

THE  
CYLINDERS



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Here's to my one-hour lunch breaks.

A special thanks to Mike Harmsen and Bart Dekker.



## Prologue

His world had started to shake. Some half remembered dream was dancing a waltz in his mind, slipping further away with each step of the beat. A solitary shape lingered behind, as it often did lately. That damned shape; he could not be free of it. Sole comfort could be found in the fact that there were many others like him that had taken up this habit as well. He wasn't alone, at least not there. David opened his eyes.

It was his bed that did the shaking, designed to wake him up at the right time. He reached out with one arm and fumbled with the device until the shaking stopped. There was a yawn next. It moved through his entire being, but he did not hear it.

There was no sound in the room. All David could hear was the beating of his own heart. At the edge of the window-wide curtains were tiny lines of light peeking into the room. There was a long sigh next. *A silent sigh*, he noted as he reluctantly put his feet on cold carpet. David wanted to keep the drapes closed, as he did every day, but he knew the desire would go unrewarded. The drapes met at the center of the room and he threw them open with a single and swift motion. Brightness followed next, and it left him squinting. It wasn't until the light readjusted that he noticed what a somber day it was. He pressed his forehead against the cold pane looking out over the city ahead.

Drops of rain tapped against his window, but he still couldn't hear them. Clouds guarded the sun on all sides, leaving only a faintest yellow hue in the sky. Just like the other mornings, David reached to his face and pulled out two black ear buds, which had been kept securely in place all night. The world around him suddenly came alive with sounds previously unheard: bare feet brushing through the soft carpet, the rain taps against the giant window and the

distant bustle of the city beneath. With his forehead still pressed securely against the window, he looked off into the distance and waited.

A loud rumbling melody blasted and started booming through the world around him. It came from far, but had tremendous reach. The window, along with the forehead pressed against it, vibrated ever so softly; the distant sound was loud. *Very loud*, David remembered hearing it for the first time. Each note followed the previous one at a set pattern and at a set musical range. It wasn't much to listen to and it never changed. Ten seconds later, as always, it was done. David sighed deeply as he stared at the giant cylinder floating above the Manhattan sky.

The gargantuan construct had a faded beige-white surface with black cuts and veins surging through it, draping the entire thing in a blanket of erratic lightning. It looked soft and stone like, closely resembling marble, though even from this far away one could tell that it was not of this world. David had made an unwilling routine of it to start every morning like this. He'd count, and then he'd wait. Sometimes it started as he woke, sometimes it would happen minutes later, and sometimes, though rarely, it would remain silent for hours, only to be unrelenting the following night. David never waited longer than five minutes.

It hovered above the distant skyline, but only slightly. From certain angles you could see only parts of the cylinder, some of it being obscured by the taller buildings, but there was no mistaking it; the thing was hovering. It did not move or propel and it wasn't anchored to anything. It was simply there, hanging defiantly in the air. David had had enough and averted his gaze. He popped his ear buds back in and moved towards the other room.

In the living room, there was a lot of everything and not in a good way. David kicked over an empty water bottle as he entered. No sound. He stopped where he would always



stop during this little morning ritual of his, and stared at the framed picture on the wall. It had been folded over several times and the quality was quite poor. It was also the only photograph in the entire apartment. David barely recognized himself in it, but he knew that wasn't the point. His gaze quickly drifted to the woman he was embracing in the photo. By contrast, he recognized every feature of her perfectly. Everything about her was exactly where he figured it would be and he knew all of it would be there again tomorrow, when this whole thing would start over. David smiled as he turned towards the nearby television. He reached up to his ears and flicked a switch on the side of his left ear bud. The screen turned on and he could hear the news jingle playing in his head.

The small buds had cost him a lot of money, but he never once regretted it. They blocked out the cylinder's incessant tune like no other brand could, and their built-in speakers didn't even suffer for it. The device was synced up to his phone, his television and even his laptop. As a joke, he also hooked it up to his refrigerator once, but that proved as useless as he expected it to.

'One year', read the headline along the bottom of the screen as David settled into the couch with a cheap breakfast. Panels and reporters were relaying the same: we know nothing. Everyone's confusion didn't seem to matter, though. People, David included, still watched it all with bated breath. When nothing was known, everything about it was news. The montage started soon after he took his first bite:

There were twenty-four cylinders in total. They were scattered around the globe in erratic fashion and David, along with millions of others, had the misfortune of living in the only city to host one. Tourism seemed to triple overnight, and it still hadn't quite leveled off since. Many businesses were quick to jump into this new market any way they could: apparel, posters, tours, and even high quality (often illegally

shot) up-close footage screened at local theaters were just some of the many new ventures devised by crafty New Yorkers.

Marble quarries all over the world started mass producing little replicas for hungry enthusiasts, nearly doubling the annual revenue of marble-based products. The Italian quarries in Carrara were so successful, in fact, that the nation saw their already large worldwide share in the marble industry grow by nearly ten percent.

Of all the new businesses and novelty products, however, it was the already existing business of soundproofing that saw its biggest growth. It was a business with well-established infrastructure and logistics behind it from the start, and it suddenly had an entire city of millions that was ripe for the taking.

This quickly gave rise to brands like Stompers, David's ear bud of choice. The small company from New Jersey, previously focused primarily on sound reduction in construction, suddenly became a household name because it shifted its focus so quickly and efficiently. In a matter of months, they were everywhere. David believed it was mostly due to their excellent design choices, but he could not ignore the key factor of sheer circumstantial luck.

All of their products had a very distinct look, and he would take odd pleasure in identifying them on his way to work each morning. There were only a few at the start, but over half the people he saw by now were sporting them. Especially on mornings after the cylinder had been particularly rough with its tune, he would see Stompers in every set of ears. David would wear them regardless, simply because they functioned as excellent in-ear speakers as well. In this, he was most definitely not alone. Ironically, the buds that were initially designed to keep sound away would ultimately excel at shooting different sounds directly in.

David owned a pair of generation two Stompers from

the 'Wraith' series. They were the second most luxurious product they sold, second only to the ones from the 'Cylinder' series. His own were of a sleek black design with white lines running across it, a direct opposite to the most expensive ones, which resembled the cylinders almost perfectly in their texture. On the streets, he would primarily see Stompers from the 'Phoenix' series, mostly because they were so hard to miss and outsold all the others ten-to-one. The bright yellow pieces made for a bold fashion statement, which prompted a particular late-night host to compare them to the amount of taxis that littered the streets left and right. Most people wore them, however, because they got the job done and were the cheapest set with built-in speakers. David had opted for the slightly more expensive 'Wraith' series instead, simply because they looked the best to him.

To the right of the television, more than a mile away, David could see the cylinder hovering over the skyline. A thin layer of rain had coated it as well as the buildings, giving it a soft glimmering sheen. It had been a year by now since they arrived, but David still couldn't really get used to the sight. It was unsettling, primarily the implications of it all. In his ears, he could hear the news continuing with their sensationalist documentary-style reporting:

All of the twenty-four cylinders were scattered around the world in a chaotic fashion. There was no pattern, and no line could be drawn between them on a map to create something meaningful. It was just random. Most of them hovered over oceans or desolate areas in the wilderness. This all quickly gave rise to the idea that the one in Manhattan had to be special. Its placement seemed more precise, more intent, especially when compared to the others.

The documentary then went on to conveniently forget about the two cylinders in India and Tibet, which held equally special significance. The first hung by a sizeable village in the state of Rajahstan, while the second one was

near a mountain that was also home to an ancient Buddhist monastery. The Tibetan one, in particular, was prone to show up on in the background news reels due to its accessibility and beautiful surroundings. The religious implications did not hurt, either. In the more global scale of things, however, neither of them held a candle to the one in Manhattan. It got all the spotlights and David understood why.

Those first few weeks after they arrived were a mixture of utter fear and horror, followed quickly by that familiar sense of exploratory wonder so ingrained in human nature. The first ten were discovered on the first day, in quick succession, and most of them got extensive news coverage for weeks on end. No one really knew what was going on, and they still didn't now, but the novelty hadn't yet worn off. It was great television.

As the weeks progressed, more and more cylinders would be discovered in the most obscure places all around the globe. There'd be short interviews and handheld footage to kick it off, before the news crews arrived en masse either by van or rented boat. Authorities quickly scrambled to set up perimeters wherever they could, desperately trying to bring some sense of order into this alien gold rush. David could still vividly remember those early days, where every channel had a world map set up with red dots scattered all over it. Each new find meant a new dot, and a potential pattern to go with it. But there was no pattern, and each new find only made that more apparent. Some cylinders were oddly close to each other, while other parts of the globe were noticeably empty. It was this void in particular that prompted countless of people, agencies and companies to go looking for more of them, almost like an absurd treasure hunt: a cylinder at the end of the rainbow.

After the twenty-third cylinder was found, there was an unusual three-month gap before the next one would be located. People were scouring the globe far and wide with no

luck. It would eventually be due to sheer dumb luck that the final dot could be placed on the map. The venture capitalist responsible for its discovery uploaded a video of it to the internet, which spread around the world and to hordes of viewers overnight.

The man had been sailing his boat across the Pacific Ocean, and David remembered from interviews that he wasn't even trying to find it. In fact, he wanted to get away from all the commotion surrounding them. The infamous clip started in the middle of a stormy night; the distant cylinder could already be heard booming its tune over the crashing waves and torrential rain. The shaky footage quickly found the venture capitalist in the center of the frame, with the alien construct hovering behind and above him. The built-in microphone had trouble capturing it all and rain drops obscured parts of the lens, but it didn't matter. The discovery renewed an already frenzied interest and the race went on.

Hundreds of internet series were started where people would catalogue their journeys into the wild. Each had the clear ambition of finding the now legendary twenty-fifth cylinder, regardless of how the odds were stacked against them. To these people, twenty-five made more sense than twenty-four. It would be found, they were convinced, and hopefully by them. Fast forward to today, however, and no new dots had been added to the map.

"There had been so many expectations," the narrator started speaking over the documentary footage, "and beliefs about what would happen, but none of it came close to the reality of it. There was no ultimatum, no message of hope or destruction. They are simply there, and we don't know why. Only one question was answered: we are not alone." David's gaze still found the distant cylinder every now and then, as if he suspected it to move if he didn't keep an eye on it.

"So what are you saying, exactly?" David noticed the change in programming after one of the panelists suddenly

raised his voice. The younger man, slick in suit, had aimed it at an older gentleman at the far end of the table. He seemed unperturbed. "I mean, I think I get what you're saying, but I just want to make sure."

"Yes, I think the cylinders are here to help us," the elder responded, a distinguished British accent oozing from every word. Most panelists frowned upon hearing it. The slick suit had heard correctly, apparently, and pushed further with a hunger poorly hidden in his voice:

"Help us? Help us how, exactly? We know nothing. We know nothing, except that they're here and they're loud. They're so loud, in fact, that they're changing this city. I don't know if you've noticed, doctor, but the streets are emptier these days. All we see are tourists and people isolated in their Stomper worlds. How can you say that they're here to help us, when it's so clearly doing the opposite?" The suit had raised his voice further, venting his own frustrations more than anything. The cylinders arriving had hit him hard, David could tell immediately. It had hit some harder than others, but you could always tell which ones were struggling the most: the aggression, the lashing out, confusing facts with fiction. As a testament to this, David knew the suit had been wrong. People had left the city, sure, and in great numbers, but it wasn't half as bad as the panelist made it out to be. The doctor seemed to realize this and kept his cool:

"Look, we are obviously dealing with something absurd here, something unprecedented. This goes completely beyond and above everything we've learned and realized over the last few centuries. What seems like chaos to us after a year of intense scrutiny might make immediate sense to the ones that are responsible. Everything about it is alien and unknown to us, so it's perfectly natural for some to lash out." David smiled, as did some of the other panelists. The suit didn't seem to notice. His veneer of anger remained firmly in place and his eyes did not drift. "It's what we do, but now

more than ever do we have to rise above that fear if we hope to reach a state where we can understand something like this. We have to be worthy." A third panelist chimed in:

"You sound like you admire them."

"Of course I do. Once you remove the suspected intent and strip away the mystery, what's left behind is something of such pure and supreme accomplishment. It displays complete control over nature and all physical laws. Once you choose to believe that; that they're not here to hurt us and that they're here to help, all you have left is admiration and wonder. I mean, to think about what the creators of these constructs have achieved scientifically, and even cosmically. It humbles the soul." The doctor took a sip of water and continued:

"Because if they are here to hurt us, why haven't they? You seem, Mr. Williams, convinced almost that they've come to hurt us. That the jig is up for us poor humans, but it is only because you view them through your human eyes. The type of violence you are afraid of would be beneath beings like this, and completely redundant to boot. We would be like the flick of a button to whoever is capable of this awesome power. So instead of fear and dangerous speculation, I simply preach caution and bated optimism."

Across the table the suit had visibly calmed down, perhaps aware of the display he was putting on. He retorted:

"What you're saying can be applied both ways, doctor. You say we can't be sure they're violent, which also means we can't be sure they're not. We are all just viewing this from our own perspective here, so what's really the difference?"

"The difference, Mr. Williams, is that I have taken no insult in this exchange."

David finished his breakfast and got ready for work. Behind him, the one-year anniversary show kept on going, which seemed a ludicrous celebration to him. Nothing was

happening with the cylinders, and for all he knew nothing ever would. Each day, that annoyed him more.

He was about to leave, when he saw footage of the first day. None of the high-quality and stable news footage, but the handheld stuff shot the moment it happened. It had been raining that day, too, and seeing it brought that horrible memory back to him.

It was about an hour shy of being exactly one year ago. David was walking down Fifth Avenue with her, their arms intertwined. They had been to the park when the sun was still out, the rain would start a littler later. It was an early start to celebrate her birthday. It was just the two of them and, as usual, David had gotten her a ridiculous gift. That particular year it was a movie she claimed to hate at a party, even though he knew she loved it.

It was next to her favorite bookstore, on the way to lunch, when disaster struck and the world changed forever. Her eyes gazed up slightly as always and David found his own gaze transfixed on her, also as always. It was her eyes; he could rarely escape, even when she wasn't looking back. He would often stumble into things when they walked together, but he didn't mind. *She didn't mind either*, David lamented as he continued to play the memory for the thousandth time. Whenever she would notice him staring or daydreaming she would simply smile and pretend not to notice, as if everything was exactly in its place.

That day was like any other day, he supposed, until she suddenly stopped moving. David was used to seeing her look upward, but that day was different. He could tell she saw something that she couldn't comprehend or understand, like someone had pulled the rug of reality out from underneath her. The shock in her eyes spread to her face, and David felt her nails dig into his arm. When he finally shifted his gaze to the sky as well, the cylinder was there. To this very day, a year later, he could still remember the exact sensation that



crawled through his entire spine before settling on his neck and the back of his head. Pins and needles, laced with cold stabs. Never before or since had he felt that.

Anne's nails almost pierced his skin, pure fear, but there was no time to respond or react. The construct immediately unleashed its deafening tune for the very first time, and a horde of stampeding people came rushing at them. They were only a minute's walk away from being directly underneath it when it started; their ears rung for days. David left his memory there and stepped out of the apartment before nine.

He shared the elevator with Steve's daughters that morning: Christie and Zoë, two wide-eyed girls he realized would grow up in a world where everyone knew aliens existed. How different it would be for them. Focused on their phones and two pairs of Phoenix Stompers protruding from their ears, they barely even noticed him getting on the elevator.

The streets outside were surprisingly crowded. So many people had left the city a year ago, but plenty enough had stayed. Some had no choice, but to others it was a matter of pride. Leaving would be defeat, to admit their great city was lost to some challenge on their liberty. So they stayed, and adapted like no other species knew how.

Soundproofing became bigger here than in any other place in the world. Entire offices and public places were acoustically treated, banishing the cylinder's tune to the streets and to those less fortunate. David considered himself a less than fortunate, as his building hadn't received the same treatment that so many others around him had. There were buildings further away from the cylinders that had had the job done, which he thought was ridiculous. Apparently, the story went that the landlord couldn't, or wouldn't afford it and that government officials deemed the building too old for it to be feasible. To add insult to injury, those same officials

claimed that the building was in what they called a 'safe zone': well-placed enough in relation to other buildings and far away enough for the cylinder's sound to be no problem at all.

"They should try sleeping here on a bad night," David had complained to his neighbors. All those months later his building still hadn't received the upgrade, so he kept his Stompers close by and in use as much as he could. There was nothing quite like getting surprised in the middle of the night by the sound of an alien construct blasting its national anthem right into your bedroom.

That anger ran through his face as he paced his way down the streets towards his job. Work was an office and a lot of data and a lot of math. His mother and his teachers had noticed early on what a knack David had for numbers and how he could seemingly make them dance to his tune. They suspected cheating at first, but a few tests immediately threw that theory out the window. He was put on a sort of fast-track after that.

In truth, it was never a passion for him or even a hobby. It was second nature, going through motions like eating or exercising. He just had the fortune of being in the severe minority of people who were capable of this. A few degrees later he found himself in a corner office of a financial software company, doing things less than a thousand people in the country knew how to do and getting rewarded royally for it.

What had interested him most about his job in the last year, however, was that his office granted him a spectacular view of the cylinder. He could see most of the bottom from his windows, and a long way up to the top; it was so massive. Especially during those first two months, when the panic had settled down, David remembered spending countless of hours staring up at the alien shape after his work was already finished. He would memorize each

dark line perfectly, still shuddering each time the tune would randomly blast (this was before widespread soundproofing and the Stompers proliferation). The windows would shake, along with the little Newton's cradle on his desk. Whenever he'd scan the other buildings around him, he'd almost always catch a fellow New Yorker doing the same. These days, however, a full year later, he barely even looked at the thing. It was funny how time worked.

He had a few more blocks to go when he felt a hand grasp his shoulder. He turned around and saw a familiar face embracing him before he could even react. *Anne*, was the first thought, but it couldn't be. Anne wasn't here, he knew she wouldn't be. As the embrace ended, David failed to realize that she had already been talking and was continuing to do so. He heard none of it, pointed to his Stompers to get her to stop, and almost reluctantly pulled them out. The soft music he didn't even realize was there was suddenly gone, and the world poured in.

"David. My goodness, what are the-", she started before being violently interrupted by that horrible tune crashing through the streets. David couldn't believe the odds. He covered his ears, as did she, but she didn't stop talking. Instead, she moved closer and continued directly into his ears. There were words he could decipher here and there, but they were only fragments of a bigger picture. It reminded him of being in a club where the music was just too damn loud, and conversations would just be gestures and body language. The only real difference, David realized, was that this wasn't fun.

Ten seconds later, like clockwork, the tune stopped. The girl carried on as if nothing happened, the smile still etched on her face. Within another ten seconds she was already turning away again, hopping on her bike and saying goodbye. David could barely fathom what had happened or been said, but she seemed pleased with the chance encounter

regardless. The girl waved and he waved back, but he was still playing catch-up in his mind. It was like a fog had been weighing him down; a fog he could only see during moments like these.

It wasn't until she turned the corner, and her golden hair waved in the morning wind that the fog finally lifted.

"Judith," he whispered, the word fading into the footsteps and traffic all around him. He put his stompers back in, for the first time in weeks without desperately wanting to.

Judith was Anne's twin sister, the girl from his framed picture. Everyone, for as long as he could remember, would always tell him how much the two looked alike. They'd line up all the similarities, not just in their appearance, and David would always feel stupid for not noticing. The truth was that he had known them both for decades (since childhood, in fact). To him, the two were as different as night and day. Judith was spontaneous and silly, all smiles, perfectly encapsulated in that short twenty second encounter they had just had. Anne had the warmth, the kind caring and piercing gaze. She was also as clumsy as one could be, while the other had had an athletic stint in college. Whatever difference or similarities there were, David was always convinced of one thing: one of them had his heart, and the other did not.

David continued forward, cursing this terrible fog for not recognizing Judith sooner. It was as if he was a spectator during the conversation, going through the motions while the soul was trying to catch up. He pondered between blaming himself and blaming the cylinders. It was easier to blame the cylinders.

All of a sudden, the music in his ear stopped. David checked his phone, but it didn't respond. The screen was black and nothing worked. No battery, he was confused as he had taken it off the charger less than thirty minutes ago. He pulled his Stompers out next, which hadn't malfunctioned once since he got them. The little light on the side of each of

them was out. None of the buttons seemed to work. He checked his phone again, before he realized he wasn't the only one.

All the cars around him had stopped and dozens of people in the street were checking their phones and Stompers. In the middle of the crowd, there was a single man who didn't seem concerned with his electronics. In a sea of people looking down, he was the first one to look up. When David joined him, he felt it again: pins and needles, the cold stabs in his neck and on the back of his head. The cylinder was rotating.

It was slow, very slow, but the fact that it would even move a single inch shot a widespread panic through the street around him. A soft hum accompanied the display, and it got louder and higher as the rotation started speeding up. People around David were running now, but he couldn't move his feet. His eyes were fixed on the alien surface, like they had been so many times before. Once again it had become the most interesting sight in the world.

David was back on Fifth Avenue, the nails digging into his arm, the angel at his side. A tear strayed down his cheek, his eyes refusing to believe what they saw. One moment he wished she was there with him, and then the next moment he didn't.

The earth shook and the world around David was filled to the brim with a visible pulse. The hum of the cylinder had been replaced with an ear-shattering thump and a violent shaking. The rotation sped up faster and faster. The roar shattered every window in a five-mile radius, and David was stuck in the middle of it. The force pushed him to the floor, along with thousands of others. The glass was lining the streets like confetti, small and deadly-sharp bits all around. David covered his ears to no avail, it was already too late. He tried his Stompers next, but they came back bloody and useless.

High above, the cylinder's rotation reached a frantic speed. The black lines and the soft-white surface meshed together in a frenzy of dark grey. The shattering roared on and down in the streets it was bedlam. Masses covered their bloodied ears as they stumbled over and through each other. Fallen businessmen crawled through broken glass, leaving a smear of dark crimson behind them as their cries went unheard.

For David, sound was gone. Whatever happened up there destroyed his auditory system immediately and beyond repair. In the dark distance, only his heartbeat remained and the panic in his vision. He saw the blood running down his arm from where he had fallen into the glass, as he felt new bits digging into his knees. Trying to get up was pointless.

Around him, chunks of glass started floating. People were running and crashing through them, blind to the changes happening. David tried to get to his feet a final time, but whatever force the cylinder was exerting kept pushing him down. The pulse vibrated through his bones, through every pore of his skin. All his hairs stood up straight. Next to him, he noticed a woman face-down on the pavement with a puddle of blood spreading beneath her head. There was blood and death everywhere, and David finally forced his thoughts elsewhere. He cleared his mind and left only one bump around. The bump was her, and every memory they shared together.

"Anne. I'm sorry," he whimpered without hearing it as the air around him broke. David thought of home. He thought about his bed and the picture frame in the living room. He thought about that morning and how short ago that was. He thought about all these things and how he wished he could try it again.

David started lifting off the ground, first his knees and then his feet. Within a second, he was hovering. Glass bits dropped off his pants to the red pavement below as he

continued upward. Everyone else remained where they were, clawing for an escape or a relief from the pain. Only David rose. After that, his speed grew exponentially. The wind roared at his clothing as the blood and glass continued to fall off of him.

Like a sonic boom, his hearing returned to him as he cleared the buildings and the cylinder behind him. The raging sounds of the winds, his frantic breathing, and the wild flapping of his clothes poured through his ears like a crashing wave.

Within a second, the buildings and the city were a tiny dot underneath his shoes. Within another second, he could see the curvature on the distant horizon. After the third second, David closed his eyes.





PART I

ZERO TO ONE

ONE TO MILLION



# David

David opened his eyes to the black veil of night. White pinholes peaked through and they looked to be dancing in the cosmic distance. Stars. His vision cleared further, stars and space. The night's sky was the clearest and most beautiful he had ever seen it. Between the gliding stars, he could see something else as it was darting closer to the ground. David followed it as the soft breeze guided it left, right, and down. He lost focus of it when it landed on his nose, but he could feel its grating texture spread between his fingers when he grabbed it: ash. Another speck fell and then dozens more. David knew it was time to get up.

As he tried to, however, he felt the pain. A stab of heat ran through his entire gut and the anguish and blood followed. His dirty and soot covered clothes were soaked near his stomach, and the red was the only color he could see in this drab world. The crushed pavement underneath his broken body ran crimson. Aching, David finally managed to plant his feet on solid ground.

His eyes couldn't quite process what they saw when he finally got up to his knees. The last thing he remembered was flying and the explosion of glass, but nothing of that seemed to match with the world he found himself in. The dark ruin around him was littered with the snow of ashes and the husks of lifeless rust and concrete. It was an empty shell of the astounding accomplishment of human achievement it used to be. All of it looked as if it was destroyed years ago, if not centuries. David got to his feet, grinding his teeth in pain. He shouted for help with a throat of stone and a voice as weak as paper.

Nevertheless, the sound traveled through the ruins around him, echoing disgustingly and distorting his voice in a

manner of ways. It was the stuff of nightmares, and he wished he could wake up.

A moment later, a second noise overtook his: a loud shriek, a woman's cry, and it came from far ahead. Like his own scream, hers echoed and danced through the buildings as well. It was coming at David from all directions now, and he took a step back. His shoe caught on something and within a moment he was back on the ground again. It wasn't the pavement though, or the gravely remnants of it; it was solid, and untarnished. The ashes made it hard to see what he landed on, but a single swipe with his bloodied hand revealed that awful and familiar marble texture of the mysterious construct. He swiped again, and again, to reveal more and to make sure, even though the first act had been enough. It was the cylinder, and it had been driven into the ground like a nail. Panic dragged him back until he was no longer touching it.

Behind him, the shriek echoed once again. And in front the cylinder waited. David was trapped. A third shriek; it was coming closer, but he didn't dare step onto the thing in front of him. He scanned around desperately trying to find something, anything, but all he saw were empty husks coated with ash. One of the husks, however, had a broken frame opening. *A doorway*, David could barely recognize the shape it used to have, but it was enough. He shambled forward and hid inside.

Most of his body was obscured, but the shanty frame still made it possible for him to view the street he just escaped from. He saw the cylinder, mostly obscured by ash except for the small patch David had swiped clear. There was blood too, drops of it leading all the way from the cylinder to his little hiding spot.

The shriek sounded a final time, and it sounded clearer than before. The ashes stopped falling, and an eerie silence took its place. He put pressure on his gut with one

hand, an almost futile effort, and put the other in front of his mouth. His breath was caught in his lungs when he finally saw her, slowly shambling into view.

The soot and dirt were all over her. It smeared her skin, her hair, her clothes and her shoes. Her face was hidden, but David imagined it to be just as bad. Tired feet dragged her forward, never lifting and only swiping. Ashes got pushed aside as she made her way closer and closer to the cylinder. The screaming had stopped, only whimpers remained.

She finally stopped next to the trail of blood. What little ashes had fallen since then hadn't covered it up yet. Her face traced the trail all the way to the end. There was no time for him to act. She stared right at him through the veil of her hair, a face of true anger and pity. All David felt was regret.

The woman didn't approach him, though. She seemed to lose interest almost immediately after staring him down, as if he was of no concern to her. Instead, she approached the cylinder. Her knees clattered against the hard surface as she dropped, and it rushed through the ruin half a dozen times before quieting down. She put her hands and face on the parts that David swiped clear, her body shaking along to the rhythm of her crying.

The rage came next. It came hard and unexpected in the form of terrible blows being delivered right to the construct's surface. Again and again, she lifted her weakened torso and struck down with her fist. Strike after strike rung around them and she soon found herself in a state of sheer frenzy. There were words as well, but David couldn't discern any of them. It was just hatred. The last blow was the loudest of all, it seemed to shake the very ground he was hunkering on.

She arched her back. Her hair flew over her shoulders, and her face was revealed. The tears had made a path of cleared skin amidst a warzone of soot and bruises. A thick scar lined her cheek. It curved awkwardly as the subtle

smile crept onto her face. The frenzy already seemed a distant memory. Gently she put her hair behind her ears before lowering back down to the cylinder. The broken woman planted a single kiss on the cylinder and spoke:

“I love you,” she whispered before crawling forward and settling into a fetal position.

There was nothing else after that, it was done. What fear had kept David glued to his little spot had lifted and he urged himself towards her, the pain in his gut still biting with every step. Seeing her there hit him with an extra dose of guilt, which he could not understand or place. He had never seen her before, yet he felt responsible in some way. His steps finally brought him to the edge of the construct, as close to the girl as he was likely to get without crossing over that border.

Her hair covered her face again and she was almost perfectly still. Air moved through her chest regularly, but that was all of it. David had no idea what to do. *It doesn't matter*, the wound in his gut whispered to him. *Just sit down*, it put forth on the table as a bargaining chip. The eventual deal would be death. *Was any of this even real?* His mind joined the conversation. *Try to wake up*, another part suggested. He told them all to shut up when he saw what was happening in front of him: the cylinder had come to life.

A thick liquid shape peered into view right behind the woman's chest. It stretched the construct's surface, turning it into a cylinder-shaped balloon that could somehow retain its shape if it wanted to. The shape stretched and rose, slowly oozing over her face like a wave.

“Hey,” David shouted hoarsely, gravel lining his lungs. He tried to call it off or scare it, as if it was some woodland critter, but it paid him no mind. The shape contorted and slowly took on the form of a very human hand. It landed on the girl's brow, sending David over the edge. He wanted to help her, he needed to somehow, but he still wouldn't cross

that border. It wasn't stone or marble, but something from beyond. He could already see himself falling into that liquid unknown, receding into the void and drowning in the impossible, tendrils wrapping around his feet and dragging him under. He wouldn't even consider it.

So he turned around and found his answer there. A small piece of rebar jutted out of the ground nearby. Bits of concrete stuck to it and the ashes had coated it royally. He pulled it towards himself, aching in pain as he released one of his hands from his gut. Teeth ground as he bit down hard to keep himself from keeling over. He paced back, his left feet now cold and going numb. His time was running out. Whatever power he had left allowed him to raise the rebar for a blow. He propped himself as close to the edge as he could and took aim.

He stopped just in time when he saw it. In front of him, the thick marble-fingers were caressing her cheek and forehead gently. Part of her hair had draped her face again, so the fingers readjusted it behind her ear lovingly. The rebar was still in his hands, but his grip had loosened. It dropped to the floor when he saw the other three hands peer into view. They rose from the pool of the cylinder's surface equally formless, but quickly took on their more familiar shape and joined the original one in its caress. One wrapped around her shoulder, the other landed on the side of her hip. The final one hugged her stomach.

After that, the surface itself started gently molding around her as well. Her fetal position turned into one that resembled a person being carried by strong arms. The hands remained where they were, but had all started to sink slowly. *Along with her*, David suddenly realized the lowest part of her had already dipped below the cylinder's surface. Her legs and stomach were already gone, and the rest was following suit. Her neck and face were the last above the surface, with all of her black hair floating beautifully on the top. Then, she was

gone. A tear ran down David's face. He was convinced he knew her and he felt his heart ache for losing her.

The low rumbling sound came next. There was no time for peace or stillness, it seemed. Only more chaos and more twists and turns. David saw the cylinder's color shift to a dark grey. The black lines were expanding and spreading. The ground shook underneath him, his numb feet wiggled uncertainly. He wanted to move, but it happened too fast.

Ahead of him, the cylinder's perfectly circular surface cracked in half down the middle and started sinking into the broken pavement. *No*, David corrected, *it started falling*. The first half went slower, but once it had gotten its start it was out of sight in seconds. The second half followed quickly, leaving a black hole of unimaginable depth in its wake. The broken street couldn't retain what little form it had, so it started oozing down like a funnel. David had really wanted to run, but it just wouldn't have been possible given the speed. He stumbled and fell, first on a somewhat stable diagonal surface, then on a near vertical slope downwards into the black void.

The dust and rocks were all around him, pushing and pulling him down and down towards his end, but David felt almost none of it. The numbness had spread far enough by now, the end was near. He couldn't see what was happening. Flashes of better times snapped through his mind while he fell. The white pinholes he had woken up to were gone, the gentle ash droplet on his nose a fading memory. All he felt was the grind of gravel and the cracks in his throat. David was ready to die, but found yet another surprise when he didn't.

The rubble started clearing around him, and it started slowing down. *I'm slowing down*, he realized. A blue light peeked into his peripheral vision and he managed to turn his body to face whatever he was gliding towards. *A clearing*, he couldn't believe it. *The end of the tunnel*, his glide had become



weightless by now, as residual momentum flung him gently towards that bright light. He wasn't going down anymore, but forwards.

During the glide, he turned yet again and saw the perfect hole he had fallen through to get here. The rubble was still oozing out of it and spreading around, but what he saw was unmistakably there. It was a giant mass of land, with a single hole pierced straight through it. His back hit something solid next and he could feel his momentum matching whatever he had hit now. His fingers felt behind him and he knew it was the cylinder's grating surface. David had finally crossed that border and he traced a black line on its surface. *Just stone*, it was almost a disappointment, but he knew there was so much more to it. The blood still trailed from his gut, but the liquid had turned into weightless globules expanding gently in all directions. It somehow seemed much less dangerous that way.

He felt the cold next, penetrating his skin and senses quickly. In front, he could see the hole he fell through grow smaller and smaller. The large chunk of land it was the center of was not alone. David could see at least half a dozen more, floating in the darkness here and there. They were like rogue asteroids, with no belt to call home.

There was no explanation, from the moment he woke up to this cold weightlessness. It bothered him at the start, but that was gone now. The cold dug into his wound and his being, the noise of the distant rubble making place for complete silence. His vision blurred with tears and the daze in his mind rooted through him. His heartbeat was the only thing left after all that, along with that mysterious blue light David had seen as he escaped that dark hole he fell through.

With the last bits of his waking power, he craned his face to the right. He could almost hear his spine cracking with every inch he turned his head. He tried to breathe, but it failed. His vision couldn't focus, but the blue appeared to be

everywhere all at once. He tried to breathe again, but no air would come. David knew there was nothing left anymore, so he closed his eyes and waited for the end.

In the darkness he took one final breath, the longest and deepest he had ever taken, and everything changed. *Everything*, his mind resonated as he awoke in his bed from the worst nightmare he had ever known.

## Shareen

A warm breeze touched her skin. There was sand underneath her and she had never been quite as comfortable. Eyes closed, she enjoyed the scent of the ocean and the cawing of a distant seagull. Closer by, she could hear the faint strums of an acoustic guitar. *Badru*, she remembered his mediocre playing of soothing melodies on the street corner. The heat from above cooked her skin, but she didn't mind. Instead, she only smiled. Her hips dug deeper into the soft ground below.

When she finally decided to gaze at the world, she was greeted by a pure blue sky, a sky that no cloud would ever dream of tarnishing. The distant seagull darted closer now, struggling fiercely with the wind and barely making any progress in its journey. Shareen wondered what it was even doing here and put her hands down to get into a seated position. Up right, her smile disappeared almost instantly. *Badru's* playing was gone, along with the pleasantness of the heat and the comfort of the sand. Instead, a desert of sand that reached as far as she could see greeted her eyes. The pleasant sun became an oven and the sand underneath became fiery coals. She saw nothing but the empty horizon and everything she had felt a minute ago disappeared.

Shareen raised her hand to try and block out the sun, but a patch of sand hit her in the face. Her eyes were clear of the assault so she tried it once more, only to find the same thing happening. There was more sand this time and her face caught the full brunt of it. With the long sleeve on her right arm she managed to brush most of it away, which was when she finally saw the miracle dangling around her other arm.

Two rings of circling sand hovered around her left wrist, each about as thick as the bone underneath her skin and muscles. She moved her hand to the left, and the ring followed suit. She shifted it right, but the ring went as well; it

almost appeared fused around her wrist as if it was a part of her. Shareen shook her arm violently next, but the ring moved along seamlessly. She tried aggression next and slapped at the floating sand with her other hand. Large chunks fell to the ground below, but the victory wouldn't last. For every grain she slapped away, another one seemed to rise up from the ground and take its place. Gravity didn't apply here, nor did logic. When the two rings were complete again, Shareen drove her hand and wrist into the ground violently. She shifted it around as best as she could before lifting it again, but still found the rings intact. It was no use. There was no one around, but she still called for help. The breeze carried her voice far and wide, but she knew no one would be around to hear it. Shareen finally got to her feet.

She tore off the sleeve on her right arm and turned it into a makeshift bandage of sorts, but instead of a wound it would cover up this bizarre display on her wrist. She wrapped it closely and tightly, but could still feel the sand softly moving against her skin when she was done. Her memory was vague, as if huge chunks were missing, but she knew she hadn't gone into any desert. The only thing on her mind was home. *Home and Omar*, she added.

The sand stretched for miles and there wasn't a single bump in sight. Shareen saw no dunes, no oases, no vegetation or life, but she also noted that the brightness made it hard to see how far it all truly went. Above, the sun scorched defiantly at the center of the sky. It gave her no indication which way was east or west. *Not that it would matter*, she thought, before finally deciding on the endless desert to her left. *Left like me*, she felt her dominant hand wrapped in fabric, the sand softly grating against her wrist.

During her steps, she tried to figure out what happened to her, but she kept drawing blanks. She kept feeling as if a large chunk had simply been taken from her memory. She remembered Badru playing guitar on the street

corner, as he always did, and she remembered herself on the roof of their home. Omar was there too, but she saw no trace of him anywhere. As a matter of fact, she saw no trace of anything.

The makeshift bandage on her left wrist was loosening now, and the friction of the rings had started to sting her skin. She didn't take it off, though. She wouldn't. Instead she started to tighten it, which was when she took notice of the fabric for the first time.

The texture was weird, the design was weird, the color was weird; even the way it felt against her skin was weird. It was draped over her body in the most unusual way, tightly but not uncomfortably. Her right sleeve was torn off to serve as bandage, but her left arm didn't have a sleeve to begin with. Her torso was covered in most places, but oddly naked in others. Anything resembling fashion didn't seem to apply to the piece; it was not of this earth. It felt like a wetsuit almost, except light and thin but tight at the same time. The sleeves on her legs were already rolled up to her knees, and her feet were bare in the hot sand.

In a single flap in her pants, she finally found the first thing that brought her closer to reality instead of further away from it. The small piece of paper was folded over several times, and time and rain had weathered it fiercely. A young man's face greeted her as she finally unfolded what turned out to be a torn up newspaper page. Above his faded picture, Shareen read a partial headline that said 'at large'. The fine print was missing or mushed together by rain and wear. When she turned it over, she found the thing she was looking for: her own hand writing.

"Flight 542 to JFK, gate 16," she read it aloud in Arabic, but what little promise of answers her hand writing had given was quickly brushed aside again. *Did I crash*, she had to ask herself in confusion, even though she didn't even remember boarding a plane at all. She didn't remember the

flight, the reason, or even the airport for that matter. The only thing she could find in her mind was Omar and her home, along with Badru's guitar playing in the background. The only thing she could think about were the spring days on their roof in the sand, and how perfect they had been. Nothing else seemed to matter in her mind, not even the things that were happening right here and now.

Shareen's feet hit something hard and she almost fell forward. While she regained her balance, her eyes finally drifted from the old newspaper and back into the world in front of her. She had been walking forward all this time, but wished she hadn't when her vision finally shifted. She fell back to the sand behind her, hard. The wind blew the paper out of her hand and into the void she had seen in front of her. There was no more sand ahead. *No more ground ahead*, her heart pumped violently as she realized what another step could have meant. The paper darted forward and sideways, before violently being yanked down over the edge of the desert Shareen almost fell into.

In front, Shareen could only see the open sky. It was almost like it crept up out of nowhere. Every muscle in her body ached with tension as she scanned the blue all in front of her. Left, right, up and down; it was everywhere. Shareen had only caught a momentary glimpse of what was beyond the edge before being forced back by reflexes, but what she saw made no sense at all. Her hands dug into the soft sand below, desperately trying to hold on to anything tangible and real, while her feet were still propped against that hard edge she almost tripped over moments ago.

The cloth around her left wrist was left on the surface as she dug her hands into the ground. It had gotten loose again, but she didn't care to tighten it this time. Like the paper, it blew forward and into that blue void beneath. Shareen could feel the two rings grinding effortlessly under the ground. No more than a minute passed, but it felt like an

eternity while she waited.

Slowly and carefully, Shareen readjusted herself and inched closer to that edge in a crawl. Her feet were away from the edge now and dug deep into the soft ground to anchor her, while her hands moved her to that void with utmost care. *I will not fall*, she thought as she moved. *I will not fall*, she repeated as her desire for answers and her curiosity outweighed all other emotions. *I will not fall*, she reached the edge and carefully looked over.

The blue was still everywhere, but there were more colors now. Shareen saw white as well, and a shade of blue much darker than the sky. *Clouds*, she knew. *And water*, she quickly added as the display beneath her started to make sense. They were leagues away and far below her, as if the desert she awoke in was floating high in the sky. The seas stretched beyond the distant curve in the horizon. Shareen knew she was high up by now, but the true reality of it didn't dawn on her until she could see the tiny wave ripples that looked more like white pencil strokes than anything else.

"It's a dream. It's not real," she said in terror as she tried to wake up. The distant waves crashed and tumbled, but the sound never reached her. The clouds were thick in places, but almost completely missing in others. In the chaos of it all, she saw it. *Scales*, she gasped in horror as she saw it moving down there. It was big, it was fast, and it was everywhere. It had popped into view quite suddenly, thrashing and coursing through the waves in pure madness.

The moment Shareen saw it, the world she held onto started a sudden and violently rapid drop. The entire desert raced downwards as if it were a single object, and Shareen could only hold on for dear life as the distant ocean and its thrashing monster came rushing closer. She screamed, she shouted and she felt her legs and torso lifting off the descending mass. Her hands still held on, but she could feel her grip loosen with every second as the distant nightmare

beast rushed closer. Shareen screamed, Shareen shouted, and she closed her eyes in hopes of waking up from this nightmare.



# Thomas

The last things Thomas remembered were the waves and the violent thrashing in the dark water. Every breath he took was a battle, but he couldn't remember the last one he took. The noise of the world died out with each wave, taken over by bubbles and rapid heartbeats instead. That new silence was interrupted again only moments later, when the violence of the world was forced his way again. The night's sky had been ablaze with thunder and it was the only source of light for him. Every second it struck, the world was visible again and Thomas could see the cylinder off the Norfolk coast. It was ahead, not far now, blasting its ten-second tune above the stormy ocean for hours on end. He remembered paddling with his hands, in a wetsuit that chafed him with every action, but none of that seemed to remain now. Now, there was only peace.

*I'm free*, his first instincts repeated when he regained his lost consciousness. *I'm finally free, and this is Heaven*, the notion continued. *Or not*, an alternative thought quickly found its place in the recesses of his mind.

There were no more waves now and no more rain. Thomas heard no cylinder and saw no lightning strike. Instead, his breathing was relaxed and the only color he could see was a soft blue draped over everything. His wetsuit was still there, but it felt like a blanket now; it fit perfectly and kept him warm. Thomas was at ease as his vision cleared further and he could see the faded sun far away in the sky. He looked below him and saw only sand, but it looked different. A blue hue draped over everything, including himself, and it turned everything into a dream world. The air seemed thicker almost, as if it was a persistent fog that lingered all around him. The blue went on as long as he could see, which

wasn't far. It got darker and darker in the distance, until it turned to black altogether.

As he got to his feet, he noticed the sand darting all around him as he moved. Each grain flew as if it was underwater, and it took seconds to get back to the ground. Thomas paid it little mind, because he knew where he was. He didn't call for help or try to run. Instead, he only waited. In his mind, he expected them to come soon enough and take him to his mother and sister. For the longest time, however, nothing happened. Thomas didn't see a bright light or hear harps and flutes playing, even though he didn't necessarily expect them to. What he did expect was for something to happen, anything, but it didn't.

Thomas knew what happened that night and what he had done, but he wanted to believe for the longest time that it wasn't his fault. *It was someone else's*, he knew. For every second he spent there in the blue, however, that belief started shifting. *Am I being punished*, the doubt taunted him. *Was it my fault*, the belief nagged and nagged, slowly gnawing a way through his subconscious. The whirlwind in his mind kept soaring and the very air around him seemed to reflect it. The mist got thicker somehow, and the distant darkness was creeping closer. The sand felt wet now and that familiar itch in his wetsuit was back. By this point, Thomas wasn't expecting an angel anymore. He was almost convinced that something else would come for him: something dark and foul that would take him to his father instead. With the doubt practically oozing out of his every thought, Thomas started to pray:

"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name," he recited from memory. Thomas felt his surroundings and became intensely aware of them. The fear followed suit. "Thy kingdom come," he started turning around frantically, trying to look at every dark place around him. "Thy will be done," red horns and hoofs filled his mind,

but they never seemed to pop out of the shadows to claim him. "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us," the sweat on his brow weighed him down. "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil," the prayer had been recited a thousand times, but they had never felt this weight to him. A soft calmness returned to him, and Thomas finished: "Amen."

A familiar sound played. It was the cylinder's tune, Thomas knew, but there was something different about it. The rough and alien timbre had made way for something organic, almost natural. Thomas couldn't make out where it came from, up until the point he saw the shadows appear. They crept out of the dark void to his left and were on him within seconds. He tried to step back, he tried to cower, and he tried to hide his face behind his hands. The darkness was all over him and they blocked out the distant and blue sun, but only partially. Thomas looked up and saw the wings casting the shadow. There were shapes, four of them, high in the sky, eclipsing the sun as they glided over him. He couldn't see their form or skin, but he didn't care. *Heaven*, he knew as a great smile of relief dawned on his face. Thomas held back the tears and raised his arms open and wide.

"I'm back," he spoke to his mother and sister as he waited to be lifted into the sky. The shadows, however, passed him by as they once again sounded their cylinder's song. The angels of his salvation were cleared of the darkness and the sun now, and Thomas could see the four whales swimming high above him. Their songs rang all through the ocean, as they played off each other with the alien tune. The cold chill crept up his spine when he realized what was happening. "Wait," he shouted after them, somehow hoping they could still help him or take him with them. Before he could utter another shout for word, however, a cold and violent gasp of death draped all over Thomas' back. It covered him from his head to his toes and the scent was that

of pure horror. There was something behind him, he realized, and he knew it was big, too big. His muscles froze in place.

Another exhale followed, and Thomas closed his eyes. *Hooves and horns*, his mind rang with panic and frozen fear as he started the prayer again. Half the words were wrong this time, and the other half was unremembered. Only fear controlled him now. Then, the voice spoke behind him, reaching deep into his core. Thomas had never felt smaller:

“Open your eyes, Thomas. Turn around.” He knew he shouldn’t, but still felt his eyes opening and his gaze shifting. The turn was slow and meticulous, but he wished it was instantaneous when he started seeing the impossible beast behind him. It crept into view with every inch he moved, and it was everywhere. Dark green scales coiled and stretched in every direction. It was a giant maze of thick snakeskin, culminating in a single head of gargantuan stature directly in front of Thomas. The yellow eyes were fire and lit up the beast’s serpentine dragonhead. The eyes of hell stared right at him as yet another exhale of pure death escaped the creature’s nostrils. Thomas could feel his wetsuit vibrate as the air blew past his entire body.

“Are you him?” Thomas suddenly said, shaking with every syllable. He was already certain, but he felt as if the question would detract it. *Or delay it*, he was convinced of what was about to happen. The beast didn’t respond. “Are you him?” Thomas asked again, with more determination this time. Once again, the beast remained silent. Thomas opened to ask a third time, which was when the response finally came:

“It’s the wrong question, Thomas. The answer won’t help you, so choose something else,” the beast’s voice reached into his core again, but its serpentine lips and mouth did not move. Thomas pondered a dozen other questions. He figured most people would if they found themselves face to face with the Devil. Only one question stuck. It lingered

longer than all the others, and it was the most important one right now.

“Am I dead?” He feared the answer. He didn’t really want it, even if he already felt like he knew it. “Are you taking me with you?” Thomas added nervously, as if to delay what was coming. To his surprise, what he expected didn’t come. The opposite did.

“You’re not dead, little one. I saved you.” Once the booming voice said it, Thomas remembered. He remembered the sea and his journey. He remembered running away and not wanting to return. He remembered going out to sea in the middle of the night; no one knew where he was and he didn’t have his leg rope attached. His destination was the cylinder, which was just a tiny speck on the horizon when he left the Norfolk coast behind. The storm hit him a full day later, and the cylinder was as big and as close as he’d ever seen it before. Thomas struggled with the waves for hours into the early morning, trying to get even closer, but he couldn’t. Thomas remembered losing his board and he remembered sinking. The cylinder boomed above him, louder than ever, coated in water and hanging defiantly in the air. It had begun to turn ever so slowly. His lungs filled with water and the darkness came for him.

“I’m still in the ocean, aren’t I? The cylinder, it’s involved with this.” He felt stupid for not realizing sooner. Ahead, the serpent seemed almost pleased when he said it.

“Clever,” the beast said before descending into silence again. Thomas had been in the cold dark waters, drowning and alone, but this impossible creature was there to save him. *It’s the cylinder*, Thomas concluded. *I’m talking to the cylinder*, his fear turned into awe and wonder. *And it’s talking back*, he felt the weight. No one knew anything about the constructs, and now he was the first bridge between these two civilizations. Thomas continued:

“You know why I’m here?”

“You’re not here, Thomas. Not yet. This today is just a fragment, the other today will be different. This today is just the message.” The beast spoke in riddles.

“What? What message?”

“The tide is turning, boy. You must be ready to ride it.” A rumble started behind Thomas, far and softly. When he turned around, he could see the darkness recede and the blue ocean extend in every direction. His view expanded a thousand fold and he saw the coral reefs and dips and heights of the ocean floor drape out all around him. Ahead in the distance, he saw the wave. It was a pure wall of white bubbles and turbulence that stretched all over the distant horizon and was creeping closer with unprecedented speed. Thomas couldn’t see the edge of it or the top. Its deafening roar of violence grew and it grew rapidly.

“Do not fear,” the beast continued. “Embrace it, and it will be easier when the time comes.” Thomas heard the beast, but the words were wind. All he felt now was fear and he wanted to run, but he couldn’t. The wave was ahead, and the beast was behind. He was stuck. “It will be alright, Thomas. Now ask me what you mean to ask me.” The serpent reached his distraught mind and he finally recollected himself enough to face the monster and respond. Thomas yelled at the top of his lungs, but still only barely managed to speak louder than the wall of death approaching from behind.

“The cylinder!” he shouted and doubted, “are you it?”

“That, my friend, is the real question, isn’t it?”

The wave was on him now, and the last thing Thomas saw was the serpent’s head splitting in half, pouncing in to embrace him.

## Eliza

Eliza felt the hairs on his stomach stick against her skin, her head rested on his chest. His heartbeat provided a steady drum-like drone and rough hands traced her back. Thick fingers lifted her black hair to reveal the scar on her cheek.

She was still tingling and each beat of her own heart sent new thrills rushing through her. The room was dark and silent, apart from their breathing.

“I missed you,” Marcus’ voice broke the silence. His hands moved around her back before settling on her side. Eliza had missed him too, but she stopped herself from saying it. Instead, she lifted her head to look up at him. Her long black hair glided over his chest as she moved closer and planted her lips on his. It said more than words would. She felt safe now with his arms around her, that horrible lump in her throat disappeared as quickly as it had come. When their lips separated she finally spoke:

“I love you,” she said without hesitation. *So long ago*, she realized the amount of time that had passed and how different everything was between them. *Better*, she added before feeling his fingers trace the dead tissue on her broken cheek.

Marcus tried to turn on the light after a while, but it wasn’t working. After getting out of the bed, and her warm embrace, he found out that the other lights in the room weren’t working either. He opened the drapes within seconds and bright light washed into every corner. Eliza covered her eyes with the blanket, making playfully aching sounds to get a response out of him, but none came. When she finally peeked over the covers, she saw that Marcus hadn’t moved since he opened the curtains. In fact, his hand still clutched the drape tightly. Something was off.

“What’s wrong?”

"It's gone," Marcus said with disbelief. "The cylinder. It's gone, look," he stepped aside so she could see. The light adjusted slowly when she stared at it, but she realized he was right. *It's gone*, she echoed his words and found a chill running through her. The mysterious construct had been far away, but even on bad days they could see it hovering over the distant skyline. Even at night it would have been visible due to the city's lights. Eliza knew it should have been there, right in view, but it wasn't.

Marcus jumped into action. Eliza still found herself staring at that beautifully empty sky, not exactly sure how to react or what to do. She smiled, uncertainly. Marcus, however, moved with intent and efficiency. He checked every appliance in the apartment, but none of them were working. He started packing. Eliza felt the bag drop on the foot of the bed and it almost scared her out of her state.

"We should get out of here. I don't like the looks of this," he had already stuffed half a dozen things into the brown rucksack and put on clothes. Eliza, still naked, tightened her grip on the blanket; it was still so warm.

"Where are we going?" It was all she could ask.

"I don't know. Just get ready, okay?" Marcus didn't look at her once. The only thing he focused on was the task, and she could feel the rush in his movements. Eliza chose to comply and the two of them packed in silence. She tried to find his gaze at times, but the only distraction he had was the distant skyline. Every once in a while, she would see him drop his task to look at it, as if he expected or hoped that the cylinder would return and that things could be okay again. Eliza knew, however, that he had been right: something was wrong.

Outside, the car wasn't working. Eliza stood by the car door, while Marcus was underneath the steering wheel looking for answers. She knew he wasn't a mechanic or anything of the sort, but she didn't stop him. When she



looked around the street, she realized they hadn't been the only one to spring into action. Cars were at a standstill all around them, some in parking spots and some in the middle of the road. Families and lone people were all walking or preparing to walk into a single direction: away from the city. There was plenty of distance between them already, but Eliza felt the need to create more. The cylinder was an alien phenomena and she remembered the unease of living so close to it during those early weeks after they arrived. She also remembered how loud the cylinder had been that horrible night that still seemed like it happened last week. She traced her numb cheek and felt the guilt. *The guilt*, she tried to push it away again, but it always came exactly when she didn't want it to. She forced her eyes away from the crowds and the skyline, in hopes of making it go away. *Away from the empty sky*, the thought echoed as a correction while she battled with the guilt coursing through her.

She looked at Marcus again, who was bent over in the car seat by now trying to get it running. *A gun*, the thought terrified her as she saw it protruding from the back of his pants. Her gaze was forced back to the street again and a million other questions poured into her mind. She knew immediately why he had it, though she doubted that he would ever use it. She knew and understood why, but she didn't understand when and for how long. Eliza had never seen it before; she hadn't even seen him take it when they left. There was no time to think, however. Marcus was out of the car by now and took her hand with a tight grip. They were on the move within seconds.

The guilt found her again after they had been walking for a few minutes. They hadn't spoken much. It was all practical and functional, but she felt the care in his hand. He held her tight and made sure she kept up the pace. It was that care, she realized, that triggered the guilt. *You don't deserve it*, the guilt would shatter her each time, and it had happened a

hundred times since that horrible night. It had happened before as well, but that night changed everything. It was unbearable at first, but the biggest solace she could find was that it had never been that bad again. Each time, the guilt's assault was weaker and lasted shorter. *It's in the past*, she had learned to say after Marcus himself had implored her to. *Never again*, she kept her pace up as the two of them walked in as straight a line as possible. Eliza was leaving the city behind her, and everything else that happened there. *It's over*, she believed.

Her feet started hurting after the first hour. That breakneck speed of the first ten minutes was gone, but it still hadn't become a leisure walk. She wore simple shoes, which she was viciously regretting by now. There was a pair of boots as well, Eliza realized, and they were right next to the ones she chose before they left. *They would have been perfect*, she achingly pondered as they kept marching forward.

There still wasn't any electricity around them after that first hour. They passed people on street corners occasionally. They had gathered in confusion much like Eliza and Marcus but chose to stay put and see if they could get any of their electronics to work. She heard words amidst the hustle, and they were all the same in each of the groups: the cylinder was gone and it had fried the entire city's power grid. *Maybe even beyond that*, Eliza hadn't seen a single trace of electricity since they started moving.

Eliza had been glancing at the gun in the back of his pants when, all of a sudden, she saw his hand reach backwards. It found her hip and guided her to the safety of the nearby wall of a building they were passing. She felt her bag bump against the wall with force and the hand pressing down on her hip bone as she regained her bearings. A faded green truck had turned the corner in front of them, quite suddenly and quite loudly. It was stuffed to the brim with men, sand bags, and materials. *Military*, she realized

immediately. Before the barreling wheels of the loud truck had passed them, another truck screeched around the corner at an unsafe speed. A third one followed and a fourth. A fifth and sixth came next and they were each soaring down the street they had just come from. Eliza and Marcus were making a beeline out of the city, and it was clear that they were making one straight for the center. By the time the tenth one turned the corner, she finally spoke up through the noise:

“Can we please go?” She grasped the hand on her hip and squeezed. He snapped out of it and turned to her with a nod. His hand found hers again and they turned a corner into an alleyway. They kept going until the trucks were a distant haze behind them.

Eliza had stopped counting when they changed directions, but every time she looked behind her she could still see more trucks turning that corner and heading towards the city. They were out of sight about ten minutes later, at which point she wasn't sure if a hundred trucks had passed or a thousand.

Another hour passed, and that initial stab of pain shooting up her heels was a pleasant memory by now. Each step ached fiercely, but she didn't show it. Marcus' pace was unrelenting and he had held her hand through all of it. She wasn't sure where they were going, and she thought Marcus didn't know either. *Distance*, she knew it was the safest thing to do right now and she didn't argue. She didn't complain, either; she just kept walking. One foot in front of the other, she shut her mind off. Suddenly, she bumped into Marcus, who had finally stopped his unrelenting pace.

“Elle, get your phone,” he turned to face her. Eliza didn't ask why, because she could already see the answer on the side of the street. There was a lamp post, and its light was flickering. The lamp post next to it, closer to the city, was off, while the one further away was working without a hitch. She

didn't wonder why it was still on at this time, power was power.

"You think we're clear?" she asked as she reached for her phone and handed it over.

"Maybe. Maybe this is it," he looked around the street lamps while breathing heavily. He hadn't shown it once through the journey, but Eliza could tell he was as tired as she was. With his thumb pressed down on the power button, they waited. Nothing happened yet.

"Why are the lights still on? It's the middle of the day."

"Damn it. Still nothing," he almost threw the phone to the floor before cooling himself. "Whatever happened must've only happened until it reached this spot. It must've broken everything inside."

"What do we do now?" Eliza dared to ask, hoping the answer would mean the end of their journey. Marcus looked around before shifting his gaze to hers. He smiled.

"Let's go find a place to rest. My feet are killing me," his smile bared his teeth now.

There was more walking after that, but it was the kind of walking she knew would be over soon. In her mind, she had already drifted deep into whatever motel room's bathtub they would end up in. Marcus was in the tub with her, rubbing the pain in her feet away. The smile oozed over her face as she made her painful steps forward. Marcus was looking her way.

"What?" Marcus asked, smiling.

"Nothing," she continued to smile and added a laugh for good measure. *No guilt*, she realized it was the happiest moment of her life.

Luxury didn't matter and they stopped at the first motel they came across. Eliza dropped face first onto the mattress within seconds of opening the door, with her backpack settling on her upper back and head. She let out a

moan of equal parts pain and relief, all the while digging her face deeper and deeper into the fresh sheets. She couldn't see or hear it, but she knew Marcus was grinning behind her.

Eliza felt him fumbling with her shoes before taking them off. They felt like shackles being loosened after years of bondage, and it coerced another moan out of her, which was muffled heavily by the fact that her face was still buried in the mattress. She could hear Marcus laughing this time, but she didn't care; she could already feel herself drift off.

The next thing she heard was the door closing again. How much time had passed? The room smelled of fried food all of a sudden, and she heard the soft buzz of a television set activating. Eliza opened her heavy eyes and noticed the dimly lit room and the night's sky beyond the windows for the first time. Marcus was on the foot of the bed, with one hand in a large brown fat-stained bag and his head pointed at the small television in the corner. His other hand was on her upper leg, almost as if he feared letting go.

"Hey," she said in the laziest and most tired way possible, she didn't care. The yawn followed and a painful full body stretch came next. Eliza could already feel the blisters on her soles and the ache in her legs.

"I got you some food. It's pretty good, actually," Marcus took another fry along with a sip of a small cup. Eliza didn't want to move, but the deep rumble in her empty stomach forced her tired body forward. She moved as little as possible, almost gliding over the mattress like an earthworm before settling next to Marcus and the fat stained bag. The smell was terrible and amazing at the same time and she eagerly reached inside. It was the best food she had ever tasted.

"Oh my God," she said with a mouth stuffed with fries. She yanked the soda away from Marcus, who only seemed to have eyes for the television ahead. It wasn't until she

swallowed that she finally saw the things that were happening on the screen.

The city was a complete mess. A mandatory evacuation had been put into effect and the entire city was being cleared out. A state of emergency had been declared only an hour before, and the National Guard was being mobilized. Eliza saw the green trucks whiz by again, but they were filled with citizens this time, each of them clinging on to belongings and loved ones as the vehicles bounced and tumbled through the thick streets. The footage being played was dark and taken later in the day, or early night, and the few emergency lights that had been set up were barely helping to coordinate the chaos. The military was there and trying, but they were outnumbered to say the least. There was footage from the sky as well, but it had been shot from high above the buildings, which were like black tombstones protruding from the pavement. The windows were gone, and shards of glass were lining every nook and cranny on the ground, making travel even harder. Only the streets were lit, poorly, and the millions of people coursing through it painted a terrible picture.

After that, she could see footage that was shot during the day. Eliza could recognize the cylinder, but had trouble figuring out what was being shown. The shot was blurry, zoomed in and clearly taken from an unstable helicopter. She could see the side of a building with a perfectly arranged chunk missing from it, as if something had seared through it like a blade through flesh. An eyewitness was reporting on the footage and saying how the cylinder had been pushed into the ground almost like a nail driving into wood. The eyewitness added by saying that there hadn't been a hammer to push the construct down, but that it just went on its own and that it went fast. It had burnt through the building and pavement in its path, before settling into the street.

Eliza saw the airport next. *JFK*, she realized, and it was on fire. The food, previously divine, had suddenly turned sour in her mouth; she couldn't look anymore.

"I can't believe this," she was on her back with her eyes aimed at the ceiling. Marcus didn't respond. She glanced over to the bathroom and continued: "I'm going to wash this day off of me," she put her hand on his shoulder to prop herself up. He took it and kissed it, keeping his eyes focused on the television. Eliza doubted, but chose against asking him to come along.

As it turned out, there was no bathtub. She was alone now, so that didn't really matter anymore. The shower in its place was simple and small; it was good enough. All she wanted was the heat against her skin, and she got it. Every step taken today washed off her skin, but the heat left no sensation on the scar lining her cheek. Doctors had told her the sensation wouldn't return, but she still hoped that it would someday. A shower like this was where she tested that hope. The scar had stopped hurting a while ago but it had healed poorly. The stitches did their work, but the damage done had been severe. *Not life threatening*, she knew, but she also knew that her face would never fully heal. She would carry it with her for the rest of her life. *A badge of her guilt*, she felt it coming again.

The scar covered the majority of her left cheek, all the way from her jaw to her lower eyelid, and she could see it stretch uncomfortably and unnaturally whenever she smiled or frowned. It felt as if she had a piece of duct tape stuck to her face at all times. Marcus tried his best to ignore it, even though it was staring him in the eyes each time he'd look at her. *It has been hard*, Eliza remembered the last few months as the water brushed the sweat and pain away. *It's still hard*, she continued, but improving. Marcus hadn't left her or changed the way he treated her. In fact, it almost appeared as if he was kinder these days. It annoyed her at first, because