

Ruinaton
by Justin Hunt and Rylan Parker

Prelude

It's strange, really. It's only strange that everybody should have seen it coming. Strange how everybody watched the idealism of what seemed to be a perfect planet crumble away. Year after year, month after month, it changed only a fraction of a percentage, but changed nonetheless. How perplexing it must have been to watch the reality of humans' daily routine bend so slowly, and then suddenly snap; yet a stick does not break without pressure from both ends.

Nobody has a recollection of the day that Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest took a physical and visual effect. Decade after decade, the average citizens IQ dropped, yet technology kept thriving, becoming more and more advanced generation after generation. How is this possible knowing that the average person's IQ dropped at a steady rate over a certain period of time? Simple. The "smarter" people at the top of the world's corporations stayed smart and developed the average human's technology. The average human gained and became more desensitized each time a new car was invented, a new television screen was produced, or a new handheld computer was bought. With all these "smart" people doing their thinking for the humans, building new technology that made lives easier, you'd imagine that the general public wouldn't just have these people thinking for them, but they'd have their inventions thinking for them, too; and that's exactly what happened.

As this increase in idleness and gluttony progressed, the need for general knowledge collapsed into nil. What use did the humans have for this knowledge when they could get almost anything they wanted with just a click of a button, or even learn what they wanted through the filtered light and subliminal propaganda that battered their minds through the simple necessity of television? None, or at least through enough years of being unknowingly brainwashed, they didn't. To this conclusion, the human race is easily led astray by the things it enjoys most.

While the average person's knowledge dilapidated over time, the "smart" people's knowledge grew without restraints. They knew they controlled the subordinates by the simplest of means. The thing is they didn't say it themselves; they had the Internet, the television, the radio, the billboards, and even the leaders and government say it for them. For

example, in modern times, if Oprah were to say, "Murder is the only way to get your kids to listen, and it's also a good stress reliever," and the United States Congress passed a law that states murder being legal simultaneously, we would all have hundreds of soccer moms beating their husbands to death in front of their own children, then watch as the children start beating their best friends because their "mommy did it, too."

Absurd, right? You might think, "I would never do this. This is wrong." Well, it's only wrong if everyone around you says it is. Imagine if those people weren't around. The ideas of right and wrong are fed to you by important people and your friends and family, who also heard it from a higher power as well. This state of mind is accepted by society; therefore, it's right. That is what brought up the end of the world as we used to know it.

The higher, "smarter" society left censorship to die, by allowing the most disturbing and violent things to sink through the television, and meanwhile, making outside laws more and more restrictive; such as making a curfew where all denizens were required to remain inside their homes no later than 10:00 PM. Then 9:00 PM. Then 8:00 PM. Until finally, everyone was in their homes with their television screens on by 7:00. Everybody watched horrid things, and eventually became more and more accustomed to it. It was the slowest and largest scaled lobotomy ever performed.

Soon, the capitalism ideas were slaughtered, and a new form of Communism took its place. People were growing more and more animalistic as time passed by. About a decade in, it reached its peak.

It started out on the front lawn of a senior citizens house. The police, about five of them, were out front and throwing rocks at the old man's front door, attempting to deceive the man into coming out. It was about 8:30 PM at the time, and the curfew stood still at 7:00 PM. The old man came out to investigate the noises. In a flash, the authorities were upon him, dragging him into the street and yelling, "Sir, you are in violation of your curfew." This led to the officers violently and aggressively beating the fragile man with their night sticks.

As the onlooking neighbors watched this horrible scene through their windows, one man saw and decided that enough was enough. He

grabbed a bat, stubbled out on the street, and bludgeoned an officer across the face, breaking his jaw and caving in his eye socket. The other four jumped at him immediately. Moments later, doors all down the street flung open and people jumped in to defend the courageous man with the bat. More authorities were called to attend to the matter. In less than an hour, the whole city was engaged in a full-scale riot. In less than a few weeks, the state itself—and soon after, the whole country—descended in a state of emergency. It was all about people growing the courage to fight against authorities and the corrupt laws that have been wrought. This pattern followed in other countries also, and after people started turning on each other as well, almost the entire world was in a state of hate and panic; hate towards each other, and panic for their lives.

People were killed, women were raped, and houses and stores were looted. There no longer existed any terms that defined peace anymore. What's more, the army wasn't called in. In fact, after a month of the chaos, no authorities were called in. They were all incidentally fired. They then joined in the killing and thievery, too. Within six months, every city that wasn't already in flames, was. The "smart" people, the world leaders, and the heads of command, sat safe and watched their plan unfold with the rest of the world giving in to what they wanted unwillingly. This lasted for nearly a year.

The government secretly placed weapon caches around the globe. Then, at the peak of insanity, nuclear weapons were launched all across the world, leading to a brief world war. A total of five nuclear bombs—and many other nuclear-based weapons—were dropped. This stopped all the riots, but killed off nearly half of the Earth's inhabitants. Out of the ashes of the wake rose the "smart" people with food, shelter, and the first aid skills required to heal the wounded. A new world order was based, and the festers of humankind, being weak, helpless, and stupid, had no choice but to succumb to it.

In the span of about 1,800 years, the world known had slowly developed into something darker, more chaotic, and hopeless. Not only this, but it altered more drastically than anyone could have ever expected; the people changed, the intelligence dropped, the "smart" people grew even more powerful, and the government even more

unscrupulous.

It was nearing the late 39th century, and the new world was more corrupt physically changed than ever. The tectonic plates have since shifted around and divided the world's continents into a series of large islands surrounded by numerous archipelagos. This process was aided by the radiation levels in the water making it harshly acidic, burning the skin or outer coat of any land dweller to touch it. Swimming, diving, and any other activity related to modern day water recreation no longer existed. The water was so acidic and radiated from the nuclear waste, in fact, that it dissolved the land and islands within prolonged periods of time, making the spaces between each island greater and greater as centuries passed by. About half of the percentage of these islands—mostly the smaller ones—supported no life and were uninhabitable. The average to larger sized islands supported human life and wildlife, each of them consisting of several small towns and few cities within a nation. It was only a matter of time before the oceans completely dissolved the inhabitable land masses.

The "smart" people, now the new world leaders whom have since separated and controlled the many different nations, conceived many children and ancestors, who kept information away about the events before the holocaust. After more and more generations passed, there became barely any recollection of the what used to be Earth and its previous timeline. The peasants of many nations were only told certain things, and only on a need-to-know basis. In fact, none of the new world inhabitants knew the year or date. The only source of time, as defined by the new world leaders of each nation, was work time, food time, and sleep time. Further more, the new world leaders convinced the general population that their ancestors were saviors of the "Great War." History changed and so did the need for proper education. This essentially led to the new world leaders into gaining the power and supremacy that they had dreamed of from the start.

The overwhelming concern over power grew too large, and soon nations ran by different new world leaders decided to rage war. Nations were against each other once more. The battles and wars continued for much longer due to weapons of mass destruction being unavailable everywhere. Most weapons, in fact, had been on a standstill since the

nuclear holocaust.

The same problem emerged with most technology and utilities as well, which were also destroyed. Because of this, only certain utilities such as the television, certain types of security cameras, and most utilities, powered or influenced by electricity, stood. Few things did come to be such as identification robot droids, electric cores, and much more. Most everything else, however, had already existed before the nuclear holocaust and had barely developed any further, if at all. The reason for this was because only certain utilities could be built upon and replicated, due to what the new world leaders could salvage during the nuclear holocaust.

Natural resources also heavily declined. An essential natural resource was oil, which had by now cease to exist. Vehicles, trains, airplanes, and oil-fueled boats no longer existed. Most everything was done by foot. It was not often that heavy transportation was necessary seeing as how each nation had resources of their own to salvage from.

What was used for rich merchants, however, were merchant boats of large rock-like wood structure that had been developed and briefly manufactured in the late 26th century. The sizes and strength of the ships varied but for certain was that they were not meant for long distance travel to other nations. Their purpose was to whisk the shorelines and shipping docks of nations, in hopes someone would buy needed food, utilities, and guns.

The ships that were meant for long distance were called battle ships. They consisted of a tight iron or steel armor coat and were ultimately much larger and more powerful than merchant boats. Every battle ship had an electric core, created and developed around the dawn of the 31st century, specifically for them. On each side of one rested a set of three harpoon guns, meant to fight other nations' battle ships. For the most part, most ships of all nations were relatively similar, save for a few factors such as the interior rooms. Because of this, what mattered most in battles out in sea was the quantity, rather than the quality of the ships.

Even the lifeforms, save for the humans, changed and adapted drastically due to the nuclear radiation. This selection of surviving creatures included single-celled organisms, insects, cockroaches,

bacteria, and any kind of animal not in the path of the nuclear fallout. With minimal predation, each species adapted and evolved to be bigger and stronger, and were able to go unchecked and eventually grow more elaborate natural defenses against one another. With food being scarce among the inhabitants of certain areas, creatures were almost always tempted to prey upon anything to its physical and visual reach.

In the oceans, most species of aquatic life could not adapt to the water and most of them died off and became extinct. The process of natural selection let remain only a limited number of species. Like animals on land, underwater creatures evolved and adapted, mimicking their limited predation and elaborate natural defenses.

With the mutated wildlife, corrupt world leaders, and limited technology that feigned to the world from the result of the humans' increasingly growing gluttonous and idle ways, everything eventually turned into nothing more than a fight for survival. They ended their own way of life, and let the people who watched it burn put it back together again in their own image.

Chapter 1

Daniel

"Do you know what the penalty of stealing is, son?" the guard asked with cold, dark intent in his eyes.

Daniel replied with silence in fear of further brutality from malevolent golem looming over him.

"Well, do you, boy?" he asked again at a much more hostile tone.

Silence kept its hold as if in disregard of the question repeated.

The guard was wearing a gray outfit with large boots of an even darker shade of gray, almost black, which complemented the coarse tone he gave off in his voice. Though one couldn't tell directly, there was also some armor padding under the guard's apparel.

"No? Well, it's death or life sentence, if you're lucky," the guard chuckled. "And by the looks of things, you're not a very lucky person, are you?"

Clenched in the his fist was a long weapon of good width. It somewhat resembled a modern times nightstick, but still differed in small details. There was blood sprinkled on the edges; fresh, it seemed. The people of the peasant town, including the guards, simply referred to it as the club.

Daniel replied with a weak mumble, "Sir, if you could only give me a chance, I swear—"

At that moment, the guard struck with his club in mid-sentence, knocking Daniel down on the ground.

"Just give me a reason, boy," the guard howled. "One little slip-up and I will rip your lungs out!"

Daniel, feeling the heat from the club across his bloodied face, stood up.

Reasoning with the brainless footman was useless at this point. He was caught. He couldn't run away, for he would be shot, and he couldn't fight back, for he would be beaten to death. With this in his mind, Daniel did nothing but stood in silence. His gut further tightened.

"Well, I guess the only thing to do is cuff you, get you identified, and put you in with the rest of the filth. Sound like a plan?"

The guard's humor being dry and dark, he chuckled as he said

this.

He shoved Daniel down once more, fettered his hands together, and pulled on his chain as if he were nothing but a lowly animal.

All of this was the result of Daniel being caught trying to steal a piece of meat. It wasn't the first time he attempted it, either. In fact, it was made almost habitually for him for what seemed to be a year now. This was just the first time he was officially caught red-handed, when he wasn't grasping onto his vigilance as tight as he should have been.

Where he was caught was known as his residing town's market place, which lay at the center, not too far from the residential area. In fact, just about every city or town, in every nation, had a peasant's central market place. It was as commonly known as is the fact that water is clear.

Daniel looked around as he was being trailed, taking in his last memories of the town before knowingly being thrown in a cesspool of hunger and violence. There wasn't too much to remember seeing as how Daniel's home was nothing more than what could be a crumpled photograph of a peasant ghetto. The resident homes, if you would even call them as such, were small—more or less of a cage—than a home for a human being.

He saw his old house down a block in the residential area while walking his green mile, and remembered having the luxury of sleeping in while his parents slept outside, due to the tight spacing in his home. This was perhaps the only time in his life where he ever felt spoiled, and he was grateful for it. Because of this, he learned gratitude, sincerity, honesty, and respect. The chores and work he had to do when he was younger built him character and discipline. The only characteristic that Daniel lacked was the ability to stand up for himself and not be a coward in certain situations; he could never defend himself and typically avoided the slums and the parts of the streets where most violent crimes were commenced.

It wasn't until his parents died from a curable disease, from which they were unable to get treated due to financial problems, that he took over as the representative and worker of his household. He worked a low-class job of harvesting in fields, picking various food items. With this, he would also frequently steal food; both from his working job and

from the central market place, as afore mentioned.

Daniel had no wife nor kids. He was the kind of person who knew he would never get attached to someone, not unless it was the right person in his eyes.

Unfortunately, it was by nation law that everyone be accompanied with a spouse by age 30, and to conceive at least two children of any gender. However, any more than three resulted in the families being slaughtered. The reason for this was the keep populous at its strong point, while still regulating an even amount of people so the development of citizens don't grow too strong to the point that an oust of the government could be possible. The world leaders of nations typically thought the higher the population, the higher the money, taxes, and goods produced; and they were right for the most part.

Daniel stared at the trash-covered, rock ground, littered with human waste and mud, garbage and clothes left behind from the deceased, and a fowl stench in the air that seemed to come from everywhere. He lived here, yet his mind still ached for a better scent.

He then looked at the people around him, all of them wearing the same dirty peasant clothing as him, and staring with fear and alertness at the guard dragging him through the streets. People were patently hiding behind trashcans, doors, and even their own kin. They obviously didn't feel the desire to be preyed upon. They knew of the guard and his ego to play with every peasant he saw. The evil smile branded seemingly permanent across his face confirmed it.

The guard enjoyed every ounce of pain and fear he could squeeze from commoners. He loved it. Every guard and law enforcement officer did.

Daniel couldn't stand looking into the faces of his peers, or even the smug face of his escort, so he tried to focus on something else. The first thing that came to attention was the sound of Bartolomeu, his residing nation's leader, coming from the tarnished television screens on the walls of the passing buildings. That would mean they were walking along the bazar, just north of the market place. On every shop wall, there were at least three small-sized television screens connected by wires that ran all over the walls and across the ground, though stirred to the side of the walk path.

Daniel never understood the propaganda spewing from the television screens. Bartolomeu was always lecturing about the "greater good," "with obedience comes peace," or even about the "importance of taxation." Every month there was always something new he addressed or ranted about. Daniel hated Bartolomeu and his taxes. If he wasn't such a cruel leader, Daniel wouldn't be going to prison for stealing packaged meat out of his extravagant starvation.

Next to each television screen, the nation's blood red-colored flag with a yellow emblem of a silhouette claw from what seemed to be a large beast. The flag's symbol was specifically picked by Bartolomeu, for whatever unknown reason, whether it may be a symbol of authority, supremacy, or other.

Daniel then noticed a man being beaten in an alleyway by at least three other men. It looked as though they had been at it for awhile. Blood spilled out of the man's mouth as he lay limp and moved only when one of his attackers kicked or punched him.

"What are you now, huh? You want to fuck with me again?" frantically screamed the leader of the pack as he spat on the face of the lifeless corpse that once was a man.

Upon seeing this, Daniel took a gaze at the guard. The guard's eyes followed the beating motions of the mob but offered no real concern to the situation. As the guard firmly tilted his head in the direction, the same man who spat on the corpse's face grimaced just before he and his company ran off.

Daniel was not surprised at the circumstance's outcome. It was hardly a surprise to anyone, in fact. Things such that usually happen in most all towns, especially in the slum parts. The reason for it was that most of the world leaders would rather have current authorities working on more "essential" crimes, typically regarding government matters; such as the stealing of taxed goods, for example. The only time when assault was ever taken into account and charged for was whenever it was against a guard or another member of law enforcement. Most of these laws and regulations took place most everywhere, in most any nation, and in most any city or town.

The prison was in near sight. To Daniel, the walk to the entrance felt like years. It was like he was awakened from deep slumber when

the guard shouted, "Alright, we're here."

The prison itself was a big, gray building consisting of many stories. It resembled more of a giant cinder block than a prison, as if it was used only for solitary confinement.

Daniel looked up to see the height of the building, noticing it to be scraping the sky with its concrete hostility.

The guard finally brought him in and unshackled him.

The guard asked, "You ever been to prison before?"

Daniel replied negatively.

The guard then began laughing.

"Well lucky you. That means you get the initiation."

"What's the initiation, sir?" Daniel asked softly.

The guard said with the familiar tone of evil intent, "Boy, you'll find out soon enough. Now let me see your signature."

In order to keep track of populous easier, nation leaders almost always had something noticeable and distinct on every newborn child's arm, whether it be burns, scars, or tattoos with a signature of the residing nation. For Daniel's nation, a bar code on the wrist.

Daniel held his arm out undesirably.

"Okay," the guard said, "I was hoping you didn't have it so I could slaughter you."

Daniel gulped at this.

"Shame."

The guard stood in contemplation for a minute or two before he grabbed Daniel by the hair and aggressively demanded, "Follow me."

Daniel made a hoarse sound rendered by the pain of getting pulled.

"Like you have a choice," the guard added.

He hauled Daniel across a few hallways and rooms before reaching what's called an identification robot droid. It resembled a round and spherical metal object on wheels with a scanner-like device coming outward from the machine.

The droid itself was a faded maroon color and was rusted heavily. Still, it worked clearly as shown by the guard activating it. It appeared as if he was just pressing down random buttons and pulling random switches on the machine, yet his face gave off the impression that he had actuated it many times before.

When it finally turned on, the top silver cap it had ascended up and turned in various directions. It seemed to act as somewhat of an antenna. The whole thing made a series of beeps and clicks before it finally spoke.

Please place signature under scanner

The guard grabbed Daniel's wrist and aversely held it out under the scanner. A red laser light hovered over the markings embedded in Daniel's skin. Then, the red light disappeared. The droid was silent for a few seconds before confirming his identity.

Identification confirmed

Foster, Daniel

Age: 22

Sex: Male

Barcode Number: 230554362

"So your name's Daniel, huh?" the guard asked.

"Yes, sir," Daniel hesitantly replied.

"Alright, then, Daniel. We'll just keep you here for about a week or two until we're able to set up your trial. Until then, welcome to hell."

Upon saying this, the guard jabbed Daniel directly in the face. The way it happened to quick, it appeared that it definitely wasn't the first time the guard insisted on "handling" a new inmate. He gripped onto Daniel by the scruff of his neck and dragged him for what seemed to only be a couple feet, though it was evidently much farther. The final destination before the guard through Daniel to the ground was to a large metal door with bolts and screws as its grisly decor.

The guard spoke threateningly, "Here's our stop."

He picked Daniel up again concurrently while opening the large metal door. He snickered at Daniel one more time before hurling him inside.

It was a small room with walls that wore many gray shades, cracks in the walls, and blood splatters. The only presence of light was the abraded light bulb dangling from the ceiling by only a black cord. In

the middle of the room there was a bolted-down metal chair that indubitably added to the room's dreariness.

Daniel first came to realization and looked back at the guard, who was missing. It was only for a brief moment, for he returned only moments later with two other guards as menacing as himself.

They jumped on Daniel, tied his limbs together, and rushed with nothing but their bare fists, beating viciously. With one strike after another, Daniel let out screams of agony that pushed out of him for every burst of pain that flowed through his body. Alas, any scream he would make would fall upon deaf ears, for nobody even within the vicinity of the prison cared for his well-being.

His arresting guard shouted, "How are you liking this initiation, boy? You're one of us now!"

All the guards laughed at this as they all had the same perverted sense of humor. Dry and evil.

They continued the beating for what seemed to be an eternity, leaving bruises, aches, and pains all over Daniel's body. Though you'd expect him to at least try to struggle back, but he didn't.

When they were finished with the beating, they all stood up and gazed down at the severely wounded Daniel with satisfaction on their faces in the form of grins. They all then looked at each other just before their black smiles grew even bigger.

Daniel suddenly felt even more pain in his abdomen area. He struggled to look up only to see the three guards kicking him repeatedly. This reminded Daniel about the poor man being beaten to death as he was walking towards the prison. As he thought of this, he wanted to mock the guards for being cowards and kicking someone who was down, but ultimately he knew it would only cause them to beat him down further.

The guards finally stopped. This time they were laughing.

"I love this job!" yelled one of them.

"Fuck yeah! Initiating prisoners!" the second laughed.

Daniel's arresting guard looked down at him to meet eye contact. He gave him a sarcastic smile signifying that it wasn't going to be the last time Daniel will get battered.

"Yeah, I'll call you guys back next time we have another peasant

to beat down," he said while still looking at Daniel.

"Alright, John."

As the two accompanying guards started towards the door with their evil grins still branded on their faces, one of them turned around and said, "Hey, John. Make sure you give this guy everything and show him what it's like to break the nation laws."

Laughs were echoed throughout the small room, despite it being predominantly cement. Daniel tried hard to ignore the conversations they were having regarding beating down inmates and peasants on the streets who break laws.

It seemed, to Daniel, that the world leaders only picked the most vicious and cold-hearted of people to serve as guards and other law enforcement officers. Because of the low crime rate everywhere, it clearly sufficed. In fact, most of the time guards had to stop peasants for no reason just to beat them down. Not all of them get the pleasure to detain a rustic everyday.

After the others left, Daniel's arresting guard left momentarily once more only to come back to throw him some ragged and ripped apart clothing, along with a dirty towel to wipe the blood off his face and body. The apparel was an extremely light gray color. Almost white, in fact. The tear marks confirmed its substandard state compared to the peasant clothing he wore hitherto.

He took a deep inhale, then sighed with the sound of pain still audible within his voice.

The guard noticed this as he looked upon him, then snickered something that Daniel would never forget.

"Boy, I hope that meat was delicious."

Chapter 2 The Prison

Daniel realized within minutes of dressing out in the prison clothing that the guard was far from exaggerating when he said, "Welcome to hell."

The prison, in fact, was almost a picture-perfect replication of what any man would think of to be hell, with punishment being the same as damnation; the guards being brutal, the food being inedible, to say the least, and in small portions.

Personal hygiene and cleanliness was nonexistent within the prison. The walls were caked with spattered blood and filth in every manner of vulgarity Daniel could possibly ponder.

The cells weren't as much as real prison cells but more resembled animal cages with bars on three sides lined up against concrete walls, with a narrow hallway in between where the guards would at random pull prisoners out for whatever reason, usually to escort them to the warden as compliance to some sort of vandalism or "inappropriate" prison behavior. There was no source of light within any cell; only a sheet placed on hard ground to sleep on and a small bucket to defecate.

The air within the prison was palpable with waves of animosity, starvation, and hate beating into the minds of prisoners with every moment. Every minute would be compared to sitting at the edge of chaos and disaster. The minds of the other prisoners and guards pantomime the shape of a desperate, rapid animal. The scrawling and graffiti on the walls of past prisoners either described their will or their hate for the nation leaders. Every day, in fact, Daniel would find new scribbles apprising hopelessness and loathing in every word and in every syllable.

The cafeteria, where meals were eaten, was small and upsetting. Regardless of where he sat in the cafeteria, Daniel always felt the eyes of starving convicts staring upon his food, with the miens that told him that they were willing to kill him just for a bite. Everyone went crazy, even for a small piece of black, charred meat. Though it was barely food, it was food nonetheless.

Even in the prisons, Bartolomeu had his propaganda television

screens mounted on the concrete walls. His mirror image on the television screens created more tension and hate within the prison, making it a literal hell.

Bartolomeu was a short man with hair slicked back and eyes as black as the feathers on the wings of a raven. He wore a formal suit whenever he displayed himself upon the television screens; something of which the people of the nation never wore. This symbolized the power that he held at his fingertips.

Daniel always thought that guards were brutal and vicious outside, but as clearly shown just after a few days in the prison, he was gravely mistaken. They tortured the prisoners on a daily basis, seeming to pick each one out at random. They would instigate fights or riots, then end them brutally and violently, either by bludgeoning inmates with clubs, stabbing them with knives, shooting them with handguns, or even strangling them to death with their bare hands. The guards would do their part with the atmosphere of the prison to physically and mentally destroy what was left of the prisoners' minds.

Daily life for Daniel would begin with him waking up and stretching to get the pains out of his back from sleeping on the painful, concrete ground. He would then usually urinate in his waste bucket and stand in attention, waiting for his guards to dismiss him to the courtyard for a daily announcement, which all internees were required to attend, courtesy of Bartolomeu. They would stand in an orderly formation and pledge their allegiance to him before his daily speech, which was displayed on the largest television screen in the prison.

If anybody talked during the speech, they were beaten savagely. Every day, the speech would have the same general message; mostly consisting of, "Listen to me, or you will die," or usually something along the lines of that.

After the daily presentation, they would all line up for inspection. Daniel never really knew what the guards were inspecting for, but they seemed to go through everyone thoroughly, looking for an excuse to catch someone with something to beat them. Seeing as how there are no other tools, aside from the ones used for personal hygiene within the prison walls, prisoners had no chance to fight back with anything.

During this time, the guards would also pick out women and take

them to the back behind the courtyard for further "questioning." The rest of the inmates would stand there and listen to the screams of an unfortunate female prisoner taken. The guards that were left standing by the lined-up inmates laughed, as if every scream was a light-hearted joke rather than a cry for help.

All the inmates would continue to stand in silence for hours on end, with the guards making sure no one spoke or moved a muscle. After which, they would all be called in the cafeteria for rations, for even calling it food would be a cruel joke, even for the guards' standards.

During lunch, the guards would sit in the main lounge eating their roasted meat, leaving the inmates at each other's throats. Daniel would try his best to stay secluded from other inmates. Being in contact was too dangerous, for any man or woman would turn on him any time for a taste of his food, or even a drink from his bowl cup of water. Daniel would then eat his rations in fear and humility, watching the chaos unfold between other prisoners being stabbed, bitten, and mauled for their brick piece of meat; worse than the type of meat that he tried to salvage from the market place days earlier.

After two hours, the guards would come out expecting nothing but disorderly conduct from the numerous inmates; while using this as an excuse to beat instigators savagely, and sometimes even kill. Jailbirds would then line up in the courtyard and would be given thirty minutes of recreation. Daniel would usually use this time to hide from the savage monstrosities that is the majority of the inmates and guards.

After their time was up, they would be ordered directly to their cell for the rest of the day and night; each cell only limiting to one individual, though the cells were neighboring each other. Daniel would receive little to no sleep for he would stay up listening to the moaning of pain of injured or dying convict. Daniel would flinch every time he heard the sound of an inmate's scream cut-off, knowing that they've met their demise.

Daniel endeavored nothing more than to stay strict with his daily routine to avoid harm, until one day, in the cafeteria during lunch, he was sitting at a secluded table away from the rest of the prison residents. A tall, dark-haired man sat next to him with a grin so sinister that other prisoners would be forced to avoid eye contact. He wanted to disregard

the man and continued salvaging what was left of his meal. The man spoke suddenly.

"You're not going to finish that, are you?" he sardonically asked.

Daniel took another bite of his meat and forced it upon himself to continue chewing. He faced forward as if it was a compulsory act, though he could feel the hate ascending in him as the prisoner persisted to taunt with odious affronts.

The man said, "You know, you have a really pretty face on you. It would be a shame if somebody were to fuck it up; specifically my initials carved on your weak forehead."

The man then pulled out a sharp knife and pretended to brush Daniel's hair. This angered him, and, for the first time ever, Daniel stood up for himself.

In a quick movement he grabbed the man's wrist and pulled it back, forcing the man to drop his knife. Daniel then struck the man leaving him on the ground and a red imprint that resembled a fist on the man's cheek.

"This is my food! Leave me alone!" Daniel forced out of himself. He could feel the valor flowing through his veins, and he grew courageous.

An inmate jumped on Daniel's back wailing punches. Daniel could feel the pain surge through his body, but he didn't care. He attempted to shake him off but this became useless as more ganged up on him. In a matter of seconds, it was about five inmates against Daniel, embarked all for a piece of meat.

Over the screaming of obscenities and howls for his blood, Daniel scarcely heard the sound of a man, "Back the fuck off him!"

He then saw the silhouette of a man grab his closest attacker by ragged shirt, flinging him to the ground, just before a kick to the head. While the inmates over Daniel were temporarily stupefied, another man, whom was tall, wiry, and blonde-haired, rushed in using their moment of frailty to his advantage. He swung onto inmates and head-butting another directly in the face, resulting in two bloodied fists, and the prisoner's broken nose.

As the silhouetted man reached out his hand to Daniel, revealing a scar across his face diagonally and short red hair, he uttered to him, "Get up, the fight isn't over yet."

Daniel did not hesitate and immediately stood up and braced himself. He then noticed his nearest assailant with an apparent broken nose cupping his hand to catch the blood flowing from his nostrils. Daniel saw this as the perfect opportunity to take out the weakest of attacking inmates.

He rushed in, clenched his fist, and delivered a striking blow to his temple, rendering him unconscious.

Daniel turned around expecting more attackers but only saw the man with the scar and another man finishing up the rest of the inmates. Just as he was caught off guard, he felt an arm wrap around his neck, limiting his ability to breathe.

"Looks like your friends are a bit busy," chuckled the inmate with the red cheek imprint as he tightened his grip around Daniel.

Daniel tried to scream for help but no air could escape from his throat. Just as Daniel's vision started to blur, the grip around his neck loosened. He took his chance while he had it, escaped the chokehold, and immediately turned around with his fists already clenched. He then noticed a knife protruding from the center of the man's neck. He tried to utter something but instead of words spewing from his mouth, blood did. The knife was then relieved from his neck and he dropped to the floor with a blank, lifeless expression on his face and eyes wide open, revealing a bearded man behind.

"Thanks," Daniel replied as he caressed the bruise on his own where the man's grip tightened. The bearded man responded with a grunt and a whistle, though his mouth didn't move.

Just as Daniel was about to question this, the scarred man with an urgent expression on his face turned Daniel around to get his attention.

"Let's get out of here," he said. "The guards will give us a lot of shit for doing something like this."

The four then evacuated the vicinity of the cafeteria as quick as possible, leaving behind the aftermath of the struggle over a piece of meat. As Daniel and his rescuers were fleeing, he heard the screaming and vigorous shouting coming from the guard's discovery of the cafeteria brawl that took place.

They then reached a prison cell block where they could remain hidden for the remainder of the lunch period. The scarred man then

looked at Daniel, then back at the other two inmates.

"My name's Zachariah," he said.

Daniel nodded in consent.

"And this is Joseph," he said while waving his hand towards the tall, blonde-haired man.

The bearded man then interrupted with a course voice, "I'm Henry."

A whistle was heard. Zachariah and Joseph then laughed.

"We call him Whistler," chuckled Zachariah.

"There's a little story behind that," Joseph said jokingly.

Daniel smiled, but only until his eyes met Whistler's, who scowled at him, just before another whistle was heard. It was evident that Whistler didn't like the apparent nickname given to him, though he seemed to tolerate it at best.

"I, I mean we," he corrected himself, "noticed you around before. To be honest, you remind me a lot like myself when I first got locked up."

The conversation between the four continued. Though not much information was shed in the brief exchange, Daniel could feel a bond develop between all of them, especially with Zachariah. He realized then that not all the cons were stern as he pictured them from the beginning, and from that point onward Daniel grew confident in his newfound friendships.

After lunch was finished, everyone, including Daniel and the others, hurried back to their respective cells, fearing what the guards would and could do to them after seeing the "mess" in the cafeteria.

With trepidation in their eyes, the inmates all concealed themselves within the dark, shadowy corners of their cells, hoping it would prevent guards from abducting them for questioning, or even worse. Beating.

A team of guards was sent to investigate the situation, and then thereafter, the prisoners. As they crept down every prison's cell blocks steadily, they peered through the shadows at the prisoners behind the bars, scrutinizing each and every one of them. They appeared as if they were looking for a specific someone.

When the guards eventually reached Daniel's cell block, Daniel

peeped his head out just barely to see the indignant guards approaching his compartment. He prayed for them to ignore his cell and to continue walking, but unfortunately this didn't happen.

A group of three guards froze as they reached him, still facing forward. The guard at the front grinned just before turning his vision towards Daniel, whose eyes widened with fear.

"Get him," softly spoke the grinning guard.

In just moments more, the two other guards restrained his limbs and carried him away as if he were a witch in the 14th century waiting to be burned by the simple-minded peasants.

"Let go of me!" yelled Daniel to the malicious guards. "Let go!"

The leading guard then struck Daniel with an elbow directly in the gut. Daniel groaned from the pain while still being carried by his limbs.

"You shut the fuck up, you little peasant!" roared the guard in compliance, "Or I'll rip your vocal cords out with my bare hands!"

"Fuck you!" grunted Daniel. "I did nothing wrong!"

The guard showed annoyance in his facial expression just before he underwent heavy, deep breathing, as if he was profoundly angered. The last thing Daniel saw was a clenched fist coming directly at him.

Chapter 3 The Warden

Daniel felt the splash of cool water on his face and immediately came to consciousness. He was in a dark room, though it was bright enough for him to notice two figures standing before him. After his eyes adjusted to the dim setting, he first saw a guard with an empty bucket, then a man wearing a formal suit similar to that of Bartolomeu's. Everything in the familiar room in Daniel's visual path was hard cement and heavily decorated with crevasses, spatters of blood, and many cracks among the walls.

Daniel wanted to move, but couldn't. He then noticed himself tied and chained up to a metal chair bolted to the floor. That's when he became full alert of his whereabouts; he was in the precise room where his prison initiation took place. With that thought, he quivered. The man in the suit grinned at this.

"That'll be all," he said to the guard. "You can leave now."

The guard certainly didn't hesitate and left promptly as instructed. The man's eyes followed the guard as he exited through the metal door behind Daniel, who wore a vexed expression on his face.

When the door finally closed, the warden turned to him.

"Hello, Daniel. I'm the warden."

Daniel looked in bewilderment at the mention of his name seeing as how he's never before seen the man.

It took him a few moments before he strained, "What do you want from me?"

The warden laughed at this and exclaimed with a grin, "What do I want?"

Daniel underwent deep breathing as the water on him continued to still trickle and drip down his face.

"Well, I've contacted the judge about your trial date, and he's allowed me to keep you as long as I want."

Daniel finally grimaced, yet the warden kept on his sarcastic mien.

"In fact," he continued, "He told me that you might not even need a trial, seeing as how you've confessed your many attempts at thievery before you were caught in sooth."

"I did no such thing!" Daniel immediately shot back.

"Ah, but you have, Daniel. You've also—"

"Let me go!" Daniel interrupted. "I didn't do anything wrong!"

The warden laughed.

He took few steps closer so that he was mere inches from the body that was. He then began to brush Daniel's hair as the inmate did before.

"So aggressive, so vulgar, so... coarse," he spoke softly. "It's only been about a week here and it seems our little jailhouse already has you by the throat waiting to strangle you to death and feed you to the hounds."

The warden took his hand off of Daniel and wiped the collected water on the peasant inmate's clothing. In acquiescence, Daniel gazed upon him with aggravation.

"That's weak," he said with a grin. "You're weak, Daniel."

As he said this, he retrieved two silk gloves from his inner coat pocket and fit them on his hands attentively, smiling while doing so.

"Let me the fuck out of here! I told you I did nothing wrong!"

The warden laughed again, this time in a heinous tone. He then backhanded Daniel without holding any strength back.

"Daniel, we know you're responsible for that little altercation in the lunchroom. We've had many eye-witnesses that say you were the head of the attack. Just admit it, for it will save you dire consequences."

"I didn't start it. It was..." whimpered Daniel. "It was the prisoner. He wanted my meat."

"Either way, Daniel, you still killed a man, and precisely two days before his set trial date, as well. He had a knife through his bloody neck," the warden said calmly. "Someone's got to pay for that, Daniel."

"I didn't do it," he pleaded.

This time the warden struck him.

"Then who did?" he asked with a belligerent attitude.

"I... I don't know..." Daniel lied with pain manifested by his voice.

The warden then sighed and struck him again.

"Just admit it! You fucking did it!" he yelled as he lost menacing grin.

Daniel spat out blood, making sure to hit the warden directly in the

face.

"You want to play that shit with me?"

He wiped the liquid from his face, whipped it across the ground, and hit Daniel again. Then again. Then another time.

"We can go through this all fucking day, Daniel!"

Daniel lost count of how many hits he was taking, only paying attention and contemplating how long he would be able to stay sentient.

As the warden was preparing a final blow, he noticed Daniel's head dangling from his own body.

He dropped his clenched fist and proceeded to laugh out to him, "What's wrong, Daniel? You hurt?"

The bleeding manifestation that was Daniel moved slightly to convey a response.

The warden picked up Daniel's head by the chin in order to make eye contact. All Daniel could see was the intimidating smile held on the official's sinister face.

"Listen, Daniel," he said, "You got one more chance to tell me the truth—"

The warden then pulled out a knife, similar to the knife of the inmate who Daniel previously encountered, in mid-sentence, and began brushing his hair in the same manner as the prisoner who antagonized him before. It was all like *déjà vu* to Daniel.

"—before something real bad happens to you."

The warden grinned while still brushing the barely conscious Daniel's hair.

It was a few moments before anything was spoken. It was just after the warden began to press the knife against Daniel's face that the silence was broken.

"Okay..." Daniel pushed out of himself, just in the nick of time. "Okay... I did... I did it..."

The warden smiled and contentedly put away his knife. He then stepped back a few feet to examine Daniel again, who was now discolored and saturated in his own blood as if he perspired it.

The warden stepped forward once more and gave him one last cuff to the gut.

Daniel grunted before he involuntarily eschewed from any

movement. It was definitely apparent that he was struggling to merely stay conscious.

Upon seeing this, the warden smiled. He then carefully removed his now bloodied silk gloves and playfully pat the barely alive Daniel before resting them in his lap, laughing while doing so.

He slowly walked to the door behind the bolted chair and opened it with ease, still grinning.

He told the guard outside, "Let him sleep for a bit."

Daniel barely heard this, but offered no concern to anything except for the pain he was enduring. He closed his eyes.

"We'll transfer him to his new cage tomorrow," the warden finished as he looked back at the still body.

The door then shut, leaving Daniel in the gloomy room to recover.

Chapter 4

Jebediah

It was two hours after dawn, and the cool breeze gently brushed against the rock-wood trees, it being the only sound audible, with the exception of the sound of waves being conceived from the acidic waters and clouting the shore rocks and land, which created the image of an almost peaceful place within the dark abyss of the new world.

The beach itself was coveted by numerous, tall, gray rock formations rising up from the ground as if they were protecting the clarity of the land within them. The bright yellow sand also complemented the tone of the beach, giving a more saturated color to the trees, the waves, and the grayish blue skies above.

The only thing that seemed to be blotting this peaceful place was the hollow, drunk figure of a man stumbling across. His name was Jebediah. He wore what appeared to be a woven ragged type of clothing that resembled a long robe with a light tannish gray color. The bottoms seemed to be ripped off consequently resulting in everything passed his knee caps showing. He also wore sandals, carved and handcrafted from a dainty wood and tied together with string, made from a post-nuclear synthetic resin.

Just weeks earlier, Jebediah's beloved wife had taken her own life due to the recent illness that caused their son's death. Their son was just a kid when he passed. The haunting occurrence of this launched both Jebediah and his wife into a severe condition of depression. Their town mourned for them for a period of time only before disregarding the situation and moving on with their lives, like any other normal folk. Contrasting to everyone else, Jebediah and his wife remained in grief over their loss, his wife being the most disconsolate of the two. Jebediah's wife hung herself in the entrance room of their house as a consequence, leaving behind an apology letter.

The upshot of the death of both wife and son was a condolence from his residing nation's leader, separate from Daniel's nation, for early retirement and pay. Jebediah should have been thrilled for the money given to him, like any other nation peasant would have been, but he was not.

Unlike Daniel's nation, Jebediah's wasn't as strict; they allowed single denizen resident homes with no stipulation for spouse or kids. Taxes, however, were still a necessity as were the working jobs of all peasants, regardless of age. Because of this, it was almost a royalty that Jebediah was relieved of his status as a worker and paid to retirement as a result of his most loved ones' deaths.

Regardless, Jebediah, in his constant depressed state, had since turned himself into nothing but a drunkard. He would wander off to the beach every now and then just to soak himself in the pain and the countless bottles that intoxicate him so. The bottles he bought were from many merchant ships that whisk the shorelines of the island nation. Jebediah himself had to travel to the town nearest the shore just so he could procure such items.

The drink itself, called Hejehno, was a trademarked intoxication formula used for numerous recreational purposes, mostly involving celebratory events. The name and contents were both derived by the juices strained and distilled from the roots of a post-nuclear, radiated plant called the hejin. The juices of the queer plant were also mixed with many other exotic fruits of the new world in order to secrete the bitter taste it attained, as well as cover up the burning sensation it gave the mouth.

Hejehno is known to be much more potent than any of the modern day ethanol beverages, yet the taste is described as more bitter as well. The habitual consumption of Hejehno was drastically threatening for Jebediah, which left him in a chaotic and suicidal state of mind, that complemented his depression, daily.

This was the reason he brought himself to the shores of the radiated sea, for everyone else knows better than to go near such a dangerous, yet beautiful, place. Out of curiosity usually comes death.

The atmosphere was a different, gleaming more of a sensual omniscience, rather than a physical, inhabitable state. The air was more spiritual, however, Jebediah was too intoxicated to regard anything else on the outside of his Hejehno bottle. His intentions were lucid; his brain ached for the call of his own blood spilled, frantically searching for its own way to end his life.

As Jebediah staggeringly approached the shoreline, he removed

his sandals and threw them into the luminous waters. He watched them sink beneath the depths. He continued to creep closer to the shore and let the water that touched the land rinse his feet with pain and agony as it burned the soles. He then stopped in his place, faced the ocean, and gazed into the rising sun. He finally screamed to the sea, "What purpose is there in life if you are alone?"

He took another swig before throwing his bottle into the sea and watching it dissolve in a matter of minutes.

"Take me! Let the creatures of the sea take my life now!" he screamed again.

Jebediah stumbled deeper into the shoreline. He could feel the bite of Hejehno burning the corners of his mind and further blurring his vision. He looked at the sea, observing every detail and every wave, and then focused his attention to the sand where the water touched. He then he fell backwards out of the water that seethed his feet, and hit the ground behind him unconscious only to stir later in the wake of a sunset unharmed, still alive, and angry at himself.

He stood up and shouted, "Is that all you've got for me?"

The ground started trembling, breaking the peaceful ocean silence and blending in with the chaotic state of mind that Jebediah was enduring. As he gazed out into the oceans, he saw what appeared to be the shadow of a monolith rising from the waters. As it came closer, Jebediah prayed it would be a beast to swallow him whole and end his extravagant sorrow. Unfortunately, this day would not be the day of his death, but instead the day that he found out his true purpose.

Jebediah watched in awe as the massive head of a beast rose. The scales upon it, gray as they may be, glimmered a luminous red that nearly blinded Jebediah. They were patterned upon its skin in such a way that it reflected an ominous presence within the small mirrored plates that coveted the body of the beast.

It seemed to Jebediah that the head grew bigger as it emerged from the water. The neck that followed was exceedingly long with the same patterned scales as on the head, minus the underbelly which was a lighter-colored gray.

As it was surfacing, many other similar heads ascended with it, all of them nearing the same characteristics as the first head that rose,

save for a few minor differences. Jebediah at first thought that there were seven beasts rising, though as it neared the shore and emerged more from the water, it was clear that the necks all connected to the same serpent-like body.

As the creature neared Jebediah, he felt the hope of death creep into his mind. The serpent was near the shoreline when it froze in its track and, with its seven heads, gazed upon the startled man. The necks leaned forward until the heads of the serpent creature were near looming over him like arches and its breath echoing in Jebediah's lungs.

The center head of the beast lowered itself to Jebediah's reach and opened its eyes, which were a dark reddish color. Within the eyes, there were no pupils but only faint swirls that looked like thick smoke through glass. Through them, it outlined the abyss with such a strength that it brought Jebediah down to his knees. Images of his wife and son were portrayed within the eyes of the creature; his wife swaying back in forth through the doorway, and his son gasping his last breath before shutting his eyes eternally.

A tear descended from Jebediah's eyes upon seeing this. With the passing of his loved ones, the pupils of the eyes appeared like a dark chasm opening up between the smoke behind the glass. The center head then rose back up with the others.

"What are you?" Jebediah asked, shaking as he wiped the liquid salt from his eyes.

"We are the almighty," said the furthest left head on the serpent's body.

"We are the omniscient," said the head to the right of it.

"We are the all-seeing," said the next head.

"We are the eyes and the ears of the sky," said the head on the furthest right.

"We are the air that you breathe," said the head to the left.

"We are the embodiment of time," said the next head.

Finally, the center head spoke, and with the other heads mimicking its words in a ominous whisper behind, "We are the voice that shapes mountains and you will listen to what we have to say."

Jebediah was in awe with the creatures response to the rhetorical question he presented. He didn't expect it to speak. This he realized as

the opportunity to end his life as he so desire after his wife and son's deaths. He was already on his knees when he spread his arms as if he was offering himself to the colossus creature.

"My prayer has been answered!" Jebediah cried to the creature. "Feast upon me, oh great beast! My time has come and I have longed for this day since my beloved ones have passed from this world!"

As he said this, the serpent heads scowled in anger, while the center head remained calm and without emotion.

The serpent, in what appeared to be unison yet again, replied with, "Though we may have power to grind your bones to dust, we shall not bare our teeth for your purpose is vital to us and greater than you can possibly comprehend."

Jebediah, displaying a well-thought out bravado with a tinge of fear that trembled in his voice, he screamed, "Why? Why can't you end me? I have longed for this day for I have too little courage to end myself!"

The six exterior heads from the serpent body roared in anger while the midst head still retained its sense of clarity and serenity.

"Listen to this, mortal," the serpent spoke. "Our patience has been nothing but perennial. We were there when the sun was created from ash and fire. We were there when the skies were cut open and the oceans and seas were bled from above. We were there when the mountains rose from the Earth. We were there when the stars glimmered in existence. We were there when humanity took its first step into plight of livelihood. We were there."

The exterior heads then calmed. Jebediah fixed his vision upon the creature with interest in what he was saying.

The serpent continued, "The life that burns within you gives light through the dim cavern of immortality. If that fire is diminished, then no one will find their way out. Death is the easiest escape route out of hardship, and earns you no rewards. In death, you have no purpose. In life, we give you the opportunity to serve a greater good. Do you feel good knowing that your people starve while you drink yourself to death, yet you have the chance to help them with the condolence money that your proud nation leader has given you?"

Jebediah then interrupted, "How do you know about that?"

"We know many things, Jebediah. We know your name. We know

today is not the day you die, and we will build up a story and we will embed it on your tombstone."

Jebediah then looked upon the creature in immediate disbelief and confusion.

"Why? Why have you chosen me? What am I a purpose to you?" Jebediah questioned in plead.

"We didn't choose you, Jebediah. You chose us. In your deep want for death, we rose to fix your mentality, and to fix your thought and perception on life. In exchange, we will also need you to fulfill a greater purpose. You have no choice but to succumb to it, like we have succumb to your callings."

"How am I to know that this isn't a Hejehno hallucination? That you are what you say you are?" Jebediah questioned.

The creature then responded, "Because the chemicals within the hejin plant have since worn off. You passed out from your intoxication in the wake of dawn. It is the sunset and the day nears the end. You are awake and you are sober upon us."

Jebediah still had the look of confusion on his face.

"We disgress and respect your lack of belief and are willing to prove to you that we are what we say we are. To you we shall bestow an offering of food and well-being that will surely last you."

With this, the exterior heads drew back and the center head leaned forward towards Jebediah. It opened its mouth revealing the numerous, sharp teeth upon its mouth. It then made a dark and loud coughing noise, sounding much more spiteful than any human or animal hacking. This frightened Jebediah, whose facial expression went from anxious fear to astonishment as the creature began what seemed to be regurgitating something. The first thing Jebediah saw descending from the creature's throat was a hoof. Then another appeared. Then, a whole body dropped from the mouth onto the ground, covered in a substance that appeared to be burning the outer layer of the animal. It looked pathetic and weak, with a face crying with agony of the burns it was experiencing.

"What is this?" Jebediah questioned in amazement.

The serpent responded, "It is a remnant of the world before the Great War. A lamb. Take it home, kill it, wash it, carve it, and cook it. It

is food. Dine upon its flesh and share it with the other peasants of your town. Then, bring them to us for we have much to foretell to our future followers."

"I will do this immediately, and I will serve you as my master and guidance. Thank you for letting this occurrence happen, oh great serpent! My condolences can only be expressed so limitedly. My life and well-being is forever yours!" Jebediah said as if he were indoctrinated into submission.

The serpent sank back into the ocean, with an ominous vibe being given off just as it was when he rose.

Chapter 5 The Inmates

The morning following the beating that the warden gave Daniel was the morning that the guards removed him from the bolted chair and transferred him to his new cell. As they removed him from the room, he awoke and attempted to struggle free. The guards slapped him in compliance and ultimately kept him embodied in the chains that tied him down in the first place.

They exited the room and held Daniel with a chain that dragged him by the neck and chin. They tugged him through the hallway, out to and across the courtyard, then to the next cell block. Daniel's vision grew blurry from the strains of the chains that tightened around his sore neck. He tried to loosen them with his hands but only found himself being strangled to the point of no respiration.

They then ventured into the shadows of the narrow halls of a different cell block, much smaller than Daniel's previous compartment's exterior location. Daniel could feel the faces of the inmates staring at him from behind the bars of their cells. Some inmates even spat upon Daniel as he was being dragged.

The guards then halted in order retrieve the keys to unlock his new cell door. Daniel's breath returned to his lungs as did his vision and he looked around, still only seeing the faces of many grisly inmates staring down at him and slobbering like feral beasts. To the right of his cage, he also noticed the familiar face of a red-headed man with a scar staring back at him. For some reason, as Daniel looked at him, he felt a touch of hope, and his feeling of trepidation left him.

Daniel looked to the cell directly across from his only to see a woman with straight and long, elegant, blonde hair, and crystal clear eyes of alluring blue. He had never seen anything so beautiful and astonishing in such a dark, evil place. Daniel was pulled out of his mesmerizing hypnosis by the guards yanking on his chain ordering him to stir inside the cell.

The leading guard then slammed the rusted door, which made an echoing sound throughout the cell block, just before he snickered to Daniel, "I'll see you at lunch, pretty boy."

The malicious guard then turned to the blonde woman across from Daniel, and whispered, "You too, gorgeous." He winked as he said this but the girl's compliance was a grimace.

The guards then left in an unpleasant demeanor, beating their clubs against the cages as they sauntered by. The sounds, like the slamming of the rusted door, were echoed throughout the cell block.

It was then silent.

"I never got your name," Zachariah said as he broke the silence.

Daniel pressed himself against the cell bars and replied, "Daniel."

"So, Daniel," Zachariah proceeded. "Did you meet the warden yet? That's why I assume you got your cell changed."

Daniel replied hesitantly, "Yeah."

"Did the warden give you his special treatment?" Zachariah asked.

Daniel looked upon him with quiver as he knew exactly what he was referring to.

Zachariah continued, "It's okay if he did. Everyone he sees gets the special treatment. Where do you think I got this scar from?"

He then rubbed the pinnacles of flesh on his face, pointing out the severity of the gash that once was.

"He took a knife through my face because other prisoners accused me of stealing food from the guards' lounge."

Daniel gazed at the cicatrix with amazement and pictured himself with the same mark, thinking how revolting it would be to have such a disfigurement on his countenance.

"Must have been horrible," he said.

Zachariah responded lightly, "It's actually not that bad after the flesh grows back. So what'd the guards take you for?"

"They thought that I was the reason for the fight in the lunchroom," Daniel replied.

"I'm not surprised. The prisoners around here are fucking hounds. They'll squeal just to save their own asses."

Daniel nodded and tried his best to keep his conversation as it went along but continued being distracted by the same blonde woman in the cell across from his.

Zachariah noticed this and abruptly stopped mid-sentence in what he saying. He then formed a smirk on his face and remarked, "Her

name's Marion."

As he said this, the blonde woman looked up at him and then at Daniel, who, unbeknownst to himself, was leering at her in an almost eerie way.

"You're giving off a pretty bad first impression," Zachariah laughed.

Daniel then snapped out of stupor and apologized, "Oh, sorry about that."

"No need to be sorry," replied Zachariah.

He then looked over at Marion and yelled, "How's it going over there, Mary?"

Funny question to ask considering the situation. Marion's sense of humor seemed to fit the cruel joke and thus laughed.

She yelled back in a surprisingly firm voice, "I don't know, but if these fucking pigs keep staring at me, I'll gouge their eyes out."

She was referring to the caged inmates on either side of her.

"She doesn't fuck around, does she?" Daniel joked to Zachariah.

Zachariah laughed heartedly, "Boy, she's killed more men than you can count in thirty seconds. You have to be that way here, though, especially being as pretty as she is. Thing is, around here, one look of vulnerability and every horny inmate would have his or her way."

"Her?" Daniel inquired.

"Shit happens, Dan. Shit happens."

"What about the guys? Do they try to... you know..." Daniel hesitantly replied worriedly.

"Believe it or not, Dan, the warden here has a sense of honor. He'll kill a woman, beat a woman, but even to him rape is a cowardly thing, but there still is that small chance."

It seemed strange to Daniel how this distance can change and corrupt the most innocent of things.

"So, Dan, can I call you Dan?" Zachariah asked.

"Yeah. Can I call you Zack?"

"No," Zachariah responded, his voice suddenly grim.

Daniel stared in question. Zachariah then grinned.

"I'm just fucking with you. Yeah, you can call me Zack."

Daniel smiled.

"So Dan, what brings you to this hell hole?"

Daniel hesitated a moment before he replied, "I stole some dehydrated meat, and yourself?"

"Ha, really? Son of a bitch, same here," Zachariah laughed. "Funny how we end up here for trying to stay alive."

It wasn't funny for Daniel, however. He found it almost impossible to derive any humor from his doomed perspective.

Soon following, the conversation died off and nobody said anything for the next couple hours. Minus Marion's many sarcastic, yet aggressive, threats and the weeping of some internees, it was silent. Whenever a man's weeping ceased, a gut-wrenching feeling would overcome Daniel. A particular incident had him shaking, in fact.

"Hey, boys! Looks like we got ourselves a hanger!"

The hallway echoed with laughter and mocking voices.

"What a pussy!" some yelled.

"Oh, he's right next to my cell! That shit's going to smell in a couple days."

"We should eat him before he rots!" another yelled.

Half of the voices heard bawled in eager agreement. Daniel's stomach couldn't take it anymore and he spewed in his bucket.

Zachariah then chuckled.

"At least you have your sanity, Dan. These other animals lost it long ago."

Daniel vomited again. It was burning his throat, mostly because it was all just vile; no food but only burning stomach acid.

The next hour was spent listening to the deranged laughter from the inmates down the hall. Daniel assumed that the inmates had found a way to the man who had killed himself.

He looked at Marion frequently to see her reaction every time a yelp or cry for help was heard, and every time she would only give him cheerful smiles as if she was ignoring the ludicrous cries. It was evident she had gotten used to them; something Daniel has yet to learn, even after spending days in another cell block already.

"Shut up, maggots!" a guard's voice was heard as he stepped into the hall.

Silence.

"One of you dumb fucking animals better answer me!" the guard

howled.

There was more silence. Then, an inmate spoke.

"Are we going to the courtyard?" he asked.

The guard yelled, "What kind of stupid bullshit question is that? Are you stupid, maggot?"

Silence persisted.

"Answer me. Are you stupid?"

The captive finally answered, "No, sir."

"Well, I think you might be. Only stupid fucks ask stupid fuck questions like that. Do you know how we medicate stupid fucks?"

The inmate didn't answer. He knew the answer. The guards always did something like this day in and day out. It was made part of their routine, and they sure didn't mind beating the sanities of depriving inmates.

"We give them stupid fuck medication!" he laughed.

He then opened up the craven inmate's cell and continued to mangle him. The beating was almost fatal.

"How's about that? Did that cure your stupid fuck problem?" he rhetorically asked the bleeding embodiment of a man.

"Now," the guard continued, "What time is it, everybody?"

All the inmates in unison, excluding Daniel, yelled, "Announcement time!"

"Good," the guard said. "Now, we're going to come by and let you out of your cell to line up. Do anything a stupid fuck would do, and you will be subscribed stupid fuck medication like our friend here. Do you understand, maggots?"

Daniel even agreed by repeating with the inmates as they shouted, "Yes, sir!"

Four guards then moved down the cell hall, unlocking the cells and letting inmates out to line up. As soon as everyone was out and in order, the guard yelled, "Okay, maggots. You follow me in two parallel lines. Any one of you who gets out of line, you will look like a stupid fuck to me. Understand?"

There seemed to be a pattern here.

"Sir, yes, sir!" everyone yelled.

As Daniel walked down the cell hall with the lines of inmates, he

looked within the cages. He passed by the cell where the man was beaten. He laid there unconscious, bloody, and barely vital. He then passed by the cell where the man had hung himself. Daniel at least assumed it was, for there was nothing left but a noose knotted with ragged clothes and a bed sheet. Blood and gore soaked the bars and most of the floor. Looking around, Daniel could see bare bones and pieces of limbs scattered throughout cells of internees.

The walk through the hallway led to two large metal doors with bolts and nails outlining it. The guards led the prisoners out to the cobblestone courtyard, which was surrounding by numerous cell blocks and prisoners egressing them. The inmates leaving other cell blocks were also escorted by guards to the center.

They all eventually lined up accordingly and faced the giant centered screen resting in the middle of the courtyard. The familiar face of the warden, who was standing next to the screen scowling, caught the eyes of many prisoners, including Daniel, who could visualize clearly the night before when he first met the warden.

The warden said to everyone, "You know the drill. You are all to listen to these announcements. Those caught ignoring the announcements or talking will be delivered with extreme consequences."

He then walked out of view of the screen. The television screen turned on to reveal the grisly image of Bartolomeu. Because of the size of the television screen, it appeared as though he was staring into the anxious eyes of everyone within the convict audience.

Bartolomeu's speech began.

"You are the dregs of society, the extra limbs amputated from a deformed baby at birth, and socially incapable of blending in with the rest of the population. You are trash, and like trash, you are thrown here with the rest of the filth that once littered the streets. Hopefully with your cooperation, we can make this more of a recycling center than a trash heap. Hopefully with your cooperation, we can fix you. Hopefully with your cooperation, you can fix yourselves. You are not in anyway different from anybody else. You are not different from a dead body. You are not different than a rotting whore. You are not different from a diseased dog that sifts through feces to find food. You are all the same

and equally worthless, and in this unity of worthlessness, you will all find truth. Let the truth be excepted that in cognateness there is order, and in order there is salvation, and in salvation there is happiness, and in happiness there is peace. Everybody wants peace. Being here it is seeming to me that you have all deliberately thrown your goals away, and thus degraded yourselves into nothing more than trash. There is two options in handling a pile of trash; either bury it or set it on fire. Believe me when I say that in your mighty flame, the ashes that fall will carry no despair. Your ashes will fall as does life giving rain, protruding Earth for the growth of a better crop. Choose the path of the renewed and grow into the crowd, or suffer in smoldering embers. The choice is forever yours."

The screen abruptly shut off with Bartolomeu's last syllable spoken. The words, in the guards' eyes, sufficed. In the prisoners', it was the same speech fed into their minds every day. For some, it worked. For others, it only inspired anger and fed aggression.

After the minds of some prisoners were left blank, some in awe, some in confusion, and the rest anger, Daniel could only expect what came next. The guards lined up the prisoners for their daily inspection. They pushed and shoved every prisoner that hesitated or did not act accordingly and immediately after the guards' orders to bear each other.

Daniel could hear the guards' conversation with the warden standing nearby. The only few words he could make out were, "With your permission, sire," and a thoroughly response from the warden in a head nod fashion. Afterward, the warden left heading towards the direction of his workplace.

The guards, smiling their usual evil smile, walked up and spoke softly to the inmates, "Prepare for inspection."

They then started going through each person. This time, they were skipping the men quickly and going through the women first and much more thoroughly. Daniel and Zachariah stared at each other, noticing each other's mirror facial expressions, after the guards walked passed them inattentively, knowing what would happen next.

A few moments later, they heard the cries of a familiar voice, "Get your fucking hands off me, pig!"

It was the voice of Marion who was immediately being dragged

towards the shadows where the other guards were snickering and unbuckling their trousers.

Daniel and Zachariah then sprung into action. The feeling of hate clinging to the back of their minds as they sped towards the attacking guards.

"Lay one more finger on her and I swear I will rip your arm off!" Daniel shouted abruptly.

"What was that, peasant?" spoke a guard as he turned around to see the instigator.

He then approached Daniel, who still stood with the expression of aggravation revealing to the guard, who looked in shock and amazement at him and Zachariah's courage to stand up for Marion.

"I dare you to say that one more fucking time," the guard stated.

Zachariah clenched his fists together as Daniel drew closer to the guard, realizing that the he was nothing more than a pig behind an armor suit with brass knuckles. He was as worthless as Daniel was, and Daniel could see it in his eyes.

"Touch her again and I will kill you," Daniel repeated more vulgar and aggressive than before.

The guard withdrew immediately at this and, feeling threatened, gut-punched both of the standing initiators. Daniel in prompt acquiescence landed a blow to the footman's temple, which instantaneously knocked him to the ground.

He went to rub and caress the bruised spot where he had been swiftly attacked and looked up at Daniel in shock and awe, not being able to comprehend the event that just occurred.

He then shouted, "Fine! Keep your little whore! The warden will hear this and you will have yours!"

He stood and ran away with the rest of his company as if Daniel had ran over to a flock of pigeons feeding on crumbs of bread.

Daniel limped over to Marion while still holding the part of his stomach that was hit. Zachariah soon followed to pat him on the back as he embraced Marion.

"Are you alright?" Daniel asked.

"Yes, I'm fine, Daniel. I can handle myself, but thanks. That was thoughtful. No one has ever stood up to a guard like that before since I

was here, especially not a newcomer like you."

"Well, what do you expect me to do when they're planning on violating your... well..."

"I know, I know, Daniel. That's why I said thanks."

Daniel smiled. He then turned around to see how Zachariah was doing and noticed all of the other inmates still orderly fashioned in their line staring at them in the great disbelief that the guard presented earlier before he left.

There was scarcely any time for celebration, for three new guards came out to escort everyone to the cafeteria for daily food time.

Unlike most days, the cafeteria was in a more orderly state due to the incident that occurred in just brief moments before in the courtyard.

Daniel, Zachariah, and Marion all sat at a table among Whistler, Joseph, and others whom Zachariah had yet to introduce to Daniel.

Zachariah proceeded in introducing, "Dan, you've already met Whistler and Joseph, so this is Jacob and Gabriel."

Two people across from Daniel at the table nodded as Zachariah said this. One of them had a buzz cut, fairly noticeable beard stubble, and was veiny. That was Gabriel. The other was shorter than the rest of the inmates sitting at the table, but also the most good-looking of them. His hair was moderately long and he was fit and muscular enough to attract almost any women he wanted to. That was Jacob.

"I like what you did with that guard back in the courtyard," Jacob said.

"Everyone saw that," Gabriel interrupted. "That was pretty ballsy if you ask me."

"Thanks," Daniel replied with a blush on his face.

A whistle was heard protruding from bearded lump that sat lazily at the table, eating a fine helping of burnt meat. This reminded Daniel of the story about Whistler's nickname.

"Joseph, weren't you going to tell me about Henry's nickname?" Daniel laughed.

"What, you mean Whistler's, the son of a bitch?"

"Fuck your mother," Whistler shot back at him.

"Calm down, it's your damn name. There's no reason for you to get upset about. Why do you get mad at me for insisting it?"

"Because, Joe, I don't really like you much," Whistler spoke honestly.

"Well, you're honest, I'll give you that."

Daniel watched the conversation while eating his rations and tried desperately not to laugh, but had to force out of himself a snicker. Whistler looked at him with a grimace, which then turned into a heartily laugh.

"I like you, Dan. You have balls. I saw those balls in the courtyard today. If I gave a rat's ass about that gal, I would have done the same thing."

"Fuck you kindly, Whistler," Marion interrupted with a cheerful grin.

Zachariah then states above all the inaudible chatter, "So, Dan, how do you like the company?"

Daniel smiled and replied with no hesitancy, "It'll suffice."

"Alright, Danny boy, do you still want to hear the grand old story about how I got this pain in the ass nickname?" Whistler inquired.

"Sure. The temptation's been killing me ever since I heard your first whistle."

"At least you get the idea of where it comes from," Whistler said. "It started all around but fifteen years erg. I was doing my daily run for food, being the poor son of bitch that I am. I was stealing a piece of meat from one of the bazar market stores. The owner saw me but rushed me instead of calling the patrols. Me being the tough guy that I am, I wasn't going to go down without a hassle. I might have had a few drinks before which made me swing and miss a couple times before I slipped on my feet and stumbled on an old flute that was hidden behind a bench. It got stuck in my neck and long story gone short, I woke up with the damn reed still in my throat. Most of the time when I breathe, a whistle is heard. Been here since, so the mocking is pretty old and doesn't really affect me, but I just like to fuck with people like Joseph just because he's easy to fuck with."

"Fuck you!" Joseph scowled sardonically.

"No, fuck you!" Whistler whistled.

Everyone at the table broke out in laughter; such laughter that Daniel hasn't experience in a long time.

As it died down, Daniel inquired everyone's reason of being

imprisoned.

"So how'd you all get here?" he said.

Gabriel was the first to reply, "Hitting too much bottles of Hejehno, which made me throw down with a guard. That's pretty much the basis of it."

"Really?" replied Daniel. "Why didn't they kill you?"

"They thought they did," he said as he lifted up his shirt to reveal a horrid disfigurement of skin and scars in such a pattern that it was almost impossible to tell which one started and which one ended.

Gabriel continued, "When they figured out I was alive, they threw me in an empty cell without even going through them droids. It was all worth it, though. I kicked the guard's ass!"

"Wow," was all Daniel could get out of himself before he turned to the others for their responses.

Marion then looked honestly at Daniel and spoke, "The reason I'm here is because I escaped my own nation in hopes of finding better places to stay. Turns out I was wrong. I hopped on board a battle ship as it was cruising down these parts and the guards here eventually caught me and threw me in for life. It's worth it, though. I met Zachariah who's pretty much a brother to me."

"Me too," Jacob intervened. "This damn nation invaded us and took me as their captive about a couple years ago. Fuck if I remember but I think they since forgot about me. Now I'm just a prison wanderer."

A whistle was heard and everyone looked at Whistler who was eating food peacefully. He then noticed the eyes of the inmates on him.

"What the fuck do you want? Can't an old man enjoy his food?"

He then continued eating while everyone continued staring with smirk-ridden faces.

"Dan, try and guess why I'm here. It shouldn't be too hard," Joseph said sarcastically.

Daniel thought briefly before replying, "Stealing?"

Joseph laughed to himself and said, "Nope. I'm from another nation also. I ran away because my nation fell apart in its own government. This happened about a year ago, so I'm pretty sure that nation has been run down since. It was kind of sad to leave it, though. I had some mighty friends up in there."

"You had friends?" grinned Whistler.

In hesitance, Daniel noted, "So, most of you guys are basically prisoners of war from another nation?"

"Danny boy," Whistler said as he swallowed his last bite of rusted meat, "We're all prisoners of war in this world."

Chapter 6 The Dream

It was about six months in to Daniel's apparent extended sentence, Daniel growing more and more apathetic with each act of depravity and his bile duct calming with each beating, each suicide, and each passing of a starving inmate.

The guards had slowly eased their tyrannical grip on Daniel's neck after becoming more and more fond of the fact that he had meticulously developed a voice and a quick fist. Most of this was because of the influence Daniel's newfound companions gave him, making his prison life more tolerable and almost appeasing at times. Still, the idea of death hid in the back of everyone's minds, visible through every convict's eyes.

The twist of torment and the brink of insanity shown through so brightly that the vicious light dimmed as men blinked. Even the food lost so much of its taste to Daniel. Instead of gagging him, it slid down his throat in tasteless flavor. Daniel was relieved that other prisoners no longer threatened to cut cords for his insipid meat.

Consequently of his next few weeks in the stern stronghold, comfort dragged Daniel to a state of cold monotony. Everyday Daniel woke up, had pointless conversations with Zachariah and Marion, and listened to the mindless internees down the hall hearing themselves describing mayhem. Guards came in after hours of this and took everyone to the courtyard for daily declarations from Bartolomeu regurgitating the same content every time.

Lunch followed this, and instead of Daniel secluding himself from others, he sat and frequently conversed with his friends about random, yet interesting, topics. Never in a long time would Daniel ever even assume the idea of other prisoners sharing the same qualities, emotion, and securities as him.

This habitual schedule accompanied Daniel for what seemed to be years and it appeared to be the way that things were always going to be. In fact, Daniel could imagine himself growing old before his trial; his joints creaking from thousands of prison brawls, and his mind softening from deaths of countless men and women.

Aided by this was the contemplation that Daniel would never again be able to see the outside world. It not only depressed him but it made him feel primitive in view of the fact that the ambience in the prison was truly lacking an established and well-bred society. This was a primary reason of most of the inmates' stable deficiency.

The idea of death in confinement dwelled within everyone's mind; Daniel wasn't the only one who braced it. Even so, there wasn't much anyone could do about it, for the absent-minded atmosphere and cold affliction wrought was far too much to overcome for most prisoners.

It was food time and almost all residents were in the cafeteria bawling without restraints. Daniel and his company had just gotten their food after standing in the line which comprised of many shoving and pushing for food. A few bites were had and munching was inevitable. Everyone was almost always hungry by lunch, regardless of the food.

A sturdy conversation emitted from the table.

Gabriel opened his mouth and spoke, "Why don't we just leave?"

"Gabriel, what the fuck are you talking about?" Zachariah asked while still gnawing.

"I'm talking about breaking out of here."

Almost everyone at the table put down their food when the idea of leaving the prison crossed their minds. All attention was then towards Gabriel with everyone's facial expressions being almost to the point of stagger.

"Boy, you are just about the craziest fuck..." Whistler started before noticing the grave expression upon Gabriel's face. He immediately knew he was serious.

The table continued ogling while remaining in a state of forbearing silence. The idea of emancipation seemed pointless to everyone at the table.

"Just think about it," Gabriel voiced. "We're all cramped up in this shit hole while others on the outside are at least living a more decent life than us."

"I suppose you could say that," Zachariah said, "Though, we have fine living here. We get fed, and it's at least food we can survive off of."

Gabriel looked at everyone else who seemed to agree with Zachariah inaudibly.

"You just say that because you're now so adapted to living in here, but if you really think about it, do you like getting tormented everyday by the guards and having to listen to the same boring speech and follow the same fucking routine every fucking day?"

"Why does it matter? Besides, what made you bring this up anyway?"

"Well, I've just been thinking how bad we have it since—"

"Bad?" Joseph blurted out, with bits and pieces of food spewing out concurrently with the word he spoke. "You don't even know what the fuck bad is."

"What do you mean?" Jacob asked for Gabriel.

"I'm saying that this prison is nothing compared to some of the shit I've been through. My nation before was terrible, and—"

Whistler broke Joseph's speech mid-sentence, "Yeah, yeah, we get it. No reason to be dramatic."

He paused and glanced at Whistler and then at everyone else who seemed to stare immensely at him.

Joseph continued, "Long story short, this prison isn't that bad. In fact, it's more tolerable than you can imagine."

"Alright, fine. That doesn't give you the right to act like some sort of conceited fuck because you've been through a lot more shit," Gabriel then shot back.

"Hey, I'm just fucking saying."

"Well, I'm just saying maybe there's places better than this prison, even."

Jacob looked up as he said this and spoke, "Hell, I wouldn't doubt it."

"Exactly. Thanks, Jacob."

Whistler began after shoving down a spoonful of mashed food before saying, "This feller might on to something."

With this, Daniel thought for a moment about what his life was like before being jailed. He thought of the depravity, the depression, and what it took to just survive. He then thought about prison life which, though was more easier to live through due to all the food and items presented, was a lot harder due to all the deranged prisoners and evil-intentioned guards.

"Like what other places? We can't go back to this nation outside of this prison," Daniel said. "It's too painful and harder to live. We'd have to flee the nation."

Joseph grimaced at the thought, while Marion did the talking for him and expressed the same thoughts as him.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" she erupted. "There's no way we can go back to traveling to other nations. Not me! I had to sneak on battle ships just to do that and it was hard as hell not to get noticed! I may look like a tough girl, but there's no way I can go through that madness again."

"Maybe we don't have to sneak on any battle ships," Jacob replied.

"Battle ships are the only things that go out to sea. What other fucking option is there?"

With this, he was beat and his retaliate was nil.

Zachariah had to finish the conversation, "Let's just drop it. It's obvious it's not going to happen any time soon."

Gabriel tried to reason at this point, "But... it could work—"

"Drop it, I said."

Gabriel's mouth then shut forthwith, and everyone at the table looked at each other just before finishing their rations and moving on. It was perhaps the most serious and stern topic that they've ever had. It evidently left some faint, yet germinating, thoughts within all of them for they all had the look of rumination on their faces.

It wasn't long before the day was done. The conversation regarding liberation from the prison had apparently killed off what was left of the purposeful vibe that day.

Later that night, Daniel fell asleep. New, coming from him, for just months ago it took such agony just to shut his eyes. Living in a hateful disturbing place was bad enough, consequently sleeping seemed to be a privilege in such conditions.

As he slept, he dreamed. All the while he dreamed, he heard several voices calling to him in calming nonchalant tones. He saw a bright beach, and on this beach he saw many men, women, and children kneeling before what seemed to resemble a big rock-wood tree. The tree, however, was not like most trees. It was indescribable; beautiful beyond anything he thought could have ever existed. Instead of being

gray, it had a dark brown trunk with the branches having fresh green leaves on them. Daniel had never seen leaves before. To him, it was almost like being unveiled a unicorn. The tree had red glowing fruits growing at the ends of each branch. The people would take the strange fruits and consume them. They seemed to be joyed by the flavor. The whole image was ultimately beyond Daniel.

He then found himself in front of the glorious tree.

The composed and cooling voices echoed, "Daniel... take the fruit..."

Just as Daniel was reaching for the strange fruit, he was awakened by a shrill scream. Daniel then jumped up yet was still mesmerized by the beautiful images that still burned in his vision.

Zachariah awakened as well and was able to say in a shaky tone, "What? What's going on? Mary, is that you?"

He shook his head to come more into realization of what was going on. The majority of the prisoners down the hall were now hollering at each other, and some at Marion for disturbing them in their sleep.

"What the fuck was that?" one inmate said.

"Some bitch just got scared!" another replied.

"Shut the fuck up!" repeated more.

Frantic insults and shouts were reverberated throughout the cell block; so much of them, in fact, that it was hard to tell which came from the voice of an actual internee or if it was just the prosthetic sound waves bouncing off the prison walls.

Zachariah ignored this and started in a more stern voice, "Mary, what's wrong?"

Daniel didn't notice that Marion was still screaming. Zachariah threw a small rock that was lying in his cage at Marion's. She awoke.

"Oh, my god!" she said in exasperation. "Oh, my god, Zack, are we still here?"

"Yes, Mary. You're still here. I'm still here. Everyone is still here."

Daniel then came to understanding and immediately over went an emotional burst of apprehension.

"Mary? What happened?" he asked frantically.

"I... I guess it was a bad dream..." she responded.

Zachariah answered in relief, "God, I thought you were dying."

"I guess I'm fine," Marion replied calmly. "Sorry for waking you guys up."

"As long as you're okay," Daniel said.

Marion smiled just before they all laid back down and drifted back to sleep. Daniel, however, stayed up longer listening to Marion's steady breathing.

The next day was also different. Zachariah, Marion, and Daniel had no conversations in the morning, or even before the announcements. Though they had aware looks on their countenance, no one made any noise. They didn't even bother replying to the guards' orders in unison, like they would always do when going to announcements and other times when being escorted as a batch.

During lunch, everyone was also eerily silent. Nobody said anything, only seemingly being enveloped in their own thoughts and eating. This was abnormal, even to Daniel.

Daniel then said, "I had a very strange dream last night."

Everyone stopped and gawked at him.

"What? Something I said?"

They all looked at each other and realized that they were all staring at him with eyes wide open.

"I had a strange dream, too," Zachariah said.

"Me too, man" as did Gabriel.

Everyone glanced towards each other.

"Did everyone have a crazy dream last night?" Joseph asked suddenly, "Because I did, too. There was a beach and... and this weird tree."

With that, everyone sat staring in amazement at the description of the dream Joseph was presenting.

Jacob began, "Yeah, and it had strange fruit growing off the branches, and people were eating them and—"

"Then a voice told you to take the fruit, eh?" Whistler finished.

"Whoa," Daniel spoke. "We all apparently had the same dream then because—"

Marion interrupted Daniel in a frightened voice, "Mine wasn't like that. The tree, the fruit, the people; they were all there, but after all the people ate the fruit, their bodies... they started to melt. Then the tree fell

and a strange creature crawled from the water. These voices told me to listen to it. Then, the creature started screeching and the melting people jumped on me, and that's when Zack woke me up!"

Gabriel's eyes brightened as he started to speak, "Can't you guys see what's going on here? This is a sign. A sign telling us that we have to break out of this hell hole and maybe come across something as magnificent as the tree and the fruit we just saw!"

"Gabriel, don't be a fool. Just because we dreamt something, doesn't mean we have to start jumping to strange conclusions," Zachariah told him.

"Yeah, but we all of our dreams were pretty much identical. You don't think that it's just a coincidence, do you?"

Daniel interrupted them, "What about Mary's dream? Hers was different than all of ours."

"Probably 'cause she's a gal," Whistler laughed.

"I don't think gender determines dream prophecies."

Zachariah then rejoined, "We don't even know if this is a prophesy."

"What the fuck do you know then, man?" Gabriel shot back. As he said this, the table went silent. The tension growing between everyone was palpable. Gabriel looked around in hope for a response from somebody.

When no retort was brought, he stood up and exclaimed, "Fine! I don't need you guys. I don't mind doing this by myself. I'm breaking out no matter what."

Gabriel then walked away towards the cell blocks in indignation.

"Damn, that dream really got to him," Jacob said. "He's almost lost his mind."

A whistle was heard, "Hey, boy! Get your ass back here!"

Gabriel noticed this, and peaked his head around with a reply, "What, what do you want?"

"I never said I wasn't against your plan in the first place," Whistler said.

Gabriel slowly approached the table.

"So you're with me? Anyone else?" he asked.

Then, Whistler began his speech, "I've been here for ten years,

and the hope of life is already leaving me. I don't want to spend the rest of it here waiting to die. Trying to find happiness is better than not expecting any."

"Alright," Gabriel grinned. "I see you understand. So it's me and you, then."

Everyone at the table swapped facial expressions and gestures before Joseph presented compliance to Whistler's speech, "I'll go through with it!"

Everyone looked at each other once more just before Jacob sighed then realized what it was worth to just try.

"Fuck it," he said. "I'm in."

"Well," Zachariah proceeded, "I hate to deny it, but that seems like the only logical way to proceed. I don't want to die here in misery when I know that there's at least a chance of hope."

"I'm only in if Mary is," Daniel said.

With this, Marion succumbed to the idea of liberation and reluctantly agreed by only nodding.

It was then decided and conversation was returned as normal. Over the course of a few weeks, they developed a rough idea of their escape plan. It took days in and days out of them constantly conversing during their free time, and sometimes during their announcements. Most of it would consist of Daniel, Zachariah, and Marion coming up with something on the basis and relevancy for parts while Gabriel, Whistler, and the others would ponder other plan segments in their own cell blocks. All of them would then eventually meet in the cafeteria and amalgamate their thoughts into one perfect plot and procedure.

First, Gabriel and Jacob would feign a fight in order to attract a guard's attention. This would lead to them attacking the guard, thus resulting more of them to come. Then, Joseph and Whistler would join in and eventually this would convert to a miniature riot. More and more guards would be forced to come out to attend to the altercation. Soon, the warden would come out in fury and attempt to subdue the prisoners, even if it meant kill. They knew what would happen and how the guards and the warden would eventually come out. It was pictured in their minds after scrutinizing them constantly.

While all of this happened, Zachariah, Daniel, and Marion would

walk aimlessly around the prison searching for the warden's personal office to retrieve the prison keys. All of them would then meet up afterwards only to see their escape a success.

The one thing that was unbeknownst to them, however, was exactly how they were going to flee the nation island. Nothing was planned because nothing could be studied. It was as if trying to plan the way out of the middle of a large maze, where the end and start points are undetermined.

Chapter 7

The Lamb

Jebediah was enlightened, and the sorrows of his family's death was lifted from his tortured soul. All he could think about while trekking was the confrontation of the creature he witness and himself. He thought of the conversation conceived and then thought of the weight of the animal the serpent offered him on his back. To him, it proved to be a sign of hope.

He no longer felt the intoxication given to him by Hejehno. Instead, he felt the entity of the serpent and its knowledge flow through him as he came to an understanding of his own existence, as prophesied by the seemingly omniscient serpent. Jebediah set these credences in view of himself because of the bestowed indoctrination. He, in his own eyes, was a new man with a new calling.

Jebediah didn't know what or how he was going to explain this happening to his town's people. He imagined them casting him down as insane and mocking him for the rest of his days; ridiculing him forever as the town drunkard for life. Jebediah imaged this just before remembering the amazing animal on his back. There was no way the people wouldn't believe him with such gawking evidence.

He was nearing his town just two miles from the shore, where he faced the creature. He concurrently planned and practiced the speech he was going to give him as he sauntered, preparing for the ignorance of the people to either fade or become violent and angry.

As he reached the town's entrance, people stared at him, looking at the strange thing he held on his back. Some looked away after losing interest while others followed him in curiosity. Jebediah only ignored for his destination was not the grime-covered backstreets but the town central market place, crowded with people who might want to listen to what he had to say.

He entered hastily with a small group of followers behind him. He walked to the center of the bazar where he stood on the platform next to the statue of his nation leader, Antonus. He then began his speech.

"All people in the town of Firesmith, look to me," he vocalized as loud as he possibly could.

People stopped what they were doing and faced him; some in anger of interruption and others in curiosity.

Jebediah proceeded, "Today, I bring to you enlightenment. Today, I bring you knowledge."

"Shut up, you lousy drunk!" one man yelled.

Jebediah, stunned momentarily by the uncivil interruption, continued regardless, "Yes, I know the title I have earned for myself is not the one most credible, but please lend me your eyes and your patience. Yesterday, I sought to the shores of the dreaded waters hoping to find my demise. I fell and slept there by the shores and awakened. What I saw, my friends, is what brought me back to the realm of the living. What I saw, you will not believe."

"Tell us, then, Jebediah," a man spoke. "What did you see?"

Jebediah responded, "I saw a mighty serpent rise from the depths, bearing seven heads and immortal wisdom. He told me to return here and tell you of his presence."

"You lie through your teeth!" said an elderly women, interrupting him.

Jebediah held out the animal given to him by the serpent, and retorted, "Proof of the serpent's existence and of my trials and all I have told: an animal to feast!"

People stared at the strange animal in awe. Silence swept the once furious crowd.

"Where could you have gotten such a beast?" a man asked.

"The serpent. The serpent gave it to me to convince all of you and to show you that I not endow such falsehood!"

"That's enough of that!" a guard yelled out as he moved through the crowd. "Your little speech has gone on long enough now."

He already had his club drawn ready to deliver a solid beating. Jebediah was not expecting an act like this. Before he had time to react, the guard was already within a few feet from him.

Jebediah braced himself for the first blow before hearing an abnormal voice echo in his mind, "Don't worry, Jebediah."

"Wait! Maybe he's right!" a townsman yelled.

Another cried out in response, "I don't believe him. After all, he's nothing but a hejin head!"

"Calm down!" replied the first townsman. "He could be right!"

Another agrees by saying, "Respect that fact."

"Could be, would be, so what? I don't give a fuck. I want certainty," another yelled in agreement with the first declining villager.

The argument progressed for a few minutes with many taking side and not taking side of Jebediah, who the guard, looking bedazzled by the argument that persevered, stood there within feet.

The guard finally said, "Alright, everyone calm down! We'll give this peasant a chance by seeing what he has to offer us."

A smile formed on Jebediah's face and he held out the seemingly dead animal.

The guard took it without reluctance and even studied it a bit before proceeding, "We will cook this animal and we will feast upon this animal, and then we will see if this peasant speaks the gospel."

He started to proceed towards a small stand nearby, where a butcher sat baffled with an unattended piece of meat in front of him.

The guard then notice the animal's leg twitch and shouted, "It's still alive!"

Without warning, the guard grabbed the animal's scruff, squeezed tightly, and rotated in a sharp motion, breaking the neck of the animal. Everyone except the guard flinched as the loud cracking sound was heard along with the animal's shriek being cut off.

After the guard released his grip, the head of the animal dangled from its body as if it was being held by nothing but an attenuated piece of string. The townspeople, including Jebediah, watched with eyes wide open and jaws down low.

He finally approached the butcher's stand and said in a rusty, sarcastic voice, "Clear that there piece of meat and fix this up for everyone so we can all see how much of a clairvoyant this peasant really is."

The butcher cleared his stand countertop simply by brushing the raw meat onto the ground. He then anxiously took the mammal delicately into his hands. He placed it gently on top and looked upon the guard's face, which had a stern, commanding mien. The butcher then knew what he had to do.

He proceeded by raising his cleaver high above his head before

descending it down onto the animal's neck area, severing the head clean off. As it bounced off the countertop with a blood trail following it, the butcher looked up at the guard in an almost concerning manner. The guard returned the gaze before turning around to give Jebediah a hostile expression that seemed to say, "You better be right about all of this."

The butcher focused his attention back to the headless body of the animal before him. He set down the cleaver and pulled a special steel knife from under his compartment in the stand. He then went into the building directly behind him and came out moments later with a small, dented bucket. He placed it on the ground next to the stand near him, picked up the steel knife, and with it he began skinning the dead mammal. He looked up at the guard standing before him as he peeled the first patch of skin off and tossed it in the bucket.

The guard noticed his assuring look, turned around to the crowd still murmuring to each other, and yelled out, "Everyone can back to their daily routines and jobs and works and recreation. The butcher will need time to skin the beast, chop it up, and cook it."

The crowd's incessant prattling persisted.

"Now!" shouted the irked guard as he thrust towards them in an attempt to startle them.

The townspeople flinched at this and immediately segregated into different directions all over. Within minutes, everyone was back to doing their respective tasks and jobs, though still gazing over to the butcher who was chopping up the obscure animal and at Jebediah, who presented it to them originally.

The guard stood with satisfaction before staring at Jebediah, who approached the butcher's stand at a leisurely pace. He then noticed the guard's gaze and responded with only a gulp.

"You better not be making all this up peasant," the guard told him. "If I find that you put all these townsfolk and me and the butcher—"

The butcher immediately looked up as he heard this.

"—to all this for nothing, then I'll skin you myself."

Jebediah then responded diffidently, "Sir, I would never bring upon such fibber to your footsteps, and I would never riddle such deception to my kin and our kind meat vendor."

"For your sake, you better be right."

Hours later after the process that took place to ready the animal for feasting, the butcher brought a big tray of cooked slabs of meat from his building, where he was likely cooking it. The smell coming from the meat attracted many who previously stood in the crowd just hours before.

"I have no idea how it'd taste, but it sure smells damn good," the butcher said.

The very same guard from before walked up and snatched one of the larger pieces of the meat, and demanded, "I'm going to try it first!"

More townspeople walked out to the center as he said this and realized that the meat was ready to feast upon. After the guard took a handsome bite, he showed the emotion of pleasure and enjoyment for the taste, while still keeping a malicious vibe.

"Damn, that's perhaps the best piece of food I've ever had," he yelled out.

Upon saying this, more and more townspeople came to the center for a piece of this delectable food. The butcher was the second to take a chop. Then Jebediah. Then the townsmen. Then the townswomen. Then finally, the children.

Within minutes, the tray was empty and saturated with grease and fat from the cooked meat. The townspeople were joyously eating the best nourishment they've ever relished. Even Jebediah was satisfied with the lump of meat he was ingesting.

After their meat was consumed and their fingers licked, the crowd gazed upon Jebediah who returned the gaze in a content demeanor.

"Do you believe me now that you have tasted the meat that the serpent has offered us?" he asked. "Do you believe it now that you have tasted what is truly heaven?"

Some of the townspeople, including the guard, looked at each in guilt, while others in credibility. They all then looked upon Jebediah and nodded.

"We want to see the creature!" one man cried out.

"Yeah! Let's see it!" another yelled.

It was only moments later before the whole crowd was demanding to see the creature that brought forth the animal to them. Instantaneously, he remembered the serpent's exact words to him

before descending back into the acid waters. He then knew what he must do.

"We shall see the serpent!" he yelled to the crowd with arms in the air.

The people of the town bellowed in satisfaction and exultation as he said this, as if he were a prominent musician at an infatuated concert.

Jebediah and his all of the town's people and the guard ambled towards the beach, where Jebediah claimed he saw the serpent rise. The journey there was exceedingly short this time around for the arrival to the beach only took half of the time it took Jebediah when he was alone.

Everything around the beach was almost exactly as left. The rocks unturned, the sand unmoved, the water still hitting the shore rocks and land, and even the footprints left by Jebediah's feet and his knee prints from when he fell to the ground before the serpent. It was all there still.

"So, where is this serpent you promised?" one man asked as he looked around in a perturbable manner.

"I... I don't know..." Jebediah responded.

He looked to the shore and gazed out at the sea to see endless miles of water with almost no disruption in the flat surface of rusty blueish green waves.

"Serpent! Reveal yourself!" Jebediah cried out to the sea.

Silence and impatience from the townspeople struggled on. Jebediah grew worried.

"Don't tell me you lied to us, you bloody drunk!" the guard glowered to him.

"What was that meat you fed to us?" demanded a townsman.

"It must have been poison!" yelled another.

Jebediah was near brittle when he heard the angered voices of the townspeople, who started creeping towards him.

"No doubt it was! The serpent doesn't exist!" said a man as he picked up a long stake on the ground.

"No! Please!" Jebediah yelled out to them as he was backing up toward the shore. "I have no reason to lie!"

The guard approached Jebediah with a mean scowl before saying,

"I told you I'd skin you if you lied. Now I'm going to trim you like a—"

Before he could finish, the ground started trembling again; much like it did before. Jebediah quickly looked towards the sea expecting the serpent to show.

"What the fuck is that?" a man yelled.

Suddenly, it ascended again. First its median head. Then its long neck. Then the six others. It opened its eyes before gazing down at the many awestruck townspeople returning the startled glance.

The townspeople, including the once spiteful guard, could do nothing but stare in great consternation and reverence, for the serpent to them was a giant monster. Many of them looked at Jebediah once more, knowing that he was right, before ending their fixed scrutiny on the creature before them. They then dropped to their knees.

Jebediah, who was now the only one standing, spoke calmly to the townspeople, "Now you believe me."

Chapter 8

The Execution