

The following excerpt is intended for entertainment purposes only.

HOPE'S REBIRTH

By Stephen Chambers

"I want to draw blood and paint, until it hurts my stomach and brings light spots to my eyes—so I feel something. I hate numbness and the itch of emotion that isn't real.

"So much of the world is 'the way I should feel', 'the way that should look', and people stare because their lives are so repetitive that they need calendars to tell the days apart. Living and not knowing why. But afraid of suicide because what if suddenly there is a reason—you don't want to miss it.

"And living for the taste of beer and that temporary buzz, temporary orgasm, temporary feelings, except there's no context. Just feelings in a loveless place of concrete and telephones and television that exist to repress feelings of inadequacy and to bide the time between meals. Between birth, marriage, kids, and death. And everything has been done before. Even this. Especially this--because what if there's no answer? And we're all bleeding."

Blakes, excerpt from recorded conversation, European Intelligence Network 2092 A.D.

Part One

Prologue

Two boys hurried through the brisk autumn air to the end of the street. Ignored by the wealthy carriages and their wigged riders, the boys ran past street merchants and the crowds of poor, who shouted unintelligibly at carriages and then burst into profane laughter.

Oxford Street was a broad lane of stained cobblestones, loud with rattling carriages and click-clonk horses. Men and women in fine overcoats and puffy undergarments talked leisurely as they passed the soiled groups who lounged on the sidewalks and in the stoops and alleyways that surrounded the cluttered row houses. The buildings poked at the London sky like uneven wooden teeth. The air stank of humidity, horse dung and rotting vegetables. Sunday afternoon.

At corner tavern, the boys turned right onto Poland Street.

"I mean, you believe it? Can you?" the younger boy said. "You believe it, William?"

"No," William said.

"Is it war then, do you think?"

"I can not say, Robert."

"What do you think?"

"I have not decided," William said, and a man in a fine suit stuffed a handful of papers into William's hands.

"For the resistance," the man said. "Death to our good Prussian King." William nodded, but when he tried to step past the man, the man shouted, "Repent in the light of equality for all, not just the few, and you shall understand our cause!"

William glanced at the pamphlets: there was a crude drawing of King George III with his trousers at his ankles, being paddled by a team of dock workers.

Robert tugged William's sleeve. "Come on."

The man continued, "We will spread the wealth of all the world equally!"

"I am sure you will," William said, and he clipped the man's shoulder as he passed. "You must try to ignore these lunatics," William told Robert. He ignored the dirty, pink-cheek women selling flowers ahead.

"But, you said that rebellion is—"

"Yes," William said. "But not every rebellion. Simply because something is seditious in the face of tyranny does not make it good. You must learn to separate good from evil."

William smelled biscuits, coffee and beef from an open window. Outside a poor house at the next intersection, old prostitutes, drunks, and skinny children slept in alley boxes. A man was shouting and waving a pistol.

"Damned in the next world!"

"Leave me be! Here, you get your hands off!"

William told Robert not to stare, and they passed a corner criss-crossed with bright graffiti. A man with a white wig and top hat stomped through the intersection, knocking children out of his way. When he smacked a woman, she jumped at him—the

top hat man flicked a knife at her face, and she cowered against the wall, murmuring, "Sorry, I'm sorry."

"Have you been reading in the coffee houses?" Robert asked.

"Have I seen the papers, you mean?"

"Yes, have you?"

"Not today."

"There is going to be a war in America. I heard a man in a top hat say so himself."

William smiled. "Did you?"

"Yes, and I think we should teach them a lesson. Ten years ago, we saved the American rioters from the French."

"Did the man in the top hat say that too?"

They turned onto smaller Broad Street, where William Blake's mother stood by the open door of their house, waiting.

Robert laughed. "You are in trouble again."

"It looks that way."

William's mother said, "Where have you been? Robert, did your brother take you to the market again? Did he? William, are you feeling all right, you look tired? What are those?" William was still holding the pamphlets—she snatched them. "Shall I show these to your father? You are late for Mr. Basire already. We will speak of this tomorrow. Hurry up."

"Mother," Robert said, and he grinned back at William: I told you so. "William would not let me go to the market."

"Why did you leave so soon after services? We will discuss it tomorrow. Get to Mr. Basire, William."

"Yes, mother."

She balled the pamphlets in her fist and tossed them into the street trash with the urine and moldy strawberries. Normally, William might not have gone to his apprenticeship at all on a Sunday, but he had been tardy too often in the past week, too many late night walks had taken their toll. Too much time spent in the confusing and crowded streets of Soho, around his house, in Golden Square, and along the banks of the Thames.

Heading east, William thought about the American protests. Yes, he thought, Robert had been right, as he usually was—impressive for a nine-year-old; the colonists were wrong to neglect their duty. I am ten years older, William Blake thought, and I agree with him.

William thought about something he had seen carved into the sidewalk on Watling Street, between Saint Paul's and the river; he had glimpsed it nine days ago now. The words: I am Coming. He stopped walking. Instead of heading to Mr. Basire's house, William stood on Whitehall road, facing the River Thames. The water was gray, and all of the sail boats and barges seemed pathetic somehow, fragile. William sat on a bench. A well-dressed man and a prostitute walked by. I am Coming.

My God, William thought, where is this going? No one believes in anything, and everyday they find bloated bodies on the river, some suicides, some not. Grain riots and curfews. Where is this going?

"I am coming," William said, and it happened.

It had first happened when he was a baby—his mother had told him years later: 'Yes,' she said, 'when you were young, you saw Moses. My son, you are blessed.'

As William Blake stared at the river, the Thames became a field of grass, with a clearing alongside another river. A young man, tired and frightened, stepped onto a pile of stones. He said something in another language, raised both hands, and then a second man dressed in white stepped through a crowd to the base of the stone pile. The second man pointed a pistol at the young man's chest and shot him. The young man crumpled, and William Blake was back on the bench.

A woman with red hair and a low-cut blouse sat beside him. "Can I give you a turn, eh?"

Without answering, William stood. He was trembling and sweaty.

"Piss off then, bugger-jack," the woman called.

An angel stood by the side of the road, dressed in a white robe. William had seen this angel since he was a young boy.

"It's been a long time," William said.

"Yes," the angel said. People in the street stopped to watch William speak to his angel. "I cannot stay," the angel said. "Peoples understand only so much. Now you can see the swollen stomachs and frozen bones and ruin on that Greek Goddess."

"I do not—"

"You do not have to. Remember never to love. I told you that before."

William said, "How can you ask that? How can I never love anyone?"

"Fever brain gangrene. You will live again. Look."

William saw mountains—no, they were buildings—made of perfect glass. He saw people in metal carriages without horses. The air was almost too thick to breathe, and the peoples' eyes were empty and distracted.

"What . . ." William said. He was alone on the street again. The people watching him laughed and moved on. Oh God, he thought, I understand. That is where this leads. To those faces: to empty eyes. I must work here, he thought. That is why I have been shown this. Milton, thou art my guide: I will live again.

Chapter One

I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow.
And marks in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infant's cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear:

How the Chimney-sweeper's cry
Every blackning Church appalls,
And the hapless Soldier's sigh,
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlot's curse
Blasts the new-born Infant's tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

William Blake, London

The stairs creaked. A small group of men in dirty white uniforms, with swastika clothes tied around their arms, waited at the bottom. A man with long brown hair and a torn white robe came down the steps and into the candlelight. The black swastika sewn onto his chest was fraying. His jaw was tight, but his eyes were calm.

The fourteen soldiers of the Religious Guard who huddled in the cellar watched as their leader, Lord Denon, sat in a simple chair. Denon folded his hands and began to drum his thumbs together. The men waited. Only one of them had an assault rifle, the rest were armed with swords and crossbows.

"This will pass," Lord Denon said at last. "It's still snowing, and I swear to you that we will retake this city."

Following the young King, Vel's, assumption of his position, civil war had broken out in the city of Hope. Lord Denon had been poised to take control of the city's government and dwindling food supplies, until the Frill came. The demons from the southern ruins had rallied around Vel and slaughtered hundreds of the Religious Guard. As Lord Denon had escaped, a flying metal building had landed outside the Palace. A man who claimed to be Blakes—the founder of the city and church of Hope over five-hundred years ago—had stepped off. That was weeks ago, and now, Denon knew, hundreds of police-soldiers had begun to patrol the ruined, snow-filled streets of Hope, searching for survivors. They were organizing neighborhoods and clearing rubble from the war zones. Vel was trying to rebuild.

"The war isn't over," Denon said, and he winced as he breathed. He closed his eyes, concentrated, and the pain subsided.

"Lord Denon," one of the men said, "we believe that we may have a shot at the King outside the Palace. If we post sentries . . ."

"Assassination will simply put the pretender, Blakes, or one of the boy's Generals in command. We don't have soldiers; he does. I want you to obey, not think. Do you understand?"

The priest-soldier swallowed. "Yes, Lord Denon."

"You will wait until I give orders." I must know what these fools intend to do, Denon thought. And who is issuing the orders? Has 'Blakes' taken control—is the King even alive? Wait, Denon told himself, and there will be an opening. God will provide a way. And then they will suffer. Denon thought about the console—the computer system that was accessible only to Blakes's descendants; to the Kings of Hope—there is a connection somewhere . . . something I don't know. I have nineteen men, Denon thought. But it doesn't matter. God will provide.

He said, "Let us pray."

Blakes ducked into the control room of his ship, the Australia. The walls were streaked with mold and dust, and the control room stank of spoiled meat: this room had once been connected via air vents to the conference room where he had hung almost a hundred men, women and children from meathooks. Now those bodies were preserved deep beneath the Frill ruins, mixed into their stone tunnels. The Australia had been reassembled, using some of the Frill-'diggers', as Blakes thought of them. The giant suits of strange-looking armor were actually mechanized organisms; they could reshape matter without touching it. They had freed the Australia from her five-hundred year grave

beneath the ruins, and, with the deposits the Australia had been silently drilling in all that time, she was ready to fly. Now, she sat, slowly collecting snow, in the street across from the half-ruined stone Palace.

Blakes stopped behind the chair of a man who looked like he had been confined to a cave or a prison camp for years. He was emaciated and pale. Blakes had not been thawed and revived by the Australia's animation systems alone.

"How soon?" Blakes asked.

"Soon," Dominique said. He punched a few keyboard commands and brought up a jumble of text and a small, two-dimension grid with an uneven blob of yellow in the center. "See, we're a week or so away. Most of the systems are already active. Just have to re-adjust the stasis lines and a few of the engines and life support. Everything else is already waiting."

Blakes was short, his eyes wide and intense, and he scratched at his balding forehead. And then we go back, he thought, back to Eden. But, the demons here must be cleansed first. I cannot leave the pestilence of bastard-children in my wake or their devil-friends. Everyone in this city will die, and the Frill will die along with them. And then I will wipe out the rest of it, put it back the way it was meant to be. Then I will finally be finished.

"Sir?" Dominique said.

"Yes?"

"Sir, I asked if you've spoken with the King?"

"Yes," Blakes said. "I haven't, but I will. In a few days, I will formally take control."

"The Frill—"

"The demons will fall in line," Blakes said, and he turned to leave. "We came back with a purpose, didn't we?"

"Yes, sir."

"The Australia will need more work?"

"Yes, no—she might. These readings aren't precise." Dominique sighed. "She's been buried underground for five-hundred years, sir, and even if the readouts say we have the minimum we need, I'm still not positive . . ."

"I understand."

"Honestly, I'm surprised she's running at all. I'm surprised we are too."

Five-hundred years in stasis, Blakes thought, and he thought of how his tiny settlement had grown in that time. How the genetic line he had specifically left to rule had been checked with the creation of an Executive Council, a council. And now Vel, the naive boy who supposedly ruled the city, sat in his room without a council, because half of the Executive Council members had died in a civil war that had been fought for control of the city's food supplies. Vel has promise, Blakes thought as he left the control room and walked down a metal hall of rotting posters and ancient tables, toward the outer door at the far end. He is my last descendant, Blakes thought, he can be taught to understand what has to be done—or he can burn along with everyone else.

Chapter Two

"I said I don't want to hear about it. No. Now get out of here and find him—talk to Jak, she's in charge." Vel paced in his bedroom, one hand on the revolver at his waist. A military officer stood just inside the closed door. The royal bed hadn't been cleaned in months, and the huge gold mirrors, engraved with stars and swastikas, were smeared with dust.

"Sir, she doesn't carry a military rank."

"I know that," Vel said. "I don't care, I told whoever it was who was here earlier—"

"General Tonlin, sir."

"—that she is in charge of the police army. Jak is going to find Lord Denon. I want him brought in, understand?" Though he was still in his late teens, Vel looked worn, as if he had somehow aged another ten years prematurely. "What part of that isn't clear?"

"I was sent me to clarify—"

"Consider it clarified," Vel said. "Find Lord Denon."

"Yes, sir."

"Jak is my second-in-command . . ."

"Sir, there are three ranking Generals still serving—"

"I want Jak."

The officer flushed. "Yes, sir. I'll inform the General of your decision, sir."

"Good idea. And while you're doing that, remind the General that right now speaking against the King—disagreeing with me in public—is sedition. Understand?"

The officer tensed. "Yes, sir."

"Go on then."

When he was gone, Vel strapped his sword to his belt, opposite his pistol, shook on a dark overcoat and stepped into the second floor hallway, where three bodyguards, armed with rifles and sabers were waiting.

"Where is Sisha?"

"Downstairs, sir," one of them said. "She's eating dinner."

The stone walls were nicked and scored from old bullets, swords, and arrows. The carpet was gashed and stained. Almost a month ago, Vel had watched the Frill butcher the Religious Guard here, and before that he had seen police soldiers die here, murdered by rioters and by the team of rebels who had helped Vel take the Palace from the late Justice Hillor. They were all dead now, even the ones who had promised to stay alive.

Below, the main entrance hall was crumbling. The right wall had collapsed, along with part of the ceiling and adjacent rooms. Dying, Vel thought, everything has been dying since I became King. Enormous mirrors had shattered, leaving sparkling grains in the floor that the soldiers couldn't clear no matter how many times they swept. All the statues and tapestries had been destroyed, leaving the entrance hall bare.

In the hall, a soldier nodded to Vel and said, "Sir, we heard you were considering General Tonlin for the position of Chief Justice."

Vel kept walking. "No. Jak is Chief Justice, not the General. The General takes orders from me, and now he'll take orders from her too."

Past another cracked stone hall, they entered a large room of cots and refugees in blankets. Beyond, in a second large room, two tapestries still hung: the swastika of the church and the star of the government. Below them, soldiers and refugees crowded around long tables to eat. Vel searched for Sisha: there, near the back, sitting alone at a table, eating a plate of grassfruit with her hands, peeling the rinds open and chewing out the seedy innards.

As Vel walked around the edge of the room, soldiers stepped aside and saluted him. Refugees nodded or stared, whispering. They think I saved them, Vel thought, and he reached Sisha's table. She motioned to the seat across from her.

"How are you?" she asked.

Sisha's skin was a deep bronze, and her eyes were as black as her hair. She had been hired by Lord Denon to seduce Vel. Denon had been raped her, drugged her, and here she was: smiling. Vel sat.

"I am okay," Vel said. "How's the food?"

"It's food," she said. Vel's guards formed a triangle around the table. "What happened with Jak?"

"I don't know. The soldiers want a General in charge. Jak was never in the military was she?"

"Sort of," Vel said. "I think she served in a unit or two before the war. During the war she was acting like an officer for the other side."

"For the rebels."

"Yes."

"And now you want to put her in charge of the police force," Sisha said, "the same people she was trying kill a few weeks ago."

Vel slouched. "Yes, that's right."

"But they say no?"

"Well, they can't say no," Vel said. "All they can do is give me a hard time, make it take longer . . ."

"And while they're doing that, Lord Denon will get away."

Vel scratched his oily hair. "Yes. Not that it makes a difference at this point. Denon is already hiding."

"You should have appointed a General until they found Denon, and then put Jak in charge."

"Don't tell me what I should have done," Vel said. "I don't have any choice—they aren't making this easy. They want a General, and I want Jak. If I had put a General in charge, what do you think would have happened when I tried to replace him? What do you think the General would have done?"

"Okay, okay calm down—"

"You act like this is easier than I'm making it, like I want everyone to fight me on every thing I do. I should have just said, 'Look, I brought the food here, and I've got the Frill to back me up. Here's what I'm doing', but I didn't."

Sisha took his hand and continued to eat. "Are you hungry?"

"No."

"You did the right thing. You don't want to provoke them."

"But I don't want them to push me around either, so where does that leave me? Everyone isn't going to be happy. I'm King, not them, so they should do what I tell them to do, shouldn't they?"

"Yes, they should, but you need to calm down."

He glared around the room, at the refugees. The city of Hope was almost gone. After the civil war, every building that hadn't been blown to pieces was collapsing under the snow that was still falling outside.

"You know how many people are still alive out there?" Vel asked.

"What, you mean total? All of the people in the city?"

"Yes, you know how many?"

"No."

"Neither do I. There were maybe twenty-thousand people before all of this, at the last census. They kept records. Nineteen thousand legitimate births, another estimated one thousand illegitimate. They had it pretty well documented, and then all of a sudden Hillor tries to take over the government. I stopped him, and half of the city revolted against me—so now we don't have any records on anything. Half of those people may be dead, maybe more. That's ten thousand corpses freezing out there, under the snow. What happens when it melts?"

Sisha tried to smile. "You're still here."

"Are you finished eating?"

"No—"

"I'm tired of being pushed around. I'm tired of being told to listen to someone who knows more than I do. I don't want people telling me what I should have to do. I'm in charge, not them."

"I know."

Vel hit the table with one hand—the sound echoed, and the room was silent. They were all staring at him. Vel said, "Don't talk down to me, Sisha."

"I'm not," she said carefully. "You're under a lot of pressure."

A soldier approached from the far side of the room.

"I don't want to be like them."

"You need to sleep—"

"No, listen to me," Vel said. "I don't want to be like Hillor or Denon or whoever else thinks they know how to rule. I have to be better than them."

Vel's bodyguards intercepted the approaching soldier, and called to Vel.

"Blakes wants to see you," the soldier said.

"Send him to my room," Vel said.

"He says that you should—"

"He can come and see me here. He can wait in line like everyone else."

"All right," Sisha said, finished with her grassfruit. They returned to Vel's bedroom with the bodyguards, and Vel dropped onto the stone floor.

"I wish you wouldn't do that," Sisha said.

"Helps my back."

"I mean you have to sleep. You can't sleep on the floor."

"Yes, I can. But right now, we have to build shelters for the city, and we need to find Lord Denon."

"And you're going to personally oversee all of that?"

"Yes. I know what I'm doing."

A knock at the door, and from outside, "Sir, Blakes is here."

Vel told Sisha, "I should talk to him alone."

She left, and Vel called, "Send him in."

Hope was a real city before I became King, Vel thought. Yes, there was horror then; yes, people were hung and the police mounted heads on poles at street corners: but it was still a city, alive. The door opened, and Vel—still sprawled on the floor—watched Blakes step inside. Blakes wasn't big, but the way he stared and kept moving, as if he always had more to say, made him seem larger and more powerful. The living computer system that had been accessible only to Hope's Kings had contained the personality of the founder of the city and church of Hope, Blakes. That Blakes claimed to have been the clone of another man, a William Blake, and now, this man, who waited for Vel to get up and speak with him, said he was both of them: the founder of Hope, Blakes, frozen for five hundred years and preserved, infused with the computer system's mind, his mind.

Vel sat up and his back stabbed at him on the left side.

"How are you?" Blakes asked, his mouth moving differently than the words:

Blakes had explained that tiny machines worked inside his mouth and skull—as they did in the other five members of his original crew who had also been frozen and recently thawed—to modulate and make their words understandable. Language had changed on Hera, in the city of Hope, after five hundred years of history.

"How do I look?" Vel asked.

Blakes smiled. All of his gestures, everything, seemed overly spontaneous. If Blakes frowned, it was because frustration had leapt rapidly through his mind, gone a moment later. It made him seem agitated, always on edge, always moving.

"You've looked better," Blakes said.

"I look terrible," Vel said.

"Yes, you do."

"I'm falling apart. Can't think straight right now. What did you want?"

"We need to make some changes."

They sat in a pair of creaky chairs.

"What are you talking about?" Vel asked. "What changes?"

"I'll be honest," Blakes said. "I like you."

"Good. Now what are you talking about?"

"I'm resuming my place here." Blakes patted him on the shoulder. "I understand you have a sentimental attachment, I understand that. You will still play a role."

"Wait—do you think you can walk in here and take charge? That's what this is?"

"I am resuming my place," Blakes said again. "I began all of this."

"Did you?"

"You know who I am. You brought the computer to the ruins and allowed me to be reborn."

"I didn't allow anything," Vel said, and he stood. "Get out of here."

"No." Blakes folded his hands patiently. "You need to understand the consequences of what you are doing."

"You need to understand this: I'm not your son. You don't get to walk in here and resume your role. I'm King, not you. Do you want me to call those guards from the hall and see which one of us they take orders from?"

Blakes lowered his voice, "Let me explain something to you, Vel. Onboard the Australia—"

"That metal house across the street?"

"Yes, that metal house across the street. Onboard, there are weapons. I'll explain this simply: I could, if I wanted, walk into that metal house, fly into the air, just like I did when I arrived, and make this place burn."

"You're threatening me?" Vel touched his pistol: Blakes was unarmed. "How are you going to do that if I shoot you in the head?"

"Let me finish," Blakes said calmly. "Those weapons—called a missile, like a tube—would burn you and everything for many miles. It would boil your entire city."

"A magic tube," Vel said. "I don't believe you."

"That doesn't matter. If you can imagine it, it can be done." Blakes smiled, as if he wanted to give Vel a hug. "You need to be aware that those weapons exist, and that I control them."

"And if I kill you?"

"Then my crew will control them."

"Vel, you have lost, but you haven't realized it yet. I'm not inhuman, but you need to know that I am in control of the city."

"This a coup. You think you can walk in here with threats of God's wrath and bluff me into submission." Vel drew his pistol.

"This has nothing to do with God."

"Quiet." Vel clicked the safety off and pointed the gun at Blakes's head. "Explain to me again why you're so important."

"You know who I am."

"I know who you say—"

Blakes stood, suddenly angry. "Stop it. You saw it. You know the Australia isn't a flying house anymore than that thing in your hand is a magical crossbow. I came to this planet to do God's Will, and that is what I intend to finish." Blakes pressed his chest to the barrel of Vel's gun. "You're smarter than this, Vel. I want you with me. I don't want you to make the mistake of backing into a corner—even if you say you don't care—in which everyone, everyone dies because of what you've done.

"Think. I'm here to help you. I want order in this city as much as you do. Why wouldn't I? I created this city as a new Eden, the church prophecies are my prophecies." Blakes knocked the gun away. "Don't insult me with this. I'm not here to fight over the scraps of what's left, I am here to do God's work."

Vel looked away. "What's that?"

Blakes gripped Vel's shoulder hard, pulling him close, like a son. "You understand. I knew you did."

"I don't know what to think about you . . ."

"It's all right. Don't think anything right now. Just wait and see."

"Those pictures, in the vaults . . . you hung pictures of starving people—skeleton-people—with numbers on their arms. And all of those bodies under the ruins, all those corpses . . ."

"The past," Blakes said. "We're beyond that now. God's glory in our lifetime. It will be realized."

"And you'll help me?"

"Yes. We'll have a celebration the day after tomorrow, so that people know, so they understand who I am. So that they aren't scared anymore."

Vel shook his head, overwhelmed. "I can't do this again. I can't just let you push me aside."

"I'm not pushing you aside. Look at me, Vel. Look: you are my son, my link to the present. We're in this together."

"The soldiers won't believe it, they won't trust you," Vel said.

"Then you will tell them to. We must believe in each other, Vel."

Vel backed away from him. "I'm being paranoid, aren't I? It's just that, I thought I knew Lord Denon, and the whole time . . ."

"What we will do, no one has ever done before. We can do this. You must believe that we can. God's Will."

"God's Will," Vel said, and he glanced at his bed, at the pistol on the floor. God's Will, he thought, I only wish I knew what that was. He laughed uneasily. "God's Will hasn't gotten us very far."

Blakes became serious. "You're young, you don't know what you're saying. I promise you will understand, all of this will make sense someday. Just wait."