

**Puzzle Master**

**T.J. McKenna**

Puzzle Master  
Revised Edition

Copyright 2017 T.J. McKenna

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission from the author.

Published by Grace Creek Press at Free-eBooks

\*\*\*

Thank you for downloading this eBook. You are welcome to share it with your friends. This book may be reproduced, copied and distributed for non-commercial purposes only, provided the book remains in its complete original form. If you enjoyed this book, please return to your favorite eBook and print retailer to discover other works by this author. Thank you for your support.

## Author's Note for the eBook Edition

I hope you won't prejudge the contents of this, or any eBook, by the price you pay for it. I've been given many books for free (including copies of the Bible) and I've found value in their pages regardless of whether money changed hands. I give you this eBook for free with my blessings, and here's why.

Every Easter, a house on the road between my house and my kids' school would do a beautiful, but simple statement of their faith. They'd erect a heavy wooden cross and drape it with a purple cloth in the days leading up to Easter. On Easter morning, the purple would be gone and the cross would be draped in white. I came to love seeing it there each spring. So much so, in fact, that over time, as I drove by, I'd find my eyes drifting to that spot year-round hoping to see it. I'd go so far as to say that, eventually, I could see the cross with my heart even when it wasn't there for my eyes.

Every now and then, I'd see the owners of the house in their yard and I'd consider stopping to introduce myself, and tell them how moving I found their cross to be. I never stopped. I was always too busy or felt like it just wasn't "the right time." Then, they suddenly moved away and I'd squandered my chance to meet them. They took the time to touch everyone who drove past, and I'd done nothing to touch their lives in return.

At about the time they moved away, my wife was unexpectedly diagnosed with cancer. Thoughts about opportunities to touch each other's lives again came to the forefront, as friends and neighbors sent flowers and food. The road won't be easy, but she's going to be fine. I'm sure of it. Imagining my neighbor's Easter cross, as I drive by each day, helps me to be sure of it.

If giving away this eBook is my best chance to plant a cross for someone to see with their heart as much as their eyes, then I don't want to squander it. I don't know that I'll ever have what it takes to be a "Best-Selling" author. Instead, I hope that people who read these words will help me to become a "Best-Giving" author by spreading the word.

You'll soon see that the main characters are just eighteen years old. I'd particularly like to see free copies of *Puzzle Master* in the hands of teens and young adults; so at the end, you'll find a second "Author's note," where I request you do something for me to spread the word among our youth and help me give away as many free eBooks as possible.

Finally, I recognize that not everyone is interested in eBooks. I, personally, still love the feel of a book in my hands and turning a page rather than tapping. Unfortunately, I can't give the paper version away for free, but I have made it available at Amazon for the lowest price possible.

## **Dedication**

For Kristen on our Silver Anniversary.

You once asked the question: "What kind of man would you have our daughter marry?" I'd be lying if I said I want her to marry someone just like me, but there is one trait of mine I'd like him to have. I'd like her to marry the man who will wake up every morning honestly believing he married the most beautiful woman in the world.

## Acknowledgements

For the revised edition, special thanks go to my very patient copy editor, Diane. If “comma deficiency” is a disease, then I have a prize-winning case of it. Diane was cure. In addition to commas, she found and fixed dozens of typographical and grammatical errors that occurred in the first edition and generally made this edition a more professional-looking product. I’d like to note that I had no prior connection to Diane, she simply read *Puzzle Master* and offered to revise it for free. Is that just happenstance? Or is it the hand of the Lord? I think you know what I believe.

I didn’t include acknowledgements in the first edition, so I’d like to thank my son, Cam. He was the first to read the first draft and is likely still my biggest fan. Sometimes we read a book and when we’ve finished it was “just a book.” Sometimes an author is lucky enough to feel that someone has really tried to “absorb” a book and uncover its nuances. If anyone has attempted that with *Puzzle Master*, it’s been Cam.



## Table of Contents

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Connect with the Author](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Sneak Peek at Puzzle Master: Master of None](#)

## Prologue

Sheridan, Illinois 2190 A.D.

God loves a good puzzle. He spent six days creating puzzles for mankind to solve and on the seventh day smiled, as we set to work on them. His grand design even included keeping some of His puzzles always just beyond our grasp, to insure we'd never stop reaching higher. I've never thought of His unsolvable puzzles as a means to frustrate humanity. I'd rather believe that, as long as we keep searching for the solutions to His puzzles, we'll also be searching to know Him.

I love puzzles too. My parents say I solved my first puzzle before I could walk, and squealed and clapped with delight before smashing it, just so I could solve it again. From that day, puzzles became my joy and wonder. I don't even know how I do it. I just see things most people can't see and know how things will fit together. Just as God planned, He provided me with a supply of increasingly harder puzzles to solve so I'd never stop reaching. He had good reason. He wasn't training me to solve man's puzzles. He was training me to solve one of His own creation.

I was just six years old in 2190 A.D., but I remember the day when the first pieces of God's puzzle were fit together. Mom was in the kitchen, humming the same tune she hummed every morning, so I hummed it along with her. I'd learned the tune at school and both Mom and my teacher would smile when I hummed it, even if I couldn't carry a tune.

Dad came down the stairs with a small bag, indicating he was going to be away overnight. Whenever he was going to be away, he took an extra-long time saying goodbye; so on that morning, he sat and talked to me while I completed a difficult three-dimensional holographic jigsaw puzzle.

"Cephas, why do you like puzzles so much?" Dad asked, while I manipulated the hovering shapes of light with finger motions.

"Puzzles are like secrets only the puzzle maker knows," I answered without looking up. "It's fun to know secrets, especially when people don't know that you know their secrets."

It's good I didn't look up, or I may have picked up on my father's concern. James Paulson was a man keeping a secret from the world - and from me. Born to a powerful atheist family, he'd somehow fallen in love with both a Christian woman and her savior, Jesus Christ. As I was just six years old, my parents had decided it was too risky to teach me about Jesus until I learned how to hide my thoughts and opinions from prying eyes.

At six years old, all I knew about Christians was what I'd learned in school. They were people who believed in some force they called "God" and their ideas were banned by the government sometime after the Final Holy War in 2036. My teachers also told me there used to be many other religions, but they were all gone by about the year 2150.

Of course, there was also the playground education on the subject. At recess, we'd play "C&C" which was short for "Christians and Cult Hunters." One lucky kid, chosen at random, would be the government "cult hunter" and would hunt the rest who were the "Christians." When the cult hunter caught you, he could "re-educate" you and make you a fellow cult hunter, or he could just kill you outright and you'd sit out until the next game started. It usually depended on how good you were at begging for his "help."

To me, the game was a puzzle where my classmates represented predictable pieces that I could move around as I pleased, so I was usually the last one to get caught. I once tried to change the rules so that the last Christian caught would become the cult hunter in the next game, but my teacher overheard my proposal and wouldn't allow it. As part of her scolding, I was assured it was illogical that the Christian who was best at evading the cult hunters should ever be perceived as a "winner."



“If you know all the puzzle maker’s secrets, maybe you should be a puzzle maker when you grow up,” Dad said after a pause.

“But then somebody else would learn my puzzle secrets,” I replied, acting more like a six-year-old again. “Solving them is more fun anyway.”

“Is the last piece your favorite piece to put in?”

“I don’t know why everyone thinks that. The first piece is just as important to the solution as the last one. What difference does the order make?”

I stopped working and considered the last piece, which was hovering in front of me.

“Dad? Have you ever thought that maybe we’re all pieces in somebody else’s puzzle?”

The question set him back onto his heels, though I didn’t know why. Was this a dangerous theological thought I’d somehow picked up from my parents? Or, was it just another passing notion of a six-year-old - a notion soon to be forgotten?

“I don’t know Cephass. Why do you ask?”

I flicked my finger to slide the last piece into place.

“Because if we are, that’s a puzzle I want to solve.”

\*\*\*

In the hills above Gore, Virginia

As Dad and I were having our conversation about puzzles; underneath a dilapidated old house over a thousand kilometers away, identical twin old men worked alongside much younger backs. They were burrowing out working and living spaces where the faithful could hide from prying government eyes. With the average life span nearing one hundred years, the twins refused to consider themselves “old,” but they both knew they’d be sore the next morning. Such was the life of a Christian: hiding in the shadows and being called “cultists” or “fish heads.” To them, this labor was considered worth the pain.

Any other excavation project in the world, big or small, would simply use digging robots. You’d program them to clear a certain space and they’d excavate it to the millimeter. The problem was, the drones would uplink to a global positioning system and the government would know instantly, and update its maps accordingly. For secrecy, manual labor was the only option available.

Three escape tunnels had been completed, but when the fourth was started it had run into a preexisting chamber which had been built by coal miners more than a century earlier. The coal itself had been much deeper, but the area was riddled with old air shafts that would mean death to anyone who fell into one. When the discovery was made, they’d explored just the first twenty or thirty meters, then erected a makeshift door and set up monitors for natural gas. Once the monitors confirmed the air was safe, the old twins took it upon themselves to keep everyone else out of harm’s way while they checked the area for danger.

“We good to go, Baby Brother?” Austin asked his brother Brill, who was about twenty minutes younger than himself.

“Sure thing, old man,” came Brill’s customary response.

Austin shined his light back and forth, paying special attention to the floor as he searched for danger. As his beam hit the far corner of the space, it swept across something shiny.

“Where’d that come from?”

“Looks like an old canary cage or something,” Brill replied. “I guess the old timers were worried about gas too.”

“I can see what it looks like. I’m saying it wasn’t there when we first broke through.”

“Your eyes are getting weak, old man. Look at the floor. Everywhere we’ve been, you can see our footprints in the dust. There isn’t a footprint anywhere near it.”

Austin carefully crossed the floor for a closer look.

“It’s not much of a canary cage. It has no bottom.”

He frowned as his light revealed a package, wrapped in brown paper and tied with a string, sitting under the cage. There was writing on it, which he could easily read because it wasn’t covered with the same layer of dust as everything else in the area.

“What is it?” Brill asked.

“Is the new guy, James, still planning on spending the night and helping with the power connection? The one with the government job and the little boy named Cephas?”

“James Paulson? Yeah - he got here an hour ago. I watched him sign the guest book and everything. Why?”

“I don’t know what it’s all about, but whoever snuck in here left a package with Paulson’s name on it.”

## Chapter One

Colorado Springs, Colorado 2202 A.D.

*Avoid eye contact. You know what'll happen if you look directly into those eyes.*

It's an odd thing to think to yourself, while looking into a mirror.

Each day, it's my job to teach classes in religious history and convince young minds that any form of spiritualism is a delusional road to ruin, compared to the truth offered by science. So every day, before teaching class, I take the advice of my old friend and mentor, whose seat I now occupy at the University. He told me to look over the parts of my body and acknowledge I'm nothing more than a complex collection of biochemical reactions. He told me that embracing my nature as an evolved being would keep me grounded in reality and free of destructive spiritualism.

*He didn't mention that you'd develop an aversion to mirrors.*

I watch my hands as they twist the silk of my tie into a knot.

"Hands are a useful adaptation our early ancestors acquired eons ago to give them a competitive advantage so they could pass on their genes. They're no different than a plant's leaves or a fish's fins," I say out loud.

*It makes perfect scientific sense. Of course hands evolved. Where else could they come from?*

I open my mouth, and look at my lips and tongue.

"Evolved to give my ancestors the advantage of communication."

I look over my ears, nose, and hair in turn, and assign them each a rational place in evolution, then let out a deep sigh when I give up pretending. I could work my way down to my toes - but my eyes will still be there in the mirror, waiting for their turn. Waiting to deny every scientific argument, with a simple twinkle.

*My life makes no sense. It never has. It's like the twinkle is the only thing that's a true reflection of me and everything else in the mirror is a distortion.*

Like every morning, the need to look into my eyes and ponder their secrets will soon overcome me; so I sigh, then close my eyes and lean in closer to the mirror. I tell myself again that eyes are just another set of complex cells that evolved to allow me to interact with my environment. I tell myself that the twinkle, the spark of life I'll see in there, is just light reflecting off the edge of the iris. I stand for a while with my eyes closed, hoping to believe it this time.

Opening my eyes is the same each morning. Try as I might, I can't see a mass of cells that collect light and transmit biochemical information to another blob of cells called the brain. I see beyond the cells staring back at me. I see a...

I stop short, before allowing myself to even think the word "soul".

*Don't go there, Cephas. Your job is to deny the existence of such nonsense, not explore it.*

I break off the staring contest with the mirror.

*There's no place for this sort of thinking in your life. Even if you're retired, you're still a cult hunter. You're not just any cult hunter; you're THE Cult Hunter, so control your thoughts.*

I drive the conflict from my mind and take another look at myself in the mirror, while avoiding my eyes. At eighteen-years-old, I'm younger than the students I teach, though it can be hard to tell anyone's age due to "enhancements." The human race long ago tired of seeing any sort of "imperfections" when they looked in the mirror. Virtually all children have enhancement surgeries of one sort or another, many while they're still babies and some before they're even born. The awkwardness of puberty typically brings more surgeries, followed by many more in later years in an attempt to deny the inevitable signs of aging.

Most people think of their enhancements as a step towards perfection, but I've never been able to view it that way. To me, enhancements make people look like a set of molded plastic dolls that all say the same words and think the same thoughts. It's always been a point of pride that I don't have any visible enhancements.

*The only thing you like about looking in mirrors is the reminder that you're not perfect.*

I look at the table that sits under the mirror and sigh again as I see the final step in my morning routine: my communications device or "com." When I place the tiny device into my ear, it'll automatically activate and the daily assault on the senses will begin. Coms don't understand the pleasure I take in being alone with my thoughts; so it'll batter me with personal messages, news, advertisements, music, and countless other types of noise. Once it's in my ear, the simple act of thinking will become like trying to sleep as a faucet drips nearby.

*Maybe that's why people love their coms so much, so they can avoid thinking.*

I wouldn't wear one at all, but as a professor I'm contractually obligated to wear my com for four hours per day, so I put it in solely to get the clock started. Anyone in the world who cares to look can now see my electronic footprint. My ear hasn't even warmed it before the first call comes.

"Incoming call, Cephas," the pleasant voice that's not quite male and not quite female says in my ear. At least it pronounces my name correctly: "See-fuss". The old voice never got it quite right.

"Really? Who's looking for me?"

"Riemann Jones from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Cult Hunter Corps."

*Not the Corps. Not again.*

I rip it out of my ear and watch it deactivate. A call from my old friend Riemann can only mean one thing; The Corps has some sort of puzzle it can't solve on its own. With the Corps, the puzzle is always how to crack Christian communication codes that nobody else can crack and find Christian hiding places that nobody else can find.

*And every time I solve a puzzle for the Corps, people end up dead.*

\*\*\*

As I step onto the front porch, a hover bus glides up the street towards my house. The hover line looks like a large metal plate embedded in the old pavement, but when a vehicle is detected, the plates will hum to life to provide both lift and propulsion. The contrast between a floating bus and my house is comical because my house has been preserved to look just like it did when it was built in 1967. That's why I chose to live here. I find a strange comfort in the old-fashioned.

I let the bus pass. As the public face of the Cult Hunter Corps, I avoid the bus system because many people on it will recognize me. A few will treat me with the adoration of a celebrity, but most will shrink from me in fear, as I force myself to make eye contact with each of them. Although I'm fascinated by looking into my own eyes each morning, I find looking directly into someone else's eyes disquieting. Unfortunately for me, being The Cult Hunter requires projecting dominance, so avoiding eye contact is not allowed. Luckily, walking for enjoyment is a lost art, so I can walk to the university and encounter far fewer people. Hopefully the solitude will put me in a better frame of mind to speak with Riemann after I'm done teaching.

Half a block from my house, I wonder if the world is conspiring to remind me that my old-fashioned world ends at my front door. A young couple is having sex against a tree just a meter from the sidewalk. Public sex is a protected form of expression under the First Amendment and since it's contrary to what we know about Christian doctrines, as The Cult Hunter, I'm expected to encourage it.

The young woman is facing me and our eyes meet. Thankfully, she can only meet my gaze for a moment, but it's long enough for me to see what I was expecting. She has what I call "doll eyes." There's light shining off the edge of her iris, just like everyone else, but even if I could stare into them all day, I know I'd never see a twinkle. Like a doll, there just isn't a spark of life to be found.

As I pass them, the closest I can manage to being encouraging is to nod approvingly at the young man. His doll eyes just stare vacantly at me.

At the next intersection, I approach some kids as they take advantage of the hover system with bikes and boards that hover. When activated by a board or bike, the system will only let them hover a few centimeters off the ground to ensure their safety. Despite the safeguards, kids have figured out that when they enter the wake of a passing hover bus, the extra lift will take them well off the ground where they can perform tricks. Some kids even carry a magnetic leash which they stick to the back or side of the hover bus and then “hover ski” along behind for kicks. Trust kids to always find a way to have fun in a system designed to prevent it.

The kids collect where multiple lines meet because there are more wakes to ride. As I reach a favorite spot, a “kid,” who’s older than I am, recognizes me and yells “The Cult Hunter!” while doing a hover board trick two meters off the ground. I don’t turn my head to acknowledge him.

“How many fish heads you take down today, Cult Hunter?” a boy who looks to be about twelve asks as he waits his turn to enter the next wake.

*Why’d you have to ask a question, kid? Now I have to respond.*

“It’s been a slow day so far,” I say in the usual monotone I reserve for the public; then stop and rotate my head like it’s on a swivel. I enter ‘cult hunter mode’ where even the smallest nuance of my appearance will be calculated and controlled.

“Christians often use such questions as a cover.”

*Start off cold. Lower right eyebrow by two millimeters then tilt head down and to the right by one centimeter.*

“Maybe you’re the first fish head of the day?”

*Narrow eyes by one centimeter and stiffen lips. He already believes you know his every thought, so let him terrorize himself.*

He goes motionless, like a scared rabbit. Some of the younger boys back away, but the older boy who first recognized me comes back and stands behind his terrified friend.

“Are you silently praying?”

*Raise eyebrows and increase head tilt with slight rotation.*

“What? No! I never.”

*Slowly reverse head tilt.*

“What are those words on the bottom of your board? Christian codes? Don’t deny it. You know I can crack any code.”

He finally lifts his head to meet my gaze.

*Barely a decade old and already doll-eyed.*

“I saw him, Cult Hunter,” the older boy says. “He was praying and making Christian signs with his hands before his last run.”

*Freeze all facial movement. Remove all voice inflection. Stop all blinking.*

“Good work, junior cult hunter. What should we do with this little fish?”

“I’ve seen this type before,” the older boy says. “He’s too far gone for re-education. There’s no hope really.”

“There’s hope,” the young boy squeaks.

“Are you saying you’ll take The Cult Hunter test to prove you’re clean of vile cultic thoughts?”

“Yes, sir. Anything!”

“Your test is to do a back flip off the next wake.”

He stares for a long time before I watch his face melt with relief when he realizes I’ve been putting him on the entire time.

“And do it without praying first.”

*Curl up left side of lip to display cruel sense of humor.*

As I resume my walk, I hear the older boy laughing about the look on his friend's face. He should know the look, I did the same thing to his doll eyes two years ago.

*The farther I've gotten from that world, the harder it's been to maintain the persona. I wanted to smile. I wanted to put my hand on his shoulder and laugh with him, and look again for a spark of life in his eyes. I should get a private hover car instead of walking, just to avoid interacting with people.*

\*\*\*

I arrive at the University studio with plenty of time to spare and see there are already a dozen or so students in the lecture hall. Most lectures are done to an empty hall because so few professors keep a regular class schedule. There's no point. Most students would rather watch the replay of lectures at their convenience, or can't attend a live lecture simply because they live halfway around the world. My classes are unconventional in that I encourage a live audience to ask questions and therefore turn the teaching into a discussion instead of a lecture.

As always, I bound onto the stage rather than using the stairs and feel my face morph from that of The Cult Hunter to being just Cephas Paulson. I wish I could teach all day. When I'm on this stage, I feel like a human being again. I expect the lights and cameras to activate automatically when my presence is detected. When nothing happens, I realize I forgot to stick my com in my ear again. The instant it enters my ear, it registers an incoming call.

"Switch to teaching mode," I command the device.

Teaching mode is a privilege I've always enjoyed. As long as I'm standing on the stage, it blocks all incoming communication.

"Teaching mode has been temporarily disabled by order of the Cult Hunter Corps. The incoming call has been given top priority."

I close my eyes.

*Even on my stage, I'm never outside their reach.*

Riemann's image comes up on the screen that's embedded into the teaching podium.

"Hello, Riemann, what can I do for you?"

"Leaving your com in your ear would be a good start."

*His eyes are slightly dilated and there's a slight shine from sweat on his upper lip. He's nervous to speak with me. Why?*

"It's feeling kind of loose. I think it might fall out--"

"Don't you dare, Cephas."

"Two minutes. My class begins soon."

"I need your help chasing down some local fish heads. Can you come to D.C. tomorrow?"

He spontaneously picks a hair off his shirt.

*Self grooming? He's lying about something.*

"I'm retired."

I await the customary response.

"There's no such thing as a retired cult hunter. You should know. You coined the phrase."

*His heart rate is increasing. I swear I can see the pressure increasing in the capillaries of his eyes.*

"I've been out for three years. I'll stick to teaching my classes."

"I've been authorized to offer you four times your usual consulting fee and, for the record, you're still on the active reserve list."

*And the only way off the list is to die.*

"You do know I don't need the money, right?"

*We both know the real purpose of the offer is to inflate my curiosity rather than my bank account.*

In truth, money stopped meaning anything to most people two generations ago because the government provides all necessities for free. Food, medical care, transportation, public housing, and mindless video entertainment are all free. Throw in free, non-addictive government drugs to keep

you stoned, and there's no reason why anyone needs to leave their house. Money only means something if you want more out of your life than the basics. Money buys privilege.

"Six times your usual fee."

*His entire forehead is shining now. He doesn't want to say whatever is coming next, but if I refuse one more time he'll have no choice.*

"Still retired."

"The boss says you're not."

"The Boss" is Henry Portman, the director of the F.B.I. and therefore king of the Cult Hunter Corps. A century ago, the President of the United States was the most powerful man on earth, but in a world without armies, war or poverty, information is now the true currency of power and Henry holds more of it than anyone. He's the sort of man who has his fingers in everything, yet never leaves a fingerprint - unless it's from his hands closing around your throat. Invoking "The Boss" is as good as skipping to an outright death threat.

"What's really going on?" I ask.

"I wish I knew. I haven't been briefed."

*No involuntary eye movements or facial changes. He's telling the truth.*

"Then it's big enough to make it eight times the usual fee. I'll catch the first tube in the morning."

*As if I have a choice.*

"Thanks, Cephas. That makes my day easier. If you didn't agree when I reached ten, I was instructed to send a kill team to bring you in."

## Chapter Two

When Riemann releases control, my com switches to teaching mode and the stage lights and cameras activate, while a congenial computer voice announces: “World Religion lecture number twelve, starring Dr. Cephas Paulson, will begin in one minute.” My podium screen switches to display relevant information for today’s class. There are hundreds watching worldwide, of which twenty-six are sitting before me in the studio audience. There are dozens of offers from both men and women to have sex with me, five of which come from women here in the studio.

*Temptations. Never-ending temptations.*

I hit the delete button on the sex offers and the message is automatically transmitted to all of the eight hundred or so students who are registered for the class. Tonight I’ll likely dwell on those offers. Will tomorrow be the day when I don’t hit the delete button?

*Not likely.*

The computer tells me that all twenty-six students seated in front of me are wearing coms to listen to me speak. All they need to do is look up and they can see and hear the real live me, but they still prefer to use their devices. I don’t blame them for having and using coms. Your com is your electronic link to the rest of the world. With simple voice commands, you can interface with virtually any computer, speak with anyone, display requested information on any nearby screen, or even do mundane tasks, like turning off a light that’s within your reach when you’re too lazy to do it yourself.

*I wish they’d unplug once in a while and see me.*

I look up to the live audience and find my silent wish has somehow come true. Seated front row and center is a young blonde woman I’ve never seen before. She’s wearing a com, but she’s also staring at me intently, so I nod to acknowledge her. When she doesn’t respond in kind, I look away and use the computer to find out who she is. Her name is Martha McLeod and she’s new to the class as of today. It’s a little unusual to gain new students after the term begins, but she and several others joined recently. In each case, the new students showed mastery of the material covered in earlier lectures, so the system let them join.

I pull up her records and see she has no high school transcript. Since high school isn’t mandatory, the lack of a transcript isn’t unusual, but it would be nice if she had one because it would help me guess at her age. With everyone trying to deny their age by getting enhancements, birthdays are strictly protected under privacy laws. Next, I look at her admission test scores and find she’s remarkably knowledgeable for someone with no formal education.

I look up again and find she’s still staring. I’d have to guess that she’s no older than me. Given the bright stage lighting, it’s hard to be sure, but I feel like she’s trying to bore a hole through me with her eyes.

I refocus my attention on the class. The truth is, the vast majority of students have no thirst for knowledge. They just enroll because they’re bored and are seeking some form of entertainment in addition to sex and drugs. I chance another glance and see that although Martha has a com in one ear, I’m clearly her sole focus.

I begin my lecture.

“Today we begin the section I like to call ‘the beginning of the end of religion.’ Who knows what event I’m talking about?”

My podium computer lights up to indicate there are people here in the studio and watching remotely who’d like to answer.

“Okay, Ms. Nikki in Toronto.”



A live picture of Ms. Nikki comes up on screens that flank the stage. She's a slender Asian woman viewing the lecture from her bedroom and barely wearing any clothes. There's a half-naked man visible in the bed behind her.

"The Final Holy War."

"Correct. For those of you who haven't read the text, the short story is that in the year 2036, a coalition of Middle Eastern nations dropped nuclear weapons on the major cities of Israel. Five years earlier, a single missile had been launched and was intercepted before it could do any damage. Somehow, just five years later, the attackers had acquired launch detection evasion technologies that should have been well beyond their technical capabilities, and the Israeli defense forces were taken completely by surprise. There were about fifteen million people living in Israel the day the bombs started falling. Just two weeks later, less than one million remained."

I pause to let the class mull over the information.

"Can anyone tell me what was unique about Jerusalem in the attack?"

I get no volunteers.

"Jerusalem was the only city that wasn't targeted. It was considered a Muslim holy site, so they chose not to bomb it."

I survey the live audience and am happy to see that a few heads have now raised to look at me. They've heard the generalities of the Final Holy War countless times since they were children, but they're here because they know I'll give them more than the usual government lecture on the evils of religion.

*Deep down, maybe they want me to make them think.*

"When it was clear that their homes and loved ones were gone, the Israeli commanders launched a counter-strike against the entire Islamic world. First they hit targets in Asia, as far away as Indonesia and The Philippines, with nuclear strikes. Then they hit Islamic population centers in both northern and sub-Saharan Africa. Lastly, they attacked the cities of the Middle East, but not with nuclear missiles. In the last attack, nearly two-hundred cities - including the capitals of eighteen Islamic nations - were targeted by the Israeli submarine fleet. But instead of nuclear horror, those bombs released little more than gigantic puffs of smoke and dust that seemed to do no damage at all."

The students know what happened next, but they want to hear it from me.

"The Islamic world danced and cheered and praised God for saving them, but just a few hours later the enormity of what had been done set in. The dust was a genetic toxin targeted specifically at people with certain genetic markers common to people of Middle Eastern descent. Within days, those who had been vaporized by a nuclear bomb were considered the lucky ones. The toxin wasn't designed to kill you quickly. It was designed to make you suffer. The Israelis had named the project "Moses' Staff" because it was like a plague of boils, skin lesions, unbearable pain, and finally death."

The screens show the image of a toxin victim, who I hope - for his sake - was nearing death when the picture was taken. Half of the live audience is now looking up, but there's little expression of empathy. Instead, their faces express a vague sense of superiority, as if to say nothing like that could ever happen to them in our modern world.

"Once all the bombs had fallen, a more powerful and destructive force that the Israelis hadn't anticipated took over. Who knows what force I'm talking about? Put your answers up onto the screen."

The large screens behind me light up with their guesses, which range from hydrogen bombs to flying monkeys. My computer indicates that Martha McLeod hasn't attempted an answer, so I look at her and see she's staring at me again.

*She knows the answer, but she's refusing to participate.*

## Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

