

Tales From a Dead Planet  
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Most of these stories were originally published on my (now defunct) blog

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## Table of Contents

<a href="#"><u>Dwellers</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>The Wisdom of the Crowd</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Dark Matters</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Good Times Were Had</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Escape</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Never Be Dry Again</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Monsters</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Test Results</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>When It's Over</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>The Ground</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>No Such Thing as a Painless Death</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>The Final Dwelling</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Make or Break</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Dead Planets and Roaming Stars</u></a>

### Dwellers

Marsha had been living in the same house for as long as she could remember. She was born here, her parents died here and it was where she planned on dying too. There was no need to move, not any more. Her dad had said that in the early days people had rushed down here, massive migrations of humans moving further and further south.

Even he hadn't been alive for that, it was nearly a hundred years ago, but time and the laws of physics had driven things along a lot faster recently. After the migration and the wars, things settled down. Scientists fought to figure out why this was happening and how to fix it. Marsha didn't really care about all that, she was focused on trying to make her last few years comfortable, most people had resigned themselves to that fate.

Some were in denial, trying everything they could to keep humanity alive, she considered herself a realist. It was better to spend a few years in comfort and relaxed than to spend it rushing around and tunneling into the earth like a scared animal.

Maybe things would have been different had she had children? She had come close, there was a man a year ago, Richard. She had loved him, as much as she was capable. Love had seemed foreign to her, he loved her though, that she was sure of. She just didn't feel the same way about him, she liked him, he was attractive and passionate. She just couldn't force something that wasn't there, so they had split and she had retreated further and further into her little hovel.

It had always bothered her that she couldn't feel love, she worried that she might be crazy. Her parents had loved each other up until their last days, until the pneumonia took them. Maybe she had evolved some kind of defense mechanism, something to stop her from bringing kids into a doomed world.

Richard had been an almost religious optimist, he wanted kids because he insisted that humanity could survive. She could never reconcile that, and she couldn't think of a reason that humanity deserved to survive.

Even in the twenty six years she had been on this planet she had seen what humanity was capable of, and it sickened her. Even though the migration wars were done humans kept at the killing. Her parents talked of a time where people didn't fight one another, where you could leave the house without getting shot or stabbed or raped or robbed.

They hadn't known peace either, but stories had been passed down. According to the stories the migration had been peaceful, it had been painful, slow and deadly in parts but it had been peaceful. There was still hope, until the planet kept getting further from the sun, then the wars started. Now there was nothing.

She had been gathering supplies for the past few months, keeping track of time was hard now, orbits and rotations had lost all meaning. The skeleton of a government they had kept track of the old calendar and people tried to use that when possible. It was tracked with a feed from an atomic clock, keeping time that now meant nothing. Days would last eighty six hours and nights would last eighty seven. They hadn't completed an orbit around the sun in five hundred days, years and months meant nothing, but everything kept changing, there was no way to set a new standard.

She just needed a few more things, than she could lock the door and forget about the cold world out there. Food was fine, so was water, heat was the issue. There was no way to store enough wood or gas to last her the few years that were left. It would attract too much attention, she wanted to be left alone, not broken into and murdered as people got more and more desperate for supplies. There was no such thing as food production any more, just the preserved left overs from the past.

She needed some fuel that would last, the only thing that fit the bill was a type of plutonium. It would emit enough heat to keep her alive until she ran out of food. That was when she would die, swift and painless, a bullet through the skull was better than starving and faster than freezing to death.

After the fall radioactive material was surprisingly easy to get a hold of. As people moved south through North America and the army dissolved the stores of radioactive material were left unguarded. She didn't care why, but people had raided these stockpiles trying to gain some kind of advantage in the new world. Those that didn't die of radiation sickness managed to hold onto these devices.

That didn't concern her though, those would be guarded by the surviving families of the original holder. She knew of a fresh source, an old war machine that lay buried under the ice. Her father had shown her it, told her that his father had stolen it to get the family out alive and safe in the war. It was an old drone, modified to carry people. Lucky for her the plutonium power supply had been shielded otherwise that line of her family would have been sterilized or killed.

It was a bit of a walk for her, outside her normal territory but not by too much, one night should be enough to get there and another night to get back. The darkness would keep her safe. Carrying supplies for the journey would be easy in a sled, it would also allow her more mobility to fight if she came across anyone on the way, she could drop the tow line for the sled and be mobile.

Twelve more hours and she could be off, she waited staring at the gauges that displayed the conditions outside. It was minus forty eight degrees centigrade with a light wind. The sun was out though. As they cooled off more and more the weather got calmer and calmer, water was locked in ice and the heat required to generate storms became less and less. At least down here in the habitable equator, the northern and southern hemispheres were locked in a state of near constant storm.

Even in her lifetime it had cooled considerably, she remembered days when she could go out wearing only a light jacket. Now it was cold enough to freeze exposed skin in minutes. She had to wear layers and bring chemical heaters with her for anything outside that would take more than a few hours. The world was getting harsher every day, she needed to get that plutonium quickly or she would be left here to freeze with all the others.

Her parents talked of days where the water didn't freeze, where snow would start to melt a little. Her grandparents would speak of a time where it was always hot here, too hot almost. They spoke of heat that she couldn't even imagine, standing outside and sweating just from the natural heat.

Breathing was also getting more difficult, it would be the lack of oxygen that finally killed every one. She was going to end it before then, but by her estimates there was maybe three more years on the planet for humanity. The temperature would eventually drop so far that the air wouldn't be breathable, the gasses would start to freeze out. At the increasing rate of acceleration this would become noticeable soon.

She closed her eyes and slept for a while, there was no way to sleep out there, it was too risky. Although infrequent, a storm blowing in and catching her off guard would be fatal, she needed to remain awake and alert.

When she came round it was time to start prepping, she dressed, layering the underclothes and arctic survival gear that had been distributed to her parents when the temperatures started dropping. The government ran this strip around the middle of the Earth like a refugee camp. It was nearly lawless but food and supplies had been handed out on a regular basis until a few months ago.

The numbers of people had dropped even in that short of a time span. Unable to support themselves they fell victim to the cold or to stronger, more capable people. She set out, loading her rifle and slinging the sled about her waist. It would be a long walk but nothing impossible.

The cold hit her like a fist as she emerged into the dim daylight. The Sun was a distant glow. They were past Mars now, halfway to Jupiter, the sun was no longer as important in their sky. Some people hoped that they would get drawn into orbit with Jupiter, stop the rapid exit, she didn't care. They were doomed, anything at this point would only serve to delay the inevitable.

They were going to die unless by some miracle they returned to the 'goldilocks' zone. The northern and Southern regions were too cold now to go forage for the supplies that might be frozen under the blanket of ice and frozen atmosphere. Even in one of the few remaining snow cats the engine and gas would freeze after driving only a few hundred kilometers out of the Equator.

She was going to do this her way, she was going to live a comfortable two years, her first and last years in comfort. That was her goal. She had never been comfortable, life had been nasty and brutish, she was changing that for herself. This expedition would be her last bout of discomfort.

The air was thin, but she was fine with it. Much like Sherpas' living in the Himalayas at high altitude humanity had adjusted to the thinner air. The air had been better when she was younger, she remembered having more energy even a year ago, but there was no way to control it. She had a few oxygen tanks in case she needed to push through, otherwise she had calculated for the slow pace and rest times that would be required of her on this final trek.

The long day was coming to an end, the dim sun setting below the horizon for the long night. The temperature dropped as the little heat the sun had provided escaped the thin atmosphere. She hardly felt it, so comfortable with cold, the absence of heat. Cold was the natural state of things, heat a brief glimmer caused by stars, most of the universe was cold. Much like civilization, heat was only temporary, she had seen that first hand. As it got colder and colder people became the primal monsters that they had tried to convince themselves they were above. Evil was the default state of humanity, she had seen that first hand, she had committed that first hand.

The sled moved easily over the frozen surface. The wind had formed drifts that were frozen into permanent waves, she had to use ice axes and crampons to surmount these mini mountains. She was ready for that.

Cresting a rise, dead tired, looking for a hidden place to camp as the sun rose in the distance she spotted something. Not sure if it was because of the exertion or how tired she was she waited, blinking, wanting to be sure.

In the distance, maybe a hundred meters out, there was a light. Electric, on top of a pole that looked like it had been stabbed into the ice. The scope on her rifle was frozen, but she could see enough through it. There was no one around the pole that she could see, she was thankful that she had thrown her white overcoat on though. The pole could be bait, some complex trap, she might have already been spotted but she needed to go that way.

She decided to take cover and wait. See if any one emerged, keep alert for people sneaking up behind her. It was a risk but she needed to see how much shit she was in before she retreated and skirted this trap. The electric light had her mesmerized, it was a colossal waste of electricity for a trap. She had a generator and some electric devices but the fuel was so precious that every time she fired up the generator she had a long debate with herself on the merit of running it.

As far as traps went this one was pretty weak. The more she lay there, the more cold that set in, the more convinced she became that this was no trap. It was more like a signal, but for what?

Traps didn't need to be this complex, and over the past year it had actually become safer on the outside as more people died off. Supplies were easy to raid from the homes of the dead, raiding living people was an unnecessary risk.

She was tired, hungry, cold, and fed up with this life and this shit. Worst case it was a trap and she died, not like that wasn't in the plan already. With the light rising behind her she stood and marched toward the light. Where there was light there was electricity and that meant fuel. Stocked as she was some more fuel could never hurt.

The pole was further then she had anticipated, distance was hard to judge in such a bland landscape. She got there and started following the cable that ran up to the light. It was buried in the snow, encased in ice. After a few meters she stopped digging. It must be a relic from the old time that had somehow survived. It was odd that it had not been taken apart, that others hadn't attempted to dig

down to the fuel below, but she had seen weirder things. On a dead planet one was bound to find a few skeletons.

She started to stand when the strike on the back of her head knocked her back down. Stars swam on the black edges of her vision.

“Harder you idiot,” a voice that sounded thousands of miles away, then another blow. This one sent her into the black

Marsha awoke in a bright room, warm, sterile, white. She was strapped to a bed her base layers were still on but all her other supplies were gone. A man stood from a chair behind her head, she squirmed to see him.

“Hello,” the man said trying too hard to be friendly.

“Who the fuck are you? What are you doing?” She didn’t have time for this. They weren’t planning on killing her yet, she was worried with what they wanted to do though. She had heard rumors of torture cults in the wastes. People who had lost all humanity in the face of destruction and thrived off inflicting pain. People who made religions out of it, whole micro societies.

“Um, right. Let me start by saying that we’re not going to hurt you,” he said.

She just started at him.

“Just try to relax,” he injected something in her arm and she fell into the black again.

Dreams of warmth, of light, of hope assaulted her. She didn’t want this, she couldn’t live with what she had done. She couldn’t live on this dead planet.

### The Wisdom of the Crowd

It didn't make sense. He changed a few of the inputs and ran it again. He walked away while the program did its thing. Even with his application specific hardware it would still take a few hours. There was no way the markets could zero out in a year and a half, his algorithm must be broken or there was a variable he had failed to enter, something must have changed in the world.

He stepped onto the deck of his island paradise and stared out at the azure ocean. The shock of heat made him drowsy, he liked to keep his house frigid. He walked out on the plank he had made and dove into an Ocean as warm as bathwater. As much as he tried though he couldn't distract himself from the fact that something was wrong with his equation.

He had never run predictions out as far eighteen months but that didn't explain the drop to zero in the market. Within forty eight hours his equations had a zero point zero three percent failure rate, a chance of being wrong so small it was insignificant. So small that he had never failed yet, his equations were what had bought him this island and house and his own dedicated fiber internet lines. His equations had made him rich.

Now they were wrong, they had to be wrong. The market wouldn't just stop one day. Even out that far the only thing that should change would be the error rate. He had tried all the major blue chip stocks down to the penny stocks and they all showed the same result, zero value in eighteen months.

He hadn't moved from the S&P index yet but that would be next, trying the DOW and the foreign markets, trying to see if maybe the system was telling him the S&P wouldn't be around in eighteen months. This was possible, an acquisition or a hack could take down the index, maybe his program was just as accurate as before.

He stared into the sky as he floated in the Ocean, the waves in time with his pulse. This was as good a place as any to think. His equations were what made him, starting with a thousand dollars picking the top stock for each day and investing the gain into the top stock for the next day had made him a billionaire two hundred times over. He had attracted a lot of attention once he had become the richest person on Earth, but no one could figure it out. He kept the equation secret.

It was so simple he often wondered why no one else had thought of it. It was just leveraging the masses toward picking what would be hot the next day. There was so much data out there, he just used the wisdom of the crowd to base his predictions. The program took all this data and computed it into a prediction in a few hours.

The hard part was the volume of data that had to be computed, that was where his program was unique. He had built a chip specifically to do the computations, taking in all the data available. The most illegal part of his whole operation was how he obtained the data.

Governments, technology companies, telecoms, they all collect near infinite amounts of data. He had gained access to that through some back door channels. The data held nothing financial, just search terms, location, movement patterns, the common daily bytes of information each human generates. That was why the hack had never been found, he was stealing information that the companies had not managed to utilize beyond targeted ads. Now that he had the money he just bought the data from them.

Once he had his billions set on auto pilot, earning him more money than one person should ever have access to he had started playing with the equation. He wanted to see if he could predict world events. The problem was that his chip and data set could only work with the stock markets. World events were too dynamic, but the markets converted these events into numbers. He was trying to use those numbers to reverse engineer the world event.

A drop in the market six months from now could mean a war, a housing crisis, an election, a terrorist attack or just a panic sell off. That was the problem, the numbers were simple, the cause of numbers was complex. Each person as a data set removed the noise and turned them into numbers. If he could figure out the reasons for up or down movements he could predict the future in a way that meant something more than money. He was trying to become a God.

The further out he went though the more complex things became. Now there was this problem of the markets going to zero. There was a decline before hand but nothing unprecedented. Then they just hit zero and stayed at zero, this was the part that seemed broken to him.

If his prediction was wrong than this whole operation, this whole quest of his was nothing. He might have missed a number which would make it all useless. He was facing the reality that he might not be the God he had thought himself. It was this reality that was scaring him, he was no more than a cheap fraud, like a weatherman for the markets. Able to predict a few days but nothing more.

He climbed back onto his deck and showered off. The operation was at ninety percent he ate while he watched the progress bar. As much as he wanted to be detached from the whole process like a proper scientist he was getting excited as the bar reached completion. He had pulled out everything he could think of on this latest iteration, if it failed he was out of ideas.

Earning more money didn't appeal to him, he needed more than money. Needed to accomplish something more. There was more out there than being rich, it bored him. People bored him, stuff was boring, he had seen the world and it was dead. A large chunk of his fortune was tied up in a space travel program, but that was taking time. Being able to see the future, that was something unique.

The result popped onto the screen, another zero. The equation was broken. He stared at the monitor and vaguely thought of putting his hand through it but that would accomplish nothing. Instead he set all his chips to working on all the major North American and global markets then went to take a nap. Getting pissed off always left him feeling drained.

When he woke he checked all the results, they were all the same, zero. He had failed. He was nothing, as much as he wanted to be a God he was just another man, just like the rest of them.

He had a gun in the drawer beside his bed. He thought of what it would be like to take his own life. He couldn't just be one of them, couldn't be another bland normal person. He started walking to the bedroom, feeling defeat on a scale he hadn't since high school. Since he had been the social outcast. Then it came to him, what if his calculations were right?

The markets were showing zero because something happened. They were showing zero because in eighteen months the markets were meaningless, because in a year and a half humanity would be in peril.

He had just predicted the future. He needed to examine it further, run the calculation for the same day and the day before as time went on. If the day of market zero stayed consistent and the days prior and after stayed consistent he had made a prediction.

First he canceled the space program. The man he had put in charge of it was pissed but he didn't care. He pulled the funding, it was moving too slow and there wasn't a lot of time left. Then while he ran calculation he started looking for causes. What would occur in eighteen months that would not have major effects on the market prior but would lead to a stop in trading?

The list was endless but he kept scouring. The wisdom of the crowd could predict the market then there must also be something out there that could be right about this. Weeks went by and his prediction was becoming more and more accurate but he wasn't any closer to discovering a cause.

He had pulled all his funds out of the various ventures he had been pursuing as an attempt to change the world and started playing the markets again, he was getting close to reaching a point where he had too much money to even enter the markets. Where the very act of him buying something would alter the price too much and his predictions would be made useless by the fact he was acting on them.

Browsing the internet, bored of thinking too much about a realistic reason for the market stop he came across something. It was worth pursuing so he started checking all the numbers involved. It was starting to line up with the movement in his predictions. The world was cooling, orbits were becoming altered. He could be wrong but he doubted it.

He pulled data from one of his satellites, it confirmed what he had read. The Earth was falling out of orbit, it was moving away from the Sun. It didn't make sense and he could almost not believe it but there was no way to argue the data staring at him.

Then there was something else, buried deep in a data set. Governments were digging, spending massive amounts of money to build something deep under ground. He had an idea as to what these places might be.

It's what he would do too. Something to save the species. They were building arcs underground, trying to get near the mantle for warmth, trying to make them self sufficient. He had found his new project, he could be a God after all.

Pulling his money from the markets almost lead to a mass crash. He had to taper it out to stop the panic. He knew the value of keeping this project a secret. He started hiring the top minds in geothermal energy, engineering and all the various disciplines this project would require. With close a trillion dollars he could have his very own Dwelling. He could fill it with people of his choosing, make it perfect. He could be a king underground.

The markets stopped when he predicted. He didn't care any more, he had his Dwelling well under way. It would take a few years to finish but he had more time than most. His build site was far enough south so that they would have the most time possible. He ordered the building a large beacon light on the surface, something to draw people to the dwelling when it was done.

That would be the key. He chose as many people as he could, but as humanity moved south he would draw more in. They would be examined and selected for various roles in the Dwelling. The key was constant expansion. Perfect efficiency was one thing but he wanted to be in a position of wealth when the new underground world came into being. He wanted his Dwelling to be the paragon, to be the dwelling that would build the new world.

A careful caste system would have to be implemented. Nothing obvious at first, but over generations it could become more and more a part of the word those people would inhabit. He was going to make humanity great, he was going to take over the new world.

That would be his legacy, they would revere him. Future generations were smiling at him through the centuries. Humanity would become what he had always envisioned it could be. Being far enough South the cold hadn't begun to affect him but the world was dying. There were more storms now, things were slipping apart.

Mass evacuations had been what killed the markets, he was partially right. The future was impossible to predict with total accuracy, but he was close. Having a Dwelling would offer him time and his own world in which to perfect his theories, a place to test them on a captive populace.

This was the best thing to happen to him. He could spend the rest of his life as a leader, a person controlling the fate of the species. His mind was overflowing with new plans. A whole new problem to tackle and it was all his.

The networking of the Dwellings had been his idea, his dwelling, with its superior resources and wealth, with the technology they had spent years developing down here took the lead. The project was done under the auspices of all Dwellings being equal, but when they all had to come to him for knowledge and resources the hierarchy became ingrained.

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All the research into aging that he could come up with was not enough to stop his own death, but it was done. His masterwork was done and it was beautiful. He created the council of elders, pure

humans isolated from the others, he was setting up a long game experiment, forcing the species to evolve, trying to create distinct branches. It would take millennia, but the elders were isolated with enough gene splicing to keep inbreeding from killing them off too fast.

The society below was comfortably locked in a caste system. Everything was set, his programs showed him that on the timescale he was looking at there was a higher than fifty percent chance for everything to go the way he envisioned. Maybe a star would grab the Earth and bring it back to an orbit where the surface could be repopulated, there was a one in ten chance of that happening.

If that happened his new race of humans would come to inherit the planet and they would be better off. They would be able to restore the Earth to glory and make humanity into the dominant race of the galaxy. Accounting for all variables there was a close to ninety percent chance that there were aliens co-existing in the same galaxy as humanity. Since that was the most likely case he wanted them to be ready to face that.

The thing that kept him working, that kept him trying to make the system even more solid was that there was a one in three chance that humans would devolve. That this whole subterranean utopia he had been building would become a mess of animalistic humans and warfare. That humanity would be pushed back to one central Dwelling and it would all crumble.

He was playing with powerful forces but he knew he was a God now. He knew he could handle this and make sure it would all work out. He just had to enter a few more numbers and he would rest, some last important steps that would reduce those odds to one in thirty. If only he could ignore the pain in his chest.

He knew he was having a heart attack, he needed to get this data out though. He now saw that if he left this set out the chance of it all dissolving was too great. He collapsed on the keyboard, his face pressing the delete key.

### Dark Matters

The kid sent me a letter, I don't know why I was attracted to it, why I bothered coming here, but I did. It was handwritten, actually sent through the mail which I found both interesting and a little odd. That should have been my first clue that not everything was right here. That and the fact that it was an unpaid job. A thirteen year old can't afford even my cheap rates, but something about it drew me in.

There was not much going on so I went. I could use a vacation and nothing like a weird mystery from a stranger kid to make it an interesting vacation. There might even be a little excitement involved, which lately my life had been lacking.

He steps out of the dark tunnel, he had to leave his car. The roads into this place were all washed out, only the old train bridge and tunnel served as an entry point. It was one of the many rusted out towns along the old supply lines. Towns built up around industry long vanished, usually with a small hold out of a population. He had no idea how the family of this kid was living here, but it must have been cheap enough that even a meagre minimum wage from one of the active towns an hour drive away would be enough.

The bridge looked like it was about to collapse. He wondered when the roads had washed out, how long had people been trapped here? How come he hadn't heard anything about it?

Dear Christopher,

My name is Mark and I'm thirteen years old. I live in Redpine Hills, and I need your help. Things are happening here and no one believes me, I need a detective to solve what's going on. My Dad is acting weird, so's my mom. I don't know where my brother went but Grandpa's been missing too and they don't care. Please help, the police won't come, after the first time I called them they think I'm a liar.

I can't pay though, I will give you what I can. I just need help, please.

Mark

Something about it, something too earnest, too real. I knew the name of the town, they had been doing some work involving a particle collider or something near there. As far as I know they built the thing under the town. It was in the news for a bit, scientific advancement and all that, but otherwise there had been no more mention of the place.

The river and waterfall were used to cool the equipment buried deep under the town, but there was no mark of anything scientific or new on the surface. The town was just as dead as ever.

He crossed the bridge. Picking his way between ties, trying to stick close the rails, not wanting to risk the ancient wood more than he had to. Something about this place was screaming at him to leave, it was almost primal the wave of fear that washed over him. Like a dog before an earthquake, or how some people think animals can sense evil.

It was clearly abandoned, there was no way people lived here, the whole town was cut off, maybe it had been recent. The letter had come from here, it had detailed how to get here, where the train bridge was. The kid had to be here, and now he felt that this investigation was going to become a rescue. Something about this place was getting his back up.

On the other side of the bridge he saw it, blood on the old electric diesel shunt car. There was a lot too, on the front and going under the wheels, but no body and no sign of one. He stepped back and slipped, managed to grab the railing on the small locomotive and save himself.

Just off the side of the tracks, covered with leaves and twigs was a hole. He uncovered it, and it was filled with sharpened sticks angled downward, designed to trap someone's foot. This was becoming more than a vacation. It looked like he was walking into a murder scene.

A part of me wanted to leave after the tiger trap, after the blood. Get out of there and call the cops. Private detectives aren't supposed to get deep into these kind of serious cases. I almost did, but there was something about this place, something that pulled at me. There was also Mark, if that kid was still alive he clearly needed help, if his dad had decided to kill the family I might be the only hope for him. Time was a factor.

I wandered the woods around the train, looking for a body, signs of a struggle, anything. If the war had taught me anything it was that people tended to not die clean deaths. I found a few more traps, basic but lethal. They reminded me of the ones the Vietnamese used back in that messy war nearly a century ago.

There was no body though. Whoever had bled all over that train had either crawled away or been dragged. I was going with dragged, there was a lot of blood. Unless it didn't all belong to one person.

He kept walking down the slope into the town. It was a shame the way things had turned out, this place would have been beautiful were it not for the industrial skeletons littered about. A stunning waterfall, beautiful wilderness, the fall colour change. He could almost forget what he had seen in the woods not a few minutes ago.

For as long as there's been civilization people have been talking about its collapse. Seems every few years there are new people predicting to fall of it all. This time felt different though. Maybe it was this dead town, maybe the war, maybe the time of year, but for some reason I felt that this time they were right.

The planet cooling despite the massive amount of carbon dioxide in the air. Amateur astronomers saying that things were shifting in the sky. I tried not to pay attention to it all but I couldn't help myself. I love to research and investigate, it's why I was in this town. Something about the end of days predictions seemed real this time. Maybe I was just starting to lose it.

That wouldn't be far from the truth. When I was walking down that hill, just past a railway switch I swear I saw a man in the woods. I couldn't tell though, I tried to get close but he ran. It looked like he was in some kind of space suit, only silver instead of white.

The war had messed with my head, took me years to get back to nearly normal, still the nightmares came. For a while there had been hallucinations too, this didn't feel like that. It made no sense though, and the guy had no where to go, the woods were pretty open in the late fall. I should have seen him run off.

I made a note to see my shrink when I got out of here and kept walking, trying to shake off the fear.

He was standing near a tree, staring into the woods when he found the first note. It was staples into the pine tree, so visible he wondered how he had missed it.

They won't find it. I've hidden it well, it's safe now.

Scrawled in messy cursive with a chunk of charcoal from the looks of it. I didn't know what to think but another wave of fear washed over me. Like a radiation emanating from the ground, it almost had a heat, a substance to it. Wonder what the scientist's under ground were doing while this town died? It was weird to think of, people living underneath the tragedy up here.

I wonder what dark matter really does, if it produces radiation? The whole point to them creating it was to study it, that implied that they didn't really know what it did. I wouldn't feel safe living above something like that, but I guess when you are this deep in poverty you don't really have a choice.

I wanted to get to what passed for the main strip of this little outcrop of a town. I could see it from the cliff edge, a cluster of homes, one looked half collapsed. My map indicated a little church off to the North and a larger fishing lodge down by the reservoir to the dam. There was never a lot here, it was a town that got passed through. Supported by the sparse work required to maintain the dam. Once that got automated for the particle accelerator there was no work left here and the people had no where to go.

After the war little population outposts like this were common. A small rail link to bring in supplies, a store an hour drive down the road, people needed to maintain infrastructure, living close to major cities but still cut off from the world. At the end of small side roads. This town, nestled in the rock of dead mountains. These places died slow as the small industry dried up or become robotic.

There was a lot of quick expansion to support the war but after, as the economy died so did these little outposts. Some became hubs for meth labs and prostitution rings, others just died and slowly rusted away. People huddled in cities, trying to scratch a living in post-war recession. It had all cost too much, and gained nothing.

I crossed the small bridge into the town. Deserted, it looked like it had been empty for a while. Maybe Mark's family was the last one here. I had his home address, he had included it on the envelope.

He walks by the abandoned houses. Old garbage blowing across the small road as birds alight at his coming. The town is clearly empty, doors blown off houses in the stronger than usual fall storms. He walks in one of the houses, curious. He has to take his time here, as he goes deeper and deeper into this place the sense of urgency is fading. Mark is probably already dead, judging by the state of decay in the town he probably died after sending the letter.

He wants to hope the kid escaped but where would he have gone? So far there were no bodies though, maybe they all left. He had been too pessimistic since the war, maybe this time everything turned out alright.

The house is a mess, full of leaves and dirt. The windows half blown out. The amount of garbage strewn about implies that it was never really well kept. The inhabitants of this town were not in the highest economic bracket, not by a long shot.

Why did mess and poverty always have to coincide? Was there a rule saying that poor people had to let everything go to shit? Or maybe it was the type of people these towns attracted, the social outcasts, the mentally ill, the lost people, shunned by society. Unable to fit in, lacking too much intelligence to make it in the city.

I don't live well, but I still keep a clean house. This place disgusted me, but I poked around anyway. I found the letter on the side table, held down with a bright glass paper weight, something out of place in the mess of a house.

He's here. There's no time. Chris killed grandpa, I saw it. He tried to kill me but I ran. Chris smashed grandpa's head with the bar up by the train. I don't know. I ran.

Dad and Mom went into the tunnels, I'm staying here. Chris said he can hear it, the song that ends the earth.

Mark's handwriting matched the letter in my pocket. The kid had been here, running from his brother. Maybe he was alive after all. He was smart, didn't say where he would be hiding. I figured he

was smart enough to go to these tunnels he said his parents went to. Saying he was staying here then going to the tunnels would be an okay way to throw his brother off the scent.

I checked the house, it was empty except for the mess. Nothing valuable was left, the previous occupants cleaned it out when they left. The other houses were in similar states, ruined and trashed. Mark's house was further away, more out of the central part of the town.

I started heading that way, with no idea where the tunnels were I figured his place would be a good place to start. I kind of wished I had a gun, the further I got into this place the more and more uneasy I was getting.

That's when I saw the smoke. Something was on fire back there, I sprinted toward it hoping that it wasn't the house. I emerged from the overgrown road to see the house engulfed in flames. I only hoped that the kid wasn't inside.

I looked around, whoever started this fire could be lurking in the woods. When I looked back to the house though it wasn't on fire any more. It was burnt wreck, but the flames were gone. It had stopped burning weeks ago from the look of it.

This place was getting to me, I needed to get out, needed to breathe.

He collapses to his knees, his nose is bleeding but he doesn't realize it. He stares at the ruined house. His hands shake as he holds them up at eye level. He doesn't know why this place is getting to him. That's when he sees the letter.

We had to burn it. They told us too, the ones who exist there. At the edge of sight, behind our eyes. The pressure, it gets to us. It hurts, my brain feels like it's leaking out the side of my skull. I know what it is though. It lurks beneath us, the darkness. They did this. We are going to the tunnels, I'm going to stop this. I need it back.

I managed to get it together, somewhere out there was a kid that needed help. He had called me here because he thought I could get the job done. I would get back into some therapy sessions when I got out of here, clearly I wasn't ready to deal with death again, not yet.

Everything seemed to center on the tunnels. A part of me wanted to find them, go down there and see what I could piece together. The soldier in me told me that going unarmed into dark tunnels was a good way to get killed, especially when there was no way to know who was down there or how violent they were.

I started walking, just to get away from the house more than anything. I figured the church would be a good spot, maybe see if there were more notes, more evidence. I had no idea of the sequence of events here, I just knew that I didn't want to go into that tunnel network unless I had to.

I reached the church, the sun high in the sky now, a little sweat beading on my forehead despite the cool fall air.

The place looked as abandoned as the rest of the town. It was a small little chapel with a tiny graveyard beside it. The graves were crumbling and none of them were anywhere close to recent.

Amazing how people thought these towns would last forever. This place had been around for a long time though. Probably a small settlement in the early days, a place with a little farming and maybe a mill of sorts in the river. The flooding of the reservoir had pushed the town out and left only the few houses on the old hill.

I wandered through the graveyard, looking for any sign of recent activity. If these people were losing it slowly I was sure that at least one of them would come here. The psychosis they were all undergoing seemed centered around killing and death, logically one of them would come here.

It was empty though, teach me to apply logic to insanity. The graves were all mostly illegible, no one had been buried here for almost two decades. The church looked like it had been used up until the town died. Like the houses it looked run down but this building wasn't trashed.

I pushed my way in through a small window left open at the back. It was a small room, the area behind the pew for the priest to store various religious nick knacks. A town this small being able to support a parish was odd but maybe people drove in from other towns for the church. There was a small parking lot.

The church itself was dark, limited light filtering through the dirty windows. I wandered around, looking for any sign of activity. Maybe Mark was hiding out in here, I could grab him and get out of this insane town.

A thorough search revealed nothing, not even another note. This was becoming more and more frustrating. There was a child in trouble and I had no idea how to stop it. For all I knew he was already dead and this was just a search to recover the body.

Either way I still had to try. I felt too involved at this point to back out. I was in for good, even if it was pushing the limits of my own sanity. Something about this place. I had a headache and I just noticed the dried blood in my nose. Maybe some chemical in the air, maybe the dark ones.

No, they aren't real, that's from the letters. I'm still having trouble keeping to together. I made my way out of the church, this time using the doors. The sun was setting, I would have to hurry along with this, find something soon or deal with sleeping in this place.

It was by the graves that I noticed it. A path leading into the forest, barely more than a few bent branches and a bit of dirt, but I had to follow it. I was getting desperate, more and more worried about this place.

I had been fine, I had everything under control. I hadn't had a flashback in nearly a year, but entering the forest I was assaulted. I knew there was no danger, nothing here to hurt me other than maybe a deranged teen. Yet I kept checking the trees, my heart raced, it felt like I was in combat again, felt like I was taking fire.

I couldn't help it, I started running. At first it was a light jog, just to try and calm down, that turned into a mindless sprint through the woods, running from nothing but my own fear.

He crashes through the forest, mad with fear. Unable to focus, totally missing the faded yellow warning sign as he tumbles down the hole. By the time he regains consciousness the light filtering down to him is almost gone. Night has slipped over the town and he is becoming more and more sure that he has totally lost his mind.

He stands, checks himself for any serious injuries, tried to shake off the concussion but fails. He brought a flashlight and it flicks to life in his hands.

For a moment I considered turning around, climbing out of the hole, but it looked like I had found the tunnels they were all raging about. I decided to just take this to the end, no matter what that end was like. It was cold without the Sun, the tunnels amplified this chill.

Warning signs littered the tunnel walls. This place must have been part of the construction of the massive collider miles beneath me. Most of the signs were about potential cave ins, warning people that these tunnels weren't safe to explore. One sign caught my eye though, it read: The Effects of Dark [etched "ones"] has not been fully explored, proceed at your own risk.

I didn't know what word had been beside 'Dark' but whoever had etched 'ones' had done it in blood. It didn't matter, I had taken on enough risk today there was no reason to stop now. I kept marching through the tunnel, trying to go as quiet as I could. Listening for even the slightest noise.

What was concerning was how silent it was down here. Pure silence is one of the most unnerving experiences. There wasn't even a breath of wind, it was dead down here.

The tunnel spiraled downward, slowly the silence faded into a faint hum. I had to have gone far down to hear that hum from the collider below. If I could hear it it meant that I was pretty close to the thing.

I emerged in a small cavern, my flashlight lit the whole space. I saw them hunched over at the other end.

“Hello,” he yells. There is no reply from the human forms at the other end of the cavern. Looking around he slowly advances toward them.

I knew they were bodies but I didn’t want to accept it. If I had accepted that fact then I would have never walked over to them. I had seen enough bodies for one lifetime. They were half mummified, preserved by the air down here. The fact that nothing had started eating them spoke to the sterility of these tunnels. Had the bodies not been bothering me so much I would have been freaked out by that fact.

They had nothing for me, the dead speak only lies. There was another note though, this one looked newer than the rest.

I Killed the Lord and left the body.  
He speaks through my actions  
I will find him  
I will find my way to the son, sun.

The rest was gibberish. I had to find the kid. The pressure of that fact was crushing me. It was like a drive for food to the starving or water to the dehydrated. I had to find him, there was no more time.

The elevator to the lower levels was flooded, after construction they didn’t need it any more. There was only one way out of here.

He ran through the tunnels, emerging into the moonlight. he was near the river now, at the base of the dam. The fishing lodge was in the distance, he ran for it. It was the only place the kid could be. He stumbled, fell, got up and kept running.

As he reached the building he stopped short. It was fading in and out of view. Shifting between ruins and structure, like a mirage overlaid on reality. He looked around confused before he found the note.

Christopher,

You have to remember what you did. You killed him, you killed Mark, you killed Grandpa, Mom and Dad. You killed them all. I know you are scared and confused, I know you will think this is fake but it’s not. I am you and I am writing this so that you remember. You killed them all, you had no choice, the old one’s told you too. The creatures in the ground, the dark ones.

It doesn’t matter what you’re calling them now. They aren’t real, you’re sick and you need help. Please, go to the cops. I can already feel myself slipping. You are not real, not who you think you are. Remember what you have done.

Vision, memory like a baseball bat to the head. Mark running, the house on fire and laughter. Mom and Dad ranting about monsters. I strangled Mom while Dad watched, then I killed him too. They wanted to join with the dark ones. Grandpa had fought it, tried to escape. I brained him with a pipe, smashed his head on the train and hid the body.

Mark was hard to catch, but I got him here. Cornered at the old fishing lodge. He couldn't run out, I burnt it to the ground and watched to make sure he couldn't escape. I had to kill them all, I had to make it right.

No, that's not me. That wasn't me. I'm a private detective, I was called there to solve it all. I'm on a new case now. Deep cover in a lab, making sure they don't end the world. The doctor's lock me up at night, study me, they don't know that I'm here studying them.

I know what went wrong under that town. How the planet is doomed now, how we will all drift through space. I just need proof.

He sits in the cell, the early winter frosting the glass outside. They want to move him underground, see if being close to the substance has any further effect. They need to know all they can about the substance. They know it was a mistake, they know what they've done and they need to fix it.

### Good Times Were Had

Those were the best years of my life, but they were also the worst. Can something be both like that? For me it was, looking back I like to think they were mostly good but I know that really they were pretty bad.

Like this one time, it was a party, I was totally trashed. High on weed, cough syrup, some codeine pills a couple of caffeine pills and a few too many beers. The sad thing is that this was actually not uncommon for me at parties during those years. The weed and cough syrup killed my motor skills but allowed me to drink more without puking, the codeine chilled me out and the caffeine kept me from passing out. My brain was a complex balance of chemicals and my liver was working over time to keep me from death

So at this party, I'm stumbling about having a grand old time, floating on a cloud of chemical bliss, I stumble into the bedroom looking for my friend. We had gone to this place together, a frat party with guys that looked like frat brothers if frat brothers got addicted to crack. The house was pretty sketchy but I was already pretty gone when we arrived.

The memory is hazy as fuck, more just a series of images than anything coherent. There were stairs, mushy cardboard everywhere, I don't know why. The floor was soaked, I knew no one and the place was a small step up from a crack house, but I was having a great time.

Usually I got wasted on my own, I had a problem, I'll admit it. I just enjoyed being drunk and high a lot of the time, don't most people? So I would get trashed alone in the safety of my small dorm room. After homework was done and all that, school did come first.

So I'm looking for my buddy, I just want to chat with him, everyone else was either too drunk to be much fun or totally passed out. This party was a mess, I do remember that. One of the bonuses of my drug combo was that it allowed me to drink most people under the table, that and the tolerance I had built up by drinking almost every night.

I open a door I thought was the upstairs bathroom. I needed to piss and the downstairs one was fucked. I also thought Chris would be in there, he wasn't though and it wasn't a bathroom.

It was fucked, what I saw in that room. It's still vivid, fresh in my mind. When adrenaline hits you sober up a minute and everything gets seared into memory. This girl was naked, spread on the bed, she looked maybe seventeen but even that was a stretch.

One of the cracked out frat guys was going at her, but he was using his fist. Not a finger, not his dick but a whole fist. She was too far gone to fight it but I could tell that the moans reaching a near scream were not because she was having a good time. The blood on his forearm was too much for me. I was too high for this shit.

I closed the door, he didn't even look up at me when I had opened it, he was too focused. I stumbled back down stairs and stood by the front door taking quick inhales of the cold winter air. I was too far gone for this shit, my mind didn't process it, it couldn't.

So I half walked half fell back to what I think was the kitchen, grabbed six beers from the fridge and shoved them in my coat and jean pockets. I called Chris on his cell, he actually picked up.

"Fuck I'm going man," I yelled, the crowd had passed out but the music was still pumping.

"What?" he yelled back. It sounded like he was still here.

"Where are you?" I yelled.

"Back yard," I hung up and wandered out the back door.

Chris was there with another guy and they were passing a joint. The cold and quiet were a stark contrast to the heat and noise inside. The snow on the ground was comforting for some reason.

"You alright buddy?" Chris asked.

"Yeah, you want to split a cab back to res?" I asked.

"Sure thing, lemme just finish this," he took a hit and passed the joint to me. I inhaled deep and passed it to the other guy as I let the cloud of smoke out into the dark night. Looking up at the few stars in the city sky.

We all talked, I can't remember about what. I remember being cold, shaking, but being okay with it. It was better than being inside. I think I drank a beer or two and chucked the empties into the darkness of a far corner of the yard. The other guy didn't seem to care, he was fucked. Swaying on his feet, eyes barely open, kind of just nodding along to our conversation.

The rest of the night is boring, we made it home, I drank the other beers I had stolen and passed out at my desk watching a funny movie on my laptop. I didn't even remember what I had seen until lunch the next day when I had sobered up enough to function.

When you stop drinking and dosing it's like the memory kind of recovers a little. It assaults you sometimes with things you had thought long forgotten. Not really fair if you ask me, I go through all that work sobering up and my brain always reminds me of what happened in those days.

That's what it was like though, there were good times, and there were bad times. The old world was fucked. Fucked in a different way than this one, but still fucked. It's funny how, now that I should be retreating into the bottle I actually have no craving to drink, for the first time in forever.

I stayed because I like being alone. I told you I loved drinking alone, that was always the best. It was safe and I didn't have to risk seeing or doing something messed up. I didn't have to worry about embarrassing myself and I could get as drunk as I wanted. I didn't have to worry about getting home in one piece.

Now I'm alone, finally alone, and it's cold but that's okay. I will have peace for the next few months, until the furnace can't keep up, until the fire stops fighting the cold. I know there is a point where the temperature will drop so low that heat will dissipate before it can warm me. That's fine, it's not a bad death.

Fighting to escape, that's a bad death. People clawing over each other to reach the equator, that's no way to go, not for me.

Pretty big kick in the nuts though, sobering up for a year and a half then the world starts this crazy ride. I guess it's better to face the end with a clean mind than a drugged up one.

That was a bad time, the early days when the scientists announced what was happening and what was going to happen to the human race.

I lived a lot of my life on the internet, my generation became known for that. So watching the world slowly dissolve was mediated by social sites and comment sections. People denied it was happening for the longest time. Denial is the last refuge for humans it seems, the last stage before you either have to take action or die. It was where I lived for the longest time, before I sobered up.

After a while I stopped going out as much. I think that crack head frat party was the turning point. I had seen some messed up stuff at parties before, people shooting drugs, fights, near riots, houses getting trashed, but something about that stuck with me.

I would only go to bars, house parties were always the worst so I phased those out. Of course drinking at bars was bad too. It cost more so I went out less and less, I drifted away from my friends because I enjoyed getting drunk more than going out.

Already I had seen the signs on conspiracy sites I would browse while wasted. People talking about the planet cooling being due to something else, theories of the drift. The reasons ranged from a large body entering the solar systems to a government destabilization program designed to reduce the population and make people easier to control. It was pretty fringe stuff, I put it in the same pile as alien invasion theories and other crack pot ideas.

I should have paid a bit more attention, I could have got a few more sober months. Those were the darkest days of my addiction, I stopped going to class, handed in essays that were just enough to pass and stay off academic probation. I rarely left my room, I lived on the computer, drinking mostly. I only needed drugs when I went out, drinking was fun alone, drugs were better in a crowd, more to look at.

I was at this bar, can't remember the name, some student dive. I was with a few friends, no one that I was particularly close to, just acquaintances and friends of friends. It was packed, over capacity for sure, I was a little high and a lot drunk. Roaming through the hot sweaty bodies of people, wondering why I came to these places. There was nothing to do, I didn't care about hooking up with bar skanks and that seemed to be the only point.

I really just went to prove to myself that I didn't have a problem, I went because of the denial. If I drank in public once a week with some friends then I couldn't be an alcoholic, that was my logic at least.

I was wandering around, debating getting another beer or just going home. That was when I noticed the angry guy in the crowd yelling something with bouncers holding him back. It looked like he was yelling at me, the bouncers had him mostly controlled though. The memory comes as a series of images, the drugs tend to do that to my memory.

Weird thing memory, it's like time travel but you can only view what happened, and it's all locked in an ever changing mural behind fogged glass. Such an imperfect thing but we tend to live there more than we should.

This muscle bound guy pitched an empty beer bottle toward me. I might have been drunk but I was pretty keyed up on drugs so my reflexes were surprisingly fast. I dodged the bottle and felt the shards of glass on the back of my neck, they hit with such velocity that I was actually cut, mildly, on the back of the neck.

I was more confused than angry, when I turned to see who the bottle had hit I realized that the guy was fighting with another guy behind me who was also being held back by people. Bars are so loud, so dark and disorienting, I lose all situational awareness in them. Add in the drugs and booze and you can see how these kind of misunderstandings happen.

The thing is, the bottle didn't hit that other guy either, it actually hit one of the people I was there with. It broke off her temple, she hit the ground as I watched, blood welling all over her face. I looked up to see the bouncers too occupied with these two guys so I grabbed her and dragged her to a bench.

The shittiest thing about it was that as I shoved my way through the crowd people were getting pissed and tried to start fights with me before they saw me dragging this half conscious bloody mess of a girl along.

When we got to the bench it was obvious how messed up she was. The cuts were deep and she was losing consciousness. Someone got a bouncer as I tried to stop the bleeding with a bar towel. Eventually the lights turned on and EMT's pushed their way into the bar with a police escort. I faded into the back ground, not wanting to deal with the questioning from the cops in my state of drugged drunkenness.

The drugs made dealing with this kind of shit easier, they actually cut off a lot of emotion and allowed me to just focus one hundred percent. It wasn't until I sobered up that I realized how messed up the whole night had been.

I saw that girl a month or two later, her face was scarred, her cheeks had deep angry purple marks. The thing was, I didn't care. She wasn't the best looking before the scars so I thought it was no big loss. I don't know, I just didn't really value people, but no one really did.

We were all in our own selfish worlds, maybe this will change that. Maybe facing down extinction together will bring people closer. Maybe humanity will be able to start actually being humane to one another. I don't know, I won't live long enough for that, and it's not like I could even see it.

Being up here still means that the only internet I have is through satellite and even that is fading. The changed orbit is slowly destroying the satellites. I just want to get this out, my generator will be gone soon. I know that there is still internet down there, that it will probably still exist until all the power is gone.

Funny how that technology so fundamentally changed us, how it connected and distanced us. Funny how we will carry it with us until the last. As long as there are computers I'm sure there will be some form of internet. Without it humanity is doomed, I still think that scientists have a chance of fixing this.

Does that make me too optimistic? I don't know, I'll be dead before they fix it anyway, there wasn't a whole lot left up here as everyone moved south. It was like a swarm of locusts, people taking everything they could, smart people taking all the food they could carry. The animals left too, a migration following the people.

I still see birds, deer come into the yard sometimes, although they are coming less and less now that winter has become permanent. Not enough plant matter out there for them. I shot one the other day, trying to put away whatever I can. There wasn't a lot of meat on it, which was sad because I wanted fresh meat but it made more sense to preserve the tough bits I could carve off it. I'm still not the best butcher, or the best hunter.

Those early days were scary but more peaceful than I had thought they would be. There was looting but people mostly left my place alone when they realized it was occupied. I didn't sleep much though, I had to shoot a few people. It was a bad time, but I kind of enjoyed it.

That's my point, I hated that time but I also loved it. Just like I hated when I was drinking, being sober I felt like shit all the time, I hated myself, but being drunk was great. It was a blend of the good and the bad. It's hard to describe, I don't think a lot of people feel the same way I do about that kind of stuff.

Even the migration, I think most people hated it and that's all. I loved it in a way. It was exciting, it was new and shooting looters made me feel good in a weird way, in a way that bothers me still.

The thing about being sober was that it was so boring. It's school, work, home, sleep. At bars it's standing around, shouting to be heard, trying to remember why these places are fun. Add some drugs and alcohol to that mix and it all becomes fun, or at least bearable.

My year of sobriety had actually been kind of dull. I chased excitement, I chased novelty. I tried hundreds of hobbies, and I was still bored. Lucky for me one of the hobbies I chased was sport shooting. I enjoyed that and it saved my life.

The first time I killed a man it was dawn. The light just starting to reach earth. It was a few months into the migration, the days were already getting messed up, I don't remember how long that night had been.

I had this mini rifle post that I had made on the roof of the house. I basically lived up there for a few months, protecting what was mine. If I was going to stay here I needed to have supplies to live off. Scavenging and looting from the stores I had built up a nice basement full of food, fuel and supplies.

I had placed tripwires connected to bells all around the perimeter of my property. If someone stepped onto my land I would know it. I spent my life straining to hear those bells, jumping at the slightest tinkle.

The tripwires were basic but I wasn't up against trained special forces, just criminals and desperate families. The cops had either returned to their families or were too busy on the main routes to worry about what was going on in the suburbs. The military would roll by sometimes, but I hid when they did that, I didn't want to be forcefully evacuated. At this point all that had stopped though. The majority of people were well on their way south.

I was awoken by the bell ringing and immediately had the guy in my scope. He froze when he heard the bell. Sometimes people ran off, he didn't.

"Don't move," I shouted. I had a whole script I would read to intruders. Basically warn them off, tell them this was mine and they should move on. Up until then they all did.

The guy dove to the ground, got up and sprinted toward the house, under my sight line. I panicked, I wasn't ready to actually engage someone, I couldn't remember if he had a gun or not.

I grabbed my pistol and jumped off the roof onto my second story deck. The guy was trying to kick open the front door, I didn't give him the chance. It was a wood door, not enough to stop seven rounds from my forty five.

I hit him three times, he was armed with a knife, that was all. He looked as starved as the deer do now. I felt nothing, I was actually pretty excited, but my door was ruined. I dumped the body in the street as a kind of warning.

From then out I killed people on sight. As soon as one of those bells rang I shot them. I left the bodies in the street. They were picked over by scavengers but they are still there, frozen reminders of what I have done.

I felt bad about killing starving people, but it also felt good. It's so difficult to get across, I don't think most people will get it.

It's like this death I'm facing. Something bad but also something good. I'm leaving this world as it dies, not desperately clinging to life in a state of denial. I feel like I'm better than those crazy people killing and dying to get south, trying to eek out a few more years here on this planet that doesn't want them.

Guess it's what life is. A combination of good times and bad times, times where the good and the bad blend. Memories that are positive one minute and negative the next. I don't know, but it feels like a microcosm of life, this whole protracted death.

I've started to save webpages, literally copying them onto my hard drive. My generator will last longer than the internet and I need something other than books to occupy the next few bitterly cold months.

I'm terrified and excited, I know that I will be dead at the end of it, but it will also be nice to experience true stillness, true aloneness. I'm looking forward to it all, and in a mixed way I'm looking forward to my own death. It is a new adventure, something you only get to do once, like being born. Birth and death, the two things every human will go through, the two things we can never share. We can never describe birth because we can't remember and death is a one way trip.

Maybe the religions are all right, maybe I'll go to heaven, I think I've been generally good. This might be a form for the biblical rapture. Honestly I don't know and I don't care, religion has never really interested me. Guess I'll find out in a few months.

I have one good story, one time where I was more than an observer of horror, one time where I was more than a killer, more than a drunk, more than who I am now.

It was in the early days of my sobriety, when the world felt scary and new, and I felt too weak to face it. Those were the worst days of my life, the first weeks without drinking, the first weeks without drugs. It wasn't the challenge of fighting cravings I didn't really have any. It wasn't detox, I never got to the point where I was physically addicted to anything, I didn't have to detox. It was facing the world for the first time in years, it was the endless possibility that stretched out before me and how unprepared I felt for it.

I was out late, I liked to take walks at night when I couldn't sleep. I didn't sleep much those first few weeks, the anxiety kept me up most of the time.

There was a man walking toward me, stumbling. I thought he was drunk, but as I got closer he looked more twitchy than drunk. He had the same erratic movements as the schizophrenics that would hang around the homeless shelter near my university.

He was wearing sweatpants, a t-shirt, he looked clean except for his beard. It was late and most sane people were in bed or working the night shift. At first I was a little nervous but that passed, my nerves were shot from all the ups and downs that sobriety was bringing me.

I walked up to the guy, I didn't care, and this is where I think I did something truly good in my life. Up to this point and after it I generally just existed, doing neither good nor bad. This is one time that my own human kindness stands out to me, a time where I feel proud of myself. The only thing I've ever done that makes me proud of myself.

Most people would have crossed the street, tried to put distance between them and the unstable man. I saw he needed help. He was lost, his clothes being clean suggested either he had a place or someone was caring for him. He had got out and was now lost.

Based on his young age I assume he was schizophrenic, I never found out. I walked up to him and just said hello.

He looked at me startled, lost, his eyes were darting all over the place, so fast it looked like they were spinning.

"I just don't want to be alone," he said.

"Don't worry, let's see if we can get you home," I said.

He stared at me, like he was seeing me for the first time.

"Okay. I'm. I'm not well," he said. The sorrow in that pronouncement was so deep I almost wanted to hug him, to do anything to take away the pain. He was probably new to the illness, scared and not getting treatment yet, or just starting it.

"Do you know where you live?" I asked. He was listening to other voices. I didn't know what they were saying, I only hoped it was something that would help me help him.

"No, no hospitals," he said.

"Okay, that's fine," I said. He looked ready to fight me off and bolt.

"Only drugs there, they don't understand, the spirals of time will fold onto peace while Jesus walks the something beautiful," he rambled like this for a while and I listened.

It's called word salad I looked it up when I got home. Schizophrenics can't form coherent thoughts and they speak in the random words and ideas that jump in and out of their minds. I just listened, I had nowhere to be and this poor guy was so scared.

I still can't even fathom what it must be like, I'm not sure if a part of you would remain aware of what was happening. If a part of you would mourn the loss of who you were before your brain decided to malfunction. That would be a kind of hell reserved for only the worst human beings. I don't think it's cruel enough of a disease for that, but I still wonder if a part of that man knew what was happening.

After he finished talking I started walking with him back the way he had been coming from. We said a few words but for some reason he seemed comfortable enough to follow me, I don't know if he knew I was real or not. If he knew what reality was at that point.

There's no grand conclusion to this, life doesn't offer those most times. I walked with him, considered calling a cab to pick us up and take us to the hospital. I didn't trust the cops with a mentally ill person, they had a bad track record of shooting first.

I didn't have to do any of that though, a lady on the street ahead of us saw him and came toward us. She was his mother, he was only twenty-three, his meds were stabilizing and he had wandered off while she was sleeping. She thanked me and took him home.

I never learned his name, never saw him again on my late-night strolls, which was a good thing, means he never wandered off again. That simple moment is one of the few, if the only, action I'm proud of in my life. Something decent done for another human being that others would have ignored. It's not heroic but I think it's a time where I rose above the loser that I am.

He's probably on his way south now, or maybe he's holed up somewhere. He could be dead a lot of the sick people died when producing and distributing medication became secondary to the evacuation.

He would have gone off his meds and maybe wandered away from people, off into the now frozen world.

It wasn't a good time, it wasn't a bad time for me either, but it's a fond memory. I don't know, does that mean anything?

Time to go for a walk, enjoy the outdoors before it gets too cold and stormy, looks like clouds are blowing in. Soon I won't be able to leave this room, but that shouldn't be for a few months. It's finally okay, life was alright after all. I had good times and I'm happy to go out on my own terms. Best of luck to you all.

### Escape

He was scared all the time now. It hadn't always been like this, he remembered being happy even a few years ago. Then Mom and Dad had started fighting and Peter had stopped playing with him. After that they moved.

He hated moving, Mom and Dad made him leave most of his toys at home, they said there was no room for them. Peter fought Mom and Dad the whole time too, they argued and it made him scared. Then they had to leave the car which meant that the few toys he had brought had to be left, his Mom let him bring the blanket though.

They joined the other people, everyone walking, all the cars left on the road. For a little bit it had felt like a day at the fair, walking on the road, people everywhere. That didn't last long though. Peter finally started talking to him again, which was nice. He even let him ride on his shoulders, he needed that his feet hurt.

That had been a long time ago though. Peter was gone now, Mom had said he ran off to become a Gorilla, but that didn't make sense. She cried a lot now but Dad didn't seem to care, he said that if Peter wanted to become a communist and betray the country then he hoped he would die.

Marty didn't see how this was connected with becoming a Gorilla, but nothing made sense any more. Dad was more upset because Peter had taken the tent with him, now they had to sleep under trees or in the crowded buildings with all the other people. Dad said the buildings were an invitation to get raped and murdered so they slept shivering in the cold.

His Mom tried to comfort him but she was too scared on her own. Dad was always angry, he carried the gun all the time now. He beat people up when they got too close, he stole from people, Marty was shocked by this and it only made him more scared. Dad said it was necessary to keep them all alive but Marty knew that stealing was wrong all the time.

They walked every day, they would walk until his feet hurt, but that was happening less and less now. Dad said he was finally toughening up, that made him feel proud but the pride couldn't out compete the fear.

Dad had become more violent before they had moved, Marty was sure of that. He remember Dad hitting Peter and Peter hitting dad back. That had been a long time ago but that was when everything had changed in the house. That was when Peter had started ignoring him more, when Mom had become more and more quiet. They moved out of the town before the last family did, but they were still one of the few that hung on. He missed his friend, Mark. Mark had been older but they still played, there weren't a lot of other kids in the small town.

There weren't a lot of kids on the road either. Marty tried to make friends but his Dad always pulled him away from other people and families. He said they needed to focus on their family and couldn't afford to make friends, that if they were going to survive they had to do it on their own.

They were in a new place now. He had been walking all day, since before the sun was up to the beginning of sun set. Mom was dead tired and fell asleep right away. Dad grumbled at this but made a dinner for them.

Marty was quietly eating when Dad started yelling at Mom. He woke her up by shaking her and hitting her. Marty had never seen Dad hit her before. He called her names and started shoving food in her face, screaming in a rage about how she was lazy and was going to get them all killed.

Marty tried to close his ears but couldn't. He started crying, yelling at them to stop fighting. He didn't know why they were fighting, but now Mom was hitting Dad and screaming at him.

She pushed him back and then, before Marty had any idea what was going on, she plunged her pocket knife into his chest. Marty screamed and started running, it was all too much, he needed to escape, needed to get away from this.

He still heard the gunshot, he wasn't fast enough to escape that. He kept running, tears streaming down his face, confused and lost. Finally he collapsed and passed into unconsciousness. He didn't remember falling asleep but it was still dark when he woke up cold and alone.

He was more scared than ever as memories of what had happened assaulted him upon waking. He wanted to cry but it was too much for that, the pain just didn't make sense. He started walking, hungry now and alone in the forest.

The remains of people who had passed before him littered the ground like a roadmap of destruction. Garbage, clothes, abandoned suitcases and bags, empty cans and burnt out fire pits. There was no one around though, the main body of people had already passed this way.

He knew they were heading South, his Mom had told him that in case they got separated he was to head south. He knew how to find South, she had given him a compass, but he went North instead. He wanted to get away from everything down there, from his parent's bodies.

Things had made sense before, they had even made sense after Dad had started getting more and more angry all the time. It had only really fallen apart when they had left home, so he was going to head back there or at least in that direction. Being alone he was more scared, the wind in the trees sounded like voices, the scraps of humanity that littered the forest seemed to be alive, ghosts of the people that had come before.

He kept walking though, scared as he was he knew that stopping was the worst thing he could do. He followed the compass arrow North and found himself in a small town. It was empty and all the windows were broken on the stores, it scared him more than the forest. At least in the forest there was noise, the silence of the town was scary.

He tried to walk as fast as he could through it but it seemed to stretch out before him, endless and terrifying. His vision was narrowing, he started sprinting in blind fear, the same fear every child feels when faced with pain they don't know how to escape.

Suddenly there was a person, someone there in front of him. A man, wearing a white coat, looking at him with confusion and concern. Marty wanted to be scared of this man, but the fear wouldn't come. Seeing someone else was more reassuring to him than anything else. He stopped his fear fueled sprint through the town.

"It's okay," the man said.

Marty looked at him confused, he had been told of stranger danger, but that was before and he felt that it no longer applied in this new world that had been thrust on him.

"Where are your parents?" The man asked.

Marty just started crying, he couldn't say where his parents were, he didn't know.

"It's okay, it's okay," the man came up to him and started patting him on the shoulder.

"Why don't we get you something to eat?" The man smiled at him.

Marty nodded through his tears and the man took his hand and led him to a door in a building at the edge of the town. The door was heavy and the man had to use two hands to pull it open. The room behind the door was small but it held another heavy door. The man closed the door behind him and locked it. Then he opened the other heavy door and, closing it behind them, led Marty down a flight of stairs he thought would never end.

At the bottom of the stairs was a massive door that looked like a bank vault from the cartoons he had watched before the darkness took Dad. The man entered a code and pressed his thumb to the door and it clicked open. They slipped through a crack just wide enough to admit them and Marty found himself in an elevator.

"It's a long ride down, here chew this," the man gave him some gum. It was bubble gum and the taste had Marty smiling before he knew why.

The man was right, the ride down took a long time.

"My name is Christos, what's your name?" The man asked him.

"Mardy," he said through a wad of gum.

"Mardy?" The man asked.

"No. Mar-t-y," he said.

"Oh. Well nice to meet you Marty," Christos enunciated the 't'.

They reached the bottom of the elevator and stepped into a large room. It was full of people, a hive of activity. This made Marty feel even better, he was starting to get scared of Christos on their way down the elevator, he had started to remember what his parents had told him about going into places with strangers.

"Well Marty, here we are. The twenty second Dwelling, a safe place for us to all live," Christos said. Marty just looked at him and smiled.

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It had been a month down here and the memories still hurt him. Marty woke screaming most nights but Christos was always there to calm him, to let him know that it would be okay. The Dwelling was nice, the food was good and everyone treated him special. He was the youngest one down here but that was okay, Christos had said that they were looking for more young people that had gotten lost.

Marty had wanted to tell him that he hadn't been lost, that he had a compass with him, but he knew what Christos had meant. He still couldn't remember what had happened to his parents and sometime the thoughts would assault him. Thoughts he knew weren't true, but they would come into his head unbidden and he didn't know how to escape them. It was at these times he would start screaming, these times usually happened at night.

Other than his own memories everything was fine. It was the best it had been in a long time and as much as he felt bad for thinking it he felt that it was better than when he had been with his family. At least here it was calm, people didn't yell at each other, there was no fighting and he could feel safe. All those strong doors above him made him feel safe down here. He was at peace in this new place and he was starting to get better.

The blackness didn't creep up on him any more, the old ones weren't talking to him as much as they had been when he was up there. He knew that those voices were what had made Daddy yell so much, what had made him hurt Mommy. He knew that they were dangerous, that they could control him. It was those voices that had made him hurt the cat, those voices that made him kill the squirrel. They scared him, but down here they were quiet, he felt that they were gone for good.

As he slowly drifted off to sleep in the small cot buried in a nook in Christos's room he embraced the warmth that surrounded him. He dreamt of fire, of death and of pitch black tendrils reaching out to pull him into the flames.

He woke with a start but there was no screaming this time. Christos was standing over his bed, staring at him. He turned away and left the room, that was when Marty heard the scream. The sounds came to his ears through the door, sounds like the insanity the surface had been.

He crept to the door and looked into the hall. It was dark, there were people moving, running, screaming, laughter that scared him more than the screams. The voices were going crazy in his head. He forced them back and crept into the darkness.

People moved around him, no one seemed concerned with him. Men chased after women and were killed by their intended victim. A man was cutting his chest over and over, laughing at the pain. Marty crept along, telling himself that it was all a nightmare. Refusing to believe what he saw in the glow of the emergency lighting.

He reached the main room and was greeted with the insanity of the end of the world. He blacked out and gave into the voices.

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Emergency beacon - Dwelling 22 - The infection is here. Do not connect. So much death. The voices. Say again, do not connect...

Come here, it's safe now. Connect. Say again, it is safe, please connect as soon as possible.

### Never Be Dry Again

The ice was only getting closer, it kept getting thicker and they had to go deeper and deeper. They had already passed the maximum depth for the vessel but it was too deep and be crushed by water or stay at depth and be frozen and crushed by ice. So they kept diving, Captain Richards had shut off the depth alarms.

“Those ratings are always given with room for error,” he had told her. She knew this was probably the case but the near constant groaning of the sub had led to her anxiety staying constantly elevated.

There was no greater feeling of being trapped than the feeling of being trapped in a submarine frozen under kilometers of ice. It had been a last ditch attempt to escape the freeze. The surface at the equator was too cold, too barren to live. There were rumors of bases under ground that were trying to save humanity but she thought those were just rumors, lies told by people to reassure themselves as they died.

Captain Richards had modified his sub and decided to escape before the surface of the equatorial ocean froze. Nuclear submarines are designed to stay submerged indefinitely, the only limit in the past had been the amount of food onboard. The Captain had rectified this by planting a hydroponic set up that grew enough food on a self sustaining system to keep the thirty people aboard alive for as long as the ocean stayed liquid.

Everything was recycled but the air was freshened by the growing of plants and the human waste of thirty people waste offered nutrients to be extracted to keep everything growing. She had to admit it was a good idea and when he had approached her about joining him she said yes despite the fact that she knew what was happening with this adventure of his.

The other twenty eight women aboard knew this as well but they had all decided to come down here with him. He had trained them all in the operation of basic systems on the sub and they could deal with anything. They had been at sea for two years now, they had been under the surface for six months, forced down by the ice.

The first bit of this adventure had actually been enjoyable. Captain Richard was a nice man and handsome. He ran the ship with military discipline and didn't ask much of them. Their duties on the sub were expected and their duties with him were not unpleasant. He only asked, never forced. Some of the other woman had refused him and he was fine with that, he was a nice man.

She wondered how long that would last. He must have been thinking of crew cohesion, they could run the sub without him so if he became forceful or violent they could always mutiny. He must know this, he was happy with the deal and she was alive which wouldn't be the case had she stayed above.

She had no illusions as to why he chose the women that he did, they were all beautiful and ranged in attributes to fit his various sexual needs. He had built an underwater harem and she was a member of it. It was a lot easier with him being sterile, childbirth down here would be deadly and they didn't have the resources to support a growing population.

Before the freeze she had been a fighter for freedom. A woman trying to make it in a man's world and pushing back against the norms wherever she could. That version of her would be disgusted with what she had become. That version of here would be frozen on the surface.

It didn't make her happy but she did what she had to do to survive. There were no women building survival subs where she had been. She wished she could have found one of the arcs or dwellings or whatever they had been called. She was becoming more and more aware of what she had got herself into on this boat.

A groan, louder than the normal creaking drives her anxiety up a notch. The Captain must be diving again. That was a quirk that had been weird at first but was now becoming alarming, he would only answer to Captain, Sir or Captain Richards. He would ignore you until you used one of those titles, there was no anger though, not yet.

The stress of diving was taking its toll on the other women, it was also taking a toll on the Captain. He hadn't got aggressive, but to the few women still holding out, 'no' was starting to become a dangerous word.

Chrissy had come to her just the other day, she had told of the Captain being more insistent than usual. He had actually grabbed her arm, lightly, and started to pull her to his pleasure room. When she pulled back he had stopped and laughed it off but she didn't like the look in his eyes.

She told Chrissy to be careful, she had told Chrissy that she was working on a plan. It was a lie at the time, but now she was starting to formulate something. The fun and excitement of this voyage was wearing off and she could see tragedy coming toward them. One of the girls, Samantha, had been a scientist before, Samantha knew that they were diving unnecessarily, she had told her yesterday.

Once this fact had been shared among the women everyone had become more uneasy. The ice was getting thicker, that had been why they started diving, but it could only get so thick and it was slowing down. Samantha had told Captain Richards about thermal vents on the ocean floor, places where they would be safe, vents close enough to the surface to keep the sub from the dangerous max depth. He had said he was heading for these vents but none of the navigation seemed to indicate that.

The loss of all communication had made navigation difficult but it was possible with sonar and maps, she had checked what Samantha had told her and they were indeed moving further from the safe spots. They were heading North.

She had kept all this to herself, the women confided in her but not in one another. She had become a repository of information on this voyage and the more she learned the more things started to become less and less clear.

She didn't know what the Captain's purpose was any more. They all knew going into this that this wasn't an adventure to save the species, they knew he was sterile. They went into this hoping to survive and live comfortably rather than fight it out on the surface. She had thought that this was just a pleasure cruise for him, a way to go out with a bang.

Now she was becoming less sure. Why would he be trying to kill them all? Had he simply gone mad? She tried to think it out but the noise of the ever increasing stress on the sub was becoming too distracting. She would have to confront him, she wanted to see if that could make any sense of this.

Still she lay in her bunk, it had been a long shift and she hadn't slept well in days. It wasn't fair that this was all on her, she would never understand why people came to her. She must exude some kind of confidence, something she didn't feel that she actually had. Maybe on the outside she was sure of herself and respectable but inside she was all turmoil.

A plan would be a logical first step but ever since she had stepped onto this sub it felt like she no longer had that personal drive to accomplish things. On the surface she had been all about doing. She had been about survival, and kept herself and her family alive.

After the attack on their camp though things hadn't been the same. She fell apart when her brother was killed, her mom freezing to death in a blizzard while scavenging had been the last straw. If there was a point where she could say everything had fallen apart that was it. Now here she was at the mercy of a mad man in a sub, a sex slave just because she wanted to be comfortable before she died.

"Weak, mediocre, lazy," she spoke into the darkness of her bunk. Then she stepped up, it was time to confront Captain Richards. Not openly, she needed to be careful. They might outnumber him but there was no telling who would be on her side in an open rebellion. Some of the women had fallen for him.

She entered the bridge, navigating the narrow corridors of the sub, the noise of the stressed vessel haunting her. The humidity making it hard to breathe. One of the downsides of growing food on board meant that the normally high humidity of the sub was even higher. She knew that she would never dry out again, it had been a tough thing to face.

Her skin was always damp, the walls always dripped, her clothes were constantly sticky, she felt wet all the time. It took a lot out of her, it sucked the energy from her movements. The humidity was something that was slowly driving her crazy. They would never surface, she knew that so she had to try and accept the fact that she would never feel dry again.

Maybe she should let him crush them all in the ocean depths or whatever he was planning on doing. Maybe a quick death would be better than slowly dying here, soaked and scared. There were others though, she couldn't let the others down, not again.

She reached the bridge, Captain Richards was staring at a chart, he spent most of his time here. When he wasn't with one of the girls he was on the bridge, he slept less and less, his life had become this bridge, he was a man obsessed.

She sidled up beside him, put on her seductive voice and asked what he was doing.

"Trying to figure out where to go that the ice won't get us," he didn't look up.

"Why not the vents?" She asked as innocently as she could.

"The volcanic ones? Can't, too hot," he said.

It sounded rushed, and as far as she knew it would be the best spot for them. It was essentially using the same concept as the rumored shelters, the planet would keep them warm, harbor them until they died of old age. Samantha had told him as much and he had told her that was the plan, now he was saying that it was too hot.

She didn't want to get Samantha in trouble, didn't want to make him suspicious, so she pressed no further. His eyes were bloodshot, he looked as frightened as she felt. It was like something was driving him deeper, driving him to kill them.

"Isn't your shift over?" He asked looking at her.

"It is," she locked eyes with him, implying the real reason she had come was for him.

They walked to his pleasure room and he started his normal foreplay. It was a tired routine for her now but she realized that it had been nearly six weeks since she had been in here, since they had started their slow, mad decent.

She had been one of his favorites before, six weeks was the longest they had gone without sex. When she looked down at him she knew why.

The other girls had said nothing, maybe they all thought he was bored with them and were too embarrassed to tell anyone. Since no one had told anyone else they all assumed he was sleeping with the others but not them, it made sense now. Unless it was just her, the frustrated look in his face spoke volumes though, this wasn't the first time he had failed to stand at attention.

"Sorry, I'm just stressed," he mumbled as he put his clothes on. He apologized like she had actually been looking forward to sex. It wasn't fun, not anymore, not since she had started to hate herself for becoming a prostitute.

She dressed too, not wanted to aggravate him further, but he kept talking.

"I had Lorie and Christa earlier so maybe I can't go three times in a row like before," he laughed. She only thought to herself that he had never gone three times in a row before.

As she walked back to her bunk with a parting kiss she thought more on what had happened. For a man with a sub full of women, a man with a full harem, he had never had that large an appetite. Over the few years she had been on this boat there had not been a lot of sex. At first there was, but slowly it tapered to once every two weeks, then once a month, now this. She had noticed the other women going with him less and less too.

The orgies at the beginning had only happened a few times before he went back to having them one at a time. She needed to confirm that he had been impotent with the others too, that could be the cause of his suicidal dive.

A man stuck on a boat with twenty nine beautiful woman, most willing to have sex with him, but unable to get it up. That was a special kind of torture. Maybe that was why he was getting more forceful with the few holdouts, he wanted to see if a new girl could help him get it up.

She walked past her bunk and found Lorie in the hall.

"I need to ask you a question," she said.

"Sure thing," Lorie said with her southern US accent.

"In private," she pulled Lorie into the empty room beside them and closed the door.

"Has Captain Richards been having trouble with you?" She asked. It was funny, they all knew what they were, that had participated in orgies together, yet sex talk was still a mix of awkward innuendo.

"What kind of trouble?" Lorie sounded suspicious.

"You know," she held her index finger out and let it go limp.

"Oh. Well. I thought it was just me," she said.

"No. I think it's more than you and me."

Over the next few days she managed to ask all the women on board and the answer had been the same. The Captain couldn't get it up any more.

Now the question became what to do about it. He was obviously losing it, trying to decide whether or not to kill them all. He was alone on this ship, some of the women liked him but it didn't go beyond that. They had all been forced here by circumstance and were closer with each other than they were with him.

The problem was none of them hated him either, he had been kind to them. Sure they were here as his whores but he also never took advantage and if they said no he respected that. He was going to kill them all though, that was becoming more and more clear. He was slowly sinking the sub, probably debating with himself if it was worth it or not.

She had pinpointed his difficulty to only a month previous. It was probably something curable or temporary, but that didn't make her feel any better. Worst case he killed them all, best case he got better and things went back to the way they were, she was no longer comfortable with that arrangement.

She wanted to be free, she wanted them all to be free. Better to take over the ship and survive as free women than to hope he got better and go back to sex slavery. Now was the time to act, when the fear of death spurred the women into caring. At the very least they should be willing to act in order to save their lives.

He was getting more and more erratic as time passed. He stopped trying to take them into his room, he spent all his time on the bridge staring at the sonar and depth gauge. Her time there was eerie, it was like he was debating on killing them all. They were already well beyond the maximum depth, but he was holding it steady, raising the ship a little, dropping it a little, moving them listlessly about the ocean.

He was smart enough to keep some of the skills in sub operation to himself. None of them could quite figure out how to navigate. He had taught them enough to keep the sub operational should something happen to him, but not enough to take it over and pilot it anywhere. They were all willing to take that risk though. She had been recruiting them all into her mutiny. They could find a vent somewhere, she was sure there were enough for them to sit by, places where the ice wouldn't reach.

They were being forced into this by him, that was how she justified what she was going to do. None of them wanted to take the lead, she was comfortable in doing that. She couldn't let any of them bear the burden she would have to take on. He was going to have to die, there was no way to avoid that.

She couldn't risk leaving him on the ship, even imprisoned he was a danger. A lot of the other women had come to care for him too much and after this interlude of danger was over he would be able to manipulate them back to his side. That was something he was good at, he was a master manipulator. That was part of the reason she was here.

She had been vulnerable, tired of making all the choices, tired of being responsible for herself and he had taken advantage of that. He had offered her a way out, a way to escape responsibility and he had fed that feeling of helplessness to all of them. He needed to be eliminated, he was too much of a risk left alive.

When he slept was the best time. She spent more and more time on the bridge, waiting for him to nod off, waiting for her moment to grab him. There were always four of them on the bridge, the minute she moved the others would join in. He would be easy enough to overpower. The years down here, the weeks of lack of sleep, the anxiety over his limp dick had all made him weak.

When the time came she didn't hesitate, to hesitate would mean death. She grabbed him, slammed his face into the metal console and pummeled him on the back of the head until he stopped moving. The other girls with her just stared in a mix of horror, they had started to move but had backed out mentally. Now it was too late though, after a few seconds they stepped to work.

He was tied and gagged. She couldn't bring herself to kill him though. Not like this, not in cold blood. The torpedo tubes still worked, and that would also serve to get the body off the ship.

They tied him in and rolled him into the tube, all of them trying their best to ignore his muffled screams, avoiding eye contact with his bulging, terrified gaze. She whispered an apology before closing the tube and sealing it.

They opened the outer door and flooded the tube. She could swear that she heard him struggling, but that would be impossible over the din of the torpedo room. None of them would ever touch that hatch again, they left the outer port open, and tried to ignore the visions of a body hanging from the front of their sub.

It was their sub now. She didn't have time to rejoice though, they needed to get shallower, needed to get as close to the ice as possible and relieve the strain on the hull. They knew how to read the sonar, he had just not been letting them read it since the dive. They travelled a hundred feet below the ice looking for a volcanic vent.

The ice was increasing though, it was pushing them deeper and deeper. Captain Richards had been forcing their depth too early but he was right about the ice increasing. They needed to figure out how to find a vent in the next two years or they would be back to max depth.

Samantha could read the charts but the late Captain had done his best to obscure their location. They needed to find some kind of landmark to orient themselves. It took a few months but Samantha eventually figured it out. She was fairly sure of their direction so they started toward the vents, ones shallow enough that they could reach them and powerful enough that they could fend off the ice.

It had been nearly a year since their mutiny and still no vents. They were hopelessly lost in the ocean. Now they were blindly navigating to any ridge that Samantha thought looked like a continental shelf on the sonar. The splits in the Earth's plates would be the best bets for finding some kind of vent. They scoured back and forth, blindly hoping to find something before the ice reached them.

The Northern and Southern oceans were already too deep with ice for them to navigate. They were being squeezed back to the equator. Hawaii and the ring of fire in the Pacific was their best bet, they just didn't know how to find it. Time was running out.

She was more stressed now than when the Captain had been trying to kill them all. The women were starting to blame her for the situation they were in. The chance of another mutiny, only this time against her, was possible except for the fact that they all knew it would accomplish nothing.

It was becoming more and more of a frantic search as time wore on. She was using the instruments to gauge the thickness of the ice above them and began navigating using that as a guide. She followed

the ice, finding strips that were thin and using those to hopefully lead to a pocket of warmth, something that was keeping it thin.

She wasn't sleeping much anymore. Finding a vent was becoming her new obsession. Staring at the sonar, alone on the bridge, she heard it. A ping through the headphones, a sonar signal that didn't belong to them. All the whale and dolphin sonar had stopped years ago, this was man made.

She looked on the display, nothing yet, it was still too far off, but in a silent ocean, locked under ice, the sound carried. She was able to pinpoint it, she turned the sub toward the ping. It might just be an automated system left from the time before, it might even be a hallucination, but it was something more than blindly scanning ice thickness hoping for a lead.

She set a course and listened for more pings. Too excited to sleep she kept the sub on course, looking for anything on the screen of green and black that would indicate another sub. It might be lost like them, it might be an invitation to getting attacked, but she needed to find it.

At full speed the pings started coming more and more rapidly. Whatever was out there was zeroing in on them. She flicked on the radio and started scanning frequencies, the other women were crowded around now, murmuring among themselves, but she paid no notice.

She jumped when she found the active channel, a voice barely coming through. Fumbling for the mic she nearly shouted into it.

"Is anyone out there?"

"Say again? You are not clear, say again," came the fuzzy reply.

"We are lost, please help," she said.

"Follow our pings, we know where it is safe," came the voice.

They followed the other sub for a week before they reached the vents. They weren't alone, four other subs were there, floating in the space of water created by ice and kept liquid by the vents. They arrived just in time, the ice nearly sealed them out. They were in a pocket of liquid ocean, six subs floating in the geothermal heat.

The other subs were outfitted a lot like theirs. They were self-sufficient, and could last out here as long as the people inside could. The other subs had started out on different voyages though, their purpose had been preservation of the species, not the pleasure of one man.

Slowly, the subs connected. Wide tubes linked the ports of all the vessels and they met other people for the first time in years. The six subs formed a linked circle, sharing resources, sharing hope that they would all survive.

It had been three years down here, three years floating around the vents. She was pregnant now, she no longer felt scared, she was finally drying out. One of the special projects had been reducing the humidity, this added more fresh water to the system than desalination could and with less energy spent. She finally felt that faint glimmer of hope. She would be dry again.

## Monsters

They were all gone now. He finally had the world to himself, a vast hunting ground, a place to do as he wished. People were toys and now he would be able to play with them unimpeded. This was his world now.

Lars had planned on giving Clarissa the flower for a long time but hadn't been able to work up the nerve. Even at the end of the world, where there was literally nothing else left to lose he couldn't approach a woman.

He had joined this group heading south a few weeks ago, before that he had been wandering alone. He had been alone for most of his adult life. His Dad died when he was sixteen and his Mom died a few years back. That had been hard, his Mom was the only person he spent significant amounts of time with. After her death his life had become a mix of work and home.

He wanted to have friends but he just didn't know how, he liked women but couldn't approach them. Even the thought of asking a woman out made him lock up with fear. He couldn't talk to people for long, he would eventually lose the conversation track, people thought he was weird.

This had led to him cultivating some hobbies that had come in useful since the world had fallen apart. Things he could do alone, things that would distract him from how alone he really was. He ran every night, ran half marathons like they were nothing, marathons every second week, mapping the distance on his phone. He practiced target shooting and had built a nice mix of firearms and ammo. He liked to lift weights and living in the woods alone had been a dream of his since he was a teenager.

When it all began to fall apart he was actually happy. He could finally be something more than just the weird IT guy. He was going to miss some of his other hobbies, like video games and browsing the internet but now he could do something.

Lars was one of the first to leave the cities, he went South but not too far, he would slowly migrate. That had been his plan at least, but the woods had overflowed with people. He retreated deeper and deeper into the wilds.

The first snow had finally given him the seclusion he longed for. Hunting and scavenging he managed to survive and thrive that first long winter. When he saw this group from a distance those weeks ago he realized that he no longer wanted to be alone. They welcomed him right away because he was armed and they had had trouble.

It took them a while to tell him what kind of trouble they had encountered but they trusted him when he had shared his weapons among the group. He was actually popular with these people, they referred to his knowledge of the woods, his navigation skills and weapons handling ability. They looked at him like he was some ultimate badass, he was glad they couldn't see how scared he was. How he wanted to just be like them, able to chat among themselves. They thought he was so quiet because he had seen some bad stuff but it was because he was too nervous around them.

Their group numbered nineteen. They had been an even twenty at one point but had lost one. Lars had managed to figure out that it was Andy's wife, it was obvious that Andy was still in mourning. He still wore the ring so it had to have been recently.

They were a mix of couples and single people who actually had a dynamic that worked. It seemed to Lars that they had been travelling for a while as a group, maybe the one's that didn't get along with the others had already left.

He was just happy that he fit in. Their group leader, although he would never call himself that, was a charismatic, happy guy named Chris. He generally had final say when the group was stuck on what to

do or where to go. He had been deferring to Lars's expertise more and more since he had joined them a few weeks prior. Lars had helped them avoid a few obvious traps and that had garnered him respect in the group.

This late into the evacuation there was nothing left of civilization, no protection offered by government forces. People were now actively hunting one another, looking to kill and rob others on their way South. There were fewer and fewer good people left up here.

Lars had been avoiding them long enough, he hadn't been deep enough in the wilds to be immune from the crazies that hunted others. He had come across a fresh camp set up by a group of cannibals in the deepest part of the winter. They had been off hunting when Lars stumbled into the camp.

Bodies were hung and butchered like deer, human flesh left to freeze in the snow. Smoke rising from the fresh dead fire. Lars had left that area as fast as he could manage, hiding his tracks as he went. He knew what was going on out here now.

It was becoming more and more difficult to hide in the wilds, the trees weren't re-growing the foliage lost in the winter and some of the evergreens were starting to die off as well. That was why he had been so happy when he found the flower.

Clarissa looked close to his age, she had spoken to him a few times, she seemed interested in him. He wasn't sure, he could never tell. When she spoke to him all he could manage was a grunt of acknowledgement here and there, the anxiety clenching his throat too much for any real speech. She was attractive, she seemed funny, everyone seemed to like her and she was tough. You had to be tough to make it this far in this new world.

He just couldn't get up the nerve to talk to her. He was able to face down the wild, face down vicious evil people but he couldn't gather enough courage to speak to a woman, to give her a flower. He tossed it on the snow as they broke camp that day, giving up on his idea. The flower would be long dead before he managed to speak to her.

Later that day as he came back from scouting a route he saw Chris giving the flower to Clarissa. She smiled and stuck it in her ear, looking beautiful, staring at Chris. Lars felt a mix of shame and jealousy overtake him. She should be looking at him like that, it was his flower, but he was too scared to make the first move.

It didn't matter, Chris was better looking, charismatic, funny and their leader. Lars was just the weird scout, the hermit they had found in the woods. He had never stood a chance with her. Even at the end of the world he was still the same loser he had been before.

He walked into camp and informed every one of the safe path forward so they could get moving. He walked on ahead feeling like an idiot, feeling the familiar pain that being with other people always brought him.

He follows the group. They have someone like him with them, someone who can't stand others, who is just as bad as he is with people. This one actually tries to be normal though, he is helping these people. He could pose a problem, but maybe not. The girl he was pining after is being wooed by the leader of this little group, that might push the other one away.

It didn't matter he would come at night, drag one of them off, start the fear cycle in them all. That would make it easier to take them one by one as they all failed to sleep, became more and more disoriented. He had done it many times before, slowly taken whole groups of people.

The screams as they died, those screams gave him more joy than anything else on this forsaken planet ever could. He could hardly wait for nightfall, hardly contain his excitement for the coming killing.

As the sun set Lars setup is small bivy sack away from the group. He didn't have enough energy left to try and socialize, he just wanted to sleep. He wanted to try and forget the embarrassment of today,

an embarrassment with himself. Even though none of the others saw or knew what had happened he still felt overwhelmed with shame.

Chris drew him into the group, he always tried to include Lars. Chris was a genuinely nice person and this made it harder for Lars because he knew that Chris was a better match for Clarissa. He tried not to notice how they were snuggled up beside one another.

Lars ate with the group, tried to join in their conversations and be normal. He excused himself as soon as he reasonably could though, it was all too much work for him. He could hear their laughter as he drifted off to sleep, feeling more alone now than he did when he was in the woods.

The scream woke him to a pitch black world. He managed to get out of his bivy in record time, flashlight in hand he ran to where the scream had come from. Still trying to blink sleep away, feeling like he was on autopilot. They had a watch posted but there were only two on watch and those two were already running toward where Lars was heading.

There was nothing, no sign of anyone but Jenna's tent was empty, the side torn open, her sleeping bag half dragged through the hole.

"A bear?" Chris asks, he had run up with the rest of them. Lars is already looking for tracks in the mud surrounding the camp. It's hard with the light and shadow from the flashlights.

"No. Cut's too clean, no paw marks. This was a person," he says.

He is in the deep woods before any of them say anything else. He saw the drag marks and had started following them. Eventually the tracks disappear and after hours of searching he can find nothing. The person that had done this was quick, capable in the woods and had probably been following them for days.

"Find anything?" Chris asks as he returns to camp.

"No, she's gone," Lars says.

The cold light of sunrise offers little in the way of assistance to their search. Lars wants to give up but can tell that the act of looking is making everyone feel a little better. They were all scared and by searching they were regaining some control over the situation. He made sure they stayed in groups of at least four and no one moved too far from camp, he alone stayed back, looking over the scene.

From the looks of it Jenna's tent had been silently sliced open, the person who had done this had probably grabbed her fast and hard, choking any scream out of her before dragging her out. In the struggle his grip had probably come loose, that was how she had managed to scream. They would have been far enough out of camp at that point that the person was able to drag her away fast enough to avoid them.

The track ended abruptly a few hundred meters from the edge of camp. She was probably unconscious at this point, struggle and lack of oxygen would lead to a quick blackout. She would have been picked up and carried off, the person knowing where to step to avoid making tracks, moving through the woods like they were an animal.

Lars wanted to keep moving, a person like this was dangerous and would be back. He knew Chris would post an extra watch tonight but that wouldn't stop this person. They were dealing with a monster here, a person who had probably been a killer before the world fell, a person who knew what they were doing. Someone strong, fast and comfortable in the wild, someone like him.

He watches from a distance, confident in his camouflage. They are looking for her but that's a waste. She's dead, kind of sad how quick it had been. He had to snap her neck and carry the body, her scream had woke them and they were quick. The camp is empty, only the one like him remains, looking over the scene of his attack.

That one had been quick, had she screamed a little earlier he was certain that he would have been caught by that outsider. Easy kills had made him sloppy, he would need to be careful with this group. They looked like the common mix of old world professionals, leeches on society, people who drifted

through their lives dulled by media and waiting to die. The other though, he was with them, he was protecting them and he made this difficult.

It didn't matter, he welcomed a new challenge.

Night falls and Chris has them set up a watch, half of them awake while the other half sleeps. Lars says nothing, a part of him thinks this is too much, that being tired won't help them. He says nothing though, too nervous to contradict Chris on matters like this. He has managed to convince Chris to get them moving tomorrow.

They had wanted to stay, unable to accept that Jenna had been dragged off in the night. They were all scared but Lars had convinced Chris that moving was safer, that a person like that would only be back for more.

He took first watch that night, knowing that his fellow watchers would be tired from a day of combing the woods and wanting to be there to make sure everyone stayed alert. He knew that this person would target the women first, he knew that they were dealing with a man. It was always a man in his limited experience dealing with the dangerous people out here.

He wasn't even sure if it was one person, it could be a group, cannibals stealing people until they shrunk their numbers enough to attack safely. Their group was large enough to make cannibals weary and they were all armed but with smaller numbers it would be easy enough. They could be getting picked off one by one and women were easier targets.

Lars went around and made sure everyone's weapons were loaded and functioning. He briefed them all on safety not wanting them to shoot one another and then stoked the fire up. They had enough wood to keep the blaze going through the long night. Clarissa was on watch with him and he had taken some extra time checking her gun, trying to muster the courage to say something other than the basic firearm instructions he was spouting.

After a minute of stammering he gave up and moved on, ashamed with himself. He spent that first watch stewing as he wandered around checking in with everyone. Beating himself up for his inability to talk to anyone on a friendly level, for his inability to talk to her. He rolled into his bivy when Chris relieved him and slept a few hours before the light of dawn woke him.

As they moved that day he could tell that not one of them had slept well, they were now more vulnerable. People made mistakes when they were tired, Lars felt the lack of sleep as well but was accustomed to it. Living on his own, even before the fall, he had trained himself for sleep deprivation. It was another of his weird hobbies. He would try to go days without sleeping, curious as to what the effects would be wanting to test his limits.

It had actually started when he was a child, he had watched a documentary on an elite special force and their training. One of the things that stuck with him was the lack of sleep, how these people could function and think even after fifty six hours awake. To him that was the ultimate sign of toughness. He had started training to not sleep after that, thinking it would make him tough, that it would make life hurt less.

A part of him thought that this was their stalkers plan, slowly drive them into making mistakes through fear and exhaustion. They wouldn't listen to him if they were scared, he didn't have the leadership that Chris did. Chris was just another guy though, he was going to start making bad choice and they would all listen to him. He hoped that it wouldn't happen but was beginning to worry that their stalker was going to divide them.

They stopped early that day. Lars estimated that they had traveled at least twenty kilometers, their stalker was probably still with them but there wasn't much he could do about that. They were all armed and Chris still had them on half watches. Lars wanted to recommend against that but knew no one would listen, they felt safer with the half watch even though it was draining them all.

The light began to dim and despite himself Lars began to get anxious. He knew that their stalker wasn't targeting him, he wasn't close to anyone here, losing people shouldn't bother him, but these people had accepted him and he wanted to help. He was nervous for Clarissa, he had checked on her while she was watching with him last night but he knew he couldn't keep an eye on her all the time. It didn't really matter though, the way things were going it looked like Chris would be joining her in her tent soon enough.

He went through weapon safety again with everyone, not wanting them to make mistakes in their worn out state. The last thing he wanted on his hands was them all shooting each other. As the light left the sky the first group took watch around the smaller camp. Lars had made them set up their tents as close to one another as possible. They had been spread out, the lack of any violence making them complacent. Right now safety overrode privacy. The tighter grouping was also easier to guard.

In a perfect set up they would all be in one tent, a ten man tent would fit them with the half on half off watch they were pulling. They didn't have a tent that big though, most only had small two man jobs, so this set up would have to work.

Lars stoked the fire and set to walking the perimeter of the camp. They sat in groups of two just out of the firelight so as not to ruin their night vision. All had their weapons ready, Lars went a bit further from the group and turned to watch them. He didn't fear putting his back to the woods.

Now he had made it hard for him. He can tell they are tired, that his plan was working, but it would still be difficult. They were much closer now, much harder to slip in without being noticed. He watched the back of the outsider, he had no fear of him.

There was another way though, he could get rid of the outsider, make them hate him, frame him. He still had some souvenirs from the other night he could wait until the other was asleep and plant those on his tent.

He slept, safe in his nook in the forest looking in on them. He had time, and even if this group got away he was sure there would be another eventually.

Lars crawled into his bivy after relinquishing the watch to Chris, and making sure Clarissa was safe in her tent. He had placed his bivy close to where she slept, wanting to make sure she was alright.

His sleep is filled with nightmares, vivid dreams brought on by the lack of sleep from nights prior. The sound of camp being broken wakes him. Chris is packing up his tent as Lars rolls up his gear and starts on the scouting for the day. Lars needs to talk to him, but it will be hard as Clarissa is there laughing and chatting, her eyes locked on Chris.

Lars manages to gather up his nerve and approach them.

"I think we should reduce the watch Chris," he leads with trying to sound confident.

"Not yet," Chris says.

Lars puts his hands in his pockets, a habit of closing himself off as he gets more nervous. There's something in there though, he takes it out instinctively. It's a lock of hair tied in Jenna's headband. He quickly shoves it back in his pocket, looking at Chris and Clarissa as he does so, hoping they didn't see.

They are too involved in one another to notice him. Lars walks off, his counterpoint to Chris drying in this throat. Their stalker was trying to frame him, trying to remove him from the picture and make the group an easier target. Chris was right, they should keep the watch up and Lars would have to keep a better eye on his own safety. It would seem that he had become a target.

A part of him felt like an idiot, he should have seen this coming and Chris was right about keeping the watch at its current level. Whoever was stalking them was getting more brazen, trying to tear them apart from the inside. Lars being the target told him one thing, he was a threat to their stalker. The stalker knew he couldn't kill Lars and he knew Lars was keeping them safe, so he wanted Lars to be taken out of the picture by the people he was with.

The thing that bugged him was that the stalker was right. These people had never really accepted him as one of them, given an excuse they would turn on him. What he thought of as respect was actually a mix of fear and confusion. They probably saw him as some strange mountain man, a crazy hermit, someone on the edge of snapping.

The lack of sleep was getting to him, despite everything their stalker was getting to him. He was starting to disown this group before they even disowned him, he didn't want to have to endure that, would rather leave first. That was ridiculous and he knew it, they liked him, Chris tried to include him in everything. He just needed to be more friendly, if anything they were the friendly ones and he was the jerk.

They move through the woods for a few more days before coming to a small town. One of those little outposts built around a gas station and restaurant. This particular town had a small store that had used to serve people making last minute purchases on their way to the cottages further north. It seemed like as good a place as any to camp.

The road and small parking lot offered clear sightlines, the roof on the store looked safe enough to sleep under. It would save time in setting camp, the doors could be locked, it was a perfect place to rest after the long watches in the forest. Lars was there first and had actually managed to scout some food, it was old canned stuff, things that had rolled under the shelves but the cans were fine, he started preparing a feast for the group.

They think they are safe now. He had hoped they would come this way, it was the final trap in what he viewed as his territory. His old store, a place he had loved working in, it allowed him to scout victims on their way to the rental cabins up north. It always amazed him how much people would share on their way to a vacation. Info about pets, who they were with, where they were staying, basic information he could use to stalk and kill them.

Now the group was holed up in his most perfect trap. He could lock the door from the outside, a lever he had placed in the brick beside it would allow him to do this without being seen. A rooftop entrance that led to a small backroom locked on the inside, it's door hidden behind a false wall. He had started the changes when the world began to fall and finished them only recently, now he could finally try his kill house.

He would wait for night, slip in like a fox in a henhouse, silently take out whoever is on watch before he woke the sleepers. Once he did that the fun would start.

Chris decided to only do a minimal watch that night, two hours on a rotation so that everyone got at least eight hours rest. Lars was against this but couldn't argue the point, having half of them on guard in a safe place like this seemed like overkill. He felt uneasy though, it seemed too perfect, this place was a little too clean. Something was putting him off.

Their stalker was still out there, he could feel it, a person like that wouldn't give up until they were well out of his territory. He decided to sleep for the first eight hours, taking the middle watch where he thought the biggest risk lie. As uneasy as he felt he welcomed the extra sleep, it would be nice to think clear again, despite training for sleep deprivation he still preferred being rested in stressful situations.

The gunshot had him out of his sleeping bag in a second, he went to grab his pistol but forgot that he had given it to Alex as his watch was before Lars. His knife would have to do, the big hunting knife beside his bag was gone though. He tried to gather himself find where the shot had come from when he saw him.

A man standing at the other end of the room, sweeping them all with a rifle, one of Lars's rifles. A quick glance and he realized that all the sentries were dead, Alex lay in a heap by the door.

Chris was up and looked ready to charge the man.

“No, don’t even consider it,” the man said. Their stalker seemed to be a lot braver than Lars had anticipated. He would have to act fast if he was going to save the rest of his group.

“Everyone face that wall,” the man pointed with the rifle.

“Fuck you,” Chris said.

“Now don’t go turning this robbery into a mass murder,” the man said.

Chris stood and walked to the wall, everyone else followed, Lars the last to go. He still had a knife in his sock, another tucked in his pocket, not big knives but they would do. He knew that this man was their stalker, that this was more than a robbery. Their hunter had caught them in a trap. To catch game you have to make the trap look attractive and that man had done just that. Lars had fallen for it like the rest of them, but he should have seen it.

Lars maneuvered so he stood next to Clarissa, this guy was either going to shoot them all in the back or tie them up before he started picking them out one by one. If he moved to tie up Clarissa Lars planned on grabbing him, stabbing him and putting an end to this. He needed to fix his mistake.

Keeping the rifle trained on them he moved down the line, he tied up Chris first, then Jeremy, then he reached Lars. Tying up the men first, something else he should have seen coming. He was quick though, the knife flashed out and dug into their stalkers neck.

He staggered back as Lars pulled the blade out preparing to go in for the kill as a gout of blood welled over him. Their stalker leveled the rifle and blew Lars’s head into a pulp of bone and brain. Clarissa was sprayed with the remnants of their guide as she lunged at the man who was struggling to hold his neck wound and keep the gun trained on them.

She pulled the straight bladed knife from her boot and with a spin plunged it into the side of the man’s skull staggering him sideways onto his knees. He shot off a few more rounds, his finger moving on an autonomic response. One of the rounds struck Kylee, Clarissa didn’t have time to notice as she yanked the blade from the man’s temple and plunged it between the first and second vertebrae severing the spinal cord right at the brainstem.

This wasn’t the first man she had killed and she hoped it wasn’t the last. The killing gave her a thrill, all the better if the person she was killing deserved it. As she yanked the knife out she looked around at what remained of her group.

Lars was a bloody heap, she had liked him, he was interesting. No loss though, she could handle the woods just fine. Kylee was gone, the shot had gone through her lower back and based on the entrails littering the floor the exit wound had been substantial.

The three they had on watch were also dead, garroted from the look of it in the dim light offered by the flashlights waving about. She could hear voices calling her, they sounded distant. Chris was shouting her name, trying to make sure she was alright as he stumbled over. She blinked, it was time to go back to being normal.

They spent the rest of the night in the small store attached to the gas station, no one wanted to stay in the gore filled supply store. Clarissa had made sure to gather all the firearms, they would be useful later.

That morning they walked out of the small town, most of their now diminished group looking shell shocked. It was near their lunch time stop that Chris approached her.

“Where did you learn how to do that?” He asked.

“By surviving out here. You have to be careful, this new world is filled with monsters,” she said staring into his eyes.

He said nothing, something about her chilled him. Something about her convinced him that monsters were real.

### Test Results

Words like metastasize, lymph node, and inoperable were things that had been exclusive to the medical drama's they like to watch. He had fallen apart at the funeral. He was too young to have attended many funerals, only his grandparents and those ones had been bad enough.

He felt bad about it but it was hard to remain in one piece when a part of him had been torn away. It was hard to justify the effort. Now was the first time he would be entering their apartment without her.

For the past month he had been living on his parents couch, too scared to come back to this empty place, frightened of the memories that were lying in wait for him here. His parents had been against it, but they had to work and he came during the day. His job had granted him disability leave, he couldn't go back there, didn't think he ever would. There would be no point now, without her there was no reason to try and make a better life.

The door opened like it always had. The apartment smelt strange, not like he remembered, a side effect of being left empty for so long. Everything was where he had left it, where they had left it.

She was so young for such advanced cancer. They had spent the last weeks of her life at the hospital, she had fought hard those weeks. The treatments took their toll and that was what killed her. The doctors had been too aggressive, she was too young not to be aggressive, and complications from treatment had killed her. He had been back here periodically to grab a few things but he had lived at the hospital with her, he couldn't leave her side.

Seeing how unchanged everything is he almost wants to break down. He realizes that he had been expecting something more grand, had been expecting her ghost to rise up from the objects that held his memories of her.

The door closes behind him with the familiar slam, he locks it out of habit. He feels empty, disconnected from his body as he walks the apartment. Taking his shoes off he goes to the kitchen, he had cleaned it before he left last time, it was still cluttered. The fridge would probably be a mess of rotting food, he isn't brave enough to open it.

This little one bedroom apartment had been all they could afford. It was nothing special but it was nice and it was theirs. Now he was left with it and everything it reminded him of. The memories of the past were hard but they were at least pleasant. All the good times, all the smiles and time together. There were the regrets as well, but they were too young to have a lot of those. They never got a chance to move beyond those early years of marriage.

It was the thoughts of the future that upset him the most. Waking up alone and scared, coming home to an empty apartment, having to keep living and facing the world only now he had to do it alone. With her he felt that life was hard but that it was something he could manage as long as she was there. Without her he didn't know how he was going to keep on moving.

He walked to the bedroom slowly. The bed lay unmade as he had left it, clothes scattered on the floor. The last t-shirt she had ever worn was here too. He had brought it back with him after the hospital, she hadn't had a lot of stuff there.

Her Dad had taken it hard. He didn't know how to deal with that though, he could barely contain his own grief, he couldn't help his father in law. When they had first moved in he had been frightened. They were both living on their own for the first time but it hit him harder for some reason. The fear of failing and having to move back home came to a head in nightmares nearly every night.

It was in this bed that she had held him and comforted him as he awoke drenched in sweat all those nights for the first few months they had lived here. It was with her help that he had managed to realize that it would all be fine, that they would make it, that things only took time.

There was dust over everything. This all needed to be cleaned, he needed to come back, needed to start life again. The future was going to be frightening, it was going to be hard, but she would want him to keep going. She would want him to remember that it would get better with time. All he needed was time. That's what she would tell him.

His Mother found him cleaning later that night, he had left a note so as not to worry them. When she had died he had been put on suicide watch. That was part of the reason he was living at home, the doctors didn't think he was ready to face life on his own.

She took him out of there. He was almost done with the cleaning any way. It didn't hit him until he was back at their place. His parents and brothers got to watch him breaking down again, sobbing to the point where breathing was difficult. He wanted to die more than anything but knew she wouldn't like that. She was keeping him here, he could almost hear her telling him over and over that it would get better. That it would only take time and he would be better.

He was able to calm down and enter a nightmare filled sleep. When he woke he went back to the apartment and allowed himself to grieve. To look over all of her things, to remember her. To try and picture her still here.

Finally he was able to get back to work, to slowly start living again. He was alone though, he had always been an introvert. A part of him enjoyed being alone. He felt guilty admitting it but he enjoyed the emptiness.

He still cried every night. Still woke in a panic at three in the morning and spent the hours until it was time to go to work fighting the fear. Fighting the fear alone with nobody to talk him through it. He had always felt guilty waking her with his nightmares but she had always insisted he do it. She had loved to help him, even now she still managed to help him. He would find a memory of her and focus on that with all he had when he was scared and it would help him calm down. He would switch from fear to depression and it was much easier to live in a state of depression.

Life went on and he kept to himself. He spent his time without her focused on distracting himself from the memory. His life consisted of an empty attitude to everything. His job had never drawn him in before but now he tried to commit himself to it entirely. Idle time lead to his mind wandering and his mind always wandered to her. The wound was closing but it still hurt to think of her.

After work he focused on his body, he would either train in the gym, lifting weights until there was nothing else except for him and the iron. Or he would run until the pain in his body overpowered the pain in his mind.

Years of this living had left him with a body of steel but everything was still about her. The apartment was the same as when she had left it the last time, he kept all her things, kept her side of the dresser filled with her clothes, never slept on her side of the bed. He knew it was unhealthy but he couldn't move on, life was still hard without her in it.

The weekends were the worst, he spent them working out as much as he could but eventually his body forced him to stop. It was then that he realized how alone he was, that he realized he couldn't remember what she smelt like that he had to watch videos of her to remember what her voice sounded like. As much as he tried to hold on the world was reclaiming her. Weekends, with their endless free time, only served to remind him of this.

When the markets shut down and the evacuation started he was completely lost. He didn't know what was going on, everything in the outside world had drifted over him lately but everyone else seemed to know. He didn't evacuate with the main group, he was still trying to decide if he wanted to leave, staying and dying with the rest of the Earth seemed like a good choice.

He was happy that she wasn't here to see what people did to each other, what the world dissolved to. It was June and freezing in the apartment. He had hid in the closet when the police came to force the evacuation. His family had gone South early on, he had told them he would follow, that he had to finish something first. He sat on his balcony enjoying the eerie silence of the dead city. It felt like late fall not like the early summer it was.

He cooked over his gas camp stove on the balcony, kept warm with their winter camping gear. He slept in their tent even inside the apartment, it kept the warmth in better than sleeping in the open. He kept his shotgun by his side, so far he had only had to kill once.

He wasn't going to let his apartment get looted, her stuff would remain untouched, she would live forever in this shrine. He had made his decision to head South, but only when he could be sure he was the last one. He didn't want to risk people defiling his shrine to her.

The death of the world had actually served to calm him down. He felt connected to the planet, he didn't cry at night and actually managed to sleep. When he thought of her now it was a happy experience. He felt that she was there with him.

They had loved camping and doing all the routines of life in the woods brought him back to those happy times. He had missed her at first but soon it became a way to remember, a way to feel something other than sadness at her loss.

There was now six feet of snow on the ground. The actual winter had been tough, he had almost frozen to death a few times. If it wasn't for the healthy supply of fuel he had gathered before the freeze he would have joined her in death. She wouldn't like that though, she would want him to head South, she would want him to help.

He always took joy in helping people, she knew this and encouraged him to do it. Now was his chance, his shrine would be safe. Heading out with his sled of gear he began walking South. The lake would be frozen over and he would be able to make fast time across it. Hopefully there would be food to scavenge on the other side. Then it was simple to cut through the center of America and hopefully he would be able to warm up once he hit Mexico.

The lake crossing was lonely, only the groan of shifting ice to keep him company. He hoped that steady temperatures below forty would keep the ice solid all the way across, he knew it was a risk but it was the most direct route. It took a few days but he made it and managed to find something to eat on the other side. His supplies of food were low, he focused more on fuel and other supplies.

Boiling snow was the only way to get water and water was more important than food so he had to prioritize. Not every store had been picked clean though and he was able to sustain himself off scavenged food. He found just enough to live, no more and no less. He was pretty sure that he was one of the last ones out, there were no fresh tracks, but he wanted to leave food any way in case someone needed it after him.

As he got closer to the cities, the old abandoned cores of civilization, countless stories began to unfold before him. Stories told in the belongings left behind, in the frozen bodies he came across, in the skeletons of the old world. He felt less and less alone as time passed. Felt her with him more and more, he began talking to her. He knew she was dead, knew that he was acting crazy, but it didn't matter, there was no one around to witness his descent so he indulged it. It made him feel better.

He found the family, their heads blown off, blood and brain matter frozen in a tableaux of horror. It was obvious to him what had happened. A woman, two children and a man. The man still held the gun in his hand, they had chosen a quick death over starvation. He wanted to help these people but it was too late.

He studied the scene longer than needed. They were in a bedroom in a house that wasn't theirs based on the pictures on the wall and the fact they all had backpacks nearly empty of supplies. The children could be no older than ten, their faces only showed the small entry hole of the bullet, they looked peaceful. The man's face was torn in anguish, even in death he could see that.

Having to shoot your family, knowing that was the best option. He wanted to pretend he couldn't imagine it. He could feel everything this man felt, he would have shot the kids first, him and his wife would have agreed on that. That way the children wouldn't have to witness their mom dying.

He wondered which kid he shot first, probably the youngest although at their age it didn't make much difference. He could feel the terror the children must have felt, a boy seeing his dad shoot his younger brother, hearing the too loud blast and watching the blood stain the wall behind his now shattered skull. Facing that barrel, seeing the tears in his father's face, his mom's sobs breaking through the ringing in his ears left from the first shot, then nothing.

He looked in the superhero themed backpacks of the kids, looking for something to remember them with, something to carry with him. He would add to the dead he carried, she would like the company. He had room to carry more, she hadn't stayed in the shrine he left her so why should she have to travel alone?

He found the youngest boy's stuffed dog. It was black, frozen and small enough to fit in his palm. He tucked it into an inside coat pocket to warm it as he looked through the other boy's bag. Older kids didn't have stuffed animals, but he found a smooth rock at the bottom of the pack under the clothes and miscellaneous items of survival. The rock must be a memento from a long ago vacation in a much happier place. He zipped it into another pocket.

The wedding bands from the husband and wife seemed to be suitable for them. Leaving markers of love at a scene like this seemed wrong. He wanted to bury them but that was impossible, even digging down through the snowpack would be nearly impossible. It didn't matter they were no longer in their bodies, they were with him now.

He slept in the other room of the house that night, feeling content that he had found some friends for her. He was feeling less and less alone every day. He could see them smiling at him as he drifted to sleep.

He made his way South, collecting bits and pieces of humanity along the way, building his group of followers larger and larger. Helping lost ones feel at home, giving her more friends than she could ever need. He always thought death was the loneliest thing that could happen to a person but he was doing his best to change that.

The snows were tapering, he was seeing more and more of the markers of recent human activity. Food was becoming scarce though, it was going to be a hard final push. A look at a map told him that he was half way through Mexico, the snow was nearly gone now. He could walk in a t-shirt and be comfortable.

He found his first settlement. A camp of people on the outskirts of a larger fenced in area. The government had managed to maintain some control, people volunteered to be soldiers, to help maintain order. He felt guilty because he was shocked by how peaceful it all was. As people took him in and fed him he realized that he had been expecting anarchy and death.

Over the next few weeks as they continued to shift South he learned from those around him what the mass exodus had been like. Most said that it had been a peaceful affair, there had been murders and robberies but on the whole it had been organized and peaceful, at least in the bigger groups.

The second and third waves of refugees claimed that there had been more violence. People had seen families murdered over a soup can, women tortured and raped, humanity devolved to monsters. This was after the mass of people had passed over, the monsters seemed to hold back and wait for stragglers.

He had seen no one on his way down so he hoped the monsters were all dead. He had seen the leavings of their work though, in the houses he slept in, the places he explored for food. He had found the mutilated and tortured bodies. That had been why he was expecting anarchy down here.

As more time passed he began to feel oppressed by the mass of people he had been absorbed into. His dead followers were already overwhelming enough, being surrounded by the living was becoming too much.

He needed to head back out there. The old sadness was creeping back in, her voice was fading in his head, he was losing her in this mass of the living. There was nothing he could do to help out down here. People were just shuffling off, further and further South, all blindly hoping it would get better.

The living didn't need him, he needed to collect the countless memories being left behind, he needed to help the dead. Needed to add them to his group, remind himself what life was by memorializing those that had passed through it.

He stole away in the night, there was no reason to hide his leaving, people were allowed to come and go, but part of him felt the insanity of what he was doing. He knew he would die out there but the thoughts of all those forgotten people were becoming too much. The stories of lost loved ones in the camp only made it worse, only served to remind him of those that needed his help back there.

She understood. Words like memory, loss, pain and love all had new meaning to him. This was a new planet, he was going to start living like it.

### When It's Over

He had finally stopped running. It had been hours, and only now did he collapse. It was done, it was over, they were all gone. He had nothing now, it wasn't fair, nothing about it was fair. His whole life he had done everything right. He worked, he paid his bills and his taxes. He supported his family and bought a house. He had done all he was supposed to do and this was what where it got him.

He would have been better off being a drug runner or a killer for one of the gangs, at least then he would have skills he could use. This wasn't fair, life had proven itself as terrible as he had always suspected.

His whole life he had believed there was no God, now he was starting to question that. There had to be a god, this was too terrible to be coordinated by random chance. Life had been too terrible for there not to be a God up there, looking down on him and laughing.

He wished there was a God, that way he could be angry at something, there was no way to feel anger toward the uncaring randomness of the universe. He lay on the cold Earth, the planet that had finally betrayed him, betrayed them all. He was having trouble processing what happened, what this would all mean for him.

They had started heading North when the snow started piling up in February. Summer in Sydney had been his favorite thing ever since he was a child. It felt like living in paradise, even the winters were nothing, so when the cold hit they were unprepared.

Still he had waited. He didn't want to head north with everyone else, it would be too insane. Crossing the Australian interior in this bitter cold was something he wanted to put off for as long as he could. It felt like a death sentence and staying in Sydney felt a little safer, at least for the time being. They had enough supplies, his children were old enough to help out and his wife seemed all for it.

They put in for two winters, gradually the neighbors left, soon they were the only ones on the street, then in the neighborhood. He doubted they were the last to leave the city but wouldn't be surprised if that were the case.

Those two years were actually some of the best he had with his family. They bonded, got close in a way they had never managed before with the constant bustle of modern life. It had been a simple life of scavenging, hunting and staying warm in the winters. Sure there had been bad times, the kids got pretty sick one year and a few times they had all started to go a little stir crazy, but they made it through.

Leaving the house felt like leaving his life behind. He had wanted the change to level off, had refused to accept what was happening. It had to stop, there was no way the whole planet could be falling further and further from the Sun.

He had to accept it though, and it was getting far too cold to remain in the southern city. They had to leave or risk dying of hypothermia. He worried that they may have waited too long, that finding a way to cross to the equator would be impossible. With no communications there was no way to tell so they had set out hoping for the best. At the very worst, Northern Australia would be warmer than here, would give them a few more years.

The plan had been to scavenge what they needed on the way and try to carry as much supplies as they could manage. That was the plan, he soon found that it would need adjusting. There was very little in the way of food, all the coastal cities had been cleaned out. They bypassed the larger cities on their way, weighing the risk of attack from the marauding gangs against the risk of starvation.

He had his old hunting rifle, an heirloom from his father. He had used it to scare off a few would be robbers in some close calls. They didn't have much trouble with other people though, not until they reached Brisbane.

They were near starvation and had to risk entering the city. His wife had wanted to leave the kids hidden and have just the both of them enter the city. He didn't want to split up, he had insisted on going in together.

Now they were all dead and he had to live with the fact that he had killed them. He had gotten his family killed, there was no way around that.

Slowly he rises to his feet. He wants to cry but feels too numb. He wants to die but can't figure out how to do that, not in his fugue state. It's all too difficult to think of right now so he just starts walking.

He hadn't run because he was scared, he had ran because he hadn't known what to do. The bastards had left him alive and he couldn't stare at their bodies any more. His two boys, his wife, their blood a bright contrast in the snow.

His mind couldn't process it, couldn't handle what had just happened. All it knew was to keep moving, so he shambled forward.

There were four men in the group, four armed men against him and a bolt action rifle. They had gotten the jump on them, he had no chance to even get his gun from the sled before they had them all lined up.

He told them to just take the food and leave his family. They said nothing, they already had the sled, but they shot them all any way. Then one of them laughed and sucker punched him in the back of the head. When he came around they were gone and only the corpses of his family remained.

He can't remember what happened then. He had gone insane, devolved into his baser self and started running. Now he didn't know where he was going, he was just walking. Only there were footprints in the snow, he could see that. There was something wrong with that, he just couldn't make the connection.

He walked, his mind a running blank. Moving like a robot, his humanity vacated. A shell, drained to the core. He wanted to make sense of it all, make it mean something. The cold was turning his fingers grey, his nose is losing colour too. He is becoming the ghost that he already feels he is.

He stops short. There's blood on the snow, his family. He walked back to where they lay, only this time he can make sense of it. His body is worn out, he's running on adrenaline and anger.

His wife's now frozen face looks serene. At least they won't suffer anymore, at least this is over for them, for him it's only just starting. If life wants him to become an animal, if life wants him to break then he will oblige it.

It hadn't snowed all day, the weather was calming down. Four sets of footprints heading off with a sled were easy to follow. As he walked he armed himself, a pipe, a length of cable torn from a building. The streets were empty, only the slight breeze moved. It was getting dark, the dim day fading.

He had a light in his jacket, he used this to follow the prints, he could tell where they were going though. As he climbed a ridge he saw the light in the distance, a shimmer on the snow. It was silly having a fire in the open like that, these guys were cocky.

As he approached, crouched low, using skills he didn't know he had, thoughts of his family ran through his mind. He could hear a laugh, a woman's laugh, and a child's squeal of joy. Memories or hallucinations? He couldn't tell.

The fire was outside a small building, inside the lower level he could see another, larger fire. These two sitting out here were only the posted watch. Staring into a flame was no way to set up a watch post at night, it killed your vision.

He moved with speed he didn't know he possessed. Clubbing the one man over the head and jumping on the other with a fluid movement. He choked the man so he couldn't scream but kept him alive. He tied them both up and moved into the building.

The other two men were sleeping, but their wives were up. He hadn't anticipated this but there was no time to think. The two women didn't see him, he brained one and slammed his fist into the

other. The children didn't even stir as he tied their mothers up and proceeded to hogtie their fathers. He dragged them all around the fire, they began to struggle but he had hit them all pretty hard.

Coming out of a concussion like that took time. The children were screaming though, he had tied them up for good measure, let them scream. He stared at the four men, the men who had killed his family. He looked at their wives. He waited for them all to come too.

Then he took the gags out of their mouths, without a word he stepped back and listened to them ramble threats at him, listened to them beg, listened to them apologize. He had the guns, but he wasn't going to use those.

He walked over to the first child, she was maybe five or six years old. He picked her up and the screams reached a fever pitch, the women begging the men swearing and struggling, the child shrieking.

All of them looking on in horror at the monster they had created as he slowly lowered the girl's head into the flame. He held it there until the screaming stopped, until the smell of cooked flesh made his stomach rumble. He tossed the limp body aside, she was still breathing but would be dead soon.

He only stared at the family, the group that had taken his life. They were insane with the rage he felt. Their rage was hot, his was cold now, everything was cold. His rage was better. Slowly he worked his way around the fire.

He reached the last man an hour later. It was all a blur, a mix of blood, screams and pain. Pain he had never known he could inflict, a level of pain that made him a god. The youngest girl was dead but the others were still breathing. He wanted them to live, wanted this to last as long as possible.

The last man he would let live though. The last man would be his signature on the world. He wouldn't leave this man walking though, he wasn't as dumb as they had been. He severed the Achilles tendon, leaving the man screaming and his foot a useless dangling piece of flesh.

The all slowly started waking up from the protective coma's their bodies had entered due to the pain. They couldn't scream any more, their voices were raw and some of them no longer had mouths that would work. He started working around the group again, this time he killed them all, but they didn't go fast.

Finally it was done, he could rest. He was so tired. Funny dreams haunted him, he had gagged the last man, tied him to a post. Still he felt restless, felt scared. It started to come back to him. The woman and two boys dead in the snow. His family?

Did he have a family? He couldn't remember. It felt so long ago.

They had started walking, had made for the North of the country. Their supplies had run out fast though, they were all starving. He tried to wake the boys up one morning but they wouldn't move. It was too late for them, the city was barren. They had hoped for something but it was a dead end. He should have left sooner, he had killed his family by waiting so long.

It had been his wife's idea. A swift death at the end of a gun instead of a slow one out in the snow. He had killed the boys first, then he had killed her. That had been the hardest shot to take. His only consolation was that he would be next.

When he turned the gun on himself there had only been a dry click. The last round was a dud, for whatever reason it refused to fire. He loaded it over and over, hoping that the gun would work, getting frantic, starting to slip.

Then the men had arrived, four of them with a sled loaded with supplies. Attracted by the gun shots they found him with a rifle barrel in his mouth sobbing and pulling the trigger over and over. Surrounded by his dead family, he stared at him.

If only they had waited a little longer they could have made it, could have been helped. It was too much. He dropped the rifle and ran.

He awakes with a start, bathed in the carnage he had caused. The bodies, mutilated and desiccated surround the dead ashes of the fire. The one surviving man sobbing in the corner, staring at him with a mix of fear and pure hatred.

"I'm sorry," he stammers out, the first words he has said since they all died. Since he killed his family.

"I. I'm so sorry," he breaks down finally breaks down. Looking at what had been done at his hand he manages to fall apart. He manages to connect it all and it only hurts. It's impossible, this level of pain, there's no way for it to stop.

It crushes him, feels like a weight, he vomits, screams, cries, falls apart. He staggers over to the guns, one has to be working. They are all frozen, the hammers stuck back, it's too cold with out the fire, without the warmth of body heat to keep them functional. None of them knew proper firearm care and the guns were all old and worn as is.

He looks at the man tied on the wall. He's struggling but the light is gone, he is as close to the walking dead as he thinks possible. This man will kill him, he just needs to untie him. The man flinches as he walks over, tries to pull away from the knife but is free before he knows what's happening.

The man doesn't even hesitate, he's been driven to the same place. They are closer now than two humans could ever be. His throat is crushed, he barely feels the man's fist crashing into his face. He won't know when it's over.

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It was the first time he had killed someone. The man that had come to their camp and started killing. The man they had found with his murdered family in the snow. He didn't feel good about it though, it didn't change anything. They were all dead and there was no one here to kill him. There was no reason to head North now, not without his family. It was all over. Even if he wanted to head North his foot was useless without a tendon.

He stripped to the skin which immediately began to freeze. The temperature had dropped over night, a storm was rolling in. He hobbled out into the snow and waited for it to be over.

## The Ground

0600 Old time, Dwelling number 11, Dr. Mark Brown, scheduled wake alarm.

The computer screen blinks at him, he turned off the sound of the alarm as soon as it started. He had been up for a while already, working at the computer trying to find some sanity in it. He had been at this project for nearly fifty years and was ready to quit. They were no closer now than they had been back then.

He stands up and stretches his back. The dim light from the computer illuminates his tiny dwelling. It's nothing more than a bed, a small lamp a few physics books, the laptop and desk, all horribly outdated and patched together.

There were no trees any more and his wooden desk was the last of its kind, he tried his best to keep it together but the constant earthquakes and small floods from the aquifer had taken their toll. He wanted to move onto a different problem, he was sick of trying to solve the movement problem. He wanted to work at the other more pressing issues. It was already too late to fix what he was working on.

Mark changes into something less dirty than his sleeping clothes and heads out into the dim hall. He shuffles his way to the cafeteria where a thin meal awaits him. He's nearing seventy five, one of the oldest residents in dwelling number eleven, although he has heard of older residents in other dwellings.

Maybe it's the years of living down here or maybe the food but he feels much more unhealthy than he thinks he should be given his age. Seventy five is not young but it's not a hundred either. It's a shame he was born when he was, he could have lived to a century or more in the old times, now he fears it all might be coming to an end. That's why he wants to contribute something.

Fifty years of work and nothing to show for it, that's a depressing life. As he chokes back his gruel and drinks the warm water that passes for coffee he thinks back on it all. At first they thought it was due to the dark matter from the Edgewater incident but that never panned out. They never found enough evidence and the only thing they came close to confirming was that being near unshielded dark matter messed with the synapses in a person's brain and drove them slowly and violently insane.

The amount that Edgewater claimed to have produced would have been much too small to affect the orbit of the planet but Mark had always suspected that they made more than they claimed. Maybe without even knowing how much they made. They hadn't realized that the experiment was a success until a few months after they had started creating dark matter.

With no conclusive evidence and only a few particles of dark matter ever captured there was no way to be sure. That was a dead end any way, the facility had been destroyed in the early days of orbit shift, an earthquake split it open and there was nothing anyone could do. At that point the government had more pressing issues than a broken research facility.

He had examined every other possibility, from interstellar masses, reduced sol size, altered planet density and had even entertained the fantastic ideas like secret weapons tests and moon bases. There had been nothing, and at this point they were too far away to fix anything even if he did find the reason.

Humanity was hanging on by a thread. A few refugees lived on the surface but they were dying off. The dwellings had taken all the people down that they could. Outside of the dwellings, deep underground caves close enough to the earth's mantle to utilize the heat of the core, there was no chance for humanity. Their resources were stretched so thin that unless a solution was found that involved the barest minimum of effort they would be stuck on this path. Their dwelling was close to one hundred percent efficient and still they struggled.

Ben sitting down beside him broke Mark from his internal reverie.

"Anything new?" Ben asked. He was a young scientist, specialized in water reclamation, one of the natural born dwellers. Ben had never seen the Sun, the sky or even a tree. Mark pitied the natural born, but they felt superior over the few remaining surfacers. They felt that this new underground world was theirs, that this was what life was supposed to be.

"No. How's the water?" Mark asked. Ben was the only natural born that he could stand, they all seemed to have too much energy, to be too happy with what was happening. Some of them even thought that his research into a cause was a total waste, that the planet was better like this. They held an anger toward the surface born, blaming them for what happened and disgusted with how they had treated the surface when they were there.

"Water's water. We are holding a perfect one hundred percent reclamation with a hefty aquifer in reserve although keeping that from freezing is getting harder and harder," Ben said.

Mark grunted in agreement and finished his food. As much as he liked Ben he had other things to do. As unpromising as his research was he needed to get on with it, there were a few simulations running that he needed to check on. He didn't want to admit to himself that listening to the work that Ben was doing, the tangible work, made him feel worse about his own theory based projects.

"I'll see you around kid," he said to Ben as he shuffled to the tray deposit window. As much as his work felt like it was getting him no where he couldn't stop it. There was no way he was going to quit on fifty years worth of blood, sweat and tears. Moments of weakness came and went but he always managed to return to the work, even just from pure curiosity.

He made his way through the maze of hallways to the labs closer to the surface. Some of the halls were larger than aircraft hangers and others were merely narrow passages. Dwelling eleven was the third largest of the fifteen dwellings they had managed to build before total collapse.

They were all built in secret once the governments of the world realized what was happening. They wanted to avoid mass hysteria while they worked on a fix, the dwellings were a contingency in case they couldn't solve the problem in time. Ideally the dwellings were meant to keep humanity alive while it worked on getting the planet back to where it was supposed to be. What Mark feared had happened was that the dwellings had become the new permanent home for humanity, set adrift on a dead planet in space.

The one benefit of the cooling planet was that keeping his supercomputers at an ideal temperature was easy and cost nothing. He just moved them close to the surface and they ran perfectly. He had to wear full winter gear when checking on them though, but it was nice to leave the perfectly climate controlled temperature of the dwelling.

Mark sat at his station in the lab and checked on the simulations. One he was running in semi-secret. Nothing could be a secret in a lab, but no one bothered to check on his work so as long as he told no one it remained unknown. This was the simulation that postulated the amount of dark matter created by the Edgewater facility as a higher number than reported. He had entered the maximum possible amount it could have created and wanted to see what effect if any it would have. So far the simulation showed nothing out of the ordinary, but there were some promising minute shifts. He kept running it, not like he needed to save processing space.

"Did you hear about the connection to thirteen?" Clarissa asked.

"No. What about it," Mark turned in his chair, always glad for the opportunity to talk to such a beautiful woman, even if she was less than half his age.

"They should be connected to us in a day," she said with a smile.

Mark didn't know how to react. Connecting all the dwellings had been a long term project since they all moved down here. On the one hand he thought it would be good to amalgamate all the dwellings, would allow for better communication and collaboration. On the other hand he felt like it

was akin to giving up. Humanity resigning itself to its new fate as mole people living underground, huddled near the core to stay warm.

"That's amazing, connecting us to thirteen means we will also be linked with nine and six right?"

"You got it. In three weeks we should be connected to fifteen which means that we will be part of the major network. After that there are only three more dwellings to be connected then it's a whole underground world," she said.

"Well it will be nice. Communication has been getting spotty lately," Mark said. Radio waves weren't transmitting to the other surface posts for the dwellings as well as before and communicating through miles of rock was next to impossible. Being physically connected would mean they could run cables and form a larger network for research and communication. It would also be nice to feel part of a larger portion of humanity.

There were no official numbers regarding who lived in the dwellings but estimates put the total population of all fifteen dwellings at near three million. Even the smallest dwelling had close to one hundred and fifty thousand people. All that life buried kilometers underground.

"This is exciting, we are finally recovering from it," Clarissa said. She was natural born, she didn't know life outside of this place. For her this expansion was akin to discovering a new country. He felt good for her, but it only reminded him of how bad it had become down here. How slowly, as the surface born died off, people were accepting this as the new normal. Before he died Mark wanted to at least know why this had happened, why this had become the new normal.

"It's definitely good news," Mark said.

"Do you miss it?" Clarissa's abrupt change in tone and topic caught him off guard.

"Miss what?" He asked.

"The surface," she said.

He paused. Of course he missed it, he wanted to see daylight before he died, wanted to feel wind, smell the air, see a tree again, he missed the smell of rain more than anything.

"Yes," he was getting choked up, even after all this time, talking about the surface still made him fall apart a little.

"What was it like?" She asked. Most natural born were curious about the surface but he had never been asked in person before. Usually they would satiate their curiosity by reading texts about the surface, by browsing the internet archive they had brought down here.

"It was warm, it was cold it was dry it was wet. It smelt great, it could also smell bad. It was where we are supposed to be," he said a tear dripping down his cheek. Age had made him more sentimental. When he was younger he had hardened himself to memories of the surface through work, through hope that they might get back.

Clarissa only stared at him. She had no concept of what he was talking about, no idea what life had been like. The only reference to the surface that she had was the love that people like him felt for it.

"Sorry," she said after a minute.

"No. It's fine. I should be used to it by now. It's like knowing your home is right there, just out of reach, and there's nothing you can do to get back there. I just hope that you natural born's won't give up on it," he said.

"I know I won't. My mom loved the surface too. I want to raise children there, I want to see the sun," she said.

"Good, I'll need someone to carry on my research when I go," he said.

"Don't talk like that Mark, I'm sure you can figure this out and live out your days up there," she tried to placate him.

"That's the plan," he smiled wanting to end the topic and get back to work.

"Good. Made any headway?" She asked.

“Nothing much yet, but it’s always promising,” he said turning to his screen. That was the problem, the simulations were always promising, it always seemed like they were on the verge of figuring it all out, but there was always something missing.

There wasn’t much to do but try new parameters and re-run the simulations. So far there were only two things that seemed possible, that seemed to be based in reality. Either a massive gravitational force was pulling Earth or something had happened at Edgewater and they had broken the planet from orbit. If there was a force pulling Earth then why wasn’t it pulling the other planets?

That was the question he was trying to answer. Their instruments hadn’t observed anything before they went down. The only thing that made sense was some kind of directional pull force like the tractor beams in old science fiction movies.

Something that powerful was nearly impossible though, and that began to enter the realm of the fantastic. Right now he was exploring the idea of micro black holes, maybe a series of them, pulling Earth further and further out. They would have an effect on the other planets and the only effects they had observed on the rest of the solar system were tied to Earth dropping from orbit.

Mark changed a few variables and re-ran the simulation. There wasn’t much else for him to do. When he was younger, healthier, he had helped out in other duties for the dwelling. Basic maintenance, child minding, that sort of thing. Down here people had their main job and then a multitude of side jobs. Everyone needed to be a Jack of all trades in order to keep the dwelling running. Now that he was older that was no longer expected, it was the closest he would get to retirement.

“I’m going to check on the servers,” Mark said as he struggled to his feet to get his coat.

“Be safe,” Clarissa was back to her work.

Mark weaved his way through the narrow tunnels leading to the server room. There was no reason to check on the servers but he liked it up there. The cold was refreshing and it was something other than staring at his computer.

There were teenagers in the secluded hall to the server room. Secluded tunnels had come to replace the old make-out points that had existed on the surface. Mark felt bad disturbing them, it was a young couple, but they scampered off before he could tell them not to worry.

Breeding was closely controlled in the dwellings, over population could become a major issue. The population sustained optimal levels with only minor control, but a reproduction license was still required. The penalty for not obtaining one was only a fine right now, but Mark knew the stricter measures they were ready to enforce should things get out of control.

Forced abortions, sterilization, test tube baby labs, these were all options on the table to control the population if needed. In order to save humanity some aspects of civilization had to be traded.

Mark reached the server room and swiped his access card. The blast of cold air assaulted him, but it was welcome. Change from the normal was always welcome down here. Maybe that was why all those born down here were so content to live out their lives huddled next to the core of a dead planet, they didn’t like change. Maybe that was why he was one of the few people that actually enjoyed checking on the computers.

On the surface change is a constant, at least it was. Now it was probably mostly frozen with the only change coming from wind in the last shreds of atmosphere. Weather changed, tides shifted, wind moved things, even the continents shifted. Although he supposed that was still happening, but the only change down here was the Earthquakes.

Those born to an unchanging world would obviously be more averse to change, so they were stuck in comfort. Or as close to comfort as one could get down here. That’s why as he checked the servers he felt more discouraged, this place reminded him that change was possible still.

Everything was working, he was getting cold, there was no longer a reason to stay in the room, still Mark lingered. He couldn’t bear facing his work, not any more, not for today. It was all too depressing, getting nowhere, tweaking minute variables and still getting nothing. He sat down on the cold floor.

Huddling there he started to drift, his mind wandering.

Wake up mark the voice from nowhere. He opens his eyes, he's no longer in the server room. He's engulfed in light and surrounded by creatures that look like shifting shadows. Long slender legs shimmer in and out of view. He follows them up to the single twig of a torso, a shimmering black like the legs. They look like living ten foot tall stick figures, inked in the deepest black.

He felt no fear though, something calmed him, like a finger on the dopamine receptors in his brain. He felt comfortable, warm, bright. He felt right.

We have answers to give to questions you ask. The voice was in his head, the figures just stood, implacable, around him.

"What questions?" His own voice startled him a little, it felt too loud in this silent place.

The planet you call home. We are taking it. We do this not from malice but from need. Ours are advanced people but we need the matter that is your world.

"No. What? Why?" He stammered feeling dumb.

We found you by the spike in matter you call dark, soon your planet will join ours, we need it to survive.

"That's not fair, we need the planet too. What about our right to survive?" Mark asked. He knew he should be more emotional about this, more upset, but he felt flat. He felt stuck in the mindless comfort they had him locked in.

Understand that to us you are dust. We like to tell sentient races why we do this, we like to inform them of why their planet is being transformed. It is a courtesy we like to extend. You are the one assigned by your race to solve the 'why' problem and now you know.

Mark wanted to say more but everything went dark.

"Mark, wake up. Come on, please wake up," Clarissa's voice seemed far away.

He opened his eyes. He was in the hall outside the server room, Clarissa was kneeling next to him.

"What happened?" He choked out.

"You must have got hypothermia in the server room and passed out," she said.

He was tightly wrapped in his coat as well as the sweater that Clarissa had been wearing.

"How long?" He asked.

"I don't know, after you didn't come back I came up to check on you and you were slumped on the floor. Maybe half an hour," she offered.

"I think I'm fine," he said trying to stand. She pushed him back down.

"Just rest a bit please, I think you should see the doctor," she said.

"As much as I enjoy an attractive lady holding me down, I'm fine really," he stood.

"Please just see the doctor," she said.

"I'll go after I check on some stuff, I promise. Now let's get back to work," he said.

He wanted to change the parameters of the dark matter simulation. Change it to a large mass of dark matter located just on the edge of the solar system and locked in orbit with Earth. He wanted to determine if his dream had been a dream. He felt the rush of inspiration for the first time in years.

It was unsettling but he was rational. He knew that it was a dream, there was no other logical explanation. Alien beings harvesting planets was beyond fantastical, that was entering the realm of fiction. At this point though he was willing to test any theory.

He was lucky that it was so easy to dissuade Clarissa from dragging him to the doctor. He just had to make sure that he didn't stumble on the way back to the lab or she would carry him to the small room that passed for a hospital. She was strong enough to do it too, the benefit of being part of the maintenance team on a dwelling was that it made you physically impressive.

He made it back to his console and started entering the data. He head felt fuzzy, everything a little distant, but he was able to focus enough to get the parameters entered for his new simulation. The one

he would call the 'alien' simulation. With that done it was time to call it a day. Clarissa still had four hours of maintenance work to do but his age got him a pass on that. It was one of the few things he enjoyed about being old.

He needed to get home quick though, it felt like he was going to collapse. He thought about going to the doctor after all but decided it would be best to go home and sleep. Clearly he was suffering from hypothermia, too much time in the cold. He had to remember that he was too old for this kind of stuff, spending all that time in the sub zero temperatures of the server room with only a jacket for warmth.

Mark collapsed into bed and slept dreamless until his computer alarm woke him.

0600 Old time, Dwelling number 11, Dr. Mark Brown, scheduled wake alarm.

He sprung out of bed, startled by the alarm, he hadn't needed it for years now. His body just automatically woke up at around five in the morning. He had slept far too long, almost twelve hours, and was starving.

As he set his feet on the floor memories of the day before assaulted him. The weird dream in the hypothermic state he had entered. The aliens, the simulation he had left running. He decided to skip breakfast and rush to the lab to check on his new parameters, see if those made sense, see if he had produced a result finally.

As he entered the lab Clarissa assaulted him, "we are connected," she nearly shouted.

He stared at her with an idiotic half grin. He didn't know what she was talking about.

"To dwelling thirteen," she laughed.

"Oh right. That's excellent, any new data?" He asked trying to match her enthusiasm. He really just wanted to get to work, to check on the simulation.

"Loads, it's going to take weeks to sort through, and there's all these new people. It's amazing," she was practically dancing.

"Well best get to work then," he said sitting down at his station. Clarissa skipped away, she was too lost in happiness to notice that he really didn't seem to care. Mark opened up the alien simulation.

There, in front of him, he had a result. It made sense. A large mass aimed directly at Earth. It had changed one of his parameters though. The mass wasn't on the edge of the solar system, it was shadowing the moon, like a tugboat pulling the planet further and further from the sun. That was why it had been so slow at first, as momentum generated they began to speed up. That was also why the orbits of the other planets had been so minimally affected.

The aliens were sitting right beside the Earth, towing them all to destruction. That was insanity though, he was basing all this on a dream he had had in a hypothermic blackout. It was the only simulation that worked though and it didn't posit much.

There was no way humans could have created enough mass to displace the earth, even if it was dark matter. No weapons system was powerful enough to do this. There was no evidence of light bending that would signify black holes. This made sense and it really was the simplest solution. Adding complex alien life forms was not that far fetched, they had to assume that other life existed, it was a big universe and being alone out here was the more improbable situation.

Mark just stared at his screen, in awe of all that it implied. The ship would be cloaked, these beings had technology beyond their understanding. The theory worked, but there was no way to prove it.

His simulation would not be enough evidence, he needed some kind of observation. There was no way he could come up with a way to do that though. He needed help, he needed another mind in on this.

Clarissa wouldn't be much help, her expertise lay in other fields. There was actually no one else in the dwelling that he could look to for help with something like this. He was the expert, he trained the

other scientists in this stuff, and they were all bored of it, approached it like a work project. It's hard to get young people enthusiastic about an experiment with no results for fifty years.

His only hope lie in dwelling thirteen. He had a colleague there although he hadn't communicated with him in close to a year. They had lost a lot of communication ability and the limited comms were reserved for vital work only. He needed to find Dr.Singer, needed to show him this data and get a second opinion. He needed to reassure himself of his own sanity.

"Do we have access to dwelling thirteen?" He asked Clarissa.

"Right now it's only leaders and vital personnel, they said a week before open access. They want to make sure everything will be compatible and run smooth."

"Makes sense," Mark walked out of the lab. He had to talk to the director, he needed access sooner rather than later.

The director's office was nestled in a dead end hall a few minutes walk away. Mark tried to think of what he would tell the director when he got there, he needed to make it so that he didn't sound like a crazy old man rambling about aliens.

He entered the office with a knock. The director, Stephen, was sitting at his desk. He looked frazzled, the merger was going to be stressful for the first little bit. It was like integrating two countries.

"Can I help you Mark," he said without looking up from his work. Stephen was younger than Mark but still old enough. He was born on the surface but had been brought to the dwelling as an infant. He had no memories of the surface world, for all intents he was dwelling born.

"I think I've made a breakthrough in my research and I want to discuss it with my colleague in dwelling thirteen, Dr.Singer," Mark dove right in. He hoped that because Stephen was so busy he wouldn't question the breakthrough too much.

Stephen stopped what he was doing and looked up. Mark didn't like his chances now, every thing he had thought of to say about his discovery made him sound like he was off his rocker.

"What kind of breakthrough?" Stephen asked.

"I think I know why we left orbit," Mark tried to sound confident.

"Care to elaborate?" Stephen seemed genuinely interested. He was the director of the science facility and an accomplished scientist in his field of crop engineering.

"It may sound a little ridiculous, but we are being towed," Mark dove into it. There was no way to sidestep this.

"Towed? By what?" Stephen's interest was starting to turn to skepticism. He was wondering if the old man was finally starting to lose it.

"Well sir," he paused trying to think of another way to say it.

"Yes," Stephen said after the pause had turned to silence.

"Aliens," Mark watched Stephen's face work from surprise, to fear and back to a calm neutral.

"Aliens?" He asked, his voice as level as he could manage. The old guy really had lost it.

"Well sir. It's complicated but yes. It's the only thing I have been able to come up with that works. Aliens are not that far fetched a solution," Mark said.

"Sure they aren't. They are a lazy solution. Listen Mark, I like you, you've done a lot down here, but maybe it's time to pass the torch," Stephen said. If Mark had been wasting time on useless Alien research then he was worthless down here. The old man had to just go to his room and wait to die like all the other people did when they were no longer able to contribute.

"I have evidence though," Mark said.

"What evidence?" Stephen asked.

Mark almost spoke about the dream. He was on the verge of trying to pass that as scientific evidence. He stopped himself.

"That's why I need Dr.Singer. I'm not sure yet and I need some help from someone else who specializes in this," Mark said.

Stephen looked him over. The man was convinced. He had to admit that Aliens were a possibility. What had happened to the planet was already thought to be impossible, why not have an impossible solution for an impossible problem? Aliens had been proposed before, but it was always passed over, a ship that could move a planet would be massive and surely they wouldn't miss it. He needed to consult with the heads of the two dwellings. The tunnel connecting them was long and trips costly at this point, it was hard to get authorization to move people through this brand new connection.

"Let me think okay? I'll have an answer for you by the end of the day," Stephen said.

"That's all I ask," Mark said. He was disappointed in the answer but it was really more than he had hoped for.

Stephen watched Mark leave the room. He couldn't believe he was doing this but he picked up the phone and dialed the extension for the Scientific director of thirteen. The basic cables had already been laid and communications were up between the two dwellings. He understood why Mark wanted a face to face meeting with Dr.Singer though. For something like this it would be a lot easier to digest if delivered in person.

The other director picked up and Stephen explained what Mark had proposed. If they were both on board then they could approach the heads of each dwelling for a permission to transport Dr. Singer to Mark's lab.

"I'm sorry to hear that," the other director said.

"Why?" Stephen asked.

"Dr.Singer had a similar theory a few months ago. He wouldn't stop raving about it, said he had been contacted in dreams. We let him go from the science wing, but he kept going on, threatening people and trying to break into the labs. Old man must have had a serious case of dementia. Shame really, he seemed fine until then."

"Where is he now?" Stephen asked.

"We had to liquidate him I'm afraid. He was costing resources to maintain and our dwelling has been having efficiency problems as you know. You guys are really spoiled over there in eleven."

"I know," Stephen had heard of the problems with thirteen even before they had been connected. Most of the dwellings weren't perfect, in fact eleven was probably on the top in terms of efficiency and its self sustaining methods. That was why they all wanted to connect. Humanity couldn't survive if only one dwelling made it.

"Regardless, you can't say you actually believe what Mark is telling you?"

Stephen wasn't sure. He wanted to believe Mark, but it was an insane idea. He had hoped that having someone else look over his work would convince him he was wrong. A part of him wanted to believe he was right though.

"No. I was hoping to dissuade him. It's a shame to lose a good scientist," Stephen said.

"Well new blood is always good in my opinion."

After some general discussion on the merging of the two labs Stephen hung up. It was time for Mark to retire. They at least wouldn't have to liquidate him, not over here.

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Mark was ready to go home when Stephen entered the lab. He had been worried that Stephen wouldn't be getting back to him today and had been planning for another way to get over to thirteen.

"Can I speak with you doctor," Stephen said looking at Mark. Clarissa looked up from her work but said nothing. Mark walked over hoping for good news despite Stephen's stern tone.

"Outside please," Stephen said.

Mark followed him out to the empty hall.

"I spoke with my colleague and he said that Dr.Singer had the same idea as you."

"That's great," Mark started but Stephen put up his hand.

"Dr.Singer went crazy with the idea. He was fired. I need to know Mark, how committed to this are you?" Stephen said.

Mark didn't know what to say. Maybe the Aliens had contacted him because Dr.Singer wasn't believed. Why would they want someone to spread the message though? There was too much to process here. He wanted to be believed but that didn't seem like it was going to happen.

"I have to say it's the only thing that I've found that makes sense. From a scientific standpoint I have to stand my ground here," he knew what he was doing was suicide for his career, that it would kill his idea but no one believed him anyway.

"Then I have to let you go. I think it's for the best, for your health. You need to rest. I heard you collapsed in the server room yesterday."

"Sir. I'm sorry but I really want to explore this idea further," Mark said.

"I can't permit that. It's a waste of resources that could be used pursuing other avenues."

Mark could tell he had no choice here. He let himself be escorted back to the lab to grab his things. Clarissa looked at him with concern but said nothing. She was well conditioned to the hierarchy of the dwelling.

As Mark walked away with his small box of items Stephen called after him.

"If you ever need help, feel free to call me. I really am sorry," It sounded like he meant it, that helped a little. Mark was hurt though.

He slumped into his desk chair. His home computer wasn't powerful enough to run the simulations. He had no more choices, it was all over. He fell into bed embracing a depressed sleep.

He awoke to men in white suits and surgical masks. He was strapped to a hospital bed, his arms stretched out at his sides. He had no idea how he got here.

"Oh you're awake," the doctor at his head said.

"What's going on?" Mark asked.

"I'm afraid you're being liquidated, standard procedure, however you weren't supposed to wake up. The sedative we injected you with was supposed to keep you under until we could perform the procedure. Going to be some trial and error getting the doses right."

"Liquidated? Why?" He asked, fear engulfing him.

"Good night Dr.Brown," the doctor stuck a syringe in his neck and it all went black.

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Stephen sat at his desk staring in shock at his screen. They had liquidated Mark, he was having trouble processing it. After he updated Mark's personnel file they had taken him. He felt like he had just killed a man. A knock at the door brings him out of his stupor.

"Come in," he says trying to sound normal.

A man looking official steps into the room and silently closes the door behind him.

"Can I help you?" Stephen has never seen the man before, maybe someone from thirteen?

"I'm sure you've heard about Dr.Brown?" The man asks.

"Of course I have, who are you?" Stephen asks getting angry.

"We have to conserve resources, I'm sure you understand," the man says.

"You didn't have to kill him. We are fine, we let people retire all the time, just because dwelling thirteen is attached doesn't mean we have to change who we are," Stephen almost yells.

"Please calm down. Things are different now. Dr.Brown was insane. I hope you understand that?"

Stephen took a minute to compose himself, something about the man's tone told him he needed to watch where he stepped.

"He was quirky," Stephen said.

"His alien theory was insane. I'm sure a scientist like yourself could determine that?"

“How do you know about his theory?” Stephen asked. There had been nothing public about it. The only way people could know would be if they had accessed Mark’s computer.

“You’re getting close to the retirement age aren’t you Stephen?” The man asked.

Stephen stared at him, he didn’t know what else to say, he didn’t know how to respond to that.

“I hope you have an enjoyable retirement when that day comes. Have a good day,” the man turned and left, slipping out the door like a shadow.

Stephen turned to his computer and deleted Mark’s file. He had been reviewing the alien simulation. After it was deleted he made sure to take it off the network drive as well. Down here one needed to do what they had to do to survive.

## No Such Thing as a Painless Death

I don't have a lot of time left. Not here at least. I've spent the last few months searching for a way to die, a way that won't hurt too much and preferably a way that will look like an accident. Guns are impossible to get, poisoning is too painful and has way too much room for complication.

I think I have found it though, an ancient method, not painless but down here you get used to working with compromise. I'll have to hang myself. It's elegant, pretty quick and from what I've heard from survivors those last few moments are quite peaceful. It won't look like an accident but at this point I think that's impossible and I'd prefer the quick and mostly painless death.

I fought so hard to get here and now I'm trying so hard to leave. Had I known what it would be like I don't think I would have come down here. I wouldn't have pestered the governors to value my art.

It's called Dwelling Depression something so common that they have a name for it. I learned from a friend in the medical clinic that they actually anticipate a 5 percent suicide rate for the first twenty years as the surface born settle in. Being cut off from the world and set adrift in space would have that effect and they tried their best to treat it but in the end it wasn't worth the resources.

It starts out as a general sense of unease, a sense of something unnatural. This is normal, anyone in the same situation would feel like that, you are miles underground, forced down here by the planet escaping its orbit. The difference is that you can't settle in, can't adjust to the routine, can't adjust to the loss of freedom.

For the more civilian types among us the transition to dwelling life was difficult. It's highly regimented and controlled, free time is limited and even if you did have a night off there wasn't much to do. That was my job.

I was chosen as a cultural commodity. I was chosen for my potential as a writer, the problem was I didn't have much potential. I knew a few people on the selection board for the dwelling, I lied my way in. My writing was awful, on the surface I had written a few books but they fizzled on the market.

I hadn't even been published, I put the books out there myself at my own expense. I had managed to tell myself the lie that I actually had talent, that I actually had unique ideas, that people would actually pay to read my work. Even as I was being chosen those lies were starting to break through the shell of my mind.

Once I got down here it only became more obvious. The only reading material was electronic, paper books being too bulky. My existing books were added to the database but no one even bothered to look at them.

Ten years in I have only published two more books, each worse than the other. I thought getting selected for here would help me reach an audience, nothing like being one of the few surviving authors. The only problem was that I wasn't an author, that was just the lie I told myself.

Eventually the board figured out I was crap, a conclusion I reached before them. The blow still hurt when it came, I was assigned full work duty, no more half day writing time. Only three or four people had actually read my books and they all hated them. I was set adrift in the dwelling, another liar exposed and sentenced to menial labour.

I actually enjoyed writing, I might not have been good at it but I enjoyed it. I still try to write every now and then, but the words don't come any more. There's no point when no one reads those words, there's no way to share a story if no one can read it. I had proof I was garbage at the one thing I had tried so hard to be good at, I could stop trying.

My whole life I hadn't been good at anything. I tried, I tried harder than most but even my best efforts led only to failure. Eventually I convinced myself that trying hard was for losers and sell outs. That I didn't need to be good at school or my career or sports or anything. That trying hard at those things was for the sheep and I was better than that. It was how I coped with failure on top of failure.

I had clung to the belief that I was a good writer, that I just hadn't been discovered. I didn't think that the reason I hadn't been discovered was because the few people that read my work hated it. It was a lot easier to lie to myself about my writing though so I kept at it.

Coming down here crushed that out of me. I could no longer tell myself the lie, I had to live with the fact that I had cheated my way in here and left someone with talent to die in my stead. I was a coward and used my writing to escape instead of face the death I deserved. The only thing I had been good at was lying.

Even now I was being a coward, but I couldn't live with myself. The pain of my final failure had become too much. Two years after being disgraced I couldn't take it any more. The depression was more than the failure though, it was this place. On the surface I could live with failing, it hurt but there were always other avenues to try, other lies to tell myself. Down here there was nothing.

The Dwelling Depression progresses from a general sense of unease and into a feeling of utter terror. Reality hits and you realize that this is your life now, that becomes too much. People would have total breakdowns, try to escape, beg to be released back to the surface. They couldn't though, the doors were sealed, coded to only open should the surface temperature rise above freezing for more than three months. Even then there were a set of other factors that had to be met.

These people, the ones who snapped, were either medicated to oblivion or they killed themselves. This was the first wave and it happened in stages, even now people would snap. Every mind is different, every mind processes things on a different time scale. This is my version of the depression I guess, but I don't want it to be.

Down here even your death is taken from you. My suicide will be said to be due to Dwelling Depression not because I was a total failure, not because I hated myself. That's why I want it to look like an accident, at least then I can own it. Coming up with a death that is painless and looks like an accident is impossible, at least for me, I'm not even creative enough to kill myself properly.

I miss the sky, I wish I could see it one last time. I miss the wind, I miss it all, but I'm not killing myself because of that. If this note is anything like the rest of my writing no one will read it, they will say that I was depressed because of the dwelling, that I couldn't handle it, but that's not why.

I can live like this. It has its charms, they didn't take my apartment from me which was nice. It's cozy, quiet and comfortable. It's also more private than the general quarters where people have a limited space, like a cubicle with a mattress. That was where the menial workers and support people were put. The rest of us, the specialists, were given small apartments. By all rights I should have been moved to general quarters, but they couldn't be bothered. I wasn't worth the effort, moving someone caused problems. I wouldn't have fought it, my ill gotten apartment was just another source of disappointment for me, but since I had it I did enjoy it.

It allowed me to write, which was saying something. Writing out in the bedlam of general quarters would have been hell. That was another allusion I gave myself, true writers can write in any condition, but I liked to have silence and a perfect set-up. It was just all part of the act I was performing for myself I guess.

Ten years down here and nothing. I'm still alone, still have no one. There's something else I hate myself for. I'm terrible at socializing, terrible at making friends and meeting women. Even with the forced closeness of this place I still find myself alone. I either always say the wrong thing or I sabotage a relationship before it develops.

I met a woman in the first months down here. Her name was Clara. Something about her caught my eye. She was different, she seemed like me, awkward and lost. I think I only managed to get the

courage to talk to her once, then I chickened out. She seemed interested but I ignored her out of fear, out of embarrassment out of the knowledge that I would screw it up.

After that I learned to accept it, accept being alone down here. I tried to keep writing to distract myself, to prove my value to myself, but I just couldn't come up with anything good. I couldn't come up with anything that would be relatable to those who were born down here. I tried to write for the next generation but it didn't work.

I'm scared that writing and literature are going to die out down here. That humanity will begin the slow descent back to the dark ages. Living like this would begin to have an effect on the species, it had to. There was no way we could stay normal in this kind of environment, with this kind of living space.

Guess it doesn't matter though, I won't be here to see it, I won't know. Would have been nice to know why this all turned out this way, why it all fell apart. It was never really together for me though, no way it could have fallen apart. I would have ended the same way had this never happened. It might have taken me longer to realize how much of a failure I really am but I would have realized it soon enough.

At least this way I don't have to waste any more words I don't have to waste more of people's time. Coming down here saved me from deluding myself for the rest of my life. Coming down here forced me to realize that I'm a failure, forced me to realize that I'm good at nothing and forced me to realize that I am a waste of resources.

I was a waste on the surface, down here it's more noticeable. The last piece of the planet I'll waste is the rope. A shame, but rope's not needed so much down here. I doubt my body will be found for a while, maybe a week. No one really cares about me enough to come by.

My foreman will probably be the one that checks on me, I'm so shitty at my job he'll be glad I'm gone and want to make sure I won't be coming back. I hope I don't stink too much, he's a nice enough guy and I wouldn't want him to be bothered by that.

My body will be recycled, everything is recycled down here. Right now it's all manual, but they are working on a way to automate it all. In twenty years I might have been able to just walk to a death center and declare my wish to die to the computer running it. Sadly, it's all still manual down here.

The knots easy enough to tie. It feels good to finally do something positive for the world, even though it might be small. I'll leave this posted here, maybe it will become my first widely read piece. Down here there is no such thing as a painless death.

### The Final Dwelling

Running, moving down narrow corridors into the massive chambers. They are after him but he had a head start and knows where the entrance tunnel is. He just has to make sure that they don't see him open it.

The loot is stashed in his pack, his equipment loaded and ready to go if they get the jump on him. He rounds another corner and reached the hole. Gasping for breath he enters the complex number sequence from muscle memory. The keypad is hidden, designed to look like rock, easy to pass and only visible as a keypad if looked at closely.

He can hear them behind him, the dim light he carries would give him away were they not blind. There was no way to stop the noise he made though, they could hear heart beats their ears had become so sensitive.

The small grate slides open and he struggles through. There is a thirty second window, after which it will close regardless if there is a person under it or not. A safety feature in case a breach did happen it would be limited. After closing it would lock for thirty two hours, enough time to change the code and reinforce the position if a breach was suspected.

None of the tribes even knew they existed though, the security measures were more a headache to the scavengers than anything else, Krilgra thought as he imagined his leg getting sliced off in the slamming of the grate. Despite all that trouble he was grateful when he heard it close behind him. He never felt safe unless he was in the home place.

He slid uncomfortably through the tunnels until he could stand again. The tribe he had just escaped, the Leapers as they were called, would think he was a ghost. All the tribes thought they were ghosts, memories of the past. The Leapers had enough intelligence left to share stories, they still had a language. Most of the other tribes were pure animal and tribe was not the right term for them any more.

All of the tribes were beyond reason though, only the human tribe, his tribe, was still worthy of the planet. That was they they had to scavenge, they had to keep themselves alive.

Krilgra starts the long walk back to the center, his pack heavy with supplies. This haul had been good, but that was becoming more and more rare. The safe circle near the complex was picked clean, the outer rings were where he scavenged but it was dangerous work and a lot of what he could see was available was too unsafe to reach.

The tribes in the outer ring were more animal than human, the systems in those areas had started shutting down. The lack of automation led to the environment itself shifting and becoming hostile. Areas that were either too hot or too cold, areas where you would suffocate if you stood too long, areas where the excessive tunneling had revealed the dangerous core below.

Scavenger hauls were drying up and even with the increase in scavengers they were still barely staying afloat. There was a time when the efficiency of the complex was near perfect but that was long gone. They had to scavenge parts and materials to keep the automations running, to keep themselves alive.

After another hour of winding through tunnels he reached the main complex. He passed through the side gate and entered the massive underground city, the last bastion of humanity. The Final Dwelling was in a huge cavern, carved and made larger as needed over time. It had multiple tunnels growing out of it like roots, it looked like an onion deep underground, it's roots reaching further and further to keep it alive.

The tunnels that went down were attempts at mining, attempts to get access to fuel and minerals, but they were so deep there was not much further they could dig. The mantle provided heat and energy, there was also a frozen aquifer above them that was mined by bots for water. Their food consisted of a fungus that required no light to grow, this was also fed to the meagre livestock and insects that they used for protein.

The last artificial lights were kept in the citadel for use by the elders. All the other humans had evolved near perfect vision, they could see perfectly with the dim biolights that they carried. Small jars of glowing fungus that they fed and watered. Their light was given to them at puberty and they cared for it like it was another family member. To let your light die was a shameful act, one that would lead to exile depending on the circumstances. The biolights were hard to grow and cost a lot of resources. They were often passed down for generations.

Krilgra's light was at a particular risk as he was a scavenger. The jar was a durable plastic but keeping the light alive on long trips to the outer rings could be difficult. He had taken a small amount of the fungus out of the jar and was growing a second light. It was difficult but a common practise among scavengers. If his main light died he could use the back up, this was considered acceptable as the backup originated from the original. Other reasons for multiple lights were forbidden. No one could have more light than anyone else, that was reserved for the Elders.

All the tunnels into The Final Dwelling were guarded and trapped. Even the mines had security gates, there were instances of a mine tunnel being burrowed into by one of the tribes, or the animals that had evolved down here. Their entire dwelling was shielded in a metal skin, the iron harvested from the mantle before the mining bots burnt out. This meant that safe expansion was impossible and any colonies created outside the dwelling were illegal.

Krilgra had heard of exile colonies though, people that had been kicked from the dwelling for transgressions against the elders banded together in small caverns along the inner ring. He hadn't come across any before but he only passed through the inner ring on his way to the outer ring. It was too barren to be bothered exploring. He wondered how the exiles managed to live, if they were becoming part of the subhuman species that stalked the tunnels.

He made his way to the processing station to deposit his salvage. It was a good haul for the times, not as good as a haul from only a year prior, but still a good haul. The man at the counter was gruff, a bearded veteran scavenger, Krilgra recognized him.

"Winsome, how goes the hauls?" He asked.

"They go. Not half of what I could have hauled, but better than naught," he said.

Winsome had started working the collection counter after losing his leg to a tribe. Slicers they were called for good reason. Their mouths had changed into near insectile mandibles, no one really knew why, but they dismembered their victims. Winsome had escaped and managed to crawl back home. It took him three days, he was a legend among the scavengers. He should be dead, no one could figure out how he survived.

"What can this get me?" Krilgra asked.

Winsome looks over the haul. It's the best he's seen all day, not enough, but the best he's seen.

"twenty two," he says.

Krilgra is taken aback. With the work he put into this he was hoping for at least forty.

"That it?" He asks indignant.

"Times is tight on both ends. Scavs have hard times finding but everyone else has a hard time buying. Low prices are the only way to sell and I still got to eat too."

Krilgra debates taking his haul across the city to another collector. There are only four that he trusts, Winsome's stand usually pays the highest, him being an ex scav. He does some quick mental math, twenty two means he can eat for three weeks, he had been hoping for a nice six week vacation

with his new girl, but three was good. He didn't want to risk trekking over the Dwelling only to be offered a worse price and have to trek back here.

"Fine, but I'm not happy," he says.

"Ain't nobody happy Krilgra," Winsome says.

He takes the pile of silver and heads for his small dwelling. He is lucky, having his own space in here. There were only a few people that had that level of privilege as space was at a premium. The scavs, the prots and of course the Elders were the only ones with private dwellings. The elders lived in their own entirely secluded section of the Dwelling though. The prots, people in charge of maintaining order down here, were often the second class with the scavs falling into the third class. Every one else lived in a communal dwelling under the Elders.

Scavs were an essential part to life down here and took huge risks upon themselves to keep the supplies flowing. They were paid well but people still appreciated their work, the populace loved and revered scavs, they were heroes. The prots were generally reviled as they were too heavy handed and people couldn't see the necessity of that. Krilgra knew that they were as essential as he was down here, so he tried to respect them.

His dwelling was small, compact, but it was his own. Best of all it was on the outer edge of the Final dwelling, far from the Citadel and the Elders. Far from the crowds of the people living under them. Most people revered the Elders, he was one of the few that questioned them. That thought alone was grounds for exile though so he kept it to himself.

He bought some food and water on his way back. He had been gone for a few weeks and the shops he frequented were happy to see him. He was one of the larger spenders in his area of the Dwelling. Scavs were not known to be miserly, he liked to share and help out where he could.

That was something he was proud of, his little act of defiance. He spread his wealth, the Elders only collected it and handed down edicts. They gave people something to look to though, a benevolent authority, people who claimed to be pure human. They were nearly revered as gods, and only came down from their tower a few times a year.

Scavs, if they survived long enough to retire, were held in a high esteem and once he could no longer work he would be cared for, like the few elderly scavs before him. That was the key though, scavs were essentially dead men walking. The ones that retired due to age were rare enough to be in the single digits. Most got out when they had saved enough, others were taken out like Winsome, injured and forced to work somewhere else.

His plan was to work this position until he couldn't any more, until he was injured or aged out. He wanted to be a benefit to his fellows down here. He had always wanted to help and this was the only way he could manage it.

His girl was in his dwelling already. She lived in the common space but he had let her crash at his place while he was out. He felt bad for her, but she was accustomed to living in the common.

"Welcome back," Devindra said. She was lying on the bed already, looking at him with those hungry eyes of hers.

He placed his light beside the back up light which was beside her light on the little shelf in the room. He made a mental note that the backup needed some nutrients and water before joining her on the bed.

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"What's it like out there?" She asked. He was up and about, unpacking and taking care of the few bits of equipment that needed maintenance. Every person he got close to eventually asked this question. He didn't mind though, it was something that he could understand, to be curious was to be human.

"Dark, even with the light it always feels dark. There's a smell to it too, it smells dead. It smells sterile. It's quiet, so quiet that you start to hear things that aren't there. My first time out there alone I

thought I had gone mad," he talks while he works. His knife needs to be sharpened and he sets to the work.

She says nothing, staring at the ceiling, he focuses on fixing up his gear. He likes getting it out of the way so that he can enjoy his time back with no distraction. It was something his mentor had taught him. Pietre had been one of the older scav and Krilgra had been lucky for him to take him on as an apprentice.

While anyone could become a scav it was generally not recommended to strap on a pack and venture out of the Dwelling. Most everyone that did that never came back. If you wanted to live you found a mentor. They would teach you where to find good salvage, where to avoid and how to stay alive.

Not all mentors were equal and the better ones could pick their apprentices, the fact that Pietre had picked him meant that Krilgra had shown promise from the start. Those had been tough times, but he learned a lot and was becoming one of the better scav down here. He wasn't quite experienced enough to take on his own apprentice but he was getting there.

He had settled in to sleep after sharing dinner with Devindra when the alarm slammed him awake like a punch in the head. At first he didn't know where he was, the disorientation of being back always took a while to overcome.

He rolled out of bed and it took him a second to realize that the alarm was the Dwelling alarm, the one used to signal important announcements and meetings. The Elders would be descending from the Citadel to address the population. He had only slept a few hours, attendance wasn't mandatory but it was frowned upon to not show up to these meetings. As someone who was actually noticeable in society Krilgra had to be there, people would note his absence and it was never good to raise suspicion with the Elders.

He was pretty sure they had a file on him already. All the scav were watched by the prots and the elders. They were an independent bunch, comfortable in their necessity, walking the fine line between insider and outsider. It was one of the benefits of being a scav, it was what had drawn him to the job. He liked being able to help, but he also valued his independence.

This independence was what made them frightening to the elders, and why they had given the command to watch the scav to the prots. It was also why despite the fact the he was able to consider not going to the meeting he was also one of the few people who would be most required at it. Devindra couldn't even contemplate not going, she was too bred into the system of the Dwelling. She was too far inside it.

These meetings were called at any time, inevitably people on the sleep hours would be woken and those on relaxation hours would be interrupted. Those working would get some free time off though, the Elders tried to rotate their meetings so that if someone was woken one time they would get to miss work the next. People were fine with this as the meetings were not common enough to become a burden and they generally stuck to the same schedule.

Krilgra supposed he had three weeks of rest ahead of him, he could handle a meeting, better to get it over with now. He walked Devindra to the meeting and she found her friends. He went and grouped with the other mid level scav. This wasn't a rule but more a tradition, people grouped with their fellow members of society at the meetings.

The Dwelling was much too large for every one to group in one place, only those close to the main stage managed to actually physically see the elders. Everyone else grouped around the screens closest to their area. This was where Krilgra and Devindra were, being on the outer edge of the dwelling he wasn't going to fight to the main stage.

The Eldar on screen was hunched, his skin blue, coated in wrinkles, blind and held up by two assistants at the podium. He was waiting for everyone to gather, this would take a few minutes due to the mass of the population. Krilgra looked on with disgust, the Elders were a gross representation of

humanity. Blind in darkness and even in the light offered by the plants. They prided themselves on the fact they still needed electric light to see, Krilgra only saw that as a weakness.

He didn't know the full story, only that they had segregated themselves centuries ago, people in the upper class. He knew that they looked like the old humans, that they were pure, he just thought they were inbred. Their skin was weak, their eyes tiny, their ears uselessly small. They had heads of hair that were dark and looked like dark shadows of people.

They were so different, so far in the minority he constantly questioned why they had to be subservient to these people. They claimed to be pure human, but he saw only weak monsters. The people down here, these were the pure people. The problem was that they were scared and the Elders offered a solution to the fear, the Elders offered organization and safety. The Elders took the responsibility of survival away from the individual.

"My fellow humans," he started his speech, the murmuring in the crowd was cut off near instantly.

"We are at a crossroads for our great bastion of humanity. I will not dance around what we face. The automation is near death. The great computer cannot be relied upon to sustain us, without repairs we will all be at the mercy of the Tribes and the ground we live in."

Krilgra didn't like where this seemed to be heading. The great computer was responsible for all the life support systems in the Final Dwelling. Without it they would all slowly die, there were no usable manual back ups, Those had failed before the automated systems and they had never been seen to be worth repairing. With limited resources it made more sense to focus on keeping the automated systems running than fixing the manual ones.

"That is why I am calling all willing and able people to participate in a great scavenging. We must repair the computer, for that we need parts. Our current scavengers have not found the parts we need. All willing and able participants will be rewarded greatly if they locate the part we need. Your local representative will issue a booklet with more information."

Here he broke into a fit of coughing and hacking. He looked like he was about to collapse. The prots that had been propping him up moved to assist him but he waved them off.

"This is a critical time. We cannot afford to fail. We are the last of humanity. I trust you will all assist in any way possible."

At this he hobbled off the stage. Krilgra looked to the other scavs, they had the same look on their faces. A mix of frustration, anger and even fear. His vacation looked like it was over.

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He rushed out of the Dwelling as fast as he could. Devindra understood, she actually wanted to go out but was too frightened, he had told her too much. She had never been cut out for scavenging, she was too comfortable in her life. Had she wanted to come he would have talked her out of it, it would have been a death sentence.

Krilgra and the other experienced scavs had wanted to get out of there before the inevitable rush of wannabe scavs came to them asking for help and training. They also wanted to leave before the rush stirred the tribes up and turned the inner ring into a blood bath. There were going to be a lot of deaths and a lot of blood in the next few weeks and he wanted out before that.

He needed to get to the outer ring before the few stragglers of this new rush reached it. This was a stupid plan by the elders, they should have just come to the scavs and asked them to find this part directly. This method of pushing everyone out at once, this gold rush method, would only lead to death. If he had known about this he could have been looking out for the part on his last few missions.

It looked like a normal enough processor, only thicker and it was apparently much denser. There was speculation that it would be deep in the outer ring, in an old lab run by one of the ancient dwellings.

It has been developed in secret before the final automation had been done. They had finished the chip but there had been no need of it due to the automation that eventually stuck.

At least that was what the info papers had told him. The Elders claimed that they had only come across this information recently, that it had been the new information that spurred their action in this. He didn't believe it, he felt it was just a wild chase, maybe an effort to thin the population.

Here he was though, looking for this part. Risking his life out here, so a part of him must have believed what they were saying. He had blown his payment from the last expedition on supplies for this one. He was lucky, Winsome hadn't increased his prices like the other sellers were doing. Krilgra stocked up for a multi week trek. He wasn't planning on coming back unless he had the part. He didn't want to trek through the inner ring more than absolutely necessary with the death that would be going on there.

The tribes were already thinner than usual out here, drawn to the meat and killing that was happening behind him. The other experienced scavengers were out here with him, but they had all split up, no one wanting to be stepping on the toes of the others. They all had different methods and scavengers were a solitary bunch of people. Krilgra was no different, after being out here for weeks he longed to get back to the Dwelling but after being in the Dwelling for too long he longed to get back out.

He had been searching out here for a week already, moving closer and closer to this lab. The Elders only had an approximate location on it and this added another layer of complexity to this operation. It also added another layer of suspicion that this was all just a plan to kill off large numbers of the population.

He kept moving inward, noticing that the trend in this direction seemed to be uphill. There were pits and side tunnels but it all seemed to head higher. It was getting cooler the further up he moved. Without the systems that circulated the heat up here centuries ago, moving further from the mantle led to cooler and cooler temperatures. He had brought his gear for this though and it didn't bother him. The cold was nice.

Another week goes by and he passes his old landmark for distance from the Dwelling. His pack is already filling with supplies. He vowed to only pick up valuable supplies, but being this far out there is a plentiful store of valuable supplies. All the weight he loses by eating he is gaining back in supplies for the Dwelling.

By the fourth week his light is having trouble. The prolonged exposure to cold has started to take its toll. He tries to keep it warm with his body but that means he can't use it as a light source. His vision is near perfect but he still needs a source of light.

It's the coldest he has ever felt, but still he presses on. He noticed footprints the other day that seemed human. Probably another scavenger ahead of him but he has been on the look out for the past few sleep cycles. He could only imagine the tribes out here, something no one would have encountered before.

He is seeing promising signs though, signs that he's on the right path. He is in an old Dwelling, one with few new tunnels. It's as close to a preserved ancient Dwelling as he's ever seen. This would be where an untouched lab would lie and he is starting to feel excited, to feel that he's going the right way.

There are still footprints, and they don't look like they belong to a tribal. That is worrisome, he wants to be the one to find this. He has poured a lot into this trip, it had been tough to get here. The reward is something he couldn't care about, he would break even from this, maybe even make a profit from all the stuff he's been collecting. He still wants that part, he can't admit it to himself but he wants the glory of finding it.

It's been almost six weeks and he's running low on food, his light is starting to die. He has been frantically searching and has nothing to show for it. It is starting to look like he will have to admit defeat on this, just so he can avoid starvation.

He enters a room in the ancient Dwelling and that's when he finds the body. Another scav, one of the new up and comers. He thinks his name was Reggie but can't be sure. What's more concerning to him is the fact that the body shows no signs of being eaten. When scavs are killed by tribals they are killed for food. Reggie looks like his was stabbed a few times and left. This either means another scav killed him or that the tribe out here is more advanced than the animal ones around the Final Dwelling.

Either way he runs out of the room. Reggie was still warm, that meant the killers were near. Krilgra starts moving through the tunnels, alert to anything, keeping his light hidden as much as he can. The fear is starting to convince him that he was right in planning to turn back. As much as he wants that part he also wants to live. He is useless as a dead scav and he will be able to turn a good profit if he scavenges on his way back.

A noise in the distance, the clang of metal. He turns and starts going back, but back that way there is the shuffling of footsteps. He looks around, starting to become frantic, feeling the trap closing around him. That's when he looks up. Above him is a tunnel, a ladder bolted to the side. He manages to jump high enough to grab the bottom rung. A length of rope tied to his pack and held in his teeth allows him to reel the bag up behind him.

He climbs the ladder as quickly and silently as he can. It leads to a small ledge and a corridor. He hauls himself up and starts walking toward the door at the end of the corridor. Slowly he pries it open, trying to avoid making noise but knowing that's impossible. Looking back he can't see anything coming over the ledge, but is relieved when he gets the door open.

The room is small and this allows him to check it over quickly. There are more than enough computer parts to rebuild half the Dwelling systems and he shoves as much as he can fit into his bag. Then he opens the door on the other side of the room.

The room he enters is larger and the walls are lined with screens. On a table in the middle of the room lies a box. He opens it and all the fear of being followed evaporates. He has actually found what the Elders wanted. As much as he thought this was all an elaborate scam he is proven wrong.

Then the fear rushes back in as he hears the door scrape open in the room behind him. He bolts to the other door in the room, pries it open and starts sprinting down the hall. There is another ladder at the end and he climbs it as fast as he can. It ends in a small room with an entrance door and another door leading out. He closes the door he came in from behind him and opens the other door.

Instantly he is blinded, his eyes assaulted with light. He is blasted with cold air and frozen water. The air screams around him as he struggles to close the door. He shoves and feels he can't do it when another set of hands reaches past him and slams the door closed. Then he is embraced and pulled onto a knife.

The being behind him tells him it's okay, he can sleep now. The knife is pulled out and he is stabbed again. This time it's not so bad, this time he can almost accept it.

### Make or Break

He couldn't sleep, his mind was vibrating. It was uncomfortable but he felt good, there were so many ideas spinning in his head. He was going to make it, he was going to escape what he had been born into and actually move up, something nearly unheard of.

Being a scavenger was what most people did to move up, but that was a suckers bet, too much risk and too little reward. Ever since the great rush for the missing part a few years ago there were more Scavengers than people knew what to do with. The Dwelling was awash in parts from the old world, everyone wanted to be a hero Scavenger now. Cranston wanted something more than that, he would achieve something more than the average Dweller could.

Sleep would have to wait, even though it was his sleep cycle. Breaking the sleep cycle was forbidden for the miner class, they were required to be alert on the job. There was no way to monitor it though so he got up as quietly as he could to not wake his bunk mates. He snuck out to the main body of the Dwelling where the bustle of activity hit him like a wave.

They operated on a cycle and just because he was supposed to be sleeping didn't mean the rest of the Dwelling shut down. Some people were on their rest cycle, some people were working, everything was still running just as he had left it. His locker held the few possessions he could call his own. A few changes of clothes, some small games to play in downtime and his supply of silver. He grabbed that and started walking toward the trade district.

The Elders citadel looked down upon him, he would never reach that level, it was something passed through the blood. He could reach the mid ring of the dwelling though. This was where all the best houses were. Safer than the outer ring and not the inner ring which was a mass dorm under the Elders.

Reaching the mid ring would take time but he knew he could do it, there were so many ideas, so many things he could do. The problem was holding onto one long enough to make it work. This was that idea though, this was what would get him started. He was going to trade between the trade hubs in the Dwelling.

There were three hubs, they started out back when the Dwelling was established as humanity retreated from the monsters out in the tunnels. There were only four safe Dwellings in those times and they slowly drilled massive tunnels until they were connected in a huge dome of rock. A place so large that you couldn't see the top above the citadel, that the other side was often shrouded in mist and the pollution that seeped into the air despite the massive recovery system in place.

The hubs were the last sign that there had been distinct Dwellings, the citadel was the point the other three had drilled toward. It didn't interact with the other Dwellings on a one to one level and thus never developed a hub.

Cranston didn't know the history behind why there were three trade hubs, he only knew that there was money to be made trading between them. He had it all figured out, it came to him as he lay in bed trying and failing to sleep. He would check the prices at one hub and write them all down then he would rush to the furthest hub and write the prices down for things there.

If he found something selling for less at hub A than people were buying it for at hub B he would buy it, truck it over and sell it for the higher price. He would pocket the difference and slowly build up more capital, this would allow him to increase his profits more and more. He was going to be rich.

If only his head would stop buzzing, the constant assault of ideas was becoming tiresome, he needed to focus on this, he needed to make this idea work. His life seemed to be a mix of half baked ideas. For the last year he had tried everything and then given up halfway. Nothing could hold his

interest enough for him to see it through, but this idea was different, this one would make him rich and he would be able to stick to it.

He hadn't planned it more than the preliminary stage, he was thinking it all over as he made his way to the first hub. He needed to make sure that there were buyers at each hub too, otherwise he would be stuck sitting on inventory. He was going to do this right, he just needed to make sure he got as many details as possible from the hub before moving off.

Cranston knew he was getting close to the Makarr hub, the noise was picking up. The hubs weren't organized, they were a mess of stalls of varying sizes, swarming with traders buying and selling goods. The prices between stalls often varied enough that one could make money trading within the same hub. That was generally frowned upon by the traders at that hub though, they didn't like giving up profits like that and often ran off the internal traders.

The hubs were where Scavs sold their wares, they were where people sold small crafted things all the way up to the mining groups selling their ores to the industries. He was going to have to trade common resources and goods, it was the only way to make sure that he would have buyers and sellers in each hub.

He was starting to feel a little overwhelmed at the selection, the hub was busy, overflowing with people. He was here for a reason though, he started acting like it, he was going to own all these people soon enough. He was going to organize the trade in the Dwelling and make his riches off that.

Long ago, so the rumors went, there was no such thing as money or trade down here. People worked and survived and lived for one another. Humanity was sacred because it was humanity. That was all legend though, old religious myth. People needed to eat and in order to eat you needed to work and get paid. The rich were those lucky or smart enough to make it. That was what he was doing, he was smarter than the rest of them down here.

Pen clutched in his hand he moves as fast as he can between the stalls, checking the prices, jotting them down, trying to figure out the volumes that are moved through each stall every day.

He's not totally without a plan, he knows items that sell, daily goods that people want, addictive substances that they need. Life in the dwelling is the best it has ever been but it's still hard. People like to escape and those selling that escape are rarely without a customer.

He records it all then heads to the nearest rival hub. It takes hours to walk, but he spends a silver on one of the few electric power carts to take him there. These are expensive enough that it is usually only the upper classes using them, he tells himself that it's an investment, paying for this cab ride. Looking out the plexiglass window at the dwelling moving past him almost makes the cost easier to stomach.

The driver drops him off at the edge of the Dolmond hub. The crowds here are much larger than Makarr and he takes longer making his way through. Already it is looking promising though, he runs down the list and circles the best item. A perfect mix between profit margins and his ability to sell it. Thankfully it's also small, easy to carry.

Transportation was something he considered, if he is going to do this and work full time he will have no time to sleep. Paying for a ride back would kill his profits, but walking will take hours. He is already looking at being late to his shift. He was going to have to sacrifice his job if he pursued this.

Cranston knew he had to take the chance, that this risk could pay off or end him. The profit from this trade would be more than he made in three days in the mines. Re-investing that profit would only serve to add to it. He was going to have to take the plunge, it felt right, for the first time he felt like he was making the right choice.

He bought as much as his meagre pile of silver could get. The vendor gave him a strange look but sold him everything at the posted price. It was a special fertilizer that the rich used for their glow fungus. It made it brighter for short periods, they used it to show how much healthier their fungus was

compared to their friends. It was a convoluted way to display wealth as they all knew of the fertilizer, it was more about who could afford it.

Moving back to the Makarr hub takes the rest of his allotted sleep time. He is missing work today, the question becomes will he be able to keep missing work? Will this all pan out? For a flashing instant panic grips him. For an instant he feels like he is acting crazy, that this is madness, that he had made a huge mistake.

He pushes it down, forces himself to keep moving, and reaches the hub on legs that are nearly too tired to stand. He sells the fertilizer and after the vendor takes his cut Cranston is left with all his original silver plus a few extra. Three days pay worth for one sleep cycle worth of work, it's not bad.

He has enough energy for another run and looks around the Makarr market for something he could sell back at Dolmond. He finds another price difference worth exploiting and undertakes the long walk back.

By the time he crashes into bed he has nearly a month's worth of profits tucked away. He knows that his job in the mines is over, he has found his new calling.

He wakes up refreshed and walks to the mine. His boss is furious but Cranston doesn't even listen. He quits on the spot before going out to 'play the hubs' as he is starting to call it. He wants to check out Jinsom hub today and refresh his price list for the other two. A whole wake cycle free to trade could mean a massive profit for the day. His stomach is alive with excitement, he knows he's on his way.

After months of this he has enough for a new place, after a year on the old calendar he is one of the richest people in the Dwelling. The type of trading empire he built is now common, with everyone who can afford to participating. He facilitates the transactions and takes a percentage from the top for the convenience.

His empire has become so efficient that the goods are no longer transported between the hubs, it all happens on slips of paper. The trading in price differences has all but stopped due to the speed of his network. Now people are trading in values and the perceived future values of commodities in the Dwelling. He has built a whole new type of economy.

It's been nearly ten years since he ran between trade hubs and still he can't calm down. There are so many ways to make money in this new economy he has built. His mind is on fire with ideas and new ways to spend and make more money. He is now the richest person in the dwelling. The Elders have spoken with him and he can command an audience with them at a moment's notice.

He is the most powerful man in the Dwelling and they still don't let him into their citadel. It no longer matters though, he stopped paying the tax to the Eldars months ago and encouraged everyone to follow suit. He was building a new government in the Dwelling, the people were protected by his private army, the Elders served no purpose any more and they knew this. That was why they left him alone, only hoping to be left alone in return.

He was happy to do this, he had no need of those blue skinned blind old men. He had bigger plans. The Dwelling was going to expand, was going to push back the monsters that haunted the darkness outside their walls. He was going to lead this push.

There was no telling what they would find in the new world he planned on pushing them into. There was no telling the profits to be made in this new world. Scavengers would no longer be needed, he was going to take back what had been lost.

The campaign is brutal. The Dwelling is beginning to turn against him. His military is starting to crumble. The fight out there is a lot harder than he had planned, the Scavs had made it seem easy. His mistake was thinking that military might could beat back the creatures out there in their own environment.

He keeps pressing though, they have managed to take and hold ground. The Dwelling has almost doubled in size, people are richer than ever before. The war is costly in terms of lives but the profits are astounding. Every one that matters is still on his side, so he keeps pressing.

For the lower classes it's either join the army or the miners. This expansion has removed the Scavengers from the picture. They aren't needed any more, all that's needed is resources and trained fighters. He's got plenty of both.

The campaign is finally becoming a victory, turning into more of a colonization push instead of an actual war, when he gets the invite. The Elders are finally inviting him into the citadel. He will be the first Dweller born allowed into that place since it was created. The importance is not lost on him. as useless as the Elders are they still serve as a strong symbol.

He drives up to the guarded entrance and exits his vehicle. He has created a Dwelling where driving is the normal, not the luxury it was when he first started trying to make something of himself. This is improvement under him, a prime example of how much better life is with him in charge. He puffs himself up with this as he enters the citadel.

The Eldars place of living is huge, a small city hanging above the center of the Dwelling, even with all the expansion it still managed to remain in the geographical center of the Dwelling. It is nearly self sufficient, the people still supply them with food but that is all the need from the outside and even that is in small numbers as they grow most of what they need.

He is led to a large chamber. The light up here hurts his eyes but he tries not to show it. The Eldars view their need for light as something that puts them above the common Dweller. He doesn't want to give them the satisfaction of seeing him cringe at it.

"I'm going to jump right to it," the oldest one says. Cranston can't remember any of their names, is not even sure if they are the same Eldars he last saw years ago, they all look alike.

"You need to stop this war. Let the Dwelling remain at the size it is, it can grow no more."

"Why?" Cranston asks. If they jump right to the point he sees no need to dance around his answer.

"It serves no purpose to us if you are larger or smaller. Grow or shrink we will be fine. Since the taxes have stopped coming we have only become more self sufficient. We do have something you don't," the Elder answers.

"What?" Cranston is growing impatient. Minutes wasted here with these old men could be earning him money back at his office.

"Knowledge. Namely the knowledge of the limits of the Dwelling. You may have thought we served no purpose, which might have been true, we did lose our way. The Elders exist for one reason though, to control the size of the Dwelling."

"What happens if we grow too big?" Cranston asks, thinking this is all a play by them to regain some grip on the power they once held.

"Humanity dies. We alone remember the purpose of the Dwellings, these places built in delicate balance to preserve humanity. Falling too far out of balance, growing too large will only serve to drive humanity further back down," the leader says.

"Listen. The people down there, they might believe you, they might believe all this superstition and all these anti-growth lies, but do you really think I'm stupid enough to let this empire collapse because of some scared old men?" Cranston says.

"Do as you wish, we only offer a warning. It is all we can do now. We never anticipated one out of our power would grow so large. Please heed us though, for the sake of humanity be happy with what you have."

The men stood before Cranston could say anything more. They were gone from the room and he was being escorted back to his car. He would take a look at the point these men raised, but that was all he was willing to do. Stopping now was not only unthinkable, but impossible. The whole Dwelling was now based on continuous growth, to stop that would be death.

He drove back to his office, actually considered calling Greg, his second in command, to talk it over. That would be crazy though, those old saps were just trying to show themselves they still had power, even the fact that he was still thinking over what they had said was too much.

It made no sense, they had killed off all the tribes close to the dwelling, they were living in the height of human advancement. Technologies were being discovered and re-engineered from the parts left by the old ones on a daily basis. Even a generation ago the whole Dwelling was brought to its knees because it was missing an essential part that they couldn't build. Now they could build anything, they were expanding, the life support systems were advancing, everything was moving up.

His brief interlude into thought was interrupted by Greg walking into the office. Some words about a strike at one of the mines and all that the Elders had told him was gone. He had seen their lives, these people who held so much sway, and had been unimpressed. They would be gone in a few years, if not he would take them out and move into the citadel himself.

Years go by and they keep slowly venturing further and further out, growing larger and larger. Cranston smiles at his empire, but he can see the cracks starting. They have grown too big too fast, fueled by the greed for more wealth the mines have gone too deep, the population is spread too thin and the the military can't keep up any more.

He is too old now, they will have to solve it without him. He knows he made it though, knows that it was all worth it, that risk skipping work all those year ago. It made him a legend, made him a myth. He built this amazing world and it's up to those he leaves behind to keep it.

He falls asleep on his bed in the Citadel. They had taken it a year ago, all the Elders were dead. He is comfortable, he can finally rest. His head finally stops buzzing.

Greg knows it's going to fall apart now. The people are already dividing into tribes, separate groups warring in the dwelling. The military can no longer hold the frontier. They are worse now than they were before. They grew too big and with Cranston gone he was going to be the one who had to watch it fail.

### Dead Planets and Roaming Stars

The planet made it through the Oort cloud, through the space beyond the solar system, it kept going and going, hurtling faster approaching the maximum velocity allowed by physics. The surface was scarred from impacts, the atmosphere stripped away, the water locked in ice, it was a dead planet.

Frozen in the dead oceans lay the remains of the last attempts by people to survive. Submarines locked in a circle around a dead vent, frozen like children around a campfire. Ancient cities buried in ice still stood, others were scattered ruins, the memories blasted away by the rough trip through space.

Trillions of lives, human and animal, all extinguished. Life was tenacious though, humans were tenacious, they still clung to existence. Miles down they huddled around the molten center of their planet, an infection driven to dormancy, impossible to exterminate.

That was what they had hoped for. The humans had made the particle, that was when they had arrived. It was dangerous to play with the forces that these apes had managed to create. It had taken them millions of years to solve and harvest the particles, humans were a risk, they could upset the balance.

That was why the planet had been pulled, it needed to be quarantined. Humans were too dangerous for this section of the galaxy in this state, but they wouldn't be here much longer. To their short lives the trip took millennia, they had changed down there in their holes. Adaptable creatures, and this made for a fascinating study.

Their own species had stopped evolving so long ago that none could discover an origin. Evolution was a dangerous and wasteful process, it relied on constant consumption, it relied on becoming the best consumer. This made the changes in evolution more interesting to observe.

The new harsh environment they had been driven to led to their previous intelligence becoming a weakness compared to brute strength. The species had branched off, a new tree of evolution had been made. Only a few remained who looked like the previous humans but even they had changed.

In another hundred human generations they would reach the star. It was hard to calculate time, but based on their computer models the humans would live for this trip no matter how long it took. They were a resourceful lifeform.

They would join the other planets around the quarantine star. This star was projected to keep along its path and carry the humans and others out of this arm of the galaxy toward the opposite arm where it looked like it would be caught in a binary orbit. This was all planned and the species would survive this long trip unless they found another way to kill themselves off.

They would cover the planet in atmosphere again, this would help to jumpstart it on its way back to habitability. The humans would eventually return to the surface. The humans had just fallen within the acceptable parameters for preservation. The other large mammals on the planet had fallen just without, their lack of ability to alter the environment in a profound way had led to their being excluded.

So far it was all a success. The humans had no idea of external involvement in this process. Some had caught on but they had been ignored and often killed by their other humans. Without help the humans wouldn't have made it this far but they believed it was all through their ingenuity which was perfect.

After the star they were being put into orbit around reached its new home they would reassess the threat and level of advancement among the species in the quarantine worlds. The most advanced one would be lifted out of the physical dimension to join them, the others would be left for another millennia.

This was the process, had always been the process. No one knew any different, it was how they grew, how they advanced. New species brought new ideas and that kept them advancing, ever advancing.

The planet settled into its comfortable orbit, the atmosphere installed to keep the water from evaporating into space. Now they would wait, leave this planet among the others that had discovered the particle. The humans stood a good chance, they discovered the particle a lot earlier along their evolutionary path.

The particle was dangerous, species all discovered it eventually. They had discovered it millennia ago, had lost control of it and it had taken over the galaxy. Fighting back against the particle was a slow process, one that drained them, a process that forced them to find new species to add to their knowledge base.

The particle was so dangerous because intelligent species seemed to be instinctively drawn to it, every race eventually developed it. That was why they were always on the watch for it, always looking out for the next race that could end it all.

It was a battle between matters, between the foundation of the universe and a particle made in a lab by an errant scientist all those years ago. They had to do what they did to protect all life. They were incomprehensible to the carbon forms living on the rocks they called planets but soon, with guidance and uplifting the carbon forms would become them. When they did it right the lives they tampered with looked like they had done nothing at all.

It's all dead down here. The earthquakes had destroyed the Dwellings, they had all been forced into the wilds outside. He was tired of looking for a way to live down here. They kept going deeper and deeper, hoping to reach somewhere where it could all be better. He decided to go up, to the forbidden place.

He had managed to convince some of his tribe to follow. They were tired of waiting to die down here too. The forbidden place would mean death or refuge, down here there was only death.

What they were doing would mean they would never be allowed back. Entering the forbidden place was punishable by death, it was the worst affront to the Gods one could do. He didn't care about the Gods, the Gods didn't care about him.

They made their way up, fighting the other tribes that attacked them. Eating what they killed. They got lost and had to switch back many times, but they kept going up. He was going to reach the forbidden place and then he was going to keep going up until there was no more up to reach.

The elders spoke of the gods that lived in the forbidden place. Not as powerful as the gods of the low place, but still dangerous. These were the gods that got pleasure from pain, pleasure from the suffering of his people. He didn't fear gods like that, they had already done their worst.

He and his group of exiles followed the instinctual drive to keep heading up, to climb upward and go until there was nothing left to reach. There had been myths, the free ones who could climb and reach a place called sky. These free ones would fight and dig their way to the surface to reach this mystical place.

It was said that only the strongest warriors and smartest healers became free ones. That only they were able to reach sky. When normal people died they went to the homestead, a place where you awaited to be spawned again.

He knew this for what it was, myth and legend designed to drive his people to fight, designed to encourage violence and subservience, the two things they needed to survive. He could respect that but those myths weren't for him, he was going to reach sky while he was alive.

It was thirty six sleep's in that they lost someone. He had honestly thought it would have happened sooner, he was more shocked that it had taken so long. None of them were great warriors but they had managed to fight their way this far.

It was a tribe that they had never encountered before. They looked like humans but covered in white fur so dense that their stone spears couldn't penetrate it. Their hands were more club than hand and it was with those that they beat the straggler to death. Screaming in a pitch just audible, a near echolocation pitch.

He managed to kill one with the fire, he lit it while the other exiles stabbed uselessly at the monster. Lucky for them all there was only one of these tribe members, maybe a scout. It had pummeled the straggler into a pink paste that the light from the flame displayed in stark contrast to the dark stone.

The fire stick had the monster aflame in seconds. All that fur was extremely flammable it seemed. The beast let out a shriek and barreled through them up the tunnel ahead. They didn't move to follow, the fire always left them too blinded to see.

Instead they offered rites to their dead comrade before removing all the useful items from his possession, he would no longer need them. He wondered if this would classify him for sky death in the old myths, he doubted it.

They found the beast a few kilometers up. It was still breathing, charred and bloody as it was. He marveled at how tough this tribe must be. Without its thick fur it was easy to kill, their stone knives butchering it while it still drew ragged breath, he wanted the meat but also wanted this monster to suffer for its killing.

They had removed both muscle bound charred legs before the loss of blood finally killed the monster. He could only hope it had felt every cut, that it had felt its tendons being severed and bones cracked to pull off its legs.

They packed the meat and started back on their way. Saddened by the loss but happy for the food, they had been running low. It took another fifteen sleeps before they found the ice. He had known they were on the right path when the flowing water had turned into a nearly impassable river running down and splitting off in the millions of tunnels and fissures below.

The exiles had a slow go along the wall of the river, clinging to the side of the rock and slowly making their way upward, scared to fall into the torrent below and be swept away. He thought of the tribes down below, they would soon risk being flooded out if this level of water continued to flow down there. He didn't know how much was above them

The stone soon turned into a wall of ice, this was where the water was coming from. The ice dripping into a torrent flooding down the tunnel. He had tried drinking it before but it was too salty, not like the stale pools below. He knew the sky was on the other side of this wall of frozen water. He didn't know how to get through it. This was something he hadn't thought of, he could sense the doubt and apprehension in the other exiles, they were realizing the same thing, they were all trapped.

Some turned back there, disappointed but hoping the tribe would take them back. He stayed, he knew that he had nowhere else to go, that there was no where else worth going. It had taken too long to get here, he would dig his way through the water or die here.

He started smashing his small stone axe against the ice taking huge chunks of it out. The few who had stayed with him joined in, they all started smashing the ice, making no headway but the act of trying to do something giving them satisfaction.

His arms were numb, his axe dull the hardened metal handle starting to bend the slightest bit. He had found the handle in a slag heap years ago, straight metal pieces were rare in his tribe, it was a prized possession for him. Some of the other exiles had stopped bashing the ice but he kept on, the splash of ice chunks and water had him soaked, shivering and tired but he kept going.

He was so tired his strikes were mostly glancing off the ice. The others just sat and watched him with a mix of curiosity and worry. He kept going though, there was no other option, he was going to see the sky, he was going to reach it.

A crack, loud like a rock fall startles them all to attention. He stops hitting the ice and takes a step back looking at the massive crack expanding in the ice. He moves to the side just as it gives away, huge chunks of ice go crashing down the slight decline of the tunnel behind him. This is followed by a torrent of water that threatens to wash him away, but he clings to the rock with the last of his strength only hoping his other exiles had managed to do the same.

After what feels like hours of clinging to the rock for his life the flow of icy water stops. He looks around in shock, blinded by the light that streams in from where the ice had been. He can hardly see but knows the rest of his group managed to hang on.

As their too large eyes struggle to adjust to the light they slowly emerge onto a warm surface. The air moves around him, kissing his skin. He wants to be able to see it all but he has gone blind. The smell is more than enough though, he knows they have made it.

A group of humans, pale to the point of transparency, eyes closed against the light, limbs short and muscled, evolved to life underground, emerge onto the surface. they won't be the last to do so but they are the first humans to be above ground in thousands of years. Their planet spins around a new star, has a new moon orbiting it, the old one having been left behind. It's coated in green, seeded by the gods that had brought it here, it chirps with alien life, an eden designed to get humans back on their feet. A group of exiles inhales as they stumble into the new world.

###

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Best Regards  
Craig

#### About the Author

Craig is the author of several novels, countless short stories and more than a few poems. His work has been published in university papers as well as select anthologies. He lives in Toronto and loves the city as well as the natural beauty of the Canadian wild.

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