

Mount Moriah

By Brian Kirklin

March 6, 2008

Andrew was doing everything he could do to maintain some semblance of normalcy. He had a house in the suburbs, a wife and a small child. He cut the grass on Sundays, walked their dog every night, and made small talk with everyone. His lawn, important to him, needed to be green and always was. Wednesday nights he golfed. Sharon, his wife, also did her best to keep things normal. She liked to plant yellow tulips in front of the house. At 4:30 she would walk down, just in time to grab the mail from the delivery man. She made dinner most nights, though Andrew did his part, and she always took care of Isaac's lunches: peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on white bread with the crust cut off and then cut diagonally into two equal triangles. Perhaps it was what normal was for them, but it seemed any attempt to get an inch more normal ended up in failure.

Andrew and Sharon couldn't walk out of their house without properly wearing the filter masks everyone was required to wear; one strap over the ears and behind the head, one below the ears and around the neck, and a metal strip pinched tight. Not wearing one could cost them money. Andrew remembered his neighbor Dave telling him about getting pulled over while driving. The officer was going to let him go, but saw that Dave wasn't wearing a mask and slapped him with a hundred dollar ticket. A hundred dollars? It was lunacy, but it was life now. Everyone was paranoid since the pandemic started.

There was good reason, Andrew knew. He was a nurse, one of the many that were taking blood samples all over the country, trying to find someone with anything that could help. If they could find a similar virus, less lethal hopefully, then there was a chance of making a vaccine. All attempts to change the current one had failed so far; it remained just as lethal or mutated back into a deadly form. Bodies wouldn't respond enough to dead versions of the virus to build up immunity. He wasn't responsible for creating the vaccine, didn't have the right education for it. That was for the biochemists that had taken over the upper levels of the hospital. He knew what he knew because everyone else knew it. The pandemic was the only thing on the news anymore. He'd gathered enough to have some idea of what the biochemists were doing. He had to take enough blood from each person, he figured, for two tests. One

was obvious: was the patient infected? The other he was basing on a rumor that had been circulating amongst the hospital staff. Supposedly, they had samples of the Hecate virus up on the upper levels. Andrew figured they were infecting half of each blood sample, hoping that someone's blood would have something in it to help eradicate the virus. Still though, Andrew was sampling blood from almost a hundred people a day, as was his friend Nick.

It was becoming a contest between Andrew and Nick. "How many have you done today Andy?"

"Thirty-six, Nick. You?"

"Ha, I got you today Andy. Already did forty myself."

"I'll catch up. I'm just finishing off my break. You're just starting yours, I assume."

"Yeah, fifteen minutes to finally relax."

"Fifteen minutes for me to pass you, you mean."

"Eh, whatever, with my renewed strength, it shouldn't take me too long to pass you again."

"I'm sure. So, what are you doing this weekend?"

"Same as usual, I'll head out to a bar. Hopefully find someone to take home. You?"

"Sharon and I'll be taking Isaac out to the park to feed the ducks, eat a picnic lunch, and then watch the fireworks. Last year, Isaac was scared of the noise. This year, hopefully he'll be old enough to enjoy them. Then Sharon and I will go home, and hopefully Isaac will be tired enough by then that we can have some privacy." Andrew winked.

"You're really depressing. You know that? Won't leave us bachelors alone."

"First, there's only one of you. Second, it's not my fault you don't like steady relationships. It's not like you've never had a chance. Remember Laura?"

"Don't remind me. I'm glad that's over, too clingy."

“Yeah, well she and the rest of her gender apparently. Who was that last one?”

“Don’t even mention Vicky; she was crazy. Can we change the subject, shrink?”

“I’ve been meaning to ask you something else, unrelated. What are you planning on doing Monday, say around ten in the morning.”

“What do you think? I’ll be here.”

“Nothing, I was just wondering if you would mind taking care of my family. We’ve been called in for testing. I’m going to sneak them in the back way, that way they don’t have to wait in line for hours. I was hoping you’d take care of it.”

“Yeah, sure thing. You know where to find me and that’ll be three more than you.”

“It’ll be two because I just had my testing last week. I’ll catch you later. That group of ten at the front of the line should even up the odds.”

“Hah, don’t think for a second you’ll stay ahead. I enjoy this more than you.”

“That’s because you’re sick, Nick.”

Andrew approached the line of people he knew stretched down the stairs and out of the building. He asked the group to follow him, and walked away. It was standard work all day long. Most people just wanted to be done and let Andrew do his job. The occasional kid refused to let Andrew near him and he’d have to call in help to hold the child down. Andrew wondered whether Isaac would need to be held down. Sharon had gone with Isaac the last few times to get shots, so Andrew wasn’t sure. He hoped his son would be good about it, but just wasn’t sure. Either way, they’d have a good time this weekend before they had to be tested.

It hadn’t been easy lately. Last time they tried to go to the movie theater, Andrew had offered to buy Isaac popcorn. Sharon reminded him that Isaac couldn’t eat through a mask and they weren’t able to get it for him. Isaac hadn’t been happy and pouted about it all afternoon. That hadn’t been as bad as the baseball fiasco though. Andrew had bought tickets to go see a Red’s game. Only a week before they were planning to go, the league decided

to end the season for the protection of the players and the fans. It had been a huge disappointment. Sunday, hopefully, wouldn't be.

It was around five when Andrew pulled into the garage that day. He went upstairs, only to find Isaac watching the television. "Hey son, why don't you say hi to your old man?" Isaac got up off of the huge green leather couch that he seemed to have sunk into and walked across the hardwood floor. Andrew bent over and picked him up in a hug. Isaac was three, but smaller for his age. "You're getting big. I'm not going to be able to do this much longer am I?"

"I don't know," he said as Andrew put him down. He shrugged and walked back over to the couch.

"Is that the woobles?"

He giggled, "No dad, it's the Wiggles."

"Oh." Isaac turned around and went back to watching his show. "Where's mommy?"

"Upstairs," he was already zoned out again.

When Andrew went upstairs, Sharon was laying on the bed in her jeans and a loose t-shirt from her summer camp job. She was on the phone, and Andrew could tell from the way she talked that it was her sister. He didn't need to change into anything more comfortable, since he left his work clothes at work. Instead, he went over to use the bath room. She gave him a slight nod as he passed, but kept talking.

By the time Andrew had finished and washed his hands Sharon was saying good bye.

"What did your sister want?"

"Not much, I called her. We were thinking we might get together over the summer since we haven't seen each other since New Years."

"When was she planning on coming out here?"

"I was hoping we'd go out there, before summer is over. You know take a break, relax for a week before I have to go back to teaching." Sharon got off the bed and walked over to Andrew. She put her arms around his neck.

"I suppose we could, if they'll let me off. It's hard to get vacation time

with the testing going on,” He put his hands around her waste and drew her a bit closer, giving her a small kiss.

“Well, you could remind Garry that you didn’t use all your time last year.”

“I’ll do my best, but no guarantees, honey. Did you pick up the bread for Sunday?”

Sharon loosened her arms from his neck, pushing away slightly. “Two loaves, just like we agreed. Do you think it’s smart to just throw bread away like that?”

“It’ll be fun, I promise. And our budget isn’t so bad off that we can’t afford a little extra bread. We’re going to try to go to Chicago, right?”

“Yeah, you’re right. I just can’t seem to stop worrying about any little thing anymore. Speaking of which, I need to go get dinner started.” Andrew waved her away and she walked out of the room and down the stairs. For a moment Andrew watched the door, and then he laid down on the bed. The wind blew the limbs of a tree, a swarm of green, just beyond the blinds. The light played gently over the gray and white drywall speckled ceiling. It had been a while since Andrew himself had relaxed. He’d like to have a week, just to himself and his family. It seemed otherwise that he was always hoping for sleep: a chance to get away, a chance to be at peace. He closed his eyes and let the day drift away slowly. Soon he knew he’d be called downstairs for dinner.

* * *

Nearly half of Sunday had floated by while Andrew and his family slept in. When they finally did wake up, Sharon packed some sandwiches, and then they climbed in the car to go up to Dayton. They were going to visit the dam where Andrew grew up. It was nearly an hour drive before they got to the Englewood. Andrew immediately recognized the area. They were on Main Street, the National Road that stretched half way across the country. As a kid it had amazed him that he lived near something like that. Now it was just another road.

Andrew had Sharon shake Isaac out of his nap to look out over the forest as they drove over the damn. It was like looking out across an ocean of leaves, only it was split by several creeks and rivers. They took a left at the end of the dam and drove down into the park. The road was a windy one surrounded by

trees and hills. Isaac sat in the back seat, just absorbing everything. Andrew parked the car in a parking where the road came to a dead end.

Getting out they walked towards the gravel bank. Where the shore pushed out into the water, there was a single old oak ridden with knobs and covered foliage. Two picnic tables were on either side of it. There were several ducks in the area, and a few geese a way off in the murky water. On the horizon the water shifted from a dull brown to a light blue, reflecting the sky.

Sharon took the two loaves of bread out of the bag and handed one to Andrew. "Ready to feed the ducks Isaac?" she asked.

"Are we eating bread too?"

"No, the bread is for the ducks. You can have a sandwich later. Here, watch me." Andrew took a piece of bread and ripped it into smaller pieces. He took a bit of it and tossed it into the water. A duck darted for the bread and then swam away with its head back, swallowing.

"Let me try!" Isaac took an entire piece of bread. He pulled his arm all the way behind his head and then with a running jump threw it at a duck. It fell short, but scared the duck away. The big piece of bread floated a foot away from shore. Andrew showed him how to rip the bread into smaller pieces and then let Isaac have another piece of bread. Isaac spent the next hour or so throwing bits of bread in the water and watching the ducks fight over scraps. Andrew sat next to Sharon, with his arm around her shoulders. The two of them watched their son run back and forth along the otherwise empty shore. Andrew could remember a time when there were tons of families on this bank. When he was a child, his family would come down here during the summer with some neighborhood friends. There were always people down here, especially on the forth of July. It seemed weird that they were the only ones there. He didn't want to mention it though. Sharon broke the silence first.

"Andrew, I'm glad we did this. I think we needed it."

"I am too. It's been forever since I've been in the area. It's very relaxing to just watch the water lap against the shore."

"Do you think we'll be able to do this again next year? I mean with the virus"

“Sharon, if it is ever within my power, I’ll make sure we’re all safe for this.”

“No, I know. It’s just scary. I never thought we’d have to raise a child through something like this. It’s like something out of a history book or bad horror movie.”

“Everyday, I have to go in to work and hope every person I draw blood from comes up negative, that way I don’t bring anything home. I heard that if the virus comes any closer, we might have to wear hazmat suits around the hospital.”

“Are you serious?”

“Completely, Nick was telling me about how a friend of his out in California had to wear one just before they were predicting the first cases in the area.”

“Well, I hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“At least I would feel safer. I wouldn’t worry so much about coming home and bringing it with me. I couldn’t live with myself if I did.”

Sharon leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. “Let’s just relax and watch Isaac. I want to forget that anything else exists.”

Thinking about Isaac didn’t help Andrew though. It only reminded him of how fragile his life was now, how risky his job was. The job was just about the only consistent thing besides Sharon that he had at the moment, and at any time it could turn into a death sentence for his family. He remembered the fear he had felt when Isaac, only a few months after birth had contracted a respiratory infection. Near death, they had to hospitalize Isaac for two weeks before they were aloud to take him home. It had been hard on him and Sharon and Andrew wasn’t sure what he would do if they had to face that kind of thing again. This was the last thing he wanted to think about at the moment, so instead he focused on the way his wife’s body leaned against him and her head resting on his shoulder.

When Isaac ran out of bread, he wandered over to the table. Sharon pulled out the sandwiches, peanut butter and jelly, and they started to eat. The geese in the area had, up until that point, stayed at a distance. Now, they began to swim towards Andrew and his family. Isaac was the first to notice.

He pointed a small finger and said, “Dad, the big ones are coming.”

Andrew chuckled, “Yes they are. I hope they don’t want any food. We don’t have any extra.”

Andrew didn’t think that the geese wanted extras or leftovers, they probably wanted everything. When they came on to shore, they began honking and walking closer to the table. Andrew had seen sometimes that when geese were after food, they would sometimes get angry. They weren’t looking happy at the moment. “Sharon, why don’t we head back to the car? They’re hungry.”

Andrew was on the other side of the table from Sharon and began to walk things back to the car. Sharon understood and stood up. She packed up the rest of the food. Before she could get Isaac, though, one of the birds had come up close to him. It honked loudly.

“Bad birdy. Go away. This is my sandwich.”

“Andrew, get Isaac,” called Sharon to Andrew who was on his way back.

Isaac was standing up on the bench holding his sandwich just out of reach. The bird made a lunge. “No,” Isaac screamed pulling his sandwich up further. Instead of getting the sandwich, the bird bit Isaac’s calf and honked again. Isaac screamed out in pain and began to cry. Andrew made a run at the bird, scaring it away; then picked up Isaac. His leg looked a little red, but luckily there was no blood drawn. Andrew put Isaac down once he got back up to the car. With the car doors safely shut, Andrew found their first aid kit and cleaned up Isaac’s leg, placing a band-aid on the red spot. It was mostly for show, but it seemed to calm him down. It took longer for Sharon to get over it than it did Isaac.

Andrew and Sharon agreed that it was probably about time to head out anyway. They stopped at Dairy Queen to try to cheer of Isaac, and then headed home. Sharon switched the radio to WLW when they got on the highway. They were barely out of the park when a news report informed them that fireworks had been cancelled due to both a cloudy sky and the mayor’s concern that it might pose a health risk. It didn’t improve the quality of the drive home. Andrew made an attempt to smooth things over by offering to rent a movie; however, when they got back to Cincinnati, they found that Blockbuster had closed. Another attempt to do something special for Isaac had failed. The day had at least not been an entire loss, but still, it should have been better.

Andrew went to work the next day, long before Sharon woke up. He'd told them night before where to meet him. The work day started off as usual. The people who wanted to get it over with the quickest showed up first and were gone. Even with the staff working as fast as they could, by nine o'clock, there was always a line stretching a few blocks down the road outside the hospital. Andrew took his break about ten minutes before he expected Sharon, and headed down to where he said he would meet her. In no time, Andrew had found a room and brought Nick over to do the testing.

Most of the hospital rooms had been converted into rooms for drawing blood. Because of this, the standard bed of hospital rooms was where Sharon had to sit. Nick took care of her with out a problem and then it was Isaac's turn.

"No, I don't like needles. I don't want a shot."

"If you are good and sit still I'll get you some ice cream to have with lunch. Can you be a big boy?" asked Sharon.

"No!"

"I promise, I won't let them do anything bad to you honey." Sharon patted the bed next to her where there was enough room for him to sit.

"I don't wanna!"

"Andrew"

"Isaac, go up and sit next to your mother now. I promise it doesn't hurt."

"You promise?"

"Yes. I do this to a hundred people a day. Everyone is fine afterwards."

With Sharon's help, he swung his short corduroy covered legs up onto the bed and heaved himself up. Then he sat up and she held onto his left hand. "Hold out your arm honey, it'll all be over in a few seconds."

Nick wrote Isaac's name on the container. He dabbed Isaac's arm with an alcohol covered pad and then got the needle ready.

"Mommy, I don't want too" pleaded Isaac.

“Shh, it’s alright. Just let Nick do his job. Then we can leave and be done with this and you can have your ice cream.” Nick stuck the needle into Isaac’s arm. Isaac’s eyes opened wide and then started to water, though he didn’t scream out. Andrew looked away, Sharon squeezed his hand reassuringly. “Don’t move honey, it will hurt if you move.” Nick quickly attached the jar, let it fill up and then removed everything. He told Isaac to hold a piece of cotton against his arm just like Sharon was. Isaac was still crying silently. “I’ll get you some ice cream. You did really well.”

“I’ll get these over to the lab now. You know the procedure Andrew. Results will be out by the end of the week.

“Thank you. We can go now then?” Sharon asked Andrew.

“Stick around for a few minutes. Let’s make sure Isaac doesn’t get dizzy. Thanks Nick, I’ll see you later?” Nick said goodbye and left the room with the blood samples. He mouthed the number twenty-nine as he left, winking before shutting the door.

“That wasn’t too bad was it son?” Andrew said.

“It hurt.”

“But you’re fine. I told you. I wouldn’t let any harm come to you.”

Andrew and Sharon spent the next five minutes trying to cheer up Isaac. Sharon took Isaac home for lunch. She had found some one to cover her group at camp for the day, so the rest of the day she would spend at home. Andrew decided he would try to talk to Gary after lunch to try to get the time off to go to Chicago. It turned out that Gary would let him have the time off, he put in some weekend shifts before and after the week he was taking off. Andrew agreed to it, hoping that a week off would make up for the weekends.

That night Sharon bought the plain tickets from one of the few airlines that was still open. Andrew reminded her that Wednesday night he was going to be golfing with Nick. She asked if he knew anything about the results yet. He explained he really didn’t have any control over how quickly they performed the tests on the blood. She knew, but still she just wanted to hear the results and stop worrying.

Wednesday rolled around with out any information on the tests either. After work Andrew drove to the Golf course. It was a warmer April afternoon

and Andrew was looking forward to letting some stress go. He met Nick at the club house at five and they had teed off by six. By hole three, Andrew was four above par, which was typical for his game. Nick was doing about the same, but Andrew expected to fall behind shortly. He never finished well, and Nick was the kind of player that got better the longer he played.

The fourth hole had bunkers sporadically on either side of the green and a water hazard about half way down. Nick was up first. He set his ball up, stood with his feet slightly apart, and then lifted his driver up behind his head. He swung forward smoothly, clipping the grass and then bringing the club around. He liked the way it looked and then moved forward a few inches to hit the ball. There was a loud crack and the ball went sailing off toward horizon. It landed a good 150 yards away in the middle of the green. Nick gave a whistle, "You're up Andrew."

Andrew stepped up, holding his driver lightly in his right hand. After placing the tee in the ground and situating the ball he found his balancing point. He took his practice swing, feeling a bit of pressure to get it on to the green. The swing felt right, and the breeze on through was relaxing. He stepped up to the tee, and pulled back. The mask caused his nose to itch a bit. He tried to ignore it and with a crack sent his ball flying. It whizzed a bit lower than Nick's had and drifted off towards the left with the wind landing smack dab in the middle of a sand trap. Nick noticed the disappointment on his friend's face. "Cheer up, it's just a game. And I've seen you come back from worse than that."

"It's the mask. It's one thing to wear it at work. That's normal, but I just can't get used to wearing it everywhere else for everything else."

Nick pulled his mask off his face, which was speckled with hair that he hadn't bothered to shave off.

"Nick, are you crazy?"

"No, I'm just sick and tired of my mask like you. We're in the middle of a golf course; I doubt I'm going to catch anything out here. Are you sick?"

"Well, no, but all the same..."

"I tell you what Andrew, I'm not sick. I was tested a week ago, just like you. Blood screen came up negative. So take that thing off, I won't be getting you sick anytime soon."

Andrew toyed with the strap behind his ear, and then took it off too. It felt good to finally feel the wind on his face again, but he still felt uneasy about the whole thing. “You think they would kick us out of here if they saw us with out masks on?”

“So long as they have theirs on it shouldn’t matter, should it? You aren’t endangering any of them. Besides, we’ll tell them we work at hospital” Andrew’s family sprang to mind for a brief instance, but he was tired of worrying. “How about we finish up this hole?”

The two walked out towards their balls. They had chosen not to rent a cart to avoid the expense. Andrew was able to get his ball out of the sand and was only a stroke above par for the hole when they finished. Nick was even. They began walking toward the next hole.

“How’d your forth of July go Nick?”

“Eh, went home alone. Shit happens. You? I heard they cancelled the fireworks.”

“Yeah, they did. I think the goose that bit Isaac upset him more though.”

“Wait, a goose bit your son?”

“Yeah, it was trying to get his sandwich. We were just getting ready to leave too.”

“That’s a funny one. You can tell his kids some day.”

“Yeah, I guess. Do you have any plans for rest of the summer?” Andrew asked as they walked the bridge over the water hazard.

“No, there really isn’t anywhere to go if you know what I mean. Europe’s out with the pandemic I don’t have a wife that wants to go anywhere. If it were all my decision, I’d go somewhere nice and quiet, maybe a lake or something and rent a house. Just relax. My dad and I used to go fishing when I was a boy. I’d like to take that up again. You ever go fishing?”

“Once or twice, my grandfather took my dad and me out on lake Erie to fish. My dad never really enjoyed it though, so when my grandfather died we just stopped. I wouldn’t mind giving it another try though. Isaac’s getting old enough for it soon, maybe next summer.”

“Tell you what. We’ll go next year. We’ll find a cabin somewhere on some lake and just relax away from all of this insanity.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“So, tell me what you’re doing.”

“What makes you think I’m doing anything.”

“Fess up, you never ask me what I’m doing, unless you’re up to something.”

“You got me. Sharon and I already bought tickets to go to Chicago to see her sister. It’s not going to be much of a vacation, but we won’t be stressed about work.” Nick looked a little uneasy. “Is something wrong?”

“You haven’t been paying attention to the news today have you?”

“No, I’ve been at work all day and I can’t stand talk radio anymore. All they do is analyze when we are all going to die. I get enough of that at work. What happened?”

“Chicago’s infected. First positive case popped up this morning. You might want to spend your summer somewhere else. The entire thing will be quarantined before summer.”

Sharon was going to be miserable. “What ever happened to the days when you could just sit back and relax with out worrying about your death?”

“What makes you think you can’t do that now? Three years ago some drunk could have head on killed you. It’s no different today. Hell, what if you had opened one of those anthrax letters. There’s no point in worrying too much about it.”

“I’ve got a son I’d like to see grow up.”

“I tell you what, if you’ll stop moping about and play some golf, you and I will survive the next year and find that cabin. Worry about the other stuff later. You’re as good as dead stressed out like this.”

They played another ten holes before Andrew realized what time it was. Curfew started at nine and it was just after eight now. He and Nick put their masks back on and headed off the course to their cars. They said their goodbyes after Nick made him promise to relax a little.

When Andrew got home, Sharon was tucking Isaac in. She seemed calm enough for Andrew to believe she hadn't heard about Chicago. He stood in Isaac's doorway watching her finish goodnight moon. She had held up a finger when she noticed him, even though he'd been there for a few minutes; Isaac was almost asleep. When she finished she leaned over him and whispered, "Don't let the bed bugs bite." Isaac had fallen asleep so Sharon turned off the lights and turned on the night light.

Andrew followed her over to their room. She was already in pajamas, clearly ready for bed. He asked her how dinner was. She told him about how she had tried to get Isaac to eat Chinese, but he hadn't liked it. So she had given up and let him have macaroni cheese while she had eaten the Chinese. If he wanted some, there were leftovers in the fridge.

After they had eaten dinner Isaac had played with some finger paints that Sharon had left over from a camp project. He had seemed very interested in painting his face, more than paper. Laundry would need to be done soon because Isaac had gotten paint on Sharon as well as himself. Sharon seemed pleased enough with the evening, but Andrew knew he would have to give her the bad news about their summer trip.

"Sharon, I don't think we are going to be able to go to Chicago this summer."

"Why? I thought your boss had cleared you for vacation time."

"It's not that. The virus made it to Chicago. Nick heard it on the news earlier today. He reckons the entire city will be quarantined by summer. And even if it isn't, I wouldn't want us to risk getting sick. I'm sorry."

"Are you sure? I have to call my sister." Andrew let her go and pick up the phone and dial her sister. The two of them talked for a good long while. Sharon asked how she was, if she was sick, how close the case was to where she lived, and whether she knew anyone who had gotten ill. Andrew didn't hear any of the answers. He knew it was bad just from the worried and shaky voice his wife was speaking with. Sharon told her sister that she didn't think it would be safe to visit Chicago, and from what Andrew could gather it didn't seem that her sister would be able to come out to Cincinnati. Somewhere inside, Andrew was ok with that. It meant that there was no chance the virus would be brought into his house under his consent. By the time Sharon had hung up the phone, Andrew had undressed and climbed into bed. She turned

off the light, and then slid into bed next to him. He could feel the warmth of her body as he put his arm around her shoulder and felt her shake. He held her for a long time before he fell asleep. He would never be sure if she had ever fallen asleep.

When Andrew went into work Thursday, Nick was waiting for him by the entrance. He was pacing cracking his knuckles. Andrew waved to him, as he got closer. Nick only nodded, and then when they were close, he whispered through his mask “Andrew, they want to see you.”

“They? Have you been drinking?”

“What? No, I mean the guys on the upper floor. Some doctor, I think he said his name was Miller, wanted to see you.”

“Where did he want me to go?”

“He said to go up to floor six first. Do you have any idea what this is about? Did your families results come in?”

“No, not yet. God you don’t think?”

“I don’t think they are sick or you’d all have been quarantined.”

“True, but I’d better hurry anyway. I’ll see you later Nick.”

Andrew took the elevator up to level three; then, he had to take the stairs. The elevators had been disabled past level three because they didn’t want anyone to accidentally get up on to the upper floors. He took three at a time, which was fairly easy without his scrubs on. He just about slammed the doors open, but remembered himself and opened them up slower. There was a receptionist at a makeshift desk in front of exit to the staircase.

He asked her where Dr. Miller was, but before she answered Dr. Miller popped his head out of a door down the hallway and waved to Andrew to come over. Andrew was slightly taller than the doctor, who looked exhausted. The doctor’s forehead was creased, his eyes were baggy, and he had the distinct look on his face that at any moment he was likely to yawn very widely; however, he had the same nervous look about him that Nick had as he ushered Andrew into a small office.

“Come in, come in, sit down,” said Dr. Miller, but there was no where to sit with all the books and papers that were piled on every surface. The

book cases were filled to the brim and seemed to have spilled out onto the floor. Somehow, the room had managed to retain that faint smell of old paper only found in library sections that contain aged books. “Just move that pile of papers on to the floor, they aren’t important.” Dr. Miller managed to squeeze between his desk and book case to sit down in an old squeaky green leather chair. Andrew did as he was told and then sat down in his chair. “Sorry for the mess. I’ve been so busy up here I haven’t really had the chance to clean lately. I’m sure you’re curious though as to why I asked you up here today.”

“Is it something to do with the test results? We’re not infected are we?”

“Yes to the first, no to the second. In fact, it’s quite a different situation entirely. Do you know what it is we do up here?”

“I’ve had my guesses, but no, I really don’t.”

“We have two jobs. One, we test for infection. If we find an infection, we quarantine individuals who have it. We are supposed to do damage control, in that respect. Most of us, however, like myself, are here for an entirely different reason. We’ve been looking for a vaccine.”

“So you do have the virus up here?”

“Yes, it is in cold storage most of the time. We take every precaution to keep it safe and away from the outside world; although, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell anyone else. I’m afraid the public wouldn’t appreciate everything we are doing. But back on topic, the reason you’ve been called up here is because your son Isaac has brought us one step closer to finding a vaccine.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, your son apparently came into contact with a less lethal cousin of the Hecate Virus at some point in the past. We didn’t even know one existed. Regardless, we think he has antibodies in his blood that we could use to create a vaccine.” Andrew was silent. He didn’t know what to say. After a moment to let the information sink in, Dr. Miller continued speaking. “There’s a problem though. He’s too small and the antibodies aren’t present in large enough quantities for us. In order to harvest enough, we’d have to take too much blood.”

“Too much? You mean kill him?”

“Yes, unfortunately.”

“I won’t allow it.”

“I wouldn’t ask you to. I can’t ask you to. Even with over a billion people dead I still have a code of ethics I need to follow as a doctor. Procedure required me to tell you this though. So far, he’s the only one we’ve ever found. It’s a good thing we found him, maybe in a few years, if it isn’t too late he’ll be of more use to us. For now, we have to leave him alone. The more pressing matter at the moment is that there is every possibility that this information will be leaked to the press, if it hasn’t been yet. I am not the only one who knows about your son. The technicians were told that they’d lose their job if they did anything, but my superiors are looking for something good to tell the media. I don’t know how long it will be kept secret. You at least should probably keep it secret that it’s your son. There are too many desperate people in this world at the moment.”

“What should I do then?”

“Live your life as normally as possible. There isn’t really anything you can do at the moment. If there is, I’ll tell you. You can go back to work if you like, or I can ask someone to give you the rest of the day off if you like. They owe me a couple favors down there.”

“Yeah Thanks, I’d like that.”

“I thought you might. Here, take my card. It has my hours. You can call me at anytime though.”

Andrew left the office in a bit of a daze. He couldn’t even remember how he got back down stairs. He used the stairs of course, but didn’t really remember walking them. He went back to work, to wait for his supervisor to tell him he had the rest of the day off. He drew blood from a couple of people, mechanically. After about a half hour his supervisor found him and told him he could head out.

The rest of the day just sort of passed with out anything happening. Andrew hadn’t bothered to call Sharon at camp to let her know what had happened. She could find out what had happened when she brought Isaac home. He had decided he’d make them all dinner, so when it got closer to four he began to get everything out.

After cutting the first few carrots and getting the oven ready, he turned on the television to distract himself. He returned to chopping carrots a little

slower than before. He became focused on feeling the knife slide and then, as the carrot gave way, slam into the cutting board. When he finished, he picked up overflowing handfuls to wash them off. After feeling the water run over his hands for a few moments, he tossed the carrots into the pot of boiling water. He grabbed the platter of steaks he had meant to cook in the oven and stopped. The TV was still on.

“The death toll has risen yet again and, as we near year two of the pandemic, analysts have tried to predict where the deadly virus will spread next and when the pandemic will end. Several studies have pointed to inoculation as the only real way to put an end to the Hecate Virus. In a turn of events, some of our sources say that a Hospital in Cincinnati has found someone with antibodies that may in fact be able to combat the virus. While this is just preliminary information, we plan to keep you updated as more information is released. No information as of yet has been released as to the identity of the person or when we could expect results. The hospital refused to confirm or deny any allegations”

Andrew turned off the TV. Blood had spilled off of the slightly tipped platter of steak and was soaking into his sock. After setting the platter back down on the counter, he pulled off the sock and went down in the basement to the laundry area. He tossed the sock into the washer along with some of the laundry he had been meaning to do that week. Setting the washer to cold, he added detergent and then stood and stared, arms braced against the washer as the water and foam slowly rose and engulfed the folds of cloth. After the water had hidden the entirety of the load in froth and the agitator began swirling everything back and forth, Andrew closed the lid and headed back upstairs. He wiped up the floor and then put the steaks in the oven. He sat in the family room while the food cooked and waited for his family to come home.

Before they did, however, the phone rang.

“Hey, Andrew where’d you take off to? I just got off of work and Gary said you’d taken the day off. Is everything alright?” It was Nick.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Tests came up negative, that’s all.”

“Andrew, they called you upstairs. And now they’re saying on the news they found someone with the antibodies. I can put two and two together. Lucky dog.”

“Nick, I don’t have them. And you’d better not be in public right now.”

“Relax man, I’m in my car. Then why’d they call you upstairs if you don’t have them.”

Andrew couldn’t come up with a lie quick enough, “It’s Isaac.”

“Your kid? What are you going to do?”

“Nothing. They can’t use him. He’s too small, they’d have they’d have to kill him in order to get enough to do anything. Promise me you’ll keep this between us.”

“Wait they’re not going to do anything? You’re not going to do anything? Andrew there are millions dead already. Chicago’s infected, they’re predicting Cincinnati will be before the end of the summer and they’re not going to do anything? What the fuck?”

“Nick, what would you have me do? Sacrifice my own son?”

“Well, no, but there has to be something that can be done.”

“Nick, keep this quiet, please.”

“I don’t know Andrew”

“Please, between us. No one else.”

The phone went dead without Nick giving Andrew an answer. Andrew stood there for a few minutes, unsure of what to do. He hadn’t expected that kind of reaction from his best friend. He’d never really had an argument or disagreement with his Nick before, it just didn’t make sense. Andrew sat back down in the family room, hoping there wouldn’t be another twist.

When the garage door opened and Sharon came up the stairs with Isaac trailing in her wake, Andrew was just putting the final touches on the table. Steak, seasoned rice, and carrots in three separate bowls were surrounded by the casual china. Three glasses of water in lucid green plastic cups had large square ice cubes floating inside of them. He still needed to put out the silverware. Sharon took offer her mask.

“You didn’t tell me you were going to be home early today.”

“I thought I’d surprise the two of you with dinner.”

“It looks good, just let me get changed and I’ll be down. The kids got

paint all over me today. Isaac, go get washed up.”

A few minutes later they were all sitting around the table. Andrew and Sharon helped themselves to the food taking turns putting food on Isaac’s plate. Sharon waited to eat until she had cut half of her steak into small pieces, which she scraped onto Isaac’s plate.

Sharon spoke before Andrew had the chance, “So, have you heard anything about the person who supposedly has the antibodies? It was all over the news. They are saying, that there’s finally a chance. Personally, I hope the vaccine comes out soon. I can’t wait. I thought all they were doing was blowing hot air before.”

Andrew decided to lie, “No, I don’t know anything about the person. Your results did come back today. They were negative.”

“Good, we’re fine then?”

“Well, we don’t have what they are looking for, in either case,” Andrew looked at Isaac who was chewing on a piece of meat. He swallowed and then smiled.

“Were you able to get the tickets refunded, Andrew?”

“I hadn’t looked into it yet, but I will this weekend. I think I’ll probably end up working that week anyway.

“What? We can still take that week off and travel somewhere safe. And if they’ve found this person, you shouldn’t have to test people much longer.”

“Sharon, vaccines take a long time to make and test. It will be a while before that happens, and we probably won’t stop testing people until all of Cincinnati has been inoculated. Even before then, we’ll have to give out the shots. And I don’t know if anywhere is safe. Really, more than half of the country is infected. And the quarantining isn’t doing anything.”

“Andrew, not in front of Isaac, we agreed.”

“Isaac’s fine.” He was. Andrew knew that no matter what happened, Isaac would be fine. He and Sharon on the other hand, who knew?

“I still think it would be good for us to get away for a week. Go to Florida, something, anything.”

“We’ll see. I didn’t tell Gary I was working again. I’ll think about it.” Andrew tried to make it seem as final as he could. And it seemed to work. The rest of the meal passed in silence.

That night Andrew couldn’t sleep for hours. For some reason, he felt as if his bed was out on the ocean. It was as if he’d spent the entire day on a boat or in the ocean and he was still feeling the waves. His wife lay next to him, but she was below the sheets. He was too hot to be under them. Instead he lay flat on his back, so that the ceiling fan would cool him off. When he was finally able to close his eyes and drift off into sleep, his mind played over everything that had happened: Dr. Miller, Isaac, Nick, and then dinner. Over and over again, he rewound and then watched again, as if it were a marathon of a bad movie. Then the blood began to soak into his socks again. He took them off, but his hands were stained and he couldn’t get them cleaned. He went to the bathroom, to try to wash them, but the water wasn’t working. So, he went outside. There were people everywhere, reaching for him, reaching for the blood on his hands, reaching for Isaac. Andrew grabbed his son away from them, who had been standing outside the door of the house. He shoved his way through the mob, to get to his car, but Nick had his keys and wouldn’t give them back.

Nick wanted Isaac, and he wouldn’t take no for an answer. Andrew refused over and over again. It was his son. Nick told him that he would never leave them alone, Isaac could save millions. Andrew didn’t want to hear it. He wanted Isaac to have a normal life to grow up. He ran further away, just ran. As he reached the crest of a hill, he saw grassy fields, filled with tombstones stretching off to the horizon. He no longer had Isaac in his arms anymore, though. He had to find him, his son. Andrew ran off through the graveyard. He could here gasping sobbing breaths in the distance. He followed them, running, changing direction all the time until he found his son again. Isaac was kneeling before two headstones. Andrew’s headstone, and Sharon’s.

There was a loud bang that woke Andrew up from his dream. A car had backfired outside his house. Andrew got out of bed, and sat in the kitchen the rest of the night, waiting for the gray light of dawn.

Andrew put the car into neutral, so that his wife wouldn’t hear it as he let it drift out of the driveway and then down to the stop sign. It was a week later. Isaac was buckled into the car seat, fast asleep. When Andrew had drifted far enough away from the house, he gave the key a turn and drove off.

The sun wouldn't be up for another few hours. He'd heard on the news shortly before waking Isaac up that a case had been confirmed in Columbus. It had sealed it. The virus would be in Cincinnati soon enough. Andrew couldn't let his wife die, and Isaac certainly wasn't going to have a normal life. Nick had given him hell for the last week. He had gotten drunk one night and told an entire tavern of people about Isaac. They'd apparently chalked it up to nothing more than drunk ramblings, but it didn't help Andrew's nerves. He was constantly worried that someone was going to come in the middle of the night and steal Isaac away from him.

The street lights passed by softly. He was slightly worried that the police would be out looking for him, that Sharon might have called them; but, if he told them he was on his way to the hospital and explained why, they would probably let him pass. As worried as he was, he didn't see anyone out on the road. Consequently, it didn't take him long to get to the hospital. There were only a few cars in the parking garage because the hospital had been dedicated to research and testing. At nights the hospital was relatively empty, but Dr. Miller's card said he'd be there.

When they got to the hospital, he got Isaac to get out of the car and then he followed the familiar path up to the floor where he had met Dr. Miller. He talked to the receptionist at the desk, requesting to see Dr. Miller. The woman after a few calls was able to find him. She told Andrew to wait in the waiting room where one other, older man sat staring up at a TV that was displaying coverage on the pandemic. This man was wearing a gray jacket, and had an oxygen tank next to him that he occasionally had to take deep rasping breaths from. He had a white goatee and wiry white hair. Andrew took Isaac to the other side of the waiting room and sat down. Isaac slumped against his father's arm half asleep.

A short time later, Dr. Miller came and led them down the hall into a room. Dr. Miller closed the door to the room where Andrew and his family had been tested only two weeks earlier.

Before the doctor could speak Andrew said, "Whatever you need to do, can do with Isaac, I'm ok with it. Anything."

"Andrew, I knew this would be difficult for you. I told you last week it wouldn't be ethical of me to do anything. I'm sorry that the hospital leaked information, but we don't need Isaac anymore."

“What do you mean?”

“We looked into his medical history to try to find some explanation for why he had the antibodies. We followed several trails, including the upper respiratory infection Isaac had shortly after he was born. It turns out, he wasn’t the only one and there were several others hospitalized at the time. Many were as young as your son, but some of the elderly also showed similar symptoms. It wasn’t wide spread and we chalked it up to flu season. But further blood testing has found us other matches.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you can go home. We don’t need Isaac anymore. That man out in the waiting room, has obliged to let us work with his blood, as have several others. Go home to your wife.”

The drive home was a long one for Andrew. He had taken his son away from home, planned never to return, only to find out that there was no reason to have left in the first place. No reason for the note he had left for his wife, under his cell phone explaining why he had left and what he intended to do. When he pulled up into the driveway, he didn’t bother to get out of the car. It was still dark, but morning would come soon. Isaac was asleep in his car seat. Andrew reclined his own, and then stared at the upholstery of the roof of his car. He was home, he knew, but the door didn’t look inviting. The suburban landscaping felt foreign, the street lamps dim. He knew his side of the bed lay cold, and that his wife would wake up in a few minutes wondering where her son was if she hadn’t already. And there would be questions. And everything would be there in the emptiness. He let out a shuddering breath, then the light turned on in his wife’s room.