**This is the tentative introduction of a lengthy story I am planning to write. This will be a long-term personal project of mine and I hope, someday, to publish my final edition.**

The sky is a black, fiery haze. Lingering ash casts a permanent shadow across the land. Green pastures and lush forests have withered and died in darkness. Cities, once glorious in a different time, are indistinguishable - piles of burning rubble, endless fields of debris and wreckage. The poison in the air, though unseen, is felt, weakening our bodies, dulling our minds.

Even as I write, I wonder, for whom and why? Perhaps it is my final act of contrition, to record man’s sins and demise and admit, finally, that we were wrong.

In the others I see the same guilt and desolation that surely must reflect in my eyes. For we are gathered here, dozens of the most brilliant men and women of our time. We were sheltered, protected underground, allowed to experiment beyond ethics in the name of duty. We were the minds behind the weapons that ravaged the earth.

In the past, we may have warred and battled, senseless soldiers in a world divided. But the civilizations we held dear have crumbled; the nationalities we swore our lives to are dead.

So we stand here, gathered under the towering roof of one of the few remaining FSP-1 complexes in the world. Four shining white walls enclose a massive room lined with intricate equipment. In the centre lies a cubicle, a diminutive box in the presence of such grandeur, yet strangely centric to the entire design.

The building itself is surrounded by eight-inch-thick lead plates. Each entrance holds a vacuumed chamber flooded with sterilizing chemicals, the system allowing entry only upon a successful contamination scan. The air within is completely purified – cycled from the outside every two minutes through a complex labyrinth of filters and disinfectants. Nothing is left to chance. Even in the face of our demise, it is hard not to admire the diligent handiwork of man.

This is a fortress, perhaps the safest above surface, but it will prolong our lives no longer than two weeks. Water can be recycled, but food is unsustainable. The shielding may hold, but the atmosphere is filled with too much poison, too many particles seeking to tear apart our bodily functions for it to last.

But this does not trouble us. We have assembled from every corner of the globe not to prolong our existence, but to partake in our final act of redemption, a penance for our sins.

It is science that has doomed us, science that shall redeem us.

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The black box fell slowly from the sky. Its red light flashed, a beacon for watchful eyes.

Out of the shadows, a boy emerged. He was not tall, perhaps thin for his age, but his hands were coarse and his eyes fierce and threatening. He approached carefully, crouched against the wall, barely visible against the backdrop of the dimly-lit alley. Long had he awaited this moment.

He took a step and stopped. He was not alone. The soft patter of stifled footsteps might have deceived an ordinary man, but the all-too familiar sound put the boy on alert. He fixed his gaze to the entrance of the alley and his heart sank as a figure rounded the corner.

“Jack,” he uttered the name bitterly.

Jack stood a head taller than anyone else in the district. Though thin as the rest of the populace, he was wiry and strong and held a reputation for savagery on the street. It was well-deserved. They had fought many times before, but the boy dreaded the thought of facing Jack’s brutality today.

He was weary and exhausted, in both body and mind – the result of stifling his numbing tiredness from midnight to the now-waking hours of dawn, lying in wait for the gleaming metal that Jack had now set his eyes upon. He had had no choice. His unit needed the supply drop more than anyone. The children were so parched that they could not produce tears when they cried. Their dry, retching sobs were their only response to the vicious pain in their stomachs that the boy knew all too well.

He had spent weeks tracking when and where the packages landed. He had predicted the position of the next drop and even the day on which it would fall. The only petty detail he had failed to learn was exactly when within the twenty-four hours it would appear. Now, it seemed, that would cost him. After so much planning, after torturous hours of prying his eyelids open, his efforts were to be trampled in a cruel twist of fate by this blundering brute. The boy almost laughed at the unfairness of it all. He struggled to contain his bitter grin when he saw that Jack was the one who was angry.

“How did you get here so fast?”

It was an accusation, not a question. Jack circled around the box.

“I was there when the wrap fell from the sky. Watched it fall to the ground, could not believe my luck. For once, just once, I thought I could get myself a meal without having to fight. I ran, fast as I could; wasn’t going to let nobody get to my prize before me.” Jack spoke, thinly veiled spite seeping from his voice,

“I’m running down the street. I can see the light flashing from the alley. My stomach hurting but that don’t stop me. I know once the wrap is mine the pain will go; all will be good. But I turn the corner. And I see you.”

He was trembling now.

“You. Trying to steal from me. I’m starving. I’m starving, don’t you see? I’m starving!”

As we are all, the boy thought, but did not speak.

“How did you get here so fast?” Jack repeated,

“You knew it was going to be here. Didn’t you? You waited. You’re tired. I can see it in your eyes. You know where these things land and you wait for them! Filthy cheater.”

The boy did not respond.

“That’s it then? No fight today?” Jack smirked,

“You wish. Cheaters never win. You must know that. But since you’ve forgotten, I’ll remind you.”

Jack advanced, his hands closing into fists, an ugly sneer etched from ear to ear, his face wrinkled by anger.

The boy grimaced. He would not be able to stand up to Jack, not now, not with his eyelids drooping and arms and legs hanging like lead. Even so, he saw his advantage. Jack’s rage controlled him. It made him blind, wild, irrational even by his own standards. It gave him a frenzied strength, but at the same time, took from him his judgment. He would not see the danger coming. The boy retreated and furrowed his eyes in an expression of fear.

“Don’t hurt me Jack. You can have the box. Just don’t hurt me, please,”

He crouched lower in submission, but even as he did, he positioned himself so that his body hid the box from Jack’s eyes, so that Jack would not see the boy’s hand reach behind his legs and grasp the metal handle.

The visible fear only assured Jack that victory was at hand. His eyes glinted with a mixture of madness and pleasure and he stepped forward, fist raised. It was the moment the boy had been waiting for.

He sprang upwards, turning at the same time and transferring all his weight and momentum into a blow delivered by his swinging arm - attached to its end, a ten-kilogram box encased by reinforced steel. The solid metal sailed on a trajectory towards Jack’s skull, before, at the last instant, the boy lowered his arm, driving the steel box into his assailant’s shoulder instead.

This split-second decision saved Jack’s life. Even so, a sickening crack was heard and he collapsed to the floor instantly. The ground was hard and coarse, bristling with ridges that stabbed and scraped at his flesh, but in the midst of pain and shock, Jack’s anger only intensified. He mashed his teeth together and if the boy had turned around as he was running out of the alley, he would have seen a malicious and undisguised hatred in Jack’s eyes. This was someone who did not forget, did not forgive, who would go every length and more to repay insult and injury. And getting knocked to the floor by a smaller boy, a cheater, was insult indeed.

“This isn’t over! You hear me? You cheated! I will find you and I will break every single bone in your body! You’d better watch out. You hear me? You hear me, Cain?”

The pain in his shoulder already forgotten, Jack was envisioning what he would do to this little boy, how he would smash and snap until the boy cried, begged for mercy. Of course, he wouldn’t stop there.

Cain didn’t respond, but Jack’s ominous threats were ringing through his ears.

The trip back to Unit 64 was long, made longer by the frequent glances Cain threw over his shoulder. It was silly. He had heard the bones crack, felt the box crunch into Jack’s side. He knew that Jack wouldn’t come after him – not for a while, at least. Even so, he was troubled by the inescapable sense of danger, as if the very ground on which he stood sought to swallow him up. He looked around once more. The resentful glares and hungry eyes bore on him from every direction, but it was not this that troubled him.

These scraggly boys, scrounging for food, were divided amongst themselves, tired and lonely as he. He knew he had nothing to fear from them. Every day and night these children glowered at those who had retrieved their boxes. It meant nothing. These were not the violent ones, the ones who sauntered down the street with murder in their eyes. Those boys did not linger this late into the morning. They did their dirty deeds in the hours of dusk, when it was easy to maim or even kill without stirring notice. It was by a blunder of chance that he had encountered Jack, but these children were nothing like him. They were hungry, but scared, and not quite desperate enough to forget their fear. It had been this way for as long as Cain could remember, and it would be no different today and no different tomorrow.

Yet, even as Cain fell back at ease, he knew he was wrong. The world he knew was changing, and it was not for the better.

In the past week, he had seen no more than three flashing supply drops. One of them he was holding in his hand. The other two, he knew only from a glimpse – they had been specks in the distance, certain to have been seized before he could have drawn near. Just last month, he had counted a steady stream of five weekly, and the one before that, seven. The supplies had already been dwindling then, but this week had been nearly unbearable, seven days of hunger and tension unlike any other. The trend was an unnerving one, and only the first of many he had begun to notice. The growing number of boys living and feeding on the street was another.

Almost half of them, lingering in corners and alleys, Cain had never seen before. They were not the usual scroungers. They had taken to the streets only in recent times, brought onto the filthy and punishing grounds by sheer desperation. Their unease and distress were evident. Their eyes darted all around, some trying to avoid contact by staring into the ground, some watching the skies above in hope for the next drop, and others glancing warily from side to side, tensely guarding themselves from one another.

The veterans, it seemed, had their own reaction to the newcomers. They clenched their fists and scowled and bared their teeth in a subtle display of hostility. Their territory had been overrun and their space had become crowded with competition. Cain briefly wondered how long it could be until fights started breaking out.

He passed another road, paved with dull-brown cobblestones aligned in uniform squares. Despite their multitude, the streets had somehow been designed so that they all looked the same. What drew his eye to this one was the sight of a girl, squatting on the ground, tousling her mangy hair with grimy fingers. He had to look twice to convince himself that the feminine features actually belonged to a female. It was simply unheard of for a girl to scavenge and fight on the street. Even most boys were unwilling to spend more time than was necessary in this unforgiving world. With a sinking feeling, Cain wondered how long she would survive. He thought of Annabelle. He couldn’t imagine her scrounging and fighting for food, but he knew that the possibility was not quite so far away.

There was more talk now of abandoning units than ever. Indeed, the majority of the boys here had likely done so themselves, each choosing to seek and claim his own fortune rather than rely on the miniscule government rations. Jack certainly had. Surely, it was an easier living. There was no constraint, no regulation to the life of a street dweller. And even the duller ones had realized that any nourishment the thin slices of soaked bread that passed as daily rations could provide was far outweighed by the advantages of not having to share food. With each passing day, there was less and less reason to support and more and more reason to desert. The throngs of children gathered around him were undeniable proof.

Briefly, Cain considered doing the same. He was immediately ashamed of himself. The labour was strenuous like nothing else and left him drained day after day. Worse still was the gnawing pain in his midsection that, try as it might, his body could never adjust to. But even in all his suffering and agony, all his pain and hunger, how could he possibly have contemplated abandoning his unit? How could he have entertained the thought of leaving four innocent children to die? For that was, without a doubt, what would happen if Cain chose to crawl into a secluded alley and devour his supplies in peace, filling his stomach with nutrients and solids it desperately needed, never to return to his unit or labour again.

But he couldn’t. He knew that. He thought of Annabelle, of how she worked endlessly with her needle to sow shoe after shoe, of how gentle she was in times easy and hard. He thought of the children, of Riley, Wendy and Frank, who never complained, never despaired despite their devastating hunger, whose only betrayal of emotion lay in a widening and deadening of the eyes each time Cain stepped into the block empty-handed.

Today, that would not be. Today, their eyes would remain alight and the whole unit would have enough food for an entire week. They would feast on real meat and drink clean, purified water. Their throats would be quenched and their bellies hollow no longer.

Cain tried not to think of how long the supplies could last if he were their sole recipient.

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It is a strange sensation to live with anticipation in the face of death. The fifty odd men and women tremble with both excitement and trepidation – but for this, we bear little resemblance to one another. I cannot recall a gathering of humanity so diverse in the last fifty years. Many have travelled overseas, risking exposure even within their steel aircraft. It is a staunch reminder of the magnitude of the task we have been entrusted with.

It is easy, within stainless white walls, to forget the horrors beyond. The blackened earth and its crumbling debris bear no relevance to the spotless chambers in which we reside. The radiation counter, perched atop the corner of the main complex, remains the sole indicator that something might be amiss, and even that is easily enough ignored.

The sophisticated instruments lined from wall to wall are no stranger to us. Indeed, the operating rooms, chemical chambers, and particle colliders bring with them an inevitable sense of familiarity, welcome reminders of our past lives. These are the tools with which we procured miracles, not their crude, underground relatives that existed only to bring death and destruction. As we file into the complex, summoned by an intuitive call to assembly, the melancholic reminiscence settles over us, the bittersweet sensation of squandered possibilities.

“You all know why we are here,” the short man with brown hair speaks with a silky voice. He uses English – not that it matters; he could have used any of the other six internationally recognized languages and we all would have understood perfectly.

“Time is short, and the work we must do is great. But there is no one, no one in the world, not then, and not now, better suited for it. The most brilliant minds, possibly in the entire existence of humanity, gathered, united under one roof. It truly is a remarkable occasion. If only we could have met under happier tidings.

“Alas, it was not to be. We were foolish, brothers and sisters; we lent our prowess to brash and belligerent men, and with it, they destroyed the very fibres that held the earth together. Such promise was within our grasp, incredible technologies whose surfaces we had only scratched. Interstellar colonization, artificial intelligence, vessels capable of exploring the greatest depths of the ocean. We could have revolutionized the world, produced wonders that would make sunlight itself seem infinitesimal.”

His voice deepens and a slight echo accompanies his words.

“Megaanuums of evolution created a cunning beast who grew to rule the earth. Eras of disaster and strife could not overcome it; calamity only gave it reason to discover and innovate. It learned to master the world, but not itself, and its fingers turned wild and clawed out its eyes, its teeth bit through its tongue, and its legs, driven mad by agony, threw the wretched body off a cliff. The beast, once vast and mighty, slain.

“But it is survived, if only as a shadow of its former self, by the seed it has implanted within the womb of the earth. The sprout will rise in the image of its father but bear resemblance by image alone, free from the fatal flaws of its predecessor. We are its cultivator, the diligent farmer who will plough and rake even as he knows he will meet death before the fruits of his creation come to bear. Thus begins the revival of sentience.”

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The gate, rusty and decrepit and laughably undersized, served more as an illusionary warning than an actual security measure, and it was not very good at either. It was already swung wide open as Cain approached the lot it enclosed, a small patch of soil coated with a layer of grass that, despite the attempts of many, refused to grow green, instead preferring a dull, withered brown that matched the colour of the shack that rested upon it. Four sheets of decaying plaster and a thin plate of metal on top to hold it all together, with the number *64* lazily etched on the front wall. The official sign had long since rotted away, but since it was mandated to keep each unit numerically identifiable, Cain had taken to scratching the figures in with a sharp stick, the process undone and repeated each time the rain turned the plaster into a watery mold.

He stood now at the front of the shack, marked by a series of wooden planks strewn together with rough twine. At least this was structurally stable – Cain had designed and created the makeshift door himself.

He looked down at his earnings. The shiny black metal and its perfectly cubic geometry seemed out of place here. Its contents would soon be divided among those who had neither worked nor fought for them. His stomach let out a vicious snarl and a sharp pain squeezed at his abdomen. How fortunate he was to belong to a unit, to be able to share his findings with four other children instead of placating his starving self alone.

Cain pushed the door open.

Riley was the first to see him – little, four-year-old Riley. No one really knew their exact age, but Cain thought Riley looked four years old, and so he was a four. Wendy was a three and Frank was a five. And Annabelle – Annabelle was whatever he was – a fourteen, a fifteen? All they knew was that the two of them had reached labour age and were eligible for paternal duty.

Wendy and Frank looked up in unison. Cain thought it unlikely that they would ever do anything that was not. They both had broad faces and dimples even starvation could not take away.

Annabelle was the last to notice the box. But when she did, her eyes gleamed and her lips opened into a beaming smile. Despite himself, Cain felt his pulse quicken.

There was no cheering or laughter; hunger had taught them long ago to be sparing with actions, but Cain knew that he had brought hope and salvation to four people, perhaps the only four people, he cared about in his life. And at that moment, he would not have traded places with anyone else, no matter how well-fed they were.

Seventeen nutrition cubes and eight purification tablets. Cain counted and counted again.

The food would last for two weeks, the clean water for one, and every last drop would be used for drinking. Still, it would be enough. Two weeks was ample time for Cain to find the next package, and if water became a problem, he could always make the trip upstream.

Though supply drops were dwindling by the day, the opposite was true for the contents inside. Cain recalled times when each package retrieved was but a momentary respite, a stint of nourishment before the next drop would have to be found and secured, usually within the same day. It had been an utterly exhausting existence, a state of constant exertion that had seen many children collapse to the floor on the streets, unable to keep searching, running, fighting for bare sustenance. Cain had not been one of them.

He had been strong, not like the bullies, relying on fear and brutality – he never took from children, never hurt them for fun – but he had never allowed f ear to control him either, had never allowed the thought of pain and suffering to quench his desire for survival.

And he saw things. Things that the others didn’t see. The winding path that led upstream to the very heart of the river was a blind spot in the Centurion patrols, the only unguarded route into an unlimited supply of drinking water. And yet, when Annabelle and the children grew too parched to emit anything but a raspy whisper and he himself retched with the dryness in his throat, he traversed it alone, incredulous that of the hundreds of units suffering from dehydration, not a single other soul accompanied him to scramble up the dirt road.

The drops themselves, the invaluable provisions for which everyone seemed to yearn, over which fights could erupt and murder could be carried out indifferently, had a distinct pattern to their arrival. It had been a difficult one to see, and Cain might not have seen it at all had he not successfully retrieved a string of five packages in a row before. His unit had eaten as never before and it had finally dawned on him why the supplies kept landing so tantalizingly close to Unit 64 – because he had kept finding them.

It was as simple as that. Anyone who found a supply drop had the next one delivered to their doorstep, a twisted reward system that fed the strong and starved the weak.

When the sixth drop had finally eluded him, taken by a scrawny, dark-haired boy Cain knew to live near the coal station by the layer of soot he had worn on his skin, Cain had watched the skies eagerly. Sure enough, the next package, as it descended through the air, a speck of darkness against the gray canopy of the sky, was silhouetted on the opposite side of the rising sun – in the direction of the Welding Annex yet too far away to land near it. There could be no doubt; it would bury itself within the housing cluster that surrounded the coal station, presumably in search of a scrawny, dark-haired boy whose freckles were hidden by a layer of soot.

This had thrilled, not disheartened Cain, for although the drop had fallen far beyond reach, it was the final proof that had solidified his speculations. And in the days that had followed, as he had watched the other children running in desperate circles, searching in all the wrong places, waiting in alleys for drops that would never arrive, there had come a greater, graver, realization.

He was not like the others.

Though he shared in their plight for survival, his yearning was for something greater than metal boxes and their flashing lights. Like a bird chained to the ground, he felt pained, as if great depths and vast expanses were just beyond his reach, his hands shackled only by the cruel and unnatural game woven and enforced by the almighty Centurion. The game of starvation, the game of exhaustion, the game of murder and brutality, of chasing black boxes and fighting Jack every single day. The game that, for now at least, he had to play. But not by their rules.

He alone knew what he was capable of, how he could see things the others could not, uncover secrets they could never have begun to guess, how, with cunning and wit, he could bend the world around him to his will, master the game that to others was a battle for life.

It was a thought that made him feel incredibly powerful, yet utterly, hopelessly, alone.

Annabelle divided the nutrition cubes, cutting and molding the leftovers into five equal pieces. Cain didn’t think the children would notice if their portions were larger or smaller than the rest, but she gave the task such attentiveness and care that he couldn’t help but chuckle. Her long hair hung over her shoulder and on her face she wore a contented smile. Her hands looked delicate and gentle as they handled the plastic knife, but Cain was not fooled. He had seen them at work before, watched as they had pulled and pricked and torn and sewed to turn bare leather into hardened soles. And he knew that if they were turned over, he would see the callouses that aligned the palms, the creases of hardened skin born from the twine she would tighten around the door when Cain was gone, the dried gashes that dotted her fingertips where needles had missed leather and pierced flesh instead. It was one of the reasons that he so admired her. For she was gentle, and she was kind, but she was also bold and dependable, unafraid to do work and endure pain when work had to be done and pain had to be endured, which was every single day in Unit 64.

It started early in the morning, when the sun had not yet risen over the vast silhouette of the main generator. That was when the Centurion trucks made their first rounds, the grey masses of moving steel expelling wooden boxes and slips of paper that no one ever read. There was no need to, daily labour was simple. It was the Second Centurion Mandate that each male and female, upon reaching the official age of labour, be designated a task to perform every single day for the rest of their lives.

For Annabelle, it was shoes. The wooden box would arrive at the doorstep half-full with unstrung leather. It was expected that she return it to the Manufactured Goods Deposit by the end of the day, filled to the brim with functional and sturdy shoes of three different sizes. She had a needle, string, and her bare hands to work with.

For Cain, it was the Welding Annex. It meant leaving Unit 64 with the heaviness of slumber still embedded in his chest, traversing the cobblestone roads to arrive at a grey rectangle of a building marked by the black plumes that rose over its top. The walk was safe, if tiring. Officially, fighting and battery of all kinds were prohibited at any time of the day, but it was only in the morning hours of labour that Centurion patrols would actually guard the roads.

Inside the Welding Annex was where the hazy and humid air of the streets turned into the stifling fumes and blistering heat of melting pots and their scorching fires. They were long hours spent inside that left his skin singed and hands raw. Cain could still recall the first day he had stepped into the Annex, how he was at once overwhelmed by the sweltering air that drew sweat seemingly from every pore of his body. It seemed so long ago, but the scar was there to remind him, a red stain across his left torso born from an agonizing encounter with molten iron. He had learned quickly after that, even though there had been no one to teach. He had watched the older boys, the ones that had been there longest, mimicking their adept hands, noting the way they made their movements more efficient with leverage.

He had caught on fast enough. Many of the other boys were less fortunate. Those who couldn’t adapt, who weren’t strong enough to perform labour in a simulated furnace were taken away by the Centurion. No one knew where they were sent and no one wanted to find out. But Cain had seen, time and time again, the silent desolation they wore as they were dragged away, the casual, almost liberating hopelessness of accepted defeat. It was this that drove him to carry on when his back ached and his eyes blurred with the sweat.

He often wondered how long it had been since the smell of burning metal and being suffocated by air had been new sensations. He was now one of the veterans, one of the older boys young Cain had used for guidance and instruction. It felt like years had passed since then, but it could have been months, or even weeks, and he wasn’t sure he would have known the difference. The days seemed to stretch on and pass by at the same time, endless cycles of labour and unit management, welding iron and fighting for supply drops.

He knew it would get easier. There would come a day when he would no longer have to fight for food, a day when he could receive meals bountiful and nourishing from the Settlement Depot. It would also be the day that Riley, Wendy and Frank left his care, the day that they reached labour age themselves and began the mad scramble of the streets, entrusted with their own units to provide for or abandon.

It would be the day that Cain reached the official age of settlement, the day that he was no longer a labourer and joined the ranks of the settlers, living as they did, working as they did. Seven hours in the Welding Annex before returning to his own separate district, one person per unit of housing except during reproduction season, food and security ensured by the Centurion. But Cain had seen them, the adults that came in to feed fire and melt iron, watched as they had raised limp arms and let the axe carry itself down upon the wood, looked on as they staggered down the road at the end of the day, eyes sunken and shoulders slumped. And he knew. They didn’t live, not really. They just existed, fed and protected but condemned to repeat the same mundane and exhausting task day after day, week after week, until finally, their bodies gave out and they died a lonely and almost relieving death.

Cain’s eyes settled on Annabelle at the end of his reverie. He found himself thinking that she was not bad-looking at all. In fact, (though of course he had never told her) Cain thought she was quite pretty. She turned to meet his gaze and the corner of her smile inched just the slightest bit higher.

The two of them didn’t talk much – there wasn’t much to say – but Cain enjoyed their time together nonetheless. When they sat in the same room, taking care of the children, cherishing rare moments of relief between periods of labour and the street, there was a connection, an understanding between them both that soothed his thoughts and warmed his blood. It was there now, in the creeping rays of daylight that inched into the room as their eyes locked in a moment sweet but brief, the knowledge that they would soon be immersed in the rigors of the day hanging in the air.

The children quietly nibbled on their rations as the first of the Centurion trucks rumbled across the street. The moment was one of quiet and peace, the calm breeze, gentle and kind, before the coming of a storm. And Cain found himself thinking yet again that Annabelle was astonishingly beautiful and wondered if she thought the same of him. Then he wondered if he should say something, but he wasn’t sure what to say and he found this funny, so his lips parted and a slight chuckle escaped from his throat. Annabelle, who had been watching, giggled herself, and Cain’s chuckle grew louder and livelier and soon, Cain and Annabelle were both laughing outrageously for no good reason at all, and it made them feel happy and free in a way they had not felt for a very long time. The children looked at them curiously and even little Riley, quiet and shy, couldn’t help but release his own bubbly giggle. And on and on they laughed, all five of them, until the morning chimes sounded and Cain walked out the door.

When Cain stepped into the Welding Annex, he realized just how tired he was. The metal tables and pots of iron seemed to melt into one convincing blur of orange and grey. It had been a full day since he had last felt the soothing embrace of slumber, the warm blankets of darkness and comfort that would envelop him if he would just allow his wilting eyes to close.

But he couldn’t. Not surrounded by acrid fumes and burning machinery with Centurion guards watching his every move. For that would be suicide in its own right, a needless lapse of strength that would have devastating consequences. He had been through worse; he would make it through today. Or so he believed, with a conviction so rigid and unwavering it might have been forged by the very iron that surrounded him, until he saw Jack’s face. *Not this. Not today.*

He had thought, with a near-absolute certainty, that Jack would have requested leave on basis of injury, one of the few circumstances that allowed labourers respite from up to one full week of work. Knowing Jack, it would have given him time to scavenge and raid unprotected units, beating the smaller children for food and supplies and sowing seeds of fear and submission among the streets. The chance to escape from the sweltering heat of the Welding Annex and do something, perhaps the only thing, he genuinely enjoyed doing must have been a tantalizing option indeed. And yet, here he was, a crude sling wrapped across his shoulder, his eyes shining with pure malice as they stabbed at Cain from across the room. The look was not one of frenzied anger nor vicious cruelty, but rather the perfect combination of both that made his gaze more frightening and terrible to behold than any amount of one or the other could have achieved.

Cain had no doubt Jack was envisioning something truly and utterly horrific.

The ladle blistered his hands and strained his arms with its weight. Even though the liquefied iron was contained within the metal cavity, the heat was such that it spread to the very tip of the handle, searing and tearing off flakes of dead skin with each successive trip from the melting pot. But Cain thought this was good. The pain would keep him awake, and more than that, his mind away from Jack’s foreboding presence.

He set the ladle down upon a metal platform and slid a silvery-grey box across the table. He split it open along a line that ran down its length and laid it out into two halves, each containing a semi-cylindrical indent that faced towards the ceiling. This was the steel casing. It would enclose the molten iron and mold it into whatever form the Centurion desired. Labourers were each assigned different molds on their first day, and it was with these that they would work for the rest of their time at the Welding Annex.

Cain’s mold produced iron bars of a sort, thin and grey cylinders slightly longer than the length of his forearm. He had tried many times to guess at their purpose but had never come to a convincing conclusion. He couldn’t imagine they were used for structural support – they were far too thin for that – and yet, they were too long to be turned into wrenches and bolts and other devices he had seen produced at the Annex. It frustrated him, to produce dozens of the same thing every single day without a clue as to what they were used for. But welders merely created the shapes, mechanics were the ones who put them together into buildings and vehicles and drainage systems.

He poured the molten orange into each half of the molding. It never failed to astound him how easily the liquid flowed from the ladle, as if it had forgotten it was once a lump of unbendable metal. He watched the orange sizzle its way to the top of each vacant cylinder.

He could not afford to be careless with this part of the procedure. Too much iron and the resulting bar would have hardened metal leaking out of its sides, excess iron frozen solid in its escape from between the molds. Too little, and the two sides of orange would never quite meet, or if they did, would only do so at a single point, forming either two separate semi-cylinders or one thin one with a gaping hole down the middle. No, this step, as simple as it seemed, had to be handled precariously.

When he was satisfied with the amount of iron in each mold, he set the ladle down and clasped the two halves together so that the box was whole again. If he had judged correctly, it wouldn’t be able to close completely. The molten orange had to overflow ever so slightly so that when it cooled, the resulting solid would be perfectly fit to the mold, and yet, the box had to be sealed so none of the liquid leaked out and distorted the shape. This was where Cain often wished he had been born just a little bit taller and a little bit stronger.

Casing

Work:

-Get molten iron into ladle

-Pour the iron into steel casing

-Bind casing together

-Allow iron to cool

-Open casing

-Remove metal bar

-Measure and check

His spirits still uplifted from earlier

-Next stage of conflict with Jack (inside Welding Annex)

-Working conditions and job details in Welding Annex

Welding annex

-Transition into immediate moment

-“Annabelle divided the nutrition squares…”

-Tablets dispersed into water, more water than recommended

-Labour and youth procedures explained

-Annabelle and Cain daily tasks explained