

**The future belongs to
those who show up.**

***Book of Lore* (12th Edition)**

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER ONE

He could feel them inside him, the spiders, inside his veins, moving this way and that, fixing all the parts that were broken. Hundreds of them, maybe thousands, all tiny, each smaller in size than a chain of nucleotides, each weaving their way through his body, his blood vessels, his lymph nodes and nerve channels, stopping at each layer of tissue, rearranging what was out of place, setting straight what was lousy and wrong.

Age had done most of the damage, age and liquor and tobacco and forbidden drugs. Tiny mistakes cumulated through time, mistakes the body had no way to fix.

Evolution had a downside.

Selfish genes replicated in casual abandonment.

Within the double-helix chemistry of deoxyribonucleic acid, there was no organized apparatus — no biological subroutine — for repairing each and every broken copy. DNA lacked, as it were, a Darwinian imperative compelling it to do so. Thus, the same mechanism that permitted evolution also made death inevitable.

Epsilon 1512 could feel the spiders repositioning themselves inside him. The sensation of movement near the base of his ribcage was not just his imagination. The spiders' work was nearly complete. They seemed to be gathering in his belly, just as Nurse Hopkins said they would.

Every person alive, every person born into this world, was condemned at birth to eventually die. Every last one of us is born into this world infected with the seeds of cancer — and of heart disease and of dementia and arthritis. Only the manmade spiders, injected into a person's pulsating veins before it was too late, could prevent the inevitable. Only those people treated in that particular way could have their death sentence commuted.

The pain in Epsilon 1512's abdomen intensified now. Tears streamed from his eyes, eyes that at a younger age had once been blue.

Now, in old age, those same eyes had lost their bright sheen, a victim of encroaching cataracts. The ugly growths cast a gray hue across his visual landscape.

Now, in old age, those gray diseased eyes were clenched shut to block out the pain in his belly.

Epsilon 1512 was tired. Before this all began, he had actually welcomed death, had looked forward to it for some time. His body was worn out, his zest for life diminished.

It was a natural progression, this thing called aging. A process of Nature. Something man should not mess with. It begins in the womb. Violent Birth. Vibrant Youth. Thriving Manhood. Lustful Marriage. Rambunctious

Offspring. Enriching Career. Stimulating Retirement. Pleasant Decline. Peaceful Death. Solemn Grave.

But to lose his identity? To be reduced to a number, to an alphanumeric? How depressing! How downright revolting! In what world is that fair? In what world should a man be forced to surrender his name and his history and accept instead the fifth letter of the Greek alphabet accompanied by a four-digit number? Was this alphanumeric now the sum-total of his existence?

Epsilon 1512 had wanted to die. — *But don't we all?* He had prayed for death. One life was long enough. Epsilon had already had two. *Who needed resurrection? Tell me — who?*

But times and circumstances had changed. Out here in the steaming jungles of Venus, death was no longer an option, not if a man had skills. Skills were valuable, more valuable than dignity. Epsilon 1512 had skills. He had to be kept alive. *He had no choice.*

Before being captured and made to work in the mines, Epsilon had been a soldier, a Recon Scout. He knew handguns and targeting. He knew land-nav and tracking. He knew code-cracking and ciphers, money and finance. He had been married, had two kids, been married again, had two more. After countless years on Venus, countless years as an enslave held against his will, he supposed the whole lot of them were dead. *By rights, he ought to be dead too.*

Instead, Epsilon 1512 landed on the wrong side of a brutish war. He ended up as an enslave here in Slave Camp #5, Domtar Province, planet Venus. In the Venusian lithium mines there was a chronic shortage of skilled slave-labor. It was cheaper to rejuvenate a trained enslave off-planet than transport a new, untrained one from Earth lockup. Thus, the choice was clear. — *Keep them alive. At all costs, keep them alive.*

Epsilon felt the pain, now, in his abdomen. A burning sensation, just below the sternum. The spiders were gathering now in the liver, the last organ to be rebuilt.

That it had gotten this far meant he would survive the procedure. It meant that he would live, that the rejuv had been successful. The process was not one hundred percent you know. When they brought him into the Centre, he was dead, at least as dead as a mortal man could be and still be successfully revived.

Technology had redefined the meaning of Dead. Death was no longer an absolute. Neuroprostheses. Laparoscopic surgery. Organ harvesting. Corrective gene therapy. Bio-algorithms. Each postponed the inevitable.

But every last one of these procedures was carried out at the macro scale, an artery here, an organ there, a bone graft over yonder. — And none of it was permanent.

The spiders were the first to get at the heart of the matter. The first to fix things at a micro level. Tiny little manmade creatures, not much larger than a virus, built to attack disease and aging at the cellular level, down where messenger RNA and her many obedient soldiers held sway.

Certain things could not be fixed, of course. Macro things mainly. That rib you broke as a kid, falling out of a tree. That scar on your knee where you hit the pavement, falling off your bicycle. These were macro injuries. The body had healed them in the customary fashion. Whatever scars were left behind from those incidents would always remain. Not even the spiders could regenerate a lost appendage.

But what *could* be fixed — and not with great difficulty — were the ATP factories harbored deep within each cell, the mitochondria.

What *could* be fixed were the errant cells, the shortened chromosomal telomeres, the tumors, the cancers that might spin out of control, destroying one's body from within.

What *could* be fixed was the lung damage from smoking, the liver damage from alcohol, the brain and kidney damage from Deludes. Suddenly a man was twenty years old again, with yet another prime to live.

But it was no longer a case of youth being wasted on the young.

The second time around a man had the accumulated knowledge and experience of an eighty-year-old — or, in the case of Epsilon 1512 — a one-hundred-and-forty-year-old.

God! How he wished they would have killed him instead!