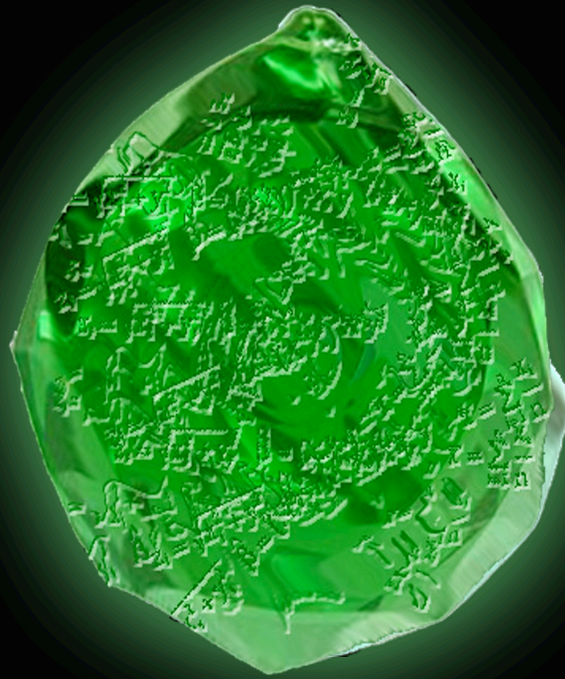


*The Remembrance*



*David M. Crampton*

# **The Remembrance**

by David M. Crampton

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*This book is dedicated to the late, great Della Henderson. I have long blamed her for my love of reading, and probably always will. I can't help but smile when I remember reading next to her as a child. I miss you, Aunt Della.*

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## Prologue

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How do I start? That's what I've always wondered, you know. That terror-filled instant where I know nothing but apprehension and doubt. I'm filled with that now, as I hold the match to its flint-strip. The plaza is decorated, as it should be, for the ceremony. The torches are placed at odds with each other and at the correct angles to the Remembrance. The only thing that I must do to begin is to strike the match alight and touch it to the first torch. This honor and duty are mine, as I am the Eldest in the Tribe and in the City. I see the muscles in my arm twitch and hear the lighting of the match. I feel the heat wash over me as the first torch is lit. I have begun the ceremony, and our People will never be the same.

Now, as we wait, I take notice of the sky. The summer is ending, and there are more overcast days than not. The clouds lighten at a point, and we know that the sun is there. From the west, storm clouds slide underneath those that were already there. I hope for lightning; thunderstorms are always good omens. I let my gaze wander over the city that we call home. Outsiders call it desolate and a place where fear reigns. Even in my old age, this sight takes my breath away. No city can rival the Glass Towers, nor the gardens we have made in the ruins of the last age. I swell with pride as I realize once again that I would give my life for the City of Dragons.

This day, I might get that chance.

I sigh, and then realize that I am not alone inside the Holy Circle that the priestesses have created. A torch to my right is lit with a yellow-green flame. Next to it stands a buxom woman with jet-black hair. The mere sight of her immediately takes the strength from my knees and kindles passion in my cobwebbed heart. We call her Fierce, and she is always the last to arrive. I do not know what this portends. Her arm-length sword is dripping with the blood of a fresh kill, and the scales of her proud wings match the colors of the flames upon her torch. She smiles at me, and I know fear deep within my bowels. Fierce is the bringer of punishment and bane to transgressors. We invoke her when we punish the unjust and when we battle those that would see us destroyed. I fear her, as any sane man would.

The torch directly to the left of mine roars lit in an impossible column of blue flame. The trumpeting roar of a dragon fills the plaza as an enormous Blue lands, claws rutting the ancient concrete. It rears

back on its hind legs, towering to its full height. It spreads its wings wide, casting the entire plaza in shadow. All of us bow, save Fierce. We cast our eyes to the ground, as tradition demands. When we raise them, a winged man clad in midnight blue robes stands next to his torch, holding a wooden staff that stands taller than him by a foot. We have wondered for generations why they take this form, this almost-human shape, when they join us. We have never dared to ask. His wings flex, as if he's irritated that he's not the first to arrive. This is Nemesis, the Harbinger.

I am distracted from my awe at Nemesis by an eerie green glow from the center of the Plaza, and the center of the Holy Circle. The Remembrance, its twisted emerald form hovering slightly above its stand, has begun to spin slowly. This is as disconcerting as Fierce's early arrival has been. I glance at her, and know she shares similar thoughts (how I consider such blasphemous ideas, even now, I'll never know). My vision fills with green, and I see a desert, feel the sand scrape my face, and hear angry women screaming. I rub my eyes, and I am back in the plaza, in the circle.

Directly across from me, I hear a gnarled voice, utterly commanding, address me. "Perhaps this young man would like to reconsider his path." I feel the age in my bones as I focus on the figure before me. I am disoriented, warm, even in the autumn winds. I look upon the face of Madness, the Teacher. He is stocky, with a reddish-gray beard. His smile shows that he knows things that would destroy my mind just by hearing them. The scene snaps sharply into focus. His tuxedo, with tails, is perfectly tailored. His top hat is angled just enough to seem sinister. His scales... the black of the world when you close your eyes at night. I look at him, straight in the eyes. He expands his grin.

"I thought not." I remember that I've never heard the word "tuxedo" before. The black of the Teacher's flame is accented by the glow of the Remembrance.

The Remembrance is glowing more brightly as the sun sets. It spins faster as more of the Dragon Guardians arrive. It knows what is going to happen to it. I wonder if the Guardians even realize that it remembers tomorrow just as clearly as yesterday.

Drums sound in the distance. There, from the river. A wooden ship, its prow in the shape of a dragon, is approaching. The rhythm is primal and frenzied shouts can be heard, even from shore. Of the two torches left, one sputters and lights. It burns orange and yellow, just as

mine does. A man can be seen standing on the prow of the ship.

No, it's not a man. It's a Guardian. The ship thumps against the concrete of the plaza to my left, and almost a hundred yards away. The Guardian strolls into the circle and emits a muffled giggle.

Nemesis scowls and Fierce joins the other two in laughter from the belly. This is Loki, the Balance. We are told by the elders (and I have told this to youngsters) that his name comes from a god in another religion from the last age. This makes the name no less fitting to the Balance. He stretches his wings, clearly showing off (I blaspheme again!) and the Remembrance spins faster and glows more brightly. He barks at the intricately engraved gem, as a dog would, and my vision fills with green again. I can feel the ocean's salty wind play with my white hair. Giant metal beasts lay waste to miles and miles of coastline, led by a bald, thin man. His body is covered in tattoos and his eyes are alight with the fever of a realized dream. I blink, and everything loses focus again. I am back in the Plaza. My age weighs on me like never before. I feel the cool of light rain on my face and sigh with relief. A good omen, at last.

I focus my vision on the last torch, now lit. Some say that purple was once the color of royalty. Others that it represents the sky at the deepest of night. Not me. I've learned the meaning of that color, and it's pain. I hear the flapping of the leather trench coat and look up. Simple black clothing, buttoned shirt, and darkened glasses that barely cover his eyes. His curly brown hair is pulled back into a ponytail, and a circlet of glass rests on his head. He pulls his glasses off of his face, and takes up my gaze with his own. His crystal blue eyes meet mine. Tears flow, uncontrollable, down my leathery cheeks.

The sun sets, and the glow of the Remembrance outshines the torches. Herod, the Rebuilder, First among the Guardians, intones the words of the rite.

"We have come, as you have summoned us. We protect this city and demand, as we have for generations, our sacrifice." His words are echoed around the circle, spoken by each. When they have finished, their eyes and the weight of centuries, bear down upon me.

"There will be no sacrifice." I hear my words, and the scrape of Fierce's sword on the concrete, as if from far away. "There will be no more sacrifices. We, the people of the City of Dragons, have accused and tried you, the Guardians, of the most heinous crime. We have followed your own laws in this." Breathe. I must remember to breathe. My head is swimming. "You have lied to us." I feel my

arms cross. My back is screaming from standing stiff-backed for this long.

A sigh from Herod. He is not surprised. "And the punishment that you have decided upon?" I hold my hand out to Fierce. Somehow, it is not trembling. She places her sword in my hand and I scream as I have never screamed. The power and agony of judgment fill me, and I swing the sword with all the might left in my body.

The Remembrance, the most holy artifact of the City, shatters in an explosion of green.

Our People will never be the same.

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When the Elders of the City heard the thunder and saw the jagged green strike of lightning, they knew what had happened. They watched the Guardians rise up from the Plaza and fly away. They approached the Plaza slowly, fearful of what they might find. Each of the priestesses lay still, impaled by a smoking piece of the Remembrance. The Eldest was never found.

## Apocalypse Yesterday

### Chapter 1

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*There was a time when human beings covered the surface of our world. We were so great in number that the Earth trembled and shook under our very weight. The smoke of our many fires filled the air, and some of us were thankful for the days when breathing was easy. The oil of our machines fouled our rivers, lakes, and oceans. Water that was pumped to our house - an inestimable luxury now - was not good enough. To be safe, we bought it sterilized and packaged in bottles.*

*We had lulled ourselves into a complacent half-sleep, and we sincerely believed that we were invincible.*

*Then the Earth convulsed. Most minds are now bent toward surviving harsh winters, so we have little time for philosophers. Herod of Dragon City has said that it was a time of a changing of the guard amongst gods. I have come upon little evidence to the contrary.*

*Whatever the cause, millions upon millions of our brethren, of human beings, died in those weeks. Meteors fell from the sky, destroying our cities. Whether judgment from above or alien invasion, the Locusts poured from those meteors and slaughtered us. Race, class, politics, and differences in faith all became meaningless as we were all stripped down to our most basic need - survival.*

*-Timothy Marley, Book of Changes, First Year*

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It's all happening. Just like he was screaming about. The sky is red as blood and the dead are everywhere. I've stolen this paper and these pens from abandoned stores and offices. It's going to be worth more than my hide if any of us live through this. My mom always told me to keep a diary whenever things got rough. I always thought that was sissy shit. But this, this is too much to handle. Maybe writing it down will get it to make some kind of sense.

Up until a few weeks ago, I was an orderly at a nut house in Detroit. Oh, wait, I should probably call it a Mental Institution. Not that being politically correct will matter for a while... anyway, this dude was committed by his family. Since the place was privately

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funded, you needed to commit yourself or be turned in by your family. According to them, he had dropped a whole load of acid, and it had whacked him out all nasty-like. They said he'd never done any drugs before, but you could tell by the bags under his eyes and the way he'd stare through people. Maybe he wasn't a pro, but he definitely wasn't new to drugs. He was docile when they brought him in. He had his head bowed, and he was crying quietly. It always disturbed me to see a big man cry.

We wrapped him in a straight jacket, just in case, and took him to his new home in my wing. Procedure was that we watched the fresh ones for two days, around the clock, to get a bead on them. We'd report what we saw and heard to the doctors, and that would start out their file. I took the first shift with this guy. He had stopped crying by now, and was staring at me. His eyes were kinda strange. They'd shift from blue to gray, but I was sure that it was just a trick of the light. I nodded to him, and he seemed to relax all at once. He pulled himself up into a sitting position on the bed and heaved a big 'ol sigh.

"They're right, you know. I'm insane, and I think I've been this way for a long time." He sounded lucid enough. Usually the fresh ones try to tell me that they're not nuts, and plead for me to let them go home. I was kind of relieved that this guy was going to make it easy on me.

"I've been seeing things. People, animals, mythical creatures. I can even touch them. By every sensory input, I know they're real. But they're not. Nobody else can see them, or touch them, or fight them. I'm having other hallucinations, too. Being in a time and place that I know it's not possible for me to be." This guy sounded more like someone going through a list of unfortunate medical conditions than he did a nut ball. I'd heard of calm ones, but I'd never met one before.

"I feel fine now, but I don't think I'm going to stay this calm." That caught my attention. "That's why my family brought me here. I guess I get a little... insistent when these visions come over me."

He wasn't kidding. By the second night, he was throwing himself all over the room. He was begging and pleading for us to give him something that would make it all go away. He went downhill pretty quickly. By the fourth night, he couldn't tell the difference between the hallucinations and the real world. I got more than my share of hard knocks whenever I had to go in his cell. His

parents had neglected to tell us that he had been studying some kind of martial art. He knew what he was doing when he tossed his weight around. My shoulder still hurts sometimes from when I hit it hard on the bed frame.

It was around the end of the second week that the weird stuff started to happen.

I remember the first time I noticed something strange. I looked into the room of one guy who had it real bad. He always thought he was covered in bugs. Straight out of every cheesy flick with a nut job in it. I glanced through the window in his door, and I saw, just for an instant, a swarm of bugs crawling all over the guy. I blinked, and it was gone. I had this creepy chill go up my spine, and I couldn't shake that crazy feeling all day. I think I got a max of, like, two hours of sleep that night.

The next morning, we had to call a crew in to haul out his body. I shit you not, it looked like it had been chewed on by bugs all day and night long. I had a hard time keeping any food down for a couple of weeks.

That morning, while we were having the body hauled out, my man started freaking out again. He had told me, that first night, that he didn't know his name any more. He told me that he was going on a quest for a new name. I asked him if he meant like a vision quest, like Indians do. He said that it was something like that.

Well, when the body was being pulled out, my man started screaming that he had been given a name from his god, and that Yahweh (I think I spelled that right) had set things in motion because of his return. I was already at the end of my rope because of the bug guy, and now this. I went over to Mr. Freak-out's room, and he had somehow busted out of the straight jacket, and was tearing apart the bedding. He was screaming, "I have a name, I have a name! Yahweh has finished his grand plan, and I have met the Harbinger!" This was the worst possible timing. I called the nurse down, and asked her to calm him down. We shot him up with Thorazine. I hate doing that to cool cats, but he needed it. The nurse told me later that day that he calmed down as soon as the needle went in his arm, even before she pressed the plunger. She said he even thanked her. That day, I agreed with him. He *was* crazy.

From then on, he insisted that he be addressed as Herod. The Thorazine became regular enough that we gave it to him in a pill form, and he'd swallow it every time like a good boy. My man wasn't

stupid, he knew what was going on. I just wish I had.

He and I'd have talks when the drugs were in him. The Thorazine calmed him down quite a bit, but the dose he was taking would just give him a heavy-lidded and slurred-speech calm. That dose would reduce the other patients to drooling lumps, but not him. I don't know if it was just something odd in his brain chemistry or if it was the serious chunk of drugs he'd done before he came to the hospital. Sometimes I'd have to listen really closely to make out what he was saying, but I always made it out. He begged me to give him a pencil and a piece of paper, but he knew we couldn't do that. He asked me to write it down for him, and I told him I was just a city kid and wasn't shit when it came to writing. Which is true, really. Anyway, he'd tell me all about his hallucinations when he'd be drugged up. He'd tell me about the red sky, about asteroids falling from the heavens, and the monsters that would "pour forth from them and cover the cities in a blanket of death and decay." He told me about the dancing armies that would come forth to protect the population, what was left of it, and he told me that he'd be part of that. He told me about arresting Jesus of Nazareth and the grim satisfaction of the crucifixion. He told me that he was more dragon than man. He told me he was crazy. Over and over again, he'd tell me he was crazy. He'd never let me forget it. Sometimes, he'd get so caught up in the grief of realizing that he was nuts that I'd have to leave. Like I said, it's always disturbed me to see a big man cry.

By the end of the third week, some of us were dead, and others of us were considering committing ourselves. Patients were being killed, one or two at a time, by their own insanities. We couldn't keep up with the bodies. Hell, most of us just wouldn't come into work. Not after we started seeing it too. The bugs had been a hint. A warning to get out while the getting was good. I stayed. By the end of the fourth week, I could see the dragons clinging to the walls and door of my man's room. They damn near wallpapered the inside.

One night, real late, there were three people surrounding him inside the room. He'd never told me about them. All three had these... well... dragon wings. One was a woman who stood six and a half feet tall. She was completely covered in armor, straight out of some King Arthur movie. She was completely intent on my man. In fact, all three were. The second one was about six foot even, and reeked of pot. Some crazy desire to reprimand them for having contraband in the room tried to push its way out of me, but I kept my

damn mouth shut. The dude was wearing a Grateful Dead t-shirt, and torn-up blue jeans. He was sitting back, almost lying, on the bed. I looked at the third dude, and I crossed myself, right there. He looked like a damn skeleton, with his skin torn in places and showing bone. You could *feel* the cold coming from him. They were all staring straight at my man. One by one, they walked over to him, and *into* him. Like some crazy Star Trek special effect, you know what I'm saying?

I opened the door and knelt down next to him. My voice was shakin', I couldn't stop that, even if I'd thought about it. You could see his eyes focus as he looked at me. He had to be doped to the gills. He looked at me and slowly smiled. I asked him if he was all right and he nodded. I asked him if he was in pain, and he nodded again. He reached out to me, and touched the end of his finger to my forehead, between my eyebrows and just above. He grimaced, and something shot through me and sent me flying back out into the hallway. He was screaming again, but I knew he was drugged. I stood up and shook off the feeling like every single hair on my body was tryin' to jump ship. I stumbled back over to his room, and... he was bent over, crying, spasming, and twitching. It looked like every single muscle in his body was tensing and twitching all at once. The skin on his shoulder blades just burst off. Jesus, I can still hear his screaming in my head. I don't think I'll ever forget shit like that.

I think I better hurry this along. The stars at night have been disappearing for days at a time. It's not like there's TV networks or newspapers any more, so nobody has a friggin' clue what's going on.

Where was I? Oh yeah, the crazy shit going on at the nut house. If I wasn't so freaked out, that line might've been funny. I know this all seems really disjointed, which sucks, but that's how it happened. The dragons guarding the room, the moving walls of the claustrophobic's room, the bugs... and the dragon wings bursting from my man's back. That was five days ago. Since then, the stuff that was happening in the asylum has been happening to normal people. Our world has been torn in half, and none of us know what to do. So I'm keeping this diary, like my mom always told me to do.

I've buried her body in the backyard of her house. There's perennials planted there. She had them in the garage, and was going to plant them in her garden. It's spring now, so they should have enough time to grow and do whatever they do to show up again next year. The house isn't big, but that's where she wanted to be buried.

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She told me, when I found her, that an angel had appeared, and it's light had burned her soul with its beauty. She could barely move her mouth, and her skin cracked and tore when she told me. She'd been so badly burned that her eyes had shriveled like raisins. She made me promise to live through this, and to believe in God, and then she died. The work gloves and shovel are lying on the porch next to me...

I'm sorry if these pages are smudged or hard to read, I didn't know that tears smeared ink like that.

It's getting dark, now, and most of the stars are gone. If I live, I'll write again.

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## Report on Creature Biology - Final Report

Dr. Diane Hastings

This report is here for one purpose, and one purpose alone. This is being written so that you will be able to understand the reasons behind the actions that we've taken. The cities are gone, the creatures have been released from their transport meteors, and they have begun to ravage the population.

Cities have checked in with us from all over the world. Every single one has been hit with a meteor that seems to be filled with a number of creatures proportionate to the population and size of the city. We are unsure if this is due to a gestation process that occurs after the meteors have landed or if this is due to a calculated strike on the part of the creatures, or those who sent them.

The military has failed utterly in its attempt to stop these creatures. Conventional weapons have no effect. Biological weapons (our department) have no effect. Hastily developed energy weapons have no effect. The creatures are insectile in appearance and biology. The supposition that lungs were necessary beyond a certain size limit was incorrect, as the diffusion of gases seems to work with these creatures. We honestly don't know if these creatures even utilize gas in their cellular processes. We have examined corpses of these creatures, however all organs seem to evaporate once the life processes have ceased. Indeed, everything but the exoskeletons goes through a rapid chemical reaction and evaporates into nitrogen, oxygen, and carbon dioxide. We have been unable to keep a captured creature alive long enough to analyze the most simple biological process.

We have failed in our assignment. For this, we apologize to what is left of the government and to all future generations. We were

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not able to find a weakness in these creatures in time to save anyone. We have abandoned Kalamazoo, and are en route to Detroit, where most of the surviving population of Michigan is gathering. What follows is a report of the method, however wholly unbelievable, that has proven to be successful in defeating the creatures that have attacked the population of our home.

Surrounding our caravan is a detachment of martial artists. They have gathered from all of the different schools that practiced in the area, and my husband, Sebastian, is among them. The detachment has repeatedly engaged the creatures and driven them back. They have ensured our survival - we, the few remaining of Kalamazoo. I must apologize once more for the ridiculousness of this. Despite its reality, I find it difficult to report. My own eyes have witnessed the repeated successes of the detachment when all else has failed. Hand-to-hand combat, as well as use of weapons such as swords, bo (a staff), and others have also been effective. Being a scientist at heart, I have analyzed these combats, the tactics involved, and the subsequent results. Here I must warn you, the reader of this report. Any hand-to-hand combat that has been observed by untrained individuals has NOT resulted in success against the creatures. We have not been able to pinpoint the reason behind this, and will not attempt to do so in the near future. Not until our results have been verified and corroborated with those in Detroit. It still may be a fluke.

Those that we have been able to contact in Detroit and the surrounding areas report similar findings. We have also discovered another disturbing pattern. It seems that just before the meteors collided with our cities, many people simply evaporated or disappeared. According to surviving witnesses and second-hand accounts (these would be rejected out of course if the numbers of first-hand accounts were sufficient to gather any data), each victim of this phenomenon experienced some sort of euphoria or muscle spasm that induced expressions of bliss, joy, and ecstasy during the minutes before their bodies lost cohesion. According to gathered data, 95% of the victims were of an openly Christian background. Data such as this cannot be ignored and leads me to an extremely disturbing conclusion.

After speaking with my husband, who at one time studied the bible religiously (pardon the pun), I can only conclude that we are living out the Book of Revelations. I cannot guess at what this means for those of us that are left behind save an expectation of much, much

more death.

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Personal Journal  
Dr. Diane Hastings

I've dreamed of Sebastian for the seventh night in a row now. Those of us that are still able jog along beside the idling cars and trucks, and it tires us out. (Soon, it'll be too hot and humid for anyone but the detachment to do that.) So when we sleep, we sleep deeply. We dream every night. I keep dreaming of cities all over the world being destroyed. In the thunder of the crashing meteors, I hear in my head, "Babylon." Paris. "Babylon." London. "Babylon." Hong Kong. "Babylon." Cairo. "Babylon." Detroit. "Babylon." The progression of cities always ends with Detroit. A friend of ours is there, in Detroit. In the dreams, and we hope in reality. We see him, but he's been changed. It makes me shudder to even remember seeing him as that terrible creature. It makes me sick to remember seeing my husband change in the same way after clasping our friend's hand. I knew his name in the dream, and it had been changed. He called himself Herod. I'm deathly afraid of what we'll find when we reach the city. So much in this world has changed. I must not lose control. For myself and for Sebastian, I must not lose control.

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The grounds shook with the force of growth. Where there had been trees, there were now ancient skyscrapers of wood and leaf to rival the redwoods in California. Where there had been grass and open field, there were growing, spreading trees. Their leaves were opening themselves up to the midday sun to soak in its perfect energy. All around the woman, nature re-claimed the university's campus. Buildings became covered in vines, but they were not torn down by their weight. She would need shelter and a place to harbor those in need, after all. The infamous squirrels of the campus raced here and there, leaping from growing tree to cracking sidewalk to riverbank. They watched her, in the center of this shivering growth, and did not fear her. They knew that she was not human, not any longer, and that she was not a predator. The woman twirled around and around, laughing a child's laugh as green-scaled bat-like wings grew from her back as a branch would grow from a tree.

Now, she was spring. Would she be summer and autumn and winter, as well? Her giggling mingled with the sounds of growth and the cracking of pavement that filled the university's grounds.

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The sun shone brightly down on a ledge overlooking a field. It made those training there that much more uncomfortable, but warmed the teacher pleasantly. He took off his baseball cap and absently scratched his head. It was a gesture that all of his students had seen before. He barked out an order to spar, and turned his back on them. He sprinted a short distance over dry grass and climbed a ledge to get a good vantage point of the sparring. He reached the top, and crouched easily. He brushed the dirt off of his hands and onto his khakis. His black skin contrasted with the light tan of the cloth, and the teacher frowned. These khakis were coming apart. They were ripped in various places, but none so badly as the knees. He shook his head as he pulled out another unraveling thread. They were all going to need new clothing soon. Such a simple act as buying clothes, and now it was so complicated. He swung his legs out over the ledge and watched his team practice below. They'd all been hardened by the combat that they'd seen. Their practice showed a marked decrease in sloppy mistakes, pompous boasting, and laughter. No one down there was a child any more. No matter what age they'd started at, they'd all grown up pretty quickly once the fighting began. He wished once again for clean water, and wondered how long it would be before they came across a stream or lake that was fit to drink from. He pulled a backpack out from between two rocks, and opened it. All of these things were so valuable now. He took out a machine-bound book. The word "Journal" was embossed in gold lettering on the cover and on the spine. It glittered in the sun as he opened the cover. The teacher thumbed to the first blank page and then rummaged once more for a pen. A cheap, ten-cent pen. He'd never see another one like it again. He sighed and began to write in the summer sun.

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My name's Timothy. Everybody calls me Tim. Everybody but my student. He always called me Timothy. That or teacher. Look, I'm getting ahead of myself. I'm writing this for those of my Brotherhood, in case we ever die out. At least they'll be able to read about us. We've fulfilled our purpose.

I've been learning various forms of martial arts since I was a child. Mostly under the same teacher, which was an advantage in my case. We never had a dojo or a school; we practiced where we could. The training was always hard, but always worth it. A lot of aspects of my life have become irrelevant or out of date since the world

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shattered, except for writing. Our Brotherhood was finally called to the lines of battle. We were foolish to think that we'd be the only ones stepping up to bitch slap demon ass when everything came apart at the seams. I'm getting a little ahead of myself again. I really should be writing about my student. Everybody knows what happened when the shit hit the fan.

When my student didn't call me teacher, he called me Timothy. He seemed to follow a pattern with this. When I was giving a lesson, or he had a question or idea about his training, he'd call me teacher. When we were talking as two people, I was Timothy. It still sticks out in my mind. He was a big guy, you know. He'd always make jokes about being a fat man. When I approached him about teaching him, he was skeptical about being able to physically handle it. I didn't disguise the fact that the road would be difficult. I also didn't shy away from telling him how rewarding it would be. He decided to do it, and it was both difficult and rewarding for him. His physical training isn't what was remarkable about him. The other half of the teaching was centered on control and manipulation of life's energy. It's a part of all martial arts and usually takes the form of meditations, focused strikes and blocks, and disguise. At this, he was a natural. If he ever finds this... if he's even still alive... he'll no doubt swell up with pride and try to deny its truth at the same time.

There was a break in his training, a few years before the storm of the angels hit the world. For a long time, he had been dreaming about moving to Detroit. For a dude like that, it was only a matter of time before his dreams would become reality. Even then. He moved down there, and, well, it's hard to say what happened. He only came to a few lessons, then disappeared. I was worried, just like all of the people he'd left behind. He'd always made sure to stay in touch. In fact, he was pretty close to obsessed with being able to be reached. I guess it was kind of a security blanket for him.

After a couple of weeks of him being completely incommunicado, I had a dream. I was in the form of the winged serpent, as sometimes happened in my dreams, and I was floating in the corner of a padded cell. I was guarding the occupant, though I didn't know quite why. I looked at the mental patient, and it was my student. He was wrapped up in a happy jacket, and was giggling. He looked up at me, and I could see the changes. In his eyes, I saw a dragon burst from inside his flesh. I saw him, as a Roman Centurion, leading a bearded Jew to be crucified. I saw a lamb break seven seals

on a scroll. It was then that he began to scream, cowering from my fellow guardians and myself. He demanded that we be cleaned from the room. That's when I woke up.

The news that he'd been institutionalized came a couple of weeks later. By then, I had quietly begun to spread the information to the Brotherhood. "Train. Be ready. Something is coming." I told as many as I could about my dream. It was thanks to him that we were as ready as we were. It wasn't hard to convince those that knew him, either. Almost all of them had their eyes half-open already. Most of them even survived, and are still around. Almost impossible odds, if you ask me.

I saw him again in the battles. I was with a team that had dealt with Chicago. We were all pretty beat up. The demons came from the cities. Some say that they were the souls of those that had been so utterly destroyed by the meteors. Some, still refusing to acknowledge anything metaphysical about the event, say that they were aliens that rode the meteors in like some sort of ship. Either way, this was the battle that the Brotherhood had existed for. Streams and rivers boiled while others ran thick with blood and bodies. But anyone reading this probably knows all the gory details. We were traveling north and east, heading for Detroit. I held out a secret hope that my student had survived. I didn't expect to find him already helping to rebuild.

He swore me to an oath of secrecy as to how he had defeated the demons, and how the Renaissance Center was still standing in the ruins of everything else. I pray to Allah that whenever it fails, those in the city will be ready for the backlash. Now, I start my journey to Mecca and the Third Temple. We have finally made peace with the Jews.

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I can't really describe the effects of Thorazine to you. Not any more than I could describe what it feels like to be on LSD. Sure, I could talk about them in relation to each other. I could tell you that Thorazine turns the same dial in your head that LSD does. I could tell you that the first turns the dial down, while the second turns it up. And I'm pretty sure that you'd understand, on some level, what that means. But you'll never understand precisely what it means to be tripping your balls off any more than you'll understand what the fog of the Thorazine shuffle feels like.

It was a blessing, when they'd give me that little chalky pill in that Dixie cup. I got so good at swallowing those pills that I didn't

*The Remembrance, David M. Crampton*

even need the water. Clean, clear, sparkling Detroit city water. Gone the way of the dodo, LSD, and Thorazine. What I wouldn't give for good, processed, fluoridated water. But, like I said, that fog in my head was a blessing. With the fog there, I couldn't see or hear them any more. Oh, we were all convinced that I was as nuts as they came. I would scream and rant and throw myself bodily against the walls, the bed, the orderlies, whatever. And the things I would rant about! Crazy shit. I would claim to be the one that arrested the anointed one that the Christians came to worship. I would scream that they'd all be judged and found wanting by their own god and that the gods of the Empire would return. Of course, I meant the Roman Empire. Of course. Other times, I would beg, plead, and bribe the orderlies to stop the dragons from taking shifts guarding me. It was stifling, and they only wanted to play Euchre to pass the time. And let me tell you, I despise no card game more than I despise Euchre. The really bad times were when I tried to cut myself open. I was convinced that I was more dragon than I was a man. I insisted that if they cut open my back, they'd set my wings free. Or other times, it was a metabolic process that I needed to trigger by fasting for an impossible number of days.

The fog would make all of that go away. It would mute the truth that sang in my mind as though suffocating it with the softest, most comfortable pillow that you've ever laid your head on. Yes, I said truth. That was the bitch of the whole situation. It was all true.

I'm sending this letter to anyone that cares to receive it. I'm leaving it in a random mailbox somewhere here in Detroit. My name is Herod. You've probably heard of me by now.

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Herod looked up at the clouds and felt a strange sense of Deja Vu. He knew that he'd never been to this particular house and this particular mailbox, but it was familiar all the same. He sealed the envelope and carefully placed it in the mailbox. It was one of those old envelopes, and it left that almost-minty taste in his mouth. Herod winced, and almost wished he'd used something new, something hand-folded and sealed with wax. The aftertaste made him want to retch, but the old stuff made more sense. It had that perfectly even feel of something machine-made. All of the lines were straight and at exact ninety-degree angles to each other. You could almost smell one of those 24-hour copy shops or bulk office supply stores. Herod shook his head. He slipped the yellowing envelope into the rusty

mailbox and buttoned his leather trench. Autumn was almost over.  
Winter was coming.

## Journeys

### Chapter 2

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*With humanity's population thinned, we began to gather toward each other. Strength in numbers became the only mantra that gave us hope of sanity in the future. Hope was worth more than anything else. Food, water, and sleep could be gone without as long as hope existed.*

*Some gathered in the ruins of the cities. The Locusts had spread from their impact craters, so these had become the safest places to be. Others gathered in the wilderness, away from the perceived threat that the cities posed. Maybe it was a dormant instinct that awoke at the horror of it all. Maybe it was some concept of "us" against "them."*

*It was quickly apparent that there were leaders left among us; there were those with the ability and strength to guide these small groups of people through dark times. They and their peoples would hold off the Locust threat for as long as it would last. They would form societies in that first year that would last for decades to come, and hopefully for centuries into the future.*

*We did not yet understand that like the Arthurian legends, these leaders would become one with their people. One with their kingdoms.*

-Timothy Marley, Book of Changes, First Year

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The air was thick and humid, the sky full of low clouds. It had been weeks since the clouds had been thin enough to let through a seriously sunny day, despite the summer heat. Usually, people would get more uptight without a lot of sunlight, but it wasn't the same this time. Not for the people living in these ruins, and not for the man sitting on top of the tallest building left in the city. The heavy wind pushed through his patched clothing and pulled strands of his hair out of the recently tied ponytail. Haircuts weren't as important as they used to be, and clothes that lasted were hard to find. Even when you were the right-hand man for the Rebuilder.

The man stood up, savoring the few moments of calm. He was built well, with dark hair that looked like it hadn't been cut in

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several months. He stood on the tallest of five glass towers that rose out of a thick concrete bed. The glass seemed polished to a reflective shine, and yet his boots didn't slip. Below him, yards from the edge of the towers, the concrete bed gave way to a murky, yet fast-flowing river. Every once in a while, when a shaft of sunlight hit it just right, a tinge of red would highlight the water's surface. Seemingly heedless of the height, the man turned in a circle, taking in the entire city. Across the river, the ruins of Windsor were completely covered in fog. The clouds seemed to reach down from the sky, getting lower and lower as they got close to the river, and then engulfing the ruins of the Canadian city entirely. The man absently reached up and brushed his hands through the lower layer of the clouds. The cool moisture contrasted sharply with the humid wind that still whipped around him. Continuing his turn, he scanned the ruins of hotels, highway ramps, business buildings, parking garages, restaurants, and stadiums. A section of concrete bridge adorned with shining metal tracks, two stories off the ground, lay whole and alone in front of the five towers. It reached out a few feet over the remains of the street before disappearing at a jagged break. Barely anything over a single story still stood as it once did in this city. Except, of course, the five towers. The other buildings were old, and their ruins exposed things that hadn't seen the sun for over two hundred years. Soon, crews of survivors would begin to cart away rubble and claim territory. While it was good news, that thought was for another time. Nearly completing his turn, he paused a moment to stare at the crater.

When the meteor had finally hit, it had known where it was going. A block wide, it had slammed into and through Cobo Hall. The entire building had caved in, along with its basement levels and the three highway tunnels that were stacked beneath it. When the cratered stone hit, the roads had risen and fallen as if they were fans at a winning Lions game. The man smirked as he compared the roughly even odds of a meteor crashing into downtown and the Lions actually winning a game. Highway overpasses had toppled, tunnels had collapsed, and buildings had cracked and slid into the street. As if the death toll hadn't been high enough before, this had sent it through the roof. As it stood, the meteor was being lifted out of the crater and set in front of it. The rubble inside was being crushed into powder to be re-used as concrete. Herod, named the Rebuilder by the city's population, had taken the crater for his Keep. Tonight, to mark the

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Keep's finishing, the city's tribes would gather to set out territory, laws, and unveil a few surprises. Surprises Herod wouldn't even tell this man, his right-hand man, about. A sigh escaped the man as he surveyed the wreckage. Memory of the restaurants, the arenas, the bums, the whole city rotting away from the inside, filled him with a sense of twisted nostalgia.

"It's better now, despite the carnage and the destruction, don't you think, Jason? The city?" The man turned around slowly and nodded at the sound of the voice. "It has a new life, it has people that care about it, and they care about actually living, instead of just surviving. It has people that want to make it their home, not just the place where they store their shit." Herod was looking over the city as Jason had been. The scaled wings that sprouted from Herod's back were still unsettling to Jason, even with the amount of time he'd spent helping his one-time patient. When he would stretch, the wings were as wide as if five more people stood on either side of the man. When he stood, they folded and layered themselves so that he was almost no wider than when he'd been brought into the hospital by his parents. There was nothing Herod could do about the height, though. They added two feet to him, and were tipped in horns the color of ivory. The man squinted his eyes as a small break in the clouds passed overhead, and he remembered Herod's screams that day in the mental hospital. He remembered the flesh bursting from Herod's back, and looked him straight in the eyes.

"It's what we've got. It's our home." Jason's face remained expressionless while Herod slowly smiled. Jason hadn't done much smiling since that day he buried his mother in the back yard. Most of the city's people had recovered, but something in Jason had snapped from enduring the events in the institution and then the death of his mother. Something was either broken or gone forever inside him, and Herod was fine with that. As callous as it was, Jason's dispassionate side was perfect for his task of running the details of rebuilding the city. There were things that Herod just couldn't do. Then again, Jason wasn't the only one that had snapped.

"Friends of mine have just entered the border of the city. They've made it through the Borderlands and are to be brought to the Keep. I've already had rooms prepared for them. And Jason? They're part of tonight's surprise, so keep an eye on them like you would on me." With a push off of the side of the tower, Herod leaped into the overcast day and spread deep purple, scaled wings. Jason

grunted and turned around, heading for the sliding trap door that led into the tower's top floor.

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*"You finally did it, man. You're out of Lansing, out of the Internet business, living it up in a swank loft." Swiderski raised his beer in a mock-salute. He was a tall, thin Polish man. His head was shaved, though his dark hair gave the whole thing the impression of having a five o'clock shadow. He had a goatee of black hair, which almost eternally surrounded a cigarette hanging from his mouth. His arms were heavily tattooed; one had a sleeve of flames racing up his arm.*

*"Thank you, thank you, thank you. And for my next trick, I'll pull another job out of my hat for you. I need to have someone nearby who enjoys retarded animation as well as serious." Herod was on his second drink, and he'd never had a decent tolerance for alcohol.*

*"No need, buddy. You're not the only one who's got the universe by the balls. Lookit what came in the mail for me today." Swiderski tossed a letter to Herod, who caught it easily. Its return address read: Tokyo Institute of Robotics, Los Angeles Campus. Herod pulled the letter out of its envelope and read aloud.*

*"Dear Mr. Swiderski, we are pleased to offer you one of the coveted full-ride scholarship placement slots at our Institute. Although your academic experience does not meet our usual standards, the admittance board was very impressed with your enclosed essays, theorems, and diagrams relating to the field of applied robotics. Your obvious passion for the subject will bring renewed interest and creativity to a field dominated by the analytical." Herod blinked a few times and slipped the letter back into the envelope. "Wow. Congrats, my friend. Your dream to create giant robots is on its way!" They laughed then, as Herod handed the letter back to Swiderski. "Of course, I'll miss ya. Who else will appreciate my extensive toy collection?"*

*"What about your woman?" Swiderski got up to grab another beer from Herod's fifties-style refrigerator. "Doesn't she get all hot over plastic and die-cast metal?"*

*Herod snorted. "She says that they stare at her when she's sleeping. They creep her out." He shrugged and finished his drink in a gulp.*

*"No accounting for taste, fat man. But then, she is into you.*

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*No telling what strange and weird things she's into." Swiderski brought him a third drink, which he opened.*

*"I miss her, man." He sighed, looking over his loft. It seemed so empty at that moment.*

*"Of course you do. She puts up with your shit, like I do, but she gives you sex. And I know that I was your first choice, ya homosexual." Swiderski picked up one of Herod's toys and began to fiddle with it. "Anyways, remember that thing we used to talk about doing together?"*

*"I told you that I don't find you attractive. Don't you take no for an answer?" Herod smirked and Swiderski snorted.*

*"Not that thing, you sicko closet-case. This thing." Swiderski pulled a small vial of green plastic out of his pocket. It was filled with a clear liquid, as far as Herod was able to tell.*

*"Is that what I think it is?" Herod grabbed the vial excitedly.*

*"Well, it's not water, that's for sure." Herod shot him a look. "Yeah, it is. Liquid LSD, from a trusted source. You said sugar cubes or some kind of hard candy would do the trick, right?" Swiderski was barely able to suppress his own excitement.*

*"I can't. At least, not until after my new job's drug test. No way I can risk blowing that opportunity, not now. How long until you leave for California?" Herod tossed the vial back to Swiderski.*

*"Two days. No good. Shit, I really wanted to trip with you, man." He put the vial back into his own pocket.*

*"Well, how about this? It's a college, and it's in California, so there's probably a long weekend every other week." Swiderski chuckled. "I'll pitch in on half your train ticket-"*

*"Train?"*

*"What, am I made of money? Anyway, we chill Friday night, trip during the day in scenic Detroit - heh - and recover on Sunday before sending you back on the red-eye train. You can sleep the whole way back." Herod took another swig of his drink, obviously pleased with himself.*

*"Huh. That might actually work. Did you make all that up yourself?" Herod flipped Swiderski the bird, which had only made him laugh out loud.*

*"You better give me the vial. Possessing it is bad enough, but transporting it over state lines is a federal crime. Better if we stick to local law-breaking, I think." He held his hand up, motioning for Swiderski to toss it.*

*Swiderski said, "Good idea," and tossed him the vial. Herod put it in the freezer, taped to the back of the icemaker. They popped in one of Swiderski's latest DVD acquisitions, and animated film from Japan about an intergalactic war, whose outcome rested on mysterious giant robots.*

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#### Personal Journal

Diane Hastings

How do you put into words what we've just been through? Is it possible? Well, I suppose that's technically the purpose of a journal, so I might as well make the attempt. I suppose the attacks of the Locusts, as they're being called, would be a good place to start. I can be blamed for that unfortunate nickname, as I was the one to bring the link between what was happening and Sebastian's experience with the Bible to the light of discussion on our trip. I don't really mind being blamed, I suppose. I almost feel proud, in a history-making sort of way.

The Locust attacks had decreased to the point of near non-existence. This could either be attributed to the time frame (maybe they'd done what they'd come to do, conquered what they wanted to conquer, been defeated, or a thousand other things that we, as humans, could not comprehend) or to the location. We didn't know it yet, but we were approaching a populated zone. About five or six hours after the last Locust sighting, we came upon a blockade across the highway. Cement dividers from the highway had been broken off and moved to block the road, and were covered in razor and barbed wire. Armed men and women in camouflage glared at us while pointing pistols and shotguns in our directions. It took a few moments to find someone in charge. Those minutes were spent glaring, questioning, and wondering if we should turn back, or keep going south along another route. Finally, someone came out, panicked, demanding to know if it was another attack. We were to find out later that he was the commander of the local militia-type military force that was in charge of guarding the borders of the populated area. He just about split his face open in a grin when he saw that it was not a band of Locusts at his barricade, but survivors from out of town.

We were rushed into town, and those of us that were injured were taken to ambulances and spirited away. To hospitals, the post's commander said. There were hospitals that were still operating.

*The Remembrance, David M. Crampton*

Several in our caravan burst into tears as the familiar feeling of a society thought lost washed over us upon entrance. The last exit before we had found the barricade had said something like Rochester, or Troy, or something, and memories of Herod before he was Herod assaulted me. Things like "suburbia" and "nothing ever changes there" and "I couldn't take the stasis" fought with the awe of a place that had been able to hold on to what once was. A month or two gone, and we were all resigned that it would never be again.

That thought troubled me more than anything during our stay there. The Homeland, they called it. Somehow, the survival of daily life, the nine-to-five grind, the fast food restaurants and the exchange of paper money, all felt wrong. We didn't stay long. Those that were in the hospital were given the choice to stay and receive prolonged care, or to take what care they could and leave with the rest of us. Feelings of being trapped and pushed in at all angles kept me up most nights, and fitful dreams of Detroit and Herod kept me up the rest of them. It didn't take long to get most of the caravan ready to move on. We did take losses; some did decide to stay. No matter how much of a relief it was to have a double cheeseburger and fries and an ice-cold pop, it just wasn't right.

Before we left, most of the caravan got together to talk about staying or leaving. It was an emotional meeting; we went through a few boxes of tissues. We tried to figure out what home meant to any of us any more. Were the hospitals and clean water worth the fast food and the nine to five? In the end, none of these questions could be answered. Most of us felt a pull to Detroit, as dangerous as the Homelander said it was, and we could not resist it. Even the detachment of martial artists that had surrounded the caravan said that they needed to move on. There were others that had fought, as they had, and they wanted to find them.

In the morning, we declared our intention to leave. The Homelander turned their backs on us immediately, cursing us for defectors, savages, and desolates. The commander was summoned to accompany us out of the city, and even he looked sad. Instead of accepting the possibility of living outside, they were injured by a small group of people not agreeing that theirs was the best way of life. Even beyond that, even if we had agreed, we could not have stayed with the dreams of Herod ushering us onward. I can't begrudge these people their society, if it's truly what they want. I can't help but feel a sense of sadness for them, no matter how illogical that sadness is.

*The Remembrance, David M. Crampton*

There was something else, but I hesitate to commit it to paper. It confirms the dreams I had about Sebastian and Herod, and I'm having a hard time admitting any correlation between those dreams and the real world. Soon after our wounded were taken to the hospitals, right after crossing the border into the Homeland, Sebastian collapsed. His heart rate and blood pressure were elevated, and his skin was clammy to the touch. I feared something like a heart attack, but Sebastian stubbornly refused to be taken to the hospital. I got some help from two of the detachment that had guarded our caravan, and we lifted him into one of the mini-vans that we'd brought. He began to hallucinate, talking about past lives, always being linked with someone named Herod. He talked about being the mark of what was coming, the one that cemented the change. On the last night, right before we had the meeting about whether to go or stay, he woke up in what seemed to be a lucid state. He clung to me desperately and told me that if we went to Detroit, any chance of things being anything like they once were would be gone. From our marriage to the gods and the universe, nothing would be the same if he went to Detroit. I did what I could to calm him, and he fell back into fitful sleep. So, I guess my decision about staying or leaving was even more stressful than most. If we stayed, Sebastian, by all accounts, had a good chance of dying. If we left, nothing would be the same again, ever. When it came down to it, like I said, there wasn't a choice. I couldn't let Sebastian die.

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Personal Journal  
Sebastian Hastings

I never really thought I'd be weak enough that I couldn't hold a pencil to a piece of paper. I guess we've all got our lessons to learn, and humility is one that keeps coming up for me. I'll get it; it just may take some time.

We've left the Homeland. I don't think that even I would be pretentious enough to call a thrown-together nation based on values and systems that are no longer applicable in a completely changed geography and society the Homeland. Utter foolishness, if you ask me. According to what I remember of the area from when I'd visited with Herod before, we've got about ten or fifteen miles of road between the southern edge of the Homeland and Detroit proper. It's been a while, but I think that's right. There was actually a convenience store operating in that pseudo-city-state, but they only

*The Remembrance, David M. Crampton*

carried maps of the areas inside their borders. Outside the borders were shaded in gray and marked with the caption "Desolate". No help there, not for us. It would be more satisfying if the people in that Homeland knew exactly how much they'd closed themselves off to in attaching themselves to a dead worldview. It would be more satisfying if they knew, and couldn't move onward, instead of just choosing to move onward and thinking that they were doing what was right and noble. Eventually, they'll find out. That is, after all, why I'm here.

I can't tell Diane about it. Her being upset would be like calling a tornado a mild breeze. She and I have already "discussed" our dreams about what will happen once we actually reach Detroit proper. "Discussed" is the term that we use when a married couple disagrees, and then I apologize and admit I'm wrong. Trust me- facts and reality have no place in a "discussion" between a husband and wife.

I know that I'm going to change when I get to Detroit. I have an idea about how, but it's almost too good to be true. I know that if I don't get to Detroit, Herod and the others will die, or at least sleep for a very, very long time. Two words are shouted at me in my dreams. In some, I run from the words and I see people I know and people I don't know slaughtered, or sleeping in caves and tunnels and buildings buried in the earth for years and decades and centuries. In others, I face the words, accept them, and become them. Those dreams always bring hardship, argument, anger, pain, and tribulation. But they bring about something. I shudder to think of the words now. I can feel that slow chill creeping up my spine from the base to my neck, like the acid shivers when Herod and I were in college. Nemesis. Harbinger. Tonight, once again, I'm going to dream about a blue dragon.

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Sebastian closed his journal softly. He kissed his sleeping wife on her forehead and then joined the detachment that surrounded the caravan of slowly moving cars. He knew that his wife had been trying to puzzle out why the martial artists were able to battle the Locust hordes, but he couldn't tell her that either. He could put it into words that she'd understand, but he had the gut feeling that that would somehow devalue what they were doing, and somehow lessen its effect. It was important that it was a secret, and it was important that it only came through training. If it did not, as they'd seen, it would

have little to no effect upon the Locusts. He ached to tell Diane everything that was going on, but too much rested on secrets.

He shook his head as he settled into a jog. He was keeping far too many secrets from his wife for it to be healthy. Duty was the reason, he thought, that secrecy and pretension were important. For someone to fulfill his duty, he would have to make it appear as if doing such were natural, and even easy. Pretension and haughtiness came naturally with that. It was almost required, really. Leadership brought responsibility, and one of those responsibilities was to make sure those that followed you knew that you were a good leader. That it came naturally to Sebastian was really of no consequence. His thoughts on leadership and pretension faded into the background as the sun began to rise. To his left, the yellow-orange orb slowly lit the sky and highlighted low-hanging clouds ahead. They looked like snow-clouds, but the weather was far too hot and humid for that. Perhaps a nasty thunderstorm was getting ready to dump its load on Detroit tonight. It was a fantastic sight to behold, and almost made Sebastian trip over a piece of overpass rubble. Sweat began to bead on his forehead as the oppressive summer heat and humidity rose in time with the sun. Conventions like air conditioning were long gone, and had been even in the Homeland. Too much power consumption, they had said. They could only afford so many electrical appliances running at once, even for those that were wealthier.

Even jogging was torture in this weather, but it was the familiar torture of physical exertion in tough conditions that had come with training. And it was the training that had made them effective. There was no way around it. If Herod had become involved in a form of training like this, Sebastian had no doubt that he had tried to find a way around the physical labor. Herod took great pride in figuring out ways around requirements, especially requirements like physical labor, and still making things work. The fact that it was usually successful made him twitch sometimes, but he knew that would only draw a smirk out of Herod. Well, it would have before. Sebastian wondered for the umpteenth time how much events had changed Herod, and how much Herod had changed events. Herod, Herod, Herod. Over and over again, he brought up the image of his college friend. Over and over again, he tried to think of him linked with the name he knew, and could not. The image was always accompanied by the name Herod. It had been that way since the dreams had started a few nights before the meteors had hit the cities.

The pavement changed beneath their feet and they knew they were getting closer to the city. Residents could tell you the exact city line by the number of potholes and cracks in the highway pavement. At least, Herod had tried to convince him of that on the way to the center of the city once. Sebastian doubted it, but there was no denying that the quality of the pavement was decreasing as they got closer to the city. Whether it was because of the meteor or because of the general upkeep of the city, he wouldn't venture a guess. He heard his wife call a stop to the caravan for breakfast, so he stopped his jog and stretched sore muscles, muscles that had been out of work and routine for far too long as he lay prone in the Homeland. He walked over to where breakfast was being handed out, and grabbed two helpings of oatmeal. Instant oatmeal. Lasts forever, tastes bland in any flavor. He brought one bowl over to his wife, and waited patiently for the question that she was clearly working up the determination to ask.

"You were mumbling in your sleep last night." The dreams were affecting everyone, but he was a little shocked that he was talking while he was sleeping. Hopefully his face was as interested in the oatmeal as he wasn't.

"Oh? Did I say anything interesting? Anything about my many, many, many girlfriends?" A joke would hopefully disarm whatever bomb was about to be dropped. Instead, he earned a quiet scowl.

"Nothing about girlfriends. Lots about Herod. And the word nemesis. In reference to yourself. Want to talk about it?" No, he very well did not want to talk about it. Unfortunately, the methods of pretension and haughtiness never worked on Diane. Ever.

"Nemesis: An enemy fated to destroy you, or a completely matched adversary that's bent on your destruction. At least that's the definition that I remember, it's probably not verbatim out of Webster's." Dodge. Dodging just might work in this situation. Not that it's ever worked before, but it was worth a chance.

"What is it that you're not wanting to talk about, Sebastian? Are you keeping secrets from me?" Well, that was the end of that, wasn't it? Nothing really to do but to come out with it.

"Yes." He looked up from the oatmeal and let the importance of the things he knew show on his face. It earned him another glare, but she was chewing on her bottom lip. That was a good sign. She was considering. She was probably trying to decide the best way to

torture him until she got the information out of him. At least she was considering.

"Well. Whatever you're keeping from me seems to be pretty important to you, though the gods know that you've kept the silliest things from me in the name of honor or your word before. Fine. I won't ask you any more about them, I'll trust you to tell me when you feel the time is right." Ow. How could she possibly make him feel lower than dirt by letting him know that she trusted his judgment? Saying she negated his pretension and hubris was an extreme understatement, especially this time around. He concentrated on his bland breakfast as these thoughts rumbled through his head, and hoped nobody noticed that he was playing with the oatmeal more than he was eating it. Bland was an understatement.

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Jason stood at the northern border of Detroit. Above his head and around his feet were the shattered remains of the I-75 and I-375 interchange that marked the border of downtown proper. I-375 would have headed deeper into the city itself had it not been obliterated by the aftershocks of the meteor's landing. I-75 continued south, eventually leaving Michigan and entering Ohio.

He watched the caravan of trucks, minivans, and mid-size cars come down the highway. It was surrounded by a group of people who easily trotted alongside the caravan. They had already spotted him, and purposely hadn't changed their speed or direction. Herod had said to keep his eye on them like Jason did on him. He thought he'd caught the double meaning, but would wait to be sure. One thing that he'd learned about Herod was that since the crazy, and even before that, he always spoke in puzzles. There was never just a single layer to what he was saying, and more hints could always lead to a greater understanding of the situation. That kind of attitude, puzzles and multi-layered thinking, was already spreading throughout the city. Even the history that was written about the destruction and the Rebuilding of the city was told like tribal lore. They all contained layers upon layers of hints and information about things that had happened. All were hidden in metaphor and double-speak. It was all there for someone who was smart enough to puzzle it out.

That's why Jason usually just asked Herod. He was just a city kid, and wasn't too big on the puzzle shit. He was learning, though. As much as things had hardened him, they had made him sharper. The head of the caravan finally reached him, and he bowed at the

waist.

"I'm here to welcome you all to Detroit. You know what? This is the last time I will be able to call it that. The Rebuilder is gonna rename the city tonight. You're all invited to the shit, as personal guests of the Rebuilder himself. He says you're friends of his." The two people in front of the caravan closed their mouths with a clack of jarred teeth. By the looks of it, they had had a speech ready, or were intending on being the first to speak. One was a woman, clearly athletic and with a light of intelligence in her eyes. The other had an air of holier-than-thou that for some reason didn't put him on the defensive. The woman spoke first.

"Thank you for your welcome. My name is Diane Hastings, and this is my husband, Sebastian. Sebastian!" The man had collapsed to his knees and was doubled over in pain. He was screaming at the top of his lungs, and the fabric of his shirt was bulging on his back. The eerie familiarity of the situation washed over Jason, and he could only grit his teeth against the wash of memories and shake his head.

"Your people should continue into the city, near the Keep. Anybody that you find will be able to point you there. You," he nodded to Diane, "and him will be brought to Herod's chambers. He is expecting you. As far as I know, he was expecting this... bullshit... as well." Damn Herod for the screams; they would never stop now.

## Enter the Harbinger

### Chapter 3

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*Force of will. Those that have it - and have used it - have a very concrete idea of what that phrase means. It will sit just outside their ability to put it into words, however, if you ask them to describe it. Some say that the most powerful forces in the world are the ones that can't be described. This may, in fact, be true.*

*As humanity gathered into cells and miniature cities, those with weaker wills clung to those with stronger. Followers were used to following leaders; laypeople were used to worshipping priests. It was an echo of the time before, and it gave people comfort.*

*It also, very literally, gave power to those leaders. Power to rival gods.*

-Timothy Marley, Book of Changes, First Decade

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Wake up. She had to wake up. Wake up wake UP wake UP WAKE UP! This was a dream, a nightmare. The spreading red-black stain on the back of Sebastian's shirt pulled at the back of her mind and threatened to tear it like an old rubber band. Jason was in the room. He was the man that had greeted them as they had entered Detroit. He seemed frozen, staring in horror at what was happening to Sebastian, who had screamed his vocal cords raw. Jason was hugging himself, mumbling that the only thing to do was to wait for Herod, because Herod had planned for this.

The door behind Diane slammed open, and she whirled around in her frustration and rage to slug whomever it was that had chosen the worst moment of their lives to walk up behind her. Her fist was caught in a grip like cold iron and crystalline gray-blue eyes bored into hers. He squeezed for a moment and smirked slightly as she let out a whimper. He let go of her fist and went to Sebastian's side. He'd been put on a bed made of stacked concrete slabs that had been laid on their sides. Anyone put on that table would be at waist height, just like an operating table. This man, this Herod, who wore the face of someone both she and Sebastian had once known, was no hero. He was no Rebulider. He would be their end, and she knew it for a fact. It hadn't just been the dreams. It hadn't been the perverse pleasure

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that had crossed his face when he had hurt her hand. It wasn't even the twisted pseudo-gothic style that he had had his Keep rebuilt in. He was looking at Sebastian as if he were a pitiable, pathetic creature. Sebastian's friend would never have showed so little compassion and respect for him. For an instant, Diane considered slapping Herod. Just for an instant.

"He is of no use to me." Herod turned to face Jason. "I was wrong. This one is too weak, and always has been. Even here, where it will kill him, and leave his wife widowed, he resists. I have too much to do. This," he made a gesture that included the entire room, "this is a disgrace." Herod scowled as Sebastian began to convulse on the slab of concrete. His pelvis rose into the air; he balanced on his heels and the crown of his head. His quiet screaming had stopped while people talked, and he had rolled himself onto his back. His muscles relaxed, just for an instant, then snapped tight again, harder than before. Herod's expression changed to a wistful sadness as this happened twice more. Diane found herself burying her face in Herod's trench coat, not daring to look. The leather was warm on her face, and somehow comforting, despite the horror that wore it. She cursed her weakness and cursed that she was thankful for Herod wrapping his arms around her as her husband's body destroyed itself from the inside.

From the direction of the table, there was a snap, a tearing of flesh, and a thud. Diane would not look. The hair on the back of her neck and on her arms stood on end. She would not see what Herod had caused by his refusal to help. Her forehead felt warm. She would find some sort of knife or gun or something that was left in this world, and she would end it for the both of them. She thought of a dream her husband had had once about a tiger and a dragon. She took a step back from Herod and met his frown.

"Don't be foolish, Diane. Killing me does you no good." She glared at him, meeting his stare stubbornly. Something in the room smelled like a thunderstorm. She jumped when she heard heavy breathing from behind Herod's bulk. A feral growl rumbled through the barely-audible range of animalistic bass and rose gradually to sound almost human. Herod and Diane slowly turned around, and she swore she could see a hint of a smile at the corners of his mouth. No, it had to be a mistake. Not even Herod could take pleasure from killing Sebastian. Could he?

"You... goddamned... twisted... creepy... controlling..."

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effective... asshole." Sebastian's hoarse voice made the words almost inaudible, but no less true. Sebastian was on his hands and knees, barely keeping himself from collapsing. Relief and horror alternately smashed through Diane as she looked at her husband. He was alive. Thank the Goddess, he was alive. Blood dripped from his back, ears, and eyes. It pooled around him, slowly thickening. All that blood had come from her husband. His life's blood spilled for Herod's pride. The horror came again as she forced herself to look at everything the blood covered. It slicked over blue scales, over ivory horns at the tips of monstrous wings. It covered him as if he'd been through some sort of demonic baptism. It covered him as if he'd just been born, a bastard child of dragon and human. Diane forced herself to breathe. No, this wasn't happening. This was a nightmare, a dream. She'd had this nightmare before; all she had to do was wake up. Herod would not speak the words she had heard. He wouldn't. Not again. He couldn't. He couldn't make it all real.

"Welcome to Dragon City, Nemesis. Tonight, you will be named the Harbinger."

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Jason was alone in the room when he woke up. The blood still pooled on the floor. At least Herod hadn't asked someone to come in and clean up the blood while he'd been out. He closed his eyes for a moment, and then snapped them open again. Fuck Herod and his plans. The last thing he needed was to see his mother's charred and peeling skin every time he closed his eyes. The last thing he needed was to go through this again. He hugged his knees to his chest, taking his time before getting up. He forced himself to breathe. Breathing was the first thing. Slow, regular breathing. Be calm, just like at the hospital. The patients would be excitable if he wasn't calm. Herod had known this was coming. He'd probably known it since he'd been batshit in the asylum. How far ahead did his plans go? Breathe in. What kind of things did his madness tell him about? Breathe out. He'd talked a lot about the distant past, and the future that had to come. Breathe in. Breathe out.

Even after the meteors, Jason hadn't credited all of it. Herod had talked in grand terms that were too big for life. If others were joining him, he must believe every word of it. Breathe in. Breathe out. No grand words or world-spanning plans would bring back his mom. Even helping Herod rebuild Detroit wouldn't bring her back. And he couldn't do the one thing that she asked him to do. There was

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no God, and he had seen proof. The clouds in Windsor were proof. The meteors were proof. The millions dead were proof. Herod was proof. Herod finding another like him was proof.

Herod was no demon, no monster, but he wasn't human any more. Jason was sure of that. You couldn't go through that and really stay human. No matter what, Herod wasn't human, but he needed humans. He needed them because he didn't want it all to happen again. He didn't want anyone else to end up like Jason's mom. Herod needed Jason to remember that he was doing all this shit for the humans. Herod needed Jason to remember that all of this was so that people wouldn't die like that again. Breathe in. Breathe out. So that people would live. Jason said it over and over again in his mind, convincing himself. So that others wouldn't have to hear the screams. Breathe in. Breathe out.

Jason got up and stretched muscles that were starting to cramp. He smoothed his hair and re-tied his growing ponytail. He opened the door and yelled at a couple of kids in the hall to snag some cleaners. They nodded and headed down the hall at a stroll. Even the kids had changed so much with all that had happened. Everyone had grown up pretty damn quickly. He straightened his patched clothes and headed toward the main hall of the Keep. He had a job to do.

He nodded to two men with hunting knives on their belts and shotguns strapped over their shoulders. They were soldiers in the Tribe of the Keep. It was premature calling them that, but the Tribes had developed on their own, naturally. This patrol's Tribe was made up of everyone that had decided to live in and around the Keep. They had decided to help with whatever was needed. They acted like it was some kind of capitol building for the city, and treated Herod as if he were some kind of king. These two had decided that physical and military strength were needed here. There were some in every tribe that had made the decision. Guarding property against intruders, a police force, that sort of thing. They were going to be named Warriors tonight, though they didn't know it. Jason increased his pace, worrying that he'd spent the better part of the ceremony passed out on the floor of that room.

He emerged into the cavernous hall and heaved a sigh of relief. The ceiling of the Keep was still being opened on giant cranks and pulleys that were turned by axles run by gasoline generators. Jason could swear that those cranks, pulleys, chains and shit should snap under the pressure. Instead, the whole thing opened slowly and

smoothly. The stars were just peeking through the opening. He hadn't missed the gathering. He had a job to do, and once Herod was finished with his theatrics, he would take over. The bickering - about things like territory lines, tribal and individual rights - would probably continue long into the night. Sometimes he envied Herod for his role in this. The envy always lasted until he remembered the screams. He shook his head. Breathe in. Breathe out. There were four levels of seats here in the hall, one level for each level of the Keep itself. This was the only room open to all levels, and it was more than big enough to hold a football or hockey game. They would need that space, especially if there were two of them.

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Sebastian smoothed the robe he was wearing. It was a bit big, but hung off of his shoulders well. There was a deep hood to it, so he could block out the sun or hold out the rain if he needed. He didn't know if it was waterproof, but he would find out. He'd asked Herod - it was still strange to call him that - how he'd come across clothes without patches around here, and he'd smiled as he said he'd made it himself. He'd shown off his black leather trench, and said he'd made that too. Sebastian doubted it; Herod hadn't ever been able to do anything beyond sewing on a button that had popped off of one of his shirts. He hefted the wooden staff that Herod had given him with the robe. It looked exactly the same as the staff he'd had in the past. It wasn't the same staff, it couldn't be. He'd burned it years ago. He'd asked Herod if he'd made that too, and Herod had only smirked. Under the robe, Sebastian wore a sweatshirt and loose pants. Those were both black, but he didn't expect anything else from Herod. He had always worn a lot of black. The robe, though, it was the perfect color blue. It was a deep royal blue. It matched the - his - scales perfectly.

The wings had disappeared. Or rather, they had folded themselves back into his body. Herod had promised him that the next time they emerged, it would not be nearly so painful. Herod came in and nodded approval at the robe and the staff. Sebastian shrugged. It felt right, and they had both known it would.

Sebastian took a moment to look over his old friend. At first glance, he looked almost completely unchanged. His rotund stature, his light brown hair grown long enough for a pony tail just past his shoulders, his blue-grey eyes, his obsession for the type of black clothing that you'd see in a sci-fi movie, were all the same as they had

always been. His skin was even still that pasty white that had always drawn the quips about being a vampire. There were changes, though. His face was harder. It was still the face of a friendly fat man, to use Herod's own phrase. Still, there was a pained certainty in his face that had replaced the eternal hope that had once been there. His eyes were different, too. There was a glint of madness there, and Sebastian was forced to admit that it was frightening. You couldn't predict people like that, no matter how well you knew them. You couldn't guarantee that they wouldn't do everything in their power to guard your back any more than you could that they would spend their last ounce of energy boning you like a fish.

"Follow me. Be ready for more surprises, Nemesis." Sebastian would have to get used to the new name, no matter how right it felt. Still, he didn't know just whose nemesis he was supposed to be. "This will be short, sweet, and probably upsetting to everyone involved." The mischievous grin was a flashback to the days in college. He had always loved to create a stir. Knowing him, things would be twisted around as to seem perfectly logical, and everyone would be scratching their heads in confusion. They walked out into the hall of the Keep through a short tunnel that opened into the main floor. Sebastian froze. He stared in wonder. The tunnel that he'd walked through had been made of all one piece of concrete. There hadn't been any seams. He looked behind him, and searched along the floor. No seam. Out into the hall's floor itself. It was flat concrete, all of one piece. He scanned the first level of the hall's seating. The second, third, and fourth levels. It looked like the hall had been poured into one giant concrete mold. Every piece was wholly connected to the whole. And it was new. He couldn't reason out how such a multi-level hall had been created so quickly. It would have taken years for this to be built, in the time before the Locusts. If it could have been built at all.

The massive ceiling was of two pieces and made of the same dark gray concrete. The pieces seemed to be hinged at the ends of the oval shape of the hall and were propped open by supports made of twisted steel girders that had been attached to a massive pulley and wheel system. That the supports held the weight of the ceiling slabs boggled his mind and denied the laws of physics. This whole place had the feel of being inside of Herod's head, and it brought another acid-shiver racing up and down his spine. His robe moved as if a breeze had blown through it, and it startled him out of his comparison.

The air was still and humid here; there had been no breeze.

"People of DETROIT!" Sebastian looked back, and realized that Herod had walked out to the center of the hall with his arms upraised. Through some trick of the shape of the chamber, or some hidden microphone and speaker system, Herod's voice rang throughout the stadium-like hall. Cheering rose from the first two levels. The second two were empty, even with the entire surviving population of the city in the hall. Sebastian looked more closely at the third and fourth levels, and realized that the benches were made of the same kind of girders that supported the ceiling slabs. Simple and disturbing themes filled this place, just like inside Herod's head. Sebastian took his time walking across to Herod, letting his presence add to the drama of Herod's speech. "You are people of Detroit NO LONGER!" Absolute silence. Shock. No one understood. "You are the people that have survived the LIFE of Detroit. You are the people that have survived the DEATH of Detroit. You are the people that have survived the seed of something new taking root in the decaying corpse of Detroit! Detroit is DEAD! Are you DEAD?" Angry shouts and curses filled the hall. Herod closed his eyes and a smile curled the ends of his mouth. It was as if he could feel their raw emotion and was bathing in it. As Sebastian reached Herod, he almost felt that way too. "NO! You are not DEAD! You have LIVED and SURVIVED! You are part of a new CITY, a new NATION, and a new PEOPLE! You have named me the Rebuilder, and I have begun the rebuilding." Every shout from Herod brought a wave of emotion and power from the crowd. "I have chosen the shape of the skeleton of the city, of the nation, of the people, and will rely upon YOU to put marrow in its bones, to give it blood and muscle and sinew and LIFE!!" A cheer arose again, and this time Sebastian would give his word that he could feel something radiating from these people. It felt like confidence, like a drive to live, like claiming something as yours, like a fevered protection of home. Something else, something stronger, something different was radiating from Herod. Something that felt familiar, almost familial.

Herod put his arms down. He was grinning broadly and unbuttoning his trench coat. Something was going to happen. The hair on Sebastian's arms and on the back of his neck were standing up, almost like they were trying to pull out of his skin. Herod tossed his head back and laughed the chilling laugh of a madman. His coat suddenly flew back, and the inside of his coat was suddenly the inside

of his wings, and they stood several feet taller than his head. He spread them wide, and let the moonlight flicker off of his scales. It was a breathtaking sight, in the literal sense. Herod's wings, when spread to full span, were several feet taller than he was. Each wing, at the joint, was capped with an ivory-colored spike that curved slightly forward. Sebastian frowned for a moment while a thought tickled his brain, and then remembered that Herod had made his robe as well. He smiled slightly as Herod addressed the people of the city again. So much of his friend was still the same.

"YOU are the PEOPLE of DRAGON CITY! YOU are the TRIBES that will SURVIVE and carry our history into the FUTURE! YOU are the WARRIORS and the SHAMANS and the ELDERS and the CRAFTSMEN that will carry us into the unwritten times to come! Without YOU, this CITY, this NATION, this LAND is nothing! LESS than nothing! YOU are the people that will make this land LEGENDARY!" With that, a tremor ran through Sebastian, like an acid shiver magnified a hundredfold, and his robe flew open. A jolt, like an electric shock, slammed through him. Starting between his eyes, it raced to his toes and fingers, and blew out his back. Sebastian staggered, and fell to one knee. It felt unnatural to have the added weight and height, but still somehow right. "Without all of YOU, I would never have become what I am! Witness your power! Your city, your land calls to its servants! It calls to us, and has brought Nemesis to us!" Sebastian looked up to Herod, suddenly wary of the fierce glint in his eyes. "He is the Harbinger of things to come!" Herod grinned from ear to ear and lowered his voice. Sebastian had the feeling that every single person here could hear him as though Herod were standing right in front of him.

"His arrival marks the path that your - our - city will take. His transformation shows that others are coming. His life locks this city as our home and us as your servants and protectors." Sebastian blinked. Herod was still changing. He couldn't see it with his eyes, but that same strangeness was radiating from him now more than ever. "Detroit is no more. Dragon City welcomes its life home." Herod's grin grew impossibly large and his body began to expand. Light the color of the night sky suffused him and filled the hall. Sebastian threw his arm up to protect his eyes. He snatched it down in shock when a bellowing roar made the concrete of the hall vibrate underneath him. He looked up to behold a sight from his own dreams and nightmares. The creature, even curled in upon itself, filled almost

half of the floor of the hall. Its scales were the exact same color as Herod's, the same color of the light that had been so strangely blinding. It spread its wings wide and began beating them. Its neck stretched upward, and it lifted from the ground. It was a dragon. It was impossible, but it was there in front of him. It bellowed again, and Sebastian heard meaning in the tones. "Join me, my Nemesis." That shock filled him once again, but was so much more. It crashed through every cell of his body. It pushed him out. Every boundary and every sense pushed outward, became bigger, more intense, more real. Sebastian screamed at the top of his lungs, but all he could hear was a roaring bellow. He opened his eyes, and every expression of those in the stands read fear and exhilaration. He craned his long neck up, crouched, and spread his blue-scaled wings wide enough to fill the hall. He leaped and beat his wings to catch his weight. This felt more right than anything had ever felt before.

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Diane grit her teeth and refused to cry. This was not a dream; it was a nightmare. She tried to mimic the determined expression on Jason's face, but was sure that her panic showed through. Her husband was gone. The man she knew had died on those cold concrete slabs. The Harbinger, this Nemesis, had eaten her husband whole and was wearing his face. It wasn't really the case, and she knew it. She knew that Sebastian was Nemesis, and vice versa. She knew that the man she loved and had married was there somewhere inside the great blue-scaled beast that had flown through the ceiling. She took a step toward the center of the hall in a vain attempt to follow her husband, but Jason had grabbed her arm and held it in a firm grip.

"You can't follow them. They're going someplace that we... that humans can't go." His face became more determined in response to her glare. "Don't. Just don't. I don't want you to think I'm more of an ass than I have to be." She scowled and glared at him, but Jason was as movable as the concrete around them. Unable to do anything to help the situation, she did the next best thing. She ranted.

"These people are mindless slaves to a creature that would throw them away, used and torn, in its plans that we can't even begin to understand. Herod, whatever he used to be, isn't human any more. We can't even begin to guess at his motivations, his causes, or if he even has the capacity to care about anyone or anything. And you have let him turn my husband into something just like him. You have

let him entrap the people here. Look at them! They would follow him to their deaths! If he told them to go drown themselves in the river, they'd do it, and with a smile on their faces! What in the hell is going on in this crazed place?"

"He saved their lives. Our lives." Diane waited, but Jason came forth with nothing more. Snarling, she pulled her arm free from his grip and punched him squarely in the jaw. She had thrown her entire weight and momentum into the punch, and Jason had staggered back. He didn't fall, though. He spat out blood, and for the first time in a long time, Diane realized that she might have just pushed someone over the edge. Jason spat blood onto the floor, and laughed softly. "When he was crazy, in the nuthouse, before the world went as batshit as he was, he told me about the dancing armies that would save the world from the plague of locusts. He predicted the martial artists that saved your bitch-ass and mine. He told me about the stars being blotted out and Babylon being destroyed." Diane gasped. "He saw this shit coming. Every single survivor in this city owes their life to him, and what he did to destroy the Locusts here. Now that you're eating your own damn words, I'm sure that you'll understand me not being all sympathetic to your issues with what your husband is. You can either trust that he's got some reason to do what he's doing, or you can take your ass out of our city. I'm sick of your whining. Now get out of my way, I have work to do to keep this city alive." Diane's mouth gaped open at the verbal lashing and the rough push that sent her sprawling to the concrete floor. She was suddenly very cold, and very, very alone.

## Borderlands

### Chapter 4

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*Martial artists, later called the Dancing Armies, were not the only people among us that could fight back. We were the majority, simply because nearly every martial art trains the artist to focus their own will directly into their movements and the results that come forth from those movements. Our inner fire, our life energy, our strength of will was the true weapon that we wielded when we fought the Locusts.*

*It is no coincidence to me that those leaders who arose embodied that same strength of will. We now know that it was this extreme strength of will that gave them the power to shape the land around them; reality and will were no longer separated as they once were.*

*Fueled by the added willpower of their followers, these leaders crafted entire paradigms that held sway only within the geographical borders of their kingdoms. This is why crossing from one land to the next is so difficult today. When you leave one for the other, the very laws of reality rearrange themselves - and you.*

*-Timothy Marley, Book of Changes, First Decade*

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Commander of the Guard Martin Schuler was a good fit for his job. He had had military experience before the Locusts had come. He knew how to manage people. More than that, he knew how to inspire them. He knew what his people cared about, and was good at using that to motivate them toward the goals of the Homeland's Militia. Commander Schuler was good at his job, and he hadn't felt this right about his job since the Vietnam War had ended and he had come home.

Only, it hadn't been home when he had returned. He had changed in the jungle, he was aware of it and would admit it. But his home had changed, too. Not just the nation hating its own soldiers. Not just the anti-war protests. Not just the open acceptance of drug use and promiscuous sex that had been so simple when it had been behind closed doors. His nation had changed, but so had his home. His wife had taken a lover in the years that he was gone. She and his son had grown cold while he was gone. They had learned to live

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without him, and realized that he wasn't such an important part of their lives after all. It was no surprise when she had divorced him five years after his return from the jungle. It was no surprise when she wouldn't speak to him at their son's funeral. Even the funeral wasn't really a surprise. His son had never been built to survive the world he had been born into.

The decades between then and now were an alcohol- and dementia-filled blur. In and out of "veteran hospitals", drunk tanks, and the AA between drinking binges, episodes of what they called "shell-shock" or some such psychiatrist nonsense, and homelessness, Commander Schuler hadn't been an exemplary citizen since his return from the jungle. It was a wonder he'd survived when the Locusts had come.

He had survived, though. Not only that, he had protected an entire subdivision from the swarm that had come from the Desolate Zone to the south. Detroit had been desolate since the eighties, so it was no surprise that the Homeland Council had given it that name. His tactics and soldiers had expanded their defense and holding to include several square miles of subdivisions, shopping centers, strip malls, movie theaters, and schools. He and his soldiers, now called the Homeland Guard, had soon found out that certain people couldn't hurt the Locusts. Guns and knives wouldn't work when they used them. Martin Schuler had discovered the flaw that these citizens possessed that made them unable to defend themselves.

It was simply that they were afraid. Everything that had happened to and around the Commander had slowly burned the fear out of the man. His soldiers were the same way. Whether it was the jungle, the desert, the Desolate Zone to the south, or some other grueling experience, none of them were afraid to die. And each one of them was a good soldier because of it.

This knowledge had made him sad when the caravan of survivors had decided to scorn his safety and continue on into the Desolate Zone. He knew why they could not stay in the Homeland. They were afraid. They were afraid that the Homeland and the values it held, coming from before the Locusts, were too strong for them. They were afraid that they could not lift the burden of responsibility. Because of their fear, they had chosen to keep running. They ran to a wasteland that was most likely completely uninhabited, unprotected, and empty. They ran to their deaths.

Whether or not he wanted to feel it, Commander Schuler felt

remorse at the thirty or forty people that had chosen death. Sometimes, when he couldn't sleep, he thought about things he could have done to keep those people inside the Homeland. He thought about things he could have said to convince them that there was nowhere safer than here, behind their barricades and underneath the blanket of the familiar society that they had thought lost. Sometimes Martin Schuler blamed the detachment of martial artists that had surrounded the caravan. He thought that they had infected the survivors with that Eastern thought that was brainwashed into people when they learned martial arts. He hadn't really trusted anyone with slanted eyes since the jungle. It wasn't racism, really. It was just that most of them would cheer if democracy fell. And now, they would cheer if the Homeland fell. He wasn't a bigot; he just knew that everyone else wanted what they had.

He would convince himself on those sleepless nights that those people had chosen their deaths, and that he'd had no part of it. He would convince himself that at least he had tried. He would convince himself that they were just as cold as his wife and his son. He could not protect everyone, and he most certainly could not protect those that shunned his protection. He would convince himself that he would protect what he could protect, and do no more than properly mourn those that chose death. And sometimes, it even let him sleep. On some nights, though, not even simple logic would protect him from his guilt over those people in the caravan. Let alone the guilt over his wife and child. So, when he couldn't sleep, he'd do the only thing that felt right. He'd put on his camo and inspect the outposts. Tonight was one of those nights. Tonight, over a week after the caravan had left, he couldn't sleep. Tonight, he had decided to enjoy the cooler night air and inspect the South Outpost. Tonight, he wished he had never given up the bottle. Tonight, he raised the alarm to the other Outposts and to the Barracks. Tonight, he saw the stars blocked out by shapes in the sky. Tonight, he knew that the Locusts were coming back.

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*Stripping away the you that can't be cubby-holed or pegged into the proverbial round hole. Realizing, with the appropriate dread and revulsion, that it might be time to stop being the square peg. Resigning to pull out of yourself all of the quirks and oddities that define you as an individual, that make you special. Conforming. Relenting. Giving yourself over to a death of strangeness that feels*

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*too much like jumping off of a bridge. Becoming a worker bee and giving up your most precious dream of being something more than a drone. Incredible pain and surrender. Near-oblivion.*

Something metal slammed into Nemesis at high speed. In the split-second that his forward, lazy motion was pushed back and up, a sense of familiar grim satisfaction rolled over his mind. In the next instant, the metal, stabbing pain became a literal fireball that sent shards of shrapnel under his scales and burning into his flesh.

If the Commander of the Homeland Guard had been shooting anything but blind, he would have been amazed at the two great bulks he that he had shot out of the sky. He would have been awed at the way moonlight glittered from their scales. He would have stared unbelieving as the shapes twisted and shrank as they dropped out of the sky. But even if he had been watching, he wouldn't have been able to appreciate the stripping away of everything special that they felt. He wouldn't have been able to tell that Herod felt himself falling toward a familiar and unsettling oblivion. He wouldn't have been able to know that Nemesis was near drowning in a panic about the moments after they would hit. If the Commander of the Homeland Guard could have known these things, he wouldn't have cared.

Nemesis and Herod slammed into the concrete of a neatly paved road of an opulent shopping district. Their momentum pushed them through pavement, grating, and compacted sand in twin straight grooves. Debris shattered huge storefront windows, cracked like-new pseudo-clay pots that were dedicated to the most tame and unobtrusive trees and flowers, and blew apart park benches that were donated by the wealthy so that as long as you were well-dressed, you could sit and appreciate the near-beauty.

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*Sebastian struggled to open his eyes, but he was unsure if his sight was still left to him. Needle-like, tingling pain spread through his being. It was like panic, dread, and a limb waking up from falling asleep rolled up into a single sensation. He struggled to visualize himself, to find a sense of identity. He swam in the painful dark, trying to remember who he was. He swam, trying to remember what he was. Gradually, a light began to suffuse the dark. The pain stayed, but he could see a form struggling ahead of him. He swam toward it, feeling a desperate need to render aid. As he approached, Sebastian saw that the form was enormous and scaled. There was no recognition, only the need to help. The pain stabbed him deeply as he*

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*entered the soft blue light. Who are you, great Beast, that you would need the help of one so small?*

*A deep bass thrummed through Sebastian, almost sending him out of the blue light. I am Nemesis. I am in great pain. You must help me.*

*Sebastian reeled, only half-understanding the Beast's words to him. Panic mated with the desire to help and bore desperation. Are you dying? I must not let you die! I must see you to safe haven!*

*The bass trumpeted, and the scaled form twisted as if trapped. I cannot rest in this place! It causes unbearable pain! You must flee!*

*Something about this was terribly wrong. Sebastian didn't know much about himself at that very moment, but he knew that fleeing was not among the things that he did. I must know more! I cannot help until I understand! Images immediately began to surround Sebastian, flooding and invading his mind. A thin man with a pointed face appeared in a ragged Columbo-style trench coat. He had a squirrel on his shoulder and was bathed in green light. There was a woman with alabaster skin and red hair, both of which seemed to glow. There was a man in military dress creeping through a jungle. He seemed somehow familiar. There was a man with dark hair and lambchop-style sideburns. Wolves surrounded him. There was an enormous white tower. There was a roller coaster. There was a shining metal dragon, etched with tattoo-like designs.*

*LEAVE THIS PLACE! Sebastian rocketed backward through the void, losing track of the blue light. Suddenly, he was moving up instead of backwards. Up toward... something.*

*Sebastian blinked his eyes and wondered what smelled like cinder blocks.*

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Twin ruts of tunneled concrete stretched for half a mile from the border of the Homeland toward the center. The street was practically destroyed. The storefronts on both sides would need to be completely rebuilt. The street would have to be completely re-paved, not just re-surfaced. The dust hung in the air like an unnatural fog, but it didn't slow Commander Schuler down. He was panting and grinning from ear to ear with exhilaration and adrenaline. The shoulder-mounted rocket launcher had knocked the meteors off of their trajectory. The blast had caused them to land a half-mile into the Homelands, where they could easily be dealt with. His troops had been ordered forward and to have weapons ready.

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His unit's efficiency was unparalleled, and they surrounded the two small craters in a rank two soldiers thick. All weapons were fully automatic, religiously cleaned and trained with, and pointing at the smoking holes where the meteors came to rest. His soldiers had his implicit trust, and he knew that as soon as they could see a Locust, guns would be trained and shots would be fired. His unit was perfect.

The smoke began to clear, and Commander Schuler ordered his troops to hold their ground. It wasn't necessary, but reinforcement couldn't hurt. In each crater was a body, one of which the Commander recognized. They were untouched by the dirt and rubble caused by the crash into the earth and clothed in business attire. The one he recognized was wearing black slacks and a deep blue polo-style shirt. The one he didn't recognize was rotund and wearing black slacks, a black button-down shirt, and dark purple suspenders. Dark purple sunglasses that reminded the Commander vaguely of John Lennon covered his eyes. They were both breathing. Lacerations covered their faces and hands, but they were breathing.

"Troops, stand ready!" Something about the man in blue, the man who had been so sick when the caravan had come through the Homeland before, and his companion angered Commander Schuler. Something about them tweaked the Commander in such a way that he was sure they knew every one of his little secrets, from the most inconsequential to the most embarrassing. He heard nothing but shallow breathing and settling dust from the craters. "Put them on stretchers. I want a look at them before we send them to the medic tent." Four soldiers descended into the craters and hefted the two onto military stretchers. They were quickly and efficiently stabilized and lifted up the crater's slope to Commander Schuler.

He looked both of them up and down. Even a civilian could read an assessment like that. Even a civilian would know that Commander Schuler had just read them both like books. Why, then, was he so unsettled? Why did it seem that they knew more than he did? He spit into the dust, and barked the order, "Take them to the medics. When they recover, put them in cells."

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Cinder blocks and mortar have a particular smell. Old cellars have this smell. Dormitories and barracks have this smell. Jail cells have this smell. Well, extremely clean jail cells smell like cinder blocks and mortar. And these particular jail cells were immaculate. Okay, all right, fine. Sebastian had never been in a jail cell before.

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He couldn't tell you if jail cells were supposed to smell like Twinkies. This jail cell, however, smelled like cinder blocks and mortar, and it was extremely clean.

"Do you feel that?" Herod hadn't said a thing for over an hour. That's how Sebastian knew that the place was so clean. He'd been studying the ceiling, walls, and floor for at least an hour. Feel that? He felt annoyance. He felt impatience. He felt like something that had started out so magically had been reduced to the mundane in the blink of an eye. Despite all of this, something was definitely odd about their surroundings.

"Yes. It's very nearly a pressure. It feels like a layer between us and what we became in Detroit. It has edges and boundaries, and I believe we can affect it." It was something thin. Almost like...

"Subvert it?"

"Almost. It's thin. It seems almost fragile. If you were to change it or move it too suddenly or fiercely, it would shatter. It would come apart at the seams."

"Sounds right to me."

"Which does?"

"Pulling apart the seams. Just need to pull apart the right ones, gently, so that everything else doesn't unravel." With that, Herod put his hands over the cell door's locking mechanism and *squished* the metal between his fingers. It oozed out over his hands as though it were dough. Herod felt that he had beat the system from within; it was practically radiating from him. Of course, you could also tell by the sideways grin that slid across his face. He slid the door open with a flourish and proclaimed, "Open says me!"

"Very funny. Now what? From the grin on your face, I doubt we will be leaving here and continuing on our merry way. Furthermore, you hated this place."

"Yeah, I did. With a passion." Herod turned down the hallway, heading toward the front gate. "Come on, Nemesis. We've got more seams to unravel."

Sebastian had to hurry to catch up. It was no longer satisfaction that rolled off of Herod in waves. It was murderous glee.

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Commander of the Homeland Guard Martin Schuler was afraid of losing his grip on the world around him for the first time since the Locusts had descended on suburbia. He was staring at an old black and white television set. It was stacked on top of and under

and beside television sets of all make, models, designs, and states of repair. Images of cells and guard posts filled the televisions nearest the Commander. The mosaic of images changed as you looked away from that section. Fronts of homes. Fronts of stores. Fronts of gas stations. The front of the hospital. Overhead views of streets, hallways, rooms, shopping malls, parking lots, and movie theaters. There was a shot from the front and from the interior of each Homeland Guard vehicle, from motorcycle to helicopter. Not that they had the fuel to fly the helicopter, but Commander Schuler had instructed cameras to be installed just in case. Couldn't be too careful. The sign outside and above the entrance used to read "Dave's TV Service and Repair". It had been replaced with "Homeland Guard Security Center". Dave had been in Vietnam with Commander Schuler. Dave had been able to keep it together more easily than Commander Schuler had. Dave had always had a glass of good Scotch for Commander Schuler when he'd come in the store, no matter what the Commander had smelled like.

A Locust had neatly torn Dave into quarters. Four of its limbs had grabbed Dave's wrists and ankles, and it had just pulled Dave apart. It had taken a week for trainees to wash Dave off of the window in the front of his store. Dave's shotgun shells had bounced off of the Locust, but somehow, Commander Schuler's standard issue handgun had pierced whatever that thing had called his heart. It had died then, its organs dissolving before the Commander's eyes. Then, he had felt his grip on reality assert itself. Now, it was creeping away.

The black and white TV, with its cracked off-white plastic shell, showed a cell with its door slid open. The locking mechanism, in its sad state, had prevented the door from opening all the way. If he didn't know better, Commander Schuler would have said that the lock mechanism had been heated until it was soft, and then squished. Of course, it would not have had time to cool and become solid again if that had been the case. From one wonder to the next, he followed the screens. Melted cell lock. One guard post, with its guard surrounded by medical officers. He had apparently gone completely insane. His gun was missing and he was babbling about scales and dragons and the color of pain. Four more guard posts, each with its guard precisely shot in the heart. The front doors to the detention center, banging open and shut in the wind, with their bullet-proof non-shatter glass laying miserably shattered equally on the tile of the entrance and on the sidewalk outside.

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Commander Schuler took out a camo handkerchief and mopped his sweating pate. He followed the screens through the street, noting shattered glass fronts and burning benches and trees. He followed the screens through an overturned Homeland Guard ATV. Its driver had been neatly shot in the heart, as far as the Commander could tell from the internal camera. He rolled his chair across the floor, following from TV set to TV set. Just as he thought.

"Post a guard outside this door! I want at least five soldiers out there! Shoot to kill, aim for vital organs! NOW!" Orders flew down the chain of command and soldiers hustled out the front and back entrances to the old TV repair shop. Poor old Dave. Commander Schuler wrung out the handkerchief and mopped his brow again. They were coming here. That young man from the caravan and the fat kid that had landed in the street beside him were coming here to kill him. They had come from the south, just as the Locusts had. Maybe, just maybe, his first assessment of what they had been was accurate. Was it possible that men, human men, would turn their coats and fight for the Locusts? Why not? There had been traitors and deserters in every war fought since the beginning of time. Commander Schuler picked up a fully automatic from the table. It might have been an UZI; he wasn't really paying any attention. By instinct, he disabled the safety and chambered the first round. No friend of those slant-eyed insects was going to destroy his Homeland. A shout from out back. Gunfire. A repeat performance from the front.

At least he wasn't fighting idiots. Too many marksmen had been idiots. These were smart, they had both exits covered. He closed and locked both doors to the camera room and ordered the soldiers inside to cover the doors. Muffled shots were still coming from the rear, but they had stopped in front. Seconds. Still gunfire from the rear, and none from the front. Panic surged through Commander Schuler as the door to the front splintered. Control began to ebb from him as the splinters drove through the guards' eyes, necks, and wrists as they were porcupined by the shattering door. The other door's guards turned around, dropped their jaws and then their weapons. Their surrender only earned them a shot to the heart, each.

The fat kid in the suspenders strolled through the door, his eyes blue-gray crystal. He held a standard-issue handgun like it was the most natural thing in the world to him. He scanned the room slowly and seemed to note every detail. Commander Schuler knew he

was this young man's prey, and that this young man was a predator to his core. He had been neatly and easily hunted, and was about to be claimed.

"My name is Herod. You would do well to remember it." Herod held out the gun and aimed it at Commander Schuler's heart. Then he squeezed. Instead of firing, the metal of the gun *squished* through Herod's fingers as if it were dough. He tossed the hunk of useless metal to the ground with a clunk as if he were disgusted with it. Four strides took him across the room to the Commander. "I will let you live. You are lucky. It seems as though I don't mind killing. I used to have the utmost respect for life, and couldn't imagine hurting a single person. Even emotionally, I hated the thought of hurting someone. Now..." With a shrug, he motioned to the soldiers lying in their own blood. "I have removed some of your toys. You should know this: Detroit is no longer. There is a city in the place you call a Desolate Zone, and it is a City of Dragons. Go there, or send your people there, and you will be killed. And if I were you, I would tighten security. All it took for me to come THIS close to killing you was unraveling a few seams."

Herod snarled in Commander Schuler's face then. The glint of insanity was wild in Herod's eyes, and Commander Schuler had never been this afraid in his entire life. He could barely feel the Homeland, his Homeland. The warm breath assaulting his face smelled inhuman and rank. Herod whirled from the Commander and smashed a boot through the door to the rear of the old TV repair shop. It splintered graciously and Herod ran out the back. Commander Schuler vaguely wondered why he could still hear gunfire from the rear of the store as he finally succumbed to his fear. He sank to his knees and cried for his Homeland to return to him, return to the way it used to be.

## The Squirrel King

### Chapter 5

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*Many of the old religions told us that we were merely dreams of the gods. When they woke up, we would disappear, and all of our strife, our suffering, and our accomplishments would be forgotten.*

*Now, as we become the gods, our dreams take shape around us. Our dreams guide and form the land around us, and our strength defines the borders of these new city-states. I can tell you, having traveled through many of these places, that the strongest power always rests with she who dreams the land.*

*As the Greeks and Romans knew well, gods are strongest in their own realms.*

-Timothy Marley, Book of Dragon City, The Rebuilder's Words

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The King idly watched a mosquito land on his arm and bite him. It had been the perfect summer for the insects. The weather had been hot and humid. The wild boom of natural growth in the area had created an extremely high number of wetlands in once-flat grasses and yards. Since the drainage system had stopped working, most of these were filled with standing water. The insect stabbed his arm with its snout-mouth-thing, and began to drain his blood into itself from one of his veins. The King watched this with great interest. This was one of the first things that he had changed. This had been his first breakthrough with changing the formulae. It had been an idle and small thing, but with so many ramifications. Plus, it was really funny. Soon, now. Three, two, one... a tiny pop accompanied the explosion of the mosquito that was trying to steal his life. The King hunched as he laughed silently. His own blood smeared his arm in a circle half an inch across. They would eventually learn. Or they would die out. Lots and lots of popping. The numbers stacked up in his favor. They were doing that more and more often lately.

The King was a thin man, and had become more so since the Forest had exploded out of the ground. He had lost what little fat that had padded him due to his previous occupation. The physical activity that had come with survival had replaced the fat with cords of muscle. It had left his pointed features accented with an impression of lithe

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strength in his panic-still stance. They used to say he looked like Tom Petty. Now, there was no resemblance. His clothes were torn rags. He was King here. The Forest protected him because he was King. His subjects protected him because he was King. Besides, all the stores were closed. A smile spread from ear to ear as a nagging problem morphed fluidly into a solution in his head. His teeth, like his face, gave an impression of being pointed, and his smile was enough of a Mad Hatter grin to make a dragon shiver.

The King flashed from tree trunk to tree trunk in quick, frenzied movements followed by absolute stillness. There had been variables in the formulae of late. Unaccounted for fluctuations in the resulting mappings. That, and his friends had been acting dumb. They had told him that they had been listening to other voices than his. The King's grin immediately inverted at the memory of the example that his friend had served. They had to understand that there was no other voice in his Kingdom but his. No others. The Forest protected him now, and HE was the King. His friends hadn't brought up the topic again, and the King had slowly relaxed. The Forest would protect them all.

The solution. The King had figured it out. The variables and fluctuations that had cropped up, seemingly out of nowhere, had a source. They had come from the south and east. It was so simple; the King bashed his head against a tree in frustration. This startled a murder of crows that had been feasting on a human corpse. A curious ex-city resident was more than enough to fill their bellies. They screamed at him angrily, so the King flipped them the bird.

The skittering little errors and variables and unexpected graphical undulations had been getting stronger and stronger. The King giggled as he wiped blood from his eyes. Of course, it would have to link to geographical proximity. The oddities in the formulae were surrounding physical essences, beings if you will, that understood the Math. They understood it as he did. Either that, or they had some other kind of understanding that allowed all kinds of messy errors to leak in and out of the formulae governing their existence. The King scrubbed his hands through his hair at the thought. He reached into one of the many pockets in his tan trench coat, all of which were fully intact and contained something or another, and pulled out a handful of coins. A quick count and... forty-two pennies. Another giggle came from the King, only this one escaped and fled as fast as it could. It didn't want the King to know

that it had a hint of worry and fear in it. The King would never tolerate such things in his Kingdom.

There were very few beings in this world that would draw forty-two pieces of copper in a random fistful of change from a full pocket of coins. Exactly forty-two pennies. A memory whispered at the back of the King's mind, so the King screamed at it to shut it up. Whatever it was that these variables turned out to be, whatever type of being they were, they had to go away. No one could threaten his Kingdom. He had to scream at the voice again. This time the trees shrank back in fear. Or they seemed to. It would be just his luck for the Forest to remember that bitch right when he needed it the most. Though, the trees might have something to do with this. The explosion of forest. The King edged closer to the borders of his Kingdom and squinted his eyes in the bright light. There was a toppled street sign on the ground. He edged out a little more. One green panel read Michigan Ave. One more step, and he'd be out of the Forest. The other read Homer St. There, that was it; he'd crossed outside of the Forest. There used to be an overpass here. For an expressway.

What the meteor hadn't destroyed, the growth was pulling down. Overpasses were crumbled and lying in cross-streets. Tunneled highway had filled with water months ago, creating strange rectangular ponds. Even outside of the Forest, the green was taking back what had been taken from it. A hot and angry wind blew at the King's fraying trench coat. It felt like it was trying to carry him up into the air and steal him away from his Kingdom. A flash of movement took him back to the safety of the trees. He stood stock still for five more minutes just to make sure that the wind couldn't see him and wouldn't try it again. Well, of course it wouldn't. No one would dare harm him in his own Kingdom. His Kingdom protected him. It had since the meteor landed. Well, shortly thereafter anyway. The memory whispered again, and this time the King heard the whisper. The Squirrel King was to receive guests in his throne room today, and he must be prepared.

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It was eerie to fly in this form. It was natural, in a dream-like way, the same way it had been for him in Detroit's... in Dragon City's Keep. The same way that the robe had blown back, and suddenly, he had had wings that stood two and a half feet taller than he did. Natural, just as when dreaming, it was natural that a completely

foreign house with rooms and hallways that he'd never been in was his house. Perfectly natural. And yet, when he awoke, it was eerie that something so foreign had been so familiar. That was the feeling of flying through the air, weighing a thousand or more pounds, covered in glittering royal blue scales. Oh, and lest he neglect to mention it, the sensation was also in a large part exhilarating.

Nemesis trailed Herod by yards while he got used to directing his flight. An instinct such as this seemed perfectly natural, but it was extremely easy to think too much, and lose the rhythm of what it was that he was doing. So, instead, he remembered. His memories disturbed him, and he wanted to share them to get some feedback. Of course, a large part of what disturbed him flew ahead of him by a few yards. Nemesis wasn't sure exactly what kind of feedback he'd get from Herod, but reason dictated that it would be better than nothing. The trouble was the vehicle of communication. He remembered understanding Herod's bellow back in the Keep, but he wasn't sure that he could reproduce it with any accuracy, let alone the variation necessary for communication. They were also flying above areas that might be populated with any assortment of oddities. If men could turn into dragons, anything was possible, wasn't it? So, the bellow could negate any stealth that they might or might not be attempting to produce.

Being alone with these thoughts was terrible. When he'd seen the bodies, the feeling that had crashed through him had made 'horrified' a faded pink next to the blood pooling on the floor. Sebastian had had no frame of reference with which to compare the experience, let alone any tools to rationalize the experience with. He had stood there, just gaping. He had taken in a lungful of air to begin screaming at Herod, but had been cut off with a simple, "Don't." Logic and self-confidence had failed him at that moment. He had been so careful while distracting the soldiers stationed at the rear of the store. Sebastian had been so careful not to kill anyone. He hadn't been able to disable them without hurting them, but none would be permanently injured. He had not been nearly as... direct... as Herod had. Even now, speeding through the air, beating his massive blue wings, his enormous stomach was roiling at the memory of the lifeless corpses. Sebastian had simply said, "Fuck you," turned on his heel, and lit his first cigarette in nearly a decade. He had quit for Diane. Nemesis snorted angrily at how he'd treated her once he'd changed. He did not look forward to his reception when he returned

to Dragon City. He wondered if he would live to return at all. Nemesis blinked his massive eyes and realized that Herod had hung back a bit, and was now flying side-by-side with him. Herod's eyes were grey-blue, even in this monstrous form. His scales shimmered, shifting through shades of purple and indigo like a stormy night sky.

An image washed from Herod into Nemesis, and Nemesis remembered the questioning look that he had directed at Herod back in the Keep. Nemesis nodded his head on his snakelike neck. He thought of the image of the corpses. He concentrated on the disgust that the image brought. He pushed them, somehow, at Herod. Herod seemed to think for a moment, and then Nemesis saw the same image, but the corpses had been replaced with broken life-size toy soldiers made of green plastic. The image carried absolutely no emotion. Nemesis' gut reaction flowed across to Herod almost immediately. It was responded to with a feeling of confirmation and an image of Herod, in human form, wearing a straight jacket and throwing himself around a padded cell. Nemesis wanted nothing more than to close his mind to Herod's, and all foreign feeling and thought suddenly ceased. He separated himself with a few yards of empty air. He could not accept that his companion was that far gone. Perhaps his earlier worries were founded, and his name of Nemesis came in relation to Herod. Perhaps. None of these disturbing thoughts helped anything. Neither contemplation of the horrors in the Borderlands nor denial of Herod's mental condition was going to keep him alive to return to Dragon City and his wife. Wariness would keep him alive. Watching details would keep him alive. Watching Herod would keep him alive. In the end, being himself would keep him alive.

Nemesis could now tell where they were headed. Herod had begun a descent as they approached, dipping down beneath the clouds and heading toward treetops. They had been following the remains of I-96 to the north and west for quite some time. When the highway angled more to the west, they kept on their northwest tack. Huge houses began to dot the landscape below, getting closer and closer together as they flew. Few seemed damaged, but all seemed abandoned. Even at this height, he could see that lawns were overgrown and vehicles were missing. This had once been an affluent area located just outside the city where he and Herod had gone to college. They could only be heading back to the university. Opulent houses gave way to abandoned shopping centers and weed-filled parking lots that gave way to shattered apartment complexes and the

rubble of strip-malls. Where the roads and lawns were low, standing water and weeds were everywhere. Where they were high, the grass was parched, dead, and receding. Most lawns were filled with tall weeds that would make approaching the houses a wading affair, at best. Memories of nights in 24-hour diners, showing Herod what power smoking was, and getting slapped in the back of the head by his then-girlfriend washed over Nemesis. He hadn't missed this place, and this visit wasn't exactly welcome.

Suddenly, vertigo overcame Nemesis. Up swirled past down, and down shot out past left field. His vision swam in a familiar nausea and all the rhythm of flight abandoned him. Panic seized Nemesis for barely a moment. Surely, he would plummet and die, broken and bleeding, amongst the remains of a city that he did not quite hate.

Nemesis was better than that sort of ending, and he knew it. A night-sky blur in front of him tumbled, veered, and swung upward. Nemesis forced his wings outward and all four of his legs close to his body. Right now, he would need every bit of aerodynamics that he could squeeze out of this form. He snapped his great wings to his sides for a split-second and twisted his serpentine body for all he was worth. His senses were coherent enough for him to know that he was moving much more quickly than before, and probably with the aid of gravity. He shoved his wings outward and sought desperately for the rhythm that had been so eerily natural only moments ago. *I must see you to safe haven.* He caught it and let his logic disengage. Both Herod and Nemesis were now brushing the treetops with the tips of their wings as they flew. Nemesis was still quaking with crossing the border into the Forest. He had felt this four times too many, as far as he was concerned.

As he flew, approaching campus, the landscape had changed just as with the feeling. Ahead of him, the trees that marked the center of campus towered to impossible heights. This particular university had always been known for its proliferation of trees and greenery, but this was edging on absurd. The tallest trees outmatched the tallest buildings, which meant that the trees were over twelve stories tall. Quite a bit over twelve stories. The canopy of the forest flowed downward in all directions from there. It reminded Nemesis of a frozen spring made of green; bubbling up in the center and flowing down into a shallow pool. Shallow, of course, only in comparison with the amazing oaks and pines that towered in the

center. The edge of the forest was a ragged circle that passed beyond the old, rectangular, borders of the campus by over a mile and a half. Nemesis followed Herod's lead and angled to the west in a lazy spiral that would land them at the north end of the forest, just outside its border.

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The King watched them land and internally screamed at the fear-being that was trying to take his body from him. It would not do for a king, especially THIS King of THIS Kingdom, to be afraid. It would not do for the King to scramble up a tree until the scary beasts went away. It would just invite these creatures to come in and take over his forest. Then the Forest would protect them, and not him. That could not happen. So, the Squirrel King stood stock-still a few feet inside of the Forest's boundary. He squinted out at the creatures as they began to shrink and shift. These two dragons were purple and blue. They were not Forest Dragons, like the she-bitch lizard. She had been green. She had been such a beautiful green. She had been perfect tribute for the Squirrel King from his subjects. Maybe these two had come for her. Well, they'd have to pay a hefty price for her. Many of his friends had been slaughtered in her capture, and his friends were dear to him. The King squinted a bit more and then blinked. He knew these two in this form, just as he had known the she-bitch lizard when she was pretending to be a human. These could pretend to be human, too. There was a portly man in a black trench coat and a man with cropped hair in a blue robe. Yes, he had known these ones before the Forest had come. But they had changed, as everything had. Now they had to pretend to be human.

"Squirrel King!" The one in the coat was shouting his greeting to him. Maybe he thought the King was far away. It was quite a loud shout. "I seek entry into your Kingdom. I seek to barter with you for something you possess. I seek to clasp hands with an old friend. Heed my greeting, Squirrel King!" Melodramatic and pompous fat man. He was always self-important. Maybe he had a Kingdom of his own now, and wanted to annex the Forest. It would be just like him to try to make everything the same. It's too bad the Chaos loved him so much, otherwise he might be able to do it. But all of that was beside the point. The big man, who called himself Herod now, had greeted him properly. His dreams had told him what greeting to expect, and his subjects were to kill the fat bastard if he had even said one word incorrectly. It's a good thing, too, because the

King really did want to watch him. He wanted to see what happened to the Formulae. He wanted to see if they danced for him like they danced for the she-bitch lizard.

He stepped to the edge of the Forest, coming into full view. "I welcome you, Herod of Dragon City, into my Kingdom."

The one in the blue robe, whom the King also remembered, gasped and gaped at him. Two words escaped his mouth (the dreams hadn't predicted this, but manipulations of the Formulae had), "Hey, that's..." before Herod cut him off with a gesture.

"I welcome you as an ambassador from another Kingdom, but not as a friend. You are much changed, too much to be called friend. You and your... Nemesis, here... may enter my Kingdom to negotiate for what I have that you want. You remember the words, don't you, Herod? You said them to people so many times in the time before the Forest. What are the words, Herod-lizard-man?"

"The words, Squirrel King, are this: Do not stray from the path, lest you become lost forever. Do not stray from the path, lest those that live here consider you unwelcome. Do not stray from the path, lest you do not return. I shall heed the words, King of the Forest." Curse those lizard-dragon-men-pretenders! Curse them and their cleverness and intelligence and melodrama and pretension and... no matter! The fear-being was gone and was replaced by an anger-being. The anger-being would be no more successful in taking his body than the fear-being had. He was in control. The forest protected him, as it always did. The words were right, and so they would live for a few more minutes. The King smiled a toothy grin at them (and it did, in fact, seem to unsettle them) and bade them enter his Kingdom. They whispered very quietly between each other while they walked. They probably didn't know that his hearing had improved since the Forest had come along. It had had to, to help him survive.

"Do you know who that is, Herod?"

"Yes, Nemesis. I'm quite aware."

"Why is he covered in blood? Why is it someone we know? What happened to this forest? Why are we here? I deserve answers, Herod."

"I was under the impression that you didn't want to talk to me, Nemesis."

"You're not good at pretension, Herod. It just sounds childish from you. Answer me."

"He's covered in blood because he's done something, either to himself or someone else, that's caused blood to get on him. What happened to this forest is very much like what happened to the Keep. We are here to barter for two things, one of which is family and the other is necessary for Dragon City to survive. Those are the only answers I'm giving you, childish or not."

The King enjoyed the frantic tone of their whispering. He enjoyed their gaping at the trees as they worked their way to the center of the Forest. He enjoyed their starting at the sounds of his subjects flashing through the trees. This enjoyment defeated the anger-being entirely. Most of all, he enjoyed the horror and fear on their faces as they approached the Hall of Wells. This is where the King had made his home. The Forest was thick here; it clung to the building in vines and trees and shrubs and utterly covered it in green. Tied in and through the greenery were the remains of those that had defied him. Here were those that had not spoken the words correctly. Here were those that had talked to his subjects. Here were those that had simply been seeking shelter from the Locusts. Here were the Locusts. The Squirrel King rarely killed. The Hall of Wells was special. It was at the heart of the Forest, and the heart of the Forest was special. When someone was brought here and sacrificed to the Forest in its heart, they did not die. The Forest grew into them (or what was left of them) and became one with them. Their forms stretched and grew slowly, naturally, the way the Forest now grew. Green was beginning to permeate the skin tones and armor plating of those hanging limply on the walls. The irony of the situation was not beyond the King. In fact, he giggled at it in front of Herod and Nemesis. Those that defied him would end up protecting him. That was why the Forest was there, now. No matter what that she-bitch lizard said.

The King grinned as the Forest opened the doors of the Hall of Wells for him. Vines seemed to flex and grip where they clung to the doors. There was no sound here, not even as a wall of green became a gaping hole into the Hall. The twitching movement of those beings welded to the building's greenery were more eerie for the fact that they were completely silent. Herod and Nemesis paused here. The Squirrel King sensed the fear-beings inside them both and was mightily pleased. He motioned for them to follow into the torch-lit Hall of Wells. They did, and he could feel the fear-beings jump and squirm, trying to get out of these silly lizard-men.

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The King took his time walking down the hall toward his throne room. He let the lizard-men savor the formulae scrawled and shifting all over the walls, ceiling, and floor. Each step that they took sent ripples through the formulae, adjusting them, creating shifting patterns that were complex and beautiful. Each of them created different reactions, the King noticed. The formulae twisted themselves into fractal and infinite random recursions where Herod walked. Nearly the opposite happened where Nemesis walked. The formulae shifted neatly into order, equating nicely, canceling out variables and making a sense of things. Where they met, the formulae nearly warred with each other, attempting to make sense of the three influences upon them.

It was good to know that the shifting writing on the walls was not going unnoticed by his guests. Their awe and confusion was apparent by their expressions of stony unconcern and open awe, between Herod and Nemesis respectively. This would keep them in check. The Forest was his Kingdom, and it would protect him, now. He stopped before his throne. He paused for a few moments so that his guests could appreciate just what the throne was made of. Then he hopped, twisted, and sat, all in one lightning movement. He could feel the pulsing of the Forest beneath him through his throne. He could feel the shifting plates of the Locusts' exoskeleton greet him upon his return to his rightful seat. He could feel the Forest exalt with his presence. He relaxed into the throne, now in complete control.

"Herod, you have come into my Kingdom to negotiate. To barter. To come to a deal. Kneel before me, as my subject, and plead your case." Herod stepped forward, but he did not kneel.

"Squirrel King, I am not your subject. I am the Rebuilder of Dragon City and I kneel to none but the Tribes of the City. This will have to suffice." Herod bowed deeply at the waist for several seconds. He stood straight and continued. "I am looking for a dragon in your domain. I have come to retrieve her. I am looking for a stone that has the ability to remember. I seek it for my City. My dreams have told me that these things are here, in your domain, in your Kingdom."

The King steeped his fingers in a gesture that emulated every villain from every bad movie ever filmed. "I have these things, Herod-lizard-man. I have a she-bitch lizard. She is the color of the Forest." Herod's eyes washed over with crystalline gray. A growl began to crawl its way up from the inaudible range of bass. "I also

have a stone that remembers. I have created it with the Formulae. I have created it with my understanding of the Formulae and what they represent. What would you offer for them?"

The growl twisted into a snarl. It escaped from Herod before his answer was given. The fear-being almost dared to show itself while the King sat on his throne, but it knew better. There would be no fear in the Forest. Not for him. "I would see these things before we speak of price. I must be assured that you have them." Ripples of Herod's different shapes flowed around the edges of his form. The Formulae became aggressive around him. They began to show destruction, entropy, and the end of things. This fat-lizard-bastard would not take his Kingdom from him. He would not!

"Very well, Rebuilder of Dragon City. You will have the viewing you seek." The King smiled again, all points and jagged edges, and Herod took a step back. Nemesis just watched. The King gestured to his right, and a curtain sewed together with vines and Locust plating parted slowly. Torches lit with a whoosh, and Herod and Nemesis saw. They saw the clear, twisted crystal, inscribed with indecipherable formulae, which hovered above a pedestal. They saw the bloodied and battered woman chained to the wall. Her brown hair was matted with blood and sweat. Her clothes, a simple t-shirt and jeans, were torn and ripped. Green-scaled dragon wings were pinned between her body and the wall. The scales shimmered, and against all odds, her wings seemed unhurt. She wore chains that writhed and twisted and melded into her arms and legs. They weren't vines, exactly. There was a metal sheen to them. She bled from her arms and legs where the thorns in these metallic vines held her. Her eyes were closed, and she was twitching as if she was having a nightmare.

Herod roared, then, and the building shook. The formulae scattered from him, as if reality's very governing factors could fear a being, and his trench coat flew backwards into the shape of dragon's wings. Nemesis understood the mourning call in the roar. He understood the tragedy and rage when Herod roared in a language that only they understood. Nemesis understood that this monster had trapped her in her own dreams, in nightmares that had plagued her since she was a child. Even the plates of the King's throne shivered with fear, until a clawed hand around his throat choked off Herod's roar.

Nemesis' cloak had flown back, as Herod's coat had, and his blue scales glittered in the torchlight. His sanity and certainty flowed

from him in a confidence that awed even the King. Nemesis lifted Herod off of the ground, flailing and kicking, and spoke to the King. "Name your price, Squirrel King. I know this Hall we're in. I appreciate the twisted metaphor and what this place has become because of you. I will not have you play games with my head, and I will not have him kill you. So, name your price, or I will let him free and you will die very messily."

"V-v-very well, Nemesis. Y-y-you shall have your price, Harbinger. I wish these things: an angel's feather, a stone of betrayal, the heart of a metal dragon, an elephant's ear, and a brick made of pride. For these things I will give you both the she-bitch lizard and the remembering crystal." Herod struggled, uttering screeches that were meant to be promises of the Squirrel King's death, but Nemesis' grip, fueled by his calm and confidence, was not one to be overcome in a time of panic.

"Fine. We're leaving your Kingdom now. We won't be back until we've got what you want, and will take what you have offered. I'm... I'm sorry that you've become what you are." Seemingly carrying Herod easily by the neck, Nemesis turned on his heel and stalked out of the Hall of Wells. His royal blue wings folded back as the hall became a hallway. The doors to the outside opened as easily and silently for him as they had for the King.

He stopped for a moment, shocked by the sight of the King's subjects ringing the entrance to the Hall. Three- to four-foot tall squirrels stood in a ring-shaped rank and file. Many had braids and beads in tufts of their fur. Tails, taller than their heads, were decorated with what appeared to be tribal brandings in sharp and violent-shaped glyphs. The squirrels were both brown- and black-furred, and watched Nemesis and Herod with intelligent eyes. Their paws, which were almost hand-like, were tipped with wickedly sharp claws that could easily rend human and animal flesh. They suddenly began to chitter eerily in unison. Both Nemesis and Herod could understand. "We can hear her. We can hear the King. We can hear the both of you." Their chattering abruptly stopped. Absolute silence returned to the Hall of Wells. The subjects of the Squirrel King darted off into the forest in flashes of frenzied movement. Nemesis sighed as Herod continued to struggle. With a roar promising his return, Nemesis spread his wings and launched himself into the sky.

Nemesis waited until he was just about to clear the canopy of the Forest before he let Herod free from his grip. He twisted, power

raging through him in this half-human and half-dragon form, and launched Herod up and past the tips of the branches. He paused, letting gravity bring him to near-falling, and then shot upward. He rocketed past Herod, who was just regaining his balance and composure. Nemesis grimaced as he felt his claws tear through Herod's back as he flew past and away in an arc. Herod whirled and immediately gave chase. Nemesis doubled back, not expecting Herod to calculate in this frame of mind. Herod had anticipated this movement, and was waiting for him. Herod snatched Nemesis out of the air, both clawed hands wrapped around Nemesis' neck. Herod squeezed, and flesh began to tear.

"I felt the nausea again on the way out, Sebastian." Herod practically spat the word. "I felt the disorientation, just like when we got hit by the rocket. Just like when we crossed the Forest's boundaries. Tell me what is going on." Nemesis calmly pulled Herod's arms out of and away from his neck. No blood flowed from either of them.

"The enraged bully shtick doesn't suit you either, Herod. Give it up." With a shove, Nemesis pushed himself away from Herod, and began to fly south. He *would* see Diane again.

### **About the Author**

David M. Crampton lives in Lansing, Michigan with his wife and dog. He attends Michigan State University, where he is finishing a degree in Religious Studies.

*Bah weep gra-nah weep ninni bong.*

