

THE CHANGE

By William Kaufmann

Chapter 1 - THE ARRIVAL

If he thought I was there to kill him, he was wrong. Circumstances would do that for me. His lips were black, one eye frozen shut, the other still open but drifting. Faint puffs of moisture iced his beard. Freezing to death is more merciful in the end stage. The slope was steep, and I steadied myself against the boulder, propping him up, then watched that drifting eye shift into a lifeless stare. Security warned he might be Anteater. I had never seen one in real life, but I knew their kind hunted communities like ours. An Anteater this close to our complex was a problem.

There wasn't much to take—his worn leather aviator's cap was typical Anteater uniform, his hikers still had use, no weapons. In his pocket were empty vials, perhaps some sort of medicine, and a thin silvery glove, a piece of old technology but still useful. I put it on. Immediately, its warmth surrounded my fingers. But neither the glove nor anything else he owned saved him from the wrath of the Desolation.

The wind was bitter, the air crisp and well below zero. My time outside was already over the acceptable limit. I slung his boots over my shoulder and headed back up the icy mountain path. From the upper valley, his figure looked like a grain of sand on the edge of an ocean, waiting to be washed away. He died but a few miles from our upper gate, not that he would have found it. Hidden deep within the mountain core is our underground community. The snow-

covered valley is disorienting, and landmarks are few. Still, it was curious that he chose this mountain and this valley out of all the others.

The wind stabbed my face like a thousand pricking needles. Clouds poured over distant mountains, a waterfall of thick grayish vapor; a monstrous storm was approaching. Soon night would descend, creating an inescapable darkness and unsurvivable temperatures. I have never seen actual moonlight, nor stars, and tomorrow there will be no sun. Blue sky is only a fairytale. We call this era the Change, although there are other names for it. It is not the beginning of the end. The end has already happened. We are the unlucky survivors.

A deep voice in my earpiece was Abraham, the head gatekeeper, watching out for my safety and my progress from inside the complex. “Brick... more visitors,” he warned. “They’re by the rock, looking at the body.”

Perhaps this lost trekker had companions. The cold was penetrating and with a malicious blizzard approaching, I had to be careful, but it was my duty to go back. Outlanders wandering in our valley was a dangerous sign.

The wind died, giving my face a brief respite from blowing snow. Through glasses, I saw four strangers standing by the boulder inspecting the corpse. A female on bent knee held the dead man’s hand.

Abraham’s voice crackled again. “My god, Brick! Two of them look like... *children*.”

No one brings children into the Desolation.

Outsider children were a rare opportunity for genetic diversity. This fact made them highly valued prizes. That young ones were still alive traveling in such treachery was an anomaly that contradicted the very laws of survival. I stood in the open, waving my arms, and they immediately ran toward me. Of course they would—they were either lost, starved, freezing, or

all three. With a monstrous storm on the horizon, I led them up the valley for the sake of the children, looking back to make sure they were following. Robotic weaponry hidden throughout the valley protects me, along with the careful assistance provided by Abraham.

It was the woman who gained ground. The others fell behind. She wore a pack; long, knotted hair flopped from under her hat. She stepped lightly over rocks that made the others halt and clamber. Considering the circumstances, her athleticism was remarkable.

I ignored her desperate shouts as she pursued me. She knew their situation was grave. “Stop,” she yelled, “wait!” But I kept moving until the camouflaged entrance to our underground complex came into view. For the adults, one question mattered—what do you bring that we need? Their answers would either save them or kill them.

Steel reinforced doors divided in the middle, built to retract into rock. Without my permission, the trail was a dead end. Above the door, a rock face of sheer granite rose hundreds of feet to the summit. At our entrance, I stopped and turned. The woman halted not more than ten steps from me, breathing hard, bent over, keeping a wary eye on my movements. It is a perilous situation when two strangers meet, and life hangs in the balance. Desperation is unpredictable. We did not take our eyes off each other, although the advantage weighed heavily in my favor. The chase had been difficult, and her energetic pursuit spoke well of her physical health. A small sound from the package on her back stunned me. Was she carrying a baby? Her swaying motions to soothe its discomfort convinced me that she did. What kind of mother would risk her baby’s life for a journey like this? Standing at our gate with children would not guarantee entrance for her or her male companion. If the Community needed their talents, the gates would open; otherwise, their sentence was death, even though they had committed no crime. The real crime

was committed generations ago by those who destroyed the planet. Because of that crime, we are all sentenced.

The rest of the family arrived shortly after—puffing and not clothed for such weather. The adult male strained under the weight of a heavy backpack, his arm bent inward, most likely to protect frost-bitten fingers. If so, he had another day, perhaps two, before he became part of a callous landscape.

And yes, two small children stood solemnly between them. I guessed them as sisters, five and six years old, maybe younger, skin color darker, closer to the male. It was doubtful that this family had the resources for a return trip out of this valley. And most likely, they were good people. It was not their fault they were here; no one should be here. Those who held the future in contempt handed this legacy to us through decisions based on self-indulgence and false beliefs. We are the last era of a history that will remain unwritten. It has been almost two generations since the sun disappeared under a vast blanket of clouds and space debris. Sunrise and sunset are now just words. I could not hate my ancestors more.

Their eyes shone with a grim hopefulness as they stood before me. The wind rose again, creating urgency for negotiation. Heavy breathing and the creak of boots on dry snow were signs of uneasiness as we stared at each other. The female had piercing turquoise eyes. A slight smile was an attempt to release the awkward tension. This family had taken a gamble they should never have considered.

“Are you a robot?” The younger child spoke first. The question was tinged with innocence and curiosity. This child—I could not understand why—was not afraid. She went to step forward, but her mother tugged her back.

“Luna, shush.” The female took the little girl’s hand and looked at me. “You are a real person, aren’t you?” She had already caught her breath while the others still panted.

I knew they could easily mistake me for a droid. My bulky clothing gave no clue to my shape, except that I was large. On my right hand, I wore a thick rigid glove, which was also a weapon. The dead man’s thin silk glove covered my other hand. My helmet had a darkened visor, my eyes hidden, yet information hung within a virtual plain continuously analyzing my field of vision. This technology had already captured the tone and cadence of the female’s voice, which would help assess her truthfulness. It also told me she was on the end cusp of childbearing age, a strike against her. I raised my visor, revealing my eyes. “I am quite human,” I answered.

The female knelt before me, and put both hands on her head. “By your grace,” she said. Her words were barely audible, her head bowed. It was a strange gesture I had not seen before. She raised her head. “We are not Anteater.”

It was a curious calculation on her part to offer information without being asked. It was obvious she recognized the dead body as a soldier from the vicious Anteater society, but at the moment, it was not my primary concern.

“If you are carrying weapons, it is best you throw them down now.” I ignored her overture. I offered no welcoming introduction, no greeting, and no pity. Lying about weapons would force me to kill the adults.

The female rose to her feet and spread her arms wide. “No weapons. We are peaceful and mean no harm.” Her voice was strong, not fearful, and her eyes were penetrating. She seemed aware advanced technology scanned her every movement. She took a small object from her pocket, holding it up so I could see. It was a laser guidance pen that calculated distance, a harmless item. The interview could now begin.

“How did you find us?” It was a simple question, but the answer had to be precise.

She handed me a torn paper with a map drawn on it. “I bought it from a trader. He was passing through a nest where we were staying. The seller had been to the mountain zone and said that it was safe from Anteaters.”

“Did you know this trader? Did he have a reputation?”

“I had never met him before,” she replied.

“How did he obtain such a map?”

“It was a nest. People trade things all the time, mostly for survival. He didn’t say where he got it. To ask is often a dangerous question. Everyone is looking for a safe place. I don’t think he understood the numbers on the map, but I did.” Breath steamed from her mouth. She looked directly into my eyes.

I lowered my visor and looked at the document. Initial scanning could not identify the numbers or formulas on the yellowed paper. A large piece of the corner was missing.

Abraham could also see what I was looking at. “Brick, I’m passing this on to Eva. She will know for sure.”

The map was vague, the numbers meaningless, and there were no points of reference. There was no way they found us with this worthless piece of paper. The outlander woman was holding back. One does not find our valley accidentally or by some torn piece of paper bought from an unknown trader. I stuffed the lie back in her hand. They were already slipping.

“What was your point of origin?” I addressed the question to the male. He was slightly bent over, silver hair strands flew from under his hat. Until this point, he had remained silent.

“His mouth is frozen,” she explained.

It was a common malady I had seen in others. She spoke for him as he pantomimed a story about another underground community three hundred miles from the mountain zone, where he taught children how to read. The wind began to roar, and I cut her off. There was no colony three hundred miles from ours. Time was short. The roiling mass of black clouds was now quickly approaching.

The man was worthless, their answers were lies. She was most likely the reason they were not dead. It was not a quality that gained admission.

“What do you offer?” The final question. Almost everyone spun a tale of significant accomplishment or their importance in a history already dead. The female kept her gaze fixed on the visor as though she could see my eyes. “I am a teacher and have knowledge about restorative gardening.”

Such skills were of minimal use. Teaching was not enough for entrance. My earpiece crackled again. It was Abraham.

“Ask her about protonic preservation.”

I followed his instructions.

She shifted her backpack. “It is old technology used for safeguarding nutrients.”

The question was a test. It is far from old technology and has nothing to do with nutrient preservation. It was useless to go on. She was bluffing. There was nothing to gain by admitting her or her partner.

“We will take the children. The Community will raise them properly. They will have a chance for a productive life.” It was my only consolation.

A look of horror spread across the female’s face. “Are you saying separate the children from us?”

“This is our offer. They will live a life that will fulfill their potential. It is your choice.”

Words stuck to her lips. The children clutched at her legs, unwilling to let go. I could just kill the parents, but this is not how we deal with a situation like this. We would let the environment do it for us. If the family chose to stay together, she and her partner would use their bodies to protect the children from the coming storm. The young ones, if healthy, would survive. The parents wouldn't. Giving the children to us would be far easier and safer. We had done it this way before. It was the humane thing to do. Children should not witness the murder of their parents. They were freaks of nature to have come this far, but since the adults had no valuable skills, there was nothing more to talk about. We did not need extra mouths to feed. I turned to reenter the gate; they had ten steps to make up their minds.

The female ran after me. A burst of wind roared down the mountain, blowing her to her knees. “Wait,” she screamed. Her voice was a guttural sound rising above the howl of the wind. “There is something else.”

We call it the plea, or the supplication. Not everyone does this.

“What else?” My only interest was in something solid, something that would add value to the Community, and for her sake, something beyond the pretense they were hiding behind. She knew that her life hung on her next few words.

“Please... wait.” She extended her hand.

I pulled her up. Her fingers took mine in a firm grip, radiating unusual warmth. My attention shifted to our clasped hands. They were shining like embers, encased in a soft lavender glow.

I jerked my arm upward. She fell backward. I shook my hand as if it were on fire. The visor suddenly became useless. An alarm within my suit went off, broadcasting an alert to

Abraham. I heard the lock on the cold steel gate bolt shut behind me. The color vanished—she did not hurt me, yet her action was hostile. I threw open the visor and raised my weapon.

“Stop! Don’t shoot.” She put her palm in front of her face, fingers spread apart. “Let me show you, please.”

She quickly shed her coat, unbuttoned her shirt, and held it open, revealing a silvery fabric sewn in small diamond shape patterns that delicately outlined her body. “I am wearing cellular thermal skin,” she shouted above the wind. Gently, she took my hand and put it on her chest. The same low lavender glow radiated from contact between my thin glove and her thermals. We stared at each other. There was a strange thumping in my ears, a heartbeat that was not mine. I slowly retracted my hand. Once again, she knelt and put her hands on her head. The family watched in silence.

“By your grace,” she said, her head turned down, her voice full of repentance. “Forgive my uncalled-for actions. I am taking a risk that you will see something of benefit. We are pleading for our lives.”

My eyes narrowed. I was disrespected by her hostile act and not sure about the value of what she wore. There were stories about an experimental technology developed for space exploration with implications far beyond their intended use. But no one had seen it, and no one possessed it, least of all a family like this.

Winds blew snow horizontally, obscuring the closest mountain peaks. It rolled into our valley like a monstrous tidal wave.

“My God! Cellular thermal skin?” Abraham’s deep voice filled my helmet. Communication was once again functional. “Get them through the gate. Now!” The lock triggered, and the steel entrance rolled open. Never had Abraham been so excited about

outlanders. I waved them into the stone tunnel. Mother and kids rushed in. Slinging his heavy pack onto his shoulders, the old man made his way toward the open gate.

A searing mass of darkness filled the entire horizon. Vicious winds howled like wolves. I shouted at him, "Forget the pack!" He refused, then slipped on the ice only feet from the gate. As the door closed, he took off his heavy load and flung it into the tunnel, then slipped again on the ice. The woman lurched to aid her colleague, but I held her back. One step out of the gate and she'd be nothing more than a snowflake in the wind. As he lay on the ground, a gale-force blast roared over the old man as he desperately dug his nails into the frozen tundra. His cap flew from his head. Jagged pieces of ice flew like knives. His effort was heroic, but the fury had arrived. Nothing would save him.

I shielded the woman and the children in a crevice as a brutal wind tore through the tunnel. The woman screamed and the young ones buried their faces in their mother's leggings. Hurricane-force wind prevented the old man from gaining traction, pinning him to the ground. Grasping the walking stick, he reached out and wedged it between the massive doors. His other hand seized the cane as another fierce wave struck the mountain. The old man's frail body flew like a flag blowing in the wind. This was no ordinary cane, and he was no ordinary human.

The woman turned to the children, shielding them from this horror. The ferocious blast paused, and his body crashed onto the ice with enough force to crush a body. Rising to his knees with a herculean effort, he crawled through the entrance. The gate slammed shut behind him, his chest heaving and lungs gulping for air. The old man collapsed on the stone floor. Now able to help, the female ran to his side and took his hand, triggering that same strange lavender glow within their touch.

The second wind wave slammed against five-inch steel doors, making them shudder. A ghostly sound echoed off the arched stone walls. The fury outside was unimaginable. Holding each other, the children trembled as the female brought her companion to his feet. That he could stand was miraculous.

“Brick.” Abraham’s deep voice echoed in my headset, “Eva has confirmed—the map is real!” I could hear his astonishment. A map with our location on it was a problem, a big problem for a community that depended on its hidden location for survival.

The family had managed entrance, but it did not mean acceptance. It was not even a maybe. They would be investigated, questioned, and interviewed. The map would need a detailed explanation. Their claim of thermal skin would be thoroughly tested. Then the Committee would decide whether the adults will stay or be returned to the Desolation. Written protocols are the law. Without the law, there would be chaos.

The woman wept as the family trudged deeper underground. “Thank you,” she kept saying over and over. She does not realize that I could also be her executioner. Their ignorance gave them hope. Hope is a false reality. If it were any other point in history, they would be cursing me. They should be cursing me. I am cursing me. But this is the age we live in. We are trapped by decisions made a hundred years ago. Now, the law reigns over everything in our community...even over compassion. But nothing reigns over the Desolation. There is only death.

