

Closing Doors, Retribution, and Sunset
By Jay Moore

It was a trip that he had not made for years; almost twelve to be exact, and Harrison was definitely not looking forward to it. He had an enormous pack, which contained his supplies already strapped to his broad back. His piercing, blue eyes darted around his cramped quarters, and he wracked his still throbbing brain to see if there was anything that he was leaving behind. A large quantity of stale alcohol, which was reminiscent of rotten potatoes, had seemed like a good idea last night, but now he was feeling an ever so slight twinge of regret. His pale forehead wrinkled in consternation. He knew that he was forgetting something but his mind was moving too rapidly to focus on the illusive target. With a final shrug of his massive shoulders, he dismissed the idea and moved toward the door. Harrison activated the latch with his calloused hand, and there was a brief burst of cool air that caused his thinning blond hair to partially veil his face as he opened the door and stepped into the corridor.

The large man turned to his left and began walking in the direction of the meeting hall. There would be two other men joining him on this brief expedition – provided that they had both recovered from the previous night's revelry. He passed several dim lights on his way; each one leading him from the surrounding gloom into a struggling pool of radiance. The rough corridor seemed to go on forever with a string of glowing orbs trailing off into the unseen distance. Harrison did not have to go that far though. He came upon a large opening to his right. Turning, he stepped into the new chamber. The high, vaulted ceiling gave some relief from the stagnant air that filled the hall outside. One of the men was already there waiting for him.

“Hello, Jeff,” said Harrison.

“Morning,” came the quick, bright-eyed reply.

Jeff was a lean man in his mid-twenties. He had a scraggly-looking mustache and the top of his shaven head shimmered like a pearl. Some people had a passion for their family or their religion; Jeff had a passion for helping people. It did not matter what the situation was; he would be there. That was why Harrison had picked him for the journey.

Harrison dropped his heavy pack from his shoulders and looked closely around the room. "So where is our other traveling companion?" he asked Jeff.

"Beats me. I've been waiting on the two of you for nearly half an hour," said Jeff. "I was beginning to wonder if you were even going to show!"

"Wouldn't miss it," replied Harrison in a tone so completely devoid of enthusiasm that Jeff had to wonder if he was being serious or sarcastic.

Jeff kicked at some loose pebbles that were near his feet. "Are you sure that we need to do this, Harrison?"

"Yes. We really don't have much of a choice –"

"Choice for what?" asked Sean.

The man had approached so silently that neither Harrison nor Jeff had taken any note until he had spoken. He was already standing between the two men before Harrison could stammer out a reply, "Choice whether or not we should be going on this expedition."

"Nope, not really a choice," agreed the newcomer.

Harrison looked from one to the other, "Are we ready to go then?"

"Yes," came the unison reply.

The three men hoisted their packs and then headed toward the back corner of the hall. There was an exit to the facility in that direction. Harrison was glad that their path did not take them back down the endless corridor with alternating patches of light and dark. The monotony of that road would have probably driven him to turn back and abandon the resolution that the entire community had agreed upon. It was indeed time for them to venture to the surface to see the terrible consequences of the war that had begun almost thirteen years earlier. Nobody had believed that the fight would escalate to the point that nuclear weapons would be used. It did reach that point even though nobody had believed it would. For all their small society knew, they were the last surviving humans on the earth. It was a terrifying realization. Earth: Population three hundred and twenty-seven. Harrison paused in his stride at that thought.

The other two men, both on a heightened sense of awareness, caught the misstep. "Are you already wanting to turn back?" asked Jeff. "We haven't even left the main hall yet!"

"No," he replied. "I just remembered what I forgot."

"Do you want us to wait for you while you go and get it?" asked Sean.

"Nah. I'll be fine without it," said Harrison.

"Okay," replied Sean.

They continued on to the shadowy recess at the back of the large room. A heavy, iron gate covered the portal that the men would use to gain access to the tunnel, which lead to the surface. Harrison walked over to an electronic mechanism that was embedded into the wall just to the right of the massive door. He pressed a large green button, which then illuminated a keypad. He entered a series of numbers on the keypad, and then an alarm began to sound as the gate began to groan in protest as it turned on its hinges. If Harrison had thought that the air in the small corridor had been heavy, and stagnant, the gust that came from the tunnel was all out spoiled. It carried the pungent reek of something that had died and had been left to cure in its own stench for a decade.

"Nice," said Jeff. "We have to spend how many hours walking through this smell?"

"At least three hours walk from here to the opening at the surface," replied Sean.

Harrison stepped back and motioned to the tunnel with his right arm. "Gentleman, after you."

Jeff stepped up and made a slight mocking bow at the courteous gesture and then proceeded into the open mouth of the passageway. Sean followed second and then Harrison brought up the rear as he closed the door behind them. The steel clang of the latch reechoed the length of the tunnel and came back to them a thousand times over. Harrison looked in disgust as he saw that this corridor was also alight with a seemingly endless row of dim lights. The companions trudged on in silence for the better part of an hour before Sean disturbed the sanctity of the tomb. "What do you think we'll find out there, Harrison?"

"I'm not really sure," he replied. "I'd just like to feel the grass beneath my feet again, and maybe we'll see a few telltale wisps of smoke from campfires or villages."

"I just want to see the sky," said Jeff. "I can barely remember what it looks like. Do you remember it or will we even be able to tell if it looks different?"

"I remember," mused Sean. "Great billowy clouds. Sunbeams streaming down in between them to touch the tops of the trees. It was like the hand of God, reaching down to caress them."

Harrison looked at him with a new sense of respect. "I didn't know you were a poet."

Sean smiled back at his oldest friend as he replied, "I'm not."

After continuing on in silence for about another hour, the tunnel began to grow dim further ahead. At first, Harrison could not tell if it was a trick of his eyes or if the lights ahead were out. As they drew closer to the growing darkness, it became apparent that there would be no light available to lead them to the end of the tunnel. They stopped beneath the light of the final bulb. "Let's go ahead and have something to eat before we venture any further," said Harrison.

The three of them sat down and rummaged through their packs to find their mid-day meals. There was very little banter between them as they ate the last meal that they would have in the light. Not one of them was looking forward to continuing the journey under these circumstances. Harrison and his companions had thought far enough ahead to bring flashlights and spare batteries. Common sense dictated that they save the batteries as long as they could. The corridor was straight and smooth so they chose to simply walk in the dark for as long as they could tolerate the pressure of nothingness on their eyes. The trek seemed interminable. Step after step. Breath after breath. Thought after thought. Slap!

The sound of a hand on metal.

"Good thing I was keeping my arm out in front of me!" exclaimed Jeff.

"Pity," chided Sean.

Harrison quickly fingered the stud on his flashlight to activate the xenon beam. "We're at the upper gate already. We made a lot better time than I thought we would."

"How could you tell?" asked Sean. "It seemed to me like we were wandering in the dark for days."

"May have seemed that way but it was only a little over an hour," Harrison replied as he scanned the wall for the means to open the door.

He finally found the mate to the control at the bottom of the tunnel and again followed the procedures. Again the metallic protests resonated throughout the corridor. This time, instead of a stagnant cool breeze, the group was assaulted by a hot, dry wind that threatened to sweep them back down the path that they had just followed. The gale quickly subsided but the three were shaken by the sudden blast. "That can't be good," said Sean.

"We'll just have to see," replied Harrison.

The end of the tunnel came out inside a small building. At first the three men had to shade their eyes. It appeared to be nearing twilight, but after an hour of nothingness and more than a decade of low watt lighting, even the veiled setting of the sun through a few windows up near the rafters caused them to squint. "I think we should check out the building and setup a camp here," said Jeff.

"That's a good idea," said Harrison. "We can start exploring later tonight, and we'll need to see what things look like during the day, tomorrow."

Their egress was located in a moderate sized garage-like facility. There was a single, large overhead door near the front and two small doors. One located at the front adjacent to the overhead door, and the other located at the rear of the building. All three doors were secure, so the explorers began setting up a small area just inside their exit portal where they would spend most of the night.

There was an extension ladder stored on a rack against the rear wall of the building. Jeff inspected the piece of equipment and nodded his approval. "I'm going to go ahead and put this up by one of the windows and take a look out," he said.

"I don't think that will cause any harm," said Harrison.

Jeff set the bottom of the ladder about four feet from the outer wall of the building and then carefully leaned the top edge of the ladder up against the window casing. The aluminum ladder shook and rattled with each step that he took. As he reached the top, he looked out of the window. As nature would have it, the sun, just before dipping below the horizon for a twelve-hour slumber, shot forth its fiery fingers. The light seared the delicate flesh of Jeff's eyes, and as he

madly flung his arms up to shield himself from the onslaught, he lost his balance from his perch and fell to the ground. Harrison and Sean ran to his side. "My God! My eyes!" He screamed.

"Calm down," commanded Harrison. "Is anything else hurt? That was a pretty hard fall."

"My eyes, my eyes," whimpered the injured man as he writhed on the floor.

"They'll be fine. Just calm down," urged Sean.

Curious, but unwilling to subject his own eyes to such a torment, Harrison decided to try and take the injured man's mind off of the pain by pushing for information. "What did you see?"

"I'm blind, and you want to know what I saw?" Jeff asked incredulously. "I'll tell you what I saw. Nothing. A fuzzy red glow, a big red ball, and then nothing!"

Harrison decided that maybe he needed to adjust his tactics. "I'm sorry. I just thought that would get your mind off of the pain."

"You thought wrong!" yelled Jeff.

The expedition had taken a sudden and unexpected turn. Sean, perpetually the pessimist, silently reached down to help the injured man to his feet. He looked over to their leader as he spoke, "Well, do we continue, or do we go ahead and help him back now?"

"We continue," replied Harrison. "We'll set him down, get him comfortable, then you and I will continue checking things out."

The two uninjured men helped their companion over to the entryway and carefully eased him down onto a thickly cushioned sleeping bag. Jeff groaned as he leaned back. "Thanks. I think I'll just stay right here for a while," he muttered.

Sean sat down near his friend and took some rations from his overstuffed pack. Harrison watched after the two for a moment but then he was satisfied that no danger was imminent; he walked back over to the ladder. He slowly began to climb closer and closer to the light like Icarus flying too close to the sun. He had received his warning when Jeff had been blinded and fallen from the sky. His curiosity drove him on. He could not think of anything except seeing what was outside of that building. He was high enough now that he could see the sky through the window. It was slightly greener than he remembered, but there were still thick clouds scattered from

windowpane to windowpane. The setting sun was becoming less luminous, and he could easily bare the light at this point. The view that awaited him was grim.

There were bare plains spanning the distance between the small building and the horizon. There were sporadic patches of green where the grass was struggling to gain a foothold. There were some saplings, which must have arisen from nuts that were dropped into the dirt before the war and then grew from the ashes of the forest that once stood there. There were absolutely no signs of life other than the extremely sparse vegetation.

Harrison slowly dismounted the ladder and walked back toward his two comrades. Sean looked up as he approached. "Well?"

"It's not pretty," was all the reply that Harrison could muster. "Let's go ahead and get some rest now, and then we'll go out and look around in a bit."

"Sounds like a plan," Sean agreed.

The three travelers sat in silence for the next few hours. Each person was lost in his own memories of what the world had been like and speculation as to whether there was really a world left or not. At length Harrison rose to his feet, and Sean was quick to follow. They could tell from his gentle breathing that Jeff was asleep and by unspoken agreement decided not to wake him. Moving quietly in the direction of the small front entrance, the two men looked like the pale ghosts of the men that had died on the surface so many years ago, passing between the large square patches of moonlight on the floor. Harrison reached out and turned the knob. It shrieked in protest as he relentlessly twisted it through a full rotation. He looked over to Sean as he leaned in and forced the door outward on its hinges. The expression on his friends face showed the same apprehension that he was now feeling.

The night air was cold.

When they had opened the door from their underground sanctuary to the surface world, the two men had been assaulted by a harsh, warm wind. Now the air was extremely frigid. It brought to mind the desert near Harrison's boyhood home where the days were blistering and the nights could get so cool that you needed a coat in the middle of the summer at times. What he saw before him did not at all remind him of that desert.

As he had looked out the window earlier that evening, Harrison had expected a rather dismal foray out into the plain tonight. The lush vegetation that he saw before him left him completely at a loss. His companion Sean was also staring slack-jawed at the panorama before them. "What the hell is this?" asked Sean

"I don't know," Harrison replied. "This isn't anything like what I saw out the window earlier."

"What did it look like then?" his friend asked.

"Different. There were only a few trees as far as I could see, and there were patches of grass here and there, but nothing like this!" he exclaimed.

The two men were looking out upon a huge garden-like expanse. Most of the plants were leafy and broad with dark leaves. There were very few plants that did have flowers, but those that did displayed large pale blossoms that glimmered in the bright moonlight. The scent of the vegetation was almost intoxicating to their senses. The over-processed air of their underground homes was so stagnant that the contrast was enough to make the men's nostrils tingle. A gentle unfelt breeze must have been playing amongst the foliage because the gentle rustle of leaves could be heard above all else.

The boyhood friends continued to stare in awe at the view before them. There was no possible way for them to even leave the building through the dense growth of plant-life. Obviously there weren't any people nearby to create a path to the small building or if there were, the sudden unexplained appearance of the vegetation had covered any trace of that path. "Did you bring a machete or big knife?" Harrison asked of his friend.

"No. I wasn't really expecting to have to chop my way through a jungle," replied Sean.

"Neither was I," said Harrison, "but I don't think we would get very far through that anyway. The plants must be able to move or something because they definitely were not there earlier."

"I imagine with the amount of radiation that bombarded the planet that there are a lot of things that aren't quite the same as we remembered," said Sean.

Harrison looked pensively out at the jungle before him. "If that's the case, I wonder if there are any humans even left out there or if this is the *Planet of the Apes*?"

"What do you want to do?" asked Sean, ignoring the implications.

The big man sighed as his hopes fled back down the half-lighted corridor. "I guess we wait, and we see," was his response. "You go ahead and check on Jeff and then get some more rest while I keep watch."

"Okay," Sean replied.

His stout friend turned and quietly walked back to the place where their other companion slept peacefully. Harrison continued to look out over the plants that had miraculously appeared to surround them. A sudden thought came to him, and he headed back into the building. He walked over to the ladder and pulled it down from its place against the windowpane. It was adequate in height for him to be able to get onto the roof of their shelter. He pointed one end of the ladder out the door, and then strained as he slowly walked it into a vertical position by pushing more of it out of the opening and then leaning it up more and more as he went. He had to move the ladder out in such a fashion so as to get the leading end of it over the top of the encircling foliage. It only took a few minutes for him to get the ladder in place against the side of the building just in front of the door. He then slid in between the ladder and the closest plant and began to ascend. The aluminum implement rattled in protest with each step that the big man took toward the sheet-metal roof above. When he reached the apex, he placed both feet firmly on the roof and then turned to look at the plant growth from a different vantage point. The reality of their situation was a slap in the face.

He ran across the roof to look in the direction of each of the compass points with the same result. The vegetation was only about one hundred yards thick in every direction and then it stopped, giving way to sparse patches of grass and the occasional tree. "Sean," he yelled.

"What?" came the immediate reply from the foot of the ladder. Sean had returned to the door as soon as he had heard the footsteps on the metal roof.

"This is not good," Harrison stated, looking down at him. "We are totally surrounded by these plants, but they only extend out for about a hundred yards in every direction and then nothing."

His friend looked up at him with a perplexed expression on his face. "So do you think that the plants are growing around the building naturally, or do you think they're deliberately blocking us in here?"

"I don't know," replied Harrison. "I'm coming back down."

He swung his left leg onto the ladder and the right was quickly behind it, racing each other rung by rung downward to see which could reach solid ground first. As he edged his way back into the confines of their shelter, Harrison looked around to see if they had any means to forge a pathway through the thick vegetation. There were no sharp-edged tools available. His mind raced as he looked for a way to escape the barrier that had been placed between the information that could only be found on the other side of the living wall and he. Harrison pivoted on his heel and saw Sean still looking up at the ladder. There was his answer.

Harrison came back over to the doorway. "We can use the ladder to help us get through the plants," he said triumphantly.

"How?" asked Sean with a puzzled look on his face.

"We just lean it out there on top of the plants and then climb up it. Our weight should push down the plants. Then we stand it up and do the same thing again until we reach the other end. We can keep doing that until we reach the other side," he explained.

"I see where you're going, but I'm not sure it will work," said Sean skeptically.

Harrison was visibly excited. "Well, it's worth a try," he replied.

His large calloused hands grabbed the lower portion of the ladder and he heaved it over into the plants. It came crashing down, bounced slightly, and then stopped at about a thirty-degree incline. Harrison started walking out over the tops of the vegetation while Sean anchored the other end of the ladder with his weight. As predicted, the plants began to give way, and soon Harrison was standing at ground level about twenty feet out in their midst. Sean turned the ladder on edge and began to push it up into a vertical position while walking along the now

crushed stems and leaves that had barred their path. The end-over-end process continued for the better part of an hour before they had cleared a trail from the building to the outer edge of the flora.

“Should I go ahead and take the ladder back?” asked Sean.

“No, we should probably keep it with us,” replied Harrison. “That way, if the plants do have a mind of their own and decided to close us out, we have a way to get back!”

Sean aimed his index finger at his friend. “Good call,” he agreed.

On this side of the barrier, the world looked much like it had from the window. They were currently standing on bare ground. The grass that Harrison had seen from afar was now close at hand, so he walked over to look at the thick, short turf. He remembered the feel of grass under his feet from long ago with bitter regret as he felt the hard, needle-like spikes of grass. It was almost like the ground had begun to sprout evergreen needles. He was on his knees beside the grassy area with his hand outstretched. His fingertips had barely grazed the blades, but it was enough. The grass disappeared in a rippling wave, which spread from his fingertips like a shockwave. Harrison looked around at the ground in horror; there was absolutely no sign that there had ever been any grass there. “Oh, shit!” he breathed barely above a whisper.

* * * * *

The grass was cool and damp under Harrison’s bare toes. He wiggled them to see small shoots of green sticking out from between the little appendages as if the blades had pierced directly through his toes. He turned his innocent blue eyes to the sky and laughed as a bird flew overhead.

It was late in the afternoon on a warm spring day, and everywhere the world was vibrant with life. The smell of blooming flowers was heavy on the air, and the rustle of budding trees dancing in the wind nearly drowned out the sound of the children at play. The warm breeze from the south rippled the water of a nearby pond and caused the young insects to search for shelter among the cattails. The winter had been long, and it was with unbridled happiness that the three boys ran about and chased each other on the lawn.

Harrison's mother watched the boys from her kitchen window and smiled. It was a smile of deep content. She reached back into the recesses of her own mind to remember a time when she too had been that carefree.

Not only had the weather been harsh that winter, but the political climate had been quite ugly as well. Her husband was a member of the state legislature, and the international tensions which had built late in the previous year loomed heavily over the entire country. With the coming of spring, the conflict which had seemed inevitable now seemed like an ancient shadow. She turned from the window and moved back over to the sink where she had been busy washing dishes.

As she moved back to the mundane task, Harrison stopped in his tracks, fascinated by a large shadow which was moving inexorably across the ground near the pond. He again raised his eyes to the bright blue sky above to see a metallic object streaking by high above where the bird had been moments before. He was young, but he was fully aware of the implications of a missile passing over. "Mommy!" he wailed at the top of his lungs. "Mommy! Mommy! Mommy!"

The small boy turned to run and continued to scream as loudly as his immature lungs would permit. The startled woman emerged from the door before he could reach the house and instantly dropped to one knee to embrace him. "What's wrong?" she asked.

He pointed a small dirt smudged finger in the direction of the horizon that the weapon had disappeared behind. "What is it?" his mother asked again.

The words did not have time to leave his lips before she saw the reflection of a bright white flash of light in his tiny blue and white orbs which were still fixed in the distance. The wash of brilliance was sudden and intense like a camera flash amplified a thousand times over. She would have mistaken the radiance for a lightning strike, if the sky had not been perfectly clear. The illumination also lacked the jagged quality that she had always associated with that particular natural phenomenon. She could clearly see their outlines stretching out across the ground before her to the opposite end of the earth.

Why? reechoed itself in her thoughts. She clutched her child to her breast and turned to see the tip of the large cloud begin to emerge over the top of the horizon. The plume rose higher

and higher and then finally began to spread as the atmospheric pressure slowed its upward journey and began to force it outward from the base. As it continued to grow, other flashes of light could be seen further in the distance coming from all directions. Panic began to set in, and the woman looked at the other two boys standing motionless in her yard. "You boys run home and get your mothers!" she yelled.

The two children looked at her as if they no longer understood their native language. "Go!" she yelled again. "Bring them back here as quickly as you can!"

Harrison's two friends looked at him, then at each other, and then bolted in the direction of their respective houses. The young boy still held to his mother's waist like grim death and looked pleading at her, trying to make some sense of the situation.

The sky was already beginning to grow dark from the mushroom clouds growing in all directions, a sick parallel to the overnight growth of mushrooms under the eaves of a gloomy forest. The woman looked down at her son's tear-streaked face. "We need to get some things from the house and put them in the car. Okay?" she said.

"A-alright," he replied with a slight quaver in his voice.

The two hurried into their home. She led him to his room and stopped in front of the small dresser in the corner. "I need you to get all of your clothes out and put them in a pile on the bed for me. Can you do that?" she asked.

"Yes," Harrison replied with an affirmative nod of his head for added emphasis.

"Okay. Mommy will be down the hall in her room getting some things too, and then she'll be right back," she told him.

The young boy pulled open the bottom drawer of his dresser and began to remove his clothes. His underwear was folded and piled neatly in the drawer, and he was very meticulous in moving them onto the bed while still keeping them in their perfect stacks. It took him very little time to completely empty the dresser of its entire contents.

Down the hall, his mother was recklessly throwing every piece of clothing that she owned into a trash bag. When she had reached her room, the first thing that she did was grab the phone to try and contact her husband; he was at work. It was nearly an hour and a half commute to his

office in the city. On some level of consciousness, she was aware of the fact that he was probably no more than a puff of ash twirling in a nuclear breeze, but she could not bring herself to confront that fact at the moment. After the eighth busy signal, she sat the phone on the bed and started working to load her husband's clothes into a bag as well. She placed the two sacks beside the door, grabbed the cordless phone, and headed back down the hall to her son's room. As she moved down the hall, the blaring sound of a car horn interrupted the repetition of numbers running through her head as she again dialed the phone.

She ran to the door and opened it to see a maroon Chevy Impala sitting at the edge of her driveway. Geraldine, the mother of one of Harrison's friends waved to her frantically from the driver's seat, threw the car in reverse, and then headed down the road as fast as the V-6 engine would allow. There was a sinking in feeling in the pit of her stomach as she watched the car disappear around a corner at the end of the street. She had hoped that she could stick together with some of her friends. As she looked up and down the road, other families were also piling into their vehicles. Just like a sinking ship, every man, woman, and child, was on their own.

She quickly moved back down the short hallway to her son's room. He had finished placing all of his clothes on the bed as she had asked. "Very good," she told him. "Now help me put them all in here."

Harrison's mother opened up a garbage bag which she had been carrying tucked under her right arm. The two of them placed the clothing into the bag, and then she pulled the two red drawstrings closed. She was about to leave the room with the bag and child in tow when Harrison interrupted her by saying, "Wait a minute, Mommy."

"What is it sweetie?" she asked over her shoulder.

"We need to tie the bag shut, so the clothes don't fall out," he explained.

She smiled and a tear began to form in the corner of her right eye as she fought to hold back the emotion. "Okay, honey," she said, her voice nearly ready to crack under the strain.

She knew that he was aware of how desperate their current situation was. The inner strength that the young boy showed in being able to stay calm brought a measure of those qualities to her as well. She knelt down beside the bag, and she and her son practiced the loop

and swoop together. Not quite every man, woman, and child for themselves, she thought. At least they would have each other.

“Can you carry this out to the car, honey?” she asked him.

He nodded his head and began to drag the bag from his room. She got to her feet and then followed him from the room. She then turned down the hall in the opposite direction in order to retrieve her clothing. She halted in mid-stride and went back to his room to retrieve the phone. The monotone notes of the touch pad again rang out as she dialed her husband’s number. Busy. She dialed the number once more, tilted her head to hold the phone between her ear and shoulder, grabbed her bags, and headed for the door.

Harrison was waiting for her near the front steps and helped her to get one of the sacks to the car. Busy. “Damn it!”

“What is it, Mommy?” he asked.

“I can’t get your Daddy on the phone,” she told him.

“D’you think he’s okay?”

“Probably,” she said as she looked away. “Why don’t you run back into the house and get us some snacks? We’ll probably be driving for a while,” she suggested.

Without a word, the little boy headed back into his home for the last time. His mother looked back to the phone and dialed the numbers once more. The realization that she would never again see her husband was starting to overwhelm her. Busy. Dial again. Busy. Dial again. Busy.

The door to their house opened, and Harrison stepped onto the door sill holding a bag with some items from the kitchen. “Do we need anything else, Mommy?” he asked.

Dial again.

“Not that I can think of, hon’,” she told him.

Busy.

“Do you want me to lock the door?”

Dial again.

“Sure, that would be fine.”

Busy.

Harrison reached around inside the door and turned the latch. He stepped onto the porch and pulled the door shut. It closed with a resounding echo that seemed to resonate with the universe. It was a sound that millions of people had heard for the last time within the past few minutes.

The child walked to the vehicle and placed the sack in the back seat of the car. "Where are we goin' anyway?" he asked.

"I'm really not sure," his mother replied.

Harrison paused and gave his mother a penetrating look, "Why'd this happen?"

She continued to stare at the piece of unresponsive plastic in her hand. His mother turned to look at him; a blank look occupied her face as she replied, "I'm not sure about that either, sweetie."

Harrison was beginning to feel worried about his mother. "Did you get Dad on the phone yet?" he asked.

"Not yet," she replied. "Let's get in the car, and I'll try to get him again later."

"Okay," Harrison agreed.

The two of them got into the car. His mother turned the key and started the vehicle. The even hum of the engine revved a little higher as she put the car into reverse and headed out of the drive. Most of the other families had already cleared out of the area, and there was no other traffic on the road. It was an ominous sight, looking down the street and seeing bikes left lying in the road, doors open, the occasional piece of clothing left behind in on a sidewalk where it had been dropped in someone's haste to get away.

"I bet somebody made somebody else mad, and they did this to get back at 'em," Harrison observed.

"That could be it," agreed his mother.

She put the car in drive and pressed on the accelerator. The vehicle began to move down the desolate street. The clouds had nearly filled the sky, and the world had grown dark and

lifeless in only a few short minutes. The sun sent one last feeble ray of luminance from between two of the converging clouds before it set beyond the end of the earth.

* * * * *

Sean had been several yards away from Harrison and was intently studying the sky, and therefore had not noticed the plant life's reaction to the slightest human presence. The moon was bright, but so were the stars. All of the old familiar constellations were still there, and he quickly picked out Polaris, Orion, and a few other clusters that he had fallen in love with as a child using his dad's old telescope. On the western horizon, there was a great bank of clouds moving in. They were black and ominous in the bright moonlight, and arcs of lightning played back and forth between the giant thunderheads, but as of yet, the distant rumble of thunder could not yet be heard. The exhalation from his friend drew Sean's attention away from the heavens. "What is —" he stopped as he noticed that his friend was now kneeling beside a vast expanse of dirt. "What happened?" he continued.

"Just as I touched it, it hid in the ground. Almost as if it was running away from me," said Harrison.

"You can't even tell there was anything there in the first place," Sean said with sudden awareness of the situation dawning on him, as he too looked in horror at the bare ground under his feet.

Harrison rose from the Earth and slowly walked back over toward his companion. Just before he reached Sean's side a sudden, intense, stabbing pain shot through his foot. He gasped and pulled his foot up to look at the sole of his shoe. Blood was already oozing out of the small hole. He fought back the pain and continued over to his friend. "I think that one was a warning," he said.

"I think so too," agreed Sean. "We better get back to the garage, Harrison."

Without another word, the two men headed back in the direction of their sanctuary. The wall of vegetation that they had just recently breached was still there and so was their pathetic trail. The barrier had either been placed there to protect them or to protect the new plant and animal life that could now be found on the healing planet. Either way, nature was sending them a

clear message; the species that perpetrated so much damage to the Earth was no longer welcome, or at the very least, it was not going to have an easy time reclaiming even the smallest part of its previous domain.

Tears were already streaming down Sean's face as the men approached the threshold to the building that was their only foothold on the surface. "What are we going to tell everybody when we get back to the colony?" he asked.

Harrison remained quite as the two men entered the building. They carefully put the ladder back into its place at the back of the garage. Until that moment, they had both been clutching the ladder as if it were the road to their salvation. The leader of the small group looked down at his hands and walked back to the door. The storm which had been brewing was now almost upon them and he could feel that the wind had picked up considerably. Now he even questioned if the plants had been moving in the wind earlier or if they have been conversing with each other, making secret plans. The lightning was far more intense and the rumble of thunder could be heard almost incessantly.

"Well?" asked Sean.

From his position in the doorway, Harrison looked back over his shoulder and said, "We can tell them that we have a choice. We can either continue to live our lives in the tunnels that once were our sanctuary or," he paused for a moment of grim reflection, "we can try to forge a new life on the surface. Either way, mankind will receive its retribution for our lack of respect to this planet. If we choose to stay below, then we are no longer in a sanctuary, but voluntarily locked in a prison that we crafted with our own hands. If we choose to try and learn how to live up here – who knows how long we will last before the Earth has claimed us all."

Sean looked stunned. "I didn't really think of it that way. Those are not very good options."

There came a shuffling sound from the underground entrance to the building. Jeff was feeling his way along the wall and heading toward the sound of their voices. Sean was closer to him and moved quickly to help him find his way. "What is going on?" Jeff asked.

At that instant there came a very strong gust of wind, which nearly swept Harrison off of his feet and the drum beats of large drops of rain falling heavily on the metal roof. The big man took the doorknob in his hand and closed the door to keep the fury of the planet outside. He looked over at his two closest friends and said, "There's a third choice that only we can make, but it must be here and now."

"Sorry, but I got in on the conversation a little late," said Jeff. "You're gonna need to run those first two by me again."

"Here's the situation," explained Harrison. "We are in a building that is surrounded by a one hundred foot thick wall of vegetation. Once you get past that, there is pretty much nothing for as far as the eye can see. To make a long story short, we go back and tell everyone that it is not possible to live up here, and we condemn everyone to a life in those caverns without hope of the world ever being the same as we remembered it. Or, we go back and tell everyone that the world has turned against us and that we can all come up here and get picked off one by one by the vicious grass." As the leader of the troop continued his explanation he became more and more impassioned and angry.

Sean had known this man since they were children and could tell when his friend needed something to release the steam that was about to make the pressure cooker explode. "And that class was a perfect example of melodrama," he expounded in the snootiest voice that he could muster.

Jeff began to laugh, but Harrison found nothing in the situation amusing at all. He rounded on his lifelong friend like a falcon about to sink its talons into the soft flesh of a young rabbit. "It's not funny and you damn well know it, Sean," he snarled.

"No it's not," agreed the would-be comedian, suddenly sobered by his friend's unnatural behavior. "But getting that worked up about it is not going to help the situation, and it certainly is not going to do anything for those people at the other end of the tunnel."

There was an extremely uncomfortable silence that followed. It was the first moment in their lives that these two men did not feel at home with each other. Jeff could feel the tense energy that charged the air and felt that it had become his duty to moderate. "So, I think I

understand the first two options that involve either going back and telling the colony the truth about the world and trying to restart life above ground, or lying to everyone and then forcing them to continue to exist in those caverns for eternity. What is this third option?"

"We do not go back at all, and we permanently seal the tunnel," Harrison replied.

"That's not an option," interjected Sean.

"Why not?" asked the group leader.

"Because they have the right to make their own choice. We were sent up here to collect facts and report back. The community will make a decision as a whole. You don't speak for everyone," replied Sean.

Jeff was nodding his head in agreement. "I've gotta side with him on this one, Harrison."

"Why?" he asked in response. "Do you think our friends and families would be happier trying to survive up here where the very earth can attack them, locked away in their caverns knowing that they have effectively been locked away by the very planet that they once called home, or would they be happier not knowing what it is like up here and content with the new world that they have created to keep themselves safe? How many generations would it take for them to forget about the idea of trying to find the surface and reinhabit it again? Three? Four? How many decades could the story about the fools who went to check the surface and never came back keep the people in that hole feeling secure?"

Sean looked over at their leader with a frown, "Seriously. You are really laying it on too thick with the melodrama. It is not our decision to make."

"Do you see anybody else here?" demanded the big man.

Jeff and Sean looked to each other with complete and total disbelief. "We need to slow down and take a break for awhile," suggested Jeff.

"Why?"

"You and the question 'Why?' are really starting to get on my freakin' nerves!" exclaimed Sean as he turned and walked back toward the entrance to their underground home in disgust.

Harrison realized that he had perhaps pushed his views too hard and too fast for his friends to follow his flawless logic. Jeff was still standing in stunned amazement near the wall

only a few yards away. He intuitively reached out for the wall behind him and groped his way along the smooth, flat surface back to the entrance as well. The leader of the small group turned away and walked back over to the closed entry door, which he had closed to keep the fury of the storm at bay. He now reached out and turned the handle again; it yielded considerably easier this time. Harrison opened the door and let the storm winds whip past him into the small building. The crashing of thunder mirrored the beating of the heart within his chest. The leader was resolved on the group's course of action. He knew what they needed to do, even if the others could not see it yet. There had to be a way to convince them.

Meanwhile at the other end of the building, Jeff had reached the mouth of the tunnel and sat down near Sean. He groped around in his pack until his hand closed around the cool, metallic wrapper that surrounded one of the granola-like bars that he had brought along for their journey. As he slowly peeled back the packaging, he blindly looked across the hall in the direction where he believed his companion to be. "So what do you think?" he asked.

The reply came from directly beside him not more than a few feet away, which startled him. "I think our friend is being a little irrational at the moment," Sean replied. "I've known Harrison for a long time so I think he'll snap out of it."

"What if he doesn't?" asked Jeff. "He seems more than a little irrational to me."

"He will," came the confident response. "I think that he lost hope once he saw the wall of plants and then got stabbed in the foot."

"What are you talking about?" asked the bald man.

"I forgot you were in here while we went out," said Sean. "There's a wall of plants surrounding this building. Harrison and I used your ladder to force a path through the wall, and once we were on the other side, there was nothing but bare plains and a few trees. Anyway, Harrison knelt down to feel the grass and it disappeared into the ground."

"What do you mean – it disappeared into the ground?" asked Jeff with a perplexed look on his face.

“The grass is like pine needles and it has apparently mutated so that it can retract into the ground,” he explained. “One of the spikes popped up from under Harrison’s foot and stabbed him.”

Jeff stared off into empty space, “Well, I guess feeling the grass under his feet again was a pretty big disappointment.”

“To put it mildly,” replied Sean.

The short man looked over to the exit where Harrison now stood outlined against the constant flashes of lightning; it was an ominous scene. The rain had started to fall, and there was the patter of light rain against the metal roof of their shelter. He vaguely recalled the fresh scent of a gentle rain shower from his childhood, and the acrid odor that was flooding into the building through the open door was a far cry from his memories. The periodic tapping rapidly developed into a frantic snare drum roll and Jeff looked up to the roof in alarm. “I wonder how often it storms like this?”

“Do you want to stay up here long enough to find out if it is a daily event or if the planet brewed it up just to welcome us?” asked Sean.

“Not really,” he answered.

“Me either,” Sean agreed.

The two men continued to sit in silence and listened to the crescendo of the rain as it beat its fury against the unyielding roof. Harrison had a much better vantage to the full impact of the storm from his location at the open door. The rain was falling almost sideways; fortunately it was coming from the side of the building opposite the door so he was not getting soaked by the heavy droplets.

The reaction of the plants to the water was an amazing sight to behold. They literally were competing to get as much rain upon themselves as they could. It looked like a crowd of kids fighting to get the last cookie at a birthday party, a cookie being a rare and precious commodity in their underground home. The heavens above also made for a chaotic and eerie panorama. The clouds seemed to be boiling; great convection currents were causing the airborne water particles to swirl and tumble like a seething cauldron. The moon rode high in the night sky and cast a

green glow upon the clouds from behind. The leader of the small group looked upon this display as further evidence that people had no further business trying to inhabit the surface of this forsaken planet. He felt shame, knowing that his species had devastated their own home with their stupidity. It was his personal belief that the planet was justified in exiling the humans to an underground prison, but it had never occurred to him that his friends might not see their position in the same light.

Now that the pain in his foot had subsided to a gentle throb and his mind had cleared, he decided to rejoin his friends at the opening to their path home. His two friends were still sitting and listening to the storm as he approached. "Well," said Sean in an inquiring tone. "What now?"

"I guess now we report back," was Harrison's simple reply. He looked at the two men on the ground before him, "I think that you should stay here to get a better feel for the weather while I help Jeff back to the colony. This is a pretty harsh storm and I'd like to be able to give everyone more details about the climate."

"That makes sense," Sean agreed. "Since it's only a little over an hour's walk from here to the colony, we should be able to set up a regular outpost for observation quite easily."

"And you get the first watch," said their leader. "Okay, Jeff, we need to get your stuff together for the walk back," Harrison continued as he turned his attention to his other companion.

"Sounds good to me, too, but I would like to come back to help out when my eyes get better," he said.

Harrison's lips were touched with a smile as he replied, "I think that can be arranged."

The three men began going about the tasks that would be required in order to carry out their plan. Harrison assisted Jeff in putting his belongings in his pack and then shouldered his own to get started on the walk back down to their home. Sean had wandered over to the door to the outside world and looked on as the rain continued its onslaught. It was only a matter of minutes before Jeff and Harrison were ready to be on their way.

"Hey, Sean," called the big man as he and Jeff began to make their way down the tunnel. "Try not to get hurt until I get back. You're the only one that didn't get injured so far and that will be one of the highlights for my report!"

Sean merely shook his head and laughed without making a reply. He knew that his friend's irrational behavior from earlier was only fleeting. It was good to hear Harrison poke a jibe at him as he departed to head back to their subterranean community. The short man turned back to his vigil; the storm showed no signs that it would abate any time soon so he walked back over to where he had stowed his pack and retrieved his sleeping bag. He figured that he should at least be comfortable if he was going to sit by the door and count the raindrops. He folded the thick blanket into a nice cushion and sat down beside the doorsill and prepared for an uneventful wait. It would be at least three hours before Harrison came back with anyone else, but it would probably be closer to four hours since he would have to give a detailed report of the events that had transpired so far and then answer an endless stream of questions. Yes, it would be a long, lonely wait.

In the mean time, Jeff and Harrison were already a few hundred yards down the gloomy passage. The two were walking at a quick pace; the echoes of their footfalls seemed to drown out any sounds that may have reached them from the lands above.

"It is going to be a long walk," said Jeff, breaking the silence between the two of them. "Sean started to tell me a little about what happened when you were outside, but I did not get a lot of detail from him. Could you describe it to me since I could not be there to see it?"

"I don't see why not," replied Harrison.

The leader of the group began to give Jeff a very vivid description of the foliage that had surrounded their above ground shelter. He also explained how he had climbed to the top of the building and discovered that the plant-life was not as thick as they had at first believed. The thin, shaven-headed man commiserated with his friend when Harrison described the stabbing sensation as the blade of grass had pierced his foot. The thought of pain, made the throbbing ache behind his eyes begin anew. They continued on, talking about the changes in the world above as it now stood in comparison to their dreams of an age gone by and lost in the shadows of time for eternity.

The slight downhill slope of the ground must have aided their progress considerably, for in less than half an hour they reached the lighted portion of the tunnel. Surprisingly, Jeff was the

first to notice the approach of the dim pools of radiance. "My eyes must be very sensitive to light right now," he reasoned.

"Very," agreed Harrison who could still not make out the lights at that point in their trek.

The men continued their march toward the end of the tunnel with few words passing between them. It was not long before they reached the lower door. "Well, here we are," announced Harrison.

"That seemed really fast," commented Jeff.

"Faster than I had expected," agreed the leader.

Harrison moved to the control for the door and once again keyed the sequence that would open the door. Two beeps emitted from the panel in rapid succession but the door did not show any inclination toward allowing them egress from the tunnel. He looked at the panel in consternation. A dimly illuminated LED display read, "Upper Seal Ajar."

"Damn it!" Harrison shouted as a sudden certainty forced itself into his consciousness.

"What?" asked Jeff with a look of concern suddenly showing on his face.

"The upper door is still open so this one won't open," he explained. "I knew it," he continued. "Everything that has happened has been a sign that we are not meant to be allowed to reinhabit the Earth!"

Jeff could tell by his tone and the rising ire in his voice that Harrison was again being irrational; he was also becoming very dangerous. "Just calm down, Harrison," he said. "Everything hasn't been a sign."

"You don't think that having your eye scorched by the sun or being stabbed in the foot were signs?" Harrison retorted. "You may not be able to see, but you can't be that blind!"

"Now wait a minute," started Jeff.

"No!" interrupted the big man, "I will not wait a minute. You and I are going back up to the surface and the three of us will permanently seal this tunnel."

"What?" asked Jeff incredulous at this turn of events.

“You heard me,” Harrison replied. “I was given a task by the community. To determine if it is safe for us to return to the world above and if not, to permanently seal our new world off from the dangers that are to be found outside of that tunnel.”

Harrison was emphatically pointing back in the direction from which they had just come, a gesture that was totally lost on the man before him as Jeff could not even see.

“I don’t remember anyone saying anything about sealing the tunnel,” said Jeff.

“You weren’t there,” Harrison explained. “You and Sean were well into your cups when I was pulled aside by our magistrate and given very specific instructions as well as a backpack full of explosives.”

“What? Why?” demanded Jeff.

“I just told you!” yelled Harrison in reply.

“We can’t do that,” Jeff said in protest.

“Maybe we can’t,” said Harrison ominously, “but I can.”

The big man lunged at his friend and threw him violently to the ground. Jeff could not see the vicious attack coming and was unable to fend off the heavy blow as Harrison used a mallet that had been concealed in his back pack to crush the side of his companion’s skull. The big man immediately felt a wave of remorse and revulsion crash over him. He dropped the mallet and fell to his knees beside his friend, weeping uncontrollably. His genuine intention had been to return to the colony and present them with information so that they could make an informed decision, but the signs all pushed him away from that course of action. The weight of the responsibility that the magistrate had heaped on his shoulders alone and the events that had transpired caused his mind to snap under the power that he was forced to wield. Harrison had not wanted to make the decision; he had begged the community official to wait until their return so that everyone could voice their opinion on the facts that his group returned with, but it was not to be so. He had been entrusted as the hand of fate and single-handedly wielded the power of the three Norns. A power which drove him over the edge.

Harrison did not know how long he had knelt there beside his lost companion. The leader of the small group collected his pack and turned to walk back up the tunnel. He hesitated,

deciding that it would be better to take the body back as well. The large man stooped and hoisted the shell of his friend Jeff onto his broad shoulders and again turned to make the journey to the overworld.

The march back to the surface seemed almost interminable. As he reached the last of the glowing orbs that were recessed into the ceiling, Harrison carefully laid the body of his friend out on the ground. He arranged Jeff's limbs carefully so that his friend's eternal slumber would be in a state of respectful composure. After a fleeting lucid thought on death and what that truly meant to him, the head of the small expedition took a marker and scrawled a warning upon the wall, "Abandon hope all ye who enter here." He figured this was a fitting statement for anyone traversing the tunnel in either direction. Harrison again knelt at his friend's side and wished him a final farewell.

Perhaps two hours after they had left, Sean began to hear sounds emitting from the depths of the tunnel. It worried him to think that his friends could be returning so soon. There was no possible way that they could have reached the colony, given a report, and then returned in such a brief period of time. It had stopped raining some time ago but the wall of vegetation still stood firm against the incursion of the human invaders. He had looked around the building for any other tools that they might be able to use to the advantage of the people that would man this outpost. He was examining a locked toolbox that he had found just outside the open exit door when the noises from below reached him. He dropped the toolbox and moved to the underground entrance to listen more intently.

There was definitely someone coming up the tunnel. Sean could not yet tell if it was Harrison and Jeff returning or if there was another party that had ventured forth after they left to lend them support. Gradually the sounds became clearer; they were the rhythmic footfalls of someone that was running. "Hello?" he yelled inquiringly into the tunnel.

The only answer was the continued sounds of a person running, and they seemed to be getting closer. Sean was beginning to get alarmed because this made no sense. Why would someone be running up the tunnel? He could not see very far into the tunnel but he was sure that whoever was running up the tunnel could clearly see him silhouetted against the light.

Before he could get an answer to this mystery, he heard a deep rumbling sound and the ground began to shake violently beneath his feet. Sean lost his footing and fell heavily to the ground in front of the tunnel. From this prostrate vantage point he could now see a flickering orange glow quickly moving up the tunnel from far below and his friend Harrison almost at the tunnel entrance.

“Harrison, what’s going on?” he asked in dismay as his friend slowed to a walk.

Harrison looked over his shoulder to see the ball of flames still advancing. “Not now! Help me with the overhead door! Quick!” he replied.

Without question, Sean righted himself and ran for the pull chain that operated the large door that was probably used to let vehicles in and out of the facility at one point in time. The plants were right against the door making it harder for Harrison and him to get it raised than he had thought it would be. There was a rush of extremely hot air from the mouth of the tunnel and a giant plume of flame shot out to scorch the plants into cinders. The superheated wind took the breath from Sean’s lungs and he gasped as cooler air from outside rushed back in to fill the vacuum. He quickly turned to Harrison, “What the hell was that?!”

His friend was also gasping for breath, “It was.. an explosion.. from where I collapsed the tunnel.”

Sean could only look at his friend in absolute disbelief. There was a mixture of emotions and questions flooding his mind. He could not focus on any one of them long enough to put the thought into words. “Why?” was the one word that finally escaped the maze that was swirling through his mind.

“Because that is what I was told to do by the magistrate if I felt that it was too dangerous up here,” he responded, having regained his breath.

Sean took a step back from his friend and continued his incredulous stare. “When? What are you talking about?”

“Why do I have to keep explaining myself? I am the leader and it was my decision to make!” he declared.

“Explaining yourself?” began Sean and then a new thought flitted into his brain. “Where is Jeff?”

Harrison looked up at his friend with tears already standing in his eyes. He tried to open his mouth but could not even enunciate the words. He began to sob; and Sean looked away in disgust.

“What have you done, Harrison? My God! What have you done?” he asked in a whisper. “You left him in that tunnel to die in the explosion!” he went on accusingly.

“No,” was the single word reply.

Sean was still stunned at his friend’s behavior. “What do you mean, ‘No’?” he asked.

Harrison continued to look at him with a desperate and lost expression. “No more explanations,” he said as he looked down at the mallet in his hand.

The realization of Harrison’s intent stabbed home into Sean’s psyche like a blade. He took another step away from his friend but before he could move much further, Harrison sprang like a cat that was toying with a mouse. Sean was not blind or small though and he could hold his own against the larger man. The two groped and wrestled on the ground briefly before Sean broke free. The light of insanity shone like a beacon from Harrison’s bright, blue eyes. He looked at his friend one more time and then dropped the mallet and ran from the building into the smoldering cinders that now stood before the building.

Sean could not even move. He merely watched in terror as his boyhood companion sprinted headlong into the wall of plants. Unlike earlier in the night, they were not there to simply guard anymore – not now that they had been injured by the flames. Tendrils of ivy quickly coiled about the man’s waist and legs to hold him in place while razor like leaves flayed him open from head to toe. He screamed repeatedly as the plants took their retribution from him. Sean collapsed to the ground and buried his face in his hands.

He sat there and wept for the sanity of all mankind until the sun began to rise.

* * * * *

A few miles away, a young girl asked her mother about the strange, thin wisp of smoke that had appeared on the horizon overnight.

“I don’t know what that’s from dear but stay away from it. That’s near where the needle grass is,” replied her mother. “Now you go run along and play, Pandora.”

The little girl giggled as she ran barefoot from the house.

Her mother, still inside, walked over to the door and called after her, "And remember not to eat any apples if you play near the orchard, dear. They're forbidden!"