

Excerpt from **The SEED of CRONUS: A Novel** by Jack Hughes

After a lifetime of fuck-ups and failure he had finally made it. Big Time. At least it was Big Time for him. He couldn't believe the money he'd been making. The commercial success of his animated rip-off of those great old *Gunsmoke* radio shows meant that he really didn't even have to work very hard any more. He still storyboarded the episodes, of course, and supervised the artists that they'd brought in. But the workload was nothing like the grueling eighteen-hour, seven-day weeks that were required to get the first ten episodes ready for the network. He had personally produced every frame, that is, he and the Tweener animation program whose algorithm automatically interpolated between the start and stop of action sequences, filling-in the frames.

The unlikely commercial success of the show was a classic rags-to-riches story. Great scripts written almost eighty years ago, brilliant copyright-free performances by a talented cast and a little artistic talent had given him a totally unexpected ride to the beach.

Until that fucking letter from the Doctrine Enforcement Authority came.

After his miraculous escape from the DEA detention facility, Bradley had time to reflect on what he might have done differently. Obviously, the rational thing would have been to take a tranquilizer, paste on one of those happy faces everyone was walking around with, wholeheartedly agree with every crazy thing that wrinkled-up old mummy said, blame the whole thing on a junior-level staffer who would be fired, apologize, and promise nothing like that would ever happen again. Then ask her to pray with or for him. Whichever.

Bradley could almost forgive that wrinkled-up shrew. She was probably insane. Who else could go nuts over seeing a vertical line and a dot on a cartoon woman's chest for maybe one second? But those DEA goons that beat him up for no reason, the creepy white-stripers with their shaved-heads ... the theological examiners ... they were the ones he really hated.

Bradley knew he was fucked as soon as he was arrested. Nobody beat the scanner. His religious beliefs had always run from skeptical to non-existent, which was easily confirmed after the Psy-Cog examiner mapped his memory and the neural architecture of his cognitive functions.

After informing him that any hesitation in his responses or other signs of evasion would be considered a failure of the examination, the DEA theological investigator asked, "What is your full name?"

"Clayton Arlen Bradley."

The investigator asked, "Where do birds fly?"

"The sky?"

"What was the name of your high school?"

"Kelso High School."

"What lies west of the North American continent?"

"The Pacific Ocean?"

"What is six times seven?"

"Forty-two."

"What color is your refrigerator?"

"White."

"What color were your mother's eyes?"

"Brown."

"Where do you put your car keys when you get home?"

"Uh ... on this little table thing by the front door."

"What was your first pet's name?"

"Pixie."

"What is your maternal grandmother's first name? Your mother's mother's name?"

"Alma."

"Where did you go on the first vacation you can remember?"

"Uh... Disneyworld."

Seemingly random questions like those continued for approximately ten minutes. Then the examiner got to the crux of the matter, asking, "Who is Jesus"?

"Jesus Christ is my personal savior, the son of God," Bradley replied, giving it his best shot.

Finally, instead of asking a question the investigator instructed, "Describe your relationship with God."

Unfortunately, Bradley's relationship with God was the same as his relationship with Zeus. Prior to his incarceration, he found the notion of a bearded God on a celestial throne to be childish Bronze Age nonsense. But now such thoughts were not only illegal, they were detectable.

The words came out of Bradley's mouth as sincerely as he could say them. God this and Jesus that. But it was all for nothing. On the examiner's screen, Bradley's ventromedial prefrontal cortex remained dark, while his amygdala, rostral cingulate, caudate, and thalamus lit up as he fabricated his response. Invented an answer. Lied.

Nobody beat the scanner. The examiner sitting behind the console gave the DEA theological investigator a thumbs-down hand gesture.

Bradley vividly recalled the TI bending over so that their faces were just a little over an inch apart, separated mainly by the obstruction created by the scan hood fitted securely to Bradley's head. In his black uniform in the darkened interrogation chamber, the TI's bald head looked disembodied, his browless eyes dark pools reflecting dots of light from the fMRI-scan control panel. "For God so loved the world He gave His only begotten Son so that you might have everlasting life. But you reject Him. You reject God's gift of eternal life. Is that a wise choice?"

Insignificant men endowed by the state with the power to inflict pain without consequence will almost always do so. Bradley had already learned the best policy was absolute, total compliance and humility.

"No sir, it is not."

"No it is not. But we've had your type in here before Mister Bradley. You think you're smart, don't you?" The DEA investigator was still in his face. Bradley could tell what the white-striper had for lunch, but he didn't know how to answer his question.

"Uh, I don't understand, sir."

"I said, you think you're smart, don't you." It wasn't a question.

Bradley was sticking with abject humility. "No sir, I do not. If I was smart I wouldn't be in this position."

The DEA investigator frowned, straightened up and looked down at Bradley, strapped into a wheeled restraint with his head immobilized by the scan hood. The examiner busied himself at his console, typing at his keyboard.

"You are a liar!" the DEA theological investigator bellowed suddenly, causing both Bradley and the scan examiner to flinch. "That was a smart answer. It was the answer of a man

who thinks himself clever, but who wants to evade punishment for his sins. You'll never earn God's mercy with clever answers Mister Bradley."

The TI straightened, pulled down on his tunic to remove the wrinkles and smiled. "You're not the first so-called smart man I've encountered in this position. Men who pride themselves on their so-called intellect. Their so-called reason. Their so-called logic. Men who think themselves too smart for God. Oh, I've interviewed hundreds of so-called smart men and women just like you, strapped-in just as you are right now, condemned by their wicked thoughts and evil hearts. It used to be that sinners like you could fool the faithful. But now, through the grace of God, we have the technical means to ferret-out those who bear false witness. Now, praise Jesus, we can peer into the true inner heart – and brain – of man and eliminate impurity and corruption from our midst."

Four armed DEA troopers entered the examination chamber. They had been summoned when Bradley failed the scan.

"Do I hear a *Thank you, Jesus?*" the DEA theological investigator called.

"Thank you Jesus!" the four troopers and the fMRI-scan examiner responded in unison.

"You didn't thank Jesus, Mister Bradley?" the TI asked.

"Thank you, Jesus," Bradley replied softly.

The DEA theological investigator motioned for the troopers to wait, then he bent back down so that he was almost nose-to-nose with Bradley again. "We want to help you now Mister Bradley. We have a way to help so-called smart, smug, prideful men who have rejected God, rejected God's gift of eternal life. You simply need to see the error of your thinking, to learn that faith comes from the heart not the head, and to discover the cost of rejecting God. We do that with Satan-X. Have you heard of Satan-X, Mister Bradley?"

Bradley had heard. He tried to answer, but only croaked. His mouth was very, very dry.

"Sorry, I didn't hear that. Well, I'll explain it to you. Some call it torture but that's not the point at all. The point of torture is to inflict pain, usually to extract information. But we already have all the information, Mr. Bradley. We want to give that information to you. That information is, of course, that God loves you. Jesus loves you. And you may not realize it right now, but we love you too, Mr. Bradley. We love you enough to help you overcome your sinful pride, your rebelliousness, your disobedience to God. Ever since Eve tricked Adam into eating of the Tree of Knowledge, many men's pride in their so-called intellect has made them deaf and blind to the truth of God. But no matter how resistant the corrupted mind may be to the truth, the body may still learn and understand. Satan-X is just as it sounds Mister Bradley. It gets the Devil out of you. It does this by giving you a taste of Hell. Do you know what the worst part of Hell is Mister Bradley? It is being deprived of the presence of God. You are going to be deprived of the presence of God. Then, when God comes back into your life we will examine you again, to see if you still reject Him, to see if you've learned to accept God into your true inner heart. Is that understood? Do you understand Mister Bradley?" The TI was smiling benevolently. "We are going to try to save your immortal soul in spite of yourself."

The DEA theological investigator smiled broadly, genuinely, and patted Bradley on the shoulder. "And why do we do this Mister Bradley? Because God is love. Let me hear an amen."

The DEA troopers and the Psy-Cog examiner shouted a practiced "Amen!" in unison.

Bradley didn't bother to answer. Nobody beat the scanner. He knew he'd just been sentenced to either death by chemical torture or the stoning pits.

With a gesture from the TI, the troopers disconnected him from the scanner and wheeled him out. He was taken through a long corridor and down an elevator to another area where he

was stripped of his orange prison jumpsuit and told to put on an adult diaper, made difficult by his humiliation and the fact that he was shaking so badly. He was then quickly, roughly, secured on a gurney, his hands cuffed at opposite sides of the frame, heavy straps across his forehead, waist, knees and ankles. He was then rolled into a large room in which the preponderance of heart monitors and IV stands gave the appearance of a surgical suite, with rows of blue-curtain screens concealing ... what?

Two of the numerous shaved-head, black-uniformed orderlies wheeled the gurney into position between an IV hanger and a heart monitor, both on wheeled stands. Terrified, Bradley screamed "What are you putting in me?" as one of the DEA orderlies inserted a hypodermic syringe into his left arm, taped it into position, connected a clear plastic tube to one of the IV bags hanging from the stand, turned a little knob on the valve under the bag, and fluid began flowing into the tube, down into his arm and into his vein.

The DEA orderlies were too busy joking and gossiping to answer Bradley's frantic questions. They simply ignored him, casually chatting to each other while affixing wireless sensors to his chest and head. An oxygen mask was then fitted over his face, muffling any further questions or protests. The rapidly increasing tempo of his heart monitor's beep-beep-beeping revealed his increasing panic, joining the diminishing-by-distance cadence of other identical beeps – the chorus of the condemned – filling the silence between the sporadic laughter of the orderlies.

Bradley was just another of the miserable sinners here for processing. Here for the Satan-X. Here to have his wicked soul saved, by the Grace of God. It was all in a day's work for the Doctrine Enforcement Authority. They were doing the Lord's Work.

Soon, a shaved-head DEA doctor, distinguished by a white coat worn over his black uniform, approached. He was pushing a cart containing a complex-looking machine with lots of hoses and indicator lights. On top of the machine was a tray containing what appeared to be an assortment of medical instruments. Bradley's heart was racing. He strained uselessly against the straps which held him securely.

The white coat pushed the cart next to his gurney and leaned over to reach for something behind Bradley's head. Bradley heard a mechanical click and then almost instantly detected a change in the smell and taste in the gas mix coming through the oxygen mask. It was a mist making his lips and tongue numb.

"Don't hold your breath. Breathe it in and out. It's a local anesthetic – to relax your throat, your larynx," the DEA doctor said.

The black-uniformed orderlies assumed their customary positions to assist in the procedure. Without intubation and use of a ventilator, nobody would ever survive the effects of Satan-X which, among its other effects, paralyzed the autonomic nervous system which controlled respiration.

The DEA doctor nodded and one of the orderlies ripped the oxygen mask off Bradley's face. Before he could utter any protests or objections the bald-headed orderly clamped a hand over his nose and mouth, cutting off his airway. Bradley frantically struggled against his restraints, panicking, breaking out in a sweat from his useless exertions.

As the practiced seconds ticked off, Bradley was jerking so violently that the gurney was rocking. His face reddened and his eyes were watering. Finally, the doctor positioned the laryngoscope near his unwilling patient's head and said, "Okay."

The DEA orderly removed his hand and Bradley gasped for breath, mouth wide open. Taking advantage of the brief window of opportunity, the DEA doctor quickly plunged the

laryngoscope down Bradley's throat. "Got it, first time," he said as he expertly inserted the endotracheal tube, inflated it, checked the connection to the ventilator, and then stepped back to admire his work.

"That was smooth, doc," one of the orderlies said.

Bradley couldn't breathe. It was like his chest wouldn't inflate and he was gagging on that gigantic *thing* in his mouth and throat. It was *strangling* him. He had to cough and he couldn't. Then *whoosh*, and Bradley's chest heaved. *Ohgodohgodohgod*. Then the process repeated, the gagging, the urgent, impossible urgency to cough and then *whoosh*. Bradley arched against the straps, every muscle straining.

The other DEA nurse removed a different IV bag from the tray and hung it on a hook on the opposite side of the first bag. The white-coat wrapped a rubber tube around Bradley's right arm, pulled it tight and knotted it, then swabbed the inside of his elbow with alcohol and said, "This may sting a little bit," which induced chuckles from the orderlies. The white-coat inserted another needle inside the brachial vein on his right arm and taped it in place. The shaved-head in the white coat then uncoiled the tube from the second IV bag, which contained a pale orange liquid, and connected it to the IV needle he had just inserted in Bradley's arm.

His chest heaving at the ventilator's mechanical cadence, Bradley watched, wide-eyed, tears streaming, as the white coat reached over and twisted a knob at the bottom of the second IV bag allowing gravity to pull the pale orange fluid into the tube, down towards his arm where the hypodermic needle inserted into his brachial vein would allow the Satan-X, to ravage his nervous system.

The drip was so slow that it took almost a minute for the Satan-X to enter his vein, which immediately signaled its presence in his bloodstream by an intense burning sensation at the inside of his elbow, which then shot like a super-heated pyroclastic flow up his arm, then his chest, then his heart. Then his entire body exploded in searing, burning pain. It was excruciating. Unbearable. The pain was so intense it penetrated every atom of his consciousness. And it kept getting worse ... and then worse ... and still worse. He wasn't even conscious of the fact that he had lost control of his bowels and bladder, all bodily function now haywire under the sudden chemical assault. The pain was so absolute that he lost the ability to perceive all other sensation. He was unable to feel the straps that he was unconsciously straining against nor the gurney beneath him. Then his body collapsed back down on the gurney as the paralytics hit. But amazingly, the pain continued to worsen. His brain was short-circuited by pain overload, but due to the stimulants in the IV mix he could not even black out. He was floating alone in an infinite red void of unimaginable pain, far, far beyond mere agony.

Afterwards he remembered lights at one point during the ordeal. Had he surfaced from that void for just a moment? Had he blacked out at some point, forcing them to revive him to ensure that unconsciousness would not deprive him of the benefits of the treatment? He vaguely remembered being blinded by the bright lights, man-sized shapes moving and people talking. Did he hallucinate it?

Bradley's memories of what came after were hazy, the trauma to the human nervous system, to the human psyche, after a treatment with Satan-X were substantial and well-documented. He'd undergone at least two additional scans and several rounds of Satan-X. How many? He didn't know. It had been worse than he could have imagined.

Due to the fugue state caused by the cycles of Satan-X and sedatives the only thing Bradley had been certain about was his pathetically eager willingness to believe. But for some reason, his brain kept betraying him. No matter how profound his conscious conversion, and he was

desperately sincere, his unconscious mind kept insisting he was lying. Nobody beat the scanner. He had reached the end of his physical and mental endurance.

Then Dixon conferred the Seed.

Despite the ravages of the Satan-X and the effects of the sedatives, Bradley most certainly remembered Dixon. How could he forget? It was like something out of the great old sci-fi movies they used to make before the New Covenant. Like getting a visit from a real-life Jedi master or having Neo pop-in from the Matrix.