

The Book, the Tower, and the Cloud

The Coming of the Cloud Makers

By Nat Welch 2006 NaNoWriMo

The Ocean

Chapter 1

Clouds rolled in mutating the sunset over the Pacific Ocean. The colors absorbed into the sky of moldy potatoes. As the sun slowly became pulled into the horizon it changed shapes, an explosion just before the clouds from the north squelched its beauty.

Chris looked onwards knowing that it would not rain tonight, even though the weather man said differently. The smell was not quite right. It didn't smell right; it did not feel like rain tonight. O how Chris wished the night would never end. Tomorrow Sunday would be over, and Chris would do anything for it to be another day besides Monday. Anything to prevent him from trading his surfer lifestyle in beautiful Santa Cruz, California for the suit and tie lifestyle he lived nine to five, Monday through Friday in San Francisco.

The buzzer was going off. Chris reached over to hit the button but missed. Two more slaps on the desk and Chris opened his eyes. The clock was not there. "Shit." The word echoed through the room. He scanned the room. There it was, across the room, hiding in the corner. This was another one of Nathaniel's silly inventions, a clock that reacted to the owner's attitude when he awoke. This morning Chris was angry and thus the clock ran away and hid in a corner. "Well this is stupid. You better put yourself back, because I need to get ready." Chris got dressed, a disturbingly simple task he found. He owned three identical suits, just pick the clean one and walk away, none of the thinking that was required for any other situation. No need to impress women or friends, this was just work.

A cup of coffee, a bowl of cereal, and a car ride later Chris was at work. Eight hours later Chris was at home, seven hours later Chris was asleep. In seven hours the twenty-four hour cycle repeated.

The job was not painful, but it was not enjoyable either. It was just work. Each day he went through the eight hours as if he was doing nothing valuable. There was no emotion, no creativity, no progression, no decline, there was nothing. Friday night came.

Chris went to the local bar where he drank with some of his friends and compensated for all of the nothingness he went through the last five days. The night was long, dancing, talking, drinking, meeting, greeting, leaving, fucking. Like a big whirl wind Chris' life exploded with emotion, undulating like the waves of the crashing ocean he felt the ups and downs of life.

At seven on Saturday morning he rose like a dolphin from the sea. He kissed the girl next to him goodbye as he slipped into his wet-suit, his favorite suit of all time. He cranked his music as he strapped his surfboard to his car and headed to the beach. The song changes as he takes a turn, he can smell the sand. He can feel the salty breeze from the waves crashing. "You are a getaway car, a rush of blood to the head. But me, I'm just the covers on top of your bed" his radio yells as he cuts the engine and stretches. The Ghostbusters theme song echoes through his head as he slowly walks towards the beach. No one is on the waves today. "Lucky Me."

He slowly paddles through the waves. More undulating, and the rhythm is absorbed through Chris' pores. Chris' chest rises and lowers with the waves, every pump of blood through his system in sync with the current below him. He turns slowly and waits. A large pause in breathing, time to get on the wave. Chris starts paddling. In one fluid motion he is up and riding, the wind glides through his black unwashed hair. After his ride. He paddles out and repeats. Just another cycle in his never ending life.

Relaxation hits Chris as he is on his fifth wave of the day. Why couldn't life always be like this? Chris bends his head back into the sun as he sits on his board in the middle of the ocean. He whispers, "Wh" and THWACK, something hits Chris broad in the face and cuts his word short.

The cold taste of sea water fills Chris' lungs. He swims and flails upwards as he reaches for the sky. Heavy coughs clear Chris' lungs as he remounts his surfboard. "What the heck was that?" Chris says in a disturbingly loud voice. He looks around and nothing looks too weird, at least not until he looks down. The ocean had changed. No longer was it a sea of ocean blue and green with infinite depths, or wait, no it was still that way just something different. There it was. Weird symbols were flying by in the ocean. It looked somewhat like computer code. Chris, still a little shaken up, paddled for the beach. He caught a quick wave and rode it in. Confusion rode through Chris' mind like trains used to ride the ancient train tracks. Was he going insane or were there still lines of code weaving in and out of his consciousness. This time though they came and went in the sky. Luckily none were on the ground, though for one second he could swear he saw one run through a stop sign. Clouds were coming in and covering up the sun. It looked like it might rain tonight. "So much for a late winter." Chris headed home.

Two voice messages, and bills in the mail. Chris closed up the house for the oncoming storm. He took a shower, threw leftovers in the microwave, and popped a beer. The weird code things had disappeared. "I wonder what that was all about, and for that matter what hit me?" Chris liked to talk to the TV.

After no response from the TV besides a few college basketball games, Chris walked over to the neurotransmitter. He pulled the cable from the underside of his left wrist and plugged it in. His eyes closed and twittered a little.

Shapes, faces and colors flew by his body. He reached to his right and picked out a circle from his now virtual world. Once it was centered in front of him, it started

spinning, exponential increasing speed until a body started forming in its place. Soon a middle aged man appeared in front of Chris. It spoke. "How can I help you Chris?"

"Hey Doc, I got hit by something pretty hard today while surfing, and I was seeing things. I feel better now; I just want a quick diagnostic."

"Well let me run through your file real fast." A hollow circle appeared in front of the doctor and he tapped it twice. It unfolded into a clipboard. "According to your encrypted key, you are indeed Christopher William Harsch born June 9th 2003 A.D. in El Cerrito, Republic of Northern California. You have had one broken arm, 23 various common colds and seven different sleep disorders."

"That's me doc."

"Prepare for scan."

"Hit me." The virtual world faded white. And then, everything came back. "Hey doc, so what's wrong. What did I break upstairs?"

"Okay Good news first. Your sleep problems have seemed to have cleared since your visit last year. And you are in great mental and physical health."

"And the bad news?"

"Hmm."

"Hmm? That doesn't sound so hot Doc..."

"Well it's not bad per-say, but you are going to need to see a specialist."

"What is it Doc."

"It is hard to explain, but what do you know of the 2010 rebellion?"

"Some sort of rebels attacked the government freeing us lifelong oppression and found the origin of life or some shit."

"You need to see this specialist. But basically, your mind has been augmented thanks to these rebels. You will probably start seeing things different. Stay off of motorized vehicles and take next week off of work. Your insurance said that they will only cover one visit a year, would you like to cover this one or wait till later?"

"It's November; do you think you will see me again this year?"

"Who knows? It's just my job."

"Ok, I'll pay up front, thanks for the look over."

"No Problem" The doctor's words trail off as the circle reappears and reality zooms in from behind. Chris unplugs and the cord slivers back into his wrist. A business card was floating in front of him. "An in house visit, Jesus, this is going to break the bank..."

Chapter 2

"Fuck it all" Dave stands up as he rubs his head. "Fucking Canada, all there is here is fucking trees for me to fucking run into after a fucking shity ass day. Fuck." Dave had been riding on his motorcycle when a tree fell in his path and clothes-lined him. Thanks to the silly safety system law requires these days; he was saved, except his head still hurt, a lot.

Dave had been returning from his latest excursion, a hike from a trailhead in eastern Alaska through British Columbia with three clients. He was now just trying to get back to Vancouver so he could rest his feet before dealing with his next group of

“clusterfuck retards.” The next group sounded enjoyable though, a group of five men from one of his dad’s old military platoon. Who knows how well they could hike at this age, but if they were anything like his dad; it would definitely be a fun weekend. Then a month off before a high-school reunion, which would probably be all together awkward, except for seeing a few good old friends, maybe he might even find a new job; though leaving the forests of Canada after five years would suck.

Many hours of riding, two nights camping, and many cups of cheap coffee later, Dave arrived at his apartment or “storage facility” as he liked to call it. The building was two stories with five rooms. Upstairs it had a kitchen, office, bathroom, and bedroom. Downstairs there was a gigantic garage filled with various types of equipment, and what was sentimentally called the wall. The wall was an ever growing collection of photographs, by many people who he had known and or traveled with over the years. His friend Nate had even installed a neuro jack, though he hated the things, into the wall, so he could digitally step into any moment, which was nice, because some people he just couldn’t hug anymore in real life. Everything was kept organized and clean, except the office. The office had to stay dirty; it was like some law of physics. If Dave could see the floor, he obviously was not playing enough video games or getting enough work done.

A cool dynamic picture frame hung on the wall. It rotated through random pictures from “the wall” and through a few artistic photographs he liked. It currently seemed to be on a high school spree, showing pictures of his ex-girlfriend, some party, and a lot of good times with people he hadn’t seen from, let alone heard from in years.

After college Dave worked many jobs, now at age thirty, he was leading backpacking expeditions all over Canada. He definitely needed to start some other work though because it just wasn’t paying the bills like it used to. Dave relaxed in his chair and passed out. He dreamed of nothing, something he had become accustomed to, his body was just too tired to think creatively. A few hours later, he awoke into darkness. As he stood up, the room slowly lit itself up, and Dave took a shower. Ordered some pizza and popped a batch of famous Daggett cookies into the oven. He drank a beer while he slowly cleaned up the garage while he waited for the Pizza.

In the corner of the garage he came across a weird grey box. It was worn at the edges, and had a metallic feel to it. It changed in temperature, which was really weird. He reached out with his left hand to touch it. A cable shot out, and then the world was gone.

Dave woke up in a hospital. Dave, being one to only express his opinion when it was needed, and it was always needed, expressed his pain quite simply.

“UGHH!” With such a simple greeting to the joyous light that is hyper-fluorescent lighting adorning most cubicle palaces and hospitals, Dave received a nurse quite quickly and given a large dose of pain-killers. “Good Morning,” she said it with a smile, as the chemicals rushed through his veins like water runs through dry creek beds. She was very cute, and if Dave wasn’t so heavily in pain, he might start talking

pleasantries, but certain things were more important. “Hi, would you mind explaining to me why I am in the hospital, or for that matter why my head hurts so much?”

“I am sorry I can’t help you there, but a doctor should be here any moment to explain it to you. It sounds like you a very lucky individual though. I will see you later.”

“Oh, ok, Thanks. What was your name though?”

“Karen.”

“Cool, thanks for the meds Karen.”

“No problem, honey, hope you feel better.” She walked out with a beautiful grace, or at least the drugs made it seem that way. Dave drifted into a short nap, and awoke with both a Doctor and Karen standing over him. “Hi David, how are you?” the doctor said in that cheery voice that always sounded fake, but was so good to hear when you were coated in pain killers.

“I’ve been better. But all things considered I guess I am doing pretty well. How are you doing today Uhhdoctor.... uhh what’s your name?”

“My name is Dr. Renaldo Wu. Mr. Daggett you have recently had a large amount of information uploaded into your head via your neuro-arm-port. The information affected your brain’s functions and thus you blacked out so your brain could restart if you will. You were found lying on the ground of your garage when a pizza delivery boy found you. You were not plugged in, nor do you have any wireless network jacks installed, so we are unsure of where this information came from. You though have been given a very special talent, how it will manifest I do not know.”

“So you know what this information is?”

“Very basically Mr. Daggett. Yes. What do you know of the rebellion of 2010?”

“Just the basics behind the military stuff, other than that not much.”

“Well you are going to need to visit a specialist in the Northern Republic of California. He lives in Santa Cruz. I suggest you stay away from large groups of people and large data networks. And do not plug in your neuro-jack, either of them, for the next five days. The pain should reside in a few days.” The doctor seemed very excited, but he kept his voice under control. “I made an appointment for you next week. Be there, if you need we can provide transportation and or communication assistance. We also booked a hotel in your name. The United States Military said your insurance will cover all of this.”

“Okay. Can you get me a phone, or how do I go about calling my buddy in Santa Cruz?”

“Karen will take care of that.”

“Thanks.” With that, Dr. Wu walked out the door without another word, not even a goodbye.

Chapter 3

Nathaniel awoke to a foggy gray San Francisco skyline. The lights flicker on in his apartment. He removes his covers and awkwardly gets out of bed. The six foot, three and a half inch tall man puts on a pair of running shorts. He looks at the picture at the end of the hall. Along with a picture of the street he is about to run on, he sees that it is indeed cold out, and he has no email. He needs to be at work in three hours though.

After drinking some water, Nathaniel runs down the street, crosses at the intersection, and takes a left. He runs up embarcadero, two miles and various random turns later, he heads in the direction he believes is home. At home, orange juice, cereal, and a shower clean him off, and he heads to work on the hover transport. Nathaniel rode into work. As soon as he arrived his neuro connected wirelessly, a special upgrade he made, installed, and programmed by hand. Two notices popped up in a semi-transparent white square.

Notices:

*Two patients for Reality syndrome in Santa Cruz. Meet them tomorrow.
Latest gray box that was recovered has finished compiling.*

Both pieces of news excited Nathaniel as he headed up the stairs. Nathaniel traversed the maze until he came to his office which overlooked the San Francisco Bay. Inside his room a grey cube spun on all axis. As he approached another screen appeared in his vision, this one described the characteristics of the new cube. It seemed this was the one he had been looking for. He quickly plugged the neuro from the back of his neck into an orange box on the desk. For about three minutes Nathaniel stood there with his eyes closed. The box turned a light purple and then beeped. Nathaniel retracted the cord and it slivered back down his spine. "Write to log, Backup done. Uploading to remote server." Nathaniel said in a loud voice. The exact words appeared on the wall with a time stamp of 091525 PST next to them. "Now plugging into Grey Reality." As Nathaniel pulled the cord from his wrist the box flew at the tip of the cord and disappeared. Nathaniel collapsed into a well placed chair. A few minutes later Nathaniel awoke to a pounding headache. "Well I guess that couldn't be avoided." The wall recording what he said; and as he looked over he noticed that as expected his new memo software that monitors the writer's mental state worked great. He had successfully absorbed rogue code and documented the entire process. This was going to be wonderful. "Computer, end log, and get me a taxi home, I need a round about route home. Plus call my clients, tell them I will meet them at patient A's house around eleven AM." Nathaniel strode quickly outside and got in a cab. It took an extra twenty minutes to get home, but Nathaniel was safely home in his bed.

A quick hover boat ride in the morning got Nathaniel to his patient's house. He walked in the door, as if the house were his and put his messenger bag next to the couch. He looked around quickly and then, like a homing pigeon addicted to crack, he went straight to the cooler hidden under the counter and grabbed a beer. He went back to the couch and sat down. He popped the cap of his beer off with his lighter and then sipped slowly. A voice came from above, "a little early to be drinking isn't it doctor?"

"Meh, real men know when. How's it going Chris?"

"It's going great Nat, never thought I would be a subject for one of your crazy theories."

"What can I say, I love you guys. Speaking of which, is Dave here yet?"

"He's at the grocery store; he'll be back in five."

"Chris. You know I wasn't kidding when I prescribed that you guys stay away from large groups of people."

“Ya, but you know Dave, he needs his caffeine.” The phone begins to ring, Chris turns but holds back. “Should I answer it?”

“Nah. Let them leave a message.”

“CHRIS! Get your ass down here, something’s going down!” Dave’s voice echoes through the house via the Video Phone.

“Fuck.” Chris and Nat swear simultaneously. “How far away is he?” Nat asks.

“It’s a bit of a walk...”

“Send the police. That’s our best bet.”

“Roger.” Chris says as he runs to the emergency button. All of a sudden the police dispatcher is echoing through the house. “How can I help you Mr. Harsch?”

“We have a situation, David Daggett is going insane due to some sort of neuro interference. We have a doctor here but we need you to bring him back.”

Nathaniel interjects, “But you cannot put him in any sort of vehicle. Walk him home, otherwise your men will die.”

“We see him on our grid, thank you for the information Dr. Welch” The police line ends, and a map of the globe appears. It slowly zooms into a satellite view of where Dave is.

They watch in terror.

Seeing Dave not in control of himself was, by itself, very scary, because neither Chris nor Nat had ever seen such a thing. Add into this oddity was the screaming that Dave was producing. Looking at the equalizer in the bottom left corner of the screen Chris noticed that the noise the speakers were replicating was toned down by seventy-five percent, and it was still pretty loud. Dave ran into a pole and collapsed onto the floor. Nathaniel and Chris both winced. Here was their best friend in pain and neither of them could do anything. Seven cops appeared almost out of thin air. One cop drugged Dave with a quick patch and then they slid him on a stretcher and started jogging. The satellite followed. The officers dressed in black SWAT gear, looked like little black circles on the screen as they carried Dave down the empty street on that clouded day.

Dave noticed the world fade from white into views. Men were all around him in modern urban tactical outfits. They had a weird feeling around them, a mixture of pleasantries, calm, and dedication. Dave felt as if he was working with the military again. These men knew what they were doing and he felt at rest as he watched the sweat drip down their brows into the crevices of their slight smiles. Dave felt the stretcher move with the synchronized rhythm of the men’s step. Dave closed his eyes and exhaled.

The officers rounded a corner, and a message flashed on the screen in Chris’ house. “Subject within visual distance, returning to orbit.” Chris and Nat looked out the window. Nothing. Chris headed to the door and stared down the street. The men moved with a beautiful ease, almost as if they were carrying a bed sheet. Without a word, five men broke off and stood in a line in the middle of the street. The one on the far left held a finger to the side of his helmet, and soon an aerial transport appeared. The last two men breezed past Chris without a word, properly laid Dave on the couch, and ran back outside. Chris waved goodbye as the men jumped in the aerial transport hovering three feet above

the ground. It flew up and the men stood there in the open doors of the transport like heroes. No celebration, no excitement, just calm. Chris felt their calm flow over onto him as he watched the brave men fully loaded and loaded for their next assignment. HE wondered, what kind of life did these people live outside of their jobs? Did they have families; did they surf, were they novelists, professional wrestlers? Chris would probably never know, but at least he was at peace.

Inside Nat had plugged into Dave and was running some sort of diagnostic. He pulled out, and looked up. "He'll be fine. Come, sit down, lets start this." Nat plugged his wrist into the material compiler. After a minute the compiler had the design and started working. He went over and started making a cup of tea. By the time the water was boiling, the compiler had made a dark blue box with rounded corners, but sharp edges. A high speed data cable also compiled quickly once Nat removed the box. He poured the tea and called over, "could you bring these cups over?"

"Sure." Chris stood up and did as he was told laying the tea pot and three cups out on the coffee table. Meanwhile Nat plugged the fat cable into the neuro-transmitter and the other end into the box. The box sat on the ground in front of the couch and coffee table. "Chris plug Dave's main neuro into the box, then your own." Nat plugs in himself while Chris reaches into the back of Dave's neck and pulls out a cord; he plugs in Dave and then repeats it for himself. Everything fades to black.

"Ok boys and girls, time for a quick history lesson. I know you all know about the history of the rebellion, because you saw the rift with me, but thankfully you lied to the doctors, so you've definitely got something on me, but we will discuss that later. Anyway, The rebellion 2010 was a rebellion where certain individuals who have yet to be identified, tore open a rift outside of the White House. Through the rift came around one hundred individuals, who stormed the building, and killed everyone inside; only two of their people died, one boy and one girl. These two individuals were where we got the neuro technology from."

"Okay that is all well and good Nat, but what does that have to do with us?"

"Just listen; this is one of the few things that I actually know something about." The digital world faded into view, the three of them were standing on top of a grassy hill overlooking a dark forest the sky was clear, but an ominous fog hung around the entrance of the forest. "About five years later, a research student came across something amazing. The bodies of these two individuals were dug up for research, but found that their bodies had not decayed. After plugging their neuro's into a exploration net, a book was found containing the history of these rebels and why they had done what they had done. This did not make the news, nor did any other pieces of research that the scientist came across. The reason was, mainly, because the leaders of our continent knew this. They knew it all and now that the continent had been reorganized into countries, like the European Union. None of the countries wanted this information leaked, and so it spread among individuals when they discovered it, and each was sworn into some sort of secrecy. No one has really leaked, thanks to the fact that they all understand the severity of this problem. You see, the rift we saw was proof that we are currently living in a digital world. Due to over population, a project was started in 2005 where everyone's minds were archived to properly create a digital version of earth. Each group of 1 billion people was put on a

space station orbiting one of the local planets and then stored in a tank. The digital world was started in the year 2000, and then built from there, after a world reaches 10 billion, the capacity or “limit” of life for the planet a new digital planet is started. It’s all very complicated but all of the planets are linked and everything that happens affects each planet. The rebels that came were tired of the United States government, who were major contributors in funding the relocation system, for perfecting their system and taking control. This is why the USA disbanded everything except their military. The rebels also left these gray boxes, one representing each station and programmed to appear every decade. The two of you were chosen this decade because of my research, and being the infamous researcher that discovered all of this, I recently also came into contact with a box, though mine is a little flawed compared to both of yours.” Chris pulled up a chair out of nowhere and sat down. A moment later seats appeared behind both Nat and Dave. “Well Chris, I think we know how your box has manifested it self in you.”

“We do? How so?” Chris asked wearily.

“Let me finish my story, I’m almost there.” Nat slid down in his chair a little. “So in summary, the point of all of this is that the world we live in is digital. The rebellion informed the current citizens of this, and left us in true control of our world. The grey boxes allow the individual compatible with them the power to somehow interact with the digital world around them. So together in this copy of earth, we are going to learn to interact with the world and use our powers. Got it?”

“Sure.” They both replied. Chris stands up, the wind ruffles his dark long hair. The grass bends with the wind and the fog pushes back a little into the forest. “So” Chris looks at Nat, “How do we know my power?”

“Well think about what I just said. This is in no way a digital construct like what you usually manipulate. Yet somehow you created chairs. This proves that you can manipulate the world physically. More importantly you can take the code from one item, like a tree and turn it into a chair, or a stop sign into a yield sign, or anything else. You can change the properties of any object, and thus turn it into another object.” Nat smiled at the look on Chris’ face, a strange confused look, which also showed some sign of happiness. Nat turned to Dave. “You though, have a much different power. You have the power over information. The reason you had so much trouble downtown was that your mind almost melted due to the heavy strain of so much information. You can gain information from people’s thoughts, and any variable you look at. So thus you could find the speed of a car, or the blood alcohol content of someone. The limits are boundless.”

“Ok Mr. Know-it-all, what’s your power. I mean these powers sound pretty awesome, but I don’t even want to know how to use it until I hear what your silly power is.” Dave seemed angry, but his tough-guy, I know more than you, in fact I am superior to your gods, attitude was setting in. “So Nat, What’s your “power”?”

“I don’t really know. I have yet to experience anything that would influence my powers.” Nathaniel shuffled his feet, he seemed almost ashamed of the fact. “So let’s train use guys and maybe I’ll come out of my shell or something.”

The rest of the day Chris and Dave worked under Nat’s guidance to train their bodies for their powers. The main strategy for using the powers was to act like this was using their neuro. Forget that they were influencing reality and everything came easily. Dave was slowly moved closer to a large city where he learned to selectively process

information. Only absorb what he needed. Dave added his knowledge of physics, military tactics, and common sense and he was able to drive, fly, and pilot and vehicle through any situation.

Nathaniel could only watch on as Chris turned water to wine, chairs to trees and trees to stop signs. Two days passed. Chris had made gigantic leaps and was only limited by what supplies he could gather. He had built an apartment complex, but had to take it down to build them their house. Dave was able to stand in a street and give advice to everyone who came by and could analyze all of the transformations taking place. Nathaniel grew saddened as he watched his comrades grow. Why could he too not grow? Why did he always have to be the planter never the plant? His sadness grew and he wandered through the dark forest. Each tree creaked with this wind; an owl flew by, the world moving on no matter what Nat did. Nat sat down in the dirt. His head bent, arms enclosing his face, Nathaniel cried. Nathaniel cried for those now gone, Nathaniel cried for the coming burdens that they might face, Nathaniel cried for his friends, he cried to pity himself. It was then it became dark. Nathaniel's tears stopped for a minute so he could look up. The rain covered Nat's face and washed away his sadness. But as Nathaniel became happy, the sky too cleared up. Nathaniel started thinking sad thoughts again, and the rain reappeared. Nathaniel started experimenting with other emotions. He could make it snow, rain, thunder, or even hail. Nathaniel kept practicing; as he attempted to practice he was able to change everything about the weather. He could raise and lower the temperature. He could make it storm, he could make it clear.

Nathaniel thought about his studies of the gray box. Which attribute was this? He was influencing the weather, no the environment, no wait, the system! Power over the system was a weird set of powers, Nathaniel now remembered, that were rather weak when thought about on the surface. The user could control the variables that influenced life. He could make things grow faster, influence the weather, change the speed of time, and even change the seasons.

Nathaniel found Dave and Chris. "Hey guys I found my power!"

"O ya?" Dave responded smugly.

"Ya, I have power over nature, and the system."

"Okay Mother Nature, make it rain." Nathaniel did as Dave asked. The rain came pouring down like tears from the sky. Nat smiled. "You see Dave, although this is incredibly cheesy, these powers somewhat match our personalities. Although I have always considered myself more of a creator, Chris has a much more vivid imagination, and has the ability to picture things far better than I do, and thus he can sculpt various objects into what his mind desires. You on the other hand have always been known to be a survivor. One of the youngest eagle scouts I have ever known that truly deserved your rank. You lead, and people follow, your ability to adapt to any situation is far better than mine and your knowledge of history, tactics, science, math, international relations, plants, technology, and every other random fact you have ever picked up can now be applied beyond your wildest dreams. You are probably now the world's best billiards player and I don't doubt the fact that as long as your physical body can keep up, you will keep pushing the limits of your world. So can you guys see? Can you see the potential of our

new gifts? I don't want to become a super hero or anything, but the concept here of being able to help people, it's just wonderful."

"Beautiful speech, Nate, but let's be honest we can't grow to well if we are stuck inside this brick. Let's go into the real world and see how we do. Let's go help other people, let's help ourselves, let's just stop playing video games for once and do something."

"Okay Dave, let's try something. As you've noticed controlling our powers isn't incredibly difficult. This is because of two things. One, the grey boxes taught your mind how to use the powers, so all you had to do was find where in your head you were storing the information. And two, I created this world, and I am by no means perfect." Nathaniel smiled, "unlike some of us of course Dave."

Dave responded with a smile Nat hadn't seen in years "Well you know, not everyone can be as awesome as me." Dave gave Nate a high five and a pound. "So lets get this shit done with and get out of here, I want a beer."

Chapter 4

The sky was covered with clouds that came and went, like a group of dolphins in the sea. Chris picked a clump full of dirt and turned it into sand, which turned into glass, all in the short time it took him to stand up. The wind was blowing at a low breeze, but it flowed through Dave like numbers through a computer and water through a river. The three were at peace. Then they tried it. You see, they always say, two heads are better than one, but I say, three heads are far superior to two. Chris, Nat, and Dave walked into that town as gods. The town had been created by them but they were not here to be vengeful gods, they were here to help, to serve, to build in this imaginary world what hours from now they would do in the real world.

Two blocks away three cop cars drifted into a straight away from different directions. The three compadres looked down the street and their eyes were drawn skyward. A building, twenty-five stories tall with the first two stories being parking garages and an indoor pool on the seventeenth floor according to Dave. It started snowing as they started running towards the building a few moments later a large car disappeared about a block ahead and soon they were riding in an ambulance.

Dave drove like hell was opening up and a riot was running after them. Traffic was almost nonexistent thanks to Dave's driving. He turned at the perfect moments so that ambulance felt like it was gliding on air, in reality it was, but it felt like it too, which was a plus. The snow was turning into a torrential down pour and yet the clouds still where in a state where evacuation helicopters and trucks could rescue people and put out the fire.

Even through the rain the sky was drenched with fire. Little embers flew up and each one caught Dave's eye. He watched as the embers lifted themselves from the hell that was this burning funeral pyre and as they reach for freedom from the sky, the tears of god cooled their tempers and sent them plummeting to the ground to become just another fleck of dust on the feet of a computer program. Something larger than a spark escaped

from the hell and came plummeting to the ground like a penny from the Empire State Building. Dave's mouth opened. "No" was all that could escape as the air traveled up the disturbingly complex human respiratory system. Nat saw it too. He reached his upper body out the window. Nate wanted so badly to catch this person. Now one should lose their life from something like this, especially when jumping from the top of a building. "Dave, how much horizontal force would it take to push them over to the next building?" Nat didn't even bother to look at Dave because he new the answer.

"Well somewhere around 1000 meters per second to get her going at a slightly acute angle. I'd double that, but I don't know if my math is right." As Dave says it Nat sees the wind come and hit her, she was going really fast now. "Fuck" Nat whispers.

Something amazing happened and it made an entire building they had passed, supposedly now empty, disappear. The roof where the girl was headed turned into foam. She flew through the foam, and it slowed her down enough so she ended unconscious, but alive, two stories above where Dave parked the car.

Real medics also came out of the back of the ambulance and rushed up to her. Clouds started to form at each level of the building, making it appear as some fancy layered wedding cake. The rain and hail flew out, entering through windows and the holes the hail made. The rain slowly put out the close fires and the hail rolled in closer melting slowly to distinguish the heat.

Chris was slowly collecting the ash. He just stared at one spot and slowly a cement cube grew, one bit by one bit. Everything that came off of this building accumulated into this new cement cube. Dave led Nathaniel into finding areas that need more ice and water and slowly the building's rage was put to rest.

Chris was now sitting on the ground starrng at the cement cube. It slowly sifted into dust and sprayed back against the destroyed building. It went in and refilled every hole on the outside Chris could find, Dave came over and placed his hand on Chris' head, and the blueprints basically showed Chris where everything was. The information streamed in as Dave absorbed where every desk was, every piece of paper, and every bit of data. It was almost as if the last hour had never happened. Nathaniel made it a sunny day and reached forward. He disappeared.

Chapter 5

It was dark outside. The only light came from the glow of the cube in front of Nathaniel. As he opened his eyes he stood up and drank the now cold tea. Dave and then Chris opened their eyes and also drank the bitter sweet taste of cold Earl Gray tea. They all began to laugh. "That was awesome!" Nat yelled as soon as he put down his cup. "I mean I knew that this was gonna be cool, but we just saved an entire building." Nathaniel exhaled, "Fuck yes."

"Dude, chill. I will admit that was undeniably awesome, but five people died in there. I guess one of the downsides of there gifts, I get to be a joykill." Dave was

definitely trying hard to hold back a smile, if only he could overlook the loss of five digital people.

“But we’ll do better next time, right, so it’s all good.” Chris looked at his friends. “I mean we will do fine under the pressure and all that jazz?”

“Ya, I hope so. Well Dave, Chris, let’s spend some more time practicing here before we get to work saving the world or whatever, let’s lower the probability of messing up.”

“Ok,” they say in unison. Over the next few days the group spent some time together and then split up to head home. Nathaniel explained how they could now travel in public, and that the reason they couldn’t before was just in case they had certain powers such as Dave’s. So after surfing the Pacific and hiking some trails through the Santa Cruz Mountains they flew apart, and it got very quiet. Dave was able to make it back in time for his trip and Chris still had work the following Monday. Nathaniel though, did not head home to San Francisco. Nathaniel took a plane to Japan to research a supposed tear that had been reported just before he left work. His flight was long and boring, but he had time to work on his NaNoWriMo novel that he had to postpone due to the whole becoming a super hero thing.

Nathaniel landed in Tokyo. The city had always intrigued him, but never id he gain enough off time and/or money to take the time to truly enjoy its wonders. Alas today would be another day where he would not experience everything the city had to offer.

Tokyo University gave Nat a lift out to where they had discovered the rift. The area, known as Saiko or Lake Sai, is connected to two other lakes and all of them remain at the same water level. They arrive at the site. It is beautiful, this November morning, and you could see the top of Mt. Fuji quite clearly. The rift was disturbingly small, about the size of a prepubescent boy, in the middle of a gigantic shrine to some god or rock or something, Nathaniel didn’t read Japanese too well.

Nathaniel plugged the small notebook looking thing in his back pocket into his neuro at the base of his skull and a small circle into a long cord into his wrist. He turns to the grad student assigned to him. “if this turns orange, hold onto me so I don’t move, if it turns red, unplug my wrist. Got it?” The student shook his head and Nathaniel stared deep into the rift. Rifts always looked weird in Nat’s mind, they were basically just a hole in code and extra unneeded code was seeping out like puss from an infected wound. But still they needed to be examined, probed and sewed up, so Nate tossed the ball towards the crack and closed his eyes. God he loved diving these rifts. As he closed his eyes he saw the beauty of the Japanese wilderness whirl by and then the beauty of the raw digital world hit him. A much different beauty than that of mother nature, but amazing none the less. Digital trees had grown where code needed to provide a suture for some internal cracks, and actually Nathaniel had planned on using something similar to seal up this crack to the real world. Nothing unusual over hear, but h came across some new species of data, probably invented from some new virus on the loose, more challenges, more solutions. This all brought up a very good point, why weren’t there ant viruses trying to escape. This was a little disturbing, so Nathaniel hi the orange button and tuned around. A small virus had just replicated and was trying to escape, Nathaniel loaded his personal

sentinel program, and a sword appeared on his back along with a .45 in his hand. He put a bullet in the little munchkin and then stole an apple from a tree. He went over to the rift implanted the apple and then tapped the rectangle for red. Nathaniel flew out of the hole and at the same time, a tree grew and sealed off the rift as Nat had just been pulled out. "Well we are sealed off here, but I want to do a scan of the area do to something I saw inside."

"What did you see sir?" one of the college students was curious, just what Nathaniel needed.

"Nothing, and that's the problem. Do you have a matter compiler in your vehicle?"

"Only a small one sir."

"Well get this compiled so I can do a ground scan, lickity quick." Nat tossed a memory block in the air and took a seat. The student caught it and got to work interfacing the American cube with the Japanese compiler.

About 20 pieces of sushi, two bottles of sprite, and a cup of coup later, the ground plug-in was ready. Nate shoved it into the ground, and jacked him self in. "If only Dave was here, it would save me so much time" Nat thought to himself. "He could scan the area in ten minutes and I would be done here." Nathaniel cruised though the sky in his digital form. Not much around here beside some left over radio transmissions. He jumped down one layer to skim he surface, still nothing. He jumped out and wrote a quick report. They got in the car, and soon Nathaniel was back on the plane. Had he even been off long enough so that he could claim more time on ground that in the air, of course not, logic like that would be silly. On the plane Nathaniel decided he would jack into the collective community that he was flying with, this was usually fun, and a pretty easy way to pick up chicks due to the way he registered online.

He met some nice ladies and a cool guy from Boston but nothing too amazing. Suddenly he received a message.

Hey, go encrypted private; I've got something I want to show you. /Mike

Not being able to remember anyone name Mike, Nathaniel backed up his brain to his remote server and connected. Inside was a large man wearing a fur coat. "Hello young one." Mike spoke with a thick Russian accent, but his English was still quite good. "Nu vse, tebe pizda!" swearing in Russian, not something Nat had expected, but eh, he could still take Mike. "Why did you wake me up?"

"Wake you up? I did no such thing, you messaged me."

"I know I did, after you woke me up."

"I don't even know you, who are you? How could I make someone up that I have never met or seen before?"

"You were just I Japan, no?"

"Yes Mike I was, how did you know that?"

"When you activated your security program, what happened?"

"O in the rift you mean? Uhh, my .45 spawned, how do you know about the rift? Are you stalking me?"

“Ok, you didn’t notice, but when you activated your security protocol, you somehow downloaded me, Mike, into your mainframe. I was the sword that appeared on your back. Run your security protocol again, pizda, and I’ll show you how much of a durak you are.” Nathaniel did as he said and Mike disappeared. Nathaniel looked around and did not see the Russian.

“Man I knew it. That guy was full of it.”

“Hey durak, look back here.” Nathaniel looked over his shoulder, and low and behold, there was a bastard sword, speaking Russian, on his back.

“Wow. So what does this mean?”

“You now have a grumpy Russian stuck to your back, what do you think it means moron? Now disconnect before I start actually enjoying this situation.”

“Ok, jeeze.” Nathaniel unplugged, and went to sleep for the rest of the trip. “A talking sword, what will they come up with next, jeezus.” Was heard murmuring from his lips as he slipped into deep sleep.

The plane hit the tarmac harder than he had expected. He really should look into getting the company to pay for better flights, none of this bankrupt United crap. Nathaniel looks at the person sitting next to him “I mean in all reality, planes should be upgraded right now beyond this silly elitist thing. Trains have all turned into electro-magnetic subways and seventy-five percent of all cars now run on a hover design or a hybrid wheel and float design. Boats are still called boats, but most commercial boats glide without wake across the ocean, waves don’t even affect them. Yet here we are on a Boeing 797 which is just an environmentally friendlier version of what my father flew in. Still there is no leg room and the food gets worse every time. What will it take?” His labor looked over, semi-irritated, “Dude I have no idea, why don’t you fix it?”

“I doubt I could, but maybe someday...” Nat stood up and grabbed his backpack and suitcase from the overhead bins. He walked down the ramp and took a left. San Francisco was dark tonight, and the airport was all but empty. He walked down various large corridors that probably had ten thousand people walk through them today. Now though, he was alone under the florescent lighting, floating above the tile.

Nathaniel exited the building and took a tram to overnight parking. He got in his car. “Take me home,” was all he needed to say and the car was soon zooming down the freeway as Nat napped, occasionally opening his eyes to stare at the lone lamps lining the freeway.

The three awoke on various places along the west coast a little under a month later. Dave was traveling south on his motorcycle, currently in Oregon. Nathaniel and Chris were on the newly built subway traveling north. Later that day they arrived at their houses in Santa Rosa. Dave was in his home and Nathaniel was sleeping in Chris’ guest bed. The next morning they all met downtown and had breakfast together. Dave talked about how he saved his most recent client from a bear. An adventurous tale where they had come across a bear cub on a trail, and when they turned around to go the other way they ended up in front of the mother bear. Through large amounts of amazing tactics on Dave’s part they made it through without anyone in either party getting hurt. Chris told of some of the amazing waves he had caught recently, and how he had gotten a new job

where he was actually having fun, he was teaching middle school. Nat told of his expedition in Japan, but conveniently left Mike out of the story, that would come later, in private company. They finished their delicious breakfasts of eggs and bacon, lots and lots of bacon, and headed towards their high school.

Maria Carrillo High School had not changed too much over the last few years. The area was still growing as more and more space was needed to compensate for all of the kids America was popping out and the architecture still comprised of California stucco and cement rocks, but the three still had many memories of the school, some better than others of course, but memories none the less. Most of the teachers were retired or dead but around 60% of the class of 2021 was there for their ten year reunion.

People hugged, drank alcohol, danced, talked, and made out with their ex-girl friends in the back corner. The evening was fun and luckily the evening brought back mainly good memories. Some people spoke and everyone clapped, but in the end it was nothing more than celebrating an anchor point that most had moved on from.

The most important thing about the entire evening was a phone call Nat got around eleven. "Good evening Sir,"

"Hi, can I help you; I am sort of busy at the moment."

"We recently received reports of a tear in London, and we were wondering if you could be on a plane tomorrow to take care of it?"

"Of course! But I would like to take two of my up and coming associates, Dave Daggett and Chris Harsch."

"No problem sir, I assume they are in our personnel database?"

"No, they are not; they are in my patient database."

"Okay, I'll make sure your tickets are there. Please be at SFO tomorrow at two o'clock for check in."

"We'll be there." Nathaniel hung up and went to tell Chris and Dave the good news.

Dave and Chris were a little skeptical about the whole thing. Not only were they not packed for a trip to London, but neither had ever truly been able to clean up a tear. "Guys, you have these incredible gifts, and I know you have been using them somewhat."

"Nat, I've been reluctant to use my powers, I have no idea where I am going to pull mass from, so I try not to make anything."

"I am pretty much the same way, I don't want to read peoples thoughts and while it has helped me keep my friends and clients safe from bad weather and falling trees, I haven't done more than just keep my powers on low."

"Well, gentlemen, tomorrow is a great way for you to test yourselves and see what you can do. Don't forget that you were chosen to receive these gifts because the system knows that you have the capability to do well. Go prove to the world that you are worthy of your gifts." Both Dave and Chris look at Nat with a bit of annoyance and a bit of hope, who knows maybe this will turn out okay.

"I'm in," Chris smiles, Dave looks Nate in the eye "You two would obviously fuck it all up without me, so I guess I am in," a grin appears on Dave's lips as he shrugs.

“There we go, that’s the Chris and Dave I know.” And with that they departed to their houses to pack for tomorrow.

The plane ride was excruciatingly long. The flight was too long, compared to the flight to Japan Nat had recently taken, but the trio just didn’t feel like talking, which was awkward. They arrived in London late into a foggy evening. The trio was dropped off two blocks of the rift. They walked in silence down the cobblestone street, almost as if they were teleported back in time. Single lamps gave off a ball of yellow fog floating every hundred yards. Each time they passed a lamp their existence was proven as their shadows were harshly lit up upon the ground. The fog got thicker as they approached the rift. Soon all they could see was grey wetness and all they could hear were the footsteps of their shoes upon loose cobblestones. Dave stopped walking. “Hey guys? Do me a favor, stop walking.” The footsteps echoed between the walls and disappeared. “I think I should be able to see in the fog if I work on it a little, maybe go daredevil or something.” Dave picked out the sidewalk edges, and Nat and Chris, but nothing more. “Hey Nat, what happens if you just walk straight into a rift?”

“I don’t know if that’s possible, I’ve never tried.”

“Well we would still have our powers right?”

“I assume so.”

“Then why don’t you try clearing up this fog.”

“Okay, but I was loving it’s dramatic effect,” Nat grinned, Dave could tell that much, and then the fog lifted, but it was still very dark, with no moon out. Chris created mag-light out of one of the cobblestones. They were standing right in front of the rift. It was much larger than any of the rifts Nat had seen. Nat tossed Chris and Dave each dark blue spheres. Plug these into your wrists, and on the count of three throw them into the center of the rift.

“One.”

“Two.”

“Three.” The trio sent their spheres flying towards the dark grey crack that was floating in front of them. Compared to the twelve inch tall crack that was in Japan, or the sixteen inch one Nat had found in New York, this was gigantic at around six feet tall. Something weird happened as soon as their spheres hit the crack. Instead of just making a connection with the crack like usual, the cord started tugging and now connection was made. “Nat, what the fuck is going on?”

“I don’t know, usually we just get a connection and we are good to go.”

“Well I am getting jack for a connection over here,” Dave yells. As soon as he yells his sphere disappears into the crack and his cord rolls back into his arm. A nanosecond later the same happens to Chris and Nat. “Guys the crack is growing, and... oh shit, it’s getting closer...”

“Fuck lets book it guys,” as soon as Nat says that and starts to run away from the crack; it envelops them and closes like a television monitor turning off.

The darkness is blinding. Or maybe it was the bright flash of light before he collapsed on the ground that hurt his eyes so much. “Come on you Veeblyadok. Wake up!”

“I’m up, calm the fuck down.” Nathaniel pauses, “did you just call me a whore?”

“No, the son of a whore.”

“Because that’s so much better…”

“Very much so.”

“Oi vay…” Nathaniel stands to his feet and looks around. He sees Dave sitting up and Chris is a few feet behind laying down rubbing his head. Nathaniel looks at the scenery; they were deep inside a redwood forest, with little light shining through the trees and deep clouds above. “Where are we?” Dave murmured, “Last time I remember redwood trees didn’t grow in London, let alone anywhere in Britain.”

“Ugh, I hate my head sometimes.” Chris stood up, looked around, and then it came. A loud roar echoed from somewhere else in the forest. “Hey Dave, where did that come from?”

“This way, follow me!” Dave started running with the others following. Chris noticed the sword on Nathaniel’s back. “Hey what is that? Nat what is on your back?”

“Umm this is a piece of defense software I came across; basically it’s a sword that talks vulgarly.”

“Interesting…”

“Ya I guess so.” Nat thought about the fact that they were running towards a loud, unhappy sounding, evil roar. “Why don’t you equip Dave with like a twelve gauge and a M4, hook yourself up with some guns too.”

“No offense, but I have no idea what they look like so thus I can’t make them.”

“Well when we catch up with Dave, have him give you images of them so we can go in prepared.”

“Prepared for what?”

“Who knows. It is war after all.” With that they caught up with Dave. He was staring up ahead at some large shape. Dave murmured something along the lines of an explicative. Chris and Nathaniel finally realized what they were looking at, a gigantic robot walking towards another rift. “Dave touch my head and think of any guns or weapons that will help us here.” Dave did as he said, and instantaneously many interesting weapons appeared before Chris, Dave, and Nat. “Chris you’ve got the most upper body strength, take the rocket launcher, Nat you use this rifle with explosive rounds.”

They all turned with their guns and took strategic points. Nat had Chris make him some sequoia seeds, and they rushed in. Chris caught his attention with a rocket too the back while Nathaniel rushed around the robot with tree seeds. Dave drew the robots attention while Chris reloaded and then with two well placed shots, took out the robots eyes. It was just now hitting Nathaniel how big this robot was, it was taking him around two minutes two just run a quarter of the way around the robot. He planted the last of the seeds in time for Chris to launch another rocket into the gigantic tin-can. Three seconds later five trees erupted surrounding the robot in a wooden cage that even fire couldn’t take out.

The robot clawed at the trees it couldn’t see. Chris built a set of steps up half way up the robot to where he ran up and planted a pack of C4 on the robots chest. A large explosion jammed him in between the trees. “Run for the rift!” Nat yelled as they all

bolted through the rift. They all collapsed on the ground, still armed as the rift sealed up behind them. They looked around as they stood up and dusted off. “We should probably get rid of these weapons huh?”

“Ya that would be a good idea Dave.” They piled their guns into a trash can, and suddenly, thanks to Chris, there were three other trash cans. “Rift closed gentlemen. Let’s get some sleep and then go home. They found the safe house located about a mile away, which felt like it was the longest walk ever, no one likes coming down from an adrenaline rush. They walked up the stairs and the door opened to Nathaniel’s DNA. Inside they collapse from exhaustion. In the morning they had a classic British brunch filled with toast and eggs and meat. They remained silent. They were on the plane and home in time for sleep again. The three crashed at Nathaniel’s studio apartment, they weren’t even gone long enough for jet lag.

After another night of sleep, they all sat down for more food, this time though they talked. Many questions were asked, mainly from Dave and Chris, but no one had any answers. They were the first to survive the jump, and they had encountered the largest amount of code that Nat had ever seen trying to escape into the real world.

Chris looked around, “So, what should we do now?”

Dave responded, “What do you mean?”

“Well sure we can go and close these rifts and tears all over the world, but wouldn’t it be great if we could stop them all together?”

“Ya but we don’t even know how they are being started, let alone how to stop them.”

“Indeed, and if Nathaniel, the lead researcher of these things, doesn’t know how it’s going down, then how can we stop them.”

“The other issue we run into, is that the occurrence of these rifts is increasing exponentially. Sooner or later, we won’t be able to close them all before something gets out.” Nathaniel rested his head in his hands.

“So basically Nathaniel, it’s hopeless.”

“I guess Chris, but I’ll keep looking, and with Dave’s help we can probably figure it out. I’ll make sure to put you guys on my payroll too so we won’t have to worry about you guys going broke.”

“Thanks I guess, but I was starting to enjoy my job.”

“And I never stopped liking my job.”

“well it’s an option, and you can always go back to your old jobs when we are done.”

“What am I going to do, take maternity leave?”

“Chris, you will get your job back, and Dave is self employed, so it will be great.”

“Ok, fine I’m in, but you better pay well”

“I’m in too, and I second the statement on the salary.”

“Well we better get out there then, and find out what’s up. Chris. Dave. Let’s Roll. I’m driving.”

“No you are not!” Dave yells as they walk down the stairs. “I am so driving Dave, it’s ok.”

“You almost killed me last time I was in your car.”

“You know you like it.”

“Screw you Nathaniel,” And with that they were off.

The Forest

Chapter 6