

Book XIII
P.O.V.

Chapter I Other People's Lives

Since the dawn of time, people as both groups and individuals have sought to understand the world around them. From this search came the rise of countless disciplines: philosophies, religions, the sciences. Organized teachings and the Scientific Method arose in efforts to unify the endlessly diverse mindsets that bloom during this selfsame quest for enlightenment.

Yet, this search has been plagued from the very beginning by an omnipresent taint, a corruption that permeates the seeking of the truth. This taint can turn compatriots against each other, rend divisions in previously unified philosophies and irreparably damage whole lines of thought. It can make villains of heroes (and vice versa), ruin lives and even bring down whole civilizations.

This "taint" is perspective. The individual point of view is ever resistant to the unifying efforts of external philosophies. A person's perspective is an undeniable factor in their overall worldview, influencing decisions and playing some part in nearly every aspect of their lives. So pervasive is this nebulous thing called "point of view" that entire new philosophies have developed solely to ponder its nature. Can it influence reality, or is it purely in the mind of the individual? Does an individual perspective necessarily reveal truth about a given topic or is it entirely limited by the bias and knowledge of the one that carries it?

While its nature may remain academic, the fact remains: it is personal perspective, and how individuals act upon it, that in large part determines how the world works, for good or ill.

On a cool Wednesday evening in November, 2044 T.E., two men crept along a sidewalk in downtown Ylelon. It was a street like a thousand others in the city, lined by housing projects like those in any other city's downside. The two men's pale skin shone under the streetlights in a sharp contrast to their dark clothing, which was worn and dirty. As they passed by the mouth of an alley between two tenements they stopped, looked about conspiratorially and ducked into the alley when they were confident there was no-one nearby to see them.

The alley was narrow and strewn with trash. The decrepit remains of an entertainment center leaned against a side entryway to one of the tenements. One of the men grasped the ruined case and tipped it up, allowing the other to open the door and slip inside. The first man let the TV case lean so that when he deftly followed the second inside and slammed the door, the case fell back against it.

The building's interior was stripped bare. Like the alley outside, it too was strewn with the detritus that had been left within since its previous owners and tenets had abandoned it some time ago. The two men navigated through the dark around the remains of the building's former life: here a ragged mattress, half-leaning against a wall, there a broken sink in the middle of the floor.

Through halls and up stairs to the third floor they went until they reached an innocuous door. The taller of the pair knocked, three times then twice more. Presently two locks clicked, the door opened from within and the two men slipped inside.

"You didn't find anything?" demanded the one who had opened the door, a feral-looking man with wild black hair and wearing an old white shirt and grossly-stained blue jeans.

"Don't start, Carter!" snapped the shorter of the two returning men. He pointed a threatening finger directly into Carter's face. "You wanna bitch about us not finding food, you can go looking yourself for once."

The front door opened directly into a living area complimented in the squatter's tradition with broken furniture and salvaged decorations. A haggard-looking blond woman sat on a dingy couch in the middle of the room: a brunette woman and an almost skeletally thin man lounged on a thin carpet on the floor.

"You didn't find anything?" moaned the blonde. "Oh, man..."

"Hey, don't worry about it, Audrey," said the thin man, "Ricky isn't back yet, I'm sure he'll get us something."

"Here we go again!" grumbled Carter. "Rick's not bringing anything back, he's more worthless

than these two and you know it!”

“Stuff it up your ass, Carter!” snapped the short man.

“Guys, keep it down!” said the thin man. “Look, there’s no need to panic, we’ve got emergency rations if we need it, right?”

“Can we?” Audrey asked. “I’m *so* hungry...”

“Leave off! We have to save that for when we really need it!” Carter almost spat the words.

“What the hell do you think this is, dumbass?” growled the short searcher. “None of us has eaten anything in a friggin’ week! Besides, the food won’t keep forever.”

“Ok, we wait for Ricky to get back, then we get something to eat. Everybody ok with that?” asked the thin man.

“Right on, Cal,” said the tall searcher. The others nodded and murmured in approval. Only Carter pouted in silence with his arms folded.

“Ok, good, we’ve got a plan,” Cal said as he walked around behind Audrey’s couch. He crouched and stood quickly, holding a woman, bound and gagged, dangling by her hair. Tears streaked her face, she had a black eye and was covered in huge, dark bruises.

“You hear that, baby?” Cal mocked. “When our friends get back, you’re *lunch*.”

The woman began to sob, but the sounds of her cries were lost among the laughter of the gathering.

The group amused themselves with games of cards while they awaited Ricky’s return. The bound woman remained huddled on the floor behind the couch, weeping softly.

Presently the code knock sounded at the door, quite rapidly. Cal was on his way to the door when the knock came again.

“Hold up!” Cal said as he opened the locks. The instant he opened the door the lithe form of Ricky stepped inside and pushed it closed again.

“Oh, look,” Carter said, “Ricky didn’t find anything, either.”

“Shut it, Carter! What’s wrong, Rick?” Cal asked.

“I don’t know,” Ricky replied. He looked more frightened than Cal had ever seen him. “I think somebody’s following me.”

The short searcher was immediately on his feet. “Who? Cops?”

“I’m not sure,” said Ricky. “I tried to lose them for four blocks. They’re good, whoever they are.”

“Did they see you come back here?” asked the tall searcher.

“I’m not sure.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding!” Carter said. “You come back here when you thought you might be followed?”

“Cram it!” Cal said. “Ok, Don, you’re with me. James, you go with Ricky. We’ve gotta check the exits right now.”

“What do I do?” asked Carter.

“You stay here and keep your damn mouth shut for a change!” Cal snorted. “Lock the door and don’t open it for anyone who doesn’t knock, even if it’s one of us.”

“But--”

“Shut it! This is serious! Move, people!”

The short searcher, Don, went with Cal into the hall, James with Ricky. Carter, cursing a blue streak under his breath, locked the door behind them.

While Don and Cal went to watch the doors of the building’s lobby, James and Ricky went to the end of the second-floor hallway, where they could watch the door below through the empty window. Most of the other entryways to the building had been boarded up or blocked off over the years, making those two doors the most likely places where an intruder would try to gain access to the building. The alley was still and undisturbed, the only sounds those of the city beyond.

“I don’t see anything, do you?” James asked after several tense seconds.

“Nope.”

“This isn’t so bad,” James said as he leaned against the wall by the window. “Maybe nobody’s coming, or if they are, at least we get some time away from Carter.”

Ricky didn’t laugh. He kept his eyes on the alley. “I got careless. I shouldn’t have come back here without knowing it was safe.”

“Look on the bright side. If it’s some moron following strangers around, we’ll just drag him inside. I’ll be like takeout!” said James.

“And if it’s cops?”

“Then we’ll have to move again, I guess,” James shrugged.

“Damn it!” Ricky slumped against the wall beside the window. “I’m so sick of moving all the time! I should’ve been more careful!” He punctuated his frustration by hitting the wall once with his fist.

“Relax, man. No sense panicking before we know for sure what’s going on.”

James kept watch for several minutes, long enough for Ricky to finish sulking and rejoin the vigil. Several more uneventful minutes had them both wondering if they were waiting for nothing.

“So much for panicking,” muttered Ricky. “Man...wouldn’t it be nice if we didn’t have to live like this? I’d love to have a real apartment somewhere, with electricity, get some video games to pass the days.”

“Tell me about it!” James said. “You know they released Ultimate Tournament V already?”

“No way!”

“Yeah, like last week. I was cruising the mall the other day. There was an article about it in one of the gaming mags in the bookstore. New moves for every character, more options, and like thirty new fighters.”

“Wow, thirty? What does that make now, like two hundred?”

“Something like that.” James shrugged again. “They’ve got people from all over the world...but they didn’t get anyone from Ylelon.”

“What? They missed us *again*? We’ve got all kinds of cool legends and stuff!”

“Yeah. Everyone forgets about Ylelon.”

“Yeah,” Ricky said, “until they’re invading us.”

They laughed.

“I dunno,” James said after some thought. “Maybe we could get something nicer, a motel in the slums, something like that. The problem is we’d have to be really careful where we...” He trailed off. “Sorry.”

“S’ok.”

“Think we’ve waited long enough? If somebody was following you, they sure as hell would have found this door by now.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right. C’mon, let’s grab the others and get some food.”

They got up together and began to make their way around the refuse in the hall. Moving quietly had long since become second nature to the two of them, as had situational awareness. Thus, as they moved through the filthy hall with instinctive silence their sharp hearing easily detected two sounds drifting through the window behind them: the rattle of an empty bear can being kicked and a muffled curse.

James and Ricky froze. No further sounds came from the alley, but a quick glance between the two confirmed that they both had heard something.

Slowly, painfully slowly, the two of them turned and started back toward the window. Each moved to one side of the sill and leaned against the wall, listening intently. Now they could just make out the sounds of several individuals moving around in the alley below. Whomever it was, they were making a great effort to stay quiet, but they could not muffle the slightest sounds of movement: the squish of boot leather against concrete, the rasp of clothing against skin, the respirator hiss of breaths being drawn. Then another sound came, one that startled both listeners: the hollow click of a bullet being chambered.

Ricky looked at James, who shook his head and held a finger up to his mouth. They both held stock-still and listened to the noises below, which presently began to include the barricade against the

door being moved.

“James! We should get the hell out of here!” Ricky whispered. James motioned frantically for him to be quiet, then stopped as they both realized that the alley had again become deathly silent. James gestured for them to move back down the hallway and then it happened.

Ricky had no idea what it was that crashed through the empty window frame into the hallway. It looked like a man, a big man, but it moved faster than anything Ricky had ever seen. In the dark hallway it was a black-clad blur, lashing out with a blow that cracked three of Ricky’s ribs and embedded him in the drywall behind him. Then it turned its attention to James, laying him out flat with a single punch.

“James!” Ricky cried as he pulled himself free of the wall and lashed out with all his might in a punch to the back of the attacker’s head. The thing moved only slightly, staggering forward just off balance, then turned and struck again. It hit Ricky dead in the face with a massive fist, knocking him half-senseless.

Ricky felt himself tumbling through the air distantly, as through in a dream. He felt the impact as he hit the hallway floor and rolled freely. Even the sharp pains of his broken ribs protesting was muted. It was the pain in his face that brought him around; not from being punched, but the agony of burning. Still half-sensate, Ricky felt at his face and found four craters of seared flesh in a tight row: the uppermost one a hair’s breadth from his right eye. A familiar metallic tang hung in the air, mingling with the stench of his own charred flesh: silver. The blur at the end of the hall that was making hideous wet crunching noises as it battered James was also using silver.

“James!” Ricky called. He tried to get back to his feet, but his vision rolled dizzily. James was now hanging from the thing’s grip by his tattered shirt. His face lolled toward Ricky, battered, singed, covered in blood.

“Run, Rick,” he croaked. Somewhere in Ricky’s scattered wits the thought that James sounded peacefully sleepy formed and dissipated. The attacker lifted James above his head and smashed him against the floor, then hurled him through the window.

Blindly, Ricky turned and ran.

“What the hell are they *doing* up there?” Don growled. He and Cal had taken places in the front entryway’s small lobby. The muffled shout and series of dull thuds that had reached their sharp hearing just well enough to startle them had stopped abruptly.

“Shh!” Cal said. “Listen.”

Rapid footsteps passed overhead, traveling at breakneck speed from the end of the hall where Ricky and James were stationed to the opposite side. The footsteps faded, replaced in the distance by the hollow thuds of steps being descended and those in turn by footsteps again, this time approaching the two watchers.

Don and Cal braced themselves. The battered and terrified visage of Ricky tearing into the lobby at a dead run with four hideous burns on his face was certainly not what they expected to see.

“Ricky?” Cal said. “What the hell are--”

Ricky barreled into Cal, almost knocking him prone, and seized him by the shirt. “It got him! It got James!”

“What? What are you talking about?” Cal said.

“This...this *thing*! It came through the window and threw James out of it!”

“Ricky, have you lost your last marble?” said Don.

Ricky let go of Cal and grabbed Don. “Are you listening to me? We’ve got to get out of here!”

“Ricky, man, calm down,” Cal said, gently taking Ricky’s hands off of Don’s jacket. “Take a moment and tell us what’s happening. Panicking won’t help anything.”

Ricky pulled away from the others. “Ok, James and I were at the window upstairs. We heard somebody sneaking around in the alley, then this thing came through the window at us. It moved like...it was, it tore James apart...”

“Ricky, what. The hell. Are you talking about?” said Don.

“Guys, guys, *calm down*,” Cal said. “If there’s somethin’ goin’ on, getting all nuts won’t help any.”

You said Jimmy's hurt?"

"He's *dead!*"

"Ok, back to the room, then. Quietly!"

When the code knock sounded at the apartment door, Carter took his time going to answer it. As he ambled across the living room toward the door, he called out, "Damn, it's about time! What have you losers been doing this whole--"

The instant the locks were withdrawn the door flung wide open, almost smacking Carter in the nose. Ricky, Cal and Don nearly tumbled into the room. Cal slammed the door shut and locked it again.

"We're in trouble," he said.

"Oh, way to go!" sneered Carter. "What did you do, bring the cops--"

Cal cut him off. "Not *one word* from you!"

"What's going on? Where's James?" Jayne asked as she and Audrey came to join the others.

"He's de--" Ricky began; Cal cut him short by kicking him in the shin.

"Something's happened," he said. "Someone tried to get in the alley door. James was there."

"But he's ok, right?" Jayne asked, nearly frantic.

Cal looked at Ricky briefly before turning back to Jayne. "I don't know, but we're going to try to find him and help him."

"What are we still talking about this for?" growled Carter. "Whoever's here, let's go beat their asses!"

"Reign yourself in, Carter!" snapped Don.

"Ok, everyone with me," said Cal. "We'll go downstairs to the far end and see if we can see anybody."

The "far end" of the first floor hallway was a wasteland of refuse and garbage. The outside door was completely blocked off by an old refrigerator and a small mountain of boxes and trash that extended into the hall past the base of the stairs. Cal and his rag-tag group gathered on the staircase above the garbage where they could peer around the stairwell wall and observe the length of the hall. The six of them took turns sneaking quick looks.

About midway down the hall, passing the lobby and the main office, a group of people were searching the apartments. All of them were dressed in black and all but one of them were carrying guns. Two of them were huge men built like weight-lifters: one wearing some kind of riot suit: a slight-figured woman with long red hair pulled back in a ponytail: and a tall blond man dressed like someone from a bad cyberpunk novel. They were systematically working their way down the hall, kicking in the door of each apartment and checking inside quickly before moving on.

Cal and his little band watched the intruders for several moments before withdrawing partway up the stairs. Don stayed at the base of the staircase to keep watch.

"What do we do? They've got guns!" Audrey whimpered.

"So what?" said Carter. "In case you haven't noticed, we're *vampires*. I say we rush 'em and tear 'em apart!"

"Hold up," Cal said. "We don't know who these guys are or why they're here."

"Who gives a damn?" scoffed Carter.

"Will you shut your mouth for once and think?" Cal was visibly shaking as he spoke. "These guys aren't cops or gang members. They did something to James. Something's really wrong here."

"Hey, they're getting close," Don whispered.

"Back to the room. Hurry!" said Cal. The group slunk back up the stairs as quietly as they could. Don lagged behind to watch the interlopers, who were uncomfortably close. He watched the redhead emerge from an apartment at the head of her group, look around--and then right at him. He ducked back around the corner as fast as he could. Deciding against the risk of looking again, he took off up the stairs.

Chapter II Clashing Perspective

Cal and the others made it back to the apartment in moments. They closed and locked the door without waiting for Don.

“What do we do?” Audrey was whining. “They’re gonna come up here and find us! What do we do?!”

“Would you cram it?” spat Carter.

“Enough!” shouted Cal, louder than he’d meant to. “This bickering won’t help us! We need to figure out what’s going on and how to deal with it.”

“Who *are* these people?” Ricky wondered aloud.

“You should know, you’re the one that brought them here,” Carter said.

Cal rounded on Carter, uncertain in that moment if he was only going to shout at the upstart or break his teeth. Whatever the loudmouth’s fate might have been, he was spared it by Don’s knocking at the door.

“Hey! Hey, let me in!” he called.

Cal slipped to the door and opened the first lock. As the second one clicked he said, “What’s going on out there?”

“I think they saw me. Let me in befoAUGHOpenthedooropenthedo--”

Don’s voice was abruptly replaced by a dull thump combined with a collection of gut-wrenching crunches.

“Don?” whispered Jayne.

A choked gurgle in the hall was cut off by a wet *crunch*. Soft footsteps followed, approaching the door accompanied by a series of rapid clicks. Then, finally, a forceful knock and a shout in a mocking tone:

“Department of Housing!”

Jayne, Ricky and Audrey drew back from the door. Carter clenched his fists and sneered at the threshold. Cal turned and sprinted to the far side of the living room.

A thunderous kick to the door: the locks broke open and the door smacked against the opposite wall so hard that the doorknob embedded there. Audrey screamed. One of the large men loomed in the doorway, grinning maliciously, unnatural black eyes sweeping the room. Behind him in the hall his companions watched him, weapons held at the ready. The big man began to walk into the room. His gloves reeked of silver and dripped with dark blood--

“Wait!” Cal shouted. “Wait! I have a hostage!”

Chapter III Conflict of Interest

Time hung frozen in the room as Cal held the trembling woman dangling by the back of her neck. The intruder held stock-still in the doorway, watching Cal with his empty black eyes. The others waited as well, watching their point man.

“Don’t move a muscle!” Call ordered. “You take one step and I’ll break her neck!”

The large man spoke without taking his eyes off of Cal. “That’s tricky, isn’t it? You having her is the only thing keeping me from beating you into pulp. Using your friends as clubs.”

“You can’t take us all, bitch!” Carter blurted.

A half-smile crept across the man’s face as he looked from Cal to Carter. “You betting your ass on that, junior?”

“Enough!” Cal shouted. “We’re leaving now. Get away from the door. If you even touch one of us, so help me I’ll make you watch me break every bone in her body one at a time!”

There was another long, frozen moment. Finally, the big man raised an open hand and began to creep backward into the hall. His companions retreated as well to give him room.

“Drop the guns!” barked Cal. “Right now, or I’ll twist her head off, I swear it!”

“Better do what he says,” one of the people in the hall said. The group reluctantly put the safeties on their weapons and dropped them to the floor.

“Now get away from the door!”

Slowly, the big man backed out of the threshold and around the corner. His eyes never left Cal’s until the wall came between them.

Quickly, Cal carried his hostage to the open doorway. He stood there with his hands around the sobbing woman’s throat and said, “Get their guns, fast!”

Ricky complied, darting into the hall and scooping up a frightening variety of firearms. The black-clad hunters watched him as he worked from an uncomfortably close distance. When he had gathered the guns Ricky turned and hurried back into the apartment.

Cal never took his eyes off of the interlopers. “You’ve got sixty seconds to get out, then we’re coming after you,” he said as he backed into the room and kicked the door shut.

“That was so *cool!*” Audrey said. Cal held up a hand to quiet her. He was listening to the muffled sounds of retreating footsteps in the hallway.

“Ok, I think they’re gone,” he said finally. “Everybody pack up your stuff. We’re out of here in five minutes.”

“What? Are you cracked?” snapped Carter.

“We do not have time to discuss this, Carter. We have to get the hell out of here before those people come back!”

“There was something wrong with that guy,” Jayne droned under her breath as the others argued. “He wasn’t breathing, he had no smell...”

“Why do we have to leave? We’ve got their guns! Hell, we should go get them and bring them back for food!” said Carter.

Cal finally dropped the woman and slapped his forehead. “Do you *ever* think? Those guys are gonna come back here, probably with backup. We don’t even know how they found us. What if there’re fifty of them next time?”

“Can we just *go?*” Audrey wailed.

“We’re not leaving! Where the hell else are we gonna go?!” raved Carter.

“It’s better than waiting around here for them to come back after us, dumbass!” Ricky said.

“*Enough!* We’ve already lost James and Don. Unless you want to join them, start packing! Five minutes!” Cal shouted.

A frenzy of activity followed as the members of the group scrambled to gather their few meager possessions, stuffing them into pockets or wrapping them in handy pieces of cloth. It took less than a

minute to pack what little was worth taking.

“Ok, all together! Keep your eyes peeled!” Cal said as he hoisted the bound woman under his arm like a sack of flour. He leaned against the wall next to the door and laid his free hand on the knob.

“We should eat the girl before we leave,” Carter said.

Cal dropped his hand and hung his head. The trembling bundle under his arm gasped and became very still.

“You have *got* to be kidding me!” Cal said slowly.

“She’ll only slow us down,” argued Carter. “We should eat her now to keep our strength up and dump the baggage.”

“Good idea!” said Audrey.

“‘Baggage’? She’s the only thing keeping us alive, you twit!” Cal grated. “Do you really want to go out there without a meat shield right now? What if those guys are waiting for us on the stairs?”

“Big deal! We’ve got their *guns!*”

“And what if they have more guys in backup coming in the front door right now?”

“Oh, what if, what if!” scoffed Carter. “All your sneaking around and making us live in this shithole hasn’t kept us from being found, has it?”

“Can we, Cal? Please?” Audrey begged as she knelt next to him and the cringing woman. “I just want a little, just wanna make her scream...” The woman whimpered frantically as she tried to twist away from Audrey’s fangs, now only inches from her neck.

“I said no!” Cal said and roughly pushed Audrey away. “I’m going *now*, and I’m taking the food with me. If you want to come we can share it after we find a new place to stay. Otherwise, get out of my way.”

Seconds ground past as Carter and Cal stared each other down. It was Carter who finally backed down wordlessly.

“Ok, let’s go!” Cal said.

He laid his hand on the knob and pulled the door open. Quick glances left and right showed that the hallway was clear. Step by step Cal made his way out into the hall, pausing to wave the others forward. In dread silence they crept from their former haven. Audrey walked with her hands clasped under her chin. Nothing moved or made a sound in the dark corridor as the five survivors stalked along it toward the staircase apposite the far end.

When he reached the stairs, Cal leaned against the wall and peaked around the corner. The way below was clear, so Cal stepped away from the wall and signaled to the others that it was safe.

From his place at the back of the line Ricky gave Cal a thumbs up. He checked back over his shoulder to make certain they weren’t being followed and when he turned forward again he froze.

A massive shadow was looming outside the window by the stairs, blotting out the light from the city beyond. Ricky pointed and tried to shout a warning, but all that came out was a dry croak. Time began to crawl: there was Cal, turning to see what Ricky was pointing at, the others moving down the stairs one step at a time, the rays of light framing the shadow shifting alignment as it crashed through the window. Cal had turned just enough to see it coming when a crushing blow tore through his face. He dropped the woman under his arm and fell in slow motion, clutching at his face, emitting a distorted scream.

Jayne heard the cry and turned in place on the fifth step down. When she saw Cal on the floor and saw the big intruder looming over him, her furious shrieks mixed with Cal’s screams as she hurtled back up the steps. She tackled the man from behind as he raised a fist to finish Cal, sending them both crashing through the cheap drywall opposite the staircase.

Time snapped back to normal for Ricky. Cal was thrashing around on the floor, producing grotesque cries as the carpet soaked in his blood. Carter ran back up the stairs and crouched at Cal’s side. For a split second, Ricky believed that Carter was actually trying to help. Then Carter had hoisted the woman onto his shoulder and was fleeing downstairs again. Audrey followed close behind him, shouting, “Carter! Wait!”

Jayne’s howls echoed out of the broken wall until a single wet *crunch* cut them off sharply.

All rational thought departed from Ricky. He turned and ran blindly down the hall, lost in panic, only aware on the very fringes of his consciousness of Cal's screams being cut short.

Carter hit the ground floor with Audrey hot on his heels. He ran two doors down from the stairs and pushed his way into the apartment.

"At last!" he said as he tossed the squealing woman to the floor. He dropped to his knees, hauled her up by the hair and dug his fangs into her throat. The squeals became muffled shrieks coupled with panicked thrashing.

"Carter, don't hog it all!" Audrey wailed as she dropped down beside him and raised the woman's still-bound wrists to her mouth. The frantic victim's struggles quickly lessened as the two vampires gorged themselves.

It wasn't long before footsteps in the hall drew Carter's attention. He let the woman fall slackly to the floor and ran to flatten himself against the wall behind the open door. Audrey was still sucking greedily on the woman's wrists, oblivious to all around her.

The footfalls approached, slowed, stopped outside the door. Presently the redheaded woman that had been with the intruders before made her way into the room, passing Carter in his hiding place. When she saw Audrey and the dying woman she shouted, "*Stop!*"

In that instant Audrey was torn away from her meal and flung backward. She lay stunned on the floor, staring at the ceiling with fresh blood dribbling from her lips.

The stranger was already moving to the woman's side. She knelt and laid one hand on the woman's neck, the other on her bleeding wrist. Carter didn't know what she was doing or where her companions were, nor did he care. He only knew one thing: here was more food.

Tip-toeing up behind the stranger, Carter reached out for her as he drew near. She flinched suddenly and looked wildly about as if sensing danger, but Carter lunged, grabbed her and dug his fangs into her neck. He tasted hot blood tinged with adrenaline. The woman struggled futilely in his grasp and inwardly, Carter praised himself for his cleverness.

Then a hideous sensation tore through his mind. It was not physical pain but a sort of mental one, the feeling of having an ice-cold railroad spike driven through one's brain. Then all worldly sensation fell away and Carter plunged into darkness.

Chapter IV A Meeting of Minds

Disorientation struck Carter so completely that for a time he even lost all sense of self. When he finally began to recover some self-awareness, confusion replaced disorientation.

The apartment building was gone. Carter found himself standing in a barren landscape, boundless and rough, dotted with the skeletal remains of dead trees and abandoned rural houses. A cold wind howled across the empty land, which was cast in twilight by a blanket of charcoal gray clouds that raced across the sky. The only sign of life was standing a few feet away: the redheaded woman. She was looking at him with something like detached curiosity mixed with disgust. On her neck were the wounds from Carter's teeth; they were leaking trickles of fresh blood.

"There you are," she said. "It took you long enough."

Carter looked at her, at the landscape, at his own hands, at the woman again. "What the...how...what is...hey!"

"Yeah, I picked a smart one to get killed by" the woman sighed.

"Where in hell are we?" snarled Carter.

"You tell me," said the woman. "This is *your* mind. And stop thinking about me as 'food' or 'the woman.' My name is Cynthia."

"What the hell is going on here?"

"Wow, you *are* a sharp one," groaned Cynthia. "I told you, this is your mind. George always says there is no situation you can't make worse by panicking. Guess he was right, as usual."

"This is...we're inside my *head*?" stammered Carter.

"Such as it is." Cynthia looked around at the nightmarish bleakness. "So this is what a vampire's mind is like inside? No *wonder* you guys are so cranky all the time."

"What the hell is all of this supposed to be?"

"You tell me. It's *your* subconscious."

Carter looked askance at Cynthia. "This is some kind of trick! What did you do to me?"

"I'm not really sure." Cynthia turned away from Carter and stood looking out at the wasteland of his mind. "I sensed danger, but I thought it was from the other vampire. When you grabbed me it startled the hell out of me. I was trying to hit you, knock you back, but I couldn't focus right. I felt where I could push..."

As Cynthia droned on, Carter snuck up behind her, holding out his hands.

"I just hope it's not Will that finds me," she continued sadly. "I wouldn't ever put him thought that again..."

Carter was now directly behind her and reached out to throttle her. At the last instant a rock the size of a loaf of bread dislodged from the dirt and flew upward, smacking Carter upside the head.

"I wouldn't do that," Cynthia said. "This place is pure mind. I'm pretty sure I can make some big changes when I want to."

Carter hopped to his feet, the rock that had struck him now held in his raised hand. He hurled it at Cynthia's head with all his might. It burst into a swarm of butterflies when it touched her.

She looked back over her shoulder at him. "See?"

Carter stared slack-jawed at her. "You...what?..."

"Ok, look," Cynthia said and rubbed her temple. "Out in the 'real' world, you're still killing me. Our bodies are sort of locked up while our minds are here, so I don't think you're actively drinking my blood any more." She put her hand on her neck: it came away slick with blood. "But, I'm still losing a lot of this stuff and I don't think my friends are close enough to help me. I've got maybe a few minutes to live. *That's* only if your lady friend doesn't grab me out of your hands. Either way, I'm dead pretty soon. It's my own fault, really."

Cynthia suddenly turned to face Carter with fire in her eyes. "I'm dead even if I could figure out how to get out of here, but I can still take you with me."

"I'll tear you in half, bitch!" shouted Carter. The clouds overhead darkened as he rushed at

Cynthia.

Midway to her a sudden gale shoved him back into a standstill as it raised a blinding cloud of dust. When the wind died down a moment later, as suddenly as it had risen, Carter could see Cynthia running away, toward the nearest of the empty houses. In an instant he was pursuing her. Twin trails of ashen dust hung in the air behind them as they ran across the barren landscape. Carter should have been able to overtake Cynthia easily, but she stayed well beyond his reach as the house in the distance came closer without seeming closer, dreamlike.

Finally she reached the empty doorway of the decrepit shack and fled inside, at once just in front of Carter and far in the distance. He rushed through the door blindly and immediately tripped. When he hit the trash-strewn floor it made a sound like glass bottles rattling together.

“What the hell is going *on* here?” he raved.

“I told you. It’s *your* subconscious.” Cynthia was nowhere in sight, while her voice came from everywhere and nowhere. “George always said I’d get new insight into others when I learned to really look into their minds. Wish I’d listened to him.”

“Who’s George? What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m not. Our minds are linked, so you’re hearing some of my thoughts. I’m upstairs, by the way.”

Carter pulled himself upright and ran to the staircase that flanked one side of the room. When he tried to set his boot on the lowest step, it slid back under the next level. Carter watched as the stairs folded up into each other like a deck of cards, leaving a stack of wood slats hanging off the end of the upper landing.

“Man, you’re a slow learner,” said Cynthia.

Carter grit his teeth: he was seeing red, so angry he could barely think straight. He opened his mouth to issue some vulgar threat, but the words died when the land began to shudder. The clutter on the floor skittered and danced with the rumbling. Carter’s anger turned quickly to fear and the quake stopped instantly.

Realization finally dawned on him. Focusing on the deck of stairs he tried to will it into its original shape. After a few moments it twitched, fidgeted like a living thing, then clattered down into staircase shape with a deafening racket.

Carter smirked as he ran up the stairs. This had been a hell of a night, but now things were getting interesting.

Audrey didn’t know how long she had lain insensate or what had happened in that time. When she finally blinked the stars from her vision, she found Carter standing in the middle of the room with his fangs in the woman that had been with the outsiders earlier. The other woman was gone: two trails of blood on the carpet led out into the hall.

“Ooh, what happened?” Audrey moaned. “Carter, where did the food go?”

Carter didn’t reply. In fact, he wasn’t moving at all, and neither was the woman.

“Carter? Hey, Carter!” Audrey walked to him, snapped her fingers, even tapped him. Still, he did not respond. Audrey took a step back, looking warily at the woman. Then she noticed the trails of blood on the carpet again and was off into the hall.

The blood led a surprising distance down the hall to where Audrey found the woman. She had managed to free herself of her bonds and was staggering drunkenly toward the exit door in the distance.

“Where do you think you’re going?” demanded Audrey. The woman looked back over her shoulder, shrieked and tried to run. Instead she stumbled and fell limply to the floor. Audrey practically dove onto her and bit her again. She barely had time for three gulps of blood before she heard someone charging down the stairs at the end of the hall. It was the big man, the walking nightmare that had killed the others. He hit the floor at a run and came down the hall sprinting. Screaming, Audrey turned and ran.

Carter kicked open the first door of the upstairs hall, ready to fall upon Cynthia. Cynthia was not in the room, but what Carter did see froze him in his tracks. The room was not the trash heap that the rest of the house was. It was brightly lit, clean and furnished, a lived-in small boy’s room with birds singing in

the tree outside the open window. Carter stared, slack-jawed, at his own room from childhood, exactly as he remembered it.

“So that’s where you lived as a rugrat, huh?” Cynthia’s voice radiated from the air. “Trying to overcompensate with machismo now?”

“Come out and fight, you stupid bitch!” Carter shouted.

“kay.”

The bedroom door slammed shut, bloodying Carter’s nose. When he kicked it open again in rage, the three drawers of the tiny bureau by the bed hurled across the room and struck him in quick succession in the chest, stomach, and groin. While Carter was doubled over in pain numerous objects from his time of innocence, picture frames, children’s books, building blocks, all rose into the air, coalesced into the shape of a very heavy hand and hit Carter over the head.

Carter shrieked. The bright veneer of the room peeled back like a layer of dead leaves blown in a high wind, leaving behind only another empty, decaying room.

“When I find you, I’m gonna…” Inspiration struck. Carter closed his eyes and tried to imagine Cynthia. When he opened them again she was there, standing in the middle of the room.

“Uh-oh,” she said.

Carter charged her. She barely managed to dodge away from his grasp and flew out into the hall. Carter followed at a strut and found Cynthia cringing against the far window of the hallway, away from the stairs.

“Where’re your tricks now?” he chuckled.

One of the floorboards tore through the rotting carpet and smacked Carter in the face.

“I’ve still got them,” Cynthia said smugly. “The problem is I don’t know how much time I have left and playing pranks is taking too much out of me. I’m going to have to finish this fast.”

She stepped away from the wall and held her hands out at her sides. Her clothing shimmered and ran like mercury, reshaping until she had a leather trench coat and sunglasses.

“This is so cliché!” she said as she looked herself over. “How does Will stand it? Ok, now I need a weap--”

Carter slammed into her. They crashed through the window, hit the roof above the front door and tumbled to the ground. In no time Carter was on his feet hauling Cynthia’s neck toward his mouth. At the last instant an invisible force struck him dead in the teeth. He dropped Cynthia and staggered backward, blood raining from his lips. When he felt his gums Carter found jagged chunks in place of many of his front teeth.

“Once of that is enough,” Cynthia said. There was no more cockiness or pomp in her voice. Another blow hit Carter, one much more powerful than the first. Carter’s mind became a haze of pain as his face was pulverized by the impact. He dropped to his knees, shrieking through his hands.

“Damn, I’d hoped that would do it,” Cynthia said quietly. “George would be so disappointed. Let’s see if I can put you out of your misery with a little more pointed symbolism.”

She closed her eyes. High above, the racing clouds began to whirl in a furious maelstrom while the howling winds became full gales. The ground shook as Cynthia grimaced in concentration. Then the maelstrom parted in a pinprick that widened quickly, letting bright, clean sunlight stream down to the blasted land below. As the widening circle of light fell across Carter, his skin blistered, blackened and burst into flame. He began to burn, wrapped in bright orange flames.

Now the trembling in the land became a full quake. The clouds slammed shut as Cynthia collapsed. The land grew darker and many of the houses in the distance collapsed as though they were made of matchsticks. Massive fissures began to form in the landscape with cracking sounds like the end of the world--which, in a way, it was.

Cynthia struggled to her feet. “Well, if you’ve gotta go…” She looked at her hands, then took off her sunglasses. “I’m sorry, Will.”

A sound from behind startled her. She whirled on her heels, terrified that Carter was making a last desperate stand. Instead she found Will, or rather what she knew was a representation of him created by her thoughts in this landscape of the mind.

“That’ll take some getting used to. Or, it would have...”

The ground shuddered violently as a massive block of land broke free and toppled into darkness. Cynthia took the hands of Will’s doppelganger.

“I’m glad now,” she said, “that I gave you space. There were times I thought that if I just pushed a little more you’d let me in. But you wanted space, so I stayed away.

“This past year you’ve been the best friend I’ve ever had. I learned to respect and help others because of you. I’m sorry I’m dying now before I could tell you what you’ve meant to me.”

Overhead jagged forks of black nothingness, photo-negative lightning, arced among the clouds.

“But I know this’ll be better for you. I was so sure I could help that girl and get our guns back. Kinda funny that the one time I run off *with* your permission is the time I get myself killed, huh?

“Anyway, I’m sorry I was so careless. I hope you’re not the one that finds me. That would bring back such bad memories for you...but at least we’re just friends, right?” She kissed his hand.

What was left of Carter was writhing on the ground as it burned. The earthquake intensified.

“This last year you’ve helped me become a better person. I hope you know that for yourself. You’re a wonderful man and I hope you find the happiness you deserve.

“I love you.”

Carter finally stopped screaming and lay still. The land shattered like glass and plunged into abyssal darkness. Still holding Will’s hands, Cynthia fell with it.

In the apartment, Carter’s death grip on Cynthia slackened. He slumped to the floor, empty eyes staring at nothing. A moment later Cynthia toppled to the floor as well.

Audrey reached the second floor and ran blindly down the hall. Behind her the staccato beat of the big man’s footsteps followed, hammering up the stairs, threatening to overtake her. Desperately she dove through a nearby door that was open a crack, ran through the entryway and hid behind the living room’s rotting couch.

Seconds thundered by. The footsteps approached, hesitated, stopped. Then the door was kicked open, almost off of its hinges. The big man loomed in the entryway as he looked the rooms over.

“You sure she came this way?” a voice in the hall asked.

“It was this one or one right around here. Stay out there in case she tries to run off,” said the big man.

He began to move forward, tossing and kicking garbage and furniture out of the way. When he lifted the couch with one hand Audrey tackled him. They went down in a snarling heap: when they came back up, he had her hair firmly in one hand and a foot in the small of her back, forcing her into a kneeling position.

“That was easy enough,” he said.

“Let go of me, you asshole!” shrieked Audrey.

A tall man, bearing familiar resemblance to the other but considerably more heavysset, appeared in the doorway. “You found her?” he said excitedly and ran into the living room.

“*You found Cynthia?*” a voice with a mechanical tinge said from nowhere. Audrey realized that it had come from some kind of tiny cameras the men were wearing on their shoulders.

“No, just the other vampire, the chick,” the heavy man said. “How’s the girl?”

“*Not good. Marc and Will are running her to the hospital.*”

The big man grimaced. “Is that a good idea?”

“*Dude, they don’t have any choice. The woman needs blood, lots of it. I’ll keep combing the place and tell you if I find anything.*”

“Roger that,” the heavy man said, then leaned down in front of Audrey. “Ok, gruesome, you wanna tell us where our friend is?”

“Go to hell! You don’t have the right to do this!” spat Audrey.

“...to do what?” Big said, exchanging glances with Heavy.

“To treat us like this! Coming in here and killing us for no reason! Who do you think you *are*?”

For a moment there was silence. Then, Big and Heavy began to laugh.

“Are you serious?” chuckled Heavy. “Who do you think you’re trying to fool?”

“We have as much right to live as you do!” Audrey complained. “You people force us to live like animals, then you hunt us and call us monsters! You won’t let us drink blood but you keep and eat animals! You’re the biggest hypocrites ever!”

Big shook his head. “Look sweetheart, we don’t have time--”

“Don’t call me ‘sweetheart’! My name is Audrey St.--”

Big’s hand closed over her throat, completely choking off her voice. “Understand me! We had a friend come in here a while ago. Something happened to her and now she’s not answering us. We really want to know where she is. If you don’t start talking, I’m going to break pieces off of you until--”

“*Guys!*” the voice came through the camera. “*I found her! First floor, room two!*”

Big was out the door without hesitation and moving down the hall at freight train speed, dragging Audrey by the throat. He skipped the steps entirely, leaping down each flight and hitting the landing and floor with impacts that shook the walls. In seconds he had hauled Audrey back to the room that she and Carter had victimized the first woman in. Carter was still there, along with the female intruder; now they were both prone on the floor, unmoving. The man in the weird armor was there, too, trying to revive the woman.

“What happened?” Big asked. Out in the hall Audrey could hear Heavy running to the room.

“What’s going on?” he blurted as he charged into the room. “Oh, hell! *Cynthia!*”

“This is what you get for attacking us for your own self-aggrandizement!” Audrey said as heavy ran to Cynthia’s side.

“What the hell did you bring her here for?” Armor asked as he held bandages to Cynthia’s neck.

“I dunno,” said Big, “I guess I was thinking we could interrogate her or something.”

“Well, shut her up for now! We don’t need any more distractions!”

Audrey, who had been futilely prying at Big’s fingers, was suddenly set upright and released. For a split-second she thought she might be able to escape. Then Big hammered her skull with one massive fist and she crashed to the floor. As the world faded to black, Audrey listened distantly to the sounds of Armor’s CPR efforts and Heavy’s frantic words:

“Cynthia? You gotta wake up. Wake up! Cynthia?”

“Cynthia?”

Epilogue

Ricky was more lucid now. He was terribly ashamed of himself, but not enough to stop running. With his friends gone and nowhere to go he wasn't even sure if running was doing any good, short of moving him as far away from the apartment complex as he could get.

As the hours crept deeper into the morning, Ricky finally stopped at a bus stop bench to think. His guilt over his act of cowardice was only slightly mitigated by knowing how inconceivable the events of the evening were. There were always rumors in the vampire community of mortals that hunted the undead, but few took them seriously. Those that claimed to have been attacked by gun-toting citizens were usually treated with the same sort of humorous disdain as those claiming to have been kidnapped by aliens. In the past, Ricky had shared that scorn, believing that the only real threat to his lifestyle was organized efforts by police or military forces.

Now he knew better. There were forces in Ylelon that knew of vampires and how to deal with them. They were organized, prepared, and *powerful*. Ricky shuddered as he thought of the monster that had taken James and the others. No one, mortal or vampire, should have been able to do the things he had done.

Yet, Ricky did not fall to despair even as he searched the alleys and buildings of Ylelon's downside for a new shelter. He knew how he could redeem himself. Others had to be told about this. He might not be taken seriously at first, but he would not stop until he found someone who believed him. Somehow, he and others would find a way to stop these mortals and make them pay for what they had done.