



**FAULTLESS & FALLEN
PART ONE**

METAMORPHOSIS

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CHAPTER 1

AWAKENINGS

The boy awoke with a start. His eyes opened, but there was nothing but darkness, everywhere. His mind was a haze, as if he was thinking through the thickest fog imaginable. He couldn't remember his name, his age, where he lived, or where he was now.

Panic was building inside him. He tried to struggle, but his body did not seem to obey. He couldn't move his arms or legs, or for that matter, anything. Blind, and paralyzed?

He listened intently. No sounds could be heard; not even the beating of his own heart. Was he now blind, paralyzed and deaf? Or perhaps he wasn't even human at all!

He opened his mouth to scream, but nothing seemed to come out. Now he was dumb as well? He was a prisoner in his own body. He was alive, but dead. Awake, yet asleep. His mind raced, even as his body was still.

He lay there for what seemed like hours, but it could have only been seconds. His awareness of time was warped and distorted. Suddenly, there was a strange stirring in his brain that struck him like a bolt of lightning: a sound! A rhythmic beeping. It started by sounding like he was underwater; it was muffled and soft. Then it became louder and clearer. One sense had returned!

The second sense arrived soon thereafter, at least, it didn't seem like the beeping had gone on for long. A light flickered on, and he found himself staring at an extremely bright and blurry orb above him. His eyes stung, and he forced them to shut briefly. Now he was becoming even more worried. Maybe it was best that his senses weren't returning, because he was becoming even more aware of his horrible circumstances.

But he knew he couldn't keep his eyes closed. He needed to look around and discover what was happening, even if the truth was the worst thing imaginable. Was he about to be probed by aliens? Was he on an operating room table? Was he seeing the light that welcomed him to death? Or maybe he was mistaken; it could be that he was lying on a beach, waking from a dream, staring into the sun. Please, he pleaded, let it be the last option.

But no, it was aliens. Definitely aliens. Two figures dressed in white with dark, misshapen heads hovered over him. They were hazy, and he could barely make anything out, other than the bright light being occasionally eclipsed by their

enormous heads. They were babbling in some kind of language that the boy couldn't understand.

"Mwah meep, bloop bawana blork."

Well, at least I can't feel anything, so when they kill me, it won't be painful.

The heads soon disappeared and he was left staring at the light again. He imagined the light as a happy, friendly light, and even tried talking to it in his mind. But it didn't respond.

It took more time, but the boy thought he could begin to understand what the aliens were saying, even though the sound was muddy. Aliens...that spoke his language?

"...cognitive intensity...synaptic perturbations...anaesthetic..."

OK, maybe they didn't speak his language.

He was aware that his arms were being prodded and pushed around, so at least there was some feeling returning.

Suddenly the bright light was pushed away, and as his eyes adjusted, a face appeared in front of him. It looked like a blurry human face; that of a woman. Hazy, green eyes. She shone a light into his eyes, this one was less intense, but he squinted all the same.

"Hang on, dear, you'll be OK. You've been through a lot, but you'll be fine soon. It will be all better." Her voice was warm and encouraging, and she was speaking something he could understand.

"If you can hear me: You'll start getting feeling back in your arms and legs, and in time, you'll be able to move them again. Your hearing and vision will slowly return to normal too. You have been very sick, but we're working really hard to get you back to full health."

It was like waking into a nightmare, but at least the nightmare didn't involve being dissected on a table in a spaceship heading to the outer reaches of the galaxy. But there were still so many questions swirling through his mind: How did I get sick? How long have I been in this state? And more importantly: Why can't I remember anything?

As the activity in the room quieted down, he contented himself with searching his mind to determine what he did know. Even though he had no memory of his family, he was at least aware that he should have a family. Although he couldn't think of his name, he somehow knew he was a boy. And that there were girls, and men and women (and humans and possibly aliens). He didn't know where he lived, but he realized he should have a home somewhere. He seemed to understand language, English, so at least he had that going for him.

And now his stomach hurt; he was really hungry! He wondered how long it had been since he'd eaten. He thought of foods: Chocolate, pizza, ice cream,

cake, asparagus... He wrinkled his face. Wait, he didn't like asparagus. Why could he remember ridiculous things like this, but not his own name? It was as if his mind was intentionally blocking out useful information and leaving the dross behind.

It certainly took some time, but the feeling did eventually return to his body. His eyes were still blurry, and his hearing muffled, but he felt like recovery was finally within his grasp. After more time and strenuous effort, he was able to sit up.

His hand had a saline lock which was attached to an IV bag hanging on a pole beside his bed. He slowly lifted his other arm and touched his face and his head. He was completely bald. Curious, he was pretty sure he had hair before. His arms were very thin—he could see protruding bones—he looked like a skeleton with only the thinnest veneer of skin over top. He was wearing a long hospital gown, and his bare feet poked out of the bottom.

He slid his feet from underneath the covers and sat at the side of the bed.

A nurse walked in, and she spoke cheerfully. "Ahhh...I see you're up and about now! Great!"

"W—who am I? And why am I here?" His voice sounded scratchy as if his words were fingernails being raked across a chalkboard.

"Your name is Nathan. You are very sick, but we are slowly bringing you back to health. You've been unconscious for a while—several months at least."

"Will I ever remember anything?"

"It's hard to say. The sickness has caused extensive damage, so it could be a long process before your memories return. We're doing the best we can. By the way, my name is Nurse Evie."

"OK, it's nice to meet you, I think."

"I know this must feel pretty overwhelming. Don't worry, we will be taking good care of you. If you can please lay back in the bed, I need to take some vital signs..."

He rested his feet back on the covers, and she began to poke and prod him. She took his temperature with a thermometer inserted into his mouth; she put a cuff around his arm and measured his blood pressure.

"I'm going to remove you from this IV now. You should be able to eat the old-fashioned way, rather than being fed through a tube." She disconnected the IV from his hand, leaving the saline lock in, but allowing him some freedom of movement.

"Not bad, considering all you've been through. I have something for you..."

The nurse reached over to the stand beside his bed. She picked up a thin yellow folder, which she handed to him.

Nathan slowly opened it, with much anticipation. Inside were pictures, and a

summary of information. They were about him and his family. Tears formed in his eyes—it was the only knowledge that he had.

He spoke as he read: “Name—Nathaniel Yitzhak Cohen. Age—Fourteen. Born—Jerusalem, Israel, July 7th, 2007. Family—Mother, father, younger brother.”

There were smiling pictures of his parents, and his brother. Nathan appeared to be a fit boy with olive skin and black, wavy hair. As he flipped through various pictures, nothing stirred his memory.

“This is all meaningless to me; as if I am reading about someone else entirely.”

Nurse Evie replied, “I know, dear. The memory loss is the hardest part. I hope some of these pictures are able to help you rebuild your lost past. It looks like you were a very happy boy with a wonderful, loving family. I expect you will remember them in due course, just keep those pictures close to your side.” She put her hand on his shoulder, and Nathan tried to force a smile.

“The one positive thing about your sickness is that it should not affect your ability to eat, or your appetite. How would you like some dinner?”

“I would love it! I’m starving!”

“And how would you like to meet one of the other kids?”

Other kids? There are other kids? “Sure, I think...”

She helped him out of bed and put him in a wheelchair. She pushed him out the door and into the hallway. They turned one corner and another through what seemed like a maze.

They arrived at a room with windows facing the hallway. Inside was a long, white table, with chairs and empty spots on each side. On the opposite end of the room, there were windows facing the outside. Nathan could see that it was sunny out; streams of light caused the room to shine with a welcoming light.

Nathan was pushed into the room and he spotted another child seated in a chair near the outside window. The child had either very short or no hair like him, and was turned toward the window, so he didn’t get a look at their face. But the child looked to be about the same age as him, based on size. The child was dressed in the same kind of white hospital gown that he was wearing.

“Here you are,” Nurse Evie said, pushing him into a spot directly across from the child. “I’ll let you introduce yourselves.” She left the room with a bit of a bounce.

He spent several seconds looking the child over, but there was no reaction or eye contact, the child was just staring out the window blankly. Finally, he said, “Hi, I’m Nathan.”

The child looked toward the ground.

“I’m fourteen, and I’m from, um, Jerusalem in Israel, so they tell me. How

about you?”

The child did not respond.

“Hello...are you deaf...or are you just...rude?”

Still no response.

“OK, can you at least tell me this...are you a boy or a girl?”

The child looked up into his eyes briefly. The eyes were blue with long, dark eyelashes. The features were soft and delicate, and looked girlish, but still difficult enough to assign to a gender; he didn't want to assume anything. He tried to imagine hair, and the truth was, he could picture both long and short hair working—girl, or boy.

“My...name...is Emma”. The voice was high-pitched with a distinct English accent. His first thought was that he didn't care for the sound of the voice, or the accent.

“So, you're a girl then?”

She looked down at the ground again, looking quite dejected. She appeared to be holding back some emotion, but Nathan could tell that he had upset her. She began to sniffle, but was able to say, “How many boys...do you know...that are named...Emma?”

“At least three, if you consider the name ‘Emmitt’ the same.” He had hoped that his feeble attempt at humor would at least break a crack in the ice.

But no, an awkward silence ensued.

Finally, Nathan couldn't stand it any longer. “Well, you don't really look like a girl; girls usually have longer hair. It's kind of hard to tell.”

She began to cry. She couldn't look him in the face, but he could see the tears streaming down the side of her cheek. Nathan crossed his arms. “Well, it's the truth.” Humor didn't work, and now it seemed as if his honest words didn't help the situation, either. He was somewhat perplexed.

Suddenly, the crying stopped. She stood up, as if she suddenly gained all the confidence in the world. She hovered over Nathan menacingly, hands flat on the table in front of her. Her eyes were narrow and full of fury. She slammed her closed fist on the table. Her voice bellowed loud and clear: “Blast it! You know what the truth is? The truth is that I don't even know you, but I already know you're an obnoxious, dodgy git. The truth is that I may not remember anything from before coming here, but I know enough to stay away from jerks like you. The truth is, I hate...” She stopped mid-sentence. Her face twisted and strained and her eyes squeezed shut, as if she'd been punched in the stomach.

“The truth is...” she said, stammering, “I...” She paused for several seconds before she could compose herself. “I don't know what I mean. I suddenly feel very dizzy and weird.”

“Should I get the nurse?”

“No...no! I just need to sit.” She slowly sat down, keeping her hands on the table to stabilize her descent. Her elbows rested on the table and her face fell into the palms of her hands. Her breathing became very shallow and jittery for several seconds, and her arms were shaking with tremors.

“I need to get the nurse...” Nathan tried to wheel his chair away.

“No!” Emma grabbed him by the wrist. “I’m OK. I just suddenly felt very wonky. Kind of like my emotions went into overload. But it wasn’t a bad feeling, it was just...very, very powerful.”

“I really didn’t want to make you mad. I thought I was just keeping it real. But at least I know for certain you’re a girl now, because I understand that girls get all squishy and emotional all the time.”

Emma sighed. “You could use a filter on your brain, ya know. You talk too much...”

“I guess I do. By the way, did you really call me a ‘dodgy git’? What is that supposed to mean?”

“Sorry, I sometimes forget that where I come from, we have different words for things. I was kind of insulting you. I didn’t really mean it.”

“You certainly do talk funny, and don’t worry, no offense taken.”

“So is your situation a shambles like mine? I mean, everything I thought I knew...everything is totally and completely...gone. I don’t even know myself. I don’t remember who I am.”

“You don’t remember anything either?”

“No. And on second thought, maybe I shouldn’t say too much more. I’d rather get to know you a bit more, because I don’t know who I can trust. And you really do seem a bit dodgy to me.” She looked Nathan in the eye, as if she were sizing him up. Her eyes were red and swollen, and it made the blue stand out even more.

“Well, we’re in the same boat, then. I don’t know if I can trust you, either. But we have to start somewhere. It helps that we seem to have had similar experiences. So tell me, how long have you been here? I just woke up today.”

“I’ve been awake for at least a week, after being told I was asleep for months. But I don’t really know...all the days kinda blur together after a while. The only thing I know about my life before this was what they showed me. They gave me some kind of file with pictures, and very basic information.” She began speaking, enunciating each word as if she was in the military; the only thing missing was the salute. “Emma Jane Livingston. Born in Barnstaple, Devon, England. Thirteen years old, my birthday is on August 8th. Family—mother, father, two younger brothers.”

“If it makes you feel any better, that’s about all the information I know about myself, as well. I am told that I’m Nathaniel Yitzhak Cohen, from Jerusalem, Israel. I’m fourteen, and I have a younger brother.”

“But it’s hard to even know if what they’ve told us is the truth. I keep getting this strange feeling about the doctors, the nurses...”

“Well, do you have any reason to mistrust them? I haven’t yet met any doctors.”

“They have been treating me with kindness. The nosh—I mean *food*—is good and the accommodations are...barely adequate. Like, it wouldn’t win any hospitality awards, but it’ll do. They let me outside to play. As you can see through the window, it’s beautiful outside, but very hot. They keep giving me shots every day. I don’t like the shots, but they tell me I need them so that I can stay healthy. But I don’t feel very healthy; I feel right knackered all the time.”

“I feel like I’ve been run over by a bus. I don’t even think I can walk.”

“That’s how I felt when I first awoke. But it has been getting better...a bit.”

The two were interrupted by a chef, carrying two plastic, white plates, humming a tune while he strode across the room. “Bonjour, Madame et Monsieur. Dinner is served.” He gently placed the plates in front of them. They were filled with pieces of chicken, plain mashed potatoes, corn, and a roll. The plate was steaming. He produced two Styrofoam cups and quickly returned with a pitcher of ice water to fill them up.

Nathan piped up, “Wow! I’m so hungry, I could eat a horse!”

The chef winked, “Then you’ll really love tomorrow’s dinner...” He neighed like a horse, turned around, and galloped out of the room.

“He’s not serious, is he?”

Emma replied, “Sebastien? No, he’s kind of a joker, a bit barmy if you ask me. He’s one of the more pleasant and entertaining people around here. Everyone else here is very: ‘get some sleep, young lady’, and ‘time for your shot’, and ‘fun is over, get back to doing nothing!’” She did several amusing male and female voice impressions, trying to imitate an American-sounding accent.

Nathan dove into his food, as if he hadn’t eaten in years. And who knows, maybe he hadn’t. His lips smacked as he practically inhaled the food.

Emma looked at him with a disgusted expression. She shook her head. “I guess you need to re-learn some table manners.”

“Sorry, but this is like my first real food...and it is amazing.”

“It certainly is...It certainly is.” She glared at him.

There was no further talk at the table. Nathan finished his meal quickly, licking the plate like a dog when he was finished. Emma stared at him the whole time, not even touching her own food, acting as if he was from another planet. He

gulped down the large glass of water.

Nurse Evie came in, almost on cue, and prepared to take Nathan back to his room. His mouth was still covered in mashed potatoes. He wiped it off with his arm. "Bye, Emma," he said as he was rolled out of the room. She waved unenthusiastically.

"I see you've made a friend," she said.

"Well, I suppose. I don't think she really likes me that much."

"Try to get to know her. You'll be spending a lot of time together. You, her, and the others."

"Others? There are more of us?"

"Yes, and hopefully we can get you out of here very soon..."

"Where are we going?"

"On a journey, you could say." Her answer seemed very cryptic and vague, and didn't give him a sense of encouragement. "But that's all I can say. Maybe I've said too much."

"I think I'd rather go home."

"In a way, it is." She smiled. "Now let's see if you can stand. You should have some strength in your legs."

She helped Nathan out of the wheelchair. His knees almost buckled, but with some concentration and effort, he was able to stand upright. Slowly, he shuffled his feet, and the nurse held his arm until he was able to balance on his own.

"Great job. You'll be as good as new in no time!" She made sure he could make his way to the bed unattended, then left and closed the door behind her.

He sat down on the bed, mulling over Emma's words, the nurse's words, and trying to search his own mind for clues to what could be happening. He looked around his room. It was very spartan, but there was a comfortable recliner in the corner, and there was a book on the table. He picked it up. It was thin, with a red cloth cover on it. The cover was worn and fraying at the edges. It was blank.

He flipped open the book. "It's a Bible," he said. He leafed through the pages, and realized he had some familiarity with the book. But it didn't make any sense why it would be here, and why it was the only thing in the room. Was it a clue of some sort?

He jumped up into bed, book in hand, and read until he drifted to sleep.

CHAPTER 2

THE OTHERS

The following day, Nathan was woken up by Nurse Evie. There were two other men standing beside her, who had every appearance of being doctors, right down to the white lab coats. One was tall with grey—almost white—hair, dark skin, and brown eyes, yet ironically he had a very young looking face. The other one was a bit shorter with a medium complexion and dark black hair. His face looked to be a bit older, and had a large nose and pockmarked skin.

The nurse said, “These are the two doctors who will be looking after you and tracking your progress.”

The taller doctor said, “Hello, my name is Dr. Ezekiel Shamala. You can just call me Dr. Ezekiel, though.”

The other one said, “And I’m Dr. Ivan Chatley. And if you don’t like me, you can call me Dr. Ezekiel, too. But otherwise you can call me Dr. Ivan.”

Nathan smiled, feeling it was a bit forced.

“You probably have a lot of questions, and I’d love to provide you with answers, but there’s still a lot we don’t know about your case.” Dr. Ezekiel crossed his arms. “We do know this—something has gone terribly wrong with your growth as you’ve started adolescence.” He took something out of his pocket and began to blow it up; it was an oval-shaped, red balloon.

“Think of this balloon as your muscles. As you get older, they get a signal to start growing, but it’s almost like your body has gone into overdrive.” He began to squeeze the balloon. “If left untreated...” He twisted and squashed the balloon until it popped. “...there could be catastrophic consequences.”

Dr. Ivan spoke in turn, “We are treating you with a serum designed to control the muscle growth, so unfortunately you will feel weak and tired, among other side effects, like the loss of your hair and memory. You have to know that much of this treatment is experimental, so we will be running lots of tests to learn more about you.”

“I want to see my family,” Nathan said.

“I understand,” said Dr. Ezekiel with some concern on his face. “We still don’t know if there is a contagious component to what you have, so we have to keep you from others. You are in quarantine here. So for now, we are your family.”

Nathan looked down at the floor, feeling downcast.

“Don’t worry, dear,” Nurse Evie said, “things will get better in time. But I need to be honest with you, there may be some things that happen that are not fun. Again, that too will get better.” She had a sympathetic look on her face. “Come with me, dear, and I’ll show you one of your daily rituals.”

He was led to a room a short distance away, and was seated on an examination table.

“This is your dose of medication.” She was preparing a needle, holding it up and pushing on the plunger to remove any air bubbles. A small amount of liquid dribbled out of the needle.

“I don’t want to...Can’t you just hook me back up to the IV?”

“Sorry, this medication is delivered a different way. Directly in your muscle, which is where the problem lies.”

Nathan felt a twinge of nervousness, but he submitted. The pick was small and didn’t hurt too much, but the medication did cause his arm to burn a bit. “What happens if I don’t get this shot?”

“Well, like the doctors told you, it could cause some problems with your muscle growth, to the point where you could...” She stopped, seeming to think better of continuing. “But let’s not talk about that right now. Come on, let’s get you some breakfast.” She led him back to the room where he had eaten with Emma the evening before.

Nathan had breakfast alone, some kind of bland oatmeal, orange juice, and toast, and then got to head outside to the yard. The grounds were quite ragged. The pavement near the building was cracked and weathered, and the field abutting it looked like it hadn’t been mowed in years. The grass in the field was very patchy with open areas of dirt. It looked to Nathan like it might be an old school. There were remnants of basketball nets—only the backboards, minus the rims and nets—and some empty patches where it looks like some gym equipment might have once been.

It appeared that the entire perimeter of the yard was enclosed with a fence with barbed wire on top. He glanced back at the window, and he could see someone watching him; the person looked away when he saw them. It was obvious he and the others weren’t meant to get out.

There was a small wooden bench by an old, twisted, knotted tree. If it were dark, Nathan imagined the tree would have looked like something out of a horror movie. He wandered to the bench and sat down. It felt so good to feel the warm air, the breeze, and the sun. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

He heard a noise behind him, and he turned to see Emma coming out into the yard. She looked a bit frazzled. She headed directly for Nathan.

“What’s the matter?” Nathan asked.

She spoke quickly. “I don’t know...I had one of those weird dizzy spells again. I was getting my daily shot—I really hate needles, like really, really hate them—for some reason I was particularly nervous this morning. I started to panic when she was preparing the needle, and all of a sudden I was overwhelmed with emotion again. I felt really scared and concerned, and it overloaded my senses and I had to lay down. I did get the shot, but my feeling was hard to explain, like nothing that was happening was real. I was totally gobsmacked. It was like someone else’s emotions were projected on top of mine, and they were being magnified.”

“That is strange...”

“But there’s more! I could have sworn she was talking to me—‘Just take the shot, my girl, try to relax...’—but she wasn’t! Her lips didn’t move. It was like I could hear her talking in my mind. I don’t know what to make of it. I’ve never had such a weird experience.”

“That is really bizarre. I really wish I could help you with an explanation. Nothing unusual has happened to me yet, other than meeting these strange doctors and nurses.”

“I know they seem strange, but they do try to be nice.”

“You’ve been here longer than I have...what happens all day long each day?”

“Well, usually I get up, get my daily shot, eat brekky, then come outside for a bit of time, just like we are doing now. Then I feel really zonked and go back to bed for a nap, get up for lunch, nap, dinner, and then to bed. There’s not a whole lot to do. The only thing I have in my room is a book...”

“A Bible?”

“Yes, that’s it!”

“Do you think they’re trying to tell us something?”

“I don’t know. They may be trying to tell us *something*, but I also have a suspicion that they’re not telling us *everything*. They’ve been very vague. The nurse has said we will be going ‘on a journey’ soon, whatever that means. I just have this overwhelming feeling that they are holding back some important information. I can’t shake it. I know they’re trying to be nice to us, but I would love to know if there’s more to this story...”

Suddenly there was a noise and both turned their heads to the door. Another child walked out, wandering woozily out toward them.

Emma said, “Another one...” They both slowly approached the child. Nathan assumed it was a boy, as it seemed a bit more obvious this time. He was dark-skinned and taller than the two of them; his body was wiry and thin. He had very short black stubble on his head. As the boy saw them come near, he stopped and looked at them nervously.

“Hi, I’m Emma, and this is Nathan. What is your name? Can you speak

English?" She spoke slowly and enunciated every syllable.

He nodded. "Afshin. Afshin Farah..." he said weakly. He had a slight Middle Eastern accent and a droning voice.

"Afshin? That's a different name..." Nathan trailed off. He decided not to ask him if it was a boy's name or girl's name, after the trouble it caused him the previous day.

"I guess I'm from Egypt, but to me it's not an Egyptian name...I don't remember how I got it."

Emma replied, "Well, if it's any consolation, we don't remember anything either. We're just as clueless as you!"

"Well, Emma here is pretty clueless. I'm just..."

"A dimwit," Emma interrupted, smirking. Nathan smiled too. Her comment had a humorous vibrancy to it. "Anyway, Nathan and I were talking. If you hear anything strange, tell us. We're trying to collect as much information as we can about the people who are here and what is happening to us."

Afshin looked at the others. "I'm sick, weak and tired. I just woke up and wasn't even able to move at first. I haven't heard anything strange other than that. But I'm glad to meet both of you. I'm glad I'm not alone."

"Me too," said Nathan. "I think if we work as a team, we can figure out what is going on."

"Do you think they're trying to kill us? Because I don't like the looks of those doctors and nurses." Afshin asked.

Emma spoke. "No, I really do think they are trying to keep us alive. For what reason, I don't know. Maybe they're experimenting on us. Or maybe we really are sick. But there is some kind of agenda."

"Oh no, that's what I was afraid of..."

Emma and Nathan discovered that Afshin was a year younger than they were, thirteen years old. He had a brother and two sisters, all younger than he was. He lived with his parents in Cairo before he was brought to this place, wherever "this place" was. This was all according to his file, definitely not according to his memory. The three of them stayed outside, looking around and otherwise preoccupied.

Nathan was trying not to be too obvious about looking for ways to escape, but everything looked very secure. Soon, a nurse was calling them back inside.



Nathan was led back to his room. He was tired from his time out in the fresh air, but while he was outside, he had come up with a plan. He had picked up a

small, thin rock and concealed it in his hand. As he crossed the threshold of the door, he inserted the rock into the hole of the strike plate of the door latch. His hope was that when the door was closed, the latch would not be able to engage and lock the door.

As the door closed behind Nurse Evie, he heard a slight click. He wandered over to the door and tried to open it. Sure enough it opened just a crack, and he looked out into the hallway. He saw the nurse enter a room, then come out a short time later, disappearing around a corner.

He opened the door, went into the hallway, closed the door behind him and snuck into the other room. It looked to be an office. There was a beautiful wooden desk with papers scattered about. An old-fashioned desk lamp was lit. The seat behind the desk was large and made of a dark wood, with black cushions covering the seat and back rest. A bookcase was behind the desk. There were comfortable-looking chairs on the walls and wooden tables beside them. Pictures adorned the walls. They were beautiful, done in black and white, with nature scenes—a lush, misty garden, a waterfall, a dry and barren wilderness.

Nathan wandered to the bookcase. There were many books, including a tidy row of medical journals, many of those dealing with treating disease in children. Strangely enough there were some religious texts, which didn't seem to fit in with the others. There were also science books and textbooks. They did not appear to be medically related, but had to do with animal biology, geology and astronomy.

He glanced at the papers on the table and began to shuffle through them. One caught his eye, with a list of names. His name was on it, as were Emma and Afshin's. A number of names above theirs were crossed out with a heavy black marker. A couple of names had checkmarks, and there were three more names below theirs. He heard footsteps in the hall getting closer. Quickly, he stacked the papers back to their original configuration.

Scared, Nathan ran toward a door, twisted the knob and entered. Great! It was a closet, and now he had nowhere to escape. Closing the door behind him, he fell into darkness. He listened intently. Over top of his own heavy breathing, he could hear a man's deep, gruff voice.

"Evie, how are all of the children doing?"

"Quite fine, Ezekiel. The three that have awoken seem to be eating well, have normal vitals and appear to be adjusting nicely. I'm continuing to monitor the other three. I expect all three of them to awaken shortly, perhaps even today."

"Very good. How about the BVZ injections? Are they continuing to work?"

"Yes, all are responding well to the treatment. Their cognitive and physical functions are within normal parameters."

"Excellent. It's important that these six are kept healthy. They are our last six. We can't lose any more, like we did with all the others."

Lose any more? All the others? Nathan panicked. He felt a bit light-headed, and began to stumble. His body bumped against something in the closet, which fell and made a loud, metallic racket.

“What the...” Dr. Ezekiel said. Nathan could hear the creaking of the chair, and loud, clunking footsteps coming toward him. He put his hands in front of his face in fear. There was nowhere to hide.

The door opened, and light illuminated the closet. A metal bucket rolled onto the floor with a clattering sound. Nathan looked through his fingers. In front of him was Dr. Ezekiel, who was instantly recognizable by his white hair. Nathan smiled nervously, staring straight at the doctor. The doctor looked around for a few seconds, bending over to check out each nook and cranny of the closet, and then his look turned somewhat perplexed.

Nathan’s hands dropped to his side. The doctor said, “It was just this bucket that fell. There’s no one in there.”

No one? But he was looking right at me! I could see in his eyes! How could he miss me?

“Ezekiel, you don’t think...”

“No, it’s impossible. The BVZ treatments should suppress any of their unusual behavior.”

“I think it’s wise to keep a closer eye on their vitals and watch for any anomalies.”

“You’re right. In the meantime, let’s go talk to Ivan to see how close the transport is to being up and running.”

Nathan could hear footsteps as the two left the office. He waited for what seemed like an eternity before cracking open the door. The office was empty and the light off. He crept out of the office and back to his room. His head was spinning, but he knew he had to tell the others what had happened.



He got his chance at dinner. Afshin and Emma were already seated at the table in the dining area. He couldn’t wait to tell the news.

Nathan spoke quietly to the others. “Something strange is going on here. First, I snuck into an office but got trapped in there when Dr. Ezekiel and Nurse Evie came in. I went and hid in the closet, but I made a noise, and the doctor came and opened the closet. I was standing right in front of him, but he acted like he didn’t even see me! I don’t know how that is even possible! I’m sure he looked me straight in the eyes.

“Also,” he continued, barely able to contain his words, “there are other kids. Three more. And not only that, there have been others before. Whatever they’re

doing, those other kids died, or disappeared, or something. We're the last ones. So they really want to keep us alive."

"I can't believe it..." Emma said.

"But wait, there's even more. The stuff they're injecting us with is called *BVZ*. They've told us that it's slowing our muscle growth, but now to one another they said that it stops *unusual behavior*, whatever that means.

Emma looked thoughtful. "So what happens if those injections were stopped? Would we die?"

Nathan continued, "I know Nurse Evie has said it would. But after hearing the two of them talk...now, I'm not so sure. The way they said it made me think that it would be bad for them, not us."

Emma stood up. "We need to stop the injections. How can we do it?" Nathan was surprised at Emma's confident tone.

"That, I don't know. I'm just the messenger, not the idea guy."

Afshin, who had been listening intently, eyes wandering back and forth between Emma and Nathan, spoke up for the first time in the conversation. "I agree. We need to stop the source of this injection—this *BVZ*. We need to find out where they are getting it from, and eliminate the supply. This will force their hand into revealing what is happening, and what their ulterior motive is, if they have one." Emma and Nathan stared at him, wide-eyed.

"OK, Afshin's the idea guy, obviously," said Nathan.

"Absolutely cracking idea!" said Emma. "Watch them carefully. See where they store the medical supplies. That's our ticket out of here."

"Oh, and speaking of our ticket out of here, when the doctor left the room, he said something about seeing if a transport was finished. I think they're going to send us somewhere, must be this journey we're supposed to go on."

"That was a jolly good job finding out all this information, Nathan. And now we need to stop them before they send us away..." Emma looked up and noticed the chef, Sebastien, coming into the room. She stopped speaking and folded her hands in her lap, trying to look innocent.

"Dinner is served! I 'ope you like scrambled eggs and toast!" Sebastien had a strong French accent.

"That's a smashing English...breakfast," said Emma, "not really what I'd eat for dinner."

"At least we're eating...I'll eat anything right now," said Nathan, as he eagerly took the plate from the chef.

Sebastien winked at him. "Ahh, yes, you say you want to eat a horse. I see what I can do."

As he left the room, Nurse Evie came in with several others trailing behind.

“Everyone, we have three more children.” She addressed the three, “Your dinner will be coming along soon.”

The new children sat down, looking forlorn. Just like everyone else, they were missing their hair and were dressed in hospital gowns. Nathan, Emma and Afshin looked at each other to see who would speak first. Nathan finally elbowed Emma.

“Hi. I’m Emma. What are your names?”

A Chinese girl spoke first, softly. “My name is Gabriella, Gabriella Liang.”

A dark-skinned girl went next. Her voice was firm, although still weak. “I am Fatima Shimon.”

A boy was the final one to speak. “Wagner. Sean Wagner.”

Afshin and Nathan introduced themselves, and then Emma talked to the new kids. “Welcome to our little group. I’ve been here the longest, and we’re all together. The same things that are happening to you are happening to us as well. But we’re looking to find out more information on exactly what that means.”

Nathan glared at Emma, and it seemed she got the idea. He didn’t want her saying too much, because they still needed to get to know the new kids.

Dinner was relatively quiet. The others were served food, but did not speak. They were likely still in shock, just like Nathan had been previously. After dinner, they were returned to their rooms. Nathan was excited, wondering and planning how they could find out where the medicine came from. He hoped that if he bided his time and kept his eyes peeled, his chance would come soon.