

# To Hell and Back

The day was still quite young as the sun strived to reach its midday apex. A large shadow cast from the administrative building created a cool refuge for several small sparrows foraging in the damp shaded grass. Within, the Medical Board was still actively pursuing the truth in regards to Bradford's accusations from the day before. But it was not Bradford under the interrogation spotlight this time.

"Let me reiterate the question. Did you specifically hear him say he was performing these unauthorized experiments?" Tunney's demeanor was stern and direct.

The figure across the table was clearly intimidated as they fidgeted with a pen, but ultimately responded. "It was very clear to me that he was indicating the experiments being performed were beyond the original scope of the Delta wave research. Yes, that I'm sure of."

"You realize, these are very serious accusations and that this entire Board has been compromised because of Dr. Bradford's overzealous attitude. I hope you've considered the consequences if what we find does not corroborate your story." Tunney was attempting to dissolve any loyalties between the individual in front of her and Bradford. "Dr. Bradford does not have the authority that he professes, and you would be wise to distance yourself from him until these proceedings adjourn. I suggest that you keep to yourself and

perform your duties. You have been a valuable member of our staff and we would hate to see you leave involuntarily.”

Tunney’s indirect threat had the desired effect. The figure nodded solemnly, as if just being scolded, and departed the room with great haste.

Wright had been awake for well over twenty-four hours and there seemed to be no stopping him. His eagerness had turned into obsession. Still situated at his primary workstation, he was tapping away at the keyboard. As he completed a sequence of entries, the computer made several audible clicks and finally ejected a tray containing a single compact disc. Retrieving the disc, he picked up a nearby cordless phone and began to dial.

“Hello,” the voice queried on the other end.

“Hey Chris, it’s Jack,” Wright replied as he located a cardboard envelope and placed the compact disk inside. “How’s it going? And how’s your sister doing?”

“I’m doing alright, but my sister’s taking it really hard. It looks like I’ll have to take care of all the arrangements myself and, to make matters worse, my father’s body was delayed in Cleveland. But overall, the support here has been tremendous. My father had a lot of great friends.” Merritt, still shaken by the subject, abruptly diverted the conversation. “So anyway, how’s the research going?”

“Well, that was one of the reasons I called you. I really can’t go into detail right now, but I’m sending you the bulk of my research and findings on a CD. This way, in the event that something happens to me, at least I’ll know it’s in safe hands.”

Merritt chuckled nervously. “Come on Jack, you don’t really believe that Bradford would threaten your life. I mean,

yeah the guy's been a royal pain and all, but he's definitely not a killer."

"Well, I wasn't really thinking about Bradford to be honest with you, but I'm just covering all the bases. You never know when your number might be up."

Merritt was growing concerned. There was something very resolute in Wright's tone, but he just couldn't place a finger on it at the moment. "Jack—you're starting to scare me. Promise me you're not going to do anything foolish."

"Define foolish," Wright said deliberately.

"Well..." Merritt was at a lost for words. He had heard this tone in Wright's voice before, and usually it was an indication that he had set his mind to do something. It also meant that whatever Wright was planning to do, nothing that Merritt could say would dissuade his friend from executing his plan. "Just promise me you'll keep me informed. Stay in touch. Okay?"

"Sure thing Chris. Listen—I still have a lot to do here, so take care of yourself and let your sister know that I'm very sorry about your dad, and if I can make it to the funeral, I definitely will."

On the other end, Merritt replaced the receiver and pondered for a moment. He had a horrible premonition that this might be the last conversation he would ever have with his friend.

Wright, on the other hand, was now on a mission. Along with capturing the last moments of John's life, he had also captured critical frequencies and waveforms needed to establish a connection. A connection to another world—another dimension? He could only hazard a guess as to where it might lead him, but wherever it was, he sincerely hoped to find Cassandra there.

He returned to the computer station and began to reorient the equipment. Producing a set of cables with pads attached on one end, he made several connections on the back of the computer until each connection was terminated. Next, he removed the table positioned in the center of the room and replaced it with a large comfortable chair. Measuring the cables visually, he positioned the chair slightly closer to the computer and extending the cables to their full length, draped them over the back of the chair.

After thoroughly examining his setup, he was content that everything was ready to go. He took a deep breath and retreated to the bathroom for a nice hot relaxing shower.

The phone at Andrea's desk rang out. She waited for a second ring and picked up the receiver. "Dr. Bradford's office. How may I help you?"

"Andrea—hi, this is Dr. Merritt. I know you don't know me very well, but Jack Wright seemed to express some confidence in you. And right now, I don't know how to say this, but I think he might be in danger."

Andrea's tone became somewhat urgent. "What do you mean? How is he in danger?"

"It's hard to explain, but let's just call it a hunch. I know Jack pretty well and the last time I talked to him, I sensed something very ominous in his tone."

Andrea tried to maintain composure as she spoke. "So, what can I do? Please, tell me!"

"Look. I don't think he's in any immediate danger, but if you could just stop by his house, I'd be indebted to you. I hate to put you in such an awkward position, but..."

Andrea quickly intervened. "Doctor, its no problem at all. When do you think would be a good time?"

“Well, if you could just swing by after work I think that would be fine. No point in alarming anyone. As I said, it’s just a hunch, so please don’t mention that I suggested this. I don’t want him to know that I’m checking up on him. Anyway, here’s the address,” Merritt proceeded to recite the address to her.

“I understand. I’ll tell him I got his address from personnel. Maybe I could even persuade him to go to dinner.” Andrea smiled at the thought.

“Sounds good. And thank you. It’s probably nothing, but I’d feel a lot better knowing that it’s just my paranoia.”

Wright emerged from the bedroom in some fresh attire and walked over to the computer. Staring at the monitor for a moment, he finally entered a single keyword. The computer reacted instantly, displaying a window in the center of the screen. The information within the window was much more uniform than the previous windows and contained several numerical values including frequencies.

He retrieved the cables with the pads and began affixing them to his head, chest and hands. Once in place, he awkwardly moved back towards the computer and struck a key. A second window appeared with a graphical representation of the connection points on his body. The numbers in the main window began to fluctuate as electrical signals passed from his body into the computer.

Finally, Wright positioned himself in the chair and waited patiently for something to happen. He really had no idea what he was looking for, but he knew that he would recognize it when it came.

One of the numbers within the main window began to increment slowly as if pausing with each increment. The

process was arduous and several minutes had passed as Wright continued to wait for something—anything to happen. And yet, as prepared as he was, nothing could have humanly prepared him for what was about to occur.

Directly in front him, a blinding light began to radiate from what appeared to be a tear in physical space. Wright leaned back slightly in his chair as the tear continued to grow and expand. Yet, something was urging him to move towards the opening. He resisted momentarily, but it seemed as if his body had lifted up and began to float directly into it. Amazingly, he glanced back to find that his physical body was still positioned in the chair.

As he entered the opening, everything around him dissolved into pure white. Glancing back once again, he could no longer see his own body or any trace of the room. He lifted his hand to see if he had any physical presence and was relieved to find that he still had all of his extremities. “I still got ten fingers and ten toes,” he mused.

Suddenly, his hand began to melt into a grotesque mixture of red, pink and white fluid. Wright’s eyes widened with horror at the sight. The process began to work its way up his arm and he eventually screamed out. Within a split second, his hand had returned to normal. Slightly bewildered by the event, he extended and retracted his fingers several times. Satisfied that his hand was again intact, he finally dropped it to his side and out of view.

“Jack,” a voice called out softly. Wright instantly recognized the voice and responded, “Cassandra? Where are you? I can’t see you.”

“Jack, you have to go back. You don’t belong here. You have to go back,” The voice whispered.

“Cassandra! Please just let me see you,” Wright pleaded desperately.

“Jack, you don’t belong here. Go back now, while you still can.” There was a little more urgency in the voice this time.

“I don’t understand. Please show yourself. Let me know that it’s really you...”

Before he could utter another word, his surroundings became extremely dark and dismal. The screams and cries of an indeterminable number of voices crashed upon his eardrums. He tried to cover his ears, but it made no difference. The horrid wails were becoming unbearable.

As he glanced around he could see only a vast ocean of tormented and tortured souls, twisting and writhing in sheer agony. On closer inspection, he noticed a variety of macabre and gruesome acts unfolding before his very eyes. The participants didn’t seem willing as they were forced to carry out their own torturous deaths.

One man had a gun in his hand, and as he raised it to his mouth he fought desperately with his other hand to push the gun away. Wright flinched as the gun fired and the man’s head exploded in a mist of crimson. The man dropped to his knees, but within moments all the bits of flesh and bone had recomposed themselves, and the man was making yet another futile attempt to resist the inevitable bloody outcome.

Wright turned in another direction only to find a young woman standing on a ledge fighting to maintain her balance. But to his dismay, she eventually hurled herself off. She flailed her arms and legs helplessly as she fell, until finally and abruptly, she hit the ground. Wright cringed at the crushing sound and the sight of her flesh being perforated by the broken and splintered bones. Again the woman was

returned to her pre-mangled state only to repeat the same horrific act over and over again.

Yet, even more bizarre things were beginning to unfold. One man was running from what appeared to be a large video game caricature. Wright had almost laughed until the man was picked apart, limb by limb, and ultimately consumed by the pixilated beast.

He was beginning to realize that the means in which these people were dying were not necessarily how they actually died, but more likely what they had feared most in real life. Wright flinched at the thought of his own worst fears materializing as they did in his nightmares.

“My God,” he mumbled under his breath, but his statement was clearly heard. In response, the screams had increased to a deafening level. Up until that moment, Wright had essentially gone unnoticed, but now everyone’s attention was focused on him. Hundreds upon hundreds of these grotesque figures rushed in towards him and began groping and grabbing at his flesh.

“You should’ve left it alone,” echoed from every direction as he fought off the numerous prodding hands.

“Get off me! Damn you! Get off me,” he screamed, but his cries seemed to merely intensify the frenzy. He fought to stay on his feet, but even this was becoming difficult as the crowd surged around him.

Suddenly, the chaos ceased and the crowd began to divide as if to make a path for someone or something. Wright finally regained his footing and strained to make out the figure that was rapidly approaching through the crowd. As it grew closer, Wright came to the realization that the people were not voluntarily dispersing, but actually fighting to get clear of the evil. For if anyone stood in its path, they were horribly maimed.

When the beast finally emerged from the darkness, Wright was even more terrified at the hideous sight than ever before. This was not a dream. The stark reality and lethal nature of this beast was becoming more apparent as it came to bear.

Towering at over three meters, it was a massive creature with a huge crab-like head and four muscular limbs, each armed with six-inch long curved talons. Protecting its entire body was a glistening black armor plating covered with hundreds of spiked appendages—deadly enough in their own right. Its razor sharp teeth dripped with venomous saliva and its cold black eyes mirrored Wright's reflection. As it exhaled, its putrid mist brought instantaneous nausea.

Finally face to face with Wright, it spoke. "So, we meet again," it hissed. "You've been warned time and time again and now you will pay the price for your disobedience—for all eternity!" Its insidious laughter resonated like thunder.

Raising its lethal talons, the beast prepared to strike. Wright instinctively raised an arm in defense and as the talons came crashing down, his arm was swiftly detached. Wright screamed in agony and instantly dropped to his knees, clutching the bloody stump. Surely, he thought he would suffer the same fate as everyone else trapped in this hellish existence.

As the beast cocked its head back to strike, Wright closed his eyes in anticipation of the inevitable and painful death. Instead, he felt two hands fall upon his shoulders, and as he opened his eyes the beast vanished in a wisp of smoke. The surroundings had returned to the pure alabaster radiance as before and a blissful silence now filled the air.

Wright was reluctant to turn around, but cautiously peered over his shoulder to see who or what had a hold on him. He

was overwhelmed with joy as he turned to find Cassandra standing there.