

# **Blood on the Sand**

**By Ryan Torrie**

**Text Copyright © 2012 Ryan M Torrie**

**All Rights Reserved**

**There is no hunting like the hunting of man, and those who have hunted armed men long enough  
and liked it, never care for anything else thereafter.**

**– Ernest Hemingway**

## Table of Contents

<a href="#">Chapter 1.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 2.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 3.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 4.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 5.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 6.....</a>	<a href="#">30</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 7.....</a>	<a href="#">35</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 8.....</a>	<a href="#">40</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 9.....</a>	<a href="#">45</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 10.....</a>	<a href="#">50</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 11.....</a>	<a href="#">55</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 12.....</a>	<a href="#">60</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 13.....</a>	<a href="#">64</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 14.....</a>	<a href="#">69</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 15.....</a>	<a href="#">72</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 16.....</a>	<a href="#">76</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 17.....</a>	<a href="#">80</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 18.....</a>	<a href="#">87</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 19.....</a>	<a href="#">92</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 20.....</a>	<a href="#">94</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 21.....</a>	<a href="#">96</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 22.....</a>	<a href="#">100</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 23.....</a>	<a href="#">104</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 24.....</a>	<a href="#">106</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 25.....</a>	<a href="#">111</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 26.....</a>	<a href="#">114</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 27.....</a>	<a href="#">116</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 28.....</a>	<a href="#">119</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 29.....</a>	<a href="#">121</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 30.....</a>	<a href="#">127</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 31.....</a>	<a href="#">132</a>

<a href="#">Chapter 32.....</a>	<a href="#">135</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 33.....</a>	<a href="#">139</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 34.....</a>	<a href="#">144</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 35.....</a>	<a href="#">150</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 36.....</a>	<a href="#">155</a>
<a href="#">Acknowledgements.....</a>	<a href="#">157</a>

## Chapter 1

Iraq, 2010

“Wake up! WAKE THE FUCK UP!”

The stinging chill of cold water jolted Carl Greenfield into bewildered consciousness. He jerked away and sputtered a bit – his first few breaths were watery.

“What” - Carl coughed violently - “What the hell?” It took him a moment to recover from the shock, but he eventually noticed another man, one who held a now-empty water bucket in both hands.

The man stepped forward slowly. Old, stained floorboards creaked under his weight. Detritus fell from his worn boots and settled over the stains on the wood beneath. Tan cargo pants, evidently faux American battle fatigues, were tucked inside his boots to discourage sand from worming in. A long-sleeve shirt, slightly frayed at the ends and perhaps incurably sandy, clung to his frame.

He spoke. “They’re dead.”

The man stood a little too close for Carl’s comfort. Carl didn’t yet possess the coordination to stand, so he crawled away for a few feet.

The man followed. “Did you hear me? Every one of your men, they’re all dead. We only spared one. You,” he said.

Carl wasn’t interested in talking. His unadjusted eyes stared blankly around the room, into the shadow. He pulled himself over the splintered floorboards; his instinct told him to flee. He crawled a little further before a firm boot landed squarely on his back and clamped him to the ground.

“You’re not going anywhere.”

The boot pressed on Carl’s back, crushing his chest. He found it difficult to breathe. His labored inhales and exhales resounded loudly in the small confines of the room. His breath was sharp and rough, and it quavered as the man ground his boot into Carl’s back.

“You don’t speak much, do you? That’s fine, we only need you to talk for a little while.”

As the moments passed, Carl became more accustomed to the darkness. His brain began to function again, well enough to answer a few questions. Just a few questions.

“Ok, fine, what do you want?” Carl asked. His words were whispered, hardly audible.

“Well, we *want* to know how your little battalion knew of our location. And we *want* to know why you advanced on this little outpost. We *want* to know what you know.”

Carl swallowed slowly. “Listen, we were only on patrol. It wasn’t a mission at all.” This was truth; Carl worked for a private security corporation, and they were only supposed to showcase their presence in the area.

“Bullshit. How did you know we were there?” The interrogator disregarded Carl’s words.

“I’m telling you, we had no idea. We were just trying to display our presence to quiet down the area, and out of nowhere, our group was bombarded.”

The interrogator pulled both of Carl’s hands from behind his back and cuffed them together. “Ok, now we’re gonna do this the painful way.” He dragged Carl to the other side of the room, through the dimness. Squinting in the dark, Carl noticed a basin – basically a crude bathtub – filled with water.

The man dragged Carl to the tub and pushed him against it. As Carl knelt, the tub reached up to his stomach. Carl teetered a good bit – he still wasn’t fully functioning. His heart pounded in his chest and throbbed up to his temples. The water beneath him swirled in the darkness.

The interrogator didn’t say anything more. He gripped the back of Carl’s head and plunged him into the water – and he held him down there.

The water hit Carl’s face like a thousand knives. It was unbelievably cold, and the shock wormed its way into Carl’s mouth, down into his lungs. The chill permeated his body.

After nearly a minute, the interrogator pulled Carl out of the water. Carl gasped for oxygen and felt the warm, dry, dusty air of the room against his skin. The warmth comforted him, grounded him into reality when everything else seemed to swirl around.

The interrogator allowed him two gasps and then submerged Carl’s head back under the water.

The same icy chills gripped Carl, and he exhaled unwillingly - the water pulled the air from his body. Bubbles formed at the top of the water, both from his breath and from his thrashing. The cold was harshest on his eyes; he squeezed them shut, but the pain persisted.

The interrogator hoisted Carl up again. He whispered in Carl’s pounding ears with the sweetest of tongues, in a voice that belied his actions. “Just tell me what you know about us.”

“We don’t know anything. We didn’t even know you were there, I swear!” Carl sputtered desperately. The water tested his spirit. He truly wasn’t lying; how could he be any clearer?

The interrogator was displeased. He pushed Carl into the bin once more. He held Carl beneath for nearly two minutes. For the final moments, Carl writhed violently: his body called out for oxygen. It demanded it. Carl squirmed in the confines of the tub and reeled against his handcuffs.

Right before Carl passed out, the interrogator pulled him up again. Carl gasped and coughed. His vision dimmed and swam from the lack of oxygen.

“I spent most of my life in Somalia,” the interrogator said. “Where I grew up, liars were punished... severely. Make no mistake – I will kill you in that water if you don’t tell me what I want to know.”

“Listen, I don’t know a fucking thing! There’s nothing I can tell you.” Carl tried to be reasonable. The water streaked down his neck and numbed his face. His water-logged ears didn’t hear the Somalian’s displeased growl.

Carl felt the Somalian's hand push him down, and the water rushed over his head. He closed his eyes, but the cold burned through. He exhaled, and the bubbles surrounded his head on their upward journey. After a period beneath the surface, he felt the need for oxygen. He squirmed and thrashed his head, but the Somalian didn't let him up for air.

His lungs spasmed and his cheeks dimpled in as he tried to digest every last bit of air in his lungs. He pulled against his cuffs and curled his toes in extreme discomfort – he thought his chest might collapse in yearning.

Eventually, he couldn't take it any longer. Without intention, he took a breath. The water gushed into his lungs, needling all the way down. Bubbles leaked from his nostrils and his eyes rolled back into his head.

He was hardly awake when the Somalian pulled his limp body back to the surface. Water poured from his mouth and his head rolled back in the Somalian's grasp. He coughed and choked many times as he vomited up the water in large, body-throwing retches.

"Tell me what you know," the Somalian said. He pushed Carl to within an inch above the water.

It took Carl a few moments to respond, and he spoke in a terse whisper. "There's nothing to tell."

The Somalian's face scrunched in consternation. He dropped Carl, who collapsed atop the tub.

"I'll be back," he seethed. "Sit tight."

With that, the Somalian left the room. He locked the door from the other side and walked away, the thuds from his boots carrying through the thin walls. The room grew still, and it magnified Carl's ragged breathing.

Carl wilted on top of the tub for a few minutes in order to recover. With time, he grew sensible again. His hands remained trapped behind his back, so moving off of the tub wasn't easy. He struggled, leaned back, and eventually fell away from the trough. He landed heavily on the floorboards below.

He managed – with some difficulty – to rise into a kneeling position. His knees both groaned and popped. *I gotta get my hands free*, he thought. The cuffs darkened any hope for escape.

He folded his right hand like a Japanese paper sculpture and pulled against the cuff. His fingers grated against the edges. The cuff didn't give, and its sharp edge dug into Carl's skin. He pulled harder, against the pain and the edge. His hand flamed and throbbed mightily.

He looked down. The edge of the cuff cut a circle into his flesh, and blood dripped out over his fingers. Carl grimaced but continued his work. He pushed down on the iron with his left hand, hoping to coax it along and over his knuckles. He pressed hard, and the cuff flayed off his skin as it slid along. He clenched his jaw and grunted, but determined not to yell.

Soon, the hand began to swell. The cuts and damage sent his hand into shock, and Carl couldn't push the cuff any further. It simply wouldn't budge. He pushed and jolted it with as much strength as he could muster, but to no avail.



Discouraged, he sat on his knees and scanned the room. As he suspected, it was empty, save for the basin. And, of course, the freezing water.

*The water.* The idea hit him like a truck. *Of course.*

He moved over to the basin and managed to submerge his hand. The blood plumed off and into the water, which quickly spread out the red stain. The icy water ate into his hand, down into the laceration. It stung, but Carl bore the pain. It wasn't long before the swelling diminished.

He pulled out of the icy water and inspected his hand. It was wrinkled, of course, like a prune. The swelling was gone, and the skin seemed somehow looser. With a bit more pressure, Carl pulled the hand out of the cuff. It slid through rather easily after the water treatment.

*Thank God.*

Carl breathed a rough sigh of relief, flexing his newly freed hand and trying to revitalize its damaged surface. His fingers looked like little raisins - the skin shrunk, the surface loose and sagging.

The cuff still clasped his right hand, but he was in no mood to try and remove it. It dangled limply from his wrist and made a tinkling sound when he jiggled it.

*Good enough,* Carl thought. He needed to get moving. Approaching the door that exited the room, he felt the handle: as he suspected, it was locked. He pushed against it and noticed that the door bent with his weight.

*It's not very strong,* he surmised. It must've been made of some cheap substance. At any rate, the door surely wouldn't contain him for very long. He took a few steps back, strode towards the door, and planted a kick in the door frame, near the lock.

The door hardly resisted. It flew open with a bang, shuddering from the force of Carl's kick. The hinges creaked in protest. Paranoid about the noise he'd just made, Carl crept through the door and into a dimly lit hallway.

The hall was illuminated in a faint orange glow, reflected off of the crude stucco walls. Carl held his handcuff and chain taught so as not to make a sound. Bent nearly double, he crouched and slithered down the hallway, looking for an exit.

At the end of the hall was a left turn. He followed the path. Closed doors that lead to interior rooms – areas much like his interrogation area – populated the walls.

In time, the hallway spilled into a large circular area. Storage crates, sheathed in large tarps, littered the room. Carl couldn't make out what they were; the lighting in the room was fledgling and faint, choked out by darkness.

He crouched in the room for a moment, pausing to collect his bearings. He needed some sense of direction, but the building suffered him no clues. In truth, he was lost, a wanderer.

Before he rose to continue on, the uncanny sounds of footsteps echoed from an adjacent hallway. Carl froze. He peered down the pathway, waiting to see who came out.

For the first few moments, he could see nothing but swirling darkness. Soon, though, shadows stirred in the dark lumination, resurrected in the glow of close proximity. At first, Carl thought it was his imagination, or perhaps his anticipation. But, he realized, the movement was real.

The faint outlines of two guards began to materialize in the room. Soon, their footsteps grew more pronounced. They strode in haste, pushing through the darkness. Carl took refuge behind a tarp and leaned out only enough to expose one eye.

He watched them move through the room. They navigated through the other tarps efficiently, like moles. Now only a few feet away, Carl could hear their strained breaths. They didn't talk, but he could feel their presence. He held his breath as they passed by, hoping that the darkness had rendered him invisible.

Sure enough, the guards passed by without suspicion. They exited the room almost as quickly as they had entered, moving down Carl's path.

*They'll notice that I'm not there, Carl thought. I don't have much time.*

He rose. And as he stood up, he heard a whirling sound from inside the room. He paused; his eyes weren't used to the darkness, but his ears were attuned.

The sound wasn't faint. In the quiet, Carl could easily hear the shuffling, the scraping, the padded footsteps. He kept pressed against the tarps, which scratched against his cheek.

The shuffling sound moved towards him. It covered the distance slowly, but soon Carl felt that the presence was on the other side of his tarp. He held his breath again. The quiet now felt thick and brooding, as strained as a thin string. A string that would soon break.

Like the subtle head of a serpent, the barrel of a 1911 pistol poked around the tarp. Carl watched as a hand followed the 1911, and a forearm. The shuffling of feet continued, inches away.

Carl acted. He reached out and grabbed towards the pistol – largely by accident, he stuck a single finger behind the trigger and gripped the gun with the rest of his hand.

The forearm pulled back with considerable strength. Carl kept his grip on the gun and sprang from behind the tarp. He soon found himself face to face with a large Arabian soldier who towered above him.

"You're a tall fucker," he growled. He kept his finger wedged behind the trigger, and it kept the gun from firing.

The Arab soldier tried twice to fire the gun, but without success. Carl had rendered the weapon useless. In his anger, the Arab threw the gun to the ground. It slipped from Carl's finger and clattered to the floor.

The Arab wasn't, however, out of options. He threw a stiff jab into Carl's face, and followed it up with a brutal cross. Carl's head snapped back; the punches broke his nose. His eyes watered, and it became difficult for him to see.

The Arab moved to strike again, but this time Carl was ready. When the soldier threw another punch, Carl ducked beneath and slipped past the Arab.

Carl moved behind the soldier, acting in accordance with his training. The deadly dance of close combat was no stranger to him. Carl remembered his handcuff, which still dangled from his left hand. Quickly – for his survival depended on it – he tossed the cuff over the tall man's neck, and pulling it tight with his right hand.

The chain from the handcuffs pulled stiffly into the front of the Arab's neck. Carl pulled with adrenaline-laced strength, keeping the chain taught against the Arab.

The Arab choked. The chain didn't allow him to breath, and he pulled against it with his massive hands. Carl held firm, though, and the pressure remained constant. The Arab flailed his legs as the lack of oxygen flooded his body, and the craving increased.

Carl felt the cuff tug and cut against his left wrist. His knuckles grew white from exertion. He breathed heavily, and his forearms burned, but he held strong.

The Arab, growing crazed from oxygen deprivation, began to claw at his own neck. He dug his fingers in deeply and drew a little blood. It dripped down and coated his fingertips. A few moments later, he submitted to the choke and drifted into darkness. His body grew slack, and Carl lowered him to the ground. The Arab remained limp on the ground, completely still.

Carl slumped against one of the tarps as relief flooded his body. Blood pumped through his veins, and he could hear it pulse. Yet, he couldn't tarry; other guards would come soon.

*No rest for the wicked.*

Wearily, he searched for the Arab's pistol. He found the weapon and checked the magazine: seven rounds, plus one in the chamber. Not bad. Crouching in the darkness, pistol at the ready, He moved on.

Following the direction from which the last guard came, Carl entered another hallway. He didn't have long to go; natural light wormed its way into the building with increasing intensity. At the end of the hallway was a double door, studded with a single window. The speckled glint of daylight shone through it. He smiled – he'd found his way out.

## Chapter 2

Changing magazines, Carl flattened himself against the door and peered through the window; no one seemed to be stationed immediately to the left outside the door. He craned his neck to peek right. As Carl expected, a single guard stood leaning against the wall outside, weapon turned away from the door. The soldier stared into the sand with a dull and glazed eyes.

Carl drew his newly acquired 1911 and slowly opened the door. The guard turned his neck with disinterest to find himself staring down a pistol's barrel. He never saw the flash or heard the gunshot; the bullet entered through the crown of his nose and continued through his skull. His head snapped back, eyes blank but widened with shock. His corpse slumped against the wall and thick blood trailed from the back of his head as gravity slowly brought him towards herself; he lay on the ground, caught in the sand.

Carl hustled past the corpse and away from the exit. Anxiety gripped him with the thought of marksmen on the roof, but he forced himself not to run. The movement might draw unwanted attention. Within seconds, he located his method of escape: a roofless 4x4 parked a good distance away from the building. Sliding into the driver's seat, he searched for keys; no luck. Instead, he drew the wires out from beneath the steering wheel, praying with bated breath that there was no security system installed in the vehicle.

Then, the shouting commenced. Someone exiting the base had noticed the corpse lying beside the entrance and raised the alarm. Others gravitated towards the yelling, and so also discovered what Carl had laid in his wake. They began to search for the culprit. It didn't take long for them to discover the man frantically fumbling with the ignition of a vehicle. Tenacity was palpable in their shouting voices. Some opened fire; however, their rusty ak47s were in no condition to achieve that kind of range. The bullets spread out before they could reach Carl. However, two of the soldiers sprinted towards Carl and closed the distance with motivated speed.

Carl spliced the correct wires together, and the vehicle roared to life.

Throwing it into gear, Carl floored the car. The tires lacked the traction for the acceleration and slipped on the hard-packed sand. Swearing, he removed his foot from the pedal and stomped down again. This time, the vehicle generated a pressing momentum that pushed Carl against the seat. The 4x4 threw itself into a charging retreat as Carl wheeled away from the structure and the mob. The soldiers were closer now, and their bullets pounded into the back of the vehicle. However, the shots were unable to stop his escape, and he quickly distanced himself from the combat.

Carl drove on in oppressing silence for some time after, hoping to avoid pursuit and searching for a road. For a time, all he could find was more sand and heat that obscured the distant landscape. Not that there was much to obscure.

At length, he found what seemed to be a dirt path. He drove parallel to the path for a time, and after a good distance reached a rural assortment of small houses. Slowing, he pulled into the village. The vehicle leaked fuel, and he didn't expect it to continue much longer. He abandoned the vehicle outside of the village and staggered into the community.

The local inhabitants seemed wary of him; most turned to look at the haggard man who stumbled through their town. Some looked long and with suspicion, but all seemed to think that he wasn't a threat and quickly disregarded his presence.

Seeking assistance, Carl began trying to talk to those passing by. Unfortunately, each moved along, as they didn't understand English. The prospect of finding help began to dim. Uncertainty proceeded to infect his thought, and despair was soon to take root when recognizable language graced his ears.

"What are you bugging them for?"

Carl turned and beheld an old woman who casually wore a crooked smile. Her wrinkles became pronounced as her eyes squinted and twinkled, intently studying Carl. Time had favored her, and wisdom mingled with understanding in her eyes. She supported herself with a wooden cane, handmade, rising up past the waist.

Carl raised his hand in a motion of good intention and turned to face her. Before she could respond, he (quite unintentionally) began to sway where he stood; dehydration and sunstroke took their effect with force. The old woman moved towards him with as much speed as she could safely muster, led him into her house, and laid him down on a soft mat somewhere within her home. She then disappeared into another chamber, humming an unknown song. The sound of ringing glass wafted in from her room.

She reentered the room as with the breeze, and laid a slightly warm beverage in front of him, accompanied with two cups of water. Green in color, it resembled tea in appearance.

"Drink it," she said, "it will cure the sunstroke. You'll have to drink more water, though; you seem to have gone without for quite a while."

She turned to walk out again, but paused and turned for a final word.

"You should know, the medicine will cure you eventually, but it can have... unpredictable effects, not all of which are pleasant. Just know you'll get through it."

Carl thanked her and readily drank the water. He hesitated at the thought of eastern concoctive remedies and was perturbed at the idea of "unpredictable effects", but succumbed to her hospitality and drained the medicated beverage as well. Within minutes the shock and discomfort dwindled beyond noticeability, and he sat in a euphoric state, welcomingly void of sensation. He soon felt eyes watching him, and turned to find a small child cautiously staring from behind a curtain. Carl smiled in a tired fashion, but gained no response from the girl. He didn't much care; he was comfortably warm and extremely thankful.

After a few minutes, he decided to pull himself into a sitting position. Surprisingly, he couldn't even move his hands. He tried to turn his head, but the action eluded him. Any sort of movement was impossible. He realized, with thoughts of panic, that he was, at least for the moment, totally paralyzed. His own flesh a prison, Carl battled his own inability with force of will. He was incapable of pushing himself off of the couch; his limbs no longer possessed the strength for any effort.

Ceasing to try, he lay still with hopes of a soon recovery. Soft voices drifted in as the old woman spoke with the young girl. Minutes wore on unmoving until an Arabic voice shouted commands from

outside. The woman pulled back her door – probably to answer the commands outside - and was greeted by a voice that chilled Carl to the bone.

“We have some questions.”

The distinctive voice of the Somali man wound its way through the house. His heavy footsteps followed. Carl yearned to cry out, to warn them of who’d entered the house. He could not, however, as he remained chained to immovability. Recurrent thoughts of icy tubs flashed through his mind.

“We have... sources that say a prisoner of ours has taken refuge in this village. You wouldn’t know anything of that, would you?” The Somali spoke as sweetly as he could. And it was bittersweet at best.

There was a considerable silence as the woman considered her options, as well as produced her lie.

“I don’t think I’ve heard of anything. Who was it?”

She spoke with a steady voice, and most might’ve believed her. However, the Somali had spent years in the interrogation room, and was beyond experienced when it came to lies. He felt the stress in her voice and recognized the deceit.

Casting subtlety aside, he drew a magnum and pulled back the hammer. The rapid escalation of events was perturbing for the old woman, but she stood her ground. The young girl proved less hardened to violence: she stifled a scream at the sight of the gun and drew attention to herself with her surprise.

The Somali turned his head, as if noticing her for the first time. His gaze then drifted to the old woman, and then back to the child. He strode across the room and brought the child next to the old woman. With clear intent, he brought up the pistol to the center of the child’s chest and made eye contact with the woman once more.

“I don’t have the patience for this. Remember anything else?”

The question reverberated through the room, unimpeded by the palpable silence. The old woman, beaten with shock, began to stammer. She felt that the man was evil. She knew he was desperate. Yet, she wouldn’t – couldn’t – believe that he’d shoot a child. It seemed to her like a massive bluff.

She shook her head.

The Somali lowered his pistol down towards the girl’s stomach and pulled the trigger. The gun went off with a rude crackle that coursed through the village. The girl teetered and collapsed both from impact and from surprise; she writhed in noiseless suffering until shock engulfed her and desensitization brought her into an altered, largely unaware state of being.

The old woman, realizing the falseness of her assumption, fell to her knees beside the girl, utterly breaking down. Her shaking sobs slowly morphed into haunting screams - screams that, amidst the other horrors of war, remained forever roaming in Carl’s memory, prowling in his mind during the sleeping and waking hours.

The Somali, realizing the futility of further questions, stepped back and checked the surrounding streets. He felt regret, as he thought he might've broken a valuable source of information; he had doubts as to whether the woman would survive the shock. However, he had more immediate problems to consider – the locals and gathered around, drawn to the gunshot and the screams. The bolder of those in the crowd now threw small stones at the stranger who'd caused the suffering of their members.

He left the house and stood before the riled crowd. The Somali had not yet holstered his pistol, and fired twice above the crowd. Like roaches they scattered, their spirit broken, their unity dissipated. Now unhindered, he walked briskly to his Humvee and drove off.

Carl, the paralyzed witness and bystander, remained inert on the floor. With much despair he comprehended the gravity of the situation; he also realized that the agony descending upon this village was due to his indiscretion.

*Perhaps, he thought, the Somali found the vehicle I left outside the village.*

The responsibility pressed down on his chest. He was too despaired to notice the calm voices murmuring outside, too engrossed to hear the organized effort that went into moving the child to a vehicle so that she could be saved. Despair choked out his eyes, and light blurred, obscuring into impenetrable, vacuumous haze.

## Chapter 3

Boston, 1983

The child flattened himself against a wall: it was happening again. Feigning ignorance to himself, he retreated further into his safe corner. He plugged his ears, he sang songs. Concentrating on the menial became an increasing chore. His energy drained, Carl surrendered to silence.

Himself diminished, the noise seeped in. Frantic and slurred voices reciprocated indiscernible hate; the details were hardly necessary. Occasional thuds and shrill shrieks cemented the occurrence, one repeated almost nightly, unopposed and seemingly unpreventable.

He heard the small jingle of keys, and assumed his mother was preparing to leave. He envisioned the way she would throw open the door - the way it would scrape against the floor - and how she'd turn to spit out some final words. And then she'd be off.

After the door slammed, Carl felt the tension diminish. The darkness of the room felt just a little blacker, the night a little stronger. Weary sleep eventually whisked him away from the blackness and ferried him into pale morning.

....

He emerged from his room the following day to the sound of silence. He found his mother in the kitchen; she must've returned home later that night.

"Morning," Mrs. Greenfield mumbled. It wasn't a good morning, just a morning.

Carl slurped down some cereal and dashed off to the bus stop. His mother hardly noticed when he left, so he felt no need to say goodbye.

He waited at the bus stop in the company of a few other children. It was too early for conversation, so they stood facing each other, each in quiet sleepiness. A few of the parents watched from their cars. Not Carl's.

Carl didn't pay much attention in school, and he felt like he hardly blinked before he was dropped off at the same bus stop. It was now later in the day, and the excited cackle of the other kids floated through the air. They scampered out of the bus and tore off towards their homes. Carl felt no particular urgency, so he took his time walking back.

He opened the door to find his dad slumped on their couch, a beer in one hand and a bag of chips in the other. Some crumbs gathered on his bloated stomach, but the man took no notice.

"You're home early," grumbled his father.

Carl glanced at the clock. It read three pm. *You should be at a job*, he thought. But he'd never say it. He didn't want to anger his father, and joblessness was a touchy subject. As such, he slunk into his room and carefully shut the door.



....

It was seven o'clock, and his mom should've been home. Carl waited patiently in the kitchen, looking out the front window, sitting at their table. The sun began to set, casting the street in an orange glow. He watched the sun sink below the line of buildings. Darkness came, but his mother didn't. She never returned that night; eventually, Carl tucked himself into bed, his dreams darkened by his worry.

....

The next few days flew by. Mrs. Greenfield was nowhere to be found - not that Mr. Greenfield was looking. Carl only expressed his worry to his father once.

"Dad, she's coming back, right?" Carl asked in a timid, anxious voice.

"Shit, I don't know." Mr. Greenfield sat in his couch and didn't bother to turn towards Carl. He sipped his beer, and some of the liquid dripped down his chin and onto his neck.

And that was the end of it. Carl never asked again. He slept less now that she was gone, and so wandered about the house in his insomnia. His father didn't much mind; his father didn't much care.

One night, late at night, Mr. Greenfield hosted a game of poker in the living room. Carl generally stayed in his room when his father's friends came over. They always drank, and they usually fought, breaking objects in the house. However, this night was different. Carl left his room and peeked in towards the study, trying his best to be a fly in the wall.

The men hunched over the table, cards in hand, beer cans littering the space around their game. None of them took any notice of Carl - they wouldn't, not when money was on the table.

Straining, Carl was able to just barely make out snippets of their conversation. He heard the mumblings of the men and the occasional question. His father's voice was louder, though, more discernible.

"Yeah, she just walked out. Slammed my fucking door and drove away the car."

More incoherent mumblings and questions from the others.

"Hell no, I hope the bitch never comes back." His father's slurred voice gave Carl the shivers.

Having heard enough, Carl left his hiding space and locked himself in his room.

....

The following day, Carl came back from school to a quiet house. He threw his backpack down at the door and floated into the living room. Knowing no one would tell him not to, he flipped on the TV and watched sports highlights.

A sharp crash reverberated from the basement. Carl twitched and turned his head, staring towards the basement door. For whatever reason, he felt the need to investigate. He tiptoed towards the door and stepped into the hall, trying not to make a sound. *It couldn't be a break-in, could it?*

A vastly unexpected scene showed itself to him as he made his way down the stairs. The sounds of sharp, strained breathing preceded his first glance. He reached the bottom step to find his father crookedly lying on the floor amidst shards of broken glass. A large knife was imbedded in his side, and blood was draining out, spilling over his hands and spreading on the floor. On the table above him was the week's worth of uncut meat and a depleted bottle of cheap vodka.

Shock lay heavily upon Carl. No emotion charged his actions, just the realization of the situation. His father turned his neck to look at him, obviously in immense pain; his face was crimson, and a single vein swelled from underneath his skin, around his forehead. He laid gaping and gasping for air, but summoned enough oxygen to speak.

"What're you, stupid? Call a fucking ambulance!"

Carl heard him. It wasn't conscious animosity that drove him; it was a directive of survival. He dropped his gaze to the floor and turned away. He took his first step back towards the stairs. His father must've assumed he was turning to find a phone, and so made no objection. Carl ascended the stairs unmolested.

Closing the basement door behind him, he realized his heartbeat had spiked. Black translucent spots appeared on his vision, swelling with every beat. He stumbled to a couch and collapsed there, trying to think. Denying the importance of the circumstance, Carl's eyes grew heavy. Slowly, he flattened out on the couch, and fell into a fitful and hazy slumber.

The hour hand on a nearby clock had made a somewhat lengthy – albeit circular – journey when he awoke. For a moment, he couldn't recall why darkness pressed on him so heavily; then, with a chance glance at the basement door, his memory flooded back. With weak knees he pulled open the door.

His father's head limply fell onto the floor beside his feet. With a cry, Carl fell back against the unforgiving ground and saw sparks fly before his eyes. Recovering, he stood again and stared at his father's corpse, and the trail of dried blood leaving a cascading trail down the stairs. Pressed on the door was a single bloodied handprint, the symbol of an agonizing but futile effort from his father.

The distinct lack of life was most prominent to Carl, beyond the blood and the future ramifications. Those lingering moments were immortalized in his mind, an unshakable tribute to both release and regret. He swayed, fearing his father would somehow reawaken. After some minutes (or hours, as time was forgotten), he realized he should call the police.

The woman who answered the 911 hotline was comforting, as she was trained to note his state of shock. With a voice like butter she asked him to tell her what had occurred.

"My dad's dead.... He's dead in the basement on the stairs."

An ambulance reached the house ten minutes later; the emergency rep stayed on the phone with Carl as they were en route, largely through silence. She did take down some basic information, probably for the report and to aid the investigation. Carl wasn't exactly talkative.

The first paramedic wasted no time confirming his father's deadness. He relayed the information to local law enforcement, which promptly dispatched an investigator.

The investigator was late, but eventually arrived at the scene. With a practiced manner he scanned the room, unheeding but certainly aware of Carl's inquisitive stare. He disappeared into the basement for a little less than an hour. Carl dared not follow him.

Against his expectation, Carl wasn't immediately questioned as to what'd occurred. It seemed they didn't consider him likely to provide useful information, much less be so intimately involved. He was accompanied by an aging paramedic, who was attempting to explain "why his daddy wasn't going to be around." Carl was more than happy to oblige. Given the situation, the condescension didn't much bother him.

When the investigator emerged from the basement, he broke the silence and began to ask Carl what he might've observed. He stood well over six feet tall, and so crouched when conversing. It was a late Friday night, and the investigator didn't seem overly joyed to be there. The scruff on his neck folded with the loose skin beneath. He was partly through his 40s, and the signs of age wore heavily on him. His voice was low and scratchy, and Carl thought he caught the smell of alcohol on his breath; the child shuddered, now defensive.

The inspector began, "We think your father was dead for a few hours before you called it in. Do you remember anything that might've seemed strange at the time?"

Carl shifted his weight - an indiscernible movement to all but keen eyes. He panicked, and so decided the truth of his actions couldn't be shared. He began to improvise a fabricated reality to cover what he'd done.

"I don't really remember what happened. I was just watching TV when I..." - he stuttered, straining to keep his thoughts ahead of his words - "I.. needed to ask him something. So I went to the basement, and there he was."

The inspector nodded, not breaking eye contact, not speaking. Carl looked down, unable to sustain eye contact, eager to retreat back into unchallenged secrecy. Much to Carl's trepidation, however, the inspector wasn't finished. He continued on, hoping to force further improvisation, through which momentary mistakes might be made that could expose the truth.

"Look, kid, I know this ain't easy. But you're not telling me something, and it's probably important to the case. Care to shed some light on it?"

This time, Carl enacted a basic tenant to any plausible lie: he imbedded a kernel of truth - nothing potentially incriminating, just the modified, lighter side to the unsavory events. He only realized himself telling the part of the story he wasn't ashamed of.

"I was watching TV when I heard a crash in the basement... And when I opened the door, my dad was right outside, and he was dead and on the ground."

This the inspector accepted. If he detected any discrepancy, he didn't pursue it. He cracked his knuckles (causing Carl to flinch) and, bidding Carl farewell, spent a few more minutes at the scene before climbing into his car and leaving. More suits began to crowd the area, and an older lady with a kind smile offered Carl some water. He accepted it gratefully.

She took the initiative and broke the silence.

“Do you have anybody that you could stay with for a while? Like, maybe your mom?”

Carl shook his head, not caring to expand on the subject without need. He stared into the house, blankly observing the police swarming around the scene. He could feel the lady studying him, trying to phrase her next words correctly.

“Um, where is she?”

“I don’t know”. His mother had made no attempt to contact him in the weeks since she’d left. Carl tried not to feel the sting. He imagined there was a valid reason keeping her from calling; maybe she was somewhere where she couldn’t... was she ok? He hoped she was.

## Chapter 4

Left without option, the woman – who identified herself as Susan – presented Carl with an alternative. “Well, you might need to spend some time at the station. It’s not so bad there.”

While not a totally uncomfortable prospect, Carl desired more familiar accommodations.

“Can’t I stay here?”

She was quick to respond, perhaps impatient. “Sorry, but that can’t really work. Unless you have someone who can watch you, you have to come with us.”

Carl sensed that this was a battle not worth fighting. He agreed, and Susan smiled, grateful for the new cooperation. She led him to a police cruiser, and motioned over an officer; Carl rode in the back, and reveled in the release of tension provided by the crackle and officers’ voices emitted by the radio.

Boston was blanketed with fog, but streetlights and billboards fought through. The haze slowed the drive; there was ample time to detect the awkward silence. Carl spent the trip observing condensation on the window, trying to escape the nausea that had enveloped him. Susan watched him through the overhead mirror, and Carl didn’t appreciate it. They’d taken him from his home, was he not allowed to maintain some semblance of privacy?

Minutes passed. The driver shut off the radio, and the sounds of the city were amplified: the honking of horns, mostly. The purr of the tires madly spinning across the road became noticeable, as did the creaking of the car roof, the pout of the fabric when one of the passengers repositioned themselves. Susan tapped her armchair, and the arrhythmic sound echoed to Carl’s ears. The driver had a cold, and he frequently snorted, trying to unclog his nose. When he sneezed, the car veered, but straightened when he recovered.

The station was nearly vacant, with only a few cruisers scattered sparsely around the lot, remnants of a crowded area hours before. Carl was the first out of the car, followed by Susan. The officer coaxed himself out, and accompanied them to the door of the station. He then bid them good night, and backtracked towards the car.

Susan paused for a moment, and pulled open the door for Carl. He shuffled inside. The two of them passed the occasional occupied desk, containing someone pulling the night shift.

Just as Carl began to think that no one talked inside police stations, another woman - roughly the same age as Susan - strode towards them. She moved quickly, with purpose. Without making eye contact with Carl, she introduced herself.

“Anne Niles, Child Protective Services. I’m here to make sure everything goes smoothly. We have some mattresses and pillows set up in a vacant office, so that should work for tonight.”

Susan appeared relieved; she’d been out of her element dealing with Carl, and was glad for the

guidance of CPS professionals. “Ok, sounds good. Which office was that?”

Anne motioned for them to follow her, and spun on her heels. She reversed her path, leading them back in the direction from which she’d emerged. Carl had to lengthen his stride to catch up.

She shepherded them into the office, complete with a down sleeping bag and fresh pillow. Waiting for Carl to become acquainted with the room, she pulled Susan aside.

“This situation isn’t exactly typical, but it should work for the night. It’s short notice, but tomorrow we’ll be able to get some more permanent housing underway. You’re sure he doesn’t have anyone that he could stay with, for any period of time?”

Susan responded, now slightly defensive. “He said there wasn’t anyone, and we have people trying to track down the mother, but it’s not looking good. She really went underground when she left.”

Carl was listening intently. *Someone is searching for my mom?* He observed his two authority figures nodding, yet what he saw and heard was tainted with a feeling of surreality; he was lightheaded, and the longing and potential for fulfillment seemed to be the material of a fantasy or dream. This disbelief delayed his reaction to Anne, though it was hardly recognized.

Succeeding the lengthy pause, Anne repeated herself, with a hint of irritation. “Are you hungry?”

Carl nodded. In truth, he was famished; he’d simply been too preoccupied to notice. Fortunately, Anne had guessed for him. She left the room, leaving Susan and Carl standing somewhat awkwardly for a few minutes. She returned bearing a microwaved dinner.

Watching him set to work on the food, she spoke to them both. “So this is only a temporary spot, tomorrow we’ll take you to a foster care home.”

The concept was not entirely clear to Carl. “Then what?”

Anne took a breath, and fell into an explanatory mode. “Basically, we’ll take you to this place with other kids lacking a home. It’ll only be temporary housing, unless the foster parents decide to officially adopt you. Otherwise, we’ll get you a new family lined up.”

“I had a family.”

Anne sighed, softening. “I know. And this won’t be easy, but there’s not much else to do. But you need to be strong for me, ok?”

She took the plates and decided further accompaniment and conversation was unnecessary. She turned to Carl. “Well, we’ll let you get to sleep, and tomorrow we can go check out where you’ll be staying, ok?”

Carl nodded, said goodnight, and flattened himself on the sleeping bag. The two women departed, and left him in solitude. He exhaled slowly, endeavoring to unwind.

Peace was coy. He invisioned his father asking for – no, demanding – assistance. What breed of monster would allow their father to die? Exhaustion played with his eyelids. In time, Carl relinquished

control, falling into a fitful dream.

He watched himself – some semblance of himself – traversing winding hallways, passing through ominous doors. He felt aware of an upward journey, unsure of the destination. His path grew steep, stairs erecting beneath his feet. He was soon crawling, desperately pulling himself to the plateau atop the passage. Victory came as he pulled himself over the final stair. He was suddenly very much aware of a screaming baby by his side, laid on the flat with him. He clutched the babe to himself, and it fell silent. He turned to glimpse its face, and found the baby's mouth to be horribly nonexistent. He screamed, and released his grip; the babe fell to the ground, shattering into dust upon contact.

....

He opened his eyes. Daylight, growing in substance, revitalized the station; life stirred in the walls and telephones began to ring. The nightmare was over. He soon felt not a little awkward inside his sleeping bag, so he extricated himself and rolled it up. He didn't have long to wait before Anne arrived, bringing with her a fast-food breakfast, a lawyer on her heels, and plaid-shirted man in tow.

The lawyer began setting up on a convenient table, moving efficiently; this was preferable, as he was paid by the hour. The plaid-shirted man introduced himself as Johnson and stuck out his hand for a handshake, but thought better of it. As a group, they gravitated towards the table; once seated, Anne spoke.

"Johnson runs a group home a few miles from here. He has a few other kids in his care, some around your age. You'll still be able to go to the same school, and maybe the adjustment won't be very difficult. What d'you think?"

Carl raised his eyebrows, inquisitive. "What, to live with?"

"For now."

A swiftly emerging theme of his interactions with the police and CPS, Carl divined that the final choice wasn't his to make. He nodded. "Sure."

Anne sat back, smiling and palpably relieved. When the kids were on board, the system's obligatory duties were far easier to accomplish. The remaining steps would be far less dramatic, and with any luck, Carl's acclimation would be a smooth one. Now, she moved to document the legality of the transition.

The lawyer spread a few papers on the desk, and produced a pen. Donning a pair of black-rimmed reading glasses, he outlined the contents for Carl.

"I'm legally transferring your residency to the home of Theodore Johnson. You're now an official member of the foster care program, so you'll have to complete three sessions with an appointed psychologist. According to our records, your parents had an upside down mortgage, so the bank will be repossessing the old house." The lawyer glanced up at Carl. "I'm sorry about that. I'm sure you won't fully understand everything that is going on here until later on."

The details weren't of particular interest to Carl. He nodded and murmured acceptance when applicable, functioning on autopilot. The lawyer droned on, thoroughly detailing the legal process and the

bureaucracy.

At long length, the lawyer sat back in his chair, exhaling slowly. “Well, that’s it; Mr. Johnson is now your temporary legal guardian, for however long that’ll be.”

Anne feigned a smile, but her eyes showed how taxed she was. “Alright, Carl. We can go back to your house to get some clothes, and then you can go check out your new home.”

Carl soon found himself in the backseat of a low-riding sedan, studying the back of Johnson’s head: he realized how little he knew of his new caretaker. Johnson had rarely spoken, and a deep sadness had often shimmered in his eyes. He now gazed out the window not unlike Carl had done mere hours before.

Carl’s house was cocooned in crime scene tape, and all three of them were careful not disturb the area any more than was necessary. Carl filled a backpack with some clean clothes, a favored cap, a ball, and baseball glove; nothing else seemed essential. Perhaps he’d have a chance to return for the rest.

Smiles were exchanged on the way to the car; maybe they were real. The sun, now swiftly climbing, glinted off of the windows, filling the air with its presence. Carl donned the baseball cap. The sunlight was bright, even within the vehicle.

The tires splayed gravel when they finally pulled into Johnson’s driveway. Vacating the vehicle, they moved towards the front door. Johnson pulled out his keys, and scraped open the lock. A short wave of apprehension assaulted Carl’s stomach as the door swung open.



## Chapter 5

Iraq, 2010

Intermittent breeze tickled at Carl's face and agitated the thin bed sheets. Slowly coming to, he pushed himself into a sitting position, supporting himself with unsteady arms. An oscillating fan buzzed at the foot of his bed.

He soon became awkwardly aware of another presence in the room: the old woman. Slowly raising his gaze, he managed brief eye contact. Grief had worn heavily on her - the frailty of her age shone through.

She spoke. "We need you."

Her words fell on unexpectant ears. Accusations had held a higher likelihood of occurrence in Carl's mind. Instead, he was neither pleaded with nor demanded of. Her words held a trust that was difficult to refute.

"For what?" He felt obligated to help, as this woman had suffered much for him. Lending service to her only seemed fair, even in his impaired state.

"I think you'd better come with me." She turned and approached the exit, waiting for him to follow. He did, and was embraced by a warm flood of the heat and light outside. He squinted, pupils growing accustomed to the brilliance.

He first saw two men, standing close to the door, staring out into the sand. The old woman wasted no time, and introduced them.

"These are my sons, Abraham and Aban."

Now aware of company, they turned to study Carl. Standing the same six feet tall, they mirrored each other in many ways: same eyes, same widow's peak, same thin beards. Abraham did, however, sport bloodied knuckles and a broken nose, in sharp contrast to Aban's unblemished appearance.

The old woman's discerning – and slightly judgmental – gaze lingered momentarily on Abraham, who shifted uncomfortably under her stare. After a moment of consideration, he explained the wounds.

"Some kid was carrying a bag of wheat, and they tried to take it. Said it was a new tax – you know, the same old rouse. I couldn't let them just take it..." He shrugged, and found the ability to meet her eyes.

She nodded, softened. Turning to Carl, she said, "This is what we need your help with. Those people who captured you, those people who shot" - her voice quavered - "who shot Sanaa, they're trying to live off the people here. They demand "taxes" from those who can't stand against them. It's pretty much crippled us here. When they're not paid, they get violent, as you know." She pointed to his hand. "When people aren't able to give them what they want, they just disappear. No one ever hears from them again."

“Wait, then why did they come after my squad?” Carl was skeptical.

“Oh, you probably just got too close, they thought you were there to uproot them. Maybe you were. But we need your help with them. We can’t hold out much longer.”

“I’m sorry, who are those people again?” Carl felt confused.

“They’re part of a larger organization,” Aban replied. “They extort money and supplies from the locals to maintain their operation in the area. We think they’re also responsible for multiple kidnappings in the area. They only take the homeless, the vagrants – the people that no one notices. But we notice.”

Carl hesitated; it was his duty to get back to base, to let command know why soldiers wouldn’t be returning to their wives. To stay away was to deliberately break protocol, and his training fought to dissuade him from going rouge, no matter how worthy the cause.

Abraham spoke. “Sanaa was shot while we were protecting you. It’s the least you could do to assist us in taking out our mutual enemy. You’d be doing your job, anyway. The police have been no help, and your military is too busy. Please, you’re our best shot at getting back at them.”

He had a point. This would even his debt, to be sure. “Alright. I’ll help. What’re you planning on doing?”

The old woman, now appeased, laid out the principles of their plan. “To kill a serpent, you cut off the head. We need you to do the same thing. Take out their leader and his right-hand man. We can give you the whereabouts of the second in command, but the rest you’ll have to find out for yourself.”

Carl nodded. In honesty, such a mission wasn’t completely uncommon. Terrorist factions were commonplace around the warzone, and taking out the leaders often quelled the resistance. Sensitive operations like these were never recorded, so his objective, should it prove successful, would seem like nothing more than a covert assignment.

“What about weapons? All I have is a pistol.”

Abraham smirked silently, though noticeably. “Oh, we’ve got a few. Over here.”

Hardly waiting for company, he set off around to the back of the house. The removal of a few blanketing coverings revealed a basic safe, the size of three gym lockers. He removed the lock, and heaved off the top. A vast assortment of at least twenty rifles and handguns, all kept in pristine condition, lay beside a few tan tactical uniforms, filled with loaded magazines.

Carl’s eyes widened. Inspecting a silenced m4 carbine, he asked, “How’d you come across these?” Immaculate, high-quality firearms were sparse among civilians. Intentionally so.

“Well, it wasn’t a short process. Some soldiers, mostly resistance fighters, would finish their tours unhappy with the compensation they were going to receive. Some tended to market off their guns to make a bonus when they left. This would often result in very well-funded militias. Not a good thing. We’d pick them up to protect ourselves, to keep them out of nasty hands, and” – he racked the bolt on the mp5a4 he was handling – “for this very scenario.”

That made sense. Though unexpected, Carl was appreciative of the good break. “So we’re loading up now?”

“Unless you have something better to do...”

They loaded up, Carl with the silenced m4 carbine and Abraham with a polymer Kalashnikov. Both carried ample extra mags and sidearms. Coming back around to the front of the car, they found Aban already similarly loaded with an m249 SAW at his feet and a scoped m14 slung over his shoulder.

The old woman showed lines of worry deep into her face. Her brow was furrowed, nearly down to her eyes. Seeing her children making ready for combat certainly didn’t add years to her life.

She voiced her worry. “I want you all to return here safe. I...” her voice trailed off. Abraham understood her worry, and embraced her, a son to his mother. She cried a bit, but regained control of her emotion and stood in silence.

They filled their truck with weapons and supplies. Abraham was checking fuel levels and tire pressure, wishing to prevent a chance opportunity from derailing the operation. Carl, valiantly though he fought, could no longer sit on the question smoldering in his mind.

“The little girl – Sanaa – is she ok? Like, alive?”

The old woman’s face was hard set. “She’s not dead. She just hasn’t woken up yet. We’re not sure how she’ll do, but she’s fighting.”

It wasn’t good news, but it was bearable. Carl had feared the worst. The burden of the unknown lifted, he climbed into the passenger seat focused with the task before him; Abraham and Aban followed suite.

Abraham eased into his seat behind the wheel, and ignited the engine. Aban sat in the back, ready to mount up the m249 SAW if they encountered resistance prematurely. The old woman had retreated to her porch, and stood at the doorway with one hand raised in farewell. Carl thought he saw tears on her cheeks.

The truck found good traction and pulled forward smoothly. Abraham’s driving was undeterred by the sand beneath. It was not long before they were cruising through the desert at a good pace, the wind whirling about their heads, the dazzling sun causing them to squint.

“Is there anyone else who could’ve helped?” Carl yelled above the gale.

Abraham turned with a bitter smirk on his face. “Like I said, the police don’t care, and the locals are too scared. We’ve been keeping our eye on them for quite a while now, but we needed more fighters to do anything about it. I guess you’re all we get.”

Carl didn’t quite know how to respond to that, so he kept silent.

“When we to the house, this guy – Yasin – is gonna lead us to the guy who’s probably behind all of this. Calls himself the Doctor. He’s a nasty guy,” Abraham said. “Yasin’s going to have some mercenaries around him, but nothing too bad. They’re not expecting company. I hope you have some

experience with interrogations.”

Carl had garnered his fair share of information from extremely unwilling subjects. He pursed his lips together and nodded. “Not going to be a problem.”

Abraham fished a picture from his pocket and handed it to Car. “That’s Yasin. We haven’t been able to get a picture of the Doctor.”

Carl studied the picture. It had been taken at a distance. *These people might be crazy, or wrong, but they seem to be doing surveillance*, Carl thought.

Minutes compounded. Carl was becoming legitimately sick of stray sand hitting his face when Abraham slowed the truck, and the din ceased. Aban grabbed his m14 and slid out of the back and walked parallel to the road, weapon at the ready. Abraham brought the vehicle into gear, and rolled on.

Carl looked behind. “Why’d you drop him off?” Aban had disappeared into the desert.

“He’s got the long range rifle, he’ll be giving us support fire. The house is maybe 800 meters from here.”

“Support fire from 800 meters?” Carl had his doubts of Aban’s effectiveness at such a range.

“Well, he’s not bad with that rifle. He’ll probably find a larger sand dune and use it as a perch. Trust me, he’ll be useful from there.”

Carl was still skeptical, but didn’t press the issue. He’d never seen Aban shoot, and decided to trust one of his only comrades. Worst case, He and Abraham would be alone against the security team guarding one house. He’d been on worse assignments.

Nearing the house, they abandoned the vehicle. Abraham left the keys in the ignition, expecting a hasty exit. Weapons ready, they moved with all caution towards the house. Carl took point. Due to the inherent flatness of the surrounding area, concealment was scarce, and cover was non-existent. They realized, with no small measure of chagrin, that they were sitting ducks.

Its timing impeccable (Carl later thought it predestined), a fierce wind picked up. Sand was thrown about randomly, rising angrily from the ground. Aban’s voice crackled over the radio in Abraham’s ear, “I’m blind. The sand’s killing my visual.”

They were unable to see more than a few paces in front of them. Stumbling, they wound their way through the haze, shielding their faces from the stinging sand. Through dumb luck, they came across a fence, and luckier still, the fence surrounded their target house. Holding to the fence as a crutch, they were able to stand against the surrounding torrent of sand.

They fought their way west – they hoped it was west – towards the front face of the house. After minutes of brutal maneuvering, Carl reached a gap in the fence. He turned back to Abraham, and screamed in his ear, piercing through tumult. “THERE’S A GAP IN THE FENCE. I THINK WE’RE IN.” Abraham yelled his affirmative in return.

Caressing the edge of the fence, they made their way into the compound. Lacking any sense of

direction, they knelt, pausing to think. Finding the house would be nearly impossible through the walls of sand, but there was no telling how long the storm would last. In the end, they were without a choice; they waited.

The storm, seemingly intent on obeying their wishes, began to ebb. In minutes, most of the sand had found its way back to earth. The air, while not entirely clear, was translucent enough to operate through. Wiping the sand from over their eyes, they located the house – immediately to their left – and began to pick their way towards it.

Aban's voice filtered through the radio again. "I'm back. Watch out for enemies. If they were outside, they won't be doing well. People inside might come out looking for them."

"Gotcha, keep an eye on the door," Abraham answered. "We'll take care of the outside force."

No one outside the house was to be seen, and it worried Carl. Cover was once again lacking, and he'd yet to find the enemy. Knowing the danger of remaining stationary, he led Abraham to the only cover in the area: the house itself.

Bent at the waist and at the knees, they moved towards it. The loose sand was difficult to speed through, but they managed. They pressed tightly against the wall, and rested a moment to collect their bearings. They were covered in sand, uniforms and weapons. Oh, their weapons!

Swearing, Carl shouldered his m4. It wasn't even worth testing. Even smaller amounts of sand routinely caused jams for the weapon. His was effectively drowned. Fortunately, his pistol holder was nearly sealed, and sand had not yet infected his 1911. He drew it, hoping it would function.

Abraham's ak47 was sturdier and was likely to fire. Kalashnikovs had been through worse and survived. He ran a cloth from his vest through the barrel. The needed minutes felt substantially longer, but they weren't engaged during the cleaning process.

His weapon again intact, Abraham moved to the right corner. Carl took the left. Cautiously, they peered beyond the edges of the house and into the space beyond, waiting for signs of life.

## Chapter 6

Sand moved on Carl side, a few yards away. Stomping out the sand on his boots and wiping the sand from his face, one ill-fated guard slowly stood. Clearly disoriented, he shook his head, trying to recover. Carl wasn't intent on giving him such a chance.

Slowly, smoothly, he pulled the trigger on his pistol. The silencer muffled the sound and concealed the flash, and the man toppled to his knees. Details hinting towards his condition were difficult to determine over such a distance and through the sand. He put another round in the man, just to be sure. His target flattened, clearly bleeding out.

Carl moved forward, utilizing the few moments he held over the defense force. His silencer didn't deaden the sound so much as muffle it, and it was clear that shots had been fired. As expected, harsh voices became audible from inside the house. Heavy boots pounded and shook the floor, reverberating outside. As he was now at the back end of the house, he noted the lack of a back door and scanned the sand. No movement. He'd expected more than one guard to be stationed outside, and hoped Abraham was competent to hold his own.

Abraham was. When Carl's shots had broken through the wind, Abraham had moved towards the front face of the house, ready to eliminate anyone trying to leave. He'd noticed one broken corpse laying a few paces apart from the house, clearly Aban's work.

He knelt, body wrapped around the corner of the house, posted towards the door. He'd just begun to notice the weapon's weight when the door flew open, and another armed man spilled out. The conjoined fire from Aban and Abraham converged onto the doorway, splintering the wood and shattering the plaster.

Nothing could live in front of it. The guard was lifted from his feet, propelled backwards into the house. Blood began to seep through the doorframe, amidst the shards. The house grew still.

Aban's voice came through the radio once again. "That was a little bit overkill, don't you think?"

Abraham conceded. "Yes. But I don't have a shot at the window. If you hold the window, I'll keep posted on the door."

A static sigh came through the radio. "Fine. There's really not much going on in there, though. Maybe it's time to breach."

After a bit of thought, Abraham agreed. He tried to make radio contact with Carl, but with no response; Carl must've never remembered to turn on his radio. He left his post to go around the house, making a mental note to give Carl grief about it at a later point.

Creeping along the house, he turned the corner, keeping a low profile. His shoulder grazed the cheap finish of the wall, and dust scraped off. He hurried, shuffling through the displaced sand. He reached Carl's side of the house, and for a moment was unable to locate him.

Then the sand at his feet took form. First a gritty hand moved, which showed itself to be attached to a shoulder. Carl had been lying completely prone in the sand, chest down, scanning the terrain for assailants. Sand had rested over him, obfuscating his figure. He'd disappeared until he moved, turning his neck to glance up at Abraham. "Time to go in?"

Abraham was momentarily stunned. He nodded, and watched Carl rise. Sand cascaded from Carl's clothing, which had lost any pattern it had once contained.

Reaching into his holster, Carl found his 1911 to be remarkably clean. The holster had once again done an excellent job sealing out debris, even when enveloped in it.

Abraham led the way towards the front entrance. Clearing their way to the front, they stacked next to the entrance. The threat of imminent danger heightened, lurking in the dark behind the door.

Carl tapped Abraham on the shoulder. "If we have grenades, now's the time to use them."

Abraham disagreed. "We might kill the target. We have to take him alive." He did, however, produce a flashbang from his vest.

"How the hell'd you get one of those?" Carl stared, suspicious.

"Same place I got your silencer. Some guy who was going home." Abraham pulled the pin, baked the grenade for a moment, and tossed it into the house. It thudded against the floor, and lay still.

A massive wall of sound rocked the house. It bloomed from the grenade, and travelled out to Carl and Abraham. They covered their ears, but it was of no effect; the sound was penetrating. Dazzling light erupted from the grenade, bursting through the holes in the house and shining out. The burning Iraqi sun darkened in comparison.

The flash over, they breeched. The house was dark, cool, damp. All seemed dark after the flash, so the inside shape was difficult to make out. They rabidly searched for life, and threats.

A single moan alerted them to human presence. On the floor lay one man, a few feet away from the spent flashbang. Having been near the epicenter of the blast, he was completely disoriented. Hey moaned again, attempting to crawl.

Carl searched him for a weapon, and removed a pistol from the man's hip. Abraham had searched the rest of the house, and found no one.

Carl sat the man up in a corner, against a wall. It was not long before the man recovered, opening his terrified eyes. Carl's memory flooded in: that crew cut, those eyes. Everything matched Abraham's picture. It was definitely Yasin.

Carl had boxed in his younger years, and the army had assisted in putting form to his talent. He'd taken advanced hand-to-hand combat during PMC training, and excelled. Simply put, Carl could punch.

He used that ability now. Holstering his pistol, he struck Yasin across the face, between his cheekbone and the crown of his nose. Carl felt the nose break underneath his knuckles, caving to the left. Blood snaked out of Yasin's nostrils. Carl swung again, in the same spot. The flow of blood intensified,

widening. Yasin began to cry out.

Abraham returned, drawn back to the cry. He was greatly relieved to find Carl intact. He beheld Yasin's pain, and grimaced for a moment, but stood clear. Carl held more experience, and Abraham felt no need to interfere.

Carl, wringing his hand to dissipate the pain from his punch, began his questions.

"You are Yasin, yes?" He was already aware the man was Yasin – he was simply trying to facilitate cooperation.

No such luck. Yasin simply started chanting in Arabic. Carl sighed; he'd hoped for a short chat. He struck again, this time in the throat. Yasin gagged and gasped for breath. Carl waited until Yasin took a deep breath, and slugged him in the stomach. The breath escaped Yasin's chest in the form of a shocked whimper.

Carl tried again. "I know you speak English. So tell me your fucking name!"

The chanting took on a newly feverish pitch, showing the strain Yasin felt. In his left eye wound a single blood vessel, throbbing to his pupil. The yellowed whites of his eyes were thrashing.

Carl drew his combat knife, and held it to Yasin's left hand. "You're gonna tell me what I want to know. Trust me on that." He singled out Yasin's middle finger, and put pressure with the blade where the digit met the hand.

Yasin struggled, trying to escape from where he was pinned. He thrashed out his right leg, trying to get to his feet. Carl stomped on his knee, and an audible crack permeated from the joint. Yasin collapsed with a scream, using his free hand to caress his damaged leg.

"You're gonna talk," Carl said, menace on his lips.

Oaths and swears came rampant from Yasin's mouth. It was unintentional, but in his anger, Yasin made one heinous mistake: in his final sentence, he switched over to English.

"...And you'll beg for death," he said.

Carl smiled, satisfaction urging him further. "And so he speaks." He drew his pistol, now confident to raise the stakes.

"We're here to find your boss. You call him The Doctor. And don't bother pretending that you don't understand me."

Yasin remain silent, resilient. Carl switched off the safety on his pistol, and put one shot into Yasin's left kneecap. The bullet travelled through, and lay entombed beneath the house. It left carnage in its wake, ripping through sinew and breaking bone. Blood bubbled forth from Yasin's knee, staining his skin.

Yasin let forth a haunting bellow, spittle falling from his mouth, his broken nose long forgotten. He fell silent, and spit blood. He glanced up at Carl, and venomously growled "You are wasting your



time. You'll have to kill me."

Frustrated, Carl needed some time to think. He knew he couldn't release the pressure, or the interrogation was futile. He paused for a moment, and chopped Yasin's neck with the side of his hand. He tripped a pressure point, and Yasin's head fell back, unconscious. His yellowed eyes saw nothing, as though dead.

Carl sat back, slowing his breathing. He had to figure out how to break Yasin, and soon. It was strange that no one else had been found in the house; he suspected that they'd fled to garner reinforcements.

Abraham had left the house, not wishing to witness the violence. He stood a lookout in case any extra enemies came. He peered in occasionally to check in on Carl, just make sure he didn't kill Yasin in his attempt to glean information. Maybe he was squeamish.

Inside, Carl paced in the dark. Blatant physical threats had not yet broken Yasin. He decided to implement psychological strategies: to use threats that brought chills down the spine.

He walked through the house, looking for something to assist him. He found no hallucinogens in the drawers, not explosives to use. His search of the kitchen was more productive. He found a functional stove, which he heated to the maximum.

He moved back over to Yasin, and removed his canteen from his vest. He poured out some of the water on Yasin's face, and plugged his nose. Yasin snorted, and came back to reality, sputtering in the water. Dropping his canteen, Carl grabbed him and hauled him over to the stove. Pulling Yasin's arms behind his back, Carl leaned him up against the stove. The heat from the stove billowed up into their faces, causing both of their eyes to water. Yasin, now more awake, began to blabber and strain, trying to pull away.

Carl spoke. "You tell me where The Doctor is, or this gets very unpleasant."

Yasin now thrashed his head and his core, trying to break free. Carl intentionally loosened his hold, making Yasin support his own weight with his damaged legs. Collapsing in pain, Yasin went limp, now compliant.

Carl reiterated his message, "You fucking tell me!"

Finally, Yasin responded. "He's dead, someone killed him a few days ago!"

Carl was disappointed. It wasn't even a good lie. "Bullshit. Where is he?" He pressed Yasin's face close to the burner; it was now inches away from the origin of the heat, and the pain was scarcely bearable for Yasin.

"ANSWER ME!" Carl roared.

Yasin resumed his chanting. In response, Carl pushed his face down onto the burner for a moment or two. The nauseous smell of burning flesh instantly filled the space, infecting the air with the repulsive stench. The left side of Yasin's face bubbled and burned, smoking. It grew discolored, loosening its grip on Yasin's skull and growing rigid.

Yasin didn't scream so much as choke. The shock and pain asphyxiated him, the pressure growing in his skull and reddening the rest of his face. His vesseled eye was now burned, and his other violently rotated. Carl peeled his face from the stove and held it inches above the surface.

"Tell me where he is, or we go again," Carl said.

Yasin broke. He no longer possessed the strength to lie or resist, impelled only by the urge to rid himself of the situation.

"Ok. Ok. He's staying some miles south of Mosul, in a smaller outpost."

Carl correctly took this as the truth. He nodded, and pulled Yasin up off the table. He took pity on the man, his brokenness and his suffering. Carl drew his pistol, pressed it into Yasin's temple, and ended him.

No longer paying heed to Yasin's corpse, Carl found some towels from a drawer, wiped himself off, and tossed them on the hot stove. They readily burst into flame.

He exited the house, found Abraham, and began walking to the truck. Abraham radioed to Aban that they were moving out.

## Chapter 7

Abraham hastened his step, trying to catch up with Carl. “I heard the gunshots. Did he tell you what we need to know?”

Carl nodded, not looking back. Abraham fell in line, and the two walked briskly away from the building. Aban’s voice transmitted through Abraham’s radio, “So do we have what we need?”

“The Doctor’s holed up North of Mosul,” he replied.

Abraham relayed the information back to Aban, but seemed uneasy. “Mosul’s about 200 miles out. That’s gonna be quite a trip.”

Carl turned back to the house, and Abraham traced his gaze. They both looked back to find the house ablaze, smoke billowing up into a pillar, slowly climbing. The flames licked out the door, claiming the inside.

Abraham turned to Carl. “What’d you do?”

“I didn’t want them to know what happened there,” Carl replied. He truly didn’t want anyone to know an interrogation had taken place; details like that might raise some eyebrows back at his base camp.

Abraham tried not to show his anger, but it reflected through his eyes. “You don’t get it. That smoke is gonna keep rising, and everyone around us is gonna know that building’s on fire. You just set a beacon for potential enemy reinforcements.”

Carl defended himself. “They know where the house is, I just made it so that they don’t truly know why we were there!”

Abraham shook his head. “They’re gonna be all over us because of that smoke.” He walked on, visibly upset.

They trudged for some minutes before reaching the truck. Aban was already in the back, cleaning out his SAW gun in anticipation for some en-route company. They wasted no time getting in the vehicle, and were soon driving westward.

Carl checked his compass. “I Thought Mosul is north of here.”

“It is,” Abraham responded, “But your little smoke beacon is gonna attract attention, and they’ll be coming from the north. Hopefully this way we’ll be able to avoid contact.”

Silence enveloped the car ride, so when Aban rapped the glass on the back of the pickup, the noise was accentuated and slightly startling. Abraham checked the car mirrors. His fears confirmed, he saw two vehicles driving in their direction, clouds of dust and sand showing their trail and their formidable speed.

Changing gears, Abraham accelerated. It was of little effect, though, as their two followers were closing distance with a motivated rush. Abraham handed Carl his ak47, his reasons somewhat obvious.

He gave up the weapon with instructions. "Don't shoot unless they fire on us first." Carl complied. Aban was busy in the back, removing the M249 from its protective tarp and loading the box magazine.

Their pursuers crept closer still. Now 300 feet off, now 200. Fire erupted from their vehicles at 200 feet. They used their semi-automatic rifles, and due to the turbulent terrain, their shots weren't true. Bullets sprayed all around the truck; one connected with the back of the truck bed, but did little damage.

Aban returned the kindness and then some. Firing in long bursts, he unleashed lines of hot lead into the convoy. He must've killed the driver of the left vehicle, because it jackknifed; its momentum carried it sideways, flipping the vehicle. It tumbled forth, burning through its speed. It came to rest upside down, rifting the sand.

Meanwhile, the remaining automobile had approached Carl's right flank. Aban wasn't engaging – Carl looked back to see him trying to get his magazine to feed. No more than fifty feet out, Carl could see the enemies rolling down their back windows to fire. He stuck his head out the window, (and with it, his gun) and emptied his entire magazine into the driver's side of the front seat. Under his fire, the windshield and passenger window both cracked, shattering. The driver slumped in his seat at once, head bowed in death.

Without guidance, the vehicle veered out of control. Entirely at the whim of the sand, it pulled off-course, and plummeted into a sand dune. It pierced into the dune, the sand devouring the front of the car. One of the passengers climbed into the driver's seat and tried to reverse, but it was no use. The automobile was stuck.

Abraham drove on. Their truck, though slightly battered, had taken no damage that would affect functionality. They tried to calm themselves after the close encounter, but adrenaline worked against them. Aban lay sprawled in the back, winded but unhurt. Carl, trying to control his breathing, sat back in the car and rolled up the window. Abraham, perhaps the most stoic of the three, drove smoothly, gripping the steering wheel only slightly too tight.

The sun began its descent, glimpsing into the truck. They righted their course, now driving north. The fuel gauge read one third full, which worried Carl.

He voiced the worry. "We're not gonna make it to Mosul on less than half a tank of gas..."

"True," said Abraham, "which is why we're going to stop in Samarra to refuel. We should be there soon, in a couple miles. If all goes well, we'll spend the night there and reach Mosul tomorrow."

All said, they drove quietly, the hum of the truck the predominant noise. The desert remained docile, and they encountered no human resistance. As darkness began to rise from the ground, the sweltering heat of the day rapidly cooled. A chill began to grow in the small of Carl's back, spreading upwards.

The sun, pulled down beneath the horizon, sent forth one final flare before disappearing. The remnant light was fading, and the stars above stirred from slumber. They formed a canopy above,

twinkling in natural majesty. There was peace in the moment.

Then the red lights of Samarra formed in the distance. Their glowing target neared them, and Abraham slowed the truck. He turned to Carl, who was lost in the chill and the wonder of the desert night.

“We’re almost there,” said Abraham. “We’ll be able to buy the gas, and find somewhere to sleep pretty soon. But I think you should lay low in the car. An American in combat uniform is gonna draw attention, and I don’t know if The Doctor has ears here. It isn’t likely, but I don’t know why he has his headquarters in Mosul when his operation is over 200 miles south. It doesn’t make sense.”

Carl agreed to stay relatively out of sight, and began thinking about the impracticality of The Doctor’s business commute. Abraham and Aban talked through radio in the back, and Aban took all the weapons he could reach, wrapped them in a canvas, and stored them in a compartment in the truck bed. Abraham put the ak47 in a hidden area underneath the dashboard. All three kept their pistols, but they tucked them under their shirts, concealed. Aban climbed into the single row-seat in between Carl and Abraham.

The lights of Samarra loomed as they drew near to the beast. The sounds of traffic became noticeable; it was nearly seven o’clock. They passed through the dreary city limits and into the bustling center. Abraham was somewhat familiar with the city, and thus drove with purpose. He first sought to refill the gas tank.

With a little searching, they found a gas station. The lights inside indicated it was still open, so they pulled up next to the pump. Abraham left the truck, walking into the store. Carl watched him through the glass as he spent a few moments talking to the station manager. He paid the manager, and the two came out to the truck. Carl made eye contact with the man, who quickly looked away. The manager filled the truck, bade Abraham farewell, and hurried back into the store.

Pleased with the uneventful refueling, Abraham got into the truck and pulled away from the station. They hoped to find an inn quickly so as not to waste any more gas than was necessary. It was due to Carl’s searching vigilance in looking for an inn that he happened to look in the rearview mirrors, and noticed the white sedan. He first thought nothing of it – just another car in the city’s stop-and-go traffic. When he looked back a few turns later and found the car in their wake, he grew slightly concerned; when the car was still behind them a few blocks later, he became nervous.

The probability of a car mimicking the wandering turns of Abraham’s search was exceedingly low. “I think we’ve got a tail,” Carl said.

Abraham’s eyebrows grew closer together. “Are you sure?”

Carl turned, and as expected, the car was still following them. “Yeah. I’m sure. That white car has been behind us since after we left the gas station.” The vehicle’s windows were too tinted to view the driver, even in the illumination of the city glare.

Abraham muttered to himself. The traffic was too jammed to outrun the tail, and they couldn’t confront the car without compromising the safety of the surrounding civilians. Abraham executed the only remaining option and parked the truck on the side of the road.

The car rocked slightly with the degradation of momentum. The stream of traffic inched on

without them, and the white car soon drew parallel with their truck. Carl kept low against the window, pistol drawn. Aban craned his neck, searching for a peak into the paralleled vehicle.

The car slowed, but didn't stop. It moved on, not resisting the flow of traffic. It was swept along until it reached an intersection, where it peeled off to the left.

Knowing they had only a narrow window of time before their tail reappeared, Abraham reentered the road. They melded with the traffic and emerged on the right side of the road, opposite to where their tail had driven. Abraham drove for a moment to gain some distance from the pursuit before idling the car on the side of the road.

He rapped on the glass to signal Aban and spoke to Carl. "Ok, we need to leave the truck. We'll come back later, but now we've got to go on foot. Keep your pistol on you."

With that, Abraham stepped out of the truck and to the side of the road, joining with Aban. Carl followed, keeping his face low and his hands in his pockets.

They couldn't run, but walked swiftly, wary of close opposition. Aban led with Carl on his heels and Abraham to the back, making sure they were not still followed. Rarely did a pedestrian pay them any heed, and they tried to avoid high-traffic areas. They followed back alleys whenever possible.

Aban voiced the question they all entertained. "How'd they know where we were?"

Carl thought he might know the answer. "That gas station attendant started acting strange when he saw me. He turned away, but I got a funny feeling about it. Maybe he called in the information."

"Well, it's that, or somebody called in the truck description," said Abraham. "But I don't know how they'd know we were gonna be in Samarra."

There were murmurs of agreement. Carl thought more than he said; thoughts of both foul play and tracking devices crossed his mind. He was also incredulous that it was difficult to find a hotel in a major city.

They continued for some time, skirting the revealing city light. His patience for Aban's directional leadership sucked dry, Carl took lead, and within two streets found a seedy hotel, concealed to inattentive eyes. A dilapidated neon sign above hinted towards a previous glory for the inn, devoured by time. Nearby pedestrians tended to keep clear of the establishment, though none viewed it.

Perfect.

The three filed into the dimly lit lobby and met the clerk at the front desk, a younger female, maybe late twenties. Abraham purchased three cots – cheaper sleeping arrangements were in a common room lined with hammocks – for one night.

The clerk nodded. "There's food in the diner if you're hungry." She spoke in Arabic, but Aban translated for Carl's sake. Abraham spoke with the woman a bit longer, and she pointed down one of the hallways. The three followed her direction.

"Where are we going?" Carl asked.

“To get some food.”

The light grew more intense when they reached the diner, which was little more than a few tables outside the kitchen. One chef labored before a large stove; there was a single other patron, seated in the far corner. He didn't look up as they came in.

## Chapter 8

Boston, 1983

Johnson opened wide the door to his home, and beckoned them all inside. The front door opened into the living room, a large area with a vaulted ceiling that gave off the feeling of limitless space. The area was clearly lived in - more stringent individuals might've considered the place a wreck. But to Carl, the room exuded a warmth that no degree of cleanliness could ever embody.

Anne followed them, and Johnson led the way into the kitchen, which showed the same signs of life as the previous area. The refrigerator was entirely covered in childish drawings, pictures, postcards and achievements. Carl was surprised there was room for so many exhibitions on one surface.

The kitchen funneled into a short hall, ending with a staircase. They ascended the stairs, and found a hallway lined with smaller rooms. The doors were stickered and drawn on, and each boasted the name of the child responsible for the artwork. There was an empty room at the end of the path.

"Carl, that's gonna be your room," Johnson proclaimed, as if the time of sadness and difficulty was over, and a new age had dawned. "At least, if that's ok with you."

The change in atmosphere was palpable. Carl's spirits rose as he realized he was truly welcome, perhaps even wanted. He beamed a smile, spoke his affirmative, and laid his backpack on the bed. Anne was looking impressed with the living conditions and the atmosphere, gladdened to know that by all measurable counts, Carl would be healthier here.

"I figure you should meet the rest of the clan," Johnson smirked. When Carl agreed, he moved to the final door in the hall, marked 'the loft'. The opened door revealed three playing children, all of whom seemed about Carl's age; one seemed slightly older.

They turned to stare at the intruders who'd disrupted their playtime. Johnson addressed them. "Guys, this is Carl. He'll be staying with us. Carl, this is David, George, and Megan."

Despite the magnitude of the events that had lead him thus far, Carl was struck with the social awkwardness that plagues all youth when they encounter one of their own. He managed a wave, but anxiety gripped him. Fortunately, not all of the three children were so affected, at least not to the same degree.

David was a little older than Carl and tall for his age; he sat hunched and cross-legged, and measured up Carl from beneath black, oily bangs. Perhaps not the warmest of individuals.

George was a blonde, rotund child, the same age as Carl. His birthday had been about a week before, and he looked like he was still riding off the euphoria. His legs were spread out in front of him, as though he had little power over their position, and he wasn't at all concerned about it.

Megan sat on her knees, the most embarrassed of the three and also the youngest. She'd seen Carl and Anne enter before they'd noticed her, but now that attention was certain, she found it difficult to make eye contact. Head bowed, her hair fell over her face. Anne thought the behavior was an age-related



oddity; Carl thought it was somewhat funny.

Johnson was amused by the cumulative reaction, but not cruel enough to allow it to continue. Knowing the difficulties children suffered during first contact, he cut it short, ushering Anne and Carl out of the room.

Knowing Anne was eager to leave (she'd be back in a day or two to find out how Carl was adapting), he brought them back downstairs and offered to show off the rest of the house.

Anne declined. "I really should get back to work," she said. She knelt down, eye to eye with Carl.

"I'll be back really soon to find out how you're doing. But give it a shot, these are good people. I was in charge of Megan's transfer here." With that, she straightened her back, rising to a standing position. She made her goodbyes and excused herself. Carl watched the sedan pull out of the driveway, away from the house, away from him.

Johnson watched her drive away too. He experienced a small moment of apprehension when he realized he was responsible for another human life. He fought through it, though, and looked down at Carl.

"We can paint your room tomorrow," he said, "unless you're a fan of plain white." He grinned. Carl recognized the small jest. Humor felt alien now— something understood but foreign to him.

He smiled anyway. "Sure."

"Alright – we can still get you pretty much settled for the time being." They returned upstairs to Carl's room, and Carl unpacked what little he'd brought with him. He stored his clothes in a deep cherry wooden dresser, and laid his baseball cap on the table that shadowed over his bed. He'd been too preoccupied to notice before, but the room boasted a lofty and mostly occupied bookshelf on the wall opposite the door.

Carl paused to inspect the sheer wall of books. Brushing his hand across a row, he swept a thin layer of dust from the covers. He wiped his hands on his jeans, but never turned from the books. They were captivating to him. Soothing, maybe. He wasn't particularly interested in their intellectual value, but the collection mysteriously held his attention.

Johnson observed him from the doorway. None of the other kids in the house had ever taken an interest in the books, but Carl stood enthralled by them.

*Hey, whatever makes the kid feel at home.*

The adjustments were always a fragile period, and it helped the kid to have something to station himself with.

Johnson moved from the doorpost to beside Carl. "Most of these are really old," he murmured. "My father was a bit of a collector, and when he passed away, he wanted me to have them. I've only read a few."

Carl pulled out one novel, and dusted it off. The spine crackled as he opened it and gently leafed

through the ornate pages. He paused at the title, but wasn't able to discern what it meant. The golden letters swooped and flourished in an unfamiliar pattern.

Johnson peeked over his shoulder. "Oh, Voltaire. That's in French. I don't even think my dad could read that one." He chuckled. "Probably just liked the way it looked. Doesn't seem like he opened it very much."

Carl realized the futility in trying to understand the book and placed it back in the shelf. It slid back into place seamlessly, once again at rest. The shelf swayed, creaking in protest as Carl drew out another novel.

A King James Bible. Adorned with trimmings of gold around the corners and a deep maroon cover, the book was everything a classic stereotypical bible was meant to be. The pages were whisper thin, almost transparent, the ink just barely showing through from the other side. The letters were an elegant swirl of antique typeset and a black ink that was faded with age.

Johnson, surprised with Carl's choice, watched as Carl examined the text. "That was his favorite. The best piece in his collection, he'd say. He used to read it beside the fire." Johnson's eyes reflected his past, glinting with memory. "Not that it was easy to read. I was never able to get beyond the 'thees' and 'thous'. Maybe it's just me."

Carl shut the bible and carefully shelved it. It didn't easily fit back in its place, as though it didn't wish to be put away. With a little force, Carl managed to fit it between the other novels, but it took more effort than he would've thought. He felt uncomfortable sifting through any more novels under Johnson's gaze, so he turned around, unsure what more to say.

Johnson was feeling similarly. He wasn't entirely sure when to leave; he didn't want to abandon Carl in a new environment, but he also didn't want to smother him. He eventually decided to check out, and backed towards the door.

"If you need anything, I'll be downstairs." With that, he backed out of the room and shut the door behind him; his footsteps resounded through the walls as he descended the stairs. The pressure that accompanied Carl's social interactions abated. Taking a seat on his new bed, Carl exhaled slowly and began processing the immense.

*Things are moving fast*, he thought.

His thoughts gradually turned to his mother. He realized with dismay that she wouldn't be able to return and find him at home. There would be no joyous return and reconciliation. Not that he'd expected one; she must've run away as far as she could go. How could she do it without saying goodbye? He longed for a name or a place that would lead him to her.

The door swung open, disturbing his thoughts. George poked his head in. Seeing Carl on the bed with his head bowed, he eased himself into the room. Carl closed his eyes, trying to collect his composure. After a few uneasy moments, he held up his head.

George stood near the bed, smiling and oblivious to Carl's emotion. He stuck out his hand to shake Carl's, something uncharacteristically mature for his age. Carl stared it down.

After a few lingering seconds, George let his hand drop. He shrugged it off, unabashedly grinning. “It’s cool that you’ll be living here,” he said. “Things were kinda getting boring around the house.” He either didn’t know or didn’t care that Carl wasn’t interested in conversing.

“Sure. In a little bit I’ll be ready to really meet you guys.” In another place, he might’ve wanted to talk more – but not now, not so soon. “At this point I’d rather spend some time alone, though.”

George nodded, not at all insulted. Understanding the inscrutable pain of parental death and abandonment, he relented in his pursuit of friendly communion. “No problem. We’re gonna be in the loft if you want to come by. I’m sure they’d want to meet you. Like, when it’s not so weird for you.”

With that, he left. Somehow, acknowledging Carl’s suffering didn’t put a damper on his spirits; he wasn’t uncaring towards Carl, but he was able to rise above the grime and mire. Quite an ability for a young kid.

Carl sat again in solitude. Simply functioning proved a difficult task, despite his will to persist. He zoned out, not thinking, simply escaping the present. He turned and flattened out on the bed, his face pressed into the pillow.

He wasn’t sure how long he remained face-down on the bed, but after a good deal of time, he felt an ache in his neck (and face), and turned over, staring at the ceiling. His eyes didn’t really register what they saw. His unblinking gaze stared inwardly. Eventually, he drew closer to reality and bowed his chin to his chest. He found himself staring at the bookshelf, examining its perfect posture despite the weight of the many books. Resilient.

Carl felt a shiver crawl down his back. No matter what he repeated to himself, he couldn’t stifle the creeping uneasiness of conscience and worry. Suppose someone found out, and he was held responsible for his father’s death? The burden of anxiety might be more that he could carry.

A soft knock rolled through the door. Johnson’s voice drifted through. “Dinner’s ready.”

*Sure, why not.*

Carl heaved himself up from the bed and drifted over to the door. He was slightly drained, but had exhausted his darker emotions. He moved down the stairs, heavy-footed and dazed, as though it was early in the morning and he’d just recently woken.

A welcoming smell floated gracefully past Carl, and his stomach murmured in anticipation. He entered into the kitchen to find a woman, slightly younger than Johnson, tending a large crockpot. She glanced towards him, but did a double-take when she realized who it was.

“Oh gracious, you must be Carl!” A southern accent adorned her voice. She bent down, and gave him a warm hug, squeezing him tight. Carl turned bright red all at once, partially from surprise.

The woman noticed his bewildered discomfort, and held a hand over her mouth to cover her well-intentioned smirk. “Oh Lawd, I’m sorry! I guess it’s just a bit of a habit. I’m Beth, Johnson’s wife. I’m glad to meet you!”

Carl stammered, still caught off guard. He eventually recovered enough to say thank you ma’am,

I'm glad to meet you too, ma'am. In his surprise, he'd addressed her as he would a teacher whom he was fond of but didn't know well enough to feel comfortable with.

She wiped her hands on her jeans, stepping away from the pot. "Well, we're pretty much ready to eat. The dining room is just outside the kitchen. We're having beef 'n' noodles tonight"

Carl took the gentle hint and moved to the dining room. The other kids were already gathered, casually seated around the table. Carl was pretty sure he heard George humming.

Carl took an empty seat next to Megan, the shy girl he'd seen before and crossed his arms on the table. The heat of their eyes fell heavily on him, but he refused to meet their gaze. He felt a surge of frustration and anger when a pregnant, brooding silence formed in the room.

## Chapter 9

Carl clenched his jaw, trying not to show his agitation. He tried to remind himself that they probably weren't being intentionally unfriendly. Probably. His sneaking suspicion would not be quelled, no matter how far-fetched. He finally turned his head towards them, his anger and hurt clearly broadcast on his face, betrayed by his furrowed brow and narrowed eyes.

David, the older boy with the longer, black hair, sat resolute across the table. He glared at Carl (at least, Carl assumed he was the subject of the glare; David's bangs obscured his eyes), not an ounce of geniality in his presence.

The two of them scowled for a little while. It might've continued for some time had George not suddenly giggled.

"You two should just kiss and break the tension." George cackled again – he almost fell out of his chair. Carl grinned in amusement; George had a way of disarming negative emotion.

David wasn't so easily placated. "Shut up," he said, but George ignored him. Carl sat back in his chair now, set at ease. He decided to avoid looking in David's direction. For now, at least.

George resumed humming, his work done. Johnson came in from another room, one he hadn't shown Carl. The bedroom, probably. Johnson had removed his glasses, and his face looked bare without them. His eyes were red and slightly sunken, but as a whole, he seemed more comfortable.

He pulled back a seat at the head of the table and moved to sit down, but thought better of it. Instead, he entered the kitchen. His low voice tumbled out, indiscernible. Beth's kindly laugh followed, swirling through and lightening the air.

Carl's mind raced. They couldn't be laughing about him, right? Immediately, he berated himself for such an out-of-place assumption. Yet, his suspicious side was still unconvinced. Split in two, he endured the internal conflict until he heard a call from the kitchen.

"Au'right, grab your plates! It's ready." Beth's voice still sounded soft and unassuming, but it carried authority. She didn't command them, but obedience felt natural when she spoke. Everyone brought their plates in, George in the front and Carl tarrying behind. He entered the kitchen warily, like an animal that had snuffed an unfriendly smell in the wind.

Beth removed the crockpot lid and steam plumed out. The temperature rose in the small area, both from the steam and the crowd. Beth portioned out the pot's contents onto their plates, one at a time.

When Carl stepped forward, he came with a question. "So, what's in the beef and noodles?"

Beth grinned. "Well, there's beef, and there's noodles." She scooped some onto his plate. "But it has some tomatoes and onions too. It's good, my mom used to make it."

He turned back and took a seat in his chair. Soon, the surrounding seats were all filled, the table covered with dishes, cups, and bowls. They kept a jug of milk on the table, which was frequently passed around.

With each glass generously filled, Johnson placed his elbows on the table and clasped his hands. “Ok, I’ll say grace.”

Carl heard a disdainful sigh from David, not loud enough for the adults to detect. It was so subtle that he wasn’t entirely sure he’d heard correctly, until he glimpsed the irritation on David’s face. The others clasped their hands together, and he did similarly.

Johnson shut his eyes and began. “Lord, we thank you for the food we’re soon to eat, and for giving us a new member of the family, for however long he’ll be here. We praise you for...”

Johnson continued speaking for a further minute or two, but it was beyond Carl’s self-control to remain still. He dropped his hands to his lap and opened his eyes. No longer participating in the prayer, he felt oddly removed from the group. Well, except for David. David, too, had his eyes wide open, though he slouched in his seat, toying with his food.

At last, Johnson concluded the supplication. The entire company now held their eyes open, newly aware of where they were. Carl glanced around, feeling guilty that he didn’t partake in the prayer. But no one seemed to notice, or even suspect. In truth, they simply wouldn’t have cared; shaming someone new to the idea of faith seemed like no way to convert.

And so the feasting commenced. Four hungry children and two adults dove into the food. There was no conversation for the next few minutes, just biting and chewing with gusto. The beef and noodles was excellent; the flavors had melded together in the crockpot, flushing into a richer flavor. Beth was an excellent cook.

Their pace eventually slowed, due to the protest of their stomachs. George had to take time to breathe. Soon, conversation had room to take place. It wasn’t easy, and Johnson was careful not to force Carl into talking.

Johnson opened his mouth to speak, but reconsidered. Nothing he thought to say sounded right. Maybe it was silly, he thought - spending so much time trying to phrase communication for a little kid. However, he wasn’t able to convince himself to finally talk.

The lack of talk grew noticeable to those who cared to notice. Social comfort can be elusive when it’s not natural, and Johnson’s timid efforts weren’t enough to sustain it.

Carl decided to end the silence. “This is really good, thanks.” While not exactly a riveting comment by itself, it had a domino effect on the table.

George made a belchy, unashamed sound of agreement. “No kidding. Thanks, mom.”

Carl noticed that George – an adopted child – had just addressed Beth as his mother. Johnson simply enjoyed the small amount of inertia put forth in conversation.

Megan – who looked more comfortable talking privately – became engaged in a quieter conversation with Beth. They were in a different world, mostly oblivious to the surrounding onlookers. While not necessary part of the chat, the rest of the table fed off of the effortless flow between them.

Their hushed and veiled words were enough to put the rest of the table at ease. Carl and Johnson went back to eating; George never really stopped. David was less than present, sort of sullenly disengaged from the moment, contentedly miserable.

It came time to clear the table, and Beth rose to collect the plates. Cleaning up wasn't nearly the group effort Carl had witnessed before. Beth made two trips and moved all the plates to the dishwasher. George helped her by gathering the cups, and soon the table was once again bare. Carl stood awkwardly, not sure what to do. He would've helped clean up if he'd been given some direction, but the attention wasn't completely focused on him. For the first time in the new house, he blended in. Maybe too much. He felt vulnerable without someone guiding him along.

Lacking of further directive, he wandered back upstairs. Without much thought, he floated past his room and into the loft. Despite himself, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was somehow trespassing, lingering where he wasn't welcome. He didn't want to leave, but stood hesitantly, reluctant to touch anything. Taking a better look at the room, he noticed a pinball machine in the corner, lazily tucked away. The power cord lay disconnected from a nearby outlet – there was dust between the tongs, gathered in the prolonged disuse.

*Well, he reasoned, if they aren't playing it, I won't get in trouble for trying it out.* He shuffled over, and tentatively bent to inspect the system. Nothing was blatantly broken, and he decided to test it out.

He knelt down to the power cord and dusted it off, wiping it on his shirt. Once it was sufficiently clean, he plugged it into the outlet. Electricity crackled and hummed. The glowing buzz of the pinball machine initiated, and a few whimsical notes came out of hidden speakers.

The whole system lit up, flashing in sequence. A slow, electric, synth-sounding song began to play. It was actually set at a lower volume, but in Carl's slightly paranoid state, he felt the music was magnified. He turned his head to make sure no disapproving eyes rested on him, and returned to play.

Pulling back the bolt, he sent the ball whirring to the top of the table. It tumbled down, taking its sweet time on the many bouncy disks in its path. It'd just reached the bottom – and Carl was preparing to fling it back into the upper reaches of the board – when the door to the loft opened and easy footsteps rolled in.

Carl was so startled that he jumped back from the machine, and almost lost his footing. He was able to steady himself against the wall, but he nearly toppled. He looked up, embarrassed.

George stood there, eyebrows raised, equally shocked. “Uh... dude. Might wanna chill out a little bit.” His eyes twinkled good-naturedly, and he turned to pick up an action figurine from the floor. Some blonde soldier, with a rifle in one hand and a cigar smoking in his mouth. Before suggestive themes were a well-known subject, kids were able to have toys with cigars. The figurine series would be cancelled in the future when smoking became viewed as unhealthy and parents suddenly didn't want their children indoctrinated with new messages. They still let them watch TV, of course. But smoking soldiers were off-limits.

George waved the soldier at Carl and left the room, waving around his toy, totally absorbed in a world all his own. Others not invited.

Carl pushed himself up off the wall and tried to focus again on pinball. He kept the door in his peripheral vision – he didn't want to be surprised again – and his score suffered accordingly. Of course, he wasn't really interested in succeeding at the game; it just helped him pass the time.

He played through a couple games until he'd grown accustomed to the table's curve, banked sharply left at parts and nearly flat in others. The system had deteriorated with age, and the imperfections showed it. Carl still enjoyed playing as much as he could while still watching the door.

Eventually, he stopped. He bent down and unplugged the system, and listened to the music drown and the lights fade. He dropped the cord and walked out to the hallway. *Where did everybody go?* He grew anxious, unsure of what he should do. He decided to look for everyone.

The first place to look was the top floor. He made his way down the hallway, stopping at the first door. He knocked sharply: no answer. Slowly, cautiously, he opened the door. Poking his head in, he saw no one. He closed the door and moved on to the next.

He repeated the motions on the remaining doors on the upper floor, to no avail. No one seemed to be up there with him; even George must've wandered downstairs while mesmerized with his figurine.

Carl travelled down the stairs, a little too quickly. He almost slipped on the narrow stairs. He completed his downward journey with his feet more sideways, and at a much slower pace. He landed mostly on his heels, and they protested mightily to the abuse. Stress had (temporarily) transformed his body into that of a forty-year-old man.

Some of the lights were off downstairs, and the home held a cozy feeling. In the low light, Carl noticed a flickering, shining light emanating further inside the house. He walked over to find the source.

Just off of the big room in the center of the house was a smaller, shorter room. The flickering was reflected off the wall in there, so he walked in. He found a long couch in the center of the room with a lit fire on the opposite wall and a couple beanbag chairs strewn around it. Megan and Beth both sat in bean bag chairs, sharing a thin wool blanket. Johnson had just entered and was taking a seat on the couch when he glanced over at Carl. He smiled and spoke.

"Oh, yeah Carl, we're just using up some extra firewood from the winter. Won't be needing it again for a while... But if you can stand the extra warmth, the fire can be comforting."

Carl took a seat in a chair slightly removed from the others. The beanbag engulfed him, and with amusement, he wondered if he'd be able to get out. The room was indeed hot, but it settled like a soft blanket, secure.

The flames danced from behind the chimney's protective chains. They flailed angrily, but the rage was contained, and those in the room drew close to the warmth.

Johnson sat mesmerized by the flames, lulled by the heat. He'd brought a book – a smaller novel with an abstract city on the front, probably science fiction – but neglected to read it. His attention was sufficiently held by the flickers and waves.



Carl watched Johnson's face contort, the wrinkles deepening, the right side of his head resting on his chin. Johnson's cheek was squashed in his hand, but he hardly had the presence of mind to notice. He looked relaxed, zoned out, maybe slightly weird.

Carl slouched in his chair. Perhaps he could fit in here.

## Chapter 10

Iraq, 2010

The dining area wasn't exactly clean, but it didn't seem infectious. One large window was propped ajar, venting out the heat from the grill. A shrill and whining a/c unit took care of the rest. Signs in Arabic were set to direct a flow of people, though Carl guessed they'd rarely been necessary. The establishment didn't look like it took much business.

Carl couldn't read the signs, but the accompanying arrows led them to a counter in front of the lone chef. He wiped his hands with a towel, placed the towel over his shoulder, and leaned against the counter. He spoke in Arabic; no one translated for Carl. Abraham talked with the cook for a few moments, giving orders. With a nod, the chef went back to prepare the food. They were left to seat themselves.

They chose a larger table and sat down. In a low voice, wary of unwelcome ears, Carl spoke up.

"So what'd he say?"

Aban's chair was wobbly, and he teetered on it. "He said all they're cooking is Fasolada. It's soup. Abraham got three of them."

Carl nodded. "Why didn't he pay?"

"The cook said it was part of the cost for the night. It's not unheard of. They probably really need the business."

A few minutes later, the chef emerged with a tray holding three bowls of soup, spoons, and cups of water. He shouted towards them, and motioned towards the food. Abraham went over and retrieved the food.

Abraham lugged the tray over and placed it on the table. The smell was good, but Carl felt suddenly nauseated.

"Oh God. I don't think I can eat. Not after the fighting and killing. Not after that interrogation." His voice softened into a whisper. Abraham, suddenly filled with the same realization, paled significantly. His eyes were wide.

Aban tried to calm them down. "I know. No one wants to eat after a day like that, but it's not really something we can skip right now. If we don't eat, we'll be weakened tomorrow. We'll be much more likely to get shot." He paused, breathing thinly, trying not to smell the food. "To die."

No audible response. Carl grabbed his water cup with both hands and drank greedily, desperately. He was dehydrated – he knew that. Needing to stand, to get away from the food, he walked over to the counter.

The cook, no longer occupied with meal preparation, was leaning close to the counter. Carl absently pointed to his cup, showing it was empty.

The chef seemed like a smart guy. He disappeared for a moment and came back with a jug of water. He handed the jug to Carl, who was gratefully surprised.

He brought the jug back to the table, pouring himself another cup. And another, and another. It was cool and crisp, refreshing; purifying, to some extent. After a substantial amount of water, Carl felt ready to try and eat.

He grabbed his spoon cautiously, calming his nerves. With a dry mouth he took a hasty bite, trying not to linger in the action. He was able to stomach it. Given other circumstances, he'd have thought the soup was excellent and probably enjoyed it. But now, he just wanted to finish it off.

He drained the bowl quickly, trying not to breathe. The taste was dulled, and it wasn't as bad as he'd expected. In a few moments, there was little else but soup stains in the bowl.

He drank a good bit more water to keep the nausea down, and turned to the others. Abraham sat eyebrows raised, chin crinkled. He looked morbidly impressed. "Wow. I'm not sure I'll be able to do that," he said.

This drew a strained chuckle from Carl. "Oh, you better. I just ate the whole thing. Egh..."

Aban was eating slowly, brow furrowed, concentrated. He completed maybe three quarters of his bowl when he tossed down his spoon. "That's it, I'm done. No more." He seemed frustrated and angry. Partially with himself.

Abraham was last. He plugged his nose, and consumed the soup with frequent gulps of water. His face didn't regain its former color until much later, but he ate. He rested the spoon inside the bowl, and sat with hunched shoulders.

"Geeze, was it really that bad?"

The three turned to the man, seated in the corner, who'd just spoken. The patron in the corner leaned forward out of the shadow, wearing a large smirk, ear to ear. He was dressed plain clothes, just a pair of jeans and a plain brown long sleeve t-shirt. He studied them, waiting for a response.

Carl answered. "No, it's good... it's just been one of those days." Then, he lied. "We're all pretty sick." Well, maybe it wasn't a total lie. Carl was feeling pretty sick at that moment.

The man in the corner looked relieved. "Oh ok, that's good. I had the same thing earlier and can't really deal with food poisoning right now." He paused, realizing he spoke as a stranger. "I'm Thomas, by the way."

Carl thought for a moment. He didn't want to be unfriendly, but a red-haired, freckled man speaking English in a shady Iraqi motel was somewhat suspicious. Or was he just paranoid? He had good reason to be. It'd been an intense day. "I'm Carl. What brings you here?"

Thomas brightened, and pride exuded from him. "A new job. I'm a journalist for Knoxville Monthly, a magazine out of Tennessee." He looked around and lowered his voice. "Doing a piece on daily life in Iraqi cities. I'm trying not to disturb the normal habits of the locals."

He grabbed a chair, and pulled it up closer to their table, on Aban's side. "What about you guys?"

There was a period of indecision, where Carl couldn't fabricate a convincing story. Aban seemed reluctant to join in. Eventually Abraham answered him. "Personal issues, really. We're only staying one night."

Thomas took the hint, and didn't press further. "Alright. Most people here aren't really talkative." He looked around. "Must be the type of motel."

Carl agreed. "How long have you been in Iraq?"

"Two days. But I spent most of the first day sleeping off jetlag." He simpered sheepishly. "I took some sleeping pills on the flight and... wow. I stepped off the plane and was totally in a daze."

Carl remembered his original deployment into the middle east. The plane ride over was rough, but he'd been too nervous to sleep. The rookies – like himself – were quiet, sullen. Veterans were louder, but Carl thought most of them were a little drunk. The flight had taken over fifteen hours due to delays. Mechanical failures, actually. They were just fortunate to have discovered the problem when they were still on the ground.

He'd pulled through the jetlag with pills and natural adrenaline. Once he settled onto the base, he was sent on night patrol for the first few nights. He'd thought it must've been some sort of initiation, but managed to stay awake through the long, dark hours.

After a bleared week of jumbled dreams and waking duties, he was given a day off. He forced himself to stay awake until eight o'clock, and slept soundly to five thirty in the morning. Before it was light, he woke to a blasting airhorn and went on his first mission with his new squad. The first few days of deployment were rough.

"Trust me, I feel your pain," he said, with just a hint of condescension.

Thomas either didn't notice it or he overlooked Carl's tone. He yawned and rose. "Well gents, it's been a great talk, but I'm gonna go walk the streets. The nightlife here is just as important as the daytime, right?" Without waiting for a response, he raised his tray in salute and walked off.

While probably a normal altercation, the three were highly suspicious of any approach from a stranger. Abraham said it best. "That was weird." He picked up his own tray and stood. "I'd rather be in the common room when he gets back. If he gets back."

The other two followed his example, rising with their cups and bowls. Arabic signs directed them to a bin, where the dirty trays were carelessly stacked. The cups – plastic, with ridges on the outside, probably for grip – were interlocking, and they sat on top. They added to the already large pile of used dishes in the bin.

They exited the diner, and the halls faded again into dim. Abraham glanced at his watch: 2300 hours, military time. If they were to catch any sleep at all through the peril and anxious alertness of the day, now was the time to start.

"It's getting late, and there's no reason to stay up. I'm going to the common room." He knew that

the other two would follow him, so he didn't bother asking.

On the way, Carl proposed a solution to their clear security problem. "So, who's taking first watch? I'll do it, but we should probably set up a watch schedule now."

Abraham agreed. "I'll take first watch. In three hours, I'll wake up Aban, and he'll wake you up at" – he did some quick math in his head – "three in the morning. At six we should head out. There's no reason to linger."

The plan sounded good, and no more words were spoken as they entered the common room. The area was empty of people, with cots lining the walls, not unlike an old sickbay. The room was ground level, and two tinted windows looked out into the street outside. Curtains covered them.

Aban looked around at the large room distrustfully. "Why'd we get the room where we'll be sleeping next to strangers?"

"Because individual rooms require information. And if we've got people trying to track us, we should try and stay under the radar." He turned to Carl, a hint of amusement in his eyes. "So try not to burn the building down this time." Carl had to laugh, despite himself.

Carl claimed the cot in the back-left corner – he liked having his back to two walls. Any assault would come from head on, and that was comforting to him. He took a seat in the cot, and leaning back. It heaved underneath his weight, and he sank an inch or two closer to the floor. The netting held firm, and he swayed slightly, cocooned. He rested the blanket over himself and drew his 1911 just beneath it. The pistol he lay across his lower chest with the safety switch active.

Aban did the same thing in the back-right side of the room. He muttered something about vulnerability as he nestled into his cot.

Abraham's muffled footsteps resounded on the hard floor. After a bit of pacing, he sat on a cot near the windows and peaked out, shoulder rested against the wall. A sliver of light shone through, running like a scar across his head and drizzling onto the floor.

Carl stared up at the ceiling, covered in faded, marbled stucco. His mind – that of a seasoned soldier – was still working on overdrive. He'd hardly had time to rest in days. Being drugged and knocked unconscious didn't count.

Unfortunately, paranoia wouldn't allow him to sleep. His eyes would close, but a deep onset of panic would hoist him out of his drowsiness and back into the common room. Sleep was a fickle mistress.

At some length, he quit trying. He lay with his eyes open for what felt like days, listening and waiting for a squad of soldiers to break into the common room and execute him in his cot, pistol or no. Abraham hadn't made a sound in some time, but when he looked down to check up on him, Abraham could be seen standing by the window, unblinkingly looking out.

He didn't recognize his descent from reality. Eventually he just moved away, receding into his brain. It happened quickly, before he was seized with terror when his eyes closed.

However it occurred, the surroundings fell into obscurity. A low, guttural growl echoed through

his ears. He felt numb, unable to move, constricted. His eyes were held – he couldn't move them – on a crying girl before him. He tried to call out, to find out why she was distressed, but he was mute.

The girl sat on her knees, legs bent beneath. She cocked her head, realizing his presence. Then, she slowly rose, pushing up with the tops of her feet. Carl thought he heard deep crackles coming from her bones.

She turned to face him, and Carl recognized her as Sanaa, the girl from the house where he took refuge. Only, something was different. Her eyes... they were decayed. Yellowed and slimy, they gazed at him, but never seemed to find what they were looking for. She never blinked; she never had to. Her eyes were coated with a slime that glinted, even in the dim.

She took a single, struggling step in his direction. The step was arduous for her, and she staggered. She inhaled roughly, with a heavy rasp.

She readied herself and took another step. Forcefully, with a jerk, she pulled forward. Well, most of her pulled forward. In the brutal push of her second step, her left foot ripped from her leg. The foot never left the ground, but remained upright, with bone and sinew spilling from the top. Sanaa fell to the ground, now hissing.

*What the hell?* Carl tried to turn away – to run away – but he was stuck, frozen in place. His face didn't even possess the freedom of movement to display the horror he felt.

In the course of a single blink, Sanaa's eyes changed from a dull yellow to a glowing red. Blood dripped, ever so slowly, from under her eyelids and down her face. Her left leg, now deficit a foot, streamed a thick and lumpy flow of goo and water.

Still, she kept on. She crawled forward, hand over hand. Her fingers convulsed and bent like worms. Carl almost wondered if they still contained any bones. After her third pull across the ground, the bone in her right forearm grew disengaged from her elbow, pushing against the skin. She took no notice, and soon the bone broke through. She collapsed over the break, and a pool of fresh blood grew around her. When she pushed herself up, one side of her face was soaked and stained red.

Carl wondered why she wouldn't stop. He tried to run away, to leave her, but he wasn't able to move. He screamed in anger and fear and frustration.

She was closer now, crawling – slithering – towards him, her right arm utterly forgotten and dragging behind her. Closer, closer still. Carl was petrified now, like a small child who had just seen a spider.

She was inches away when he regained the power of motion. She'd stuck her head forward, intent on biting his foot. When she had all but come in contact with his skin, he snapped into mobility.

He drew his foot away, first back and then up. Then, with all the force of fear and rage, he brought it down on her head. His foot encountered little resistance. Her skull fractured and caved, like jelly. The entire corpse exploded; gore littered the ground and coated his left leg.

Then he was plummeting, down into dark depths.

## Chapter 11

Carl wrenched his head from his pillow, gasping for breath. His sheets were damp from cold sweat, though he himself felt hot and stuffy; he couldn't think straight. The pistol he left against his chest was missing, and he panicked for a moment. He threw off the blankets and tried to exit the cot.

Unfortunately, he was still partly asleep, and his coordination wasn't entirely there. His foot got entangled in the hammock, and he tumbled out onto the floor. Swearing, he struggled to his feet. The pistol was innocently dangling at the foot of the cot.

"Woah! Calm down, Carl. Just calm down." Aban, who'd been keeping watch, sauntered sleepily over towards him. "Nobody's here, you won't need that."

Slowly accepting reality, Carl slowed his breathing. "Ok, sorry. I got a little freaked out there."

"No kidding."

Carl shrugged, not nearly attentive enough to feel self-conscious. Then he sobered. "What time is it?"

Aban checked his pocket timer. "Almost five. I wouldn't even bother trying to sleep anymore, we'll be heading out soon."

The sun was lurking below the horizon, but preliminary rays floated in the distance. The day was still somewhat cool (or at least not blazingly heated), and Aban's window was open.

Abraham stirred in his sleep, muttering. Aban watched him for a moment and then spoke to Carl, "Will you wake him up? I'll start packing." Carl agreed and shook Abraham on the shoulder.

No result. Carl shook again, but Abraham remained deep in sleep, his face contorted, reflecting a troubled dream.

Carl flashed back to his first few days of redeployment and on how sleeping soldiers were woken. He didn't have an airhorn, but there was another rough awakening, one so commonly practiced it was almost standard.

He flipped the cot upside down. It creaked and Abraham tumbled out. Landing chest-first on the stone floor, Abraham exhaled deeply, like a deep sigh, only more guttural. Wincing, he spoke. "Yeah, I kind of expected that."

After a moment, he flipped over onto his back. Still partly entangled in sleep, he half chortled, half yawned. "Next time, I get the last watch." He managed to stand on two wobbly legs and leisurely arched his back. The cracks from his spine were faintly audible throughout the room. "But that was quite effective. Wow."

Thankful that Abraham had been a good sport about his short ride from the cot to the floor, Carl looked about the common room. “So no one showed up all night?” Both Abraham and Aban shook their heads in a slow-coming “no”.

Carl thought it strange, but wasn’t concerned. “Alright, let’s go.” He grabbed his things and walked towards the door. Their procession commenced.

No one was stationed at the front counter, so they let themselves out. The sun was slowly climbing, and the clear sky was comfortably warm, like a relished blanket.

They traced their steps back to the truck. Scattered individuals roamed the streets, but no one took notice of or tried to stop them. And no one was following their steps, as far as Carl could tell.

In fact, the streets felt dormant peaceful. For a minute or two.

“HEY! STOP!” The words rang out, spiteful and threatening. Carl turned towards the shouter, his hand groping for his pistol. When he saw it was Thomas the reporter, he drew it.

Thomas was nearing them, not running but certainly not walking. His face broadcast an anxious mix of hostility and self-pity. When he found himself staring down the business end of Carl’s pistol, however, he lost the hostility. His hands were immediately in the air, palms out in surrender.

“OH GOD, DON’T SHOOT!” He backed up slightly and tensed his body in anticipation of the gunshot.

Carl, however, studied his arms. They were cut and bruised, lacerated in several places. His knuckles were cut and bloody, and his left eye was swollen and purple. His lips were cut, bloody. “What do you want?” Carl asked.

“Look, I was just out doing my research when some guys come up to me and ask me if I’ve seen you guys. They had pictures, dude. They stood too close to me. I was fearful for my life. It freaked me out, and I said I didn’t recognize you.” He looked away, tense-jawed. “Big mistake.”

He looked back, staring Carl down with squinted eyes. “They beat the shit of me. One tried to tie my hands behind my back while the other two beat me. Eventually I broke their hold and took off.”

Emboldened by his monologue, he stepped forward. “So who the hell are you guys, and what did I just get myself into?”

Carl might’ve told him on the spot. He might’ve poured out the entire story of his capture, escape, refuge and vendetta. He might’ve, but Aban spoke first. “Nothing,” he said, “and you should go home. Or go to another city. You’re not their concern. Just get out of here and they’ll probably leave you alone.”

Thomas reddened, steaming; Carl didn’t think any more rage could possibly exist in one person. “Probably? Killers and thugs just seriously assaulted me and you’re telling me to just skip town? THAT THEY’LL PROBABLY JUST LEAVE ME ALONE?” He was yelling again – any more provocation and he was liable to get violent.



Seeing no other alternative beyond brute force, Carl spoke up. “Look, they’re criminals. They’re taking money and goods from common people. Others, they just make disappear. We’re going to try to take them down. Sorry you got in their way, but there isn’t really anything we can do for you. We have to go now, though.” Carl turned around, hid his pistol, and began walking away.

“Hey, whoa, you can’t just leave me.” Thomas’s voice took on a more pleading tone. “They’ll kill me for helping you.” He looked around him, and for a moment, Carl almost expected to catch a glimpse of a sniper’s scope from a distant window.

“There’s no way they’ll know you talked to us,” he said.

“Carl, they *know*. They had pictures of you, called you by name. They’ll track me down and kill me. That’s gonna be on *you*!”

Exhaling a deep grunt of frustration, Abraham butted in. “He’s right. If we leave him here, he won’t last long.”

Carl turned to him, incredulous. “You’re talking about taking a civvie on a combat mission!” Thomas kept silent, acutely aware that the soldiers before him were deciding his fate with cold calculation.

Abraham raised his voice, on the verge of anger. Not so much towards Carl, but due to vexation with the circumstance. “And he’ll have a better chance of survival in a live combat zone. You know this!”

Carl bowed his head, fingers interlaced atop his skull. He squatted, trying to think. Morality and cold logic clashed. The others were watching him, anticipating an angry response.

Their anticipation was, fortunately, unfulfilled. Carl sighed, and rose. “Ok, he can come along.”

Thomas’ face lit up in a mournful joy: he’d been given hope. He stammered a bit, trying to explain that he wouldn’t be a bother, and how he’d do whatever they ordered him to, and how he wouldn’t slow them down. Instead, he ended up mumbling thanksgiving that was mostly ignored.

Trying not to waste any more time, they recommenced their journey. Carl brought up the back, still wishing to keep an eye on Thomas. He didn’t want any funny business.

The truck was not far off, and with a little searching, they found it alone beside the street. Almost eagerly, Aban jumped into the truck bed. Abraham, who knew him better than the others, realized that Aban never wished to be apart from his weapons. The reunion with their rolling armory had been eagerly awaited.

The others clambered into the front, and Carl ushered Thomas into the cramped middle space between Abraham and himself.

“Sorry for the tight squeeze,” he said, “but we weren’t really expecting to pick anyone up”. It was a small bummer, really. Knee space would indeed be in short supply.

The truck started faithfully, and they made their way north, out of the city. Buildings faded to suburbs, and soon structures became sparse. Yesterday’s gale had settled into a series of fickle gusts, but it

was enough to warrant closed windows. The front cabin was increasingly stuffy.

Thomas was silent, wary. He'd hoped to blend in during their journey, to stay mostly out of the way, but he already sensed the burden he was proving to be. *Well, I'll change that when I can*, he thought, with a tad of resentment. *I didn't volunteer to take a surprise trip while in exile with these people.*

The theatrics of the day before left a lull in their wake. For an hour, they rode in the relative quiet. Carl gazed out of the scratched passenger window, watching the sand blur before him, framed by the glass.

Looking across the seats, he posed a question for Abraham. "I hope you don't take this offensively or anything... but how do you speak English so well? I mean, you're really fluent."

Abraham chuckled slightly, delighted to explain. His language proficiency was a point of pride for him. "Well, I spent two years out in the world, experiencing other cultures, languages, and religions. Spent a year in California, actually. That was my last stop."

"Wait, how old were you?" Carl asked.

Abraham cocked his head, sifting through memory for a moment before replying. "Oh, around twenty. My father had just died, and I needed to get away for a while. My mother was teaching full-time, so there really wasn't any reason for me to stay around."

Carl's demeanor changed. "I'm sorry," he simply said. He wasn't able to muster up another question, and left Abraham to continue.

"Oh, it was a long while ago. I got back, and taught Aban the English I'd learned. He took a long trip to Maine, actually. So there's some east-west synthesis for ya." He smiled.

"Did you like California?" Carl was able to easily speak again.

"Well, sure. In the course of one year I picked up an American dialect, the Christian religion, and about twenty pounds in belly fat." He glanced down at his stomach for a split second. "Which I worked off when I came back home. I had a job at a restaurant on the beach, though. Ended up pretty much running the place."

"My foster parents were Christians," Carl said absently. Then, in a more present voice, "But where'd you get combat training?"

"...I took a class," Abraham said, and he sounded embarrassed about it. "The restaurant was robbed one day, and I decided I should be prepared. So I took a basic weapons course and excelled. The last class I took was advanced urban combat. That was a great class."

"No kidding," Carl murmured, his eyes shining. Nostalgia could be a good thing. Carl had enjoyed his training; he'd been wanted before, but at training camp he felt *needed*. Like others were dependent on him. Not much more was said, and a fulfilled quiet rolled into the vehicle.

The truck crawled through the desert, humming and buzzing on every jolt. Occasionally the windshield wipers would flip, keeping vision clear. Their speed grew to the full extent that their path

would allow, and the ride wasn't smooth.

Carl turned his neck and shoulders, momentarily smothering Thomas, to take a look back at the truck bed. Just on the other side of the glass was Aban, laid out almost flat with a strap buckled around his chest and waist. Both of his arms were wrapped around his tarp, caressing the guns inside. *The man really likes his guns*, Carl thought, and stifled a laugh.

He rotated back into his chair, his seatbelt now a little too tight. He tried to loosen it, but the worn, man-made fabric wouldn't budge. It pressed against his chest and neck, and he coughed. *Screw it*, he thought, and moved to unbuckle.

The faded red release button was near his left hip, and he pressed it. It made a clicking sound, but didn't let go of the seatbelt. Angrily, he pressed it again. And again, but to no avail. Grunting, he pushed back against his seat.

"Guys, the seatbelt's choking me," he barked. He didn't like being pinned down. The icy hands of claustrophobia began to toy around with his insides. The heat in the cabin, the sand outside, it all grew somehow insidious. He squirmed a bit.

Thomas turned to him, and tried his luck with the release button. He wasn't any more successful than Carl. His eyebrows crested, forehead wrinkled in slight confusion. "Weird," he murmured, and pressed down on the button.

Holding down the release, he instructed Carl in the reserved voice of someone who wants to help but doesn't really consider the situation dire. "Ok, I'm pressing down, you try and pull free."

Carl pulled on his belt, a good solid yank, and the seatbelt flew free. The pressure on his chest was instantly dulled, and the icy hands abated. Breathing unconstricted, the wind seemed less evil, and the cabin wasn't all that stuffy after all.

He said to Thomas, "Thanks man. Crappy seatbelt, I guess." Thomas was mostly happy to have earned thanks. Maybe he was proving his worth after all.

Abraham, who'd done what he could to keep his hands on the wheel and eyes on the road, finally contributed. "That one's a little iffy, I would've gotten it checked out but..." He shrugged, and his voice waned. "I was just a little busy. What, with tracking the extortionists and traffickers I guess I couldn't find the time."

Carl felt a little guilty for his reaction to the seatbelt. They were on a combat mission, and room for petty agitation simply wasn't there. Sheepishly, he voiced his lamentation. "Sorry about that. I think I'll leave the seatbelt off for now."

An explosion of sand and sound silenced any response among them.

## Chapter 12

Two massive pillars of sand loomed into the air, coupled with a monstrous roar. Behind the dust and debris, a fire burned, eating through the surrounding oxygen. A shockwave from the blast radiated out, and it stopped the truck in its tracks.

The front windshield of the truck cracked, but it held. The front tires popped, unable to hold against the pressure. The front engine slowly began to blaze. Abraham and Thomas were thrown forward and gagged on their seat restraints. Carl, who'd removed his own, flew forward, colliding head-first into the dashboard. The rest of him carried forward, over his bent head, and his neck emitted a sickening crackle and crunch. He saw nothing, immediately removed from the situation, unconscious – or worse.

Gunfire blazed about them, and after a moment of shock they realized it was Aban, who'd managed to extricate himself from the back of the crippled truck. He was now lying prone behind the bed, the bipod on his m249 deployed. He lay for generous fire onto obscured figures, kneeling some yards off.

Even through the distance and the fury of the winds and settling dust, Abraham could see one of the figures fall. The other two drew their own weapons and shot back.

Thomas, acting with a heroism beyond his civilian status, managed to pull Carl's broken body from behind the dashboard to a point behind the truck. He then fell down, face first in the sand, hands above his head.

Abraham dashed the truck bed and fished out Aban's m14 from underneath the tarps. Praying it was loaded, he cocked the bolt and centered the scope's crosshair on one of the assailants. He exhaled, then fired. The bullet veered wide, and Abraham relocated. The scope was calibrated for a further distance, and he adjusted his aim accordingly. This time, his shot was true. Through the clarity of the scope, he witnessed the bullet slice into his victim's neck. Blood spurted out like a fountain.

He moved his scope to the final man when he felt a great stabbing pain in the upper portion of his left arm. A bullet had penetrated the muscle, tearing off skin and burrowing through. It exited the other side before he could register and place the pain and burrowed in the sand behind him. He pulled back behind cover, hissing in pain. The gun battle raged on without him, but the sounds were dull, mostly unfocused.

In another thirty seconds or so, Aban's firing ceased, followed by a shout:

“I THINK I GOT HIM – CAN YOU CHECK WITH THE SCOPE?”

Breathing heavily, Abraham hefted up the m14. The weight had never bothered him, but his arm protested it mightily now, and it was difficult to remain steady. Too difficult, in fact. He had to rest the weapon on the car to get a clear line of sight through the scope.

After a few lingering moments of observation, he saw no movement. He yelled back. “I THINK THEY'RE ALL DOWN.”

Together, slowly, they moved in to confirm. Abraham drew his pistol and rested the m14 against the truck's bumper. They stumbled through the sand together, approaching from different angles. Sand thrown about in the explosion was now coming to rest, and their vision cleared.

They closed the distance, only twenty feet away. In a second of fear, Abraham envisioned two undetected shots breaking through the wind and ending them both. Spurred by the vision, he hastened his pace, bobbing and weaving as he moved.

Fortunately, his precaution was needless. Four corpses greeted them, strewn across the ground. One clutched a line of detonation cord with dead fingers, and Aban kicked it out of reach.

*You can never be too careful, right?*

Not wishing to linger with the deceased, Abraham retraced his steps back to the truck, clutching his arm, which had begun to bleed substantially. Blood oozed from between his shaking fingers.

Aban stayed a bit longer, waiting for Abraham to wander back. Then he picked up one of the Kalashnikovs left in the sand – he was sure the weapon wouldn't be missed. He moved the fire selector to semi-automatic and put a bullet in each of the corpses, a single shot through the temples. Just to be sure.

The bodies twitched, absorbing the momentum. The heads limply rolled, one by one. Pools of blood and brain matter formed above the neck, though the sand absorbed some of the moisture, creating circles of reddened mush.

His business complete, he threw down the weapon, and not without distain. *I think a little anger is understandable. They just tried to kill me.* Still, the grotesque nature of his deed grated against his conscience. Shaken, he made his way back and rejoined the group.

They clustered together, survivors. Thomas, finally showing his inexperience, partially knelt over Carl's broken body. His right hand shivered and twitched, and he held it at the wrist. In a sporadic voice he murmured repeated but indiscernible words.

Abraham stared down, gaping. "Oh God, what happened?"

Thomas remained hypnotized for a time longer. Eventually Abraham's words sank in, and he turned around to explain. His words spilled out in a mostly-coherent mess, his voice deep but filled with phlegm.

"He didn't have his seatbelt on and he flew forward when the bombs went off and he hit his neck and his neck snapped and he was knocked out and I dragged him here and he won't wake up and..."

Abraham couldn't make out the rest. Patiently, he tried to calm Thomas. "Wait, wait, stop. His neck snapped? Is it broken?"

Thomas's eyes narrowed, incredulous even in his panic and shock. "Do I LOOK like a doctor? I don't know, but I dragged him out here. I tried to be as steady as I could but there was so much shooting."

Blood was dripping down his arm and covering his hand, but Abraham tried to concentrate. Carl's need was more dire than his own. He bent down, not sure what to do but discontent with sitting

complacently by while his new comrade lay wounded in the remote sand.

Aban, however, had been more proactive in his reaction. He searched the back of the pickup, and came back with a first-aid kit. He took out a disinfectant hand towel and rubbed it quickly over his brother's bleeding arm, ignoring the resulting hiss of pain. Holding Abraham's arm steadily, he removed a brown paste from the box. With a sterilized brush, he applied the paste over the wound. It dried immediately, caking over the bleeding like a second skin.

Quickly, before the drying paste cracked open, he wrapped a generous amount of medical gauze around the injured area. Taping it shut, he stepped back, tentatively impressed with his work. "It's not a fix, but it should hold you over until the mission's over," he said. "In the meantime, I don't want to hear any complaints." It took a sharp eye to notice the deep worry shielded behind his eyes.

Collectively, they gave their attention to Carl. He was laid out like a rag doll, his head bruised and lacerated, his neck folded in an unnatural angle. His chin, along with the left side of his face, pressed against his chest.

Aban inspected his neck, and - even with his rudimentary medical experience - knew hope was slim. Carl's neck had broken at the impact, severed beneath the bloated skin. Even if he lived, he'd probably never walk again. And given their location, even survival wasn't likely.

"We've got to get him to a hospital, or he doesn't stand a chance," he said.

Thomas, who'd gained deep red wrinkled around his eyes in the last few minutes, spoke. "What happened to him?"

"He has a broken neck, internal bleeding, and probably a concussion." Aban's face was forlorn, despairing in the circumstance. "And I don't know how we can move him without worsening the injury to his spine."

Abraham was pacing, his hands laced behind his head, his injured arm forgotten. Sweat stained his shirt past his shoulders. "Well, we can't just leave him here, he'd die for sure." The helplessness swarmed over him; he wanted to scream, to bellow and rip the pickup to pieces, to carve a road through the sand. He was irrational in his constrained frenzy.

Thomas's timid, shaking voice brought clarity and immediate purpose to them all. "Uh, guys, he's not breathing, and that can't be good. Is there any way we can get him breathing?"

Aban responded first. "Well, there's CPR, or we could try to wake him up. I don't know, maybe smelling salts?" His medical experience ended with basic field patch-ups. He'd never been trained to deal with anything so delicate.

However, through the inexperience came open-mindedness. He was willing to try anything, even what others might deem futile. And his willingness was smiled upon.

Moving on hastened impulse, he jumped to his feet and threw open the first aid kit. He dug through the packets and bandages until he found a packaged syringe, and drew it out.

Kneeling back beside Carl, he tore open the packaging and primed the needle.

“Whoa, what the hell is that?” Thomas was cautious, skeptical.

“Adrenaline,” Aban replied. “It might wake him up.”

He found a vein in Carl’s (relatively) undamaged arm, and drove the needle in. Unsure of how much of the drug to use, he pushed the hammer down halfway. He paused for a moment, waiting for a change, any change.

Nothing.

Impatience got the better of him, and he drove the rest of the drug into Carl’s body. Deftly, he pulled the needle out and discarded it. The syringe had left a small hole in Carl’s arm, but no blood seeped out.

A desperately waiting quiet followed, as they wind softly bayed. Carl remained unmoving, stoic in his critical state. Abraham’s early frenzy had receded, and he swayed where he stood, borderline catatonic.

“I don’t think it worked. We gotta do something else.” Thomas spoke evenly, but his hand still shook.

Aban didn’t respond, disappointed but not surprised. There was nothing more he could do; he was powerless now – maybe he’d been powerless from the start. The desert began drowning them out, falling back into undisturbed order.

But then, whether by the construction of God or men, Carl’s eyes fluttered open.

## Chapter 13

Boston, 1983

The first rays of morning peeped into Carl's room, casting thin wisps of sunlight through the blinds. The sunlit stripes fell over his face, and he batted at them, still mostly asleep. He pulled his covers up and up, over his head like a shield. The joy of the morning had always been lost to him.

He drifted between dreams and reality for the next hour; it was Sunday morning, and he was accustomed to drowsing through the first parts of the day. The strange bed didn't bother him - he'd been through enough to gain a sort of numb outlook, where small details were hardly noticed.

After an hour of flirting with sleep, his stomach felt notably empty. Hunger spurred him out of bed and towards the door. Dressing (he'd worn his clothes to bed, and they felt rough and dense), he wandered out to the hallway.

He navigated down the stairs with more grace than before. The downstairs tile was sharply cold on his bare feet, like a lonely toilet feels in the dead of winter. Arching his feet, he entered the kitchen.

George was lounging at the kitchen table, his feet propped up over the adjacent chair. He held a newspaper in front of his face, and Carl envisioned him as an old man with little difficulty. Then he lowered the newspaper - he was actually reading the comics - the young boy returned.

He smiled, his contented face that of youthful innocence and outlook, untethered by worry. "Morning, sunshine," he cackled, enjoying the mournful look on Carl's face. "Everybody else is at church."

Carl was silent, but thankful that they hadn't left him alone in a strange house. He felt too vulnerable to be unaccompanied.

"They left me here to make sure you were ok," George said, stretching. "Which is pretty sweet."

He rotated his neck, which crackled thinly. "There's cereal in the cupboard by the sink if you're hungry. I don't think you're brave enough to try my eggs." He reconsidered for a moment, then rephrased. "Or dumb enough."

This amused Carl enough to warrant a toothy grin. He moved towards the cereal, and pulled out a box. It was half-full; George must have gotten to it earlier in the morning.

Carl sat and unfurled the packaging. It crinkled pleasantly. He poured out a bowl full and added milk. "So they usually go to church?"

George nodded. "Most Sundays. Some Wednesdays, too. But it's pretty cool, less like *church* than you'd expect."

Carl was crunching away, and the cereal lulled him a bit, put him at ease. He let his guard down for a moment and spoke his mind without really thinking. "I'm sure David hates going that often."



George raised his eyebrows, surprised at the accuracy of Carl's comment. It was true; David loathed going. "Good call. How'd you know?"

Carl, still honest, explained. "I was watching him during the prayer last night."

That tickled George, and his eyes crinkled softly. His fat and rosy cheeks scrunched in a grin. "Sounds like you weren't paying much attention yourself." His smile was ever so good-natured, and Carl didn't feel the least bit shamed or judged.

Saying something he'd planned on talking about, George grew more serious. "I hafta apologize for something, though. Johnson... he can be a little odd sometimes. He gets flustered when things are awkward. But he's a good guy."

Carl looked at him blankly, surprised. "If that's the worst thing he does..." His eyes didn't move, didn't blink. "Then it's nothing. It can be a lot worse. A lot worse." He was suddenly angry, thinking of his own father, lying bleeding on the floor. He thought of how he walked away, uncaring. He saw himself as he opened the door when his father's corpse tumbled out. The talks with the police, spending the night at a police station.

*Yes, it could be worse.*

He returned to reality, dragging with him a large amount of unidentifiable emotion. It wasn't entirely anger or sadness or grief; it spread into his chest, laboring his breathing. His diaphragm shuttered, pierced with the feeling. He thought his heart might suddenly stop and surrender. He dropped his spoon, knowing he couldn't stomach any more. In fact, he'd be lucky to keep down what he'd already eaten.

George looked concerned and a little scared. "Uh... anything you want to talk about?" Then, after a bit more observation: "Are you gonna be sick?" Without waiting for an answer (or expecting one), he quickly left the kitchen in search for a bucket. In a few seconds, he returned with a large plastic bowl. He offered it to Carl.

Carl waved it down. His face was ghostly pale, but he muttered "I'll just go to a toilet." He pushed away from the table and staggered a bit. George supported him and led him to the bathroom. Carl stumbled in, and vaguely heard the door click shut behind him, ever so gently.

He fell to his knees and leaned against the toilet seat. He waited for a moment, tensing his body for the unavoidable. Then he retched. The cereal, as well as some beef and noodles, came up in a spicy, tangy rush. His hands fumbled blindly for the lever, and he flushed the toilet.

His stomach flailed inside him, and he dry heaved, his face bright red. He couldn't take a breath, he was too clenched; he panicked, thinking he might suffocate. But after a few seconds – long seconds, in Carl's eyes – the heaving ceased, and he could breathe again.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and flushed again. Staggering to his knees, he washed his hands thoroughly and splashed his face. He glanced at the mirror and beheld his sunken eyes and puffy bags. His face hadn't yet regained its color.

He opened the door slowly, and it creaked on the hinges. George was leaned against a wall outside, nervously cracking his knuckles. A self-conscious grin toyed at the edges of his face. "I know the

cereal wasn't totally fresh, but I don't think it was *that* horrible."

*Ha-ha.* Carl rolled his eyes, but couldn't do much else. Moving deliberately, he wobbled into the living room and collapsed in a chair. He felt better, but his body wasn't up to speed. Breathing was easier now, but it took concentrated effort.

George followed him over but gave him a wide berth – he didn't want to trigger another episode. He took his own seat, anxiously watching Carl. There was a brooding pause between them as Carl steadied himself.

"My dad died two days ago. He was drunk, and somehow he stabbed himself. Accidentally, I think." Carl paused, trying to phrase his next words carefully. He could still taste the vomit, and it mixed with saliva.

Eventually, he found words. "I could've saved him. I could've... done something. I just didn't want to. I couldn't." He looked in George's general direction but couldn't meet his eyes. "He was horrible. I thought I'd be better without him, but I don't know."

George waited for what seemed like hours before responding. Carl honestly expected him to run out of the room, to leave him sinking in his guilt and shame. He expected to be called a murderer, to be condemned and punished.

But George did none of those things. George was tense, even scared – but he didn't judge, and he certainly didn't condemn. His voice was small, measured. "You're in a better place here. You're in a safe place here."

He didn't address the morality of Carl's actions; it wasn't his place. In that moment, dealing with a true issue, he realized his youth. Johnson would know what to do.

Carl swallowed, wincing. The vomit was still noticeable on his tongue. "When do they get back from church?"

"Normally around twelve, but I think they'll hurry home today. So maybe a little sooner." George talked quickly, almost automatically, as though his mind wasn't focusing on the present.

An old grandfather clock, stowed away in the corner of the room, peeled eleven times. Carl shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Listen, about the stuff with my Dad ... let me tell the others. On my own time."

George complied. "Sure. No problem."

"You swear?" Carl's face was anxious, eerily pale.

"Yeah. I swear."

Carl wasn't sure if he could trust George at his word, but he didn't really have any other choice. He curled up a bit on the chair, hoping that he wouldn't have to talk anymore.

In time, George realized there wasn't much more he could do. His interest in comics dissipated,

and he reached for the TV remote next to him. He pressed a few buttons, and their tv – a smaller model, with a large dial on the side – buzzed to life. He kept the volume low and started flipping. He eventually stopped on a documentary about sharks in the Pacific and watched with mild interest. Mostly, his mind was dwelling on Carl's behavior and haunting story.

Carl, too, learned about sharks and feeding frenzies. The monologist's grim voice detailed the habits of the "cold, calculating killers of the sea." Occasionally, a clip would roll showing a Great White splashing out of the water, crashing down with a thunderous flop as the guides crooned from behind the camera.

A commercial break killed the show's mood, and Carl began to zone out; he didn't really care about lawn care products. He leaned back in his chair, gazing up at the ceiling. With his head tilted back, he began to feel a tingling sensation from inside his chest, as though butterflies were trapped inside.

He snapped back to a sitting position, unnerved by the phenomenon. It abated some, and he assumed it was an aftereffect of puking. But after a few peaceful seconds, it returned with a vengeance. The feeling was more aggressive, and he likened it to riding a rollercoaster.

Soon his arm began twitching, free of his dominion and control. Then his legs began a similar shake, and he panicked. He would've yelled out, but he could speak no words. His shaking legs bucked him from the chair, and he landed roughly on the floor.

He landed with his eyes closed in anticipation of the impact. Yet, when he reopened them, it made no difference; he could see only darkness. Horribly awake and terrified, he moaned softly. He sensed George was at his side, but couldn't see him. The tremors continued for a few more excruciating minutes, and ceased. Carl then closed his eyes and fell into an exhausted sleep.

George was beside him, praying and muttering. When Carl finally went lax and slept, relief passed through his chest. He didn't know if he should try to reawaken him or let him rest, but at least the convulsions were over.

With great difficulty, he hauled Carl onto the couch. Carl stirred but didn't wake. George was confused, shocked at what had just occurred.

He sat nearby, apprehensively awaiting Johnson's return. The grandfather clock ticked slowly; time crawled along. He paced, trying to pass the time. Carl's chest rose and fell rhythmically, smooth and unobstructed.

After an agonizing wait, George heard the scrap of the front door. His heart leapt into his throat, and he ran towards the sound, his clumsy feet padding heavily on the floor.

Johnson was holding the door for the rest of his family with one hand and holding a bible and a baseball cap with the other. He was on the tail end of retelling an encounter from church to Beth.

"...But it was so weird, this total stranger just came up to me and told me to avoid radiation treatment." Beth was nodding, also curious as to what it could've meant.

"Did he say anything else?" She asked.

“No,” Johnson replied, “that was it. He just walked away. I didn’t even get a chance to ask him anything else.”

At that moment, George came careening towards them as though he’d glimpsed a demon. His face expressed the emotion that he could put into words: one of urgency, one of panic.

Johnson’s face turned deadly serious. “George, what’s wrong? You look sick.”

George was panting, but he was able to whisper his message. “It’s Carl – he’s in the living room, come quick!”

With that, George sprinted off again, back the way he came. Johnson followed quickly with long, hefty steps. The others trailed behind.

The concerned procession wound its way back into the living room, where Carl was still soundly asleep on the couch. His breathing was slow, deep. He looked as though he’d suffered through a long night out and was sleeping off the effects.

Johnson hesitated, relieved that Carl wasn’t gravely injured, but not grasping the problem. He turned to George. “What’s wrong with him?”

George made a flustered sound, both a whine and a grunt, before trying to explain. His words came loudly and in a rush. “He was just watching TV and he started shaking really bad! And then he cried out, and then he fell asleep.”

Johnson tried to make sense of the perturbed child. “So he started shaking? And couldn’t stop?”

George nodded.

Johnson continued. “And then he cried out, and then he fell asleep, like he is now?” George nodded again, calmer now that he’d delivered his message.

Beth, who fancied herself a functioning doctor after parenting three children, grew concerned. “That’s not good,” she said. “It sounds like a seizure.”

Johnson was still, winding through a mild shock. “What do we do?” His distressed eyes never left Carl, who’d curled into a tight ball.

“Just let him sleep,” Beth replied. “When he wakes up, we can talk to him. We need to get him checked out, though. A brain exam or something.”

Johnson agreed and fetched a thin, soft blanket. He draped it over Carl’s shoulders, and it settled like a feather. They then left the room, leaving Carl to rest.

## Chapter 14

Hours later, Carl woke. He was alone, lying on another couch. A low throbbing pain coursed through his head, and for a while he couldn't remember why.

He sat up, and noticed his back was in similar pain. He remembered taking a short fall... and then his memory returned to him like water from a broken dam. Confusion was predominant in his mind; the experience had been foreign, beyond what he could understand.

He tried to leave the couch, but he lacked the energy. There was will, but his muscles simply couldn't perform. After a few unsuccessful tries, he crashed back in frustrated defeat. He slumped on the couch, feeling comatose.

At some length, Beth entered the room with a cautious lean. She regarded his consciousness and moved closer to him. She put a light hand on his shoulder, which started him from his trance.

"How're you feeling?" She spoke softly, as though he was delicate, as though a loud noise might break him.

He answered despondently. "I don't know what happened. I think I'm ok, just really tired." He tried to stand up, mostly to prove his point.

He wobbled. With a gentle flurry, she eased him back down. Carl accepted the help, and sprawled carelessly back on the couch. His muscles were sore, whining from the inside. His brain felt fuzzy and preoccupied. He couldn't think, couldn't make sense of things.

"What happened?" he asked in a delirious slur. His daze had heightened when he stood.

She replied. "We think you had a seizure, sweetie." Carl knew what a seizure was; he once had a school time friend with epilepsy. Her words terrified him, but Beth's gentle southern cadence had a calming effect, and he was able to swallow the information.

"But I don't wanna be sick." His voice held a slight tremble, a masked frailty. The sound nearly broke Beth's heart. She bent and hugged him tightly. In another scenario, Carl might've felt smothered and protested; now, he held tight.

"I know, I know," she said. "But we're gonna take you to the doctor tomorrow, and he'll make you all better, I promise." She watched Carl's nodding face through eyes brimmed with tears. She barely knew Carl, but she felt a need to take care of him. And his innocence, fear and timidity were heart-wrenching.

In his delirium, Carl regressed into the caution of a normal child. In a timid voice, he asked, "Is it ok if I sleep 'till then?"

Beth felt his forehead for a fever – it was mostly an ingrained reaction. "Of course. I'll wake you

up when we're about to go." His forehead was hot, but not horribly feverish.

Carl nodded, thankful. He nestled further into his blanket and curled up slowly. Politely dismissing Beth, he closed his eyes, his chin dropped to his chest. In the following minutes, his breathing slowed, becoming more rhythmic. Sleep followed, troubled but unbroken.

Beth rose deftly, trying not to disturb him. The couch shook slightly and was still. Carl remained at rest. She left the room quickly, stepping into the kitchen where Johnson was anxiously waiting.

She relayed the information to him; they'd called the doctor shortly before and he'd advised them to let Carl sleep. Tomorrow would be a difficult day, filled with diagnostics and exams. The doctor had mentioned an MRI more than once, and both Beth and Johnson had agreed that Carl was tough enough to go through it.

Holding hands tightly, they climbed upstairs to talk with the other children. The stairs creaked and thudded against their feet, but they didn't notice. Their walk to the playroom was a long one.

The children were seated in their customary circle, murmuring occasionally. George had already spread his concerned take on the events, so their talk was sober. All three heads turned to the newly opened door.

Johnson began the talking, though he rarely received a response beyond the occasional nod or mumbled agreement. He almost preferred it that way. Rubbing his hands together, he tried to explain the situation, to settle any fears or inaccuracies from George's earlier testimony.

He took a deliberate breath and began. "You probably know that Carl isn't feeling well. Yes, he's sick. Tomorrow we're gonna go take him to be checked out. Right now we're letting him sleep, so please don't go wake him up."

He paused to make sure he still had an audience. When he was sure all eyes were still keenly upon him, he recommenced.

"From what we can tell, he had a seizure. George, that explains the shakes you saw. I know it's scary, but we really need to give him time to recuperate. Tomorrow we'll wake him up right before we leave for the doctor's office. You'll all be at school by then. But when we get home, I don't want you guys to make a big deal of it. He's going through enough; he shouldn't have to feel even more different. A little encouragement would go a long way, but please don't pry."

He exhaled finally, his monologue complete. Somber faces stared back at him. Unsure of what else to say, he quickly bade them goodnight and left the room. Beth began sending the children to bed and tucking them in, a nightly ritual that often took quite a while.

He goose-stepped to his own bedroom. Brushing his teeth and washing his face gave him a brief haven from the new stress. It didn't last long, though, and solitude afforded him little relief. He tried reading, but found no solace. Sadness and empathy for Carl continued in him.

*Hasn't the kid been through enough?*

Eventually, after what felt like days, Beth returned to the room. She looked weary, with

pronounced bags beneath her eyes. Smiling faintly, she fell into her pillow. Face first. Johnson chuckled a bit, but controlled himself when she turned her neck to look at him.

There was a moment of silent comradery between them. In it was a gentle love, more of a mental connection than anything else; enduring, long-suffering. Despite all circumstance, Johnson was continually grateful for their bond. He knew she was, too.

He rolled over on his side and gently put his arm around her. She leaned against him for a time, dozing. Johnson however, remained entirely awake – sleep was hardly attainable for him. He stirred and fidgeted, and eventually Beth noticed his discomfort. She rotated onto her back, trying to wake herself.

“You’re thinking about him,” she said.

He nodded. “Of course. I mean, I think he’s been through enough with his mom and his dad. And now this? Can’t he catch a break?”

Beth paused, thinking. “God works everything for the good of those who love him. And I know he loves Carl.” Her voice was a whisper, calm and pure.

“Then why’d he putting a *child* through all of this?”

Never one to become unsettled, Beth faced him with patience. “I don’t really know. But I trust. And it’s easier to sleep when you trust.”

“I hope,” he said, and closed his eyes; but sleep would be a long time coming.

## Chapter 15

Monday morning formed into gray daylight. The dull sun nudged Johnson into consciousness around seven o'clock. He stretched, stiff from a night full of tosses and turns. In his sleep, he'd kicked off the covers, and Beth lay next to him in a silky cocoon. Groaning, he sat up.

He noted, with some measure of disgust, that his drool was damp on his pillow. Some had crusted on the right side of his mouth, and he wiped it off as best he could. It took some motivation, but he forced himself from the bed.

He wandered into the bathroom thoughtlessly and relieved himself. The sound of the running sink roused Beth from sleep, and she was standing when he shuffled back in.

Skipping the normal salutations, Johnson mumbled a bit, then cleared his throat and spoke more crisply. "I'm taking off work today. I want to be there with Carl for the tests."

Beth agreed. Together, they traveled upstairs to wake the children for school. On a normal day, Johnson might've joked about using an air horn to jump them out of bed. But today, a light spirit wasn't present.

Carl slept soundly through the early morning proceedings. Beth fried eggs over a crackling stove, and the shower was intermittently turned on full blast for each of the kids. George – who'd been slow out of his bed and had taken the last shower – grumbled about running out of hot water.

Together, Johnson and Beth drained a large pot of overly-strong coffee with generous doses of milk and creamer to hide the taste. There was little conversation. Megan studied for a spelling bee over breakfast, and David ranted about the injustice of tests on Mondays.

When the kitchen clock struck eight, Beth rose and moved for the front door. The youth followed shortly after. They piled together in the blue van and pulled clear of the driveway.

Johnson remained at the table and drank three more cups of coffee before Beth returned. He mused a bit about his potential caffeine addiction (his own mother had often scolded him for his morning reliance) and sipped slowly. When he found the energy, he cleared the table, balancing the dishes in the sink.

Beth returned home with a rumble in the gravelly driveway. Johnson watched her as she hiked up towards the front step. The door opened and shut quickly, quietly. She moved into the kitchen, and it looked to Johnson like she was nearly floating.

It was hours until Carl's appointment, and there wasn't much more they could do but wait. Beth cleaned up a bit, and Johnson set up some papers in his study. He worked as part of a construction contract team and made up the mechanical brains of the operation; he drafted the builds on paper and then supervised the construction.



He leafed through a new project – a kitchen renovation – and became lost in the design. He managed to hyper focus on the plan, checking and re-checking his work. The tedium had an engrossing quality, and the minutes melted by.

Minutes morphed into hours. Johnson was good at what he did, and he pulled steadily along. His hand wasn't nearly as steady as it usually was, but he didn't let it hinder him. Details began to take shape, materializing into a grand design. Each part flowed into the next with mathematical certainty and precision. He knew he could create more...

A hand on his shoulder. He flinched slightly, shaken from his focused state. He turned and found Beth, who was standing close. She wrapped one arm around his shoulder and spoke in her gentle southern cadence.

"Time to go." Beth turned away into the house, shutting off the remnant lights. Carl had just finished a sleepy shower and changed his clothes. He emerged from the kitchen, head shielded by a baseball cap. He made no effort to engage with Johnson and stood stolidly in the hall.

Johnson rose from his desk, piled his papers, and walked over to him. Swollen and purple sleep-bags had grown underneath both of their eyes, due mostly to stress and fatigue.

"How're you feeling?" Johnson asked. There was a long and brooding pause between them.

"I don't really know," Carl replied, and honestly. Having slept for the past 24 hours, he'd risen and pissed like a racehorse. But even after a shower and some time awake, he wasn't at all hungry. He didn't feel any other emotion, either.

Johnson was without words. Overnight, it seemed, Carl was transformed; the confused and timid child was no longer visibly present. Instead, a new beast had taken place, one that was both weary and mature. Indeed, Carl appeared to Johnson like an old man, care-worn and wise.

At that time, Beth returned. "Is everyone ready to go?" she asked.

Nods. Beth tossed the car keys to Johnson, who caught them with both hands. Collectively, they left the house. Beth turned to lock the door behind them and brought up the back of the group.

They piled into the van; Beth sat up front, naturally, and Carl chose the center part of the backseat so as to preserve his view of the road. Anticipating a quiet drive, Johnson flipped on the radio. Soon, mournful blues-beats reverberated in the vehicle. Carl thought he heard something in the lyrics about malted milk, but he wasn't really paying attention.

The drive was short, not more than twenty minutes. They pulled into a bustling shopping district and wove through the parking lot. Pedestrians seemed a little aggressive, darting out in front of the van. It took a while to find a parking space.

Once they'd parked, Johnson led them to a smaller building marked simply PEDIATRICS. He held the door open for the other two, and soon they were inside.

The sounds of the outside district died as the door clicked shut. Inside, a very different realm presented itself. The familiar and expected smell of disinfectant was strong at first, but faded as their

noses adjusted.

A middle-aged woman took down their names and told them to sit wherever they pleased. Carl wandered to a corner chair with his back to the outside window. The chairs weren't particularly comfortable, but he didn't much care.

The soft jingle of easy-listening music was prevalent in the small office. Johnson spent some time judging the acoustics of the room and thought the thin carpet did a decent job reflecting the sound off the walls and through the space. He wasn't, however, able to find the speakers, so his interest waned.

There were no other patients in the building, but that might've been normal for a Monday morning. The general physician Johnson usually favored for any family sickness didn't have the experience – or the inclination – to deal with neurological symptoms and disorders, so Johnson had surfed through a phonebook until he found a doctor who was up to the task. He was somewhat nervous in bringing Carl to a strange doctor, but he didn't know what else to do, especially on short notice.

At some length, the middle-aged woman returned and asked them to follow her deeper into the building. Up close, Carl could see her nametag, and found that her name was Carla. She herded them through a short hallway and into a patient room.

The room consisted of a raised examination table, a few foldable chairs, and a grainy painting that canvased the walls and ceiling. Carla left quickly, and they were left again to wait. Carl, sensing the examination table was intended for him, climbed on top and rested a bit.

The room's theme – a friendly jungle – was comforting to him. A canopy was detailed on the ceiling, which gave the art an immersive feel. The floor was a dark green tile.

Soon, the doctor arrived. The door swung open purposefully, and a tall man with deep-sunken eyes and a slightly receding hairline moved in. He shut the door behind him softly, and it creaked.

He turned, clasped his hands together, and grinned without showing teeth.

"I'm Dr. Maddux," he said. His voice was rich and gravelly. "Sorry about the wait. I heard some stuff happened yesterday, could you tell me again?"

He didn't speak directly to anyone, but both the adults and Carl felt compelled to respond. In the end, though, it was Carl who replied.

At first, Carl didn't know how to begin. He thought for a moment and said, "Well, I had a strange feeling in my stomach, and then I started shaking. I couldn't see. And eventually it stopped... but I was so tired. I just went to sleep."

Dr. Maddux nodded, his eyes betraying nothing. "Has anything like this happened before?"

Carl shook his head. After waiting for his reaction, Johnson and Beth did the same. There was a brief quiet.

Dr. Maddux nodded slowly, his brow creased slightly. He wore large, dark spectacles, and they slipped down his nose a bit.

“Sometimes these things can be caused by stress. Have you been through anything stressful lately?” he asked.

Carl spoke quietly, mostly mumbling. “Yeah.” Johnson and Beth concurred. He’d been through quite a lot.

The doctor inquired further. “What happened?”

No answer. Carl didn’t even maintain eye contact. Johnson and Beth would’ve answered if Carl hadn’t been in the room, but they thought it would be an invasion of privacy to tell what Carl wasn’t willing to explain.

At any rate, the doctor received no answer. He sighed heavily and massaged his nose with one hand. He had a pounding headache, and it worsened with his frustration.

“Look,” he said, “I’m not a shrink, so I won’t try to get you to talk about it. But sometimes these episodes can involve a stress-related trigger. Were you intensely stressed before your episode?”

Nods.

“Ok,” the doctor said. “That’s what I expected. At this point, we’re just going to run some tests to see what’s really going on with you. Fortunately, we have all the equipment in this building. So if you’re ready, we can begin.”

Johnson agreed; he was impressed. “You have all the stuff you need here? I thought we’d have to go to a hospital.”

“Nope, we’re all set,” said Dr. Maddux. He swung open the door and held it for them. “Shall we begin, then?”

## Chapter 16

Iraq, 2010

Carl's eyes moved about their sockets with direction. He looked around rampantly, but only as far as his eyes would let him.

There was pain in his voice. "I can't move my neck." With his words, any surreality dissipated. "I really can't move my neck!"

Thomas was gaping, eyes wide. "How the hell...?"

Aban, who'd only recently gained his footing, jumped back down onto his knees next to Carl. He ignored the loud, protesting pops from his tendons.

"Listen," Aban said, "don't try to move your neck. It's seriously injured. Probably broken." He paused briefly, trying to regulate his breathing, trying to calm the adrenaline and shock. "I don't know how you're alive."

Carl coughed a little, and it hurt a lot. "What happened?"

Thomas jumped in and spilled out the story. "Somebody had a trap waiting for us. They had bombs or something on the road, and that's what hurt you. There was gunfire. Abraham and Aban fought off the shooters." He let his words linger for dramatic effect. He was in shock, but he was also a journalist.

"I dragged you behind the truck and out of the shooting," he concluded, and not without a small measure of pride.

Carl swallowed. There was sweat on his upper lip, and it tasted like salt. "So my neck is broken?" Am I paralyzed?"

"We're not sure yet," said Aban. "But it's a miracle you survived. It truly is."

Abraham was pacing wayward loops in the sand, trying to think, his soldier mentality initiating. His lips moved a bit as he thought, forming silent nonsense words and fragments.

"I don't know how we're going to get you outta here," he said, with an unintended severity. Then, with a softer tone, "...But we need to get you to a doctor. Something."

"That might not be possible," said Carl. The sun was high and burned at his vision, but he didn't want to twist his neck: it could cause further damage. "But if I can't move myself, then you'd better leave."

Thomas spoke quickly, brashly. "Not gonna happen; you'd die out here." His voice then dwindled as he realized that the consequence was very much intended.

“I understand the sentiment,” Aban said to Carl, “but there’s no way we’re gonna leave you. Not until there is no other conceivable choice.”

“But that’s what you don’t understand,” replied Carl, still straining to speak. “There are way too many miles in between us and any end of the desert. And it’s not all flat, either. You won’t be able to tolerate any extra weight.”

“Not gonna happen.” Thomas butted in again. “We’re not gonna leave you, that’s... barbaric.”

Carl spoke evenly, given the circumstance. “It’s probably necessary.” A trickle of sweat slithered down his neck, and it tickled. He scratched it away – and then realized what he could do.

“I can move my hand!” Electrifying relief and excitement flooded through him, and he felt light-headed. He combed the corners of his vision, trying to get a view of his hand.

He couldn’t quite glimpse it; so, with reckless abandon and high hopes, he tried to raise his hand. At first, there was no response, no obedience. There was panic when he felt there was to be no further movement or control.

Then, reluctantly, as if travelling through deep water, he felt movement again. His hand travelled slowly upwards. It was somewhat foreign to him, as if he was wearing a baseball glove. He wasn’t capable of any accurate motions, but generalized action was possible.

He held his hand above his head victoriously, and none too soon. His neck throbbed and sputtered. Muscles twitched and vibrated violently. But through the discomfort, Carl felt a greater dominion over his limbs.

Abraham peered intently down, deeply concerned and tentatively hopeful. “Really slowly, try to move your neck. If you feel any sharp pain or resistance, stop right away.”

Carl would’ve nodded, but that wasn’t entirely feasible at the time. He rotated his neck a few cautious degrees without any extra pain. That was good. He pushed further, turning until his cheek encountered the hot sand.

“Good, now try turning the other way,” Abraham instructed.

Now more confident, Carl began to turn his head. The sun was bright in his eyes once more. Before the rotation was complete, Carl heard – or rather, felt – an appalling series of cracks from the vertebrae in his neck. His heart jumped to his throat, and his stomach bottomed out: what had he done?

He held perfectly still, unwilling to breathe. The men around him were speaking, but their words were fuzzy in his ears. Isolated, he wrestled with the consequence of his movement. He wasn’t capable of thought, only emotion; fear, mostly. Uncertainty. He felt frozen, even in the sweltering heat.

However, inaction wouldn’t save him. Taking a prolonged breath, he scrunched shut his eyes and turned his neck the rest of the way. Another series of pops, more solid this time.

He waited to be made aware of the detrimental effects that his neck would suffer; he assumed they would be immediately obvious and catastrophic. Yet, nothing felt worsened. He noticed, mostly

through unintentional observation, that he could still move his hand.

Come to think of it, the popping sound in his neck hadn't been so insidious. Maybe they weren't furthering his injury. But it would be insane to think they were healing him. Totally insane. Yet, he couldn't shake the thought.

"CARL! ANSWER ME!" Aban was a foot above Carl's face and nearly screaming in his ears. Thomas was pouring out a steady stream of profanity in the background.

Carl was slow to register the desperation in their voices. "What?" he asked.

"What happened? It sounded like your neck snapped in half!"

Carl grimaced. There was an increased sensation in his torso, and he realized his ribs were definitely bruised, maybe broken. "Yeah, I thought so too. But it was really weird... I think it almost helped. Maybe cracking it straightened the spine?"

Aban cast him a dubious look. "I doubt it." Aban paused, though. "...But I suppose anything's possible. You're alive, and that really is a miracle by itself. Let me feel the vertebrae in your neck."

He put two fingers on each side of Carl's neck and gently pushed around the spine. There was substantial swelling, but he managed to feel the bones.

"That's unreal," he breathed. "It looks like the bones are all totally aligned. I couldn't even feel the break. Can you move your hands?"

Carl was still unnerved and reluctant to move quickly, but he waved both arms in a slow, deliberate manner. He felt more in control the limbs now, as though he'd regained mastery of his own arms.

"Yeah," Carl said. "I feel fine. Considering I was just in a car explosion without a seatbelt."

Aban nodded. "Try – and I don't want to rush you, but this is important – try to sit up on your elbows."

Without much deliberation, Carl brought his elbows back. He sucked in his stomach and held his breath, pushing up with his core. His ribs weren't pleased. Daggers of biting pain danced through his chest, but he fought his way into a sitting position. Only then did he dare to release his gulp of air.

"Well, that's amazing." Aban seemed continually bewildered. "I don't want to push this too fast, but if you're able to walk soon, then we stand a chance at getting back as a group."

The prospect of standing – something so simple – was appalling to Carl. "I don't know if I can," he said.

Abraham broke from his silent thought. "You don't have to get up yet; give yourself more time to heal. And I think that's what you're doing somehow. Your neck is healing."

There was general incredulity from the others. The idea seemed impossible, but Abraham

remained insistent.

“Guys, I trust my eyes. And I know how bad Carl just was. He’s getting better. That much is obvious.”

“In any case, we should give him a few minutes and then see if he can stand.” Thomas was very impatient, so allowing the time wasn’t easy for him. Yet, the words came from his mouth.

Carl was grateful for the break. Recovery was exhaustive, and his head was swimming. The sand clung to his face, grinding against his eyes and lips. He spat some out, but it proved to be stubborn - and pretty gross when swallowed.

A few minutes in the desert took quite a long time. The wind whistled quaintly, lacking an audience. Thomas drummed his fingers and breathed heavily. He looked around at the others, but no one made eye contact. The minutes were spent privately.

In time, Thomas spoke. “Ok, according to my watch, it’s been fifteen minutes. Do you want to try to stand?”

Carl nodded. He would try. Hoping that no injury would befall him, he shifted his weight to one side and rolled over onto his knees.

Small crackles gurgled from his back, but he ignored them. He wasn’t sure if they were healthy, but so far they hadn’t been detrimental. They faded quickly.

Carl lifted up his back and straightened. He’d made it to his knees. Quickly, before his brain would make him rethink his next action, he pushed up with his thighs and rose to his feet.

He wobbled like a top on cheap carpet. Blood drained from his head, and for a few moments he saw nothing. His head felt light, and he barely held onto consciousness.

Aban ducked underneath his left arm and stationed him. After a moment of hesitation, Thomas did the same on Carl’s other side. With support, Carl stood.

## Chapter 17

“You ok?” asked a concerned Abraham.

Carl’s voice was slurred. His tongue felt thick and heavy. “Yeahhimokay.” It was a little difficult for him to concentrate. Fortunately, his neck felt fine - the upright position did wonders.

Abraham wasn’t entirely convinced. “...Ok. But there’s no point in rushing out somewhere. We don’t even know what direction to go.”

Any euphoria or hope Carl might’ve clung to evaporated with that statement. “Oh crap, we’re screwed. There’s no way we can get back through thi-”

Abraham cut him off. “No, everything’s gonna work out. When you panic, you get irrational. Stay calm.” His voice was receded and toneless, and his face didn’t betray any emotion. But his brother, after many years of experience, could tell how fearful he was. Their position was destitute.

Abraham shook his head, trying to throw off despairing thoughts. “No, no, there’s got to be a way back. Just let me think.” His hands were squeezed into tight fists, and a large vein throbbed in between his front two knuckles.

Then, brief inspiration. “The people who tried to kill us! They must’ve set up a return vehicle after the kill. We can get them to bring a vehicle to us.”

“That’s brilliant!” said an elated Thomas, perpetually eager to get out of the desert. “Maybe they had some sort of communicative means on them. A radio or something.”

Abraham nodded. “Exactly. Let’s go see what they have.” He strode off back towards the bodies.

Collectively, they went back to the gruesome scene. Abraham stared hard at the bodies and turned back to Aban, speaking harshly in Arabic. Carl thought it might’ve been about the corpses, all of which were marked with a bullet in the head. He wondered if there’d been an execution, or if the wounds had been given post-mortem.

The talk between the two brothers was heated, and lasted for some minutes. Carl and Thomas felt entirely out of place, and for a time they were entirely ignored. The brothers never yelled, but Abraham’s venomously admonishing voice prevailed. They ceased to converse, and Abraham switched back to English.

“Look for some sort of cell phone or radio. A GPS would be good too, just in case. We’ll just need to see what they have.” Then, in a strained voice, he added, “Try not to mind the blood.”

The bodies were indeed bloody. Abraham and Aban had ensured that they were supremely dead. Thomas had a difficult time dealing with it, and for a while he looked like he was going to be sick.



They searched, each to a corpse. Carl found some water as well as sunscreen. He found it amusing, but cast the items aside. He was seated, somewhat uncomfortably, but his spine was holding fine.

They checked the pockets, but those were empty. Carl's guy was wearing a tactical vest, and Carl started checking the pouches. Some were filled with blood, and he had to dip his fingers inside and fish around for a bit before deciding if there was anything worth retrieving.

In the rightmost pocket was a rudimentary radio bag – Carl had struck gold. A large, long-distance radio, definitely outdated. “Guys,” he said, “I found something.”

No one else had any luck, so they gathered around the radio. It was sandy (obviously), but seemed otherwise functional. A large, rubberized antenna stuck out from the top.

Thomas smirked. “What is this, world war two?”

Carl waved him away. “No, it's a long-distance radio. Not exactly cutting-edge, but I think this was their communications tool.” He looked around. “We'll only get one chance at calling them to pick us up. If they think something's awry, they won't show.”

“We're gonna have to try. I'll make the call,” said Abraham, “and hope there's no code word.”

Carl wasn't thrilled with the plan, but conceded. “Might as well try. But the pickup site – assuming they chose one beforehand – is probably some distance away. If you make it seem like you're wounded, they might come here.”

“That sounds risky,” Thomas quipped. “If they think you're hurt, they might bring more guys with guns. And guys with guns put us in our current position.”

After a bit of thought, Abraham made an executive decision. “I'll call them in and try to get them to come here.” He was reluctant, but the day was spending quickly, and a frigid night in the desert would be worse than the heat of the sun.

Getting into character would be difficult. First, Abraham started breathing quickly - faster, faster, until he was nearly hyperventilating. Then, he flicked on the radio.

“Let's hope it's on the right channel,” Thomas muttered softly.

It was. A raspy voice came through the radio, speaking in Arabic. Abraham responded in the same language. Carl couldn't tell what he was saying, but Abraham looked to be playing the part with a convincing flourish.

Abraham managed to breathe heavily enough to show stress, but not too heavily. He wanted to seem exhausted, in dire need of help. The voice in the radio sounded alarmed and confused, which was perfect. They spoke for a few minutes, and the voice in the radio signed off. With a sigh, Abraham clicked off the radio.

“You should've been an actor,” joked Carl. “That was pretty well done.”

“Yeah, well, I think they bought it,” Abraham responded. “They said they’d send out a truck for the extraction. We’ll see the vehicle from a good distance off, so it shouldn’t be too hard to find out whether or not it’s a trap.”

“... Which is exactly what we’re gonna set.” Aban spoke, summing up the entire plan.

Abraham then left the group and limped back to the van. He returned with three guns and some extra mags, all wrapped in a tarp.

Carl took his m4 and loaded the extra mags into his vest. The weapon felt familiar and comfortable in his hands. His strength had returned, so there was no strain for him in standing.

Aban accepted his customary m249 and racked the bolt. He would be ready.

Abraham undid the bipod on his m14 and left it standing in the sand. He kept extra mags in his pockets. “Look guys, I’ve got something to tell you.” He waited for their attention, but didn’t waste any time. “In the gunfight I got shot in the leg.” He motioned down to his left thigh, which was tightly bandaged. A slight tint of red seeped through.

He waved his hands in an effort to stop any reaction before it began. “I can walk. It hurts now that the adrenaline is dying off, but I can manage. Aban, if you have any painkiller in the medical bag, I’d appreciate some.”

Thomas’s face was a blank sheet, totally surprised. “You’ve been walking around! You’re freaking *shot*?”

Carl was perhaps the least surprised. “I’ve had people in my squad who were shot in the leg and didn’t know it.” He glanced down at Abraham’s wound. “But we don’t have much of time before that becomes a very large burden. Meds will help, but we’re on the clock now.”

Aban returned with a syringe full of a clear fluid. He approached Abraham and disinfected his arm with a new wipe.

Abraham drew back his arm. “What’s in the syringe?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Aban said. “Just painkiller. It won’t even make you drowsy.”

Abraham watched soberly as the syringe entered his arm. The needle hardly made a mark, and after a few seconds, it was complete.

“It’ll be a few minutes before it kicks in,” said Aban. “In the meantime, let’s go over strategy.”

Abraham wiped off the drop of blood from his injection. “Right. I’ve got the marksman’s rifle, so I’ll take the first shot. I’ll try to take out the driver. But here’s the important thing: we can’t damage the vehicle. If it’s hit too many times, it won’t run, and we’ll still be stranded. So no firing randomly into anything that moves.”

Perhaps subconsciously, Carl switched his m4 to semi-automatic. “I’ll have to wait for them to leave the vehicle before I can shoot.” He looked over at Aban. “You’ll probably have to do the same.”

Aban nodded. “We’ll just have to hope they spread out when they’re searching for their dead friends.”

Abraham didn’t appreciate Aban’s choice of words but remained silent.

“How long did they say until they’re here?” Carl inquired. He didn’t want to be caught off guard.

“They’re close. He said they’d come very soon. So I’m guessing it’ll be a few minutes.” Abraham strapped the m14 to his back. “I’m gonna go find some higher ground. Don’t shoot until I do. We can stay in touch with our radios.” With that, he left in search of a vantage point.

“You guys don’t have radios, so you’ll need to stay with me,” said Aban. Carl nodded. Miscommunication – or worse, no communication – could be costly.

“Hey, I don’t know. I don’t even have a gun,” said Thomas. “Why can’t I take one of their guns?” He motioned to the scavenged corpses.

“Have you ever fired a gun?” asked Aban.

“Well, no... But how hard could it be?”

Aban shook his head. “Not gonna happen. This isn’t a journalistic trip. It’s a combat mission. And since you’ve never even shot a gun, you’re better off without one.”

Thomas grumbled lowly. Carl picked out a few choice words about the intellect of a soldier, but didn’t bother to become offended.

They found a lower area with protection from all angles and dug in deep. Abraham was visible, faintly, from their spot. He’d covered himself in sand, breaking up his outline. There was netting over his sniper scope so the sun wouldn’t reflect off the lens.

They waited. The sun dangled overhead, beating down. Carl’s skin was burned. The back of his neck grated against itself, red and inflamed. The backs of his hands throbbed and peeled. He pressed them into the sand, trying to take refuge from the rays.

Beside him, Thomas squinted out into the desert. His eyes crinkled and his mouth was slightly ajar. Dehydration was beginning to take effect on all of them; there was a burning glare out across the sand, and it blazed in their eyes.

Not a pleasant midday.

At some length, Abraham’s hushed and disquieted voice wafted the radio. “They’re here. Coming from the North.”

Immediately, Thomas’s head popped up above their makeshift bunker, and Carl was momentarily reminded of the game Whack-A-Mole.

He yanked Thomas back down and looked at Aban. “Ask how many there are.”

Aban did. Abraham's response came through. "One van, I can only see the driver. There may be a few in the back seat. Maximum of four."

That was good news. "Will you be able to hit the drive when the van's moving?" Aban asked.

"I don't think so, not in one shot. Hopefully they'll slow down or stop before they get too close."

Then, as though on command, the van slowed to a stand-still. Through his scope, Abraham could see the driver pick up a communication device and talk into it.

The radio from the slain man began to speak. Words in Arabic floated into the air behind Aban. He listened for a moment, and summarized for everyone else. "He's telling us to find and get into the van. Abraham, now's the time to take the shot."

No response through the radio. Carl looked to the hill, and Abraham's figure was entirely still, rifle aimed.

Aban spoke again. "Take the shot."

Still, no response. Impatient words were on Thomas's lips when there was a loud crack from the top of the hill. Abraham had fired.

The shot might've been a call, and the echo was an answer. The report from the rifle permeated the desert air for a few moments, and then silence. A dead silence.

Abraham's resigned voice came through the radio. "Target down."

Aban lifted his head just barely above the ground. The bunker wasn't hard-packed, and his movement caused the loose sand to tumble down over them. It wasn't much, but it covered them all in a thin layer. Thomas moaned and spat, trying to keep it out of his mouth and eyes.

Aban held his radio up closer to his face. "Any signs of movement?"

There was an observatory pause. "No," said Abraham, "But I'll keep you covered if you move towards the van."

"You do that," Aban replied. He motioned for Carl to follow. The two of them left the bunkers, weapons in hand.

After a few steps, they noticed a third set of feet trailing behind them. A somewhat timid set of feet.

Carl turned. "Thomas, dude, you should go back to the bunker. We'll handle this."

Thomas shook his head. "No way, I'm not getting back in that sandy piece of crap. Let's go, I'll stay behind. I won't be in danger."

"Look, you could still get shot. There could be more people in there with guns. They'll be trained. And you don't even have a gun." Carl's voice was impatient. They were standing outside of cover, trying

to reason with a civilian.

“I won’t get shot, I’ll be hanging back. I’m a journalist in Iraq, I can handle myself.” Thomas was obstinate, like a young child with an obsession.

Aban tapped Carl on the shoulder. “We don’t have time for this. If he follows, it’s at his own risk. Let’s go.”

Carl didn’t like it, but he agreed. They were still a few hundred yards away, so they picked up the pace. Nothing too fast: they didn’t want to be winded when they reached the van, and it was an extremely hot day.

The van grew in size, increased in detail. It was a black van, still in reasonably good condition. At two hundred feet out, they noticed that the windshield was broken. Abraham’s shot had clearly come from the front.

They drew closer. Slowing to a walk, Aban and Carl drew their weapons to their shoulders. Their sights were centered on the van. The sand was more compact, and their boots crunched on the ground.

Closer, ever closer. They approached from the right side, which housed a double-door opening in the front. The windows were darkly tinted, so they detected no movement. Carl tried to regulate his breathing, taking deep and slow breaths.

They were ten feet away. Ten feet and closing.

Suddenly, the doors flew open. With an inarticulate cry, a lone gunman came through, gun blazing. He held an ak47 and emptied the entire magazine in one massive spray.

Carl instinctively twisted his core away from the gunman. Aban turned away completely, trying to avoid the spray of lead. Carl rotated his gun around and blind-fired one bullet at a time. He still didn’t want to damage the vehicle.

Eventually, the gunman’s magazine ran dry. The gun emitted a few clicking sounds, and the gunman grew horrified. He groped around for another magazine, but Aban was upon him.

With a barbaric yell, Aban brought the butt of his weapon down on the gunman’s head. It was an immediate knockout. The gunman fell forward out of the van, face-first into the ground.

“YEAHH!” Aban’s victory cry was short and controlled, given the amount of adrenaline that was flooding through him. They stood there, very much relieved. The van was empty.

A groan. A groan from behind them.

Carl turned and stared, dismayed. Thomas was flat on his back, with dark blood running out of his chest. His face was pale, his eyes unseeing.

“Oh God no.” Carl knelt beside Thomas and tried to put pressure on his chest. “Oh God no.”

The pressure couldn't stop the bleeding. Carl's hands soon became soaked and stained. Eventually, he realized that Thomas wasn't breathing. Then, the rage began.

He screamed. Cursed. He stood up, unable to remain still. The gunman remained unconscious in the sand, and Carl prowled over towards him.

"YOU BASTARD!" Carl bellowed. Venom emanated from his presence. With a hiss, he put his boot into the gunman's ribs. It was a brutal kick, and if Carl had listened, he would've heard a hollow crack.

He kicked again. And again. He bent down and savagely struck the back of the gunman's head with his fists. His knuckles soon ripped open, but he didn't care. His vision swirled and waved like a settling projector screen.

He took a moment to steady himself and was just about to recommence the beatings when Aban grabbed him from behind and threw him back.

"You could kill him!" Aban shouted, trying to stop Carl's rampage. It did little to soothe Carl.

"He doesn't deserve any better." Carl spoke, and was right. He was still shaking with wrath.

"Maybe you're right," replied Aban, "But we could still use him. We still don't know where their compound is. He'll lead us right to them."

Carl was silently incredulous. He shook his head slightly but made no further move to strike at the gunman. He strode away, wiping his bloodied hands on his shirt.

Abraham radioed in. "What happened down there?"

"There was one guy in the van. He's unconscious right now. He shot Thomas." Aban walked towards Thomas and checked for a pulse. Nothing. "Thomas is dead."

"WHAT?" Abraham's yell was distorted by the radio receiver. "I'm coming down."

Abraham leapt up from his prone position and sprinted down towards the van. He stumbled in the sand and almost fell. His leg burned and throbbed, which caused him to slow. He limped the rest of the way.

## Chapter 18

Boston, 1983

Dr. Maddux led Carl, Johnson and Beth deeper into the clinic. Given the size of the building, Johnson thought it slightly strange that a normal clinic was so spacious. It seemed to him that the entire facility stemmed from one central hallway.

The doctor was led them down that hallway. The air grew somewhat musky, masked with a stale air freshener. At the end of the hallway was a door marked with two signs: EMPLOYEES ONLY and DO NOT ENTER.

Dr. Maddux held open the door for them. "This is where we keep our testing equipment. Don't worry, it's quite safe if you know what you're doing."

Not at all set at ease, they moved through the doorframe and noticed that it led to a downward staircase. The pavement steps coiled like a serpent. There were dim, yellowish lights on the walls, and they cast morphing shadows throughout the area.

Dr. Maddux entered last and closed the door behind him. "There's a railing to hold onto when you're going down these stairs. Wouldn't want any of you to take a spill." His voice sounded eerily hollow, echoing off the staircase.

The stairs only descended one level, and soon they reached the bottom. They entered a much larger room, one shrouded in darkness. Their footsteps travelled far into the space.

The doctor spoke again. "One moment, I'll get the lights." There was shuffling of feet. "Excuse me... thank you... Ah! There we are."

He flipped a switch and fluorescent lighting flooded down from the ceiling. The room proved to be a proper facility with multiple large machines and computers strewn about. All the wires fed down into the floor, which was a pristine white tile.

"Wow," breathed Beth. "This is a lot better than I expected." She immediately realized how her words might be interpreted and began to stammer a little bit.

"Not that I was expecting anything bad, but this is just really nice, and... Oh, you know what I mean." Her cheeks reddened a good bit, but Dr. Maddux didn't look at all perturbed.

"Oh, it's quite alright. I'm in the midst of a slight renovation, you see. This whole place is getting an upgrade." He moved towards a large gray machine on the left side of the room. It was set in the midst of a section encased in glass.

"This is an MRI," he said. It stands for magnetic resonance imaging." He spoke directly to Carl. "This is how we'll get a picture of that head of yours."

"Is it an X-ray?" Johnson asked.

“Sort of, only better,” answered Dr. Maddux. He still sounded like he was talking to a child. There was a computer stationed outside of the glass, and he pressed a few buttons on the keypad, probably a password.

“Basically, Carl, you’ll need to lie down in this table, and it’ll retract into the MRI chamber. There, we’ll be able to take pictures of your head. You won’t have to move at all; in fact, you shouldn’t move if you can help it. That helps make the picture nice and clear.”

Carl didn’t quite understand what was going on. Everything was moving too fast for his young mind. Events had been a blur for quite some time, and there hadn’t been any time for him to recuperate. So, he obliged thoughtlessly and entered the chamber.

Once inside, he turned and observed the others from behind the glass. He felt a sudden comradery with animals he’d seen at the zoo. Their existence felt quite real to him in that moment.

Dr. Maddux’s voice drafted in from the intercom stationed on the ceiling. “Alright, all you have to do is lie down on that flat part there.” He hesitated; most children required some reassurance and persuasion. But so far, Carl had been entirely compliant. “How are you feeling? Any stress?”

Carl flattened down on the track and flashed a brief thumbs-up. He felt stress in his anticipation of the test. And stress about his seizure. And stress about his father’s death. However, that wasn’t anything he intended to share.

“Alright,” said the doctor. “The test is going to be noisy, but just try to stay calm. It’ll be over soon, and we’ll be right here the whole time.”

Carl made no response. He remained still on the track, eyes closed. He would endure.

Dr. Maddux pressed a few buttons, and the track began to move, dragging Carl into the mouth of the beast. The machine was constructed to be a hollow tunnel. Carl moved into the tunnel, his eyes tightly shut. The walls surrounded him. They entombed him.

At last, he felt the bed stop moving. He peeked open one eye and immediately wished he hadn’t. The ceiling was suffocatingly close, only two or three inches away. Claustrophobia had never been an issue for him before, but this was too much. He panicked but didn’t allow himself to move.

Faintly, as if from a distance, “Hang in there, Carl.”

Then, the noise began. First, an innocent click, somewhere inside the machine. Then, the throbbing sound.

It was everywhere - a toneless, continuous wave of sound. It was encased by the tomb, and bounced off of the walls. Carl felt it break through his chest. He thought his heart might stop.

His breathing became increasingly ragged. His eyes opened, but he no longer focused on the close ceiling. The sound was more than enough to deal with.

Thankfully, the volume of the noise dulled with a little bit of time. Carl’s ears began to ignore the throbbing waves, and the sound receded. It became bearable.



After what felt like hours, the machine shut off. There was a familiar click, and in an instant the sound was gone. The track moved Carl away from the machine and spit him out of the tomb. He got up from the track and slunk away from the machine.

Johnson held open the glass door for Carl. "How was it?" he asked.

Carl gave him a spurning gaze. "Awful. I'm never doing that again."

Johnson chuckled empathetically. "Don't worry, that's all you have to do." He patted the child's head. "But you really handled it well. I had a test kind of like that done to me, and I freaked out."

Carl looked up at him. "Really?"

"Oh yeah," Johnson replied. "I totally panicked. The doctors had to give me laughing gas." He chuckled again.

Dr. Maddux interrupted any chance for Johnson to conclude his tale. "Alright, we're going to process the photos we just took of Carl's brain. It may take a few hours, but we'll give you a call by the end of the day to let you know what we find."

Johnson thanked the doctor, and the group walked back up the stairs. The steps seemed less ominous during the ascent. When they reached the top, Dr. Maddux unlocked the door, and they crossed through.

Back in the fully-lit hallway, the doctor gathered their attention once more. "I have other matters to attend to; will you be able to see yourselves out? Just follow this hallway to the front."

Johnson shrugged, then nodded.

The doctor smiled curtly and strode off into a different room. The potential size of the office was still surprising.

Their visit thoroughly surreal, they moved towards the front desk. The hallway stretched for some distance, and the walk back felt longer than before. Eventually, they reached the front desk, where Carla waved sluggishly as they passed. There were still no patients in the waiting area, which felt oddly bare. Johnson held the door for Beth and Carl as they let themselves out.

The glare outside and the rumble of traffic welcomed them back to reality. The morning was well underway, and hordes of people walked about. Johnson was somewhat taken aback by the ruckus; he thought the pedestrians might be flocking towards some festival. The parking lot had certainly filled out. After a little searching, they found the van, which wobbled as they piled inside. Johnson turned the key, and after a few seconds of whining, it sputtered to life.

As Johnson backed up the van, the dashboard beeped. He glanced down and saw that the fuel gauge was critically empty.

"Crap, I'm gonna have to stop for gas. It shouldn't take too long," he said.

It was true. A local gas station was just a few short miles up the road, but given the number of

pedestrians, it was going to be a while.

Beth grew somewhat concerned. “Oh, I hope we make it. Running out of gas in the middle of the road...” her words lingered, and she began drumming her fingers on the dash.

Trying not to think of dire possibilities, Johnson kept driving. Traffic backed up significantly, and they were soon bumper-to-bumper in the road. Not exactly usual for the suburbs.

After a few minutes of inching down the road, Johnson began to lose hope. “We’re not gonna make it,” he said ruefully.

“Do you have any extra cans in the trunk?” asked Beth. Bostonians weren’t exactly understanding when delayed in a traffic jam. She didn’t want to be the target of enmity.

“Nope,” Johnson replied, and somewhat abruptly. His grip on the steering wheel grew increasingly tight. “I honestly don’t know what to do.”

Beth began to pray – not from desperation or selfish petitioning, but rather for peace of mind. She was quiet for a few moments, head bowed. When she reopened her eyes, she appeared less strained: her breathing stabilized, and the stress-wrinkles around her squinted eyes smoothed out.

Carl sat in the backseat, bewildered but still very much in a stupor from the testing. A rather tranquil car ride – even with impending immobilization – felt restful to him.

The walking crowd was enormous, like a massive swarm of ants scurrying about a sand hill. They poured out of the sidewalk and into the streets, clogging intersections. Crossing guards catered to them, and drivers suffered much time lost.

“Only a few more blocks to go...” Johnson muttered. A small, bluish vein wormed its way around his temple. His jaw was tightly clenched, muscles taut.

Finally, they crossed an intersection. They felt like jailbirds on a prison break, powering through the cross in the roads. The horde of pedestrians receded for a time.

And with the release came heartbreak. The van began to cough and sputter, accelerating sporadically, sometimes not at all. Johnson continued muttering and searched for a place to pull over.

He found none. They encountered few parking spaces, but they were all occupied. The van was hardly crawling now. Beth noticed, with some chagrin, that a substantial line of cars piled up behind them.

They reached a stop sign and came to a halt. There were no cars to their right or left, so their path was clear. A cluster of pedestrians moved in from the distance, but they were still a safe distance away.

Johnson eased down the gas pedal. The car didn’t respond. Slow to realize the problem, Johnson pushed the pedal to the floor: still nothing. Desperately, he pushed and pulled on the steering wheel.

He slumped back in a crushed heap. “We’re out of gas. She won’t budge.”

The pedestrians were close now, flowing out from the sidewalks and into the intersection. Cars behind the van began honking. Their horns formed an unforgiving choir.

“Well, I suppose there isn’t anything we can do now,” Beth said. “She, too, slumped in her seat slightly, but mostly out of embarrassment.

The pedestrians entered the intersection, cutting off the cars for a time longer. The honking horns redoubled their efforts, and Carl soon became silently flustered.

Johnson was thinking that he might need to get out of the van and inform the other drivers of the problem when there was a humble knock on their window.

He looked out the window and saw, to his surprise, the familiar face of an odd man beside their van. Johnson rolled down the window.

“Um, what can I do for you?” Johnson asked.

The odd man – Johnson recognized him from yesterday’s church service – smiled slightly. “Oh, it’s not what you can do for me.” His eyes flickered over the van. “You wouldn’t happen to be stranded, would you?”

Johnson’s eyes widened significantly, though he tried not to show his surprise. “Yeah, we’re out of gas.”

The strange man smiled again, this time inwardly, as though some mystery had been made clear to him. “I see. Yes, I suppose that makes sense.” He held up his right hand, which held a large canister of gasoline. “Care for a fill?”

Johnson’s mouth dropped open, as did Beth’s. “Uhhh... sure, I guess. That’d be great.”

The man nodded and moved to the back of the van. Johnson powered down the vehicle, just to be safe. The sounds of gurgling gasoline were faintly audible. After a time, the man returned.

“How much do I owe you?” asked Johnson.

“Nothing at all, sir,” replied the man. He seemed entirely content. In a moment of realization, though, he peered into the back seat and noticed Carl. The man turned back to Johnson, now gravely serious.

“Remember what I told you yesterday - don’t accept radiation treatment. For the sake of child.” His eyes bored into Johnson’s with an earnest glare.

Johnson’s words were thick in his mouth; he was now thoroughly caught off-guard. “What’s your name?” he asked.

“Have a good day, sir. But remember what I told you.” With that, the man strode away, melding with the walking crowd, carrying his gas can.

## Chapter 19

Beth opened her mouth to speak but found no words to express the situation. She tilted her head slightly and scrunched her eyebrows, still silent. Johnson was in a similar state.

Carl's gentle prod pushed them into action. "You should probably start the car."

Johnson turned the key. At that moment, with a wave of anxiety, he hoped the strange man had actually put gas in his van.

The car started, however. Its contented rumble was a welcome sound. Johnson put the vehicle in drive and pulled out of the intersection. The fuel gauge was closer to full, so he headed for home.

"I really can't believe that just happened," he said.

"Was that the same guy from church yesterday?" Beth asked; her face was quizzical.

"Yeah, same guy. He told me to avoid radiation treatment, same as just now." Johnson's eyes flickered towards his rearview mirror. "You don't think.... he couldn't have been talking about Carl's treatment. No way. Carl wasn't even sick yet!"

Beth thought deeply. "And he couldn't have been stalking us. He wouldn't have known about Carl's sickness. He also couldn't have known that we'd run out of gas, could he?"

Johnson shrugged. "I doubt it. And he didn't ask for money, so I don't think it was a scam."

Carl was slightly slow to understand. "You didn't know that man?" he asked. Johnson shook his head. "He seemed nice," Carl finished. He proceeded to stare out his window. His memory of the test was beginning to wash away.

"No matter how you look at it, that guy knew more than he should. More than he could. Really, more than we knew," said Beth. "But should we really value his advice?"

The man's cautionary words seemed somewhat far-fetched to Johnson as well. "I'm not sure. But I don't think we should dismiss them just yet. Not after what he knew and did."

Beth shrugged, reluctant. "I suppose. It's all just so strange..." With that, all conversation tapered off. Johnson receded into private thoughts, and Carl continued to exist in a separate world from anyone else. They reached home shortly after midday, and the sun reflected off the ground. Carl hurried on his way into the house.

Once everyone was inside, Johnson felt a significant burden released from his shoulders. He now had time to think. He slunk into his room, and collapsed on his bed, wondering if the advice from a stranger held any merit.

For whatever reason, Johnson couldn't shake the feeling that his decisions extended far beyond him - that the ramifications would ripple further than he could currently comprehend. It didn't make his choices any easier.

Instead, he flipped on the television. Football highlights were easier to focus on, and soon the pressure began to peel away. He slumped against a pillow, happily numb.

Feats of talent and skill – as well as an abundance of opinions – whisked the time away. He wasn't a die-hard football fan, but it didn't really matter. The program settled him.

He continued like that for quite a while, until the Carl's sickness was far from his mind. His eyelids closed partially, and his chin dropped onto his chest.

Beth found him in that state. "Honey, what are you doing?" she asked, her voice layered with both frustration and disappointment. "We need to stick together right now."

Johnson turned his head towards her, and the crushing reality came back to him like deadweight. It seemed to him that he'd been blissfully asleep, and Beth's plea was an alarm clock. Now wasn't the time to quit.

"I'm sorry," he said, and he meant it. He rose from the bed and hugged her tightly.

"Whatever we do, we'll do together." The words felt somewhat strange on his tongue, but he said them anyway.

There wasn't any course of action to take, however. Only waiting, waiting for the doctor's call. They rose and then sat at the kitchen table, the phone between them.

After a bit, Beth grew restless and started a fresh pot of coffee. The aroma of roasting coffee beans soon flourished. The smell was calming and familiar, drifting up through the house.

## Chapter 20

Carl smelled the coffee absently. He had more important matters to consider. He curled up inside his bed, a pillow over his head. Maybe it would keep the world out.

His mind processed the morning's events. When undergoing his test, a very secret longing had welled up in his chest, a feeling so strong that it was physically painful. He stifled it immediately: he couldn't let it in, couldn't acknowledge it. Yet it was there, in the midst of his terror and frustration.

He wanted his mother.

He shuddered in his bed, trying to forcibly expel the thought. He couldn't think of her, couldn't imagine her name, her face. She'd abandoned him, fed him to the wolves.

Yet, he couldn't shake his programming. From the beginning, his mother was his lifeline. She was his life.

But there existed another emotion, buried beneath his regret and resentment: anger. Anger seeped into him, travelling through his veins. He fed on the feeling, and it brought him strength. Even better, it numbed him. Everything else became distant when he fostered the rage.

His anger, his malice, grew. It rooted down into his soul, fusing with his consciousness. He would never again be vulnerable – he couldn't. He would persist through his own power, and no one would leave him.

After a little while, Carl noticed he was crying. His eyes leaked for some time, speckling his pillow. The moisture pooled and stuck to his face, a cold reminder that he could still feel.

*Crap.* He flipped his pillow over, seeking the dry part. Within minutes, however, he'd dampened both sides. Carl sat up on the edge of his bed, rubbing his eyes. *Why won't they stop?!*

Rubbing his eyes turned to poking, which progressed into gouging. But no matter what he tried, he couldn't stem the flow of tears. They welled up, breaking through the cracks between his fingers, tasting distinctly of salt.

His lower lip quivered. His shoulders wanted to heave, but he wouldn't let them. At the very least, he wouldn't sob. He wouldn't do that. He decided to find some way to distract himself, some way to calm his shoulders. In the end, he simply held his breath. He took a large breath and held it, tear-stained cheeks bulging out.

Sixty seconds passed before Carl couldn't resist oxygen any longer. In a raspy heave, he gulped in air; it had never been so welcome in his life.

His room swirled. The light grew extremely bright, and his head whirled. He fell back onto his bed, unable to find his balance.

The tears were gone, though.

## Chapter 21

Iraq, 2010

Abraham's leg was nearly screaming with pain when he reached the bottom of the hill, but he took little notice. His rifle grew heavy, and he dropped it; the sand shivered in its wake.

Still limping, he stumbled towards Thomas's corpse. "What happened?" His voice was a hollow wisp.

Aban laced his hands behind his head. His eyes never blinked, even through the wind and sand. "He wouldn't stay back... wouldn't stay..."

Abraham noticed the other body, settled close to the van - the gunman. "Did he do it?" Abraham inquired coldly. He didn't really need a response - the answer was clear.

He maintained a solid composure, but it wasn't easy. Abraham squatted down next to the gunman and whispered in his ear.

"You're gonna lead us to your boss. And we're gonna burn your camp down." He paused, knowing that his words fell on deaf ears. Nevertheless, he continued. "You'll pay for what you did. You'll pay."

Just as Abraham rose to his feet, Carl returned from self-imposed isolation. Carl's face was grim, his eyes sunken but resolved.

"It's time to wake him up," he said. "Do you have any extra adrenaline?"

Aban shrugged. "I do, but..." - he glanced down at the gunman - "...I'd rather not waste it."

Aban did, however, get an idea. "I'll get him conscious for you. Get ready." He bent down, and plugged the gunman's nose with his thumb and first finger.

The first few seconds garnered no response. Then, the gunman's face twitched. His nose scrunched and his eyes trembled involuntarily.

With a gasp, the gunman came entirely awake.

Instantly aware, the gunman flipped onto his stomach and tried to stand. His frenzied eyes, yellowed by the sun, were bloodshot around the edges.

Aban stopped him with a purposed kick to the face. "You're not going anywhere," he said. The gunman collapsed into the sand. When he lifted his head, Carl saw him spit out a bloodied tooth.

Aban's kick had weakened the man's jaw, so the gunman's words were slurred. He fought through it, however, and spoke in Arabic.

Carl didn't understand what he said, but it sounded nasty. Aban's eyes squinted in contempt, and



he wound up for another kick.

But before Aban could bring his foot home, the gunman began to babble and whimper. He said something else to Aban – something pleading, Carl guessed, judging by the tone of his voice – and Aban paused.

The gunman used that pause. With the deranged passion of a caged animal, he pushed himself off the ground and charged Aban. His lunged, arms outstretched, clawing towards his target.

The butt of Carl's m4 carbine stopped him short. Carl swung his rifle accurately, and his stock landed squarely on the gunman's forehead, ripping open the skin. It carved out a tear, starting from his brow line and travelling up into his scalp.

The gunman squealed. His wound began to spurt, and he clapped his hands over the laceration. Blood trickled down his arms like gory tears. He dropped to his knees and collapsed into the fetal position.

Abraham gazed down at the gunman. "We need some way to restrain him," he said in an oddly vacant voice.

Carl nodded. After a moment of thought, he walked towards the van. Hoping for something of use, he hopped inside. He emerged from the van with a coil of rope slung around his shoulder. "I think this'll work," he said crisply. He stood above the gunman, and began to untie the rope. Warily, he brought the rope around the gunman's ankles. Still moaning, the gunman offered little resistance. Carl had expected as much.

Next, he looped the man's hands together and drew the rope tight. When he felt confident that both knots were secure, he tied the gunman's hands and feet together.

"Really? You hog-tied him?" Abraham smirked; he offered no objection, though.

"Yeah, I saw it on the old Western TV shows when I was a kid," Carl replied. "It worked for them."

Abraham shrugged. "Ok then. Let's get him into that van, and pray that it starts up."

It took two of them, but they managed to haul the subdued man into the van. The gunman, who looked to be fading in and out of consciousness, remained still. They propped him onto one of the seats next to a splintered window.

Aban went to retrieve his medic box and weapons. He jogged off at a decent pace, and soon disappeared into the sand.

Abraham walked over to the driver's side of the car and opened the door. The driver's corpse, complete with a large bullet wound in the center of his torso, tumbled out. Abraham stumbled back to avoid the falling body. He grunted loudly, shocked and appalled. Inside, the seat sported a large bloodstain.

"That's not good," he said, to no one in particular.

Aban returned, rather quickly, with supplies. He slung the medic box around his back and held another bag of essentials in his hands.

“Do you have a towel in there?” Abraham inquired. He didn’t want to drive in a bloody seat.

Aban raised an eyebrow but didn’t ask questions. “Uh, yeah, I think so.” He pulled out a few water bottles from the box and passed them out – the heat of the desert felt undying, and it burned down mercilessly. The water was hot beneath the plastic outer casing.

Carl finished his water in a single breath; it did little else but to awaken his thirst. He looked down lustfully at the remaining bottles, but refrained. They would be needed later.

The brothers drank theirs down just as fast. Once finished, Abraham tossed his bottle aside and marched back to the driver’s seat. He spread the towel over and around the bloodstain; the frayed ends of the fabric crinkled up slightly, but the towel stayed in place.

He climbed into the seat but was reluctant to rest against the towel. The keys still dangled in the ignition, and he turned them gently.

The van came to immediate life. Abraham whooped in joyous relief. “Ok, everybody into the truck – we’re moving out!”

Carl leapt up to the truck’s passenger seat; the location was familiar to him, established by routines. As such, Aban crowded into the back seat. The gunman’s eyes were closed, his breathing rhythmic.

Carl stopped and quickly opened his door. “We need to bury Thomas.” He felt ashamed, barbaric. How could he even think of leaving a comrade to rot in the desert?

Abraham exhaled deeply and turned off the van. “Yeah, he’s right. We need to be civilized,” he muttered. The same guilty feelings rumbled in his chest.

“What’re we gonna use to dig the hole?” Carl asked. “I don’t see a shovel.”

Aban threw back the doors of the van and tossed out a rusty spade. “Guess we’re in luck,” he began. “There’s all kinds of stuff back here. No guns, though – but I think I saw another old radio and an operating table.”

Abraham claimed the spade from the sand and marched towards Thomas’s body. With shaking hands, he closed Thomas’s eyes. Carl thought he heard something else, uttered in gentle Arabic. But he was never sure.

Not one to waste time, Abraham broke the nearby sand and yanked out a pile of earth. Grains teetered off the shovel and wafted away. The sand wasn’t light, and creating a hole was arduous work. Abraham toiled for some minutes before Carl offered to relieve him.

“Let me dig for a while,” he said.

Abraham gratefully accepted the invitation. His leg throbbed and upper body ached, yet he felt

significantly better – as though his labor was a proper way to honor Thomas’s memory. It was in no way sufficient, but it was a start.

Carl’s duty was only beginning. He didn’t want to dump Thomas in a shallow grave; something deeper would be needed. The hole already had shape but forged only two feet into the earth.

He continued to dig. The blisters that covered his fingers broke open, and fluid spilled over the shovel. The new skin, no longer sheathed by calluses, protested the work. However, after a few minutes of unceasing labor, he finished up. The hole burrowed over four feet, and Carl thought it more than sufficient. He dropped the spade into the sand and motioned for Abraham.

“Ok, let’s bury him,” he said. His words held a surreal, dream-like quality.

They tried to conserve as much of Thomas’s dignity as possible as they carried him to the grave. His body felt enormously heavy, as though he was filled with mortar. Cradling his arms and legs, they lowered him into the crude tomb.

Carl couldn’t think of any words to say, so he shoveled the first ceremonious clump of earth into the grave. Filling the hole was much easier than digging it, and soon there was no hole at all.

Abraham lingered for a bit longer. They needed to get moving, no question; yet, it was difficult to brazenly leave a fallen comrade, even an unlikely one.

In the end, though, he had to continue on. He could do nothing more, and the day would progress, ignorant of his reluctance.

Grabbing the shovel, he sulked towards the van. Aban paced around the vehicle, eagerly awaiting their departure. The sun readied itself for descent, and the temperatures would soon drop.

Carl slunk into the passenger seat and stared down at his hands, thoroughly depressed. His fingers throbbed furiously – sand had and grated against any calluses he had left.

Soon, everyone was in the van. For the second time, they readied themselves to leave. Abraham turned the key, sparked the engine, and threw the van in gear.

“Mosul, here we come.” Abraham’s voice reverberated louder than he intended, and Carl winced slightly.

“When are we gonna wake up the prisoner?” asked Carl. “We’ll need him to find the hideout.”

Abraham shrugged. “We should leave him be for a while longer. Don’t want to give him too much time to think up a lie. We’ll do it when we’re close to Mosul.”

Carl nodded. “And that’ll lead us to The Doctor. Hopefully then we’ll be able to shut down this whole operation.” He looked over at Abraham with sorrowed eyes. “I hope Thomas died for something.”

Then, without warning, Carl felt the smothering hands of exhaustion. The two-day trip and prolonged combat took a toll on his strained body, and the adrenaline shot wore off. It hardly took more than a few seconds for him to fall into a black, dreamless sleep.

## Chapter 22

*Thud.*

Carl came into a drowsy state of awareness, but didn't bother to open his eyes. The car hummed busily along, and the atmosphere felt mostly tranquil.

*Thud.*

Carl's eyebrows dipped; the sound, originating from the backseat, interrupted his peace. The noise floated around in his mind, nudging him awake.

*Thud.*

He couldn't ignore the sounds any longer. Grudgingly returning to the land of the living, Carl opened his eyes and looked around.

Abraham noticed his awakening. "Glad to have you with us," he said. "You were out for quite a while there."

Carl rotated his shoulders, trying to promote circulation. "Where are we?" he asked. The light wasn't nearly as intense, but he still squinted.

"Not far from Mosul. We'll be there in a few minutes."

Carl was silent for a time. *I must've been asleep for most of the ride*, he realized. Then, his tired brain recalled their plan.

"Are we gonna wake up the prisoner?" he wondered aloud. "We should probably do that."

*Thud.*

A small and crooked grin rippled across Abraham's face. "We already have."

Carl turned in his seat and peered into the back of the van. As he expected, he saw Aban kneeling on a small stool. The gunman slouched in a corner, bleeding from the mouth and eyes.

Aban continually talked to the man in a quiet but stern voice. After a period of talking, he'd ask a question – and every time, his question would go unanswered. The gunman refused to cooperate.

And when the gunman didn't cooperate, Aban hit him. A towel, wrapped loosely around Aban's fist, did little to soften the strikes. But even through the blows, the gunman wouldn't talk.

Carl watched for a few minutes, trying to awaken himself fully. Then, he called Aban over to the front seat. Aban, breathing heavily, moved to the front of the van.

“How’s the interrogation going?” asked Carl. The question was only a pretense - it was clear that no success had been achieved.

Aban grimaced. “Not well at all. I can’t get him to talk about his organization – if you really want to call it that. I don’t know how I’m gonna get him to give up their location.”

Carl nodded. “Ok. What do you know about him?”

Abraham cocked his head. “Nothing. He won’t talk, doesn’t even threaten me in return... it’s impossible!”

Carl stopped him before he could continue. “Try to focus. Is there anything, even a small thing, that you observed about him? Mannerisms, markings, something like that.”

“Well... he looks like he shuts down when he gets hit. And he has a tattoo on the back of his neck.”

Carl’s ear perked up. “A tattoo? Do you know what it means?”

Abraham shrugged. “Well, it’s not very common, but I think it’s a disciplinary tattoo. Three notches, three offenses. Something like that.”

“He’s made mistakes...” Carl muttered, not loud enough for anyone else to hear. “Alright,” he said, “will you translate for me? I want to have a talk with him.”

Aban agreed, and together they moved back into the van. Carl grabbed the small stool, and sat down close to the gunman. He exhaled slowly, collecting himself. The gunman stared vacantly at the floor.

“Do you know why you’re here?” Carl asked, and Aban translated. The gunman glared at Carl for a moment, and looked away. Aban stood up to begin the hitting, but Carl motioned for him to stay.

Continuing without a response, Carl said, “I’ll bet you were told to go pick up your friends. It’s interesting that they never showed up...”

Again, Aban translated. The gunman’s face reddened, and his eyes narrowed to slits. He stared venomously into Carl, but said nothing.

Carl’s mouth began to curl into a smiling snarl; the gunman was playing into his hand. Excellent.

He commenced his monologue. “You know what I think? I think they were never meant to get picked up. I think you were sent out here to run into us.”

Finally, the gunman could no longer constrain himself. He shouted at Carl with what little strength he had left, towards Carl. More Arabic. Spittle flew from the gunman’s furious mouth. Carl leaned back a little in order to stay out of the way.

“He says you lie,” relayed Aban.

Carl smirked. “Of course he does.” Then, he addressed the gunman again. “Your tattoo – it means you screwed up. Maybe you screwed up one too many times.” He leaned in close. “Maybe they just got sick of you.”

The gunman shook his head frantically. He stared at the floor, then closed his eyes. His hands shook, only in part from his wounds. Carl’s influence began to take effect.

Carl moved in for the kill. “They gave you over to us. They wanted you to die in that van. They wanted you to die like your friend did...” – Carl pointed up to the front of the van – “right in that seat.”

Aban translated, and the words landed like brutal blows. The gunman slowly began to crack, and he hissed when he took a breath. His uncertainty manifested itself physically.

“You take us to your people, and we’ll let you leave. They’ve tried to kill you, and we might just let you live.” Carl leaned back again, pausing for effect. “The choice is yours. Do yourself a favor.”

Aban translated in a powerful tone of voice. The van grew still as the gunman weighed his options. His eyes stayed closed, and he clasped his hands to still the shaking. Then, in a small, reluctant voice, he spoke to Aban. After delivering his message, the gunman bowed his head.

“He says he’ll guide us to the base,” Aban breathed. “I can’t believe it, but you got him to talk!” His eyes were wide from pleasant surprise.

Carl nodded. He wasn’t exactly elated – interrogations never sat well with him. The practice was vile, but necessary. He preferred not to implement violence, and occasionally he could get away with it.

“I’m not always a gun-toting brute,” he said, and he was glad he’d been given the chance to prove it.

Aban shook his head in mild wonder. “Alright, go ask Abraham when we’ll need further directions. We should be set at this point.”

Carl hopped back into the front seat. “The gunman’s gonna lead us to the hideout,” he informed Abraham.

“Yeah, I heard,” replied Abraham. “I’m glad you didn’t have to beat up on him, even though he deserves it.”

“Whatever gets the job done. When are you gonna need directions?”

“Soon,” Abraham admitted. “If Yasin’s information was accurate, then we’re only a few miles away.” Abraham scratched his beard, thinking. Sand fell out and onto his lap. “Actually, I think we should ask him to guide us there.”

Carl nodded, and retrieved the gunman, who complied without any fuss. The two squatted behind Abraham’s seat.

Abraham spoke a few gentle words to the gunman. As usual, Carl couldn't understand. He was beginning to feel a little left out.

"He says the outpost is just north of here, maybe a few kilometers off." He glanced over at Carl. "Which means a mile or two."

Carl chuckled a bit. "Yeah, I know what a kilometer is."

Aban seated the gunman back on the stool and gave him some instructions. The gunman listened attentively, but found it difficult to balance on the stool. He looked like he might've lost a lot of blood.

Abraham rapped Carl on the shoulder. "Aban's telling him that he's free to leave when we head into the base. Are you ok with that?"

Carl nodded. "...I hate what he did to Thomas, but I can't just kill him in cold blood. I suppose he can go."

"Good man," Abraham said approvingly. Then, in a louder voice, directed at no one in particular: "*Alright, load your weapons, this is it.*"

## Chapter 23

Boston, 1983

At long last, the phone rang. The table vibrated with the noise, and it caused both Johnson and Beth to jump. With frantic reflexes, Beth picked up the receiver.

“Hello? Dr. Maddux!” The words left her mouth without intention. For a brief time, she panicked; what if it was just a friend calling?

Luckily, her fears were ungrounded. The doctor’s weary voice floated into her ear.

“Yes, it’s me. I’m talking to Beth, correct?”

Beth sighed, but her deeper anxiety remained. “Yeah, that’s right. Did you get the results?”

Beth heard the doctor take a deep breath through the phone, and her heart sank. *Oh no, oh please no. Don’t let him be too sick.*

“This is difficult for me to say,” the doctor began, “but we tested for a few potential ailments. I thought it was epilepsy. But that’s not actually the case.”

His voice faded, lingering for a tantalizingly long time. The pause drove Beth beyond impatience. It made her want to scream, “THEN WHAT WAS IT?” but she held herself together.

The doctor continued with all reluctance. “It turns out that he has a tumor in his brain...It’s cancerous. I’m sorry.”

Beth didn’t respond. She couldn’t respond. Shock numbed her, and she sat blankly in her chair, somewhat stupefied.

Johnson, who hadn’t listened in on the phone call, badgered her with questions. She only stared back at him with glistening, wide eyes.

“Beth? Are you there?” The doctor’s voice buzzed in her ear.

“Uhh... Yeah. Oh God. Oh no. Will he be ok?”

“Well, if you don’t mind, I’d appreciate it if you, your husband and Carl would come back down to the clinic. We can discuss treatment options there.”

Again, no response. The doctor sighed. He tried to avoid the “C” word whenever possible. No one ever liked to hear the word cancer. He’d hoped to avoid the resulting waterworks. But at least it was over and finished, kind of like ripping off a Band-Aid.

Finally a reply: “Yeah, ok. When do you want us to come down there?”



“Anytime would be fine. Preferably today,” the doctor replied.

“How about now?”

The doctor grinned haplessly. Typical response. “Sure, that’d be just fine. See you in a few minutes.”

With that, he hung up the phone. Informing patients of the bad news was the worst part of his job – he much preferred his research. But, he supposed, work must come before play.

He sat and waited for their return.

## Chapter 24

Beth hung up the phone, still very much in a stupor. She sniffled a little, and wiped her nose with her sleeve. Johnson watched her carefully, trying to comprehend her behavior. *The doctor must've given her some really bad news*, he surmised.

"What did Dr. Maddux say?" he asked gently. Her hollow state appeared fragile, and he didn't want to set her off.

Beth stood up and walked away from the table, looking for the car keys. "He has cancer," she said.

"What?"

"Carl has cancer," she repeated. Some color returned to her face as she searched for the keys. "We need to take Carl back so they can start treatment."

Johnson sat back in his chair. It felt like he'd been slugged in the stomach. All the air left his lungs.

"Cancer, are you sure? In his head?"

Beth looked at him sharply, and some of the fog faded away from her eyes. "That's what the doctor told me. And I believe him."

Johnson held up both of his hands in a gesture of forfeit. "Ok, let's take him to the hospital."

Beth shook her head. "No, Maddux wanted to see him at his office."

Johnson shrugged and shook his head – things were moving rather quickly, and he felt out of control. He pulled the keys out of his pocket and handed them to her. "I think you'll need these."

Beth snatched them up and smiled her thanks. "I'll get Carl."

She disappeared upstairs, moving weightlessly. Johnson remained in the kitchen, still winded from the shock.

It wasn't so much that he felt attached to Carl – he'd only known him for a few days. But the value of a life – a human life – wasn't contingent on his familiarity with the person. Especially after Carl's struggles and difficulties, it didn't seem fair.

The familiar, crushing pressure of responsibility grew present - nothing unmanageable, but certainly not a simple feeling. He wanted to get Carl all the help that he could get. Hopefully, Dr. Maddux would point them in the right direction for some sort of specialist, someone who would increase Carl's chances.

Beth returned with Carl in tow. “You ready to go?” she asked. Carl seemed thoroughly confused, but kept quiet.

Johnson led them out to the van and started the engine. Carl crawled into the back seat obediently. He waited until the van began to move before asking questions.

“Why are we going back to the doctor?” He didn’t feel very keen on going back to the testing rooms.

Johnson shot a discreet stare at his wife. *You didn’t tell him?*

She received the message and shook her head.

He shook off her response with a sense of incredulity. *Carl shouldn’t have been kept in the dark for this long*, he thought. But in truth, that wasn’t why he felt upset.

He just didn’t want to have to tell the kid about the cancer. Yet, he knew it wasn’t anyone else’s job. As the head of the house, the responsibility fell upon him.

“Well, Carl, Dr. Maddux found out what is making you sick.” He swallowed; a lump grew in his throat, and talking became more difficult. “It’s a tumor. You might not even know what that is, and that’s totally fine. The important thing is that we’re gonna make you better.”

Carl watched Johnson through the rear-view mirror. He noticed the gleam of sweat on Johnson’s face and the slight quaver in his voice.

“It’s that bad, isn’t it.” The words formed a question, but Carl knew. He knew it was bad. His question – his statement – lingered in the stale air.

“Yeah, it’s pretty bad,” Johnson replied with a crackling voice.

Beth slapped his arm. Communicating with angry stares (as married couples often can), she sent him a message: *Why would you tell him?*

Johnson replied in the same manner. *I’m not gonna lie...*

Beth intervened, if only briefly. “It may not be a good sickness, but we’re gonna make you all better. I promise.”

Carl’s ever-observant eyes connected with hers. His voice was ghostly, hollow, like a departed soul. “You shouldn’t make promises that you can’t keep,” he said, or whispered; Beth would never know. But she would never forget that instant.

The streets were clear for the remainder of the drive, and they arrived rather quickly. Johnson rolled through the parking lot and parked directly in front of Dr. Maddux’s office. They left the vehicle, hopped over the curb and entered the building.

As before, the waiting room was devoid of patients. The woman at the front counter recognized Johnson and called them over.

"I'm glad you came," she said. "Dr. Maddux set up a room for you. Follow me"

She disappeared behind the counter for a time, but emerged before she was missed. She opened up the door to the long hall and propped it open.

"This way," she commanded, and Carl jumped to obey. The woman had a marvelous ability to make it seem like everyone else existed on *her* time.

At any rate, she led them into another patient room. Just as before, she left them waiting for the doctor. And just as before, the doctor didn't keep them waiting long.

He emerged, touting a clipboard and wearing a deep-set frown. "Hello." His salutation, which went appropriately unanswered, seemed reluctant.

In a calculating sweep, Dr. Maddux moved through the room. The others watched him with dependent eyes. He removed a pen from his breast pocket and placed it atop his clipboard.

"Beth, we've already spoken briefly on the phone, but the message was reasonably clear." He continued, perhaps without tact: "Carl, you're sick. There's a tumor inside your head, and our results say that it's cancerous."

He paused, waiting for any question. Johnson had two.

"How long has he had the tumor? I mean, how long has this been going on?"

The doctor glanced briefly at his clipboard before answering. "Well, as far as we can tell, the cancer is fairly aggressive. It hasn't been a year. Probably a month or two. My guess – and that's all it is, a guess – would be around eight weeks."

Johnson, never one to accept any circumstance as unchangeable, was a little stubborn. "But that's almost no time at all – how can it be so serious?"

The doctor answered, but not without an undertone of condescension. "The cancer is quite invasive, and given the sensitive nature of the region, treatment will be... touchy."

Johnson rubbed his eyes. "This should've been caught sooner. Somehow, it should've been stopped."

"Well, I'm assuming Carl hadn't been to the doctor in a while. Perhaps they could've found it sooner, but I doubt it. The disease can be, by its very nature, difficult to detect."

Dr. Maddux received no vocal response, so he continued, and braced for the backlash.

"Had he shown symptoms earlier, we might've caught it in a younger stage. But now... I don't think there's much we can do." He appeared reluctant, but Carl thought he detected a sly hint of eagerness in the doctor's eyes.

"*WHAT?*" Beth's voice rang out harshly, perhaps a little louder than she intended. "There must be *something* you can do."

“Well, we can try radiation treatment, but the success rate isn’t very high. And it might only elongate your life by a few years.”

Johnson removed his glasses and forcefully rubbed his eyes. “It’s gonna sound strange, but a... guy I know warned me about radiation treatment. Is there anything else? Anything at all?”

Dr. Maddux stared rigidly into Johnson. For a strange moment, Carl felt a slight falter in the doctor’s confidence. No one dared blink for some moments.

Eventually, the doctor spoke, but he talked without emotion, almost robotically. “There’s one other option. I’m running a very... experimental test on a new treatment. Something I created myself. I can’t say it’ll be successful, but it may be your best bet.”

Johnson raised an eyebrow. This latest revelation seemed almost *too* timely – planned, even.

“Why didn’t you tell us before?”

The doctor replied smoothly. “Most people don’t put their faith in fringe treatment. It’s generally the more... desperate patients who consider alternative cures.”

That sounded reasonable to Johnson, and Beth didn’t protest. “So what is the treatment all about?” he asked.

“Ah,” the doctor breathed, “the crux of the matter. In brief, with new scientific advancement, cell division can either be promoted or discouraged. If I can highlight the cancerous cells and discourage their reproduction, the cancer will recede.”

“Has it ever worked before?”

Carl’s clear voice washed against their ears like crashing waves.

The doctor peered down at Carl, thoroughly unsettled. “Well... not exactly. You’d be part of the first test group.” Immediately, Dr. Maddux regretted his honesty; knee-jerk panic would probably drive Carl out of his scientific grasp.

Yet, to his surprise, the family didn’t stampede out of his office. They remained seated, still available. Perhaps they’d consent after all...

“And there’s no other choice?” Johnson wondered aloud.

The doctor shook his head. “That’s all that would be effective at this point.”

“I think I should try it.”

All faces turned towards Carl. His acknowledged none of their glances, but stared stolidly into the floor.

“I think I should try it,” he repeated.

Johnson nodded. "That doesn't sound like a bad idea." *At least it's in line with Carl's wishes*, he thought.

The doctor nodded, trying not to look as giddy as he felt. "Excellent," he said. "We can get started today if you like. I'd suggest immediate treatment. At this point, every second counts."

Now in a state of reluctant acceptance, Johnson did his best to abandon his skepticism. "How does it work?" he asked.

"Well, Carl will stay here for about three days. We have two beds downstairs, and he can take one. As I said, this treatment is largely fringe science. He'll take a few injections every day, and we'll monitor him 24/7."

"May we be there during the treatment?" Beth inquired. She sat with her arms folded limply across her chest.

The doctor held his hands apart, palms up. "You're welcome to stay for the first session, but it'd probably be best if you gave us room to do our work."

"Oh, come *ON*." Johnson spoke more harshly than he intended, and the doctor reacted as though he'd been slapped.

"Sir, it's standard protocol," the doctor said. "And we don't have a viewing room, so you'd only be in the way. It would be in Carl's best interest if you simply allowed us the freedom to cure him."

Johnson sighed. "Alright," he said. "Let's do the first session, though. I want to see."

The doctor nodded slightly, and Carl thought it somewhat rigid. However, Carl allowed himself to be led, not unlike a sheep, back into the testing rooms.

## Chapter 25

The spiraling stairs seemed less menacing the second time, and the testing rooms less mysterious. In truth, both looked pretty normal. Dr. Maddux pointed to the right wall of the grand space, towards an oddly shaped chair.

“Carl, if you’d please sit in that chair...” the doctor’s voice trailed off; his focus shifted elsewhere. Beside Carl’s chair was a large metallic filing cabinet, which fit in nicely with the rest of the room. Dr. Maddux skimmed through the files, searching for notes. *Not directions*, he told himself, *just guidelines. Standards, really.*

At length, he found the applicable notes. His eyes studied the page astutely, but not for too long. Newly enlightened, he placed the notes back in their file.

The filing cabinet served as a table for a small cooling unit, which hummed faintly. The doctor eased open the unit and withdrew two bags: one with a clear liquid, the other with a light red solution. He placed these close to Carl’s chair. Carl eyed the bags carefully – to his young brain, they looked much like water and blood.

Dr. Maddux must’ve guessed Carl’s mind, or else entertained similar thoughts.

“They’re just cases of medicine,” he said. “I’ll be inserting them through an IV drip, which is basically just a needle in your arm. The medicine will go right into your blood.”

Carl was a tough kid, but a kid nonetheless. “That won’t hurt, right?”

The doctor shook his head. “It’ll be a small prick through your skin. Nothing too bad.” He began priming the medication for use and didn’t notice Carl’s face begin to pale.

*That could’ve been handled better*, thought Johnson. He tried to reassure Carl as best he could. “Don’t worry, it’s just a little poke. It won’t hurt at all.”

Carl didn’t buy it, but he remained calm – mostly. He was, at least, mature enough to stay seated. His small fingers gripped the chair tightly.

The doctor began to assemble the IV drip. He pulled out and primed the tubes easily; his practiced hands made the process simple. He glanced slyly – ever so slyly – towards Johnson and connected the clear bag to the dip. The red bag remained untouched.

Dr. Maddux flipped a switch, and the clear fluid began to creep up the tube. He fastened a sterilized syringe to the far end of the tube and brought it over to Carl’s arm.

“It may help if you look away,” he told Carl.

Carl refused. Perhaps, deep inside, he felt the need to retain some measure of control. It didn't matter, though. The needle was going in, one way or another.

In his experience, Dr. Maddux had found that it was best not to give the patient any warning. Kids tended to freak out when they had too much time to think about it. Adults did too. Something about that little needle...

So, wishing to move along quickly, he tapped Carl's arm to find a vein and drove in the needle. It was all over in a moment, as the doctor knew it would be.

Carl's brain took a moment to register what happened. He witnessed the needle pierce his skin. He even watched as a small drop of blood formed around the broken skin. But it happened so fast, he never had time to react. The pain was hardly noticeable. If anything, it felt odd to have a foreign object imbedded in his arm. He felt, for a lurid moment, that he could feel the intravenous fluid pouring filling into him.

"How do you feel?" Johnson nervously inquired.

"That wasn't so bad," replied Carl. Then, with a sheepish grin: "I have a needle in me."

Johnson chuckled slightly, quite relieved. "Is he gonna be a little loopy?" he asked the doctor.

Dr. Maddux nodded slowly. "He'll be somewhat illusioned for a while, possibly even after treatment. The drugs will take some time to flush from his body."

"Is that standard?" asked Beth.

"It is for this treatment," the doctor replied. "It will be more... substantial than regular treatments. Nothing permanent, of course, but he may see things, or think he's seeing things. The hallucinations are, on the whole, totally regular."

Beth seemed perturbed, but the doctor wasn't in a very soothing mood, so she remained in that place. Her forehead creased and jawline grew more pronounced as her teeth clenched together. The stress was somewhat evident on her body; Perhaps it was a little disproportionate this latest development... perhaps it was a reaction to cumulative events.

Johnson watched Carl carefully, looking for any signs of discomfort. On the whole, though, Carl seemed perfectly content – perhaps more happy than Johnson had seen him. The drugs did wonders to ease Carl's worry.

"So what did you just give him?" Johnson questioned.

"Well, there was a drug to cleanse his body from any recent toxins. It will help to create a more open atmosphere to begin the cell treatment. The side-effects are pretty apparent - loopiness, disorientation, and so on." Only Dr. Maddux knew this to be only half-true: the disorientation was largely due to the LSD that had been mixed into the solution.

Johnson, in his understandable ignorance, accepted the answer. *Surely* a doctor would never lead him wrong.



“Alright,” said the doctor, with just a touch of impatience. “Carl’s going to be pretty tired here in a little bit, so it’ll probably be best if we give him some space... The treatment is exhaustive, so he won’t be accurately conscious for the next few days. That’s part of why we keep him here.”

“We’ll be able to visit him, right?” Beth asked.

Dr. Maddux grimaced and cocked his head to the side. “I suppose it would be possible, but I’d be surprised if he even knew you came. He’ll be *that* out of it. It’d probably be best – for him – if you didn’t.”

Beth couldn’t imagine why, so she didn’t say anything in return. Johnson went up to Carl and put his hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“Hey, buddy. We’re gonna have to go soon... But I’ll see you later, ok? A couple days tops.”

Carl nodded happily, zantly. He patted Johnson’s hand – a surprising show of affection. In fact, for Carl, that was a lot. Johnson walked reluctantly back over to Dr. Maddux.

Together, Carl’s foster guardians walked away from him. They followed Dr. Maddux up the stairs and (Carl later assumed) left for their house. For the time, though, they left him.

## Chapter 26

The footsteps faded slowly, moving up the stairs. Straining, Carl could just make out the sound of a door closing. Then, silence.

Incidentally, Carl noticed a circular clock hanging on the opposing wall, slightly off-center. It counted away the seconds soundlessly. The rest of the room was still and quiet – oppressively so. He couldn't get up and walk around due to the needle in his arm, and he possessed neither the will nor the inclination to remove it.

As such, Carl sat in the reclining chair – which was actually pretty comfortable – and tried to relax. It didn't look like the doctor would return immediately, so why stress out?

The IV drip gradually served its purpose. A surgery-grade painkiller pushed Carl into mild delirium: it had taken effect almost as soon as the needle had broken his skin. If it hadn't been for his altered state of mind, Carl might've plucked out the needle and investigated the testing room. Instead, he sat quite contentedly in the chair.

The LSD took more time to come into effect. The minute hand on the silent clock moved considerably before Carl felt any change. *Dr. Maddux must be getting more medicine*, he thought. *He'll come back.*

Before he could worry about the doctor's absence, a most peculiar thought crossed through Carl's mind: he felt that the room was breathing. Not a ragged or forceful breathing, but a slow series of breaths. The room would inhale deeply, hold itself, and exhale. It was peace; it was rhythm.

The walls boasted a cheap stucco covering, which rippled slowly, like waves in a calm ocean. The room would swell in inhalation, and the walls would ripple out and around him; the room felt very much alive. Carl sat, marveling in the midst of this new presence. His pupils dilated a good bit, and the light in the room intensified.

However, his marveling ceased with the sound of footsteps. Someone descended the stairs and moved into the room with deliberate and confident strides.

The devil walked in.

Forgetting his previous joy, Carl shrank back into his chair. Shrill terror crept up his spine, and it froze him in place. This devil only smiled, though: a hollow, false, soulless grin.

*It must be the devil*, Carl thought. *Something evil.* The creature stood over him, observing Carl's emotions with mild interest. In time, the creature removed his doctor's coat and wiped his hands with a cleansing wipe.

"Stay away," whimpered Carl. "Just stay away." Given his state of mind, it was difficult to speak at all.

The devil took little heed and acted on his own accord. He produced another syringe and hooked it into the IV system. He then took the red bag – which, until now, had gone unused – and plugged it into the needle.

“I don’t want it,” stammered Carl.

The devil only chuckled. He flicked the needle twice to prime the fluid and gripped Carl’s arm.

Carl, stricken down in terror, went entirely limp. He remained aware, but couldn’t summon the strength to move or resist. Carl felt the prick of the needle and consigned himself to some horrible fate.

*I’ve been poisoned, he thought. The red bag is poison.*

“Those are just fluids,” the devil said, with a voice much like Dr. Maddux’s. “You’re definitely going to lose some body fluid soon enough, and this’ll keep you going.”

“What’re y-you gonna d-do to m-me?” Carl could hardly speak, and he barely managed to blubber out his words.

“Exactly what I said I would do. I’m gonna try to make you better.” The devil said. Or did the doctor say it? Carl couldn’t tell. They were indistinguishable.

Largely unprompted, the doctor – or the devil – began to explain his means and motives. “Look.. you’re gonna go through some unpleasant things in these next few days. I don’t want you to distinguish reality from hallucination... given, by some off chance, that you actually survive.”

Carl couldn’t entirely understand the message. His mind was already far too inebriated for abstract thought.

“Really, I’m only telling you this,” the doctor continued, “because I’m sure you won’t remember it. But I think you should know, if only for a little while. See, I like you, kid. You’re tough. I have hopes for success with you.”

Carl, reacting instinctually, retreated into himself. *I have to remember what happens, he said. I have to remember.*

And with that final thought, Carl succumbed to the fluid and LSD – his mind ventured into space, beyond his willpower.

## Chapter 27

Iraq, 2010

Carl thought that his heart might burst. The typically apprehensive surge of adrenaline coursed through his body - combat was not far off. The road towards outpost – and hopefully the end of his journey – wound back and forth rhythmically.

He glanced back. The gunman remained on his stool, trying to remain conscious and alert.

*He's lost a lot of blood*, thought Carl. *He won't last much longer*. He wasn't exactly saddened by the thought. The man had killed Thomas.

Aban crouched in the back. He too stared at the gunman. His thoughts were probably the same. In many ways, his stoic persona was that of a seasoned soldier. His m249 rested before him, primed and ready to do work. His hands, though – his hands shook.

*The fighting is getting to him*, Carl thought. He felt a small bit of empathy for the man, pushed to the limit.

Then, Carl looked down. His hands were shaking, too.

A garbled bit of Arabic floated in from the back seat. The gunman had roused himself from the blood loss and managed a few words.

"He says that we're close," Abraham translated. He slowed the van to a lower pace and rolled down the last bit of empty road. The calm before the final storm.

Carl closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. Once, exhale. Twice, exhale. The shaking in his hands lessened, but didn't entirely leave. He opened his eyes slowly and squinted forward. The vague outlines of interconnected structures emerged.

Carl grabbed his m4 and checked his tactical vest: *Ammo? Check*. He inserted a magazine and snapped back the bolt. He glanced to his side, and noticed that Abraham's weapon was resting across his lap, already loaded and primed.

"Preparation," Abraham quipped, with a coy grin. His smile died quickly.

In a few moments, the compound came into clear focus. Buildings laced together, all labeled alphabetically. Even from a distance, Carl could see the order.

A massive chain-link fence stood before the compound, stubborn and looming. Abraham drove towards the fence.

A gate attendant, who carried an ak47 over his shoulder, held up his hand. He barked out a few confident words in Arabic and stepped forward.

“Yeah, right,” said Abraham. He clenched his jaw and floored the van.

The confident light in the gate attendant’s eyes vanished. The van roared forward as fast as the dusty vehicle could go; Abraham kept the gas pedal pressed down completely.

At first, the gate attendant tried to unsling his weapon. The van, however, was simply moving too quickly. As the collision became increasingly imminent, he tried to turn and run.

The van closed the distance with an amazing speed. The guard didn’t really have any chance at all. When the van was nearly on top of him, he tried to dive out of the way – and the top half of his body was safe.

His legs, though, took the full force of the van. Both of his knees buckled, forced to bend the wrong way. The two sickening snaps weren’t audible over the roar of the vehicle.

The force of the collision spun the attendant’s body like a rag doll. His torso spun back in towards the van, and his face smashed into Carl’s door. Carl caught a glimpse of the man’s face as he fell away from the van, but wished he hadn’t - the man’s top teeth had been shattered. His nose was destroyed and blood was smattered over his face.

Less than a second later, they came into the chain link gate. Surprisingly enough, when matched with a speeding van, the chain link wasn’t very effective.

Those inside the vehicle felt a brutal lurch, but the gate blew open. The van sputtered a little bit, and one of the tires popped, but they were inside the compound.

An alarm sounded somewhere, wailing like a newborn babe.

“Ok, let’s move,” Carl heard himself say. The words were involuntary.

Both Carl and Abraham leapt from the van, guns up, safety off. They moved into the space, moving for the closest cover: Building D, which was just another structure that interlaced with the rest.

Aban exited through the back doors, leading out the prisoner, who they’d already freed from his bonds. As they crossed the van’s threshold, though, Aban put his hand on the gunman’s shoulder.

The gunman turned, fearful. But Aban didn’t stop him with ill intent. Rather, he presented the gunman with a short knife – not the best weapon, perhaps, but still a dangerous tool.

The gunman’s faced was both grateful and surprised. He nodded his thanks, still quite bewildered.

“Remember who provided you with freedom,” Aban said, and then sprinted away towards Carl and his brother.

The gunman, eager to leave the facility, made a run to a different building. Perhaps he sought to find a back door. As he began to run, though, the crackle of latent gunfire broke the waiting silence.

Somewhere, from the top of another building, one of the facility guards opened fire. He shot long bursts in a zigzag motion towards the van. Bullets caught the ground, causing hiccups in the sand.

Carl and Abraham, who'd enjoyed a brief head start, made it to Building D unscathed. Still mostly running, Carl put his boot up towards the center part of the door, which broke open immediately. The two filed inside.

Aban, who felt the urgency and loneliness of uncovered ground, sprinted for the door. He ran, nearly bent double, as fast as he could make himself move. The sand about his feet kicked up from his striking heels and the storm of lead that trailed him. When he was only a few feet off, he dove head first through the doorway. His face landed on the floor before the rest of his body, and he cringed awkwardly... but he survived.

"Am I hit?" He wondered aloud, checking himself for bullet wounds. He found none.

The gunman's journey was substantially longer. The building that he made his goal was further off. He ran awkwardly, already dizzy from blood loss and fatigue.

The guards – more of them had come to stop the intrusion – fired down, mistaking him for an outsider. Perhaps, even if they had known his identity, they would have fired anyway.

Their aim wasn't great, but it was entirely sufficient. Of the hailstorm of bullets that they unleashed, slightly less than half made contact. They struck the gunman with incredible synchronization, all over his body. The gunman collapsed in a mangled heap, his blood staining the sand; his arms and legs were riddled with gunfire; his torso was broken with the hot lead.

The guards would've fired any executionary volley, just to confirm the kill, had retaliatory shots not resounded from Building D. Carl, seeking to keep the guards at bay, fired a few shots in their general direction.

The guards weren't used to enemy fire and they ducked away, calling for further backup. The gunman, through sheer strength of will, remained conscious. He couldn't move his hands – he couldn't move his neck. He tried to breathe and sucked in some sand with the oxygen.

It took nearly a minute, but his blood began to pool. The fluid drifted around his head, sealing away his breathing space. He tried to move his neck, but the action eluded him.

He tried to breathe, but the air just wasn't there for him. The blood sealed over his face, blocking out the oxygen. He took an involuntary breath and consumed a mix of bodily fluid and sand. His stomach tensed in primal consternation, crying out for air. His next few seconds were beyond unpleasant – riddled with bullets and unable to inhale. Then, his body slackened, his struggle ceased.

He lay still, drowned in his own blood.

## Chapter 28

“WHERE TO WE GO FROM HERE?” Aban yelled – combat had effectively removed his volume control.

“I’m not sure yet,” Carl replied. “We need to cut off the serpent’s head, though – the whole operation will crumble without their leader. We have to find the man you call the Doctor.”

“But then where is he?”

Carl shrugged. “That’s the problem. Our best bet would be to try and get to the center of the compound; it’ll probably tell us where we need to go.”

A massive spray of gunfire silenced them. Bullets beat against the walls of Building D; some found their way inside.

“TAKE COVER!” Abraham shouted, though it was apparent to everyone that standing wasn’t prudent.

“WE NEED TO GET OUT OF THIS BUILDING!” Carl yelled. He looked to the doorway, and realized that making it outside wasn’t exactly likely.

*Maybe we can get deeper inside the building,* Carl thought. He turned around to see what was behind him; a single door, shrouded in the dim light of the building, seemed like their salvation.

The door into Building D had been easy to break, so Carl held high hopes for another success. The gunfire eventually abated, and he saw an opportunity. With a deep breath, he rose and turned towards the door. Exhaling forcefully, he planted his right boot into the door.

Nothing. It didn’t even budge. Carl bounced back, grimacing at the shrill pain in his leg. He tried again and got the same result. Aban and Abraham watched desperately, hoping for a way out.

The gunfire increased again, but Carl ignored it. He threw himself against the door in his desperation. It knocked the wind out of him, but the door remained still. He pounded against the door with the butt of his rifle, and then with his fist. Nothing worked.

The gunfire amped up even further, and Carl instinctively ducked. The roar of multiple guns echoed outside. The concrete walls of Building D kept most of the rounds at bay, but the occasional bullet hole caused sunlight to shine into the dim.

Carl glanced up hatefully at the door. He couldn’t get through, and there was no other way out. The volleys outside felt distant to him, and their apparent distance contributed to a rising feeling of disbelief that welled inside his head.

*It can’t end like this,* he thought. *It wasn’t supposed to end like this.*

The thumping of boots thudded from outside. *They're moving in*, Carl said to himself. He shouldered his rifle and emptied a magazine through the doorway.

Thinking slowly and moving at a similar speed, Carl turned to notice Aban's valiant fight. The Arabian man lay on the floor, firing enough for the three of them. His tanned face was red with pressure and rage.

Abraham, kneeling a few feet to the right of his brother, changed his magazine. The air was thick and heavy, hot from the exhaust of their rifles.

Looking outside, Carl could make out the shadows from a company of soldiers. The enemy stacked against the outside of Building D, close enough that Carl could sense them.

A hand appeared at the door way - a hand that grasped a roughly cylindrical object. Someone tossed the cylinder into the room, and it landed a few feet from Carl.

His brain reacted sluggishly, but the connotations of the object eventually became clear to him.

*It's a stun grenade*, he realized.

The next second, the grenade executed its intended function. It ignited. A brilliant and blinding flash lit the room, followed by a deafening bang. Carl fell back, stunned and dazed. The light seemed to filter through his eyes, through his mouth, through his nose. It infected him entirely.

The enemy soldiers breached the room quickly and effectively. One brought the butt of his rifle down onto the back of Carl's head, and Carl knew no more.



## Chapter 29

Carl opened his eyes to the inside of a cell. *I'm getting used to being knocked out*, he thought. His head stung and throbbed, but the pain felt somewhat customary.

Lambent moonlight broke onto the cement walls of the cell, peeping through cracks in the raised ceiling. The front of his cell consisted of a few metal bars, not unlike American prisons. The rest of the cell was in a state of disrepair – parts seemed to have crumbled away.

*They couldn't even put me anywhere nice.* Still, he was thankful to be alive. He couldn't think of any reason why they hadn't killed him. They must've had a reason – orders, probably. But that didn't really answer the question.

His legs had curled themselves beneath him, and he straightened them out, slumping against one corner of the cell. A crumbling corner. He ran his hand along the cell's edge and felt the groove. Large portions of cement seemed to be missing. Upon closer inspection, they seemed to have been intentionally taken out.

Scratched out.

*What's going on here?* The missing chunks – the scratched chunks, he thought – covered the cell. Surely, nothing could've scratched the cell so entirely. He put the matter out of his mind; larger questions demanded his attention.

Questions, he realized, like the location of Abraham and Aban. Wherever they were, they weren't in his cell. *Oh God, I hope they're still alive.* The idea alarmed him, but he couldn't assume that everyone survived the assault in Building D.

A scream echoed out from elsewhere in the building, and it ended his thoughts. The scream, he supposed, wasn't entirely human.

Another scream. A louder version of its predecessor, the noise scratched at Carl's ears. It wasn't the sound of pain or hate. It seemed, at least to Carl, like a bellow of rage; a scream caused by constraint and frustration.

In any case, he didn't want to meet the source of that scream. He pulled his legs towards himself. The cell was cold, but not chilled. It lacked a toilet but was otherwise habitable. Still, he doubted that he'd get any sleep during the night.

He absently ran his fingers across the scratches. One groove, deeper set than the others, created a small gap between the floor and the walls.

Lacking a more productive activity, he investigated. Edging his fingertips into the crevice, he brushed something softer than stone. It crackled slightly, but only once.

Based on instinct, he yanked his fingers out. It was a few minutes before he convinced himself that the crackling object wasn't living. When his concern abated, he dug back into the crevice and pinched the crackling object.

When he felt like he had a sufficient grip (which was difficult work), he pulled softly. His clamped fingers held, and a crumpled parcel of paper emerged from the hole.

Surprised, he unfurled the parchment. The paper was browned and cracked at the edges, but otherwise intact. Both sides, he found, contained a sprawled and scratchy writing.

His corner of the cell was too dark to examine the paper effectively, so he rose and walked into the path of the moonlight. The lowest point of the moonbeam was slightly above his head, and rested on one of the cell walls. He pressed and smoothed out the paper over the wall.

The writing, he realized, was in English. *What luck!* The writing was hardly legible, but with some effort, he was able to read most of the words. Some letters had formed together and pooled into a portion of indiscernible text, but this was rare. On the whole, the red letters were distinct enough. Eager, he flipped the text to the beginning and began to read.

----

It has been days since I came here. Since they brought me here. I don't know why they chose me, but I don't know much about them. I don't know who they are. But I know what they do.

My name is Francis, and I came to Iraq to visit a friend from college. He invited me to stay at his house for a few days because he said he had something to show me, something about our research. We studied cellular biology. At the time, it was a fringe science.

When I came to his house, he was in a terrible state. He was paranoid, sweating, and spoke in hushed tones. He wouldn't tell me what was wrong, but something troubled him greatly.

It was as though he felt like we didn't have much time. As soon as I entered his home, he pulled out pictures and documents, which he spread over a table.

At that point, I became somewhat alarmed. I asked him what the pictures were of, and his response was immediate. He was condescending, and explained the pictures as though I was child.

The documents and photos, it turned out, were of what he called a *secret research operation*. He told me that some organization took people from their homes for cellular experiments. Of course, this all seemed quite strange to me.

I asked them who the organization was, and he began to laugh. Sweat shined from his forehead. *It's Gregory Maddux*, he said - our old research

partner. He was convinced that our old acquaintance was continuing our research through the use of kidnapped subjects.

I didn't believe him - the story was too fantastical. This infuriated him, and he began to yell. *They're coming for me, he said. You must spread the word. He must be stopped!*

I was quite convinced that my good friend had lost his sanity. I thought it would be best if I spent the night elsewhere, and I told him so.

*Excellent, he told me. That way you won't be killed when they arrive.*

I was saddened, but decided that the ranting of a deranged man would do little to help me rest, and I was very tired from my plane ride. His insanity could wait for the next day. I grasped his hand and said that I would contact him the next morning. He shook his head, as though there would be no reason for it.

I assumed his words were a part of his illness, and took a single step towards his front door, which was located a few rooms away. As soon as I took the steps, though, an incredibly loud noise exploded from outside.

*You're too late, my friend moaned. They are already here!*

The first tingling fingers of fear scratched my heart. I hunched over slightly and waited to see if the prediction held any validity. Sure enough, deep voices floated towards us, coming from inside the house.

*Goodbye, sir, my friend mumbled.*

I turned around and saw that my research partner held a pistol in his shaking hand. He put the barrel in his mouth and, before I could dive towards him, pulled the trigger.

His body fell limply to the floor. I was in deep shock. I may have been screaming, but I don't really know. I only remember the blood and brain matter that covered the walls.

I fell to my knees - I know that much. The thought of running never crossed my mind. I only thought of the corpse that lay before me, and how I might bring it back to life.

Men entered the room. I don't know how many. They surrounded me. One jammed a syringe into my neck, and I lost consciousness.

The next thing I remember was a bright light, emanating from a single source. I think it was a light bulb, swinging slowly from a thick line. I tried to move, but was constrained by ropes that crossed all over my body. There was a man in the room, but I never saw his face - the light was too bright, and my

eyes were dilated.

He injected me with a long syringe, and I winced. I am not fond of needles, especially the pointy end. However, given the circumstances, it wasn't a large deal.

The injection burned inside my arm and spread to my chest. It wasn't a painful sensation as much as a feeling of power. Immense power. I didn't know the man, but I hated him - I hated him with such incredible force. That hatred seemed to fuel the injection, making it more potent. I could feel the fire spread all across my body.

----

Carl's avid eyes skirted to the end of the back page and stopped. *There must be more*, he thought – but he could find no more writing on the either side of the paper. He folded it crisply and tucked it into his pocket for safekeeping.

He paused for a few moments. Sweat formed on his forehead, and he wiped it away with filthy, blackened fingers. Slowly, a suspicion formed in his head. His eyes narrowed, and he glanced towards the crevice.

*It's possible...*

Carl didn't hesitate much, and knelt next to the crack. Once again, he flattened his hand and felt around, searching for more paper.

Nothing. His hand returned grimy and empty. He snorted, somewhat surprised. Trying a second time, he pushed his hand back in and swept it around wildly, back and forth as far as his arm would reach.

During his second sweep, the familiar, soft touch brushed his hand. A faint crackle reached his elated ears. He managed to pinch whatever was down there and dragged it back into the cell.

Another piece of parchment! Carl did what he could to clean up the paper; dust had all but covered the front and back. He flapped the paper up and down and even blew over the front. Eventually, the red words surfaced.

He paced back towards the moonlight, pressed the paper against the cell wall, and continued to read.

----

With the flames coursing through my body, the cords that held me down no longer seemed significant. I roared, I bellowed, and I snapped a few of the ropes. The scientist seemed somewhat alarmed and shrank away from me.

With concentrated effort, I broke all of my bonds. I was left bleeding and burned from the ropes and chords, but paid the injuries little mind. My focus was on the scientist. I rose from the table and faced him. So sweet was

my freedom, so glorious would be my retribution, that I felt the need to laugh. I chuckled and wiped my mouth. Vengeance would be sweet.

I never saw the scientist's face. He shrank back from me, stammering. I raised my hand to exact my revenge, and he recoiled.

Suddenly, a grievous pain from the back of my head. I stumbled forward, and turned to see three guards, armed with billy-clubs, moving towards me. My smile turned to a snarl. The men hesitated, but held their strength.

One rushed towards me, and swung his billy-club. The shaft collided with my skull at the same time that my fist met his face. Both of us staggered backwards; I remained standing; he fell to the ground, and did not again rise.

The other two guards were smarter. They came upon me at once, from two different angles. I could only prevent one from his goal. The other brought his weapon down upon my head, and I fell to one knee. Surely, without the fire-serum, I would have been knocked unconscious, perhaps even killed.

My hands fell to the ground, and I found it difficult to get up. The guards were ruthless and fell upon me with many blows. They beat me into the ground - from there, I black out. My memory fails me, and I do not remember what occurred.

Pondering it now, I think the serum wore off. Perhaps the injections don't last long, at least at first. In any case, the next moment I remember pacing about this very cell.

I'm not sure how long I prowled these walls. Time behaves strangely here. Part of me thinks I paced for days... I don't rightly know. However, after some time, a few men came to my cell. All three were armed - two with rifles, the other with a syringe.

They said it was time for my 'dose'. Of course, in the face of loaded weaponry, I didn't put up much of a fuss. The injection was of the same sort of magical serum that I had experienced previously. It spread even faster during my second dose, and just as before, my whole body felt the lick of the flames.

A few moments after the injection, I felt the familiar inclination towards violence. I thought of my friend - in particular, his suicide - and the rage urged me to fight.

The soldiers noticed my change. They raised their weapons and told me to stay back. I balled my fists and grinned broadly, but didn't approach them. Without much hesitancy, they backed out of my cell and locked it shut.

They thought they were out of danger and lowered their guns. I don't know why, but I attacked. With a below, I sprinted forwards and thrust my

hands through the cell bars. One of the guards was just within my grasp, and I pulled his shirt.

He screamed, partially from surprise. Mostly, though, he screamed because he was a coward, and he feared me. I pulled him into the bars and sank my nails into his torso. Realizing the distinct lack of brutality in my actions, I worked my hands upwards, towards his face.

He flailed violently and continued to scream, but the fire-serum gave me strength to hold him to my will. My right hand clawed at his face until my finger gouged one of his eyes. He flinched, and I furthered the action. In one smooth motion, I dug my fingers into his eye and squeezed them together.

The guard continued to wail. The other guards shouted. Everyone was yelling. I pulled my hand out of his eye socket, and his eyeball came out with my hand. It hung on his cheek, dangling from the optic nerve. This, I severed with my thumbnail.

I dropped the soldier, but he slumped against the cell bars, screaming and covering his eye socket. My arms still rested outside the bars. They shook violently.

One of the guards moved forward and slammed the butt of his rifle against my forearm. The bone snapped against the bar, and I fell back. The pain was tremendous. I landed on my back, and cradled my broken arm.

Still angry, I glanced up at the men outside the cell. The fire-serum kept me attentive, despite the pain. So, I was given a terrifying glimpse into my fate - one guard raised up his rifle and took aim at me.

He pulled the trigger before I even had the chance to gasp in terror. The bullet struck my stomach, and I fell flat on the floor. My eyes stared up into the cracked ceiling. I heard the soldiers leave the outside of my cage. I was alone in my agony.

## Chapter 30

Carl finished the second portion of paper and was somewhat disgusted. Although accustomed to violence, he didn't enjoy reading about it. Of course, he craved more from the story. Any knowledge of his captors would be valuable.

*He mentioned a guy named Maddux, thought Carl. It couldn't be MY Dr. Maddux, could it?*

He didn't know, and probably wouldn't be able to find out from inside the cell. *Patience*, he told himself. The time for escape would come.

Hoping for more pages, he knelt once again beside the groove and ran his hand through the crack, which provided him with two more pieces of paper. The sheets were crammed deep into the crevice that Carl could barely pull them out; it was no surprise that he hadn't found them before. He pulled it out into the moonlight. As expected, the story picked up again.

----

I woke sometime later. The pain from the gunshot wound knocked me out, and I never expected to again see the land of the living... yet, for some reason, I was allowed another chance.

I think I must've been out for many hours. I was ravenously hungry, despite the pain in my stomach.

*My stomach!* I looked down and noticed the hole that the bullet had left in my shirt. Dried blood caked my torso entirely. However, when I pulled up my shirt, my stomach wasn't bleeding. In fact, I could find no wound at all - it was as if nothing had ever happened.

My forearm, too, felt entirely fine: so much so that I didn't remember the injury until later. Somehow, by some miracle, my fatal wound had healed entirely.

Towards the front of the cell, I noticed a food tray that had been tossed through the bars. It held bore some sort of mushy substance, something I wouldn't ordinarily consume. I was so hungry, though... I crawled over to the tray and ate with my hands. It was pleasantly bland, and I was desperate for the nourishment.

Finishing the plate, a thought struck me. *Clearly*, I deduced, *they expected me to live. Otherwise, they wouldn't have left me anything at all.*

The thought gave me some measure of disturbing hope. But how had I survived? I thought of the serum. Perhaps it changed more than just my

behavior.

The idea seemed far too abstract for me. Nevertheless, I was shot, but I bore no scar. I checked my midsection twice over, just to be sure. I was entirely fine! Covered in blood, but fine.

The blood, though, was horrible. I reeked of it. It dried over my shirt and chest, forming into a solid paste. I could feel it break and splinter as I twisted my midsection. My shirt was rigid from it, so I pulled off the fabric, baring my torso.

As I removed the shirt, some of the dried blood brushed up against my face. I grimaced in utter revulsion, and felt my belly quiver.

I was hardly able to remove my shirt before I vomited all over the cell floor. I choked, I spat, I heaved... it was awful. The retching sounds attracted attention to my cell - snarls came from the behind some of the walls.

It was then that I realized I was not alone. I didn't much care at the time, with all of the vomit and blood, but it was a sharp revelation. I rolled onto my back and lay next to the vomit, without the will to sit up.

"So even animals can be sick and tired."

A deep, monotonic voice came in from outside of my cell. I rolled my neck and strained my eyes in order to get a decent view of the speaker. I first noticed the wheelchair. Then I noticed the individual.

"Do you understand me?" The man droned. He hardly spoke with any emotion at all. His wheelchair beeped once, but the man took no notice.

I nodded. I was the one behind bars, yes - but somehow, I felt like I was in less danger than the man in his chair. He seemed so... vulnerable.

There was a time of silence between us. He sized me up from behind the safety of the bars, and I fell down again next to my own vomit. I'm sure I was less than intimidating. The snarls from other cells died down some, but clearly the other inhabitants weren't thrilled with our communication.

The man in the chair took meager notice of their vocal displeasure. "They're animals. Of course, so am I. And so are you. We all are."

The musings of a queer scientist outside my cell weren't of particular interest to me, so I didn't respond. He might not have been talking to me; it was difficult to tell. At any rate, he didn't seem bothered by my lack of feedback. The snarls around us melted to low grumbles and growls.

"I see you took a bullet. The serum certainly worked."



*That* gained my attention. It felt like he was baiting me, but I couldn't help myself. I had to find out what was going on.

"What's in the serum? And just who the hell are you people?"

My response brought a somewhat broad smile to his face. I hated that smile. It laughed at my ignorance, and from that point on, I felt the need to remove the grin from his face.

"The serum allows your body to heal itself. The injections provide temporary regenerative abilities... they're limited, at first, to a few minutes of change. We're working on making it more potent." He paused and glanced over my cell. "You're helping make it more potent."

"I didn't sign up for this shit!" I blurted out. I did what I could to sit up, and managed to slump against the side of my cell. My face was crimson, partially from sickness. I was also furious.

He provided a half-empathetic nod. "This is true. However, you're a part of a massive project. You'll play a part in changing the world. It's a sacrifice, yes, but for great gain."

I decided to try and reason with my captor. "Well, I can do that in ways besides the role of a lab rat. I studied cellular biology in college, maybe I can help."

This surprised the wheelchair scientist. It took him a bit of time to respond. "Perhaps, if we had known that sooner. Unfortunately, I don't think you'll be sane from much longer."

He pressed a button to power on his wheelchair, and turned to roll down the hall. I stumbled towards the front of my cell and grasped the bars.

"What the hell does that mean? STOP! WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?"

He ignored me and rolled away. I never saw him again. Two guards, one equipped with a riot shield, entered the room. They pressed me against a wall. The second guard went to inject me with more of the serum, and I didn't object. However, he leaned overly close to me, and a red pen hung out of his jacket pocket.

He seemed preoccupied with the injection, and I took advantage of that. Carefully - so very carefully - I lifted my hand toward the pen.

He didn't notice my hand as I lifted the pen from his pocket - he was too busy injecting me with the fire-serum. He must've been new at the job. I palmed the pen as best I could, dropped it to the floor, and covered it with my quivering foot.

The guards finished the injection and left hurriedly. They obviously didn't want to be in my cell when the serum took effect, and I could hardly blame them. So, I sat down and looked at my prize.

The pen was scratched on the grip, probably from the trampling it endured from my boot. I licked the point and tested it against my forearm: much to my happiness, it wrote beautifully.

The serum gradually took effect, and I lost interest in the pen. I paced some. My cell... my cage... felt much smaller. No one was around to feel my anger, so I attacked my walls. They stood resolute before me, and I didn't much like it.

I punched and scratched and snarled, but made no lasting effect on the cell. At one point, during the peak of my frenzy, I tried to lift the very walls from the ground. Of course, it didn't work. But I dug my fingers underneath a crack in the cement in order to get some sort of grip and pulled up with all the strength I could muster. I almost threw my back out of alignment, but found something obscure stowed in the crack: sheets of paper!

The serum gradually wore off, and my sanity returned. My actions no longer felt rational, and I realized that my fingers bled from my attempts to scratch away my cell. My fingernails were broken; the skin beneath the nail was bruised and purple.

Yet, I was ok with the small injury, for I realized the power I'd obtained - a power mightier than the sword. I had pen, and I had paper. Not even scraps to use: the papers I found (the papers you're reading now) were massive, more like vast sheets than pieces.

It has taken hours to retell these recent events, and my hands pain me tremendously. However, I'm trying to write while the details are still fresh in my mind... and, assuming the doctor told me the truth, while I'm still sane.

I don't think I can write any more right now. Perhaps more will come later.

-----

I'm not sure how long I've been here, but I have received two more injections since I last wrote. They seem to last longer now... The side effects also seem more severe. Now, I black out after the injections and wake up with bloodied hands. Sometimes my blood will be on the walls; I think I'm still scratching them. My wounds heal quickly, though. Far too quickly - it only took a few minutes after my latest trip.

You'll have to forgive my handwriting - in the past days (I assume that days have passed), my fingers have elongated immensely. I hardly recognize them when I look down. I don't know if it's due to the abuse that they've

suffered, or if it's another effect of the serum. I suppose time will tell.

-----

I don't feel much like writing any more... I must get out of this cage. Yes... I must get out of my cage. I can break through, I can get out... This cage cannot hold me. I'll escape soon, I think.

-----

I cannot get out. I'll die in this cage... pinned down. They aren't coming to me anymore. They won't give me the fire for my body. I cry to them - I growl to them. But they do not come.

-----

I WILL GET OUT THEY DO NOT COME FOR ME I WILL ESCAPE. Leave this cage this cage this cage. I leave now. Leave now. Leave leave leave--

----

A long, dwindling stroke from the pen drifted off of the page; Carl could find no further words. The end of the page bore scratches and lopsided tears. He shuddered violently and looked around the cell for blood residue inside, but found no evidence of any gore. As before, he analyzed the mysterious scratches that covered the walls - they were only a few inches long, and none were higher than he could reach. Hesitantly, for he feared what he might confirm, Carl ran his hands over the scratches.

They were the exact width of his human finger.

## Chapter 31

Boston, 1983

All around – around and within – was dark: a murky, indistinguishable, terrifying shade. All was still, yet entirely alive. A sense of urgency, a will to run, a chain to complacency, it all melded together. And it couldn't be seen or felt through the darkness.

Carl knew he was awake, but he wasn't sure if he was dreaming. He thought his eyes were open, but the darkness told him otherwise. He could hear a throbbing hum and listened carefully.

The emanations and vibrations seemed vocal. They seemed personal. Carl listened more intently and began to make out a voice. It was nothing discernible, but he felt something calling to him through the vibration. A person, maybe?

The room felt similarly alive, and it swayed with every breath. *Maybe the room's talking to me*, thought Carl. His surroundings were certainly organic, certainly living. Yet, if he was intended to receive some sort of message, it didn't go through.

A more solidly perceivable sound broke through the sensation: a cheerful whistling, a sound that epitomized satisfaction. Carl frowned; such noise didn't seem appropriate.

The whistle continued and began to move. It stopped briefly when the whistler bumped into something - the darkness was thick. Yet, after a moment, the whistling began again, even louder.

It moved entirely around Carl. Eventually, the whistler managed to flip the lights, and a reddish glow filled the room. Carl turned and noticed that the whistler was Dr. Maddux.

"Dr. Maddux, the devil is here!" Carl recalled his earlier encounter with a devil, which had injected him with some serum. He couldn't recall much else...

"Oh, is there?" The doctor chuckled. "I wouldn't worry about it. He probably won't be back."

"...Probably..."

"Look, just drop it." A bit of irritation arose from the doctor. "I'm surprised you remembered it, anyway."

Carl decided not to pursue the subject any further. The conversation had sobered his mind some, and he tried to get up, maybe to stretch or walk around.

He leaned forward in the chair and noticed that ropes bound him in place.

"Hey, lemme go. LEMME GO!" His voice cracked, as the voice of a child often does when they're angry or scared. Carl was both.

"No, you're going to stay put. We have a lot of work to do," said the doctor. He primed a syringe.

“Your treatment truly begins right now.”

Carl struggled and kicked against the bonds, but it was of little use. He was pinned. The doctor injected the serum into his arm, and Carl flinched only a little bit. He tensed, though, in anticipation for what horrible trials he might need to endure.

He could feel the serum spread. The fluid coursed through his veins, and it burned. Oh! It burned. The inward and liquid flames tortured his insides. He was entirely sure that his innards were melting.

“Oh God, I’m on fire! It’s fire!”

Dr. Maddux smiled briefly. It was an ugly grin, smug and condescending. He continued to observe Carl, waiting for the serum to truly take effect.

Carl, after the initial shock of feeling like his body was ablaze, began to quiet down. His breathing was labored and sporadic. His hands curled into white-knuckled fists, and most of his body quivered.

Then, the animosity settled into place. Carl’s eyelids slanted and his face grew wild, like that of a beast. The quivering grew into attempted thrashing as the crazed Carl tested his constraints.

The ropes held. Carl remained immobile, and Dr. Maddux was thankful for it. The doctor slipped an iron-knuckled glove onto his right hand and stood in front of Carl.

“You are no doubt feeling the effects of the injection. With the drugs in your system, your cells will actively rebuild themselves. Unfortunately, something needs to put them to work: some sort of serious injury.”

Dr. Maddux flexed his hand and struck a blow across Carl’s face. Carl’s head bobbed back against the seat and hung forward against his chest. The iron knuckles ripped open a scratch on his cheek, and it trickled.

“We’re creating that injury right now.”

Carl hissed violently. His mental state put him beyond the capacity for words. He yearned to counter-attack, but his bonds held him in place.

The doctor didn’t wait for a response and didn’t ask for forgiveness. He lashed out again, this time striking Carl’s jaw, which cracked faintly. Carl squinted but didn’t cry out. The drugs toughened him.

The doctor struck again and again. The blows battered Carl’s face, which grew swollen. One eye closed entirely, and Carl tried to see from the other. A rather large cut on his brow bled down into his good eye and made visual observation difficult.

The doctor didn’t pause for pity as Carl’s face grew more and more disfigured. He eventually grew somewhat out of breath, and his strikes became less powerful - but they were still blows, and he still wore iron knuckles.

The beating continued. With each punch, Carl’s internal beast grew more agitated – and the beast

was cunning. It watched the doctor's punches, and eventually devised a way to get back at the man. The rational Carl, who was very much in shock, succumbed to the inward animal and obeyed.

The doctor's next strike – a straight cross, it turned out – aimed for Carl's jaw. Carl anticipated the blow and moved all of his weight to the side. The punch glanced off of the side of his face and collided with the back of the chair.

The doctor fell out of balance after missing his target. Carl took advantage of the confusion and bit down on the doctor's exposed arm. His injured jaw crackled from the exertion, but he maintained force in his bite. Carl's teeth were still sharp and serrated in their youth. They punctured the doctor's skin without much difficulty.

The doctor swore. "*Get off of me!*" He tried to pull his arm away, but Carl bore down persistently.

Dr. Maddux pushed with his free arm against Carl's face. He slapped the child, but nothing would loosen Carl's bite. Eventually, the doctor managed to tear his forearm free.

Carl felt the skin edge out of his teeth; it felt like biting an apple when a chunk came loose from the core. The doctor's arm was an apple, nothing more.

"You little bastard!" The doctor cradled his bleeding arm. Red bite marks stood out starkly against his pale skin. The little indents pooled up.

Carl made no response. The serum began to wear off rapidly, and his head began to swim. It wasn't easy to focus. He couldn't see clearly.

The doctor recognized signs, and noted the decline of the drugs. "This is what you get," he said, and planted a final punch onto Carl's swimming head.

Carl's eyes rolled up into the back of his head, and they didn't realign for some time. His chin dipped down and rested on his chest, and his neck swung loosely. The drugs, though, began to work their restorative magic. The beating had set them to work; they began to heal Carl's external wounds. In time, they would set to work on the tumor in his brain.

## Chapter 32

Carl only remembered being awake, never waking up. He was suddenly aware of his surroundings again, and felt entirely sober. The beating had ended. The room no longer spoke to him, and he could hear no breathing.

Well, aside from the breathing of the doctor, who stood behind the chair.

“...I’m ok?” Carl felt fine, but he couldn’t believe it.

“Yes, you’re entirely fine.” The doctor walked around the chair and into Carl’s field of vision. He wore a bandage around his bitten arm, and his knuckles were red and swollen. “You’re probably in better condition than I am.”

Carl shook his head, thinking of all of the blows to his face. He remembered – faintly - feeling his eyes swell shut. The memory angered him, fuzzy as it was.

“Here, take a look.” The doctor produced a hand-mirror, which reflected Carl’s face.

Carl stared: his face looked perfectly fine – no scratches, no blood, no swelling. He didn’t even look pale. His eyes grew wide and his eyebrows spiked, though he didn’t truly understand what he saw.

“The drugs undid all of the damage to your face. Once they set to work on your system, everything was repaired.” The doctor grinned in triumph. “I put you through an MRI while you were knocked out, and the cancer seems to be in remission.”

Carl was already surprised, but news of his cure put him into a glorious shock. “So I’m gonna be ok,” he said.

“Well, mostly,” said the doctor. “You’ll have to come back in a few weeks for a bolster shot, but the hard part is over. Once the drug is active in your system, you won’t even need to sustain any injury during the second dosage.”

“So you won’t hit me again.”

The doctor squinted slightly. Carl’s tone was haunting, and it alarmed him. “No I won’t be doing that again. I don’t like being bitten.”

Carl sat silently for a few moments, and the doctor busied himself behind the chair. Neither one said a word, even though there was much to be said. Carl could hear a plastic shuffling from behind him, but the chair kept his gaze forward. The red glow in the room seemed lighter, not nearly so muffling and surreal.

Finally, the doctor completed his work behind the chair and moved so that Carl could see him. He carried a last syringe, one filled with a clear liquid. Carl could’ve imagined it was water, if he was a bit

more naïve.

“I imagine that you intend to tell your parents all about the treatment,” the doctor said. His monotone held an understated menace.

Carl, being a perceptive child, sensed that the doctor wanted the happenings to be kept secret. “I swear I won’t tell. I won’t tell anyone, not a thing!”

The doctor grimaced. “Unfortunately, I can’t take your word for that. If anyone ever learned about what happened here, my career would likely be over. I might even go to jail, and I won’t risk that.”

Goosebumps rippled across Carl’s neck. “Are you going to kill me?” he whispered.

The doctor shook his head. “Of course not. Don’t be absurd.” He motioned towards the syringe in his right hand. “These drugs are going to knock out your memory from the past few days.”

“Wait, so I won’t remember this treatment?”

The doctor gave Carl a very demeaning look. “That’s what I just said. You’ll probably never remember this office, your sickness, or even me. You’ll certainly never remember the lower floors.”

Amnesia seemed better than death, so Carl remained quiet. Dr. Maddux injected the contents of the syringe without any further ado. Carl didn’t even squint in discomfort; the injections were beginning to become somewhat normal.

The doctor withdrew the needle and placed it in the disposal bin. He then washed his hands with a disinfectant wipe and moved towards a phone in order to make a call.

The idea of losing his memory – even for a few days – was extremely disturbing to Carl. He stared intently up into the ceiling, and sweat accumulated on his forehead.

“How long until I forget?” he asked.

“Not long now,” answered the doctor. “A few minutes at most. I’m going to call your parents back to this office, and by the time they get here, you’ll be an entirely new person.”

“You can’t do that!”

The doctor waved his hands through the air to dry the disinfectant. “Don’t fret, you won’t remember that you lost any portion of yourself.” Once his hands dried, he picked up the phone receiver and held it in his hand. The phone hummed faintly.

“You’ll have a childhood of relative normalcy. I’m sure it’s what you want,” he said.

Disheartened, Carl shook his head. “You’re killing me here. You’re killing a part of me. I won’t be whole again.”

The doctor dialed a number and leaned against the desk. After a few moments, someone must’ve picked up the other line, for he began to talk.



“Hi, Mr. Johnson? It’s Doctor Maddux.”

The doctor listened impatiently for a moment.

“Yes, he’s quite alright. In fact, he’s going to be ok. The treatment was successful.”

The doctor listened again. He rubbed his temple with one hand; he needed a break. He got headaches when he was stressed, and the last few days had been somewhat stressful to him.

“Yes, yes,” he said, “We’re all very excited. I’m just calling to let you know that you’re free to pick up Carl any time you like. He’s all set for the time being.”

The elation was palpable through the phone. Beth and Johnson were, no doubt, glad to come get Carl. Right away.

“I should let you know,” the doctor mentioned somewhat too casually, “That the last few days have been pretty rough on Carl. He was delirious throughout the treatment and seems to be suffering from short-term amnesia. He can’t remember the last few days. It’s a reasonably common side effect of the drugs, I assure you.”

The doctor allowed the foster parents to be alarmed but made sure to reel them in quickly.

“I can explain everything in further detail here at the office,” he said. They must have agreed with him, because he made a hurried goodbye and hung up the phone.

Happy to be through with the emotional side of things, Dr. Maddux breathed a sigh of relief. The ordeal was nearly over, and he’d be able to add more notes to his research.

“I’m already dead, it just hasn’t happened yet.” Carl still stared into the ceiling. The sweat spread down to his neck and over his scalp, making his hair soppy.

“It’s not so massive a problem,” said the doctor. “Most people never remembered much of the treatment after their first LSD trip. But you sobered up quickly... I had to wipe the memory entirely.”

“You’re heartless,” breathed Carl. “You fooled Johnson, you bound and beat me, drugged me, and now you cover up the mess.”

The doctor felt a twinge of tempered indignation flare up inside him. “I did what I had to do. If it wasn’t for me, you’d be dying right now!”

*“I am dying.”*

The doctor scowled and shook his head. “I think you’ll find yourself completely alive in a few minutes.” He checked his watch. “The drugs should activate any second now.”

As if on cue, Carl began to feel stretched, almost thin. His mind felt bleary, hazy. He gurgled in fear but couldn’t do anything more. The drugs were inexorable. Carl felt no propulsion, but he stepped forward, back into the past.

As the lingering events slipped away from his consciousness, Carl faded into a world of very blissful ignorance.

## Chapter 33

Iraq, 2010

Carl shuffled the scraps of paper together and folded them neatly. Over the course of hours, the moonlight in his cell had intensified into daytime rays. The night had suffered him no sleep.

*I must escape, he thought, or I'll suffer the same fate as the last prisoner here.*

He stood up sorely and stretched his back. The movement was good for his legs, which had grown somewhat numb from his night's stay. He shuffled over to the cage bars. When he pressed his face against the metal, he managed a decent look at the outside hall.

It didn't lighten his spirits. He was able to see room for at least five or six other cells, and no exit was to be found: just grey walls extending out in either direction. He pressed against the bars, but they didn't budge. He didn't expect them to give – after all, a crazed and drugged-out man hadn't been able to dent them.

Carl sighed deeply. He wasn't going to leave any time soon, at least not on his own accord. He'd have to wait for his captors to come to him.

*They're going to come, aren't they?*

He didn't truly know. Yet, he assumed there was a reason that he wasn't already dead. He leaned against the front bars and hoped that someone might happen by.

Time passed. Slowly. Carl's hopes and expectations dwindled with the passing minutes. Or were they hours? He couldn't truly tell. His training told him not to panic, but serenity wasn't easy to achieve in the midst of his dehydration and hunger.

Eventually, he heard – or thought he heard – the echo of footsteps. His heart flared up and his hopes resurged, but he didn't lose his soldier's mind. His instincts told him to back away from the bars, and he obeyed.

Then, without fully thinking through his plan, Carl fell to the floor and sprawled out over his cell floor. He closed his eyes, steadied his breathing, and prayed that the footsteps were headed towards his particular cell.

The floor of the cell was cold against his cheek. He yearned to open his eyes and survey his captors, but his training told him to remain still. The lack of control was terrifying; so was his fear of the imminent unknown.

He focused his ears on the thudding of feet. He tracked the noise and felt a small chill when the thuds ceased in front of his cell. *Military boots*, he surmised. *Probably two guards.*

One of the guards rapped on the front of his cell. Carl made no response, though it took every muscle in his body. He clenched his teeth tightly and willed himself not to look at the guards.

“This one looks hurt,” observed one guard. “Should we move him to the sickbay?”

“Let’s examine him first. See if he’s bad enough,” commanded the second. Clearly, he was the dominant one of the two.

*I know that voice*, thought Carl. The man had a distinctly Somalian accent. *Could it be...?*

The jingling of keys toyed with Carl’s ears. He heard the lock scape open and almost twitched when the cell door swung in. It screeched from its use and its disrepair. The two guards moved into the cell cautiously.

One of the men – the dominant one – cradled Carl’s head in one hand. With a casual flip, he prodded Carl’s face so that it would roll over onto the other side.

Carl, with more restraint than he thought he could muster, relaxed his neck and allowed his head to roll free. His other cheek felt the cold floor. He shortened his breath as best he could, hoping that the soldiers wouldn’t test him any longer.

The dominant soldier’s breath was warm and rank against Carl’s neck. There was considered silence for some time. Finally, the soldier deemed Carl to be in some sort of bodily disrepair.

“Ok, let’s move him to the sickbay.”

The subservient guard left quickly, and returned with some sort of rolling stretcher. Together, the two guards heaved Carl onto the roller and rolled him out on the gurney. They pushed Carl down the long hallways carefully, trying not to bump the stretcher.

Carl remained limp. He couldn’t believe the guards had believed his possum routine; clearly, they hadn’t received any true medical training. Amateurs.

The trip was a short one. They left the holding area and moved indoors. Carl felt the refreshing chill of air conditioning and assumed that the building was somewhat modernized. The ground was smoother, probably tile. After a few further yards, the dominant guard addressed his apparent subordinate.

“Alright, you keep up with the rounds. I’ll take the sick one here to the doctor.”

The other guard didn’t say anything, but walked back towards the cells. Carl smiled inwardly – only one guard to go.

*I can take this last guard*, he thought, and yearned to leap from the stretcher; yet, the small inner voice told him to stay down for just a little longer, and he obeyed.

The remaining guard wheeled him into one final room. As they passed the threshold, the air staled into a sterilized and stagnant atmosphere. The temperature remained the same, but Carl felt a cold sweat begin at the base of his back.

*The beginning of the end*, he thought. The room began to fester inside of him. He remained limp, but vessels began to bulge in his face and neck.

“Doctor, we’ve got a sick one,” the guard said.

A short exhale of air, a new voice. “Bring him over here.”

The guard wheeled Carl further into the room. “We found him passed out in his cell just now.”

The other voice, the doctor, approached the gurney. “Impossible!” The man breathed.

“Something wrong, sir?”

The doctor grunted that everything was fine. He continued to stare over Carl and the stretcher.

“You know, this is the second time I’ve had this man under my care. The last time was long ago, back at the beginning of my research.” The doctor said. “I never thought I’d see him again. But why is he here?”

“He was part of the recent break-in, sir. We...”

The guard’s words began to fade out of Carl’s mind. His internal voice spoke again, almost audibly, and it drowned out all other sound. *It’s time.*

Carl paused. And again, the same words came to mind. *It’s time.*

Carl didn’t hesitate again. He abruptly opened his eyes and couldn’t help but flash a ghastly smile. He looked up into the cold eyes of the doctor, who cried out from surprise and fell backwards.

Carl leapt from the gurney as soon as he gained his bearings. The other guard was close by and drew a magnum from his side-belt, but he didn’t draw the weapon fast enough. Carl swept the guard’s hands away from the pistol, which fell to the floor without firing.

The guard grunted, his eyes wide and mouth open. Carl stared, though, with eyes that were even wider: it was the Somali! His captor, his torturer, the murderer, the intimidator... The reason Carl began his conquest in the first place.

The two soldiers squared off, hands at the ready. The doctor, still in shock, slumped against his equipment table and breathed in massive gulps of air.

Carl didn’t wait for the other man to strike. He jabbed twice, but the Somali blocked his preparatory punches. He threw a cross, but the Somali blocked that as well.

After the third punch, the Somali grew tired of playing defense. He grunted again, exhaled sharply, and laid into Carl with an explosive tackle. The two men sprawled towards the ground and landed with a thud. One of the flimsy, field medical tables crashed down with them.

Oblivious to any damage he might’ve caused, the Somali punched feverishly into Carl. The blows landed squarely, and they tore a cut above Carl’s right eye. Carl held up his hands, trying to shield his face.

With a break in the pressure, the Somali reached towards his belt and fumbled for his scabbard.

With adrenaline-laced and shaking fingers, he drew a hunting knife from his belt. The blade gleamed, reflecting the incandescent light from above.

“Oh shit,” hissed Carl.

The Somali laughed sharply and shortly but didn’t delay for long. He knelt over a flattened Carl and held the knife like a ceremonial blade. In sacrificial fashion, he raised the blade into the air and drove it down.

Carl, with a mixture of reflex and luck, caught the Somali’s wrist. He wasn’t able to stop the force of the stab, but he was able to guide the knife down, away from his heart. Instead, Carl pushed the blade towards his stomach, where the blade found its home, digging into flesh.

The pain was extraordinary, unlike anything Carl had ever experienced. A foreign object lay imbedded in his body, and it drew blood internally.

The Somali moved to extract the blade from Carl’s stomach so that he could stab again – this time somewhere more lethal. He flexed his grip around the handle and grasped tightly.

Carl wrapped his hands around the blade as well, encompassing both handle and the Somali’s hand. “The knife stays in,” he choked.

The Somali ignored him and began to pull upwards. Carl pulled down, trying to keep the blade in place. The wound began to tax him, though, and his strength began to slowly slip away.

He grew light-headed. He couldn’t sit up, couldn’t get away, couldn’t even beg for his life. He looked around desperately, hoping to see some sort of salvation or rescue. Any kind. He glanced to the left and found nothing of use. He looked to his right and noticed the .45 magnum pistol just within arm’s reach.

Carl kept his left hand firmly planted around the hilt of the blade, but freed his right hand. He tried to twist as little as possible due to the knife imbedded in his stomach, but reached for the pistol. His fingertips just brushed the hilt of the weapon. He stretched out his arm, and scraped against the cold steel.

Oh! The desperate fury. Carl could feel the weapon, but he couldn’t grab it. Not without worsening the wound. The Somali continued to pull upwards on the knife, opposed by Carl’s hand. The knife’s upward struggle rubbed upwards against Carl’s skin, and blood began to ripple and spill over his midsection.

He knew a losing battle when he saw one, and he knew he couldn’t keep the knife in a reasonably safe location forever. *I have to get that pistol*, he decided. No matter the cost.

Trying not to think of the consequences, Carl lurched his body upwards, slightly to the right. His torso moved, and the knife cut into Carl’s body for every inch. He didn’t need to move far, though; he only needed a finger-length more reach.

The pain was nearly as bad as the initial penetration. Carl yelled out, bellowing slurred obscenities. But the pistol, he found, was now reachable.

At that very moment, the grip in his left hand failed him. His hand slipped from the hilt of the knife, falling into his lap. The Somali wasted no time in tearing the knife from Carl's body. He raised the knife up once more, aiming for a final and deadly stroke.

Carl didn't allow it. He grasped the pistol and pulled it up, pointing it towards the Somali. He put the soldier's face in his sights and squeezed his finger to pull the trigger.

The Somali, with reflexes that hardly seemed human, shrieked in a loud voice. Without much thought, he put his hand over the barrel of the pistol. His face tightened in a final shiver of fear.

Of course, the Somali's hand did very little to deter the bullet. Carl pulled the trigger, and the weapon fired. The bullet tore straight through the palm of the Somali's hand and moved towards the head.

Carl had aimed for the upper portion of the head; however, the knife wound and dehydration affected his aim. The bullet actually landed beneath the Somali's cheek. It broke most of the Somali's teeth, and tore through the lower portion of the skull.

The Somali collapsed. His head went limp on his shoulders, and he fell into a wretched heap. What was left of his mouth dangled from the rest of the skull, blood spilling down his neck.

Carl felt neither horror nor relief in the death. He stared down at the hole in his stomach, and did what he could to keep his mind awake and functioning. Shock – nature's mercy – numbed his pain, but he couldn't get up.

## Chapter 34

The graceful sound of metal contacting metal emanated to Carl's left. It was almost immediately paired with a few whispered words: "Oh, shit."

Wearily, Carl turned his head. His hazy brain had lost all sense of objective. *Who is it now?*

The doctor lay slumped against a downturned table, his legs limp and extended at awkward angles. He held a syringe in his hands, one that was full of fluid. Obviously, he hadn't meant to be detected.

Carl didn't think he seemed like much of a threat, but he pointed the magnum in the doctor's direction. "What are you doing with those drugs?"

The doctor paled, but he managed a clear answer. "My legs don't work when I'm under duress. The drugs help them function again."

"Oh." Carl kept the pistol raised. He didn't see danger in the syringe, but at the same time, didn't want the doctor considerably more mobile. "Toss the syringe towards me."

The doctor clutched the drugs and hugged them to his chest. "...Why should I do that?"

Carl scowled angrily. "Because I'm holding a fucking gun, and your buddy just stabbed me. I'm not happy right now. Toss over the syringe!"

Though hesitant, the doctor obliged. He tossed the syringe about halfway between them, out of their collective reach – unattainable. Carl nodded, satisfied; he just wanted the drugs away from capable hands. Carl listened to the doctor's flustered breathing for a few moments before posing a question.

"What's your name?" he asked. He wanted to make sure the man was his target. The head of the serpent.

"...Maddux," the doctor reluctantly replied. Then, with some confidence through indignation: "Why did you invade my compound?"

"Because you're intimidating and kidnapping people. You're running experiments on human beings!" Carl's voice grew into a shout, which made his stomach burn. The pain, though numb from shock, still agitated him.

"I experiment only on the leeches," Maddux spat. "Members of society who drag the rest of us down, who burden the elite. The poor, the debtors, the desperate instigators."

Carl narrowed incredulous eyes. "That's a crap reason. They're still people." He aimed his pistol at the doctor's head and closed one eye.



Maddux threw up both of his hands in a sign of surrender. “No! Stop! I do it to benefit everyone!”

“You’re lying,” Carl retorted.

“Of course not,” shot back the doctor. “The drugs made in these labs have the potential to cure mankind of nearly every ailment, every disease, and every wound.”

Carl really wanted to pull the trigger, to end his mission. Yet, curiosity stayed his hand for a few lingering moments.

“Just let me explain what the medication can do,” he said. He sounded so logical, his pleading so earnest, that Carl wasn’t able to decline.

Carl lowered the pistol a few inches. “Fine. Get talking.”

The doctor cleared his throat, wiped the cold sweat from his brow, and began. “Well, I discovered a biological compound that caused spontaneous cellular regeneration. This was around thirty years ago. At first, I thought it was useless; I couldn’t control what cells grew, and they just formed into tumors.”

The doctor swallowed slowly, shifted one of his unresponsive legs, and continued. “Then, through more experimentation, I discovered that the compound would heal damaged cells. The human body is intelligent; it purges the bad cells, and replaces them with healthier counterparts. It just needs the right... motivation. Usually through the form of some serious wound.”

Carl tried to digest the information. “What kind of wounds?”

The doctor shrugged. “Broken bones, beatings, anything that draws blood or does serious damage to the core of the body: the head, the chest, the abdominal region. Stuff like that.”

“So you have a drug that cures any major wound or disease? If you’re trying to benefit humanity, you’d better share this stuff.”

The doctor snorted. “Oh, I did. Went to a few prestigious medical research centers and showed them my findings. They weren’t interested.” Maddux spoke as a man spurned by institutions. “They said my serum was too volatile. See, it causes extreme aggression at first dosage. Over time, it can cause physical deformity, and generally drives the subject insane.”

Carl chuckled spitefully. “This is bullshit. You have a magic drug that heals people, but eventually turns them into deranged freaks?”

Maddux nodded. “In a manner of speaking. In fact, you should be able to attest to that.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

The doctor exhaled audibly. “You really don’t remember. I don’t suppose you would.” The doctor wiped the sweat from his forehead once more; the man was sweating profusely. “When you were a little kid, you had cancer.”

Carl shifted a little bit. “Yeah. Not any more, though. How did you know that?”

“I treated you. You were very young at the time.”

“Wait, you gave me the compound?” Carl’s eyebrows raised.

“I did. I also activated the serum in your body. It’s still there, coursing through your veins.”

“The drugs are still in my body?” Carl looked down at the wound in his stomach, which wasn’t bleeding as much as it had been.

“They’re permanent. They’ll never leave,” the doctor replied. “Tell me, have you ever experienced some sort of extraordinary recovery from injury? Something that seemed impossible?”

Carl lowered the pistol to his side. “Actually, yes. On the way here, a mine exploded beneath our vehicle, and apparently I broke my neck. But I’m still walking.”

The doctor nodded. “That makes sense. The serum can activate under extreme duress, even after years of latency. Perhaps your broken neck activated the drugs.” The doctor pointed at Carl’s knife wound. “For instance, that hole in your stomach: on a normal man, that’d be fatal. But I’d wager that you’ll be walking around in just a few minutes.

Carl felt torn. The man was clearly a monster, someone capable of performing horrible acts on human beings. Yet, he was the sole reason that Carl was alive. “Then why are you still doing research?” he inquired, and rather forcefully.

The doctor held his palms upward. “You don’t get it. With this compound, I didn’t just cure petty wounds. I cured mortality. Cellular regeneration might cure death itself. It just takes a little... tweaking. I haven’t ironed out the wrinkles yet.”

“You mean the physical deformities and insanity?”

The doctor stared down at the ground. “Yes, that. It’s something I’ll look into in the future.”

Carl shook his head and aimed the pistol at the doctor’s shiny and sweaty face. “No, I don’t think you will.”

The doctor feared for his life again. “Please, think of what you’re doing. The benefits of my research will never come to fruition. I’m due some reward for my efforts!”

“You’ll be stopped for what you’ve done, and a better man will continue your efforts. Without human subjects.”

The doctor opened his mouth to speak, but reconsidered and remained silent. There were no words to express his indignation and fear, and he was too proud to beg. He bowed his head and stared into his hands, waiting for Carl to fire the weapon.

Carl watched the front sight of the magnum pivot over the doctor’s forehead. The pistol felt cold and heavy in his hand. He felt the dull throb of his healing stab wound, and realized that within minutes, he’d walk out of the room. He stared long at the doctor’s limp and useless legs, which only hindered the doctor from any chance at escape.

Before he acted, though, a horrible screeching growl coursed through the building. A few seconds later, a distinctly more human cry. A series of thuds and the scraping of metal echoed from the hall of jail cells outside.

The doctor's head jerked up. "Marauders," he whispered.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

The doctor's fear developed into terror. "After extremely long-term treatment, some of the patients would develop extreme deformities. Their arms grow, their skin turns a dark purple, they grow claws. The guards call them marauders. It sounds like one just escaped the cage."

"Are they dangerous?" Carl felt an uneasy shiver run down his back.

The doctor's head bobbed up and down. "They're humanoid creatures with daggers for hands that regenerate cells almost immediately. They're almost impossible to kill."

Carl leaned his head back against the medical table. "Shit. Are they intelligent?"

"Sometimes. It varies... but if one of them just escaped their cell, then they're probably pretty smart. In fact, I-." The doctor's voice ceased when a shuffling sound began to move up the hallway.

Towards their end of the hallway.

"It's coming this way," Carl whispered. His held his gun pointed at the door and waited.

"Don't bother shooting," the doctor whispered back. "If it comes in this room, we're both dead."

The shuffling sounds echoed through the halls. Carl listened intently, trying to place the location of the sound. He heard a huffing breath, intermittent snorts, and the slurping sound of swallowed drool.

"It's right outside." The words died on his lips. He straightened his back and tried not to breathe. The creature lurked just beyond the doorway, judging by the noises.

The doctor, seeing Carl's distraction, reached for the syringe that he'd tossed away. His legs still didn't work, but he bent as much as he could, nearly folding in half. The syringe remained a few feet away from his reach. As quietly as he could, he placed his legs to the side and began to slide himself toward the drugs. He pulled himself with both hands on the ground and dragged against the floor. His right boot, which covered one of his unresponsive feet, squeaked against the tile - not a loud noise, but one that broke the quiet.

Carl heard the beast outside hiss. Clearly, it had heard the squeak. Then, a deep, tenacious growl. Carl shivered violently; the noise was so carnal, so beastly, that he couldn't help but fear. The marauder would come through the door within seconds, he knew, but the prospect seemed too ghastly to be real.

As if born from hell or a nightmare, a deep purple claw rested into the room. The veins glowed blue from beneath the skin, and the elongated fingers filed into talons. Bent and twisted bones pushed forth against stubborn flesh.

Carl caught his breath and stared. The next moment, an identical claw came to rest beside its predecessor. Now Carl could see the arms behind the claws - they were skinny and long, maybe five feet in length. They were similarly purple and black, and the veins were visible all the way up the arms.

The rest of the creature followed the claws. There was no hair on the marauder, neither on the arms nor head. It didn't seem to have eyelids either, as the yellowed eyeballs bulged from their sockets. The chest was bony. Its rib cage protruded from the chest, clearly discernible. It held itself erect with its arms as much as its legs, much like an ape. Perhaps most terrible of all, though, was the face. The creature had a somewhat human look. Their ears were flat against the skull, and the gums were swollen from enlarged teeth, but the face cast an eerily human aura

Dr. Maddux panicked at the sight of the monster. He lunged for the syringe, acquired it, and injected the contents in his arm. "Come on, get working," he muttered to his legs.

The doctor's actions attracted the beast's attention. With a brutal snarl, it prowled into the room and moved right past Carl. With a victorious and unthinking confidence, the marauder studied Maddux for a moment. It eyed the doctor the way a lion might eye a sheep: with anticipation of bloodshed.

The serum began to course through Maddux's body, and he stumbled to his knees. He tried to turn and run, but his legs weren't yet ready for the movement. He fell back into the tile, unsuccessful in his flight.

The creature pounced. It came upon the doctor suddenly, directly. With one terrible claw, it flipped the doctor onto his back. It pinned the doctor to the ground with the other.

"Oh shit, oh fuck!" the doctor howled.

The beast then extended its head and tore into the doctor's neck with its mouth. Its fangs went to work and tore a chunk out of the doctor's throat. And another chunk. And another.

The doctor would've screamed from the pain, but lacked the vocal cords to project the noise. He hadn't long to suffer, though, before the beast completely obliterated his neck.

The marauder erected itself and bellowed a victorious roar, its bloodied face cast towards the ceiling. It stepped – or crawled, Carl couldn't tell which – away from the doctor's body. It surveyed the room and eventually noticed Carl.

Carl leveled the pistol at the beast's chest and fired. The bullet went into the creature, but it drew no blood. The beast staggered back and bared its teeth, angered.

Carl fired again, this time at the beast's head. The bullet found its mark and disappeared into the marauder, just above the cheekbone. And again, it staggered back. It didn't crumple, it didn't run, it just stared and growled.

Carl panicked. He emptied magnum's ammunition, firing the remaining rounds into the marauder. The beast took the shots unwillingly, but suffered through the pain. It shook off the barrage of bullets and hissed at Carl.

"*What the fuck?*" Carl yelled. He tried to stand up, but his stomach wound wasn't fully healed.

Instead, he leaned against the table and grabbed the Somali's hunting knife.

"Stay back," he warned. But he wasn't fooling anyone. He was scared.

## Chapter 35

The marauder crouched onto its back legs and pounced again. It landed, claws straddling Carl's sides. Carl choked and coughed – the marauder gave forth a horrible odor, a chemical and sweaty smell. The stench was disorienting, and Carl's eyes watered.

The beast raised one claw to strike, but Carl moved with a faster, more desperate speed. He plunged his knife into the creature's mouth, through the fangs and up towards the brain. The creature shrieked, and Carl saw its muscles clench from underneath the skin. It lifted its head in pain, and for a moment, Carl thought that he'd slain the beast.

No such luck. The creature turned back to Carl with an enraged loathing that glowed through its yellow eyes. The knife stuck out from its mouth - its cells had regenerated around the blade, rendering the fangs blocked and useless.

The marauder hissed down at Carl, and yellowed saliva dripped down from its hampered fangs. It swiped Carl with its raised claw and tore four identical stripes into his side, stripes which immediately began to bleed.

*No more of that*, Carl thought. He grabbed both of the beast's claws at the wrist and held the creature steady. Now, neither of them could do any damage to the other.

The creature yanked violently, trying to free its hands. Carl just squeezed all the tighter, maintaining his grip on the purple and bony wrists. The creature's blue veins coursed underneath the purple covering. They swelled and pushed upward, causing bulges in the skin.

Carl clenched his hands tightly, hoping to postpone his death. His stomach wound seemed to be nearly healed; the cut was thin and shallow, and it no longer bled. His strength, though, began to fade. His arms quavered and shook. His muscles burned from a lack of oxygen. They stung from over-exertion. Surely, he couldn't hold on for much longer.

Then, as though from some angel of mercy, Carl noticed a thin wire slip over the beast's head and around its neck. *It's cheese wire*, he realized. The keen and cutting wire tensed around the marauder's neck. Carl heard a massive grunt of effort from behind the creature – another person in the room!

The third person pulled back on the looped cheese-wire, and it cut through the marauder's neck. The purple skin flayed easily, and the muscle gave little resistance. The creature gave a startled cry before its throat sliced open.

Carl's savior pulled the wire through the rest of the beast's neck. The marauder's decapitated head fell from its shoulders, ferried to the ground in a chariot of blood and gore. Its naked shoulders collapsed to the ground, muscles still twitching, heart beating in vain, pulsing rhythmic torrents of blood from the lidless neck.

Carl pushed the marauder's dark purple carcass aside and looked upon the face of his savior.

“Tell me, what did I just kill?” Aban inquired, rather casually. He then smiled and gestured that he might lift Carl to his feet.

Carl obliged, and Aban gave him a hand up. Carl lifted himself with a good deal of effort, but didn’t feel any pain in his stomach. The knife-wound had healed.

“I couldn’t even begin to tell,” Carl said. “But you should know, the doctor is dead. And apparently, he treated me when I was a boy.”

Aban’s eyebrows raised in surprise. “Well, I’m glad you were able to finish the job. It’s time to get out of here, though. Right now. Abraham should be waiting for us at the end of the building.”

The two soldiers stepped out of the room and back towards the holding cells. “You two split up?” Carl asked. The two brothers had, thus far, been inseparable.

“For a little while. He had some business to take care of, and I needed to find you. He shouldn’t be far off now, though. Once we picked the lock on the cell door, we went in different directions.”

Conveniently enough, as Aban finished speaking, Abraham stumbled into the hallway. He clutched his wounded shoulder, and the pain was clearly bothering him. But through the discomfort, an inexorable resilience shone through his face.

Abraham smiled at Carl. “Glad you’re not dead,” he said. Manlier words had never been spoken.

Carl nodded. “You too – so are we gonna leave now? The doctor’s dead.”

“Yeah, let’s get out,” replied Abraham. “We’re actually quite close to a back gate. This place is so much smaller than it looked from the outside – only a few acres of buildings.”

The three men walked and limped through the hall of cells. Towards the end, Carl noticed the shredded corpse of another guard. The man lacked a neck, and his chest was slashed open and gaping.

“I can’t imagine what did that,” Abraham said.

Carl knew. “Don’t worry, Aban already killed the creature.”

Aban looked almost as surprised as his brother. “That purple thing did this? Wow. I really saved your life, then.”

“No shit,” Carl growled.

At the end of the hallway was a door. Light shone through its peephole, reflected off of the outside sand.

“The back gate is maybe thirty yards from this door. I’m hoping they keep a couple vehicles outside, in case of immediate deployment. That’ll be our ticket outta here,” Abraham informed them. “Just walk calmly, and we won’t raise too much attention. Nobody should be expecting an escape.”

Carl took a deep breath and pushed open the door. The two brothers said quick prayers and

followed suite. The light was dazzling after so long in the dark, and all three squinted.

Abraham's intelligence was spot-on. The fence that extended around the compound was less than fifty yards off, and a gateway that left the compound was three hundred feet away. A single guard stood outside the fence, his back turned to the buildings. Behind the guard, on the inside of the fence – Carl's side of the fence – was a topless 4x4 parked adjacent to the edge of the compound.

"That's our ride out of here," Carl whispered. Even at a distance, he was afraid of alerting the guard. "We'll have to be quiet."

Together, they crept the distance to the gate – the walk felt like an eternity. The wind began to pick up slightly, and its whistling deadened their footsteps.

When they were only a few yards from the gate and the guard, Aban took the lead. "Wait here," he said. "The guard's mine."

Without any other instruction, Aban departed from their party and slunk up to the gate. Carl watched him stalk away and listened as his steps were lost in the noise of the wind. The doors were open, and Aban exited the compound without even opening a door.

He crept up directly behind the guard, wasting no time. He hunched over and bent at the knees, minimizing his shadow. His footwork was marvelous - the heels of his boots seemed to hover over the ground. He almost floated the final few feet.

Then he sprung. He swung both hands into the guard and chopped his target at the base of the skull. His hands cut off the Carotid Artery, and the guard dropped into the sand, immediately unconscious.

When the guard's body hit the sand, both Carl and Abraham moved for the 4x4. Carl strode forward quickly, and Abraham did his best to keep up. Both reached the vehicle soon enough, and Carl inspected the driver's seat.

"No keys," he moaned.

"Can you hotwire it?" Abraham asked. His eyes were wide. The time spent wounded in a cell had taken a toll on him.

"I can try." Carl went to work underneath the dashboard.

Aban came back from the outside of the fence and hopped into the back seat. "Why aren't we leaving?"

"Patience," his brother replied. "We're working without keys."

Carl busied himself pulling out the necessary wires for ignition. "Would you guys keep a lookout please? I don't want to be surprised by any hostiles."

The two brothers nodded. They turned and surveyed the rest of the compound for soldiers, scientists, and rampant marauders. Tense and anticipatory quiet descended for a few minutes. They felt exposed and helpless, hopeful that they wouldn't come in contact with anyone else. Yet, for whatever



reason, the compound seemed almost empty.

Then, like an inconvenient anomaly, someone exited the buildings from the same door that they had previously used. He scanned the outside and noticed the 4x4. With a suspicious gate, the man began to walk towards them.

“We have company,” said Abraham. “One hundred yards off, I’d wager.”

Carl kept at his work. *I’m almost there*, he thought. *Just a few more moments...*

The man kept closing the distance. “Fifty yards away,” Abraham growled. Time passed. “Thirty yards.” He turned to Carl. “We have to leave NOW!”

“I’ve got it...” Carl hissed, and he did. The vehicle growled and purred to life. When the vehicle started, the man began to charge for the 4x4. He yelled something indiscernible and continued to run.

Carl threw the vehicle into drive and gassed it. The tires spun wildly before catching traction. The vehicle leapt forward and sped through the gates, leaving the compound. Their pursuer was fast, but not fast enough. When he realized he couldn’t catch the 4x4, he drew a pistol and fired wildly.

Carl hunched behind the wheel; Abraham flattened against the seat. Aban just fell down into the backseat and began to laugh – quietly at first, then louder and louder.

“I can’t believe we’re alive,” he gasped. “Are either of you shot?”

Carl and Abraham checked themselves, but they both seemed to be ok. The vehicle took a few shots, but it still drove. Moving at a joyous speed, the three men watched as the compound grew smaller and more distant. Safety was beautiful.

When they were a good distance away, Abraham pulled a box from his battle vest. “Stop the car for a second,” he commanded, and Carl obeyed.

When the vehicle came to a grinding and total halt, Abraham flipped open the box, which contained a single, red button. He pressed his finger to the button, hesitated for a moment, and pushed down. The box beeped once.

Behind them, back in the compound, a detonator initiated. It was plastered to a gas tank, and the explosion ignited the fuel inside. The resulting fireworks began an extreme fire that spread quickly through the buildings, consuming the plaster, drywall and wood.

Even at a distance, Carl heard the rich rumblings of the explosion. He turned in his seat, and eventually noticed an orange glow that emanated from the compound.

He stared critically at Abraham. “What did you just do?”

Abraham shrugged. “I put a charge of c4 on a gas tank. I wanted to really end their operation.”

“And you didn’t tell me about it?”

Abraham locked eyes with Carl. "I didn't think you'd approve."

Carl turned back in his seat, started the car, and continued to drive. "Well, it was a thorough job. That blast isn't going to fizzle out, not in this heat and dryness."

Abraham nodded. "We just dealt with a great evil. I'm glad it's done, though. I think I've lost my taste for combat."

Carl just drove on, through the desert, into safety and anonymity. They drove until the compound was hardly a speck on their hazy horizon. No one trailed them with blazing guns; no one noticed them at all, save for a few lonely birds that circled overhead, high in the heavens.

"What're you going to do now?" asked Abraham.

Carl considered his answer for a time. "I suppose I'll go back to headquarters. I have a lot of explaining to do."

"For your absence," remarked Aban. He stirred slightly in the backseat.

"It shouldn't be too hard to explain." Carl grinned half-heartedly. "It was just a long method of escape."

....

## Chapter 36

Carl's boots crunched as he walked up the gravel pavement towards his compound. *Home at last*, he thought. The reassuring sight of American troops did much to ease his worry. The mission was over, and his body was finally beginning to relax, uncoiling like a rusty spring.

The guard at the gate recognized him, which was fortunate, since Carl didn't have any form of identification left on his person. Recent events had left him devoid of markings as an official soldier. *Going rogue has a tendency to do that.*

The gate attendant let out a whistle and strode up to Carl. His official title was Corporal Michaels, but everyone just called him Beetle; during his first week, Beetle consumed a few of the native Iraqi insects, and the nickname was born.

"Jesus, what happened to you?" Beetle shook Carl's hand vigorously. "When the rest of your platoon didn't make it back, we put you down as missing in action."

Carl just shook his head. "There's way too much to explain. I need to report back to the Captain, though; is he on the base right now?"

"Sure, I'll take you to him," Beetle replied. He called over another soldier, some new recruit. "Man the gate for a few minutes," he commanded. The recruit nodded and moved into position.

Beetle led Carl through the gate and into the barracks. "People took it pretty hard when we lost the platoon. And all to establish our presence in the area..." He shook his head. "This place is inexplicable sometimes."

The Captain, it turned out, was taking residence in their command center. Beetle knocked twice and opened the door. "Sir, do you have a minute?"

"Sure." The Captain's deep voice floated from the room. It was a classic beer-and-cigarettes drawl, graced with a southern accent.

Beetle opened the door, and Carl stepped inside. Beetle closed the door and left, presumably to go back to guard the gate.

Carl stood at attention. "Carl Springfield reporting back from field duty, sir."

"Carl?" The Captain, a broad, heavyset man with a dark red beard, stood from his desk. "Son, what the hell happened on that mission? Reports say the platoon was hit by an ambush."

Carl swallowed. "We were hit on the outskirts of town from all sides. I don't know how we walked into the trap, but it wiped us out."

The Captain took a seat behind his desk and removed two cheap cigars from one of the drawers. "Smoke?" he offered.

Carl declined.

"There'll be an official investigation," said the Captain, stowing the other cigar. "So you don't have to go in-depth right now. I trust that won't be a problem?"

Carl shook his head. "No, sir. It's quite a story though."

The Captain chuckled, and his red beard bounced up and down. "I'm sure it will be. It's good to have you safe, Greenfield."

"It's good to be back, sir."

## Acknowledgements

There are a few people to thank for this novel: first is the ever-gracious Christina for her patience and effort in editing the manuscript. I'd also like to thank Sgt. Adrienne Killingsworth for her photography prowess, and the extremely talented Adriana A. Morales for her artistry.

This book wouldn't even exist if it weren't for my composition professors - Mr. Daum and Mr. Johnson - who provided the inspiration and the kick in the ass that I needed. I'm quite sure neither of them knows that this book exists.