

Prologue.

Framed by burning torches, the obese, middle-aged balding man in a pale gray suit stood at the podium before an audience of a hundred or so.

He speaks:

“From the beginning of time, from that fateful moment when the primordial slime lifted its head and howled to the uncaring Heavens, *I am alive*, evolution has molded and remolded life on Earth. Always in a random haphazard fashion — one step forward and two steps back. Until now.

We stand at history’s greatest turning point — not just of human history, but of geological epochs. And you, loyal members of the Iron Order, will be able to tell your children and grandchildren you “were there.”

I, Harry Pembroke, will succeed where the great Hitler failed.

I’m speaking of the creation of *homo superior*, a telepathic master race that will eliminate humans as surely as we eliminated Neanderthals.

Yesterday, they called us madmen. Tomorrow they will kneel before us as our slaves. Do not mourn the billions who will have to die. Do gardeners mourn weeds?

Just as my H1P1 virus cured congenital blindness, so my god-virus will cure inferiority.

I have tricked ignorant thugs into funding my final push and found a dupe to incubate the virus.

Victory is ours!"

Chapter 1

The gentle rocking reminded him of a time, years ago, when he'd slept in the boat while his father and sister had fished for striped bass off Tumbler Island — a time he hadn't felt trapped.

A light blinded him.

It was as if someone held a flashlight against his eyes. When he opened them, he was alone again in a dark bedroom.

He tried to go back to sleep.

Light flared.

When he opened his eyes this time, he found himself in a grassy meadow filled with wildflowers under a clear blue sky. He clapped his hands over his eyes. When he opened them again, he was alone again in his dark bedroom.

What's happening? Could it be a side effect of that pill?

Plagued by suicidal thoughts, Derek had responded to an ad in the paper to participate in a clinical trial for Seshadri-Clarke Pharmaceuticals. And, a few hours ago, a man named Harry Pembroke had given him an “investigational drug” — a small red pill — to combat depression.

“What have you got to lose?” Pembroke had said. “This drug is guaranteed safe. The worst that can happen is nothing.”

That’s what happened. Absolutely nothing.

He drifted off to sleep again. The fluttering sensation returned, accompanied by a feeling he was bursting out of his skin like an overcooked sausage. A vivid sensation of flipping end-over-end in bed followed.

“I’m going to sue Seshadri-Clarke *and* Pembroke,” he growled, leaping out of the bed.

A wonderful feeling of well-being suffused his body, a sense of being lighter than air. At the same time, he felt more awake than he had ever been in his life.

I never had a lucid dream before. It’s as if I woke up after spending my entire life in a drugged stupor. Maybe the pill really had some effect.

There was no particular reason for him to turn around, but he did. And he saw himself lying in bed.

How can I be standing here and lying in bed at the same time? Am I dead?

Then he noticed the sleeping figure’s chest smoothly rising and falling.

This is the most bizarre thing that has ever happened to me.

He carefully looked around his bedroom. His sleeping body glowed slightly, flickered actually, like a candle. The glow was a color not on any palette he had ever seen — an unnatural color, a color with no name.

Flickering with the same unnatural color, his black and white tabby, Norton, raised its head and stared at him, silently meowing.

I’m losing my mind. Will my life ever be normal again?

The bedroom looked the same as always but its walls seemed slightly transparent. Strange shadows moved through the air like ghostly presences and the air itself gave off a faint glow. He moved toward the door and tried to open it but his partially transparent hand passed through the handle.

Pembroke better be able to fix this.

With no transition, Derek found himself in an ornate study, floating near the ceiling. Books lined the walls and Pembroke sat behind a large cluttered desk, apparently arguing with a heavysset man in a suit who sat across from him. Solid objects were slightly transparent, and the two men flickered with the unearthly light he'd seen earlier.

A herd of bison — transparent almost to the point of invisibility — slowly strolled through the room, the walls, and the people in it, completely unaware of them. Small transparent shapes or creatures winked in and out of existence — suspended in mid-air.

Or mid-whatever this is. It's as if I'm swimming in a ghostly ocean teeming with life.

Besides softly glowing, the “ocean” around him seemed to radiate energy or encouragement. It was as if the air itself was alive and conscious, and aware of Derek's presence.

It was so much more pleasant than the one time he'd been in the actual ocean, when his boat capsized off the Burnt Island Light, and he'd almost froze to death.

He looked at Pembroke.

I can hear them. But their lip-movements don't match their words.

“Ignorant thug,” Pembroke said, without moving his lips. The ignorant thug didn't react — as if he hadn't heard Pembroke.

Derek moved toward the men and passed his arm through them.

“Cold,” the heavysset man said, without moving his lips. He rubbed his hands together.

“The people I work for want their money,” he continued — his lip-movements completely out of sync with his words. “They are losing patience.”

“Prescription drugs cost more than *heroin or cocaine*,” Pembroke replied. “And Americans spend *billions* each year on antidepressants. I’ll pay the people you work for with interest — even the rates they charge.”

“Seshadri-Clarke owns you,” the other man said.

With the kind of certainty found in dreams, Derek knew this man’s name was Maxim Baranov.

“That’s the beauty of this scheme,” Pembroke replied. “I built a lab in my house and bought my own animals. I even bought my own DNA sequencer. My greatest triumph, and Seshadri-Clarke is *completely* cut out of it.”

“Yes,” Baranov replied, “With *our* twenty million.”

“I’m barred from getting research grants,” Pembroke said. “And I can’t use Seshadri-Clarke facilities. I thought I explained the time-frame. . . .”

“Excuse me,” Baranov interrupted, pulling out a cell phone.

Derek hadn’t heard it ring. In fact the only thing he could hear was the odd conversation.

“He’s right here,” Baranov said into the phone. “Of course I can speak freely in front of him. He doesn’t know a word of Russian.”

Gotta love dreams. All languages sound like English.

“I think we should give him more time,” Baranov said. Then, without moving his lips, added, “Not paid to think? Asshole.”

“Should it look like an accident?” Baranov continued. “No? OK.”

“They’re willing to give you more time,” Baranov said, putting the phone away. “But I must take pictures of your lab.”

“Good. I tried to explain the time-frame involved in developing a new drug.” “As if you apes would know lab equipment if it bit you,” Pembroke replied, saying both sentences simultaneously. Derek had no trouble telling them apart, but Baranov didn’t react to the second one.

“It’s in the basement,” Pembroke said, standing and walking to the door.

When Pembroke had his back to him, Baranov pulled out a pistol and noiselessly shot him twice in the head, sending geysers of . . . material against the woodwork.

It was like a silent movie.

Carefully sidestepping Pembroke’s corpse, Baranov left, wistfully muttering, “Our own Bugsy Siegal. Or will I be the Bugsy Siegal?”

Oddly, this didn’t startle Derek in the least. He’d felt the murder coming, the way one feels a storm brewing. The air’s faint glow briefly intensified around Derek and radiated feelings of affection and protectiveness. A hug?

Derek felt a sickening sensation of falling and found himself back in bed, awake and relieved.

He fell asleep again and had vague but intense dreams of his body changing — as if he’d begun to subtly mutate into something . . . alien.

Derek got up.

He looked around his studio apartment, with its off-white walls holding the Salvador Dali poster *Persistence of Memory*, its bookcase separating the kitchen area from the table he used as a computer desk.

He made coffee, fed Norton, and cleaned the cat's litter box.

Pembroke had given him a notebook to record any "unusual experiences." Looking at the Seshadri-Clarke logo on the notebook, Derek wondered whether Mr. Pembroke *had* lied to him about the drug trial.

He thought back to when he'd signed up for the program, two days ago. He'd met Pembroke in his office at Seshadri-Clarke Pharmaceuticals — where he was the chief neurochemist, according to the secretary. That had seemed legit. Then he'd spent at least thirty minutes signing a stack of legal papers: nondisclosure forms, releases of liability, etc. Pembroke had told him this project was secret and he wasn't to discuss it with *anyone*, including other Seshadri-Clarke employees.

Derek Evans was a muscular, six-foot-four twenty-four year old with brown hair and eyes, from the lobster-fishing village of Boothbay Harbor, Maine. He'd been an A-student who loved science-fiction, science fairs, and complex, story-driven computer games like *Dreamfall*, *Gone Home*, and *Life is Strange*. He was so much of a nerd he'd resisted efforts to recruit him for his high school's football team. He couldn't remember the team's name.

At the age of seventeen, Derek had done the unheard-of: he won a special scholarship to New York University complete with full living expenses. The Boothbay Observer even published an article about him with his picture.

He'd reacted to the city's sensory overload like a frightened turtle: he'd pulled in his head and spent every waking moment of his time studying.

At times he yearned for the tranquility of home, the silence as he glided under sail through misty coves like a ghost, occasionally startling harbor seals, cormorants, and dolphins.

When he'd gone home on visits, though, he'd felt trapped. Then, his nostalgia for New York was keener than anything he'd ever felt for home. The city was the battlefield where he'd build his future, and home was a sleepy backwater cutting him off from it. His sister's talk of getting her own lobster boat seemed parochial.

It had been the same when they'd visited him, last year. His sister, Wendy, had complained that she couldn't hear the sea, that New York even smelled "all wrong." She'd paced like a caged tiger.

His father had said his apartment was more a lair than a home, and his mother had questioned how he could ever be happy there.

He typed an account of last night's dream into a computer diary; the paperwork could wait.

"Norton," he muttered as the cat walked in front of the computer screen while he worked, blocking his view. Cynthia had given him Norton three weeks ago — just before telling him they needed a "vacation" from each other. A consolation prize?

He'd met her when she'd accosted him on the street and invited him to a party. That had struck him as odd but, perhaps, that was how things were done in the Big City. And, after a fling that had lasted a week, Cynthia had cut him off.

He shaved, showered and dressed. After spending fifteen minutes working on an inventory system for the new game, *A mind forever voyaging*, he realized he'd be late to work.

Maybe I'll be able to win Cynthia back. No — I know I'll win her back

Last night's dream was one he wished he could have a hundred times more. He'd never be trapped again.