

- D O P I N E P H R I N E -

# *Distant Cathartic*

## PROLOGUE

KING Perseus lay in his palace, surrounded by his family and friends. He had reached the age of 540, old even for an Olympian. His silver beard reached his stomach, and his eyes held the creases of centuries of laughter. He looked up at his great-great-grand daughter, who squeezed his hand, her face glowing with love. The king looked at his table, covered in holo-pictures of his dearest friends. His lieutenants waved from beyond the grave in their frames, and Perseus smiled at the thought of them greeting him from the Elysian Plane. Soon, he would die, and be reborn in the glory of The Elysians, revitalized and rewarded with eternal life.

A murmur passed through the room, and Perseus opened his eyes to the arrival of the royal color guard. An aisle formed as Perseus' large family parted to allow the guard's approach. The guards saluted, and stood aside, revealing The Android standing between them. Perseus' eyes widened, and he smiled, matching the grin already on The Android's face. In a stride, The Android was at the King's side. Kneeling on one knee, The Android took the old man's hand, and beamed at his friend's weathered face.

They spoke deep into the night, Perseus recounting the history of Olympus, thriving and prosperous in the five centuries since he and The Android had fought side by side to free the Kingdom from the madness of General Pyke's tyranny. The Android told Perseus of his adventures, stretching from one end of The Dopinephrine Galaxy to the other. Perseus sat in quiet excitement, devouring The Android's stories like a child, thrilled by the fantastic exploits of his oldest friend. The Android had saved entire civilizations from natural disasters, freed whole races of people from slavery, and rescued ancient creatures from extinction.

As dawn rose on the Capital of Olympus, The king lay old and gray on his deathbed. He began to murmur to himself, his eyes staring blankly at an empty point on the wall. The Android kept his grip on Perseus' hand, and watched the life begin to slip from his face. Perseus stirred, and with a deep breath returned his gaze to the metallic face of his friend. A hint of fear entered his eyes,

and then in a flash was gone. In a burst of strength, the king grabbed The Android's arm and pulled him close, pressing his hot forehead to The Android's cold one.

The Android saw Perseus in his mind. The king's voice echoed with power, his words permeating every thought in The Android's head:

*My dear friend, I knew you would come. My time is over, but yours is just beginning. I have but moments; please hear me. Something old is awakening. A darkness unlike any I have ever seen. I can feel Him, at the edges of my dreams, full of rage and hatred. His destruction will end all if you do not stop him. Go, with haste, to the world of Khenti-Amentiu, and prepare for the coming storm.*

*The galaxy owes you the greatest of debts, and will owe you much more before the end. I cannot repay you, but I offer you my blessing. Take with you the title you deserve. As King, I dub thee ATHLON, Champion Of Olympus. Let all who hear this name know what you have done for my kingdom, and for our galaxy.*

When The Android opened his eyes, Perseus' family had returned. The king was weak and exhausted, and The Android took his leave, knowing that now it was time for the private peace of a dignified death. He left the king's residence, still stunned at Perseus' words. The title was a great honor, but The Android's thoughts were of the coming threat Perseus had spoken of.

Trumpets rang out from the Tower of Olympus, marking the death of the king. An era had ended, and another had begun. It was time to go to Khenti-Amentiu, and find what Perseus had feared.

## PART I

KHENTI-AMENTIU was not a planet Athlon was familiar with, but after some extensive research in the Ortega Archives, he found mention of the remote world among some religious scrolls. It was in a distant corner of the galaxy, hundreds of lightyears past the edge of the furthest trade routes in the sector. Everything Athlon could find about the small planet was billions of years old, some of it in a language that Athlon's powerful software couldn't translate. One document included a passage about a nameless shadow that had fallen on the Amentiu solar system, driving people mad, and squeezing the life from the outer worlds. Troubled, Athlon departed Ortega, and began his long trek to the mysterious world from Perseus' dreams.

As he sped through deep space, Athlon wrote a deciphering program and set it to work decoding the ancient text. Finding the pattern that would offer the key to reading the old writing would take a long time, but Athlon hoped that the power of his unique brain could translate the passage eventually. It would take weeks to travel all the way to Khenti-Amentiu, and Athlon was pleased to have something to do.

Two days after Athlon moved out of range of familiar space, he performed a maintenance reset. It had only been seventy years since his last reboot, but he wanted to make sure he was operating at 100% efficiency when he arrived. He brought all security protocols online, and then closed his eyes. The restart took only about four minutes, but Athlon gasped upon awakening. Something very new had happened: The Android had experienced what could only be described as a dream. He had never dreamt before; after all, he didn't sleep, and his brain was mostly inactive during the occasional reset.

In the dream, Athlon had seen a yellow planet. He had never seen it before, yet he knew immediately that it was Khenti-Amentiu. The planet made Athlon uneasy. It felt unnatural, like it was possessed by a morbid whisper. As Athlon watched, a silent braid of fire and black matter erupted from the planet, pouring forth into space. The vision had a strong effect on Athlon: he was afraid of the power in the dream, and he found that he wanted to turn back and forget Khenti-Amentiu altogether. Athlon considered this for a long moment, but decided that if the ominous images were some sort of premonition, it was all the more reason to take a look. He thought of Perseus, and returned to his flight.

Athlon performed a series of long range sensor sweeps, looking for any kind of danger in the solar systems he was passing through. He found absolutely nothing. The journey would have been boring if not for the fear in Athlon's mind. With the coast clear, he decided to try recreating the conditions that led to the dream. Athlon shut down again, this time with internal recording software running. His eyes closed, and for several minutes he simply coasted through space.

Deep inside what should have been motionless hardware, a few synapses fired in the dark of The Android's head. Athlon felt as though his eyes opened, and he could see a spectacular expanse of space stretching out before him. He accelerated to an impossible speed, and planets and stars began to blur into long lines of bright light. Quickly approaching was a star, but Athlon had no control over his propulsion systems. Convinced he would crash into the looming sun, he closed his eyes, and immediately felt himself slow down. Blinking, he saw a tiny planet blocking out a sliver of the star's light. Whispers floated through his mind, an ominous scratching sensation that he couldn't focus on. He found that he couldn't tear his eyes from the planet. A deep rumbling shook from the small world, and it seemed to split open, releasing a twisted stream of power, snaking quickly away from the planet and towards Athlon. Terrified, he tried to move out of its path, screaming at his body to respond. Nothing happened. Frozen in place, the braid of darkness struck him, and a deep laughter echoed in his thoughts.

With a quiet whir, Athlon's systems came back online. A few happy chirps signaled a return to full power. Deep in thought, Athlon checked his logs, amazed at the brain activity they showed. What he saw should be impossible; all power had been cut from his brain, yet the logs stubbornly showed that its activity was off the scale. And it hadn't lasted a few short minutes: the logs went on for *days*. Athlon decided to delete the logs, assuming that they had to be full of bad data, a result perhaps of a passing static field or a faulted series of sensors. Sighing, he blinked and looked around to get his bearings, triggering his navigational computers.

A pinging alarm came from the nav-systems. Athlon ignored it, stunned by what he saw. It was the sun from his dream. And just below his field of vision, the yellow planet sat in its orbit, as if the dream had made it real. Navigation confirmed that he had traveled at speeds greater than he was capable to the Amentiu system. The laughter echoed from deep inside Athlon's body, more like a noiseless vibration in his spine than an actual sound.

*So you have arrived.*

Athlon tried to spin around to face the voice, but found himself frozen in place. The laughter came again, louder this time.

*You can't see me, but soon you will know me. My time has finally come.  
I brought you here for a great purpose. Welcome to my home.*

The laughter dissipated, and Athlon felt himself come back under his own control. He enhanced his vision, zooming in to look at the landscape of Khenti-Amentiu. It was mostly a barren desert, little to see but rocky mountains and wind-torn valleys. As the planet turned, a small city came into view. There was no information in Athlon's database about what he could see, and he soon realized that the city contained no space docks or defense systems. Its inhabitants had not achieved any of the technology found on most worlds in The Dopinephrine Galaxy. No satellites orbited the planet, and no transmissions could be picked up by Athlon's sensors.

Athlon scanned the atmosphere and found that there was almost no pollution coming from the tiny civilization. Confused, he retrieved the strange writing he had found in the Ortega Archives. His translation software had gone offline days earlier, probably during the strange journey he had experienced. Regardless, the writing had been translated. Athlon read the short passages.

The document contained a brief history of Khenti-Amentiu. It spoke of war and famine, and a shadow that had fallen across the planet. An army of death was said to have stamped out all life in the once-prosperous civilization, striking from a city of darkness that no man could penetrate. The shadow crushed all in its path before being trapped in the Amentiu system by an ancient wizard. Without more life to consume, the shadow grew weak, and then dissipated. The once impenetrable city sank in the sands of time, and the ravaged system was forgotten.

At the bottom of the document, the shadow was named. In a dark, chaotic script that seemed to reflect hatred in its letters, the name loomed: Osiris, God Of Death. As Athlon read the words, the laughter returned, somehow emboldened by the story.

*I AM OSIRIS.*

The rumbling from Athlon's dream echoed in the quiet of space, and then a mighty crack shook Khenti-Amentiu. As Athlon watched, the ground began to come apart, like an earthquake along two perfectly straight plates beneath the primitive city. Seeing the sudden danger, Athlon tried to fly to the city's aid, but was once again stopped by the unseen force of Osiris.

Athlon waited for the city to fall into the maw of the earthquake, but instead it began to rise. Something was pushing upwards from under the ground. Athlon could see frightened people running in the streets of the simple city, terrified by the sudden catastrophe. The buildings cracked, and chunks of the city began to fall to rubble under the force of the rise. From beneath the city emerged something massive; Athlon searched for answers, trying to understand the horrific events. Soon he could see what was pushing upwards: it was another city. This one was much different from the home of thousands being destroyed by its emergence; it was black, made of huge spires and buildings that dwarfed the humble city in uprooted.

Dark tendrils emerged from beneath the ground, fueled by some hidden rage. They felt their way along the edges of the dying city, finding citizens and wrapping around them, pulling them underground. Athlon fought the force holding him in place, pushing with everything he had to get free to no avail.

With a surge, the buried city split its smaller counterpart in half, and continued to rise as rubble fell around it. Osiris' ancient city rose slowly into the air, huge and menacing. Free of its tomb, it picked up speed, and quickly penetrated the atmosphere of Khenti-Amentiu. Moving towards Athlon, it spun slowly, revealing a row of massive cannons. The whole city was built like a fortress, protected by tall walls and defended with heavy weaponry. It came to a halt above the planet and fell silent, the huge wound it had inflicted on Khenti-Amentiu gaping from below.

Athlon felt himself come free of the unknown force and immediately sped for the hole where the only sign of life on the planet had stood moments earlier. He searched frantically for any sign of activity amidst the rubble, his sensors scanning for life signs. He found only death.

The ground continued to rumble beneath Athlon. Desperate for answers, he flew deeper and deeper underground, his eyes blazing with a powerful light to reveal the interior of the planet. Even so, he was blinded when a fearsome ray of orange energy pierced the dark and rushed up to meet him. Athlon was sent sprawling, crashing into the wall of the vertical tunnel.

*You are here to serve a purpose. Do not try to fight me, Champion of Olympus.  
I am The God Of Death; you cannot compete with my power.*

The braid of energy plunged into the ground, loosing a huge piece of rock that hit Athlon, forcing him downward. He tumbled for miles, trying to spin to face the boulder. Finally, he managed to turn upward, and threw a mighty punch that cracked the wall of rock pressing on him. Broken in two, Athlon sped between the pieces back towards the surface of the planet. The light turned to meet him, slamming from one side of the cavern to the other, trying to slow The Android down. Athlon darted back and forth, evading the tumbling rocks. He blasted out of the tunnel and up towards the black city. No answers had been offered, no understanding had graced Athlon's mind, but one thing was obvious: Osiris' city had a greater purpose, and surely death would follow.

Athlon meant to destroy the impossible city, but as he rushed upwards, the braid of orange and black passed him, punching through the atmosphere and entering the black city. Immediately, one of the massive cannons came to life, and spun to meet Athlon. A huge blast struck the would-be destroyer, sending him reeling. Stunned, Athlon found his bearings and turned back towards the city. The light had surrounded the impossible fortress, and was absorbed by its dark walls. The voice returned in Athlon's head:

*Remember this moment, Android. Today, Osiris returns to power.  
Those feeble descendants of my prey provided me enough strength to raise my  
glorious city. Here, in these walls, I will rule once again. My subjects have  
risen with me, and are thirsty for the blood of the living. From my city we will  
purge this galaxy of light. My shadow will reign in every corner of existence,  
and you will have the honor of witnessing my campaign.*

*I exist disembodied, with no vessel to command. My essence is pure power, but  
I must have a place to rest before I dissipate. That, young Athlon, is why I  
have invited you to the Genesis of my Resurrection.*

*You are a spectacular creature. I can feel the treble matter in your brain.*

*It practically begs me to claim you. From your remarkable body,*

*I will command my armies, and spread my shadow across the stars. Every person who dies by my hand will join my army of death.*

*They worship me, Athlon, and give me strength.*

*I must kill my children in order to save them.*

A twisted beam of energy arced from the highest tower of the city, and struck Athlon, working its way into his mind. Athlon screamed in pain as his systems shook in a sickening lurch. Osiris spread along Athlon's neural pathways, wrapping himself around every part of the positronic network that made up the Android's brain. The laughter was deafening, and Athlon felt his internal components overloading. The pain was greater than anything he had ever experienced, and his vision flickered under the strain. Memories flashed through Athlon's mind, and he understood that Osiris was reading them like a book. He saw Olympus on fire, the Titans of The Dopinephrine nebula cluster, and Rhythm's long pilgrimage with Poetry. Osiris laughed at the power of Pyke, amused that it had taken so little to bring a mighty kingdom to its knees.

As Osiris' grip solidified, Athlon felt himself being pushed out of his own mind. For a long, strange moment, the only thing he could think about was a long weekend he had spent babysitting the prince of Portsmouth.

Athlon had a vision of Osiris' city firing on peaceful planets, leaving a streak of death and fire in his wake. The amount of casualties was incomprehensible. The pain became too much, and Athlon passed out as his body overheated under the siege.

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Days passed before Athlon woke up. A spark flickered in the back of the Android's brain, and Athlon found that he was aware of his surroundings. His memory was murky, and for a time he didn't understand what had happened to him. There was, however, a strong instinct to speak French. Curious, Athlon floated for a while in his confusion, exploring his thoughts without thinking too much about where he was and what he was doing.

Athlon began to get a grip on himself, and soon found that he was a prisoner in his own head. He couldn't move his body. He sensed Osiris with him, evil and dark, but knew that he was ignoring the mind of his host. Athlon's memory came flooding back, and he saw that he was on a battlefield, somewhere in the Jintisu system. He sensed the black city far behind him, and saw that thousands of shadowy warriors were marching with him, slaughtering the population of the planet they were attacking. Furious, Athlon screamed at Osiris, fighting the power that so solidly gripped his body.

*What can you do against me? I am in control here, Android.  
Throw your fit if you like, but you will do little more than tire yourself.  
Soon I will find a way to purge you completely.*

Athlon could see what Osiris saw, and from the back of their shared brain Athlon watched in horror as Osiris used the Android's hands to slaughter a scared looking soldier. Osiris laughed, and then fell silent.

Athlon stopped watching what was happening. Being helpless was intolerable for Athlon, who had spent his life helping others and enjoying everything he found, from the complex four-dimensional art of Metebelis IV, to the perfect croissants baked by the few remaining Ba'ku chefs.

He had to focus, gather his strength, and find a way to fight back. He worked away in the back of his head, building a shield against Osiris' mind, hiding what he intended to do. Osiris was wrapped around every part of Athlon's brain, giving him full control. There was nowhere Athlon could gain ground.

Athlon's plan was simple, if difficult: he would use his knowledge and technological skill to split his personality. If he could partition his brain into three parts, Osiris would have to jump between them in order to remain in control. That meant that Athlon could move into a different section and battle the intruder.

With his activities shielded, Athlon set to work, knowing that every second meant more people were dying at Osiris' hands. Slowly, he made headway, severing connections in his brain in order to separate one into three.

It was a painful process, and Athlon found that insanity threatened his progress. This wasn't something he was designed to do, and the controlled destruction he was inflicting on himself fragmented his thoughts. Sometimes it was hard to focus, and Athlon had to work carefully in order to keep from falling into the deepening pit of madness opening in his mind. He left the primary pathways between sections for last so that Osiris wouldn't notice a sudden difficulty in operating The Android's brain.

Athlon couldn't simply divide his brain without also separating his mind. He existed as a single being, and while Osiris had taken over the hardware, Athlon's consciousness existed in every part of his brain. Emotions had to be put in one section, while logic and rationality had to be put in another. Athlon's memories and knowledge went into the third partition, and his personality itself was split between all three. Essentially, three simplified Athlons now existed in a single brain, segregated to protect the greater whole.

When Athlon's work was complete, he waited for Osiris to return to the black city. The city rose from a burnt planet back into space, and Athlon made his move. Severing the final pathways, Osiris was thrown into disarray. His consciousness regrouped in one partition, and Athlon grabbed hold of another. Osiris roared:

*WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?*

*You will not force me out. I am a GOD. You are nothing more than software.*

Athlon and Osiris fought inside The Android's head, battling mentally until both were exhausted. Athlon refused to give up an inch of ground, and continued to pummel the evil force in his brain. Finally, Osiris retreated to the third partition and tried to regroup. Athlon moved forward, reinvigorated by his victory. With two-thirds under his control, Athlon rebuilt the pathways, effectively doubling his strength.

Enraged, Osiris struck back, trying to burn Athlon's brain rather than be ejected. Athlon attacked with everything he had, melding his portion with the edges of Osiris'. Osiris screamed at Athlon, infuriated as he steadily slipped from control.

On the mental battlefield, three Androids stood side by side against Osiris. A mighty clash ensued, with Osiris' warrior nature matched by Athlon's defensive instincts. The thrust of Osiris' sword was quickly dodged by Athlon's nimble movements. Osiris found that he could overpower any one of the Androids, but against three he was outmatched.

Sensing defeat, Osiris released his grasp and attempted to flee, his energy leaking back out of Athlon's body. Knowing Osiris would hunt for another host, Athlon quickly wrote new pathways to the third part of his brain, and condensed the sections back into a single piece. Athlon's new strength stunned Osiris, and Athlon attacked with his full control restored.

Osiris screamed in Athlon's head, cursing and threatening in rage. He grabbed hold of Athlon's fear center in a desperate attempt to regain his footing. Pulling from The Android's memories, Osiris showed Athlon a collage of all the darkness they had seen.

*I have awoken in you the ability to dream. It was simply a side effect of my divine influence on your brain, but I have allowed you to keep it. You have travelled all across the stars, you know as well as I that there is so much more to fear in this galaxy than to love. Your dreams will be nightmares after all the evil you have faced. Everyone wants to use you as I have. But with me, we can cast a beautiful shadow across all life, ending the ambitions of meddling men. All can be reborn, equal and freed of the weight of greed, saved from pain and guilt and loss. Would you stand against such a pure goal?*

Athlon felt the fear rushing through his mind, and wanted very much to release the territory he had won and retreat back into his corner. The urge was remarkably strong, and Athlon suddenly felt weaker than he ever had before. Keeping his focus on Osiris, he transitioned with great effort from the emotional partition to the logical one. Immediately, Osiris' words lost all power.

Athlon grinned, and surrounded Osiris' essence, crushing it with a burst of mental strength. The energy dissipated, and The Android fell to the floor.

After a few long moments, Athlon straightened, and opened his eyes. He was sitting in Osiris' black throne, centered above the rest of the city. An exhausted Athlon prepared to fight any guards who might have seen the god's body convulsing in internal conflict, but only silence greeted him.

Carefully, Athlon left the throne room, searching for any of Osiris' soldiers. After a short walk, he found a pile of bones. They were very old, and when Athlon touched them, they crumbled into dust. He began running wide sweeps for any kind of life or movement, but everything was still and cold. Athlon found many more bones, and eventually a huge room that was piled high with the skeletons of dozens of species.

Osiris' army had only been able to function while inspired by his immense power. By defeating Osiris, Athlon had simultaneously ended the mission of the army of death. As if on cue, the black city lurched sharply, sending Athlon tumbling through a pile of remains. The city had lost its ability to defy physics without Osiris' power, and gravity was pulling it towards the smoldering planet below. Athlon rushed into the open and flew off the city. He watched the black city gain speed, and crash into the landscape it had annihilated just hours earlier. The city exploded on impact, sending chunks of black rock whizzing through the air. The once mighty fortress was scattered like ashes across the better part of a continent.

Athlon turned his propulsion systems to maximum power and sped away from the planet. He suddenly needed to get as far away from Osiris as possible. Athlon screamed at the stars, the scars of the battle hot and fresh in his mind. He was so incredibly tired.

Athlon found a small uninhabited planet a few lightyears away, covered in beautiful meadows dotted with tiny white flowers. He set down near the planet's equator, enjoying the warmth of its sun. He laid down on the soft grass, and stared upwards at the sky. After a long moment of contemplation, he closed his eyes, and without quite knowing how, went to sleep.

Alone there in the meadow, Athlon dreamed. He dreamed of beauty, and of peace. He dreamed of a long, fulfilling journey, seeing new sights and meeting new people. He dreamed of

indulging his fascination in everything he came across, and of purging the memories of Osiris that plagued his mind.

Days passed, and Athlon woke up. His brain had finished repairing itself, and the absolute exhaustion was gone from his mind. He thought of the black city, and Osiris, and all the death, and while it troubled him deeply, his nap had allowed him to put a little distance between himself and the horror he had experienced. Athlon knew what he had to do next.

Speeding back into the sky, Athlon built a route through all the worlds Osiris had destroyed. He intended to return to each battlefield, and see what life remained. Athlon knew how terrible it would be to see all of the destruction again, but he had to do everything possible to make amends, and help the people reclaim what Osiris had taken.

Afterwards, he would take a long trip, to see new places and explore new things, and try to put all of this behind him. It would be a journey of healing, a quest for a future where he could release the pain left by being controlled by a murderous entity. It would be an odyssey for a distant cathartic release, for freedom from the bonds of slavery in the name of a merciless god claiming divine right.



*The Essence of Osiris*



*Osiris Rises*



*The Black City*



*Osiris Goes To War In Athlon's Body*

- D O P I N E P H R I N E -

# *Distant Cathartic*

## PART II

THE Monks of Charity were gathered in congress on Joshua, the small planet where Osiris' black city fell from the stars. They were a powerful group of religious mystics, dedicated to the worship of God and the protection of the faithful. Praying in a circle, the Monks asked God to purge the wrath of Osiris from the ruins of his final attack.

Athlon decided that Joshua was where he would begin his quest to offer help to all those who had survived the onslaught of the Army of Death. Appearing in a long white streak in the heavens, Athlon descended on the planet, seeking the Monks to ask what could be done.

Upon seeing the Android, the Monks huddled, begging God to deliver them from the returning evil of Osiris. They did not know that Athlon had simply been Osiris' captive, and saw his return as a sign that their trials were not over. Fear penetrated the minds of the Monks, and they performed a special ceremony to summon the protection of God. As Athlon touched down on Joshua, the sky thundered with a sudden storm, and lightning struck the ground near the bewildered Android.

High above the planet, a massive vessel appeared, and a booming voice came down through the atmosphere and echoed off the Northern mountains. The Monks threw their hoods off their heads, and turned their faces upwards to receive the words of God.

God spoke of the power of the Monk's faith, and agreed to smite the demonic forces of Osiris. God promised to spare the Monks from the rage of the invader, and with another clap of thunder, a brilliant flash of lightning struck Athlon, erasing him from the face of Joshua.

Athlon fell to the floor of the vessel, stunned by his sudden transport. The voice continued, accusing Athlon of Osiris' terrible crimes. Stating that Athlon had no faith, and worse had attempted to slaughter the faithful flock of the Lord Shepard, God sentenced Athlon to damnation.

Athlon rose to his feet and rushed for the door at the end of the narrow room he was in. Immediately, blue electricity arced from the ceiling, pinning Athlon to the ground. He felt the electricity pierce his body, and lift him into the air before slamming him against the back wall of the room, holding him motionless in place.

The engines of the massive ship engaged, and the craft began to move. After a few moments, the door opened, and Athlon saw a hulking figure enter. In the flickering light of the electricity, Athlon saw that the figure belonged to a large man, his face covered in patches of beard and deep scars. He was dressed in all white, a button down shirt and a tie with matching slacks. An enormous belly spilled over his waist.

The man flashed a wide, toothy grin, and approached Athlon. He looked the Android over, and let out a low whistle. The robot was perfect.

Athlon tried to speak, but found he had lost control over most motor function. The man licked his lips and laughed a high-pitched laugh at the struggling Android. He slapped one hand against his thigh, and was gone from the room as quickly as he had arrived.

A program began to hack Athlon's brain. It was powerful, but crude, and Athlon immediately wrote some software to counter it. He used a simulation application to create an image of his actual mind, and segregated the invasive program to an isolated loop, tricking the program into thinking it had successfully gained control. Athlon shut down his external life signs. As his body went limp, and his eyes went dark, Athlon retreated into his head. Behind the isolation loop, Athlon could continue working without being detected.

Athlon desperately needed answers. Inside his dormant shell, he set to work, remotely scanning the ship's systems and hacking its databanks. It was surprisingly easy to slip into the ship's logs: it was a powerful craft, but no one had bothered to protect against internal hacking. It would have seemed foolish, but Athlon sensed that the lack of specified security was rooted more in arrogance.

The ship was called *The Maelstrom*, and it was owned and under the command of one Boris Gregory Bedlam. The ship's records contained a treasure trove of information, a massive collection of data and history going back millions of years. Knowing that if he was detected the

ship would lock him out completely, Athlon downloaded the entire contents into his own archives, and disconnected from the ship's digi-structure.

*The Maelstrom's* records told an incredible story. Boris came from humble beginnings, born to poor parents millions of years ago. In a desperate attempt to escape the poverty that plagued his surroundings, Boris was seduced by crime. Starting in the streets, he made a name for himself through fearless dedication to wealth. Gifted with an immense intellect, he quickly carved out a ghetto kingdom with himself as king. His greed knew no bounds, and it wasn't long before he acquired a ship and left his birthplace in search of greater riches.

For millennia, Boris was a scourge on the Dopinephrine Galaxy. He established vast networks to flood entire sectors with drugs from distant worlds. He ran the largest prostitution ring in history, touching thousands of planets, and building a fortune that could buy him anything he could imagine. Still it wasn't enough.

Many died on Boris' path to ultimate wealth. He laid waste to entire races in order to claim the rare elements found on only a handful of planets. Boris built a fleet of advanced ships to keep the flow of excessive wealth moving to his criminal empire. Armies were built to fight the kingpin, but no force could match the endless resources Boris had hoarded away. Law enforcement agencies from across the stars united in a desperate attempt to end Boris' reign, but a hatred for all who wished to knock him from his lofty throne boiled deep in Boris, and he attacked all who opposed him, killing untold millions in a bloodthirsty war against the established order of the galaxy.

Eventually, with all challengers laid to waste, Boris found that he was unsatisfied with his riches. He had everything he could ever want, but Boris' greed cried for more. Power became his highest goal. Boris retired to his tower to contemplate the nature of power in private.

Ruling was not enough. Boris had the muscle to take any nation he desired with swift military defeat, but conquering a population and establishing himself as ruler offered no real power in Boris' mind. The people would not welcome him, and surely whispers of discontent would reach his ears. History taught Boris that conquerors often sank their wealth into endless attempts to crush rebellions and uprisings, keeping them from fully controlling a truly unified citizenry.

It would take something much bigger to satisfy Boris. It was only after years of meditation that an idea began to glow in his mind. He fostered the idea like a weak ember, coaxing it to grow, feeding it in an effort to light the fire that would power the forge of his ambition.

The idea was beautiful. Complex yet elegant, Boris came to believe he had found a way to ascend to untouchable power. He would not claim territory, or raise a new banner over an old one; instead, Boris would make billions come to him and ask to be dominated. His people wouldn't stir and plot against him; they would beg for him to rule them, and they would surrender everything, even their own families, in an attempt to please him. Boris would make the galaxy kneel before him, and offer him control over their lives, their desires, even their thoughts.

Boris set to work, gathering the fears of mortals and offering a way to escape them. Holy texts were drafted, offering stories of the genesis of life, and its required dedication to a fictional creator. Boris wrote dozens of books, each with a version of the same god ruling from the distant past, watching over all with spiritual authority. He established the concept of a supreme evil; a threat of everlasting punishment in the pit of Lucifer, an unthinkable fate awaiting anyone who dared defy their Savior, or failed to follow his every demand.

Boris set himself as Lord of All, encouraging each group of believers to inflict their faith with righteousness over others. Scores of peoples were given a slightly altered version of the grand lie, each made to see themselves as the chosen followers of God, each with a moral imperative to subjugate their fellow beings. Boris promoted intolerance, making victims of homosexuals, women, and selected ethnic groups. War spread through the galaxy faster than ever before, with fool fighting fool in the name of a holy dictator.

Religion had been born. Boris fine-tuned his messages, maximizing the hate between groups, forcing billions of followers to demonize billions more of their former brothers and sisters. The power of this religion came from hate, and Boris had mastered the art of hatred.

Athlon sank deep in his mind. He felt defeated. For hundreds of years he had fought for unity, stopping mindless violence wherever he found it. Now he had discovered the hidden history of fractured groups and emotional brutality. The story continued, on and on, documenting Boris'

spiderweb of influence growing in strength, spreading blood and fear across thousands of worlds.

Words hold power in the Dopinephrine Galaxy. Ideas can become energized when enough people believe in them. Countless masses of anonymous individuals believing their god was the true god had empowered Boris to supernatural levels of power. It had given him unnatural long life, the belief of entire races sustaining him millions of years beyond his mortality. Belief that Boris was God had made him God. He could hear his followers whispering to him in their prayers. Once he had achieved deity status, Boris found that he could feel the timelines of his children when their bodies were destroyed. He called these personal histories souls, and began to collect them. Boris dipped into his massive fortune and built a golden city that stretched across an entire planet. He named it Heaven, and started routing the after-images of people's lives there. Their continued belief, mixed with a tangible afterlife, offered him an endless source of energy powered by the timelines of the dead.

Athlon pulled up a collection of images of Boris, and recognized him as the fat man in white who had captured him. It was his voice that boomed across the fields of Joshua, answering the enhanced prayers of the Monks of Charity. Records showed that Boris rarely left Heaven. He had the worship of millions of people that he could send to spread his word and complete his tasks. The rise of Osiris had caught Boris' attention, and what he saw in the Android persuaded him to go personally to claim the technological marvel created by the ancient Titans of Dopinephrine.

The program that had hacked Athlon came to a stop, and Athlon sensed a signal calling out to its master. The isolation loop had worked, and the program was reporting that Athlon had been successfully enslaved. A few moments passed, and Boris returned to Athlon's cell. He approached the motionless Android, and read a report from the hacking program. He grinned a wide, wicked grin, and tapped away on a screen next to Athlon. Images flooded Athlon's mind, and he realized that a massive download was in progress. The new files contained the full text of every version of every holy book ever written, and every religious ceremony designed to strengthen the faith of Boris' believers. Finally, a new set of protocols were installed in Athlon's head. Boris meant to use Athlon like a simple tool, a walking computer that could be controlled by any programmer. Athlon reinforced his simulation copy, making sure there were no holes for Boris to see the true being beneath the software.

The Maelstrom arrived at Heaven. Coming to rest at the base of a tall golden steeple, Boris loaded Athlon on a transfer platform and disembarked. They entered a diamond-encrusted lift and descended into Boris' tower. After a short ride, they exited the lift, and Boris set Athlon in a grand throne, facing a huge panel covered with tiny receptors. The panel fed a massive amplifier, thousands of floors above the primary court of Heaven. Athlon remained completely still, letting Boris believe he was dormant, awaiting the command of the false god.

Athlon felt a long, needle-like control unit enter the back of his head. More software wrapped itself around Athlon's command nodes, informing him that he was now God's Hymnal. Answers came quickly, and Athlon soon understood. The knowledge Boris had installed was to feed new programming in the Android's head. Boris was harnessing the Ares Clef at the center of Athlon's construction. Diverting outward control through the simulation image, Athlon began singing the praises of God, the music passing through the amplifier and reaching every corner of Heaven. The population joined the Android, singing of enduring faith, making Boris groan with pleasure as his power surged to new heights.

For a moment, Athlon felt utterly defeated. Boris was wearing him like a glove, making him move like a puppet. But Athlon's fury rose with a surge of strength, and he started to form a plan. He easily reversed the polarity of one of the amplifier's auxiliary backups, and used it to feed the voices of the unseen masses below back to him. Athlon found that while most of the souls in Heaven were unified by the music, a surprising amount of conflict rested below the surface. Every soul poured worship upon God, but deep inside they couldn't help but sense the unnatural reality around them. Athlon smiled to himself, proud that even the devoted masses of Heaven privately struggled with their natural doubts.

The souls were held together by their history. As people, they had spent their lives serving God, some of them crusading against other factions of Boris' religions. Those years of faith defined their lives, and so their timelines were easily collected by God as souls, each one adding strength to Boris' power. Athlon would have to change the constant devotion of the people contained in the shadowy timelines that Boris ruled.

It had to stop. Athlon had explored the whole story, and what he saw was mindless dedication to a widespread lie. As religion had spread, it had gained strength, adding more and more corpses to its ugly history. Boris' path to supreme power was littered with torture and genocide, and his

holy reputation was stained with blood. Now that he knew the story, Athlon felt a deep responsibility to free the souls in Boris' evil grasp.

Working as incredible speed, Athlon partitioned the collection of carefully designed lies Boris had installed, and replaced it with his copy of *The Maelstrom's* databanks. He made new connections between the Hymnal software and his archives, and began broadcasting the truth of Boris' religious invention to the souls of Heaven. Instead of reinforcing the supreme control of God, Athlon showed the people Boris' story. Heaven saw God's true motives, His hate-promoting tactics, and His war on peace.

Athlon could feel the souls of Heaven listening. Their pre-existing doubts were compounded by the sudden revelations. All singing stopped, and Athlon heard Boris fall to the ground behind him.

Boris roared at the Android, and laboriously rose to his feet. His strength was being sapped by the shaken faith of his power source. Sensing the time for subterfuge was over, Athlon reengaged his control matrix and set the amplification panel to continue the broadcast remotely. Reaching behind him, he ripped the control unit from the back of his head and rose to meet the enraged god.

Boris hit Athlon like a brick wall. They tumbled through a stain-glass window with a crash and plummeted towards the streets of gold below. The two pummeled each other as they fell, Boris' anger fueling his assault. Athlon struck the god with everything he had, the fate of billions flashing in his mind.

They landed hard, sending a shockwave through the city that leveled several blocks of intricate buildings. The amplification panel continued to send images of the truth to the souls who had grown still as they realized what they were being shown. Slowly, a hum rose over Heaven as the people moved to see their bloodied deity wrestling with the metal man.

Athlon felt Boris' strength slipping as the fight continued. Doubt was taking hold in the city, and with each faltering inch of faith, Boris grew weaker. The hum peaked into a roar, and the souls of Heaven converged in the primary court. Athlon broke free of Boris, and moved back against the crowd. Boris poured blood onto the ground, and as the throngs of betrayed souls watched, his

face cracked with lines. His skin turned gray, and fell loosely on his bones. He looked around at the accusing faces of his flock, and settled on his back. He closed his eyes, remembering his long life, and limitless ambition. He thought of his crushed glory, and let go of his frail frame, consumed by his exhaustion. In his last moments, he embraced death, moving towards the open arms of eternal sleep. In seconds, he withered into a fragile old man, and collapsed into dust under the murmurs of his former followers.

Silence fell over Heaven, and Athlon felt the eyes of millions on him. For a moment, he tensed, anticipating an overwhelming attack, but the faces around him fell blank, and the souls slowly began rising into the air. Inside the Ares Clef, Athlon felt the relief of the masses, finding true death much more welcoming than eternal life in servitude. The souls slowly began dissipating as they rose above Heaven, each of them finding rest in the void. For many, their final thoughts were of forgiveness towards their fallen ruler.

Athlon flew back to Boris' tower, and sat on the ground. He was saddened by what he had seen that day. He was pleased by the victory, but he mourned for the billions that had died in the name of God. Weariness filled Athlon's mind, and he let himself slip towards a deep sleep, thinking of the message he would spread through the worlds scarred by Boris' lie. It was time to move on from institutional hatred, for the galaxy to reunite as one, unified by shared life. Fear of death would be purged, and a new generation would forget the darkness of the past. As sleep took him, Athlon found comfort in the new dawn of the Dopinephrine Galaxy, and the promise of fresh growth pushing through the blackened earth consumed by the fires of yesterday.





*The Maelstrom*



*Holy War*

- D O P I N E P H R I N E -

# *Distant Cathartic*

## PART III

### *Chapter 1*

THE pain was beyond words. Athlon floated in agony in a pitch dark pit, no stars above, no ground below. His soul was ablaze, filling his mind with one endless scream, blocking out any thoughts other than the desperate need to end the anguish. Athlon tried to fly, speeding at full power in what he hoped was up.

Chains appeared from nowhere, binding Athlon with a weight that plunged him against his will deeper and deeper into the pit. He called for help, barely conscious, screaming on every frequency, sending his voice out to anyone who might hear him. There was no response.

A feverish heat consumed Athlon's head, making him weak and confused. He continued to fall, miles and miles beneath the ground, the chains impossibly heavy. A glow appeared below him, and he looked down to see flames rising to meet him. As he fell, he felt the hands of the damned reaching out from the walls of the pit, grabbing at him, trying to pull him apart. Athlon's own screaming was overpowered as a million new voices screamed from the flames below, overloading Athlon's receptors and knocking him unconscious.

With a start, Athlon jolted awake. His eyes darted around in panic, hunting for the next torturous attack. Reason held no dominion in the Android's mind, and fear sent him skittering backwards across the floor, his arms propelling him into the nearest corner. There he curled up, rocking back and forth, trembling in terror.

It took several minutes for Athlon to get a grip on his mind. His triple-partitioned brain was desperately calling up emergency protocols, and commands were congesting in his neural pathways. His control was weak; most of his brain refused to listen to him at first, like the synapses in his head themselves were trying to flee the nightmare. Athlon cried quietly to

himself as his thoughts rushed in circles. He was too tired to care that he had lost so much control over himself, or to feel the deep concern that should surround such a revelation.

The frantic chaos in his mind subsided slightly, and Athlon made himself stand up. His hands shook, and he was skittish. His eyes moved constantly as he tried to look in every direction at once. He took a few unsure steps towards a balcony, and peered out over the city. It took several long moments of confusion for Athlon to remember where he was: it was Boris' tower, where he had fallen asleep after their battle. Heaven stretched out before him in the dark. Athlon enhanced his vision to examine the golden streets and buildings that covered the surface of the planet. Something was wrong; everything looked different than it had when Athlon arrived.

Athlon closed his eyes. He felt like he was made of rubber. He couldn't focus. Fear rose again in his mind, consuming his concentration. Terrible images danced in his thoughts. He saw children running from a mad man covered in blood and wielding a wicked looking axe. He saw Osiris laughing on a blackened battlefield strewn with corpses. He saw Poetry being forced beneath a guillotine, it's razor-sharp blade beheading her before he could respond. Athlon opened his eyes again and fell against the balcony's railing. Everything was so horrible. What had happened to him?

The sky was turning blue in the East; sunrise was coming. As the first rays of light peaked over the horizon, Athlon saw what was wrong with Heaven. It was tarnished. The sparkling gold had turned dull, and none of the spires glinted under the fresh light. In fact, some of the spires were crumbling, as if they were victim to centuries of disrepair. To the South, massive churches were chipped and pitted, their edges softened by wind storms. It didn't make sense.

Athlon tried to gather his thoughts. He couldn't remember what he was supposed to do next. There had been the battle with Boris, the souls of Heaven had dissipated, and then....

A bright light appeared directly above Athlon. It pierced the dawn, growing much brighter than the sun, and ripped a long tear across the sky. Athlon stared at it, finding he didn't have the will to run. The tear separated, and through it slipped two streaks of blue light. They moved across the sky, and descended on the tower.

Two figures materialized behind Athlon. He turned, knowing he was in no condition to defend himself, and saw that the beings from the sky were made of pure energy. They were tall, at least seven feet; Athlon couldn't be sure because it was hard to tell where their bodies ended. They appeared humanoid, both female, and their skin and robes shimmered with life. Everything about them had a bluish hue, except their headdresses, which were ablaze with bright red and orange energy, looking like a sea of long hair rising from their heads. They had pleasant faces that smiled at Athlon, and one of them reached for his hand. He let her take it, and a tingle of blue energy ran up his arm. The energy calmed Athlon, quieting his fear and helping him focus.

Athlon felt the same old hope that accompanied his thoughts every time he met new people. His shoulders perked slightly, and he leaned forward, anticipating the sweet sounds of new words. Surely, *this* would be the time. After so long, this was going to be the person that would address him in that most beautiful language, the highest linguistic achievement ever developed by civilization. Athlon could already hear the nuanced beauty, the perfect accent, and the divine vocabulary that could only exist in the sublime decadency of the French language.

*<Hello Athlon.>*

Athlon's shoulders fell. No matter. One day, it would happen. A voice had appeared in Athlon's mind, and the women spoke again.

*<We are The Elysians. We have lived here, in the Dopinephrine Galaxy for quite some time now, though we cannot be seen by its people. We have decided to make ourselves known to you, so that we may offer you our help. Tell us, do you understand what has happened to you?>*

Athlon blinked.

*<You have been here for 4000 years, unconscious, while your soul has been locked in The Realm of Lucifer. You have, for all intents and purposes, been in Hell. We do not have much time, so we are going to show you what has happened to you. Do not be afraid, Champion of Olympus. You will see the events that brought you here, but you will be in no danger.>*

The two women put their hands on Athlon's arms, and closed their eyes. Athlon felt himself rise off the balcony, and his vision blurred into long streaks as The Elysians took him back to the day he had arrived on Heaven.

Floating just off the balcony of Boris' tower, Athlon and the two Elysians watched the younger Athlon leap from the amplification station and fight with Boris. They crashed through the stained glass window and fell hundreds of stories before hitting the ground. The souls of Heaven congregated around the battle, and witnessed Boris' death.

The young Athlon returned to the balcony and sat down, falling asleep as the souls rose into the air and began to dissipate. As the souls disappeared, Athlon kept his eye on his younger self, perfectly still against one wall of Boris' tower. There was a long moment of silence, and then, to Athlon's surprise, lightning pierced the sky. A storm rolled with incredible speed across the surface of Heaven, unnoticed by the dormant Android sleeping in the tower.

Blackness blocked out the sun as dark energy from the storm grew together into a huge form. An immense being solidified from the darkness, with a red splash across the face. With the Elysians still holding onto him, Athlon knew it was Lucifer. The voice returned,

*<The Dark Lord. He was invented by Boris, written into the holy texts as the embodiment of evil, designed to be the ultimate deterrent. Boris used fear to collect followers who were terrified of an afterlife in Lucifer's dominion. Here in the Dopinephrine Galaxy, ideas gain power when they are believed. Lucifer should not exist, but the fear of Boris' followers, counted by the billion, made Lucifer real. Boris was quite descriptive of the unholy terror of Lucifer and his pit of damnation. Boris' creation of Heaven concentrated the beliefs of his followers, and Hell was born from their faith.>*

As Athlon watched, Lucifer flew to the balcony. Lucifer stood still for a moment, examining the sleeping Android before moving to him. Lucifer plunged one arm into the young Athlon's chest. Still observing, Athlon and the Elysians were whisked forward. They were pulled down into the mind of the Athlon being attacked by Lucifer. Pushed along onto another plane, the watchers were given a new vantage point above the reality Lucifer had created. The still-sleeping Athlon woke up to find Lucifer standing over him, the two of them in a sparse, shadowy void.

Lucifer spoke to Athlon, congratulating him on murdering God himself. He said that once Boris had been killed, Lucifer was able to see Athlon's soul. Athlon's timeline was full of adventure, a life defined by his selfless acts of salvation. Billions had been saved by Athlon during the Olympus Crisis alone, and millions more had been rescued or freed by Athlon since. When his personal timeline was compressed, Athlon had the richest soul in the galaxy. Every life Athlon touched made his soul stronger. Lucifer explained that by consuming such a soul, he could rise to new power, allowing him to leave Hell permanently. He could wage war on the galaxy, collecting the souls of the wicked, and killing everyone else. Lucifer intended to take advantage of God's death by ruling the Dopinephrine Galaxy as a supreme being, powered by Athlon's life.

Athlon's soul could not simply be taken however. Athlon had no cruelty in his heart, leaving his soul pure. Lucifer's realm was built on fear and hatred, and he was limited to claiming souls polluted with darkness. Lucifer painted fantasies in the void, offering the young Athlon anything he could imagine. Lucifer showed him a glorious Olympus with Athlon as king. Athlon refused, exclaiming that he would never submit to Lucifer's foul plans. The scene changed, and Lucifer showed a future where Athlon had been given divine power, able to save anyone he liked from Lucifer's coming empire. Athlon could enjoy immortality on Heaven, strengthened by the souls of the good as Boris had. All he had to do was surrender his own soul to Lucifer. Again Athlon refused.

Lucifer roared at the Android, demanding his surrender. Athlon stood fearlessly, defying the anti-God. Lucifer seethed, furious at Athlon's strength. Then, with a vile, toothy grin, Lucifer painted a third temptation for Athlon.

Before him, the young Athlon saw a beautiful mansion surrounded by a rich garden full of flowers from all across the galaxy. A young man walked up to the door and went inside, turning as he did long enough for Athlon to recognize him as Rhythm. Inside the house, Rhythm was greeted by Poetry, who glowed with love for him. They embraced, and Poetry giggled as Rhythm lifted her in his arms, spinning her in a circle. Two children ran to meet Rhythm, tugging at his shirt with their small hands. Rhythm knelt with them, a huge grin on his face, and hugged them together, one in each arm. The scene froze, and Lucifer appeared, his arms wide. He spoke once more to Athlon, promising that he could return him to his original form as an Olympian. Athlon

could be Rhythm again, with Poetry and a full life to live. They could have children, a peaceful home, anything they wanted.

Athlon stared at the image of Poetry, and longing gripped his thoughts. He didn't know how much he wanted to be Rhythm again until he saw the illusion. For a very long moment, Athlon looked like he might surrender, sell his soul to the devil, and claim his prize. He closed his eyes, and thought of the slaughter his soul would allow. Rhythm and his family might be spared, but the rest of the galaxy would be terrorized and destroyed by an all-powerful Lucifer.

As The Elysians and Athlon watched the memory, the young Athlon opened his eyes, and looked directly into Lucifer's.

"NO."

There was a long pause. Lucifer stared into Athlon's gaze, hatred seeping from every pore on the Dark Lord's body. Like a snake, Lucifer slithered towards Athlon, getting very close. Athlon stood his ground. Lucifer touched his cheek to Athlon's and spoke very quietly into his ear. If Athlon would not offer his soul, Lucifer would take it. Lucifer promised it would hurt.

The scene was set back into motion. Rhythm kissed his daughter on top of her head, and both children turned to run out onto the lawn. A shadow fell across the threshold, and a fearsome demon appeared, clutching a long sword. He scooped Rhythm's daughter up in his arms and licked her cheek before beheading her in a single movement. He held her head up by her ponytail as her small body crumpled on the floor. In a flash, the demon crossed the short distance to Poetry, slicing the young boy neatly in half on the way. Poetry screamed as the demon sank his blade into her stomach. He spat at Athlon and disappeared, leaving Poetry choking on her own blood in Rhythm's arms.

Lucifer erased the scene and disappeared, leaving Athlon alone in the void. The young Athlon spun in place, looking for the evil god. The void went completely dark for a moment, and Athlon could hear the excited murmuring of a crowd, slowly growing in volume.

A spotlight flooded Athlon, who found himself standing in a wrestling ring. Two more spotlights moved across the audience, illuminating thousands of black souls, summoned to watch the show. An excited hush moved through the audience. The spotlights centered on a stage across

from the ring, and Lucifer emerged to the sound of a powerful anthem. Humorously, he flexed his muscles for the crowd who roared with applause. Lucifer swaggered down the walkway to the ring, stopping now and then to wave at the throngs of spectators.

Lucifer entered the ring opposite an unsure Athlon, and the applause peaked as the audience cheered for their master. Lucifer took a mock bow, and then charged at Athlon, pinning him against the ropes. Athlon pummeled Lucifer's head, metal fists pounding bony temples. Lucifer took a step back before hitting Athlon with an uppercut that threw the Android completely over the ropes, sending him crashing into the front row. No longer able to contain their blood lust, the audience swarmed Athlon, beating his body and pulling on his limbs. Breaking free, Athlon swung wide, sending several of his attackers flying. He rose to his feet and swung again, but this time he hit only air; Lucifer had replaced the scene yet again.

Athlon was laying on a leather couch in a psychiatrist office, with one fist in the air. Lucifer threw his head back and cackled from behind a mahogany desk, the black, viscous sap that made up his form shifting and merging like hot tar in zero-gravity.

Athlon tried to stand, ready to pull Lucifer apart. He couldn't move an inch. He used his arms to propel himself up, but again failed. Athlon went still, and focused. He pulled together his strength and routed all of his power to his thrusters. In a single movement, Athlon launched himself upwards, his micro-engines at 300% capacity. The couch lit fire and was blown apart by the thrust of the Android, but he remained in place, floating on his back, smoldering leather and cushions beneath him. Lucifer cackled again, and rose from behind his desk, gliding silently across the room and touching down next to Athlon.

Lucifer peered down at the frantic Android, and extended one finger towards him. His nails were long, and sharpened to a point, and they frightened Athlon. The Android struggled harder than ever to get away from Lucifer, who chuckled quietly and touched the tip of his index finger to Athlon's chest. Terror swept through Athlon's body, seizing his mind and destroying his ability to remain calm. Lucifer cocked his head, grinning at the sight of his prey helplessly thrashing.

Lucifer spoke to Athlon, his voice booming in his mind. The two Elysians and the older Athlon could hear it too; a voice that dripped with evil, destroying all focus as it penetrated every memory, every hope, every thought.

COME NOW, DEAR ROBOT. YOU ARE HERE FOR YOUR OWN GOOD. TRY TO EXPRESS TO ME HOW YOU FEEL. YOU CAN TRUST ME.

Athlon shivered with fear. The words cut to his very core, wrapping around his soul. He was hopelessly overmatched.

NO? VERY WELL. SOON ENOUGH YOU WILL SHARE EVERYTHING WITH ME. YOU WILL BE MY POSSESSION, AND I WILL READ YOU LIKE A BOOK. I HAVE PATIENCE, ROBOT. I CANNOT CLAIM YOUR SOUL YET, BUT EVENTUALLY YOU WILL SURRENDER.

Lucifer leapt atop Athlon, startling everyone with his speed. He put one hand around Athlon's throat, and with the other he began punching the Android. Again and again he struck, with a sickening thud reverberating from each blow. With a roar, he lifted both hands above his head, and brought them down on Athlon's face, causing the light in the Android's eyes to flicker, and leaving a dent in his right cheek. Lucifer brought his face close to Athlon's and screamed with hatred at him. Then, like mist, the Dark Lord's body separated, and the remaining black cloud evaporated above the wounded Athlon, who was twitching as sparks sprung from his neck and torso. From his vantage point above the scene, the older Athlon touched his own face, feeling the cold dent Lucifer had given him all those years ago.

The office disappeared. Lucifer was gone. The young Athlon stood up laboriously, alone in the void, surrounded by nothingness. A soft murmur rose, like a scratching at first, growing into a faint whisper. When Athlon turned to face it, it echoed across the void to remain behind him. He swayed for a moment, and then sat down, woozy from the attack. The whisper continued, taunting Athlon, planting seeds of despair in his mind. Athlon covered his ears with his hands, trying to block the evil suggestions, but he could still hear them just as loudly. He stood up, trying to gain control, trying to build a plan.

A long mirror appeared, turning to face Athlon. As he looked at his reflection, his image began to change. The Android's semi-shiny exterior grew dull, and the reflection's eyes turned from pale green to deep red. Athlon watched as his image grew hunched and sinister, flashing a row of jagged teeth in a vile grin that matched Lucifer's. The reflection threw its head back and

laughed silently at its subject, and Athlon swung his fist at the twisted image, shattering the mirror with a loud crash.

As the older Athlon watched, chains appeared from thin air, and wrapped themselves tightly around his counterpart. The ground opened up, and swallowed its immobilized victim. Sensing his growing fear, the Elysians put their hands on Athlon again, and the void disappeared.

Setting back down on the balcony of Boris' tower, Athlon staggered to the wall and leaned against it. His hands had started shaking again. The Elysians spoke:

*<Lucifer sent you into Hell. When the void swallowed you, you fell into his dark pit. Lucifer needs your soul, so he damned you to a lifetime of torment, falling forever, horrors reaching for you. He wanted you to know how real his power is. After 4000 years, your faith in his existence is unquestioned. Your timeline has now been dominated by your millennia in Hell. Do you understand?>*

Athlon shook his head slowly.

*<Your timeline is your soul. Your soul has spent most of its existence in constant fear of Lucifer. He can take you now, Athlon. He has a genuine claim on your soul. Very soon, he will arrive, and destroy you. He will consume you, and it will give him new, unlimited power.>*

Athlon turned, and slid down the wall to the floor, holding his face in his hands. Words could not describe his fear.

*<Have heart, Champion of Olympus. We have come to help you. We can sense his impending arrival, and we intend to help you escape this fate. If we do not, the galaxy will fall to his new power, and all will perish. The galaxy needs you, Athlon, more than ever.*

*Six of our kind have volunteered for this task. They will return you to before the events you have seen today. They will remove the fear that troubles you so, and renew your youth. They will travel with you, and fight by your side against Lucifer. When he*

*arrives to claim you, in the midst of Boris' defeat, you will not be alone.>*

From the sky, a second tear appeared, and six more Elysians descended to the balcony. They were all males, and they wore intricately decorated battle armor.

*<These are Elysian warriors, Athlon. They have watched your long journey across the stars, and when your time of need came, they all asked to join you.>*

The warriors bowed to Athlon. They each drew a gleaming sword from their hips, and as one they lifted the weapons in salute to the Android. Athlon was speechless.

*<We are out of time. Lucifer approaches to claim his prize. You must return now, to that fateful day. And this time, you must defeat him. Go now, and take the hopes of all Elysians with you.>*

As the Elysian women finished their words, lightning poured forth from the sky above Heaven. The warriors grabbed hold of Athlon, and leapt from the balcony, pulling themselves into a perfect dive. High above them, Lucifer appeared from the black clouds of the storm, and rushed towards them. Athlon closed his eyes.

## Chapter 2

The Elysian warriors remained calm. All six extended their arms, shooting streaks of blue energy towards the fast approaching ground. A round portal formed in the golden street beneath the tower.

Athlon could hear Lucifer screaming from behind, and he knew he could feel the Dark Lord gaining on them. A long, black tendril wrapped around Athlon's leg, and Lucifer's black voice echoed across the surface of Heaven.

HE IS MINE!

One of the Elysian warriors let go of Athlon, and spun in mid-air, drawing his sword and severing the tendril. The other five gained speed, and just as Athlon opened his eyes, they flew into the blue portal.

At first, Athlon was completely disoriented. The time jump jumbled his thoughts, and it took several seconds for his powerful processors to recalibrate. Athlon looked around, seeing that they were exactly where they had been, now flying upwards towards the balcony which had regained its pristine shine. The rest of Heaven looked fresh as well; no pitted buildings or tarnished gold.

The five remaining Elysians set Athlon down on the balcony. Two of them roused the second, sleeping Athlon, who awoke with a start. His eyes moved with precision, scanning each Elysian, before landing on the older Athlon.

They stared at each other. Both of them sped through identical protocols, reading every inch of the other and confirming that they shared the same data signature. A moment of silence passed, and then the young Athlon took a step forward. He examined the dent on his doppelgänger's face, and then leaned in very close to look at the perfect *399* above his left eye.

The older Athlon grinned back at himself, and was trying to decide what words were appropriate for such a meeting when the crackling sound of electricity rose from below. The warriors were all

looking over the balcony, and the two Athlons joined them in time to see the sixth Elysian rocket out of the portal. He landed on the balcony, and looked at his brothers with fear in his eyes. All six turned, grabbing the Athlons roughly. The younger Android resisted at first, but he sensed the trust felt by his older self, and allowed the Elysians to encircle them. Wasting no time, the warriors held hands, and a painfully bright light grew from their eyes. The light wrapped itself around both Athlons before forming a column of pure light. The warriors released their grip and dove back off of the balcony. Inside the column of light, molecules began to merge. Athlon could no longer tell if he was the older or younger version. He felt the years of trauma melt from his mind, and the dent on his face glowed white and hot, and then disappeared. The energy column surged, and a shockwave blasted outward.

The gold of the tower began to melt under the heat, and the shockwave severed the tower neatly in half. Chunks of the massive building were thrown with immense force in every direction. Athlon tumbled across the balcony, feeling it pulverizing beneath him. He tried to get his bearings, but he was blind from the light, and could do little more than bounce off of the tower and fall towards the ground. He landed hard, knowing a simple fall wouldn't even scratch him. He blinked a few times, and looked up at the tower, which was crumbling under its own weight. A cloud of dust welled up from its base, throwing bits of molten gold like shrapnel through the air. Athlon put up his arms, and sped into the sky out of harms way.

He understood what had happened. His two timelines had been joined, erasing the age from his body, but not the memories from his mind. The terror that had plagued him in the future was gone, and in its place was a bit of resentment. Athlon could remember what had happened to him, but he was disgusted at how weak it had made him. Lucifer had very nearly beaten him, not with raw force, but with mental anguish.

Shaking the feeling off, Athlon decided to just be glad to have the sharpness of his mind returned. He hovered for a moment, scanning through the settling dust for the Elysians. He found them standing around the portal, hands extended, trying to close it. He called to them, and heard their response in his mind.

*<Lucifer is still chasing us. On the other side of the portal, only a few seconds have passed. If we fail to close the portal on this side, Lucifer will come through it after us. Athlon, you*

*cannot help here. We are 4000 years in the past, and the Lucifer of this time is about to arrive to find you.>*

Athlon turned and flew upwards, remembering where he had seen the storm form above his sleeping self. He felt strong, and his fear of Lucifer had been replaced by an anger that fueled his ascent.

The storm appeared, just as before, and Athlon increased his speed. After a few moments, Lucifer arrived, the clouds forming his black body. Athlon hit him with everything he had, separating his head from his shoulders completely. It fell apart, and quickly rejoined his body, forming again in a few seconds. Athlon continued upward, hungry to demolish the Dark Lord. He peaked a few thousand feet above Lucifer, before turning and engaging his boosters for a descent followed by a sonic boom.

From so high above Heaven, Athlon could see the entire battlefield. The tower had come to rest in a pile of rubble, and the melted gold had cooled into round drops covering everything for a half-mile from the site of Athlon's reconstitution. The Elysians remained around the portal, pouring everything they had left into closing it. It was still bright blue.

Lucifer was fully formed, and turned upwards just in time to be hit by the speeding Athlon. Athlon wrapped his arms around Lucifer, driving him towards the planet's surface. Lucifer struggled, but Athlon kept his grip tight, giving no quarter. Together they fell towards Heaven, slamming fists into one another in an epic conflict.

They hit the ground like a missile, shaking it for miles. Athlon's speed had driven Lucifer several meters below the ground, and they were both stunned by the impact. Shaking it off, Athlon flew back out of the crater, and pushed a large piece of the former balcony in on top of Lucifer. Focusing, Athlon gave himself a surge of power, internally heating his own body to an incredible temperature. He laid his hands on the balcony, slowly melting it. Rage had seized Athlon; he didn't just want to be victorious. He wanted to bury Lucifer forever.

The gold liquified, rushing into every crevice of Lucifer's makeshift grave. Athlon sped back into the sky, cooling himself in the rushing air. Turning back, he worked to calm himself, knowing there was more to be concerned with than just the evil god screaming from beneath the ground.

Athlon located the Elysian warriors exhausting themselves with the effort of closing the portal. This was taking too long. Something wasn't right. Athlon took off towards them, not sure of what to expect.

The force of Lucifer coming through the portal sent the six Elysian warriors flying. For just a moment, old fear gripped Athlon. He remembered his anger, and drowned the fear with sheer will. He increased his speed, ready to tackle the Dark Lord away from the Elysians, hoping to give them a chance to recover. A split second before Athlon reached his target, Lucifer turned and swung at the Android, connecting with a perfectly timed punch. Athlon spun out of control, crashing through the wall of a nearby building.

Athlon picked himself up and flew back out of the creaking structure. Lucifer had already moved to the filled crater, feeling his own presence from the past beneath the cooling gold. With amazing speed, he flattened part of his body, letting it slip into micro-fractures in the tomb. He hefted the entire boulder of gold, and flung it towards Athlon, sending the Android right back into the hole his crash had left in the building. The boulder knocked out the opposite wall, and the whole building came down with Athlon inside it, burying him in rubble.

The Elysians had regrouped, and came speeding in formation to the collapsed building, digging Athlon out with impressive strength. Together, the seven warriors rose from the wreckage, looking for either of the Lucifers. They were together by the crater, one shaking chunks of gold from his body, the other keeping watch. Spotting the group, he flashed his evil grin, and grabbed his twin. Their bodies loosened, thick ropes of black fluid weaving together. One arm ripped the head of the weaker Lucifer from the mass, and tossed it away. The tangled mass of tendrils combined, and re-solidified, leaving one hulking Lucifer rising from the surface of Heaven.

Athlon and the Elysians sped for their foe, but Lucifer hunched his body, and then launched into the air with blurring speed. He shot back into the storm that remained stirring in the sky, and the clouds surrounded him. In a flash, he was gone.

## *Chapter 3*

Athlon stared out into the endless expanse of stars and worlds. There were so many countless souls, huddled together in bunches on the .00001% of the galaxy that was made up of habitable planets. Life clung to every rock, every inhospitable crevice of every atmospheric moon. Lucifer wanted to claim them all. Somewhere, hidden in the trillions of miles that made up the Dopinephrine Galaxy, the Dark Lord was plotting his next move. Whatever he was planning, Athlon knew it would mean the death of millions.

Orbiting Heaven, the Android had retooled his long range sensors to pick up even the faintest hint of Lucifer's presence. It had been three days since Lucifer had escaped Athlon and the Elysians, and Athlon had spent most of that time up here, searching for the ultimate predator.

While the sensors spun endlessly, searching for a signal, Athlon had considered the nature of Lucifer, hoping to garner some insight. He built complex algorithms to analyze every encounter he had with Lucifer, and extrapolated a model of behavior. He added to this the memories of his 4000 years in hell, examining every twisted soul, every psychological horror.

At his core, Lucifer hated life. He saw how people had swarmed to Boris' teachings, how they had given up on the grand potential of life in exchange for mindless slavery. Lucifer was a lonely being, a creature that destroyed or imprisoned every form of life he had ever come in contact with. He was bitter, and had used his bitterness to bury himself ever deeper in the lustful allure of evil.

Athlon saw that what Lucifer truly desired was an empire. He had collected billions of souls, just as Boris had. But where Boris wanted personal power, Lucifer wanted an army. For him, it wasn't enough to be lord of the damned. He wasn't satisfied with the souls that came to him willingly; Lucifer wanted to prey on the basic instincts of man, driving them to fear him and each other. He wanted to plant his dark flag above the entire galaxy, and move from planet to planet, collecting the souls of everyone, good and bad alike. Athlon considered this a long time, and came to realize that Lucifer was his greatest foe to date. He made Osiris look like an angry puppy, and Boris like a lazy fool.

Deciding to rest, Athlon turned his sensors to maximum power, and headed back down to the shiny planet where the Elysian warriors were waiting. They had reclaimed their strength, and were meditating in a circle when Athlon landed. After a moment, they stirred, and rose to welcome their leader.

Athlon sat with them, and asked the question he had been pondering since meeting them. He asked why the Elysians wanted to help him. They existed on a different plane, and easily could have remained unknown to the rest of the galaxy, going about their long lives in peace.

The Elysians looked around at one another, and Athlon sensed that they were communicating privately. After a few minutes, they turned to Athlon and agreed to share their story. One of the six stepped forward, and took Athlon's head in his hands. He stared into the Android's eyes, and began a mental transfer. Athlon was gently tugged deep into his mind, and he closed his eyes, feeling the calming effect of the Elysian's telepathic presence.

Athlon saw the beautiful dimension that the Elysians had called home for eons. Millions of Elysians moved about, floating in space instead of residing on a planet. They reminded Athlon of jellyfish, glowing softly against the blackness of space.

Athlon came to understand much more than just what he saw. His ally on Heaven had opened a remarkable door in Athlon's mind, and had given him unlimited access to the memories of the Elysians. They had existed here, in Elysia, for millions of years. Having ascended from carbon-based lifeforms to beings of energy, they had achieved long life that bordered on immortality. They existed in space, feeling the solar winds passing through them. They collected ancient knowledge from the rest of the universe in the whispers of the stars.

The Elysians had evolved to pull energy from chaos itself. They did not eat, or sleep, or age; they simply existed, fueled by the most bountiful source of energy in the cosmos. To ensure they would never run out of sustenance, they constructed The Mik'hymbi, their highest achievement: a complex series of artificial black holes, based on calculations so advanced, even Athlon could not understand them.

The Elysians mastered time with their supreme collected intellect, and learned how to use time to fuel The Mik'hymbi without so much as bumping the history of lesser beings. Eventually, they

learned to manipulate time as they wished, moving backwards or forwards without disrupting time's delicate harmony.

Thousands of black holes of varying size, all across Elysia made up The Mik'hymbi. Into it, the Elysians funneled time. Constantly bending and changing, there was a massive amount of energy left over as time decided its true path. Aborted timelines and alternate realities were identified and directed into the network of black holes, which swallowed everything put in their path. This caused tremendous-yet-controlled chaos between the black holes, as the events they consumed could not be reconciled with reality. This chaos was syphoned by the Elysians, who could feed from it no matter where they were in Elysia.

Hundreds of millennia passed in this way. Chaos was endlessly reproduced, and the Elysians were free to live their long lives without the disruption of searching for consumable energy. Things should have continued forever, and would have, until an event known as The Mik'hymbi Cataclysm. The name appeared in Athlon's mind with quiet force, and he felt the sorrow all Elysians shared at its memory.

The Cataclysm was triggered when General Pyke detonated the Ares Clef during his battle with Rhythm. The Ares Clef had been built in the Dopinephrine nebula cluster, where dimensions touched. When the Ares Clef detonated, its immense power leaked through into Elysia, bumping a single black hole out of balance. A massive chain reaction was triggered, and the Mik'hymbi ate itself. The thousands of black holes swallowed one another, tearing the fabric of space and time in the process. Planets, stars, and eventually the entire dimension was stretched and consumed by the endless hunger of The Mik'hymbi's implosion.

As Elysia was being swallowed, the Elysians gathered to decide what to do. They reached out into the nothingness between dimensions and searched for a new home. Boris' invention of religion was the next most chaotic force in the universe, and so the Elysians chose to abandon their home and seek refuge in the Dopinephrine Galaxy. Calling out to the Titans residing in the Dopinephrine nebula cluster, the Elysians asked for help opening a door between dimensions. The Titans agreed, and allowed the Elysians to pass through moments before being destroyed by the Ares Clef.

The Elysians were still ascended beings, and decided to remain on the ethereal plane, unseen by the lesser beings of the galaxy. Their command of time was warped by the detonation, causing their existence to stretch from their first moment in Dopinephrine all the way back to the birth of the galaxy. Whispers of their existence were cast across all of time, and the Elysians became myths in the history of many cultures. The Olympians especially heard the name, and in their earliest days the people of Olympus told myths about the powerful Elysians, and their impossible home undetected by mortals. These myths became a part of culture, and were passed down through the generations. Athlon remembered Perseus speaking of the Elysians, and their invitation to an afterlife on their plane of existence.

The constant holy wars of Boris' followers caused enough chaos to feed the Elysians, though they mourned the violence that gave them their sustenance. They watched the events of the galaxy, and continued life much as they always had, as beings of thought and energy, gathering the wisdom of time and contemplating the nature of existence. They witnessed Athlon's birth during the Ares Clef detonation, and watched him defeat Pyke, freeing the people of Olympus. They watched his centuries of travel, his capture by Osiris, and his battle with Boris. And they watched as Lucifer took Athlon and sent him to Hell, ripening his soul for harvest.

Seeing the dark future in Lucifer's plans, the Elysians realized that their lives would be in as much danger as any race. If Lucifer succeeded in consuming Athlon's soul, the Dark Lord would gain enough power to wage war on the galaxy unchallenged. He would commit genocide on a scale never before seen, and fill his pit with the souls of mortals, leaving no one to continue life anywhere in the galaxy. With no one left, there would be no more war, and of course, no peace either. Chaos would no longer be generated, and the Elysians would starve and die.

Faced with this new reality, the Elysians again convened to decide what to do. After long debates, they decided that they could not save the galaxy simply to ensure that war would continue. They wouldn't just stop Lucifer; they would help Athlon destroy him. With Boris and Lucifer both destroyed, the Elysians knew that the peoples of the galaxy would gradually grow past the dark chapter created by religion. Hopefully, the Elysians would find a new source of energy, and could continue existing alongside the people of Dopinephrine in peace. If enough chaos to feed them could only be found in the constant warring of men, the Elysians would allow themselves to die. No longer would they feed on the misery of others.

Athlon opened his eyes. The Elysian warrior removed his hands from the Android's head, and for a while the two simply looked at each other. The story made Athlon sad, but it also inspired him. He found that he was deeply honored that people such as these wished to fight at his side against evil, and that they would risk themselves to save him from the horrific fate he had faced.

A few more moments passed, and Athlon noticed the persistent beeping in his head. His long range sensors had found something, but the signal was too weak to decipher. Athlon shook the warrior's hand, and offered his gratitude, both for the selfless help the Elysians had given him, and for the story they had shared. Then he took off for space, where he could get a stronger signal, and hopefully pinpoint Lucifer's location.

## Chapter 4

YOUR GOD HAS LEFT YOU. YOU HAVE BEEN ABANDONED. BUT DO NOT DESPAIR; YOU ARE NOT ALONE. I HAVE ARRIVED WITH GLAD TIDINGS. NO LONGER SHALL YOU WORSHIP A GOD WHO IGNORES YOU, WHO ALLOWS YOU TO SUFFER, AND LEAVES YOUR PRAYERS UNANSWERED. A NEW DAWN APPROACHES; AND WITH IT COMES THE MORNING STAR. A NEW GOD, WHO WILL NOT FORSAKE YOU, NO MATTER THE TRIALS YOU FACE. I BRING WITH ME AN ENDLESS BOUNTY, A RENEWED PURPOSE, AND SALVATION FOR ALL FROM THE DARK THINGS OF THIS GALAXY. REJOICE! THE NEW DAWN IS NIGH!

Athlon couldn't believe what he was hearing. He fully expected to receive a transmission about Lucifer's movements, but he thought it would come in the form of a devastating attack, not a proclamation by the Dark Lord himself. Lucifer wasn't hiding; the message came with a recording signature, offering Athlon and the Elysians the exact location of the transmission.

Athlon returned to the surface and played the message for the six Elysians. They discussed possible motivations, and tried to detect any hint of a trap. Ultimately, they decided that Lucifer's intent mattered little; whatever he was doing would not end well. Only the seven warriors on Heaven could stop him.

The transmission came from the Assyria Sector, from a tiny moon not labeled in Athlon's memory banks. Nearby was the Thracian Empire, one of the most highly populated civilizations in the Dopinephrine Galaxy.

Immediately, Athlon knew that was where Lucifer would strike. It would offer him a powerful victory to begin his campaign on the rest of the galaxy, and give him a strategic stronghold near the deep mines of the Alabaster belt. The only question that remained was when he would make his move.

Athlon and the Elysians departed Heaven, flying in a pattern for the open stars. It would take only a few hours to arrive in the Thracia solar system. Athlon enjoyed the company of his Elysian

friends. He had spent so much time flying alone in space with no company but his own thoughts.

Less than an hour had passed when a second message came.

YOUR GOD DENIED YOU YOUR NATURAL STATE. HE MADE YOU TURN FROM YOUR NATURAL INSTINCTS, DEMANDING YOU CONFORM TO ARBITRARY LAWS SET FORTH BY HIM AND HIM ALONE. I SAY, EMBRACE YOUR HUMANITY! TONIGHT, ON THE FIRST DUSK OF THIS NEW GLORIOUS ERA, I CALL ON YOU TO RECLAIM YOUR BIRTHRIGHT! GO FORTH, PEOPLE OF THRACIA! RAPE, PILLAGE AND STEAL! MURDER THOSE WHO HAVE WRONGED YOU! PUSH DOUBT FROM YOUR MINDS! EMBRACE THE TRUE POTENTIAL OF YOUR SPECIES. ANARCHY AND CHAOS RULE YOUR HEARTS; SHOW ME YOU HAVE THE COURAGE TO EXIST IN A WORLD THAT IS NOT CONTROLLED BY GREEDY RULERS AND ARROGANT ENFORCERS. SET FIRE TO THE GALAXY!

Athlon began to understand. Lucifer would not simply attack the people of the galaxy; he meant to turn man against himself. In the aftermath of bloody anarchy, millions of souls would flood Lucifer's pit. He was building an army of misfits, outcasts and anarchists to tear down the institutions that enforced order and justice. Lucifer would sink the Thracian Empire into a lawless dystopia in a single night.

Athlon and the Elysians slipped past the Assyrian border, and then entered the Thracia solar system. Athlon declared the unknown moon as their destination. Lucifer was almost certainly there, and the only chance they had of stopping the approaching carnage was to put Lucifer down. If they failed, tomorrow would see a Lucifer at new heights of power, with the galaxy tearing itself apart in his name.

As the moon came into view, the Elysians slowed.

*<That is Cimmerian. This is where it all began, so many years ago. When Boris wrote Lucifer into existence, it was from this moon that he was said to rise. A city rose from the moon's dust, already ancient when it appeared. Lucifer will have extra power here: it is his mortal domain.>*

Athlon slowed as well. He had never heard of the city, but it's name rang in his ears, repeating itself over and over. Cimmerian. Birthplace of Lucifer. Home of evil.

The Elysian warriors were clearly shaken. They never thought that they would ever see such a place, and now they approached battle here, in Lucifer's oldest layer. Athlon spoke to his friends, reminding them of the vital task ahead. There was no room for fear now. Lucifer had to be stopped.

The Elysians paused for only a moment; they knew Athlon was right. They nodded at their leader, and the group continued their journey. Athlon's joy at having company had evaporated. He was leading six people into a battle that they well might lose, and he could feel their uncertainty. The idea of losing his new friends scared Athlon even more than the pit of Hell had.

Cimmerian loomed before them. Athlon's body tingled as they approached: Lucifer's dark presence extended well beyond the borders of the round rock. Strange vibrations ripped across Athlon, and bizarre thoughts began to tremble in his sub conscience. He noticed unusual low light frequencies coming from the moon, and upon analysis discovered that they were delicately tuned to upset the natural balance of the human brain. Lucifer was using a wavelength projector to stir madness among the people of Thracia.

Athlon scanned the Thracian sun and its 14 worlds. The population of the capital planet of the Thracian Empire was concentrated on a single continent, and the planet's shadow was creeping onto the edge of that land mass. Dusk was setting.

There was no more time. Athlon lacked a plan, and he had no weapons beyond his own fists and the Elysian's swords. There was nothing for it; they had to attack now. They sped up, gaining momentum as they closed on Cimmerian, the red streak of Athlon's thrusters, and six thicker streaks of blue on a collision course for the city of dust.

Lucifer was expecting them. Just as Athlon and the Elysians got close enough to make out the outline of the evil city, heavy cannon fire exploded from the moon's surface. The Elysians broke off from their formation, taking evasive maneuvers, but still speeding towards their inevitable

battle. Athlon, though, refused to flinch. Even as anti-space craft shells exploded all around him, he remained in position, staring into the fray rushing up to meet him.

Fury took the Android's heart. As he descended on Lucifer's layer, the deep scars of Athlon's time in Hell burned in his chest. He had experienced so much pain, so much doubt. He very nearly lost himself in the depths of that vile place, and now his hated captor threatened the entire galaxy with the same fate. Athlon promised himself he would die on this battlefield before he would see Lucifer gain any more ground in the Dopinephrine Galaxy.

The cannon fire stopped, and for a moment, there was silence. Athlon pushed his thrusters even harder, scraping for every ounce of speed. Far below him, he saw the black wisps of Lucifer's energy gathering. The Elysians rejoined Athlon in formation, and screamed with him, a fierce battle cry that surely gave even Lucifer chills.

Lucifer rose from the center of his city, growing in size many times greater than he had appeared on Heaven. His body rose hundreds of feet in the air, casting a shadow that nearly covered the city. He screamed back at the inbound warriors. They flew like missiles at Lucifer, hitting him with tremendous force. Lucifer stumbled backwards, crushing a gray building behind him.

Athlon reversed his thrusters, putting space between Lucifer and himself. They were nose to nose, staring into each others very being. Athlon flew straight for Lucifer's face, hoping to punch through his massive head. The Elysians followed.

Lucifer put up one arm to block Athlon, exposing that side of his torso. The Elysian warriors saw their opening, and attacked Lucifer's chest, hacking and slashing with their swords. Lucifer cried out, moving his arm to swat at the Elysians just as Athlon reached his target. He felt Lucifer's face give ground under his attack, and he swung both fists as fast as he could, leaving a deep wound on Lucifer's left cheek that leaked thick, blue blood on Athlon's fists.

Lucifer grabbed Athlon, plucking him from the pain in his face. He roared at the tiny Android, and squeezed his hand around him. Athlon engaged his thrusters once again, propelling Lucifer's hand up in a half circle before the Dark Lord let go. The Elysians hit him once more, sinking their blades into Lucifer's thick skin, again and again, striking with the control and power of well trained warriors.

Reaching behind him, Lucifer produced a long, thin black whip, and swung it in a wide arc, catching two of the Elysians and throwing them to the ground with a thud. He swung again, but the remaining four were ready, dodging the whip as it passed by them. Athlon called to them, directing them to Lucifer's hand. They attacked together, hacking away at Lucifer's huge fingers, loosening his grip on the whip. Athlon followed the whip's tip, catching it just as Lucifer let go, pulling his injured hand away from the biting pain of the Elysian's swords. The Elysians grabbed the thick handle together, understanding Athlon's plan.

Moving in unison, Athlon and the Elysians rose with the whip stretched between them. Athlon flew in sharp circles around Lucifer's neck, wrapping the whip tightly on the Dark Lord's throat. After three passes, Athlon flew away from Lucifer, pulling the whip with all his might. The Elysian's let go, and split up, each attacking a different part of Lucifer's face. Moments later, their two comrades rejoined them from the moon's surface, stabbing Lucifer's chin.

Lucifer fell to one knee, grabbing at the whip around his throat. Athlon refused to give an inch, pulling the whip tighter. Lucifer's head began to change shape, and for a moment Athlon thought he was dying. Instead, Lucifer elongated the tendrils making up his head, pulled them through the coiled whip, and reformed his head beneath it. Athlon let go just in time to receive a dizzying punch from Lucifer, and he went flying through the air.

As he found his bearings, Athlon's communication center started screaming in his head. Reports were flooding the Android's open channel from the Thracian Empire, as the police and military called for reinforcements. Thousands of anarchists had overrun the capital city, setting fires and killing at will.

CAN YOU HEAR MY CHILDREN, ROBOT? THEY ARE RECLAIMING THEIR HOME. HAD YOU ONLY GIVEN ME YOUR SOUL, NONE OF THIS BLOODSHED WOULD BE NECESSARY. IT DOES NOT MATTER NOW. TOMORROW, MY REACH WILL EXTEND THROUGH THIS ENTIRE SECTOR, AND I WILL HAVE A LAUNCH PAD TO THE REST OF THE GALAXY. I HAD INTENDED TO LET YOU WITNESS MY RISING GLORY, BUT I SEE NOW THAT YOU WILL ONLY STOP WHEN YOU ARE DEAD. THIS IS WHERE YOU DIE, ROBOT. CIMMERIAN WILL BE YOUR TOMB.

Athlon came at Lucifer again, reentering the fray. The Elysians were circling the Dark Lord, stabbing him quickly before moving on to avoid his huge hands, which swung in wide arcs, searching for the pesky insects that stung Lucifer again and again. Athlon went for Lucifer's eyes, hoping the soft tissue would tear beneath his attack. Immediately, Lucifer stopped hunting the Elysians and turned to face Athlon. As the Android neared the giant's face, Lucifer slammed his hands together, pinning Athlon between them. Lucifer pressed his palms together with immense strength, crumpling Athlon's exterior.

The Elysian's flew to Athlon's aid, piercing Lucifer's hands with their swords. Again and again they struck, until Lucifer finally opened his hands, letting Athlon fall from between them.

Athlon fell like a rock. His thrusters had been completely destroyed. Both of his arms were broken, exposed wires sparking in the night. His neck was broken too, and his head was twisted at a sickening angle. Athlon hit the moon hard, and didn't move.

The Elysians immediately fell back, rushing to the surface to assist their fallen leader. Lucifer grinned down at them, and then turned, evaporating back into a black cloud, and disappearing into his city to watch Thracia burn.

Athlon was vaguely aware of the Elysian's presence. The pain was incredible. He tried to speak, but only a dull clicking came from his mouth. One of the Elysians lifted him carefully, and Athlon could feel the air against his body as they departed Cimmerian. He thought of fresh baked pie, and cold milk, and his favorite songs, and about how adorable frogs were. Athlon wanted nothing more in the world in that moment than to get a pet frog. Maybe if he could just have a tiny frog, it would make him feel better.

The sky spiraled above Athlon, and the stars ran together until everything was white lines, making him dizzy. The light dimmed in Athlon's eyes, and then went out. There was nothing left to see.

## *Chapter 5*

Athlon opened his eyes. He was lying on his back, and above him he could see the night sky. His hearing was muffled for a moment, but then began to clear, revealing the sounds of distant gunfire and an occasional explosion. A figure came into view, and then another. Six men stood above him, smiling down at the Android. Athlon thought they looked like his Elysian friends, but they were flesh and blood, not the beings of energy who had fought by his side. One of them spoke.

Athlon, can you hear me? Are you still in any pain?

Athlon considered the question. He remembered being in terrible pain, but now he felt... good. He felt great.

We managed to heal you, Athlon. The six of us. We poured our energy into you. The power of our Elysian heritage was enough to repair you, and then some. Can you stand?

Athlon stood. His memory was a bit foggy, but he was piecing it together. They had been fighting Lucifer; Athlon had been injured. The Elysians had carried him off of Cimmerian, bringing him here, to Thracia. Athlon could remember the faint chanting of the Elysians, and then a bright light had filled his body.

Like a brick wall, everything hit Athlon at once. The power of the Elysians was inside of him; he could feel their knowledge in his mind. There was so much - Athlon felt like he had been a child before his friends expanded everything he had ever been. It was like being alive twice over.

One of the Elysians doubled over, coughing and groaning. The others bowed their heads. Athlon looked around at them, one by one, trying to read their faces. Finally he asked: what had they done?

You must not feel sorrow Athlon. We made this decision because we know only you can stop Lucifer. We volunteered to fight alongside you knowing we would likely die in battle. Instead, we have the glory of dying not by the enemy's sword, but for your resurrection. Our time is very short, but you must know, we are

honored to go in such a way. Your power is heightened; our energy will lend you the ability to defeat this threat, and all who have hope in the galaxy will be saved.

Tears welled in Athlon's eyes. He had only just begun to know these men, and now they were going to die because he had pushed ahead without thinking. He should have regrouped, he should have made a plan. It had been so stupid, rushing to attack a monster he couldn't possibly defeat alone.

We made this sacrifice out of necessity, Athlon. We never would have defeated Lucifer. We barely hurt him as it is. Now, you hold the power to win this fight. Had we the strength, we would fight by your side forever. And in a way, now we can.

Athlon grabbed each Elysian, one by one, hugging them too tightly, and when he was done, he went back and hugged them all again. How could he ever earn what he had been given?

The Elysians were growing old before Athlon's eyes. Their faces were turning gray, and their bodies were growing frail. Athlon couldn't watch.

You must go now. Dawn approaches. Soon, there will be no stopping Lucifer at all. Return to Cimmerian, stop the Dark Lord. Ensure the galaxy will not fall today.

Athlon nodded. One of the Elysians fell to the ground. He had stopped breathing. Athlon turned to go, no longer able to stand being in the presence of these warriors.

Athlon. You have our essence with you now. You have the strength of Elysia. Remember: that strength does not reside only in our bodies, but in our minds as well. Search your thoughts. There you will find the key to understanding this battle.

Athlon tried to respond, but he was overcome. He gave a shaky nod, and flew high into the sky, through the atmosphere, and into space. The last Elysian watched Athlon's light disappear, and smiled weakly. He sat down next to his brothers, turned his face to the wind, and died.

Athlon could feel the new power in his mind. It had expanded his understanding of reality, and of life itself. He felt faster, more agile, and wiser. He rolled the Elysian's final words over and over in his mind. He searched his thoughts, trying to unravel the mystery. What more was there to understand?

The faintest whisper touched Athlon's consciousness. Athlon listened, and it came again. Like a loose thread on a canvas, Athlon tugged at the whisper, and it grew louder. Athlon could feel the secret resting just beneath the surface, like a priceless treasure buried beneath an inch of sand.

Athlon switched control over to his navigation systems, setting his destination as Cimmerian. Free from distractions, he receded into his mind, meditating the way he had seen the Elysians do it on Heaven. Slowly, he brought his thoughts to a crawl, and then stopped them completely, clearing his mind of everything but the tapestry shrouding the truth. Carefully, he pulled back the curtain, revealing the wisdom of Elysia.

He saw Boris, and Lucifer. He saw Good, and he saw Evil. He saw the billions of souls, choosing between God and The Devil. And he saw what he had never seen before: the balance between the two.

*All things carry the potential for both. All things contain the seeds of both. Every experience in every life from the big bang until the end of all things hold both good and evil. Yet that does not stop us from learning and growing from those experiences. The universe is not divided between two definable columns. It is much more beautiful and complex than that. The universe contains good and evil, that is true; but they are two sides of the same coin. They hold only the power they are given by people.*

*Faith and belief gave Boris and Lucifer their power, their very existence. So many individuals sacrificed what made them special to cast their lot with one side or the other, hoping and praying that they had chosen the winning side. This can lead only to endless bloodshed, pitting man against man until there is no blood left to spill. True wisdom comes not from following good and denouncing evil; it comes from seeing and understanding both so one can rise above the duality. Only by recognizing both halves of the whole can there be harmony.*

Athlon opened his eyes. He felt better than he had since before Osiris and the black city, that initial conflict that had marked the beginning of this journey. He felt at peace. And he knew how to end the conflict on Thracia, and how to stop Lucifer.

The navigation system beeped cheerfully, and Athlon reengaged manual control. Cimmerian was directly ahead, but Athlon felt no fear this time. It was just another city belonging to another megalomaniac that Athlon would protect the galaxy from.

Lucifer saw Athlon approaching, and rose again, his impossible height dwarfing the city behind him. Athlon opened every channel he could broadcast from, and connected the Ares Clef to his communication array. Every person in the Assyria Sector could hear Athlon and Lucifer.

Athlon flew right up to Lucifer, eye to eye one last time with the embodiment of evil. Athlon smiled.

"I DO NOT BELIEVE IN YOU."

Lucifer flared his nostrils. Athlon grinned at the towering Dark Lord, and then sped straight up into the sky. He summoned every ounce of strength, every last bit of energy the Elysians had given him, and then tucked into a dive. Athlon flew faster than he ever had in his life, and he could feel his body warming with the blue light of the Elysians. He began to spin, faster and faster, until he was nothing more than a silver bullet. He came down directly on Lucifer's head, piercing the flesh, and tunneling straight through the center of Lucifer's body. Every follower for a billion miles heard their master scream as Athlon drilled a perfect tunnel straight through Lucifer, from his head to his black heart. there Athlon stopped, and with a tremendous bang the energy of the Elysians exploded outward, pulverizing Lucifer instantly. Athlon was left hovering where Lucifer had stood a moment before, and as Athlon watched, Cimmerian cracked in half and crumbled into harmless dust and rock.

Days passed. Athlon helped the Thracian authorities reestablish order, but they had it mostly under control. Lucifer's followers had killed many, but without their lord, they lost the heart to put up much of a fight. Athlon sent a priority message to Olympus, with the location of Heaven, and asked Perseus' heirs to claim the riches of Boris' dead kingdom. He requested that they distribute the wealth among the planets ravaged by Osiris, and included a list of coordinates. Olympus agreed.

Athlon collected the bodies of his fallen friends, and wrapped them in shrouds he had woven himself from the finest cloth in the Thracian Empire, a gift that came personally from the emperor. Athlon flew them each to the Dopinephrine cluster where he interred them in Poetry's nebula. He stabilized a large asteroid, and he lived there for a time, working through everything he had seen, and contemplating his new knowledge. It had been a hard journey, but Athlon was grateful for the love of his friends, his salvation by the Elysians, and his new understanding.

Eventually, Athlon remembered how much there still was to see. He looked out into the stars, picked one that didn't look familiar, and headed for it, ready to explore once again.

Maybe, just maybe, he would finally meet someone who spoke French.

*The End*



*Lucifer*



*The Demon*



*The Pit of Hell*



*Distant Cathartic*

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