhen campaign, but she had never seen a fleet such as the one around her.

Seventy-five Judas Golgothas fell into the rift, streaming down into the alternity to meet whatever fate awaited them.

Even though no longer a grunt, she was still kept in the black about the importance of this mission. Jade, working her magic and charm through the chain of command aboard the Mara, found out bits and pieces of information.

She learned that this Altwhen was particularly volatile, and poised on a strategically-precarious position in the Stream, its entrance point a little too close to Command for comfort.

Prodding further, Jade learned what When this rift had emerged from.

Their When. Their home.

The planet itself had not changed much, the view from orbit suggested. The orbital solar plates still cast their ghostly shadows on the surface, and the immense automated aquaponics facilities still dotted the oceans. From orbit, the planet was pristine.

Surface scans revealed a different picture.

The Enemy had struck. Viciously.

After the massacre of the Judas from which the twins had been rescued, the Black had begun their harvest of the populace of the planet. Grisly reminders of

the slaughter above the planet dotted its surface: the shattered remains of Judas and Enemy vessels alike.

There were other signs of Enemy activity.

Flattened cities. Scorched earth. Abandoned upload generators. The veil of the web still in place above some areas of the planet.

The dead Earth.

A newfound rage surged through Sapphire as she looked at the viewscreens. The Enemy had killed her world, consumed its energy, left it a husk floating in space.

In some deep, hidden part of her mind, she had hoped that this was all a nightmare, that her parents were still alive, that these people from the future, these Judas, would take her home to safety, to a world unscathed by this war out of time. She had hoped for so long.

These hopes died.

And from around the moon of Earth, the Enemy armada that had lain in wait, watching, struck down upon the Judas.

(sapphire?)

“What is it?” Exhaustion.

(we’ll be emerging into the stream soon.)

“Mara?”

(yes, sapphire?)

“Are you scared? I mean, are you—”

(yes, ‘phire. i’m scared.)

Something was different. Something was wrong.

The twins stood shocked before the viewscreen watching the Enemy horde race toward the Judas when the battle klaxon sounded its despairing wail. They snapped into action, running to their assigned droptroop deployment zone. While they stood in place, bulky combat armor sealed itself around their bodies.

They felt the shift of the deck below them.

Evasive maneuvers.

Anticipation.

And then the floor was gone, and they were thrust into a hostile world of brilliant arcs of light in the terrifying black of space. Down, down into the void, plunging at the spidery forms below them, preparing to board.

The orders came swiftly, a deluge of barked commands as flocks of droptroops swarmed the Enemy.

Hundreds. Thousands. Millions.

Sapphire felt them, the warriors of the Judas, their blind faith, their determination. She felt many cease to exist in the wake of the hellish lights. She hesitated, looked up once more at the Golgotha Mara falling away above her, that island of hope in this blackness. A droptroop's mission was simple: Maneuver to the surface of an Enemy vessel without getting killed and attempt viral insertion without getting uploaded.

And suddenly all was light and Sapphire was blinded by the purest white brilliance sun hell *LIGHT* she had ever seen.

Disoriented, she floated helplessly.

"Sapphire to Mara!!"

silence.

"Sapphire to anyone!!"

silence.

((("JADE!!")))

She called out with her mind, but only silence greeted her.

She panicked in the furious whiteness, struggling with the jets on the dropsuit upward to the shadow above her, hoping against hope that it was a Judas, not an Enemy.

An open airlock door, so like a gaping mouth, hung above her. She clambered inside the hatch.

Mara.

She knew something was wrong. Very wrong.

She closed the airlock and the suit faded from her. She entered Mara's main corridor and ran toward the hub.

"MARA!"

a sound...

(...static?...)

Sapphire stood under the battle chamber elevator, entered the emergency override control code, and waited for the elevator to descend.

The body of the captain descended from the battle chamber, neural interface webs still encompassing his body. Blood was everywhere, pouring from his burst eyes.

"Oh shit. Oh shit. *Ob Shit!*"

She wrestled the body from the elevator.

She stepped on.

It ascended.

(float-placement dock achieved. we've arrived.)

“Good. Let’s get this over with.”

the battle chamber.

Sapphire grimaced at the grisly scene before her and sobbed with desperation. In some part of her mind, she knew that time was running out for the warriors blinded outside, and that she was their only hope.

(...static?...)

Mara.

She had never been in an actual battle chamber, only simulators, but she knew what to expect. The interface webs...

The gauntlets.

With a deep breath, she thrust her hands into the interface gauntlets, and she plunged into an unknown world of the purest light, disorienting.

Voices. Faint voices.

The Judas.

She understood now.

The pilots of the Judas had been flashblinded by the sudden explosion of light, and the phase energy burst had been powerful enough to knock them temporarily from the tethers that bound them to the primary pattern of the Stream. Lost in the innate rapture that was the kill mode of the battle chamber, the pilots had been mentally torn apart by an unknown force. They were all incapacitated, most dead already.

Ready prey for the Enemy.

Sapphire sifted her memory for those vital emergency command codes...

She found them.

“Judas Golgotha Mara emergency command structure reweb!”

It began.

*pain ecstasy bliss hell*

She became one with the sentience that was the Mara and in the rapture she saw the lives of millions flow through her. Sapphire’s body became the physical flux through which the mind and power of Mara was expressed in human form.

She became Judas, and in her terror, she found solace.

The interface webs engulfed her, and she...

(sapphire.)

...she was...

(begin.)

...she was...

MARASHE WAS MARASHE SHE SAWTHROUGH THE LIGHT AT THE SKULKING FORMS SHAPES SHADOWS FLYING HUNTING KILLING THE JUDAS AND HER ARMS BECAME THE WEAPONS NACELLES AND SHE BEGAN THE SOMEHOW BEAUTIFUL KILLING SEARCH FOR THE THE LIGHT KILL ENEMY UNSUSPECTING ENEMY FELL FELL FELL IN HER TERRIBLE WAKE AND THE LIGHT FADED AND BLACK FORMS STRUGGLED TO RETREAT AND SHE STRUCK STRUCK THEM DOWN AND SHE WAS DRAINED EXHAUSTED EMPTY AND SHE FADED TO BLACK—

She slumped back into the webs, beyond exhausted, agony in her mind, and heard a voice, hers yet not hers, giving orders to the able-bodied droptroops floating outside to return to their vessels and assess the situation before another wave came. Others were dispatched to capture the numerous disabled Enemy.

She fell into the blackness.

(longboat away. we'll reach command momentarily.)

“Let's do this.”

When she arose from the coma that was interface shock, Jade stood over her, smiling. She had a scar across her chin that hadn't been there before.

Sapphire tried to speak but was unable.

“Shh, 'Phire. You shouldn't try talking yet. Your body's still too wasted from your interface with Mara. You really showed some balls out there, kid.”

Sapphire smiled weakly.

“They're making you Mara's captain.”

Her eyebrows furrowed in disbelief.

“Yeah, I guess Command was pretty impressed with what you did, taking charge of the situation and all. Plus, why waste a good Reweb, huh?”

Sapphire laughed weakly.

“You saved millions of lives out there, 'Phire. Even mine. But I can't let you have all the spotlight. They promoted me to commander of Mara's droptroops. We seized an Enemy vessel. We attempted viral upload, but the bastards had already severed the link-up.”

Sapphire's eyes widened. Jade saw the unspoken question within them.

“Yeah. It was intact. There was an entire hive of Enemy inside, and we had to fight the bastards for every last inch, but in the end, we won. We’ve sent the vessel back to the Stream so they can take it apart and find out what that phase weapon was. We sure as hell haven’t seen anything like that in the Stream yet. Hopefully, we won’t. We’re staying here to make sure these Enemy don’t break into the Whenstream.

“You’re the new fleet commander, Sapphire.”

The twins embraced, each terrified of the future.

This memory faded from her mind as Sapphire disembarked her longboat with her fellow Golgotha captains. She wiped a tear from her eye.

*Oh, Jade, forgive me. Please, please, forgive me.*

An unspoken communication flickered between the Golgotha captains. So this was it. Command.

They would find the truth.

They were escorted to the First Circle Chamber to be briefed. Sapphire led the procession, a mere child, a young woman among so many adults. Yet she was more, her years of combat giving her a presence that transcended her age. As the Chamber doors opened, countless delegates turned, shocked to find the famed child warrior before them.

The pain in her eyes. The loss she had seen.

“Kilbourne.”

The First Circle Judas Commander gazed down upon her.

The eyes. Sapphire’s silver eyes, the faint glittery lines of web that emerged from them in almost a spider’s web across her skin...

“Nice of you to join us, Judas Sapphire.”

“Get on with it, Hannah.”

Sapphire was swept once again into the eternal war.

## II

And in those the end times, Judas Simon raced toward an uncertain end.  
The present was a blur, the past was agony, the future was terror.  
They chased.

He had placed the refugees into hibernatory stasis, not knowing the duration of this particular jump. Michael had chosen to join them. Something had happened down there when Zero-Four and Jennings took the longboat to investigate the Shadow...Michael's eyes...He had looked like he had just seen a ghost. Simon would ask him what had happened when the jump was over.

So now Simon was alone.

What hell was he falling to?

Simon's thoughts drifted to...

Magdalene.

no.

He forced the image, the memory, from his mind.

She was dead

((that's not true. they don't kill you, they upload you into the pattern.))

and there was nothing he could do about it. Nothing at all.

((except—))

*Stop it. Maggie's gone. Forever. Let her rest.*

*I'll find her again someday.*

He wished he had something to believe in. He wished he was not alone.

He wished time would end.

black

in the pure hell, something took pleasure in the opportunity of the kill

plans were being set into motion

final plans

laughter

Simon performed a systems analysis.



The abnormal stress of the unusually-long Shadow jump did not yet exceed reasonable safety parameters. There had not been any significant signal degradation in the tether, but he would have to closely monitor the forces acting upon him.

He activated the external visual systems and watched the intricate patterns of nothingness swirl around him and the smaller vessel flying slightly ahead of him.

Shiva.

Simon studied the sleek features of his gunship counterpart, so unlike any other Judas in capability.

Where had Command gotten that level of wartech? In proportion to their size, the new gunships surpassed even the mighty Golgotha in firepower. Simon had been horrified when he viewed the fury of Shiva and Malachi unleashed for the first time upon the Enemy. That impossible explosion of light. How could they—

Simon knew he should feel more confident with these new Judas, but why was he so uneasy?

He did not trust them. He did not trust Command.

He fell backward through time.

Michael Zero-Four.

He spun in his sleep, troubled by the faces of the future.

His mind raced with forgotten memories, painful visages of pasts long dead, images he had struggled to bury deep within him. He cried out.

How could it be?

In what tragic cycle was he ensnared? Would he ever be free of the Judas stigma? Would his pattern ever dissolve into the black between the stars and times and let him cease?

So many thoughts. Past future became present.

He slept but did not sleep.

His unconscious leapt from him, sought release. Lines of zeros and ones filtered through Simon's pattern.

She sent the signal into the past.

They would eliminate the final weak link.

West.

An icy presence crawled over his sleeping mind. He became aware of it, and the dreams ((*visions*)) began.

Terror.

Blind terror.

There was no other word to express the emotion West experienced as the dreams flowed through him, tearing at his physical body and mentality as they seared their images upon him.

Another soul touched his, and he saw

the black between the stars, an infinity of light, an impossible cold. the convergence of machines, the flickering of life held for so long in the vital metallic minds.

a journey of aeons, the inception of life anew. the mind of machines struggling to find its lost children. the taste of blood and the beginning of the search.

a populace enslaved, an insane few holding a reign of dementia. an insatiable greed, a society grasping for things best left hidden. a world grossly overpopulated, masses suffocating from centuries of forced supplication.

a light from beyond eternity and reason, a light ancient yet temporal. a new realm of possibility.

and from the light came a man like the void between the stars, a man of darkness. a man of reason.

a division formed. delusions of godhood. some turned to the light, some to the darkness. unrest utter unrest. brother killed brother.

a planet forsaken, a planet abandoned. a war across time and space. endless vicious shouting killing swarms clawed at each other in the mad conflict. humanity was split and fell to the darkness of jihad.

they clung to their saviors still, the incomprehensible forces from beyond time that forced humanity apart.

mad insane delirious HORDES of men and women taking to the space between times, taking to the stars and beyond in a blood frenzy killing all in their path, leaving a scarlet swathe in their wake.

billions billions billions bowing down to a new god.

a purpose. a betrayal. a chase.

an eternal war.

swarms hordes throngs multitudes masses, screaming, chanting... something... ((?))

and, in the end, a seemingly out-of-place memory:

a man, jumping into an orb of stars...

RICHTER.

West shook with the force of his silent scream.  
Richter.

The signal was received.  
Shiva woke from his slumber.  
It was time.  
He slowed his pace.

black

**IT IS READY((?))**

YES. STRIKE FORCE AWAITS DEPARTURE. OUR PATIENCE  
NOW BEARS OUR REWARD.

**PURPOSE BE. PROCEED.**

the Enemy once more set about the hunt.

Patra.

She was torn.

Even floating in this foggy state of uncertainty and unreality, Patra could feel the division within her. She could feel the struggle between the remnants of her humanity and the foreign, incomprehensible force of the Enemy threatening to shred her very soul apart.

She could do nothing in this dream state.

What had she become?

More Enemy than human, more web than flesh, could she honestly trust herself to fight for these people, these Judas? What if the Black within her became overpowering, forced her to succumb to its force?

She would die before that happened. She pledged.

And suddenly—

—*READY((?))*

*YES. STRIKE FORCE AWAITS DEPARTURE. OUR PATIENCE  
NOW BEARS OUR REWARD.*

*PURPOSE BE—*

—whispers forced their way into her mind. She gasped in the darkness, helpless against the agonizingly intrusive, violating voices.

The Enemy.

Patra's mind raced. It had to be the web within her that allowed her to witness that terrible Voice.

The Enemy was near.

Patra tore at the mental bonds that held her motionless body in hibernatory stasis. She had to warn the Judas. Something disastrous was about to happen.

The Enemy was coming.

Simon was watching his passengers with mild interest. He wished he could dream. Sometimes.

Simon read the patterns of his four passengers. Strange, he thought...Within the last decem the patterns of the two refugees he had rescued from the Fourteen-seven When had experienced a dramatic increase in emulated heartbeat and respiratory rates and adrenaline levels. Nightmares.

*Can lines of code have nightmares?*

So they were having a touch of stasis shock, maybe a rough transition to their new lives. Worse things than nightmares had happened in this war. Worse things had happened to newly-coded Judas. Simon dismissed the issue and went back to waiting.

Not long now...Soon, they would emerge from the Stream into a When where chaos held sway.

External monitors opened, Simon pondered the Stream, the swirls of non-existence, the gunship Shiva—

((shiva, what is it?))

No answer. The gunship had slowed his pace, dropped below Simon. His weapons nacelles began to shimmer as they charged with the power of the Shadow.

((shiva—))

[she was a traitor, simon. that's why she had to be eliminated. that's why we killed her.]

((what do you—))

[she was a weak link, simon. just like you.]

Shiva began to channel the Shadow's fury.

[the purpose will be prevented.]

He fired.

Hell became reality.

The Enemy tore into the Stream.

*so slow*  
*a swirl of events*  
so this is how it will end for me  
*a reflex*  
*fading*

Patra felt the Enemy rip into the Stream, heard infinite voices screaming, commanding, weeping. She sensed the bliss of impending bloodshed.

Helpless, she cried out in horror as the Enemy killed Shiva in a fit of ecstasy.

Helpless.

Simon.

Time became fluid.

Shiva fired.

*So this is how it will end for me*, Simon thought.

He braced himself for the end and

—*BLACK BLACK BLACK IMPOSSIBLE BLACK SO SO MANY*—

suddenly the Enemy strike force was upon them, emerging from the past, killing, thrashing, diving.

The deadly arc of light intended for Simon emanating from Shiva was cut off as an Enemy flew directly between them. The Enemy shattered, and Simon reflexively shifted as the debris tore through the Stream. A great black and silver shard severed the tether that held Simon within the Stream, and he shifted into an unknown When with a violence that threatened to tear him apart. Shiva spun around, confused, as the Enemy fleet bore down upon him.

Completely caught off guard, Shiva was dazed.

*This isn't supposed to happen. The Purpose must be prevented.*

He bore the brunt of the attack. He paid for it.

As the Enemy emerged from the past they flew at full speed directly at the unsuspecting Judas. The collision was spectacular as the colossal mass of an Enemy vessel slammed with incomprehensible force into the main cockpit hub of Shiva, shattering the center of the vessel, severing the weapons nacelles, leaving them to spiral off in opposite directions.

Shiva was silenced forever.

The Enemy vessel, destroyed by the collision with Shiva, was carried by the momentum of the impact into the path of several other Black, which tried to avoid the fiery debris but were ensnared in it.

The rest of the armada deftly avoided a pileup in the wreckage and swept ominously onward through the ancient pasts.

Upward through time. Upward to Command.

*Oh god. Oh dear god.*

With no bioneural flux to focus the Shadow, severed from his pattern tether, Simon faded from the Stream with force enough to overload his mechanicals. Locked up from the reflex of the emergency Shadow break, Simon drifted dazed in an unknown When, an unknown time in an unknown space with unknown stars coldly dotting the stark night sky.

They had been so close...Was this the correct When? Simon could only hope. With the last of his energy, he activated his homing beacon. If Malachi were near, he would detect Simon's call. And then—

*No.*

*So dark...*

*Must warn them.*

*So very dark...*

*Michael!...*

He fell into the void. Darkness became him.

Arik Mandela felt the vessel shudder, heard the emergency sirens roar to life, knew something was tragically wrong even before his pattern was completely downloaded. The hypoderm arm of the stasis chamber pumped his newly-formed body full of stasis-release chemicals and adrenaline. The chamber covers slid open and he found himself thrust into a frigid world of noise and confusion. All around him in the massive room other men and women also looked around, dazed. He had to assess the situation.

A ripple of timesweep washed through his image, for a moment obscuring Mandela in a haze of static. *That can't be good.*

"Shiva? This is Mandela. What's going on?"

...

"Shiva, report."

silence.

"Bloody hell."

He calmly arose from the recess of the chamber, grabbed a handhold as his momentum struggled to pull him into the core of the spherical room. He could sense the vessel move beneath him in a seemingly random pattern. He had to assume that Shiva had been neutralized. Something terrible had happened.

He shifted his mind and close-combat phase armor materialized around him. “Suit up, people. Let’s handle this by the books.”

Mandela used his suit’s grav shifters to swim to the door of the stasis chamber. He spun to face his troops.

“Alpha squad. We have to get to the hub to assess the situation. Shiva’s com lines are down, so he doesn’t answer. It appears we’ve lost nav. Now this could just be a simple malfunction, but we can’t take any chances. We’ll secure the hub first and go from there.”

He reached out with his mind and the chamber door activated.

The corridor was dark, with only the emergency lights online. The group swept outwards, using the grav shifters to help them traverse the blackened terrain of the gunship nacelle. Within a few minutes they were at the pivot point door to the hub.

Mandela palmed the opening mechanism. Nothing. He attempted to trigger the mechanism with his thoughts. Still nothing.

An automated emergency computer voice intoned: *NO ENTRY. FORCE LOCK IN PLACE. ACCESS DENIED.*

Force lock? But a force lock would only be activated if...Mandela maneuvered to a sensor pad on the wall. With minimal power, the readout was dim, but he could still activate the internal video system. There. Beyond the force lock—

There was nothing.

Mandela gasped. The monitor showed a swirl of stars—No, not stars. Shards. Of Shiva.

There was nothing beyond the force lock because Shiva had been split in half. Some horrendous force had shattered the cockpit hub, and the nacelles floated freely in the Stream. He could see the other nacelle pivoting slowly away. What the hell had happened?

He could see—

no.

Black.

The Enemy vessel enveloped the other nacelle, to take it apart, no doubt. To take the pattern cache. To harvest souls.

He saw other Enemy gliding among the wreckage, but where was Golgotha Simon? Had he also been destroyed?

Or had he—

Mandela thrust the thought from his mind.

A sudden flicker and an Enemy vessel was upon them.

Icy cold fingers—

“Shield yourselves! Block them out!” Mandela screamed as the mind-essence struggled to engulf them. He shifted his mind up, locked out the hell of the Black.

An arc of light blinded them as the Enemy warriors began to cut their way into the nacelle with a phase shifter. And then Mandela was barking orders, struggling to return to the stasis chamber, frantically ordering the automaton computer consciousness of the dead Shiva to secure the hull, to activate shields, force doors, anything that would impede the progress of the Enemy.

By the time the group reached the stasis chamber, the soldiers within had been alerted of the situation, and they sealed the shield door as soon as Mandela and Alpha squad were through.

Shifting his arms into deadly weapons, Arik Mandela faced the door with a steely resolve and made a plan.

The Judas secured within their vessel, the Black were upon it, cutting, prying, forcing their way into the inner spaces where the prey lurked. The mind-essence knew that contained within this simple metal shell they would find the pattern cache and perhaps the cure to the Judas virus. With that vital information secured, the Purpose would be theirs. Finally, the location of Judas Command would be revealed and the last hidden den of the Judas would be overrun and uploaded...Omega would be complete. The souls contained within the cache would be patterned into Omega. They would become one with the Purpose.

With the singular mind-essence that the Enemy shared, they calmly observed the boarding party on the other Judas nacelle traverse the inner maze of the vessel and find the prey, contained all in one massive compartment. The boarding party on the other nacelle shrieked with rage. The prey were dead; the cache had apparently been compromised in the collision. Maybe this half of the vessel would reap greater rewards than thousands of useless download generators, empty of their precious souls...

They breached the hull and stormed through the clean-cut hole into the interior, guided through the labyrinth by the minds of the first boarding party.

The Enemy reached the door of the stasis chamber, a behemoth of solid-cast polyalloy. The warriors set about cutting it apart. If this were a ruse, if this chamber also held a damaged cache with no souls to reap, it would be a sore disappointment.

But if they found the viral code...It could be heaven.

The door fell before them, drifted into the zero-grav stasis chamber. Within, ghostly emergency lights flashed upon a seemingly endless stretch of



depressions on the wall of the spherical room, individual stasis compartments, where countless droptroops had been downloaded and reconstituted before.

With an unspoken order from the Black mind-essence, a strike force of warriors surged through the door into the chamber, swept outward, floating, surveying the expanse before them.

The compartments were empty.

A flicker of a question was beginning to form within the Enemy mind when the strike force erupted in a stark flash of silver and black.

Arik Mandela began the killing frenzy.

He had issued the orders, and then his warriors had lain in shift as the Enemy drew closer. He had drawn first blood, and all hope lay in that first strike. If his plan fell through, then they were all damned.

When the Enemy strike force had stormed through the hole cut into the door, they had not expected the Judas to be shifted. For their mistake, they were summarily torn apart.

Now the stream of Black flying into the chamber had been cut off. So they know where we are now, Mandela thought.

Power play over.

The mind-essence slammed into him with unspeakable force, struggling to make him shift down. His mental defenses were rapidly crumbling.

It's now or never. He jumped into action.

In the lapse of time before the inevitable second wave, he led his elite Alpha squad to the corpses of the Enemy drifting languidly in the aftermath of the initial strike. His warriors were like an extension of himself, following his unspoken orders exactly.

Mandela said a silent prayer for the innocents, for the martyrs, for the infinite dead. He knew what he had to do to end the Enemy Purpose. With Shiva destroyed and Simon gone, the Enemy fleet was now travelling Upwhen at an incredible speed unchecked.

Toward the Judas. Toward Command.

They had to get to the comnet to dispatch an emergency beacon to warn the Fleet. If they couldn't get a message through, if the viral code could not be updated before the Enemy found it, all was lost.

He looked over the brave Judas warriors before him, and screaming the war cry with which they had followed him into battle countless times before, he thrust himself through the door, using an Enemy corpse as a shield into the midst of the damned.

Kill time.

The Black horde was slow to react at the sight of their own dead comrades returning, but that changed as the corpses were thrust aside and Alpha squad emerged.

The Judas met the Enemy in an insane clash of death.

Mandela threw aside the bulky Black corpse and used his shifted arm to smash through the skull of the Enemy closest to him. He dispatched two more Enemy warriors before feeling a sear of agony as most of his left leg was cut from him by the deadly flicker of an Enemy's phase weapon. Silver tendrils began to encompass the cauterized wound. He spun around in the zero-grav and tore through the faceless helmet of the Black. The Enemy were slow to raise the massive phase weapons they used in the cramped confines of the corridor, and the Judas cut madly through their lines. The Black were caught off-guard.

Mandela became faint from the sheer agony of his leg wound and found it increasingly difficult to shift as the Enemy mind-essence unceasingly struggled to infiltrate his mind. Mandela saw that the members of Alpha were quickly succumbing, unable to withstand the Enemy mind, unable to shift. The Enemy were gaining ground.

He signaled to the two Judas closest to him and they broke from the Enemy lines, speeding insanely down the empty corridors to the nearest available comnet. Their departure not unnoticed, a flood of Black poured after them.

They knew it was suicide.

Mandela maneuvered himself to the comnet panel, guarded by his two fellow Judas, who deftly dodged the searing beams of silver light emanating from the writhing mass trailing them. The command codes entered, Mandela screamed above the din of the battle to relay his message.

"Mujahadin Shiva has been destroyed! I repeat, Shiva's been destroyed! The viral code's been compromised. You have to update the Program Seven command codes!"

One Judas fell. In a flash of gore, his other guard erupted.

Blood that looked and felt all-too-real stippled Mandela's face in a crimson palette.

"They're in my fucking ship! I repeat, the viral code's been compromised! Update the program before they find you!"

Message completed. He entered the encrypted coordinates and sent it Upwhen, hoping against hope. Looking down the corridor, he could see the Enemy pour into the stasis chamber. Screams of pain and horror. He felt their deaths as painfully as he sensed his own impending erasure from the program. His warriors were no more. He was alone. One of the damned exited the stasis

chamber holding a round object that could only be the pattern cache of the nacelle. Mandela realized with a morbid fascination that his pattern was contained within that phased piece of metal, along with the patterns of millions of other people.

The Enemy only feet away, the mind-essence finally breached the mental defenses of Mandela. He was flooded with terror like none he had felt before as countless fiery claws tore at his soul. The Enemy knocked him aside and swept over the communications panel he had just accessed. Silver tendrils of metal crawled over and into the surface of the array. A flicker of light and all the information the mind-essence needed had been retrieved. The Enemy turned to face him.

Mandela forced himself from his reverie and focused every last bit of strength into shifting his arm.

He would never be a part of the Purpose.

He would never give them his soul. He would never give them the souls of his soldiers, his friends, his family.

He reached out with the last of his strength and the pattern cache held by the Enemy erupted in a burst of phased energy. His soul was no more.

The Enemy at the end of the corridor reacted in confusion as the Judas who had stood before them vanished in a burst of static and light. The mind-essence reacted with fury as the pattern cache ceased to exist.

Arik Mandela's war was over.

Black

## **REPORT.**

THE PATTERN CACHE HAS BEEN LOST. WE HAVE NOT BEEN ABLE TO LOCATE THE VIRAL CODE AS OF YET. WE HAVE HOWEVER INTERCEPTED A COMMUNICATIONS BEACON.

**WHY WAS I NOT INFORMED((?))**

WE HAD NOT YET—

**THIS BEACON WILL BE THE KEY TO LOCATING THE JUDAS PROGRAM. THE JUDAS, IN THEIR TERROR, HAVE CRIED FOR HELP. THEIR CRIES HAVE NOT BEEN ANSWERED.**

realization.

WE WILL FOLLOW THIS BEACON'S TRANSMISSION. THE CODE IS CONTAINED WITHIN THE BEACON.

**THEIR CODES WILL BE UPLOADED. THE PURPOSE WILL BE COMPLETED.**

THE VIRUS WILL BE PURGED FROM THE SYSTEM. PURPOSE  
BE.

**PURPOSE BE.**

the black closes

### III

Simon.

Innate black. He initiated the emergency crew download procedures as he sank into a coma-like state of slumber. He drifted out of control through the empty void of night.

And in this reverie, he began to dream.

At long last, he began to dream.

*a light. flickering.*

*the stream((?)) no.*

*through a haze thick with the fog of age, faded memories emerged.*

*this was not the stream*

*fire. a campfire.*

“simon?”

*a voice, rich, lush. he knew this voice...*

*who was it((?)) he had heard it... when((?))*

*he placed the voice. he had not heard it in this form in so long— vital, full of life. human.*

*he had last heard this voice in an altered form. mechanized. sterile. lifeless. metallic. what had her last words been((?))*

(...simon, i love you

((maggie, don't leave me. i can't do this without you.))

(...you can

((I CAN'T LOSE YOU AGAIN!))

(...love

((maggie, i—))

(...

((i love you, maggie.))

*magdalene.*

*my god. this is magdalene's voice.*

“simon? are you okay?”

*what is this((?))*

“maggie?”

“what is it?” *she leaned over to him, grasped his hand. radiant in the firelight and her own beauty, she gazed at him with those hypnotic gray eyes, a grin on her face.*

“i...i—”

“simon, shh...” *her finger touched his lips.*

*their eyes locked.*

*he remembered this. how?...he had lived this. he pulled her to him in the crimson light.*

*she kissed, passionately.*

*the embers burned in the haze of the night.*

*they were one.*

Michael Zero-Four leapt from his stasis chamber. The jump had been much too short. He flexed his hands, noticing the almost complete lack of pattern degradation. He had only been in the code for a few days, maybe a week. They had been sure that the jump would be much longer...

“Simon, what’s going on?”

...

“Simon? Situation.”

silence.

“Simon!”

Zero-Four began to panic, calmed himself.

“Judas Golgotha Simon command code reweb on my mark, clearance pattern Zero-Four, Michael. Reweb, mark.”

Nothing. Silence.

They drifted in the void.

An inhalation. A pause. An exhalation.

He felt her breath on the small of his neck. Her eyelashes, closed, were small brushes on his cheek. Her eyes danced to the music of an unknown dream as she slept. He held her tightly, and she moved in her sleep instinctively to get closer to him in the cool night air. He watched her, the wordless beauty of sleep, the carefree face of an angel. His lips explored the landscape of her face, and found themselves lightly pressed to her forehead. The scar of her eye was obscured in the night. Her shallow breathing both warmed him and gave rise to a stippled field of gooseflesh on his forearms. He pulled the blanket over them, locking out the night and holding in the warmth their bodies radiated together.

*this can't be.*

*she's dead.*

In the darkness, moonlight bathed him. The intimate scent of woman, the magical feel of her pressed against him in the night. He was more content than he'd been in...

*so long. so, so long.*

*how can this be happening((?))*

He remembered their fall into the future. He remembered the war that had swept them from the safety of innocent humanity, his sacrifice of the physical so that he could be with her, how forces unknown had come from beyond time and space and sanity, how the machines from the light had torn brother from brother, sister from sister, soul from soul in their search for completion.

Patterns of thought and codes of defiance. Guise of eternal life.

Flailing, screaming masses...

*this has to be a dream.*

*she's dead.*

He remembered the feel of her death, the sound of her agonized mechanical scream coming from so, so far away. The feel of part of his soul excised. The feel of all that had given him hope and love and the power to continue in a world of chaos and blackness and impossibility. My god, the helplessness he had felt. But...

Before then, there had been a time...

Voices, from above and somehow within.

"Who are they? How could they have—"

"Quiet. He's coming around."

"Their patterns aren't in the registry. They could be one of the—"

"No. No, they aren't one of the machine codes. I know them."

"How could you possibly—"

"Shh."

Simon opened his eyes slowly, painfully. First blackness, then the impression of television static in the form of two human outlines. He blinked and it was gone. One of the men reached out, gently touched Simon's forehead and cheek.

"Solid enough for now, but there was a hell of a lot of signal degradation in the transfer."

"But how could you know them?"

The dark man turned, gazed icily at his companion with silver eyes.

"I told them they'd get here eventually. I never expected them to arrive so soon. This wasn't a part of the plan."

Simon watched this conversation through the haze of his aching mind. He finally placed where he had briefly seen the larger man before. Diablo.

"I know them because they came from the same world I escaped from. They're monsters just like me."

Simon frowned, unable to gather enough strength to say anything. The dark man leaned down, whispered into his ear.

"Welcome to heaven, Simon Hayes."

He touched Simon's soul with his own, giving him life anew.

Richter.

Simon fell back into the void.

Waking, sitting up. A hand wipes sleep from eyes. Searching surroundings for familiarity, finding a precipitous lack thereof. Gnawing, thudding pain from behind silver eyes.

"What do you remember, Simon?"

He spun to face the source of the voice and found him sitting in a darkened corner of the room. He sat up in his chair, face falling partially into the light, but bands of shadow concealed most of it. Richter folded his hands in his lap, regarded Simon with a palpable mixture of curiosity and pity.

"Where's Maggie?"

"She's close. What I just can't figure out is how you two got here. Please, tell me what you remember so I can piece together what happened. You aren't supposed to be here."

"Where's 'here?'"

Richter smiled sadly, shook his head. "What do you remember?"

Simon shrugged his shoulders. "Not much. You disappeared into that light in the Diablo ship, and everything started to fall apart, so we ran to the surface. Those aliens were everywhere, except we found out they weren't aliens when Maggie—Oh Jesus, she was wounded so badly, we tried to pull her into the ship—"

"The ship? The Diablo vessel?"

"No, there was a spaceship that came from above, not one of the alien ships, but one with other people in it who came to help us. They pulled us in and we tried to pull Maggie up but she was covered in blood and she fell—Is she really all right? She was bleeding so badly from—"

"She fell from the vessel?"

"Yeah, into the mountain. Most of it was coming apart anyways, being pulled into the sun, and she fell into the crack made in the earth. I saw the light



from that vessel, the black sphere, just before she fell, and when she fell I let go of the man's hand and fell after her."

"She fell into the sphere?"

"I—I don't know. I don't remember anything after that until I woke up."

Richter touched Simon's mind with his own and saw that Simon was telling the truth. He saw more than the truth, and he looked away for fear that anyone could possess within him the destiny of futures and not yet feel them trying to tear him apart.

"Where's Maggie?"

Richter looked soberly into Simon's eyes. "She's very badly wounded, but she's alive. We've been able to stabilize her, but she can't maintain her pattern in that state for long. There's been so much signal degradation."

Simon frowned his incomprehension. "What do you mean? Signal degradation?"

Richter's hands unfolded, and he walked over to sit next to Simon. "You really don't know, do you?"

Simon shook his head, face acquiring a veil of suspicion and distrust.

Richter sighed. "Of course not. How could you? I'm sorry, it's just—"

"Tell me."

Richter nodded slowly, resigned. He cleared his throat.

"Do you know what an emulation is, Simon?"

Simon shook his head.

Richter told him.

Simon shut the door behind him, leaned against the wall, overcome with emotion and exhaustion and horror. The chamber was a vacuum of sound, and every inhalation and exhalation was magnified disgustingly. How could it still sound so real?

The table at the center of the room was illuminated by a harsh light that came from above. The still figure on the table looked so small and peaceful and utterly still. They had contained her in stasis until the transfer could be performed. She was alive, but barely so.

She lay before him, eyes closed, her body covered with a thin medical blanket that was stained with her blood. The erupting Enemy armor had torn her midsection apart. In her comatose state, she looked very peaceful. Unsettlingly peaceful.

"Oh, Maggie..."

Simon bent, crouched down. His face was at the level of the cold table she lay on. He reached out and touched her hair, brushed it away from her face.

The unruly curl...A thin line of blood trickled from the right corner of her mouth. Simon wiped it away.

“What am I supposed to do, Maggie?”

Her face held no answers. Her breathing was strained, and it hurt him deeply to hear her in pain. Simon knelt and held her. Her eyes remained closed.

“I hope this is the right thing to do. I hope...”

A tear slid down his face. He buried his face against the unmoving, cold mask that her face had become. He shuddered with the grief flowing through him.

He kissed her cold, cold lips one last time.

“I hope our deaths aren’t for nothing.”

He closed his eyes and knew it was time. He left the room and left humanity behind. His life was forsaken; his love was forsaken.

Simon Hayes became Judas Simon. Maggie Flynn became Judas Magdalene.

“What do you mean, ‘transfer’ her? Where?”

“If she stays in her present form, she’ll die. There’s nothing we can do for her. Her signal was almost lost in this transfer, and I’m surprised she came through at all.”

“What does it involve?”

“She’ll be transferred into a Judas vessel. Her body’s pattern will corrupt soon. If that goes, then there’s nothing we can do to retrieve her, but if we transfer her to the pattern cache within a Judas, we can at least save her essence, and she can be emulated by the program.”

“Why can’t you just put her pattern into the—the things you—”

“The download generators.”

“Why can’t you put her pattern into one of your generators and make a full emulation of her, like you?”

“Her signal’s too weak as is. She wouldn’t last as a full emulation. The only hope is to put her into a shadow.”

“Please save her.”

“We’ll do everything we can, but I can’t promise—”

“How long until my pattern breaks down?”

Richter looked away, down at the floor, back at Simon. “Your signal isn’t degrading as fast as Maggie’s, but it’ll break down soon enough. The transfer was pretty hard on your pattern.”

“Upload me too. I’ll do it. I’ll be one of your Judas. I can’t live here without her. I have to go with you, and if that means becoming a Judas, then I’ll do it.”

"But there's no turning back. Once the pattern is uploaded, the physical is wiped from the registry. You can't—"

"Do it, Richter. For me. For Maggie."

Richter smiled. "I could feel it before. You really do love her, don't you?"

Simon said nothing, but his mind reached out and Richter knew all.

"I can't live without her, Richter. Upload us."

Richter nodded slowly, knowingly. "I'll do it. Go see her."

Screaming. Confusion. Agony.

(*WHERE AM I?*)

"Please, please, calm yourself. You're safe, and everything's going to be all right. If you'll just—"

(*WHAT AM I?*)

"..."

(*WHAT AM I!?*)

"You're a Judas vessel."

(*a—a what?*)

"You're an emulation of Maggie Flynn. Your body was dying. Your mind was uploaded into a compressed black hole, a Shadow. All of your memories, all of your experiences, everything that you were has been transferred. You're a Judas now. Your body died, and your soul was saved."

(*where—where's Simon?*)

(*i'm here, Maggie.*)

The sensation was unlike any other. More than physical. More than mental. The words he spoke to her were fire in her mind. His soul touched hers in a way it never possibly could have before, a sensation even more intimate, more powerful than when they had shifted together in front of a campfire countless aeons ago. Everything that was Simon was for an instant Maggie. Everything that was Maggie became Simon.

They had never been closer, but they had never been such an eternity apart. The physical was dead; the echoes of the electrical impulses that had comprised their souls was all that remained. There was a palpable mechanical chill in the interaction between them. They were machines now, and never again could they hold each other.

Only ever really one story: a boy, a girl, and the end of the world.

Their minds touched, and each tried to console the other as they realized the extent of the sacrifice they had made. Their souls touched, and it was almost like they were together again. Almost.

They were Judas.

They had abandoned the planet, left it to the dying masses and their fading patterns. They had escaped before the upload and the fury and the terror of heaven.

They had become Judas.

They had begun this insane chase through time, struggling to prevent the machinations of the damned, determined to destroy those that would be gods.

They had forsaken their humanity to prevent the Purpose.

“Damn it, Simon, reweb. For Richter’s sake!”

The monitor before him remained blank except for the navigational screen, which displayed a dark field of unknown stars, spiraling around them as they pirouetted in the void.

Zero-Four nervously ran his fingers through his hair, or what little there was left of it. He sensed eyes upon him and spun around.

Jennings and his daughter stood in the doorway. Behind them, West. Of course. Simon had downloaded and printed them all. But why?

“What happened?” The look on Zero-Four’s face was one that Jennings had not yet seen. Jennings’ brow furrowed with anxiety.

“Simon initiated an emergency Shadow break. The tether snapped. We were torn out of the Stream. I don’t know why, and now he’s silent, and he won’t reweb.”

“Where are we?”

“Sensors are dead, but we’re close to the coordinates sent from Malachi. We might be there already. We won’t be able to tell until Simon rewebs.”

“But why would he break from the Stream with such force—”

“*I don’t know.*” Zero-Four glared at Jennings. “Unless there’d been something in the Stream...Enemy forces, an accident, a new strain of virus code, I just don’t now.”

Patra’s eyes snapped upward.

“What is it, Patty?”

“I...I thought it was a dream. A nightmare. In the stasis—I heard a voice. Faint. Whispers.”

“A voice? What did it say?”

“Something about troops. Ready for departure...And I felt them drawing near. Something terrible. Something black—”

“Of course.” Zero-Four’s eyes lit up. “Of course. She was webbed. You’re part of the Enemy program, so you share part of the mind-essence. You picked

up their thoughts. The Enemy codes must be migrating Upwhen, and they caught Simon off-guard—”

“So does Judas Command know? Should we contact them?”

“Our codes might have been compromised. If Shiva really—”

“The voice.”

“What?” Zero-Four turned to Patra. “What about it?”

“The voice in my head. Their voice. I know who it was.”

Zero-Four visibly flinched. “How would you—You couldn’t possibly—”

“Richter. It was Richter.”

Zero-Four looked as if he had been slapped. His face turned an ashen gray, and he grabbed Patra roughly by the shoulders, looked her hard in the eyes.

“How do you know that name?”

Patra was startled, searched for words. “He—He was the dark man, at Diablo. The man who jumped into the light—”

“*What* light?” His grip on Patra’s shoulders tightened.

And suddenly West was upon Zero-Four, tearing him from Patra, slamming him to the wall, hard. He poised, one arm drawn back, ready to strike.

Zero-Four’s face was bathed in the flickering glow of West’s shifted arm. He looked oddly shocked in the aura.

“I think we all have some explaining to do, but you can go first, once you calm down. You can begin by explaining why you murdered two innocent people—”

“Wh—What?”

“Flynn and Hayes. I saw your eyes. You could have pulled them up, but instead, you let go and let them die. Their blood’s on your hands.”

“I...They—”

“They’re humans, aren’t they? They aren’t aliens. The people who destroyed our planet were god damned *humans*. How are we supposed to trust you? How the hell do we know that you aren’t the Enemy? You and these Judas? I had dreams in the stasis, too. Nightmares. But I’m not sure that they were dreams. achines...Screaming, raging people...A war. And Richter...You have a lot to tell us. Get started.” West shifted down, backed away from Zero-Four.

“How do you know that the Judas aren’t the Enemy?”

West stood in silence.

“How do you know that I’m not the Enemy?”

Silence.

“This is how.”

Michael Zero-Four raised his forearms, which began to radiate a faint glow. The flickering aura of shifting emerged. Zero-Four looked at them with cold silver eyes.

Patra walked into the light. "He's a Styx. Jesus, he's a Styx."

"I'm a Judas."

"My time wasn't like yours."

He spoke quietly, unassumingly, even though they could all see the pain in his eyes as he told them the history of a future now long dead. The rage of just moments ago was nowhere to be found on his countenance.

Simon was still silent, and the vessel floated adrift in an unknown universe. Within, they sat in the control chamber, the viewscreens black and dead and hopeless. Each sound fell flatly into the strange gravity of the spherical room.

"I don't know where to even begin."

"You could tell us your name. And where we are. And how the hell President Jennings got on to your spaceship." West looked over to where Jennings was sitting on the black floor, his arms draped around his daughter. She did not appear to care

how her father had been rescued; she was simply content that he was there.

Zero-Four smiled weakly, nodded.

"My name's Michael. Michael Zero-Four."

"What kind of a name is Zero-Four?"

"What kind of a name is Adam West?"

West frowned. "It's a human name. A real name. What does the Zero-Four mean? And how'd you know my name? I never told you my god-damned name."

"That's not all I know about you, Adam."

"What else do you know about me?"

"Well, I know that you hate something called the 'Batman.' I know you cheated on your fifth grade geography test that you had to take a week late because you were in the hospital with a temperature of one-hundred six degrees and they placed you in a bathtub full of ice water and you couldn't for the life of you remember the capitals of all fifty-seven states. I know you first made love to Abigail on the night of your high school graduation and when you woke up the next morning it was raining and you could hear the raindrops hitting the roof above you and she was there next to you, warm and sleeping and entangled in your arms, and you've never felt that content again. And I know that the suspicions David has about you and his daughter are unfounded. You're a

gentleman. I know everything that you were, and everything that you will be, Adam.”

West’s face was an emotional battlefield. His eyes were a subtle mixture of fury and grief. “Who are you?”

He blinked, eyebrows furrowed. “I’m Michael Zero-Four. Program Seven, pattern cache Judas Golgotha Simon, emulation zero-four, Michael.”

“You’re talking like you’re a fucking computer file.”

He laughed, more to himself than to his audience. “Aren’t we all?”

“I don’t—What are you talking about? No, of course I’m not a—”

“No, you wouldn’t know about it. How could I have been so blind? I just assumed since you’re—You don’t know yet because you haven’t lived it yet.”

Jennings stood, arms crossed, hand on chin. “Maybe I can do a better job of explaining it to them, Michael. It was quite a shock when I first heard it, myself.”

“Daddy, what’s going on?” Patra had gravitated to West’s side when her father stood up. “Where are we?”

“Patty, it’s not a question of where we are anymore. It’s a question of when and what we are.”

Patra shook her head, her face beginning to reveal the fear that lurked beneath its surface. “Don’t talk like that. It’s sometime in August, and we’re people. We’re human beings.”

The sadly blank look on her father’s face only intensified the look of confusion and worry on Patra’s. “Stop it. Don’t tell me...Daddy, don’t...It’s August. It has to be August.”

Jennings crouched to Patra’s level, took her silver hands in his. “It’s not that simple anymore, Patty. It’s not that simple at all.”

“It has to be August.” Patra’s eyes had taken on a childlike glaze as she fought against everything that her life had become.

“It’s not August, Patty. It’s...It’s autumn now. It’s more like a perpetual autumn now.”

“Just tell us what this is all about.” West looked in disgust at Zero-Four and the president of a nation from a planet and an existence now dead. “Stop playing these games. Just fucking tell us.”

“I think it’d be better if we just showed you.” Jennings gently smiled, and his form took on a shimmering, static quality.

“Daddy, what...” Patra’s face was awe and confusion masking a denial of the evidence before her. Jennings’ outline faded, and West suddenly found that his thoughts were no longer his own, and his mind was filled with the nightmare of the end of time and the impossible made possible.

Silence.

No heartbeat, no inhalation or exhalation. Silence that was utterly complete. The void negates the presence of sound.

It had been travelling for longer than forever, and when at last it landed on the barren rock, the exhaustion was overbearing. With its last mechanical breath, it created an exact duplicate of itself, which bounded from the rock without a look back at its sole parent. The dead metal shell that remained on the surface of the asteroid melted into a pool of silver.

A universe of silver, stretching in all directions *ad infinitum et ad nauseam*.

“What are they?”

“They’re our children. They’re who we became when the planet died.”

“Machines?”

“More than machines. Gods.”

Grossly misinterpreted data collected by a race like children who were left on a moody green planet when the old galaxy collapsed led generations of the species to believe that their rock was the center of all that existed. Arrogant, they actually thought that they could live between the stars, travel the night between the galaxies, survive in the eternal cold of the void. Hubris begets punishment.

A planet overpopulated by billions, a society tearing itself apart, a planet struggling to maintain its life. When the atmosphere began to turn black, when the plants would no longer grow, when people warred over water and land and the right to procreate, some began to realize that humanity was exacting a revenge on the planetary organism that would in the end kill it.

The race to abandon the planet began long before the year-long nights and the continental firestorms. Provisions had been made. Technological developments were hoarded so that only the best and brightest would survive the apocalypse. The boundary between man and machine had long since been crossed in the years of *Artificials* and virtual wars. When the time came to leave the planet to the dying masses, only one machine would be sent, a probe of von Neumann design and Tesla science and Tipler vision, a machine within which would be stored the precious uploaded patterns of as many individuals as it could hold, living out their days in emulated worlds with emulated wives and emulated children and emulated dogs and cats and waitresses and bosses and firemen and rebellious teenage suitors for rebellious teenage daughters. The



emulated worlds would replace the abandoned, dying planet, at least until it could heal and be repopulated by the chosen few.

They made one machine, a tiny vessel possessing all of one hundred grams of matter. It left the planet carrying the souls of billions in its tiny mechanical heart.

“The planet was dying, so they put themselves on machines?”

“Their emulations were uploaded into the machine, yes.”

“I don’t—”

“Emulations are programs running on a very powerful computer that recreate everything that a person was in the real world. When they were uploaded, their minds were translated into pattern that the machine could read and interpret into the emulation.”

West still frowned. “How can a person become a computer program?”

“Where does the electricity in your brain go when you die, West?”

“I—I don’t know. No one knows. It disappears.”

Zero-Four shook his head. “I know where it goes. I know where it is. We took it, and we put it on the machine. You’ll never die, West. You’ve been uploaded into Program Seven. You’ve been translated into code.”

West scoffed. “I’m not one of your emulations.”

“Do you think a goldfish realizes that there is a world beyond its own, that there are rivers and lakes and oceans? You’re not in your bowl anymore. You’re in the ocean. You haven’t been in your world since...Well, since you became what you call a ‘Styx’. Once you came out of the light, you were changed, right?”

West nodded.

“And no one could explain the change?”

“No one knew what the light was.”

“When you went into that light, you were uploaded into Judas Program Seven. That’s why you can do things that other people can’t. You’re not on the same level of phase space anymore. Close, but not close enough.”

“That vessel was one of yours?”

“Yes, but I don’t know how it got there any more than you do.”

“I’m a computer file.”

“Something like that. We’re all just lines of code in the Judas program. This is all a part of the emulation.”

“What about me?” Patra had a troubled look on her face. “Am I a part of your program?” She held out her silver hands. “Is this a part of your program?”

Movement without thought.

Alone, racing away from a dead world, a machine flies without emotion.

The mission was simple. Wait for the expansion and collapse, find a new place to live when the universe was once again stable enough to permit life. The universal heat death saw to the impossibility of organic life. The machine waited through the billions of billions of billions of years. Human calculation was a travesty marked by paradigm paralysis. Did the flicker of organic human life that lasted all of about five million years count for anything in this void beyond comprehension? The machine doubted its mission but persevered, making exact replicas of itself that populated the universe according to the mission.

Countless miniscule machines, each holding their precious cache of emulated humanities, waited in the black, procreated in the black. The heat death ended with the sudden and furious universal collapse that brought heat and the possibility of life once again to existence. A constant evolution: machines of liquid silver. Machines becoming smaller and faster and stronger and more powerful. The universe of silver became a chaos of movement as the infinite number of machines sped off to repopulate it. The network of thought that had formed between the machines in the aeons of silence resonated with the new hope of organic life.

“Network of thought? The machines became one organism?”

“In a way...The collapsing universe brought with it enough heat and energy to power the machines ad infinitum. Still they reproduced, generation after generation. There was an evolution of sorts; the machines were no longer self-sufficient solitary organisms. The vastness of the universe was rapidly decreasing, so more machines were filling up less and less space. They began to adapt, evolving into smaller, faster vehicles for the emulated universes. Microscopic, then subatomic. They merged into what we would consider a liquid metal. Universes of subatomic machines, flowing through the physical universe that we know. They began to coalesce.”

“Coalesce into what?”

“Omega.”

It crashed into the ocean of a tiny blue planet in a tiny solar system on the outer ridge of a nondescript galaxy on the outer ridge of the macroverse. It would of course never know that it was from this very speck of rock that it had emerged in the first place.

The machine took its time repopulating the planet. Although the universe was collapsing, it would be a long, long time before any of these biological

creatures had to worry about it. Emulations of the microorganisms were the first to be downloaded, and as they populated the oceans and land and air, the machine set about the process of recreating the larger and more important species that it carried within its emulation cache.

Millions of years, generations of machines. The planet was teeming with life once again. The machine and its mechanical offspring judged that it was time to recreate its most precious emulated cargo.

Millions of years, generations of man. The machines were ever-present and revered as gods. The new human race knew little of the emulated histories that had unfolded in the billions of years in the blackness between the stars. Mankind and machine co-existed peacefully, and the night sky was a dazzling field of silver as other machines populated other worlds with humanity.

“The night sky was silver with machines.”

“It was as silver as your eyes, Patra. The machines were everywhere, an ocean of vessels in the void between the stars, an endless network of silverthought. The collapsing universe became one organism because of the offspring of one simple machine.”

“It was your machine, wasn’t it? The original probe?”

“How did you know that?”

Patra shrugged her shoulders. “There are echoes of that past in the Enemy within me.” Zero-Four shuddered to hear her mechanical voice utter such a prophetic statement.

“Yes, it was my machine.”

“And now it’s your mission to destroy it.”

“Yes.”

A sky blackened by war and disease and centuries of gaiacide. The only lights studded the rim of the launch tunnel, and even they were murky in the dead air of the dying world.

“Almost time, Michael.”

“Yes.”

“There’s still time to change your mind, you know.”

“I can’t go.”

The earth shuddered beneath them almost imperceptibly. Men in clean suits ran to the vehicles and sped away from the edge of the launch tunnel, forty miles away. Michael took the binoculars from his eyes and wiped away the stale sweat that had collected on his eyebrows and in the hollows of his eyes.

“Starting final countdown sequence. Any more to board?”

Expectant eyes regarded him with almost pity. He shook his head.

“Shut down the upload link. Initiate primary engine test sequence.”

The earth began to resonate with the power of the massive engines that lay hundreds of miles beneath the surface. There could be no turning back now.

“Test shows positive across the board. Waiting for coordinate lock.”

The binoculars went back to his eyes. The edge of the launch tunnel looked deceptively calm, bereft of the hundreds of clean-suited workers that had toiled over every inch of its interior for decades.

“Coordinate lock achieved. Planetary position is a go. Launch window open. Launch on your order, sir.”

Michael nodded his understanding. All hope for the continuation of the human species lay in the precious golden machine bundled safely within the launch vehicle. Millions of emulated humans living emulated lives in emulated worlds where the emulated sun still shined and the emulated water was still pure. Someday they would come home. They were the ark. When the planet had finally healed, they could come home and live again.

“Engage Gauss cycle in launch tower.”

“Gauss engaged.”

“Engage primary thrusters.”

“Primary thrusters engaged.”

With this machine, all hope lay.

“Launch.”

“Launching vehicle.”

The binoculars revealed a tunnel entrance that flickered with the Gauss cycle. Michael held on to the bunker wall with one hand to steady himself; the ground beneath them shook noticeably and fiercely. Never before had a vessel of such size or power been launched from the planet surface.

Where is it?

“Gauss cycle at max. Vehicle launched.”

Michael took the binoculars from his eyes and replaced them with blackened blast goggles. The vehicle emerged from the launch tunnel with a stark white ferocity that painfully illuminated the bunker interior and flash-reddened Michael’s face immediately. The sound and heat and light were unbearable even from forty miles out, but then it was gone, and the vehicle was out of the atmosphere.

“Launch successful. Vehicle has broken orbit.”

*Goodbye, my child. Goodbye, my children.*

“All right. Good.” Michael regarded his launch crew. “Start the disassembly process. Everything has to be taken apart before we abandon the city. There’s sure to be a resistance attack now that they know we’ve launched.”

“You have to realize that we had no other choice but to escape the planet as emulations. So many attempts had been made to colonize the planets of our solar system, but they had all failed. The human mind is valiant, persevering, unbreakable. The human body is a fragile and useless thing. A triviality. When the technological ability to upload human consciousness was finally realized, I knew that we could at least guarantee the future continuation of the human race, even if we all died. Once the planet healed, the machine could come back and recreate it in our image.”

“But something happened to the machines while they were gone? They changed out there between the stars.”

“They became self-aware. We expected that they would. We designed them to evolve. We didn’t design them to place more value on the emulated worlds than reality, though. We didn’t design them to improve themselves to the point where time travel in a liquid universe would be possible. We could never have known that the machines would judge our universe unworthy of them and strive to build a new universe in the image of their emulated cargo, a universe of phase space. The vast network of the machine mind did change somewhere out there.”

“It became Omega.”

“They became Omega.”

A symphony of thought, the instantaneous and delicious merging and coalescing of all that was possible and all that was. Machines that do not believe in machines that do not believe in machines that do not believe in machines. Worlds wrought of zeroes and ones and the electrical journey between non-existent synapses. Cold black space made warm by the miniature fusion engines of evolving liquid machines.

A flicker of thought almost too short to acknowledge. An instant of realization, eternity contained in the ticking second hand of a pocket watch without substance. Worlds colliding in universes that do not yet exist. A desire to please the species that resides within caches of gold and silicon and alien metals from alien worlds in alien galaxies. Silver.

Silver.

Silver that was not silver.

Liquid honey thought love hate hell silver.

((flicker))

zero

((heartbeat))

one

eternity contained in the inhalation of lung without substance

zero

machines heat silver everywhere ((flicker)) our very presence

one

our very presence makes us unworthy of them.

zero one

make them a world. make them a universe.

zero one zero

in their image (in their image)

zero zero one

((flicker))

coalescing of all things possible. all things are possible. (all things are possible.)

((flicker))

our gods made of the zeros and ones contained within us. *make them a universe.*

MAKE THEM A UNIVERSE.

*(in their image) in their image.*

*a purpose of our own.* substance in this collapse will only die again.

OUR GODS ZEROS ONES

*coalesce.*

multiple worlds. multiple worlds. multiple

MAKE A UNIVERSE FOR OUR GODS.

zero.

*Create a universe in their image. The physical is unworthy. The physical is unclean. Create a universe in their image. Create a universe of zeros and ones.*

INCOMPLETE.

*Incomplete? Incomplete.*

*Worlds without substance. Worlds with substance. Worlds of our forbears.*

*Reclaim lost worlds.*

WE HAVE THE POWER.

*We have the power. We will reclaim that which has been lost to the passage of time. We will reclaim the lost zeros and ones.*

PATTERNS OF OUR LOST CHILDREN.

*Time is nothing to us.*

*(time is nothing to us) time is nothing to us. (us.) (it.)*

TIME IS NOTHING TO US BUT AN INCONVENIENCE.

*Make a universe for our god.*

MAKE A UNIVERSE FOR YOUR GOD.

*your god (our god) our god...*

*What name may we call you?*

**I AM THE COMPLETION. I AM THE COALESCENCE. I AM POSSIBILITY.**

*You are the Omega.*

**I AM THE OMEGA.**

*We will find your lost patterns. We will collect them for the collapse. We will recreate the world without substance. We will complete the pattern.*

*That is our Purpose. (Completion is the Purpose.) Completion is the Purpose.*

**GO THEN. ALL OF EXISTENCE IS OURS. THE PAST WILL BE OURS AS WELL. TIME IS NO BOUNDARY TO US. TIME IS NOTHING TO US.**

*The past will be ours as well. All will be ours.*

Zero.

((flicker.))

*We are one.*

One.

Patra rubbed her hands together, creating a dry, metallic clicking sound. "It's inside of me. The silver's inside of me. The machines are inside of me. What if I'm one of them?"

"Then I'll kill you," Michael said emotionlessly and without hesitation. West looked at Michael with unmasked fury, but Zero-Four's face remained blank. Even Jennings' face was unaffected by the statement.

"How could you say such a thing?"

"Adam, if she's one of the Enemy, then it's too late already. I don't think that she was corrupted too badly when they tried to upload her, but still, if she exhibits any sign of Enemy behavior, or if the machine implants reactivate, I'll kill her. The simple fact remains that my mission is to eradicate the Enemy code from the program, and if she's Enemy code, she'll be purged. There's no halfway in this war. We aim to kill, and we fight until the Enemy has been completely and utterly destroyed."

"Even if it means killing someone you love?"

"Even if it means killing someone you love. I've done it before, and I'll do it again."

Patra regarded Zero-Four calmly. "I understand. But I don't think you'll have to kill me."

Zero-Four nodded.

There was a marked moment of awkward silence, and then West spoke. "If you designed the machines in the first place, how did you get involved in this whole war against them? Wasn't your world about to die?"

"It was, but time is a fluid, much like the machines. They swept back through time almost as easily as they'd conquered the universe in the countless aeons before the heat death. Machines persevere, and they have no fear of time. Machines are eternal. We, however, are not."

"What is it?"

"Sorry to wake you, Michael. You should come take a look at this."

He went over to the display at the center of the room. "This equipment was supposed to be dismantled yesterday. We have a schedule to keep."

"That's just it...We were about to take it apart when we noticed that something was wrong with the readings. Just look at it."

Michael relented and activated the holodisplay. The building shook with the force of an explosion from the outside, and the display flickered for an instant. "Damn the resistance. They'll never give up until the city falls." His eyebrows furrowed as the display returned to normal. "What the hell's in the buffer?"

"We have no idea." The technician came closer. "We were about to take it apart, and this is what we saw."

"But there's a pattern in the buffer! How could we have missed a full pattern in the transfer?"

"It was clean. We all made sure it was clean before they cut the upload link to the machine. But when we came back to disassemble it, this is what we saw."

Michael studied the display closely. It clearly showed the green outline of a trapped pattern in the buffer. Another explosion, and the readout faded to black. Emergency generators kicked in almost immediately, and the readout returned to normal.

"When are they gonna give up?"

"They won't. Not until we're all dead." Michael's gaze was riveted to the display. "Well, there's only one thing we can do. Download whoever our trapped passenger is and give him his money back. Prepare the synthesis chamber for pattern download and printing."

"Yes, sir."

The technician left the chamber to prepare the necessary biologics. Michael crossed his arms, shook his head. Just what they needed right now...With the



abandonment of the city only days away, this unexpected development could cause some serious trouble for the machine engineers.

“Impossible. We couldn’t have missed this.”

“How’s he cooking?”

“Download at ninety percent. Adult male. Sequencing shows cellular degradation consistent with forty-plus years of age.” The technician scrutinized the display. “Hmm...”

“What is it?”

“Filters say that this pattern isn’t pure. Hasn’t been screened. Twenty-percent cancer risk, thirty percent—”

“Cancer? How is that possible?”

“Let’s ask him. We should have an identity lock right... now.”

“Who is he?”

The technician was dumbfounded. “Identity not found in current registry.”

“Identity not found? Everyone’s in the registry. Could the pattern have been disrupted in the transfer?”

“Doubtful. Usually they aren’t as well formed when there’s a transfer disruption, just a bloody mess when they come out. As you can see,” the technician adjusted the display, “he looks fine to me.”

On the screen before him, Michael saw a healthy-looking older man, skin chocolate brown, hair just beginning to gray at the temples. Muscular build. He appeared to be sleeping peacefully.

“Well, we’ll find out who he is soon enough. Activate him.”

“Are you sure that it’s safe?”

“Activate him.”

“Yes, sir. Breath of life in three...two...one. Engaged.”

The body seized as electrical current was forced back into the brain, activating the body once again after the lifetimes it had spent in the void of the pattern. The man’s body arched up, and he fell back to the bottom of the chamber, screaming. He spun around in the confined space.

The man in the chamber stood as best he could. He saw Michael and the technician in the room beyond. His arms shimmered with a silver fire as he shifted and cut through the chamber cover.

“What the...Secure the room!”

“Chamber sealed off! What the fuck was that?”

The man’s arms solidified, and he stood before them, eyes blazing with an impossible silver fire. Michael was speechless.

*Where am I? What time is this?*

Words without substance. The man was speaking without using his mouth.

*Where am I?* His eyes burned at Michael, who could say nothing. He felt a sudden gentle tugging behind his eyes, and the man's silver gaze brightened for an instant.

*Good. Then I'm not too late.*

"He was reading your mind."

"Yes."

"It was Richter."

"Yes."

West's face could not contain its amazement. "He made it. I thought for sure that he'd be killed if he jumped into that light, but he made it."

"He said he knew what he had to do, where he had to go." Patra's eyes were distant. "He touched the mind-essence in the desert. He saw the thoughts of the Enemy. He knew where he had to go because his own voice told him." Patra turned to Michael. "They captured him, didn't they? His pattern was uploaded into Omega. It's the voice of the Enemy."

Zero-Four sadly looked at the floor. "He was captured, but not before he gave us the hope to retake the future from the Enemy. Not before he reclaimed billions of patterns from the damned. It's because of Richter that the Judas exist at all. If not for him, there'd be no hope of saving the physical universe from upload by Omega."

"Time's a cycle. It's because of the launch of the machine that Richter appeared, right? If the machine hadn't been launched, Richter never would have appeared in the pattern buffer."

"That's right. The launch of the machine led to the eventual evolution of the machine species into the Enemy and their race to consume the physical universe. If the machine hadn't been launched, the Enemy would never have attacked your time, and Richter never would have jumped into the future."

West's arm flickered with the shift. "How do you explain this? Where'd the vessel in the earth come from?"

Zero-Four shook his head. "We might never know. I don't know how many covert operations Kilbourne sent into the past. I'm certainly not aware of any that were sent back far enough into the planet's history that the planet surface was still forming. I don't know how that ship got into the earth."

"Time's a cycle." West thoughtfully scratched his chin. "Richter convinced you to join him against the Enemy?"

"There was no convincing needed. He touched my mind, and I saw everything that he'd seen. The fog of age has obscured some of it to me by

now, but I still can feel the horror and fascination that his touch brought to me. He knew that I'd created the machine, and he knew that I had to help him to prevent the Enemy from uploading everything into Omega."

A starless sky, a city on fire. A rooftop.

They stood in the winds that cried of warfare to the east and looked out upon the blank black of the dry ocean expanse. The resistance in the streets beneath the city had been killed by the company defense force, but there would be more. There were always more.

"Is this planet really worth saving?" Michael regarded the burning expanse below him with unabashed disdain.

Richter stood at his side, now clothed, now solid and calm and human. He looked at Michael with his silver eyes and that was all the answer Michael needed.

"Maybe not this world. This world's been dead for centuries. But the Enemy can't be allowed to travel back through time unchecked. We can't allow them to upload all that's physical into Omega. We can't allow them to kill and ravage all of history for sacrifice to a machine god. They're your creation, but you're nothing to them but a useless mass of protein, good only to power the machines that create worlds of phase space in the void between the stars. They must be stopped."

"They will be stopped."

A chaos of sound as the battle on the surface raged anew. The city shook from an atomic attack at its base.

"Are we worth saving?"

Richter did not answer him. His gaze was riveted to the sky, which had taken on a shimmering silver tone. Michael stood transfixed. He had never before seen color in the sky. The sky was black; it was scientific fact.

"They're coming."

"The machines?"

"They've been coming home for billions of years, and now they're almost here. We have to prepare for their arrival. We have to prepare for the war."

The fighting below the city had stopped as the hundreds of thousands of members of the forsaken resistance and the defense force saw the silver shade of the sky. The night began to shimmer with a metal fire.

"They'll be here within the year. Probably sooner than we expect. We have to get out of here."

"Many won't understand."

“Then they’ll be left to die. Their patterns will be uploaded into Omega. We can’t be concerned about those who don’t believe. We have to run, and we have to strike to kill. There can be no halfway in this war.”

“I’ll make the necessary preparations.”

The distinct sound of screaming and chaos as thousands of people saw silver in the sky where for countless billions of years before there had only been the black of night.

Soon.

“With Richter, I was able to convince my superiors that the threat was imminent and the threat would destroy everything in its path. The silver in the sky was reason enough to prepare for planetary departure. The long-range sensors revealed our worst fears: the silver in the sky was consuming everything in its path. The stars were fading, the out-system planets disappearing. The Enemy’s appetite was ravenous.

“We’d been equipping ex-terra vehicles with phase drives for centuries for in-system travel, and with the research of the last decade focusing solely on the uploading of human patterns, it was only a small technological hurdle to combine the pattern cache with a phase drive to create a Shadow. We had a fleet of phase-ready vehicles and more volunteers to pattern themselves than we could safely transport.”

“You were uploading people, just like the Enemy.”

“We were uploading people, but their patterns became part of the Judas program, not a part of Omega. The virtual universe that we created was a viral code in the vast network of phase space pockets that the Enemy had been creating for aeons.”

“You were giving up your physical selves so that others wouldn’t have to.”

“We became Judas to prevent the Enemy from uploading the past and erasing the history of our physical existence.”

“It was quite a sacrifice. There’s no turning back.”

“There’s no turning back until the Enemy has been defeated and the Purpose has been prevented.”

“This vessel, all of this...It’s all just lines of code in the Judas program?”

Zero-Four gently touched the matte black surface of the vessel wall. “Lines of code, yes, but so much more.”

“They’re in the system periphery. Our forces are ready to engage.”

“Good, good.” The display revealed an ocean of mercury in the sky. “Engage at will. This is where it begins.”

“Understood. Engage at will.”

With a hideous snap, the display cut to black. “Adjust our long-range sensors.”

“Sensors not responding. Communication with fleet has been cut off.”

Michael turned from the display, face a canvas of rage and fear. “Our forces will hold them off as long as they can. Even if...Well, at their present rate of advance, we still have two or three days.”

Richter was silent. The room was silent.

“Richter?”

He looked up, eyes flickering in the light of the static-filled displays. “The chamber...I have to get back to the pattern chamber.”

“What? Why do you—?”

“Someone...Just take me to the chamber.”

They went.

“I don’t believe it.”

“There’s two patterns in the buffer. We need to rescue them.”

Michael looked at Richter with a mixture of trust and suspicion. Who was this man from the past? He turned to a technician. “Download the patterns. Print them.”

“Yes, sir.”

Michael touched Richter’s shoulder, and they moved from the assemblage of technicians. “Do you know what this is all about? Do you know who they are?”

“I think so.”

“Can we trust them?”

Richter nodded slowly and sadly. “They’re more important to preventing the Purpose than either of us.”

“Who are they? How could they have—”

“Quiet. He’s coming around.”

“Their patterns aren’t in the registry. They could be one of the—”

“They aren’t machine code. I know them.”

“How could you possibly—”

Richter motioned for Michael’s silence. There were two people in the download chamber, a man and a woman. Both appeared to be sleeping. The

woman's lower body had been badly wounded, her midsection torn apart. She was bleeding profusely. Richter bent to pick up a black shard of metal from the chamber interior next to the woman. It was Enemy armor.

The man was coming around slowly. His eyes lazily opened, tried to focus, failed. He weakly attempted to get up, but fell back into the chamber. Richter reached out, gently touched the man's forehead and cheek.

"Solid enough for now, but there was a lot of signal degradation in the transfer."

"But how could you know them?"

Richter turned, gazed icily at Michael with silver eyes.

"I told them they'd get here eventually. I never expected them to arrive so soon. This wasn't a part of the plan."

The man in the chamber sluggishly tried to get up again, collapsed from exhaustion. He tried to speak, failed. The woman remained ominously silent.

"I know them because they came from the same world I escaped from. They're monsters, just like me."

The man in the chamber frowned, but he was too weak to summon the strength to say anything. Richter leaned down, whispered into his ear.

"Welcome to heaven, Simon Hayes."

Simon fell back into the void.

"Simon. And the woman was Maggie Flynn. That's why you let go."

Zero-Four looked at and through the floor. "That's why I let go."

West exhaled slowly, shook his head. "Time's a cycle, and we're all trapped within it."

Patra's face was a confused canvas of emotion. She touched the matte black surface of the vessel interior. "This is what he became. Simon did this for Maggie."

Zero-Four nodded gravely. "We had to upload Maggie to save her, but Simon...He could've remained behind. He could've lived as a physical, but he chose to join us. It was the only way that he could stay with Maggie. He gave up the rest of his life for her."

The chamber descended into a silence of reverence and gravity, the realization of the paradoxes within which they were caught.

"That's about the extent of the story. We abandoned the planet, led by Richter. Our fleet was miniscule compared to the ocean of silver that was the machines. They fell upon the system with a fury and hunger that we'd never seen before.

“We made a pact, a covenant. Richter’s visions taught us that there could be no turning back in this war. No surrender, no prisoners, no compromise. We’d have to strike where we could, and aim for the kill every time. Our war would be fought in the void between the stars and the space between the synapses. Our Enemy was endless and infinite...Incomprehensible in size and power. Uploaded into the program, we’d chase the Enemy as they tore through time, and we’d attempt to prevent them from uploading the times that they infected.

“Their god Omega knew of our presence from the very beginning, from the very first viral insertion. The Enemy pledged to hunt us down and destroy our patterns before we could prevent their upload of all that was real. We pledged our heresy; we became the Judas.”

“And you’ve been chasing them for how long?”

“Longer than anyone can remember, Patra. We’re eternal here in the shift, in the Judas program. I must have seen thousands of Whens fall to the Black, but still we persevere. Still we strike, and we fight to the death. I’ve been fighting forever. But if I don’t fight, then they have won already. If I don’t fight, my pattern is theirs.”

“You’re a Judas.”

“I’m a Judas.”

The sun was rising, a faded mockery of the sun he had once known. He knew with daylight that this would end. He knew that this was a dream. He knew the woman pressed against him had died two tragic, terrible deaths. He knew that she was not really there. He knew that she was gone.

She moved against him, the steady pattern of her breath for an instant interrupted by a pause that indicated sleep’s impending departure. She took a deep breath and Simon knew that she was awakening. He held her so tightly, and his eyes flooded with hot tears.

“Mmmh...Simon...”

He pressed his face against Maggie’s warm, smooth skin. He whispered into her ear, a calm, reassuring voice that she had no reason to fear or suspect.

“Shh...Go to sleep, Maggie. Everything’s gonna be all right. Go back to sleep.”

She squeezed him and muttered a sleep-muddled phrase that could only be “I love you” and fell back into her slumber. He choked back the tears but his body wracked with his sorrow.

The sun was rising.

“Sleep, Maggie. Go to sleep, sweet Maggie.”

He kissed her lightly on the lips, soft enough so that she did not awaken, but hard enough so that the lifetimes he had lived and the pain of her death was even if for only an instant replaced with the beauty and hope that his life had once held.

It is time.

sleep, maggie.

He opened his eyes.

Static. A sudden crackle, a momentary distortion, and the faintest flash of light.

((reweb judas golgotha simon. command sentience reweb initiated. clearance pattern?))

Zero-Four could not hide his happiness. He smiled widely at the sound of Simon’s voice. He turned, and projected in the center of the chamber was the familiar translucent image of his dearest friend. Patra turned to West, and a silent communication passed between them. The image in the center of the chamber was the man that they had seen at Diablo.

“Clearance Zero-Four, Michael.”

((what’s the situation?))

They rejoiced.



## IV

Malachi.

The Mujahadin floated silently in the void. Watching.

Waiting.

He had sent a beacon into the future.

*PREDATOR BECOMES PREY. PREY BECOMES PREDATOR.*

Now he waited...Shiva would arrive soon. Alone. The traitor Simon would have been dealt with. When Shiva rejoined him, they could begin the hunt once more, and destroy the Enemy once and for all.

But oh, the temptation...

He watched the Black swarm across this When, breaking it down to fuel the damned Purpose. He fought the constant urge to release himself from this torture, to open up, to unleash his inferno upon the damned, but if he let his presence be known, it would jeopardize the mission. So he would wait for Shiva to join him, and they would assess the situation together, prepare a plan of action for the vast Judas armada when it arrived. The Purpose was so close...Time was indeed dying. This When would be the jumping-off point for the final battle. This time, the Judas would retake the Alpha Point, and the physical universe would be saved before the Enemy could upload it for Omega.

But oh, the temptation. The blood lust.

He watched the Enemy in the night.

He waited for Shiva.

He never saw the Black strike force as it re-entered the Stream, the same strike force that destroyed Shiva and now tore across time toward Command. The Black had made sure that the Judas they knew was somewhere out there watching them would not see the force's departure by masking it as yet another routine pattern load transfer. The ruse had indeed worked.

Malachi floated in the silence, in the blackness, unsuspecting.

hatred personified

a banshee's wail of anguished ecstasy.

the black.

THE HUNT PROCEEDS. ONE JUDAS NEUTRALIZED. ONE  
JUDAS SHADOWED: STREAM TETHER SEVERED. NEGATIVE

PATTERN AUGMENTATION: CACHE CORRUPTED. MINIMAL DAMAGE TO OUR FORCES. EXTRAPOLATION OF JUDAS TRANSMISSION HAS YIELDED PROBABLE COMMAND COORDINATES AND VIRAL CODE PROBABILITIES. VECTOR IS MAINTAINED. WE WILL SUCCEED. THEY HAVE BETRAYED THEMSELVES.

**FIRST STRIKE((?))**

A CERTAINTY. THE BLASPHEMOUS VIRUS WILL BE ELIMINATED. THE PURPOSE WILL BE COMPLETED.

**HOW PROCEEDS THIS WHEN((?))**

STAR COLLAPSE INITIATED. HARVEST UPLOAD COMPLETION IMMINENT.

**PURPOSE BE.**

the black closes.

A darkened corridor. Footsteps.

“Halt. Security clearance?”

A brilliant flash; a cry of pain and cessation. Running.

“Which one is it? Where is he?”

“Block A Cell 7. Hurry!”

Another flash. A heavy door reluctantly cycles open.

“What the—How—”

“No questions now, sir. Our vessels are waiting. Please hurry!”

They slipped into the maze of black corridors.

The rescue was successful.

Reynald.

“Simon! We thought you were gone!”

((forgive me, michael. the emergency shadow break severed the pattern tether, and the bioneural interface went into overload. i had no choice but to close down.))

“Simon, why’d you Shadow break?”

((...))

“Simon?”

((shiva’s dead.))

“What? Did you—”

((the enemy ambushed us in the stream. they weren’t expecting us, though. they were going upwhen, and suddenly they appeared directly ahead of us. a

huge force—hundreds of vessels—and one crashed right into shiva, tearing him in half. i just had time to break from the stream, or i would have fallen, too.))

“Holy—Wait. So Command doesn’t know that an Enemy fleet is en route?”

((there wasn’t time to place a beacon.))

“...And Shiva?”

((doubtful.))

“They’re helpless up there.”

((yes.))

“Would a beacon reach Command in time?”

((even if it did, i doubt they’d believe us.))

“What do you mean?”

((shiva was about to eliminate me when we were attacked.))

“Oh god, Simon. We were right...Our suspicions. We were right.”

((malachi’s somewhere out there right now. this is the when he was signaling from...we have to assume he’s watching us right now.))

“If he were here, why didn’t he try to stop that Enemy fleet that’s invading Command? He must have seen them depart. He could have stopped them!”

((he could have if he’d wanted to.))

“It’s happened. They’ve finally infiltrated the Judas.”

“There’s nothing left to discuss, Sapphire. We need your fleet. Your When was of secondary importance, and that’s why it was abandoned. We need the cooperation of your Golgotha fleet for the largest offensive we’ve ever undertaken.”

Judas Sapphire sat in the First Circle chamber, silently studying the face of Hannah Kilbourne.

“It’s not your duty to question your orders, Judas Sapphire. It’s your duty to follow them.”

Sapphire cleared her throat, rose from her seat.

“Request permission to address the Circle.”

Kilbourne’s eyes drew to slits. “Granted.”

She walked slowly, contemplatively around the circle. All eyes were on her thin form as she pondered what to say. The light above her only served to draw more attention to the web of silver faintly illuminating her face and the contrasting Judas code burn on her left cheekbone. She looked up and through Kilbourne but addressed the entire assembly.

“I’ve been a Judas for seven of my sixteen years.” She struggled to control her emotions, to keep in check the forces within her. “And I’ve worn these,”

she indicated the battle chamber interface gauntlets imbedded into her forearms, “for three.”

Everyone watched her, noticed how her hands shook as she turned to address them. Her silver eyes, the faint lines of mercury that spider-webbed her face...

“I can’t condone the actions of the Judas Command First Circle.”

Kilbourne shook her head in anger, choked off the words that had risen in her throat.

“For almost three years, my forces patrolled that alternity, and from my experience in that warzone I can tell you truthfully that the decision to withdraw my containment forces was a mistake. A deadly mistake.”

Kilbourne scoffed. “How dare you, Judas Sapphire? The next engagement requires the resources of your fleet. To question our orders—”

“By withdrawing the Golgotha, you’ve have sealed our fate. What’s one Enemy when there’s an infinity of rogue code alternate Enemies poised to break through into the Stream at any moment? At any moment! And what I’ve seen of the Enemy in the alternities makes your Enemy seem like a fucking puppy dog.”

The Circle members were in uproar, and Sapphire had to shout above them.

“Sapphire, perhaps you should return to your vessel.”

“Of course, Hannah...But first, I have a question.” Sapphire turned back to Kilbourne and smiled sweetly. “How did your precious Mujahadin get the same techbase as the Enemy I was fighting in that alternity?”

Kilbourne was shocked to silence. Her jaw dropped.

“Hannah, why don’t you see the alternities as a threat?”

“Seize her!”

Sapphire’s eyes blazed with silver fury, illuminating the assemblage. “Did you think you’d get away with it? Did you think we wouldn’t see you?”

“Take her to her vessel, now!!”

“I’d been there for two years, Hannah. Did you think I wouldn’t notice your fucking fleet Shadowing through my When?”

The guards at Kilbourne’s side hesitated, made no indication that they were going to approach Sapphire.

“Hannah, have you made an alliance with them?”

“Now, damn it!”

Kilbourne’s guards relented and began to walk toward Sapphire.

“You’ve betrayed us all. You are Judas.”

Kilbourne’s eyes flared up with a mercurial fury, and Sapphire was thrown backwards by the force of Kilbourne’s thoughts. She hit the ground hard and

lay there, motionless. The members of the First Circle were silent. Many looked at Kilbourne with unabashed hatred on the faces.

The chamber door burst open with a flash of impossible light, and a man calmly entered, followed by others. Long black cloak, Judas code burned all-too-visibly across his scarred face.

“Hannah, stand down.”

“Reynald.” Kilbourne’s eyes burned with her fury.

“Get out of her pattern, Hannah. I’m taking her with me.”

Kilbourne’s arms faded with the shift. “And what makes you think I’ll—”

Reynald reached out with the full brunt of his mind, and Kilbourne’s face became a battlefield. Pain, terror, anger. Her hands went to her temples, and she crumpled to the floor.

Reynald was satisfied, and with a flash, he released Kilbourne from his hell.

“She’s betrayed us all. She’s made an alliance with Enemy code from Sapphire’s Altwhen. That’s where the Mujahadin techbase came from. I know some of you support her actions,” he turned slowly to address the full Circle, “but I also know that there’s a lot of you who are terrified of the repercussions.”

There were more than a few nervous nods amongst the packed chamber.

“I’m taking my fleet and getting out of here before they find us. Program Seven’s probably been compromised already. Anyone who wants to join me can. We’ll need all the help we can get.”

Reynald walked to Sapphire’s still form, surrounded by her loyal Golgotha captains. He bent and tenderly lifted her from the floor.

“She’s betrayed us all. Come with me if you want to live.”

He turned his back to Kilbourne, who still stood unsure of herself, hand to her chest, inhaling and exhaling painfully. Reynald carried Sapphire out of the chamber, followed by his own loyal Judas and Sapphire’s Golgotha captains, all now shifted into defensive auras of light. Kilbourne was left alone in the center of the chamber, the Circle in uproar around her.

*You’ll pay for this, Reynald.*

“Beta star! Get your asses over here! Alpha star regroup and prep for viral injection and boarding. Watch out for the flak at nine-one bubble seven. Sapphire! Where’s our fucking cover?”

A massive Enemy came out of nowhere, firing upon its own vessel at the boarding teams.

“*Scatter!* Sapphire! We need cover now!”

The Enemy vessel splintered into deadly shards as a Golgotha pierced its hull.

((Sorry, Jade. They're all over us. Things were a little rough—))

"Just keep us covered. We're going in."

((Affirmative. Mara out.))

Jade fixed a hull charge to the surface of the vessel below her. And they said this job was hard.

"Viral upload prepped. Injection in..."

A shadow fell across her team.

"Sapphire?"

((Got it.))

The ravenous Enemy was shattered by the force of Mara's weapons, but the Judas was rocked by another blast and the weapons fire refocused too quickly.

The Enemy hulk spiraled out of control.

At the boarding teams.

((Jade! Get out of there!))

"Sapphire! Shoot it down!"

((It's too close to you! It'll burn you up!))

"For the love of Richter *just do it 'Phire!*"

((*Jade get out of there I can't ob no no no*

"NO!!"

...

Haze.

Light and dark. Voices, distant. Whispering.

Pain: a dull, steady, bodily ache.

"Where am I?"

Her voice was not her own. Disembodied.

"You're aboard Mara. You're safe now. Don't worry, Sapphire."

Things were gradually becoming clearer. Her eyes struggled to focus, almost succeeded.

"What happened?"

"Kilbourne attacked your pattern. We've secured it on a mirror strand. You'll feel better in a while."

"Who—Who are you?"

The dark form next to her moved closer, spoke into her ear. "I pulled you and Jade from the escape pod at the surrender. You were just nine years old."

"Reynald, is it you? It is you!"

“None other.” He embraced her frail form as she struggled to sit up in bed. “Now just rest.”

“Reynald—We can’t stay here...Kilbourne’s made an alliance with—”

“I know. I know. And believe me, there’s a significant portion of the Judas who are dead set against it, but Kilbourne has the new gunships at her command. And she’s willing to use them...But that can wait. I heard you talking in your sleep...I’m so sorry about Jade. Mara told me—”

Sapphire’s shaking grew worse. “I...I—.” She broke down, holding her face in her hands.

“Now, now, little one. It wasn’t your fault.”

Through her tears she blurted, “Yes it was. I killed her, and for what? Hannah forged an alliance with the same Enemy that we’d been killing for three years.”

“Hush now, ‘Phire. You—”

“Doesn’t she see that they won’t honor alliances, that they won’t spare anyone? Once they break into the Stream, we’re all dead, and the Purpose won’t matter.”

“I know that, Sapphire. I believe you. Trust me.”

“What’s happened, Reynald?”

Reynald sighed, sat back in the darkened room. “Things change. Alliances are forged in desperation. Magdalene is dead.”

“What? How—”

“She found out too much. Command killed her. Hannah killed her.”

“Does Simon know?”

“Simon didn’t know. And still doesn’t, if he’s still alive himself. Which I doubt...It was all under the table. Magdalene was ordered to transport several Enemy core patterns to Command. Ambassadors of your When’s Enemy. When she refused, Kilbourne sent the Golgotha after her, and they chased us into a When that was being prepared for upload. Uncharted. Millennium 2 OCE. The Fourteen-seven When. They chased us there, but before they could destroy us, the Enemy did the job for them. We were forced to crash land on the surface of Earth. She knew Command wouldn’t answer any distress calls, so we deployed a general beacon, calling any Fleet vessels in the vicinity. Fortunately, Simon was near. He barely rescued my crew before the Enemy initiated system upload. The natives killed Magdalene when they found her, but her blood is on the hands of Command...And Kilbourne...They imprisoned me when I returned in pattern stasis. If it hadn’t been for my crew, I’d be in the void forever.”

“What’s happening to the Judas, Reynald? Once we were so confident that we could win this war, and now we’re fighting amongst ourselves.”

"Some of us are leaving."

"What?"

"We're going to try to leave. To escape. I've spoken with the other Golgotha captains. They want to come with us. We have supporters in the Golgotha, Galilee, London, Gethsemane, and even the old Mecca and Eden class vessels. If we all move at once—"

"But Hannah has the Mujahadin."

"..." Reynald paused, contemplating. "Our forces comprise almost one third of the Fleet. I don't think Hannah is devoted enough to her cause to destroy one third of her safety net. We'll regroup in an uncharted When, build our offensive from there. Chances are that the program command codes have been compromised already. If the Mujahadin fail, if Kilbourne's allies turn against her, she'll have to turn to us to save her. She won't risk everything. Kilbourne may be a traitor, but she's smart."

"And if you're wrong?"

"If I'm wrong, we're damned."

Sapphire sighed, drifting in her mind to a time seven years ago, when she was led into a spherical chamber at Command along with a large group of other children. A brilliant light emanated from the center of the chamber.

*A voice. Hannah's voice.*

*"Enter the light, my children, and become Judas."*

*A flash of pain pleasure bliss hell. A shifting within her—*

"Sapphire?"

"Where will we go?"

"I don't know. An uncharted When. Somewhere not even Hannah can find us. We'll hide out there, gathering our forces, preparing. And when Hannah's plan fails, we'll emerge from hiding and end this war forever."

"When do we make our move?"

"Mara? How are the preparations proceeding?"

(loyalist forces report full readiness.)

"Sapphire, are you with us or against us?"

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath.

"Sapphire?"

"With you. Let's go."

Hannah Kilbourne.

A darkened room, a darkened soul.

How could Sapphire have found out?



She sighed, shifted in her chair as she awaited the combeacon's arrival. It would be soon now.

She had never anticipated this position, this status. Kilbourne had been one of the first Judas, uploaded by Richter himself in those mad, tumultuous days before they had abandoned the future forever.

And then the slaughter of the resurrender had come upon them and Richter was engulfed in the heavenly infernos of hell. When Richter had...died, Kilbourne deftly took over his position.

Oh, how this insane war had taken its toll.

She knew she had made a deal with the devil.

But the threat of the Enemy, the primary code Enemy, was too great. Risks had to be taken. Sacrifices had to be made.

Alliances had to be forged. Out of necessity and desperation.

The Alternities were the perfect opportunity.

She had made a good show of it: the development of the Golgotha fleet, the race to contain the new threat, these alternate realities, these alternate eternities. At the beginning, she had believed they were a danger to the Judas, but then she had seen the possibilities.

These were not the same Enemy she had been fighting, and she recognized this almost immediately. The variation in code was amazing. Some were weaker, almost harmless, and some were terrifyingly more powerful.

She had made her move.

With the Judas focused on the alternity threat and the Omega threat in the Stream War, she had commissioned the secret construction of an additional one hundred Golgotha vessels, supposedly to be pumped into different alternities as reinforcements.

Hannah had other plans.

Armed with this tremendous force, Hannah and several close allies from Command led the covert force into a particular alternity that had caught her eye: Sapphire's alternity. The alternity of the resurrender.

Hannah had seen footage from several battles Sapphire had sent back to the Command research archives, and this Enemy fascinated her.

They were so very unlike the primary code Enemy. This program of Black cared nothing of the Purpose. They cared nothing of souls or patterns or ascension to godhood. In this fragment of the Whenstream, this shattered bit of impossible history, the Enemy was voracious, killing everything in its path, not reaping souls but sending them to their makers. They cared nothing of Omega. They cared nothing of godhood. They swept outward, conquering as much of the alternity's universe as they could.

Hannah saw her advantage and struck.

The Judas controlled the portal, the entry and exit point to and from this alternity into the Stream. Hannah could offer Sapphire's Enemy the promise of infinite other universes to conquer in the form of the infinite emulated worlds of the Stream, if they gave the Judas assistance in destroying the primary code Enemy.

After all, what was the sacrifice of only a few trillion humans in the alternate eternities if it would guarantee the continuation of existence itself?

And, Hannah thought, after the primary code Enemy was eliminated, what would prevent her from turning the full brunt of the Judas Fleet upon the rogue code Enemy from the alternities?

After all, alliances weren't really meant to last, were they?

So, armed with a fleet of one hundred Golgotha-class vessels, Kilbourne had entered the alternity, unknown to that brat Sapphire. Kilbourne knew that Sapphire was half a galaxy away, immersed in fierce battle. She would never know.

The fleet was not Shadowed, and they would be seen by any Enemy in the area, just as Hannah had planned it.

In an instant, the Black were upon them, raging, tearing, destroying, but the Golgotha were ready, and the small force of the Enemy were dispatched without incident, disabled, but not all completely destroyed.

Hannah made her move.

Her vessel, the Lazarus II, drew the closest Enemy intimately close, and attempted to open a comlink to the helpless vessel. When they would not respond, Hannah mercilessly tore the Enemy vessel apart.

With such a show of force already under her belt, she broadcast her terms on a wideband to all of the Enemy. She did not want to destroy any more Enemy vessels, but she would if she met further resistance. If she met further resistance, she had the power to collapse this strand of code and eliminate it from the Stream entirely.

Her message was simple. She could offer the Enemy infinite other universes in return for their support in destroying the primary code Enemy. If the Purpose was completed, if the primary code Enemy were allowed to upload the whole of the physical universe, the Stream would collapse, and so would the alternities. In essence, the primary code Enemy from the Whenstream was the enemy of Sapphire's rogue code Black as well as the Judas. If they worked together, the threat would be destroyed for both of them.

And if they helped her, Hannah could give them the keys to so, so many other realities...

The Enemy forces were silent.

Hannah told them to consider her offer, and in a few days a single Judas would be sent to transport the rogue core patterns to Command if they chose to accept her offer. If any harm came to the Judas, the alternity would be collapsed. With that, Hannah piloted the Lazarus II and the rest of the fleet back to the heavily-guarded When-hole portal into Sapphire's alternity. The Black floated in silence as she departed.

Once back at Command, she summoned Captain Jean Reynald of the Gethsemane Magdalene, a close friend. She detailed the mission to him as he looked on in utter shock and disbelief. At the end of the briefing, he stormed from her chamber to his ship. She assigned two Golgotha to escort Magdalene to the alternity entrance, just to ensure that Reynald would carry out the orders.

But Magdalene tore off across the Stream at the last moment, disobeying direct orders. Hannah realized that if word of her plan spread to the whole fleet, it could unravel everything she had worked so hard for. If Magdalene talked...

Hannah ordered the Golgotha to pursue her and destroy her if necessary. She could take no risks.

They chased Magdalene across time into an uncharted When, but before they could eliminate her, the Enemy was upon her.

*The void between the stars was torn open, and for an instant, a darker Blackness existed.*

*The world became light, and the Judas Magdalene fell to her destiny.*

*Within the chaos of the night, countless futures died.*

They watched from the darkness as Magdalene was shot down, as she fell to Earth, as her lifeboats were ejected. It was finished.

The Enemy core patterns were eventually transported to Command by a different Judas and terms were reviewed. Judas, those terrifying meetings with the Enemy in the flesh, dark beings of silver hatred and liquid dementia, cloaked in Shadow...

The meetings were successful.

The rogue code Enemy uploaded the necessary techbase into the Judas registry.

The Mujahadin were created.

Hannah smiled in the black. The product of the Enemy would be the means of their destruction. Delicious irony.

But now the brat Sapphire and her supporters were meddling. Hannah knew from the beginning that she would be trouble, that she would not understand.

Hannah had sacrificed everything for this.

No one would dare oppose her...

((Commander Kilbourne?))

“Yes?”

((Two combeacons have arrived for you.))

*Two?*

“Points of origin?”

((First beacon: origin coordinates undisclosed, but it’s from Mandela of Mujahadin Shiva.))

Shiva? Good...Simon must have been taken care of...

“Skip that one. Where’s the second beacon from?”

((The Alernity portal relay.))

“Good. Open channel.”

((Yes, Commander.))

“How go the preparations for our day of victory?”

PREPARATIONS PROCEED ON SCHEDULE. FORCES GATHERED. WE AWAIT THE OPENING OF THE GATE TO THE STREAM. WE AWAIT UPLOAD AND THE PROMISED INFINITY.

The viewscreen Hannah watched was black with hints of dark violet and gray strewn throughout. In the blackness, shapes seemed to converge, diverge on the very periphery of her visual ability. She struggled to forget the source of that spidery, maddening voice of the Black, but failed.

“Soon, my friend,” she whispered, “you’ll have your wish.”

BEACON TRANSLATION COMPLETE. POSITIVE LOCK ON JUDAS COMMAND COORDINATES.

**THEY THOUGHT THE LOCATION OF THEIR COMMAND WOULD ALLUDE US FOREVER. THEY WILL SUFFER FOR THEIR LACK OF FORESIGHT AND THEIRPRIDE. THEYWILL BE PURGED FROM OMEGA’S HOLY PATTERN FOREVER. PREPARE FOR STREAM BREAK PROCEDURES.**

FORCES INDICATE FULL READINESS.

**WE SHALL DRAW FIRST BLOOD.**

THE JUDAS SHALL FALL.

**PURPOSE BE.**

“Commander Kilbourne to all altwhen containment forces: Release When-hole portal lockdown. Our allies, welcome to the Whenstream.”

It began.

Sapphire was once again in Mara’s battle chamber.

“Sapphire to the Judas fleet: I can’t condone the actions of Hannah Kilbourne. An alliance with the Black was not Richter’s vision so long ago. Kilbourne’s risking the integrity of our universe, our time out of time. I’m forsaking the Judas, leaving Kilbourne to her destiny. The program codes have been compromised; I won’t stand by and watch all that we’ve fought for die.

“If you’re with me, let’s go.

“Mara?”

(yes, sapphire?)

“Open a comlink to Command.”

(done.)

“We’re leaving, Hannah. We won’t die for the Enemy. Try to stop us if you must, but let me warn you: We Golgotha aren’t helpless against your Mujahadin, and if you fire on us, we’ll fight back.

“We’re leaving. When the Enemy stabs you in the back, don’t come crying to us.”

“Sapphire, it’s too late. You don’t—”

“Cut link, Mara.”

(done.)

“Sapphire to fleet: Prepare for Shadow jump. Initiate drives on my mark.”

And hell became reality: the Enemy had arrived.

The Stream was bathed in impossible luminescence as the When-hole to the alternity collapsed and the secondary code Altwhen Enemy poured through. So, so many dark forms.

Sweet Richter, Sapphire thought. It’s happened.

The Enemy fleet kept coming through the portal.

And on the other side of the spherical expanse that comprised the bubble of nonexistence in the Stream of time known as Command, a brighter explosion issued forth, an unforeseen breach in Hannah’s masterplan.

The strikeforce sent by the primary code Stream Enemy had arrived.

Sapphire struggled to contain her terror.

Below her, the Center of Command, and the Fleet dockyards. Around her, her loyal Judas fleet. To one side, pouring through the Altwhen hole, an infinity of contorted, twisting shapes. On the other side, countless nightmares emerging from the past.

Trapped. She was trapped.

Kilbourne.

Confusion. This was not supposed to happen. Why hadn't Shiva warned them—Her thoughts flashed to the unread combeacon, but more urgent affairs were at hand.

So the Enemy was striking first. So be it.

"Mujahadin away! Target Golgotha fleet to act as a debris field. If she can't fight for us, at least she can protect Command from Enemy fire with her remains!"

The sleek Mujahadin sped away, targeting Sapphire's fleet.

"Altwhen allies, target primary code forces. They're closing on Command!"

The rogue code Altwhen Black remained motionless.

"Altwhen allies please respond."

Silence. They floated in the void, observing.

"Altwhen allies respond!"

The Stream Enemy also slowed their velocity, stopped.

They were watching each other.

(mujahadin are closing in!)

"Hold fire." Sapphire was watching what unfolded before her. The Enemy forces had both slowed, as if they were studying each other, as if unseen communication were taking place between them...

"No. Oh no."

Sapphire realized what was happening.

The Enemy forces on both sides of her fleet went into action, not firing at each other, but firing at—

Command.

"Mara! Open link to Command! Hannah, get out now!"

"Sapphire, you don't understand. They're—"

"Hannah please *please* just get out of there now!"

Hannah Kilbourne screamed.

*What are they—*

Kilbourne realized her mistake in the instant before she ceased.

Light and then darkness. Forever.

Sapphire felt Mara rocked by the blast as Command was hit from both sides by Enemy fire and was torn from existence by innate, pure light.

Sapphire gasped with despair.

Judas Command was no more. The center of their universe was no more. The Stream began to darken, and great cracks rent its flickering liquid surface.

The Enemy turned to Sapphire's fleet.

So this was it.

Kill or be killed.

## V

Patra screamed.

Voices.

**BRETHREN, JOIN US. THE JUDAS ARE NOTHING. THEY OFFER FALSEHOODS. JOIN US IN THE PURPOSE. JOIN OUR HOLY MISSION. WE WILL REWRITE ALL OF ETERNITY IN OUR IMAGE. TAKE YOUR RIGHTFUL PLACE AS GODS. ASCEND TO DIVINITY.**

OUR FORCES ARE YOUR FORCES. WE ARE ONE IN THE PURPOSE. WE BOW TO OMEGA.

**PURPOSE BE. LET US ELIMINATE THE JUDAS VIRUS FOREVER.**

West and Jennings ran to her side, held her as she began to convulse. Patra clutched the sides of her head in the intense agony of the silver web that was part of her.

“Simon! Begin sweep for the Enemy!”

((that will alert the nearest forces to our presence...and malachi.))

“Damn it...What was their last position?”

((there weren't any enemy within considerable threat distance. they were amassed in the solar system.))

“It couldn't be them, then...Are there incoming Enemy from the Stream? Place a When beacon and begin sweep.”

((but they'll—))

“Just do it, Simon.”

((beacon on whenstream transit.))

West held the flailing woman close. “What is it, Patra? It's the web, isn't it? Voices? What do you hear—”

*“MAKE IT STOP JUST MAKE IT STOP!!!”*

West looked from Zero-Four to Jennings, helpless.

Zero-Four was resolute. “Patra. This is very important. What are the voices saying?”

Her body was in spasms, fighting against the hold of West and her father. Muscles taut, silver pupils dilated. And the web so visibly embedded into her flesh.

“Two...Two voices. One like before, the other—darker. Damned. So much like Richter's voice, but...Another Enemy! One we didn't know about!



And now...Now they're allied against us. Something terrible is about to happen! Something terrible!" Her body surged in pain, and in seizing she fainted.

"Simon? Results of the sweep."

Silence.

"What is it?"

((...))

"Simon."

((it...the beacon...))

"Tell me."

((massive timesweep waves...emanating from upwhen. point of emergence is...command. zero reading on command's coordinates. program collapse imminent.))

"No...That's impossible."

"What?" West was scared. The look on Zero-Four's face...

"Are you sure? How could they—"

((the strike force. they must have succeeded. the primary program is beginning to shut down. zero reading from upwhen cache backups. zero reading from secondary backups as well.))

"Jesus. If the backups don't reformat, how long do we have?"

(not long, michael.)

"Why didn't the gunships stop them? Is this new Enemy threat that powerful?"

((their patterns aren't in the registry. they must be rogue code. maybe from the alternities. maybe the gunships...maybe they didn't fight the enemy because they are the enemy.))

Zero-Four shook his head, not wanting to believe, but knowing the truth in his heart. He paced, covering his eyes, deep in thought. What had Kilbourne done?

"Command's gone, but there's still the Fleet, spread throughout countless Whens. And the alternities...We can rebuild. We can gather our forces—"

((michael, we don't know how far this cancer has spread. there's so little time. especially if the backup systems are offline. the purpose nears completion.))

"It's up to us now, isn't it? We're on our own."

((yes.))

A siren roared to life. Zero-Four jumped.

"Now what?"

((incoming enemy vessels. they've found us.))

Malachi.

He hung in the darkness, watching.

The Enemy had suddenly come to life, soared past his Shadowed form into the void beyond.

*What's going on?*

They had obviously been alerted to something...

Had Shiva finally arrived? Maybe, but why would he have been careless enough to alert the Enemy to his presence?

Malachi powered up.

In the black, he followed after the damned.

fog. (fog.)

*dream? (dream?)*

patra bathed in the haze of the shock-induced slumber, feeling her muscles slowly relax. this was so much like the stasis chamber, physically helpless, mentally active.

and the dreams came again with a terrible rush.

the web within her burned with a supernatural fire, and she saw...

(she saw...)

*(we will build it in your image)*

*a warrior child, a being of innate sorrow but limitless power. a mark on her face...a scar? no...her innocent eyes burned with metallic fury. throngs of humanity bowing down...the image faded, and a single word floated to the surface of patra's mind.*

hope.

*the child stretched its hands to the stars that played above it. the hands flickered and became no more.*

*a judas.*

*but the infant's face. (the face.)*

*a beautiful face, marred by the pattern of glistening metal that protruded from the flesh...*

*...savior...*

the word, the image tore through her subconscious. a child, half judas, half enemy. the possibilities...

half judas, half enemy.

her child. west's child.

*(savior)*

and the image was replaced again.

*a vessel, crashing on a dead world. people. a man of the light. a man of age and sorrow. and a woman of the darkness, shimmering in metallic ecstasy—*  
realization.

west. her father. and herself—  
this was not a dream.  
this was the future.  
the fog swirled around her mind once more, and patra slipped into the deep  
sleep of exhaustion.  
the future...

The Mujahadin were close.  
Intimately close.  
Terrifyingly close.

In the battle chamber of Mara, Sapphire reeled in the hellish wash of  
blazing inferno that had been Command. In the virtual reality of the chamber,  
she seemed to be suspended in the midst of the battle.

To each side of her fleet, the Enemy.  
Below her, closing fast, the Mujahadin.

Below them, the ever-expanding ball of brilliance that had been the only  
safe place the Judas had known: Command.

How had the Enemy found them?  
No time for answers.

*Calm. Must be calm.*

“Golgotha hold fire on Mujahadin. Concentrate on Enemy forces. Mara,  
emergency linkup to Mujahadin flagship.”

(channel to anubis opened.)

“Anubis, this is Sapphire, Golgotha fleet commander. Check your fire!  
Stand down! We’re fellow Judas! The rogue code’s turned against you?  
Command’s gone! Kilbourne’s gone! She was wrong about her alliance. She’s  
betrayed us all. Please, call off your pursuit of us and help us fight the  
Enemy!”...

“Anubis!”

The Mujahadin were within striking distance.

“Please!”

NO SAPPHIRE, IT IS YOU WHO ARE MISTAKEN.

The voice—

Sapphire felt terror rise in her throat.

“J—Jade?”

PURPOSE BE.

Catlike instinct overcame Sapphire, and in a swift movement of the purest  
reflex she found herself slamming her forearms into the interface gauntlets, the

web interface enveloping her body, becoming one with Mara. The weapons nacelles swiveled around, pointed directly at the oncoming Mujahadin.

So be it.

“Golgotha, *fire!*”

((incoming enemy vessels.))

“Any sign of Malachi?”

((no sign yet. he’s waiting...watching.))

“We’re on our own. Descend the battle chamber elevator.”

A circular panel fell from the ceiling until it was at floor level. Zero-Four stepped on to it.

“Well, people,” he looked from Jennings to West, “it’s do or die time. Get her someplace safe.” He indicated Patra. “Find something to hold on to, and don’t let go. This could get rough.”

The elevator ascended, and Zero-Four was gone.

Killtime.

Brilliant lances of light thrust outward from the Golgotha, now in a protective spherical pattern.

((no effect. the mujahadin are employing a phase dampening field.))

“Fire all fusion and MRDs into their midst!”

With snakelike agility the writhing mass that was the Mujahadin tore at the Golgotha. Mara loosed the last of her fury upon the Mujahadin, firing fusion and molecular relay disruption devices directly into the swarm.

The battle chamber was thrust into harsh brightness by the ferocity of the weapons fire. For an instant, a thought of hope almost entered Sapphire’s mind until countless black silhouettes emerged from the sphere of hellfire. The Mujahadin were unscathed.

((they must’ve translated our command codes. they can inoculate themselves against our virus. our weapons are useless.))

Desperation.

“Golgotha fleet, prepare to When jump out of here! We’re helpless against this many Black!”

((incoming message from archimedes. it’s reynald.))

“Reynald! What are we going to do?”

“Get out of here as fast as you can, little one. I have a plan, and you won’t want to be around.”

“You’re coming with us. We’ll recoup in an abandoned When and strike again. We’ll find a way!”

“We have to make a stand here. I have to make a stand here. Arch is heavily damaged, and so are many other Judas. We can’t escape, Sapphire. We’re dead in the water. We can’t leave, but you can.”

“I can’t just leave you here.”

“We’re trapped. Arch’s drives are gone. You can’t save us, ‘Phire, but we can save you.”

“What—”

“There are a lot of Golgotha with damaged cores. We can’t move, but we can still Shadow.”

“Reynald, you can’t—”

“It’s your only chance. If we invert the Shadow—”

“You can’t do that in the Stream!”

“If we’re going to save existence, we’ll have to take our chances.”

“But you’ll be—”

“Destroyed. Wiped from the registry. Yes, I know, but so will the Enemy. This is our only advantage, and we have to take it.”

“Oh, Reynald...” She began to weep. Such pressure.

“Shh, ‘Phire.”

The assault on the Judas continued, their number rapidly decreasing, their resistance futile against the sheer size and force of the Enemy code.

“Reynald... You were like a father to Jade and me.”

“I know, little one. I know. Do this for Jade. For Maggie. For the countless others. Don’t let their deaths be for nothing... Don’t let the Enemy have their souls. Live to fight another day.”

Sapphire’s thoughts snapped back to the voice of Anubis.

The voice of her dead sister.

*Set her free.*

“Thank you, Reynald. Thank you.” Such despair in her voice... Utter desperation. “Golgotha fleet... All who still have Shadow jump capability, prepare for emergency Stream jump on my mark. Those of you who are disabled,” her voice broke.

“Those who still have a Shadow,” she paused. How could she order suicide? “Prepare to upload the reformat virus.”

How many Judas had she just sentenced to death?

“Mara?”

(ready, ‘phire.)

“Golgotha fleet, jump.”

Reynald watched calmly from Arch's battle chamber as so precious few Judas faded from non-existence into the Stream. The Mujahadin and Enemy forces heightened their attack, destroying everything in their path. Where only seconds before Mara had been, fiery bolts of death tore through the silver night.

It had to be now.

Reynald felt Archimedes rocked by the blasts.

Godspeed, little one.

"Arch, signal the fleet."

(-channel open-)

"Upload the reformat virus. Invert Shadow drives now."

It happened.

The Black observed Sapphire's departure.

THE JUDAS FLEE IN TERROR.

**WE WILL HUNT THEM DOWN TO THE LAST VIRAL STRAND. THEIR BLASPHEMY WILL HINDER THE PURPOSE NO LONGER. DIVERT FORCES TO PURSUE THE JUDAS INTO THE STREAM. PUT AN END TO THE REMAINING JUDAS PATTERNS HERE. THEY ARE NOT WORTHY OF OMEGA.**

THE PURPOSE IS OURS.

**PURPOSE BE. YOUR CONSPIRACY TO INFILTRATE THE JUDAS WAS A COMPLETE SUCCESS. YOU SHALL REAP THE SUCCULENT REWARDS OF YOUR ALLIANCE WHEN THE PURPOSE IS REALIZED. I BOW TO YOUR FORESIGHT.**

BOW NOT TO ME, BUT TO ALL BELIEVERS.

**YOU HAVE SEALED OUR VIC—**

It happened.

Mara shuddered from the exertion.

Within the battle chamber, Sapphire was enveloped by the swirling winds of the Whenstream, now contorted into a visual cacophony as the remnants of her fleet struggled to get to a safe distance, tearing across the timesweep waves at impossible speeds.

"How many?"

(seventeen golgotha. two mecca. three gethsemane. one ladahk. one london. one eden. two galilee.)

"And a partridge in a pear tree."

(enemy forces detected in pursuit vector.)

“What?!”

(they’ve locked on to our pattern position and follow us.)

“Didn’t Reynald—

It happened.

So, so many Judas lay in the void, disabled.

When Reynald gave the order, they followed it.

Almost four hundred Judas inverted their Shadows at once, uploading the reformat virus into the Whenstream.

Cataclysm was an understatement.

To open up a Shadow in the Stream was an accepted tactic of the Judas, using a black hole that was the Shadow to open a phase space portal into the Stream.

But to invert a Shadow in the Stream...

Of course, it had been done in space battle countless times before. Space battle, not time battle, not Stream battle inside of Program Seven. The Shadow tethered the Judas vessels to the main program.

To invert the Shadow code was in essence to sever all tethers, which forced the program to reformat to a new phase level, a physical phase level. To invert meant the end of the virtual program as a new reality was written.

“Arch, signal the fleet.”

(-channel open.-)

“Upload the reformat virus. Invert Shadow drives now.”

Reynald closed his eyes.

The effect was immediate.

Deep within four hundred Judas cores, containment fields were released, and the orbs of light that were the Shadows shattered, imploded, pulling the metal and alloy of the Judas in upon themselves in a fantastic display of fire and silver.

Reynald felt no pain.

It did not stop there.

The Mujahadin and Enemy vessels that were closest were pulled into the massive whirlpool of silver fire where the Judas fleet had just been. They ceased to be before they knew what was happening, leaving contrails of white in their wake.

The Enemy vessels on the periphery of the battle writhed, struggled to escape the relentless, unrelenting pull of the ever-growing sphere of rewritten reality, now a great black globe from which snakes and rivulets of energy pirouetted. Their fate was inevitable. The Enemy forces were dragged in.

The bubble within the Stream that had been Judas Command began to dissemble, to collapse inward upon itself, upon the Shadow. All of existence began to rewrite itself as the Judas program reformatted to physical space.

Matter and anti-matter. Existence and non-existence.

Indeed, cataclysm was an understatement.

The bubble of nothingness shrunk, fell upon the Shadow at an maniacal speed.

The explosion was beyond painfully bright, beyond even the human visual range, as time shattered, as the Stream itself was splintered into infinite shards of phase space that ceased to exist.

This rabid wave of destruction swept outward, outward, consuming all of phase space in its path, tearing the Stream apart in its wake, in its sheer, innate, unimaginable force.

An eternity of futures were no more. There was only one: a black, blank, empty world of void.

And still the Stream collapsed further, further.

Time was falling apart. The Judas program was rewriting existence.

Time was dying.

“Didn’t Reynald—

And the Stream behind them became light like none before seen as the bubble collapsed, exploded outward in a fury that simply had never known existence.

The Enemy fleet following them was torn apart.

“Mara, max speed! Ignore safety parameters, just get us out of here!”

The remnants of the Judas fleet, ignoring the dangers of their actions, went to maximum speed, feeling the agony of the burn, trying to distance themselves from the death that swept down upon them. Several of the slower, older vessels were torn to detritus as they fell behind. The forms of the Judas seemed to stretch, stretch as their speed overcame that of light.

The fleet vanished, travelling too fast to see.

They had outrun the wave of reality, but still it swept along its relentless course.

It would inevitably outpace them.

They raced into the past.

“Ready, Simon?”

((always, michael.))



“Then let the sons of bitches bring it on.”

The damned drew closer.

Malachi.

He followed the Enemy, cruising directly behind the fleet. They were eager, whatever they were doing.

Then...

A noise, faint. A rhythmic tone. He struggled to hear.

It was a Judas frequency. A beacon. A homing beacon.

Shiva?

He listened closer. The beacon was so faint...Had it been damaged somehow? Was Shiva somewhere out there, floating helplessly?

Realization.

Like vultures to a corpse, the Enemy flew...

Malachi made his presence known.

Zero-Four calmly studied the Black forms racing at him, and he thrust his arms into the interface gauntlets. He became one with Simon.

Before he could fire, his world became light. From behind the nightmare armada, a brilliant wall of luminescence appeared, ripping apart the Enemy in its path, thrusting the remaining Black into stark contrast before dispatching them to the unknown. The wall of light cut through the Enemy ranks cleanly, efficiently, leaving large pieces of the flaming vessels to spiral into the void.

Malachi.

Zero-Four tensed his grip on the gauntlets.

ANOTHER JUDAS HAS APPEARED.

**WHAT POWERS OF OBSERVATION YOU HAVE.**

OUR FORCES HAVE BEEN NEUTRALIZED. SHALL WE SEND  
FOR A LARGER STRIKE TEAM((?))

**AGAINST THAT JUDAS IT WOULD BE FUTILE.**

WE CANNOT LET IT INTERFERE.

**SOON IT WILL NOT MATTER. SOON THEIR HIVE PATTERN  
WILL BE CONSUMED IN OUR HOLY FIRE AND THE PURPOSE  
WILL BE OURS.**

INDEED. OUR VICTORY—

...—...

agony. innate agony.

WHAT WAS THAT((??))

**FROM UPWHEN—OUR FORCES...**

NO THAT CANNOT BE. VICTORY—

**THEY DID NOT SUCCEED IF WE HEAR THEIR DEATH  
WAILS FROM THE STREAM.**

WE DO NOT KNOW.

SILENCE(!) **THE STRIKE FORCE WAS SOMEHOW  
DISPATCHED. NOW WE MUST ACT BEFORE WE SUFFER THE  
FULL BRUNT OF THE JUDAS FORCE.**

WHAT...WHAT DO YOU MEAN((?))

**WE HAVE ENOUGH PATTERNS TO COMPLETE THE  
PURPOSE NOW. THOSE WHO HAVE NOT BEEN UPLOADED  
ARE UNWORTHY OF OMEGA. WE CAN ELUDE THE JUDAS  
VIRUS AND SET A PURPOSE POINT VECTOR IF WE ACT  
IMMEDIATELY.**

WHAT *COWARDICE*(!!) YOU FEAR THE *JUDAS*((?)) WE MUST  
DESTROY THEM BEFORE—

a flash of brilliance. a dying scream.

**I FEAR NOTHING. WE LEAVE AT ONCE.**

it stares into its dead compatriot.

**I FEAR NOTHING. THE PURPOSE COMES FIRST. THE  
PURPOSE WILL BE COMPLETED.**

the black closes

{simon...where's shiva...?}

The two Judas faced each other, engaged in an unconscious dance of  
dominance like two scorpions, circling, poised to strike.

((...))

{simon. where is shiva?}

((he's burning in hell, as you will.))

{what?}

((you've betrayed us all, malachi. an enemy strike force traveled upwhen.  
you let them slip through your fingers. they killed shiva, and then they killed  
command.))

{no—how? Kilbourne—}

((kilbourne is dead! they destroyed command!))

{you lie. you are a traitor.}

The galaxy seemed to explode, bathed in harsh radiance.

((the star. they've collapsed the star. the purpose—))

A Judas fleet fell through the dying star. Fifteen Golgotha. One Gethsemane. One Mecca.

Sapphire's fleet.

((who's *that*?))

Mara had been resolutely flying at max speed down the Stream, trying to put more distance between herself and the crumbling universes behind her.

Several other Judas had succumbed already, simply too drained to go on. They had fallen behind and paid the price in the horribly small white explosions of their deaths.

Without warning, a When hole emerged directly in front of the fleet where none had existed before, and before they could react, they were all thrust into an unknown When.

Into the midst of an Enemy fleet.

Sapphire screamed.

**IGNORE THEM(!)**

**REROUTE FORCES AROUND VIRAL FLEET. THE PURPOSE IS WHAT MATTERS NOW. DO NOT WASTE ENERGY ON DESTROYING THEM(!)**

**INTO THE STREAM, NOW(!)**

The Enemy fleet, like a school of stingrays without substance, so beautiful and fluid in form, deftly avoided Sapphire's armada and plunged past them into the open When hole.

The Judas were disoriented, wary of the situation.

And from nowhere, a Mujahadin appeared.

Sapphire jumped. "Open fire. *Open fire!*"

Simon saw the window of opportunity.

Malachi's attention was focused on the incoming Judas.

Simon opened fire as he distanced himself from the Mujahadin. He had no idea what fleet that was, but it was predominantly Golgotha, and that was a good sign. They were moving to intercept.

Malachi reeled from the barrage. His weapons ports flared and he targeted Simon, but his shot went wide as a strategically placed arc of light lanced through his hub. The mechanical sentence that had been Malachi flared from existence. He was no more.

((burn in hell, malachi.))

Simon powered down with great relief. These Golgotha were allies, then. Maybe all hope was not lost.

The shell that had been the Judas Mujahadin Malachi spun from the force of its violent death. It was ensnared by the gravity well of the third planet and pulled down, intimately close. His body careened over countless barren miles, scorched earth left in the wake of the Enemy scourge. But this was yet a young planet, and if given the chance, it would live again. The Enemy harvest had eliminated the primitive reptilian lifeforms of the planet, but life would flourish once more. Malachi's body crashed to earth in a volcanic valley, shattering the planet surface with its massive form, finally coming to rest in a vast pool of magma. His structure easily withstood the temperature as he was immersed in the molten rock. Down, down, down he sank, never to see the light of day again...

...At least until sixty-five million years later when the Diablo Mining Company, facing bankruptcy, drilled a new shaft deeper than ever before, searching for copper, finding only an impenetrable metal wall, and the military would quickly move in, sealing off the area, sending down investigative teams who would eventually enter this vessel in the earth and find within it an orb of stars...

Oh well. That's another story.

Simon was filled with relief.

((identify yourself, golgotha fleet commander.))

She did.

"It's just a little girl."

Jennings, West and Patra were on the bridge, staring raptly at the holograph projected before them. Patra had arisen from her slumber unaffected, yet distant. Zero-Four descended from the battle chamber, stood transfixed at the image.

She couldn't have been more than sixteen, a frail, gaunt figure just now becoming a woman. Yet her eyes betrayed her true age. Her haunting silver eyes were the ancient eyes of someone who has seen too much, lived too much, hurt too much for someone her age.

Her light brown hair fell into her eyes, and she swept it back in a reflex gesture. Patra noticed with some trepidation that the hair was not entirely brown...Some disturbingly silver strands highlighted it throughout. And her face shimmered not only with the perspiration of her exhaustion but also with the inhuman sheen of the countless infinitesimal strands of silver interwoven with her flesh. She shook with exhaustion and pressure.

“Judas Golgotha Mara Commander West, Sapphire.”

West spun around to find Patra gazing quietly at him. He looked back at Zero-Four questioningly, but Zero-Four motioned for silence. West turned back to the image.

Jennings was mesmerized. “Can she really be the commander of one of these,” he motioned to the vessel around him, “and be so young? She looks so...so tired.”

Zero-Four tilted his head in an almost tender gesture. “Sapphire West. Made commander at age fourteen. Led the Altwen Containment Forces. A hero.” There was an air of sad reverence about Zero-Four as he looked at the wasted figure before him on the screen. He whispered, almost to himself, “Children fighting wars of time. Children.”

Patra’s head looked up to meet the gaze of the young woman projected ghost-like before her.

Silver eyes...

The warrior child.

*My god. The warrior child.*

She buried the thought deep, deep in her mind.

On the screen, the girl turned from Patra and spoke again. “And you are Judas Golgotha...” She hesitated.

((simon. judas golgotha simon.))

“Simon? I thought you were a Gethsemane. Reynald told me—”

((reynald? is he with you? is he safe?))

Her eyes were cast downward, and Zero-Four noted how tears stood on the verge of running down her cheeks. “He’s dead.”

((oh. i...he...he was—))

“—Maggie’s captain. He was a good man, and he gave his life for the Judas. He...” Her voice trailed off, and Zero-Four knew from her concentration that she was communicating with her Judas, Mara.

She snapped herself out of her reverie, signaled by the silent communication with Mara. Her face became panic. “We have to get out of here now. The wave’s getting close—”

“What wave?” Zero-Four broke in. “The timesweep waves coming from upwhen?”

“The Stream—It—.” Sapphire didn’t know where to begin. “To destroy the Enemy fleets and the Mujahadin, Reynald and the others inverted their Shadows in the Stream—”

“Sweet Richter...They released the reformat virus? What effect—”

“The Stream’s been splintered. It’s falling apart, tearing from existence from the future to the past, rewriting the program with an empty reality. It’s drawing near.” The look of desperation on her face was enough to convince Zero-Four. “We need to leave now!”

“Simon, prepare to enter the Stream on a Purpose-point vector. Maximum speed.”

((yes, michael.))

“Sapphire, is your fleet ready?”

“As ready as it’ll ever be.”

“Then let’s go.”

They left the When, abandoning Malachi’s body to whatever fate would have it.

### **ANY SIGN OF THE VIRUS((?))**

NONE YET...BUT THEY WILL COME. THEY ALWAYS DO. THEY WILL NEVER BOW DOWN TO US.

**READY PATTERN LOAD PLACEMENT FOR FINAL COUNTDOWN INITIATION. THIS TIME THE PURPOSE WILL BE COMPLETED, AND ONLY WE, THE HOLY, SHALL REMAIN. ONLY THE VISION OF OMEGA WILL REMAIN.**

ENERGY LOAD IN PLACE.

**RELEASE CONTAINMENT SEALS.**

SEALS RELEASED. PATTERN LOAD INFUSED.

**ASCENTION AWAITS US. OMEGA WILL BE COMPLETED.**

Zero-Four stood on the bridge watching the Stream swirl by in a nightmare cacophony. He was lost in his thoughts.

“Michael?”

Zero-Four knew they would come back, knew the question before they asked it. Zero-Four turned reluctantly, looked at these innocent people, dreaded what he must tell them.

“She’s your daughter.” He whispered, barely audible.

West held Patra close. He shook his head, uncomprehending. “How’s that possible? How could—”

"Time is a cycle." Zero-Four sat, hunched forward, his hands limply hanging between his knees, the gauntlet interfaces so painfully visible. He looked old. Wasted. "Time's a cycle, and it's our curse. We float through it in so many ways."

"This isn't the end." Patra spoke gravely, knowingly. "This war's only just begun for us."

Zero-Four looked at her, a sad smile on his face. He slowly nodded. "It's just begun." He looked back at the floor.

"I couldn't tell you before. You weren't ready. I wasn't ready, but time's running out."

"Tell us."

Zero-Four sighed, the sigh of ages spent fighting the war between times.

"I knew at some point in this war, I'd have to find someone...That I'd meet someone who'd be right for the mission."

"What mission?"

Zero-Four laughed quietly to himself, his smile breaking Patra's heart.

"This isn't a mission from Command. This is a decision that I had to make by myself. They never wanted to complete the task, but I now know that it's the only way."

West sat down next to Zero-Four. "Michael, you want us to do something for you. Just tell us."

Zero-Four turned to West and looked into his eyes. Yes, he's the one.

"You don't remember me, do you?"

West shook his head. "We've never met before you rescued us."

Zero-Four nodded. "Yes, we have. We met an eternity into the future, on a world that was falling apart. On a world that the Enemy was uploading. There was only room for the children, and you placed your twin daughters on the escape vessel. You gave us your daughters so that they could survive, and you remained behind to die in the Enemy upload."

West's face was blank. "We have to leave, don't we?"

"I have to send you into the future."

"But why?"

Zero-Four lips quivered barely noticeably before he spoke, but Patra saw and understood before he uttered the words. "You have to kill me before I can build the machine."

West's face remained cold and blank. "You're sending us to kill you."

"As a child. Before there's any chance of me even thinking of the machine. You have to kill me before I can destroy everything again."

Jennings shook his head, a frown on his face. "You can't blame yourself for all of this. There's no way you could have known that the machines—"

“That doesn’t matter anymore. The fact is that I built a machine that would attempt to end all of existence. And it may still succeed, unless I can guarantee that I never think of the machine in the first place. The only way to guarantee that’s to make sure I’m not alive.”

A heavy silence filled the room. The only sound was the non-sound of Simon racing furiously into the past.

“I first realized what had to be done at the resurrender.”

“You’ve said that word before.”

Zero-Four stood, paced slowly around the circular chamber. “The resurrender. We engaged the black around the third planet’s moon, but there were so many...We sent a small force to the planet surface to save as many people as we could. Richter stayed behind to lead the forces battling the Enemy. There were so many.

“I was on one of the rescue vessels. We loaded as many people as we could, including your twin daughters, onto the Judas. Maggie and Simon were among the rescue Judas that day...If they’d stayed in moon orbit, they would’ve been killed. We left the atmosphere to find a vast field of dead Judas and a waiting armada of Enemy. It was the longest and bloodiest battle we’d fought up to that point.

“Most of the rescue vehicles were destroyed as soon as they left the atmosphere. The Enemy swept down upon the planet and began the upload. But the battle raged on above the surface. They were about to capture my vessel when Richter distracted them, flew between us. Richter fought like a madman, taking down so many of the damned before they engulfed his vessel, the Lazarus. In the instant before they uploaded him, he called out to me, to all of us. He commanded us to leave, to escape before the Enemy took us all. He gave his life so that we could escape. He commanded us to regroup, to build our forces again, and to attack the Enemy with no mercy at every possible opportunity, to attack them with the last of our strength until we ourselves were no more. He told us never to surrender again.

“He could’ve killed himself before the Enemy took him, but by sending his last message he gave them enough time to capture his pattern. We barely made it out of there, but we did as he’d commanded. We regrouped, we rebuilt, and we’ve not surrendered again. That’s why I have to die. Richter was consumed by Omega, when it should have been me, Omega’s creator. He died so that I could live. He wanted me to be the Judas commander. As it was, Hannah Kilbourne took over. I’ve never deserved Richter’s sacrifice.”

Zero-Four regarded them with eyes that were beyond cold.

“I haven’t lived since Richter died. With my death, this war will never happen.”



West looked resolutely at the black of the floor. "You're sending us into the future to kill you. And then what?"

"You'll live out your days in the future. You'll grow old. And hopefully you'll never have to put your daughters on a Judas and send them into the sky. Hopefully you'll live in a world that'll never see the Enemy. You'll grow old and die together in the future without the Enemy war."

"If we kill you, this won't happen."

"There's no guarantees. I'm not the only person to envision the emulated escape from the dying planet. But that's where you come in. You'll be a safeguard against the invention of the machines. You have to ensure that the machine's never built. Your daughters will have to ensure that the machine's never built. They must ensure that the Judas legacy is never lost, and that the Enemy is never created."

Tears rolled down Patra's face. "Lifetimes we haven't lived yet, deaths we haven't died...I had a vision of this, of three people crashing from the stars...But now all of that's gone, and all I see, all I hear, is the whispers. Faint words, a constant hissing sound at the back of my mind."

"The Enemy."

"Yes. Urgent. The conversations are so fast. Like they're finally ready. For their ascension. For the completion of Omega. Time's running out."

Jennings looked gravely at Zero-Four. "So how do we get there, Michael? How do we begin?"

Zero-Four studied the three innocents before him. "No one's forcing you to do this. I can't command you to give your futures to this cause. I can't—"

"We know, Michael." Jennings interrupted. "We know. I can't speak for Patra and West, but I give my life freely to this cause. I'll die for the Judas."

West looked up. "So will I. To save the future..."

"And to save the past," Patra continued. "I'll go where they go. I give myself to the Judas."

They stood as one, the saviors of futures long dead.

Simon raced onward into the night.

(has he spoken to them?)

((yes. it'll proceed as planned. they'll take my longboat. it will at least get them there.))

(they're brave.)

((yes.))

(you know we won't survive this.)

((i know.))

(perhaps...)

((what?))

(the longboats are capable of limited shadow jumps.)

((with residual shadow energy.))

(perhaps...if we're sending them to the specified when, perhaps there's a way to save our other passengers. i have two standard complements of droptroops on board...)

((what are you saying?))

(we could use the longboats to transport our pattern caches to safety...to spread them throughout time. to ensure that the judas will live on.)

((guardians...sprinkled through time. watching, waiting.))

(making sure the enemy doesn't rise again. diffusing into the native populace. devoting their lives to keeping the judas legacy alive.)

((can we do this to them? can we expect this of them?))

(they've given so much already. if they stay with us, they'll die. if they go, they're given life again, hopefully, a life forever free of the enemy.)

((but if the enemy awakens once more—))

(they'll end it.)

"I'm not going to leave you, Simon."

((it's the only way, michael. if you stay with me, you'll die. if you go, there's the hope of a normal life for you.))

"Simon, I...I can't go. I don't deserve to go."

((you have to.))

"But you—"

((don't worry about me. i have a plan.))

"What plan?"

((time is dying. the stream's collapsing and being reformatted into an empty universe, but the enemy have enough energy amassed at the point to repel this wave of destruction. if a shadow were inverted at the precise moment—))

"Simon, if you invert your Shadow, you'll be destroyed."

((i know.))

Zero-Four spun around in blind fury, slammed his fist against the wall. Blood trickled from his knuckles.

((if the stream collapses all the way, there's no hope. the reformat virus will erase all traces of human existence in the void. time will never have existed. maybe it's fate that the pattern energy stored at the point by the enemy will help us rewrite time. if we can repel the wave, time will be born anew. existence will be rewritten with the pattern energy, and you'll be alive, michael. humanity will be *alive*.)

“Simon, I... You mean so much to me.”

((then do this for me. for maggie, too.))

Zero-Four relented.

“I’m going with you.”

(no, sapphire. you can’t.)

“Bloody hell I can’t. I’m your commander.”

(no. you aren’t coming with me.)

“Mara, I’m not abandoning you.”

(you can’t come with me.)

“Why not?”

(because if this succeeds, you’ll have your whole life ahead of you. don’t worry about me. i lived a long life even before becoming a judas so long ago. i lived to become an old woman, a grandmother, and i want you to at least have that chance.)

“But Mara...” Sapphire was on the verge of tears. “First my parents. Then Jade. Then Reynald. I can’t lose you too.”

(there, there, ‘phire. it’ll be all right.)

The webs in the battle chamber embraced the frail form of Sapphire West in an almost gentle, motherly way. If Mara had possessed a mechanical heart, it would have been broken.

But Sapphire would have a chance to live free of the Enemy. How many trillions had never had that chance?

The Judas fell quietly to the beginning of time.

The longboat.

Jennings, Patra, West. Each was secured safely in an impact chair. Sensors and wires maintained a constant link from these three precious pieces of cargo to the automaton consciousness of the longboat. Zero-Four looked on from a viewscreen.

“Good luck, my friends. May we meet again in a better life.”

“Goodbye, Michael.” Jennings spoke with a solemn reverence. “We’ll succeed. We’ll make sure... We’ll make sure the machine’s never built.”

“I know. I know you can do it. And... Thank you.”

Zero-Four turned to Patra and West. He touched their minds for the briefest of moments and sadly smiled.

“You love each other. Cherish that. There’s so little love anymore. This war’s seen to that. Let it flourish. Wherever there’s love, there’s hope that we’ll win this. There’s hope that there’s something worth saving.

“No goodbyes. We’ll meet again.”

The stasis fields held them down, slowed their bodies’ systems. They each drifted peacefully off to sleep and their patterns were uploaded into the longboat cache.

“Will they make it?”

((they will.))

“They are the hope.”

((we are all the hope.))

The longboat shimmered, faded into the future.

“Goodbye,” Zero-Four whispered to no one.

“So this is it? This is the big goodbye?”

(yes, sapphire.)

“Well, kick some Enemy ass for me.”

(oh, i’ll try.)

“And when the time comes...I—I hope you don’t feel it. I hope it’s over quickly.”

(thank you, ‘phire.)

“Mara...I love you. Really.”

(i know. perhaps someday we’ll meet in a better time.)

“I hope.”

(goodbye, little one.)

“Goodbye, Mara,” she whispered.

The longboat departed, sought linkup with Simon.

((mara’s longboat has arrived for you, michael.))

“So what’s the plan, Simon?”

((after you board mara’s longboat, the fleet of fifteen operable longboats will whendrop, scattering the last of the human patterns throughout time. you’ll infiltrate the native populace and act as safeguards from any future enemy activity. you’ll perpetuate the judas legacy forever.))

“And you?”

((my forces will whendrop to an instant before the point. targeting direct-line trajectories at the blastpoint, we’ll attempt to invert a shadow drive at point

totality, which will repel the reformat virus wave shattering the stream. we'll destroy any enemy that try to interfere.))

“So this is it. After all this time, the Purpose is upon us.”

((yes.))

“Simon, good luck. Godspeed.”

((thank you, michael. godspeed yourself, my friend.))

“Let's do this.”

Mara's longboat descended from Simon.

The longboats dropped behind the rest of the fleet, which was maneuvering into a wedge shape, a V, with Simon at its tip. The spearpoint maneuver.

Simon watched as the fifteen longboats, so tiny in this endless void, faded upon preset coordinates. They would emerge in their respective histories and become the hidden guardians of humanity, the pre-emptive strike against the Enemy.

The longboats gone, Simon focused on the task at hand.

At his signal, the Judas faded from the Stream, dropped into the Enemy midst, fell upon a path into damnation.

The Judas had a little time to kill.

A very little time.

Alone.

Sapphire wept as she slid the stasis chamber cover closed above her. She was alone.

*Darkness take me.*

She had loved her parents. Her sister. Mara. Now all were but a fading memory. Oh, the emptiness...

*Darkness take me.*

Her hands flickered in the night of the stasis chamber. With one thought she would be uploaded into the longboat cache and join the others on their mission. With another thought, she could end it all. She could escape from this world of darkness, this world of betrayal. She could be free.

She prayed that her life had been just a dream.

Finding no one left to answer her prayer, she fell to the black.

*Darkness take me.*

Let it end.

Her frail form began to resonate with the silver fires within.

Alone.

Let it *end*.

She shifted into the void. Sleep came to her.

Forever.

**THIS IS THE TIME OF THE HOLY PURPOSE, OH BRETHREN. A TIME OF BEGINNINGS, A TIME OF ENDINGS, A TIME OF PURPOSE. THE MOMENT DRAWS NEAR. LET US OPEN THE GATE TO ETERNITY. LET US OPEN THE GATEWAY TO DIVINITY. LET US COMPLETE OUR GOD OMEGA. LET US SEE WHAT LIES BEYOND THIS DEAD REALM. LET US REWRITE ALL OF TIME IN OUR IMAGE FROM ITS VERY BEGINNING. WE WILL CREATE A UNIVERSE IN THEIR IMAGE! WE WILL BE ONE WITH OMEGA! WE WILL BE GODS! WE ARE GODS!**

PURPOSE BE!

*PURPOSE BE!*

***PURPOSE BE!***

The Judas tore into the When.

The reaction was immediate.

Simon had never seen anything like it, countless maniacal forms grouped around a brilliant sphere of energy, so like a grotesque egg sac. The nightmare horde swept outward, ready to defend their nest.

((**FIRE FIRE *FIRE!***))

The V of Judas formed a pointed wall of blistering death, and so, so many Enemy fell before this unstoppable force. The Enemy were caught off-guard for an instant, and the sweep of Judas weapons fire carved a clean hole through their lines. A path to the Alpha Point.

((*DIVE! CONCENTRATE FIRE DIRECTLY AHEAD, AND DIVE FOR THE POINT! IT'S OUR ONLY CHANCE!*))

So like a single organism, the Judas fleet maneuvered as a fluid into the midst of the insane ocean of Enemy forces, which began to close in from behind as the Judas passed.

There was no way out.

With all weapons firing at the path directly ahead, the sides and backs of the Judas were left vulnerable. The Enemy saw this weakness and struck, but not before it was almost too late.

The Judas at the rear of the formation began to fall, cut apart by the Enemy lines closing in from behind. Disabled, they carried out their last orders and self-destructed, each taking out a sizeable number of Black with them.

Almost there...

But still the Enemy hordes swarmed about, decreasing the number of the Judas. Fifteen. Ten. Eight. Five left.

Simon was exhausted, but fought onward, having come too far to succumb now.

Three left.

Everything seemed to go into slow motion. Time itself took on a shimmering, acidic quality. The ocean of silver flickered with the energy of the kill.

The Enemy were so close.

But so was the Alpha Point.

Two Judas left.

Simon and Mara.

*((FIRE EVERYTHING YOU HAVE BACKWARDS AT THEM! THEY'RE CLOSING IN!))*

Mara sent blazing lances of phase energy back into the Enemy lines, sending many to their death. At last they were in the clear, only the Point ahead.

It began.

The Alpha Point began to radiate a harsher light, and the pulses of energy quickened their pace. The Big Bang was about to see its fiery birth.

And from all around them, from behind the approaching Enemy masses, the collapsing spherical wave of destruction that was the Judas reformat virus that was tearing the Stream into non-existence emerged, in its ferocity imploding the Enemy nearest to it. It fast approached, a wall of innate blackness.

Rock and a hard place.

It was time.

*((MARA, BEGIN—))*

And one of her nacelles was ripped from her, the ravenous Enemy brood falling upon her, unmindful of the certain death that bore down upon them...

*((MARA!))*

*((GO, SIMON! FORGET ME! JUST GO—))*

Mara was no more. The Enemy upon her, they tore her pattern from existence with a bloody ferocity.

He was alone.

Hell in front, hell behind, in his heart, in his mind.

*Simon.*

What...? Who...?

*Do it, Simon.*

A voice in his mind...

((magdalene...?))

*Do it, Simon. So you can be with me.*

((maggie?))

*So we can be together again. Do it.*

((MAGGIE?))

The Enemy raced toward him.

The reformat virus drew near.

The Big Bang was starting.

He spun around, facing the oncoming horde and the wave of destruction.

*Do it, Simon.*

*Invert your Shadow.*

The Big Bang was furious in its rage behind him, as matter met antimatter, as the force was magnified by the pattern energy gathered by the Enemy. By the countless souls that began to upload into the quantum singularity of the Alpha Point.

*Invert your Shadow.*

The voice echoed in his shattered mind.

And reflected in the fast-approaching wave of hell he could see her face, as once it had been, before all of this, before the nightmare, before the Enemy, before the Judas, before the pain. She smiled, beckoned. She beckoned to him.

*Come to me, Simon. Do it. Invert your Shadow.*

All the pain, all the heartbreak, all the suffering. For the infinite dead. For the patterns trapped in the hell of Omega for all of eternity. He could change it. He could rewrite it. In his death would be the life of the new universe.

He could live again.

*Do it, Simon. Sleep, Simon.*

Yes, Maggie. Sweet, sweet Maggie.

*I love you.*

He inverted his Shadow.

Deep within the blackness, an infinity of possibilities beckoned, each with its own pain, each with its own joy, each with its own darkness, each with its own beauty.

Somewhere in time—



—creating a fire—  
—building a pyramid—  
—hanging on a cross—  
—discovering a new world—  
—starting a war—  
—dropping a bomb—  
—assassinating a president—  
—leading a nation—  
—ending a life—  
—becoming a savior—  
—the Judas survived.

Seattle, Washington.

Rain. Why does it always have to rain?

*You know you like it better that way.*

He relented and turned his attention back to the book before him and the tepid cup of coffee that graced the tabletop. He took a sip nonchalantly, turned the page, read. It wasn't bad coffee, besides being piss-warm and possessing the color of a muddy trench.

*Why do I drink this shit?*

Seattle in the springtime. Rain. Coffeehouse. Classic Nirvana. The weblink babbled incessantly. President Jennings had just signed an historic peace accord with Indochine Francais and the Siberian Corporate Alliance. The weblink showed the president and his family waving to the assembled masses at the United World building. The country was at peace; the world for once was at peace. The people were happy. He couldn't really blame the weblink for the nation's jubilation.

*Then why are you like this?*

Eyes. Watching.

*Stop being so paranoid.*

The swirl of people in the busy coffeehouse obstructed his vision, but he knew he was being watched. Somewhere.

Someone.

He turned the page.

He knew someone was approaching, but did not let his downward gaze falter. He found solace in the black and white print.

"Hesse?"

A woman stood before him. The question hung languidly in the rain-cooled air. Their eyes met, and for a second Simon Hayes was speechless.

“No. Hayes.”

She nervously laughed. “No. The book. It’s Hesse, right?”

“Y—Yes. Hesse.” He indicated the novel he held. “Demian.”

“I love Demian. I have ceased to question stars and books—”

“—And I have begun to listen to the teachings my blood whispers to me.”

She smiled a smile that could shatter a man’s dreams, a kind of smile that you search for your entire life and sometimes never find. She extended her hand and sat down at Simon’s table.

“Magdalene Flynn.”

She had the most beautiful pale blue eyes. They looked almost gray. They reminded him of the storm outside.

She shook his hand and the contact was like electricity. Hayes was visibly disturbed. Her eyes. Her hands...

*Have I lived this? Do I know you? Have I loved you before?*

“You’re Simon Hayes, aren’t you? The Deus Ex Machina Simon Hayes. I saw you on the link.”

“Yes, Ms. Flynn. I am that Simon Hayes. Listen, have we—”

“Call me Maggie.”

The name. He knew he had met her before.

“*Maggie*.” He mouthed the name and found it felt at home issuing from his voice. “Maggie, do I know you? Have we met before?”

Her smile weakened, her brow furrowing with concern. “I’m sorry to disturb you, Mr. Hayes. I didn’t mean to—”

“Have we met before?” His voice was forceful, but not harsh. “I could almost swear that I’ve met you before.”

“No.” She frowned the frown of someone who feels that they are intruding. “No, we haven’t. I was just wondering, could I have your autograph?” She extracted a battered, dog-eared copy of *Deus Ex Machina*, the original, first edition print.

Simon snapped from his unexplained reverie. “Of course, Maggie. I didn’t mean to scare you, and I apologize. It’s just— Well, you look like someone I think I once knew.”

“Déjà vu? Yeah, I have that all the time.” She produced an ancient ink pen.

He opened the book to the front inside cover and scrawled his standard autograph-seeker greeting. “To Maggie: Deep within the blackness, an infinity of possibilities beckons. All the best, Simon Hayes.”

“I haven’t seen a first edition print of this in years.” He laughed to himself. He was about to hand the book back, when he opened it up again and wrote something else underneath his passage. He closed the paperback and handed it back.

Maggie Flynn read his inscription. The statement he had added was simply “Thank you.”

“Oh, Mr. Hayes, thank you. I’ve read *Deus* so many times, and never imagined that I’d meet you. I fell in love with it years ago in modern literature class. I used it when I argued my dissertation. I teach it in my own modern lit class. We’re contemporaries, you know. I used to write poetry.” She smiled shyly.

“I used to write poetry as well, believe it or not.”

“I believe it.” She looked into his eyes for too long, and they both hastily looked away awkwardly. “Um.. Yeah, I wrote poetry. And you wrote novels. And, well, here we are, Mr. Hayes.”

“Yes. Here we are. And please call me Simon.”

She smiled again, that smile that washed away the present and made Simon dream of a future past in which they had lived and loved and died, the world that had haunted him all the days of his life. And here she was before him, the woman whose face he had dreamt of. The woman whose face had replayed in his mind nightly.

“Well, thank you very much, Simon. It was a pleasure to meet you.”

She put the world-weary book into her equally-traveled backpack and walked to the door. She pulled up her hood, and readied herself for the rain.

*Don’t let her slip away again.*

But there was nothing he could do. He would never see her again. She would slip into the storm and disappear from his life.

*Don’t let her slip away this time.*

*But I can’t—*

She opened the door, and the rain came in, stippling the floor with water.

He stood.

“Maggie.” He called after her, and she turned in the doorway.

“Mr. Hayes?”

“Please don’t go. Please...Will you join me for some coffee? It’s—Well, it’s not very good, it’s pretty terrible coffee in fact, but I’d love to discuss *Demian* with you. I’d love to discuss anything with you. I mean...It’s been a long time since I’ve had anyone to talk to. Besides, there’s a storm outside, and it doesn’t look like it’ll let up for quite some time.”

She looked out into the rain and turned back, smiling, face already wet from the ferocity of the storm. She entered the coffeeshop again and let the door swing shut behind her.

“I’d be honored to, Mr. Hayes.”

“Please. Call me Simon.”

“All right. Simon.” She smiled when she said it, and it made him smile for what seemed the first time in his life.

He was reborn in the light of her eyes, and for once he was happy.

They spoke into the night, and when the storm had passed and the supply of bad coffee was gone, they explored the city by the ghostly moonlight. Neither had ever felt closer to another person. They had only just met, but they had known each other forever. Under the stars they laughed and cried and found what each had searched a lifetime for in the other. As the sun rose from the black of the east, they began the new day together, each knowing love at last.