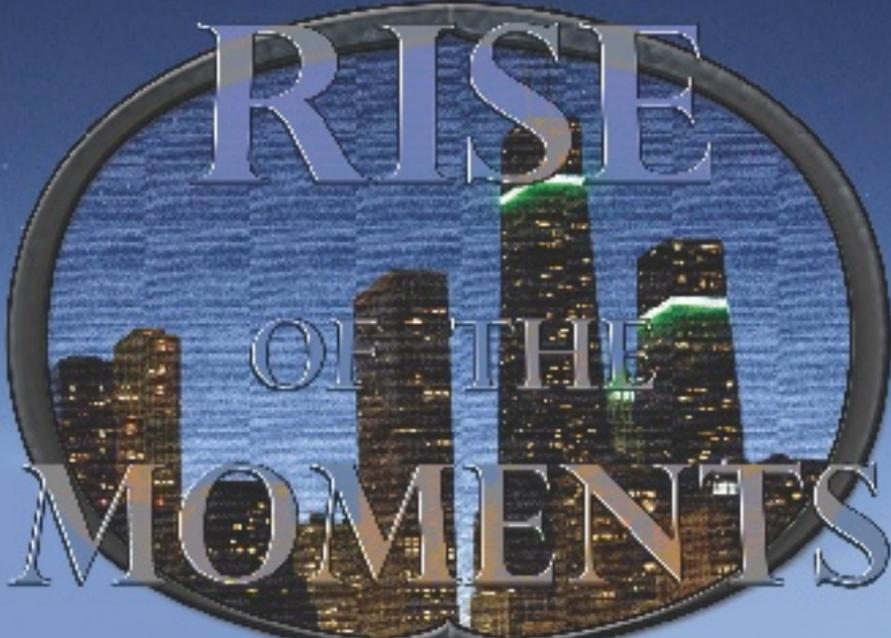
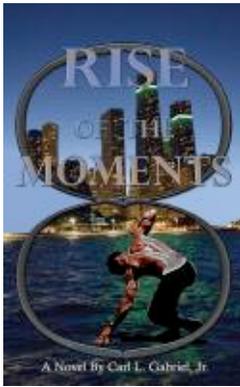


RISE OF THE MOMENTS

A circular frame containing a night cityscape with illuminated skyscrapers. The frame is positioned at the top of the cover, with the title text overlaid on it.

A Novel By Carl L. Gabriel, Jr.



Ultra-sentient beings, known as "Moments," continue to monitor humanity as they themselves make ready for the transition of the universe into its next phase of existence. When two special humans encounter two Moments designated "Eight," it evolves into a complex game of cat and mouse, and begins a rapid chain of events that will endanger the very fabric of the universe. Someone has to die that we might all survive...

Rise of the Moments

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RISE
OF THE
MOMENTS

Carl L. Gabriel, Jr.

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Second Edition

CHAPTER ONE

9 Deaths

He had seen him before, although it had been a lifetime... and a lifetime, before that... and a lifetime, before that. In fact, it had been several lifetimes, and there would be several more to speak of. It was not an affront to him, by any means. It was just what he was meant to do, and this soul, this person, this human was oblivious to him.

This was just the way it worked, and although he was powerful enough to affect change in the man's life, it was not a decision to be made by him. His purpose drove him, and this, too, was not an emotional matter. The only emotions he could know were those he witnessed in the instances where humanity became part of his undertakings, over the life cycles.

The man was young, about twenty-one years old, and his face was ever the same as it appeared, although there was an increasingly noticeable weariness about him. His posture, although wearisome, was confident, if not a little indignant. This was a testament to all he had been through, even in this short span of his lifetime, and with so much more to experience. Even so, he held a sense of decorum in his guilt, as his strong sense of honor bade him to do.

From this perspective, Eight watched the young man with what might have seemed like admiration. It only appeared so, because there was no visible form of

emotion within him, to speak of. Even as he watched him, though, he imagined how he might find something new in this iteration of life. It mattered little that there was death on the horizon, and not very far off. There was nothing he could do for the young man, but he would not have intervened, in any case. What was to happen was going to happen. It was, after all, meant to happen.

As he glanced about, he could see the young man's countenance changing before his eyes. His mood was darkening, noticeably, and this was the reason they were to share this encounter. A young woman was approaching, somewhat warily, and the young man now turned to face her. He had been waiting for her to arrive, and she had been dreading her promise to meet with him.

"Hey!" he said to her, sensing her discomfort.

"Hey, Daniel," she responded, as she came to a stop, five feet away from where he stood. She settled into a posture that would let him know he should not come closer, her arms crossed, and head tilted away from him.

"How have you been?" he asked, trying to keep it light. She shifted in her stance, now favoring her left hip, and tilting her head forward. Her eyes darted right, then directly to his, and she threw her arms down to either side of her body, palms facing him.

"Why are we here, Daniel? What is so important that we had to meet?" she asked, impatiently.

Daniel stood more upright now, and inhaling heavily, he started to speak. Just as he did, a third individual came lumbering towards them. It was her boyfriend.

"Yeah, why the hell am I still over here waiting for you, Sheila?" he yelled as he approached.

"I will be right there!" she yelled back to him, hoping to curtail his assail.

"Tell him it's over and not to call you again! It is really not that hard!" he continued to chide, loudly, as he began to slow his approach.

"Please, let me handle this!" she yelled back, now turning her upper body a quarter of the way toward the yelling man, and shooting a harsh glare at him. He stopped twenty feet away, but did not turn to leave.

Daniel leaned to look around her, and then directed his eyes back to hers, which now glared at him.

"I don't have time for this, Daniel. It IS over, and you should lose my number," she said. "You lied to me, and I moved on. You should, too."

It was for this moment that *he* was here observing the young human.

As the girl walked away, joining the abrupt man in a hurried exit, he watched Daniel's eyes tense as he fought the deep sorrows that welled in their depths, even as the shame shook him to the bottom of his foundation; and there, in the darkness, Daniel lost the last strand that could keep him from falling into the pit of his own insurmountable guilt.

Through fire and brimstone, inside and outside of time, Daniel descended; and finding himself at his apartment door, some time later, he trudged in. Whether the keys handled themselves, or the door had found its own way to open to him, he could not care.

His mirror greeted him in the same way it had for the past several weeks; with its energy-efficient, dead-toned reflection of him. This time, however, his eyes were void of hope.

He packed a small box with items to be shipped, posthumously, or at least to be willed to the persons he had designated on the note in the box. His camera gear, his computer tablet, a purple satin sash rolled with gold fringe, and all of his hard drives full of images were given particularly special care in the process. Even the sheepskin from the university, of which his family had been so proud, along with all his other accolades, was in that box. He had just one last research project to complete, as it happened, to be accepted into the program to get his second such certificate.

During all of his years studying ancient warrior cultures, honor was a facet that he had always understood. The Samurai and other noble warriors of olden times lived and died with honor, and their decisions and mistakes were met according to the creeds that governed who they were. They understood the weight of their failure in one respect or another, and that they were solely responsible to set things right. Daniel had, even at his young age, understood this burden, and he now bore it, firsthand. No matter

what she had done, he still had to live up to his own sense of honor. In his heart, in his actions toward her, he had dishonored himself and failed those who had a hand in molding him.

Daniel was in an impossible place, and had found himself drawn further into Sheila's version of life during the course of their two-year long tumultuous relationship; so what little wonder it was that he fell from life's tightrope. Still, there was no justification for his reaction, no matter what she had done. Here, he met with the results. Here, he ended all the crap that he had to keep coming up against. As this victim, he could only wait for some obvious end, but only after some protracted period of time. That, however, would mean more suffering.

Victim, no more! thought Daniel. *This ends, TONIGHT!*

He had studied various ways to leave this dismal semblance of life, and now was the time for him to begin his exit strategy. All of his research and preparation came to this final moment. For days, he had sought ways to commit this act of self-removal, this act of emancipation and redemption. The criteria seemed simple enough: the method had to be relatively free of mess and gore. It also had to leave him in a state where no one would know of his passing for days, at least. He had no family nearby; at least, no close relatives or associates who would seek him out as missing. And the methods would have to appear innocuous to the average onlooker. They could not

know that he was gathering materials to take himself out.

The first death:

He had read that one of the natural sources for cyanide was that of apple seeds, ingested in very large quantities. For two weeks, he ate apples, and collected seeds to fill several mason jars.

On this night, he began the end. Handful after handful of seeds he chewed and swallowed, with nothing but the occasional heave burgeoning from his aching belly. His head spun, probably from the exhilaration of it all more than any real poisoning. The first jar, now gone, yielded an upheaval that told him that something was at work. He took that to mean there should be an upping of his ante, and so he persisted with the remaining three jars, forcing himself beyond the rancid, earthy taste that still lingered in his now sore throat.

The second attempt failed as gloriously as the first.

Eight watched, having seen it happen so many times before, and wondered if Daniel was ever alive to begin with. After all, this was such an unnecessary turn of events, especially given that his juvenile methodologies showed his obvious lack of true commitment to dying. Yet Daniel was sure, in his own mind.

The third death:

Iodine is not to be ingested... Period! From all of his research at the library, Daniel gathered this would be the next poison with a strong chance of expediting his escape from this dismal planet.

The pharmacy around the corner from his apartment provided the fuel for this mission. Daniel bought three bottles, making sure that the warnings confirmed what he read about their potential for death in the swallower.

The taste alone made him yearn for death. As he took the first gulp, his resolve was the only thing forcing him to not spit the horrid liquid right out. He endured. The first bottle he drank in large gulps, and then he followed with the second, slightly slower. He found himself delirious with the prospect of dropping to the floor, convulsing into the great, dark beyond. Yet, the lesson learned from the trace cyanide was not lost on him; he forced the third bottle to his trembling lips.

Eight, who was by nature an unemotional being, would have shaken his head if only he had one. He had seen this drill play itself out, and it seemed to him that Daniel might have somehow grown to be somewhat immune to these minor toxins to his body. Still, Eight had exquisite curiosity that was growing as he watched the young man. Even this action of shaking his head was new to him, and he found that to be even more curious.

With a mighty burp, Daniel wretched and gave up all of the iodine. The nearby commode was the only salvation he could know, and after this, another failed attempt to engage death, Daniel became even more despondent, and then desperate.

The fourth death:

The ceiling fan that hung securely above his bed offered a new option of exodus. After moving the bed clear of the room's center, Daniel searched the apartment for a strong enough rope or cord for his latest endeavor.

It was a nylon cord, thin but sturdy, that would answer the call. As Daniel tied the slipknot noose, he thought, *This is not the way I had imagined, but it will provide my freedom, and so it has to be worth trying.*

Eight looked on, marveling at the ardor with which Daniel worked to secure the cord, and then at how he seemed to void himself of any thoughts that did not align with this deadly mission.

Daniel, who stood five feet, seven inches tall, now stood atop a wobbly stool with a rotating seat cushion. He did not waiver, however, and seemed as a cat climbing to his perch. He leaned forward, and the stool toppled the opposite direction. With a surprisingly smooth arc, Daniel's body adjusted and there was no snap in the line... Just a cinching of the cord as it tightened around his neck.

Daniel simply dangled, and consciousness slipped slowly away from him. Serene warmth overcame him, and he could see the room zooming out to some distant vantage.

Then, it stopped.

Eight saw Daniel slowly come to, and Daniel found that his toes were now touching the floor beneath him, just barely, but enough to keep him in a state of supreme balletic balance.

The fifth death:

Having been so close to relief from his woeful life, this drudgery, Daniel would not be denied. He decided almost as soon as he had extracted himself from his failed makeshift gallows that he would not take chances that would yield anything but finality.

He considered the remaining options, and on this cold winter Cleveland day, one stood out: a nice bath.

He filled the tub with warm water, prepared himself for what should have been the ultimate and final plunge into the abyss of death. It was a simple and elegant choice, and he was sure it would work to his satisfaction.

In the adjacent room, which happened to be the theatre of his last failed attempt, he plugged the portable stereo radio into the extension cord. As he stepped toward the edge of the tub, he placed the radio firmly, and tuned it to the local popular music station.

The song playing was a familiar one, and he caught himself tearing up.

This is a good sign... This should actually work, he thought.

He got into the tub, and after a few deep breaths, he unceremoniously pulled the radio into the water.

What the --?!! he thought, almost exclaiming it aloud.

The music continued to play, sounding warbled by the immersion but otherwise unaffected.

Now livid, Daniel looked at the radio and picked it up, glaring at it. His eyes rolled up as he tilted his head in defiance to God Himself. Then he bolted from the tub into the living room, dripping puddles of water as he did so.

The sixth death:

He looked left and right for a more powerful source of shock, and his eyes rested on the ceramic space heater that sat along the windowed wall. He grabbed it and went back to the new stage of his eventual freedom. He disconnected the radio, tossing it to the floor on top of his expelled clothing.

After plugging the space heater in, he climbed back into the tub, still warm, but a few inches lower from the rim of the tub.

He pulled the heater in.

As Eight watched, he grinned slightly. It was like watching a prank play out, although this analogy was not one that he could appreciate as well as the average human could. Still, he got it.

Daniel watched with absolute denial as the fan blade within the mouth of the glowing orange face continued to churn the water. There he sat, and it settled between his legs to the bottom of the tub, as a jet in a hot tub. It may as well have been just that for all the good it did.

"Well, shoot!" he exclaimed aloud. Then he slumped further into resignation, sitting dumbfounded as he continued to eye the orange coils barely hiding behind the fan blades.

He stepped out of the tub, unplugged the heater, and unstopped the tub to drain it. After toweling himself off, he sat on the edge of the bed and cradled his head as he thought about things.

Something had to work, and he was going to find it. He had already ruled out guns, as he had faced them as a daily hazard in a former life. In his childhood neighborhood, street violence had been commonplace, and he hated the idea of guns. They cheated people out of better options in resolving problems. Besides, he had lost his father to side effects garnered by such an environment in violent times, and he remembered his father's stern admonitions to avoid them.

He recalled that voice of wisdom, as it came through his dear dad, along with many of their deepest conversations. This included some philosophical

discussions that eliminated his fear of death almost altogether, replacing it with an appreciation for what it ultimately meant. Those same conversations also yielded a deep code of ethics and a heightened sense of responsibility, each of which played into this saline conflict within his heart.

Eight witnessed those moments, as he had witnessed and cataloged every other important thread in Daniel's life. Each time, Daniel acted and reacted; and Eight worked in the essence, while Daniel remained absolutely oblivious to the whole thing.

Daniel found himself dressed and sitting in his old rusted yellow 1974 Ford Mustang, with its tank at less than an eighth full, idling outside of the twenty-four hour Quick-Serv Mart. He had heard, over the years, that death by overdose was pretty common, and sleeping pills held a considerably high rank among those statistics.

He walked in, and found the section of the store where these sleep remedies were lined up for ease of shopping. There he found the most potent one he could afford. Then he reasoned that he would no longer have to worry about financial matters, which lead him to purchase the even more potent option for a few dollars more.

When he returned to the apartment, he was confident that he had found the way of his liberation. As he passed into the dining area of his small apartment, he stopped. He had begun to realize something, as he analyzed the events of the long night

that he was now only halfway through: it all felt somewhat familiar.

Then he took a deep breath, staring at the chair in which he had been seated when he lost the respect of his girlfriend, their mutual associates, and the honor of his peers. He remembered feeling as small as he had seen the cartoon characters shrunk by shrinking rays to some minuscule size. That was how he felt, in his mind's eye: worthless.

The seventh death:

He went to the cabinet, grabbing a large plastic cup, which he then filled with water from the cold running tap. He dropped his coat in that chair along with his hat, scarf, and gloves. Then he walked into the bedroom, shutting off lights left on during his previous forays into Death's hold.

When he reached the bedroom, he placed the water and the box of sleeping pills on the single nightstand. Next, he cleared the toppled stool from the room, along with the cord. He went to the far side of the bed, and he moved it back to the center of the room. Order was restored.

He sat on the side of the bed, purposefully opened the box, and placed the pill container next to the cup. He took a sip of the water, with his mouth fully dry from the anticipation of this, his final act. He made himself ready, sitting erect, and clearing a pocket in

which to climb after initiating this walk into death, between the fitted and flat sheets, underneath the quilt and comforter. Once the safety cap was removed, and the cotton filler was discarded to the nightstand top, the pills fell easily into the palm of his hand with a randomized rattle. The weight of the pills did not amount to much, but the heaviness of the moment rested on his heart.

A tear welled up.

Sweet freedom, he thought.

With a large gulp, he began. First, he took in the mouthful of water, then as many of the large pills as he could swallow in that self-same gulp. Then, another mouthful, and more pills... And finally, he took the rest of the water with the few remaining pills. The water was now gone. The pills were now ingested. This was it.

The day before faded. The evening dissipated. The long night of failures vanquished to mere shadows. His eyes bore the burdens, all at once, and then succumbed. He succumbed to the slumber. Here, Hamlet's soliloquy took meaning.

The eighth death:

Nine hours later, a bell rang. First, it was distant. Then, it became very present.

Ring! It was the doorbell.

One eye opened...

Ring!

Autonomously, Daniel's hand reached to shut off the alarm clock, but found no result. He rolled over from his scarecrow sleeping posture onto his side, nearly falling off the side of the bed. His foot found the floor, stabilizing the roll.

Ring!

Daniel was now a fully-activated zombie, lumbering past the darkened living room, with its windows framing the freshly fallen snow outdoors. Into the foyer of the small apartment, he hunkered, with heavy hands and head seeking the button to respond to the harrowing ring of the doorbell, which resounded in his head as a bell tower at noon.

"Wh-hoo izzit!" he bellowed, hurting his own delicate sensibilities, as the hangover hammered his head from several angles.

"Brown Box Delivery for Rorie Damian!"

Eight appreciated this moment with a certain humor. Daniel did not.

"Wroooong addresssss!" he forced out through gritting teeth, almost hissing.

"I am so sorry to have bothered you," said the voice, in response.

As Daniel walked, trudging back toward the bedroom, he glanced to the bathroom, and decided this might be a good time to relieve himself in a way that he could not fail. As he finished, he turned from the toilet to wash his hands, and caught a glimpse of

himself in the mirror. He saw a reflection that gave him pause: it was his father, who most people said he resembled when he was younger.

At that moment, wisdom came back to him, succinctly. His father's words had instilled a certain level of fearlessness in him, especially regarding death, but the message had never been as clear as it was in that moment.

"It is not for man to take you out of here," he recalled his father saying, on that particular day.

Today, the rest of the message came through: "You, also, are but a man. Your choices will not always be right, but it is your decisions during the moments that follow questionable decisions that will define the quality of the rest of your life."

Eight had seen it from start to finish, and would see it again. This was the way it flowed, and the way he would record it, each time, until the human grew beyond the unnecessary steps to become who he was meant to be. Thus would be the growth that made man his most effective part in the greater machine that is life.

CHAPTER TWO

A Moment In The Flesh

He was uncanny, as a superhero, and even more the quandary as several of them.

Joe Splitt was totally unaware of his propensity to change, and no one could have known of his double life, let alone his timely shift through half a dozen lives in one.

Eight, who had been alongside him for his second, third, and now going into his sixth psycho-physiological split, was beginning to feel the strain of the impromptu exponential growth. As a Moment, his attachment grew to his subject; especially when the instances of his split personalities involved concurrent physical and physiological variance. In other words: as Joe experienced his personality changes, his entire body, identity and abilities changed, and that was per character. Eight was along for a ride, each time.

The first three iterations only yielded two distinct personalities, but iterations that followed proved his advancement would be more than just additional growth; he was a rare multiplier. While most humans were only able to affect their genetic furtherance by procreation, Joe was able to recreate himself, asexually.

He, however, was blissfully unaware, but managed to generate the perfect atomic-level sustenance and biological components to rarely become sick as an

adult. Further, it allowed him a preemptive balance that instinctively guided him to never expose his subconscious forays to most onlookers; a talent gained partly as a side effect of a rare temporal dysfunction in his unique makeup.

For Eight, it was an assignment that would rival having been the Moment assigned to heroic men and women who sacrificed themselves for the greater good of their fellow mankind, as are scattered throughout mankind's history. In this, the twelfth iteration of Joe's life cycle, Eight found himself more than stressed by the changes.

Joe was now about to "birth" his sixth character. This meant that Eight's own absorption of emotive response was stretched beyond his expectation. This was potentially dangerous to the system in place, as he teetered above the chasm of insanity most commonly reserved for the human condition.

As a child, growing up in orphanages, Joe's only real escape was into his own head as he read all the comic books he could get hands on. He was industrious, so that he found ways to earn the coins that afforded a few of his mental escapades; and fortunately for him, the library stocked a few of his favorites, so he had access even when he had no money. They also provided reading stations with scanned comic books for the patrons to enjoy.

Among his favorites were the superheroes, often troubled individuals with some formidable gift or a combination of them, but anchored to realistic lives

riddled with problems that made them chime a note within him. He strongly identified with some of their humble origins, and the losses some of them suffered, which lead to their becoming the heroic figures they were laid out to be. His own losses started with death and displacement, leaving only him and his older sister alive, and at the mercy of the system.

Eight had been there to witness them all, and after so many times along for the journey, he had begun to sympathize. Even though the idea of a set of parents was as foreign to him as aimlessness would be, his attachment had allowed him to better understand the needs that resided deep within the young man, now twenty-five years old, and living an almost normal human life.

This week was an exceptional one. Just two days ago, during the wee hours of the night, Joe went to bed. He was tired from a long day of projects, and a little depressed about losing some of his favorite collections of image and audio files when his hard drive crashed. Despite his skill with handling most computer matters, this one caught him by surprise, and his salvage efforts proved not quite sufficient for one hundred percent file recovery. After three hours, he knew he had hit threshold, and he reformatted the drive to begin anew, backing up the saved files to another external drive. There he slept, barely stirring, and oblivious to the waking world.

The faux analog clock on the computer's screensaver showed the time as three o'clock a.m.

Joe, still asleep, rolled over to sit on the edge of the bed. Suddenly, a spasm hit his body that caused him to sit erect. His eyes popped wide open and a series of sparks danced deep in them, partially lighting the dark room. Joe's silhouette in the background betrayed the change in his physique, which was lithe and without cornered edges, such as elbows. They bent, but only curves appeared.

Eight had seen this character only five times, and it reminded him of his own people, in some ways. No features were there, save eyes, which appeared shut. And Joe's head seemed to slump slightly forward, as if he were nodding off to sleep.

He went to the window and seemed to listen for something, as he turned his ear toward the glass pane; then he paused before repeating the motion. His head rose, as a dog who might have caught the scent of something on the wind, then he bolted thru the glass without breaking it. Eight could see him in his essential state as a subatomic being, but to human eyes, he would have seemed as a dark ghost passing through the window frame.

As he followed Joe's phantasm-like persona, he could sense something strange in its energy, and how it was affecting him. He managed to shake it as he coasted behind Joe, but he noticed that Joe seemed to pick up his presence. Perhaps it was a side effect of his Alpha state of sleep, even as he sleepwalked into this adventure. Even so, he was undeterred as he swooped down and intervened in a mugging, as a drunken

woman in a suit haplessly tried to fend off her would-be assailants.

She had screamed for help, but no one responded, and if they had she might have been dismissed as another rowdy disturbance to be ignored in the late hours of the night. No one came, and a lighted window some distance away was extinguished.

Joe, somehow zoning in, had tapped into it like a police scanner. He had tracked the source by some metaphysical radar, and he arrived just in time to save her when one of the assailants was preparing to cut her throat to silence her belligerent protests. He rushed in and disarmed the thug, then slammed him haphazardly into one of his cronies nearby.

The third man, eyes bulging in absolute terror at the sight of the sleepwalking phantasm, crossed his heart and mumbled a prayer for salvation as he turned tail and ran. He was nearly twenty feet away when Joe coasted beside him, head still slumped, and then simply grabbed his shoulder. With a yelp, his burley figure was midair and en route to the pile where his associates lay unconscious.

As Eight recorded the instances, Joe shooed the woman off, beckoning her to move along and get to somewhere a little more safe. He said not a word, and the drunken damsel sauntered off toward the streetlights in the distance ahead. As she walked into a diner sitting at the closest corner, Joe turned his head toward Eight. He lifted his hand limply, almost dangling as if by palsy, and waved at him. Eight, a

little surprised, waved back, and then Joe took off toward his apartment.

He sat on the bed for a few seconds, stretched and yawned, then lay down. Within moments, he was back to himself, sleeping like nothing had occurred.

Eight, still fresh from the action, thought about the strange sensation he had felt. He noticed that one of his bio clocks was now changed to a reddish color, and he felt something else he had never known, before: sleepy.

The digital clock sitting atop Joe's nightstand read seven fifty-seven a.m., and Joe sat in his swiveling office chair at the window nearest his workstation peering at a squirrel on a nearby branch.

As a blog ghostwriter, he had the benefit of working at home on his own schedule. His psychiatrist had recommended it as an ideal occupation for a patient with Joe's imagination and literary abilities. As a favor to his sister, Julia, a budding psychiatric resident with some promise in the field, the doctor took it upon herself to refer him to the perfect company. It was a vested interest, of course, since it would allow her new progeny to better focus on taking up the work that lay before her growing practice in this prime location of the inner city.

This spring morning, for Joe, marked a point of extreme, largely because his metabolism seemed to balance and his mind seemed absolutely clear. His last

appointment with the doctor had been relaxed, and from her standpoint he was less likely to have any psychotic episodes borne of his post-traumatic stress disorder. Medication seemed to become less necessary course, and although he was consistent in taking them, they knew he should back down to a lesser dosage of the new, experimental drug to eliminate the likelihood of other side effects, including potential addiction.

Seven fifty-eight a.m. The squirrel, perched on the limb, turned its head toward Joe and froze in place.

Seven fifty-nine a.m. Eight moved in closer to Joe, whose fully dilated pupils revealed sub-retinal sparks deep within, like a telescope peering into the dark at star-filled galaxies afar.

Joe slumped back into the chair. Then, a pulse occurred. It was not visually obvious and gave off no sound, but the feeling in the immediate area was like that of a gentle thrust from a core to the extremities in a concentric wave.

Eight noted the occurrence, and found that he himself was a little frayed by this most recent change. Of the previous five fragmentations, this one bore the heaviest imposition for him. Whether because of the growing ebb of energies that it took to bring such manifestations about in this realm, or because of the growing frequency with which the changes seemed to occur, over the iterations, it placed a particular strain upon him.

Joe rose up, a new character in his own right, and opened the window. He leaped and was bounded so far

away, and with such speed, that there should have been some degree of impact on the wind or the surrounding matter, but there was not. He seemed to be riding the pulse that occurred mere seconds ago, warping reality on an infinitesimal, imperceptible level... At least, to human and most animal eyes, it was unseen.

Feeling a little woozy, Eight gathered his own energy and focused. As he came to, he found himself almost fully manifested in humanoid form, very closely resembling Joe's previously incurred persona, but with an almost opaque skin of indigo with one emblazoned emblem on his forehead.

Joe now stood at six feet seven inches, with muscle structure befitting a pro wrestler, and a frantic pace about him. He landed on a rooftop, and saw his task unfold before his eyes:

Save the people beneath the construction site that was crumbling above them!

He acted with the agility of all the heroes he had admired and imagined himself to be throughout his childhood. The only betrayal of his potential became evident when he tried to speak.

"Feah, no--t! I wull save you...!" he heard himself enunciate with some forced concentration.

His physical strength served him well as he bolted to catch the largest piece of falling slab and concrete, and laid it aside. Then, he was quickly en route to the point where he determined the weakness of structure.

From within his mind, Joe watched, distantly, unable to really control the body that now contained his mind. Although he could not actually feel the strain of the brawn he exercised, he could sense its power. It eased his concern, as it usually did, to be able to experience his fantasies without the apparent pain that probably came with the tasks he was party to. And the aftermath usually came about with him feeling rather invigorated.

Eight, now in a manifested physical state, stood nearby and recorded. But there was something different in his mindset, and he could feel it growing. His physiology was metabolizing and syncing with some temporal frequency. He shook his head and tried to focus. As he did, Joe looked at him.

"Who wuhr-- you?" he asked the strange looking humanoid, his tongue now more in his control, although his stupor continued.

"I am E-- Ehhh-- I am Errant," responded Eight, speaking through his physical façade, surprising himself.

His hands found his face, realizing a fully-formed mouth on his pliant face. The sensation of touching it caused him to shudder. His eyes rose to Joe's towering physical form, locking on his eyes, which appeared oafish under his enlarged brow.

"What have you done to me?" asked Errant, confused.

"Huh?" replied the giant with a shrug.

Obscenely bewildered, Errant rushed to confront him, lunging. Without thinking about it, Joe pivoted as he grabbed his wrists and swung him around, tossing him forty or fifty feet.

Errant had never personally experienced violence, although he had witnessed it so often in all the iterations of the universe, in so many different manners among mankind including the much younger Joe Splitt. As he crashed into the steel dumpster in the alley that found his momentum, he quickly appreciated it as something to avoid. As he got up to his feet, he looked upon his extremities with much concern.

He wondered, was it just a skin suit, or was he actually biologically melded to it? He considered what would have happened if it had been seriously harmed. And why did it seem to need a period of adjustment as he began to rise, or when he had moved toward Joe's massive frame? One thing was for certain: he did not want to chance that he could not get back to his original form. That meant that he would have to figure out, quickly, how to be free of this impediment of physicality.

He turned around to see that Joe had gone. The crowd of people that were on the scene had witnessed the rescue, and the initiation of the skirmish, which had happened far too fast for them to notice his continuous presence. The cheers they gave had now dissipated into a low huzzah, as ambulances and rescue workers secured the area.

He walked, then leapt, trying to find his way back to Joe's apartment. This had to be set right somehow. And that meant he had to reconnect with Joe. This he knew from within his newly materialized bones, which seemed to resonate as he got closer to Joe's location.

As he rounded the corner, he looked up to see Joe, standing at the window looking out at the sky, once again oblivious to all that had occurred. He felt a twinge within the center of the body he now carried, and he knew that it would be the death of him. His sense of purpose felt dense, now encapsulated with him in this suit; and as he looked upon Joe, he looked through the opaque shell of his gathering limitation. He knew there was only one way out.

This human, and all of his person, had to be destroyed.

CHAPTER THREE

Camera Obscured

Doctor Kerr studied the black surface of the tablet with an intensity that rivaled that of a chess master at work. His goal was to simplify the complex algorithm that allowed macro-level calculations with speed that could change the industry standard. Thus far he had come fairly close, but with no celebratory cigar, so to speak. But there had been moments that made him feel worthy of the degree he had worked so hard to earn. In this case, however, he felt severely lacking most of the time. It had been several months, and he could not stomach the idea of giving up on it.

Besides, his longevity as team leader on this project depended upon his effectiveness. This task was one he brought before the board of advancements, and one that they charged him to take lead on. His failure might mean financial loss to them if a competitor beat them to it, but loss of his job was the grand scheme that drove his efforts.

Eight watched with rapt attention as he toiled at the figures.

In iterations prior to this one, the doctor had shown an almost artistic flair of creativity when he had come to the eventual result of this puzzle, each time arriving to that end a hair sooner than before.

"Hmmm. That is surely close to my solution," he said to himself aloud. "But *what* am I missing? What? Think, D.K., you idiot!"

He cradled his head, fingers spread as wide as he could, as if the expansion could reach the recesses of his unused brain synapses to bring about clarity and incite the genius that so many others had praised him to have.

He then erected his head, chin jutting forward, eyes fixed on his hands, which he held at nose level in front of him, fingers still outstretched. As he stared at them, something clicked, so he pored back into the formulaic model on his tablet's face.

Eight affixed his gaze upon the doctor's forehead, reading and noting the slight change since their last encounter, and recording it to his own memory.

Interesting, and as consistent as ever, thought Eight.

"I think that's IT!" exclaimed the doctor, and he rushed over to the optical lathe device to fashion a set of lenses with which to test the theoretical solution in a real world application. While it processed, he went to the computer and made edits to the nano-processor that would maximize the effectiveness of the new lens configuration.

He sent the specifications to the hybrid technology department via his direct digital mail, which netted an instant response and approval of the design alterations. That meant he would have it in his hands within the next thirty minutes, which was the longest it would

take for them to produce the nano chip and test its integrity.

After looking over the lenses, he set them in the testing chamber that would ensure they would remain free of alien particles while he awaited the nano chip's arrival.

As he did, his cell phone began to ring. By reflex, he reached up to tap the call button on his wireless earpiece, accidentally dislodging it. It toppled down toward the chamber, which was almost closed, and fell to the nearby floor.

Doctor Kerr gasped, holding his heart. Any damage to the enclosed prototype lenses would have to be noted in his departmental budget, and he knew that was not a cheap proposition. This was important because the board that provided for the funding of his and other experimental projects within the company would hurry toward other open hands, were the costs found to be frivolous. There were always plenty of suitors wanting to get a piece of his budget, albeit those suitors were more driven toward traditional expenditures, which promised no more than a current profit for the company. That would mean a much leaner budgetary model for them all.

Still reeling from the exhilaration, he bent down to pick up the earpiece, glancing toward the lenses thru the encasement. From that angle, for just a split second, he could see a figure refracting through the field of his view. He stumbled backward out of sheer fright.

He had never believed in ghosts per se, but he was seeing and believing something he could not verbalize here. And almost as soon as he saw it, he lost sight of it.

Gathering himself, he brought his hands in front of him with steepled fingers and drummed his fingertips, barely touching his mouth. Then he slowly leaned in to find that angle he had happened upon, but he saw nothing.

"What the hell was that?" he asked himself aloud.

He furrowed his brow as he recollected the details of the figure he had seen. It looked humanoid, for sure, but had only one eye that looked like concentric circles of light. That "eye" appeared to be where he had seen the third eye depicted in his esoteric perusals as a younger man. He did not see whether the figure had arms or other extremity in the brevity of his encounter, but he was certain that he saw what was shaped like a head atop a pair or broad shoulders. There did not appear to be a mouth or nose, either, at least that he could detect.

He sat down in his chair, slowly, and reached over to pick up his earpiece. He looked at his cell phone to see who had called, and dialed back.

"Doctor Kerr here. You tried to reach me a moment ago?"

The call was brief. It was an administrative notification call letting him know that the part he requested be quick-processed was on its way to him. It was one of the many budgetary protocols that

guaranteed the avoidance of superfluous production utilizing in-house resources.

He stooped near the encasement, renewing his explorative attempts to recapture the glimpse in that moment. He was not met with success, but now his attention was truly divided.

Eight watched, and although this had already played out, several times over several iterations, he noted that it was a different version than previously recorded. He had not expected the edition, and so he readied himself for what was to come, and very soon by his calculation: the engagement.

Doctor Kerr accepted the part, which was delivered to his door within five minutes of the call, via sensitive inner office parcel. He signed for it, and the interior courier was hurriedly off to whatever mission was next for him.

"Alright," he said to himself aloud, as usual. "It is time to set the eye in sight."

As he began the procedure to set the chip into the encasement feed, wherein he would use touch-less hands to install it, he continue to search for the lost glimpse.

He waited for the depositor to engage the contaminant shield, and as it began, he sighed.

"That's that," he said to himself, almost in a whisper.

He walked over to the desk where his digital tablet sat and reviewed the calculations he had made, and

how he came to the current version. If this worked, he knew the implications would be grand, but his excitement was tempered by the uncanny event that occurred moments before.

Eight saw the instant happen wherein the doctor would have his eureka, along with the point that would initiate their communication. The device started, and the chip was placed squarely in the hewn space that was prepared for its insertion from the grip of the depositor device.

"Notation," he said, this time after pressing the "record" button on the system's audio journalizing device. "The time is now two thirty a.m., and the testing process for super macro lens version zero-zero-four-nine-three point seven is initiated. The prototype lens set has been set at a minimum arc of three hundred thousandths, and nano processor chip beta five-zero-zero-one has been placed."

There was a compressed whirring sound, and he flicked the switch to turn on the large precision monitors, which were mounted a few feet above the station along the nearby wall. As he watched, he saw the test card at the head of the encasement come into sharp view, and the numerical calibration reading rolled to a stop.

"Not bad, Doctor! Not bad at all!" he said, almost tempted to physically pat himself on the back. "Let's see how far we can push it for clarity under low light."

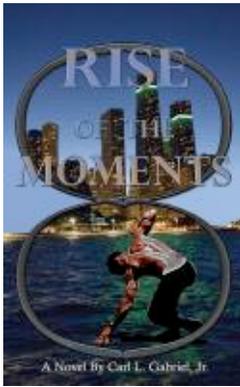
After lowering the ambient light in the room, he set the chamber lighting a few kelvins lower, but refrained from over-dampening the ocular panel.

"Lowering ocular refraction light incrementally... slowly..."

He typed in a minor revision to the calibration formula, and after running through the calculation in his head for a few seconds, he nodded and purposefully pressed the "enter" key to set it in motion. He was now biting his lower lip, and subconsciously craning his neck to get a better view of the screen as the numbers rolled to a stop and the image went past the point of razor sharp. That is when his eyes learned to see what he thought he had only imagined before.

He stood erect, clenching his hands at his sides as his chest tightened, his breath coming to him in shortened gasps.

Do not be afraid, Doctor Kerr.



Ultra-sentient beings, known as "Moments," continue to monitor humanity as they themselves make ready for the transition of the universe into its next phase of existence. When two special humans encounter two Moments designated "Eight," it evolves into a complex game of cat and mouse, and begins a rapid chain of events that will endanger the very fabric of the universe. Someone has to die that we might all survive...

Rise of the Moments

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