

THE VISION

(THE CUBE PART II)

BY PARKER CASTLEBERRY

AS I GOT CLOSER, THE LIGHT GOT BRIGHTER, UNTIL I COULDN'T LOOK DIRECTLY AT IT. IT WAS LIKE STARING INTO THE SUN. IN A FEW MINUTES OF WALKING I HAD GONE FROM PURE DARKNESS TO INTENSE BRIGHTNESS. THEN I FELT ANOTHER WALL IN FRONT OF ME. AGAIN, I PUT MY HAND TO IT AND THIS TIME THERE CAME TO ME A BLINDING LIGHT—SO POWERFUL THAT I FELT MY EYES BURNING—AND A VOICE. A DARK, OMINOUS VOICE, DEEPER THAN ANYTHING I HAVE EVER HEARD.

“I AM NEEDED AGAIN.”

A BRILLIANT RADIANCE ENVELOPED ME AS THE MYSTERIOUS VOICE SPOKE TO ME. IT WAS A KIND OF LIGHT THAT COULD PIERCE THE BACK OF MY HEAD AND BURN MY RETINAS. FORGET LOOKING AT THE SUN, THIS WAS STANDING INSIDE IT. A STRANGE SENSATION SHOT THROUGH MY BODY, LIKE I WAS BEING ELECTROCUTED. BOLTS OF LIGHTNING STRUCK ME FROM THE WHITE AROUND. I WAS BEING HIT WITH BILLIONS OF VOLTS, BUT IT DIDN'T HURT, AT LEAST IN THE SENSE THAT IT DIDN'T KILL ME. THE INTENSE GLOW AROUND ME SEARED MY SKIN AND EVEN SEEMED TO PENETRATE INSIDE ME AND ILLUMINATE EVERYWHERE – THERE WAS NO SHADOW OR DARKNESS WHERE I WAS. IT WASN'T PAINFUL; IT JUST FELT REALLY HOT. A FIERY FEELING TRAVELED INTO MY BODY, INTO MY CORE.

“SOON, THE ARMY OF THE DARK LEGION WILL COME TO CONSUME ALL THAT YOU KNOW,” SAID THE VOICE.

I SAW A HUMANOID FIGURE WITH DEEP CRIMSON SKIN AND WEARING WHAT LOOKED LIKE A SUIT OF ARMOR; PLATES OF A DARK GREY METAL COVERED IN BLACK RUST HUNG FROM THICK CHAINS AROUND HIS SHOULDERS. UNDERNEATH WAS A LARGE, MUSCULAR BODY. TWO BONE-WHITE HORNS CURVED ALMOST GRACEFULLY FROM THE TOP OF HIS HEAD, OUT OF HIS LONG, BLACK HAIR. A COLOSSAL SWORD, SO GREAT NO HUMAN COULD PICK IT UP, MUCH LESS WIELD IT EFFECTIVELY, WAS AT HIS SIDE. A SKULL LIKE THAT OF A HORSE DECORATED THE SWORD HILT AND GLOWING SYMBOLS RAN DOWN THE BLADE. HE WAS SITTING IN AN IMMENSE CHAIR MADE OF DARK STONE, LIKE A KING ON HIS THRONE. A PILE OF SKULLS OF CREATURES I COULDN'T RECOGNIZE SAT AT HIS FEET. HE STARED RIGHT AT ME WITH EYES THAT GLOWED RED, A WICKED SMIRK ON HIS FACE. IN HIS LEFT HAND SAT A VAGUELY HUMAN SKULL WITH LONG POINTED TEETH AND THREE EYE SOCKETS.

LIGHT BURNED THROUGH THE VISION LIKE FILM MELTING ON A PROJECTOR. I WAS BACK TO FLOATING IN A VOID OF WHITE. THEN ALL THESE SENSATIONS CAME TO AN ABRUPT END. MY EYES OPENED TO ANOTHER BLINDING LIGHT, BUT AS MY EYES ADJUSTED I REALIZED IT WAS A JUST A LED BULB IN FRONT OF ME. I COULD SEE THE REFLECTOR AROUND IT, THE STEEL BEHIND IT, THEN THE PARALLEL METAL RIBS THAT INDICATED A CEILING OF A SPACESHIP. IT FELT

THE VISION WAS OVER. I WAS BACK TO FLOATING IN A VOID OF WHITE. THEN ALL THESE SENSATIONS CAME TO AN ABRUPT END. MY EYES OPENED TO ANOTHER BLINDING LIGHT, BUT AS MY EYES ADJUSTED I REALIZED IT WAS A JUST A LED BULB IN FRONT OF ME. I COULD SEE THE REFLECTOR AROUND IT, THE STEEL BEHIND IT, THEN THE PARALLEL METAL RIBS THAT INDICATED A CEILING OF A SPACESHIP. IT FELT

AS IF EVERY PART OF ME HAD BEEN SCALDED, EVEN INSIDE OF ME, PRESUMABLY DUE TO HEATING FROM THE LIGHT. SUPER BRIGHT LIGHT CAN PENETRATE SKIN, SO I ASSUME THAT’S WHAT HAPPENED. LOOKING AT MY SKIN, I FOUND THAT THERE WAS NO VISIBLE DAMAGE DONE. I MOVED MY GAZE AROUND AND SAW THE STERILE WHITE ENVIRONMENT OF THE MEDICAL BAY OF MY SHIP, THE ULTIMATE. MY GRAPPLING GUN AND OTHER GEAR WERE SITTING IN A PILE IN THE CORNER. THE STEADY BEEPING OF VARIOUS MONITORS HOOKED UP TO ME INDICATED THAT I WAS MEDICALLY FINE.

“OH, HE’S AWAKE.”

I RECOGNIZED INSTANTLY THE VOICE OF MY FIRST MATE, DEREK, WHO WAS SITTING BY MY BEDSIDE. HE SERVED WITH ME IN SQUAD 435 BACK IN THE GREAT WAR AS AN ENLISTED SOLIDER. AFTER GETTING SEPARATED AT THE BATTLE OF JAGGED MOUNTAIN—THE SAME BATTLE WHERE I GOT MY LEG BLOWN OFF – WE MET UP AGAIN AT THE NAVAL ACADEMY A FEW YEARS LATER. OF COURSE, HE GOT OUT OF THE WAR UN-INJURED.

“HOW ARE YOU, SIR?”

“YEAH, I’M FINE. I’VE NEVER FELT BETTER IN MY LIFE.”

THAT WAS TRUE. THE BURNING FEELING HAD FADED AWAY AND NOW EVERY PART OF ME FELT STRONGER, AS IF I HAD BEEN WORKING OUT FOR A LONG TIME. MY EXPERIENCE SEEMED TO HAVE INVIGORATED ME.

“WHAT HAPPENED?” I ASKED HIM.

HE SHRUGGED. “HELL IF I KNOW. I THOUGHT YOU COULD USE SOME BACKUP AND I FOUND YOU FLAT ON YOUR BACK ON THE TOP OF THAT CUBE-LIKE STRUCTURE YOU WERE EXPLORING. IT WAS HARD TO CARRY YOU WITHOUT SLIPPING ON THE SURFACE THERE.”

“YEAH, I HAD TROUBLE TOO. HOW LONG HAVE I BEEN HERE IN THE SHIP?”

“A FEW HOURS. YOU WERE KNOCKED OUT COLD. IN FACT, FOR A WHILE WE THOUGHT YOU WERE DEAD. YOUR BRAIN ACTIVITY WAS ERRATIC, AS IF YOU WERE DREAMING, BUT YOUR HEART WASN’T BEATING AND YOU WEREN’T BREATHING. YOU ONLY STARTED TO COME BACK A FEW MINUTES AGO. YOU’RE LUCKY TO BE ALIVE.”

DREAMING? SO ALL THAT WAS JUST A DREAM? IT COULDN’T BE; IT WAS TOO VIVID, TOO LUCID FOR ANY DREAM. I COULDN’T HAVE IMAGINED THE EVIL FIGURE I SAW. NOT TO MENTION THAT I HAD ESSENTIALLY BEEN DEAD. NO DREAM COULD DO THAT TO SOMEONE. DISBELIEF RAN THROUGH ME. IT’S IMPOSSIBLE THAT I COULD STILL HAVE BRAIN FUNCTION AFTER NO HEARTBEAT FOR SO LONG. IT DIDN’T ADD UP. SOMETHING HAD TO BE WRONG. I TRUSTED DEREK, BUT MEDICAL SCANNERS COULD BE WRONG.

“YOU SURE IT WASN’T JUST AN ERROR IN THE SCANNER? I MEAN, I FEEL GREAT.”

“NO, I TOOK YOUR PULSE BY HAND, NOTHING. YOU WERE DEAD.”

“THERE’S SOMETHING MISSING HERE.” MY THOUGHT TRAILED OFF, REPLACED BY A NEW ONE. “WHERE ARE WE NOW?” I’LL HAVE TIME TO PONDER THE WHOLE ‘BEING ALIVE WHILE DEAD’ THING LATER.

“STILL IN ORBIT. WE DIDN’T WANT TO LEAVE WITHOUT YOUR PERMISSION.”

I TILTED MY HEAD TO THE RIGHT AND SAW THROUGH A WINDOW OUT INTO SPACE THE SMALL, GRAY, CRATERED PLANET AND THE BLACK MONOLITHIC CUBE ON WHICH MY BODY HAD APPARENTLY DIED.



“DON’T GO RUNNING OFF YET,” DEREK ADVISED ME.

HE PUT HIS HAND ON MY SHOULDER AS I SAT UP IN MY BED AND BEGAN TO TAKE OFF THE SENSORS THAT WERE MONITORING MY BODY.

“I’M FINE. JUST LET ME GO TO MY ROOM. I NEED SOME TIME TO THINK.” I BRUSHED HIS HAND OFF OF MY SHOULDER.

I PUT MY ROBOTIC HAND TO THE DOOR TO MY ROOM, WHICH WAS IN THE TOP OF THE SHIP NEAR THE BRIDGE, OPENING THE LOCK WITH A WIRELESS CHIP BUILT INTO MY PALM. THE LARGE PIECE OF METAL SLID ASIDE SILENTLY ON ITS MAGNETIC TRACKS. INSIDE, MY ROOM WAS THAT OF A CAPTAIN. IT WAS THE SIZE OF A SMALL HOTEL ROOM, YET IT’S BEEN MY HOME FOR NUMEROUS YEARS NOW. IT WAS COZY, A LITTLE MESSY, AND FULL OF OLD RELICS FROM EARTH. WARM INCANDESCENT LIGHTING (AS OPPOSED TO THE BRIGHT LEDs COMMON NOW) AND WOOD PANELING ON THE WALLS MADE IT AN INVITING PLACE. A TOWER COMPUTER WAS MY PRIZE POSSESSION, AS PERSONAL COMPUTERS ARE RARE AND EVEN THOSE ARE ENTIRELY CONTAINED INSIDE THE FLAT DISPLAY. I WANTED TO FIND A CRT MONITOR, BUT THOSE WERE ANTIQUE BACK ON EARTH AND ONE WOULDN’T HAVE FIT ON MY DESK ANYWAY.

SITTING DOWN AT MY DESK IN AN OLD CHAIR I HAD RECOVERED FROM ONE OF THE ORIGINAL SHIPS THAT ESCAPED FROM EARTH, I PUT MY HEAD IN MY HANDS AND TOOK A BIG SIGH. SHOCK, DISBELIEF AND CONFUSION REIGNED OVER MY MIND. WHAT COULD KEEP SOMEONE’S BRAIN ALIVE WHEN HIS HEART STOPS BEATING? WELL, THERE ARE ARTIFICIAL HEARTS. BUT EVEN THOSE WOULD CREATE BLOOD-FLOW AND THUS A PULSE. NO PULSE, NO CIRCULATION, NO OXYGEN, NO BRAIN. IT’S THAT SIMPLE. I WASN’T A DOCTOR, BUT I DID KNOW MY FAIR SHARE OF ANATOMY FROM THE CLASSES AT THE ACADEMY AND MY OWN EXPERIENCE. THERE IS NO POSSIBLE WAY; IT COULDN’T HAPPEN. YET IT DID, SO THERE MUST BE A WAY. I’M JUST NOT THINKING OF IT. IT SEEMED OUTSIDE THE LAWS OF SCIENCE. WHAT IF IT WAS? MAGIC DOESN’T EXIST; SO IT MUST BE SOME SORT OF SUPER-ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY. HUMANS DON’T HAVE THAT CAPABILITY, SO DID SOME ALIEN RACE KEEP ME ALIVE? WAS IT THE SAME RACE THAT BUILT THE CUBE? AND WHAT ABOUT MY VISION? A HALLUCINATION? THE PRODUCT OF AN OXYGEN DEPRIVED BRAIN? POSSIBLY.

MY MIND WANDERED FROM WHY I SAW TO WHAT I SAW. WHO WAS THAT MAN-CREATURE IN THE VISION? AND WHAT DOES HE HAVE TO DO WITH ME? “A DARK LEGION” IS WHAT THE VOICE SAID. OK, LET’S ASSUME THAT EXISTS. THEN IS HE PART OF THIS ARMY? AND AGAIN, WHY SHOULD I CARE?

“WILL, YOU SHOULD CARE BECAUSE YOU ARE THE ONLY BEING WHO CAN STOP THE ULTIMATE EVIL. YOU ARE THE UNIVERSE’S ONLY HOPE,” REPLIED A SHADOWY DEEP VOICE, THE SAME VOICE I HEARD IN THE CUBE.

TO BE CONTINUED ...



