WILLIAM L.K

THE VOICE
And so it was that on the third day after the annihilation, we began again. With my consciousness barely stirring, I noticed my hair was filthy and wet, clothes torn and unrecognizable. Struggling, I was able to get my head high enough above the water line to see the town before me in ruins. Mostly smoke now, some fire. I was one of the few who found something to float on. I was stretched out on a large, jagged piece of what I assumed was once part of a wall. It was sturdy enough to support my weight, and I had the luxury of a little extra room to spread out from time to time.

A bell was ringing from the edge of the beachfront, I would guess a few hundred yards from my position. It was the first sound I had heard coming from land since the exodus to the sea. There were less than a dozen of us out here floating aimlessly. Some on broken pieces of wood, some bent over barrels or pieces of trees, whatever would keep us afloat. The bell rang out louder and louder, almost an indication that it was all right to return. At least that is what the optimistic part of my brain was telling me. Some of the survivors had already started back to land. Hesitant but hopeful, I followed along. The sea was almost too calm against the backdrop of the torn and smouldering town. No manipulation of the water at all, just as still as could be. As I paddled in toward the coast, the sunlight occasionally bounced off the water and created an orangey-blue reflection mixed with the remaining fire. I must admit, it was eerily beautiful. Starting to kick up slightly, a few tiny waves finally did come alive just before I made it to shore. They made a subtle but unsuccessful attempt to knock me off my course.

I could see the bell clearly now, surprisingly shiny and unsullied. It had the size of a liberty bell, clanging away every three to five seconds. Next to the bell, standing on a sizeable metal scaffold, stood a large framed, bearded muscular Goliath. Well over six feet tall, he towered over the rest of us. Sounding the bell with methodical regularity, the giant stood there, never looking up, just ringing the bell over and over.

Some of the survivors were gathering around him as I placed my bare feet into the murky shoreline. Bare feet? Where did my shoes go? Did I have shoes on?

Then suddenly, the bell stopped ringing.

No sound, nothing and no one moved.

It seemed as though even the world itself were in a freeze-frame, unable to catch it’s breath, afraid of what might be next, if anything at all.

Then, before another movement would occur, it dawned on me. Something was so very wrong and I knew what it was. A sudden panic wrapped up every inch of my being as I began to tremble...

What is your name? I asked myself.

There was a long pause before I realized the truth.
Three days earlier

“Get down from there,” yelled Marie. “I don’t give a damn what you’re looking for, just get down!”

Marie had already had it, it was just before Noon on the Fourth of July, guests had arrived way too early for the pool party and John was upstairs in the attic searching for more decorations that they didn’t need. She also knew that with every decoration he put up, it would be her that would have to take them all down later when he was in a drunken coma.

“Calm down,” Said John from the upstairs attic, hardly affected by her small tirade. He was going to find the fourteen electronically lit American Flags, complete with sparkly fringes and cast iron stands, even if it killed both him and her, preferably her first. “I know I put them here last year, they look so friggin cool shining on the fence!”

Marie kicked the bottom of the staircase, hurled a silent ‘screw you’ up at him, and stormed away toward the pool.

The muddled nightmare of a party was well in swing. Kids everywhere, parents everywhere, people Marie was sure she didn’t invite everywhere. What fun! She thought, quite sarcastically, as she prepared herself for the onslaught of the day. Despite her reluctance, she was trying her best to be moderately jovial. She found a red and white hairclip in the bathroom cabinet and put her long brown hair up into a ponytail. Marie was once a very attractive woman, but life, and marriage, actually marriage mostly, had taken the vivacity and exuberance from her youth. She was not old, but she was quite weathered.

Grabbing two trays of hors d’oeuvres from the stovetop, she then hip checked open the back door and stepped out onto the deck leading to the pool.

The sun was radiant and powerful today. For the sun lovers, it was the perfect day to tan and soak up the rays. For Marie, this was pretty much what hell must be like. She hated the heat. Obviously, this was not her idea to have this kind of party, but like always, she gave in to John and passed out invitations hoping for a less than stellar turn out. Of course, it didn’t work out that way. The sea of people was less than tasteful for her liking, there were maybe only three of four actual friends among the crowd, most were there for the free food, fireworks and booze.

“Appetizers everybody,” Marie shouted from the deck, the grubby hands already lurching forward.

It didn’t take long for Judy to sniff out the smell of fresh food as she rolled off her chair and began the bounce toward Marie. Judy lived next door, all three hundred pounds of her. She was harmless enough, but her opinionated husband Isaac was another story. Half the size of Judy, thick rimmed dark glasses and a bald head, Isaac had something to say about everything, yes, everything! They were both wearing summer garb today, complete with matching Hawaiian shirts and shorts. Judy was popping out of her shorts, blubber desperately trying to break free. Oh boy, they were a spectacle indeed.

“Mmm, yummers!” Said Judy as she nearly knocked over two kids politely waiting. “I better get some for Isaac,” Judy smiled as she filled both fists.

Holy crap! Marie thought to herself. This day was going to be never-ending. There had to be over fifty people milling around the deck and there were bound to be more on the way. Not that Marie didn’t like parties, she just preferred intimate gatherings. This type of revelry wasn’t festive at all for her, just too much chaos.

She made her way off the deck, which was decorated with red, white and blue paraphernalia. Her daisies were lined in a few neat rows which bordered the short cobblestone walkway to the pool. The entire yard was meticulously landscaped, Marie took great pride in her many flower arrangements, a few being of the most exotic variety.

At least they thought ahead this year, hiring a lifeguard to monitor the pool. There were about twenty kids and parents already swimming, thankfully she needn’t worry about that. Marie and John didn’t have any kids of their own, even though everyone thought they’d make for great parents and had been married almost ten years. It was by choice, they both knew instinctively that they were far too selfish to fully commit to such an undertaking.

“I couldn’t find the flags,” John proclaimed, standing behind Marie and startling her for a moment. “I could have sworn they were up there.”

Marie shrugged, “Well, now you can help me out at least.”

“I will,” said John excitedly. “As soon as I get back.”

“Get back! What are you talking about?”

“I have to pick up the hero,” John smiled.

“Just go,” Marie said, ready to rip his liver out with her bare hands.

At first, she thought it was just the anger in her head making the sound she next heard. It was not. An abrupt
rumbling, like the sound of an impending earthquake tremor, made the activity of the party turn instantly to stunned stillness.

Then suddenly, and without warning, it happened.

As John started to walk away from Marie, the sunlight vanished! The spine-chilling silence of the unknown enveloped them all.

Marie stared upward, fixing her glare only into obscurity and darkness.
 CHAPTER 2 

So there I was, standing on the beachfront, looking intently at this giant of a man, waiting for something to happen. Nothing did, not for a long time, we all just stood there dumbfounded. I was still in shock, realizing I hadn’t lost my intelligence, but my identity. It was a horrifying feeling that washed over me. I was too scared to say anything to anyone just yet. None of this made sense, I had no recollection of how I got here, no understanding of why this was all happening. All I knew clearly was that I was alive and I was, for the time being, a survivor of whatever catastrophe had taken place.

Standing closer to it all, I could see the charred remains of what I assumed were some storefronts and a few houses. It didn’t look like a city stood here, but a small town maybe. Too much smoke still to make out any detail, but it was easy to see that the destruction was whole. It was hard to imagine what could have torn this place apart so completely. I assumed an explosion of some sort, it was the only explanation that made sense.

The smell was putrid, seemingly toxic. I knew for sure that I had never experienced anything in my life that could define the odor properly, except to say that I was close to vomiting from the stench.

The others were all gathering around the bell as the giant peered out over the small and frightened assembly. He cleared his throat as we awaited his words.

“Dies Unus!” The giant called out, his low voice booming out followed by a short reverberation.

Dies Unus? What the hell does that mean? Whatever it meant, it didn’t sound comforting. I looked around to see if anyone around me had any reaction. They all appeared to be just as confused. Except one man, bald and skinny, filthy from head to toe. I caught his eye and his glare seemed to say that he knew something the rest of us did not.

The giant had nothing more to say. Making his way down from the metal scaffold, he plopped down, leg over leg, onto the sandy seashore. He put his head in his hands and let out a sigh loud enough for all of us to hear.

Suddenly, I felt a tap on my shoulder. Frightened, I spun around quickly, fists clenched, to see the bald man before me.

“Relax,” he said, putting his hands in front of his face in a defensive position.

“I’m sorry,” I said instinctively, lowering my fists.

“It’s ok,” he said calmly. “Dies Unus! I know what it means!”

“What does it mean?” I asked, somewhat afraid to know the answer.

“It’s Latin,” he said. “It means Day One!”

I heard what he said, but could not comprehend any of it. Day One? What could that possibly mean? Maybe this stranger could shine more light onto this ambiguity.

“Who are you?” I asked him, somewhat hesitantly, and not sure if I would believe or trust him anyway.

Gazing at me intently, the man asked, “Don’t you know who I am?”

“Should I?”

“Well I was hoping you would, the way you caught my eye before, I thought maybe you knew me.” The man gulped awkwardly. “I wish I could answer you, but I can’t remember who I am.”

“Neither can I,” I responded, comforted by the company. At least I wasn’t alone in my confusion. “Do you remember anything?”

“I woke up and I was floating over a barrel out there,” He gestured toward the sea. “That’s all I remember. What about you?”

“Same, except I was on a piece of wood,” I said slowly. There was something clearly not right here. Something far beyond the realm of anything even remotely familiar had entered into this equation. Every indication was that we were experiencing some kind of paranormal phenomenon, there was no other rational explanation.

It was then we heard the voice for the first time. “Do not be frightened, we will tell you what to do,” the voice said. “Proceed Northeast.”

Just to make sure I wasn’t losing my mind, I looked at the man and asked, “Did you hear that?”

“Yes,” he answered, “Proceed Northeast.”

The voice continued, “You will see a single road. This road has been saved for your transport. You will not have any problem finding it, This road is the only undamaged part of the township.”

The voice sounded like it had to be coming from a large PA system. I scanned the area and saw nothing. “Where’s it coming from?” I asked the man, but I was also asking myself.

The man started his investigation along with me, searching the shoreline, the edge of the town, the sky. Neither of us could locate the origin of the voice as it continued to speak.

“You will walk this road until you receive further instructions. You may choose one individual to travel with, but no more. Talk to no one except your partner. Failure to comply with these instructions will be dealt with severely.
We can only accept you if you prove yourself, at the very least, capable of following basic commands.”

After the voice finished speaking, I noticed the man staring at me. “Guess we’re partners,” he said.

With nothing to gain or lose, and an incomprehensible urge to follow these directions anyway, I nodded my head as we began to walk. The others followed closely behind, except for two.

Two men, hair gray and noticeably older than the rest, had apparently decided not to venture down this road. I was in no position to offer guidance, except I had a growing chill come over me, A feeling that the men were making a horrible mistake.

It didn’t take long for this fear to become reality. We had only walked maybe fifty yards, when I suddenly heard a rapidly increasing drone. A deep bellowing hum that soon became intolerably loud and piercing. The sound was so loud that it stopped us all in our tracks.

Then the voice spoke again, clear and definitive, “Remember, disobedience will not be tolerated.”

Just as I turned back to see the two older men, the hum tapered off and the men were gone.

In the blink of an eye, they had completely evaporated.
“Marie,” John said, standing in the blackness, wondering what had happened.
“T’m here,” answered Marie, holding out both hands, reaching for him. John launched his body toward the sound of her voice and fell into her left arm, grabbed her and held her close. “An Eclipse?” she asked
“I don’t know, maybe,” John answered, not sure what to make of this. They both looked straight up, suddenly unaware that they were just in the middle of a party, or that they were standing amidst all these people in their own backyard.

The sun was gone, completely. The darkness was complete, nothing in the sky, no stars, no moonlight, no clouds, just never-ending blackness. The fear gripped them all, the children gathered at the party were reduced to whimpering and silence.

This was clearly no ordinary occurrence, and they were all quick to realize the intensity and completeness of the darkness. It wasn’t just that the sun had vanished, but the way in which blindness had occurred so quickly and with no warning.

Marie could feel John’s heartbeat quickening as he pulled her closer to his chest. He looked for some words of comfort, but could find none. Marie felt equally hopeless, there was nothing to say, they were certainly experiencing some mystical happening, far beyond what their minds could possibly comprehend.

Then, a light! Then, another!

Several of the guests started lighting their cigarette lighters. Isaac made his way to the barbeque, opened it and lit it. In the startling and complete darkness that surrounded the party, the light that was now emanating from the lighters and the barbeque was fervent.

Helped by the lifeguard, the guests that were in the pool quickly made their way out of the water. The adults did their best to calm the children. It was a difficult task, since the adults were seemingly more anxious than the kids.

It had only been a minute or two since the sunlight vanished, but it seemed an eternity. There was a timeless sense of all matter. As if everything and everyone were moving in super slow-motion.

Marie and John watched as the guests started to cluster together near the deck. Marie took notice of a man she didn’t readily recognize, a very tall man with a beard, running into the house. Barely visible from the deck, she could see he was checking the kitchen lights, trying to turn them on. Nothing, no power! Marie realized that the pool filter had stopped running as well.

All of a sudden, the pool water started to bubble!

A vigorous, dense fog rose from the water as the bubbling became erratic and ever more powerful.

The wind, which was not present a moment earlier, kicked into high gear. All the lighters and the barbeque extinguished beneath the strength of the wind.

Silence turned to horrifying screams as the party guests scattered into the gloom. They were looking for shelter, but none would be found.
We were on the road now. Just as the voice said, it wasn’t hard to find. I counted eight of us total, walking closely together. The only person I was concerned with was my new partner. This bald and skinny man seemed harmless enough. Like me, his clothes were torn and he was also barefoot.

We walked without much talking, still in considerable shock from seeing the two men completely vanish before our eyes. They were there one second and gone the next. It was both surreal and absurd.

As we made our way down the road, all we could see was destruction. One home after another lay in smouldering ruins. The stink of smoke was thick in the air. Power lines and tree limbs cluttered what was once sidewalks and lawns.

The road itself was remarkably unscathed, much like the voice said it would be. If it wasn’t for the devastation all around us, the road itself would have appeared to be a normal suburban street.

We had walked maybe a mile when my bald friend spoke, “Any thoughts on what this is all about?” he asked, although I had a feeling he had some ideas of his own as well.

“I wish I knew, I can’t even remember my name,” I said, as we marched along. “Do you have any memory at all? I can’t remember anything about who I am.”

“I wish... I know I’m not crazy, but...” The man paused a long moment. “This is a dream, another reality.” He finally said, convinced that could be an answer.

I thought long and hard about that, but this was no dream. I was also not crazy, and I knew the difference.

Kicking some loose rocks as I walked, I asked. “Does any of this look familiar?”

“No, I’ve been looking for a reminder...Something...None of this looks even remotely familiar. It’s so strange because I feel like I know my name, It’s as if it’s on the tip of my tongue. I feel like I even know who I am...it’s almost as if my brain won’t let me go there.”

As nonsensical as that may have sounded, I had the same sensation. I didn’t feel like I had lost my identity completely, just that my brain was keeping it from me, like a secret it wouldn’t let me in on.

We walked for what seemed like a couple of miles. More of the same all around. Smoke, waste, total destruction.

Then the humming started again. Did we somehow displease the voice? Were we to be exterminated next?

“This has been an assessment,” the voice said. It was just as loud as we heard it before, but no sign of where it was coming from.

“We want to share our world with a being that is intelligent.” The voice continued. “But we also want to be sure you are in suitable physical condition for the transformation.”

The bald man hit me on the shoulder, “The voice,” he whispered. “I know where it’s coming from.”

The voice continued, “Four of you will not be needed from this point on, Thank-you for your compliance but we do not feel your bodies will be physically capable of surviving the transformation.”

It wasn’t until that moment that I realized that my bald friend and I were many steps ahead of the others. Four of the eight had drifted and were maybe fifty yards or so behind us.

The humming started again. Increasing in volume and tone. The emerging drone of annihilation.

Looking back, the four survivors who lagged behind disappeared from sight as the hum came to an abrupt halt.

“Now, continue.” the voice said calmly.

After a moment, I turned toward my bald friend. “The voice, where is it coming from?” I asked.

“It’s not coming from anywhere,” the man said. “It’s in our heads.”
Within moments of the wind kicking up, a vibrant red light shone from the bottom of the pool. This was followed immediately by a thunderous rumbling as the wind continued to howl.

The pool water started to spill up onto the patio and splash violently as the red light became ever more ominous, thicker and brighter.

Marie wondered why no one was running and then she realized why. As she tried to move her feet she became aware of the fact that she could not move at all. “I can’t move,” she screamed in terror.

“I know, neither can I,” said John. “My legs are numb, I can’t feel anything!”

Some force greater than their might was now in control. As hard as every guest tried to move, they were unable to pick their feet off the ground. They were helpless statues forced to watch.

Then, suddenly, a huge amount of water shot from the pool and splashed up onto everyone. The water was boiling and oppressive.

Their cries were only silenced by the roar. The sound of the bellowing roar which followed made quiet all their screams. Reverberating from the bottom of the pool, it was spine tingling and deafening.

And then they saw the creature for the first time. Eyes shooting a beam of red light everywhere, it’s massive and muscular torso rising from beneath the water. A giant of a man, towering over all of them, it’s flesh was sodden, beige and slimy.

Emerging from the water, the beast-man stood before them in the center of the pool. It’s entire body was heaving and startlingly human-like, immense and powerful. It’s eyes emitting vivid red light, like pools of blood soaked carnage.

Marie and John were still standing there, squeezing each other as tightly as they could. Marie found herself blinking furiously, hoping this would all just go away when she opened her eyes each time.

John was trying with all of his strength to move his feet, it was a feeling of complete helplessness as he tried again and again. There was nowhere to go, they were at the complete and total mercy of this creature that stood before them.

The beast positioned itself facing Marie and John. It’s mouth open and drooling. A crimson tongue lapping side to side. It’s teeth were not teeth at all, they resembled thick nails emerging from the gum-line. Serrated and mammoth, they could instantly rip apart any prey.

Suddenly, it’s arms darted forward directly at Marie. As she screamed with hopeless abandon, the beast separated John’s arms from around her and bound Marie up into a cocoon of his own.

The beast lifted Marie up like a man would a fly. Marie could smell it’s breath as she approached it’s mouth. It was a disgusting odor, muddled with vomit and refuse. Marie thought it’s breath was foul, no doubt, from the scores of victims before. She ceased to scream, accepted her fate, death was upon her.

As she closed her eyes and waited for the pain, she took several deep final breaths. Her body was completely wrapped in the beast’s hands, except for her face. She could feel the pressure of the slippery fleshy tissue of the beast,compressing her body as she gasped for what she undoubtedly felt were her terminal breaths.

Let it happen, she thought. Just get it over with, I’m ready!

But nothing happened, the beast just stood there, looking at her, some drool falling from it’s face onto the fingers still grasping her. She looked directly into death, saw it’s bloodshot red eyes, felt the steam from the radiant glow.

Go on, if this is it, then do it! Just do it!

But still, nothing happened. This monster of a man just stared through her, easily becoming more and more serene with each passing breath.

Then, she locked onto it’s eyes. There was no movement as the beast and Marie just looked at each other.

Marie had a feeling something was saving her. The creature’s grasp had slackened.

She had faced death, so she thought, but now, she knew instinctively this would not be the end for her. Something inside her said to relax, it was going to be all right.
We walked along for maybe another two miles before we could clearly see the end in sight. The last part of the road was just up ahead.

My bald friend turned to me and spoke with heavy sarcasm, “Looks like the end of the road, maybe literally and figuratively.”

The devastation was more widespread than we could have imagined, and seemed to go well beyond just this town. As we approached the end of the road, we were able to see the horizon. It looked as if the sun had scorched the earth all around us. Smoke and some flames curled up toward the sky in every direction. Automobiles had swerved and crashed. The cars that we saw were mostly flattened, almost all of them had been burned to a crisp. Every home and small building was razed to the ground. No structure stood for as far as we could see. Smoldering trees and brush spread out before us into the distance. Quite simply, everything had been demolished.

As the road ended, it merged into what seemed like a grassy and heavily wooded area, maybe a park. The trees were all black and gray from the onslaught of fire, white ash covered the land.

The four of us that remained stood at the end of the road, not really sure if we were supposed to continue or not. I knew what we were waiting for...The voice!

It seemed to make sense that the voice would speak to us now, especially because of our present confusion. Still, there was no voice, no instructions.

The two men that were left with us looked no different than me and my bald friend. They were equally unkempt, dirty and lost. One of them had what I thought was probably red hair, I could see a little of it coming through the filth on his brow.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“I say we wait,” Red head answered, even though I wasn’t talking to him.

Without any warning, the hum began again. I remembered what the voice said earlier.

Talk to no one except your partner!

The hum was beginning to take on a life of it’s own, emerging from the silence and becoming the terminating drone we knew it to be.

As the hum reached it’s climax, red head suddenly was no more, vanishing right before our eyes. The hum decreased in volume and was gone as well.

Now there were just the three of us, and fright was undoubtedly tightening the choke hold.

My bald friend and I just looked at the third man. There was nothing we could say, and we feared trying to communicate through some other means would be fatal. The voice seemed to know everything, who were we to defy it after experiencing it’s wrath.

I remembered the voice said to travel Northeast, as far as I could tell, we were still heading in that direction.

I took a step onto the scorched grass.

Then another.

Nothing happened. The voice must want us to continue on.

And so we did.

We walked for another ten minutes, before we saw what I felt had to be our destination.

Looming large in front of us, revealing itself in more detail as we approached. There it stood, our destination, maybe our ultimate fate.

The fear the three of us felt was suddenly being replaced by an insurmountable and intense curiosity.

At last, an answer was upon us!
The stench of the beast was overwhelming and Marie could bear no more. She slipped into unconsciousness and her mind began to whirl.

She remembered her childhood. All the stories her Dad used to tell her about how special this place was. How lucky they all were that the voice had allowed them to continue on.

Like the rest of her childhood friends, they were all taught the ways of the voice. What they should expect and, most importantly, what they needed to comply with. The most important lesson was to always listen to and obey the voice.

This was the agreement the voice made with humanity when it invaded Planet Earth almost three hundred years ago. They were permitted to keep all the technology they had acquired, allowed to celebrate the same holidays, keep the same culture, mirror every part of the society they had grown accustomed to. The only catch was that their ancestors would be transported to their new home planet of Sebulese, where they all lived now. Shortly after transporting the population of Earth to Sebulese, a task which took close to four years to complete, Earth was transformed into a docking port for galactic space travelers.

The voice then made it clear to everyone, they had but one rule to abide by. Never question and always obey the voice. That was the agreement, and it was not negotiable.

As Marie slipped in and out of consciousness, she waited for the voice to tell her something, anything! What had they, or she, done wrong? There must be a reason for this creature’s appearance.

The beast lifted its giant feet from the pool and stepped up onto the patio.

Laying its claw-like feet down, the creature outstretched the arm holding Marie and set her down gently under him.

Marie, still struggling to remain alert, caught a glimpse of John, tears in his eyes, as he tried in vain to break free and rescue her.

There would be no rescue.

The massive monster looked around the yard once, shooting the glow of miserable red as his eyes assessed the crowd.

Then, with no warning and extreme prejudice, the red beam turned to flames. Scorching, red, fiery flames shooting from the creature’s eyeballs down upon its prey.

Flesh soon was devoured by the blaze, seared instantly into ash.

It only took moments for the entire yard to be filled with death. Marie watched in horror as John disintegrated beneath a fury of crimson fire and smoke.

There was time to hear only a few muffled screams as the fire stretched out quickly and ferociously over the victims. Marie could feel the steam on her face and body as she tucked her head down beneath her arms and started to wail.

Except for Marie, no one was spared.
There it was, right in front of the three of us. This was the spacecraft, no doubt, that lay ruin to this town.

It was huge, almost four stories high I would suspect. Shiny black, metal exterior with small blue and green lights affixed to the periphery. Halfway up the front of the craft, one enormous landing light jetted straight out. Right above that was a glassy tubular cockpit area, the glass was shimmering making it impossible to see anyone inside.

It looked no different than any other spacecraft I remembered seeing flying over Sebulese. While I still could not remember my name, Sebulese I suddenly and instinctively remembered quite well. Like a rainstorm, the memories started to flood into my brain.

It was the planet my Father was born on, and the planet where I was raised before we were sent to Earth to work at the docking port. I remember my Father saying that he had disobeyed his superior when I was still very young and our punishment was to be hard work at the docking port for at least the next generation.

I think I remembered Sebulese so well, mostly because my Father talked about it so often. We left there when I was still a boy, and working at the docking port on Earth was the only life I ever knew.

The only elder we ever answered to there was an extremely tall man named Quata. My Dad would remind me daily how important it was to follow Quata’s orders at all times. Failure to comply with Quata and his men would certainly spell doom for all of us. And so, that was my life before this.

It was funny, I hadn’t remembered any of this until we stood before this spacecraft. The spacecraft must have jogged loose this memory. Unfortunately, my name was still a mystery.

My bald friend turned to me and said, “Are you remembering also?”

“Yes,” I said. “I worked at the docking port on Earth.”

“So did I,” said my bald friend. “I think we worked together, I remember your Father, very protective but a good man.”

“I am starting to remember him also,” I said, a hint of nostalgia floating through.

My bald friend stared up at the massive spacecraft and said, “This ship is already equipped for travel, looks fully fuelled and polished to me.”

I knew we would never see a ship in this good a condition on Earth unless it was ready for takeoff. Ships that came to earth were there for fuel and cleanup mostly. This ship was ready for a voyage.

“We are not on Earth,” I said. “We must be on Sebulese.”

“Why?” Said my bald friend, simply.

“They want something from us, we better behave!” It sounded amusing at first, saying it that way, like a child afraid of his abusive parents. The truth, however, was just that.

The spacecraft made a noise, it was the hum. Not nearly as threatening as the times we had heard it before. The sound hovered over us calmly. Serene, tranquil, infinitely more friendly.

Then, the voice spoke to us. “So now you know what you once were, slave workers on Planet Earth. For the last twenty five years, you have been working there, servicing our spacecraft. The two of you have done well. However, we only need three of you for the transformation.”

I immediately spun my head around, there were three of us here. What was the voice talking about? Only three? That’s all there were.

Then the voice explained it all to us. “We have selected a woman to journey with you after your transformation, she will be your female counterpart, your mate. You will meet her shortly. We have done our best to transport most of the life forms here on Sebulese in the last three days. Through the use of conflagration and our own enhanced telekinetic energy we have extinguished their physical presence here and recreated them on Planet Earth, they will be the next generation of slave workers. We did not kill anyone, you should know that. We are not the barbarians the human race has proved themselves to be, we kill no one. To use a term you are familiar with, we recycle everything.”

The voice paused for a moment, apparently giving the three of us a chance to take it all in. Then, the voice continued, “You will soon remember everything about your previous life, including your names. Then, you will be transformed and your mission will be fully explained to you. We are sorry but since we can only take two of you along with the woman, one of you must be relocated to Planet Earth now.”

The third man stood up straight. My bald friend and I anxiously awaited the verdict. The hum turned ominous and threatening once again, increasing in volume.

Then, suddenly, I remembered my name. I turned toward my bald friend and instantly knew who he was. He worked with me on Planet Earth since I was a child, my older Brother, Peter.

“That is correct Adam,” said the voice. “This is your Brother, Peter. Do not be afraid, we will keep you together.”
The third man froze, realizing his fate.

Within moments the sound had increased once again and the voice spoke, “Adam and Peter, the man standing next to you was not a slave worker on Planet Earth, he lives here on Sebulese. We took him along because of his close connection to the female we have chosen. He may be of use to us some day, but not today.”

And then, just like the others before him, he was gone, transported back to Earth to work on the docking port. The hum decreased in volume and was gone as well.

Inside my head, I wondered what the man’s name was.

I didn’t need to ask out loud to receive an answer.

The voice answered me in my head, “His name was John.”
Marie had slipped completely into unconsciousness. The beast had used its own power of extra sensory perception to induce a coma-like effect on Marie. She had been sleeping now for almost three days.

When she awoke, she was no longer in her backyard. She had been taken aboard a spacecraft. She was placed comfortably on what felt to her like satin sheets and an extra soft pillow. As she awoke, she was still not sure if what she experienced was a dream or not. However, the unusual surroundings were confirming her fear that what she had experienced was indeed real.

Finally, the voice spoke to her.

“Marie, do not be afraid, John is safe.” The voice seemed convincing and kind.

Sitting up, she noticed the creature standing nearby. Jolting back to reality with an almighty sense of apprehension, she tried to scream but could not.

“Do not worry,” said the voice, trying to comfort her. “We are not here to harm you, we are here to help, show you how great you can be. We have been watching Sebulese and we are currently not pleased. Once again, humans have squandered the chance they have been given. You will have an opportunity to make things right again. However, this will be the last chance.”

Marie was dumbfounded, not sure what the voice wanted or expected. In her head, Marie lined up all the questions she had, hoping the voice would provide some clarification.

*What is it you want from me?* Thought Marie.

“You will be the child bearer,” answered the voice. “You will be Mother of the new world.”

*Why Me?*

“You know that is a silly question Marie.”

*Why is it silly?*

“It makes no difference who we choose, there is no formula for selecting someone. You are healthy and able to bear children, that is all we are concerned with.”

*What if I...*

“Don’t want to.” The voice finished her thought. “Now Marie, do you think that wise?”

She sat there in stunned silence, trying to free her mind from thought. She was still alive, so was John. Hang in there, she told herself.

“You should rest some more,” said the voice. “In a short time, you will meet your counterparts and be given further instructions about your mission.”

*Mission?*

“Marie, you are destined for a remarkable greatness, your mission will test your will. Trust us and the answers will be there to find.”
It was a tidal wave of emotion I was experiencing. To have lost my identity and then, suddenly have it all flood back into my brain at once. It was an overwhelming mixture of confusion and joy.

The events of the last few hours had left me in a state of total shock and awe. I could not even begin to imagine what the voice wanted from us now.

After John disappeared, Peter and I were taken aboard the spacecraft. We spent the better part of the last several hours being ‘conditioned’ for what is being called our transformation. Stuffed with all kinds of liquids and some food, none of it recognizable.

A massive and frightening looking creature had been administering the fluids and food to us, some of it intravenously. The creature looked like the rest of the crew, enormously tall and muscular. The most frightening thing about the creature was his blistering red eyes.

My fear had subsided somewhat, I knew I’d be dead already if they wanted me to be. I also had to admit that the thought of not going back to earth was a pleasant one. Of course, I did miss my Father, but having Peter here was a comfort.

“It is time,” The voice said. “We have been feeding you a mixture of what we call, potency enhancing substances. Everything you’ve been fed will have the chemical reaction necessary to help complete the transformation. We will be intravenously administering you two doses of a very powerful thermo-kinetic substance from our home planet. This substance will transform your skin into an armor almost impossible to penetrate. It will be your protection as you begin your mission. To save you the pain of the process, we will put you to sleep first.” The voice paused a moment and then asked, “any questions?”

What do you want from us? I thought to myself.

“It is not what we want that is important,” The voice answered. “if we want anything, it is a better life for you.”

YOU destroyed us, YOU did this to us.

“It would be easy for you to assume that, but we have done nothing but save you from yourselves.”

So give us a chance!

“What do you think we’re doing right now.”

I could feel myself beginning to fall asleep. The weight of it all was suddenly leaving me. I heard the voice ask once again. “Any other questions, Adam?”

Could I maybe get a cold beer?

“Very funny Adam,” answered the voice, as I fell into darkness.
Marie was ushered down a long corridor, shown to a dressing area and asked to put on the flight suit that was laid out for her. It was white and shiny with zippers, several pockets both on the jacket and the pants.

After she was done, she emerged to see the beast waiting for her. He led the way down another long corridor, all white, almost blinding.

They turned into a room where there sat two men, also in the same white flight suits. They were both having their intravenous needles removed from their arms when Marie walked in.

The voice then spoke to them all. “Marie, meet Adam and Peter.”

Marie was always uncomfortable with introductions but this was beyond ridiculous. What was she supposed to say?

“Why don’t you just say hello Marie,” The voice said.

And so she did, offering a handshake to both Peter and Adam. As awkward as it was, the men exchanged pleasantries.

Finally, the time had come for them to receive their mission.

The three of them were led to the cockpit area, Adam and Peter were very familiar with all the instrumentation and operating procedures associated with flying this vessel. They had serviced every part of almost every type of spacecraft for years. This particular model, the GS-42 series was equipped with all the latest technology including light-speed travel.

“The time is now,” said the voice. “This is the beginning, Dies Unus! Your mission is simple but for some reason your kind has had much difficulty assuming this task. This is the fourth and final time we will be giving the human race this opportunity, after this, should you fail, your kind will be doomed to live the rest of eternity as slave workers on Planet Earth. Your mission is to take this spacecraft and start again. Find a suitable planet to call your home. Build families upon families and love each other. The last part seems to be the most difficult for humans. But love is the highest priority of all, should you learn how to use it, you will understand how amazing life could be. You use but ten percent of your brain, this is no one’s fault but your own. Teach your children well and instill in them the thirst for knowledge so that they do not fail. The opportunity is now before you, I wish you well.”

They were left on the spacecraft to ponder their newfound mission.

They now the pioneers of a new human race. If a free life for mankind were to continue, it would now be up to them.

Then they noticed it.

They were alone.

The voice was gone.
- EPILOGUE -

And so it was that on the third day after the annihilation, we began again.
Gripped with fear, I stretch out next to a toilet bowl and begin to pray.

The movie ended for everyone fifteen minutes ago. There were only a dozen people watching the dreadful low-budget documentary when shots were first fired. The theater quickly turned into a bloodbath, shots ripping through flesh, bones crackling under the weight of relentless shotgun blasts.

Not knowing what to do, I fled the theater, ran to the bathroom and hid.

Clinging onto this sullied toilet bowl, I pant with irregular streams of breath. Wet toilet paper is stuck to the white tiled floor, a moldy stench floating through the dampness in the air. The green beaten-up stall door is locked, although I don’t remember locking it. Iridescent bathroom lights flicker through the smoky haze.

I check myself for wounds, I wasn’t hit. I’m sweating profusely, remembering the harrowing screams, the people dying all around me. It was only a few moments of time, but in that time life ended in the most vile and abrupt of ways. Guts and gore splashing onto the seats; fearful, faceless victims ducking for cover to no avail.

Enough time has passed now, I can let out a huge sigh of relief. I’m in the clear, the gunman must have left the theater. There would be no reason for him to stick around, with all that blood, I’m quite sure he killed them all. The last images I can remember is him standing there with a sick grin on his face; a slaughterhouse before him. I don’t even know how I was able to escape; but I did…for now anyway.

Then I hear the door to the bathroom open. It’s rusty hinges screech to a halt as it bangs into the dilapidated concrete wall.

Through a crevice in the stall frame, I see a human figure. I hear the unmistakable thump of a heavy footfall, then another, then another.

Crouching down on the floor next to the toilet, I see the boots, muddy brown with silver tips. Squatting down even further I see a man wearing a long black trench coat. That has to be the gunman. Certainly there is plenty of room inside the coat to hide a shotgun? And now I have cornered myself, I’m as good as dead. My brains will soon be splattered all over this small grimy stall. This is how I’ll die, on the floor in fetal position, whimpering next to a filthy toilet bowl.

Holding my breath, I feel my heart beat faster and faster, pounding furiously like a jackhammer pummeling my chest cavity.

The man approaches.

Methodically placing one boot in front of the other, the man is heading right towards my stall. There is nowhere to go.

Should I scream? No, I should wait it out, maybe he’ll leave, maybe I can talk him down, it’s possible, anything’s possible…

I cannot lie, I know instinctively who this man is. It has to be one of the celebrated guards of the new world regime. And they were sent here to kill me, no doubt. My insubordinate internet posts have finally caught up with me. The government takes no prisoners since the great civil war, and now I will pay with my blood.

I’ve spent the better part of the last six months posting in every forum and chat room I could find. Ripping apart the new world regime and all the false promises they have so flippantly made. I’m tired of it all; the phoniness, the masquerade, the blatant deceptions.

I urgently gasp for a few jagged breaths. Fear consumes my every fiber when I realize my breathing will certainly lead to my discovery. But I have no choice, I can’t hold my breath any longer. As I frantically smack my hands over my mouth, I feel my right foot kick out from under me. My sneaker makes a terrible scratching sound on the tile.

That’s it, I am done for!

Moving with purpose, I hear the boots coming straight for me. Unable to suppress my terror any longer, I begin to wheeze, a pathetic childish bawl. Then, suddenly, the boots stop. The man stands right outside the bathroom stall.

One long second in the unknown passes us by. The harrowing silence of doom chomps through my thin wall of awareness. My sanity takes flight as dread becomes my companion.

Then, shockingly, the boots turn away. They arch quickly, the silver tips clinking as the man runs from the bathroom. I breathe easy, perhaps luck is with me on this night.

But wait, there are several voices muttering something right outside the door.

“Come out with your hands up,” shouts a booming voice from just outside the bathroom.
I shake my head and look down to the floor.
There on the floor, I see it.
And now I remember it all. Staring up at me like a vulture ready to strike, I look down to see the shotgun I just used.
My memory pleasantly returns to me. I killed them all, and I loved seeing them die. They are all fakes and phonies. They deserved a fate such as this. My mission is complete, I have conquered them all.
I decide to give up, echoing the words over and over again in my head, “I knew I could do it, I knew I could do it!”
“You done rollin’ that yet?” Anthony asked impatiently, his twitching deep set eyes blinking furiously.

“Keep your pants on chief,” Gabriel answered calmly, dumping the last of the baggie onto the rolling paper. “Just take a chill pill partner; you need to learn the fine art of patience.”

“No, I don’t!” Anthony snapped, taking off his Met’s baseball cap to run his fingers through his tousled and dirty brown hair.

The lake swished softly just behind them. They were alone on the sandy shoreline, the early morning beginning to creep in, violet clouds settling on the horizon, a chill in the autumn air.

“C’mon already,” Anthony barked, “You roll that thing like my grandma. Just let me do it.”

“No, you can’t, you’re too freaked out right now.”

Gabriel finished rolling it, carefully sealing the cigarette shut. He held it up to his nose and smelled it. “Now, you do know what’s in here right?”

“Would you give me a freakin’ break,” Anthony said, punching his fists together. “Just light it!”

Gabriel took out a long lighter with a Black Sabbath logo on the side and lit the cigarette. This was not like any other joint they had smoked before. There was no marijuana in this cigarette.

“C’mon already,” Anthony yelled, “I gotta be home before my Dad gets up. I gotta work today.”

Gabriel grinned. He was fifteen years older than Anthony. His innocent charm, blonde crew-cut and muscular physique covered up the malicious intent lurking inside. “Tell me you understand what you’re about to do?”

Anthony’s eyes widened, “Now you’re just pissing me off. Light it!”

“No,” Gabriel shouted, “first, you have to tell me you understand…and you will accept the consequences…whatever they may be.”

Anthony’s bloodshot eyes twirled, he rocked his head back and forth, “For cryin’ out loud, yes, I understand, whatever you say, just give me a drag already!”

Gabriel smiled knowingly and handed the joint to Anthony.

The gates opened. Gabriel sat behind a menacing gray cloud of smoke, his minions dressed in sparkling robes as Anthony approached.

“You belong to me now,” Gabriel said, his face a shining beacon of fire, yellowy-orange haze surrounding his torso. His wings were mammoth, stretching out on both sides, flapping in foggy vapors.

Panic consumed Anthony, “Where am I? Who are you?”

“I am your destiny,” Gabriel answered.

“You’re not Gabriel. Don’t mess with me!” Anthony screamed.

The minions of angels laughed, the white clouds grew thick and dark. With a thunderous boom, a golden cage crashed down around Anthony, trapping him inside. Grabbing onto two shiny bars, he thrust his head forward, squinting to see through the ambiguous surroundings.

“What do you remember?” Gabriel asked.

“I remember smoking a joint with you.”

“I told you it wasn’t a joint, you don’t listen.”

Anthony began to laugh, “Ok, I’m tripping…fine, I get it.”

“Believe what you will,” Gabriel spoke with a seriousness that made all listen and fear. “You have crossed the line, my friend. You belong to us. And you will do my bidding from now until the end of time…”

“Anthony! You high?” Sara asked.

My head popped up, a little drool coming out of my mouth. “Oh, sorry,” I said, regaining my bearings.

I sat on a stool, guitar in hand, in the rear storage room of Gino’s Music Store and Pizzeria.

“Boss will be in soon,” Sara said as she grabbed some staff paper from a silver file cabinet, taking time to slam the drawer shut with authority. “Get yourself together, dirt bag!”

“Get a life, Sara,” I said, wiping the drool from my lips. “When did I get here?”

“You were here when I got in, you were sitting right there looking like a corpse.” Sara was not one to mince words. She’s in my 10th grade history class where we never speak. I got the job here as a part-time guitar teacher, full-time pizza delivery boy because my Uncle Gino owns the shop. When he asked if I knew anybody who played clarinet, I thought of Sara cause she’s always carrying it around. My mistake, I never would have asked her to work here if I knew what a ball buster she’d turn out to be.
Sara turned at the door, adjusted her black hair which was tucked up into a bun, a pencil slipped through the knot.

“Hey, wait,” I said. “I’ve really been here all morning?”

“You’re wasted! Get it together!”

“I’m not wasted,” I said, realizing that I should’ve been. I smoked the joint this morning with Gabriel; then…..well, I don’t remember. The most shocking thing is I’m not high, not even a little bit. I’m not that concerned though cause I clearly remember smoking the joint, and now, I’m not even a little high. What happened?

After spinning a few possible scenarios around in my head, I looked up to see that Sara had left the back room. Picking up my blue electric guitar, I went out to the front of the store. The fresh smell of pepperoni and cheese wafted through the pizza-music store. Boy, I’d love a Stromboli right about now. Yummy!

“Gooda Mornin, Dirta-bags!” Mario yelled from behind the counter, busy pounding the palm of his hand into a wad of dough.

“Can you tune this?” a boy of about eight or nine years old asked me as I walked past a long line of Fender guitar’s and amps.

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll be right with ya,” I said, though I had no intention of going back his way. His Dad stood next to him with half a calzone sticking out his mouth, he gave me a frown. Tough! Eat your calzone fatty pants!

Sara sat on a stool behind an upright piano in one of the small lesson rooms next to the soda machine. She was notating something with her clarinet on her lap. Man, my head felt like overcooked lasagna, “Hey! Was I seriously just sitting in the storage room this morning?”

“Yes, you were just sitting there,” Sara said, continuing to jot down notes. “Don’t you ever work?”

“It’s weird; I don’t remember how I got here.” Boy oh boy, my brain feels like stale noodles in rotten Alfredo sauce.

“Well, somehow you did, lucky me!”

“And for the record, I’m not high,” I had to tell her that. I mean, I should be high, but I’m not. Gabriel gave me some bad stuff, not only am I as straight as a die, but I also blacked out. He’s gonna get an earful when I track him down later.

Oh man, I hope I made it home before my Dad got up this morning. He’s gonna freak out on me if I just came right here and didn’t stop home. Well, it’s Saturday, maybe he’s got a hangover and he won’t notice. I should be so lucky.

“Standing around doing nothing,” Uncle Gino said, his thick grouchy voice slicing through me like a pizza-cutter. His fat tummy blubbered over his beltline, he was an Italian mess.

“Hey Unc,” I said, “I’m just getting set for my lessons.”

“You got a new one,” Gino said through a belch. He had some sauce and cheese smeared on the bottom of his salty goatee, freakin’ gross.

“A new student?” I asked, hoping to sound excited.

“Yeah, that kid over there,” Gino said, pointing to the kid I passed by. Oh great, another crybaby annoying kid wanting to be rock star. And his Dad probably hates me already, what’s new?

I woke up about an hour ago but I haven’t been able to move. I’m in the back room again, but it’s so quiet outside. Did the shop close? I can’t believe I blacked out again, Gabriel is gonna get a punch in face when I see him.

Last thing I remember, I was standing next to my uncle, getting ready to teach that kid. Then…I don’t remember. Now I’m back here again. Oh boy, I could really use a Stromboli, I’m freakin’ starving.

This is way messed up, I am tripping out bad. But that doesn’t make sense either; I don’t feel the least bit high. Ok, that’s it, no more drugs for a while. It’s not like I’m a druggie anyway, I only smoke with Gabriel. And now that I think about it, it was never that great in the first place. And now I gotta deal with this. I’m not gonna wind up like my Dad, he calls himself a weekend alcoholic, at least that’s what I heard him tell his friends. I know the truth, he’s trashed every night.

One night, he told me about how he took me in when I was only two. He’s an x-ray tech at the local hospital. I was left on the doorstep of the hospital. I stayed there a while from what I understand, then I popped around to a few different homes. I’m not really sure what the true story is. All I know is that he formed some kind of bond with me, so he says, and I wound up with him.

He did legally adopt me? He always tells me I was sent from God. That’s because I had this huge crucifix on my chest when they found me on the doorstep of the hospital. And yeah, I still wear it. It’s heavy as hell, but it looks kinda cool when I’m jamming. Oh yeah, I was left on the doorstep stuffed inside a pizza box. Yep, I swear to God. No wonder Uncle Gino loves me so much.
Ok, I gotta get up. Stand up Anthony, get yourself home. Opening the door, I don’t hear a freakin’ thing. Store has to be closed now; I don’t see any light on either. I fell asleep, it’s nighttime, Dad’s gonna kill me. And I’m gonna kill Gabriel!

Walking out into the store, I can’t see a thing. It’s nighttime, no light coming in from the storefront window. A pale glow coming from what I assume is a full moon.

Then, I trip…No, not trip like a drug trip, I actually fall over something.

Now I’m on the floor, my pants are wet. What the hell is this?

I reach down and pick up what I think is the neck of a guitar. It’s not…It’s a bone…A human bone! Blood trickling down the side of it onto my arm, I throw it from me and it splashes down into a puddle of more blood. Hmmmm, it sorta smells like baked ziti.

Running for the light, I switch it on to see the horror before me.

Sara is ripped apart, her dismembered head staring up at me, brain matter and ricotta oozing out her ears. I turn to see her bloody legs dancing over in the corner to “Oops, I Did It Again” by Britney Spears. Wow! She can really move!

Uncle Gino is nailed into a cello. His head wrapped in a thick string, the E string I think!

Sara’s mouth moved, “I told you,” her head said, then a rat crawled down her tongue and scurried away leaving red footprints behind.

“I told you,” Sara’s head said again.

“Sara, what did you tell me?” I screamed.

“You’re a dirt bag! That’s what I told you…And I was right!” she smiled with blood stained lips, or was it tomato paste, hard to tell.

Just then, a strobe light switched on, a glittering disco ball fell from the ceiling, twirling magnificently in a neon glow. Suddenly, “I Gotta Feeling” by the Black Eyed Peas starting playing. Oh man, that Fergie is SO hot! Sara’s legs pass by me; they are doing the fanciest jig I’ve ever seen. She really needs to take up dancing professionally.

This is so cool. But all I really want is a Stromboli.

Gabriel sat upon his mighty throne and peered down into Anthony’s cage. “You have sinned, and now you belong to me. You will do my bidding from now until the end of time. Now tell me, what lesson have you learned from all this?”

Anthony swallowed, he was so hungry, “I have learned that the next time I want to get high, I should maybe eat a Stromboli first.”

“You crave a Stromboli, don’t you?” Gabriel asked; holding up a deliciously meaty, cheesy, steamy hunk of the most perfectly made Stromboli ever known to man.

Anthony smiled, “That is all I want. It is all I’ve ever wanted. Please Gabriel, I will never do drugs again, just give me a bite of Stromboli.”

“No Stromboli for you,” Gabriel chided, licking his fingers and filling his mouth with the tasty treat. And so, Anthony had learned his lesson well: Don’t do drugs!
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