

Prologue

“Just as ripples spread out when a single pebble is dropped into water, the actions of individuals can have far-reaching effects.”

Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama

A giant was dying on Mars. Not a human-shaped construct like those of myths and fairy tales—those beings were merely the reflection of the inner desires of humanity to be greater than their fellows—nor was this a metaphoric giant, such as the great leaders of humanity’s short existence in the ancient cosmos—such figures were no more than specks of dust compared to this titanic leviathan, who had once ruled over the red planet.

The dying leviathan’s death throes shook the very surface of Mars. The races of Mars retreated, knowing the Great Brain’s life leaked away daily. The name, “Great Brain,” was not an allegorical title, but a simple description of this monstrous horror that had once called all of the red planet its fiefdom.

The Great Brain was a Brobdingnagian organ, a brain whose vastness hid beneath Olympus Mons, the largest mountain on Mars. The titanic structure of stone and sward barely contained the immense tissues and electrical impulses that empowered this dying deity.

The mountain home of the titan shook each day as its power weakened and caused segments of the vast mind to fail and harden. The Great Brain convulsed, seeking a means of preventing its imminent demise—an end that was mere days away. The monstrous mind shrieked as each cell failed, feeling death for the first time in millennia. No longer could it feed on the inhabitants of Mars, or use the bestial “vampires” as its dreaded aerial hunting hounds. Death, formerly a philosophical state that only others faced, finally existed as a reality for the Great Brain.

As more cells and neurons expired, the Great Brain screamed in defiance, disregarding the universe’s edict, determined to live another million years. And there was only one place this terrible, vampiric creature wished to rule: Earth. Had it not been the Earthling, Robert Darvel, that had caused the natives to revolt against their living God? That world deserved subjugation beneath its will—a true enslavement, not the distant method that had reduced the inhabitants of Mars to savagery.

Its decision taken, the Great Brain detached a shard of itself and, summoning what little power it had left, hurled that splinter into the ethereal void.

A lightning bolt sailed from Olympus Mons, traveling towards the blue-green star that appeared only as a distant speck to the inhabitants of the red planet. The thirty-four-million-mile distance was traversed in a mere instant, thwarting the laws of physics through a method known only to the dying god of the red planet.

The bolt struck the Earth, enveloping the closest human near it. At once, the human’s mind, once a barely used object, filled with the thoughts, memories, and, for lack of a better term, soul of the Great Brain of Mars.

The human collapsed under the weight of the experience, unable to control the immense energy as it exploded outward.

Then, a secondary explosion rocked the street where the human stood. Fire leaped from a nearby building and the screams of many victims filled the air as the building collapsed.

Ignoring the conflagration, the Great Brain, existing now in the weak, miniscule body of a young human, dusted off his inexpensive clothes and headed into the night. There was much work to do—a new world to enslave...

And so, the Great Brain had tossed its first pebble in the pool that is time and space, transforming the Earth forever.

By appearing on one random street in the city of Sarajevo, its energy had ignited a bomb in a nearby apartment. The explosion caused the death of a man named Danilo Ilić and his followers—a terrorist cell known as the Black Hand.

Thus, on the next day, 28 June 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie, passed through the city unmolested. The remaining members of the Black Hand, most notably the Chief of Serbian Military Intelligence, Dragutin Dimitrijević, found themselves discredited, and later outlawed. The Austro-Hungarian Empire never declared war upon Serbia, never triggering the various alliances of European powers to begin the terrible conflict known to us as the Great War—World War I.

Millions of lives, once lost to that war, survived, shaking the very fabric of the universe. The ripples spread, becoming a tidal wave, transforming the Earth and starting the world anew...