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DARWIN'S DISCIPLES

by

Eben A. Jordan

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(Biology)

The Honors College

University of Maine

May 2014

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Abstract

Set in a time when the world's population has surpassed a sustainable level, the biggest threat to humanity is itself. Manmade climate change is poised to render Earth irreparably inhospitable. One of the first successful products of human genetic engineering, Cain, is directing his immense intellect toward solving the problem. Cain sees only one true solution: cleanse the planet of mankind. Cain and his followers, known as Darwin's Disciples, seek to recruit the top ten percent of the population based on genetic makeup. The unfit, the unworthy, and the underwhelming are targets to be eliminated.

A small faction, the Bastion, has risen to challenge him. These champions of the people need every stroke of luck they can get if they are to succeed in stopping the coming darkness. This is the story of the culling of the human race and the desperate struggle that ensued.

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Artist's Statement

Darwin's Disciples is a work of science fiction that addresses the dangers of overpopulation and climate change. Through my education in both the biological sciences and the liberal arts, it has become apparent to me that the biggest issue facing our species is overpopulation. Global climate change is inextricably linked with the population crisis. The dangers of these conditions exacerbate one another and are posed to cause incredible obstacles to our continued existence. We are consummate survivors, proven capable of flourishing in a multitude of environments and overcoming most challenges thrown at us. What happens when that challenge is our own success?

This question, however, is far from novel. Thomas Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population* was published in 1798. He observed, mathematically, that the power of population greatly outstrips the Earth's power of production. As an unchecked population will increase in a geometrical ratio, the means of subsistence would need to match that rate. Malthus posited, however, that the means of subsistence increases arithmetically and is thus easily outpaced by population. He claimed that "[i]n two centuries and a quarter, the population would be to the means of subsistence as 512 to 10: in three centuries as 4096 to 13, and in two thousand years the difference would be almost incalculable" (Malthus 8). As it happens, we are just a year past two centuries and a quarter from the year of publication. We have staved off the 512:10 ratio only through advancements in technology, advancements Malthus could not have rightly predicted based on the scientific knowledge of his time. Genetic engineering and the power of industry have helped mitigate the disparity. Though able to provide more food for more people, our advancements in technology have taken a huge toll on the environment. We

sacrificed balance for abundance, and have unwittingly found ourselves in a dangerous situation.

A Malthusian Catastrophe, or an unstoppable return to subsistence-limited growth, is no longer as farfetched or sensational as it once was. Malthus believed we would be limited by the power of subsistence naturally, that such a catastrophe was unlikely. However, he did not account for our industrial capabilities of producing mass quantities of food being self-sabotaging. What happens when our massive crop systems fail due to drastic climate change?

A modern take on this potential crisis, *Eaarth: Making Life on a Tough New Planet*, by Bill McKibben, synthesizes climate science, economics, and global politics to illustrate a picture of the planet we have created. McKibben claims the climate issue is not only one our children will have to deal with, but is one our great-grandparents should have dealt with. We are no longer living on Earth, but on planet Eaarth. While I do not share his nomenclature, I sought to illustrate this point through a monologue in my thesis: “We metastasized and became malignant, invading every corner of the world. We dug deep and spewed pollutants high. The Earth’s temperature rose as if in fever to destroy the sickness of us” (25). The monologue (dispersed throughout the text) brings continuity to the document while allowing me to convey concepts I was unable to adequately cover in story form.

A second concept I address through the monologue is how traits that allowed us to overcome much in the past now threaten to be our undoing: “Compassion and intelligence – previously two of man’s best tools – have become our biggest threat” (35). Nietzsche wrote of the rational man and the intuitive man. The rational man is one of

intelligent investigation, of planning and learning. His counterpoint, the intuitive man, is an emotional whirlwind that never learns from his mistakes but lives and loves fully. The rational man's intelligence resulted in technology capable of producing weapons of mass destruction. The intuitive man's compassion resulted in a society in which we "expend inordinate resources to preserve life" (35). These aspects of our nature, though capable of doing great good, have contributed as much to the problem as any other. Though science and technology have summoned this storm, in them there is hope.

Advancements in technology, I believe, will be our salvation (if there is one to be had). A product of the twenty-first century, I am of the firm belief anything can be manipulated if we understand it. Classes in organic chemistry, neuroscience, and genetics have shown me the surface of the knowledge we have accrued about how the world works. If we can last long enough, we will find a way to counteract the damage we have done. I illustrate technological advancements throughout the text. The major focus for increasing our chances of survival is not the engineering of electronics or structures, but the engineering of our genetic code. Eugenics, both positive and negative, is employed to cultivate the ideal code for engineering. These select few are known as Darwin's Disciples, and they are responsible for "ushering humanity into a new age" (47).

Along with eugenics, there were several ideas I wanted to address in this text. I created a list of ten or so themes to keep in mind while writing. They ranged from human damage to the environment to intrinsic equality. Each theme is generally influenced by evolution. If I hit a wall creatively, or needed to introduce new characters, I would access this list and write a section about it. Each week, I was assigned to write 8 pages in order to generate a body of material to work with. While this pace was not quite met, I was able

to generate a little more than twenty-three thousand words by the end of winter vacation. At this time I had started reading several texts on writing. These texts were great sources of inspiration. When I would get particularly stuck I would read *How to Write a Sentence: And How to Read One*. It analyzed sentences the author, Stanley Fish, thought were worthy of note. He discussed the areas in which the sentences succeeded and gave examples of how they could have failed.

Another important text was *Plot & Structure*, by James Scott Bell. I had an intuitive grasp of much of what this text discusses through my own experiences, but this text smacked me over the head with a formula that has been proven time and time again to receive high marks from audiences. Clever ideas and writing skills are irrelevant if you do not know how to craft an interesting plot. A writer with mediocre command of language and grammar can be successful if they can contrive a plot that demands attention and carries forward at a dynamic pace. While I believe I managed to keep a decent pace throughout, I sacrificed the depth of the story for interesting highlights.

I had envisioned producing a novel for this assignment, and had a vague idea of a beginning and an ending. This was my first large writing project, and I had truly underestimated the amount of time and effort necessary to produce a text of that length. My advisor quickly reigned in my goals to a more manageable project. Instead we settled on generating individual glimpses of a larger story. Thinking back on the novels I have read, I have a new appreciation for authors who write lengthy series. Even editing a lengthy document of fiction was more time consuming than I could have imagined. Not only did I have to actively seek-and-destroy errors, but I also had to keep track of characters and plotlines that had accumulated over four months of writing. Throughout

the editing process I tried to keep Stephen King's advice in mind, that the second draft should be the first draft minus ten percent. I eliminated roughly two thousand words through three complete edits (two done by myself and a third done after receiving feedback from others). My final product is something I am happy with, though it needs to be fleshed out before it is truly completed.

My goal was to write a story worth reading. My goal was to write a story that would wake people up to the recklessness we have endured and endorsed. Our abuse of technology and our intrinsic qualities have led to a dangerous situation of our own design. If we do not take serious steps to mitigate and reverse the damage we have done, there is no telling what lengths we will need to go to to survive...

Victor

It was the kind of cold that drives hands into pockets. A delicate layer of snowfall carpeted the forest floor, disturbed occasionally by crisscrossing animal tracks. Victor and Andy stamped tracks of their own as they walked, carrying a comfortable silence between them as only brothers could. Andy sighed as Victor bent to examine a game trail.

“Alissa is pregnant,” Andy said. “And she wants to keep it. I tried to convince her to abort, to explain that we can’t raise a child. Not now.” Victor’s stomach churned. He took a long pause, considering how to best approach this news.

“There’s joy to be found here too, Andy. The Bastion will keep you, her, and the baby safe. Plus if it’s a boy I can teach him to be a man,” he said as he tried – and failed – to ease the tension. Their small village afforded them low status to Peoples and Population, but scrutinizing eyes were never away for long.

“I wish I could see it that way,” Andy said. They continued their patrol, the comfortable quiet now like a too small shirt: ill fitting, restrictive. Victor adjusted the rifle strap on his shoulder. He hated how much trouble could come from such a beautiful thing. He racked his brain about Alissa and the baby and what would become of them if the child were to be discovered. Lost in thought, he clipped his toe on a root and stumbled. He reprimanded himself for the lapse and redirected his attention to his surroundings. Silence. Not the quiet of a sleeping forest, but a silence that permeated. It rolled into his lungs and brought with it a visceral unease.

“Haven’t seen any animals since we’ve been out here,” Andy said. “We should’ve seen something by now.”

“No bird calls, either,” Victor said. “Let’s do our loop and head back.”

They arrived to the edge of an open field, the farthest point of their route. Victor scanned the field, his eyes lingering over nine figures standing along the far edge. *Are those people?* he thought. Victor ducked and pulled Andy down. He drew his rifle up, scoping the irregular shapes on the tree line. As they came into focus a jolt of fear coursed through him: Sharks. Genetically engineered and molded from the time they are born, a Shark’s sole purpose was destruction. Each of the modified men had his right arm cut off at the elbow: in place of the missing flesh was a bionic arm.

Victor motioned to Andy to retreat. There was a radio stashed mere minutes away. They had to warn the Bastion. If these Sharks made it to the unsuspecting village, the slaughter would be devastating. Victor crept backwards, keeping his eyes on the field.

“Drop your weapons and turn around,” a deep voice said. Victor tensed. He knew what waited behind them. The slight smile on Andy’s face showed he knew too. The brothers had never been the kind to shy away from a fight. Together, they turned to attack. A burst of light struck Andy in the chest before he brought his pistol up. Victor squeezed off a shot before he was staggered, a flexible square catching him in the stomach. The sticky pad delivered an excruciating jolt, sending him to the ground in a fit of spasms. *Why didn’t he kill us?* he thought as he saw Andy’s chest rise and fall. The Shark moved to examine his new prisoners. He kicked the rifle from Victor’s hand and crouched to meet him face to face.

“Curious, how weak you always are,” he said as he increased the intensity of the pad. Victor’s eyes rolled in the back of his head. The Shark turned, looking Andy over. He took the pistol from Andy’s hand and kicked him in the ribs several times. He

dragged them to the field where the other Sharks waited, dropping them at the feet of a white clad Shark. Though Andy was beginning to regain consciousness, Victor's spasms continued to intensify.

"Found these two in the woods, G-12," their captor said.

"Turn that off," G-12 said. The Shark snorted but did as he was told. Victor went limp. G-12 looked Victor and Andy up and down as if he was examining livestock.

"Names."

"Victor."

"And you?" he asked Andy, who was still slightly stunned.

"Fuck you, half man," he said. This earned him another kick to the ribs. Victor thought he heard a rib crack.

"By the looks of you I shouldn't waste my time, but I'm in a good mood," G-12 said. Victor knew what was going to happen. Everyone knew what happened to those captured by Sharks. He held his arm out and rolled up his sleeve, exposing a tattoo of three dots arranged in a triangle on his forearm. G-12 ripped Andy's sleeve from his arm, revealing an identical tattoo. "Members of the Bastion? Looks like we are getting close."

Victor's heart sunk. *They're searching for us. How do they know?* The leader fiddled with his mechanical arm, extending a large needle from the end. He inserted it deep into Andy's arm, taking blood to be analyzed. He removed the needle and stared at a screen on his wrist. After what seemed an eternity, the screen flashed red.

"No!" Victor screamed. G-12 extended a long, thin blade from the underside of his mechanical arm.

"Any last words?" he asked. Andy slowly shook his head, unable to speak. G-12

grabbed a fistful of Andy's hair and slammed the blade into the base of his skull. A spray of hot blood hit Victor in the face. Several teeth flew through the air as the blade exited through his mouth. He looked Victor in the eye and let Andy's corpse fall face first. The Sharks laughed in unison with no variations of pitch or rhythm. Victor lunged at G-12 only to get batted down.

"Easy now, you'll get your turn," G-12 said with a chuckle as he prepared the needle. Victor winced as it pierced the skin. He watched his blood – his chance of survival – flow from him. After an agonizing ten seconds the screen flashed green. Victor slumped as relief and pain intertwined.

"Congratulations, Victor. Your genetic makeup is in the top ten percent," G-12 said. He clenched Victor's shoulder so hard with his bionic arm he thought his collarbone would snap. A loud pop accompanied Victor's scream as a micro tag embedded an inch into his shoulder.

"If you try to take it out a powerful neurotoxin will be released, killing you in under a minute. We've almost reached our quotient for whites, too. You're lucky we found you when we did. You'll be welcomed with open arms when you decide to join us." He pushed a button on his bionic arm and the robotic eye of each Shark lit up in unison. They walked away in a coordinated fashion, each step perfectly timed with the leader.

"Who are you?" Victor asked. "Who are you to do this?"

The Sharks all turned. "We are progress," G-12 said, the rest of the unit perfectly still, toothy smiles painted red by the setting sun. "We do this because we can." They left, following Victor and Andy's footsteps in the snow. Victor sat by Andy's corpse,

disconnected. Where would he go? He couldn't rejoin the Bastion. He'd be damned if he was going to join Darwin's Disciples, but what choice did he have? Night enveloped him and filled him with morbid, vengeful thoughts.

Nadia

Nadia nocked a black arrow to a taught bowstring, an angry tropical downpour splashing on the canopy of maple and oak above her. Drawing the string back and air in, she focused on the boar rooting through a pile of rotten vegetables. It tore into the bait with mad avarice, its wet and wiry fur crisscrossed with scars. One of its tusks was jagged and much shorter than the other. It was a fighter. *Come on, turn*, she thought. Shooting now would run the risk of the arrow glancing off its thick skull. The boar raised that thick head and sniffed the air, taking on an alert posture. *There's no way it can smell me*, Nadia thought, worried she might lose the opportunity. It wasn't a perfect shot, but it was one she had to take. Just as she was about to loose the arrow, a bolt of yellow fur and claws erupted from the underbrush. *Damn chags*, she thought, yielding the tension on the string. The chag, an abomination of the Species Forward project, landed squarely on the boar's back and bit into its neck. The boar bucked and dove to shake free of the large feline. The struggle was over in seconds and the muscle-heavy chag tore into its prize. Nadia drew the arrow once more. It was in perfect broadside. The arrow leapt from the bow, striking the chag directly behind the shoulder. It dropped without a sound. *Now comes the dangerous part*, she thought, nocking a second arrow as adrenaline coursed through her.

She waited for a few minutes before she approached, giving the chag time to bleed out or get up if it was inclined to do either. She was careful and slow, never looking away from where the animals were downed. When she reached them, it was clear both were dead. Nadia pulled her knife from the sheath at her waist and went about the tedious work of gutting the chag. The boar would not be worth salvaging. She'd heard rumor of

some chags being venomous, though she knew their meat to be safe. *Not a risk worth taking*, she thought as she sized up the boar. As practiced as she was, she took longer than she would have liked. The chag, too heavy for her to carry alone, would be worth the effort to get home. It meant her family wouldn't go hungry for the next few weeks at least. *If Mike found anything we might even be able to sell some of this*, she thought. Mike was no hunter, but he was loyal and kind and knew a fair amount about edible plants. He was as good a fisherman as any, but the days of edible fish in the rivers were long gone.

Since it was too heavy for her to carry alone, there was only one thing to do. She took a coil of thin rope from her pack and tied one end to the chag's legs. She then tied the other end to a rock the size of her hand and threw it over a high branch on a neighboring oak tree, allowing her to hoist the carcass out of reach. It wouldn't be safe from other people, but then again, nothing was safe from other people anymore. She slung her bow over her shoulder as she began the trek home. Deanne and little Charlie would be waiting eagerly for her return. The looks the food would bring to their faces would make all the effort worth it. She would do anything to put smiles on those faces and food in those bellies.

Despite the din of the rain, she overheard voices in apparent confrontation. She crouched and took her bow in hand. She crept along, listening to find the source. These woods held dangers. It would not be the first time she came across thugs. They were more common than honest folk. Ever since the government began to withdraw from the less populated areas, the true nature of the scoundrels surfaced – people and morality grow thin when times are hard.

“— worth your time. Do I really look like I have money? Food? I’m a traveller, not a banker,” broke through the undergrowth. It sounded like they were just around the next tree. *Best to stay quiet*, she thought, inching closer to catch a glimpse. She peered around a thick oak trunk to see a man in tan robes standing in front of a ragtag group of three men and two women. Even though the bandits held him at gunpoint, she could tell he was unafraid. Easily a head taller than any of his accosters, the hooded man stood in defiance of their show of aggression. One on five did not seem fair to her; however, she had a family to feed and wasn’t going to risk herself for a total stranger. *Odds are he is as bad as them*, she thought as her grip tightened on her bow.

She turned from the scene. *I should get out of here while they are distracted*, she thought. More indistinguishable words were exchanged. After a few steps she began to feel guilty. Her conscience got the better of her and she nocked an arrow. If they hadn’t stopped him, they probably would have shaken her down instead. They might not have stopped there, either. As she deliberated on what to do, a shot rang out. She turned and rounded the corner, arrow drawn. What she saw, she couldn’t believe. The man stood in the middle of the now unconscious group, whistling an upbeat tune. His hood had fallen back, revealing a head of dark brown hair and tanned skin. A bloom of red darkened his robes just above his belt. She ducked back behind the oak, hoping he hadn’t seen her.

“You can come out, it’s all right,” he said. “I heard you before this whole mess. I appreciate you coming back.” Nadia came out from behind the tree, arrow still drawn.

“Were you shot?” she asked, gesturing to the blood on his robes.

“This? Well, yes, I was,” he said as he poked his finger through the hole in the fabric. “It went all the way through, no worries there. But would you mind lowering that

arrow? I'm afraid you are making Alecto nervous."

"Alecto?" Nadia asked, unsure what to make of the man in front of her. She lowered the bow and relaxed the tension.

"He won't hurt you, I promise. Look to your left." Not six feet from her was a black dog that stood at least four feet tall at the shoulder. It broke its menacing posture and padded over to her, tail wagging. Alecto sniffed her hand and legs, barked his approval and ran to the man who was searching the downed would be thieves. Sniffing the exit wound, Alecto went about cleaning it with his tongue.

"Hey that tickles!" the man laughed. "I'm fine, pal. Help me search these guys," he said, playfully pushing the dog away. Nadia could see the skin underneath was whole except for the pink mark of a newly formed scar. *How is that possible?* she thought, amazed the stranger was so nonchalant about taking a bullet to the gut.

"Do you want this pistol?" he asked, extending the weapon to her. "It's kind of old, but I don't need it. They have plenty of ammo too, surprisingly. We can split the food they have on them, I don't think they came by it honestly so I don't feel bad about taking most of it."

"I'll take the pistol, but I don't need the food. I just shot a chag. I don't want to be in anyone's debt," she answered, approaching the outstretched weapon.

"A chag? Those things are nasty. 'Let's replace extinct species with new ones.' Yeah, great idea," he said as he dumped the contents of a bag on the ground. "Aren't they usually pretty big? How did you carry it?"

"I hung it from a tree. I'll get it later," she said.

"Let's go get it now. This isn't the first group I've run into. I would hate for the

likes of these to take it.”

“No, no I don’t need your help.”

“You won’t owe me anything. Consider it thanks for coming back to help me.”

“All right, fine. It’s a short walk there and another hour back to my cabin, if you’re up for it.”

“I’m Zander, by the way.”

“Nadia,” she responded, offering an open hand. An outdated sign of respect, but it was how she was raised. Zander smiled and shook her hand.

“Nice to meet you, Nadia. I think we’re done here, unless you see something you like?”

Nadia picked through the items. He had only taken food and the pistol he gave her. There were plenty of valuable things left: a book, a few knives, assorted jewelry and trinkets they had undoubtedly stolen, and even a few hundred marks. Nadia took the book and the marks. *Deanna has been wanting more things to read*, she thought. This would bring their book total to ten. Physical copies of anything were hard to come by, but her mother had always made a point to collect books when the opportunity arose. She left them to her when she passed away, a legacy not many people could claim.

“Fine selections, Nadia. If you can read some of the older English, you’ll really like it.”

“Yes, I can. This is mostly for my daughter. She loves reading. We only have a few books but she knows them front to back.”

“Excellent! Well, how about we go get that chag. It’s going to get dark before we get it back if we don’t leave soon.”

The rain had subsided, but thick gray clouds held any hopes of sun hostage. Nadia pushed the front gate open and beckoned Zander and Alecto through. Much of the house was cobbled together from bits of non-biodegradable material previously discarded. The windows – made from old car doors – were fitted to the log walls seamlessly. The roof was composed of alternating solar panels and old sheet metal and the chimney was plastic piping repurposed. The door was the least remarkable part of the structure. It was simple, wooden. The knob was a mute gray, unassuming and meant only to serve a functional purpose.

“I can skin it for you if you’d like,” Zander said, setting the chag down.

“No, thank you,” Nadia said. “You’ve done more than enough already.”

“Mom!” a girl’s voice rang from one of the windows. The front door swung inward and Deanne and Charlie came sprinting from the house. Nadia crouched and caught them both in an eager embrace. Charlie was the first to notice Zander and Alecto.

“Puppy!” he yelled, squirming from his mother’s arms to get to Alecto. He ran to Alecto and petted him furiously.

“*Puppy!* What a compliment for an old geezer like yourself,” Zander said to Alecto. As smart as Alecto was, he was as susceptible to affection as any dog. This led to an embarrassing fit of leg kicking that Zander made sure to tuck away for later. Alecto loved children and was soon frolicking and playing with Charlie like a puppy instead of the thirty-five year old epitome of canine evolution he was.

“Charlie, honey, he’s awfully big. I don’t want you to get hurt,” Nadia said, worried that her young son was roughhousing with an animal that size.

“He is as safe as possible with Alecto,” Zander said. “There is no chance Alecto would hurt him, inadvertently or otherwise.” Charlie, having not heard a word of what his mother said, was now riding Alecto around like a horse. Alecto would neigh and prance, careful not to dislodge the tiny would-be knight on his back. Nadia turned to Deanne.

“I have a present for you,” she said, unzipping her pack. “Close your eyes and hold out your hands,” Nadia said. Deanne did as she was told. Nadia placed the book in her hands and said, “Okay, open!” Deanne opened her eyes and let out a high-pitched squeal, too excited for words. She threw her arms around Nadia, and then ran inside to start reading.

“Thanks again,” Nadia said to Zander.

“It was nothing, really. I think it’s time for us to leave though, I don’t want to overstay our welcome.”

“Why don’t you stay for dinner,” Nadia said. “You can meet my husband, Mike. He should be back soon.”

“Alecto seems to be enjoying himself,” Zander said. “All right, we’ll stay for dinner. I’m going to skin the chag though, I’ll hear nothing to the contrary.”

Nadia acquiesced and went into the house to begin preparations. The inside was far more advanced than it appeared from the outside. The solar panels provided enough energy for a fully functioning kitchen, a television, and overhead lighting (so long as they weren’t all being used at the same time). They had a generator for emergencies, but often the solar panels were adequate. There was a waste treatment unit in the bathroom, allowing the toilet and shower to function with small water stores kept on the outside of the house. It was a comfortable home. A home Nadia was proud of.

Before she knew it, night had fallen and the windows were dark. *I wonder where Mike is*, she thought. Normally he was in by twilight, but staying out later wasn't unheard of. A knock came at the door. Nadia answered it to find Zander carrying a sleeping Charlie in his arms. Alecto was nowhere to be found.

"I was telling him a story and he fell asleep," Zander said. "I think Alecto tuckered him out."

"Where is Alecto?" Nadia asked, motioning for him to come in. She took Charlie and laid him on the couch, letting him sleep some before dinner.

"Out hunting. He'll go out on his own but he always finds me," Zander shrugged. "He might come back in an hour, he might find me in a few days. Your woods will be safer after tonight, he usually goes after the more...challenging prey."

Nadia nodded. She was beginning to accept the oddness of her new friends. "Did you finish skinning the chag?" she asked, pulling the door open.

"Yes, I strung it up, too," Zander answered. They walked to wear the animal was hanging. Nadia inspected Zander's knife work. *He knows what he's doing, I'll give him that*, she thought. She cut off a large haunch to prepare for dinner.

"We'll need to get this into the freezer before too long, I don't want anything to come steal it overnight. We have one in the shed out back, it should fit in there. I'll have Mike do it when he gets here," Nadia said. On cue a beam of light slashed through the foliage and Mike soon followed, his bags loaded with a variety of plants and other scavenged items.

"Woah, what is that? A chag?" Mike asked as he approached Nadia. His broad shoulders and careful pace denoted him as a natural leader. He hugged her and gave her a

quick kiss on the lips. He broke from her and held a hand out to Zander. "Name's Mike," he said.

"Zander. That's quite the handshake you have, Mike."

"Same to you. Shame it has fallen out of common practice," Mike said. He turned to Nadia once more, "Did you get this on your own? You impress me every day." He handed the bags to Nadia. "I'm sure you'll put these where you want after I put them away wrong the first time, so I'll just skip a step," he teased. She rolled her eyes and took them inside with the haunch she had harvested. "Will you grab one side?" Mike asked as he lowered the chag to the ground.

"So how did you and my beautiful bride meet?"

"She pointed an arrow at me," Zander said.

"That sounds about right," Mike laughed.

"She was actually trying to help me deal with some bandits, she was just a little late to the fun. She's a good woman."

"Don't I know it," Mike said. Once the meat was stored, they went back to the house where their noses were met by a wave of cooking meat and vegetables. Nadia was moving about the kitchen rhythmically, pacing each action so everything would be ready at the same time. Mike walked over to the couch where Deanne was reading and Charlie was groggily rubbing his eyes. Deanne hadn't noticed her father come inside. She was too engrossed with the book. He patted Charlie on the head and asked, "What is your sister reading, Charles?"

"I don't know," he said through a yawn. Being too young to read long books, Charlie had little interest in them. He preferred to play outside and harass the local

wildlife.

“Mike, Deanne, can you please set the table? Dinner will be ready in ten minutes,” Nadia said.

Zander was over at one of the windows, playing with the switch that rolled the window up and down. “I’ve only ever heard of these! This is so cool!” he said. “I can’t believe you found some that still work.”

“Mike is very resourceful,” Nadia replied as she flipped the segments of chag she was grilling on the stovetop. “He made most of the improvements on the house himself from things we either traded for or found. This place was abandoned when we found it but the structure was sound. It needed a lot of work and love, but we have plenty of both to spare.”

“It’s a lovely home,” Zander said.

“Thank you,” Nadia said with a smile. “Dinner is ready, kids go wash your hands.” The children did as they were told in a race to the bathroom. Zander washed his hands and sat where Nadia gestured. The meal was simple: a bowl of greens and a slab of grilled chag. A pitcher of room temperature water was the centerpiece. When the meal was finished, Nadia sent the children to bed. Deanne grabbed her book and ran to her room. A reluctant Charlie, who always wanted to stay up later than his bedtime, followed her.

“Thank you for the meal, it was delicious. Let me do the dishes,” Zander said as he scooped them all up in one armload. Nadia was surprised by the speed with which he completed the task. Mike went to the cupboard and pulled out a large bottle of brown liquid and three glasses.

“An after dinner drink, Zander? I insist,” he said as he poured liquor into each glass. “I have something I want to talk to you about.”

“Sure. What are we drinking?”

“Whiskey. It’s not the best, but it’ll put hair on your chest,” he said as he handed Zander and Nadia a glass. “To new friends,” Mike said.

“So what is it you want to talk about?”

“Do you know anything about a group called Darwin’s Disciples?” Mike asked. Zander tensed visibly.

“Michael! This is not the time,” Nadia said. She knew where Mike was headed.

“This is exactly the time,” Mike said. He turned to Zander once more. “Do you?”

“Yes.”

“So you know what they are capable of, what they have done? You know about the murders?”

“More than you could imagine.”

“I have a feeling about you, Zander. I can tell you’re a good man. My gut says so, and I always listen to my gut. What I’m about to tell you can get us, all of us, killed. Can I trust you to keep it secret?”

“You can.”

“Nadia and I are members of a group called the Bastion.” He rolled up his sleeve, exposing a tattoo of three dots in a triangle. “Up until recently, we have stayed off their radar. They destroyed a village where many of our members operated. We are now operating under the assumption that they know about, and are actively pursuing, us. We must be proactive in our recruiting if we are going to stop them. We need manpower. We

need people willing to fight to protect those who can't protect themselves. I think you would make a welcome addition." Zander stood in silence and took a sip of whiskey.

"There are a lot of us, Zander. What I saw in the woods today...we need you. We want to make a world safe for Deanne and Charlie. News of the violence and expansion of the Disciples is coming in more frequently. They are getting bolder, and our people aren't up to the task of stopping them," Nadia said. Zander remained quiet and stared into his cup.

"Thank you for your hospitality," he said. He set down his half empty glass and left without another word.

“There are too many of us. The population will be decimated through wars over resources and famine due to a lack of them. We knew overpopulation would pose a threat, but it was a problem for our children or their children. We are those children. Where our parents were weak, we must be strong. Where our parents were apathetic, we must be decisive. We must be brutal. Regardless of what I do – what anyone does – a darkness is coming. I can only hope to shelter few and survive. Mankind will not flourish for some time. Endure, that is all we can do. It is what I will do. The drive for survival is the lynchpin of life. Everything wants to live, to reproduce, to dominate.”

Zander

Clear water tumbled along smoothed rocks, an early morning summer sun brightening the residual damp of a hard rain. 29 days of torrential rains had widened the gentle stream into a coursing, forceful thing. It dove into pools and swirled along flats as it wound toward whatever container would have it. A white sheen glossed rips and peaceful parts alike, reflecting the greatly missed sunlight. Zander sat on a purpled rock, his bare feet dangling in a shallow backwater. *It would only be a matter of time before he found out*, he thought. *Whatever attention they think they have now... they don't know what they asked.*

Zander reached into his pack and pulled out a metallic sphere the size of his fist. It was an Axund, the last tangible thing he had that reminded him of his grandfather. He turned it over in his hands, its surface bending and following whatever pressure he applied. *But what chance do I have alone? -- I need to change my perspective.* He put the Axund back and wedged the pack between two boulders. He stripped and put his clothes in the pack, covering all his earthly belongings with another boulder. Happy with the security of his things, he leapt some thirty feet out into the middle of the stream. This decision was not one that would be met easily at rest – he intended to find it among the wild, moving parts of the world.

“Intelligence, coupled with selfishness, yielded technology that polluted and destroyed much. We wanted to go faster, fly higher, burn brighter. We metastasized and became malignant, invading every corner of the world. We dug deep and spewed pollutants high. The Earth’s temperature rose as if in fever to destroy the sickness of us. It was a golden age for much of the world, humans living irresponsibly and sating every fancy of convenience. There was even a time when we would eat ourselves to death, our gluttony yet unchecked by limited supplies.”

Dalton

She is so beautiful, Dalton thought. He thumbed the well-worn corner of a photo he kept in his breast pocket. The woman in the picture had flowing blonde hair, her blue eyes caught in a moment of mischief. She was turning, looking like she wanted to be chased. *I finally caught her*. Dalton hadn't seen his wife outside of that photograph in five months. Video chat and calls were strictly prohibited on board. That was the life of a Trak-Down worker: six months spent away from home at a time, living completely isolated. Dalton was of the few with a wife and child. An intercom announcement cut through his wistful haze, dragging him back to the cold metallic hall he was standing in.

"Hey, Dalt, I'm picking up a bit of interference in Line 1. Could you poke around and see what the issue is?" a whiney voice asked. He hated when the new guy, Kessler, called him Dalt. Only a few people were allowed to call him that. His effete new co-operator was not one of them.

"Sure thing. I'll head down right now." Dalton strode toward the elevator at the end of the hall and took it three stories down. Trak-Downs were massive, roaming excavators that stripped the land of trees, soil, rocks – everything. They ran on a combination of biodiesel and whatever they needed to skim from the excavation process. Each Trak-Down had complex processing systems that analyzed what was worth keeping and what could be discarded. The resulting refuse was more or less a mound of dung: it even stank after being run through the exhuming process. He found the access panel he needed and unscrewed the cover.

Dalton scratched his head, uncertain what the problem was. *It isn't a short*, he thought. If it were, at least one light on the panel would be blinking yellow. *Maybe we*

picked up something nasty. He screwed the panel's covering back on and sifted through the possible problems. There were only a handful of times he could recall in the last ten years where he had to run an extensive diagnostic to sort out an issue (that took precious hours the higher-ups did not appreciate). *This new guy has been doing well, but I suppose he was bound to screw up sooner or later.* When Dalton had been the only supervisor the machine went down only if an incompetent worker mishandled their task or got caught up in the machine. Since no report of injury came over the intercom, it had to be something else. *I told them I didn't need any help,* he thought. *Maybe this will show them we're better off with just me in charge.* Their reasoning for the new hire was to help spread the workload because Dalton was getting on in years. At forty-five he hardly felt he was over the hill, but he knew they were training his replacement. Not many people lasted in the industry as long as he had. Though he didn't think he needed help, he didn't mind these last few weeks being a little easier. *Well, easier until this. The bosses are going to want to know how this happened.* Their tolerance for failure was very low.

Dalton keyed his radio, saying, "I'm requesting full shutdown. I need the Tubes crew down here. This is going to take a while." The constant rumble of the vehicle abruptly cut out. He climbed a flight of stairs and walked to the nearest Tube access. Since the monitors were all reading clear, there must be a mechanical issue they weren't picking up. This meant they had to examine each Tube in search of the problem. Even with five others helping him, it could take the rest of the day.

Dalton put on his gear as he waited for the team to arrive. Gas mask, full heat resistant jumpsuit, and rubber soled mid calf boots were the mandatory protective gear for anyone going into the Tubes. As he zipped up the front of his bright yellow jumpsuit,

the five members of the Tubes team filtered through the door. Each man was a deviation of the stereotypical Trak-Down worker: average height, lean, bearded. Dalton knew all of them well except the youngest of the group. He was a recent replacement for a man who lost his arm working on the rig. The youth had patchy, scraggly facial hair. He couldn't have been older than seventeen. Dalton's son was around that age. He felt a pang of homesickness thinking about him.

"This is Sam," one of the veteran workers said. "We need to show him the ropes. He's quick to learn, shouldn't slow us down much." Sam, not expecting this praise, beamed and nodded. Once the Tubes crew finished donning their gear, Dalton ran a mic check. With all systems ready he opened the hatch. A blast of hot air met them at the threshold. Even through the heat gear, there was a noticeable increase in temperature. Dalton descended the ladder, the flashlight attached to his hood bobbing up and down as he met each rung in turn. He jumped the last step, landing firmly in several inches of detritus that lined the Tube floor. The Tube they were in was ten meters in diameter, average as far as Tubes go.

"Okay, this section should be easy to clear. Sam, you're with me," Dalton said, the other crewmembers already knowing which direction they were supposed to search. Three of them went one direction; Dalton, Sam, and the third member, Phil, went the other. They walked together until the first split in the Tube. Dalton gestured, sending Phil to examine the side branch.

"What are we looking for?" Sam asked.

"Anything out of the ordinary. Leaking ducts, blockages, vents on the fritz. When we do shutdowns like this we never know what we'll find. Just keep an eye out and tell

me if you see anything that doesn't seem right."

They continued in silence for several minutes. Not finding anything in their sector, he checked with the others. None of the others reported finding the issue. His hopes of resolving this problem quickly were beginning to fade. This section was the one most likely to have a problem since it was so close to the intake. The further into the system you got, the smaller the Tubes became. It could even mean crawling on hands and knees through some of the smaller ones. *I hate those small spaces*, Dalton thought, shaking his head. The last time he went in there he almost got stuck. *What a way for a supervisor to go.*

He keyed the mic once more. "Let's meet back at the entry point, boys," he said. Dalton and Sam turned to head back to the hatch when a voice filled their helmets.

"Any luck, Dalt?" Kessler asked. There was something strange about his tone. Dalton couldn't put his finger on it.

"Not yet, Kessy," Dalton replied.

"I suspect you won't find anything," Kessler said. His voice now had commanding quality, very unlike the man Dalton had met a month or so earlier. "I suspect you won't find anything because there isn't anything to find." A slight rumble started as the Trak-Down began coming to life.

"That's not fucking funny," Dalton said, hoping this was some sort of prank. He had a feeling it wasn't. "Shut it down."

"Oh no? I find it very funny. It took me a while, but I finally was able to rig the engines to overheat," Kessler said. Dalton could hear the smile on his lips. "None of the other monkeys on this thing can undo what I've done. I just needed to get you out of the

way.” If the engines overheated, there was the potential for a meltdown. "I deactivated the safety protocols too. I know you were thinking that would save this savage machine. It won't. Not that you'll be alive to see it, but this is going to be quite the show.

“This was the last Trak-Down we infiltrated. We’ve been waiting for you to quit or die, but your unfortunate tenacity forced our hand. A lot of strings were pulled to get me on this rig. Your bosses insisted that there was no need for a new operator because you were so damn good. However, those long years of service, and your life, are coming to an end today. We have men in place on every Trak-Down rig on the continent. Today is the end of such monstrosities. Long have Darwin’s Disciples waited for the moment where we could tear down this horrible testament to man’s stupidity in one fell swoop. Goodbye, Dalt.”

The Tube began to shake. Dalton grabbed Sam. There was only one way out of this. No doubt Kessler had sealed the hatch they entered through. They had less than a minute to reach a utility duct. He knew where the closest one was. He also knew it was probably too far. They moved as fast as their gear would allow. Sam struggled a great deal more than Dalton, his boots sinking into the waste. Dalton was big enough to pull him along. He wasn't going to leave the kid to die in a place like this. A roar emanated from the way they came as the wall of material hurtled towards them. Phil rounded the corner, his flashlight frantically bouncing. Behind him the roar intensified. Dalton reached the hatch and wrenched it open, throwing Sam inside. He hesitated, not wanting to shut Phil out. *He's not going to make it*, he thought as Phil stumbled. He got up, yelling for them to wait. He stumbled once more and fell face first, his flashlight no longer visible. "We need to help him!" Sam yelled, bolting from the safety of the hatch.

"There's no time!" Dalton said, reaching to grab him but only securing air between his fingers. Sam made it to Phil and picked him up. Just as Phil made it to his feet the wall engulfed them. Dalton ducked through the hatch and slammed it closed. The crushing wall was on him in an instant, grinding and clanging against the door. Those two, likely along with the others, were on a breakneck pace toward the incinerators.

He removed his gas mask and hood and destroyed the microphone inside. Hopefully that would be enough to convince Kessler they had all been swallowed up. Crawling on his hands and knees he traversed the bends and intersections of the utility duct for several minutes before he came to an external door. He opened it and stepped onto one of the walkways that ringed each level of the Trak-Down. The engine was likely close to causing a breach. Any effort to stop a meltdown would be in vain. The only thing left to do was to risk the ten meter fall from the back of the Trak-Down and hope to get far enough away before the breach resulted in an explosion. Dalton ran to the end of the catwalk and kicked the extending ladder down. The terrible excrement from the mechanical beast was unpleasant at best and toxic at worst. Dalton didn't know of any toxic materials in the plot they were harvesting, but they had been wrong before. He wondered if Sam and the others had made it through processing yet. *At least they went quick*, he thought.

He pulled out the picture of his wife, lightly brushing his fingers across its surface. "Wish me luck," he said, kissing it and tucking it carefully into his breast pocket. His hand lingered there, channeling all the goodness and strength he could find. Resolved to see her again, he descended the ladder. Dangling from the bottom rung, he grew less sure about his plan. Ten meters was cited as the drop height. The designers didn't want

people to be able to board easily from the ground. *What I would do for a ladder truck right now.* With his feet swinging forward and back, ten meters looked like twenty. *Here goes nothing,* he thought as he took a deep breath. He let go. The image of his wife remained fixed in his mind as the ladder grew smaller and smaller. The impact threatened to drive the picture from his mind as it drove the air from his lungs. His vision began to fade, his hand over his breast pocket. Everything dissolved to black.

Millie

Millie took a long drag from the bottle before handing it back to Justin. A sweet warmth snaked through her stomach and radiated throughout her body. The taste of *Moon Man!* was one that she would never, ever get tired of. Hand in hand they walked the busy city streets in a drunken euphoria, an easy past time in which they would float along without an errant thought about the bleak outlook the future held. Government owned billboards throughout the city displayed celebrities and statesmen alike drinking *Moon Man!*. Millie and Justin came to a stop below one such billboard, the advertisement portraying a professional athlete upending a bottle as the last drop hung in anticipation. “REAL Pros Drink Every Last Drop! Play Outta This World! Now With More Protein!” Justin looked up and mimicked the pose, upending the bottle on an outstretched tongue. Somewhat less successful than the ad, the remainder of the bottle splashed onto his face and already stained shirt. Laughter erupted from both of them and they continued walking. Justin tossed the empty bottle at a nearby wall. Millie wiped the tears from her eyes with a chuckle.

“Why do you always do that? There’s a trash can right there,” she said.

“Why not?” was his only response. He let go of her hand and wrapped his arm tightly around her neck, bringing her close to kiss her on the head. She leaned into him, comfortable in his presence. Another couple walked towards them, each with their own bottle of *Moon Man!*. It was rare to see anyone not at work without it. Millie and Justin were like most citizens of New York, spending most of their free time in the new chemical balance. Crime had plummeted and the hungry masses were able to get their fill of cheap *Moon Man!* to sustain them when food stores periodically dwindled. Millie and

Justin turned the corner to reveal the top of her favorite building in the distance: Human Resources. The third tallest building in the city, Human Resources was a towering 130 floors and consumed an entire city block.

“I wonder what it’s like in there,” she said.

“Don’t you mean you wonder what Cain is like,” Justin accused. And she did wonder what Cain was like. He was always so handsome and nice in the news.

“Is that a hint of jealousy I hear?” she said as she tickled his stomach.

“I just don’t see what the big deal is. He isn’t all that great. And he’s goofy looking, if you ask me.”

“He has done so much for the city! Jobs, medical care, the new traffic system? He’s a great man. And he’s not so hard on the eyes, either.”

“Oh well then maybe you should go in there and throw yourself at him!” Justin took his arm from her shoulders in a huff. Millie stifled a giggle. She liked getting him worked up over little things. She reached for his hand.

“You know I’m yours, Justin. And it’s not like you never have fantasies about other women,” she said. She knew about his other girlfriends, but she also knew she was his favorite. There were other men in her life, but none that made her feel the way Justin did when they were together. It would be bizarre if they were monogamous, but Justin was her favorite.

“Alright, alright, yeah you’re mine, right? I’m your favorite,” he said, a bit of his confidence surging through the hurt façade.

“Of course you are. Now let’s stop here and get some more *Moon Man!*, I’m starting to come down,” she said as she pulled him toward the nearest bodega.

“Compassion and intelligence – previously two of man’s best tools – have become our biggest threat. Our compassion is now a drain on our society. The more lives we extend, the more mouths there are to feed. When once the sick and dying would be left to fend for themselves we now expend inordinate resources to preserve life. Intelligence allowed us to dominate landscapes and other species. We no longer have natural predators or parts of the globe that cannot be colonized. Two traits at the core of the human identity are now poised to be our downfall. On their own, intelligence and compassion are wonderful things. However, mankind’s vicious nature and brutal inclinations were also integral in the domination of Earth and live side by side with the gentler aspects of our nature.”

Zuberi

A glare reflecting from a neighboring building had finally wandered into the eyes of a pensive Zuberi. Sighing, he closed the blinds on that half of his office with the press of a button. He ran his fingers through his graying, curly hair as he leaned back in his black leather chair. His promotion and corner office were once exactly what he wanted, what he worked so hard for. He had read somewhere that satisfaction was the death of desire, but he had not expected the satisfaction to die so suddenly. Working in Human Resources seemed like a rewarding career, a real chance to impact the lives of many. The once ambitious and passionate man had grown old and jaded. Human Resources had scooped up the promising young doctor, spinning webs of lies disguised as higher truths. “The momentary pain of the few is worth helping the innumerable generations to come,” the recruitment agent had said to ease his ethical pains. The money she offered made this medicine easier to swallow. Much easier.

Now Zuberi had reached the top of the organization. His years working in the bowels of the human testing facilities were behind him. He was the leader of his own projects, answering only to Dr. Frank Neder and to Cain himself. Neder was a hack in Zuberi’s eyes, a hack whose job he could have within a month if he wanted it. His ambition, though, had slowly worn away with his compassion as he spent year after year treating people like lab rats. The things he had done to men, to women, to children – things he would never have believed himself capable of doing. Now he was giving the orders to have these things done and he found it easier each day. There were no more faces, no more names, no more screams to deal with. The scientists of old, how their hands were tied! Rats? Flies? Analogues could only come so close to the truth. They

could never hope for the precision of Human Resources. HR wasn't burdened with overblown ethics or regulations. The medical advancements he alone had been a part of were groundbreaking. He was a firm believer in the ends justifying the means. He had to be.

Zuberi swiveled his chair to gaze out the window of his 101st floor office. The city was awake and vibrant as always, the busy traffic moving as fluidly as only a computer program could orchestrate. Cain had solidified his control over the city when he fixed the old system for free, citing it as a community service. His true motivation was to regulate most movement in the city. He won the favor of the population as he slipped the leash around their necks. Unfortunately for a younger Zuberi, the new traffic program almost eliminated accidents. *I remember when I would get a fresh victim almost every day*, he reminisced. The smell of their blood, the uniqueness of each injury, the data he could collect – though the laboratory was able to generate random events, nothing was quite as thrilling as knowing natural carnage imposed the damage. The laboratory was monotonous, boring. His favorite part of his time in the Locker was getting terminal patients from the hospital. It was easy to take sick patients from hospitals. Terminal patients will agree to anything if you tell them it might cure them. Saving the individual was not the purpose of Human Resources, however. They were just as happy to have a patient die as they were to have them live. Both successes and failures were integral in their work. He loved the puzzle and the stakes of having someone's life in his hands. Some of his colleagues preferred to induce diseases, taking a healthy person and infecting them or giving them cancer. That work used to be too slow for him. Now all he did was analyze numbers, detail experiments, and manage the workers under him: the lab would

be a welcome change. Bureaucratic maneuvering was for schemers and snakes: he had little patience for such sniveling sycophants. He was the best at what he did and of the highest blood in Cain's hierarchy. His seat of power was not only earned but was his by birthright.

His secretary's voice dislodged his ruminations as it lolled from the phone on his desk. Her voice seemed tailored for the speaker and the speaker tailored for her voice, as if the two were inextricable and would not function properly under different circumstances. "Mr. Neder has requested to see you," Charlotte said. She could be as dull as a potted plant on occasion, but she was excellent at her job. Neder infrequently asked for an in person meeting, preferring to let his underlings bring him information and basically do his work for him. To meet in person usually meant there was an issue Zuberi needed to resolve or the results of a big project were finalized.

"Let him know I'll see him this afternoon," Zuberi replied, not wanting Neder to think he had access to him at his leisure.

"He wants to see you now, he was very specific about that. Should I tell him you are busy?"

"Did he say what it is regarding?" he asked. As little as Zuberi respected him, Neder was not without his wiles.

"No, but today was the scheduled end of the first phase of the big project they have been working on," Charlotte answered. This was not something she should have access to, or even know about, but she always had her finger on the pulse of the office. Very little happened in HR that Charlotte didn't know about. Zuberi owed much of his advancement to her. He overlooked or ignored most of the political jockeying and

backstabbing. Charlotte kept his career on track by navigating those waters for him.

“I’m on my way,” he replied as he stood and swung into his suit jacket. He walked with an air of entitlement and confidence that couldn’t be faked. An alpha lion roaming his territory, his hubris carried him through the halls and workspaces as if he were the only one in them. Few workers made the mistake of approaching him when he was going about his business, and no one did it more than once. There was only one thing that walked the halls that unnerved him to any degree. Cain’s pet, Skoll, had free range of the entire complex and occasionally liked to remind him of its presence. Pure white and massive, it resembled a wolf mixed with a polar bear. This walk was undisturbed by the beast as it preferred the lower levels to the lofty, rigid offices.

He arrived at Neder’s office and stood in the doorway, waiting to be acknowledged. The office was gaudily decorated in a manner befitting a man as gluttonous and tasteless as him. Large ivory tusks jutted from the wall directly behind his desk and various stuffed trophies hung from the walls. A cabinet in the corner contained relics from an age long past: maces, war hammers, and a great sword that hung askew in a decorated Nordic sheath. Neder fancied himself a warrior by heritage; his supposed Viking blood was a point of pride that surfaced more frequently than his intelligence. *This man is as much a Viking as I am a bird*, Zuberi thought. Frank Neder looked up from a pile of papers on his desk and flapped his chubby fingers, motioning Zuberi to enter. “So glad you could see me on such short notice,” Neder said. “Do I have some news! Some very exciting news. Might even pique the interest of someone as dreary as you, Zuberi.”

“And what might that be,” Zuberi said as he took a seat.

“This,” he said as he tossed the folder across his desk.

“A preliminary report? You called me here for a preliminary report? My time is valuable, Frank. Why are you wasting it with underling work.”

“Would you take the stick out of your ass for a minute and read it? Always so serious, Zuberi. Read it and tell me what you see. I’ve never seen numbers like this before! A 95 percent effectiveness and an almost flawless transmission. Obviously this is just the first trial, but we could fast track this if both of our departments work together. Cain would be pleased beyond measure if this could be implemented, much less if we could improve it! I need your kind of genius to make this happen.”

Zuberi was not immune to flattery, and his ego swelled with this praise. The numbers were impressive. *It seems like his trained monkeys may have stumbled across something*, Zuberi thought as he flipped through the data. He could see areas where their methods could be improved, slight miscalculations or misinterpretations of theory he could fix. This was the next big thing, and if he put his name on it he could solidify his favor with Cain. Getting back in the lab would be a nice break from the 101st floor and the headaches that came with it. This was dangerous territory though. Neder was not to be underestimated, and Zuberi wasn’t going to show how interested he was until he felt he had the upper hand.

“So you need me, huh?” Zuberi said. “I have my own projects I’m working on, and I’m not so sure about these numbers. Why should I drop my own work to help you with yours? It isn’t my concern whether or not your men are up to the task.”

“I’ll give you half of the credit, equal partners. No more, no less. Don’t be getting greedy on me, Zuberi. My team did the heavy lifting, we just need to have someone go

through and fine-tune it. You're the man for the job. You know and I know you are in a league of your own. But, Zuberi, this *will* be big, regardless of your help. Imagine your budget increase! C'mon Zuberi, we can do something great here. We'll make history, you and me," Neder said.

“Half...half and my name is the lead on it. Non-negotiable. I also will not work with you looking over my shoulder the whole time. If I'm in, your team does what I say. You want my help, I run the show. Send up the lead on your team this afternoon. If I like what he has to say, and if the numbers make sense, then you'll have my help.”

“I came to this conclusion not with zeal, but with a heavy heart. I have the burden of understanding the great scope of the world. With the inequity of the times I find this to be the only solution to preserve our species. If no one else can – or will – do it, I will. I have means, motivation, and logic. There will be pain. There will be death. There will be misery. Atrocities will be committed in my name. The momentary pain and suffering of the few is greatly outweighed by the lives of the generations to come. I am an engine of evolution. I will take the best of us and carry them through the oncoming darkness. I will make us strong. I will nurture mankind and shepherd us into a new era. This planet is destined for desolation. We will migrate to a new home, one that has been unblemished by the ugliness of mankind. The day will come when we return, when we have learned to live in a way to respect Mother Earth and exist without destroying her.”

Victor

Victor stared sullenly into his coffee, steam rising from the black pool at a leisurely pace. The food on his tray was simple: toast, eggs, oatmeal. Normal. Not that anything was normal anymore, not since he became a member of the Disciples. At least he was allowed among the others now, though he didn't have many friends. He didn't want to make friends with these people.

"Eat up, big guy. You're going to need your energy," Winston said with a wink as he took a seat across the table. Winston was a pale balding man in his forties, standing a few inches shorter than Victor. His oval glasses were too large for his face. Victor found himself wanting to snap them in half.

"It's not every day a man meets his future wife!" Winston winked in a conspiratorial way again as if he had made a particularly insightful statement. *That's an annoying habit*, Victor thought, remaining silent. He thought sitting alone in the corner would be enough to deter anyone from joining him.

"Hopefully the one you're assigned won't be as ugly as my old ball and chain. Who knows, you may even get more than one! I get nagged enough it feels like I have four wives, mind you," Winston said as he spread peanut butter on a bagel. It was amazing how many luxuries they had here. There was almost everything you could want for comforts, including food. Everyone had a strict amount of food allowance, but the peanut butter's presence was a testament to the resources their caretakers had. Victor bit off a chunk of toast and washed it down with a gulp of coffee. Real coffee. He still couldn't believe it was made with beans, not powder or imitation syrup. Maybe he could get used to a few things here.

“You’re lucky, too. I was waiting for them to find me a match for a whole year! A whole year! You’ve been here what, two months? Lucky,” Winston said as he crunched into his bagel, peanut butter falling to the gray plate below. Victor methodically ate his meal, doing his best to ignore the slight man across from him.

“Not up for talking, huh? That’s all right, I was so nervous on my Pairing Day I couldn’t eat a single bite!” The truth was Victor *was* nervous, but he didn’t want to acknowledge it. What if she was horrible? What if she was as vicious as it seemed so many of these people were? They would be a near perfect match genetically – giving their child the best chance to be of Royal Blood – but that did not guarantee they would love each other (or even get along, for that matter). In some cultures arranged marriage was standard. This felt different. Colder. Odds were he hadn’t even met her yet. He had been among the general population for a week and had only seen the women in the dining hall. Meal times and other planned social activities were the only times they interacted with the opposite sex. The interactions between the men and women were kept to a minimum and were always supervised except for Paired couples. Once Paired, they would be moved to larger, joint quarters as if they were a real couple. It seemed farcical to him, to attempt to make a scientifically based relationship appear legitimate. Perhaps they thought keeping some semblance to old traditions would make the whole thing easier. Victor finished his meal and pushed out his seat, eager to leave his unwanted tablemate.

“Good luck, friend!” Winston chirped, followed by yet another wink. *How was he selected to be Royal?* Victor wondered, but dismissed the thought. Winston was not someone he cared to waste time thinking about. He returned his plate to the rotating

dishwasher and sauntered out of the dining hall, faking confidence in hopes it would make him feel less anxious. He was tempted to scan the room for her but he knew it would be pointless. There wasn't going to be a moment of two strangers making eye contact from across a crowded room, instantly falling in love and living happily every after. No, this was a different kind of fate. It was the fate handed down by the geneticists on high, their algorithms and calculations attempting to optimize the human race. What was once a rolling sea of possibilities would soon be narrowed to a single passionless trickle. No, not a trickle. One drop. He didn't dare think he'd be lucky and find someone wonderful and beautiful waiting for him. Many of the people here weren't recruited as Victor was. The long term ones had been there since before the violence. They had been selected under a guise of free genetic mapping, a movement supposedly meant as preventative medical care. They had been indoctrinated, told they were special, and given security in a deteriorating society. Most people, deep down, believe they are special in some way. Darwin's Disciples gave them a reason to believe it and promised them better lives. This made them callous toward those not of Royal Blood. Twisted men and women who were once normal – driven zealot by their perceived elite status – made up most of Darwin's Disciples.

Victor exited the cafeteria. He was expected to be in the Assignments office in a short five minutes. The corridor to the Assignments office was austere, the off-white walls colored light blue by overhead lighting. He rounded a corner and was facing a large metallic door with "ASSIGNMENTS" printed above it. He paused, took a deep breath, and continued. The door swung inward and Victor stepped into a bright office with a single desk. Two women were in the room: one behind the desk facing him, the other

sitting back-to. A nameplate on the desk read *Angela Finestein, PhD*.

“Victor?” the woman behind the desk asked, not looking up from her folder.

“Yes, mam,” Victor responded.

“Please take a seat,” she said. He sat, not daring to look at his future wife. He could feel her eyes on him, digging into his skin. “Victor, this is Jenna. Jenna, Victor. You’ve been assigned as partners,” Dr. Finestein said, still not looking up from her folder. “As you know, this means you are expected to live together and to make a progeny when called upon. Your things are being moved to your new quarters as we speak. You’ve been assigned to D Wing, Room Number 3342. Any questions?” she asked, finally looking up over her horn-rimmed glasses. Victor shook his head. Jenna continued to stare at him. “You may now kiss the bride,” Dr. Finestein said, sentencing them to a life espoused.

Victor turned and locked eyes with his bride. The look he saw there was one of accusing spite. He saw his fears coalesce in those deep green eyes. He leaned in and pecked her tight, unmoving lips. She hated him. He could taste it.

“Can we go now,” Jenna said, turning back to Dr. Finestein.

“You are to go to your new quarters and make yourselves at home. You will get your injections and further orders this afternoon,” she said with a dismissive wave. Jenna stood and stormed out. Victor stood and followed. He watched the rhythm of her hips as she strode the hall. She had a natural grace even in anger. She turned, catching him staring. “Excited to rape me later?” she said.

“Rape you? I would never,” Victor grumbled. She scoffed and turned, leaving him behind once more. After several twists, turns, and an elevator ride, they stood in

front of room 3342. She put her hand on the scanner and the door opened. Their new quarters had three rooms: a bathroom, a bedroom, and living room. It was sparsely furnished with only a small couch and a bed. A screen was built into the wall across from the couch where they would receive video announcements and watch the occasional mandatory entertainment program. The screen flashed on, accompanied by a short tone. A woman's disembodied head floated on a white background.

“Welcome to your new apartment, and congratulations!” the bodiless woman said. Victor and Jenna moved to the couch. “Now, I'm sure you have tons of questions about your new residence, spouse, and responsibilities. This instructional video aims to answer some of these questions. Your apartment is a luxury suite designed to accommodate and support your burgeoning relationship. All of the residents of this wing are married couples as well, so you'll make many new friends! They are your new family, so get to know them. They will be your companions on this big adventure.

“You and your spouse are as genetically compatible as possible. Isn't that sexy? You will have strong, healthy children. You will be allowed to consummate, but not quite yet! There are several preparations that each of you must undergo.

“Your overall goal will be to produce two children. This is not expected of you until after the Great Migration, of course, so until then you will both be given regular doses of birth control. Once a month you will report to Medical and undergo the process. These visits will also include DNA priming, making your DNA as fit as possible to pass on to your children. Your children will be healthy, smart, and strong. You two are part of the process of ushering humanity into a new age. Now *that* is something to be proud of! You will have some time to get to know each other, then you'll be separated until tonight.

So talk, listen, and learn. A happy home makes happy children. Good luck, you are beginning a very exciting journey.” With that, the screen shut off, leaving the two of them in silence.

“The Great Migration. I wonder when we'll actually learn what that means,” Victor said. “You know, it wouldn't hurt to get to know each other a little,” he tried. “Like it or not, we're in this together.”

"I don't like it. I don't like you. I don't like anything about this place," she said.

"I'm not the monster you think I am. I hate it here, too. If I had anywhere else to go, that's where I'd be. But I don't. So here I am. After the Sharks came, I was alone. I was starving. I had nowhere to go. I'm not like a lot of the people who are here because they believe in what the Disciples are doing. Hate me if you want but don't dare think I'm like them."

The edge in her voice lessened. "Well, how did it happen then?"

"How did what happen?" Victor asked.

"How did they get you?"

"Sharks came, they tested, they killed. I saw my brother murdered. The Sharks, they just laughed. He was going to be a father, too," Victor shook his head.

"They killed my brother, too," Jenna said, covering her face with her hands. Victor reached for her shoulder to console her. She looked him in the eye and slapped him. Hard.

“Do not. Touch me.” She slapped him again. As a third arced toward his cheek, he caught her wrist.

“Enough,” he said, his cheek bright red. She wrenched her arm free as she stood,

backing away from him. A knock at the door broke the tension. Victor got up and checked the screen next to the door. Two men in lab coats – one tall and thin, the other short and squat – waited outside. The door opened with a rush.

"Can I help you?"

"We are here to escort you each to your appointments. The priming sequence is very specific and must begin soon. Victor, you will come with me. Jenna will go with my colleague here," the tall one said. His wrinkled face and graying hair lent him an air of distinction.

"Okay," Victor said. He stepped into the hallway and turned to Jenna. "You need to go with him," he said. Jenna crossed the threshold, the automated door closing behind her.

"Follow me, Mrs. Fennigan," the portly man said as he started walking away. She glared at Victor one more time before following. Being called Mrs. Fennigan clearly worsened her mood. The remaining doctor glanced at the handprint that was blooming on Victor's cheek. He made a weak attempt to hide his amusement, and with a grin he motioned for Victor to follow him.

“We use this technology as a means to an end. To bring down the system of excess and insatiable growth we must surpass the capabilities already established. Less has not been able to stop more. Mother Nature has tried since we began defiling her, but half measures will not work. Full measures, that is what we use.”

Zander

Three men sat around a roaring fire, their shadows long against a barrier of thin poplars. One of the men held a metallic cube that fit neatly into his palm. As he closed his fingers around it the edges moved to conform to his grip. “Well ain’t that the craziest thing.”

“Bert, toss it here,” one across the fire said. It flattened into a disc as it moved through the air.

“It’s lighter than it looks,” he said as he turned it over in his hands. Eyes wide, he asked, “Whaddaya think it is?”

“Whatever it is, it’s gotta be worth more than you, Tom,” the pale man next to him said.

“Oh, kill yourself, Will. Now you don’t get to play with it,” Tom said.

“You think so? Hmmm, that’s too –” Will said as he lunged for the now spherical object. Tom pushed him back, amused by the attempt.

“The day you get the drop on me jus ain’t never gunna come. You’re jus too slow. I ain’t one of them pretty little girls you fancy. How do you even hold them down with such skinny arms?” Tom asked. Infuriated, Will redoubled his efforts and tackled Tom. The sphere arced from Tom’s hand and landed in the fire.

“Look what you did! Get it out!” Bert yelled, now standing.

“I can help with that,” Zander said, stepping out of the shadows.

Will and Tom stopped wrestling and stood. Will looked him up and down. “You look familiar...”

“I’m the one whose pack you stole,” Zander said.

“Right! I knew it. You’re the fool who was swimmin’ in the river. Thought you’d drownt yourself with how long you ‘er under,” Will said. “Come here for a beatin’?”

“No, I came to get that back,” Zander said, motioning to the fire.

“Sorry to disappoint ya, but that metal thingy is ours now,” Tom replied, pulling a knife from a sheath at his waist. Several notches marred the steel. Based on the scars on the blade and on the man holding it, both had ended a few lives. “Now why don’t you carry on before things get real bad for ya.”

“Things aren’t going to get bad for me.” With that Alecto appeared, seeming to precipitate from the shadows. On the day they had stolen from him, Alecto had been off hunting. This was the first they’d seen of him. He now prowled the edges of the firelight, his bright yellow eyes menacing against the black of his fur. *Now for some real theatrics*, Zander thought. “Rise,” he said, pointing at the fire. The Axund, now glowing, rose and hovered to him, landing in his outstretched hand.

“Holy hell,” Bert said, his jaw slack. Tom, however, saw it as an opening and attacked. In a flash, Alecto was on him. A sickening crunch could be heard as Alecto shattered Tom’s forearm with his jaws. Alecto moved up to hold Tom’s throat in his mouth.

Zander sighed. “Now look, you have clearly upset Alecto. I think it best you apologize,” he said. Disarmed and terrified, Tom managed to squeak an apology. As with all cowards, his bravado abandoned him when tested. Alecto let go of his neck but kept him pinned. Bert took a step back, earning himself a deep growl. “Let’s all stay put. We’ll have a little chat, then I’ll be on my way,” Zander said. “You stole from me. Since I’m sure you didn’t know what it was you were taking – you seem little more than petty

thieves – I'm going to let you live. If you come looking for me, Alecto will be waiting for you. If you tell anyone of this, who I am, what you stole – Alecto will track you down and won't be as gentle as he is right now. Understand?" Bert and Will nodded.

Zander manipulated the Axund, sending it hovering a few feet in the air in front of him. "Any questions?" Zander asked. Will opened his mouth as if to speak. "Too late," Zander said. A soundless wave pulsed from the orb, expanding in all directions. Bert and Will were knocked off their feet, unconscious before hitting the ground. Tom grunted and went limp. Alecto shook off the impact like he just stepped out of water. Zander, unmoved, stepped to the Axund and pocketed it. *This isn't leaving my side again.*

"What should we do with these guys?" Zander asked Alecto. "How about we teach them a lesson?" he said, grinning. After a few minutes he stepped back to admire his masterpiece. The three unconscious – and now naked – men were lying next to each other in an orderly row. Zander threw their clothes into the fire. *These three deserve a few cold nights,* he thought. With harmony restored to the universe he started on his way, Alecto padding quietly behind.

"Where did all my friends go, Alecto?" he asked. Alecto ignored him and continued sniffing the path ahead of him. "You too? A shame, I managed to find this pouch of beef jerky. Looks like I have no friends to share it with." Alecto stopped, eyes wide at the word jerky. "That's what I thought," Zander said laughing. He tossed him a piece from the pouch. "You did well back there. Very scary." Alecto wagged his tail, eagerly waiting for another piece. "That's enough for you. You're starting to get a little chunky." Alecto, not appreciating this jab, went in a playful crouch. He was ready to pounce, all four hundred pounds angled at Zander. "You sure you want to do this? You

haven't won in a while, I'm starting to worry you've lost your edge.” Alecto let loose a throaty growl, the pace of his wag increasing. “Alright, if you really want to get embarrassed again. Winner gets the rest of the bag, deal?” Zander set the bag down, and before he looked up Alecto was on him. Zander had been expecting this, however, and easily shifted the large animal's momentum off of him. Just as Alecto hit the ground he changed directions and was on him again, this time securing his forearm between his teeth much as he had subdued Tom earlier. He drew blood, but not much. Zander rolled and manipulated the muscles at the back of Alecto's jaw, loosening the grip just enough to slide his arm free. He moved his arm to Alecto's neck and spun him around, dragging him to the ground. Alecto bucked and knocked Zander from him, sending him flat on his back. Two massive paws instantly pinned him to the ground. "Ah you've learned that counter well," Zander said, slightly out of breath. "However, your footing is risky," he said as he swiped at Alecto's back paws with his legs, trying to roll to safety. Alecto leapt over his swipe and now stood firmly on Zander's back. He squirmed for a second, unable to move. He tapped the ground twice with his hand. "Who taught you that? I thought we hadn't made it to that one," Zander said as Alecto let him up.

Zander rubbed his arm where Alecto had bitten him. "That really hurt you know," he said in a wounded tone, watching the twin holes close. Alecto whined mockingly as he licked the blood from Zander's arm. "You don't need to be mean about it," Zander said as he swatted him on the nose. Alecto barked and nuzzled Zander's face. "All right, all right, I love you too buddy," Zander said, patting his jet-black fur. "We need to go back to Nadia's. I have a plan.”

Nadia and Mike would have his help. This recent loss of the Axund had woken

him up. He couldn't keep running from the Disciples. He had to bring the fight to them, to Cain. He knew Cain and how he thought. They were cousins, after all. Even if Cain was a decade younger, they had spent time under the same roof and learned many of the same lessons. If he was going to beat him, he needed to return to where it all began. If he could break into Human Resources and steal information, he could help the Bastion more than they could have imagined.

“Intelligence, coupled with brutality, yielded cruel weapons and dangerous diseases. We wanted to destroy, to kill, to obliterate. This worked to keep population in check at first – world wars, conquering armies, nuclear weapons – but compassion and empathy became the norm, making what can be considered the most peaceful time in history. I see that time of peace as the deep breath before the plunge. We are hitting the surface of frigid waters and soon will be floundering in the black depths of an icy, bottomless pool of our own design.”

Nadia

“Only ten marks a pound? Are you kidding me? I know you can do better than that, Felix,” Nadia said.

“That’s the best I can offer, Nadia. If you’re looking to buy, however, I did just get a shipment of *Moon Man!* straight from New York. Everyone is buying it, I might run out by the end of the day.”

“Yeah, I’ll take a few bottles, if you’ll take chag for it,” she replied. *At least it won’t go bad*, she thought. If the freezer broke down before the meat was eaten, they would be out of food. Though she didn’t like the thought of giving the children *Moon Man!*, everything she had heard about it was positive. *I’d rather have them drunk than starving*. After making the exchange, she left the shop with enough *Moon Man!* to last them several more weeks. It was more nutritional than the chag, and Mike was running low on whiskey. He would be fine with her decision. She crossed the pavement of the town square to the clothing store Mike and the children were in.

“Mommy! Look what I picked out!” Deanne said, running to meet her at the door.

“Wow! You look so beautiful, my love,” she said with a smile as she adjusted the collar. “You’ll grow into these in no time! Where is my sweet prince?” she asked.

“He’s in the changing room with Daddy,” Deanne replied with a twirl, the tan dress swirling with her. As if on cue, Mike and Charlie, hand in hand, appeared from the back. Charlie’s clothes hung from him comically, his tiny frame nowhere near large enough to fill them. *He’ll grow in and out of them soon enough*, she thought. A bittersweet pang thrummed along her spine at the thought of her little boy growing up. “There are my handsome men,” Nadia said, scooping up Charlie and kissing Mike. “Do

you like your new clothes?"

"Yeah, they're alright I guess," Charlie replied, tugging at the sleeves.

"Did you buy them already?" she asked Mike.

"Just about to pay. I need you to try something on first," he said as he pulled out a forest green jacket.

"We don't have the money to spend on that," she said. "I don't need anything."

"Yes, you do. We do have the money to spend, and you deserve something new too. I can only patch and re-stitch that old jacket so many times, you know. Just try it on?" He was right – her jacket was tentatively intact at best. With winter coming, she would need something she could count on.

"Alright, alright. I'll try it on," she said with a smile. *He is too good to me*, she thought as she took off her jacket and tried on the new one.

"See? Perfect fit," he said. He walked to the counter to pay before she could try to talk him out of it. She rolled her eyes, but was happy with his choice.

"Okay, kids, go change back. You can wear them when we get home, I don't want you to ruin them on the walk," Nadia said, stuffing her old jacket in her pack. They left the store and perused the remaining shops, buying a few essentials and replacement parts they needed for the house.

They came to a footbridge that spanned a wide stream. Charlie and Deanne skipped along as they sung a nursery rhyme. "Race you across!" Charlie yelled. He took off across the bridge with Deanne hot on his heels.

"Kids come back here!" Nadia said.

“They aren’t going to fall in, Nadia. We can’t coddle them forever. Let them have their fun,” Mike said. Nadia forced herself to relax. *They can’t fit through the railing*, she supposed. They might get a splinter or two if they fall, but that would be a lesson learned. She took Mike’s hand and they watched as Deanne closed in on Charlie. Deanne passed him at the last second and jumped up and down with her hands raised in the air.

“I win! I win!” she yelled. As she turned back to face the bridge, a figure swooped in behind her and lifted her from the ground. Charlie stopped, eyes wide. A man scrambled out from under the bridge and grabbed him. Both held knives against the children’s throats. In that moment, Nadia’s world stopped.

“The one thing that is a constant for everything that lives – death – is what is most feared. Fear is as powerful an emotion as any. This aspect of man is one I have exploited. Fear makes people irrational. While irrational people are dangerous, they are also easier to kill. They pose no real threat to me. Man is the greatest predator, but I am the greatest of men.”

G-12

G-12 observed the compound from his place atop a sloping hill, his mechanical eye bringing the target into focus from more than a mile away. It was exactly as the blueprints and intelligence had depicted it: walls twenty feet tall and roughly five feet thick surrounding a formidable main complex. The outer wall was concrete reinforced with rebar. It also sported a line of spiked, and reportedly electrified, defensive stakes jutting at alternating angles along the top. Guard towers were located every 100 meters, eliminating blind spots in the circular perimeter. Manned, this was an impressive defense against men. However, G-12 was not a leader of men. He was a Great White. He had ten Sharks under his control: nine Bull Sharks and one Hammerhead.

The Bull Sharks served their purpose well. They were an impressive force of destruction and followed directions exactly as commanded. The Hammerhead was his most valuable asset – other than himself, of course – with its array of sensory equipment even he was not able to fully understand. Though his senses and those of the Bull Sharks were heightened far above a regular human's, Hammerheads possessed extra senses like no other. Heat sensing, sonar, radar, and radiation detection were all integrated seamlessly into the Hammerhead's neural network. The systems were so precise they could even detect brain waves within a certain range. Their weapons were minimal when compared to the Bull Sharks, and borderline pathetic when compared to his own. However, he relied heavily on the Hammerhead to adjust battle plans where necessary. With no modifications announced from the Hammerhead at his right, he initiated the attack. Though this mission was of the utmost importance, the fortifications did not yet call for him to breach the battlefield. Conservation of the target was the goal. Where

infiltration had previously failed, a more direct approach was now necessary.

Explosions blossomed simultaneously at three points of the perimeter. *Excellent timing, boys*, G-12 thought. He could see the guards in their towers scramble to react to the new threat. Three Bull Sharks stormed through each hole. Guard towers on each side of the breaches were obliterated before the guards could mount a defense. Joy welled up inside G-12. *Nothing is more satisfying than seeing scum burn*, he thought. Each group of Sharks maneuvered in a clockwise direction as they took out the remaining guards. Every window and door on the main building had metal drop down covers, sealing them shut. The building's automated turrets activated and opened fire on the Bull Sharks. Missiles were lobbed back from the Bull Sharks, disabling several of the turrets in a single volley. *That's my cue*, G-12 thought as he and the Hammerhead made their run to the target. By the time he arrived all of the guards and turrets were neutralized. G-12 barked an order and his Bull Sharks dropped into a single line behind him, their bionic eyes pulsing in a synchronized fashion. The Hammerhead stood directly to his left as it analyzed the building.

"Any surprises waiting for us?" G-12 asked. The Hammerhead slowly shook its massive, metal encased head. "Excellent," G-12 continued. "I know you are in there, and I know you can hear me. So listen closely," he boomed. "We represent Darwin's Disciples, and we are here for the information you have so diligently amassed over the years. We asked politely at first, yet you refused to share with us. We offered money, yet you wanted none. We offered safety, protection: you declined. We even tried to peacefully take what is rightfully ours. This was our last choice for retrieving the information. You have forced our hand. What you see before you is your own doing. We

will be getting inside either way. That is inevitable. Our leader respects what you have accomplished here. He wants to preserve as many of you as possible, for he believes your type of minds are not to be discarded casually. Sifting through that much information and sleuthing out what is worth keeping is a beautiful foundation for our goals.

“I offer you one last deal, one last chance to resolve this without further bloodshed. Open your doors and assist us with the data transfer and you will all be spared. No testing will be done. A free pass will be granted and you will be unmolested by Darwin’s Disciples from this point on. You have one minute to comply. If these doors are not open within sixty seconds, I will open them. Those who live will be tested. Those who fail will die. Your minute starts now.”

As the seconds dwindled, G-12 prepared his munitions for entry and his Bull Sharks began to work themselves into frenzy. He allowed it as the sight of them might help to push those inside towards letting them in. With three seconds to spare the main door opened. A woman strode confidently from the doorway. G-12 held his arm up and the Bull Sharks snapped into a ridged, silent formation.

“This is what you came for. Now leave,” she said, setting a bright blue box on the ground. She stood unabashed in front of him. *This one does not yet know fear*, he thought. *We’ll see how long this impudence lasts*. He took his time as he approached, allowing each footfall to punctuate his size. He towered over her as he pretended to inspect the building behind her.

“Impressive. The fact that it took us this long, and that you drove us to this length before breaking, is a testament to your organization. Now tell me,” he said, bending to bring his face within inches of hers. “Does this contain everything we have asked for?”

The steel in her eyes only hardened at this intimidation. *She will make a good addition to the Disciples*, he thought.

“Yes,” she responded. A loud release of static came from the Hammerhead. She was lying.

“My friend here says you are being less than truthful. Now why would you lie to me? That wasn’t very trusting of you. How unfortunate, and I was hoping we could resolve this congenially,” G-12 said. He picked her up by her throat, her legs kicking as she struggled. He drove his bionic arm through her sternum, the sound of breaking bone cracking through the humid air. Blood dripped from her chin as she gurgled for breath that would not come. G-12 smiled at the fear in her eyes. He launched her body at the now sealed door. Fury and bloodlust had risen in the Bull Sharks. G-12 approached the main entrance and pinpointed the four corners of the door. Raising his bloodied weaponry, he fired. Four streaks of plasma ripped through the panel. With unbroken stride he fired a concussive round, denting the door violently and blowing the floundering woman apart. Three more steps and he was at the door. He delivered an explosive punch that wrenched the door from the frame with thunderous force. They were in.

“Every full moon will bring new waves of death. It will be inescapable and unstoppable. How long do you think it will take them to realize it is the moon? Months? Years? By that time there will be no one left, or not enough left to make a difference.”

Zander

I don't want anything too flashy, but it has to be a little dangerous, Zander thought as we walked down a long line of cars. He came to a stop at a blood red cruiser that looked as though it was fresh from the printer. *Well, maybe a little flash,* he thought. Casual and cool he checked left, then right: no one in sight. He brought the Axund up to the lock and twisted it. He pulled on the handle to no avail. With furrowed brow he used the Axund once more, leaning close to listen for it to unlock. Nothing. Feeling the weight of the metal in his hand, he looked at the window then back at the Axund. Zander reared back and threw it through the window. *Really? No alarm?* he thought as he unlocked it and sat down in a huff, perplexed by the entire situation. Within moments the car purred at a soft idle. He produced a loaded syringe from his jacket pocket. After finding an appropriate vein, he injected himself with the suppression serum. *There, now for the fun part,* he thought. He activated manual control of the car and pulled on to the empty street, promptly accelerated, and crashed headlong into a concrete wall. Zander slumped over the steering wheel, unconscious and bloody. Sirens wailed and within five minutes a squad scooped him out of his car to transport him to HR.

“How the hell did this happen?” one of the medics asked. “We haven’t had a solo crash all year.”

“The car is set to manual. Maybe a suicide attempt? He’ll get his wish, though not as quickly as he was hoping,” the second one laughed, flicking Zander in the head where the dashboard had opened it up.

“Now that is hardly professional,” the first said as he gave his partner a stern look. Unable to keep a straight face they both broke out into laughter and loaded Zander into

the ambulance. The heavy thunk of the ambulance door jolted him awake. He feigned unconsciousness for the remainder of the ride, though it didn't matter: the medics didn't check on him once. After they passed through security they slowed to a halt inside an ambulance bay. The two medics hopped out and opened the back door.

“You're completely wrong, and it's a little embarrassing we get paid the same amount.”

“I've seen it! I saw a guy do it! The patient was in cardiac arrest and the guy just thumped him on the chest as hard as he could. Bam, heartbeat back,” the second medic defended. The argument continued as they unloaded Zander. They strolled him to a secure door where they swiped in with a pass card.

“I don't even know what to say to you. Do you not understand how the heart works at all? How did you pass your exams?”

“I'm telling you, I *watched* it work. In real life. Right in front of me! Here, I'll show you how he did it,” he said. He stopped the stretcher and positioned himself to the right of Zander. He raised his fist above his head and brought it down as hard as he could on Zander's sternum

“Ow! Why did you do that?” Zander said. The thumper leapt at this, shocked that he was awake. Zander sat forward and snapped the restraints that were securing him to the stretcher. He rubbed his chest as he looked at the medics.

“H-how is that healed?”

“I am disgruntled with your customer service,” Zander said as he unhooked the restraints on his legs. “I mean really. To hit a patient like that.” Zander swung his legs from the stretcher and stood. “How far does that pass card work? I'm going to need it.”

“Well you’re not get–” he said, cut short by Zander’s fist in his stomach. He rounded on the second medic and bounced his head off of the corridor wall. He lifted the first medic and slammed him onto the stretcher where he restrained him with the straps he hadn’t broken. Zander unceremoniously threw the unconscious one on top and wheeled them to the ambulance. Rummaging through the drug box he found what he was looking for. He took the syringe full of sedatives and gave half to each. *That should keep them under for a while*, he thought as he grabbed the pass card. He jumped from the back and shut the door and left them to their chemical dreams. Zander knew the layout of HR – or how it was several years ago – so the 101st floor was his target. The pass card would get him into the Locker, and from there he could use the Axund to access any other doors. The Axund would also make him almost invisible to any camera surveillance so long as he kept it in his pocket.

Moving through the halls he searched for a supply closet. He found one conveniently unlocked and traded his jacket for a lab coat. It would cover his bloodstained shirt and allow him to walk around without drawing extra suspicion. He also cleaned himself up; it wouldn’t do to walk around with a bloodied forehead. If he could make it to the access elevators he would have a straight shot to the 101st floor. He wandered a minute or two and found the elevator he needed. The Axund worked on the scanner and the doors parted. He was exhilarated with the ease of his progress. *I just need a few more minutes of luck*, he thought. The lift slowed to a halt and doors slid open to reveal a directory sign.

Dr. Frank Neder, Director of Research & Development. Room 10114. As good a place to start as any, he thought. Runners that lined the bottom of the walls dimly lit the

halls. This floor was quiet, with not so much as a janitor cleaning or workaholic burning the midnight oil. Zander had been in this part of the building once before and the layout was firm in his mind. Two turns and he reached his target. He held the Axund to the scanner. It hummed softly as it interfaced with the panel. A click and a whoosh and he was inside. Dim office lights casted gruesome shadows from mounted animals that adorned the walls. He sat at the desk and plugged the Axund into the sleek computer unit. Within seconds the computer was his to access freely.

He searched all files for the Reprogenetic Project as well as any Shark related information. While the Axund handled the encryptions and search, he perused the current projects. *Let's see if there's anything I can meddle with while I'm here*, he thought. Anything that could set them back could be worth the risk. An inconspicuous file labeled "GM" was the most recent one to be opened. *Let's see what Dr. Neder was up to*. Zander's heart began to race as he read. Cain and his followers were planning to leave! And it would be soon, as soon as Project: Mosaic was complete. *What are you waiting for, Cain*, Zander thought as he opened the Mosaic file. He found the most disturbing part of the file in the form of notes:

"It is really quite fascinating how quickly and efficiently this virus destroys the host. Though untested on a large population, the virus's high rate of mutation and its ability to transmit flawlessly with the smallest exposure makes it the most successful candidate we have worked on. We need at least three more lunar cycles to determine its full natural effect. Specific strains can then be tailored to individual regions to ensure maximum effectiveness."

Zander's head reeled with the implications.

“When combined with the litany of agents my lab has been working on over the years and the plans for crop/livestock viral decimation, our purge will be unstoppable.”

Zander downloaded the Mosaic information to the Axund. He had to look at the Great Migration and Chimera files at greater length.

As he read, he heard four paws in rhythm as they bounded down the hallway toward him. *Skoll*, he thought, rising to his feet. A boulder of white fur hurtled into the office, coming to a stop between him and the door. “You must have smelled me, huh, Skoll? You have gotten fat since the last time I saw you... does Cain not take you for enough walks?” Skoll remained silent with his hackles raised. Zander scanned the room for a weapon to use. The Axund would be of no use while it was downloading data. His eyes landed on a cabinet in the corner. Skoll saw this and lunged to cut him off, intercepting him a foot from the cabinet. *Damn, he's faster than Alecto*, he thought as he evaded snapping jaws. Zander staggered the beast with a swift kick, catching him flush behind the ear. He smashed the glass with his left hand as he reached for a mace. Dull and ancient, the weapon was far from battle condition. Before he could turn it on Skoll, the monstrosity clamped down on his forearm and shattered the bones. As the mace clattered to the floor, he seized Skoll by the back of the jaw and wrenched himself free. He could not stay and trade blows. He had to escape before security arrived.

Zander abandoned the weaponry and pressed with a flurry of kicks and punches. Skoll countered with a snap or a swipe. As they danced Skoll stayed

between him and the door, more than willing to let him get out of reach of the weapons. Zander feinted left and delivered a smashing right fist to the tip of Skoll's nose, sending an involuntary yelp and a handful of teeth through the air. With bloodied hands he swung the beast into the elephant tusks that hung behind the desk. Skoll slid motionless to the floor, a foot of magenta slicked ivory jutting from his chest. Zander grabbed the Axund and the collar from Skoll's neck: it would be his all access pass. He walked over to the broken cabinet and pulled a sword free of its scabbard. He twirled the mammoth blade with nimble fingers to test its weight.

With collar in one hand and great sword in the other, he tore from the office. A slurp came from the motionless Skoll as the tusk slid from his chest. Teeth sprouted from empty sockets. The white giant stirred and stood as the wound closed. He let out a primal, crazed howl. Skoll began his pursuit.

“I have selected those whose DNA is particularly inspired or malleable to suit my goals. This generation is not the one I look to preserve, but the future generations that will come from the Royal Bloodline. What is passed down will be what I choose to show them, what I choose to salvage from the slush of human endeavor. Why is that decision mine to make? It is mine to make because I am in the position to make it. I have orchestrated this entire thing. Who is more qualified?”

Dalton

“No, he is still alive,” a deep voice said as the pressure on his neck subsided. “Weak heartbeat, but alive. That leg is definitely broken though. Nasty.” Dalton was slowly regaining consciousness as the man searched his pockets.

“He doesn’t look like a Disciple to me, no, he doesn’t,” a second voice squeaked.

“Yeah I doubt it, no scar on the shoulder,” the first voice said as he tugged at Dalton’s collar. Dalton opened his eyes and tried to clear his head. He closed his eyes again, trying to make sense of the situation. *How did I get here?* he thought. The smell of burning oil and metal swept over him.

“Hey, you okay?” the man searching him asked. “Can you open your eyes for me?” Dalton did as he was told.

“Damn. He’s scrambled. Do you know where you are? Do you remember what happened?” the first man went on as he reached his breast pocket. The man pulled the picture out and looked at it.

“I-I um, well, no. I don’t really remember much of anything.”

“Do you know who this is? Is she your daughter? Wife?” Dalton was able to focus on the picture long enough to make out the details of her face. When he reached for her name he couldn’t find it.

“I know her...at least I think I do? I can’t remember. Yes?”

“You took a pretty big crank on the head, friend,” his interrogator said. “We can take you back with us and treat that leg. Does anything else hurt?”

“Nothing worse than the leg,” he said, and for the first time realized how much pain he was in. They picked him up and looped one arm around each of their necks.

“Can you support yourself with the other leg? I’m Daniels, by the way. This is Marwin,” the deep-voiced man said.

“Yeah I think so,” Dalton replied.

“Our ride isn’t too far away. We do have a trailer you can lay in while we continue our search, we do. A Trak-Down exploded not far from here, so we are going to see what we can salvage. Hopefully, *hopefully* the whole thing wasn’t ruined,” Marwin said. “Once we’re done we’ll come back for you, yeah. Okay? That leg doesn’t look oh so bad, no. You’ll be fine to wait a little? We’ll be back quick sure enough.”

After a short walk, Dalton was placed in the back of a run down contraption that seemed made up of entirely salvaged parts. They laid him down and left him to sift through hazy, tired thoughts. Whenever he would begin to form an idea of what happened the images would run from him. A warm autumn breeze skewed a pillar of black smoke as it rose above the golden orange treetops. He slipped back into muted darkness.

“So you’re an engineer, right? That shirt you were wearing when we found you looked like an engineer’s shirt,” Daniels said.

“Yeah, yeah I think so,” Dalton replied.

“Good. We need you to take a look at something, then. We have tough men and women, smart men and women, but we can’t figure this damn thing out,” he said, pulling back the sheet to reveal a bionic arm. “We pulled it off of a Shark we took out. We lost a lot of people to get this.”

“Woah,” Dalton said as he approached the table. “What is it?”

“Were you not paying attention? Jeeze. I thought you said you are an

engineer. It's the weaponry of a Shark. You must know what those are."

"No, yeah I know, I just have never seen one in person before now. Wow," he said as he inspected the end of the arm. "Why is the flesh still attached?"

"It is integrated almost seamlessly. I cut it out of the shoulder socket to make sure I didn't damage any of it. I still ended up cutting a wire or two, but this was the best I could do."

"So what, exactly, are you expecting me to do with it?"

"Look, I know your brain was scrambled when we found you. You've been a little whacky since, but if you can somehow figure out this technology it could be the difference."

"It is highly advanced," Dalton said, walking around the table to get a different view. "Are you sure it's deactivated? Can I pick it up?"

"If you can lift it, be my guest. It's been under surveillance and shielded from incoming and outgoing signals, so there is no way the Disciples have access to it." Dalton picked up the conglomeration of flesh and metal. *That's heavy*, he thought as he set it down with a grunt.

"What tools do you have? Is there anyone who has made any progress at all?"

"This is Ari," he said, gesturing to the young woman in the corner of the room. Her dark brown hair hung limply to frame her narrow face. "She is the closest we have to an engineer. She has access to all of the tools you might need, so just ask. She will be your aide or guide, depending on how much headway you

make. I'll leave you to it." He swept from the room and the air grew thin. Dalton felt the dynamic shift from businesslike to an immediate awkwardness as Ari stood in the corner with her eyes to the floor.

"So, Ari, what can you tell me about this so far?" She approached the bench without making eye contact, notebook in hand.

"This is an interface for what looks like controlling the different options of the arm, but we also assume there is a neural component to the actions of the arm. Here," she said, pressing a button that produced a hidden blade from the tip, "we see manual control over a mechanical aspect. My guess is that it was set up like this in the event of neural control failure."

Dalton nodded as she went about detailing the particulars she had discovered. A wire here she thought important, a button there that could be for this, but she wasn't quite sure. "Why did they need me, again? You seem like you're well on your way to figuring this thing out. I'm quite impressed with your findings so far," he said. For the first time she looked him in the eye, the hint of a smile playing at the corner of full lips.

"I have come up with a few ideas, but the details are what have escaped me. Unfortunately, I have no formal training, only what I have picked up over the years from interest and natural inclination."

"They appear to have served you well so far," Dalton said, glad she was starting to warm up a bit. "I agree with most of what you have said, and I have a few ideas of my own. Where are those tools Daniels was talking about? Let's pop this thing open and see what's under the hood."

As Dalton worked on the arm, he could feel the practiced ease with which he used the tools. He knew what some of the parts were even though he could not remember learning them. Those that he did not know the name of he could readily guess their function in relation to the rest of the unit. His hands rhythmically disassembled the complex machine. The puzzle of discerning the function and composition of the unit was engrossing. He realized he hadn't spoken or looked up from the arm except to jot down the occasional note. Ari stood across the table from him, mouth agape.

"Quite remarkable," he said as he flipped a switch that extended a set of blades.

"How did you do that? You just took it apart like it was nothing!"

Dalton scratched his head with a shrug. "I don't know, actually. I just, I just *understand* it. I can't describe it any other way. I looked and saw and understood. Did you learn anything as I went along? Any suggestions or ideas?" Ari walked around the table to compare her notes to his.

"Wow, okay, yeah that makes more sense," she said as she scribbled notes onto her pad of paper. "I don't think I have anything to add, but I do have a lot to learn. Do you think you could reproduce it? Do you think you could figured out how to disable it?"

"Well, I need to run tests. I haven't seen most of this technology before, but it seems straightforward enough. Reproduce its ability? Sure, I bet I could rig something to mimic some of its weaponry. Disabling it is another story though. Do you see this casing? The thickness of it? Short of taking over the Shark's neural command, I don't think this

can be disabled.”

“That’s great, this is so great! We need to start running the tests, then. I’ll call Daniels in here, he can get us everything we need.”

Their forested trek led them to a most peculiar seam in the world. A ledge some fifty meters high rimmed a vast plain of churned rock and dust, vegetation hesitant against the expanse. The only known force to produce such geological anomalies was that of industry. Dalton didn’t have to search the perimeter long to find the Trak-Downs. The two monoliths lay broken along their appetitive course. The scouting team sped to them, eager to complete the assignment. Zander and Alecto would examine one, he and Ari the other: a larger team ran the risk of drawing unwanted attention.

Dalton hopped off his vehicle and began to pick his way through the ruin of the once great machine. An identical sibling of the Trak-Down he once worked, the damage done to this one was irreparable. They were in the main operating areas of the Trak-Down, the areas where the crew would have carried out the majority of their day-to-day tasks. A clear glass that was originally used to monitor the core littered the floor, light flooding each level from a massive hole opened by the meltdown. Dalton unscrewed a blackened panel to assess the damage done to the circuitry. *This unit is worthless*, he thought.

“No good?” Ari asked. Dalton only issued a grunt in the negative.

“Can you check any similar panels you find on the two levels above us? I’ll do the two below and we can meet back here when we’re done. Be careful,

though, there is a good chance of structural damage so make sure anything you step out onto is supported first. Stick close to the walls. It'll give you the best chance," Dalton said. Ari nodded and flashed a pearly white smile that threatened to draw him in. She turned and climbed a nearby ladder, leaving him to his work.

Dalton clambered down the ladder next to him, checking the solidity of the walkway landing with a stomp of his boot. He stepped down tentatively, holding on to the ladder before trusting his full weight to the potentially compromised floor. Satisfied, he strode to the next access panel. Upon opening he immediately knew the panel was worthless. His nagging tendency towards defeatism surfaced as doubt began to wash over him. *I knew this wouldn't work*, he thought, making his way back to the ladder. He descended one more level, this time less careful with his landing. Not so much as a shudder of response from the floor. *If this one is toast, the electrical system from here down is useless*. He finished his task, however, and opened the last panel. *As busted as the last*, he thought. Frustrated, he slammed the unit shut. He leaned up against the wall and sighed. An itch arose in his breast pocket. He soothed this discomfort by removing the item of agitation. He thumbed the well worn-corner with a practiced motion that both quenched and fueled the disjointed feelings. No amount of soul searching, of reminiscing, had led him to discover the truth of who she was. He had constructed countless variations of who she was, who she is, who she would be. He slid to the floor, letting anxiety wash over him. Minutes of fruitless rumination passed, and he remembered Ari would most likely be waiting for him. One more sigh fled from him and he put away his token from a forgotten life.

He climbed the two stories back to meet Ari, who had not yet finished her assessment. *I wonder if she needs any help*, Dalton thought. He made his way up the ladder, eager to leave and check in with Zander. “Ari? Ari, where are you?” he yelled down the hall. No response. *She must have moved to the next level*, he thought and began the climb once more. He poked his head up through the opening to see her boots staring him in the face, the eyelets of her laces casting a judgmental stare.

“What happened to meeting back where we started?” she asked, bemused. “Didn’t think I could handle looking at a few wires all on my lonesome?”

“My floors were all useless, figured I might as well come up and see if you needed a hand.”

“That was very thoughtful of you, and now that you’re here you might as well come check out what I found. This level seems salvageable, with enough knowhow,” she said. Dalton clambered onto the landing.

“Lead the way,” he said with a smile. She returned the smile and led him to an open panel. Dalton lifted a few of the wires with a gloved hand, inspecting them for damage. “Well? What do you think? It looks good, right?” Dalton shook his head.

“No, Ari, not good. See this here? See how there isn’t any fraying or burnout? How none of these bulbs are blown out? I would say this isn’t in good condition. I would say it’s in great condition.” Ari jumped up and down in excitement and pulled him in for a hug. Before he realized it, she was kissing him. And before he realized it, he was kissing her back.

“When there has been a threat to our survival we have gone to great lengths to persevere. Plagues brought down quarantines upon untold numbers of suffering people over the course of history. The hard choice was made to let the few die so the many could live. The threat now is the plague of man. I will quarantine the many so the few can survive. We will endure.”

Cain

A procession of heavily armored vehicles threaded through the city streets. Cain picked a specific route and controlled the traffic from his seat in the lead truck, the automated trucks programmed with orders to lead them all the way to the launch site. Skoll rode with him, made more intimidating by black combat gear. Cain was similarly dressed, his black combat gear patterned with a blood red DD across the chest. They were about to enter the most dangerous part of the Great Migration. The movement from HR to the launch site was the best chance the Bastion would have at disrupting his plan. They would undoubtedly try.

The city was not the worrisome leg of their trek. Here he was in control as the city had been his for years. The people loved him, the police were in his pocket, and the mayor and all city officials did exactly as they were told. Any attempt to stage an attack here would be almost impossible to hide. Once they were in the flatlands there would be battle. *I will be seeing you soon, Zander*, he thought as he punched orders into the interface on the dash. If Zander joined in the attack he would have no choice but to join the battle. Skoll let out a low grumble from the seat next to him. “You will have your fun soon. There will be plenty of blood. Keep your head about you though, we are on a schedule today and it will not do for you to waste time,” Cain said.

Dull thuds thumped in rhythm as bullets bounced off the window. Small explosions accompanied the next volley. Not so much as a scratch was left on the window. Nothing was getting through the armor on his trucks short of an atomic blast. The Sharks running along side and the City Police in their machine gun turrets returned

fire. Skoll began pacing and growling. A soundless wave swept through the caravan. Skoll let out a low grunt as it hit him. The Sharks on either side of Cain's truck dropped, their electronics disabled. The entire caravan shut down and slowed to a halt.

“He's here,” Cain said with a smile. He wanted to feel Zander's bones as they broke, to look in his eyes as the life left them. His men were under orders not to fire on Zander. He was Cain's, and Cain's alone.

“Ancient philosophers purported that all men are created equal. We are not. There is a spectrum of ability in all things we do. I challenge you to find ten men or women capable of outsmarting me. Of running faster, or jumping higher, than me. You won’t because I was designed to be better. The same holds true between every individual and every skill. We know this as a society as well, though it is indoctrinated to be appropriate. There are those among us that we have agreed are not equal. Those infirm of mind. Those who have given up their rights through actions that we find reprehensible. A child does not have the same rights as an adult because they do not have the mental faculties to consistently make what society sees as appropriate decisions. They lack the foresight and experience, thus we do not let them participate in all activities. Not every child will grow into an adult that is able to make good decisions. So why is it, then, that this foolish or inept adult has as equal a say as their more capable peers? Why do they get the same rights? Natural Law? If Natural Law were written by nature, not man, there would be no intrinsic rights. There would be no rights. You would only have what you are capable of doing and what you are not capable of doing. Our overblown sense of morality and conscientiousness created an unsustainable social landscape in which, no matter your capability or intelligence, you have the same rights as everyone else. ‘But that’s fair,’ I can hear the dragging masses say as they cling to their unearned seats of privilege. Fair? How is it fair to bring down the elite to cushion the lives of the underwhelming? Because your DNA has produced you in human form? This does not make you equal. It simply grants you consideration.”

G-12

Twin gouts of blood erupted from his neck as the sniper round ripped through his carotid arteries. He could feel six of his Sharks taking similar damage simultaneously. Before his wounds could heal, a soundless pulse dislodged his control over his bionics. For the first time, G-12 heard whispers of fear in the back of his mind. Pulses of light swarmed the caravan as the trucks crawled to a stop.

G-12 stood tall, his shattered mask hanging in pieces, his mechanical arm hanging limp. None of his unit remained, but it didn't matter. The caravan was almost safe. There was only one option left to him, one last order to fulfill. He knew the protocol. He hoisted his mechanical arm and pointed it at the Trak-Down. He twisted a lever, calling a series of red lights that encircled the arm to glow brightly. He fine-tuned his aim and pulled the lever. The arm ripped itself from his elbow and arced toward the Trak-Down. It detonated on impact, causing the massive structure to fold in on itself. G-12 fell to the ground. He grew still, his face fixed with a smile. Neither gunshots nor cries for help rang out. Only the sound of burning wreckage and dry wind sweeping across the plains remained.

Zander

The truck's suspension bucked as Zander landed on the hood. Red dust rose from the impact as the metal bent inward. Explosions rang out as the Sharks recovered and mounted their counterattack. Balls of white and yellow made a deadly light show as they danced from one force to the other.

“Go, Skoll. Come back when the trucks are back on-line,” Cain said. Skoll leapt from the truck and streaked toward the Bastion forces. Alecto intercepted him and they went down in a flurry of tooth and nail. Cain stepped out and Zander leapt off the hood.

“You will not stop me. We will board the ships. My Sharks will wreak havoc and bring down the infrastructure of every major city. You have failed. Now you will die knowing you let down the worthless masses, knowing you were not good enough to save them,” Cain said.

Zander drew his knife and fell into a defensive stance. Cain unsheathed a knife of his own and began to circle him. Zander matched him step for step. Cain had always been the aggressor, always one to press the attack. This time was no different. Cain leapt forward with tremendous speed as he swung his knife in a perfect arc. Zander moved only enough to let the blade whisper past his throat. He countered with right hook. Cain blocked this strike and pressed forward with a kick. Zander shed the strike, guiding the force of it off of him. He swung down at the now exposed leg of Cain and scored a deep gash along the inside of his thigh, severing the femoral artery. Cain simultaneously landed a crushing elbow to Zander's eye socket, breaking it in three places. Both staggered from the exchange. Cain's blood spurted in thick torrents but quickly subsided as the wound knit shut. Zander's vision blurred, his head reeling from the blow.

“None of my Sharks have even been able to land a blow on me like that,” he said, inspecting his leg. A spray of bullets kicked dirt up at Cain’s feet. This time Zander took the fight to him, wading toward him with careful steps. He lashed out, redirecting the angle of his strike at the last instant to trace a shallow cut along the width of Cain’s chest. Cain, sacrificing what he knew would be a superficial injury, allowed the knife to glide through him to set up a vicious counter of his own. He pushed Zander’s arm along the trajectory, forcing his momentum to carry him to the ground. He rolled, narrowly avoiding the dropping knee Cain aimed at his head. As their battle progressed, the first truck to recover rumbled to life and began to roll toward them. Zander saw this and feigned a slash at Cain’s head. He fell back, drawing the Axund from its holster. A blade sprouted from his palm, driving the Axund from his hand. Cain drew a second knife and attacked with renewed ferocity. Zander could only defend as he bit down on the knife handle, pulling it free. The truck passed him, its automated system transporting the unconscious Disciples steadily toward the launch site. Zander responded to Cain’s advance in kind, retaliating with the fullness of his strength and speed. Cain parried and darted as he stayed between Zander and the Axund.

One by one the trucks came online and crept by them, blood splattered paint the only indication they had been in battle. Zander could feel the fight slipping away from them. Desperate, he abandoned technique for offense. Cain was ready, however, and took him down by his throat. He plunged his knife deep into Zander’s chest and threw him under the last truck as it motored by. The back wheels of the truck crushed Zander’s chest and drove the blade further in. A massive explosion rang out from the direction of the Trak-Down. No more strips of light seared the air. Battle cries and prayers alike were

absent among the ruin.

Cain retrieved the fallen Axund and knelt next to a broken Zander. “We could have been kings,” he said. He pressed the Axund to Zander’s cheek. “This is a lovely parting gift. Thank you for bringing it.” He looked to the caravan as a bunker entrance sprouted from the earth. The lead truck disappeared into the dark mouth. Zander weakly grabbed for Cain, only to be shrugged off. Cain surveyed the silent battlefield and, satisfied, ran to catch up with the caravan.

Zander choked and gurgled as his body attempted to repair the catastrophic damage. Sirens wailed and he angled his head toward the plains. The air reverberated with the chorus of thunderous rockets as the fleet began its climb. The Great Migration had begun. Those lucky few that fought and died here would not experience the desperation that would soon grip every inhabitant of the planet. The next full moon would bring a wave of death and there was no way to stop it. What could he do? At that moment wars were igniting all over the world. Anguish enveloped him, empty thoughts mute among the sorrow.

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