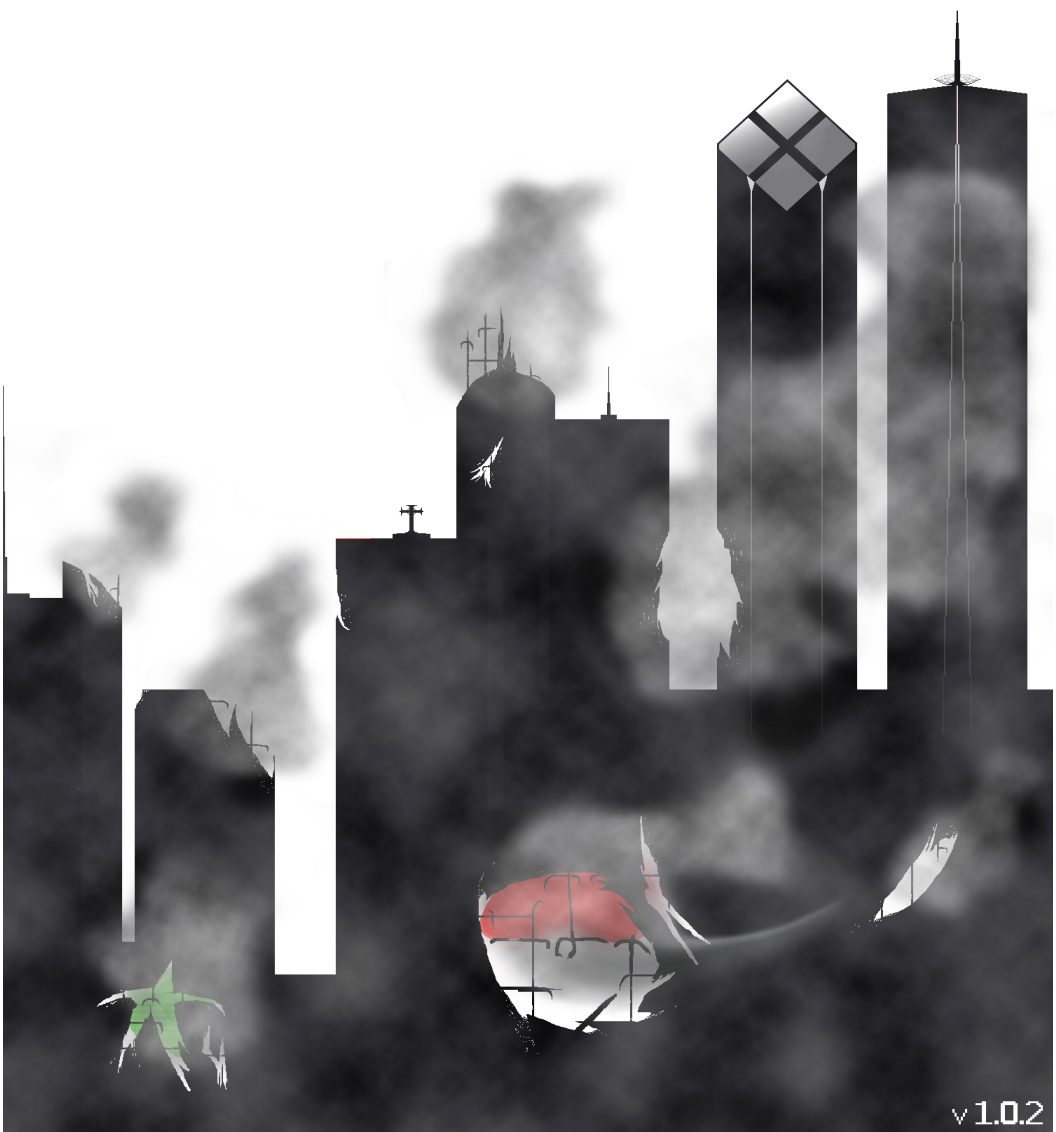


Redemption

> Sophia Knight



Redemption

v 1.0.2

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A View from the End of the World

And God said, "This is the token of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you for perpetual generations: I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth."

Genesis 9:12-13

A thick fog draped the city. From the antennas of the highest skyscrapers to the cracks between stone and rubble hundreds of meters below, there was fog. Pockets of purple poison clung to the fog and saturated the air into a lavender town. Ghastly faces in the air evolved into haunting guises and formless doppelgangers existing only as silhouettes. These sylphs, always eager for a battle, were like unidentifiable ghosts that claimed this domain. What once was air safe for breathing was now a haze that prevented vision beyond five meters. The dank smokescreen was thorough in spreading into all the nooks and crannies of the desolate streets and vacant offices. Fog and smoke and debris drifted about the barren streets like snow. There was fog hugging the windows, staining the glass, tugging at the air. There was smoke and soot gently and precisely placed atop the remains of cars, buses, fire escapes, scaffolding, balconies, and rooftops. There was debris, stone and concrete that was once supporting the grand buildings of the city as well as metallic beams and boulders, closing off roads and blocking entrances to luxury homes and subway stations. There were fires, fires from within cars and from within buildings and from under the ground that whispered a collective, unintelligible canto. From the burning fires, ash caught everything, both far and wide. The scorched earth

formed many creatures, like charred lizards or burnt prime apes etched onto the sidewalks. Large fissures scarred the earth for miles and united to form chasms that bled metal and stone from exposed subway tracks. The concrete jungle had erupted from under the ground with onyx and geodes and gravel dispersed in every which direction, out onto the streets of this pewter city with centuries of progress lost at the end of the world.

Heavy air would have drowned all sounds of the normally busy city if any noise were being made. But traffic no longer ran through the city's veins and all that remained was a grid of dry streets. No vehicle moved, no light passed through the smoke, no rubber blabbed against the asphalt. Tired police and fire engine sirens could not slash through the air and instead, they let out muffled cries that occasionally broke the eerie silence of New York City. Sheets of paper and folders and documents glided in mid air, slowly descending towards a final resting place. Citizens of the once proud city laid slain and scattered about the streets as corpses, dismembered limbs, pools of blood, and red smears against the torn pavement and walls. Fragments of ice composed of dust and powder hovered on the surface of the dirty, misty Hudson. Only dark colors remained, as if a pallet of many shades of black was shared among the landscape. As far as the eye could see, which was barely, disorder firmly grasped the city that tried to reach the sky.

The elevated plaza at the intersection of William and Pine was once an open area for minute meals and gossip and laughter, but now served as the bed for torn buildings and derailed stairways. The scenery of the plaza, commissioned

for the healthy viridian and celadon leaves, now rested alongside the shards of elegant black and white sculpted trees. Though once a large piece of artwork, the monochrome trees were easily toppled. Although the art distinguished the plaza at one point in time, it seemed now only to perfectly blend into the scene that resembled an unexplored and abandoned city. The fountain of the plaza, instead of cascading cerulean water, began endlessly spewing out a dark concoction of grime, muck, and blood. The statue of a pond turtle squirted out a continuous stream of this substance which, to the impulsive mind, could easily be mistaken for viscous wine or tar. The plaza had been quickly converted into an uninhabitable, toxic marsh.

The only life and movement remaining on the plaza came from the winged scavengers who also resided in the city and called it home. The grey creatures strutted across the plaza, as if eternally victorious at some kind of wager. They bumped into each other, pushed one another away, quickly jabbing at the ground with their beaks hoping to find the simplest or most modest of bread crumbs. When their desires went unanswered, they again bounced around among themselves on their way to drink from the dark pool to satisfy their fleeting appetite for bread and wine. Too stupid to come to any rational conclusions, the animals would soon find themselves among the pile of pigeons—those that had imbibed the dark paste earlier—resting peacefully a few steps away. Together they formed a mass of tar and feather, for alone and without their congregation, they were nothing, and the last of a dying kind.

Amid this chaos, a band of survivors managed to outlive the storm. A thick barrier of glass was all that separated the survivors from the stench and the imminent death of the hazardous air. The world outside the doors was patrolled by an eminently present god of death, silently and patiently waiting to claim a name and face as its victim. But the revolving doors of the bank were locked and the lobby secured; the god of death would not claim any lives here. The officer of the law, Michael Wilk, took on the task of protecting this party from any harm. Regardless of the constant pain from the cuts and bruises he had won throughout the day, he upheld the commitment he had sworn to abide by the moment he earned his badge. Even in exsanguination, Officer Wilk of the New York Police Department would be faithful unto death. Some of his wounds were skillfully patched by the veteran who also happened to run into the same shelter. Former Marine Charles Deacon, who had specialized as a combat medic on the field, tended to the officer the instant he laid eyes on the fresh wounds. He was able to find emergency kits in the desks that sat in the lobby, and he was quick to make use of them. A silent but humble “Thank you” escaped the officer’s mouth.

“I’ll do what I can, bro, but I don’t think we got enough bandage here for all these cuts.” His voice of genuine concern echoed across the lobby. Much of the lobby was displaced: furniture laid tossed aside, chairs had been thrashed around randomly, computer monitors and desks were knocked over, and paintings and tiles had fallen from or shifted out of position. Rumbling from the distance

seemed to reverberate within the building, as expensive paintings and tiles jumped off the saffron walls. The hall was, in many ways, a small museum, housing myriad valuables on platforms, protected by glass. One such decorative, porcelain statuette appeared to have been rocked and smashed against the floor, now in billions of pieces that would never fit back together again. Another exhibit was titled “Old Amber,” also encased in glass, resembling a luminous loaf of bread but clearly not edible. A stone echinoderm also had a presentation of its own; this one was supposedly related to one of the last blastoids to ever have existed. The last display still intact was a replication of a pair of fossils named “Helix” and “Dome,” antiquities which were much too priceless to keep in the lobby, but still important and prestigious enough to force into the minds of patrons and visitors.

“It’s fine. I’ll be fine,” Officer Wilk quietly responded. He tried as best he could to ignore the pain while keeping his gaze fixed on the foolish birds outside that continued to drink the tar and proceed to die within minutes. He attempted to make sense of just what was happening and how it was possible that he was lucky enough to be alive. Throughout the day he had witnessed a few too many things that would never be erased from memory even if he had been granted eternal life; he would only find more ways to despise and divide those in an already shattered world. He wondered who was responsible for this atrocity and others like it. He had seen it all laid to waste, perhaps the doom of the gods had come, seeing as how the only way he could

accurately describe the events of this morning were of fire and brimstone freely raining from the heavens.

Before entering into the safety of this bank, he was able to recover some identification cards. He also found some inside the lobby of the bank, some still in the wallets of whomever such and such corpse may have been. He figured these may have been people worth knowing. He took out his collection of ID cards to stare at them again; for whatever reason he just wanted to keep checking them again and again.

Nakamura, Hiro; the face of someone who could find joy anywhere, he may have been that one guy who would never be caught in a bad mood no matter what. This kind of boyish charm was often rare among the hard skinned New Yorkers. Masuda, Junichi; a man of many talents, experience and curiosity could be noted by his composure, a blend of a traditional and a modern man. Leaf, Jade; a young student maybe her smile suggested she knew what she wanted to do in life, or maybe, like himself, she just had too many interests to stick to only one. Oak, Azure; another student, that cocky smirk on his face, like he was ready for anything life had to throw at him. Aiden, Redd; another kid, that stoic face was betrayed by his eyes which clearly aspired to explore the world and be the best. Maybe one of these people would have been more deserving of—

A sharp uproar interrupted the silence of the lobby and his unfinished thoughts fled back into the wild depths of the mind, to that place where words did not exist. These discordant yells of a child slid across the lobby walls without

resistance. Officer Wilk tried to fish out that coy thought, he splashed words in his mind to reel it in; no effect.

The boy was full of energy. He clearly wanted something, and knowing boys, he would get it. He pulled and tugged and stomped on the ground trying to free himself of his mother's grasp as she held onto his wrist. Overzealous Adam did what he could to slip away, but to no avail. His younger sister, on the other hand, clung with both arms wrapped tightly around the mother's leg. The little girl was assured that the arm hugging her would never let go. Every now and then she would survey the lobby with her huge, blue eyes and then quickly bury her face in her mother's leg again whenever anyone made eye contact. Off to the side of her right eye, just above the cheek, were two rows of small, black stars. Her mother shared the same design. The black ink was presumably part of an art project that had been assigned at school, and it was safe to assume that she could be no more than five years of age. Timid Maggie was living a horrendous nightmare, one in which everywhere she looked, scary people and scary noises and scary things lurked. Unable to protect her son and daughter from the horror of this day, Amy MacMillan was caught in the eye of the storm with her children. She was fortunate enough to find a sheltered, cloistered location in all the confusion, as well as to have been united with Officer Wilk and Charles Deacon who could help ensure their wellbeing.

In an extremely quiet, barely audible squeak, the little girl hummed as she tugged on her mother's shirt, "Mommy, I'm hungry."

“Me too! I want something to eat!” Adam was quick to proclaim. He tried again to free himself of the hand that firmly grasped his wrist. Again he was unsuccessful in his endeavors. Amy ignored the brutal swaying; under her supervision he would not be running around to inadvertently and naively harm himself or others. She was determined to keep her son in sight at all times and would not grant him his desired recklessness.

The arm that comforted the little girl left its place, in response the little girl shivered and hugged tighter. Amy knelt down on one knee, grabbed her daughter’s backpack which was reclined on a wall and began looking around for something. Her hand maneuvered through the bag full of books and papers and she retrieved an apple. Like a cinnabar light bulb floating in a sea of cruelty, the apple radiated brightly the instant it was introduced to the broken city overwhelmed in variations of grays.

From the bag she also took out a white, plastic knife with which to slice the apple into three pieces. Although reluctant to remove her grasp on Adam, Amy slowly reached for the knife when she noticed Adam’s full attention rested on the apple. Adam, in his hunger, had forgotten all about the adventures he wanted to have, as had he forgotten that it took two hands to slice an apple properly. The young family quickly munched on the fruit, forgetting about the condition of the world for a few seconds. When they were done, Amy quickly grabbed her son again, lest he wander off unattended. Instantly he recalled his passion for exploring without Mom, and his want to demonstrate to his sister just how brave—in truth, how childish—he was. He was the

kind of person who loved to act only when all eyes were on him, and where everyone could see what brave feat he wished to accomplish. All the world was his stage, and he wanted to be seen, to let the world know what it was he was preaching of himself.

The great, unknown bag held many items as Mommy looked inside yet again. She found napkins and cleaned off the adhesive apple juice from their hands. The remains were tossed into a nearby trashcan that they had found behind the reception desk. Whatever had happened to these people was a complete mystery. Remnants of their memory and of their existence were still present, however, with name tags and labels on certain pieces of equipment. The computers closest to them had been labeled “Sabrina’s PC,” “Erika’s PC,” and “Bill’s PC.” Wherever they were, Amy hoped it was anywhere that had not been struck by unannounced danger.

“Here, Maggie, hold this,” Amy said, withdrawing another apple from the bag. The little girl could barely contain the big apple in her tiny hands. Amy gave the plastic knife and some napkins to the girl as well. She got down to her level with a smile and said in a sweet voice, “Give these to the nice men over there, will you?” The timid girl slowly turned to see the men and she stared in their direction for a few seconds. She then turned back to Mommy. With water slowly accumulating in her eyes and with her head aimed towards the ground, she shook her head.

“Oh , come on. I’m sure they’re hungry too. Let’s share our food with them!” Amy insisted. Again, the little girl shook her head.

“How ‘bout this, if you give them the apple, I’ll give you the pen and we can draw more stars!” A third time she resisted the idea and she held the apple towards Mommy to return it.

“Aww, don’t be like that,” a short pause. “I know! What if Captain Bear goes with you? *Then* will you give the nice men the apple?” Maggie hesitated this time, her indecision Amy’s definition for yes. Amy’s smile widened as she took yet another look into the bag. This time she pulled out a small, brown bear. It fit perfectly into the little girl’s hand, and instantly she felt confidence flowing through her body.

She slowly turned towards the guardians and with a little push from Mommy, Captain Bear and Captain MacMillan were on their way. With each step she gained even more confidence. She was, for the first time, progressing on her own. She remembered naming Captain Bear on her own, too. Captain, just like Daddy. Her heart was beating quickly, her legs shaking from both excitement and dread, just like her first day at school. The vermilion fruit in her hand felt lighter than how she had originally found it, and Captain Bear’s smile encouraged her every step of the way.

She had reached Mister Dickens. At least, she thought that was his name. That’s what she remembered from overhearing him talking with the policeman. A huge shadow loomed before her, his eyes trained on the smoke that clouded the plaza. That was the same plaza she used to walk by everyday with Mommy and Adam on the way to school, but from this perspective she could hardly recognize it. With her new found bravery she held the apple up in front of herself and quietly gained the man’s attention.

“Um...my...my mommy wants you to have this...” she said slowly with a worried smile. She was still nervous and afraid, but she spoke nonetheless.

The tall man looked down at her, as if not knowing she would be there. He got down on a knee and took the delivery. With a warm smile he told her, “Thank you. This is very kind of you and your mom.” The little girl, not knowing how to respond to Mister Dickens, stood there and smiled; as far as she knew, this was always an okay response.

“Hmm...might you be interested in seeing...” he said with a new tone for every word, “... a magic trick?” The girl’s smile grew noticeably, a relatively high chance of that meaning “yes.”

“Alright, then, this is gonna be fast, but I’ll need to concentrate first.” He held the apple in his open palm, in a very natural manner. His eyebrows burrowed in towards his nose and his eyes thinned. He peeked up at Maggie and found that she was staring intently at the apple, trying best not to blink and miss the magic.

Deacon’s other hand was waved and fluctuated around the apple, as if a shield of glacial water were preventing him from getting any closer. He then tossed the apple up into the air, it spun very quickly on its way up and on its way down. It appeared to Maggie as if the apple had changed somehow. She didn’t exactly know how, but it changed a little. He flung the apple into the air again, this time he said “Abra!” It changed again, *somehow* again, but how?

He spun the apple into the air again, this time “Kadabra!” as it twitched violently above his head. This time she saw it! She knew what it was! It was the color. The apple started out

red, but in the air it appeared to be half red, half white. The apple went into the air once more to “Alakazam!” With that last incantation the apple disappeared when it should have landed in his palm again.

Maggie’s eyes tripled in size, her jaw forced down by gravity in a childish way, and an accompanying childish “Woah” leapt out of her mouth.

“Pretty cool, huh?”

The quivering in her voice was no longer present as she quickly begged and ask “But, but where did it go?” barely able to contain herself.

“I ate it already. Without even biting it once.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, look,” he paused, a pensive look on his face. He took a deep breath and out came a small belch. Maggie laughed at the silly antics of Mister Dickens. “I learned that one from Alakazam the Great!” he exclaimed proudly.

She quieted down again, remembering that she wasn’t normally too keen on talking with adults as if they were her friends or classmates. “You seem like a pretty timid girl. I think I’ll call you that from now on...Timid. That’s a nice nickname, don’t you think?”

She shrugged, certain she did not want to lose the name Maggie.

“Well it may catch on, you never know. Thanks again for the apple, and tell your mommy I said thank you too, okay?”

The giant was friendly and had a nice, big smile much to Maggie’s surprise. The little girl responded with a happy “Okay!”

The man extended his arm towards the girl. It took her a few seconds to realize what was going on and she eventually held out her hand in response. His big, brown hand met her small, white hand, just like all the grownups do all the time. They shared a short laugh, and with that Maggie parted ways, back towards Mommy. She held up the small stuffed animal with both hands and quietly told him, "I did it, Captain Bear!"

The bear would always be there to listen to whatever it was she may want to say, to listen to her voice and pay close attention to her every word. Regardless of the dull sky or the fear in her heart, the bear would have a perpetual, soothing smile to keep the girl clam. She got back to her mother and told her the message the man had sent. "See, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

"Here, mate, you can have it," the former marine told Officer Wilk. "I ate well this morning. Besides, it looks like you need it more than I do." Wilk looked back at Deacon. Despite their ill-fate, he was glad that the concept of generosity had not yet perished. He took the apple without a word, cut it in half and offered a piece to Deacon.

"I'll be alright. But I still want you to have half."

"Nah, man, it's cool. You can have it all."

"I'd really much rather share this. Besides, you know what they say, 'you should never eat alone.'"

"Yeah, I guess that's one way of looking at it."

"Thanks for understanding," the officer remarked. He would truthfully have preferred to have the entire thing having not had a bite all day. As they ate the fruit, they kept watchful eyes over the bog outside, as sludge continued to

overflow from the fountain. More life had apparently been drawn to the plaza. Veno-gnats and venom moths cluttered some of the area around the dark material, as had they found suitable housing within sacks of feathers which would also be able to serve as new hives. These insects, as well as the hardened pods and cocoons, may have been what drew out the infinite zoo bats and ghoul bats from their caves, now beating their wings triumphantly over the pigeons.

On the ground they could see the outlines of new creatures, they like akin to sand shrews or rats scurrying across the shaken earth. Yet the smoke was too thick to allow their eyes to properly identify their new neighbors, and no sudden flash of clarity could lighten up the darkness that consumed the streets. Somehow it seemed that the longer they stared at the outlines of the critters out on the field, the more they could see even larger rats clashing amid the shrews and pigeons and bats. Perhaps they were looking to eradicate the competition and to claim the resources of the bread and wine only for their own kind. All of this occurred around and on top of the mud and mire that had now taken the form of a strange, dinosaur-esque beast with man-eating-plants sticking out of it.

These primitive, animal ambushes were, while cunning, extremely simple for Deacon and Wilk, both of whom were judging what little they could see of the battle going on outside. Not only had the fog prevent them from seeing too far, but slime was also attaching itself to the window, and ever so slowly climbing up, blocking more of their view. The dark creek before them was really a primeval game over territory. The downpour of continuous ash and soot caused

issues for all of the animals. As Deacon observed the overgrown battlefield again, he realized that it could also be mistaken, if not for a marsh, for an area affected by broken pipelines. Maybe the viscous wine was just black gold, further reason for all the animals to want it for their kind. Luckily for Deacon and Wilk, however, mankind was far more compassionate and civilized than the animals before them who fought for survival and wealth.

Sick of the sight, the officer turned on his radio only to hear static. He slowly ate the fruit, hoping to gain knowledge from the airwaves as the device hissed like a serpent. The hissing constantly changed, as if a backward snake slithered and pranced around inside the radio. After a few minutes he turned off the radio, his faith having had eroded in the process. He held onto it as if it were his beating heart, as if he would die were he to accidentally let go. He would not be getting any assistance and he feared for the uncertainty of his party's future. Heavy drops of sweat ran down the officer's face, realizing that he was unable to make a distress call or unable to do anything useful for the survivors other than wait in absolute agony. Without the ability to fall back on the technology he once relied on, he found himself in a restricted world of confusion, aimlessly looking to pick up a few clues here and there. In his despair he daydreamed, and stared at what he could see of the upper floors of the other buildings, or at least what remained of them.

This was the part of Gotham where brick and mortar met steel and glass, where old met new in architectural ingenuity, and where machine met supremacy, where man was once able to achieve greatness. Behind the windows of the ruins

were jagged human outlines. But it would make no difference to try to contact them or group up, nothing could be done. But maybe those were actually ghosts that had appeared in the towers. Maybe these skyscrapers were now graveyard towers. Perhaps he had seen the spirits of the people that the rockets killed.

“You know, I always thought it’d be much more thorough. This ‘destruction of New York thing,’ y’know?” said Deacon. “And even then, I didn’t think I’d be one of the ones to win this chancy, morbid game of life and death. Maybe one day I’ll live to regret having survived this first wave of hell. I know I shouldn’t be thinking these kinds of things, but it’s just so surreal that here I am, still able to draw breath in this god forsaken city. I just really hope we can find a way out of this mess. And it’s funny, ‘cuz to us this is a nightmare, and the kind of thing that truly only happens in bad dreams, yet it’s just another day in the universe, and we here, an atom to all that, can do nothing in the wake of these events. Anyway, enough from me. I say, before we think of how we’re going to survive tomorrow or even tonight, we just find out what we’re going to do right this moment.”

Neither of the two spoke, but the lobby was filled with whispers and occasional laughter from the family sitting back in the corner. After digging his thoughts for a second, Wilk replied, “Your guess is as good as mine.”

From the very back end of the lobby, the distinct sound of tiles shifting around on floor were heard. As far as Officer Wilk was concerned, no one from his party was back there. Amy was aware of this fact as well, and immediately began to quiet down her children. Wilk slowly removed his pistol

from his holster, and just as slowly removed the safety. He then slowly, painfully slowly, began sneaking towards the rear of the lobby. His left arm was slightly paralyzed and thus disabled; he winced whenever he tried to use it. He held up his pistol in front of him in his right hand, ready to fire at a moment's notice.

“Anyone back there?” his voice darted through the lobby. The rustling sounds stopped as soon as he opened his mouth. He immediately found the source of the sounds and instantly regretted having said anything aloud.

Their lithe growls grew vicious, and they grew ferocious, with such zeal and with a look intent on killing and feasting. Four canines met the officer's eyes; they brandished their sharp, polluted teeth. If it were only one dog, he would have been able to handle the issue, but in his current status he would take no risks. With his eyes on the dogs, he spoke in a low, solemn voice, with a tenor less confident than before; he mumbled carefully and quietly, as to not trigger any fast movements from either side, “Deacon, get them out. Get them out now.”

Officer Wilk sloppily aimed his weapon as the hounds of doom charged his way. Deacon, who had already formed some chemistry with Wilk's leadership, unlocked the revolving door nearest to his location and signaled to the family, “We are leaving! Get over here!” Amy, having paid close attention to everything and having properly calculated Wilk's moves in her head, ran towards the door covering her children's ears.

A fusillade rang from inside the lobby as they were forcibly evicted from shelter. They now had no choice but to

run out into the air of fuchsia, into a wild safari of danger and solid smoke, to slowly push their way through pockets of toxic air and radiation. The Big Apple, the city that never slept, was crushed, its veins were exposed, and New York was now a giant laid to rest with centuries of progress lost at the end of the world.

Eviction

And Jehovah said, Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is what they begin to do: and now nothing will be withholden from them, which they purpose to do. Come, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.

Genesis 11:6-7

Eight million people used to live in this city; now it's a ghost town. The iron sky of New York loomed overhead, like steel helixes held in place by the solid air. Starved vultures found themselves perched on rooftops, waiting to swoop down and feast on the city's remains—when the time was right, the billboards would glide down and peck at the helpless bone and marrow. The armored avian of these kind could easily crunch through the weakened steel below. All around, the knees of monolithic structures gave in as they crumbled to the ground and formed mountains of boundless annihilation.

From the evolving chaos, pipes were vaporizing on as steam rushed into the air, soon to rain down showers. From the raw cables that ran between floors, electric shocks flickered, jolting on and kicking the air with sparks and thunders. Embers from cars and homes were flaring on while winds of flame crackled without end, serving as boosters to the air. The once great structures that were now leveled and demolished, creaked and moaned as fat winds slowly squeezed through the dismal streets. Mannhatta under fallout was a winter of eternal night and black snow.

The surviving citizens ran out of the bleak house no longer protecting them, and out onto the bleak streets that were no better. They had only entered the realm of the god

of death whose sinister, Glasgow smile grew, causing him to choke on his own laughter. In light of the existence of law, it meant nothing to the god of death, and justice, as always, was folly; mercy was what kept criminals free to roam this rotten world. This jester, under the shroud of night, no doubt believed itself a justified killer and god of the new world.

While the world around them steadily dissolved, the god of death followed. He followed as they ran past the pigeons that continued to drink from and fight for the dark pool. He followed as they ran past pillars of slime and walls of sludge and lampposts of grime that collided with the ground. He followed as they ran past his fortress within the elm trees and pseudowood and pinecones on the ground. They ran as new layers of smoke scratched, slashed, and clawed at them.

The dead pigeons lying a few feet from their footsteps were like mischievous murk crows. Their eyes would never close, yet they aimlessly glared at nothing. In the end they were responsible for their own actions whether or not they believed themselves fated and destined for something. Even so, these were not the only winged scavengers to fight for or drink from the bog. A more aggressive and persistent group of sparrows, sparrows to be feared, had joined the fray with the force of spears. They perceived the survivors as danger, instantly attacking them, only ceasing once they had gone a fair distance away. Spinning arachnids had found their way to the bog as well, spreading their web to all corners of the plaza and around foes of all kinds. The rise in the number of bugs forced the more predatory combatants to engage in a bug catching contest.

Charles Deacon led the party out and he remained at the front, carefully directing the path they would take away from the madness of the plaza and the dour hounds. They jumped down the few stairs of the plaza, and ran towards the only direction that was not blocked by hills of debris or vehicles. The mist made it difficult to see, and Deacon moved as quickly as he could while still granting his eyes time to adjust to the violet city. Using his shirt to cover his nose, he expected to avoid some of the effects of the lumps of levitating toxic air. Despite his efforts he was coughing and wheezing relentlessly.

Behind him Amy held onto her children, one in each hand, with bags strapped on her every which possible way. If not for their fear of the dogs they would not be running as quickly as they were. “Keep your eyes closed!” she yelled, desperately hoping they listened to her instructions, unable to look back and check. Although she kept close to Charles in order to keep sight of him, he would every now and then melt into the fog only to reappear shortly afterwards.

Officer Wilk, the last to leave the bank, was still fighting it out with the hounds that persisted and chased through the streets. The chain collars around their necks rattled as they ran, as they barked and snarled, and as they took pursuit of their prey. Firing shots in their general direction did nothing to slow the dogs down, though they *would* occasionally let out cries of agony. The officer tried his best to run forward and keep sight of the two small figures ahead of him, but in spite of his athletic prowess he simply slowed down after every rapid dash.

He had already finished off one magazine of ammunition and he was on his spare. In the heat of the moment he had not kept an accurate record of how many shots he last fired. Perhaps he had fired six, perhaps seven; he could not be sure what his missing number was. He just *could not* be sure, and now wasn't the time to check, either. With all the debris on the streets it was difficult for the officer to find sure footing. With one of his drowsy strides, he fell.

Adrenaline rushed into his veins. Pain temporarily disappeared. He looked back. Three figures in the dust. That was all he could do, an electrifying peek, and choose where he would fire off his three blind rounds while getting up. More whines. He pressed onward. He reached an intersection. Two roads blocked off. Left was the only open route. Hydro pumps jumped into the air from fire hydrants. The water grounded some of the smoke, clearing up a great portion of the air.

From the corner of his right eye he was able to see it. He was able to make out—what seemed like some oddish five miles to the north—a gloom and towering vile plume. It blossomed as the carcasses of high rises faded into the wind like powder and spore. Endless blackthorn petals rained from the massive cloud like a petal dance. He was astonished by this spectacle, and in all vain attempts to move on, he collapsed from exhaustion.

He heard heavy breathing and loud exhaling as if someone were breathing right into his ears. But the gasps and pants matched his, they were all his own. The destruction he saw was enough shock and awe to daze him into a full paralysis. He inched his way forward but this

ended in futility and his mending wounds were again exposed. Blood pushed its way between his fingers and around the unsteady hand that was desperately clenched, trying to contain the scarlet liquid in his abdomen.

As he gazed at the giant mushroom, he lost control of his eyes. They began closing on him. They belonged to someone else and he could do nothing to keep them open. He felt as if he had been charmed by a hypnotic spell. The goldenrod tint of the towering mushroom weakened, forming a yellow figure with a white ruff around its neck; perhaps this was the spell caster of his hypnosis. The yellow figure dimmed to gray, and then black and white. His eyes were now completely closed, they were relaxed and they had never felt more comforted in all his life. As his adrenaline died out, pain returned and engulfed his body. This time pain was soothing and inviting, it wanted him to surrender. The howling wind that blew in his ears became faint, and a beautiful whisper took over. The cement beneath him became a soft pillow that his entire body pleasantly rested on. His breathing calmed down to a relaxed snore. He began to lose control of his hands as his warm firearm slipped from his fingers. A destiny bond had completely seized Michael Wilk; in his mind, a vision of a swinging pendulum came to an inevitable halt matching the rhythm of his heart.

As he quickly revisited his memories, and as he blacked out, he came to the realization of this situation and of the grave danger he was in. And he decided that this is not how it would end.

He forced adrenaline to pump back into his bloodstream. He quickly opened his eyes—they now belonged to him

again. While he was attempting to register the world, everything in his line of sight was made of blocks. He saw the world that sat before him made of squares of varying shades of gray. Once on his feet he regained clear vision and continued down the road, fully aware of his surroundings, but everything he heard was muffled. During his revitalization he had recalled everything. He recalled he was a New York Police Officer. He recalled his mother's birthday was in two weeks. He recalled that there were dogs hunting him with chains around their necks that rattled as they moved; he imagined they were an elite four horsemen galloping toward him. He recalled that he was fleeing. He felt the warmth of his pistol again, but his available ammunition remained a mystery. He darted down the street only to reach another intersection.

The roads ahead of him were carved deep into the ground. The abyss seemed to run down endlessly, as if this were the edge of the world. Above, bare buildings held out their steel hands, these scarecrows of brick and limestone and iron, while fragments of the buildings tumbled down into the bottomless crater. The open route to the right was partially blocked by trashed vehicles, but circumventing them would be no problem. He quickly slid over the hoods of the cars with ease at the expense of wounded body.

Ahead of him the smog returned in full force. Behind him, the growls grew to roars as a canine gnawed at his sole.

In one final attempt to fight off the hounds he fired his weapon until it was empty. After two loud bangs that almost echoed through the tight, corridor-like streets, he was empty. Two rounds and that was all he had left. This time he only

heard one whimper. He turned around, and on the ground rested his victim.

The officer heard a new bark as one last dog emerged from the smoke. It leapt into the air and viciously tackled him. Wilk pushed back but the dog charged at him again with extreme speed. He crossed his right arm in front of his body to withstand the impact and pushed away upon collision. The quick attack was disorienting and Officer Wilk fell a third time. He noticed that the dog's fur was rough and that he could peel off a thin layer of black soot, as if it had sharp, spiky fur much like cinder quill.

He recuperated from the knockback on all fours, overcome by the instincts of a wolf. Crimson trickled down his arm where the dog had struck, but amid the fight he felt nothing, entering a defensive, curled stance. The battle continued as one mindless beast clashed against the other with brute force. After a few strikes, Wilk managed to stun the animal. He pushed it back a fair distance and picked up a handful of stones and sand that were on the ground of the constricting, walled street. For good measure he first flung a sand attack to lower his foe's accuracy and avert any possible chance at a successful retaliation. He then threw the rocks at his foe and stoned the beast. They continuously landed, some rocks appearing to have critically struck and injure the animal, others completely missing the canine. The rock slide slowly came to an end as the lake of rage within Wilk subsided.

There was no whine or howl but the dog no longer moved, and that was all Wilk needed to let his guard down again. Silence took over again, save for the sporadic sirens

that were distorted by the thick fumes in the air. Officer Wilk took a moment to compose himself. He was, after all, still human and not that wolf that seemed to have overcome him in that fight. Had he not used the walls of the surrounding buildings as support, he would have fallen shortly after the confrontation. He steadily ventured further down his victory road without even the slightest sense of direction. After all he had done, he felt he had had enough. He sat down and leaned against a glass window, finally admitting defeat. Neither his victories nor his accomplishments mattered now that he was both lost and weak. It was here that he confessed to himself that no longer would he be of any use to his city.

Across the narrow street, shards of glass lay on the ground. Inside he could see three wooden columns, all sharing the same fate, but in a different manner. The first was splintered into pieces like ice; it seemed as if it was once an arctic sculpture that blew apart into a million pieces. The second was structurally weak; the exposed cables zapped erratically with electro buzzes. The third column was burnt and burning; it had molten due to some extreme heat and Wilk could see flames jumping out of the pillar and towards the ground.

Next to him, on the ground, was a displaced lamppost with broken traffic lights and bent street signs. The white text on the one of the green rectangles read “WallSt” and the other, “Broadway.” He heard hollow knocking off to his right. He faced the direction of the sound and was surprised to see Charles Deacon tapping on the glass door of the building Wilk was settled against. Deacon beckoned him to

come over, slowly opening the door. The officer, unable to find the strength to stand, pulled his inexplicably heavy body closer to the door. He crawled closer and closer, leaving behind a red trail. Only with Deacon's help was he able to get on his feet once again, but he still needed assistance in order to walk.

"Thank...you," he exhaled loudly, his voice shivering and parched as if he had just been pulled out of a dark blizzard that absorbed and leeches the life out of any traveler.

Upon entering the building, he removed the plastic gas mask Deacon had provided for him back where they found the emergency kits. There were only four gas masks and Deacon was confident that he wouldn't need one. Even now, however, he seemed to be coughing uncontrollably.

Wilk's arm hooked around Deacon's back, and with his support, they left the vestibule and entered the lobby. The officer was dropped down on a comfortable seat. He sighed and groaned loudly as his body was slowly relieved of its many aches. He hoped to be able to catch just a minute of rest, to close his eyes and forget about everything.

The interior design of *this* bank relied heavily on black marble tiles. They were the theme of the floor, of the pillars, and of the main counter. The jet black and olivine scheme was laid out all about the lobby except for the furniture. The comforting desks, cubicles, and couches of mahogany were spread around the room with fashionable expertise. Behind the main counter a wall was blasted in and ruined planks of wood were scattered about the radius.

Opposite the destroyed wall, a massive window overlooked the broad street. Mysteriously, the air here was

so clear that they could see the church on the other side of the street. It was protected, on a hill, and behind a black fence. Aside from the mega geranium or the swaying azalea, the blood-red cherry grove on either side of the church was of two kinds. On one side of the church the trees were rotted and thawed, isolated in their complexion of cyan wood. On the other side were shrubs from another world, they were deformed and jaded like beige and ecru teaks. At the foot of the trees were the distorted shadows of motionless rock golems and the shadows of a trio of moles that had stopped digging in order to breathe in some fresh, poisonous air. The lifeless vegetation served as an indication that this was by no means a healthy, viridian forest.

The bell tower of the church was slowly burning from top to bottom. While watching the fire spin atop the tower, the survivors saw occasional zephyrs of gold and silver merging with the storm. The rest of the church was unscathed, perhaps there was a sacred aura shielding this particular group of brick and mortar, allowing the rest of the city to fend for itself.

This display, of plummeting flames and of spiked creatures and of impending death, frightened Timid. She was keen on spotting the monsters that were hidden in the tall grass of this cobalt, indigo plateau. "I don't want to be here, Mommy," she urged. She tugged on her mother's clothing and faced away from the large window. Amy, quick to sympathize with her daughter, could understand that she had possibly imagined feral gators or arcane canines or cherubim rising from the headstones of the church's cemetery. A gust rushed in and their clear view of the church was gone. The

explosion of a typhoon in the air was a powerful whirlwind that obscured that very broad way.

“Okay. It’s okay. We don’t have to look this way,” Amy responded as she took her children towards a couch off to the right of the main desk. The comfort of the sofa would probably be reason enough for them to stay put. If not, the phone they had found would be a useful distraction. None of the phones in the atrium were functional and the children dialing random numbers would be no issue. Although Adam would normally be eager to run around, he was still tired from the jog he just had. Confident they would stay put, Amy left Adam in charge of their safety.

“Mommy will be back after she talks with the policeman. Take care of your sister and stay here, okay? I don’t want you to get lost or hurt,” she said cheerfully with a forced smile. She dropped Timid’s bag on the couch and as she walked back towards the horrifying landscape, Timid turned around, kneeling on the cushions and observed every step her mother took. Instantly she became anxious of being away from Mommy even for a little bit. The only way she or her brother could see anything behind was in this manner, just like looking out of the subway windows. After a few minutes she sat on the couch normally and saw witnessed a change in scenery. Outside of this window there was a building with three columns, one with frozen spikes, the other with zapping cables, and the last one with melting magma. Still, it was far less frightening than the monsters in the dark, fallen garden.

She felt she had done enough sightseeing, took out a book from her bag and began reading. There was just

enough light in the room for her to clearly see the pages. This particular book was one she had not yet seen, but it quickly won her attention. Although the words were basic, it took her some time to get through the pages since she had only recently learned how to read on her own. The pictures, with their reds, blues, greens, and yellows, comforted her as it was the most color she had seen in a while. In the story, the jewels of gold and silver and crystal belonged to the princess, yet for all their differences she was eager to share it with her kingdom, not in spite of their differences, but because of them. It was as the cool and famous Champion had said: “Our differences make us stronger.” The Rocket Bandits were no threat once the princess stood up to them. They would no longer pillage and burn those who had done nothing wrong. But they still teamed up with the giants. The giants, with their silly, big heads, and with their ancient, stringent ideologies, attacked the kingdom hoping to instill their rigid lifestyle everywhere. With the help of the musical fairies from Lunar Mountain, the princess was able to put an end to the quarrel. And the fairies would never be forgotten; tales and fables of armistice and of embracing the world’s differences would be forever recorded into lore. Unity was not too farfetched, it seemed, but perhaps the princess simply needed more Dragon Knights to ensure harmony and serenity could thrive everywhere. For her integrity she was revered a hero, a champion. The kingdom of Joto was rebuilt and remade; it’s heart, gold, it’s soul, silver.

“We don’t have any method of communication. I don’t know what we can do,” Amy told Wilk and Deacon. “Neither my phone nor any of the phones here seem to

work. And these computers don't work just like before. It doesn't look like very many electronics other than your radio and some emergency sirens are functioning."

The officer reached for his radio and turned it on. It continued to hiss at him, only this time there was a subtle pattern of bits and beats and beeps behind the static. He could have also sworn that he heard a voice or a sound or a *something* that sounds like spoken words, words that were lost in the radio's nonsense. The broadcast of this unknown, ruined alphabet confused both Wilk and Deacon. They mused and thought and contemplated the possible meaning of this puzzle, but their minds were blank. Wilk wondered why he was able to hear distinct sounds from the radio this time, but not the last time he had the radio on.

"It's definitely not Morse. I would have picked something up by now," commented Deacon, "if anything, sounds like radio comms are congested—" he coughed "—too many people tryna talk while the system's weak."

Rare nuggets and pieces of data come through to their end. Sometimes a rapid succession of beeps resounded. In a very binary manner, eight beeps were composed from the device, then three, then twelve. The most common were the eight bits that eventually grew to become sixteen bits, from which many possible meanings could be derived. The airwaves could hardly transmit all the pieces in full, struggling everywhere to be understood. Ultimately, neither Wilk nor Deacon could decode the language or the art of the bits. If they could make no sense of it they would not know what do to, else they act without any wise guidance.

After a few more minutes of static and undecipherable hums and codes, Wilk shut off the radio. He sunk back into his sofa, reminding himself that he had no reasons to be so tense. As he closed his eyes, he allowed his mind to wander without purpose, without destination.

Charles Deacon took this chance to explore their new environment since the officer looked beat and he could do nothing about his wounds without any medical equipment. On both sides of the main counter were cubicles and desks, sofas and tables. Everywhere he went he could see bank notes and green pens littered on the floor, as well as pieces of wood from the blown in wall.

Next to the bank notes were also some wallets, seemingly without owners. Not a single person or deceased body was to be found. He opened them and he was able to obtain three ID cards. One of them belonged to a guy named Sugimori, Ken. Just by looking at his picture Deacon could tell the man knew a lot about art and style. One of the other ID cards used to belong to someone by the name of Tajiri, Satoshi whose huge glasses made him look like a bug. The last of the cards belonged to Yamauchi, Hiroshi; he wore a face of success and one that invoked confidence in Deacon. Just by looking at the photo, he could not help but smile. He put the cards away; he figured he may one day need to return these to their respective owners.

He moved to investigate the blown in wall. He was overcome with a familiar scent as he walked closer to it; it smelled of burnt plastique and smoked rubber. He let out another cough. The gap in the wall was big enough to walk

though and he ventured on. This was more like a hallway than anything, but it was completely dark this far in.

When he saw a cluster of green glow sticks sitting on a table, he was bemused. It provided very little light, but he could see that he was now in the bank's vault. If anything, this was a silver cave; the entirety of the room was sleek, which reflected the dim, green lights. As he moved closer to inspect the room he heard a constant babbling and chirping that went on and on and on. He entered the room and saw that a radio on a desk was the source of the chattering. To the right of the desk was reflective wall, to the left, more glow sticks on the ground and on other desks.

“Hot damn!” the voice over the radio yelled with some static behind the voice. He walked over to the desk and picked up the device.

“Kaboom,” another digital voice said, this one less enthusiastic than the one prior. He could find no visible buttons or switches on the device.

A weapon safety clicked. A bright light flashed and shone against his face. Fire shot through his body and his heart splashed and thrashed against his lungs and against his chest. He coughed again as his body instinctively recoiled in a defensive manner, shielding his retinas and his face from the blinding light.

Salvation

Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he die, yet shall he live and whosoever liveth and believeth on me shall never die. Believest thou this?

John 11:25-26

Four uniformed men stood before Officer Wilk, Charles Deacon, and Amy MacMillan. Their faces were shielded by professional grade gas masks; nothing went in unless it was safe to breathe and nothing came out unless they breathed it out. Each was fully armed, and protected from weapons and elemental dangers. According to their shoulder patches, they were members of the Rocket Dragon Battalion. These men in particular appeared to be a Patrol Unit, aptly named Team Rocket Dragon. Deacon, who was familiar with some armed force branches, tried to get an answer out of them.

“This is Mr. Wilk of the NYPD. He could really use your help. If you guys have any—spare bandages or pain killers I could use, that’d be great.” The soldiers were unresponsive.

“And this is Mrs. MacMillan, she and her—”

“—I could really use some information. I’d kind of like to know what’s going on if that’s not too much to ask of you,” she interrupted Deacon. She sent him back a glare and ever so slightly shook her head as he coughed.

“Yeah, we’re all pretty much just tired of running and we really want to know if there’s a way out of here,” Deacon continued with a forced smile. He took another look at their patches and noted the insignia of the team. It was a winged creature; one silver wing, one rainbow wing. Its squinting eyes were acute and ever vigilant. It had razor sharp teeth; the design in general contained sharp, spiked, and extremely

linear shapes. The wyvern was a mixture between an Oh-Holy phoenix and a sacred, guardian in the form of a plesiosaur or a beluga.

Shallow bangs resonated from the horizon, passing through the gaunt, skeletal buildings. Deacon coughed again, unable to find any solution to the scraping in his lungs or the dryness of his mouth. "That's a hit!" the man on the radio garbled on. J. Dahmer was the name of one of the soldier nearest to Deacon. S. Sellers, the name of one of the others.

"I'm really just hoping you guys can help us out of this mess," he said with a hoarse voice, forcing a cough to try to get a better look at names.

Wilk could not find within himself the energy necessary to look up at who it was Deacon and MacMillan were speaking with, nor could he find the strength to open his eyes for a single glance.

A fifth man emerged from the hallway that led to the vault. Like the rest, he was completely covered and concealed. He dropped some large bags on the ground next to the four sentinel men, the bags dropping with a loud thud.

"Alright, what have we here?" a stern voice spoke from behind the mask.

"Three civilians, sir," a grunt was quick to respond, "one of them being a police officer."

"Is that so? Lance Corporal Giovanni Shepherd. I'm assuming you three were caught in the madness and managed to stay hidden, yes?" he said offering his hand.

Metal rattled loudly within the building and out on the street. Valves and wheels and magnetrons, for a split second,

vibrated and came back to life in a random surge of electricity. The lights of the bank flickered on for just as long as volt orbs sparked between connections and for as briefly as electrodes shook into action once more.

For the first time within the past few hours, sunlight broke through the smoke and the church atop the indigo plateau was once again visible. Gusts of wind drove away the once thick smoke and daybreak shone down on the city. A clear, blue sky had neither been so relieving nor so beautiful a sight.

“That’s correct,” said Deacon, shaking his hand. “Charles Deacon, former marine.”

“Former Marine?” he asked as he scratched his shoulder. “Any CO I may know of?”

“I worked under Lieutenant Surge and Captain Pryce about a decade ago. They worked mainly small operations, so you may not have heard their names.”

“No, sorry. Doesn’t ring a bell. And you might be?”

“...MacMillan. Amy MacMillan,” she said before reluctantly shaking his hand, “teacher.”

“High school? You deal with brats all day long?”

“Elementary, actually.”

“My dear Watson,” said Shepherd after a brief pause. “And who may this be?”

“Officer Wilk. NYPD. He’s been injured and we would greatly appreciate any help you could give us.”

“Hmm, how sad. It doesn’t look like I’ll have any time to play with my food today.”

More echoes ran through the streets followed by an apparent “hit” of some sort as announced by the radio.

“What?” Deacon exclaimed.

“Well, no use keeping it from you anyway,” said an audibly upset Shepherd. “We’re not really here on any search and rescue mission if that’s what you had in mind. We have our own special assignment, and civilians weren’t really mentioned in our briefing, so it’s really up my guy,” he said, his hand suspended well above his head, “that dictates what we do with civilians. And my guy likes a no witness policy.”

Deacon’s smile, which he wore out of relief, turned into a mean look. This was the last thing he wanted to hear.

“But don’t you three worry; there have been others before you. You guys won’t be the first, but you also won’t be the last.”

Amy was apparently right to remain cautious of these men. It would be the last thing on her mind to bring her children anywhere near this situation. Overall, her distaste of the circumstances under which she was acquainted with Rocket Dragon did not leave her with the best of impressions.

Deacon took another closer look at the bag that Shepherd dropped when he exited the vault. This time he noted that there were four leashes attached to the bag. Much to his surprise there were also police badges pinned on the bag, all of them lined up perfectly, displaying a row of organized badges. There were seven, each different from the next. The only name he could really see from where he stood was Jenni. The only question Deacon wanted answered was whether or not the badges were taken by force. He had seen and heard more than enough to know what filled the bag.

“Unless you missed any part of that, I don’t think I need to repeat myself,” Shepherd rambled on in a voice more menacing than before. He removed his weapon from its holster before asking “Any last words?”

The destruction in the distance was drawing closer and louder. Aero blasts and sacred fires from above shattered into pieces anything that was unfortunate enough to impede the intended target. “Nother hit,” “You got ‘im,” “Nice one,” the radio continued replaying, as if it were a recording.

“This is cruel, inhumane, and not to mention—illegal.”

“Hey, small operations, right, Deac? Simple wet works. I’m sure you’ve had to do your own share of wet work. Besides, I never said we were USMC, you just assumed we were.” No doubt he wore a sinister smile under that mask this very moment. Deacon had no more words, nothing with which to negotiate with, and no way to best get out of this ordeal safely. The silence led Shepherd to aim his pistol in front of him.

“Why? We haven’t done any wrong to you, yet you want to kill us here and now. You’ve chosen, for some reason, that we aren’t worthy to live. Why should we so easily fall under submission to someone like you?” an angered Amy asked. Her voice was nothing like that of a mother’s nor like that of a teacher’s. This time she was a completely different person.

“This Desert Eagle,” responded Shepherd, lazily waving the firearm around.

“We would have nothing to bring against you if you just let us live. And even then, all you have to do is get us someplace safe or leave us be and you’ll never hear from us

or *of* us ever again. Why are you selfish enough as to so easily decide what fate will befall others? It's in the common good, no matter what you believe or who you adhere to, to at least grant us our own freedoms. If we die out there it would be all of our own accord and we would be responsible for that, not you. Allow us to answer for our own trespasses, and relinquish us of the trespasses of those before us. If we do wrong by you in the privacy of our own lives, permit *us* pay the price. You can decry us to your satisfaction, but please don't harm us, and please don't destroy who we are just because you devote yourself to a dissimilar creed. We shouldn't all be hinging on rights or morality or life and death just because of *your* personal commitments."

The bell across the street, the bell from the church, rang. There must have been other survivors inside. The sound of the bell, above the trinity, purified everything it reached. Were they ringing the bell to rally help? Or maybe the church really *was* protected from the reality of the world, celebrating a wedding while the rest of mankind faced its greatest torment yet. Maybe the bell rang due to a baptism. Or maybe—maybe the bell rang for some other reason.

It rang the first time as if the bell sprouted life, like when the young are born. In their youth, children were always eager to find the good and joy in others, though the callous conditions of humanity may lie dormant, disguised as salvation; as Deacon hated himself for not seeing it sooner.

The bell rang a second time, this time as a weeping bell, like when the old die. For all the aches that had been endured and healed, as with all the blood that had been spilt

and would no longer regenerate; as Wilk began turning pale and cold.

The bell rang a third time, this time no doubt a victory bell. Mankind's creations and intelligence allowing him to understand, not fear, his own human nature, dispelling the primordial dependence on the supernatural; as Amy's reasonable speech taxed Shepherd's mind.

"Look, dear, I know you may have the preconception that I can simply choose my orders or whatever it is I am to do, but I simply don't, alright? A long time ago I gave my word that I would follow orders, and nothing is going to stand in the way of getting that done, whatever my orders may be or whatever the obstacle. Nothing, no one, no person, and especially no *ideologist* is going to hinder me. You're not like me; you don't understand me or where my alliance lies. Sometimes things work in mysterious ways that I may never be meant to understand."

"But know this," he raised his pistol. Shepherd muttered next, words that have remained here for the ages, "in spite of the things I've done, I know that God forgives."