

WJ LUNDY



THE INVASION TRILOGY

A SCI-FI MILITARY THRILLER

THE LIGHT

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THE SHADOWS

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THE DARKNESS

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THE INVASION TRILOGY

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THE DARKNESS

BOOK I

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CHICAGO SUBURBS

DAY OF THE DARKNESS, PLUS 5

The city was a ghost town. Jacob's co-workers jokingly called it a FEMA holiday, like a snow day in the summertime. Office buildings closed, the government declaring a national shutdown with only essential employees required to report. It was rumored that police officers and even medical professionals were starting to walk off the job, refusing to report for duty.

Jacob willingly agreed to working from home until the crisis passed, happy to avoid the traffic for a few days. A long break from the out-of-town travel would be nice, and he could spend some much-needed family time with his wife and young daughter. As the emergency progressed, internet connections and even the phones began to fail. He tried to call in to the daily meetings at the factory but received a fast-busy signal and dead phone lines instead.

Grocery stores sold out of everything as the mass hysteria slowly spread. Gas, milk, eggs, water... everything hoarded, or the prices raised beyond the average person's reach. By the time Jacob figured out something real was going on, something that wouldn't pass, it was too late. He drove by the local superstore and saw armed guards at the entrance of the parking lot where shoppers were required to show cash before they could enter. The store delivery trucks didn't even bother to unload their goods as merchandise was being exchanged right out of the backs, like a shady underground marketplace.

The news just seemed so far away and foreign. It was something that happened in the third world, not here in the suburban neighborhoods of Chicago. Jacob sat on his living room sofa watching a looping satellite

broadcast of the chaos in Atlanta. The anchors warned that the rioters had already breached the lobby. Stairwells were full of piled furniture and the elevators sat dead at the bottom of their shafts, but still the rioters came and destroyed everything in their path—nothing was left untouched. Not knowing what else to do, Jacob loaded his handgun and stared at the TV. The loop always stopped at the enraged face of a man with pearly black eyes; the image would freeze before the video re-started.

Jacob turned to watch her pace the room while she dialed the phone over and over, receiving the same steady tone as a response. He knew she was afraid; everyone was. She wanted to go to her parents' home near the lake, north of the city. It was out of town and quiet there; maybe she was right, but how would they get there? He had seen then video feeds and knew the city wouldn't be safe—even the outer areas of Chicago would be chaos—and he couldn't risk it on the interstate, not with Katy. Laura suggested the trains, but that was the last place he wanted to be stranded if the lines went down.

He knew the phones were down, the circuits jammed, but she tried nonetheless. Once she realized she would have no contact with her mother, she would be devastated. Jacob didn't want her to give up on him; he needed her to stay focused. He needed her and Katy to be strong. He could not do it alone. He watched the scrolling bar on the bottom of the TV. Emergency officials demanding calm, ordering civilians to shelter in place. He looked over his shoulder, she held the phone by her side, and tears were filling the corners of her eyes.

"Give it a couple days, Laura; if nothing changes, we'll try for the city, we'll get to your folks."

DAY OF THE DARKNESS

PLUS 7

“What happened?” Jacob muttered, pulling his head away from the airbag. He tasted blood from a broken lip and smelled oil dripping from a hot motor. Looking over the dash and through a broken windshield, he could see a second vehicle with steam still pouring from its radiator. Jacob could barely hear his daughter, Katy, screaming over the weather siren. In the side mirror, he caught a glimpse of a man in denim dragging his little girl from the car, then lifting her to his chest before turning to run.

Jacob strained and painfully pressed against the driver’s door, the metal screeching as he forced it open. Losing his balance, he rolled from the car and onto the street. His daughter’s screams faded. He felt anger rising, giving him strength; he scrambled to his feet and ran after the screams. His daughter fought, screaming and flailing her arms and legs while scratching at the man’s eyes and nose as she struggled. The man dropped her and put his hands to his face, but when he saw Jacob, he turned to lunge. The man’s black eyes locked on his, and he howled while reaching for him wildly with oily, blood-covered hands.

With his body shaking violently, Jacob raised his Ruger P89 pistol and fired quick shots from only feet away. The first rounds went low; the others, directly to the man’s chest. Jacob twisted away and dodged as the man’s momentum carried him past before the body tumbled to the ground, landing on its stomach. Not waiting to see if he was dead, Jacob turned hard and stepped on the man’s back. Enraged, he fired one more shot into his head. The body stiffened before going slack. Jacob’s terrified daughter screamed

from where she lay on the pavement; he scooped her up and ran back to the car.

On the passenger side, Laura was struggling with a second attacker. The large man was on top of her and almost had her pinned to the ground. Jacob sat Katy down, ran full speed, and then, leaping onto the man's back, grabbed him under the arms. Rolling forcefully, they tumbled away from Laura and into the grass. The crazed attacker was able to gain position on Jacob. Having the advantage in strength and weight, he tussled and twisted until Jacob found his own back to the ground. The man now stared down into Jacob's face as his hands grasped Jacob's throat and began to squeeze.

Looking into the man's dark eyes, Jacob saw no emotion that could be reasoned with. Like a rabid dog, the man seemed to have no regard for Jacob's life. Jacob pushed against the man's chest and gasped for air while struggling under the attacker's weight. The man suddenly dropped and fell limp over Jacob's chest, having taken a full kick to the side of the head from Laura.

Jacob hoisted the body up and rolled it off him. Grabbing at the grass, he pulled himself away and pushed up into a sitting position. He coughed and choked for oxygen as he looked at the unconscious man. His attention was distracted when he noticed Laura was on the ground, sobbing and pulling Katy into her lap.

The attacker let out a moan and stretched an arm, reaching for Jacob's ankle. Jacob pawed at the grass until he found the pistol and then turned back to face the man. Leveling the weapon, he shot the attacker once in the face, snapping back its head violently, causing the girls to scream.

Staggering back to his feet, he looked in both directions. Jacob's focused tunnel vision faded enough to allow him to see everything. The sounds of the wailing weather siren seemed to come back even louder than before. It was over; the threat stopped. Suddenly exhausted, he struggled to stay on his feet as adrenaline pushed spasms through his legs and knees. Jacob turned and looked around him; his neighbors were standing on their porches, staring at him accusingly. He ignored them and reached down for Laura.

"Are you okay? Come on, get Katy back in the house," he said, lifting Laura to her feet.

Laura looked at him in shock. "What happened?"

“I don’t know, get Katy back in the house, Laura!” he said over the sound of the siren.

Laura looked at the dead man at her feet. She asked again, “What happened?”

Katy began crying hysterically.

With his heart still racing, he lifted Katy and handed her off to Laura. “Please get her inside; I’ll be there in a minute.”

Laura turned her head to look at their neighbors before backing away toward the porch. She held Katy’s head to her shoulder in a belated attempt to shield the young girl from the horror of what lay on the ground.

He watched them move across the porch and waited for the door to close behind them. Jacob’s head ached, and the sound of the siren clouded his mind as he struggled to collect his thoughts on what had just occurred. He stepped to the house and wearily dropped to the porch steps.

They were trying to flee to the country, or at least get to Laura’s parents north of the city—anywhere as far away from people as they could get. He remembered pulling out of the garage and barely entering the street before the speeding car collided with them. But the men... where did they come from? They must have been pursuing the other car. Why did they attack them?

Under the spiteful eyes of his neighbors, Jacob stood and went to the other car.

“Thanks for the help, guys,” he said under his breath.

He ignored their stares and opened the passenger-side door, stretched across the front seat, and checked the man’s bloodied wrist for a pulse. The driver was dead; the lack of a seatbelt had allowed his body to thrust partway through the windshield.

Looking in the backseat, he found it filled with luggage. He saw a plastic grocery bag stuffed with oranges and bottles of water. Jacob pondered them briefly before taking the bag and joining his wife back in the house. Ignoring his neighbors’ cold stares, he shut and locked the house door behind him. Even if the phones worked, the police wouldn’t come.

Moving across the room to a window, Jacob parted the curtains and looked into the street. The incessant wailing of the weather siren was better behind the plate-glass window. Even with the power out, it wailed. Why

had it not been shut off yet? Jacob looked at the smoking vehicles in the street and saw his neighbors approaching the crash scene.

The anxiety built up in his chest; he was sweating, and he felt his heart racing. Jacob was fighting off panic... and losing. He had to do something.

“Laura, get everything and take it upstairs to our bedroom,” he said.

Laura was in the kitchen, handing Katy a glass of water and still trying to calm her. “Why? What are we doing?”

“Something is changing, I’m not sure what, but I think we need to get to the safe room. We need to lock ourselves in. I’m afraid they’re coming.”

“Those rioters we saw on the news? Here? Is that what that was?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Laura, those men... they looked through me, they had no fear, please get all the food and water upstairs. We don’t have much time. I’ll be right behind you.”

Jacob went to the garage and shut the overhead door before retrieving his cordless drill and a box of deck screws. He made a quick pass through his home, locking and bolting every door, closing every curtain.

By habit, he went to arm the alarm by the front door, his fingers nearly touching the buttons. With no power and the backup batteries long dead, the alarm was useless. Jacob shook his head before running up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

He joined his wife on the second floor and followed her into the master suite. Their bedroom was large and square; an antique armoire rested against an interior wall close to the door. A single, long window faced the street, opposite the entrance to the bathroom. A king-sized bed in the center of the room, with a nightstand on each side, filled the rest of the space. Jacob moved to the foot of the bed where Laura had placed everything and took a quick inventory of their belongings. He nodded before turning away to bolt the heavy hardwood bedroom door.

Jacob had always been security conscious... or paranoid, as his friends called it. He was on the road a lot for work, and he wanted his family safe when he was away. Laura shook her head at the idea of him tearing out their master bathroom to construct a state-of-the-art safe room. As a compromise—in Jacob’s mind, at least—he’d installed a heavy exterior door at the entrance to their bedroom. The heavy bolt he had added, to secure it further,

effectively turned their master suite into a hardened shelter that could hold off any home invader.

Jacob stopped and looked at the door with the brass bolt lock, talking quietly to himself. “Better than that damn security alarm I spent all the money on,” he said. “More practical too... and passive, doesn’t require electricity like the alarm. Nothing to train or learn and no fancy monitoring companies... a one-time expense to install, and we have a barrier between us and them...”

He paused when Laura asked, “Who are you talking to?”

Jacob put his hand on the door again and rattled the knob. Checking the lock, he felt the clunk of the steel bolt riding into the two-by-six stud frame.

“Nobody,” he said.

Jacob lifted the drill and a handful of screws. He drove the four-inch screws in deep—one in each corner, two in the top, and two on each side.

“What are you doing?” Laura, she asked.

Jacob stopped and looked her in the eye. He could see she was in shock and not fully comprehending the situation. She was still struggling with the thought of being attacked in the streets of their quiet neighborhood. Even having felt the violence firsthand in front of their home, she wasn’t fully grasping the urgency of the situation. This wasn’t something that was happening far away, not anymore; the violence had reached their front yard. People were killing out there, and nobody was coming to save them. They would have to save themselves.

“I’m running screws through the door all the way to the studs. The lock is good, but this is better.”

Laura watched the same news reports he did—the attacks, the disappearances, the mobs, the warnings from police to stay off the streets. At first, the commentators compared them to events expected with third-world mentality, like the massacres in the Congo and attacks in Rwanda—even the LA Riots; they simply did not make any sense.

The newscasters relayed messages from mayors urging residents to *stay in their homes and wait out the crisis*. The government was working on it and the police were organizing a response. The National Guard mobilized and set up evacuation centers. Although in some cases, the evacuation centers were as dangerous as the streets. Several reports aired news of them

being *wiped out... everyone lost... everyone dead*. The warnings were shown on the TV in long, repeating broadcasts before the power went out.

Secured on the second floor, Jacob went to the window and observed the street. The road was wide with tall shade trees on both sides and ran deep into the suburban neighborhood. Well-maintained, cookie-cutter homes sat back from green lawns, interrupted by the destroyed car that was still smoking from the collision just beyond his own driveway. Some of his neighbors had left their porches and gathered around it, talking and taking photos with their phones of the dead men.

“What are they doing? Damn it, they need to get inside,” Jacob shouted. “The news said to stay in your homes. Did they not see those men? Don’t this know something is wrong. They need to get back inside!”

Laura went to the window to stand beside him and looked out. “We have to warn them Jacob. They don’t understand, they didn’t experience it like we did—”

Jacob looked at the door and considered going back to the street to reason with his neighbors. “No, it’s too dangerous; I don’t know what they are. Bath salt nutters, zombies, crazed maniacs... Laura, I’m afraid—”

He was interrupted by a loud, blood-curdling scream from down the street. Jacob strained and focused through the shade of the trees lining the road. A woman was running barefoot toward them and screaming, her ripped clothing covered in blood. She ran directly into a man standing by the wrecked cars. He tried to hold the frantic woman, but she struggled and pointed back down the road. She broke free of the man and continued to scream as she ran away.

Jacob stared in horror when he saw what the woman had pointed at; the mob was just as the newscasters described—crazy and bloodthirsty. Their black eyes stared straight ahead, and they shrieked as they filled the street from curb to curb, charging fast like a herd of bulls. He saw the neighbors around the cars begin to scatter while they fled back to their homes. The mobs broke up and splintered to follow them up onto porches and crash through doors.

Jacob grabbed his wife, pulled her to the floor and out of sight, and then put a hand over her mouth to muffle her cries. He crawled across the floor with his wife in tow and grabbed his daughter. He brought them both into

the en suite bathroom and sat them on the floor, holding them tight and urging them to be quiet.

“It’s them they are here aren’t they?” Laura sobbed.

“I don’t know,” Jacob whispered back.

Jacob waited for the noise to stop, the screaming and the pleas for help to fade. He ripped down the shower curtain and, walking low, moved back into the bedroom. He peeked cautiously through the window and saw that the street was clear. The destroyed cars remained, but there was nothing else left. The mob was gone and, with the exception of the dead man still poking through the window, there were no bodies—even the two men he killed were gone. Tattered clothing littered the street and lawns; blood streaks and drag marks showed where victims had been pulled away. The things, whatever they were, seemed to have consumed everything in their path. They recovered their dead and took away the living.

Why leave the man in the car and take the rest? Jacob asked himself.

Searching, he looked at the neighboring houses. Two of them were destroyed, their windows broken, and the doors shattered. He then looked at the house across from him. In the second-story window, he could see his neighbor, Smitty, looking back. He waved to Jacob. Jacob returned his gaze and shook his head sadly before stretching the shower curtain across the window to further block out the light.

CHAPTER ONE

A chilling, uncomfortable silence woke him. His wife and daughter lay sleeping beside him, their soft breathing the only noise to reach his ears. Not wanting to move, he opened his eyes and stared at a solitary fly walking across the ceiling. His clothing was soaked with sweat, but he didn't dare remove his heavy shirt and jeans. The room grew hot during the night with the electricity out and the air conditioning along with it. The summer heat and humidity made the space nearly unbearable. Quietly, he worked his way around his daughter, Katy, and pulled his legs to the side of the bed before standing in the blacked-out bedroom.

He was normally a patient man, taking his time to ensure things were done right. He wasn't one to jump to conclusions or make thoughtless decisions—probably why he was good at his job working as a setup engineer. He traveled the country from plant to plant troubleshooting assembly line operations, fixing bottlenecks, and finding solutions to problems. Jacob wasn't hasty in action; he liked to analyze problems and attack them with a well-conceived plan.

Admonishing himself, Jacob took a deep breath and warned himself to be cautious—to work out the problem methodically, as he'd always been able to in the past. He reached to the floor at the base of the bed and felt for the jug of water. Finding it, he took a long gulp that quenched his thirst. A cold shower would be better, but that was impossible for now. Why is this happening? For the first time in his life, he didn't have the answers. He wouldn't be able to sketch a solution or logically define the problem. Jacob

followed all the rules, did what he was told, and now he felt doomed by it. He feared he had failed his family.

The silence outside was disturbing; he listened intently, feeling his heart beating in his chest and fighting back the steady panic building in his stomach. For nearly a week, the weather siren had wailed day and night without relief. They'd grown accustomed to the whine of the up and down squall blocking out the sounds of the rest of the world. Even after the electrical grid failed, the loud siren blared nonstop. Running off batteries, he presumed, or maybe a generator. None of that mattered now; the siren was off and the night quiet once again. Standing in the center of his bedroom and facing the window, Jacob strained to listen.

He moved closer to the curtains covering the window and finally received the feedback he craved to remind him they were not alone. He heard the barking of a dog in the far distance, a car alarm, a faint scream, and the *pop, pop, pop* of a firearm. The once quiet neighborhood had slowly become a war zone. Jacob walked to the window and put his fingers to the edge of the heavy drapes.

"Is it over?" He heard Laura whisper from the bed.

Jacob turned and squinted to see her in the dark room. "I don't know; it's quiet—the siren stopped," he answered.

He looked at her as she sat silently on the bed, and he knew she was thinking of her parents north of the city. Jacob thought of the chaos outside and what must be happening far away. What if they *had* gotten out of the driveway and beyond the neighborhood? The televised backups on the interstates and city streets had made for murderous scenes on the network news channels. Glued to the TV during the first days, Jacob watched the helicopter footage of men being dragged from their cars, police shooting into charging mobs on the magnificent mile, and panicked soldiers running away from their posts.

Jacob moved across the room and sat beside her on the bed. He put his arm around her waist while she rested her head on his shoulder. "Katy isn't speaking," she said.

"I know; I am worried about her too."

Jacob looked back at Katy sleeping peacefully beside them.

"What's happening out there?"

“I think they have it all wrong. The news, they say it started in small towns with crime sprees, and then everyone just went crazy, the entire populations turning to violence overnight.”

“It doesn’t make any sense. People don’t go mad overnight,” Laura said.

“I really wasn’t that worried until the police started to disappear and they said cops were joining the looters and how it had spread from small towns to the cities after that. I talked to Jerry at work just a week ago; nobody knows what’s going on or how it’s spreading so quickly,” he said.

“Why don’t they just tell us what they want?”

“They don’t have a spokesperson and they won’t make demands. The President said he was going to implement martial law. You already know they told us to stay home from work, stay at home and off the streets, and they closed schools. I think the government knows more than they are telling us.”

Laura sat up taller, looking at him. “Jenny said she heard it all has something to do with the meteor shower last weekend, like maybe it polluted the water, and it’s making people crazy. Smitty says they weren’t meteors at all; he said it was a signal, like a sign.”

“Smitty is a tool; a sign for what?” Jacob asked, already having a low opinion of his neighbor.

“Well, Smitty says the Chinese or North Korean sleeper cells have probably been activated to disrupt the economy.”

“Ha! What economy?” Jacob asked.

“Well then, maybe it’s global warming; or like Jenny said, something in the water or chemicals in the food. All those people on the TV, the experts, they all seemed to have an opinion—at least they did until the experts began to vanish too.”

Jacob sat and listened to her while he second-guessed his earlier inaction. Maybe if they’d left at the first signs of danger, they wouldn’t be trapped here. They would be safe at Laura’s parents in the country. Now they were stuck, left alone to starve... or worse.

“I think you were right, Laura; we should have left when we had the chance.”

“It’s okay. You were just trying to keep us safe. You did what you thought was right,” she said.

Jacob stood and stepped closer to the window, then pulled back on the edge of the drape and let the bright moonlight bleed into the room. He put his eye to the crack; the skies were clear, and the moon hung full, casting a blue hue over the residential street and turning the pavement a gloomy shade of gray. On the horizon, the skyline glowed orange and yellow.

He could see his wrecked car in the center of the road where they'd abandoned it. The car that hit him was twisted, the body of the driver still hanging from the windshield. Jacob tried to look away, but the wreckage mesmerized him. Every time he looked at it, his eyes drawn back to the body... the man's bloated corpse mangled by the glass... the oily stains on the sidewalk where the other bodies had been...

Movement caught his eye. Jacob instinctively crouched and backed away, even though he didn't think anyone would be able to see him peeking from the darkened second story window.

"What is it? Did you see something?" Laura whispered.

In a low crouch, Jacob went back to the window and scanned the street. Against a curb, stood a shirtless man, his naked arms tensed, and his head locked straight ahead in a dark stare. Standing like a stone at the edge of the street, the man didn't move.

Jacob heard the squeak and rattle of a storm door. He concentrated on trying to find the source of the noise and pushed closer to the gap in the drapes.

"No. What are you doing?" he whispered, as he caught a glimpse of his neighbor's front door slowly opening.

The door squeaked and pushed out. A man dressed in khaki pants and a heavy robe walked onto the porch. Smitty, his neighbor of five years, stepped into the moonlight with an aluminum baseball bat held loosely in his right hand. He pointed the bat with an extended arm and called out.

"Hey... hey you! Why'd the siren go out?" Smitty said to the stranger in the street.

The bare-chested man turned his head to look at him. His arms flexed and extended, pointing at Smitty. His back arched, and he let out a yell—no words, just an anger-filled roar. Jacob watched his neighbor take a step back in fear.

All along the street, more figures came into view from the shadows. They were running at full speed, screaming. They poured past the bare-

chested man and ran to the house. Smitty ran inside and closed the door just as the mob crashed into the front of the home. The wood siding rattled, and the windows buckled from the impact. Jacob watched as they piled over the porch and surrounded the perimeter of the home, searching for a way in while tearing at the windows and siding.

The mob exploded through the front windows and crashed through the door. They continued to pour down the street—at least a hundred of them—all entering Smitty’s home. There were no screams from inside the house. No cries for help. Nothing could be heard over the roar of the ravenous mob. Jacob let go of the drape, rolled away, and pressed his back to the wall. The thunder of his neighbor’s home being torn apart shook his own and he barely heard his daughter’s cry from the bed.

His wife pulled her close, whispering as she tried to comfort the girl. Jacob went to the nightstand, gripped his pistol, and walked to the bedroom door. He checked the locks, feeling the long wood screws he had fastened into the doorframe. “What’s happening outside, Jacob?” his wife asked.

“I don’t know,” he answered. He searched the floor, lifted the water jug to his lips, and then mumbled, “They’re attacking Smitty’s house.”

“What? Jenny and the kids!” Laura said as she jumped to her feet and began running to the window.

Jacob moved quickly to stop her; he didn’t want her to see. He didn’t want her to make a commotion that could be detected from the street. He pushed her away and back to the bed.

“More of the rioters?” she asked as she turned away from him.

“They are *not* rioters; just be quiet... *please*. They’ll hear us.”

The sound of the mob slowly dissipated, and Jacob worked up the courage to return to the window. When he looked out, the mob and the bare-chested man were gone but his neighbor’s home was in shambles. Windows were shattered, the door was gone, the walls splintered, and much of the front porch had collapsed.

With no sign of anyone, the area was once again quiet. The previous mayhem on the street had retreated into the shadows with the mob, leaving Smitty’s once quaint and well-maintained home destroyed. Jacob searched the neighboring properties and found many in the same condition. Nearly every other house showed signs of attack.

How long before they come for us? Jacob thought.

He moved to the foot of the bed and sat on the floor. The rifle that leaned against the wooden bed frame near his head wasn't much; a squirrel gun, his dad called it. It was a .22LR—magazine fed and reliable, but not much stopping power. He should have bought a larger rifle when he'd had a chance, and he'd had plenty, stopping to look at them on trips to the outdoor stores and admiring the stealthy look of the exotic assault rifles. He always wanted one, but Jacob wasn't a hunter and he didn't spend weekends at the range, so how would he have justified the purchase?

An inherited handgun passed down from his father for home defense and the rifle he kept from his childhood seemed to be plenty enough at the time.

A nearby gunshot shocked him back into the present. He resisted the temptation to go to the window this time. There was no reason to look; he wouldn't be going to anyone's aid. There would be no opportunity for escape. If anything, he would reveal himself and those things—those monsters—would make their way into his home. If they came for his family, he wouldn't be able to stop them. No, he wouldn't look. Instead, he sat at the edge of the bed listening to the screams and praying that the weather siren would come back on.

Jacob took another sip of the water, careful to ration it. He'd filled the bathtub of the adjoining master bathroom while the water was still running, just like the news people advised. He knew he could use it to refill the bottles, but it hadn't come to that yet. More gunshots rang out, even closer now; he heard his daughter whimper at the sound of each noise. He could hear yelling now, followed by footfalls in the streets. A man was running, but Jacob still refused to go to the window. He wouldn't get involved and put his family at risk.

"What are we doing? Do we just wait for them to come for us too?" his wife whispered. "Wait for them to kill us or take us away... one at a time?"

"We can't go out there on the street? You know what happened last time," he said, pointing at the window.

"I feel like we have to do something... anything, Jacob. I just can't stay here anymore. Not like this. Katy's sick; I think she needs a doctor," she whispered.

Katy hadn't spoken since the attack on the street. He thought it was shock, but she refused to eat or drink and now she had a fever. Jacob got to

his feet and walked along the side of the bed. “Wait till morning; we’ll figure out a way. We *will* get out of here,” he whispered.

Jacob turned away from her and walked into the attached bathroom. A small window positioned high on the wall at the end of the room that, days earlier, Jacob had covered with a piece of cardboard. He carefully peeled back the material and investigated the backyard. Dark, quiet, and no movement, but in the distance, he could see the yellows and oranges of a new day beginning.

He moved and took a seat on a stool near the bathroom vanity. He smiled, thinking how he’d walked past this stool thousands of times, but never sat on it. He had put it in here for his daughter; his wife would brush her hair here every morning. Jacob had never bothered to admire the stool and how high it sat... nor how uncomfortable it was. Now it was the only chair in this part of the house.

Looking in the mirror at the bruise on his face from the airbag and the purple swelling under his eyes, he thought back to the previous day—the day of the accident... the look of hate on their faces... the dark, soulless eyes of the attackers...

Laura whispering to Katy in the bedroom brought him out of his trance. He looked up from the stool and deep into his reflection in the vanity mirror. His face was stubbled. His hair was matted. Three days of holding out in the upstairs of their home, with no showers and using a bucket as a toilet, told him they would have to make plans soon. They couldn’t stay here indefinitely.

After 9/11, Jacob researched and studied survival. Although he didn’t become a prepper or do anything drastic, he wanted to be educated. *Shelter in place, food and water for three days, hold out and help will come* was the common mantra. Jacob did his part, but help wasn’t here. Where were they? Why hadn’t the police knocked on their doors or the Red Cross arrived with food and water? He feared they would never come.

Jacob moved back to the bedroom. His wife was opening a package of crackers to feed their daughter. She looked up at him.

“What?” he said.

“We can’t stay here,” she said. “This is the last of the crackers. Then what?”

“I don’t know. After the crash... I don’t know.”

“We should have kept going, after they attacked us” she said. “Walked, ran... whatever we had to do.”

Jacob nodded his head, not knowing what else to say.

Frustrated, Jacob walked to the far end of the room and sat at the head of the bed. He grabbed the small battery-operated radio and clicked it on. There was static on all stations but one—a local AM frequency that had been broadcasting the same emergency message for the past forty-eight hours. The same useless garbage—*stay off the streets, help will come; shelter in place; if you must evacuate, go to the park*. Jacob shook his head and shut the radio off before tossing it to the bed.

His wife looked up at him. “We should do it. We should go to the park.”

“That message is days old; how do we even know anyone will be there?”

She looked at him while biting her lip. “I want to leave.” she said her voice finally breaking.

“It’s going to be okay, Laura.”

He knew she wouldn’t leave; she wouldn’t go without him. He got the message though. It was time for them to go... but at what cost? *Why leave this piece of shelter for the open streets?* Jacob got up from the bed and helped his wife pack items into the bag. The action seemed to calm her nerves; although, when she looked at him, he could see she was holding back tears.

“I know,” he said, touching her cheek. “I’ll keep you safe. I promise.”

“What if they find us?” she sobbed.

Jacob held her and looked at his daughter on the bed. “I don’t know; they just can’t.”

CHAPTER TWO

With late afternoon, came the sweltering heat. Jacob pulled the drapes away from the window to try to allow a draft, but only hot air entered. He paced through the room, sweating. He wanted to go downstairs and sit in the family room or venture into the basement den where it was always cool. His wife was sitting on the bathroom floor, fanning herself, when Jacob walked past her and entered the walk-in closet adjacent to the room. He looked up at the ceiling and thought about the attic. He knew it would be just as hot, but it was also vented and with the window in the gable end, he would have a better view of the street.

The attic access was in the hallway outside the sealed bedroom door. Not wanting to compromise their security, he decided he would just make a new entrance. Jacob retrieved a knife from his nightstand and climbed the tall shelves to the ceiling of the closet. He jabbed the blade of the knife into the sheet rock. Dust and bits of insulation poured down over his face and shoulders. He squinted to protect his eyes and worked until he'd created a fist-sized hole. He then stuck his hand in and broke away at it until he'd created a large opening between the ceiling joists.

With a hole large enough to enter the attic, Jacob stuck his head through and pushed away the rolled bats of insulation. Looking in all directions, he could see little; the attic was dark with only small bits of dust-filled light entering through the vent. He dropped back down and called for his wife. When she entered the room below, she looked at his body partway into the destroyed ceiling, then looked up at him with wide eyes and her hand held over her mouth. "What are you doing?"

“Get me the flashlight,” he said, not answering her question.

“Why? You’re not going up there,” she argued.

“Can you get the light,” he said not looking back.

He heard rustling below him and looked down to see that she’d climbed the shelf partway to meet him. She passed up the light. Jacob took it, clicked it on, and then pulled himself into the attic. He crawled across the joists to a center portion floored with plywood and filled with holiday decorations. He heard a noise by the hole and saw his wife’s head looking back at him.

“Why are you up here?” she asked again.

Jacob crawled to the gable that was above their bedroom. Seated in the end was a large louvered vent cap; it was normally pushed open by a thermostat-controlled electric fan. The surface of the fan was enclosed in a cage and full of louvers that were currently closed. “I wanted to see if I could get some air flowing,” he said back to her.

Jacob pushed his hands against the electric motor and found it firmly in place, blocking the gable vent. He forced the knife blade into the mounting screws, trying to break them free but failing. Behind him, Laura dropped below then quickly returned before reaching out to pass Jacob his drill. He smiled as he took it from her and then, working carefully, he was able to remove the bracket and drop the fan motor to the floor. After working at one of the exposed vents with his knife, he felt it give as the plastic louver broke free and snapped off. He repeated the maneuver with two more of the louvers and was quickly rewarded with a slight drawing of the attic air.

He looked back at his wife and could see her hair gently flowing up as cooler air from downstairs was pulled through the master suite and out of the attic window, the natural rise of the hot air creating a draft. The temperature decrease was subtle, but the moving air across their skin felt like heaven after sweltering in the sealed room.

She smiled at him approvingly. Jacob moved his eye closer to the vent and peered through the gap created from the broken louvers. He pressed close and looked in all directions. Far in the distance, he could see billowing smoke from fires and abandoned cars at intersections. The streets were void of all traffic. Junctures that were normally busy stood silent with debris in the streets.

Houses that still stood were closed up tight and had their window blinds closed. With cars visible in some driveways, he knew people were still around; they had to be. *They can't all be gone. The smart ones that followed the instructions are inside hiding the same as we are. They have to be,* Jacob thought as he sat watching and listening. He heard his wife crawl up behind him, and she pressed close. Jacob eased out of the way, so she could look through the louvers. He watched her jaw drop as she gasped over the scene of their small bit of neighborhood.

"Oh my God. Jacob, this is really happening, isn't it?" she croaked.

He put his hand on the back of her neck, not speaking. She looked at him. "What are we going to do, Jacob?"

"We just need to hold on."

She backed away from the gable vent and sat silently. A muffled cry from below caught her attention and Laura turned to look at the access hole. "I'll check on her; don't be too long," she whispered as she crawled away.

He turned back to follow her to the master suite. Moving across the attic, he paused and looked at the plywood floor filled with plastic bins and boxes. He pushed them aside and made his way to the pull-down attic access ladder. He found a long board and slid it through the handle, locking it into the up position. Jacob turned and moved back to the makeshift hole and, grabbing the joists, lowered himself back onto the closet shelving.

He found Laura scooping a small paper cup of water from the bathtub. She used it to wet her hands before wiping them down the sides of Katy's cheeks. She looked up at Jacob and said, "She's burning up. I'm not sure what it is, but we're going to need real food; all that's left are some scraps, nothing solid."

Jacob bit his lip, knowing she was right. He could see Katy needed a doctor; he nodded his head. He stood in front of her, and although he was listening, he was thinking about their supplies. They'd used the last cans of soup already, having eaten it cold, and the fruit was gone the day before. As their luck would have it, everything had happened on the day before grocery day when the cupboards were already bare. He could check the kitchen again, look for something they may have missed in the pantry, but it wasn't likely there would be anything there. Jacob walked through the bathroom and again stood by the bedroom window. He pulled back the drapes and peered across the street.

Smitty's house was a shattered mess from the mob attack a few hours ago, but maybe there was something left—a scrap of food in the kitchen or something. The house was directly across the street; if he moved quickly, he could cross without being seen. As if agreeing with someone, he nodded his head and moved to his dresser. He pulled out a black, hooded sweatshirt and a pair of dark jeans. He searched a desk drawer and removed a small paddle holster for his handgun. After pulling on his jeans and tucking the holster into his pants over his hip, he dropped in the Ruger pistol until it clicked into place.

“Where are you going?” Laura asked.

Jacob quickly dressed in the rest of the new attire and dumped one of the backpacks they'd previously packed full of their clothing. “I'm going over to Smitty's to see if there's anything left.”

“What? No, it isn't safe; their house was attacked, Jacob,” Laura protested.

“Maybe that's what will make it safe. They might not come back to it.”

“What if they do?”

Jacob pulled the backpack over his shoulders. He removed and checked the slide of his handgun, dropped the magazine to make sure it was full, and then placed a spare in a small pocket at the front of the holster. He grabbed a black ball cap from atop the armoire, and then looked back at Laura. “You said it yourself. She needs real food.” Jacob picked up the drill, walked to the bedroom door, and stood there staring at the screws.

“How do you know they'll have anything?” Laura asked.

“I don't, Laura, but I have to try.”

Shaking his head slightly, Jacob set the drill down next to the door and walked through the bathroom and back to the closet to look up at the hole in the ceiling. “Listen, if I come up empty, I'll try another place, but that's it. Then I'll come back, okay? I won't stay out long; you can watch me from the window.”

He snugged the straps on his backpack then turned to hug her before he grabbed the shelves and pulled himself back into the attic.

Jacob asked Laura to follow him as he worked his way back to the ladder hatch. He showed her how he removed the board securing it, and then lowered the ladder into the hallway below. Looking down, he saw

nothing out of the ordinary. He kissed Laura on the cheek and told her to pull up and secure the ladder behind him. She nodded reluctantly.

When he poked his head out of the hatch, he could make out the stairway leading to the first floor. Jacob slowly descended the ladder and stood in the hallway outside of his bedroom door. He folded the attic ladder and let it ride back to the up position. Jacob drew his pistol and slowly approached the stairs.

The rooms below were dark, the heavy drapes still in place. He crept down the stairs and entered the living room where he pulled back the curtains slightly and surveyed the front yard. Empty—nothing in sight. Jacob approached the front door; then, having second thoughts, he walked to the kitchen and used a side door to enter the attached garage. Going through the garage, he could exit out onto the back deck and sneak around to the side yard while staying hidden from view.

Jacob opened the deadbolt on the utility door leading to the garage. He paused in the doorway listening before cautiously entering. He then locked the door behind him, placed the key in his pocket, and began to creep through the dark garage. The stall where the family car usually sat was empty—a grim reminder of the danger he faced. He moved to the back and quietly opened the door leading to the deck. A quick look in both directions and he moved outside, silently pulling the door closed behind him.

He crouched low and hid behind the unkempt, overgrown evergreen bushes. Jacob was thankful that he'd failed to trim them for several years. He dropped to his hands and knees and followed the perimeter of his house until he entered the side yard. A tall wooden fence divided his yard from that of his neighbors, the Johnsons. He hadn't seen or heard from them in days, but their home was still secure. They had either left or were locked up tight, the same as he was. He considered going to their door and asking for help, but more people would add complications; not to mention, they might turn him away—or worse, attract attention.

"No, stick to the plan," he whispered to himself as he moved to the front corner of his house. He could see Smitty's driveway. His beaten and battered Lexus still sat parked in front of the garage. Smitty was always an arrogant prick and not someone Jacob would call a friend. He knew the garage would be empty; Smitty parked the Lexus on the street so people would see it. He considered it a status symbol. Now it was a dented wreck

with broken windows. Bits of the car's glass lay covering the driveway, reflecting the sunlight.

Crouched at the front corner of his own porch, Jacob eased his head out of the bushes and searched in both directions for movement. It appeared clear. He took one more deep breath and took off at a dead run, flying through his front yard, across the street, up the driveway, and past the Lexus to the garage door that was pushed inward and broken. Jacob knew all the houses on the block had a similar layout with a door leading to the kitchen from the garage, and Smitty's would be no exception. He quickly ducked down and crawled through the broken hole in the overhead garage door. Catching his breath, he crept into the darkness and pressed his back against the wall.

Looking back into the street, things were still as quiet as he'd left them. He looked up at the second story of his own house, just barely detecting movement of the drapes in his master bedroom. Even though he couldn't see her, he knew Laura was watching. He flashed a quick thumbs up, then turned and ducked deeper into the garage. Jacob stepped over a dumped cabinet of oil and paint cans, then around scattered toolboxes. He rummaged through tools, searching for weapons or anything useful, taking note of things he may need later before finally making it to the small set of steps that led to the open kitchen door.

He paused at the landing to listen, hearing only the rattle of window blinds blowing in the breeze as they scraped and scratched against the shards of broken glass left hanging in their frames. The house smelled dusty and earthy from the opened walls. Jacob took a silent step and peered into the kitchen. Looking straight through the long kitchen into the house, he could see into the dining room where the eight-seat mahogany furniture set was shattered and crushed into pieces. To the left and right, cupboards were knocked off the walls. The refrigerator was knocked from its place and lying across the floor. Slowly, Jacob moved forward and hid behind an L-shaped counter on the right that divided the kitchen from a family room with a small bar. He took light steps deeper into the kitchen and looked through the bar window into the family room. Focusing beyond upended leather furniture, he could see the home's heavy oak front door had been ripped from its hinges and shredded like balsa wood.

Jacob looked behind him in the direction of a stairwell and saw the body. The man's naked legs twisted back to creep out from behind the railing. One foot was turned out, still wearing a black slipper. Unable to stop himself, he crept forward on the balls of his feet. He paused just in front of the stairs and looked down at Smitty's broken form. His head was pulled as if dislocated from his shoulders, only hanging on by stretched and discolored skin. His left shoulder was green and grotesque, yet Smitty's right hand still clutched a bloodied aluminum bat. Looking closer, Jacob could see bits of hair and fat sticking to the dented end.

"You fought hard," Jacob said.

Suddenly repulsed, Jacob raced away and dry-heaved into a corner of the room. He wiped his watery eyes before staggering back toward the kitchen. Losing his balance on debris, he nearly fell but put a hand on the kitchen counter and took deep breaths to try to calm himself. He relaxed and dropped into a crouched position. Looking across the room, he spotted a large, red camper cooler. Jacob crawled through the space on all fours and popped open the lid.

There wasn't much inside, three bottles of sports drink and half a cooler full of water from melted ice, but he was happy to have it. Jacob quickly dropped the full bottles into his bag then looked around the kitchen for an empty jug. He dumped over a blue recycling bin against the wall, then rummaged through it and found an old water jug. Jacob opened it and filled the jug with the water from the cooler. If he had to, he could boil the water for drinking if he managed to build a fire, or at the very least, he could use it for bathing. He searched the kitchen, carefully stepping over bits of broken glass while trying to remain quiet. In a crushed cabinet, he found a half box of instant oatmeal, some canned sardines, several cans of soup, and a jar of bouillon cubes—his hope was renewed.

CHAPTER THREE

Jacob looked into his pack one last time, taking inventory of his meager finds, before he glanced back at Smitty's corpse. "It's not much, but thank you," he whispered.

He pulled the sides of the bag tight and zipped the backpack shut. Turning toward the garage, Jacob froze as he found himself standing mere feet away from a young girl. She was alone in the doorway of the kitchen. She was missing a shoe and dressed in soiled jeans and a torn top. Jacob methodically dropped his hand from the shoulder strap of the backpack and let it find the grip of his still holstered pistol. He held his breath while trying to search beyond the girl and into the garage to see if she was alone. She looked familiar, but he knew she wasn't part of Smitty's family. She was looking away as if in a faraway place—not speaking, just staring into the floor space where a refrigerator had been before it was knocked to the floor.

She took a soft step in the direction of Jacob, still looking down at the floor. She moved deliberately, like an animal; her feet plodded up and down, arms twitching as her neck stretched, examining the void between the cabinets.

Jacob's hand caressed the grip of the pistol; he squeezed it with his sweaty palm and let his finger drop straight over the receiver. He swallowed hard and in a low voice asked her, "Are you okay?"

The girl's pale head snapped up to face Jacob; her eyes were a deep, solid black. When she opened her mouth, it revealed glossy white teeth wrapped in dark-purple gums. Her mouth stretched wide, her bottom jaw

quivered, and she went to scream just as the sound of a gunshot filled the air. The girl's head twitched and twisted toward the garage, like that of cat quickly searching for prey.

Jacob didn't hesitate; he drew the pistol in a smooth motion and fired a single round into the girl's chest. He saw that where the bullet punched through the girl's light cotton top, black, oozing blood slowly filled the fabric. For a brief moment, Jacob feared he'd made a terrible mistake. His empty left hand reached out to help her, feeling regret for his actions.

The girl's eyes looked back at him with hate. She hissed, letting the last of the air escape her body before she fell back to the ground. Jacob lunged forward and bolted past her for the door. He heard another series of gunshots and, recognizing the sounds of his .22 rifle, he stumbled his way through the garage then charged headlong into the driveway.

A teenage boy dressed in a T-shirt and jeans was searching the sky for the source of the gunfire as rounds skipped off the asphalt and smacked into the Lexus. Jacob looked toward the second story of his house and saw the shiny, blued barrel of the rifle poking out, accompanied by silver puffs of smoke wafting from the muzzle. The boy halted in place upon discovering Jacob. Its body turned in his direction and charged without warning as its mouth unhinged inhumanly wide, its black eyes showing no mercy.

Jacob raised the pistol and fired as fast as his finger would allow. Multiple rounds scored several hits as the thing collided with him and knocked him to the asphalt. Anticipating the impact, Jacob rolled back and went with it, then flung the now dead boy off him. He continued rolling until he was on all fours. Not wasting time to look, he scrambled on his hands and knees onto the lawn, pulled himself to his feet, and bolted across the yard and into the street.

He didn't stop. Fleeing what was behind him, he ran for the side yard of his house and dove into thick bushes that scratched his face and cut into his hands while he clawed his way into the cover of the foliage. When it was too tight to crawl, he dropped to his belly and dragged himself ahead until he was tight against the foundation of the house. Jacob burrowed in and buried his face into the soft dirt. Clenching his eyes tight and trying to control his breathing, he lay there listening but struggled to hear anything above the beating of his own heart. Jacob pulled himself into a more open space near the wall and rolled over to face the street. Seeing nothing, he

attempted to stand, but then he heard footsteps. He froze, and letting his body go limp, dropped back to the ground where he again tried to become one with the earth. The gunfire had halted, and Jacob prayed his wife was wise enough to return to her hiding place.

He cautiously lifted his head and laid his ear to the earth so that he could see the road. Several people were walking the street and scouring the area; their heads shifted from side to side as they searched for him. He watched as they left the street and surrounded the boy in the driveway. One lifted the dead thing and cradled it in his arms. With no emotion, it turned around and left, carrying the boy. Shortly afterwards, another left the confines of the house carrying the girl.

Why take them and leave Smitty? Jacob asked himself.

The *Others* loitered in the area for several minutes, not actively searching but clustered in the center of the street, as if they didn't know what to do without direction. They moved to the edges of the street, standing near the curb looking out, their eyes watching the surrounding houses. Jacob heard no communication between them, no whispering, no orders, or commands; nobody seemed to be in charge. Eventually, they stopped moving altogether and stood motionless, frozen in the street.

Jacob lay with his head in the soil, afraid to move. He could feel insects crawl across his neck, and leaves tickled his nose, but he didn't dare move for fear that he'd alert the black-eyed things standing in the center of the street. Gunshots followed by a woman's scream sounded far in the distance; the things' heads lifted all at once as if a switch powered them on. In unison, they turned and took off in the direction of the sound. Soon after, Jacob heard the high-pitched wail that he knew was their call, followed by the rumble of an attack. He crawled along the perimeter of the house until he was clear of the bushes, then scrambled for his garage door.

He made it inside then closed and bolted the door shut mere moments before losing his stomach onto the cement floor. His eyes watered as he gagged and coughed while pacing the room. He stopped beside the small steps leading to his house; he sat there collecting himself, but when he went to wipe his face with the sleeve of his hoodie, he noticed the boy's blood. He looked down and saw it was on his hands and clothing. It clung to his fingers. It wasn't red or sticky, or anything at all like he would expect the texture of human blood to be. He quickly pulled off the black hoodie and

tossed it to the center of the room. He looked at his hands and saw that the black, greasy stains were still on his fingers.

Jacob grabbed a rag from a workbench and scrubbed his hands with a bottle of solvent. The greasy blood clung to his skin and tingled. He used the rag and scrubbed at his palms; the blood finally came off as a single rubber-like glob that then curled back on itself. With disgust, he let it drop to the floor. Jacob's curiosity peaked, and he quickly retrieved the sweatshirt. He looked at the rest of the bloodstains, watching them shrink and retract like a heavy rubber film that was dry rotting as he watched. After a couple minutes, he was able to grab it by the edge and completely remove it from the sweatshirt. He lifted it and dropped it to the floor where it changed from the greasy black to an ashen gray.

"What the hell?" he muttered as he scuffed the remaining traces of it away with the toe of his boot. "What is this stuff?"

He dug through his pocket for his keys and re-entered his home. He wanted nothing more than to collapse into the comfy sofa in the far room and pretend everything was back to normal. Jacob shook away the thoughts, knowing Laura and Katy would be anxious after watching him disappear and not knowing where he went. Jacob dragged his tired legs up the stairs and pulled down on the attic hatch in a pre-arranged knock. After a moment, he heard the board slide away and when the ladder dropped, he saw his wife looking down at him over the sights of the rifle.

"I thought I'd never see you again," she said quietly.

Jacob nodded and quickly climbed the ladder, pulling it up behind him and barricading it. He reached out for her while still in the attic, grabbing her hands then embracing her in a tight hug.

She looked up at him. "I'm sorry I shot the gun... I didn't know what else to do—its eyes... they were so black," she cried.

Hugging her and trying to calm her, he said, "I know... You did the right thing, Laura. There was another one inside; I might not have gotten away if you hadn't fired."

They sat silently in the attic until Jacob removed the backpack and indicated for Laura to lead the way back into the rooms below. They moved into the bathroom and sat on the floor, leaning against the tub while he dumped the contents of the bag and separated the sports drinks. "It's not a

lot, but we can drink water and save these for Katy. They'll help with her dehydration; at least until her fever drops."

Laura picked up the items, sorting them into piles. "She still isn't speaking," Laura whispered. "I'm scared."

"I know; so am I. It must be the stress. She has been through a lot," Jacob said. "She'll be okay once we get out of here and to some place safe. We just need to care for her and make her comfortable until then."

Laura nodded her head in agreement and tried to hide her tears. She wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her blouse then opened one of the drinks, poured the liquid into a small sippy cup, and left the bathroom. Jacob followed her out and while Laura helped the girl drink, Jacob walked to the bedroom window. He saw the rifle propped against the wall and looked down at the brass shell casings littering the carpet. Jacob removed the magazine and locked back the bolt, removing a round. He grabbed a yellow box from his nightstand, reloaded, and charged the weapon before leaning it back against the wall.

"What are they?" Laura whispered, not looking up from her task at hand. "Those weren't kids down there."

Jacob walked away from the window and sat on the bed, reloading his pistol. "I don't know. The girl... she looked familiar, but when I spoke to her... her eyes... and the way she reacted to me. I didn't even hear her until she was right behind me."

"I don't know where they came from. I was watching the street and then suddenly, they were there. I watched the girl go into the house. I wanted to warn you... I didn't know how. The boy—that was the Emerson's son. His little sister, Mia, used to ride Katy's bus. He looked up at us and I know he couldn't see me, but through the scope—I saw his eyes, Jacob, they were so dark, like there was nothing behind them, and then his head darted to the house, like he heard you. I was so scared... I fired; I didn't know what else to do. *I shot him, Jacob!*" she said, holding back tears.

"It's okay. You did good, Laura. It's okay."

"Was it Mia? The girl, was it her?" Laura asked hesitantly.

"Not anymore; I don't know what she was."

"Did she attack you?"

"She would have. I'm certain of it," he mumbled.

"I heard your gun. Did you kill her?"

“I don’t know; I watched them take her away.”

Jacob sat down wearily. “I found some soup,” he said, changing the subject. “You should eat.”

“You haven’t eaten, Jacob.”

He lay back on the bed, closing his eyes. “I’m okay... I just want to rest,” he said.

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CHAPTER FOUR

“Jacob, Jacob, wake up,” Laura whispered.

He turned over and looked at the dark ceiling, searching the room in a daze. It was early in the evening; the sun was just beginning to go down and low light still broke the edge of the curtains. Katy was sleeping soundly at the foot of the bed. Jacob closed his eyes tightly then opened them again, blinking until his vision cleared. He looked at Laura lying next to him. “What is it?” he asked, still groggy.

“Someone is—” she began as a cracking of wood sounded from somewhere outside behind their house.

Jacob froze and put his hand to her lips. He rolled out of the bed and placed his feet on the floor as his right hand searched the nightstand for his pistol. He felt its cool frame and gripped it tight. There was another bang and a thump from somewhere outside. He got up, crept around the foot of the bed, and walked to the bathroom window. He slowly pulled back the cardboard and investigated the yard.

Two crouched figures were next to the plank wood fence that separated his yard from his neighbors. They were young—teens, maybe early twenties—wearing light backpacks. One, a young man, held a crowbar; a young girl was close behind him. They were looking in the direction of his back deck. There was another sound of splitting wood followed by a loud pop, and he saw the two individuals get to their feet and run to the deck.

Jacob knew someone was breaking in and that they’d managed to jimmy open the French doors off the family room. He heard them below now as they closed the door. Muffled voices seemed to direct someone to

move furniture—probably to brace the destroyed door. Jacob looked behind him and saw his wife through the open bathroom door, sitting up in the bed with Katy in her lap. He held a finger to his lips as he crept toward her and stopped to kneel next to a heat register in the floor. With his ear pressed against it, the ductwork funneled the muffled sounds from below.

“There isn’t shit here. Why are we stopping, Frank?” a young male voice said.

“We need to hold up, at least until morning. We can’t keep stumbling around in the dark; they’ll find us,” answered a gruff older man’s voice.

Jacob listened to the two males arguing, the female remaining silent. The sound of kitchen cabinets and the pantry doors opening, and closing was followed by complaints about the house having no food or water. He listened as they continued to stomp through the house; opening and dumping drawers... then a foot fell on the bottom steps.

Jacob took his ear from the floor vent and, returning to the bedroom, moved to his wife’s side to scoop up his daughter. He kept her head against his chest in case she made a sound. Jacob quickly moved them through the bathroom and into the walk-in closet. Laura sat in a corner, and Jacob placed Katy in her lap. He told his wife to be silent and wait for him. As he crept back, she reached out and grabbed his arm.

“What are you going to do?” she whispered.

“Let’s just see who they are first,” he said, walking into the bedroom. He took a position where he could observe the heavy wooden door.

The steps slapped against the hardwood stair treads. Whoever was attached to the feet was not trying to be quiet. The footfalls sounded thunderous over the silence of the room, and Jacob imagined heavy work boots. The sound dulled as the feet left the stair treads and stepped onto the carpet at the top. He heard them near the door. He stared intently at the knob and watched it turn side to side. Then it rattled as someone shook the handle, the heavy door hardly budging thanks to being locked tightly in place with the screws.

“Hey, Joey! We got a locked door up here!” the gruff voice called out.

“Will you be quiet?” Jacob heard another respond. “You want them to hear us?”

The door rattled again. “Boy, they ain’t going to hear us indoors.”

Jacob heard softer footsteps running up the treads, followed by a second set. The lighter footsteps approached the door and Jacob could hear them shuffling around on the landing. The knob turned and rattled again.

“Damn, who puts a bolt lock on an inside door?” the younger voice muttered.

Jacob heard metal slide along the doorframe then a creak and pop of splintering wood. He knew one of them was applying a crowbar to the doorjamb. He ducked into the bathroom doorway and leaned out, keeping the pistol in his hand. He was confident the door wouldn’t move with the deck screws. Even if they were able to seat the crow bar, they would need a fire axe to remove it from its frame.

“Wait, there might be people in there; let’s just leave it alone.” Jacob heard the girl speak for the first time.

“Girl, you’re stu—”

“Damn it, Frank, I told you not to talk to her like that,” the younger man said.

An exaggerated laugh echoed in the hallway. “Boy, what are you going to do about it? You’d be dead right now if I hadn’t come back for your ass.”

“Screw you, Frank; we were getting along just fine without you,” the girl said.

“The hell you were. Now shut up before I slap you both upside the head with this bar,” the gruff voice said laughing.

There was another clunk as the bar pried into the doorframe, causing a slight creaking of wood, then the bar popped, and the man yelped. “Dammit; smashed my knuckles!” he shouted.

The man huffed and breathed hard until, suddenly, a thud resonated as the man punched the door.

“This fucker is solid,” Frank said. “Maybe we can get some tools in the morning and try again.”

Jacob heard the crowbar drop to the carpet.

“Or... maybe I should just shoot the lock.”

“Are you crazy? They’ll hear that for sure,” the girl argued.

“Boy, you better shut that little bitch up before I do,” Frank said.

There was a commotion on the landing that sounded like fists being thrown. Heavy breathing and grunting were accompanied by banging against the door as something hard smacked against it repeatedly.

“Stop, Frank! You’ll kill him,” pleaded the girl. The banging against the door stopped; then Jacob heard a loud slap and the girl whimpered. “This is your fault. If you’d just kept your mouth shut!” Frank yelled. “Take this piece of shit downstairs before I kick both your asses. I should have never come back for you,” he said, grunting and breathing heavy.

Jacob could hear the soft steps fade as they fumbled down the stairs. The other man’s heavy breathing remained. He thudded against the door, and Jacob could hear him slide down to the floor. He was muttering to himself. The sound of a lighter sparked to life and soon after, Jacob could smell cigarette smoke as it drifted through the cold air return.

He knew the man was lying against the door. He could easily muffle the gun with a pillow and press it against the wood; a single shot is all it would take, if he guessed correctly. A quick shot in the night. The people downstairs would probably thank him.

There was a clanging as the man pried the bar against the knob. A sharp, metallic clunk followed by a crunching sound, and the handle broke off. Jacob felt the fear build and backed up as he observed the handle drop on his side of the door. The man then jabbed at the knob and knocked away the core, creating a small peek hole where the knob had been.

I cannot allow him to enter, Jacob thought.

Jacob hung back in the shadows and looked at the small hole. He could see the whites of the man’s eye as he peered in. The curtains were drawn, and the room was pitch-black; Jacob knew the man couldn’t see anything. Now was the time—if he was going to do it, he’d do it now. Jacob raised the pistol and aimed at the hole in the door. He’d shoot him through the eye. The gunshot would be loud, but a single shot would be hard for the things to pinpoint.

“Who’s in there?” the man said.

Jacob eased back the pistol and held his breath.

“Come on now, I know someone’s in there; I see your stuff on the bed.”

Jacob held the pistol with both hands and sighted on the hole. He let his thumb quietly click off the safety then cock the hammer on the pistol, holding his breath.

“Whoa, okay now, I heard that; let’s take it easy in there,” the man said.

“Take it easy like you did on the boy and the girl?” Jacob asked, breaking the silence, trying to make his voice sound raucous.

“Come on now, I’m the only thing keeping them alive. The boy’s got some growing up to do; I’m just trying to toughen him up.”

“Yup, that’s your business and you can keep it out there,” Jacob said. “What do you want?”

“What do you got?”

Jacob forced a laugh, wanting the man to think he wasn’t afraid, even though he was. He relaxed his shoulders and kept the gun aimed at the door. He could no longer see the man’s eye but from the deflection of his voice, Jacob knew he was still resting in front of the door.

“You can have anything out there. I don’t have enough in here to share. Take what you need, stay the night, but in the morning, you need to be gone.”

“Oh, come on now, you ain’t left us shit out here. We gonna need something more. What you got? Food? Some water maybe?”

“What I *got* is a big-ass shotgun aimed at your head,” Jacob bluffed. “I already made you my best offer. Take it or leave it.”

Frank let out an exaggerated sigh. “Mister, I think we got off on the wrong foot here. We’re all on the same side. I just need a little to keep us going. Hell, give us some of what you got, and maybe you can come with us. Lord knows I could use someone like you; that kid sure as hell ain’t no help.”

Jacob had no intention of letting the man in, but he wanted information from him. It was the first contact he’d had with anyone from the outside in days.

“Where are you going?” Jacob asked, intentionally leading the man on.

“The park; word is that it’s safe there. The military is running an evacuation,” Frank said, relaxing his voice. Jacob heard the sound of a lighter as he lit another cigarette.

“Where did you hear this?” Jacob asked.

“State cop, two days ago,” Frank answered.

“Bullshit, I haven’t seen a cop since this all started.”

“There’s still some out there, mister. They stick to the highway, mostly. Won’t go into the neighborhoods anymore.”

“Then how is it you saw one?” Jacob asked suspiciously.

Frank grunted. “Stupid story, really. I actually made it the hell out of here... well, almost. My sister talked me into going back for her dumbass

kid. The troopers had school buses up at the old high school, evacuating people. I got my family there, my sister and her little ones, but the woman refused to get on the bus. She begged me to go back for that one downstairs.

"I guess I am as stupid as he is for letting her talk me into it. Kid was holding up at the house with his girlfriend. I got 'em out of there, but shit was too far gone by the time we got back on the road. The siren that was going suddenly shutting off really screwed us. Seems like they're more active now than ever and running in those large groups."

"Have you... have you killed one?" Jacob asked.

A long pause. Jacob could hear Frank inhale deeply on the cigarette and let out a muffled cough. "Yeah, I've killed some. You?"

"Yeah," Jacob answered.

"Did you know them?"

"I knew the last ones; they were kids from up the street, but... but they were different," Jacob muttered.

"They weren't the people you thought they were. I'm not sure what's happening, but they aren't the same. This is no riot, brother; it's not civil unrest or revolution like the radio said. Shit ain't right out there—something's wrong, really wrong. I killed an old lady. She lived up the street from us, used a walker, and rarely left her front yard. That old bitch ran at me like a kid in her twenties. It's not right; that's not possible. I heard folks saying they from outer space, like an invasion!"

Jacob thought back to the blood on his hands, how it curled against the concrete floor. "That's nuts; I mean, Aliens? Really? No, it's not possible, right?" Jacob answered.

"Really? It ain't so crazy if you *really* stop to think about it."

"You said you knew the old lady, so how could she be from outer space?" Jacob asked unable to hide the sarcasm from his voice.

"Well... maybe not aliens, but shape shifters, something... That old woman, she wasn't an old woman anymore, she even smelt differ—"

A large crash at the front of the house caused Jacob to jump. He gripped the pistol again and brought it up. "What was that?" Jacob asked.

Another large crash followed by the scream from the girl downstairs—they were at the house.

"Come on, mister, you got to open this damn door!"

"What did you do? You brought them here!" Jacob shouted.

SOUNDS OF SHATTERING GLASS ERUPTED FROM DOWNSTAIRS.

“I have to help them; when I get back you need to let us in!” Frank yelled.

Jacob heard Frank running down the stairs yelling, “I’m coming, Joey; hold on, boy!”

The yelling continued, Frank’s voice now enraged, shouting to the others. Jacob turned to his wife sitting behind him. “Get Katy to the attic.”

“Come with us,” Laura pleaded.

“I’ll be right behind you. I have to help them.”

Jacob moved closer to the door to listen. He heard the screams outside and more glass breaking below, followed by a shotgun blast. He reached for the drill to remove the screws. The house below him shook as windows exploded; he knew there was nothing he could do for them. Jacob ran to the closet where Laura was struggling to get the barely conscious Katy up the shelving.

He took his daughter from Laura and helped his wife up the shelf, using his shoulders to try to boost her up. He climbed as high as he could, then passed Katy to Laura through the hole in the ceiling and scrambled up after them. The house was shaking violently as he pulled himself up through the ceiling joists. He quickly moved to the center of the attic and kept his wife and daughter behind him as he looked over the access hole.

“We have to help them,” Laura said, her voice trembling.

“There is nothing we can do for them, there’s just too many.” Jacob whispered.

He shook his head and grabbed his wife and daughter in a tight hug as he listened to the screams below. Gunfire from the first floor, barely audible above the roar of the things bursting into his home, found its way through the rooms. The walls shook as it felt like hundreds of them must be pouring through his house. Jacob watched nervously while the ceiling joists swayed and rattled under the load of the things below. He left his wife’s side and crawled across on his belly to the gable vent, wanting to see how many there were. He pressed his eye against the opening and peered into the street.

The front yard and the street were filled with them. Shoulder to shoulder, they crowded and pushed their way into his home. The house heaved and shook with protest in rhythm to the movement of the mass. Jacob watched in fascination as the screaming suddenly stopped. The creatures halted their forward momentum and slowly withdrew. As quickly as they had massed, they collectively dispersed back into the shadows. The remaining ones in his home slowly bled back into the street. Jacob saw a tall man cradling the young girl's body, then another carrying the boy. Several others vacated the home before he witnessed the gruff man called Frank being dragged away.

"Where are they taking them?" Jacob whispered.



THUNDER FILLED THE NIGHT AIR AS BOLD LIGHTNING STRIKES FLASHED IN the distance. The flashes filled the bedroom with light through the gaps in the drapes, a strobe of patterns that played tricks on his mind as he watched the door. Laura was curled into the fetal position beside him, cradling Katy as they slept in the center of the bed. Jacob held the rifle in his hand, splitting his time watching the bedroom door and peeking through the window. He tried to sleep, but every slap of thunder thrust him awake so hard it made his chest hurt.

Two hours had passed since the things left the house without even trying the second floor, never even moving to the steps. They kept all of their focus on the visitors below, and the pack left with them in their clutches. Jacob had watched them move away and vanish from the street, leaving things as if they'd never been there. He'd then waited until he was sure the things were gone before returning his family to the bedroom.

Jacob lay on the bed, listening to the sound of raindrops beating on the roof, the cadence slowly increasing as the storm intensified and moved over them. He let his feet touch the floor and moved to the window. Pulling back the drapes, he saw that the street was filling with water. Without power, the pumps would be down, and basements would soon backup. The cars were still there; the dead man's body hanging out and soaked in the pouring rain. He looked across the street at the ruins of Smitty's home.

Jacob thought of Frank's story of the evacuation at the school. How he had to go back for his nephew himself. There was no rescue; they had to do it on their own. "Nobody's coming," he whispered. "Nobody."

A stirring in the bed snapped his gaze from the street. He turned and watched as Laura propped herself up on one arm and looked at him. "Anything?" she asked.

Jacob shook his head and closed the drape before walking back to the bed. He sat down lightly at the edge, close enough that Laura could put an arm on his shoulder. A loud rolling of thunder rattled the house, and Jacob flinched with the noise. "Come to bed; lie down with us," Laura whispered. "There's nothing you can do."

CHAPTER FIVE

There was a distant, low rumbling noise and muffled voices when Jacob opened his eyes. He imagined it was a dream until he heard them again, along with the growl of a diesel engine. He jumped from the bed and hurried to the window. Down the street, he saw a small military convoy moving slowly and deliberately. Green painted trucks, with men walking along beside them, headed in Jacob's direction. The convoy stopped just in front of his wrecked car.

A Humvee, with a man standing in the turret over a large machine gun, led two large transport vehicles. As soon as they stopped, more soldiers dismounted the vehicles and stood near the curbs with their rifles out. Ignoring the destroyed homes, another group of soldiers ran to the remaining intact front doors, pounding on them and calling out for survivors.

Jacob watched in amazement as homes that he'd presumed were abandoned opened their doors. People were guided out and they hurried to line up at the backs of the trucks. Soldiers tossed in bags and helped men, women, and children climb steps to board the vehicles.

Rescue! They're here! Jacob thought.

"Now! We have to go now!" Jacob yelled, jumping to his feet and waking his wife.

Grabbing the cordless drill, he removed the screws from the door as quickly as he could.

He grabbed the rifle, slung it across his back, and placed the pistol in its holster. His wife was fumbling with the backpack. Jacob grabbed it from

her and put it over her shoulder, then lifted Katy. He grabbed Laura by the wrist and pulled her behind him as he ran for the stairs. He rushed for the already open front door, weaving through the overturned furniture and stepping over the remains of the splintered front door. Jacob worried when he saw that the trucks were nearly full. He called out and caught the attention of a soldier who was near his porch.

“Show me your eyes!” the soldier ordered, aiming the rifle.

Jacob stopped and raised his hands staring at the soldier. “We’re okay, we are all fine.”

The soldier looked them over and pointed a gloved finger at Katy lying in Jacob’s arms. “What’s with the little one?”

“She is just sick; she needs a doctor.”

The soldier stepped in and looked at Jacob closely then down at Katy. He frowned sympathetically and nodded his head. “Okay. Quickly, we gotta keep moving.” The soldier then yelled over his shoulder, “We got three more over here.”

Jacob rushed his wife and daughter ahead of him to the back of the first transport. A soldier was just beginning to close the canopy. “Sorry, sir, this one is full; try the other truck.”

Jacob looked at the man in shock. He knew there would be no arguing with him, so he grabbed his wife’s arm and dragged her to the second transport.

The soldier had already removed the stepladder and closed the gate, but when he looked at Jacob and Katy, his mouth dropped upon seeing the sick girl. “It’s okay. We can make room. Lift her up!” he said, locking eyes with Jacob.

Jacob lifted his daughter at the back gate. Someone grabbed her and pulled her on board the truck. He could hear Katy’s screams as he lost sight of her. He hugged his wife and went to lift her over the tailgate. From above, a man in a flannel shirt put his hand in her face and pushed her away. “Truck is full, man!” he yelled.

A second soldier stepped forward, put a hand on Jacob’s shoulder, and said, “It’s okay; you two can walk with us.”

“My daughter is alone in there,” Jacob yelled. “Just let my wife on.”

He turned and looked at Laura. “Don’t worry, I’ll find you,” he said before he lifted her again.

The soldier helped lift Laura, and as she grabbed the top of the truck's tailgate, a woman on board grabbed her hand and tried to help pull her in. The man in flannel again came forward; he tried to peel Laura's fingers from the gate then went to push an open palm to her face. "I *said* the truck is—"

Not allowing him to finish, Jacob let go of his wife and grabbed the man's wrist. He lifted his leg to the tailgate and pulled back.

The flannelled man lost his balance and tumbled head first from the bed of the truck and out to the street. Hitting hard against the pavement, he lay motionless. Jacob watched as his wife was lifted up and over the tailgate. A soldier moved Jacob aside and began fastening down the canopy as shots erupted from behind them. Jacob spun to see a black-eyed man sprinting toward them, but—already—soldiers were online, firing. Jacob watched as the thing dropped and rolled to the ground as more fast-moving runners came into view from down the street.

"Go, go, go," a soldier yelled, slapping the side of the truck. He then turned Jacob around and, pushing him forward, said, "Let's go, friend, keep up."

Jacob stared as the truck slowly moved away. With the gunfire erupting all around him and not knowing what else to do, he chased after it. He watched as the soldiers fell in beside him, turning often to check their rear for pursuers. They were moving fast but not fast enough; the truck was pulling away and the mob was closing on them.

Jacob heard screams of agony as the swarm overcame the man in flannel. The soldiers stopped; one of them grabbed Jacob and turned him toward the center of a quickly forming protective ring. Jacob looked at his surroundings and realized he was the last civilian remaining on the street, encased in the human shield provided by this group of soldiers. Hearing the screams and seeing the black eyes approach, Jacob swung the rifle from his back and held it tightly in his arms.

"Make 'em count, boys!" a soldier yelled.

The soldiers fired with chaotic precision. Jacob watched them take quick shots into the crowd and work as a team, covering each other as another reloaded. Jacob moved to an edge and prepared to fire but was quickly pushed back to the center. Once the initial wave was cut down, the men were back on their feet, shouting orders, and directing Jacob in the

direction the trucks had gone. The mob began to close in again; Jacob saw the Humvee as it circled back over the sidewalk and lawns. Its engine at a high roar, it raced past them and skidded to a stop in the street. With the Humvee shielding them from the advancing swarm, the big gun on its roof let loose a barrage. A *thump, thump, thump* resonated from the big gun up in the turret, ripping the charging mass apart.

Following the soldiers, Jacob ran and took cover behind the Humvee with two other men. The big gun cut down wave after wave of the charging forms while other soldiers covered the sides and backs. The gunfire became deafening; it disoriented Jacob, and he put his hands to his ringing ears. When the gunner stopped firing, the street was suddenly quiet. Jacob turned and saw through the billowing blue smoke that the transports had moved on in the chaos.

The tight mass of soldiers began reloading magazines while holding their position and watching the surrounding neighborhood. Jacob felt lost in the group, and he looked to the soldier next to him. The man was middle aged—maybe late thirties—and looked like he hadn't slept for days. His weather-beaten face was dirty and stubbly with the makings of an early beard. He wore a tattered army uniform; the sleeves were torn, and there was a long rip in one pant leg of his trousers. The man's knees and elbows were covered in dirt and blood.

"Where did they go?" Jacob asked.

Pushing loose bullets into a magazine, the soldier replied, "Back to the park. We're staging folks there before moving everyone north." The soldier finished with his task and looked up at Jacob. Seeming to notice the way Jacob looked him over, he continued, "Yeah, I ain't much to look at; it's been a rough week."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to stare."

The soldier waved his hand, dismissing Jacob's apology. "You know, I saw what you did back there," the soldier said. "The man on the truck."

"I won't apologize. He wouldn't let my wife on the truck," Jacob said.

"Yeah... he was an asshole. I've lost a lot of *good* men the last few days. I won't be shedding any tears for that one," the soldier replied and then extending a gloved hand. "By the way, my name's Murphy."

Jacob returned the handshake. "I'm Jacob."

Murphy gripped Jacob's hand firmly and pulled him in close so the others couldn't hear. "Listen, I ain't gonna sugarcoat this for you. They'll be back and when they come, they'll come hard. You need to get that weapon up and be ready to use it; do you understand? You can't cower."

"I got it," Jacob said, suddenly unsure of himself and missing the security of his second-floor safe zone.

More screams erupted from all around them, signifying the things were out there roaming the backyards of the homes.

"Well, that didn't take long," Murphy said under his breath. The soldier then rose to his feet and yelled as he brought up the rifle, "Lock and load, boys—it's time to pay the bills!"

The mob had somehow managed to completely surround their position. Instead of coming back at them from down the street, they had slipped through the backyards and were pouring at them from between the houses. The turret gun opened up, sweeping and hitting everything it could, and the soldiers on both sides of Jacob fired their rifles. Jacob pulled the .22 rifle tight to his shoulder and took aim before pulling the trigger, switching targets until his only magazine was empty. Then he drew the handgun from its holster.

The deranged things had gotten in close. He watched as a soldier was hit from behind and knocked to the street. A black-eyed man tried to drag him away, and as another soldier went to his aid, he was quickly taken down with him. More climbed over the hood of the Humvee and swamped the mounted machine gunner from behind. The gun fired wildly, the gunner refusing to be taken down without a fight.

Jacob looked up the street in the direction the trucks had moved. He stood and contemplated running after them. His hands were shaking with fear. His ears were ringing from the close proximity of the gunshots, the screams blocking out his thoughts. He raised his pistol when he saw another wave of the mob closing on him. He aimed straight into the chest of the closest one and fired until the slide locked to the rear.

They were all over him now; they leapt and tackled him to the ground, then more piled on. Jacob tried to fight back but was pressed against the pavement with his head turned to the side. He could feel the things tugging at his legs, trying to drag him off. He heard the clang on the street beside him and recognized the round metallic object that was rolling in his

direction. He closed his eyes tight and waited for the explosion he was sure would come.

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CHAPTER SIX

The ceiling was made up of evenly spaced old wooden beams; holes had been drilled through them and strands of wire were stretched between each timber. Heavy wooden floorboards with small breaks between them allowed bright light to filter in. The rays cut his pupils, causing them to contract; he closed his eyes. He heard heavy footsteps above him and clomping of heavy feet. Scattered dust drifted through the beams of light and he watched pieces of earth slowly fall until they touched his face. He lay staring at the ceiling as if in a dream; his eyes open and aware, he stayed immobile waiting for his body to catch up with his brain.

Suddenly, Jacob jerked and stiffened as the feelings of pain and fear filled his body. He tried to sit up—until agony shot through his shoulder and hip. Jacob looked down and saw that a green field dressing covered his wounded side. He felt the pressure of a heavy hand on his chest.

“Whoa there, big guy; just relax,” a soothing voice whispered.

“Wha... where am I? Where’s my family? Where are Laura and Katy?” Jacob asked, breathing heavily. Still struggling to sit up, he knew he needed to relax but couldn’t fight off the fear. His heart was beating out of his chest and he felt the sweat gather on his forehead.

The soldier scooted closer and Jacob recognized the face of Murphy, the soldier he had met on the street. “I need you to stay quiet; okay, buddy?” Murphy whispered as he pointed to the ceiling. “Can you do that for me?”

Confused and angry at being spoken to like a child, Jacob glared at the man. He wanted to get to his feet, to escape, to find the trucks. He needed to get to Laura and Katy.

Jacob was about to protest again when he heard more hollow, heavy steps on the plank floor above. They slowly faded and were followed by a loud slap of a screen door. Against a far wall, Jacob saw a tall black soldier standing on an old crate and looking out a narrow window. The man turned and looked back in his direction.

“They gone, Sergeant; all of ’em. Just moved back down Oak Street.”

“Shit. That’s the third time they’ve been through this house; not sure how long our luck is going to hold,” Murphy whispered.

Jacob moved his good arm behind him, pushed, and forced himself into a sitting position. Feeling bolts of pain fire through his trembling body, he scooted so that his back rested against a rough block wall.

“You said Oak Street? Where the hell am I? What happened back there?” Jacob whispered.

Murphy looked down at him with concern. “I need you to relax okay. Just chill for a bit and let those wounds set up. You took some frag from that grenade.”

The other soldier walked away from the window and sat against the wall near Jacob. “It was superficial, but damn, you’re a bleeder. I patched you up and ended up using all the damn med kit on your ass,” the soldier said. “You remember any of it?”

Jacob looked down, letting his hand tenderly touch the bandage. “Thank you... I guess. Wait, where... where’s my family?” Jacob stuttered.

“They’re safe; I’m sure they made it back—” Murphy started to say before Jacob interrupted him.

“Then you don’t know.” Jacob said.

Murphy raised a finger to his lips and pointed at the floor above.

Stephens shook his head, watching Jacob. “Fools, man... we never shoulda stopped for that last set. We’d be back on the base behind the walls if we’d just kept going. Hell... I should have never reported to duty at all. I should have stayed home.” The soldier swung his head down to hold it in his hands. “I’d be downstate right now, quiet and comfy.”

“Cut it, Corporal; our job is to collect civilians, not take care of our own asses,” Murphy said.

“Man, that’s bullshit. Who gonna care for all them civilians now, with Second Squad gone?” Stephens muttered as he looked down and dug through a small pack. He reached in, pulled out a small bottle of water, and

handed it to Jacob. “Here, drink this down. You lost a lot of blood, need to replace those fluids.” Stephens reached back into his bag and removed Jacob’s pistol. “Take this too. I topped off the mag for you. I seen you in action back there. Next time, slow down and aim; you’d have better luck with it.”

Jacob held the pistol in his hand. Ignoring the water, he said, “I don’t understand how I got here? Who are you?”

“Hmmh,” Stephens grunted. “Some appreciation that is... Guess you took a hard thump to the grape. Yeah, I’d be jacked up in the head too.”

“Where’s my family?” Jacob said, trying again to get to his feet.

Murphy put his hand up. “I already told you, your family is safe. I think so anyway; the base is locked up tight and those things haven’t gotten in yet. Now... like I said before, you need to *chill*. If those wounds get to bleeding again, we’ll be stuck here.”

Jacob exhaled loudly, his frustration growing. “Where is *here*?”

He watched Murphy reach into his pack and pull out a brown plastic pouch the size of a large book. He used his knife to open the package, and then dumped smaller packages on the floor in front of him. “We’re in the basement of a house on Oak. You should be more grateful, seeing as how we carried your ass... well, Stephens did mostly—”

“You’re welcome,” Stephens sounded off. “You heavy as hell too, ya know... wouldn’t kill you to do some cardio, lose some of that gut.”

Jacob looked down and removed the cap from the bottle he was holding. “Oak Street? That’s only three blocks over from my house.”

“Like I said, you heavy,” Stephens answered, glaring.

Murphy pointed at the window. “We barely made it in here, as it is. We were able to cut down the last wave. The grenade helped, but we had to move before they rebounded—they always fucking rebound. You’re damn lucky we decided to take you with us.”

“I’d ha’ left ya if it was up to me,” Stephens said, shaking his head. “Hell, Sergeant here, guess he figures better to take you with us than fight you later.”

Jacob stared at him blankly. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means every time we lose someone, they come back as the fucking darkness.”

“The darkness?” Jacob asked.

“Those, things, whatever the hell they are,” Stephens said, moving away to a far wall and dropping down against it. He pulled his rifle into his lap and cradled it.

“What is it? *The Darkness*... is it like a sickness?”

“Hell no; it’s an actual thing, like a whole new person,” Stephens muttered, shaking his head.

Jacob found himself losing his patience. “You’re talking nonsense!”

Murphy dug into the plastic pouches in front of him and tossed Jacob a sealed package. “Eat this; you need the calories.”

Murphy put his knife back into a sheath on his belt. “It’s not a sickness; it’s... it’s something different.”

Jacob took the package, flipped it over, read the *pound cake* label, and set it on the floor next to him. “Sorry. I’m not in the mood for cake.”

“Then go ahead and eat it, because that shit is in no way cake. If you’re going to be strong enough to travel with us, you need to eat,” Murphy ordered.

Jacob took the foil package and ripped off the top. He looked at the yellow brick inside, and then looked back at Murphy. “I’ve seen them close up. The black eyes, the dark mouths, and their blood... it... it was like oil,” he said quietly.

Stephens grunted. “That’s cause they ain’t people; they the darkness. We already told you that.”

“What does that mean?” Jacob asked, looking at Murphy as he pulled the yellow brick from the wrapper.

“The Darkness, Zulus, Marble Eyes, Boogie Man—whatever you call them, it’s all the same,” Murphy said, spooning through his meal. “They are not us, not anymore.”

Murphy opened a drinking tube hanging from his vest and sucked water into his mouth, taking a long swallow. He stared at Jacob, then looked at Stephens who was leaning against the wall. “You been cut off since the beginning of this, huh?”

Jacob nodded. “We haven’t left the house since the sirens turned on. I saw the early news reports about the rioting and the PSA to shelter in place,” Jacob said, breaking off a hunk of the brick and putting it in his mouth. He made an odd face and took a long swig of water to wash down the substance.

Stephens pulled his rifle away from his lap. “Damn PSA; shoulda told people to run, get as far away as you can. Now we got so many pockets of people trapped in the city and they just waiting to get *taken*... soon they’ll all be gone, be one of them.”

“So, what are they?” Jacob asked.

Stephens spit on the floor near his boot. “I don’t know what they are,” he said, his voice rising. Catching himself, he turned back to Jacob and spoke in a low voice. “Doc Jersey, our medic, he cut one open after we killed it. No guts, man, just a black jelly glob all up in their bodies. We tried taking one prisoner... yeah, we captured and hog-tied its ass. They strong, but they ain’t no supermen. This thing was weird, though; the damn thing screamed until it died. We didn’t do a damn thing to it. It just fucking died, man. Then it dried up like a choked-out fish.”

“It’s true; they shrivel up... like dehydrate,” Murphy said.

Jacob’s jaw dropped, not understanding but seeing a connection. “The ones I killed; the blood, it shriveled and dried up too, like old paint—”

There was a loud thump on the floor above as a door slammed open. Stephens held a hand up and put a finger to his lip. Jacob looked up at the ceiling and watched the shadows as a figure walked over the planks. It paced through the house and then quickly left again.

Stephens quietly got to his feet and stepped lightly to the window. He looked out to search the street, then moved back to his position and looked down at Murphy. “Sergeant, we can’t stay here. That’s the fourth time they checked this place. They know we’re close.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Jacob stood pressed against the wall with Murphy to his front. He was blinded in the night and kept a hand on Murphy's shoulder, so he could be guided by him. Stephens had already cleared the basement doorway and advanced out into the shadows to scout the way ahead. They were waiting for his signal to proceed outside. A low clicking sound came to Jacob's ears and Murphy turned, looked at Jacob, and waved him forward. The soldier then stepped off, pulling Jacob behind him. Once in the doorway, they pressed back against the wall. Jacob looked around, trying to orient himself before stepping up the concrete steps to the outside. He was shocked to make it up them without falling on his face.

Murphy moved quickly along the side of the house, then knelt beside a tall bush. He looked back at Jacob and lifted his night vision goggles from his eyes. "You, all right?" he whispered.

"I can't see anything," Jacob whispered back.

"Just keep a hand on my back until your eyes adjust... You good?"

Jacob nodded even though the pain in his hip seemed unbearable and was causing bolts of burning spikes to shoot to his spine. Not wanting to stop, he clenched his teeth and whispered back, "I'm good."

"Okay then; Stephens is just ahead. I know you can't see him in the dark, but it'll get better as we go. Just stay close and keep your mouth shut, walk when I walk, stop when I stop, and if I run... try to keep up."

Murphy stepped off briskly, hugging the front face of the house and moving south in the direction that Jacob knew would take them to the park. They stayed away from the sidewalk—crouching beside shrubs, moving

between cars parked in driveways, and sometimes jumping a fence. When they came to a cross street, Stephens would duck near the corner of a house to wait for Murphy and Jacob to bunch up behind. Murphy would slap the tall man's shoulder and he would dart across the street, the sound of his boots slapping the pavement and filling the dead air.

A signal invisible to Jacob's naked eyes was received and Murphy got back to his feet, dragging Jacob behind him. As promised, his night vision slowly improved as they traveled. He was able to make out the shapes of houses, then objects in the yards. Now he could see nearly everything up to a short distance, and Jacob slowly recognized the neighborhood they were in. He often used this route as a shortcut when going to Katy's daycare.

The streets were lined with well-manicured lawns on both sides. Many of the homes here looked untouched; the doors remained closed and windows were in place. Jacob found that more and more of the driveways were absent of vehicles as he traveled the neighborhood. *Were they evacuated?* Jacob pondered as he passed another long, empty driveway. They rounded the corner of a tall brick-faced house and suddenly, a bright floodlight filled a front yard. For a moment, Jacob could see the crouched figure of Stephens freeze just before he sprinted out of sight and vanished.

Jacob was turned back by Murphy before being rushed to the side of the house. They knelt down next to the side of the home in a dark shadow and away from the light. Murphy flipped up his goggles and raised his rifle to search the area lit by the floodlight. He scanned left and right as the area, again, suddenly went dark. Murphy pulled the rifle back into his chest and dropped his goggles. He crouched lower and pressed his body against the wall.

Jacob couldn't contain himself and whispered, "What's going on?"

"Nothing; probably just one of those damn solar security lights, tied to a motion sensor," Murphy answered. "Come on, follow—"

A loud sound of feet falling on the sidewalk silenced Murphy. They both pressed tight against the brick house as several figures passed by within yards of their position. The Others moved beyond them, and the floodlight kicked on again, lighting the neighboring yard but this time, also illuminating six figures. They stood together but randomly spread across the yard—not searching, just standing in the center of the brightly lit space.

Murphy pushed Jacob back around the corner then skirted ahead of him to lead the way to the brick home's backyard. They moved up a narrow walkway that brought them to a tight stone path between the house and a detached garage. Murphy moved through it with Jacob close behind. They rounded a stack of overflowing metal trashcans, then dropped low in the grass and continued on to the far side of the yard where they met up with a tall picket fence.

Murphy low-walked the distance to the fence and knelt down with his back to the wooden slats. They were now directly behind the brick house and all the way to the back of the lot. Next door was the home with the solar light in the front yard. Behind them, over the fence, was a narrow patch of high grass and trees that divided the lot from the home on the opposite side of the block.

Murphy had pulled his goggles down and was looking ahead at the brick house. He then lifted his rifle and probed the area of the neighboring backyard. "Three more of the damn lights up there by the roof," he whispered.

Three quick shots, followed by two more, blasted from the front of the neighboring home. Murphy leapt to his feet, turned, and pulled Jacob up beside him. "Time to keep up," he said and took off running toward the neighboring fence. When he got there, he let his rifle hang from a sling and cupped his hands, providing a step for Jacob.

"What are you doing?" Jacob asked.

"I'll give you a boost. Get over and don't stop until you hit the next yard."

"But the lights—" He was interrupted by a long scream and volley of gunfire, this time farther away.

Murphy flexed his arms. "Let's go; you're wasting time!"

Jacob shook his head and lifted a foot into the soldier's grip. He stood up and grabbed the top edge of the fence as he felt Murphy pushing him up and over. He cleared the top lip of the fence and fell hard to the grass on the far side. He scrambled back to his feet; the pain in his hip sent electrical shocks up his left side. Jacob had just stepped off in the darkness with his hands in front of him when the backyard exploded with bright light.

Three bright halogen lights, attached to the roof's gables, kicked on simultaneously. Jacob looked directly into one, filling his vision with spots

and momentarily blinding him. He heard Murphy thump to the ground beside him and felt a hand shove him forward.

“What are you still doing here?” Murphy yelled. “*Run!*”

Murphy again shoved him forward, causing him to almost trip. He ran past Jacob with his rifle up, sweeping the yard as he bolted to the opposite end. He nearly crashed into the fence when he stopped and aimed toward the front yard to wait for Jacob to catch up. Murphy, again, dropped the rifle to the sling and dropped his cupped hands. Without argument, Jacob lifted a foot to the gloved hands and felt himself being lifted up and over the fence. Again, he dropped fast to the other side and landed hard as he impacted with the ground.

Gracefully, Murphy dropped down beside him and pulled Jacob to his feet by the back of his shirt. Once more, they were up and running through backyards—fortunately ones without fences. Murphy slowed to a jog, then to a brisk walk. He kept his rifle up as he continued forward and scanned ahead. At the corner lot, Murphy stopped and moved in closer to the back of a home. He paused just off a back patio that led up to a room filled with furniture.

Murphy held up a hand, halting Jacob, then pointed a finger at the patio door. Walking low with his back to the wall, he approached the patio. As Jacob watched, Murphy lightly walked up the steps to a large deck before he crept to a sliding patio door. Moments later, the door slid open and Murphy waved Jacob forward as he disappeared inside. Jacob took a deep breath and followed the soldier into the home.

The patio door opened into a dining room dimly lit by the floodlights from down the street. The space smelled of death and rotting food. A round wooden table held a carton of milk that was knocked over; its spoiled contents splashed across the table and onto the floor. Jacob closed the door and followed Murphy deeper into the house. In the living room, they found piled luggage and an open closet with coats and shoes spilling out.

“They left in a hurry,” Murphy whispered as he walked to a partial wall banking an open staircase. He pulled back a curtain to allow more of the light to pour in and peered into the front yard.

“Is Stephens out there?” Jacob asked.

“Somewhere... he’s smart; he’ll find a tidy spot where he can watch for us.”

“Why did he fire, you sure they didn’t get him?”

Murphy clenched his jaw, looking to the front yard. “They might have gotten the jump on him, but more likely he was providing a diversion for us —”

A noise near the front of the house caused Jacob to drop down and pull his elbows in. Murphy heard it too and dropped the curtain. In one fluid motion, he spun on his heels, pressed his back to the wall, and brought up his rifle. Murphy looked across the room at Jacob and pointed to the kitchen. Jacob nodded then turned and moved quietly across the floor to get behind a kitchen island. He knelt down, his head just out of sight.

An already partially open door squeaked as it swung inward, bleeding more light into the room and backlighting the cabinets over Jacob’s head. More noise echoed through the space with the sound of a vase or pot being tipped over and rolling loudly across a hardwood floor. Jacob squatted lower as he heard wet shoes squeaking on the waxed wood floors. They moved closer and seemed to stop just beyond the kitchen. After a short pause, they moved again and stopped at the island. Jacob could hear the thing’s breath and the rustle of its clothing as it moved its hand over items on the island. A glass was knocked over; it rolled across the island’s surface and dropped to the floor, shattering at Jacob’s feet.

A shard of glass slid and rested against Jacob’s boot; it rattled and chimed with the shaking of his knee. He held his breath and tried to stop his trembling. Finding it impossible, he steeled his nerve, gripped the pistol, and rose to face whatever was there. He stumbled as he stood too quickly and caused blood to rush from his head. His already weak knees taking him off-balance, Jacob dropped a hand to the island to steady himself as he looked into the blackened eyes of a broad-shouldered man. He was wearing a collared work shirt with one sleeve ripped free, a pink and black tie still knotted around his neck.

The thing looked through Jacob like it was focusing on the wall behind him. Its lips curled back to reveal glistening ivory fangs and blackened gums. Suddenly, the thing’s arms shot out. Reaching for Jacob, it lunged forward over the island. It opened its mouth to yell but was halted by Murphy leaping from out of the dark and landing on the thing’s back. Murphy quickly wrapped his forearm around its mouth to block the scream from escaping. Pulling a knife with his free hand, he shoved the blade into

the creature's neck. Together they flew over the island and crashed into Jacob, the three of them dropping hard to the tile floor.

Murphy held on until the thing stopped moving then rose above it, continuing to stab at the base of its neck. When the black-eyed man finally stopped twitching, he pulled his arm away and rested back on his ankles. Jacob struggled below them and pulled himself clear. Murphy dropped back to his rear and scooted until he was across the kitchen, pressed against the refrigerator. Jacob continued to crawl away toward the light then rolled to his back and looked up at the ceiling.

Breathing hard, he pushed himself to a sitting position and nursed his wounded hip. The thing's head was turned in his direction; its blank eyes seemed to glare at him as the black, oily blood drained from its neck onto the tile floor. Jacob looked across the kitchen at Murphy, who reached up and ripped a decorative towel from the refrigerator handle then used it to wipe the blade of his knife.

Murphy rolled to his knees and climbed to his feet. He pulled open the refrigerator door then looked away as a stench hit him. He looked back and, cupping a hand over the end of his flashlight, looked through the fridge again. Pulling out a bottle of water, he closed the door and twisted the cap from the bottle. He drank half of it and, on his return to the living room, tossed the rest to Jacob as he walked past him.

"Get up; we've got to move," Murphy whispered.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The solar light went out and stayed out. The house and yard were dark —no sign of the things. Murphy moved them to the front of the house where they hid on a large, open front porch. A wood swing hanging from the rafters squeaked as the wind moved it.

“There,” Murphy whispered, pointing in the distance.

Murphy held out his goggles and put them to Jacob’s eye. Jacob blinked and let his vision adjust to the optics. Up ahead, on the opposite corner, a light flashed. Jacob dropped the goggles. Looking in the same direction, he now saw nothing.

“You can’t see it without the NODs; it’s infrared. I have one just like it,” Murphy whispered while removing a small chip holding a tiny bulb. Murphy manipulated the device connecting the battery then held it over his head. “He’s in the scrub brush. How well do you know that area?”

Jacob looked back at him confused. “I... I don’t know it at all. I mean, it’s just a few empty lots... was supposed to be developed—”

“Buddy, I don’t need a real estate lecture. Do you know what’s on the other side of it?”

Jacob looked back to the distant tree line. “It moves out from here. There is a railroad bed at the back of the lots; that’s the reason they never sold... I mean, there’s railroad tracks back there, then past that and through the trees is a two-lane highway.”

“Route 30?” Murphy asked.

Jacob nodded and watched as Murphy pulled a small spiral notebook from a pocket on his sleeve. He began to sketch their location, then

scribbled notes that Jacob couldn't make out. Murphy folded over the page and stuck the notebook back in his pocket. "Okay, that should bring us out on the approach to the safe zone. You ready to move?"

"What about the motion light?" Jacob asked.

"Well, either those things are gone, or the battery died. You can't go home, and we can't stay here."

"I understand."

"Good; I'll run with you to the corner and stop. You keep going and head to the trees. Slow down to a walk when you cross the street; Stephens will find you."

Jacob nodded as a response. Murphy slapped him on the shoulder and climbed to his feet. Slowly, the soldier led them off the porch with his rifle up. They moved quietly, walking a narrow path leading from the stoop to the main sidewalk. Jacob's eyes had adjusted to the moonlight, and he could see a good distance in all directions. Murphy picked up his pace, and Jacob followed, running along and staying just behind Murphy's right shoulder.

Just as he'd said he would do, Murphy stopped at the curb and quickly turned to cover the direction they'd traveled. Exactly as he was told to, Jacob ran past him. Continuing into the street and running for the wooded lots, his footfalls echoed off the pavement. Halfway across, gunshots erupted from behind him. He continued on his way and sprinted for the cover of the woods. When he hit the grass—instead of stopping as instructed—he kept going, the adrenaline pushing him on. Muzzle flashes from deep in the trees ahead blinded him as tracers cut just to the right of his path.

Jacob ran on, his foot catching in a hole and causing him to tumble forward. He dropped into a shallow embankment. He instinctively lowered his hands to try to cushion his fall, only to have them cut open on the sharp gravel. He ducked his head as he rolled, crashing through a thorn bush at the bottom. Gunfire continued as Jacob crawled forward deeper into the lot. Feeling cuts to his hands and face, he dragged his battered body away from the sounds. Suddenly, a hand from behind lifted him back to his feet and he heard Stephens' voice.

"Run!"

Wet branches slapped his face; thorns tore at his shirt and dug into his skin. He ducked and turned, running for the open ground he saw ahead and

praying it would be the railroad bed that would provide cover. Bullets snapped around him; the sounds echoed off the canopy of the trees as the muzzle flashes confused his vision. Jacob took long staggering steps, struggling to put one foot in front of the other as his lungs burned and he gasped for air.

He hit the railroad bed and again fell to his hands and knees. Scrambling to the top of it, he ran across the first rail, tripped over the second, and rolled down the other side. He crawled forward; disoriented, gasping for air, bile in his stomach begging him to vomit. He fought the urge to collapse as his arms and legs cramped from fear and exhaustion. He crawled on until Murphy moved up beside him. He felt himself being pummeled and pressed to the ground as someone dropped on top of him, and a gloved hand cupped his mouth, forcing him to take whistling breaths through his nose.

“Shhhhh, quiet,” Murphy whispered in his ear.

Jacob closed his eyes, trying to control his breathing. A crash of footfalls tumbled over the summit of the railroad bed; stones clanged against the tracks as they ran across and into the brush on both sides. Jacob’s body flinched uncontrollably from fear and adrenalin. Murphy pinned him to ground tighter, and Jacob, putting trust in the soldier, resisted the urge to break free. He forced his eyes closed, allowing his face to be pressed against the dirt and tasting the leather glove held tight over his mouth. The things ran to the left and right of him so close, he could feel the breeze off their legs racing by as bits of mud and grass were kicked onto his cheek.

They slowly faded away with the sounds of the breaking tree limbs, moving farther east. Murphy rolled off him and popped up to a knee. Jacob saw that Stephens had joined them in a small depression at the base of the embankment. Murphy and Stephens held their rifles steady as they slowly scanned the area. Jacob lay silent, still catching his breath, trying to control his heartbeat, and pushing back the pain radiating through his body.

After what seemed an eternity, Murphy looked down at him and asked, “Are you okay?”

“Hell, no. I’m not okay,” Jacob responded.

“Good.” Murphy handed Jacob a plastic bottle. “Drink some water; we’ll be moving shortly.”

Jacob took the bottle and pushed himself up to his knees, then rocked back to a sitting position. The rifle was still over his shoulder and he'd somehow managed not to drop the pistol through all of it. He lifted the bottle to his lips and took a sip. Murphy looked at him, scowling.

"Finish it; you never know when you'll get another chance," he said.

Jacob tipped the bottle back, gulped the remainder of the water, and then let it rest in the weeds beside him. He put his hand to his hip and moved his fingers over the medical tape, feeling the curled edges and the dampness of the bandage. Jacob knew it had come loose in one of the falls he'd taken, but it could wait; he wanted to keep moving and make it to the park as soon as possible.

Without saying a word, Stephens got to his feet then dropped a hand to pull Murphy up; in turn, Murphy reached a hand to Jacob. They stood silently. For the moment, the woods seemed safer than the neighborhood; the tall trees provided concealment for their movement. Stephens, again, led the way, slowly stepping through thick cover until he located a game trail. Jacob watched as he took careful steps, lifting his feet and cautiously putting them down to avoid branches and leaves.

They stopped often to listen, sometimes kneeling in the brush and vegetation waiting for a suspicious sound to fade. They could still hear the black-eyes moving, although they were far off. Jacob could hear the distant snapping brush and splashing of water as the things continued searching for them. Stephens pressed forward until the trio reached the two-lane highway, where he dropped to his belly and crawled to the mowed shoulder of the road.

The moon was high in the sky now; its bright face lit the blacktop surface of the road, making it easier to see. Murphy pushed Jacob ahead, and soon the three of them were shoulder to shoulder at the highway's edge. It was surprisingly empty and devoid of vehicles. Jacob expected abandoned cars and a deadlocked traffic jam; instead, he looked over a silent roadway. The buildings on the far side all appeared to be empty and surprisingly untouched. The road rose away from them and off to the right. At the top of the hill sat a police patrol car blocking the road.

Stephens had his rifle to his eye while inspecting the vehicle. He pulled his eye away from the rifle's optics and whispered, "There's people in the car."

Jacob twisted while trying to get a better view of the vehicle that was a hundred yards away, but it was hard to pick out anything in the dark. Backlit by the horizon, the light bar on the top made it stand out from the grey-blue sky behind it. Jacob squinted; he could just barely make out movement from inside the vehicle. Murphy scooted back away from the shoulder, and then started to crawl in the direction of the car.

“What are you doing?” Stephens asked.

“Let’s check it out. Stay close behind me.”

Murphy continued crawling in the direction of the patrol car. Jacob felt a pat on his back and looked back at Stephens who motioned for him to follow.

“You heard the sergeant; we’re gonna check it out,” Stephens whispered.

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CHAPTER NINE

It was slow going crawling through the tall grass toward the patrol car. Jacob watched Murphy and tried to mimic his motions—every movement deliberate and quiet as they slipped through the blades of grass. Murphy held his rifle in his right hand by the sling, near the barrel. He would push his arm forward then slowly allow the rest of his body to crawl ahead. He'd stay motionless, listening, and then lift his head to survey the area before moving his rifle arm again to repeat the movement.

One arm length at a time, they moved along the depression at the side of the road. Jacob didn't dare lift his head to look. He stayed as low to the ground as possible, trying to become one with it, and wishing he were thinner so that he could bury himself in the weeds. Every time he pushed himself ahead with his feet, he felt the wound on his hip grind against the soil.

Keeping the pain to himself, he didn't yelp or cringe. He didn't want to be a burden or give the soldiers an excuse to stop. Jacob desperately wanted to reach the evacuation site, and he knew he couldn't do it without the men escorting him. Jacob reached an arm out ahead and slapped into Murphy's calf. In his agony and trying to push his thoughts aside, he hadn't noticed that Murphy had stopped. Jacob pulled back his arm and waited.

Jacob heard the clunk of a car door opening and heavy-soled shoes strike the pavement. They were close now, and he wanted to look but didn't dare. He didn't want to give away their position. The feet moved away; another clunk and another man caused sounds of metal clinking together

while heavy feet slapped the pavement. Jacob listened to the sounds of the doors slamming shut.

Murphy didn't move. Jacob could feel Stephens behind him, lying almost on the back of his legs and could hear the soldier breathing. Suddenly Murphy rose up to a kneeling position all the while concealed in the high grass and the cover of dark. Stephens slowly crawled past Jacob and rose up next to Murphy. Jacob remained lying in the grass, not wanting to move as the two soldiers set out ahead, walking much faster now while still crouched in the grass.

Frustrated and not wanting to be left behind, Jacob lifted himself to a push-up position and brought his knees forward. He climbed up and followed the other two. He could see the patrol car clearly now. It was empty. Whoever previously occupied it was gone. Murphy and Stephens moved quickly along the shoulder, then cut diagonally across the pavement and crouched near the patrol driver's side door. Jacob knelt by the brush guard at the hood of the car while Murphy circled it and Stephens moved around to the passenger side to look through the window.

"Keys are in it," Stephens whispered just as they heard heavy shoes striking pavement in the distance and moving back in their direction.

Jacob ducked behind the grill of the patrol car. Without speaking, Stephens and Murphy moved back to flank him, where they watched and waited. As the footsteps grew louder, Murphy stood straight up, holding his rifle in front of him, the stock in his shoulder and the barrel still pointed down at the street. Stephens did the same, side stepping and using the vehicle for cover. Stephens looked down at Jacob cowering. "Stand up fool; get your weapon out," he hissed under his breath. "And be ready, just in case."

Jacob forced himself to his feet and raised the small rifle in the direction of the footsteps just as two figures emerged from the shadows. Both were police officers wearing black body armor; one cradled a shotgun, the other walked with an empty holster. They continued moving forward then stopped as they saw the trio formed up around the patrol car. The officers didn't speak, or even as much as look at each other to communicate.

Their movements were jerky. One stepped awkwardly to the left, trying to focus on them while the one with the shotgun took a quick step forward and brought the weapon up in his arms.

“Stop; we’re with the Army,” Murphy said in a commanding voice just loud enough to be heard.

Without any warning, the unarmed officer ran at Stephens, a scream erupting from the man’s mouth. Frightened, Jacob stepped back as the other officer raised the shotgun and fired. Jacob could hear and feel the buckshot zip past his head. In tandem, Stephens and Murphy brought up their weapons and fired. Jacob watched the soldiers’ rounds tear holes through the officers’ vests. The policemen dropped to the ground dead; the shotgun clacked as it hit the pavement.

“What the hell was *that*?” Stephens said, moving forward and kicking the weapon away.

Jacob quickly rounded the vehicle where Murphy was already leaning over one of the officers.

“Holy shit, you guys just killed two cops!” Jacob said.

Murphy looked back at him shaking his head. “I don’t think so,” he said, lifting his gloved hand. The black oily blood clung to his fingers and dripped off in thick strings, like heavy paint.

Stephens pulled out a knife and cut a long gash down the other officer’s arm.

“No! Ahh, what the hell are you doing?” Jacob gasped in disgust.

The skin split open, revealing a dark oozing gelatinized flesh. “Yeah, these ain’t cops. We gotta get the fuck outta here, Sergeant.”

Hearing the sound of tree limbs snapping, Jacob turned his head toward the woods. More were coming, obviously attracted by the sound of gunfire.

“I said we gotta go,” Stephens repeated as he ran back to the patrol car.

Jacob turned and ran after him. Stephens was already in the driver’s side with the car running before Jacob jumped into the backseat. The passenger’s door closed with Murphy slapping the dash and yelling. “Go, go, go!”

Stephens hit the gas, the tires spun, and the car pulled away before the first of them broke the tree line. Jacob watched out of the passenger’s window as several of them ran onto the road and turned to follow the patrol car. They passed deserted cars rolled to the sides of the road, houses with broken windows and doors left to hang open, and the occasional abandoned body on a sidewalk. Stephens drove at high speed with the lights off until he hit a side street and quickly slowed to make the turn in time, the engine

roaring with every maneuver. He drove for several more minutes, pulled to the curb of an empty road, coasted to a stop, and cut the engine.

Jacob looked out and knew they were only blocks from the park. There were no homes here; it was a long, empty street. A river ran parallel to the road on the left and he knew they would cross a bridge ahead that would take them to the park's main gate. To the right stood a high "noise pollution" fence that sheltered the high-priced homes on the other side from the traffic sounds.

Stephens pressed a button, and the cars doors all locked simultaneously. "Looks like a nice enough neighborhood, but why take any chances." He grabbed the CB radio, clicked the mic, and scanned through all of the channels only to receive interference and static. "Nothing; we can't get our comms on this radio without the frequencies loaded. Cops must be off the net," he said, clicking it off and letting the mic hit the floor.

"What the hell happened back there?" Jacob asked.

Murphy looked at him over the backseat. "I'd say we got away. Were you hit?"

"No, I wasn't hit... but he shot at us!"

"Yeah, they do that sometimes," Stephens whispered. Keeping his hands on the steering wheel, he continued looking straight ahead.

"What do you mean, *they do that sometimes*?" Jacob asked, frustrated.

Stephens shook his head and leaned back in the seat. "It's like some of them know. Like if they was cops, they keep doing cop shit. They get smarter the longer they're out there. I've seen soldiers still holding their rifles and walking patrol while surrounded by more of the darkness. Carpenters holding hammers. Butchers with knives. Most of 'em are like what we saw back there, you know... like zombies or something, but sometimes... yeah, sometimes they shoot at us."

Stephens let out a long sigh. "But I don't think they want to kill us," he said. "I think they want to take us; you notice they leave the people they kill? It's only the living they keep, and their own dead."

"Why do you think they do that? What do they want?" Jacob asked.

"Us," Murphy said, turning back and looking ahead to stare out the windshield. "They want to replace us."

"You guys have lost it," Jacob said looking away; he knew they were right, but he wasn't ready to accept it. "What are we doing here? Why

aren't we going to the park?"

"Too dangerous," Stephens said. "We approach at night and the guards will light us up."

"So, we just flash the lights or something... so they know we're normal," Jacob suggested.

"Bro, you ain't fucking getting it! The darkness has lights too. They have everything we have; the only way to know the difference is to get up close. You gotta see the shit in their eyes, man. Most of 'em scream and run at you, but some—like those cops back there—those ones will wait until they're close before they show any sign. No, we can't go to the park tonight. The park doesn't allow any traffic in or out after dark anyway."

Jacob sat back looking at his feet. He looked back up at the soldiers in the front seat.

"This isn't happening; it can't be."

"Oh, it's happening, Jacob. It's happening everywhere," Murphy whispered.

"Everywhere?" Jacob asked.

Murphy reached down and clicked on the car's FM radio. It scanned over several stations before hitting on one, another public service announcement in a monotonous voice warning people to stay indoors. Murphy pressed the scan button again. The FM dial scanned and hit more stations all relaying the same sort of recorded messages—government spokesmen and small-town officials reading prepared statements of little facts and false promises. Murphy switched to AM, skipped ahead, and stopped on a solemn man's voice.

"We're all in a bad way, folks. Judgment day is here. Satan's army is marching on the White House as we speak. There is still time to repent, people. Won't you pray with me?"

Murphy hit the button again. The digital numbers scrolled by and stopped. A man was speaking calmly and reading a list of names, one after another, in a steady cadence.

"Davis, Martin, 4. Jones, Douglas, 3, Roberts, Alice, alone."

"What is he talking about?" Jacob asked, speaking over the narrator.

"Those are the families evacuated; the name of the sponsor and number of family members," Stephens answered. "With no phones, it's the only way to get the word out."

“Riley, Steven 3, Marcus, Joseph, 2, Silvas, Richard, 2.”

“Evacuated where? The park? Is that where they took my family?”

“No; the list comes from north of here in Chicago. They’re taking the ferries out on Lake Michigan,” Murphy said.

“Ferries? No way, too many people,” Jacob said.

Murphy sighed and shook his head. He opened a leather tool bag on the floor of the patrol car and found two boxes of 12-gauge shells. He opened the box and started reloading the shotgun he’d recovered from the dead officer.

“Was... too many people; not anymore.” Murphy pressed the scan button again, finding a station just as a fatigued voice was giving a graphic content warning to the listening audience. The broadcaster’s voice faded to a recording filled with static and crackles of background noise. A reporter was on the street, in the middle of chaos.

Jacob listened to the man breathing rapidly as he ran, the microphone clicking and banging off of objects. He heard the man tumble, and the mic went dead with a loud crack before clacking back to life.

“This is real; they are firing on us right now! Remnants of the Army National Guard are firing on our position. I repeat... members on the Illinois National Guard have joined the protestors and are shooting at us! Whoever—whatever—they are, they are advancing! I don’t know how much longer I can report on this channel...” The microphone again faded in and out as gunfire erupted around the reporter’s position. The sounds seemed to swallow the man’s voice.

“If anyone is listening, we are located at Northerly Island. State Police and the Chicago Police Department are here, but we need your help. You can’t hide anymore; you need to fight. Get out of your homes and come to Northerly Island. Come to the Castle and bring any weapons you have...” More sounds of automatic gunfire and explosions drowned out the recording and suddenly the sound went to static. The broadcaster was back but Murphy reached over and shut off the radio.

“It’s like this everywhere. It started small, with the riots, and now it’s come to this,” Murphy whispered. “When they called me up, they said it was for riot duty downtown—we didn’t last more than a day. We were stupid; we came rolling into town in our trucks. We put up yellow tape and wooden barriers, like it was some kind of peaceful protest. At first, they

ignored the barricades and stayed away from the roadblocks; then we watched them take down pedestrians and the weak right in front of our eyes. They ignored us, just staying far enough away so that we couldn't stop them. We were ordered to hold; to contain the line... that the police were supposed to do the arresting.

"After dark, they started to bunch up together. Their numbers had multiplied. Suddenly they came at us—not trying to get past us—they actually wanted *us*! They would reach through the shields and snatch people. They'd pull someone back, and they'd pass them deeper into the mob like a baton. I watched many of my own men dragged off, and there was nothing I could do to help them. The normal stuff didn't work. Tear gas, rubber bullets. Sure, fire hoses knocked them down, but didn't stop 'em.

"We fought hard, but we couldn't hold them back. By dawn, we were using lethal ammo... but they still came. We... we were killing them by the hundreds, but they still came and grabbed us."

Murphy pressed back against the seat and took a long drink of water from his drinking tube. He let out a long sigh. "Just before dawn, orders came to pull back. We loaded up in the trucks and prepared to move out, but..."

"But what?" Jacob asked.

"I saw them," Murphy whispered.

Stephens nodded. "I know, brother. I saw it too; we all did."

"What? What did you see?" Jacob asked impatiently.

"The soldiers—the ones we lost, our friends. They were back but changed... still wearing their riot gear. They marched *with* the mobs," Murphy said.

Jacob leaned back in the seat. "This is all bullshit. It had to have been something else. Maybe another unit, a group you didn't know about, in stolen uniforms."

Murphy nodded and turned his head to look out the window. "Yeah, maybe you're right."

Stephens started the car's engine and put it into gear. "We need a place to hole up."

CHAPTER TEN

The patrol car rolled slowly down the center of the empty road as Jacob surveyed the small industrial park that was coming up on their left side. Only a block from the two-lane road that led to the park encampment, it would make for a perfect hide.

Stephens slowed the car until it was rolling just above idle speed, then turned into a paved drive that faced a building with a double overhead door. The wheels crunched as the car maneuvered over broken asphalt. A large sign at the front of the building labeled it a commercial heating and cooling sales shop. Stephens eased the patrol car forward, then stopped it in front of the door—close, but not so close that he couldn't turn and flee if need be—then reached down and shut off the ignition.

“Why here?” Jacob whispered, still frustrated they were not going straight to the park. He was growing anxious with worry about his family.

“This building looks solid enough: only one door in the front, no windows, steel overheads,” Stephens listed off patiently as he dropped his arm and secured his rifle. He reached up, popped the dome light cover, and removed the bulb. He held a hand on the door and used his other to slowly pull the latch so that the door quietly released under pressure while Murphy did the same on the passenger's side.

Jacob waited and watched as they quietly let their doors swing shut. Stephens opened the back door, and Jacob realized for the first time that there were no handles on the inside of the rear passenger's doors. Stephens handed Jacob the shotgun they'd retrieved from the dead cop. “Here take this; it'll get you farther than that rifle,” he said.

Jacob nodded his acceptance and stepped out of the car.

Stephens moved to the rear of the car and used the key to open the trunk. A large black gear bag was inside; Murphy reached in and opened the zipper.

Inside were a police carbine and a black tactical vest already loaded with three, thirty-round magazines. Murphy removed the rifle and set it to the side, then pulled out the heavy vest and placed it next to the rifle. The rest of the bag was filled with road flares, a protective mask, and a baton. Another bag was filled with tools and other emergency gear. Murphy closed the bags and pushed them aside. Searching the rest of the trunk, he found nothing further of use.

He waved Jacob forward and placed the vest in his hands. It was heavy. *Police* was stenciled across the back in white, bold letters, and an embroidered badge patch was affixed to the front center. Several loops held zip ties and other bits of equipment. Jacob pulled the vest tighter and let the weight adjust in his arms. Murphy took the rifle and opened the sling, hanging it over Jacob's back.

"Come on, man; what am I, a mule?" Jacob whispered, protesting.

"Just until we get inside; then I'll show you how to put the gear on," Murphy said.

After one more sweep of the trunk, Stephens slowly lowered the lid and pressed until he heard the latch click. The soldier reached up and dropped his NODs over his eyes, then gave Murphy a thumbs up. Murphy looked at Jacob. "Just follow us in and press your back against the wall."

Jacob nodded back to the man as Murphy pulled down his own goggles and followed Stephens to the front door of the business.

Stephens moved to the right of the door with Murphy standing just behind him. He reached out an arm and felt the handle move in his hand. The door pushed in easily and glided open, staying that way. Stephens sidestepped to the lip of the door, lowered the barrel of his rifle, tapped it twice against the doorjamb, and then pulled back. The three of them silently stood, holding their breath and listening for any sound of movement.

After several agonizing minutes, Stephens stepped into the doorway and dropped into the room with Murphy close behind him. Jacob moved in quickly after and, as instructed, pushed his back to the wall and waited. Murphy reached back and closed the door, the room quickly falling pitch

black. Jacob couldn't see a hand in front of his face; he pressed against the wall and began sweating while holding the heavy gear in his trembling arms.

He could hear the soldiers' footsteps as they moved deeper into the space. Their sounds of movement reflected off walls and played tricks on Jacob's mind as he tried to imagine the layout of the room. The soldiers' steps continued to move away; then, suddenly, the room flashed in bright light. Jacob squinted, pulled up a hand to shield his eyes, and heard men yelling from a loft. Jacob watched as his friends peeled off their night vision devices and raised their hands.

Bright handheld spotlights painted them in blinding beams. Armed men chaotically yelled for them to show their hands. Jacob dropped the gear and thrust up his arms. He was ordered to move forward and online with the others. Whoever held the spotlight was using it effectively; they hit Jacob right in the face with the beam, and he couldn't see anything while blinded by the light. He tried looking away but found it impossible to escape the beam. Jacob stepped forward, nearly bumping into Murphy who was speaking low, trying to identify himself to the unknown men in the loft.

Jacob heard boots clank as they ran down a set of metal stairs. The other men continued to order them to keep their arms up. A man approached, pushing a barrel into Jacob's chest and yelled for him to look straight ahead and open his eyes and mouth. Jacob struggled to peel open his eyes against the blinding light. He heard the man yell, "Clear!"

The lights' beams were directed away and shut off. Small portable lanterns filled the room with a softer glow. A man in jeans and a Carhartt work coat stepped forward. He held a military-looking rifle in his arms and had a revolver tucked into his waistband.

He looked Jacob over and moved to the soldiers as more men, still holding their weapons on them, walked down the stairs.

"Where in the hell did you all come from?" the man asked.

Murphy began to speak, but the man held up his hand and pointed at Jacob. "Nope, I'm asking him."

"Why me?" Jacob asked.

"Cause one thing here ain't like the others and you probably ain't as good at lying. Now where did you come from?" the man asked again, stepping closer.

Jacob looked over at Murphy. The man, growing annoyed, said, "You don't need his help. Now where are you from? If I have to ask again, I'll toss you out the door... naked."

"We came from town... a few miles from here," Jacob said.

"We were evac—" Murphy began before the man angrily raised a hand, shutting him up.

He looked back at Jacob. "Continue."

"Ah, I was at my home, the convoy came down the street picking people up, my family got on the truck, but we were attacked. I got separated from my wife and kid; these men helped me. They've been helping me."

"Where'd the cop car come from?"

Jacob looked at Murphy who stood, not speaking. He shrugged to signal Jacob to continue. "Up the road; two cops... two... of... they... we killed 'em and took it."

"What did they look like... the cops?" the man asked, pressing his face uncomfortably close to Jacob's.

"It was dark... but they had the black blood," Jacob said, stepping back and looking away.

The man reached out an arm, slapped Jacob on the shoulder, and nodded to Murphy. "Okay, fair enough; my name's Johnny and this is my shop. Sorry to be an asshole, but things have gone sideways in the last week. You're free to stay the night here, but I'm afraid I can't offer you anything."

Murphy, having heard the man out, extended his hand. "I'm Sergeant Murphy with the Illinois National Guard; this is Corporal Stephens. We're assigned to the Wilson Street Park. Have you heard anything from them?"

The man looked at Murphy with wide eyes. "You're joking, right?"

Murphy stood silently, then turned to face Jacob and Stephens and shrugged his shoulders.

The man called out in the direction of the loft behind him. "Miller get down here."

Jacob watched as a younger man dressed in an identical Carhartt jacket ran down the stairs, taking them two at a time. He stopped just short of Johnny.

"These two say they're stationed at the Wilson Street Park," Johnny said.

Miller shook his head. “Shit no, they gone. Pulled out this evening—shit-load of trucks, tanks, helicopters... everything. That camp they built is empty,” Miller said. “I watched ’em leave with my own eyes.”

Stephens clenched his fist angrily and swiped at the air. “Dammit! The jump order must’ve come down and we missed it!”

“What does that mean?” Jacob said, panicking. “Where the hell did they go? Where is my family?”

“It means we’re fucked,” Stephens said, disgusted.

Murphy turned to face the younger man who had come down from the loft. “Miller is it? How do you know this?”

“I was there when they left, moved off to the big evacuation point. I came back here to stay with Uncle Johnny; we’re waiting on my dad and some others. The soldiers said they were pulling back to the lake front.”

“Northerly Island,” Jacob mumbled, feeling lightheaded.

“Yeah, how’d you know?” Miller answered, looking Jacob up and down. “Hey man, are you hurt? Your leg’s all bloody. You don’t look so good.”

Jacob suddenly felt far away and unable to answer—despair, exhaustion, and worry for his family taking a hard toll. He just stared at Miller, watching him talk. Jacob could see that the young man’s lips were moving, but he no longer heard the words. Stephens moved between the other men to look at the wound on Jacob’s hip.

“Dammit, fool, you let this get to bleeding again. Now I’m going to have to re-dress it,” Stephens said as Jacob began leaning forward, so far that Stephens had to catch and steady him. Wearily, Jacob watched through clouding vision as Johnny tilted his head to look at the nasty blood-soaked bandages coming loose from Jacob’s side. He grimaced and turned to Murphy. “Why don’t you get him upstairs? There are more people up there; they can help with that.” Jacob closed his eyes as the man continued to speak.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Jacob didn't know how long he'd been out; he didn't remember being moved to the bed or even lying down. He looked across the darkened floor space; only a few candles lit the long, narrow room. Heavy machinery was interspersed with moving lumps of blanket on the floors and tired men holding rifles, keeping watch over their families as they leaned against walls. A child cried from some place in the back. A sharp pain pulling at the wound in his hip caused him to turn away. He jerked to the side to look back and saw a woman cleaning his wound with a damp wad of gauze.

"Oh, you're awake," she whispered.

Jacob squinted, trying to see her face in the low light. He could make out that she was middle aged, her hair was pulled back, and she wore a dark sweater. He tried to sit up for a better look, but the weight of his own body prevented it.

The woman placed a hand on his chest and eased him back onto the cot. "Come on now, hun, you need to rest. Just let me get this bandaged for you," she whispered.

"Where am I?"

She pushed a gauze dressing around the wound. Holding it in place, she attached a long piece of tape. "You're in the loft of the shop. You got a little dizzy down there, and your friends brought you up here."

"Where are they?"

"They're here; don't worry, they didn't leave you," she whispered, pulling a blanket over his lap.

A loud rumble from overhead shook and vibrated the corrugated roofing above their heads. Jacob jumped and tried to sit up. Again, the nurse gracefully lowered him to his back. "It's okay; just relax."

"What was that?" Jacob asked; the shock obvious in his voice.

"I was told it's the Air Force dropping their bombs in town," the nurse answered.

"Bombing? But... I thought they were evacuating everyone."

Rumbling explosions in the distance shook the building, the air cracking with impacts.

The clanking of footsteps came up the stairs, followed by the smiling face of Stephens, who overheard the last bits of the conversation. "They're CAS missions," Stephens said, moving to Jacob's side. "How you feeling?"

"CAS?" Jacobs asked.

"Close air support."

Not understanding, Jacob looked blankly at him as aircraft flew low overhead, on another pass.

"They're blowing the hell out of the things trying to get close to our people!" Stephens said over the very distant rumblings of explosions, a remote and deadly fireworks display ripping apart the night air. "Those are Warthogs, most likely. I'd say they're pulling out all the stops tonight. About damn time too."

Jacob shook his head. "Why didn't you just say that to start with?"

"That is what I said; not my fault you don't understand shit."

The *crack, crack, crack* of gunfire echoed from somewhere outside the building—far away at first but quickly moving closer. Stephens stepped back and ran to the loft window overlooking the factory floor. Jacob pushed himself to a seated position, this time ignoring the nurse's advice. The gunfire grew louder and was joined by the ping and squeal of rounds slapping against the building's metal skin. Stephens turned and walked hurriedly for the stairs leading to the factory floor as hidden faces in the loft began to cry out and speak in hushed tones.

Jacob sat upright and slipped his pants on halfway before he searched the floor at his feet in the dim candlelight. He found his boots and quickly slipped them on. Giving the laces a quick yank, he wrapped them around his ankles and knotted them. He looked around and saw his shirt and jacket in a bundle at the end of the cot. He got to his feet and felt the pull at his

side, his hand instinctively dropping. He pulled his pants up the rest of the way over the bandage and winced at the discomfort.

The nurse, watching him with frustration, moved and grabbed his shirt and jacket. "I had to stitch you up. Sorry, I only had a local anesthetic and not much for the pain; it will be wearing off soon," she said hurriedly as she helped Jacob into his jacket. "You'll need to have that cleaned again and the stitches out in a week or so."

Jacob nodded and searched the jacket pockets and the empty holster on his waist. "Where are my guns?" he gasped.

The woman moved along the wall just behind the cot to a tall metal cabinet. She quickly returned, carrying the black tactical vest and police carbine. Jacob noticed at once that his P89 was now fastened into a holster on the chest of the vest. "This is yours. The soldiers said you would gladly trade the other rifle and shotgun for the medicine we used on you," she said, placing the rifle on the bed and handing Jacob the vest.

The vest was open at the sides, but he'd never worn one before. He stuck his head through the center, nearly getting lost in the heavy armor. The nurse stepped in and pulled the Velcro side apart and snugged the vest down over him, then lashed the Velcro waist straps.

"You aren't too familiar with this, are you?" she said, helping him to adjust the straps.

"No, guess I never had much reason to put one on before tonight."

She curled her brow, throwing Jacob a puzzled look. "Well, this is correct. Unfortunately, I have spent enough time in the ER to know how an officer's gear goes on and off."

Jacob nodded a thank you as he looked over the snaps and attachments at the front of the vest. He tried pulling them until he felt the pressure against his wound. The heavy plates in the chest and back caused the other straps to cut into his shoulders. He lifted himself to his feet and shrugged hard, trying to adjust the weight before he took an uneven step toward the stairs.

"Officer, your gun!" the nurse called after him. She moved toward him, holding the rifle.

Jacob turned to look at her, and then recalled seeing an embroidered badge patch on the front of the tactical vest. Suddenly, he realized that the

entire time she had assumed he was a police officer. “I’m not a—oh, right. Thanks.”

He paused then reached out for the rifle. Never having really held one like this before, it was foreign in his grip. A magazine that stuck out of the lower receiver was already seated so Jacob let his hands work over the metal and up the hand-guards to feel the weight of the rifle. He turned it to the sides, examining the mechanisms. Pushing a button, the magazine dropped and nearly fell to the floor before he clumsily caught it and slapped it back home.

Mistaking Jacob’s curiosity with the new weapon as an inspection, the nurse said, “It’s fine; nobody messed with it.”

Jacob thanked her and walked toward the stairs, spotting families hiding in the shadows of the loft as he passed them. He turned into the opening and clanged down the metal treads to the factory floor.

The lower level was dark with all the lights off, and rounds continued to ping off the outer walls. Jacob was able to spot Murphy and Stephens pressed against the door they’d entered earlier. Johnny, along with some of his own men, was crowded around them while Murphy was trying to convince Johnny to move his people away—and losing the argument. Murphy turned his head, catching the movement of Jacob’s approach.

“What are you doing down here?” Murphy asked. “You’re going to bust yourself open and start bleeding again.”

Jacob stepped closer to the group, holding the rifle awkwardly in his hands. “You need everyone,” Jacob said just above a whisper, the fear showing in his voice as the sounds of battle echoed just beyond the walls.

“You even know how to use that?” Murphy asked, reaching out and snatching the rifle from Jacob’s hands. He dropped the magazine then reseated it. He instructed Jacob, giving a quick rundown of the rifle’s parts and functions. He pulled back the charging handle and chambered a round before turning the rifle so that Jacob could see the selector switch. “This is safe, that’s semi... don’t even fuck with the other one.” Then he pushed the rifle back into Jacob’s hand.

“Stay here with them; we’re going outside to see what’s going on. If we break out, we’ll come back for you and the others,” Murphy ordered.

Jacob shook his head. “No, I’m sticking with you.”

Stephens turned and faced Murphy. “Come on, Sergeant; he’s just going to slow us down,” Jacob overheard him whisper.

Murphy looked at Jacob waiting eagerly as rounds stitched the top of the building and a loud explosion rattled the steel sides. Murphy dropped his head, rubbed his temple with his gloved hand, and then forced a grin. “Fine, get your ass behind Stephens and don’t miss.” Murphy turned to Johnny. “Take care of your people. If I can get contact with my command, we’ll send someone back for you.”

Johnny nodded, reaching toward the door’s handle. “Good luck out there,” he said, slapping Murphy on the back as the door swung open. Murphy looked back over his shoulder and cut out into the night with Stephens following close. Jacob lurched forward and hesitated in the doorway. He felt a nudge from behind as he was shoved outside, and the door closed behind him.

Murphy and Stephens were running, crouched between the patrol car and the building. Jacob came to his senses and took off after them, sprinting as more gunfire erupted from close by. Murphy rounded the far side of the car, dropped to a prone position, and crawled to the rear bumper. Stephens squatted, keeping the engine block between himself and the sounds of battle. Jacob ran and dropped in next to him.

He looked out at the field across the street. It was dark, and he couldn’t make out any figures—only the muzzles of weapons spitting flame as they fired. Tracers cut back and forth across the field and occasional rounds flew over Jacob’s head, smacking into the steel-clad building behind him. Jacob looked to his left and saw Stephens hovered over his rifle with his night vision down. Murphy scooted back away from the tire and rejoined them around the hood.

“Looks like a patrol made contact,” Murphy whispered, “They’re taking some heavy fire from the tree line. I think if we target them from here, it’ll loosen up their flank.”

“You sure, Sergeant? They don’t even know we’re up here. What if our guys fire on us?” Stephens protested, not looking up from his rifle.

Jacob looked around. He was still blind in the dark but could hear the sustained battle coming from across the street. “What are you two talking about?”

Murphy grinned. "There's a unit in the field over there. Someone... something has them pinned; we're gonna suppress so they can maneuver."

Jacob scowled. "Just tell me what to do."

"That's the spirit. Let's go; we need to get distance on this building. We don't want to draw attention to it."

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Jacob sat anxiously behind the wheel of the patrol car. He had the vehicle in neutral as the soldiers pushed it out of the factory's parking lot and into the street. The car slowly rolled back, entered the decline, and picked up speed. The two soldiers jogged to keep up. Jacob maneuvered the car backwards and into the street. He overcut the wheel, causing the car to turn too far and smack into the curb, one tire screeching against it as the steel rim scrubbed the concrete.

Murphy ran up alongside the driver's window. "Okay; when I give the word, start the car and hit the field with your high beams."

Jacob looked through the windshield to the field in front of him where he could still see the muzzle flashes and the tracer fire crisscrossing the dark sky like laser beams.

"How will they know we are the good guys?" Jacob asked nervously.

"Don't worry. Soon as I drain a mag into those black-eyed monsters, they'll know who we're siding up with," Stephens said, moving close to the car and leaning his rifle over its roof.

"Do it," Murphy ordered, speaking louder.

Jacob felt the key in the ignition and turned on the engine; it quickly roared to life.

"Hit the lights!" Murphy yelled.

Jacob searched the left side of the column and found the toggle. He pulled the lever, turning on the lights. He hit the switch that activated the high beams, then grabbed the hand-powered spotlight and directed it into

the field. His stomach dropped, and he fought the urge to run back to the factory.

The terrain to the front was filled with moving figures—men, women, and children running through the high grass toward a line of soldiers dug in on a side street. The men fired desperately, trying to hold back the approaching mass. Farther behind the swarm were more of the things, armed and indiscriminately organized. Walking straight ahead with their rifles loosely tucked into their shoulders, they shot blindly toward the soldiers on the far side of the field.

Jacob steeled his nerves and pointed the spotlight at the things in the open, causing their dark eyes to turn in his direction. Murphy's rifle rattled off a burst and Stephens' quickly joined it. The target direction for the creatures changed as they turned ninety degrees and headed for the road. As Murphy predicted, this now had the swarm moving perpendicular to the line of soldiers in the field and allowed them to shoot at the sides of the mob, more effectively cutting them down.

A round smacked the windshield and Jacob ducked down. When he rose back up, he saw a statue-like man aiming a rifle in his direction. Jacob moved the spotlight to blind him while rounds pecked around the man's feet before one found home and knocked him back. Jacob continued to move the light, pointing out targets and blinding the rushing things as they moved across the high grass. As Jacob directed the light, he saw that the approaching waves were thinning out. The things on the fringes with weapons disappeared back into the shadows while the soldiers on the side street were cutting down anything still alive in the field.

The passenger's door opened, and Stephens dropped into the seat, quickly changing out magazines in his weapon. He rolled down the window and fired again while leaning out. Murphy smashed out the rear window then jumped in the back. Reaching across, he kicked out the other side and slapped the cage with a gloved hand. "Okay, let's move. Get up to that side street where the troopers are. Drive slow; I'm sure they're a bit jumpy... and cut off the spotlight."

"What's all the window breaking about?" Jacob asked.

"Windows and doors don't open back here; I don't want to get trapped," Murphy said.

Jacob powered down the directional light and locked the car into gear. He drove ahead cautiously while Stephens occasionally took shots from the passenger's window, cutting down stragglers that were still moving. Drawing closer to the side street, men in uniform ran forward and shot hand signals to Jacob. He saw the palm of a soldier's hand and the business end of a light machine gun.

"Cut the lights, stop, and put it in park," Murphy said.

Jacob reached down turned off the headlights, as instructed. He saw Stephens looking straight ahead through his goggles. He held open the passenger's door, slowly stepped out, and walked straight ahead. He turned back and pointed toward the car. Murphy exited, took steps forward just past the bumper, and then moved back to the driver's window.

"Okay, kill the engine and get out," Murphy ordered. "Follow me."

Jacob shut off the car, reached between the seats, and grabbed his rifle. Leaving the keys in the ignition, he joined Murphy in the street. The soldier led them ahead in the dark toward a group of men sheltered at the rear of an old bread truck resting on flat tires. A man held a red-lens flashlight to cast a soft red glow over a group of kneeling soldiers examining a map. Jacob suddenly noticed they weren't walking alone; they were being escorted by two soldiers in full gear. As they approached the gathering around the map, a rugged man in uniform stood and looked them up and down. Old and grizzled with tanned leather skin, Jacob could tell by the way he carried himself that he was in charge.

He stepped away from the group and walked over to them. "Thanks for the support back there. Who are you with?" the man said just above a whisper.

"Sergeant Murphy, 38th MP, Illinois National Guard. You?" Murphy said.

"First Sergeant Bowe, 420th Engineer Battalion, out of Gary; I thought all you Natty boys were cleared out of here," the man said. "My command element is about a block south if that's what you're looking for."

"First Sergeant, we got some survivors held up in the warehouse down the street," Murphy said.

Bowe stopped and turned to shout orders to the group of soldiers gathered to his rear. "Okay, we can take care of that; now what are you all doing here? Where's the rest of your unit?"

“We need a route to the north. We were hit on an evac run and separated from the rest of the 38th. What’s going on here, First Sergeant?” Murphy asked.

Bowe turned and pointed an arm up and down the road. Adjusting to the natural light, Jacob could now make out shapes in the distance. All along the road going away from him, soldiers were dug into the shoulder and facing west. Jacob turned and saw more of them beyond the main road leading all the way to the river and past the factory.

“We just moved up here in the last half hour; been pushing our way west all day. Higher ups finally got their heads out of their asses—this is a full-on containment zone now. We’ve been tasked to hold sixteen city blocks. No easy feat. The Zoomies started dropping lots of ordnances in the town out there; not sure what good it does, but after every run, we get a load of ’em headed this way. Poking the hornets’ nest.”

“Are you going into the town? Are there still survivors there?” Jacob asked.

Bowe paused to stare at Jacob; with a clenched jaw, he let out a guttural sound that made Jacob fear the man might bark. “What? Well, civvy, right now what we have is a defensive line going south to the interstate and north to the 2nd Street Bridge; beyond that, it goes right up to Lake Michigan.”

“What about the people at the park? Where are they?” Jacob blurted out.

“You a cop?” the first sergeant asked, looking at Jacob’s vest.

Ignoring the question, Jacob asked again, “Do you know where they went?”

Murphy put a hand on Jacob’s shoulder. “First Sergeant, we were extracting his family; we were en-route to the park when we got cut off. Do you know where they moved to?”

“Folks at the park are gone; all the civilians are either being pushed south toward Kentucky or up onto the ferries on Lake Michigan. If they moved this afternoon, I’d guess they shot straight up to Northerly Island.”

“That’s it, the island. That’s what was on the radio, what Miller told us,” Jacob said.

“Well, if you want to go there, you better get moving. They’re closing the corridor in forty-eight hours. Shit, most of it has probably already collapsed. You’ll have to head straight up this route; the main highways are all blocked. The Seabees were running the route clearance missions with

the Marines and keeping it open, but that was before these things started shooting back.

“Every hour, they get a bit smarter. Hell, I heard over the company net they’re starting to set up ambushes, blocking the roads and sniping from cover. Even some of these human wave attacks are letting up—like they’re improving their tactics.”

“They’re smarter? Like how...? Do we even know what they are?” Murphy asked.

Bowe squinted. “You mean *The Darkness*? Fuck if I know what they are. HQ is calling it an *invasion*... I ain’t kidding; that’s the words they used. Not outbreak, not riot control. They said *invasion*. Craziest shit I ever seen—like Fallujah all over again, except these things don’t get scared.

“Most units have pulled back to this defensive line, letting the Air Force cut them down. Urban search and rescue has been called off for anything in the city limits or west of this position.” Bowe paused and looked intently at Murphy. “Could I give you a bit of advice?”

Murphy looked at Jacob, then back at the first sergeant. “I’m afraid I already know what you’re going to say.”

Bowe reached into his pocket and removed a tin of tobacco. He smacked it against his palm then opened the lid, stuffing a bit under his lip. “I think you should stick with us; the Lake Michigan route is all but closed. Northerly isn’t going to hold much longer either. If you got family up there, you aren’t going to do them any good getting yourself and these men killed,” he said, looking at Jacob. “Only about sixty percent of the boys showed up for the recall; I’m shorthanded so we could use your help.”

“I have to get to my family,” Jacob said adamantly.

“I get it; I really do, but the routes are closing up. I’m not sure you understand the gravity of the situation,” Bowe said, pointing out over the now empty fields. The sky was lit with blooms of orange and yellow as bombs exploded far in the distance while the sounds of remote gunfire echoed through the trees.

Jacob ignored the first sergeant and looked at Murphy. “I’ll just take the car and go on alone.”

“Hold up; nobody is going anywhere alone,” Murphy said, raising his hand.

Stephens shook his head and started to walk away before stopping and looking back. “You should let him go, Sergeant; this isn’t our mission anymore.”

Murphy laughed. “This isn’t for him. We have orders and vital intel; we need to link back up with Battalion. If they headed north to the city, then that’s where I’m going. I understand if you want to hang back here with these guys, Stephens; no hard feelings.”

Stephens looked disgusted. He stomped away a few paces and cussed, then stopped and came back. “Man, this is some *bull*-shit!”

Bowe looked at Murphy and chuckled. “Well, I guess I owe you one for the help you gave me back there. If you insist on going, I can at least get you resupplied.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Jacob laid his head back on the bench seat of the patrol car. Stephens was driving tactically with the lights off. His helmet was on the seat and he navigated by sparse moonlight. Going so slow and stopping so frequently, they were often passed by soldiers speed walking up the road or held up by crowds of wandering refugees being pushed south. Stephens had to keep the car to the far right, as the left lane of the road was lined with soldiers. Occasionally, they'd pass a roadblock where men would stop the vehicle and shine lights in their mouths and eyes before allowing them to pass.

Jacob leaned back in the seat and observed the men outside his window as the car passed them. Every so often a machine gun would fire a long burst into the far-off tree lines or at an object on a distant street. At one point, they drove by a large group of field artillery firing barrages into the city skyline. The firing of the big cannons rocked the car and made the windows vibrate.

At other parts of the road, it was quiet, only occupied by tired soldiers in work parties building fortifications against the things to the west. Who those things were still hadn't been explained; Jacob heard most soldiers refer to them as "The Darkness." He saw the dried and shriveled corpses stacked and piled like cordwood at points on the road—no respect being paid to the bodies of whatever they had become.

Looking to the distance from the passenger's window, he could see tall pillars of smoke rising above the trees. The neighborhoods west of the highway were now burning, the fires caused by the relentless bombing that

was ordered through the night in an attempt to hold back “The Darkness.” On the seat beside him sat a large nylon backpack that at one time held chemical gear. Under Bowe’s orders, the supply sergeant near Johnny’s shop had dumped the bag out and packed it with loaded magazines for Jacob’s rifle.

He had also stuffed in a couple bottles of water, an old flashlight, and a few of the bagged meals like the one Murphy had shared earlier. Jacob had read everything on the package after the supply sergeant handed the MREs to him. The meager things in the nylon bag were all Jacob owned now; everything he had before was back in the house—*the house that’s probably long gone, burnt to the ground, nothing but splinters and ash. Is this my new life?*

The car stopped abruptly, and a bright flashlight shined through the window. A soldier kept the light on Stephens as a second man approached from the shadows and probed the passengers with a light of his own.

“End of the line, gentlemen. Mouths open,” he ordered, crouching so that he could see inside the patrol car.

Jacob looked straight at the light and held his mouth open; the soldier scanned their faces then clicked off the light. “What’s with the wheels?” he asked.

“It’s a loaner; the Bentley’s in the shop,” Stephens answered.

“Okay, smart ass; what are you doing this far north?”

Murphy leaned forward so that he could see the soldier. “Moving to Northerly, trying to link up with the 33rd.”

The soldier yelled to the other one holding the light. The light cut off as the second soldier ran away to a Humvee on the side of the road and then came running back with a clipboard. He handed the board off to the man at the window. The soldier lifted up the pages, quickly flipping them over the top of the board, and stopped near the bottom. He looked back up at Murphy.

“The 33rd?”

Murphy nodded. “Yeah, that’s right.”

“Well, they came through late afternoon. I got their manifest right here; but hell, the route’s closed up now.”

Jacob reached for the handle through the broken window, opened his door, and stepped into the street before reaching for the clipboard. “You

have a manifest?”

The soldier pulled away, his hand dropping to his sidearm. “Whoa, back up now! Who are you?” the man said, taking a defensive stance. The second soldier quickly came back into view and put the light in Jacob’s face.

“Dammit, will you cut that shit out? I just want to see if my family was on the list!”

The soldier lowered the light, so it shone on Jacob’s chest as the first man looked down at the clipboard, then at Jacob sympathetically. “Names?”

“Laura Anderson, Katy Anderson,” Jacob said.

The soldier unfolded a long, tri-folded paper log sheet. “Gimme some light,” he said as his finger ran down a list of names from top to bottom. “Oh, here we go, *Laura Anderson, 2 members.*”

Jacob leaned forward. Looking at the handwritten entry, he smiled. “So, they’re at the Island then?”

“Now, I didn’t say that. I’m just saying they came by here.”

“Okay, thank you.” Jacob’s hand dropped to the door handle.

The soldier put out his arm, resting it at the top of the door. “Hold up; like I said, the route is closed now. It collapsed about a quarter mile north of here. Closed all the way up to Museum Park. I’m sorry; I’m going to have to turn you around. That’s no man’s land up ahead.”

Jacob stepped forward to the barrier and looked into the dark landscape beyond the roadblock. They were beside an old brick fire station that sat just beyond them to the right. The building’s walls were now reinforced with sandbags going up nearly five feet. Concrete forms in a serpentine pattern with wooden sawhorses blocked the road ahead; a hastily erected sandbag bunker was positioned to guard the approach.

Jacob looked off into the distance, seeing no movement. The terrain no longer held green residential neighborhoods. To the left, was a sparsely wooded lot and less than a hundred feet ahead from where he stood, a steel-girded bridge met the road. Jacob turned back toward the car where Murphy and Stephens were now standing near the gate guards. “How far to the museum?” he asked.

“Shit, might as well be a thousand miles tonight,” one of the men said.

Jacob turned and glared at them. The first soldier came forward and looked out across the bridge. “It’s a good twenty miles, sir—but it’s really

bad. The marines pulled back a couple hours ago and, hell, they were in AMTRAKS.”

“I don’t know what that is, but I’m going,” Jacob muttered, turning back to look at the bridge.

“Sorry, sir, my orders were to hold all civilians. You being a cop and all... I mean, I guess if you *really* need to get yourself killed tonight, nothing I can do about it. But seriously, those Marines... they were in bad shape when they came limping back. The things are changing.”

“Is the road clear or not?” Jacob asked.

The soldier shook his head. “Most of the way, but it’s completely blocked at the railroad. You’ll have to finish up on foot—and that’s through heavy areas—the museum is still under siege; you’d have to get through that and—”

Jacob watched as a hole popped at the base of the man’s neck. The soldier’s eyes went wide, and his left hand reached up as the echo of a single gunshot cracked. The machine gun on the Humvee opened up and flames spit from the barrel as the gunner swept the tree line with fire. Jacob was tackled from behind and pushed to the side.

“*Get down, you fool!*” Stephens yelled at him as he lifted his rifle and fired quick shots off into the trees.

Jacob stared at the asphalt and watched the expended brass from Stephens’ rifle bounce and roll at his feet. He steadied himself and rose to a knee, keeping the concrete barrier between his body and the incoming rounds. He looked out beyond the sandbag bunker; armed men were rushing in under the cover of the trees. Unlike before, when they would run head on into incoming fire, this group would run, disappear from sight, and then rise up shooting at the men dug in on the road. Rounds smacked into the Humvee and the gunner went limp—another soldier quickly took his place.

A machine gun positioned on the roof of the fire station joined the fight. Flares launched in the sky, casting long, haunting shadows over the approaching army charging in from the woods. Jacob watched as a soldier to his left was hit; he was knocked back and looked at the hole in his armor that miraculously landed at the very center of his chest plate. The soldier put a finger in the hole, looked up at Jacob, and smiled just as a second round hit the man in the top of the head.

Jacob felt fear, then anger build in his gut. He forced his rifle up and aimed into the tree line, pulling the trigger continuously though he couldn't see his targets. He could hear a soldier speaking into a radio frantically, "Requesting fire support; unit in danger of being overrun."

Men screamed farther down the line behind them. Jacob turned as an explosion ripped through a bunker. Soon after, men dressed in civilian clothing and carrying all manner of weapons poured into the street, breeching the defensive line.

Jacob flinched at the shriek of an incoming round moments before it crashed into the far tree line and exploded, lighting the night sky. The radio operator continued yelling into the handset, "More, more, more, on target, fire for effect!"

Rounds shrieked in and began erupting all along the defensive line. Earth and smoke were tossed into the air. Murphy grabbed Jacob by the collar and pulled him back, then shoved him toward the rear seat of the patrol car. Jacob turned and looked down the road, back in the direction they'd traveled. The swarms were inside the containment zone, running and fighting the soldiers. Blood and blue smoke mixed with a flurry of arms.

"Back in the car! Back in the car!" Murphy shouted as he shoved Jacob into the back seat. Murphy opened the front door and stood beside it while firing his weapon across the hood as Stephens leapt in the driver's side and fired up the engine. Murphy dropped into the passenger's seat just as the car began moving. Stephens drove around the serpentine path of concrete barriers, crashing through the wooden sawhorses. Looking out of the rear window as the car raced toward the iron bridge, Jacob witnessed the soldiers left behind being overwhelmed by the swarm pressing against the fire station's walls.

Tracers crisscrossed the sky while artillery rounds exploded into the street and field, churning up earth and bodies. The smoke from the rounds quickly developed a fog that mercifully blinded Jacob from the horror.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The streets were dark beyond the bridge. The scent of cordite and burning garbage hung heavy in the air. No people, no animals, no movement, no structure—nothing was left untouched. They passed a still smoking, tracked vehicle. Around it, expended brass and bits of uniform covered the street. Jacob watched as Stephens concentrated his focus on navigating around the smoldering hulk, using his night vision to maintain a course north and into Chicago.

Jacob leaned against the door, his weary eyes looking out into the street and watching the abandoned homes as they passed. Sounds of battle persisted all around them. On all sides, the glow of explosions bloomed and receded in the sky. The clacking of small arms and the booming thump of mortars and artillery rounds intermingled with the sound of low-flying aircraft roaring overhead... a manmade thunderstorm that overstimulated Jacob's already fatigued brain.

"Where is everyone?" Jacob whispered.

Murphy had his window down with his rifle aimed out and at the ready. "I haven't seen shit since we crossed the bridge."

Stephens grunted. "We're in the eye of the storm. Look around; everything here is dead. The Darkness is all around us. They're out there. If we keep driving, we could run right up their ass... but that ain't gonna happen."

"What?" Murphy looked away from the open window.

Stephens flicked a finger at the dashboard. "Gas; something must'a punctured the tank back there. It's bleeding out faster than it should be."

Jacob leaned up over the rear seat to look through the window in the cage. “Can we fix it?”

Stephens shrugged. “I don’t know... but I’m not about to go all Mr. Good Wrench out here in the fucking open.”

“Okay, find us some place to pull over,” Murphy ordered.

Stephens guided the patrol car through wreckage and a twisted makeshift barrier of wooden police obstacles and plastic barrels. Dark-blue riot gear and helmets littered the street. Just ahead was a long intersection and on the northeast corner was a tall four-story brick building—two stories higher than the neighboring structures. The sidewalk in front of the building was clear. Murphy pointed it out and Stephens gingerly brought the car up to the curb, stopping just shy of the entrance.

With the car stopped and tight to the curb, he cut the engine. They sat silently, Stephens and Murphy searching the surrounding area with their night vision and the scopes on their rifles. Jacob looked through the side window at the front of the brick building. Plywood was nailed over the front lobby windows. The entry door was doubled padlocked and held shut by a large chain. A black panel was bolted to the wall with a long list of names next to white buzzer buttons.

“Think there are people in there?” Jacob whispered uneasily.

Stephens turned his head to look. “Doubt it... it’s chained from the outside. Place was probably evac’d early—especially being on the main route.”

Murphy lifted his rifle. “Let’s get this done; this place is creeping me out,” he whispered before opening the door and stepping into the street.

Jacob moved quickly and followed him out. Murphy moved to the back of the patrol car and held up, looking out in all directions. He then turned to Jacob and adjusted his rifle in his grip so that it was against his chest, pointed down and out. “Hold it like this, ‘low ready’. Watch our backs; we need to grab some gear.” Stephens used the keys to open the trunk and the men rummaged through the bags while Jacob watched the surrounding buildings.

Jacob looked at the luminous dial on his wristwatch. *Just after 2 am—the darkest part of the night*, he thought. He looked at the watch again; his wife had given it to him as a birthday gift years ago. At the time, he had discounted it; he was so used to using his smart phone for the time that he

wasn't sure if he could get back to wearing a watch again—until his wife turned the watch over and showed him the inscription on the back.

My Friend, My Love, My Hero, Laura

Reciting the words in his head didn't comfort him; instead, he felt the returning sense of helplessness and panic. Jacob looked away from his watch and gripped the rifle. Knowing he needed to stay alert, he scanned the streets. "Gotta get it together for the girls," he whispered to himself.

"What?" Stephens asked, as he approached from behind. "You see something?"

"Huh? No... you find what you were looking for?"

Stephens held up a compact set of bolt cutters and a crowbar as an answer then walked to the chained door. He moved close to the chain and waited for Murphy to move in behind him to provide cover while he worked. Jacob followed Murphy's lead and stepped to the opposite side then looked outward into the dark street.

A clank and a snap later, Jacob could hear Stephens fishing the chain through the heavy handle of the door. The door rattle and Stephens worked the handle. "Locked; just be another minute," the soldier whispered.

Jacob looked behind him and saw Stephens wedge the bar under the plywood covering the door, just enough so that he could smack the glass with the bar. The sound shattered the otherwise silent area.

"Damn, you're being noisy. Let's step it up," Murphy whispered.

"Think you can do better, Sarge?" Stephens said as he slipped his arm inside the break. A click and a clunk later, and the door was unlocked. He pulled back and stood, peeking into the open door, checking for threats. He looked back and announced, "It's open."

"What are you waiting for?" Murphy turned to cover the street. Jacob felt him pressed against him as Murphy moved backwards, pushing him inside. They closed the door behind them and relocked it. In the pitch dark of the lobby, sealed shut by the plywood, Jacob was blind again. He felt a hand grab his wrist. "Keep hold of my vest," Murphy whispered as he guided Jacob's hand to his back.

Jacob gripped the heavy fabric of the man's vest and stumbled forward, kicking objects on the floor as he was guided down a long hallway.

"Watch your step. The floor is covered with luggage, bags, and boxes of shit people left behind," Murphy whispered.

The trio continued on shuffling; the plods of their boots echoed in the silent hallway. A latch popped, and Jacob recognized the sound of a door squeaking open and items on the floor sliding as the door was pulled outward, into the hallway.

“Stairs are clear,” Stephens whispered back.

Jacob was led ahead and around a corner; the echo of their footsteps changed, and the space now smelled of cleaning solvent. He heard the door latch behind him and a white light clicked on. Murphy had powered up a weapon-mounted flashlight and was surveying the stairwell. It was clean—the floors polished and the walls still vibrant with fresh paint.

“Place must’a had power when they were pulled out... probably used the elevators,” Stephens said. He reached into his cargo pocket and pulled out a long length of chain he’d salvaged from the front doors. He looped it through a pull handle and secured the other end to a handrail. He reached over and snatched sets of zip cuffs from Jacob’s tactical vest then locked the ends of the chain in place. He tested the stability of the hasty lock and nodded his approval to Murphy.

Murphy turned and, holding his light up the stairwell, slowly patrolled forward. The heavy fire door at the second floor was locked, and one look told them it would be difficult to open with the crowbar. They stood near it, listening but found only silence. They continued up to the next floor, which was also locked. Murphy began to round the corner to enter the landing that brought them to the fourth floor but stopped and stepped back. He pointed ahead to the next floor’s fire door—it was slightly ajar.

The sound of a glass bottle being knocked over rattled across a tile floor from above. Jacob crouched and held his breath as the sound of footsteps echoed into the stairwell. Murphy reached his hand forward and clicked off the light. A dim, soft glow emanated from the open door. Murphy knelt down and took a long lunging step around the corner, squaring up on the exit above. Stephens quickly moved forward, grabbing an angle and covering the other soldier from the corner.

“Who’s there?” Murphy called out, causing Jacob to flinch with surprise; he hadn’t expected the soldier to announce their position like that.

Sounds of scrambling above and muffled voices reached Jacob’s ears and the light went out. Jacob clutched the handrail and strained his ears to pick up the sound of Murphy’s boot treads slowly ascending the staircase.

“Don’t ya’ll come up here—I’ll blow ya’ll back to hell where ya come from!” a woman’s voice shouted.

“Now hold up!” Murphy said. “We’re not here to hurt anyone!”

“Ya’ll ain’t dragging me off; you’ll have to kill me first!”

Stephens moved up the steps, holding a palm up to Murphy as he passed. Murphy nodded his approval. “What the hell you talking about, lady? We ain’t the darkness!”

“The hell you ain’t; now get to stepping before I come at you with this twelve gauge!”

“Lady, you ever seen one of those things in an argument?” Stephens said; his voice lower.

After a pause the woman answered, “Well, no, I guess I haven’t.”

“Ma’am, now I’m coming up; if you shoot me... well, you’re gonna have some explaining to do to my momma,” Stephens said.

Still staying in the cover of the stairwell, Murphy stepped ahead and followed close behind Stephens while Jacob held back on the rail. He watched as the light came back on and a shadow cut across it. Stephens stepped up the stairwell, the soft light outlining his form as he cautiously took the steps one at a time. Jacob observed as Stephens let go of his rifle and, letting it hang slack from the sling, stepped to the landing at the top of the stairs. He put his hands up and extended them into the hallway.

“Okay, see my hands? I don’t intend no harm on y’all. I’m coming in, okay?” Stephens said, speaking calmly.

“Yeah, I see ‘um,” the woman answered.

“Nana, just put the gun down,” a younger man’s voice called.

Stephens continued to extend his arms as he walked into the hallway. He stepped clearly into the light and held his hands up, the soft light illuminating his face and uniform. Garbled words were exchanged in soft voices. Then Stephens peered back into the stairwell, looking at Murphy and Jacob, and said, “You can come up.” Murphy lowered his weapon and waved Jacob forward.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

An elderly grey-haired woman stood looking at them suspiciously, a shotgun tightly gripped in her hands. A young man walked past her and greeted Stephens enthusiastically. “Good to see you, brother. Where’s everyone else? When are we leaving?”

Moving Jacob ahead, Murphy stepped out of the stairwell to stand beside Stephens and looked back into the dark hallway. He tried to close the door behind him but found it was stuck open.

“Mr. Carson broke the door when the elevators went out. Door was locked from the inside, and it was the only way to get back up here,” the young man said, watching Murphy’s attempts to secure the entrance. “He was supposed to come back for us... but never did.”

“What’s your name, kid?” Stephens asked.

“Tyree,” he answered.

“Tyree, why didn’t you all leave with the others?”

The young man placed his hand on the older woman’s arm. “Nana, you can go back inside,” Tyree whispered.

She looked at the strangers and shook her head at them before turning and walking back down the dark hallway. Near the end of the passage, she stopped and threw them one last scowl before disappearing into an apartment.

The young man looked back at Stephens. “My papa has been ill for a while and he can’t walk; he’s in a chair and needs oxygen. When the folks came to get us on the bus, they didn’t have an ambulance or a wheelchair for him. The police said they’d send someone, but they dint.”

“This place was locked up tight. Boarded and chained,” Murphy pointed out.

Tyree nodded his head. “That was Mr. Carson, the landlord. He stayed back with my grandparents to help them out after they got everyone else out. Nana and Papa were the only tenants left in the building. He watched over them ‘til me and my cousin got here. Carson locked us in, sealed up the building, and went for help.”

“When was this?” Murphy asked.

“Bout three days ago, maybe. After the electricity shut off,” Tyree said. “You all thirsty? We got water... food.”

“Thank you, I could use a bite. We’ve been on the move since yesterday,” Murphy answered.

An explosion in the distance roared outside and shook the building, causing the windows at the ends of the hallway to rattle. Jacob stepped back and put his hands to the wall.

“It’s okay. That shit’s happening a lot, but this ol’ building is tough; it ain’t falling down anytime soon,” Tyree said as he turned to walk toward the apartment at the end of the hall.

Stephens glanced over at Murphy. When all Murphy did was shrug his shoulders, Stephens sarcastically smiled before stepping off to follow Tyree. Murphy started to follow as well when Jacob reached out a hand and grabbed his forearm. “What are we doing? We need to keep moving.”

“Relax, we’re just stopping long enough to get eyes on the area, and we’ll be on our way,” Murphy said, pulling away and following Stephens.

Jacob stood looking down the dark hallway; every apartment door was partially opened, and the windows at each end of the long hallway had been covered with paper. He turned and glimpsed back at the broken door as explosions outside made an ominous rumbling sound that crept up the stairwell. Listening to the growling echo up the stairs and the trembling as the building protested the concussion of every bomb drop, Jacob suddenly realized he was alone in the dimly lit space. Shaking himself, he quickly moved out after his friends.

Jacob reached the apartment the others had entered and, slipping quietly through the open door, paused in a small hallway. The apartment was neatly made up and well kept. Family pictures covered the walls and Jacob recognized Tyree in several of them—as a young boy sitting on a sailboat

and holding a fishing pole, group photos of happier times, but most notably, his high school graduation photo, enlarged and holding a prominent spot above a large maple bench.

Jacob followed the voices he could hear to the end of the small hallway. He walked into a living room where an elderly man, wearing an oxygen mask, lifted a hand to wave. Jacob forced a smile and returned the gesture as younger man, possibly late teens, moved from the kitchen and looked Jacob up and down. “You a cop?” he asked accusingly.

Jacob sighed and shook his head. “You know, I’m going to have to get a new tailor.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” the kid asked.

“Means I found this gear in the back of a cop car. I’m not a police officer,” Jacob answered.

“Cool, because I got warrants,” the kid said.

The old man snapped the oxygen mask from his face, the sudden movement catching Jacob’s eye. “James, will you shut up? The police ain’t sending nobody out here to arrest you for speeding tickets.” The old man looked up at Jacob. “Pardon my grandson; he tries to play tough, but he’s harmless.”

“Papa, will you stop? We don’t owe these folks any explanation,” James said, looking embarrassed.

“Child, hush, and go get this fella something to eat,” the old man ordered.

Jacob let his arms relax, still not used to the weight of the rifle and tactical vest. Seeing his discomfort, the old man offered him a seat. Jacob moved across the room, pushed aside crumpled blankets and pillows, and sat at the corner of a sofa. He closed his eyes and tipped his head back as the weight relaxed from his back.

“Sorry about the mess; the boys been staying with us and we ain’t got a lot of room,” the man said.

Jacob scanned the space; it was a humble apartment—heirloom furniture, sofa and chairs, a small dining table for two just outside of the kitchen door. The windows had heavy blankets pulled over them, sealing out the light. The apartment door was open, but Jacob could see where furniture had been pushed against it at one point.

Following Jacob's stare to the front door, the old man said, "We used to keep it closed up but we leave it open 'cause the floor is empty now and the doors downstairs is all locked. Might need to change our policy, though, considering you folks just walked up on us like that."

James returned to the room and eyed Jacob suspiciously before handing him a plate and a small plastic cup. "Here, it's just water and a grilled cheese."

Jacob accepted the plate. "Been a bit since I had a hot meal; thank you."

"I wish I had more for you. Y'all can call me Ernest, or Ernie; most my friends do. Gas is still on up here; keeps the stove going. Some water pressure from the tank on the roof, but not sure how long that'll last."

Jacob took a long drink of the water. He looked at Ernie and nodded. "It's good; thank you, sir."

"Sorry, I didn't catch your name."

"I'm Jacob."

The old man turned his head, stretching to see into the kitchen. "Listen, Jacob, I know what's happening out there. I been hearing what they say on the radio."

Jacob looked to the old man. "I don't have answers, if that's what you're asking—" He stopped as the sound of an explosion rattled the windows and shook the building.

The old man shook his head. "I'm not looking for that, Jacob. I need you to get the boys out of here. I already talked it over with the wife; we won't last out there, especially not on those streets... not in no shelter either. We'll be okay up here; we got food and water and can get by for some time on our own. I need you to promise that when you leave, you'll take the boys."

Tyree walked into the room. "Papa, I already told you we ain't leaving without you, so stop bothering this man."

"You got to; these folks will need your help, anyhow."

Jacob looked at Tyree and noticed the others were now moving out of the kitchen.

"How, exactly, would we need their help?" Jacob asked.

"They know the streets. You'll find that the roads are all blocked. These two can get you in and out and up to the island—I know that's where you all are headed; no other reason for you to be up this far."

Murphy stepped into the room, raising a hand as he swallowed. “What do you know about the roads being blocked?” Murphy asked. He took a seat next to Jacob, holding a half-eaten sandwich.

Ernie grinned and pulled back a blanket on his lap. He had a small handheld police scanner. He held it up and clicked it on; hearing nothing but static, he powered it back off. “It was alive with reports up ‘til about four hours ago. That’s when the fire department called in for help. We heard their distress calls; said they were pulling back to the south. Later, those men out front, they got shot up and their vehicles wrecked.

“That street out front will get you killed. You’re gonna have to stick to the alleys. These boys can help you.”

Tyree raised his hand and stepped closer to face Ernie, moving behind his chair and leaning over his shoulder. “I told you, Papa, we ain’t leaving. Now stop this.”

“It’s okay, Ty,” the old woman said. “Your grandfather and I already discussed it; it’s all been figured on. You know I can’t go running and jumping over no fences, and no way I’d go an’ leave him here alone. When you get to the island, you can tell ’em where we be, and they’ll come back for us. I got plenty here to take care of your Papa.”

Tyree looked down and shook his head, then stepped away while looking toward the hall and staring at the door. James moved from the kitchen and hugged the woman. “Don’t make us go, Nana,” he said, his voice breaking.

The old man cleared his throat and looked back at Jacob. “Now, y’all can take what you need. The boys scrounged up plenty from the empty units, but you need to be going quick. It’s been quiet for a couple hours, but you can bet it won’t last.”

“Wait!” Murphy said loud enough to silence them. “Tell me about what happened out front; you saw it?”

Tyree turned away and looked at Murphy. “I saw it... I was on the roof.”

“Who did it, and how?”

“It was a bunch of trucks and a school bus; they were driving down the center of the street, then the people... you know them, the ones on the news —”

“The Darkness,” Stephens said.

“Yeah, it was them. They come out and filled the street. They were pushing at the vehicles; you know, crowding around them and trying to open the doors to get in. But the trucks didn’t stop; they just kept going, slowly pushing them out of the way. Then it was like... shooting from everywhere. The trucks tried to speed up through the crowd, but more of ‘em—these different ones with guns—they started shooting. The army guys, they started shooting back.

“Well, one of them things had a bazooka or something because it blew a hole right through one of those tanks out there; the one out front.”

Stephens nodded. “Yeah, and then what?”

“Well, mostly the vehicles kept going right through it, leaving that one out front to burn. Later, some helicopters flew by and I waved to them from the roof, but they didn’t stop. When I looked back at the street... they were all gone... every last one of ‘em.

“I still been seeing them. Right before you showed up, a group moved down the street, all carrying rifles. A woman ran to them for help... they tackled her and drug her off.”

“Where did they take her?” Stephens asked.

“I don’t know. Just gone... up the street somewhere.”

“You think you can get us to Northerly Island through all of that?” Murphy asked.

“No... no way. Not through the city—too many people and too many places for them to get at us. You’re talking ten miles on foot. If it was that easy, I would have already tried.”

“So, think about how you would go now. How would you go if you had to, without being seen?”

“Go to the lake,” Nana said.

Murphy looked at her. “Yes, ma’am, that’s where we want to get.”

“No, I mean straight to the lake; you could go through the Oak Woods Cemetery and then to the harbor,” Nana said.

Murphy looked at her, then back to Tyree.

Tyree nodded his head. “She’s right. It’s only a couple miles if we cut through the graveyard.”

Stephens chuckled. “For real man? You want to go through the friggin’ graveyard? In the middle of the night?”

Murphy put up a hand, silencing Stephens as he got to his feet and stepped toward Tyree. “Take me to the roof and show me the route.”

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Jacob followed the others back down the hallway, into the stairwell, and out a roof access door. Jacob used a sleeve to wipe his forehead; it was raining again and hot. The humidity made the air feel heavy and sweat instantly built up under the vest on his back. The rain drizzled in and tapped at the rubber and pea-stone surface of the roof as Tyree led them to the north corner. Just before he reached the end, he crouched low and waited for them to gather around.

“I’ve seen them down there all around those streets. So, watch yourself,” Tyree said, before turning back and moving slowly toward the edge. He moved right to the end, and then squatted back on his heels behind a stubbed wall that ran the perimeter of the roof.

Jacob hung back as Murphy scooted next to Tyree and looked out over the edge. “What am I looking at?” he whispered.

Tyree reached into a light backpack he’d carried with him up to the roof and pulled out a red collapsible toy telescope that he handed off to Murphy. Murphy looked at it in his hand. “Really? How old are you, man?”

“Gimme a break, I found it in one of the apartments,” Tyree said.

Murphy grinned and extended the scope. He looked out over the edge of the building and down at the dark streets. Jacob watched him scanning from left to right before lowering the scope and looking back. “Okay, again, what am I looking at?”

Tyree pointed in the distance. “See out there at the end of this road—the bridge? We gotta go all the way down this street about five blocks, under the Skyway, and then under the el tracks. After that, we’ll get to the

cemetery wall; it's about eight feet high. There's lower spots than that, but there's barbed wire at them places."

"Walls and barbed wire? What kind of cemetery is this?" Jacob whispered.

"Come on, man, it's Chicago. Don't act like you never heard of fences to keep folks out," Tyree said.

"Okay... back on topic. What's it look like inside?" Murphy asked.

"It's big, man—like a park; lots of places to hide, trees, and small lakes. A road goes right down the middle, almost all the way to Jackson Park. From there, it's right to the golf course and lakeshore."

Murphy scanned with the scope and handed it off to Stephens, who took his spot near the edge of the roof. Murphy moved away, pulling Tyree with him. "This harbor; you sure there will be boats there?"

Tyree shrugged. "It's a harbor, ain't that where they stay? Summertime, docks should be full this time of year. Papa used to keep a boat there; he used to take us out all the time before he went in the chair and had to sell it. But I ain't exactly been out fishing lately, ya know."

"Okay, so you and your brother, you have weapons?"

Tyree shook his head. "James ain't my brother; he's my cousin... and no, just the pump gun and we can't take that. Nana wouldn't give it to me, anyway."

Jacob reached down and un-holstered his pistol. He looked at Tyree and held it to him. "Take this; I'm no good with it," he said.

Murphy nodded. "Okay, good, but you'll need to find a bat, bar, or whatever; you and your bro—cousin need to be able to fight. Let's get back downstairs. I want to be moving while it's still quiet."



THE OLD WOMAN STUFFED BAGS OF FOOD AND BOTTLES OF WATER INTO their already over-stuffed backpacks. Jacob looked away while the boys hugged her and promised to return. He didn't want to be torn again by thoughts of his wife and daughter... where they may be, if they made it to the island, were they evacuated, or were they on the bus that was attacked on the road? He wanted to push it out of his mind, but he wasn't trained to

act like the soldiers that were guiding him, the ones that could turn off emotion and fight. Jacob tried to mimic them, but he failed.

Now there would be another burden on the two men in uniform—civilians like him to slow the soldiers up and possibly cause more problems. Jacob hoped it wouldn't be too much. He watched as Tyree released his grandmother, turned away from her, and used the sleeve of his shirt to wipe away tears.

"It's okay," Stephens whispered to him. "We're gonna send someone back for 'em."

Tyree clenched his jaw and nodded his head before looking away. He reached down and put on his backpack. "I know," he whispered. He stepped off toward the stairwell, leading the way with a small flashlight.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Stephens untied the door.

"Dark from here on out; go on and cut that light," Stephens whispered.

After the light was cut, he took the lead position and opened the door to the dark lobby. As Jacob had done before, Tyree kept his hand on Stephens' armor and was led helplessly into the lightless lobby. James did the same, holding Tyree. Murphy gave them a moment to move ahead then looked back at Jacob. He flashed a thumb up then dropped his goggles and stepped into the dark with Jacob holding his gear.

They moved slowly, but it wasn't graceful or quiet. Jacob heard one of the boys breathing heavily, nearly hyperventilating. Trying to calm him, Stephens whispered, "It's okay, bro, I got you; we're almost out."

Objects were kicked across the floor, causing gasps; their shoes seemed to slap heavily on the tile and bounced eerie echoes off the walls. Murphy suddenly stopped, and Jacob bumped into him, his rifle clacking against the back of Murphy's pack. Jacob felt Murphy's gloved hand push him back against a wall. He sensed, and heard, the boys standing next to him. One of them was trembling; his legs were shaking, every movement making a noise. "Just relax, I'm here," Tyree whispered.

"Wait one; we're gonna pop the door, peek outside, and we'll be back for you all," Murphy whispered.

Jacob heard them quickly step away. The door opened and the clang of a chain on the south side rang as it was pulled tight. Jacob could see a faint slice of moonlight cut through the narrow opening in the door. Stephens was kneeling with the bolt cutters in his hands. He stretched them through

the opening and strained to squeeze the arms together. After a loud *clang*, the chain was cut and fell to the hard concrete.

Slowly, Stephens pushed the door all the way open, walked out, and pressed against it while keeping his rifle up. With the door fully open, blue light spilled into the lobby. The rains had stopped, and the sky was clearing, allowing some stars to peek through. He pointed at the men along the wall and signaled for them to move. Jacob reached out a hand and helped guide James to the door. Two steps in and the boy panicked.

“No, I can’t,” he said, pushing off violently and sprinting for the stairwell. They could hear his footfalls and the stairwell door fly open and slam shut.

Tyree turned to go after him just as Stephens raised and fired his rifle. The bright muzzle flash filled the void in the lobby. “Leave him! There’s no time; move your ass!” Murphy shouted. “Get out here!”

“No, we gotta go back,” Tyree yelled.

Murphy grabbed the man by the collar and shoved him forward. “You stay, and you’ll lead those things back to the building!”

Jacob stepped out, pushing Tyree ahead of him, and Murphy quickly shut the door, shoving hard to feel the lock catch as it closed before he knotted the chain through the handle for extra security. Murphy then slapped Stephens on the back, indicating he was ready to move just as two rounds impacted the building directly above his head. Stephens already had his rifle up and was returning quick-aimed shots of twos while Murphy pushed the others ahead.

Jacob stopped and pivoted while attempting to raise his rifle. Murphy reached out and shoved him forward yelling, “Run!”

Stephens lowered his weapon and cut away at a sprint, catching up fast, already passing Jacob and pulling ahead. Sprinting with his head down, Tyree was close behind him. Jacob ran down the right side of the street, struggling to keep up and feeling the pain in his ribs and hip. Murphy moved alongside him and turned out as Stephens stopped at a street corner, then pressed against a building to look down the street to the left.

Murphy pushed Jacob ahead. “What happened back there?” Murphy whispered.

Stephens briefly looked back over his shoulder. “I saw three of ‘em and one had a rifle.”

“You sure it was one of them?” Murphy questioned.

“Nope, but I know it wasn’t one of us,” he answered. “Corners clear. Cover me while I move. Send ‘em when I get to the other side.”

“Roger; got you covered,” Murphy snapped back.

Stephens looked left and right one more time before sprinting to the far side of the street. Murphy waited a count of ten then slapped Tyree to follow. After another brief count, he slapped Jacob.

Jacob ran into the center of the street and nearly fell while clumsily moving forward. Struggling under the weight of the vest, he had to concentrate on his footfalls but felt as if his legs were wobbly and he would fall at any moment. He ran full speed, stepping up onto the opposing curb. Failing to slow down and not seeing clearly, he lost his footing and slapped face first into the building.

Tyree caught him as he bounced back. Looking around, Jacob felt the sting on his face but shook it off, aimed his rifle out, and waited as he heard Murphy running across the street. Murphy dropped against the wall between them then slapped Stephens on the back and pushed him forward, telling him to move out.

Out of immediate danger now, they walked ahead slowly and hugged the left side of the street. The neighborhood changed to small storefronts, mixed in with the apartment buildings. They crossed another street and fell in alongside a three-story brick building.

Cars were crammed in tight along the fully congested street. Ahead, Jacob could begin to see the Skyway overpass. They paused and knelt to look down at the slowly descending elevation of the street as it dropped under the highway. Jacob strained his eyes trying to see into the dark shadows below the overpass. As he looked, the shadows appeared textured and to have movement. He blinked his eyes and looked away, trying to focus. They appeared like smoke as the shadows moved and twisted to roll in on themselves.

“We have to find another way,” Stephens whispered. “I don’t wanna go down there.”

The smoke moved up the road in their direction. As the mass caught the moonlight, they materialized into a wide-bodied parade of men and women pressing against each other shoulder to shoulder and spreading out as they escaped the confines of the tunnel. As they moved into the light, the mass

picked up speed, spread out, and flooded the open ground like water running from a hose.

Murphy turned to the building and Jacob followed his gaze; the windows were barred and there was no time to cross the street. Jacob spun to look behind them at the way they'd come and saw it would be a long run to the corner to get to any cover. Murphy grabbed Jacob's arm. "No time... into the street," he whispered.

"What? No way!" Tyree said from where he hid behind Stephens.

"Get under the cars. We have to let them move past us," Murphy ordered as he rushed hunched over to the curb. Jacob ran up the street in the direction of the approaching mass, following Murphy. Searching for the right spot, they found a long and wide delivery truck with cars pressed against it on either side. Murphy removed his pack and tossed it under the back bumper before dropping to his belly and low crawling in after it. Jacob followed and did the same then he felt Tyree and Stephens crawl up close behind him.

Jacob crawled onward, thankful that the vehicle was high enough that he could lift his head. Murphy was nearly to the front of the vehicle, under the engine. He was lying on his back with his rifle on his chest, head to the side. Jacob moved to his heels but stayed on his belly. He laid his head flat against the damp pavement just as the first of the *Others* moved in alongside the truck.

They didn't shamle along or stagger like drunks; they walked calmly, like mall walkers or pedestrians on a busy sidewalk. They didn't moan or breathe heavy, no talking or simple chatter; just moving one after another to form lines that twisted through the maze of congested cars. They smelled—not like human body odor or retched flesh—but like sulfur, burning rubber, or the fresh spray of a skunk—only sweeter and not so pronounced. It wafted under the truck and surrounded Jacob and Murphy.

Jacob lifted his arm and forced his face into his sleeve. A car alarm far ahead sounded, probably as one of the black-eyes bumped into it. The mass seemed stimulated by the noise; their pace picked up and they moved along at a near jog. When they thinned out, stragglers ran to catch up. Jacob looked at the dial on his watch; they'd lain under the truck for nearly twenty minutes—the mass seemed endless. Every time he thought they'd all passed, another group would move out and run to join the others.

After a long bout of silence, Murphy looked back at them. "Wait here," he whispered then quietly rolled to his belly and crawled forward. He moved out in front of the truck and took a knee. He dropped his hand and signaled for Jacob to join him. Jacob began crawling until he cleared the front bumper. Murphy pointed to a small Volkswagen ahead on the left. Jacob nodded and, staying hunched over, moved beside it to take a kneeling position.

He heard a light clang of metal on metal and froze. Turning his head, he could see that Murphy had heard it too. The soldier dropped and spun on his heels. He lifted his rifle and took a step forward, looking high over a car to their front. Rapid-fire shots rang out and the windshield of the delivery truck exploded.

Murphy returned fire, providing cover while Stephens rolled from under the vehicle and let his weapon join the fight. "Get your rifle up, Jacob!" Murphy said.

Jacob hesitated and looked around, searching for cover, as he witnessed the two soldiers square off to the threat, weapons up, firing, and walking directly into the enemy. Tyree was quickly on his feet and following close behind Stephens, the pistol gripped tight by both hands while he fired ahead. Jacob took a deep breath and stepped off before stopping again. "The bags," he called out, talking about the rucksacks at the back of the truck.

"Move up, dammit!" Murphy ordered. "Leave them!"

Jacob leveled his rifle and fired at the muzzle flashes coming from ahead. The dark space under the bridge lit up like a field of fireflies. Jacob moved straight on, facing them, ducking behind cars then aiming at the flashes before pulling the trigger, finding a new target, moving, ducking, and firing again. While they moved, the fireflies dimmed as their numbers dwindled. Soon, they were at the entrance to the tunnel.

Murphy held up an arm to pause the group before leaning back and resting against a sedan as he changed out the magazine in his rifle. Jacob walked forward and joined him, mimicking Murphy's movements to reload his own rifle. A body dressed in jeans and a casual T-shirt lay at his feet. The thing was holding a black rifle with a synthetic stock and scope; its black eyes stared up. Murphy kicked it with his boot and said, "Police issue."

As Murphy reached for the weapon, a rushing sound from behind caused him to pause. The crunching of cars and the screaming of the mob in pursuit grew louder. Murphy pulled his knife and crouched low to look under the rear of an abandoned vehicle. He shoved the knife into the car's fuel tank and rocked the blade until fuel poured out onto the street.

"What are you doing?" Jacob asked.

"Giving us some time." He pulled the blade from the tank and tossed a match to the ground, the gasoline whooshing and flashing brightly as it ignited.

"Go, Go, Go!" Murphy cried out, taking off at a sprint and leading the way into the tunnel.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Fire blazed, casting orange-tinted light over the path ahead. Black smoke billowed and rolled to the roof of the overpass above, catching the top and spilling forward. Jacob could feel the heat at his back. He heard the sounds of tires exploding, windows cracking, and sheet metal buckling under the extreme temperature. He struggled to stay with Murphy who was running, dodging abandoned cars, and leaping hoods like a world-class hurdler. Jacob picked up on the sounds of the mob behind him and the steady rate of gunfire to his front.

Moving through the smoke to the tunnel's exit, he spotted Stephens kneeling against a concrete wall; his rifle was already up taking aimed shots as he attempted to suppress a small group moving toward them. Tyree stood over his shoulder with both arms extended, firing Jacob's pistol. Murphy closed in on the group as the last of the things fell to their fire.

"How much farther is it to the cemetery?" Jacob asked.

"It's just ahead, past the elevated platforms," Tyree said, getting to his feet.

"Good, we need to keep moving; the fire won't hold them. It won't be long before they figure out they can go over the Skyway," Murphy said, moving them out.

The two-lane road ahead was strewn with rubble; bits of broken concrete covered the abandoned cars, their windshields broken and pushed in. Buildings on both sides of the road showed damage from the bombing. Murphy marched them ahead, hugging the wall on the left side. Again, the road descended while it moved under the elevated railway tracks. From a

distance, the station and platforms appeared abandoned. No trains, no movement. They patrolled through the area and continued on to the empty void where the road opened back into a commercial zone.

They stopped at an empty intersection. Storefronts stood in ruins on all corners, their faces a mess of shattered plate glass windows. Empty teargas canisters and riot gear littered the ground. A knocked-over police barricade explained the lack of abandoned vehicles ahead. The street to the left was scattered with bodies, the buildings pockmarked from gunfire. Murphy surveyed the now empty street before turning back to Tyree. "Where to now?"

"We have to go another block up that way then we'll see the cemetery wall on the other corner, toward the lake," Tyree said, pointing.

In the direction Tyree pointed, gunfire raged, broken only by the sounds of explosions. Occasionally, a group of unknown people would run down the street, traveling right to left toward the heart of the city. A group of attack helicopters flew low over the street, heading west at high speed to approach the city center. Sounds of rockets and heavy machine guns rocked the ground. All the while, human screams mixed with the howling of the Others.

Murphy sat silently looking ahead, concern in his eyes. After a moment, he looked at Tyree. "You sure there isn't another way?"

"If we go around, it'll take us all night and keep us on the streets."

Murphy nodded thoughtfully and turned to Stephens but spoke so they all could hear. "They're up there. When we hit the wall, we have to get over it fast. We get these two over first, then you, and I'll go last."

Stephens nodded in agreement and flashed a thumbs up as Murphy turned so that he could see into all of their faces. "We have to get to the wall; no stopping... if you go down... get back up." He pointed. "That is the kill box; we can't stay in it!"

He paused as a truck raced down the intersection to the north, the front end swallowed in flames and the bed filled with the Others beating the cab. It continued through the far intersection while racing away from the city.

Jacob looked at the chaos in horror. Sounds of the things behind them grew closer while gunfire and destruction lay ahead. "You sure about all of this?" he gasped.

Murphy shook his head. “This city is lost and we’re in the middle of it. We must get out now or not at all. Hug the storefronts; at the last corner, we sprint for the wall. Stay behind me, shoot anything that isn’t us, and *do not stop!*” He reached out a hand and squeezed Stephens’ shoulder before taking off to cross the street, running with his head down and rifle up. He briefly looked left down the near street then pushed ahead, crossing the intersection.

Stephens nudged Jacob in the back and told him to move. Jacob stepped off fast, running to keep pace with the Murphy. Still a hundred yards to the next block, he could already see the orange glow of fires and the blue smoke of gunfire. A pack of the Others cut across the street ahead; three continued across to move deeper into the city, the fourth stopped and looked in Jacob’s direction, catching the attention of the fifth.

The pair turned and took a step in Jacob’s direction. Before Jacob could call out a warning, Murphy had his rifle in action, firing at the one to the left as it moved toward them. Jacob took a step to the side and used a lamp pole to steady his aim then pulled the trigger and watched the man on the right drop. Jacob hit him in the chest—right where he was aiming. Grinning, he looked to Murphy for recognition. Stephens came up behind and smacked him. “Don’t stop running! Go!” he yelled.

Jacob cringed, realizing his error as the first three came back into view. After having seen the fate of their comrades, they charged around the corner. Two shots from Murphy and a stream of three rounds from Stephens cleared the route. Tyree ran ahead and planted himself on the corner. He pointed across the street to a tall, nearly eight-foot high, concrete wall offset from a wide sidewalk. Murphy nodded and rounded the corner. Taking a knee, he fired rapidly, drawing more to his position. “Get them over,” he shouted without taking his eye off the sights and the distant targets.

“You heard him... go!” Stephens yelled moving Jacob and Tyree ahead of him.

Jacob took a deep breath and ran into the street. He looked straight ahead to avoid the sight of danger to his left. He crossed the street and, recalling the last incident, deliberately threw himself at the wall, then turned away as Tyree came up behind. In a flash, Stephens was beside him; he knelt over and cupped his hands and Tyree stepped into the pocket. Grunting, Stephens lifted and nearly tossed Tyree over the top. Rounds

impacted with the ground around them, popping as they skipped off the sidewalk.

Ignoring the incoming fire, Stephens again cupped his hands and looked to Jacob, who nodded and put a hand on the soldier's helmet. Another grunt and Jacob were elevated upwards. He grabbed the top of the wall and pulled as Stephens pushed at the soles of his boots. Jacob strained and pulled until he was able to throw his leg over the top of the wall. Now straddling the wall, he looked out and saw a group of three charging from behind. Recognizing the danger, his eyes went wide. He raised his rifle and fired wildly, hitting two of the Others running toward their position. The third continued and crashed into Stephens.

Jacob twisted on the wall, trying to get a new firing position and lost his balance. He flopped and tumbled off, landing on his head and shoulders into a thicket bush on the other side. In the dark, he couldn't see but he felt hands grabbing at his clothing. Jacob lashed out with his fists swinging and feet kicking against the hands.

"Dammit! It's me. Stop, you asshole!" he heard Tyree yell.

Jacob pulled back his hands and felt a wrist grip his ankle. He was yanked from the bush, the thorns catching and tearing at his clothing and scratching the skin underneath. He dropped from the bush to land on his face and his mouth grabbed a taste of grass and dirt. He crawled away from the bush, rolled to his back, and looked up at the top of the concrete wall.

The top edge seemed to glow and reverberate with the explosions on the other side. A gloved hand reached up and grabbed the edge just before Stephens' helmet came into view. He climbed up and lay flat on the wall, gripping the top edge with his right arm as he dangled over the far side. Jacob watched the man strain as he pulled, and Murphy came into view before clawing and crawling directly over Stephens and tumbling into the same thorn bush. Stephens pushed up off the wall, dropped his legs, then fell the remaining distance to the ground and landed on his feet.

Stephens moved off from the wall and took up a spot a distance away to watch for trouble while Jacob and Tyree pulled Murphy from the bush. Once free of the entanglement, Murphy shook them off and motioned for them to watch the area. Unlike the violent activity on the city side of the wall, the cemetery side was still. They'd dropped in just short of a well-maintained walkway where heavy smoke blanketed the ground, just thin

enough to reveal a number of crypts, tombstones, and monuments dotting the wooded terrain.

“We clear?” Murphy whispered as he exchanged magazines in his rifle.

“I can’t see shit in this smoke,” Stephens called back in a low voice.

“Tyree... which way?” Murphy asked.

Tyree pointed with the pistol. Murphy put down his goggles and scanned the terrain, then lifted them to look at his watch. “Couple hours till dawn; let’s get through here while we have cover.”

Jacob pulled his rifle in close to the vest and willed himself up to his feet. The gunfire and explosions still echoed off the wall to their backs, and the fires cast an eerie light that made the smoke seem luminescent. The tall tombstones and monuments cast optical illusions as their shadows moved in different directions with the strobes of the explosions. Jacob shivered but, knowing he had to stick with the team or he’d never find Laura and Katy, he urged his feet to move.

He cautiously stepped ahead until he was with the rest of the group. Again, Murphy directed Stephens out front and took the open side while keeping Jacob and Tyrell close to the wall on the opposite side.

They moved ahead slowly, creeping through the acrid smoke. Jacob pulled his T-shirt over his mouth and nose to block the stench. Gunfire raged close; the rounds cracked off the walls as aircraft flew over, attacking the city with their payloads.

Murphy called out just above a whisper, “Come on guys. Don’t bunch up.”

The team intended to stay spread out but continually grouped back together out of fear. Nearly shoulder to shoulder, they patrolled deeper into the graveyard; the dancing shadows and gunshots echoed off the tombstone, making it hard to focus.

They met a blacktop path and quickly crossed it, not wanting to stop in the open. The terrain sloped down on the far side, where it gradually leveled out as it met a small pond. Stephens moved ahead then suddenly dropped to the ground; without question, the others fell with him. Murphy low crawled past Jacob until he was at Stephens’ side. Jacob squinted and strained his eyes to see ahead. Then, with the flash of an explosion, a large crowd of figures were outlined where they gathered around the opposite shore of the pond—hundreds of them standing in a tight cluster.

“What are they doing?” Jacob whispered.

With a focused expression on his face, Murphy didn’t answer. Jacob crawled forward with Tyree toward the high grass and cattails that lined the shore, stopping when they were online with the rest of the team. The more he looked, the more his eyes adjusted to the light and Jacob saw that it wasn’t just a mob; all around the edges, there were more solitary figures. Looking closer, their posture revealed that they were armed and appeared to be standing guard over the Others. The group made noise and backed away to create a long opening for a group of men that ran through the gap carrying bodies to the water line.

The unconscious victims were dropped at the bank of the pond and their heads were submerged. All at once, the men huddled in the dark realized what they were seeing. The shoreline was awash with the bodies; only their legs— or just feet in some cases—were exposed. Occasionally, one would kick and spasm, inducing a random hand from the crowd to reach down and pull the body from the water. The others would hold it upright until it could stand on its own. The newly removed thing would drift away from the pack under the watchful eyes of the sentries, stumbling around drunkenly like a new calf learning to walk.

Jacob watched as the new ones were guided to the outer edges, their stride slowly improving over a short span of time. Then they would move back to the mob and merge with it, becoming lost in the mass. Groups would break off and move away from the mass and out of sight as others returned, carrying more victims. The swarm again opened up to accept them and provided a path to the water line as the cycle continued.

“Fuck me... look at the water,” Tyree muttered.

Jacob lowered his view to the dark surface of the pond only feet away. The moon’s reflection barely broke through the smoke to allow the blue steel ball to reflect light back. The closer they looked, the more the opaque liquid seemed to have motion. It swirled and turned over while the surface remained static. Unlike water, the upper layer appeared thick and dense to resemble the look of oil—the same as the blood spilt from the things on the street.

Stephens picked up a loose branch and pushed it forward into the water, scarring its surface. As he dragged the branch across the top, the scratch seemed to remain and then slowly repair itself. When he removed the stick,

the liquid pulled off. Like a rod dipped into mercury, the liquid held together, and none remained on the branch. Where the surface had been broken, the water suddenly began to bubble—slowly at first, then turning to a boil.

“We should go,” Jacob said.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

With their eyes focused on the oily surface of the pond, no one was watching the Others on the far side. Tyree let out a high-pitched yelp as he backpedaled away from the bank. Jacob looked up and saw it too; the entire mob had their heads up, and their dark eyes were looking in the team's direction. The mass hadn't zeroed in on their position, but it sensed them—somehow the mob knew they were there.

Tyree continued to scramble back until he was on his feet and off at a run. Jacob followed him back up the hill at a sprint away from the pond, desperate to increase separation from the mass. Tyree was out front, breathing hard and oblivious to his surroundings. He ran head on into one of the armed sentries and plowed through it. Both crashed to the ground, Tyree rolling headfirst to the grass and the black-eyed man falling back and landing against a tree. Stephens, who was close behind, maintained his course and ran directly at the thing lying dazed against the base of the tree. Like going for a long-distance field goal, he kicked it hard on the side of the head before falling to the ground himself.

Murphy jogged up and stood over the now unconscious thing, stabbing it once at the base of the neck for good measure. When he pulled out the blade, he paused, looking confused.

"What is it?" Jacob whispered.

"It's different... harder or something." Murphy grabbed a handful of the thing's shirt and rolled the body. As before, he took his knife and opened the man's arm. Instead of being filled with the black oozing gel, the limb now had thick fibrous flesh that extended bone deep. Murphy removed the

blade and pulled at the creature's neck; the same snake-like skin extended up to wrap behind its ears and the forehead appeared broadened and ridged.

Murphy wiped the blade on the thing's shirt before returning the knife to its scabbard on his belt. Tyree and Stephens got back on their feet and moved closer. "Whatever is in the pond, it's changing them," Murphy whispered.

"Not changing... replacing," Jacob responded.

Tyree turned the man's head to look at the neck while asking, "What do you mean 'replacing'?"

"Like a parasite, or those spiders that lay their eggs in their kills, so they can eat them from the inside out. We're just a host for whatever that shit is," Jacob said, pointing at the black goo.

"Then we should stop it—put gas in the pond, set it on fire, or something," Tyree said.

Murphy shook his head. "Wouldn't do any good... not now; these things are everywhere. This can't be the only pond. No... we stick to the plan. When we get to the lake, we can pass this information up the chain."

The sounds of branches snapping and things passing through trees startled them. "Let's move," Murphy ordered. "And Tyree... slower this time."

Stephens grabbed the younger man. "I got him, Sergeant," he said, directing Tyree to his front and then moving them out.

Murphy looked over his shoulder as he turned away from them. "Go on; I'll be right behind you."

Jacob peeled himself from the damp grass and forced his exhausted legs forward. He clutched the rifle in his sweaty palms and listened to the sounds of the Others closing in from behind. Not wanting to lose sight of Tyree and Stephens ahead of him, Jacob moved quicker. Soon they were back at the wall, and they turned alongside it so that they were running parallel to the street. They worked their way north in the direction of the lakeshore while gunfire erupted from behind. It was more sporadic than before—quick shots of one and two rounds with long pauses in between, mixed with the explosive crack of fragmentation grenades.

Ahead of Jacob, Tyree and Stephens picked up the pace as Stephens looked over his shoulder. Jacob saw the look on his face. Stephens' eyes showed fear, his mouth opened wide, and then he turned away and sprinted

as the noise from behind got louder and closer. Jacob saw bark explode, wood splinter, and tree leaves rip apart as bullets tore through them.

Murphy overtook Jacob from behind and, breathing hard, said, "Pick up the pace; they're all around us."

Ahead, Stephens and Tyree had stopped near a section of a low four-foot wall. Tyree was pulling back the wire as Stephens snipped it with a small pair of cutters. Tyree dropped the wire and pulled himself up and over the wall while Stephens turned back, firing to cover Murphy and Jacob's approach. The rounds were so close to Jacob's head that he could hear them zip past.

Jacob continued running, aiming for the breach in the wall. He hit it fast; without pausing, he outstretched his arms and thrust himself over the wall. He flew high and clear, sailing over the top edge and crashing hard into the pavement on the other side. Landing in a darkened area, he saw rows of railroad tracks that ran parallel to the wall. Beyond the tracks, he spotted another high fence.

Murphy cleared the wall next, and then turned around to fire over the wall into the mob. "A little help, guys!"

Tyree had his pistol up and was firing over the wall as Jacob scrambled to his feet and fell in behind him. He brought up the rifle and fired until his weapon was dry. He pressed the magazine release button the way Murphy had shown him then fumbled with his vest for a new one. He gripped the top and slapped it home, pressing the bolt release. Jacob heard the clunk of the rifle and, feeling satisfaction that he'd done it right under fire, he brought up the rifle and squeezed the trigger. Stephens pulled himself over the wall between Tyree and Murphy then took the loose strands of wire and quickly twisted the ends back together.

The mob hit the wall just as Stephens pulled back his hands. The wire screeched and stretched as the things slammed against it and more attempted to climb over them. Jacob stepped back when he spotted a shotgun-wielding, heavysset man with empty eyes trying to scramble over the mob pressed against the wall. Jacob leveled his rifle then fired into the man and the Others below him. The pile collapsed, but more quickly filled the space.

Stephens pulled the pin on a grenade and held it up. "Run!" he screamed as he tossed it rows deep into the mob on the far side of the fence.

Following Tyree, Jacob turned and bolted. Rounds zipped past their heads just before the grenade exploded. They were running across rows and rows of railroad tracks that ran into the city. Moving east now, they crossed the last set of tracks and came to the tall wall at the other side. Looking back, Jacob could see the things had already rebounded from the grenade blast and were pouring over the fence to charge toward the tracks.

Just beyond Murphy's reach, the wall had a deep shelf where maintenance workers could shimmy along the top. Murphy boosted Jacob up to where he could reach a high handhold. He held it tight to allow Murphy to climb his back like a ladder. Stephens and Tyree were similarly working together to scale the wall. Once they were all at the top, not wasting time, they dropped into deep brush on the far side. They were in a dark and empty residential area lined with tall duplexes and apartment buildings on both sides.

"It's not far now," Tyree said. "The golf course is just ahead, past that the harbor."

Jacob could see that beyond the low wire fences was a long row of duplexes. Murphy directed them forward and into a backyard behind the duplexes. It was a tight-fit neighborhood where buildings stood close together with narrow strips of grass and parking structures between them. They now moved quietly, taking their time and trying to catch their breath as they traveled. Jacob focused on controlling his breathing; his heart was racing and sweat ran down his forehead and into his eyes. He wiped his brow and looked up at Murphy who nodded back at him. Murphy then stopped and knelt near an overturned trampoline.

He surveyed the backyard while his team rested. Murphy pointed toward an old, weatherworn one-car garage. The structure was pushed back against a clapboard fence; overgrown weeds and grass poked around the edges of the building. Normally not a welcoming spot in anyone's backyard, this morning the forgotten and neglected structure would be a haven.

Murphy patrolled ahead, allowing the men to follow close behind as he guided them into the narrow space between the fence and old garage. He held up a hand to halt them before he crawled to the far end, peeked around it, and then pushed back. He concealed himself in the tall grass so that he was hidden from sight but still could see the approach. Jacob dropped

beside Murphy under the cover of the building. He felt the old, warped wood against his back and, because he could smell the lake now, he knew they were close.

Stephens nestled into a tight spot against the building and he rubbed his belly. “Damn, that enchilada MRE I was saving would be nice right about now.”

Jacob looked back at him and whispered, “I’d just like a bottle of that water in my bag.”

Tyree pulled a small bottle of water from his knapsack. He twisted off the cap and took a sip before passing the bottle on. Even though his mouth was dry, Jacob sipped sparingly at the precious liquid. He could have all the water he wanted once they reached the lake. His stomach growled; Murphy heard the noise and looked back at him, grinning.

“Me too, brother,” Murphy said.

Jacob sat pressed back against the building and listened to the sounds of battle coming from the city center. Like a violent thunderstorm, the air rumbled and cracked while the ground shook with the impacts of faraway bombs. The sky was now filled with smoke and the scent of burning wood and plastic hung heavy in the air. Helicopters flew back and forth over them as the sun broke the horizon.

Jacob closed his eyes and let the warm sun dry his skin. He was exhausted and knew that he might not get another chance to sleep. His mind raced, thinking about Laura and Katy. Where were they? And were they safe? Were they worried about him? Was he doing the right thing? Should he have gone south like the first sergeant warned him? He must have drifted off and the thoughts became just a small part of his nightmares until a hand squeezing his shoulder woke him.

He looked up into the sweaty, dirt-streaked face of Tyree. The young man held a finger to his lips. Jacob understood and looked across at Murphy who was now sitting with his knees up, his rifle rested across them, and his eyes to the rifle sights. Straining, Jacob could pick up the sounds of movement. The Others were close—and there were a lot of them. He could smell the burnt rubber and sulfur stench. And the sounds, they didn’t sound like crowds of moving people—like a parade, or a crowd in a mall—but more like the rush of flowing water caused by fabric swishing against itself and the gentle plodding of feet against the pavement.

They were still hidden behind the garage—Stephens and Tyree to his left, Murphy just to his right near the fence. In one smooth motion, Murphy rolled to his side and ducked next to Jacob into the concealment of the garage. Moving on his belly, he crawled closer to the men, and then leaned forward.

“The street is packed; they’re moving again,” Murphy said as he looked back at the fence. He placed his hand on one of the clapboard planks. It was loose and pulled back easily. “As long as they stick to the streets, we can cut through the yards. We’re close now.”

Stephens nodded and moved next to the fence. Together, Murphy and Stephens quietly slid their hands up the plank, patiently loosening it, one precise pull at a time. Removing planks and setting them aside, they continued the process on two more boards until they created a gap in the fence.

Murphy pointed to Stephens and signaled for him to move out. Stephens quietly unclipped his rifle from his harness and held it through the gap with one arm as he stealthily moved through. After a long minute, Stephens’ hand stuck back through the gap to flash thumbs up, then an open palm to wave them on; Tyree went next and then Jacob passed through the gap. Stephens shot Jacob a quick hand signal, positioning him to where he could cover the left. Crouched low and duck walking ahead, Murphy moved in behind him.

Tall multi-family homes filled the lot. A beige stucco building was to their front with windows broken all the way to the roofline, and the front door hung wide open. Murphy moved them through the carport and halted the group beside a row of green overflowing dumpsters. Sprawled out in the grass, only feet away, was the body of a woman, her jacket sleeve torn loose, and Jacob could see she held a small revolver in her hand.

He stared at the back of the woman’s head, imagining how she’d gotten there and sad that she had no one to retrieve her body. Looking beyond the dead woman, he saw several more bodies. A barrier stood at the end of the carport: an SUV loaded with belongings. The doors of the vehicle were open to reveal an empty car seat still strapped to the backbench. Removing the woman’s pistol and dropping it in a pocket, Stephens scouted ahead to the SUV and searched for water and food. After a cursory check, he looked

back, held up empty hands, and then patrolled on, quickly covering the open terrain and pressing against the beige building.

Jacob ran next, covering the space in a few strides and forcing himself not to look at the woman as he ran past her. He fell in behind Stephens and pressed against the building. He and Stephens waited for the rest of them before the team formed back up and pushed ahead along the side of the building while still hiding in the shadows. They avoided views of the street, choosing instead to stay close to the structures and hidden from the windows.

They continued this movement of leapfrogging open spaces, hugging buildings, and resting in the shadows. They paused often to rest while hiding and scanning their surroundings. As they moved deeper into the residential lot, the sounds of the parading mass faded. Stephens led them between two tall stacked condominiums along a narrow sidewalk that led between the buildings and to another parking lot. Jacob slid next to Stephens with Tyree and Murphy at their backs. Looking around the corner, he could see a long, dark street laid out from left to right. Just to the front of them was a sheet metal-roofed carport that served as resident parking for the apartment buildings. Stephens hung at the corner to survey both directions before quickly traversing the gap. He crouched next to a car in a nearly empty covered-parking lot before waving Jacob on.

Jacob sprinted ahead and stopped next to the structure. Designed to keep the weather off the cars, it was nothing more than a roof and sheet metal walls that stopped a foot from the ground. With the solid cover, he was able to walk to the edge where Murphy called them. Looking out, Jacob could see they were now at the end of the city block. A gravel drive led away from the structure and into a wide two-lane street. At the end of the street was a wall barrier made of coiled wire and sandbags; military vehicles were parked in the grass and across the corner. The passageway itself was blocked at both ends. The scene of a final stand, weapons and equipment covered the street; bloody drag trails moved over the barriers and down the sidewalks, leaving remnants of clothing.

Beyond the barricade was a fortified corner lot occupied by a commercial bank building. A tattered military tent stood limply beside the bank amid more collapsed and tumbling sandbag structures. A fire truck was parked diagonally across the lot and all the windows in the truck's cab

were broken. Murphy slowly moved out of cover and approached the barricade with the team close behind. As he got closer, Jacob could see human bodies hanging in the wire. Beyond the roadblock, a soldier was dead on the ground with his rifle still tight in his hands. Stephens stopped next to the body and removed the rifle. He quickly checked the weapon's action, then inserted a fresh magazine and exchanged the rifle for Tyree's pistol. Jacob stood over the dead soldier, not speaking, then turned away to keep watch while Stephens and Murphy scavenged for equipment.

"It's crazy; they recover their dead. All these bodies are... human," Stephens said.

Jacob turned back. "All of them?"

Murphy was going through the Humvee and pulled a soldier from the turret before removing magazines from the man's load-bearing vest while saying, "I haven't seen one of them yet."

Tyree shook his head. "Why would they take them?"

"Who knows," Murphy answered as large explosions to the west took his attention. "How much farther is it?" he asked Tyree.

"We're close... not far," Tyree said. "The golf course is just across the street, other side of the bank."

Murphy nodded. "Let's move."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Tall shrubs lined the sidewalk that wound along the bank's perimeter. The shrubs connected with a sandbag wall topped with a single row of razor wire. The long wall shielded the containment area of the parking lot but a large swath of it was knocked down and the bags pushed inward. The ensuing avalanche of bags continued down and through the once finely manicured line of shrubs. The wire over the fallen bags stretched to the point of snapping, its loose un-coiled ends now lying twisted and mixed with the bags. Jacob and the team lay on their bellies at the mouth of the breach, looking out with Murphy using Tyree's telescope to scout the terrain ahead.

Jacob lay looking at the terrain as Murphy pointed out landmarks. The ground ahead was flat and open for fifty feet with very little cover available from trees. Other buildings and structures were far apart so there would be little available to hide behind. Beyond the initial narrow street, ran a four-lane road with a lone bus stop to one side and then a thin stretch of median grass. Beyond the grass was an access road that curved around and led deeper into the park; they would be out in the open until they hit the golf course. At the edge of the fairway, a row of trees ran parallel to a path that skirted a tall chain-link fence bordering the golf course.

"That path," Tyree pointed far into the distance, "will take us all the way to the boats. The harbor is fenced; I don't know if the gate will be closed, but it ain't high. We can jump it if it is."

Murphy looked out with the scope and pivoted, following the path. Then he handed the scope off to Stephens.

“See any of them?” Jacob asked.

Murphy shook his head. “No, but they’ll be there... hiding... waiting.”

Stephens collapsed the scope and handed it back to Tyree before pulling his rifle back into his shoulder. “How you want to do this, Sergeant?”

“Tyree, you lead. You run into anything, shoot it in the face. Stephens, we have the flanks; run alongside the fence—it’ll keep one side protected—get to the harbor, find something that floats. Jacob, how’s the hip?”

“I’ll live,” Jacob answered.

Murphy smiled. “I hope so. We’re running the entire way. One eight-minute mile and we’re on the water. Don’t stop; we have to stay ahead of them. If we get pinned down, they’ll mass on our position. We can’t afford to fight our way out of that.”

“Got it,” Jacob said. The rest nodded their heads.

Murphy pulled back the bolt on his rifle, locking it to the rear. He dropped the magazine and inserted several loose rounds from his pocket to top it off. Jacob watched the veteran soldier push on the rounds, then after reinserting the magazine, let the bolt go forward. Jacob mimicked Murphy’s actions and readied his own weapon.

Murphy looked up, grinning. “Good day for a boat trip. Tyree, whenever you’re ready,” Murphy said.

Tyree crawled forward through the crumbling barrier and rose up, scrambling through and around the wire. Once he reached the street, he looked back to ensure he was being followed. Tyree paused long enough to allow the team to gather around him.

“Okay Ty, find me a boat,” Murphy said, slapping him on the back.

Jacob watched as Tyree crawled to the edge of the bags then, without speaking, took off running across the street toward the faraway tree line. He felt Murphy’s slap signaling for him to follow. Jacob pulled his rifle flat against his chest and ran, trying to keep pace close behind the younger man. Murphy and Stephens were to his left, running just feet away. He cut across the first street, stepped onto the narrow median, then on to another small blacktop road. Finally running across grass, he was in the park.

Tyree was pulling away, running too fast. A clustered group of figures stood up out of the shade near a patch of trees. Jacob saw them and wanted to shout a warning to Tyree. He willed his legs to move faster and try to catch up. A gunshot shattered the silence. One member of the clustered

group had a small pistol in the air and fired in the team's direction as the rest of the Others took chase.

Tyree pivoted and let loose several wildly fired rounds, low and wide, in the direction of the runners. Murphy and Stephens yelled for him to continue on while the two soldiers fired instead. They knocked down the one with the pistol and quickly dropped the rest. Jacob was now running alongside Tyree; he could see another cross street, and at the bottom of a low hill, the harbor was just coming into view.

Tyree raised his hand and pointed at a large group running directly at them from the edges of the park ahead. The group was to the team's left and moving on an angle that would intersect them at the harbor gate.

"I see them; don't stop, get to the boats!" Murphy yelled.

Jacob crossed the street separating the golf course from the park, carrying his rifle in his right hand. He pushed himself on and felt his lungs burning. In his peripheral vision, he saw the swarm rolling in closer with every second and he could hear their cries growing louder. They were behind them now and pursuing from the city. Jacob's adrenaline surged as his vision narrowed to focus on the water in the distance. Enclosed by a tall, black iron fence, the harbor lay just ahead. The gate was open, and Tyree pushed through while the sounds of Murphy and Stephens' rifles filled the air.

Jacob ran through the gate and on to a parking lot inside, which paralleled a boardwalk and a number of small docks. The first of the docks held several small boats. Having already crossed the lot and hurdled over a small fence, Tyree was nearing the dock when he stopped and looked back at Jacob.

Jacob waved him on and yelled, "Ready the boat; I'll get the gate!"

A sliding gate, secured with a chain lock, was left gaping in the open position. Jacob used his rifle to shoot at the lock, the third time successfully shattering its mechanism. The lock exploded and fell from the chain. Heaving with his back, Jacob pulled at the gate until it broke free and swung toward the closed position. Jacob left just enough space to allow Murphy and Stephens to squeeze through.

The gunfire put Jacob's attention back to the distance; Murphy and Stephens were behind an abandoned car, firing into the charging mob. Jacob

spotted a man far behind the mob, raising a rifle and preparing to fire. Rounds already pinged off the car's hood, dangerously close to Stephens.

Jacob raised his rifle. Eye to the sight, he focused on the far-off target and pulled the trigger. A clear miss—he didn't even see the round impact near the gunman. Using a trick his father taught him years ago when he learned to shoot, he aimed low and watched the rounds splash into the grass to the low right of the target. He adjusted his aim and fired again, this time knocking the man down. With the mob now closing in, Jacob dropped his point of aim and began firing rapidly into the mass.

Murphy and Stephens fell back, firing steadily until they reached the fence. Once they passed through, Jacob slid the gate shut behind them. Stephens removed a D-ring from his vest and placed it on the gate's hasp moments before the mob collided with it. Jacob raised the rifle and shot one point-blank in the face. Even as it fell back, another quickly took its place.

"Go; leave them!" Murphy ordered, already turning to run toward the dock.

Tyree had a small boat untied and was standing on the bow, holding a rope while waiting for Jacob and the rest. Stephens grabbed Jacob by the back of his vest, pulling him along as they ran for the small boat. Jacob moved behind while Murphy leapt over the bow and climbed to the controls. When Jacob neared the bow, Stephens grabbed at Jacob's jacket and pushed him aboard. Taking the rope from Tyree, he shoved the boat off the dock and into the water then jumped aboard as it drifted away.

The boat continued to pull away slowly, gliding through the water as Murphy called out, "I can't start the motor; I got this running off the battery, but we won't have much speed."

A round shattered the small windshield; Stephens spun around, raised his rifle, and squeezed off several shots before being hit in the chest. He fell back, nearly rolling off the deck. Tyree dove, caught his arm, and pulled him back to the center. Jacob brought up his own rifle and aimed at the shoreline. The mob was climbing the iron fence and more were pouring in from the sides farther up the drive. They were ringing the water, yelling and shouting while, beyond the gates, more armed men hid in the shadows and fired at the boat.

Murphy fired quick rounds and then lifted his head to yell at Jacob, "Prioritize your targets! Shoot what's shooting at us."

Jacob saw three men running along the roadway carrying rifles, one leading by several feet. Jacob fired then watched the first one drop and trip up the one that was following close behind. Jacob shifted his point of aim, fired again, and saw another man drop. A round impacted the boat's deck near his knees, causing Jacob to dive over the windscreen and take cover in the cabin. He held the rifle and continued to search and fire at targets while the boat crept along.

They were moving in on a bridge and would have to pass below it before entering the channel that would bring them into Lake Michigan. The surface of the crossing was covered with the Others, arms outstretched and reaching for them. Jacob fired up at their black eyes, taking a strange satisfaction in watching them tumble over the rail and into the water.

"We're fucked!" Stephens called out. Lying back against the cabin with blood spilling from a rip in his vest, he struggled to swap magazines with one hand. He finished the task and brought his rifle back up. "Too many of 'em."

"There!" Tyree screamed, spotting two attack helicopters.

"Stephens, smoke!" Murphy called while watching the Apaches circle around in a search pattern.

Stephens struggled with his left arm to free a smoke canister from his gear. He pulled it free of the pouch and tossed it underhanded to Jacob.

"Get it on the bridge!" Murphy yelled.

Jacob held the canister in his right hand and pulled the pin. He threw it as hard as he could, but the grenade hit the bottom deck of the bridge and bounced into the water. Thinking he'd failed, Jacob cringed—then the channel surface erupted and red smoke boiled out of the water, quickly forming a cloud.

"Stephens, get your strobe on!" Murphy yelled. Reaching to his own collar, he connected a battery to a small device that he then inserted into a carrier on his chest.

The Apache helicopters dipped their noses then circled back around, at first flying away before cutting a high angle into the sky and turning ninety degrees to line up with the bridge. They hovered in the air, rapidly firing rounds that exploded all along the bridge just before rockets screamed from the helicopters and splashed into the banks. The bridge erupted in plumes of yellow flame and black smoke.

The Apaches split apart, strafing opposite sides of the shoreline and clearing the way for Murphy to get back on the throttle and ease the boat through the wreckage of the bridge and into the upper harbor. Jacob saw Murphy yank ignition wires from the battery and short them to the engine. The big outboard roared to life.

“Tyree, steer this hog,” Murphy said. Jacob ran to the back deck and helped Murphy lower the heavy outboard engine into the water.

The boat rocketed forward with Murphy manually opening the throttle. Tyree cut the wheel and guided them into the channel. Fire and smoke billowed on both sides of the approach to the lake as the helicopters continued to provide cover while they raced through the channel. The boat jetted a course straight into Lake Michigan and away from land.

Clear of the shore, Murphy dropped the throttle and the engine quickly lulled into an idle as the boat stopped hard in the water and bobbed ahead. Murphy went to Stephens’ side and found that he was unconscious. He pulled away the wounded soldier’s vest and pressed a dressing against his wound. Jacob looked away and back to the shore, now barely visible in the distance. The engine had died and all they could now hear was the water slapping against the sides of the boat.

Tyree turned around in the captain’s chair he’d been occupying and asked, “What do we do now?”

“Come get pressure on this wound,” Murphy answered.

Jacob climbed across the deck and held a hand to Stephens’ chest where Murphy’s had been. Murphy tossed back a seat cover from a bench to reveal a storage area below. Throwing out fishing gear and life jackets, he located a small first-aid kit. He pulled the kit open, dumped its contents onto the deck, then sorted through the items until he found a package of gauze dressing, and went back to Stephens’ side. Murphy replaced the soaked field dressing with the new pads and then put Jacob’s hands back in place.

“Don’t worry, guys, it won’t be long now,” Murphy said just over the low pitch of a red Coast Guard helicopter flying in their direction.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The thousand-foot long lake freighter filled with passengers; every inch of the rusty, red, painted surface occupied by the city's refugees. The passengers were divided and separated along the decks; families were kept together while single men and women scattered along the port rail. Men in dark-blue utility uniforms walked the passageways, handing out paper cups of water and small sandwiches. Other men carried clipboards while gathering names and family information. Tyree sat across from Jacob, waiting for his turn to speak with the ship's officer. They'd already reported the location of his grandparents to the helicopter crew; the information was recorded, but no promise of rescue could be made.

The sailors had confiscated all of their ammunition as soon as they boarded the freighter, but the pair was allowed to keep their weapons. Jacob's police tactical vest still provided him with benefits. When they attempted to separate him from Tyree, Jacob quickly interrupted and said they were traveling together. A crewmember at first protested but upon seeing the embroidered badge on his vest, he nodded, apologized, and allowed the men to stay together.

Jacob hadn't seeing Murphy since they had landed and members of the crew quickly ushered him away to rally with other soldiers. Stephens remained on the helicopter and had been sent off to receive treatment for his wounds at a hospital somewhere to the north. The ship was anchored offshore in the company of several others just like it. He overheard other men talking about how the flotilla had been out for days. Many of the men complained how this was supposed to have only been a temporary spot until

the city could be secured. Failing that, they would sail north to islands that were still unaffected by the attacks.

A bearded man carrying a scoped rifle and wearing torn, battered clothing walked across the deck, looking at Jacob's vest. He motioned at a space by the rail and asked if he could sit. Jacob agreed, waving his arm and welcoming the man to drop into the space next to him. The man introduced himself as Michael and said he'd been on the boat for twelve hours—ever since he had been pulled out of the water near Michigan City.

"How are things that way?" Jacob asked him.

The man shrugged and lit a cigarette. "Bout the same, I figure; they're everywhere, multiplying by the hour. I don't think this is something we can fight."

"You come in by helicopter then?"

"Nah, I got a boat," he answered before taking a long drag on the cigarette. "Well... had a boat. The Coast Guard commandeered it. I was able to get a couple families out... I left a lot behind too."

"I was south of Chicago in the suburbs. I'm trying to get back," Jacob said.

Michael looked at him. "Yeah, I heard you all were planning a counterattack, trying to get a foothold on the city. He with you?" Michael said, pointing down the passageway.

Murphy was walking in his direction with another sailor following close behind him. He stopped just short of Jacob and lowered a hand to help lift him to his feet. "Jacob, you're coming with me. Tyree, the petty officer here will be getting information on the whereabouts of your grandparents. Give them what they need; they can help."

Tyree nodded and shook Murphy's hand, thanking him. "What about Stephens?"

Murphy put his hand on Tyree's shoulder. "He'll be fine; the Coast Guard got him to a military hospital—"

"Do you have any news on my family? Did you tell them what we saw at the graveyard?" Jacob interrupted to ask.

Murphy nodded patiently. "Come on, let's go; you have a lot to hear."

Murphy turned and walked away, keeping Jacob beside him so they wouldn't get separated on the crowded deck. They rounded a corner at the large bridge structure where a pair of guards in digital-blue uniform stood

watch. They nodded to Murphy and allowed the two men to pass. Jacob followed Murphy along the structure on the portside and neared a ladder where Jacob grabbed at Murphy's elbow, stopping him.

"So? Where are they?" Jacob asked.

Murphy pulled away. "Just come inside; they'll brief us, and then I can answer your questions."

Jacob stood his ground and put out an arm, blocking Murphy's path to the ladder. "Just tell me. Are they dead?"

Murphy shook his head. "No man, it's not that." Murphy paused, looking around him then pushed Jacob closer to the ladder and out of sight of the guards. "Your family is at the Field Museum. They're calling it the Castle—"

"Then why don't they get them out!" Jacob interrupted again.

"Believe me, they're trying. The Castle is cut off and surrounded now. So far, the walls are holding but it's a desperate situation on the ground. They need help."

Jacob looked at Murphy, confused. "I don't understand; what's going on?"

"Jacob... they need men to assault the beach to take back the island and Grant Park... or at least hold it long enough to get the survivors out. While the beaches are assaulted, the pilots can use the distraction to bring in every available air asset to get the survivors back here."

"Why all the secrecy about Laura and Katy; why didn't you just tell me they were there?"

"The captain didn't want you to know their whereabouts until you volunteered to join the assault," Murphy said, looking Jacob in the eye.

"Me? How? I can't go..." Jacob muttered.

Jacob pointed at the badge on Jacob's chest. "I used this to get you in the door. They're desperate and just stretched too thin, Jacob. Most have already given up on the city; they don't think we have the ground resources to make this happen. Some want us to just pull back and leave the city to its fate."

"I'll go, but... I'm not a soldier, Murphy. Hell, I'm not even a cop."

"I know that," Murphy said. "We've got law enforcement on board. They're going to start hitting up able-bodied civilians until they get a body

to every rifle and a seat filled on every boat. If I judged you wrong, I'll understand; but if this assault doesn't succeed... well, you know the score."

"Murphy," Jacob asked, looking at him sincerely, "what about your family?"

"I don't even know, man; I left them alone when I reported to my unit. You know how that worked out," Murphy said shrugging it off and obviously not wanting to talk about it.

Jacob lowered his arm to clear the way for Murphy to proceed.

"You know what, Jacob? If my family is in trouble, I hope there are people like you and me trying to help them."

Murphy took a deep breath and let out a sigh before slapping Jacob on the shoulder. Jacob watched as the soldier turned and moved to the ladder before climbing it to a small landing. Murphy rapped on the door and stepped back as the hatch opened.

"You coming?" Murphy called down to him.

Jacob nodded and ran up the stairs.



THE DUO WAS GREETED AT THE HATCH BY ANOTHER SAILOR IN BLUE camouflage who led them down a dark ladder to below decks. They entered a passageway that stunk of solvents and fresh paint.

"Watch your step," the sailor said as they passed through another hatch.

The sailor stopped and waited for them to catch up before he opened a door and ushered them in. Murphy led the way and moved into what looked like a small company cafeteria. Even though he'd never personally seen one, Jacob knew it must be the ship's galley; the tables were filled with men in varying uniforms—pilots in flight suits, state troopers, county cops, at least four different blends of camouflage. A tall, old, and leathered man standing at the front, wearing dark-green digital camouflage pointed to a pair of empty seats.

Jacob squeezed through the crowded aisles and picked a spot. He watched as others moved through the hatch and filed into the room. Everyone in the galley sat quietly, looking at the floor or their watches or scribbling aimlessly on notepads. The man in front did a quick head count,

then held up four fingers to the sailor at the door. The man opened the door and relayed the message to a guard outside.

“Some things never change. Hurry up and wait,” Murphy said under his breath, getting some laughs from others nearby.

There was another knock at the door; the sailor opened it and a group in civilian clothing filed through. Jacob recognized Michael, the man that he’d spoken to earlier. The civilians worked their way through the room and found seats in the back. The man in front did another head count then faced the group.

“Gentlemen, I am Captain Nelson. By now, I am sure you have figured out that the world is a shit sandwich and we are all taking a bite. The fifty men in this room—military, law enforcement, veterans, and civilians—along with groups of men scattered among this ragtag flotilla of ships are all that’s left in the region. We are all that’s left to stand against them.

“A very high-level overview is that the city is lost, and the state is lost. Our forces have been pushed back; the lines we thought we held even twenty-four hours ago have now been dissolved.” The captain paused and walked across the room to put his hand on a table.

“I know some of you have heard the rumors that we’re withdrawing to the north. I’m afraid it’s true. In less than eighteen hours, we will all be moving north to the upper peninsula of Michigan. That being said, we have eighteen hours to get the remaining people out of the city; eighteen hours before the Air Force finishes what they started and bombs those things back to hell.” The captain stopped talking and looked down at the silent faces at the tables. He looked away and pointed to a young officer in the front row.

“Lieutenant Richards, the floor is yours,” he said, stepping to the side and finding a seat in the corner.

A clean-shaven young man dressed in a khaki uniform and carrying a dark, leather folder moved to the front. He dropped the folder on a table and turned around.

The young officer cleared his throat, and then looked nervously at the captain. “This is a classified briefing, sir.”

“Lieutenant!” the captain interrupted. “Please continue.”

The young officer looked at his notes before looking back up at the men in the crowd. “Under these extenuating circumstances, the captain has ordered me to pass on this information. I would appreciate it if—”

“Lieutenant, keep it moving!” the captain said.

“Yes, sir. Petty officer, please dim the lights.”

The lights were lowered, and a large map of the earth was projected on the wall. The officer removed a laser pointer from his shirt pocket and shot a line running parallel through Chicago.

“Fourteen days ago, the NASA space weather bureau reported a meteor shower that encompassed the 42nd parallel. What made this event atypical is that it ran a straight, precise line down the 42nd as if deployed from a high Earth orbit. NASA, through radar and satellite analysis, confirmed that neither we nor any allies—or enemy, for that matter—had any birds on that trajectory.

“Six hours after the event, the anomalies began. Data collection now confirms the earliest reports were simultaneously recorded in California, Connecticut, Illinois, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, New York, Pennsylvania, and overseas in Europe and Asia.” As the officer spoke, his laser pointer drew a straight line across the world map marking spots as he read them off.

Jacob looked at Murphy. “Is this for real?” he whispered.

“Just listen,” Murphy answered, not looking away from the screen.

More sidebars broke out in the room. “Gentleman, hold questions and conversations to the end!” the captain shouted over their voices.

The young officer turned away from the map and looked back at his notes. “Thank you, sir,” he said as he flipped pages and looked back at his audience.

“Twelve hours after the event, mass disappearances were reported. Eighteen hours after the event, civil disturbances and riots broke out; at forty-eight hours, we began losing communications with remote areas; by seventy-two hours, the condition had spread one hundred miles north and south of the 42nd.”

“Lieutenant, let’s skip ahead,” the captain said.

Richards leafed through his stack of papers and placed them back in his folder. “Yes, sir; next slide please.” The men in the room gasped as a fully dissected naked male body appeared on the screen. The young officer moved his pointer over the display. “As you can easily see, the anatomy of the aggressor is not human. *Next.*”

A new slide showed the same man, but the chest cavity had been cleared away and the top of its head removed. “As you see on this slide, organs do exist at early stages. Although very rudimentary—and with the exception of the brain, eyes, and some sort of lungs—they are not recognizable. They have no identifiable circulatory or nervous system; a sort of single-cell caustic gel has replaced them. The gel consumes the human organs and systems then uses the energy produced to transform the carrier. At the stage in this photo, the carrier still holds a high percentage of measurable human DNA.

“Gentlemen, what you are seeing is a previously unknown, and most probably alien, *parasite*. It infests its victims via the eyes, nose, and mouth through direct contact with seeder ponds. We believe that explains the black eyes and mouth of the aggressors. We believe these warm-water ponds were contaminated by the original *event*, and recreational swimmers were its first victims. *Next*.

“Again, as you can see on this slide, this male has progressed in the transformation. This male has developed muscle tissue and the organs are now enlarged. You may also notice the texturing of the skin. At this stage, the carrier has less than 20% measurable human DNA. This group is more highly capable and cunning. They have been observed planning and using strategy in attacks. *Next*.

The room gasped, and people began shouting, causing the captain to again get to his feet and silence the crowd. The image on the screen showed a CGI-produced image of a humanoid. It had a pronged reptile-like head, scaled skin, a bold chest, and elongated arms.

“This is an artistic rendering of what we predict the final progression will look like—”

“Bullshit,” a man in a state trooper uniform near the back yelled. “You trying to tell us we’re being invaded by the Creature from the Black Lagoon?”

“Captain, I don’t care what they are; just send me back so I can kill them!” another shouted.

Captain Nelson slammed a hand on a table at the front of the room. “That’s enough; turn on the damn lights!” Nelson stood up angrily. “Listen for your name and assignment, and then get your ass on deck to be outfitted and briefed by your squad leaders. We assault at dusk.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Nervous men stood in long lines and crowded along the back deck of the freighter as squads were divided up, arms were issued, and ammunition handed out. Two tall Marines stood near crates of equipment, pulling men from the line to be fitted with protective armor. Jacob was snatched and, after a quick look-over, his police vest was refitted with a chest rig holding nine thirty-round magazines for his rifle and two fragmentation grenades. The Marine grabbed Jacob by the shoulder and spun him clockwise, pulling on straps and tabs, and then applying tape to anything dangling.

The Marine looked Jacob in the eyes. “How’s it feel?”

“Heavy,” Jacob said.

“Okay, you’re good,” the Marine said before shoving Jacob back into the line.

Jacob learned the invasion force, even though critically short of men, had plenty of ordnance, mostly flown in from Reserve and National Guard armories in northern Michigan and Wisconsin. Various sized watercraft were being positioned at the bottom of a long stairwell as cardboard boxes full of uniforms and boots were dumped on the deck. The empty containers were tossed over the side to make room for more.

The men were split into squads and waited in long lines; some at ladders to board the small boats while others were organized and led away to the stern to board helicopters. Jacob looked out over the water at the gathered freighters and ferries. Ships of all shapes and sizes stretched to the horizon

while small leisure boats speckled the water, bobbing amongst the larger freighters and transport ships.

Standing at the center of the deck now, Jacob was near the middle of a stack of eleven men who were members of his recently formed squad. He looked around in the chaos; the only familiar part of his assignment was Murphy taking the position of squad leader at the front. Helicopters orbited the flotilla, dropping in to pick up teams, then rejoining the holding pattern above. Jacob stared up at a circling twin rotor helicopter, curious about its destination.

“You don’t want to be on them,” a soldier in line ahead of Jacob said, noticing his stare. The man was wearing sergeant’s stripes and the name *Cass* was written on the front of his helmet.

Jacob nodded acknowledging the man. “Why’s that?”

“Air assault. They are dropping inland off the beach, right on top of the bastards up near Michigan Avenue; a long way from where we’re going. They’ll be elbow deep in the shit before we even hit the beach. Higher ups are hoping to draw the things off of Grant Park and the lakefront, so we can safely get ashore,” the sergeant said. As he spoke, the man’s eyes followed a helicopter making an approach to the rear of the freighter where a tight pack of soldiers were waiting.

“That’s insane!” Jacob muttered. “They’ll be slaughtered!”

“Them’s the breaks,” the sergeant said grimly, shaking his head before looking away.

“What about us?” Jacob asked.

“Amphibious landing! We’re on the boat teams... going right through the breakwater then slamming into the wall. Hauling ass and digging in near the highway where it turns into Lake Shore Drive—traditional blocking action against an atypical force. It’s good though; we’ll have wide fields of fire and good cover over that stretch of roadway... but all that depends on the air assault boys pulling them off the waterfront.”

“This is good?” Jacob asked.

Jacob was nudged from behind as the line moved ahead and snaked around a container. His squad of eleven moved into an open staging area just shy of the stairs leading to the waterline. Murphy was there going over men’s equipment and dividing the group into two halves. Murphy then

moved against a container and pointed at a sheet of plywood with a rough map sketched on it.

The map, which had four horizontal lines running across it, was oriented so that the lake was at the bottom; a straight line running along the bottom of the board represented the lakeshore. Above the shoreline was another line designated as *the trail*. A parallel line marked as *41 Lake Shore Drive* was situated over *the trail*. A shaded area labeled *park* was sketched in between *Lake Shore Drive* and a final line near the top of the board. This line was denoted as *Michigan Avenue* and was marked with an X, along with the words *Air Assault*. At the far-left side of the board, at the end of the shoreline, was a box marked *Castle*.

"Listen up," Murphy said, pointing at the board. "We will be hitting the shoreline here, just to the right of the museum complex. When you hit the sea wall, move in to the trail and wait for instructions. When everyone is on line, we will push forward and dig in on Lake Shore Drive that we'll find to our front.

"The air assault force will be hundreds of meters inland; the Castle will be far down the shoreline to our left. Our objective is to take the beach, drawing the black-eyes to us. We need to hold them as long as possible before pulling back south to the Castle. We have to create a pocket to allow for extraction of the survivors." Murphy turned away to push the soldiers ahead as more in the line tried to take the spot by the board.

Jacob was sent to the right and grouped as A-team. The soldier, Sergeant Cass, was placed in charge of Jacob's team. He moved them out of the line and formed them into a small group.

Murphy handed out a roll of what looked like duct tape to Jacob's team leader and said, "Get this on everyone's back."

"What's it for?" Jacob asked as the soldier spun Jacob around and twisted strips of tape into his gear.

"Reflective tape. So, the guys in the sky don't kill us."

"Enough chitchat; finish up with the tape and get on line by the ladder," Murphy said, waving the men back into two lines. "We have two small boats picking us up. A-team, I'll be traveling with you."

A sailor pulled back a gate leading through the rail and onto a rusted stair platform. Jacob looked out over the water; the stairs ran down to the surface where another small platform was attached just above the waves of

the lake. Two small cabin cruisers were tied on, swaying and rising with the swells of the freighter. Men dressed in dark navy-blue camouflage and orange life vests were waiting at the bottom.

"I hope you all don't get seasick," the sailor said as he ushered the men onto the stairs.

Jacob gripped the rail, not wanting to let go as fear settled in. He looked back at the man behind him and saw the same look.

"You okay?" Cass asked him.

Jacob took a deep breath and thought of his family trapped on shore. He looked up at the sky and stepped through the gate onto the stairs. "I'm fine."

He grabbed the stair rail and took the steps one at a time, steadying himself against the swaying of the freighter. Murphy was leaning against the ship, talking to them as they descended. Slapping backs and checking gear, he waited for the entire group to reach the bottom before he fell in with them on the platform.

Murphy stepped to the edge of the small landing deck, facing his squad. "There were close to three million people in the city before all of this. We don't know how many made it out, how many are dead, or how many are fucking lizard people now. We messed up early; we didn't know what we were fighting, and we went soft on them.

"Not this time! No riot shields, no flex cuffs, no arrests, no rules of engagement. If they run at us, shoot them; if they are on the beach, shoot them. If they have solid-black eyes, shoot them. We need to attract every damn lizard person in the city to our position. It's the only way we get our people back. The only way we get our families evacuated from the Castle. We must get the landing zones clear, so the birds can get in and back out.

"Your team leaders have been picked for a reason; follow them. Now let's get out there and kick some reptile ass!" Murphy shouted, signaling the sailors to begin the boarding of the small boats.

Jacob followed Cass to the right. "Mount up," Cass said.

A sailor pulled the small boat in tight while another grabbed Jacob's arm and helped him onboard. "Don't fall in," the sailor warned. "With all that armor, your ass will sink to the bottom like a brick."

Jacob nodded and nearly tumbled aboard the small Bayliner speedboat. Painted white with red pinstripes, it was no assault craft; the bow was

covered with a red liner and had a glass windshield and two captain's chairs in the front. Murphy quickly moved aboard and dropped into the seat on the left, while the rest of the team was ushered and crammed into a U-shaped bench in the back. The passengers' knees and shoulders pressed together in the tight space.

Sitting heavy in the water, the boat was filled and pushed off. The sailor moved away from the side, plopped into the driver's seat, and started the engine. It gurgled to life as the smell of gas and oil mixed with the lake water. Jacob could feel the vibrations under his seat as the sailor moved the motor to reverse. The small boat rose up on a lake swell then drifted back while being pulled away by the engine. The wheel was cut, and they moved alongside the tall freighter. Families looked down at them from the top rail; some waved but most just stared with shocked and scared faces. The sailor slowly opened the throttle, allowing the bow to lift, and they broke away from the freighter on a course to open water.

Black smoke billowed on the horizon over the otherwise clear sky. Small specks ahead quickly transformed into an armada of various boats as they approached. Police boats, Coast Guard patrol boats, cabin cruisers, and speedboats of all make and model were floating together in a packed cluster.

Murphy spun around in his chair and looked at his watch. "Weapons on safe, locked, cocked, and ready to rock; it won't be long now."

Jacob followed Cass's lead as he locked back the bolt on his M4 and fished a magazine from his vest, slapping it home and letting the bolt slam forward.

Murphy grinned watching Jacob. "Might make a soldier out of you yet."

He looked back up at Murphy as boats throughout the formation began beeping and blowing their horns. The sailor upped the throttle of the boat and fell into line with several others. The mass broke from a cluster into a deep formation of several rows.

"Listen up. When you get to the wall, get the hell off this boat, stick with your team leader, listen to his instructions, and do what he says; we fight as a team!" Murphy yelled over the wind and roar of the engines. "Nobody gets left behind. Nobody gets taken! Make damn sure neither *you* nor your battle buddies are taken *alive*! Got it?"

"Hooah!" the soldiers replied. Jacob nodded, feeling overwhelmed.

With a feeling of impending doom in his gut, Jacob's legs began to shake, and the rifle rattled in his grip. Cold water splashed over the bow, soaking his uniform top. A soldier across from Jacob held a silver cross to his lips, his eyes closed in prayer. With a grin on his face and caressing the grip of his rifle with his gloved hand, the state trooper appeared excited. The air roared as dozens of attack helicopters flew low over the water heading inland. Men in the boats pumped their fists at the gunships. Then another formation of larger helicopters full of air assault troops garnered the same response as they sped by overhead.

The coastline materialized out of the smoky mist. A sortie of fighter aircraft flew parallel to the beach dropping bombs, and a wall of flames erupted within Grant Park. Attack helicopters, looking like swarms of bees from the distance, flew in maintaining a high altitude before stopping to hover just offshore. Volleys of rockets and explosive projectiles were let loose and churned up the ground in the direction of Michigan Avenue, softening the landing zones. The gunships peeled off and orbited as the Black Hawks, Chinooks, and Sea Knights approached the beach from the west before disappearing into the black smoke and fire over the park.

With his thoughts occupied on watching the air assault, Jacob lost track of his own situation. The boat slammed hard in the water, snatching Jacob's attention back to the beach. He glimpsed the passing through the breakwater and the sea wall quickly approaching. Boats bunched together as they breached the breakwater entrance then spread out to race toward shore, already under fire. The pilot of Jacob's boat cut the wheel hard to line up with a hole between the other boats; he gunned the engine and shot for a section of seawall just in front of Queen's Landing and a large flat concrete dock.

Rounds exploded in the water. Men were on the boardwalk and firing at them. "Shit, the air assault didn't work!" someone yelled.

"It's working; we can handle the stragglers. Get ready!" Murphy yelled back.

The boat snaked left and right, bouncing over wakes of the other crafts as rounds smacked the windscreen. Jacob saw other boats hit the seawall and soldiers pouring ashore. "We're going in hot! Hold on!" the sailor at the controls yelled and opened the throttle to the max. Just before hitting the wall, he cut the wheel hard and slammed the throttle forward, forcing the

boat into a swift turn and rapid stop. The boat's momentum lifted it from the water and slammed it against the wall.

Cass was knocked back but recovered quickly and tossed a looped line over a cleat. He pulled the line tight, ducking under the cover of the wall. Jacob watched as Cass turned and pointed at him. "Go! What are you waiting for?" Cass yelled.

Jacob stood on wobbly legs; he grabbed the edge of the wall and pulled himself up while being pushed from behind at the same time as others scrambled to leave the boat. Although he stepped high, his boot caught the edge of the sea wall. Forcing everything he had into his leg, he launched himself up and out of the boat. Running ahead, he saw the Others to his front charging toward the men invading the shoreline.

"Get to the trail!" Murphy screamed.

Jacob raised his rifle, firing at the ones directly to his front. He felt the state trooper fall in behind him while another soldier fell in to his left.

"Push forward, dammit! Don't stop!" Murphy yelled again.

Taking comfort in the closeness of the rest of the squad, Jacob willed his legs forward. Soon they were all falling in line with each other on the trail, firing to their front as they moved forward.

The black-eyed creatures were cut down as they advanced inland. The squad ran to the short wall lining Lake Shore Drive that outlined the main grounds of the park. The state trooper took a round to the cheekbone; his left hand reached up and touched the wound with a gloved hand. He looked at Jacob and asked, "Is it bad?"

Jacob watched the trooper remove his hand, revealing the blood, bone, and ripped flesh that hung off his face. "Fuck yeah, it's bad," Jacob answered.

Cass jumped between them yelling, "Get your rifles back in the fight!"

Cass yanked a bandage off the trooper's belt and wrapped his face and cheek while the trooper returned fire into the remaining creatures. All the teams were ashore and bodies—friend and foe—littered the approach.

As Jacob scanned to the left and right, he saw a sea of rifles pointing over the short wall. The soldiers held fifty feet of open terrain along the Lake Shore Drive. The other short wall on the opposite side would have to be crossed to get to them. A pair of creatures charged forward, jumping the far wall and running onto the roadway. All along the line, weapons opened

up and shredded the beasts as scared defenders fired at anything that moved.

Murphy walked back and forth behind the line of soldiers. Slapping shoulders and encouraging them while also assisting with weapons malfunctions. “Watch your lanes! Conserve your fire!” Murphy yelled up and down the lines.

“What does that mean?” a man yelled in a frustrated voice.

“Shoot what’s in front of *you*, not what’s in front of *me*!” a soldier yelled back sarcastically.

The immediate enemy turned away from Lake Shore Drive and back to the fighting on Michigan Avenue. With the road and beachfront now clear, Jacob could hear the frantic battle and screaming of the air assault teams. The sky soldiers had done their job pulling the Others off the beaches and luring them to their positions further inland. Now the air assault troops were cut off from the beachfront, overwhelmed, and surrounded on Michigan Avenue. Gunships flew in making strafing runs, trying to provide desperate cover.

“The Apaches only have enough fuel and ammo for a couple passes,” Cass said to no one in particular. “They’ll have to drop back soon.”

Jacob sat at the wall, staring into the smoky mist and listening to the battle. Distant screams mixed with the rapid firing of rifles and machine guns. He knew that when the Others finished with the air assault troops, they would move back to their front. Explosions ripped across Michigan Avenue and clouds of dark smoke billowed across the grasses of the park, obscuring the view ahead. Bright flashes of light shone through like orange glows of fire as nearby buildings ignited.

Far to the south, Jacob could see the transport helicopters returning. They hovered then dropped to the roof of the stone-walled “castle”. Too far to see individual people, he still knew the assault was working; the aggressors were being pulled off the museum, allowing the helicopters to get in close enough to make extractions. The gunfire to the front gradually picked up, and then slowly declined as the air assault troops were taken out of the fight.

“Get ready, they’ll be coming for us now!” someone yelled.

Men to his left and right lay pressed against the wall. Veteran soldiers undid snaps on their vests and readied magazines for quick access; grenades

were placed on the tops of the walls. An engineer team bravely ran to the center of the road and placed a hasty line of claymores before bailing back.

A man's hoarse scream came out of the smoke. "Don't shoot, don't shoot!" he yelled as he emerged from the smoke and haze. He leapt over the far wall and tumbled to the street then crawled forward before clawing back to his feet.

"Go! Get out of here... they're coming... there's too many of them!" he yelled as he ran across Lake Shore Drive, breaking through the near wall just feet from Jacob.

The man pulled himself over the wall and scrambled for the boats. A sergeant tackled him and pulled him down behind cover, trying to calm him. Jacob could hear the man screaming, yet not able to make out the words. The mob in the smoke drowned out all other sounds. As they drew closer and the yelling become frenzied, the state trooper to Jacob's left backed away from the wall.

"Fuck it, I didn't sign up for this!" the trooper said, turning away. Cass was behind him and shoved him back into position.

"There is no place to run!" he yelled up and down the line. "Get ready!"

Jacob had flashbacks of watching old movies about forces armed with axes, charging an opposing army who stood behind a shield wall and waited for a tidal wave of death to push against them. British soldiers on line, facing down waves of charging Zulu warriors; every man on the wall had a purpose and together, they were strong. If one man failed and allowed a breach in the shield wall, they all would fall.

The swarm grew louder, their feet beating against the sod and pavement. The smoke hanging over the park appeared to boil from the turbulence of thousands of attackers charging under the haze. The first of them rammed the far wall; the rest were moving so fast they collided and tumbled over it as rapid salvos from the soldiers' rifles cut them down. Another wave was close behind and moved the mass forward like a bulldozer shoving them to their deaths at the hands of the soldiers' rifles. The next wave slowed; calculated now, they dropped into cover. While looking for holes and running at angles, they hurdled over the barriers.

Tactics changed again, and they massed farther to Jacob's right. Wave after wave launched at the wall before the attacks moved to the middle, and then more to the left. Probing for a weakness, they hit every section. Bodies

stacked up on the roadway, hanging lifeless on the far wall, and Jacob continued firing into their rushing bodies and faces. When his weapon would empty, he'd quickly reload. He dropped a magazine in the grass at his feet and when he went to retrieve it, he saw the piles of scattered brass.

"How many more can there be?" a man yelled.

"More than we have ammo for," another answered back.

Jacob's hand slapped his vest at empty ammo pouches. They were right, he'd already expended half his rounds, and the things were still coming. A sniper's bullet caught the man to Jacob's left, his head snapping back as more shots knocked out men to the left and right.

"Sniper!" a sergeant screamed.

Jacob prepared to duck just as another mass hit the walls. In coordination with the sniper's fire, the mass was able to break the wall and move to the center of the road. The claymores exploded, cracking like a bolt of lightning shooting down the length of the roadway, covering the pavement in concrete dust and thick smoke. Jacob's ears rang from the overwhelming noise. A hand grabbed him, pulling him off the wall, and then turned him south. He stumbled to his feet but upon seeing others move, he stepped off and jogged with the group.

"We're falling back to the Castle," men yelled as they turned to fall back to the trail and run south to the museum.

His view to the right as he ran to the Castle was obscured in smoke. Ahead, though, he could still see the beacons of the helicopters orbiting and landing on the museum roof in their rescue mission. The trail moved up into an elevated road that overlooked the park where abandoned sandbag fighting positions were being re-occupied by the withdrawing soldiers. When Cass pulled his team aside, attempting to regroup the fleeing men, Jacob could see the stone steps and structure of the aquarium behind him. The museum itself was still far away, its solid walls standing tall while rings of bodies surrounded it. Sandbags stacked in the first-floor windows supported rifle barrels of the helmeted men looking out.

A battle-worn man stomped forward. Jacob immediately recognized him as the captain from the ship. Now wearing green body armor and sporting a large cut across his forehead, he moved out of the crowd. He carried a pistol slack in his right arm as he grabbed Murphy with his left hand, pulling him close. The captain turned and pointed to a position far to

the south, away from the reinforced line on the other side of the Castle grounds. Murphy nodded, looked back, and waved a hand at the remnants of his squad to bring them in.

Captain Nelson looked at the weary bunch. “You men! Follow me; we have to support the far flank,” he ordered.

“Lead the way, sir!” Sergeant Cass shouted back, answering for the group.

Incoming rounds smacked the sandbag barriers behind them as they moved on. When the roar of the mobs began again, Jacob turned. From the overlook, he could see thousands of charging people moving at the elevated line. Machine guns opened up from the left and right while soldiers launched grenades into the swarm. A mortar crew fell into position and quickly set up their tubes before lobbing high explosive rounds into the mass. Muzzle flashes revealed the positions of the enemy in the far-off tree lines, bushes, and gardens. The enemy shooters were supporting the charging mob with surprisingly accurate fire. Jacob was mesmerized by the chaos of the scene and he stood like a spectator in awe watching the battle.

“Jacob!” Murphy yelled.

Jacob spun around; the rest of the squad was moving out to the south and following the captain. He looked back one more time at the murderous mob, and then turned to follow his squad leader.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Captain Nelson moved them away from the sandbag defensive wall to farther south on the shoreline and into what could be described as the backyard of the museum. Jacob saw the dead scattered over the grounds; many were dressed in uniform, but several were the dried, shriveled bodies that he knew were the Others. Looking to the right as he followed the squad, he could see the back face of the museum; to his left was a sort of park with small snack bars and the aquarium. The captain led them through the destruction and to another walled barrier that marked the end of the museum grounds. As on the near side, this side was also fortified with bunkers—many that now stood empty.

Jacob could see the beginnings of the famous museum running parallel to the defensive line. The steps were covered in strands of concertina wire; bodies were twisted and tangled in the jumbled coils of wire, piled in excess of ten feet. Looking beyond the far side of the museum building, he saw a tall, battered sandbag and plywood position standing watch over a once grassy approach to the museum grounds. In the distance, Jacob could also see Soldier Field, a large football stadium; the approach was now pockmarked with craters and burnt swaths of grass as scorched bodies lay over what was once a parking lot. A road that led visitors to the museum park was now filled with blackened skeletons of vehicles.

Hundreds of meters out, an explosion flashed, filling the darkened field with a glimmer of light.

“Anti-personnel mines,” a man said from up above.

Jacob looked up at the bunker in front of them. Facing south, the nearly twenty feet long structure guarded the rear and flank of the museum grounds. Made from intertwined double sandbagged walls, it was elevated and built on top of HESCO barriers. Comprised of large wire-reinforced bags filled with gravel, the HESCO barriers were stacked side by side until they formed a foundation for the defensive position built directly on top of it. In order to gain access, a soldier from above dropped down a handmade wooden ladder to the group.

Captain Nelson put a hand on Murphy's shoulder to pull him in. "It's been quiet on this side of the Castle since the beach assault started, but we know the black-eyes will be back. We have to hold the flank while the survivors are airlifted out, and then we'll withdraw from the beach."

Murphy nodded his reply.

Captain Nelson pulled him closer. "Sergeant Murphy, I don't know how to emphasize this. It is *imperative* that we hold. If we lose this position and get surrounded, we will never leave this park. Everything we fought for tonight will be lost—"

More mines exploded in the distance in ones and twos, then several in rapid succession.

Captain Nelson turned and looked over his shoulder at the blasts in the approach. "We were able to convince the Air Force to scatter AP mines all along this area after we abandoned the stadium. It has slowed them down some, but it hasn't stopped them—"

More explosions, followed by heavy machine gunfire from their rear at the reinforced line, caught the captain's attention; he took a deep breath and looked at Murphy. "Sergeant hold the flank... nothing gets through."

"How long, sir?" Murphy asked.

Nelson looked at the men around the bunker with a somber expression. "Good luck, Sergeant; take care of your men," he said, turning away.

More AP mines exploded, closer now, and the soldier at the top of the ladder shouted, "You guys need to get up here!"

Sergeant Cass stepped ahead and quickly climbed the rungs. Jacob followed him to the top where they discovered that only four men manned the bunker. Of the four, one had his left arm tied off to his body with bloody bandages, and another's face was bleeding from tiny scratches. Jacob

moved deeper into the structure, nearly tripping over a row of blanket-draped bodies.

“Hey, watch yourself,” a soldier said, looking up from a radio handset. “We haven’t been able to get them out. The living have priority on evac.”

Jacob shuddered and quickly walked away to the far side of the bunker. He dropped against the sandbag wall and looked back at the museum. Exhausted, he sat back in the dark, pulling his knees to his chest before leaning his head against the bags. Gunfire rang out from the reinforced line on the other side. Men screamed, and machine guns ripped off long bursts. When a flare was launched somewhere over Grant Park, he could see the backlit silhouettes of people moving along the roof of the museum. Helicopters dropped in from high altitude, quickly loading passengers before lifting away and flying back out toward the freighters. Jacob stared at the people in line, imagining that he saw Laura with Katy in her arms.

She looked down at him and smiled. He raised a hand to wave then watched her turn away to head toward the door of a waiting helicopter. Jacob felt comfort knowing that his family would make it out, even if he didn’t.

“Come on, man; wake up,” Cass said, slapping him on the cheek.

Jacob looked up at Cass, not realizing he’d drifted asleep. “Sorry,” he said.

“Come here, I need to show you something,” Cass said.

He dragged Jacob to the furthestmost right corner of the bunker. The floor was covered with expended brass, and green boxes of ammunition were stacked against the wall. A machine gun, with a large scope attached to the top, rested on a bi-pod overlooking the approach.

“This is an M240 machine gun. You are now a machine gunner,” Cass said, sliding Jacob behind the gun.

“Really easy: pull the handle back, lock it, and let it ride forward. Tray opens like this,” Cass explained as he pushed a tab, causing a tray to pop open.

“Grab a belt from a can over here and drop it into the feeder tray—brass to the grass—then close the tray; too easy, right?” Cass said, performing the actions and charging the weapon. “You got that, hero?”

“I’ll figure it out,” Jacob answered.

“Good, get it figured. This here is your basic night scope; it pretty much sucks, but I need you to keep eyes on the park and kill anything that comes at us. If it gets crazy and you can’t see through the scope, look over it and walk your rounds in with the tracers.”

Cass made a fist, slugged Jacob on the chest, and waited for him to put the weapon’s stock into his shoulder before walking away to position the rest of the squad. Jacob tried to get comfortable. The weapon was at just below his armpits when standing. If he stood with his legs apart and leaned forward, then the scope lined right up with his eye.

Jacob looked through the cupped eyepiece and saw a grainy image flecked in green and white. He blinked his eye and moved his head away, trying to focus. Moving closer to the eyecup, he clenched his eyes tight then slowly opened them, trying to adjust to the image. He swung the weapon left and right and was slowly able to make out objects. He saw a flash far off from an exploding mine and moved the barrel in that direction.

Burning debris flickered in the scope—the remains of a taxi cab. Jacob swung to the left then paused to stare at what looked like the hulk of a tree trunk. He tried to focus on the grainy image when he detected movement from the corner of his sight picture. A single man lit in tones of black and green was walking in the direction of the bunker.

“I see something!” Jacob yelled over the sounds of the fighting behind them.

The man continued walking toward him and as he drew closer, more walking figures materialized into the image of the scope.

“Sergeant Cass, I see them!” Jacob yelled again, not getting an answer.

In the scope, he watched the man transition from a walk to a jog; the group behind began running as well and soon the scope was filled with a mass of running figures. Mines began exploding, and the machine gun on the opposite end opened up. Jacob watched tracers cut through the image and when his own finger finally found the trigger, he pulled. He fired a long burst, losing the enemy group as the weapon jumped under its recoil. Jacob looked over the machine gun’s scope just before someone in the bunker launched a flare.

The light under the parachute now exposed the hidden creatures. The field was full of them; Jacob pulled the trigger again, walking the tracers

through the ranks of charging men. Jacob watched a man in the mass pause and raise a rifle. Before the thing could fire, he was cut down.

“Focus on the runners; we got the shooters!” Murphy yelled, standing beside Jacob and firing his rifle while searching the crowd. “Get back on the trigger, keep pouring it on!”

Jacob swept the gun left and right, the 7.62 rounds chewing through the charging mass. Incoming rounds splattered the sand in front of and next to the gun; even through heavy fire, the mass was closing on them. Jacob pulled the trigger. Getting no response, he looked to the left and found the belt had been expended and the gun was empty. He popped open the tray as instructed, fumbled with the belted ammunition, slapped the tray closed, and racked the bolt. Leveling his aim on a group closing the distance on him, he pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. Jacob felt panic burning. He pulled the handle and racked the bolt again.

“Get that gun up!” a soldier yelled from down the line.

Murphy looked over at Jacob and jumped to the weapon, knocking Jacob out of the way. He pulled the handle back and lifted the tray cover. “What the fuck? Links on top!” He flipped the belt, fixed the mis-feed, and slammed the tray closed. “Fire!”

Jacob leaned back behind the weapon and squeezed the trigger; the mob had closed to within fifty feet while he was screwing with the gun. He strafed the area to his front, moving left to right and felt the impact as the mob closed and slammed against the HESCO barrier below. They screamed while trying to climb the barriers to get at the men above.

“Frag out,” a soldier yelled, dropping a grenade over the wall, the blast thumping the bunker. More grenades dropped over the side and Jacob saw that an entire case of them was at his feet, the cardboard tubes discarded all over the floor. Jacob continued to fire as Murphy lobbed grenades. He lost his breath and felt fire in his ribs as he was knocked to the bunker floor. Murphy ignored him and jumped on the M240, getting the gun back in action.

Jacob bit the fingers of his glove to remove it and slipped his hand into the front of his vest, wincing with pain. Expecting blood, he pulled out his hand and found it dry. He slapped the front of his tactical vest and found the hole where the round slapped against the plate. Jacob tried to stand but stopped to look at the roof of the museum—it was empty; there was no

movement. Searching the museum grounds behind them, he saw the soldiers were pulling back and running toward boats waiting in the harbor.

“Everyone is leaving,” Jacob said, not being heard over the gunfire.

He rolled to a knee, pulling himself up the wall next to Murphy who was frantically working the machine gun, trying to push back the overwhelming mass hoarded around the tower.

“They’re leaving us!” Jacob yelled.

“Get on your weapon!” Murphy screamed, grabbing Jacob by the arm and shoving him toward the firing ports. He stumbled forward, hitting the bag wall and looked down into the faces of the screaming mass. Jacob stepped back and again felt Murphy’s shove. “If you ever want to get out of here, kill them!” he ordered.

Jacob raised his rifle up over the edge and fired at a steep angle down into the mass. No need to aim; they were so close and pressed together that every shot was a hit. The soldier on the radio lifted his head to yell down both sides of the bunker. “I have two birds inbound! Danger close!”

Jacob dropped his magazine, reloaded, and leaned back over the wall, firing at the black eyes of the mob. Rounds penetrated the bags to his left and front.

“Willy Pete out!” Sergeant Cass yelled.

Jacob watched as Cass tossed a grenade into the crowd; it popped and threw white-hot burning shards that ignited clothing and billowed clouds of acrid smoke that blocked the view of the enemy shooters.

A roar ripped through the sky as two long-winged aircraft cut overhead then peeled off, heading north on Michigan Avenue, doing a flyby over Soldier Field.

“Those are our A10s! Here they come!” the radio operator cheered.

The Warthogs looped back around and lined up for a run. The sky roared with the thunder of the planes’ cannons firing rounds that exploded and ripped the earth apart. The sound echoed across the park like the ground was being unzipped as a line of destruction was painted to within fifty meters of the bunker, erasing everything in its path. Jacob was lifted off his feet and tossed to the back wall with the rumble of the earth.

The operator yelled down the bunker, “They are coming in hot with Mark 84s—danger close! Danger close! Get your heads down!”

The A10s cut away and climbed for altitude then dove in, releasing their bombs. The sky flashed white and the earth rolled up like God shaking out a carpet; sandbags buckled and collapsed back onto the parking lot below. Jacob felt the floor give as the shockwave pushed the bunker off the HESCOs. He pulled his arms in and curled into a ball when fragments and bodies fell all around him as they tumbled in a waterfall of wreckage. Jacob landed on his belly, debris covering his back; he crawled away from the bunker and rolled into the street. His ears ringing and his nose bleeding, he coughed dirt and gagged because his mouth was too dry with suet and dust to be able to swallow.

Jacob saw a rifle next to him; he grabbed it and used it to push himself up. He then struggled to his feet and staggered ahead, only getting a few steps before falling against a bullet-riddled car. With his left hand, he opened his tactical vest, wincing at what felt like a thousand broken ribs. He turned and sat on the hood of the car, every breath bringing spasms of pain. Fires burned all around him and, having collapsed, the bunker was gone. Nothing moved, and he could find none of his squad.

He stumbled forward only to trip over a man's legs. Jacob hit the ground with a painful thud but quickly climbed back to a knee as he felt the man's hand grab his ankle. Jacob looked back into the creature's black eyes flaring with hatred. Jacob gripped his rifle and thrust, hitting it in the face. The thing's head snapped back, and then it reared forward to grab at Jacob's feet again. Gasping, Jacob fell to his knees and rolled to the side. Grabbing a broken piece of concrete and swinging, he bashed it in the face. Jacob felt the skull crush his own fingers between bone and stone as the oily blood splattered on his face.

He turned again and fell to his belly. Taking shallow breaths, trying to avoid the pain his ribs, Jacob crawled back toward the bunker. He pulled himself back to his feet using a post and, one loose step at a time, Jacob made it back to the fighting position. An arm moved from under the debris. Jacob grabbed the hand, tugged, and got a yelp in response. When he dug away the bags and dirt, he found the twisted face of Murphy. Jacob dug him out further and grabbed the collar of his armor, dragging him clear of the rubble. Murphy moaned and pushed him off before reaching down to open his body armor and shrug out of it. He reached into a pouch on his chest and

fumbled with what looked like a small flashlight. He pressed a switch and stuck it into Jacob's hand.

"It's a strobe; get it someplace high!" he mumbled.

"Okay," Jacob said and nodded. Turning back, he stumbled ahead to a long strand of rope tied to a barrier. Jacob cut the rope free and knotted one end to the strobe. He moved to a burnt, leafless tree and grabbed a branch. Pulling himself up, he climbed until he was as high as he could get, then secured the strobe to a branch. Jacob dropped back to the ground and staggered to the bunker. He could see the things were moving again—not focused on his location, but milling about.

Helicopters flew far off over the city and he could hear the sound of boats in the harbor. Jacob moved back to Murphy's side and dropped in beside him. As the things moved in closer, he readied his rifle for a final fight.

"Don't... it'll make it worse... leave me; get to the water," Murphy said in slurred words, bloody foam gathering at the corners of his lips.

Feeling strangely calm, ready to accept his fate, Jacob shook his head and pulled Murphy to his lap. He watched a flashing light high in the skyline make an abrupt turn; it moved around before it angled toward them, coming swiftly in their direction. Jacob pulled Murphy's vest with the reflective tape on the back over to face them and set it on his friend's lap. He cupped Murphy's head with his left hand, feeling his friend's labored breathing. Jacob was tired; he just wanted to rest. He watched the slow-moving flashing light draw closer.

"Hold on, Murphy; they're coming," Jacob said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Daddy!” a young girl yelled, waking him. He saw her running, her feet slapping the polished tile floor.

Katy easily scaled the hospital bed and thumped onto Jacob’s chest to embrace him. Jacob winced and smiled at the same time, hugging her with both arms while a tear formed in his eye. Laura came next, reaching down and locking them both in tight hugs. Jacob grunted and struggled to sit. A nurse in camouflage scrubs scrambled around the bed.

“No, you don’t, Mr. Anderson. We worked too hard to keep that lung from collapsing; I’ll let the hugs slide, but that’s it,” she barked.

“Lung?” Jacob said, finding his breath.

“You had significant internal injuries; you need to rest,” she said while scribbling on his chart. “Not too long, okay, hun?” the nurse said to Laura as she left the room.

Jacob looked around, confused by the surroundings. “Where are we, is this Chicago?”

“No, Jacob. We’re in Canada,” Laura said. “In a military hospital.”

“Canada... how? I don’t understand... how did I get here?”

“They found you unconscious and they brought you here. Your friend, the soldier, helped to find us in the camps and had us brought here while you were still in surgery.”

Jacob’s eyes widened with recognition. “Sergeant Murphy? He’s here?”

“No, his name wasn’t Murphy. It was Corporal Stephens,” she said. “The Canadians took us in, Jacob. The camps were horrible; they had

nothing—no water, no food, and there were so many people there. I thought we would never—”

“Why were you in Canada?”

“The Canadian Army is holding them off and trying to keep them at the borders.”

Jacob grew frustrated with so many thoughts filling his head at once. “Where is the man I was with?”

“I don’t know; you were alone when I got here.” Laura shook her head. “Jacob, we’re lucky to be here.”

He tried to speak and began coughing; he felt the pain in his ribs as he concentrated on breathing.

Laura frowned and poured a glass of water from a nearby pitcher. She passed it to Jacob who took it and drank thirstily. “The doctor says you need to rest,” she said, helping him sip from the glass.

A knock at the open door turned their heads. A tall black man in a green hospital robe and pushing an IV cart looked in, grinning.

“Damn man, still on your ass... oops, sorry. Pardon my language, ma’am,” Stephens said, catching himself. “I didn’t see the little one all cuddled up with her daddy there.”

Laura smiled at him.

Jacob laughed painfully. “Good to see you... Is Murphy here too?” he asked.

“Jacob... Murphy didn’t make it,” Stephens said, walking to a chair in the corner of the room and sitting heavily.

Jacob’s jaw dropped as he lay back in the bed, feeling his body become numb with shock. Katy crawled higher on him and laid her head against his chest. He lifted his hand and stroked her hair, fighting back tears while not knowing why he was so upset over a man he barely knew.

Laura grabbed his hand and whispered, “Who was he?”

“He was my friend,” Jacob said with shock in his voice.

Stephens looked at him sympathetically. “Man... I’m sorry, Jacob; I thought you knew.” Stephens turned to Laura. “Ma’am, I hate to ask this right now, but could we have a moment? I promise I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important.”

“I can appreciate that, Corporal Stephens, but we—”

Jacob put up a hand. "It's okay, Laura; it'll just be a minute," he said. "I'm not going anywhere."

Laura shot Stephens an exaggerated cold stare before she leaned over to kiss Jacob. "Come on, Katy. Let's see if they are serving lunch yet." She retrieved Katy and left the room, leaving the door slightly ajar.

Jacob pressed a button, raising the back of the bed so that he was nearly upright. He grunted trying to adjust his pillow. "What is it?"

Stephens pulled his chair close. "Bro, when I saw you come off that Medevac, Murphy was with you. They tried to save him, but it was just too much."

Jacob chewed his lower lip, not speaking. Stephens looked at the door and sat back in the chair. "I told the doctors about your family; they used the Red Cross to locate them and get 'em here."

Jacob forced a smile. "Thank you. That means a lot to me."

"But that's the thing. This is a military hospital. I told them you were part of Second Squad, Jacob. It was the only way I could get them here to you."

"You what?"

"Our forces are so jacked up right now, they don't know up from down. They didn't question it. I just had to lie, man. I didn't want your family out there in one of those camps when you woke up."

"Is your family here too?"

Stephens looked away then back at Jacob. "I don't know where they are. Last word I got, they were moving them south some place toward Atlanta, maybe Fort Benning. I don't know. Contact's been cut."

"I'm sorry, Stephens," Jacob said just above a whisper.

Stephens shook it off. "Don't be sorry, bro. I know they're okay; I can feel it. Listen, Jacob, we need to talk, man; everything is gone now. We got pushed back across the border and refugees are pouring across faster than the Canuks can find room for them. The United States south of Milwaukee is lost and The Darkness is spreading down into Central and South America. They thrive in warm weather. Europe is the same way; cold areas are stable while they move and spread south.

"Those ponds we found? They use them to breed and multiply. Most of the dumb ones stay close to their little birthing ponds, but the stage three types... hell, they've been spotted way far north."

“Stage three?” Jacob asked.

“That’s what they’re calling the smart ones, the ones that shoot back. The fully evolved ones.”

Jacob nodded his head, remembering the briefing about the lizard men.

“So, what’s next?” Jacob asked. “Where do we go from here?”

“That’s why I needed to talk to you. I got your family in here, but for them to stay, you’re gonna have to *enlist*—and I mean for real. This base is only for military families. I listed you as a private with Second Squad. I don’t know if that’s gonna last or not. You better hope it does, ’cause if it don’t, they gonna send your wife and daughter out to the camps. You too probably, once you get healed up enough to walk. There just isn’t room on base for everyone.”

“I can’t leave them again,” Jacob said.

“It’s going to happen. You need to heal up and go back with us if you want to keep them safe. The generals say we won’t last two winters if we can’t push them out; we can’t survive this far north. We’ll all starve.”

“So, I have a choice of leaving my family to go fight, or leave with my family for these camps?”

Stephens shook his head, frowning. “The choice is yours, Jacob.”

THE SHADOWS

BOOK II

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GLOBAL JOINT BASE MEAFORD

DAY OF THE DARKNESS PLUS 90

The gas furnace roared to life, the blower whining as it forced warm air through the ducts running along the ceiling of the old wooden barracks. Heavy beams and thick wooden walls reminiscent of Bavarian craftsmanship, the buildings were rumored to have been constructed by German prisoners at the end of World War II. Solid and well-built, they stood the test of time by housing training armies for generations.

Jacob lay motionless, listening to the sounds of men snoring over the rumble of the furnace blowers. Light spilled into the open bay barracks from a row of windows high on the wall. He stared at the bottom of the bunk above him, where he'd tucked a small wallet photo into the mattress springs. Laura and Katy in happier times, sitting on a beach near Chicago, Lake Michigan glistening in the sun behind them. He knew they were safe on the other side of the camp. He knew to keep them there that he would have to persevere. He was a soldier whether he like it or not.

South America went dark soon after the first attacks; no word from anyone south of Mexico City by the second week. *The Darkness* thrived once it was introduced into the damp, warm climates. They grew the fastest in the jungles of Honduras and Nicaragua, spreading through the rivers and wetlands. Once stabled and the countries decimated, the creatures turned and charged north with little resistance. Unable to contain the advance, many of the border states became victim of carpet-bombing by both the US and Mexican Governments. Jacob heard the rumors of nuclear strikes around the globe. At first, they were whispered as being used to end the

crisis, but after the bombs fell with poor results, the talk of their use was hushed.

Jacob's family was spared the worst, finding sanctuary in a small military base north-west of Detroit just over the northern border in the safe zone. Safely across the border, they were hinged on the front lines of the conflict. But Jacob's sanctuary came with a price; nobody got a free ride. Laura would soon be assigned work supporting the camp, and Jacob would be tasked to augment the defense forces.

He thought he'd seen enough already in the war to know what to expect from his training. Jacob volunteered for service and as soon as his wounds healed, he was placed into the next training cycle. An Army recruiting sergeant in dress uniform stopped by his small housing unit to help with the paperwork—a two-page contract and a small government agreement stating that his family would be allowed to stay on the camp in exchange for his service.

The second form was a sort of insurance policy. Laura and Katy would be allowed six months free time on the camp in the event of his death; after that, there were no guarantees but they could stay on a “space available” basis. If he failed training or quit, they would be expected to report to the refugee camps immediately.

There were no negotiations, no concessions. The lines to join the military stretched from the main base's gate and into the refugee camps. Training slots were scarce and Jacob had only managed to get in based on the help of his friend Stephens. Even though he didn't see him often, the soldier made his presence known to Jacob and his family in other ways; sending care packages and additional rations when he could. Sometimes it was just a friendly note, or reassurances on the progress of the fighting outside the gates.

After Stephens's wound healed, he fought to be sent back to the front; he was immediately refitted and assigned a new unit. As was common now, Stephens was quickly advanced from corporal to staff sergeant. Most of the trained standing army was gone, with experienced leaders hard to find. Anyone with prior—or especially active—military experience was assigned to units. Veteran soldiers were placed in leadership positions over men as fast as units could be formed with fresh recruits. Stephens was no

exception. Jacob knew the man was out making runs and doing patrols deep into the danger zones, risking his life for the rest of them.

With Stephens' word and the noted performance at the Battle of Museum Park, Jacob was given priority placement for a training date. That date approached faster than expected. Even with stalling from the doctors and pleading from Laura asking them for more time, Jacob was soon cleared and determined fit for duty.

During the recruiting process, Jacob pressed his education and work experience; he requested engineer or even officer training, but the recruiting sergeant's grin said otherwise as he scribbled Jacob's name on the top of a clipboard. The Army had engineers; what they needed were shooters, or *bullet catchers* as the recruiter described it. Jacob was given a slip of paper and a date to report... that date was yesterday.

He said his goodbyes to his family at the provost marshal's office near the center of camp. There were several families there and other men who Jacob didn't recognize. Some were younger than him, but many were far older and reporting directly from the refugee camps. He held Laura, speaking softly to her. They made promises to each other: him to return and her to wait for him. She promised to take care of Katy while he was away. His daughter didn't seem to understand; she held his hand and hugged him good-bye, expecting to see him later that night at dinner.

Before he was ready, men in uniforms entered the building and ushered them all into the back of an already full truck. Jacob and the other recruits were driven to a remote location where several old buildings were grouped together and surrounded by chain link fence and tall poles with mounted spotlights. It looked more like a prison than a training camp.

The recruits were quickly removed from the trucks and stripped of all belongings outside of personal photos, a single religious item, and an identification card. They were then issued two olive drab uniforms, a pair of boots, and a set of shorts and T-shirts. The recruits were forcefully clustered together and herded to the end of a long wooden building. As they entered, Jacob was slapped in the chest with a set of white sheets and a green wool blanket. He was assigned a bunk and a locker number. When he stopped to ask a question, a sergeant at the front of the line grabbed him and shoved him into the room.

“Get to your rack and get some sleep... your time for questions is over,” the sergeant said gruffly.

Sounds of shouting outside the barracks broke Jacob from his reminiscent thoughts. He could hear men yelling and pounding. The door swung open, filling the room with bright, blinding light and screaming men. A sergeant stormed into the room, stomping his boots and banging a metal pail with a small hickory rod. In shock, Jacob sat up swiftly and saw other men fly from the bunks completely unprepared for the chaos. More men in uniform poured into the room, yelling and shouting instructions. A man in a top bunk was grabbed by his ankle and dragged out of bed; another was shoved to the ground when he stepped in front of one of the sergeants.

A leathered man, hardly five foot eight, marched into the room. He was dressed in starched trousers, a black sweatshirt, and spit-shined black boots. The man stomped from one end of the bay to the other and yelled in a loud baritone voice, “Drop your cocks and grab your socks; you’ve got five minutes to get your soft, worthless bodies formed up and out front!”

Jacob locked eyes with the man, who returned a cold, hard stare. He was old and calloused; a deep scar ran from the top of his shaved head to the bottom of his cheek. Even though older, he was large and powerfully built, broad shouldered and intimidating. Jacob looked away, breaking the man’s stare and wondering what the hell had ever convinced him to sign up for this.

Jacob fell from his bed and scrambled for his trousers, feeling the man’s hate burn into him. Suddenly, he was afraid... afraid of bringing any attention on himself. The main thing Stephens warned him about training was to remain anonymous; *Become invisible, don’t get singled out*. He hurried into his boots and joined the others as they rushed out onto the short strip of white gravel directly in front of the barracks building. The sun had yet to rise, and it was cold, their breath forming little clouds of condensation in the freezing Canadian air.

The shocked recruits grouped together in a tight huddle, looking to hide their eyes from the glaring sergeants that circled around them like sharks. Jacob peeked between the rows of bodies as he watched the leathered man leave the barracks and move into the front of the group. He marched purposefully, shaking his head side to side, muttering to himself in disappointment. He stopped just in front of the tight cluster of scared men at

the end of a crushed-gravel lot. He stood like a statue with his chest pushed out. He feigned shock and disgust when he looked up at them.

“What in Jesus H... is this gaggle...? I want every one of you dirtbags in the front leaning rest! Move dammit!” he bellowed.

Jacob stood confused as the group collapsed in on itself. Everyone wanting to create as much separation as possible from the man in front of them, they squeezed together, the huddle getting tighter.

“Well? What the hell are you waiting for?”

Sergeants stepped from the shadows and grabbed the recruits by their shoulders, forcing them to the ground. “He means pushup positions! Now get your filthy civilian bodies on the ground,” one yelled.

Jacob scrambled for room and dropped to all fours while the others—moving just as quickly—dropped in all around him. Sergeants moved among the group, all yelling at the same time, making it impossible to understand individual commands. When they stopped, Jacob could already feel his arms begin to shake from holding the position.

The leathered man strolled between the rows, not making any attempts to avoid stepping on them. “Now... I understand this is your first day and you all don’t know Joseph from Mary, that you are weak and pathetic, so I’m gonna take it easy on you today. I’m going to give you five seconds to get your nasty bone bags into a formation. I want to see four equal rows of earth sacks. Do you understand, recruits?”

The group held silent; only the sounds of panicked breathing emanated from the scared men.

“I said *do you understand?*”

A low mumbling of “yeah” fell from the group.

“What! Who said that?” The man stepped toward one of them, placing a boot on the recruit’s back and pressing his body into the gravel as he continued shouting. “‘Yeah’? Let me make one thing perfectly clear, recruits; I am *not* your buddy. You will address me as Drill Sergeant! Do you understand?”

“Yes, Drill Sergeant,” the recruits said in unison.

“Better. Now show me a formation!”

The recruits jumped to their feet and tried to scramble into four rows. Jacob was trying to press between two men. Another group was just behind, and everyone crowded together again in fear.

“Three... two... one... Everybody back down!” the drill sergeant said.

They stopped where they were and dropped back into the pushup position. “Now this has got to be the *stupidest* bunch of privates I have ever dealt with. Maybe all the good men are dead. You must be the remaining cowards that ran for the hills at the first sign of danger. Oh, I so hope I am mistaken. Now give me a formation before you piss me off,” the drill sergeant said. “Move!”

This time when the recruits leapt to their feet, the sergeants again stepped in and forcibly arranged them into evenly spaced rows. Jacob tried to remain in the back but was quickly ushered into the center of the first row. He found himself standing face-to-face with the leathered drill sergeant. Jacob averted his eyes and tried to look beyond the man. Focusing on a far off light pole, he tried to become invisible.

When the sergeants had them formed up, they stepped back off to the side and the drill sergeant paced around the group, walking up and down the rows, yelling at them individually. “Stand up straight, recruit. You look like two hundred pounds of chewed bubble gum. Untuck your shirt, hero. Where’s your headgear, private?” He stopped directly in front of Jacob and stood so close he could smell the drill sergeants nasty breath. “You ever show up for my formation with that stubble on your chin again, I’ll shave it for you with a rock! Do you understand, recruit?” he growled.

“Yes, Drill Sergeant!” Jacob shouted back.

The older man grunted and shook his head before stepping back to the head of the formation and turned so that he could face the group.

“Let me introduce myself. My name is Master Sergeant Masterson. You will know me as Drill Sergeant. These men around you are my cadre; you will know them as Drill Sergeant. Are we tracking?”

“Yes, Drill Sergeant.”

“Now, I don’t think you all understand what’s going on here; the seriousness of the situation you all are in. Less than two hundred miles south of here, there are soldiers worth far more than you maggots. These skilled warriors are fighting and dying while you rest your disgusting bodies in my cozy bunkhouse. I used to be out there myself, holding that line between The Darkness and our people. I was plenty happy doing just that, but it seems we are running out of soldiers and somebody higher up

thought it a good idea to have me shape you soft, worthless civilians into fighting men in two weeks.

“Now, I know what you’re thinking. *Why, that’s impossible! To turn a soft piece of lard civilian into a fierce fighting man in two weeks?* Now normally, I would agree with you, and normally we have sixteen weeks to convert a turd into a trained killer. But like I said, unfortunately, I have only two weeks. The good news is we get to skip the bullshit. All you need to learn to fight The Darkness is to shoot, move, and communicate. I will teach you how to kill and how to die like a soldier; you can learn the rest when you report to the suck. Now... are we still tracking?”

“Yes, Drill Sergeant!”

“Good. Now, I noticed not a single one of you dirtbags made your bed. We don’t have maid service here, and your momma ain’t gonna stop by to pick up after you. When I say *fall out*, you will have five minutes to get your bodies inside and square away your rack, then I want you back out here, formed up and ready for PT—five mile run in five minutes.

“Am I clear?”

“Yes, Drill Sergeant!”

“Yeah, okay, we’ll see. Fall out!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Jacob bent over and used the belly of his gray T-shirt to wipe the vomit from his chin. The run had been hard, but he'd finished it. Although men half his age fell out, he had managed to push through. He wouldn't allow himself to quit or let his mind accept failure; even if he did fall into the grass to puke his guts out seconds after Masterson ordered them to halt, he was still here. And after completing the run, he knew the score... Masterson could make him miserable, he could wear him down with pushups, get in his head, and break his mind and body, but he couldn't kill him... only *The Darkness* could do that.

As bad as Drill Sergeant Masterson was, he knew *The Darkness* was worse, and as long as Jacob stayed tough and absorbed the training, his family would be safe. Jacob wiped away the rest of the mess from his face and stood upright. He took a deep breath and turned back to the barracks. As he walked, he saw Masterson standing in the shadows, watching the recruits gather and return to the squad bay. Jacob felt the Drill Sergeant's stare. He ducked his head and went to a jog, rushing for the door.

Inside, men had already dumped their issue bags of clothing to the floor. They scrambled to arrange uniforms and take showers, pushing their way through lines to get cleaned up and prepared for the morning chow formation. Exiting from the showers, Jacob moved to his rack, his green duffle bag at the foot of his bed. He looked across at a pair of legs dangling from the top rack. The man scooted and fell to the floor, springing up like a cat. He was at least ten years younger than Jacob, broad shouldered, greasy

blonde hair, and blue eyes. He looked more like a football player than a soldier.

The man reached a large hand across the rack to Jacob. "I'm Winslow, Jesse Winslow. Looks like we're bunkmates," he said.

Jacob returned the handshake and tugged his own green bag open, digging for his uniform items.

"Sorry I didn't introduce myself last night; guess I didn't hear you come in," Jacob said.

Jesse nodded and yanked on a brown T-shirt before hopping into a pair of camouflage trousers. "Didn't get in 'til way past dark. Just got word they drew my number yesterday."

"Drew your number?" Jacob asked.

"The lottery," Jesse said. "I was lucky enough to get drawn for military training. Damn, I'm glad to be out of the camp."

Jacob nodded; he didn't even know such a thing existed. He knew there were more volunteers than space for training, but a lottery surprised him. "Sorry, I was recruited from in here. I haven't been to the camps."

"Damn, you lucked out! They're filling up classes fast. There are lines of us trying to find ways out of the evacuation camps. Military duty is the top choice right now; most everyone else gets pushed into labor. The last resort is with the militias, but that's just as bad as the camps, and it don't get your family moved onto a military base."

"You have a family then?"

"Me? No. Probably why they took me; cheaper for 'em—no extra mouths to feed. What about you?"

Jacob looked away; dodging the question as he pulled a T-shirt over his head then looked back. "I have a wife and daughter. They can stay here as long as I don't fail," Jacob said, his tone changing. "Who knows if I'll ever see 'em again?"

Jesse forced a grin and finished buttoning his uniform jacket. "Hey man, you'll do fine, and they'll be here waiting when this is all over."

A door slammed behind them as, once again, men were on their feet running for the exit. Jacob tugged his bootlaces tight and scrambled to his feet. "Let's go, Jesse, it's chow time."



THE SUN RESTED HIGH OVER THE HORIZON, THE AIR BRISK BUT CLEAR. Jacob's new boots crunched on the crushed limestone bed. They fell in proficiently this time, learning from their previous failures. A drill sergeant moved to the front of the formation and called them to attention. They froze, standing perfectly straight with their shoulders squared and their chests out. Jacob looked straight ahead, concentrating and not allowing his eyes to wander.

Masterson moved into view, stopping just in front of the younger drill sergeant before taking charge of the platoon. He stepped forward and stared into them. Jacob was sure they would be dropped for more pushups, but the man looked away to a high-backed pickup truck. A door opened, and a uniformed man stepped out with a clipboard.

"Listen up, turds. I told you this would be an accelerated course. When your name is called, report to the armorer and sign for your weapon," Masterson said.

Jacob waited as men were called and fell out of formation, running to the back of the truck, signing for M4 rifles. Jacob waited his turn. After being called, he ran to the truck and stood at attention. A supply sergeant in the back looked at his name on the clipboard and grinned before turning to open a footlocker. Reaching in, he pulled out a heavy, black, scoped rifle with a synthetic stock. He turned and stepped to the back of the truck then released the empty magazine and drew back the bolt, verifying the rifle was empty.

The man stretched out his arm, offering him the rifle. Jacob put up his hands and stepped back apprehensively. "What's that?"

"It's your weapon, dummy."

Jacob shook his head. "Can't I just get one like all the others?"

"Are you Private Jacob Anderson?"

"Yes, Sergeant," Jacob said.

"Then no, you get the M14. It says so right here." The man flashed Jacob the clipboard with one hand while tossing the rifle at him with the other. Jacob caught it and staggered back.

“Is there a problem?” Masterson’s voice boomed, causing Jacob to turn on his heels and nearly fall.

“No, Drill Sergeant,” he shouted, running back to his place in formation.

Jacob stopped in his place next to Jesse just as the younger man’s name was called. Jacob watched as his new friend ran to the back of the truck. When Jacob heard a similar argument, he dared turn his head slightly and watched as Jesse was handed a large machine gun, much heavier than the other men’s weapons. Suddenly Jacob felt relief, his own M14 losing the extra weight he was worried about just moments earlier. Jesse returned to the formation. Breathing hard in frustration, he stopped and fell in.

More men took their turns at the truck, receiving weapons and returning to the formation before Masterson broke them into two equal lines and formed them up on opposite sides of the road. He moved them out, cautioning them to walk spread apart. Jacob was on the right-hand side of the road, the fifth man back from the front. He could see Jesse on the other side of the street, only two men ahead of him. The drill sergeants stomped down the lines, yelling at them to keep their weapons up off their chests and muzzles pointed out at the sides of the road as they patrolled.

“From this moment on, everywhere you go, you will move tactically,” Masterson said. “If you pass training, when you report to your units, you will move tactically. If you fail to be tactical, *The Darkness* will kill you. This is the world we live in now. No place outside of these camp walls is safe. Do you understand, turds?”

“Yes, Drill Sergeant,” they shouted back.

The platoon was road marched for three miles. Jacob could tell by the heat on his feet that blisters were forming. As they moved, the drill sergeants marching at the center of the road sped them up. Sometimes shouting at them or yelling out different warnings, causing them to have to run into the tall grass at the sides of the road and drop into the thick vegetation before lying down with their weapons up and ready to fire at an imaginary enemy.

They would be shouted back to their feet, then forced to run forward for hundreds of meters to avoid a pretend artillery attack. Again, dropped and formed into a hasty ambush, they waited behind their rifles for an invisible enemy to approach from the road. As they patrolled on, phrases became

more and more familiar to them. They learned their part in every battle drill. Jacob's motions became clear; just as in his former life as an engineer when he knew how to break down and assemble a production line, he now knew what to do when attacking or under attack.

They drilled until their bodies ached and their blistered feet bled. They were fully immersed in the training, stopping at the side of the road to eat and hydrate before again moving out on the trail. Masterson called out battle drills, and the platoon reacted.

"Near ambush!"

The men at the front screamed and ran through the kill zone yelling *pew, pew, pew*—firing imaginary weapons as the men at the back of the patrol dove for cover before laying heavy suppressive fire, covering their teammates as they assaulted through and destroyed the enemy.

"Far ambush!"

Soldiers in the kill zone took cover and provided suppressive fire while those at the rear of the formation maneuvered around and destroyed the enemy.

They learned to break contact, to initiate contact; different patrols and traveling formations; when to ambush and when to hide; how to react to chance contacts and how to pursue and run down the enemy. After a particularly difficult round of chaotic drills, Jacob overheard Jesse laughing with the other men. "This is just like football practice." Jacob could see that the big man was loving it, memorizing plays like it was all a game. Meanwhile, Jacob felt his own tired body breaking down... and it was only the first day.

The patrol finally ended at a long gravel road. They were halted and moved back into a formation. Jacob's pants were covered with dirt and grass stains, the elbow of his shirt torn, and the toes of his boots scraped, the raw leather showing through. Masterson range walked back to the front of the formation and faced them to the right, marching them to a grassy field where the pickup truck and supply sergeant were waiting.

The supply sergeant was standing behind the truck with the tailgate down. Cans of ammo were stacked in the back with more soldiers positioned over them. Masterson fell them out and they formed a training circle around the back of the truck. The supply sergeant stepped forward

and removed his hat, wiping beads of sweat from his forehead with his sleeve.

“Okay, Privates, you will form into three lines and draw ammo.” He pointed to three tables just behind him with soldiers standing over them. “Little guns, big guns, and bigger guns. If your weapon fires non-belt-fed 5.56 go to the first table.”

Men with the M4s and M16s fell out and ran to the first table. Jacob waited for instructions and moved to the 7.62 table with four other men while Jesse and the other machine gunners moved to the third. Jacob stood looking at the others; other than all holding scoped rifles—M14s as the supply sergeant had called them—he couldn’t find anything in common with the group he found himself in.

A man wearing a dark-red ball cap with a yellow badge paced behind Jacob’s table, picked up a clipboard, and then wended around it. Without introducing himself, he ordered the five men into a line, standing shoulder to shoulder. He tossed the clipboard back to the table before walking up and down the line. He ordered them to hold their weapons out then, one at a time, inspected each recruit’s rifle. As he walked down the line, he stopped to ask them questions while he looked over their weapons. He stopped in front of Jacob and snatched away his rifle. Expertly, he opened the bolt and inspected the chamber.

“You a veteran? Done time in the military?” he asked without looking away from the weapon.

“No, Sergeant.”

“A hunter?” he asked.

“No, Sergeant. I’m an engineer.”

“Then why are you in my designated marksman group?”

Jacob dropped his head, subconsciously moving away from the table, embarrassed. The instructor pushed the rifle back into Jacob’s chest then reached back for the clipboard. He flipped through pages then stopped. “Jacob Anderson,” he said as his finger traced the lines of text. “Says here you were in Chicago—at the Battle of Museum Park.”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

“Then that is why you are here. With only fourteen days to train up recruits, we are forced to pull some troops ahead in their training to go over advanced skills.”

“But, Sergeant, seriously, I... I don’t know shit,” Jacob stammered.
“Don’t matter, you will soon enough; I can promise you that.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“Hey, you awake?”

Jacob forced open his weary eyes, blinking to clear his senses, and found himself staring into the darkness of the room. The furnace blower was once again roaring, mixed with the snores of exhausted men. “I am now,” he whispered into the dark.

“So, what do you think?”

“Damn, Jesse, what time is it?” Jacob said.

“Seriously, do you think we made a mistake?” Jesse asked, rolling in the bed so that his head hung over the top bunk, looking down at Jacob.

“Hell, man. I don’t know. It isn’t like we had a choice—not really, anyway.”

“I was just wondering, you know, is it worth it? I mean, the camp was rough but at least those things were far away from us. They’re going to push us right into the fight, you know. We won’t be sitting safe being gate guards or something,” Jesse said. “They’re planning to put us right in the middle of it.”

“No use worrying about it now; it’s done, right?” Jacob said.

“Yeah, guess you’re right. I won’t go back to the refugee camp, and no way could I go back to Detroit again.”

“Detroit? That where you’re from?” Jacob asked. “Chicago myself.”

“Yup... worked in the Ford plant. Good job too. Wish I had saved some of that money for a rainy day. Maybe I would have gotten farther. When the shit hit the fan, I was dead broke from a weekend at the casino. Then the

plant halted production after the attacks started. I was stuck at home with no paycheck and no money in the bank... those kinda odds won't get ya far."

"Things happened fast in Chicago too," Jacob whispered. "By the time we realized what was going on, it was too late."

"Detroit was a nightmare, bro. I thought I could make do, hold out in the city. Yeah, that was a bad idea—real bad. I watched them from my apartment, watched them attack the police. I didn't know what to think of it. I just wanted to get away. People said up north was safe, so I crossed the river into Canada and just kept moving."

"Come on, man, shut up," a soldier shouted from up the bay, silencing Jesse.

Jacob lay back; he raised the green wool blanket to his chest, listening absently as Jesse continued to tell his story. He turned his head to the side and looked down the row of bunks. They all had a story, all different but still the same. Now they all found themselves here, like soldiers in any war from the past, united against a common enemy.

The man yelled again for them to be quiet.

"Get some sleep, Jesse," Jacob whispered.



MORNING CAME QUICK, LONG BEFORE THE SUN HAD RISEN. SKIPPING THE five-mile run, the drill sergeants dragged them from their bunks. They were quickly assembled outside, dressed for combat, and pushed through the same drills, only this time with limited visibility under the cover of darkness.

In the following days, they ran the same routine—starting with being kicked awake at random early hours and dragged from their racks. After insane rounds of questioning out in the street, they were sent back to dress. Finally, they would be out front again for long periods of exercise, followed by patrols and hours on the range or gathered in circles, listening to their marksmanship instructors.

The instructors made the chaos routine, helping the recruits adjust and acclimate to the madness. The men became adept at quickly forming for the patrols and battle drills. They could move from rest to battle positions in a

matter of seconds. The drill sergeants added new obstacles to trip them up. The range instructors force-fed the recruits technical details. Soon the men learned to break down, clean, and maintain their rifles.

By the end of the first week, they had advanced to live ammunition and learning to sight in their weapons; training on static, then pop-up targets, and finally progressing to moving targets. By the start of the next week, they were falling into formation according to their weapons assignments and finding their own unique role within the patrol. Exhausted and moving like robots, their bodies functioned on muscle memory.

Jacob learned how to react on battle drills and what was expected of him as a designated marksman. After reaching the ranges, he was yanked out of the larger group with the rest of his long rifle team to learn scouting techniques. Their marksmanship instructor was patient and precise in his instruction. Jacob learned how to use the radio, call for fire, and report enemy movements. Hitting them over and over until they were proficient, all of these tasks were integrated into the morning battle drill marches.

As the end of the week and the final days of training approached, they patrolled like a veteran group—not with precision, but worn down and fatigued. Even though still green, most never having faced the enemy, they were broken and their uniforms soiled and faded. The weapons they carried were cleaner than their bodies. Jacob trekked his position near the rear of the formation, his mind focused on his role. Jesse was ahead of him, now gracefully holding the machine gun, his head swiveling with every step.

When a truck approached from the rear of the column, the men parted to allow it to pass through them and to the front. An excited soldier exited the vehicle and ran to Master Sergeant Masterson. A drill sergeant at the head of the column raised a fist, stopping the column's movement. Jacob prowled to the shoulder of the road, taking a knee and surveying the surroundings. After a short wait, he dropped to his belly and crawled into the high grass, taking up a security position. The rest of the men did the same thing without being instructed, the halt procedure now deeply ingrained in their subconscious.

Masterson moved past Jacob and stood in the center of the street just behind Jacob's feet, waving the other sergeants to his position while sounds of distant explosions and gunfire echoed off the heavy cloud cover. Explosions that at one time sounded far away and distant now seemed

close, like an advancing thunderstorm. Some of the blasts were close enough that the concussions seemed to rattle the ground. Jacob lifted himself to his elbows, trying to listen in on the drill sergeants' huddle.

"They ain't ready," he caught one of them say.

Masterson grunted and spit on the pavement, using the toe of his boot to scrape at the spot. "We're in the best position to intercept. It's an opportunity for some of this bunch to get some real trigger time and stop an incursion in the process. This isn't up for discussion; I'm taking five with me in the truck. Get the rest of the platoon back on their feet and return to the barracks."

Jacob strained his neck, trying to get a better look and made the mistake of locking eyes with Masterson. The elder drill sergeant pointed a finger at him. "You, and you four; get up and get in the back of the truck. The rest of you prepare to move your asses back to the barracks," he said, waving his hand to a group of five. He then turned and headed to the cab of the waiting truck.

Jacob pushed himself to his feet and stood, looking confused, not wanting to be the first to step toward the open back of the pickup. He watched as Jesse ran forward and jumped into the truck bed, pulling others in behind him. Jacob felt a shove from behind as one of the drill sergeants pushed him forward. "Get moving. Time to earn your pay, troop," the sergeant said.

Jacob stepped to the truck, his boots feeling heavy as lead. He placed a foot on the rear bumper and raised his hand. Jesse dragged him in just as the truck moved ahead.

The vehicle cut off the road and turned directly into a high-grass field. The recruits in the back bounced as the truck rolled through uneven terrain. Jacob felt his teeth rattle and struggled to keep his helmet on his head as he was tossed back and forth in the vehicle's bed. Finally, the truck steered out of the high grass and onto a gravel road. The driver turned right and raced onto the dirt surface, tossing a cloud of dust behind them.

"What's this all about?" Jesse said, leaning in close to Jacob's ear.

Jacob turned and looked back. "I don't know; Masterson said something about an incursion."

"What the hell does that mean?" Jesse asked.

“No idea, but we’re headed in the direction the explosions have been coming from.”

One of the other soldiers scooted forward. “I thought that was just other training groups, artillery practice and range time.”

Jacob nodded in reply and leaned back so he could see ahead in the direction the truck was moving. He spotted an open gate with two vehicles parked on either side. Jacob’s truck raced past them without slowing then continued down the road and up a long hill, stopping just below its peak. The doors opened, its occupants spilling out.

“I think we just went outside the wire,” a recruit whispered.

“Dismount!” Masterson yelled. “We ain’t got a lot of time so move your asses. I want a skirmish line formed up in that brush over there, overlooking that far tree line,” he ordered, pointing just ahead and to the left of the vehicle.

Jesse jumped from the truck and dropped the tailgate to allow the others to spill out. Jacob moved to the spot indicated then walked slightly beyond it, finding a place of deep cover with good views, the way his instructor had taught him to. He waited for Jesse to find a position farther up and watched as he fixed the bi-pod for his machine gun, then dropped to the prone, with the other men online around him. Masterson stepped toward them, the driver of the truck following close behind. He moved up to the crest of the hill they’d aligned themselves with and dropped to his knees, raising a pair of binoculars to his eyes.

Jacob scanned the distance with his scope, seeing nothing but golden grasslands that butted up to a tall line of deep green pines. They were on a high overlook, the terrain dropping steeply down the far side before moving against a thick forest. He lifted his eye from the scope to see Masterson next to him, consulting a map. “What are we looking for, Drill Sergeant?” Jacob asked, immediately regretting his decision as Masterson shot him a cold glare.

Masterson turned his head to Jacob as he folded the map and passed it to the man behind him. “You’re Anderson, right? The one from Chicago? They say you were at the Battle of Museum Park.”

“Yes, Drill Sergeant. I was there,” Jacob said, trying to avoid the man’s cold stare.

“Well, you survived; not many of us did. Look down at the tree line; see the split tree, blackened like lightning struck it? The trail moving to the left of it?”

Jacob raised the rifle back to his eye and panned the edge of the tree line. Over a thousand meters to his front, he spotted the tree, the top splintered and burnt to a char. “I see it.” Jacob turned and looked back at Masterson. “Were you there?”

“That’s where we expect them to come from,” Masterson said, pointing a finger and ignoring the question.

“How do you know?” Jacob asked.

Masterson looked Jacob in the eye, not used to being questioned. He forced a grin then held up the small handheld radio. “Two-Six made contact with a small group about an hour ago. They knocked down most of ’em, but remnants of the enemy patrol broke off and scattered. They’re pushing them this way.”

The radio squelched, causing Masterson to turn his back. He held the radio to his ear, a look of concentration on his face. He placed it next to his lips and pressed the button. “Roger, we’re in position. Out,” he said before turning back to Jacob. “Okay, get on the glass... won’t be long now.”

Masterson dropped to his belly and crawled up next to Jacob. The driver moved closer to the other men, kneeling just behind Jesse’s machine gun.

Jacob put his eye to the scope and focused on the burnt stump. He felt Masterson crawl closer. “How are you on the rifle?” Masterson asked him in a low voice.

“I can hit what I shoot at... most of the time,” Jacob whispered, not taking his eye from the scope.

“We’ll see.”

Five minutes passed before the first of them broke the cover of the trees. They were walking quickly, tightly packed together—not talking, not looking around. They focused to the front as they exited the forest and continued on the trail toward the hilltop road. Jacob counted seven of them, all carrying weapons of some sort and wearing a variety of clothing. He whispered the information to Masterson the way he’d been trained.

“Hold your fire; let them get closer,” Masterson said, loud enough so all could hear him. “Anderson here will drop the point man, and then you all take out the rest. Let none escape.”

Jacob raised the rifle into his shoulder and focused on the leader, a tall lanky man. He was wearing coveralls and carrying a wood-stocked rifle in his arms. It was the first time Jacob had seen one of them since Chicago. He could tell by its movement that he wasn't human. It was a subtle difference, but once recognized, one a person couldn't forget—the mechanical motions in the way it moved... the perfect posture... the way it walked without ever looking back to check on its comrades, knowing they would follow.

"Shit," Masterson said. "Weapons tight, people; don't fire till Private Anderson initiates contact."

Jacob took his eye from the rifle, looking at Masterson. "Drill Sergeant?" he said.

Masterson pointed farther down, a second group of nine men emerged from the tree line, moving in the same direction as the first but in their own distinct element. "Get back on the rifle; fire when I give the word. We can't let them pass. Two-Six is in the woods, moving this way. All we have to do is delay these bastards 'til they get here."

Masterson lifted the radio back to his lips and whispered into it. "Two-Six, this is Four Actual." He held it to his ear, waiting for a response that Jacob couldn't hear. "Roger, Two-Six, we have 'em seven strong, lightly armed. I'm tracking a second group of nine to their east... Roger, waiting to engage. Four Actual out."

Jacob felt his heart rate increase as he blinked his eyes, trying to focus on the man in coveralls. The strange man continued marching on the trail, moving directly in line with the prepared ambush. Jacob exhaled audibly and let his finger caress the trigger.

"Let them come... just a bit closer," Masterson whispered into his ear. "They get close enough, you can see the black gel in their eyes... let them get on top of you... ya can smell them, that skunky, shit smell. Let them see you and they let out that scream, like a bitch hyena. That's a scream you'll hear in your nightmares."

Jacob held his silence, not knowing how to respond to the drill sergeant's commentary.

"But you already know that, don't ya? Hell, you were at the castle," Masterson said sarcastically. "You probably got it all figured out."

As the man in coveralls came closer, Jacob kept the reticule over the man's chest. He let it drift up and now clearly saw the man's gnarled

reptilian face; its forehead was heavily bridged, its neck scaled with gray flesh. He had closed to within two football fields—well within Jacob’s comfort zone. The blackened eyes were now visible in the scope. Jacob focused the cross hairs high on the man’s chest, tightened his grip, and whispered, “On target.”

“Take the shot.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

His rifle barked, deploying a 7.62-caliber bullet downrange at 2,800 feet per second, crossing the field in the fraction of a second. With his system full of adrenaline, Jacob didn't feel the kick of the M14 rifle. He kept his eye to the scope and watched intently as the man in coveralls took his last step. The creature's body shuddered then crumpled to the trail, a solid hit to the upper chest. A line of outbound tracers filled his view as Jesse let loose a long burst from his M240 Golf machine gun. Rounds from below zipped up at them, seeming to arc over their heads at the last second. Jacob instinctively flinched and ducked down, then felt Masterson's hand on his shoulder.

"Keep scanning, boy. You got one in the open returning fire. You got him; he's at your five o'clock, hundred and fifty meters."

Jacob forced his fear to the back as he pressed his eye to the scope, panning away from the creature he'd already dropped. He found the new target, a man in flannel, walking forward with an AK47. Jacob had already shifted his rifle to the right, placing the cross-hair center mass. The thing showed no fear, firing at them from in the open with its weapon raised while letting out long bursts of automatic fire, the tracers racing in Jacob's direction.

"Got 'em!" Jacob shouted. He pulled the rifle close to his shoulder, letting his finger caress the trigger.

"Then drop his ass," Masterson said.

Jacob eased back on the trigger in one smooth motion. The rifle responded, and he watched the man fall back.

“Hit,” Masterson shouted over the noise of the firing. “There’s another just behind him, get on target.”

Jacob pivoted. Finding the next target, he focused on the man. “Got him. On target,” he said, remembering his training.

“Fire,” Masterson said.

Jacob squeezed back the trigger and watched the side of the man’s head vanish in a puff of red. Rounds pounded in the ground ahead of him. Jacob turned away then shifted, searching for the next target: a man running directly at them. Jacob dropped his point of aim, leading the man as he ran. “On target,” he said.

“Drop him.”

Before he could fire again, rounds tore into the man from behind. He watched as the creature’s body contorted and twisted to the ground. Jacob took his eye from the scope and looked into the grassy field below. Men in dark camouflage were running from the trees, rifles up, engaging the remaining others still on their feet. The camouflaged men rushed forward in line, firing rapidly and effectively knocking down the last of the alien invaders. Soon a small dark-green Jeep left the trees with a man standing behind a mounted machine gun. The big gun opened up and swept the field where the last of the Delta resistance remained.

“Hold your fire,” Masterson shouted to the group. Jesse fired several more rounds before his gun fell silent, the barrel belching white smoke. They watched from the high ground as the Canadian patrol exited the forest, killing the remaining creatures below. A man turned and looked up at them, shooting them a mock salute. Masterson fired one back. Jacob sat leaning on his heels and lifted his rifle to his chest, dropping the box magazine and replacing it with a full one. Masterson climbed to his feet and moved away toward the driver of the truck.

Jacob slumped, exhausted, letting the rifle lean against his slack firing arm. He observed the soldiers below emerge from the tree line. They moved among the dead, routinely kicking and rolling over the bodies of the creatures. He wondered how often they did this sort of thing. *Is The Darkness really this close to the gates?*

Jesse stood and moved next to him, dropping close beside him. He snatched a canteen from his pack and took a long drink before handing it to Jacob.

“That was intense. Is it always like this?” Jesse asked him.

Jacob took a drink from the canteen and used his sleeve to wipe the drops of water from his chin. “What do you mean? The fighting?”

Jesse took the canteen back and replaced the cap. He pulled his machine gun close to him. “Yeah, you’ve done this before, right? I’ve heard some of them talk... they say you’re already hard,” his friend said, laughing.

“I didn’t do shit, Jesse. Most of the time, I was afraid of dying. I just did what I was told,” Jacob answered before looking away.

Jesse bit at his lower lip and looked down at his dirt-covered hands. “Hey, bro, I didn’t mean nothing by it. I’m sorry if I said something out of line.”

Before Jacob could respond, Masterson was back on his feet, shouting at the men to return to the truck. Jesse moved first, leaping to his feet. Then, lending a hand to Jacob, the big man pulled him up with ease. They double-timed it to the rear of the truck and joined the others already aboard. Jacob sat against the tailgate watching Masterson brief a man with a Canadian flag patch on his shoulder who’d climbed up the hill.

The Canadian soldier held out a map. He waved his hand across the landscape, pointing out distant terrain features. Masterson nodded to the man then looked back at the truck. He put his hands on his hips and spit into the tall grass before shaking the soldier’s hand. Masterson nodded his head again and returned to the truck.

The drill sergeant walked past the vehicle’s bed, stopping momentarily to look over the soldiers sitting in the back. He stopped and took a quick head count. He proceeded on then paused, looking directly at Jesse before turning his gaze to Jacob. “Everyone good?” he asked in a tone that was softer than usual.

“Yes, Drill Sergeant,” they responded in unison.

Masterson turned to look back at the Canadians, who were walking down the hill to the dead in the field. “Okay then,” he said, slapping the side of the truck before entering the cab.

The truck roared to life, backing up swiftly and causing Jacob to nearly fall. He pushed his muddy boots against the bed of the truck to steady himself. Leaning back and feeling Jesse pressed in beside him, Jacob looked up at the three other men across from him. Younger than him and Jesse, all three were in their late twenties. Jacob hadn’t gotten to know

them, the pace of the training and limited downtime making it nearly impossible.

Jacob watched the men push close together as the truck bounced down the road. They returned through the perimeter gate and followed the fence back to the garrison area. Jacob recognized some of the buildings... the hospital where he was treated, and the gate to the housing area where he knew Laura and Katy were staying. The men watched over the rails of the truck as they passed through the familiar site. The driver didn't stop; he continued on then turned onto the gravel road that returned them to the recruit training camp.

As they approached, Jacob could see the rest of the recruits formed up on the limestone lot, standing at ease as they waited. The truck drove close and stopped. Masterson and the driver exited, the latter quickly moving to the rear to drop the tailgate as Masterson stood beside him. Jacob and the others rolled out from the truck, holding their gear. They scrambled ahead, moving toward the rest of the men formed up on the gravel lot.

"Anderson, Winslow, you two stand fast," Masterson said, stopping them. "The rest of you, back in the barracks and get cleaned up for chow."

Jacob stepped back and put his M14 on his shoulder; he looked to Jesse, who shrugged his shoulders. Masterson went on his way, leaving Jacob and Jesse alone by the back of the truck.

"You think we did something wrong?" Jesse whispered. "What does he want with us now?"

"I don't know, but I'm sure we are about to find out."

Masterson called the waiting formed-up recruits to attention then turned them over to another drill sergeant, who led the group of men off to the evening meal. The old soldier turned and looked back at Jacob with a shake of his head before slowly striding toward them.

"What's going on, Drill Sergeant?" Jesse asked.

Masterson forced a grin. "You can drop the *Drill Sergeant* shit. Your time here is done; your training will continue elsewhere."

Jacob stood, confused, as fear welled in his belly, thinking he'd failed. "I don't understand... what did we do wrong?"

"Nahh, it ain't that," Masterson said, reaching into a shirt pocket and stuffing a wad of tobacco into his lip. "You're moving on... both of you. I'd

be lying if I say I didn't envy you. A soldier shouldn't be back here in the rear at a time like this."

"Moving?" Jesse asked.

"The Darkness is infiltrating north faster than anyone had anticipated. They hit us this morning—just a small group, but they managed to do a lot of damage. That little piece you saw was just a fraction of what came at us. We are starting to learn how they work. If they're here, and they know where we are, they'll come back. If they manage to get established someplace close, they will multiply.

"That unit we supported earlier has an outfit preparing to move out. They lost a couple of men recently and turns out you're going to replace them."

Masterson looked Jacob in the eye. "You must have friends in high places, because they asked for you by name. I would have turned them down, but he had paperwork authorizing it."

"Hell yeah," Jesse said, putting a fist up to Jacob.

Jacob ignored the gesture and looked to Masterson. "Who? Where are we going?"

Masterson laughed. "I don't know, guys. But listen, I watched you both today; you'll do fine, but you aren't ready yet. You need to listen to your sergeants; maybe you'll stay alive long enough to learn something. Now go toss your weapons in the back of that supply truck. You won't be needing them anymore. Two-Six will outfit you with all the new gear and rifles you'll need downrange. Go grab your shit out of the barracks; your pickup will be here in ten mikes and you need to be ready to go when it arrives."

"Can I see my family before we leave?" Jacob asked.

Masterson looked at Jacob, letting his jaw soften. "I'm sorry, but there's no time. You just take care of yourself, okay? I'll look in on your family and let them know you've moved out. Ten mikes; don't miss your ride. Good luck, gentleman." Masterson turned to walk away, leaving them alone and confused.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Jacob was cold and wet; he couldn't remember a time ever feeling such pain and discomfort from the weather. His jaw ached from shivering, his body cramped, and his legs numbed where they pressed against the cold steel of the Ford pickup truck. It'd been raining for hours and he was soaked to the bone, the green wool blanket doing little to comfort him.

The vehicle had pulled into the barracks lot just after sunset. Jacob and Jesse rushed into the back of the old pickup truck just as the rain began. They'd been driving for over an hour down broken gravel back roads, avoiding the main highways, entering dark forests and hilly terrain. He tried to follow the street signs and look into the small guarded villages where soldiers patrolled the streets and all windows and doors were tightly secured. Jacob quickly lost track of where they were as the weather gradually turned worse and he resorted to lying low against the cab to hide from the rain.

Jacob removed the blanket from his face; Jesse was sleeping across from him, barely visible in the dark night. He was wrapped in a blanket of his own with his body sprawled out in the bed of the truck, bouncing and swaying with every bump. As the wind blew more pelting rain into his eyes, Jacob pulled the blanket tight, shielding his face.

The truck came to a halt on a dark, muddy road. The driver's door swung out, squeaking against rusted metal. A tired, bearded man wearing a faded lime-green camouflage parka and a floppy hat with water running off the brim stepped into the cold rain. He had the hard look of a warrior. The man could easily fit in as a barbarian with a large axe and horned helmet.

He pointed up the hill to a small log cabin with a barn behind it. There was a thin sliver of light in a front window between the heavy drapes.

“That’s home for tonight, boys. Get your stuff so we can get inside before we all drown,” he said before reaching back into the truck’s cab and grabbing his own bag. He stepped away and slammed the door, waking Jesse. Jesse rolled to the side and looked up at Jacob, confused.

“Let’s go,” the man shouted, losing patience. He took another step toward the building then paused to allow Jacob and Jesse to gather behind him.

The man led them up a muddy path toward the cabin’s porch while lightning flashed behind them, showing the way in strobes of light. The bearded man moved ahead of them and stopped just before the door. A large barrel-chested guard dressed in a similar camouflage parka, wearing a dark, wool watch cap moved out of the shadows and looked them over. The two men exchanged words and a low laugh. The guard stepped closer and used a small light, shining it in Jacob’s eyes. “These are the cherries; just picked them up at the orchard,” the driver said.

“Not much to look at, are they? But they’re clear, at least... no infection here,” the guard answered with a nod. He stepped aside, allowing the driver and the others to enter the room.

The bearded man looked back. “Don’t take it personal, rookie. Everyone gets checked for infection on arrival,” he said. “Especially cherries.”

The man left the door open, allowing Jacob to follow him into the warm, open space. The guard quickly closed the door behind them as Jesse paused before following them in. The bearded man approached an old, stone fireplace and tossed pieces of split wood to the hot coals. The wood soon burned brightly, heat radiating off the stonework.

The man shed his wet clothing and hung it on wooden hooks so that the fabric dangled near the flame then knelt down beside the fire to warm his hands while water dripped from his soaked beard. He turned back toward Jacob and Jesse and pointed at a far wall. “That’s your spot over there. Drop your gear and get cozy. You ain’t going anywhere ’til morning, so you might as well get comfortable for the time being,” he grunted before turning back to the warmth of the fire.

Jacob walked to the far wall and dropped his bag, hanging the wet wool blanket over the back of a chair to dry. They were in a rustic one-room cabin lit only by the fire blazing in the large fireplace. The windows were all covered with dark drapes, and the floor was made of rough-sawn boards fitted tight and held in place by flathead nails. The floor in front of the fire was covered by a thick rug made of animal fur. On the opposite wall, Jacob spotted the forms of sleeping men near a table in the corner with chairs scattered around it.

He turned to look at Jesse, who was still groggy from his nap in the back of the truck. Jesse was the type who could sleep anytime, anywhere, and on command. The big man dropped his bag and stumbled to the wall then sat back against it. He looked around the room wearily before rubbing his eyes and drifting off to sleep. Jacob was suddenly envious of his friend's tenacity to rest. He watched as Jesse's head dipped to the side then rolled back, snoring.

Being ignored by the bearded man at the fire, and his only friend having returned to sleep, Jacob stood, feeling suddenly alone. He was still shivering, his uniform drenched with the cold rainwater that permeated to his bones and made his joints ache. The growling in his stomach reminded him that he'd missed the evening meal to catch his ride. Thunder clapped outside and wind beat hard, pelting rain against the sides of the cabin. For a moment, he missed his warm bed and the furnace in the old training barracks.

Jacob stepped closer into the light of the fire, unzipped his jacket, and let it drop to the large stone mantle. He then moved closer yet to the glowing embers, feeling the warmth as it caused his wet T-shirt to steam. The man turned and looked at him, seeing the agony on Jacob's face matched by the shivering of his body. "You should be thankful for the rain."

"What?" Jacob asked, puzzled. "Is this one of those farmer things, good for the crops and flowers and all that shit?"

Showing bright white teeth through his thick beard, the man smiled and squatted down to the mantle, sitting with his back to the fire as he untied his boots. "No, just makes it easier for us to maneuver. The Deltas don't like it; not sure why, but they seem to hunker down when the weather turns foul like this. Especially cold, miserable nights like this one."

"Deltas?" Jacob asked.

“Deltas, The Darkness, or whatever you want to call them; black eyes, devils, assholes... take your pick, it’s all the same. You know, you should get out of those boots. Last thing you want is trench foot; you’ll need good feet when we cross the lake. You need to get your wet clothes hung up and dried out.”

Jacob dropped and sat beside the man, undoing his own laces, pulling off the wet boots, and removing his drenched socks. His feet felt cold and clammy, his toes tingling with numbness. He moved his clothing onto hooks embedded into the mantle, letting them hang close to the fire. “You said we’re crossing the lake? Where the hell are we, anyway?” Jacob asked.

Ignoring his question, the man turned and removed a blue steel pot from the fire using a thick leather mitt. He shuffled away from Jacob and filled two mugs resting on the mantle before handing one to Jacob, who sniffed the liquid and made a sour face. The man laughed softly. “Fern tea... might as well get used to it,” he said before replacing the pot.

“We’re just outside of Meaford, still in Canada. This is one of our safe houses between the base and the front lines. We go here to rest up between missions. It’s not great but still better than being on base—more freedom out here. You’re Jacob, right? You can call me James. Sorry for skipping introductions earlier. Sometimes you have to move fast and skip the formalities. I hate traveling alone after dark without an escort, bad weather or not.”

Jacob held the warm cup in his hands, letting the metal thaw his cold fingers. He sipped the tea, the taste becoming easier the more he drank it. He closed his eyes tight and slowly opened them again. “James, why am I here?”

The bearded man stood and stretched. “Tomorrow... you’ll know tomorrow.” He pointed to Jesse, who was still leaning against his pack, asleep under the wet blanket. “You should get some sleep. That’s a key around here: sleep when you can. We have a lot to do in the morning.” The man took another sip of his tea and splashed the rest into the fire before returning his cup to the mantle. He shifted away from the fire, moving into the back of the room where Jacob watched him dig a bedroll from his pack.

Jacob stayed by the warmth of the fireplace. With his back to the mantle, he removed his wet T-shirt then lay down on the thick rug and stretched out on the surface to let the fire become his blanket. He closed his

eyes but couldn't sleep; too many thoughts and emotions clouded his brain. He wondered if Masterson would keep his word and inform Laura that he'd shipped out, then he wondered if maybe it was better that she didn't know.

The door to the cabin opened, allowing another pair of armed men to enter. They passed inside, stomping their boots and stripping off wet gear. Jacob feigned sleep, not interested in more uncomfortable conversation. He watched the men move near James and arrange their own sleeping areas. The men spoke in hushed tones that Jacob listened to for a few minutes before dozing to sleep.

He was awakened by a kick at the bottom of his bare feet and caught his name before he opened his eyes. He tried to sit up, feeling the cold aches in his back and shoulders. Light now shone into the room through the heavy drapes, telling him it was morning. He squinted, trying to focus on the tall man standing over him. He wore the same dark camouflage as the others and looked at Jacob with a beaming smile. "Told ya I'd look after you, bro," the man said.

Jacob's face filled with recognition after catching Stephens's grin looking down at him, and he tried to sit up.

"How come every time I see you you're laying down, always on your lazy ass?" Stephens joked.

"Oh man, it's so good to see you. I didn't know what to think after last night. So you're the one responsible for all of this?" Jacob said. He reached for his now dry shirt on the mantle and quickly pulled it on. He looked to the wall to find Jesse sitting on his pack, eating something from a large bowl. "What are you doing here?"

"Hell, this is my spot. You're assigned to me now," Stephens said, going to the fire and using a wooden spoon to stir at a deep, black, iron pot. He used the spoon and plopped a large scoop of the mixture into a bowl. He handed it off to Jacob then made one for himself before dropping to sit on the floor. Stephens took a large mouthful and swallowed before saying, "Get your gear together and meet me outside with your boy. We got a lot to do and not much time to do it. We're moving out today."

"Moving where?" Jacob asked.

Stephens smiled. "We're going back... taking the fight straight to these things." Stephens took another gulping bite and climbed to his feet, throwing his bowl and spoon into a large basin. He turned back to Jacob.

“Seriously, you need to get a move on. You’re with Recon now; we don’t drag ass, so hurry up.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Jacob stood on the front porch of the cabin with Jesse waiting eagerly close beside him. Both men huddled under the roof. They carried their duffle bags on their backs and were still without weapons. In the daylight, Jacob could see that the cabin sat deep in the woods, surrounded by tall trees, the muddy road the only access point. There were no neighbors in sight. Old wooden rocking chairs were on the porch and a fieldstone fire pit in the backyard. At one time, this must have been someone's vacation retreat—a hunting spot or place for family gatherings.

The sky was heavily overcast and the rain continued to pour down, causing the ruts in the road to overflow with brown water. Rain ran off the shingles and dripped over the roof's edge, creating deep puddles on the muddy path. The road at the bottom of the hill was now empty, the truck gone. The guard was also gone. Jacob exchanged glances with Jesse. "They said out front, right?"

Jesse shrugged his shoulders in response.

"Hey, Private Pyle! Over here!" a shout echoed across the yard, causing both men to turn their heads.

They saw a cedar-sided barn just inside the tree line. Its large sliding door was open to reveal men inside, nearly concealed by the shadows. Jacob stepped off quickly toward the barn with Jesse following close behind, stomping through the puddles. A solidly built, clean-shaven man with a staff sergeant's rank on his chest moved out and met them just outside the door. He looked them up and down without speaking.

“Damn, you all look even worse in the daylight. I asked Masterson for replacements and he sends me this shit? Hell... good thing Stephens vouched for you, or I’d be sending you off to the labor camps.” The man shook his head and pointed to the barn. “Well? What are you waiting for? Get inside, cherries.”

They stepped out of the rain and through the door to find the other men grouped around stacks of wooden crates. A lean, confident-looking man with bulging arms stood close to the door. He turned and grinned at them as they entered. “Finally got us some fresh ones. Where the hell they find these two?”

“Boots—right outta training from that new camp they set up at Meaford. They’s pushin’ recruits through fast as the Deltas can kill ‘em,” Stephens said, stepping from the back so that he could be seen. He shot a wink at Jacob to let him know he was among friends.

The lean man with slicked-back dark hair stepped closer and looked them up and down. “Well, no time for games; we got a mission to get to. Those two rucksacks in the corner belong to you. Fish out whatever personal things are important to you, an’ load ‘em up. The rest of your shit you can dump in the corner... you won’t be needing it.” The man turned around on the balls of his feet and, looking at Stephens, continued, “Get these two armed up. We need to meet the boat.”

“Yes, sir, L-Tee,” Stephens answered. Stephens moved from the group and herded the recruits to their rucksacks, giving them a minute to swap photos and personal items from their duffels and into the field packs. “You got everything ya need in those packs—sleeping bag, some clothing, and such. Don’t worry about holding on to them olive drab rags from training; you both have fresh camies in the packs. Hurry up and get them on. You can hold onto your boots; now ain’t the time to break in new ones.”

Stephens stepped off, quickly returning with a pair of M4 carbines equipped with advanced optics. “These were laser zeroed and paired to the optics. It’ll be good enough for now. The vests over there are loaded with mags; find one that fits and stand by. We’ll be leaving soon,” Stephens said.

Jacob was kneeling in front of his issue duffel bag, moving items to the larger rucksack. Placing a photo of his family in a front pocket, he looked up at Stephens. “Is this our base then? Will we be coming back here?”

Before Stephens could answer the question, the lieutenant moved up on them from behind and answered for him. “This is O.P. Thunder; just a jumping off point back to the States—a place where units go to rest, regroup, and gather replacements. A month ago, it was in Northern Michigan. Who knows where it will be a month from now if we fail.

“I’m Lieutenant Marks. You already know Stephens. Like the rest of us, he’s been fast tracked through promotions and is now your acting squad leader.” Marks turned to face the rest of the group, watching as they broke open the wooden crates to begin removing ammo cans and loading magazines. “You met the famous and bearded James last night. He’s as abrasive as three-grit sandpaper but listen to what he has to say. The big guy that yelled at ya is Rogers. He’s our everything expert, and if he tells you to do something, you better do it.

This right here is Alpha Squad... Assassins. We aren’t much of a squad, but this is what we got. I’m sure you know the main base got hit yesterday. The Deltas are getting bolder. They’re moving farther north away from the ponds, and we’ve been tasked to make it stop. We’ll get all the details later once we’re en route.

“I heard you all had a part in some of the cleanup action yesterday. That’s good, but it don’t mean shit to us here. Plinking Deltas from a hilltop doesn’t impress me much. You just do as you’re told and maybe you’ll survive the week.” Marks stared down into their blank expressions before turning and leaving the barn.

Stephens waited until the lieutenant left the space then looked back at Jacob. “Just stick with me for a few days, okay? You’ll get yourself squared away in no time. You too, Winslow; let Sergeant Stephens show you the way,” he said, smiling. “L-Tee wants us outside and ready to get on the trucks as soon as they show up. We’ll be moving to the coast soon.”

“Stephens, where the hell are we going?” Jacob asked.

“I told ya, we’re going back... back to the States. Gonna get in deep and start killing these things,” Stephens said. “These are good people—real good. We’re lucky to be with them.”

“That’s it? A week and a half of training and they’re sending me back?”

“Don’t worry about any of that. Just concentrate on staying behind your rifle; let me and the L-Tee worry about where we’re going and when we’ll get back.”

Jacob finished filling his pack and adjusted his vest; he leaned back and examined the faces of the men around him. They were hardened and leathered, not the soft and scared faces of the men in his training platoon. James was just finishing with the ammo detail. His sleeves were rolled, exposing a forearm covered with tattoos. A globe and anchor tattoo was prominent on the side of his neck just below his beard.

The stocky man, Rogers, was breaking up the remnants of the wooden crates and stacking the bits in a corner. Jacob figured the man couldn't have been more than five foot ten, but his posture was broad and intimidating, and he had the voice of a giant. He then watched Marks move back across the barn and examine a map in a plastic pouch. He held a scrap of paper next to it while his finger traced a path along the map. Jacob shook his head, intimidated. Jesse caught the movement and shared a similar expression. "I know man, I think we're in way over our heads," Jesse whispered.

The sound of screeching brakes stopped the men from what they were doing and caused them to look down toward the muddy road. "All right, Assassins, that's us. It's time to saddle up!" Stephens called out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Jacob moved quickly from the barn. At the bottom of the hill, he saw a large panel van with a Humvee positioned to the front of it. Marks was standing at the side of the van, talking to the driver as a second man slid the side door open. Jacob rushed down the hill and was ushered into the back of the cargo van. He shuffled to the side wall and dropped to the floor with his new rucksack on his lap. After the rest of the men piled into the van, Jacob used his feet to slide closer to the van's wall and men packed in around him.

He opened the top of the bag, sorting through his new equipment. Multicam uniforms, webbing to match, a new Kevlar helmet, a second pair of boots, a poncho liner, and a large freezer bag filled with socks. There were two MREs and several bottles of water. At the bottom of the bag was a small compartment, where he found boxes of extra ammunition. Jacob shook his head wearily as he closed the top of the pack. *It really is just the bare essentials*, he thought.

The van eased forward, causing its occupants to sway as it bumped through ruts in the road and splashed through deep puddles. It moved up a hill and picked up speed as the road seemed to level out. Stephens crawled across the floor of the van and grabbed at Jacob's vest, pulling on his ammo pouches and checking that everything was snapped tight before moving on and doing the same with Jesse.

"Expecting trouble?" Jacob whispered.

Stephens finished with Jesse's vest and looked up. "Have to be ready for anything once we leave the gates," Stephens said.

James coughed and opened a bottle of water. "They're everywhere now. Not in numbers like you'll see in the States, but the fuckers have managed to get by the blockades," he said before taking a long gulp of water.

"Blockades?" Jacob asked, feeling ignorant on the state of the world.

James put the cap back on the bottle and slid it into the cargo pocket of his trousers. His left hand removed his boonie cap. He scratched his head, thinking before speaking. "There's a final defensive line spanning from Lake St. Claire to Lake Erie. It's the only thing keeping the 401 Corridor closed... we lose that, we lose Quebec. We took out the Mackinaw Bridge early on. Back East, the 10th Mountain Division has managed to plug the Buffalo route into Canada."

Jacob let his head drop as he thought about what he'd heard. "What about the West?"

James shook his head without speaking.

The van abruptly stopped and the driver's window rolled down. At the same time, the sliding door swung open. Two weary looking Canadian soldiers with scruffy beards and soiled uniforms looked into the van, the lead man holding a bright flashlight. Jacob watched as the others strained their mouths wide and opened their eyes. The first soldier in the door examined them as the second stood back with his rifle at the ready. The soldier pointed at Jacob. Jacob quickly opened his mouth, showing the man the roof of his mouth and gums. The soldier nodded and slammed the door shut before slapping the side and allowing the driver to take off.

"Welcome to the hot zone. We have officially left friendly lines," Stephens said.

Jacob observed the rest of the team loading magazines and letting the bolts go forward, prepping their weapons. He followed suit by checking and double checking the safety on his rifle. The van slowed and made abrupt maneuvers, causing the occupants to sway back and forth.

"Most of the roads this far west are still blocked. We haven't had the time or resources to clear the highways," Stephens whispered, seeing the question in Jacob's eyes. "Out here, if anyone approaches that you don't personally recognize, you challenge them... do you understand?"

Jesse nodded and Jacob mumbled a soft yes.

"The Deltas are sneaky. They've learned they can't cross the border en mass without being detected so they started sending out smaller groups in

ones or twos. Once they get enough of them together, they start harvesting. It's happening more frequently, hundreds every day, and the refugee camps have become their favorite target," James said. "Even if we kill a hundred for every two we lose, we'll run out of soldiers by the end of the year."

"Jesus," Jesse gasped.

"Nahh, he had nothing to do with it," James responded, lying back against the wall of the van. "This is the Devil's work."

The vehicle stopped abruptly, again causing the occupants to shift. The passenger in front quickly exited the vehicle and flung the side door open. Marks looked in over the occupants and said, "No time to waste; let's get moving."

The men poured out of the passenger compartment, pulling on their packs and holding weapons at the ready. Jacob positioned himself close to Stephens as his eyes swept the terrain. The van had stopped just outside of a tall wooden barrier. The rain quit but the sky remained dark and gloomy.

They were at the edge of a small coastal town, where a stretched-out main street separated brick storefronts. Garbage and broken glass covered the pedestrian walkway that ran in front of the buildings. Looking down the long street, Jacob could see a narrow marina filled with small watercraft. Farther out was what appeared to be a large Navy ship sitting in the water.

The air stank of death and burning garbage; a heavy acrid odor that couldn't be escaped. He tried to pull his shirt up over his nose when Stephens looked at him. "It's the smell of destruction, ash, and decay. After the attacks, damn near every bomb in every Army's arsenal was dropped on these things to try to stop them. In Europe and Asia, they even used nukes. Rumor is we might have even dropped some in the Southwest, down on the Mexico border. The shit that didn't blow up usually burnt in the days after. All this stuff, places like this, have been abandoned. Left to rot. That, my friend, is what we have here today and what causes this glorious aroma."

"That's our ride," Marks said, pointing at the ship. "Stephens, lead us out. Keep us tight to the left side."

Stephens nodded and pointed at the bearded soldier; James grinned and pulled his cap on tight. "James, you got point. Rogers, you take slack. I'll bring up the rear with the cherries and L-Tee. We need to move quickly so we can get on board before the Deltas know we're in town."

James slapped the bottom of his rifle's magazine and stepped off, not looking behind him. Rogers waited until James created a bit of distance then turned and winked at Jacob before falling into the slack position, following James down the debris-ridden sidewalk. Stephens pushed Jacob off ahead before moving Jesse behind him; they fell into a long, stretched out column, traveling slowly but deliberately at the same time.

Jacob watched as James and Rogers worked together clearing areas and blind spots around corners. They quickly cleared danger areas and leapt back ahead before pulling the rest of the column in close behind them.

The way they traveled down the main street was far different from anything they'd done in training. The method in which the point man and slack man played off of each other's movements and hand signals seemed choreographed. Jacob slowed as he watched the men out front clear another corner until Stephens moved up behind, urging him forward.

"What's wrong? You see something?" Stephens whispered.

Jacob flinched, startled by the man moving up beside him. "What? No, it's just... how am I supposed to do that?" he asked, pointing ahead with a free hand.

"Don't worry, you'll get it. Trust me, you'll be glad you got teamed up with us," Stephens answered.

Jacob stopped and froze when he noticed the men out front had vanished from view. Stephens grabbed him by the collar and together they knelt behind the body of a large Chevy sedan resting on flat tires.

"Where did James go?" Jacob whispered.

Stephens didn't answer; instead, he put a gloved finger to his lips to signal silence while he searched the streets ahead. Jacob looked back and saw Jesse lying flat on the ground, his M4 resting in front of him. Marks was just behind him, looking through a pair of binoculars. Jacob turned back ahead and searched the empty street.

He saw a flash of movement on the far side of the street, which turned out to be a stout woman in a flannel shirt and camouflage pants. She carried an assault rifle close to her chest and ran to the front of what was once a pharmacy. She stopped at the front and two more men dressed similarly ran past her and leapt through the broken storefront window. After a brief pause, she followed them inside.

"Deltas?" Jacob whispered.

“No... bandits, maybe militia; either case, they’re bad news and we try to avoid them when we can,” Stephens answered.

Jacob looked at the building then back at Stephens. “So we just ignore them?”

Stephens shook his head. “Any groups out here are usually bad news; the types that can’t adapt to the camps or military service. Best case, they’re friendly and want our gear and help but they’ll slow us down and deplete our supplies.”

“And worst case?”

“They’re hostile and will kill us to get what we have. Listen, some of them ain’t all bad, but the groups out here are noisy and they take a lot of chances. Especially the ones this close to friendly lines, there’s usually a reason they choose to live in the hot zone. We need to keep our distance, okay? You may find this hard to believe, but it’s not all puppy dogs and rainbows outside the wire.”

Jacob nodded his understanding. Stephens pointed far ahead, turning Jacob’s attention back to the patrol. The point man was on his hands and knees and waving them forward.

“Okay, bro, you need to be sneaky now. Get your ass up there without them seeing you,” Stephens whispered, patting Jacob on the back.

Jacob nodded and pushed himself back onto his rear. He gripped his rifle tight as he took a last look toward the pharmacy building. The stout woman was nowhere to be seen. He stepped off lightly at first, testing the sound of his footfalls. Hearing nothing, he picked up the pace and ran ahead expecting to hear the sounds of gunfire. Finding another bit of cover ahead, he stopped and ducked low to hide behind a small van while he caught his breath. He glanced back and saw Stephens signaling for Jesse to move up.

Jacob duck-walked ahead and looked around the front bumper of the van. Closer now, he could see into the pharmacy storefront and hear the sounds of shelves being pushed over, but the woman was still nowhere to be seen. Looking ahead, he spotted Rogers waving him on impatiently. Jacob got back to his feet and sprinted forward. Running with his head down, he didn’t stop until he was feet away from Rogers. He carefully slowed his pace and knelt down beside the other soldier, breathing heavily as he pressed himself into the cover of an old stone bench.

He looked over his shoulder in time to see Jesse move up and drop into cover beside him. They held their position until all of them were grouped back together. Rogers shot Jacob thumbs up before the man climbed back to his feet and resumed his patrol just behind James. Stephens waved Jacob on and he moved ahead and fell back into the column. Looking around, they'd manage to move through the town and were now approaching the marina.

Long sets of wooden docks with small boats in all states of disrepair greeted them. Some were sunk in the water all the way the rails, their taut ropes still tied to cleats on the docks. In some places, larger boats had dropped below the surface and taken bits of the wooded pier structure with them. Jacob moved quicker now, mimicking the movements of James and Rogers ahead as they ran crouched down on the tips of their toes and stopping only briefly to look at their surroundings.

Soon they were deep into the marina, near a U-shaped fork in the wooden docks. James stepped near the edge of the dock and reached out at a filthy canvas tarp, covered in mildew and mold. He tugged at the edge and fought the fabric until it moved. Rogers stepped forward and assisted the bearded soldier; together they removed the heavy tarp, revealing a dark inflatable boat resting beneath.

As soon as the craft was uncovered, the two men leapt aboard and dropped the outboard engine into the water. The boat was coated in a non-reflective black paint, the bottom made of a soft aluminum covered in rubber skin. Marks ran up behind them with Stephens and Jesse in tow. "Okay, let's get this thing moving. We have a rendezvous to make."

Jacob moved along the dock and prepared to jump onto the small inflatable when a gunshot echoed from the main street.

CHAPTER THIRTY

“Aww shit, they’re in it now,” Rogers gasped, looking through the scope on his rifle. “Not much I can do from here; they’re out of range.” He was positioned high in the bow of the inflatable, standing so that he could see beyond the marina and into the main street.

Marks moved ahead to look past him. “What do you see?”

“Looks like those fools attracted some unwanted attention. I got Delta movement coming on to the main drag, less than ten for now. Those fools better move before more show up or they’re gonna get cornered,” Rogers reported. A woman’s ear-piercing scream put emphasis on Rogers’s statement.

Marks looked down then toward James sitting over the controls; his eyes were locked on the town, his gloved hands pumping into fists hungry for action. “It’s not our mission, James. Come on, let’s start the boat and get us out of here.”

James, instead of starting the engine, raised his hand. “Sir, if I may?”

“Go on, but make it quick.”

The pace of the gunfire from the main street picked up, as did the screams. The sound of the battle was terrifying but still far away. Suddenly, the chaos was joined with the howls of the Deltas. “Sir, just let me put some fire downrange, help pull some of them Deltas back in our direction and give those fools a fighting chance at least. Hell, sir, we got time and distance on our side. We can get in the water before them things get anywhere near us,” James said calmly, yet failing to hide the urgency in his voice as he continued to look back.

Marks shook his head. Gunfire raged behind them. “Fine... make it happen. Take one of the cherries, but don’t go far, stay in the marina... if you fuck up, we won’t be able to wait.”

The bearded sergeant smiled and backed away from the controls, turning and jumping back to the dock in a single leap. Pausing, he looked back at Jesse then turned to Jacob. “You ready to get your dick wet, rookie?”

Jacob looked up at him with shock in his face. Showing confusion and fear, he shrugged; he then nodded, knowing what he had to do.

James laughed. “Good, then drop that pack like a set of college girl panties and come run with me. You ain’t lived ‘til you’ve had some alone time with Sergeant James,” he said, offering a hand to Jacob.

Jacob dropped his rucksack and pushed himself forward. Reaching out, he took James’s hand and was yanked out of the boat and nearly across the far side of the dock. James took off at a light jog, not waiting for Jacob to steady himself. Explosions, mixed with the sounds of the gunfire, ricocheted across the marina.

“We’ll have the engine ready to go; don’t be late,” Marks called out after them.

Jacob leapt forward. Keeping his rifle tight to his chest, he struggled to keep up as James rounded corners looking for the end of the docks and searched for the perfect position. James turned left and moved toward a wooden boathouse structure. Near the boathouse was a flimsy wooden barrier with a gate and a large concrete planter blocking vehicles from driving onto the docks.

James dropped in close behind the wooden barrier next to the planter then signaled Jacob to find a position near his side. Jacob watched as the bearded soldier removed a pair of hand grenades and set them on the wooden barrier to his front. Jacob reached for his own grenades, but the soldier reached out a hand, stopping him.

“Nope, this is just insurance; two should be enough—save yours for later,” James said before looking back to the front.

Jacob could see the mass building far ahead, gathering on the sidewalk across from the pharmacy. Whoever was in the building was putting up a fight, keeping most of the Deltas in the street. The things were standing,

using the abandoned cars for cover as they fired into the empty storefront. If they charged, the fight would be over.

"I've never seen them fight like that," Jacob whispered.

James spit on the dock as he raised his right hand to make adjustments to his optics. "Yeah, they get smarter every day. Most still run at you, but every now and then, we find a group like this that knows how to fight."

"Once I start firing, they're going to change direction and come at us. You need to be quick and make your shots count. Don't let your rifle go empty, but call out if you have to reload; I need to know what you are doing at all times. Stay close to me," James said with excitement in his voice. "Understood?"

Only hearing every other word, Jacob nodded his reply, causing James to spin and grab his shirt collar. "I said, *understood*?"

Jacob backed away. "I got it!"

"Then fucking say so; this ain't scout camp—you need to sound off!" James lifted the rifle back to his eye. "We're wasting time, let's go to work." Eager to join the fight, he swiveled, quickly found a target, and pulled the trigger.

Jacob raised his own weapon and searched the street to the front, looking for targets. As he searched, he watched the Deltas drop to James's rifle. Others stopped firing into the pharmacy, turning in the direction of the new threat. Jacob looked at a tall male through his scope; the creature turned and faced him, its mouth open and ready to scream. Jacob flinched and squeezed the trigger at the same time. Keeping his eye on the target, he was rewarded with a pink mist as the creature dropped to a knee. Refocusing his eyes, Jacob held his breath and fired again, this time watching as the thing's head snapped back.

He locked onto another target and fired at it on the move. The bullet struck true, and the skinny man tumbled forward from the impact. James let loose a three-round burst into a mass of creatures charging at the storefront. Searching for targets of his own, Jacob locked in on another man who was running toward the docks. He eased back the trigger and fired, missing completely, the rounds dropping behind the creature. He continued to pull the trigger and watched a round impact at the man's feet, missing again. More screams came from close by; so close he thought they were on top of

him. Jacob rose away from the scope and saw that a small group had broken off and moved at them from a flank.

Concealed in a blind spot, they'd gotten to within a hundred feet and were closing at a dead sprint. Jacob stood and backed away from the barrier. Lifting his rifle, he fired quick shots and dropped the first runner. Jacob turned on the balls of his feet to fire into the chest of a woman with a torn shirt. She was armed with a steel rod and slashing at the air as she screamed while running toward him.

Two pulls of the trigger and she stumbled out of control, crashing to the ground. Jacob pivoted hard again and found himself looking into the devilish black eyes of the final attacker. Empty handed, it sprinted on with fisted hands, its teeth bared and lips curled back to reveal charcoal-black gums. It screamed as its arms flailed wildly.

Jacob aimed center mass and pulled the trigger. Feeling no recoil, he looked down and saw that his rifle's bolt was locked back on an empty chamber. His left arm dropped down, frantically searching his chest rig for a fresh magazine. The screaming man closed the distance and became airborne, flying over the barrier as Jacob tried to feed a full magazine. The metal box slammed against the empty magazine that he'd forgotten to drop. Now fully panicked, Jacob yelled and gripped the rifle, lashing out at his attacker. James spun a half second before the creature impacted; he fired two quick shots, knocking the creature off its path and into the water.

"Well, you fucked that all up. Come on, it's time to move, rookie," James shouted. Gripping the first grenade in his hand, he removed the pin and threw it deep to the front. Before it detonated, James had the second pin pulled and arcing into the distance after the first.

He pushed Jacob ahead and together they ran to the small inflatable. The explosions cracked behind them in rapid succession. The gunfire softened, although the telltale sounds of rounds zipping overhead continued; the zips and pings sounded off as they harmlessly struck far away objects. Jacob ran with burning lungs down the dock's maze of paths. As they neared the inflatable, they heard the engine running—the boat had already been turned in the water and was being held close to the dock, awaiting their return. Jacob neared its side first and poured off the wood surface, tumbling into the boat. Jesse reached out and, grabbing him, stabilized him against the rigid hull.

Jacob pushed back and let his head hang while he gasped for air. He watched as James casually stepped into the inflatable and took a seat at the controls near Rogers. He grabbed a bottle from his cargo pocket and took a long drink. He looked back at Jacob and winked. "Nice work, rook." He slapped Rogers on the back and said, "Get us out of here. They'll be hungry now."

Rogers let the throttle move forward. The engine roared, causing the bow to lift out of the water. As the small boat picked up speed and smoothed out over the lake, Rogers navigated it to open water, aiming for the coastal patrol ship that sat in the dark blue waters of the lake. "Any of those friendlies get away?" Marks yelled over the engine.

James nodded. "Yes, sir; I saw three break out from the pharmacy and run for it once we joined the fight. I lost visual with them after that."

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“Take her in slow,” Marks ordered. “We don’t need to go getting shot up by a nervous deckhand.”

Jesse sat up, leaning forward. “Those things don’t drive boats. Why would they be nervous?”

The soldiers turned and looked at him. Rogers smiled, showing his teeth. “You’ve been out of touch, boy. Deltas can do it all now.”

“No way? Drive a boat? What about a car; can they fly?” Jesse asked.

Rogers laughed. “Everything. Longer they cook, the more dangerous they are.”

“Damn,” Jesse muttered.

Jacob looked on as Jesse leaned back against him, shaking his head. Rogers eased back on the throttle. As they moved slower, the lake’s swells became more apparent, the boat rising and falling on the water. Objects on the large ship quickly came into view. Rogers killed the throttle, allowing the boat to glide along the surface toward a back corner of the ship. Two men on deck in digital-blue camouflage ran to the rail, one holding a shotgun at the ready, the other a bright flashlight. The man with the light leaned forward and aimed the beam.

“You all know the drill,” a sailor shouted down at them.

Everyone turned and opened their mouths into the beam of light. The sailor scanned their faces then lowered his light and tossed a line. James caught the other end and held the inflatable close to the ship then tied it off to the ladder, steadying it as Marks reached up and placed a boot on the

ladder's rung. Once he was away, Jacob climbed up next, following the lieutenant until he was on the deck of the ship.

Jacob moved away from the others and pushed against the rails. The deck was large and gray with a building structure just to the left, a hatch door pinned open. Across from him was a large machine gun. A sailor stood watch over it while looking out toward the shoreline with a pair of binoculars. Another sailor emerged from the hatch, rushing to Jacob's side and helped him out of his rucksack. Others gathered around, lending a hand to carry their gear through the hatch. They were ushered down a passageway and into the ship's galley where they were directed to large round tables. Jacob followed his team to the front and found a seat at the end of the first row.

Sailors at the front of the galley filled white porcelain cups from a large stainless steel cylinder and handed them out to the waiting men. A young sailor, barely twenty, looked down at Jacob as he passed him a cup of steaming coffee. "Hey, you wouldn't happen to have any chewing gum, would ya?"

"Uh, no," Jacob answered.

The sailor bit his lip and nodded. "Okay. Well, if you come across any, think of me, okay? I can trade you for it," the sailor said, walking away. Jacob held the cup to his lips and sipped as he looked over at Jesse sitting across from him. His friend shrugged his shoulders and tried to hold back a laugh. "No chewing gum? Damn, these guys got it rough," he whispered.

A man in digital-blue camouflage, wearing a black ball cap entered the galley. He stopped at the front and sifted through items on a counter before grabbing the entire tray and walking toward the seated men. As the man approached, he dropped the tray and slid it across the table's surface. "Wish there was more I could offer you. We're running low on everything... haven't been resupplied in weeks," the man said.

James reached across the table, snatching a packet of saltine crackers from the tray. "Thanks, Chief. We'll take anything we can get."

The man shook his head and sighed. "How many times I gotta tell you to call me Bud."

"Just one more, I promise," James laughed.

"We had reports of gunfire and explosions on shore. Did you run into trouble?" Bud asked.

Marks slurped at his coffee and set the cup in front of him. "Just helping out some friendlies; nothing worth reporting on."

Bud shook his head. "Yeah, I'm sure you'd like to avoid a report. You know, with that contact, you've shut down this entry spot for a week. The Deltas will be all over this place. Now we'll have to burn fuel looking for something else."

Marks ignored the admonishment. "So, what's the deal? I know the Navy is still flying drones stateside; how does it look over there? Any signs of them thinning out?"

"No, quite the opposite, really; it's bad. Seeing less and less of the living every day. We can't even approach the shoreline in daylight anymore without taking fire. We haven't made a survivor pickup in over a week."

"Concentrations?" Marks asked.

Bud took a cup of coffee from the table and found a seat. With his free hand, he reached into a pocket on his left leg and removed a long manila envelope. "Heavy around the big cities and, of course, bodies of water. Most of them are scattered along the coastlines. The real danger lately is how fast they gather, and no place seems to be void of them." The chief took a sip and looked across the table at Marks. "You sure about going across? I can push these orders back; I have no problem doing it. Delay you some; maybe get you a week's rest on board."

"What about the captain?" Marks asked.

Bud shook his head. "He still ain't a hundred percent, and shit is getting to him, losing so many of the crew. He'll stick with me if I refuse to deliver you. Shit, I doubt he would even know."

"I appreciate the sentiment, Chief, but we didn't get all dressed for nothing," Marks said.

"I figured as much. Do you know what's in here?" Bud slid the sealed envelope across the table, leaving his hand on it.

Marks pursed his lip and nodded his head. "I've seen the intel."

Jacob looked at the faces around him, trying to see if they were in on the conversation or as lost as he was. He saw no looks of recollection or concern, only committed stares.

"Do you believe it? Do you think it's what they say it is?" He held the envelope, waiting for Marks to take it from him.

“The French and Germans say it works. I think we have to take a chance. Either way, it’s above my pay grade.”

Bud nodded his head and let go of the envelope. “If you’re still getting paid then I need to make some phone calls. I’ll leave you to brief your team. We’ve already set a course for north of Bay City. With any luck, we’ll have you there unseen in the darkest part of the night.” Bud paused to look at his watch. “Looking at oh three hundred. You can rest in here and use the heads on the second deck. Use the showers while you have the chance; hot water is the only thing we have plenty of.”

Bud got to his feet before lumbering to the galley door, stopping just inside the hatch. He turned and looked back. “Marks, seriously, if you or your men need anything or change your mind, come find me.”

“Thank you, Chief—er, Bud.”

The men sat silent until Bud left the room and closed the hatch. James was the first to speak. “Damn, sir, you’ve been holding out on us. Sounds like they got something extra shitty in mind for the Assassins. I can’t wait to see it.”

Marks didn’t answer; instead, he passed the sealed envelope off to James. Marks pushed away from the table and found his rucksack. He flipped it over and removed his sleeping bag from the carrier. James drew his KA-BAR from a hard leather scabbard on his hip and used the blade to slice open the envelope in one smooth stroke. He peeled open the cut edge and removed the contents onto the table: a section of map, a strip of white paper with radio call signs and grid coordinates, along with a smaller, tape-sealed envelope with a yellow tag labeled with a list of names.

James held up the tagged envelope, staring at it. “Tertra... chlora something or other?”

“TCDDMX4,” Marks said. He laid his sleeping bag out flat and moved back to the table, taking a seat over the map. He unfolded it then turned it so everyone could see it.

“What’s a TCDDMX4?” Jacob asked, moving closer and seeming to recognize the word from his college days.

Marks stopped and looked at him, then grinned. “It’s what gives Agent Orange its bite. Seems the same shit that kills us slowly stops the Deltas in their tracks. At least that’s what the Frogs and Germans are saying.”

“No way... Agent Orange kills 'em?” Stephens said as he reached across the table for the sealed envelope.

“No, not Agent Orange; the toxin found in it—the cancer causing part—when super concentrated and weaponized.”

Stephens paused, examining the word on the yellow tag before holding up the sealed envelope. “So what’s inside?”

Marks nodded. “Instructions on how to test and verify it... if we can find it.”

James laughed as he got up from the table and moved across the room to refill his cup. “And where do we find this elusive black magic that stops the Deltas cold?”

Marks opened the map and pointed at a city near the center of it. “Middleville, Michigan, twenty-five miles inland from our drop-off point. According to sources, they were working on the stuff before the government pulled the plug on the project. Apparently, they still have tanks full of it 'cause Uncle Sam never paid the expense of destroying it.”

Rogers leaned over the map, using his finger to scale the distance. “That’s a lot of uphill sledding, sir; better hope we can secure a vehicle.”

The lieutenant nodded. “It gets worse; they aren’t even sure that it’s there. The chemical plant may or may not be intact. Satellite and drone imagery shows the holding tanks intact, but we don’t know if they’ve been drained or damaged.”

Stephens put his hands up. “Now hold up. How do we even know this stuff works or what it’s supposed to do?”

“The French assure us it works,” Marks said.

Jacob shook his head. “And they have a history of reliability,” he said, causing the others to laugh.

“Well, look at that, the cherry’s got jokes,” James said.

Marks raised both his hands, silencing the group. “It’s good intelligence, and like I said before, the Germans confirmed it.” He lifted his cup and took a sip before taking the envelope back from Stephens. “There is a small village in Italy, Seveso. In the seventies, there was some sort of chemical spill. Loads of this shit got dumped into the ground there.”

“And?” Stephens asked.

Marks beamed. “And there ain’t no Deltas in Seveso. And that wasn’t even the concentrated batch.”

Stephens shook his head and prepared to speak. Marks put up a hand, stopping him. “No, the Germans didn’t believe it either, so they got their hands on some of it and sprayed it over an occupied village in the Alps. After twenty-four hours, every Delta in the neighborhood was dead or severely FUBAR and not a single one has moved back.”

“But sir,” Jacob said, “if this stuff is toxic, and say we use it, won’t we just be turning the world into a no man’s land? We might as well just hit them with sarin gas or anthrax.”

James chuckled mirthlessly. “Cherry, we already tried all of that shit; nothing worked. Hell, India even tried nuking the bastards. It incinerated some of them but didn’t even slow the rest of ’em down. If you’re afraid of hurting Mother Earth, you might as well punch out and sign the deed over to the Deltas. Because I don’t know if you looked outside lately, but it’s already no man’s land.”

Marks again put his hands up, silencing them. “I wouldn’t worry about it, Jacob; there isn’t enough to spray the globe, even if we wanted to. This stuff is pretty hard to come by in the concentrations we need. But if this chemical plant in Middleville has it, we can use what’s available to create a real buffer zone, a border to protect our people while we fight them. All we have to do is verify it’s there and get the hell out. If we can deliver a sample, that’s even better.

“If we can secure enough, it puts us back into the fight. Now let’s get some sleep. We can finalize our plans when we hit the Michigan coastline.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Graceful as a herd of stampeding buffalo, the ship's crew was back in the galley, making coffee and preparing breakfast. Pots slammed together, waking Jacob. He rolled in his sleeping bag and pushed against the wall, checking his watch: *Just past two a.m.* Looking across the dark galley, he could see a small seam of light escaping from a door leading into the kitchen area. "Damn, nobody sleeps anymore," he grunted.

"Hell, no. These guys don't mess around," he heard Jesse whisper. "Not gonna complain; I'm starving."

Jacob sat up in the bag and looked back. Jesse was curled up next to one of the galley tables, the other soldiers farther behind them, still snoring away. The ship's engines hummed, but very quietly now. Jacob could hear the calm slapping of the water against the sides of the ship instead of the breaking of waves he'd heard earlier, letting him know that the forward momentum had halted.

"When did we stop?" he whispered.

Jesse pushed himself into a sitting position and leaned close. "It got quiet about an hour ago. I think we've dropped anchor."

Jacob nodded, letting the bag fall from around his shoulders, the cold night air slowly waking him. He sat drearily; without realizing it, the anticipation was building in his stomach and prepping his body for the day's activities. As jitters grew in his legs, he found he couldn't sit still any longer.

Working by feel in the dark room, he dragged himself out of the sleeping bag and removed his meager hygiene kit from his pack. He slunk

across the galley, avoiding the other sleeping bags on the floor, and then dropped to a bench while he wrestled on his trousers and boots. Jacob got to his feet, passed through the galley, and stepped into the well-lit passageway.

He found his way down the long p-way, stopping to ask directions twice before he found the second deck head and showers. The other men on the team had taken to growing long “tactical” beards; or at the very least, a solid two days’ worth of scruff. Jacob looked at his own grown whiskers in the mirror, running his hand over the dark scruff. He decided this would be his last shave as he stepped into the hot shower.

The water was hot and the steam did wonders clearing his head. He stepped out into the cold air, dug through his bag, and retrieved a nearly empty can of shaving cream and a clean razor from his hygiene kit. Once he used it, he would discard the remains here. He wasn’t planning to take more than a bar of soap and a towel with him downrange, and this would be less weight he had to carry. No reason to waste his last opportunity for a clean shave.

As he finished wiping his face with a clean towel, a young sailor wearing blue shorts with a well-worn *Pearl Jam* T-shirt, moved into the room behind him. The young man stopped to look at Jacob’s multicam trousers hanging on a hook over his roughed-out boots. “You with the ground team?” the sailor asked.

Jacob hesitated, still not feeling like a member of the Assassins yet. He took a deep breath as he wiped the rest of the shaving foam from his chin. “Yeah, I guess you could say so. Just recently joined them.”

The sailor nodded then squeezed past Jacob to one of the benches. The man stripped down and entered the shower. “Hey, you know anything about Virginia?” he shouted over the spraying water.

Jacob stuffed his things back into his kit, tossing the shaving gear into a trashcan before draping the damp towel over his shoulders. “Virginia? What about it?” he asked.

“Yeah, you know, Norfolk, Virginia Beach, Little Creek? Anything... how they are doing, any news? Since we moved up here, nobody has heard from home.”

Jacob paused, moving against a bench to dress into his uniform. “Sorry, kid, can’t say that I have. I’ve been up in Canada. I’m from Chicago

originally, but I've been pretty cut off from the world myself. How long have you been here?"

The man turned off the shower and exited, drying his face with a towel. He stopped and looked at the ceiling thoughtfully. "Hell, a month, I guess. No, that ain't right... hell, maybe even three. I'm not sure; times and dates don't have the same meaning that they used to. We stopped counting when they told us we were never going back. Has to have been a while because we're damn near out of everything on board.

"This patrol ship isn't set up for long periods between replenishment, out here operating alone like this. We do what we can, taking from other boats or salvaging when we find a friendly port, but it's still hard. *Too* hard even, for some of us."

Jacob laced his boots, happy to have found someone who wasn't afraid to speak. Most of the men in his team weren't talkers, or when they did, it was like getting juice from a peanut. They were always abrupt or directly to the point, intimidating and making him uncomfortable to ask questions. Maybe once he got to know them better, he thought. Jacob put on his T-shirt and left his towel wrapped over his shoulders. He leaned back against the wall. "What's that mean—'too hard'?"

"Well, you know, like the skipper. He just shut down on us... don't even leave his berthing anymore. And a couple of the guys jumped ship one night; said they'd had enough and were going home. I'm sure you've seen some of the same where you come from."

Jacob nodded in understanding. "So how did you end up in the Great Lakes?"

"We got rapid deployed right after the first attacks. We traveled fast, came up the seaway... you know; back when it was still open. Sailed on through... right up to Detroit. They tasked us to help in the fight to save the city. No luck... we got here too late to make a difference. Spent most of our time ferrying survivors across the lake.

"Been stuck in these waters ever since. Once the seaway was lost, we got trapped. It's been pretty busy running teams like yours back and forth, supporting missions inland with our UAV, even helping escort some of the larger civilian ships. Things have slowed down lately; most people that want out have left, and we are close to being the last vessel out here now.

“Most of the civilian freighter crews beached themselves on the Canadian side and disappeared. I’m sure we will do the same eventually. Hell, Chief says if we don’t get a real resupply soon, we may have to go into port for good. We got some firepower on board, but this low on ammo and supplies, we aren’t much good to anyone. Hardly got enough on board to even defend ourselves, if it comes down to it.”

Jacob sat listening, not wanting to interrupt. He watched as the young man finished shaving and gathered his belongings. He stepped to the door then paused to look back at Jacob. “Hey, good luck, man. We take a lot of you all to the States; not many of you come back.”

“Really, is it that bad?” Jacob asked.

The sailor furled his brow. “I know about the dioxin. Let’s just say you ain’t the first team that’s been tasked with this same mission.” The sailor dipped his chin then turned and left the room, leaving Jacob alone.

He gathered his things and moved back to the galley, returning the way he came. The rest of the team was up now, feasting on plates of powdered eggs and toast with plenty of black coffee. Jacob walked past them and stuffed his things back into his rucksack. Jesse called him to a galley table and slid a large plate of powdered eggs and burnt toast across to him.

“These guys must like us; they fixed up the last of their eggs and fresh baked bread just for us,” Jesse said, grinning.

“More like a gallows meal. I think it’s more pity than like,” Jacob said.

James grunted. “Hold your tongue, boy. It’s respect; they know where we are headed.”

Jacob took in a heaping forkful of eggs and washed it down with the hot coffee. “I heard about the one-way missions...”

“If you’re looking for a one-way trip, it can be arranged for you. If not, then shut your damn mouth. It’s bad juju to talk shit like that before an op,” James spat.

Marks passed across the room, with the chief of the boat, Bud, close behind him. The chief was holding a black canvas bag in his hands.

“That’s enough, fellas; let’s save it for the Deltas. Bud was able to give up these toys for us. Could be a difference maker,” Marks said.

The chief set the bag on the table and opened it, revealing six M4 suppressors and MK III silenced pistols with a number of boxes of subsonic rounds. Bud reached into the bag and stacked them on the table. “The

SEALs left some gear in the weapons locker. It ain't much, but I know what you're up against, and I thought you could use it," Bud said. "There's more shit they left behind in the corner over there; take what you need.

"And fellas, be careful with this gear. Don't go filling it up with bullet holes and bleeding all over it. Bring it back to me in one piece, okay? I'm sure when we get back to port they'll be asking for it and wanting to take it out of my paycheck."

"You're not staying?" Stephens asked.

"Afraid not. We've been recalled back to Meaford. Leaving as soon as we drop you off, hopefully for a refitting and resupply, but I have my fears that it's not in the cards for us." Bud used his hand to pull at his overgrown mustache. "Listen, if you get into trouble, get a message to me and we'll come running, orders or not."

James shoveled in the last of his eggs and reached for one of the small Ruger pistols. He drew back the slide, showing an empty chamber. Grinning his approval, he shoved the weapon into a pocket on his tactical vest. "Thanks, Chief. I'll make sure I nail one right between the eyes for you."

Bud nodded. "Just keep your ass alive for me; that'll be thanks enough ___"

A radio on Bud's shoulder squelched, interrupting him. He reached up and pressed the transmitter button. "Go ahead."

"All ready, standing by," came a metallic response.

"Ten-four, I'll let them know," Bud said. He looked back at Marks. "The RHIB is ready to launch when you are."

Marks slapped his hands together. He ordered the team to finish their chow and to get to the top deck in ten. Jacob gulped down the last of his eggs and coffee and scrambled to his gear. He stuffed in the remnants of his belongings, pulling straps tight on the pack to crush its size and make it more manageable. Rogers moved to his side and snatched away his M4, using a wrench to remove his flash suppressor and install the new silencer. He then handed Jacob two magazines with a strip of black tape at the bottom of each. "These are if we go quiet; make sure you have the right mag in, or the suppressor won't do us much good."

Before Jacob could ask a question, Rogers had already moved on to set up Jesse's rifle. Jacob waited for him to finish then hoisted his rucksack and

moved to Jesse's side for the walk up to the top decks.

The others passed them moving fast. Jacob picked up his pace climbing to the top and out onto the deck. The air was cold and damp. Still dark out, the stars shone bright over a clear sky, reflecting over the calm Saginaw Bay. It was impossible to tell which direction the shore was in, as there were no coastal navigation lights to be seen. Water calmly slapped at the sides. A number of sailors were standing around, having come on deck to witness their departure.

The team followed a sailor along the decks and to the fantail, where a large ramp had been deployed. They were offered a set of orange flotation devices, which Marks waved off. A man tossed them aside before moving to the business end of a winch control station. Following the cable down was a black RHIB, similar to the one they'd used to get there but far larger with a wood deck and a machine gun mounted in the bow.

Jacob walked close and Rogers took his pack, loading it into the boat with the other gear. Two sailors moved in close, both carrying blue five-gallon jugs of fresh water and other supplies. They set them on the deck and Jacob handed them off to Rogers. When all the gear was loaded, Stephens gathered them all off to one side.

"Easy day today. We're gonna egress to a marina at the mouth of the river. The sailors say that the marina is nearly empty—"

"What does that mean, *nearly*?" James interrupted.

"Nearly," Stephens said. "The marina is isolated north of the city. They've spotted Deltas on the main roads, but nothing concentrated. We have a couple of hours of UAV support. Right now they're coming up empty. We will have eyes while shelter. After that, we are on our own. If everyone is ready, let's mount up."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Memories of his first amphibious assault against Museum Park raced through Jacob's mind as he rode in—flashbacks of the Darkness holding the shorelines and brave men being thrown against the breakwaters like cattle being led to slaughter. They charged the beaches under heavy fire with nowhere else to go. Jacob looked across the boat at Stephens, thinking of Murphy and wishing he were here with them, knowing it wasn't possible.

This time, the ride was different. Instead of shaking with adrenaline, waiting for the boat to slam against a breakwater while explosive violence filled the air, Jacob sat near the center of the boat, trying to stay hidden. He tried to control his breathing, sure that everyone around him could hear his heart thumping in his chest.

They motored into the center of the Saginaw River then cut the gas engine, switching to a small electric trolling motor to slide them quietly against the current. Cold water sloshed over the bow, splashing against his face and soaking his uniform top. Jacob stretched, trying to ignore the sudden chill, fighting off the shivers aching at his arms. He let his hands slip over the rifle, taking comfort in its weight as he worked his fingers over the selector switch. His eyes looked ahead, and slowly he could make out the black-grays of the distant shoreline emerging from the fog.

The marina was ahead on their right. A sign identified it as a private yacht club. High-end boats were scattered along the shoreline of a main boathouse that was burnt to the ground. Looking into the marina, Jacob could see that many of the docks' fingers were twisted and broken with sailboats pushed up against them. Summer storms and lack of maintenance

had done damage to the place. There were a number of docks branching out like a tree, each branch filled with slips of its own. They skipped the first marina entrance, finding it too congested to maneuver in easily. They passed the destroyed boathouse, motoring into a smaller harbor shelter with a wide entrance that allowed for faster access back into the river.

Once inside the harbor and out of the river's current, the electric motor was cut to allow the RHIB to drift freely with the occasional correction by a paddle. James lay far in the bow of the boat with his night vision goggles dropped low over his eyes. Rogers perched over the fifty-caliber machine gun, searching for threats just behind him. Quietly stroking at the water, they guided the RHIB in close to a large cabin cruiser—the Great Lakes' version of a yacht. The boat quietly thumped against the dive deck of the larger luxury watercraft. Marks, walking on the tips of his toes, leapt aboard the second vessel and tied the boats together with a nylon rope.

Marks stealthily slipped across the deck and dropped to his knees, peering out at the dock access. He let his rifle hang from its sling as he quietly removed the gangplank connecting them to the dock then allowed the board to slip into the water. Keeping his rifle up, Marks shifted his position and watched James bound up with Rogers just behind him. The two men boarded the boat and patrolled forward below deck. Jacob could faintly hear the men moving about the cabin cruiser; speaking low muffled commands to each other, doors being opened, a glass bottle kicked, a curse at the noise. Silently, the two men reappeared on the deck of the cruiser, turning out in opposite directions.

"It's clear," Rogers whispered.

Marks moved back to the edge of the boat, leaned over the RHIB, and whispered a command to Stephens, who touched his helmet. He lurched, crouched low, and looked down at Jacob and Jesse. "Okay, let's get the gear transferred. This is our home now for a while."

Jacob navigated to the far side of the RHIB and stepped onto the boat's deck, leaving Jesse alone. Slowly, Jesse handed over the large rucksacks as Jacob stacked them on the cruiser's deck. After everything had been moved, Rogers walked past them and secured the M2 machine gun on the RHIB by covering it with a large canvas case. Jacob crept to a corner of the boat and looked out over the surrounding docks.

The marina was arranged in a large horseshoe pattern with boats tied all along the sides in individual slips. Their boat was located at the top of the center arc, facing the river. They had a clear route back into open water if they needed to egress quickly, and a straight run down the dock to reach dry land. Like the marina in Canada, several of the boats here were sitting low in the water, flooded, with their mooring lines stretched and putting stress on the docks. A large sailboat next to them showed obvious signs of a battle. Bullet holes riddled the sides, the sail was ripped and shredded, and a pile of luggage sat on the dock, just next to its gangway.

Jacob picked up a *thump* behind him and turned as James dropped a woman's body onto the deck. Without speaking, he went back below and returned with the body of an elderly man, which he placed on top of the woman. He stopped and pointed at Jacob. "Get these over the side, but be quiet about it."

Jacob looked at him, disgusted, but nodded his acknowledgement, knowing it had to be done. He grabbed at the old man's corpse. The stench permeated through the man's clothing and overwhelmed him; Jacob's eyes watered and he had to turn away before he retched. He backed away, pulled his T-shirt over his face and returned to the task. Jesse came up beside him and helped by grabbing the body under a shoulder, gripping its heavy shirt. Together, they moved it to the rail and slowly lowered the man over the side, watching as the corpse slipped below the surface of the water then bobbed back to the top before drifting away.

They moved to the woman next and did the same. Again, the body slipped below the surface, returned to the top, and then floated into an unseen current, following the old man. They watched in macabre fascination as the couple floated off and into the stronger currents of the Saginaw River.

"I feel like we should say something," Jesse whispered.

"Let's go, we need to be set up below before the sun comes up," Stephens whispered to them.

Jacob swallowed, still watching the couple drift away, wondering who they were, how they died, and why they didn't sail away when they were so close to entering the big lake and making their way to Canada. Maybe they passed early on or were ambushed back when people were hiding and sheltering in place trying to wait things out like he had done. Jacob hoped

they passed peacefully, maybe an overdose of pills, or carbon monoxide poisoning. He blinked his eyes hard, pushing the thoughts away; he'd seen enough death that these things shouldn't bother him anymore.

Stephens called out to them again to get below deck. Jacob shook off the dark thoughts and grabbed his gear, making his way to the large cabin. As soon as he entered the hatch, the stench hit him. The rot and decay of death was in the air, so thick it seemed to cling to his skin. He hesitated in the door, not wanting to enter. He wondered if he could negotiate a way to stay outside. James barreled out, carrying a folded up mattress. He pushed Jacob aside, making his way through the cabin entrance and dumping the soiled blankets and linens over the side. When James returned, he pushed Jacob ahead of him. He moved forward, closed the master cabin door at the end of the galley, and sealed it with duct tape. It helped cut down on the smell.

Rogers was moving around, opening hatches to circulate air and powering off all the main electrical breakers. Marks moved in behind him. "How's it looking?"

Before answering his leader, Rogers opened another panel and flipped down a long set of breakers. "Solar and wind chargers seem to be up—but the radios and navigation lights bled the system dry. We should have something tomorrow once the sun comes up, assuming the battery can hold a charge."

"Radio?"

Rogers nodded. "We have comms open with the ship. They're pulling back the UAV and will anchor up in forty mikes. I can get the big antenna up once we get some daylight. I don't want to stumble around up there in the dark. Cables and lines are twisted everywhere."

Marks slapped the man on the shoulder. "Nice work. Let's button up and wait for the sun then."

The team settled in below deck, leaving only James on the top to stand watch with the night vision. Jacob moved into the small galley and sat at a booth-shaped dining table. Scooting himself along a bench so that he was against a wall, he lifted a foot to the seat and placed his rifle on the table in front of him. The smell of death was still prevalent, but with the master cabin door closed and sealed, it was tolerable. Stephens pushed buttons and spun dials on the galley stove. He was rewarded with the hiss of a small,

blue flame. Smiling, he found a small coffee pot and a can of grounds. Pouring water from a bottle in his pack, he quickly went to work brewing.

Jacob sat without speaking as the boat gently rocked. He felt the air pick up with the breeze that cut through the porthole windows. The boats in the marina shifted with the wind, their skeleton framework creaking and cracking as the boats crunched together. The sailboat in the slip next to the cabin cruiser rubbed against the dock, wailing and screeching as the water lifted it up and down, the hull protesting as it scraped against the docks. Jacob cringed with every impact of the neighboring vessel.

Looking up from the brewing coffee, Stephens noticed the new man's discomfort. "It's good, the noise; it covers our sound," he whispered. "Anything in this area would have grown accustomed to it."

Jacob nodded. "So why are we here? Why us? If this is real, shouldn't they send everything they got after it? Don't they have Special Forces guys for stuff like this?"

Marks nodded and moved across the cramped galley. He pushed into the bench across from Jacob. Stephens poured a cup of coffee and set it in front of the officer. "There aren't enough of us left to make a big push for it... not anymore. Doesn't matter, anyway; whenever we show up in force outside the wire, they crush us. Two months ago, every team that went out was fifteen to twenty men strong. We found it's too hard to move without getting caught in those numbers. If they see us, they swarm and bog us down, forcing an evacuation... or worse."

"That leaves all the snoop and poop work to small teams like this now," Stephens added.

"Really, though? We're the *best* they can do?" Jacob said.

Marks sipped at the coffee and quickly pulled away, blowing on the liquid before taking another sip. "Do you really think they'd augment my team with you and your buddy if there were plenty of experienced operators left? Most of us are gone, all used up. Yeah, this really *is* the best they can do."

A rapid tapping at the cabin roof shifted their eyes to the porthole windows. Jacob's hand touched his rifle as he spotted movement on the nearby docks. Two individuals, barely silhouetted in the dark by the backlighting of the stars. "Deltas?" Marks whispered.

Stephens held a pair of lowlight binoculars already to his eyes, searching. “Two of ‘em, both with weapons, moving this way.”

“They on to us?”

Stephens eased away from the porthole, into cover. “I don’t think so,” he whispered.

Jacob flexed his arm to pull his rifle close. Stephens dropped his palm to the table, covering the hand-guard and waving him off, shaking his head no. The two individuals continued along the dock across the water from them, stopping when they were in line with the cabin cruiser. They held up, appearing to stare at the RHIB tied tightly to the side. One of them continued on, passing the other. After tense moments, the remaining Delta lifted its head and followed before stopping again just yards away. It stood silent, looking back before continuing on and disappearing in the direction of the burnt-out boathouse.

“Were they Delta?” Marks asked again.

Stephens shook his head. “Too hard to confirm, but by their movements, I’d say so. Anything human would be scared shitless out there in the dark. These things had swagger.”

Marks put out his hand, reaching for the binoculars. He searched the horizon then placed them on the table. “If they come back, we’ll need to move. Can’t take chances this far from help.”

Stephens nodded then looked at Jacob. “Get some rest. You’ll be on the first patrol out with Rogers and me. We need to find us a ride.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The cabin door creaked open. Jacob opened his eyes and watched the bearded man creep through the small opening. The sun was out, shining bright rays of light over the boat, illuminating the mess that had been hidden in the shadows earlier. There was evidence the couple lived here for some time. White, overstuffed trash bags covered the floor and empty cans and bottles filled a large cardboard box. A .38 special revolver sat on a shelf. Marks lifted it and opened the cylinder, removing six empty shell casings.

He lined up the small brass shells side by side on the shelf, everyone watching him, not needing to voice how the rounds must have been spent. “My old man used to have wheel guns just one like this. He loved the things; never got used to semi autos,” Marks said, holding the pistol in his hands. He flicked his wrist, closing the cylinder. “He was an Air Force man, a master sergeant. Heck, Dad is the reason I went to the academy and became a combat rescue officer. He said the only way he would allow me join up is if I got an education and became an officer. He didn’t want me on the ground getting shot at.” Marks shook his head and laughed softly to himself, taking the small pistol and tucking it into a pocket on his pack. “If he only knew...”

James crept across the cabin and shook Jesse awake. “You got the next watch; let me show you the ropes,” he whispered.

Jesse shook his head, closing his eyes tight then opening them wide again before taking a long sip of water. “What time is it?” he asked, fumbling to his feet.

“It’s time for your watch.” James smiled and led the big man back out onto the deck.

Stephens opened his rucksack, digging out a map and laying it across the galley table. Several items and locations were already circled. Grease markers of different colors marked routes and objects of interest. Marks moved close and pointed to an area to their south.

“Just follow the road, look for a ride here at the marina parking lot, and then patrol back up this way. The UAV showed several vehicles that matched our needs. Stay out of trouble, okay? We aren’t here to fight,” Marks said, using his finger to trace the path he wanted them to follow.

“Got it, boss,” Stephens said. He looked at Jacob and shot thumbs up. “You good to go?”

Jacob lifted his rifle to his chest and pivoted out of the dining booth. He leaned over for his pack, grabbing the straps. “Leave it; you won’t need it,” Stephens said.

Rogers was already up, checking his rounds. Jacob saw that he had loaded one of the black-taped magazines, so he did the same, dropping his standard mag and reloading one with the sub-sonic rounds then charging his weapon. Stephens took the map from the table and folded it so that the patrol area was at the top then placed it into his chest pocket. He looked at Rogers and nodded. The barrel-chested soldier led them out of the hatch and up to the main deck.

Jacob saw Jesse positioned at a corner of the deck where he could oversee all approaches to the boat, by water or over the docks. He dipped his chin and smiled as Jacob stumbled by him. Stephens made his way onto the dive deck of the boat and, with slight leap, landed heavily on the dock. Rogers followed him doing the same, with Jacob right behind. The men knelt down, holding their position as they listened, looking for any sign that they had been observed leaving the boat.

After several minutes, Stephens pointed at Rogers and sent him forward on point then smacked Jacob on the back, moving him along. Jacob stepped ahead, testing his feet on the dock’s surface and finding it far steadier than its battered appearance had led him to believe. The gray and weatherworn boards creaked as Jacob prowled along. Trying to mimic Rogers’s movements, he walked upright, his body turning left and right as he

patrolled forward. Not running and ducking the way they'd done back in the small harbor town.

They moved out slowly, patrolling past the tied down boats. Rogers would square up to them, side stepping each one and slicing the view as he rounded by it to search the surface of the boat for movement. Jacob would do the same but less pronounced, trying to keep his eyes on Rogers while still observing the passing boats and looking for anything Rogers may have missed. Rogers moved them into a straightaway with less cover. He picked up the pace and dropped into the concealment the lawn blanketed with tall unkempt grass provided.

Again they huddled low and close, keeping their heads just above the high grass; all of them taking a different direction while listening and observing for anything to indicate they'd been detected. They were at the main entrance to the marina. A narrow blacktop road followed it around with roadside parking on both sides. A large gate hung open, a chain and lock lying on the pavement nearby. All the vehicles close to the men were small; nothing large enough to suit six warriors plus all of their gear. Looking farther south, Jacob could see a larger car parked at a boat ramp. Several large pickup trucks, still connected to boat trailers, sat neatly aligned and showed no signs of chaos.

Stephens held a hand to his lips and spoke softly into a radio receiver, updating their position back to Marks. He then shot a thumb up to Rogers. The point man waved a hand at the far-off lot and pumped his fist. The patrol rose back to their feet and moved forward. Avoiding the blacktop road, they kept to the high grass, walking directly to the far lot. A heavy tree line lay between them and their destination. Rogers moved them into the shade of the tall trees, to within a football field's length of the vehicles. The point man circled his hand and they took cover near a tall, wide oak. Stephens used his binoculars to scout the lot, then to look back at the marina.

He identified a long navy blue Suburban with a boat trailer still attached. "Think you can start it?" he asked Rogers.

"It's new; older would be easier, but I think I have the tools to hack the software and get it up and running," Rogers answered.

"Okay, get it done. We'll tag along and cover you," Stephens said.

Rogers smirked and dropped his small pack, sorting through it until he found a small nylon case. He stuffed the smaller bag into the cargo pocket of his fatigue pants for quick access, and then slung the small pack over his shoulder. "Okay, let's move then," he said, stepping off quietly.

The big man ran ahead of the interlacing vehicles, clearing corners and blind spots as he traveled. Jacob stayed just behind him and back at an angle, the way he'd learned during his brief time with Masterson. He slowed when Rogers halted and dropped to his knees behind a black sedan. The point man raised his rifle and swept the area before moving back to a crouched stance and approached the Suburban. Rogers made a quick pass of the vehicle, looking under it and peering through all the windows. Jacob posted up on a vehicle beyond the Suburban and took up a good firing position where he could observe all approaches to the parking lot and provide cover.

He turned briefly when he detected the door pop behind him; he saw that Rogers had already gained entry and was under the console, connecting wires. Jacob put his attention back forward, searching and scanning for targets. He heard the vehicle crank then purr to life. *Damn that was fast*, he thought, surprised.

When Jacob looked back again, Stephens was signaling for him to return to the Suburban. He met Stephens at the back and helped him remove the boat trailer before they all rallied around the passenger's door of the vehicle. While Rogers sat in the driver's seat, Jacob stood with his back to the others, nervously watching the road that ran past the marina. Stephens made a quick inspection then ordered them aboard.

"How'd we do?" Stephens asked.

Rogers looked at the dash and adjusted the mirrors. "Over three-quarters tank of gas, and this sucker is fully unlocked." Rogers held a small device that was still connected the vehicle's onboard computer. He stretched the wires and placed the device that looked no larger than an iPod into the cup holder. Jacob saw a small, yellow, brick-shaped device plugged into the vehicle's cigarette lighter resting on the dashboard. Rogers unplugged the yellow brick and wrapped up the cord before placing it back in his pack. He caught Jacob's stare and grinned. Pointing to device in the cup holder, he explained. "This hacks the truck's PCM module and this yellow box boosts twelve-volt power to the battery. Too easy."

“Smart,” Jacob said, not fully comprehending how it was done but still impressed.

Stephens reported in with Marks over the radio, who then ordered the Suburban back. Rogers shifted into gear and guided them to the road, making the return trip to their spot in the marina. He backed in the truck near a low wall to shelter it then cut the engine. Rogers lifted the small iPod device and flipped through menus. “Battery took the charge pretty well.”

“Good, we’ll report in and maybe be on the road soon.”

The Suburban had two rear bench seats with a large cargo compartment in the far back; Jacob sat in the first backseat row. When movement from ahead caught his attention, he jolted forward and looked to the passenger window, trying to find its source. Far off in the trees, he spotted a small child. “Stephens,” Jacob whispered tapping the seat in front of him.

Stephens leaned back and turned his head, his expression changing when he saw the fear in Jacob’s eyes. “What is it?”

Jacob turned to the dark tinted passenger window and pointed. The child was now feet out of the tree line and walking toward them—a young girl in a bright pastel blue T-shirt. Two more figures exited the woods near her, then two more.

“Oh fuck!” Rogers said, securing the door locks and leaping into the back seat. He reached to the front and grabbed Stephens, dragging him back.

Crushed under the weight of the two scrambling men, Jacob said, “What are you doing?”

“Hiding, get down and shut up,” Rogers whispered as Stephens scrambled back into the second bench seat.

Stephens edged his feet in and leaned back before turning his head to Jacob. “Just relax; they can’t see through the tint.”

“Did they see us drive up?” Jacob whispered.

Rogers eased into a better position so that he could watch the closing crowd. “Doubtful. If they did, they would already be screaming the alarm and charging at us. Probably just heard the engine and are coming out to investigate its source.”

Stephens opened the channel on his radio. “You got company—you need to come to us,” he whispered. “...Roger that, we’ll create an opening.”

The group cleared the woods and entered the road. They paused, seeming to be unaware of which direction to travel. They first moved back toward the parking lot then stopped and turned toward the marina. Jacob pressed back against the bench seat as the first of the group passed the Suburban. They kept their heads straight ahead, seemingly uninterested in the vehicle. Jacob could see the protruding foreheads and scaled necks as they passed. Even the child shared the reptilian features and blackened eyes. He counted only one weapon among the group, an old and battered shotgun.

Two of them held back with the child, just to the front of the Suburban, looking away. The remaining Deltas continued past them and onto the docks. They walked up the narrow walkway then around, not stopping at the cabin cruiser. Instead of returning to their group, they headed to the area of the burnt out boathouse in the same direction the pre-dawn Deltas had traveled.

The remaining Deltas stood like statues just in front of the Suburban, the two males to the back with the small child directly in front of them. Rogers unsnapped a cross-draw holster on his vest and removed the Ruger MK III pistol. He checked the slide and verified the top round. He looked back at Stephens, who nodded his approval. Rogers shifted close to the door and pressed his shoulder against it, putting weight on it as his free hand released the door latch. Making barely a sound, the latch released and the door eased open.

Rogers stepped out of the Suburban, his boots silently making contact with the street surface. He stretched an arm around the open door, focusing on the closest male target. The man was less than fifteen yards away, an easy shot and a drill he'd practiced often. Rogers leveled the pistol and pulled the trigger, *clack, clack*. Before the first male fell, Rogers swung his point of aim to the right, *clack, clack*. The knees on the second male buckled. Both targets collapsed to the ground together. The child to the front spun on the heels of its feet and looked Rogers in the eye. The big man hesitated for a brief second before putting two rounds into the creature's face.

As quickly as he'd left the Suburban, he slipped back into the vehicle and silently closed the door. He was breathing quickly. He dropped the Ruger's magazine and, pulling small-rim fire bullets from a pouch on his vest, replaced the six spent rounds.

“Holy shit,” Jacob gasped.

Stephens was back on the radio placing a call to Marks, updating them on the situation and preparing them to move. “The way is clear. You need to move, we’ve got to leave now,” Stephens said, lowering the transmitter.

After reloading, Rogers climbed back into the front seat and plugged in his devices. He pushed a button on the iPod and the vehicle turned over easily. Rogers, sweat dripping from his forehead, worked the controls and powered on the air conditioning, getting the air to move in the stuffy Suburban. He pressed a button, opening a sunroof, and then looked back at Jacob. “Get up there and cover them while they move; they’ll be hauling ass and carrying our shit.”

Jacob nodded and moved himself into position over the console, bending to stand through the narrow sunroof.

Stephens reached out for him. “Don’t hold back—if you see something, kill it. Those three waited here for a reason. They wanted to hold us in place while others moved up. It’s a basic tactic for the Deltas. They want us to hide and prevent us from moving until they get enough of them to do a deep search. We only have a few minutes until the main body arrives.”

Jacob bit his bottom lip and nodded.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Just as Jacob spotted the remaining members of the team running down the dock, the first of the creatures appeared in the tree line. Jacob leaned into his rifle and took aim through his optics. Stephens lowered the rear window and readied his own rifle. Rogers was waiting anxiously behind the wheel; he pressed a button, opening the hatch of the rear compartment, and yelled, “Come on guys, knock those bastards down!”

There were many this time—more than Jacob could count—and they ran in a line single-file. Setting a quick pace, they moved toward the marina. Jacob heard the suppressed report of Stephens’s rifle, and found a target of his own. Aiming for the lead runner, he squeezed the trigger and watched the creature tumble forward, causing several runners behind it to trip into the trail. Keeping his eye to the optics, Jacob stayed on the trigger, firing rapidly now, dropping them as soon as they ran into his view point.

He fired until the rifle was empty, and not repeating his earlier mistake, he pressed the magazine release. Allowing the empty thirty-round magazine to fall back into the Suburban, he reloaded another black-taped magazine, pressed the bolt release, and went back to work. The things had closed to a half football field’s length away now; they’d also managed to pinpoint their position. He picked up the first of several gunshots and felt the disruption in the air as rounds zipped past his head.

Jacob flinched and instinctively dropped lower into the sunroof. He got back on the rifle and searched for the shooter, finding a man in the tree line with a scoped bolt-action rifle. He saw the man’s head pull away from the rifle as he attempted to feed it another round. Jacob aimed high and eased

back on the trigger. Moments later, the man spun around before dropping against a tree.

More gunshots rang out, and a round pierced the side of the Suburban with a metallic *thunk*. James rounded the corner of the docks and tossed two heavy rucksacks into the back. He opened the driver's door and stood on the running board. Taking aim over the top of the SUV, he leaned forward and returned fire. Shooting rapidly, he let loose with unsuppressed rounds. Jacob glanced back long enough to see Marks and Jesse boarding the SUV from the shielded passenger side.

"Go, go, go," James shouted.

The Deltas were closer now. A fast-moving pair broke away from the rest of the group and charged forward. Stephens fired a burst, hitting one in the legs and knocking it to the ground. Jacob fired at the other one, hitting it square in the chest. Its momentum caused it to tumble forward, rolling as it hit the ground. Jacob shifted back in time to see the first crawling forward; he adjusted his aim and put a round into the top of its head.

Rogers dropped the Suburban into gear and the SUV lurched forward, having to drive directly into the mass that now surrounded them and blocked their exit from the marina. Jacob felt a tug at his legs as he was hauled down into the vehicle and shoved against the rear passenger door just moments before Rogers collided with the mass. He drove slow, plowing through them before veering hard into the grass to escape their numbers, then racing for open roadway.

Rounds pinged off the metal of the hood. As the Suburban skidded through the soft grass, Rogers over corrected and had the SUV nearly sideways when it entered the hard surface of the road. The right tires bit for traction, lifting the vehicle onto two wheels as they caught. Rogers hit the brake and cut the wheel hard, slamming the Suburban to the roadway. He then mashed the gas, opening the big V8, and propelling them away from the approaching mass of Deltas.

"Well, that was closer than I prefer," Marks said, breathing heavily. He reached into a chest pocket and pulled out his own map. He unfolded it and leaned forward from the back seat so that the map was resting over the center console. "Get us to the Middleville city limits then find a hide spot. I don't want anything tracking us to the chemical plant. We can sneak in on foot tomorrow morning right after sunrise."

“Got it,” Rogers said. He pushed a button on the dash, launching the vehicle’s navigation system. James, riding shotgun, leaned forward and flipped through menus before finally entering a destination for Middleville. “Nav is still up,” he said as he pressed “Go” on the system.

Marks folded up the map and stuffed it back into his chest pocket. “So what happened back there?” he asked, leaning back against the bench seat.

“Hunters, same as this morning,” Stephens said. “Three came out of the woods, followed by two more. The first group stayed back by the road while the others made a round. As suspected, they had a horde behind them; we initiated contact before they had us cornered.”

Marks exhaled loudly and removed his helmet, holding it in his hands. The Suburban continued down the road, slowing to avoid stalled vehicles and roadblocks. “They’re becoming predictable. We can use it against them.”

“How?” Jacob asked.

Marks shook his head. “I’m not sure yet, but the time will come.”

Jacob turned his head and looked out the passenger’s window. Things hadn’t gone well here. Badly decayed bodies lay dead on the shoulders of the road. Homes were burnt to their frames; cars were crumpled and rusted in collisions. It really was a war zone, and it looked and felt the way Jacob expected it to. The terrain was residential—sparse neighborhoods, single-family homes occasionally mixed with a gas station or corner store. Jacob wondered about his own home in the suburbs of Chicago, if it still stood, if he’d ever see it again.

Rogers slowed the SUV as they approached an intersection. They were nearing the Middleville city limits from the north, passing through the outskirts, attempting to stick to the rural back roads.

Rogers slowed just before turning toward the more congested city. Just beyond the intersection, a military tank sat dead in the middle of the street. A chewed up and destroyed sandbag barrier sat in front of it. Long strands of wire twisted and stretched from building to building, completely blocking the route. The only way they could go was to the right and deeper into the city center. Rogers looked into the back seat at Marks. “Stop here, turn around, or go right?”

“Right, but don’t stop. I don’t want to be stuck in one of these urban areas. See if you can get us closer.”

Rogers cut the wheel and gunned the engine. The Suburban rolled forward, crunching over a wooden police barricade. The road was covered in refuse; garbage littered the street from curb to curb. They entered the main street, spying the usual suspects of fast food restaurants and department stores. They moved along slowly, unable to detect any Deltas. At the end of the street, they corrected their course, moving left and putting them back on track.

The terrain closed in and became more commercial. James pointed a finger to the right side of the street where bodies were stacked in a long row like firewood. A group of ambulances riddled with bullet holes and resting on flat tires were parked near them. A police car windshield was spider webbed and filled with bullet holes. Inside, a uniformed man lay dead against the driver's seat. The skeleton of a charred Blackhawk helicopter rested on its side in the center of a destroyed building.

"Find us a side street; I'm not digging this place," Marks ordered.

James leaned forward, zooming out on the navigation system to look for an alternate route. "You know they're out here, probably watching us right now," he said.

They traveled on and off the main streets looking for a clear route. The avenues had become parking lots with vehicles of all makes piled up at the intersections. They passed a shopping mall with a stack of crushed vehicles at its exit. The cars were blackened hulks that wound deep into the parking lot. Jacob turned his head and saw the charred frame of a driver still gripping a steering wheel. Rogers turned them around again after finding another blocked route. Moving farther than intended, they found themselves trapped in the city center and forced to find smaller roads and alleys to get them out. Rogers guided them behind buildings and loading docks, looking for holes through fences.

The Suburban lurched forward around barricades; at the next intersection, the road was once again blocked. Rogers turned right, following the navigation system's directions. The street narrowed. Vehicles lined the shoulders of the road alongside buildings with broken windows and doors shattered on their hinges. The road went uphill, blocking their view. As the SUV crested the hill, Rogers hit the brakes. Ahead of them, the last route into the city was blocked by a congested stream of vehicles—cars, three rows wide, packed together and reached for miles.

“We got company,” James said, his eyes locked on the rearview mirror.

Jacob twisted in the seat and searched the street behind them. At the corner of the last intersection stood a solitary male dressed in heavy clothing. He stood alone, watching the Suburban. The team sat silently, not moving as they watched the individual at the end of the street, the idling of the engine the only sound.

Jacob strained, trying to get any sign that indicated whether the man was friend or foe. “Maybe he's one of us,” Jacob whispered.

“No,” Stephens said, shaking his head, “not alone and unarmed, and not this far out.”

Another entered the intersection from the opposite side of the street, ending any doubt of the man's disposition. A woman dressed inappropriately for the cool temperatures stepped beyond the curb and into the street. Her torso turned mechanically, halting to look in the direction of the team. She seemed to ignore the heavily dressed man next to her. After some sort of non-verbal communication, they stepped off and walked in sync with one another.

Marks leaned forward and squeezed the headrest of James's seat. “Knock them down, James. Do it quick and silent before they can sound an alarm.”

“I thought you'd never ask,” James said.

The man retrieved his rifle from the floor and opened his door. The vehicle was angled slightly so that he was hidden from the view of the approaching creatures. James duck-walked around the front of the Suburban and raised his rifle. He swapped magazines, loading the suppressed rounds. A pop slightly louder than a nail gun, and the woman's head snapped back, the brick wall behind her painted in a splotch of oily black. The heavily dressed man seemed unaware of the strike. He continued pacing forward without checking on the female. James followed him through his optics and, before the man completed his second step, a sub-sonic round ripped through its chin. The man stumbled then fell forward hard on its face.

James quickly returned to the vehicle, closing the door behind him. Not wasting time, he dropped the magazine and replaced the two sub-sonic rounds. He looked up at the rearview mirror and slumped. “Hold the applause, we got more moving in,” James whispered.

From the direction of the female, two more stepped into the street. The newcomers noticed the female's downed body right away. One moved forward and looked ahead into the congested street, searching for the shooters. It shouted, the noise causing the others to become more animated. Several others rounded the corner; without a target, they joined in the shouting while a mob gathered around the bodies.

Marks turned forward. "Rogers, get us out of this shit. Take the damn sidewalk—just move!"

Rogers cut the wheel hard and gunned the engine. The Suburban launched up and over the curb, tires squealing as it entered the narrow sidewalk. The mob witnessing the motion of the vehicle became frenzied and charged after them. Rogers accelerated, picking up speed as he drove through a pile of bicycles and garbage containers. The driver's side scraped against a storefront wall, throwing up sparks while the driver's side mirror disappeared in a flash of dust. Rogers corrected and slapped the SUV against parked cars, continuing to accelerate and build speed.

Rogers yanked the wheel hard when they made it to the end of the street, which sent the Suburban spinning into open road, heading left. Finding the street ahead was once again blocked, they turned and raced on. Jacob looked back and spotted the mob rounding the corner, hot on their trail. Rogers cut right, headed north and crashed through another set of police barriers. After a hundred feet of open road, it was obvious that street would be impassable; vehicles were stacked from curb to curb, with more on the sidewalks. Soon, they would find themselves boxed in. Rogers, without instructions, slammed on the brakes, throwing his passengers forward.

"Bailout! There won't be any way out—we move on foot," Rogers yelled.

Marks looked left and right, calculating the call, though he knew his driver was right. "Let's go. Find me an exit, and walk us out of here!"

The team bailed from the vehicle as the mob's screams filled the air from over a block away. Frantically, the men gathered their heavy packs from the rear cargo compartment and took off at a sprint. James led the way with his rifle up, running out front. He found a building with a tall, heavy, wooden door. The windows of the red, brick-faced building were covered with heavy sheets of screwed down plywood.

James skidded to a stop on his well-worn boots and pushed the knob. The door was securely locked; he stepped back and fired several suppressed rounds into the doorknob, the impacts puncturing and shredding the steel. He reached out with his gloved hand and found the door still secure. He took aim again, firing to the right of where he knew the deadbolt would rest, destroying a portion of the door. He backed up then threw a solid kick at the door, breaking it open. James jumped out of the way and waved the others in past him. Jacob lunged forward running hard, being pushed from behind. The men poured into the room, unaware of what was waiting in front of them, but knowing they had to get out of sight before they were spotted.

James slammed the door shut behind them; the sounds of furniture scraping against the old tile floor followed as the men slid a heavy steel desk in front of the entrance. Then they stopped, slowly and silently backing into the darkness of the room until they hit a tall wall. They knelt down in the pitch black. The only light that spilled in came through the small cracks under the front door and a small decorative piece of glass at the top.

The noise on the outside roared toward them as the stampede of bodies filled the street. The light from the rattling door was blocked out as bodies pressed against it, crowding into the street and around the Suburban. Windows broke; sheet metal gave and crumpled—the sound of bending metal mixed with the wails of the Deltas.

Jacob held his breath; gripping his rifle tight, he drew it into his lap. He could hear the panting breath of his friends. Someone opened a bottle and chugged water before passing it on. Jacob took it and drank, not realizing how thirsty he'd been until that moment. He passed the bottle on and looked at his watch. The sun was already hanging low; it would be dark soon. They'd been running and fighting most of the day.

The frenzied mob continued in the street, still surrounding the vehicle and looking for its occupants. "We need to get to high ground," Stephens whispered.

The snap of plastic, and the room filled in a soft, blue glow. Rogers crept forward with a blue chem light. Holding it in front of him, he waved it through the room. He leaned over his pack and removed his night vision goggles and dropped them down over his eyes, passing the chem light off to

Stephens. James stood up, placing his left hand on Rogers's right shoulder, both men now with goggles dropped down over their eyes. They moved into a hallway that led off the main room. Stephens stood in place and waved the rest of them forward into the hallway, taking up the rear with the chemical light.

"Why don't we have more goggles?" Jacob whispered to Stephens.

Stephens placed a hand on Jacob's back, urging him into the hallway. "Sorry, Best Buy was all sold out."

The team moved deeper into the building, the smells of mold and decay filling the spaces. Noticeably absent to all of them was the smell of death. They walked past a bank of elevators, which were blocked off with yellow and red tape. Jacob's feet kicked and scuffed at broken floor tile. The blue chem light reflected off of a high ceiling covered with water stains. The building had obviously been closed and empty for a long time. On the wall between the elevators was a posted directory listing department names: *human resources, legal, payroll*. Past the elevators Rogers located a steel fire door, with *stairs* stenciled across it in black.

The big man let his rifle hang slack as he pressed down on the push bar. A metallic *clunk* echoed through the space, followed by a loud squeak as the door opened into the stairwell. Rogers pressed against it, holding it as James slowly crept through and went up the stairs to the top of the first landing. The others filed into the dark damp space behind him. Once they all were inside, Rogers slowly closed the door behind him and pressed it shut until the latch caught.

Rogers rotated the goggles away from his eyes and clicked on his flashlight, filling the space with bright white light and causing the others to squint and look away. Rogers examined the door then secured the mechanism with two long zip ties he'd removed from his cargo pocket. He looked up at James, who was leaning out, staring almost vertical at the stairwell over their heads. The bearded soldier rotated off his own goggles and sat down on the upper step.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

“I feel like I’ve been here before,” Jacob whispered to Stephens.

Stephens pursed his lips and nodded. “Yeah, another time and place, huh? We haven’t done too good, have we? What has it been? A few months? And here we are back in a stairwell, trying to hide from them.”

Jacob ambled to the steps and sat down next to Jesse. “The more things change... the more they stay the same,” he said, smiling.

Marks gave them time to catch their breath and to drink water before he got them back to their feet and continued patrolling up the stairwell, pausing at the landings to secure each door with more zip ties.

At the fourth floor, they held up while James and Rogers cleared the roof exit then looked back in, signaling them up. This was one of the tallest buildings within view. Even at only four stories, they could see down onto neighboring rooftops. The sun had already set and the western sky was a deep orange and red. James led them down the center of the roof against a mechanical structure filled with vents and exhaust pipes.

They dropped to the ground, relaxing the heavy packs on their backs. The men sat heavily and stretched their legs out straight in front of them. Marks and Stephens moved away toward the edge of the wall with their maps out, trying to orient themselves while conducting recon on the area with the binoculars.

James used a shirtsleeve to wipe away the sweat from his brow and looked around. “I won’t say it’s clear, but we’re out of immediate danger,” James whispered. “This place is a real shithole.”

“Just like the sandbox, brother; the neighborhoods stink and the people all hate us.” Rogers chuckled.

“I like the rules of engagement better here though. They look at you sideways, you feed ’em a bullet,” James answered.

“You two were in Iraq together?” Jesse asked.

“Ha. Hell no. I was there with the Corps in oh-four and again in oh-five and eight. This fucking guy though, he done way crazier shit than me,” James said sarcastically.

Rogers shook his head. Removing a granola bar from his pack, he broke off a chunk and passed the rest down to Jesse. “Don’t sell yourself short, James; you’re probably one of the craziest sons of bitches I know.”

Jesse broke off a small piece of granola and washed it down with a sip of water. “So, James, you’re a Marine; what about you, Rogers?”

“Army, born and raised. Grew up a brat and signed on my seventeenth birthday. Played the game for six years before jumping into the civilian side with Dark Horse.”

“Dark Horse? Like the mercenaries?” Jesse asked.

Rogers grinned and leaned back against his pack. “Contractors, little brother. Don’t believe everything you hear,” Rogers corrected. “Security work for the State Department big wigs. When the civilians need someone willing to do the dirty work, they called on us. Guess we were too proficient for our own good; they canceled our contract early. Said we were too aggressive. Took us out of theater and blacklisted us for overseas work.

“No hard feelings though. They had no problem tracking us down and putting Black Horse back on the payroll when the first of the attacks started.”

“Yeah, what did you do?” Jacob asked, now listening intently.

“First, it was the usual shit: watching gates, providing backup to the regular mall cops at the Pentagon and White House. As things got worse, they split us up. I got paired with a senator from Pennsylvania and charged with the protection of his family.

“The guy was a real pain in the ass. I told him we needed to get out of Philly; get up in the mountains, someplace quiet, where we could lay low and have options. He didn’t want to listen to anything I had to say. Stupid bastard thought the iron gates and security system would protect him.

“By the time we got the order to evacuate the city, it was too late. The airports were closed and there was no way his fat ass was getting away on foot. He made some calls and secured a seat on a helicopter; he said the state governor agreed to get us all out.”

Jesse shook his head. “What happened?”

Rogers paused, looking into the dark night. “We left in two cars; the guy wanted to bring everything with him... pets, furniture, all kinds of useless shit. He rode in the second vehicle with his assistant and one of his private security guards. I rode in the lead vehicle with his wife and kids. By this time, I wasn’t one of his favorite people. They set up a helicopter-landing zone on this golf course—a country club or whatever; guess this guy was a lifelong member there. I remember racing across the green and this guy yelling at us over the radio about fucking up the grass. Can you believe that shit? This son of a bitch is worried about the grass while Philly burns.

“It was mayhem. Turns out Mr. Two-Bit Senator didn’t have the pull he thought he did. We weren’t the only ones there, and it was becoming apparent there wouldn’t be enough birds. The National Guard had a checkpoint. They were screening everyone for infection and crosschecking them before you could cross the barrier. A smug officer in dress blues held a clipboard determining everyone’s destiny.”

Jesse sat up. “Did he tell the truth? Was his name on the list?”

“Oh yeah, his name was on the list, but his family wasn’t. I told the fat fuck I could get them across the border. I pleaded with him to make the call while we still had time. Gunfire opened up on the far side of the course. I could see the tracers arcing through the air. People panicked. I saw his face go pale; told him again to get back to the car, and I would get them all out.” Rogers paused to take a sip of water.

He looked down then leaned back, looking up at the dark sky. “He didn’t listen. I watched him turn and walk through that barrier. The National Guard soldiers escorted him away and out of sight. He never once looked back at his wife and kids.”

“Damn, he just left you all?” Jesse gasped.

Rogers took in a deep breath and held it before exhaling. “The Guardsman said the helicopters were going to Toronto. So I loaded up his family and hauled ass. Five hundred fucking mile, six-hour drive on a good day. Ten days later, we got there, his wife and both kids. Yeah, some wear

and tear but still, they're alive. Mr. Senator's bird never touched down in Toronto. Last I heard they still don't know what the hell happened to him.

"I keep waiting for it, you know... to see that fat bastard in his Italian-cut suit. Sometimes I find myself watching the crowd, looking for him, to see him out there walking around with those dead black eyes. I'm not sure what I would do. Nahh, fuck him. I know how it would end." Rogers rocked forward on his heels and got to his feet. He grabbed his rifle and slipped away into the dark.

"That's a messed up story," Jesse whispered, looking to James.

James stuffed a large wad of dip under his lip and shook his head. "Don't look at me, man. I ain't no open book."

Marks returned to the hide site and lifting up his small pack then stuffed the radio set inside. He dropped heavily and tossed the pack next to him, leaning back and pulling his hat over his eyes. "Well, we're on our own. No response on the handheld; the ship's long out of range."

Stephens returned to the group and pointed at Jesse and Jacob. "Grab your rifles and follow me; I'm giving you two the first watch."

The two of them were led away to a far corner. The roof was nothing more than a large square, flat and covered with small pebbles. At the corner, they could look back and see the rest of the team positioned near the mechanical equipment and the stairwell structure across from them. Stephens handed Jacob the low-light binoculars. "Just keep an eye on things. In two hours, wake up James and Rogers. If you need anything, come get me."

The sergeant walked away, leaving them alone for the first time since they'd joined the group. Jacob took the binoculars and looked out over the edge of the roof, scanning the city. They were located in an industrial park—or at least that's what they would have called it back home in Chicago. He could easily count ten warehouses within view and several more at the edge of town. Just to their south was a large factory complex where he counted several large chemical tanks.

Jacob pointed at the far off complex. "I bet that's the spot," he whispered to Jesse. Jacob passed off the binoculars to his friend, who put them to his eyes and looked in the direction indicated.

"Dang, that's a long way. I wonder how we're supposed to know which one of those has the dioxin," Jesse whispered. Lowering the binoculars, he

looked out over the street below then quickly swiped his head back. “Oh shit, they’re still down there.”

“How many?” Jacob asked.

“Too many. How can this whole city be dead? None of us left, not a single one?” asked Jesse, feeling defeated as he lifted the binoculars back to his eyes and searched farther out. He scanned left to right before spotting another group of them on a far off corner. “They always seem to come out at night. A stereotype that always fits. Monsters come out at night.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Jacob said.

Eyes still glued to the street corner, Jesse asked, “What are they doing here?”

Jacob rose. Leaning back, he used the optics on his rifle to look at the group. There were at least ten of them, all standing together in a tight pack. “I don’t know. Getting ready for dinner?”

Jesse shook his head. “Not just those; I mean all of them.”

“What, you mean like why did it happen?”

Jesse looked down over the edge again, watching the things below. “Yeah, why are they here? What do they want?”

“I don’t know. They don’t seem smart enough to want anything. Hell, I’m just tired of the empty streets. Sometimes, when I see a group of them, I try not to look too hard and pretend they’re people just like us. Not just something that we have to kill.”

Jesse laughed. “Better not go saying shit like that too loud, bro. James will smack you in the mouth.”

The group below gathered smartly together and moved as a single entity. They stalked off to the north, leaving their spot. Although not obvious at first, they moved in an organized method, and Jacob was starting to see the pattern. They moved, keeping an even distance from each other. Then they slowly spread out over the street, and in groups of two, splintered out in a large, circular search pattern. As the small groups moved away, the larger group followed them but remained organized in a tight pack.

Jacob took the binoculars from Jesse and searched in all directions. “It’s like a ripple effect.” He dropped the binos and looked at Jesse’s confused expression.

He pointed. “Look... see how they’re spreading out and leaving in groups of two hunters? Now look how the rest of them have centralized

themselves. They're shifting slightly and moving to the centers. See how they've spread out, following those hunters? It's like army ants searching for prey. They send out these tiny hunters on patrol. Once they find something, they call in the main body for the attack. Then they destroy everything in their path."

Jesse stared back. "It's exactly like that."

A noise of boots scraping the roof turned them back. James had moved close and knelt between them. "So what are you girls talking about?"

"Oh, just boys and stuff," Jesse replied, causing James to laugh.

James leaned his rifle against the ledge. "You two get some shut eye, we're going to the warehouse tomorrow; you'll need your strength."

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Jacob woke to the smell of brewing coffee. Even before he opened his eyes, he knew it would be Stephens playing barista. Jacob stretched and lifted his head from his sleeping bag. He lay in the open and looked up at the gray sky. Heavy clouds blocked the sun; the outside of his bag was damp with water from the morning dew. “Tell me again why we couldn’t sleep inside.” He groaned as he removed himself from his bag, opening it so that he could sit on the dry fabric as he dressed.

“Better to be out here in the open. Here, have some coffee; it does wonders for your spirit.” Stephens poured part of the contents of the pot into a small cup and passed it across to Jacob, who took it eagerly in his hands. He sipped at the liquid as he looked around the roof. He could see that Rogers was on watch at the far wall. Jesse was still asleep in his bag just across from him. Marks, once again, had the map out, plotting their next move.

“We saw them moving again last night,” Jacob said between sips. The air was cold and he could see the condensation as he exhaled. “There are a lot of them.”

Stephens looked up at him. “Yeah, they move a lot at night; they're nocturnal.”

“No, it was like we saw at the Marina—the predictability of the pattern they follow. I thought about it and I know how we can use it,” Jacob said. “I’m a process engineer; I solve problems, it's what I do.”

Stephens pursed his lips and nodded his head. “I’m listening, Mr. Engineer.”

“It’s like with anything else... have a problem, look for the patterns, right? Like with a Tsunami. How do we know when they are coming?”

Stephens looked at him sideways. “Well, earthquakes then a really low tide.”

“Exactly. All those things sound the warning and an alarm goes off and you head for the hills. With these things, it’s the same principal. We always see a hunter, usually two; they call a warning and it’s followed by a massive wave attack... or the Tsunami. Well, what if we were ready for the Tsunami, even called for it? And what if we had a way to stop it?”

“So we would intentionally trigger the mass, like alert the hunters on purpose instead of hiding from them?” Stephens said skeptically.

“Yeah... but at a place and time of our choosing—a place where we could box them in and kill them all.”

Stephens grinned at Jacob’s sudden enthusiasm. “Maybe you’re right. I’ll bring it up with the L-Tee. Seriously, it’s good work, but right now I need you to focus on the task at hand, okay?”

Jacob nodded and drank the rest of his coffee before pulling on his boots. He got to his feet and kicked Jesse’s bag as he moved past him to find a makeshift, rooftop bathroom.

During the night, the mass on the ground had dissipated and moved on. Currently, they were nowhere to be found, having moved back to their daytime hiding places or wherever they nested during the day. Searching the immediate area, they looked to be alone. The city streets were empty with the exception of the occasional hunter quietly walking the odd street.

Plotting a direct route to the chemical plant took them through a grassy, overgrown area that would provide good cover. On the map, it was designated as a park, but from the rooftop it appeared to be nothing more than a long-forgotten vacant lot. One of those areas that gets returned to nature until the city has funds to do anything else with it. Still, now it would serve their purpose well and give them standoff room as they patrolled forward toward the plant.

After packing up their gear, the team scarfed down Meals Ready to Eat, drank water, and changed out their socks, not knowing what the day would bring. Rogers tried again to reach the Navy ship. Even using the long-range antenna from the top of the building, they failed to get a message out. Slowly, the clouds thinned, opening up and allowing the sun to break

through. Marks stood, took a final look around, and ordered them all downstairs.

They opened the stairway door and listened for signs something may have moved in during the night. After feeling confident it was clear, they pressed on. Moving tactically, they followed James back into the musty lobby. Sunlight now filled the space, allowing them to easily navigate. With a quick search of the ground floor, they confirmed the building was empty except for odd bits of furniture. As suspected, the place was vacant long before the fall. They moved the desk away from the door and cautiously stepped back into the now empty street.

The Suburban was where they left it. Every surface on the vehicle was marred. Dented body panels and broken windows showed the effects of the mob pressing against it. They formed up into a tight Ranger column and crept along the sides of the building, hiding in the shadows. James once again moved far ahead on point with Rogers walking slack. The patrol moved slowly. In no hurry, James checked every corner, ready to knock down any hunter that came into sight before it would have a chance to report their position.

The streets were empty, the sidewalks covered with shards of broken glass. The men had to watch where they stepped to avoid stepping on the fragments and the noise of crushing glass. Jacob roved on, looking at the stalled vehicles. Most suffered broken windows; he could see where people struggled with the things trying to remove them from their cars. Blood on windshields and door handles, bloody tire irons lying in the street. Two blocks of narrow streets filled with death, flanked by commercial brick and concrete buildings before they reached the overgrown field.

James stopped at the edge of the building across from the field and knelt down, observing the way the grass moved and looking for any disparity in the motion. Anything that would indicate someone or something was hiding in the tall grass. He got back to his feet and waved the column forward, leading the way across the street and into the waist-high grass. He stopped when he reached a narrow dirt trail and decided to follow it, as it would allow them to move more quietly and to see what was in front of them. Avoiding the grass silenced their movements, even if it made them easier to see.

Jacob was relieved at being off the city street and back in the open terrain. The air was clear here and the stench of the decay less prominent. As they hiked along, he could push out the horrors of the death-filled streets for just a moment. Although they were walking through a large open field surrounded by tall tree lines, Jacob felt concealed in the space even though he knew the feeling was unfounded. He looked at the trees in the distance and realized any of them could be out there right now, watching, planning their next move... running to intersect them when they left the woods. Jacob shook his head and blinked his eyes rapidly to clear his thoughts then focused on the ground immediately to his front.

At corners on the path, James would halt the patrol, allowing the men to kneel out of sight in the grass while he sneaked ahead with Rogers on slack, keeping him in view. When James was confident the way was clear, Rogers would signal them forward. The trail led them through a low depression and up to a hilltop surrounded by thick, unpruned trees. James guided them to just below the crest of the hill to avoid skylining the team then halted the patrol, the men naturally forming a small defensive circle. The men made a nest and moved together, all facing different directions to provide a security bubble while they rested.

Marks opened his map and spread it out across his lap. James pointed out their current location and the route they would travel. "The plant is on the other side of the hill," he whispered. "I'll scout ahead then bring you all up."

Rogers moved off to the side, trying to take advantage of the elevation to contact the ship. He looked frustrated as he tried different techniques to relay a signal. Jacob sat slightly apart from them, off the trail and low in the grass but still in a position that he could see down the hill. He fished a bottle from his pack and sipped at the water, not wanting to drink too fast; he didn't know when they would have a chance to refill their bottles.

He spotted movement on the trail below. He flinched and focused his eyes, thinking he saw a flash of gold dart across their back trail. Jacob lifted his rifle and focused on the far off spot, using the weapon's optics.

"Did you see something?" Stephens whispered, observing Jacob's change in posture and reaching for his own rifle.

Not immediately answering, Jacob strained his eye and tried to steady the rifle so that he could see into the waist-high grass. He saw the flash of

movement again, though this time it darted across then stopped and looked right at him. He took his eye from the scope, lifting slightly over it to look again. Less than a hundred feet away, a bright golden Labrador retriever was sitting on the path looking at them, its tongue out while it panted.

“It’s a dog,” Jacob said.

James crawled to Jacob’s position and looked through the binoculars, verifying his report. “Damn, I ain’t seen one of those in a long time. I thought they were all dead.”

“What do we do?” Jacob asked.

“Well, you saw it, so it’s only fair that you get to shoot it.”

Jacob looked back at James sternly, then at the cold faces of the others. “Fuck you; I ain’t killing no dog. What’s wrong with you?”

James laughed and smacked Jacob on the back. “Just playing with you, bro. We’re not shooting any damn dog. But if it gets to barking, you’ll have to do something about it.”

The dog sat watching them, keeping its distance. Slowly, it stalked closer up the trail, stopping within fifty feet of the strangers before moving back into the tall grass and disappearing. James got them back to their feet and led them over the hill and down the far side into the thicker trees. Jacob looked back behind him and caught a glimpse of the golden dog following them. It popped onto the trail, walking along before slipping back into the high grass.

As James had predicted, they could start to make out the white steel buildings and holding tanks of the chemical plant below. The point man moved them to a tall, thick tree line at the edge of a road running parallel to the chemical plant’s tall chain linked fence. Beyond that was a wide, grassy field—or rather, long uncut lawn—then the steel-sided building.

Joining the huddle, Jacob moved in close to the others across from the fence. He pointed at the tall, white cylinders in the distance. “That’s the tank farm... there should be a pump house or some type of control room nearby. That would be the best place to find a list of what’s where. There should be a large layout inside the guardhouse or control room; there has to be a disaster plan someplace for fire fighters and other first responders. It’s usually inside the gate or security office so emergency workers know what they are dealing with.”

Marks looked at him, surprised; the others stopped and stared. “How do you know all of this?” Marks asked.

Jacob kept his eyes on the tank farm, searching the structures. “Because my day job kept me in factories and manufacturing plants—I know a thing or two about them. There are a shitload of storage tanks over there. If we’re lucky, they will have a class-six label.”

“What, you mean like booze?” James said, stating the military’s designation for alcohol.

“No, I mean like HAZMAT. Look for something that says poison or toxic. But it would be better to find a layout that takes us right to it.”

Marks looked at Stephens, who shrugged. “Makes sense to me. I think we should listen to him,” Stephens whispered.

The team leader pushed the map of the compound to Jacob. “Okay then, where do you suggest we look?”

Jacob took the map and compared it to what he was seeing on the ground in front of him. “We can follow this main fence around to here. Looks like there should be a gatehouse and driver check-in area with a security checkpoint for other visitors. We can check that place for a first responders’ notebook, or something like that. Not every plant has one, but I’ve seen plenty that do.”

“Okay,” Marks said. “James, you take point with Jacob; follow the fence and clear the guard shack. See if he can find this layout directory or notebook thing. We’ll hold up outside, backing you up. If we locate the tanks, we’ll go inside and set up a patrol base before going after it.”

Jacob nodded. Still holding the facility map, he looked it over closely; there were only two tank farms, each with over twenty tanks. It would be difficult and time consuming to locate the dioxin without a schematic if they had to search the tanks one by one. Jacob folded up the paper map and passed it off to Marks. As he did, he saw the golden Labrador retriever walk up just behind them and sit at the outskirts of the group huddle.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

“**W**hat the hell do we do with this dog?” James asked.

Jacob put a hand on the retriever’s head and scratched at its ears. The dog wagged its tail and cautiously moved closer, pressing into Jacob, nearly knocking him off balance. Jesse smiled and broke off a piece of jerky he’d been carrying in his pocket and fed it to the dog. The dog lapped at it hungrily then licked Jesse’s hand, begging for more.

“No, dammit; don’t go feeding it,” James protested. “Now we’ll never get rid of it.”

Jacob patted the dog on the side. “Don’t worry about it; he’s friendly and done something right to survive out here on his own. We could probably learn a thing or two from him.”

Stephens put his hands up. “Shut up about the dog, James. If it causes problems you can deal with it.”

“Fuck that, I ain’t shooting a dog,” James muttered under his breath.

“Enough.” It was Marks, growing frustrated. “Back to the task at hand. James, let’s get this done; move us out.”

James crouched, and then stood. Looking back, he offered Jacob a hand and rocketed him up to his feet. He put his mouth close to Jacob’s ear. “Just give me room to work. Stay close... but not too close,” he whispered.

Jacob shook his head mockingly then nodded his understanding, allowing James to step off ahead of him, before following along the wooded roadside. Jacob looked back and saw that the rest of the team were on their feet, spread out along the tree line. The dog walked just in front of Jesse, its

tongue out like he was on a leisurely stroll through the park, happy to be a member of the pack.

James crept along out front, positioning himself so that he stayed in the shade and shadows of the tall poplar trees. They approached the gate, still concealed in the tree line on the far side of the street. A sign labeled the area as a loading dock entrance—not a main entry for factory and office workers. From the back, the factory was dead, no signs of movement or life. Tall sheet metal buildings with dirty windows stood empty, and a parking lot near the guardhouse was completely void of any vehicles.

James looked back at Jacob and waved him forward. “Looks like this place is closed up tight. We cross together. I’ll work the lock while you cover me.”

Jacob again nodded. James used a hand to slap his back then they ran across the open area of the street together. The gate was in a small stretch of gravel lot; their boots made noise as the treads shuffled along the crushed stone. James slid in and crouched down. Removing a lock pick kit from his cargo pocket, he immediately went to work on the padlock. Jacob turned so that he was looking past James. His rifle up, he swept the terrain for targets. The chain clanged and the lock fell to the ground. James undid the latch and they pushed until the gate gave way then opened it just enough so they could slip inside. James hung the lock on the fence so the last of the team could secure the gate behind them after entering.

The guardhouse was just ahead. The building looked intact, even though the door was open. James ran, crouching low, and pressed against the shack’s front wall, squatting so that he was hidden below the window. He waited for Jacob to fall in beside him before he slowly moved down the wall and, working angles, cleared the doorway. He stood and leaned inside before pulling back out. “Yeah, it’s empty; go see if you can find anything.”

Jacob pressed forward and slipped around him, moving past the open door and entering the guard shack—a small, square building with windows on all sides. Just in front of the door was a steel gray desk. A lunch box was open with a half-eaten, dried up sandwich on top of a paper towel. A small thermos sat near the edge of the desk, next to a full cup of coffee. Draped over the chair was a man’s heavy work coat with security patches on the sleeve.

A clipboard with scribbled entries hung on the wall near the door. In black ink, the final entry read *Lockdown complete 16:00*. The date of the entry was blank. All entries before it were routine: *gate secure, facility closed*. Jacob turned away from the clipboard and searched the small file cabinet next to the desk. Like most security offices, it was filled with garbage instead of official business; hot sauce packets, paper plates, and Styrofoam cups joined a stack of unfiled incident reports bundled together on the bottom of the drawer.

Jacob felt discouraged, not wanting to let the team down. He got low on the floor, looking under the desk and pulling things away from the wall. He spotted a red plastic container, the size of a ream of paper, mounted on the far side of an open and empty first aid kit. Jacob removed the plastic case from the wall and placed it on the desk. The case had a fire department logo sticker on the front and *TIER II* reports in stenciled, bold letters across the middle.

He unlatched the box and flipped it open. The hazardous chemicals report was directly on top and dated within the last year. He lifted the stapled pages out and set them aside. Next was a long list of emergency contact numbers and, finally, a site schematic—exactly what Jacob was looking for. He flipped through the pages, looking for the word “dioxin”. He found it on the third page, 2,3,7,8 – *Tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin Military Experimental (TCDDMX4)*. A grid reference line was next to it that corresponded to the schematic. Next to that was a warning: *Protective apparel, inner and outer garments. Gloves, boots, respirator*.

Jacob ripped the page from the book and folded it together with the schematic. He gave the office another quick sweep and stepped outside, moving around James and kneeling low beside him.

“Find what you were looking for?” James asked.

Jacob held up the folded papers to the bearded Marine and nodded. James pointed to the lieutenant and waved him over. Marks ran from the small place of cover where they were held up near the gate then moved in and knelt down with the two men. Jacob opened the folded pages, showing Marks the chemical list and its spot on the small diagram. Marks grinned. “Good work. James, find us a patrol base.”

Not waiting for Marks to leave, James stood back up. “Any suggestions, factory boy?” James asked.

Jacob shrugged and shook his head. “Something open and easy to access; maybe a loading dock?”

James grinned and moved across the open ground to the side of the first large steel wall. He paused, waiting for Jacob to fall in behind him. Then he stepped off, moving slowly while staying close to the edge of the building. When he moved up on a corner, he would pause the group trailing behind then step away and slowly round it before bringing Jacob along with him. The building was flanked with high grass that transitioned to blacktop as they moved around to the backside of the structure.

Ahead were two large, overhead doors with a fireproof man-door between them. Beyond this wall, they could see a large loading dock then the tank farm where the dioxins should be located. James continued patrolling forward until he was at the small, steel entry door. He checked the handle and found it locked. James unclipped his rifle from his vest and leaned it against the building as he squatted down. Examining the lock, he let out a grunt then dug back into his cargo pocket for the lock kit.

Jacob moved closer and knelt beside him. He aimed out with his rifle while occasionally looking back at the rest of the team lined up on the wall, including the retriever that lay in the tall grass next to Jesse. James worked on the lock, cursing to himself.

“So if you can pick locks, why did you shoot up the door yesterday?” Jacob asked.

James shook his head and twisted the small tool. When he felt the lock give, he reached for the door handle and pulled down, releasing the latch. “Cause we didn’t have the time... and sometimes I like to break shit.”

He lifted his rifle with his right hand, keeping his left on the door latch. Jacob turned around, waving for the others to move up.

When they were all stacked on the door, James powered on a bright light at the end of his rifle and swept into the building with the others close behind him. Jacob moved through the door, detecting the musty smells of standing water and wet concrete. James’s light cut through the dark room, deep into the structure, revealing tall, steel girders and beams. Stacked plastic drums, covered in shrink-wrap, sat on wooden pallets. An electric fork-lift rested idle, still plugged into a wall.

A life-sized, cardboard figure of a man greeted them with a cartoonish display, showing how to wear an apron, safety glasses, and gloves. Beyond

this was a large walled-off area. James moved up to the corner of the structure then rolled inside, panning the area with his light before moving back out and declaring it clear. "Looks like a break area; dining tables, microwaves, that sort of thing," James said.

Rogers closed the steel door, cutting off the only light source and causing them to depend on James' flashlight. Rogers snapped several chem lights and dropped them on the floor, hanging another at the entrance to the break area. Marks passed into the room with the others following. When Jacob entered and sat at a table he looked down and saw the dog was still with them, sticking close to Jesse's side. As soon as Jesse sat at one of the tables, the dog jumped up and sat in an empty chair next him.

Glass shattered and Jacob looked up to see James using the back of his KA-BAR to access a vending machine. He reached in then tossed small bags of chips and candy bars onto a lunch table. James sat at the table and sparked the dog's attention when he ripped open a bag of chips. The Lab approached the man and sat by his boot.

"What is it with this dog?" James laughed and then leaned down to stroke the dog's head.

"Oh, you mean Duke? He's our mascot," Jesse said.

"Hell, no. You fed it, and now you went and named it," James said, trying to sound tough. He stopped petting the dog, causing Duke to look up at him and press his wet nose against his arm. James grinned and continued to pet the dog. "Well, guess he's a member of the Assassins now." James opened the bag of chips and set it on the floor for Duke.

Jacob walked away from the table and looked out of the break area into the warehouse, factory, or whatever it was. He looked at his watch, amazed at how fast the time passed. He overheard Marks talking about the plan to recover the dioxin and asking for ideas on how to gather a sample. Marks slid out the yellow envelope and set it on the table. Jacob turned and moved back to the group.

Marks used his knife cut the envelope open. The paper inside explained how to treat the chemical and included two small test strips to verify that whatever they found was concentrated enough for what they needed. Stephens lifted the little plastic pouch that contained the strips. "Looks like standard test strips. Says they turn blue if the shit's good to go."

“The stuff is deadly; the reaction plan said we needed suits and respirators,” Jacob added.

James laughed and shook his head. “What’s wrong, cherry? You worried about getting cancer in ten years? Hell, I’m worried about living until next week. I’ll bottle the shit for you if you’re scared.”

Jacob shook off the comment and moved to a table in the shadows. “Suit yourself, tough guy. Come talk to me when your shit shrivels up.”

Marks put up a hand again. “Don’t worry about it; I’ll gather the chemicals. I have something else in mind for you two and Rogers.”

“What?” James asked standing and leaning toward the table.

The lieutenant smiled, showing his teeth. “I need a test subject. I want to make sure this stuff works.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Half an hour later, Rogers decided it was time. He dipped his hat, signaling for James to edge up past them to the corner of the intersection. James tugged back on the cut length of rusted chain link fence, allowing Jacob to pass through. With Jacob safely on the other side, James looked back, winking at Rogers to let him know he was set.

It was dusk and the light was fading fast. Even above the chemical plant on the small road leading away, he could see it would be dark soon. They'd moved out from the factory at nearly a jog, finding what Rogers described as the perfect bottleneck: a Y-shaped intersection where two roads met. On the road nearest the factory was a long-term storage facility, *Open 24 Hours*, was written on a heavy wooden sign over a rusted iron gate. The first thing the men did was close the gate then move to the far end and cut a hole in the chain link fence close to the corner.

A row of dumpsters overflowing with large cardboard boxes gave them all the material they needed to construct a hiding place. There was a small import car just behind the corner; Rogers worked his magic and managed to get the car going at a slow idle. It was far too quiet to attract the attention they sought; they needed something to bring in the hunters. There would be two of them, possibly together but maybe moments apart. They always worked in twos. Jacob had the easy job. He would shoot the first one; "In the face" as James put it.

Then the bearded man would tackle the second one, while Rogers knocked down anyone late to the party. The snatch team would only have a brief window to make the grab and get out of Dodge before the follow-up

Deltas from the main body arrived. If the hunters were able to get off a warning, the time to move would be even less. They couldn't get trapped or pinned down. It would most certainly mean death, and there was no way they could lead a mob back to the chemical plant. If they failed, they were on their own.

While all this went through Jacob's mind, James approached the small car at the corner. He snatched the rubber from a wiper blade arm then reached through a window and pushed a button, which triggered the car's windshield wipers and hazard lights. The scraping squeal of the wiperless metal arm against the window started immediately. Jacob feared it may be too loud. They wanted to create noise, but not too much. James looked in both directions then slipped back into the alcove of a building near the car to wait.

It didn't take long. As Jacob was adjusting his position, trying to shake the needles out of his dull and sleepy arm, the first of them stepped into view—a big farm boy that was probably less than eighteen years old in life. Jacob knew this would be the one he'd drop—no way were they carrying this guy all the way back to the chemical plant. Farm boy stumbled forward, walking like he'd had too much moonshine the night before. As the thing rounded the front of the car, Jacob could see why. Most of its right pant leg was missing, along with its shoe, showing a badly wounded shin and knee.

Jacob tried to relax, so as not to focus too much attention on the big guy. It moved right up next to the driver's side window. The Delta swiveled its head as its lifeless eyes searched the surroundings then looked intently at the wipers' movements, nearly hypnotized by the motion. Finally breaking away, his eyes wandered then stopped on the dumpster where Rogers was hidden. It held its focus as a second creature moved into view. To Jacob's relief, this one was a skinny man; sticking with the farmer country boy theme, he had the appearance of Joe Dirt. He sported ragged, faded blue jeans and a long, unkempt mullet. Its face was covered in patches of the man's best attempt at growing a beard.

In another time or place, Jacob would laugh at the duo; tonight, he was all business. He locked his sight on the big boy's forehead. At under a hundred feet, using a scope, he knew he wouldn't miss. Jacob held his breath and eased back on the trigger, launching a single suppressed round. The big man fell back, his wounded right leg kicking as it dropped. Before

Jacob could rise out of his hide, James was already on top of Joe Dirt, raining down punches and trying to stuff its mouth with rags before covering its head with a large burlap bag.

Jacob ran to his side and dove into the mix. Joe Dirt tried to scream but was heavily restrained by James. Jacob grabbed an arm and used two hands to force it to the thing's side. He bound its arm to its trunk using a roll of duct tape. As soon as one arm was immobilized, he did the next. Then the legs. Before he could say a word, Rogers was over them, tapping his watch. "Time's up; we gotta roll."

The big man reached down and lifted Joe Dirt like an old carpet. Bouncing him up and down, Rogers quickly rested the creature across his shoulder. "Get us moving, James; lead us out," Rogers barked, still adjusting to the squirming man's weight.

James led them off, making for cover before the rest of the mass arrived. Soon they were in waist-high grass. They moved deep into the field and penetrated a grouping of thick trees that would shield their approach back to the chemical plant. Ducking into the trees, James spun around and covered the back trail as Rogers moved past them. He tossed Joe Dirt to the ground with a thud while the creature kicked and fought against its restraints.

Jacob looked down at the figure in disgust. "You all really think this is necessary? I hate being around these things."

James backed up; then taking the tape from Jacob, he quietly peeled back the layers, using it to double up Joe Dirt's bindings. He slowly removed the hood and checked the gag. The man looked back at them with solid-black eyes. No pupils to follow, it was hard to see what he was focused on, but they could all feel his stare. "Damn, bro, cover that shit back up," Rogers said. "He's about as ugly as your last girlfriend."

James dropped the hood, pulling it down over Joe Dirt's neck, then loosely applied a loop of tape to prevent it from falling off.

Rogers put up a hand to silence them. "The party has arrived."

Jacob sat still in the thick brush, looking at the far away intersection. The main body had gathered, slowly pushed around the import car, and inspected their fallen hunter on the ground at the driver's door.

"That was a good shot," James said, watching the Deltas look down at their big boy. "You cracked the sucker's grape wide open."

“Thanks,” Jacob answered, keeping his eyes on the mass.

Rogers quietly hoisted Joe back to his shoulders and scuffed through the thicket in the direction of the chemical plant. James kept them in the tree line and tall grass, moving parallel to the access road. Then, as with their initial approach, they ran across the street and entered through the security gate, locking it behind them.

The sun was gone now; the tall chemical holding tanks cast dark shadows over the facility grounds. James moved them to the factory’s steel sides and shadowed them around to the open access door where a black tarp had been draped. James pulled it back, revealing a space lit with white light. He held the drape so Rogers and Jacob could pass through, and then dropped it.

“Found some emergency lighting,” Jesse said. “Batteries say seventy-two hours; should be plenty for the time we’re gonna be here.” Duke ran forward and locked up in a protective stance between the team and the bundled up Delta. Duke’s lips quivered as he let out a low growl.

“That’s what I’m talking about. You go, Duke,” James said, pointing at the dog. “I told you all I liked this dog.”

A chair was set up in the middle of the concrete floor, away from the break area. Lights were pointed at the chair with it flanked by the pallets of plastic drums. Marks pointed at Rogers, who still had the prisoner on his shoulders. “Put it over there.”

Duke followed Rogers to the chair, keeping his distance while panting and walking a wide circle nervously around the prisoner. Rogers sat the man in the chair then, using more of the tape, bound its legs to the chair’s legs. He did the same with the creature’s arms, cutting them away from its trunk and securing them tightly to the chair’s arms. When he was finished, he looked up at Marks. “It’s ready.”

“Any problems?”

“Nope; like we figured, they're getting predictable. Did you find the dioxin?”

Marks cocked his head to the side and pointed at a sealed five-gallon bucket and what looked like a spray bottle of window cleaner. Next to it were two dark-blue strips of test paper. “Right where Jacob said it would be; a bit of a pain getting it out of the tanks, but damn, the shit tested positive.”

Marks edged closer to the creature and removed its hood. He stepped back, looking it over. "It sure is ugly." The creature was fully developed. The forehead thick and protruding, scales went from below the neck of its T-shirt, up under its chin and to the sides of its ears.

"So Stephens, you've caught one of these before?" Marks asked, not taking his eyes off the creature. Its head now shifting side to side, examining the men in the room.

"Yeah, back at the start of this, but it wasn't at this stage yet; didn't have the snake skin."

"And tell me again what happened."

Stephens moved closer and approached the captive Delta. "Well, we tackled it and brought it back to base. But like I said, it was far less developed, none of this nasty snake shit growing on it. We brought him to the doc. But the thing just kicked and screamed; there was no calming it down. Doc tried a sedative, but it had no effect on it. We still thought they were just sick, and maybe we could fix it.

"Had to keep it gagged because it wouldn't stop screaming or fighting with us. We strapped the thing to a gurney and put it in a jail cell, but by morning, the thing was dead—all dried up."

Rogers nodded. "Well, this one seems pretty damn calm. I mean he ain't struggling no more. Kinda seems to be studying us. You think it can talk?"

Stephens shook his head. "I don't think so; no reason for them to."

"Not yet," James laughed, pointing at the five-gallon bucket. "Ain't no reason *yet*."

The lieutenant nodded and strolled across the room toward the bucket. He put on a long, black rubber apron and a pair of long black gloves before picking up the spray bottle. He moved back to the creature. "According to the information card, this stuff is supposed to work as an area deterrent and a direct weapon. How do you suggest we test it?"

"Make him drink it," James said.

Rogers shook his head. "Go sit down, bro. You seem too excited. Maybe go pull security for a bit."

James shook his head and stepped back from the group. "You guys are no fun," he said, dropping low on a stack of empty pallets. He called Duke up next to him and sat back with the dog lying across his lap, watching over them. Marks moved back to the five-gallon bucket and lifted one of the test

strips with his rubber gloves. He held the strip out, waving it toward the Delta. Its black eyes didn't appear to move; the thing's head continued to dart back and forth between each of them.

Marks moved closer with the test strip. The creature turned its head, suddenly focusing on the paper. Its eyes blinked for the first time and the protruding brow on its head seemed to tighten. As Marks moved the paper closer, it leaned his head back as the look of recognition painted itself across the alien's face.

"Holy shit. Like garlic to a vampire," James gasped from his place on the pallet. "Come on, hit it with some more."

Joe Dirt's head moved back as Marks removed the test strip. He reached over and tore away the fabric at the creature's wrist. Joe looked down at it with keen interest. Marks held the spray bottle in his hand with the sprayer close to the creature's skin. He hesitated and yanked it back. The creature looked up at him. Marks looked it in the face. "Tell me why I shouldn't spray you."

The creature held the same expression, eyes focused once again on the spray bottle.

"Come on, man. Hit it with some juice," James said.

Jacob stood and slinked further away, taking a position just outside of the blinding lights. Marks held up the bottle and pushed it toward Joe Dirt's face; the creature again leaned back, away from it.

"Last chance. Communicate with me or you're getting it."

The creature gave no response. Instead, its gaze remained focused on the movement of the spray bottle. Without warning, Rogers squeezed the sprayer, applying a light mist to the creature's wrist. The Delta writhed and shuddered in the chair so hard that Jacob thought its bindings might break. The creature bounced up and down, pulling and tugging at the tape.

"Look," Marks said, pointing at the thing's wrist as it thrashed.

All along the surface where the liquid had made contact, the previously bleach-white skin was changing from deep red to purple. At the same time, blisters had formed and continued to grow until the tips turned white and burst.

"Damn, it's like mustard gas." Rogers stepped closer and looked at the blisters.

“This is just a simple dioxin. It’s usually a by-product of manufacturing... things like weed killers and pesticides; how is it doing this much damage? Yeah, it can mess you up, but this is incredible,” Jacob said.

Rogers looked at the growing and popping blisters. “The Deltas didn’t grow up with this shit in the food and water like we did. It has no tolerance for it.”

Marks looked at the bottle, moved away from the bound creature, and set it back down by the five-gallon bucket. “So it works. How are we going to use it?”

“Wait,” Jacob said. “Pick the spray bottle back up.”

Jacob walked around the chair, instructing Marks to soak the concrete in a wide circle around the Delta. When he’d painted a strip of concrete a foot wide and in a ten-foot diameter, he looked back at Jacob. “Okay, now what?”

Jacob removed his pocketknife and sawed away at the tape holding the thing’s legs. James stood up to protest, but Marks raised his hand, backing him up. “Yeah, I want to see this,” Marks said.

He finished cutting away the bindings then cut its ties from the chair. James removed his MK III pistol and chambered a round. Duke still lay across his lap, the dog picking up on the building tension. As soon as Jacob cut the last arm free, the Delta lunged back, knocking Jacob to the ground. Rogers grabbed him and quickly removed him from the circle. The thing ran toward the wet concrete but backed off in agony every time.

“Look at its face,” Jesse said.

The thing was pacing back and forth within the dioxin barrier, going from side to side, trying to keep itself from the perimeter of the circle. When it turned, Jacob saw that its exposed skin was already turning pink and blisters were forming on its face and arms. Soon, it was bright red, completely covered in the festering blisters. After several minutes, it clawed at its face, trying to remove the gag; its fingers bled as it dug at the tape.

The Delta fell to the floor and drew its legs in. He looked at the men, its head moving from each one of them. Duke growled as the creature turned to the side and lay down.

“We done?” James asked.

Marks moved back from the circle. “Yeah, I’ve seen enough.”

Clack, clack—two quick shots from James's pistol and the thing lay silent on the ground.

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CHAPTER FORTY

Light shone under the canvas tarp, letting the weary men know the sun was up. James stretched then tossed the remaining cup of coffee he had to the concrete floor before he approached the door and pulled down the heavy cloth that covered it. He pressed his shoulder against the door, cracking it just a bit, allowing the morning sunlight to fill the room. He leaned out and looked left and right before pulling back inside. He nodded satisfaction then stepped out into the open. Duke trotted out next to him, and then both relieved themselves on the building's wall.

Rogers had worked the radio most of the night, attempting to make contact with the ship, with no success. Without a message, they would not be returning to Bay City for extraction. Marks briefed them on Plan B. The next pre-arranged egress point was a hundred miles north at an old Army National Guard Base. The place was untouched during the attacks as most of the soldiers were deployed to other areas before the outbreak reached its gates. According to all reports, the communications towers were intact and standing.

The men carefully transferred the dioxin into two dozen plastic soda bottles they found in the break area and divided them evenly among the team. Their trip allowed them to verify the location and quantity of the chemical; getting that information to command was the priority—especially now that they knew how well it worked.

Jacob followed Duke outside, where he watched the Golden Lab pace excitedly as if he was going for a walk around the block. Jacob noticed that James had shed much of his heavy protective equipment and now wore a

well-worn floppy hat. It made Jacob's own helmet feel even heavier, and he debated putting it back in his pack and trading it for a soft cap. Shifting his attention to the doorway, he watched as the others fell in behind him dressed in all of their armor. He decided to follow their lead and gathered along the backside of the building, waiting for the order to move out.

James knelt by the corner of the tall steel structure and pointed to the far trees. First, the team needed to break out of the city unnoticed then it was a straight shot north to the Army base. Marks had the coordinates of a communications tower there that they hoped they could use to get a message out. James looked up and smirked as Marks folded up the map and tucked it away in a breast pocket. "What's so funny?" Marks asked.

"I just think it's cute watching you try to read that map," he whispered before reaching over to stroke the dog's ears.

Marks flipped him off then looked back at the rest of the patrol. "Let's get this done."

Thirty minutes later, Jacob was walking on a narrow game trail fifty feet into a thick wood line that ran parallel to a winding gravel road. The men moved through parks and what were once finely manicured gardens and golf courses. Traveling south, they crossed a bridge, taking them farther from the city before reentering the woods. Hoping to avoid Deltas, they turned west—away from any structures and opting for the high grasses and woods instead of paved roads and sidewalks.

Jacob watched as Duke worked with the point man. The dog would wander out a few feet ahead, sometimes darting off the trail, then slowly walking back to rejoin them before trotting back to the front. If the dog stopped, James would call them to a halt while Duke sniffed at the grass or looked off at some distant object. When Duke went back to wagging his tail, James would move them back out. This style of movement made them slow and would take them longer to travel, but the slow easy-to-follow pace was also less exhausting.

The dog hadn't barked; he only growled and bared its teeth in the presence of the Delta back at the warehouse. Not the evidence Marks needed to consider the dog a true military tracker, but still, James had already taken the dog in and made it one of the Team. James was slowly putting his faith in the dog and making him part of his point man tool bag.

Duke again stopped on the trail to sniff and inspect the ground around a worn tree stump. James held up a fist, halting them as the dog stepped into the tree line while keeping its nose to the air. This time, Marks made his way up to the front of the patrol. “James, we need to pick up the pace,” he whispered. “We can’t stop every time your dog needs to mark his territory.”

James shook his head lazily, listening to the lieutenant’s rant. “Sir, Duke is in the zone right now. I’m sorry, L-Tee, but I can’t mess around with that kind of Mojo.”

Marks shook his head. “James, stop fucking around—”

The dog suddenly dropped low, its feet apart in a fighter’s stance, his tail rigid and tucked back. Duke didn’t bark or growl, but Jacob could clearly see its lip curl, revealing white fangs. James put a finger to his lip then held out a flat hand and waved toward the grass, causing the others to fan out and get low in the heavy vegetation.

James dropped to his belly and low crawled forward past Marks and took up a prone position near Duke. Feeling the closeness of James, the dog’s lip dropped, covering the white fangs; however, Duke remained rigid as he looked off into the woods with his nostrils flaring and the hair on his neck and back standing up. James stroked the dog calmly, letting him know he was there, not wanting the dog to bark.

A branch broke and tree limbs scraped against something. It was far off and out of sight, but they could hear it clearly in the silent woods. Something was walking along the shoulder of the gravel road. Whenever it moved ahead of them, it made a lot of noise as it crashed through brush. Duke’s ears remained pinned as he followed the sounds. The dog’s nostrils flared again as he looked up the trail, drool rolling over his lips and exposed teeth, just as a second sound of breaking branches and scuffing of dry leaves echoed over the trail.

“There’s the second one,” Rogers whispered from somewhere behind Jacob.

They lay in the heavy vegetation for fifteen minutes, allowing whatever was in the woods to pass them by. Afraid to move, Jacob remained completely still and silent as he watched ants crawl across his gloved hand. Duke relaxed his posture and stood high again. He panted while his wagging tail slapped against James. The team let out a collective sigh and

got back to their feet, slowly grouping up. Jesse tossed a full strip of jerky to the dog who hungrily lapped it up.

“Okay, let that dog keep its Mojo and move us out,” Marks said, giving in. “The mass is still out there somewhere.”

James nodded and leaned down, giving the dog a firm pat on its ribs before stepping off. Duke eagerly moved back to the front, leading his pack. The trail slowly curved away, taking them southwest and farther from the city and congested areas.

Jacob saw an opening in the trees. James halted the group and slowly edged them out alongside a wide stretch of interstate. The road was now a parking lot. Even if they could find a usable vehicle, this stretch of highway would be impassable.

Sticking to the tree line and still moving west, they followed the road from a distance. The trees thinned out and the occasional house set back far from the road appeared. Some boarded up but most burnt out or destroyed with broken windows and kicked in doors. James was walking far ahead of them now with Duke close at his side. The dog still occasionally ran off, zigzagging in and out of the parked cars before running in the opposite direction to inspect an empty home or building. If the dog stopped, they all stopped until Duke relaxed and moved on.

The congested roadway cleared after a large pileup of cars—a rusted hulk of a fire truck flanked by a number of crushed sedans. Near a tow truck with its windows shot out lay a scattering of decomposed bodies, some in uniform. James solemnly crossed through the area then cut across a paved road, halting the patrol at a corner across from a line of cookie-cutter homes, an empty gas station, and a mini-mart.

As James debriefed Marks on what he wanted to do, Duke sat panting beside the man. Marks nodded in agreement and turned to the others. “We’re going to hold up here for a bit. See if we can find some water and food. Rogers, secure transportation; take Jesse with you. Jacob, you’re on security.”

The big men took off together to look for a vehicle. Jacob followed the others as they made a direct path for the mini-mart. As they approached, he could see the storefront windows were smashed but the fully stocked shelves showed that nothing had been looted. There had been no time for that; The Darkness had moved into most areas so quickly, people had hid

behind locked doors, afraid to go out into the open—even for food. The ones who had taken the chance, and were discovered, were hunted down before they ever made it to the store shelves. James stepped up to the broken door of the shop's shatterproof glass, now white and crystallized, still held together by the frame.

The bearded Marine let his rifle hang from the sling and drew his sidearm. He stepped to the door and tugged it open with the ring of a bell hanging just above it. James pressed his back to the door and reached up, snatching down the bell. Searching the area, he found a small can filled with sand and cigarette butts. He slid this to the entrance to hold the door open, and then followed the dog inside.

Jacob paced out front as the others entered the convenience store. He saw a gas station next door. A car was parked at the pumps with its driver's door open. Inside, a body lay slumped in the seat, a pistol still clutched in the driver's left hand with a finger wrapped around the trigger. The gas pump handle lay on the ground near the rear tire, a gas cap to the right of it. Jacob turned to look at the station attendants' building. A leg propped the door open, a high heel lying near its foot. As he contemplated the dried blood that covered the steps, Jacob wondered if The Darkness was responsible for the bloodshed or if people desperate for fuel did it to each other.

The sound of glass breaking behind him caused him to flinch and turn his attention. Jacob plodded back to the storefront. James was pushing containers of spoiled dairy products out of the way so he could reach the shrink-wrapped cases of bottled water. After he procured a bundle of water, he shambled over the mess and left the store. With Duke just in front of him, James sat on a parking block and ripped the shrink-wrap open. He removed a bottle, tossed it to Jacob then poured another into a container for Duke. Next, James removed his small pack from his back and retrieved a can of dog food. He used his knife to open the can and poured the contents on the ground, watching Duke go at it.

"Take it easy, boy. James has more where that came from, even if I gotta take less for myself." He smiled as he held the pack open so Jacob could see several cans of the dog food inside.

Jacob drained the water bottle and sat on the curb. "Why didn't you just grab people food and share it with him?"

The Marine looked up at Jacob, smiling. “Hadn’t thought of that.” He laughed then added sarcastically, “Damn, you’re smart.”

Jacob shook his head and stood, trying to hold back his own laughter as he wandered into the store to restock his food supplies.

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CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Finishing his third candy bar, Jacob heard the low rumble of a diesel engine. He looked up to see a bright blue crew cab pickup with the window stickers still in place. The truck weaved in and out of cars, driving along the shoulder of the road before Rogers backed it up to the storefront and killed the engine. Jesse jumped from the passenger side, walking directly at several shopping bags filled with goods. He opened a bag and dug through the contents.

“You all save anything for me?” Jesse said, removing a can of peanuts.

Stephens walked around the truck, lifted a case of water, and set it in the bed of the pickup. “We loaded up everything we could find. Feel free to make another pass inside.”

Marks stepped to the side of the large vehicle and put his hand on the highly waxed rail. “Nice wheels; where’d you find it?”

“Car dealership just up the street. The salesman was willing to let it go cheap,” Rogers said, draining a warm bottle of Gatorade.

Marks nodded. “Did you get the extended warranty?”

“Oh yeah, and then some.” Rogers laughed. “Cab will only seat five, but someone can ride in the bed.”

“I got it—I’ll take the back with Duke,” James said, already tossing his ruck into the truck bed. He lifted Duke in then grabbed the tailgate and, using the bumper, climbed over the rail. Up high in the truck, he surveyed the area before lying down and stretching out across the back. Duke moved up and lay beside him with his head on the man’s chest. James pulled the

floppy hat down over his eyes and covered the dog with his arm. “Hell yeah, perfect fit.”

Jacob helped sort the last of the groceries, breaking things down and stuffing them into their packs. When they finished, he helped load it all. With everything on board, they climbed into the cab and Rogers headed west on the open road.

The terrain slowly changed as they rolled north; the grass grew long and yellow, the road flanked by tall pine trees. Oaks and poplars were gold and orange with their fall colors. The road opened up with far less traffic and the homes became farther apart. Billboards pointed to tourist spots and gave directions to hotels and restaurants. They drove past an occasional body on the side of the rural highway, or sometimes slowed to look at a burnt out farmhouse.

Marks rode shotgun with his military map out across the center console. He strained to see road signs as they passed by, stopping at cross streets to compare them to his map. “A street atlas would be nice,” Marks said, trying to plot their current location. “Nobody uses the damn things anymore, relying on their smart phones and navigation systems. Well, lots of good that does us now.”

Rogers laughed in agreement. “Don’t sweat it, boss; we’ll find the base.”

Jacob rode in the back seat between Stephens and Jesse. He had his head down, and his rifle was between his knees. The slow going and buzzing sounds of the new tires on the concrete tugged at his eyelids, making his head heavy. He looked left and right and saw his friends both asleep and stopped resisting.

The truck stopped suddenly, jolting Stephens awake as the side of his head smacked against the window. “What the fu—” he barked. “What happened?”

Jacob leaned forward and saw what caused Rogers to stop. Just ahead, the road curved right. A large sign welcomed them to a quaint lake town. But what stopped them was beyond that. A long procession of people walked in a double single-file line, traveling right to left, moving across the road toward the lake. Jacob leaned forward and adjusted his view; the line stretched far into the distance.

“Do they see us?” Jesse whispered. “Why are there so many of them?”

Rogers put the truck into park and sat silently. "If they don't, they will soon; if we turn around now they're going to be on to us," he said, squeezing the wheel.

A tapping come from the back window. Jacob leaned forward and strained his neck to see behind him. Rogers pressed a button, opening a window in the rear of the cab. As soon as the window opened, they could hear Duke's growl.

"We got company," James whispered. "Looks like a Delta convention is gathering in town."

Behind them and on the right side of the road was a small patrol of Deltas, five walking in a staggered file and headed in their direction, every one of them armed. Farther back, a small SUV hugged the shoulder of the road as it drove slowly, keeping pace with the Delta column. James had his rifle up, leaning on the tailgate for stability.

Jacob gasped. "What the hell? They're moving like a military unit."

"It happens. Not often, but it happens," Stephens answered.

James glanced at Marks. "That truck's getting closer, L-Tee; give the word, and that driver eats a bullet."

Marks looked back and front several times, searching for a way out, struggling to make a split-second, life-or-death decision. "Fuck it, kill him. Take out the vehicle too. Rogers, as soon as that SUV is down, get on the gas and take us off-road. Let's get some distance before we have to bail out."

James leaned into the rifle resting on the tailgate and fired two suppressed rounds in rapid succession. After a brief wait, two holes appeared over the driver's side of the windshield. The Delta SUV continued forward but veered right, drifting off the road. James shifted and fired three more times and was rewarded with a flash of steam from the vehicle's radiator. With perfect timing, Rogers stomped the gas and the truck lunged forward. James held the trigger, draining the rest of the magazine into the marching patrol.

Rogers then cut hard right, smoking the tires and tossing James to the side, forcing him to let go of the rifle and grab on. Rogers jerked the wheel and sped the truck from the roadway. He lost traction in the grass, fishtailing away and throwing mud. The Delta patrol opened fire as the truck sped down a small embankment headed for the far off trees. Rounds

smacked the tailgate; others slapped the ground around them. Rogers stayed in control, dropping the vehicle into four-wheel drive as more rounds zipped overhead.

“There!” Marks shouted, pointing at a small cattle gate with a *no trespassing* sign hanging over the center of it. Marks slowed as he lined the truck up with the gate yet still hitting it hard enough to snap the gate back but not enough to immobilize the truck. Rounds peppered the tailgate and shattered the rear window. Rogers ducked as he maneuvered the truck onto a well-rutted trail that snaked around and into deeper woods. They rounded a corner then dropped downhill, picking up speed on the muddy path.

“Oh shit! Hold on!” Rogers shouted.

Jacob looked ahead and could see that the muddy trail was covered by water. They hit the water hard. The mud exploded and wrapped around the front of the truck, covering the windshield. Deeper than it looked, the water rose to the center of the truck’s doors, bogging the vehicle down. Rogers stayed on the gas; he fought the mud as the truck tires spun, searching for traction. The truck fishtailed and sank deeper into the muck.

Rogers punched the dash and cut the engine.

“Okay, dismount, fellas,” Marks shouted, throwing his own door open. “Time to beat feet.”

James was standing in the back tossing the packs to dry ground. Jesse pried the rear door open, throwing his weight against the muddy water. He took a long step into the mud and fought through it to the weed-covered bank. Then turning back, he helped pull Jacob up the slope behind him. The muck permeated his clothes with a skunky, bog water stench.

They scrambled into their packs and waited for James, rifle across his back and Duke cradled in his arms, as he jumped from the truck. He set the dog down and threw the straps of his own rucksack over his shoulders just as rounds impacted the muddy water. Duke bounced back and forth, agitated by the gunfire.

James pivoted and adjusted his rifle, firing several times and dropping the only visible attacker. More came into view; Jacob raised his M4, aimed at the center of the group, and pulled the trigger, sending rounds in their direction. Some dropped, but more quickly filled the space. “There’s too many; let’s move!” Marks ordered, forcing them to break contact.

Rogers led the way. At a near run, he cut through the thick lodge-pole pines, moving the team back into high ground. The terrain was covered now with pine needles with most of the forest floor open. Unlike the thick brush they traveled earlier, this terrain allowed long fields of vision. The soft groundcover cushioned their footfalls and concealed their tracks, making them hard to follow. They changed direction often, trying to lose the pursuers. This forced them further south and away from their destination.

After running nearly a mile through the pine forest, Rogers called them to a resting halt. The men dropped to the ground, hiding in any sparse cover they could find, breathing heavily trying to listen for sounds that the Deltas were still in pursuit. The gunfire had stopped. No trace of the moaning or sounds of vehicle engines. They looked at Duke for signs; the dog was sitting calmly next to James, panting. His nose was in the air, sniffing, but its ears were relaxed.

“They know we’re here. They won’t stop looking,” Stephens said. “Let’s keep moving.”

Rogers traded out the point position with James, allowing him and Duke to lead them out. They cut a diagonal path through the pine forest, trying to intersect with a game or recreational trail that would lead them north. Moving farther west, James stepped them into a dry streambed. He turned to follow it until the ground became wet. The damp, sandy soil made it easier to travel but also left heavy, easy-to-follow boot prints. They hurried across it and moved farther north through sparse woods. They stayed just below a ridgeline until they crossed a hilltop and found a well-marked lake view hiking trail. James cautiously led them onto the hard-packed trail. From there, they could clearly see the distant lake, the water holding a jet-black sheen. The town far below was filled with the Deltas.

“That explains the mass on the road,” Rogers said. “Looks like we got ourselves a mega seed pond... or hell, mega seed *lake*, even.”

“Nothing we can do about it. Let’s get some distance on this place,” Marks said, pushing them on. “We can’t afford to get into a fight with these numbers.”

At the top of the hill, the trail cut sharply again, moving them down and to the south in the wrong direction. James slowed and navigated the terrain before throwing a fist in the air. Jacob strained to see over James’s shoulder to find out why he had stopped them.

At the bottom of the hill, he spotted movement—a flash of white fabric. Jacob ignored the halt and stepped just behind James, straining his eyes to get a better look. He spotted her; she was standing straight up, wearing khaki cargo pants and a camouflage parka. She had a rifle slung over her right shoulder while waving a white flag with her left hand.

Jacob felt the others move up, gathering around him at the top of the hill. “Damn, is that a woman? What’s she doing way out here?”

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CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

The men bunched up on the slope, staring down at her. Tall with broad shoulders, she wore an army patrol cap with aviator sunglasses. The girl was younger than Jacob, mid- to late-twenties, but stood with the confidence that gave her the appearance of being much older. She didn't flinch or hesitate as the men approached. She stood with her feet shoulder-width apart and arms folded in front of her.

Seeing them move closer, she tossed the white flag to the ground and unslung her rifle, putting it into low carry with the barrel pointed down. Not threatening, but not overly inviting either. Jacob had seen enough bad war movies to recognize the AK47 with a thirty-round magazine. On her hip was a long Bowie knife, and tucked into a shoulder holster under her left arm, she carried a black semi-automatic handgun.

"Dibs," James, said walking forward, letting Duke lead them.

"Bullshit," Rogers mumbled. "You got the dog. Boss, you think we can trust her?"

Marks stalked close behind them, speaking low as they approached. "Let's see what she has to say. Right now, we are the group of strange men and she is the lone female. For some reason, she chose to trust us."

"Yeah, that's what worries me," Rogers said.

Marks shrugged in agreement. "If it goes south, we kill her and stick to the original plan."

James stopped and looked back at them. "Come on now, you can't shoot my girlfriend on the first date," he protested.

The team continued walking down the steep trail. When they were within fifty feet, she put up her palm, halting them. “That’s close enough. Who are you and why are you stirring up the natives? You’ve made enough damn noise to spin up every black eye in the county.” Her voice was quiet, yet assertive. Duke continued forward and walked around her, sniffing her legs and ankles before stopping and sitting at her feet.

James opened his mouth to speak but stopped when Marks put a hand on his shoulder. “Excuse me, ma’am, we’re with the United States Armed Forces. A small recon team,” he said. “We are here to—”

She shook her head, giving half a smile. “Nah... there is no US Armed Forces anymore. Who you are? And don’t lie. I have shooters in the trees just waiting for a reason to take you down.”

“Oh boy, I think I’m in love,” James said.

Marks put his hands in the air, stepping in front of James, pushing the Marine back. “It’s true. We are with the US Armed Forces, operating out of Canada. We were on a recon mission south of here when we ran into trouble. Had some trouble with the radio so we’re trying to make our way north.”

“All of you? You’re all military?” she asked, eyeballing Jacob.

Marks cleared his throat and waved his hand around the group, making brief introductions. “James is with the Marines, Rogers is an Army vet. Stephens is also Army. I’m with the Air Force. Jesse and Jacob there are—hell, I don’t know what to call them. Let’s say conscripts.”

“Conscripts? What, like they were drafted?” she asked.

“Something like that. We do what we have to these days,” Marks said.

She looked the men over, seeming to focus on their matching uniforms and equipment. “Okay, follow me and stay close.”

James jumped forward, extending his hand. She brushed him off. “We need to hurry before they pick up your trail; they’ll be coming through this way soon.” She moved out quickly, leaving James dumbstruck with his hand still extended. The men passed by James, slapping him on the shoulder as he mockingly grabbed at his heart. Duke moved by his side, looking up at him as the others passed.

She moved them fast over what looked like a well-worn game trail, except this one had seen a lot of human traffic. The surface was packed earth, occasionally turning to stone. Some places were even built up and

compacted with logs and brick. She veered them off the trail, moving downhill into thicker cover and heavy underbrush. She moved at nearly a jog, the speed making it impossible to communicate. Because of the pace, Jacob doubted her story of the far-off shooters. If there were any in the trees, they would have lost them. Or she was running them into a trap.

They came out of the underbrush onto a small, recreational, two-track trail that looked like it had once been used for all-terrain vehicles. She followed the trail for a few hundred yards then turned north, marching them up a steep incline. The top leveled out into a high overlook; here she finally stopped the vigorous pace. She moved to a moss-covered log and lifted back a green tarp. Underneath was a gallon water jug. Jacob also spotted several rifle magazines for her AK and a tactical tomahawk. She removed the jug and took a long drink of water before passing it to Marks.

"There aren't any shooters are there. Who are you?" Marks asked as he passed the jug to Stephens.

She ignored the question. When everyone had a drink, she placed the jug back under the tarp, pushing dried leaves and pine needles back in place to conceal the cover. "We have to keep moving. It's not safe here with the increase in activity. Come on; the camp is this way."

They moved slower now. She led them over the soft needles, crisscrossing the undergrowth of the forest floor, leaving no discernible trail. James, with Duke beside him, worked his way back to the front. "I didn't catch your name," he said, moving beside the woman without taking his eyes off the surrounding forest.

She hesitated then looked at him briefly. "Name's Eve," she said, stepping slightly ahead and avoiding a follow-up question. Jacob roved near the back, where he could see that Stephens and Marks were constantly exchanging looks. Occasionally, Rogers would move close to them and flash a number of fingers or some other sign. Jacob looked over at Jesse, who was walking next to him. The big man shrugged his shoulders. Jacob watched as James pursued, sticking close to the woman as the others seemed to plan their next move.

James looked back at the rest of the team now that he was leading far ahead and walking beside the strange woman. He turned back to her. "So where are you taking us?"

She suddenly stopped and looked them over, allowing them to move close and gather around her. James stopped and stood beside her, as if he'd already picked a side and was on her new team. He knelt down and stroked Duke's head as he waited for her to speak. "Something is happening and it's been happening fast. They are congregating around the lake, their numbers growing every day, and it makes it hard enough to get supplies without people like you stirring them up. Just ahead is my father's hunting cabin. He won't be happy to see you. I was out gathering supplies when I heard the shooting, and it was probably stupid on my part to bring you back."

"Okay, slow down, miss. What hunting cabin?" Marks asked.

She curled her lip like she had something to hide. "You'll see. Come on, it's just this way."

She led them down another slope then through a large thicket, slowing them before pointing down at the ground. "Watch your step." Just a foot off the forest floor was a tightly strung strand of barbed wire.

Jacob stopped to follow the wire's path; it seemed to go on forever, wrapped around the base of the trees. Just yards past the wire, the thick brush opened up into a clearing. The ground was covered with dried leaves and sparse spots of long grass. There was no road or driveway, and there were no vehicles. At the end of the clearing, was a modest one-room cabin with the door shut and heavy shutters in place. Beyond that, alone in the forest clearing, was a rustic red barn that seemed out of place. Jacob looked at it and turned to Jesse. "Not much here," Jacob whispered.

She led them to the small front porch of the cabin and opened the door, allowing them to enter. It was dimly lit by a glass skylight and smelled of wood smoke. It seemed even smaller inside. Pine planks covered every surface. A cold woodstove was in the corner with a pile of pine boards next to it. There was also a set of bunk beds and, in the peaked ceiling, a loft—no kitchen or bathroom in sight. A small rustic dining set filled a corner with a set of wooden chairs pressed against a wall. Eve moved in past them and paused at a corner, waiting for them all to come inside before she opened a closet door that revealed a set of plank stairs that led down to a cellar.

She turned and disappeared below. James followed her, staying close behind. What Jacob thought was a cellar opened up into a long rectangle with another doorway in the back. The room was over twenty feet wide and

thirty feet long with cinderblock walls. Looking up, the high ceiling appeared to be poured concrete. LED lights were draped across steel I-beams, lighting the room.

They moved down and gathered at the bottom of the stairs. Looking around the space, Jacob spotted what appeared to be two of every kind of weapon known to man. On another wall was a long, steel shelf loaded with boxes of ammunition. Near the front was a small utilitarian kitchen, stainless steel counters, and appliances. A small dining area was just across from it.

“Who *is* this woman?” Jacob whispered.

Eve minced along a wall, stopping beside a bed, where a large, gray-haired, bearded man was asleep; she sat in a chair beside the bed, pulling a thick blanket back from his chest and coaxed the old man awake. He woke coughing profusely before suddenly spotting the men in the room. “Dammit Eve—” His coughing caused him to turn to his side. She handed him a glass of water, which he sipped down. “Get me a cigarette,” he said.

Eve shook her head no and helped him sit up. “Eve, who the hell are they? What did I tell you about bringing back strangers?”

A red door at the back of the room opened. Probably drawn by the voices and the old man’s hacking, a young girl, less than ten years old, peeked out. She looked at the new faces then back to the woman. “Is Grandpa okay?” she asked.

Eve nodded her head. “He’s fine, and I’ll be back in a minute to see you.”

The little girl turned to look at the strangers before pulling back into the room and closing the door. The old man coughed again then pushed himself upright. He shoved the blanket away from his chest and turned in the bed so that he looked like he was about to stand. “So what the hell are they doing here?” he asked her.

“Dad, we need help; you’re sick and the kids can’t stay here in this shelter forever. If these guys have a way out, we should go with them. It’s been over three months—we’ve had enough, Dad.” She turned and moved toward the red door. “I’m going to check on Mom and the others.”

The old man laughed and coughed again. “Three months—I built this place to last three years, and already they’re wanting to hang it up. I got a mutiny on my hands.” The man lifted himself to his feet after putting on a

pair of slippers. Ignoring the watching men, he shuffled across the floor to a kitchen counter where he poured hot water into a cup and added tea bags. He turned and faced the men.

“Don’t listen to my daughter. I ain’t sick; it’s just a cold, and she ain’t going nowhere.” The man moved closer to the group. As he stood, they all noticed a 1911 stuffed into a paddle holster on his waistband. He waved them to a far end of the shelter where a long wooden table with chairs around it was positioned. The old man found his way and sat down. “Go on, drop your packs and have a seat.”

Eve re-entered the room from the back, quietly closing the door behind her. The old man watched her walk toward them and looked up at her. “Eve, get these fellas something to eat,” he ordered, causing displeasure to cross her face. She shook her head then moved along the wall, leaned against it, and ignored her father’s request.

Marks dropped his pack near the wall and took a seat, smiling. “Sir, it’s quite all right, she’s already done plenty.” He scooted in the chair so that he was just across from the old man. He stretched his arm across the table. “I’m Lieutenant Jeffrey Marks, United States Air Force.”

The man took another sip of his tea. “Yeah, I assumed you were military by the uniforms. You can call me Stone. I’m retired Army and this is... well, *was* my best-kept secret. Now, I’m not sure what you men are doing here, or why she brought you; maybe you could fill me in.”

Marks leaned back in his chair and looked around the room. “Well... to be honest with you, sir, we were doing all right on our own. Making good time on the trail, trying to get to our next way—”

The woman interrupted. “They were on the trail to Denton.”

The old man let out a hacking laugh. “Hell, you’re lucky she came along then. Denton Shore is overrun—hell, worse than that—it’s a hot bed. These things are coming in from all over to get to Denton. You’d a never made it out of there.”

“What do you mean?” Marks asked suspiciously.

Eve pushed off from the counter and moved back to the table. “They’ve been migrating to there by the thousands. Don’t know why, but it started a little over a month ago. They go down to the water and wade out in it, just standing out there before moving on.”

“You got close enough to verify it?” Marks asked.

Eve rolled her eyes. “You were close enough to verify it, if you’d bothered to look around. Didn’t you notice anything unusual on the road? All the traffic moving to the lake?” She shook her head, waiting for his response. “The East Bay, where you all came in”—she slammed a fist on the counter, raising her voice—“is full of them and you idiots damn near drove right down their throats. Then you turned and left, and led the entire pack this way. Hell, didn’t you notice the water is black? I’ve spotted columns of movement every day coming from all directions.” She turned and looked at the old man. “Daddy, we need to leave. They’re getting closer to this place by the hour, and they only made it worse.”

The old man put a hand up; he looked up as the red door opened again. This time, an older woman with blue hair pulled tightly back, wearing oversized clothing and a button-up, dark-blue sweater ushered out, smiling. She held a large pot and was followed by a boy carrying plastic bowls.

“Really, it’s okay, ma’am,” Marks said, putting up a hand, feeling uncomfortable by Eve’s sudden outburst.

The old woman shook off the comment. “Oh no, we feed our guests, young man,” she said, moving forward, placing the large pot on a counter. “The kids already ate and there’s plenty.” She took a ladle from a drawer and filled the bowls. “Remember when we’d have all the guys over for dinner, Henry? It sure has been a while since we had a house full of soldiers,” she said with a smile.

Henry Stone laughed and slid his chair back, reaching for a pot. He added more hot water to his cup. “Been twenty years at least.”

“We take care of our own though, don’t we, Henry?” she said.

The old man grinned. “Yeah, guess we do. Boys, this is my wife, Gloria, and my grandson Billy.”

The men around the table nodded as the boy handed out bowls of potato soup. Marks took a bowl and after a heaping spoonful, he looked back at Stone. “Sir, do you have a radio? We really need to get north and contact our command. Maybe there’s something we can do to help.”

The man coughed into a napkin and shook his head, pointing at a black box near a small table in a corner. “Had one, but lost it. Thing cooked itself; probably dirty power from the generator. Still have the receiver if you think you can get it working.”

Marks nodded to Rogers, who wiped his face with a napkin and stepped off toward the radio, taking the bowl with him. Marks looked back to the front. "You seem well armed. How many people you got here?"

The man nodded and, looking at the shelves lining the walls, said, "The guns? Just part of my collection. I have more in the field. Don't worry about any of that; it's just the three of us and the five grandkids.

"So tell me, son, where exactly are you headed?" he asked before Marks could follow up with another question.

Marks hesitated, looking back to Stephens, who shrugged. "What harm's it gonna do now?"

"We need to get to Grayling," Marks said.

The man licked at his teeth and stroked his gray beard. "Well, you're on the right track. Take the highway up the west side of the lake and you'll run right into it. That is, if it weren't for all the black eyes in the way. Son, I'm not sure you'll ever get past that lot. To be honest, I'm not sure how you made it this close to the lake without them getting you."

Marks shook his head in disagreement. "You seem to be doing okay."

Stone dipped his head slowly. "Might seem that way. I've lost my sons and their wives out there. Eve and the kids are all we got left." The man looked away. Gloria moved to his side and put a hand on his shoulder. He shook off the feelings and drank the rest of the tea. "If you could cause a big enough distraction—and I mean it would have to be big—you might be able to break away to the north."

"What exactly do you have in mind?"

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

“So what is it you have to show me?” Marks asked.

They were riding in the passenger compartment of a large crew cab truck. Stone was at the wheel and Stephens was riding shotgun while Jacob was in the backseat with Duke panting away in the space between him and James. Not as nice as the new one they’d left buried in the mud, but this truck was better equipped for the back country where they now weaved in and out of trees and large boulders. The truck was fitted with oversized tires, a raised suspension, and a large tubular steel brush guard that helped Stone force his way through the back trails and dirt tracks. The truck showed the dents and scars of being used in the rough wooded terrain, and Stone showed it no mercy as he fought his way through thick narrows in the trail.

Stone let out a long string of hacking coughs before spitting into a handkerchief. “You okay?” Marks asked him.

“Emphysema. The women don’t know and I want to keep it that way; they got enough to worry about,” Stone said. He slowed to ease the truck onto a gravel county road. After a short distance, he cut the wheel and put them back onto another all-terrain vehicle trail. “Just my luck. I build up this damn doomsday bunker, and by the time anything good happens, I’m too fucking old and sick to use it.”

“Hey, at least you didn’t have to spend your good years doing this. You got to enjoy them, right?” Marks said.

The old man shook his head and laughed. He reached over Marks and popped the glove box, removing a half-smoked cigar, which he placed

between his teeth. “Yep, guess that’s one way of looking at it.” He slowed the truck and eased it off the road into a patch of tall grass. “It’s just up here. We walk the rest of the way,” he said.

They left the truck and followed the trail. The old man carried a Hungarian AMD-65 rifle with a short barrel and collapsible stock. He let it hang from his left arm while he navigated the trail. Just ahead, Jacob could see a wide path of cleared brush and exposed churned earth. The man continued on, walking directly into the barren field.

“It came down during the early fighting; mechanical failure would be my guess—never seen one of those black eyes take down an aircraft. I heard the crash from back at the cabin when I was still sleeping above ground,” Stone said as he left the trail and entered the debris field. “I came out here with my boys. We salvaged everything we could from it. The pilot must have ejected; there was no sign of him in the cockpit, but the plane was full of ammo. Couldn’t make use of the 30mm or the bombs. Still, we worked hard at removing everything.”

They followed Stone over a rise and into a depression. Just ahead of them, they saw the destroyed body of an A10 Warthog. Stone sauntered past the aircraft to a relatively flat spot covered in dried and dead tree limbs. The old man lifted the limbs away, revealing a carefully arranged stack of green bombs with yellow tips.

“Well, holy hell. You definitely got yourself some ordnance.” Marks moved close to examine the bombs. “You know these are armed—you could have blown yourself up moving them around.”

Stone grinned while removing a bottle of Schnapps from his back pocket to have a drink. “So do you think this would make enough of a distraction?” He offered the bottle up to the rest of them, all waiving it off but James.

Jacob crept close to the stack of bombs. “L-Tee, this is what we need; the way we can use it against them.”

“Use what?” Marks asked.

“The hunters, how they always attack and each wave gets bigger than the last, drawing in the main body. We could set these up, bury them in the woods and draw them to us. We lay down fire until the horde arrives... when they mass right over these things... boom,” Jacob said.

Stone laughed, causing more of the deep coughs. “Hell, yeah ‘boom’. You’re talking three thousand pounds of boom. That’s enough bang to get you all out of Dodge and then some,” Stone said.

Marks stared at the weapons, a smile slowly building on his face. “Okay, how do we get the bombs into position? These aren’t exactly light.”

“I got a Bobcat back in the barn. I can help you get ’em moved, but there’s something I need from you in exchange.”

James, staying quiet till now, handed the bottle back to Stone before walking away from the bombs and moving closer to the aircraft body, leaning against it. “What do ya need, Stone? Talk to me, brother.”

“I think you already know.” The old man looked away, kicking at the earth with his worn combat boot. “It pains me to say it, but I need you to get my family out of here. This isn’t the end of the world I’d prepared for. Eve’s right; I can’t keep the kids locked up in the shelter all day underground, and it’s only a matter of time until they find us here. We were okay until my boys disappeared. Now I just don’t have the help to take care of the place and give the kids the attention they need.”

“So Eve is their mother, then?” James asked, shooting a covert wink at Jacob.

“What? No, she’s their aunt,” Stone answered.

Marks grimaced and stepped ahead thoughtfully. “What happened to them? To your sons, I mean.”

Stone turned away and moved closer to the aircraft before leaning back against it. He took another sip from the bottle before answering. “They went out on a run. Hardware parts to fix the radio, some plumbing supplies for the well. They never came back. It’s as simple as that, I guess. Left us here with the kids and Eve. And now the changes in the way the black-eyed bastards are acting, the numbers of them that keep moving to the lake—I’m worried our time is running out.”

Stone shook his head. “I set this place up to be big enough for my entire family—my two sons, their wives, their kids, and Eve’s family—if she ever slowed down enough to start one. That girl can’t hold still for a minute, always putting more focus on that job of hers than starting a family. She had a serious boyfriend or two but never a husband. She’s too damn stubborn for that, I figure.

“We all made it here, but the boys took their wives out salvaging that one morning and never came back. Eve found their truck down by the East Bay. She never found any sign of the boys or my daughters-in-law. Not a damn thing... no blood trails, not a single spent cartridge. I know those boys wouldn’t have been taken without a fight, tough as nails, they were.”

Marks edged closer to the old man, looking him in the eye. “I’m not sure if you realize what you’re asking. There ain’t much out there for them; the camps aren’t ideal for children. As bad as it sounds, you have it better here than anyone in those camps do.”

Stone moved near James and sat on the plane’s wing. “What else can I do? They can’t stay here, not with all of them out there and more moving in,” he said, waving his arm toward the tall pines.

James reached out a hand for the Schnapps and took another long drink then paused; looking up like an idea just came to him. “What about the dioxin?” he said.

“What about it?” Marks asked suspiciously, frowning at James’s mention of it.

“We have plenty of it. Hell, over three gallons—way more than the sample that command asked for. There has to be a tributary feeding that lake; how much would it take to ruin that seed pond, maybe run some of them off?”

Jacob moved to James. “You want to poison the lake? That’s your answer?”

“News flash, hero. The lake is already poisoned. Take a swim in it if you don’t believe me. That oily shit has it all clogged up. I’m just saying, without the lake the Deltas have no reason to come here. It might open things up for Stone and his family. Hell, maybe I’ll even stick around and help him manage the place,” he said, shooting another sly wink at Jacob.

“What is this dioxin?” Stone asked.

James smiled, showing his teeth. “It’s like mustard gas, and it messes them up pretty damn bad. If they’re coming here for the lake like Eve says, this might be enough to change their minds.”

“And you say you’ve got this stuff with you?” Stone asked.

Marks pursed his lips and dipped his chin. “We’ve got it, but like Jacob says, it’ll poison that lake, kill everything in it. We don’t know the half of what else it could hurt. For all we know, it’s death in a bottle.”

“Then do it, I don’t care,” Stone said. “We’ve got nothing to lose here. If it doesn’t work, I have to leave anyway. If it runs them off, then maybe we can move back above ground. I can get my water upstream; it’s worth the risk.”

James shrugged and slapped the old man on the back. “It’s worth a try, right?”

Marks stood up and stepped closer to the bombs, hesitating before looking back. “Okay— let’s do it.”

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CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Working in shifts, they prepared the ambush site. Stone knew the area well and hand-selected a spot just off the main trail, a well-traveled and very dangerous spot to be in. A place where traffic naturally funneled up from the East Bay then broke off onto several different trails. If they poisoned the stream leading into the East Bay, it might be enough to push the entire horde to them. They moved the bombs early in the morning—the time of day when the Deltas were least active.

Jacob was sent far out ahead of the group with James on security, using Duke for early warning. Stone seemed to pick up on James's attraction to his daughter and sent the bearded Marine off as far from her as possible. From their observation post, they could just make out the faint sounds of the distant Bobcat as it moved and buried the bombs. Using two-way radios, they would call back to the group, ordering them to halt work whenever a Delta was spotted walking the main trail.

The weather had turned for the worse and the temperatures slowly dropped. The day had started with a light rain that gradually built into a heavy snowfall that soon covered the ground with fresh accumulation. Jacob watched a pair of Deltas moving into view. Through his scope, they almost appeared to be ordinary hikers, except the woman was dressed in jeans and long black boots. The man in a dark business suit. Not only did they not belong together as a couple, they didn't belong in the woods in the late fall. The scene almost made him laugh.

"You think anything human is left in them?" Jacob whispered, watching the man walk along the trail.

“I used to think that, but not anymore; especially not after that black-eyed bastard back at the factory,” James said, keeping his hand on Duke’s head to calm him.

The dog’s lips were curled in the presence of the Deltas. “Duke sure does hate them. I wonder if he watched his family taken. Don’t you worry, boy; it’s almost time for us to get some payback,” James said, scratching Duke’s neck. Duke pushed his head against James like he understood what he was saying.

When the Deltas passed, Jacob gave the all clear over the handheld and the work started again. The Bobcat ran long into the afternoon until the word was finally passed for them to return to the cabin. Stone told them over the radio to avoid the ambush site. They didn’t want anything being led into the area until the day of the attack, and Stone was worried about them leaving tracks in the fresh snow.

As ordered, James made a wide cut through the woods, working his way back to the bunker. Duke shadowed beside him with Jacob just behind. “So, I heard you have a family back in Canada,” James said.

Jacob sighed. “Yeah, a wife and daughter.”

“That why you joined up, for the benefits?” James asked.

“Yeah, I guess you could say that. If they’d offered us safety and shelter without it, I probably wouldn’t be here.”

James laughed. “That’s nothing to be ashamed of. Hell, men have been fighting for the benefits since the history of war. Sometimes the benefits aren’t as obvious, sometimes they are.”

“What’s your benefit?” Jacob asked.

“Me?” James said, “No, no benefit for me. I fight because it’s the only thing I’m good at. Heck, maybe that’s my benefit. You can’t do this on the outside without ending up in prison. I’ve tried the civilian life. Didn’t work out for me. You try writing *warfighter* as an occupation and *blowing shit up* as a special skill.” James laughed. “No, I got out for a minute after my second tour in Iraq, but I couldn’t stay away. I bet everyone would like to hire Sergeant James now though. Yeah, I signed right back up for a third tour. I was on leave when all this shit started.”

“Vacation with the family?” Jacob asked.

“Oh, no family for me, bro. This was a fun trip... out with my boys in Atlantic City,” James said, taking a long pause before continuing. “My best

friend from high school. The son of a bitch was getting married. Best bachelor party ever, you know? Boys all out on the town. Hell, they were all there, all of the old crew. His brother. One of my favorite cousins. Man, I hadn't seen those guys in forever. It was good, Jacob, real good. We had a lot of fun for those first couple days." James looked away, reflecting, taking several steps before continuing.

"That wedding never happened."

James stopped and turned, looking toward the lake. He moved away so that he stood next to a tree, his tone dropping. "Shit, Jacob—I'm the only one of us left now. All my friends are gone. They looked to me, the bad ass Marine, lean and mean. They thought I had all the answers. Hell, I thought I had the answers. There wasn't shit I could do. As soon as we hit the streets, we were separated in the crowds. It was mass chaos. I barely got out myself.

"Fucked up to think about it. Them all gone and me still here. Why me, Jacob? I'm no better than they were. Their only mistake was trusting me."

Jacob didn't know what to say; he stood silently waiting.

"You know, Jacob, this really is the place for warfighters like us. It's where we belong. Warfighters need to be together. We can't get mixed up with civilians all together in cities like that. That's how shit gets broken."

"Like us?" Jacob asked.

James nodded. "Oh yeah, I've watched you. You're a warfighter too; you just haven't accepted it yet. You keep fighting against it, telling yourself you're just here because you have to be, just trying to follow along doing the bare minimum. Screw that noise. You need to embrace it, bro. Don't endure; you got to embrace this shit, or it will eat you alive."

Jacob laughed. "You're nuts."

"You'll see." James turned back hard on the trail. He stepped ahead and faced Jacob, his expression suddenly serious. He moved so that he was inches from Jacob's face. "I'm telling you. Tomorrow, when we are out there on that line and those things are coming at us, don't fight like you're being forced to; fight like you're standing in front of something worth protecting. If the Devil points his finger at you, you better lash out and bite it." James turned away, not waiting for an answer, leaving Jacob standing alone. "That's how you keep your family safe," James said over his shoulder.

They trekked silently down the trail after that, Jacob giving the man space. They crossed over the barbed wire and exited into the clearing of the cabin. Jacob saw the others gathered near the barn. Stone had a trapdoor pulled back, revealing a deep root cellar. It was the type people used to shelter in during tornados and severe storms. Jacob edged closer and could see it was stocked with weapons. Jesse was in the hole removing items as Stone pointed to them. They stepped closer to the stack of weapons and James leaned down and grabbed a heavy machine gun from the ground. "I'll take this 240 if you're playing Santa," he said.

Stone turned to face him, looking him up and down. "Yeah, you sure as shit do look like a machine gunner. Go on and take it; you'll find some linked ammo in the barn."

Peering down into the cellar, Jacob saw a scoped M14 leaning in a corner. The same as the one he'd used in training. "Sir, the M14."

Stone looked back suspiciously. "You know how to handle it?" he asked.

"I had one like it in training," Jacob said.

Stone waved a hand at the M14 rifle then pointed further in. "Give him old reliable over there. Yeah, that shorty AK47 pistol also. Works well for CQB and kicking them when they're down."

"How'd you buy all of this?" Jacob asked.

Stone smirked. "I owned a gun shop in town after I retired, but I didn't buy most of this. Well, not all of it. The big hardware like that M240 machine gun and the .50 in the barn, my boys found out on the highway right where the military dropped them after things went to hell. Loads of abandoned military checkpoints up and down the highway and county roads; plenty of hardware to be picked up. Have to get to it before it gets to rusting though.

"Some of this stuff I owned from before or collected on my own. People with militia ambitions stashed the rest here. Being a licensed gun dealer, I've been holding some things for them. Hell, some I'm still expecting to come back and collect. Can't believe all them crazy bastards are gone."

Jesse looked up from the hole. "So that's who you are, what this place is. You're with the militia?"

"Go on, boy. Grab that big, green, square box-looking thing there and climb on out. So militia, ay? Is that who you take me for?" Stone laughed,

looking down at Jesse.

The big man lifted the object and set it on the edge of the hole. “I don’t know, I guess not. But it *is* a lot of guns.”

The old man crept along to the edge and leaned down to lift the M202 flame weapon. He held it up and turned it in his hands, inspecting it. “Been in there awhile. Need to make sure it ain’t leaking. If the jelly gets to leaking and you fire it, the rocket motors tend to ignite the whole damn thing then blow up on your shoulder and roast you like a marshmallow. But don’t worry about none of that; this one looks good,” Stone said, slapping the case and setting it beside him. “I’ll show you how to use it later.”

Jesse looked at him apprehensively. “Oh, gee, thanks... I guess.”

“However, to answer your question, I’m not militia, but I don’t got nothing against them either. They always paid me well to make purchases and hold stuff for ’em, and they’re all legal like—I got nothing to gain by selling to criminals. Property taxes don’t pay themselves, and an Army retirement check only stretches so far. Man’s gotta run a business.”

They closed up the barn and weapons cache then followed Stone back to the cabin.

“We better lock up, it’s getting dark. Gloria’s got some venison on the stove. Oh, and don’t mention the guns to her—she don’t know about half of them,” Stone said, letting out a deep laugh before stepping inside.

The team followed him in, securing the cabin’s doors. As Stone had mentioned, as soon as they entered the space, they were hit with the smell of roasting meat. They followed him down into the bunker below. Gloria had the table set, and they gathered around for a family-style dinner. The kids had gathered at one end of the room, watching the hungry men devour the meat and vegetables.

Jacob looked up away from his plate and saw a little girl in the corner staring at him curiously. He smiled at her, causing the girl to blush and retreat to the back. Jacob finished his meal and helped the others clean up before they began closing up the bunker for the night.

Stone spread the men out and split them up across the bunker, making sure they were comfortable. James and Stephens would sleep above ground, keeping watch behind the bolted door, while the others slept below on fold-out military cots. Rogers stuck by the radio, managing to get it working, but still not reaching anyone.

He planned to stay awake all night, attempting to make calls, but Stone insisted he get some sleep. He showed one of the kids how to operate it, and they formed a twenty-four hour radio watch, hoping to get a message out. Rogers was satisfied and returned to a cot along the bunker wall. Stone walked the length of the bunker, shutting off lights before retreating to the family space in the back. “Try to get some rest. We have a big day ahead of us.”

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CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Eve led them into a lowland next to a small lake. At the north end of the lake was a creek that flowed around and into the larger lake. There were larger streams, even rivers, farther away, but she didn't think they could reach them without running into the neighbors. Everything else in this area flowed out of the lake and wouldn't suit their purpose.

The activity was fierce the closer they got into the wetlands. They had to stop often to avoid the wandering Deltas, sometimes forced to lie in ditches for long agonizing minutes while they passed by. They now pressed close to the ground with their bodies prone in the fresh snow.

Jacob looked up, swiveling his head. The ground in the well-traveled area was covered in footprints. "It's not safe here; we need to make this quick."

Stephens lay beside him. He knew Rogers would be somewhere on the high ground, perched over a scope, covering them while they worked. Eve crawled toward the bank then stopped and looked back. "How close do we have to get?" she asked, looking away from the black murky water. She was looking at Jacob, the resident engineer. They all assumed he was the expert on all things mechanical or scientific.

"I'm not that kind of engineer," he whispered back.

"Grace us with a guess," Stephens snarled through his teeth.

Jacob pushed up from his stomach, looking in all directions. The small lake stretched for hundreds of yards. Eve had brought them in through a thick point on the north side of the small lake. Behind them was the larger lake. Jacob could see where the water pooled and flowed through a narrow

channel into the larger body of water, both visibly contaminated by the Delta oil. They were hidden in tall reeds right at the water line. The shoreline to the east and west was met with cottages and larger lake homes. “This feeds into the big lake; it should be good enough.”

She nodded. Jacob looked down at the oily water, watching it swirl and flow. Searching the shoreline, he could see masses on the far sides. There was no denying this was a seed pond. “How fast is the current? How fast does it flow into the big lake?” he whispered.

She looked back at him, her eyes showing frustration. “I don’t know; it’s a creek. What the hell, Jacob; are we going to do this or not?” she snapped.

He second-guessed the plan. They were attempting to mix a few gallons into millions. What if it diluted the solution and it didn’t work, making it useless, wasting the small amount they had. They’d only get one shot. He watched the swirling liquid, observing bits of the lake’s surface flex and relax, as though it wasn’t really water. The fluid motion looked more organic, like a large living organism. What if the entire surface reacted in the same way the Delta’s skin did?

Stephens pushed his pack forward, breaking his thoughts. “This will have to do.” He opened the flap and removed the plastic bottles. He passed them forward to Eve, who was closer to the shoreline, lying just above where the bank rolled into the opaque liquid.

Eve took the repurposed soda bottles and carefully placed them next to Jacob. There were twenty in all, the team deciding to hold some back to return to command. “How do we do this?” she asked, looking to him again.

Jacob reached for a bottle, opened it, and placed it next to a rock as he opened several more, prepping them. “Let’s get them all opened, then we toss ’em in and run like hell. We need to be quick; once we disturb the surface, they’ll be on the move.”

Stephens stretched a hand to offer another set of bottles. As he moved, he shifted loose a small rock. Jacob watched as it tumbled down the bank and lunged forward, trying to stop it. Unable to reach it in time, the rock bumped into the stack of bottles, knocking one loose. It fell over, spilling its precious liquid as it rolled down the small embankment to the water line. They held their breath watching as the bottle stopped short in the soft sand, not quite touching the oily liquid.

The bottle slurped and burped as the dioxin flowed out. It rolled along the bank then joined with the murky fluid. Like oil and water, the compounds didn't mix. At first, the oil looked as if it would pull back; then it curled into itself, giving the appearance of thick churning black butter, foaming with hundreds, then thousands of tiny bubbles that formed and popped with astounding speed. The oil seemed to scream with the sounds of the now writhing liquid.

"It's too late—get them all in," Jacob said.

Jacob rapid fired, tossing the open bottles into the lake as fast as he could. Eve took bottles from the pack, spun off the caps, and launched them into the now boiling and turbulent surface of the lake. They heard the creatures on the far shore react, screaming in agony, somehow remotely affected by the liquid's reaction to the chemical. As Jacob held the last bottle, he looked to the far side of the lake and saw them massing, running to get at them. Jacob took the last bottle and threw it deep into the lake.

"That's all of it; let's move," he said.

The entire body of oil now churned and writhed like a boiling pot. Turning, Jacob could see that it was not localized. As he'd guessed, the liquid spread like a large organic skin—it was connected. The creek bed filled with the same bubbling froth, stretching down the channel. The waters of the larger lake were already turning over and seemed to explode from within.

Jacob stared, mesmerized and fascinated in the way the liquid reacted to the dioxin. Stephens reached out and grabbed the back of his armor, pulling him up the embankment.

"It's time to go," he shouted, just moments before rounds impacted the muddy bank around them. Jacob looked up and saw creatures on the opposite shore with rifles raised. Shots from higher ground let them know Rogers was engaging targets of his own. They needed to move back to the ambush site.

Eve scrambled up the muddy bank on all fours then rolled to a knee and raised her rifle, taking a quick shot. Jacob's jaw dropped as a shooter on the far side of the lake tumbled back. She lowered the rifle and continued scrambling up the bank. Jacob moved behind her, gripping the blades of the tall grass to pull himself up. Soon they were out, moving fast to rejoin Rogers on the lake view trail. Jacob spotted him perched beside a tall tree

while taking long shots, slowing the enemy as the team regrouped. They'd broken contact for the time being, but they knew—needed—the creatures to follow.

Stephens ran to Rogers's side and slapped him. "Move. We're right behind you."

Rogers dipped his chin, peeled back from the tree, and moved toward the ambush site at a slow jog. Gunfire cracked far behind them in the distance. Sporadic, the Deltas were shooting carelessly into the unknown. Stephens stood silent, hearing it too. The man tried to catch his breath. "It's panic fire," Stephens whispered. "Seems the Deltas can be broken." He put his hand on Eve's back and guided her forward.

They moved out quickly now, the sounds of the forest slowly coming alive all around them—rounds fired like a far off Fourth of July exhibition, branches snapping in the distance, the screaming and yelling, the echoes of feet impacting the forest floor as the things rallied for an offensive. Jacob felt his chest tighten with fear. He knew they were coming. It reminded him of the dark scenes in black and white movies when a lost patrol was alone in the Congo waiting on a violent native assault, drums beating in the night, scared men standing behind lit torches. Jacob felt his hand shaking and picked up his pace, wanting to be back with the rest of the team and off the trail.

Eve led them to the split, following Rogers' boot prints in the snow. They ran ahead, winding through the bottleneck they intended to draw the Deltas down. The trail was flanked by rows of buried bombs. Eve stopped and turned, looking at Jacob and Stephens. "Good luck, see you at the cabin." She ran away, leaving them alone.

Stephens lifted the precut pine boughs, handing one to Jacob. Walking backwards now, they swept the snow covering the trail, trying to conceal their tracks. The duo moved deep past their original hiding spots then separated, Stephens moving low and to the left while Jacob snaked back up through thick brush to a downed log.

He spotted Jesse lying low with a rifle in his hands and the flame weapon nestled behind a large log to his front. Jacob approached slowly, walking low, and then dropped to his belly before crawling ahead the last few yards. The sounds of the approaching Deltas pushed him low and out of sight. Still second-guessing the plan, he felt the impending doom build in

his stomach. He rolled to his back and raised the scoped M14 to his chest, letting his gloved hand squeeze the synthetic stock. "Embrace it," he said to himself, remembering James's words. Jacob rolled back to his belly and nestled up to the log, covering himself with the white linen left there to conceal himself in the snow. He moved forward, easing his weapon in front of him.

He cautiously turned his head to the right, looking for James. He couldn't see him but knew he was out there, dug into a high mound on the side of the sloping terrain. The heavy machine gun in front of him, James would have wide fields of fire once it all started. Jacob looked back to the front and heard the things on the far off lake view path pick up their trail; they were coming. The snow melted in the sun, causing a thick fog to form over the forest floor and blanket the ground to their front. He wondered if they would take the bait and make the turn toward them, or continue on past them.

"Come get us, you sons a bitches!" James shouted from somewhere to the right. Duke's excited bark joined the man's challenge. "Come over here, I got something for you!"

Jacob sighed as he put his head back down behind the cover of the log. "Guess that's one way to embrace it," he said just above a whisper.

"What?" Jesse asked from his position, hidden to Jacob's left.

"Get ready, they'll be here soon."

He rolled to his left side and eased the rifle ahead before pulling it back tight into the pocket of his shoulder. Lining his eye up to the scope, he scanned. He tried to relax, controlling his breathing, slowing his heartbeat. They were moving closer. He could see their movement as they were drawn in by James's taunts. He saw them slowly appear from the lake view trail; they made the turn toward them while they followed the fresh tracks in the snow. This pack was more controlled, not yet affected by the dioxin. They were aware and they were hunting them.

The pattern was different. They knew the team was here. They were on the attack; having already been alerted, no pair of hunters led the way. They moved in a long column stretching back. They were heavily armed, carrying all make and model of weaponry. This time would be different for all of them. This time, the Assassins were ready, and *they* arranged the meeting.

He signaled Jesse with a tap of his boot to start the ambush. Marks had placed the two men forward to initiate the attack and to act as scouts after. He lay impatiently listening to his friend ready the M202 FLASH. Jacob lifted his own rifle, put his eye to the glass, and searched for a target. The largest threat was a tall creature walking out front, a heavy machine gun cradled in his arms. He led the man slightly in his sights, held his breath, and waited for it to start.

Jacob pulled his rifle into the pocket of his shoulder and pointed it at the tall creature. Aiming just in front of the thing at shoulder height, he held his breath and waited. Four successive explosions propelled the sixty-millimeter rockets forward. *Boom, boom, boom, boom...* gray smoke twisted ahead, straight down the firing line they'd cleared with the Bobcat.

Jacob pulled the trigger and watched machine gunner fall just as the white-hot shards of flaming explosive filled the trail. The forest exploded in flame and fire. James, in an overwatch position to their right, let loose long bursts of machine fire, shredding the enemy column. Blue smoke and fire covered the terrain ahead as Jacob searched for anything still able to shoot back and picked off targets.

A whistle from Marks silenced his team's weapons. They quickly reloaded and pressed their bodies into the earth, waiting and listening for the follow up attack. The screaming started on the trail just as it always did. The Deltas did as expected, their movement always the same. They would make contact and attack. As before, they would mass on their prey. Only now, Jacob's group was ready—the plan was working.

Jacob listened to the Delta scream deep in the smoke-covered trail amidst the crushing and breaking of branches as the mass gathered to their fronts. Marks blew the whistle again. It let The Darkness focus on their direction, allowing them to accurately mass to their fronts. Jacob could hear the bodies pressing together while they formed up, the clanging of their weapons, and the united breathing and beating of their feet on the trail as they coiled tightly for the attack.

Then it happened... the roars—roars always preceded the counterattack. The Deltas charged forward en masse, supported by their own riflemen on the flanks. Unable to pinpoint Jacob's men dug into the snow-covered ground, the enemy rounds went wild. The Darkness charged forward at a sprint. Hundreds of them, a horde of screaming, rage-filled faces armed

with whatever they could carry. Jacob kept the tip of his trembling finger on the trigger but held his fire.

“Cover!” Marks ordered.

Jacob buried his face into the soil berm to his front, pulling up his gloved hands to cover his as the forest exploded around him and the ground beneath him protested and shuddered. He was levitated from the earth and then slammed back into it as a shockwave ripped through the ground. He felt clods of mud and ice fall from the sky onto his back. Branches cracked and popped in the distance, remnants of the trees now fully engulfed in flame.

Jacob lifted his head and looked to the front. The once thick, pristine forest was now void of life, everything decimated by the blast zone. The rows of buried 250-pound bombs did their job; the column was destroyed.

Jacob picked up his leader’s orders from a hidden position. “Jacob, Jesse. Scouts out.”

Jacob nodded even though he knew the gesture would be unseen. He pushed himself up with his hands to a kneeling position and raised his rifle, covering ahead while Jesse pulled up beside him. Jacob twisted his long rifle on its sling and let it hang across his back as he readied a short-barreled, pistol version of an AK47. Jacob took a lunging step forward, moving ahead with Jesse covering the rear.

Crouching stealthily, he moved into the kill zone where the stench of burning flesh and cordite mixed with the strong essence of pine and earth. Jacob moved between twisted trees and broken bodies, searching for threats. He spotted a tall, stretched out creature wearing a chest rig; a separated arm clutched an SKS rifle. Jacob knelt beside the figure and stripped its chest of magazines, placing them in a drop pouch on his belt. He searched its shirt pockets, finding nothing.

Jacob dumped the man’s pants pockets, finding remnants of its previous life: a battered wallet, some folded currency, a set of car keys. Winslow stepped forward and knelt beside him.

The Darkness didn’t communicate with written word, or even spoken that they could see. It was through touch and other non-verbal means. A faint wisp of movement pulled Jacob’s eyes back to the front as a mangled man scrambled to its feet and stumbled forward. It gripped a rusty machete tightly in its one good arm, while its other arm and part of its torso were

missing. The black blood oozed from its wounds, and charcoal-colored foam dripped from its broken jaw as it limped toward them.

Jesse rose to his feet and stepped forward, leveling his rifle. “Just die already,” he whispered. One pull of the trigger, and a round tore through the thing’s chest, ending it. “Why won’t they all just die?” he said.

The forest came alive all around them. Roars and echoes of feet in the distance and a scream unlike any Jacob had heard before. He raised his head and whispered, “Something is wrong.”

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CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

“Don’t stop! Keep pushing!”

The ground rumbled under his feet and the forest canopy retracted, shaking dried leaves with the concussions of explosions. The crack of grenades shaking his senses, Jacob stumbled back and looked down at the burn marks on his shirt. The torn fabric showed where bullets and shrapnel had ripped through his vest, coming dangerously close to his flesh. Crazy beings howling and screaming in agony ran in all directions, coming at him from everywhere.

He’d lost sight of Jesse. James was firing rapidly, the M240 gun spitting rounds that cut close by his side and suppressing the enemy advance. *How did they rebound so fast? Where are they all coming from?* he thought, shaking off the explosion and taking a step to the side before staggering back and being caught and steadied by Stone’s tight grip.

The forest was covered in smoke and flame. Dirt, bark, and ashes rained down, hitting his arms and face. It must have been another grenade. He remembered standing near the bodies with Jesse, then the explosion. He looked down; he was still holding his rifle and felt the AK pistol bumping against his side, still hanging from the sling. He couldn’t feel his body. He looked down at his shirt. *Maybe I’m dying, and it will all be over soon. What will Laura think? Will they know how I died? What will they do without me?* The old man grabbed Jacob by the shoulders, shaking him then spinning him around shoving him out of the kill zone.

“Run, you fool,” he shouted.

He looked at Stone's blurry image, his nervous system overwhelmed with feedback. Jacob blinked hard, trying to focus on the old man's words. Being pushed ahead, feeling slowly came back to his body as his muscles filled with blood. He closed his eyes tight and when he opened them, his body and mind finally responded.

The way Stone fought, no one would have guessed he was in his late sixties and suffering from emphysema. He swung the rifle, catching a badly blistered Delta in the face. Jacob watched as the thing's jaw exploded, teeth and blood flying through the air as Stone dropped back and delivered a swift kick to the creature's chest. He then turned, firing a quick burst into the downed creature's body. Jacob fell back, hitting the ground hard. He looked at the downed Delta beside him; the creature was suffering from the effects of the dioxin.

Jacob's head spun in all directions at the raging and charging monsters. They were all affected. Red blistered skin, screaming and lashing out at everything in all directions. The stuff they put in the lake was affecting them all; somehow, they were all connected to their seed pond.

Rounds zipped and flew over their heads; tracers going by so close that Jacob could feel the heat from their pyrotechnic tips. Stone lifted his weapon and fired into another charging man—three rounds to the neck and face, dropping it onto the trail before looking back at Jacob. "Let's go!"

Jacob grabbed the dirt, forced himself back to his feet, and scrambled after the elder warrior. He looked left and right. Through the smoke and haze, he couldn't find the rest of his team. Behind him, he heard the heavy machine gun rattling away and Duke's frantic barking. There was another explosion to his right. They were caught in a bloody fight to the death, surrounded on all sides. To live, they needed to break out and get to cover. The Deltas were everywhere. No longer organized, they ran chaotically through the woods all around them.

In his peripheral vision, he saw a three-man pack moving at them from the right. A Delta ran directly at Stone, firing from its hip. Jacob raised his AK47 and let loose a long one-handed burst, watching the first crazed man tumble as rounds stitched its chest. Jacob paused. Using the weapon's collapsible stock to steady his aim, he squeezed the trigger, knocking down the two that followed.

He looked ahead just as Stone staggered forward and dropped to a knee. Jacob was quickly at his side. He hooked one arm under Stone and lifted the old man to his feet, moving him into a depression beside the trail. Seeing another group of attackers rush in, he let go. Stone's knees buckled under his own weight. Jacob pulled the AK to his eye, let off a short burst, and thwarted another Delta assault. Looking down, he watched as the crimson blood soaked the old man's faded camouflage pants.

"I'm hit. The rat bastard got me good!" Stone pushed Jacob off of him and fell back to the grass. The old man quickly removed his belt, wrapping it around his thigh as a tourniquet. Jacob lifted his rifle, firing up the trail and trying to cover the old man while he worked. With the tourniquet in place, the man put his own rifle back in action, firing a volley into approaching targets.

Jacob ducked and flinched as a stream of rounds impacted a nearby tree, throwing wood and rock splinters into his face. When he looked back up, another Delta wave was moving at them. Stone shouted a warning before tossing a grenade and let loose a long stream of gunfire and obscenities in the wake of the grenade's explosion. He turned back to Jacob. "Go, get back to the bunker. I'll catch up."

Motion from the side caused Jacob to spin hard. He leveled his rifle, finger on the trigger. He was moments from firing when he recognized Jesse stumbling ahead, collapsing to the ground with them. The man crawled forward, bleeding from his neck, his shirt covered with powder burns and gore.

"They're everywhere," Jesse gasped. "All around us."

Jacob helped pull the big man into their meager cover. Jesse collapsed and rolled to his back. Armed with only a pistol with its slide locked back, his face was pale. Frothy blood rested at the corners of his mouth. Stone took the pistol and loaded a fresh magazine taken from Jesse's own armor. He let the slide go forward and put the weapon back in Jesse's hand. "Welcome to the party, son, glad to have you with us," Stone said, turning back to the front.

Jesse coughed and spit blood on the trail. He tried to laugh, but instead he turned and extended his arm over Stone, firing and knocking down a Delta staggering toward them from the old man's blind spot. Stone reached

out and squeezed the big man's shoulder before looking back at Jacob. "Go; get to Gloria and the kids. We got this."

Another dove at them. Jacob raised the AK47, looking into the twisted face of a teenaged Delta. The creature showed no surprise—only hate and vile rage. Jacob steadied his weapon and pulled the trigger, watching as the heavy rounds tore through its cheek and face. He shifted his fire as more ran at him from farther back, the steady rounds cutting them down and dropping them hard on the trail. Stone's rifle barked as it fired rapidly into the wood line. A round came close, hitting the side of Jacob's helmet, spinning his head back like a blast from a baseball bat. When he turned back to the front, the assault had ended.

Jacob looked down at his friends, wondering how things had gone so wrong. The ambush plan was shit. They underestimated the Delta numbers and their reaction to the dioxin. The first ambush, the placement of the bombs, it all went off without a hitch. But the numbers were far more than they had anticipated, and they didn't slow down.

Hitting them hard after the initial strike, wave after wave they fought them, bounding back until the Deltas managed to flank them with grenades. Jacob and Jesse were caught too far forward in the middle of it all, trying to find cover. They were hit on three sides. A mass ran at them as if blinded and crazy, their faces swollen with bursting blisters, the dioxin making them mad. Grenades flew from every direction.

The team tried to maneuver and counter the assaults. Eve's voice was on the two-way radio; the Deltas found the hide and were surrounding the barn and cabin, forcing her to retreat below to the bunker. Yellow smoke filled the air. It was Marks's signal to break contact and hide. They would rally back at the bunker. James fought his way to an overwatch position, laying down suppressive fire with the heavy machine gun and allowing the others space to break contact.

This wasn't conventional warfare. The Deltas were no longer predictable and they weren't fighting as a team. After the initial contact, the massive charge, and the explosions, the order ended. Now they scattered and filled the forest like hornets from a squashed nest, frenzied and chaotic.

"Go, dammit," Stone yelled again, waking Jacob from his sudden stupor.

Jacob handed the AK47 to Jesse then removed the scope from the M14, letting it drop to the ground. He rose up to his knees and fired into the distance, knocking down two more attackers.

“I’ll see you at the cabin,” he shouted, not knowing if it was true. He turned to run down the trail, racing for the bunker. His lungs burned with every footstep. The intense minutes of combat overloaded his system with adrenaline and were crushing him. He was exhausted and shaking with energy at the same time. He rounded a corner in the thick trees, surprising two Deltas with their backs to him. They spun around as he fired the M14. The 7.62 rounds hit the nearest square in the back. The other spun and closed the distance, pushing the rifle to the side as it attacked.

Jacob rolled with the impact, taking the creature with him to the ground. He forced the rifle between them and used his boot to dig into its thighs, trying to gain leverage. The creature reared back and pounded down with both fists. Jacob looked up into its blister- and pus-covered face. The thing snarled, drooling in agony as its empty hands punched down at him again, the blows deflected harmlessly off his helmet. He turned and twisted, releasing the rifle as he drew the MK III pistol from his jacket. He clicked the thumb safety and fired into the creature’s abdomen, not stopping until the pistol was empty.

The Delta relaxed and collapsed on top of him. Jacob could hear another set running down the trail, snarling and screaming as they approached. No time to react, he lay motionless faking death as they passed him by. He closed his eyes, failing to shut out the battle. He could still hear the steady rhythm of James’s machine gun in the distance. *He must be nearly out of ammo*, Jacob thought.

The feet passed him by. He could hear them screaming and shouting as they swarmed the cabin just ahead and down the trail. Pushing the body off him, he rolled back to his feet and leaned over to grab his rifle, determined to retake the cabin or die trying. He pushed out of the heavy brush then moved into the clearing. He forced himself to slow down, to assess the situation, and not run head on into danger. He saw a group of them charging at the cabin wildly. They ran right at the wire, every one of them catching it and tripping before being tossed face first to the ground.

Jacob did not let the opportunity pass by; he stood upright, raising the rifle, and shooting the creatures in the back where they lay. He then dropped

his stance, searching for another target. The nearby creatures were massed around the cabin, not interested in him. Jacob watched as they pounded against the wooden door and shuttered windows, their pus-filled blisters breaking open, leaving black streaks on the roughhewn planks. Jacob moved ahead stoically before taking cover behind a tree. He drew the Ruger MK III and inserted a fresh magazine. Steadying himself, he went to work dispatching the Deltas from behind with single shots to the back of the head.

One by one, they dropped with strikes to the skull. Jacob cleared the front then moved to the side of the building. He reloaded and turned, searching for more targets but finding none. The woods around him were suddenly silent. No more gunfire; only the occasional scream of a Delta to let him know he was not alone. Jacob tucked the pistol into his waistband and held the rifle at the ready, stepping carefully over the downed bodies.

A Delta staggered out of the woods behind him. It moved down the hill and, like the others, tripped over the wire. It clawed and scratched at the ground, moving itself forward. Jacob looked at the thing through the sites of his rifle. Its face was swollen, blistered, and peeling, the dioxin doing its work, but there was something else. The creature dragged itself ahead, ignoring him. Jacob stepped closer. His boot scraping across dried leaves caused the creature's head to turn toward him, its jaws snapping. "You're blind," Jacob whispered, stepping closer.

He moved ahead, keeping his rifle aimed at the creature's face. Jacob whistled, and the Delta grew frantic, slashing at the air. When it looked directly at Jacob, he could see the milky-white eyes filled with oozing fluid. "Yeah, you can't see me," Jacob whispered again before pulling the trigger.

Jacob shambled slowly to the porch, grabbing a Delta's foot and dragging it away from the building. He returned and sat on a step, looking down at the pathetic creatures lying next to him. All of them had the same milky eyes. "So it blinds them," Jacob said, leaning back. He let his rifle drop to the steps as he searched his gear for water. He found a crushed, nearly empty bottle and drank thirstily, draining it before tossing it to the ground.

He detected something in the cabin behind him. Eve unbolted the door and walked out onto the porch, examining the view. She stepped ahead, walking down the steps and onto the open ground. She looked up as Jesse

staggered ahead out of the clearing, his neck bandaged heavily; Stone's arm was over his shoulder as he too limped forward. Eve ran to them, helping him move Stone down the hill and to the porch.

Jacob peeled himself from the steps and closed the distance with the others. Eve was tending to her father, leaving Jesse standing alone holding a column attached to the cabin's porch to stable himself. "Any sign of the rest?" Jacob said.

Jesse shook his head. Jacob put a gloved hand to his friend's arm, squeezing it before stepping back toward the hill and up the trail. He knew he shouldn't go alone, but he didn't care; he wanted to find the others. Jacob shook his head, fighting off the cold air and finally slowing down as his sweat-soaked body felt the chill. He slung the M14 over his shoulder and gripped the MK III, letting it hang in his exhausted arm.

They lay all over the ground. The Delta's dead not moving, some with obvious gunshot wounds, others fallen from the effects of the dioxin. Everywhere Jacob turned he could see one.

Walking slowly, he moved along the trail and headed for the ambush site. He spotted one staggering through the woods on his right. Jacob watched it move clumsily through the trees. He allowed the thing to get closer before calling out to it. He watched as the thing's grotesque blistered face turned toward him, its pus-filled eyes searching. Jacob raised his pistol and fired a single shot; the creature bucked and tumbled to the ground.

He turned ahead, spotting Rogers stumbling in his direction from out of the haze; his rifle hung limp from his right arm and his face was covered with soot. He staggered to Jacob with his head down, intent on reaching the cabin. Jacob put his arms up, grabbing the big man and steadying him. Rogers looked up, fatigue showing heavy in his eyes. He looked at Jacob as if he didn't recognize him.

"Rogers, where are the others?" Jacob asked.

Rogers pointed behind him and moved on, continuing down the trail.

Jacob stepped off deeper into the woods in the direction of the smoke and burning fires. He found Marks farther up, face down, a knife gripped in his hand. The Deltas on all sides had been slashed apart. He knelt down and rolled the body over. His chest was covered in blood; his head fell limp to the side. Jacob backed away knowing his leader was dead. He dropped back and saw Stephens' lifeless body leaning against a tree.

Jacob looked away, feeling a gurgle in his own guts as bile rushed to his stomach. He rocked back, looking off into the smoke. He took deep breaths as he tried to build the courage to face his friend. Stephens's right arm was bent back and broken. He clutched a pistol in his left hand. Jacob moved closer, seeing Stephens's white eyes looking straight ahead, unblinking. Not wanting the image burned into his memory, he looked away then staggered back, nearly falling to the ground.

He turned into the smoke-filled forest when he heard Duke's whimper. Jacob increased his pace and searched the woods, again nearly falling. He searched for the mound where he knew James should be. He climbed up a rise, falling into the thick leaves and snow, clawing at the ground and crawling over several of the dead as he made his way to the top of the mound in the direction of Duke's whine. At the edge, he saw the piles of expended brass and spent links from the machine gun. The M240 golf was lying on its side with part of a linked ammo belt still loaded and the barrel still smoking.

Jacob continued to the top then looked over the mound. James was sitting back in the dugout position, piles of mangled and twisted bodies all around him. Duke lay across his lap with James' left hand covering the dog's back. James' head was to the side, looking into the forest canopy. He turned to face Jacob as he approached.

The Marine lay back in the soft mud, his body covered in grime. A Delta body with an open throat lay at his feet. James' arms were pale, his knuckles cut and bleeding. His hands shook from exhaustion, and blood covered the side of his face. Duke looked up at Jacob for a moment before dropping his head back to James' lap, releasing a soft whimper.

"Are you okay?" Jacob asked, stepping closer.

James nodded, his head barely moving, his hand stroking Duke's back. "Did you see them?" he asked, turning his head in the direction of where Marks lay.

Jacob pursed his lips as he stumbled into the fighting position and dropped to the ground next to James, letting his rifle fall beside him.

"I couldn't save them," James said.

Jacob looked away. He fought back tears and took a deep sobbing breath. "It's okay."

“No it’s not,” James said, his voice breaking. “I can never save them.” He dropped his head, burying his face in Duke’s neck as he pulled the dog close to him. “I let them get to me again, and they always die.” His words trailed off and he turned his head away from Jacob.

Jacob looked up at the blue sky through the tree cover, wiping his eyes clear with his sleeve. “It’s okay,” he repeated, taking a deep breath.

James sniffed and exhaled, fighting back the tears. Lifting his head, he again looked up at the sky. He rolled his shoulders and stretched back, glancing in the direction where Marks and Stephens lay. His lip quivered. “There were so many of them. Everywhere all at once; they surrounded me. I tried to push them off, but they got too damn close and there were too many. They got in the hole. I didn’t ask for help but they came anyway. Marks and Stephens came back to get me. They drew them away from me. I couldn’t... why the hell did they come back?”

The bearded man shook his head, putting it down again. “I’m done, Jacob. I don’t want to do this anymore,” he said, just above a whisper. “They shouldn’t have come back.”

Jacob extended his hand, offering James a bottle of water. “Drink, you’ll feel better. You just need to rest.”

As James took the bottle, he looked at the caked blood on the back of his hands. He drank thirstily then took in a long breath. Closing his eyes tight, he exhaled loudly. “Let’s go back to the cabin; I’ll be okay. You’re right, Jacob. I’m just tired is all.”

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Wind blew at the cabin walls, the night air filled with the sounds of creaking branches. James slept in the bottom bunk with Duke curled in a tight ball at his feet. A fire burned in the wood stove, heating the small cabin above the bunker. Jacob was alone now. He was tired and hungry but with his body unwilling to sleep, he paced the cabin floor restlessly. Duke looked up at him with weary eyes. As Jacob moved past him, the dog buried his head in the thick blanket, hiding his face.

Jesse and Stone were both in the bunker below him, still down from their wounds. Gloria was doing what she could for them, but they would need a doctor soon. She patched them up and stopped the bleeding with what medical supplies they could offer. Rogers spent his time working on the radio, desperate to make contact with the rear. Desperate to call for an extraction.

Jacob opened the cabin door and stood in the opening, looking out into the surrounding woods. He let the cold breeze hit him in the face, heightening his senses. It was now dark. A bright moon lit the trees in a pale blue light and the snow had stopped falling, the weather turning clear. The dioxin worked. After the attack, the area became clear of them. Any they did see were dead or dying, others vacating the zone immediately around the lake.

Jacob left the cabin and stepped out onto the small front porch. The poncho-wrapped bodies of Marks and Stephens lay side by side, a stark reminder of the price they paid. If they couldn't reach command tonight, they would bury them in the morning. Rogers had helped him recover the

bodies. They wrapped them and returned them to the cabin one at a time without speaking. Neither man could muster the strength or courage to bury their friends yet. Now they lay beside him on the porch, and Jacob still didn't have words for them. Stephens brought him here and was with him since Chicago, and now he was gone, like Murphy before him.

A scream far in the distance spooked him, the sound echoing off the trees. They were waking up. He gripped his rifle and backed into the doorway, pausing to take another look at the tree line before retreating inside and bolting the heavy lock behind him. Jacob looked at James. The Marine's head was to the side, and he was snoring loudly. His beard matted, flecks of dried blood still on his forehead. Jacob stepped lightly beyond him and opened the door to the bunker then walked into the dark stairway.

At the bottom, a gas lantern glowed, reflecting a soft orange light off the walls and ceiling and making the space feel smaller than it was. He found Stone sitting alone in an old wooden kitchen chair, his leg wrapped in fresh white bandages. Jacob turned to the far wall where he spotted Jesse. He was asleep in the lone bed along the far side; his neck was covered in gauze, a red spot marking the location of the wound. Stone waved a hand at Jacob, pointing at a chair.

"Have a seat, son," he said. "Join me for a bit."

Jacob crossed the open space and dropped into the old wooden chair beside the man. Stone took a pull off an amber-colored bottle then stuck a cork in the top and passed it on. Jacob held the bottle in his hand and, turning it, looked at a label he didn't recognize. He wasn't much of a whiskey drinker... he wasn't much of a drinker at all outside of the occasional beer on a hot day.

"It's vintage, but not necessarily good," Stone said without emotion. "Go on, trust me, it'll help you feel better."

Jacob pulled the cork. He sniffed the strong contents and took a long sip before pulling away with a deep cough. He managed to hold the harsh liquid down, blinking his eyes rapidly while the burn passed.

The red door opened. Gloria, Stone's wife, walked into the large room. She spied the bottle and twisted her face. "I told you that's not good for your bleeding, Henry," she scolded.

"It's not me; the kid here brought it with him. I ain't had a drop."

She shot Jacob a cross look and shook her head. She moved to Jesse's side and checked the man's bandage. After pulling away the gauze and applying a new one, she adjusted his blanket, tucking it under the sleeping man's arms. Gloria moved into the kitchen area and removed a large pot of coffee and several tin cups, setting them on the table.

She looked back at Stone. "Don't stay up too late, Henry; you need your rest," she said before returning to the red door.

"She's good one, but damn she can nag up something fierce," Stone said, watching the door to make sure it didn't reopen before he snatched back the bottle. He took another long pull of the whiskey. "There's plenty of room back there, ya know. We can fix you a spot if ya want. Gloria would like it; she enjoys a full house, even if it is just a bunkhouse full of stinking soldiers."

Jacob laughed. "I'm fine out here or up in the cabin. I don't want to intrude on your family. We'll stay out here and keep watch for you all; it's the least we can do."

Stone sat quietly, looking at the wall. He took another sip of the whiskey before passing it back. "I've never seen anything like that today, even back in Nam. The way they came at us like rabid animals. You'd think after the last few months, nothing could surprise me anymore. But that... even back when all this shit started it was nothing like that, and I've witnessed my share of the hordes." Stone looked down at his folded hands, shaking his head.

"The family here, we had it easy all things considered; better than folks in the city, anyway. I had a friend in St. Louis. He had his own connection and was able to give us some early warning, posted a message online right after the first of those meteor showers. He let us know the stories were true; you know, about the takings, that the riot stories were all bullshit.

"He was updating us on the real deal before the government was even admitting something was wrong. I told Gloria we couldn't take the chance on it all blowing over or being contained in the west the way the news people said it would. We made a vacation out of it; invited the kids up here to the old homestead for some family time. Schools and most jobs were closed anyway, so it was easy to sell them on it.

"This place used to belong to my granddad. It was a big farmhouse back in the day. Two-story home built over a full cellar—used to be full of

potatoes and canned goods when I was a kid. My father inherited the place; he's the one that had all of this improved. He cleaned up and reinforced the basement walls with block. Added the extended room back there as an underground bunk house.

“He let the house above go; he always had a notion something like this would happen and he wanted a safe place for his family. He was planning on an atom bomb though; you know, back when the cold war was in full freeze. I bought it from him after I retired. Tore the house down and put the small cabin up top. Only way I could get Gloria to go along with it. She called it our cottage and rolled her eyes at all of this prepper stuff down here.

“The kids love the cottage. It was easy enough to get them to come up here for a spontaneous vacation, but I think they suspected it would only be for a week, two at the most. We spent those first days fishing and relaxing. But every day became a reminder that something really bad was coming. The radio and satellite TV gave dire reports of what was going on in the big cities: Chicago, Detroit, and Indianapolis. It was getting closer and all around us. We decided to close up the homestead. We left the trucks down on the road, covered everything up with brush, ran the trip wire around the property line, and shuttered the windows.

“A few days later, I heard the first gunshots and the screaming from over the hill. I took the boys with me and we watched them take the town; we laid up from that same lake view trail that we used against them yesterday. Couldn't believe my eyes at how fast it spread. The boys and I couldn't just sit there. We tried to stop some of 'em. Used the usual tactics—ambushes on the road, set traps, shot at them from the hills to try and slow them down. We killed far more than our share. But for every one we killed, more came in to replace them.

“Eve heard about the ponds over the VHF. We confirmed it a day later down at the East Bay; we saw them dragging people to the water. It got too hairy for us after that. They seemed to be looking for us. The things started spending more time out here in the woods, hunting for survivors. It was like they knew we were here somewhere. We decided we'd stretched our luck to the limits and voted to lay low and hide, wait for the military to retake control. We stayed locked up in the cabin most of the time, and always at night. Only making runs into town for essentials. The boys, well they—”

Jacob held the bottle, taking another sip, which was easier this time. "I'm sorry about your sons."

Stone nodded, looking away. "You know, some people think losing someone you love is the most painful thing you can experience in your life. It's not. It's hard, but the pain will fade," Stone said, looking at the red door. "The real pain is knowing that when the Devil comes down those stairs for the ones you love, there isn't shit you'll be able to do to protect them from it. I live with that every day. How will I protect those kids back there? I don't know, Jacob. What will I do when they come for us?"

Jacob swallowed hard and looked away. He took a third sip, this one longer, now finding the bourbon smooth. The pain in his body relaxing, he slouched in his chair and stared into the lantern. Rogers wended toward them from the darkened corner of the room. He rummaged over the table and filled a small tin cup with coffee before moving closer to the other men and taking a seat. He reached over, grabbed the bottle from Jacob, and topped off the cup before setting the bottle on the floor.

"Radio is sending fine, but nobody is picking up," Rogers said. "I think I'll go on alone tomorrow. I can move faster and send help back for you."

"Where exactly will you go?" Stone asked.

Jacob, suddenly caught off guard, didn't know the answer to the question. He looked at Rogers, waiting for a response.

Rogers put the cup to his lips and took a sip. "I guess I'll continue driving north; find that comms tower on the Army base. Try to reach command and get a ride out of here then send a bird back for you all."

Stone chewed his lower lip and used a hand to rub his tired eyes. "I've been thinking about that—this Army base. It doesn't make sense to me."

"How so?" Rogers asked.

"For starters, Grayling is even farther away. Why would you want to go farther if you can't send a message from here? There's a local state police post in town. I'd bet they have just as good a radio tower—hell, maybe better. I know they can hit patrol cars a good distance upstate."

Rogers took another sip, thinking about what the old man had said. "This police station, is it close to the lake? You sure it's still intact?"

"I'm sending Eve to town in the morning. I want to make sure those things are gone. She can take you to the station to have a look."

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CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Jacob opened his eyes, trying to remember where he was. It was dark, but the silence had ended. The noise outside reminded him that he was in hell; the constant calling, the high-pitched screams. The Darkness, Deltas, the black-eyed bastards—whatever they hell they chose to call them—were out there, wounded and blinded. They were emerging from their dens, or wherever they spent their days, to howl, hunt, and feed. Except tonight they came out screaming. He'd heard them crying out in the night before, but this was different; this wasn't the typical moan of the hunters. It was agony. They were out there dying and suffering the effects of the dioxin.

He lay on the top bunk, listening to their cries. He tried to sleep, but every time he closed his eyes, their screams entered his dreams. He felt James shift below him, the big man tossing in the bottom bunk. "You awake?" James whispered.

"I am. You feeling all right?"

"I woke up a few hours ago. Warm and soft in this bed. The night was quiet. I tried telling myself this was all just a bad dream. But then that started," James whispered.

Jacob swallowed hard and squirmed in the top rack, sitting up against the wall. He didn't respond. He just sat with his back to the cedar planks, listening to the moans outside and wondering if they were close. If they would be safe if they tried to enter the cabin again.

"We hurt them today, Jacob. We hurt 'em bad and they know it," James said, getting up from the bed. "That's what you hear; that's how they mourn

over a healthy ass-kicking.” James moved across the room and stopped to feed more wood into the stove. As he adjusted the flue, the flames grew, filling the one-room cabin with an eerie yellow light. Duke got up and edged close to the stove, stretching before moving in a circle. Then, stopping by the door, he sniffed the air entering from outside; his ears perked, then relaxed. Finally, the yellow dog moved and lay by the warmth of the fire.

James slid a chair away from the wall. He lifted his uniform from a hook and pulled on his pants and jacket. He lifted his rifle, looking it over before removing the night vision goggles from his pack.

“What are you doing?” Jacob asked. “You aren’t thinking of going out there?”

James yanked on his heavy boots, pulled the speed laces tight, and then put on a pair of green leather shooting gloves. “I’m going hunting; finishing what we started today.”

“Alone?”

“No, Duke is coming. He still has scores to settle too,” James said, standing up. He placed the NVGs onto the top of his head. Reaching down, he retrieved his tactical vest and pulled it on over his shoulders. He looked down, checking the straps and ammo pouches on the front before slipping the Ruger MK III back into its holster.

“James, I think you should stay. You don’t have to do this; there’s nothing out there that can change what happened today,” Jacob protested, already knowing it wouldn’t do any good.

The bearded man smiled before turning and walking to the door. “Don’t worry about me; I’ll be back when the sun comes up.” James unlatched the door and slowly opened it, letting the cold air enter the room. He took a step and stood in the doorway. “Can you feel it, Jacob? Oh, I do, and I’m going to go get me some. We’re going to take what’s ours, ain’t we, Duke?” The dog leapt to his feet and joined the man’s side. Without speaking another word, James dropped into the night, closing the door behind him.

Jacob was wide-awake now. He regretted not doing more to stop him, or even leaving with him. He sat against the cedar boards, listening to the howls outside, the evil screams. He thought he heard a distant bark, and then a gunshot split the night air. He strained, listening for a sign that James was okay. He debated waking Rogers to go out after him. Moments later,

another shot, followed by another, the last being even more distant than the first.

Jacob shifted and dropped down from the top bunk, moving to a chair by the stove, knowing he wouldn't sleep anymore; not this day. He retrieved his pack and took several aspirin from his hygiene kit, trying to cover the headache from the bad whiskey. He opened a case of water sitting in the corner, removed a bottle, and guzzled down the entire thing before opening another and setting it on a table beside him.

A creaking at the stairs took his attention. He looked up, seeing Rogers enter the room. The big man was carrying a cast-iron skillet filled with fried potatoes. He looked down at the empty rack, then at Jacob sitting alone by the stove. Rogers shook his head as he stepped across the room.

"James went out, did he?" he said, not really asking, no look of surprise on his face. He set the skillet atop the wood stove and set a pair of plates on the table. He served up a large portion before handing it off to Jacob.

"I don't know what he's doing out there; he wasn't being reasonable. I should have gone with him."

Rogers sat heavily in an empty seat and looked at the wood-covered window. "How long has he been out there?"

"Not long," Jacob said, pushing potatoes across his plate with a fork.

Another gunshot cracked in the distance. "This is the way he deals with his despair. It's his own twisted version of therapy," Rogers whispered. "Back at the camp, I've seen him do this in the towers. He'll go up there for hours. I made the mistake of going with him once. He won't talk about it. He just perches himself up there, getting even. He thinks he can fix everything by getting even. He'll come back; he always does."

They sat quietly listening to the echoes of the gunshots and the howls of the Deltas. Jacob finished the potatoes, forcing every bite. He had no appetite but knew he needed the calories. Rogers offered him more, but he pushed the plate away. "How long have you known him?" Jacob asked.

"Not long, but like all things, time is relative. You go out on a mission with a guy, after a week you feel like you've known him your whole life. James is different but he's good people."

Sun broke the horizon and light cut through the bottom of the door. Eve exited the stairwell and joined them in the cabin above. She was wearing a heavy parka and gloves, a black watch cap pulled tight over her long hair.

She carried a small assault pack in her hand. Looking at the empty rack and men sitting alone, she moved to the wall and set her pack and rifle beside the exit. There was a noise outside and heavy steps on the wood porch. When the door creaked opened, Duke rounded the corner, wagging his tail, with James following him.

The bearded man passed inside, stomping the snow from his boots on the threshold. He looked up at Eve and smirked. “Good morning, beautiful.”

She turned away from him, moving to the far wall. James shrugged and moved past her, setting his rifle near his pack, which he opened to return the NVGs to an inside pocket. Duke moved to the stove and shook off the wet snow before lying in his spot. James noticed the skillet of potatoes on the stove and pointed.

“Help yourself,” Rogers said.

Using a nearby mitt, James lifted the entire thing from the hot stove. He sat at the edge of the bed, hungrily scarfing down the food, tossing every other bite to the dog.

“You all are up early,” he said, looking to the others. “It’s a cold morning.”

Eve nodded. “We’re going into town. See how things look.”

James glanced up at her and, through a mouth full of potatoes, said, “Gimme a sec. I’ll go with you.”



JACOB STOOD, GRABBED HIS PACK AND RIFLE, AND SWUNG OPEN THE DOOR to the small cabin, walking out to the brisk morning air. He carried his loaded pack over his left shoulder; his rifle slung over the other. The smell of wood smoke and cordite was still heavy in the air. A thick white-gray mist hung low, covering the ground and limiting his visibility. He moved down the steps and looked over the property. Delta bodies were everywhere. They would have to do something about them soon. Rogers and Eve stepped down beside him, followed by Duke and James. Eve walked away from the porch and moved to the trail, the others following close behind her.

“How was the hunting? Did you find what you were looking for?” Rogers asked, not looking back at James.

James coughed, clearing his throat then spitting to the side of the trail. “Wasn’t much sport to it; these things are messed up. The ones I saw were wandering around blind. A few were clawing and fighting at each other. Didn’t see a single healthy one. The dioxin must be in the air or something ‘cause it’s still affecting them.”

“I don’t think that’s it,” Eve said from the front. “I’ve watched them. They rely on the ponds. I think it’s how they feed. This being their local spot, they return to it on a regular basis. If they were animals, I’d tag and track their movements. Hell, maybe I will anyway. Poison or not, we killed off the entire colony when we introduced the dioxin to that lake.”

“Did you work with animals?” Jacob asked.

“I’m... I was a research assistant with the Department of Natural Resources. I tracked the movements of white-tailed deer. I could do the same with these things.”

“So they just keep returning to the nest, poisoning themselves? You don’t think they’ll wise up to it?” Jacob said.

Eve looked at him. “I don’t know. That’s just my best guess.”

She led them farther from the cabin. As they entered the forest, she took a different route, completely avoiding the death surrounding the ambush site. Jacob thought it was for their benefit, but maybe it was a shortcut. Either way, Eve wasn’t the type to explain herself. Even walking wide, the wind carried the unmistakable stench of death. The team pulled up scarves and wrapped them around their faces. Eve moved them faster to high ground, merging with the lake view trail further west and dropping in just above the lake town.

From their high vantage point, they could clearly see down the small lake-town’s main approach. Grand homes with long wooden docks lined the water’s edge. The far side of the street was interspersed with small shops, restaurants, a post office, and other businesses. The road was congested with abandoned vehicles, most parked at the curb, some in the center of the street. A tree had fallen across the town’s only intersection and lay across a bright red fire truck.

Eve walked them to an overlook, where she knelt down and used a pair of binoculars to survey the distant streets. She pointed to a well-used hiking

trail and indicated a number of small shops where they might find some needed supplies.

“Where is the state police post?” Rogers asked.

“One more street up,” she said. “It occupies an entire street corner.” Eve got back to her feet. She unslung her rifle, holding it at the ready, and approached the descending trail. Before she could move down, James and Duke moved ahead of her to the front.

“Let me take point for a bit; Duke needs to stretch his legs.” James let the dog run out ahead while he kept an eye on him, looking for any signs of trouble.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

The team dropped off the trail onto a small gravel road that snaked between homes before merging with the main street. The road curved around, following the lake, its views disappearing beyond every sharp curve. The houses on the lake side were destroyed, front doors missing and every window shattered. The businesses on the land side shared the same fate. James moved the group to the side of the road, leading Duke off the sidewalks, worried about the dog's feet and the shards of broken glass.

They spotted the first one sitting against the trunk of a large oak tree, its arms and face covered with the broken blisters. A black oily gel leaked from its mouth and eyes, forming a dried cake that stained its clothing. James moved close to the body, while Duke held back, showing his teeth. James lifted his boot and kicked the Delta. He watched it fall onto its side, the body already rigid.

James let out a low grunting sound that resembled a laugh. "This one is good... good and dead," he said.

He turned away and continued to hike them toward the western side of the town. Looking up, Jacob could see the hill to their south, steep and wooded with the overlook at the top. The ground was blanketed with snow; in places, deep piles of leaves covered the sidewalks and banked high against the buildings. This would have been a tough place to escape in the middle of the onslaught, trapped between the terrain behind them and the lake to the front. Jacob shook his head, trying not to think about what the people here must have gone through. Eve put up a hand, pointing to a large Victorian home.

“I want to look inside,” she said.

Jacob stopped and looked at the house. Like the others, the front door was open and all the ground floor windows were shattered. It did not appear to be anything special, not worth their time. Long, once-white curtains, now a hazy yellow, moved in the breeze. They parted just enough to allow them to see into the dark home. There was nothing there.

“Why?” Rogers asked.

“I just need to see,” she answered. Eve crossed the lawn, approaching the home with her rifle at the ready. She moved out quickly and alone.

Rogers shook his head and pointed to James. “Keep watch out here. I’ll go in with Jacob while she has a look around.” He glared back at Jacob then steeped off swiftly, trying to catch up with Eve.

She moved through the front door and into the dark interior of the home. Jacob followed her but was tugged back by Rogers as he entered the doorway. They waited in the foyer, allowing their eyes to adjust to the low light. “If she wants to rush in and get herself killed then let her.”

They could hear Eve moving from room to room, stomping over the hardwood floors. After a few moments, Rogers strayed inside. Jacob followed him as they cautiously passed through the living room on the first floor.

Even though destroyed from the outside, the house was neat and orderly within. They crossed through a large formal dining room where snow covered the floor beneath a broken picture window. Rogers stopped at a large, stone fireplace with a mahogany mantel. He leaned in, and then pointed at a row of family photos... in particular, a silver framed photo at one end. A young woman in a long evening gown stood at the end of a dock, a young man behind her. Rogers lifted the picture, examining it as Eve crept up behind them. She snatched the picture from his hand and stuffed it into her pack.

“There’s nothing here, we can go,” she said, not waiting for a response.

Rogers shrugged and followed the young woman back out onto the street. She continued walking, not waiting for James to lead the way. He stopped and looked at Jacob as the men passed him by. “What did you do to my girl?” he said.

“Don’t ask,” Jacob answered. As they moved deeper into the little town, Jacob could see that many of the buildings had burned. Several of the

sidewalks and entryways were coated with streaks of blood, showing signs of struggle. This place had a violent past, and it showed through every shattered window. Cars covered with bullet holes, a shriveled, badly decomposed body lay in a gutter with an axe planted in its back. "I don't think this is what Rockwell had in mind," Rogers uttered.

They patrolled over a small plank bridge where they had a clear view of the water. Eve paused, allowing them to group up as they gazed at the lake's cold water. The oily sheen was gone, replaced by a thick, black crust with the texture of roofing tar. The dry surface was scaled and flaking, bits of it broken off and floating in the lake and bunching together. Clear water escaped between the broken shards of the crust; bloated dead fish floated in the gaps. There were still no signs of The Darkness, the entire place giving off an eerie feeling of death.

"No one will ever live here again," Jacob whispered.

Eve backed away, ignoring his statement. She pointed to an intersection in the distance. "The police station is just ahead," she said.

The two-story, brick-covered building on a corner lot looked like a reclaimed home. It stood in the open with wide views of the lake. The front entry doors were open, a set of squad cars on flat tires blocking the main entrance. Knocked over sawhorses and police barriers lay across the road. They moved closer, spotting the bodies of uniformed officers lying near the vehicles. Spent shotgun shells covered the ground. The team roved away, skirting around to the rear of the building, following the perimeter without entering it.

At the backside, they spotted a number of National Guard trucks, two Humvees, and a larger troop transport. Several badly damaged police cruisers were in a line near an open bay garage. The only noise came from the fabric of a shredded tent as it slapped against the frame. Rows of black body bags lay organized in neat rows at the back of the tent. Rogers pointed to a tall radio tower then turned to Eve, stopping her. "That's what we're here for. Let's see what's inside."

She turned away from the lot and led them to a back door. The glass was broken but still hung in place. James moved up first, with Duke close by his side. He knelt by the door and pulled. Feeling it give, he let it open just enough for Duke to press his nose against it. The dog scratched at the

door, ready to enter. James stood and drew the door back the rest of the way. Powering on a flashlight, he patrolled in with Duke leading the way.

Jacob pushed the door open as far as it would go and slid a nearby brick into place, blocking it from closing behind him. He followed James inside, entering a small sally port—a bit of an airlock with an electronic lock on the far door and a red call button on the wall by the door. On the right was a small booth, separated from the rest of the entrance with a bulletproof window. Looking through the moisture-covered glass, they could see the booth was empty. James crossed the space to a large steel door, and pushed down on the handle. To their surprise, the door clicked open, the electronic lock disabled. James pushed ahead with Duke close at his feet, the dog excitedly moving into the dark, musty space.

Jacob followed as they stepped into a wide hallway that opened to an even wider room filled with desks. They were moving in from the rear of the space, the desks and counters oriented to face away from them. At the front was a reception desk and the double door they had seen from outside. Now, Jacob saw the inside destruction firsthand. Bodies lay in the lobby, killed in whatever last standoff must have occurred here. Duke moved into the room lit only by the light pouring in through the lobby glass. The dog paced through the space, sniffing at objects on the floor. Several men were handcuffed to a counter, piles of brass and police batons at their feet. The bodies were badly beaten and contorted.

“They cuffed themselves so they couldn’t be dragged off by the bastards,” James said, standing over the uniformed men.

A stairway with a sign pointing to dispatch was over the stairs. Rogers moved up behind them with Eve shadowing him. He pointed to the stairs and James led the way. The second floor, a large loft with more cubes, was clear. It was apparent people had lived in the space. Cots and sleeping bags covered the space between the cubes. There were also stacks of military meals ready to eat and cases of water, which told them the space was overrun or—optimistically—evacuated without time for the defenders to take their essential supplies with them.

At the end of the room was a long counter filled with computer monitors. Rogers edged around it and found the building’s radio base station. He looked it over and nodded. “High power. This should do. James,

I saw a generator house out back. If you can get that running, we can try to get a hit on comms.”

“On it,” James said, leaving the room with Duke.

Eve watched James leave. She sighed and slumped her shoulders. “I’ll go cover him.”

Jacob wandered through the space, looking at the desks; some were covered with police reports, others with personal belongings—spare clothes, parts of police officer uniforms. Jacob continued through to the far end of the room. He saw an area broken off from the others, divided by colorful blankets and rugs. Children’s toys and books were on the floor. “They must have brought their families with them,” Jacob said.

“What’s that?” Rogers shouted from the back.

Jacob turned away and moved back to the radio console. “They had kids in here. Families stayed here; there are children’s things in the back.”

Rogers nodded as he opened his pack and removed small toolkits divided into nylon cases. He laid them out in front of him for easy access. “I would. Wouldn’t you if you had family and knew you couldn’t abandon your post? Why not bring them here? They probably thought it was the safest place for them at the time.” Rogers looked down and shook his head, pushing away a dark thought. “We can’t fault them for trying.”

Jacob walked to a window overlooking the city below him. He reflected on Laura and Katy safe back at the base. “Do you have family?” Jacob asked over his shoulder.

Rogers stopped what he was doing and looked up at him. “What, like a wife? Kids and all of that good stuff? Or you mean a mom and dad?”

“Yeah, like a wife,” Jacob said.

“No, I was never married.”

“Girlfriend then?”

Rogers laughed. “Yeah, lots of ’em.”

Jacob turned away from the window and proceeded to the cases of MREs. Pulling back a cardboard flap from an already opened box, he dug through the contents until he found a sealed beef ravioli. Jacob moved to an empty cube and plopped into an office chair, tearing open the brown plastic package. “So why no wife then?” he asked.

Rogers took a deep breath and sat in a chair behind the computer screens, searching for the right words. “I don’t know... the travel, I guess.

Maybe because I never wanted to give it a chance, always running off to someplace else before things got too serious.”

Jacob held up a pouch of toasted corn kernels. Rogers nodded and Jacob tossed them over. “So you were one of those guys, huh? A girl in every port,” Jacob said.

“I guess. Hell, even if they were willing to take a chance on me, I would become a big enough asshole until I scared them off. Yeah, I’m one of those guys.” Rogers laughed. “Guess I should be thankful, not having that extra weight to carry right now. I couldn’t imagine having a wife or even a kid right now.” Rogers stopped, seeing Jacob’s expression change.

“Sorry, bro. I didn’t mean nothing by it,” Rogers said.

Jacob shook it off. “It’s fine.”

Suddenly the lights flicked on, dimming low then coming on bright. Computers located in the office cubes clicked and buzzed, beeping as they booted up, as did the communications console. Rogers pressed buttons and raised an eyebrow. “It’s coming online,” he said.

CHAPTER FIFTY

Rogers pulled cables tight, yanking them through tiny holes in the back of the countertop. He lifted large, flat-panel monitors, sliding them back and dropping them to the floor. He dragged out a long power strip, tugging cables away from a black radio console before dropping a tangled bundle of wires to the floor. Rogers slid his hand around the countertop, removing bits of equipment, and then reached under a cabinet. He knelt down then rose, holding a second radio console and set it on top of the first, routing wires through both devices and plugging everything into a long black power strip that snaked back to an outlet.

“Everything okay?” Jacob asked.

“This system was designed to run on an uninterrupted power supply—a kind of battery backup. It looks like it died when the generator came on and off line. I would probably find that the UPS is fried if I pulled it apart. Doesn’t help that it was all plugged into these computers—probably a dispatch application of some type. I don’t have time to figure that out. I’m rerouting things so it will pull its juice directly from the generator, and run it old school through a mic and speaker.”

With another flip of a switch, the console power came to life with a whirring of fans. The radio speakers let out several rapid beeps. A light lit on the main console then several windows with blinking lights and gauges popped to life. Rogers smiled and lifted the hand mic just as James and Eve entered the room.

“The genny just needed diesel. Did you get the radios to work?” James asked.

Rogers turned his head sideways, looking down. "If it does, this may be our ticket out of here. I don't have the frequencies so we'll be talking in the open. I hope someone is listening in the clear." He pressed the transmit button, pausing before he said, "Bravo Two Six, Bravo Two Six. This is Bravo Two One, over. Bravo Two Six, Bravo Two Six. This is Bravo Two One, over." Rogers let his hand drop from the transmit button, listening to the sounds of static.

He tuned the radio dial, trying again. "Bravo Two Six, Bravo Two Six. This is Bravo Two One, over... Any station. This is Bravo Two One." Rogers tuned the dial again. "Any station, this is Bravo Two One. Dammit, somebody answer me!" he shouted and backed away from the microphone.

Eve paced slowly across the room. "You just got it working; it might take a little while."

Rogers looked up at her then turned away, walking to an open window.

"Bravo Two One, this is aerial recon flight Alpha Zulu, send your traffic, over." The radio buzzed, coming alive through loud speakers mounted on the wall behind them.

Rogers froze in place before his brain registered the contact. He lunged forward and ran back to the microphone, nearly tripping. He grabbed it in his hand and pressed the transmit button. "Alpha Zulu, this is Bravo Two One, requesting assistance."

"Understood, wait one, over."

"Who are they?" Jacob asked, rushing to stand near the console.

Rogers looked up from the microphone, reaching for his bag. He pulled out a pen, paper, and a small binder with laminated pages before looking up at Jacob. "At this point, does it matter? It's anyone and they have an aircraft."

Jacob started to speak again, but before he got a chance, the radio squawked and Rogers put up a hand.

"Bravo Two One, this is Alpha Zulu. I'm going to set up to relay your traffic to command, prepare to receive instructions, over."

"Thank you for your help, Alpha Zulu."

"Bravo Two One, this is Meaford Control; can you authenticate, over."

Rogers flipped to the back of his notebook, looking for date time codes. He ran his finger down the page, stopped, and jumped back on the radio.

“Meaford Control. We are Bravo Two One, I authenticate... break... echo whiskey two two one niner... Over.”

There was long pause on the radio before the signal returned. “Welcome back to the net, Bravo Two One; Bravo Two Six is on the dial.” Another long pause and a less formal voice broke onto the network. From the expression on Rogers’ and James’ faces, they knew the operator’s voice.

“Hell, boys, we thought you were all lost.”

“No way; we are definitely here, Bravo Two Six. We are Mike Charlie and request extraction, over.”

“You have the package?”

“Roger that, we used some and it has proven highly effective. We’ve taken losses, request immediate extraction.”

“You used it? What is your current SITREP, enemy activity?”

“We are in the clear, the package chased them all off. Haven’t seen one since the sun came up. I have one WIA, two KIA.”

“Get me your location, boys, and I’ll have a bird in the air. We need to secure that site.”

Rogers looked up from the radio and at a large county map on the wall behind him. “Eve, quick, where can we put in a helicopter?”

Eve ran to the map and pointed to a large golf course. It was between the lake and the cabin, still close enough that they hoped it would be in the effective area of the dioxin.

“Sir, we are at: Sixteen, Tango, Fox, Quebec, eight, six, five, four, four, one, over.”

“Good copy, Bravo Two One. So it really works. Your call couldn’t have come at a better time.”

“Yeah, it works; it put the Deltas on their backs just as advertised.”

“Stay safe and keep your ears on, boys. We are spinning up QRF and will be at your location in... One twenty mikes; be ready to receive a ground team and be ready for extraction. Bravo Two Six, out.”

Eve looked at them. “What does that mean?” she asked.

James picked her up and spun her around, causing Duke to bark excitedly. “It means we are out of here!”



AN HOUR LATER, THEY WERE STANDING AT THE GREEN OF THE NINTH HOLE of the Lake View Country Club. The fairways were overgrown, but the putting green remained flat. Rogers moved to the center, removed the pin from the hole, and tossed it off to the side. He had the handheld radio in his hand with the long-range antenna fully extended; he watched the eastern sky, searching for an incoming aircraft. James and Duke were near the end of the course. James had a pry bar in his hand, molesting a soda machine and bashing at the metal cabinet.

“Will they have room for all of us?” Eve asked.

Rogers took his eye from the sky and looked at her just as James approached with his arms crossed. He stopped at the edge of the green and dropped several cans of soda. He smiled, showing his teeth through the matted beard, and tossed Cokes to his friends. Rogers caught a can two handed and popped the top, the brown liquid exploding over the top of the can. Rogers grinned and brought it to his lips, slurping madly, trying to catch the escaping liquid.

When he lowered the can, he looked back at Eve. “I think you should reconsider. If the dioxin holds them back, you have it better here than you will in the refugee camps.”

“Are they really that bad?” Eve asked with determination on her face.

James double fisted cans of soda and swaggered to the center of the green, plopping on his rear, leaning back against this pack. He retrieved a small plastic bowl from his pocket and poured a can of soda into it, laughing as Duke lapped it up.

“Bro, I don’t think that’s good for him,” Jacob said, walking closer.

James laughed again. “Relax, it’s diet.” He leaned back, taking a sip from his own can. He turned and looked at Eve. “The camps? They are that bad, sweetheart. I would take living underground any day over what you’ll find in those lawless places. Hell, look at Jacob over there. He picked living with us over the camps.”

Eve turned back at Jacob. “Really?”

Jacob shrugged before moving away and finding his own place to sit on the green.

“I’ve only been to one, and I hope I never have to go back,” James continued. “Early last month on a recruiting drive, looking for able-bodied men. I had low expectations on the bus ride over. Thinking who would

voluntarily sign up for this shit? We go outside the wire every day, and most of the people in the camps fought hard just to reach them. When we rolled through those gates and the bus doors opened, my mind was blown. It's the kind of squalor that would make a third-world country proud.

"Prostitution, drugs, booze, everything and anything that can be bought is for sale. The gangs run everything inside. Yes, they have peace officers, but for the most part, they stay out of the way. The bus was there for under an hour, and we had sixty volunteers. The ones left in line started rioting after we filled the bus. We had to start a fight just to get away. Yeah, one time was enough for me. Take my friend's advice; you're better off here."

Eve looked down at the ground and turned away. The air suddenly echoed with the noise of an approaching helicopter. Rogers's radio squawked. He nodded and pulled a flare from his vest, popping a tab, then threw the device off to the side of the green. Soon after, a small Kiowa scout helicopter swooped by at high speed. Painted in a non-reflective glass, the bird flew so close that they could see a sniper hanging from the side. It cut a wide arc and circled several times before leaving the area.

James pointed at the horizon. Two small dots slowly built in size and eventually materialized into a pair of large, twin-rotor Chinook helicopters. "We got a pair of Shit Hooks in bound," James said without getting up.

They approached from the east, flying in column with one slightly back and to the right of the other. They lined up on the fairway of the ninth green, the lead helicopter's nose rising slightly before it touched down on its wheels. Ramps dropped and rows of soldiers in full battle dress poured out, creating a perimeter.

Jacob jumped to his feet and tossed his empty can in a pile near the others. He slung his rifle and moved closer to Rogers as two officers approached from the lead helicopter. The first was tall and wore a clean uniform. His body armor looked new, out of the box, with no attachments. His only visible weapon was in a green, nylon drop holster over his right thigh.

The second man was in sharp contrast to the first, shorter and broad shouldered. His face bore deep scars; his uniform was soiled, the knees and elbows worn and faded. His armor was frayed and stained, covered with gear: a pair of shooting gloves tucked into a fold, a medical kit, frag

grenades, and a cross-draw holster at the center of his chest. In the man's right arm, he carried an M4 carbine with a laser and optic attached.

The men, who had their heads down to avoid the blast from the rotors, marched directly toward them. Jacob turned and saw Eve still standing at the back edge of the green. James was still sprawled on his rucksack, holding Duke next to him.

The man in front stuck a hand out to Rogers. He made a point of pointing to the rank tab on the front of Rogers's uniform. "Staff Sergeant, I'm Captain Cole, this is Captain Emmitt. Are you in charge?"

Rogers looked back at James, who nodded his unspoken agreement. Rogers turned back to the captain. "Sir, I've taken lead."

Emmitt interjected. "I was hoping to find Lieutenant Jeffrey Marks; is he here?"

Rogers looked down and shook his head slowly. "I'm sorry, sir. Our C.O. didn't make it."

Emmitt pursed his lips. "I'm sorry to hear that. Marks was a good man."

An enlisted soldier ran to Cole, delivering a white sheet of paper. Cole read the note enthusiastically and looked back to Rogers. "The Kiowa just reported in. It's amazing. He says the Deltas are grouped but maintaining a nearly perfect one-mile standoff from the lake. You'll have to brief me on how long it's been like this, and exactly how you deployed the MX4."

The helicopters engines shut down, the blades beginning to slow. Jacob watched the soldiers return to the ramp of the Chinook; they were unloading containers of gear. Large green boxes and canvas bags. Rogers stepped closer to Cole. "Sir, I can give you a full brief. I see that you have deployed men and equipment; will you be staying in the area?"

The officer nodded excitedly. "Oh yes, Sergeant, if our results are as promising as the German Army says, we'll be staying here for a long time. The Bundeswehr reports once a pond is killed, the Delta will not return to it. Our Kiowa flew over the lake and surrounding areas. He reported positively that there are definite signs that the water-borne contamination is broken and dispersing.

"We have two teams here. I'll need you and your men to refit as soon as possible and break off with Captain Emmitt and his recovery platoon. You will be escorting them to the chemical plant to secure the remaining MX4," Captain Cole said.

The same young soldier from before returned from the cluster of equipment and handed Cole a black clipboard. The officer turned to walk away. Rogers reached out and grabbed his elbow. “But, sir... I thought we would be returning to Meaford,” Rogers said. “We’re beat up here and could use some downtime.”

Captain Emmitt, short and broad shouldered, shook his head. “Sergeant Rogers, Meaford is under direct assault. We can’t—we won’t—return empty-handed. The only reason we were able to get here so fast is we were already on standby to assault the chemical plant without intelligence.”

“Then sir, I need to report to you that we have civilian survivors in the vicinity. They are also caring for my wounded and have wounded of their own. And I have KIA that need to be attended to. Can you ensure that this is seen to?”

Captain Cole’s eyes went wide with a surprised expression. “Yes, of course. These civilians, they know the area well? Do they have details on the MX4’s deployment? They could be a valuable resource for us; where can I find them?”

Rogers turned and pointed to Eve.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

Captain Merritt moved fast, gathering the remaining Assassins to an assembly area south of the Chinooks. A large green locker box was opened with new weapons and ammo. Another pair of marmite containers held hot chow, fresh from Meaford. While the men ate, others moved around helping them, refitting their equipment for the next mission.

“I’m really sorry to do this to you. You damn well deserve a break. But with recent events, we need your ground experience at the plant,” Merritt said. “I asked for the hot meal. Thought maybe I could earn back some friendship with it.”

Jacob scooped a mouthful of mashed potatoes and gravy from a plastic tray. “Sir, what exactly is happening at Meaford?”

Merritt advanced close to them and sat on an ammo case. “As you all know, we started getting probed last week. Yesterday, they broke through the lines. By midnight, they were at the main gates.”

“How bad is it?” Jacob asked. “Are the people inside safe?”

“We’ve held, but we can’t keep throwing our forces at them like this. We really need this MX4 to work.”

James took a bite from his tray and tossed a chunk of sliced turkey to Duke who quickly lapped it up. Merritt took notice and looked at the dog curiously.

“Strange, I don’t recall your squad having a working dog.”

“Oh yeah, this guy's an Assassin through and through. One of the best on the team,” James said with Rogers and Jacob nodding in agreement.

James reached down and patted Duke on the ribs before setting the remains of his tray on the ground for him to finish.

“What’s his duty type? Explosives? Force security?” asked Merritt, looking at the dog’s matted fur.

James stroked Duke’s neck and smiled. “This guy? Nah... he is a dedicated Delta detector. Best in the business, too.”

Merritt grinned, knowing he was being bullshitted. “Well, it’s good enough for me, but you should probably get a leash on him; don’t want him getting away from you in the Chinook.”

“Duke can’t be leashed; he’s recon like me. Needs to have his space to work.”

“Well, suit yourself. It’s a short hop to the landing zone; keep a hold of him,” Merritt said, laughing. “Oh, and I’ll get Duke, the Delta Detecting Recon Dog, added to the passenger manifest.”

The Chinooks’ turbines whined as soldiers gathered gear and loaded from the rear ramp. Rogers stood and grabbed his weapons and equipment, restocking the items laid out for him, stuffing them in his pack or filling empty pouches on his gear. Jacob followed the veteran troop’s lead and did the same. He still had the M14 and refused to give it up; he liked the iron sights. He now had an M9 on his hip and several more grenades on his chest.

James was the first to move toward the aircraft. Duke hesitated, so James bent down and carried the dog in his arms. Jacob grabbed his own pack then helped James with his. He moved forward and fell in line behind James, following him aboard the helicopter. The aircraft was nearly full, being filled from the front to the back. James moved to the next available seat, dropping into an orange webbed jump seat. Jacob piled in next to him, placing his ruck between his feet and situating James’s pack. Rogers dropped in across from him. As the turbines roared, the rotor RPM increased, washing out the fairway in swirling grass and dry snow.

Looking up the fuselage, Jacob counted twenty-four men, including his own group. The engines roared and Jacob pressed back into the seat while the Chinook quickly lifted off and spiraled up and away, avoiding ground fire as they passed over occupied areas. Jacob looked down at Duke on James’s lap. James had his gloved hands over the dog’s ears, helping to

shield them from the noise. James caught Jacob's gaze and leaned in close, yelling, "I wonder if Eve is going to miss me."

Jacob put his head back against the headrest, laughing. The helicopter turned to the right and gained altitude then banked hard and turned sharp, diving as the helicopter banked. Merritt moved to the jump seat beside Rogers. He had the chemical compound mapped out and Rogers pointed to the tanks holding the MX4. The helicopter dropped again, already preparing for their approach to Middleville.

"Seemed a lot longer when we made the trip by foot," Rogers said, looking across to Jacob.

Wide holes, the size of fifty-cent pieces, suddenly appeared on the sides of the helicopter then traced a line along the floor of the aircraft. Jacob looked at them curiously for a second before his senses registered. He pressed back into the jump seat as he looked out of the ramp, seeing tracer fire arc up around them.

The helicopter banked hard again, shuddering as it traded altitude for speed and spiraled down, dropping so fast Jacob thought he could feel his stomach touch the roof of his mouth. A machine gunner opened up near the nose, the weapon vibrating the fuselage as it fired.

Duke clawed and scrambled in James's lap at all of the commotion and the extreme maneuvers of the aircraft. James held him down tight, pulling the dog into his chest. The Chinook banked hard again and dropped fast, leveling out just above the treetops. This time when it flared, Jacob saw green grass below and the sides of the steel factory. The helicopter swooped hard then held position just feet from the ground. Rogers jumped up first and rushed the ramp with the other soldiers rushing out behind him.

"This is our stop," James yelled nudging Jacob with his shoulder.

Jacob reached down and grabbed both of their packs before running to the ramp. He jumped and found the drop farther than he expected. He hit the ground hard but rolled as he impacted, avoiding injury. He dropped the bags and quickly scrambled back into his own before helping James into his. The Chinook's pilots powered down quickly as Merritt led everyone out, shouting, "Move! We need to get away from the helo so it doesn't remain a target."

They moved away from a grassy enclosure, shielded on one side by the factory. Following Rogers's directions, Merritt led them around a corner

and toward the nearest tank farm. The ground was slightly banked here, forming a bowl around the yard containing the chemical tanks. Merritt moved the men out of the bowl then forced them into a hasty perimeter with rolling grass to their front. Half a football field away was a tall chain link fence running parallel to a perimeter road. Beyond that was a sparse tree line. Sporadic gunfire came at them from all directions. Some men broke from their positions and ran for the cover of the steel-sided building; they were quickly cut down by the increasing fire. "Stay put and dig in!" Merritt yelled.

The chemical plant's perimeter was completely enclosed in chain link fence. Jacob looked ahead and saw that a small pedestrian gate was hanging open. The Deltas saw it too and ran for the breach. Jacob dropped his pack then lay behind it, steadying his rifle. He fired round after round, dropping the creatures as they pressed through the narrow opening. A machine gun on Jacob's right joined in and quickly put down the assault.

With the first wave stopped, two men were ordered ahead to the gate with a small length of rope. They reached it, removed bodies from the opening, and then tightly secured it.

Soldiers called out directions, seeing the Deltas moving from high ground and running at the plant from distant streets. Jacob heard Duke growl and turned to see James lying prone over his own weapon beside him. "This was probably a stupid idea," James said, removing an entrenching tool from his pack. He hastily scratched at the dirt, digging a hole, pushing the fresh dirt in front of him. Jacob didn't have a shovel, so he drew a long knife from his gear, used it to break up the soft dirt, and did the same.

A group of several men broke off with Rogers and ran toward the chemical plant's tank farm. "Where are they going?" Jacob asked.

James looked over his shoulder at the running men then turned back. "They're NBC guys."

"Like the TV channel?" Jacob shook his head, not understanding.

"Chem warfare experts Nuke, Bio, Chem. They are going after the MX4."

The two soldiers at the pedestrian gate, having secured it, turned to run back to the small perimeter. Duke barked frantically. Jacob saw another wave of Deltas emerge from the trees across the street and watched as the

two men were knocked down from behind. Mere seconds later, a full wave launched itself at the fences from deep in the trees—lines of attackers, most armed and firing as they ran at the fences. Jacob looked into their crazed faces as they assaulted forward, screaming and shooting.

Incoming fire ripped by his head, smacking the dirt. He watched a puff of fabric as his pack in front of him was hit. Jacob dropped low and hugged the ground. All along their hasty line, soldiers opened fire. The machine gun opened up again, catching the charging deltas in the open. It mowed them down, sweeping left and right as more advanced. More men ran forward from the back. Jacob watched them sprint and drop to the ground near James where they set up a bipod and steadied a second machine gun.

Jacob pressed his face to the soft dirt while the gunfire made his ears ring. He could barely make out the screams of the wounded and orders from the soldiers up and down the line. He looked over at James and saw him reloading his rifle. Duke was pressed into the hole behind James's pack, the dog's rear legs shaking with fear. James glanced across at Jacob and slapped him hard on the back. "One hell of a party we got invited to, isn't it?" James said. "You know this is one of those moments, Jacob. It's time to embrace the suck."

More screams and roars filled the air from the distant wood line. The main mass had arrived. Jacob could hear the trees and brush cracking as the mob formed together in the woods.

"Get ready!" Merritt yelled over the noise. "Hold this line; nothing gets through."

Men dumped their packs, pouring out belts of 240 ammo which they passed down the line, stacking it in front of the machine gunners. Another soldier collected 40mm grenades and passed them to the Grenadiers. The soldiers pushed together, tightening up the line while they waited for the next assault. Jacob continued to dig and push earth to his front.

"Get your frags out and ready; this is gonna be a long fight!" Merritt said.

Jacob turned to his side, removed his grenades, laying them by his pack, and then placed several spare magazines near them for quick access. Jacob detected the sound of clanging metal and watched as three men deployed a small mortar tube in the bottom of the bowl. As the roars from the forest intensified, one dropped a round. Jacob looked ahead as it exploded

somewhere deep in the distant trees. “That’s spot on; keep it coming,” a soldier yelled from Jacob’s left.

All at once, the air erupted with whizzing hornets. The earth around him exploded with the impact of rounds. The Deltas screamed their frenzied war cries and charged from the forest. Some firing from the hip as they ran, others charging forward directly at the fences empty-handed. The machine guns went into action laying down heavy fire, raking the fence, cutting down the advancing mobs. Jacob got behind his rifle, ignoring the wave and looking for shooters the way he’d been trained.

He spotted them—a small group on a rise in the earth, positioned at a forty-five degree angle to his perimeter. Invisible to most of the soldiers on the line, they were firing at them from an oblique line, nearly obscured. Jacob shifted his position sharply, lining up on them, then held his breath and squeezed the trigger, watching the shooter’s head snap back. Another slid into the spot and lifted the dead Delta’s rifle. Jacob fired again with the same result. James followed his barrel, saw his targets, and joined the fight, their combined efforts silencing the enemy snipers.

Ahead, the fence was bending and starting to give and the soldiers focused their fire to the front. A machine gun went quiet as a gunner struggled to change a warped barrel. The fence fell forward in a screeching clash, releasing a flood of charging Deltas that poured out from the breach. Jacob reached for his grenade and tossed it onto the gap then returned to his rifle, firing madly as the enemy advanced. When his weapon ran dry, he rolled to his side to reload. He watched as James’ expression changed and looked up to see a small mob run through their perimeter. Jacob drew his M9 pistol and shot one in the back then fired straight up, hitting another as it hurdled over his position.

Rolling to his stomach, Jacob raised his weapon. He cringed, horrified to see the fence swamped and their perimeter being overrun. The mortar men adjusted and rained rounds into the small clearing to their front. The machine gun was back online, pouring fire into the charging masses. Merritt screamed for the men on the back side of the perimeter to turn around and reinforce the front. Jacob felt the rounds coming from behind as the men at the rear turned and fired their rifles, supporting the brothers. Jacob watched the assaulting Deltas in slow motion, their bodies jerking, being torn apart

from flying shrapnel and rounds coming at them from every direction as they ran down a gauntlet of steel.

The last man stayed on his feet, running through the fire unscathed, its black eyes locked on Jacob. It ran twisting and lunging as it bound over the dead to its front. Jacob was frozen, looking at the man, seeing every detail in its clothing and pockmarked face. It closed the distance and looked down at him, beginning to leap at his position. The creature's body jerked and contorted as it was suddenly cut down by the machinegun's fire. Jacob watched the creature fall, still focused on its face as the black faded from its eyes.

When he looked back up, the assault had ended. Merritt was on his feet trying to rally the men. Rogers was back with the NBC team. They were able to get the pumps online, moving the MX4 from the storage tanks through hoses to the external drop tanks under short wings on the Chinook. Rogers moved toward the perimeter line with a tall NBC sergeant by his side.

"How long until the MX4 is onboard?" Merritt asked.

Rogers shook his head, pointing to the front. "Doesn't matter, bird will never get off under these conditions; enemy fire will rip it apart."

James dug through his pack and removed one of the remaining four bottles of the dioxin, the yellowish liquid shining through the clear plastic soda bottle. "I think it's time to call an audible."

"Stow your piss bottle, soldier," one of the NBC sergeants shouted from behind Rogers.

James showed a wide grin as he reached into his bag for electrical tape. Strapping the bottle to a frag grenade, he said, "Oh, this is the Devil's piss right here. What all you nerds call MX4."

Merritt pointed down at what James was doing. "Will that work?"

The NBC sergeant moved close and knelt down next to James. "In theory it should work, though it won't be very effective. But he's right; it's time to break it out, sir. We have chemical fogger gear on board. Might as well test and deploy it here.

"Get them set up," Merritt agreed.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

A short break in the violence allowed the soldiers to regroup and distribute ammo. Men scrambled across the line, helping one another improve their fighting positions. The dead lay spread over the field to their front, covering the ground from the platoon's hasty defensive line all the way back to the fence and beyond. James prepared the last of the improvised grenades he now affectionately called "piss bottles". Captain Merritt liked the idea and ordered more of the improvised grenades be made up and placed all along the line while the foggers were removed from the Chinook, assembled, and pushed to the rear of the perimeter.

The NBC sergeant, wearing a protective mask and gloves, primed the propane foggers, positioning them so that the mist would travel with the wind, away from the dug in platoon, covering their flanks. Still unsure about the MX4 effects on humans, the NBC team didn't want to introduce the mist into their own lungs, instead using it as a standoff weapon. The propane burners were lit and the tanks charged; they just waited on the word from Merritt to begin the release.

Jacob lay in his hole next to James, waiting for the next assault. James continued digging, throwing more dirt to the front, creating a tiny sump for Duke to lie in. They could hear the Deltas running and crashing through the woods, their numbers increasing rapidly. Jacob looked down the line at the hardened faces; he could see that the rest of the platoon had dressed down in protective garments and gas masks. "So what gives? They didn't bring any of that for us to wear?" Jacob asked, pointing.

James looked at him and grinned back. “Don’t sweat it, bro. We don’t need that snivel gear. Nothing can hurt us; we’re too hard for that. Besides, you don’t plan on getting any of it on you, do ya?”

“No, I guess not, but don’t you think it would be nice to have, just in case?”

Jacob looked away, but turned back in time to see James tie a bandana over Duke’s snout. “What the hell? I thought you just said we don’t need to worry about it?”

“Come now, Jacob. You know Duke’s a Delta sniffing dog. We got to protect his most powerful weapon, right? We don’t want his sniffer getting out of calibration, do we?”

“I guess, James, but you know what? You’re crazy as hell.”

“Shit, look around you brother; everyone here is crazy.”

A sudden rise in the volume of noise from the distant trees let the men know the Deltas were moving again, pushing toward the plant for another assault. Sounds of rattling brush and the roar of the mass once again became frenzied. Captain Merritt grabbed a nearby soldier and sent him to the NBC position, ordering them to release the fog. Merritt walked the line, crouching low, ensuring that every other man on the line now held a piss bottle, ready to deploy it on his order.

“Did you tell him what the dioxin does to them? That it doesn’t kill them right off?” Jacob asked.

James shrugged. “Yeah, I told ’em,” he said, pushing forward with his rifle.

Merritt moved behind James and dropped to his knees, looking through the fence. He turned, facing down the platoon’s defensive line. Holding a hand to his mouth, he yelled, “Tighten up, everyone. This will be their last push. This is all they got left in them. But we’re going to hit them back this time; we got something for them. We hold one more assault and we can go home.”

A soldier ran back and dropped next to Merritt, out of breath. “Sergeant Emerson says the foggers are lit. They’re sending a hell of a mist downrange. The entire back approach is now in a toxic cloud.”

Merritt nodded and faced the front as the frenzied mob ramped up. Trees cracked as they pushed ahead, still hidden in the cover of the brush and hanging clouds of smoke. Jacob could tell by the thunderous roars that

the creatures' mass had increased in size during the lull. The previous gunfire and explosions drew more of them to the fight. Merritt looked back at the mortar men and waved his hand down. "Let's burn them out!" he shouted.

As they arranged earlier, the mortar team loaded and dropped the first white phosphorus round. A chemical round that explodes and reacts harshly to the air, it can burn through skin deep to the bone, causing blinding fires and white smoke. The mortar launched from the tube and exploded with a loud crack deep in the woods, emitting blooms of sparks and white smoke. "That's right where I want it; keep it coming," Merritt ordered.

The mortar team rapid fired its entire supply of Willy Pete then switched to high explosive, the trees quickly filling with white burning smoke and thundering explosions. The sounds of the monsters' rage increased with every strike. Soon the tops of the trees were shaking while hot, dirty, yellow flames backlit the smoke. And again, The Darkness burst from the trees in a full charge, supported by their own shooters. Rounds whizzed by overhead. Jacob raised himself up, searching for a target, but saw nothing except the white acrid smoke. A volley of screaming Deltas ran from the trees, their clothing tattered and in flames. The dug-in platoon held their fire, waiting.

James rose to his knees, bleeding off a full magazine, screaming back at the charring mob, "Come and get it! You ain't got shit on me. Come on, you bastards."

Jacob lifted his rifle, rose up next to James, and fired into the advancing mob, hearing the rest of the platoon's rifles join in. The machine guns went cyclic, raking the gap, chopping down ranks of the charging monsters. Bodies stacked up as more of the creatures forced their way through. James, sitting high as bullets whizzed by, screamed challenges at them. He pulled the pin on his improvised grenade and tossed it deep into the breach, hearing it explode with a loud crack and seeing the devastating results as the bodies of the tightly packed creatures were tossed to the ground by the explosion. Merritt saw James's action and ordered the release of the remaining bottles. Men up and down the line rose to rain their own improvised grenades. They exploded in rapid succession, spilling carnage and dioxin over the battlefield.

Jacob dropped and pressed his face to the dirt as debris and body parts showered his back. When the explosions stopped, Jacob pushed up, looking over his pack to see them still coming. As they charged forward, Jacob aimed center mass, knocking down a man directly to his front. The grenades impeded their advance, but fresh waves still emerged from the burning woods. These new ones crossed through the downed fence. They staggered over the dead and fell, disorganized as they passed through, the dioxin finally entering their systems.

They grew mad with symptoms, gouging at their eyes as they charged forward, now lashing out in pure rage at anything that moved, even each other. An entire platoon online supported by heavy weapons with a clear field of fire made easy work of the chaotic mob. Sensing the lack of incoming fire, Jacob rose to a knee and took aimed shots, downing the staggering creatures one by one. With this current wave nearly destroyed, another approached the gate at a full sprint, again breaking up as they were slowed by the pool of bodies and waded through the contaminated breach, falling with sickness of their own.

This time, half of the mass broke off, repelled by the chemical, and retreated back into the raging fire now burning in the trees. Others tried to move around the perimeter, walking the fence line, only to be cut off and overwhelmed by the chemical fog. The platoon's men climbed up from their fighting positions, slowly advancing on line with each other and putting down the blind and suffering Deltas. The men continued gaining energy and excitement over finally seeing the Deltas defeated on the battlefield. They walked along the grounds, placing kill shots on any of the creatures still moving.

Merritt watched as his men claimed victory over the field; he called the men back, ordering them to police their equipment and hold the line.

James looked over and exchanged a relieved look with Jacob. The bearded man coaxed Duke from his hole, allowing the dog to run ahead toward the dead, sniffing at the Delta bodies all around them. James stood upright, grabbed his rucksack, and tossed it to the undisturbed ground behind him. The NBC men reported in with Merritt; Jacob watched as the men gave their brief. He overheard them say that the chemicals were completely transferred into the holding tanks and waiting to remove the lines. Merritt nodded and waved them off. He turned, faced the soldiers, and

ordered the platoon to their feet, leaving only a few men back for security while the rest returned to the Chinook.

James knelt down by Duke, watching the soldiers pass by. He poured water from a bottle, allowing the dog to drink. Jacob moved off to their side to rest. He sat down on his rucksack and used a bandana to wipe the grime from his face. Merritt passed by and stopped, looking at the carnage in front of them. He turned to James. "I don't think we could have done it without the poison," he said.

"You know that shit is against the Geneva Convention," James said with a serious face, making it impossible to tell if he was joking. "I'm going to have to file a report when we get back."

Merritt shook his head. "Good thing the Deltas never signed it."

"Good point, sir. So how's your platoon?"

"Five dead and many more wounded." Merritt paused, looking to the fence. "Considering all things, we fought well today. This was a win for us." The hardened officer turned and walked away.

Hearing orders for the security team to return to the helicopter, Jacob leaned over and lifted James' heavy pack to his shoulder. They headed for the Chinook, where a man in a flight suit removed a hose from a large tank attached to a stubby wing. Seeing the bullet holes in the side of the large helicopter, Jacob was going to question the man about the bird's flight worthiness. When he heard the engines whine and the blades starting to turn, he changed his mind and, not wanting to be left behind, rushed ahead to the ramp.

This time, he led the way, moving deep into the belly of the helicopter from the rear ramp, solemnly stepping by the black body bags of the platoon's dead. Jacob dropped into the orange jump seat and sat back as the engines gained power. He turned to look out of the back ramp, watching the helicopter defy gravity and leave the ground before swiftly gaining altitude, banking, and turning to the west. As the helicopter circled, he caught a glimpse of a Delta mass moving along open streets. There were still thousands of them down there in the city; they would have been killed without the dioxin.

Jacob tried to clear his thoughts and take the time to rest. He tried to watch the blue sky from the small port windows. He saw that the other men around him were sleeping, heads heavy and leaning back. Jacob tried to

relax and look away, but his eyes were always drawn to the black bags at his feet. He couldn't sleep. His mind racing, his thoughts filled with ideas about the men they lost. Wondering how it was that he survived when people like Stephens, Marks, and Murphy didn't. This war wasn't about skill; it was all about luck—being in the right place at the right time. He lay back against the netting and turned his head to the side, watching the blue sky pass by.

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CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

Jacob walked off the helicopter with the others close by. They were on a bustling air strip. All around them, helicopters were landing to be refueled before taking to the air again. From where he was, he could see and hear signs of the fighting—a black plume of smoke billowing up and drifting away, echoes of explosions, and the cacophony of distant gunfire. At the end of the tarmac sat a yellow bi-plane with other military helicopters parked close to it. Jacob stopped and stared at it, finding it curious that it was surrounded by so many modern military aircraft. A small orange fork truck raced by, turning sharply and expertly parking under the Chinook's stubbed wing.

Members of the Chinook flight crew gathered around, helping cross transfer the MX4-filled extended fuel tank over to the smaller service vehicle.

"Careful with that, it's not cheap," James yelled out to one of them sarcastically. The driver of the fork truck flipped James the finger in reply, causing James to burst into laughter.

Jacob, feeling bold, took a step toward one of the flight crew. "Hey, what's with the bi-plane? We haven't gotten to using that in combat, have we?"

A crew chief began to speak but was cut off by the truck operator who looked at Jacob after finally getting the tank strapped to a rack on the small vehicle. "It's a crop duster. Going to use it to wet down the Deltas with this stuff," the man said, patting the extended tank. He turned away and jumped

into the small truck, following the work party to the other side of the helicopter.

The group stood, watching them for a moment before heading to a tall hangar bay at the end of the tarmac. At the entrance, they were met by a man in camouflage pants and a black T-shirt. He wore a 1911 in a black nylon shoulder holster. When he saw Rogers, he rushed forward and grabbed the man in a stiff bear hug before greeting James the same way. He stepped back, looking the men up and down. "I heard about the L-Tee and Stephens," he said. "Glad to see you two made it out."

Rogers nodded and changed the subject, not wanting to think about it again. He grabbed at Jacob and pushed him forward. "Hey, meet Jacob, this is our cherry. Jacob, this is Alex. He works up at command; you heard his voice on the radio."

Alex shot Jacob a sly grin. "Oh yeah, I heard a lot about you. Met your other guy earlier. The broken one, Jesse. He says—"

Jacob interrupted. "You mean Jesse is here?"

"Yeah, up at the hospital. He's going to be fine, by the way. He refused to take the Medevac bird back unless they brought the other guy with him. He must be a tough negotiator, because it worked. I can take you there, if you'd like."

"Wait, did they bring in the old man?" James asked.

Alex nodded. "Yeah, old man and a young woman. But don't get too excited; they're both headed back out once they stitch the old man up."

James stopped and turned. "Hey guys, I have some things I need to do. Maybe run to the hospital for a checkup." He shot a wink at Jacob, showing a toothy grin, before pulling on his rucksack and stepping off with Duke close by his side.

"What got into him?" Alex asked.

Rogers grimaced, trying not to laugh. "Don't even ask."

Jacob shook his head. "Alex, I'd rather you took me to see my family. Can you do that?" Jacob asked.

"Yeah, sure, no problem. I can drop you off on the way to the unit building. They have your wife and kid staying over on the north side. We got them moved in to nicer digs. We like to keep all of the unit families together. It's on the way."

They followed Alex down the flight line, turning a corner to where a dark green open-top Jeep waited. As they strolled, a large group of soldiers in full kit passed by them going the opposite direction in a hurry. Jacob turned and saw they were moving to a flight of Blackhawks with the props already rotating.

Rogers threw a thumb over his shoulder and said, "They seem to be going somewhere fast."

Alex glanced back but continued on. "Yeah. Headed back out to the chemical plant in Middleville. They need to recover the rest of the MX4. Looking to be an easy mission; the scout birds still report the area being vacant of Deltas."

"We heard the base is in trouble. How bad is it?" Rogers asked, moving up alongside Alex, Jacob lagging back.

"The base is good for the time. The Deltas broke through our defensive lines at the border and have been massing against the forward deployed troops. That's where the real fighting's at. We've had massive assaults against the walls and stopped every one of them. As you can hear, they're still fighting them." Alex paused for effect, pointing a hand at the distant walls and the sound of the artillery explosions. "Command is in a rush to get the MX4 deployed. It's going to be a game changer."

"It works," Rogers said.

Reaching the Jeep, Alex stepped into the driver's seat with Jacob in the back and Rogers riding shotgun. He started the vehicle and took off. "Yeah, it works, but the problem is that might be all we got. Once they drain the tanks back at the chemical plant, there might not be any left."

Jacob grabbed the seats with his hands and pulled himself forward, saying, "You mean here? They have to have it someplace."

Alex shook his head. "No, that ain't exactly over-the-counter stuff. They think there might be some in Buffalo, but nobody has confirmed it yet. The Germans used all of theirs. The last resource on the books is China, but we haven't heard a peep from them in over eight weeks."

"Can we make more?" Jacob asked.

"I don't know; do you know any chemist still alive?"

Jacob looked down. "Damn, there won't be enough."

"Don't worry about it; we'll figure out a way to make it work."

The Jeep slowed and pulled into a tiny neighborhood of old, red-brick homes. Each one looked exactly alike. Alex wound down several streets before pulling into an empty driveway. “Well, Sergeant Anderson, this is you,” he said.

“Sergeant?” Jacob said. “No, I’m a private.”

Alex smiled. “Promotions come fast in the apocalypse, but don’t get too excited; it doesn’t come with a pay raise. Enjoy your family time—you’ve definitely earned it. I got you an eighteen-hour pass. I’ll send a vehicle for you in the morning.”

Jacob reached into the front to shake Rogers’s hand. He jumped to the sidewalk and lifted his bag with his right hand. “Take your rifle. Everybody on base is required to have a weapon at all times,” Alex said.

Jacob nodded, lifting his M14 from the back seat. The engine restarted and the Jeep drove away, leaving him alone on the sidewalk in front of a strange house. Jacob walked to the front door and set his bag on the sidewalk. He leaned his rifle against it and stepped to the front door. Raising his arm, he took notice of himself. His arms were covered in dirt, the front of his blouse coated with dark stains and blood.

Running his hands over his face, he knew he must look like a mess; maybe he should have stopped to clean himself up first. He detected the steps behind the door. The knob turned. The door opened and he saw Laura standing feet away from him. She looked at him hard then her eyes filled with tears as she lunged at him, embracing him in a tight hug. Jacob held her back burying his face in her soft hair.

“I’m filthy,” he whispered to her.

“I don’t care,” she whispered back.

She pulled away, taking his face in her hands and locking eyes with him. “I can’t believe you’re back.” She stopped and hugged him again, crying. He held her until she stopped. Then held her even longer. She backed away and took his hand, leading him into the house. Jacob looked around the small space. It was nicer than he thought it would be. A quaint two-bedroom townhouse. A small living room and dining room off the kitchen with two bedrooms on the second floor.

Jacob saw an M4 rifle on the wall with a stack of thirty-round magazines on top of a bookshelf. Jacob pointed to the rifle. He smiled, remembering a time when Laura refused to handle a firearm.

“All of us have one. A man from your unit took us to the range and taught us to shoot,” she said. “The unit has been great. They upgraded our housing and the other wives helped us settle in. Katy is in school, and I have been helping at the hospital. All of us have a job here.”

Hearing tiny footsteps on the stairs, Jacob turned to see Katy running at him. He smiled and bent down. She jumped into his arms and held onto his neck as he lifted her high. Jacob smothered her with kisses and hugging her tight.

“Daddy, you stink,” she gasped, pushing away.

Jacob grinned, looking at Laura. “Dear, it is pretty foul,” Laura said, laughing, tears once again forming in her eyes.

Jacob, taking the hint, retreated to the shower. After shaving and changing into fresh clothes Laura laid out for him, he felt his body crashing as the exhaustion settled in. He moved back down the stairs and found a fine meal ready for him in the dining room. He stepped to a chair and stopped short, smiling. Suddenly, he felt as famished as he was tired.

“I wish there was more,” she said.

Jacob sat at the table and smiled when Katy pulled up a chair beside him. “This is fantastic; it smells amazing.”

“We're all on ration stamps. This is probably three days' worth of food,” she said, feigning laughter as she sat across from him and filled his plate with meat and potatoes.



AFTER DINNER, THEY PUT KATY TO BED. LAURA MADE A POT OF TEA AND they dressed in warm, comfortable clothing. She led him by the hand to the backyard, moving to a wooden bench on the patio. It was cold. The temperatures had dropped rapidly, but they didn't care sitting close together, nestled tight with a blanket wrapped around them. The sky was dark, but clear, the stars shining brightly and a full moon high in the sky. Far off, they could see plumes of oranges and yellows, followed by rumbles of thunder.

“It goes on all night,” Laura said, looking at the flashes of orange light. “The explosions from bombs and artillery; the sound of battle in the distance.”

Jacob didn't speak; he pulled her closer and held his head against her. "What did you do out there, Jacob?" she asked.

He stayed quiet, starting to speak once before catching himself. "I... I don't know," he said.

"It's okay; we can talk about it when you're ready."

They sat close together under the blanket watching the stars, Jacob not wanting it to end. He didn't want to tell he had to return to duty the following day. For the night, he just wanted to be alone with her. To forget about the war.

She saw it first. The shooting star. She pointed at it as it swiftly passed overhead, shining bright, leaving a trail of silver in its path. More followed it, until suddenly the sky was filled with them. "Jacob," she whispered, her amazement turning to fear, the fright building in her voice.

He watched the shooting stars as he held her tight, both of them knowing that it was a meteor shower that first brought The Darkness to Earth. He was terrified at what this might bring. The meteors seemed to be orbiting, not falling or getting closer but looping overhead as they were joined by hundreds more, their color changing from the silver sparkles to bright gold as they slowed down. They continued to shoot past, so many of them that they filled the sky. They slowed until they were hardly moving but still passing overhead, floating above them high in the sky.

Then suddenly they stopped.

THE LIGHT

BOOK III

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CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

Jacob sat beside her, trying to imagine the world being peaceful again; no more killing, no more monsters. A place where he could shower, watch TV, enjoy a good meal, and sleep in a warm bed. A dark night sky, the crisp winter air, the backyard's green grass coated with the light dusting of early snow. He forced his eyes closed, exhaled a long stream of white vapor, and felt her warmth against him, the blanket tight over their legs. Her body pressed against his on the bench, he wanted nothing more than to pull the blanket over their heads, just sit peacefully in his backyard, and pretend that none of this was happening.

His eyes drifted to the sky as he wrapped his arms around her shoulders. She pushed back, leaning her head against his neck, both of them ignoring what was clearly in front of them. He fought against the despair that was pushing into his chest, the eagerness to submit.

Not again; why can't it go back to the way it was?

Sitting in the backyard of his newly assigned military housing, for a brief moment the war felt far away. In this home with all the conveniences of their previous life, he wanted to ignore the metallic balloons flying high in the sky, but there was no mistaking what they were. This was The Darkness. It was back.

Jacob felt her tremble against him. He forced his head back, prying his eyes open and taking in the sight of the bright golden balls of light drifting across the sky. They slowed, and the vapor trailing the burning globes quickly dissipated. No longer shooting stars, they now appeared solid, glowing bright, their bodies sharply in contrast against the night sky. It was

hard to discern if they were small and floating low, or very large and soaring extremely high. As the UFOs lost altitude, they spread out, some slowly fading over the horizon as others settled directly overhead, eventually stopping right above the remote military base.

Jacob felt Laura press close against him under the blanket. Her arms shook; not from the cold, but the fear. Porch lights came on in the neighboring townhouses. Voices interrupted the silent night as people entered their backyards, searching the sky. He could hear the murmur of their speech, sensing the building panic. Months ago such an event would be cause for excitement, but not now. A phone rang from inside. Laura tensed and went to stand. Jacob put a hand on her leg, stopping her. “We have a phone?” he asked.

Laura grinned softly. “It only works inside the base, but all of us have one.” She pulled away, removing the blanket from her legs. “I have to answer it; they only call in emergencies.”

She stood and looked up at the sky before moving toward the house. Jacob was swiftly on his feet and following her through the sliding glass door, taking a last look at the alien globes before passing inside.

The old-style phone tolled until Laura lifted it from the cradle. Not speaking, she pressed the receiver to her ear. He watched as her flat expression changed to worry. She put a hand over the bottom of the handset and stared at Jacob. “He wants to speak to you,” she said.

Jacob sighed and proceeded into the room, already dreading the message on the other side of the phone line. He took it from Laura and felt her hand on his back as she moved past him to the window, her eyes returning to the sky. Jacob turned away to face the wall, pressed the receiver to his ear, and swallowed.

“Jacob?”

“I’m here.”

“*This is Rogers. Do you see what’s happening?*”

Jacob nodded involuntarily. *Of course I see it, how could I not?* he thought to himself. “Yes. What is it?”

“*They don’t know yet, but these objects have taken out every satellite we had left in orbit. They’ve cast a virtual net over the entire planet, slowing and dropping in altitude, destroying all of our eyes in the sky—*”

Laura stepped away from the window, turning to face Jacob. “They’ve stopped,” she said. “They stopped moving.”

“Europe... Asia... it’s everywhere, all reporting the same phenomenon —”

“Come on, Rogers, we could use terms like that a year ago; this is The Darkness, and you know it. Why did you call?”

“Listen to me. Get your family ready to move in a hurry, okay—”

“Wait, what are you saying... what do you know?”

“Nothing yet; nobody’s saying anything, but have your family ready to go. We’re bugging out. I’m headed to the hospital to find James. We’ll stop at your place on the way back. Listen to what I said—have a bag packed, and be ready to go.”

“Come on, tell me what you think. What do you know?”

“If you were assaulting a base and were getting ready to bomb the hell out of it, what would you do with your troops just outside the fences?”

“Well... I’d move them away, get them in cover.”

“Jacob, be quiet and listen now. The Deltas... they started backing away from the walls less than an hour before these things showed up. It’s like a button was pressed, and they all turned around—”

“Wait, where are they going?”

“Away, Jacob. We can’t track them because they took out our satellites. They are turning and moving away. At first, command thought they were just retreating to the wood lines, but then we got word from other bases in NATO, and holdouts out west. All of the Deltas are pulling back from major installations. Anywhere globes have been spotted, the Deltas have withdrawn. There isn’t a lot of time... have your family ready. I’ll see you soon.”

The line went dead with a heavy click. Jacob held the phone in his sweaty palm, turning it in his hand, wondering about the warning. Debating in his mind, *Why else would the Deltas move away? They’re going to bomb us.*

He carefully returned the receiver to its cradle and paced across the room. Stopping next to Laura, keeping her back to his chest, he put his arms around her.

“Are you leaving again?” she asked.

“I’m not sure. I need you to pack a bag for us.”

“Us?”

She reached down and grabbed his hands, pulling them tight around her waist. “It’s already done. The men from your unit showed me how to pack a bag in case we had to leave in a hurry. It has clothes, some food and water, even extra ammunition for the rifle... I packed everything they put on the list. It’s in the hall closet.”

Jacob smiled, impressed with her. “We aren’t the same people anymore, are we?”

She shook her head and sighed. “I don’t want to be caught like that again, like what happened in Chicago.”

“I don’t either.”

She paused, looking away at the night sky. Her voice softened. “What did you see out there? Is it bad?”

“It’s the worst.”

“Then where will we go?”

Jacob held his breath, not knowing. He pressed his eyes closed and exhaled. “I don’t know. But the people I left with, they’re the good ones. I’ll follow them.”

“You trust them?”

Jacob paused, considering his answer. He had as much to lose as they did. They had no reason or motive to help him; in fact, they would be better off without him and his family to slow them down. The men had nothing but each other. Jacob considered her question. “Yes, they’re part of our family now. They’ll be here soon, you’ll see.”



THE REMAINS OF ALPHA SQUAD, THE ASSASSINS, ARRIVED THREE HOURS later with an impatient knock. When Jacob opened the door, it was still night. The golden globes put off an eerie glow that lit the street in an orange hue. He stepped onto the front stoop and looked up at the sky.

“Like jack-o-lanterns, aren’t they?” Rogers said.

He turned his gaze, finding them all there. Jesse, loopy from pain killers and his neck still wrapped. James, with his new scout dog, Duke, close beside them, were standing near the driveway. The bearded man knelt down

and rubbed the dog's ears. A late model Chevy Blazer, painted in a woodland camouflage pattern—the replacement for the green military Jeep—sat parked on the street, a matching pickup truck just behind it.

“Well? You going to invite us in?” James shouted.

“Yes, of course. Come on, guys, get in here.”

Jacob backed away, pulling the door open while they pushed in past him just as Laura drifted down the stairs from the second floor. Spotting them, she greeted them and introduced herself at the threshold. “Please... everyone come in, I'll put on some coffee.”

James' ears perked up. “Coffee? How about a beer?”

Biting her lower lip, Laura stared at the bearded man. Jacob stepped between them. “Ignore this guy. Coffee would be great, hun,” he said, ushering the men into the next room.

Laura nodded with a smile and turned away from them as the team worked their way into the small sitting room. With his back resting against the wall, Jacob watched them all find places around the sparsely furnished home. They were in better shape than the last time he saw them, cleaned up and in fresh uniforms. Jacob retrieved a chair from the dining room and brought it near the others.

Katy appeared at the top of the steps and looked down wearily, rubbing her eyes. Jacob was on his feet and fetched her, bringing her back to the sitting room with him. Laura returned and was handing out small cups of coffee. “Wish we could offer more, but the rations...” she said, setting the pot and tray of cups on a small table before quickly moving to her husband's side.

Rogers grinned and dipped his head as he raised a cup. “Jacob, we need to talk about our next move.”

Katy squirmed, trying to escape Jacob's arms, having taken notice of Duke across the room, curled into a ball at James' feet. She pulled away and fell in beside the dog. James hoisted Katy onto his knee as the little girl tugged and yanked at Duke's ears, Duke leaning into it and enjoying the child's attention.

Jacob turned back to Rogers. “What's the plan?”

“We don't have an officer; our unit is on standby until they find a replacement for—” Rogers paused and swallowed hard. “We are on hold until we get a new CO. They want to keep us on the base, but I fought and

finally got permission for us to refit at the outpost. I don't think it's safe here, or at least it won't be shortly."

Laura looked at Rogers. "The outpost?"

Rogers nodded. "A set of cabins close to here. It's a safe place."

Jacob stared at James, who appeared discouraged as he sat holding Katy, the dog leaning into them. "Where are Eve and the old man?" Jacob asked.

Rogers dipped his head and grinned. "They're safe, caught a resupply bird back to the bunker an hour ago."

"Well, maybe we should go there," Jacob said.

"No; no way command would okay it. The outpost will work for now. Just an hour from here, it's secluded. We have everything we need: a full pantry, fresh water source, shelter, and good communications. In reality, we have better access there than we do here."

James shook his head. "Give me half a day; I'll go secure us a bird and we can—"

Rogers took a deep breath. "I know, James, and we'll get there. Listen, I read Captain Cole's last report from the bunker. The dioxin is still holding the Deltas back. No reported pumpkin sightings since we left the area. Cole has a fire team holding there. Gloria and the kids are safe. It sounds ideal, but I'm not ready to just go rogue... not yet. And you know if we show up uninvited, Cole will send us back."

James sat Katy down next to Duke and tossed up his hands. "Regardless, we need to get back. We should leave tonight while we're all still in the clear," he said. "Come on, man, you know things are about to go sideways. You willing to risk it all?"

Rogers clenched his jaw. "I'm working on it. I plan to get us all there in due time, but for now, making it to the outpost is the best play."

Jacob reached to the window and drew back the curtain. Changing the subject, he asked, "So what are they?"

Rogers shook his head. "Don't know. Space command tracked them coming in from behind the moon. They seemed to hit from all angles at once, then slowed down as they entered the atmosphere.

"Now they're floating, and spreading over population centers. We have three over us right now. The Russians hit one with an S-300, knocked the hell out of it and forced it down. They sent out a recon team to investigate,

but we haven't heard back. Our people in Texas wagered a shot at one with a Patriot battery; let them have it good, multiple missile hits. Last report is, the thing went down somewhere off the shore of Corpus Christi."

"So they didn't fight back?" Jacob asked.

"No, but..."

"But what?" Jacob asked.

"In both cases, after they shot one down, it was replaced by two more in a higher orbit, and the second group has managed to evade the missiles," Rogers said.

"Probes." James turned to look at Jacob. "They learn, they adapt, and now they know our anti-air capabilities."

"So that's it, that's all we have?" Laura asked.

James nodded, smiling at Katy playing with the dog. "That's all we know."

Rogers finished the rest of his coffee and stood, placing the empty cup on the table. "We should get going. Once we get to the outpost, I can talk to the pilots, and arrange transportation to Stone's bunker from there. We have a helicopter pad on a hill nearby with a fully fueled helicopter, if things go the way we think they will. I'm sure it won't take much convincing for the pilots to bug out with us."

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

The vehicles were fully loaded with supplies. Under the cover of darkness, they rolled through the gates of the Assassins unit's compound on the far side of the base. Jacob was pressed in the cab of the pickup truck with Laura sitting in the center of the bench seat and Katy on his lap.

Rogers looked over at him from the driver's seat. "We have two trailers already loaded with gear; we're just going to get them hitched and we'll be on our way," he said.

The big man stepped out of the truck and ran into the dark night. The engine remained running, the headlights on and illuminating the sides of a steel-walled building. Jacob rolled down his window, allowing the cool air mixed with diesel exhaust to enter the vehicle. Katy was curled into his lap, her head against his chest. Looking out, Jacob could see the globes; three of them were positioned over the base, still glowing and passing off their dull, orange light. He looked left and right, following the horizon.

The globes positioned themselves directly overhead. Jacob felt the fear in his chest, and he suddenly wanted to be far away from them. *Rogers was correct about leaving*, he thought.

"Hey, give us a hand," he heard James shout from outside.

Jacob grimaced and slid Katy from his lap, handing her off to Laura before he opened the door and left the truck. Rogers and James were wrestling with a large green trailer. It was fastened to a type of dolly, which the men were using to push it across the lot and fasten it to the backs of the

vehicles. With Rogers up front guiding it, Jacob put his hands on the back beside James, and helped push it forward.

“What’s in here?” Jacob asked, grunting.

James laughed. “Everything. When he got back earlier,” James said dipping his head toward Rogers, “right after the pumpkins showed up, Rogers emptied the team rooms into these two trailers. You know how he is... the guy is like a boy scout, always prepared.”

With a flicker of light, everything changed. The dull glow overhead intensified. When Jacob looked back to the sky, the globes directly above them were turning a deep red. Looking directly at it, he could feel the radiant heat. Then slowly, the orb climbed in altitude as it began to rotate.

Rogers saw it too and, slapping down the top hook and securing the hitch with a pin, said, “We need to move. Back to the trucks.”

Jacob proceeded to the front of the vehicle and jumped into the cab, pulling the door shut behind him. Looking up, he watched as the bottom of the nearest globe turned to black then fired. Not the way Jacob imagined it would, with lasers or cannons suddenly extending from the top, or maybe missiles launching from holes, twisting toward earth in tiny spirals. None of that. The globes changed color then slowly rotated clockwise, the bottoms opened up revealing a blue light, and then they dropped a tiny seed. He couldn’t take his eyes off the rotating orb.

“Something is falling out of it,” he uttered.

Jacob stretched back, holding tight and pressing his head out of the rear window. The truck rocketed forward at high speed close behind James as he acquired the lead in the Blazer, the vehicles whipping through the gates of the unit compound, racing onto a gravel road, tossing loose stone in their wake.

He watched the seed spiral down, dropping out of view just above the surface of the ground. Then the earth trembled.

“Look away from it!” Rogers yelled.

Jacob ducked inside and grasped a hand across his face an instant before a bright flash erupted in the distance. He pulled Laura and Katy down to his legs, shielding them from the light, both of the girls now screaming. Looking over, he saw Rogers’ jaw was clenched, his left hand over his face as he stayed on the throttle and focused on keeping the truck straight on the road.

After the flash, a blinding cloud of debris crashed and overtook the vehicles. They were now driving through a thick fog of dust, the headlights barely illuminating the way ahead. Blinded, James was forced to slow down while Rogers moved the truck forward, staying in view of the lead vehicle's taillights.

"What was that... a nuke?" Laura asked, her voice trembling. Katy was still in her arms, sobbing.

Rogers shook his head, both hands clutching the wheel tight. "I don't think so; we'd be dead if it were. Maybe kinetic... electrical? A rail gun firing straight down, fuck... something unknown?"

Jacob looked back behind them, trying to focus on anything in the cloud of thick dust through the rear window. "I think they hit the airfield."

Rogers nodded his head. "Most likely."

"You think anyone got out?" Laura asked.

Rogers clenched his jaw and narrowly shook his head, not taking his eyes off the Blazer in front of him. "There were three of them in our area; the globes probably placed themselves so they would have overlapping blast radiuses. We were five... maybe ten miles away when they hit. You felt the blast and shockwaves yourself. What can you imagine happened closer?"

Suddenly, the truck ahead stopped, the taillights growing bright. Rogers slapped the truck into park. The girls got very quiet as a spotlight hit the windshield, cutting through the haze. Neither Rogers nor Jacob spoke as a group of men with flashlights patrolled up both sides of the road, rifles aimed at the cab. Rogers lowered his window and leaned out. "Slow your roll, heroes, and get those damn rifles out of my face; I got a kid in here."

The lead soldier put up a hand, waving the others off, then approached the driver's window. He saw the rank on Rogers' collar. "Sorry, Sergeant, we're all on edge. What the hell happened?"

Rogers' own eyes showed alarm. He looked across at Jacob then back at the soldier. "I don't know. Do you have contact with the other stations, other gates?"

"No, Sergeant, the radio fuzzed out just before those things turned red... then the blast... You all are the first vehicle we've seen. Are there any more behind you?"

“I don’t think so. We were already on the road when they attacked. Listen, secure this gate, do what you can to lock it up then get your people out of here. Whatever they did back there, I’d say this position is no longer worth defending.”

The soldier’s eyes went wide as he looked past the truck and down the road toward the main base. “But, Sergeant, I can’t just abandon the post; I—I’ve got orders,” the soldier said.

“Look, I can’t make you leave, but I would highly recommend you do what I say. Find a place to hole up, someplace hidden back in the trees to watch the base from cover if you want. Try to stay on the radio, but just get the hell out of the open, okay?”

Rogers pointed ahead as the Blazer began to ease forward, showing James’ eagerness to leave. “We’ve got to go. There is a mission staging area not far from here, do you know it?”

“Yes, Sergeant. O.P. Thunder.”

“That’s right. If you can, try to get there,” Rogers said.

Rogers placed the truck into gear and rolled ahead after the lead vehicle. As the truck trekked forward, Jacob spied through the windows, making eye contact with the frightened and dirt-covered faces of the guard force. He wondered if they saw the same fear in his own eyes. The truck trudged over a rise in the road and snaked around concrete barriers before moving out onto the open roadway.



THE FALLOUT SETTLED, AND THE SUN BURNED OFF THE HEAVY condensation, clearing the air. Jacob searched the sky but couldn’t find any of the globes. They rounded a corner and traveled north at a fork in the road. Laura was asleep next to him with Katy still in her lap. Off to the right, Jacob saw plumes of black smoke in the sky. He pointed at it silently, Rogers catching the signal.

“That over there is probably the closest thing to a big city around here,” Rogers said. “It’s a small village, maybe a hundred homes, some small shops.”

“You think they bombed it too?” Jacob asked.

“Maybe... or the residents are panicking, nearby refugees looting what’s left. Most of these areas up north were unscathed by the Deltas. The local military did a great job cordoning off the bigger towns and villages.

“But what we saw last night. That’s a game changer. I’m sure there are a lot of scared people this morning.”

Laura turned her head and opened her eyes. With a groggy expression, she glanced at Jacob then down at Katy. “How much longer?”

Following the Blazer, they turned onto another dirt road entering a sparse forest. “We’ll be there soon,” Jacob said.

Katy wiggled awake and scrambled, trying to sit up. She reached out for Jacob, who raised her back onto his lap. “Are we going home, Daddy?”

Jacob grinned. “Not yet, but we’re going to a cabin in the woods, just like when we went camping.”

She smiled and pressed her head against the window, watching as the trees passed by. Laura dug through a small bag at her feet and retrieved a bottle of water. Opening it, she took a sip before placing it in Katy’s hands then watched the road ahead of them as the thick tree cover blocked out the light. The road narrowed, becoming barely wide enough for two vehicles to pass.

The sides of the road banked up steeply. They occasionally passed a house or small hunting cabins with boarded up windows. Rogers explained that there were very few homes in the area; most of the places there were seasonal, and empty now. If people were living in them, they did a fine job of making the places look vacant. Most people from the towns and large cities didn’t have interest in the harsh backwoods. Even refugees traveling long distances from the camps tended to avoid the rough terrain. The forest isn’t inviting like a farm or small village, where people imagined they could easily take animals or food from the fields. The woods required skill, and could be very unforgiving to the untrained.

Rogers pointed to an abandoned vehicle on the roadside with the doors and trunk open. “City folks like to imagine they can survive out here deep in the woods, like they’ll live off berries and mushrooms. A rabbit in every pot, shit like that. In the months after the fall, I buried a lot of their kind.”

They rode silent for a few minutes before Laura spoke again. “Are the others here?” she asked. “Those... things?”

“The others? You mean the Deltas?” Rogers answered.

“Yeah. They were at the fences yesterday. Where did they go?”

Rogers scowled. “Those were on the south walls; the north side of the base was clear. We’re traveling through what we called the western corridor. It’s a heavily patrolled, small tract of land barely five miles wide and flanked by some very tough terrain. This is the only route we had from the base back to the ports, and to reach the States.”

“The only route?”

“Except by air, of course.”

“So this place, the cabin, it’s in the corridor? It’s protected?”

The truck slowed as the Blazer in front came to a complete stop, and then edged forward onto a narrow driveway almost entirely concealed by heavy vegetation. The gravel road became an unmaintained rutted trail leaving the forest road behind. At first the driveway appeared invisible. The soldiers who stayed here covered it with large swaths of pine needles and dry leaves then left a zigzagging stretch of brush piles to conceal the entrance. The truck bounced and the shocks squeaked in protest. Katy let out a giggle as she was rocked up and down on Jacob’s lap.

“Yes,” Rogers said, continuing, “this is still in the defense corridor, but I don’t know the state of it after the attacks. We’re secluded enough; in fact, we are about as far away from things as we can get. That should buy us some time.”

She turned and looked to Jacob with concern, then back to Rogers. “How much time?”

Rogers maneuvered the truck into the yard of the cabin and killed the engine. He let out a loud frustrated sigh. “I don’t know; that depends on what else those pumpkins brought us.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

“Well, it’s not much to look at,” Laura said, holding a bag with Katy next to her. Jacob stood beside them, his rifle slung over his shoulder, and Laura’s rifle in his free hand. James moved up with Duke, the dog running to Katy and pressing against her, begging for more attention. At the top of the grassy hill they were standing on stood the one-room cabin named O.P. Thunder. A tall barn was just behind it.

James pointed at a small trail that ran to the barn then curved off behind it. “What you see is only the main house. Used to be some sort of vacation place up here. This was a reception place, lobby, or something. There are several smaller cabins off that trail. Each is connected to the main house by a sound-powered telephone. Take it far enough, you’ll find a lake and hunting lodge.

“The lodge is surrounded by open prairie; that’s where they keep a couple helicopters and a drunk-ass—” James paused, looked down at Katy, and cleared his throat. “Excuse me, our *pilot* likes to stay up there. Keep going all the way to the top of the hill, there’s a radio tower, and on the far side is a small town. Same one we saw on our way here.”

Laura followed his hand then looked back at the larger cabin. “Where are we staying?”

Jacob’s head came up and he raised a hand toward the main building. “Best if we all stay up here for now.”

As a group, they proceeded up to the main house, Jacob observing the grounds while the rest gathered. The last time he was here, it was dark and gloomy from a downpour. The constant falling of the rain and the pending

mission had given him tunnel vision; he hardly recognized the place in the bright sunlight. They stepped onto the covered front porch and entered the cabin.

The space smelled of hickory and wood smoke even though the fireplace was cold. Cast iron pots and kettles were neatly stacked on a shelf near the mantle. While the others selected the far wall, Rogers pointed to a corner of the cabin where the only bed was located, and told Laura she could occupy that space with Katy. Looking at Jacob, she started to protest. Rogers smiled and said they wouldn't be getting much sleep anyhow, so it wasn't worth the discussion. After they all agreed, he showed them where they could keep their weapons and how to access the pantry and fresh water stores.

Jesse stumbled through the open room and sat heavily in a wooden rocking chair, still out of it, while Rogers led Jacob and James outside. They went to work unloading the gear from the trucks and storing it in the barn. The place was larger than Jacob remembered. Having only been inside the front door of the hay barn on his previous visit, he could now see that behind a large set of wooden doors it went back a depth of at least sixty feet, and had high shelving on both sides. The shelves were stocked with cases of MREs and boxes with brand names he recognized from grocery stores. The back wall was completely filled with cases of water.

"The people on base were being rationed. Why is there so much here?" Jacob asked, carrying the last box of goods from the truck. He moved to a shelf and dropped the box on the straw-covered floor.

"This is just the Quartermaster's stash," Rogers said. "It's for units going down range. You didn't complain when we loaded your pack full of it last time."

"Where did it all come from?"

"We brought most of it with us when we withdrew from the States. The rest, we stocked up on during supply runs. There's more too; we have a weapons and ordnance cache in a cave at the top of the hill by a radio tower."

Jacob passed the long rows of shelves then turned, looking at the full rucksacks lined up against a wall—obviously loaded for missions down range. "Why aren't there more people here?" he asked.

Rogers stopped and stared at the same row of packs. “Been asking myself the same question. They sent two platoons west after the dioxin. Maybe the rest were sent to defend the camp. Or the town over the ridge. Usually aren’t more than a few teams here at a time, but I was still expecting to see a friendly face or two.”

James crossed through the double doors and moved past them to a row of canned goods. He stopped and leaned against the shelving. “I think we need to patrol up the trail, make sure the birds are still there. Then... we should leave.”

“I know,” Rogers said. He exhaled and edged to a stack of empty pallets sitting on their edge. “We’ll go, but we need to be suited up; I have a feeling those globes brought more than just bombs.”



JAMES LED THEM OUT AFTER LUNCH, PATROLLING UP THE HILL. JACOB stepped in front of Rogers, watching James further ahead of him, with Duke leading the way with his nose. He felt bad about leaving Katy and Laura alone with Jesse, but she understood. They were blind out here all alone, and she wanted to know the state of things just as bad as the rest of them did. Seeing the rifle slung over Laura’s shoulder as she hugged him goodbye, Jacob was amazed at how their lives had changed—from hiding in a bedroom, to him going on patrols while she protected the camp.

The patrol’s first objective was to check out the helicopter pad; then Rogers wanted to visit the radio tower overlook at the top of the ridge. He wanted to gather intel on the neighboring village; he needed to find out if it was really bombed, and if not, why it was burning. The men still hadn’t seen a globe since they left the base, and he was growing concerned the things may have landed. If they landed, he wanted to know what they brought with them. They were all thinking it was an invasion, yet none of them would say the words out loud.

Jacob patrolled forward, watching every step as he navigated the well-worn trail that was married to a ridge line. He could see the place was heavily used by tourists at some point; the sides of the trail were marked by posts indicating popular hiking paths that jutted off the main trail. At one

open spot there were several wooden benches with names carved into it. Farther up, was a picnic area with tables and permanent barbecue pits. Jacob looked to the front and watched Duke trotting along with a relaxed posture, only occasionally stopping to stand point at a squirrel or sniff a raccoon track.

The team passed several identical small cabins, each of them rustic with a small covered porch and a single window in the front. The patrol checked the first two, stopping to peek inside and seeing the empty beds and cold wood stove. They were not only empty, but also bore no signs of people, or any clue they'd been used recently.

Just below the ridge line, the trail broke off to the south. A post in the ground indicated it would lead to an athletic field. James made the turn following the path and guided them onto a trail that doubled in width as it rounded a bend. Jacob could see bright sunlight breaking through the trees, indicating that the clearing was ahead. The point man put up a flat hand, then stepped off into the tall vegetation on the side of the trail. Jacob followed the guide's lead, and knelt to the side as Rogers brushed past him to creep close to James.

Jacob adjusted his position so he could watch the back trail while the others planned. A breeze gently moved the trees and, lifting his face, Jacob smelled tobacco smoke. He turned his head as Rogers crept up beside him. Rogers held fingers to his lips, mimicking a cigarette, and pointed in the direction of the clearing. James looked back and waved them forward as he stepped up and led the way.

They moved into the clearing together, more relaxed knowing that the Deltas didn't smoke, but still on alert for strangers. The field was a bit larger than a double football field. A Blackhawk helicopter was at one end, its blades staked down and a cover tossed over much of the body of the aircraft. On the far side of the bird was a small block building and a covered picnic area. The building had a stone chimney climbing to the top and small patio in front of a covered open porch. To the right of the porch sat a man leaning back in a wooden chair. He had a vintage western cowboy hat resting low over his eyes, and his feet were up on a loose stack of split firewood.

As Jacob moved closer, he could see a cigarette in his right hand with a long smoldering ash.

“So what’s his story?” Jacob whispered as they crept closer.

James turned his head, scanning before looking back ahead. “You mean Buck? He’s a good cat. A Nam’er ... retired in the early ’90s. Guess he was on a beach down in Florida, and somehow found his way up here driving a crash hawk after things went to shit. Don’t get me wrong, Buck is a good catch. He knows his stuff, but he’s a bit of a lush when it comes to the sauce.”

The man in the cowboy hat shifted in his seat and let out a hacking cough, somehow startling Duke and causing the normally quiet dog to release a loud string of barks. The man kicked back with his boots and fell over in the chair. Rolling and scrambling to his feet, he fought against the straps of a holstered sidearm.

Jumping ahead with his hands up, Rogers announced, “Calm down, Buck, it’s just us.”

The silver-haired man relaxed, falling exhausted against the building, taking deep breaths while holding a hand over his heart and wiping sweat off his forehead with the other. “Dang, guys, I nearly killed all of ya. Ya can’t go sneaking up on me like that.”

“Wasn’t much sneaking up. What the hell are you doing sleeping out here in the open, you old fool?” Rogers said.

The old man fanned his face with the hat. “Shoot, ain’t nothing going on up here.”

“You don’t know about the attack, do you?” Rogers asked.

“What, on the fences? That’s old news—”

“No, you old fool, the bomb drop. They bombed the base, blew it to hell.”

Buck’s arms went slack as his eyes focused on Rogers. “You mean,” — he stopped and shook his head— “No... I heard an explosion last night; hell, it shook the cabin. But... no, that was just the zoomies on a run... it couldn’t have come from that far away. Would have to be a nuke to feel a bomb’s blast from that far away.”

“Buck, something hit us. The globes—or whatever they are—they dropped something on the base. Something big.” Rogers paused to look back at Jacob. “We barely escaped the blasts ourselves.”

“No, that can’t be,” Buck said, moving back to the chair and dropping into the seat. He reached forward, searched between the bits of stacked

wood, and retrieved a corked bottle. He removed the cap and took a long sip. "How bad was it?"

"We didn't go back to see," Rogers said. Changing the subject, he pointed at the helicopter. "Is it ready to go?"

Buck rolled his shoulders and focused his eyes on the single Blackhawk. "It's topped off if you need to go for a spin, but... the other birds haven't returned. I don't have a left-seater, and no gunships. They recalled the chinook back to the base for maintenance yesterday... guess you explained why they haven't—"

Cutting him off, James stepped away from the porch and looked up the trail in the direction of the hilltop. "We need to keep moving if we want to get back before sundown."

Rogers nodded in agreement and turned back to Buck. "Get sobered up; we're patrolling up to the ridge. I need to check out the arms cache. Oh, and we saw fire in the village on the way in. You know anything about it?"

Buck shook his head no, removing his hat and dragging an arm over his forehead.

"Well, I want to know why it's burning."

"Well, hell, I'm sober now; maybe I'll tag along and have a look myself."

"Buck, I don't have time to argue with you. Get the bird ready to go, okay?"

Buck pulled his head back and nodded. "Can do."

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

The trip to the top of the hill went without incident. They found the tower and cave entrance unguarded and unoccupied. Partially concealed by tall grass, the cave doors were sealed tight by steel bars going deep into the rock, broad hinges welded to the plate steel, and a cipher lock dead center. The cave wasn't well hidden; most of the structure protruded from the rock at the base of the hill, and fresh earth had been piled at the sides where it met with roughly poured concrete. Jacob walked past the doors and saw a large stack of discarded steel shelving, as well as other equipment cabinets.

"What is this place?" Jacob said.

Rogers stepped to the cipher lock and opened a plastic cover, revealing the face of the keys. "Used to be a maintenance locker for the radio and the phone company's use. They kept their computers and cell stuff in here. Some of it still is here. When the Army took ownership, they gutted most of the old, unusable stuff and reclaimed the floor space. There's a generator in the back, and most of the batteries are still good."

Jacob looked at the entrance; he could see the welds were new. He pounded on the door, feeling the heavy plates thump without an echo. "Why so much security up here, out of the way?"

James skirted past them with Duke at his side, stopping near a large boulder and dropping to his rear. "The bean counters at the base insisted on it; guess they were worried if the militias knew about this cache, they might try and grab some. We have people defecting from the units every day, so

secrets are hard to keep,” James said. He turned and looked at Rogers. “How we gonna get inside?”

Jacob stopped and glanced back at the lock. “You don’t know the combination?” he asked incredulously.

Rogers sighed and dropped the plastic cover, letting it fall over the key pad. “Only officers had it. Marks had it, but...” Rogers paused and shoved a hand into his pocket before looking back at the worried face of Jacob, “now I have it.”

They grew quiet, remembering their fallen commander. A gunshot echoed from over the hill. Rogers’ head lifted as he looked toward the summit. He stepped around the cave’s bunker-like door and climbed up the steep face to the top of the hill. Pausing at the top, he crouched low so that he wouldn’t skyline himself against the sun. He turned and looked out along the far side. He crept ahead, focusing on something far in the distance, and then moved away. Jacob scrambled up behind him.

A cool breeze hit him in the face. He looked down into a long, green valley covered in thin trees. At the end of the valley, Jacob could barely make out the shapes of homes and other structures. Focusing on the center and far side of the village, he spotted a thin stream of black smoke.

“That the same village we passed on our way here?” Jacob asked, although knowing the answer.

Before Rogers could reply, they heard more sounds of gunfire—not just random shots, but open combat, automatic weapons fire joined by the thumps of distant explosions. Duke edged past them and stretched forward, his tail tucked and ears going ridged. He let out a subtle whine as James lifted his rifle and used the scope to look into the distance.

Joining the sounds of combat, an unfamiliar metallic clang echoed—like the smashing of metal drums—followed by a high-pitched *voomp*, *voomp*, *voomp*. Finally, a bright flash of light and a deafening explosion caused the ground to shudder. There was no shockwave, but the men could feel the heat of the light on their faces. The gunfire slowly diminished, and more smoke filled the distant skyline.

The village was in flames now, the black smoke being defused by a thicker cloud of gray that hung heavy on the ground, obscuring their view of the village.

Backing away, James shook his head side to side. He lowered his rifle. "That didn't sound like... like any weapon... *anything* I know."

"Maybe a plane crash?" Jacob suggested.

"No," Rogers said. "Don't be stupid, you know what that was. They're under attack."

Waving for the others to follow, he moved back down the hill away from the smoke before stopping at the bunker door.

"They had a light garrison in that village, just enough to keep the Deltas away." Rogers lifted the plastic cover and keyed in the door's code. He moved his hand to the latch and pushed down, releasing the lock. The door swung out with a screech of metal on metal.

Jacob descended the hill and looked into the cavern. Shaped like the back of a semi-truck trailer, the space was no more than twelve feet wide but led into the rock farther than Jacob could see.

"Whatever just happened down there, that wasn't Deltas," James said.

Green weapons racks lined the walls and were filled with all sorts of small arms. Deeper in the corridor, beyond the racks, sat stacked cardboard boxes, lockers, and wooden crates painted in olive drab. Rogers hit a switch on the wall and paused as lights slowly flickered to life down the length of the bunker's ceiling. The farthest light revealed a small workstation on the back wall. Rogers didn't wait for the others and stomped directly to it. He tugged at a metal lock box and removed a ring filled with keys.

Rogers' normally calm demeanor was gone, and he now moved with a rigid purpose. He spun around and put the key to a lock on the nearest crate. He flipped open the lid and reached inside, removing a three-foot-long green cylinder. Rogers passed the first to Jacob then took a second in his hand before walking to the weapons racks. "What do you think, James? The M82?"

James moved in behind them and shrugged. "Yeah, that ought to do it."

"Wait," Jacob said. "What the hell is going on?"

Rogers ignored the question and opened a long, metal box, removing a large canvas bag. He turned and pointed at James. "Make sure it's good to go, no time to waste." The big man then turned back to Jacob and snatched the tube from his hands. He pulled at the side and adjusted the shoulder strap before handing it back. "This is an anti-tank rocket, AT4. Make sure you hold on to it."

Jacob put his hands up, refusing the rocket. "What's going on? Talk to me."

"We're going down to the village; we need to take a look."

Jacob shook his head. "With all of this," he said, pointing to the rocket. "Looks like more than taking a look."

"I'm not going to lie to you, Jacob. If we get the opportunity, I'll kill whatever made that sound."

"Shouldn't we go back and warn the others first? Why not just leave?"

"I'll call on the field phone and let them know we won't be home for dinner. As of now though, what would we warn them about? We don't know what's going on." He paused and shook his head, looking down at the ground before turning back. "I know running seems like the smart bet, but... Hell, just strap this to your pack; we're not leaving without answers," Rogers said, pushing the rocket into Jacob's chest. He then moved to the rear of the bunker, where he grabbed a green telephone handset from a cradle.

Jacob held the rocket loosely in front of him, watching as James lifted the heavy canvas bag to his back and adjusted shoulder straps, Duke waiting patiently at his heels. "Let's go," he said, winking at Jacob as he moved away and exited the space.

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

Dropping down the sloping walls of the valley, the acrid odor of the smoke grew stronger. The sun fell into the clouds, and the temperatures dropped. Rogers moved them cautiously, avoiding open spaces, leading them through thick grass, and copses of tall trees. The terrain became marshy and sponge-like. Even in the cold air, Jacob felt himself sweating, the pools of moisture forming at the back of his neck and running down his back beneath the small pack he was covered by.

The ground was wet here; he felt it squish under his boots with every step. Jacob took a short leap over standing water and felt his boot sink into the mud. He pulled it out, fighting the suction, and whispered, “Isn’t there a better route?”

James looked back at him and grinned. “This is good; it’ll make it hard for vehicles to maneuver against us.”

“What vehicles?”

Rogers shot up a flat hand and crouched low in the grass. He looked back at the other two with wide eyes and put a finger to his ear. Duke’s ears were pointed, the dog’s lip quivering, letting the others know that he’d heard it too.

A low vibration, subtle like a subwoofer lying face down in shag carpet, was just enough to be picked up if they held their breath. Jacob found his own spot in the grass and dropped low, holding his rifle to his chest. He sat listening, feeling the moisture from the ground seep into his clothing. The rumble grew louder. Duke’s posture became rigid, causing James to instinctively put an arm out for the dog and pull him close.

“Vehicles?” Jacob said.

“No, can’t be. They’d get bogged down in the mud here,” James whispered back.

With the thumping sound, the grass began to sway, slightly at first, then faster and more rhythmically. Rogers gazed back again, his eyes wide. He pointed two fingers at himself, and then stuck an index finger to the center of the valley, away from them on the opposite side just before the ground sloped up. Jacob pivoted then rose up on his knees to see. The rumble tickled at his ear drums, the vibration making the hair on the back of his neck buzz. Straining against the fading light, he saw them.

A column of... he didn’t know what to call them. They were shoebox shaped and void of any solid color. The sides of the vehicles gave the impression of liquid metal that bent light and reflected the ground they traveled on. There were three in total, each identical, smoothly moving in a straight line, not hindered by the rough terrain. Behind the vehicles, a parade of Deltas followed in two disciplined columns. No longer armed, the black-eyed monsters marched standing straight up, evenly spaced apart.

“So that’s how they do it,” James whispered. “Hovercraft.”

The vehicles appeared to float over the surface, the ground at the edges of the vehicles blowing outward with the beat of the rumbling subwoofer. Using a type of air displacement rather than conventional fans, they moved closer to the team on a course that would intersect with the small patrol.

From the top of the lead vehicle Jacob could clearly make out the body of an elongated man. The torso of the creature was long and narrow and wrapped in fabric that resembled blued steel. Its shoulders were padded in red, ridged material, and the head covered in a helmet matching the shoulder pads. The creature was facing forward, its head swiveling from side to side.

Jacob, now fighting back fear, consciously struggled to control his shaking hands. He turned to look at James for an answer, surprised to see his friend hunched over the now unzipped canvas bag. Inside was a large scoped rifle. James went to work, quickly deploying the bipod and readying the scope while Rogers pushed rounds into a box magazine.

“What are you doing?” Jacob whispered, his voice breaking.

“Get the rocket off your back. The instructions are on the side; get familiar with them,” Rogers answered in a tone letting Jacob know that now

wasn't a time to hesitate.

James finished with the rifle and plucked the magazine from Rogers. Locking it in place, he put the stock in the ground, balancing the rifle while he dropped his pack and settled the bi-pod into it. Dropping low in a prone position, he tried to focus through the blowing grass.

"This won't be an easy shot, boss," he whispered, trying to hold the weight of the rifle as he racked a round into the chamber. Duke nudged close to him and rested by James' side.

Rogers prepared his own AT4 for firing. "The one in the hatch is yours, James. Jacob, you have the middle vehicle. I'll take the trail vehicle and block them in," he said. "Shoot and scoot, easy money, that's all I'm asking. Anything we don't kill, James, you finish."

Rogers shifted away farther to the right then looked back at Jacob, who was looking down at the tube in his hands. "You having a problem?"

"What if the rockets don't work against them?"

"Only one way to find that out," Rogers said with a sly grin. "Just aim for the front of the vehicle; let the warhead do the worrying."

Jacob rested on his knees, his mind lulling behind in the action. He held the green tube in his hands, looking at the instructions but not comprehending any of it, the impending fight clouding and shocking his thoughts at the same time. Rogers crawled back beside him, moving behind James, who was already locked onto the creature exposed in the lead vehicle. Rogers handed Jacob the rocket he'd already prepped. Rogers put the rocket to Jacob's shoulder and pointed at the sight. "Too easy—look through the peep sight and squeeze this."

Jacob looked the weapon over and nodded, taking the full weight of the rocket in his hands while Rogers readied the next.

"I'm ready when you are," James whispered in their direction.

Rogers reached his left hand out and put up a thumb up to Jacob. "You start us off, Jake. Just give it a solid squeeze and hold steady; we're only a couple hundred yards out and they're at a crawl. Too easy."

Jacob held the tube on his right shoulder, steadying the AT4 with his left hand while his right thumb rested lightly on the trigger. He looked through the small peephole sight. The shoebox seemed to glow a phosphorous green, the shades of light shifting in browns and yellows as it moved over the uneven ground and vegetation. Focusing through the peep sight, he

could now make out more detail within the active camouflage—the edges and contoured lines of the vehicle, hatches, and exhaust ports. The grass moved with the beat of whatever kept the vehicles in the air.

“Any time now,” Rogers whispered.

Jacob swallowed hard and put the sight just to the front edge of the vehicle; he squeezed the safety and pushed the trigger. The blast of the rocket shattered his ears. He looked away just as he saw the shoebox erupt into flames. Rogers fired next to him, and James released a salvo from the heavy rifle in steady beats.

The large rifle roared, pushing grass away in the wake of every round. Jacob saw Rogers flip his expended rocket tube forward into the grass and raise up his rifle. Jacob shook off the shock and did the same. Looking through the sights of the M14, he could see the vehicles were different now. Burning hulks of dark brown, the luminescence died with whatever made it. Both vehicles hit by rockets were engulfed in flames. The alien convoy never had a chance.

The air was still, the rumbling vibrations now gone. The second vehicle was sitting idle, the mirrored image of the terrain flickering on its sides as James pumped armor-piercing rounds into it. The creature once exposed in the hatch was nearly gone, only a portion of its decapitated body still partially visible. Panning to the left he saw the Deltas still standing in their disciplined formation seemingly unaffected by the violence.

James fired the last round and quickly packaged the M82, shouting “up” as he finished to let Rogers know he was ready to move.

Rogers turned and pulled Jacob to his feet saying, “Let’s move. We need to get clear of here.” Jacob stumbled up and lunged forward. He looked back over his shoulder to the burning vehicles, the billowing smoke filling the sky.

With Duke close by his side, James hoisted the pack to his shoulders. “I’d like to take a closer look at those vehicles.”

Rogers shook his head and stepped off. “No time, who knows if they have communications or air cover? I don’t want to hang around and find out.”

Jacob drew his rifle close to his chest and dropped his head, picking up the pace to keep up with the other two. Rogers moved them back to the

opposing wall of the valley, scrambling up a steep incline until they were hidden in a rocky embankment.

He fell into the cover of a downed tree and thick mud where rains had long ago caused a slide. The debris now formed a high earthen wall of tree trunks and stone. Jacob ducked behind them, crawling forward and turning so that his back was pressed against a tall rock. He looked up and saw James reloading the box magazine with .50 rounds, while Rogers was back on his binoculars, looking out between two large boulders across the valley.

“What now?” Jacob gasped between labored breaths.

Rogers removed the binoculars from his eyes and sipped at a bottle of water. “The Deltas are still down there. Still in that stupid line.”

Duke began to growl, and the hair on the dog’s neck stiffened.

Jacob crawled next to Rogers amid the tall rocks and looked out. As he’d said, the Deltas were standing as still as statues, still in their columns facing the burning vehicles. “Wait... there! What’s that?” Jacob whispered, pointing to movement in the tall grass beyond the burning vehicles.

Rogers adjusted his binoculars and swiveled in the direction Jacob indicated. “Aww, hell, the cavalry is here.”

Jacob watched as the things smoothly glided through the tall grass, approaching from the high ground on the opposite end of the valley. Lean and elongated, their bodies were covered in blue steeled fabric with gold piping on the arms; heads that seemed disproportionately large for their bodies were covered by helmets. Each one carried a type of compact battle rifle that was held with two hands. They moved gracefully, taking long striding steps. Two in the back and one farther to the front, they approached the line of Deltas and looked up and down the column before moving close to inspect the burning convoy.

“I count three. We can take—” Before Rogers could finish, more came, moving swiftly through the tall grass. At a full run, their speed could challenge an African Gazelle.

“Make that ten,” Jacob whispered.

Rogers used a flat hand to silence the exchange and leaned in. Jacob saw the things crowd around the vehicles. Even though alien, it was easy to read their body language. Their heads darted and they faced out in all directions. They were afraid. The creatures moved back to the column of Deltas, shoving and swatting at them violently with their rifles, forcing the

column back on the move. Soon the column was marching again, the aliens' attention focused on the Deltas as they passed through the center of the valley.

"Look at the bastards. They should be patrolling the tree lines; instead, their eyes are glued on the black eyes. We should hit them again out of principle," James whispered. Jacob turned and saw him perched just over his shoulder.

"Why aren't they coming after us?" Jacob asked.

Rogers dropped his binoculars, the group close enough now to see them clearly. "I don't think they're soldiers. Yeah, they're armed, but look how they move; that's no formation, just a gaggle. These things aren't used to resistance."

"Well, something resisted. You heard that fight when we first got here," Jacob rebutted.

Rogers nodded. "You're right. Still, I'm surprised at how soft their vehicles were; they drove straight ahead, turrets unmanned."

"Maybe this is a logistics convoy," James said. "But wait, then that would mean... aww, shit."

Jacob looked back, alarmed. "It would mean what?"

"That we're behind enemy lines," Rogers said.

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

Jacob sat motionless, watching another convoy roll across the valley floor. The light faded while the team lay low, forced to hold position in the rocks. The enemy activity increased all around them. Streams of alien vehicles filed into the valley. Unlike before, these new hovercraft had red-painted, armored turrets on the tops. Several vehicles were supported by ground troops. The alien infantry was different in appearance from the supporting troops Jacob saw earlier. The new creatures wore red, armored plates on their chest and back in addition to the blue, steel fabric. Tall and broad-chested, they were carrying large shoulder-fired weapons and shielded battle helmets. Walking stooped over forward, they moved tactically with their heads swiveling.

Jacob used a gloved hand to swat a bug from his chin, keeping his eyes glued to the enemy columns. "Where are they all going?" he whispered.

"Away from here," James answered. "From their posture, I'd say they're looking for a fight."

Rogers pushed away from the rocks and spun around. "My guess is south, toward our remaining strong points. Those columns are coming from the base. Landing parties... pushing troops out toward our lines... that's what I would do."

"We should get back to the cabin," Jacob whispered, watching Rogers nod in response.

James eased in between them and extended a hand in the air. "No, not yet."

"Why the hell not?" Jacob spat.

“Because look at them, they’re loaded for bear. If they’re headed toward the guys holding the lines, or even worse, the refugee camps... We have others to think about now; the civilians in the camps, the men ahead in the trenches—”

Rogers leaned forward and looked at both of the soldiers across from him. “We can’t stop this, James.”

“No, but we can try to slow them down, allow our boys to organize. We have an opportunity here. If we hit them hard, they’ll be forced to spend resources on us.”

Jacob shook his head in frustration. “We don’t know if there is anybody left to organize, and if we get ourselves killed? How does that help anyone?”

“Fuck it then, you two go, Duke and I got this,” he said, running his hand down the dog’s back.

“Can it, James, nobody is saying that. We just need to think, is all. Consider all the options,” Rogers said. “Hide or fight... either way we need to be smart. If we hit them again, they’ll certainly come after us, and if we hide, how long will it be before they find us?”

“We shouldn’t be talking about this here; we need to get back to the cabin,” Jacob said, pulling his pack toward him. “We should load up and take the Blackhawk back to Stone’s place. If we want to fight them, we should do it from there, not here.”

Suddenly, gunfire echoed across the valley. The men spun around and pressed back to the opening, Rogers squeezing between them with his binoculars in hand, searching the opposing high ground. On the far ridge line were muzzle flashes, tracers raining down into the alien soldiers. Rounds pinged and slapped into the soft earth around the convoy. A group of the red armor-clad infantry bounded ahead toward the ridge. Taking long leaps and landing with planted feet, they squatted and turned their rifles upward, opening fire as the vehicles’ turrets rotated and unleashed a barrage of blue flame.

With the same *voomp, voomp, voomp* they’d heard before, the barrels released blue bolts of energy—something Jacob had never seen outside of a Hollywood movie. The bolts propelled forward, the blue energy sticking to and engulfing anything it made contact with in a bright blue flame. The noise of battle increased while the alien infantry and armored vehicles

moved toward the ridge line. Soon, all of their forces were engaged, the bright light of their weapons forcing Jacob's eyes away. The gunfire from the ridge lessened as whatever attacked was killed or withdrew over the ridge line.

Rogers backed away and grabbed at James' shoulder. "There will be time to fight later, let's go." The big man rolled then crawled away back toward the tower.

James twisted and leaned back into the rocks, the flashes of the battle reflecting off his face. He switched his gaze between Jacob and his leader then grimaced, knowing full well that they were out-gunned. He dipped his head in surrender and conceded they wouldn't win any fights tonight. James gathered his gear and followed Rogers into the night with Jacob close behind him, the flashes and *voomps* of the battle continuing at their backs.

Jacob followed them to the summit of the hill and rolled over the top. They came out farther away from the tower. Rogers gathered them without speaking and led them out, walking quietly with his weapon up. The rifle fire had stopped, but they could still hear the *voomps* of the enemy weapons, and bright flashes lit the sky to their backs.

Rogers led them over the side and down along the tower past the bunker entrance. He checked the lock then continued on down the trail without stopping. Jacob fell farther back, allowing James and Duke to take point as he lagged back into rear security. After a short distance, Rogers fell in beside him, checking both sides of the trail and looking at the illuminated dial on his watch.

"We'll get them out," he whispered.

Jacob nodded, understanding who he was talking about. "How?"

"We'll take the Blackhawk."

Jacob stalked several steps, scanning the dark path ahead and watching James' cautious movements. "What if they shoot it down?"

Rogers didn't answer. He held up a hand, pausing Jacob then pulling him down to the muddy trail. Ahead on the path, James vanished from sight. Jacob was alarmed he hadn't seen it; he didn't know where the point man went. He took the nudge, found the side of the trail, and dropped to a prone position with his rifle ahead of him. Looking right, he saw Rogers doing the same, perched up on his elbows with his eyes just over the sights of his rifle and looking intensely into the dark.

To the left came a loud snapping of a branch and the shuffling of feet in the leaves. Jacob twisted, searching the thick vegetation for movement. A flicker of light appeared and a low voice sounded out, followed by a high-pitched voice that was lost and frustrated. "Joe, you don't know where the hell you're going."

"Shut up, they might be out here," responded a tall man.

Jacob held his rifle steady and dropped his head, waiting for a response from his leader. The men broke the thick vegetation and stumbled onto the trail. Moving into the open just ahead of Jacob, two men, both unarmed, stepped to the center of the trail that divided them from James. The men continued to argue as more people spilled into the clearing, crouching behind them. The others were silent, but from the silhouettes, Jacob could tell they were women and children. Smaller in stature and not burdened with gear, they cast a thinner shadow.

He strained and looked across the trail to Rogers for a sign, seeing that his friend's head was down and slowly shaking from side to side. Jacob watched him remove a small pen light from his sleeve. He lifted it up and flashed the strangers with three quick splashes of green light before leaving the beam on and focused on the faces of the strangers.

The people on the trail froze; a gasp escaped the tall man's lips. He raised his right arm as his left palm reached out in an attempt to shield the light.

"Relax," Rogers said just above a whisper. "We're the good guys." Rogers cut the light, the transitions from bright to dark leaving the strangers on the trail momentarily blinded. "Who are you? Where are you going?"

The tall man lowered both arms and took a cautious step toward Rogers' voice. "We're just like you, trying to escape whatever is out there."

"You militia?" Rogers asked.

"What? No. We're from the village over the hill... well, what's left of it. I'm Clayton, this is my neighbor, Ray." The man reached back and pointed to the smaller individual beside him.

"How many are you?"

"Ten—no..." The man paused. Jacob could see him put his head down and turn to the group behind him. "Six, mister. We're all that's left."

Jacob spotted James further up the trail; he'd circled back, keeping Duke close by his side and his rifle at the low ready. Rogers nodded to him,

catching a mock salute in response.

“Okay, listen up. We don’t have time for ice breakers and a get-to-know-ya. So let me make myself extremely clear. Stay quiet... no more talking... turn up the trail, follow my point man. Everyone is on edge and I don’t want anyone getting hurt. I’ll get you all to shelter; from there we can figure out what’s what.”

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CHAPTER SIXTY

Jacob followed the trail, keeping the civilians just ahead of him. Observing them, their awkward movements and noise ripped his thoughts back to his days before The Darkness. He would be in the same spot—or even worse—as these people if everything hadn’t aligned for him. What at the time seemed like an incredible streak of bad luck, somehow kept his family alive. But alive for what? And how long?

Heavy clouds drifted in and blocked out the moon. Snowflakes began to fall with the dropping temperatures. The people ahead suddenly stopped. Jacob heard James whisper, calling Rogers forward. More muffled voices joined the conversation at the front of the column. He stepped off the trail and passed the others, making his way to the front. A stout man wearing an unzipped, camouflage parka over a thick, black fleece was standing next to James. More uniformed men just behind him quickly grabbed control of the civilians and led them up the trail to the block house and field with the Blackhawk.

“Looks like the cavalry has arrived,” Jacob said.

His words caught the attention of the parka-clad man. The man’s head turned and caught the pale moonlight, causing a thick scar to glisten. Jacob immediately recognized him.

“Masterson?” Jacob whispered.

James looked up and watched him approach, grinned, and then waved Jacob forward. Masterson shook his head watching Jacob move out of the darkness.

“Well, shit son! Anderson, you’ve outlived your expectations.”

“Drill Serg—”

“You can cut that shit, it’s Masterson now. I saw your buddy all busted up. You did well though, getting your woman and kid here.”

“Laura. You saw them?”

Masterson raised a hand, covering a cough, and then removed a canteen from his hip and brought it to his lips. Jacob noticed the burns on the man’s neck and hands. “I moved everyone up here to the block house. It’s not safe farther down the trail; it’s too close to the road. Their patrols are picking up.”

“Patrols?”

A second man with a heavily grayed beard, dressed in a well-worn canvas coat and faded jeans, moved in from the shadows and asked, “Who’s this you found?”

Masterson clenched his jaw, returning the canteen to its carrier. “Anderson, meet Clem. Clem, this guy here is one of our recent graduates.”

“Any good, is he?” the bearded man asked.

Masterson grinned. “He ain’t dead yet, so good ’nuff.”

Jacob shook his head and stepped closer. “I’m right here, you know. So what about these patrols?”

Masterson grunted and fished a can of tobacco from a breast pocket. He stuffed a wad in his cheek then looked around before continuing in a low voice. “Yeah, they’re spreading out fast. Not sure what the hell is going on, but we had to get away from the road. Further back, and into heavier trees we get, the better. So far they stick close to those floating APCs.”

“We hit a small group in the valley about a mile due east of here.”

Masterson’s eyes narrowed as he eyed up at Jacob. “Yellow or red?”

Jacob squinted, not understanding the question.

“Their armor, was it yellow or red?”

Duke whined restlessly and James sighed, stepping away from the end of the trail he was guarding, and interrupted. “Let’s move this conversation inside. It’s not safe out here in the open.”

Rogers, along with most of the civilians, had already moved on and entered the small block house, leaving the rest of them alone in the dark. A small gathering of soldiers was standing sentry in the field near the lone helicopter while others patrolled closer to the block building.

Masterson nodded his agreement and moved out of the way, waving his hand toward the house. James stepped off, leading the way with Jacob close behind him. The door to the blockhouse hung open. A thick tarp was draped over the opening to block the light inside from escaping. Jacob pulled back the tarp and stepped into the warm interior.

He immediately felt the heat of the wood fire and smelled the savory scent of roasted meat and vegetables. At the front of the crowded low-lit building, people were sitting at two long picnic tables. Jacob stepped deeper into the space, feeling the crunch of dried leaves under his boots. He could see the strangers from the trail were already working on bowls filled with stew. Huddled around low burning candles that were randomly positioned over the plank tables, they ate quietly while being mindful of the soldiers lying in sleeping bags at the back of the house.

Jacob let his eyes scan the place until he saw them—Laura and Katy in a makeshift kitchen along a side wall. Katy sat in a tall chair while Laura helped Buck, their pilot, fill bowls with stew.

Jacob followed his stomach and moved off in their direction before being caught by the sleeve. He turned back to see Masterson looking back at him. “I know you’re eager to get off duty, but let’s get this out of the way first. Tell me about them... the ones you hit in the valley.”

Rogers crept up from the dark with bowls in his hands. “What about it?” he said.

“Who were they?” Masterson asked.

Rogers passed a bowl to Jacob then pointed to an empty place at the table. Jacob nodded and dropped onto a bench seat beside him. “They were a type of support troops, riding tall and dumb with no cover. We took out three of those invisible cars. They were soft... unarmed from what I could see. Our AT4s and the fifty cut through them like butter.”

As the men talked, Jacob watched Laura work in the kitchen, returning items to their place and chatting with the other women. She turned away from a stove and made eye contact with Jacob, casting him a knowing smile before turning back to finish.

“What about reinforcements?” Masterson asked, forcing Jacob to look back across the table at the scarred man.

Rogers scooped another spoonful of the stew before continuing for him. “A group of others responded, gold shirts, yellow sleeves. Later, some

heavies showed up. They were different, bigger. Blue uniforms with red chest plates, heavier rifles. Then more vehicles with red turrets—probably their version of a quick reaction force. We were planning to let them pass,”—Rogers shook his head—“but some unit on the far side of the valley engaged them—”

Masterson frowned and cut him off with a loud sigh. “Echo Company,” he said. “Explains the gunfire we heard and why they missed the rendezvous. We traveled separate. We went south of the road, Echo north. I figure that would have put them in the spot you’re talking about.”

Rogers finished the stew and pushed the bowl away from him, wiping his face with his sleeve. “They put up a fight, but it didn’t do no good. Those things opened up with some big guns, crazy shit like we’ve never seen before. Last glimpse I got, they were chasing them toward Meaford.”

“Doesn’t surprise me; The Colonel was always itching for a fight,” Clem added.

“Who?” Jacob asked.

Masterson used a chunk of bread to catch the last of his stew. “Our battalion commander; solid officer and good guy. He’s in charge of all the training companies. I know he’s been looking for a fight since they relieved him off the line and put him in charge of training.”

“How many did he have with him?” Rogers asked.

“Not many. Forty... maybe fifty trainees, another dozen instructors. Hell, we’re all that’s left. Only thing that spared us from the bombing is that we were far enough from the main base when they dropped that shit. Colonel Grady rode out with the training company. I had most of the support guys and half the instructors. We ran into a small group of the base security forces, and they told us about you all making it for the outpost, so we joined up with them and moved out.”

Rogers shook his head slowly, understanding. “Any other survivors?”

“’Fraid not, the base is a total loss. I plan to move back down the road toward friendly lines tomorrow. See if we can find a safe place. I’m going to need some of your scouts,” Masterson said.

“There’s no scouts. Counting Jesse with his neck wound, there are only four of us that made it out.”

Masterson rubbed at the stubble on his chin and looked at the three tired men across from him. “Then, I guess you’re it. Be ready to move at first

light.”

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CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

It was impossible for him to sleep with the gunfire and explosions rumbling like a distant thunderstorm. Roaring concussions rattled the roof and windows of the small block house. The enemy—the things—were getting closer. His mind screamed for him to grab his family and run, but he knew he couldn't; they would never survive alone.

Jacob lay awake; he tossed and turned then flipped onto his back hard before pulling the heavy blanket from his chest. He rolled off of the makeshift sleeping mat and pushed up to a seated position, leaning against the wall. His mind raced with thoughts of despair and dread. If this really was an alien invasion, how would they ever last the winter?

Katy and Laura remained soundly asleep beside him, nestled against the wall under heavy blankets. A low glow from the woodstove in the corner emitted the only light. Men snored away; a soldier by the front entrance stood watch, and Jacob watched the man fill a tin cup from a blue coffee pot.

"They're fighting again," Laura whispered.

Jacob turned to look down at her, putting his hand on her shoulder as he nodded his reply.

"How long has it been going on?" she asked.

Another distant impact shook the rafters. "Couple of hours, maybe... Don't worry, it's not close." Jacob put his head back and looked at the ceiling. "The cloud cover and valley just make it seem like it."

"You're going back out, aren't you?"

He forced a smile and nodded as his hand squeezed her shoulder. She moved closer, letting her head rest in his lap. Jacob could see the swelling in her eyes, knowing she had cried when the stories of the base's destruction sped through their meager camp. He dropped his arms on her shoulders and felt her trembling.

"I'll go if they'll take me. This isn't like before; we have to stay ahead of them to survive."

Laura moved, reaching up to grasp his hands. "Why do you have to go?"

He sighed, squeezing her hands. "This isn't something we can hide from."

She turned her head to look up at him but didn't speak, and she closed her eyes while pulling his hands to her cheeks.

"We're going to have a look around. I'll be back then we can leave and find some place safe," Jacob whispered.

"I know you'll be fine. I just want us to be together."



BEFORE THE OTHERS WOKE, JACOB FOLLOWED THE MEN OUT OF THE BLOCK house and into the cold morning air. He felt the near freezing temperatures bite at his neck and pulled up the collar of his shirt. He caught a whiff of cigarette smoke mixed with the brisk morning air. Turning his head, he saw Buck with a wool blanket over his shoulders, a smoke in one hand, and a thermos cup in the other while Masterson and Rogers crowded around him.

"Have the bird prepped and ready when we get back," Masterson told him in a matter-of-fact tone.

Buck nodded his head slowly and smiled, showing his stained teeth. "She'll be ready." Buck paused and looked left and right before stepping closer and lowering his voice. "I can only take ten. You'll have some decisions to make."

Masterson grimaced then returned the pilot's smile. "Multiple trips then; I'm sure you're up for it."

Buck shrugged. "Assuming we have fuel to top off the tanks for a second trip, and what about security?"

Masterson looked back and caught Jacob listening in on the conversation; he brought up a gloved hand and slapped Buck's cloaked shoulder. "Let the gunfighters worry about that; just be ready to go."

Masterson stepped into the clearing near the helicopter and waved his arms, bringing the twenty-man patrol into a tight cluster. The plan for them was to move back down the trail to the cabin and barn, then meet the dirt access road. If all remained clear, they would move over it and into nearby hills. Once on high ground, they could set up a hide position so that they could observe the main road and intersections.

Most of the soldiers in Masterson's party were veterans and knew the part they would play. Experienced, they had performed these drills countless times on foreign battle fields. But today, everyone was wary. Even though the noise of the distant battles had dropped off with the rising of the sun, the men still didn't know what to expect. This wasn't Afghanistan or Iraq where everyone played a role; nobody knew what to expect from this new brand of invaders, or even what purpose the Deltas would have in everything.

"Don't get too heavy on your triggers; we have half of a missing company out there and who knows what else. Stay quiet and keep this place a secret as long as we can." With that, Masterson ended his conversation and pointed to Rogers.

Rogers took a deep breath and dipped his chin. "A'right, let's get this done. James, you got point. Jacob, take slack with me."

Jacob found his spot in the file and patrolled cautiously with his rifle in the crook of his elbow, his gloved right hand resting on the stock. They packed light for the patrol; no heavy rucksacks or body armor to weigh them down. Most of them didn't have armor anyway, and who knew if it was effective against the invaders' weapons? Nobody had been able to examine a dead alien—or even one of their victims for that matter.

James waved a hand to the ground, slowing them as they approached the main cabin. The place appeared empty; a low fog hung close to the structures and blanketed the lonely buildings. In the yard of the cabin, Jacob spotted the trucks they used to get there. Along with their trucks were several open-backed Humvees and a massive cargo truck, and a white Toyota pickup was next to the barn. James let Duke move on his own, the dog zigzagging between the vehicles and stopping to sniff the air.

The point man knelt near a tree, waiting for the dog to return before he waved the others forward. Jacob moved close and squatted, finding a position where he could watch the road. He heard Masterson order five of the men to stay and secure the cabin site before ordering Rogers to push ahead. As Jacob got back to his feet, he could feel the mood change. The hair on his neck buzzed with electricity; moving onto the road felt dangerous and foreign to him.

Looking back at Rogers' stone face and clenched jaw, he knew his leader was feeling it too. They were in a dangerous place now. James moved them across the road and onto high ground on the far side. It was a low ridge that gave them viewpoints over the gravel access road. They turned and moved south, cutting through a saddle and onto a high, tree-covered slope. Working their way to the top, they could begin to see the shapes of roofs and far off buildings from the high vantage point.

Pillars of black smoke snaked up from a bunching of homes. Farther away, where the gravel road met the paved highway, was a cluster of destroyed and smoldering vehicles—civilian cars and military trucks twisted and smashed. The distance spared him some of the carnage, but Jacob knew what he would find if he wandered closer.

James dropped into the cover of a large tree and waited for his teammates to join him. He huddled the dog close to his side, pointed down at the destroyed vehicles, and said, "What's left of last night's battle."

Jacob used the scope on the M14 to examine the devastation. Nothing moved; no signs of life. Panning from left to right, he could see more signs of black smoke on the horizon. The rest of Masterson's men moved up behind him and formed a wide, half-circular perimeter on the face of the hill. Riflemen moved in with nervous anticipation, finding bits of cover and concealment as they searched the far off sights.

Clem, the rough and tattered civilian, weaved in close to James with Masterson right behind him. He retrieved a pair of olive-green binoculars from his hip pocket and scanned the distant horizon. He pointed his hand and waved it past the distant streams of black smoke. "They're hitting every bit of civilization between here and Lake Huron."

Rogers ignored the older man. "We should go down and have a look, check for survivors."

Clem pivoted and pointed to the east. The road twisted and disappeared into a series of deep cuts and rolling hills scattered with heavy trees. “No, they’re close; we need to stay out of sight.”

Rogers shook his head. “How the hell do you know that?”

“Cause it’s war. The sides change but tactics are always relative.” Clem paused to look down at the twisted, smoldering vehicles. “Looks like local survivors trying to make a caravan west, away from the landings. Got ambushed just past the intersection and tried to push through. Military escort pulled up ahead and went down with ’em.

“Yeah... if it was me, I’d have shot up everything in the kill box down there then dropped back into the cover of those hills. Yeah, I reckon they’re waiting in there.”

Rogers looked at Masterson with a smirk. “Who the hell is this guy?”

Clem put up a flat hand, waving off the comment. “I’m a nobody, kid, don’t you worry about me,” he said, passing the binoculars to Masterson.

The scarred soldier took the glasses and opened his mouth to speak when Clem raised his hand, silencing him. “Listen,” he said.

Rogers rolled his eyes. “What now, old timer?”

Clem pointed to the sky and looked at the tree tops. Slowly, the sound of helicopter blades beating came into range just before a pair of Apaches tore over their heads, so close to the treetops, they knocked snow off the high branches. Following the terrain, they dropped in elevation then banked hard into a gun run over the nestled crop of hills Clem had pointed out earlier. Without slowing, the attack helicopters let loose a salvo of hydra rockets. Bright streams of white disappeared into the hills. The sounds of thundering explosions echoed back as it mixed with the belching of the helicopters’ 30mm guns.

Blue streaks reached up into the sky after the Apaches, harmlessly falling far off course. The helicopters banked hard and made a second high-speed pass, launching Hellfire missiles before climbing and disappearing. The enemy fire ceased, the cluster of hills now engulfed in fire and smoke. Secondary explosions snapped and popped from the cluster of hills as the sounds of the Apaches faded. Jacob looked down and could see the men on the hilltop perch up with excitement on their faces.

“Well, I’ll be... our birds can kill them,” Clem said.

“Who are they?” Jacob asked.

“Pelee. They must be out of Pelee Island. They’re the only ones with attack birds left,” Masterson said.

Jacob grabbed his pack and started to stand. “Then that’s where we’ll go. The airspace must be clear; the Blackhawk could get through... right?”

Rogers shook his head. “No. Whatever these things are, they’ll be going after them now.”

Jacob turned to face him. “How? You saw the helicopters... those shots didn’t even come close. They don’t have air defense.”

“You may be right, but I don’t like assumptions. We’ll use the diversion of the Apache strike to get our own people back to the bunker.”

Clem grabbed a handful of dirty snow and squeezed it in his fist. “He’s right. They’ll focus on those attack birds. Start moving whatever they have after them to pinpoint the source. We can move away from it. Take advantage of the vacuum.”

Masterson climbed to his feet, lifting his rifle with him. “Okay, I like it.” He pointed a finger at a nearby soldier and called him close. “Send two of your people back to the compound. Tell that pilot to ferry the first batch out.”

The young soldier turned to run away when Masterson grabbed his shoulder. “Make sure that old bastard knows to turn around and come straight back, and tell him I don’t care if he returns on fumes.”

“Yes, Master Sergeant,” the man said over his shoulder as he rushed off.

Jacob watched impatiently as a pair of men accepted their instructions and moved back down the hill. He looked up at Masterson and grabbed his sleeve. “What the hell are we still doing up here?”

Masterson smiled. “Our day ain’t done. I want to take a peek in them hills.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

The point man and his dog stealthily rose up and approached the steep slope angling down to the intersection. “I’ll lead us out,” James whispered.

“Stay close to him,” Rogers said, leaning in to Jacob so the others couldn’t hear. “I don’t like the looks of this.”

Jacob filed down the hill, keeping James to his front. As he moved he watched the rest of the patrol step up and file in behind them, slowly joining the column. James led them down the face of the hill and pushed up against the hard-packed shoulder of the road. He knelt into cover, causing the rest of the men to follow his lead. Jacob crouched in the heavy grass and weeds, feeling the cold snow press against his clothing.

They lay silent, becoming one with the terrain while James and Duke strained their ears to listen for any sign of danger at the side of the road. It was beyond quiet, nothing moved; the leaves even seemed to freeze on their limbs. Down the road to the left, he could see the doomed civilian caravan; to the right, an open road leading back to the base and the neighboring villages. The air reeked with the stench of burnt rubber and plastics mixed with death. Rogers crept up behind Jacob and again whispered, “I don’t like it.”

“Do you see something?” Jacob asked.

“No, but it shouldn’t be this quiet. If we were alone, you’d hear the animals... birds or something; even the damn bugs are hiding.”

After a long fifteen minutes, James rushed across the road, cutting a path through the fresh snow. Rogers pointed it out as they followed it.

“Everything about this is wrong,” he whispered. The rest of the men quietly rose to their feet and fell in behind them. Jacob picked up his pace, letting Rogers tuck in behind him as he crossed the open roadway. Soon he was wading back into the thick foliage on the other side. At the base of the hill, the vegetation was thick as it wrapped around him, making it nearly impossible to see. He moved ahead, following James by sound alone.

This is bad, I can't see shit, Jacob thought. He used his left hand to push dense brush aside as he navigated the thick underbrush. It was impossible to stay quiet; the branches and thorns grabbed at his clothing, scratching any exposed skin. It was darker and colder at the bottom of the hill, and the smoke seemed to build up and blanket the ground. Jacob could taste it now. The thick, acrid, metallic taste burned at the roof of his mouth, causing his nose to run.

James led them through the slight depression then up into another rising hill. The vegetation became sparser and allowed Jacob to open his stride. The hilltop cleared and opened into a mound of yellow grass.

Near the summit, James dropped to a crouch and slowly backed himself up before he lowered his body to the ground. He rolled to his back and waved Jacob forward. Jacob did as instructed, dropping to his belly and leopard crawling ahead while holding up the muzzle of his rifle as he crept to the front. He moved up to just beside James' thighs, Duke leaning down to greet him with a lick to his face. The dog scampered slowly in a circle and dropped into the grass with a sigh.

Jacob waited for Rogers to join them before he rotated to his hip and looked up at James. The point man rolled onto his back, gazing up at the clear blue sky partially obscured by the blooms of black acrid smoke. Now closer, Jacob could hear the occasional pops and snaps of burning wood and parts of the alien vehicles.

“You get eyes on them?” Rogers asked.

James looked into their faces and spoke in a hushed tone. “On the other side... down the center of a wide road.”

“Numbers?” Rogers whispered.

James shook his head side to side. “Hard to tell; Apaches fucked 'em up. I didn't see any moving, but I didn't hang out long either.” He struggled with his equipment, pulling a canteen from his hip. James took a long drink before pouring more into his palm and offering it to Duke. “We shouldn't

be here... this is the kind of shit that gets people killed," he said. "They'll be moving in to collect on their dead, and to collect our heads."

Rogers opened his mouth to speak but held his tongue when he heard Clem and Masterson moving up behind them. The scarred man moved in close and glared at all of them. "Why are we stopped?" he asked impatiently.

"They're just over the top," James answered. "It's not secure."

Masterson grinned and rolled to his back before sitting up. He held his arms straight out and waved them up and down, signaling for his men to get on line. He dropped his gear and crawled ahead, pushing Jacob aside as he forced his way next to James. "Okay, we'll cover you from up here while you all go down and check it out."

"Fuck that! I ain't doing nothing of the sort. You want to go down and say hello then have at it," James retorted.

Masterson's jaw clenched. He reached out a hand and grabbed the shoulder of James' jacket. Clem chuckled from behind them. "If your boy is scared, I can go down myself," the old man said.

Before Masterson could respond, there was a loud clanking of metal. James put up a hand, silencing both of them as he rolled back to his belly and crawled to the top of the hill. Not waiting for instruction, Jacob did the same, edging forward through the high grass. The snow was lighter here; in direct sunlight, most of it had already melted off.

Looking ahead, Jacob could see that the grass continued over the top of the hill then dropped swiftly down to meet the paved road on the far side. Stretching down the middle of the roadway was a column of destroyed and burning alien vehicles, black smoke boiling from the wreckage. He was surprised to see Rogers moving ahead of them; ducking down, he bear-crawled on all fours and waded into the thick grass, only his head and shoulders showing.

The rest of the men fanned out and followed his lead while Jacob stood in a crouched stance. He felt Duke brush against his side; the dog was still relaxed, its tail wagging feverishly. Jacob tried to let the dog's temperament comfort him, Duke always being a fair gauge for danger.

Jacob paused in his movements and held his rifle's optic to his eye, panning down the long roadway. He counted at least six of the destroyed hovercrafts, all burning, some brighter than others, the metal putting off

strobe-like flashes of light similar to burning magnesium. Where the vehicle occupants tried to escape the inferno, there were charred bodies in the road. Jacob looked back and saw the patrol's riflemen now lining the top of the hill; some knelt down, others stood. If they were shocked, their faces hid it well. The men were stoic, weapons out providing overwatch.

James stepped closer. He raised his rifle up and held it steady with his right hand while he pointed to a still body with his left. "This one's still got all its parts. This what you're looking for?"

Clem hissed and halted the others as he alone approached the blue-clad figure. The old man stepped beside it and nudged the body with his boot, getting no response. He leaned down and pulled the form over, its lifeless, helmeted head flopping to the side. It was one of the Yellow Sleeves, smaller than the Reds.

"Thing fuckin' stinks, don't it?"

Clem pushed at the thing's chest with the stock of his rifle, the figure contorting with the pressure.

"Freeze!" James hissed, holding up a flat hand.

Clem stopped cold, his body instinctively crouching at the warning. "What is it?"

Jacob turned on his heels to look back at his friend. He saw Duke with his back arched, lips curled back revealing white fangs, a low growl slowly rising in volume. James was by the dog's side, his rifle at the low ready, trying to follow the dog's intense gaze.

"We're not alone down here," James whispered. "We need to move."

A dry heat suddenly filled the air. Blue bolts of energy rushed at them from all directions. Jacob dove for the soft earth at the edge of the burning vehicles, hearing the sounds of the patrol returning fire from the hillside. Machine guns and deafening explosions joined the now familiar metallic *voomp* of the enemy weapons. He felt the tickling vibration in his ears and knew the alien vehicles were on the move. Fighting to his knees, he searched and spotted the first of the enemy hovercraft emerging from the far tree lines, their red turrets glowing as blue bolts raced in his direction.

"Cover!" Clem screamed.

Rogers reached down and yanked Jacob to his feet, pulling and nearly throwing him into the high grass as men above tossed smoke and tear gas canisters, desperately attempting to conceal their withdrawal. Jacob lunged

at the hillside, falling and grabbing at the thick grass while scrambling up the steep slope.

“Pull back! Get to the woods,” Masterson shouted over the fighting.

Jacob lunged ahead, moving past Clem. The older man had dropped to his knees, howling “Don’t stop. Keep moving” as he bled off a full magazine from his rifle.

Earth exploded near Jacob’s face as blue vapor mixed with searing hot mud, the heat flashing against his exposed skin. Jacob looked away and clawed at the grass, following the report of the platoon’s rifles toward friendly lines. He crested the hill just as another blast of blue caught a trooper square in the chest. The man flipped backward, a dark smoldering impression burning into the man’s uniform. Jacob reached for him then pulled back in horror, seeing the damage the weapon caused—the blue plasma sticking and burning through flesh as it dripped from the soldier’s ribs, consuming his organs.

“Oh God,” he gasped.

Jacob forced himself away, following the others as they crawled for the concealment of the thick woods. Blue bolts arced over their heads, impacting with the treetops and showering them with burning debris. Jacob struggled on, the shouting and screams of agony mixing with the *voomps* of the enemy weapons. The now downward slope of the hill increasing his momentum, he followed the others crashing into the heavy brush. The men of the hilltop were now in a full retreat. Friendly gunfire ceased, the noise quickly replaced with the scent of spent rounds and a strange, charred, electrical stench.

Vegetation wrapped him like a thick blanket, giving a false sense of security as he fought his way forward. Lungs burning with every step, he sprinted down the hill to the next road. He could hear men crying out in pain ahead of him. He burst into an opening in the thicket, nearly falling on medics fighting to restrain a large soldier. Jacob recognized the wounded man as one of the unit’s machine gunners.

The man’s left arm was covered in the blue smoldering plasma. It sizzled and ate at his flesh, the skin and muscle appearing to melt and mix with it. The man’s arm flailed as medics wrestled him while others worked to cover the plasma with dirt and pouring the contents of their canteens on

the wound in feeble attempts to smother and neutralize the strange blue flame.

Clem rushed into the space from behind and stole a quick glance at the wound. He drew a long knife from his belt and passed it to a medic. "Get that arm off him... now."

The husky soldier struggled and attempted to right himself, pleading with them not to take his arm. "I'll be okay, just wrap it up," he gasped.

Clem dropped to the ground and pressed his face close to the injured man. "You need to suck it up," he snarled through gritted teeth. "You're giving away our fuckin position, now bite down." Clem stuffed a handful of folded cloth in the man's teeth. The soldier's eyes clenched tight, sweat building on his forehead, tears breaking from the corners of his eyes. He chomped down and growled.

A young medic who'd already applied a field tourniquet above the wound, rested on his knees. Holding the blade in his shaking hand, he looked up at Clem with a deep worried expression and said, "I don't have anything for his pain."

"Then do it quick," Clem said in a matter-of-fact tone before leaving the clearing, pushing Jacob and the others ahead of him.

Jacob picked up on Duke's panicked bark and the echoes of snapping branches. He moved to the sound in a hurry. At the bottom of the decline, he lost his footing and tumbled through the thick vines and thorny bushes. Falling face first, he broke from the trees and plummeted into a low ditch at the side of the road. Water from the melting snow splashed his face and snapped him back. He rolled to his back and scooted up to the roadside, once again facing the doomed civilian convoy. A soldier already on his feet hooked an arm under his shoulder and pulled Jacob up from the ground. "Sergeant, we need to get off the road."

He resisted the soldier's grasp, suddenly embarrassed by the momentary loss of conscious thought. Jacob stood and held his rifle to his chest, taking deep breaths and pushing the shock from his mind.

"Sergeant, what do we do?"

Jacob stood stunned, not realizing the soldier was speaking to him.

"Sergeant?" the young soldier asked again.

Jacob shook his head and squeezed his eyes tight before looking back at the soldier. "Get everyone together; we'll be moving soon." He spotted

Rogers standing on the road and quickly rushed to his leader's side. Rogers was pointing down the road in the direction of the cabin.

Jacob felt his blood run cold when he spotted the thin stream of black smoke. "No..."

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CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

Laura pulled the straps tight on the nylon backpack. “I think we have everything. Now we just wait for Daddy to get back,” she said, smiling down at her daughter beside her.

“And Duke,” the girl replied.

“Yes, and Duke.” Laura laughed, pulling Katy in for a hug. She hoisted the pack to her shoulders and gripped the M4 rifle in her left hand. Looking down at Katy, the girl grinned and reached up to her. She gripped Katy’s hand and walked through the cramped space of the block house and out into the cool morning air.

Laura had never visited a place like this before. Some stops at manicured, resort camp grounds, where they would rent a well-furnished condo on the lake shore, maybe a night in a friend’s beach house, but nothing as sparse as this. Camping was Jacob’s thing, a sentimental connection to his father, reminders of fishing trips they took together when he was a boy. Jacob tried to pass the same lessons on to Katy. “No daughter of mine will have to depend on a man to bait her hook,” he used to joke.

She moved into the sunlight and watched the soldiers actively prepping the helicopter. The old man in the cowboy hat was fussing with them as they loosened ropes and readied equipment. Other people, refugees who came in with the soldiers, were sitting impatiently waiting; some argued with the soldiers and pointed at them accusingly.

The news of their departure to a possible safe area at first caused excitement, but when rumors spread that there wouldn’t be enough room for everyone on the first flight, fights and heated discussions broke out.

Everyone became suspicious of how the lucky passengers would be picked. Families of the soldiers, then women and children seemed the obvious choice, but families didn't want to be separated. And there wouldn't be seats for everyone.

A soldier with a notepad looked directly at Laura; he'd already stopped to talk to her earlier that morning. "Ma'am, I really think you and the little one should be on the first flight. As Sergeant Anderson's family, you have priority." A year ago, Laura would have never thought of speaking to a soldier—or even meeting one for that matter. Growing up in the suburbs of Chicago, the closest she ever got to the military was a local parade, or a patriotic TV commercial. Now, they came to her like she was part of the family, each of the soldiers feeling a responsibility to look after her.

Laura looked past him to the others—the refugees that stared at her suspiciously. They eyeballed her rifle, her backpack, even her boots. She knew they had nothing; they'd left everything behind, and she could easily be in the same position if things played out differently. She looked up at the soldier and shook her head no. "We won't leave until my husband returns," she said.

A man she recognized, husky with a bloodied bandage still clinging to his neck, moved past the others and stepped between her and the soldier. He frowned and leaned in close. "Ma'am, please, we heard gunfire down the road." Jesse paused and lowered his voice so the others couldn't hear. "There might not be a second flight. I owe it to Jacob to make sure you get on board."

"Not without my husband."

Gunshots echoed in the distance, causing them to look off to the east. Jesse dropped his gaze, not making eye contact while he spoke in a hushed tone. "Okay, but I have... well, I feel I have a responsibility to tell you... if they come... Mrs. Anderson, we won't be able to stop them."

Laura gave him a reassuring smile and put a hand on his forearm. "It's okay, Jesse. Let one of them have our spot. We'll be fine."

She led Katy away to a quiet spot farther from the helicopters and the soldiers. She set her pack on the ground and sat atop it while Katy kicked at the leaves and tossed small pine cones. Laura watched the soldiers selecting a young woman holding an infant from the group. The woman looked in

Laura's direction and waved as she was led to the waiting helicopter. Katy stood close to her mother's side and returned the woman's wave.

"Momma, look, the baby is going on a helicopter," she said.

Laura pursed her lips and nodded, already feeling a tear form in the corner of her eye, wondering if she was making the wrong decision. She watched the soldiers make a final pass around the helicopter. They gave the old man a thumbs up then stepped away. The man removed his hat and moved into the Blackhawk. The turbine whined and the blades began to rotate.

The spinning of the blades increased; Laura leaned over, pulling Katy in to shield her from the wind. Soldiers moved around her, gathering in a cluster as debris began to blow, the Blackhawk fighting against gravity to leave the ground. The helicopter slowly lifted away, the tree tops swaying away from the blast of its rotors. Shielding the wind away with her hand, Laura looked up. She watched as the aircraft's nose dipped and, gaining altitude, slowly moved away.

Her stomach dropped, and her muscles constricted. Four thick bolts of blue arced up from nowhere. Time slowed as she watched them drift through the sky. The pilot must have spotted them; the helicopter banked hard to its right, dipping precariously close to the treetops. Three of the bolts arced high, missing it; the Blackhawk's nose dipped and the aircraft rotated clockwise before thrusting forward in the opposite direction. The third bolt scraped across the tail-rotor, launching the helicopter into a violent spin. The Blackhawk's turbines screamed for power as the pilot struggled for control.

Laura wanted to look away, but her eyes were glued to the sight. The helicopter tipped back, nearly inverted, before falling to the far end of the grassy field in a ball of orange and yellow flame. The force of the explosion and the heat from the burning fuel pulled her back, Katy still tight in her arms. She tumbled back, landing heavily in the thick grass.

Before she could open her eyes to recover, a soldier with stripes on his helmet was beside her, lifting her back to her feet. Finally her head cleared, and she heard yelling. Men were running among the scattered group, trying to direct the fight. "Get back, get back. Get the civilians to the woods, everyone else form on me," she heard the man with the stripes order.

The pack was gone. Katy, clinging to Laura's chest and arms locked around her neck, began to cry. Laura tried to lift her arms, realizing she was still holding the rifle in her left hand. Jesse swooped up her nylon backpack and steadied her. "Please, ma'am, we need to go," Jesse shouted, ushering her ahead.

Still stunned, she stepped back, Katy's screams clouding her thoughts. She stumbled for balance. The surrounding soldiers' weapons were firing, and the refugees screaming—some running to the block house; others aimlessly into the woods. Blue streaks of light raced across the field to her front.

"Ma'am," Jesse yelled, his face now inches from hers.

Laura swallowed hard and nodded. "Okay, let's go," she said in a dazed expression. Not afraid, she wondered, *Is this what shock feels like?*

Jesse forced a smile and led her forward. A bright flash of blue turned Laura's head in time to see a running man's body engulfed in a splash of blue. It looked like he'd been swallowed by illuminated jellyfish. *How beautiful*, Laura thought for a split second before the man's body was again revealed, nearly naked and stripped to the bone by the blue blaze.

"Oh shit," a crouched soldier shouted, looking down at the maimed man. He raised his rifle and fired at unseen targets to Laura's rear. She pushed forward, adrenaline spiking her senses, heart beating frantically, and Katy's tight grip around her neck. With clarity came the fear—she was now eager to escape. She ran the trail, struggling to keep up with the retreating soldiers and civilians ahead of her. They rounded a corner near a row of tiny cabins. Jesse stopped her with a tug at her elbow and pointed deeper into the woods to the north. Civilians ahead of her continued down the trail, others rushed through the thick vegetation in the direction Jesse indicated.

"Keep going, and don't stop. We'll hold them here," Jesse said.

"Where do I go?"

"Just run. Run until you can't hear the fighting, and then hide."

Laura hesitated, gunfire thundering in the distance. She pleaded with Jesse to go with her, to show her the way. He gave her a knowing nod and strapped the nylon backpack to her shoulders. He snatched her rifle and checked the action before placing it back into Laura's hands. "Go, stay quiet, and hide. We'll find you—Jacob will find you," he said solemnly, turning away. She went to follow in his direction when a blue bolt of energy

splashed against one of the small cabins. The roughhewn pine boards were quickly swallowed in flame.

She looked back and saw that he'd been hit. The thigh of his uniform now scorched and blackened, somehow the big man managed to stay on his feet. He fired his rifle directly into the advancing enemy, not stopping until the bolt locked back. He shot her a scornful look as he reloaded. "Go," he yelled. "Get the hell out of here."

Katy screamed into her neck as she turned and followed the others into the trees.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

A distant groan of fire and earth rolled through the forest, the trembling ground forcing the soldiers of the beleaguered patrol to huddle together, their stomachs gripped tightly with fear. Looking in the direction of the camp, watching as the tiny pillar of black smoke was joined by a ball of orange flame and roiling black smoke, Jacob froze. His heart stopped as the men in Jacob's company lost any momentum they thought they'd earned from the helicopter attack.

"No, it can't be," he whispered.

Clem burst from the tree line, his oilskin coat now smeared with blood. He looked to the fight in the distance then back to the men, shoving them out of the clearing in the road and toward the cover of the forest. "Keep moving, get into the thick of it, we can lose them in the back country," he shouted. "We move south, away from it all."

Jacob stumbled back from the paralyzing fear. Looking over his shoulder at the older man who was still shouting orders, Jacob thought he caught a glimpse of a smile on the man's face—an eagerness for the man to be in charge, to take command, like he'd found his opportunity.

"We can't. We have to get back for my family... for the others... there could be survivors," Jacob said.

Men were already moving into the woods, vanishing in the thick trees like they'd been instructed. Masterson rushed ahead, passing a cluster of men and closed the distance, stepping between Jacob and the older man. "Clem, I appreciate your help, but you're not in charge here."

“Fuck who’s in charge. I’m just trying to keep you lot alive. Soon, everyone at that campsite will be dead, and whatever is there will come back at us. Then we’ll be sandwiched between them and the things just over the hill we’re already running from.”

Rogers stepped up next to James and cleared his throat. He spat on the ground near Clem’s boot. “You leave those people to die back there, and you’ll be running from me also.” Rogers stood up straight, adjusting his rifle, while James fell in behind him.

Clem slowly panned down, laughing, looking at the wet spot on the pavement before looking up to shoot a sadistic grin at the bearded scout.

“Nobody cares about them. Right now it’s about survival, and if they don’t have the means, well, then we can’t go sacrificing ourselves for them.”

Rogers clenched his jaw and nudged a step forward. Clem let a hand drift from his hip to rest on the grip of a holstered sidearm. Turning to face Rogers, he squared his shoulders and stepped a half pace forward, inviting the threat. “Master Sergeant, I suggest you get your people un-fucked,” he said without looking away.

The muscles in Jacob’s neck tightened; his eyes locked on Clem’s hand wrapped around the butt of the pistol. Instinctively, he pulled his own rifle closer. Distant combat echoed behind them, rattling through the trees, reminding them of the people dying at the camp.

Rogers shook his head slowly and his expression hardened before turning toward James, ignoring the others. “Let’s go—lead us out. Jacob, keep that rifle up and ready; you kill anything that isn’t us.”

“What about them?” James asked, dipping his head at Clem as if he were an object rather than a person.

“Let them run if they like; it’s not our job,” Rogers said.

“You’re all going to die. There aren’t enough of you to make a difference,” Clem shouted.

Jacob turned away to follow his leader; he met eyes with Masterson, who slightly dipped his chin before looking at Rogers. “Get to your people, then meet us at Emmerson’s Ridge. Do you know it?” Masterson said.

“I do,” Rogers answered, stepping off into the destroyed convoy advancing in the direction of the camp.



THEY RAN DIRECTLY AT THE FIGHTING, SACRIFICING CAUTION FOR SPEED. Moving out of the narrow hills and onto an expanse of flat ground, James guided them to the shoulder of the paved road, Duke trotting by his side. The closer they got, the more Jacob could hear the sounds of screaming people, the noise fueling his adrenaline and blocking out the signals from his tired muscles begging him to quit.

At the cutoff where the paved surface of the road met the gravel, they spotted the first of them—a cloaked vehicle, its surface reflecting the same liquid sheen they’d seen in the valley. With no time to hide and without warning, a red turret materialized from atop the mirrored shell and rotated in their direction. A bright flash burst out, and Jacob gasped for breath as a blue beam raced above his head, the oxygen in the air feeding whatever energy the projectile consumed. Jacob felt the heat on his neck, and the screech of the shot screamed at his ears.

He was bumped hard and knocked off course as Rogers moved him from the road and into the concealment of the trees. James’ rifle barked somewhere ahead of them, single shots in rapid succession. “Contact left!” he shouted before firing another salvo.

Rogers stopped abruptly and dropped next to a tree, bringing up his own rifle. Jacob followed his movements, doing the same and dropping in line. Rogers’ weapon joined the fight while Jacob spotted a target of his own—a broad-shouldered creature dressed in blue, the red stripes seeming to illuminate the sleeves of its arms. Covered by a wide, glossy helmet, the creature’s head swiveled. The helmet turned, and a dark tinted screen locked in Jacob’s direction.

The creature seemed to lean back slightly, surprised by his presence; its weapon rose to its shoulder and leveled out. Jacob was faster and already on target. He applied pressure to the trigger, feeling the buck of his rifle. The creature lurched back then spun, collapsing to the ground. James was back on his feet, running toward the camp as he shouted over Duke’s barking for them to move up. Jacob could see the woods ahead flashing with the bright blue lights of the alien weapons, the report of the friendly rifles’ resistance fading.

Without consideration for their own safety, they rushed on, already committed and ready to put themselves in harm's way to shield the civilian withdrawal. Jacob exited the trees and dropped into the clearing of the athletic field. They had egressed at the center of the longest edge of the field. Rogers and James close to him, they were in a perfect flanking position.

Jacob could see the blockhouse far to his right, the structure now engulfed in blue flames. He searched a mass of friendlies just in front of the blockhouse, some fleeing while the wounded on the ground were making a final stand. He couldn't find Laura anywhere. The burning wreckage of the Blackhawk was on the opposite end of the field just inside a copse of trees—he prayed his family wasn't there. James moved close to him and grabbed his shoulder, taking his eyes from the burning wreckage of the helicopter and back to their immediate front.

"We'll look for them later... now, we fight," James said.

Jacob saw the creatures moving forward, firing at the wounded men on the ground. His anger blocked any recollection of fear. The aliens were close, less than fifty meters, and lined up in a makeshift skirmish line. Formed up like an opposing football team, this was a clean-up crew, organized to finish those left in the fight. Marching ahead, they approached the blockhouse, weapons up and firing rapidly at anything to their front, the blue beams exploding and engulfing on contact, knocking the fleeing soldiers and civilians to the ground.

Watching the carnage, James snarled, "We have to stop this! This isn't an attack... this is a massacre."

Still in the aliens' blind spot, the bearded man raised his rifle and snapped off three quick shots, took a deep breath, and fired again, laying down a base of fire into the blind profiles of the lined up creatures. The nearest alien crumpled; the others in the line, still preoccupied with the targets to their front, were oblivious to the attack on their flank. Jacob dropped to a knee and opened fire determinedly. Selecting targets of his own, he locked on center mass of each creature and watched them tumble with the impact of his rounds.

The remaining aliens turned, suddenly aware of the threat at their flank. At less than fifty meters away, they lunged, bringing their weapons up as they advanced. The Assassins were ready and already stable in their firing

positions. Jacob was on his feet. Stepping into the field, he stayed on the trigger, shoulder firing his M14 until the bolt of his rifle locked back. Jacob watched as his rounds cut through the creature's shirt, others smacking against its helmet and visor. Whatever armor the things wore, it was useless against Jacob's weapon.

The creatures were down, the gunfire ceased, and the Assassins found themselves alone now in the field, surrounded by the dead. James moved to one of the dead and kicked a heavy metallic rifle away from its gloved hand. He drew his knife and stood by the body encased in the blue suit. At over seven feet, the thing was taller than a human, its chest wide and shoulders at least double that of the largest man Jacob had ever seen.

"Looks like they skip leg day," James said, moving closer. He pointed at the creature's lower body, which appeared scrawny in comparison to the barrel chest.

"What are you doing?" Jacob asked.

Behind them, the fire around the downed chopper grew, the dry grass of the field and nearby woods now in flames. Rogers pointed in the direction of the helicopter. "We can't hang out here, the woods are going up," he shouted.

"I want to see what they look like," James said.

"What?"

"These things... I want to see their faces."

Rogers moved close and looked past them, posting himself at a standing watch. Unable to hold his own curiosity, he nodded the okay. "Hurry up then; get it done."

The bearded soldier probed and tugged at the corpse's armor. Duke paced back and forth restlessly, the scent of the beings still close in the air. Looking for a zipper or a way into the uniform, James rolled the thing over. He slunk back and looked down at his hands, now covered in bright red blood. "Well, they certainly bleed like us," he said.

"Well, they ain't us, so don't go getting attached," Rogers scorned, showing his impatience.

James found a locking fastener at the back of the creature's neck. With some struggle, he was able to break its grip. As he pulled down on the fastener, the fabric relaxed and loosened over the body. Soon it was so loose it draped off of the thing's shoulder blades, revealing a dull gray flesh

covered in thick scales. When James went to touch the skin, the creature tried to rise, its back suddenly convulsing. Dropping down with force, James pressed a knee between the thing's shoulder blades and pinned it to the ground, listening to the alien wheeze its last breath.

He let off the pressure and rolled it to its back. The suit's grip released the helmet, allowing it to be easily lifted out of place from a locking collar and revealing a humanoid head. All the features of a human, its head was bald, the expressionless face showing evenly spaced eyes below perfect eyebrows, its lips thin and pressed tightly together.

"What the fuck? He looks just like us," Jacob gasped.

James pressed a finger into a hole just below the thing's collar bone. "Well, they weren't prepared for projectile weapons. If I had to take a guess, this blue suit works great against their ray guns."

"Energy weapons," Jacob added, reaching down to recover and examine the creature's rifle. It was simple in design from his engineer's vantage—a long cylinder that fit over the wearer's forearm and a lever mechanism fired the bolt. A series of red and blue lights shone brightly at the base, probably displaying the charge or weapon's strength. "It makes sense not to use projectiles—not having to replace a bullet—these things are probably rechargeable."

Looking down, Rogers shook his head. "So our body armor is useless against this blue shit. And their suits don't work against our rifles."

"Perfect matchup," James said sarcastically.

A low moan near the burning block house alerted them. Before Jacob could turn, Duke bounded through the field toward its source. His bark was different, more of a high pitched whine. He whimpered and stopped at a form near the building's porch, the dog's tail wagging frantically as he circled the figure. The men rushed ahead, finding a crumpled man struggling to stand. When he turned to face them, Jacob saw the bloodied bandage on the man's neck and the mournful face of Jesse Winslow.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE

Wind blew through the trees, causing the upper branches to sway, the ends rattling as they touched. The light was fading, the sun's last rays casting orange slivers through naked trees. She could hear the cries echoing through the forest; other survivors, lost and alone, the same as her. She debated reaching out, searching for them; strength in numbers she thought. They ran through the forest, scattered and afraid. She listened to the rifle fire and the screams all around her. Looking at her pack filled with meager supplies and thinking about the way the others had enviously looked at her rifle, she thought otherwise. She did not know them, or if they could be trusted.

Laura lay hidden in the foliage of a dry creek bed, the vegetation too sparse to completely shelter her. A place where the ground dropped swiftly, the bank created an overhang that she was able to crawl into. A trail ran above her. If she held out, Jacob would return, and he would find them. Laura's heart still thudded away anxiously in her chest. She pulled the collar of her shirt up over her mouth to cover the sounds of heavy breathing, and to conceal the cloud of condensation that marked her position. Katy's face was buried in her hip; Laura could feel the warmth of her body pressed against her.

A curtain of roots hung down above her head. She heard the rustling and breaking of branches on the ground above—someone, or something, was stalking the trail. Laura's back was to the base of roughly packed dirt surface while tall grass and reeds surrounded the space directly to her front. She pushed the pack against the mound of earth so that it sheltered Katy

from the wind channeling up the creek bed. As the noise above her grew louder, she cradled the rifle across her lap, allowing the end of the barrel to rest on her knees.

“Mama,” Katy whispered.

Laura dropped a hand to the girl’s head, cupping it, and brought her face down to meet her daughter’s. “We have to be quiet now, okay?”

Trembling, Katy pursed her lips and pressed her face tighter to Laura’s hip, her breathing barely audible. There was a crunching in the dry leaves above, then a whooshing through the air. A creature with long legs crashed into the dry creek bed to her front. The alien form landed hard, yet controlled, with its legs bending to absorb the impact. It darted a step forward then stopped. Its body was humanoid, but its movements were mechanical, not exactly like a machine but more like a freakishly muscled man. The thick-trunked creature twisted at the waist, its bulk shifting to look back behind it, then back up at the elevated position it’d leapt from.

Laura held the rifle, biting down on the inside of her cheek and trying to suppress the urge to shake, scream, or call out. Her right hand squeezed the pistol grip of the M4 carbine, her thumb searching for the selector switch. A series of low beeps and clicks came from the creature’s helmet. It turned its unarmed hand as if looking at a wrist watch then dipped its head, looking down and searching the depression where she hid. Its face mask focused on her, the thing’s gaze traveling from Laura to Katy then back, its head tilting sideways like a curious dog.

She didn’t wait, her thumb dropped the selector a single click and she pulled the trigger. The rifle bucked against her legs. She saw the puffs against the creature’s chest, and the blue fabric tearing where rounds punched through its shirt. The thing dropped a step back. Laura imagined the look of surprise that must be on its face below the shielded helmet. Its right arm holding the weapon dropped and went slack; its left hand lay flat against its stomach then slowly slid up until it covered the already bleeding wounds. It staggered another half-step back before collapsing into the sand- and gravel-covered creek bed.

Laura tried to conceal her fear. She looked down and could see Katy shaking beside her, and the young girl’s face contorted as she fought back tears. More footfalls landed heavily in the brush on the trail above her. She froze, looking down at the rifle still in her hands. She knew she couldn’t

fight them all; hiding would be the only way. Maybe if she dropped the weapon they would spare her. These weren't the same mindless monsters that came with the first meteor shower. The creature she just killed had hesitated as though it saw something that delayed it from killing her.

She had to try; she shoved the rifle into the thick leaves beside her and drug brush over their laps, lying back, hoping to hide. The ground shook as more of the creatures dropped in from above, crashing to the creek bed around the fallen alien. Laura opened her eyes, unable to resist the urge to look. She saw four of them; three the same as the one she killed, tall and broad-shouldered, but the fourth was smaller, more slender. The fourth wore gold stripes on its sleeves and moved in a smooth manner. Where the large beast lumbered, this one seemed to dance with graceful motions.

Laura couldn't take her eyes from the slender creature. She watched as the group examined its dead then turned to face her. The smaller figure stepped forward and stretched out a closed hand in her direction. Its golden-gloved fist opened slowly, revealing a thumb and six fingers; in its palm was a metallic disc. Laura watched as the disc blinked then flashed a blinding strobe. Instantly her body went numb. Paralyzed, she couldn't move. She attempted to fight it and desperately tried to reach for Katy to shield her, but her muscles wouldn't respond.

Her eyes shot straight ahead, unable to blink, unable to change focus. The slender alien turned to face the others, the clicks and beeps filling the air. The large creatures moved forward on stiff joints, lumbering toward her. One reached down, holding a golden bowl that he placed on the top of her head. Laura's muscles tensed at the same time her body flung into a spread eagle position. She felt distant, her mind a passenger in her body.

The clicks were gone, and then she heard a soft voice—not in her ears, but directly transmitted into her thoughts. "Keep the female with its cub. Deliver them to element six."

She struggled to turn to search for Katy. The slender creature approached her and knelt over her form. "There is no need to resist; you and your cub are safe now." The slender one put its hand to Laura's head and the world went dark.

CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX

Crunched against debris at the side of the blockhouse, his shoulder and side speckled with burns, Jesse tried to push up to stand next to them. Gritting through the pain, he looked up at Jacob. “They’re alive. She wasn’t on the helicopter. She left with the others,” he said.

“Which way did they go?”

Jesse clenched his eyes closed tight; Jacob could see that the man was fighting the pain. He opened them again and strained the muscles in his neck, attempting to get up. James removed a canteen from a carrier on his belt and opened it, allowing the wounded man to drink. Jesse gulped thirstily and paused. “We followed the trail, up toward the small cabins. I sent her north.”

“Alone?” Jacob gasped.

Jesse dipped his chin and shook his head. “I’m sorry, Jacob. We tried to fight them back, but they outflanked us. They were on all sides. They got behind us; we pushed back this way but... those things went after them. They fought through us and went after the civilians.”

Movement in the brush behind them revealed two men creeping out of the woods and into the clearing. A soldier dressed in a soiled uniform, a young man in civilian clothes beside him. The soldier carried a rifle loosely in his arms. The other man had burns to his face and neck. The armed man spotted them and rushed in their direction, dragging the wounded man with him. As they approached them, the wounded man collapsed to the ground, exhausted. The soldier squatted by his side. He looked up at Jacob, and the others then searched the surrounding field.

“Where’s Masterson?” the soldier gasped between labored breaths. “Where the hell is Clem?”

James shook his head, taking the canteen from Jesse and passing it to the new arrivals. “He’s not coming. Can you tell me what happened here?”

“Fuck,” the soldier gasped, dropping to the ground on both knees. “He’s not coming? What do you mean he’s not com—?”

Jacob edged toward him, interrupting. “Where are the civilians, the other survivors?”

The wounded man pulled himself together and sat up. He put his hands on his face and rubbed away dirt and grime from his forehead. He looked at Jacob intently. “I know you; you’re the one with the little girl.”

“Yes,” Jacob said eagerly. “Where are they?”

The man looked down at the ground then met Jacob’s stare. “I’m sorry. Those things—just so fast, they—they took them.” The man closed his eyes tight and looked away.

“Where are they? I have to know.”

The man swallowed hard and pointed in the direction of the cottages. “I barely got away myself.”

Jacob got to his feet and faced the trail. Stepping off, he moved out alone. James and Rogers were quickly up and following him. Rogers turned back and pointed to Jesse struggling to his feet. “Salvage what you can from here then take this one and get to the bunker at the end of the trail—”

“By the radio tower,” the soldier answered.

“That’s the place. Now go.”

Jacob moved on, walking the center of the trail. He noticed the others following him and looked back. “You don’t have to do this; I understand the odds,” he said, his voice breaking.

James increased his pace. Not answering, he moved past Jacob, taking the point position and moving down the trail filled with nightmarish scenes. “We’ll find them,” he said, ignoring the obvious all around him.

Bodies were strewn along the trail, many of them scorched by the blue flames; open wounds cauterized by the heat of the plasma weapons. Smoke was billowing through the woods, mixed with the smell of burning plastics and building materials. Fires raged all around them. Ahead, Jacob could see the one-room cottages fully engulfed, the orange flames lighting the forest

floor. He moved past them, feeling the heat of the fires, stepping over the bodies of fallen soldiers and civilians, checking each as he passed.

He stopped and looked down at the ground. The packed dirt of the trail was broken and disturbed. He knelt and fumbled with the loose soil. Duke was at his side, whimpering and sniffing at the ground.

James pointed off the trail. "The branches are broken, the grass bent against the others... they left the trail here," he said. James swiveled his head, giving a worried glance back at the flames. "We'll need to hurry."

The bearded scout broke the trail, stepping into the pucker brush, his hand pointing to the signs of a cut trail. He nearly stumbled over the body of a young man in civilian clothes, the back of the man burnt down to his exposed ribcage. James stepped to the side and pointed; without saying, the others knew they were on the right path. Coming out of the thick cover, Duke ran ahead and sat on another trail, this one far narrower and led along a dry creek bed. The dog moved ahead, leading the way with the others close behind.

The forest was suddenly quiet, only the roaring of the fire and the crackling of burning trees making any sounds. The light had faded; if not for the eerie back glow of the burning forest, it would have been too dark to see each other. James put down a palm, slowing the others and bringing them in close before pointing down at sets of odd boot prints on the trail. Large and oval shaped, they pressed deeply into the soil and looked to be composed of hundreds of tiny spikes. James stepped off, leading them on before pausing again.

Duke was ahead on the trail, pacing anxiously and whining as he moved on and off the trail to show the way. James cautiously followed along beside the animal and made his way to a steep drop-off. He weaved left and navigated his way off the trail with the others close behind. James stopped in a gravel depression and touched his gloved hand to the soil. When he raised it, it was covered with sticky blood. He then waved his hand along the sand and gravel bed, covered with more of the odd boot prints nearly lost on the loose soil. "A group of them stopped here; one didn't leave vertical," he said, sticking a gloved finger into a puddle of blood.

Jacob followed him into the creek bed, the despair building in his body, fearing what he may find. He spun, looking at the boot prints and the blood on the sand. A lingering fear began building in his stomach. He stopped and

was caught by a sudden flash of color, bright nylon fabric against the bank. He rushed ahead and found Laura's backpack, her rifle and a spent shell casing on the ground beside it. Jacob took a step forward and dropped to his knees, pulling the backpack to his chest.

"Jacob, over here," Rogers called, following Duke over a rise on the far side of the creek.

A bare foot exposed from the surrounding grass. Jacob moved closer, climbing the rise and finding a scene of burnt and discarded bodies scattered among the small clearing. "My God, they killed them... all of them," he gasped.

Rogers shook his head in disagreement as he bent over and lifted a stuffed bear. "No, only the men," he said, indicating the bodies. "Check them for yourself. All the women and children are gone, and all their belongings are left where they were dropped. They were taken, Jacob."

CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN

The television was too loud. Tin echoes recalling the previous day's news, traffic, and highlights of the weather. She had fallen asleep in front of the TV. Jacob would be home soon, she should get up. She squinted. Bright sunlight from an open window; she forgot to close the blinds last night. Somewhere in her subconscious she smelled wood smoke, distant but alarming. A tiny voice in the back of her mind began to scream *something is wrong*, pulling her into the present.

"Mommy."

Laura rubbed her face and jerked her head to the side. Prying open tired eyes, she looked into an unfamiliar space. Shocked awake, her now conscious brain struggled to move into this new place. She was not home. She was lying on an overstuffed sofa, covered with an afghan blanket. The room was a cliché 1960s theme—pastel walls, shag carpet, a wood-paneled console television along a wall, playing a black-and-white image with a looped broadcast. There were family photos on the wall, filled with people that she didn't recognize.

"Mommy," Katy said, shaking her arm.

Laura pulled her in, suddenly remembering her last thoughts when she was hiding in the woods, trying to keep Katy safe. But now Katy was here and she was clean, wearing a yellow cotton gown. Her hair was soft, washed and tied back, a concave bowl attached to the top of her head. Remembering, Laura's hand swung up, checking her own head; she wore the same device. She noticed she was also dressed in the same yellow clothing. "Katy... where—?"

“You were sleeping, Momma. The people gave us food,” she said.

Laura pushed herself up, feeling disoriented and struggling to recall the gaps in her memory. In the corner of the room was a small dining table; on the top was a brown tray with cut sandwiches and stainless steel cups. “Did you eat it?” she said, tension building in her voice. “Who put it there?”

A hissing sound, the clunk of a lock, and the door swung in. A backlit figure stood in the opening and lurched a cautious step forward. “The consumables are safe; we have no reason to poison you.”

The voice was soft and familiar; it appeared in her thoughts rather than her ears. Katy was on her feet before Laura could stop her. She moved past the being and climbed to the table, grabbing a sandwich. She took a bite and looked back at her mother, smiling.

Dressed head to toe in baby-blue linens that reminded Laura of hospital smocks, the creature slid another step toward her, and the heavy door swung closed behind it. Feminine features, tanned skin, petite and slender, it was smaller than any woman Laura had ever met. The thing’s head was free of hair, its face perfectly shaped like a store mannequin. Its lips moved when it spoke in a foreign tongue, but Laura was somehow able to comprehend the words. “Are you comfortable?”

With graceful movements, the creature moved closer. It looked at Laura and blinked its piercing blue eyes. Passing through the room, it sat gently on a chair across from her and smiled with perfect rose-tinted lips.

Laura looked away, repulsed; her head spinning.

“Don’t be alarmed; it’s your knowledge plate. The discomfort will soon pass as your system adjusts,” the alien said.

Laura’s eyes focused on Katy at the table. Again she went to speak, but the creature stopped her with an uplifted six-fingered hand. Laura’s gaze found the table where a notepad and pen lay just in front of her.

“The food is safe. It meets all of your nutritional needs,” the alien said.

“Why am I here? What do you want with us?” Laura sat up. Leaning forward, she let her hand pass over the notepad and palmed the pen. She pulled it into her grip and slipped her hand to her thigh.

“Why are *you* here?” the thing responded in turn.

“I don’t understand; you brought me here.”

“Then you concede that we were here first?” The thing nodded and crossed its hands into its lap. “Understanding will be the key to our

partnership.”

Laura shifted in position. Sitting up further, she looked the alien in the eye, squeezing the pen in her grip, emboldened by the firmness of it. “Partnership? Who are you?”

“I am Thera, your guide.”

“What do you want?”

“I am but one of many. I don’t want anything.”

Laura, not waiting any longer, lunged at the creature, arms outstretched, stabbing down with the tip of the pen. It did no good. Before she cleared half the distance, the alien shifted to the side smoothly and opened its hand, freezing her. She fell back into the cushions. Her legs still bent, she tilted to the side awkwardly, her eyes now fixed on the ceiling.

“Your knowledge plate gives away your intentions. You have shown strong restraint characteristics, Mrs. Laura Anderson; your peers were not so cordial in our first meeting.” The alien paced across the room to the exit and turned the knob. The creature looked back to Laura and flashed six fingers. Laura felt immediate relief, the feeling returning to her muscles, her heart rapidly beating in her chest.

“When you have rested, we will have more to discuss.”

Laura’s head panned to Katy, who was still sitting at the table, unaware of the tension in the room. The door opened and two men entered, both dressed in dark-blue coveralls. The taller of the two carried a clipboard and a bundle of folded, yellow clothing. The shorter man stepped forward, smiling. He wore a close-cropped beard, the rest of his head nearly bald. She noticed that both men were wearing the gold discs on their heads. The tall man waved to Katy as he passed the alien that was leaving the room, the door closing behind it.

“Mrs. Anderson?” the short man said in a thick French accent. “It is good to see you awake. Are you finding everything you need?”

Laura stretched her back, numbness fading as blood rushed to her muscles. Her hand moved up to squeeze the pained muscles in her neck. She pushed forward and quickly got to her feet, edging away from the visitors and standing between them and Katy. “Who are you?”

The shorter man smiled and dropped his hands, showing palms in a submissive stance. “My name is Francis; this is Ernesto. We’re friends; you have nothing to fear from us.”

“Am I... am I a prisoner?” Laura asked, her head spinning in confusion.

The men laughed patronizingly. “No, of course not; no more than we are. You’ve been rescued.” The man focused on Laura’s shocked expression. “Does this look like a prison? You’re safe now.”

Laura stepped back and allowed herself time to survey the space. She noticed a covered window on the far wall. The short man caught her gaze and followed it. He waved a hand toward the thick drapes. “Yes, it’s okay,” he said. “Please, have a look.”

Laura backed away then slowly stepped to the wall, casting a wide berth around the two strangers. She put her fingertips to the heavy drapes and pulled back the fabric.

Bright sunlight bled into the room as she peeled back the curtain. Laura moved and pressed against the glass. She was in a house at the end of a cul-de-sac. In front was a lawn of thick uncut grass and a car in the driveway on flat tires. Along the blacktop surface sat a row of cookie-cutter homes, garbage stacked along the curbs. Beyond them, she could see a tall fence. It didn’t look natural, its material smooth and out of place; not metallic, but not wood or stone either. “We have some work to do, but this community will do nicely. We have full support from the Creators.”

Pressing close, in the distance she could see people walking the tree-lined street—all women and children. More of the figures in gold sleeves wandered among them, all being watched over by the large, more stout creatures. She was in a community, but she didn’t recognize any of it. She looked back at the men. “What is this place?”

“It’s a start.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT

Jacob, Rogers, and James now lay shivering in damp grass, a dense fog rolling into the valley out of the surrounding hills. Fire glowed in the distance, the woods fully engulfed and no teams of fire fighters to battle them. Through the warm tones of the fire, Jacob could see the glistening frost on the grass. He wished he'd taken the time to wear warmer gear, the dirt and blood-covered blouse and armor doing little against the chilled morning air. His food was gone, and only a tiny bit of water sloshed around in a near-empty canteen.

Their packs had been left back in the thick of the woods. All they carried now were their rifles and ammunition. They'd spent the night in the foundation of a burned-out gas station, cautiously moving to their current spot long before dawn. This bit of real estate was on the approach to a small village. They'd seen lights there from the high ground and, from markings on the trails and vehicle traffic, believed that's where the captives were taken.

James was on watch, and Jacob knew he should sleep, but between the shivering, ache in his belly, and the restless thoughts, he found it impossible. He lifted his head and looked to the western horizon; there was still no sun. He forced a roll and felt the dog move anxiously behind his calves. No pause in the big man's heavy breathing beneath his poncho liner, Rogers ignored his movements.

Cautiously working to his side, he pulled up the binoculars from the grass to his front and surveyed the terrain. James positioned them on the slope of a ridge, distant from the village. They lined up so that a far off

streetlight was directly ahead, like a beacon, guessing at what the terrain would bring in the daylight. With the coming of dawn, Jacob could just barely make out the manmade shapes of walls and peaked roofs. A lone street lamp illuminated an iron gate maybe a half mile from their hide.

Suspiciously, there were neither people nor the Deltas—or more deadly Red Sleeves—in sight. Several vehicles had moved down the road in both directions, both entering and exiting the gate. Jacob wanted to get closer, attempt to enter the gate or climb the wall, but Rogers wouldn't allow it. The plan was to lie in overwatch and develop a strategy. They were on their own, and no help would come if they were compromised.

James edged closer and looked over the same space. "If they have sentries out, they must be behind the walls."

"Can this be done?"

James furrowed his brow as he focused on the far off gate. "I guess that depends on what we plan to do."

"If you all aren't talking about coffee then shut the hell up," Rogers mumbled, moving under the poncho liner. He pulled back the blanket and tussled to his side before propping up on his elbows.

The sun was slowly breaking the horizon. Jacob watched as the black shapes became a large, gated community. A tall fence moved out to the left and right. A well maintained blacktop road met the gate. He was punched on the shoulder and caught Rogers handing him a small hunk of jerky. Jacob grabbed it and stuffed it in his cheek before putting his eyes back on the binoculars. "When do we go down?" Jacob whispered.

"Pssst," James hissed. "We got movement."

Jacob saw a vehicle convoy approaching the gate; the tickle in his ear let him know it was their vehicles. Four personnel carriers in a straight line, they slowed and stopped just short of the gate. A red-sleeved beast exited the first carrier and bound to the gate, pushing it back, allowing the convoy to enter, and closing it behind the last vehicle.

"Strange... they opened the gate themselves, no guard posted," Rogers whispered.

Within minutes the tickle was gone, and they were again alone in the high grass.

James sighed and backed away, catching Jacob's stare. "What?" he asked.

“I’m sorry, Jacob, but this isn’t going to work,” James whispered.

“Now hold—”

Rogers tilted his wrist, looking down. “He’s right, best case we get everyone killed. They’re running some sort of base out of there. We can’t take it alone.”

Jacob turned to Rogers. “Like you said... no guard.”

Rogers grimaced. “That just means they are confident.”

“Or they have an inner perimeter,” James added.

“If we’re not here to get them out, why the hell *are* we here?” Jacob said.

“Recon, maybe take a head.”

“A head?”

“Sure every enemy has a leader; maybe we can kill or capture one. James, see if you can sneak around that wall; travel east and look for a secondary entrance. I’ll take Jacob to the west. Don’t engage; we need to see what’s in there.”

James nodded, pulling his gear in and stuffing it into pockets on his vest. “Back here in four hours then?”

“Wait no longer than that. If we aren’t here, fall back to the bunker.” Rogers rolled to the right and sat up. He folded the poncho liner then opened a small pack and removed four grenades still in the tubes, handing two to James before placing the other two in pouches on his chest rig. He stuffed the blanket into the small pack and readied his rifle. “Go ahead, James, I’ll give you a five-minute start before we move. If you hear shooting, don’t try to back us up, just bee-line to the bunker.”

James grinned. “Understood, but I can’t make any promises.”

Before Rogers could argue, James was on his feet moving down the hill with the dog close by his side. Jacob watched the man glide down the hill and disappear into heavy vegetation at the base. Soon there was no sign that he’d ever been there. Rogers looked at Jacob. “You ready?”

He nodded and signaled a thumbs up. Jacob stood and fell in line behind Rogers. They moved away from the gate, staying just below the hilltop, careful not to profile themselves against the rising sun. Jacob felt good to be back on his feet, the movement helping to warm his cold and cramped muscles. They passed down a draw and toward a thick batch of vegetation.

Rogers set the pace, cutting back and forth over easier-to-travel terrain. They moved around a low, open area, sticking to the shadows of the hill.

Jacob looked back at the high ridge behind him, its high grass now swallowed in shadows. Looking further east, he could see a sloping face that overlooked the west wall. Rogers pointed to it and dropped to his knees then slowly leopard-crawled into a batch of low grass.

Jacob could tell by the growth patterns of the vegetation that this is where the field would have been cut to before the attacks. The grass went from a tall, brushed clean appearance to more wild and mixed with weeds and scrub brush. Looking closer at the high walls as the sun hit the surface, Jacob suddenly could see that it was different. “Rogers, that material, what is it?”

Holding the binoculars, Rogers scanned the fence. “A type of carbon fiber maybe? This has to be a base, why else build a wall?”

Rogers pointed to a batch of playground equipment surrounded by a small walking path that led into an open slot on the wall filled with a narrow gate. Jacob put his rifle to his cheek and scanned the low ground ahead. No movement, the area appeared completely unoccupied. The pedestrian gate hung closed and a broken sapling slapped against the surface of the nearby wall.

On the far side of the walls, shingled rooftops glistened in the morning sun and the shadow of the hills behind them receded. Clouds of smoke in the distance drifted lazily on the horizon. Using the binoculars, they spotted a road that meandered through the small community. Rogers tapped Jacob’s shoulder then indicated an elevated mound near the edge of the clean grass. It was higher than the rest of the nearly flat ground that ringed the fence, but they would have to cross open terrain to reach it.

Jacob nodded a reply and followed his leader toward the position. Wading through high grass, Jacob could feel the pace pick up. He felt the urgency; they needed to get set before the sun completely broke the high ground behind them and washed them in daylight. As the shadows pulled toward them, Jacob instinctively swallowed at a tickle at the back of his neck. His muscles tightened. “Rogers,” he whispered above the labored breath of his movement.

“I feel it too, just keep moving.”

Rogers scrambled ahead and dove into high grass as the vibration intensified. Jacob low-crawled, following Rogers' boots up the incline of the mound. He could hear the sound of the vehicles; the *whooshing* their engines made, defying gravity as they forced away from the ground.

He crawled up until the ground leveled out then they turned and pushed their weapons in front of them, faces down in the earth, taking labored breaths from both exhaustion and adrenaline. When he dared, he slowly lifted his head just high enough so that he could peek through the tall grass. They'd closed the distance to the pedestrian gate to less than a football field.

It was in easy firing range now. The sapling no longer swung with the breeze. Beside it stood a tall, red-sleeved soldier. The creature carried a weapon at the low ready, while a larger group of them were forming up inside the wall with the vehicles inside the now open gate.

"You think they know we're here?" Jacob whispered. "What made them rush out like that?"

"No, if they knew, we'd be dead, just stay cool."

Jacob's eyes met Rogers' stare. "Okay, what do we do now?"

The hardened soldier pressed closer to the earth and dipped his chin. Jacob's eyes followed the motion and saw them—a large group of people, mostly women and children, walking two by two in a long column on the path. They were flanked on both sides by the red-sleeved aliens. As they got closer, Jacob could see they were being followed by Deltas. Moving differently now, they marched in straight lines, their black eyes locked straight ahead.

Jacob began to speak, but Rogers silenced him with a finger to his lips. The civilians carried no belongings. Women gripped the hands of children; those too young to walk were carried. The Deltas seemed to focus on moving the civilians forward, while the Red Sleeves were on lookout, searching for threats. As the group neared the gate, more Reds exited, these also joined by the smaller, gold-sleeved creatures.

The approaching civilians stopped short of the gate. They were quickly grouped together and formed into a long line with the Deltas directly behind them and to the side, effectively fencing them off. One by one, a Gold Sleeve would leave the gate and approach a family unit. Dividing a parent and children from the others, the alien would then escort these small groups

through the gates, a new gold member replacing it before identifying a new batch of civilians.

On more than one occasion, a civilian would hesitate or resist instructions to follow; these would somehow be dropped to the ground then carried by a Red. Soon the entire group of civilians was inside the walls. The Deltas turned and began moving back down the path into the direction they'd come from with the Red Sleeves forming up to follow them.

The pedestrian gate was now closed; the Reds inside the wall vanished.

"What just happened?" Jacob whispered, seeing the last of the marching Deltas fade from sight.

"They're herding us; using the Deltas as sheep dogs, and those damn Reds as shepherds. That explains what we found. They killed off all the men, gathered the women and children, and took them here."

"Why?"

"I don't know, but I think they're safe. Why take them and go to all of this trouble just to kill them?"

"Why do *any* of this? What are we going to do?"

Before Rogers could answer, the snapping of distant gunfire echoed through the valley, a single gunshot quickly followed by two more.

Rogers grunted and pushed away. "And that would be James. It's time to move."

CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE

Clem rolled his shoulders, forcing aches and cramps from his weary muscles. His pack and rifle lay at his feet. So far he'd managed to keep up with the younger men, but at over sixty years old, he knew his days were catching up with him. It took them all night to make the climb to the top of Emmerson's Ridge, and now they were all paying for it. Exhausted and pushed to the limits, the stress of moving through the enemy territory had worn heavily on him. Looking around, for the first time, Clem began to regret having joined up with this group.

He was doing fine on his own. Surviving the initial attacks then living quietly in a secluded cabin between the American lines to the west and the Canadian forces behind him to the east. He'd managed to stay hidden from the waves of refugees, and even score a way to trade goods with the passing patrols. The American soldiers were always willing to give up a few rounds of ammunition or a ration pack for a portion of his homemade wine and spirits. Masterson and his instructors had become some of his best customers—probably why he allowed them near his place after the big bomb dropped, and then allowed himself to be convinced to go with them.

The old man lowered himself to the ground and leaned back against his pack. He was no stranger to this life. Not so much a soldier, but having spent a career working with the intelligence service, Clem had paid his dues on the ground and in the bush. Still, he was no infantry commander, and he felt at odds in his current situation. Surrounded by the grunts and their leaders, he felt exposed and vulnerable. His trade had called for being alone or in a small group, hidden in plain sight. Clem knew he didn't belong; he

was used to working with a scalpel, whereas the tool of choice for these men was a chainsaw.

There were caches of food and ammunition hidden along the ridge and Masterson had his men moving up and down it, securing the goods. Men stacked bundles of stockpiled weapons and ammunition, all makes and model of military arms hidden there weeks ago.

Clem watched as the veteran soldier approached him. He waved a hand, inviting the tired soldier to sit. Masterson nodded in recognition of the gesture and turned to look back down the valley before slowly lowering himself to a knee. The man was breathing hard and sweat lined his brow. Clem extended a hand and tossed the man a canteen filled with cold water. The soldier put it to his lips and drank thirstily.

Masterson dropped to the ground and let the canteen fall by his side. “You know, I thought we were winning again; maybe had the black-eyed bastards pushed back. After everything we went through, the numbers we’ve lost, I thought we were finally gaining ground again.

“But this—whatever this is—Clem, you know in the last forty-eight hours we’ve lost everything we’ve gained? I don’t know what we have left to fight for. For the first time, I don’t know what in the hell to do, or how in the hell to do it.”

Clem nodded, looking along the cluster of men hidden in the rocks and stumps along the ridgeline, most of them now asleep under ponchos while a small working party was reloading magazines and sorting through supplies. He reached across the ground and retrieved the canteen, returning it to his belt. He sighed and leaned farther into his pack. “You need to cut them loose,” Clem said.

“Loose?!” Masterson said, unable to hide the surprise in his voice.

The old man dipped his chin and used a hand to rub his wrinkled brow. “You had what? Two hundred men three days ago; a hundred yesterday and now down to forty, maybe fifty, still able to fight. You need to create a smaller footprint, and you need to do it fast before they are all gone. Send them to ground.”

“Not much of a plan.”

“It’s the best I got for you, Matt,” Clem said, using the old soldier’s nickname. “Divide them up, pick a leader, give them instructions to go out and raise hell for the enemy. Or send them east to see if the lines are still

holding there. Hell, just tell them to hide and wait it out; better than losing the lot of them on some empty country road.

“This isn’t giving up; it’s what defending armies do when confronted by a greater force. We can’t face this head on. They have the weapons and they have the numbers. It’s time for the Republican Guard to fade back into the population, preserve their numbers, and prepare for the resistance.”

Not missing the reference to the invasion of Iraq, Masterson looked back at Clem. “I know you said you were some sort of cop at one time, but really, who the hell are you?”

“I’m just a tired old man with too many scars.”

Masterson looked Clem in the eye, frustration showing on his face. “That’s it then? I tell them to hide and wait it out?”

Clem shook off the comment and reached into a side pocket of his oilskin jacket. He pulled out a stainless steel flask and removed the cap, putting the neck to his nose before taking a long sip. He pursed his lips and grinned before passing the flask to Masterson.

“You know, I’ve been thinking about this since day one. The meteorites, the Day of the Darkness; that was just to soften us up, make us weak and destroy our defenses, get us to tighten up behind walls. Hell... and that’s exactly what we did, just like they expected us to. We consolidated our forces, our people.”

Masterson took a sip and held back a burning cough. He nodded. “That’s what we did at Meaford and similar places across the globe, barricaded behind walls.”

Clem pointed at him. “And you know what else? Look at the way we abandoned our conventional weapons, tanks, and fighter aircraft when we lost the airfields and oil reserves. That’s all gone now with the waves of those Deltas. We settled in for a long war with them, and now look.

“Then came the first of those damn balloons soaring overhead, positioning themselves like landing craft in the English Channel. The way they hit the ground with the bombs, destroying population centers and bases, once again softening us up before landing their troops. And look at them now, the lack of aircraft, not a single drone. Why is that?”

Masterson shrugged as he drank again this time more heavily, straining to keep up with the old man’s thoughts. He held in the liquid and shrugged before passing back the flask.

“Because they don’t have any, that’s why. I think they’re stuck here. These aren’t Viking raiders, these are Roman conquerors; hell, pilgrims even, and we’re the Indians this time. I don’t think they’re much different from us, maybe some new gadgets and tricks to kill us, but I’d imagine their tech is nothing outrageous; if it was, we’d already be dead.

“Those were drop ships, and—I believe—on a one-way trip at that. Those things aren’t here to steal shit from our planet and leave. Nope, that’d be too simple. They’re here for the planet. They’re here to colonize. They want it all, and best I figure, they aren’t leaving.”

Masterson laughed. “And what do you plan to do about it?”

“I sure as hell won’t surrender, and we’re dead if we all stay bunched up like this. Maybe in small teams we’ve got a chance.” Clem chuckled. “I’ve been watching their movements, and they’ve all come from and returned to the same direction. I think one of those drop ships landed close to here and set up a base. I’m going to see if I can find it.”

“And if you do?”

Clem smiled. “Well, hopefully kill a bunch of them and live long enough to brag about it over a jar of homemade shine,” he said, taking another long sip and passing the flask back. “How about you, Matt? You think you got another war left in you?”

The old soldier grinned. “You know, Clem, I’ve been fighting on the other side my entire life; guess it’s time to see how the gorillas do it.”

CHAPTER SEVENTY

Laura tried to remain calm; she put on a strong face for Katy, who was completely unaware of their situation and enjoying the new surroundings. The home was warm and clean, she found the kitchen lightly stocked with food, the refrigerator held a metallic pitcher of water, and there was even bread on the counter. All the drawers and cupboards were empty of china or glass, supplied instead with a set of plastic plates and cups.

Laura searched the old house, finding closets cleaned out, dresser drawers empty. Moving from room to room, every window was sealed shut, and every door locked from the outside. She entered the small bathroom and tried the faucets, finding the water hot. *“How can this be? What is this place?”*

A knock at the front door, followed by the clunk of the lock, frightened her. She rushed from the bathroom and took a position between Katy and the entrance. The door slowly opened, revealing the smiling face of the short Frenchman. “Sorry to alarm you, Mrs. Anderson, it is time for reception.”

Laura backed away, lifting an arm to shield Katy behind her. “Francis, I don’t understand why you are doing this. Just let us go.”

The man looked at her with a shocked expression. “Go? Why would you wish to leave? Where would you go, the camps? Would you prefer that over a warm home and the food you have been provided? Is that what you would prefer for your child?”

“I had that before—”

“And you have it now. Please, Mrs. Anderson, it would be unwise to decline reception. It is required, and not attending will have consequences.”

Laura backed away, getting closer to Katy.

“They would take her from you,” the man said, looking to Katy. “Please, just do as they ask. You’ll see; it gets easier.”

“How do you know, Francis? Why do you trust them?”

“What’s not to trust? They feed us, they provide us shelter, and they protect us from the martyrs.”

“The martyrs?”

“Those who preceded the Messenger.”

“You mean the Deltas?”

“Yes, of course.”

“But they made them,” Laura said. “They created those monsters!”

“They made everything; they are the Creators. Please, we cannot be late,” the man pleaded.

Laura ignored him. “Why did they attack us?”

The man turned and looked at the open door. Laura could see people moving past it, all dressed in the dark-blue and the soft-yellow gowns. “You mustn’t speak this way; you shouldn’t even think it. Blasphemy is not tolerated among them. Please, just come; all will be explained.”

Laura could tell by his words that the man was worried; not only for her, but for himself as well. She turned and held Katy’s hand before looking back at him. He smiled eagerly and waved a hand, ushering them ahead of him. She took a deep breath and told herself to relax, this wasn’t submission, she was just learning about them; she would find what she needed to know and look for a way out.

“Okay,” she said softly and stepped through the doorway and onto a narrow sidewalk.

The roadway in front of the small house was now filled with a parade of people. The helmeted Reds lined the sidewalk like security guards, searching the group for threats. Francis moved close to her. “Now just walk with me. Do not talk to anyone; communication with other new arrivals is frowned upon.

“If you have a question or need assistance, ask me and no one else. Do you understand?”

Laura nodded her acknowledgement without looking at him. She was now in the mix, Katy walking close beside her. The road was filled with clusters of women and walking children, each with a man in dark-blue gowns of their own. She looked ahead at the end of the road between the houses, and could just barely make out their destination.

“Where are the men?” Laura asked.

“There are no men, except for those like myself.”

“And what are you?”

“Think of me as your sponsor, to assist with your transition.”

Laura looked down at Katy. “Are you okay, hun?”

Francis grinned. “She is fine. Children are more receptive to the knowledge plate; her level of understanding already exceeds ours. Her mind is more open and less resistant to the transition.”

Laura hesitated, a chill moving down her spine, causing her legs to stiffen. Ahead was the globe, the mammoth pumpkin-shaped orb now buried into the flat ground with only its top remaining exposed. Missing portions of it showed entry hatches and openings. She saw Deltas along the outside of it moving earth and cutting away vegetation, making room for vehicles and formations of gathering Reds. At the front was a large stage. The procession of people was leaving the road and approaching it.

“Francis,” she said with fear in her voice.

He gripped her free hand and squeezed it. “What you are feeling is normal. I was afraid at my first reception as well. Soon you will understand.”

A formation of Reds moved them tighter together until they were all clustered at the front of the ship. Unlike other crowds of this size, the group was silent, only the breathing and rustling of their clothing providing any ambient noise. Above the large platform, an entryway appeared at the side of the orb. A group of Reds exited and lined the edges of the platform, soon followed by a group of the smaller creatures with gold sleeves. Like the guide, Thera, these wore no helmets. They formed a straight line along the face of the platform then knelt low. Behind them, a blue light shone in the entrance, and out walked a male dressed head to toe in glimmering gold. It was taller than the golden-sleeved guides, but nowhere near the size of the Reds. The crowd let out a combined gasp as the thing moved forward, stopping directly in line of the gold-sleeved guides.

She felt Francis squeeze on her hand. She knew it was his reminder to remain calm. Francis put his lips close to her ear. "This is the Messenger," he whispered.

The thing moved to the center of the line then raised its arms. Laura looked and watched as the crowd around her knelt, taking the same position as the guides on the platform. A pressure from the top of her head urged her down. She dropped to her knees, holding her eyes closed against the pressure. The creature waited until everyone had followed suit. Laura heard an angered shout near the front and looked up; an older woman stood defiantly shouting, her hand pointed at the Messenger. He flipped a wrist in her direction. She crumpled to the ground and was quickly collected by Reds that moved in from the perimeter. The woman was hurriedly shuttled out of sight.

She returned the squeeze and looked down at Katy, giving the girl a small smile. Katy looked up playfully and leaned into her mother, the young girl somehow sensing the seriousness of the gathering.

The Messenger lowered his arms, and the Golds rose back to their feet, the crowd rising with them.

Stepping to the edge of the platform, the Messenger began to speak. Once again the words came to Laura as thoughts, not transmissions through her ears. "We have come home to you, and now you are saved. You are now a part of us, as you have always been. This we accept. You will be provided for; all of your needs will be met. We welcome you into our civilization; any rejection of this will not be tolerated."

The Messenger stepped back and looked to his right, then nodded. A pair of red-sleeved guards emerged, holding the older woman who'd shouted the outburst earlier. They brought her forward. The woman's body appeared paralyzed, frozen into an already kneeling position.

A pair of guides emerged out of the blue light, pushing a large golden cauldron. The Messenger approached the old woman and removed the knowledge plate from the crown of her skull. Freed from its hold, the woman began to struggle, yet unable to break the grip of the Reds holding her tight. The Messenger waved them forward. They stopped just short of the cauldron, shaking the woman and forcing her to her feet. The Messenger gripped the back of the woman's head and looked back into the crowd.

“Those who refuse our message will be martyred.” The Messenger forced the woman’s head into the cauldron. Her body convulsed, fighting against the grip of the guards. The old woman fought, legs kicking, splashing the black, oily liquid from the pot. Suddenly, her body relaxed, and the Messenger released his grip on her head. The guards pulled the old woman back. She stood upright and opened eyes as black as coal. The crowd let out a collective gasp.

Katy buried her head into her mother’s waist. The Messenger stood with his arms raised; Laura looked back to the front, the pressure in her knowledge plate forcing her eyes to remain open. Silenced, with all of their eyes to the front, the crowd stood fixed on the woman’s transformed body.

Raising his hands, the Messenger began to speak when its head snapped back as a gunshot cracked through the air. Laura felt the release of the knowledge plate when the Messenger’s head slumped forward, its forehead destroyed as two more holes thumped into its chest. Gunshots echoed in the midst of Reds rushing forward to surround the Messenger. Screaming, the crowd panicked, while Laura stood still, a smile forming on her face.

“The Assassins reject your message,” she said.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE

“Holy shit!” Jacob shouted, running for the tree line. “Whatever just happened, they are *pissed*.” The air was erupting with the vibration of the alien vehicles coming to life. Blue bolts of light ripped across the far horizon.

“Get up the ridge and into the tree line,” Rogers yelled.

Jacob led the way, stumbling through the high grass, colliding with the steep slope of the ridge at a full sprint. He twisted his gloved hands into the thick vegetation and pulled himself up, his legs pumping for traction. The *voomp* of the enemy gunfire growing louder and nearer to them, Jacob summited the steep hill and reached back, pulling Rogers up behind him. They low-crawled into the cover of high trees overlooking the walled community.

“There,” Rogers said, pointing.

Cutting across the low ground and running close to the fence, they spotted James, the dog close by his side. Splashes of blue raced by him, the shots going up and smacking into the sides of the far off hills. Rogers raised his rifle, spotting the first of James’ pursuers—a Red in close pursuit.

“We’re in it now,” Rogers said, pulling the trigger. Firing several rounds, the Red tumbled to the ground. James lifted his head. Spotting them on the high ridgeline, he corrected his course and ran directly to them.

In his peripheral vision, Jacob saw the pedestrian gate open and three Reds move into the open. Unaware of them on the ridge, the Reds turned to the west, attempting to cut James off. He turned and squared his chest to them. Putting the rifle to his cheek, he eased off the safety and took aim at

the tail runner. He let loose a salvo of five rounds that left the three Reds dead on the ground. A blue splash of plasma smacked the trees over his head, raining down flaming debris. Jacob spun back to the front; the number of James' pursuers had doubled, and then tripled.

Many were firing as they galloped after him. Jacob whipped left and leveled his rifle. Now laying down suppressive fire, rounds going wide, it was enough to slow the pack of Reds and force them to take cover. James was at the ridge now, Duke running up the slope ahead of him.

"Move your ass," Rogers yelled.

James looked up at him, panting. "Tha' fuck you think I'm doing?"

Rogers pulled a smoke canister from his belt and threw it into the distance, the canister popping and spewing green smoke to screen James' climb. Jacob moved back into the trees, taking cover behind a tall oak. He bled off the remnants of his magazine, watching another Red fall. Blue plasma raced in his direction, cutting through the smoke and striking precariously close to James as he rolled over the top of the slope.

Rogers reached down and yanked him to his feet. "'Bout time, you lazy bastard. Hope you're up for a run."

"Hell, I thought you'd never ask."

Jacob watched as a formation of armored vehicles rounded the curve of the wall and came into view. He saw the flash as their main guns fired. Jacob dropped back and rolled into the woods, landing on his feet at a full run, the others close behind him. He felt the blast and heat on his back as the forest and ridgeline exploded.

Then it was over. They continued running, crashing through the thick underbelly of the forest, their ears ringing, and their skin burning from the flash burns. At a bend in the contour of the terrain, Rogers led them again uphill, moving them into a draw before heading into a copse of fallen trees. Jacob hurdled over a thick tree, and after several steps dropped into a bed of leaves and pine needles, the adrenaline crash leaving him exhausted. He held the rifle to his chest and hung his head with his mouth wide open, gasping for air.

The others fell in beside him, doing the same. "What the fuck happened back there?" Rogers asked between labored breaths.

James pulled Duke close to him, running his hands along the dog's body, checking it for injuries before rubbing the dog's ears and pouring it a

handful of water. “I broke up some sort of ceremony; some flamboyant fucker in a Liberace dress was torturing some old lady. James isn’t okay with shit like that. I put him to sleep.”

“Yeah, you might have put him to sleep, but you managed to wake up their entire army. Who knows what other damage you caused?” Rogers said.

“It is what it is, but I bet they think twice before doing silly shit like that out in the open again.”

Jacob leaned forward, dropping the empty magazine from his rifle before searching for a replacement in his vest. “Did you see anything else?”

James nodded, drying his hand on his trousers. “They got ’em, lots of people in there. It’s some kind of town. I was able to get up to a rooftop just across from the orb. They built a fence that runs right around that small town. There are a few houses on the backside that look like they were damaged when that thing landed. For whatever reason, they excluded them from the fence.

“I had a good view of the back approach; something was going on. They positioned all of their guards in and around the orb—had all the civilians marching down the main street for some sort of concert, gathering, or something. I couldn’t hear anything, but it must have been important. I was about to pull back and head for the tower when I saw them pull some lady onto the stage. They dumped her head into some of that Delta stew, the black shit that turns them.”

“And you stopped it?” Jacob asked.

“He’s not in good shape. Popped his grape and put two into his chest.”

Rogers grunted. “This isn’t good. I think you just poured gas all over the hornets’ nest. They’ll double up security now and go out in force after us.”

James spat and, using a log, drug himself back to his feet. “Wake up, brother, what you think they were already doing? I just let them know they can be touched. I put them on notice. And hell, I plan to do more of it. I just need a bigger gun.”

“You might have crushed our only chances of getting inside.”

“Damn, Rogers, what the hell are you so afraid of? Look around you. We’re fucked. This is all lost already, there’s nothing left to lose. I lay up there on that roof watching them, so damn many of them, and not that many

of us. The people filed out of those houses, all of them falling in line, doing what they were told to—”

Jacob leaned in. “Did you see Laura?”

The bearded scout shook his head. “No... just crowds of faces all dressed alike. But for the most part they looked safe—except for the one, but she stood up to them. I saw her shout at them before they snatched her from the crowd. Maybe that’s what we’ve got to look forward to. Do what we’re told to survive.”

“Except they don’t accept men into their little commune,” Jacob said.

“Wrong, they had men. I watched a couple of them really close. Little rat bastards wearing blue pajamas, like trustees or something, they had more freedom of movement than the others. I was planning to snatch one of the little turncoats. Well, before I saw the Liberace routine.”

“We need to go back,” Jacob said, having heard enough.

James grinned, swinging his legs over a nearby log. “Now you’re talking. But first we need to get back to the tower and rearm.”

CHAPTER SEVENTY-TWO

The old man lay tucked into thick grass, his eye glued to the scope with a clear sight of the roadblock. He was in an elevated position and less than five hundred meters from the target; they would take several down before they had to withdraw back into the woods. Even if they did not kill them all, it was enough to slow them down, and that was their main objective—to disrupt the enemy movement.

A single alien vehicle blocked the intersection; two Red Sleeves in front, another behind it, one sticking out of the armored turret. The back of the carrier jostled and a ramp dropped, more alien soldiers exiting and moving into the grass alongside the carrier. The ear tickling vibrations stopped as their vehicle shut down and settled onto the surface of the road. These things were settling in for a long shift.

Clem grinned. Excited at the prospects in front of him, he let his hand move to the top of his scope and turned a dial, illuminating a red dot. He steadied the .308 bolt-action rifle and focused on the alien in the turret. He knew more of Matt's soldiers would be farther up the trail, setting improvised explosive devices on the road leading back to the alien base. If these called for help, there would be a surprise for any quick reaction force. They were ready to take the fight back to the enemy. Clem turned his wrist and looked at his watch, almost noon. Almost time to begin.

"Hold up," Masterson whispered.

His spotter was positioned just behind him to his right. He was behind the stock of an M240B machine gun fitted with a long-range scope—a gift from the stores at Emmerson's ridge. "What is it?" Clem asked.

“We got civvies on the road, moving this way.”

Clem removed his eye from the scope and squinted into the bright sunlight. He spotted a group of refugees, women and children carrying heavy bags, one with a suitcase on rollers. A sight right out of the Third World. He used his scope to get a better view. Panning left and right, he could only see women; two paced out in front of the others—an elderly woman and a short, husky woman, wrapped in blankets.

The two red-sleeved soldiers at the front of the convoy spread out on the road, watching the approaching mass. One turned back, signaling the alien in the turret. A short moment later, a Gold Sleeve exited the back of the vehicle and joined them on the road. The creature made its way to the front, anticipating, almost welcoming, the approaching civilians.

“They surrendering?” Clem whispered.

“Looks like it. Your call, what do you want to do?”

“I’m hungry, but I’m not eager to take down friendlies in the crossfire,” Clem said. “Let’s see how this plays out.”

As the civilians drew closer, the Gold Sleeve stopped and allowed the Reds to move into position. Clem watched as the Gold opened its arms in a welcoming gesture, waving the women forward, at the same time signaling for the Reds to back away. The guards complied and took a step back, lowering their battle rifles. The civilians hesitated, but continued their march forward.

The Gold slowly approached, her arms outstretched, palms open. A female at the lead of the group stepped forward and stopped when the alien raised her hand. She approached the female and placed a reflective cap atop her head. Almost instantly, the female knelt down to the surface of the road. The Gold nodded and reached into a pouch, retrieving another bowl. It looked up to the next female and waved her forward—the heavyset woman draped in blankets. Two teenaged girls followed close behind, flanking the blanketed woman on both sides.

“I don’t like this. I think I’ll put a bullet in that little one handing out Yamakas,” Clem whispered, allowing the red dot to pan and settle center on the back of the gold-sleeved alien.

Before Masterson could respond, the large woman threw the blanket aside, revealing a snub-nosed revolver. Time seemed to slow as Clem watched the woman’s arm extend inches from the gold-sleeved alien’s face.

The woman pulled the trigger, and the Gold's helmeted head snapped, a puff of red mist exploding from the back. The teen girls on either side drew small hand guns, each unloading into the guards to their fronts.

"Give them cover!" Clem shouted, finally back to his senses. He pivoted hard on his elbows and centered his optic on the alien in the turret. Before he could pull the trigger, the top of the vehicle exploded in bright yellow flames. The alien flailed, its blue-and-red suit engulfed in flame. Clem exhaled and squeezed the trigger, the round tearing through the alien's armor. He heard Masterson's machine gun open up behind him, ripping rounds into the aliens in reserve, cutting them down as they ran forward toward the civilians, making them easy targets in the open, and swallowed in the flames of the burning vehicle.

Clem pulled his eye back from the scope, working the bolt as he searched for more targets. He saw the women now scattered across the road front. The rolling suitcase was open, revealing bottles stuffed with rags; the women were showering the vehicle with Molotov cocktails. The husky woman stopped over each downed creature, finishing them with a single shot to the head from the revolver while the teen girls swarmed over the dead, removing equipment.

With all of the aliens down, Clem eased off the trigger. He looked to Masterson, who was already on his feet and bounding ahead toward the ambush site. Clem pushed himself to his knees and gathered his equipment. He made another quick scan of the area before moving down, watching the crumpled alien forms as he approached.

The women on the road took notice of the approaching men. The broad shouldered woman drew a second handgun from her belt and leveled it at Masterson, who quickly put up his hands and slowed his approach. "All on the same side here," Clem shouted, closing the distance. "I'm Clem; this is my buddy, Matt. Mind telling me who you all are?"

The woman lowered her weapon and grabbed the gold-sleeved body by a wrist, straightening its arm. Another female stepped from the back and, using a long blade, slashed down, removing the dead alien's hand.

"What are you doing?" Clem asked.

The woman turned to face him. She stopped and opened what looked like a velvet bag attached to the gold-sleeved creature's hip. She dumped its contents onto the road, the saucer-shaped devices clanging as they spilled

out. "These are some type of mind-control devices. Only a guide's hand can remove it once it's in place." She pointed as another woman used the dead alien's hand to remove the saucer from the elderly woman's head.

"Guides?" Masterson asked.

The women quickly circled back around the blanketed woman, the teen girls holding bags stuffed with goods, the roller suitcase now re-filled with the alien rifles. She looked at Clem and Masterson then down at a stopwatch hanging around her neck. "I'd be happy to speak to you, but we have to get off the road. They'll have called for backup by now."

An explosion roared from the north. Clem turned to see a mushroom cloud forming over the distant trees. "We were ready for their back up," Clem said. "Mind telling me who you all are now?"

Before she could answer, an open-backed pickup truck raced onto the road from somewhere in the woods. The women quickly tossed their goods into the back and piled in.

"You can call me Ruth," she said, tossing her blankets into the truck and pulling herself into the back.

"Now, you all coming or just going to stand here with your thumbs up your ass?" the woman shouted.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-THREE

The man's heart still raced in a panicked frenzy; he stood by the window, looking out into a street filled with soldiers. Transports roared over the surface, surrounded by scores of the witnesses; no longer apathetic, they were now active and enraged. *The high council will not stand for this. They will be out for vengeance and looking for someone to punish.* He looked at the defiant woman he had been assigned. *Why this one?* he thought, dropping his head. *Why not one of the more subservient wives from the refugee camps, who were eager for a fresh bed and comfort?*

"What have your people done?" Francis said, eyeing the woman standing stoically behind a kitchen counter. He saw the smug expression on her face, the lack of understanding in her eyes.

Laura laughed defiantly. "*My people?* Are you no longer part of the human race?"

"What was it you said when the Messenger was killed?" he asked.

She pursed her lips and looked away.

"It was something about rejection; do you know what this act of defiance will mean to the community?" Francis turned away, pulling the heavy drapes closed. "There is so much you don't understand; so much that *your people* don't understand. If they only knew, they would stop these senseless attacks."

She ignored him, moved to the refrigerator, retrieving a pitcher of water, and filled a plastic cup, slowly locking eyes on the locked front door. He caught her gaze and followed it. *What is wrong with this woman? Why can she not see the comfort and safety the community provides?*

“Don’t even think about running, especially not now. They would kill you for sure. They won’t be able to hold back the soldiers. The entire council will be out for blood tonight,” he said. *And my blood with it when they discover my failure with this one.*

“Why are you here, Francis? Why us? Why can’t you take a different family of prisoners?”

Oh my dear, how I wish I had a choice. Francis shook his head and moved away from the window. Walking around the sofa, he sighed and sat heavily on the overstuffed cushions. He shrugged before leaning his head back. “Again, I am not a guard and you are not a prisoner.”

Laura forced a smug laugh. “So I can leave then? You won’t try to stop me?”

“You’re safe here.” He clenched his fist, letting it rest on his thigh. She was lucky he did not believe in the practices of some of the other mentors. It was probably his French upbringing, his reluctance to violence, and maybe the distant thoughts of his own mother long gone. Besides, she was a strong woman, and Francis knew that barbaric methods would not work to win her over.

“I’m a prisoner. And you didn’t answer my question. Why us?” Laura asked, her tone changing.

“I was assigned to you. I am your mentor.”

“Who assigned you?”

“The Creators, of course. We never know why; it is just the way.” *I wish I knew. What did I do to deserve this?*

Laura looked away and left the room, taking the water and walking the hallway to a small bedroom. Francis followed her, keeping his distance. Katy was asleep. He watched as she lifted the blankets around the girl and tucked them in, leaving the cup on a nightstand. He turned to the window and saw the ominous shadows moving past the drawn curtains. He watched as Laura moved to the glass and drew back the curtain, then pulled back upon seeing the witnesses walking a silent sentry around the homes in the neighborhood.

He stiffened his jaw. “They are for our protection,” Francis said quietly from behind her, trying to sound reassuring.

“Protection? Or to keep me from leaving or from talking to the neighbors,” Laura protested. She turned and edged past him back into the

living room, stopping in front of the door. Francis sighed and followed close behind her. He watched as she put her hand on the knob. “What would happen if I walked outside and went next door?”

Francis shrugged, knowing she would be killed before she reached the street. Maybe he should let her; end this struggle and take his chances with the council. “And why would you want to do that?”

She shook her head at him in frustration. He could see tears welling at the corners of her eyes—she was breaking.

“I don’t know... to borrow a cup of sugar. What does it matter?!” she said, her voice rising.

“I can send for anything you need; within reason, of course.”

With that, Laura finally burst into tears, her frustration peaking. He approached her, but she turned away and put up a hand. “Don’t even,” she shouted.

Francis backed away with his hands at his sides, his face showing sympathy but his mind smiling; this woman that put up the strong front was finally breaking. “You just don’t understand.”

“Then explain it to me,” she shouted. “Why are they here?”

Francis frowned and turned his back to her, smiling when she could not see. He took several steps before pausing to look back. “They may kill us all for what happened today. That’s the law if a community turns against a Messenger,” Francis said wearily before moving to the dining table and sitting. He folded his hands in front of him and looked down. It was the first time he had allowed Laura to see real emotion from him, and not the optimistic look of an infomercial sales clerk. He would have to use this opportunity to bring her into the fold.

“If that’s the law, then why are we still alive?” she asked.

He would have to plan every word. Every bit would have to draw her in to convince her that their path was the only way, and anything else would mean death or a life of suffering. “They are in session. Our only hope is that the elders consider this an outside attack and not from within the walls of the communal,” Francis said in a low voice while looking down at his hands. “Might I bother you for some tea? You’ll find it in the pantry.” A simple request, would she oblige him?

Laura nodded and opened the cabinet door, removing a covered tin filled with tea bags. As she retrieved the kettle from the stove and filled it,

she asked, “Who are the council?”

Francis sighed and looked up at her with serious eyes. “They are everything,” he said, the pitch of the salesman gone from his voice. “I’ve never seen them. I never will. They never come down.” He was not lying; in all the years he had been in the community, he’d never been allowed an audience with the Creators.

As far as Francis knew, they never visited the terrestrial planet and always stayed hidden from human eyes. He looked at her and pondered if she was ready and would be able to accept the truth should he tell her. There were arguments among the council that only children should be taken. It had been their way for centuries. Adults were deemed incompatible with the knowledge and would not accept the message; they were too old, too stubborn even, and their world views already coded.

But this was a migration and if the communities were to succeed, they would have to take in everyone. At some point an agreement was made; a worker class would be needed, and they couldn’t wait for a generation of children to come of age. The compromise was to accept women, mothers, with the reasoning that they would sacrifice for their offspring and willingly join the community.

“To Earth, you mean?” Laura asked.

Francis nodded; he would try. “Yes. Laura, I know this all sounds strange to you, unbelievable even, but they have been here long before any of us. Your indigenous people probably felt the same when they saw the first white man. But, you shouldn’t fear them; they don’t consider themselves guests or invaders. In their eyes, this is not our planet. It is theirs. They have invested in it, and we are the guests.”

“Guests?” Laura asked, moving to the table with the kettle and two small cups.

Francis thought for a moment. “Guest is the wrong word. Children, maybe ... or extended family left to occupy a residence. But they’re back now, and they aren’t happy with the way we’ve taken care of their home, the path we have taken. This was their planet and meant to be their home.”

She poured the hot water over a tea bag, filling the mug, and slid it across the table. Francis lifted it and teased the string, dunking the bag into the steaming liquid. He lifted the mug to his lips and took a cautious sip before setting it back in front of him. “They’ve been here many times—

many, many times over the ages. They planted the seeds, passively guided us, kick-started our development, and tracked our progress. All the signs of their visits were there if people had bothered to look. They are much older than us, you know. Their written history dates back to before the dinosaurs.

“When they first visited, they found a place that is only a shell of what it is today. Over a thousand years ago they started the exodus plan with hopes that when their planet died, ours would be ready for their arrival; that our people and technology would be ready for them.”

“A thousand years ago?” Laura asked.

“That was what they call ‘the beginning’. The first time a Messenger stepped foot on our planet and chose to intervene in our development, they formed their first outpost in the depths of a cave and used it to explore and examine our ways. The Messengers found us to be violent and disgusting creatures. Earth was rejected by the council, and it was determined the planet was not ready for their arrival.

“THIS IS WHY THEY FIRST CAME TO LIVE AMONG US. IT WAS A SMALL presence then; only a Messenger and a few guides to show us the way. A small human tribe was chosen and their leader given the truth. The first time they shared their message, they started a following that grew and spread quickly. That should have put us on the correct path to paradise; instead, our species resisted and failed to come together. Most of the populous rejected the message, and it led to wars with the tribes that failed to follow us.

“Don’t you understand? The Messengers guided us in the hope we would build a great society that they could one day join. They did not want to destroy us. However, we failed to evolve in time; we are still living as hundreds, even thousands, of tribes under many banners. The Creators have run out of time. Their planet is dying, and they can no longer wait for us to grow into a harmonious society. Now they have come to correct the wrongs of our way, and they will not stop until it is complete. Those that have taken witness have ensured this.”

“Witness? Why do you call them that?”

“They have been given the truth; it shows them the way and has made them genetically superior—”

“It kills them. I’ve seen what it does, it took away my friends and neighbors,” she blurted out.

“The truth saves them, improves everything about them, and brings them into the communal in a way we could never comprehend.”

Laura looked away, clenching a fist and watching the shadows pass by the kitchen windows. “Then why were we spared from it?”

“Every civilization must make sacrifices to advance; the witnesses made that sacrifice for us. They have been granted the true potential of our race. You think of them as dead, but they aren’t... they now live in full connection with the Creator,” Francis said, looking up at the ceiling. “One day, they will be far greater than any of us.”

Laura scowled. “Is this just religious indoctrination, an interstellar cult? All of this is sounding more and more like a galactic holy war.”

Maybe she wasn’t ready, he thought. “You mustn’t speak that way. It’s blasphemy.”

“Blasphemy? You know we won’t stop, that we won’t stop fighting—wait, of course, you do know, don’t you? That’s why you’ve separated us from our men.”

“The soldiers have declared your men dangerous. Your men attacked us,” Francis said with sincerity.

“Attacked? Who are you, Francis? How did they get you?”

Thunder cracked in the distance and rain began to tap against the roof. Francis grinned and leaned back in his chair. *Maybe she understands more than she lets on*. “I am not important. You shouldn’t think in the ways of individuals. It will only prevent you from seeing the truth. We are a community; we must do what’s good for the community.”

Laura bit her lower lip, ignoring his statement. “Where the hell are you from? They’ve been here less than a week, yet you talk like you’ve known them your entire life.”

Francis grinned, thinking to his first days in the community as a child; a day when he was extracted from the burning rubble of a bombed city, tanks rumbling in the distance. How the Messengers took him in and showed him the way. His face broke into a smile. “Because I have been with them my entire life.”

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-FOUR

Rain pounded and soaked through his uniform top. They patrolled in a column with James leading the way, winding a path up the steep hillside toward the radio tower just visible in the distance. Lightning flashed, exposing bits of the darkened trail in strobes of uneven light. He couldn't get his mind off the walled community and the people inside. His heart told him Laura was there, and he wanted nothing more than to return. Looking ahead, he saw Rogers and James. He knew they wouldn't steer him wrong; he had to trust them as he always had.

James paused at the end of the thick woods. Kneeling, he let his eyes pan over the clearing ahead and pointed to a lone grassy hilltop barely visible in the low light. The steel bunker door cut into the hillside was barely visible between the flashes of light. "You think the others made it up here?" Jacob whispered.

Rogers shrugged. "Someone did, and they made a half-assed attempt at camouflaging the door with brush. I wonder who? Only one way to—"

"Wait," James whispered, extending an arm to ease them back into cover. He waved and pointed down the trail before ducking back into the brush.

Jacob followed the scout's gloved hand and saw them: three tall Red Sleeves leading a fourth and shorter Gold along the muddy trail that led to the radio tower. The aliens moved through a clearing of high grass, following the trail toward them at an angle. Jacob knew from the previous trip that the trail would disappear in a bend before traveling past where he

now stood. The two Reds stalked out front, leading the way, with the Gold in the middle, and the other Red following farther back.

Jacob crouched in the heavy brush and raised his rifle, taking aim. Rogers reached over and squeezed the hand guard of his M4, shaking his head side to side. "No guns. We fire up here and they'll be all over us." Rogers released his grip on the rifle and pulled a fighting knife from a scabbard on his chest. James smiled and quietly slipped across the trail before ducking into cover.

Jacob searched his belt, looking for his own knife. Rogers looked back at him and whispered, "Let them pass. We'll take the lead two, and you take down the one in the rear. We need this to be quiet."

Jacob nodded. "And the Gold?"

"We'll handle that one last. It doesn't appear armed, maybe it's wounded," he said.

Jacob tipped his head in Rogers' direction and watched him slip away. He then did the same. Squatting and slipping back into the wet foliage, he allowed himself to blend with his surroundings completely before the alien patrol emerged from the cover of the bend. Jacob's heart rate quickened as the first of the Reds moved past his hiding spot.

He could hear the creak of the alien's uniform, flexing and squeaking in the rain like polished leather. The thought distracted him. *It wouldn't be leather unless the aliens had cows, or is any hide leather?* The aliens' helmets emitted a soft glow of light where they fit over the creatures' heads. Jacob wondered if they had special optics like night vision and thermals. *They must, he told himself. They're advanced. But if they do, then why haven't they spotted us? Or maybe they have and it's all a trap, maybe they planned all of this.* Another moved past, and finally the smaller Gold figure slowly neared Jacob's position.

Jacob sat perfectly still, allowing the cool rain to flow over his body and the damp leaves to shield his form against the wood line. *No, maybe it's the rain. That's why they can't see us; it must mess up their optics.* Before he could finish his thought, a low hum emitted from the lead creature. The others halted and raised their rifles. Jacob watched the Gold step ahead, moving closer to those in the lead while the one in the rear turned to face the trail behind it. *Just as a trained soldier would,* he thought.

He froze, watching the tail Red's head pan and scan the tree line, sure that it would turn and spot him less than five yards away. *They couldn't have seen me. If they did they would have already fired. Maybe it's a proximity sensor then, just something that detects, but doesn't pinpoint... I guess that's possible. No more impossible than aliens landing in giant pumpkins.*

Jacob heard a growl followed by several barks. He watched as the Gold took a startled step back. The scout dog was on the trail now, in a fighter's stance. Duke showed his teeth and growled, the hair standing stiff on the dog's back. A Red squared off curiously, the humming became louder, and he raised his rifle. From nowhere, streaks and blurs of multi-cam crossed the trail followed by a flash of steel and a spray of blood.

Jacob remembered what he was supposed to be doing. He forced himself forward, springing from bent knees to explode onto the trail and colliding with the far larger creature in a footballer's tackle. The creature ducked and tried to roll Jacob off. A fatal mistake. It was at the wrong angle, and Jacob was able to curl his arm around the thing's neck and sink his blade just under the alien's helmet. The crunch of bone and the tearing of sinew vibrated through the knife as the blade struck home. The creature collapsed while its wet sticky blood warmed Jacob's gloved hand.

Jacob hit the ground hard and continued his forward roll into the grass, somehow finding his way to his knees, his rifle slapping against his side from the sling. He looked up and saw the Gold staring at him. It pointed its golden-gloved left fist in Jacob's direction. Seeing him on his knees, helpless and only feet away with the bloodied knife, the creature hesitated. Things moved quickly; Jacob sat stunned, looking at the creature that he was sure shared his own sense of shock.

The dog's continued growling, joined by a noise from up the trail, forced the creature to look away and into the direction of the sound. Rogers and James were slowly approaching with their rifles held up, the crumpled bodies of the red-sleeved soldiers lying dead at their feet.

"Take it easy there, Gold Finger," James said, moving ahead and leading the way with his rifle's barrel.

The Gold stiffened, its head shifting from Jacob to James while its gloved hand moved along with its head. It stopped on James and pointed a gold finger.

“Now, I ain’t sure what it is you got going on with that fancy glove, but where I come from it ain’t friendly to point,” James said.

The alien curled its finger, gracefully retracted its hand, and then removed its helmet. James’ jaw dropped as his head leaned back, his eyes squinting in the low light. The creature revealed a soft feminine face. Perfectly shaped and formed like the finest porcelain doll. Rain pelted off its smooth hairless head, water running down and over high cheek bones. The alien lowered its arm and rested the helmet on its hip. She blinked wide eyes and spoke in a smooth female voice. “I submit; I am yours to do with as you wish.”

James stammered, taken aback by the alien’s appearance and soft-spoken words. He sarcastically shook his head then exhaled loudly, regaining his senses. “Oh no, this isn’t the first time I’ve had a pretty gal tell me that. Never ends well for me, usually passed out and naked with all my credit cards gone.”

“Cover and bind it,” Rogers said. Stomping forward, he slapped a pair of zip ties in James’ hand.

Jacob watched as the bearded scout nodded and yanked a bit of cloth from his belt. He grabbed the slender alien by the shoulders and spun it around, blindfolding it. He took its right wrist and bound it with a zip tie, but before he could wrap the left wrist, the hand opened, revealing a flash of light. James’ arm’s stiffened, and he convulsed while falling back. Rogers was still close. He swung hard, catching the creature in the solar plexus with the butt of his rifle.

The alien reeled, releasing James from his agony. The creature turned, now trying to direct its weapon at Rogers. Before it could, the soldier stomped down heavily on the outside of the alien’s knee, forcing it down, while Rogers threw a forearm to direct the alien’s weapon up and away. The creature let out a screeching gasp as it fell into the thick mud.

Rogers moved by the crumpled form and kicked its ankles so that they were close together. With his boot on the thing’s back, he squatted low and grabbed the creature’s gloved wrist then twisted it so hard Jacob thought it may snap. Unable to remove the weaponized glove, he used a roll of tape and made several passes to get the tape to stick in the pouring rain. He wrapped the gloved hand into a fist before binding it to the other then taped

the creature's arms to its waist. "Try that again and I cut the hand off," he said.

Rogers then eased back and taped the ankles together. He leaned down and easily hoisted the now restrained creature to his shoulder. James was still recovering on the ground, sitting up wide eyed and forcing an embarrassed smile to his face. "You okay?" Rogers asked.

"They get me every damn time," he chuckled.

"Give it a rest! It isn't even human," Rogers spat. "Get off your ass; we need to move."

Jacob smirked and extended a hand, pulling James back to his feet; the scout stood and slapped the wet mud from his pants. "What about them?" Jacob said, pointing to the dead.

White lights came on in the far distance, emitting a soft glow that outlined the hilltop and backlit the radio tower.

"Leave 'em, there's no time," Rogers said, already moving toward the bunker door. Crossing the remaining distance at a near jog, Jacob followed Rogers' lead, with James lagging behind, still recovering from the stun. The bunker door was partially concealed by cut limbs and pine boughs, but not enough to completely hide it. Rogers moved past it to the sloping hill and dropped the creature hard to the ground. He spun back to Jacob. "Keep an eye on it."

Jacob nodded and moved toward the crumpled form and knelt down with his rifle close to his chest. He watched James move in and take a position across from the door with Duke by his side. Rogers worked his way through the cover of the brush and tapped lightly on the door before lifting a latch and swinging the door in. A low rectangle of light cut out and Rogers turned back. "Get inside, now."

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FIVE

The building was old; exposed rough-cut planks covered with heavy coats of paint reflected back the soft glow of gas lanterns. High industrial rafters were covered with webs and stained with dust and smoke from a hundred years' worth of fires. Clem let his eyes adjust as he searched the open space, noting the walls were covered with block and tackle, and rusted hooks wound with heavy rope hung from the ceiling. In the back, he could barely make out a group of people huddled around wooden tables lit low by candlelight, the flickering flames silhouetting the mass of people.

He could smell the wood smoke and a faint scent of roasting meat. People spoke in hushed tones. A vehicle door slammed and he heard the husky woman's commanding voice behind him. "Leave your gear against the wall; you can hold onto your rifles," she said as she stomped past him.

Masterson followed her then stopped by Clem's side. "What do you think?"

Clem dipped his chin. "Do what she says; maybe there's a hot meal in it for us," he said, tossing his rucksack to the side. When the others were out of earshot, he turned to Masterson and whispered, "We need whatever intel these people can give us."

Masterson shrugged and stepped off, following the others toward the candlelit corner. Faces slowly materialized around the table. Four women—their hair pulled back and wearing dark clothing, army surplus jackets, and ill-fitted hunting parkas—were hovering over a road map covered with push pins.

A red-haired woman looked up at Clem, scowled, and turned to Ruth. "Who are the strays?" she asked.

"Found them on the road. I didn't think they would make it through the night on their own," Ruth said.

Clem grunted; the red-haired woman looked at him, then back to Ruth. "How'd it go?"

Ruth moved around the table and ran a hand across the map, pointing a finger at a long stretch of road. "Here," she said, taking a pin and pressing it into the map. "We wrecked one of their trucks and a squad of their soldiers. No casualties on our side."

The woman raised her eyebrows. "Any of the little ones?"

Ruth nodded. "Yeah, you were right about them; they're still eager to take us in. Whatever has them spun up, it hasn't stopped them from wanting prisoners. We stopped in the road like you told us and that thing came right out to greet us."

The red-haired woman showed no emotion; she looked back at Clem and Masterson. "And what's the story with these two?"

Ruth scowled. "They were up in the weeds—watching us, I guess. They seemed useful and didn't get in the way so I brought them back."

"Useful? Ha! Hell, if we hadn't been up there, they would have cut you down," Clem said. "You can't hit an up-armed patrol with hand guns and liquor bottles."

"My ass! You put us in danger; my girls had it handled."

Clem laughed at that and moved closer to the table. Looking behind him, he found an old wooden chair and pulled it close before sitting down.

"Go on... make yourself at home," Ruth scowled.

Ignoring her, he leaned forward and stared down at the map. "So, what have we got here?"

The red-haired woman looked him over then let her eyes drift to Masterson, her gaze stopping at his weapons and equipment. "I've seen enough soldiers in my time to know you're either military or one of those veteran militia crazies. Which is it?" she asked.

"Which would you prefer?" Clem said.

"Mister, whoever you are, we don't have time for games." She turned and whispered to one of the younger girls positioned around the table. The young girl, barely a teen, nodded then moved back, disappearing to the left.

Masterson stepped out of the shadows and stood over Clem's shoulder. "Military, ma'am. Excuse our manners; we've been on the run since those things showed up. We were prepping to ambush the group on the road when your party came along."

"So you haven't followed the call to surrender like the rest of them?"

Masterson looked down at her curiously. "Surrender, ma'am?"

She turned back to a radio. "A man has been on the radio broadcasting a looped message. He claims they've negotiated peace. Said all of the military units were being stood down. If we drop our weapons and come in peacefully that these things—friends he called them—would take care of us."

"Anything else?" Clem asked.

She nodded. "They claim we are the aggressors now; that they have come in peace, and we attacked them."

Masterson shook his head and looked to Clem before looking back to the red-haired woman. "Honestly, this is the first I've heard of any surrender. As far as I'm concerned, my boys will fight until they don't have any fight left in them," he said.

She nodded curtly, looked at the map, and pointed a finger. "Okay then, so how many in your command? Where are they? We need supplies."

"I'm sorry; I dissolved what was left of my company yesterday."

"Then you did surrender," she snapped back.

"No, ma'am; just sent them underground so they could cause more damage. I assure you they are doing what they can to slow down the enemy."

The young girl returned to the table, holding a notepad. She handed it to the red-haired woman, who flipped through pages cautiously before stopping at one then set the notebook on the table. "Toronto is completely lost. They have the city surrounded; only unarmed civilians are being allowed to enter."

Clem cleared his throat and spoke up, answering for Masterson. "Before we get into all of this Q and A, how about you tell us who you are and what you're all doing here?"

She smiled and pulled up a chair of her own. "They call me the Grandmother, and this is the resistance."

"Resistance?" Clem said, trying to keep a smile from his face.

“Mister, I’m sure you can find humor in this, but after they showed up, things changed. All of our men are gone; the camps aren’t safe anymore. While the military has been doing whatever it is you do, those things were going from town to town, killing every man standing against them and taking the rest away. Most of the camps, and some of the cities, are completely occupied now.”

“Wait, what do you mean taking the rest away?” Masterson asked. “Taking them where?”

The woman lifted the notepad and shook the small book. “We think we know where, but what we don’t know is why. Most of us came from the city before it was sealed off; some of us from the camps to the south. Those things came in after the first of the bombs dropped on the cities and military bases. Then they waited... they used the black eyes to corral us, and then they started capturing. I was with my husband and two daughters when they cornered us on the road. We tried to surrender...”

“What happened?” Masterson asked.

“One of their soldiers executed my husband then one of the small gold ones did something to us, and we couldn’t move. They put my girls in their truck... I would be gone too if Ruth and her people hadn’t come along.”

Ruth grunted. “It wasn’t nothin’ heroic... completely by accident. We were running, the same as the rest. We’d just been attacked west of Toronto after the first of the bombs dropped and had been driving through the night when we saw Sarah lying on the road and those things standing over her. They took her girls and were about to take her too. We just did what we could; started shooting. I guess it was enough because they pulled back and let us be.”

Masterson nodded. “How many of you are there?”

Ruth frowned. “We had a lot more yesterday—I lost a lot just finding this place. We were out looking for survivors when we ran into their patrol.”

“So your attack on their convoy today, that was spontaneous?”

“We try to keep patrols out around the clock,” she said, motioning to pins on the map. “Our priority is to find survivors before they do. But, if given the opportunity, we kill them.”

“And you think you know where they are taking them?” Masterson asked.

Sarah nodded and held up the notebook. "One of the women we brought in this morning knows where a dome landed. She said their soldiers were walking survivors on the road toward it. More are being guided that way by the hour. We have contact with all of the militias in the area; they are ready to strike when we give the word."

Masterson looked down at Clem beside him. "We need to get eyes on this thing and find out if maybe there's a way to hurt it. How soon could your people be ready to attack?"

A door opened and a pair of women dressed in fatigues carrying pump-action shotguns filed into the open room. "Ruth, they're here," one said, alarm showing in her voice.

"How many?"

The girl shook her head. "There's a lot of them this time; way more than before. I don't know if they've seen us, but their numbers are growing."

"What's going on?" Clem asked.

Ruth looked away from the girls and locked eyes with Clem. "The Black Eyes—they found us."

CHAPTER SEVENTY-SIX

With dawn came an eerie calm as the rain beating on the roof soothed her. The storm continued, its thunder blocking the dark thoughts in her head. Laura tossed the thick comforter away and left the bed. She cautiously crept the hallway, fully expecting to see Francis still there, but he was gone. The kitchen was clean, and the door closed. On closer inspection, she could see that he'd left it unbolted. She did not know if that was a show of trust, or a test, or possibly a complete loss of faith in her.

Laura approached to the door and pulled away the heavy curtain that covered the glass pane set in the top. She saw two women standing alone at the end of the sidewalk. They were dressed head to toe in black, only their bald heads exposed. Laura eyed them suspiciously. The women stood in place until they were joined by others, then they turned toward the door and navigated the sidewalk in Laura's direction.

She backed away, put her hand on the lock, and felt the sweat building in her palm. When she looked back up, she could see a dark-faced woman standing just outside the door. She heard the knock and before it could register, she saw her hands open the door. The woman stepped into the opening and inspected her, her head slowly panning over her body. The woman reached for Laura's wrists. Her hands were cold and dry as she turned Laura's palms up and inspected them.

"You'll come with us now," the woman said with an accent the Laura had never heard.

"But my daughter... I'm not even dressed," she protested.

The woman waved a hand and two women brushed through the doorway, quickly draping Laura in a dark gown and heavy cloak; another woman crouched and placed a leather slipper on each foot. When they finished with her, they nudged her forward.

“Your child will attend school, you will come with us,” the woman said.

“Where is Francis? I want to talk to him,” she said.

From the back, another leathery skinned woman marched forward and scowled at Laura. She looked her up and down and gritted her teeth in disappointment. “Why always the lazy ones?” she muttered before looking Laura in the eye. The leathered woman held a small chrome box and smiled at Laura as she caressed the box in her palm. Laura felt a static sensation in the plate on her head.

“The Creator does not demand obedience... he expects it,” she said.

“And if I ref—?” Laura felt a quick squeezing sensation in her head that subsided as quickly as it came, the world going light then dark as if a light switch had been flipped. She looked back up at the leather-faced woman.

The woman glared back. “Any more questions?”

Laura shook her head *no*, a tear forming in the corner of her eye; she wanted to show strength, but she felt broken, her head still cloudy from the pressure. The woman showed no mercy and nodded to the others. They formed around Laura and pressed her out of the house and onto the walkway.

Not speaking, the women guided her to the street where others huddled around her in the pouring rain. She tried to turn her head but lost sight of the leathered woman. At the next house, she was forced to wait in the street as another woman was retrieved. She now understood the group she stood with were all new like her. This was their common bond; instead of resisting the huddle, she now fell into it. Hands clapped and the group shuffled along, moving quickly now. Laura recognized the course and knew they were returning to the orb.

They were stopped and formed into a straight line, standing shoulder to shoulder. Laura looked up and saw men dressed in the same dark blue as Francis moving from a hatch in the Orb. She watched them until a firm hand squeezed the back of her neck and she heard the leathered woman’s voice. “Do not look at them.” She spoke louder so the others could hear. “Do not speak to them.”

Laura focused her eyes to the ground as a man paced by her, stopped, and faced her before stepping off. She was then led forward; looking left and right, she saw she was now in a new line along with five others.

The leathered woman was replaced by a frail woman in an identical dark robe who said, "Come, this way."

Following the instructions and moving ahead, Laura saw that the others had already begun to follow, so she fell in close to the group, moving toward the hatch. She watched as the blue-dressed men moved in ahead of them, vanishing in the opening. Soon they were on the ramp, climbing up toward the opening, the metallic surface scuffing against the soft sole of their sandals. She heard a woman whimper, sobbing quietly as another tried to comfort her. The woman guiding them ignored their agony, walking straight ahead as they followed.

The hatch was rough, the surface appearing old and unmaintained. Laura tried to look inside, but the interior was dimly lit. The ramp faded into the floor of the space that was a rough metallic, the walls made of the identical material. Laura expected pneumatic hatches and sliding doors, laser lights and soft hospital-like lighting. Instead, what she found was very industrial; the space was rough and soot covered. Carved into the walls were symbols that looked vaguely familiar—like hieroglyphics, but instead of cranes and alligators, they were strange creatures.

The passageway narrowed and they were squeezed into two columns of three. The space smelled smoky and oily, like the belly of an ocean vessel. None of it was what she expected of an alien space craft. Finally, they rounded a corner that ended at another rough-cut wall. Laura tried to search for anything useful, but the lights were low and all she found was a space void of any recognizable features. A crunching sound of gears, and the wall began to move up. Lights flickered, casting the space in a dizzying strobe effect.

The robed woman guided them into what appeared to be a large kitchen. They stripped off the soaked cloaks and hung them along a row of hooks evenly spaced high on the wall. Other women in black garbs were already hard at work removing food from pots and setting up plates on shiny metallic trays, some containing bowls, others with pitchers and glasses. The stench made her choke, and she fought back the revulsion.

Laura and the others were again formed into a line standing shoulder to shoulder, facing the kitchen staff. The last of the bowls were filled and the kitchen staff was formed into lines and marched back through the same hatch Laura's group had just entered.

The robed woman moved in front of them; she turned her head to verify they were alone. "I am Taurine; you now answer to me. You will serve the guides their afternoon meal. You will not speak to them. You will follow any and all instructions. If you violate any of the rules of our order, you will be witnessed." The woman paused. "Do you understand?" Her voice was calmer and more reassuring than the leathered woman's.

Laura nodded as the woman panned, examining their faces. "Each day will be better than the next."

The back wall made a grating sound and slid to the left, revealing an open dining room filled with the humanoid creatures dressed in gold linen. They were seated around long communal tables. Consumed in conversation, they didn't bother to look up or seem to notice the dingy kitchen filled with servants.

Taurine stepped forward and gently touched Laura's wrist. "You serve the *mélange*," she said, pointing to a tray of glasses. Without waiting for a response, Taurine moved on assigning other responsibilities to the women.

Nervous, Laura bit her lower lip and stepped forward cautiously. She edged to the metallic counter and gripped the tray in both hands. She noticed the glasses had already been filled and the carafe was topped off as well. The tray was heavy so she held it close to her body to stabilize its weight. She turned toward the open dining room and saw some of the seated guides eye her impatiently.

She moved ahead; the room filled with sounds of alien voices, her knowledge plate struggling to keep up while processing several conversations at once, and her head filled with waves of strange conversations that made no sense to her. She stepped lightly alongside a table, her legs feeling heavy and wobbly, the tray rattled in her grasp.

She moved between a pair of seated guides; one reached up without making eye contact and casually grabbed a glass, the one across from her doing the same. She proceeded to move away when the closest guide snarled at her, took the carafe, and placed it in the center of the table then shoed her away with a flick of its wrist. Laura inhaled deeply, trying to

calm her nerves and moved on. Looking around, she could see the other women were now all holding trays and making their way around the room.

The fact that the guides seemed to have no interest in them helped her to relax. She tried to not focus on the job of serving and instead take in the sights of the room for anything useful, anything she could use. She strained her eyes, trying to look up and into her mind and silence the storm of voices, tuning in and out of several conversations until one caught her attention.

“The council is not happy with the Messenger’s loss.”

“Do you know who will replace him?”

“No, but when he arrives, the retribution will be delivered. They have chosen to spare the community and instead will hit the outside harshly. It appears the local resistance is not isolated, so the migration here is not going well.”

“How so?”

“The other settlements are far ahead of this one. The council will not tolerate our ineffectiveness and our sustained losses... We have to be ready for exodus...”

“You there!” a voice echoed loudly in her head.

Laura suddenly realized she had stopped moving and her tray was still resting in her hands while she’d been lost in the voices inside her head.

“Yes, you,” she heard again over the others. Laura glanced down and saw a female face—the same as the one she’d met on her arrival. Scanning the room, she saw they all looked identical in every way, only a scar or birthmark to tell them apart.

Laura began to speak but held her tongue in fear of the warning she’d received. Her hands gripped the tray tightly, and she stared down at her white knuckles, afraid she may have already offended the alien by looking it in the eyes.

“It’s okay, you may speak to me,” the guide said.

Laura looked up again, waiting for a response.

“Has every guest been served?” the guide asked.

Laura again eyed down. “I’m sorry.”

“Do not be sorry, be obedient. Do not stand and wait to be called,” the guide said, shooing her away.

Laura backed away and hurriedly completed her rounds around the table before returning to the kitchen with an empty tray. She set it on the counter then pressed her palms onto the cold metallic surface, listening to her heart beat.

Taurine watched as she put back her head and took deep breaths. The old woman moved by her side. “Why are you in distress? Why do you find it difficult to serve the communal, what is there to fear?” she asked.

Laura felt the presence of the others—the women returning to the kitchens with empty trays of their own. They gathered around her, all looking at Taurine.

“This is not a trick or a difficult question; you may answer it freely,” Taurine said. “I am here to help you with the transition.”

Laura gaped at her confused. “What transition?”

“Is that why you are afraid?” Taurine asked. “Because of the unknowns?”

Laura pursed her lips. “It’s because everything has been taken from me.”

“Everything? Do you not have a daughter? A home? A purpose?” The woman waved her arms, motioning the kitchen. “What more would you need?”

Laura fought to hold back her emotions. “What about my husband?” she said, her voice breaking and a tear forming at the corner of her eye.

“You’ve been assigned a mate; does Francis not suit you?”

Laura gasped and looked away.

Taurine flashed a wicked smile. “Oh, you didn’t know. Well then, maybe *you* are the one that is not being found suitable. I suggest you work on that before you are cast aside. Do you think that would be best for your child?”

The old woman clapped her hands, bringing the other women in close. The door to the dining room slid closed as a new group of women entered the space from behind them. Laura listened as they were given instructions on what their job would be. She leered up and locked eyes with Taurine, who flashed her a vindictive smile.

“You are all dismissed. Your mates will greet you in the passageway,” Taurine said.

Laura stumbled and stepped toward the exit door, her body feeling heavy and out of breath. She moved slowly, falling into the group of women. She wanted to be far away from the vindictive woman who appeared to take pleasure in her agony. She fell into line, following the others through the narrow opening and back into the dimly lit passageway. Just as Taurine had said, she found Francis there waiting for her.

He didn't speak, turning away once she acknowledged him, knowing that she had no choice but to follow.

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-SEVEN

The bunker didn't spare them from the sounds of the roaring storm outside its walls. The space was cold and dreary; rain seeped under the door, turning the concrete a dark gray. A stream of murky water traced a line between the tired soldiers, making its way to a drain vent located in the center of the small space. The man-made cavern was dimly lit by a single low-watt bulb hanging in the center of the bunker.

Jacob watched Jesse move, happy to see him on his feet. His friend was back; the attack had invigorated him. He stood in the corner over a propane stove warming water for soup. His neck still wore a bandage, and his body bore the wounds from the fight, but he knew the other soldiers expected more from him as a scout, and he was doing his best to put on a show.

Not designed for housing, the bunker was filled to capacity. Along with the two who came in with Jesse, four more had arrived during the night. Survivors and stragglers, men who, when they found the destroyed cabin, knew this was the last refuge in the area. Along the floor, intermixed with bundles of equipment and crates, men sat exhausted. A lone soldier stationed himself at the back, fidgeting with the only working radio, desperate for a signal. All the landlines back to the cabin were dead; an uplink to the radio tower was their only hope.

Jacob pressed against his space of open wall, moving his knees to keep them from the encroaching water. His eyes turned and focused on the prisoner across from him. Its head was still covered in the fabric, its wrists and ankles still bound, and the blue-and-gold-sleeved uniform coated with mud from the trail. Rogers and James were arguing about what to do with it,

how and whether or not to interrogate it. The other men listened in anxiously, this being the first live alien they'd managed to capture.

"We need to get that uniform off and get rid of it," James said. "It could have a tracker embedded in it; they're probably using it to find us right now."

Rogers rubbed his forehead wearily. "Seems like they'd already be on us if that was the case."

James pointed up at the ceiling. "These walls are pretty thick and shielded by the cell company that originally built it. Who knows how much shielding our guys added to it? Probably blocking the signal." He paused and stared at the alien in deep thought before nodding. "Yeah, it's got a tracker. Hell, I bet they're out there right now searching for this one. They must have found her dead friends by now."

"Really? It's a *her* now? That's how this plays out?" Rogers grunted, the hours of movement without resting taking a toll on him. "You never stop, do you?"

"Don't get all excited, even a boar hog can be a she; it doesn't mean I'm going to go exchanging phone numbers and asking her to prom."

Rogers shook his head in frustration and moved back against a bench. "If you're serious, then have at it. Get the clothes off this thing," he said, leaning back in surrender.

Jacob sat up. "Why don't you just ask it first?"

James turned and looked back at him. "Ask?"

"She knows we'll find out anyhow. I'm sure she's been listening—"

Rogers sighed and shook his head. "And now here you go with the *she*."

Jacob ignored the comment and continued. "This is a good test; give it up the easy way or we find it the hard way. Let's see what she has to say. We need to know what's going on out there."

James shrugged, looking over to Rogers. "He's got a point; why take her alive if we weren't planning to use her for something?" The leader returned an apathetic shrug in response.

James inched closer to the restrained alien. The creature had not moved since it was dropped to the floor hours earlier. Men along the walls, sensing something was about to happen, adjusted their posture, their full attention now focused on the creature.

James grabbed at the alien's uniform and yanked it into an upright, seated position, forcing its head away from him. He worked on the knot of fabric at the base of its neck and tugged the satchel from its face.

The alien squinted in the light; its bright blue eyes closed tightly and slowly opened. Jacob saw sadness in the creature's face. He began to feel pangs of sympathy before he caught himself, remembering what this thing was capable of. He looked around the room and could see the other soldiers were having the same reaction. James reached ahead and pulled away a final strip of fabric that had bound its mouth. Once its lips were free, it swiveled its head smoothly, examining the room and the faces of the strange men.

"Why have you taken me? Where am I?" she asked in a soft voice.

Jacob was amazed that the tone was matter of fact, the English clean and crisp. She showed no signs of fear or displays of emotion. The creature sounded unconcerned, even though its eyes deceived it.

"This is my summer guest house. I want to apologize in advance; the lake house is being renovated, and the housekeeper is home with a sick kid," James said.

"Guest house?" she asked, puzzled.

Rogers shook his head, not amused. "Just ask."

James frowned. Using his thumb and index finger, he stroked the heavy beard covering his chin. "Are you wearing a locator?"

Without answering, she gave him a puzzled expression.

"Are you wearing anything that will allow your people to find you?" he said, speaking slow and deliberately.

"Why would I have such a device? No member of the communal is any more valuable than another."

"So where is it? How do they track you?" James asked.

She looked at him absently. "Why would they track me?"

James cracked his knuckles, letting his eyes examine her uniform, looking for anything distinct. "Well... since you say there is no device, I guess we can cut all of your clothing off and shred it. According to you, I will find nothing and that would prove you are truthful." He stared at the alien and saw her expression hadn't changed. "Or, we search your clothing and find a device. Then—well, let's just say it'd be better if I found you trustworthy, and you just gave it to me *now*."

“I don’t understand your reasoning,” she said.

James reached to his hip and drew a long, custom Ka-Bar.

“I’m just saying it isn’t healthy to be caught in a lie. You sure you ain’t got something on you?”

He leaned in close, slowly turning the blade so the alien could see it from every angle while the light reflected off the sharpened surface. James grabbed the chest of her uniform with his gloved hand and pulled it tight. “Now you’ll have to take it easy on me. I’m not used to undressing ladies this way.” She drew away from him. He stuck the blade close to the fabric and let the razor-sharp knife sink into the material. It cut as easy as silk, quickly splitting with slow movements of the blade.

She lugged back again and turned her head to the side. “Yes, I have such a device.”

“Ah, really? You mind telling me where it is?”

She stretched out her bound arms and looked to her balled up left hand. “It’s in the glove.”

Rogers stood from the bench he was leaning on. “Now hold up; that’s the weaponized hand.” He moved forward so he was in front of her. “Tell us how to safely remove it, or I’ll cut the entire arm off.”

She scowled, turning away from Rogers, not liking his harsh tones. “The glove cannot be removed with my hand like this.”

Losing patience, Jesse stood up and, moving closer, he said, “Let’s just kill this thing and get rid of it.” He stepped close to get a better view. Other men nodded, agreeing with him.

She shook her head, worry now clearly showing in her eyes. “The glove is not a weapon. It is not lethal. Only designed to render obedience.”

“I can think of only one good way to do this.” Rogers reached out violently and grabbed her bound wrists, pulling them tight, and dragging the alien partway across the floor as she whined in protest. Then he brought in his boot and stepped on her forearms, applying so much pressure that Jacob thought her arms might break. She yelped and cried out in pain, having been surprised by the big man’s sudden movements.

“What the hell are you doing?” James said. “Take it easy, boss.”

Rogers turned his head. “Shut up and get it off. Cut it at the elbow.”

“No... take it easy. Let me try first. I can get it off.” James scrambled, grabbing at the thing’s fingertips. The alien, frightened yet complying,

straightened them just enough so that James could slowly roll the glove off of the creature's hands. All the while, the thing struggled and kicked against Rogers' boot.

"I got it," James said, pulling back at the strips of heavy tape before taking the metallic glove tight in his hand.

Rogers stepped away and the alien pulled back, crashing against the wall and bringing its hands up to shield its now tear-covered face.

"Well, look at that... the space lady has feelings," Rogers said, unaffected.

Jesse stepped closer, pointing at the alien's face. "Don't let it fool you, Sarge; it's a killer. I saw them firsthand."

"You are the killers," she gasped.

Ignoring her comment, James laughed as he stretched the glove out and examined it. "Relax guys, we got it off," he said.

He turned the glove over; in the palm was a diamond-shaped pendant. All the fingers were coated in a type of silicone with embedded circuitry clearly visible. James stretched the glove out and laid it flat on his palm, the entire piece far smaller than his own hand.

"What does it do?"

"It's of no use to you," she said.

James grinned and let out a short laugh. "That's not what I asked. So this is what you used to knock me on my ass; how is it powered?"

"I don't understand."

Jacob scooped closer; he reached out for the glove and James obliged by handing it over. He felt the wires and squeezed the pendant between his fingers. "The energy source; what activates the crystal?"

"It is part of my being; the same as how the rifles are part of the Ursus warriors. We all have a role."

James took the glove back. "Ursus? You mean the big bastards with the red sleeves?"

"I understand your word *bastard*, and this is not correct. The Ursus are brave warriors, bred for war; they come from strong family units."

James smiled and glanced at the pant legs of his uniform, where he'd wiped his hands earlier. "Well, they bleed like pigs." James looked her in the eye and saw he got no response from his comment. "How many Ursus will they send for you?" he asked.

She eyed up at him. "I'm not important enough for them to look for me."

"Who are you?"

"I am Karina, a guide for my people."

"What were you doing out here?"

"I am a guide; I was searching for survivors so that they could be safely returned to the community."

"You mean prisoners." Jacob leaned in. "What have you done with them?"

She shot him a puzzled glance. "We have cared for them, given them food and shelter; they are part of the communal now."

"You have my family; I want them back."

"Then you should join them. All are welcome in the communal."

Answering for Jacob, James scoffed. "My people got a saying, lady... better dead than red!"

She pursed her lips. "I don't understand this *red*."

Rogers laughed and said, "Different time, but the same principle applies. We'll get our people back."

James nodded and winked at her. "We need a vehicle to get into that camp," he said before he turned to Rogers still standing over his shoulder. "How many claymore mines do we have left?"

Rogers smiled, knowing the bearded scout's intentions. "We can spare a couple."

She glared up at him. "Why would you need mines?"

"I figured we could see if you're right—that they wouldn't bother looking for you. I'll stack the dead out there and this glove right down the throat of a mine."

Her eyes shifted from the glove and back to the door. "There is no more cause for this violence; if you lay down your weapons it could all stop."

"Nope. That's not our way," Rogers said. "Thought we explained that."

"You must understand... the war is over. You have lost."

James shook his head. "I think you're the one who is not understanding. You all just got here; we weren't even trying earlier."

"Your big cities have already fallen, and your armies destroyed or surrendered. Only small pockets of resistance remain, and they will be

squashed with the exodus.” Her tone changed from weakness to one of strength.

Rogers stepped over her and looked down. “Bullshit. What is the exodus?”

She smiled, showing perfectly shaped white teeth. “Our people will arrive. What you have seen is only an advanced party meaning to pull out and detect your remaining forces. The exodus will force you to submit and join us, or cease to exist.”

“Why the hell would you tell us this, anyway?” James said arrogantly.

“It is our law. You have captured me rightfully in combat or by submission; I now belong to you,” she said. “Same as your people now in the communal belong to us.”

“Unless we take them back,” Jacob retorted.

She nodded in agreement. “Yes, of course. Or if you surrender and become a part of us.”

“You’d be surprised what it takes for us to surrender,” James spat back.

Karina openly smiled at his statement. “Surprisingly little; your governments have already petitioned for peace. Your people have been approaching our communities of their own free will offering surrender, and once others hear the peace signal, we expect your remaining forces to join the communal.”

Jacob reached out and put a hand on Rogers’ shoulder. “The people at the orb... the civilians... the ones being escorted by The Darkness—”

“Escorted for their protection,” Karina interrupted. “Tribes and those like you have become a danger to everyone. If you had not fired on our landers...”

Rogers put up a hand between Jacob and the alien. “You said peace signal?”

She nodded, taking her eyes from Jacob’s hateful stare. “Yes, it is being broadcast now, over clear channels, on what you call FM.”

Rogers scrambled to the back, pushing the soldier away from the radio console. “We’ve only been searching our military frequencies; of course we should have looked at the local FM.” He flipped dials and switched a speaker, filling the space with static. He dialed the knob until it locked on a clear, clean channel with a steady voice.

“... lay down your weapons, the armed resistance has been disbanded. We have lost our ability to fight back. For the sake of all of us, I ask that you surrender and go to the road un-armed. You will be given sanctuary; food and shelter will be provided. Our friends have guaranteed our safety. Please... this is the only way to stop the bloodshed.”

Jacob thought he recognized the voice and whispered, “He sounds familiar.”

“It’s the Vice President,” a soldier in the back uttered. “What does this mean?”

Rogers flipped off the radio. “Don’t mean nothing; we go in tomorrow.”

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CHAPTER SEVENTY-EIGHT

They stood two deep, partially concealed in the tree lines and overgrown grass. Sunlight reflected off the blued barrels of their rifles. The Darkness had them surrounded, but for some reason still hadn't moved against them.

Clem stood on a wooden crate, observing them through a hole in the brick wall of the warehouse while the survivors had moved to the rear of the large building. The space, which looked like a loading dock, was filled with vehicles of all make and model, and had two tall overhead doors chained shut at the end of the wall. The women ran about, hurriedly packing their gear and preparing for a hasty withdrawal.

"How many?" Masterson asked. Standing just below Clem, the old soldier was pulling belts of linked ammo from his pack and prepping his machine gun for a fight.

"Got to be over a hundred of 'em."

"And the uniformed critters?" Masterson asked.

Clem shook his head then leapt off the crate. "None yet."

Ruth rushed up behind them, followed by a group of girls carrying large duffel bags and boxes of canned goods. She stopped beside them as the other girls continued to load the vehicles. "We're going to break out," she said. "If we hurry, we can make the woods before they organize. If their vehicles show up, we won't have a chance."

Clem watched as children were loaded into the cabs of vans and pickup trucks parked in long columns just behind the sliding doors of the

warehouse. Women with worried expressions stood watch over the vehicles as the precious cargo was loaded.

“No, it won’t work,” Clem said, not taking his eyes from the vehicles.

“What choice do we have? We can’t stand against this many; they’ll have us completely blocked in soon enough.”

Clem looked down, locking eyes with Masterson, who nodded in response. “Get us someplace high; we’ll help you get past them. If you have any of those Molotovs left, we could use them.”

Ruth gazed at them and then back to the overloaded vehicles. “You don’t have to do this. We’d have a chance on the road.”

Clem shrugged. “Like you said, what choice do you have? We can cover you and fight it out on our own. Just get your people someplace safe.”

Ruth frowned and pointed to a wooden crate along the wall. “There... that’s what we have left. At the end of the room you’ll find an iron staircase; it leads to the roof.” She stepped forward and grabbed Clem in a tight-gripped bear hug. “We can’t thank you enough for this,” she whispered to him.

“Just wait for us to open fire then get them out of here. Get as far away from this place as you can,” Clem said.

She let go and gave Masterson the same kind of hug before turning away and barking orders at the girls, rushing them to finish loading. Clem watched her leave before looking over at his friend. “You ready to go to work?”

Masterson dipped his chin and lifted the heavy machine gun to his chest. “Yeah, too much estrogen in this place. Let’s get up top. I need some fresh air.”

Moving past him, Clem slapped his friend on the shoulder. They stopped at the crate, grabbing as many bottles as they could carry, before moving to the staircase. The stairs were old and screeched as they climbed them. The spots where wrought iron brackets met the brick shook and spit crumbled mortar in protest. The stairway ended at a pigeon-feces-covered exit. Clem passed through the doorway and stepped onto the roof. The perimeter of the area was lined with a three-foot-tall, red brick knee wall. In the middle, surrounded by rotting piles of leaves, empty trash cans, and liquor bottles probably left by exploring teens, stood the remains of a crumbled utility building.

Clem heard the truck engines fire up below and knew they were ready. He pointed to a section of the low wall that would be to the right of the overhead doors below. "You post up there; I'll take the other side."

Masterson nodded and dropped down, duck-walking to sneak into cover without the Deltas on the ground spotting them. Clem did the same by belly crawling up to the knee wall and letting the barrel of his rifle slowly move into position. He looked across the opening to Masterson and waited for the man to flash him a thumbs up before he crept his head over the ledge.

All along the front the things waited. Still standing shoulder to shoulder in some sort of wall, it would make for easy shooting. From the overhead door, a cracked and broken asphalt drive wended away before vanishing into the thick of the woods, giving the trucks a reasonable chance of escape. When he heard the engines revving below, Clem searched for targets, trying to identify a leader, or an obvious choice to kick off the attack. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a cluster of the Deltas charging forward. He'd waited too long, maybe it was too late.

Masterson also saw the rushing group; without hesitation, he lit the first of his Molotovs and tossed it into the open ground just in front of the advancing group. With the splash of flame, the remaining Deltas began to scream.

A round whizzed over Clem's head while another struck the brick wall to his front. With no need for instructions, he pulled the rifle into his shoulder and began firing on targets, picking those with automatic weapons first.

Masterson's machine gun let loose at the same time as the overhead doors began screeching open. The first of the trucks racing forward, Masterson changed the angle of his fire just enough to allow the vehicles to move through the wall of lead he was providing.

The convoy was taking heavy fire. Clem laid down his rifle and rolled to his side, lighting the fire bombs and tossing them in rapid succession to his left and right, trying to create a gauntlet of flames for the vehicles to race down.

Clem watched in horror as the Deltas on the ground began ignoring them. Instead, The Darkness focused all of their fire on the escaping vehicles. A gray cargo van took heavy fire, rounds drumming across its front. Clem figured the driver must have been killed as he watched the van

veer hard, nearly rolling before sliding partially off the asphalt and colliding with a tree just short of the opening to the road. Vehicles behind it slammed to a stop, while some tried to steer right of the disabled van, the back half of it now blocking the road.

A wave of at least ten Deltas emerged from the trees, screaming as they charged forward at the van. Clem went back to the weapon, his bolt-action rifle not able to keep up with the mobs. The things reached the van door and began grabbing at the woman and children inside. He no longer had a safe shot and was forced to get off target. He switched his aim in an attempt to support the other vehicles and watched as women exited with weapons in hand, fighting bravely while trying to cover the others as they escaped.

Masterson stayed on the machine gun, screaming as he fired, bringing his aim in as close to the women on the ground as he safely could. "Oh my god, here they come!" he shouted. Clem gaped down and saw the first of the red-sleeved soldiers appear in the tree line, their vehicles just becoming visible in the distant trees. The Deltas were handing off their captives to them. Looking down, Clem could see some of the armed women were falling to the heavy fire, while others were retreating back to the warehouse. He clenched his teeth and looked away from the carnage below, instead focusing on the red-sleeved soldiers standing to his front.

Clem's guts ached and his throat constricted as he realized they'd failed. This was a fight he knew he couldn't win. He pushed away the dread and steadied his aim, firing a shot directly into a creature's chest. He worked the bolt, loading another .308 round and took down another creature before the first had even fallen. A blue splash of plasma erupted to his right, and he felt the heat on his cheek. Ignoring the pain, he reloaded and dropped another of the alien soldiers.

"Clem, we need to move!" Masterson yelled.

He loaded another round and panned left. Having dropped the first group of alien soldiers, he searched the tree line for more. An enemy squad was kneeling in the trees. He locked onto one and saw he was looking down the barrel of an enemy rifle... they fired at the same time. He watched the soldier's helmeted head snap back from his round as the bolt of blue plasma raced in his direction. With a yank at his boot, Clem was jerked away. He felt himself being dragged across the roof just as the knee wall to his front exploded.

He rolled to his back and looked into the tired face of Masterson. "I said we have to move! There's nothing else we can do here," his friend yelled.

"No, I won't leave!" Clem protested over the sounds of screaming children below. He tried to roll back to his belly and return to the wall. He knew the fight was over, that the Deltas were taking them all away, but he would do whatever he could to stop it.

Masterson low-crawled to his side and, pushing his face in close, said, "We can't help them if we're dead."

Clem acknowledged him with a slow nod, biting into his bottom lip until it bled.

He watched as Masterson searched the roof. The building itself was engulfed in flames, and black smoke was pouring up the stairway they'd used earlier.

"There," Masterson said, pointing to the back corner of the building, which appeared to be the only place flames weren't licking over the sides of the roof.

On their stomachs, they crawled together. As they neared the back of the building, the incoming fire stopped and the screams faded into the distance; only the sounds of the roaring fire remained. They moved along in a drainage trench that followed the edge of the roof, finding a hole cut in the side that allowed rainwater to drain from the flat roof. Looking over the edge of the knee wall, they could see what remained of an ancient, tin downspout.

Masterson reached over and nudged it with his boot. He rose up and looked back at Clem. "Looks solid enough. I'll go first." The man dropped over the side and disappeared. Not wanting to be left alone, Clem scrambled after him, nearly falling as he grasped the pipe and slid to the ground. He landed hard, feeling his old knees crunch from the speed of the drop. He turned away and pressed his back to the wall while flames and smoke rolled from windows overhead.

Masterson turned an eye back at him. "You okay, old timer?"

Clem flipped him a middle finger. "Lead us out," he said.

Masterson scaled ahead slowly, patrolling them along the perimeter of the building, rounding the corner, and coming into view of the far side, to the place where the vehicles had attempted to flee from. The enemy was gone; the ground littered with their dead.

Looking toward the blacktop road, Clem stared mesmerized at the burning hulks of the vans and pickup trucks once filled with children. He staggered closer, stopping at the body of a woman he didn't recognize. He knelt beside her and used his palm to close her eyes.

"Over here," Masterson said from farther ahead and closer to the building.

In a depression lay the body of Grandmother; the red-haired woman's chest was covered in blood and she was wheezing. Masterson pulled her from the ditch and rested her head on his lap. He put a hand to her bloody chest then looked up at Clem, shaking his head. She strained to move and pointed at her pack. "Get it for me," she gasped.

Clem moved to the spot and retrieved a small bag and placed it by her side. She fumbled through a front pouch and fished out the small notebook. She pushed it in Clem's direction as she coughed and blood curled over her bottom lip. "Get my girls back," she whispered.

She reached a hand back and Masterson took it. He felt her grasp loosen as the old woman wheezed and drew her last breaths. Slowly and gently, he rolled her head from his lap. "What are we going to do?" he said, examining the destruction surrounded in the flames of the burning vehicles and warehouse.

Clem lowered his head and sucked in a deep breath before dropping to his knees. Falling back on his rear, he flipped through pages of the notebook, stopping at a hand-drawn map of a small, walled village with an orb positioned in the center. "I'm going to get them back, or kill as many of those things as I can trying," he said.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-NINE

She stood by the picture window, watching as new arrivals were marched down the center of the street. Unlike the last ones, some men were present in this group. Ragged and in torn clothing, they were under close guard as they carried suitcases and held the hands of children. Rows of the armed black-eyed Deltas and several of the red-sleeved soldiers were always close by, unlike other groups of new arrivals.

The people were being herded toward wide, blue, steel transports. A group of guides stood near the transports, examining each person before directing them to the back of a cargo hold. Watching, Laura was able to detect a pattern; the young and healthy always moved to the left, while the old and sick to the right. She turned and looked to Francis who was sitting at the dining room table, eating a small meal of cheese and sliced meats—the man was spending more time at the house now.

They'd barely spoken since she'd returned from the kitchen duty. Out of fear that her words may be true, she didn't want to bring up her conversation with the old woman—that Francis was now her mate. She shook her head, refusing to accept the idea. Instead, she asked, "What are they doing with them?"

Francis kept his eyes on the plate to his front. "The local population is being relocated; well... those sensible enough to join us."

She glanced back at the transports, then to Francis. "Why separate them?"

Francis lifted a fork-full of meat to his mouth and chewed slowly. He turned and looked Laura in the eyes then waved a hand at her dismissively.

“Because of your people’s refusal to surrender, resources are now scarce; we don’t have enough for everyone. They have destroyed too much of our infrastructure and transports, as well as our ability to gather more. Because of their ignorance, this place is no longer safe for us.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means choices have to be made, not all will be allowed to move with us.”

With her breath held to control her emotions, she turned and approached the table. “What do you mean *move*?” Laura asked.

“The council has decided to give up on this area; we will be leaving soon.”

She took a pitcher of water from the table and refilled his drinking glass. Francis looked up and acknowledged her actions with a smile. “Leaving?” she asked.

He nodded, lifting the glass and taking a long drink. “We will join the large communities in the city. This communal will be abandoned. They never should have attempted to settle here so far from support in the first place. Once we leave, the surrounding areas will be quelled by the witnesses. Maybe we can return one day when it’s safe.”

“Quelled?” Laura said, unable to hide the horror in her voice.

“Yes, it will take time, but they will bring this place to peace,” Francis said calmly.

“By killing everything?”

Francis swore under his breath before looking up at her. “It is unfortunate, but the local population refuses to submit. What other choice do they have? The people committing these crimes have to be dealt with.”

Laura returned to the window and pulled back the curtain, pointing to the right trailer. She turned back and began shaking her head at the man. “And what of them? You didn’t explain why they are separating them.”

Francis snorted and laid his fork beside his plate. “Those not chosen to continue on our path will be given the gift of the message. They will become witness to the truth and continue our fight here.”

She shook her head and backed away from the window, watching as an old man pushed a boy in a wheelchair up the ramp of a transport to the right. “You’ve lied to them all; they think you will protect them.”

“And we are protecting them. Those people are old and sick; when they awaken, they will be strong and a vibrant part of the communal.”

“They need to be warned.” She turned from the window and rushed to the door. Francis got there first and blocked her with his shoulder. Knocking her away, she fell hard to the floor. He stepped close to her, and reached down, offering her a hand. She slapped it away.

“We leave tonight,” he said, returning to the table. “Ready the child.”

Laura tried to steady herself to push back her anger. “I won’t leave; not without my husband,” she scowled.

Francis smiled at her, already knowing that she’d learned the truth of their relationship. “Your old life is behind you. I am your husband now. Gather your things and ready the child.”

She scrambled to her feet and backed away from him, almost falling against the dinner table. “We won’t leave with you. We won’t go anywhere with you.”

He stood and squared his chest to her. He pushed forward, the softness gone in his voice. His face was hard and intimidating. “You don’t have a choice. The war is over; we’ve won. Your governments—your people—have surrendered to *us*!”

She stepped back, bumping the table and knocking over the drinking glass and pitcher. Laura fumbled, steadying herself, and her hand brushed the side of the heavy clay pitcher. She quickly reached out and took it. Then, swinging hard, she smashed it against Francis’s head. The man stumbled back, surprised, putting a hand to his bloodied face. He lunged at her. She dodged and ran for the hallway, sprinting to Katy’s room. She made it just ahead of him, slamming the door, and leaving him to pound against it.

She felt the pressure cease against the door then heard the clunk of a bolt lock. She stood and backed away. Katy was sitting on the floor looking up at her with wide eyes. She moved back and fell to the carpet beside her daughter. She raised the girl onto her lap, and Katy gripped her hands. “Are you scared, Momma?”

Laura nodded, trying to hold back the tears. “We have to leave now; we have to escape.”

She grabbed Katy and stood her up. Finding her coat and long pants, she dressed her in heavy clothing, then put boots on her feet. She felt the tears

falling on her cheeks as she reached out and took her daughter again, holding the girl tight to her chest. "What have I done...?" she said.

"It's okay, Daddy will come back."

Laura nodded, forcing a smile. "We're gonna find him; we'll leave tonight." She snatched a rat tail comb from the dresser and pulled the girl's hair back, tying it up, then put a heavy hat over her head. All of her own clothing was in the other room; she would have to leave with what she had on. She wasn't dressed for the cold, but she would take her chances.

Prepared to move to the only bedroom window, she heard a knock at the door. The bolt turned and released. Laura stood and pushed Katy behind her. Taking the rat tail comb in her hand, she concealed it behind her back.

"Mrs. Anderson," a familiar voice called as a woman in dark robes entered the room.

"Taurine!" Laura said, surprised to see the old woman. "What are you doing here?"

"Your mate sent for me. He is afraid for you; afraid for your daughter." Taurine strained and saw Katy dressed for travel. Her gaze traveled up and met Laura's.

"Were you planning on going somewhere? Do you know what will happen to you if he reports this?"

Laura shook her head and leered down. "Is that why you're here? Are you going to take me away?"

Taurine smiled and stepped closer. "No, silly woman; I am here to discipline you, to teach you to be more respectful of your husband."

Laura watched as the old woman slipped the small metal box from her pocket. She felt the knowledge plate on the top of her head begin to tingle.

"Don't worry. As I promised your husband, this lesson will be discreet. I've come alone; this will be just between us. If the others knew, they would reject you."

Laura backed away as the woman stepped closer. Taurine rubbed a finger along the top of the box and the tingling on Laura's head buzzed with intensity, pain beginning to form in the back of her skull. Taurine stepped closer, now within arm's reach.

"We have much to discuss, Mrs. Anderson. I knew from the moment I met you, that you would be difficult."

She raised the box so it was at Laura's eye level. "I'm sorry, but you have to learn the price for disobedience," Taurine said, slowly sliding her thumb down the box.

Laura felt weakness in her legs. The woman was now so close Laura could see the pores on her skin. Suddenly Laura no longer felt afraid, the fear replaced by anger. She no longer hesitated; she feigned turning away to the left, while lashing out with the rat tail comb gripped tightly in her right hand. The tip of the spear caught Taurine just below the jugular. The old woman screamed and dove at Laura, her hand clasping the metal box tight. Laura felt shooting pain in her head and her vision filled with bolts of blinding light.

She fought through the agony to maintain the grip on the comb as she forced it deeper into Taurine's neck, twisting it as it burrowed its way to her spinal cord. When the plastic tip broke, Laura punched at the wound and the side of the woman's head. Taurine screamed something as her hot blood poured down Laura's arm. The old woman gagged, spitting blood; her grip relaxed and Laura felt the relief and release of the knowledge plate.

Her vision returned to her in the scene of a nightmare, the old woman's blood covering her body. She wanted to scream, but she saw Katy standing against the wall, her face white with shock. Laura pushed the old woman off of her and rolled back to her knees, pushing herself up to her feet. She looked at the door and wondered if Francis was in the house. Maybe she could sneak past him.

She gripped Katy's hand and led her from the room, locking the door behind her. She stalked down the hallway and found the home empty, the front door unlocked. Quickly, she moved to the back of the house where the kitchen door led into the backyard. This door was bolted, but could be opened without a key; she quickly unlocked it and looked out into a fenced-in yard. She knelt down next to Katy and whispered, "We have to go now; you have to be very quiet, okay?"

Katy nodded. "We're going to find Daddy."

"That's right, Katy. We're going to find Daddy."

CHAPTER EIGHTY

They hid in a small cluster of homes just off the main road and prepared the ambush behind a series of parallel parked cars. The homes around them were destroyed, doors removed and windows shattered, leaving no doubt as to why the owners had abandoned this area or been forcibly removed. Two red-sleeved bodies lay dead in the center of the street while the gold glove was placed over one of the car's radio antennas in a mock salute.

The Assassins had placed four claymore mines in a circle, all of them pointed in. The intent was to lead the enemy into the kill zone then blow the directional mines. There was no discussion over ethics or further attacks while the VP was calling for a surrender. They were all in agreement that they would continue the fight as long as they had the means. And today that meant taking the fight directly to them. Jacob felt the tickle in his ear, predicting the oncoming vehicles. He lowered himself behind a windowsill of a house directly across from the ambush kill box—he would have a front-seat view.

Jesse was next to him, once again carrying a heavy machine gun; he sat with his back to the wall and the weapon rested on his lap. Karina was bound and restrained in the kitchen of the home. Several walls were missing, exposing blackened and charred framing and allowing the men to see from one end of the house to the other.

Jacob turned back and caught a glimpse of one of their more injured soldiers. Refusing to stay behind, the man was now on guard duty, standing watch over the alien prisoner. Even though she had given allegiance to them

and agreed to full cooperation, calling it their way, Karina hadn't come close to earning their trust. Jacob turned back to the front and strained to find the rest of the group. He knew they were scattered among the remaining homes, waiting for the approaching enemy and the blast of the mines that would trigger the ambush.

Moving at them from the east, the road traveled through the cluster of homes and sloped down a hill, the top covered in the fog of early morning. The heavy mist blanketed the ground, and the sun rising behind the hilltop made it difficult to see through. Jacob watched intently as the first of the red-sleeved soldiers appeared, emerging from the cloud like a hazy ghost. They were walking in a triangle formation. Rifles at the low ready, they were scouting the way for a column of three vehicles that gradually materialized behind them, the hovercrafts' engines blowing and dispersing the light fog surrounding them.

The approaching soldiers paused and seemed to signal, pointing at the waiting bait pile. A Red aimed his rifle toward the suspended golden glove and the Reds approached it, the vehicles moving in closer to provide security. The three-soldier patrol stopped at the first of the destroyed cars and allowed one of the hovercrafts to pass by. The vehicle sped past the glove and stopped just shy of leaving the kill zone. Jacob knew from its angle that it had parked almost directly in front of one of the claymore mines. The next two vehicles raced ahead, moving into position and creating a triangular formation nearly identical to the one the Reds had been walking.

The hovercrafts were being cautious, parking tactically and using dismounts for support in an attempt to shield themselves from danger. Ironically, their parking spots put them in the sights of a cauldron of mines. *They have a lot to learn about the human style of warfare*, Jacob thought.

He was ready to rise up over the window sill and take aim when Jesse grabbed his elbow. "Wait," the big man whispered.

With a clanging of gears, the hovercrafts anchored and ramps began to drop. Groups of soldiers and Golds exited through the rear of the transports. Knowing what was about to happen, Jacob winced, almost allowing pity to enter his mind. They had never intended to do this much damage. Now, with nearly twenty-five of the creatures—several unarmed—loitering in the kill box, he second-guessed the plan. *Maybe this is too much*, he thought.

He then remembered the strike against Meaford and the devastation of the Deltas on his hometown of Chicago. *No... this was just enough.*

Reds spread out and posted up security, having no idea they were looking down the face of a mine and about to receive a dose of 700 steel ball bearings propelled by high explosives. Other groups of soldiers formed working parties, recovering the dead bodies and returning them to one of the vehicles. The Reds were lax and at ease, still feeling they were the APEX predator in the area. A pack of Golds approached the suspended glove and pointed at it suspiciously.

“What is he waiting for?” Jacob whispered.

A Gold moved closer and extended a hand to the antenna; it grabbed the golden glove and began to remove it from the wire. Knowing it was about to happen, Jacob squeezed his rifle’s stock. The view to his front vanished in a flash of lightning, fire, and black smoke. The ground lifted and crashed under his feet; the house rattled and cracked from the shock waves of the explosives and stray fragments of the mines. Jacob leaned forward out of the window with Jesse by his side, searching for targets. Every alien was down, and two of the three vehicles were engulfed in metallic flame.

He stood and bounded over the windowsill. Approaching the kill box, he saw grotesquely maimed bodies spread out on the ground. A Red struggling to rise caught his attention; Jacob raised his rifle and put quick shots into its body. Just then, a blue flash raced by him and he spotted a small squad of dazed and scattered Reds—somehow spared the carnage of the mines—slowly recovering and firing blind. He crouched for cover between the cars as Jesse leveled his machine gun and let loose several long bursts, shredding their bodies.

More gun shots sounded from the opposite side of the ambush; Jacob knew it would be Rogers and his own team moving in. Jacob crouched and shuffle stepped forward, his rifle up while he surveyed the damage. Slowly he stepped into the spoiled ground of the ambush site. The alien bodies at his feet were mangled and twisted, still smoldering from the mine. The car where the golden glove had been was now folded and crumpled, all of its windows gone, and a tattering of Gold bodies lay strewn beside it. Jacob saw the remnants of the glove near the bloody pulp of an alien body. He reached down and held it up, showing it to Jesse.

“Hold on to it, maybe it’ll bring us good luck,” Jesse said.

Jacob stuffed the glove into a breast pocket and stood his ground, watching while Rogers came into view from the far side of the remaining vehicle. The leader had his hand up, pointing out positions and directing other soldiers into security zones. He looked at Jacob then put two fingers to his eyes and pointed at the remaining vehicle, the only one not burning. They merged on it from opposite angles, walking in arcs so that their rifles were aimed into the rear compartment. The back crew space was empty. With a steel box and bench seats along the bulkheads, it didn't appear to be any different from human transportation.

The front is where things changed. An empty driver's seat sat in the center, surrounded by flat-panel consoles and operators' chairs, also empty. There were sparks and smoke coming from some of the stations, but the vehicle still floated at an anchored hover and appeared stable. Rogers looked to a soldier behind him. "Go fetch me our alien," he ordered.

The soldier gave a quick nod and turned to run away.

Jacob shadowed Rogers as he moved deeper into the compartment, examining the cold metallic surfaces, and the monitors filled with foreign text and flickering images. Most of the seats were small and compact, apparently built around the small frames of the guides. "What do you make of this?" he asked.

Rogers stepped closer and observed the bench seats, running his hands over the plush fabric and looking down at golden uniform items left behind. "This isn't a combat vehicle; looks like some kind of mobile command center or intel truck. Probably why the Gold fucks were in it."

"Sergeant," the soldier called from behind. He and another soldier had Karina locked in a grip between them. Her face was distraught and sickly from having just waded through the bodies of her own dead.

She turned to Rogers. "Why have you done this? Why must you continue this senseless fight?"

"This is war, sweetheart," James said, pushing up beside her. "Just be happy you're on our side now." He grasped her by the elbow, taking her from the escorting soldiers, and led her deeper into the crew compartment then dropped her into a seat behind one of the consoles.

Rogers moved so that he stood over her. "You say you'll help us? It's time to put up or shut up."

She looked up at him. "I'm not sure what you expect me to do."

“I want to know what’s going on in that walled city.”

She nodded her head and moved her hands to a graphite black bar. Before her hands took hold of it, Rogers grabbed her wrist. “No tricks,” he said sternly.

She swallowed hard and continued her hand to the bar. “This is a musing transport. It is not designed for battle. Guides, like myself, use it for meditation, to gather information, and to interpret findings. You should not have killed these people; they wouldn’t have fought you.”

“Spilt milk,” Rogers said. “You might say your Goldies are friendly, but those other guys sure as hell aren’t.”

Karina scowled, glaring down in disgust before looking up at him. “My people are no friend to the Ursus.”

James laughed, moving closer and plopping onto an alien bench. “Oh, so now it’s *my people*, and *hey, look at me, I hate them just as much as you do*. Bullshit, you are happy as a pig in shit back in your little hippie commune, and now you want to feed us your sad story.”

She shook her head before powering up the console, moving her hands along the graphite bar. “Before Earth, the Ursus captured my home world. There is no human word to describe my people; we were given the gift of the message a millennium ago. The Ursus came to enforce the message.” She paused, looking away. “The Ursus are not of my race, even though we now all share a common creator.”

“Their creator is Ursus?” Jacob asked.

“No, the *Creator* is the *creator*; the Ursus are just another member of our communal. We all serve a purpose under the eyes of the Creator—the Ursus are warriors; we are spiritual and technical minded.”

James shrugged, leaning back and calling Duke up to his lap. “Well, I say kill ’em all and let God sort ’em out. And just to avoid any confusion, I’m talking about my God, not your hocus pocus man behind the curtain gibberish.”

Rogers grunted. “Enough. Karina... what can you tell me about their base?”

Her hand moved along the bar, the display changing light patterns as it scrolled from left to right in bouncing waves of green and blue. She was unable to hide a shocked expression and pulled her hand back as if it were on fire.

“What did you see?” Jacob asked her.

She turned and looked him in the eye. “We can’t stay here. We need to get very far away.”

“Why? What’s happening?”

“They have initiated a dissolution protocol for this region. The Council has lost patience with the death of our... *their* Messenger.”

Rogers pointed at her. “Cut the bullshit. What does this mean in human?”

“They will leave and take the community with them.”

Jacob pushed forward. “No... we have to stop them.”

“That isn’t all,” Karina said in a lower tone. “They will release the wit —” She stopped, thinking of the human word. “They will release the Deltas on this area. Not only that, they will rapidly multiply the number of them. This region will be blocked off until nothing living remains. My people call this ‘the quell’.”

Rogers clenched his fist, looking at her then catching the fear in Jacob’s eyes. “When is this going to happen?”

“It’s already begun,” she said. “This patrol was out looking for survivors and recovering the dead; the last mission before the area is abandoned and moved to the south.”

Rogers turned and called to the pair of soldiers waiting at the bottom of the ramp. He removed a dog-eared notebook from his chest pocket and wrote a series of instructions then folded the paper and placed it into the palm of the nearest soldier. “I need you to get back to the tower and get on the radio, the same frequency they are using. The tower should have the power to override their transmission. I want you to call out to anyone and everyone in the area to converge on the community. The grid coordinates are on the paper. We have to attack and destroy it now, or everyone in this area will be killed.”

“WAIT, I CAN DO BETTER,” KARINA SAID. “THIS VEHICLE HAS THE ABILITY to change and rebroadcast the message. The community will not know that it’s happening.”

Rogers looked at her. “Why would you do that?”

“I told you... I am now one of you; I belong to your communal. It is our way.”

“Then get it done. Do it now,” Rogers said.

He turned back to the soldier. “I need you to get back to Meaford. According to our turncoat here, the area should be clear. You need to rally everyone and get them moving against the orb. We need to attack at dusk. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

“Move... we’re counting on you,” Rogers said. He paused and turned to Karina. “Can you drive this hippie wagon?”

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CHAPTER EIGHTY-ONE

Laura stumbled into the darkness of the backyard. There were no lights, only the moonlight reflecting off the high steel wall circling the communal. She moved along a clapboard fence, pulling Katy behind her and searching for a place to hide. She knew Francis would return soon, and she needed to be gone. When he found Taurine, he would report her, then the Deltas would come. She crept along the fence, wending her way through an overgrown garden, deeper into high grass and away from the homes along the street.

The tall and solid wall reflected back at her mockingly; she wouldn't be able to escape this way. A noise in the house startled her. Someone was pounding on the locked door—they would find Taurine soon. She needed someplace to hide, to get as far from here as she could. She pressed against the clapboard fence, searching the boards. She found loose panels and pried at them with her bare hands, scraping her knuckles until they bled. A board came loose. She pulled it free and worked on the one next to it, finding it easier to pull away.

Laura stuck her head through the hole in the fence, searching until she was sure the way was clear. Quickly, she whirled back and guided Katy through the opening ahead of her. She scrambled through just before a beam of light began searching the backyard. She could hear Francis calling out for her, shouting her name, making promises she knew he wouldn't be able to keep. Laura took one last chance, reached through, and was able to stack the loose boards back over the hole. They wouldn't pass a close inspection, but right now, in the dark, it may be enough to conceal her route.

Straining her eyes, she searched the neighbor's backyard. Less than fifty feet wide, covered with tall grass, and an overgrown garden at the back, it had a similar layout. She squinted, spotting a dark shadowed area in the corner—a large garden shed. Laura clenched her jaw; it could work... it *had* to work. She ran across the yard, dragging Katy behind her, imagining a swarm of Reds already storming the house, finding their dead witch, and releasing the hounds into the yard to search for her. There would be no sparing her now, no second chances.

She tried to think of the brief survival lessons on evasion they taught her back at the base—what to do if they were attacked, if the Deltas got into the base and she had to escape. Back then she had a rifle and they taught her to use it, but even the military instructor training them knew the rifle would be her last resort. It was drilled into her that her best defense was to hide, and that's exactly what she would do now. She approached the garden shed and found the door locked with a pin. It was easily removed, but she would have no way to re-lock it from the inside. The door would open freely without it.

The door slid open like a barn; she dragged it just enough so that she could slip inside. She guided Katy in behind her and let the barn door slide shut. Moonlight shone in through a small skylight placed in the roof and a row of smaller windows in the front. She looked around the space, gasping and out of breath. Her eyes watered as she tried to focus on the room in front of her. Laura crept over the wooden floor of the small shed and past a rusted garden tractor parked in the center. In the back was an assortment of garden tools and burlap feed bags. Laura pressed in between the bags and sat Katy on the floor.

Laura flinched when she felt a static pulse through the knowledge cap. Her hand gripped it and she pulled and tugged, trying to remove it. The thing was solid, gripping her skull tightly. On the far wall, she saw a workbench, and near it was a large tool chest. Laura knelt close and pressed her face against Katy's. "Stay here, hun. Momma has to do something."

Silently, Katy nodded her head. Laura forced a smile and kissed her forehead then crept across the space to the bench, feeling the static increase in her head. She knew it would have to be removed before they found her or crippled her with the cap. Finding a flat-tip screwdriver, she pried at the metallic device until her scalp bled, but the cap refused to move. She began

to panic as the pressure in her skull increased. She searched the walls and saw a string of jumper cables hanging from a hook.

Taking the cables, she moved back to the garden tractor in the center of the room and lifted the tractor's seat, finding a small 12-volt battery right where she hoped it would be. She began breathing heavily, feeling the rush of pressure from the cap as it blocked the fear of what she was about to do. She connected the ends to the tractor battery then placed the negative on her cap. She looked in the corner where she'd left Katy, smiled, and then touched the positive clip to her cap.

There was no explosion or arc of electrical sparks like she expected; just the pain of a sledge hammer coming down on the base of her neck. She fell backwards and tumbled to the wooden floor. Instinctively, she reached up to touch her sore head and noticed the plate was gone. She found it on the floor beside her, the surface of the gold plate scorched where the electrical connection was made.

She lay on the floor, her cheek pressed against the dry boards. Katy ran to her side and palmed her face. "Are you okay, Momma?" she whispered.

Laura reached up and held the girl's hand. "I'm fine now."

There was a noise from outside, a splintering of wood that she knew was the clapboard fence. From her angle, she could just see under the sliding door and watched as heavy boots stomped through the yard in her direction. A bright light passed over the door, breaking through gaps in the shed's siding. She sat up and pulled Katy onto her lap, letting her eyes search the small space for a place to hide. Panicking, she knew it was hopeless; they were sure to find her.

Backing away, she scooped into the feedbags, pulling them in front of her. She heard hands grab the door, the wood clacking as something attempted to open it. The door slid partway before a distant explosion paused its motion. Laura heard human screams and gunshots followed by a man's voice shouting challenges. Holes appeared in the door where bullets pierced the wood, and a blue flash filled the gaps with light.

More gunfire and explosions covered the sounds of human screams. Laura crept toward the door and peeked out. An alien soldier in a blue uniform with red sleeves lay dead. Another was sitting against the clapboard fence a distance away, its hands grasping its bleeding chest. Laura slid the door open and looked out, seeing bright flashes of explosions

over the rooftops of the homes. In the space between the houses, a man was kneeling as he held a pistol and was firing into the street.

She watched as blue bolts raced around him. The man stood his ground, covering groups of fleeing civilians who had previously lined up to enter the transports. Laura called to Katy and lifted the girl to her chest. Now was her chance; she would mix in with the fleeing group and leave with them. She ran through the yard, racing along the side of the house. As she drew near, she saw more uniformed men with rifles squaring off against the aliens. She turned and ran into the street. Just before she reached the man with the pistol, she watched as he was hit in the chest by a blue bolt, his torso melting under the flame of it.

The man fell back, his body hitting the ground. Laura watched his pistol slide across the pavement. She rushed toward the body, quickly scooped up the weapon, and tucked into the waist of her pants as she ran past him. Holding Katy tight, she found her way into the mass of fleeing civilians and tried to disappear into the group. It was chaotic, all of them running for a distant gate at the end of the street. Seeing the soldiers, their soldiers, fighting back against the aliens, she thought of Jacob. Laura tried to search the human faces for her husband, hoping he was alive and safe.

Running closer to the gate, she saw the uniformed men exchanging fire with the red-sleeved soldiers, the men desperately trying to create an exit for the civilians to escape through. The Deltas were clustering and stampeding into the opening, trying to plug the gap. A small car raced through the gate from outside, charging directly at the horde of Deltas. Bodies broke and were tossed aside as the car hit them, knocking several back and creating a wake of death in its path. The car reached the center of the horde and screeched to a stop. The Deltas swarmed and piled onto it before the car exploded into a blinding fireball. The blast knocked Laura back, the blinding flash pushing a shockwave over the crowd.

The crowd of civilians broke up and scattered, panicked men and women breaking in all directions. She followed a group of women behind a house. Holding Katy to her chest, she struggled to keep up with them. Laura didn't know where they were going, but she didn't want to be alone, and she wanted to get away from the frantic fighting at the gate. She was rocked by a round of deafening explosions and felt the ground shudder.

“The wall is down!” a man ahead of her screamed, pointing to the far off structure. As he’d said, Laura could see that a large hole had been punched into it. Engulfed in bright yellow flames, the skeleton of a large fuel truck rolled through the breach.

The crowd turned and headed for the breach, desperate for a way out. Laura felt a hand grab her as a man’s voice called her name; she turned and stared into the face of Francis. She reeled back, keeping Katy away from him. He held his hand out to her and said, “Come with me, there is still time to escape.”

Laura backed up, not speaking and shaking her head.

“It’s okay. I understand why you did what you did,” he said, looking at her with compassion. “Please, this is all getting out of control. I have a transport; we can escape together.”

An attack helicopter flew in close overhead, flying low over the group. The civilians ducked and cheered as the small aircraft made a gun run against the orb in the center of the community. As Laura stood and looked toward it, she let a smile cross her face.

“Are you enjoying this?” Francis shouted at her.

Laura stepped back and turned toward the breach, trying to catch up with the group. Francis again reached out and grabbed her arm, this time pulling her back violently. “You’re coming with me!” he said sternly.

Katy gripped her neck tightly and began to scream. Laura was spun back so quickly she lost her footing and was tugged into the man. He looked her in the eye, putting his face close to hers. “I’m not giving you the choice; you’re coming with me.”

Laura let her right arm drift to her waist while still struggling to pull away from Francis. She found the pistol and grasped it tightly. She tugged and broke his grip. He lashed out and smacked her face with the back of his hand. She felt the sting and tasted the blood on her lip. She paused and glared at him. He held a stone expression. “Come. There isn’t time.”

Laura shook her head and raised her right hand. Francis saw the pistol, his eyes going wide. “I always knew my end would come this way,” he said.

She squeezed the trigger, hitting him in the chest. His hands reached up at his light-blue robe, the blood seeping between his fingers. He dropped to his knees and eyed up at her. He shook his head and stared down at the

grass. People ran past them, rushing for the breach in the wall. Laura backed away as he reached out his blood-covered hand. "It didn't have to be this way."

It was just then that Francis lunged for her. Laura stumbled back and again pulled the trigger. She watched as Francis's head snapped back with a hole in the center of his face. She suddenly felt weak in her legs, and Katy felt very heavy against her chest.

A large woman stopped beside her. "Come on, keep going; we're almost out."

Laura looked into the woman's hard eyes. The lady was dressed in civilian clothing; dirt and blood coated her forehead. She was husky and had the look of a leader, her black and gray hair tied back, scarf hanging loosely from her neck. The older woman traveled with several other young girls as a group, like a family. Laura nodded and turned to follow her.

As they got closer to the gate, men rushed through to greet them from several open-backed trucks that sat parked in the breach. Helicopters raced overhead, dodging the bolts of blue plasma as they provided supporting fire to the men on the ground. Ahead, a man was standing in the high grass, directing the loading of vehicles as another man rallied soldiers to press on toward the battle near the orb. Laura stayed close to the woman, letting her lead the way to safety.

"Clem," the husky woman shouted to one of the soldiers. Laura stopped and stood close with the others. The man glanced back then reached out and hugged the woman. "Ruth! I thought you got it back at the warehouse."

The woman shook her head. "I should have. I was knocked out when our truck rolled, and I woke up here."

Laura pushed past them and grabbed the man's oilskin coat. "I remember you," she said. "You were at the cabin; you left with my husband. Do you know where he is?"

Clem pursed his lips, looking at her and the young girl on her chest. He nodded and pointed at the far off gate where the battle still raged. "He's in there, leading the fight."

Laura turned and looked back, seeing the waves of Deltas and Reds rushing at the men dug in on the line, fighting against them as waves of helicopters roared overhead.

Clem put a hand on her shoulder. “Come on, we need to get you all out of here.”

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CHAPTER EIGHTY-TWO

The transport moved forward on a cushion of air, rocked back with the shockwaves of nearby explosions. Rogers was sitting by Karina's side, directing her path through the maze of rallied soldiers. The nearby men—some hiding in the woods; others, survivors and remnants from Meaford—had answered the call. Every unit and militiaman within fifty miles had come out of hiding to join the fight, all of them coming together in one last stand against the alien base.

James was standing in the open hatch, wearing one of the red-sleeved uniform jackets over his own uniform, running a heavy machine gun. He dropped back into the hatch just as a splash of blue harmlessly bounced off the surface of the hovercraft.

"You sure we're safe in here, and wearing this shit, Karina?" James shouted, hesitating before he climbed back out of the hatch.

The guide was busy driving the vehicle and didn't answer. Looking through the large, view-screen display, Jacob could see the chaos outside. All types of civilian and military vehicles were rushing by them on all sides. Columns of advancing troops were firing into the open gate as they moved forward. He even saw helicopters from some hidden base had joined the last-ditch fight against the invaders.

"This vehicle, and the Ursus' uniforms, have thermal shielding; highly effective against the Ursus' rifles," Karina finally said. A burst of rounds pinged and crunched against the side of the transport, followed by a blast of sparks and smoke popping from a console on the bulkhead. "Unfortunately, we were not prepared for your high-velocity projectile weapons."

“Well, that was stupid,” James laughed.

Jacob was also wearing one of the Ursus’ jackets. It had the feel of smooth synthetic leather; it was light and seemed to shrink and adjust to the occupant’s size. They’d used shoe polish to cover the red-striped sleeves in hopes that an excited soldier wouldn’t put a bullet into them. The pock-marked and blood-stained front of Jacob’s jacket reminded him that these coats wouldn’t work against a good old fashioned rifle. They’d procured the enemy armor, but the rifles were useless to them. Somehow tuned in to the alien DNA, their own human bodies were unable to activate them.

She shook her head, thrusting the vehicle forward, narrowly missing a car racing into a Delta horde at high speed. “The last time we visited this world, the most advance projectile we faced was a musket or a spear.” The craft rocked as it collided with a truck; she corrected course and directed it forward. “We would have expected your weapons to evolve with your technology—lasers or other energy-based weapons—but you humans have embraced your primitive projectiles.”

James laughed loudly, loading another belt of ammo into his M240. “Hell, yeah!” he shouted. “We love guns.” He stood and climbed back into the turret, firing long salvos into the Delta horde.

Jacob watched on the view screen as a column of small cars raced directly into the Deltas and exploded in the center of the mass. Karina ducked as the view screen filled with the devastation, the explosion temporarily washing out the display. Rogers righted her, putting her back on the controls. “Militias,” Rogers said, pointing to the craters left by the car bombs. “They are not to be fucked with.”

She put her head down, working the throttle and veering to the left to allow more of the car bombers to pass by her. “I will never understand your people’s call to violence. Why not just leave? Even if you win here, you cannot win everywhere.”

Rogers grunted. “Look who’s talking. Those men out there fighting have had everything taken away from them. *Your* people created this, not ours. You said it yourself; if we leave, they’ll cull this area with The Darkness. Maybe we can stop that.”

“You are only delaying the inevitable. The exodus has begun; there is no way for you to win once our main forces arrive. This is a waste of both of our people,” Karina protested as she watched the slaughter in front of her.

Rogers looked up and saw they were now at the stalled front lines. Ahead of them, men were exchanging gunfire with the aliens at long range. In the distance, he could just make out the glow of the alien orb. "Okay, this is close enough. We can move out on foot from here."

With that, Karina broke the craft from its hover. Slamming a control arm forward, the vehicle anchored hard into the ground outside and came to rest, grinding against the earth below them. James' machine gun continued to rattle away, spilling hot brass into the compartment. Duke paced and growled below, snapping at the man's boots while Karina used a control panel to drop the rear ramp. Jacob lifted his rifle close to his chest and checked the action. He turned and followed Rogers out as the big man moved Karina ahead of him into the open battlefield. The sounds of war were louder outside, the air filled with the zipping of rounds, yelling of men, and the stench of burning explosives and gunpowder.

Overhead a Blackhawk passed by at high speed, gunners firing from the doors. The bird banked hard, making a dangerously close pass while the door gunners bled rounds into the last of the Delta lines. In front of the horde, the remnants of one of Meaford's remaining rifle battalions were in close, engaging The Darkness at point-blank range.

"They teach you about close air support at your Star Fleet Academy?" Rogers said, smiling at the helicopters racing overhead. "I notice you turds don't have any air defense."

She shook her head. "Like I said... spears and muskets. But you can trust me when I tell you that our main forces will have such things. These skies will not be safe when the exodus arrives."

Rogers moved around the side of the hovercraft; he squatted and waited for the others to catch up then peeked around the corner. Just as Karina had said, the defenders appeared to be pulling back. Off to the right was a series of loud explosions that rocked the ground and lit the sky to the east in balls of orange flame. He turned his gaze and pointed to a section of the alien wall, now crumbled and twisted. "That would be Clem. Right on time, opening another exit."

Jacob stood and used the optics of his rifle to look in the direction of the blast, seeing the bright fireballs of exploding semi-trucks laden with explosives. The wall was peeled back in an open breach. Transport trucks raced through to gather the fleeing civilians. He searched the mass and

could see long columns of approaching survivors. Jacob held his breath and prayed that Katy and Laura were in the group.

“You okay, Jake?” Rogers called back to him.

Jacob lowered his rifle; he closed his eyes, feeling his muscles tighten. He swallowed hard, knowing that they were exacting a hard revenge for everything that had been done to them. “On it, boss. Let’s get this done,” he said, pulling his rifle into his shoulder.

Rogers slapped James on the shoulder, the latter now having switched out the heavy machine gun for a carbine, Duke by his side and ready to move. “Lead us out, James,” Rogers said.

James grimaced and stepped off, running ahead at a jog with Duke beside him. Rogers led Karina ahead of him as they fell in with pockets of other soldiers advancing forward. The team ducked down a narrow street and headed for the main road that would take them in the direction of the orb. Jacob followed with his rifle up, covering the way. The Delta resistance had been broken; any of the remaining black-eyed creatures were now separated into small pockets and easily cut down by the approaching soldiers.

The Ursus were nowhere to be seen. The way ahead appeared clear, with an empty street all the way to the orb. “Where the hell are your friends?” Rogers barked after they’d reached a narrow street flanked by small cookie-cutter homes.

Karina stopped and looked ahead pointing. “They will set their final defense in the landing ship.” She turned back to Rogers. “Please... you must give them the opportunity to submit.”

Rogers shot her a hateful glare. “Like the one you gave us at Meaford?” He turned and signaled for James to press ahead into the quiet neighborhoods.

Along the route, the men stopped to pound on doors while others provided security. Along the outer walls, they could still hear heavy fighting as The Darkness drew toward the fighting in the community. Soldiers were working desperately to evacuate the last remaining civilians from the community, showing them the way out.

Jacob passed by the fleeing civilians, checking every face as the people passed. He was still surprised at the way the base fell and the inability of the invaders to put up a solid defense. “Karina, where is everyone? You

must have more than this,” Jacob asked her as she trudged along beside him with her head down.

“Only two legions came down with the lander; we rely heavily on the witnesses for defense,” she said. “Your people have killed many of the Ursus in the field.”

“Why haven’t they sent reinforcements?” Rogers asked.

She stopped and rubbed her eyes, taking in a deep breath. “When our Messenger was killed at the reception ceremony, it brought great shame on this communal. Not only that, but it brought great attention on our failures. The council decided to write this place off, determining the population too dangerous for habitation. There will be no reinforcements.”

“You know, I was the one that tagged that fruit cake,” James grunted, overhearing the conversation.

She looked at him, puzzled.

“Your Messiah character, that was me,” James boasted proudly. “Easy shooting too. Right through the brain bucket. Split the dude’s grape wide open then punched two more into his chest for good measure.”

Karina turned away, horrified. “When you killed the Messenger, you took away the communal’s means of negotiation; only the Messenger has the privilege to settle for peace with the local population.”

James laughed and spit on the ground near her feet. “Some luck, huh?” He grunted and moved away, not expecting a response.

Uniformed men were bounding forward, moving tactically toward the final perimeter near the outer edges of the orb. James guided them through what appeared to be an alien motor pool divided into cubes. The nearby soldiers were swiftly moving the last pocket of survivors to safety through the maze of heavy rock barriers that separated sections of the motor pool from other areas while Jacob’s team moved into an empty bay that overlooked the front entrance to the orb.

No longer glowing, Rogers noted the dull object’s hatches and exits were sealed. A small balcony that ran along the roof of the object revealed small groups of the Ursus soldiers. They appeared to be randomly engaging the men on the ground with pot shots. Rogers quickly fell back into cover beside the others. An organized unit of combat engineers was moving ahead, supported by a Stryker vehicle, its 30mm gun blasting away at the sides of the ship.

Suddenly, the main hatch of the orb fell back. The void quickly filled with a large vehicle equipped with a massive turret that opened up with its main gun, destroying the Stryker with waves of plasma. The vehicle drew fire as it raced down the ramp to engage the engineers on the ground. The red-sleeved soldiers used the frenzied action to try to gain momentum. They poured out of the orb, firing at the dug in soldiers surrounding them.

“You must stop this,” Karina pleaded with Rogers. “Pull back! This fight is already over.”

Rogers shook his head. “No, we have to end this place and keep them from creating more of the Deltas.”

Karina’s eyes couldn’t grow any wider. She grabbed at Rogers, pleading with him to stop the killing. Ignoring her, he turned away. A group of soldiers ran to their position and knelt down next to Rogers. A sergeant leaned in close to report. “We have all of the survivors located. These are the last of the enemy holdouts; we finish them off and were clear to egress. The captain wants to know if there is anything your scouts can do to assist us in assaulting the craft.”

Without warning, the enemy fire intensified. Another hatch opened and a second assault vehicle rushed out of the orb, leading a wave of Ursus into the open. A soldier escorting the reporting sergeant was hit with splatter from the blue plasma; his face vanished in a hot flash. Rogers drew the other soldier deeper into cover before rising up to return fire.

Jacob watched in horror as a group of civilians were caught in the open. A man sprinted to the barrier, carrying a child in his arms. A Red directed several pulses at the man, narrowly missing, yet causing the man to trip and roll to his back. The Ursus concentrated their fire in the man’s direction as he scrambled to get his child into cover. Jacob jumped over the barrier he was hiding behind, James yelling for him to get back. Under intense fire with the blue bolts raining down on them from elevated positions, Jacob made it to the forward cover. He rose up, firing rapidly to suppress the aliens on the catwalk while screaming for the man and child to move.

Watching them get to cover, he tried to escape himself by crawling to a corner of the low wall then rising up again to fire back; this time his luck ran out and he was hit in the flank by a blast of plasma. He tumbled back, the air knocked from his lungs as he rolled behind the stone barrier. The

Ursus's armored jacket held, but he felt the blazing heat against his skin under his left arm.

The fire to his front stopped with the Ursus assuming he was dead, angering Jacob even more than being shot at. He clenched his teeth and checked the action on his rifle then rolled out of cover. He spotted the Red, now focused on his team. Jacob centered the cross hair and squeezed the trigger, proudly observing as the side of the alien's helmet exploded outward.

The aliens appeared to be making a last push to retake the communal. "We have to get these people out of here," the soldier yelled, pointing to a pinned down group of civilians behind them. He rolled to his left and back into cover, looking to the wall behind him and the huddled group of women and children. They reminded him of his family, and he immediately wondered if they'd gotten out safe.

Rogers turned to him and pointed to a parked alien transport in another of the sheltered bays farther away from the outer walls of the orb. "Jacob, take it and get these people to the coast."

Jacob shook his head. "No. I'm staying, dammit. Have somebody else do it. Besides, I can't drive one of those things."

Rogers shook his head. "It wasn't a suggestion; I'm telling you. Now take Karina and go. Get those people to safety. Meet up with Clem at the coast. If you hurry, you'll get there before he leaves."

Jacob hesitated and Rogers grabbed him by the shoulders, pulling him in. "Go. I'll catch up with you later," he said. "Don't worry about us. Once we finish here, we'll be right behind you."

Jacob nodded and raised his fist to meet Rogers'. "See ya soon then," he said, and ran off with Karina toward the hovercraft.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-THREE

The transport crunched over debris as it moved toward the coastline. Jacob sat on top, surrounded by survivors who sat or stood anywhere they could find a spot atop the hovercraft. The vehicle was loaded to capacity. The compartment below was filled and they had kept the ramp open and dragged it behind them to allow more to ride along. The road was quiet; they hadn't seen any of the enemy since leaving the walls of the communal. As the sun rose on the horizon, Jacob wondered what would come. Would the enemy send more to recapture it, or just let the place be?

Ahead, they spotted columns of civilians marching along the side of the road. They scattered upon feeling the ear tickles of the hovercraft, but then turned back, looking curiously to watch the alien vehicle covered with humans. Word had spread to get to the marinas on the coast if any survivors in the area wanted to leave.

Soon, the road was filled with walking crowds of people carrying all of their belongings. Once the road became too choked with people to proceed, Karina moved the hovercraft to the shoulder and they abandoned the vehicle. Jacob led her away, walking into the wood line, and kept her out of sight while he searched through discarded luggage and bags on the side of the road.

Jacob returned to her with a handful of clothing and children's jackets recovered from the road. She was very small for a human woman, but Jacob figured she could easily pass for a young adult in the right light. He handed her a small, brightly colored jacket with a large hood he'd picked and stood watch while she changed into the new clothing.

As she made to rejoin him on the road, Jacob stopped and turned to face her. “I won’t make you stay with me. You are free to go.”

Karina frowned at him. “My people would refuse me now. I have nowhere to go, but I could help you.”

“How?”

“I can remove the knowledge plates—the caps. There are other things I could do. Don’t abandon me here.”

Jacob shrugged, having no sympathy for her. He turned away and continued walking toward the coast. Looking back, he saw that she was following just behind him. “Will they come back?” he asked her.

Karina moved up, keeping pace with him. “They will be forced to respond. The musing transport’s systems showed areas south of here that are secure and safe, but the North has been declared too cold for our people. I suggest we go there.”

Jacob didn’t answer her; this wasn’t new information. Although he suspected the real reason they wouldn’t move north was because the Deltas didn’t do well in the cold water. He smiled, wondering if they knew what Chicago and Michigan would be like when winter came. Maybe the ice on the lakes would freeze them all out. He lost himself in thought while walking with the group. When he looked around, he realized he’d picked up a following—people recognized his uniform and were falling in around him. Walking with him, were people desperate for any sort of structure in the chaos.

Ahead, the woods began to thin, destroyed vehicles lined the road, and the packs of people grew into uncountable numbers. He could see the waterline and the makings of a harbor. Survivors were lined up and being escorted into boats then ferried out to large vessels anchored in the bay. He had a flash of *déjà vu*, remembering a similar flotilla in Lake Michigan of the waters of Chicago. He stopped and stared at the impressive sight, allowing the others to move past him to meander down the road and fall into the lines.

He saw more armed men, militia and soldiers standing watch over the lines and guiding the survivors to the boats. Karina stood beside him. “It could have been different,” she said.

“Your people made that choice, not mine.”

She nodded and moved ahead. Jacob rolled his shoulders and followed her. He found the back of the lines and moved past them, continuing on to a group of soldiers near the head of a pier. Men with clipboards were taking a head count of families before leading them down the pier to waiting passenger ferries. Jacob recognized the unit patch from Meaford and stepped close to the soldier.

“I’m looking for a woman and her daughter.”

The soldier looked up at him with a cross expression; he waved the clipboard at the long line of people. “Take your pick.”

Jacob nodded his head and exhaled, beginning to turn away.

“Hold up,” the man said, putting a hand on Jacob’s shoulder. He pointed to a small ticket office at the head of the pier. “Check in at the office. We turn these registers into Laura; she’s been keeping track of everyone board —”

“Wait,” Jacob interrupted, his face breaking into a smile. He grabbed the man by both shoulders. “Laura, is that what you said her name was?”

The man nodded. “Yeah...” He looked at Jacob as recollection filled his eyes. “As a matter of fact, she has a little girl too. Nahh, man, you gotta be shitting me. That’s who you’re looking for?”

Jacob spun away. Dropping his pack, he ran for the ticket office placed just to the right of the pier walkway. Jacob moved around piles of luggage and empty boxes. The building was square and painted white; the front held a glass ticket counter, the glass now covered with heavy cardboard. Jacob skirted around the building and found a small door where a soldier stood outside it, smoking a cigarette. He saw Jacob approach and eyed up at him.

“Something I can—Anderson?!” Masterson said, looking at him with shock. “How in the hell...? Are the others with you?”

Jacob shook his head. “Is she in there?” Jacob asked.

Masterson flipped his cigarette into the water and turned back. He reached behind him, opened the door, and allowed Jacob to move ahead of him. Inside, the room was low lit and dusty. A tired sergeant sat behind a desk, going over charts and stacks of papers, and a second man lay sleeping on a bench with his rifle and rucksack beside him.

“Through that door,” Masterson said, pointing to a door set into the back of the room, *Manager* stenciled on the old wood.

Speechless now, he felt the anticipation building in his guts. He stepped to the door and grabbed the knob. Pausing, he took a deep breath and pushed the door in, following it into the room. She was there, going over stacks of papers and transposing names into a large journal book. She heard the door but didn't look up. "You can set the papers over there," she said, pointing to a large box filled with the unbound pages.

When Jacob didn't reply, she looked up and her jaw dropped.

"How...? When...?" she gasped. Pushing away from the desk, she ran to him.

Jacob wrapped his arms around her, pulling her in tight. "I just got here. The men out front told me the way."

She stood wrapped in his embrace. "I love you," she said, looking up into his stubbled and scarred face. Pressing her close to him, he kissed her, and for the moment they were safe and far away.

"How did you get here?"

"Kiss me again," she said.

He met her lips, closing his eyes and letting the warmth of the room take him. He felt a tug and heard a call from Katy. He dropped to her level and lifted her in a tight hug. "Daddy! You're back," she said, tears in her eyes.

"I'm back, Katy," he said, the three of them now wrapped up together.

EPILOGUE

On a cold pre-dawn morning, water slapped against the sides of a tall, double-decked cabin cruiser. The boat rested low in the water at the outer edge of the floating refugee camp. Every day, the floating city grew smaller as vessels of every type broke off and plotted a course to move northwest toward Michigan's Upper Peninsula—the last known safe area for humans.

For reasons unknown, the aliens had stopped moving to the northern parts of the state. Rumors thought it had to do with the dioxin attacks in central Michigan. Others claimed that the creatures were unable to adapt to the cold climates. Some even claimed the creatures had learned a lesson with the losses there, and Jacob suspected the trend had occurred in other areas as well.

Jacob stood at the controls, watching a large fishing trawler pull away, black smoke rising from its stack as white water churned up in the wake of the departing ship. Another group in search of a safe place to start over. He watched as the vessel faded away, hoping they would find the safety they were searching for.

Counting the dwindling number of vessels remaining, he contemplated how long he would be able to wait for them. But after everything they'd done, they deserved his patience. He sat down and looked up at the sky, forgetting how many stars were up there. He would never look at them the same way again. A tracer cut across the horizon, another easily identified as a Karinan vessel. They'd named the alien race—with much objection from her—after their traveling companion. Karina was correct in her predictions

of the exodus. Ships were entering orbit daily, flying overhead and buzzing the flotilla. So far they had left them alone. Karina said they wouldn't attack unless their territories were entered, for now anyway. She claimed that most of the people fleeing the dying galaxy would have no stomach for the fighting. Jacob had his doubts, but maybe she was telling the truth.

The sun broke the horizon to his back and lit a shining path across the water. He focused on a far off vessel; rather than departing, this one was coming closer. He heard Laura below deck moving through the cabin; she stepped lightly on the steps and stood beside him, then handed him a cup of instant coffee. He could hear Karina and Katy laughing below in the galley while fixing the morning meal. Jacob pointed out the approaching vessel to Laura. She moved closer and put her arm around his waist, watching silently.

He slowly began to recognize the ship and remember where he'd seen it last. On a mission to the east coast of Michigan. A Navy vessel that transported them across these same dangerous waters. He stepped off the bridge, grabbed a small pair of binoculars, and climbed up to the second deck. He steadied his eye and focused on the bow. His body warmed when he saw men on the bow leaning against the rail, the shape of a dog standing with them. He smiled and turned to the controls, starting the engine.

"What are you doing?" Laura called from below.

He looked down at her excitedly. "They're back."



THE HEIGHT OF WINTER, THEY STROLLED THE SHORELINE OF MACKINAW Island. In the distance, an ice bridge had formed and teams were moving supplies across the Straits of Mackinaw from the mainland aboard horse-drawn sleds. Standing alone and closer to the tree line, Jacob watched them. He found a worn driftwood log and sat atop it, letting his rifle hang loose from the sling. He grinned while watching Katy roll through the snow as the big bearded man and scout dog dropped to make snow angels on the beach with her.

The remaining members of the Assassins had claimed one of the large homes overlooking the lake. Soon after, other survivors arrived, retaking the

town and bringing the area back to life. They hoped to again have steady electrical power, but for now they relied on the generators. James still left quite often with his Delta detecting dog, making trips to the southern part of the state to check on his friends at the bunker, where a large Army outpost had now been established—the threat of the dioxin still keeping the aliens away.

The radio traffic called the survivors *holdouts* and *the last bastions of humanity*. James' favorite word for them was *insurgents*. Invitations were often sent to them by courier, asking them to return home. Celebrities and political figures made recordings that were broadcast over the radio, asking for the *holdouts* and those like them to lay down their weapons and return to the south to live in the well-structured communities of the Karinans. Instead of becoming a deterrent, they motivated others to flee the communal and make the trek north, to the safety of the human camps. Knowing that others were surviving on their own motivated families to take the risk and flee.

The word the humans gave to the alien people had become a slur to them. Named for what the humans considered a hero of their race and what the aliens considered a traitor, Karina was now an ambassador to the free peoples of North America. She was protected and kept safe, yet always on the move. Rogers traveled with her from camp to camp, keeping up the morale and building support for the resistance. They'd manage to salvage bits of alien technology, and even recovered a fully functioning orb in North Dakota. With Karina's help, they also managed a way to convert the Ursus battle rifles for human use.

Katy stood and waved to him, laughing before she turned back to tackle Duke, the two of them tumbling into the heavy snow. He heard the crunching of boots and looked behind him. Laura appeared, carrying a long thermos. She grinned and poured him a cup of hot chocolate, then dropped to sit beside him on the log. They had as much of everything as they needed. With the threat of The Darkness retreating in the wake of the winter snow, they'd been able to raid food warehouses all along the state. Supermarkets and corner stores still sat full with their stores of canned goods. There would be plenty of food for the winters, and they'd have time to grow their own in the coming spring.

James ran toward them, carrying Katy in his arms and Duke bounding by his side. His beard and jacket covered in snow, he looked like the abominable snowman. He pointed to the cup in Jacob's hand and scowled. "Hey, Mom and Dad, you're holding out on us!"

Laura laughed before pouring them each a cup then turned to Jacob and hugged him close. "I think we're going to be okay here," she said.

The End

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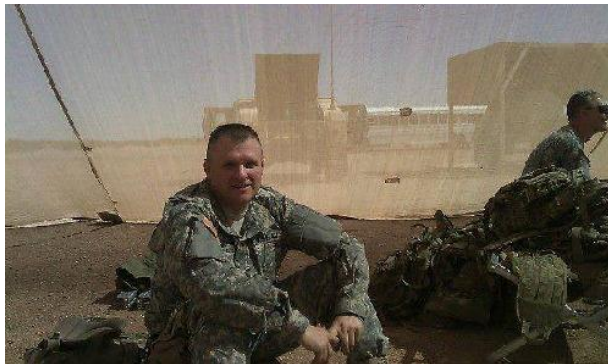
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W. J. Lundy is a still serving Veteran of the U.S. Military with service in Afghanistan. He has over 15 years of combined service with the Army and Navy in Europe, the Balkans and Southwest Asia. Visit him on [Facebook](#) for more.



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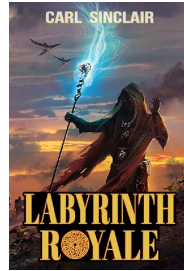
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