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Azai's Rocket Ship

Every day, Azai rolled out of bed with a scowl on his face. He didn't always wake up in a horrible mood, but ever since the Gog arrived on Earth, or Magog as it was called now, there wasn't much for him to be happy about. *It's just one more day, you can do this*, Azai thought to himself, his lackluster attempt to get his day going didn't help much. Azai lazily made the bed and walked into the kitchen where his wife, Elizabeth, was making their morning meal, some form of grains mixed with water.

"Good morning," Elizabeth said.

"Morning," Azai muttered back. Neither of them had much to say these days.

Azai sat down with a groan at the kitchen table, his eyes dark and hollow. He began to pick at the food Elizabeth set in front of him and mumbled a "thank you" under his breath. Elizabeth didn't bother acknowledging Azai- no one had the energy for formalities anymore. The Gog's presence were too draining.

After he finished his breakfast, Azai checked the shattered clock on the wall that he had miraculously fixed after the most recent Invasion, and hurriedly got dressed for work and headed out the door without as much as a glance back at his wife. *Life is pointless these days*, Azai thought with a sigh. Had it been the Olden Days, Azai would have given Elizabeth a kiss on his way out, and they would have enjoyed a lovely morning together. Only this wasn't the Olden Days- this was Magog. Earth was gone, at least in the sense that nothing was how it used to be.

Every former country, government, and landscape was destroyed during the Invasions. Few parts of Earth remained untouched or unscathed enough to resemble what they once were.

The Gog were an invasive alien species that had begun invading Earth and taking over. The few news outlets left showed what once were beautiful mountains, oceans, and deserts were now leveled, dried up, and burning. The only remaining parts of Earth were small settlements scattered across the planet, full of Survivors evading the Gog Invasion.

The Survivors were the grittiest members of Earth. They were the outcasts and outliers, those with few strings holding them to their lives. That's what made them survive. When the Gog attacked, the citizens of Earth had to act fast and leave all they knew behind. The people who tried to wait it out or submit to the Gog's rule were instantly killed or enslaved. Only the lucky few made it out, choosing a life of nomadism and uncertainty over certain enslavement or death.

Azai hurried along the dirt road towards his work at ETE, or End Times Engineering. He had once been a happy Zoologist, but once the Gog arrived, he had no other choice but to leave the Zoo and flee for safety. The Gog destroyed everything in their path and took humans as their slaves, subjecting them to torment and chaos. Azai was determined not to let that happen to him or Elizabeth. That's why when he stumbled across ETE, he quickly began working as a Rocket Scientist. Lucky for him, he had earned a degree in his early twenties in engineering, so he had caught onto the job quickly. However, Azai *hated* working at ETE. His passion was animals, and every day he spent away from them made him feel like he was missing a piece of himself.

Azai continued on his trek to work, stopping occasionally to listen if he heard a branch break or a crunch of the leaves nearby in the forest. His body was on high alert- the Gog could arrive at any time. He had heard stories of other Survivors letting their guard down in isolated areas where they thought no Gog would ever find them being kidnapped or killed in an instant

before they ever noticed that they were not alone. Azai was extra careful each time he left for work, as more and more people quit showing up for work. They either packed up and moved locations in the middle of the night or were taken by the Gog, either way Azai had no way of hearing from them again.

As he walked he often daydreamed about what life would be like without the Gog, and how much he had taken for granted as a Zoologist. He missed the days when he would kiss his wife goodbye at the door, drop his son off at school, and go to work at a place he loved. Azai never connected with humans like he did animals. There was something special about animals to him, and he always felt like there was a force drawing them together. Ever since he was a young boy, Azai remembered feeling like there was purpose in his life when he was around animals. He used to think that his calling in life was to care for animals, but with what the world had become, Azai was no longer sure of that. With a sigh, he reached ETE and pulled the secret lever on a tree to reveal the underground staircase that led to the headquarters.

End Times Engineering served as a facility designed to create mechanical devices and equipment. It was formed after the first attack as an underground shelter for employees and their families only. Since the Gog had taken over Earth and renamed it Magog, no climates were left untouched. All ecosystems and landscapes were changed for the worse, and everywhere the Gog occupied was a total wasteland. The Gog's machinery and spaceships leaked poisonous gasses into the air, killing anything in its wake. The ships incinerated miles of landscape whenever they touched down, regardless of terrain. Entire mountain ranges were leveled and seas were dried up where the Gog landed on Earth. Once their invasion began, little could be done by humans to reduce the total destruction of Earth's ecosystems. Azai had witnessed firsthand what the Gog's Invasion did, and he wanted nothing more than to keep him and his wife away from it.

Suddenly, Azai felt himself back on that traumatic day, all those months before. The first Gog invasion had happened in Azai and Elizabeth's hometown, at a random time, on a random day. Azai had just arrived to work at the zoo and Elizabeth had just arrived home from dropping their son off at school. Suddenly the ground began to shake and a huge cloud of darkness covered everything in sight. Women and children screamed of pure terror as they ran for their lives, only it did nothing. Only a lucky few made it out alive that day. The Gog came with no warning and decimated half of the city. Survivors were taken as slaves or killed. Azai and Elizabeth had somehow survived, each feeling like a wind had whispered them into safety, but neither had told the other about their experience.

After hiding under a pile of rubble for what felt like days, Azai had emerged to see the once-beautiful city that he had called home since he was young was nothing more than ruins. What once were beautiful skyscrapers were now piles of dust and decay. Azai had never completely shaken the feeling away after emerging from under that pile. He felt a pit in his stomach as he slowly turned in a circle, trying to take it all in. He heard people whimpering as they lay dying on the street, too hurt to move and too weak to cry out for help. It wouldn't have mattered, nobody was coming to help anyway.

Azai had known that something like this was coming for a long time. It had been months at that point since the first round of Invasions, but he had been naive in believing it would never impact him. Suddenly, that pit in his stomach manifested into something worse. He snapped out of his daze and remembered his wife and son. Azai took off in a sprint but immediately hid behind a large pile of rubble as a Gog strolled past him. After a few deep breaths, he peered around the corner of the ruined building and made sure the coast was clear before moving forward. His mind was racing as he moved from ruined building to ruined building. *I've got to*

find Elizabeth and Shem, he thought to himself, *I'll find Elizabeth first then we will go together to find Shem*. He was closer to his home than his son's school, so he darted towards it carefully and swiftly. As he approached what once was his neighborhood, Azai's jaw dropped. The Gog had not just decimated the city, they had destroyed the residential outskirts of the area as well. He hid behind a torched car and saw a few Gog forcing humans into lines. As they moved down the line, the Gog chose at random a person to pull out of the line and kill. There was no pattern to it- just a randomly chosen victim. As he waited, Azai watched an old woman be plucked from the line and shot by some sort of ray gun. The Gog watched with smiles on their disgusting faces as the woman writhed and screamed in pain as the rays shot into her frail body. His stomach twisted and knotted as he watched the woman suddenly fall to the ground, unmoving. The Gog continued to line people up, most likely to force them into slavery.

I have to get around them somehow, Azai thought to himself. Suddenly, he saw a small figure moving between piles of rubble. He watched as the body moved with quickness and a familiar gait as he suddenly realized that it was his wife, Elizabeth. *I have to let her know I see her*, he thought. Without thinking, Azai started moving towards the figure in the distance. He moved strategically, keeping an eye out for the Gog nearby but without losing sight of Elizabeth in the distance. He sprinted from pile to pile, what once were homes and cars and other buildings were now the only things shielding Azai from the Gog and their torturous ray guns. After about twenty minutes of hide-and-chase, Azai finally got close enough to Elizabeth to quietly call her name from behind the ruins of the old post office.

"Elizabeth," he whispered. No response. No movement from behind the pile he thought she was hiding behind. "Elizabeth," he said again, a little louder this time. Azai waited a few seconds with no response. "Elizabeth," he said, his voice full volume. As he waited for an

answer, his heart began to pound. *Is it really her, or have I been chasing after someone or something else?* Azai wondered. Before he could call out for her again, the figure emerged from behind the pile.

“Azai?” the figure asked, voice full of pain and fear.

“It’s me, Elizabeth!” remarked Azai as he rushed over to her.

“What is happening? Have you seen the city? It’s destroyed!” wept Elizabeth.

“I know. We have to find Shem, it’s been hours since the Invasion began,” said Azai.

With that, the couple exchanged a glance and began quickly making their way over towards the area their son’s school had once stood. They kept covered and searched the area, but there was no building left to search. The city was like a ghost town, nothing moving, no sounds being made other than the occasional whimper of a person who had not yet died. After hours of searching through the rubble, the couple silently wept as they sought shelter for the night. Their home and everything they had were destroyed, and it would have been too risky to return to the area the Gog had been enslaving humans, so they found the ruins of a building that had formed a small cavern just big enough for them to fit.

“Just try to sleep,” whispered Azai. He knew neither of them would be sleeping that night, not until they found Shem.

“You try as well,” replied Elizabeth, trying her best to comfort him.

After a night of fitful sleep, Azai and Elizabeth peered out of the small cavern they were hiding in.

“We have to keep searching for Shem,” declared Azai. Elizabeth did not reply- she just gazed into Azai’s eyes with something of pain and understanding. Azai ignored her look and crawled out of the hole. They were only feet away from the ruins of Shem’s school, but by the

looks of it nobody was near. The two of them secretly searched for their son for hours, but the school he attended was little more than dust.

Eventually, Elizabeth placed a hand on Azai's shoulder and shook her head. Azai knew what her silent gesture meant. He had been fighting off the realization that his son was gone, but Elizabeth's confirmation crushed him. The two silently wept before Azai broke the silence by saying "We must leave here. Go somewhere else, away from the Gog. I will never forgive them for this."

"We will survive," said Elizabeth, as if she was speaking it into existence.

With that, the two set off towards a new life.

Azai shook his head after recounting that experience. Azai had never forgotten that feeling, and he vowed that day that he would never allow what had happened to his son to happen to his wife. That's why he worked at ETE. He wanted to make sure that if the Gog found them again, they would be able to hide in ETE until the attacks passed.

End Times Engineering had been designed to withstand the strongest of the Gog's lasers and other worldly devices. As an underground bunker, it served as both an emergency shelter from the Gog as well as the headquarters for Azai's work. Part of the deal working there guaranteed employees and their families somewhere to go during an Invasion and also give them some sense of community. Azai had worked there for 6 months and barely had the motivation to get up and go to work. However, he made a promise to himself and to Elizabeth that they would survive, and he knew no better way to keep on surviving than to work at End Times Engineering. The group of Survivors who worked alongside Azai ranged from former school teachers to doctors to janitors. Everyone worked together and combined their skill sets to keep the place running.

Azai walked through the bunker and went to sit at his makeshift desk. Since most of the owners' of End Time Engineering time went into making sure the bunker was safe and secure, there wasn't much time for frivolous things, like desks and office furniture. Azai and the other employees had been forced to come up with creative ways to get their work done- Azai worked at an old filing cabinet he had found that he turned into a workspace.

Azai sat silently at his desk, twiddling his thumbs rather than get any quality work done when he heard footsteps approaching. Quickly gathering himself, he began to get out his collection of tiny tools and began tinkering with his latest project, a laser gun similar to the Gog's that he had seen used on the old woman.

"Working hard, Azai?" asked a gruff older voice. *Ugh, Haman*, thought Azai. Haman was the owner of End Times Engineering, and a true pain to deal with.

"As always," replied Azai.

"Why don't you put down that silly toy and come with me, we're having a team meeting," said Haman. *What could this be about?* Azai wondered.

"Alright, I'll be right behind you," said Azai. Haman left, presumably to irritate the next employee, and Azai stood up with a groan. *We never have meetings like this... I wonder if there is new information about the Gog*, Azai thought to himself.

Azai walked into the conference room, if you could even call it that, and sat down on a wobbling stool. The "conference room" was just a bunch of random chairs and tables that the group had scavenged and placed haphazardly around a giant screen and hologram projector. They usually used the room to track the Gog's movements around Magog and note when employees and their families should lay low for a few days. Usually those meetings were scheduled on a repeating schedule, unless there was an emergency.

Azai could feel the tensions in the room rising as he looked around and saw one coworker anxiously picking at his collar and another biting her nails. Azai felt like he was going to pass out, and the temperature of the room felt like it was boiling. Having never been one for impromptu meetings, Azai was already nervous, but coupled with the tense nature of the meeting, he had a really bad feeling about it.

“Alright, everyone, take a seat and we will go ahead and get started,” announced Haman. The room became so quiet, Azai was convinced he could hear the heartbeat of the man sitting next to him. Haman turned on the projector and the holograph of a Gog appeared. Azai’s stomach churned every time he saw one, mostly because he was so afraid that the terrifying creature was the last thing his son had seen before he died. The Gog were disgusting creatures. They stood seven feet tall and a foul color of green, with thick mucus-like slime expelled from every pore. The Gog had no hair that grew on them, but had web-like tendrils that grew all over their body, sticky to the touch and unseen by the untrained eye. Azai had come into contact with a dead Gog before he came across ETE. It had been killed by a group of humans who decided to fight back against the Gog. They managed to take out one creature before they were slaughtered, and Azai had taken some time to study it before moving on. Even thinking about that memory brought a sour taste to Azai’s mouth. The Gog somehow could speak English, but their voices were so unnatural. It was like hearing a human talk through a loudspeaker, muffled yet projected. Azai had seen videos of the Gog rounding up humans to take as slaves, and it their demands almost sounded scripted.

“LINE UP. DO NOT SPEAK. YOU ARE NOW PROPERTY OF MAGOG. DO NOT RESIST” the Gog had said in the video. Azai tried to turn his attention towards the meeting that was beginning to take place, mindfully keeping his eyes off of the Gog in the holograph.

“Ladies and gentleman,” Haman announced, “I’m sure you’re wondering why I called this meeting.” Murmurs from the crowd indicated some unease amongst the End Times Engineering employees. “As you know, we monitor the Gog’s movements and attacks very closely here at ETE,” stated Haman, “We do not take any of their attacks lightly.” Azai felt his stomach drop as he waited for Haman to announce what the meeting was truly about. “The Gog have been moving closer and closer to us and have taken over more human settlements and cities. I have been given secret funding by what once was the United States government to formulate a team to find a solution. Since the Gog have invaded Earth, we have no other choice but to go to... space.”

Azai felt a weight lifted off his chest and the mood of the room instantly lifted. Azai was fighting hard to contain his laughter at such a ridiculous statement, and the laughter from around the room solidified that he was not the only one feeling how he did.

“That’s the funniest thing I’ve ever heard!” proclaimed one person.

“You can’t be serious!” yelled another. The boisterous laughter echoing throughout the previously solemn building was getting louder with each passing giggle.

This is ridiculous, thought Azai, Outer space? Seriously?

“Alright, quiet down!” Haman bellowed, his face turning red with irritation. “This isn’t a joking matter. You saw the video of the Gog torturing humans and taking them as slaves. We have to do something or else all of mankind will be wiped out!”

The room silenced at Haman’s outburst. Azai looked around and saw the blank faces looking at Haman with intent. “I have selected one of our most prospective engineers to lead this program... let’s give it up for Azai!” Haman said enthusiastically. The room erupted into an

awkward applause as Azai stood there dumbfounded. “That’s it for the meeting, everyone go back to your posts.”

Azai stood where he was until he was the last person left in the room with Haman. He tried to wipe the confused look off of his face before he spoke to Haman, but it was to no avail.

“Why me?” Azai asked, straight to the point.

“You are one of my most promising engineers, Azai,” Haman stated, not seeming like he cared to explain further.

“What am I even supposed to do? Just build a rocket to blast into space?” Azai questioned Haman, becoming more confused as the conversation continued.

“How you complete the task is up to you. I see potential in you, Azai. I believe you are the best suited for this job. Remember, the fate of the human race depends on you.”

With that, Haman walked off. *Wow, I really don't like him*, Azai thought to himself. *This is pointless*. Azai rolled his eyes and walked back to his “desk” and sat down. *I don't even have a real desk. How am I supposed to do this? I can't possibly have the fate of the entire world in my hands- I only work here to keep my family safe and I already failed at that!*

The rest of the day passed without much action, and Azai spent it tinkering around, becoming lost in his thoughts on how he would ever save the human race through a rocket ship.

On his silent trek home, Azai found himself feeling more despair than usual, and it showed in his uncharacteristic recklessness while walking. It was a particularly windy day and normally, Azai would stop and listen to the sound of a twig breaking or the wind rustling, but today he found himself stomping through the woods. Suddenly, he felt a *crunch* under his foot and jumped back in terror. *I have to snap out of this*, he thought. Azai looked down to see what he had stepped on when he wasn't paying attention and saw a crumpled up piece of paper laying

at his feet. He bent over and picked it up to read- flyers weren't just flying through the wind these days, humans leaving evidence like this for the Gog to find would mean certain death or enslavement.

Join Us for the Grand Opening of End Times Zoo!

End Times Zoo? thought Azai, *Why would there be a zoo opening while the Gog are invading?* Azai decided that he didn't want to know what this group of idiotic humans with a death wish were doing opening a zoo and shoved the paper in his pocket. He tried not to think any more of what was happening, but as he began his silent walk again he couldn't help but feel like the wind was whispering something in his ear.

The next day, Azai and Elizabeth were having their usual breakfast when Azai suddenly remembered his news from the day before. News that wasn't about the newest Gog takeover or invasion was rare these days.

"Elizabeth," said Azai suddenly into the silence.

"Yes?" muttered Elizabeth.

"I was selected for a new project at work yesterday. I'm going to be designing a rocket to send into space to hopefully save mankind from the Gog."

Elizabeth was silent for a moment, then she burst out in laughter. "You can't be serious! They think the way to fight off the Gog invasion is through a rocket ship?"

"I think it is as ridiculous as you do, but I've been assigned to engineer it," Azai replied.

"What will you even do with the ship?" Elizabeth asked.

"Well, that's what I'm not sure of," Azai answered, "I don't have a plan of how this will even help if the Gog keep invading how they do."

“I suppose you better figure it out soon. They say the Gog are slowly making their way towards us,” Elizabeth said with a shudder.

“I will.” Azai quickly kissed Elizabeth on the cheek as he left for work, just like how he did before the Gog’s arrival. Both of them paused for a moment after, then softly smiled as they parted ways. Azai liked how he had a real task to complete, but he felt lost as to how to complete it. *I don’t think anything I come up with will even make a difference*, thought Azai.

Azai spent the next two weeks brainstorming and drawing up plans for this hypothetical rocket ship that would save mankind. He ran calculations, created rockets with heavy artillery attached, designed large and small models, yet nothing seemed like it would work. *I don’t even have a goal here. Will the humans launched into space start a new life somewhere else? Will we attack the Gog back?* Azai tired himself out with the constant struggle of not knowing what to do and decided to leave work- he had stayed later than everyone else already. On his walk back, the wind was blowing strong gusts, causing Azai to be on high alert. He came to the place where he happened upon the zoo flier and wondered what would happen to the animals at the zoo when the Gog inevitably made their way over as they were already on track to do.

When Azai arrived home that night, Elizabeth was waiting for him with a worried look on her face.

“What’s wrong?” asked Azai.

“The women in the village told me of some horrible news today!” declared Elizabeth with worry in her tone.

“What news?”

“The weather detection machines some of the men at ETE have been working on have detected a great storm that will come in two months time. It will cover the entire planet in waters as deep as oceans! We will all die!”

Azai thought to himself for a moment. It wasn't everyday where one spent everyday trying to evade death by alien invasion only to learn about their certain death by natural disaster weeks in advance. Unable to speak about the matter, Azai and Elizabeth went to bed in silence. Neither slept that night- all of their hopes for survival had been stripped away by the news of their certain death.

End Times Engineering had given employees the next two days off to cope with the news. Once Azai returned to work, the spirits of the office were lower than usual. Haman was in a worse mood than Azai had ever seen before, and he was storming around the office yelling at everyone. Azai made sure to stay out of his way. Feeling claustrophobic and overwhelmed in the ETE bunker, Azai slipped outside into the forest the bunker resided in. He needed some fresh air to think. *I have to figure this out. The answer has to be right under my nose*, thought Azai. He paced back and forth for a few minutes, running calculations and scenarios over in his head- all with the same unfortunate result. *If there really is a giant flood coming, there must be something we can do to save ourselves*. The wind started blowing, and Azai started looking around him in case anything decided to pop out of the woods and get him. The wind started picking up, and Azai felt a whisper in his ear, unsure of what it could have said. Suddenly, an idea popped into his head. *The rocket*. It was the key to everything. *The rocket. We can evade the storm in space! We just have to outwait the flooding. But that could take years...* Azai decided that any shot at survival was worth a try and he immediately headed back inside End Times Engineering.

“What are you working on?” Haman demanded, his faith in Azai’s rocket project long lost.

“I have an idea on how to save us all,” responded Azai.

“I’m sure you do,” Haman muttered as he walked away. He had such little faith in surviving the oncoming floods that he couldn’t even bear to listen to a potential solution and be let down. Nobody could. Azai felt so much hope for his new plan, but he could never tell anyone of the details regarding it if he were to be wrong.

As the days to the flood drew nearer, Azai kept drawing plans and calculating new equations, making sure that each piece to his rocket would be perfect. *I only have one shot at this*, thought Azai. He began staying later and later each night, often falling asleep at End Times Engineering. However, the rocket ship began to come together. The days progressed, and so did Azai’s work on the ship. With one week to go before the great storm, Azai felt that the ship was finished. By that time, most employees of ETE had stopped showing up for work, and the ones who did moped around in sadness. Azai decided that he needed to spread the word and get as many people to agree to board the ship before the floods came.

“I’ve found a solution to the great flood,” exclaimed Azai to his coworkers, many of whom just rolled their eyes and ignored his attempts at convincing. “Haman?” Azai quietly murmured. He had given up on gathering the rest of ETE. Haman, as grumpy and insufferable as he was, was Azai’s last person to try to convince to board the ship.

“Yes, Azai?” Haman replied, the darkness under his eyes suggested that he had not slept for the past two months- but then again, no one had.

“I really want you to reconsider boarding the rocket I’ve been constructing. It’s the only way we will have any shot at surviving this flood- or the Gog. They’re still moving closer to us, you know,” Azai pleaded.

“I’m not boarding that ship. I don’t want to watch my home get destroyed from space. What will you even do once you’re up there? Will you wait until the floods subside? That could take decades! Will you come back to a decimated Earth, I mean Magog, that still has been taken over by the Gog?” Haman’s voice was rising with each word.

“We will bring supplies to last for years up there. I designed the ship to last decades in space with no issues,” replied Azai with confidence. He had thought this part through extensively.

“Then what?” questioned Haman.

“Then we return to Earth. The Gog will either leave or will die in the floods.”

“There will be no Earth!” yelled Haman, “There will be nothing left after the floods. Habitat destroyed, humans gone, all animals dead!”

With that realization, Azai went silent. *How could I not have thought about that? There really will be nothing left when we return*, Azai thought, feelings of despair creeping into his mind. *Did I just spend my last two months alive working on something fruitless?*

Azai left without another word, his body going numb. He made the silent trek home to Elizabeth, only stopping once in that same place where he had stepped on the zoo flier months before. *There has to be something more. There has to be something I’m missing.* Azai looked around him and felt a heavy gust of wind brush against him. *That’s it!* Azai realized, *The key to it all is the animals!* Azai rushed the rest of the way home and began plotting his new plan.

The next morning, Azai rolled out of bed an hour earlier than usual. He had already been awake and jittery for an hour, so he decided to go ahead and get a jump on the day. Azai shook Elizabeth awake, “Elizabeth, wake up. We must go somewhere, hurry!”

Elizabeth stirred awake, confused. “Why? What is happening?” Elizabeth asked groggily.

“We are paying a visit to the zoo today,” Azai said proudly.

Elizabeth had a quizzical look on her face, but got dressed quickly and the two were on their way. Azai and Elizabeth made sure to keep an eye out for the Gog as they traveled towards the zoo. Azai pulled that crumpled flier out of his pocket to periodically check that they were heading to the coordinates listed on the paper.

“What are we doing, Azai?” Elizabeth asked, concern in her voice.

“Haman pointed out to me that there would be nothing for us to return to after the floods. The animals will be gone, the ecosystems destroyed. Earth will be uninhabitable after the Gog and the floods. I have found a possible solution to that,” Azai responded.

“What is your solution?” replied Elizabeth, still questioning Azai’s plan.

“We are going to take two animals of each kind with us into space, one male and one female, then we will repopulate the earth once the floods subside!” Azai proclaimed.

Elizabeth was silent for a moment, contemplating Azai’s new plan. “I suppose since no one else was willing to join us on the ship, we will have more than enough room,” she responded.

Together, the two of them went one-by-one through each enclosure of End Times Zoo, taking with them two of each animal and rounding them up in the middle of the zoo. From bears to penguins to foxes to snakes, Azai and Elizabeth collected them all. The animals didn’t resist, and it was evident that whoever had started the zoo had quickly abandoned the idea due to how

skittish the animals were around humans. Azai and Elizabeth made as many trips between ETE and End Times Zoo as they could over the next few days. They made sure that all the animals were comfortable in their new enclosures on the rocket ship, and that there was plenty of food to last them throughout the flooding. Azai had anticipated up to ten years of flooding, so the ship was packed tight with supplies.

There was nobody left at ETE the day before the rains were supposed to arrive. Elizabeth had stayed with the animals on the ship while Azai went to the zoo to grab the last few animals. They had decided to leave early the next morning, just as the rain began to fall. On his walk back to ETE, Azai heard a noise he had been dreading to ever hear again.

“LINE UP. YOU ARE NOW PROPERTY OF THE GOG. RESIST AND DIE,” shouted that strange voice full of muffled static, just like a megaphone.

Azai felt his stomach drop. *I have come so close*, he thought. *I have to make it out of here. If I can just reach the rocket, I'll be safe.* Azai looked around for the source of the voice and saw through a patch of trees a group of figures standing about 100 yards away. Trying to formulate a plan, Azai desperately looked around him for an escape route. The only animals he had with him were small enough he had been carrying them in a small cage, so Azai knew he had to get both him and the animals away from the nearby Gog. *I just need to creep past them and maybe they won't hear me*, thought Azai. He began creeping through the woods in the direction of ETE and the rocket ship. He made it about 50 yards when he heard a *SNAP* beneath his foot. Azai's breath hitched and he looked down where a twig had snapped below him.

He paused for a moment and took a few breaths, too scared to move. He looked around and listened for the Gog, but heard nothing. *Maybe they didn't hear me*, thought Azai. He began moving again when he heard “DO NOT MOVE. YOU ARE NOW BEING TAKEN BY THE

GOG. RESIST AND DIE,” in that familiar voice he dreaded so much. With that, Azai took off in a sprint towards ETE, the crate of animals still in his hands. He could feel something chasing after him, but the movements were so unfamiliar he didn’t know how to outrace them. Azai weaved through the trees towards ETE, hoping to throw the Gog off his trail. As he continued running, the winds picked up and the skies turned dark. It looked as if night had fallen at midday.

The Gog were gaining on Azai as he approached that secret lever in the tree. He began shouting for Elizabeth, “Elizabeth! Elizabeth! Ready the ship! The Gog are coming, they’re coming!”

Azai pulled the lever, opening the secret door to ETE. He sprinted down the stairs into the bunker, still yelling “Elizabeth! Start the ship!” He could hear the ship’s engine starting, but he felt the Gog getting closer and closer with each step. The rain had begun, earlier than predicted, and Azai could hear the water beating into the ground above the bunker.

Rounding the last corner, Azai had a straight shot to the rocket’s doors. “Close the doors!” yelled Azai. Elizabeth’s face appeared through the window in the ship’s control room and he heard the machinery begin to move. The doors slowly started closing as Azai got closer and closer. *I sure hope this works*, he thought to himself. The Gog had reached the same room he was in and he could feel their arms reaching out to grab him. One Gog ripped a hole in his shirt as he ran, narrowly avoiding their grasp. The doors to the rocket were almost fully shut by the time Azai got there. He slid under the door without a second to spare and immediately the Gog were beating against the door.

“Elizabeth, prepare for takeoff!” yelled Azai, quickly securing the last animals he had brought. He rushed into the control room where Elizabeth had already strapped herself into her seat and was pushing buttons preparing for liftoff. Azai buckled his seatbelt as the rocket began

lifting off. He could hear the Gog desperately trying to break down the doors to the ship, and Azai feared that they might succeed. The ship blasted off and immediately was met with pummeling rain. Azai had never seen rain like this, and it was no wonder how it would cover the entire earth. Within minutes, Azai and Elizabeth were leaving Earth's atmosphere.

"Wow," said Elizabeth, unable to say anything more. Azai nodded his head as his only response. The couple sat in silence for a few minutes, processing all that had happened.

"We did it," Azai said suddenly.

"Now, all that's left to do is wait," replied Elizabeth.

The couple looked at each other, then back at all of the animals on the ship and nodded their heads at each other, knowing that no matter what they had gone through on Magog, Earth would be back and flourishing one day because of all their hard work.

Creative Writing Commentary

I have chosen to write my creative writing story based off of the Biblical story of Noah's Arc. I am trying to be intentional with my writing process and include references to other parts of Biblical scripture. My most obvious reference is to Noah's Arc, and I will be retelling the story of the flood but from a space and alien invasion point of view. I took the most inspiration from *Perelandra's* use of classic Biblical retellings in a space setting. I liked how C.S. Lewis made it obvious that it was a retelling of the Garden of Eden story, but it was a new story that took place after Adam and Eve in the same universe. His creative choices made the book an easy to follow story, but I liked how he changed the plot to reflect how the fall may have happened on a different planet. I am trying to cut out some of the heavy handedness of *Perelandra*, however, because I felt like the obviously similar plot and direct references to the Biblical story were too much and left little to the imagination.

I am also pulling inspiration from *Shardik*. I have been absolutely loving reading this book and I love how there are religious themes in line with Biblical stories and concepts, but the religion is completely different and unique. I think that the reader has to look for the religious analogies and themes in some places and it leaves the reader questioning more. I like how our class has been questioning whether Shardik is a vessel used by God or simply just a bear, and I plan on recreating this question in my work as I continue writing.

Throughout my brainstorming process, I have been trying to leave small hints to Biblical stories in my work. I researched Hebrew and Biblical characters and names and used them in my story. "Azai" is Hebrew for "strength," Elizabeth means "God's promise," and Haman was an evil character in the Bible in the book of Esther. As I continue writing, I am going to use the meaning behind each character's names to further develop them as characters and leave small

references to their meaning as the story progresses. I want my creative writing project to have multiple layers to it that each reader can discover based on their intuition, previous knowledge, and hints that I will include throughout my writing. I will have to make revisions and edits as I continue to work on this project, but I think that my foresight in planning will help me do so easily.

I also made Biblical references to Revelations. I wanted this story to take place in a post-apocalyptic world where chaos rings every which way. I made references to “end times” as described in the Bible with the engineering company the main character is employed at. I also used the “Gog and Magog” to name the aliens invading Earth and their new name for Earth. Referenced in the Jewish, Muslim, and Christian scriptures, Gog and Magog are invaders of Earth who are opposite of the will of God. According to Britannica, there are multiple references to Gog and Magog, each following a similar pattern of evil foreign invasion and God’s will overpowering the forces of evil.

I have made a lot of plans to continue revising and editing my work as we continue class discussions and readings. I have taken inspiration from many of the texts we have read this far and I hope that I can stay away from the heavy handedness of *Perelandra* while still keeping the original Biblical story’s main points. I also hope that my plan to spark conversation and debate, like in *Shardik*, is fruitful. Overall, this assignment has challenged me to think outside of the box, but our class discussions and analysis have prepared me well.

As the semester has progressed, my understanding and interpretation of how religion and literature interact has changed tremendously. Before this class, I had a weak understanding of how religion and literature fit together. I did not think that religion could impact literature in any way that was not a heavy handed retelling of a religious story, idea, or theme. I also did not think

that the class conversations and commentary would be so insightful. I had a preconceived notion that all classes that dealt with modern religions would leave me frustrated with one-sided conversations and viewpoints. However, I was pleasantly surprised with the conversations we had in class. Instead of one line of thinking being pushed as the “correct” way, everyone was comfortable sharing their personal takeaways and interpretations of the texts and how they felt religion influenced it. I really enjoyed how this class forced me to think deeper than just the plot of the stories. We had to critically think about how the writers used religion as a means of exploring science fiction and fantasy, and there were more pathways for authors to do that than I previously thought.

Now, my opinion on religion and literature has changed. Religion can appear in literature and influence it in more ways than I thought possible. I originally thought that religion in literature, especially in science fiction and fantasy genres, would just be retold religious stories. *Perelandra* was the first book we read, and it definitely continued my way of thinking at the beginning of the semester. However, I quickly learned that not all literature with religious influence was merely a retelling of a religious story. I learned that religion can be used as just a source of inspiration. The writers were not always followers of the religions they drew inspiration from. In *Parable of the Sower*, the religion in the story was not a real religion. Even though the religion was made up in that story, our class still had many insightful conversations on the application of how that story could influence readers’ thinking.

I loved the dynamic approach of understanding religion in literature that this class took. No two writers drew the same conclusions from the same religion, and it was interesting to see how each authors’ worldview impacted their writing and how they portrayed religions’ role in society. One of my favorite conversations we had was during *Dune* and *Shardik*. I liked hearing

some of my classmates' more pragmatic approaches to religion in those conversations where we discussed whether or not the religion being valid or true even mattered. Those classes really opened my eyes to a new way of seeing religion's impact in my own experiences. I liked how we discussed how it didn't truly matter if the religion was true because what was important was how people responded to it. This was an interesting thought to bring into my own life and changed my thought process from whether or not different religions are true into examining how they make people react. Overall, this class challenged my beliefs in the best way. I enjoyed having time each week set aside to discuss everyone's thoughts on the readings and I liked hearing everyone's theories and opinions.