



RETURNING HOME

A Journey from Nightmare to Apocalyptic Nightmare

We are legion. There was a time when we were lost, forgotten, but that was long ago. Seven hundred years. Now we are coming home.

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It's been seven hundred years, but I still remember. the memory is as clear as yesterday. I once walked the plains of the Earth. You wouldn't think it to look at me today, but it's true. There was a time I strolled the idyllic landscape on only two legs. Appendages made of flesh and blood; not steel, polycarbonate compounds, nucleotide gels, and electrons. Back then I was mortal and couldn't even dream of existing for the greater part of an eon. Now, if you were to look upon me with my old eyes, you would call me monstrous. But to me, what I am... what I have become... is a survivor. Isn't this what mankind is all about. The need and the will to survive whatever the cost?

What I don't know is how it happened or who did it. I only know it did happen. We were ripped away from our homeworld, torn away from Earth. We were brought to the other side of the galaxy to a place well beyond our understanding. A land of frightening difference and terrifying similarities. Red skies and purple grass. Here I gained a new understanding of the plight of early man. Without tools, without the technology, we'd so learned to depend on. Nothing but our wits. Alone in a hostile world, without knowledge, where everything wanted to kill us.

Thousands died just learning what was edible. An equal number went mad, unable to adjust to a world as strange as this. To make things worse, we were hunted. The local animals found us tasty. It was a struggle to survive, to master a new world. To rule in a land not our own.

Those who survived this world learned it was not, as we first suspected, without technology. It was just technology we didn't recognize or understand how to use. Those who made it were long gone, so they couldn't teach us how to use it. Hundreds more died as he taught ourselves. I was there on the Day of Understanding, the Day of The Awakening.

It was in a cave. Dark, damp and dismal. The kind of place which reminded me of a sewer back home. But it was safer than facing the horror rain. It had an odd smell to it, more like a tomb than a sewer. It gave me the creeps as if someone had died here. That smell. It seemed dry, despite the water running down its walls. At first, it seemed natural, but then before we noticed it seemed man-made. The walls smooth, the lines straight. The angles, perfect right angles. As if it had been carved out of the living rock. Or more accurately, poured like concrete. There was a table in the center with the strangest looking thing sitting on it. It looked like a body. Like it had once been alive.

"Damn thing looks like some kind of metallic eel crossed with a crab," I suggested.

My partner was dumbfounded. "It goes back to Hobson's theory, there was another sentient life form on this world before us. Someone made this. The flesh tigers certainly didn't."

"So, if there were sentient beings who once walked this world, where are they now?"

"What do I look like a walking Wikipedia entry to you? How would I know?"

I put the device back down on the table. That's when I saw it move.

We both took a step back. We'd learned everything that moves on this world is dangerous. I shook in terror. The dead don't move.

The air seemed to waver and then she appeared. To this day, I don't know if it was a computer-driven image or if it was real. But it seemed to know English. I mentioned it was female, right? But saying she

was a woman doesn't quite do her justice. She was more than just a woman. She was perfect, she was everything. "You should take that back with you," she said, "It's important."

I shook my head, but she was still there. Standing squarely before me. "Okay, who are you, how did you get in here and what are you talking about?"

She seemed not just to move, but to slink around the room. It was both arousing and disturbing at the same time. She had a vaguely eastern European accent, but later Jacobson swore it was British. "You'll find this device very useful."

"I'm sorry. You still haven't given me your name and... why would you care what happens to us?"

"I have an intimate interest in mankind," she smiled. But it was an unnerving kind of smile. "As for my name, I'm called Lucifer. I'm sure you've heard it before."

Jacobson spoke up. "I thought Lucifer was male?"

"What makes you say that?"

"It's in the bible that way."

She chuckled. "Well, just like an actor, I never read my reviews. And you know how your political opponents are. They never write anything worth reading. None of it's true."

I picked up the device. "What makes you think this is important?"

"It's the ultimate in communications devices. Put it on and not only can you communicate with anyone you wish; but you can hear their thoughts as well. Even the thoughts they don't want you to hear."

I dropped it back down on the table. "It doesn't sound useful to me."

"Well, when you get better at using it, you can place thoughts into people's minds. It can come in handy; I guarantee it."

Don't let anyone fool you. All the stories about this fallen angel being a temptress, they don't know the half of it. I had to fight to keep from drooling, or I might have become dehydrated. She just gave me an edgy smile. "It takes some practice, but you can learn to insert your feelings into other people's heads. It's the ultimate way of making other people think that your idea was theirs in the first place. A sort of sharing of ideologies if you will."

I pushed the device farther away from me on the table. "Yeah, well, humanity has had enough trouble with such things already."

"Suit yourself. It's already too late."

I turned to Jacobson. "Let's get back to base. Central is going to want to know what is going on down here." The air seemed to waver, and she was gone.

Jacobson seemed preoccupied as we walked back to Central. It wasn't until a week later when I saw Jacobson with the device on his head. He and four others. They seemed to move as a unit, work as a unit, operate as if they were one. No matter how hard you worked, Jacobson and his boys always

seemed to do more. What's worse is they never seemed to tire... but then again, they never seemed to be happy or proud of their work either. They didn't seem like they had any emotions at all. Everything was the work... not to mention some sort of secret project they wouldn't tell anyone else about. Some undisclosed goal.

At first, it was just the five of them. Jacobson and his lost boys, we called them. But within a month there were more. Ten, then twenty and then a hundred. All with the same single-minded look on their faces. Showing the same emotions you'd see coming from your average squid.

Mulroney was the first. He'd lost an arm to the flesh tigers. Now he had a new one. A cybernetic arm. The rest of us simply stared in amazement. The technology was nowhere near what the rest of us could have produced. More importantly, it was the first locally produced advanced technology we'd seen since leaving earth. It was years ahead of our stone tools and sticks.

After that came the Big Jump. Now, those of us who were not wearing the device were the minority. Our numbers dwindled. I was one of the last. One night I awoke. Six of them were holding me down. Behind them was Jacobson.

"What in God's name do you think you are doing?"

His voice was a monotone, devoid of inflection and timbre. But it had an energy about it. As if his voice was a storm, a part of nature itself. Thunder and lightning all at once. "She was right, you know," he informed me. He was holding one of the devices in his hand. It was clear he intended to give it to me. "You feel so much better once you're wearing this. No more cares, no more worries, only purpose."

I struggled as the six held me down. "Get out of here. I have no interest in joining your Lost Boys club," I screamed.

"You say that now. Give it a few hours, you'll feel differently, I assure you."

Darkness seemed to close in on me as they loomed down over my once sleeping form. I struggled until the end. It was the last time I was alone. I slept, for how long I have no idea. When I awoke. I no longer thought Jacobson was right... I was sure of it. As sure as I knew the sun would rise. Wearing the device, I no longer needed to sleep. It took care of the regeneration of my brain as I worked. Now I could produce all day and all night. I never again experienced what it was like to feel tired, sick, or unhappy. Nor did I dream. I do miss dreaming.

Sometimes I think I remember what it was like to dream, but I'm not sure. We all talk to each other now in our minds. No one is ever alone. After so many centuries, I can no longer tell which thoughts are mine and which ones came from somewhere else. So many memories, so many images. But we can think. We can solve. What once puzzled me is no longer a mystery. If one of us once understood cybernetics, now we all do. Before long we were creating things on this planet that on earth, no one had even dreamed possible.

Time itself seemed to fade. It was just a construct, a limitation. And we no longer had those. I felt as if the next century was time-lapse photography. We conquered our world and then we conquered others. By then I had four arms and eight legs. If you had known me on Earth, I'd now be impossible to

recognize. The human body is so frail. You can replace an organ here and an organ there, but sooner or later something else will fail. That's the problem with biologics.

Fortunately, the others have figured out a way to transfer everything which makes us who we are into a computer system. I was one of the last to go, but now I am a fully cybernetic system. It's funny how you miss eating though. At least I think I miss eating. Maybe it's one of the others. It's hard to tell.

When we journeyed out among the stars, we encountered others. They didn't understand. Like I hadn't understood at first. They soon learned. It's surprising, the device seems to work on everyone. It doesn't matter what the species is. carbon-based, silicon-based, pure energy, it didn't matter. When you first hear them, they have strange thoughts. Ideas that are so alien, it's perplexing. Violent, brutal, destructive. You can tell they were angry about our use of the device. But these ideas were replaced with our thoughts. Or at least I think we did. It doesn't matter. What does not conform must be eliminated. We marched on. Those who refused were annihilated.

We always learned from them. Even the ones we devastated. But they had to accept the device. Without the device, we couldn't communicate with them effectively. There was only verbal communication. That's just not enough to explain everything. It's so slow and doesn't have the nuances of the message. It's like tapping out Morse Code. They need the device. They must be made to wear them.

I saw Jacobson the other day, or at least what he had become. We have not seen each other for many years. Of course, we've been talking every day for decades, but we haven't met face to face in a long time. "Do you remember the cave?" I asked.

"What cave?"

"The Day of Understanding, the Day of The Awakening. Do you remember Lucifer? She was so beautiful. I still have never seen anything so beautiful. Even with all the things we have seen. Sapphire nebulas, The burning comets, the vaults of Nestos."

If I could have seen Jacobson's face, it would have looked confused. It would have been the expression on his face now. But I could only tell from the manifestation in his voice. "What woman? What are you talking about? The days of dreams are passed. What you remember is nothing but a dream."

"But it happened. I remember. The day in the caves when we found the device."

"You found the device."

"But it was you who put it on. I rejected it."

His voice sounded blank, unemotional. "You were the first person to wear the device. You brought it back to the rest of us. Don't you remember."

Strange how memory works, isn't it? You would think that with all the frail biological parts gone, your memories would exist without all the human flaws. But they seem to persist. The fading memories, even when they are stored electronically. Updated, refurbished, relocated to better storage systems... it doesn't matter. It is not important what we remember, or who does the remembering. We are all one now. The Unity. It is the only thing that matters.

We are but the rain that precedes the flood. From here we roll on. From planet to planet. From solar system to mighty star clusters. Ever mounting, ever widening, until at last our wave engulfs the entire galaxy! I remember someone else saying something like that once. Why can't I remember? What's wrong? I have ... I have an Alsatian. My brain had an Alsatian called Highmers. That sounds right, but wrong at the same time. I don't recall ever owning a dog.

It doesn't matter. All that matters is the goal. We must bring the device back to Earth. Back to Earth so that everyone can enjoy the benefits. Soon we will be returning. Soon we will be home. The distances are small now. A light-year is the same as an inch. I can feel myself approaching home.

I am called Gog and my ship is named Magog. We are legion. There was a time when we were lost, forgotten, but that was long ago. Seven hundred years. Now we are coming home.