

If you ask anyone how it all started, they'll all tell you the same thing: it all started with the box. Nobody knows who made the box or where it came from, but we all know one thing. The box was the reason the world ended.

If you're new to this planet, let me tell you the whole story: It all started when the box came to my doorstep. I was flummoxed by the box, because nobody would ever send me a gift, let alone a gift that was wrapped in silver paper. Paper was a rare resource, surely nobody would waste it like this. A small tag was attached to it, saying "To the one who believes in wonder." I quickly called my roommate over, and after a few minutes, we opened the box. Inside was a weird, heart-shaped object. Every few minutes, it pulsed, and it let out a blinding burst of light. My roommate, Jack, leaned over to tap it, but I shoved away his hand. "Why is your first instinct when you get a strange object to touch it?", I shrieked. But while I was scolding him, our dog came up to the object and ate it!

"Kibble, no!!!", I shouted, but it was too late. Kibble began throwing up, splattering mysterious silver liquid with strange lumps in them. "Are those...his organs!?" Jack screamed. We ran out of the house and hopped onto our hovercraft, but the engine wouldn't start! While we were busy trying to get the engine to start, a strange figure rose out of the silvery goop. "Finally," it said. "I have been waiting to get out of my prison for over a century!" I started running, and Jack followed me.

Before we could get far though, a bunch of airships teleported above us, and transporter soldiers rained down from them. All the transporter soldiers held transport rods, each one having a strange, pulsing material at the tip, like the thing Kibble ate. Those transporter rods break apart every molecule in your body and store the pieces in the long, tube-like container. If you get touched by one, it hurts like hell. Those are only for dangerous criminals though, so I have never felt one. Then I looked down and saw a huge hole in my body that was growing. After that I blacked out.

I woke up in a small metal tube; my hands bound behind my back. Suddenly, a voice reverberated around me, saying "Do you know what you've done! You just released one of the Akamini generals!" "Who are you, and what is that?" I responded. "I demand you let me out of here at once!" A panel in the metal wall slid open with a hiss, revealing a face that looked like it was carved out of old, stinky leather. The man was wearing a high-collared uniform—the kind the High Command wears—and he looked at me like I was a bug he was about to squish. "I am Commander Vane," he said, his voice dropping to a low growl. "And that 'thing' you released is a world-eater. We spent centuries keeping their essence trapped in silver-wrapped stasis boxes, hidden in the ruins. And you? You let your dog eat one. The silver liquid that came out of your dog wasn't just organs, kid. It was a biological gateway. The General used your pet as a pile of Lego-bricks to reconstruct its physical form."

Suddenly, the metal door of my tube didn't just open; it exploded inward with a deafening bang. Through the haze, I saw Jack holding a stolen transport rod like a baseball bat. "Man, you look like total garbage," he said, waving the smoke away. "Says the person who as a piece of spinach in their teeth." I reply. He used a laser-cutter to snap my bonds, and we sprinted out into a white corridor where the General was waiting. He looked like a man, but his skin moved like waves on a lake. He lunged at us, but I noticed a rack of fire-suppression tanks on the wall. "Jack, the fire-tanks!" I shouted. Jack smashed the valves, coating the General in freezing foam. I ran straight at the frozen General and shoved my glowing transport rod into the hole in my chest, letting out a massive shockwave that shattered him into a million silver shards. We scrambled to the roof and escaped in a black needle-ship, but we didn't stay hidden for long.

For the next six months, we lived as ghosts, moving through the rusted-out skeletons of old skyscrapers and eating canned rations. The government—the Global Oversight Unity (GOU)—had put out a "Shoot on Sight" order for us, claiming we were bio-terrorists. That's how we found The Shards, a rebel group led by a woman named Kael. She told us the GOU had been harvesting the boxes for years to power their tech. "They're building a throne for the General," Kael warned. They were fighting the government because they knew the truth: the GOU was keeping the public in the dark while the world sat on a ticking time bomb. Every time the government used a transport rod, they were actually weakening the seals on the hidden Akamini generals. We spent weeks in an underground bunker, training for a massive assault on the GOU's main Citadel.

The final battle was a freaking bloodbath. We hit the Citadel at midnight, our armored hovercrafts roaring through the rain. I stood on the roof of the lead craft, my hands glowing with a sickly silver light as I melted through the blast doors. "Go! Go! Go!" Kael screamed, but the resistance was off the charts. Transporter soldiers dropped from the ceiling, and one by one, my friends were turned into silver statues. I fought my way to the basement, but I was too late. Vane was there, his skin already shimmering with silver scales. "The bridge is already built," he laughed, and he pulled the master lever. A sound like a thousand bells ringing erupted as the silver storm expanded through the crust of the earth itself. The ground groaned and the entire tectonic plate cracked, swallowing the Citadel whole.

We ignited the thrusters, shooting upward just as the entire city of Neo-York began to melt like a candle. As we hit orbit, I looked back. The Earth was no longer green and blue; it was a shimmering, liquid ball of silver. Seven billion people were gone, absorbed into a giant, pulsing heart hanging in the dark of space. We drifted for years, the ship's food synthesizers running out until I no longer felt hunger—the silver in my chest was providing

everything. Finally, we saw it: an abandoned, gray planet that wasn't on any map. We landed in a dusty plaza and found a stone pillar with a tattered silver box at the base. A figure emerged that looked exactly like me, only a thousand years older. "You're late," my double said. "The General said the Earth harvest was rich."

I looked at Jack, who had fallen to his knees in the gray ash, coughing and pale. I looked at my hands, which were now perfectly smooth and silver, the memories of my old life fading like a dream. I realized then that the box didn't just end the world; it was a seed, and I was the gardener. I picked up a fresh sheet of silver paper and began to wrap the next heart-shaped object. "Who's next?" I asked, my voice becoming a vibrating hum. My double handed me a small, pulsing heart. "A little blue planet three galaxies over," he said with a grin. "I think they're finally ready to believe in wonder." I sat down in the gray dust, the cycle starting all over again, and I began to wrap the gift that would destroy another world.