

The Loneliest Man on Earth

by Vincent Pet,

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The characters in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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In the Not Too Distant Future

There's a spark of purpose that comes from holding a simple sheet of white paper between two hands that brings instant clarity. It's an act so rigid that it

solidifies and gives shape to scrambled thoughts—a little like dropping an egg in a frying pan, thought Admiral Hunt. A cluttered digital screen, where one could swipe left or right, down or up, could never do that. He much compared it to aiming a heavy-duty flashlight at a shadowy corner—one strong, precise beam of light able to cut through the disarray and bring to the forefront what needed to be relevant.

His eyes darted up into the taut, worried face of General Roe who'd just handed him the brief hand drawn message. The information it contained was much too sensitive to print out through a computer. Even uttering those jotted words was a serious matter of consideration from fear of being overheard—not that anyone would understand, outside the two, but the name of Travis Howard was simply never to be mentioned just like a uniquely dangerous thought was best left unspoken, buried, and forever abandoned to the end of times.

Both men's attention drifted to the oversized, mega liquid-pixel screen at the far end of Admiral Hunt's large office. The news channel was showing footage of the horrific scene. Not even half an hour had passed since the sharp explosions. Debris was still smoldering and thick smoke was rising from a part of the mangled fuselage. There was no doubt that it was a terrorist attack. The Pentagon and various other government agencies already possessed solid leads. The plane was directed to London, from Philadelphia, and had barely lifted off when at about eighteen hundred feet two quick blasts cracked the air. Witnesses saw what remained of the plane literally fly off in every direction as the pieces eventually plummeted to the ground.

When Admiral Hunt first saw a clip of the event from one of the Pentagon's secret surveillance satellites in low orbit above the Earth, he was convinced that all the three hundred people on board were dead. Ten minutes later, the first rumor of survivors surfaced. The minutes that followed were rather hectic as government staff went on high alert, concentrating on filtering intelligence data and securing departure points across the country. When he heard, in the background, that one lucky bastard had survived the explosion, he rather scoffed at it, believing it to be a press misinterpretation or one sick individual's attempt to get his fifteen minutes of fame.

He had barely stepped foot back in his office from an emergency briefing when General Roe came rushing on his heels with the scrawled note. The survivor's name was Terrence Holden. General Roe needed not etch anything else down, even if he did. Terrence Holden was Travis Howard's step-brother.

Admiral Hunt kept his pondering eyes riveted on the screen. The news channel had been able to get a high quality amateur clip of the exploding plane. No one could have survived that crash – not with that intensity and at that height. He was either in the presence of the greatest miracle that he'd ever witnessed or somehow Travis... but Travis had no knowledge that he even had a brother.

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Travis Howard sat on a small, cold-metal chair at 23:59:00 hours precisely, like he did every night, and waited quietly for the two words that would designate his existence to materialize on the miniature black and white terminal screen in front

of him. For the first few weeks, the exercise had been intriguing, almost amusing, to speculate which name he'd be consigned for the new day.

Not that Travis guessed. He had no concept of guessing. He supposedly didn't even understand what the word meant. At least, that's what his medical file read. Chance, hazard, luck, call it what one wanted, was not a part of his essence and he needed to accept this as a fact—even if—it bothered him not being able to experience this human trait.

One of his three ongoing thought processes in his mind stopped. While one continued to contemplate the conversion of solar energy by the body to repair cancer cells by utilizing the natural bacterial fauna of the intestine and the other worked to solve the final steps to convert salt water to power mechanical engines, the other questioned what it meant to be human and if he could be considered as such.

He dimmed his other two thought processes to concentrate on the problematic matter, but within seconds, he discarded the argument as being unsolvable even if relevant. Of course he was human—and he wasn't. He was missing one significant detail to be able to answer that simple question with—was he an anomaly of human evolution or simply the next stage of the species development? He didn't know, and if he didn't know, then what was the purpose of pursuing that thought?

The name game, for instance, had been a puzzle to solve and there had never been any doubt that he would find the answer. He supposedly had a logarithmic mind capable of narrowing down the possibilities in an abstract, logical sequence that came naturally to him.

Robert Halenk, he thought, and in the next second the name Robert Halenk flashed on the screen. That would be his designated name for the next twenty-four hours. It brought him no satisfaction knowing that he had successfully cracked this supposedly artificially intelligent induced, security failsafe program. Then again, they probably had expected him to do so. That's why he lived alone, secluded from the world. That's why he would never see another human being again.

Travis Howard knew too much and that made him the most dangerous man on Earth.

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Sam pushed his knuckles against the wall as if he wanted to puncture the thick barrier in front of him with the pure pressure of his thoughts. He banged his head, comforted by the dull noise of the impact, even if the irritation that he felt continued to pervade him. He breathed heavily as he looked outside of his girlfriend's apartment down to the street below. He shook his head as irrational thoughts ran through his mind.

Why was he feeling so miserable? Why did he have this throbbing malaise deep in his heart which he couldn't escape no matter how much he wished to? Everywhere he looked, he saw the futility of life. People running, people working, people loving, people convincing themselves that they were satisfied with their lives—why, what for? Didn't they understand that everything was pointless? Didn't people understand that societies are just mazes that men built to define reality because people didn't know what to make of their lives once they were born?

He was young, in the prime of his life. He could fool himself that everything he touched, that everything he smelled and that he saw in front of his eyes was real and had its importance in the universe. He could even think there was a God—yes, that would make survival more comfortable and answer every doubt. Mystery is such a wonderful word when one ponders a question that no one has an answer to. Who is the only one that knows every mystery? God, of course.

Yes, he could fool himself to live, because he had youth on his side, but one day, he'd be old and lonely. He was terrified about being alone, about being boxed in a one room, tiny apartment waiting for the breath of death to come extinguish his feeble life.

Alone and forgotten—was that any way for a human being to end up? He imagined himself wrinkled and bent, shunned by young people and ignored by the mass. He saw himself walking among the crowd on a bright sunny day, a fearless face pretending to be brave which would fool no one, not even the shadow of death strolling lazily next to him in his foolish attempt to elope the winter. He imagined the crowd resolutely marching around him, with their impassive faces, that detached safe distance that people observed when a slow, old person was in the middle of their path.

Sam was already feeling the pain of the world fast forwarding around him, ignoring him, leaving him behind to saunter with his own graying memories. Or, worse yet, he imagined the young with that flickering sign of impatience on their healthy faces as they walked towards him, almost imperceptible, as if telling him that he shouldn't be out in the middle of a crowd at his age, but should instead shunt himself to the side—like a wrinkled, dry autumn leaf.

Tears were forming in his eyes as Sam anticipated his lonely future. He would have his memories left to comfort him, but memories were cruel, torture actually, when one was so terminally alone. They were like mirages which gave a sudden hope of relief until the stark reality surfaced and left one marooned with the bitter taste of fragmented, interrupted dreams.

At that point, better never to have been haunted by the beauty of life. Better never to have lived through such joy. Better never to have awakened to realize that youth was just a trance, like abstract art that didn't really mean anything in the end—or meant anything that you wanted it to mean with never having the certainty of knowing. Old age, instead, was real. Old age was as solid as the wood around a canvas. Old age burned up in smoke and at best left the once young and vibrant colors of the painting scarred. And worthless.

Sure, he had Judith's love now, but that was destined to end. At present it was new and exciting and every word and thought seemed as fresh as if he was thinking it for the first time, but he had once read that the pinnacle of any love lasted a maximum of two years before the passion started to wane, before the faults of the other person started to creep through and idle monotony set in. So what was the point? Already, she was his third steady girl and none had ended on a good note. Why should he believe this one would be different when he had loved each with every fibre of his heart and each had returned his love equally as much just to see it all fall apart in the end?

It was getting late in the afternoon as he thought of Judith. She would be home soon and although he had been able to hide his true mental state of mind for the

last few weeks, he knew that he wouldn't be able to bluff anymore. He was truly lost in this cold, selfish, and unfriendly world. Sam started to weep. He couldn't go on living like this.

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Judith was looking forward to her one month vacation. She was concerned about the terrorist attack the other day, but that wouldn't stop her from visiting Mexico, especially with Sam. He had never seen the ancient ruins and she was eager to share with him the wondrous monuments of that long gone civilization.

A smile crept up to her lips as she thought of Sam. There was no denying it. What first started as a one night affair had unexpectedly turned into something much more than she anticipated—or desired. She was not a woman who liked to remain in steady relationships for long. Something told her, though, that this one could turn out to be a little more serious than her recent ones. She didn't know, however, if this would be a positive in her life. She preferred to keep a safe emotional distance—a buffer zone, as she called it.

With her usual determined, confident stride, Judith hurried through the door of the university. From the corner of her eye she saw a smartly dressed military man, about fifty, veer towards her as she came down the steps leading to the parking grounds. She instantly recognized his high rank and turned her gaze squarely in his direction while slowing down to give him a chance to meet her. He reached her midway up the stairs, a slight smile on his thin lips. His clear blue eyes, though, were cold and impenetrable.

“Dr. Judith McBain? My name is General Roe.”

After the initial formalities, he quickly came to the point.

“I represent a highly specialized branch of the Pentagon that is integrated with homeland security. We are involved in maintaining an operative force against non-conventional modes of warfare. I have contacted you from a select few candidates based on your impressive research on paranormal activities. We need your expertise on a particular case.”

She joined him as they walked down the stairs.

“You suspect someone is threatening the country through paranormal means?” Judith asked, not waiting for him to further elaborate the circumstances of his visit as she took charge of the conversation.

The general seemed to approve of her quick intuition. She could tell, that he too, was a man that wasted little time in idle talk.

“Exactly. The word suspect is the key since the paranormal has never been scientifically proven. If there is, however, one individual that could have such capabilities, we know who he is.”

She paused in front of her car, an F430 yellow Ferrari. General Roe had heard of her rather brash, impulsive ways and the type of car she flashed simply confirmed that Dr. McBain was, what one would call, a hot blonde. She could easily have rivaled any of the prominent socialite divas and then some.

“Interesting. General Roe, if you are acquainted with my research then you know that even though I've acknowledged that the human mind has great potential, I'm a skeptic when it comes to unleashing the brain's power using today's technology. So far, no scientific experiment has confirmed or denied any of

my hypotheses. I am first and foremost a psychiatrist and unless proven otherwise, I prefer not to speculate on the paranormal. I much rather prefer to deal with today's reality where ESP is, at best, a fringe scientific field which has lots of success in books, television and at the movies."

General Roe nodded appreciatively.

"Indeed. I knew this would have been your response and this is why you were chosen over other qualified candidates. This matter is so delicate that we need a skeptic, one that doubts every piece of information before accepting it as real. The individual you will have to deal with is unique in every way. I assure you that you've never dealt with an individual quite like this. Only a handful of people have ever come in contact with him."

She burst into a merry laugh which startled General Roe.

"I must admit that you are starting to intrigue me. A high ranked general, an encounter in a parking lot, an individual potentially capable of using his thoughts to endanger national security—and you even know his name! How convenient!"

General Roe cleared his throat, a little irritated.

"Dr. McBain, are you mocking me?"

Her sparkling, raunchy eyes clearly told him that she was.

She opened the door of her car.

"I will have to think about it. I have a lecture tonight and then I'm off to Mexico for a month. I'll let you know when I get back."

She turned to him as she slid in her seat. "By the way, what do I do? Just call the Pentagon and ask for the paranormal general?"

General Roe's eyes didn't waver one bit as he held her amused gaze with a dignified stance.

"Actually, Dr. McBain, you don't have a choice in the matter. As a citizen you are required to protect your country and I have the legal authority to enforce this. I will contact you again first thing tomorrow morning for a briefing. If, by the way, you do leave the country, I will come and bring you back from wherever you might be in the world within twenty four hours. I guarantee it."

As he thought, his words had no effect on her. That didn't surprise him at that point.

She smiled up at him with her most dazzling smile.

"Promises, promises... I do like a man who can keep his promises. Unfortunately, I haven't come across one, but if you do come, please bring champagne."

With that same buoyant smile, she slammed on the accelerator and was gone before he could add another word.

A few hours later, both General Roe and Admiral Hunt were at the lobby of the Lorina Hotel, packed with a great amount of people interested in hearing Dr. McBain speak of her latest book. Word came in very quickly, though, that she had cancelled for the evening. A friend of hers, Sam, had died.

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"I wish you were here, Will. I really need to be held by someone."

William heard his sister's broken voice and wished he could squeeze her tightly to him. By nature, she had never been the sort of person to seek comfort with a

hug; then again he couldn't remember the last time he had seen Judith so worn-down—even when their parents died in a car crash she had been composed for her age, withdrawing within herself to mourn in silence while channeling the strength inside of her to reach her dreams. Judith had always been like that: driven, strong and independent; flamboyant on the outside, but guarded about her privacy. So much so, that at times he didn't feel he had a sister even if he loved her dearly. Which was why, he assumed, he always felt a subtle veil of inadequacy when he was with her.

Her presence made him feel awkward. It was almost as if he recognized that he should get more involved in his sister's life despite the fact that he didn't know how to be of any help to her. It wouldn't surprise him if she felt the same about him. Perhaps, the fact that they possessed very different characters made getting closer a little harder even if he cared deeply about her. Then, he imagined that the age difference also didn't help. He was ten years older.

He looked at her through his monitor from the ISS, the International Space Station.

"A little bit tough to get back from 260 miles high," he finally said as that sense of futility welled up in him.

He didn't add anything else as she stared back at him from her terminal at the hotel she was staying at. Communication between them had always been difficult even if they had much that they could tell each other. Both were accomplished in their fields, both lived a full life and each was very proud of the other.

At times, William didn't understand why their bond struggled to express itself. He wished for a closer affinity, but at other times he felt that they had established a perfect equilibrium and anything deeper could cast a shadow over their relationship.

Perhaps, thought William, they trusted each other blindly and dared not tread on each other's thoughts. Perhaps, they respected each other too much and dared not intrude on each other's path. William didn't know if this was the case, but at that specific instant, he dearly wished he could offer his little sister much more than what he was giving her.

They still had another five minutes of connection time left. Mission control had granted them this special request considering he was her only family. Her hair was disheveled, he thought abstractly. She had always been so precise with her appearance. He broke the silence.

"You're not going back home soon?"

She shook her head glumly.

"I'm selling the place even at a loss. I just can't walk into the bedroom anymore. He hanged himself from the light fixture."

She sighed deeply, trying to regain her composure following the shock she had experienced. Her hollow, stark eyes looked pointedly at him.

"Will, I'm a psychiatrist. I should have known. I don't understand how I didn't see the symptoms. I mean, I'm supposed to stop these things from happening."

William realized his sister was primarily speaking to herself as she searched for inner revelation, but he nevertheless tried comforting her.

“Maybe, there were no symptoms, Jude. Perhaps, he was that one in a million subjects who looked completely healthy and showed no instabilities. You shouldn’t feel guilty.”

She nodded slowly, listening to his words, but it was very apparent to William that she was not the very least convinced.

“I wish you had known him...” she uttered as her voice trailed off.

William was somewhat surprised at her statement. He had never been introduced or met his sister’s boyfriends and it was just as well. He didn’t understand this aspect of her life and left it at that, trusting that she was perfectly satisfied to live life without any meaningful sentimental obligations. What he did know was that her unwillingness to keep a commitment was not an emotional instability, as his wife suggested. Neither was it a case of immaturity. Perhaps, she was too stringent. Perhaps, she hadn’t found the right one or it could be that she was very much in love—to her freedom. Or, pondered William, maybe she understood the precise moment when to leave a relationship before it soured.

“He asked me to marry him a few days ago...you don’t suppose...”

Yes, that would be a situation which would bring her to truncate a story, thought William.

“I don’t know,” he retorted softly. “What did you say when he proposed?”

She looked at him, clearly distraught.

“I laughed at him.”

William grimaced.

“It could have contributed, Jude, but he must have been mulling over his decision for some time. I don’t think he committed suicide on the spur of the moment. The marriage proposal must have been a desperate attempt to clutch at something to keep him hanging on to life. If it was, it was unfair to you. Really, Jude, don’t second guess yourself. You...”

William abruptly turned his head around and nodded. He turned his attention back to his sister as his colleague drifted away.

“I don’t have much time left...”

She smiled feebly back.

He hesitated to cut the connection.

“Jude?”

“Yes?”

“Are you more concerned...”

William paused. These were not the right words he wanted to use under those circumstances, but he couldn’t think of a gentler way to ask her. He knew he was prying and that his sister was vulnerable at the moment, but he yearned to know if she was capable of loving someone—even at the cost of putting a slight dent in the comfortable distance that their sibling relationship was based on.

“Are you more concerned about Sam’s death or about the fact that you were not able to prevent it?”

She stared at him, expressionless for a moment before her eyes dropped away. She lifted her head and stared straight at him. He saw a hint of worry in her painful eyes.

“I honestly don’t know, Will. It’s a terrible response, isn’t it?”

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Travis Howard was the most intelligent man on the planet. He was at least twenty times brighter than any man ever born on Earth, which also made him the most dangerous man alive. His ultimate goals were the advancement of the human race and the protection of his country. He had agreed to these and didn't wish it to be any other way, but lately, his commitment to those causes were becoming difficult to maintain.

The problem was that he was alone—truly utterly alone. Few knew of his existence and it would remain this way until his very last breath. Once that transpired, it would be as if he was never born on this Earth. There wouldn't be one line in the media to announce his death, a simple thought from someone's memory to reminisce him, to remember at least the contour of his face, the color of his eyes, his tone, a smile, a frown—anything. Not one.

Actually, he would die exactly in the place where he lived. A small nuclear explosion would pulverize him into oblivion. The thought of death did not terrify him, but the thought of dying alone did. His life was dedicated to helping humanity flourish, but this altruistic goal could not sustain him much longer. What he desperately needed at that moment of his life was to satisfy his emotional cravings. Travis had ignored his feelings for far too long and now they were clawing back at him, demanding their due—but he had no means of appeasing their needs. He simply didn't know how to.

Confined in a small laboratory underneath the ocean's crust, the floor of the Pacific coast was not meant for humanity let alone a single individual. He was buried in a cold, deep, living tomb and the Earth above him felt more distant with each passing year. Many times he pondered if his solitude for such a long period of time was affecting him to this point even if it had always been problematic being with people. His rational mind told him that he was much better off by himself and to simply ignore the background noise that came from his emotional desires by concentrating on his daily tasks.

After all, his childhood memories were not very positive when it came to interacting with others. People had always hesitated accepting him despite his best efforts to belong and to be liked. He had always desired to fit in and to feel what it meant to be human. He wanted to be part of society, participate in the fabric of life and this permanent isolation, unfortunately, was only strengthening his resolve.

How he wanted to be liked, to love and be loved. It was such a simple concept, but it had become an obsession as he struggled to understand its mystery and the hold that sentiment—or lack of it—had on him. It all came down to having someone to care about, thought Travis. Or did it? He was not sure. He was not sure at all about love. He ached to understand it, ached to experience it, to touch it and cradle it in his soul, to wet his words in the ocean of this love and sail the calm and stormy seas of its strong emotional tides.

What did he understand about love? When had he ever loved? His parents, certainly a long time back, but what could anyone secluded from all human contact, from the world above, from even glancing into the blue sky on a sunny day and feeling content—what could a person like that possibly know about love?

But the loneliness! The loneliness that came from being aware that love was missing was more unbearable than the idea of love could be fulfilling... and Travis Howard was the only person in the world that truly knew about this type of loneliness.

However, he could not fault the men who decided his fate for he understood their mistrust and their misconception of who he was and what he represented. He realized early in life that he was very different from the rest of humanity. He came to learn to accept the differences, to accept that he was the aberration, the monster, and not humanity.

The few individuals that came to know him had concurred that he was too dangerous to live as a free man, but too valuable to eliminate. Since his intelligence could also represent the nation's greatest threat if put to malicious use, it was agreed that the safest way to protect themselves from him was to hide and isolate him in the most unreachable part of the world that could be imagined. Travis had suggested the Pacific Ocean's bottom and had been the designer of his own quarters. The prison he made for himself was a quarter of a mile under the crust of the Pacific Ocean, not far off the coast of Hawaii.

Benik Mooskian. That would be his name for the day. Travis closed his eyes, not even waiting for the computer's confirmation, and thought about his youth like he did every single day. He tried to rationalize his loneliness by trying to convince himself that he wasn't being objective about his situation. He told himself that his desire to go back in time was an infatuation for a simpler time—a typical human reaction when the present seemed unbearable. He was unsatisfied with his present, yes, but to deny all that he had accomplished was biased. He had discovered and solved many extraordinary things in the undersea laboratory, and to be fair, had been given the means to create whatever his mind envisioned.

Yet, his thoughts constantly went back to that ten-year-old, naive boy. His parents had been modest people and like most parents, had wanted the best for him. They had trusted that they would be placing him in capable and expert hands when he was removed from home. Travis still remembered his dad reassuring him that they would continue their coin collection that they spent years piecing together. His mom promised him that she'd prepare his favorite treats on the day he'd return home.

These were simple everyday things that he found comfort in. His mind had held on to these promises like an anchor through the early years of his captivity. Unfortunately, those were the last words he heard his parents speak before he was separated from them forever.

Supposedly, he was scheduled to come back home after one year, but he never did. In the first few months, Travis was transferred to special foster homes of reputable scientists who scrutinized him from morning to night. Later, he was moved to secret government facilities as they slowly came to realize, despite his reluctance, that he had very special and frightening powers. In the end, there were only two choices left: either kill him out of fear of what he could do or harness his knowledge to everyone's advantage.

It was now well over fifty years since Travis had been living undersea. The only contact with the outside world was a one hour window the first day of every year. A submergible would rendezvous at his location and attach a cable locking to a

port jutting out a few feet from the seabed that linked his quarters to the outside world. He would transfer the data of his year's work and in return he'd receive a query list, usually consisting of political and economic dilemmas that the US government wanted his expertise on, as well as scientific and military projects that he should focus on for the upcoming year.

The fear that he could be discovered by any other country was such that no further communication outside this one hour window was considered safe. Not even wireless communication was deemed secure, even at that depth. If Travis needed to reach someone for an emergency, he would be unable to. If something catastrophic happened to the station, or if he were to suddenly die, the station would not even be physically inspected on their return the following year to assure that he was dead. If at the end of the hour he did not respond, the protocol he'd written instructed the military to drop a nuclear warhead on top of him which in turn would activate another nuclear device below the base that would implode his quarters and obliterate his existence.

At times Travis reflected on the irony of his existence. Life had started as a single cell, presumably at the bottom of the ocean, and now, after billions of years, the most intelligent brain ever born had come full circle. Not much movement for all that labor evolution had invested in, he mused. Yet, it was this assumption that he was born to accomplish great things that had brought him there in the first place. It would inevitably have happened, for sooner or later, someone would surely have noticed that he was not like the rest of them.

It was during grade school when he'd finally lost his sense of caution and with it, the lessons that his parents had diligently taught him. He'd been told at an early age that he was unique. His parents had spent every day of their lives reminding him how he should behave in public. They warned him that if he didn't blend in with the rest of humanity, he would be taken away from them and studied as a test subject.

It was forbidden, for instance, to show any paranormal activity outside his room. He had to practice to lower his IQ score in order to pass as normal. There were also other simple rules that had put a great strain on him during childhood. It was strictly forbidden to correct a teacher, to use sophisticated words in a sentence, or to express ideas that were not part of the established literature.

It hadn't been easy for him notwithstanding his utmost effort to be seen as normal. He desperately sought to be liked and strived to be friendly with everyone he met, but he wasn't able to blend in. It was as if the children possessed a sixth sense and had discerned that something was not quite right with him. His classmates remained distant despite his best attempts to befriend them, but it wasn't only the students that shunned him. The teachers too were uncomfortable with his presence. After the usual, initial friendly impact, Travis started to notice that uncomfortable look on their face as they slowly started to avoid him.

A part of it was due to the manner he walked, his gaze, and his demeanor when in company. He was at the same time too composed and reserved for his age. His interactions with other people could have been mistaken for either politeness or shyness, but it went beyond this. It was disquieting the manner in which he struggled for every answer when he was posed a question. It was as if he couldn't find the words to articulate a proper response, as if he was thinking of a hundred

different ways to reply and didn't know how best to complete the answer. His emotions were never out of place, his tone never varied, his piercing gaze always seemed to weigh and judge – it was disconcerting to have Travis Howard as a classmate or student and it became second nature for everyone to ignore him regardless of his attempts to befriend them.

Then one day, a knock on his parent's door started the sequence of events that eventually brought him in contact with the government. The principal of his school had paid a home visit to explain to his parents that their son was having difficulty socializing with his peers. Not only, but the principal was convinced that their son's outstanding grades were due more to their son's amazing capacity to memorize than his intelligence. He explained that Travis was slow to respond at times and that his awkwardness around people was more than just plain timidity. He found their child creatively challenged, noting that he wasn't active in school activities and showed a lack of interest in the sciences and arts despite his high grades.

“I strongly suggest,” he advised, “that you seek special counseling for your child. I know of a few fine institutes that could cater to his special needs.”

The young Travis wanted to burst out of his room and confront the principal. He wanted to tell him that explaining gravity by imagining an apple falling on a head was not as exciting as that of calculating the bending light of a star passing near a black hole. Nor could he start designing functional, architectural wonders at the age of twelve without arousing astonishment. Drawing lines and circles and filling in the spaces with colors did not interest him. He did not confront the principal, however. He remained crouched and silent where he was, alone in his room. That's what his parents told him to do when visitors came and that's what he did at the time.

His parents were very mindful not to worsen the situation as they thanked the school director for having expressed his concerns. As soon as the principal left, a painful, worried look crossed both his parents' faces. For the first time that evening, he heard his parents at odd as they grappled with the unexpected dilemma. They were at an impasse, uncertain of what was best for his future. One thing they concurred on was that they had to leave and start over again—but where and how?

As for the young Travis, he was in deep turmoil. He was tremendously hurt to hear what other people thought of him even if he'd been well aware of the general malaise surrounding him. However, to hear it expressed in clear terms, to hear it actually said by a person of authority hurt him immensely. What was even worse was that he was not even considered mentally at par with the rest of his classmates.

At first, his heart ached, then his pride suffered, but by the time he went to bed, his thoughts were galloping excitedly in his head. He needed to show them who he really was. That would set everything right again. His parents must surely have come to the conclusion that the course of action that they had told him to follow was inappropriate. They had told him to hide who he was, to keep everything secret for fear of being rejected, but despite following his parent's plan perfectly, he had been rejected!

The following day, his parents didn't send him to class, figuring it was best to let a few days pass by before deciding about the future. As soon as they left for work, Travis actively started searching for ideas that he could put into use. He wanted to impress his classmates and teachers. He wanted them to be in admiration of him. He wanted them to like him. He wanted to be popular.

Even at that age, Travis thought that the major theories on physics were for the most part incomplete and misleading. He had scribbled some ideas, but would his classmates understand and be impressed with his mathematical equations? He doubted it. The scenario which most appealed to him was to use his paranormal gifts and send the whole class flying around the school a few times, but that wasn't very practical since his purpose was not to scare people but to let them realize that he was worthy of being among them. He had to find something never done before that would dazzle his classmates and teachers and would make people respect him and his family.

When a plan finally did emerge, he hesitated for a few long minutes as he considered the consequences. He knew how important the new television and appliances were for his parents, but if he was successful, he was convinced that they would understand and forgive him. Once his decision was made, his thoughts focused entirely on what needed to be done to reproduce what he had in mind. He used up most of the morning to complete his task. By the time noon came, most of the major appliances in his household were in shambles, never to work again. On the other hand, the first quantum laser gun ever assembled stared back at him—even if, at that time, he had no idea that what he held in his hands would eventually be called such.

Travis was terribly excited. It was the first time he had ever put so much effort into something and he was thrilled at the result. He wasn't sure if it would work, because the material would only support one blast before fusing. It was a start, though, and he already had a ton of new ideas to try out in case the gun didn't work as expected.

His problem, now that the gun was completed, was to find a way of demonstrating its capabilities so that the whole school could see what he had created. He knew he couldn't wait until morning, because once his parents entered the house, they would not only take his gun away, but also proceed to destroy all evidence of it. He would also be grounded for days if not weeks and by that time, they probably would have relocated to another city and he would be once again constrained to live in secrecy and suffer the same circumstances. He had no choice. He had to go to school that very day and make his statement.

School was only ten minutes away by foot from his home. If he hurried, he would still make it for lunch hour. Travis stuffed his weapon in his back sack and lugged it off to the playground. It was bulky and heavy, but his determination was such that despite the weight he managed to arrive in less time than the commute usually took him.

Most of his classmates were still playing outside when he reached the school grounds. He stopped within the front gate of the fenced in area and looked around. Now that he had arrived, he didn't quite know what to do. Then he noticed one of the kids holding a basketball in his hands. It was Jeffrey. He was one of the kids that had recently given him problems.

Travis made his way towards his classmate and stood beside him. Jeffrey pretended not to notice as he kept bouncing the ball up and down on the spot. Some of the other kids had started looking at Travis with smirks on their faces. He had never played in a game and they wondered what he could possibly want at that moment.

"Jeffrey, I need your ball... please. I have a special gun in my back sack and I need a target to shoot at and see if my gun works as intended. I promise that I will get you a new ball as soon as I'm able to."

Jeffrey turned towards him as the ball slipped out of his hands.

"Just get out of my face, will you Travis?"

For a moment, Travis winced at Jeffrey's over aggressive tone. He decided to pay him no attention. He dropped to one knee and opened his back sack. Jeffrey's outburst drew the attention of the teacher who was supervising them. She started walking slowly towards them, but when she saw Travis take what seemed to be a crude rifle from his bag, she frantically dashed forward in a desperate attempt to reach him before he pulled the trigger. Travis's next moment would seal his future.

As the teacher screamed at the pupils to flee, Travis kept his eyes fixed on the rolling ball. With numb hands and his heart thumping loudly in his ears, he swung the gun towards the ball. The path was clear. He hesitated for a fraction of a second, making sure that no one would get in harm's way. He felt the teacher's breath on his neck as he pulled the trigger.

Travis didn't really know what a quantum laser gun would do even if he had projected certain scenarios. First, there had been the pure joy of seeing a small pinkish bolt jump from the end of his gun. It seemed to him that it moved towards the ball like a spoon falling through molasses. Then his analytical mind kicked into gear as he tried analyzing the phenomenon that he was witnessing. Half way towards the ball, the bolt seemed to instantly jump inside the ball. The last thing he remembered seeing was the ball shrinking into a dot and then disappearing in thin air, imploding on itself.

He was awe struck. The bolt jumped because it bent space! He had been able to superimpose two points in one space! Just then, as his mind was racing to explain the mechanism of the ball's disappearance, a hot bluish glow enveloped his body. The last thought he remembered having was that the matter composing the ball had been transformed into a solid heat wave and had hit him back like a ricochet.

When he next opened his eyes, he was lying on a very stiff bed. He was surrounded by men in uniform pointing guns at him with noticeable apprehension evident on their tense faces. He knew that something had gone terribly wrong with his plan. In fear, Travis panicked just a little, enough to levitate from his bed.

He should never have done that.

* * * * *

"Travis Howard was born in 1960. His mother was in her early thirties and came from war torn Poland. His father was a private stationed in an American base after the liberation of Italy. They met in Italy, got married in Europe, and came back to the States to start their lives."

Judith listened to the measured voice of Admiral Hunt, but her thoughts were still with Sam. She had been to his funeral that morning and was still struggling

to accept the fact that he was dead. It couldn't be him, she kept repeating to herself. He couldn't have done it. There were no symptoms. She bit her lower lip. How could she have missed his suicidal tendencies? She was a psychiatrist. How could she have missed it?

"Dr. McBain. Are you alright? Do you wish to come back tomorrow?"

She looked up at the other person present in the room, General Roe, and shook her head.

"Continue. I need to keep my mind occupied at this moment."

General Roe nodded understandably as his gaze turned back to Admiral Hunt who sat behind his office desk. Admiral Hunt was about to open his mouth again to continue on the subject of Travis when Judith, slightly frowning, interrupted.

"You said 1960? That would make him nearly one hundred years old!" she exclaimed.

"That is so and we have no idea how much longer he will live. We asked him that question a few years back and he left the response unanswered. What we do know, through the yearly medical information that he provides us, is that all his physiological functions seem as stable as they were fifty years ago so my guess is that biologically he is as fit as a healthy, normal forty year old."

Judith pursed her lips. It was very difficult to concentrate.

"You have no pictures of him?" she asked Admiral Hunt, trying to get a feel for the subject.

"None. Only a few pics and videos remain of his childhood and adolescence."

"I don't understand... you've had him confined for so long."

Admiral Hunt quickly explained the situation.

"We are taking every single precaution imaginable. There are only two computers that harbor his files. These are two stand-alone units side by side in the most secure place of the Pentagon. These computers have no possibility of ever being connected to the outside world and therefore cannot be hacked into. In the most unlikely event that these computers are ever stolen, the hacker would need four passwords to access the files. The last password changes every minute and the code is randomly produced in a separate room by another stand-alone computer whose location is known only to four people. If, despite these precautions, someone succeeds and gains entry to the files, then he or she will have to figure out the encrypted code which is specific only to these files and used nowhere else in the world. If finally someone does succeed and gains full access, it will seem that a whole army of individuals working over an eighty year period have produced this work instead of one specific person. Since all the names are fictitious, no enemy spy will ever be able to deduce who these scientists are, let alone think that it was the work of only one individual."

"Like a big, solid, impenetrable castle..." muttered Judith as she stared thoughtfully back, slightly taken aback not only by the level of precaution, but also of its simplicity.

The two men glanced uneasily at each other as Judith's eyes became glassy and her thoughts wandered off for a few brief seconds again. They had briefed her on their doubts and the possible impact their suspicions might have on the world. She understood what was expected from her, and yet, something left her troubled about the whole situation. She didn't feel that she belonged in the discussion and

she really didn't want to know anything more of Travis Howard. It was coming very close—very close to her own personal demons and the impenetrable secret that she guarded.

Admiral Hunt started speaking and Judith's mind snapped back to the present. She glanced at the laptop placed beside her. It showed the recent footage of the aircraft explosion as well as the interrogation of the miraculous survivor, Travis's half-brother, Terrence, who was in his mid-seventies. She was vaguely listening in to Terrence's interrogation with one earpiece while Admiral Hunt's voice droned on.

"Terrence was born much later from the same father. We closely followed his early development to see if he exhibited any attributes resembling Travis, but it was soon apparent that there was no similarity between the two. Terrence has led a very normal, uneventful life."

A smile stretched slightly across her lips as she completed his thought.

"Until the day he fell from eighteen hundred feet with not even a scratched fingernail."

"Exactly," nodded Admiral Hunt. "We cannot rule out that faced with a life threatening situation, Terrence exhibited some hidden paranormal talent and unknowingly saved himself—much like a reflex against danger. But nothing in his past suggests that he possesses a special capability of doing this. Nevertheless, before completely discarding this hypothesis you will have the chance to interrogate him further. He has been completely cooperative, and like us all, doesn't understand how he could possibly have survived the crash."

Judith detached her gaze from the monitor and took out her earpiece. She had a perplexed look in her eyes as she turned towards General Roe.

"Have you noticed his demeanor?" she asked.

General Roe nodded.

"Good observation, Dr. McBain. Yes, I have. In the first two days he was euphoric and felt lucky simply to be alive. On the third day he fell into depression when it finally dawned on him that not one passenger's body was left intact in the explosion and therefore how improbable it was for him to survive the crash. Our psychiatrists have told us he is experiencing survivor's guilt."

Judith shook her head slightly, not fully agreeing with the assessment of the Pentagon's experts.

"No, it's more than that. He said that he clearly remembers every moment while it happened. He said that he felt like he was trapped inside a bubble as human parts and debris scattered around him."

She paused before continuing as if struggling to come up with a workable hypothesis with the little information at hand.

"He states that during those few seconds he felt so much loneliness that he fervently wished that he could die like the rest of the people on the plane. Strange thing to say, don't you think? Here he is, witnessing the plane going to pieces and the first thing that comes to mind is that he longs for death. One's first reflex when in danger is to flee and survive at all costs. That's why adrenalin kicks in—but in this case his reaction is quite the opposite."

Her eyes glazed over as she recalled the last text message she received from Sam. *I feel so very lonely*, he had texted her. She had chuckled then, interpreting

his message as his desire to see her. She had texted back that she knew something that would cheer him up. She remembered rushing to a lingerie shop. Her book lecture was at eight that evening at the Lori Hotel, but until then she had a few free hours to dedicate to her man. Thinking he was waiting for her in bed, she had slipped into her lingerie. When she walked into her bedroom, she had found him hanging with a broken neck.

“Dr. McBain? Are you sure you’re alright?”

“No,” she quietly responded. The surrounding air had all of a sudden become stifling. She looked around as if lost and hastily rose up from the chair. Her voice was barely audible.

“Everything seems... seems so sad,” she said, surprising herself. Now why had she said that? It was the way she felt, though, wasn't it? All those people on the plane dead... Sam dead.

General Roe looked questioningly at her as she impatiently waited to be escorted out. This was not the same Judith McBain he had met a few days earlier.

* * * * *

Travis Howard enjoyed sleeping. Lately, it had become his only wish. He was incapable of sleeping more than an hour, though. This was all the sleep time that his body required to function normally. In that hour he dreamt. In the first few years of his confinement, the dreams had been blurs. The only people he was able to discern in his dreams with any detail were his parents. These figures were clear as they moved in the murky, shadowy world around them.

The dreams, for the most part, always took place around the places he was familiar with during his childhood. He would walk the comforting streets, even if, in time they started changing their aspect. Even his parents started changing. One night, he went to sleep and didn’t find his mom anymore. His father was with another woman, much younger. It left him disconcerted.

He strained to find his mom in his next dreams. He wanted to reach her, and some of the details around him started to become clearer as he pushed himself beyond the safe world of his youth. He started noticing people’s faces around him as he started to venture to unknown places within his dreams, continuously reaching out beyond the limits of his mind.

He became caught in the excitement of the sounds he heard, of the smells that surrounded him, of the rain dripping on his skin – and especially of the voices he heard. He would sit still in his dream and listen to the people speak, not daring to disturb them for fear that they would vanish and he’d be left alone in his sleep, just like in his reality.

One day, not bearing his isolation anymore, he spoke. To his horror, no one heard him. They all ignored him as he pleaded with the faces that passed him by, as he ran frantically up to each one and requested to be noted. Just once, he begged, just once, please talk to me. I am not that different. I know I am not. I just want to be liked. I just want to be loved.

Then one night, he suddenly awoke. It was the first time his sleep cycle had ever been interrupted. He had dreamt of that other boy his father had. There had been an explosion. Through time, he had noticed that once a person disappeared from his dreams, that person never came back regardless of how much he wished it. He

didn't want to lose that boy, who was now an old man. He was the only one left that tied him back to his father. In desperation he lunged and hugged that man, whose life he wanted so much to be part of, tightly against his heart as the plane exploded into pieces.

Travis put his feet on the solid metal floor, not quite knowing what to think about this novelty. For the first time, he had been able to interfere with one of his dreams.

* * * * *

A haggard Judith entered her stylish office suite. Her secretary had not arrived that morning and she was surprised to see quite a few unknown faces standing downstairs in the lobby of the office building, waiting for her to arrive.

She made a couple of phone calls before assuring herself of a substitute receptionist for the day. She frowned. It was very unprofessional of Debra to take a day off without advising and making arrangements for a substitute to fill in for her. She figured that something must have urgently come up at the last minute.

Judith sank in her plush chair and exhaled deeply. She was tired, but couldn't pinpoint the reason. It would have been much easier to remain in bed—simply to forget about the world for a little while and sleep. Anyway, she told herself quite sarcastically, all that she would be exposed to the whole day long would be a hoard of depressed people she could only make well for a short while before they returned being depressed again.

She needed time off. She knew it. She realized that she was suffering the first symptoms of depression. Ever since Sam's death, she'd been unable to shake off that gloomy feeling that hanged around her, sometimes suffocating her to the point of breaking her down.

She knew, however, that her much needed vacation would have to wait. She was too involved in the ongoing investigation of Travis Howard's half-brother and was starting to realize that there were many more intricate factors to consider than she could fathom. The mystery excited her, but at the same time gave her a creepy sensation. There was a horror lurking in the background that she knew was eventually going to jump out at her.

Judith glanced at her watch. Her first patient was due in fifteen minutes and the others would have to wait until a secretary arrived to put order in her day. She turned on her laptop and replayed the interview that she had last night with Terrence.

He was being held in solitary confinement inside a high security compound with twenty four hours surveillance. His broken, sobbing, faint voice while he talked sent shivers up her spine. This was a man whose dearest wish was to die.

"Please... I can't bear this... this loneliness. It... please... I... I... am so lonely. It is so empty... not cold though, but burning hot, asphyxiating me inside... so much nothing spreading and expanding and wilting everything it touches... please... let me die. Please."

Her voice seemed tired and impersonal as she questioned him. Not like her at all, she thought, as she heard herself speak through the recording.

"Terrence, did your father ever talk to you about your half-brother? Did your father ever mention to you his name?"

Terrence started wailing as if someone was torturing him at that moment. He was in a straitjacket. He had attempted to claw his neck open and expose his carotid artery with his nails. She clicked forward on the clip, omitting his ten minutes of agonizing, moaning pain that every now and then was interrupted by bursts of disorderly words. At a certain moment, she tried to address the issue again. His words finally became cohesive, but his eyes somehow managed to remain unfocused even when staring directly into hers. She had seen empty gazes before, but the depth of that void left her unsettled.

“The day my mother ran away from my father, there was an argument. I was twelve and she mentioned another son my father had. It was the first time I knew that I had a half-brother. My father slapped her hard across the face and told her never to talk to him about his first son. My mom retorted by calling him a weirdo – just like that son of yours you said could move objects through space, she said. Those were her exact words.”

“Did you ever talk to your father about him again? Did he mention his name during the argument with your mother?”

“No. My father died not even a year later. I only saw him two or three times after I moved out with my mom. He was a heavy drinker.”

There was a prolonged silence as neither spoke while the camera recorded. Judith was closing her files, getting ready to leave when Terrence, in a marvelled voice, suddenly became illuminated as if he had finally understood something vital.

“*Travis...* is that his name?”

Judith stared at him, somewhat stunned that he had guessed it even if he just told her that he didn't know.

“Yes. His name is Travis,” she said.

“Then he is the one that saved me.”

“How do you know?”

Judith recalled that her heart nearly stopped when Terrence uttered the next words.

“I don't know how, but I thought of the word Travis just as the plane exploded.”

* * * * *

Judith looked at her brother staring back at her from the ISS and envied him at that moment. They had done well for themselves after their parents' death. She had been eleven and him twenty-one. William had always been her rock, her one true anchor in life, even if she'd never revealed this to him. There were so many things that she'd never told him. At times she wished she found the courage to open herself more, but to what avail?

Despite some similarities, they were very much different in their approach to life and if they hadn't been brother and sister, she doubted very much they would even glance at the other if they had a chance to meet. No, she thought, it was better this way. Their differences might break that precious bond that kept them together and that she so very much depended on. She couldn't think of living without his presence in her life.

However, even if she could reveal her secrets, there was one specific event that she promised herself to never divulge. He didn't know that she carried with her the

terrible doubt of being responsible for their parents' death. The only thing which prevented her from drowning in guilt and abandoning her life to listless fate was the reassuring research that she had performed throughout her career—that ESP events were doubtful at best.

For a second, her mind flashed back to that day when she had tumbled into the old, dry well outside their country cottage home. An unexpected event in the city had delayed their parents that morning and they were running late. She had been told to remain in the house with her brother until they arrived, but she had ignored her parents' wishes and had strolled outside. The two workers who were about to fill in the hole had taken an early lunch and weren't paying attention to her as she wandered to the edge of the opening.

She had been glancing at her watch, expecting a friend to come over at noon when she lost her footing. In desperate terror, she yelled out her father's name and miraculously survived the steep, narrow fall. Judith remembered the exact moment it happened. Her eyes read ten minutes to noon when she took the ill-fated step.

When they received back their parents' belongings following the deadly car crash, she had taken her father's watch in her hands. The hands of the clock had stopped at ten minutes to noon. She told herself that it wasn't her fault, that it must have been a coincidence. The two events couldn't possibly be linked.

She had been very strong—extremely strong at eleven years to hold back that dark wave of sorrow and guilt that threatened to wash over her and wreck her young life. Still, she needed an answer. She needed to know for certain that the two events were not linked. It was at that moment that she decided to become a psychiatrist and explore the mysteries of the human mind.

Judith pursued her field with a zealous passion and was so meticulous and methodical that she became a leading authority in her domain as she endeavoured to validate the existence of ESP with ground breaking experiments. She had failed to prove anything tangible, but her approach was highly respected by the scientific community and considered to be beyond any doubt the most serious body of work ever undertaken on the subject matter.

There were some people—especially those that wanted conclusive, positive evidence of the paranormal—that considered her a disappointment because she had been unable to definitely prove the existence of the supernatural, but not Judith. Actually, each inconclusive test that she performed was reassuring. It meant that there was no link to the two events which had marked her life and that her doubts were still safe. Judith's purpose in life was not to prove that the paranormal existed, but that it didn't, and the only way she would be able to prove this was if she did everything in her powers to discover its existence.

Perhaps, her daddy had not heard her scream out and momentarily stunned had lost control at the wheel while taking a sharp curve. Perhaps, it had just been a cruel twist of destiny that her parents died at the same time that she fell screaming into the pit.

Then why was it that she had seen the road swirl with her open eyes as she fell inside? She already knew of the deep, thick scars on the bark of the unforgiving tree where her dad's car had hit even before she saw them with her own eyes a few weeks later, didn't she? Or did she? Perhaps, in shock, she had misfiled the image

in her mind as being before the accident *after* she had seen the scars on the tree. The mind did not always place a series of events in the right chronological order, especially after a trauma.

“How are you feeling, Jude?”

She looked at William and frowned.

“Terrible. I have this case which is giving me a real headache. I don’t even want it...”

It was William’s turn to frown. Judith had never backed down from a challenge and it was very uncharacteristic of her. He didn’t know how to respond.

“You, instead? How are things up there?” she asked as she ran her hand nervously over her temple as if validating that she effectively did have a bad headache.

A slight smile creased his lips.

“Our biggest challenge is Igor’s corny jokes. I don’t know if we’ll be able to stay up here another four months. What’s amazing is that he never seems to run out of them. He’s also taking too much of a liking to Donna—I have to make sure that he’s never on the same shift as her. Good thing I’m the Commander!”

That finally brought a smile to his sister’s lips.

“Will, give that poor girl some slack! You’re such a jealous...”

She checked herself. Of course, she couldn’t say the word. She had never heard her brother swear while she did it naturally among friends and close colleagues. He didn’t know that, though, and she couldn’t bring herself to tell him. William had just too much integrity. He was too much of a respected figure—a whole, honest to God, human being, and she would feel awfully ashamed if she ever pronounced such a word in his presence. If everyone was like him, she’d also be out of a job!

William had this ruffled and quizzical look in his eyes as if anticipating her answer while wondering if she’d really have the audacity to surprise him.

“...a jealous bear!” she finally concluded.

Another warm smile overcame him. It was good to see her brother smile in her presence. He did it so rarely.

“Better safe than sorry,” he answered back tongue-in-cheek.

Yes, she thought. With William it was always better safe than sorry, even if he was strong, poised and self-assertive—and very intimidating. He could get out of any perilous jam just by flaunting his big frame, but his cool demeanour enabled him to get out of tight situations without ever lifting a finger.

However, he did have one weak point. Judith knew that she was his soft spot. He would do anything for her. He’d almost given up his dreams to be with her, to protect her and replace their father. She couldn’t let him, though. She couldn’t let him quit school to take care of her. She missed growing up without the constant presence of her brother, but she had gladly embraced her foster family to set him free.

William had little idea how much of a role model he had been for her or how his successes had spurred her on and comforted her. He was the only person she couldn’t disappoint, the only person that had her total commitment, and the only one that filled her heart with pure, unselfish love—which made what she was about to say even more difficult.

“Will, I have this dreadful feeling inside of me...”

He looked at her, perplexed, as she continued with a soft voice that reminded him so much of when she was a young girl and he came to visit her on the weekends to take her out to the movies or to the amusement park.

Her voice choked up. “I’m so afraid that this might be the last time we hear each other.”

William’s jaw dropped as his eyes froze. It came as such a surprise that he wasn’t even breathing anymore. He cleared his throat as he regained his voice. It was very strained though, hurting his vocal chords as a terrible knot formed in his throat.

“Jude? Don’t say that! I don’t understand what you mean. Is anything the matter?”

She saw the frightened look on his face and reassured him.

“Will, I’m not planning on doing anything senseless if that’s what you mean. It’s just that I have this terrible premonition. Something is not right and I don’t know what it is. Did you know that I’ve talked with my colleagues and that there is a four to five fold increase in people seeking counseling these days? There are also more people reporting in sick at work and the lineups outside hospital emergency wards are off the charts! We never experienced anything like this. At least, I can’t remember.”

She paused, searching for words as he saw her gaze hover towards the ceiling.

“There’s this air of gloom all around. I cannot explain it, but I’m very afraid, Will. It seems like all of a sudden, everyone is becoming depressed.”

She glanced back at him and he saw tears forming in her eyes. His tone faltered as he spoke.

“Jude, listen to me. I don’t want you to be alone these days. OK? It’s going to be another four more months until I return and that’s a long time... and I want to find you in one piece. You hear me? I want to see the same sister I’ve always seen. Do you understand? Once I’m back, we can talk. We’ll spend a lot of time together—all the time that you like. You promise you’ll be OK until then?”

Judith pressed her lips tightly together before taking a deep breath.

“Love you big brother,” she uttered in a quick, muffled tone.

It was the first time she had ever said those words and something told her it would be the last.

* * * * *

Today, Travis was Henri Ledoux. As Henri Ledoux, Travis had to run the latest experiments on gene sequencing in order to bring the Mammoth regeneration process one step closer to completion. His thoughts, though, were primarily concentrated on the latest developments of his dream.

Through the years, his dreams had definitely become increasingly more defined, linear. Every week he avidly reread all the material of the real world and encouraged his subconscious to reprocess this information to recreate a realistic dream world while he slept.

Using a mixture of the places and faces he had known in his life and the images he scanned through the vast databanks that were provided to him once a year, his mind had fabricated a dream world that had been able to offer him an escape, but

had not been able to quench his solitude. Something unexpected, however, had just occurred. For the first time he had willed an event in his dream world. He now knew it was possible to influence his dreams directly. What he needed was more sleep time.

It was evident that the time he spent in the dream world was the key factor to his progression. It had taken him many years to make his dreams evolve from a simple, undetailed, murky scene to a panoramic, highly detailed, multi-dimensional world, but he didn't have the patience to wait as long for that next progressive step to happen. He would eventually die without knowing the completeness of being desired, of being loved that only his parents had given him a glimpse of so very long ago and that he now hoped he could find in his dreams.

Travis needed to find a means to sleep longer. For the first time since he was ten, Travis was not going to be altruistic. He closed the government file that he was working on and shifted his thinking processes. He needed to find a viable solution to induce a longer sleep cycle. The other activities could wait.

* * * * *

Dr. Judith McBain exhaled forcibly before speaking. She was taking too many deep breaths lately, almost as if willing herself to go ahead. They were in Admiral's Hunt office and had just learnt that Terrence had died.

His death was not technically listed as a suicide even if his heart had simply slowed down and stopped on its own, but it did seem as if he had somehow ordered himself to shut down. It was as if he had enough of suffering and had decided to exit this life with the only option he had left—his will. The two men in front of her, General Roe and Admiral Hunt, were looking at her with haunted, hollow eyes, as if their worst nightmares were coming true.

"You understand," she began while repeatedly glancing into her constantly shifting hands. She couldn't stop the habit. It was as if she was forever washing her hands. "That there is still no conclusive proof that an ESP event ever happened between the two. Granted, there is evidence of a telepathic link between Travis and his half-brother Terrence, but it cannot be proven. The fact that the word Travis appeared in his mind at the precise moment that the plane exploded is a strong indicator that such an event did take place, but it could equally as well be a childhood memory of a name that he had heard his father pronounce which he then removed from his conscious until the sudden shock of the explosion jarred his mind."

Judith stopped, not quite knowing how to proceed with her train of thought. She hoped her words made sense and that the two military men had understood what she was saying. A glance into their faces told her that they did. She knew that it was highly probable that an ESP occurrence had taken place, but just because the odds favored it did not mean it actually happened. She still refused to acknowledge that there could not be another explanation but the obvious one. The obvious one went against all rational thought and rationality comforted Judith.

And, she grimly told herself—she hadn't been able to prove that she killed her parents with so many years of hard work. How could she prove in just a few days that Travis Howard—even if the evidence she had been provided with was eerily convincing—was responsible for his half-brother's rescue or his death?

Admiral Hunt proceeded to speak. It was clear to him that they had to dig into the inexplicable to better comprehend the situation.

“For arguments sake, let’s assume that some sort of telepathy was involved. I know that you don’t like to speculate, Dr. McBain, but you have seen the proof with your own eyes of what this boy called Travis was capable of when he was young. You have learnt of the new technologies that are a direct consequence of his discoveries. Aren’t you astonished at what humanity has been able to achieve in the last one hundred years when you compare it to our previous tens of thousands of years? While the population at large think that this is due to our species coming of age, you are one of the select few that knows, that *really* knows, that the world we live in is a direct result of this one very special individual called Travis Howard. Without the input that he has provided, I think we would still be figuring out how to land on the moon, not to mention cellular phones, the internet, cloning, genetic therapy and countless of other technologies where he has contributed. Without Travis Howard, we would have a much larger list of things waiting to be discovered than things actually discovered.”

Judith narrowed her lips as Admiral Hunt spoke. Her words came out rather terse.

“Assuming that this is true, then this person called Travis that you are holding captive somewhere under the Pacific Ocean has found a way to escape his prison without ever stepping foot outside? The question now becomes what will he do next and what can we do about it, if anything can be done.”

Admiral Hunt nodded as he was finally glad to see her cooperative and contributing.

“Indeed, and not only. Another question that we can ask is what has Travis *already* done that we have no idea about?”

Judith frowned, unwillingly putting herself in the position of talking about Travis special capabilities for argument’s sake.

“Judging by his history, I don’t think he’s malicious,” she continued. “He simply saved his half-brother. It’s something that anyone would have done under the circumstances if given the power. He could have decided not to, judging that the risk was too great and that it could eventually be traced back to him, but he acted like any compassionate person would do.”

General Roe grimaced somewhat, slightly agreeing.

“Just that he only saved his half-brother when he could have saved everyone else on that plane too.”

They remained quiet for a few moments, pondering on this observation. Admiral Hunt broke the silence.

“Terrence described the event as being trapped inside a bubble. Out of all the people he saved, he picked Terrence, a half-brother who he should have no knowledge of. Somehow, he is reading our minds, or he’s been able to infiltrate our stand-alone computers and scanned our files with his mind. Even if his father told the story of his special son a million times to everyone he met, there was no way the information that he had a half-brother could ever have reached Travis under the ocean. No possible way.”

General Roe agreed.

“Unfortunately, we have to consider every hypothesis. Travis might have been interfering in shaping our history for decades. He might be capable of controlling people’s thoughts, objects, and events. Could he bring a plane down with his mind? Could he plant a seed in a person and make him carry out a terrorist plot? Can he shape the fate of a country by taking hold of a leader’s mind and influencing events?”

Judith put her hands up in a sign of frustration.

“Wait a second! I think you are both getting carried away.”

She placed her hands to her temples and let out another long slow breath as the two looked at her with puzzled reaction. She stared into her palm and felt overwhelmingly dejected. It was an emptiness that wouldn’t go away. It was a sensation of impending doom.

“I’m sorry... I can’t seem to concentrate lately.”

She grimaced. The atmosphere in that room was suffocating her. Terrence was dead. She didn’t even know why she was still there talking to the two men in front of her. She had no more reason to be there, did she? She took a deep breath. She had to leave. Permanently.

“Since you two seem to be on top of things and considering that Terrence is dead, my obligation to this assignment is terminated. I do not intend to stay on any further and will be returning to my everyday activities. I also believe I have a long overdue vacation to take, so if you gentlemen would excuse me...”

She noticed the two men exchange long glances. General Roe turned squarely towards her and she sensed she was not going to like his response.

“I believe that when we first spoke, I referred to Travis and not to Terrence.”

Her suspicious eyes scowled out at the two.

“Meaning?” she snapped.

Admiral Hunt interjected. The tone of his voice was factual, but hard. There was no compassion for her distraught condition, even if she expected none.

“I will come to the point, Dr. McBain. I have proceeded to notify the President of Project Sky. When a President takes office he is given a highly guarded list of words that refer to military or scientific projects that are so secretive and sensitive that he will only become aware of them if the individuals heading those projects are convinced that national security is at risk. It prevents critical information from falling into the hands of a President who will one day retire from his functions and who may become a target of terrorist activities putting his life and that of the nation at risk. Project Sky is the code name for Travis Howard. We are awaiting the President’s decision on the matter and you are one of the names that we have informed him has knowledge of Travis.”

Judith insisted. “I still don’t understand what this has to do with me anymore.”

She simply wished to go back to her new home and crawl into her room and sleep for at least one week without having to deal with the outside world. She was tired of it, tired of everything, tired of everyone. Why wouldn’t they just leave her alone? General Roe glanced at her as he spoke in a softer tone, continuing where Admirals Hunt had started.

“The President has absolute powers on these projects. He has the absolute liberty to choose whichever person he wants to be part of this decision making

process as well as the members of the task team to resolve the issue. You are now part of Project Sky and cannot escape your responsibilities.”

He wetted his lips nervously before continuing.

“There is one more thing. Once the threat is resolved, if the President thinks necessary he can order the elimination of some or all of the individuals involved if he thinks this knowledge could damage the nation in any way.”

Judith’s face went white. It was incomprehensible. At another time, she would have exploded with rage. She might even have strangled the face in front of her. At that moment, though, she just felt like breaking down and crying. She didn’t even have the strength to word her sentences well.

“What... what do you mean, eliminate? Like in kill?”

They didn’t say a word, but their silence spoke volumes.

Judith felt her upper lip quiver. “What are our chances? Of dying, I mean. Once this is resolved...”

Admiral Hunt shook his head in a not too encouraging sign.

“I made my recommendations to the President based on protocol—the one that Travis wrote in case he ever represented a danger to mankind. He gave us the order to eliminate the base with a nuclear explosion and the justification he wrote is quite sane. I’m afraid that the only course left would be our elimination as well. The knowledge that such an individual existed, if leaked, can potentially trigger serious research activity into the relationship between the paranormal and human genetics that can have a devastating effect on our society and the world. I do not think that humanity is ready for this yet. Travis can be an irreproducible anomaly, but he can also represent the future face of mankind, which for some freak genetic accident, was born a million years too early. If anyone finances such research and succeeds in rearranging the human genome to produce such individuals, then we are all dead.”

Judith’s mind had frozen. Quite sane? Did the Admiral say ‘quite sane’? There was nothing sane about this situation. No one was sane. Not her, not the men sitting in front of her.

* * * * *

Travis stared at the slightly brownish flask he held in front of his eyes. He had a dilemma on his hands. His breathing was rather strenuous as he struggled to contain his many thoughts together. The dreams were becoming crisp and vibrant, palpable, almost as real as his reality. His half-brother was dead—no matter his agonizing attempts to protect him.

He despaired as he saw his half-brother slip away into the void, never to return. He woke up with tears rolling down his face and could not stop. He was truly alone now—even in his dreams. When he slept his next one hour night, he started sobbing again and could not stop. In the process, his mind overwhelmed his dream and his emotions were so powerful that he felt as if that final chain tying him down and preventing him from soaring over this dream world had finally stretched and broke, setting him free to roam.

He was finally free to go wherever he wished. Each scene of his dream opened like a page of a book that he could flip at will. Each face was like a file that he that

could effortlessly scan and remember. As this autonomy grew, however, the initial sudden elation was rapidly replaced by mounting horror.

Every mind he touched recoiled from him. Every rose he touched withered. Unfortunately, his loneliness had infiltrated his dreams, but he refused to believe that it could contaminate his paradise. He refused to believe that he could not control it and that this beautiful world that he dreamed, this beautiful world that was his only refuge from his cruel existence, was destined to fade away into the void.

He searched his dreams, grabbing every face that he saw on his journey. He screamed at each face with primeval desperation, begging each to talk to him, to look at him. Yet, everywhere he turned the faces became long and miserable—and then there was this discussion of eliminating him, this Roe and Hunt that kept popping up in his mind as if his dreams were rebelling against him. Travis could not afford to lose the only wonderful thing that he possessed on that dreary base, the only thing that kept him living and hoping: his dream.

* * * * *

Travis? Travis, is that you?

Judith suddenly stopped brushing her teeth as she stared wide eyed at her reflection in the mirror. No, no—it couldn't be, could it? *Travis?*

She had felt the deep pain of a wounded animal. No – not an animal. That, she might have been able to understand—but this—this was peculiar. It was foul, disgusting. It was primeval. It was frightening and it felt as if a searing rod had been poked into her guts and slowly twisted her insides.

It was horrible, atrocious... and hideous.

She froze for fear of being discovered as her eyes slowly searched behind her by way of the mirror. There was no one standing in the background, but she already knew that. It was not something on the outside that she feared—but something that poked inside of her head.

Yes, something was definitely present. It was something that required attention, something that demanded to be wanted—so much so that it was willing to take away her will to choose. Her freedom to be. Like rape.

Yes, like rape. Her lips pronounced the words, barely audible. It wanted to rape her.

She looked at herself through the mirror and screamed hard—at the top of her lungs. She was in her nightgown and the lights of the city were hazily glowing around her as she dashed outside onto the narrow balcony of her apartment and hit hard up against the railing separating her from the brutal fall below.

Judith looked down to the street and her eyes grew in terror. She was breathing rapidly. It felt so tempting to flip herself over the railing. If Travis would have approached her, she would have, but he had receded, had slithered away leaving her with an immense burnt, smoldering hole inside her soul.

She slumped to the base of the balcony and wrapped her head inside her arms, numbly falling asleep to forget.

* * * * *

Travis injected the brown liquid into his arm as he lay on his bed. It burnt his mind and he instantly started to feel groggy. It would reverse his sleep cycle. He would sleep for the next twenty three hours. He needed to recuperate his dream world. He could not imagine living in a world of eternal loneliness where his reality matched his dreams. All the people were running away from him, disappearing forever, just as they did when he was young. By any means possible, he needed to break through to them. He had to reach their minds and let them know how much he needed them. If the dream was taken away, he would go mad.

Then he noticed her and was astonished. How could he have he missed her presence? He dared not tread too close for fear of disturbing the blissful moment of his crusade. She was his holy grail. She had noticed him too. She had noticed him!

True, people were starting to feel his presence and some even whispered his name, but with her it was more than just a sensation or a sixth sense. She was actually conscious of him and aware of his existence at the precise moment he looked at her! He quietly reached out to her with his soft touch, but quickly redrew.

No, he must be careful. He could not imagine what a refusal might do to him. He could not lose her from this dream. She was the most beautiful flower of all... Judith. He wept as the joy of finding her overwhelmed him. With her in his dream it really wouldn't really matter anymore if everyone else disappeared. He could live with her forever and ever.

His dream was vast and endless, that was true, but with her, even the dream was too limiting. He could never dream enough about making her happy. No, the stars were not enough, not even the universe was big enough for her. He needed to make her understand the depth of his love for her. He trembled, slightly. Was he beginning to understand love? Perhaps, the love of one was more important than the existence of everything—and that thought awed him. Was that what it meant to be human? Was he finally beginning to understand love?

When he woke, his heart was beating quickly. Travis looked around and felt a pang of frustration. It hurt so much inside. He had so much longing for Judith and was furious at his condition. He understood the moment he awoke that he would never be satisfied by just dreaming about her.

She was unique. He had to make her real, but it was impossible, simply impossible. Unless, he thought in a moment of euphoria, he recreated his own prison in his dreams. He pondered what that would imply. Would that mean he would not see the world of his dreams anymore? Probably. He would be living with Judith on the base under the Pacific Ocean every day of his life.

It would seem real, though. For all intent, it would be real. His dream and reality would be the same setting. When he awoke in his real world, his prison, he would pretend that she was in the other room, reading a book or listening to music. Then when he closed his eyes, she would be there with him. Yes, he could live like that. Furthermore, it would only be for an hour before he would rejoin her again.

Would the rest of the dream world matter at that point? The cities, the strangers, the stars, the trees, the wind... not really. He would have everything he

needed with him—Judith. He would love and be loved. Everything else would become inconsequential. He didn't need the dream world.

Just that, he needed her to reach him. How could she reach him, though? She had to come to him, and somehow, in his dream, he had to get her inside the Pacific base. He had to guide his dream so that she would leave her home and come to him. How? He would think of that later. Now, all that mattered was to get her as close to him as possible.

Travis counted down the minutes before he injected himself for another twenty-three hour dream cycle. He had a very important mission. He had to convince the President of the United States to help him get Judith to the base.

* * * * *

Judith was summoned to the Pentagon. She was expecting it. The President had declared a state of emergency as had most world leaders. It was thought that there was a new, if yet unknown, epidemic ravaging the world. The scientific community thought that its mechanism of action seemed to target the nervous system, especially the amygdala, regions of the brains responsible for governing emotions.

However, this was all speculative since there was no scientific proof available, nor had any bacterial, virus or chemical agent been isolated as the probable culprit. For the time being, both the existence of the virus and the mode of action were hypothesis as the scientific community desperately tried to find a means to stop the infection.

Judith knew that she should have contacted General Roe a few days earlier, ever since her privacy had been breached by something or someone. She knew that it could have been Travis, but until she had scientific proof she refused to acknowledge it as a certainty. She could not. There was no such thing as ESP she kept repeating to herself like when she was young.

She couldn't reasonably explain what happened in her apartment that evening, but other explanations were just as likely. Perhaps, she had suffered a momentarily nervous breakdown due to the accumulated stress and she had induced herself into thinking that Travis was the culprit. After all, when the mind snapped, irrepressible thoughts could lead to the breakdown manifesting itself in many different ways. Actually, she thought as she reflected more on the topic, it certainly sounded more credible to think of it as a stress related event than an outlandish ESP attack.

Judith stopped and placed her hands on her forehead as she walked. The throbbing pain that she had been having for days simply wouldn't go away. Not even with the painkillers. She also felt very confused. Her thoughts were scrambled—not at all cohesive—and she was disappointed in herself. Greatly disappointed. Now what was it that she needed to tell General Roe? It had something to do about Travis—about Travis and the amygdala. There was a connection, wasn't there?

Then Judith scoffed. What was she thinking? Travis was innocent. There was no connection. Didn't she just tell herself that there was no proof? ESP didn't exist. Then she suddenly recalled what she meant to tell General Roe. It was about a patient that possessed all the classical symptoms of depression.

Judith rubbed her forehead again. There were too many patients. What was his name? It didn't matter. She couldn't even remember his face. The patient heard voices in his head.

"I keep hearing the word Travis," he told her, "but I don't know anyone named Travis."

That's what she needed to tell General Roe... even if... did it really matter? What was the point? Why go through the hassle of analyzing a situation when there was no believable solution available?

Judith couldn't readily explain the incident, but then again, Travis was a common name. The patient was probably having flashbacks to an unpleasant situation involving a person from his past. Yes, she thought convincingly, her patient had suppressed memories that needed to be confronted. A little targeted therapy would certainly alleviate his condition.

Judith sighed as she neared Admiral Hunt's office. When will this nightmare end? She had been asking herself the question repeatedly these last few days. She couldn't help but notice, as she was led through the high security areas leading to Hunt's office, that the corridors were empty and the lighting inadequate at some places.

It seemed like they were relocating and had only left a skeleton crew behind, she thought. It was in stark contrast to the bustling activity that greeted her the first time she entered the Pentagon. She knocked on the door and when no one responded, opened and stepped through the doorway leading into the Admiral's office. He was sitting, doing nothing in particular as they came face to face and glanced at each other. His face was more severe than usual; his eyes seemed beady as if he hadn't slept for days.

He stood ungainly up, as if he couldn't make up his mind to remain seated or not. She glanced blandly around and noticed that General Roe wasn't present. Other than that first meeting, a few weeks back, she'd never seen the two apart.

The Admiral confirmed her suspicion.

"General Roe had an accident. His car spun out of control and he's dead."

Judith nodded.

"He must have been going too fast," she said while at the same time noting how tired she sounded. "It's easier to speed these days. Fewer cars on the road. Quite a few gas stations closed too. I heard they're not getting gas delivered."

It was just one thing after another, thought Judith, hardly surprised anymore. She turned around, glancing at the TV screen behind her as the Admiral's turned his eyes towards it. The panel of journalists and scientists debating the situation were shocked, as if they couldn't bring themselves to believe what was transpiring around the planet. One was even wiping his tears. There was little coherence in what they were saying. There was a lot of dead air followed by a few words where they all seemed to talk together about anything that came to mind. Not very professional, thought Judith.

The again, the news program was just a reflection of what was happening in the real world. The financial markets were in shambles, people were panicking. The whole world seemed to be ungluing at the seams. It was terrifying how civilization was breaking apart in just a few days' time. What had taken tens of thousands of

years to build was tumbling down in less than a month. She turned her head back to the Admiral as he handed her a sheet of paper. It was a graph.

“This is the number of suicides in the US for the last 52 weeks. Take a close look at the last couple of weeks.”

Her eyes must have bulged for he acknowledged her reaction.

“That’s right. The average rate in the US is roughly eleven suicides per year for every one hundred thousand people. It is one of the top ten causes of death in our country. We were at one hundred last week and the rate is expected to be over a thousand this week, meaning a tenfold increase in seven days. If this tendency continues, we expect ten thousand suicides next week and the complete annihilation of the American population in about two weeks’ time. Furthermore, all the other countries that have released their figures show a similar trend. We can be theoretically looking at the extermination of the human species in less than a month through self-inflicted wounds.”

Judith could hardly retain herself. Her voice was barely above a whisper.

“We are all committing suicide? Men, women and children?”

His lips quivered.

“Especially the children. They have not yet acquired that life experience to control or understand their own feelings. They are the hardest hit group because they are the most sensitive.”

The Admiral took out a cigar and offered one to Judith. Even though she smoked only cigarettes, she took one.

“I quit smoking a long time ago,” the Admiral said. “Figured it would kill me. But...”

She nodded as he his voice trailed off. He quickly regained some composure and came rapidly to the point of why she’d been summoned.

“Dr. McBain, the President has decided that you are to be part of the task team that will try to establish contact with Travis. There is a strong possibility that this pandemic and Travis are somehow linked.”

Her eyebrows shot up. Clear disbelief was written across her eyes.

“Who says so? You or the President?”

“Please, Dr. McBain. There is no time left to contemplate conflicting theories. Let me proceed. You will be flown to our base in Hawaii where you will board a highly sophisticated nuclear submarine, THE DEFIANT, which will bring you to within ten thousand feet of the Project Sky base. At this depth, you, the pilot, and the Presidential envoy will descend the remaining distance with a specialized submergible until you arrive within ten feet of the base. Once you’ve established a cable link with the portal leading to the base, you will have one hour to understand what Travis is doing and his involvement with whatever is happening to us.”

“Admiral Hunt, I really don’t think I’m the right person for this. From the beginning...”

The Admiral interrupted her.

“Judith, if I may... please. You understand that this... this whatever it is has contaminated us all?”

He clutched his hands together as he spoke.

“The reason we are now convinced that Travis is involved is that there is a particular symptom spreading throughout the world associated with this disease—if we can call it that. Some patients who are experiencing heavy depression are starting to hear the name Travis in their minds.”

She nodded, dejected. She had fervently hoped that her patient’s case was particular, hoping that it could be easily explained.

“Dr. McBain... General Roe thought very highly of you. He convinced me that you are the very best in your field and I assured the President that you are our best hope to figure out what is happening with Travis. Please don’t let Roe’s death be in vain.”

Her chin hardened as the Admiral started to sob. Recently, she had seen many people crying around her and wished that she knew how to make them stop. She tried to hold back her own tears, but simply couldn’t as a knot formed in her throat. The Admiral cleared his throat before continuing.

“Your mission will be to judge if Travis is involved or is responsible for the epidemic. You will relay your opinion to the Presidential envoy and he will make the final decision. There are only two possibilities. The first is that he knows that something catastrophic is occurring and is using his ESP powers to try to save us which would explain why people are starting to hear his name in their minds. If so, he becomes humanity’s best hope in finding a cure and is to be assisted in every way imaginable. Otherwise...”

Admiral Hunt paused for a few seconds, searching his words carefully.

“Otherwise, if there is even the slightest doubt in your assessment that he is launching an ESP attack on the world, your mission will be to destroy him without any hesitation on your part. The submergible is not only equipped with a code which once transmitted through the link activates a nuclear device beneath the base, but it also carries a nuclear warhead which automatically activates within five feet of the base portal.”

Dr. McBain’s tears quietly kept flowing down her cheeks. She had expected, feared that something like this awaited her. That wasn’t the reason of her tears, though. She had never openly cried before. It was fine to cry, that is what she had always told her patients, but now that she tasted her own salty tears she felt terribly useless and weak.

She resented what she had become.

* * * * *

The submergible started its descent towards the base. The three occupants were very quiet. The soft green glow of the instrument panels bathed them and Judith clearly noticed the envoy’s trembling lips through the weak lighting.

Judith again wondered what she was doing there. She was fairly convinced that all decision making had crumbled world-wide and doubted that the President, his advisors, Admiral Hunt, or for that matter any world leader, was capable of making a logical decision.

This depression was like a parasite, sapping the minds of people and preventing them from making rational choices. Else, why was she chosen by the President? There was no logical reason that would make her part of such a crucial mission—or was it crucial? Did it really matter anymore? Could she influence the inevitable

end? Her thoughts flashed back to what a difficult patient once told her—*at best we can delay our fate, but fate is fate and there's nothing any one of us can do to prevent fate from happening. That's why it's called fate.*

Judith felt like cracking up with laughter. The patient's word seemed like the words of a fool. They were so silly and yet in their silliness there was a logical rhyme to them.

Judith touched her throbbing forehead as she struggled to keep a coherent, lucid mind—just keep focused on who you are and what you are supposed to do, she told herself forcefully, yet not at all convinced that repeating to keep focused would necessarily make it so.

She tried to hold down that deep inner, brittle voice of hers that she didn't think she had until a few weeks back – the one that told her that it was all hopeless, that there was nothing worth living for, that reality was a mess, that it was not worth to suffer for, that no one really cared about her, that the world had passed her by, that everyone was ignoring her, that she was dumb and useless... and that the world was such a lonely place for a person like her to live in.

Judith blinked and shook her head vigorously to clear the negative thoughts rushing through her head. She turned her attention back to the pilot, who up until then, had exhibited no visible adverse reaction. She was at least grateful for this bit of good news. It had been a difficult descent. Six people had committed suicide on THE DEFIANT and they had been able to avert a catastrophe when a crew member tried to launch armed nuclear torpedoes.

In those few hours it took to reach Hawaii, the world had further deteriorated. Every second that passed, there was someone else who snapped and went on a shooting rampage before taking his own life. The last news that she heard before boarding the submergible was that the leaders of the nuclear countries were coming to an accord to dock and ground all nuclear ships and subs.

Only a few hours previously, over sixty commercial airline planes had been driven into the ground by suicidal pilots. Unless absolutely required, all airports had been shut down. For the countries that were still able to enforce the law, a permanent curfew was set in place even if the majority of the people preferred to remain home to die.

What at first had been estimated as a tenfold weekly increase in suicide rates had actually been misleading as the rate had dramatically picked up by the time she landed in Hawaii. Her last conversation with Admiral Hunt before boarding the nuclear sub predicted that the population of the Earth would be extinguished in a few hours if the suicidal frequency continued to grow at the present rate.

"It's no longer there!"

Judith's thoughts were sharply interrupted as the pilot broke the eerie silence.

"What?"

The pilot turned to her with a frightened, quaking voice.

"THE DEFIANT. It's gone! I don't have radar contact anymore."

The envoy suddenly started to bellow, hyperventilating. The noise he made in the restrained compartment was deafening. His voice was shrill and uneven.

"I want to get *ooout* of heeeere! *Now!* Please!"

Judith found it difficult to make her voice heard as the Presidential envoy continued shrieking.

“Let’s not panic. Hold on to yourself. Everything’s going to be fine. Keep repeating that everything is going to be fine...”

All her field experience was useless at the moment, all her academic background futile. What a waste, she told herself. What a useless waste I am. Then she drew in a sharp breath as the envoy continued to wail. *Don’t... don’t think negatively. Don’t think...*

Suddenly there was an abrupt silence as the envoy slumped over. There was blood unevenly spurting out of his chest. Judith didn’t need to see the solid metal pen that the envoy had taken from his pocket and driven forcibly through his ribcage, piercing his heart. Now what?

For a brief moment her mind cleared and the fog which had fallen over her thoughts rolled away. She felt something terrifying quickly approaching. He was content, sickly satisfied and he desired her. Travis. It was Travis.

She gasped with more pain she thought possible as a wave of uncontrollable emotion hit her. It was so potent and raw, so excruciating that it was unbearable as she bent over in two. The closer the submergible got to him, the more her mind felt the wave of desperate energy traversing her body. His signal was powerful and strong at that distance than it had been at the apartment and she finally realized not only the horror of his suffocating clutch but also the monstrosity of his loneliness.

It was him. It had been Travis all along. In his solitude, he had reached out to be wanted with a brute force that had destroyed everything in its path. It was like an unstoppable ESP tsunami, a wild furious hurricane of welled-up, frustrated emotions that had battered, overwhelmed and flooded the Earth. That same small dose of solitude that spurred individuals to seek love, children, God, and friendship was so excessive in Travis that there was no means to fulfill its need. His requirement for love left a hole so deep in the human subconscious that no sentiment that a human being possessed was capable of satisfying the depth of that loneliness. Travis was digging a hole into the human soul that was just too deep to climb out of. Judith realized that the only choice that she had to make that pain end was his demise...and her death at the same time.

As that terrible thought grew in her mind, she glanced with her remaining sanity at the instrument board. They were one thousand feet from the portal. There was no discussion possible with Travis. He had to die. Her watery eyes turned to the pilot. He had his eyes glued to the instrument board, staring intensely at one of the panels. Judith stared at him, noticing he didn’t blink and called out his name as she doubled over with pain once more. Travis was reaching out for her. He had his hands on her and she struggled with all her strength to kick him away. Her attempts to escape him were futile, though. He was much too strong for her and was quickly wearing her down.

She called out to the pilot once more. He didn’t respond. She followed his eyes and realized he was staring at the radar above him, searching for THE DEFIANT. He wasn’t looking at where he was going! He wasn’t looking at the main navigational screen! Judith started to panic. She screamed at him, at Travis, at her fate, at the dying world. She momentarily slipped away from Travis’s grasp. He wanted to possess her; he wanted to cage her in like a soulless doll in his prison. She would not give him one inch of her freedom. Never. Her screech was still

resounding in her ears when she blared out to the pilot with a deathly urgency. The fear of Travis had given her a sudden purpose.

“It’s the other screen! You have to get within five feet of the portal! Do you hear me? You have to get within five feet of the portal!”

The pilot’s lips were white, his face pale and sweaty as he exploded in heavy sobs. His words were incoherent as he spoke of his divorce and how his wife had left him for someone else years back. Judith realized that the pilot was reliving that moment more intensely than the day it happened. He would not be recoverable.

Judith leaned over with all the courage she could muster as Travis came back at her with angered force. She grabbed the hand of the pilot, intending to pull it off the lever while Travis penetrated her mind, intent on squeezing out her heart.

The pilot’s arm was unyielding as he remained clutching the handle and reminisced in his misery. His fingers were cemented to the lever. Travis was creeping inside her like a spider demanding her abdication to his love as he spread and dipped his tentacles into her. She could not pry the pilot’s fingers from the control. The submersible was starting to rise instead of descending and Travis was pulling her down, tearing her apart from the inside.

Judith slumped to the ground and her tears started to flow. She thought about her parents—thought about that day she had fallen inside the well. Yes, she had been the cause of their deaths. Yes, her mind had projected itself out of fear and for a split second she had been in her father’s head and had seen the road through his eyes. He had been surprised, but in that split second she had felt the great and pure love he nurtured for her – the love which had saved her life. For it was his love which had made her survive the fall, else she would have died. It had given her the strength to hang on as she lay at the bottom of the well, waiting to be rescued. That love had then made her battle through life to make him proud and to show him that she had done well with the life that he had gifted her with. She fervently hoped that she had succeeded and made them proud. She fervently hoped that their deaths had not been in vain – nor should it be in vain now.

There was a reason why she had controlled her emotions up to that day. She had wanted to remain free to choose. She had been terrified all her life that she really did have an ESP episode brought on by raw, fear-induced emotions and had vowed to control them ever since. She had made certain that she would never experience something as strong as that primal instinct even as she lived through life denying it ever happened. The death of her dad and mom had been the last thing she had ever wanted to happen and she promised never to put herself in that situation again. Travis just made her realize that she had been guilty, but he also made her realize that the tremendous love her father felt for her had been real.

Judith closed her eyes as Travis held her tattered body, satisfied of his catch. It was then that she opened her heart to Travis. She opened her heart completely and he saw himself in the reflection of her soul as she pushed back at him. He was a monster.

Travis screamed in anguish as desolate as the ash that he now held in his arms.

But I loved you, Judith!

* * * * *

Travis woke. The tears flowed liberally down his cheeks. *Judith*, he uttered. He inhaled deeply and held his breath for a very long moment. He let the air seep out slowly through his pursed lips, as if to say that he had reached a final decision. They were all gone. There was no one left. If only Judith had remained. He only needed her. But...

Travis finished his final report. He programmed it for automatic pick-up on the first day of the year. He had one final request as he typed his last wish. Please destroy the base. By the time you read this I will have ended my life.

Travis went back to his bed and injected a deadly serum into his veins. He closed his eyes, knowing he would not dream anymore. He was relieved. There would be no more suffering, no more loneliness. His last thought went to Judith, the only woman he had ever told he loved—and the woman who had finally convinced him that he could never be loved.

* * * * *

William held Donna tight in his arms as tears rolled down her cheeks. There were no more words to say, no more dreams to live through, no more future to ponder together. The long goodbye had started.

It had been over three months since their last contact with Earth. One by one, the lights from the cities had started to dim and disappear. The only lights that appeared were the wild forest fires and the gushing lava of a couple of active volcanoes a night. He did not know what Donna would find on her return but he dearly wished she would live a long life and find some sort of happiness.

Igor, Helmut and Shirley had their suits on and were ready to board the capsule which would bring them back to Earth. There were nine astronauts on the ISS but the escape pod had room for just four. The rest would be stranded, orbiting in space until a vital life support system failed. Unless, of course, one of the returning astronauts could get help and lead back a rescue team. William didn't count on it. There were no more radio waves coming from Earth and he didn't expect humanity, if still around, to be in any condition to launch a rocket back into space any time soon.

Donna took a last look at him and he smiled bravely back. He had been one of the four chosen to return to Earth, but in the end he declined. In his early forties and infertile, he knew that he was not the best candidate even if he had won the lottery for a position on the capsule.

Igor was barely thirty and strong, and after much deliberation, William sacrificed his place and commanded Igor to go down with his wife. It was the right thing to do. He expected it to be a bleak world and whatever parasite or disease had ravaged the world might still be present. If it wasn't, then youth and physical strength would be the keys to survival.

Donna had understood his choice. That is why he insisted that she leave her wedding ring behind with him. She would have no time to reminisce if she was to survive, no time to look back in the past when the future didn't depend on it. Half an hour later the future started. The capsule separated and started its descent back to Earth.

Author's Word!

Along with *Area 51*, *Oblivion*, *Immortality* and *The Great Organizer*, *the loneliest man on earth* is part of *Countdown to the End of The World* concept that I launched in 2011. The idea was simple—ten original, thought provoking stories about humanity's journey, our search for meaning, and our ultimate fate as a species (or something like that).

the loneliest man on earth was the last story that I released in 2011 on Amazon and I had more success with it than I thought I would have. It is a story that has frustrated me through the years, because I realize that it could be much more.

Not that I haven't tried! I had written another storyline intertwined with the one presently offered in this book, but in the end I decided to remove it since it diluted the story instead of adding to it. Furthermore, the story is already depressing as is—so why add to our pain?

This story is very much about love in its most selfish form—or more importantly, what a void of love can do. Those that have read my books know that love in all its forms is a central theme in my storylines. The story presented here has evolved from 2011 and this version is more or less as last published in 2013. It has been about three years if not longer, I believe, since I last published this book.

This story is a wink back to my younger years when I used to devour stories about ESP—funny thing is that I never believed in Santa Claus, but boy, talk to me about telepathy and ESP and you would have my full, riveted attention. I wanted to write at least one story about this topic in my ten book quest, and here it is. You can read many things in this story on many levels, but if there's one thing that I would like you to consider is that loneliness can make us all monsters, but only another human being can make us lonely.

Love,
Vincent Pet

