

T.A. Roe

the
LORDS
OF SILICA
Technis

The Deceiver has discovered a new way to wage war on humanity
But, the followers of The Way will not be denied their freedom!

THE LORDS
OF SILICA
TECHNIS

**More Information about
The Lords of Silica
can be found at**

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The Lords of Silica

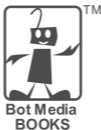
Technis

ELECTRONIC EDITION



By

T . A . R O E



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LOS-T-2007

**First American
Electronic Edition
December 2007**

To Robin--for two decades
of Faith, Hope, and Love,
and to the three princesses,
Iliea, Noel, and Olivia

**THIS EDITION HAS BEEN EDITED FOR BETTER
PRESENTATION ON ELECTRONIC READING
DEVICES AND CONFORMS TO THE FORMAT
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SONY READER,
PROVIDED BY SONY ELECTRONICS, INC.**

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**THE LORDS
OF SILICA**

TECHNIS

00001 ONE

COMBAT 3X9ER1ENC3

It was dark and Tim's heartbeat grew louder in his ears as the canopy locked into place and the air filtration system whined up to full speed. Red numbers and technical readouts scrolled across his faceplate as the mission objectives loaded.

"Open blast shield."

The computer beeped in response, and light splayed through tiny cracks causing him to squint. The metal shield that protected the glass cockpit slid into recesses surrounding his view.

"I can't believe I'm here," Tim mumbled under his breath.

With two years of combat experience as an independent mercenary--he anticipated rapid deployment, but being chosen by Ben Clan--that was an honor beyond his wildest imaginings. At twenty, he was the youngest person in the unit by a few years--something his squad-mates never failed to mention.

"Ok Tim, Don't screw up," again to himself.

"Please ensure your restraints are in place," the gentle female voice suggested from his console. It was the computer--she sounded hot. Tim grinned as he tightened his harness and turned on the perimeter displays.

All around him was the rest of his unit; battlepods in various configurations dotted the bay.

Claxons blared--warning lights flashed--and the floor noisily opened around each of the fifty pods. The detached metal gangway plates then folded themselves neatly on end revealing the hydraulic lift arm holding Tim's cockpit. It dropped quickly into the belly of the transport, Tim swallowed hard to keep down his lunch. Finally, he felt bolts locking his cockpit into a massive tank bristling with antennae, sensors, and weaponry.

"Listen Up!" It was Ben--the unit commander. "When we arrive at the drop point, I want Decker and Johnson to stay behind with the command center--you're my backup. The rest of you branch out into attack formation Bravo. Once the transport is clear, activate your first waypoint and stay alive as long as you can."

There was tension in Ben's voice. It quivered nervously. Fear and uncertainty slowly crept into Tim's mind--Something wasn't right.

After a short pause Ben continued, "You are all-- Here it comes..."

"-expendable... as we approach our drop point, you have the next few minutes to make peace with that. Our objective is to give air support a shot at their base. I do not expect many of us to make it out... do your job--maybe you will."

"If your destiny is to die in this battle, you make sure they remember you did not go gently into that good night! I want them to pay for the blood they spill this day--THEY MUST NEVER FORGET THAT WE ARE BEN CLAN!

The sound of that name drove the fear from Tim's mind. He could feel his confidence returning as he heard that very same confidence steady the voice of his commander.

Whatever you do--get their attention, everything rides on that air assault. If they ignore you--give'em a swift kick in the butt--remind them that you're there."

Tim's tank shuddered violently as the transport vessel fired its main thrusters for lift off.

Even with the deep-set slotted windows severely limiting his view, Tim could see all the way to the horizon on both sides of the launch bay, he craned his neck for a better view. A massive ringed planet hovered menacingly close to this moon and beside that, he could see one of the system's two suns setting beneath a blazing reddish-purple sky.

The transport rose and fell as it passed over small mountains and ridges. "Oh- I wish I'd skipped lunch."

Tim heard groaning metal stressing under the moons gravity, and a loud whining sound as the engines vectored toward the drop point.

Yellow lights spun rapidly and a horn blasted a warning of the approaching drop zone. A loud clanging from above grabbed Tim's attention--large tree-sized metal tentacles dropped from the ceiling over every tank and support vehicle in the bay. He winced as the one above him fell upon his cockpit locking its massive grapple into the sides of his tank with a loud thump and whirl of bolts securing his vehicle.

Suddenly the floor beneath him cracked open, and the liberated air of the launch bay rushed violently downward toward the rapidly passing

craggy surface below--Tim's tank bounced on its grapple as the floor fell away.

Noticing the warning light on his console, he charged his ground effect repulsors.

"Prepare for drop--" Ben said. "Brace for impact!"

Tim watched the massive grapple holding his tank nervously. His heartbeat accelerated--and in spite of the cold blast from the nearby vents--beads of perspiration formed on his brow.

A loud metallic clang near the front of the bay told him that the first row of vehicles had dropped. Then one by one--row by row, they released far ahead, dropping out of sight. Three rows to go. WHIRRRR, came the now audible sound of the bolts as safety mechanisms opened--CLANG--they fell away. Two rows- WHIRRRR, CLANG, A loud ringing as the tentacles banged against each other above, when they released their cargo. One row, WHIRRRR--CLANG! Tim swallowed hard. Now his--WHIRRRR (the cacophony of sound around him was deafening now), his body tensed, CLANG--they opened.

He clutched at the grips around his cockpit, feeling weightless for the three-second drop to the surface below. Clutching at hand holds as the ground approached, the repulsors kicked in, rapidly

slowing his descent--the sound and gentle vibration of their comforting embrace flooded his mind with relief.

After a couple of small bounces, Tim caught his breath and jammed the controls forward to get out of the way of the tank falling just behind him.

The twin suns and brightly lit planet on the horizon captivated him, he felt so small beneath the menacing gaze of that ringed giant, "No time to enjoy the view." Jamming the first waypoint on his navigation screen caused the tank to accelerate forward. The ground was pockmarked with craters and gashes--ravages from constant battle--he had to override the computer several times to avoid diving into one.

He could see a squad-mate moving past him on the right then; -BOOM- A massive blast erupted beneath the tank. A Skuttlemine!

"Thanks for the heads up," he turned on his surface scanners and directed more power to the forward-lower shields just in case they missed one. Then he messaged Ben concerning the incident.

"I wonder if there are survivors," he thought. Slowing, he scanned the wreckage carefully. Suddenly two small missiles screamed past--he wasn't their target. The disabled machine erupted

violently, the wash of heat and debris splashed over his shields glowing and sparking dramatically--there was nothing left. He accelerated toward the waypoint now as quickly as his tank would move.

"Tim! A Seeker is scanning you," said Ben. "It picked up your shadow when that tank exploded. Recon didn't mention Seekers. You should dig in--your shields won't be able to take a hit like that!"

"A brilliant deduction," Tim thought as he cycled through the available targets. He found the incoming missile--It was powerful. The computer set its damage potential at ten thousand pounds of high explosive force. Even with his shields at double front, Tim could only handle a direct hit of four at best. Thanks to Ben's recon, the missile had an ETA of 45 seconds.

Stopping his tank, Tim fired the router guns. The cockpit began to shake violently as a crater formed beneath him. Slowly his computer increased the frequency of its beep, tracking the incoming missile.

Tim scrunched down in his seat trying unsuccessfully to hurry the decent while watching the ground rise to cover his canopy. Sweat was streaming down his face now, as the sound of

beeps became more frequent. "Come on baby, move it!"

"Warning-" came a gentle female voice. "Incoming missile- ETA 15 seconds." Then it counted down. "Impact in nine--eight--seven..."

"GREAT," Tim glowered at the speaker thanking Ben silently for his advance warning. "Computer--remind me to replace you when I get out of this mess!"

"Acknowledged-" said the computer calmly.

Soil and rock covered his windows, but just for safety's sake, he continued to burrow until the last possible second. "Now the shields!"

"Warning--energy reserves below minimum required to activate shields." The router guns had completely drained his energy supply.

ARRRGH! His mind screamed as the computer's beeping became a steady hum, then, the hum was drowned out by the terrifying sound of the missile as it approached. "The eject button-" he frantically searched the cockpit--"Where is it?"--fear gripped his mind. "WHERE'S THE EJECT BUTTON?"

...

It wasn't easy being the little sister of a superstar--that's the way Lisa felt. At 17--she didn't *have* to work, but she enjoyed the game so much she couldn't help herself. This was more fun to her than hanging out at the mall--and besides, you could only own so many pair of shoes. Her college gave credit for this job and what a better way to earn it than playing games. As a Pod Tech, she helped players board and prep their battle pods for combat missions. She really liked helping people, and it gave her a chance to do her other job--the mission she was *called* to do.

She saw Tim when he arrived. He was somewhat lanky, had brown locks of hair dangling against his pale forehead, (he obviously didn't get out much). He had big blue eyes above freckled cheeks--kinda cute. Hoping to get a chance to meet him, she watched his tank closely at her monitoring station, flinching as the missile struck. Activating the floor panels around his pod, she waited for them to lock into place then walked over to help him out.

It was dark again--suddenly light tore through a small crack and then flooded the cockpit, hurting Tim's eyes. He unbuckled his harness and began

crawling out of the seat--his foot caught on a strap and he struggled and tugged to break free.

"That's one of the shortest combat runs I've ever seen."

Tim twisted around awkwardly to see the face of Pod-Tech Lisa staring at him from beside the open canopy. She pulled her red locks off her forehead and grinned, batting her big brown eyes at him.

"Well, it was my first real missio...AAAYYYY!" Tim hadn't quite untangled his foot--he fell backwards out of the pod. Shaking his head, he tried to focus on Lisa as he swung lazily back and forth, his leg--from knee to foot--still securely held inside the cockpit.

Lisa bent over to get closer to his face, "Wow! That was impressive--Do you always exit battle pods that way?"

Tim grunted as he tried to reach the edge of the canopy. "Only- when I'm trying- to impress a pretty girl."

"Uh-huh," Lisa blushed slightly and pressed the release on his harness. He tumbled down the last six inches to the metal gangway below. Lisa bit her lip. "Sorry! Are you ok?"

"Yeah--my helmet broke the fall." Tim moved his helmet around to massage the scalp beneath. "What's your name?"

"Pod-Tech Lisa, at your service Tim." She put out her hand to help him up. Then, nudging him toward the launch bay exit, "Why don't you get changed and we'll go to the observation deck--We can watch the rest of the battle from there."

Tim took a quick diversion through the locker room and met Lisa on the other side. As they were walking toward the main elevators he said, "I don't know what happened in there. I'm usually better at this game."

"Don't let it bother you--everyone who tries that burrow defense gets fried the first time." She patted Tim on the shoulder, "You know--you were supposed to get some basic orientation before you got in the pods. Most people don't realize how different it is from the Hypernet version. The intensity of the simulation really overwhelms you."

"Sure--it's obvious now!" he rolled his eyes and grinned sheepishly.

Lisa giggled.

Tim smiled at the sound, Wow--My stomach is acting weird today. The elevator doors hissed open startling him.

"Try to focus Tim." She pulled him inside.

"You have entered the observation tower transport lift," it was that computer again.

Tim shuddered, "The last time I heard that voice my tank exploded."

It continued, "Please hold the handrails tightly--proceeding to the observation deck."

The elevator was a fantastic part of the illusion. While traveling upward, they passed through the ceiling twenty meters above the main concourse into temporary darkness.

Tim gasped, like the simulators in the launch bay; the windows around them presented a view of the virtual world beyond. As they rose into the air a mere fifty meters, the simulation gave them the impression they were traveling more than a mile above the alien landscape, which stretched to the horizon on all sides.

There was the same fantastic view of a ringed planet and twin suns filling the sky as they careened toward the observation deck. Tim was grateful for this opportunity to enjoy the view. The fog of war had so clouded his mind during the battle, it was impossible to truly appreciate it.

A formation of air-support ships buzzed the elevator on their way to the battlefield--Tim jumped

noticeably as they blasted past causing the elevator to shudder. Several people around him snickered.

"Whoa!" He grabbed the handrail again, with both hands this time, "You could have warned me." He scanned the windows nervously.

Lisa winked at him, "Didn't want to spoil the surprise."

The doors slid open and he followed her through the crowded observation deck to a railing, which encircled the entire room. Tim looked around--his eyes boggled at the technology. Beyond the windows lay the battlefield in all directions. Strategically positioned around the room were special binoculars, which gave you a close-up view of the action while it happened in the game.

Tim accessed the control panel near him to search for his team, "They're west of here."

Scanning the horizon with binoculars, they found Ben leading a small assault team against the enemies' base. It was smoldering from the recent air assault, but they could tell that it hadn't been too terribly damaged by the attack. Statistics scrolled past giving the body count so far--his team was nearly wiped out, and Bill's Brigade wasn't doing

much better. "I think the distraction worked," said Tim.

"So you understand the strategy then?" Lisa asked. "I'm afraid it's a bit obvious--especially considering Ben tried this just a week ago. It's not like him to be so banal. It's a mistake to use a ploy like that against such an able opponent--I'm afraid he's been snookered.

"Why? Everyone's wiped out." Tim was incredulous. "Look at the other team's armor points... They're toast!"

Lisa grinned at him, "You want to bet?" She took out a security badge and held it over the analysis console waiting for his answer.

Tim hesitated a moment, "Umm--sure--I guess... bet what?"

"Just a date Time," placing her badge in the slot and moving her body between them, she typed in her password. "We could go out tonight... If you win you get to choose the place and if I win--I choose."

Tim stared, but said nothing. His gaze dropped to the curve of her behind (an involuntary response).

She turned her head to face him--flipping her hair back across her shoulder, "Waiting Tim."

He quickly jerked his eyes back to her face. He would bungee jump off this tower if she asked him to--so--by comparison, her request seemed pretty easy, "I'd love too!" He looked down, mentally calculating the contents of his wallet (maybe McDonalds).

"Look Tim," she pressed a button, and a holographic display appeared in front of the observation window. It showed the technical readouts for all of the remaining units on the field.

Everything was standard accept, "What are they doing with their leeches? They're not even charged! I would have used them first thing to get as much fuel as possible."

Lisa shook her head, "And you probably would have lost them in the first attack... What works at home with newbies may not get the same results in the simulator Tim."

Tim wasn't dissuaded, "Look! They are almost completely out of energy."

Lisa reached into the hologram and pressed a blinking yellow 'MOD' icon near the leeches. The leeches had been modified to absorb anything that hit the shield.

Tim was befuddled;"I've never seen that before."

...

Back on the battlefield--Ben mentally assessed his situation--All that's left is my tank and two others. That should be enough, "Decker, Johnson, let's take down that shield and finish this!"

Cautiously at first, they unleashed a short barrage of plasma death on the shield, "I guess air support took out the watch dogs--Everyone left, must be inside."

They continued the attack, this time switching their own defensive fields to minimum, allowing the guns to take all the energy necessary to achieve their goal. Slowly the base shield's bright blue shimmer began to fade.

Ben charged up his main weapon, his own shields began to drop rapidly as he forced all remaining power into the 'coup de grâce'. "In a moment, shields won't matter."

Tim and Lisa watched the final attack through their binoculars--Ben fired--The shield instantly went to twice its normal power--reflecting Ben's attack and all of the other absorbed energy outward in a wave of destruction--all three tanks

disintegrated, engulfed in a massive fireball. Checkmate!

A loud cheer erupted throughout the observation deck, everyone high-fived his or her neighbor and the crowd chattered excitedly while moving toward the lifts.

The computer said, "The contest has ended--Bill's Brigade has defeated Ben Clan. All teams proceed to conference room 'A' for a special message from Benjamin Roy. Press passes are available at the front desk."

Looking around, Tim tried to find a way through the crowd. He stopped on Lisa, her eyes had a glazed look about them, "What's up Lisa?"

"Umm--nothing," a sideways smile appeared. "I'm just wondering about the *special message*--let's go! We won't get a seat unless we hurry." She grabbed his hand and pulled him along, elbowing their way onto the first wave of elevators going down.

00010 TWO

N3W 9ER5P3CT1V3

Minutes later, Tim and Lisa couldn't believe how packed the conference room was. They pushed their way to a good vantage point with some difficulty. This was the largest meeting room in the building, easily capable of seating 500--today that wasn't nearly enough. Every nook and cranny was filled by a mass of observers jockeying for a better view.

Beyond this room, all the screens in the entire complex presented the same view to the other 14,000 gamers huddled in anticipation throughout the facility. This event was attracting a lot of attention, being simulcast to several major television networks as well.

Benjamin Roy stood near the back of the stage, eyeing the crowd with trepidation. He walked methodically to the podium--The room hushed. His stats displayed on the huge screen covering most

of the wall behind him. The computer read aloud the results of the last match.

He placed his hands on the top of the podium, a large metal block of brushed steel about one meter across. His Clan's logo, A 'B|C' with a sword slicing up the center, spun slowly on the screen inset in the front.

Gathering his composure--he looked at his opponent, Bill, sitting on the front row--He managed a slight smile. Looking around the room at the other expectant faces, he saw Lisa, his sister, grinning at him. He smiled back at her and winked, nodding yes to her unasked question. "That was good."

Ben smiled at Bill again, who bowed his head magnanimously. "You know the drill... I have some good news and some... bad news. I know we'll get past this, and I think Bill here, has demonstrated that the game has grown beyond me and my ego."

He paused, waiting for the laughter to subside. "We have done it! The arena is finished, and we've demonstrated that it is not only a viable form of entertainment, but it is so desirable that 23 other countries have purchased franchise rights to build their own arena."

The room erupted in enthusiastic cheers and applause.

"...All of the major sports channels have picked us up and they broadcast live one-hour games six times a day, nationwide. Variety magazine reported that our pay-per-view ratings are in the top five revenue generators this month. The tournament has garnered high praise from every one of our sponsors; the in-game product placement has proven itself a much-desired commodity. Moreover, we've proved my more cynical fellow gamers wrong," he winked at his teammates. "Since all ad-placement is context sensitive, it never breaks the player's suspension of disbelief and we've somehow managed to restart the cola wars."

Once again, Ben had to wait for the applause to die down. "We have done something rare my friends, we have created a new market so huge--it has taken the world by storm."

"...That's the good news." A nervous laughter filled the room, "The one persistent question reporters and talk show hosts have been asking me the most is, 'How do you handle this kind of fame at such a young age?' The short answer is I don't. Actually--I suck at it. My personal life is a mess, and I'm not sure if I can pull out of the self

destructive nose dive I'm in," he choked and cleared his throat.

The murmuring continued.

"My business partner and long time friend, Daniel Chow, isn't here tonight because he is working on our new project."

"...No, I can't say what it is--my father talked us into it, and you know he is a lead engineer for NASA, so you can take that in any direction you want, but you won't get the details out of me." He took a drink of water to clear his throat.

"Today's game was an example I think, of what's to come for Ben Clan, unless something dramatic is done." He motioned someone up from the front row, "This... is Todd Evans. As you know, he is my second in command. I've been in negotiation with the board of Ben Clan Incorporated, and in spite of their very enthusiastic desire to keep me on board... I've decided to step down... I'm going to take a break."

The room erupted with noise, flashes of camera light, and some shouted questions from reporters.

Shaking his head, one hand on Todd's shoulder, Ben waved them down. "Todd... Hold on please... Todd has agreed to take my position as Team Leader of Ben Clan. I must turn my life around or I

may end up like so many other tales of fame and misfortune."

Doubt and cynicism poured from nearly every face in the crowd. "It's the only way this game will go to the next level folks--The only way forward from here."

Todd's eyes were wide, he swallowed hard and his eyes darted nervously from Ben to the crowd. It all looked good on paper, but Ben and Daniel gave birth to this. The fear of failure haunted his thoughts.

Ben lowered his voice, "You have the skills Todd, I know you will succeed--Don't be afraid."

Ben forced back the tears welling up, "I want to thank my fans and the stockholders for their support and generosity--It's been an honor to play with such an outstanding group of friends. You're the best. Many of you think it's silly to believe that a game can change the world--make it better... But, LOOK AROUND. Since the dawn of arena competition in the days of the Roman Empire, has there ever been a change like this? Has there ever been a shift of this magnitude, in the way people are entertained?"

"If any game can do that impossible thing, this one can. Watch--as we change the world." He

patted Todd on the shoulder and pulled him in front of the microphone, stepping away. Turning, he quickly exited through some doors behind the stage.

Todd watched his friend leave, and with no small amount of trepidation he said, "I'll... be glad to take your questions now." Shouts arose from throughout the room as team leaders and reporters started barking their questions. He gulped and gripped the podium tightly. "God help me."

...

Tim was stunned as he stared at the man now standing behind the podium. He was dazed at this turn of events and turned to face Lisa expecting a similar look of disbelief on her face, tears were streaming down her cheeks, "What's wrong?"

"I'm ok Tim." She smiled weakly. "You see, Ben is my brother."

"Really! Your brother?"

"Yes and... I've got to go." She slipped a card into his hand and waved goodbye. "Call me around 6:30 tonight. I'll tell you where to meet me."

"You're kidding. Are you sure you can still go out?"

She smiled weakly again and nodded, "I'm sure--it'll be ok--It's a good thing." She vanished into the crowd.

Noticing he only had an hour to get ready; Tim rushed for the main exit. The events of the past few minutes played back through his mind, "This is huge."

...

Ben walked down the long hallway toward arena parking. His slow methodic footsteps reverberated back at him from the metallic walls. Even though a great weight had lifted from his spirit, it was hard to breath.

Lisa charged through the doors behind him. "Big brother!"

He pretended not to notice. She got in front of him, blocking his movement, "I can't believe it! You actually quit." She looked up at him, her eyes still filled with tears. "That's awesome." She grabbed his neck almost knocking him over and kissed him on the cheek.

Ben smiled weakly and pulling her off his neck. He fell against the wall. Nausea invaded his senses and he wiped the sweat from his forehead gripping his hair in clenched fists. He slowly slid to a seated position on the floor.

Lisa plopped down beside him.

After a few deep breaths he said, "It seemed like the right thing to do you know--with everything that's happened."

"Yeah, I figured you would quit, in a month, or a year, but... well, you're just full of surprises these days." She wiped her cheeks, "So what's next?"

"I don't know--for the first time in my life, I feel like I'm just making this up as I go. Last night, at Victory--I thought I was gonna explode if I didn't go forward for prayer--it felt like I didn't even have control over my actions. I've never felt this way about religion... it's weird."

"It's not religion," she rolled her eyes. "How many times have I told you that? It's a personal relationship with God."

"Well, you may have told me about that before, but I was probably doing what I always did when you talked. I was ig-nor-ing you." He grinned.

She punched him in the arm.

"Ouch! That wasn't very Christian sis." He rubbed his arm and forced himself to a standing position, pulling her up as well, "Actually, I *do* know what I'm gonna do next. I'm going to mom and dad's--I've got some explaining to do... I've been such a jerk!"

"Yeah."

Ben shook his head at her, mouth open, a feigned look of hurt on his face.

She winked at him, "Dad may have a stroke... Or at least call Hell to check the weather report."

"Yeah, it will be a shock..." He gave her a hug, "I'll see you there right?"

"Much later--I have a date."

"Oh? ...with who?"

"I met a guy in the launch bay today--he's a game nut, you'd like him." The doors behind them banged open. They glanced back and noticed some of the other teammates and friends walking toward them. "He lost a bet, and now--I get to set the date."

"So what was the bet?"

As their friends passed, Lisa waved--she looked away, hoping he'd moved past the question.

He furrowed his brow at her and tilted his head, "Now I'm suspicious."

"Okay! I bet him that you would lose."

His eyes were wide, mouth agape, "You bet against me--your only brother."

She shrugged.

"That really hurts sis."

"Hey, all's fair in love and war, and this is definitely war," She grinned. "I'm gonna make a move on him."

Ben raised an eyebrow at her.

"NO- not that- I'm taking him to the rock concert at church dufus. I want to see if I can get him saved." She smiled at him, "Think of it as your first effort to enlarge the kingdom brother," Lisa continued mockingly in a deep announcer voice, "Benjamin Roy made a tremendous sacrifice today, leading his team of arena warriors to their destruction in a selfless act of defiance to the corporation. A new name may be added to The Book of Life, news at eleven!"

"Alright, alright, cut it out-" Ben put his hand over her mouth, "What's a guy gotta do to shut you up?"

"Hey! Let the lady speak." It was Todd, the new Clan Leader. He forced himself between the combatants. "You got a lot of guts man." He squeezed them both in a bear hug. Then, stepping away--he glanced back and forth at them--a

puzzled look on his face, "Is he crazy? There is no--freakin'--way I could have walked away from that contract. You were set for life dude!"

"Yeah... I know," Ben said. "Don't rub it in."

"You'll still play I hope?" Todd beamed.

"Wouldn't miss it--gotta keep you humble bro." Ben stuck out his fist. "You're the right man for the job though."

Todd bumped knuckles with him then shook his hand. "Thanks--I owe you big-time." They were almost to the exit now and everyone had left but the three. Todd paused before opening the door. "Why don't we get some coffee or something? I'm buying--just got a *huge* raise."

"Can't," said Ben. "I've got to talk to dad about what happened here today."

"That ought to make him happy," said Lisa.

"No doubt," Todd agreed. "I'll catch you two later." He waived and walked toward his car. "Good luck with your dad!"

Lisa grabbed Ben's neck before he could get away and gave him another big hug. "You did good brother--God's got some serious stuff for you. I can just feel it!" She kissed his cheek again and ran back toward the doors. "Gotta finish my shift... later!"

"Yeah--that's right. Abandon me." He smiled at her back as she left. Approaching his car, Ben felt a lot better, "She is really good at that."

...

The bus Tim was on arrived at his street. He signaled the driver to exit, then slow jogged to his house as quickly as the oppressive Florida heat would allow. As he approached, the latch turned green and the door opened--he was greeted by an icy blast from the overzealous air conditioner, and his cocker spaniel, Lucky.

With great enthusiasm for such a little guy--Lucky tried to knock him over. Wrestling the fuzzy white clump of fluff out of the way, Tim headed for the kitchen.

Moments later, he watched the seconds count down as the hybrid-cooker monitored and modified the air, heat, and moisture of the frozen hamburger--creating a perfectly cooked sandwich.

"You aren't gonna believe the girl I met today Luck," the dog stared up at him, his soft chin planted firmly on his knee. "She has the most amazing eyes," Tim bent down close to look him in

the face--Lucky held his head perfectly still, only his eyes moved--darting back and forth to track Tim's every motion.

Tim grabbed his friend's head between his hands, using his thumbs to lift some of the bushy brow hair away from his eyes, "Her eyes are a lot prettier than yours buddy."

Lucky stared back for a moment--motionless, then WHAM, he caught Tim right across the nose, leaving a huge slimy trail from his lips to his eyebrows.

"YUCK--cut that out!" Tim shook Lucky's head and bonked their foreheads together. The beeper went off and as he stood, he nudged the dog off his knee. "Your breath is nasty boy--what have you been eating?"

Tim wiped his face with his shirt, and tossed part of the sandwich into the waiting jaws of his friend. He glanced at his watch. Only minutes left before the call--he ran upstairs to get ready.

...

Later, at the arena garage, Lisa had finished her shift and was walking toward her car when her cell rang. "Hello Tim," looking at the caller ID.

He was lost in the sound of her voice for a moment. "Uh... Hi Lisa. So where do we meet?"

Lisa said, "Do you know where the Victory Center is?"

There was a pause, "You mean the church?"

"Yes-" she waited as it sank in. "Is there a problem Tim?"

"Umm, no- it's just- a bit of a surprise you know-- not what I expected. I don't think I'm dressed for church," He was flustered.

"Don't worry about it Tim--they're casual there." Silence on the other end, "You lost the bet Tim--but I was being sneaky so you can pick the place next time ok?"

"Cool... so when do I meet you there?"

"In twenty minutes."

"Oh-" Tim searched his pockets. "I've just gotta check the bus schedule."

Lisa giggled. Her car chirped at her approach, the alarm deactivated and the door opened slightly, "Why don't I give you a ride Tim."

"Okay, that'll work." He was relieved. "What are you driving?"

Tossing her gym bag into the back seat Lisa answered, "A red Mustang GT Convertible with white racing stripes." She slid into the red leather upholstery.

"Really... that Pod Tech job must pay well."

Lisa inhaled the new car smell. "Not really--I've got connections you know."

A few minutes later, she arrived at Tim's house. Lisa gripped the steering wheel and smiled cutely at him while his eyes boggled.

"*That's* your car?"

"Nice isn't it?" She sighed and waved him in. "You should buckle up."

Tim grabbed onto the door to keep from tumbling into her as she sped out of the subdivision. He took her advice--reaching for a seatbelt.

00011 THREE

T3CHN1CAL D1FF1CULT1E5

Daniel was Ben's best friend since third grade. In that time, they had built a small empire in the game industry and turned the *entertainment* industry on its ear. Daniel was the programmer side of the equation and Ben was the business/creative side.

The NASA project was looming over them--the first deadline approaching fast. In the six months since they began--much progress had been made. A full prototype was constructed in their small research facility, and only one persistent problem stood between them and a successful milestone. This thorn in their flesh had created much stress, not only in their own friendship, but with their families as well.

He looked around the popular restaurant, searching for the face of his college professor. He saw him talking to a waitress.

Professor Phillip Johnson (a Doctor of several specialties), was known as an entrepreneur first and a scientist second. He had recently developed a mass memory system, Crystalline Memory Chips (CMCs), beyond anything the world had ever seen. For the first time, it was actually feasible to store the memories of a lifetime on one device. Thousands of hours of high-def video could fit on a chip the size of a sugar cube. This was the missing piece of the puzzle--the thing that made the cryonics system feasible, and their only chance to finish what they'd started on time. -Under budget? Now that was another thing altogether.

Daniel waved as he approached Phillip's table. "Danny my boy-" he stood a little to shake his hand. "Good to see you."

"You too sir," noticing the disapproval on the professor's face. "I mean Phil."

"That's better," Phil smiled.

They ordered, and while waiting for the food, Phil asked, "So what's this big experiment you're working on?"

"I can't give too many details of course. But, Ben and I have been working through the negative effects of cryonic sleep."

"Who hasn't?" Phil smiled again, "I can't tell you how many nights I've lain awake in bed, staring at the ceiling--wracking my brain for hours over that very thing."

Daniel raised an inquisitive eyebrow at the presumed sarcasm.

"Well, it's like this professor... we have a deadline approaching, and- I was wondering if there is any way you could help me with a little problem we've run into."

"I know exactly what your problem is Danny my boy. It has plagued the science of cryonics since its inception by Karl Werner in sixty-five. Cryonics isn't *really* a science--no one has ever been able to fully reverse it in a higher life form--Too much tissue damage."

Daniel, grinned at him, "You really have been thinking about this."

"I wouldn't lead you astray."

Daniel continued, "We are experimenting with some techniques--they've yielded solutions to the tissue damage problem, some medical engineers at NASA have already built a prototype of the chamber... still- um- well... there are other issues."

"I don't want you to get in trouble, so let me make this easier for you Danny. You don't have to

say a word, just listen. The insurmountable problems caused by freezing the human brain are too risky; therefore, you intend to keep the brain awake. BUT! With awareness comes madness, especially when the sleeping brain is incapable of dreaming, a side effect of the cryo-protectant used to bathe the cells prior to freezing." He watched Ben's reaction--He was sweating. "You need to feed images to the sleeping brain. You need to keep it busy. That's the only way you can succeed, and *that* is why you've come to me."

Phil paused for dramatic effect, taking a thoughtful drink before continuing, "You have decided to keep the brain awake, and you need my CMCs to store memories, sights, sounds, and feelings for the journey so that mister and miss's astronaut don't go wacko during the trip."

Daniel smiled weakly as he took a couple of long drinks.

"Your silence is deafening Danny my boy."

Daniel sighed, "Let's say there's a certain probability that you're right. What then?"

"A group of well-funded entrepreneurs approached me two years ago Danny. We have since created a new research facility in south-west Florida. You should see it--Cost a fortune!"

“So that’s how you made such progress on your chip technology?”

“It didn’t hurt... You need something that I have-- and I am willing to let you borrow it, if you will sign with my company. I need a ten-year contract--that should be enough time to establish my destiny.”

“It’s NASA Phil,” Daniel shook his head. “They don’t borrow technology, they buy it.”

“Well then--Perhaps we are at an impasse.”

Daniel’s curiosity had been piqued, “What are you doing at this facility?”

“Oh, this and that- heh-” Phil leaned close, “I am well on my way to taking over the world. You better hop aboard Danny--The train’s about to leave the station.”

They laughed.

Daniel took a drink and examined the face of his old professor. He wasn’t sure that last statement was in fact a joke. “Just how do you intend to do that?”

“I could tell you, if you signed.”

“I’m already under a contract.”

Phil grinned, “Maybe there’s a way out of that.”

“So why do you need me to help you with your plan?”

Phil said, "It's not complicated. You have something I need--the missing piece. You could say we have each other's missing piece."

Their food arrived and they spent a few moments preparing to eat. Then Phil cut a piece of his steak off and held it up to the light. He stared at it then smacked his lips noisily. "It's amazing!"

"What?"

"What this steak does to me... if you could write a program that would help me feel the way I do when I eat a filet mignon, then we might have something." He winked at him before savoring a bite.

"Well, I can--but so can lots of other coders... right? There must be tons of programmers that can do what you need Phillip. You must have access to the best of the best."

"I *have* the best of the best--well, most of them anyway. There is no one else Danny. I have hired thousands of people for my new company, and not one of them has what you have. Your talent is truly unique in the world. Why do you think you and Benjamin have had such success with that game of yours? Lots of people have created simulations like that. You managed to do something they could not."

Daniel pondered that, but couldn't put his finger on it. "I don't know what you mean. It's a popular game, that's all."

"How naive you are for such a genius--You have programmed emotion into the simulation, captured the essence of human dreams, and packaged it into some sort of shoot'em-up adventure. People will pay anything to live in their dreams Danny my boy. They will sell their car... mortgage their house... even- kill for that chance. Like so many intrepid inventors before you, you have failed to see the forest for the trees. You're too close Danny--Too close to what you've done to truly appreciate its potential."

Phillip ate a few more bites before continuing, "I have the memory system that you need, and you have a unique ability to create artificial realities so fantastic, no one can discern them from reality. That's what I want from you--help me make dreams more real than reality. Where we are going, life *is* a dream."

"I'm not sure what you expect me to do. Ben and I have been in the game business for ten years. We're tired of games (never thought I'd say that). The reason we got involved in this NASA project was to redirect our destiny toward more useful

goals." Shaking his head, "I'm under a contract with the federal government and I'm pretty sure they won't let me just- walk away--this whole scenario is pointless don't you think?"

"You are supposed to meet with a government committee next week, right?"

Daniel coughed- washed down the poorly chewed bite then said, "Yes--that's right. But... how did you know that?"

Phil ignored the question, "I have a better idea. Why don't you blow off that meeting and meet with my people instead."

"What people would that be?"

Phillip leaned back a little in his seat. "Just some people who could make all of our dreams come true--heh--quite literally I might add."

"Who?"

Phil whispered, "I could tell you but... then I'd have to kill you." He grinned, and leaned back in his chair.

They both broke into spontaneous laughter and Daniel once again searched Phil's face without conclusive evidence 'that he was joking' presenting itself.

In spite of Daniel's discomfort, the rest of the meeting went well. They continued to discuss the

NASA project well into the evening. Daniel did his best to guard the details of his project, but was continuously dumbstruck by the depth of the professor's knowledge.

By midnight, his brain was shutting down. So Daniel excused himself and left the restaurant.

00100 F O U R

A T 1 M 3 T O H 3 A L

Ben arrived at his parent's house shortly after leaving the arena. Trouble between him and his father had persisted for the last few months. It eased a bit when he decided to work on the cryonics project--though that was just a temporary fix really. He had to make some changes to his lifestyle if he truly wanted to heal the relationships he had broken.

After his experience at church the night before, his mind had gone ballistic, redundantly playing back everything offensive he had ever said to his parents and friends. His language had grown very crude since he found success; he was always interjecting unnecessary profanity. He was disrespectful to his parents, and his attitude toward the opposite sex had gotten pretty bad too.

Though most people thought he was charming, when he looked himself in the mirror, it all boiled

down to blatant contempt for everyone else. He had never really stopped putting himself first, in everything that he did, and the really scary thing was, until God entered his life, he had never thought of himself as anything but wonderful.

His parents seemed especially irritated with his relationships. He thought they didn't approve of the women he dated. It turns out he was the thorn in their flesh. He had forgotten what they taught him--had turned his back on the godly way they brought him up.

As he pulled into their drive, an old memory popped into the back of his mind, Mary Reese, and Justin Roy were high school sweethearts. They got married in college, and they'd been together every since. In this age of fast food, fast weddings, and fast divorces, he puzzled over that concept, for better or worse, until death do we part--Does that still happen?

The door unlatched at his approach and he nudged it open. He followed the sound of television down the hall and discovered his parents in the family room, mesmerized by the news that described a shakeup in the gaming industry. Ben Clan's leader had resigned. Ben's stomach began to twist in knots as he watched the events on the

screen. His companies' stock had dropped nearly 20% in just the last hour. It seemed to be bottoming out for the day though--that was a relief.

His mom was standing over his dad, who was leaning forward in a chair. The news had caught her just as she arrived with two tall glasses of ice tea. At that moment, a drop of ice cold condensation fell from one of the glasses and into the back of Justin's shirt. He yelled and jumped up knocking the tea from her hand. They both screamed as the icy splash struck them, covering their legs. Much panic and brushing of ice-cold droplets later--they looked up to see Ben biting his lip, trying not to laugh.

"Ben! They ran over to him and hugged him." There was much ado about leaving his job and how difficult that must have been... they rambled on for some time, before stopping.

Ben gently pushed them away and stepped back, he breathed, steadying his emotions, "Mom-Dad- I've been a jerk."

They put their arms around each other and looked lovingly at him.

"You must be really steamed at me."

His mom was tearing up now, "We never stop loving our kids Ben."

Ben shook his head--a week before he had cussed at his parents from this very spot. He told them to stay out of his life, and stormed out of the house--yet, there they were... grinning... tears of joy streaming from their eyes. His throat tightened and he forced back some tears.

His mom and dad walked to him and hugged him sweetly, Mary kissing him on the forehead. "I love you baby."

Later, after cleaning up the mess and settling down around the bar in the kitchen, they chatted about all that had happened over the last few days. His mother said, "I heard you made a big decision at church last night."

"Well, yeah- I went forward and got saved."

They both grinned sheepishly.

"I'm not sure what to think about it though. My life has been pretty screwed up lately--how can I really know about my relationship with God? It's not like He tells us we're doing a good job or anything."

"It's not easy," Mary said. "After twenty-five years of marriage, we still work it out every day."

Justin looked down thoughtfully, "You get up every day--Ask God to help you not do anything too dumb. Then... you trust Him to guide your steps."

He looked up, "Basically, you play it off the cuff Ben."

"I've got that down, especially lately--everyone thinks I'm nuts!"

Working together, they prepared dinner, and a couple of hours later Lisa arrived. Seeing her brother there with her parents made her giddy. They played games (the board kind), and for the rest of the evening debated the finer points of Monopoly and Sports Franchise law.

After way--too--much tea and pizza, Justin looked up and saw the sun setting. He tugged at their arms and motioned toward the beach. The red and yellow sky drew them through the back gate and down onto the sand. Sticking their toes into the receding waves, they were held--mesmerized by the evening's embrace. The sun warmed their faces, and the wind rustled their hair. The day said goodbye, and it was a day very difficult to forget--perfect in every way, like that sunset sinking slowly into the gulf, a fiery night sky left in its wake.

Ben stayed there that night in the guest room, and for the first time in years. He felt completely at peace--a great weight had lifted. He closed the door, and didn't quite make it to the bed. Dropping

to his knees, he pushed his fingers into the plush carpet. It felt nice--he dropped onto his chest.

"What a day." He ran through the events in his mind. He was exhausted, but felt good. He laid there for a few minutes listening to the sound of his breath as his chest rose and fell.

"I can't believe I did it." He considered that--In his mind, he played out the last eight years--so much drama, filled with twists and turns, each one bringing him closer to this point. He felt himself drifting off to sleep--a tear streamed down his cheek. "God- You did it." He slept.

00101 FIVE

1 N B 3 T W E 3 N

At Daniel's home, he tossed and turned all night--driven to sweats by a dream-filled sleep. He was standing on the edge of a ravine. The only way across was a dilapidated trestle bridge.

"You have to come across now!" The red dragon screeched. Its arms were straining, its muscles bulging as it held the bridge together. Smoke and flame was spiraling out of its flared nostrils as it spoke.

Daniel started across, timidly--checking the rotting boards for stability. Dust and chunks of termite-ridden wood fell around him. A board gave way beneath one of his feet and he grappled for a hold on the side of the bridge, while searching for new footing. A few steps later, a huge beam fell from above breaking a gaping hole in the floor of the crumbling structure. Beyond the floor, he could

see a river of fire far below--flames leapt up, hungrily devouring the debris.

"RUN!" yelled the Dragon. "There's no time for caution. RUN or you won't make it Danny my boy."

Daniel's eyes opened. He remained motionless for a moment, staring at the stucco-covered ceiling of his bedroom. He followed the random patterns embedded in the surface and traced out faces and designs in his mind's eye. The morning sun was just breaking through the French doors on the east side of the room. The ornate railing on the balcony was casting an intricate vine-like pattern on the opposite wall.

Daniel wondered at the dream as he prepared for the day. "What if we *could* help people live their dreams? Wouldn't that be worth something?"

Later as he was driving to get breakfast, he decided to find Ben so they could talk about last night. "Dial Ben," his cell responded with a beep. Ben answered. "Ben, it's me. You'll never guess who I spoke to last night."

"Hey Danny... Who?"

"Professor Phillip, from Particle Physics... Remember?"

"Yeah, I remember him. So? Danny--I'm having breakfast with my parents, get to the point."

"You will not believe what this guy said, he... Hey, would you mind if I stopped in for a few minutes? I need to talk to you about this, and I could use some input from your folks as well."

"Hold on," Ben put the phone to his chest. "He wants to join us for breakfast--says he has news." They looked back and forth a moment then nodded in unison. "Ok, why not?"

"I'm almost there," he said as he hung up.

Still at the breakfast table, they all stared at Daniel as he wolfed down a pancake in one bite while pacing back and forth. Syrup dripped off his lips onto the plate held close by his other hand. With his mouth still chewing--he said, "So the professor- said we could use the chip but only if I signed with his company." He looked back and forth between their faces, waiting for a response.

Ben was staring at him--one eyebrow raised, "Well? What did you tell him Danny?"

"Don't you get it? What I'm talking about here is the answer to our problem Ben. We need a lifetime of memories that we can plug into the human mind. This chip can give us that. There's never been anything like it. The sleeping astronauts will get to watch and play... whatever we want them to, while they journey to their destination. No Psychosis!"

Lisa spoke up first, "Wow Danny, that sounds really cool! It's perfect."

Ben scowled at his sister, "Danny--he must be pulling your leg. There is no way he can be at that level. We would have heard about it. What makes you think he can pull this off?" Ben rummaged in the fridge, "Besides--we can't change the game plan now, NASA won't like it--It takes the government years to move on something this big."

Justin said, "Danny--I hate to be the one that points out the obvious here, but what makes you think this professor of yours would allow his technology to be integrated into a government project?"

Daniel plopped onto a chair, "Well- I'm a little fuzzy on that bit. He never actually said he would allow that."

"Jeez Danny!-" Ben shook his head, "Don't you guys see what he's getting at?" Staring at Daniel, "You want to just walk away from the US government and go work with this guy--We have non-disclosures, non-competes, and who knows how many other non-thingies hanging over our heads. I'm pretty sure there's a law we'd be breaking somewhere in all that legalese."

Daniel smiled at everyone sheepishly, "You're right of course--I've been pretty stressed about it."

Everyone looked stunned at the revelation.

Daniel continued, "I know--I know. I'm not the type of person that stresses. But, Ben and I have been going in circles with the brain freeze/psychosis thing and, well... I don't know if we can find another solution--no matter how much time we have- I'm certain we won't find it before the deadline."

Mary walked over to him and hugged his neck, "Don't worry Danny--you're not any good at it, you might break something." She kissed him on the forehead and rustled his hair with her fingers. "Your brain might explode if you stress about this too much."

Ben sighed, "Sorry I freaked... let's just look at this a different way. I agree with it in theory, so we'll run with that. We don't need Phillip's technology for our briefing, we'll just point the committee toward it in a subtle way."

Daniel raised an eyebrow at him, "You mean something like, 'We think you should use some kind of impossible memory chip to store hypothetical simulation data then play it back during the flight. If I were an impossible memory

chip I'd probably hang out at Dr. Phillip's domain dot com.'--That kind of subtle way?"

"Maybe not exactly like that Danny," said Justin. They all snickered. "But I think it's your only option, like you said, just present it as a way to solve the problem, they'll do the rest. If I know NASA, and I do, they won't let some piddly insurmountable problem stand in the way of this brave new conquest. You won't have to extend the deadline, they will more than happily oblige. Remember, when they came to you guys, there was a less than zero chance the technology would be ready by the voyager project start date. Now, six months later, you've got a cryonics prototype, and a really good test case of a lab rat recovering from cryogenic freeze after three days. No one has ever been able to demonstrate that kind of progress so quickly!"

"There's something really odd about all this," Lisa broke in furrowing her brow. "He has been watching you--keeping track of your every move, like he's... stalking you or something."

"It does make me wonder what the professor's been up to," said Ben. "Isn't he too busy to be keeping tabs on his former student's whereabouts?"

"From what he told me, he's got a huge facility in southwest Florida--thousands of employees. It must keep him really busy," said Daniel.

They all agreed that they should just let NASA make the first move concerning the professor. With a little prodding and a promise that Mary would make his favorite dish for dinner, Daniel decided to spend the day with them. Later that night he and Ben prepared to leave.

"I've never seen you like this Ben." Daniel looked at him sideways. "You've changed--it's like you've finally learned to relax, you know?"

Ben said, "It's hard to explain... I know you don't believe in this right now Danny, but, over the last few days I've begun to understand what makes my family tick (first time that's happened my whole life). I now realize that God loves me. A difficult concept for you--since you don't really believe in God--"

"I never said I didn't believe in God Ben."

"I know, but you've never really given Him credit for anything in your life--I'm not judging, believe me, I have no right, I'm just saying, God is there, I realize that now, and I hope that someday He'll reveal that to you. I love you like a brother, and I'd just like us to be on the same page and all- you know what I'm saying?"

Ben was giving him the biggest cheesiest grin he'd ever seen. "I guess..." Daniel smiled back and got in his car. "I love you like a brother too Ben. See you at work tomorrow."

They lived near each other, so Ben followed Daniel for most of the trip. Just a few blocks from their street, they stopped at a red light--lining up their matching indigo Porsche Carreras. The custom light kits under their cars pulsed as they revved their engines. Most of these streets were abandoned this late at night. They waited--glancing at each other out of the corners of their eyes. The light turned green.

Wheels broke pavement sending out a piercing squeal and they sped toward the next intersection. HA! Daniel had him, Ben shifted to third too soon, and Danny pulled ahead as they closed rapidly on the next street.

The light was still green, so Daniel went to third and leapt even farther ahead--piece of cake. He looked in his side mirror at Ben's car, he was at least ten feet behind him now, he looked up--THE LIGHT WAS YELLOW, crap! How long?

Ben saw it too, he jammed his brakes--they went straight to the floor. Ahhh! He looked down at his feet and jammed them repeatedly. He looked at his

speedometer--97! The light--It was red now. His mind screamed at him, DO SOMETHING!

Daniel jammed his brakes. The antilock systems did their job--bringing him rapidly to a stop just past the crosswalk. He glanced over his shoulder; Ben blasted past him, "BEN!"

Ben looked into the cross road ahead, there were two trucks beginning to pass each other--His eyes darted to the seatbelt hanging loosely by his side, he'd forgotten it. He jammed the brakes again and locked his arms on the steering wheel, pushing himself back into the seat, turning his face away and squeezing his eyes tight--he struck.

Daniel watched in horror as his friend just missed the front of the delivery truck and struck the side of the semi--making contact with the rear wheels. At the same instance, the other truck struck the rear of Ben's car causing it to spin wildly into the air--it tumbled end over end finally landing roof down and out of sight between the two vehicles.

Daniel grabbed his cell phone and leapt from the car running and dialing 911. The operator answered, and he began yelling into the phone, "My friend has been in an accident--Oh God--It's awful! You've got to get somebody here quick!"

The woman's voice on the other end was quiet and controlled, "I have your GPS location on my screen sir--Can you confirm the street address?"

He frantically looked around for a sign. Seeing it, he told her in desperate broken sentences as best he could. He rounded the smaller truck on its front end seeing the mangled remains of his friend's car. He looked back at the truck door as it opened.

The driver was climbing out, his face was pale and his hands were shaking, "I'm sorry, I didn't see him."

Daniel yelled, "Oh God--BEN! Where are you?" His eyes searched frantically through the broken windshield but Ben was nowhere in sight.

The phone was hanging at his side and he could hear the operator yelling for attention. In a confused daze, he put the phone up to his head, "I can't see him. He's buried somewhere in there, but I can't see him anywhere--you've got to hurry." He began pacing around the rear end of the car trying to get a better view.

By now the other driver had made his way around the wreck--he looked at the twisted metal that was Ben's car and the debris lying everywhere, shaking his head in disbelief.

The operator said, "Sir--an ambulance and police units are near by and should be there in a few minutes--stay on the line until they arrive."

Daniel nodded to the phone, "I will... Ok..."

Minutes passed like hours--he heard the sirens approaching, and the driver of the semi came over to him and put his arm around his shoulder, "Listen son, we've got to get back out of the way so they can get to your friend."

Reluctantly, Daniel stepped backwards away from the horrific sight. Emergency technicians moved in with hydraulic equipment to open up the car and search for Ben. After 20 frantic minutes the smaller truck was safely moved aside and the car was peeled open like a tin can. Daniel could see his friend now--his twisted body had been thrown from the seat, and under the front console of the car. His arms and legs were turned in ways that weren't physically possible. Daniel felt acid in the back of his throat and his stomach began to churn. He ran to the side of the road. Falling to his knees, he began to heave on the grass--tears were running down his face.

He could hear the technicians yelling with panicked voices, "Bring in the backboard! NO! Don't move his head!" Then someone else, "Keep

his neck still!" He wanted to see if Ben was ok, so he tried to stand up, turning to face the scene--the lights over the street began to trace out tiny lines all around his periphery, and then they closed in. He was having trouble catching his breath--he spun--seeing the truck driver; he reached for him to steady himself, but missed his hand and fell to the pavement catching himself hard on his chin. He heard a cracking sound and saw a bright flash of light--everything went black.