

What began as a minor dispute between Matthew Ford and Jesus has escalated into a feud that threatens to undermine a Cold War that has existed between Heaven and Hell for two millennia. The question is. what will happen next?

Anti-Christ: A Satirical End of Days

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Anti-Christ: A Satirical End of Days

Matthew Moses

CwHyAPTER 1

The stars shone like luminous islands in the sea of night. Each triumphantly glimmered as an ethereal jewel out of the reach of man, gems of untold wealth that enriched man's thoughts.

Humanity once thought those strobing specks were the immortalized memorials of their legendary forebears, heroes that had lived lives of epic proportions and whose images were meant to embolden, guide, and inspire those that came after. There was something more to that horizon; it was man's spiritual home. Each one of those shining stars was a giver of life, light, and possibilities. They inspired man to strive beyond himself that, one day, he might reach them.

Then came science, that murderer of myth; science revealed those jewels to be so numerous as to be worthless, their origins mundane, their possibilities quantifiable realities. Man touched the stars and left his flaws upon them. The stars went from immortal legends to finite gas and fire always on the verge of fading out. The mystery was stripped away and lost with time, the spiritual replaced by the corporeal.

Now, those stars were as mortal as those who stared up at them. They were beings that seemed so close, yet were so distant from one another. Their light was simply a shallow image to cover the turmoil within them. Without mystery, the heavens lost meaning. Man lost interest in staring up at the firmament, his head bowed to the realities of life.

From that lofty height one single man fell away from such divine diversions back through obscuring clouds to his set, mortal place on that speck of dirt in the universe known as Earth.

Matthew sat alone at his table in the food court ringed by the bustling crowds of the modern day, that encircling miasma of men and child obscuring any and all paths out of the current purgatory he found himself floating in, namely that capitalist Paradise known as “The Mall”. Matthew stared up through the large skylight at the free, uncontrolled firmament beyond. He was one of the few that still looked to the heavens. That sea above was the sole glimmer in this dull world of worthless endeavor. From that ocean arose mysteries in his mind as to the meaning of it all: life, faith, love.

Love: that mystery he was continually trying to figure out in his own awkward way. It was not simply his bumbling grip that prevented him from getting a grasp on it. It was the complexity of women that thwarted his every theory on the subject. Tonight was another attempt at that irritating, unsolvable equation.

He was currently on a date. A blind date. A blind internet date. With a girl he had met...online. He'd spoken to her. Well, he had spoken to her once...via text. At least she knew his name...his screen name. It all seemed so impersonal the way the date had been arranged, ironic as that sounded. They had originally agreed to see a romantic movie and have dinner; then it turned into a comedy and dinner; then just dinner. Matthew felt like he was bartering some trade agreement.

It was all so pathetic, but Matthew didn't care. Loneliness had a way of eroding pride. The problem was he simply didn't understand people, women in particular. One look at this wild-haired, clumsy man-child was enough to send even the most kindhearted scrambling for escape. To say every encounter helped to deepen Matthew's complex about himself was an understatement.

So here he was now, his vigil stretching into its third hour. There was still no sign of her. Even Matthew had to admit the likelihood of her showing up was approaching zero, yet another gaping hole in his life.

“Nice waste of an evening,” he mumbled. Sadly, what else did he have to do tonight?

The rumblings of the crowd began to drown out his thoughts. The murmurs sent a tremor through his excited frame causing him to tremble further as the buzz itched at his ears. All those faces turned towards him as they circled around and placed him under siege at the center of the food court. Matthew bit his lip as he felt the eyes of the surging crowd upon him. They knew why he was here, cackling beneath their whispers. He dipped his head as he tilted his glasses down forcing the masses to merge into a blur as he gripped his date’s gift, a book, closer to his chest like a protective totem.

Yet, despite himself, Matthew was drawn back to those scattered about the tables littering the food court, their lives causing his brooding head to rise. It was some sort of magnetic attraction that kept him from fully pulling away, but as he watched them smile and laugh their faces wrinkled into something demonic and mocking. Their happiness only increased Matthew’s bitterness and made him recoil.

His eyes drifted over to the empty seat across from him. Why had he even come? Had he really expected her to show? He had been sitting here for three hours too long, his head jerking with each possible sound. Each glimpse proved a disappointment. Every minute further depressed him. She wasn’t coming. Matthew slumped, dejected as ever. Love, like so many other things, would forever remain a mystery to him.

Matthew's eyes wandered the food court before settling on one couple as they talked and laughed. The man said some off comment and she grinned. "How do you do it?" Matthew asked from just out of earshot. "You make it all look so easy."

The girl gently touched her partner's forearm before giggling some more. Matthew let the guy fade out of sight as he focused on her. Her flaxen hair was shining gold, her blue eyes sapphire. That ivory goddess became an idol of worship. "What do I have to do to get the attention of a girl like you?" he whispered. As if she heard him, the girl turned towards Matthew causing him to quickly look away.

What was he still doing here? Matthew plowed that wild mane of his as he took a deep breath. He had studying to do. The big final was tomorrow, but first he had to return the book. He didn't want anything to remember this night by.

Matthew got up to go on his little quest, his bow-legged waddle drawing a lot of stares as he made a hasty retreat into the consuming crowd bumping into a table on the way causing it to wobble in his wake. He felt like a fish in a current, separate from those that rushed around him. He bobbed and weaved through the undulating waves making his way through a crowd that seemed bent on pushing him back. He let the world pass by him as he went his own way regardless of who he had to push through to get there.

After a few minutes, he left the main artery and entered a bookstore heading straight for the register. Without so much as a warning, Matthew slammed his book down on the counter.

"Help you, sir?" the cashier asked with a nasal drone.

"Refund please."

The cashier looked down at the book. "Didn't you buy this a few hours ago?" His eyes flicked back up to Matthew.

"I've had a change of mind," Matthew told him as he pushed the book forward.

"We don't give refunds," the cashier replied as he pushed the book back.

"I didn't do anything to the book."

"That's not the issue."

"Then why can't I have a refund?"

"Because it's against policy."

"Well that's a stupid policy."

"I'm not here to debate company policy," the cashier breezily cooed.

"The fact you're jockeying a register proves you're not capable of much."

"I'm capable of not giving you a refund, sir." The cashier stressed the final word sarcastically.

Matthew balled his fists. "Well, I don't want the book," he growled.

"Well, that's just too bad."

"What if I just give it to you? The store still makes a profit."

"I can't take that book back from you, sir."

"Why the hell not?"

"Policy," the cashier stated once more.

"What do you want me to do with it?"

"Take it home with you. Make it into a paperweight. It's not my concern."

"This book is going back on that shelf," Matthew all but demanded pointing at the book-lined wall.

"This book isn't going anywhere save home with you."

Matthew wanted to pick up the tome and slam it over the man's head. At least then he'd have some purpose for it. His palms began to sweat as he locked eyes with the cashier. Though it was only a book and though it hadn't cost much there was a principle to the whole thing. As insane as it

seemed, Matthew simply wanted to correct the mistake he had made in purchasing the book, correct his ever removing it from the wall. Its very weight reminded him repeatedly of a bad choice. He was not going to keep the thing nor throw it away. It was going back from whence it came.

A crowd had started to develop around the two as a line formed behind Matthew. "Can you hurry it up?" the customer behind Matthew asked. Matthew simply waved him away.

"Sir, I'm going to need you to step aside," the cashier coolly ordered.

"I'm not leaving here with this book," Matthew retorted.

"Oh, just take the book," the customer behind Matthew interjected. Others in the crowd murmured in agreement with him.

Matthew could feel his anxiety starting to grow, his heart ramping up as his breathing shallowed stealing his ability to reply.

"Come on buddy, I've got places to go," someone said from the back of the line.

"Stop wasting our time."

"Sir, you're going to have to take your book."

"Yeah, just take the book and leave."

"Why do you have to cause so many problems?"

Matthew fidgeted as he stood there struggling with himself. He wanted to run out of there, but the weight of that book anchored him. "I'm sorry," he managed to sputter over his shoulder to the angry mob before quickly jerking back towards the cashier. "I'm not leaving here with this book," he hissed.

"Well you are going to have to, sir," the cashier stated.

Matthew grimaced, the faces closing in on him. He looked everywhere for salvation, some sort of solution, before his

eyes settled on a little placard pasted to the back of the cash register. "You give in-store credit for returns?"

The cashier's eyes narrowed as he realized a weakness in the return policy. "Yes, sir."

Matthew grabbed the nearest book and dropped it on top of his return. "I'll take this."

The cashier caught a glimpse of the title and put his hands up in mock self-defense. "*Encyclopedia of Serial Killers*, hmmm?"

"Yeah, I like to masturbate to the crime photos," Matthew cut back, agitated by the cashier's smug voice. The minute the words left Matthew's mouth he felt his face sear. He swore the flesh would melt right off his skull. He looked over his shoulder and around the shop. Ghastly faces hovered about him in the silence, mouths agape with mothers clucking their tongues.

One mother was hurrying out the store with her son in tow. "What does masturbate mean mommy?" the tyke asked as he passed.

Matthew gave everyone a fleeting smile as his hands shook and a sickness started in his gut. Someone coughed briefly breaking the quiet as Matthew turned back to the cashier. "Uh, just...uh, put it in a bag." He swallowed that lump that caused his voice to break.

Matthew wandered through the parking garage looking for his car. It had to be on this level. He'd tried all the others. He walked down the length of cars letting his hand trail over a few tail ends. Of course one touch set off a car alarm sending him running as fast as he could, the wail reverberating off the walls. After the adrenaline wore off, Matthew bent over sucking all the wind he could swallow. As

he took that latest gulp he looked up to see his car not but a few feet ahead.

Relief washed over him as he closed the gap between him and his rather imperfect car. It wasn't the newest model, and far from the prettiest, but it was dependable. "Just like me." He ran his hand down the dented, off-white side panel, his fingers tracing the pitted surface as he approached the driver's door. He inserted his key and pulled on the handle. The door didn't open. "You stubborn..." Matthew pulled on it again wrenching and straining. Without warning it finally popped after the latest yank, the door slamming into his knees. The blinding blow caused Matthew to slump forward closing the door as lights exploded before his eyes. When the pain subsided, Matthew went to pull the door open again only for it to jam like before. Remembering the result of his last struggle, he wisely limped to the passenger side and climbed in.

"Another day lost." He sighed as he turned the key. After a few minutes of coughing and automotive seizures, the choking car came to life. Matthew reversed and drove out of the parking lot making for the exit and the waiting night.

Snow drifted down from the dark skies twinkling like falling stars. Only the occasional car lit the evening, all going the opposite direction. The radio throttled Matthew's ears as he zoomed through the blackness. He found himself dwelling on the day that was, shaking his head at the way things had turned out. At least they couldn't get any worse.

Without warning the car started to shake. "What the..." Matthew started, turning down the radio. The shaking quickly became a bouncing as he was thrown violently up and down in his seat, his head ramming into the roof over and over again. He slowed down and pulled over.

As he turned the key, the lit stereo immediately went mute and the car rattled before going still. The night was dark, only a lone streetlight twenty feet away gave him any illumination. He climbed out, walking the length of his car to check the tires on the driver's side. Everything was fine. Rounding the back bumper he caught a glimpse of the rear passenger tire and the problem. The thing looked like a lion had used it as a chew toy. "Glorious. Glorious!" Matthew railed at no one as he kicked the tire, or what was left of it, getting the toe of his boot caught in the rubber shreds. He pulled it free only to slip, his feet going out from underneath him. Falling forward he caught his forehead on the edge of the car splashing the night in splotches of colors.

His hands had already gone numb as the winter winds pushed him around, the icy air slapping him hard in the face helping him to collect his bearings. He put a hand to the swollen knot just above his right eye, the touch causing him to wince. "Jesus Christ," Matthew muttered wide-eyed as he pulled himself up. So things could get worse. He used the car for support as he trudged back to the trunk and popped it. Once in, he wrestled to remove the spare.

His dim struggle was exposed by someone pulling off just in front of him. Matthew paused to watch as some guy climbed out and came back towards him lit by the rise and fall of hazard lights. "Hey, everything ok?"

"Flat tire," Matthew responded, surprised anyone would offer aid.

"Oh. Ok." The guy turned around, got in his car, and drove off.

Matthew watched as he faded away into the night. "Thanks for the help," he tossed after his tease of a rescuer. Snow began to fall again, the white flakes peppering him. Matthew sighed as he pulled the spare from the trunk.

"Russia celebrates the re-election of their president tonight, Alexander Romanov. Staunchly backed by the conservatives of the Duma, he has sworn to put Russia back on track towards a brighter future and reclamation of their lost legacy as a world power.

"In another part of the world, tensions rise as terrorists struck at the Indian Parliament building. The death toll was well over sixty, including all terrorists involved. India blames Pakistan for supporting the terrorists, threatening armed force if words fail to bring any reform in policy. Pakistan denies any involvement but has warned India against any attempted military action." The anchorman smiled, oblivious to the threat just mentioned.

"In America, President Lucas continues to deny corruption charges over government contracts issued to various corporations associated with large donations to his re-election campaign. The President had this to say."

The screen switched to President Lucas standing behind the Seal of the United States, his hair slick and image suave.

"Oh, he's so gorgeous," Mary sighed. She sat there in her nightgown, wrapped in a pink robe, curled up in her chair watching the world at a glance, the television illuminating her face in its flickering glow.

"Fairness has always been a hallmark of my presidency," Lucas began. "I've had a vision and stuck to it. My detractors in the liberal media would call me guilty. I am only guilty of doing what is best for the American people." President Lucas winked through the screen, giving a thumbs up.

"That's right. Damn Democrats. Always attacking good men." Mary shook her fist at the TV. Its worn, bent rabbit ears failed to hear her threats. She continued her tirade, the curlers in her hair bouncing. The reception of the television

was jagged, slightly off with a hue of fuzz over the transmission as the picture occasionally rose vertically before settling back into position.

The anchorman came back onscreen. "In Los Angeles, a passenger on flight A401 was reported to have been infected with a new strain of bird flu."

"Bird flu!" Mary pulled her robe close about her face.

"He was quickly quarantined, and the diagnosis was proven premature."

"That's what you want us to believe, you liberal liars!" she yelled at the screen. "Get us all sick and then hike up prices for medicine! I know the conspiracy!"

"In local news, it is flu season and-"

Mary dropped the remote control on the floor, the rest of what was said lost in her mania. "Flu? No, it's more than flu. It's bird flu! It's come here. No, oh no!" She reached up and felt her forehead. She felt hot all over and then came the chills. Her fears produced nausea as her anxiety grew. She began to shake. "Bird flu. I've got bird flu!"

She heard someone walk into the room. She turned and saw Orlando, the family's white Chihuahua, staring at her. "You!" Orlando licked his black lips, his big eyes growing bigger. "You gave it to me, you dirty animal!" Orlando turned and scurried from the remote that was kicked at him. She ran after him, cursing and screaming. The chase continued into the kitchen as her anxiety became epic. He dove through the doggy door to escape outside.

Mary was frantic. Sweat beaded on her forehead. She wiped it away, worried. What was that noise? Was she hearing things now? Dementia! Wait, it was coming from downstairs. She turned to the basement door and opened it. "Mike?" She looked into the darkness, swearing she saw a

glimmer off in the corner. "Mike, are you down there?" As she started down the stairs, the wood creaked.

"Don't come down here!" warned a voice.

"Mike, what are you doing down there?" she yelled down the stairs.

"Nothing." Mike had the lights turned off, the volume as low as he could make it and still hear. He watched his porn privately, clad only in his boxers that rested around his ankles, gut spilling over. His clothes littered the floor. The flashing glow danced on his baldhead. His wife couldn't stand the thought of such "entertainment" in the house. She also couldn't stand the thought of sex since menopause had kicked in so Mike was in horrible circumstances. Hot, cold, hot, cold: and that was just her!

"That's right. Do a cheer," he whispered as he watched, the light of the television illuminating his face as he grimaced and made kisses at the screen. "Hey, he has the big game tomorrow. He deserves encouragement."

"Mike!"

"What?" he yelled back over his shoulder.

"I don't feel well. Can you go to the pharmacy?"

"Ok," he replied. "Go back to your coffin, ice woman," Mike murmured as he continued to watch. His eyes were drawn to the smut and nothing could pull them away.

"Mike!"

"What?" he roared back, unable to stay in the mood with each interruption.

"When are you going?"

"All the pharmacies are closed!" he said offhand refusing to be distracted.

"No they're not!"

"They are! I'll go tomorrow!"

"I need medicine!"

"Tomorrow!"

"But I need it now!"

"So do I," he sputtered listening to the moans of the cheerleader.

The light around him snapped on followed by the sound of the stairs creaking. He hurriedly switched the television off, wrestling to pull his boxers up. "Michael, what are you doing down here in the dark that is more important than my health?"

"Woman, if you know what is good for your health you'll go back up those steps."

As Mary reached the foot of the stairs she stopped, noticing the television behind Mike. "When did that get down here?"

Mike turned around. "That? Few days ago. I'm, uh, trying to fix it. Extra money."

"It looks brand new."

"It's the lighting. It's definitely not new."

Mary took a closer look. "There's a satellite box on it!" She gave Mike a horrendous glare. "I thought you got rid of our satellite!"

"Ok. Sometimes I like to watch television in private-"

"You're watching dirty movies again aren't you!" Mary rasped, her illness forgotten.

"I was watching a sports show if you want to know."

"I know what you really watch!"

"Now wait a minute-"

"Does immoral lust mean more to you than our family? I'm gonna rip that destructive dish off the house and bury it-"

"Don't you threaten my satellite, woman!"

"Don't speak to me that way!"

"I'll speak to you that way if I want. You won't threaten my dish."

"While I am dying you refuse to get my medicine so that you can watch those filthy movies."

"What do you think is keeping me from killing you myself?"

"You dirty old man. I'm tearing it down!" Mary started stamping up the steps.

"You frigid witch!" Mike ran after her. "Don't do it! I swear you'll be buried in this basement if you take away my satellite!"

The pair raced up the steps into the kitchen. Despite his best efforts Mike couldn't beat her to the backdoor so he made a last minute gamble and hurried over to the cabinets opening the middle set. Inside were herbs and pills, vitamins and supplements each in alphabetical order. Mike reached inside knocking a few of the bottles over to rattle onto the countertop.

Mary froze at the sound. "What are you doing?" she asked in horror.

He grabbed two bottles from inside and popped the tops. "Giving the sink its daily dose."

"I need those!" Mary was in utter shock. "Don't do it!"

Mike put the one bottle over the sink, twitching his hand and making the pills shake like gravel inside. His mouth made an "o" as he taunted her.

Mary rushed over to the stove and picked up a frying pan. "Don't you even dare! Drop it," Mary warned. She inched a little closer, a crazed look in her eye.

Mike put one of the bottles down and turned on the water. As she inched closer he flipped the switch. The garbage disposal ground to life. The blades swung in the recesses of the sink ready to shred. Mike hardened his expression, setting his jaw. "I'll send your new age to the stone age." She moved a little closer. "I mean it!"

When she inched a step closer Mike lunged for her, dropping the pills, and got his baldhead whacked. He fell to the floor dazed. "Bitch hit me with a frying pan," he grunted as he tried to stand and fell back down on his butt.

As Mary sauntered past him, Mike made an uncoordinated grab for the hem of her nightgown. She easily brushed by him as he continued clutching at air. She pulled the backdoor open and stood there unable to walk outside. She wanted to step out, but she couldn't find the courage to do so. "Can't do it, can you?" Mike taunted, rubbing the growing bruise on his baldhead. "Too many pathogens and germs out there."

Mary turned and gave Mike a dirty stare. "I'll go out there one day, you sick old man." She slammed the door shut and dropped the frying pan on the counter. "You're sleeping in the basement tonight. Maybe your hellish behavior can keep you warm." She stamped back to her bedroom.

"I'd freeze to death if I slept in your bed," he retorted. The door slammed in the distance.

The backdoor opened minutes later, Matthew stepping in. He saw the scene in the kitchen. His dad looked up from the floor clad only in his underwear with a purple explosion on his baldhead as the water poured and the sink roared. Orlando came in after him and stopped between his master's feet, looking first up at Matthew and then at Mike. Matthew stared at his father, raising an eyebrow.

"So," his father started. "How was your night?"

The Duma, Russia's legislative body, was in chaos. Communists shouted at capitalists. Capitalists shook with fury towards communists. Reformers screamed insults while conservatives shrieked louder. It was the common mob...in business suits. They were the symbol of Mother Russia

tearing itself apart in confusion. The Speaker called for order, his voice drowned out by the slanders of those present.

"The people freeze while your party steals from the coffers of the state," one of the Duma's officials threw at the opposition.

"They freeze because they keep their money hidden under their mattresses and refuse to spend it," a member of the opposition retaliated.

"Why bother?" another broke in. "A million rubles would make a better blanket before it could buy a heater."

"You care nothing for the people!" a reformer cut in.

"I do! That is why I want the old order back. You capitalists believe in luxury before progress, you decadent pigs!" a communist yelled, his face crimson.

"Pigs? You who live in the filth of your own hypocritical luxury!"

The noise continued to rise as these men attacked one another with their favorite weapon: words. Lies, half-truths, and vague rumors danced in the halls of government as the nation crumbled around them. In these chambers anything was accepted as the truth.

Without warning, the doors opened. The crowd remained oblivious as Alexander Romanov marched in. He watched these representatives of the people with eyes of steel embedded in a long, wolf-like face. "Peasants that want to be kings," he said as he stared disapprovingly at the masses. His face gradually hardened as he lost his patience. He let out a bellow that shook the room. Everyone went silent and turned to Alexander. He returned their gaze. "You are men, not women. Leave the arguments and gossip to those best suited."

Alexander made for the podium, his stride confident meeting any stare he received. His fists were balled for battle, his jaw set. The legion of legislators watched warily, unsure of this upstart. He mounted the steps towards the podium brushing aside the Speaker.

"I am Alexander Romanov. I am your President, and you," he swept his brown sleeved arm across the expanse of the Duma, "are nothing." The Duma erupted in shouts as grown men threw paper, drinks, and even chairs. Alexander banged his fist down on the podium. Every one went quiet. "This," he pointed at them, "is the price we pay for capitalism, for," his face became distorted in disgust, "international legitimacy. We were once great-

"We are still great!" someone challenged.

"We are worthless!" Alexander roared back. "Crime is out of control. In some parts of Russia we do not even hold full authority. Corruption is everywhere. You eat the finest cuisine. Wear the finest clothes when our soldiers die without being paid in months! Our proud nation is fragmented, our economy in shambles. What have we attained since the fall of our empire? The lands of our fathers have been amputated from the body of Mother Russia. The West gorges on our losses and closes in on what lands we still hold. Our once feared army cannot even destroy a band of rebels! The people prefer the dollar to the ruble! Russia is unstable, and you are to blame!"

"We have done nothing!" retorted a senior member of the Duma.

"I know and that is the problem." Alexander fixated on them with a predatory stare. "Before the fall, power was concentrated where it could best be used. In the executive. In the leader. Now it is scattered. It is time to return to those old ways."

"No!" most of the Duma yelled, others cursing and threatening.

One of the Duma stood on a table and waved for quiet. "You cannot simply remove the authority of the Duma. You do not have that authority."

"Oh, I surely do! I hereby dissolve the Duma." They were horrified. "Elections will be postponed until order has been re-established."

"Order?" yelled someone.

"When will that be?" another asked.

"When I say so." Alexander descended the podium and exited this tomb of democracy.

Matthew was in his fourth year of college, on the cusp of a degree and some major decisions in his life with a final the following day, and there he was jumping up and down screaming at the top of his lungs like some gorilla as he watched big men in colorful underwear tear each other apart in a scripted battle within the squared circle. Professional wrestling: the sport of the elite.

"Hit him with a chair!" Matthew yelled. He was up on his feet in excitement, Orlando hopping up and down beside him on the floor.

Matthew was lost in the programming, flailing his arms oblivious to what was around him. Wanting to become a part of the action, Matthew grabbed Orlando and put him in a sleeper hold. The dog pawed with futility as he was jerked around, his little feet dangling in the air. Matthew released the pup and raised him to face level, staring those big eyes down. "Do you think you can beat me?" he asked, his voice dropping to a deep bass. Orlando cocked his head away and then back at his master. Matthew raised Orlando above his head with both arms as if to throw him to the ground. The

pup kicked with one of his back legs as Matthew pretended to toss him to the carpeted floor. The Chihuahua landed softly on the bed with a mild bounce. Matthew quickly reapplied his grip putting the pup in a full nelson.

"Do you submit?" Matthew crowed into the pup's ear. "Do you submit?" The pup gave a yelping bark, and Matthew dropped him. "I win. I win!" He posed in his victory celebration, flexing biceps that butter would put to shame. To his detriment, he threw his arm to the side knocking a ten-pound weight right off his desk and right on his bare toes. The impact was immediate and hard. Orlando jumped back as the weight fractured Matthew's one toe ripping a red gash. Matthew was quick to fall, grabbing his aching foot as he cursed through gritted teeth. His mother was at the door in seconds causing him to curse for a whole new reason.

"Matthew, what happened? I heard a a...Matthew!" She saw his bleeding toe and started to lose it.

"I'm ok, mom. I had an accident, but I'm fine."

"Are you sure? You could get an infection. Even lose your toe."

"Mom, it's only a scratch."

"Well, let me see." His mother moved forward and stopped just before touching it, running out of the room only to return seconds later with a wash cloth and a big, brown bottle. She unscrewed the top and poured a large amount of Hydrogen Peroxide on the wound.

Matthew screamed, slapping the bottle away. "What are you doing?" he shrieked.

"I should have warned you it would sting a little."

"A little?" Matthew gasped as his gash sizzled with foam.

"Oh, it looks bad," she wept as she grabbed his toe.

Matthew winced before pushing her hand away. "Mom, don't wiggle it!"

"Does it hurt?"

"Hell yeah, it hurts when you move it! Just let me put a band-aid on it. It'll be fine."

"A band-aid. A band-aid! Matthew, that is a bad cut."

"It's on my toe. How bad could it be? My toe is tiny. Worse case they amputate it."

"Matthew, don't say that. You need your toes. What if it becomes infected? It can spread into your foot. Then your leg. My God, even your heart!"

"Ok, mom-"

"I should call a doctor."

"It's ok, mom-"

"Let me call 911."

"Mom, no, I'm fine."

"You could be delirious." Matthew's mother put her hand on his head to check for fever.

"Mom, please!" His mother froze. "It's a cut."

She gave him an upset pout. "Fine, don't be careful. See where you are when they have you on life support."

"Ok, mom." Matthew steadily started moving his mother out the door.

"I won't cut life support." She waved her hands in the air.

"Ok, mom."

"I won't let go of my baby!" Matthew shut the door as his mother sobbed all the way back to her room.

The howling of the wind picked up outside as a storm brewed, shaking the window. The audio of the television began to break up followed by the picture. "No!" Matthew screeched.

Matthew's mom stomped back down the hallway yelling through the locked door, "What? Has your toe turned black?"

Matthew could only shake his head as the televised fight devolved into hissing snow. "Modern technology at its

finest." Matthew's mother continued pounding on the door as he turned to his desk, staring at his books. "Guess I'm studying."

He pored over the books, trying to stay awake and make sense of the gibberish. *Why did I choose philosophy?* Matthew asked himself. *Why not political science? Wait, is that degree even usable?*

Socrates asked too many questions. Plato believed too much in "shapes". Aristotle liked to stare at things too much. Hobbes believed we were all savage. Locke gave man too much credit. And Nietzsche...he needed to get laid. All of them asked the same question: why? Each came away with a different answer. Only in philosophy could your studies all contradict one another.

Matthew tried to stay awake, the weight of fatigue causing his head to rise and fall. His eyes were on fire causing him to blink. It felt so good when he left them closed, the fiery pain smoldering.

A breeze swept in from nowhere. The pages on his open books blew this way and that. He looked up, but the window was closed. Suddenly the desk lamp flickered and went out. "Great," Matthew replied as he tapped on it. It didn't come back on. The wind continued to howl outside. "Guess study time is over."

He gripped the back of his neck massaging out the stress of another day. He stumbled through the dark to his bed accidentally hitting something on the floor with his bad foot. "Ow!" he yelped as he fell into bed, favoring his mangled toe. Matthew managed to grit through the pain as he slid under the covers. He tried to sleep, the throbbing guiding him into a snooze.

Creaking started to sound throughout the house as if it was sighing. Light sounds of air, like breathing, began followed by whispering. Matthew ignored it. The whispering began to build. He grabbed a pillow and covered his head to drown out the noise. A voice began to rise out of the whispers calling his name. Matthew continued to ignore it. His bed started to shake by unseen hands shattering what little chance there was of falling back to sleep. Irritated, Matthew threw the pillow off and saw a muted light around some odd figure. It continued to call out to him. "Matthew." The ghost reached out to touch him. "Matthew." Its features remained unsculpted and hidden in mist. "Matthew."

The front door to the house opened, and Matthew threw the ghost out into the garbage cans, the crash causing a dog to bark down the block. "You picked the wrong night to bother me. This has been going on for too long. I'm tired of it. No more!"

"You can't kick me out!" the ghost yelled, picking itself up from the rubbish.

"Oh, no." Matthew reached for the baseball bat kept in the front closet and started to walk back outside towards the ghost. It turned and ran down the street. Matthew laughed as he walked back to the front door. "Who you gonna call?" He slammed the door.

CHAPTER 2

It was dark in Matthew's bedroom, the curtains serving as the drawn boundary between his world and the vast one that waited outside. He kept his curtains pulled often, unable to stand seeing his reflection in the window as if a ghost in the world beyond that transparent mirror. He could not stomach being so insubstantial though he knew that, in reality, he really was nothing more than a shade.

Nothing stirred in his black hole. Well, a little something did. The door to Matthew's bedroom slowly opened with a tiny squeak. In the narrow gap a white muzzle crowned by a black nose stuck itself through smelling the stuffy air. It sniffed the carpet below, snorted, and then sniffed the air again. Pushing the door open a bit more, Orlando pranced into forbidden territory. He bobbed and weaved around books and magazines to stand beside the bed. He stared up at his sleeping master, a tiny shadow amongst the various hills of debris on the floor.

Matthew's mouth yawned open as he snored. His left leg dangled over the side of the bed poking out from beneath his quilt. It was evident Matthew was still wearing the same clothes from last night.

Orlando cocked his head, the pup's bottom lip hanging diagonally as he observed the heaving mass. He approached the bed and stood up balancing his front two paws against the wood paneling. He gave a little, moderate bark. His jaws were slightly open and his lips closed. He barked again. Matthew was totally unconscious.

Orlando jumped on the bed, navigating the bumps and blanketed dunes. He eventually settled on Matthew's leg and proceeded to start biting it. He growled as he tore at Matthew's thigh, but his little mouth couldn't tear toilet paper

let alone make any real noticeable impact on someone's leg. He started jumping all around, racing all over the bed.

Matthew muttered something unintelligibly as he rolled onto his back. His breathing was softer as the mattress partially muffled his mouth. Orlando slowly crept up to Matthew's face, the nervousness in his eyes showing as his tiny head shook. Matthew twitched sending Orlando rushing to the foot of the bed. The dog lost traction and slid along the quilt, thumping his head on the frame as he rolled and fell over to the floor, his little body hitting the door closing it with a silent click. Matthew rolled back over then was still again.

Orlando peeked up over the frame before jumping back up. He began moving forward again, stopping every few inches. Matthew coughed, waking to see some dark shape on his leg. At first he froze in fright before reason clouded instinct. "Orlando? That you?" he asked. The dog's head perked up at the sound of his name. Mystery solved, Matthew started to pass out again when he felt it. It was a gradual warmth that turned into a wet cold. He was being pissed on! Matthew jerked up, and Orlando went rigid. "You..." Matthew menacingly breathed.

He reached for Orlando, missing. The dog was on the floor in seconds, slamming headfirst into the closed door only now realizing he had locked himself in. He scratched quickly at the barrier as Matthew got up. As he came around, Orlando ran between his feet and skittered under the bed. Matthew followed after the dog, but he proved too big to get underneath. "Come out!" Matthew struggled to reach the runt as it hid in the furthest corner. "Come here now!"

Without warning, the door opened and Matthew's mother peeked in. "Matthew?" Orlando sped out from underneath the other end of the bed and charged out of the room skimming Mary's robe. Matthew came out from underneath

the bed as his mother wrinkled her nose. "Did you have an accident?"

"It was that stupid dog. Ugh!" Matthew looked down at his stained leg.

"About time you got up," she told him, stirring her cup of tea. "Don't you have tests today?"

Matthew dabbed at the dark stain with his quilt drawing his mother's disapproving glare. "First one isn't until ten."

"You better hurry then," she replied before taking a sip.

"Why? It's still early." Matthew's mom went over to the window and pulled the curtains. The sunlight blinded him, his eyes melting behind those solidly sealed lids. He stumbled to his feet before falling back down. "What time is it?"

"Ten to nine."

"I've got to go!" Matthew jumped up thoughtlessly and hit his still sore toe on his desk chair. Wincing at the renewed pain, he limped to the closet and opened it. It took him a few seconds for his sun spotted sight to smooth dimly over. Nothing was hanging. "What the...?" He turned to his mother. "Where are my clothes?"

"I'm washing them."

Matthew's shoulders became tense as he raised his hands, his face pushing forward with haste written all over it as it spasmed side to side. "Now?" His mother nodded. "Why?"

"I couldn't get around to it yesterday."

"I gave you my laundry three days ago."

His mother took another sip. "Did you?"

"Of all the days..." Matthew let loose an anxiety laden sigh. Exhaling loudly, he hurried past his mother into the hallway towards the pantry beyond.

His mother gave him a funny look. "What are you doing?" she asked as she followed after him. She found him tearing

through the piles of clothes on the floor and in baskets, the thumping washer behind him.

"I need something semi-clean." He picked up a shirt and went to smell it. His face quickly turned away, gagging. He picked up another with the same smell: that gamy, sweaty, dirty laundry stench. Matthew released an anguished lament. "I guess I have to go in this." He started to leave when he stopped and reached into a cupboard over the washing machine and pulled out some air freshener. He turned his head to the side and sprayed the entire can on his violated leg.

"Matthew!"

"I have to get rid of the smell!" He stopped spraying after thirty seconds when he felt it. It was as if something was eating through his flesh. He started to slap at the stain. He turned the can over and stared at the warning. In bold letters it stated, "Do not expose to skin". "Oh ...great," Matthew muttered through gritted teeth, a hole being eaten through his thigh. "Oh, oh, oh," he whimpered as he turned to the washer and yanked up the lid. He soaked his hands in the sudsy water and began dousing his scorching thigh.

"Matthew! The clothes-"

"Forget the clothes," Matthew scolded her. "I want to keep my leg!" When the searing pain had largely smoldered, he limped down the hall back to his room to find some shoes, each step feeling like the denim was rubbing his skin off.

"Do you want breakfast?"

"I don't have time!" He bit his lip as he shoved his bad toe into the shoe.

"But you need it. It's the most important meal of the day."

Matthew went to tie his second shoe when the string broke. "Why me? Why me!" he screamed to the ceiling

before throwing the useless string with all his might for it to simply fall to the floor a few feet away.

With one shoe still loose, agitated beyond belief, Matthew raced out the door, hair a mess, teeth unbrushed. He nearly collided with the bathroom door. His face twitched with increasing stress. He tried the knob. It was locked. He twisted and twisted again, pulling and pushing on the knob trying to force the door open.

"Hey, occupied," his dad called out.

"I need in there!"

"You're going to have to wait."

"I don't have time. I don't have time!" Matthew began kicking the door.

"What the hell are you doing?" his father demanded through the door.

"Trying to scare the crap out of you."

"He'll need all the help he can get," Matthew's mother told him. "Constipated from all that junk he's been eating."

"Ugh! I don't...I don't need to know that!" Matthew pushed past her as he hurried into the kitchen towards the sink. He flipped the faucet on putting his hands beneath the water to cup as much as he could hold before splashing it onto his mangy mane doing his best to weight it down into something controllable. Hair still dripping, Matthew put his palm to his mouth and blew. The smell was rancid. "What to do. What to do." His eyes scanned all over the room for anything he could use for his breath before settling on the counter. With few options, Matthew grabbed the soap bottle. Steeling himself, he squirted a good gob into his mouth and began to squish it all around, his face betraying the taste. When he was through he spat out bubbles. "What time is it?"

"Ten past nine," his mother replied.

"I gotta go." Matthew twisted the tap closed and shook his hands dry as he hurried down the hallway one last time, walking then running. He felt the water running down the back of his neck and wetting his back. He dove back into his room and scoured the floor, furiously kicking and thrashing before he found what he needed. Jacket in hand he rushed back into the kitchen and through the backdoor that led to the driveway.

"Drive safely!" his mother called after him as he all but kicked the door out.

Matthew charged down the walkway along the side of the house where he had parked. It was only when he began to slide that he realized the concrete had iced over. He slipped backward slamming his elbow and knocking the wind out of his lungs before gliding like a sailboat to the end of the walk to stop right in front of his car. He lay there, on the ice, looking up into the blue sky, little snowflakes dropping into his eyes causing him to blink. He remained still for a while. Without warning, he started kicking and flailing his arms and legs, screaming. This was starting out to be a bad day.

President Lucas sat at the head of an important table. Generals, admirals, diplomats, and bureaucrats gathered round it for yet another divisive debate on the fate of the nation. To his right sat those men of action: his military commanders and battle hardened officers. To his left crouched his cronies: bootlickers and silver-tongued flatterers.

"The situation in Kashmir is becoming alarmingly unstable," General Adams started. "Mobilization has started on both sides."

"Where is Kashmir?" President Lucas asked.

"Between-"

"Between India and Pakistan, Mr. President," Security Advisor Cory Brown interjected cutting Adams off.

"So what's the problem? There are wars in Africa all the time," President Lucas coolly stated.

A few officers shook their heads.

"They're in Asia, sir," General Adams corrected.

"They're always threatening one another," Secretary of State William Hermann retorted. "It's nothing but bluster."

"Agreed," President Lucas replied.

"Sir, even if it is, nuclear weapons are involved. We can't simply watch. This could go atomic disrupting the whole of Central Asia if not the entire continent." General Adams stressed that last part hoping that would at least get the President to raise an eyebrow.

"When did they get nuclear weapons?" President Lucas asked.

"Shortly before your presidency, Mr. President," Brown replied.

"From bows and arrows to nukes," Lucas muttered to himself.

"Don't worry, sir," Brown soothed. "India doesn't have launch capability anyway."

"Pakistan does!" General Adams verbally slapped the pair upside the head. "We're talking about the potential of millions of casualties."

"Mr. President," Lucas' Chief of Staff interrupted. "Some of America's businesses have interests in India. Outsourcing. Investment. It would be...detrimental to allow hostilities let alone abandon them in their time of need."

"Hmmm," Lucas pursed his lips and struck a pose of contemplation.

"Perhaps we should lean on Pakistan? After all, they did start hostilities," Brown offered.

"Terrorists, not the Pakistani government, made the attack on the Indian Parliament," General Adams broke in.

"We are supposed to believe Pakistan had nothing to do with this?" Brown rolled his eyes. "They're not even a democracy. Besides, they hate America."

General Adams looked from Brown to Lucas. "We can't afford a conflict between the two. Our military is stretched enough as it is. Operations in the region-

"What exactly is the problem here?" Lucas asked.

"Kashmir, Mr. President. Both sides want Kashmir," Hermann explained.

"Let's lean on Pakistan, make them give India Kashmir," President Lucas ordered. "I don't see why fabric should be so important."

"Sir! We can't just make Pakistan give up Kashmir!" General Adams replied horrified.

"Why not?" Lucas' face was confused, his jaw hanging in slack ignorance.

"Because Pakistan holds the land sacred."

"When did we start talking about land?" Lucas was lost, a regular occurrence.

Adams wanted to throttle the man. "That's what this conflict has been about all along."

"Well, land is land. After all the unfair treaties, about time we gave the Indians back some land," President Lucas rationalized.

"I think you're talking about the wrong Indians."

"Well which ones are they? The Sue? The Nava-Joe?"

Adams shook his head not even wanting to delve into that conversation. "Sir, even if we ordered them to give up Kashmir there are Pakistanis living there who won't accept Indian rule. It will only lead to worse problems tactically and

strategically. Besides, we need them as an ally in the Middle East. They are one of our few friends."

"They've done little to close their borders allowing excursions into Afghanistan by insurgents," Hermann sniffed. "They are merely playing all sides. Don't be a fool, Mr. President. America needs to see us making orders not bowing to them."

The President nodded. "We'll move them. Problem solved. Next?" Lucas quickly passed over the major problem as if it were a mild annoyance.

Adams wasn't through with the subject. "Sir-"

"China is making attempts to assert sovereignty over Taiwan," Brown offered up.

"We can't allow that, Mr. President," Hermann cautioned. "Economically they are already becoming a problem. If they seize Taiwan it wouldn't simply hurt us economically. It would hurt our prestige. Taiwan is an ally and a major economic partner. China, on the other hand, has repeatedly thwarted various investments we've made into their infrastructure, and worse, refused to recognize our patents and copyrights costing us billions. We are already locked in a commercial war with them committing the equivalent of atrocities. We must stand strong or continue to be bullied as well as ripped-off. Anyway, the Chinese military is symbolic of all Chinese products. Cheap and shoddy." President Lucas nodded agreement with Hermann's words.

"Mr. President," Lucas' Chief of Staff began, "we should use caution. Perhaps find some compromise."

"They are trying to seize the island!" Admiral Odom screamed in shock, his glasses falling from his face. "They have sent a fleet to the edge of Taiwan's borders to hold naval exercises. They are clearly threatening their security. We cannot compromise with these people. Not with their

record of human rights abuses or their increasingly bellicose stance. Taiwan has been on their agenda since 1949. They have warned us that this does not concern us and refuse diplomatic channels. They mean to take the island."

"Mr. President," the Chief of Staff began, "if we were to exert pressure on China our work on economic treaties with China could find themselves in jeopardy. Yes, there have been some...misunderstandings, but it is a large market with many opportunities for your...constituents. And we do have certain 'allies' amongst them. Mr. President, compromise is best here."

"China wants nothing less than control of Taiwan!" Admiral Odom slammed his fist on the table. "Nothing else. The people of Taiwan wish to vote on a referendum to recognize their independence internationally. Are we supposed to strip them of their rights to freedom solely for money? How are we supposed to compromise with a nation that values life below the lowest common denominator? Give China control in everything but name?"

"That is how government works," Brown curtly replied.

"They are a democracy and an ally!"

"You deal with this, Hermann. See what you can achieve." President Lucas smiled at his underlings, his naïve confidence failing to permeate this crowd. "Next?"

"It seems Russia is back to its old self again," Brown began.

"Those damn Soviets!" President Lucas snarled.

"Sir, there haven't been Soviets in over a decade," General Adams corrected him.

Lucas gave Adams a dirty look before turning back to Brown. "What are they up to now? Is there a global threat?"

"Mr. President," Brown continued, "the leader of Russia, Romanov, has dissolved their legislature and is ruling by

decree. There is fear that he might attempt to retake some of the Soviet Union's old republics and destabilize both Eastern Europe and, possibly, Central Asia."

"Where did you get that?" General Adams asked.

"His speeches have been belligerent since his re-election," Brown shot back. "He speaks of returning Russia to greatness."

"Those damn Soviets. They won't stop until they conquer the entire free world." President Lucas took another pensive pose.

The generals and admirals looked at each other with concern.

General Adams tried to counsel reason. "Sir, Russia is in no position to challenge anyone. It's merely a case of saber rattling to rally the people. We should be focusing elsewhere-"

"The Soviets only understand armed force. We learned that in Dubya Dubya Two. We should test a nuclear bomb near their borders."

The military personnel nearly leapt from their seats.

"That is illegal, Mr. President," Hermann replied.

"Well then what other options have we?" Lucas asked.

"We could go to the United Nations and urge new elections in Russia or threaten them with international sanctions," one of the junior functionaries offered. A brief silence quickly collapsed as everyone in the room laughed causing the functionary to bury his head.

"Seriously, what should we do?" President Lucas asked again.

"Put troops on their borders. Just to balance any problems resulting from the political climate in Russia affecting adjacent nations," Brown recommended.

Adams bit his tongue knowing that such an action could only stretch the military further if not further exacerbate the situation, but he knew a realistic view meant little here.

"Do it immediately!" Lucas ordered.

"We need those adjacent nations' approval first, Mr. President," Hermann corrected.

"Really?" Hermann nodded. "Well, do that and, if it comes to it, America will invade the Soviet Union to bring an end to that evil empire and give freedom to its people," President Lucas bellowed, that deep boom out of place coming from that slim frame. "President Lucas, conqueror of Communism," he murmured as everyone gave him an odd look. "Make it happen. Meeting adjourned."

As they filed out General Adams focused on his paperwork, shuffling and sorting. Admiral Odom came up to him. "You can't teach a blind man to see."

General Adams crammed his papers into his briefcase. "The bastard is an idiot. Nothing more than seductive eyes and a serpentine smile."

"Don't forget the hand to accept campaign contributions." General Adams gave up a barking laugh. "If it's any consolation, I didn't vote for him."

"Why even bother to vote? I believe in people earning their jobs."

Matthew had to get to school. He sped along the slick roads, his tires retaining traction by the sheerest of margins. Matthew would press the accelerator down to the floor, but as his car started to veer, he would slow down. Of course rational thinking would dissolve beneath the feverish mania Matthew found himself in causing him to floor it all over again. The white world whizzed by as he drove faster. Warp speed. He dove in and out of traffic, making his way through

human obstacles with homicidal ease. He played life like a video game, and now, it came time to hit reset.

A semi was in front of him kicking up melted snow and slushing his vision, the sludge splashing up onto his windshield. Matthew couldn't see anything through the dirty monsoon. Every time he tried to merge into an adjacent lane a car would zoom up cutting him off. "Make room!" he yelled slapping at each passer by. No gaps opened. Matthew screamed like a banshee, banging his wheel over and over again behind the slow semi.

Then an opportunity presented itself. A gap! It wasn't large, but it would do. He made a quick jump for it, but the sudden turn made his car swerve wildly. In a panic, Matthew kicked the brakes to the floor causing his car to lose control leaping through three lanes of traffic. "Arghhhhh!" he screamed pumping the brakes over and over again. Somehow he slid through tiny breaches avoiding cars on either side as he skidded sideways. He drove at forty-five degrees through a wall of steel. Mere inches separated him from a life of eating through a straw. The world slowed down. He could see the faces of those he missed through their windshields, Matthew's eyes locking on one driver as the gum fell out of his mouth.

Matthew regained control in the far-left lane, his brakes finally gaining traction with a squeal as time slammed back at normal speed. He slowed down to a stop, his head dropping to the steering wheel as he let out a sigh of relief. Then something bumped his car from behind. Matthew looked up into his rearview mirror. Some piece of junk truck had hit him. "You've got to be kidding me." Matthew slapped the dash. "I don't need this today. I...really...don't...need...this." He thumped his dashboard harder with the palm of his hand. He groaned as he closed

his eyes trying to calm himself. His heart kept banging away in his chest.

With few nerves and his engine still running, Matthew got out and went to speak to the driver. "So..." he started, trying to be tough. Then he saw the driver of the truck: all three hundred pounds of him. "Interesting day," he said in his friendliest tone.

"Boy, you nearly killed me!" the burly man replied.

"Me? You ran into my car!"

"You pulled in front of me like a damn fool and hit your brakes!"

"Maybe you should watch where you're going."

The burly man started towards Matthew. Maybe he would be eating through a straw after all. Matthew gauged his chances of escape. Cars zoomed by on his left as well as over the divider on his right. "Hey," Matthew grinned. The burly man kept coming, his fists clenching. God, his bicep was bigger than Matthew's head. "Hey!" Matthew waved his hands.

"Yeah, boy?"

"Maybe I could look at the damage. See what my insurance needs to cover." Matthew grinned again, feet poised to accept his chances of leaping into traffic as opposed to whether or not this human pit bull would leave his head intact.

"Yeah. Yeah, ok."

Matthew walked behind his car to look at the truck. The thing was a rust bucket. It looked like a zombie automobile with holes throughout the frame and a cracked, yellowed windshield. He took a glimpse down at the front bumper. The thing was barely hanging on thanks to wiring. "Doesn't look that bad," Matthew replied starting back to his car.

The burly man stepped in front of him. "Boy, you damaged my truck."

"Is that even possible?" The burly man grabbed him by the shirt. "Uh, you know what? Let me get a copy of my insurance card for you. So you can make the claim to put your," Matthew gulped, "truck...back in order. Ok?"

"Now we're talking." He let Matthew go.

The pair started towards Matthew's vehicle. As Matthew opened his door he reached inside but stopped. He turned to the burly man. "Could you give me your license plate number? So I can tell my insurance company."

"Yeah, sure." As the burly man retreated Matthew's eyes followed him. Once he was at the back of the truck Matthew slammed his door and sped off, the burly man screaming at him as he shrunk with each second.

"You get that plate for me?" Matthew cackled as he sped off.

The humor was short-lived. With time slipping away, the anxiety began to build in Matthew once more, each pebble of sand running through the hourglass a boulder that battered him over the head. The stress caused him to tighten, his muscles close to snapping. As he quaked and trembled, his exit came up rapidly. "Finally!" Off the main road he turned.

Within minutes he saw his college approaching on the horizon. As the campus loomed on his left Matthew pulled into the parking lot. The place was packed. He drove around discovering how full the place truly was. Cars were not only parked in spaces but also on the grass and along various lanes throughout the campus, stealing any and every available spot. Did these many people even attend this school?

An open spot! He kept his eyes open for any threats or obstacles, his eyes darting back and forth. He slowly

pattered along until he discovered that someone else had seen it. Both cars froze, their drivers carefully eyeing one another. They both needed the space. They both wanted the space. Their engines roared threateningly back and forth before they started forward. Rolling toward one another, they started picking up speed. It became a charge, the two aiming for the ultimate prize. They launched toward one another as if jousting, making for the promised spot with the cars of the lot serving as a silent audience. Both leaned forward for every necessary ounce of speed, careening towards collision.

Matthew jerked into the spot seconds before his challenger. His wheels squealed in a shrill, triumphant war cry. He raised his fist in victory. "Ah ha!" The man idled, his car huffing.

Matthew smiled as he went to open his door. It didn't budge. It had jammed again. His smile collapsed into a frown. Matthew banged it again and again, ramming his shoulder into it hopelessly. The car shook up and down. He gasped for air, the windows fogging. As he rested, he decided to simply exit out the passenger side. When he went to open the door he noticed he had parked too close on his right. He couldn't open the passenger side door all the way though he did try to ooze through the minor crack. He shut the door and bounced back into the driver's seat revving the engine back up.

Matthew went to reverse for a better parking position when he discovered the challenger still waiting behind him. He knew he would have to pull out all the way to readjust his parking, but if he did, the challenger could make a jump for the spot. No way was that happening. The challenger remained where he was. Matthew twitched back and forth.

He couldn't get out. He couldn't get out! Matthew looked down at the clock. He was late!

Matthew cracked. He started ramming his shoulder into the driver's side door again, too stubborn to give up his parking spot. He put enough force into his blows that he nearly dislocated his shoulder. The door finally popped open slamming into the car next to him. Matthew stared at the massive dent he left, his eyes widening and mouth gaping. It was at least a foot long and an inch deep; the black paint job of the neighboring car was chiseled white by his door. The sound of the engine supplemented the lack of noise from his open maw. "Oh boy," Matthew mumbled. Now what was he going to do? He turned and looked in the rearview mirror. His foe, the other car, was the same color as his: a pristine, virginal white. "HmMMM." Matthew closed the door and slowly pulled out of the spot, giving it to the challenger. Maybe another spot was better.

Matthew ran to class, flying down the hall skidding on his slippery shoes. He dodged out of a student's way and tripped over a mop bucket. He caught himself on the wall and continued running, brown mop water flooding the floor as the janitor shook a fist at him. Matthew made all haste for his class, his thigh still flaring and his toe vibrating with agony. He did a comical hopping run. "Almost there," he wheezed. He rounded the corner and saw...his entire class still outside. Matthew slowed down, trotting to the door. "What's up?" he asked.

"Professor's not here," a student replied.

"What? You're joking."

"Nope. Someone said he got arrested for a brawl at some gay bar last night."

"No way. They caught him molesting some kid," someone else passed along.

"Whatever! The guy isn't a pervert."

"He belongs to NAMBLA."

"You know he did give me an uncomfortable look once in his office," a male student offered.

"Dude, you had a burrito. Probably wanted to rape it more than you, the fat bastard."

"He's not here?" Matthew asked again, shocked at his futile need for speed.

"No way, dude. Long...gone," a stoner blew out, his hand made a sweeping motion in front of him before he stopped to watch it wave.

"What's that smell?" someone asked.

Matthew pulled away from the group a bit to hide his odor nearly bumping into a member of the faculty carrying a thick set of test booklets. "Sorry," Matthew offered.

"Hmmp." The assistant professor pushed him aside.

"Alright students, Professor Rosenberg won't be joining you today."

"Alright! No test!" someone cheered, the entire group roaring with joy.

"Oh, there will be a test." Groans filled the hallway. The assistant professor unlocked the door to let them in, smiling as they passed. The students filed in with grim enthusiasm. They dragged their feet to their seats. Matthew made it to his seat, last in the very back of the room. The culmination of four years was ahead of him and he was ready.

The professor shut the door and proceeded to pass out booklets. "Here is the exam that Professor Rosenberg has left for you. This is your future so I hope you take it...seriously." The professor stared at the stoner student as he played with the pages of his test.

The stoner kept flipping through the pages, holding it in one hand and fanning it with the other. "That is so freakin' cool." The professor grabbed it from him, opened it on the desk and slammed a pen on top of it. The stoner looked up at him and back down at the test. "Harsh, man."

The professor continued to hand out tests, eventually reaching Matthew. It must be bad Matthew thought as he watched the expressions on everyone's faces as they opened their booklets and looked at the test. The professor put a copy down on the desk along with a pen. Matthew opened the booklet to gaze at the questions that awaited him. This was the exam of his life. This was what his future hinged on. Matthew started to read. The first page had only one word on it: why. Matthew flipped through the other pages. They were blank. "You've got to be kidding," he blurted. The class hissed for silence. He blushed a little, his nose spasming at the stale smell of urine and air freshener. Matthew turned back to his test.

Why? Matthew thought to himself. *Why? WHY! I have taken this subject for four years, questioned the world around me, studied at least an hour or two last night for this stupid class and that is the test? WHY?!?!?* Matthew looked up and realized a few of the students were staring at him. "Sorry," he offered before letting his eyes flick back down to the test. Matthew stared in stunned disbelief at the single word, that lone typed word, on the opening page of his exam. Three letters stood arranged against him.

He became agitated. This was it? "My life is an anticlimax," he whispered. *Why? Is there really any answer?* He heard the scribbling of the class. He glanced up as everyone wrote down their theories on reality. Everyone believed in something, had some belief as to why everything was. Was there really any reason? Matthew thought of

himself. What exactly was his reason? He hadn't made any earth shattering revelations. He'd never accomplished anything of worth. For all intents and purposes, if he died today or had never been born would the world really be any better or worse? If there was no real reason for his existence then what reason was there for these people's existences?

This is a cheap, third-rate college. Will any of these people really accomplish anything? In fact, has anyone really accomplished anything? For all our years of civilization, we're nothing more than animals that think. Crudely virile, violently territorial: we put more stock in the physical and forget the spiritual. Does that mean we lack that spark of the divine? Maybe we are truly like our Creator, this dirtball called Earth. All we care about is material: bodies, resources, useless crap. Nothing has ever really changed that. Have we really come any closer to that vision of perfection we're always talking about? Has humanity really changed at all since its inception? We still live like we always have, but what exactly does that even mean? What exactly does humanity do that serves a purpose? We eat, crap, screw, and sleep. Well, I do at least three of those. Life is merely survival, but what use is surviving for no better reason than to be?

So what are we? Why are we? All we really seem to be is a variable for balance in some complex system. Is that all we are? There are places on Earth where life functions well enough without any humans at all. In fact, thrives despite us. If humans aren't really needed then is life even needed? If thought can be done away with then why even bother with thoughtless creatures that bring nothing to existence? The majority of space seems empty of life. So if life isn't really needed for reality then why is reality if there is no life needed

to document it and function in it? Is there any reason or is it just because? Hmmmmm.

Matthew had been chewing on his pen failing to notice he had been sucking the ink out. *Because.* Matthew liked that. Nothing really had to be. It just was. There was no purpose, just chance. There was no destiny, only possibility.

Matthew excitedly wrote out his answer, "because", and smiled to himself, teeth blackened. He was a genius, a brilliant philosopher. He gave himself a light punch to the shoulder, smiling. Then he realized the class was watching him again. He got up and marched to the front of the class, test in hand, triumphant. *Let them watch, the fools. They wrote their volumes of crap. Not !! I can truly see.* Matthew banged his knee right into one of the desks as he walked, his reflexes causing his foot to jerk driving his injured toe into a table leg. Matthew winced horribly. The class looked at him as he bent over in pain. Realizing their eyes were on him, Matthew quickly straightened, finished walking to the front, put his test on the professor's desk and gave them all a bow. He walked out the door.

"Forgot your books!" one of the students yelled to Matthew.

Matthew hurried back into the class. Gathering his texts in hand, the pile proved too cumbersome and he dropped one on the floor. He bent down to get it and whacked his head hard on the desk. He rubbed his bruise in agony, but bravely picked up his dropped book and stood proudly. "It was meant to be." Matthew struck a pose for the ages and then walked out of class not wanting to see the class' expressions.

Matthew exited the building walking towards the parking lot. No one was in the quad as he passed through. In fact,

the entire place seemed empty. When he reached the parking lot he discovered a multitude of open spots. *Yeah, empty now*, he thought to himself as he approached his car. Matthew slid his key into the door and wrestled with it, finally jerking it open. That was when he heard a voice behind him. "Matthew Ford." The voice wasn't asking.

Matthew turned around and was confronted by two miniature figures. The two "men" were no taller than four foot dressed in white suits. Their skin was pale, their hair curly and golden. Their eyes were covered by silver tinted glasses. "Can I help you?"

"We need you to come with us," one of the smartly dressed midgets said.

"I don't think so," Matthew chuckled. "The yellow brick road isn't on my way."

The other vertically challenged fellow grabbed Matthew's arm. "We're not asking. We're ordering."

Matthew slapped his hand away. "Hey, watch it Cabbage Patch Mafia. Society might have treated you badly, but don't take it out on me."

"You have business with our boss."

"I didn't win any golden ticket so go back to Willy Wonka and give him my regards."

The two midgets looked at each other. They both turned to Matthew, their faces starting to mottle. "Don't make us tell you again."

"Then stop asking. I've had a bad day so piss off!"

Matthew turned his back to them to get in his car. As he went to open the door the one midget got on all fours. His partner ran and jumped off the other's back onto Matthew's wrapping his tiny arms around Matthew's throat. The impact drove Matthew headfirst into the door aggravating the bruise he got in class and slamming the door shut. The other

midget grabbed Matthew by the leg. There Matthew stood, getting jumped by dwarves. The one on Matthew's back tried to choke him, baby fingers tickling his neck as little feet banged into his lower back.

"Don't make this any harder on yourself," the midget on Matthew's back gasped into his ear. Matthew threw him over his shoulder to the pavement. As his partner saw him fall he bit into Matthew's thigh. Matthew screamed and started kicking trying to throw the midget off. His friend was quick to his feet, running at Matthew with top speed to head-butt him right in the crotch. Matthew dropped due to damaged goods. The other midget released his leg and proceeded to grab Matthew by the hair. Matthew had just enough time to see that dastardly dwarf of nut-butting brutality preparing for a second run, this time headed for his face. Matthew quickly jerked to the side sending the charging midget into the car door. The dwarf dropped stunned.

Matthew leaned forward to grab the keys he had dropped, the other midget trying to pull him back by the hair. Matthew threw elbow after elbow behind him until he knocked the little guy down. Matthew grabbed the keys in one hand and the leg of one of the midgets with another. He dragged the munchkin to the back of the car and unlocked the trunk. He threw the midget in and slammed it shut. "We're going to the cops. See if they can't cut your ass down to size." Matthew pounded on the trunk. "You like that? Huh?" He pounded some more.

Matthew looked around the car for the other dwarf, but he was gone. Matthew slowly stalked around the vehicle, looking under it. No one was there. He went and unlocked the driver's door, quickly glancing over his shoulder, before prying it open and climbed in. As he was about to turn the

key in the ignition he looked into the rearview mirror. His nose was bleeding. *Those little punks!*

Suddenly the passenger side window exploded into shards. Matthew turned to see a rock in the seat next to him. There was a thud and then another. Matthew looked out the window to see the missing midget throwing stones at his car. He hurriedly exited, leaving the keys inside. "Stop that!" Matthew yelled. The dwarf responded with a rock that barely missed Matthew's head. "Hey!" The midget threw another rock catching Matthew in the knee. Matthew limped after the little fellow. The midget threw a final rock in a futile attempt to end the stunted charge hitting Matthew in the arm. The little guy quickly ran with Matthew in hot pursuit. They circled around the car as if playing a kid's game. Though his heart was in it, those short legs were no match for Matthew's. Matthew quickly grabbed the midget in a headlock and started dragging him kicking and screaming back to his car.

Matthew grabbed the keys and limped back to the trunk. "I thought you guys were supposed to be happy. Whistling while you work and shit." The midget fought with him as he popped the trunk. As it opened the midget trapped inside jumped up and knocked Matthew out with a tire iron.

Groggy, Matthew started to wake up. His head ached. Where the hell was he? Matthew slowly rose to see he was in the backseat of his car. The two midgets were in the front driving, one on the pedals the other minding the wheel. The window that had been smashed out had plastic taped over it.

The midget on the floor looked up. "Oh, you're finally awake."

"Stop the car. I said stop it!" Matthew started to climb into the front seat when the midget driving pulled out a silver

wand and touched it to Matthew shocking him. Matthew grabbed his arm in pain.

"Stay back there!"

"What is going on?" Matthew looked out the windows and only saw fog. "Where the hell are we going?"

"Well, certainly not there. No good roads there anyway. They have better public transportation, what with the large numbers."

"Excuse me?" As hard as Matthew tried he couldn't discern anything through the haze. "Where are we? The mountains?" As he asked he saw a break in the mist and discovered they were thousands of feet in the air. "Whoa!" The two midgets laughed as he stared wide-eyed at the expanse.

The car eventually broke through the ceiling of cloud cover. The blue sky was bare before them. "We want to make it before the next millennium. Gas it!" The midget pushed the pedal all the way to the floor throwing Matthew backwards in his seat. The blue sky darkened and went black, stars glistening in space.

"Guys, I'd really like to go home. I have a dog. Need to feed it-"

"Don't worry. You can go home after you see the boss."

"Wasn't that Venus?" Matthew asked as they flashed by a planet.

"Yeah."

Matthew gazed out at its retreating shape, yellow and glorious. It shone like a pearl in the void. "So, are you guys aliens?"

"Why would you ask that?" the midget on the floor queried.

"Well, I've been abducted, and we are in space. That wasn't an anal probe you zapped me with, was it?"

"We're not aliens!"

A blackened sphere approached. "What the hell is that?"

"Mercury."

"Mercury?" Matthew winced at a blinding light that began to pour in the side window. "Holy..." He leapt to the other side of the car. The sun was massive, its fiery arms curling towards them. "Where are you taking me?"

"There." The midget driving pointed to what seemed a dimple in space. As they approached, Matthew saw what could only be dubbed an anomaly. It was exceptionally black, even blacker than all that around it. It was like someone had taken reality and twisted it, a whirlpool of space-time.

"What's that?"

"Our exit."

It struck Matthew all at once. "That's a black hole!"

They drove towards the edge, the car locked in and beginning to spiral down into that insubstantial tunnel. Matthew freaked out and lunged again for the wheel. "Get back!" The midget screamed, trying to zap him with the wand. Matthew tried to turn them away as the midget on the floor jumped up to help handle the wheel. The car swerved back and forth on the cusp of the black hole, wavering on the edge.

"No, we can't go in!" Matthew screamed.

"Will you let go!" the midget with the wand yelled, zapping Matthew again and again with it. The wheel turned hard as Matthew released it and the other midget pulled. The car veered right sharply and teetered on the hole, slowly moving up and down as the nose of the car overlooked the depths. "Hit the accelerator."

"No!" Matthew jumped forward again, the weight throwing the car into the depths. Matthew screamed as the car

dropped like a roller coaster into the black hole dropping for miles at immense speed, each foot accelerating them further. Weight increased as they quickened down the hole, Matthew's body shoved back against his seat. An invisible hand tried to push him through the back of the car, his face contorting beneath the pressure.

The speed eased as did the pressure, and they began to glide through the darkness. Points of light emerged and sparkled, multiplying. Matthew stared at what seemed a glistening expanse ahead. "What's that?" Matthew asked as they floated towards it.

"Must you ask what everything is?" Matthew nodded dumbly. "It's a parking lot if you must know."

There were millions of them, cars of all makes and eras neatly parked for what seemed miles in the darkness of space. They glided to the outskirts of the lot and came to a stop. "Great. No spots!"

"Maybe over there," the midget offered. They coasted around a few minutes before finding and settling into a spot.

"Where are we?" Matthew asked as the midgets opened the door and jumped out.

"Heaven, you moron."

"Heaven? There is a parking lot in heaven?"

"Come on," the pair ordered as they approached his door.

"Come on where?" Matthew asked quickly grabbing the handle to prevent them from dragging him out.

"You've got to meet our boss," they told him.

"I think I'll stay right here."

The two midgets grabbed the door and tried to yank it open as Matthew pulled against them. "You're only making this harder on yourself," they warned him. The tug of war seemed never-ending until one of the dwarves quickly ran

around the side of the car and opened the door behind Matthew, dragging him out onto the asphalt.

Matthew screamed, kicking and thrashing until he hit the ground. "Whoa...it's solid."

"Of course it's solid. What did you think we walked on? Clouds?"

"Don't forget the parking pass. I don't want a ticket." One of the midgets pulled a decal out of his pocket and put it on the dash.

"Let's go."

"Go?" Matthew asked, looking at the steel and glass that surrounded him in perpetual twilight. "Go where? There's nothing but cars around."

One of the midgets looked down at his watch. "A shuttle should be by in a few minutes. They'll take us in."

They had been riding the shuttle for hours, there appearing no end to the rows upon rows of cars. The monotony was driving Matthew insane. "You guys have a car right?" he asked.

"Yeah," one of them answered.

"So don't you have a reserved spot? Why did we park so far out?"

"You wouldn't fit in our car. Besides, you have to go through immigration."

"Immigration?"

The shuttle slowed and came to a stop. "This is our exit."

Matthew stretched his legs before exiting the shuttle, his appendages gone numb from the long ride. What he saw upon exiting was lines upon lines of people that appeared to stretch for hundreds of miles. "This is going to be a long wait."

"Don't worry. Just follow us." They made their way forward, walking parallel to one of the waiting columns, those standing giving them irritated expressions as they passed. Eventually they found the destination these people were waiting for. A wall of white marble that was imbued with an elegant glow, higher than Matthew could see as he stared up into the black sky, stood before them with gates of silver, gold, and bronze. The gates, too numerous to count, were sculpted into amazing arrays of twisted metal that spiraled, circled, and bore a design that captivated the eyes and made one's vision drunk with beauty. Before these were little booths that seemed too modern for the classical design behind them, spare of any design or artistic quality. Thousands of booths, forged of glass and steel, were separated into various sections into which the multiple lines streamed into. Above each section were signs: Employees, Citizens, Near Death, Permanent Residents, and Reincarnation. The officers of each section wore immaculate, pressed suits of an unearthly silken white. Their ties were a sterling silver. They had thin computer screens embedded into the desks before them into which they stared when they spoke with those at the front of each line. Matthew followed the dwarves as they cut a swath through the queues.

"Here is a stamp to get back in when you return," Matthew overheard an officer in the "Near Death" section tell the person at his station.

"Oh, thank you." The man turned around and was escorted away.

At another section an officer in the "Citizens" portion asked the person at the front of the line, "Do you believe in the infallibility of our Lord and Savior?"

"No one knows everything," the man cynically replied.

"Fail. Go to the Reincarnation line."

"But I've been in this line over twenty years." The man's lip quivered, his eyes slanted in disappointment.

"Go to the reincarnation line," the officer ordered, pointing.

"I can't go back." Guards appeared from out of nowhere, giants at least ten feet tall. "Please! I believe. I swear-" He was seized and pulled away from the rest of the group.

The midgets pushed through the line under "Employees", getting a lot of flack from those in front. One of the officers stepped in the way. "He can't come through here," the officer stated stabbing a finger at Matthew. "He has to show his papers at the 'Permanent Residents' line."

"We've got authorization otherwise," the midgets responded flashing some weird, metallic document. The guard scanned it, giving the odd group the once over. He waved them through. The midgets grabbed Matthew by either hand and pulled him through the turnstile. They walked towards walls that glowed even in this eternal night and the gates began to open, a golden light piercing the darkness.

CHAPTER 3

Matthew and the midgets found themselves in the lush plains of Paradise. Every color was heightened and pleasing to the eyes. The sky was golden without clouds to smother the enriching light of ethereal origin. The wind was soft and caressing, blowing from their back towards whatever waited ahead, gently nudging them forward. The blades of grass, knee level in height, seemed to wave asking them to venture into this realm of perfection. It was unnerving to Matthew's mortally flawed vision. "This is Heaven?" he asked. One of the midgets turned around to give Matthew an irritated look. "Sorry. I pictured something...more." The other midget turned around to glare at him. Matthew instinctively went on the defensive. "Hey, I read *Paradise Lost*. I expected domes and arches and togas. You know singing angels and such. Not...the fields of Indiana."

"*Paradise Lost* was written by a blind man. Why would you listen to the visual descriptions of a blind man?"

"Be happy he even read a book," retorted the other midget.

"Be happy you're not still in my trunk," Matthew returned in kind.

"Excuse me!" the midget yelled as he started towards Matthew.

"Stop, Ezekiel." Ezekiel stomped on despite his partner's warning. "Stop!" The one midget grabbed the other trying to pull him back.

"Whatever. Guys, can we speed this up. I really need to get back home before my mother gets a one way ticket here."

"Like I really care-" Ezekiel started.

"He's right. We need to keep her down there as long as possible," his partner quickly cut in.

"Oh, you know her?" Matthew asked. The one midget shuddered. "Yeah, you know her. So now what?"

"We go to Zion."

"Zion?"

"Yes," Ezekiel replied.

Matthew looked left and right seeing nothing but grassy plains. "Uh, where is that? It's not a state of mind is it?"

"Don't be so damned metaphysical. It's a few dozen kilometers north."

"What the hell is a kilometer?" Matthew asked.

Ezekiel gave Matthew a quizzical look. "You don't know what a kilometer is?"

"Of course he doesn't. Americans are too stubborn to use the universal metric system. Then they wouldn't be special."

"I forgot," Ezekiel replied, once more glaring at Matthew. "Always trying to be different. Problem with too much freedom. Think you know it all." Ezekiel turned back to his short companion. "Come on, Mel, let's go." The two midgets lifted into the air, their baby legs dangling freely. They flew into the sky leaving Matthew behind on the ground.

"Uh, guys..." The two midgets continued to fly away. "Guys?" Matthew was starting to lose sight of them. He cupped his hands together around his mouth. "Guys!"

The two soaring dwarves froze in the sky looking down at Matthew. "What?" came Ezekiel's distant voice.

"Are you just going to leave me here?"

"Get off your flat feet and follow us," Ezekiel ordered.

Matthew jerked his head back a bit. "What are you talking about? I can't fly."

Mel looked at Ezekiel as they fluttered in the firmament. "He can't fly?"

"Uh oh," Ezekiel muttered while rubbing his left eye with the palm of his hand.

"You said humans flew!" Mel floated over and shoved Ezekiel.

"They do! I've seen it!" Ezekiel shoved back.

"Where?"

"In movies."

"All you know about humans is from movies!" Mel shouted. "Don't you ever do real research?"

"What? Are you saying movies aren't real?" Ezekiel asked.

"You're just as bad as he is," Mel responded insultingly with his finger jutting at Matthew below.

"You take that back!" Ezekiel demanded, shaking his fist at Mel.

"No!" challenged Mel, sticking his jaw out for any coming blow. Ezekiel obliged him with a punch to the chin, the puny pugilist knocking Mel a few feet south. Mel's eyes went wild as he recovered, soaring up and spearing Ezekiel in the chest with his shoulder bowling them both over.

They wrestled in the sky, Matthew watching as they dove and rose, twisting through the expanse. Their curses filtered down to him as he beheld the holy smack down. Matthew mockingly cheered and booed, punching at invisible opponents and chanting for one then the other dwarf. "That's right, lay the wrath of God on him!" Matthew crowed, throwing punch after punch into thin air. He did a karate kick with a mocking "Hi ya!" Matthew laughed as he viewed the miniature melee above. His grin turned to a frown as he saw them hurtling down right towards him, spiraling faster and faster, their cries growing louder. He jumped out of the way as the two, screaming all the way, smashed into the ground sweating and heaving, tearing up the fertile earth of Eden.

They bounced twice before rolling on the ground facedown. Matthew looked up from where he landed, staring at the two munchkins as they remained prone on the grass. He got up slowly. He stepped carefully as he approached the shattered duo, nudging one in the ribs with his worn boot.

"Piss off!" Ezekiel replied before shoving Matthew's foot away.

"That's no way to speak in Heaven." Matthew clucked his tongue. He walked over and offered his hand to Mel helping him up. When he did the same for Ezekiel the midget ignored it and stood up on his own. "My hand not good enough?"

"I don't need anyone's help." Ezekiel waved him off.

"HMMMMM," Matthew stared at the little macho man. "Someone has a problem with anger management."

"I have a problem?" Ezekiel ran and kicked Matthew right in his broken toe. Matthew yelped as he fell to a knee. Ezekiel glowered at Matthew now at eye level. Matthew's eyes watered from the agony. "Not such a big man now are you?" Ezekiel taunted.

Matthew's arms shot out grabbing Ezekiel by the throat. Tightening his calloused hands on soft skin, Matthew throttled the little man and shook him without pity. Ezekiel, his face purple, started to fly up in order to pull away. Matthew slowly lost his grip, his fingers gradually slipping off baby fat. As Ezekiel thought he had scored freedom, Matthew latched onto his leg. Ezekiel darted left and right trying to shake his grasp. Matthew held on tight, his feet occasionally leaving the ground.

"Stop it!" yelled Mel. Matthew and Ezekiel paused. Mel ran his chubby fingers through his curly hair. He sighed, closing then opening his eyes slowly. "Can we just get going?"

Matthew released Ezekiel reluctantly. He looked down at his hurt foot and shook it a little to ease the discomfort before looking up again. "So, what are we doing? Walking?"

"No way!" Ezekiel crossed his arms. "I am not wasting the next four hours. Walking is for animals anyway."

Mel gave Ezekiel an exasperated expression before turning back to Matthew. "Well, I guess we need to carry you."

Matthew gave them an incredulous look. "Yeah right."

"What?" Ezekiel frowned. "We can carry you."

Matthew knitted his brows together as he looked at the pair, shaking his head smiling as he raised his arms gesturing them forward. "Go for it, little Hercules." The two midgets grabbed Matthew under each arm and tried to lift him into the air. Matthew's feet slowly rose, up, up, then down. The midgets tried again. Up, up, down. The midgets struggled for air.

"This man stinks," Ezekiel coughed as he covered his nose and mouth after whiffing Matthew's armpit.

Matthew felt that barb as it cut deeply into his sensitive self-esteem; mock him and his fragile ego would shatter into a series of sharp rebuttals. "Maybe a little pixie dust there, Tinkerbelle, and we'll be away," Matthew ribbed as they tried to lift him again. Ezekiel slapped him in the back of the head. Matthew tightened his arm around Ezekiel's throat putting him in a headlock. As Ezekiel kicked for freedom Mel grabbed Matthew around the head, wrapping his thighs around Matthew's neck, and pulled up. "Hey! HEY! I need that!" Matthew yelled, releasing Ezekiel and swatting Mel off.

Ezekiel was quickly losing patience with their failing attempts. "Climb on my back." Ezekiel flew down to chest level, his big butt in Matthew's face.

"I'm not so sure. I mean, you being a fairy and all, this seems kind of gay-"

"Just climb on my back!"

Matthew looked at the tiny figure floating before him. Despite his misgivings, he mounted the little guy. He wrapped his arms around Ezekiel's waist, tiny as it was, as Ezekiel tried to stay afloat. They jerked up and down as the weight proved a little more than even Ezekiel's ego could handle.

"I kind of enjoy this," Matthew quipped as the two dipped and popped up like a merry-go-round. Eventually they collapsed to the ground where Ezekiel still tried to fly, his little frame lost beneath Matthew. Ezekiel continued to thrash around underneath. Matthew looked up at Mel as Ezekiel's attempts only accomplished a mild tilting side to side. "Keep some dignity," Matthew joked, patting Ezekiel on the back as he got off.

"Well, now what?" Mel asked.

"Gravity just kicked your ass, that's now what."

Mel looked off into the distance. "Well, I guess we walk."

"What, you guys don't have a phone or anything? You know, call a taxi or something."

"We don't need phones up here," Mel chided.

Matthew looked down at Ezekiel, still facedown on the ground too tired to rise. "Seems like you do now."

Ezekiel stood up on shaky legs. "Let's just get going." Mel rose into the air, flying at shoulder level. Ezekiel proved too weak to follow.

Matthew reached over. "Come on, I'll carry you on my shoulders."

"I can make it on my own, thank you." Ezekiel jumped into the air and landed flat on his face. He looked up, his face wet with sweat. He stood up to try again, but stopped

himself. "I think I'll take that offer." Ezekiel climbed on, resting his hands on the top of Matthew's head.

They walked through the fields of Paradise, a gentle melody singing through the lush grass as the wind played them like a series of natural instruments. After twenty minutes Matthew saw figures in the distance. As they approached, Matthew could almost make them out. "Hey, who are they?"

"Who?" Ezekiel looked over and around Matthew's head.

"Them." Matthew pointed. They appeared to be human. Tan and in tattered clothes, the group muttered in what seemed to be Spanish.

"Oh no, not more." Mel flew after them yelling warnings. The figures quickly turned and ran the opposite way disappearing into the brush.

"What's that all about?" Matthew asked.

"Mexicans don't just sneak into the U.S. these days," Ezekiel replied in Matthew's ear.

"Good border control."

Ezekiel boxed his left ear. "Hey, you try guarding all of Existence and see if there aren't cracks."

Matthew put his hands up in defeat, and they continued on without speaking. The silence of their march greatly bothered Matthew, a man whose mouth proved the asshole of his mind. It also suffered a serious case of diarrhea. If he thought it he said it immediately always creating quite a mess for himself.

"You guys aren't quite as I expected."

"What do you mean?" Ezekiel asked.

"Well, I pictured you...taller. And with wings."

"Wings?" Ezekiel squinted his eyes. "Can I ask why you humans always assume we have wings?"

"Well, you fly for one thing. And I saw them in pictures and a few movies-"

"Movies? Pictures? Don't you ever think for yourself?"

"Ezekiel, you're one to talk," Mel chastised his partner. "Besides, you keep forgetting he's American. If it isn't audio or visual they tend to miss it-"

"Unless there are big boobs next to the words. Then they read." Ezekiel smiled at his own wit while bouncing on Matthew's shoulders.

"Hey, if she thought it was important enough to show her assets it has to be worth my time," Matthew blurted out. His face changed expressions quickly as he cocked his head in the direction of the dwarf riding his shoulders. "Why am I even talking to you about boobs, you prepubescent pixie?"

"I am a cherub?" Ezekiel sniffed.

"What the hell is a cherub? Is that another name for angel?"

"Sometimes I wonder why we allow humans in here since they seem far more obsessed with Hell. Then again, the majority do have to plan for their future accommodations." Mel floated alongside the two, his cynicism too heavy for his weightless form. "We're not angels, right Ezekiel?" Ezekiel kept quiet as he continued riding Matthew's shoulders as if they were a proud mare and he king. "Ezekiel?"

"You're not angels?" Matthew's interest was piqued.

"Of course we are," Ezekiel quickly replied discounting Mel's confession.

"We're not angels," Mel stated, peeved at Ezekiel's tact.

"We're the personal servants of God," Ezekiel countered.

Matthew seemed lost on the differing viewpoints. "Are you new?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"Well...you're kids."

"I am over ten millennia old!" screamed Ezekiel boxing Matthew's ears again.

"Do that again and you won't see bedtime!" Matthew growled as he grabbed a pudgy arm nearly yanking the cherub from his shoulders.

Mel let out a deep breath. "We never grow up. We stay this way forever."

"You're kids forever?"

"We prefer eternal innocents. We never learn the sins of life nor the moral loss of maturity."

"You don't quite seem innocent to me."

"Blame it on Ezekiel. He got us this job. I preferred my harp but no, he had to be where the action was."

"What do you mean?"

"Technically only angels communicate between man and Heaven," Mel started.

"Hey, I belong to a union for a reason, and they can't keep me out on account of who I am. I have seniority." Ezekiel thumped his chest.

"Union? They have unions here?" Matthew tilted his head up to Ezekiel.

"Hey, we're tired of being taken advantage of. We're not some form of entertainment and cuteness to be admired. When the angels go off to fight, who do you think took care of this place?"

"Here we go," muttered Mel.

"Up until two millennia ago those angelic pricks went off to war and left us. Who do you think kept this place running in their absence?" Ezekiel once more thumped his chest. "We did and guess what. We did pretty well. And every time they came back they wanted us to return to our harps and simply forget any leading role in the affairs of Heaven. Us! We kept things going while they abandoned us to play. We've got

rights! I'm tired of discrimination! I am not an object! This is my land! I have every right to a say in it!"

"Ok, cabbage patch," Matthew replied trying to soothe the little man.

"What?" Ezekiel whispered. "WHAT!"

"He values your contributions, don't you?" Mel subtly nodded his head, Matthew understanding.

"Sure. You...be strong." Ezekiel climbed off Matthew's shoulders and flew, moving slowly and obviously straining before dipping and finally touching the ground. Matthew offered his shoulders again, but Ezekiel's pride preferred to walk along the ground, his small steps making him have to run to keep up.

"For eternal innocents, you guys sure seem mature."

"That's what happens when you have contact with mortals." Mel instinctively wiped his hands on his suit. "They corrupt everything."

They reached the outskirts of Zion a few hours later. Matthew was amazed at the size of it as they advanced, the city stretching endlessly across the horizon. It glistened in an amber radiance, an amazing collection of sparkling pillars. Zion was a garden of light, a series of flashes and glowing luminescence. It was as if the city ahead were constructed of the rays of the sun.

As the whole fell away into individual parts with every step, Matthew's awe ebbed. The buildings were not like Ancient Greece or Rome. It wasn't even on par with New York City. The glimmer itself was an illusion. Shining off what appeared to be diamond and silver, closer inspection proved the buildings were nothing more than mere glass and steel. Every building, row upon row, was a simple oval of glass and

steel. No ornate styling. No individuality. *How did they even know the difference between each one?*

"This...is Zion?" Matthew stopped to let the wave of disappointment pass over him. "Very original." His voice dripped with sarcasm.

"Must you...be critical of everything?" Ezekiel gasped as he trailed a hundred feet behind, close to collapse from running for miles.

"Where's the grandeur? Where's the originality? I thought this place looked like Greece. Or Disneyland."

"Are you in Greece? Are you even on Earth?" Mel asked.

"No," Matthew replied.

"So why would you think it should look like something from Earth?"

Matthew shrugged his shoulders. "I'm just saying as the pinnacle of Existence it falls flat."

Mel offered up a sad look. "You stress appearance far more than substance. Still, what do you expect? Our talent pool isn't very large or skilled."

"Why? This is Heaven, where the best go. Couldn't you draft that Michelangelo guy for some double-duty up here?"

"Most artists have a few problems." Mel rotated his right hand in a circle.

"And your point?" Matthew asked.

"Where do you think they go?"

Matthew thought a bit. "They go down there?" He pointed down.

"Yes," Mel replied. "Besides, most of their views are a little too liberal for up here."

"I thought Hell was fire and brimstone?"

"Hell is flash without substance."

Matthew nodded while trying to comprehend. "So, it's like Vegas only hotter." He looked around. "Well, so much for variety. Why does substance have to be so dull?"

"You ask too many questions. I miss the ones that went on faith."

"Well, I am seeing Zion, but I'm not believing it-"

"Can we go now?"

Matthew, disillusioned, acquiesced. "Sure."

Ezekiel struggled on, his steps awkward, falling forward and grabbing Matthew's leg for support. His hair was dripping, his face lathered. He panted and slouched. "Can we...wait...three minutes?"

"We don't have time to waste. Come on." Mel flew onwards into the city. Matthew followed him, Ezekiel nearly falling on his face with his support gone. He weaved back and forth before regaining a sort of balance, stepping with a drunken gait after them, his suit drenched with yellow stains.

The grass stopped at the outskirts of Zion, crushed beneath stone streets and a round wall of buildings that seemed to mark the city's periphery. They walked on roads of limestone, trees lining the path. Here and there, swaths of land were still virginal like the fields beyond, islands of nature in this city of Heaven.

Humans of all eras, dressed in all periods, wandered the streets. Oddly, they were all Caucasian. Matthew didn't think much of it; only that they seemed mindless, looking straight ahead as they marched on. They didn't acknowledge one another as they passed. Some rested under trees while others looked off to the horizon behind Matthew and his hosts as if they weren't even there. Matthew snuck up to one of the resting inhabitants, waving his hand back and forth in front of their face. Nothing. Matthew got up a little freaked.

Then he noticed it. Softly, a recording played throughout the streets: "Independent thought only confuses and blinds you from the truth. Faith is the way. Trust in faith. Faith is good." It seemed to loop, barely audible, but it was still there.

"Why does everyone look so bored...and drugged?" Matthew asked as they walked past the souls of Zion. "And where are the shadows?" Matthew hadn't realized it until now, but no darkness existed here; not even shade beneath the trees.

"You try living a few centuries. Eventually you do everything, hear everything. For us it isn't so bad, but you humans...ugh. You always need something new. If not for enforced serenity you people would be too troublesome-"

"Enforced serenity?" Matthew asked.

A bell tolled from some hidden location chiming the change of the hour. Suddenly everyone came to life charging for the buildings. Matthew had to dodge the rampage as Mel flew over it. Ezekiel screamed as he was butted to and fro by knees and feet.

And then there was no one. The roads were vacant and quiet. "We'd best keep moving," Mel told them. They navigated the deserted streets, the emptiness eerie. Matthew went to ask why everyone had bolted, but caught himself. Did he really want to know? Besides, something else was eating at him. "Do Asians go to Heaven?"

"What?" Mel asked taken aback.

"The Asians. You know, Japanese and Chinese. Are they allowed up here?"

"Why would you ask that?" Mel questioned.

"Well, I didn't see any samurai or geishas. Plus most of them are Buddhist...or Hindu...or some other weird religion. Matter of fact, I didn't see any minorities around. Do you guys discriminate on who you allow to immigrate up here?"

"The requirements are the same for everyone," Mel told him. "We show no favoritism."

"Do you have to be Christian to get in?"

Mel looked back and forth to make sure no one was listening. "Christianity isn't the end all be all of Existence," he whispered behind his hand.

"Meaning?"

"There are other ways." As Matthew was about to ask again Mel shook his finger. "No, don't ask." Mel looked around again as if they were being watched. "Best not to know."

Matthew pursed his lips. They continued on through the city blocks. No matter how far they walked it seemed they traveled the same path over and over again. Matthew tried to break the insane sameness and inject some variety. "So where are they?"

"Who?" Mel asked.

"The Blacks. The Asians."

"Not in this section of Heaven."

"Heaven is segregated?"

"Yes," Mel replied.

"You guys aren't racist are you?" Matthew asked.

"Why do you say that?" Mel barked before stopping.

"Hey, I know how it is. You guys are blonde haired, blue eyed, keep the minorities out of your living space." Matthew licked his lips and whispered, "Hitler isn't God is he?"

"That is quite enough!" Mel screamed. "Do not speak to me again."

"I was just cur-"

"Shhhhh!" Mel hissed.

Ezekiel continued to stagger after them leaving puddles behind him as his blistered feet minced his steps. His hair was no longer curly but straight and hanging with droplets

flowing down them like golden stalagmites. His cheeks were a bright red. His arms hung limply as his little legs tried to keep up. He had a black eye from the stampede as well as footprints on his suit.

Matthew looked around as they strode through the Kingdom of Heaven. He found himself bored by this seeming perfection. It was so controlled, lacking random variety or artistic expression. It was minimalism in its purest form, all decoration stripped away for the most utilitarian architecture. All color had been pressed together and bled into a sterile white. It was...unnatural. Maybe life did end with death.

Matthew stopped. Something different caught his eye. Color! There was actual color. Not white, not clear, not steel but actual color! Matthew wandered in a separate direction to see exactly what dared to defy conformity. Mel flew on oblivious to the fact that Matthew was no longer behind him. Ezekiel collapsed on the grassy knoll enjoying the sweet, sweet release of rest.

Matthew hurried back down the block and found the street the color had come from. As he turned down it he discovered the origin of said color. A giant sign floated between two buildings. On it, a man with cropped black hair and a beard smiled down on the street below. It read, "Obey the word." The sign itself was framed in white and gold, the words in a sky blue on a background of purple. Matthew found himself scrutinizing the face of the Messiah. It was so alien. Far from beautiful it seemed...common. His face was round with a bulbous nose. Where was the flowing fair hair? And those black eyes. Didn't Jesus have blue eyes? Matthew couldn't get over it. His short attention was snagged when he heard muffled laughter. It came from one of the apartments.

He followed the sound to one of the buildings and peeked in through the transparent glass. Everyone inside was

watching television. "So that's where everyone went," he said to himself. They seemed hypnotized by whatever program was playing. A woman and two men were leaning forward, perched on the edge of their seats. They smiled and giggled. The obsessiveness in their eyes was scary. Matthew knocked on the glass trying to see if they were real. Not a single eye turned his way. This place was strange indeed. Matthew walked a few feet to the side and stared in another window. Another group of people watched television just as transfixed. They seemed in some sort of rapture.

Mel was amazed at how quiet Matthew had been. Five minutes without speech. The human was learning a sort of patience. "I'm sorry for my outburst," Mel said over his shoulder. "I guess I am not really good with people." Mel flew on. He started to get irritated. "You could say you accept my apology." Still no response. "Didn't your-" Mel turned around to see only the blank road behind him. "Oh no."

Mel rapidly flew back in the direction from which he came trying to find out where Matthew had vanished to. "Hello? Hello?" Mel called down every block he passed, darting this way and that. Mel was in a panic. This was not good. Not good at all.

But if he did lose Matthew, what would that mean? So he would lose his job. Not like he enjoyed going down to Earth anyway. The place was too disorganized and dirty for his liking. Besides, then he could go back to playing his harp. He could also lose this ugly, tight, constrictive suit and return to his toga. Now that was an outfit. Loose, flowing, really breezy and never hard on the nether regions unlike these pants which were chafing once again.

As Mel contemplated giving up, tugging at his crotch, he was shocked to see someone unconscious on the ground.

Mel burst forward to see what the problem was. He dropped to the ground and waddled over to the miniature form. "Ezekiel," he cried as he turned him over. Ezekiel emitted a little moan as Mel dropped him. "You're soaking wet!" Ezekiel gave him a fuzzy stare, clearly out of it. "Great, just great," Mel replied.

The anchorman looked out at his audience, his trademark smile followed by a wink opening the program. "In world news tonight, problems between India and Pakistan continue to spiral out of control. India, claiming international right, swarmed into the disputed province of Kashmir in order to capture suspected militants sought in connection with an attack on their national parliament. Rumors of possible atrocities have started leaking out.

"Also in the news today, protests erupted throughout Europe at the heavy-handedness of the United States." The camera panned over swarms of people throughout the cities of Paris, Berlin, and others, holding placards and screaming. "Many in the region are outraged at President Lucas' deployment of military forces in the Eastern European nations."

The screen cut to a young man, hair greased and beyond his shoulders, wearing a bandana and denim jacket with buttons pinned all over, who stared into the camera. "Americans think they can bully others into doing whatever they want," he told the world, his thick German causing him to sound arrogant. The crowd behind him approved loudly. "Maybe the United States should focus on their own affairs. All they want to do is make war and destruction. Go home USA!"

The scene went back to the newsroom. The anchorman smiled that perfect, ivory grin. "The President's approval

rating has dropped in recent days as the American public shows their opinion of their leader's administration. The President has been quick to respond to critics of his 'go it alone' policy."

President Lucas came on screen. He was sitting in his chair in the Oval Office, proudly displaying the seal of the presidency on his desk. "My fellow Americans, we are in troubled times. The fragile new democracy of the Soviet-" "Russia," a whisper came from off screen.

Lucas looked beyond the camera and mouthed, "Really?" He nodded and smiled again at the camera. "The fragile new democracy of Russia has been undermined by the dictator Romanov. Many call my deployment of troops throughout the region 'war mongering' and an attempt to provoke Romanov into some confrontation. That is the furthest from the truth. I am attempting to prevent the spread of his communist-"

"Authoritarian!" someone hissed off camera.

"Authoritarian regime's chaos. We have seen that Europe is far from willing to defend itself leaving it up to us, as it has for decades, to protect them from the hordes. The nations of Eastern Europe remain weak and in need of support. Whereas the western states believe themselves safe and ever willing to sacrifice their neighbors selfishly, we know the delicate situation that is being played out. I will not allow the eastern hordes to swallow up those states which we have only recently freed from the darkness of Bolshevism.

"Democracy is under attack everywhere from Pakistan to North Korea. The United States has always been willing to defend those unable to defend themselves. Western Europe tells us to mind our own business. I say we are as Western Europe is neglecting theirs. The time of words is over. Words can be twisted. Words can be lies. Only action achieves

anything. We shall prevail." Lucas gave the camera a thumbs up as he winked.

The screen quickly clicked back to the anchorman. "Russian President Alexander Romanov had this to say in response."

The screen switched to the swarthy Russian, his hair graying at the temples. He stared right through the screen at everyone watching. This was a man of power and prestige about to speak on a pressing piece of world affairs. He cleared his throat and spoke those immortal words: "Fuck America."

The screen came back to an obviously shocked anchorman. He sat in silence for a second and quickly regained composure. "President Lucas couldn't be reached for comment."

Where was he? Matthew walked down another block. They all looked the same. Same white road. Same rows of trees. The weird part was the further he went the more pictures he saw of Jesus. Some were strung along the sides of buildings, others on signs like he had seen earlier. He even came across a statue in the only part of the city so far that differed from everything else. The square was thirty three feet in diameter and on a circular platform stood a bronze of Jesus with his arms outstretched. On his face was a broad smile, eyes closed. Matthew looked at the plaque below. "Embrace the spirit of Jesus as he accepts you blindly. The Word, the Way, the Life". From that square Matthew looked left then right. In this city Jesus was everywhere in one way, shape, or form whether on signs or banners. You couldn't escape his eyes. Matthew looked back at that large statue, looking at the expression on that

bronze face that seemed in a state of blind ecstasy. He backed away, crept out, and started searching again.

Matthew rounded a corner and found something he hadn't expected: an inner city. The buildings were run down but classical in their architecture, complete with broken pillars and statues, some decapitated, staring out from the walls. Hewn of stone and standing no higher than four stories, this place did not belong in the same era as the rest of Zion. Cracks ran throughout the stone, grass poking out between the blocks that once were organized streets. Oddly enough, the pictures of Jesus ceased to appear here.

Matthew could hear music coming from somewhere shaking the calm air of Heaven. Drawn to the discord it brought to this one-note town, he followed it. As the music grew louder he found its origin. The building itself was of mottled marble, taller than the rest of those on the street. Etched into the wall above the arched main door was a neon sign: "Gabriel's". It flashed a bright red. It contrasted with the rest of Zion with its flickering lights and dark windows.

"Finally, some entertainment." Matthew walked up to the entrance. "Wait, should I really go in there?" Matthew asked himself. He stopped to debate the pros and cons when he heard people. "Hey, it's Heaven. What do I have to worry about?" Matthew wandered through the arch leaving the golden light behind and entered a smoky blackness.

The place was alive with activity. A bar was set up to the left, carved with various notches in its pine exterior, where a few dozen figures sat drinking from silver chalices and watching television. They bellowed with laughter. To the right were various tables where people sat and talked, drinking themselves silly. To the rear was a door with light streaming out around the edges. The place had an off-kilter type of feel, as if anything could happen at a moments notice. The

place was rumbling with conversation. Not a soul noticed him as he stood in the doorway.

He looked closely at the figures scattered about the room. It was definitely a Nazi paradise. Every man inside was blonde haired, fair skinned, and blue eyed just like the cherubim, but the similarity ended there. Their size was enormous: ten foot tall easy and as broad as a bull.

Matthew walked over to the bar only for it to grow uncomfortably larger the closer he got. He followed the line of big fellows until he found a break. Everything about the place made him feel like a child, especially the open stool. The seat itself stood at forehead level. He struggled to climb up it. The large fellow next to him, noticing his problem, laughed loudly as he grabbed Matthew by the scruff of the neck and plopped him down on the stool. Matthew thanked him as the giant went back to his chalice. Matthew strained his head upwards to peek over the bar. "Get a drink?" he asked, finger in the air.

"Here you go," bellowed the barkeep as he towered over Matthew. The fellow looked like steroids were fed to him from conception. The veins in his beefy arms throbbed menacingly as he slammed a silver chalice down right in front of Matthew spilling a little of the contents onto the wood of the bar.

"But I didn't-"

"Here you go," the barkeep cut him off with his syrupy brogue.

"Thanks," Matthew offered as the barkeep wandered off. He reached for the chalice only to discover his arms wouldn't go that far. Matthew had to stand up on the stool to reach his mug. The thing was the size of a milk jug. He tried to peer into it, tilting it to the side. Clear. Probably vodka. He took a sip. Nothing. Took another sip. Still nothing. Where was the

taste? He turned and saw everyone else chugging their drinks down. Matthew raised his chalice and tried to follow suit, raising his as he opened his mouth to swallow, only to get the majority all over his face and up his nose as the weight proved too much. Everyone laughed as Matthew sneezed. Wiping his eyes clear, he finally realized why there was no taste. "This is water!" He dried his face with his sleeves.

"Best holy water in all Zion!" the giant next to Matthew claimed.

"Yum!" Matthew replied as he licked his lips feigning appeasement. As the giant grinned elsewhere Matthew became annoyed. *Heaven sucked man! Maybe a life of sin was the way to go.* He swept his wet hair back as the barkeep slammed another chalice down in front of him. Loud noises came from beyond the rear door. Matthew turned. Well, at least there was some sort of excitement. As he turned to climb down his stool an ad came on the television causing him to pause.

"Jesus has helped you, hasn't he?" The words were spoken as they crossed the screen. A group of people popped on, nodding their heads yes. "You love Jesus, don't you?" The words once more crossed the screen. The crowd came back, nodding like before. "Remember, Jesus is Lord..." The words trailed off as Jesus' face came on screen, smiling. Boos sounded from all over the room. Some even threw things at the screen.

"Would you look at that," came an accented voice further down the bar. "He's everywhere. Not like he belongs anywhere. You understand me?" Matthew looked down the length of the bar to see who was making the noise. "Bastard takes over and now what? We have nothing." Matthew saw the giant. His hair had mild streaks of white in it, his face

lined. Bags weighed heavily beneath eyes rimmed with crow's feet. He looked broken, sorrowfully sitting hunched over on his stool. "Once we were Heaven's defenders. What is there to defend anymore? We can't even drink wine these days," he growled, knocking his chalice off the bar with the wave of his hand.

"Come on, Gabriel. It's not that bad-" the barkeep started.

"Not that bad? We're nothing but..." Gabriel turned sensing Matthew watching him. "What is this?" His face contorted, the lines causing his face to crackle with fury.

Matthew looked around. Everyone was focused on him. Gabriel got up from his stool and started to come towards him. Matthew knew he was in trouble. He tried to get away, but as he went to jump off the stool, the giant next to him put a meaty hand on his shoulder. "Not so fast, boy."

Gabriel stood towering over Matthew even as he stood on his stool. "Your kind isn't welcome here."

Matthew felt like wetting himself. He was definitely not expecting an ass kicking in Heaven. "Maybe you should put a sign in the window to warn future...um...people-"

Gabriel grabbed him by the shirt and lifted him off the stool, Matthew's feet dangling. "Are you trying to be smart? He might protect you out there. In here, no one sees nothing."

Matthew tried to lighten the mood. "Yeah." He looked up at the ceiling. "Bad lighting-"

Gabriel gripped Matthew by the throat, his hand like a steel vice. "Want to mock me, boy? I'll grind you into the dust you came from." Gabriel looked closely into Matthew's eyes, his hand a second away from snapping bone. "Because of you we lost our rights, our glory, our dignity. We'll never be what we once were. We are nothing!" His eyes were the gray of thunder clouds.

"He's not worth it." The barkeep had come around to stand behind Matthew's dangling self. "Do you want to end up like the Horsemen?" Gabriel looked at the barkeep, his face twitching. "Do you?"

Gabriel looked back at Matthew. "You're lucky, boy. Your savior saves you again." He dropped Matthew as he turned to leave the bar, his steps loud thumps.

"Christ," Matthew rasped, rubbing his throat and choking on fresh air, drawing the word out. The place went silent at the word. The entire room gave Matthew a very angry stare. He stood there, surrounded by some very roid-enraged giants, unsure of where to go or what to do. The rear door was closest so he started towards it slowly, their eyes following him like a cat's making him the mouse. He backed into the door, his free hand fiddling with the knob behind him. He smiled as they eviscerated him with their sharp looks, the door behind finally opening. Matthew quickly jumped in and slammed it.

He breathed a sigh of relief as he turned around to a welcome sight. A ring was set up in the dim room, a raucous crowd surrounding it. Giants bellowed, jumping up and down as they jeered and catcalled. The walls shook. In the ring itself two figures slammed into one another without a single care for safety. They rained blows down on one another like brain damage was as benign as a cold. "Hell yeah!" Matthew screamed as he tried to find a good vantage point.

Now this was entertainment. The one figure managed to get his opponent in a headlock and proceeded to bring punch after punch down on his scalp. He stopped to scream at the crowd. That proved a mistake as he was back dropped right out of the ring. He fell over the ropes onto a table with a crack. As he struggled to get up the giant in the

ring ran and jumped over after him slamming into not only his opponent but also two of the audience.

"Go Michael!" someone shouted encouragement.

The two audience members got up, throwing their drinks at Michael as he turned around and knocked the one out before shoving the other to the ground. He grabbed his opponent off the floor and threw him back into the ring before climbing in after him. As the opponent tried to stand up, Michael gave him a good kick to the ribs with a loud slap. Matthew grimaced. Michael grabbed the guy by his hair and heaved him into a corner where he proceeded to pound him into hamburger, blood pouring from every pore the guy possessed. A bell rang from somewhere and it was over.

Matthew half-expected the bloodied giant to need medical treatment, but the guy smiled. The crazy bastard smiled! Before Matthew's eyes, the opponent's wounds sealed and seconds later it was as if they had never been. The man gripped Michael's wrist as Michael did the same in some sort of handshake.

"Good match!" the opponent said.

"You make a good punching bag!" Michael laughed as the crowd roared with him.

"Hey!" the opponent mockingly replied. "You got lucky, old man. Next time let's keep it in the ring."

"Then there is no fan participation!" The crowd cheered as Michael smiled. He butted heads with his foe before climbing out of the ring.

"There you are!" Matthew turned to see Mel floating behind him. "You shouldn't be in here."

"Why not? I'm over twenty-one."

"Come on."

"Can't we stay a few minutes? I want to catch the next match." Mel's face carried a flat denial. "Ok, ok." As they

started to leave two more men climbed into the ring. A huge thud caught Matthew's attention. He stopped and turned to watch the next fight as Mel grabbed him by the ear and painfully lead him away.

Once back in the main room, Mel let him go as he flew towards one of the tables. On top was a delirious Ezekiel. "Play the strings," he moaned in total dementia. "I play the strings."

"What's wrong with him?" Matthew asked.

"Exhausted. Can you help me carry him?"

Matthew slung him over his shoulder. "He's wet!"

"It's sweat. Come on."

"I play the strings!" Ezekiel continued.

On their way out, Matthew saw Michael sitting at the bar. "Where's Gabriel?" Michael asked, concern apparent in his voice.

"You know Gabriel," the barkeep replied. Michael shook his head understanding.

"Will you come on?" Mel tugged on Matthew.

"Oh, right." Matthew followed Mel out, cherub over his shoulder. "So what's the story?"

"What do you mean?" Mel asked, constantly looking behind himself to ensure Matthew was there.

"The guys in the bar. Well, giants I mean."

Mel flew on, Matthew in pursuit. Mel decided to answer if only to prevent him from wandering off again. "They are angels."

"Really? I thought angels were...a little queerer."

"They were the leading soldiers of God. Protectors of the Heavens from all that threatened her borders. They live to fight."

"Well, that guy, Michael, can really kick some ass."
Matthew walked a few more steps. "What do you mean were? They aren't anymore?"

"They aren't really needed anymore."

Matthew was confused. "They're not needed? Hell still exists right?"

"Yes," Mel replied exasperated.

"So why aren't they needed? Demons become pussies or something?"

"A treaty was signed two thousand years ago." Mel made a turn. "Heaven and Hell ended hostilities. Since that time, the angels haven't had much to do. That's why clubs like that exist."

"Clubs like what?"

Mel stopped and put his hands on his hips as he pivoted around in the air. "That was an Arch Angel club. They meet there to release their frustrations, bunch of brutes." Mel turned and continued flying. "They're nothing more than border patrol now and you see how well they do at that."

Matthew thought it over as he nodded dumbly. "They don't have flashbacks do they?"

"What?"

"All veterans have them. Do they? You know, go crazy and flip some table in a cafeteria screaming about 'Charlie in the wire-'"

"We aren't as weak-minded as you," Mel retorted.

"But you aren't an angel. How would you know?"

"All of God's creations are flawless and strong-willed."

"But I'm one of God's creations."

"You are one of his accidents."

"I don't follow."

"Well, you'd better if you want to make it back to Earth by your lifetime."

After a few steps Matthew piped up again. "They don't seem very happy."

"Who?" Mel asked.

"The angels."

"Who cares whether or not they're happy."

"Geeze, do you hate people more the taller they get?" Matthew asked sarcastically.

Mel stopped and turned. "Angels have been nothing but troublemakers since the Christ took over."

"I don't follow." When Mel gave him that exasperated look Matthew could only reply with a genuine blank stare.

"They hate the Christ for having ended hostilities and outlawing war and bloodshed both here and on Earth. The angels believe that Hell is to not be trusted. They even think they have the right to interfere in human affairs."

"When did they ever interfere in human affairs," Matthew asked before shifting Ezekiel on his shoulder.

"Whenever God did something they carried out his commands. Walls of Jericho, plague in Egypt, etc."

"Ohhhh." Matthew began to understand. "I still don't understand why they hate Jesus so much."

"How do you know that?"

"Well, when I said his name they looked like they were going to grind me into the floor."

Mel started to fly again. "Doesn't surprise me. They've always believed in action before words."

"You're losing me again."

"They hate the Christ immensely. Believe he doesn't keep with the old ways of God. With Christ in power, Heaven began allowing many more humans entrance relaxing the prerequisites to get in. The angels claimed he was flooding Heaven with mortals in order to build his numbers. Increasing his power base. When Christ had himself

proclaimed the Lord of Heaven and Earth, the angels had had enough. Around fourteen hundred years ago Gabriel led a revolt. He tried to enact a coup. It all started when he went down and spoke to some Arabian nomad."

Matthew smiled despite himself. "You're telling me that Islam was created as part of a coup against Jesus?"

"It was more than that. We are not that petty!" Mel scoffed. "The entire episode proved most troublesome. Telling them that Christ was simply some ordinary man. Even telling them not to pray to the Christ but God instead! They even encouraged bloodshed! Always the sword before the word!" Mel spit through gritted teeth.

"So the revolution failed I take it?"

"For a while the angels helped the Muslims to some very impressive victories, doing their best to wipe out the Christ's human supporters. When the Christ discovered the angels' plans to remove him he acted in response. Heaven became embroiled in a war that saw the angels beaten thanks in no small part to the Christ's human supporters...as well as the cherubim."

"Is that why cherubim are so important now?"

"If you mean why we, rather than some barbaric angel, came to get you, yes it is. But not out of spite. The new system believes in equal opportunity."

"Whatever. Seems angels don't get many opportunities these days."

"Think what you want." Mel sniffed before continuing on.

Matthew, with Ezekiel staining his shoulder and Mel leading the way, continued through Zion and its bland perfection until they reached a set of descending stairs. "God live underground?" Matthew asked.

"We're taking the subway."

"We're taking the subway to meet God? Classy."

"You're not the VIP you think you are. Now come on."

As they descended the steps Matthew looked at the sterile, tiled walls. The place was immaculate. His hand followed the silver banister as he stepped down into the depths. At the bottom was a platform along with hundreds of waiting passengers. "Good. We haven't missed it." Mel flew over their heads to stare down the track. Matthew's eyes strafed the walls, a long line of posters with Jesus in a suit pointing at the reader. "Jesus Wants You to be Holy!"

"The strings!" Ezekiel croaked.

"Is he going to be ok?" Matthew asked Mel as he came flying back.

"Sure. A little holy water and he'll be fine." A rumble started to grow. "Oh, be ready."

"Ready for what?" Matthew asked. Squeals of metal echoed through the tunnel as the subway train arrived. The multitude began to stir. "All aboard!" an electronic voice called from somewhere as the doors of the train hissed open.

"Go!" Mel pushed Matthew into the crowd as everyone fought to get in. It was chaos. It was undisciplined. It was the subway system of Heaven.

What began as a minor dispute between Matthew Ford and Jesus has escalated into a feud that threatens to undermine a Cold War that has existed between Heaven and Hell for two millennia. The question is. what will happen next?

Anti-Christ: A Satirical End of Days

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