

INTRODUCTION

What Came Before

THE WORLD WAS CHANGING FAST. Technological advances were coming so rapidly that they severely disrupted a global economy that was unable to adjust quickly enough. Worldwide recession settled in and threatened to become permanent depression. Meanwhile, these same advances also made it possible for even the poorest nations to develop lethal weaponry.

Rising unemployment and financial uncertainty triggered a wave of nationalism that swept from country to country and continent to continent. Fear led to mistrust, which led to hostility. Political leaders—not knowing what else to do—did what they’d always done: they blamed problems on their political opponents, and on outsiders. A growing sense of helplessness combined with the proliferation of nuclear weapons to greatly escalate the danger of open conflict.

Leaders from two separate organizations independently saw where the madness was headed, and each developed a secret plan of last resort.

The Order was an ancient organization, long steeped in mysticism and alchemy, but over time it had evolved into a technological behemoth. Its tendrils were spread across borders and throughout the scientific and engineering worlds. As war approached, John Martin, head of the Order, directed vast resources to create what he called ‘Sanctuaries’, living time capsules intended to preserve human progress for future generations.

These Sanctuaries were constructed in secret, and geographically hidden in natural underground caverns. They were equipped and staffed with the very best tools and scientists. If war came, Sanctuaries would provide shelter from the destruction. Later, the survivors would emerge to rebuild the world.

For decades the Order had also been working on a set of clandestine genetic engineering programs, a long-term effort intended to improve human design by developing all new characteristics. In addition to their primary goal, each Sanctuary was also charged with continuing these efforts, collectively termed the Future Man project.

Separately, leaders from the three major monotheistic religions—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—also recognized the danger of apocalypse. They met in secret, searching for a way to stop the madness. These leaders recognized that action was needed to avert war, but that their chance of success was small. The urgent threat to human existence compelled them to abandon their customary mistrust of each other and to dedicate their combined power, influence, and wealth toward a single purpose. To that end, they formed a joint hierarchy called the Council of God.

The Council ordered emergency reserves of food, water, and tools to be secreted for use after war, to save as much human life as possible. Like the Order, they hid the reserves in natural underground caverns worldwide, and assigned clergy to each location. These ‘priests’ would become the new leadership if the worst happened. The Council placed much of the blame for the coming war on two root causes: a loss of faith by the population, and the spread of dangerous knowledge and technologies. Besides saving as much human life as possible, the clergy was also given an additional charter: lead survivors to a simpler, faith-based life in the new world, and limit the spread of dangerous knowledge. They believed that a population rooted in faith and based in an agrarian economy would be far less likely to repeat the predicted destruction.

The war everyone feared came and billions died. Most of the world, along with almost all of the emergency food reserves, and the Order’s Sanctuaries, were destroyed. Only the Land escaped the

apocalypse. It was in the Land that two of the Order's Sanctuaries—always built in pairs—and one of the Council's reserves endured.

Survivors from the Sanctuaries and the new Council of God leadership only learned of each other's existence after the war, when the Order members emerged from their hiding places. The Council was suspicious of the Order, and the Order was wary of the religious hierarchy's purpose. Still, the two groups managed to form an uncomfortable partnership and penned an agreement they called The Balance. It stipulated that the Order keep its core knowledge secret. They could provide the benefits of a modern civilization, but not disclose how the underlying technologies worked. Further, the Order was to acknowledge that the Council was senior in their arrangement, and agree to not openly challenge its leadership.

The Balance forced compromise, and created a successful collaboration that lasted over 150 years. However, everything changed once the Future Man programs were accidentally revealed. These efforts had always been at the very heart of the Order's charter, and enormous progress had been made following the war. A number of the human products from Future Man's three programs were secretly living in cities and blending in with the population.

The Council considered Future Man heresy, and a direct threat to the faith. They began taking measures to expel the Order from society in what became known as the Purge. Overnight, Order members became outcasts, and were driven into hiding, or arrested. Beings created through the genetic programs were declared demons, and rounded up for public execution. The Council warned people about 'demons walking among us' and advised everyone to be on the lookout for people practicing witchcraft. The population's fear intensified when an unexpected natural catastrophe occurred.

A wayward asteroid, mislabeled the 'comet', crossed Earth's orbit, calving into many pieces as it passed too closely to the moon. These pieces rained down on the world, striking on land and in the sea, and they created widespread destruction that caused two years of winter-like weather. The threat of mass starvation created

panic. Fortunately, the Council had replenished their emergency food reserve and was able to save the population, just as they had in the past. The story of *The Balance* begins almost eighteen years after the 'comet' struck.