

Teace Snyder

RISEN

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By Teace Snyder

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RISEN

a novel

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RISEN

CHAPTER 1: FROM THE TREE

Derek Riggs, Upstate Massachusetts, 2004

I had never been that wounded before. In all of the fights I'd had, all of the beatings I'd taken—the drills, the falls, the training—none of it had ever made me feel the way I felt in that moment. None of it had ever made me feel like I was really broken. But I was broken now. I was nothing now. And everything that I knew to trust or care about had vanished with my newfound bruises and cuts. They were gone. Matthew was gone. Sebastian almost certainly wouldn't survive. And his girlfriend... that cheating whore had seen the inside of the fort, and now... it was gone too. I was as good as dead. If anything happened—if anything came for me—I couldn't escape. I was trapped. Lying there in the hospital bed, broken and battered. Pained breaths. Unable to move. Unable to so much as fucking stand. I wanted to die. I wanted it all to be over. I couldn't imagine starting from scratch. I couldn't imagine rebuilding everything all by myself. But, most of all, I couldn't imagine how even then, as bad as it already was, that it could still get so much worse. My father had been notified. He was on his way. And as I dipped in and out of consciousness, I hoped and dreamt that I would die in my sleep well before he arrived.

My eyes fluttered open for a fraction of a second and I caught a glimpse of someone standing at my side. I jolted back, tried to pull my arms up in defense but felt the tug of a few cords in my veins and straps on my wrists. My breathing shifted and I began to panic. I didn't know if it was an undead or not. I didn't know what was happening or what the drugs I was on were doing to me. Instead, all I knew was that someone was there and I hadn't invited them. I began to thrash, clearing my throat and pushing through the haze to cry out.

"Leave me alone!" I shouted, panicking all the more as a hand came to rest on my shoulder.

"Hey, hey! It's ok. Everything's ok," a voice assured me—a voice I didn't recognize—someone I didn't know. A cop. A doctor. It didn't matter. If they were there trying to help, I wanted them gone. I continued to thrash in my bed—feeling the IV turn inside of my veins, adding to the pain. My one good eye swiveled to the side to try and get a look at the person, but I struggled to focus and stay alert. Soon, the drugs started to pull me back down again. Soon, I was unconscious—still weary and terrified by anyone who might come to stand by my side.

I woke up again. But I don't know how much later. I didn't know... anything. I groggily turned to the side to see someone sitting in a chair beside me—the same person who had tried to get me to calm down before I was awake. I struggled to focus on them, to stay conscious and understand what was happening. Then, after

violently clearing my throat, I managed to sputter out a few words without even realizing what they were until after I'd spoken them.

"I'm afraid," I stated, shocked by what I had just said. My heart pounded in my chest and my breaths quivered. I looked to the person by my side—whoever it was—and prayed that they could help me. Help me understand. Help me feel less alone. Anything. Because as long as I was strapped down in that bed I was worse than dead, I was unable to kill myself. I wanted out. I wanted to disappear. I needed to get the straps off and break free, any way I could...

"It's ok... the police are looking for him... you have nothing to be afraid of," the person replied, leaning in with a relaxed tone to encourage me to calm down... I shook my head—confused.

"Who? What... What are they looking for?"

"For your frie... For Matthew. The boy who did this to you."

"Matthew?" I muttered, thinking about what the person had said—the boy who did this to me. The boy who was responsible for all of this. Who had lost his mind and nearly killed three people. The psychopath. The deranged inhuman who dared express his sorrow in spilt blood. I turned slowly out of my daze and looked in dismay at the person at my bedside. "Matthew didn't do this... I did."

"Um... the police will take your statement when you're feeling better, but... they've already spoken to Anna and now they're looking for Matthew," they informed me, unsure of how to take what I had just said—unsure of what to make of my fragile and volatile state. I shook my head. They didn't understand me. They didn't know what I was saying. Tears forced themselves out of my eyes and soon enough it was as if I had reverted to a suffocating infant, crying out for their mother.

"No... I did this," I repeated, choking on my words and struggling to breathe through the tears. "I did this..."

"Try and rest..."

"I did this... I did this," I continued, feeling the weight of the world pull me under—feeling life as I'd known it come crashing to an end. "I trusted them... I trusted them!"

"It's ok sweetie, it's ok," the person tried to say, consoling me as best they could and leaning in to try and embrace me. I attempted to reach out to them. I tried to hold them too. But the straps kept me in place. I cried and wailed. I screamed and gasped. I was losing consciousness again—burning energy faster than my fragile state could manage. Then, just as I felt the warm embrace of the person at my bedside, I caught a glimpse of who it was—Sebastian's mother—Matthew's mother—a ghost to greet me along my way. She had always been good to me. And, of course, she was long dead. I was dreaming. I was delirious. Rambling to myself in my sleep. And, when I finally did open my eyes and manage to decipher the only other person in the room, he

*wasn't sitting at my side and he certainly wasn't interested in making me feel better.
My father sat silently across from my bed—watching me through barren lifeless eyes,
just as I did him.*

CHAPTER 2: RISE AND SHINE

Wes Korbuto, Washington D.C., 2018

The last thing I remembered before blacking out was sputtering blood on the floor of the train while the other passengers stood horrified watching. For as long as I was still awake, they didn't try to help me—they didn't rush to my side and give medical care or pull out their cell phones to try and call someone. They stood there, each one no doubt expecting the others to take the initiative and do something. Do anything. While those, like myself, who had fallen ill—who had pains in their stomachs so bad that I could see them dripping sweat as they clutched their sides, rocking back and forth in agony—had only fallen to the floor themselves, just as helpless as I was. I thought I was going to die. I thought I'd been poisoned and that my last moment on earth would be nothing but confusion and fear. That I would leave this world without any kind of goodbye or resolution, like the whole damn experience was for nothing. That I'd wasted it; that I'd pissed it all away on frivolous joys and useless endeavors. I regretted everything. I wanted my time back. I wanted to live. But, most of all, I wanted to understand why this was happening to me and what I had done to deserve it? As if I somehow deserved better than to die suddenly without reason. I wasn't proud that that was my last thought. But it wasn't until I woke up and remembered what I had been thinking that I was able to come to that conclusion.

When I opened my eyes again, the pain in my stomach had nearly vanished. My head hurt, and I had bitten my tongue when I'd fallen, causing my mouth to fill with the blood that I remembered sputtering up. The lights of the train blared in my eyes as I looked up at the ceiling, reaching my hands to my head and wiping away a thick layer of cold sweat. Had I been dreaming? Was the whole thing just some kind of stupid nightmare experienced when I'd fallen asleep on the train? And, if it wasn't, if what had happened was real and everything I thought and felt had really occurred, then the next question in my mind, as I peeled my head off the floor and looked around, was where in the hell was everybody? The train was empty. Completely empty. Except peoples' bags were still sitting around on chairs, still flopped down on the ground like the people responsible for them had all just disappeared into thin air—purses, backpacks, notebooks, souvenirs—everything, without anyone. What in the fuck was going on?

“Hello?” I coughed, rolling my bruised tongue around in my mouth and swallowing the stale bloody saliva that had accumulated while I was passed out. Nobody answered. “Hello?!”

I pushed myself off the floor and rose to my feet, listening to the message of ‘which stop the train was at’ loop over and over again—the Mall—the Smithsonian, only the first time that I’d ever seen the station this way without bustling traffic or lost tourists. I poked my head out of the train and hobbled out into the empty station. Bags littered the ground there as well, along with scattered papers and knocked over trashcans. But it wasn’t until I spotted a long smear of blood that I really began to worry. Perhaps the nightmare wasn’t over—maybe I was still dreaming.

Suddenly, a sound echoed through the empty corridor like someone moaning in slow motion. My eyes traced along the smears of blood on the floor until they came to rest on the corner the sound had come from. I began walking in that direction, glancing back at the train that had stopped halfway past where it was supposed to stop on the tracks. Flashing lights on the side of it, that were only supposed to be used for emergencies, held my focus for a moment. But then, as my eyes drifted down to the tracks, I noticed something far worse. People were on the rails. Dead people, crushed and sliced in half by the wheels of the train—their blood painted the walls alongside the tracks and the bottom of the train as well. I lifted my hand to my mouth to keep from throwing up and looked away—Oh Christ. ‘It happened,’ I thought to myself. ‘It finally fucking happened—another God damn terrorist attack.’ That had to be why the station was empty; that had to be where everyone had gone—they were likely outside, standing by a thousand cop cars, SWAT teams and news crews, about to rush down and secure the scene any minute. That had to be it. It was the only thing that made any sense.

I turned my head back in the direction of the moaning and the corner it was coming from. And, just as I did, I saw a man emerge—walking like he’d been on a bender for months. Except it wasn’t his slouched posture or dragging feet that made my blood curdle and every muscle tense up in my body, it was the fact that he was covered with bite marks—human bite marks. Every single inch of the man had been gnawed by someone—leaving only half of his scalp in tact, his lip dangling from his drooling mouth, his shirt and pants soaked through with blood, while a length of his own intestine dangled out of a hole in his abdomen and dragged along the floor. I gagged and staggered back—completely and utterly horrified by what I saw.

“Sir, you need to lie down!” I cried, eventually regaining my composure enough to try and help him—to try and get him the medical care he would need to be able to survive. Where the fuck were the

authorities?! Where the fuck were the ambulances and paramedics?! This whole fucking city was under constant threat of terrorist attacks and when one finally happens they're nowhere to be seen!? What the hell!?!

The man continued to moan, the air running through his throat bleeding out puncture wounds on the side of his neck. The fact that he was alive at all amazed me, and I couldn't imagine how much pain he must have been in. I rushed towards him to try and help him move. His arms stretched out in front of him—reaching towards me—and I took his hands, trying to assist him. But, as my fingers touched his blood splattered flesh, even my cold sweat was nothing compared to the cool, rigid feel of his skin—so cold that he might as well have been lying around in a freezer and so firm that it felt more like fingernails than flesh. I couldn't believe it. It almost felt like he was dead. But what was even stranger than the feel of him, was the fact that despite my best efforts to get him to stop moving and lie down so I could try and tend to his wounds, he just kept walking—kept moving right past me as if I didn't even exist.

“Sir, you're in shock! Please listen to me!” I pleaded, following behind him and waving my hand in front of his face to try and catch his attention. Nothing. Not one God damn bit of a response. And then, as he let out another withered and hallow moan, the sound of more people making similar noises came from the train tracks. I turned my focus to the people that had been lying on the tracks—mangled and torn to pieces by the train, to see that they too were miraculously still alive—dragging or twitching what little functioning parts of their bodies still remained in any direction they could move—moaning all the while. I clutched my stomach and staggered backwards, throwing up into a garbage bin and leaning against a railing for support. What in the hell was happening?! How were these people still alive?! How in the hell could someone with their fucking heart hanging out of their ribcage still be alive?! What the hell kind of terrorist attack was this?!

“Help!!!” I screamed, realizing that despite my best intentions, there was nothing I could do for these people; there was nothing anyone could do for them. Something horribly wrong was going on here, and for all I knew, I could be the next victim of whatever had been done to them. “Help!!!” I screamed, moving quickly down the length of the station until I reached an escalator, the steps of which were also stained with blood, and rushed up to try and reach anyone who could do something—anyone who could give me an answer for whatever was happening.

The station manager booth was empty—bloody hand marks stained the glass on all sides of it. A phone dangled off the hook, beeping continuously from the sound of the dead line. I continued moving, glancing to the sides to see smears of blood and traces of human remains.

My shoes slid along the still wet floor and my hands smacked against the stained railings of the escalators. I rushed up them, breathing frantically and desperately searching for help. Then, as I reached the top of the long escalator to see yet another empty corridor, I slowed down and forced myself to stop my panicked gasps. What sounded like an earthquake was coming from both sides of the corridor—a deafening roar from just outside of the subway station. I crept slowly forward, periodically calling out to try and catch the attention of anyone nearby. But from the barrage of sound echoing down the hall, I could barely even hear myself. Then, as I cautiously climbed out of the subway station, towards the source of the sound, my heart shuttered with fear and I looked out onto a site so horrific I wished I had never woken.

Blood covered everything, everywhere. Cars were crashed along the middle of the street, windows were broken, and the first few floors of a building were on fire. Sirens and car alarms flared, and yet even their howls were swallowed up by the whirlwind of noise—the sound of hundreds upon thousands of people moaning—all of them lumbering down the streets in exactly the same way the man in the subway had—all of them dripping with the bodily fluids of themselves and one another, like the depths of hell had been spilled onto earth. Like some shit you’d read in the Bible. I stood stunned for a moment, for minutes, my jaw dropped, my knees weak, barely able to comprehend what was before me or how it could possibly have happened in what I assumed had only been the short while I was unconscious.

Eventually, I managed to inch forward through the crowd, moving past one vacant stare after another. Everyone’s mouths drooped open, like their jaws were being pulled to their chests. Some seemed semi-normal, aside from their bizarre posturing, while others seemed so brutally injured that there was no justification for their standing, let alone moving. And, despite my best efforts to get their attention—to get even a single solitary one of them to sit down or respond to my pleas, they ignored me, and, instead, continued lumbering in all directions—filling the streets and the wide-open space of the Mall, overlooked by the national monuments and historic buildings that, despite the chaos, had also been overrun by injured and brutalized people. There were no clusters of cop cars, or lines of people in riot gear; there were no barricades or emergency aircraft hovering overhead, only chaos—only insanity and confusion. And as I lumbered alongside the countless people, each more wounded and disgusting than the last, I soon began to think that I hadn’t woken up at all—I was in hell—I had died, and this was hell.

The gates of the White House lay broken on the once pristine green lawn, and now, hundreds of wandering, moaning people funneled

beside one another as if it were any other yard in the world. Every minute I expected a secret service officer to come running out and tackle them—to put things right and restore order. But then, as my eyes combed the crowd of people, I noticed they were already there—wandering among the others, just as disoriented and wounded as everyone else. What in God’s name was happening here? What in the hell had made people act this way? And where was everyone else, like me, who had managed to keep from being seriously injured or losing their damn minds? I kept expecting to find someone else—to see some semblance of the world that just hours before had still been there—the same world that had been on track to bring another shitty day of boring D.C. bullshit rather than the fucking apocalypse—rather than this unbearable, unbelievable hellhole. I had to be dreaming—I just had to be dreaming.

A half an hour walk saw me pass every familiar building, all of which had since been swarmed by senseless people and marked with their blood. The corner magazine booth, one of the few where I could still find a newspaper, was empty—and the headlines read the same as they did before all of this had happened. Nothing new, nothing out of the ordinary, or so much as suggesting something of the severity that I was witnessing. My data wasn’t working on my phone—I couldn’t get information that way either. I was trapped in a pit of unknowing, looking out on everything in a haze of indescribable shock. The entire walk home felt like a dream... like an acid trip or horrible illusion that had sucked me into another dimension. Maybe I was in a hospital somewhere? In a coma or something? And this was... the worst I could possibly imagine... I wondered the entire way home, hoping with every single step that I would wake up and it would be ok again... but I never did... The door to my apartment building was smashed through—bloody wooden shards protruding from what remained of the frame. Inside, more people wandered aimlessly. And, as I climbed the stairs past them, trying to reach my home where I only prayed I would find my brother as I’d left him earlier that morning, I removed my keys from my pocket and took a deep breath.

“Hello?” I exclaimed, creaking the door open to reveal our apartment, just as I had left it. The moans of the people lumbering down the hall sent shivers down my spine and I closed the door behind me to try and silence them. But, just as I did so, I heard the faint sound of something coming from the bathroom. I moved forward and made my way down the hall—hopeful. “Ken? Are you in there?” I asked, knocking on the locked bathroom door. I pressed my ear against it to try and hear better—the sound of things being knocked over and a person grunting coming from just inside. I knocked again and again, asking over and over

for him to open the door. But then, after another moment's uncertainty, a loud thud came from the other end of the door followed by more of the same moaning—more of the same wretched noise that filled the halls and outdoors.

“Ken!” I shouted, kicking at the door—no longer in the mood for reserved, level headed actions. My brother was in there—banging against the door for my help. And for all I knew he was alright and had been trapped inside with one of those fucking things—one of those injured, confused and crazy people. I had to believe that. I just had to. But then, when I finally kicked the door in, knocking aside the man who had been pounding on it, I collapsed to the ground in dismay and sorrow. It was my brother, Ken—giving the same empty stare as everyone else. A tourniquet was wrapped around his arm tightly and bandages were beginning to fall off a bite mark on his arm. But what struck me most was his blank expression—free of the zest for life he had always had, free of the smile he forced himself to show, whether he was in a particularly good mood or not, and most of all, free of the color his careful well-earned-tan had earned him—pale and sickly as if he had contracted the plague. He stumbled past me, walking down the hall as if I weren't even there, and I forced myself to my feet, chasing after him.

“Ken, sit down,” I insisted, grabbing hold of his waist and pulling against him—feeling my eyes fill with tears as my breaths grew shorter and more panicked. My brother was sick—he was just like everyone else—and I was alone. “Ken, please!” I begged, losing grip of him as he trudged forward, moaning with outstretched arms towards the closed front door. His fingertips bumped up against the wood and he soon began pounding on it, over and over again. “Ken!!!” I screamed, moving around front of him and shaking him wildly—slapping him in the face to try and pull him out of it—shoving him hard in his chest and pleading for him to be ok again, to come back to me and be himself again. But he didn't. He stayed that way. And, after fifteen minutes of trying everything I could think of, I eventually made my way to the couch and collapsed, tears of devastation streaming down my cheeks as I looked out at the empty airspace surrounding D.C., as I looked out on the mobs of people and the chaos that I had woken up to. Then, in complete and utter disarray, I lay down and passed out from the grief and shock of everything that had happened, unable to keep my head straight in a world as terrifying as this.

CHAPTER 3: BREATHE

Susie Simmonds, Upstate Massachusetts, 2018

I never liked horror movies very much. My sister did though. She loved them. She used to download them and then watch them with her mouth pressed up against a pillow just in case she got scared and screamed. But they didn't scare me. They just seemed dumb. A bunch of dumb people, doing dumb things, and then dying for dumb reasons. All the time! No matter which movie it was, that's what happened in them. That's what always happened. So I stopped watching horror movies with her. I read books instead. But, even then, characters weren't very smart in them. They always did the wrong thing for the wrong reason. Something always went wrong. No matter what, something went wrong because someone acted like an idiot. So I stopped reading books written for teens and tried reading books written for adults, but the characters were even dumber—they just had more elaborate excuses for being dumb and more complicated situations for them to get confused by. So I asked my dad, 'why do the plots of so many books and movies rely on dumb people doing dumb things?' He laughed and put his hand on my shoulder—giving me that look he always gave me when he found something I said cute. Then he told me something in response and I wasn't quite sure if he was joking or not at first. He said, "When bad things happen suddenly, most people don't think—they react. Everyone's dumb."

My mother sat beside me firmly pressing her hands together and nervously fidgeting her leg. I'd scared her half to death when I'd left the shelter earlier that morning without telling her—when I'd moved the truck out to a field, put the music on full blast and wandered around like it was just a regular old day—wandered around like there weren't a bunch of undead people clamoring to try and devour anything that moved... anything that moved but me, that is. But I had to leave the shelter. I had to see for myself if the ghouls ignored me face to face. I had to see for myself if Elvis, the family dog, had retreated back into the house or vanished trying to find someplace safe. But, most of all, I had to see if there were some clue of where my brother Archer had ended up—if he were still out there—if he were still alive. Cause while my sister and my father hadn't made it to safety, now that I knew I was immune to the disease, it was up to me to see that my brother was safe too. I was going after him. And no matter what, I was going to find him.

After I opened a video of a woman with gigantic fake boobs covered in honey, my mother insisted on being the one to go through my

brother's computer searching for clues of where he might be. I had lugged it inside the shelter along with a few old pictures of my dad and my favorite stuffed giraffe that he had given me when I was still just a baby. My mom stared at the picture of him holding a fishing rod for a good five minutes before she was able to speak to me again. Her eyes filled with tears and her lip quivered. She held her heart and looked away—trying as she always did to stay strong. I hugged her, but she couldn't stop crying.

I missed my dad too. But I missed my sister Sarah more. I hadn't brought back any pictures of her though. I couldn't even look into the room where the two of them were still lying. Instead, I'd closed my eyes until I reached the door and pulled it shut. I didn't want to go in there. I didn't want to so much as peak in there. But the longer I spent in the house, the more I felt like I was inside that room. The more I felt like I was suffocating and losing my breath. I grabbed the pictures along with Archer's computer and then ran out the front door. But I had left all of Sarah's stuff exactly where it was. I couldn't look at it. I couldn't touch it. Her things made me lose my breath—they made me feel ill. So I just ran back to the shelter and dumped everything I'd gathered into my mom's hands. Then I hugged her as hard as I could until I got my breath back. It took us a little while before we were settled again and felt ready to go through Archer's computer. Though, to be honest, when we finally did, I didn't get the sense my mom was prepared for some of the stuff he had on it.

"Oh for Pete's sake," my mother muttered, clicking wildly behind the computer screen.

"What is it?" I asked, raising my head from the desk after a few moments silence, hoping she had found something useful.

"Nothing. Never you mind."

"More porn?"

"Don't say that word!"

"So... yes?"

"Susie... your brother is entitled to his privacy," my mother stated, seemingly at odds with the excuse she had just made for him. "I may not agree with what he does with it, but he's entitled to it all the same."

"I guess you wouldn't be able to ground him anyway... unless you made him sit on the roof of the barn," I muttered, lowering my head back into my folded hands on the desk. "But that would be more like a time-out than a grounding, really..."

“Susie... do you know what place this is?” my mother asked, gesturing to the screen. I pushed myself up from my chair and made my way over to her side to see a picture of Archer with his arm around his girlfriend, Bree. She held the camera up above them and made a subtle duck face. Archer barely smiled in the photo, but it was more than I’d seen him smile in real life for years. Behind them was an old Ninja Turtles arcade game—vintage—totally awesome, and one of my personal favorites. I knew exactly where that place was.

“That’s Buddy’s Diner! I play that game all the time!” I exclaimed, pointing to the side of the game behind them in the picture. My mother frowned for a moment and leaned back in her chair.

“You play that game ‘all the time?’” she inquired, squinting in the way she always did when she corned me with the truth. “I thought you went straight to practice after school? So... when did you find the time to play this game ‘all the time?’”

“I...” I muttered, inadvertently opening a can of worms with what I’d said and not quite able to think of something to put the lid back on it. “I’m... entitled to my privacy too,” I finally replied, swallowing my smart-aleck smile before my mother caught wind of it.

“Mmmm hmmm,” she replied, folding her arms and turning her eyes back to the screen. “She’s wearing pajamas in the picture... is that a style nowadays or is that something out of the ordinary?”

“I don’t know... I’ve never seen anyone dress like that in there before.”

“That red car that was always picking up Archer... they’re posing by it in one of the pictures... parked just down the road from that diner,” my mother continued, talking through her thoughts as they came to her. “Do you have any idea if she might live in town or nearby there?”

“Could be... I’ve seen them in that place a few times but,” I explained, stopping the confession I was about to make for fear of giving more incriminating evidence. My mother noticed my hesitation, unfolded her arms and then rolled my concerns away with a smile and a laugh.

“It’s ok, Susie... you have a clean slate—you’re not gonna get in trouble for telling me anything you did.”

“Ok... They were there a lot. Almost as much as me. They’d usually come in for something to eat after school and then leave before all their other friends did. Like they had someplace else to be or something.”

“Reeeeaallly... well, well... she most definitely lives nearby then,” my mother concluded, shaking her head ever so slightly as she closed the picture folder and leaned away from the computer.

“What makes you so sure?”

“Because I know how hard it is to find a time and a place to be alone at that age. And, if they’re leaving their friends at the same time everyday, I’d wager it’s because they have a place to be alone together.”

“Ok.... Then maybe I should start looking at Buddy’s?”

“No... but it’s a good place to keep in mind,” my mother stated, standing up and walking to the other side of the shelter. “You’ll need to start at the school and bring back some of the computers they have in the main office there,” she explained, pulling a small rifle down from the rack. “I don’t know if they have any hard copies of students’ files, but if they do, look for Bree’s file. If not, bring the computers back and we can start sifting through them for anything we can use.”

“I... have to go back to school?” I asked, feeling a slight shortness of breath from the idea.

“That’s the best place to start. After you’ve gotten a sense of how bad things are other places and... whether or not it’s safe to go that far at all... well, then, I think the school’s files are probably our best bet of finding where Bree lives and where Archer may have ended up,” she explained, shaking a few handfuls of bullets into a side pouch that snapped onto a belt before turning her attention to another part of the shelter for additional supplies. I cleared my throat and swallowed nervously, thinking about what my mother had just said. I had insisted on finding Archer. I had been the one to initiate this. But now that I watched my mom gathering supplies—flares, food, water, walkie-talkies, tiny bolt cutters and bundles of ammo—all I could feel was the air draining out of my lungs and the walls closing in.

“Mom...” I wheezed, tightly clasping my jittering hands together—but she didn’t hear me—she was too busy gathering supplies in the other room. But I couldn’t breathe. I didn’t want to go back to school. I didn’t want to have to see that place again. I felt like I was back in that room with my sister. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t breathe! “Mom!” I screamed, gasping for air. The sound of cans hitting the floor came from the supply room and my mother came running out, full speed towards me. I fell forward out of the chair and landed in her arms—squeezing her as tightly as I could—squeezing her to try and find air.

“Sweetie, are you ok?!” she cried, trying to pry me off her just enough to see my face and know if I was hurt. But I wouldn’t let her go. I

wouldn't loosen my grip. I couldn't. I couldn't breathe if I did. "Susie, please, tell me you're alright!" she continued, placing her arm on my back—feeling each stifled gasp I made. I couldn't talk. I couldn't say what I was thinking or feeling. I couldn't say anything. Then, as my mother squeezed me in return and whispered gently into my ear that 'everything was going to be all right', I began to weep and lost all the strength in my legs. My mom held me—picked me up and hugged me tight. She rubbed my back firmly and kept repeating the words 'it's ok' over and over. But it wasn't ok. Nothing was ok! Everyone was dead! Everything was gone! And I missed my daddy and I missed my sister! And I didn't want to be alone! I hugged my mother as tightly as I could, choking on air until finally, finally I was able to sputter words in between sobs and gasps.

"I don't want to go to school!" I howled, feeling the idea weigh on my chest as every memory I had of my sister stabbed me in the heart. I couldn't go. I couldn't do it. I was just a kid. And I was scared! I was so, so scared!

"It's all right sweetie... you don't have to go there... it's all right."

My mother slowly lowered herself down to the floor, clutching me tightly as she did. I adjusted my grip so my arms wrapped around the top of her shoulders and my head rested against hers. We held each other for a few minutes and cried without speaking. Her breaths were long and drawn out—pained and struck with worry and dismay. I could feel how concerned she was about me in every part of how she moved and breathed. Then, as the use of my lungs slowly returned to me and my grip loosened, I knew she could feel my panic slowly drift away. Ten minutes later I was able to stop crying. After half an hour we sat up and she made us pancakes with maple syrup. We ate them without talking to each other and every so often my mom would reach over and gently squeeze my hand. I'd smile and nod in response, knowing that she understood everything I hadn't said. We missed our family.

CHAPTER 4: OUT OF THE FRYING PAN

Matthew Simmonds, Virginia, 2018

Fear lingered in the air. Quick breaths. Short gasps. Anything and everything that moved made us freeze in our places. Staring into the woods—peering through the darkness—listening for the sound of footsteps or moans. The rain had nearly stopped. A slow trickle of semi-warm water, dampening our already soaked clothes. We smelled of the shit we were covered in. The massive pools of feces, filth and waste that had backed up the sewage system of the town we had just barely escaped from—the same town that we were still trying to get away from. Because, if the computer screen I read just prior to our leaving was correct, everything behind us was about to sink into a smoldering crater. The drones were on their way. And we had no way of knowing exactly how big the blasts would be.

“Are you sure we’re going the right way?” a White Coat asked me, though which one exactly I wasn’t sure.

“Nobody ask me that question again,” I snapped, stopping in my place and sharply turning to address the group. “Just because we made it out of the town, doesn’t mean we’re out of the woods,” I continued, glancing off to my side at the trees surrounding us in all directions. I couldn’t believe I had to tell them this shit again—I couldn’t believe they were stupid enough to keep opening their mouths—but I reminded myself that they weren’t soldiers—they weren’t fighters. Instead, right now, they were liabilities. And if it wasn’t for the fact that they had helped keep me alive, I might not have felt inclined to return the favor. I tried to be as patient as I could. But patience isn’t a virtue when you’re running out of time. “EVERYONE keep absolutely quiet until we reach the base. We do not have time for this. Now move,” I hissed, gripping my rifle tightly as I swiveled back around to lead us through the forest.

The outback in Virginia is damp and overgrown and roars with noise churned out by bugs and all sort of critters. They gave us a smooth blanket of sound to rustle through the leaves but also kept us from hearing whatever might lay in wait ahead of us. Cause while Roger, the now missing NSA agent, had insisted this base would hold some vestige of life or communication to the outside world, I suspected otherwise. In my mind, there was likely little life or outside world left. This base would turn out to be nothing more than a haven for the soldiers who had become infected there. And, in the extremely unlikely event that it wasn’t,

and someone was actually still alive inside, then we would almost certainly be marching towards our deaths. On the other hand, if survivors were inside, the base would be surrounded by ghouls clamoring to break in—moaning to attract more to their midst—giving us no choice but to look someplace else for food and shelter. I prayed there were no survivors left. Not a single solitary one. We needed to fortify that base and hide as best we could. Then, and only then, could we dare to hope.

When you're standing in the dead of night, and an explosion goes off, the light hits you for a fraction of a second before the shockwave does. The only thing that has time to react to it are your pupils. The sound is too loud to really be heard. Instead, it's quickly replaced by a shrill piercing shriek in your ears. The forest was painted white for a fraction of a second and the leaves of every tree were ripped off branches and commandeered by the wind. Your feet don't come out from under you in a blast like that—they're lifted over top of you. And the sheer God damn force of hell incarnate reminds you just how small and pathetic you really are compared to the payloads of the US Air Force. When the explosion hit, every single one of us was thrown and scattered in the wind. A blast so large it felt like a bomber squadron called in on a city, not a fucking radio control toy flying around without a pilot. This was something I hadn't experienced firsthand in combat yet. Next-gen mechanized warfare. I recognized the high nasal, incinerated taste in the air though. The smell brought memories flooding back. Memories of war. Of killing. Of medals, militias, sand and deployments. Memories of thinking I was going to die, only to open my eyes again, shake the dirt off my head and stand up—looking towards the direction of the blast.

Two fingers on my left hand were broken. I noticed a slight flash of pain push its way through the mouthful of pills I'd downed when I tried to grip my rifle normally again. I had been slammed against a few trees when the explosion blew me off my feet, skidding on a few jagged roots along the way. My wounded leg was still in one piece though. Sore, yet to be healed and relying on stitches, but still, in one piece. I intuitively leaned to the side to see it better in the newfound light—an intense orange glow radiating in the distance—not just from the building we had escaped, but from the entire town. Every single bit of it had been blown to dust. And a thick, black, billowing smoke churned into the sky, mixing with the night—the only remains of everyone and everything that had been there just moments before. I shook my head and smacked my palm against the side of my skull to try and dull the ringing and check for additional wounds. I didn't know if I was in shock or not. I didn't know if more than just my fingers had been snapped. But I did know that I was the only one who had managed to stand back up since the blast. I craned

my neck around, suddenly able to see glimmers of illumination in the woods from the blaze burning in the distance. But, even though I couldn't find sight of anyone, I didn't dare open my mouth or cry out for them. They had to get up on their own. They had to come to and stand up on their own. I couldn't find them all. I didn't have time. And I sure as hell couldn't risk drawing the attention of any ghouls that might have wandered into the forest. Because as sure as that blast had just cleared 15,000 undead—that was nothing compared to the number that would soon come searching for the source of the noise.

I pressed my back against a tree and took a few strained breaths—concentrating hard to try and pull my hearing back to normal. The shrill ringing quivered in my bruised and battered head. My breaths felt heavy, like I'd had the wind knocked out of me. I was tired—only slept a few hours. I was worn—drained from explaining things to rookies and holding their hopes alive. But I wasn't dead yet. I wasn't ready to die yet. Instead, I felt life pour its way through me one heavy beat of my heart at a time. Pounding adrenaline into my system to counterbalance the rush of every sensation I had. I stood against that tree for nearly a minute before any semblance of sound returned to my ears. And then, when it finally did, I heard the strained wheeze of someone crying for help—a White Coat, unable to stand up, praying someone would come and save them. I pushed my back off the tree and approached whoever it was, rifle in hand.

"I think my legs broken," they exclaimed, doing their best to keep their voice low. I looked down at a splintered branch shoved through his right leg—squirting blood from a punctured artery. At, most, even with a tourniquet on, he'd last 20 minutes. He was dead. He'd never have the chance to make it to the base. I took his hand and squeezed it, his eyes already beginning to fade. Fuck me... I left him there... bleeding out... I left that man there to die...

Other faint cries for help became audible around me. Cries from every direction. They had all been hit harder than they knew how to recover from. They had all been blown into the wind and crushed against the earth. None were strong enough to stand up again right away. Not even Leanne, the woman who I'd fallen in love with at first sight—the woman who I had thanked God to have been one of the few to make it out of the town with me. Instead, every last person who had formed the human chain and pressed through the hoards of undead by my side, now found themselves on deaths doorstep. And I found myself surprisingly torn with the decision I had to make. The protocols explicitly told me to leave the weak, to abandon liabilities and to ensure my own survival by not risking my life saving those of others. But the protocols were never

designed for situations involving amateurs. And, moreover, my ten years of service had trained me to think very differently—to save the wounded—to risk my life for the wounded. But... in this world... in an undead world with no fallback position or genuine sense of how many undead might be ahead of us? Even being badly wounded could turn critical—open doors to becoming infected themselves.... God dammit... the protocols told me to leave them all and my service told me to fight for those fighting alongside me. And so it was that I felt a glimmer of death run through my mind when I finally decided what to do. Nevertheless, I did it anyway. Maybe it was for Leanne's sake. Maybe it was because of how hard I'd just hit my head. But, likely, it was something else altogether—I didn't want to live alone anymore. I chose what I had learned in my service over what I had learned in preparing for the outbreak.

"Everybody listen carefully!" I shouted, my voice carrying through the forest like a loudspeaker in a canyon—a beacon to everything, living or not, of exactly where we were. "We have to get together and form a group again! To do that, you need to either stand up, or make your presence known to me! I will assess the nature of your wounds! If you cannot at least stand, we have no choice but to leave you behind!" I shouted, firing up the flashlight taped to the barrel of my rifle and shining it through the woods—another beacon to give away our location. "Make yourselves known, and do it now! We cannot stay here!" I finished, catching eye of a few hands raised in the air for assistance, while a few other staggered figures managed to pull themselves to their feet and hobble in my direction.

"I can barely hear anything!" one man yelled, the first to reach me, and, fortunately, in fit condition to continue forward. I pulled him towards me and shouted near his ear so I'd be sure he understood.

"Gather the wounded!" I instructed, running ahead to the first of many raised hands begging for help. A man, broken hip, dislocated shoulder and nearly severed jaw—already fading... good as dead. Next, a woman, topless somehow, her right breast mangled and torn, but her state of shock was the real threat. I slapped her. Hard. And she was able to stutter back to life—alive. I turned back towards the man I had given instructions to to see a cluster of survivors had formed, silhouetted against the orange glow of the burning town. I continued as I had been, moving towards the last visible hand raised for help—and the one person I truly cared whether or not I found—Leanne.

"Are you ok?" I asked, keeping my tone elevated so she could hear me despite the damage that had been done to her ears. She shook her head in between sobs and gasps for air. I aimed the flashlight down to see

her right kneecap was exposed. I looked at the wound closer—taking my time. Then, just as I made the judgment call that she was light enough for me to help her continue on, I heard the sound of moans approaching—a few straggling undead had found their way into the forest and had moved towards the sound of our voices. We couldn't wait any longer. We had to leave, and we had to do it now. I looked down at Leanne, her expression both frightened and understanding. It was best for the group for me to leave anyone who couldn't walk on their own, and she knew it. But, despite that fact, I decided not to. Instead, I shoved a stick in her mouth and leaned forward to give her the best advice I could. "It's ok to scream as long as you're biting down on this... but you cannot pass out—you are not fucking allowed to pass out on me, do you understand?" I asked, placing my arm under her and adjusting her position. She flinched in pain and grunted loudly, clenching the stick between her teeth. Our eyes met as I wrapped my arm around her and placed it firmly in her armpit—preparing to hoist her onto her feet. She nodded and I helped her up.

The couple of lumbering ghouls in the forest tripped over roots and fallen branches—as coordinated as fat drunken hobos wearing snowshoes. They weren't a threat for the moment, but I knew more would soon follow them. I had hoped we would be able to spend the night huddled together for warmth—hidden in the darkness to calm our nerves before we had to press on to the base. But the payload of the drone was so much larger than I had expected that our options were few and far between. An explosion of that size and a fire that large would pull every undead in the state towards us. And without a fortified hiding place, it was only a matter of time until we were surrounded and overrun. We had to make it to the base tonight. And we had to do it with the wounded keeping pace.

Our footsteps now sounded eerily similar to those of the undead. The wounded White Coats dragged their feet and grunted in agony. We'd lost at least a handful of people, most of whom were only minutes away from death. One man, however, while unable to stand, would find himself staying alive despite all odds—lying behind us—left with an excruciating choice. He could either end his own life before the undead found him. Or, if he were brave and selfless enough, he could use his final moments on this earth to cry out—to lure the undead towards the noise he was making, not us. He chose to be brave—his voice crying out loudly into the night—his voice chanting and singing in defiance of death. Eventually, as we moved through the forest, his screams faded—but not until after they had intensified. He'd been discovered. And once we could no longer hear the faint sounds of him behind us any longer, I felt a stabbing pain in my chest for the sacrifice he had made. In combat, I never would have

left him behind like that. But... an undead world changes things... We moved as quickly as we could, torment or not, and I used Leanne's staggered steps and frequent tortured gasps as fuel to press forward. The others followed close behind—stronger than I'd expected. And, after another hour or two of rushing past lone ghouls, lost and staggered in the woods, we finally emerged from the trees to see the final stretch of road that lead to the base Roger had instructed us to go to.

My flashlight was off but the clouds overhead had cleared enough to let faint glimmers of moonlight through. Abandoned cars littered the road—some parked in the middle while others veered off to the side with broken windows and open doors. But it wasn't the obstacle course of vacant vehicles that gave me concern. Instead, it was the sight of lumbering figures slowly navigating in between the cars—gradually moving in our direction. The stretch of road and cars served as a barrier as much for them as it did for us. Because, in order to reach the base, we'd first have to run alongside the length of the road, and then, make our way through the vehicles towards whatever undead might still remain. There was no other way. I stopped, briefly to turn to address everyone, quite possibly for the last time.

"Here's how this is going to work," I exclaimed, lowering Leanne from my shoulder and trusting her care with the group. "I'm going to try and herd them as they come out from in between the cars. They should pool behind me if I make enough noise. While I do that, you need to move up the stretch of road until you reach the parking lot. Once there, light this to give me a signal," I continued, digging into my pocket for a waterproof bag and pulling a flare out of it. I handed it to a White Coat and made sure he knew how to use it. I then stuffed what remained of the bag and its contents into my side-pant-pocket and turned at the sound of an undead, lumbering just a few feet behind me. I ducked down, leaned to the side, and sprung up—smashing my rifle into its temple and knocking it to the ground. I followed with another blow and it stopped moving. "After you light that—move towards the base. If you encounter any ghouls—try and move around them. If you can't—do what I just did," I finished, briefly scanning the terrified faces of the remaining group of White Coats. "Any questions?"

"What do we do when we get inside the base?"

"Lock the doors—all of them."

"What about you?"

"Worse comes to worst... I know how to climb," I stated, turning my attention towards the now ten or twenty ghouls that had emerged from between the cars. The group started to move—too

frightened to question anything I said any longer. I watched them for a moment, gauging the distance of the undead to them. Then, as they shuffled past a few straggling ghouls, I fired up my flashlight and pointed my rifle at the undead nearest to me—firing a single shot and blowing its head off to attract the attention of the others.

The undead are only as much of a threat as circumstances and the people in those circumstances allow them to become. A rigid, rigamortis stricken, lone-ghoul is hardly a concern. Ten in a confined space is another story. But, if you know how to herd them—how to lure them and influence their thoughtless steps—then, not unlike brainless people, you can pre-empt their decisions and make them for them. I had never had the opportunity to try and herd ghouls before. But Derek and my brother Sebastian and I had run countless drills on how to accomplish just that task. The trick was to form a group and then use that group to lure stragglers towards it. To do that, required bait. And since I had no other lure at my disposal, I'd have to play that part.

The group of wounded and still sturdy White Coats crept wide along the perimeter of cars as I walked steadily towards the ghouls flowing out from in between them. The sound of the gunshot had drawn their attention, and I could now see nearly fifty figures across the length of land moving towards me. I stepped just within grasp of the closest ghoul and used my rifle to cave in the side of it's kneecap, moving aside smoothly as it crashed to the ground and slowly tried to grab me. I repeated this process, over and over again until the nearest patch of undead had been crippled even more than usual. But, despite the speed with which I immobilized them, the group of hobblers quickly formed in all directions around me—reaching for my ankles and clamoring overtop one another. I had lured them away from the White Coats. But I had also trapped myself against the stretch of cars leading towards the base.

I climbed on top of a truck and used it as a springboard to leap onto another vehicle—watching the wounded's movements all the while. It would still be a matter of minutes until they reached the point in the road where I'd instructed them to light the flair. And, in that time, all I had to do was keep making enough noise to give them cover. To that end, I decided to occupy the time with more than timid, calculated delays. Instead, I wanted to kill every last ghoul in sight, and, by doing so, ensure that a group wouldn't linger outside of the base as a beacon to attract more. I didn't want to spend all of my ammunition and I didn't want to depend solely on the hilt of my rifle to use as a weapon. So, instead of moving in the fastest, smoothest and smartest line through the cars, I veered off course towards a particular vehicle trapped in the middle of the mess—a fire truck.

I pulled open the side door and poked my head into the vehicle, shining my flashlight around until I spotted my prize—a long, sturdy, beautiful piece of skull crushing majesty—a fire axe. I reached in and pulled it loose, slinging my rifle over my shoulder. Then, as I emerged from the truck to see the outstretched arms of ghouls surrounding me in all directions, a smile spread wide across my face and the axe sprung up over my head—like old times—like riding a bike. I used the back of the axe to slam into an undead arm, pull it towards me, stepped on its still moaning head, un-lodging the axe, and swung it down again on its skull. The other ghouls were still too far away to reach me, and as my attention momentarily swiveled to the group of wounded, I easily and casually made my exit in their direction. The flare lit up and they paused a moment, checking for any ghouls in their path and whether or not I had been eaten yet. I jogged over towards them—a pack of some forty or more ghouls trudging directly behind me at varying distances from one another.

“Ok good... Now everyone get inside, clear the building, lock the doors and be as quiet as possible. It’s very important we keep a group from forming around that building,” I instructed, hoisting the axe over my shoulder and smiling reassuringly at Leanne. She blinked in disbelief as did the other White Coats—no longer stricken with fear but completely baffled by my level-demeanor and relaxed state of mind. They knew I was military. But they had no idea that I had trained for just this occasion my entire childhood and youth.

“I can help you,” one of the White Coats chimed in, without physical injury or fear in his voice. I shook my head politely and waved my hand in the direction of the cars to encourage them onward.

“No thanks, I got this,” I exclaimed, turning once more, axe in hand to face the mob of ghouls steadily approaching me.

Kneecap, skull. Kneecap, skull. Side step—pause—skull. Light jog around the side of the group—skull, skull, skull. Ten minutes of careful, calculated strikes later and fifty-seven recently smashed skulls lay in the open field adjacent to the length of road leading to the base. I breathed heavily and scanned the tree line for anymore ghouls that might emerge but the coast was clear. The raging fire still burned in the remains of the town we had just escaped from and I clung to hope that most infected would make their way towards it, not us. The sounds of crickets and bugs churned the night air into a flurry of noise—sweet, lovely noise without so much as a groan or wheeze of undead. The closest thing to silence and peace I’d heard since I first stumbled on the infection just a few weeks prior. Then, just as I felt my heart begin to slow and my nerves soften, I heard a woman’s scream come from inside the military base. I quickly ran towards the sound, noticing as I did so, a few rotting corpses

of the soldiers who had once been on duty there—heads missing or mashed—brains long since destroyed. I ran past the fence and up to the front door, slamming my hand against the knob and ripping it open to look inside—pointing my rifle in front of me and tossing the axe aside.

The group stood near the entranceway—their terrified expressions illuminated by the light mounted on the barrel of my rifle. But there was no sight or sound of any ghouls inside the building. There was no cause for concern or identifiable reason for why I had heard a scream. I moved forward, slowly, confused as to what was happening.

“What’s going on?” I asked, wondering why the group had remained frozen in the entranceway rather than following my instructions and securing the whole fort.

“There’s somebody here,” one of the White Coats replied, pointing down the length of a long dark hallway towards a thick, reinforced security door with a loudspeaker mounted overtop of it. “And they said they want to talk to you.”

CHAPTER 5: SERPANT

Ellex Vussel, Eden Island, 2018

I couldn't sleep. Even after the doctor had stitched my wound. Even after I managed to calm down enough to lie down, I couldn't sleep. Instead, I lay motionless in bed—staring coldly at the ceiling. Unflinching. Unwavering. The cut along my collarbone throbbed and I marinated in the pain it gave me. It fueled me. It kept me from rest. My mind jumped from one scenario to another, trying to discover the truth of what needed to be done. But the rage I felt shackled my focus and forced me to obsess on one particular detail—over and over again, I obsessed...

She betrayed me. My former best friend and confidant, Nathan Gills, had called my wife, Hannah, whispered secrets in her ear to turn her against me and then... she betrayed me—she threatened it all—everything I had spent so very long working to accomplish. And for that, I wanted to kill her. I wanted her to suffer. And the only reason I hadn't already done exactly what I wanted and punished her was because Nahuel had had the audacity to stop me. He had forced me to stay my bloodlust and think—to keep me calm—rational. He had tried to control me—to sooth my mind by employing reason the likes of which the tyrants and dictators that he had once known had themselves lived by. But as I lay in bed feeling my wound's stinging song, I was slowly serenaded away from his conclusion of the type of person I was and what I ultimately stood for. I was slowly swallowed by my rage—boiling furiously inside me—and, in that, I was reminded of who I had become underneath it all.

Nahuel had been wrong about me. He didn't understand the person lurking behind the scowl I always wore or the greater purpose of the island I had quarantined us all on. He didn't understand what I had set out to accomplish so many years ago and the meticulous manner in which I had painstakingly brought that vision to reality. I was not corrupted by desire nor lured by immutable power as were the men he once served. I was not the likes of, nor so lowly as, dictators or tyrants. Instead, I was a visionary—a viciously simple man locked in perpetual wallow and dismay. So much so that the person I once was had all but disappeared over the years, leaving only the principles I stood for in his place—only the plan remained of the man who'd made it. Nothing else mattered—nothing. Nahuel was wrong. I didn't have to reason. I didn't have to think. I didn't have to be careful. And I didn't have to spare my wife's life if I knew full well that she needed to die. This was **my** island. And only I truly knew the

promise and responsibility it held. She had to die. There was no other way. She had to die...

My wife and I typically slept in separate beds. We both liked our space to stretch out in. And each of the connecting rooms in our shared suite had giant luxurious beds for us to do just that—to stretch out—to spread wide and enjoy our time apart. But, as I lay in my bed, fantasizing about slitting her throat, a sudden desire to sleep next to her crept over me. A sudden desire to impose myself upon her space and curdle her already shattered state of mind came to the forefront. Soon enough I was standing. My clothes were changed. My slippers were on. And I stood at the door both connecting and separating our suite into two. I didn't knock. I didn't announce myself as I crept into her room. I didn't hold up a blade or a gun. I didn't even glare at her. Instead, I turned on a light, sat in a chair, and remained calm and collected even as she startled awake—clutching a knife in her hand should someone have come to kill her in her sleep. She looked at me—her eyes screaming fear and uncertainty. And I looked at her—placid, stern and cold. Her freshly bandaged broken nose complemented the small mound of bandages covering my own wound. And together, in a moment of pensive confrontation, we sat without words—her clutching the knife, and me hoping she would dare to use it.

“What do you want?” she finally uttered, breaking her silence and yet offering nothing of substance or subordination in her tone. I looked at her in response, saying nothing either by way of my eyes or any nuance in my expression. She waited a moment before repeating herself—this time, allowing me to hear the fear in her tone that I wanted her to experience. “What do you want, Ellex?”

“Your confession of why you married me preceded your intent to have me killed. As if some further part thereof... as if some justification therefore... Did you realize that?” I asked, placing my hand upon my chin as I spoke—recalling our conversation earlier in the night, prior to its sudden downward spiral of violence and betrayal. Of how she had told me why we had wed. Of how she had confessed it, as if it were something to confess. Her eyes twitched at my words and I could tell she was still too scared to think clearly, let alone grasp my deeper meaning and respond to it. I cleared my throat to clarify the point I was making for her. “Did you realize that your little tirade about marrying a monster coalesced with the truth that you yourself have become one?”

“I'm very tired Ellex... I would like to get some rest,” she stated plainly, her pained breaths causing her chest to quiver. She was terrified—unimaginably afraid both for her life and that of our son, Desmond. I had threatened him too after all. I had threatened everything she had left in this world and promised nothing less than her torment in seeing it taken

from her. She temporarily forced a smile, trying to placate my hatred for her, and my brow sunk at both the site and sentiment of it. The audacity.

“I’m very tired too, Hannah... I would also like to get some rest... But you and I have unfinished business to attend to.”

“If you’re going to kill me, at least spare me the pain of listening to what you have to say,” she snapped, cutting through my intentions with quick-witted dismissal. She always did have a way with words. I stood up from my chair and took a step towards her—watching as she clutched the knife in her furious trembling hand.

“He’ll die if you kill me... you know that,” I said affectionately—turning the knife she held in defense, within her own mind, to reflect the wound it would cause her if she dared lash out. Our son... her only living son... if she killed me, the island would become infected and she would lose everything. She slowly lowered the knife, trembling all the while. I took another step forward and looked down at the mattress—expecting her to back away and give me room to sit. She didn’t budge. I looked at the knife and began to reach for her wrist. She shuddered a moment and then quickly complied—allowing me to sit down beside her—in arms length of both her throat and the knife she held. “Anyway... where was I? Oh, yes... I remember now...”

“What do you want, Ellex?”

“I want to talk to you about what you had to say in the moments before you intended to have me murdered,” I explained, gently reaching my hand out and placing it atop of hers. She looked down at it—sickened by the gesture—disgraced by my warm touch accosting her cold shoulder. I smiled. Just as she had forced a smile to placate me, I smiled to spite her. “You said some very hurtful things, dear... you called me a monster... you described using me for my money and marrying me so that one day, you could have it all to yourself... and then, you confessed living in a world of regret and sorrow for the decisions you’d made... as if our marriage were for nothing... do you remember that?” I asked, gently caressing her hand with my thumb. “Do you remember the very hurtful, angry things you said... just before you planned to have me tortured and killed?”

“I remember.”

“What did that feel like?”

“What?”

“What... did... that... feel like?”

“I don’t understand what you’re—”

“How did you feel? How did it make you feel? To plot my torture... to plan to have me killed... how did it feel?” I questioned, slowing the caress of my thumb down until it was nothing but a mild pressure on her hand, held underneath my own. She stared at me for a moment, scowling nearly as much as I did.

“It felt necessary.”

“Yes... I can see that,” I sighed, gently increasing the force of my grip on her hand until I squeezed it in its place. “And what if you had the opportunity again? To beat me at my own game and see me fall... how do you suppose you would feel then?”

“Relieved and elated.”

“Very true... I know **exactly** how you feel,” I confessed, suddenly releasing her from my grip—moving my hand slowly along her forearm—tickling the fine hairs standing on their ends. “But monsters don’t feel that way, you know? It’s **people** who are made to feel that way as reality forces them to face what reality is.”

“I don’t care, Ellex. Whatever point it is you’re trying to make to me, I don’t care.”

“I know... because you think I’m a monster... you think that’s how all of this works. I’d have to be, wouldn’t I? To do this... to plan something like this... to cause so much pain and destruction... how could I be anything but a monster? How could I be anything but the monster you married?” I continued, my hand coming to rest on her shoulder—a single finger stretched out to touch her jugular and stroke her neck. She leaned slightly away from me as I did so, feeling the knife in my mind as my hand mimicked the blade. “Isn’t that right? I’m a monster... and you had no choice but to plot my murder to escape our marriage and everything I made you suffer through, isn’t that right?”

“Yes... it is.”

“That’s how I felt when they killed her,” I admitted, staring at the finger pressed against Hannah’s neck—remembering my first wife—remembering the woman I had married because I actually loved her. I glanced up to see Hannah looking curiously at me—trying to understand what I had just said and what my intent might be pressed so closely beside someone who had just tried to kill me. “My wife, that is... that’s how I felt when she died,” I announced, freezing my finger at the mention of my lost love, Eden.

“I used to want to save the world too. All young people do. But, like all young people, I didn’t really understand what the world was. I only knew what I had been told about the world. The fairytale version of

reality that in truth is anything but real,” I shared, giving her a deeper glimpse of the man I was and exactly who it was that she had betrayed. “I fought hard for that vision... I sacrificed for it... I slaved away in the lab trying to make it a reality... to try and create a miracle cure for every problem mankind faced... and I truly felt that I was up to the challenge. It felt good. To know that I was a good person working tirelessly for the betterment of mankind... it felt good,” I continued, curling my hand off her neck and bringing it around the back of her head to gently caress her hair—thinking of my late wife Eden all the while. “After they killed her, I remember looking in the eyes of the men responsible... locked behind bars... no different than wild dogs on display just before they were put down for good. They all had a glint of stupidity in their gazes... looks of hardship... a profound indifference to the pain that they had caused and yet... a visceral recognition that they were supposed to feel guilty for it... that they were supposed to be sorry for raping and murdering an innocent woman. But they weren’t. I could see it in them. Instead, they were defiantly empowered by what they had done... they were strengthened by having lashed out against someone who was privileged. To them, it didn’t matter if she was a good person—it didn’t matter if she deserved what happened to her. The only thing that mattered was spreading the pain that their entire lives had seen them infected by,” I confessed, looking into Hannah’s eyes in search of who she truly was, just as I had done with those murderous men so many years ago. “And there I stood, expecting justice by locking them away for the rest of their pathetic lives... and, for that... I was no different than they were. I wanted them to suffer my pain. I wanted them to endure my hell. Just as they had done to my wife. And for that immeasurable hatred and contempt I was no different than them. Just as now... you’re no different than me,” I stated, leaning in to ever so slightly kiss the tip of her earlobe. I felt her shudder in response—I felt her heart quake at the gesture and her stomach churn. I held the pose for a moment, savoring her discomfort, before continuing my address.

“After that... I stopped trying to save the world. After that, I realized the greater truth that we all hide from one another about what life on this planet really is. I realized that life is nothing more than revenge, circulating over and over again... People want their enemies to suffer and fail. They want those who have wronged them to be wronged in return. They want to covet privilege for themselves, exploit the weak, exclude the powerless and only live in the best of days and the most immaculate of circumstances. But more than anything, they want revenge,” I whispered, now pressed up against the side of her ear—holding her head in place and her mind in submission. “I wanted revenge too. It consumed me. It destroyed me. And I plotted everyday for years to make those men suffer

all the more while they rotted in their cells. I employed other prisoners to rape them. I employed guards to starve and beat them. I made their lives hell. And yet... it did nothing to fill the void in my heart. And it did even less to make amends for the truth of what the world was... I realized then, after years spent lingering in a hellacious pit of dismay and insatiable bloodlust that I had become everything I hated. And that I hated the world more than I could possibly describe for incubating that cycle of men... It made no sense to try and save that which would only seek to destroy—those who would only endeavor to do harm in equal proportion to the harm done to them. And so I decided with grave conscience and liberated mind to accept the inevitable—to wipe the slate clean.”

Hannah didn’t speak. She had no idea what to say. But I wasn’t there to make amends nor persuade an irrelevant opinion from her. I was there only for revenge, just as she had sought to take her revenge upon me earlier that evening. Nahuel would no doubt be boiling in his quarters, sitting beside his family, thinking of how to kill me without risking their lives. Those offshore on their yachts would be plotting a way to usurp my power—to take all that I controlled—and to assume their positions of privilege once more. All over my island and all over what remained of the world the same terms of communication and retribution would stand true—foolishly confusing the notion of revenge for justice. People everywhere, whether living or undead would turn their hatred against one another, and the cycle would continue. The only hope for anyone, that would come in the days after the infection was gone, was to destroy everything that had come before it—to kill them all—to end the world built on terms of retribution by allowing it to be born anew in fire—cleansed and pure. I smiled at Hannah’s barren frown and tightened my grip before my expression soured and I leaned in to kiss her.

I sunk my hand deep into her hair and used it to force her down, pressing her against the bed and holding her in place. She gripped the knife tightly but didn’t dare turn it against me. I allowed her to hold onto it—to spit on her notion of having any semblance of power or choice left in this life. I moved her legs apart with my other hand, pulled at her panties until after a few firm tugs they were moved from her hips. Then, without delay, I raised myself overtop of her, unfastened my pants and gently slid myself inside to try and accentuate her pain by daring to make love—prying her eyes open with my fingers and staring into them as I held her in place—fucking her tenderly to amplify her misery every bit as much as I fucked her to share my own. I was the monster she married after all. And I had nothing left in my heart but hatred and vengeance. To strike her would have done nothing. I wanted an emotional wound. I

wanted a gaping, festering, venomous wound in the shape of the affection we had once shared together—now turned putrid and rotten.

In the first moments of my advances she seemed to hold onto her rage and hurt. But soon the way I touched her—hatred veiled by affection—consumed her so much that she could do nothing but lie motionless—without any degree of feeling or dread left to illicit. Instead, now, held tenderly in my arms, her helpless misery had sunk so deep within her that she no longer had the strength to so much as show it. And, as she reached that state of melancholy, lying expressionless as if a tattered doll, I realized I didn't have it in me to show the mercy of killing her just yet. I wanted her to continue suffering. I wanted her to wilt, time and time again, like a leper picking at scabs. And so, after I was done carving her innards with my meticulously gentle contempt, I stood up—removed the knife from her placid broken hands—and walked back to my own room—locking the door behind me to quarantine her with her misery. Then, satiated and satisfied with her heartbreak and all-consuming sorrow, I slipped back into bed and drifted to sleep.

CHAPTER 6: OREGON TRAIL

Derek Riggs, Oregon, 2018

I lost two days. The supply crate was buried—held down by fallen trees and hardened mud. The undead chased me further into the forest—further from the path I knew to take. There, I spent the evening in a tree fort. There, I met the only other survivor beside myself that I saw any hope and potential in. There, I betrayed every promise I had ever made to myself since I had lost my friends so long ago. And, there, I adopted a new path. One I would no longer travel alone. One I would do anything to see to the end. And though a nagging sense of dread now weighed upon me as much as my own armor; nevertheless, I felt a visceral sense of elation pump purpose through my veins. I had an ally. I had someone to accompany me. And together, we would cross this humbling river.

Cory learned quickly. He understood the stakes. He knew the threat. And he listened to every single word I said as if it were gospel. As we walked through the forest, I instructed him. Each lesson profound. Each lesson a possibility waiting. He asked questions too—he tried to grasp all that I knew and all that I tried to pass along. And though I was impressed by him, nevertheless, I recognized his limitations and ignorance. He was a liability for the time being, but one who proved worthy of giving a chance. We traveled through the forest for a full day until I decided on an exit point to try and return to roads. There, as we emerged from the trees, I heard the sound of something remarkable carried on the wind—moans drifting across the land in such density that I could scarcely comprehend what I was about to see. We held low to the ground and I instructed Cory to stay where he was. Then, without sound or sudden movement, I crept towards the edge of the tree line and caught my first glimpse outside the woods.

The canyon, a quarter mile in front of me that the road stretched along, was filled—a slow funnel of undead pouring out toward us and veering down the stretch of highway off to the side. Cars were parked on it and bodies filled the crevices between every one of them. The hoard of ghouls was so large and so dense that they now walked atop the writhing remains of those trapped below them. The hoard of ghouls was so large, that the wind carried a collective hiss—a deafening roar of hell incarnate. And as I looked out across that landscape, I noticed a peculiar behavior of the undead—moving like a herd, not a group—branching out in a unified direction rather than varied clusters that chased after random noises or

the sounds of animals. No, instead, this mass—this ghoul tsunami—seemingly either knew where they were going, or were being drawn to something in particular. What that might be, I had no idea. And looking out over the landscape before me and the direction they were migrating, I didn't particularly care to find out. We needed to cross the canyon. We needed to escape the hoard. And in order to do that, we would need to climb.

My gear was outfitted and designed for any number of contingencies and alterations in my plotted course. The heavy bicycle I carried with me, among other things, might appear to encumber my mobility but in truth served as an apparatus at my disposal to enable it via alternative means. I removed the tires and fastened them tightly to the frame, consolidating the size. Then, after removing a few pieces from the jigsaw of interlocking parts, and tightly fastening the remains to my backpack, I turned towards the cliff-side and craned my neck up to plot a course. Cory stood apprehensively at my side, unsure of how we could possibly ascend the rocky, near seventy-five-degree slant we now faced. I waited until I was ready to move before I bothered to address his concerns. Then, as I powered up a tiny drill mounted on the side of my left forearm interface, I knelt down to speak to Cory over the nearby hiss of moans pouring out of the canyon.

“Alright... This little thing is a drill. It's designed to puncture brick, rock, concrete—all kinds of things. It allows me to bore holes into walls or cliffs and then insert these into them,” I instructed, holding up a metal ring for him to see. “This system was designed to allow me to scale buildings and keep a safety line for supplies along the way. The drill feeds off the battery in my helmet. Because of that, my HUD will likely be disabled for the next hour until it gets enough juice to recharge. If we make it to the top, and the coast is clear, I will re-assemble the bike and use that to get it back up to capacity,” I explained, doing my best to give him a reference point for both the competencies of my suit and the impending sitrep as we ascended the cliff-side, located just around the corner of the opening in the canyon that the massive swarm of undead continuously gushed out of. Cory nodded along as I spoke—a stern, fiercely attentive look on his face that let me know just how devoted he was. “There shouldn't be any ghouls up there, the terrain's too variable and isolated... and that will give us a chance to assess the surrounding area and plot a course forward,” I continued, stretching a lasso of climbing rope from the side of my utility belt and slipping it around Cory's waste. I tugged on it until it was tight enough and then instructed him to secure his clothing underneath it so as to avoid any friction and

burn to his skin. “That said, the drill makes noise... A lot of noise... but... I don’t think that’s going to be a problem right now.”

“Why not? Won’t they hear us?”

“Not likely, no... This is a super-cluster of undead... it doesn’t work the same way that groups of ghouls normally do,” I stated, moving along the wall until I spotted a vertical trajectory. “Something bigger—vibrations likely, is pulling them like a magnet... see how they’re all moving in the same direction when they come out of that opening?” I exclaimed, leaning back and gesturing to the hoard in the distance. Cory nodded, both curious and confused about what I was telling him.

“What could that be? I mean... what could make them move like that?”

“Any number of things... fault line acting up... tremors... rock concert... still active fracking or drilling equipment... no way to know for certain. But they can’t hear anything right now—the moans are too loud—barely any sound could get through that level of noise. Only the vibrations of the hoard and whatever it is they’re being pulled towards affects them at this point,” I finished placing my hand on the rock and hoisting myself up from one firm hand grip to the next—searching for the first hole I would drill to give Cory’s length of rope the support he’d need to hang below me. “The important thing to remember is to focus on the climb—not them. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” he nodded, tightly gripping the length of rope tethering us together. I nodded back and gave one last glance to the massive swarm of ghouls.

“Alright, good... now hold on tight.”

The rock was soft enough that it allowed for easy drilling without compromising support. The weight of Cory on the line and my bike on my back kept my movements to a fraction of their usual speed. What would normally have been quick, self-testing bursts of adrenaline and efficiency instead eroded to painfully controlled motions to counterbalance the sway of Cory beneath me. I glanced down occasionally to check on him—to see his frayed attention glancing back at the hoard—his feet firmly pressed against the wall of the cliff side and his hands gripping the rope all the while. He had no idea what was happening—no grasp of the larger implications in the world. To him, and any survivor like him, no matter how they might thrive in their newfound freedom, it would always come at the cost of truly understanding the shackles that they might otherwise have inherited. So far as I knew, Cory had lived a life in the woods—a life of daring and risk the likes of which lives are meant

to be lived. He would not identify with the herds of cattle turned infected, now dredging through the streets, dragging their entrails along with them. No... instead, he would identify with me. He would come to see the world in the likeness of those who had chosen to pull back the superficial veil imposed upon them by society and its puppet-masters. And, in that, he would grow free of mental chains and inhibitions. He would grow to be my partner—a member of the team. Not only in physical stature but mental prowess too. I had a protégé now. And every last thing I did, I did both for our survival and his continued education. We reached the top of the cliff side in forty-five-minutes and briefly sat for a moment for me to regain my strength—looking out over the stretch of land beyond the canyon as I did so.

My neck suddenly snapped to the right and I shot to my feet—automatically pulling my hand up to my helmet to try and zoom in on what I was seeing. The sound hadn't hit us yet—the shockwave was still a few seconds away. But the flash of fire and light that came from a few miles off was so large and all consuming that I knew exactly what to expect. I turned my feet to the side to stabilize myself and pulled Cory towards me, tightly pressing my hands over his ears. Then, after a few more seconds of anticipation, the aftermath of the explosion hit us and shook the trees that stood watch by our sides. A bomb—three bombs to be precise, dropped within a few seconds of one another—creating blasts so big that they would be heard and felt for miles around. A deafening boom, echoing over the horizon. Birds immediately took to the air and flew in the opposite direction, while, the wave of undead, however, only staggered a brief moment before continuing forward in the very direction of the blast... What in the hell just happened?

“What was that?!” Cory cried, mesmerized by the force of the explosions. I lowered my hands from his ears and toggled the view on my HUD—hoping I had enough battery life left to narrow in on the culprit. I scanned for heat and motion in the area—but the size of the blast swallowed what I was able to decipher through my visor. Then, just seconds before my battery died and left me with nothing but the use of my own eyes, I spotted a tiny dot, too far away to see clearly, hovering in the cloudless sky just to the side of the blasts—a plane, a bomber, a helicopter, a drone—something—it could be anything. But, whatever it was, it had just destroyed an area the size of a small city. And that area just happened to be exactly where the undead were marching towards. I released a faint, startled breath as an idea popped into my mind, glancing down at Cory to answer his question.

“That was... part of a plan,” I exclaimed, picking up my folded bicycle and turning to look for the highest point we could climb to.

“Follow me,” I instructed, quickly sprinting up the hillside, weaving between half dead trees until I reached the highest point on the top of the canyon—a peak that provided me the view I needed, unencumbered by obstacles. Cory tried his best to follow behind me, but it took him longer than I would have liked to reach my side. I looked out over both the entrance to, and exit from, the canyon—seeing a mass of ghouls, tens of thousands in numbers squeezed within it or spilling out around it—all trying to get to the same place. All trying to get to exactly where the explosions had just come from—it was a plan—it had to be. It was the only thing that made any sense. Airstrikes. A clean up job. An attempt, either desperate or preordained to burn the infected and end the disease... however it had started. Suddenly, I remembered the planes that had fallen out of the air during my escape from Los Angeles. I remembered the news headlines of ubiquitous infection—the unanimous chaos all over the globe. And there, looking out over the smoldering smoky remains of the blast, gushing black into the sky, I understood that those responsible for releasing the virus had more on their minds than just chaos, hell and disorder. No... whoever had done this was now behind something far bigger than I had anyway of grasping or confronting. And what we had just witnessed was our first indication of whatever that might be.

“Cory,” I muttered, looking out over the sea of undead—looking out over all that I didn’t understand and had no way of knowing—all that now stood in the way of everything I had so carefully prepared for. “We’re going to have to make a detour to gather some intel.”

“Ok... Where?”

“There,” I replied, pointing down the length of the hoard to a distant destination buried beside a small town—a place located just along the outer border of the undead migration—my home away from home—a halfway fallback position built in case of any such emergency. My fort.

CHAPTER 7: RUN AWAY

Derek Riggs, Upstate Massachusetts, 2004

It took me two days to figure out how to get out of my bed straps without making too much noise or drawing the attention of the nurses. I slept most of the time... snapping in and out of my drug-induced-delirium. But when I was awake, I was plotting my escape. From the hospital, from my hometown, from everything I knew. I wanted to leave—to run away and find someplace as far from people as I could. My grandfather had left the family a worthless plot of frozen land in northwest Canada—the long planned get away location for when the infection finally struck. Getting there wasn't difficult—I could hitchhike anytime I wanted. But, surviving there, staying hidden there—informed, ready for anything and fully trained for the end of days, no matter the circumstance, was something else altogether. It's one thing to tell yourself you'll be safe. It's quite another thing to try and prepare for it in a world built on thin ice by fat people.

There's a prevailing stupidity in the minds of most... an absurd idea that everyone entertains on some level deep down—underneath denial and far from reality—born from living in bubbles of privilege. An illusion. A mirage of superhero-potential that they self-assuredly insist upon—the idea that they are all special somehow—the idea that they are all uniquely situated to survive in this world... to win a fight if they were in it... to know the right thing to do in impossible situations... to be the hero. And, in that, to survive—no matter what. A laughable way to regard oneself, and yet, a commonplace fantasy in a world in which super heroes and legends coddle such childish and whimsical delusions all the way into 'adulthood.' But truth and reality are another matter. In times of devastation, truth is a cold, hard feeling in your blood—a long buried lust for violence and brutality. Those fit for survival have it. And all those without it indulge in fantasies to fill the hole. It's animal. It's our nature. Buried beneath our culture—our warm and cuddly homes and lives—lies our need to survive and our need to think of ourselves as fit for survival. But survival isn't reaching someplace that's safe. It's not being comfortable or building a home strong enough to withstand anything that might come to pass. No. Being a survivor is something else all together. It's being able to endure, no matter where you are or what you have to suffer through. That's freedom. That's life. So, it was either I was ready for that... or I was dead. And in the devastated state I was in, I was as good as dead. I had to leave. I had to get out. And now that my friends were gone and the fort was destroyed I felt a burning rage boil in my blood telling me to get away from everything as fast as I could. Only problem was... it wasn't the only source of boiling rage inside of me nagging for my attention.

After detonating all of the explosives in the fort, I had dragged both Sebastian and Anna as far away from the blast site as my frail physical state allowed.

I periodically stopped to throw up along the way, wipe my cold sweat off and punch myself in tender wounds to up my adrenaline level—forcing myself to stay conscious—all so that I could keep moving and save the lives of two people I now cared nothing about. Matthew had taken off on his bicycle—his tearful goodbye stuck in my memory even more than the blood he had spilt. He had betrayed me. He had ruined everything. And, just like I suspected, it was all because of a girl. The stupid fuck... he should have seen it coming... he should have known... and, for that matter, so should I. But I was as blind and naïve as he was—foolishly believing our friendship and pact could endure anything... and now, bruised and battered, I had finally learned my lesson.

When the paramedics and police arrived to the homemade smoke grenade that I had deployed to signal our location, they turned white from the sight of us. I was immediately separated from Sebastian and Anna—as if I were the culprit—as if I were responsible for hurting them, rather than saving them. But when Anna came to—screaming and crying deliriously about “the monster Matthew!”—they got the picture of what had really happened. For once, I was the good guy. For once, I had done the right thing. And in the eyes of the police and emergency workers alike, it was almost too strange to believe. They all hated me. They had always hated me. I was nothing but the stupid fucked up kid of a couple of drunks who spent all his time in the woods shooting guns and scaring anyone who dared enter. I was practically a legend in that town—the only one truly fit to survive when the infection struck. And there I was in that moment when they’d found me, covered in blood, as fucking weak and helpless as everyone else. I hated myself for that. And I hated all of them for taking pity on me—for trying to give me medical treatment. I fought them off as best I could, but eventually they held me down and tended to my wounds—drugged me, carried me away and strapped me in a bed.

My father came to see me in the hospital. My mother didn’t. Neither of them really cared about me. I made sure of it. They were a weakness... they always had been. In any and every situation, they had proven to be a liability. And the more they cared about me, the more they would put their noses in my business and try to intervene. The more they would insist they knew better than I did and that they had a right to control me or what I decided to do. But, whether they realized it or not, they had instilled in me from an early age an iron will to prove myself better than them. When I’d act out, they’d put me in my place. Or... they’d try to anyway. Soon enough, the beatings didn’t really hurt anymore—they didn’t phase me. So they tried locking me up, taking things away, breaking me down. But none of it worked. I always found a way out. I always got what I was after, one way or another—clawing my way to freedom through whatever they might say or do to try and stop me. Eventually, they got the idea. I wasn’t their son. I wasn’t their property. I wasn’t some fucking house pet. And it wasn’t up for debate. I was an animal—one whose will couldn’t be broken with fists or trained with treats. A survivor. A true survivor—no matter what. And, to that end, I learned to love my punishments—I learned to embrace the pain. To embrace

the truth of the world. And yet, despite how clearly I could see things... the deeper reality of it all had only just sunk in.

The thing is... when you see pain as a friend—as an opportunity to prove yourself and test your limits—you slowly lose your grip on everything that doesn't hurt. Love... kindness... all of these things make you feel weak... and the only joy or strength you know is found in solitude and hardship. Over the course of my life I had tested myself—pushed my limits time and time again. Broken them. Healed, and broken them again. It was the only way—the only way to know for certain that I would be ready for anything when the time came. I had done everything in my power to see Sebastian and Matthew act the same way but... they were different. Both of them were different—their lives, their demeanors. Neither had grown to appreciate pain the way I had. Instead, they simply conditioned themselves to bear it. That difference was the key to it all. Because as soon as pain became unbearable for them, so too did their will to survive dwindle. I understood that now. Because of what I was—because of what I had trained myself to be—it was inevitable that this would happen... one way or another... one day or another. Inevitable. I knew that now. I could see it clearly. And yet... despite my revelations born of being broken once more, the rage I felt still tore my mind from the open roads I intended to run to back to the hospital walls around me. Sebastian was here. Somewhere in this place, same as I was—strapped in a bed. And before I left for good... I wanted to experience his pain too.

Getting the straps off was only the first hurdle. Moving silently through the hospital halls at night, in a nightgown no less, and managing to avoid catching anyone's eye was the next task at hand. My bandages made a strange rustling noise and my wounds made certain movements more uncomfortable than others. But after a few minutes of maneuvering, I was able to find a balance between the two. After fifteen minutes more, I was able to find Sebastian's room—located exactly where I suspected they'd put him—as far away from my room as possible. A sleeping police officer stationed down the hall was the only real threat between us—assigned, no doubt, to ensure his safety in the event that Matthew returned. The hospital staff was no bother—as doe-eyed and unsuspecting as anyone. Believing that nothing could go wrong because the cops were there to keep the peace. And while the protocols that Sebastian and I had once sworn to would normally have meant my seeking him out would be to end his life, those same protocols were now dead and gone. I was all that remained. I didn't want him dead—I wanted to see what little remained of his life. Or... at least that's what I told myself until I saw his face again.

He looked even worse than when I'd pulled him from the fort. A swollen, tender mess of what was left of my once best friend. IV's poked out of his arms, bandages hid most of his face, and stitches seemed the only thing that held him together. An ECG sat at his bedside, letting anyone who might question, know that he was still, in fact, alive. Barely... just barely. Matthew had tried to kill him—and, looking at the severity of his wounds—I came to believe that he probably thought he had. Sebastian as we knew him may never surface again. And the broken mess of a human

being lying before me was as close to a goodbye as I would get. My eyes traced the contours of his deformity and, despite my best efforts to quell the sensation, I felt pity creep through my veins. I took a seat beside him and placed my hand gently next to his—kept at a slight distance.

“You look like a fucking tomato,” I eventually exclaimed, letting out a sigh as I shook my head, searching for words. I had wanted to see him suffer. That’s what I came for—to witness what he had become—what was left. But sitting in that chair beside him wasn’t the same as what I told myself I wanted. I stumbled on my thoughts for a minute longer, but quickly returned to sputtering them out when I realized Sebastian couldn’t hear me let alone respond. I might as well be talking to a cantaloupe at a grocery store. Fuck me... He used to be my best friend... And every God damn second I sat beside him, I felt memories of who he once was pull at my nerves—vicariously feeding the insatiable pain deep inside me until its hunger subsided and I couldn’t feel it any longer. Until it became relief at the sight of him. Then I found the words.

“I never really thought about it until after the fact, but... in retrospect... I knew Matthew was weak... that both of you were weak. But... I honestly didn’t ever think you’d be stupid enough to provoke him like that... to come back to the fort... to bring someone with you,” I muttered, staring at my hand resting near his, pinching the sheets between my fingertips. “What did you expect to happen, Seb? What in the fuck were you thinking? You fucking moron, tomato asshole... you got what you deserved,” I growled, tightening my fist and sinking my grip into his bed—caught in palpable frustration. The ECG beeped quietly and I pulled my eyes up from my lap to look at his barely recognizable face once more.

“I couldn’t stop him, ok?... I tried. I really, really tried but... I just haven’t been training hard enough... Or... I haven’t been training in the right way... I’ve only ever really prepared myself for being in a group when the infection hits... I’ve always, always relied on the idea of having other people with me but... now I can see that we were wrong... and that I was weak because of the two of you... You can’t trust other people, Seb... you can’t trust other people... with anything... ever... they’ll just lie to you... they’ll just lie to themselves... and when push comes to shove... they just fuck you over... and then, when you’re fighting each other as much as the undead... everybody dies... You know? I see that now... You can’t survive in a group... the mistakes of the individual will always tear people apart... always,” I finished, reflecting on the protocols—reflecting on the fort—on my friends turned enemies, my life turned to shit and everything that I’d soon leave far, far behind me. Sebastian’s neck drifted ever so slightly to the side and for a moment his breaths seemed additionally strained. I shook my head and clenched my jaw—I had what I came for. And now, I never wanted to see him again.

“Anyway... I’m leaving town. But before I do... I want to thank you for being so stupid and weak... to tell you to whatever’s left of your face that... I’m glad you did this,” I confessed, soaking in the lesson to help deaden my nerves and harden

my resolve—to bolster my ability to survive by suffocating any deeper feeling or dormant weakness, just as I had done time and time before—like a wild animal and nothing more. Free at last. “Thank you... and thank your brother... wherever he is... good riddance to you both,” I stated, standing up and turning my back on him.

“Ith... nub reah,” Sebastian whispered, pulling my head around in shock that he was conscious, let alone that he had attempted to speak between his broken teeth and swollen jaw. I stuttered for a moment—questioning whether or not he had actually said anything—staring into his mangled face for any sign of an expression.

“What did you say?” I asked, catching glimpse of a faint part in one of his eyes. He was awake. The brain dead, pulverized remains of my once friend was actually awake—staring right at me.

“Ith... nub... reah,” he repeated, in a strained, exhausted murmur. I blinked a few times trying to understand what in the hell he was blathering about.

“Ith nub reah? You mean ‘Where am I?’ You’re in the hospital,” I explained, trying to make sense of his convoluted words. “You’re safe. But I wouldn’t recommend looking in the mirror anytime soon.”

“Ith... nub... reah!” he said again, trying to shake his head—trying to communicate. I sighed, staring at him without compassion or concern. Whatever he was trying to say, I didn’t care anymore. I turned my back on him again and moved towards the door.

“Uhn-fuc-chun,” he slurred loudly, drool slipping out of his mouth and accenting his syllables—infection. That’s what he was trying to say. I waited as he repeated the word as best he could. My hand gripped the door handle, but I didn’t turn it. “Uh uhn-fuck-chun... ith nub reah,” he continued, over and over again until his head drooped to the side and he blacked out. I stood still, trying to decipher what he had said to me—what his intended last words might have been. I’m sorry? Go to hell? Infection? Injection? Maybe he thought he was an infected now? Maybe that’s the only way he could make sense of how grotesque he had become? Whatever. It didn’t matter. None of it mattered. I was alone now, and so was he. I turned the knob and left him behind—taking the first steps towards the open road, a new life and, someday soon, my very own fort.

CHAPTER 8: SEVER TIES

Wes Korbut, Washington D.C., 2018

I would never have thought it was possible but... fear can dilute with time. It sinks deeper into you—further into your mind and heart than you could ever have imagined. You don't scream... or, at least, not after you run out of breath from screaming all the time, you don't. Instead, you ferment. Like a rotten sack of shit, cooking in its own juices. Like the remains of your former self, squeezed under the weight of losing everything you loved. Depression sinks in. Hopelessness takes over. But fear doesn't last. And, as it dilutes in your blood and curdles your mind, you feel yourself slowly going mad. You literally feel the layers of yourself peeling away until there's nothing left—like nerves exposed to the wind. When that happens, you break down completely. You suffer pain worse than torture, and a part of you long trained by your comfortable life atrophies and dies. For me, it took a week. A week of hearing constant moaning... A week of looking out my window at blood soaked streets littered with lumbering dead people... A week of crying for help, begging for rescue... of praying to wake up to anything else. I had always been a coward. But I'd never been forced to sit with that side of myself for a prolonged period of time. And so, for me, it only took one small sliver of time to crush every feeling of who I was under the weight of what the world had become. But, then, once that weakness had withered away, the fear I had felt so viscerally subsided. I realized no one was coming to save me. And, without fear, curiosity made its way to the surface. One morning I stood up from the couch, cast aside my protective layers of blankets and pillows and unlocked my apartment door to venture out again for the first time since I had hidden myself away.

The power hadn't worked for days. The whole city had gone dark. And every morning as the sun slowly crept across the horizon, my heart had sunk with what its light revealed. Creaking the hallway door open, however, revealed only darkness. That, and the smell of rotten flesh punching its way into my nostrils. No noise. No moans... from the hall anyway. And no sign of anyone living but me. My brother Ken had tried to escape into this mess over a week ago. In his sick and mindless state he had tried to break free. I tackled him—wrestled him to the ground—bound his hands and feet and stuck a gag in his mouth to keep him from moaning. But he never stopped. Ever. He didn't eat or sleep. He didn't blink or breath. He was dead. But, despite that fact, he and everyone else who had found themselves like him continued to dredge forward in

search of... God knows what. They had all gone crazy—even more mad than myself. And, over the course of the past week, I had noticed that despite their seemingly all-encompassing insanity, they were, nevertheless, moving collectively in one direction—they were leaving the city. Mindless or not, everyone was slowly funneling southwest. By the time I had opened the apartment door to venture out, the city streets were nearly cleared, the sun had fully risen and my brother... my brother... my brother had... I froze in the doorway, lifting my hands up from the knob to pull the earplugs out.

“Coast is clear Ken,” I exclaimed, only to hear his muffled moans return to an audible level as my words faded—echoing down the empty hall. I turned towards the sounds he was making, listening as I always did for any sign of the person he once was. Nothing. Only moaning. That constant fucking moaning that had bore its way into my brain. I stood there for a moment, looking into the black hallway that reeked of death. And, as emotion churned through me, the courage that I had gathered to move forward hiccupped in my heart and I staggered back. I had no reason to return here. Ever. I had nothing left. And if it wasn’t for the garbled cries of my now dead brother from the other room, I wouldn’t so much have hesitated to leave. But I did. I couldn’t go. Not yet anyway.

I gently closed the door and walked back into the apartment—approaching the barricade my brother lay behind. I moved the chest of drawers I had pulled from my room and opened the door. I walked towards him, bound and gagged, writhing on the blood-stained carpet. And then without delay, without goodbye or a heartfelt eulogy I began beating him mercilessly. I used my bare fists at first—dense thuds crashing against his decaying flesh over and over again. My knuckles soon began to peel and so I kicked him instead, slow and hard at first and then faster and faster—using the heel of my foot like a hammer. My breathing sped up and I became frantic. I wanted the moaning to stop. I needed it to stop. He wasn’t coming back. He was dead. He had been dead for a week. The food I had tried to feed him covered his shirt. The water I had tried to give him had long since evaporated. He was dead. And so I beat him to stop the moaning—as hard and brutally as I could—kicking his head—grunting, growling, screaming as I did so until finally, finally his skull caved in and he fell silent and motionless at last. A wave of elation washed over me from the sight of his silent corpse and tears of joy flooded down my cheeks. My brother was gone and now so too was the monster that he had become. I wiped his demolished skull and brains off my foot and turned to leave the apartment—my mind focusing on my intended destination once more, free of distraction or fear. The White House was only a brief walk away.

The black hallway just outside my apartment felt like an abyss in another dimension. My mind was back in the room I had left my brother's body in. I wasn't thinking straight. I breathed heavily and my chest shook uneasily every time I exhaled. After a few moments of frustration, I realized that I was waiting for the elevator—in a building with no power in a hall with no lights on, I stood there waiting for the elevator to come and get me. I shut my eyes and shook my head as I realized how stupid I was, glancing once more at the button before I made my way to the emergency stairwell—pushing open the door and carefully descending the darkness. My hands nervously peeled across the railing and my toes prodded out in front of me anticipating obstacles. But no one had used the stairwell to escape... no one had gotten inside. I made it all the way to the bottom of those stairs without seeing a single other person who had wound up like Ken. I tried to hold onto the sensation of that peace and quiet for as long as I could—wondering how many other survivors were still out there and what I would need to do to find them?

CHAPTER 9: HERE BOY

Susie Simmonds, Upstate Massachusetts, 2018

I dreamed of my dad and my sister and my brother and our dog. That's it. That's all I dreamt of. While I was asleep, it felt like everything was still ok. They were all alive and we were still a family. And then a sinking feeling came over me when I opened my eyes. Like I was waking to a nightmare. And then I'd immediately pull myself out of bed, find my mother wherever she was, and hug her as hard as I could until I could breathe normally again. Every time I woke up, that's what I did. Except that one morning when I left the shelter—when I had ventured outside to test once and for all whether or not the undead could even see me. The same time that I had gathered some of Archer's things to try and find him only to realize that I was too afraid to actually go looking for him on my own. Like a stupid kid. Like some dumb loser in a stupid horror movie who couldn't even do the thing that they needed to do to save someone. I was so stupid! I was so, so stupid! And every day after I hugged my mom to feel better after waking up, I dwelled on how stupid I was—out of breath, afraid and helpless. Until, one morning, as my eyes peeled open and the dreams of my family faded away, I heard the sound of a dog barking in the distance. I was awake, but I still heard the sound. My mom was asleep. And my heart skipped a beat at the idea that our old hound dog might just have found his way back home again.

I pushed myself out of bed and immediately ran up the winding stairwell that led to the top of the barn. My bare feet froze on each step and then bounced off them just as quickly to try and escape the morning cold. As I reached the top of the barn, looking out over the empty fields of our farmland, that for once was actually free of undead, I prayed that what I was hearing wasn't just another dream—that it was real and he had actually found his way back. I powered on a flashlight and shone it out from the top of the watchtower, listening carefully for any sound he made.

"Elvis?!" I shouted, scanning the sides of the barn and house with a focused dot of light. I couldn't spot him at first and instead heard only a slight rustling from the house. I moved the light up for a moment and held my breath—releasing an elated yelp of glee as I spotted him run out from the side of the house and begin barking again. "Elvis! Elvis!" I cried, yelling his name over and over again as I hopped in the air, laughing and gasping for breath. Elvis mimicked me, jumping up and down, wagging his tail and leaning backwards towards the house—towards the

direction he had emerged from. He barked over and over again as he slowly backed away—tilting his neck around as if he were gesturing to something.

“Susie?!” my mom shouted, hurrying up the stairwell to see what was going on.

“Mom! It’s Elvis! He came back!”

My mom reached the top of the stairs, holding the rifle that she always did whenever she came to the watchtower. She looked down at Elvis, still barking as he darted in one direction or another, and she raised her hand to her heart—smiling deeply before sniffing and trying to hold back her own tears of joy. It felt like a member of our family had come home. Only it wasn’t Archer. He was still out there. And seeing Elvis brought both of us a happy surprise and grim reminder of everything that had happened.

“I’m gonna go down and see him, ok?”

“Alright, sweetheart... I’ll cover you,” my mother replied, moving the rifle up to her shoulder and uncapping the scope. I tossed the rope ladder down the side of the barn and made my way towards Elvis. He ran over towards me and waited at the base of the ladder, continuing to bark. As I lowered my ankles near him I felt his tongue start to lick my exposed legs. Then, as I swiveled around to hug him, he began licking my face. I laughed and held my hands up to try and keep his tongue from getting in my mouth. But, as I did so, I realized that the front of his belly and collar was covered in blood—and now so was I.

“Oh, GROSS!!!” I yelled, pushing him off of me and looking down at my pajamas to see I was now covered in stains of blood. He tried to lick me again and I smacked him lightly on the side of the head. He recoiled and tilted his neck down, looking up at me sympathetically—not quite understanding his error. I wiped my hands on my pajamas and shook my head, turning to the ladder once more to climb up and get clean.

“Everything alright?!” my mom asked, peering down over the ladder as I moved up it.

“Yeah, it’s fine,” I muttered, emerging at the top of the barn. But, as I did so, my mother sharply pulled away from me and held out her hands in defense.

“Susie, stay there!” she shouted, her gun held ever so slightly to the side of me as a result of how she recoiled—held closer than I could believe. She quickly realized her error and moved the rifle off her shoulder—caught in a startled and terrified moment of confusion and

conflict. I froze—unsure of what to make of the gesture. She was afraid. She was absolutely terrified. And, after a stifled moment between us, I understood why. The blood. She was afraid of the blood. She wasn't immune—she hadn't been infected. And, for that matter, other than exposing my shoes to a few traces of undead blood, neither had I. I hesitated to swallow and tried to think whether or not Elvis had gotten any in my mouth by accident—whether or not in our joy in seeing one another, that I might just have risked my life. Suddenly, I felt out of breath again. Suddenly, I felt like I was going to faint... Like I was... help me... mom... mommy...

I woke up to the sight of my mother leaning over me by the couch in the shelter, wearing a pair of plastic gloves and a protective mask. Sweat had built up on her brow and the rifle rested tightly under her shoulder. As my eyes fluttered open, she quickly adjusted the barrel away from me, but also made sure to keep it in reach. I sputtered, gasping for air and tried to lean forward to hug her, but she held me back firmly—I was still covered in blood—I was still a risk to her. But I couldn't breathe. I kept gasping, tears forcing their way out of my eyes. And then, after a moment longer, my mother took a blanket, wrapped me tightly in it, held my arms down and hugged me reassuringly—whispering over and over again that 'I was ok' in my ear. After a few minutes, I was able to breathe again. After a few minutes more, I was able to speak.

"I'm so sorry!" I admitted, feeling like the dumbest person alive. I hadn't thought. I hadn't considered that I might expose her. I was so, so sorry. "I didn't realize that..."

"It's ok sweetie, it's ok... we just have to clean you up, alright?"

"I'm sorry!" I reiterated, unable to let it go—unable to think of anything other than how stupid I was.

"It's ok sweetie!" my mother said again, in the wonderfully reassuring tone she always used to make big mistakes feel like insignificant errors. "I overreacted... I shouldn't have yelled at you like that... I know I scared you and I'm sorry for doing that... it was foolish of me," she explained, removing the blanket from me and carefully pulling off my blood-stained-pajamas. She tossed them into a plastic bag and handed me a wet sponge to clean off my face and hands. I took it from her and smiled, hearing Elvis' constant barks above us.

"What about Elvis?" I asked, scrubbing myself as I spoke. My mother paused a moment, thinking about what I had asked and then lightly shook her head in response. She pressed her lips together, caught in conflict. But I already knew everything she was gonna say. It made sense. It was too risky. We didn't know if the blood might infect me...

there was no way of knowing if Elvis might infect my mother. We had no way of knowing anything. That the undead ignored me didn't make any sense. That my sister Sarah had gotten the disease and I hadn't made no sense. And now, locked up in this place together without my father or everything he knew about this disease, the only thing we had to use to defend ourselves was good sense and paranoid judgment. We couldn't risk it. Elvis would have to stay outside. And whenever I gathered the courage to venture out again, I would have to be weary of anything I dared bring back with me. I finished cleaning myself and my mother removed her gloves and mask.

"How do you feel?" she asked, gently hugging me and running a hand through my hair.

"Stupid," I answered, still unable to fully let go of how short sighted I had been.

"Honey... We have a long family history of beating ourselves up over the past. It's one thing to learn from a mistake but it's quite another thing to hit yourself over the head with it till you can't think of anything else. We're **both** just going to have to remember to try and think more before we act... it's a dangerous world now... immune or not."

I agreed with her and we had late night pancakes to calm our nerves. I was able to go outside once more to visit Elvis, give him a bowl of water and a can of corned beef to eat. Then I headed back inside and my mom and I huddled up together on the couch and watched an old movie about a princess in a castle just waiting to be rescued. My mom slowly dosed off during the movie, but I couldn't sleep. All I could do was focus on how helpless the main character was. On how she couldn't venture out because of a dragon... just like other princesses couldn't venture out because of a curse. By halfway through the movie it was making me upset. I still felt so stupid. For scaring my mother, for feeling out of breath anytime I was afraid, and, most of all, for not doing what I knew I needed to do and go look for Archer. Eventually, I turned the movie off—nudging my mother awake so that we could go to bed. She tried to usher me into her room to sleep by her side, but I politely refused—giving her the excuse that I wanted to stretch out and read a little bit. She kissed me on the head understandingly and reassured me once again that 'everything was alright.' But I knew better. Everything wasn't alright. I was acting like a kid. I was acting like a stupid, scared kid. And to make it worse, I could still hear Elvis barking above us—telling me to come outside again.

I lay in bed for a few minutes listening to him. Then, after I felt enough time had passed for my mother to slip into deeper sleep, I slowly

snuck out of my room. I put on running shoes and tight-fitting clothing. I gathered the orange backpack full of ammunition and supplies that she had prepared for me when I had wanted to go looking for my brother before. I wrote a detailed note telling her what I was doing and I put it in plain view for her to find when she woke up. But I didn't wake her. We both knew what I had to do. I just had to do it. So that's what I was going to do. I decided I was done being afraid. I was done acting like a kid. And, most of all, I was done being stupid—wasting away in a castle while my brother was still out there in need of rescue. I was the only one who could save him. And from the way Elvis was barking—the same way he had always barked every time he had something to show me when we played together before all this happened—I had no choice but to leave the shelter and explore. I knew it. I just knew it. So I climbed back to the top of the barn and shushed him. Then, after a few minutes of battling my nerves, I climbed down the rope ladder, securely fastened the backpack of supplies I'd brought with me, took a few deep breaths and headed for the family truck with Elvis by my side.

CHAPTER 10: WHERE'S ROGER?

Matthew Simmonds, Virginia, 2018

The door was a blast door. Thick. Heavy. Impossible to break through or blow past. I'd seen them in a number of military bases before over the years. Typically used for storing heavy munitions or anything that required additional security—top secret or otherwise. A loudspeaker was mounted above it along side a security camera and a panel interface rested under that. All standard issue hardware. A sequence of security lights littered the wall beside it and a few bullet marks punctuated the site with splatters of blood. Handprints slathered across the door—no doubt left by the infected soldiers assigned to the base, clawing at the metal barrier after it had shut. But what caught my attention most about the door wasn't the fact that it was closed, or that God knows how many people were locked behind it. Instead, it was the clear, unmistakable corporate logo of the very building we had all just risked our lives to escape from—Eden Corporation. Ellex Vussels company. The bringer of all doom. The place responsible for the virus, the infection, the drones and the four horsemen of the apocalypse for all I knew. And, apparently, a friendly associate of this particular military base and whatever the hell was locked behind that door. Great... just fucking great... Roger hadn't said a word about this. And, as I slowly approached the door to talk to whoever had requested to speak to me, I wondered what else he might not have mentioned.

"You wanted to talk to me?" I hissed, my tone caught between an audible level and a whisper—paranoid that we hadn't fully cleared the complex of undead just yet.

"I can hear you more clearly if you use the button to talk," a man's voice exclaimed, the volume of the loudspeaker set to a similar level—putting my nerves at ease that at least whoever was behind it had some sense in them. I stepped forward until I was in reach of the intercom and pushed the button on the display panel.

"Who am I speaking to?"

"Dennis. Where's Roger?"

"MIA. Lost him leaving the town."

"Do you have the hard drive?"

"The hard drive?"

“The one he was carrying. Was he able to get it to you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“How can you not know what I’m talking about?! It’s the only reason you’re here!”

“The reason we’re here is to save our lives.”

“You’re dead already,” Dennis exclaimed, his tone startled by how oblivious I seemed to be. He waited a moment before continuing and I concentrated hard... trying to think clearly between the pain resurfacing in my wounds and the fear that there might still be more undead wandering inside the base with us. “If he didn’t tell you that, I’m sorry to be the one to have to break the news to you, but it’s true.”

“Alright... Dennis... Roger never really trusted me... Undercover NSA agents tend to be like that... so, I’m sure you’ll understand if I’m missing a few details,” I replied, turning momentarily to see the stern frowns and hopeless eyes of the surviving White Coats I had led to the base in Roger’s name. Leanne sat on the ground holding a bandage over her bloody knee—looking to me to make things better. I nodded humbly and turned back to the intercom, trying to make sense of things. “How is it that we’re dead already?”

“The alarm... the drones. Take your pick.”

“Because they’re going to strike Eden Corp facilities?”

“At first, yes. But you’ll probably die before that happens.”

“So elaborate motherfucker! I’m getting sick of the foreplay!”

“You see the lights mounted on the side of this door?!”

“What about them?”

“They’re part of an alarm system that runs through this base,” Dennis stated, his voice sinking slowly as he explained the situation to me—making it painstakingly clear just how little hope there was. “That alarm system is routed into a fallback generator a few miles off site. That fallback generator is programmed to an interval ignition sequence. It’s designed to go off in the event of proximity biohazard alerts, ok?!”

“What the fuck are you saying to me, Dennis!? Spell it out for us, please and thank you!” I snapped, clenching my fist on the side of the intercom.

“Ok... here it is... because the building you were just in blew up, it will set an alarm off in four hours when that generator kicks in and realizes what’s happened! I can’t stop that from happening without the override codes from the hard drive Roger had with him. I can’t open this

door until that generator turns on either. And I'm currently sitting in an isolated bunker a few miles underground. The elevator eats too much juice to go all the way up on the emergency reserve, which means it would take **three full cycles** of it igniting to get to the top! And then another **three full cycles** to get to the bottom! That's a total of 72 hours of slow-ass-transit time with the alarm going off, just to get to the top and then head back down again just **once**. Are you following me?"

"What if we disable the alarm?"

"Not possible."

"Then what if we disable the generator?"

"What the fuck?! Ok... if you do that, then, yeah, the alarm won't sound. But the elevator also won't work and you die in a week's time anyway when the drone strike is scheduled to hit this facility."

"So then we can run and avoid the blast radius!"

"It won't make any difference! Aren't you listening to me?! This is just a matter of time! One way or another, you're fucked! If you stop the alarm, you stop the elevator! If you avoid the blast, you walk into the next one! The drones are bombing everything, remember?! The whole fucking continent is scheduled to go up in flames!"

"Why the fuck didn't Roger mention this to us?! What's so God damn special about that hard drive that he couldn't have had more than one of them!?"

"It's encrypted, can't be copied and it's built to only be compatible with internal military grade Eden Corp interfaces," Dennis continued, as frustrated with me as I was with him. "Basically, only a handful of the damn things exist above surface at all. And as far as 'why he didn't tell you about it?' I don't know... maybe its cause you're a hotheaded asshole who held him at gunpoint!?"

"What?" I gasped, my expression wiped clean from his words. I had taken my rifle away from Roger after I'd woken up under his care—I had forced him to talk—to tell me what was happening. But Roger had never mentioned anything about any kind of contact with the outside world. In fact, he'd outright told me he was cut off from other people—that **nothing** was out there—only static! I clenched my jaw and pressed the intercom button again to clarify what I'd just heard. "How in the hell do you know that?"

"Because I was watching you when it happened."

"How?"

“The same way I’m watching you right now,” Dennis groaned, twitching the camera above me back and forth to draw my attention. “I have continued feeds coming in from labs all over the country... or, I did until they started getting blown to hell.”

“Did Roger know you were here?”

“All Roger knew was that he was supposed to be extracted by a rescue team and rendezvous at this base. They were supposed to obtain the hard drive from him. Then they were supposed to bring it where it needed to be. His life wasn’t a part of that equation. It didn’t matter. Same as your lives don’t matter.”

“Why would a team need to find a hard drive just to open a fucking elevator?!”

“Alright... I’m trying to... just listen to me, ok?” Dennis sighed, cutting his intolerant tone in half and forcing himself to calm down so I could follow him. After all, it was our lives on the line, not his. “All military grade Eden Corp hard drives act as access keys, but that’s only a subsidiary function to whatever’s actually on them. The significance of the drive Roger had was the information on it.”

“It was Ellex Vussel. He did this.”

“I already know all that. I received that communication from Roger before the outbreak occurred. But that’s not what’s important about the drive.”

“Then what is it?! What’s so fucking important that he didn’t tell anyone about it?!”

“Override codes!”

“Codes to override what?!”

“They’re for the drone base!” Dennis explained, finally giving me something I could understand. “If I had that hard drive, I could use what’s on it to sabotage the clone console Ellex is using and hack the bombardments!”

I released my hand from the intercom button and looked at my watch. Less than four hours until the alarm sounded—sucking every ghoul that had been drawn to the detonation site we’d just come from straight towards us. I breathed heavily, caught in a panic of thought and conflicting ideas. Venturing out to try and find Roger’s corpse was like finding a needle in a haystack that was trying to kill you. Staying there was like inviting the haystack to come and visit. Running meant an inevitable death and hiding meant the same Goddamn thing. There were no good options. Absolutely nothing that could be said or done to save any of us.

And yet... we still had a few hours until all hell broke loose. We still had... the alarm—a beacon to bring everything directly to us. I turned and looked at the group of White Coats behind me, each of their expressions barren and robbed of hope. They knew they were going to die—I could see it in their eyes. They had all accepted it—just as soon as the idea was presented to them, they had swallowed it, hook line and sinker. But I hadn't. To hell with that. I turned once more to the door and calmly pressed the intercom button—deciding for everyone what we were going to do.

“Dennis... Direct me to the base's armory, please.”

CHAPTER 11: TITANIC

Ellex Vussel, Eden Island, 2018

I checked my personal tablet and then gently slid it into my pocket, allowing my eyes to comb the sand at my feet—chiseled remains of rock and coral carved into pebbles over time. The prior night still chilled my blood. My wife’s confession that my former best friend and confidant, Nathan, had called her before the infection’s release was... terrifying. That he had spies watching me, that he had suspicions deeper than I had ever guessed, and that he had reached out to my own wife—a woman who never liked him—lent credence to my deepest fears. No longer was I fully confident in the world’s demise or my ability to see it burn undeterred. I had no way of knowing exactly who was still out there or what they may have learned about me—what might still be left, ready and waiting to spring up in opposition to my agenda. Nor did I know what secrets even those I had lured to my island might have become privy to through the grapevine—what little birds might have whispered in the ears of my pets to turn them against me. Instead, all I knew was that 17 ships with 17 different private security teams loyal to 17 different masters lay in wait. And there I stood—staring out to sea—my hands tucked in my pockets as the wind gently pulsed across the shore—reflecting on just how easily any one of those ships might become a sanctuary for my enemies.

Every one of them had released their anchors a half mile off the coast of my island, now silhouetted by the first gleams of morning sun. On them sat those I had most closely aligned myself with in my gradual consolidation of wealth and rise to power. On them, sat men I had played the part of friends with for so very long that I had even come to fool myself into thinking it might be true. And yet... not one of them was so much of a friend that I held any great sentiment in opposition to the idea of never seeing them again. Billionaires. Tycoons. Tyrants. Fellow snakes. And, yet, there they were. Like unwanted pets, nagging for attention and scraps from the table—they both demanded my time and tried my patience. They questioned my decisions, nagged me for intervention in the outside world, insisted I consider their plans and, worst of all, threatened my own. For, just as the men on those ships had found themselves stranded by my island and dependent on me, now, on the cusp of the final stage of my lifelong plan, for the moment I remained critically in need of them—dependent on a meeting we would soon have, a verdict they would soon give, and an uncertain course between us all to be determined

in just a few hours time. I glanced at the chiseled rocks at my feet once more before departing the beach—no longer calm enough to enjoy the sights.

A pair of guards would provide a personal escort for each of the men as they were first cleared to leave their ships, then inspected by a doctor, and finally, meticulously screened for any weapons or electronic devices. They were then shown to their seats in a meeting room where, for the first time since the infection struck, they were able to rest on solid ground. I was not present to greet them as they arrived, however—still too tired and strained from the events of the night prior. They asked for me, of course—inquired about what delayed me—but were given no more response than ‘I had urgent business to attend to.’ By the time I arrived, they were all seated, save only for one man whom I had asked to meet me before I addressed the group—Gregory Voustin. A lifelong amicable rival and the very man I had convinced to speak to the others about my drones just a few days before. He wore casual beachwear as always, and this time seemed as if some degree of color had returned to his complexion.

“Gregory, thanks for coming,” I exclaimed, forcing a smile onto my face as I came to stand by his side—adjacent to the meeting room full of every snake on the island, save for myself.

“Ellex, thanks again. Feels good to be back on dry land,” he replied, firmly shaking my hand while extending his other to grasp me affectionately by the arm. I did my best to conceal a wince of pain from my stitched collarbone at his touch and quickly moved onto what I had to say to him.

“I don’t have much time for pleasantries, Gregory. You understand, I’m sure.”

“Of course. What is it you wanted to speak to me about?”

“I’ll get to that in a moment... First, I’d like to know if you were able to broach the subject we had previously discussed with the others?” I inquired, referring to the drone bombings I had requested he persuade them needed to occur.

“Yes, I did.”

“And...”

“They were... startled. Many seemed confused that if you still had such means at your disposal that you wouldn’t first try and reach out to... I’m trying to remember how they phrased it exactly... ‘still standing uninfected infrastructure?’ I believe that’s how it was described anyway,” he explained, alluding to the remnants of militaries, private bunkers and

anyone who had managed to avoid falling ill or succumbing to those who had. I grinned at his account of their suggestion—just as I suspected they would suggest.

“So they were entirely opposed to the idea then?”

“Not entirely. They understood the need to strike Eden Corp facilities to destroy any remains of the raw disease but... well... you’ll hear for yourself their reservations when it comes to the idea of bombing anything beyond that.”

“Did you explain to them that without such immediate interventions, literally millions of infected could make their way into the oceans and, potentially, wash ashore here in the years to come?”

“I told them everything you told me to as convincingly as I was able. Sorry to say... they’ll need to hear it from you.”

“Very well,” I grumbled, no longer able to bide my time twisting their arms with the tidbits of information I fed them. I needed those drone strikes to continue unabated. And, for that to be assured, I needed everyone in that room to cooperate fully—whether they realized they were cooperating fully or not. I cleared my throat and adjusted my stance, glancing around us for anyone that might be close enough to listen. “There’s something else I need to discuss with you... an extremely sensitive matter that has only just come to light.”

“Yes?”

“My wife has fallen ill,” I confessed, seamlessly stitching truth and lies together as I had grown so accustomed to sowing. “I’ve confined her to her quarters for the time being, but... I’m very worried about her condition.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Ellex... what... what sort of illness does she have exactly?” he asked, paranoid about infection—swallowing apprehensively both before and after posing his question.

“I believe she was poisoned.”

“P-poisoned? You’re sure?”

“I’m nearly certain. And for good reason.”

“Who... do you know why anyone might—”

“Yes, I do,” I explained, making sure to keep my voice low and his nerves agitated. I leaned in slightly closer to delicately confide the lie I was building. “My son’s Nanny also happens to be the wife of the commander of my guards. Have you seen him?”

“It’s hard not to see him—he’s taller than most buildings.”

“Yes, well... his name is Nahuel and... I’m not particularly proud to say that I’m responsible for hiring him but... well, he’s not exactly the sort of man you want to have trapped on an island with you... I’m sure you understand?”

“I’m... sorry to say I don’t understand, Ellex... I mean... I’m sure I could guess. But... I’d really rather not have to,” Gregory insisted, trying his best to understand the logic behind the tone of voice I was using to insist on Nahuel’s guilt. I scowled and clenched my jaw momentarily, taking Gregory by the arm and slowly making our way down the hall to be certain no one would overhear.

“Gregory... I hired him because he’s a trained torturer and murderer who has previously worked for dictators, tyrants and criminals alike... do you understand now?”

“I see,” Gregory whispered, his shoulders slouching ever so slightly as my tale unfolded. “And... why would he want to—”

“He was trying to poison me, not her.”

“And why would he want to poison you?”

“I believe one of **them** knows the answer to that,” I suggested, glancing ever so slightly back at the room full of tycoons and billionaires fresh off their boats. “Last night there was an anomaly in the patrol of my guards. An anomaly that happened to coincide with a foreign vessel being spotted just offshore.”

“What kind of vessel?”

“A raft... from what my cameras were able to spot it lacked any insignia or recognizable markers, and the identities of the men inside were entirely concealed. But, one thing is clear—a drop-off was made from whoever was on that raft. And before I could see who picked up whatever was dropped off... the camera went dead,” I finished, looking into his eyes to see if he had truly swallowed all I’d told him. Gregory stood uneasily—never one to play the games of the power elite himself. He believed me. He believed every word. And yet... his thoughts lingered in defense of what I had told him.

“Ellex,” Gregory finally replied, shuffling uneasily for a moment as his tone turned accusation—he suspected there was more than I was telling him. “I don’t doubt there’s some deeper conflict playing out here than I could surmise... and I don’t doubt you’ve already decided what needs to be done about it... So, I suppose my question is... why is it that you wanted to speak to me about this?”

“Because you’re the only one in that room that I can be certain would never do anything like this,” I replied, glad to see that Gregory had enough sense to understand the sinister compulsions of those I had lured here—only as naïve as the circumstance called for him to appear. He nodded at my words—agreeing on his own innocence. “And since you’re the only one I know had nothing to do with it, you’re the only one I can trust to help me.”

“Please just ask whatever it is you’re asking of me.”

“Not of you, so much as of the guards you employ.”

“That’s just it, Ellex—I employ guards, not assassins.”

“You employ men. Men who reason and think and understand should they be presented with circumstances they have no choice but to face.”

“I was under the impression that they had a choice... and that so do I?”

“You have a choice, Gregory,” I stated plainly, slowly losing my patience as the morning’s time slipped through my fingers coddling his conscience. “You don’t have to help me and neither do they. But if you don’t and nothing changes, then many more people on both this island and **those** ships will suffer the consequences for it,” I whispered, seeing his stubborn morality crumble to the realization that choice or not, he had no choice. “What I want you to do is to speak to your guards after this morning’s meeting concludes. I want you to say as little as possible to them and, yet, to be explicitly clear. I will make sure Nahuel finds his way to your ship by this evening. Once there, you need to make sure that he doesn’t leave it again... do you understand?”

Gregory struggled greatly with what I had just told him—but whether I had spoken only lies or truth, regardless, the verdict would be the same. He would do it. I could see in his fluttering eyes and churning stomach that despite the sickness my suggestion had brought him, that he would do exactly as I had asked. But then, as Gregory turned his eyes up from looking through the floor, his expression suddenly sunk as if the air had been pulled out of the room—staring over my shoulder at something behind me.

“I believe he’d like a word,” Gregory stated, gesturing down the length of the hall. I turned and scowled bitterly. Nahuel stood at the side of the meeting I had called—watching me speak with Gregory—quickly closing the gap so that neither of us could escape whatever it was that he had to say. Gregory shuffled his stance, unable to hide the uncertainty in

his eyes—screaming every secret I had just confided in him as the very beast we plotted against approached.

“Sir... a word?”

“Not now. There’s a room full of people waiting.”

“I will be brief,” Nahuel insisted, his eyes carefully dissecting Gregory’s rigid demeanor—his locked jaw, vacant stare and careful breaths. He knew. He could see that he was feared—and, for that, he would know that my plan to kill him was already underway. His eyes soon turned to me—staring coldly, sternly just as I did.

“If you’ll excuse me,” Gregory interjected, quickly stepping around us both to try and escape the conversation.

“Gregory Voustin?” Nahuel grunted, turning to address him as he fled—startling him like a spooked deer. “It is you I came to speak to,” he continued, stepping to the side of the hall to loom over Gregory. I watched uncertainly, a sense of dread slowly realizing itself in the back of my mind.

“Oh. Alright... What is it?”

“I want to apologize.”

“For what?”

“Thank you for the opportunity to meet your guards,” Nahuel stated, reaching down to Gregory’s hip as he spoke—removing a small device mounted on the back of his belt—a small device no doubt placed on him without his knowledge when he was escorted to the island—inspected by both a doctor and my guards just hours ago. I took a deep breath—locked in a stinging bubble of apprehension and surprise. Of course he had planted things on them—he had final say over who was cleared to enter the island—over nearly every security protocol I had in place. Nahuel politely smiled as he spoke to Gregory—dismissing every threat I had just made against him. “But I’m sorry to say I will not be visiting your ship this evening.”

Gregory stood stunned—his Bambi eyes slowly turning to look at me as if he half expected he would be torn in two. I didn’t say a word. I was nearly as struck as he was. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t thought of something so simple. Nahuel grinned, waiting for whatever words Gregory might sputter in response—only to watch him eventually depart without so much as an utterance of acknowledgment or a refusal of what had been said between us. He was clearly terrified. And neither he, nor I, had any idea what to expect of Nahuel. After Gregory left us—retreating quickly down the hall to the roomful of other guests—Nahuel turned his focus to me.

“I believe you are confused,” he muttered, as calm and rational as a trained hunter handling its prey. I swallowed apprehensively—allowing him to speak—allowing him to tell me his version of what had just happened. But, most of all, allowing my ego a moment to repair the embarrassment it had just endured. “You are of the impression that you remain in control. This is no longer true.”

“I disagree.”

“Yes. I can see that,” he explained, lifting up the tiny device he had removed from Gregory and waving it in front of my face. “This is... child’s play. You know this and yet, still... you were bested by it... a man so very smart that he managed to fool the whole world is himself so easily fooled?... Ironic.”

“I have a meeting to attend,” I huffed, feeling the weight of the circumstances overwhelm my mind—I had been so stupid—so simple and so straightforward in my actions. But, just as I tried to step around Nahuel and make my exit, he lifted a hand tenderly up and placed it on my wounded collarbone. I sucked in a trembling breath and froze—in remarkable pain—and Nahuel gently guided me back to where I had stood just a moment before—effectively putting me in my place.

“I am not done talking and you are not done listening,” he stated, watching as I quickly raised my right hand to cover my wound just as he lowered his hand from it. “You did not escape last night... you bought time. How much time, depends on you,” Nahuel informed me, each word he spoke ringing in my ears as I ever so delicately slipped my left hand in my pant pocket to fish for a device. Nahuel didn’t seem to notice—more concerned with giving me a stern talking to than he was with considering that I had an alternative to the plot he had just foiled. He stood immediately beside me—within the arms reach that he had already overextended—blathering all the while. “Your secret is no longer yours—you are being watched. Remember your guards are my guards too. And, remember, you are no longer in control of who lives and who dies.”

“Control is a funny thing,” I muttered, removing the device slowly from my pocket—turning it around until I held it, as if a knife. “It’s a chessboard as much as a battlefield,” I explained, waiting for a time to strike—when his attention was frayed—when his eyes wandered—any opportunity at all—clutching the device I had removed from my pocket tightly in anticipation.

“Ellex!” Gregory cried from down the hall—pulling both of our attention to him—giving me the chance I needed to strike. “We’d like to get started now, please.”

Nahuel's reflexes snapped in and he grabbed hold of my left forearm as I thrust it towards him—looking down at the display pad I concealed in my hand. His eyes then traced up to me, as if he had hoped to see a knife or a gun instead. My arm shook in frustration—having just missed my chance to catch him by surprise. He removed the tablet from my hand and looked at it—examining it carefully for any clue of what my intention to use it for might have been. My expression remained bare—offering no glimpse of what I had hoped to achieve. He deliberated a moment—whether or not to take the tablet with him. But, as he did so, I could see his mind churn—trying to grasp the full depth of tricks I had at my disposal while on this island. We stood without speaking for a moment, each understanding the imminent threat of the other. And as his fingers combed the contours of the device, I held my breath in anticipation... hoping he would tap the screen. He looked at me sharply—unsure of what to think—and, in that, he could see how ignorant he still was of the threat I posed him. Suddenly, without so much as a parting word, Nahuel dropped the device, turned away from me and walked down the hall—just out of arms reach or snake's bite. I clenched my jaw in frustration and bent down to retrieve the tablet that I made a point of keeping on me at all times. Nahuel had escaped... for now.

CHAPTER 12: CROSSROADS

Derek Riggs, Oregon, 2018

It was beautiful in a way. A super-cluster of undead—stretching as far as the eye could see, all marching towards a source of unknown vibration and the distant explosions large enough to level a city. Their collective moans hung in the air and carried in the wind—forming a piercing echo of false unity—as if they were working as one—as if they were rallying their mindless and unrelenting force together to a calculated end. The color of the undead varied depending on how long they had been infected and how they had come to acquire the disease in the first place. The majority bore no marks or wounds—ordinary people reanimated on the heels of their unforeseen ends. Bathrobes besides business suits—school children, nurses, police officers in tandem—no matter what their titles or what their places in this world had been—now, they all marched together—now, they all cried out together. And there, sitting on the highest land for miles, overlooking the barren abyss of wandering ghouls, Cory and I lit a fire together. A big one. As big as we could make it—using all the wood that we could find atop the canyon’s landscape in the last few hours of daylight—we turned to fire for comfort.

Cory seemed to enjoy gathering wood. Not because of the task he was given, but because I could see that he wanted to please me—to make me proud and fulfill any duty I handed him. I respected that. He understood that I understood better than he did, and he listened to me. He really listened and he really cared about what I had to say. But, my favorite part about Cory was that even though he gave me his devoted and unwavering attention, he still made a point to delve deeper into just about everything I said. To really grasp all that I had trained for—so that he would know what he would need to do to survive on his own if he had to. For that, he questioned relentlessly. And I answered as best as I could. With one exception... the explosions... the mystery vibrations pulling the undead toward them... the agenda behind the infection—whatever it was and whoever was behind it—I still had no definitive answer. And for that, we had no choice but to set a new course come morning. We would take a detour eastward before continuing north. And once there, safe in the bosom of my fort, I could equip us with both the answers and the gear we would need to press forward—no matter who or what might stand in our way.

Suddenly, as my eyes lingered on the tiny dot of a town we would soon make our way toward, another distant sequence of flashes cast light

across the land and turned my attention to the display panel on my wrist. Cory immediately sprang up, monitoring the blasts the same as I was, and plucked a stick off the ground. He waited, his feet planted firmly to the sides to brace himself for what was to come. Then, after only a few short moments, the shockwaves violently wriggled the massive flames before us and I cried out to him just as the air cleared. “Mark the times!”

“Twenty minutes since the last one and a six second delay between each blast, right?!” Cory replied, using the stick to write in the dirt—keeping track of both the frequency of the blasts and how long it took their shockwaves to reach us.

“Yeah... that’s what I got too... They’re striking right next to one another!” I sighed, quickly doing the math and shaking my head—trying to read the minds of whoever was behind this—dropping bombs one after the other in a straight line or grid formation, over and over again. Like they were clearing every single inch of soil, no matter who or what was on it. “The strikes could be automated... maybe procedural... I don’t know...”

“What do you mean ‘procedural?’”

“It all depends on who’s pulling the strings and what’s left of the world.”

“Who do you think it is?”

“Fuck if I know,” I grumbled, scratching my head and double checking the sensors I placed in the woods around us for any movement—all clear—just us overlooking the blasts together. A picturesque post-apocalyptic moment of two strangers turned family by a campfire. Cory stared off at the distant flames of the explosion as it slowly disappeared into the smoke it had made—trying to wrap his head around what was happening, just as I was.

“Maybe it’s the Air Force?”

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

“Well... whoever it is, they’re helping us either way, right?”

“Bombs kill people too, not just ghouls, Cory,” I muttered, unsure of his train of thought or where it was leading. “How does shit getting blown up help us?”

“Well, it keeps them distracted at least... that’s pretty cool,” Cory suggested, gesturing down the length of the canyon to the still funneling masses of the undead—tens of thousands in number—not one paying us, or the fire we sat, any attention at all. The only thing they heard or saw now was each other and the vibrations of the blasts—steady and recurrent

to pool and lure them. I shot Cory an odd look and shook my head at his suggestion—as if the ghouls needed to be distracted for us to be safe from them.

“For those bombs to be a help to us, you’d have to think of the undead as a threat to us,” I answered, removing a hotdog bun from the bag at my side—stuffing myself fuller than full before we would have to abandon all of our supplies in the morning. “But that’s not the case, remember? They are only a threat if you are in a position to be threatened by them,” I instructed, doing my best to refine Cory’s philosophy of the undead—to enlighten what it means to successfully live in a world overrun by ghouls. Cory awkwardly shuffled one of his feet in the dirt he had been writing in with the stick—trying to grasp my meaning.

““They’re only a threat if you are in a position to be threatened by them?”” Cory repeated, digesting my words for their meaning. “But... you said to always be aware—to always expect their next move—and to... respect the virus? Right?”

“Yes.”

“Well... they’re carrying the virus... so... aren’t they a threat then?”

“Not necessarily.”

“Sorry, Derek... I don’t really think I understand what you mean...” Cory admitted, seemingly ashamed that he hadn’t understood my frame of mind. I smiled affectionately at his confusion—typical of anyone fresh out of society’s womb.

“Bears are threats... but not if they’re in cages, right? Cars are threats... but not if you can predict where they’re going to turn, right? The undead are threats... but not if you know how they’re going to react and how you should react to them, right?” I explained, shoving a bite into my mouth with one hand while encouraging Cory to come and sit beside me with the other. He walked over and plopped down, reaching into the bag to grab another bun—nodding along to my logic. “The reason it’s important to always think of them as threats is so that they never have the chance to actually become threats. It’s a survivor’s mentality... be prepared... be ready... balance your mind and your nerves... You know? It’s like Bruce Lee said... ‘Be like water’”

“Be like water?”

“Yeah. It’s a Kung Fu thing... you ever try and learn any martial arts?”

“No, I never really learned anything like that,” Cory sighed, clearly at odds with the philosophy I was trying to feed him. “My dad said ‘Why learn to punch in a world that needs a hug?’” he exclaimed innocently, without so much as realizing how profoundly stupid what he had just said was. I was livid. I was insulted. But most of all I was surprised—he still had so much to learn. And while I prided myself on having the answers Cory needed to hear, I sorely lacked the patience to coddle or stomach any weakness he might show. I swallowed the bite of bun I was chewing and turned sharply towards him to make an example of what he’d just said.

“And your father’s fucking dead now, isn’t he?” I snapped, enraged by the simple-minded, warm and cuddly, weak-natured bullshit Cory had just quoted to me. He froze in response to my words—shocked tears building up in his eyes despite his best attempts to hide them. Like a kid. Like an ordinary fucking ten-year-old kid rather than the cutthroat protégé he needed to become to survive in this world. He looked at me glaring at him and seemed as if he were about to fall apart for having shown me something I didn’t want to see. Like a child... apprentice, protégé, companion or not... he was still a kid and I needed to remember that reality if I was going to teach him in a way that he could learn. Suddenly, I felt like shit. I swallowed hard—feeling the vicious sting of what I had so callously said to him. “I’m sorry, Cory... I shouldn’t have said that.”

“It’s... it’s ok...”

“Your father was both right and wrong,” I continued, trying to navigate a course forward without hurting him further. “I don’t doubt he taught you all kinds of invaluable things to live in the world... but the world he lived in isn’t around anymore. So... you’re just gonna have to try and put those lessons aside and learn new ones... alright?”

“I see your point,” Cory whispered, pushing the tears back inside as if I hadn’t really hurt his feelings that much.

“Once we’re up North, I can teach you how to fight though, ok? It’s actually kind of fun,” I exclaimed, doing my best to try and cheer him up.

“Ok,” Cory muttered, staring off into space for a moment—digging through the painful emotions I had just caused him in search of a conclusion about where we were headed and what we were doing together. I looked at him, caught in internal conflict, and felt every word he didn’t say. I looked at him and remembered just how fucking atrocious I was at being around other people. But I still had to try. I still had so much to learn too.

“Cory... if you have something to say, you can feel free to say it,” I remarked, squirming under the weight of the uncomfortable silence between us. Cory turned to look at me, his eyes caught somewhere in between hurt and confusion. His lips parted to speak and yet it took him a moment to find the words.

“Then what happens?”

“What do you mean?”

“Once we’re up North... then what happens?”

“Oh. I told you, I have a place there.”

“I know. But... what will we do there?”

“We’ll survive.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“We’ll hunt, gather food, water... intercept any communications to keep tabs on what’s left of society... We’ll chart any changes to the surrounding area—fallen trees, landslides, anything like that. We’ll train—we’ll never stop training really... we’ll... live our lives, I guess.”

“But **then** what?”

“I... don’t understand what you mean? **Then** what, what?”

“We’re just gonna stay in one place? We’re not gonna try and help rebuild or anything?”

“Rebuild? Rebuild what?”

“The world.”

“Fuck the world,” I exclaimed, the harshness of my words clashing with Cory’s once hopeful outlook on life. He stared at me for a moment, still somewhat uncomfortable with how crude and blunt I always was, just as I found myself uncomfortable with how sweet and innocent he acted—no doubt in tune with how his father had taught him to behave. Soon enough I grew tired of his vacant stare and began double-checking my utility belt to keep my eyes focused on something else. I wasn’t used to having company. I didn’t like how it made me feel to know I was being observed—to know I was being judged. “Cory, whoever decides to rebuild the world is gonna be the same kind of assholes responsible for burning it to the ground. We don’t want any part of that.”

“But how do you know?”

“I deduced it.”

“But...” Cory muttered, choking on what he wanted to say as he searched for a polite way to say it. “I... I don’t agree with that... Why would you say something like that?”

“Something like what?”

“Something so... hopeless.”

“Because that’s how it is.”

“Well, I don’t believe that.”

“I pulled you out of a shack in the middle of the woods, kid... I don’t know what kind of a life you’ve lived, but I can say for damn sure you ain’t seen shit compared to me,” I grunted, glancing up from tinkering with my belt to cast a similarly judgmental eye at him—at odds with each other’s’ outlooks to say the least. “You wanna talk about the world—keep in mind you don’t really understand what the fuck you’re talking about.”

“I suppose there’s some truth to that... But... Just because you’ve lost hope doesn’t make the world hopeless,” Cory insisted, as set in his opinion as he was polite in its presentation—practically my polar opposite and a peculiar reflection of how I communicated. Cory didn’t become upset with how I talked or acted towards him, even though I could see he didn’t really like it most of the time. And, because of how patient he was with me, it encouraged me to try and be patient with him too. Maybe there was something to the way he approached life. Maybe he could become a hard ass and still hold on to some of his sweetness. Or, far more likely, that sweetness would prove his weakness and get him killed. I stopped fidgeting with a noisemaker on my belt and placed it aside to stare Cory in the eye—to scare the sweetness out of him—no bullshit, no half-truths and no fairytales to poison his mind about what the world really was or what little hope might still remain.

“Ok... I’ll play this game with you... let’s say there’s still ‘hope’ to rebuild the world, Cory. Then what? You tell me what happens next.”

“People will come together... form communities... and then... help each other out to rebuild... just like they always have.”

“And then what?”

“They’ll find a way to stop the infection from spreading any further... they’ll keep each other safe... work together, make families... and they’ll live their lives together.”

“Really? They’ll just live happily ever after together, forever and ever then, is that it?”

“No,” Cory exclaimed, sternly brushing off my little kid simplification of what he had just said. “I know life is hard... I’m not saying that’s gonna change... I’m just saying... there’s still hope. There’s always hope,” he insisted, that fucking word chiseled into his brain at the hands of his father. I clenched my jaw and shook my head.

“Bullshit.”

“I may be a kid, but I know how to have a discussion with somebody without calling names,” Cory stated, lifting his chin up as if he were mimicking the mannerisms of his former roll models and recently deceased parents. He was right though. In a cute, ‘still wrong even though he was right’ kind of way. I smiled at his stubborn insistence to see hope in a hopeless world—even more clueless than I used to be.

“I wasn’t calling names, Cory... I was calling bullshit. As in to say that what you just said wasn’t actually true.”

“But that’s not a fact though!”

“Yes, it is!”

“If you think the world is hopeless, you make the world hopeless! It’s just a self fulfilling, um... it’s a self-fulfilling-prophecy!” Cory insisted, stumbling on the thought, trying to remember the turn of phrase that he had heard before when someone had said to him the exact same words that he had just said to me. I clenched my jaw harder than before and sharply stood up—worse at being patient with people than I had realized.

“Stop quoting your fucking father to me!” I shouted, startling him as I loomed over him forebodingly. He didn’t move—unsure of what to expect of me. The never-ending-collective-moans of the undead bellow punctuated our silence and I looked down at my hand to see that I was clenching my fist too. I forced myself to take a breath—to remember how to have a conversation with another person without getting upset. Then, after a moment more, I sat back down—still feeling the weight of Cory’s eyes and judgments. “I’m sorry... I shouldn’t have yelled.”

“I understand... people can get upset talking about things they care about,” he replied, forcing a patient smile that soon faded away. I cleared my throat and stared into the fire—refusing to move past the point at hand until he understood how wrong he was.

“You wanted to know what happens next, right? To understand what life’s gonna be like stuck up North as the infection and the infected slowly disappear over time? You want to know what happens when people try and rebuild after that, right?” I asked, doing my best to keep calm. Cory nodded and I continued. “Alright... I can tell you what that’s gonna look like... and then you can tell me just how much hope you

think there really is,” I grumbled, staring out at the brainless masses of lumbering people—practically no different than they were before they were infected. “There are strict post-outbreak contingencies we’ll have to abide by based on how surviving factions attempt to reorganize society,” I replied, seeing that my explanation only confused Cory more—he didn’t understand what the most volatile part of all of this chaos would soon become—the part even worse than the virus itself—surviving other survivors. I nodded my head understandingly at the look on Cory’s face, probing deeper to see just what he had and hadn’t grasped. “Do you know what I mean when I say that, Cory?”

“I think so... You want us to wait and see what other people do before you decide what we’re going to do, right?”

“Kind of, yeah,” I exclaimed, pleasantly surprised by how sharp he was—that he was doing his best to listen to what I had to say, despite my shortcomings in communicating it. “For the first few years, we likely won’t spot anyone else. They’ll be fortified someplace... hiding until the undead aren’t a threat to them or until they’re forced to venture out searching for supplies. But... once the ghouls start to decompose, they’ll slowly become an afterthought... no real danger to anyone. Once that happens, other survivors will become the threat.”

“But why are they a threat? Aren’t we all on the same side?”

“At first—kind of... I guess you could see it that way. But it doesn’t last and you can’t trust it.”

“How come?”

“Because... you can’t trust other people,” I stated frankly, as if it were absurd to come to any other conclusion. Cory blinked blankly in response—expecting more substance to my words than what I’d given him.

“What about good people?”

“Yeah? What about good people?”

“You can trust them.”

“Nope.”

“Of course you can!” Cory laughed, dismissing my paranoia as if I believed in the boogiemani. “I mean... you trust me, right?”

“Actually, I don’t,” I answered plainly, wiping the smile off Cory’s face faster than anything I’d said to date. He stared at me blankly, unsure how to react to what I’d just said. I looked at him through barren eyes—allowing him to internalize the callous disregard for other people I

had sworn to live my life by. I could see in his face the confusion of the circumstances we found ourselves in—the question of what my intention was if I didn't trust him but had still brought him along with me. I waited a moment to see if he would speak again, eventually deciding to pick up the reigns of the conversation once more and explain. "Don't take it personally, Cory. I don't trust anyone."

"Why? And why don't you trust me? I'm a good person."

"You're a good person whose never had to make any hard decisions. You're a good person **only** because you've lived in a bubble the entirety of your short life—because you were privileged enough to be good. But you're not privileged anymore—you're a survivor now. And that means only hard decisions lay ahead for you... because of that, you'll have no choice but to face who you really are when the time comes. And I can guarantee, whoever that person is, he won't be as simple as 'good or evil.' No one is."

"I... I..." Cory muttered, too overloaded with conflicting thoughts to be able to rest on just one. I could see he clearly hadn't allowed his mind to branch out to all the possibilities ahead—that he was only just now grappling with the magnitude of change that would be required of him. "I... but... then why am I here? If you don't trust me... if you don't trust anybody... why did you bring me along?"

"Because... I think you might have what it takes," I answered, internally questioning myself just as he did—trying to understand why exactly it was that I had decided to bring him along. "And, if you do, then... um... it's too early to know for certain, ok?" I grumbled, tripping over my words and thoughts in search of the truth—an idea I'd played with that I didn't dare say. "We'll see how well you learn... and... just how well you can adapt. It's too soon to know for certain, ok? Lets just say I had a feeling."

"You had a feeling?" Cory muttered, internalizing our discussion and taking a moment to himself. His eyebrows gently twitched and I could see a conflict deep inside him brooding its way to the surface. "I had to kill my parents, you know?" Cory exclaimed, his eyes resting gently on the fire as he said it—staring into the flames to sooth the feeling burning him up inside. "That's a hard decision I made... I did that and I'm still a good person."

"You killed your parents after they were already dead," I replied, dismissing his interpretation of what I'd said. "That's not a hard decision, that's just the hardest decision you've had to make... as far as that goes, you did the right thing, and you did it because you knew you had to. That takes guts, sure. But, don't fool yourself—you can sit comfortably with

what you did for the rest of your life. Hard decisions aren't like that. Hard decisions are when you're wrong no matter what you do and you do it anyway. And you can't trust the hard decisions that other people will make to survive. That's life. That's what life is really like when you step outside of privileged bubbles of delusion."

"Well, I trust you," Cory whispered, still staring into the fire.

"I know."

"So, are you saying I shouldn't trust you then?"

"I'm saying 'Be like water.'"

"I don't know what that means!"

"Alright, I'm gonna spell this out for you," I huffed, pushing myself off the ground and taking a few short steps forward—pacing before him as I spoke. "The reason we want nothing to do with rebuilding the world and the reason you can't trust other survivors is because of what all people have been preprogrammed to think in the event they make it through a global infection," I explained, doing my best to illuminate the distinction between who people really are at their core and the parts that they've only been conditioned to play. "Weak people panic and cower, expecting someone else to come and make everything better... they're overwhelmed by fear and paranoia... they're quick to judge but slow to think... forever defined by the leash of the world that raised them. Weak individuals don't last long on their own. But they do, however, **thrive** by being subordinate within larger groups—which quickly becomes any individual's top priority whether strong or weak in the event of a disaster like this one—people instinctually want to find other people so they can form groups together," I explained, reflecting on the effervescence of society as I always did—through a hateful lens. "The groups that form out of these individual survivors are hierarchal. A leader or group of leaders emerge to form a governing body—an authority of some kind... Whether that authority is dictatorial, democratic, communist or any variation thereof is irrelevant. The important part to remember is that it's a **hierarchy**... a pyramid built of people."

"Ok... wait... but... that makes sense though, doesn't it?" Cory replied, doing his best to follow the larger point I was trying to make—clearly accustomed to having conversations with adults, not other kids.

"No, actually, it doesn't make sense. It's completely insane."

"But... isn't it easier to survive that way? Doesn't it make sense to build a pyramid or whatever?"

"Not necessarily."

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand,” Cory confessed, seemingly frustrated by how illogical my responses were—just like any little kid raised to think in compliance with the preexisting model of the world they were born into. “If those things don’t make sense, then how do you know that people will do them? Why would people do something that doesn’t make sense?”

“Because people don’t think, Cory. They have been programmed! They will re-create the world according to that programming! And, moreover, they will do so by strictly abiding their perceived place within an established hierarchy.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means if you meet a man who believes he has authority he will act as if that authority places him above you. If you meet a man who believes he lacks authority, he will act in subordination to other men... the parts people play in a society define who they are even more than the people they think of themselves as. And now that those hierarchal parts have been rearranged, there’s no telling what authority will dictate ‘just’ and ‘necessary’ once certain groups reemerge.”

“Ok...”

“Do you understand what I mean?” I asked gently, wondering if a fragile mind like his could fathom the post-outbreak-world—if he could understand how the sins of the father would be passed to their sons... all of them mimicking one another in futile attempts to rebuild a world that was fundamentally broken even before the infection struck.

“Yeah... I guess I understand.”

“Don’t guess. Do you understand or not?” I insisted, refusing to let the point go despite Cory’s clearly eroding patience. He swallowed the emotional turmoil that accompanied what I was describing and tried to think of something more to say.

“So... then... what do you think will happen? If I’m so wrong, tell me what will happen instead?”

“Probably the same old bullshit. That’s what I’m saying.”

“What do you mean ‘same old bullshit?’”

“A centralized bureaucracy.”

“A what?”

“A government. Sooner or later, they’ll make a government... or a religion. But that usually takes longer.”

“And what’s wrong with making a government?”

“Hahaha,” I laughed, both amused by and resentful of the unrefined contours of his still forming mind. Cory stared at me, unsure of what had provoked my sudden outburst. “I think I have a few genuine ‘history’ books up North I can show you—maybe then you’ll get the idea.”

“I know history. I know all about history. And about governments too,” Cory stated defensively—pushing against my contention that he was still little more than a little kid. “Some governments are bad. Some systems just don’t work. But democracy can be different as long as people are willing to listen to each other. And if people in a democracy build a pyramid, that’s for the best for everybody. I know that. And I know it because it’s what happened in this country.”

“And do you know who mandated the lesson about democracy you just blathered about to me? Huh? Do you? Can you guess?”

“My dad did,” Cory grumbled, misunderstanding my contempt for the state as if it were another crack about his father—quickly growing agitated and noticeably unsettled as a result. I could see that my dismissal of his hopes and opinions was starting to get under his skin—pushing him to the same rigid disregard of what I had to say as I had shown him. But I didn’t care how much he hated to hear what I thought. This was a lesson this kid needed to learn sooner than later—whether he felt good about it or not. “My dad taught me about history because he was a good father. He was a good father who taught me how to trust other people, not to hate them and not to see only the bad things in the world. And I’m glad he taught me that because he was right.”

“Sure... Right and wrong. Good and evil. Black and white... I’m starting to get a pretty good sense of what your father taught you alright.”

“Shutup!” Cory shouted, shooting to his feet and clenching his fists in anger. He glared at me—his hands trembling—his bottom lip folded as his eyes swelled with angry tears. He was absolutely furious and rightly so. Everything his father had told him had set him up to be heartbroken by reality. And there I was—the cutthroat asshole who wouldn’t so much as break it to him easy or give him space to breathe. I tilted my head down and reconsidered my tone. I wasn’t helping things by being so hard on him. I was only turning him away. And now, looking at him as furious as he was, I could see the harm I was doing. Fuck me. I’m so God damn awful at coddling other people’s sensitivities, let alone a God damn kids. I felt sorry. I felt really sorry. But I wasn’t wrong. And now Cory was too upset to just let it go. He took a few stifled breaths and hurriedly wiped away a tear before continuing to speak. “You didn’t know my dad! You didn’t hear the things he had to say or the way that he said

them! I know he wasn't wrong! I know he was telling me the truth! And it's not fair for you to pick on me just because I'm a kid!"

"I'm not picking on you Cory," I muttered, slowly lifting my head from looking at and feeling like dirt. "I'm treating you the same way I'd treat any full-grown man."

"Then you don't have any manners!"

"No... I don't."

"You should learn some then! It's not ok to be so rude to other people," Cory exclaimed, doing his best to wrestle his frustrations and keep himself from crying again.

"I was being blunt, not rude."

"Yes you were! You didn't know my father!"

"No, I didn't know him" I admitted, letting a moments pause usher my reservations forward—because despite how sorry I felt for making him feel this way, I knew I'd feel even worse if I took it easy on him—just another in a long list of hard decisions I'd had to make. "But I can see your father in you, Cory. I can see him in everything you think and say. And I can see quite clearly that you're not your own man yet... you're still just your father's son."

"Yes, I am! And I'm proud to be!"

"I can see that too."

"What gives you the right to tell me he was wrong, huh? How can someone who doesn't care for other people... who doesn't trust other people!... how can... what gives you the right to tell me that I'm wrong?!"

"The fact that I was right," I stated plainly, raising my arm to point to the canyon filled with ghouls—the undead remains of all that Cory's father had taught him to see as just and true. Cory turned to look down the length of my arm for a moment, pondering my response—caught between what he was feeling and being able to process everything I had said. He shook his head, opened his mouth, took a deep breath and stared solemnly at me—unsatisfied with my answer.

"You don't make any sense," Cory stated, using his arms to gesture as he spoke—swinging them up and to the sides broadly to accentuate just how worked up he had become. "You said to avoid large populated areas, but, at the same time, you also said that you lived in Los Angeles! You said no one saw this infection coming, but you also said that you knew it would happen! How is that possible?! How could you know something was gonna happen that nobody else did?!"

I stared at Cory blankly for a moment—juggling the question he'd asked around in my mind. He expected answers from me. He demanded a justification for who I was and every choice I'd made. And yet he threw my wisdom and philosophy away without hesitation because it didn't make him feel as warm and fuzzy as the fairytale version of reality that his dad had once serenaded him with. He looked at me judgmentally, unknowingly, sitting on his high horse of ignorance just like everyone else and yet he still had the motherfucking audacity to insist that I was wrong—to suggest that, despite the horrific pains I'd endured to unearth the truth, that somehow my convictions and insights were lacking. My hand quaked for a brief moment and I had to stop myself from hitting him hard on the side of the head. But as the idea crossed my mind, I realized the compulsion to strike him didn't really have anything to do with the insubordinate attitude Cory was giving me. Instead, it was because of something he had said and a memory that he had unintentionally awoken... a scathing memory that he had exhumed from deep inside me... that I knew... 'How could I know?' 'How could I possibly know something that nobody else did?' I choked on the answer to his question. It boiled in the darkest depths of who I was and who I had forced myself to become in order to survive. Any sense of humanity or decency melted out of my eyes from indulging that feeling and Cory's expression suddenly went bare too—recognizing the animal inside of me that he had just provoked. I eventually managed to clear my throat and push through the feelings clouding my mind—growling the answer to Cory's question through clenched teeth and stifled rage.

"I knew... because my father told me."

CHAPTER 13: SKELETONS

Derek Riggs, Upstate Massachusetts, 2004

I stood barefoot and exposed-assed in a hospital gown. Contemplating the best way to break into a house I had so often escaped from... that idea came with both a sense of irony and familiarity. I had come straight from the hospital in the dead of night. My wounds were still inflated and bandaged but were no longer concerning enough to justify allowing myself to stay strapped in a medical facility—the inevitable epicenter of any major infection—waiting for the shit to hit the fan. If I could walk, that meant I could run. And I couldn't stand the idea of delaying that decision one minute longer. Now, I had no choice but to move on and start anew. The fort was gone, Sebastian was as good as dead, Matthew was God knows where and the only reason I hadn't skipped town already was because of my sickeningly low lack of supplies. For that, and for any such emergency, I had a fully packed and buried lockbox under the backyard shed containing food, water, money, a pistol and gear enough to get wherever I needed to go. That box was my salvation. And it was the only reason I had bothered to come back home.

Motion sensor lights surrounded the house on the east side—one after the other as if I were breaking into a prison. But we didn't have a guard dog or an alarm system. Instead, we had a loaded shotgun under my parent's bed. That gun and their bedroom sat on the west side of the house—a motherfucking jungle gym of wind chimes, lawn ornaments and the open window of my overly nosy neighbors who hated me almost as much as my parents did. Together, it made trying to get to the shed in question seem more like a fucking spy movie than a few meters trek. Normally, I had my maneuvers practiced and refined—no noise, no interactions with any object I didn't explicitly want to touch, and no problem sneaking in or out regardless of the hour in the night. Cause, when you have an ex-military PTSD drunk for a father and an insufficiently medicated bipolar mother, you very quickly learn the ins and outs of the house. Particularly since he made a point of never hitting her—of protecting her—from everything and everyone. Especially, what had become of her once sweet and innocent son. Her baby boy—all grown up into the asshole monster currently trying to run away for good. One big happy family. And another reason for me to get out of town as quickly as I could.

I had practiced walking sideways on the way from the hospital. One of my eyes was half sealed shut... at least two ribs were broken... I was missing a few teeth... my head never stopped hurting... I felt out of breath most of the time and my balance wasn't great. But I knew that if I concentrated hard enough and forced myself to be patient that I could sneak in on the west side of the house—carefully tiptoeing in between chimes, lowering myself on all fours to snake around the periphery of the yard, and then, finally, using my bare hands to claw at the strangely loose dirt behind the

shed until I felt my fingernails scrape against the cold metal, unearthing the lock box that I hadn't seen or touched for nearly a year since I last restocked it. I heaved it out of the ground—feeling the pain creep its way through a number of pressure points in my body and eventually explode and throb in my skull. I took a moment to keep from passing out—watching the gate next to the shed swirl around. Then, after my vision had started to level out again, I entered the four-digit code into the box—321R—and popped it open. Empty. The box was completely empty. I dropped my jaw and froze—sucking in a panicked and confused gasp of air. What... in the fuck...

"The hospital called about fifteen minutes ago," my father stated, stepping out from behind the fence surrounding the yard—shotgun in hand—ready and waiting for me to come looking for my supplies. I glanced up at him, suddenly too dizzy to stand let alone try and make a run for it. He made a point of keeping the gun aimed at me as a precaution—unsure of what kind of behavior to expect and rightfully so. "Said you were missing and asked if I'd seen you... know what I told em?" he grumbled, planting his feet well out of reach—blocking any exit I might turn to with his bulky, well-fed-frame and extra thick skull. I shook my head in response to his question... swallowing hard to keep from throwing up. "I told em that you stopped by real quick and grabbed some clothes... left the house to head out of town for good, but didn't mention where you were going. Told em you barely said anything to me—you just stared like you always do with those dead eyes of yours... Yeah... just like that," he said, tilting his chin up to gesture at the glare I gave him. "And do you know what they said about all that?"

"How did you know the combination?" I asked, ignoring the point he was trying to make—unable to figure out how he knew where to look and what to expect from me. I had been so careful—I had always been so very careful. How in the fuck did he know?

"They said 'good.' They actually said that to me if you can believe it... They weren't worried about you... didn't much care about the condition you were in when you left... just seemed pleasantly surprised that you were gone. And boy, let me tell you... I knew exactly how they felt," he continued, lowering the shotgun down to point it at the ground while shoving his hand into his pocket—watching me like a meal he didn't know whether to devour or throw in the trash. I looked at the gun at his side and then back at the empty lockbox... he had waited for me... he knew what I would do... and he had come prepared for the worst. Somehow, he knew more than he did before I was admitted. And sitting there, broken, battered, defeated and outwitted, I didn't have the strength to try and figure it all out. I gave up. Simple as that. I gave up. And whatever it was he was going to do to me or with me was just fine because I didn't have it in me to fight anymore.

"If you want me to leave... I can make that dream come true for both of us," I sighed, tossing the lockbox aside and leaning against the shed—surrendering. "I'll leave and never come back... I promise... just give me some clothes and I'll get out of town, alright?"

"I thought about that too... long and hard," he grumbled, fishing through his pocket for something as he carefully stepped towards me. "But we both know you'd come back someday. And, all the while, your mother and I would just be sitting here... dreading whenever that might be. Afraid of seeing you again... You know why? Because the only thing that scares us more than who you are... is the thought of who you're gonna end up as," he exclaimed, finally removing what he had been searching for from his pocket—a pair of handcuffs that he tossed over to me before pointing the shotgun at me once more. I looked at the cuffs—at what he had prepared to be able to manage me at all—knowing full well that under normal circumstances, he would have had to force them on me and I would have tried to run. But I just didn't have it in me anymore. It was too much... It was just too God damn much... And I, like the box at my feet, was now empty and useless. I picked up the cuffs and looked blankly at them with my one good eye—tightly clasping them around my wrists and tugging on them so he could see they were securely fastened. We'd been through this before after all... just like old times.

"Gonna lock me in the shed again then, is that it?"

"No... me and you are gonna have words. Straighten a few things out before I decide what to do with you."

"Words about what?"

"You already know," he stated, glancing at the lockbox—at my last best hope to stick to what remained of the protocols and get the hell out of town—glancing at the same box that he had somehow miraculously known both the location of and the combination to. Then he looked at me—staring with eyes as dead as my own. "Now get up. We're going for a drive."

CHAPTER 14: STATE SECRETS

Wes Korbut, Washington D.C., 2018

I had already knocked on every door in my apartment building... the doors that were still intact that is. One after the other, hoping that somebody was still there—that I wasn't the only one left. Nothing. I walked around the block shouting, waiting for a response—for any sign of anybody. Nothing. I carried a bottle of water with me—the last from my apartment—sipping it every so often as the unusually high temperature gushed sweat out of me. After an hour or so of exploring I felt tired and hungry, so I stopped by the convenience store down the street. Normally I'd buy things with my credit card to earn extra reward points for the new TV I was saving up for. But the lights were out and the power was down, just like everywhere else. Shelves of items were strewn across the floor and flies had taken to feasting on most of what was previously refrigerated. All the ice cream had melted—forming a pool of multicolored goop with swirls of blood in it. A few bodies lay beside it—swollen and decomposing in the heat. I removed a loaf of white bread from the shelf and some canned goods. Then, feeling guilty about the idea that I might be stealing, I removed a twenty-dollar bill from my wallet and left it on the counter... just in case someone came back.

I ate my lunch in a park—a refreshingly barren scene without corpses or bloodstains. Except that, even there, I couldn't think of anything else. I looked at my knuckles—raw and torn from bludgeoning my brother's skull earlier that morning... from setting him free... I stared at the empty playground equipment and wondered if all the children had suffered the same fate as him. I remembered my niece in Seattle and hoped to God that she didn't have to see anything like this... that she might still be alive. I looked at the broken windows of the school near the park I sat at and struggled to swallow what I was chewing. Eventually, I put my lunch aside altogether—realizing that losing everything I knew and loved might just be the wonder diet that I had been searching for. My fat stomach folded out over my waist and I shook my head looking down at it—thinking how even in a world where everyone else was dead, I still felt self-conscious about my weight. I stood up a moment later and approached the school—hearing a faint banging from inside of it as I did so.

“Hello?” I announced, stepping into the dark halls covered with colorful posters. The banging continued—slow and recurrent. The same steady pulse as my brother had made when I'd found him. Over and over

again. Bang... Bang... Bang... By the time I located the source of the sound, I already knew what would be behind the door. But I wanted to see for myself anyway—to gather clues about what had happened everywhere I went. A broomstick had been forced through the handles of the door to the gymnasium—keeping whoever was behind it locked inside. I removed the stick and stepped back from the exit—letting them out to wander aimlessly just like all the rest.

The door slowly crept open and the sound of air passing through limp lifeless throats followed with it. One child after another trudged forward—greenish grey in complexion—cloudy white eyes, open mouths, outstretched arms. And yet, not a single solitary one of them had any wounds or bite marks. But they all had dried blood on their mouths. Then, just as the gymnasium emptied, a single adult appeared, crawling on all fours—completely covered in small, child-sized-bite-marks—as if they'd been eaten alive. As if every single kid in that gymnasium had overwhelmed and gnawed the person to death—only to see them become no different than the very children who had attacked them. They were eating each other. They were attacking each other. And yet... none of them were attacking each other now. They were just... gone... vanished... little monsters... walking corpses... nothing more. And, just like every other lifeless undead person I'd encountered, these children paid me no mind at all—it was like I didn't exist—lumbering past me in the same direction that all the others had on their way out of town. I shook my head in dismay and glanced in the gymnasium for a moment, catching eye of multiple blankets laid out on the floor—as if remnants of a place that had served as a temporary medical center. As if the children had been sick before they had died... just like I had been... maybe somehow they too had suffered stomach pains so great that they could barely stand... maybe whatever I had been sick with had something to do with everything else that had happened since I woke up... I stood there a moment, remembering all the ill people I had seen before I lost consciousness on the metro. Before I came to and opened my eyes to see... this... this fucking nightmare... this hell incarnate... God dammit... I sighed loudly as the faint moans of the children lumbered out of my hearing range. Then, feeling faint once more, I stepped away from the gym and made my way out of the school—stepping past the tiny figures I had freed to breathe fresh air again.

I soon took to walking the streets—stopping to check peoples' cellphones to see if there was any battery charge left—realizing that nearly all of them were dead and any that still worked were without a signal. The internet wasn't up either—it hadn't worked for as long as the world had been like this. And in large part because of that, I had no way of knowing

just how much of the country had suffered from whatever it was that this city was suffering through. No air traffic had passed overhead. No lights lay on the horizon when the sun went down. Just darkness... abandoned streets... and the occasional still wandering undead following in the footsteps of all the others that had already slowly walked out of town together. Where were they going? No clue. But I figured if anybody would know, some places might be better than others to look. After all, this city was full of landmarks for survivors to rally around—one in particular, more than the rest. Soon I stopped checking phones—convinced that the only place any answer might lie was in the remains of the White House.

“Hello?!” I yelled, cupping my hands around my mouth to increase my range. Nothing. Not a sound. “Hellooooooooooo!?” I shouted again, cringing and leaning forward slightly as my vocal cords hit their limit. Still nothing. Dammit. “Ok... um... I’m coming in now! I’m a normal, harmless person so... if anybody’s in there, please don’t shoot me!” I finished, forcing myself up the front stairs to the open doors of the White House—every corner of which was covered in blood and bodies, just like the rest of the city.

I paused to glance up and down the gnawed remains of a secret serviceman—the head of which was half blown off—and contemplated arming myself with his pistol. But, after kneeling down, picking up his weapon and feeling a sudden rush of discomfort and insecurity, I quickly decided against the idea. What was I thinking? I didn’t know how to use a gun. The only weapons I’d ever fired were playing videogames. Not to mention I was about to trespass in a federal building—which felt wrong enough already. But... then again... every person in every movie I’d ever seen in this situation would definitely pick up that gun... of course, those were the people in the movies—people who already knew what to do with guns in the first place... they were soldiers, cops, vigilantes, superheroes, whatever... not fat middle-aged deadbeats who got winded walking up steep hills. I was not the gun carrying kind of guy. I was not a hero. So I left it where it was—realizing only after doing so just how fragile my nerves still were. My hands were shaking. And the closer I got to the front doors of the White House, the worse it became.

“Just to reiterate, I’m not a terrorist!” I cried, half expecting to get shot in the face just for raising my voice in the foyer—a beautiful, elegant, old world décor and design... that also happened to be completely covered in blood and bodies too.

“Shit,” I hissed, wiping sweat off my brow with my trembling hand and removing a small American flag bandana from my back pocket—folding it over itself a few times and then raised it up to my

mouth—tying it tightly around the back of my head to help me handle the smell.

I forced myself forward—tiptoeing over bodies and sidestepping smears of blood. Famous, priceless paintings of long dead icons littered both the walls and the ground as I made my way forward—navigating through bleak and dim halls—meticulously combing every room for survivors. I breathed heavily—long and hard—announcing myself every so often only to hear the echo of my unanswered calls. Every sight made me feel sick—reminders of the world that was so recently destroyed. Most of the bodies around me wore business suits or formal skirts but a few were plain clothed. And as I slowly maneuvered my way toward the heart of the building, I became more and more preoccupied with identifying the dead lying around me than I was with discovering anyone who might still be alive. I wondered if the president was still ok... not that I cared about him, just that I was curious about what had happened to him. I wondered if our country was still a country. And as I knelt down and examined the decomposing remains of a man, I wondered if somehow, I might be next.

“Holy fuck,” I muttered, recognizing the rotten flesh of the fallen man—the once Vice President in the... well... in the ‘what was left of his flesh.’ My God... What in the hell happened? I couldn’t be the only one left... I just... couldn’t be! I knelt down lower and stared at the man—determined to make sure it was really him—holding my hand over the bandana I’d tied just to be able to stomach the smell. It was him alright. Just like everyone else. Wow. That really hit me hard—for whatever reason, looking at the face of a man I’d never met who held a job in a building I’d never visited, struck the greatest cord and sucked all the hope out of my lungs. Overwhelmed, heartbroken tears slowly crept into my eyes and I felt my chest throb and ache. I was alone. I was completely alone. And even here, in the upper echelon of the most powerful men in the world... no one had survived.

A minute later I solemnly stood up, peeling my focus away from the dead man on the floor to a long bloodstain leading down the hall—as if someone had pulled themselves forward and left a trail along the way. I made a point of trying not to muddle the scene too much as I followed the blood. Paranoid as if someone could suddenly show up and get mad that I had rearranged things. And as if that wasn’t ridiculous enough, as I caught sight of a tiny sliver of a room I recognized from countless TV shows, I literally stopped in my tracks—unable to believe that I had found myself where I was, looking at what I was looking at—the Oval Office—ready and waiting for a total nobody to just waltz right in and save the day. Yeah, right. Really, I was just trying not to piss my pants.

“If anybody’s there... please say something!” I shouted, caught in conflict on the cusp of entering the doorway and discovering the end to the trail of blood I’d been following. “I’m gonna open the door now! I’m unarmed, ok!? I’m really just a nice person looking for other survivors!” I yelled, waiting for any kind of response—nothing. Not a sound. “Ok... here I come!” I finished, forcing myself to move forward—to breach the entranceway—and to stand in the most important place I could possibly trespass in. I pushed my hand against the door, slowly nudging it open—revealing, to no surprise and my continued horror, the exact same scene I had witnessed everywhere else in the city. Blood... bodies... carnage... silence.

The windows were broken—all of them. A large wooden desk remained unmoved but the other furniture was knocked over and splattered with blood. Shit stains from dragged bowels filled the air and accented the muddy colors tainting the previously immaculate décor. Men and women wearing normal clothes scattered the ground—their forearms covered with cuts of glass as if they’d stormed through the surrounding doors. A few more secret servicemen lay dead and a number of fully armored SWAT members lay motionless and mangled as well. HUGE guns the likes of which you’d only see in a summer blockbuster littered their bodies. And there, amidst it all, sat a raccoon on a couch eating part of a severed hand. My jaw dropped as the two of us stared at one another—it giving me an annoyed look that I had just interrupted its meal before cautiously making its exit—suspiciously eying me at all times in case I tried to grab it or the hand that it had claimed as its lunch.

“Fuck...” I groaned, my mouth hanging open as the creature dipped out of view—leaving me caught somewhere in between disbelief and heartbreak. I had come to the most powerful office in the world to try and discover the fate of mankind—to unearth any hope or sense of what had happened at all—and instead I spotted a raccoon eating a hand... Great... just fucking great! “This is just—” I began to say, unexpectedly interrupted and scared half to death by a ringing sound that I reacted to as if I were about to die—crying out in a shrill, cowardly way and instinctively raising my arms up in defense.

Like the pussy I was, I trembled uncontrollably, breathed like I’d just run a marathon and felt my heart pound in my chest—keeping my eyes closed to try and hear what had just broken the silence... But it was gone... the ringing had disappeared... And whatever the sound had been and whatever had made it, for the time anyway, had vanished. Then, just as suddenly as it had happened before, it happened again—a recurring tone... a gentle ringing that... a phone! It’s a fucking phone you idiot!

I quickly opened my eyes and narrowed in on the sound—looking right at the unturned desk on the other side of the room. I rushed forward and pivoted around it—expecting to find a big red phone like you’d see in the movies. But, instead, as I investigated the desk, I realized that the source of the sound was coming from a body nearby—from the pocket of a half-eaten man pressed up against the back wall. I scrambled forward and clawed at his clothes—eventually clutching onto a vibrating bulge in one of his pockets—removing a working, currently ringing tablet. My heartbeat exploded with fear that I might not answer it in time and I frantically clawed at the device until I figured out how to work it. Then, hiccupping on anxiety, I pressed what I could only hope was the button to answer the call—holding the receiver up to my ear to find out who was on the other end of the line.

“Hello? Hello?!”

CHAPTER 15: ENCORE

Ellex Vussel, Eden Island, 2018

As I approached the meeting room door I felt quick, sequential vibrations come from my personal tablet—just recently tucked back into my pocket. I scowled and froze—puzzled by the nature of this particular indication. My usual setting stipulated a double vibration to let me know if something needed to be addressed but three pulses was something I hadn't felt for weeks... something that, if it weren't for that sudden surprise, jolting my mind and stopping my heart, I would have sworn I'd never feel again. I stared forebodingly downward as I slid my tablet from my pocket, turning it around to see a flashing screen showing an impossible message—absolutely impossible. Nathan Gills, my former best friend and confidant at Eden Corporation, had just picked up his phone for the first time since the infection struck. And the satellite overhead image zoomed in on his precise coordinates in real time, indicated he was standing in the remains of the White House when he did it.

"That's not possible," I whispered to myself, caught staring down at the screen—overcome with a brooding sense of indignation forcing itself through the cracks of my composure. "There's no Goddamn way," I hissed, squeezing the tablet hard on its sides and furrowing my brow. And yet... there it was... proving me wrong and curdling my blood—blowing my mind and every assumption I had made about the level of control I maintained. He was alive. Or... if he was in fact dead... someone else was using his phone now.

"Ellex... Are you alright?" Gregory asked, still standing by the meeting room door—having just recently escaped Nahuel's clutches. "What did he do to you?" he blathered on, misinterpreting my sudden white complexion and uncontrollable tremors to my encounter with Nahuel and not the notification I'd received. And though he continued to ask me questions, I couldn't so much as answer a single one—speaking inaudible gibberish to myself as my wife's words of how Nathan had 'spies watching me' repeated over and over again in my mind.

"That's not possible!" I shouted, jabbing at the screen to refresh it—reviewing the same information over and over again. His phone was in use—a private, Eden Corporation network that only served a handful of internal functions and contacts. Any one of whom could be turned against me. Any one of whom, if still functional, if still operational in any significant capacity, could work against my greater agenda. And there I

stood, lurching over my device—cold beads of sweat forming on my brow—struggling to fathom what on earth to do. Gregory spotted my spiraling state of dismay and soon came to stand by my side—concerned for my wellbeing.

“Ellex... talk to me. Are you alright?” he asked again, trying over and over to get me to respond—to understand what I was going through. I ignored him and leaned my back against the nearest wall, feeling faint—feeling a pulse of nausea stab its way through my stomach and crawl into my chest. Gregory didn’t hesitate a moment longer. He quickly closed the gap between us and pulled my arm around his shoulder—hobbling with me down the length of the hall until we reached one of my guards. “Ellex, take a seat, please,” he instructed me, ushering me onto a chair and instructing the guard to fetch a medic and some water. I sat hunched forward, clutching the tiny tablet device with both hands—watching the second-counter increase over and over again as the call on Nathan’s phone continued unabated. What on earth was he talking about? And with whom? If in fact it was him, how had he survived in the first place? What was he doing in the White House of all places? What had he told whoever he was talking to about me? And, now that I was so very close to erasing the remains of the world... would any of it even make any real difference? Even if they did know, whoever they were, whatever they had left at their disposal... could they really do anything to stop me now?

I slowly peeled my eyes from the tablet and gazed into the meeting room I sat before—staring into the large ovular hall of tiered seating, overlooking the beach and all 17 ships anchored off the coast. The men, seated inside, seemed to notice my sudden ailment—my depleted complexion and inability to stand. They temporarily ceased speaking to one another—putting aside their tidbits of food and drinks to stare inquisitively at me... like a pack of wolves spotting weakness... like a herd of sheep, led to the slaughter only, now, to suspect he who had led them. And there I sat, looking back at them, digesting every moment between us through the lens of my sickening anxiety and brooding trepidations. I was so close. I was so very, very close. And in that room was the last step I would have to take to kill any and all who might rise in opposition to me. I couldn’t stop. Not now. I had to calm down and... I had to pull myself together and...

“Here, drink this,” Gregory suggested, holding out a bottle of water for me. I turned my head slightly to him and nodded—taking it and unscrewing the cap.

“Thank you,” I grumbled, breaking my silence as the panic of my thoughts slowly drifted away—I was so close now—too close to allow

anything or anyone to get in my way. No matter who or what that might be... I was in control... I was in control... I was in control...

"Are you feeling alright? Did he... did he say or do something to you that—"

"No. It's fine. Everything's fine," I interrupted, cutting short any notion Gregory might have that Nahuel had been the reason for my behavior. "I'm just... I was feeling a bit overwhelmed for a moment," I confessed, taking a long drink of water and rotating the cool plastic bottle in my palm. "I'm better now... we can begin," I stated, standing up to march into the meeting room. Gregory lingered behind me a moment, thanking the guard for his assistance, while the other men—the 17 tycoons who I had called a meeting with—collectively approached me at the door to shake my hand and bid me welcome... just like old times.

The first hand to reach out to me was Darrel Alain, an old Texas oilman. Immediately beside him was Wes, Patrick and John... three, even older, former trade organization moguls. Next was Perry... a scruffily bearded, new-money, lay-about who had used his fortune to play the stock market so well that he had multiplied his inheritance nearly 100-fold... not to mention his vast and varied acquisitions. Aldous and Powell... two hickory-smoked middle aged fuckers who owned half the agricultural-trendsetting-institutions in the world. Terence, Jared and Jordan... practically sewn at the hip for as long as I'd known them, they were... so far as I had been able to document, well connected in the worlds of both organized gambling and crime. Though, in truth, I had never come to understand specifically to whom it was they owed their rich network of associations. Behind them were Brandon and Isaiah... energy-tycoons ranging from natural gas, solar arrays, home-storage-batteries and beyond. And, lastly, Eric, a robotics specialist, Tyler, a rare-earths mogul, Pier, an aviation entrepreneur and, my least favorite of all, Charles, a rather worthless asshole who happened to own a few things I needed that he had stubbornly refused to sell to me. And, of course, Gregory Voustin—who shook my hand once more—leaning in as he did so to double check my wellbeing one last time.

"Are you sure you're feeling alright, Ellex?" he asked, kind to a fault as always. "It's no problem to reschedule or take a moment if you need it."

"I'm fine, Gregory. Now sit down," I instructed, glaring feverishly at his suggestion of weakness in the midst of the crowd. He nodded and withdrew, just as the other men did—finding their seats in a jovial, casual fashion. I stood anxiously, tapping my foot against the ground with my hand buried in my pocket and a sweat forming on my

brow. I hiccupped on a recurrent thought of Nathan, alive and well somewhere, and then quickly clenched my jaw and closed my eyes to force him out of my mind.

“Ellex, now that you’re here... Who do I talk to about getting a day pass to this place!?” Charles bellowed, his words sparking an orchestra of chuckles and applause—the first time any of them but Gregory had been allowed on the island since they had first arrived. I ignored the remark and took my own seat at the helm of the meeting—scarcely able to see these men for the people they were—my focus lingering solely on the property that their fortunes had afforded them—the same property that had incentivized me to invite them here. I managed to conjure a faint, forced smile in response to Charles’ words... thinking all the while how pleasant it would be to watch him and everyone else in the room with me wither away and die. My smile soon faded and I powered up the display in front of me to coordinate the larger functionality of the room—every gesture triggering an immediate technological response from my well calibrated and coordinated stage. Show time.

“Jokes aside, Ellex, it’s great seeing you! Thank you again for inviting us—we can’t thank you enough!” Perry continued, tossing me a token of thanks to which I could only muster yet another pitiful smile in my charade of interest... faking every single nuance of my temperament and conduct... everything except... the purpose of the meeting—the reason I had brought them to my island and gathered them in that room. That I still cared about. That I still needed to pay attention to. And so, to that end, I pretended to relax—just like I had so many times in the years before.

“Of course... of course. Thank you all for coming... for... being lucky enough to attend in the first place,” I exclaimed, taking my seat and powering on the projector—occasionally pausing to reply to the formal words and best wishes of those still huddled around me, attempting to win my favor. Gregory soon stepped to the entrance and closed the door behind him—making eye contact with me and gesturing to a small first aid kit that he’d gotten from the guard—placing it beside the exit just in case I felt faint again. I looked blankly at him—impartial to the gesture—and utterly determined to see it unfounded. I was fine. Everything was fine. I just needed this charade of a meeting over with and then... once I had confiscated these men’s acquisitions via their biometrics... then I could... I could... I uh... I... fucking God damn piece of shit... how in the fuck is Nathan still alive? It’s not possible! It’s not **fucking possible**! Someone else has to be on his phone! But who?! And who in the hell were they talking to?! God dammit!... just... alright... just... breathe

and... Concentrate! CONCENTRATE! Just get through this meeting and...

“Let’s begin please!” I shouted, tearing myself away from the recurrent nags of my inner thoughts and worries—startling those around me and silencing the rest. My tone swayed, more fragile than I would have liked, and the few remaining men at my sides suddenly cleared away from me—made acutely aware of my urgency and zeal. “If you would all please place your palms face down on the surface in front of you, it will engage a touch screen application so you can follow along,” I instructed, my eyes carefully scanning the room as each and every one of them placed their hands where I had told them to—triggering an electrical jolt in the tabletops that quickly illuminated to match what I was about to display on the central screen—controlled by the computer in front of me, loaded with the presentation I had carefully built to persuade them with. The men waited patiently, their bare expressions carved with contours of light from the panels beneath them—a foreboding sense of anticipation marking the ambiance of the room as they neared their first glimpses of what remained of the world. Everyone did as I said. Every single one of them. And with that... I was able to breathe just a little easier... I cleared my throat and opened a folder of satellite and surveillance footage I had selected for the occasion. Then, with the subtle click of my finger, I revealed hell.

“The easiest way to understand what you’re looking at is to think of this cluster of ‘people’ as if this were an ant hill. Imagine a big fat caterpillar is dropped on the top of an anthill. We all know what happens to the caterpillar. But it’s the behavior of the ants that’s paramount to understanding the minds of these undead,” I explained, slowly zooming in the aerial view of a few million-infected migrating across the United States—a swarm of people so large and vast it could easily be confused for an ocean. “They are, for all intents and purposes, on the cognitive level of insects now... arguably, even lower. Except that insects are still bound by biological limitation... insects are still conscious... these people, if you can call them that, are not,” I continued, toggling the image from the remains of cities and landmarks—each one selected for maximum nostalgic impact and visceral revulsion. The men in the crowd stared in awe at the screens before them—their hands or fists pressed up against their mouths—their minds held in fragile submission as if children once more.

“Now, those are the ants. The anthill, however, is still conceivably what it was before the caterpillar made its appearance,” I explained, pulling up audio and visual recordings of panicked people all over the world—each dug into some niche of fortified infrastructure

crying out to one another in search of salvation. “These people will all die eventually—one way or another... be it by thirst, starvation, sickness, madness... one way or another, their deaths are inevitable. That they’ve managed to find temporarily-secure-places to wait out the apocalypse is admirable but, ultimately, is of little to no significance on a larger scale. Because not only are they as good as dead, once bitten, they too are as good as undead,” I sighed, interjecting a purposefully dismayed huff of air to caress the emotional threads of the men I manipulated. “We could debate semantics of whom to help and how much energy to spend trying to do it but... the fact remains, it won’t do us or them any good. This disease spread so quickly—so instantaneously that the sheer force of numbers has torn the hill to shreds. And, as those numbers lose focus on trying to find and attack the remaining survivors around them, they will, eventually, find their ways into the oceans... rivers... the most secluded and abandoned parts of this earth... and, eventually, they will find their way to this island. They can survive under water... they can drift by the thousands across the waves... and, if we don’t stop them, they will overrun us. It’s hard to accept, I know, but... that’s the reality. A reality made all the more difficult by the time quickly passing through our fingers... So, now, given this situation, the question is... if we’re not in a position to save these people... how do we save the anthill? And how do we get rid of all the ants before they find their way here?”

“The answer, unfortunately, has less to do with finding some abstract wondrous solution to all of this than it does with simply rephrasing the question... How do we get any of this land back **at all**? And, moreover, how can we utilize and adopt what remains of the world’s infrastructure to help us to that end? What do we have? What can we do with it? And who’s still out there in any real position to be of any assistance to us? Those are the questions we naturally ask ourselves and they’re the very questions you should be asking yourself right now. What... do... we... do?” I asked of them all, halfway between a rhetorical question and one I knew very well none would dare answer simply because they had not truly thought it through to the end. Instead, just as I anticipated they would, the men merely sat open mouthed and wide eyed—glued to the screens before them and the selective nuances of truth I chose to sprinkle their minds with. “The answer is relatively simple... cold blooded... reductionist, albeit, but, true and necessary, nevertheless... you don’t try to save ants and you don’t try and liberate an anthill overrun by them. Instead, you hire an exterminator—kill the ants—level the hill—and rebuild a better infrastructure for the species to try and start over. And we do this, because, if we don’t... if we don’t use what we still have left to remedy this situation... then it’s only a matter of time until we too are overrun by it... I had hoped that Gregory had made

that clear to you when he'd spoken to you on my behalf, but... now he tells me you have reservations? He says you need convincing... so, I suppose my question to you now is... are you convinced or... are you still hoping that some miracle will come and save us from our own refusal to act?" I asked, clicking the table once more to end my short presentation on a surveillance video depicting a blood-spattered American flag flying high above the brainless masses trudging beneath it.

There was a cold lingering silence at first. And then, a single hand slowly rose in the audience. I tilted my head up in recognition of them and gestured to the hand in the darkness—their dark silhouette keeping the contours of their face and expression from me. The man cleared his throat and took a long breath—staring down at the screen in front of him that had allowed him to isolate satellite images and surveillance videos at his discretion. I looked down to the interface in front of me to prioritize whatever it was he had discovered on his own—pulling it up, front and center, to the screen we all collectively looked upon. Then, after turning my head slightly to the side to witness whatever it was he planned to make mention of, I quickly raised a hand to my mouth to conceal a condescending grimace—experiencing the sight before me in stark opposition to the emotional vulnerability felt by everyone else in the room. I knew exactly what he was showing us—and exactly how he intended to twist it in favor of his interests as if somehow synonymous with the rest of ours. They would all do exactly what he was about to do—they would all clamor and whine for any other recourse than losing everything they'd once owned. I swallowed hard a moment later—forcing a blank expression to stomach the onslaught of this rabble's approaching protest.

"Ellex, this site is the... well, let's say 'remains' of a facility and underground bunker of particular interest to me and my family. It's located in... what used to be Ohio and... well, I suppose there's no point in sugar coating or hiding this from you, but... it would be beneficial to the species for this place to remain intact and preserved for future generations... I suppose what I'm wondering is... if you have the means at your disposal to have these drones bomb selectively... then why not have them bomb selectively instead?" he suggested—garnering nods of approval and agreement from those in the crowd with him. I nodded too—mimicking their mannerisms, not their sentiments.

"If you'll all please look closer at the surfaces in front of you... in the upper right-hand corner you'll notice a resource chart that doubles as a tally for your individual wealth, assets, loved ones and... well just about everything on record about you—including those things you have done everything in your power to try and hide," I informed them, having

loaded their treasures and fortunes into the very fold of the interface before them. They all stared down—their eyes peeled open, dissecting the intricate list of assets and real estate. And as I looked at them, carefully analyzing the duration of time in which they stared at their screens, I recognized in the faint contours of their expressions, subtly illuminated by the screens below them, a calculative progression of their emotional states. At first, they were surprised to find I had taken the liberty of summarizing their lives for them—digging through their dirt and inventorying all that they knew and loved. Next, they fastidiously combed through the details to ascertain if in fact I had done my homework and truly knew them and what they held dear. Then, on the cusp of feeling overwhelmed at the idea of it all being taken away, they pulled back from their screens and leaned heavily in their chairs—stubborn and indignant. Just like any wealthy, spoiled monkey conditioned to have their way would be. Because now, looking down at all that they had once held themselves up by, they were forced to consider the idea of living without it—of burning every last grain of sand in the anthill they had once played so large a part in building.

“I understand your point and I sympathize. I wish as much as you do that I could selectively bomb,” I confessed, my mind returning to the notion of Nathan alive and well—my friend—my enemy—my patsy... off the leash and on the loose... son of a bitch... I cleared my throat and tried to remember what I was saying... to stay present in the room I was in... to orient my focus in a world hell-bent on stripping me of any piece of mind. “Kmmm... That is to say... I wish the circumstances were different and that I had the power to just bomb one thing or another,” I continued, double-checking the tablet in my pocket to see if Nathan’s phone was still in use—fifteen minutes and counting... he was still on the phone. I clenched my jaw and looked up again—doing my best to return my mind to the men before me by placing the tablet face down and sliding it out of arms reach. I cleared my throat and folded my hands together to lean against the tabletop. “Believe me... If I were sitting in your chairs, hearing this from someone else, I probably wouldn’t be able to swallow it either. I know, but—”

“Excuse me but... how are our assets a threat to anyone?” another black silhouette interjected, deaf to reason in the face of loss. I choked on my rebuttal a moment and swallowed a spike of anger—glaring at the man who so audaciously interrupted the answers I was giving to demand the answers he wanted to hear.

“As I was saying... your assets are not the threat... the infected are... but we can’t very well get rid of one without affecting the other,” I explained, tightening the firm grip of my hands pressed against one

another. I opened my mouth to speak again—to continue with the address I had prepared—but the same man insisted on voicing his opinions over my insistence to disregard them. And as his voice rang out again, my jaw clenched and shoulders sunk—feeling the weight of his impatience gnawing at my own.

“Ellex, I understand we need to clear away the infected. No one is disputing that. But, if I’m reading this correctly,” he muttered, hunching over the display in front of him and adjusting his glasses so he could see it better. “It says that these drones aren’t just going to bomb infected areas, they’re bombing **everything**... everything **everywhere** mind you... including a weather monitoring station I own in the alps... which, frankly, seems a little ridiculous. Why in the hell would we need to drop a bomb capable of leveling a **city** on a building the size of an **outhouse** on top of a **mountain** with **nobody** on it? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“The undead freeze. If one of them happens to climb a mountain and weather conditions vary, it can then thaw out and become animated again. If that happens, it can pose a threat to future generations. As I said, because of this we need to bomb everything everywhere the infected are or might travel to. Put simply, it’s better to be safe than sorry,” I huffed, no longer able to so much as pretend to relax. The tablet in front of me vibrated again and I stared at it—fighting against myself to keep from reaching out and looking at whatever it might be now. The man scowled at my response and the dispositions of those around him began to thaw out of the shock and awe of the presentation I’d shown them. They clung to their denial and rattled the bars of the cage they found themselves in... just as my vibrating phone continued to rattle me—louder and louder in my mind.

“It’s one thing to remove contaminants to allow people hidden in underground bunkers to be able to survive after the infected waste away. I understand that. And, yes, it makes perfect sense to preemptively remove the infected before they enter the oceans and wash up on shore here. I understand that too. But your contention that the virus is so widespread that no place on this earth other than this island should be spared from your drones seems rash and premature,” the man insisted, adopting a naively hopeful disposition of alternatives to what I insisted need to occur. “So, I suppose my point is... the idea of incinerating additional infrastructure that could be helpful to us or other survivors doesn’t make any sense to me. Why not make calculative strikes instead? Target the undead and work with whomever’s still out there rather than simply disavow everything altogether?”

“So... adopt some sort of post-apocalyptic babysitting club then, is that it?” I sighed, moving the chess pieces around in my mind—the

arguments arranged for this very debate in the years before it—in careful preparation for when the men would place their hands on the table, stare into the screens, voice their oppositions and then... suddenly, find themselves without recourse—all part of the plan. The man cleared his throat and looked around him to the other figures in the room—clearly of the opinion that his confusion was mutual.

“That’s not what I’m saying at all,” he huffed, taking my crack about babysitting as if there were no irony or truth to it whatsoever. “I’m not suggesting any of us leave this island. And I’m not suggesting we risk the fortunate position we’ve found ourselves in thanks to you. Instead... I’m simply suggesting that your priorities do not necessarily represent our priorities. That’s the purpose of this meeting after all, isn’t it? To discuss the matter before we decide what to do?” he insisted, whispering mutiny to the crowd below the bellows of his hubris—as if ‘we’ would decide and not ‘I’. I clenched my teeth momentarily and took in another breath—feeling an additional three pulses quiver from my tablet across the table from me. I froze and turned my attention away from the man again—reaching out to grab my tablet and turn it over. The satellite image was now moving—Nathan was leaving the White House, traveling on foot, still talking on his phone. I stared down at the tiny dot of a man—reminiscent of an ant even in near full satellite zoom—who in the hell was he speaking to? And where on earth was he going?... I stared at that screen... lost in my own mind... “Ellex? Wouldn’t you agree? Aren’t these grounds for a vote or a discussion at least?” the man continued, luring my head away from my tablet once more—back to the crowd gathered under the assumption that their opinions, lives and livelihoods held any true significance to me.

“What about the military?” another man suggested—objection quickly becoming the tempo of the crowd.

“What about it?”

“Well, I had enough holdings in enough weapon contractors to attest to the fact that a great number of their facilities were underground as well,” he explained, flipping through the screen in front of him until he located something of particular interest—a weapons cache he helped fund, supervise and advertise. “Are you telling us, in no uncertainty or lack of knowledge that **all** those facilities and **all** the people in them are in no position to be of any assistance whatsoever? Or... for that matter... that every single one of them are completely out of contact to that end?”

“To clarify... yes, some are alive... and they’re desperately trying to rally together to salvage what they can,” I informed them, sliding my chair in front of the computer screen once more to pull up charts of the

aforementioned weapon cache's stockpiles and supply levels. "But, that said, every single one of those people are, also, completely fucked... none of them is outfitted for periods of underground fortification or survival beyond a single years time. Now, in regard to your other question... while their communications were largely dependent on the global grid, that doesn't mean that they're now completely without outside contact... it just means that who they can talk to, and who's able to hear what they have to say, is severely limited."

"I'm sorry. Hold on... You know this because you can hear them, is that right?"

"Yes. I can."

"And can you respond? Do you have communication with them in any way?"

"If I felt so inclined, yes, I could," I replied, hearing an uproarious hiss of gasps and grunts—my words clearly a shocking revelation to them.

"If you felt so inclined?" Do you mean to say that you haven't even bothered to communicate with them?"

"No. Like I said, they're as good as dead."

"On whose authority?" he demanded to know, insulted by my seemingly innocuous regard for previously vested institutions of privilege and power. In his mind—in all of their minds—the only right to action lay in the hands of those 'righteously' bestowed with that right. And there I sat, intending to take the power for myself and to have their blessings in doing so. The men quivered on the edges of their seats—torn between their allegiance to a dead world and my insistence that in order for us to survive, we needed burn all of it.

"Look... I didn't mean to give you the impression that we were the only ones left alive on this planet. We're not... not by a long shot. But we **are** the only ones left alive on the surface, who are going to **stay** that way. That's what I'm trying to communicate here. That's the point of this meeting. So, yes, we can have a vote. We can have a debate. But the purpose of that debate will only be to educate you, not to compromise or come up with an alternative. There is no alternative. **That** is the point of this meeting."

"Then please do a better job of explaining why it's not possible. Because, frankly, this sounds less like an absolute necessity than it does a personal bias. And less like a rescue operation than it does a nail in the coffin of everyone else out there," one man insisted, while others peeled away from paying attention to me to start discussions with each other. I

took a deep breath and brooded idly for a moment—unable to pay them my full attention or patience—like Caesar in the senate surrounded by would-be assassins both present and abroad. Nathan... Nathan... Nathan...

“What about the intelligence apparatus?” another man suggested—jolting my focus back to what my wife had said about Nathan—to him being an informant for the NSA, still on the loose... still on the phone. The other men in the room nodded in agreement to what was just said—peeling away the layers of their own reservation, one at a time. “If people are still out there, they might know something we don’t—they might be able to help us understand how this happened in the first place and what’s being done in response, wouldn’t they?”

“That’s not important right now,” I tried to suggest, the sound of my voice drowned out by the frayed attention and growing debates around me. “We don’t have time to play detective... we need to stop the infected before we can—”

“Who exactly do you have contact with?” a group of three men in the back of the room demanded to know—voicing their concerns above everyone else’s. “I know for a **fact** that the CIA has contingencies in place for this sort of thing—that there are carefully kept plans in the event of outbreaks or national security breaches of this magnitude! It is **imperative** that we cooperate fully with those people and do everything in our power to contact them!”

“Look! Again we can’t—” I tried to reply, growing increasingly frustrated with the disintegrating composure of the group. Soon more dark silhouettes of supposed friends voiced their concerns—cried outrage and insisted on an alternative. “Excuse me! Everyone!” I tried to say, distracted once more by another three pulses jolting against the table—the emergency notifications of my tablet that had feverishly plagued my mind ever since this meeting began. I clenched my jaw again and dove my hand forward once more, expecting it to be a notice that Nathan was finally off the phone, but, instead, it was something else completely... another in a long list of impossible surprises that day. I stared down at the notification on the device and shuddered at what it could mean. The security system that controlled the doors in my personal quarters had just triggered—allowing the locks to fail and the doors to open—and my wife, the person I had made a point of quarantining in that room, was now, miraculously, able to leave it. Only I hadn’t been the one to release her. And, so far as I knew, she had no way of figuring out how to escape on her own. I scowled sharply at the device—raising my head slowly out of the daze I was in, back to the cries of the men around me.

“This little trigger finger mutiny of yours doesn’t give you the authority to do what you’re talking about, Ellex?! Don’t you understand that!? We are obligated to speak to those men and to do everything in our power to work with them to find out what the hell happened and what we’re supposed to be doing about it!” he insisted, no longer a man—now part of a collective hive-mind, furiously disagreeing with me and all that I knew. A hive-mind speaking in occulted code about ‘moral responsibility’ when, in truth, all they were focused on was retaining remnants of their power and influence. Not a single word they spoke carried with it the gravity of truth or justice—none of them had the slightest care for saving another human being! Only greed, wrath and pride underlay the points made here—those treasures and properties so desperately clung to as if they were still theirs to keep. And yet... while I looked at the shadowy figures of these men and heard their words, my mind struggled to depart from the idea of my wife suddenly roaming free... how had she gotten out? What would she do now that she had and... and... what else might she know that I didn’t realize? What was happening? This wasn’t possible.... It’s not fucking possible... I should have just killed her... I should have cut her down when I had the chance, that venomous, evil fucking cunt... “Ellex? Ellex!?” the men hollered once more, finally snapping me back to reality with their unrelenting tugs of audacity—children banging pots until the only adult in the room could no longer stomach their incessant, juvenile noise.

“Shut up!” I screamed, unable to control my anger any longer—finally silencing the room. The men glared at me—a pack of wolves tearing me one way or the other to appease their appetites and interests—and I glared back at them, the shepherd to these clueless, ravenous sheep—supposing that they had any right to ‘thoughts of their own’ despite how very, very little of the truth they knew. I trembled with rage in their silence—too furious to contain what was brooding inside me or entertain their misconceptions any longer. Fuck the tempered plan to bite my tongue and keep everything from them—I had what I needed from them already. I was in control. I was in control! And as soon as this God damn meeting was over, I would expedite every pragmatic step I had intended to take and silence them once and for all.

“How exactly do you think we came to be in this situation in the first place, huh?! How do you think I managed to get enough control to be able to do anything about the undead at all?!” I yelled, both snubbing and spitting on the assumptions they’d made. “You think that sort of power exists in this world without the express knowledge and consent of the CIA and the intelligence apparatus? Huh?! Or of the military?! Or of every single person sitting on a throne anywhere on this earth?! You think

I just happened to have access to destroy the entire fucking world without having that access expressly **given** to me?!” I continued, turning my eyes toward one of the first men who had spoken—who had alluded to the military bunkers he held stock in. “You all know **exactly** how this works and how its worked for decades, and yet you still have the audacity to coddle your juvenile, lackluster grasps of reality as you pathetically scrounge for the remains of what you once owned?! How dare you!!!” I screamed, the spite and fury of my many wounds finding their way to the surface through my words. “The worldwide military industrial complex and its intelligence apparatus PR campaign have **nothing** to do with national sovereignty and you know it! Ever since 9/11, that power has been outsourced to private contractors—to international corporations so that they can build bombs and economies through endless war! And you are **acutely** aware of this ghastly reality quite simply because **every single one of you** holds significant investments in the world ‘defense’ infrastructure! You have all directly profited from its design!”

“Excuse me! But—”

“Shut up! Shut the fuck up!!!” I hissed, veering my hand to the side to stand up and throw the chair I sat upon—slamming it against the nearby window that barely shook in response. The men froze, unsure of whether it was to their benefit to see me unravel in the way that I was—my composure stripped and my temperament bare. I was livid—absolutely livid. For they, those stupid fucking insolent children, dared question all that I knew and all that I had planned for so very long. “And yet even though you **know** the private sector manufactures the military, even though you **know** the private sector runs the world, you fucking infants cry to me about ‘responsibility’ and ‘authority’ as if I haven’t already been given it!!! Of course I know what the people in those bunkers have to say! Of course I know what happened and how it happened! Of course I know who made the virus, who planned its release and who facilitated its secrecy! I know because it’s not a secret! It’s only been a secret to **you**! And that’s because none of **you** and none of **your** corporations received the corporate-military contracts that would require you to be in the know!” I explained, my eyes scanning the humble glances of tyrants who, for a few brief moments, had allowed themselves to think no further than what they stood to personally lose—to be as blind to the buildup to the outbreak as they were now blind to the assumptions they continued to make about it—to never suppose that this plan to rebuild the world—my plan—wasn’t... originally... mine. Instead, it, just like all forms of genocide and deception throughout history had originated in the hearts of the ruling elite—serendipitously commandeered by me and my corporation on this island. A plan to depopulate the world—a plan that I

had reinvented, reimagined, and revolutionized to free the world of those who had, for so very long, sought to rule. The invisible hand, bitten by those it fed and their life's work, all mine at last. And, yet, despite this monumental shift in the paradigm of control... these few tattered sniveling men in my midst—these former trinkets of the world I now saw fit to burn and recreate—they dared to question their liberator.

"Ellex," Gregory interjected, the tender, vulnerable nature of his voice contrary to the scathing inquiry of the rest of the men. I turned to him—huffing on breaths of fury. "Are you saying... that you knew beforehand? That... all of this was planned?"

"Of course it was," I confessed, as if every one of them were insane for not seeing it so clearly themselves. "That's why any of you are alive right now, don't you see that? That's why all of those carefully selected, pre-screened people were safely tucked away in Eden Corp bunkers when this happened—and that's why I'm in a position to be able to do something about it now... Because it was a plan—a contract that my company which preceded even Eden Corps creation, received nearly two decades ago to begin preparing for... a plan that I deliberately stalled and sabotaged over and over again, only to be removed from my position as CEO as a result. And so, my former friend and confidant Nathan Gills took it upon himself to finish what I started—to actually go through with it! And in response to that! In response to my being held so helplessly, with no other recourse, I generously brought you ignorant shits here... I lured you to my island—knowing full fucking well what was coming to the rest of the world. But don't think for a single solitary second that I **need** any of you now that you're here!" I continued, telling a version of events as close to true as any of them could fathom might be truth—telling them the real reason only after I had gathered them together into one room why they had been gathered together at all. "Instead! Now that you've sat here—now that you've scanned your palms on the surfaces in front of you—now that those surfaces have collected your retinal, verbal and DNA signatures, I don't need you or your consent any longer! With your biometrics, I can disengage every single security measure to all of your military assets combined—any part of what you once owned that might have been used by anyone on this earth to threaten or stop me is now no longer an option. That's why you're here! That is the **only** reason it was necessary for you to be here. Because of what you **owned**! And if you have any desire to stay on this island, know this—it is only because of me that you are alive. And it is only because of the measures I have taken and the drones at my disposal that the men who commissioned that contract to my company—the contract to see this plan was undertaken without anyone in this room surviving it—it is because of me that those

men will not be the ones responsible for rebuilding this world... Instead, we will," I finished, reaching the end of my argument and all that they would need to hear to be convinced of just how right I was.

They sat silently in response—not struck, nor crippled by the reality of my words so much as scolded and put in their place by them. They knew the matter in question after all—the quintessential venomous reek of power and those who play with it. And, so too, did they recognize that here and now—on my island—there was absolutely nothing they could say or do about it. They were my sheep and I was their shepherd. They didn't know what was truth and what was lie. They didn't understand the larger picture of the world that remained well enough to distinguish the blurred lines I outlined for them. And yet, in their eyes I recognized a guttural appreciation for the brutality that had unfolded across the earth—for the horror that they had been spared from by their consolidations of wealth and privilege. But most of all, I saw in them a recognition of a good, well-executed plan that had laid the groundwork for them to remain in some semblance of privilege as the world reemerged... so long as that privilege was well beneath my own. And so... they said nothing. They did not object. They did not protest. They only held their heads in pensive reflection of all that I had said—searching for how, if any, way to object without fear of repercussion. And then... just as the feeling of self-assured superiority and righteous authority reached its full culmination inside me, an alarm sounded and the door to the meeting room suddenly burst wide open.

Nahuel stood holding an assault rifle—pointed in front of him to sweep the room and count heads. A handful of other guards stood watch outside the door beside him and the emergency lighting system of the facility kicked in—tainting the room with flashes of blue. I choked on my words and stared in awe—completely dumbstruck by what was happening. A blue alarm light wasn't an indication of a fire—it wasn't a sighting of a ship off the coast—it wasn't even a storm warning. No. A blue-light-alarm was something very different and very particular. And looking at the stern, unwavering expression of Nahuel, I understood that despite my initial fears of what that light might mean, in truth, it was far more likely a part of his plan. A blue light meant an outbreak had occurred and a quarantine was in effect. Nahuel quickly stomped his way over to me and reached out to secure me by the arm—under the guise of it being for my own safety.

"There's been an outbreak, sir," he stated blankly, as if he didn't care whatsoever whether or not I believed his ruse to be true. Then, without bothering to wait for so much as a word in response from me, he turned to address the 17 other men in the room. "There has been an

outbreak on the island! You are being evacuated! We are all evacuating!” he yelled, the full nature of his plan dawning on me as he did so. “Now if you’ll all please follow the guards, we’ll get everyone to safety!” he finished, pulling me by the arm despite my feeble attempts to resist him—forcefully tearing me away from all that I had built and every precaution I had taken in the event of any such mutiny. Because if Nahuel got his way and if my island were evacuated in full it would mean three things were almost certainly going to happen. An actual outbreak would occur if I failed to enter a deactivation sequence in time. The drone strikes would become automated, bombing strike coordinates determined by priority-algorithms outside of my immediate control. And, not least of all, finally free of obstacle or repercussion aboard the ships docked off the coast of my island—seemingly kept at a safe distance from the contamination I had assured him would break out—Nahuel would finally have his opportunity to kill me.

CHAPTER 16: SURVIVORS

Susie Simmonds, Upstate Massachusetts, 2018

The only time I'd ever driven before was when I parked the truck in the field to distract the undead a couple days ago. That was pretty easy to manage though.... Nothing to crash into anyway. Driving down the road, however, made me a lot more anxious. Like A LOT more anxious. I barely drove twenty miles an hour and anytime I'd come upon a crashed or parked car in the road, I'd slow down and nervously inch around it—accidentally scrapping the side of the truck and knocking a mirror off in the process. But the further I drove the easier it got. And after about fifteen minutes, I was feeling pretty good about it. I sat perched on top of a few folded blankets and I had to use my tippy-toes to be able to hit the gas and brakes right, but, still, I managed well. Elvis was in the passenger seat, his head sticking out the window, panting happily. Blood was still splattered across his belly, but I'd used well water from back home to get most of it off before we ventured out together. And while I hadn't told my mother I was leaving the shelter face to face, I believed that when she woke up and read the note I'd left her, that she'd be proud of me, not just worried. I was the only one who could go looking for Archer after all. And because of that, whether my mom was afraid for me or not, I knew that this was something I had to do. It was my responsibility. It was my obligation. And it was my time to grow up and stop being afraid.

After barking constantly—demanding my immediate attention—Elvis finally quieted down when we got in the truck. My mother had previously mentioned that my best bet to find Archer was to go looking for his girlfriend's address in the computers at school. But when I made the turn to head east to the school rather than west to the town, Elvis started barking again—insisting that we go the other way. At first I was going to ignore him based on my mother's advice but... I had a feeling that he knew something I didn't—that he wanted to show me something... hopefully, something other than a buried toy this time. So I hit the brakes and listened to him—backing the truck up slowly—fidgeting my head around to see where I was going while still trying to keep my foot steady on the pedal. Elvis kept barking all the while—trying to steer me one way or the other. Eventually I got it right though—bumping off a parked car before I was able to put the gear in the forward direction and keep driving. But, just as I did, I noticed a group of undead had formed around me—attracted to the sound of the engine. At first I didn't pay them any mind—accustomed to them ignoring me. But then,

just as I started to pull forward, an arm landed hard against the side of the truck—scaring me half to death. I screamed and reared to the side. Elvis lunged in the direction of the undead and barked viciously at them, but they ignored it—no more concerned with him than they were with me. It was the truck they were attacking—the noise it was making. I put my foot on the gas again, but it slipped off the pedal. Another thud hit the side of the truck and then another. The group of ghouls around me was getting larger and as I tried to readjust my balance and start moving again, I started to feel out of breath.

“Come on,” I wheezed, a jolt of panic shooting through me as the truck struggled to move forward—caught on something I couldn’t see. The undead moaned loudly—slamming their discolored arms against the drivers-side-window until eventually it shattered and sent glass flying all over me. I screamed and ducked away from the opening—now filled with an arm that swung wildly in all directions. Elvis opened his jaws wide and sunk his teeth into the arm, fighting against it, but as more undead surrounded the other sides of the truck, I felt their collective blows nudge us back and forth—threatening to tip the vehicle. I sucked in a strained, staggered breath and gasped, completely consumed with fear. What if they kept attacking the truck? What if because it was making noise they would know I was in it somehow? What if I got cut and their blood infected me? Elvis’s teeth ripped off the ghouls arm as the muscle tore in two—sending coagulated blood down on top of me—mixing with the shards of broken glass. I tried to scream again but I was too short of breath. I was panicking. I didn’t know what to do. They were attacking me! They were attacking the truck and... that’s it! I knew what I had to do!!! Suddenly, just as a few pairs of arms started banging on the front windshield, I repositioned myself onto my side and pulled the keys out of the ignition—covering my face as the protruding bone of the ghouls crippled arm reached right for me... stopping dead as soon as the truck did. Elvis kept barking as the ghoul’s attention faded away—no longer interested in us or the noise we were making.

“Huhhh... huhhh... hmmm... I think we’re close enough to walk the rest of the way,” I sighed, after taking a few minutes to catch my breath and stop sweating—about as scared as I’d ever been. That was too close... that was stupid on my part... I should have thought of that, but I didn’t. ‘Stupid... just stupid!’ I thought to myself, yanking the orange knapsack of supplies off the floor and making sure I still had everything. “Come on,” I exclaimed, popping the door open and encouraging Elvis to follow. He plopped out of the truck and cheerily looked up at me—stepping ahead and barking once more. I slid the keys into my pocket and did my best to brush off the broken glass and remains of blood—catching

eye of a half squished undead, lodged underneath one of the trucks tires as I did so—squirming to try and get free.

We walked for about twenty minutes until we reached the outskirts of town. A sign that read ‘welcome to’ but the rest was missing... knocked off by a crashed car. It was a good idea that we decided not to drive the rest of the way because around here it was hard enough already to get anywhere on foot. Smashed cars and broken glass were everywhere. The buildings were all dark and empty—stained with blood or littered with bodies. I crept forward steadily—weary at all times that a ghoul might notice the sound of my footsteps and suddenly care that I was the one making them. I clutched a pistol in my hand—one that I’d practiced shooting plenty of times out behind the barn with my dad—ready and willing to use it if any ghouls got too close. But as I gradually made my way deeper into the town, I noticed that both Elvis and every ghoul around us were headed in the same direction. Then, just as my ears perked up to the nearby sound of dense moaning, I walked around the corner of a hardware store to see a bittersweet sight that froze me in my place.

About one or two hundred ghouls were all pressed together around a four-story building—their arms stretched out towards it, hammering against the walls—reaching up, unable to climb. But that wasn’t what made me freeze. That wasn’t what made me understand what Elvis had been barking about all this time. Cause on the fourth floor of that four-story building, contrasted by a still dimly lit nook of the rising sun, was light coming out of a window—unnatural light—either lantern or flashlight, illuminating the inside of the building by whoever was still alive inside of it. Archer... my brother... it could be him! It could be him and who knows who else! Only thing was... the couple hundred of ghouls banging on the doors, blocking both the exits and any entrance to the building. Elvis barked and jumped in the air, tilting his head in the direction of the hoard and I patted him appreciatively on the head.

“Good boy,” I stated, allowing a big smile to spread across my face—survivors! Other people! But... they weren’t immune. They were trapped. And without help, that’s exactly how they’d stay. Stuck in that building, waiting to run out of food or water. And there I was, with one pistol, a backpack of supplies—food, water, rope, flashlight—things that would only help me or a couple of people at most but not however-many-people might be stuck in that building. I needed a plan. I needed to think. And, in order to do that, I needed some quiet—to get away from the loudly moaning mass of ghouls and brainstorm what to do. I paused a moment, trying to orient where I was in town amidst the chaos of trashed stores and crashed cars. “Come on, Elvis. Lets go eat some breakfast.”

An old diner that my parents used to take me to was just down the street from the cluster of ghouls. The windows were shattered, but most stuff was still the way I remembered it the last time I had visited. The morning sun poured in and gave me enough light to see without having to use my flashlight. I cautiously made my way to the back and opened the freezer door—smelling the foul taste of rotten milk and spoiled meat. But, despite that, I had no trouble making my way inside to find exactly what I was looking for—and what my parents had fought to keep me from eating every minute of every day for about as long as I'd been alive—pecan pie. LOTS OF IT!

“How are we gonna get them away from that building?” I asked Elvis, shoving a forkful of pie into my face, as he wolfed down a full one of his own under the stool I sat upon. He glanced up at me a minute, licked the slobber off his face, and then went back to eating more pie. “Maybe if I set off some car alarms? Or like... played some music or something?” I continued, nearly as preoccupied with what I was doing as Elvis was—ignoring me and the questions I asked him. “But... even then... they'd still be around—they'd still attack people... and unless those people in there are immune, that's just too dangerous to risk, you know?... crap!” I huffed, finishing what I was eating as I shoved another couple of pies into my orange knapsack for later. I pushed my bloated stomach off the tall stool and slid the bag over my shoulders—picking up my pistol once more, popping a gumball in my mouth and making my way to the door. “Come on, Elvis... lets go see if we can find something that'll work.”

Elvis gleefully pranced behind me and we soon made our way back to the group of undead clustered around the building. The sun was just about fully up and with it I could see the full devastation of the town turned ghost town. No other groups of ghouls had formed anywhere else and no other lights were on anywhere either. This was clearly the only group of normal people left. And they were smart enough to stay both hidden and high above ground. Elvis made a point of keeping a slight distance from the group of undead and growled uncomfortably as I walked right up to them without a care—unsure of how to protect me if I insisted on endangering myself.

“It's alright, they don't pay any attention to me—I'm immune!” I told him, clicking the safety off of my pistol and locating the exact center of the group of undead. Then, after carefully aiming the gun at the head of the ghoul nearest me, I pulled the trigger and took a quick step back—anticipating that they'd follow me. The undead that I'd shot fell over immediately, its body now little more than a hurdle for the others to trudge over. But the rest paid the sound no attention at all—none! As if it

were nothing more than a loud fart. So I lifted the gun up again—to see if firing a few consecutive shots might get their attention—not even bothering to aim at their heads this time. Three loud cracks fired off, and this time, a few handfuls of undead towards the back of the group turned around—phased by and attentive to the noise I’d just made. It could work! I could get them to follow me instead of surrounding the building! I just needed more bullets... a lot more bullets! And a better gun too... But, in order to do that, I’d either have to walk back to the truck, drive all the way back home, get everything ready and then wait till next morning to come back—if my mother let me come back at all for leaving the way I did... No... that would take too much time... and it would use our supplies up too! I had to find a way to do this now. And since all I needed to do was find guns and ammo, I knew just the place to look—walking quickly down the length of the road until I came across the sporting goods store my dad used to take me to. But, just as I reached the doorway—the front window of which was smashed and smeared with dried blood—Elvis’ ears perked up and he stared attentively off into the distance—hearing something I couldn’t. I lifted my head, staring in the direction he was staring, but didn’t see anything. So, instead of waiting by him for whatever it was he was fixated on to appear, I pushed the door in and pulled out my flashlight to start gathering the supplies I’d need to first, lure the undead away from the building, and then arm whoever was still inside it with a way to defend themselves. I had a plan. And it was going to work.

After fifteen minutes of rummaging around, I’d managed to get together enough weapons and paired ammunition to kill two thousand ghouls, not just two hundred. Elvis hadn’t come inside though and, occasionally, I’d hear his faint barks from outside the store—no doubt trying to scare away any lingering undead that might happen by. After I’d put all the weapons and ammo in piles together, I restocked my backpack and prepared for what I was about to do. But in the time that I’d been sifting through the stores stock, I came to realize that I’d need to make more noise than just a pistol could manage. I’d need something bigger. So I found the biggest gun they had and the biggest clip they had and decided to use that. It weighed a freaking ton though! And I could only carry it for so long until my arms and back got sore. So when I strutted out of the store carrying it, I very nearly dropped it right away when I realized what Elvis had been barking about all this time. The group of ghouls had begun to move away from the building—distracted by something louder than their collective moans.

About twelve parked motorcycles lay just down the road and about fifteen men wearing black leather, carrying long machetes stood

right next to them. Each moved towards the undead, smashing their heads in, as if they were playing tag in a schoolyard. I ducked down and hid behind the half-destroyed window—looking on, caught somewhere in between afraid and captivated. They weren't immune. But they were acting as confidently as if they were—walking right up to any ghoul they could and dismantling them like they were no threat at all. Within a few minutes, every ghoul in site had been hacked apart—piles of bodies littering the full stretch of road and every crevice in between the fallen cars. The men laughed and shouted to one another—like total idiots who didn't care at all that they were making noise that might put them in danger. I pulled the huge gun that I'd found towards me and clutched it close—catching eye of Elvis as he trotted towards one of the men and sniffed his fingers. I held my breath and bit my lip—terrified that they might do something to him because of the faint traces of blood on him.

"No, no, no, no, no," I whispered, the large weapon I clutched rattling slightly as my hands shook. But, to my surprise, the man who Elvis had walked up to didn't treat him like a threat. He even bent down to pet him! Removed his helmet, combed a hand through his huge beard and then took the time to play with Elvis while the other men... walked right towards me!

I pulled behind the part of the window that wasn't smashed and backed into the corner of the store to try and hide myself. The men were all carrying bloodied machetes or swords—they all wore leather and rode motorcycles—they were all covered with tattoos and their faces were hidden behind sunglasses and bandanas. I had no idea who they were, what they were doing here, or what to expect if they found me. I just knew that my mother had warned me about strangers—that my father's journals were filled with details about how people behave after an infection breaks out. I didn't want them to find me. I didn't want them to have any idea that I was there at all—whether they were good guys or not. And yet... I didn't have anywhere to run. And I didn't know if they'd think I was a threat if I did. So I clutched the gun nervously, pulled a wrack of empty bags near me to conceal myself and then waited—listening to the sound of crunching glass under their boots as they approached the shop—machetes ready and waiting to hack apart anything they might find.

"How many bags you got?" one man asked the other as they stepped into the store—not even hesitating as they did so, or combing the area for ghouls. I held my breath as they approached the counter, spotting the piles of guns I'd laid out as they did so.

"Like three... got a few more back at the trailer. Might as well just grab whatever they got here."

“Alright, sure, I’ll look. Start loading these up in the meantime,” the man exclaimed, putting three bags on the counter before looking around the store—walking around the side isle and slowly approaching the things I’d covered myself with—the things I’d thought would keep me hidden if it weren’t exactly what these men were looking for—gun bags. Then, just as that thought hit my head, the man’s eyes traced up from the mounds of things scattered along the ground, to where I was hidden—making his way right for me. I swallowed hard and squeezed my weapon—sucking in a huge breath as the man’s arm reached out and grabbed a bag resting right in front of my face.

“What the...”

“Ahhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!”

“Woah, woah, woah, woah!!!” the man screamed, holding his hands up above his head as he stared down the barrel of the gun I carried—half the size of me and big enough to blow him in two. The other man removed a pistol from his waist and pivoted around the side of the counter, aiming it right at me. Nobody moved. And as my scream faded away, I breathed heavily, waiting for them to either leave, shoot me, or tell me everything was gonna be ok. “There is no need for that now!”

“Don’t come any closer!”

“I’m not! I’m staying right here! And I’m gonna stay right here till you feel like showing me some manners and not pointing that cannon at my head!” the man snapped, slowly lowering his arms—as if he had nothing to be afraid of. I watched him carefully as he did so—spotting his own pistol tucked in a holster at his side. “Did you hear me?”

“Yes... I heard you,” I muttered, realizing from his tone that there was no need to treat him like he’d done anything wrong. The other man behind the counter had lowered his pistol and put it away—approaching me without worry too. I clenched the gun nervously, but I didn’t lower it. Whether they trusted me or not, I kept it aimed square at them.

Suddenly, the bearded man who had been petting Elvis stepped into the store to investigate all the noise. Then, after turning to see me hidden behind a stack of bags, holding a gun half my size he smiled and laughed. The other men shook their heads and stepped away from me, resuming what they were doing by packing up all the weapons and ammo they could find. I slowly lowered the gun as they did so, realizing that they weren’t even gonna bother paying me any more attention, let alone trying to disarm me. The bearded man walked over and Elvis rushed in behind him to check if I was alright—rushing right up to me and putting himself

in between me and the approaching black-leather-wearing, tattoo-covered man.

“Now **that** is an awfully big gun for such a little lady... you sure you wouldn’t rather carry something a bit more compact?” he asked, crouching down and patting Elvis on the head while he talked to me—his chin resting only a few inches from the barrel pointed at him.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded, my heart still beating about a mile a minute—acting like I owned the place in a desperate attempt to try and hide how afraid I was.

“Fetching supplies. How about you? What are you doing here?”

“... Same.”

“And are you here all by yourself?”

“Maybe. What’s it to you?”

“Hahaha!” he laughed, plopping down on his butt and sitting across from me—showing me just how little he was afraid of me and just how little I should be afraid of him too. I took a deep breath and calmed my nerves, realizing he was right and how foolishly I’d been acting. After all, just cause the world was over didn’t mean everyone, undead or not, had lost their minds... thankfully.

“I’m sorry... You just scared me, that’s all,” I confessed, allowing myself to soften up ever so slightly.

“It’s alright. You didn’t load that clip correctly anyway,” the man stated, reaching forward and taking the gun out of my hand. “Here look,” he continued, pulling the clip back a moment, toggling it slightly and then pressing a small button beside it—pushing it in place to hear a clicking sound. “There. Now you’re all good. But, next time... you might want to calk it, alright? Oh, and I put the safety on for you too, ok?”

“Sure... thanks,” I said, taking the weapon from him—both embarrassed by the fact that I hadn’t done it right and pleasantly surprised that he was so nice about it.

“My pleasure,” the man replied, in a surprisingly upbeat, non-threatening way. A few distant gunshots rang out and the man tilted his head to the side, glancing out the window in the direction they’d come from. “Don’t worry about that... just cleaning things up, that’s all.”

“Cleaning things up?”

“Yes ma’am. Like a good Boy Scout should,” he exclaimed, raising two fingers to his forehead to give me a salute. I smiled and

reached out to pet Elvis too—sitting gleefully at our side. “What’s your name?”

“Susie.”

“Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you little lady. My name’s Cherry.”

“Cherry? Really?”

“No. Not really. But that’s what everyone calls me, so now that’s what I call myself. You got any nicknames?”

“Not really... my dad used to call me munchkin... me and my sister.”

“Oh? And where are they?” he asked, looking around as if he expected them to be hidden somewhere in the store too. I lowered my head and fluttered my eyes, trying to keep the tears at bay. My heart hurt just from remembering my dad and my sister. And even worse I started to feel out of breath again. Cherry looked at me and noticed how upset I had suddenly become. “I’m sorry... is that a sensitive subject?” he suggested, shaking his head and pressing his lips together in frustration—giving a similar look to the ground as the one I was... he had lost someone too. “Well... I ain’t really never been no good at saying things to commemorate the dead, so... any chance that’s a strong suite of yours?”

“I don’t know... not really.”

“Well then... a moment of silence it is,” he stated, smiling in a way where I could tell he didn’t really want to smile. He lowered his head and looked to the ground—remembering whoever he was remembering and allowing me to do the same. He closed his eyes, but I didn’t look away from him. A moment later he raised his head up and tilted it back in the direction of the men still loading weapons up into bags—the tall one who I’d pointed the gun at approaching the two of us, keeping an eye on me all the while.

“I didn’t catch your name,” he grumbled, still riled up from having a kid hold him at gunpoint.

“Susie.”

“Right. Well, Susie... would you mind terribly if we took a few of those bags? We sure could use them right about now,” he explained, gesturing to the rack of bags I sat sandwiched in between. I hesitated a moment, unsure of where I should go or what I should do—still apprehensive about the strangers around me, despite how nice they were being.

“Yeah... ok... sure,” I answered, cautiously rising to my feet again. Cherry watched me intently, picking up on how anxious I was and stood up as I did.

“How bout we go outside and see if we can’t fetch your fella here a bite to eat?” he asked, looking down at Elvis who gingerly licked his fingertips at the suggestion. I nodded and listened to him—following him back outside to see that the other men on motorcycles had already advanced towards the four-story building—to see that people were already being brought out from inside it. Suddenly, my mind snapped back to the task at hand and I ran forward—praying I’d find Archer somewhere in the growing crowd that had just been led to safety by the men in black. I dropped the huge gun weighing me down and ran forward—leaving Cherry behind without so much as a word.

“Archer?! Archer?!” I shouted, ducking and weaving in between cars and headless bodies of undead till I reached the front of the building. About fourteen people stood there, crying and hugging each other—shaking the hands of the men who’d saved them. But as I looked at their faces, I realized my brother wasn’t there. Instead, it was nothing but old folks, a couple of kids and a few teenagers, just about none of whom I knew or recognized. “Crap!”

“You looking for someone in particular I take it?” Cherry asked, standing by my side—holding the huge gun that I’d dropped back at the store.

“Yeah... my brother, Archer.”

“Alright... well... when was the last time you saw him?” Cherry asked, sitting on the side of a mangled hood while we spoke. But before I could respond to him, one of the people who’d come out of the building stepped forward to interrupt—looking at me like they knew who I was, even if I didn’t recognize them.

“Susie? Susie Simmonds?” they asked, as relieved to see me as if I were their own family. I stared at them blankly for a moment, unsure of how to feel.

“Ye—Yeah?”

“My name is Lisa Nelson and... well, my daughter is Bree Nelson... I believe she’s dating your brother?”

“The cheerleader?! YEAH! THEY WERE DATING!” I shouted, so shocked and elated that I could barely control myself. “I’m... I was... ugh!” I coughed, trying to calm down enough to communicate what I wanted to say. “I’m here looking for him! Do you... do you know where your daughter is? Or... Do you have any idea where they might be?!”

“As a matter of fact I know exactly where they are,” she replied, looking to Cherry as she spoke. “I talked to Bree before the cellphone reception went out and... She told me where she was and she said that Archer and some other friends were there with her.”

“Seriously?!” I squealed, sucking in two quick gasps of air as I felt emotion overwhelm me. Cherry smiled affectionately at how happy I seemed to be and the woman turned her eyes to him once more—her face painted with the request she was about to make.

“I don’t know who you are, and I am so very grateful for your helping us,” Lisa began to say, pressing her hands together as if she were praying. “But... if you would be able to... if you could just find it in your hearts to help us, just a little bit more, then—” she exclaimed, cut short by Cherry making a clicking noise with his mouth and giving a look like he already knew everything she was gonna ask of him. Lisa stopped speaking, here eyes filled with desperate, hopeful tears—looking to her would-be-savior to come to our rescue again.

“See now... this here little group we’ve got?” Cherry stated, gesturing to the motorcycles that the survivors were already being walked towards—mounted on the backseats of and given helmets to. “This isn’t much more than a supply run, here to grab more guns and helping hands,” he explained, Lisa’s lip beginning to tremble in fear that he might not be willing to help us after all. “But, that said... we’re gonna get you to safety first, and, after we get there... well... we’ll just have to wait and see,” he finished, gesturing for us both to make our way to the bikes and get ready to leave. “First things first though... we’ve got a Convoy to catch,” he finished, alluding to something else that none of us had any idea what he was talking about... a Convoy?

“What Convoy? What is that?” I asked, unsure of whether to feel hopeful or defeated—Cherry didn’t seem to know whether or not he would be able to help us. But... he’d mentioned getting us to safety... as if someplace in this world could possibly be safe. He looked down at me a moment and chuckled—a grin spreading itself wide across his face.

“The Convoy? Well... best I can describe it... It’s every club, biker, free citizen and helping hand left alive this side of the country. And, in a nutshell, that makes for one hell of an undead-killing-army,” he exclaimed, jolting my hopes with a revitalized sense of awe—hundreds if not thousands of people who had pooled together to resist the undead, located somewhere nearby. “Now lets get going... You’re gonna wanna see this.”

CHAPTER 17: FORTIFY OR DIE

Matthew Simmonds, Virginia, 2018

“Your other left!” Dennis shouted, his voice ringing out of the base’s intercom system as I sprinted through the halls searching for the armory. I quickly turned around and doubled back to the door Dennis had guided me to.

“What’s the code?!” I yelled, turning up to a camera mounted by the doorway and waving my arms around—one of dozens of cameras that Dennis was able to monitor live feeds of the base through—and the same way that he was able to shout directions to me of where I needed to go. A few White Coats jogged behind me, trying their best to keep up—ready and waiting to do every last thing I told them to if any of us were going to survive what was coming.

“Door should be open,” he answered, the sound of furious typing coming from his end of the line as I stopped flailing my arms and turned the handle. I pushed the door in to reveal exactly what I had been looking for—guns. **Lots** of guns. “There’s a panel you can access the intercom system through at three o’clock,” Dennis informed me, my eyes scanning the wall until I spotted what he was referring to—a small touch screen panel that could detach from the wall—a newfangled way to track inventory right next to a few stacks of shiny crates. I quickly walked over to the tablet and pressed around, trying to find the application Dennis was referring to—holding it in a way that the camera overhead could see. “No, no, go back one. There! Hit the button that says talk and keep your finger on it so it doesn’t time out after a few minutes.”

“Marco?” I asked, pressing the button and leaning forward.

“Polo.”

“You, White Coat!” I shouted, pointing with my broken fingers tucked back at one of the scientist as they entered the room—out of breath and still covered in the thick muddy shit of the sewage soaked town that we had all crawled through. “Hold this tablet and keep your finger pressed here, but don’t touch anything else, alright?!”

He nodded and made his way over to the panel—acting as a human paperweight to give me the freedom I needed to move around the room. The other scientist waited for me to tell him what to do too, but I ignored everything around me other than the serial numbers on the sides of the crates—nearly identical to those I’d been assigned to tally in the last

base I was stationed at. I hadn't been responsible for moving the gear firsthand of course—nobody trusted me with guns because of the accusations I was being reviewed for. But I knew the system of how and where everything in that room was stored like the back of my hand—allowing me to navigate those supplies like an old pro. Dennis yapped over the intercom a few more times to try and get my attention but I ignored him—eventually finding what I was looking for and removing a long, thin crate from the wall—slamming it on the empty table in the center of the room.

“Hey! What are you doing?!” Dennis yapped, as ignorant of my plan as everyone else was—all of whom would be required to take part in the elaborate shit show I was cooking up when the alarm sounded in less than four hours time.

“Gimme a minute,” I muttered glancing back at the wall of guns again—quickly running to the other end of it and grabbing a few more crates—taking them by the handles and hustling them over to the door. “You! Take these to the front and then send EVERYONE who can walk back here to get more,” I instructed, returning to the center table and popping open what I'd placed on it—revealing a limited edition, auto-fed, bolt action, scoped rifle that I'd taken a liking to since I was first able to try it out about a year ago. The White Coat holding the button on the tablet leaned in, watching like a parrot in a cage as I screwed the pieces together.

“Matt... Matt!... Mathew!... Lieutenant Simmonds!!!” Dennis demanded, so frustrated that I wasn't already spelling things out for him that a piercing sound came from the speaker as if he had suddenly spiked the volume—his way of throwing a temper tantrum that I wasn't responding fast enough. I clenched my jaw and pounded a fist on the table—wincing at a sting from my recently broken fingers.

“Knock it off!”

“You know I might actually be able to help if you just TELL ME WHAT THE FUCK IT IS YOU'RE THINKING?!”

“He'll be moving faster than they will!” I shouted, screwing the scope on and fastening the shoulder strap on either end.

“Who will, Roger?”

“Yes! We just lost him a few hours ago! So if he did get infected, and he didn't get swallowed by the blast, then he'll move faster than all the other ghouls will—rigor mortis isn't as bad as weeklong decay! He's still relatively spry! And when the alarm sounds and pulls every ghoul towards this base, he might just be one of the first to arrive!” I explained,

placing the rifle down by the doorway before moving quickly to the other end of the lengthy room to grab more crates—hauling them along the ground and leaving them by the exit. “And, if for some reason he isn’t here first and it takes him longer to reach us, then we’ll just have to clear a path for him! Fish him out of the crowd when he does come round!”

“That... that’s... ok if you think you can... ok, I guess,” Dennis exclaimed, internally probing my plan for its flaws—realizing as he did just how much work we would have to do in the next few hours—fortifying that place like a castle against a siege.

“Take those next!” I instructed, as a few more White Coats returned to help move supplies. “And you! See those four black ones over there?! Take those up to the roof!”

“Alright... wait a minute... they’ll just break in through a glass section in the rear! You need to prioritize securing this facility,” Dennis protested, the sound of furious typing chiming in on his end of the line—searching for answers as if he might be able to get ahead of me and outthink everything I’d just thought of—an annoying tendency that irked my temper—like a recruit eager to follow, unintentionally shooting the officer in the lead.

“I **know** what our priorities are! We’re going to surround the rear of the base with cars—block off anything that can be smashed through and fortify the entire grounds! I already know!”

“That might not work. There aren’t enough cars.”

“If we compromise a few walls and reduce the area we need to fortify it’ll work!” I insisted, popping open a container filled with artillery rounds and glancing over the adjacent explosives—doing rough estimates in my head all the while.

“What about the noise?”

“I agree! You should shut up already!”

“I meant the noise from the explosions...”

“I’ll spot targets from the roof to clear working room for everyone else! Snipe off any undead that come by before show time!”

“And then what? You’re gonna pull one guy out of a crowd of thousands?!”

“Not quite.”

“So what?”

“While I’m on the roof clearing ghouls we know aren’t Roger I can also oversee construction of the funnel! Prepare for both a short-term and a long-term siege that way.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know if I heard you correctly. Did you say funnel?! Is that a code word? What funnel?”

“The one we’re gonna build out of cars to sort the ghouls through!”

“I’m sorry, what!?”

“Just shut up and—Look! Be on standby! Be my eyes and ears while we set up! If at any point you can assist with something coming this way that I don’t know about, say so! But DO NOT try and understand the orders I give before they are given, got that?!”

“Yeah... ok... Got it,” Dennis grudgingly snapped, like he resented the idea of me thinking I was in control of how we intended to save our own lives. I understood him wanting to know exactly what I was doing—exactly how I planned to dig our way out of this impossible situation. But I didn’t give two shits about satisfying his curiosity. If we could find Roger, we had a chance to stop the drones. There was actually a way to do that—to genuinely help stop Ellex! Nothing mattered but that.

“Now there are a few things I need to know before we start building this thing... first, what’s the lay of the land to the East of this location? Mostly uphill or down?”

“Variable. But mostly down I’d say.”

“Good. Other than where we came from, where are the nearest towns or occupied areas?”

“A town about three miles, southwest. A few factories five miles north. And city, ten miles southeast. All of them without communications and likely fully overrun with infected.”

“Good... now—” I began to say, stopped dead mid-sentence by something Dennis had just told me—no communications—that those places had no communications and were likely fully overrun. I swallowed hard and sucked in a jittery breath—for the first time thinking about how the drones steadily bombing their way to this location would also affect the rest of the world—the rest of the world and those I knew would have no way of knowing that the entire planet would be coming to a sudden and premature end. “Dennis, how did you know that those locations are without communications?”

“Because none of them are responding.”

“You mean to tell me you that have contact with the outside world?”

“The parts that are left of it, yeah.”

“What about radio? Can you broadcast from this location?”

“Of course.”

“What’s the range?”

“If I reroute it right I can reach just about anywhere in North America, why?” he explained, giving me and my conscience a quick kick in the head—forcing me to slow down and think outside of the box we were trapped in. Cause even if we were able to fortify the base as intended, and even if Roger’s-walking-corpse did happen to waltz right up to us still carrying the hard drive we needed, the time it would take that elevator to reach the surface and slip back down underground meant that we might all still die regardless of the outcome of any of this. But at least we had the luxury to know that—to factor it into the plans we were making to try and survive. Suddenly, my mind was taken away from what needed to be done here and now to what I could do to help other people that might still be out there—one in particular who I owed a debt greater than my life and that of everyone else stuck in that base with me—my brother, Sebastian.

“Dennis... there’s an old channel I need to get a message out to.”

“I’m busy.”

“It takes two minutes!” I shouted, in no mood to comb over the semantic details of the command center he was in, if in fact it was still fully operational. I knew damn well how bunkers in places like this would be outfitted—having camped out in and been a part of numerous missions in similar ‘search and rescue’ situations myself. It wouldn’t be a trouble at all for Dennis to do what I had asked, and the fact that he gave me grief about it made me pause and wonder just how much I could trust this asshole in the first place? “But, hey, if you can’t help me out even a little bit, then I guess I’m gonna have to do it myself. Direct me to a communications board above ground please! I’d rather not have to find it on my own.”

“Alright! I’ll do it! Relax... where do you need to talk to?”

“Good! Glad to hear we’re on the same side!” I growled, returning my focus to the siege ahead—caught between doing whatever it took to find that hard drive and passing along priority-intel to Seb and his family. “Relay an advisory message everywhere you can. But be **absolutely certain** it gets through to Upstate Massachusetts.”

CHAPTER 18: SHOOT THE MESSENGER

Anna Simmonds, Upstate Massachusetts, 2018

“Dear mom, Don’t worry! I didn’t run away ;P I’m out looking for Archer and I brought Elvis with me. I’ll be back in time for dinner. Probably 6PM, unless there’s traffic! XD Love you and see you soon :) Love, Susie. P.S. If I make it into town I’ll try and get some stuff I know you like!” her note read, about the cutest and most unsettling thing I’d ever read. My little girl was out there, navigating the remains of the world, with little more than her two cents and the hope that her brother might still be alive. And there I sat, about as useless as I could be—staring at the desk she’d left the note on, next to the piles of journals my late husband had written—an entire library of information about what was going on that I’d only managed to crawl through a slim portion of. His writings didn’t explicitly say who or what would be out there at this very moment—they just said over and over again not to leave the shelter unless absolutely necessary—to be weary of other people and, most importantly, to stay together. My stomach churned and my heart tangoed with the idea of going after Susie, sitting there reading her note over and over again—churning worries around in my head. But I couldn’t leave. I couldn’t go outside, or do anything but sit and wait and read to keep my mind from running endless possibilities of what could go wrong... of how things might go even more wrong than they had already gone.

Sebastian, the thoughtful and wonderful husband that he was, had made a point to stock the shelter with shelves of books he knew I valued—the classics in real, tangible-form—the only way I enjoyed to read. I sat on the couch after pulling a few off the shelves to flip through—quarantining myself to the couch since, to my surprise, there were no moans of the undead today that I needed to use a rifle to silence. In fact, it was the first morning I’d woken to when I couldn’t hear moaning—be it from the undead above or from Susie whining about the nutrition level I mandated for her breakfast. Normally, back home, when we were all still living together, I’d have savored a moment’s peace and quiet just about as much as anything in this world. But sitting there—trying to force my imagination to read rather than worry—well... the silence felt more like a curse than a gift... like a window to remembering and reflecting on everything I’d lost. I missed my husband... I missed Sarah... I missed Archer... and whoever it was that I was becoming locked away underground, only the will to live for the sake of caring for

Susie and praying for Archer. Nothing else mattered. And because of that, my alone time wasn't mine—every minute belonged to them.

Eventually I put the book down to stare at the ceiling. I took a few trips up to the watchtower, hoping to see Susie trot home without a care in the world. But instead, all I could see were empty fields—completely empty. Nothing moved. And it was as though our tiny, insignificant little shelter was now regarded that way in the minds of the undead. For that bit of silence at least, I was grateful. Maybe now we'd be able to sleep at night without earplugs. Maybe now there'd be some hope of seeing something outside these walls. I looked down at the house near the barn I stood atop wondering longingly just how quickly I'd be able to go inside and visit... to go inside and... see my husband and our little girl... to pay my respects and... I can't... I just couldn't risk it—no matter how clear the coast seemed, I couldn't risk it. I sucked in a trembling breath and allowed myself to cry—no longer having to hold the tears back for Susie's sake. What had happened? What awful mess had become of this beautiful world and when, oh when, would I see any hope for it again? The sun crept up slowly—shining bright and cheery as if nothing were afoot. But my head hung low, grappling with the pain.

I didn't know what had happened to Archer—I didn't know what Susie would find looking for him. But I knew that worrying wouldn't help any of us. Like it or not, I'd have to find a way to see the good in this world. So I decided that's just what I was going to do. So I stood up, brushed myself off and made my way back down the winding stairwell that led to the top of the barn, hearing an odd chiming sound coming from someplace inside the shelter as I did so. I froze a moment and looked around—trying to pinpoint the source of the noise. But it was gone. It took me a while of second guessing as to whether or not I was hearing things before I convinced myself to let it go. But then, five minutes later when I sat flipping through one of Sebastian's journal's, I heard it again—coming from... I don't know where. So I put the book down and listened carefully—closing my eyes to lend my full attention to locating the source of that noise. But it was silent again... as if some alarm or indicating noise that would only repeat itself every five minutes.

I stood up and looked around—wondering what in the heck it could be and why I was only hearing it now for the first time. The solar panels had been getting a good bit of juice lately, maybe it had something to do with them? Or maybe it had something to do with the well water that we were drinking? Or... a smoke detector battery getting low or... something! I was hearing something! I wasn't imagining it. And for a good hour or so, every five minutes a chime would go off that would make me feel like I was losing my mind. I couldn't find it. I looked. I searched high

and low to pinpoint where in the heck that noise was coming from—moving from one corner of the shelter to another—eventually coming to determine that it was originating from the living room. So I began moving things to see if it made the sound any louder or quieter. I cleared shelves of gear, books, gadgets, clothes—everything I could to try and locate the source of the sound. Then, after a few of the most frustrating and maddening hours of my life—I discovered what I believed to be the source of the noise.

Underneath a few stacks of Sebastian's journals beside the desk was an old stereo system we used to keep in the house when the kids were younger. But after it got knocked over in a game of tag, Sebastian pretended to throw it away—instead moving it out here unbeknownst to me. I stared at that thing, waiting the few anxiety filled minutes until it made the sound again—a light ringing chime. I pressed buttons, checked to see if something were inside it—whatever I could think of—unplugging it from the wall and everything. But even then it kept making that same darn noise.

“What in the heck are you trying to tell me?” I asked the whining contraption, planting my hand under my chin and leaning over it—realizing in that moment that there was a tiny antenna sticking out the back of it—that despite the fact that I'd unplugged it from the wall, I hadn't detached whatever that was and I also didn't recognize it from when it had been in the house before. I pondered that for a moment. Then, glancing back through my memories, I took a closer look at the machine and did my best to recall how it was set up back when we'd had it inside the house. It was almost identical to how I remembered it but... the speakers! “It's missing the speakers!” I hollered, jumping out of my seat and tossing my gaze around the room—spotting a couple of external speakers beside the television as I did so. I moved quickly over to them and unplugged them, delighted to find that they were the exact same make as the stereo device. Then, after plugging them back in and returning it to the place by the wall that I'd found it in, I fidgeted with a few buttons till I hit one that gave me more than the same tone of static—the buttons to turn on the radio—it was a working radio!

I sat crossed legged on the floor, flipping through signals without hearing a single thing. Then, after a few minutes, I came across what seemed to be an emergency broadcast—a signal on repeat, advising people to stay indoors and wait for local law enforcement to give them the all clear. I shook my head in frustration—knowing all too well how much trouble that advice might get folks in if an infected officer happened to bang on their doors. The chime happened again a moment later and I took a deep frustrated breath, annoyed, to say the least, that I

couldn't figure the stupid thing out, even after I'd plugged the speakers in. So, disgruntled and temporarily defeated, I returned to the only source of information I had to go by—Sebastian's journals—all hundred or so of them.

I flipped through the appendix of each one—everything from water purification information and seed cultivating to ancient law summaries. My husband had treated this collection of journals as if it could double as a manual for all mankind to rebuild itself. And thinking back on how often I'd happened across him writing in his journals, I understood more about who Sebastian really was... about his intense interests in books and hobbies—always paying close mind to survival stories and dark chapters in human history. I just figured it was because he was a man—not because he actually felt this way... that he actually believed this hell was coming. I still didn't completely understand that that side of him I'd never been allowed to really get to know. And thus far, reading through the handful of journals that I had, the greatest insight I got of my husband was that he had believed, without a shadow of a doubt, that this was going to happen one day. And that when it did, the only chance anybody anywhere had was to be ready for it... as if being locked underground were some sort of destiny for this family and others. But that wasn't the only thing in those journals. There were tiny little notes too—both to himself and about others. And while he hadn't done the best job of organizing it for someone else to read, I didn't doubt for a second that he'd written down every single word I'd ever need to know—discovering to my surprise and thrill a list of frequencies hidden in the seventy fourth book's index that I looked through.

I returned to that stupid beeping stereo system a moment later with the list in my hand. Then, reading through the associated literature he'd provided, I came to understand what the beeping was—an indicator sound for a radiofrequency that he and his friends had agreed to use in case of emergency. A radiofrequency that only he and a couple of other people in this whole world would know to use in a time like this—and the very reason that that sound was going off every five minutes the way that it was. Someone was using the frequency—someone was trying to tell him something. And that meant clear as day it could only be one of two people—one of whom was just about the only person on this earth I didn't care lived or died—who, no matter **what**, I didn't want anywhere near me, my daughter, my son or this shelter! So rather than tuning into that frequency and hearing whatever it was that they were trying to say, I just reached behind the stereo device and removed the antenna—silencing it and the noise it made. But try as I might, I couldn't get rid of the shivers

it sent down my spine that Matthew might still be out there, looking to come back home.

CHAPTER 19: HAUNTED

Derek Riggs, Oregon, 2018

The distant drone blasts continued throughout the night—pulling the massive swarm of ghouls towards them and jolting both Cory and I awake. Every time, I'd watch his head twitch up from his sleeping bag—the blasts scaring him without fail. But I didn't get up to check on him or hover over him as if I were his mother. Instead, I had decided to give Cory his space and he had decided to give me mine—retreating from one another to opposite sides of the flat-stretch-of-rock we'd set up camp on. The argument we'd had the night prior was... disconcerting to say the least. I knew he was still a kid, I knew he'd just lost his parents and everything he held dear in this world but... that's no fucking excuse. That's life in a nutshell. Survivors move on. Survivors endure. And looking at the frail and vulnerable way in which Cory held himself on an interpersonal level, I pondered if he truly had what it took to survive in this world. He slept facing away from me all night—deliberately isolating himself. Though, despite his attempts to conceal it, tucked seemingly out of earshot from me, I could hear him sniffing every so often—crying. But I refused to get up. And I refused to hug him again. Instead, I gave him and his pain the privacy he would need to get rid of it by morning. Cause as soon as sunrise hit, we would be on the move again. And I had no intention of taking a liability along with me.

The ocean was a few miles west of us, and from what I could tell, nearly all the infected population from the towns and cities in that direction had already made their way into the super cluster now funneling through the canyon we sat perched atop. A few crawling stragglers still slowly moved across the largely barren field towards it, but... for the most part, the west appeared clear of danger or obstacle—too far from the super-cluster to risk it suddenly spilling over or wandering back. But Cory and I weren't headed west. Not anymore. Not with those unexplained blasts calling out to me to satisfy my curiosity and investigate what was going on via the information relay set up in my fort—just a few short miles away to the east along the outer edge of the supercluster.

A horrifically rotten smell of deteriorating flesh and spilled bowels wafted up from underneath us with every strong gust of wind. And yet, just prior to the sun rising, Cory remained tightly tucked in his sleeping bag, unaffected by the moans, the smell or the blasts any longer—catching the last few moments of rest that he would need. I looked at him. And then I looked at the undead... analyzing the situation

for every option I had. It would be easy to just throw him off the rock and spare him from all of this—to cut his head off just as I had with the woman in the boulder field when the infection had first begun. But, as the idea crossed my mind, I felt a sharp spike of agitation in the deepest contours of my heart. It wouldn't be right of me to decide Cory's fate for him. He had already proven himself worthy above anyone else I had witnessed... he had already killed or washed away as many undead as I had. And yet... the idea had occurred to me for a reason. Cory and I weren't done talking. And if I truly was going to take him with me—first to my nearby fort and then onward to sanctuary outside Whitehorse—I would need to know without any doubt that he could bear the road ahead not only in body but in mind and heart as well. To be a successful protégé, after all, is to bow to the wisdom of truth, no matter the scrapes on your knees or the fire in your ego.

"Cory," I stated, slightly nudging his shoulder only to have him pull immediately away from me. Suddenly, Cory rolled over—using his sleeping bag as a padded snakelike insulation. He spun around, looked right at me and held up his rifle that he'd kept tucked at his side throughout the night. I stood stunned a moment—blinking twice as what he was doing dawned on me. Then, with an affectionate burst of laughter, I clapped at his conduct. "Very good. Very, very good," I exclaimed, extending my hand to help him to his feet—praising his quick reflexes and calculative paranoia in the event that an undead or wandering survivor had touched his shoulder to wake him rather than me. Cory smiled back and took my hand—putting the rifle aside so that we could eat breakfast together.

"Don't we need to ration this?" Cory asked me as I dug my hands into a cereal bag and separated it into two.

"Nope. Forts got plenty of food in it already. Besides, we're gonna shed the weight anyway before we push off."

"So we're just gonna leave everything?"

"Not everything. By my calculations after factoring in your weight, we'd just need to leave the contents of our backpacks, firearms and my armor from the neck down," I explained, giving him his food with one hand while lifting the other to my mouth—gobbling down carbs like a pig at a trough.

"Wait... you're seriously gonna leave your armor behind?" Cory asked, making a contorted and confused expression so twisted I half expected him to spit his cereal out.

"Yep."

“Why?! You can’t be that confident the undead will stay grouped together... can you?”

“No, I can’t. But that’s not why.”

“Then why would you do something so... um... I mean... I don’t understand your decision making process,” Cory muttered, taking tidbit bites of his cereal. I chewed loudly for a moment, swallowed, and stood up to walk over to my bicycle. Cory watched me curiously, completely unaware of what I had planned for us.

“I don’t know if you noticed when we briefly tried riding together before, but its not exactly the most comfortable thing in the world for me to be on this thing with a kid mounted on my back squeezing my nuts against the seat like they’re in a vice,” I explained, reaching down to the bike and unscrewing a few parts of the frame. “So, given the distance we have to travel... the known stockpiles of where we’re ending up... the potential for the super cluster to adjust its course if we did continue via bicycle—potentially cutting us off mid-way if that happened... all of that, not to mention the fact that I still have no fucking clue what those explosions are about or where they might hit next... because of the situation, we’re gonna try a different more direct approach this time,” I continued, pulling the tires off the bike and tossing them aside.

“What... um... what do you mean a more direct approach?” Cory asked, utterly bewildered by the fact I was seemingly destroying our only means of traveling quickly.

“From this elevation we can catch enough drift to take us past the fort if need be. So, if I ditch the armor and leave the supplies, it balances out so that I can bring you along strapped underneath me—we can fly right overtop of the supercluster—save ourselves days of trying to move around it,” I grunted, sliding a long rolled-up-tube of ultra-thin-kevlar-fibre-cloth out of the central column of my bicycle’s frame. “You’re not afraid of heights, are you?”

“No way!” Cory cried, shooting to his feet and coming to stand by my side as he figured out what I was up to—dismantling and reassembling my bicycle to create something else altogether—a short-range hang glider, conventionally designed for one person... and, while I hadn’t tested it with two people yet... I was absolutely positive that with the correct weight calculation it would work for both of us. “That’s so cool!”

“I know, right? This thing is so fucking cool,” I said, gleaming with pride as Cory watched in awe—my creation slowly taking shape, one piece at a time. “It took me like thirty different prototypes to get the

rotating bike configuration right when I made it though... almost died testing it out a couple of times,” I explained, noticing the slightest wince of apprehension from Cory at my mention of our possible deaths. I stopped what I was doing in response to that sign of weakness—to that fleeting glimmer of reservation deep inside him... remembering my own reservations from the night prior. “Look, Cory... we need to talk.”

“Ok... What’s up?”

“Last night... you yelled at me... you didn’t ponder about what I said... you clung to your dead father’s words over my insights... you forgot how much more I understand about this world than you do. That’s not all right. And it can’t ever happen again if we’re going to continue on together,” I exclaimed with Cory’s expression slowly going blank as I lectured him. “If you’re going to be my protégé, you need to understand, in no uncertain terms, that I know more than you do—even if it hurts to hear, I know more about this world. Period... do you understand?” I asked, refastening parts of the frame to my backpack’s hard exterior shell—acting as the central node to graft pieces of the bike to. Cory didn’t respond. Instead, he looked at the ground and thought. I waited a moment, continuing to do what I was doing, but it didn’t take long for me to lose my patience and demand an answer sooner than later. “Cory! Do you understand?!” I shouted, stopping what I was doing and glaring at him. He looked up at me and frowned—startled by my sudden change in mood.

“I understand, but...”

“But what?”

“Am I... um... am I supposed to just... keep quiet then? What if I know I’m right about something? Shouldn’t I at least... speak my mind if I’m right?”

“Not if you’re unwilling to consider you might still be wrong.”

“Then, I’m sorry, but... I guess I don’t understand,” he muttered, still looking at the dirt at his feet.

“It’s simple. Until you come of age, until you have the experience needed and the knowledge to survive on your own, our relationship must remain a militaristic one. A careful, calculative structure of following orders and not questioning them. I know it sounds harsh. But yesterday you let me know just how ill prepared for this world you are. We’re going to have to be more strict than normal with conversational-protocols now because of that.”

“Conversational-protocols? But... last night we were just talking. I didn’t mean to... I mean... I wasn’t trying to be... I just... um.”

“Stop blathering,” I snapped, startling Cory mid-sentence and pulling his eyes back up to me. “Discipline hurts at first. It feels like being thrown in the trash. But that’s not what’s happening here... I’m teaching you Cory. Teaching you things your mind might not even be able to grasp for years still. But that’s what it takes to harden a man... trial to eliminate error... do you understand now?” I asked, expecting Cory to feel better because of what I said. But, instead he seemed even worse—as if he expected me to be a friend to him more than a superior officer. I clenched my jaw and lowered my brow, feeling a brooding sense of frustration culminate with every moment of silence that passed between us. “Cory... do... you... under... stand?”

“Yes, sir,” he squeamishly exclaimed, without so much as looking at me—without the conviction in his voice or strength in his character that suggested he actually believed what he was saying—telling me what I wanted to hear just so that I’d stop lecturing him. That was it. That was the last straw. This fucking kid had to learn a hard lesson and had to learn it now.

I quickly shot to my feet and lunged at Cory. His eyes popped open wide as my fingers sunk into his jugular—lifting him off the ground with both hands and marching quickly towards the canyon’s edge. The rank smell hit us in full as I reached the cliff-side, dangling him off the edge and leaning my face in to press against his so that he would have no fucking choice but to look at me. Cory gasped for air and swatted at me with no effect—in utter panic and disbelief at what I was doing. Then, as I removed one hand from his neck and placed it on a tree to use as an anchor, I leaned even further forward—holding his feet over open space so he would have absolutely nothing but me to keep him from falling. He clutched onto my arm—terrified—panicked, horrified gasps for air coming out of him as tears flooded his eyes. There was no escape. His life was in my hands. And he was going to listen to what I had to say or he was going to be left behind to rot.

“When I ask you a question you do not hesitate to answer! When I give you an order you do not hesitate to comply! When you are hurt, you overcome it! When you are weak, you find strength! I am not taking some fucking child as my protégé, I am taking a man! So it’s your fucking choice Cory! Either you become the man it takes to survive or I leave you behind and you’ll wind up just like your father did!” I screamed, swirling violently to the side as I finished speaking—throwing Cory onto the ground and looming over him as he gasped and sputtered for breath. Then, as he finally pulled air back into his lungs, loud wails the likes of which I had only ever heard once in all my years poured out of him—tears gushed down his face in a distraught, heartbreaking display. He curled into a ball

and placed his hands on his head—assuming the fetal position. In that moment, the rage slowly funneled out of me and I looked down at my clenched fists to realize what I'd just done to him. Jesus Christ... what the fuck was... why did I... that wasn't necessary... I could have taught him the lesson without... I could have... God dammit... It was too far... it was just too far! Fuck me. FUCK ME!

"Cory, I..." I tried to say, approaching him with a tender outstretched arm—remembering how hugging him had helped when he was crying a few nights before. But as my hand came to touch his shoulder he reacted differently than I expected him to. Just as he had done when I'd woken him, he quickly rolled to the side, pushed himself to his feet and sprinted back to his rifle—snatching it up and spiraling around to face me. Realizing, as he did so, that I had already drawn my sidearm in response. Cory froze, holding the rifle at his side—knowing very well that if he dared raise it to aim it at me, it would be the last thing he did.

"You're crazy! You're crazy!!!" he shouted, panicked, terrified tears gushing down his cheeks.

"No, Cory," I huffed, slowly stepping towards him—his head square in my crosshairs all the while. "In the dream world you thought you knew... in the world your father raised you to believe existed... you could call me crazy, sure. But in the real world... in an undead world, I am the epitome of sane. Now put the rifle down."

"You can't treat me like this! It's not ok! It's not ok!!!"

"I went too far. I apologize."

"Why would you do that to me!?" he sobbed, with no choice but to drop the rifle and sit down beside it—broken and defeated—hysterically sad and utterly unable to cope with what I had just done to him. I had gone too far. I had wounded him rather than hardened him. And as I slowly approached, still pointing the gun at his head, it wasn't until I pulled his rifle out of his reach that I was able to lower my sidearm. Cory inched away from me on the ground—without any way to defend himself—without any idea of who I really was or what I would require of him to continue on by my side. "Why... would..." he stuttered, choking on gasps and tears. "Why would you... do that?"

"To show you what the stakes are," I replied, holstering my weapon and taking a seat far enough from Cory that he could keep some semblance of boundaries. "To scare you into understanding, I suppose. But... I went too far. I realize that now. I'm sorry."

"I don't accept your apology!... and I don't want to go with you anymore," Cory stated, his tears beginning to slow as the anger in him rose. I nodded in response, looked at the ground and pondered his words.

"That's your decision, Cory. And... that's perfectly alright if that's what you want... but... I can guarantee you that you'll die if you stay behind... sooner or later... one way or another... you won't make it."

"Fuck you!" Cory shouted, trembling on the word 'fuck' as if he had rarely if ever sworn before in his life. I smiled affectionately at the rage pouring out of him—at the indignant refusal to just lay down and die. I respected that. This fucking kid had some serious balls. That's why I had brought him along after all. And that's why even after the disrespect he'd shown, deep down I still wanted him around. I could see past the boy he was to the man he might become. But what I couldn't do was control myself well enough to ensure that he would understand that. I rarely if ever socialized in the world before the infection broke out. And when I did, most of the time I was only thinking about how to kill the person I was speaking to in three moves or less. It occurred to me that I might not have what it takes to mentor him... that because of my lifelong insistence to endure the infection on my own, that here and now... I was as much of an obstacle to Cory's understanding as he was. I took a long breath, realizing the depth of my own faults, and stood up—slowly unfastening the top piece of my armor to show Cory just what I had endured to be ready for this day.

My forearms were reminiscent of a mummy's skin—a crisscross design of hundreds of long, fine cuts, overtop countless burns. My biceps were selectively calloused—stretching nearly all the way around my arms from peeling the skin off over and over again to harden it. My chest was a lean muscular precision killing machine, covered in self-given tattoos and barbwire scars. My back was a graveyard of lashes, meticulously acquired from self-mutilation. My belly button looked like a starfish—torn out to the sides from when I'd half disemboweled myself and then run four miles holding onto my own intestines... to see how far I could go... to see how much blood I could lose and still stay standing. Cory's eyes bulged out of his head looking at the rigid, scarred, ghastly remains of my skin—the greatest testament to all that I had endured to know just what I was capable of—to prepare for this day—to be stronger and harder than anyone alive. And in his expression I could see his sense of empathy boil over his rage. I could see the kindness inside of him resurface and his heart swell with pity and grief. But this time, I didn't hold it against him. This time I felt a glimmer of appreciation deep down for the fact that he could see all I had been through—that he understood the pain I had

endured—the first person I’d ever deliberately revealed myself to. A long moment of silence lingered between us as I stood bare before him. And then, after swallowing hard and regaining his courage, Cory spoke again.

“What happened to you?”

“It’s a long story,” I explained, unable to look him in the eye as some of the memories of my oldest scars gradually resurfaced. “I was always devoted to the idea of being strong enough and... being prepared for the infection but, uh...” I stated, stopping cold as my mind combed over the encounter—the night I was locked in a warehouse, treated like a wild dog to the point where I very nearly became one. I gradually tilted my head up to look at Cory—an expression of such melancholy and despair on his face that in looking upon it, I could see what lay inside of myself. “Well... kmm... kmm, kmm... I didn’t start doing this to myself until my father abducted me... and...” I confessed, my breaths growing shorter as I spoke—quickly turning to gasps as my mind began to slip away from the moment at hand, back to the memories buried for good reason...

CHAPTER 20: CLOSET

Derek Riggs, Maine, 2004

We drove for hours without stopping... After my father discovered me trying to dig my lockbox out from under the shed... after I found it inexplicably empty... after he handcuffed me and forced me into the car at gunpoint... telling me we were 'going for a drive.' He never did say to where. Or what he planned to do when we got there. I sat quietly in the backseat the whole time. We had nothing to say to one another. Or at least, I had nothing to say to him. Cause as far as I was concerned, this little stunt of trying to discipline me one last time, fresh out of the hospital before my wounds even mended, was just an excuse for me to take another good beating and prove what else I could survive. Or at least that's what I told myself at first. Because when he eventually did pull the car over and turn the engine off, my father didn't get out—he didn't unlock the doors—he didn't lower the cage he'd set up around me to keep me from trying to escape. Instead, he opened a bottle of whiskey and started drinking—fast and hard. It was then I realized, this wasn't just another beating and it wasn't just some random place he'd dragged me to. This was something else completely. And with every gulp of whiskey he took, I grew more and more convinced that my father needed to get drunk to be able to do whatever it was he'd brought me here to do.

Fifteen minutes later the bottle was mostly empty. His head swayed back and forth ever so slightly and one hand still held the steering wheel—his grip tightening around it like he was ringing a wet cloth only to relax and drift off to his thoughts again. I'd never seen him like this. For all the nights I'd come home to him drunk and all the times I'd pushed him past his limits... this was something else. He didn't get drunk to 'do something', he got drunk to 'do nothing'. And as I glanced at the shotgun tucked under the passenger seat, I took a wild guess of what that something was.

"You don't have to kill me, you know?... I'm gonna run away. And I promise I'll never come back," I said, breaking the silence that we had both enjoyed until that point. My father took a deep breath and opened his mouth to speak... but he didn't say anything. Instead, he just finished off what was left in the bottle. "Letting me go will save you having to hide my body anyway... works out better for both of us, don't you think?"

He didn't respond. He didn't even turn around to look at me. Instead, he just stared blankly ahead at the building he'd driven us to—some old, rundown warehouse without any cars around or nearby streets with traffic passing through them. Vacant... isolated... the perfect place to get rid of me once and for all. I clenched my jaw and looked down at the handcuffs—briefly contemplating breaking my thumb to try and escape them. But I knew that if I did, he'd hear the sound. And if he heard that sound, likely I wouldn't so much as make it out of the car. No... instead, my best

bet was waiting to pounce. Waiting just a few more moments until he let me out—too drunk and disoriented to manage the hell I'd unleash on him. Because then, for the first time since I was a little kid... I would actually try and fight back. I'd show him what I'd been keeping secret for so long—what I'd trained for—what I was capable of enduring. And, if he was lucky, I might just let him live.

After the bottle was gone, he placed his other hand on the wheel—leaning forward to tighten his grip on it and then pushing himself slowly back—over and over again. He started muttering something to himself under his breath but I couldn't hear what it was. Then he started breathing heavily—like he was gonna throw up or pass out. But, to my surprise he didn't do either. Instead... he cried. He broke down. Quick, pulsing sobs at first and then... wails... loud, uncontrollable, animal cries of despair and grief. I had only ever seen him shed tears once before. Other than that, I had never seen him do anything but the most macho thing he could possibly do in any circumstance. But there he was... full-on fucking unraveling right in front of me—reaching over to the bottle again only to drop it in frustration when he remembered that it was empty. I slunk back into my seat—giving another glance at the makeshift cage surrounding me. He was going to do it... holy fucking hell... he was actually going to do it.

A few minutes later he managed to get himself back together. Or, to stop crying at least. He sucked up huge lumps of drippy snot that had leaked out over his shirt collar and wiped away the remains of his tears. Then, after another deep breath to psych himself up, he opened the side door and stepped out of the car. That was it—that was my chance to make the noise I needed to make—before he opened the backseat door—before he pulled the cage out. This was my only chance. I looked down at my left thumb, clenched my teeth and repeatedly jammed it as hard as I could with my other hand—finally managing to break it on the fourth try—just as my father opened the back door. I pulled in a slow and tender breath to counter the sharp pain coming from the wound, and my father reached forward and yanked the entire cage, with me still in it, out of the car—tossing me on the ground and slamming the door shut behind me. But, what he hadn't considered, was the fact that the cage had surrounded me while still in the car. Out here, in open ground, I could easily crawl out of the top or bottom. And so, as he shakily brought the shotgun up to point it at me, that's exactly what I did. I slowly pushed my way out of the cage, as he took a few steps back—watching me like a drunk-hawk all the while.

"Stay on your knees," he slurred, stopping me just before I rose to my feet. I looked at him—assessing his state of mind and physical condition. I could take him. In this state, I'd have to hit him twice as much to knock him out. But, with the alcohol thinning his blood, he'd bleed even faster. Way I figured it, it would be one hell of a fight. That is until he lowered the shotgun and tucked a hand in his jacket pocket—fooling me into thinking I had my chance. Suddenly, I began forcing my recently broken left thumb through the handcuff and shot up from my knees. But he didn't raise the gun in response—he didn't even seem to care that I had disobeyed what he'd said. He

expected it. He knew what I'd do and how I'd act. And so the only one of us that was surprised by what happened next was me—stopped dead in my tracks as an electrical current pulsed through my body. My father stood holding a taser pulled from his jacket pocket—amped up to full blast—completely immobilizing me and my best attempts to confront him. Motherfucker. Cunt piece of shit... he'd come prepared... he was ready for everything and... I... was... trapped...

While I lay on the ground, he slapped a belt around my neck and tightened it. Then he leaned down and placed the taser against the side of my head—glaring at me with increasing rage as the liquor settled itself in his system. I didn't fight him though... my hands were shaking... my heart was freaking the fuck out... I was... barely able to stay conscious... he pulled me along the ground by the leash... like something he'd dragged outside to toss in a dumpster. And as my face slid along the dirt—pebbles of granite cutting open my lips and filling my mouth—I did everything in my power to pull together strength enough to try and fight him again but... it just wasn't there... and as he reached the door of the building he'd driven us to, a fleeting thought crossed my mind... why in the fuck hadn't he just shot me instead? If he'd brought me here to kill me... why was he keeping me alive?

I blacked out. Don't know for how long. But when I came to again the belt was off my neck, a puddle of my own puke was in front of me and I was soaking wet. My father stood over me pouring a bottle of water on my head. And as I sputtered and gasped back to consciousness, he slowly stepped away to sit in a chair, ten yards from me—the shotgun resting beside it. I breathed heavily without moving for a minute, twitching my fingertips until eventually I was able to push myself up—realizing as I did so that the handcuffs I'd been in before had been replaced by thick braces and chains. I looked down at them, trying to determine, through my blurred vision, if there would be a way to slide my wrists out. But, as I did so, I realized a thick adhesive had been squirted onto my skin—gluing me to the metal. After a few minutes more, my vision started to clear and my breath returned to normal. My heart was still pounding erratically but... soon enough, it too began to calm.

"Just fucking kill me already you pussy," I instructed, leaning against the brick wall—my eyes leering around the large dark room we were in—the only light spilling down from a single overhead bulb... a brand new shiny bulb, purchased just for that one light. My father didn't respond at first... his face didn't even move. He just stared forward—dried lines of tears pronouncing his already hardened wrinkles. It was as if he was someplace else... as if what he was doing to me was paining him just as much as it was me. I hated him for that—how fucking dare he feel anything for me while treating me like this. "That's why you brought me here... isn't it?... Isn't it!?!?" I shouted, my breaths growing deeper—louder—more panicked. "Just do it already!!!"

"I'm not gonna kill you!" he stated loudly, finally managing to pull his head out of wherever he was off to and look at me. "I didn't bring you here for that."

"Then what... huh?... just to... to do what?! To torture me?"

"I don't want to torture you... That's the last thing I want!" he cried, appalled by the suggestion no matter how close to the truth it was. "If you just knew how to stop fighting and... to just... God dammit, you fucking kid," he hiccupped, planting his hand against his forehead and supporting it on his knee—doing his best to keep the tears at bay. "If I could have just asked you to come along with me, I would have. But I know what you are... and I knew what kind of sick fucking shit I'd have to do to get you out here at all," he confessed, his words echoing through the empty darkness around us. He pulled his hand away from his head and pressed it against his other—rubbing his fingers like an anxious kid.

"Then why am I here?" I hissed, the sensation of metal and the still drying glue that melded it to my arms sending chills through my blood—soon nothing would get these chains off—nothing short of ripping every bit of skin from my arms and hands loose... possibly even having to hack or gnaw them off altogether. "What the fuck do you want?!"

My father stared at me a moment before moving again—turning to the side to pull a small backpack in front of him. He leaned forward and clumsily fished around in it for a moment, eventually removing a medium sized plastic bag containing what looked like a burnt book in it. And as I stared at that bag and tried to guess what the charred book might be I suddenly realized how he had known where my lockbox was. The book was from the fort—blown to hell with the cover charred. Because, in my zeal to destroy everything, I hadn't properly doused or exposed it to the blast... That book had been kept in an old, antique ammunition crate—one that could easily have withstood the explosion. But I didn't think of it till now. It had never even crossed my mind. But it made perfect sense. The police must have found it in the remains of the fort—along with whatever might have been left of our stockpiles of weapons and supplies. And while Matthew had rightfully been handed the blame for what had happened to Sebastian and Anna, not even I could deny involvement with that book—a carefully documented log of drills, success rates, codes, documents and confessions. And, because when Matthew snapped and nearly killed us, I had decided to prioritize saving our lives rather than burning evidence... there it was... only partially destroyed. My father identified the recognition in my eyes as he held it up—carefully removing it from its plastic bag and cracking it open.

"I don't know where to start," he muttered, staring down into years of my life he'd never been privy to—into every preparation made for the infection—everything stolen so that we'd be ready—every burglary, sacrifice, misdeed and crime... at least... as far as he was concerned that's what it was. To me, it was a memento of hard times and lessons learned. But I knew damn well that any kind of explanation would only fan the flames of his delusions and contempt. He wouldn't understand. He had given up on the idea of protecting himself and his family long ago—he had abandoned our safety, even though he knew damn well what was coming—he had sat back, gotten fat, failed to fortify, failed to do anything—anything other than drink and watch TV and fuck around like the lowlife piece of shit he was. And yet he stared at that book and at

me—judgment and disgust swelling behind the tears in his eyes. Fuck him. Fuck his shame. Fuck his pride. I was the man he didn't have the balls to become. And, when the infection struck, it would be me, not him, ready to withstand it.

"These protocols of yours... this contract of... things to do in the event of an 'outbreak,'" he continued, opening the book to the page containing the contract signed in blood between Sebastian, Matthew and I—Sebastian's name long since scratched off it. "Your friend Sebastian's name is crossed off... right under the sentence that says 'to abandon the protocols is punishable by death,'" he read, lowering the book to look at me after he was done speaking—as if I should give a shit what he might think about the measures we had taken to ensure we were ready—no doubt supposing Matthew and I had tried to kill Sebastian as a result of what that contract read. I didn't respond to the accusation and he shook his head... closed his eyes and breathed heavily for a few moments. "When I saw you in that hospital bed... screaming about 'how you trusted them!' I wasn't there to visit you," he continued, tossing the book aside and leaning back in his chair—anxiously massaging his fingers once more. "I was there to see what you'd done with my own eyes. To talk to your friend's parents... to talk to his girlfriend's parents... and to say whatever I could to apologize and give my deepest condolences for the son I raised... for the monster you've become... and for all the hell you've put everyone in this town through ever since you learned to walk."

"Like father like son," I grumbled, turning to the side to check what sort of bolts were keeping my chains fastened to the wall—trying to determine a length of time it might take me to chisel them loose or kick myself free.

"Don't you fucking dare," he growled, his sorrow quickly gobbled up by erupting rage. "I put a firm hand to you anytime you stepped out of line—there ain't nothing wrong with that if that's what it takes to get you to listen! But you took it like it was a fucking challenge... like everything anyone ever did to you was a personal attack... and then you walked around with that hate and threw it in other people's faces every opportunity you got! You insulted everyone you ever met, hurt more kids in school than I can count, stole at every opportunity, stole from me! From your own family! Till we had to lock every door to every room just to feel safe having you around! We had to cancel any family vacation because you'd always pull fire alarms and push your way through crowds or run away and try and find your way back home without us! Don't you fucking dare put who you are on my shoulders! I loved you! I did everything I could to try and teach you! And you spit in my face over and over again until that disrespect was the only side of you left!!!" he screamed, rising to his feet and stumbling towards me—staggering to the side as he approached in his drunken delirium. "You used to be just an innocent little kid! You were so beautiful... and... I held you in my arms and dreamt about the man you might become... and you turned it into a fucking nightmare... God damn you!"

"Are you kidding me?!" I laughed, staring through his bone deep vulnerability and wails of grief at the parts he left out to portray himself as a saint. "You put a hand to me because you were always too dumb, drunk and lazy to think of

any other way to raise someone! You had to cancel every family vacation we went on because you dragged me on them kicking and screaming against my will, so of course I ran away! I only hurt the kids in school who attacked me first! And I stole because I had to! You turned into a lazy piece of shit who treated your family like property rather than a responsibility!" I exclaimed, snapping his delirious self-righteous portrayal of my life across the knee of reality. "And, as if that isn't bad enough, you turned your back on me and my mother by failing to prepare for the outbreak you **knew** was coming! You put your own fucking son in charge of having the balls in the family and now you're lecturing me about it?! Fuck you pussy! I did what I had to!"

"Are you completely crazy?! Is that it? Hub?!?! Cause, if that's it, I'll drive you to whatever mental institution will take you and throw away the key... Except that, oh wait, **I fucking tried that already!!!** And all you did was play the part of sane well enough to sweet talk anyone who ever assessed you! Cause you're smart enough to know the difference between right and wrong but evil enough not to care!"

"Did you hear a fucking word I said?" I huffed, moving my arms around my sides to get a feel for how much space I had to work with given the chains tethering me to the wall. Not much. But if he got close enough... I could make it work. Likely, he had the key on him—and if I made him angry enough to hit me again, I'd pull that motherfucker in and choke him to death. "**I did... what I had to!!!**"

"What you had to do?" he scoffed, a bitter taste in his mouth rolling his neck to the side in disgust. He spit a thick wad of saliva onto the floor and began pacing back and forth in front of me—still just out of reach. "Boy... you never, ever did anything in this life other than exactly what you wanted to."

"**Bullshit!!!**" I shouted, lunging forward—a rage burning in me so furious I could scarcely contain myself. My arms snapped back as the chains held me and I fell down once more, strained and out of breath. I glared up at him a moment—stifled by palpitations—desperately trying to keep my heart from exploding out of my chest.

"How could I not prepare for it? Hub? How could I not do everything in my power to be sure that I was ready? To protect my friends when they were still my friends... to protect the family that you never cared enough about to bother to save! I did what I had to because you didn't have it in you to do anything at all! So **don't you fucking dare** tell me my life has been what I want! I've never been able to want anything! Because all I've done is work to be able to survive!"

"What in the fuck are you talking about?!" he screamed, stepping closer—just... ever... so slightly... out of reach. "You had a roof over your head! You had food! You had an education! A fucking middle-class family for Christ's sake! You didn't have to survive! We already gave you everything you needed!"

"And when the infection finally happens all of that will disappear! And you know it! So what the fuck are **you** talking about?! Hub?!"

*"What infection?! What God damn outbreak you psychotic little shit?!" he demanded, stuttering my rage a moment with the conviction of his denial—his tone and posture completely unaffected by the lie he told. He knew. **He knew!** He had told me all those years ago! He had been the one to force the idea into my mind and to let me appreciate what was coming! And yet here and now he had the motherfucking nerve to play dumb? To lie about it!!! No... there's no fucking way... this piece of shit was only lying to himself. And I'd be damned if I was gonna swallow the likes of that.*

*"What infection? **What infection?!** What do you think?!!!" The Solanum virus!!! The undead!!!!" I yelled, his face suddenly falling blank and stunned from what I'd just said. His knees buckled ever so slightly and his balance tipped him to the side—still out of reach—clearly struck by my words. He waited a moment, feeling around for what he wanted to say in response.*

"Where did you hear about that?"

"From you!!! You stupid fuck!!!!" I yelled, aghast at everything about him—everything he lacked the courage to say or admit—even here and now he couldn't admit it.

"From me?... When?" he asked, a look of dumbstruck confusion and dread swelling under his curdled Neanderthal brow. And that's when I realized it. He wasn't lying to himself... he didn't remember.

"You don't remember, do you?" I growled, so sickened by that fact that I couldn't stay upright. I shifted my legs next to the puddle of vomit and crossed them—burying my head in my hands as I dug into the memory to recount the details for him.

"Remember, what? What the hell are you talking about? I never told you. I never told you a damn thing!"

"I was six years old... you just got laid off... so mom left. She took me with her. But I ran away to go back home... I ran away to go back to you... and I found you in the garage with the car running trying to kill yourself," I explained, settling down—speaking slowly, a wounded hiccup of love turned hate emanating from that day burned into my mind. "I opened the door and aired it out. I let you out of the car. You woke up a few minutes later, drunk, as usual... and then you told me... You told me everything. About your years in the service, working in that lab... about the experiments they were doing on soldiers without their knowledge... how you were one of those soldiers. You told me about the conversation you'd had with a man who said the government was planning to depopulate the world... and that it was only a matter of time until the disease was released. You told me you didn't want to live in a world you knew was going to disappear. You didn't want to love a family you knew would be taken away from you... That you didn't have the strength to go on anymore. You told me you loved me. And that if I were a man, we could be men and face it together... and then you passed the fuck out and puked all over yourself until mom came back and found us."

He didn't speak. He couldn't respond. Baffled tears rolled down his cheeks and a stunned, opened mouthed expression punctuated the memory I described that he'd had the luxury to block out of his mind—the driving force behind my initial zeal to prepare for the outbreak. To defy everyone, to fight against anything greater than myself, to need nothing in life and to give everything I had to securing a sanctuary for when that fateful day came—to give my friends a place they could call home when their parents tried to tell them what to do and what was best for them, even though they didn't know what was looming over us all. But most of all, it was what had incentivized me to become more than just a man—to become a survivor. I looked up at him—at my father... the weak, sad little man that he had become... and he couldn't so much as say a single solitary fucking word in response. He just swayed in place, like a dead leaf jutting on a bare bark skeleton... staring at me... at what I'd just told him... cycling the thoughts over in his mind... but, try as I may, I couldn't decipher what was happening inside of his head. I couldn't tell if his rage and insanity were from the liquor, the denial, the war we'd waged with one another throughout my entire childhood, or, perhaps, the experiments that had been done on him? Maybe that was it? There was no way to know... but, whatever it was... it had hollowed him out... emptied the deepest parts of him as a person and left nothing but this explosive mess of pain instead. He didn't speak. He couldn't. And so, instead, he sat back down. He leaned forward, planted his head in a hand and threw up—spitting the last bits of his dinner out from between his teeth. Then, after a few more moments of silence between us, he managed to look at me again.

"I don't remember that," he confessed, a now frozen expression the only glimpse he offered of his inner conflict—that he was responsible for cultivating everything he hated about me—that I had grown up in the shadow of his past. And now, here we were, at the end of the road—the shotgun resting within reach of his chair. He turned away from me in disgust a moment later and looked back at the gun.

"Dad," I stated, pulling his attention up to me—my tone calm and determined. "I don't blame you. I'm glad you told me. I'm a survivor because you did. But I don't deserve this," I continued, holding my chains up in front of my swollen face to appeal to any sense of mercy or decency he had left. "Let me go and you'll never see me again. I promise."

"Hmmm," he grunted, folding his arms tightly across his chest to consider the idea. He waited a few moments, fidgeting his foot nervously and rolling his tongue around in his mouth—still trying to manage what I'd told him without allowing me to see how much it had affected him. Then, after nearly a full minute of silence, he stood up, retrieved the gun and walked towards me. I didn't move. I didn't squirm one way or the other to try and get free or dodge what was coming. I just sat there—waiting for whatever it was he decided to do with me. And then, just as I convinced myself he was coming closer only so he wouldn't miss, he pulled a set of keys out of his pocket and stared down at them—gently turning them in his hand, trying to decide what to do..

"I can't just let you go back into the world the way you are, Derek... You know that. You're too dangerous. Too... crazy," he explained, the keys in one hand and the gun in the other. "So... if the reason you're like this really is because of preparing for an outbreak, then there's something you need to know about that disease," he explained, dropping the keys to the ground and kicking them over to me—all the while holding the gun up to his shoulder to square me in his sights in case I tried to attack him. I reached forward and grabbed onto the keys, maneuvering them despite my broken thumb to unsheathe my arms from their shackles before the glue fully set in. The adhesive that had been applied under the metal stretched out into long strands of gooey elastic bits dangling off my skin and I tossed aside the cold metal chains—releasing a visceral sigh of relief as I did so. My father held his ground—ready and willing to shoot me if I so much as dared move in his direction.

"Ok, what is it?" I asked, more preoccupied with the idea of learning more about the virus than I was with winning my freedom. My father shook his head and took pause before speaking again—as if he half expected he might have to shoot me anyway.

"It doesn't exist, Derek... the virus isn't real."

CHAPTER 21: OCCULT

Wes Korb, Unknown, 2018

“Hold the hard drive up to the panel on your left,” the man on the phone instructed—the most recent in a laundry list of demands he’d made of me ever since I answered the ringing cellphone on the floor of the Oval Office.

“Facing it or—”

“It doesn’t matter, it’s proximity triggered,” he quickly interrupted—every single second counting more than the last. The drones were coming. The bombs were about to fall. And I was... told not to ask questions until I got ‘them’ what ‘they’ needed. I glanced at the shimmering blue translucent panel and fidgeted with the ‘S’ shaped, top-level-security hard drive I’d dug out of the man’s pocket—the immeasurably important piece of the puzzle they kept telling me was my sworn duty to deliver to them immediately. But they wouldn’t tell me who they were, what was on the drive I was carrying, or... anything really. And every time I tried to learn anything about what was happening or where they were directing me to, they just started shouting about ‘drone strikes’ and ‘imminent threat to every living person on the face of the earth.’ I was just happy to hear there were still other people out there—other people who, unlike myself, seemed to know what the hell was going on and what to do about it. The sound of more keyboard rustling chattered on his end of the line as the panel illuminated in reaction to the hard drive coming near it. Then, after only a couple of seconds, the huge metallic door I stood before began to make clicking noises—unlocking itself and sliding open for me. “Good. Now proceed down the hall. Take the second left.”

“Ok,” I mumbled, stepping through the gradually opening door, past a handful of bodies with smashed in heads—staring down a long hallway illuminated by LED paneling on both the floor and ceiling. “What is this place?”

“Once again, that is not something I’m at liberty to divulge. Thank you for your cooperation.”

“Yeah, sure,” I sighed, more than frustrated with the degree of secrecy I found myself surrounded by. But then again, what the hell did I expect? I had been poking around in the damn White House of all places. “Can you please at least tell me your name?”

“No. Continue forward after you make this left. I will give you further instructions in approximately 30 seconds. Do not change directions. Continue ahead unless otherwise advised,” the man stated blankly, his tone firm and rigid as if he’d prepared his whole life for just this sort of thing. Probably military, or intelligence or... fuck if I know... but he sounded really hardcore. I did exactly what he said. He had yelled at me once when I asked too many questions earlier and I hated being yelled at. So now I was more of the opinion that I’d just shut up and do what he asked until I found myself wherever the hell it was he was directing me to go.

As I walked down the long hall, the walls soon turned to large windows on either side of me—overlooking huge hangers filled with massive machines and thousands of crates. It looked more like something out of a science fiction movie than what you’d expect to find in this day and age. But given that I hadn’t exactly frequented top-secret underground government facilities in my life, for all I knew this sort of thing might be normal. The still functioning elevator that I’d taken to get down here had moved in a way that gave me little sense of where I had ended up—descending in a spiraling sidewinding trajectory that made it feel like I was jumping between train tracks rather than just going up and down. I’d stood on that thing without being spoken to by the people I was on the phone with for I don’t know how long. Every minute of which was accompanied by silence—heartbreaking horrible silence thrust on my shoulders immediately after having the chance to speak to someone for the first time in over a week! It felt like torture. They wouldn’t talk. They only gave orders. And now, deep below the underbelly of the city, located potentially anywhere in the greater landscape of the most iconic security and military buildings on the planet, I had the distinct sensation that I was trespassing in the heart of something I could scarcely conceive of let alone understand. This place wasn’t built for civilians like me. And though I kept walking forward, a feeling deep in my gut screamed of apprehension and uncertainty... What would happen to me after I gave them the hard drive?

Pools of meandering dead people lingered in each hanger—banging their arms against some of the crates... as if people might be alive inside... as if something might be making noise or drawing their attention somehow. From what I’d gathered from all the other bodies I’d examined and places I’d been, whatever this disease was, it caused people to attack, bite and infect one another. That’s what had happened to my brother... despite his level of fitness and all the races he’d run... he’d still wound up bitten and infected just like all of them. It was me who was different somehow—who was invisible to the undead. And when I had

revealed that fact to the person on the phone with me, it was the only time in our conversation that their tone seemed to falter at all. They were surprised by that fact. So if not any information about where I was, where I was going, who these people were or what had happened to the world, at least I had known something that they didn't... I was immune. And now... I was on a mission.

"Stop," the man stated blankly, my feet freezing in place without a moment's hesitation—turning to my side to face a long, widening hall that led to another large security door, big enough to drive ten flatbed trucks through. It was older than everything else in this place—like something you'd see in a cold war missile silo. Almost as if that giant door were the very first thing about this entire place that had been built. "Turn left. Proceed to the panel to the far left of the large door. Raise the hard drive up to it again."

"Ok," I whispered, keeping my voice low out of a brooding sense of paranoia that in a place as huge and sprawling as this one, I might not be the only one here who was still alive... what if I was caught trespassing? What if they shot first and didn't bother to ask questions at all? What was I supposed to do then? And while that idea made me so nervous I felt like I was about to piss my pants, I didn't dare ask the man I was on the phone with for fear that he'd just yell at me again. Soon, I came to stand before the door, realizing as I did that there was another subset of smaller doors immediately adjacent to it. Muffled, barely audible thuds emanated from the larger door—as if someone or something were being repositioned behind it—feeding my feeling of dread as I spotted the second blue translucent panel I had been directed to and raised the hard drive up to it—looking in between each of the doors, large and small, without any idea which would open or which I'd be directed to walk through.

"Stand by," the man instructed, barely audible chatter surrounding him in between his words to me—as if he were either standing in some sort of command center full of people doing what they could to try and stop what was coming, or he was talking to them at the same time he was talking to me. But I didn't know which. I just knew to shut up and do what I was told. A few seconds passed and then one of the smaller doors quickly slid open. "Proceed inside. The lights will be turned on in a moment," he continued, answering my next question for me—how in the hell I was supposed to find my way around what looked like an abyss of darkness. I stepped forward into the room, unable to see anything inside and hearing only the faint moans of air passing through lifeless lungs in multiple places around me. Then, just as he said they would—the lights turned on.

The room was large and ovular—about the size of a basketball court—with tiered seating progressing up around a central array of computers and transparent screens. On the upper tiers were more computers, more desks, hand railings, and large display screens acting as the upper border just before the ceiling. A few handfuls of undead, none of whom had any wounds on them, wandered in my direction—attracted by the sound of the door opening. I stepped aside and gave them the space they needed to funnel out as I stared curiously at the translucent panels which quickly morphed into double-sided display screens. Then, immediately after power was restored to them, the other screens booted up and the room was filled with lights and countless sounds of notifications popping up on all the screens. I looked down at the one closest to me and leaned in—reading a few of the headlines that it displayed. Notices of outbreaks all across the world—of failed power systems, cries for help, requests for assistance and, most of all, of imminent bombardments—the drones... they were already bombing places.

“Holy shit,” I wheezed, feeling faint of breath and completely overwhelmed. My knees dipped for a moment and I worried that I might pass out from the stress.

“Proceed forward to the main command terminal located immediately below the large central screen at the base of the platforms,” the man said, as I did my best to pull my face away from what I was reading—bombs going off everywhere on earth and a map of the planet that looked like a charted course of predetermined targets with a set of crosshairs over everything. The drones... they were going to bomb everything... everything, everywhere! Holy... shit.... SHIT! I swallowed hard and stopped trying to grasp the situation. I got it now. I got it loud and clear. Then, after realizing that I’d been given instructions again, I rushed forward to the terminal he’d described and noticed another translucent blue panel beside the console.

“Ok! Now what? Do I put the drive on the panel again?”

“Yes. Place it down and do not remove it. Its contents will be remotely transferred to us,” he explained, some faint clapping and guttural cheers of success ringing out from somewhere on his end of the line—originating from who knows where on this earth. I quickly placed the hard drive down and took a step back—watching as a laundry list of files, folders, technical specs, encrypted codes, details and God knows what else flashed across the screen—accompanied by a loading progress bar that showed it would only take a few minutes more to complete.

“Ok... ok! I did it!” I gleamed, proud that I had managed to accomplish something that no one else on earth was in a position to do. I’d completed my mission. I’d gotten them whatever the hell it was they needed from that drive. And standing there, completely elated and keen to help however I could, I felt like I’d accomplished something really important for the first time in my life. “Now what?”

“Ensure the drive finishes loading and wait for further instructions,” the man finished, hanging up the phone immediately afterward... without so much as a good bye—without a single solitary scrap of advice, or even so much as an indication of what the hell to expect next.

“Hello? Hello!?” I shouted, staring down at the phone—a crushing wave of abandonment and helplessness flooding over me. They hung up. They got me to do what they wanted and then they just hung up on me! “You cannot be serious!” I whined, kicking a chair next to me and raising my hands to my head in frustration—staring around me at countless computer consoles displaying imminent threats of immediate death. But, just then, as I felt distraught, terrified pains gush out of my swelling heart, I remembered the crates I’d seen the undead banging against just a few moments before—I remembered that I currently stood in a secret, underground government facility the likes of which I never could have found on my own—in a position to help anyone who might still be trapped down here with me. And because of that, as far as I was concerned, my mission wasn’t over yet—regardless of whether or not I’d been left to fend for myself by whoever the hell I’d just been speaking to. Because now not only did I have a top-secret facility I needed to comb for other survivors—I also had a working phone with a list of contacts from a company called ‘Eden Corp’ to try calling.

CHAPTER 22: CONVOY

Susie Simmonds, Upstate Massachusetts, 2018

I'd never gotten the chance to ride a motorcycle before. It... was... AWESOME! I was like totally scared at first and I'm pretty sure I couldn't have squeezed Cherry any harder even if I'd tried—sitting on the back of his bike as we drove away from town. But after a few minutes I started to understand just how good a driver he was. Cherry's bike and the other motorcycles, loaded both with all the people they'd saved and the guns they'd gathered, quickly maneuvered in between cars and obstacles—veering around any undead we might come across as if they were no threat at all. Even though they weren't immune, they didn't seem to be afraid of the ghouls at all! Instead, they were 'cleaning up' as Cherry had put it—going from place to place helping towns get rid of the infected. And because they'd been doing that for over a week now and had driven all across the surrounding states and cities, they'd gathered a huge group of people who had decided to come along for the ride. They nicknamed this mass of vehicles and survivors the 'Convoy'—located just on the outskirts of town, not too far from the recently built shopping mall. The very same shopping mall my brother, Archer, had taken refuge in when the outbreak occurred—and, hopefully, where he still was, waiting for us to come rescue him and anyone else still trapped inside. Riding that bike I felt like a total badass—like things were finally starting to get better. And now, rather than lose my breath or submit to my fears, my heart pounded an elated sense of hope through me—I was going to find my brother and he was going to owe me for LIFE for saving his ass!

"Wooooooooooooaaaaahhhhh!!!" I cried, Cherry turning ever so slightly to shoot me a delighted grin and a firm thumbs up as my eyes peeled wide open—setting sight on the Convoy for the first time.

What looked like a few hundred vehicles of all shapes and sizes twitched around in a central mass—hundreds of motorcycles swarming around it—branching out to track down and eliminate any undead that approached. As we got closer, I realized a temporary settlement had been put up using huge tents and sprawling nets to ensure nothing got near that wasn't supposed to. Gunshots rang out across the air and a few big rig gasoline tankers were parked on the outskirts—refueling anyone who needed more juice to head back out to kill some undead. It was pretty much the coolest thing I'd ever seen and my mouth hung open on the back of Cherry's bike for a few seconds until a bug flew in it and I smacked my tongue around wildly, trying to spit it out.

“THIS IS FREAKING AMAZING!!!” I yelled, tiny streams of tears sliding back along my cheeks—either pent up from sheer joy or from the wind rushing into my eyes. Cherry didn’t hear me over the noise of so many engines revving but I was pretty sure he already knew exactly how I felt. Cause now that I could see just how many people were still out there, there was a good chance my mother and I wouldn’t have to spend the next four years locked down in a basement with no one else to talk to. I was so happy. I was so very, very awe struck and happy! And, as we approached the heart of the Convoy I started laughing in a gleeful and delirious fit of giggles—we were saved—we were saved!!!

Cherry slowly veered his bike off toward the part of the Convoy where tents were set up—passing by hundreds upon hundreds of other people dressed just like him. Black leather, big beards, tattoos, piercings—all kinds of stuff. Nearly all of them carried big guns or objects that could be used to bash in skulls—crowbars, machetes... one guy was even carrying a two-handed-broadsword around like some sort of Viking or something! Then, just as we passed a group of twenty men and women showering blood off themselves with a fire hose, Cherry pulled the bike over, powered down the engine and reached around to pop the helmet he’d given me off my head.

“See... These things aren’t so bad once you get used to em,” Cherry exclaimed, pulling a pair of sunglasses off his face and tucking them into his vests front pocket.

“Yeah! That was fun!” I chirped, leaping off the bike—only after I realized I was standing in a pool of bloody water, trickling away from the group of people showering. “Oh man! I can never keep these shoes clean!”

“You might wanna consider getting’ some boots then. They make for better footwear for the end of days in my opinion,” Cherry suggested, gesturing down to his feet as he spoke—shiny metal skulls bordering his boot rims and a sharp shimmering metallic point at the tip of each toe that looked like the Grim Reaper. I sucked in a breath of air to respond only to see Cherry’s eyes had drifted off to focus on something else. “Hold on a second there, missy, I got intel to tell,” Cherry continued, his attention fixed on a group of people emerging from a tent—all of them dressed in the same jackets that Cherry was. He raised an arm and waved—whistling sharply and pointing to the bags of guns and survivors mounted on the other bikes that had been parked not far from us. The men smiled widely at the site—walked over to us and smacked a firm hand to the side of Cherry’s arm for a job well done.

“This everything or just what you could grab?” one of the older men asked, while two middle-aged-sunglass-wearing-guys stood by his side at all times—one of them glaring at me like I was uninvited or something.

“Everything worth grabbing anyway. Mall still sounds like our best bet though,” Cherry replied, mentioning the place my brother was last seen as if it was already where they were planning to go.

“Nah... we put eyes on it while you were gone... a few thousand-infected surrounding it on all sides,” the man replied, pulling guns out of bags and passing them to his helpers—quickly rushing the supplies to the backs of trucks for redistribution. “We’d burn as much fuel and ammo getting in there as we’d be able to pull out of it. Best to just leave it be and push onto the next,” he explained, saying everything I didn’t want to hear—thousands of ghouls—no choice but to move on—leaving my brother behind. I shot a scared and distraught face at Cherry but he was too busy talking to pay me any mind. And just as I realized that saving my brother might not be as easy as I’d hoped, I noticed a similar expression on the face of the woman who had said she was Archer’s girlfriend’s mother—Lisa stood over by the other bikes as another group of black-vested people spoke to her and the people she was with... no doubt having a similar conversation as the one I was overhearing. I looked back to Cherry, praying he’d say or do something to stop my hopes from sinking.

“A few thousand? That many, huh?”

“Yup. Word is we’re gonna leave it. Catch a few more supply runs on the road instead. But, for the most part, we’re all squared away at this point... ready to get er’ done,” the man stated cheerfully, a big wide smile swallowing up the parts of his face that weren’t covered with his long white beard or dark black sunglasses. Cherry looked down at me a moment, nodding humbly as he did so—his eyes telling me everything I didn’t want to hear.

“Alright... if that’s what they said but... I’ve got it on good authority that that mall’s the place to be,” Cherry protested, winking at me to let me know my brother wasn’t forgotten. “Little lady here says the mall just opened. Got about the biggest sports supply shop in the state inside it... we hit that, we won’t even need to do supply runs on the way through,” Cherry suggested, speaking in a charming casual way that movie stars always did. He was really good looking too... even though he looked like he needed a haircut and a shower.

“This isn’t a discussion. That’s how things are gonna go,” the man snapped, quickly losing his upbeat disposition as he looked at me.

“And I don’t particularly care what this ‘little lady’ has to say about it. So whoever she is, get her over with the rest of the ‘chicks’ and then saddle back up for another run,” he finished, turning his back on us to tend to the truck full of guns he’d gathered. Cherry bit his lip and didn’t talk back—holding his hand out to the side ever so slightly to give me a sign that I shouldn’t either. Then, after the truck’s engine had started and the man had pulled away, Cherry lowered his hand and took a deep breath—struggling to try and find a way to break the news to me.

“I’m sorry to say, that... his word counts more than mine,” he explained, a nauseating feeling of frustration growing inside my heart as he spoke. “And... well... sounds like going after your brother isn’t an option anymore if we’re gonna be moving out soon,” he sighed, sitting against his bike seat and folding his arms across his chest. “My condolences.”

“That’s it?” I huffed, appalled that, just like that, my good news wasn’t any good anymore. I now knew where my brother was. And if like the man had said, the mall was surrounded by a couple thousand ghouls, then, immune or not, there was still nothing I could do about it by myself. “We’re not even gonna try?!”

“Fraid not... gotta prioritize the... other priorities, I suppose,” Cherry exclaimed, doing his best to excuse the inexcusable. He extended his arm to try and hand me a helmet once more—expecting me to get back on his bike so he could ‘get me over with the rest of the chicks’ as he’d been instructed to do. I stared blankly at the helmet in his hand—wondering exactly where it was I had found myself and what it was that they all seemed to think was so much more important than saving my brother’s life.

“No... No! That’s bullshit! We have to try and help him!” I insisted, pushing aside the helmet as the feeling in my heart continued to grow—straining my voice and billowing my tears. Cherry gave me a sympathetic glance before turning his eyes to look at the dirt.

“Like I said... My condolences.”

“But... but...” I sputtered, trying to reconcile how close something just out of reach was. I looked over to the faces of the other people who had been saved—noticing as I did that they were all being loaded into a truck—heartbroken tears staining their cheeks as they held onto one another for support. I couldn’t believe it. I just... couldn’t believe it. “No! NO! We have to try and help him! We have to! You said you were here cleaning up, right?! So lets go clean up! I mean... you can’t just leave a couple thousand ghouls behind and call that clean, can you?” I argued, noticing, as I did so, that Cherry’s face wasn’t affected by my pleas

for reason. He wasn't going to budge. Not one bit. And if I didn't think of something to say fast, I might just wind up abandoned and helpless with all the other 'chicks'—unable to help my brother or potentially even make my way back home by nightfall without a vehicle. I looked at Cherry, desperate for him to hear how afraid and in need of help I was—to feel sorry for me and to find a way to do the right thing. And even though I could see he knew what I was feeling, his face stayed the same. He extended the helmet out for me again—no longer in any mood to listen to my opinion.

“My advice is to move on, sooner than later,” he stated blankly, fastening the helmet to my head after I failed to accept it from him. Tears streamed down my face and the distress of knowing Archer might still be alive but I was helpless to save him churned my insides around over and over. It hurt so much. It hurt so very much. And just like that, I felt myself struggling for breath again... remembering my father... remembering my sister... the memory of them lying dead together on the guest room floor burned into my mind. Cherry noticed how overwhelmed I was and took a step toward me—placing a hand on my shoulder and kneeling down so he could look me in the eye. “I ain’t being cold, I’m being tough. It’s ok to feel what you’re feeling. But all the same, we can’t let our feelings stop us from moving forward when we have to. Now come on. We gotta go.”

“No,” I snapped again, refastening the helmet Cherry had just put on me with a little more slack on the strap. “I’m not just gonna go sit in some play pen! I need to save my brother! And if you’re not going to help me do that, then at least you can give me a ride there so I’m not stuck in the middle of nowhere,” I insisted, turning back to face Cherry’s bike and fetch the weapon I’d acquired in the gun shop—still mounted on the side of it.

“Look... I like your spirit and everything, but I’m not particularly inclined to give you a ride someplace just to watch you get your stubborn ass killed. And, for the record, it’s not a ‘play pen’ you’d be hanging out in so much as a...” Cherry exclaimed, stopping as he got to the part of where he had been told to take me—gazing in the direction the white bearded man, who had just given him the orders, had driven off to. “God dammit,” he whispered, shaking his head and taking in another deep sigh. “Susie... I ain’t gonna bullshit you. We ain’t no rescue party. This lots been poking around looking under rocks since the shit hit... taking whatever we feel like along the way. That’s what our priorities are. Even us saving people ain’t really about ‘saving people’. It’s about getting more helping hands together. And those hands only matter if they’re able to help. You following me here?”

“But... I thought you said you were cleaning up?”

“We are... but that’s not **all** we’re doing.”

“So... then... you’re just stealing stuff then, is that it?”

“It’s not stealing if nobody owns it.”

“Then... I don’t understand... the mall is where all the stuff is, isn’t it? You can take ALL of that stuff, so... just... I don’t understand!” I shouted, watching a group of dogs on leashes as they smelled a truck full of people—wandering as I watched them if Elvis had managed to find his way back home without me. He was unable to get on the bike after all—there wasn’t enough room with all the other passengers for us to have taken him with me. Then, just as that thought crossed my mind, I wondered what my mother would think if he showed up back at the barn without me. And, as I struggled to grasp all that was happening and all that might still go wrong, I realized just how stupid I must be for not understanding things better. I held my head low, looking at the ground in search of what I was supposed to say or do to change things. But I couldn’t. I just... didn’t know what to do.

“While I don’t doubt they’ve got a fine selection of home electronics, a shopping mall is only good for gathering basic supplies. And it ain’t worth gathering supplies if you gotta spend more than you’ll get going in for em’, alright? But that’s not the only issue on the table. You need to understand that there’s more behind this whole operation than just resource management,” Cherry explained, sliding his sunglasses back onto his face as he spoke. “This whole group is headed down to Kentucky... and the course we’re taking there is already set in stone... so... the offer as it stands is that you’re welcome to come along if you like. But I’d prefer not to have’tah take you as a hostage or tell you you don’t have any say in the matter,” he continued, stepping out of the way as a group of women hauling wheelbarrows full of ammunition passed us. “So... it’s your call little lady... what’s it gonna be? Alone and dead? Or alive and well?”

“I need to save my brother,” I admitted, realizing that there was no way I could ever consider the idea of doing anything else. I had to try. I just had to. Cause if I didn’t... if I just went home and told my mom there was no hope... I couldn’t look her in the eye, let alone live with myself after the fact. So... that settled it... I’d just have to find a way to get to Archer on my own... sooner or later... I’d just have to find a way. Cherry looked at me with a sour expression and pressed his tongue up against his front teeth—making a squeaky sucking sound as he did so. “Thanks for the invite... but I guess I’ll just have to do this on my own.”

“On your own?” Cherry grunted, his tone sinking as he spoke—as if nothing I could have suggested could possibly have been more absurd than what I’d just said. “I beg your pardon if you construe what I’m about to say as an insult but... you’re a fucking idiot,” Cherry stated, four trucks full of people driving past us—blaring music—adding to the chaos of noise coming from all directions. Cherry cleared his throat and spoke up—making sure I caught every word. “Or, that’s to say, stop acting like such a fucking idiot if you wanna live to see tomorrow! Now please make a reasonable decision and get on the bike, thank you.”

“I’m not an idiot. Don’t call me that.”

“Then stop being an idiot!” he repeated, taking a few steps over to his motorcycle and straddling it. “I already told you, I ain’t given you a ride just so you can get yourself killed.”

“I’m not gonna get myself killed. And I’m not an idiot!” I cried defensively, looking around the swirling waves of vehicles to try and orient myself and figure out exactly where the convoy was located—spotting an old water tower in the distance that gave me a landmark to go by. Best I could guess, I was twenty miles east of the mall and it was already halfway through the afternoon. I didn’t know if it was a good idea to go after Archer this late in the day. And I sure as heck wasn’t gonna go to Kentucky with the convoy. So... one way or another... I was gonna get on that bike and ask Cherry for a ride. But... my mom told me not to bring anyone back home with me... to be mindful of other survivors and keep the details of where we lived and the supplies we had there to ourselves. But she didn’t say anything about getting a ride back home to the neighborhood we lived in. That was probably ok.

“Look, I gotta take off and do another supply run before the afternoon’s up!” Cherry explained, starting up his bike again and pushing back the kickstand. “I’m headed back into town now... if you really do insist on being a complete idiot and staying behind, I suppose I can give you a ride back to where we came from. You seemed to fair well enough there before on your own anyway... maybe you’ll be alright... for a little while, at least.”

“I’ll be fine... and, yes, I’d appreciate a ride... but... can we take a detour, please?” I asked as nicely as I could—noticing a slight wince of apprehension from Cherry as I did so.

“What kind of detour?”

“To... um... well... it’s just a big open field... it’d take me too long to get there on my own, alright? It’s not far, I promise.”

“No.”

“Please?”

“Little lady... get on the bike,” Cherry stated in a stern unwavering way where I could tell he wasn’t gonna give me anymore of his time or listen to anymore of my attitude. I took in a deep breath and sighed—frustrated that I’d have no choice but to head back to town, only to return home just to tell my mom everything I’d seen and done—hoping all the while she’d be able to make some sense of what to do next. I approached Cherry’s bike and mounted my weapon back on it—climbing onto the back and wrapping my arms around his waist.

He pulled away a moment later, swerving in between cars and other motorcycles. Dirt shot up from the ground and covered my ankles and shoes as we cut across the large, open, lay of land towards the outskirts of the convoy. But as Cherry navigated this way and that, it slowly dawned on me that we were driving in a different direction—away from the water tower—away from town. Then, just as I raised my voice to ask ‘where it was we were heading,’ Cherry sharply pulled the bike over in front of a large tent and whistled to get the attention of a few men standing out front. In the distance, just inside of the tent, I could see a few handfuls of kids sitting at tables—staring down absentmindedly in front of them, sorting ammunition and loading it into crates. But even then I didn’t really understand why we had stopped. That is, until one of the men walked right over to me and put his hands around my waist—heaving me off the bike like I was a duffle bag, not a person.

“What are you doing?! Hey! Hey!!! Let me go!!!” I cried, swatting at the huge, bear of a man holding me under his arm. “Cherry! Help!!!” I begged, realizing as I did that he had never intended to let me go or drive me anywhere but where he’d been told to.

“I told you! I ain’t giving you a ride just so you can get yourself killed!” he hollered, lowering his sunglasses and having the nerve to smile at me as if he’d just done me some kind of favor. “Now stay put and do what you’re told! I’ll check in on you later!” he finished, kicking up the throttle on his bike and quickly speeding away—leaving me feeling so stunned and betrayed that I couldn’t even find the words to curse him as he drove off.

CHAPTER 23: BRING IT

Matthew Simmonds, Virginia, 2018

Which decade a military base was originally built in tends to determine much of its layout and use. A lot of older bases I'd been stationed at over the years were comprised of a number of individual buildings and mid-sized compounds loosely grouped together in perimeter fencing—the geography evolving and spreading from one generation to the next. In those sorts of bases, personal quarters were typically more cramped and the tap water often tasted like it was from another century. Somehow places like that had a feeling of home. For as long as I'd been in the service, things had been like that. A greased wheel from one place to the next. A uniform rigor of distinctly American presence and posture. In my experience, local US bases were almost always folksy and old timey in nostalgia in some way—celebrating the valor of old wars or icons who had reached distinction serving there. That is... unless a base had some sort of special function or jurisdiction. Then people who had attended weren't celebrated so much as the base itself was. This place was one of those exceptions. No pictures of anyone hung on these walls. Only flags, billboards of products, corporate logos and signs telling you how to get to the bathroom.

The facility we had found ourselves tasked with fortifying was almost entirely new—built within the last two decades, consolidated in form and tucked tightly together. This place did not feel nostalgic. Not one bit. Instead, it felt distinctly cold and sterile, like a hospital that you'd send other sick hospitals to spend a night in. The doors were locked remotely or through the use of encrypted personal tablets, not metal keys. The emergency lights didn't stay on if nothing moved for too long and most of the windows were shaded to keep what was happening inside any given room a complete secret. That is with the exception of a few important areas we had made a point of setting up in as soon as we had arrived.

Under Leanne's watch, the wounded nestled into the med bay—making sure to get every person we had with us as close to healthy as they could get. Everyone had switched gear—peeled away their shit-stained clothes—washed clean, put on fresh fatigues, rationed food, water, weapons and then immediately got every able-bodied person to assist in fortifying the place. All the while, Dennis remained responsible for communications, available at the touch of a button thanks to a tablet kept holstered on my hip. He and I hadn't spoken much since fortifications

began. But I thought of him and this place every second while preparing for it to be overrun... a dizzying mess of questions bouncing off one another, flooding my mind with all that I didn't know, over and over again...

I wondered about whether or not we'd ever find Roger? If the hard drive he had with him could really stop all this once and for all? I wondered what kind of dirt the NSA had been digging up while they were still spying on Ellex? For that matter, I wondered what Ellex was up to nowadays—now that his plan was in motion? Might he be putting some sort of 'special emphasis' on killing the spies that had been watching him? Hmmm... I wondered... I wondered what remained of the rest of the world? Of the nation? Of the military? Of all the people that I'd ever known and served with... Who had survived to be in command at a time like this? What were the orders they were handing out? Kill people? Save people? Who had officially been declared the world's enemy when your own people are the threat? Was the disease outbreak now public knowledge? Was everything the government had been doing experimenting with the Solanum virus in secret labs across the country something that wasn't secret anymore? Was that public now? Had that come to light too? Hell, was anything public knowledge? Was there even any public left? Or had things gotten so fucking bad that people had just been flat out left to fend for themselves? God damn... What was still left out there anyway? Was my brother alive? Did he stay true to our training all of those years? Was he prepared for the outbreak? Or... was he already dead? Just another walking corpse himself?... I wondered... constantly I wondered... thinking all kinds of privileged thoughts that I still didn't have the privilege of knowing the answers to. My curiosity running rampant, searching for clues—gobbling up every bit of mental energy I had in between working hard with my hands.

After we had cleared the facility and made sure there were no ghouls meandering inside, I was able to shift my focus away from the interior to what needed to be done outdoors. As if the mechanical feeling of this place wasn't already eerie and cold enough, anytime one of the motion sensing emergency lights slowly dimmed out, a tiny red spec would stay illuminated in almost every corner of every hall and hallway, making it feel like all the walls had eyes. Cameras. Everywhere. Watching us and every single thing we did as the clock ticked down. Scouring the base, we had discovered that most doors were locked—turning long hallways into winding dead-end-labyrinths if you didn't have the needed access tablet with you at the time. The entire place was empty, no survivors or fortified pockets of soldiers anywhere above ground. Not one—not even an **attempt** to maintain an above ground presence.

Almost like every single person who had been here had rushed somewhere else or had died along the way. I wondered why Roger had insisted we run and hide in this particular base of all places—about the extraction team that he had been told would be coming for him... what happened to them?

Unsettled feelings and half-answered questions lingered in the back of my mind more than I would have liked to admit. The trees helped ease my nerves a bit, working outside of the base. Moving cars, cracking skulls, taking mental notes about the lay of the land and how the alarms were mounted in a way that would help us cull ghouls—all of them soon to be rounded up like cattle, pooled against a barrier, and then sorted through by the White Coats. Strange as it was, as soon as that alarm sounded, it would be my job to turn lookout-sniper and their jobs to turn ghoul ranchers—literally slapping their hands on infected who had made it to the tip of the funnel and promptly giving them a pat down for any merchandise they might be carrying. A ludicrous situation to have found ourselves in—one soldier and a group of amateurs knowingly and deliberately getting as close to the undead as we could. My mind itched and churned constantly about it... about how unlikely our success would be and how bad the situation had become to force us into acting this way... But we had no other choice. And the still smoldering horizon of the now incinerated town that we had all just escaped from gave us a constant reminder of that fact. In order to stop the drones, we had no other choice than to find a hard drive tucked away in one lost ghoul's pocket. Absurdity had become necessity.

The fence surrounding the perimeter of the base would filter the undead around the sides all the way to the front parking lot—spilling over from one choke point into another and mingling with even more undead emerging from the tree line. Like two waterfalls colliding. Then, convoluted in formation, the undead would wrap themselves every which direction until they reached the tip of the funnel and the source of the soon-to-be-sounding alarm. Walking corpses reliably flowing along the path of least resistance, weaving in between parked cars, attempting to shove their festering fingers up our asses. I watched small clusters mass in places and stumble outwards, triple checking their trajectory, how they moved and the way their footsteps fell before putting a bullet in their skulls. I instructed the White Coats all the while, doing my best to educate them before things got really intense. They listened as best they could and tried to do what I said. But none of them took particularly well to killing. Like a gym class full of awkward fat kids nobody else wanted to pick. A few could get by without embarrassing themselves, sure. But this was far from an all-star team.

“Look, stop being such pussies about it, alright?!” I shouted, holding a crowbar at my side as I instructed the group of White Coats who were still fit to fight about the nuances of the undeads’ behavior—about analyzing them, not just freezing in fear at the sight of them.

Each of the White Coats held a weapon in their hands—outfitted with supplies from the base to look like soldiers. Polished boots, crisp fatigues, well fitted belts and side arms galore. They looked the part of professionals alright. But few of them had ever actually fired a weapon or swung an object with the intention of doing another person serious harm. And while everyone no doubt used to get their jollies off watching action heroes save the day, most people don’t actually have it in them to so much as lift a finger in that regard without feeling queasy or tucking their tails between their legs. It takes time to educate a man how to kill without getting himself killed in the process. We didn’t have the luxury of time. But we did have a shit ton of ammunition.

“The color of their skin, according to its level of decay and any visible wounds, is your best indication of how quickly and how fluidly they are going to move! Now, this one here, has been dead for over a week!” I announced, stepping past a crawler, whose knees I’d snapped, to a still standing ghoul—one of a handful approaching the base from the field out front. “Its balance is awful, its movement is restricted, and, while it’s still very strong, it can easily be out maneuvered!” I exclaimed, stretching my arm out so that the ghoul could grab it—latching onto me immediately with a vice like death grip. The White Coats gasped in shock that I had allowed its cold dead hand to wrap around me—using my weight to shift it off balance and topple it to the ground—quickly swinging the crowbar down three times with my other arm until its brain was completely destroyed. Then, still in the clutches of its now motionless hand, I swiveled my wrist to pull its fingers free and stood up again to address the class. No more phased from what I had just done than if I had been playing with a puppy.

“Now, you’ve all got plenty of ammo. And since we’re making more noise than we can possibly manage setting this whole thing up, you’ve got the opportunity to practice!” I explained, gesturing out to the twenty or thirty lumbering figures around us slowly emerging from the woods. “Don’t be afraid, but also, don’t be stupid. Work in pairs! And mind where you point your guns when you’re firing them AND when you’re not! Carelessness is every bit as likely to get you killed as the undead are!” I finished, glancing back at a couple of trucks driving around the side of the base—relocating the explosives I’d ordered placed near a small stretch of glass exterior.

“I’m headed out back now. Two minutes,” I announced, keeping Dennis in the loop of the chaos running circles around us on the surface. He gave a brief ‘affirmative’ to let me know he was still listening and I quickly slid the tablet onto the holster on my belt, jogging around the side of the building—a stiff, piercing hobble etched into the deepest parts of my muscle and bone—still healing from the glass dug out of it the week prior and the force of being thrown by the explosion just a few hours before.

The painkillers I’d popped on the way out of the Eden Corp building had served me well up till now. But every minute my broken fingers, swollen leg and bruised ribs became more and more apparent. The pain wasn’t the problem though. It was the idea of restricted mobility or far worse, feigning accuracy that dwelled on my mind. Cause as soon as I set up the explosives to go off and sealed any potential back entrances into the base—and as soon as the White Coats had finished constructing the long funnel out of cars to control the ghouls steadily approaching towards the front—then I’d be heading up to the roof to shoulder my rifle and pop heads. One by one, over and over, until one of two things happened. The base was overrun—trapping me on the roof and all of us without hope but to individually inspect each and every ghoul. Or, Roger was found and that God-damn elevator could finally start moving again. Twenty minutes and counting... the show was about to begin.

“Woah, woah!!!!” I yelled, pulling my side arm up to shoot three lumbering ghouls in the head just as I spotted the trucks where I’d told them to be. “Don’t unload that! Just leave it as is!” I instructed two White Coats, both of whom looked about as terrified as anyone I’d ever seen. “Just head back out front and keep running ammo to the roof!” I ordered, pleased that they still knew how to nod eagerly and rush off to do exactly what I said.

I hauled a crate across the length of the truck bed and rotated it until it was facing the side of a window—yanking open the top, and reorganizing its contents. The thick metallic beams inside the base wouldn’t be affected by the blast—reinforced steel that kept the building from being compromised by ordinary explosives. But I didn’t need to topple the structure completely, I just needed to collapse vulnerable entrances, large glass viewing areas or anything that the undead might be able to sneak in through—bringing the ceiling down enough to obscure the entranceway. Ghouls can’t climb after all. They could stumble upwards if the terrain allowed, but they couldn’t climb—too uncoordinated both in body and mind to even consider the idea. And that fundamental inability of the masses of ghouls that would soon overrun us was paramount to the

jungle gym we were creating for them to walk through. Fifteen minutes and counting...

I glanced at my watch as I made my way back toward the front entrance—hearing the tablet’s chime once more immediately after the signal from the detonator went live—Dennis, keeping close tabs on what was happening on the surface—waiting for my word of when we were going to hit the switch and blow the charges. I reached down to my hip and pulled the device off my belt—rearing around front of the place to see that the full length of cars had nearly been set up—a long stretch of about thirty vehicles, stacked two by two and flipped on their sides to lean against one another, all the way down the length of the wide walkway leading to the parking lot. A grin spread across my face at the site—spotting White Coats off in the distance, brutally swinging crowbars or firing pistols into skulls, exactly as I’d instructed them to do. Seeing them acting like that gave me a rush of hope. It could work. It could actually work. And despite all my trepidations and paranoia about whether those I was with were up to the challenge ahead, underneath it all, I still secretly felt a giddy pulse of long dormant excitement that any of this was really happening. I’d always wanted to see just how many undead I could kill. That part, if nothing else about the situation, was still something I was looking forward to. So I made a point of reminding myself of that—promising myself that killing ghouls would calm my worn nerves.

“The last of the charges will go off just before the alarm sounds—give it a few minutes,” I answered, tapping the tablet.

“This isn’t about your explosives,” Dennis announced, quickly wiping my smile away from the sound of his unsettled and bewildered tone. He wasn’t just keeping ‘in touch’ anymore—something was wrong. “Something weird is going on and I need to run it by you.”

“Define weird?”

“You haven’t used anything to try and communicate with anyone outside this base, have you?”

“No. Why?”

“You’re sure no one tried to use communications, right?” he repeated, his tone interrogative and frayed. I scowled and hiccupped on uncertainty—unsure of what he was getting at or why he would second guess if we were actually on the same side.

“No, Dennis. Why?”

“I think we’re being monitored.”

“Monitored?... Hold on,” I huffed, unsure of what the word ‘monitored’ meant—ever so slightly losing my focus as I sidestepped around a car before it was turned on its end by three White Coats and a forklift—putting the finishing touches on the fortifications of the funnel. “Dennis, just tell me what I need to know, please.”

“Ok,” he grumbled, letting out a breath like something big was biting chunks out of him. “A few minutes ago, communications lit up—putting out calls to all active military personnel to do two things: report in, and to stand down any and all attempts to assist the civilian population... So, basically, I was just told to let you all die and cease any and all communications with you.”

“What?” I sputtered, straining my mind to think of any situation in which an order like that one would have been issued by anyone in the military. “Told by whom? Who’s in command?” I asked, walking down the length of the long hallway away from the White Coats so that they wouldn’t overhear and lose all hope—eventually finding myself a secluded corner to crouch in and think. I still didn’t know much if anything about Dennis or what his position was—who he reported to or what his standing orders were. I didn’t ask. But hearing him tell me that ‘he was supposed to abandon us and let us all die’?! That bullshit gave me serious pause for reflection... who the fuck was this guy? And what crazy assholes was he taking orders from?

“My command is AWOL assumed KIA.”

“So then who were they while they were still alive?”

“No, you’re missing my point, this message isn’t coming from command,” Dennis corrected, trying to steer me back on course to what he was describing. “These announcements came from a subsidiary channel. Eden Corp broadcast in origin, **not** military. VERY LIKELY a recording made for just this scenario.”

“So then fuck em,” I snapped, annoyed that he had any inclination to come to a decision other than helping us. My mind stalled and hiccupped on all that was happening—overloaded with constant concerns in every direction each nagging for my undivided attention. I didn’t know what ‘weird’ thing Dennis was getting at—what being ‘monitored’ meant or how bad that was if in fact that was true at all.

“Listen to me, this doesn’t make sense! Like I said, the communications board just LIT UP. I’m seeing chatter from everyone who’s left. EVERYONE is jumping on the horn to reply and make their intentions known,” Dennis exclaimed, his tone stressing something that I didn’t quite seem to grasp—too frazzled from loading ammunition to

understand the subtleties of the situation. If the channel that we were being fed the order through was Eden Corp, it was almost assuredly complete bullshit being bled into the system to poison the minds of anyone listening—to try and stifle any attempt by survivors to rally together or decipher the bigger picture of what was happening. And, if that were the case... then... well... compliance with that broadcast wasn't really a 'request' or an 'order'—it was a ruse... it was... it was a trap! Suddenly, what was happening dawned on me and I realized what Dennis had meant by the word 'monitored.' He had my full undivided attention now.

"Shit, wait, I get it. It's Ellex!" I groaned, sliding a hand through my hair and dropping my head back to smack against the wall—seeing the threads of implication behind the overt call for communications Dennis had just received. It was a trap Ellex had set to determine where to bomb next—how to kill the highest number of still active military personnel and ensure no one was able to stand up to what he was unleashing. And, because of that, the more Dennis and I said to one another—the more anyone on this earth communicated over open lines being actively monitored—the more likely it became that they would be targeted and bombed next. I clenched my jaw hard and thought of what to do—wondering just how much I needed Dennis to be able to accomplish the task ahead.

"Better safe than sorry, Lieutenant—we're gonna have to go dark," Dennis stated, kind enough to let me know before he pulled the plug. "Broadcasts too," he added on, forcing me to make the decision between warning my Brother about what was coming, wherever he was, and the long-shot-in-hell of me and the White Coats actually doing something about those drones. Damned if we do, damned if we don't. But, either way, I couldn't risk it if it meant adding to everything we were already risking. I took a deep breath and sighed, accepting the hard decision for everyone.

"Ok. Cut the signal. If we make it into the elevator, or if we don't make it, try and send it out again. Otherwise, it's been a pleasure," I stated, waiting the short moment for Dennis' last words—wishing us 'Good luck and God speed'. I put the tablet down and slid it back into its holster—ready and waiting just in case Dennis needed to speak to me or we somehow miraculously found that fucker Roger. Five minutes and counting before the alarm sounded. Only now, we had no eyes and ears to overlook the operation other than my own. So I pushed myself off the ground, moved quickly down the length of the hall—whistled loudly to get the White Coats attention to retreat back to the base and then headed for the roof to watch it all unfold.

Fifteen crates of various ammunition and weapons had been placed in a central pile on the roof next to select ordinance, flares, water and rations of food. A single chair, my favorite prototype rifle, a walkie talkie, and a flashlight to use for signaling, all sat beside the crates—ready and waiting for me to take the helm. The White Coats jogged back to the base—running down the length of the huge funnel built out of cars—like a fishing net or a makeshift-dam, forcing them to walk in other ways. Two cars, tipped on their sides, pressed roof to roof all the way back until they lay on the parking lot pavement. The tree line of the dense surrounding forest sat just beyond that lot, already littered with a few handfuls of corpses—their cracked skulls peppering the field like piñata shards. A tiny appetizer of carnage compared to the sprawling doomsday we were about to host. Any minute now...

As a final touch, the fire truck I had previously pulled the axe from had been parked adjacent to the funnel—a way to keep a central mass from forming and forcing the ghouls to walk all the way around it. Newly acquired smears of undead blood tainted the White Coat's crisp uniforms and their dispositions appeared different from when I'd seen them just a few moments prior. Now they appeared enthralled by how they had been given the reigns—how they had actually fought back against the things that were trying to kill us. It was as if they had been liberated by chaos and were now free to kill as they pleased. I smiled at their cute, virgin bloodlust—setting the stage for the hell waiting just over the horizon. Then, as if picnicking in the summertime, I took a seat in my chair, uncapped the scope of my rifle, ate half a sandwich in the last free minute I had... and then... I watched the bright blue sky as the clock wound down to zero—blowing vulnerable chunks of the building to rubble and sounding the bases endless shrieking alarm—a beacon bringing every single ghoul for miles around straight towards us. Bring it.

CHAPTER 24: HOSTAGE

Ellex Vussel, Eden Island, 2018

The evacuation contingency was simple—in the event of an outbreak, get everyone to the docks, load the emergency vessels, and clear the island to nearby outposts or ships. Of course, I had never, ever suspected that any evacuation could possibly be ordered without my express consent and participation. I had never considered the length to which my plan would be strained and potentially compromised by so many different people over and over again. And I had never considered that come time to evacuate, that such measures would be forced upon me at gunpoint by the very man I had hired to lead my guards and secure my safety. Nahuel marched at my side, one hand on his rifle and the other on my arm as we quickly made our way towards the docks with the 17 other men who just moments before I had held a meeting with—now collectively fleeing the island for the supposed safety of their ships. And though I did my best to protest what was transpiring, well aware of the fact that there couldn't possibly be a real outbreak, nevertheless, the sounds of the alarms and the panicked disarray of all the people trying to run, drowned out my pleas for sanity and reason.

The body of a man lay on the ground with his head blown off—a long smear of blood painting the light pavement of the pathway we walked. I looked at the body, clearly a prop of a once healthy person used to convince the crowd that we were in danger, and came to realize that I recognized his clothing—the doctor who, earlier that morning, had stitched both my collarbone and patched my wife's nose. Nahuel had set an unspoken example by executing him first as if a warning of the subsequent infection to everyone else. And as I gazed down at his freshly fallen corpse, I was reminded that if I didn't act soon, I would be next. Nahuel gripped me tightly—as aware as I was of the charade—and, as he did so, I slowly slipped my free hand into my pocket, fishing for my personal tablet to use as a weapon and break loose. But, just as I managed to dig it out, trying to hide it in my palm, he quickly reached over and snatched it away—throwing it as hard as he could into a cluster of trees. I stared helplessly as the tablet disappeared into a fern—my best chance of escape and only hope of communications now discarded and useless.

“Fuck your tricks,” Nahuel growled, in no mood to entertain any surprise I might hold in store for him. He was in control now. He was calling the shots. And so, to that end, I was his hostage. The group was marched to waiting lifeboats and rafts, already half full of the other people

who had worked for me as caretakers or servants. Terrified, shock-stricken looks were plastered across their faces, and some even held onto one another to be able to endure the ordeal at all. And though I looked from one raft and boat to another, no matter where my eyes fell, I couldn't spot either my wife or my son. I glared at Nahuel as he directed me towards a private vessel—twisting my arm ever so slightly to emphasize the strain on my fresh wound.

"You've killed everyone now... your family too... they're all as good as dead. You realize that, don't you?" I explained to him, knowing well that regardless of whether I spoke truth or lies he wouldn't believe a word I said.

"Don't be so sure," he growled, hurling me forward into the vessel and gesturing for the other men to either climb aboard and steer, or to find another ship to escape in. Nahuel stepped into the cramped cargo hold a moment later and closed the door behind him—pounding his hand on the ceiling to give the driver the all clear. Then, not even a fraction of a moment later, the boats turbines kicked in and we pulled away from the dock. Only then, after he had me all to himself locked in a private room on this tiny vessel, did he seem to relax—taking a seat across from me and casually laying his rifle across his lap—daring me to try and escape or confront him. I looked hatefully at him but didn't risk making a move or allowing him to suppose that I was panicking. For if I was going to have any chance in whatever lay ahead, it was his assumptions as much as his suspicions that would determine whether I lived or died. He didn't know everything. And I had every intention of keeping the way in which I would end his life a surprise to him until the very last moment.

"Comfortable?" Nahuel asked, his giant hands lightly caressing the rifle before him. "Anything I can get you to help you enjoy the ride, sir?"

"Where's my son?"

"Perhaps with your wife?"

"And where is she?"

"I can't be certain... she seems to have left her room... last I checked anyway," he smugly explained, alluding to breaking her free or somehow letting her loose—whether she was, in fact, still alive, a mystery he seemed to think I would go mad pondering. I stared through his attempts to lord his stature over me—as if he'd won—as if this was all over and I had nothing I could say or do to stop him. "Perhaps we'll run into her when we arrive? Wouldn't that be a happy reunion?"

"And what about your wife? Your child?"

“What about them?”

“Will they be a part of this reunion? Are they comfortable? Is there anything I can do to help them get through such hard times? They must be terrified of falling ill too?” I asked, the corners of his mouth slowly losing their curves as I stripped the condescending grin from his face. “I mean... who knows? In an outbreak like this... anyone could have been exposed to the virus.”

“True... any one of us might have been infected somehow... but some viruses are worse than others. Makes sense to kill one before fighting the next, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Hard to say,” I stated, the waves of the shore causing the ship we were moving in to rise up and down heavily as it sped away from the island. “I never was any good at convincing people how stupid they are. Showing them, however, has always been a strong suite of mine... So, I suppose we’ll just have to wait and see who fights and kills whom,” I growled, knowing all too well the hellacious fate his zeal and hubris would earn us. My stomach churned a moment and I felt a cold sweat begin to grow on my brow—the brooding anticipation of what was to come itching my every nerve and thought. It wouldn’t be long now... and, without an Eden Corp issued phone the likes of which Nahuel had just thrown away, I wouldn’t be able to stop what was about to unfold...

“Yes. We will see ‘who fights and kills whom... I’m looking forward to it.”

“Are you? Really?”

“I am.”

“Strange,” I muttered, the churning feeling in my stomach punctuating the movement of the vessel. “I’ve never met a man who looked forward to his own death before.”

“I have met a great many,” Nahuel jested, reminding me again just how accustomed he was to the torture he would soon, undoubtedly attempt to put me through. “Begging for death is more common than you would like to believe.”

The boat began to turn slightly and I tried to decipher in my own mind the particular course it might chart—wondering which of the 17 ships docked off the coast Nahuel had chosen to retreat to. He watched my expression carefully as I attempted to look through the walls and decipher his plan. And as I did so, his smug condescending grin returned to him once more.

“Was that little show of yours for my sake or for theirs?” he asked, breaking the temporary silence between us out of curiosity. I scowled at his question—unsure at first exactly what he was referring to. Then, recalling that he had planted listening devices on my guests, I understood that he was speaking of the meeting I had just held—the information I had just presented—and the temper I had so foolishly lost in those muddled and heated proceedings. I swallowed a moment’s trepidation, reflecting on my spiraling lack of composure in search of the truth to his question. Not for his sake of course, but for my own. “I’ve never seen you act so... recklessly before.”

“It wasn’t an act,” I eventually replied, feeling a strange sense of ease that in this place, under these circumstances, I very nearly could be candid with another person—a sadistic, horror of a man, who, in truth, I shared far more in common with than either of us would care to admit. “I told them the truth. But the context of the truth is often more important than the truth itself,” I eventually replied, a subtle flinch of disbelief painting the back of his mind as I spoke. He didn’t believe me. Or, that’s to say, I could tell that he did in fact believe me but also that he wouldn’t allow himself to. For if what I had said to those men was actually the truth, then killing me wouldn’t change a thing—the plan was larger than me—larger than my presence on this island—and something that could not be stopped by abducting only me.

“I don’t believe you,” he eventually grunted, adjusting himself uncomfortably on his side of the rocking cargo hold. “What would you have to gain in confessing to anything?”

“Understanding.”

“Understanding?” he probed, tilting his head to the side and frowning—failing to grasp my deeper meaning. “You prove yourself guilty and expect mercy because you proved it? Have you really gone so mad as this?”

“No, that’s not what I meant,” I huffed, rolling my eyes at the simplicity of his thoughts. “Guilt doesn’t matter to people if they’re guilty. Neither does accountability, especially if there’s nothing to be done about it. Those men don’t ultimately care about what I confessed... they already understood it on some level... besides, they’re too spoiled to genuinely care. They only whine, demand, insist and expect... as if they’re somehow entitled not just to their lives but to the privileges they’ve grown accustomed to. Because of that, for them, understanding is more important than the difference between right and wrong. That’s how good businessmen do business after all—right and wrong don’t matter. Only understanding does,” I explained, noticing as I did that he still struggled

to follow my meaning. I took a deep sigh and extended my arm to keep from bumping against the side of the boat as we banked sharply to the right. I coughed a moment and pressed my other hand to my stomach—feeling my unsettled nerves tug at me more and more with each turn and wave.

“Now is not a good time to become sick,” Nahuel exclaimed, leaning forward to stress the point. “You might be mistaken for infected.”

“I’ll try to keep that in mind.”

“You believe you will be forgiven then? Is that it? You think your trial will be forgiving if they understand the reasons for your actions, yes?”

“No.”

“Then speak sense, or realize that you are without it.”

“Right... I forgot I need to spell things out for you,” I grumbled, speaking down to his grasp of human nature as if his insights carried no more weight than that of a delinquent child. “An example to illustrate my point perhaps?... When I kill you, you will respect me. Until I do, you won’t,” I explained, leaning forward as well to stare him in the eye and stress my own point. “You won’t respect me because I killed you mind you... you’ll respect me because you’ll know that you lost and that I won. You’ll finally understand how foolish and stupid you were for testing me like this. And then, in that moment, whenever it comes, you’ll realize and appreciate all that I could see that you couldn’t,” I continued, seeing a deep lust for blood beginning to brood inside him as I turned his inquiry to reflect his inevitable fate. “That understanding will be your final thought. The elation of truth will overshadow all other emotions. And when you sputter your last breath... you will think of me—not your family, not your dreams—your last thought will be of me. The reason is simple... understanding allows one to rest their mind. And if you put a person’s mind at ease, whether you’re good or bad, right or wrong... it doesn’t matter. There’s comfort in defeat when you accept that you could never win.”

“Ah... I see now,” Nahuel exclaimed, comfortably leaning back in his chair once more and nodding in agreement to what I had said. “If you create an impossible situation, you choose the outcome for your enemies... you... dictate the response, yes?”

“In a matter of speaking, yes,” I agreed, feeling the boat begin to slow as if we were approaching a boarding area or dock—without windows or means to determine wherever that might be.

“I understand now,” Nahuel grunted, a slight huff escaping his nostrils as if to belittle me and all that I had said to him. “You’re a genius

turned fool... unable to grasp how lost you are in your own mind. Pathetic.”

“You’re one to talk.”

“No, no, no... you fail to understand me,” he insisted, adjusting his feet as if he would stand at any moment—waiting for the door to open to wherever it was he had brought us. “You have never killed before... spilt the blood that you so arrogantly boast about. You have never found yourself as vulnerable as you are now, or as dependent on your self-assured superiority. You do not realize that you have already lost, because you are so convinced that you cannot lose.”

“I can’t. Not now. It’s too late... you made sure of that with this pathetic attempt of yours to meddle in affairs you can’t even conceive of,” I snapped, brushing aside his contention of superiority. The ship soon came to a halt, swaying gently back and forth as the sound of heavy footsteps quickly approached the back door. Nahuel stood up and aimed his rifle at me—my once protector turned captor. Two loud thuds echoed on the back door—a signal of whether or not to open it—but Nahuel waited a moment, choosing to speak to me first.

“There... again... another assumption you’ve made,” he growled, gesturing for me to stand up. I complied—the seasick feeling in my gut and pain in my collarbone staggering me as I rose. “Do you see it?”

“See what?”

“How blind you are?” he asked, the grin returning—the self-assured hubris that had led him to so zealously attempt to remove me. I stared blankly at him in response, waiting for him to spit out whatever it was he was so confident about. “No? Too blind to see that you can’t see?”

“By all means, enlighten me,” I said, my tone bordering on sarcasm—no more afraid of him or what he might do to me than I was of anyone else. It was too late now. He had already sealed all of our fates by abducting me. And whether I died by his hand or because of his actions, nothing could change that now. He took a bold step forward, removed one hand from his rifle, and pulled a tablet similar to the one I had been carrying with me from his pocket. I looked down at it and furrowed my brow, wondering exactly where he had managed to retrieve such a device from. It wasn’t mine... he hadn’t raided my supplies or confiscated it from me. And it certainly wasn’t anything he had been authorized to possess or come into contact with. No... the device he showed me was something that only a select few people had been issued or given access to. And as I looked down at it resting gently in his hand, it slowly dawned on me that this little mutiny of his might not have been his idea at all—he

was taking orders. My expression turned blank as the idea dawned on me—my mind suddenly returning to Nathan, alive and well—to whomever he had been speaking to on the phone with—possibly the very people he had spying on me—and the very people that that device might have given Nahuel the opportunity to be in contact with too.

“They admitted that it may be too late for you to be stopped,” he stated confidently, tucking the tablet back into his pocket and turning me towards the door so that we could make our exit. “But they insisted that you be replaced.”

Nahuel pounded twice on the ceiling—the signal that it was all clear to open the door. Then, to my shock and dismay, the hatch opened to reveal soldiers on all sides wearing crisp, immaculate United States Navy uniforms—guns drawn and cuffs waiting. Nahuel pushed the barrel of his rifle against my back to force me out of the cargo hold—towards a tall, dark haired man standing at attention, ready and waiting to receive me from him. The pulses in my stomach suddenly escalated from minor distractions to visceral pains—leaving me unable to believe what was happening or to keep from nearly vomiting at the site of it all. I was trapped. I was cornered. And looking into the eyes of the man before me as we stepped towards him—accompanied by the cool clasp of chains around my wrists—I realized just how few options I now had. I swallowed faintly to keep from passing out... my complexion turning white... my hopes sinking to the depths of my being—deeper and darker with every passing moment.

“Mr. Vussel, welcome aboard the George H.W Bush,” the man stated sternly, his firm anal-retentive posture as much a signature of his rank as the countless pins and medals adorning his breast. “You are hereby placed under arrest and will remain in custody and under supervision until your trial, to take place in one day’s time. Please follow me to your quarters.”

CHAPTER 25: PRISON

Derek Riggs, Oregon, 2018

We communicated through uncomfortable silences. I had told most of my story. Cory listened. He didn't interrupt. He let me speak. I told him about my father. About my former friends. About our fort. About everything we went through and how it all went wrong. I told him everything that had happened to me and everything I had done to discover the truth of what was coming. And Cory sat there through it all, his expression morphing and readjusting as if he were watching a sad movie. Every so often I'd come to a memory that would make me harden up and freeze. I'd clench every muscle at once and then... stare blankly off into the waves of undead and remember the protocols. I'd revert back to a simple, animalistic version of myself and bury every thought that nagged at me in the process. In that I could feel calm again. In that I could feel safe—knowing full well that I could kill my way out of or endure any possible situation or confrontation. But I couldn't sit with the memories. Not for long. That is, until, after nearly five full minutes of quietly staring forward, Cory raised his voice to ask what happened after I had stopped speaking.

"Derek?"

"What?"

"Then what happened?"

"What?" I muttered, calculating the wind—ignoring the memories—focusing on the jump we would soon have to make. "Happened? What do you mean, what happened?"

"With you and your dad?" he asked, his voice as delicate as if speaking to a crying infant—a tender, gentle caress of empathy and compassion. I tensed up from his tone—unsure of how to take it. I didn't need pity. I didn't need some candy ass intervention. I just needed... I just needed... the wind was changing... I'd need to adjust our trajectory to account for it... glide ahead deeper into the super cluster and then bank to the left for the descent... that should do it... that should give us the best course forward... "Derek?"

"What!?!?" I abruptly shouted, startling Cory as once again he tore me away from my own thoughts and brought me back to the memories. He stared at me uncertainly for a moment, and after a few seconds I realized that I was sitting with my knees folded in front of

me—my arms wrapped around them—tightly clasping my hands together as if frozen in an immobilized, defensive, ball. All Cory had done was ask what happened next. That's all. Nothing more. But for whatever reason, that question made me more uneasy than I could possibly put to words. I stuttered on the answer for a moment... breathing in between attempts to speak... and then... after... the trajectory... just focus on the trajectory... just survive—put your mind to the task at hand and survive... don't dwell... don't reflect... don't remember the lies or the liar... the abuse or the wounds... just... escape... just break through the chains and escape before it's too late...

CHAPTER 26: CAVE

Derek Riggs, Maine, 2004

Denial is more powerful than reality. But only those who have had their realities questioned really know how true that fact is. Because when you hear something that you refuse to accept as real—when you hear something that tells you everything you know to be true is wrong—you don't just lie down and accept it as 'truth'. You seize up and reject it with every ounce of your being—you react emotionally... become overly sensitive... hate whoever dared contest your vantage point and smear them with unbridled contempt. You seek out information that will validate your views—you insist on things that make no logical sense. But mostly you do anything to avoid the imposition of uncomfortable truths... sinking deeper and deeper into denial until nothing short of reality snapping your neck could force you to face it. For my father, denial was the only suitable vantage point of reality. And now he stood holding me at gunpoint—threatening everything I had sworn to live my life by, by insisting 'the virus wasn't real.' As if him saying that to me was some sort of necessary condition of letting himself off the hook for having told me about it in the first place. Frankly... I wish he'd just killed me then and there... pointing the shotgun at me as if he'd just set me free in more ways than one.

"What?" I grunted, half-inclined to laugh at the absurdity of what he'd just said—that it wasn't real... that the Solanum virus, despite everything he had confessed to me years ago, didn't so much as exist.

"You heard me. It's not real. It never was," he reiterated, the visceral fear and rage that had initially grown in his eyes now sinking slowly into him—further into denial.

"Bullshit," I coughed, dismissing what I was bearing. "You weren't lying to me when you told me about it, so don't think you can lie to me about it now. It's real. You know it's real."

*"No... I **thought** it was real. It wasn't."*

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"You heard what I said! When you're in the military, your orders aren't always the 'truth'. More often than not, they're just what needs to be said to get the job done," he explained, speaking without pause or reservation—as if he actually believed the bullshit he was spouting.

"Horseshit. You're lying."

"Boy... I'm doing you a favor that you don't have the character to appreciate," he growled, agitated by my recurrent nags of calling him a liar—of seeing

through him and everything he insisted on trying to hide from me. "You wanna know the truth? I'm telling you. So listen up—it was all a lie. A ruse to justify violating our trust—that's all it was," he continued, gesturing with the shotgun for me to stand up and make my way towards the door. But I didn't move—I didn't so much as consider the idea of getting up. My father took a bold step forward and tensed his grip of the gun—making it damn clear that he'd answered my questions only to insist I had no right to question him at all. "Now get moving. This little sob story of yours won you your freedom—let's not idle on goodbye."

"You told me you were stationed at a military lab in Louisiana," I snapped, returning my focus to the only truth I had ever known. "That's why you have that tattoo on your left arm—the one you had covered up with that ugly panther," I continued, remembering every detail of what he had told me and how I had come to verify it was true. "321R—sound familiar? Same combination as my lockbox—and the identification number for that facility. Everyone stationed at that base had one. But you didn't tell me that part, now did you? I had to find it out for myself," I explained, delving into the research I'd done—into every lead I'd chased and answer I'd scrounged for to know the truth for certain. My father's eyes boiled over listening to me talk back to him again—even at gunpoint—even after he'd insisted everything I held dear was a lie—calling his bluff and spitting on him for trying to bullshit me.

Suddenly, he veered the gun to the side and pulled the trigger—a deafening bang ringing in my ears as tiny shards of brick exploded out of a hole right next to me. My father bore his teeth at me and shook his head—utterly unwilling to confront what I had just revealed about our past. I blinked feverishly on my right side to try and clear the dust out of my eye but he soon enough started barking at me again—anything to get this night over with as fast as he could.

"Get up! You want to disappear!? GOOD! DISSAPEAR!" he screamed, breathing heavily—cornered within himself. I nodded and made a point of keeping my hands in plain view—rising up, barely able to walk. I placed a hand against the wall and used it to steady my balance—heading outside in my bare feet back towards the car. I listened to the sound of my father staggering behind me—wondering with each drunken step if I had pushed him too far. I stood in the cold night—my hands raised to my sides—and turned to look at him again. "Open the trunk," he instructed, pointing the gun at the car parked a few yards away. I complied immediately—familiar enough with erratic human behavior to know that I was no longer speaking to a man, I was speaking to a scared little boy locked inside of him. He was crying again—whether he realized it or not... he was crying. But this time... they weren't tears of sorrow or grief but of pain... pure, boiling pain.

I popped the trunk open and stared into it—stunned to see the contents of my lockbox inside—all of the money, clothes, food, water and supplies I'd need, only without the pistol or the machete. I stared back up at my father, confused why he had made a point of bringing these things with him to my abduction site—realizing in that moment that even he hadn't really decided what it was he was going to do with me. He

gestured towards the trunk with his gun again and instructed me to get dressed and 'clean myself up.' I obliged him again, slipping my broken thumb and battered body into a clean pair of black clothes that swallowed me into the night. He leaned against the side of a concrete pillar—his knees shaking as the tears increased. He was fighting a war inside himself, and if it weren't for the liquor dulling his senses, I knew that he'd never have allowed me see how much it pained him. I finished dressing and slipped the backpack on—remembering when I was younger how he'd helped me fasten on the back-shell of a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle costume—standing watch over me then no different than how he was now. And then, after I was dressed, we stood there without speaking. Waiting for him to tell me what to do next—still struggling to clear my mind of the bitter taste his lies had left.

"Now leave. And never show your face again," he demanded, looking down a long, dark length of road that he expected me to walk. I glanced off in that direction—at the freedom he insisted I take—at the prospect of starting a new life. But I didn't move. I couldn't. I was frozen in place—my thoughts lingering on everything that remained unresolved between us.

"Why won't you just tell me the truth?" I asked flatly, without a tone of anger or entitlement muddling my words. He took a deep breath for a moment as if he were about to fly into another rage from what I'd said, but instead just hiccupped on despair and released a deep sigh—defeated by himself—shaking his head repeatedly, unable to escape the memories I kept insisting were real.

"I don't know the truth, God dammit... and I don't wanna know," he stated, stepping towards the car and lowering the gun across his lap—pulling the door open and sitting down behind the wheel. He breathed heavily over his protruding gut for a moment, fumbling the keys around in one hand—the liquor in his system quickly catching up to his level of adrenaline. Sitting there, he took a moment to himself to think—staring through space at something he couldn't quite put into words. "You might think that knowing what's real will help you sleep better at night... but... it won't bring you any piece of mind... just more questions... nothing but questions," he confessed, pulling the gun into the car and slamming the door—looking at me through the windshield as if he half expected me to try and kick him through it. But I was just as heartbroken as he was—reflecting on the 'irrefutable facts' I was so convinced I knew and all that I had lived my life dedicated towards. Eventually my father rolled the window down half an inch—just enough to say his parting words to me.

"All I ever wanted was for you to grow up and become somebody decent," he muttered, turning the engine on and drunkenly shifting gears. "I would have been a good dad to somebody decent," he finished, pushing his foot on the gas and pulling away sharply—disappearing down the long stretch of road that just moments before he had tried to point me down.

I stayed in that spot for a good ten minutes not knowing what to do. The protocols were clear—my plan was set—to make my way to a plot of land in Canada... to make my way, completely on my own to the place where I had once planned to live out my days with my friends. Only now... my friends were gone and my

confidence was shattered... my mind was plagued. Because as sure as I had always known that the infection was coming, now, my father's refusal to admit the truth about it had made me take pause and question everything. What if he wasn't the one in denial? What if I was? What if he was actually telling me some semblance of the truth and actually had been lied to about the virus? I had no way of knowing what was real and what wasn't. And that, despite all the war wounds I'd suffered and all the people who had betrayed me, this was the most horrible pain I'd felt to date. I soon collapsed on the side of the road and buried my head in my hands—breathing heavily and fighting against that brooding sense of panic tearing me apart inside. I had to know. I just had to know. And until I did, I couldn't escape that insatiable need gnawing at the deepest part of myself. That is, until I realized what had to be done.

"The lab," I whispered, remembering what he had confessed to me all those years ago—the story of being stationed in a government lab outside New Orleans—a secret facility that manufactured and tested the disease on soldiers. Finding that lab was the only way I would ever know if the virus was real. And sitting there in a fit of my own neurosis and dismay, planning how I would soon break into it and find the answers I needed, was the only thing that calmed my broken nerves.

CHAPTER 27: SHADOWS

Derek Riggs, Oregon, 2018

Cory's arms were crossed—draped over his knees—and his chin rested atop them. He was listening—he was still listening... to every word. His face was... attentive... focused... unwavering... heartbroken. He was in pain. It was as if by listening to me he could feel my pain. And... in speaking to him... it was as if the pain didn't hurt me quite as much. But... no... no... NO. There is no pain. I don't remember it. I overcame it. I endured. I survived. I am a survivor. Nothing more. Not an animal, not a person—a survivor and nothing else. Fuck pain. It only exists if it pains you. And I choose not to feel it. I'm stronger than that—stronger than him and the sympathy he shows. And so... I stopped talking... stopped reacting... stopped feeling. My arched-spine that slouched me over, slowly curled up until I sat straight and rigid again—normal... back... to... normal.

"What was the last thing I said?" I asked, unsure of what I had confessed to him and what I had only become lost in remembering myself. Cory cleared his throat before responding—breaking a long-held silence between us.

"The lab," Cory explained, jolting me with mention of my own memories. "You said 'you planned to break into the lab.'"

"No shit," I mumbled, staring out at the horizon—at the ample light we would need to make our jump and move onto my fort. We were ready to go—everything was prepared and squared away for our departure. But I wasn't ready to move. Instead... I was caught in a web of sensation I'd never experienced before. I'd only ever told one person my story in all of my life. And that was so very long ago that talking about it again felt like being in the past—prying open a lid of things ignored in plain sight every single day and looking at them for the first time in years. "That fucking lab," I whispered to myself, trying to recall the order of events that followed—of when it was that I came to realize just how right my father was about finding questions in pursuit of the truth.

"Did you find it? Did you get inside?" Cory asked, prodding deeply into a freshly excavated part of me. "What was in there?"

"Answers... and more questions," I replied, feeling a strain on my ability to breathe and think clearly—as if my nervous system knew something deep down about how I was feeling that my mind refused to see. Cory nodded—unsure of what to say to the vague response I'd just

given him—unsure of how to react to the way I was now acting. Sitting still, watching me... waiting for my lead or... whatever it was I might do next. Only... I didn't know either. This wasn't like me. This wasn't anything like me. And yet... I didn't move. I just sat there... Sat there and stared at the sun resting behind the smoldering remains of the fire we had built together.

"I never did see my father again," I confessed, my eyes scanning each long scar I had carved into my own skin—each pain endured and lesson learned by testing just how much I could suffer through. "He got in that car and had an accident on the way home. Ran a red light. Killed two other people," I explained, shaking my head at the irony of the tree I'd fallen from. "And still... the last thing that he'd said to me was how he wished I was decent," I finished, turning my eyes from the sun to meet Cory's gaze—apt and unwavering—still listening—still watching. I cleared my throat uncomfortably—snapping myself back to the reason I had told him any of this in the first place—the lesson I was trying to teach him through my clumsy, rage filled attempts to convey wisdom and council.

"Cory... All the pain you've ever felt in your entire life... it's nothing compared to what you'll have to endure growing up... which... can be pretty hard for a kid to be able to hear... but it's true. When I say something to you... when I make a demand of you or tell you what to do... that's not me talking... it's the pain I've gone through, telling me to teach you how to survive in this world so that you don't have to feel that much pain too. But, no matter what I do, one day, one way or another, you will... you'll grow up and you'll feel pain like that too. And, when that day comes... if you're not ready for it... if your nerves aren't deadened... if your heart isn't hardened... then that pain will break you... and you'll either die or you'll be crippled for life because of it... That's why it's so important to listen to me, Cory. If you're going to survive, you're going to have to kill the part of yourself that's able to cry victim to that much pain," I explained, watching his expression—his attempts to decipher and understand everything I had told him and the reasons I claimed to have confessed it at all.

"Ok," Cory whispered submissively—a humble admission that he couldn't possibly understand all I'd been through—that he couldn't possibly fathom what it might mean for him to endure such pains too. But that's real life—that's what it takes to be a survivor—and that sure as shit wasn't something this kid was raised to understand or really appreciate by his tender, loving, father. But he got it now. I could see in his face and in his dampened spirit that he really got it now. And, with that, once again I was comfortable with the idea of having Cory by my

side. I put my helmet back on, turned to look at the glider, and began pushing myself off the ground.

A burst of white light, brighter than the sun, ignited the canyon side and swallowed the moment—a deafening, heart-stopping blast, so powerful and all consuming that it tossed both Cory and I backwards—knocking everything around us into the air as if the whole fucking world had just been cracked in two. My ears rang—unable to hear anything beyond the shrill piercing sound of whatever the fuck had just happened—an explosion—a huge, nearby explosion. I came to realize I wasn't moving anymore—that my hands were pressed against the dirt and my helmet visor was cracked—my bulletproof, shatterproof visor was cracked from the force of slamming against the side of a rock—and my lungs were aching for lack of air. I looked up from the dirt—the shrill ringing in my ears slowly fading as a rumbling vacuum-sucking sound became more and more audible. I looked up to see that the place the white-flash had come from was now nothing more than a tower of smoke—a huge plume billowing out of what, just moment before had been a super cluster of undead—thousands upon thousands of which had instantly been incinerated by the very explosions Cory and I had previously sat watching—the first time those explosions had drastically changed direction since we'd taken notice of them the prior day.

I pushed myself off the ground and tried to assess my surroundings—all of our supplies scattered across the lay of land we had set up camp on. My recently assembled glider had been tossed about twenty yards back—fortunately, tangled and caught by a group of trees. Cory, however, hadn't been so lucky. He'd been dragged—slammed against the rocks and tumbled end over end. Now, he lay motionless with his face down in the dirt. I sprinted over to him—pulling his head up to try and assess the damage. He was unconscious... unresponsive... but, from what I could tell, had sustained no serious injury from the blast—only shock and bruises that would grow with each coming day. If there was no internal bleeding, he'd live though—he'd be just fine. Assuming, that is, that we both managed to get the fuck out of there as quickly as possible. Because now that those blasts had changed location—now that they were targeting large groups of undead, not simply advancing in a grid-like strike pattern—it meant it would be suicide for us to stay where we were—peering out over the cliffside waiting for the next explosion to hit. They almost always were dropped in pairs or threes after all—sometimes a few seconds delay in between them, other times minutes. Which meant... any second now... any moment... another blast could hit and wipe us off the map. We had to go—we had to get as far away from

that cluster of undead as we could—and we had to do it now! I scooped Cory up under my arm and ran to retrieve the glider.

I used my supply of climbing rope to fasten Cory tightly underneath me—tossing him this way and that like a ragdoll until I was certain he was securely in place. Then, after pulling my glider out of the trees, I mounted it on my back and double-checked every hinge and interconnecting piece. As I did so, another explosion on the other side of the super cluster ignited—an explosion about two or three times the distance from us as the last, but still large enough to knock me off my feet. I turned to the side, glanced at the glider to determine if it were still fit for flight, and realized that I'd have to forgo absolute certainty and piece of mind. It looked fine. It looked completely fine! But... if there were a micro-tear or un-lodged screw then... fuck... I didn't have time! We had to leave now!!! Something had changed or... the 'plan' I had theorized about had been progressed or expedited somehow. The undead were no longer being herded by the blasts—they were being systematically eradicated—explosions lighting up all along the distant horizon in greater number—countless targets, swarms of ghouls and remains of cities all gone in a flash. What the fuck had happened?! What had changed so suddenly that the targeting layout had jumped from a grid sequence to seemingly random bombardments ten times in number?!

“Cory! Wake up!” I demanded, shaking his limp body to try and pull him back to reality—but there was no response—no indication of how long he'd stay out or any way to anticipate what his reaction might be if he woke up mid-flight. But I couldn't wait any longer—not where we were—not with what was suddenly happening all around us—threatening to engulf us any moment. So despite my reservations that my glider might have been compromised, I made the decision to jump anyway—backing up to get enough distance and then sprinting as fast as I could—diving off the side of the cliff—free of the armor, supplies and firearms that would have weighed us both down—hoping—praying—clenching my teeth and stomach all the while that we would make it over the super cluster without disappearing into another blast.

CHAPTER 28: EXPEDITED COOPERATION

Ellex Vussel, Eden Island, 2018

I was marched down the deck by an entourage of guards. Leading the way was the well-decorated man who had received me—all of us aboard a huge aircraft carrier filled with personnel—each and every one of whom stared hatefully at me and me alone—the most infamous man alive in the flesh, now their prisoner. I was soon led into a winding stairwell, down three flights, then right through another doorway, followed by another right after twenty paces—reaching my would be cell or interrogation chamber within only a few minutes. And, while as I walked, I concentrated on remembering how I had arrived so that I might be able to escape if the opportunity miraculously presented itself. In truth, I was well aware that I would very likely never see the light of day again. I would die here. I would slowly rot and deteriorate here—falling more and more ill and hopeless by the second. I never did have a very good pair of sea legs. The water had always made me feel nauseous. But this time it was much more than just the water. I was no longer in control. And not even I, nor anything I might say or do, could possibly stop what Nahuel had so foolishly and brazenly set in motion by bringing me here—as if there would be no consequence or contingency for removing me from my island.

I coughed loudly—pressing my shackled hands up against my mouth to check for any spots of blood. Nothing yet. Still a normal, functional, healthy individual waiting for a trial to tell me how wrong I was and how guilty I should feel. A joke. A charade of blame marching me to death at the behest of those I had betrayed. As if severing my head would be any consolation for all the death I had caused and all the lines I had crossed. Laughable. Absurd. And yet typical of a system of militaristic, chest-thumping-bravado, insisting they were the sole arbiters of justice in this world. The very same justice that would soon be my reward for knowing far better than they did—for being far superior to them. And so I welcomed their hate and contempt with open arms. A stubborn, glowing sense of pride establishing itself in my heart since arriving here—reminding me with every passing breath that they would all be dead soon enough. Reminding me with every passing minute that the pain of being alive would soon be gone. And with it, I could finally, finally be at peace... at rest... at ease... knowing that I had won despite it all.

The hatch opened and I was moved forward into a small room with a single metal table. I continued to cough—checking my hands again

before resting them on the table I was soon handcuffed to. Guards stood on the periphery of the room as the decorated man took the seat across from me. Then, just before the hatch was closed to begin the necessary proceedings, one last person entered—that God-damned stupid fucking ape, Nahuel—smiling gleefully at me—glowing with a similar sense of pride as my own—as if he had won—as if there were, in reality, any way he possibly could win. Fool. God damned fucking idiot. He’d killed himself and his entire family without even realizing it. And now he smiled at me—staring through him, both appalled by and scarcely able to conceive of the depths of his ignorance.

“You’re the dumbest man alive,” I stated blankly, shaking my head at his smug, condescending gaze. He smiled even larger in response, and I turned to look at the other man to keep from falling more ill. “Is it really necessary that he be here for this?”

“Yes,” the man stated blankly, a tablet device suddenly placed before him by one of the other guards in the room. The man began to navigate through files on it and cleared his throat to address me—turning his eyes to meet mine. “Mr. Vussel, I am a liaison for the acting captain of this ship. He has been designated on behalf of the remaining members of the United States military to ensure you are questioned in regards to recent and impending events,” the man read—his eyes intermittently toggling from the screen before him to the glare I gave.

“Don’t I get a lawyer?” I interrupted, jesting playfully at his stern unwavering demeanor. He winced ever so slightly in response and I came to realize just how difficult it was for him to keep from losing his cool and caving my skull in.

“No sir, you do not,” he replied, returning his eyes to the screen before him—only to be interrupted by me again.

“What government is left exactly? The Secretary of Agriculture? Is he the acting president now?” I laughed, indifferent to the formal, anal-retentive proceedings these men insisted on putting me through. The man’s eyes enflamed and his jaw clenched—raising a single hand to his side and snapping his fingers. Immediately after he did so, one of his guards stepped forward—marched behind me and held their forearm tightly against my jugular—cutting off my air supply and rendering me unable to speak or breathe.

“As I was saying,” he continued, reading the rest of the document before him as I struggled against the guard holding me—desperate for gasps of air. “Mr. Vussel, you have managed to cause an inordinate degree of irreparable damage to the United States and the world at large. And while I have been made aware that your company was, in fact,

commissioned to prepare this disease, nevertheless, your egregious deviations from command to serve your own interests by releasing it is a grave and unforgivable offense that flies in the face of sanity. By way of that, you have been found guilty. Your trial tomorrow will serve only to sentence you not to treat you with any semblance of human decency, as you have failed to demonstrate and, thus deserve, absolutely none,” he continued, gesturing ever so slightly to the guard holding me so that he would be sure to keep me conscious—just barely conscious. “That said, these proceedings, between you and I, are to determine the fate of your family, particularly your son, who as it stands now is seemingly the only thing you have left in this world that you genuinely care for. If you cooperate, he will be found innocent. If you do not, he, as well as your wife, will be found guilty of aiding and abetting you.”

The guard behind me released me from his grip and I sputtered and wheezed against the table before me. The captain’s liaison waited patiently as I sucked in air—fluttering my eyelashes and scraping my fingertips against the cold metal. Nahuel looked on attentively—as if he wished he could either take part in what was happening to me or pull out his dick and satisfy himself watching—that same hollow, barren, somehow gleeful look that he always gave anytime blood might be spilt. After a few moments I was able to regain my composure enough to speak again—coughing loudly into my hands, still without any traces of blood. I did my best not to panic. I had only been away from the island for twenty minutes at most. It would almost certainly take thirty minutes before I would feel a sudden and drastic shift in my stomach, far worse than the one I was currently fighting against.

“You don’t honestly expect me to cooperate, do you?” I muttered, my voice now raspy and stripped. The man shook his head and moved the tablet resting before him off to his side—leaning in ever so slightly as if to speak from his own mind, not simply on behalf of those he took orders from.

“No. I expect you to suffer in equal proportion to the suffering you have caused. And I will do everything in my power, morally bankrupt or otherwise, to ensure that that is the case,” he growled hatefully, his eyes a glimpse of the depth of rage boiling deep inside him. And, yet, he remained in placid subordination to the uniform he wore—neither hitting me nor raising a hand to spread or alleviate his contempt by spilling my blood. “Nahuel has made it clear to me that you no longer have any affection for your wife. Torturing her seems of little relevance. Your son, however...” he stated coldly, scanning my expression for any deeply felt traces of love or compassion—expecting full well that he could not break me, but rather only those things I loved... my son... Desmond. Innocent

as any. And yet... marked for torment on behalf of my sins. I took a deep breath and swallowed forebodingly—willing to play this game with him only to buy time. Both for myself and the hope that my son and I might somehow escape this hell.

“What do you want?”

“Firstly, your clone console. It needs to be destroyed.”

“So then why don’t you just shell the island and destroy everything on it?” I inquired, already knowing the futility of any such attempt. The liaison clenched his jaw and shook his head at my words—clearly of a similar mindset.

“The console itself is located a quarter mile underneath the surface in some sort of underground, reinforced bunker. And as you are already well aware, you’ve commandeered any and all firepower at our disposal capable of penetrating to those depths. So do not waste my time with unreasonable delays or absurd notions. We are not as ignorant as you might think.”

“Oh, you’re not?” I scoffed, insulted by his insistence that he too could somehow escape the fate poised to consume us all. “If that were true, you’d already know that I didn’t just commandeer the firepower capable of reaching those depths... they won’t so much as launch if directed to fire on those coordinates in the first place,” I continued, struggling to think of anything I could tell them that wouldn’t escalate in seeing my son slowly murdered before me. “That console cannot be touched except by my family, and that bunker cannot be breached by anything that exists on this earth. I saw to it. Believe me.”

“Bring Desmond here immediately,” the man stated—one of his guards quickly opening the hatch to go and do his bidding.

“I’m cooperating!” I shouted, feeling a visceral jolt of despair at the idea of watching Desmond hurt—of having to sacrifice him along with everything else I had tried to keep safe on my island. “I’m telling you the truth! There’s nothing I can do!”

“You’re not cooperating, you’re trying to buy time. I need answers, not excuses. Solutions, not dead ends,” he snapped, his militaristic poise merely a ruse to hide his growing panic. “Now tell me what I want to hear, or I will expedite your cooperation.”

“The console can’t be destroyed but it can be turned off,” I explained, my nerves pinched and bruised with inner conflict—both juggling the variables at play and digging for a solution. “Only myself and my family can access that bunker. It’s DNA encrypted,” I suggested, realizing that what I said was not only true but also the best possible way

to get my son off this ship as quickly as possible. The man sneered and bore his teeth in response to my suggestion—suspecting a trap.

“According to what you said last night, your island is now poised to release an ‘airborn pathogen’ that will ‘infect everyone on it,’” he insisted, no doubt quoting me by way of what I had confessed to Nahuel—that if I didn’t enter a retinal, verbal and key-code-verification into a secure console, that the entire island would become infected. “How long until that takes place?”

“Within thirty minutes of my death, failure to enter the proper codes OR if I’m away from the island!” I yelled, confessing a half-truth. For while my island was about to become saturated with the disease, it wasn’t only my island that had been designed to hold a biological detonator. I glanced at Nahuel—remembering as I did so the device he had shown to me—the tablet nearly identical to the one that I had carried with me at all times. “I can use the tablet in his pocket to temporarily deactivate it,” I suggested, tilting my chin in the direction of Nahuel’s chest. The liaison and the other guards in the room turned to look at him—expecting him to offer it to me without a moments hesitation.

“It’s a trick,” he stated coldly, shaking his head as he pulled the device out of his pocket and held it up for everyone to see. “He carried one just like this with him at all times. And, on two occasions, attempted to use it as a weapon,” Nahuel explained, wisely cautioning against listening to anything I might say. The man leading my interrogation pondered the thought a moment before turning to look back at me—deciphering the growing sweat on my brow and visceral uncertainty churning inside me for any nuance of truth in the mix. Suddenly, the hatch door opened again and the guard who had left stepped back inside—accompanied by my tearful son, Desmond. My heart swelled and fell at the sight of him—terrified and helpless. He was walked into the room, shivering as if he might faint at any moment. And, in that, he had the security he felt he needed.

“No. Not this time he won’t,” he insisted, holding his hand out so that Nahuel could pass him the device. “Desmond, take a seat,” the man ordered, standing up from his chair and holding his hand to the side so that my son could sit before me. Desmond obliged—looking to me to make things better.

“Dad, what’s going on?” he cried, fighting against tears to be able to speak at all. I sucked in a long breath to try and come up with any answer I might console him with, only to have my thoughts interrupted by the tablet being shoved into my hands.

“Where did you get this?” I asked, staring down at the familiar screen, come back to haunt me.

“I’m not telling you anything you don’t need to know. Just enter the codes, and do it quickly,” he insisted, standing behind Desmond as he spoke.

“I need to know where this came from if I’m going to use it safely,” I replied, lying to pry the necessary information from him. The man glared at me—on the fence between whether he would spill my son’s blood or answer the question I posed—eventually, deciding on the latter by giving Nahuel an affirmative nod.

“It was confiscated from Gregory Voustin this morning,” Nahuel stated blankly—shocking me and turning my stomach all the more from the name he mentioned—my lifelong amicable-enemy, apparently, turned betrayer. I stuttered in my own mind from the revelation given me—carving an even deeper sense of uncertainty of how much of the world might still be left standing in opposition to me—to my drones—to my plan—to everything I had spent so long preparing for. The liaison took a stern step forward and placed his hands on Desmond’s quivering shoulders—insisting that I not waste another second of his time dwelling on my own thoughts.

“**NOW**, Mr. Vussel,” he stated sternly, tightening his grip of my son until I could see fierce discomfort boil in Desmond’s eyes. I didn’t hesitate a moment longer. I entered the necessary default password into the tablet that allowed me to override or undermine any interaction made with it. I then quickly glided past the records of phone calls—of messages sent—and immediately located a satellite interface I could use to connect to my island. Then, staring down at the two remote detonator options before me, I hiccupped on what to do for a fleeting moment—thinking of who to try and save and what I was willing to risk. I glanced up to Desmond once more—squirming under the grip of the man glaring hatefully at me. And in that moment I realized that I had never really considered the possibility that he might be hurt in all of this. I had threatened his mother with the idea of hurting him the night before, but had done so only in an attempt to control her. The truth was, I loved my son—I genuinely loved him more than anything in the world. But... I couldn’t betray my plan simply because of that love. I looked down to the device in my hand—to what only I truly understood was about to unfold—raising it to my eye to give the retinal scan needed for only one of two detonators to ignite within the next few minutes—leaving the other primed and ready to fire. Then, swallowing a glimpse of the hell I had just promised myself, I placed the tablet down.

“It’s done. The island is safe. You have exactly twenty-four hours to locate the console. I would recommend you move quickly,” I admitted, turning my attention sharply to my son’s best interest. “Everything’s going to be alright, Desmond. This is just a necessary precaution. It will all be over soon.”

“Secondly,” the man announced, keeping his hands tightly clasped to my son’s shoulders despite the assurances I had given him. “An agent in the D.C. facility managed to upload deactivation codes for your drones,” he explained, jolting my mind back to the call my former best friend and confidant, Nathan Gills, had made from the White House—miraculously alive and well—still working to try and undermine me. I clenched my teeth and seethed in rage—feeling a sense of distraught hopelessness shred my composure and confidence. “Since that time, however, the frequency of strikes has become sporadic and increased tenfold. Why?”

“Because you triggered the alarm and abducted me,” I growled, returning my focus to that stupid fucking useless ape Nahuel. “It’s a proximity trigger. When I left the island, the clone console became automated in accordance with emergency procedures. I’m not controlling it anymore. Now it chooses its own targets based on perceived threats and density of population,” I explained, counting down the final few minutes in my head—hoping that within that timeframe I would be able to clear Desmond from the room and spare his life. The man seemed to release his grip of my son for a fraction of a moment—if not from compassion, then from surprise.

“Explain the statement ‘density of population’ and ‘perceived threats,’” he demanded, removing a single hand from my son’s shoulder to reach for something on his belt—a knife—a pistol—any number of things to force the answers he wanted as quickly as he could.

“Listen to me,” I begged, knowing that I had a minute at most before the still active detonator would fire and threaten us all—my son included. “I am cooperating fully. I will tell you everything and assist you however I am able to. But right now, this very second, you need to get my son and my wife into that bunker if you want to stop those strikes! They are the only ones, besides myself, who can access it safely! And, since I don’t imagine you have any intention of letting me go, it is imperative that in order to stop those strikes, you get them in there and you get them in there now!”

The man removed a tool from his belt and adjusted it until a blade protruded from the side. He held it to the neck of my now weeping son—crying for help, begging for mercy—reaching to me for any

semblance of salvation as he was held in place. I pulled hard against the handcuffs locking me where I was and shouted at them—cutting and bruising my wrists—knocking the chair beneath me free and landing on my knees, as if praying to God for mercy. The man leaned forward and increased the pressure against Desmond’s neck—to the point where even a subtle pull would puncture and bleed him dry.

“‘Density of population’ is determined by live-satellite-feeds! The drones will strike the most populated areas one by one until nothing is left!” I screamed, pressing my hands together and begging out of broken desperation. “‘Perceived threat’ is defined by ACTIVE MILITARY HARDWARE!!! It means THESE SHIPS!!! OPEN COMMUNICATIONS!!! Anything that could form an effective resistance!!!” I continued, no longer a man, no longer a formative, calculative individual—now, only a desperate father, begging for the life of his child—of his legacy—and the only hope that might see him and it along with him survive. “So unless you want this ship to be next, do what I fucking said and please, PLEASE get them into that bunker!!!”

Suddenly, as my final words escaped my lips, I felt the drastic, painful, twist inside of my stomach that I had been anticipating ever since leaving the island. I had been unable to escape the circumstances of it—choosing instead to leave one of the detonators still active, and ensure my plan would work no matter the cost to myself or my family. However, it wasn’t the detonator that threatened to infect my island or those who set foot on it that I had left active. Instead, it was the one sewn into the lining of my stomach that had now burst open inside of me—pouring infected blood into my mouth and curdling my abdomen—pressing my face into the table to writhe in pain. I couldn’t breathe—not one single breath while Desmond was still in that room. It wouldn’t be long until I was infected—until every last person onboard the ship was infected too. But, from what I had said, and the argument I had made, it was entirely possible my wife and son might be ushered to safety without me—that they might live to see another day in the underground bunker I had built. I held my breath and pulled my face slowly off the table to meet the eyes of my interrogator once more—trembling and begging for him to believe my despair and do as I had asked. He waited a moment—staring into my eyes, unaware that I, and the air I breathed, was now contagious.

“You will remain here under supervision and provide all necessary information to deactivate the console,” he exclaimed, pulling the knife away from my son’s neck and refastening it to his belt. “Any attempt to fuck us, and I will bring this little piggy back and bleed him all over you—so help me God.”

I nodded feverishly—still holding my breath—still sucking on a mouthful of blood trying to force its way out of me onto everyone in the room. My stomach churned and I felt my cold sweat grow even colder... it wouldn't be long now... a day at most... Because even with the resistance I had accumulated to the disease, I could only act as a carrier for so long until I too visibly succumbed to its effects. And so... I nodded desperately as tears flooded to my eyes—watching gratefully as my son was led out of the room under watch of my captors. Nahuel stood unsettled by what had transpired—knowing me well enough to see that something unspoken was afoot. And yet, he did not raise his voice to object. Instead, he stepped forward and swiped the tablet off the table after the others had left—tucking it back into his pocket before turning to leave as well.

“Nahuel,” I grunted through clenched teeth, slowly allowing myself to breathe as the sounds of my son being walked down the hall grew further and further away—less and less likely to be in range of the airborne contaminant now seeping out of my nostrils. Nahuel paused and turned to look at me once more—caught in internal conflict, wondering if he had in fact won by bringing me here. “There’s something you don’t know,” I whispered, keeping my voice low to try and goad him into approaching. He did. Ever so slightly he did—stepping back towards me, past the two guards left by the open doorway.

“What was that little boy?” he asked, moving within a meter of me. I looked hatefully at him—at all that he had unknowingly unleashed—very nearly threatening everything I cared for and the lives of everyone on my island. “Speak up. It’s hard to hear you on your knees.”

“I said,” I growled, quickly spitting my mouthful of blood out onto his face and shirt—watching him recoil in disgust and confusion—swatting at the mess of blood emanating fumes into his nostrils. “I bit my tongue! Be a good dog and fetch me some bandages!”

Nahuel’s boot landed hard in my eye socket and the other guards quickly stepped forward to intervene—pulling the screaming ape away from me and out of the room. I grimaced watching his rage boil over, no longer in a position to torture me or dictate the terms of my fate. But, after the hatch door had closed and the room had been cleared, the spiteful smile quickly faded from my blood-splattered-face. I was infected now—a time bomb of disease seeping into the air around me. And with that, the reigns of control had been stripped from my fingers. I was no longer the arbiter. I was no longer in power. And not even I knew who would die next.

CHAPTER 29: LITTLE SOLDIER

Susie Simmonds, Upstate Massachusetts, 2018

“The hell you are! Don’t waste my time!” one of the two men huffed, shaking his head abruptly to spit out a huge wad of whisky soaked tobacco mid-sentence. He returned his focus to the pad of paper in front of him and ignored what I’d just said as if it meant less than nothing. The man who’d carried me into the tent didn’t seem particularly amused either—though both of them appeared relieved by the fact that at least I wasn’t crying... yet. The rest of the kids in the tent with me, however, were another story—all twenty or thirty of whom sat teary eyed at the tables set up around us watching me talk to the two men.

“I’m not kidding. I’m immune!” I shouted, trying to lower my vocal chords so that I’d sound more masculine. But I was off by a little bit and ended up sounding closer to a cartoon villain instead. The man chewing the tobacco rolled his eyes and gestured for me to be taken away—lifted clear off the ground and hauled over to an open chair by his gigantic sidekick. “Hey! Hey!!! Let me go!”

“Kid, just pretend that I’m a ride and that this place is Disneyland,” the man carrying me groaned, making loud grunting sounds anytime he had to lift me off my feet without my consent. I thrashed around angrily in his arms—still so furious that Cherry had abandoned me here that I could barely think straight. Not that it would have mattered even if I could think straight! These two idiots wouldn’t listen to me! And all the other kids looked like they’d just been salvaged from the inside a whale—dirty, terrified, sobbing and desperate for someone to tell them that everything would be alright. But, instead, all they got to comfort them were these two morons and the expectation that they would sit around sorting ammunition crates. No one wanted to be there. At all! But there we all were, stuck together in a stinky, dirty tent festering with the sound of engines all around it. I had to get away. I just had to!

“You can’t keep me here! I have rights!” I yelled, skimming the surface of the best excuses my panicked brain could come up with. The man who had carried me laughed heartily in response—shaking his head as he leaned down to show me how I was expected to help—the smile on his face quickly fading to a thin-tempered-sowl.

“Listen... this goes a lot easier if I don’t have to backhand you into doing what you’re told, you hear?” he stated plainly, as if hitting me was something he didn’t want to do anymore than I wanted it done to me. But he would. With the look he was giving me, he made it very clear that he would. I stopped talking abruptly and clenched my jaw—

unaccustomed to threats or gigantic strangers making them against me. Suddenly, I wasn't just some smart-aleck kid in an awkward situation—I was a captive desperately debating my fate. But I sucked at debating! I only knew how to argue and complain! But that man threatening me like that... like... like hitting a kid was no big deal! And... if it had to happen then it would!... I didn't know how to respond to that! So I just shut up, sat there and listened to what he had to say about loading ammunition—fighting off the tears building up inside me more and more the longer he spoke. “Understand?” he exclaimed, handing me the crate so that he could watch me do what he'd just instructed me to.

“Like this?” I asked, doing exactly as he'd shown me without offering any lip in response. He nodded and firmly smacked me on the back to show his appreciation.

“Good! Now do it till you run out!” he grunted, gesturing with his chin to a wheelbarrow full of bullets by my side. Other children of all ages clamored around the wheelbarrow—clumsily transporting handfuls of ammo back to their seats to do as they had been told—shooting me glances all the while until the gigantic man had turned and left us alone again.

“Pssst!” a little girl covered in dirt, with short ragged strawberry blonde hair whispered. I looked up at her and then back at the men—trying to determine if we were allowed to talk or not. “Pssssst!!!”

“What?!” I hissed, swallowing my tears just enough to squeak out that one word. The little girl leaned forward and grabbed me by the sleeve—pulling me down towards the side of the table so that we could whisper back and forth.

“Are you really immune?” she asked, her voice soothing and sweet—a southern accent and an even tempo to how she spoke, even in a whisper. I nodded sternly, still trying to swallow the tears. The little girl glanced back and forth between my eyes to discern whether or not I was telling the truth. Then, after nervously rubbing her muddy yellow summer dress between her fingertips, an elated grin spread wide across her face. “Really, really?” she asked again, fluttering her eyes like what I said was almost too good to be true.

“Yes! But they won't listen to me!”

“Good! You don't want them to!” she whispered, glancing up again to see whether or not the man chewing tobacco had taken notice of us talking. “This is just where they put people they don't know what to do with! Eventually, everyone gets moved someplace else. But I don't know where,” she explained, aware of the fact that the other children around us were listening—still sitting in their places doing only as they had been instructed to do.

“How long have you been here? Who are these people?”

“They’re bikers! Gang members! All of em!” the little girl gasped, mentioning the men around us with a tone of flabbergasted indecency. “They all got together after the world fell apart and now they fancy themselves kings!”

“Shut up!” one of the other children seated near us snapped. “You’re gonna get us in trouble again!” he insisted, a swollen, clotted wound clearly visible on his lower brow. He looked fearfully at the man at the front again—as if he anticipated being struck for stepping out of line.

“That’s my brother. He’s a coward. Don’t listen to him,” the little girl responded, flipping a tiny, half extended middle finger at her brother’s attempt to reason with us. “My name is Bell. It’s a pleasure to meet you. I think we should escape together. Are you in?”

“Not this again!” her brother whined, dropping his shoulders and shaking his head in clear dismay. “She’s crazy! Don’t listen to her!”

“What?” I muttered, unsure of exactly what was happening around me and just how big of a mess I’d fallen into. “Escape? What are you talking about?!”

“We have to leave. It’s not safe here.”

“But... there are armed guards everywhere... how isn’t it safe?” I asked innocently, glancing around me at the stunned or distraught faces of the other children. Bell shot me a flustered glance loaded with unfulfilled expectations and released an exasperated sigh of disapproval. Clearly there was something obvious she had said that I hadn’t understood.

“The last **five** people that have been taken out of here have been little girls about to be forced little women,” Bell exclaimed, speaking harshly—on the verge of losing the charm of her voice to the fear in her tone. “I do not intend to be next. Will you escape with me?”

Just as Bell finished speaking, another man emerged at the front of the tent, escorting a sickly white young teenage girl with him—so pale she might as well have been infected. But she wasn’t. She was just in shock. And as the man casually returned her to the front desk, as if some sort of chattel to be taken or removed at his leisure, the unspoken truth of what was going on dawned on me. The kids in this room were only worth having around if they helped. And it occurred to me that the third man who had just emerged from outside, was helping himself to whomever he pleased. Bell glared hatefully at him—like she’d seen his sort before and wanted nothing more than to sort him out with a crowbar to the skull. I swallowed apprehensively and Bell’s brother turned his eyes to the dirt—certain that if he spoke up again it would mean another beating, worse than the one he’d already got.

“Escape where?” I whispered, more quietly than before—both of us watching the man who had just emerged—taking eye of the

uncomfortable glances the tobacco chewing man gave him too... unsettled by what had happened, but silent all the same. They knew what he was doing, but... they didn't stop him! A chill ran through my body and I looked to Bell, my newfound accomplice, with the hope that she knew what she was doing.

"You're from around here, right?" she guessed correctly.

"Yes."

"Do you know someplace safe?"

"Yes."

"Then we'll escape there. Alright?" Bell suggested, glancing back and forth between my eyes again to try and determine my response before I gave it. But I froze at the idea—remembering again how I was never supposed to bring anyone back to the shelter or reveal where it was hidden. But... I had to... I just had to. I couldn't escape alone and I was too scared to try.

"Uh... Ok. Yeah," I replied, still watching the newly emerged thug speak to the tobacco chewing man at the front of the room.

"Good! Good! Now here's the plan," she tried to say, interrupted mid-sentence by a loud bellow from the front of the tent.

"Immune?... What do you mean immune?!" the man shouted, turning and staggering abruptly—so drunk he could barely walk. But from the way the tobacco chewing man kept his mouth shut, I could tell it was because this drunken oaf was the one in charge. And from the way he was looking at me, I could also tell I should have kept my big mouth shut. "How do you know you're immune?!" he hollered, stepping slowly towards me through the room full of frozen fearful children. Bell squeezed my hand tightly and then let it go just as quick—returning to her duties and keeping her head down.

"I... I..." I muttered, feeling an overwhelming sense of panic tug my mind in every direction—he was getting closer.

"Speak up! I can't hear shit around this place!" the man insisted, coming to stand just beside the table we sat at. I looked up fearfully at him, still stumbling on my thoughts—trying to think of anything I could say to turn his attention to something else.

"Because... I... I just know."

"You just know? Do you know because you were bitten?!" the man asked, taking me by the arm and pulling me to my feet—inspecting me like a cut of meat you'd find at the store. "Were you bitten?!" the man repeated, turning me around and patting at my clothes in search of a handful of flesh or a hidden bite mark. I curled my chest inward and tried my best to cower away but it didn't do any good—the man continued to grab at me, to tug and pull at me. And as he did so, I turned to Bell

looking for salvation—seeing only the heartbreak in her eyes and the dull stare of her brother looking down at the table doing as he was told. “Come on! I’m taking you for a check-up!” the man stated loudly, hauling me by the arm towards the exit of the tent.

“I wasn’t being serious! I was just making stuff up!” I tried to say, lying as best as I could to undo the bind I was in. But it didn’t do any good. And nobody stood up to do anything to stop the man from leading me away. Everyone just kept their eyes down and did what they were told—even the two gigantic men stationed at the front of the room. They looked at me like they knew what was going to happen—like they were helpless to do anything about it. And before I knew it, I couldn’t speak anymore. All I could do was sob as the man led me by the arm out of the tent through the muddy stretches of bikes and bikers. I begged him. I pleaded with him. I said any number of things—anything that came to mind. But it didn’t do any good. I couldn’t get away. And to make matters worse, I was starting to lose my breath again—I couldn’t breathe. The man trudged up to a long row of camper trailers all parked next to one another—trailers that might have been acting as homes for some of the bikers. But I didn’t know for sure. I didn’t know anything! And I couldn’t breathe! I couldn’t speak! I couldn’t do anything at all! Help! Help me! Somebody please! Stop him!

The man yanked the trailer door open and pulled me into it. The smell of rotten flesh hit my nostrils hard and I sputtered and wheezed all the more from it. Pieces of body parts were strewn across a large table in the center of the trailer and a man wearing overalls, an apron and a clear-plastic-face-mask splattered with blood looked up at us. He held an electric bone saw in one hand and a metal rod in the other—standing immediately over a severed, still animated head of a ghoul—gnawing at the air around it to try and eat anything in range of its tongue. The man covered in blood turned his attention away from the table and pulled down the layers of cloth protecting his mouth—turned off the bone saw, removed his facemask and stared me right in my terrified, teary eyes. I didn’t move. I couldn’t move. And I had absolutely no idea where I was or what was about to happen to me. The man who had dragged me there still held me tightly by the arm, and as I looked away from him, I came to realize that somewhere along the way to the trailer I had wet myself—so afraid that I couldn’t so much as control my bladder anymore, let alone my ability to breathe or speak.

“Doc!” the man at my side slurred, thrusting me forward by the arm until I bumped into the bloody, limb filled table in front of me—staring right at the gnawing severed head in the center of it. “This one says she’s immune! Which says to me she got bit and just ain’t turned yet!” he explained, as the ‘Doc’ he spoke to looked me up and down, trying to

assess the progress of the infection. I swallowed deeply and leaned away from the table—my heart beating about as hard and fast as it ever had. “Figured you might want a look’ssee,” the drunk man finished, unexpectedly staggering back out the door and leaving me behind.

The man who had been called ‘Doc’ quickly placed his tools on the table before him and took a few steps towards me—his hands stretched out. My knees shook and my arms quivered as he approached. But I didn’t have the lungs to run or scream. So all I did was keep sobbing and slowly slide to the ground where I was—helpless—curling my arms around myself and shaking my head over and over again... mouthing the word ‘please.’

“I’m not going to hurt you,” Doc stated plainly, holding his hands beside his head and smiling largely to try and calm me down. But it didn’t work. I was too afraid... too disoriented and shocked... the room was covered in blood—completely covered—as if this man had been cutting up bodies all day long and I was next in line! “Hey, hey! It’s ok! He’s gone now!” Doc continued, pulling off his bloodstained gloves and reaching for a file drawer—opening it quickly to remove a blanket. He leaned down and placed the blanket beside me—noticing as he did the trouble I was having breathing. “Are you asthmatic? Would an inhaler help?” he asked, making a point of keeping his distance as I sat trembling and weeping on the floor in front of him. I shook my head at his question but continued to cry. I wanted to go home. I wanted my mom. “Ok... um... my name is Dr. Carson Wiesner. I’m a practicing coroner... and... uh... I lived most of my life in Pennsylvania,” he explained, speaking in a way where I could tell he desperately wanted me to calm down and feel better. But... there was so much blood... so much blood... and... the head on the table was... looking right through me—flapping its mouth up and down right next to the bone saw that had severed it. The doctor turned and looked at what I was looking at—smacking the back of his hand against his face as he did so. “Jesus Christ! I’m so sorry that idiot just brought you in here like that! I don’t... I don’t know what to say! Are you alright? Are you just scared or... have you been bitten?” he asked, carefully watching me in case I gave any indication that I had been. But I hadn’t—it was all a misunderstanding. And, as I gasped for air and shook my head feverishly, he seemed to relax. “Ok, good, good.”

The doctor stood up quickly and approached a sealed Tupperware crate on the other side of the trailer—popping it open to remove a bottle of water. He then walked over to me and sat beside the blanket still resting at my feet—carefully and tenderly extending the bottle to me so that I would know he didn’t mean any harm. After a moment’s hesitation, I was able to accept it—my breaths calming down—my senses returning to me. Then, after a few long sips, I felt the trembling in my

hands start to slow. I was feeling better. Slowly but surely, I was feeling better. And, soon enough, I could both breathe and speak again.

“Are you a hostage too?” I asked timidly, still trying to understand exactly who all these people were that made up the Convoy. The doctor extended a confused eyebrow up at the question and shook his head ever so slightly in response.

“No, no, I’m not a hostage... I’m just... wow, yeah, this must look pretty bad,” he exclaimed, turning his focus back to the severed head on the blood-soaked table. “I’m studying them. The infected. And... it can get a little messy sometimes.”

“Are they... are they gonna make you kill me?”

“What? No! No, of course not!” he insisted, releasing a heartfelt sigh at the suggestion alone. “No one is going to hurt you. I’m sorry that that... **asshole** brought you in here and just... just... I’m sorry. Ok? I can’t exactly speak to him about his manners but I can apologize for your having to go through that. Is there anything I can do to help you feel better?”

“Can you help me escape? Please?”

“Escape?... I... Why would you want to do that?”

“Because I need to get home!”

“Ok... but... I don’t know if that’s... safe... or not. It’s not safe out there on your own.”

“Yes it is! I’m—” I started to say, cutting myself off mid-sentence just as the word ‘immune’ came to the tip of my tongue. I swallowed what I was about to say and looked away from the doctor, trying to think of an excuse I could give instead of the truth.

“You’re what?” the doctor asked, giving me a look like he knew there was more to my story than I was telling him. “It’s ok to talk to me. I can help,” he assured me, smiling gently and nodding his head to let me know I had the all clear.

“I’m... I’m... um...”

“You’re immune? Is that right?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re immune, but you weren’t bitten?”

“No.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes! I’m scared, not stupid!” I snapped, now taking long chugs of water as my heart calmed down and I started thinking straight again—ever so slowly growing accustomed to having the crap scared out of me.

“Ha... ok, I’m just making sure, that’s all,” he laughed, relieved that I seemed to be returning to normal. “What’s your name?”

“Susie.”

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Susie. Please call me Carson,” the doctor exclaimed, extending his gloveless-clean-hand out to shake mine. I hesitated a moment before reaching up and accepting the gesture—trying to maneuver the blanket next to me to hide the fact that I had peed myself.

“Nice to meet you,” I muttered, realizing as I spoke that, in fact, it wasn’t nice to meet him at all—I was still trapped—stuck on the outskirts of town surrounded by people who didn’t seem to give a damn about anything I had to say... that is... except for him—except for doctor Carson sitting next to me, doing whatever he could to try and make me feel better. And as I turned my eyes from maneuvering the blanket to looking at him again, I came to realize that just like Bell, I needed someone I could trust to give me hope of getting out of here.

“Will you help me escape or won’t you?” I asked abruptly, throwing my full trust and every fear I had in the world into his lap as if he held all the answers I’d need to get away. He fidgeted a moment before responding—closing his eyes and twitching his lips until the words he was searching for came out.

“Susie... you’re safe here. I’ll see to that. I promise,” he stated calmly, holding my eyes as he did so and making sure that I knew he was sincere. “But I need to understand what you mean when you say that you’re ‘immune.’”

“I mean that I’m immune!” I shouted, worried that the man who had brought me here might come back any moment. “I used to be sick. My sister and I... we were both sick but... she turned and I didn’t, alright? She... she...” I tried to explain, remembering my sister Sarah dead on the guest room floor—remembering my dad lying across the room from her. And with that memory I couldn’t help but start crying again.

“She turned?” he asked, nodding compassionately—letting me know that I didn’t need to speak if I didn’t feel I could. “She turned, but you didn’t?”

“Yes.”

“Was she bitten?”

“No.”

“Pardon my confusion, Susie, but... how do you know you’re immune if you haven’t been bitten?” Carson asked, doing his best to

understand what I knew that he didn't, but, also, wasting valuable time in taking the time to ask—the man could come back. He could come back at any minute and take me to another trailer and do whatever he wanted to me. “Did you get some infected blood in your mouth somehow? Is that what happened?”

“NO! I just... Please! I need to get out of here!” I begged, tugging on his shirt, only to realize in doing so that it was stained in blood. I looked down at my red hands and shook them in rabid frustration.

“Ok, ok... it's ok. Let's get some fresh air, alright?” Carson suggested, standing up and offering me his hand. I reached out for him, only to have him help me up by the wrist instead—avoiding touching the blood on my palm directly with his bare skin. “Come on. Lets go for a walk... talk about this someplace a little less... gruesome.”

Carson opened the door to the trailer and helped me out of it. He removed his apron and tossed it back inside—doing his best to reduce the amount of blood on him now that we were back in public. The lengthy row of trailers sat adjacent to trucks full of bodies all tied together with rope. They writhed and squirmed—moaning for anything to eat—staring lifelessly at the commotion around them. I know it didn't make any sense, but for some reason I felt sorry for them—thoughtless, helpless—trapped on this earth with nothing to do but spread death and disease. Carson walked up to a tent not far from the trucks of ghouls and helped himself to a faucet—rinsing some of the blood off and then turning to me to clean my hands.

“See? It's safe here. We even have delightful home décor,” he joked, gesturing behind me to a rubber ducky impaled on a coat hanger, dangling overtop the water station we were at. I smiled timidly in response—looking in all directions for any sign of the drunken man. But he wasn't there. It was just us. Just us and thousands of vehicles and people all swarming around as if they all had jobs to do.

“Thank you,” I sighed, feeling my panic begin to subside.

“You're very welcome. I'd say I can't imagine what you've been through, but... we've all been through it,” Carson sighed, finishing up with the faucet and extending his hand to take mine. “Care for a tour?”

“A tour?”

“Yeah. I'll show you around. Make sure you don't get misplaced again. Sound good?”

“I don't want to be here, Carson,” I replied, grateful for the offer but distracted all the same—it was getting late and I needed to get home to my mother before she went insane with worry. “I need to get home.”

“Ok. Are you from here or did you get picked up somewhere along the way?”

“I live here, yeah. Me and my mom. And my brother too, but... he’s missing.”

“Is he immune too? How about your mother?” Carson asked, his questions motivated both by concern and curiosity—he still didn’t understand what I meant when I said I was immune. And I kind of got the impression he still didn’t believe me.

“No. They’re still normal... I’m just... different.”

“How do you know you’re immune, Susie?” Carson asked again—unable to or unwilling to talk to me about anything else until his curiosity was satisfied.

“Because they ignore me.”

“Who? The dead?”

“Yeah.”

“Show me,” Carson suggested, tilting his head up to the truckloads of roped-together ghouls—the same ghouls being pulled out of trucks, led into trailers and cut apart by people dressed just like Carson was—entire teams of people dressed like him, studying the undead.

“Ok. Sure,” I muttered, taking a deep sigh to try and regain my courage. But before I stepped away from where we were to approach the ghouls, I turned back once more to address Carson—locking eyes with him and curdling my expression to be as stern and serious as I could. “I need you to promise that you’ll help me get home. Before I show you anything... promise me.”

“I promise,” he stated genuinely, holding one hand to his heart and the other to the sky. I nodded and looked him up and down—believing what he said.

I walked calmly over to a writhing mound of ghouls as Carson watched—he held back a little, both observing what I was doing and making sure no one else might intervene. A group of bikers were helping wrangle and transport some of the ghouls I stood by, but for the most part no one was paying me any mind but him. I then held up my hand so that he could see it and calmly extended it in the direction of a ghouls mouth. Carson tensed up immediately and very nearly ran towards me to my aid. But, instead, just as I knew it would, the ghoul completely ignored me—my hand dangling inside its open, moaning mouth, without any fear of it biting me or noticing me at all. Carson’s face was stunned—awe struck by the implications of what my demonstration meant. He soon walked over to me and I lowered my hand away from the ghouls mouth—watching it turn to look at him standing next to me—gnawing in his direction.

“Susie... I’ll get you home like I promised. But I have a favor to ask of you first,” he suggested, breathing in a way where I could see how enthralled and excited he was.

“What?”

“I’m not the only one here studying the dead. We have whole teams of people working on it... doctors, immunologists, specialists of all kinds. Entire tents full of people pooling their resources together to try and understand what we’re up against,” Carson explained, helping me grasp what his place in all this was and exactly why he didn’t seem to be worried about escaping himself. I swallowed apprehensively—anticipating what he would ask. “Could you please follow me so that I can introduce you to them? It’s extremely important that we... have the chance to understand as much as we can about what happened to you and why it is that you’re different.”

“I don’t know...” I mumbled, looking down to try and think about what he’d just said.

“Please. It will help us. It will help us so very, very much.”

“Who are these people?” I asked, nervously checking around me as more men dressed in the same leather jackets as the man who had abducted me walked past—laughing amongst themselves, carrying huge machete’s on their belts. “And how do I know I can trust them?”

“You can trust them. Believe me, you can—these are good people,” Carson insisted, already turning his head in the direction of where he intended to take me—his tone elevated and his mind reeling. “They’re all... I mean... we’re all working together. All of the survivors. And anyone with a specialized skillset is given a task for their skills. We, the doctors, the medical professionals who were saved by the Convoy, have been asked to investigate the disease. To try and find a way to stop it or a way to cure it. So far we have absolutely no clue and it was looking pretty bleak. But... Susie... You might just change that. And I cannot stress enough how important it is that you help us... if... if you’re willing?”

I clenched my jaw in uncertainty and reflected on my mother sitting alone back in the shelter without any idea of where I was—expecting to see me by sunset. From what Carson had said, they desperately needed my help. But I was just a kid. A kid out searching for her brother—without any other purpose in this world or sense of what needed to be done. He stared hungrily at me—like he was about to lift me off my feet and bring me to theirs. And it was that look that scared me—like because of what I’d said, he might not be as trustworthy as he was just a moment ago.

“How long would I have to be there?” I asked hesitantly, looking

into his eyes to try and determine if he was still on my side.

"I'm not sure... We'd just have to draw some blood and start running tests... I can't speak for which tests or how long they'll take for certain. I'm just one specialist... there are all kinds who would need time to get a sense of this," he explained, unable to hold my eyes—unable to stay focused on me—continually glancing off in the direction he intended to take me. I swallowed apprehensively and looked down at my bloodstained shoes again—remembering why it was I had left the house at all. And, as I thought of Archer stuck in that mall, I realized that I wasn't as insignificant as they had treated me. Instead... I actually had something they wanted. Something they needed—desperately. And, as that idea crossed my mind and I managed to swallow the growing apprehension inside me, I realized that I might just have a bargaining chip I could use to save my brother. My expression went blank and my eyes slowly drifted back up to meet Carson's—still hopeful and enthusiastic to begin studying me like some sort of specimen, regardless of what was important to me.

"Carson... how valuable is finding a cure?" I asked, reading his response for the answer I wanted—to know that the Convoy would do anything to find me if I really did hold the key to a cure.

"It's... It's the most important thing there is! We've been putting all our heads together and still nobody has a clue! It's a miracle we found you, Susie! Hell, it's a miracle you exist at all!" he continued, assuming I would be just as enthused as he was. But I wasn't. My brother was still out there. And it had been the judgment call of the men in charge to just leave him there to rot—refusing to waste the resources it would take to fight the ghouls surrounding the mall... but maybe, just maybe, they'd be willing to fight those ghouls if it meant fighting for something more valuable? I froze in that moment, reflecting on what to do. Because if I went with Carson—if I trusted him the same way that I had just trusted Cherry—it was very likely that I'd be held against my will all over again... like property—like some lost little kid in the end of days who had no say in anything other than how long to shut up for... No... No!... I couldn't. I just couldn't go with him and be taken advantage of again. So instead, I looked him sternly in the eye and decided what I needed to do.

"Do you know who's in charge of the Convoy?" I asked, inching closer to my plan without letting him realize what it was.

"Sure... it's a group of club leaders... a sort of council of bikers, if you will," he explained, trying to figure out why I was asking these questions—why I was suddenly acting so shiftily and distant. "I met with them a few times—all the doctors did. Why do you ask?"

"If you had to... would you be able to convince them of how important I am?"

“I don’t think that would take any convincing at all.”

“Good. And... if they had to... do you think they’d come and find me?”

“Come and find you? Susie, what are you getting at here?”

“Just answer the question!” I cried, startling him sharply.

“Please... I need to know!”

“I don’t know. I’m not the one in charge.”

“Well... you’re going to have to convince them, ok?” I replied, glancing around me for the best direction to turn and run—for a path to get away from Carson without being nabbed and dragged back again. “I need you to change your promise. I need you to make them come and save me, ok?”

“What? Save you? Save you from what? Susie, what are you talking about?”

“The sporting goods department store in the mall... next to all the guns—that’s where I’ll be,” I explained, feeling my breaths grow deeper than before—anticipating the chase I would lead him on and how I’d find my way to the mall—how I’d lure them all to the mall to come and find me—to force them to save Archer too.

“Seriously, Susie, what are you talking about?!” Carson urged, stepping closer to me to try and understand what I was going through. But I was already backing away from him, keeping my distance—moving further and further out of reach—towards a fenced-off area next to the trucks—fences full of still lumbering ghouls like cattle in a pen. Carson stopped approaching me—realizing that he was only making things worse and scaring me more by looming closer.

“My brother is missing. They won’t save him. But if I’m really as important as you say I am... then... then they’ll have no choice but to try and save me, right?” I exclaimed, my knees itching and heart screaming for me to run—to get away as fast as I could and seize the only opportunity I had to save my brother.

“No, no, no! Wait!” Carson stuttered, realizing in that moment what my intentions were. “We can talk to somebody about your brother but—”

“No! I tried that! They won’t listen! Now tell them to come and find me!” I shouted, turning sharply and running as fast as I could to the fenced off area. Carson cried out and lunged to try and get closer—to get me to stop and come to my senses—but I was too far ahead of him—climbing over the fence and weaving my way through packs of ghouls to make sure he wouldn’t try to follow me.

My feet slid in the mud and the sound of engines drowned out his pleas for me to 'come back'. Just ahead of me, on the other side of the fenced in area, was an open field—a long stretch of farmland that led out to the surrounding roads. If I got there, I could disappear into the crop—taller than I was. Then after finding my way to the road, I could reach the mall in a couple hour's walk or a quick drive. But first I had to get away—I had to make sure nobody grabbed me and nobody stopped me or my brother might be as good as dead. So I just kept running. I ran hard—frantically—thinking of the man who had grabbed me over and over again to push through the ache in my lungs. And then, after I scaled the short fence through the mounds of ghouls wandering around me, I entered the open field.

The sounds of the Convoy still roared behind me and I worried with every step that a rogue motorcycle would come screaming out and snatch me. But the further I got the more I realized that I had actually gotten away—standing in a field of sweet corn, free from all the chaos of that place. In that moment I started to feel guilty—like I was a bad, selfish person for leaving Carson like that—for telling him everything he wanted to hear and then just abandoning all the other people with him. I thought about how I had acted the entire way to the mall—about Bell—about Cherry... about every overwhelming thing that had happened that day—hoping every step of the way that Carson would live up to his promise even though I hadn't given him time to promise it.

CHAPTER 30: BROOD OVERFLOW

Matthew Simmonds, Virginia, 2018

174 headshots in the first couple hours alone. One went through the eyeball and out the back of the head without sufficiently destroying the brainstem, so the damn thing kept moving. I put two more in that son of a bitch just to be sure. You never know with ghouls... its brain could have sunk down through its own jaw, left dangling by a twisted stretch of spine or something—keeping a kill shot ostensibly out of my line of fire. But it wasn't nothing like that. The ghoul went down and stayed down—the last animated body in an otherwise clear field for the time being. Bright green Virginia foliage, complete with churning grasshopper noises, high humidity and the occasional hummingbird zipping past the corner of the eye. I had spent plenty of time in the outback of Virginia over the years. But this was the very first time in a very long time that I had taken to firing at another person while I was still on American soil. Shooting felt different here. Still felt like war but... less extravagant somehow... War had always been something I had to fly halfway across the world to get to. Not anymore. Now, shooting someone in the head was more common than the hummingbirds were.

I used my few free moments to eat another sandwich. Turkey this time. It was pretty good. A little dry. Could've used mayo... or some hot sauce or something. Stopped to get a couple more shots in. Then dessert. A bag of double-fudge Oreos. Normally, I'd take the time to separate the layers—eat the bottom half and then assemble the pieces to make one giant cookie with quadruple stuffing. But I wasn't in the mood. The White Coats down below never seemed to stop spooking about one thing or another—my walkie-talkie, which we were still able to use despite this facilities policy of 'no communications', fizzed static in between their fearful gasps. Every time they had to confront a ghoul to check if it were Roger, they would keep me in the loop. Every single time they let me know if we had actually snagged that bastard. And every single time... they hadn't. It was never him. Not from their efforts and not from mine—staring down my sites—firing off four more rounds before returning to my seat, resting my taped-up-broken-fingers and aching leg to comb the tree line anew... God damn, it was getting hot out... I fucking hate Roger... Show up already you son of a bitch!

So much of war is waiting. Waiting to strike, waiting to be struck—watching, anticipating, fighting off complacency or lack of focus so that you're ready when those fateful moments finally come. Every tour I'd ever been on and every mission I'd ever been given had come with its

fair share of waiting for action. And in all that time spent waiting over all of those years, I had always used my downtime daydreaming about a day just like this one—when the undead would finally overrun the world. I didn't actually expect it to happen though. Not for real. I had convinced myself it wasn't based in reality and let the idea go in every way except for how I fantasized when I wasn't doing anything else—staring through a scope until it came time to pull the trigger. Seeing undead eyes as bullseyes.

Another head exploded. And another brainless ghoul fell. Over and over again—the cycle repeated itself. Only now, in between shots, I wasn't fantasizing about a day like this one anymore—I was reflecting on the road that had brought me here—the people I had left behind. That was now what took the place of fantasy—that was how I occupied my thoughts, waiting on that rooftop—thinking about whether or not I'd see my brother again. Whether or not he'd be spared from the drones. And whether or not the stand I made here and now might somehow amend the damage I'd done all those years ago. I hoped so. I even prayed a little. That's the power of regret after all. You think you can carry it as far as you need to, for as long as it takes. But regret grows heavier with time—it adds to the weight you carry, over and over again, until you can't even lift it anymore. Maybe it was the undead that made me realize that—a fantasy come true at a time when I had no need for fantasy.

Of course, of all the wild shit I'd ever imagined about the post-apocalyptic scenarios that I might one day face, I never, **ever** would have dreamt up **this** particular load of bullshit. Even though our fortifications and choice of weaponry in this place were optimal, our overall situation was still a total cluster-fuck. Searching for one man lost in thousands of blood-splattered, shit smeared walking corpses was never anything I would have invented for post-apocalyptic-pastimes. Nope. Not me. But there we were. All of us, awkward and as makeshift a team as any that had ever been—doing what we had to to pass the time and scrounge for hope... leaving me wandering through reverie all the while—second guessing myself constantly...trying to think if 'how we had set ourselves to finding Roger' really was the best way to go about doing it? Maybe I should have gone out looking for him on my own? Just risked everything and gone looking straight away... Maybe if I hadn't broken formation back in the town and scrambled to get on top of a car to stay safe—maybe we never would have lost him in the first place? Damn... maybe that was it... maybe a moments cowardice of mine was the real reason everything had gone wrong? Fuck me... sitting there on that roof sent my mind reeling from one place to another—firing shots over and over and over again—questioning everything I'd ever done in my entire life. But I guess I couldn't complain too-too much. I was still sitting comfortably on

that roof after all. The White Coats on the other hand?... well... they ended up inheriting just about the worst job on earth.

The ghouls approaching from the back of the base were forced along a snaking trajectory to the front—colliding with the long funnel of cars that we had set up for anything that trudged their undead asses up to the door. As they slowly trickled towards that opening, the surviving, uninjured group of White Coats had been assigned the task of fearfully staggering out to greet them—identifying whether or not the walking corpse in question happened to be Roger—before abruptly snatching those walking corpses out of the group—tossing them to the ground, killing them, patting down their bodies, making triple certain it wasn't him, disposing of their corpses in an orderly manner and then repeating the process, **all... day... long!** That was their job. That was what every other person who hadn't been wounded was currently doing stationed underneath the bases blaring alarm. And as those White Coats scoured the ghouls at the front of the funnel, I kept a constant watch on everything—their inspections, the fields, the cloud formations overhead—all of it. I cleared as many ghouls as I could while I could—only able to snipe those walking corpses that I knew for an absolute fact weren't Roger... the ones wearing dresses... the ones with bright clothes... giant afros... really fat people... all kinds of ghouls that quickly found themselves without heads... 475 of them and still counting.

A few more shots rang out in the air—swallowed up by the noise of the siren—a shrill pulsing wail, over and over again—announcing our location to anyone and everything. The way chains of ghouls follow one another is like a magnet creating other magnets. One ghoul who couldn't hear the alarm would follow another ghoul who could—reaching out, linking in, and marching together—every ghoul for miles around all pointed this way, whether they were in direct earshot of that alarm or not. Because of that, the two nagging questions in my mind were: how long would it take for them to get here? And how much longer than that would it take for us to sift through all of them once they did? 793 headshots and counting... 851... 888... they just kept fucking coming...

900. 1000. 1200. 1500... more and more and more... all day long... they just kept marching out of those woods... Some of them would have branches lodged through their bellies or sticking out of them when they surfaced—so mangled and bent from navigating through the forest that when their rotten corpses finally emerged, they were half fused with the woods that they'd been crawling through. Made for some strange sights alright. As peculiar and odd as people had looked when they were alive, they seemed to develop even more character rotting in death. They all had a story to tell. And sitting there scanning their warped expressions

in the moments while they still had faces to scan, I wondered what their stories might have been? Who were they before they were undead? Before they were just another number on my list? Bang! Bang! Bang! Oh well... their story's over now.

Another clear field and brief moments rest... this time I took a slow relaxing breath, turning my eyes to the sky. The smoke from the drone strikes we'd run from had died down—barely visible now in full daylight. The afternoon heat felt like a punch in the face that came out of nowhere—shedding light on just how thick our troubles were and intensifying every task we had to do. The smell, the sweat, the haze, all of it. The heat made everything about our lives worse. But at least I could finally see... cooking on that rooftop, marinating in my own sweat, I could see clear as day in all directions.

The light gave me a view further than just the tips of the trees—I could see the whole damn forest, rolling up and down over hilltops. And behind those trees and behind that forest, I could see the faint, blurred remains of distant towns. Just like Dennis, the now silent observer sitting below us had said—those towns would be coming in this direction. The surrounding forests were now chock full of lumbering corpses. And, as that happened, the slow, gradual emergence of ghouls from the woods around us would eventually become too much to handle—forcing the White Coats to use a locked fence at the tip of the funnel to control the influx—forcing me to fire shots continuously—without pause—without waiting—without the luxury of time. Eventually, every single inch of this field would be covered in ghouls. All of it, like a rock concert rushing the stage. And then, just like my regret, it would brood until it overwhelmed. How long could we look for Roger like this? How many more hours or days could these people take doing this kind of work? Wasting away... digging through corpses so full of bugs and maggots that their skin had become like stretched water balloons waiting to pop.

At around 1800 headshots, it became clear to me that we were starting to encounter a different level of activity. Now entire droves of ghouls were coming out of the woods at once. Normally, in the brief moments following long stretches of continuous fire, I would have taken the time to examine my own 'artwork'—the brain-splattered-bullet-holes that had formed a jagged line across the tip of the woods—like dozens of firing posts all lined up next to one another, half cut down by my bullets. Normally, I would have stopped shooting long enough to be able to look at those trees and fancy myself some sort of Picasso for the fine work I was doing painting the forest with undead brains. But not at around the 1800 or so headshots mark... That number is about the time when I lost the luxury of reflection. Hell, I even lost the luxury of counting... Now,

there were just too damn many to count. Dense waves were pulsing out of the trees—foreboding, tightly pressed together—their collective moans humming under the noise around them. The faces of the White Coats turned grim as my rate of fire became constant—relentless... Like I was singlehandedly trying to spare them as many unnecessary ghoul inspections as I could—preemptively saving all of us days and days of heavy lifting and dangerous grudge work. They were right. Now was my last stand before we were all completely overrun. And never before in my entire life had I ever fired that many bullets, that quickly, with such precision and satisfaction before. I don't know how many I killed after the 1800 mark exactly. But I know I finished a crate of ammunition in that time alone.

Like fighting a forest fire with a garden hose, my efforts to thin the hoard were easily swallowed by the sheer number of them. Entire cities of undead were marching on this base, and it damn well fucking felt like it—like we were being invaded or drowned by a foreign army—like I was back at war, for the first time assigned to fight on the losing side. It was intense, stunk to high hell and was only getting more crowded by the minute. Just as the White Coats had been instructed to do when that fateful moment finally came, they narrowed the barrier at the tip of the funnel—closed it inwards, restricting the movement of the undead that reached the front. This way, they could keep the hoards from filling the inside of the funnel and only allow a couple of individuals to push through at a time—move them down the length of the stretch of cars, kill them safely, search them, and then dispose of them. The same constant routine, just as it had been before, only with a tiny bit more 'parental safeties' built into the procedure now that the field was full. And while earlier in the day the routine that the White Coats had been running felt somewhat stretched out and lackadaisical, now everyone moved frantically. My gunfire was like a drumbeat. White Coat arms darted forwards and back grabbing ghoul's necks like they were swatting flies. Sweat gushed out of every one of us and I breathed like I was running a marathon. Hours passed at that pace—the hoard moving in, inch by inch despite my best attempts to thin their waves. And then... just as I heard the faint sound of a fresh shell casing sizzle when it plopped into a puddle of my sweat down around my boots... just as I heard that sound... something that didn't just disappear into the alarm caught my ear and made my hairs stand on end.

Screams are different. They don't fade away as easily as gunshots—even with other sounds stepping overtop them. I'd always heard screams more clearly than anything else. This time was no different. I pulled my eyes away from the scope—away from the brain splattered tree line—to see a White Coat curled overtop of himself holding onto his

arm. A ghoul lay beaten beside him—motionless after a few quick whacks to its skull. But the damage was already done. The man had been bit. How? I don't know. But he'd gotten himself bit. And the others standing at his side quickly rallied around him to try and get him to safety. They sealed the barrier at the front—slapped on the emergency locking device if they needed to temporarily halt the influx of undead—and then preceded to completely ignore the hoard. I practically shit my pants watching the way they responded—ignoring their posts and embracing the bitten—bringing him into their arms and rushing him back inside—back to Leanne, overseeing the med bay.

I half choked on a breath the moment they made that decision. They weren't supposed to bring him inside at all, let alone to where all the other wounded were. We had talked about this—we had been very clear about dangerous situations like this one and specifically what to do in the event that someone was **clearly** bitten. But still, they brought him directly inside to the medical bay. I pulled up the walkie next to me and barked into it—trying to get them to stay focused even as this tragedy unfolded. But I couldn't even so much as reach them! All I could hear was static—the noise of their active walkies, carelessly left active as they panicked from the site of first blood. None of them had witnessed a bite before. We had lost people along the way—disappearing into the night. But they hadn't had to watch them die—or to have to watch them turn into a ghoul. That was different. Intuitively, they all felt like there was something they needed to do—that there was still hope to save that man's life. But there wasn't. Bites are different than wounds. He was dead already. And we did not have time to waste consoling him for however long it would take him to become a corpse. I sighed loudly and combed the tree line one final time—attempted to walkie the White Coats one final time—and then, to my indescribable frustration, I stood up and left my post to do the job that they wouldn't do.

I couldn't believe it. Maybe it had been the heat that short circuited their brains? Or maybe it was the raw intensity of the work that they had been doing? I don't know what motivated their terrible decision other than that they clearly didn't know what to do now. So they brought the bitten man to the med bay—to the place where the wounded were gathered. They tied a tourniquet to his arm to try and slow the spread of the disease—to keep him lucid and calm. Leanne even sat beside him, doing her best to assess the nature of the wound and theorize how best to treat it. She held a walkie in her hand—trying to talk to me—trying to get my two cents about the matter. But this was no time for talk. As I entered the room and spotted the terrified faces of those who had tried to save this man, I didn't so much as hesitate long enough to say 'hello.' Instead, I immediately darted forward, grabbed a couple of White Coats by the arm

and shouted for them to ‘Get back out front! Now!’ They blinked like frightened deer and darted away—only just then realizing that their actions might have put us all in danger. The front entrance could quickly turn vulnerable. They needed to keep at least a couple more people out there—to be absolutely certain that the latch couldn’t fail and the funnel wouldn’t be penetrated. Their eyes bulged open when I’d spoken to them—realizing their error in judgement. They left to do their job again while I inherited an even worse job than any of theirs. I looked at the wounded man and removed my sidearm—feeling my pulse quicken as I did so.

They were supposed to have shot him already. Technically, he was supposed to have used his side arm to shoot himself. Not cry for help. Not run back inside. And certainly not get comfortable seated alongside the wounded. He was supposed to have immediately moved away, taken half a second to accept his own demise and then, he was supposed to have ended his own life to ensure he didn’t risk the wellbeing of anyone else. If bitten, that’s what an individual’s responsibility was. But... for whatever reason... both he and everyone else who had been stationed out front had decided to ignore that responsibility. And so, standing there, I needed to clean up that mess. My swollen trigger finger, half worn down from a long day of countless targets, ached all the more at the idea of adding this man to my number. But... there he was... exactly where he wasn’t supposed to be—in the med bay, surrounded by wounded, putting everyone else at risk the longer he was alive. And so, with tremendous discomfort lessened only by the necessity of my actions, I walked steadily forward, took the bitten man by the side of his shoulder—looked right at his wound, a wound that absolutely no doubt would result in infection—and then got him off his ass and led him into a corner without anyone else in it.

“Thank you for your help. I’m sorry it’s come to this. Do you have any last words?”

“They got a tourniquet on right away! I can still—” he nervously tried to explain, seeing that I wasn’t interested in saving his life. He was shaking... trembling... hysterical with fear.

“Bites spread too fast. I’m sorry,” I continued, raising my pistol to point at his head. He pulled his arms up—desperate to stop me from doing what I had to do—from doing what he was supposed to have done already himself. “Do you have anything you want to say?”

“But—but there’s a chance I cou—”

“Lietenant! Please lower your weapon,” Leanne, tried to interject—as if a voice of reason—silencing the rest of the room who all

stared at me. Nobody moved. Nobody breathed. They just watched the gun in my hand and the look in that man's eyes.

"Do you have any last words?" I asked him again, stressing the sincerity of the question. I was going to shoot him. And this moment was his only chance to pause and reflect before that happened. The man looked at me—as if he still hadn't acknowledged let alone accepted what was really happening to him. He had absolutely no idea what to say. None whatsoever. He didn't want to die. I could see that in his panicked, tearful gaze caught on the cusp of speaking. But he never did speak. And seeing the color of his skin already starting to fade under the glistening cold sweat dripping off his brow, I decided I couldn't wait any longer. Instead, I said a silent prayer for him and pulled the trigger.

Everyone gasped loudly as I fired a shot square in the center of the infected man's forehead—the bullet passing right through one of his outstretched hands, desperate for me to stop. The shot rang out loudly accompanied by jumps and screams—eaten away by the sound of the siren overhead. After that confrontation, the room was held in suspension. They just stood there, staring at his body—in shock—in utter despair and disarray—terrified. And, as they looked at their fallen friend, with a hole in the center of his forehead and the wall now painted with his blood, it was that same terror that eventually led them to raise their voices in opposition to me. As if I had been the one to act foolishly by taking on the responsibility of doing what needed to be done.

"We slowed the bleeding," one of the White Coats gasped, their hands shaking from the excess adrenaline burning itself off in their system—that or their nerves being permanently fried from stress... their friend's eyes were still open, staring forward, focused only on me. "We could have amputated the arm and saved him!"

"We're not trying any of that 'save the bitten' bullshit," I hollered, startling the group quiet by my sheer refusal to entertain a delusion that they were all so devoted to. "Trying to save the bitten is like trying to juggle sand."

"How could you do that?" another White Coat asked, so utterly baffled by the coldhearted way in which I had just executed their friend that they failed to realize that I hadn't executed him at all—I had spared him from a slow descent into an agonizing death. I clenched my jaw, trying not to get too angry in protest, but as they all kept yapping, I could feel my patience being pecked away at. "We should have tried to save him ... we have to **try** at least!"

"Not from **bites** we don't."

“I think we should have a vote,” some stupid fuck suggested—actually serious about the garbage idea that had just come out of his mouth—of voting! Of coming to decide what policies were best for a group in the middle of combat who didn’t know a fucking thing about combat! I stared at him, dumbfounded for a moment, and my mouth hung open in disbelief.

“Are you all kidding me?! You studied this virus as part of your jobs, right? You know what it does, and how it works. Right?” I contested, half caught between disbelief and brooding frustration. Their level of naivete was glaring.

“We could have tried amputating his arm!” one of the most hysterical of the group clarified again, as if that were some kind of rationales for all of them ignoring how stupid they’d just been. I looked at the corpse on the floor—at the deep bite mark oozing blood—and struggled again to grasp their vantage point. The time it took to move that man inside was more than enough time for the virus to work its way through his bloodstream—beyond the wound itself into his organs. They knew that. They had to have known that. But they had ignored it all the same and rushed him back inside anyway—clinging to a futile hope that the reality wasn’t as bad as it was. They panicked. Simple as that. Some of them were still panicking—confused and overwhelmed. I don’t know how they’d gotten the idea in their head that they somehow could have saved that man, but... now, faced with the truth—looking at his empty dead eyes—it almost seemed as if it was the loss of their denial that they were grieving, not simply the loss of their friend. That’s when it really occurred to me how thin these people had been spread. The group was falling apart. Shaking hands, chattering teeth, intense sweats, shrill voices... Jesus Christ... The last few hours of intense work had worn them down to next to nothing. And now, with this mess on our plates, they were at a breaking point.

“Listen to me! You would have to have amputated his arm the **second** it happened. Otherwise, the disease moves through the blood too quickly. I’m sorry to have to remind you of that, but it’s true. You panicked and lost track of what your orders were,” I insisted, trying my best to stamp their delusion out and return a sense of stability to the group.

“We showed mercy to a friend. That’s all,” a wounded man lying on a gurney stubbornly insisted, helpless, overwhelmed tears swelling in the corner of his eyes—clutching his own wounds—trapped by the one-dimensional way that he had lived his whole life. Like a housecat expected to turn lion, quivering his lip at the sight of blood. I’d seen broken men like him before countless times in the field—civilians I’d happened across

who had never encountered real war—who had never been swallowed up and chewed raw by chaos before. He wasn't just speaking to me—telling me I was wrong or I was unfair—no, no, no... he was speaking his hatreds from someplace deeper than that and he was saying them straight to God. The hurt screaming out of his eyes... that was God's business to answer for, not mine. I did my best to remind myself of that fact—that what was happening right now wasn't easy for them—that in order to bring them back to a clear state of mind of what surviving this ordeal would **really** mean, I would need to communicate with them in a way that they could all digest. Half of shock is not understanding that you're in shock. I needed to remain calm and talk them out of this.

"Listen to me... when you **panic**, even with good intentions, you allow your thoughts to trap you—to disarm your ability to think clearly or to reason effectively," I instructed, turning to meet eyes with each and every person in the room while reciting similar lectures for them as those I had received over the years while being trained to keep a level head under fire in order to stay alive—to save the lives of those I was fighting alongside of. "The reason I'm explaining something so **obvious** to you is because you are all very intelligent people. And very intelligent people always like to think that they know best. Sometimes, they don't. In the context of combat, your orders are your best reminder of how to think. Otherwise, you leave yourselves vulnerable to panic," I finished, a humbled silence hanging in the room—as loud and piercing to their ears as the nagging cries of the base's alarm. They all stood shell-shocked—staring at the dead man in the corner—at their friend. None of them moved. Despite what I had said—they all kept standing there, as if I needed to elaborate further. "Now get back to your posts and let's keep looking for Roger!" I shouted, startling them out of reverie once more with disgruntled side-glances the only acknowledgement they gave me of what I had told them to do.

I stood there for a moment after they left—contemplating what my plan of action would be if they failed to uphold their end of things. The funnel we had built would be able to effectively re-direct and slow the oncoming swarm. But it would be impossible for me to effectively deal with and remove every single approaching ghoul through that entrance alone. It was just too much—too many shots, too quickly, without any way to confirm each kill to ensure Roger wasn't accidentally taken out, let alone actually search the bodies! I couldn't do it by myself. I **needed** them. But, for the time being, they were a goddamn liability. And that feeling tugged at my gut so bad that for a moment at least, the pain in my fingers and leg subsided to the magnitude of these White Coats being a pain in my ass.

"I was going to kill him," Leanne stated sternly, lying on a bed

not far from the body of the man I had just shot. I turned to look at her—at the bandages on her mangled knee and the table of medical equipment stationed beside her. “We all knew what had to be done. They just wanted to do it in a way that didn’t make them feel like murderers,” she explained, her beautiful eyes holding the contempt of the group—focused solely on me. “I know these people. You don’t. And I can tell you with full confidence that the situation was under control,” she finished, so torn up that her eyes overflowed with tears. Yet, her tone remained steady—the strongest one of any of them.

“They never should have brought him in here,” I began to say, speaking to her more softly than I had to the others.

“The man they were helping was hysterical and required them to!” she shouted, starkly interrupting my best attempts to calm her down. “The situation was under control you—you... fucking asshole!” she stuttered, so angry she was out of breath by the time she finished speaking—pulling her hand up to her tearful eyes to wipe away any visible trace. I smiled affectionately at her contempt—half put in my place, half ready to remind her of where hers was.

“You don’t know these people, Leanne. Not anymore,” I stated calmly, my tone just loud enough to be heard over the sound of the alarm. “You knew who they were when they were comfortable... People act differently when dying’s involved. These people turned into cowards. That’s not ok. They should have shot that man on the spot. Say a tender last word, take a moment to themselves, and then, put him to rest. They needed to do that without so much as considering how they’d ‘feel about it’ afterwards. But they didn’t. So I came here and I set things straight before the shit really hits and every one of those people you claim to ‘know’ panics and gets themselves killed.”

“They’re not soldiers, they’re civilians. And if the only way that you can approach normal people is by barking orders and expecting them to think and act like you, then it’s your inability to adapt that will get us killed—not them!” she snarled, no longer attempting to hide her tears.

“We don’t have time for this,” I grunted dismissively, in no mood to coddle her refusal to understand how hard choices work. “Cry about it and then get over it—I’ll be on the roof.”

I turned and left—snatching a bottle of pills off the table so that I could take something for the growing ache in my leg. I popped a couple of tablets into my mouth on the way back upstairs—stuffing the rest of them into a side pocket on the vest I wore. As I moved, I pondered the perspective Leanne had offered—of trying to adapt to the White Coats rather than expecting them to adapt to the world we now lived in. And the more I thought about it, the more upset I became. Life isn’t smelling the roses, it’s what the roses grow out of. It’s not Christmas dinner or

Happy Birthday or any kind of warm and fuzzy feeling. It's a goddamn train wreck of tragedy. And if you're not the one steering the train, you're the one getting run over by it. People who've led comfortable lives never seem to understand that—they can never bring themselves to reduce their perspective to the level that conflict reduces it to. Primal. Nothing but animals, surviving by killing animals trying to survive. That's it. That's life. All the rest is just fluff to distract you from the fact that one day you too are going to die. And most likely, you're gonna die a slave holding onto that warm and fuzzy feeling until the moment you find yourself in front of the train.

I returned to the roof and my rifle to see a full field of undead waiting for us—everywhere in all directions—pushed up against the sides, trudging their way around front. A group of about fifty were directly at the tip of the funnel—met head on by the White Coats, sifting through walking corpses. They acted as I had instructed them to—herding the group of thoughtless ghouls before making calculative strikes or shots into to their skulls. The White Coats moved with greater focus than before—more precariously and yet more fluid as well. As if the trauma they had just experienced opened their eyes only to have an overwhelmed emotional numbness keep them from tears and force them to tough it out. Shock to counterbalance trauma, turning previously innocent scientists into dazed initiate soldiers, killing what was trying to kill them—and growing more and more comfortable with the idea as the day wore on. I watched them through the scope of my rifle—picking off select ghouls who might run the risk of veering off to the side and disrupting the formation of the herd. And then... just as my finger inched towards another headshot, a blinding blast of light pulled my eyes away from the scope.

A smoldering crater of smoke rose up from where, just moments before, a distant town had been. 'Holy fuck that was a big explosion' I thought to myself, immediately remembering the blast that had tossed us through the woods. I sucked in a sharp breath and braced myself—swiveling down low to the ground. A moment later, the shockwave struck our location—quaking through the trees, one after another. The group of White Coats was shaken off their feet—caught off guard by one of the unannounced drone strikes Dennis had forebodingly insisted loomed just over the horizon—striking the most populated areas or anyone who was still using active lines of communication—two bombs that had just dropped at the exact same time. One was the town. The second, was in between this base and that town—decimating something or someone in the middle of all this mess—close enough for us to feel the force of it. My ears rang like a call center had just set up shop in my head. And then, as I

slowly brought myself back to look out on my new view, the sound of screaming returned.

A couple of the cars that had been tipped onto their sides to build the funnel had been forced back down by the shockwave—one of them falling right into the center of the long stretch of vehicles. Underneath that car was one of the White Coats—pinned down and bleeding out. The others huddled around him to try and help—to try and heave the car off him and pull him free. I watched attentively through the scope of my rifle—understanding their urge... however... I knew full well that as soon as that car was moved and the pressure on his abdomen was released, he'd lose consciousness and never come to again. With my scope, I could see the blood gushing out—his spine was crushed. His bowls were spilled out. And a pool of his blood was spreading out on the concrete around him. But still... the White Coats persisted—banding together to move the car. The entire field of ghouls, that had all been knocked down by the force of that blast, had managed to stand up again—to move forward towards the tip of the funnel.

“Watch your backs,” I muttered to myself, taking note of a small pack of ghouls that were creeping through the tip of the funnel. I aimed down the length of the field and took eye of a few distant targets, clearing them out with a handful of quick shots. But I left the pack of ghouls nearest to the White Coats unharmed out of stubborn indignation. To test whether or not they'd listened to me—to see if they were still paying attention to their surroundings, even as the shit hit the fan. Or, far more likely, that they somehow expected me to pick up their slack and keep watch over absolutely everything—like I was their guardian angel perched over their shoulder making anything that could go wrong alright. But I couldn't save them from themselves. And I desperately needed them to grasp that reality—that whether they were soldiers or not, they were now my men. And however awful we felt in this place, we still had a job to do.

It was then that one of the White Coats stopped what he was doing trying to save the wounded man and looked up at me instead—looked me in the eye, his hands covered in the blood of his dying friend—wondering what on earth it was that he was supposed to do now? It was then, in that moment, I could see the situation clearly. Not only the limitations that they had as soldiers, but my own limitations as a commanding officer. These people would never be what this world demanded they become. It was too much change to ask of them, too quickly, in too pressing a time. They'd make do for a while and then reliably fail later on. They might even perform wonderfully right up until they completely crashed down. Leanne was right. I couldn't just expect them to snap to and fall in line just because it was an undead world now.

No... if we were going to survive together, then that meant I would need to meet them half way. And so, this time, when I stood up to leave my post, I didn't do it with the intention of setting those White Coats straight. This time I stood up to remind them that we were all in this together.

By the time I reached the front of the base they had managed to get the car up off the ground enough to pull the wounded man free. But just as I thought he would, he had blacked out and fell limp. The pack of ghouls I had let wander had made its way into the tip of the funnel without any of the White Coats noticing at all—still expecting me to be where I was covering their asses. Instead, I stood down there alongside them, holding an assault rifle in my hand. I watched the ghouls attentively, clenching my jaw in pensive deliberation. I placed one hand on the shoulder of a White Coat and nodded to let him know it was alright—to let him know that they could all try to save their friend—they could all take him inside and it would be ok. Situations like this one were different than bites. He was wounded, not bit. And it was of the utmost importance to all of us that we do everything we could to try and save him.

“We’re gonna get him inside!” the man who’s shoulder I had touched told me, still keeping his back to the small group of ghouls now just a few meters away—unable to hear them approach over the constant, deafening wails of the base’s alarm. The undead stumbled forward—arms reaching out clamoring for someone to grab onto. I nodded to the man and watched the White Coats run off together, carrying their mangled friend along with them and leaving me to hold down the front.

Within a minute of my standing there I had comfortably put a bullet in the head of every ghoul we needed to search. After that, I began moving bodies—dragging them by the ankles towards a section of the funnel where the White Coats could sift through them later—search their pockets in the event that one of them had been Roger. The obese ghouls were always the worst ones. The fatter they were, the more strenuous it was to manage their corpses both when they were standing and when they weren’t. A few of the undead that I executed at close range were especially fat ones—pouring large mounds of their torn bellies out onto the pavement as I hauled them along the ground. The chunky-white-fat globed together like spoiled cottage cheese mixed with half dried glue. Normally, those fat bastards never would have walked all the way to the front—I would have sniped them off before they got half way. But the situation was rapidly unraveling and I hadn’t had the chance. It was more important that I be down here for them—fighting with them. The White Coats were going through something pretty severe right now and I needed to respect that. After all it was their first day on the job of living in an

undead world, not simply of hiding away safely in a tower someplace. It's a very different feeling to have no safety around you, not to mention the promise of drones on the way. Hell, I sympathized with them. If I had never seen combat before—never had to watch a person's belly split open, smeared along the sidewalk—hell, if I'd never seen all these things and often more so in war over the years, doing what I was right then and there might just have put me under too.

Eventually, they all came back to the front of the funnel—solemn and fighting back tears. The man they had all tried to save was dead. I knew that even before I had come down to lend them a hand. But they had all hoped something could be done for him... anything... anything at all. The man who I'd previously offered my assurances to by touching on the shoulder, walked right up to me—to relieve me of my assistance and let me know 'it was ok to return to the roof.' His eyes traced up the length of my bloodstained gloves until they met mine. And then, standing there listening to the blaring alarm together, he parted his lips and stood stunned.

He looked at me knowing exactly what he wanted to say but he never did find the ability to speak a single solitary word of it. Instead, he just stared. And I allowed him those few moments of broken anguish, unencumbered by my constant demands for everyone to 'keep moving.' I knew exactly how he felt. I'd watched plenty of my friends die in combat. And so, standing there, staring into his eyes, remembering the heartbreak of losing men in battle myself, I stepped forward, removed my gloves and then crisply saluted the teary-eyed man standing dumbfounded before me—saluted him and the friend he had just lost. His eyes watched me, perhaps trying to decode the full meaning of my gesture—of treating him like a fellow soldier—like I would have treated anyone I was paying my respects to. And then, finally, he spoke.

"Thank you," the man eventually replied, heartbroken tears forcing their way out and trickling down his cheeks. He was moved. Deeply moved. And standing there in that moment, we all understood each other better than we had before. The others began sorting through the bodies I had set aside—doing their jobs—glancing at the cars stacked up all around them, half expecting the whole thing to come crashing down. But even with the few vehicles that had fallen inwards, the funnel was still functioning exactly as it had been built to. It was still there to help us survive this mess—still there to give us a hope in hell of ever finding Roger and leaving this place at all. The man saluted me back as best he could and I nodded subtly—seeing in his eyes a different person than he had been before. I felt that gaze follow me as I walked back inside—reloading my assault rifle in case I needed to come back down

and help them again. Because that's the situation we had found ourselves in. They weren't just White Coats anymore. Soldiers or not, circumstances had made these people into my men. And that meant, live or die we were in this together.

I returned to the med bay and knocked lightly on the door to announce my presence. Leanne looked at me coldly, still trapped in the encounter we'd had before—presiding over the body of the most recent friend of theirs to have met an untimely end. A blanket was draped over him from the waist down—to keep everyone from having to see the horror of his bloated broken remains. The other wounded in the room recoiled as I walked forward—noticeably retreated and moved their hands towards their mouths—half to conceal a scream if need be, or perhaps motivated only by instinct. I don't know exactly. I hadn't taken the time to get to know these people. To me they had always been somewhat expendable. This entire time they had been nothing but scientists I had found myself stuck with. Their lives didn't really matter to me—not really. Their names didn't even matter to me. But now... things were different. Bleeding together does that to people. There are two types of family on this earth—the ones you share blood with and the ones you spill blood with. For whatever reason, the undead apocalypse had persuaded me to forget that fact. But now I remembered—my head on straight again.

"I'm sorry," I stated, taking a seat beside Leanne—wincing from a spike of hurt as I sat down. She looked at me in boiling frustration and I repeated what I had just said again—making sure the entire room could hear my apology. I was sorry... I really was. I did what I had to do but... I could have done it better.

"It's fine," she eventually replied, in the quintessential way in which people always say it's 'fine' when actually, it's not. She was furious. They all were.

"What was his name?" I asked, looking at the thin grey blanket covering the pulverized, flattened legs of the man beside me. A tiny portion of one of his kneecaps was visible from the side—chewed up like a dog's bone. Seeing that hit me hard and a sense of squeamish discomfort crawled through my belly—crying out memories of my brother.

"His name was Matthew."

"Really?" I sputtered, finding irony in it.

"Yes. He was a good man."

"I'm sure he was," I agreed, nodding my head and squeezing my lips together someplace in between a reassuring smile and a buried frown.

I couldn't stop staring at his mangled knee... just like Seb's knee had been when I'd put a bullet in it all those years ago... "I'm sorry I didn't get the chance to know him better. To... treat him better when it mattered most."

"Well... we're going to have a funeral later tonight. You can meet everyone then," Leanne replied, understanding my meaning without my having to say it. I nodded humbly, appreciating the thought of her welcoming me into the group. But I never took my eyes off Matthew's broken legs. And looking at him there—seeing his mangled knee—all I could think of was the regret I carried.

CHAPTER 31: OXEN FREE

Wes Korbuto, Unknown, 2018

“My name is Wes Korbuto. If you’re still alive and you receive this message, please call me back on this line. I’ll have the phone on and with me at all times. I’m immune to the disease. The infected don’t pay me any attention at all... it’s like I’m invisible to them or something. I’m currently in a secret government facility underneath Washington D.C. I was directed to come here by... um... I don’t actually know who they were, they never told me that information. But I don’t think I’m supposed to be down here and I’m just trying to figure out what’s going on and if there’s anyone else still out there. Thank you... hope to hear from you soon,” I finished, hanging up the phone as I placed another in a long list of identical messages—going one by one through every ‘Eden Corp’ contact on the phone I’d dug out of the dead man’s pocket on the floor of the Oval Office.

Since I’d opened the door to this control room half an hour ago, not a single ghoul had wandered in. I saw one down the length of the long hall turn in my direction when I kicked a chair out of frustration. But after only a few paces toward me it stopped and turned its attention back in the direction it had been headed. I still hadn’t worked up the nerve to leave that command room and explore the compound further. But now that I had exhausted every number on that phone, I didn’t have any choice. The crates the infected had been banging on... the ones that I’d seen stacked together in the giant hangers. They were my best bet to finding survivors—of hoping someone had locked themselves inside and might need my help. Because as thrilled as I was to have found some proof that life was still out there, it didn’t do me any good if I was stuck down here alone, waiting for the bombs to fall.

By looking at a couple of maps located next to a row of what I assumed were fire hydrants, I was able to figure out that this facility was absolutely gigantic. Twelve different levels, each with ceilings big enough to drive semi-trucks carrying King Kong on them. I’d never seen anything like it. Or, that’s to say, never in real life anyway. It was like something out of a science fiction movie... like being on the Death Star or discovering a buried alien ship. The only thing that gave me pause to keep my imagination from wandering too far was the fact that all the signage was in English and all infected used to be human. No aliens here. No Stormtroopers or talking robots. Just ghouls, dragging their entrails from one corridor to another. And because of that, it didn’t take me long to

figure out the best way to locate potential survivors. I followed the blood trails.

After ten minutes of moving down hallways trying to open closed doors I found a man with half his face gnawed off who was dressed differently than everyone else. Most ghouls were wearing what looked like full body scrubs, dark blue in color with the same corporate logo and ID badges on them. But he was wearing a half-torn suit with tattered remains of a white lab coat still overtop it. His ID badge was different too. I pulled it from his lumbering corpse and looked more closely at it—shining my flashlight across the sections of it still free of blood. His name was Russian or Ukrainian or something. But what interested me wasn't what was written on it so much as the style of the badge—thicker and heavier than the others—like it wasn't just a security badge... like it was some sort of device or something. The blue lights next to the doors that I had held the hard drive up to flickered to life as I held the ID in front of them—peeling doors open at my leisure, one after another revealing rooms without any survivors in them—locker rooms, a cafeteria, lab after lab after lab. Giant MRI-like machines that I couldn't fathom the use of—vehicles with huge safes loaded on the back of them that even the ID wouldn't unlock. All kinds of stuff. And yet... no weapons. None. Not on any of the ghouls, not on the ground or in the rooms. Nowhere was there a single solitary firearm. As far as I could tell, there weren't even any guards. In a secret government facility this size, this sophisticated with this much at stake, I could barely believe the lack of security. Even some of the guys at the Mall guarding paintings had guns. But, for whatever reason... not here.

I used what I assumed was a large power tool to bludgeon ghouls and drag them away from a crate—lugging bodies one after the other until I had cleared the room of the thirty-odd infected constantly trying to bang on the side of a large container. I locked the door behind me to keep a few stragglers at bay that were endlessly wandering the halls—walking in circles like they were caught in a maze with no exit. Then, with palpable hesitation about whatever I might find inside the crate, I scanned the ID and pulled the handle—holding my breath and clenching my jaw.

“Hello?” I asked, pulling my flashlight up to reveal exactly what I had hoped for. Someone was inside. Two people. Only... they weren't moving. And the color of their skin told me nothing I could do would be able to help them. Two bodies sat hunched over one another, clinging to each other tenderly. A handful of empty water bottles surrounded them and a few discarded wrappers. They had made it to safety—they had even had supplies with them. But... I was too late. They died of dehydration... holding each other in their final moments as the endless drone of thuds

against the wall drove them mad. But... if they were dead... why had the ghouls still been banging against the sides of the crate?

I approached their bodies and pulled my shirt over my face—swallowing my urge to vomit from the smell of their spilled bowls, leaking out of their pants all over the floor of the container. In the semi-silence of that place, without moaning relentlessly accosting my ears, I could hear something vibrating—jittering inside of one of their pockets. I leaned down and began fishing through their clothes, eyeballing them both suspiciously all the while in case one of them suddenly sprang to life and lunged at me. But they didn't move... only their pocket did. And eventually, as my fat fingers clumsily crawled through their layers of clothing, I found what the loud vibrating was. A phone. Another phone that looked just like the one I had found in the Oval Office. I swiped my finger across to open it and held my breath—listening carefully as a message was played back.

"My name is Wes Korbut. If you're still alive and you receive this message, please call me back on this line," I heard my own jittery, scared, lost voice say—left over from one of the many calls I had placed just moments before.

"Fuck," I muttered, pulling the phone down and ending the message—realizing as I did that there was another message on the phone from a couple days prior—unanswered and unheard by the two dead people that had been locked in the crate. I stepped away from the pair and exited the container, pressing the phone tightly to my ear to listen to whatever it was they were supposed to hear.

"I need you to bang louder!" a woman demanded, her tone withered and tearful. "The last time I tried to come down for rations they were still around! I can't fucking get up and down carrying extra weight with my arm like this if they're still in the room with me!" she continued, the faint sound of moaning and recurrent thuds echoing from her end of the line. "I'm still trying to reach the others but... they're not answering their phones and I'm getting worried. I need you to get back to me or to start banging again to draw their attention or I'm not going to be able to climb down safely! Call me back and let me know, soon!" she finished, hanging up the phone and leaving me in a befuddled daze. I scrolled through the recent call list until I saw her number—one that wasn't included in the phone that I had previously been using—and then quickly pressed dial. Holding the device with my shaking hand tightly against my ear, I bit my lip praying that she'd still be around to answer.

"Are you ok?! What the hell took you so long!" the woman screamed, out of breath and full of hurt.

"My name is Wes Korbut. I'm immune to the disease. I'm in the

facility. The people you were trying to contact are dead... I just found them. But I'm here to help. Tell me where you are and I'll do whatever I can to make things safe for you to come out, ok?"

CHAPTER 32: RECON

Derek Riggs, Louisiana, 2005

I spent a full year investigating the lab my father had been stationed in. I scoured every lead I could find, every person who might be able to spill a scrap of information for a false promise or wad of counterfeit bills in return. My recon didn't ultimately reveal much if anything that I didn't already know. My father had been a secretive son of a bitch whose past military record died with him. But what he'd told me when he'd dragged me out to that warehouse last year still stuck in my mind, gnawing its way deeper and deeper, no matter where I went or what I did. 'It's not real. It's not real... it's not real.' Motherfucker. Even after he was dead—killed that very night running a red light and T-boning two other people—he was still alive and well inside of my skull, tormenting me endlessly to find the answers I never had the opportunity to interrogate him about. The lab. The place he'd confessed to me all those years ago when I'd first learned about the virus that would one day wipe the world clean. It was my only hope for answers. And the year I had spent going slowly mad clawing and griping for clues had nearly broken what little remained of my resolve. That is... until the storm hit.

I knew where the lab was. I knew the basics of shift rotations, electrical demands, waste disposal, scope of the perimeter fence and the number of years I'd get in a federal prison if I so much as tried to set foot there. I knew my best opportunity for entry and exit points, that keycards were encrypted, and the type of weapons the guards were carrying. I even knew the names of all the secretaries and which military personnel harassed them most. But none of that information gave me a shot in hell of getting inside, let alone getting access to the files I needed to learn what I wanted to know. I was stuck. I was at an insurmountable impasse. And it seemed as if all was lost.

Apparently Sebastian had tried to get in contact with me. My mother had called telling me she had opened the letter he wrote and read it. She said that she was 'proud of me' for being a hero for once and saving him and his girlfriend from Mathew the way I did. I didn't respond to either of their attempts to reach out to me and make amends. Ever since my father died she was a different person... a version of herself untainted by the horrible men who had once consumed her life. In a way, I was glad she was feeling better. But still... I said nothing in response. Only communicating that I was still alive by cashing the check she had included so that I could buy more food rations and keep my tent 'protocols ready'. I was, after all, despite being on recon, still alert—still vigilant, aware that any day no matter how my father's words tortured me that it could all come crumbling down. And it did. Sooner than later. Only... it wasn't in the way I expected it to.

I sat in my tent in the rain having waterproofed and secured everything to weather the storm. I had heard word-of-mouth chatter about how it was supposed to be a bad one this year. But nobody suspected how bad. As the winds increased, my tent, secured by tying rope around nearby trees, thrashed violently in the swampy jungle I'd called home for the past few months. The sky had turned a special kind of grey—a deeply layered abyss of clouds raining an entire ocean down upon me. I kept my back to a tree, watching as branches and leaves were thrown past me, disappearing into the swarms of wreckage that grew larger every moment. In the deep swamp, not far from New Orleans, some locals like me lived in the woods separated from society. Some even stayed on the outside of the city levies to avoid the clamping jaws of the United States government—to actually live free lives like this country supposedly stood for. I'd happened across them from time to time when doing my patrols to secure the area. We had never spoken to one another except through brief nods of recognition—seeing in each other a similar disregard for the way in which the world insisted we were supposed to live. I could tell they wanted to talk to me, to be friendly and make conversation. But so too could they tell that I wasn't the sort of stranger for that. I was on a mission. I was doing recon. And, eventually, they came to understand where the territory was I had drawn for myself.

After the storm had become loud enough to put jet engines to shame, I noticed some of the locals struggling to flee—clinging to floatation devices and what few supplies and belongings they had secured for the trip. I wondered what could have compelled them to go out in the storm—to leave the shacks that I had seen them call home. And then, not long after asking myself that question, the water started to rise. Most of my things were well enough off the ground, tightly fastened to trees, but the few small items that weren't tied down became my focal point. I moved quickly, my hands given a vice-like grip from the special rubber gloves I wore, holding myself half in place by gripping a tree trunk I had lassoed a length of climbing rope to. But, as I did my best to keep my things accounted for and safe, the water kept rising... higher and higher until, eventually, I could no longer set foot on the ground. I watched as my tent was ripped in two—penetrated by the raw force of water and rubble flowing into it.

A quick flash of lightning revealed a pack of alligators in the water, caught in a swift current too great for even them to fight against. I pulled myself higher up the thick tree I was fastened to and planted my feet firmly six yards off the ground. But still, the water kept rising. I stared in disbelief at what was happening—the wind screaming in my ears, the forest thrashing as if it were about to be uprooted and thrown into hell. I had never witnessed a hurricane before and had, foolishly perhaps, insisted on being in the woods to withstand this one firsthand. But this wasn't just any storm, and the waters weren't just rising to their normal levels. Eventually, as the debris grew more and more visible, I came to recognize pieces of the shacks I had seen my fellow woodland locals living in—washed away as if their rightful place in this world was to be drowned and forgotten. It was then I realized that the levies had to have broken... that the storm was winning. It was then I knew Katrina wasn't just your average

hurricane. In that moment, I realized both the danger of what was happening around me, and, also... the opportunity. The lab was about to be under water and, as soon as the storm cleared, I'd have my chance to go swimming for answers.

CHAPTER 33: SAFE THEN SORRY

Derek Riggs, Oregon, 2018

The wind carried the dense plume of smoke steadily in our direction as we glided to the side of the most recent blast area. Cory dangled unconscious beneath the glider, held tightly in one arm. I didn't have time to perfectly secure him with a safety line and I was too paranoid to leave his dangling body out of reach. Moreover, I didn't have the resources with me to ensure that when we landed we'd be able to move quickly or with confidence. All I had was the aching feeling in my gut of more blasts to come—sucking up thousands of undead one strike after another to rid the world of the disease that had consumed it. Whoever's 'plan this might be' entertained the back of my mind, tickling one possibility or another about what could possibly come next. And the only way for me to have any hope of answering that question, of delving through what was left of the world and tapping into the still active lines of communication, was to reach my nearby fort—just on the other side of the super cluster we were currently gliding overtop.

As we entered the final stretch of fresh air before entering the plume of smoke, I sucked in a deep breath and tightly closed my eyes—remembering our trajectory with the hope that I'd be able to keep on course without sight of where we were headed. Those ghouls beneath us that hadn't been engulfed by the blast now meandered in the direction of the crater that was left behind. Their collective moans becoming more and more audible as both our altitude descended and the ringing in my ears subsided. We were losing height fast—faster than I'd like. Perhaps my weight calculations had been off, balancing Cory's size and that of all of the gear I had no choice but to leave behind. Or, more likely, my glider had somehow been compromised from the blasts. I stuck my tongue out to try and gauge how deep in the plume of smoke we still were, deciding to open my eyes after a full minute of not breathing. As I did so, a sharp sting burned its way into the slits in my eyes and I quickly closed them again. Our course was still correct but our landing area was way off. I could only hope the super cluster would be able to migrate faster since the blast had struck—hope that when we landed we wouldn't be square in the middle of it. But, as usual, as soon as I started hoping for one thing, another thing happened.

Even with my eyes closed I could see the flash. But for the brief second before the wind hit us, I had no idea where it was or how hard the blow would be. I opened my eyes just in time for the smoke in front of us

to clear, but also, just in time for a huge gust from behind us to knock the glider ass end up—throwing both myself and Cory into a misguided tailspin. He toppled out of grip as I tried to steady myself and for a split second I deliberated whether or not I would let him fall. But I couldn't. I refused to. And so, as the gliders balance went from bad to worse, one arm clung to the handlebar while the other, fully extended beneath me, clutched Cory's clothes. The tailspin became worse as a result, his weight setting us even more off balance—pulling us down and to the side. I reached up, repositioned my hand and thrust my weight to the side to try and center the glider... to try and save us from the situation we were about to find ourselves in. But it was too late. We were going down. And where we were about to land didn't give us much of a chance without my gear. We hadn't cleared the super cluster... we were about to land on the outer edge of undead, all of whom were only slightly displaced by the shockwaves that had knocked them around like pylons in an earthquake. I only had one machete and my katana with me... no side arm... no armor... just my training, my instincts and my desire to make up for years waiting for a test just like this one. As we neared the ground I was able to swing my weight hard at the last moment, slamming one wing of the glider into the ground to break our fall. My shoulder hit the ribcage of a toppled ghoul and crushed it inwards, leaving a number of vulnerable gashes along my side. But that wasn't the worst of it. I lost my grip of Cory—both of us bouncing end over end through mounds of ghouls still struggling to get back to their feet from the most recent shockwave that had knocked them over. And then, after five or ten seconds of sliding along the dirt and bodies strewn across it, I finally came to a stop and pushed myself to my feet.

A katana in one hand and a machete in the other—spotting where Cory had landed. A small pack of ghouls were already reaching out for him, still unconscious and folded open like a bag of meat ready to be devoured. I sprinted forward, balancing my steps on chests and backs of still disoriented undead until I was within arms reach of him. Then, with quick windmill like cuts, I severed heads and sliced arms—clearing both of us a few square meters of immobilized undead. But it wouldn't last... it wouldn't stop. Because where we had ended up ensured a full circle defense—a defense that needed to be vigorously maintained every inch of the way for the next quarter of a mile. We weren't outside the perimeter of the super cluster by a long shot. Instead, we were exactly where I had feared we'd end up—one wrong move away from no room at all. I knelt down and slapped Cory across the face to try and wake him up, glancing to the side to slice off another couple of heads that would otherwise have made their way towards us. But Cory was still unconscious, having suffered additional scrapes and wounds from the hard landing we'd just

made.

“Wake up,” I hissed, barely able to hear myself over my pounding eardrums. I lowered an arm to his shoulder again and shook him, deciding in that moment I couldn’t risk staying in one place and losing our ability to maneuver. I temporarily put the machete down, picked Cory up, swung him around and draped him over my wounded shoulder. I pulled my helmet off and cast it aside—so damaged and covered in trash that it was more of an encumbrance than a help. Then, with one machete clenched between my teeth and the sword in my right arm, I turned my attention back to the ghouls—nearly all of which had now managed to rise back to their feet and zero in on the only living things in sight. Their mouths hung open, their glazed over eyes and torn-to-shreds faces all stared at us—in an instant, all of them realized exactly who they needed to surround and devour. And then... almost altogether as one, they advanced. Dinnertime.

The heart of the swarm was collapsing in on us. My razor-sharp blade cut off hands instead of heads—moving from one ghoul to the next to prepare the formation in a way that wouldn’t leave me as vulnerable on all sides. I dropped my shoulder with Cory on it and used him as a battering ram to push a few handless-undead away, stumbling off their feet and falling backwards into the crowd. They acted as temporary hurdles for those who came after them, tripping and falling forward. A few quick slices of the katana and they too were immobilized, acting as part of a sectional blockade I would have to build to be able to survive at all. I pulled my arm back again, but a remaining hand that had pushed its way through the crowd faltered my aim. I missed a head and fell off balance. Cory slipped off my shoulder and the small pile of ghouls I had already created writhed and wriggled, clawing at me with their bloody stumps—smearing their remains all over my naked body. There were too many of them. Hundreds. Thousands. Everywhere in all directions. Their open mouths and jittering jaws stretched wide, sensing the taste of flesh. I removed the machete from my teeth and sliced in twos—cracking skull after skull and toppling corpse after corpse. I breathed fiercely, sweat pouring out of me from the constant motion and force of will I insisted we could survive with. What had been a few meters of perimeter had now collapsed to less than three feet. I was trapped. Cory lay on the ground, teeth growing closer and closer to his frail body. And... I suddenly realized... I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t win this fight or hack our way to freedom.

With the last few feet of room disappearing, I did the only thing I could think might save us. I pulled Cory tight to my body and swung a few decapitated corpses overtop of us to act as shields. Hands slapped at my body and I stabbed through the crevices, aiming for eyeballs. The weight quickly increased—hundreds of ghouls sandwiched against one

another, pressing us deeper and deeper into the dirt—falling over top of us as more and more approached behind them. I felt my lungs ache and tremble barely able to breath between the bodies crushing us and the undead pressing up against them, trying to continue forward and reach their meal. The moans screamed in our ears and I found myself pressed tightly against the ground, face to face with Cory—fleeting glimpses of light through the chaos revealing that his eyes were still closed. But he was breathing. He was still alive. But... not for much longer. The weight was becoming unbearable and in a matter of moments it would crush him beneath me and suffocate his delicate attempts to keep breathing.

“I’m sorry, Cory,” I wheezed, clenching my teeth in indignant rage and disgust that we had ended up as we had. That I had jumped without knowing we could make it. That those fucking bombs had fallen without me understanding why. I took responsibility for everything. I had prepared my whole life for this and it still wasn’t good enough. Fuck me. Damn me to hell. But he didn’t deserve it. A moment later Cory began to cough loudly, sputtering back to life and opening his eyes as a trickle of blood splattered across his face and more hands, teeth and stumps slapped against our bodies. My calloused, burnt and hardened skin would keep their teeth from puncturing me too easily. But without my armor... it was only a matter of time. Cory met eyes with me and in the dim amount of light still making its way through the hoard, he could see that it was over. That even I was helpless to stop them from eating us alive. I held the machete in my hand, both of us curled in the fetal position surrounded by corpses, and gestured down to it—trying to ask him if he wanted me to slit his throat to stop him from turning. But he didn’t understand. Instead, He just hugged me and cried, wheezing for air and understanding. And then... another blast hit.

The shockwave and the blinding light were nearly in sync this time. And the sheer ferocity of the blast made the ground itself jump—thrusting us up like a water drop catapulted from a pool. The mounds of undead on top of us suddenly subsided and the weight we had felt just a moment before turned into thin air, throwing us and everything around us forward like an anthill hit by a hurricane. We flew for what must have been ten or twenty meters, still clutching onto one another before landing hard on a row of walking corpses recently knocked to the ground. The blast had been so close and so loud that neither of us could now hear anything... not even ringing in our ears—just a high piercing singular tone. I fluttered my eyes to try and see through the blood, realizing that I still had the katana left in my jittering hand. I gasped for air and summoned the strength to stand, yanking Cory off the ground and swinging him around my back like a baby chimp. His hands tightened

around me—still conscious—and staring forward at the hundreds of ghouls in front of us slowly crawling to get back up. I began to run.

I didn't have time to kill them. I didn't bother to swing with my sword. I only ran as hard and as fast as my feet could carry me. Every single inch of my body was covered in blood and dirt. And I wondered... I calculated and speculated... praying that the wound on my shoulder wouldn't become infected before I reached my fort and made sure Cory was alright. But there was no way to know. All I could do was hope to move fast enough to escape the hell raining down on us in all directions. My feet landed on undead body parts and charred-rubble nearly turned to dust. And then, as I entered a long gust of wind that had infused itself with smoke, I held my breath once more to keep from passing out. Cory coughed loudly on my back, no longer able to scream or cry. And I kept moving... hands slapping against my legs to try and slow me down... but I wouldn't... I couldn't. As my ability to hear slowly returned to me I noticed Cory trying to say something but I couldn't decipher what. We were nearly at the edge of the super cluster now... nearly to a point where a brisk walk would outrun them. But, until we were clear of it, there was still every chance the hoard would rise up and pull us to our graves. I ran. I ran. I ran. And then, out of breath and shaking viscerally, I collapsed.

I woke up a moment later to Cory screaming in my face, slapping me this way and that as dirt rained down from the sky and pockets of black smoke darted through the wind. I had reached the outside of the super cluster just in time to lose consciousness and, with it, time we needed to get away. Cory's face was as drenched in blood as mine but I couldn't tell if it had come from me, him, or the undead we had just cut our way through. I sputtered a gasp of air and trembled, feeling as if I couldn't move. I managed to pull my back up but a couple of motionless ghouls lay across my legs, weighing me down. I squirmed and fidgeted until I was free and Cory bravely lunged out with my sword in hand and hacked at the knees of approaching undead to slow them down. Then, together we began jogging away from the super cluster toward the outskirts of the town where my fort was. All the while I counted in my head how long it had been since I was in the cluster... how long it had been since I had a wound directly exposed to the infected. And then as I was able to regain my composure well enough to sprint, I began moving so fast Cory couldn't possibly keep up with me.

"Derek wait!" he shouted, his tiny feet galloping in the dust of my strides.

"Go right in two blocks! Left down the first alley! Open hatch on the ground!!!" I instructed, disregarding his insistence that I slow down for him to catch up. But I didn't have the time... if I was going to turn

into a ghoul, I was going to turn soon. And, at the very least I wanted to make sure I opened that door for Cory before I did. My muscles ached and my lungs felt like they were on fire, but I couldn't distinguish between the pains I felt and whatever the hell it would feel like to turn into one of them.

After a few moments more of sprinting full speed I screeched around the side of the alley and fell face down, looking right at the basement hatch that led to my fort. The key-code entry of 321R was quickly entered twice despite my shaking hand. I paused a moment to throw up, feeling my stomach churn and convulse... remembering as I did the voicemails the people in my office had left about how they had felt when they contracted the disease. I hauled the hatch open and made a point of leaving it for Cory who I assumed was still following right behind me. I ran down the stairs, entered the code for the second security door and stumbled forward towards the fort's emergency shower. I slammed my hand hard against the button and frantically began washing away the mounds of dirt and blood that had soaked into my skin. The muddy putrid goop funneled quickly down the drain, and after a brief moment of cleaning myself, I ran naked to the gun cabinet and removed a firearm—clutching my stomach with one hand and the pistol with the other. I placed it square against my temple and stared at the clock... counting down the seconds until I decided to pull the trigger. But not until Cory was safe... Not until I knew he had made it and that I didn't need to be around any longer. Then... after a moment... I heard the hatch close and someone descend the steps. I kept waiting, kept hoping to see his face again. And then just as he rounded the corner and rested his eyes on me with a gun to my head, I noticed him out of breath, clutching his gut too.

"What are you doing?" he wheezed, so blacked with dirt and blood that it looked like he had crawled through a chimney.

"Get in the shower and get clean!" I demanded, now unsure of whether I'd need to kill him, myself or both of us. Only time would tell. But first, he had to wipe the filth off him so I could see how bad the damage was. Cory moved sluggishly over to the shower before I grew impatient and rushed over to his side—thrashing my free hand up and down on him to clear the dirt away. Cory had a few long scrapes on him but no cuts like the one on my shoulder. He had some places where bruises were clearly going to show, but as far as I could tell, he wasn't the one in danger. I was. The water stopped a moment later and Cory clutched his naked body, shivering in the cold.

"What are you doing Derek?!" he repeated, a quivering lip and brooding tears overflowing from the hell we'd just escaped from. I took a quick breath and looked at the clock again, acutely aware of every passing

second and how it might be my last.

“I’m being careful,” I replied, lowering the gun from my head and putting it in his palm. “This place has everything you’ll need to survive... the library has manuals and instructions for everything. Other than that... Good luck. You know what to do if I turn,” I exclaimed, feeling a sinking feeling in the pit of my gut pulling me down to the ground. My eyes began to shut and I felt myself beginning to go under... repeating the words ‘Good luck’ over and over again until I blacked out.

CHAPTER 34: NEXT OF KIN

Susie Simmonds, Upstate Massachusetts, 2018

“Shhhhhiiiiiiiiitttt,” I groaned, my mouth drooping open as I looked out over the thousands of ghouls pressed up against one another surrounding the mall my brother was hiding inside. There were so many people that it looked like the entire town had emptied out and ended up here. But they were all so rotten and decayed I didn’t recognize anyone from their facial features. I did, however, recognize some of the clothes... blood splattered versions of old jackets or dresses I’d seen worn at my school or in my favorite shops. And now they were here. Huddled together banging endlessly on the walls of the shopping mall like they were trying to crack open a piñata.

“How the hell am I supposed to get in?” I asked myself, walking around the sides of the mass of people looking for any sort of entrance or weak spot in the crowd. But there wasn’t one. It was completely packed everywhere, and if I tried to pry through individual people I’d almost certainly get stuck in the crowd unable to move further in or escape back the way I came.

As I moved around the sides of the huge group of people, I started to encounter more and more cars in the parking lot. Those cars had gaps in between them filled with ghouls. But the cars themselves were free of the undead—acting as Lily Pads in a pond of people. And, as I thought about it, I realized that those cars might be my best bet at getting a closer look. I turned around, got back in the abandoned truck I’d found to drive here, and turned the engine back on—moving it up to the side of the parking lot and laying my hand against the horn. As I did so, the undead closest to the outside of the group began to peel away and lumber towards the noise. I waited for them to get almost right up to the car before I stopped pressing on the horn, leaving them to be attracted to the radio instead. Then with a tiny emergency supply pack that I had found in the truck along with a baseball bat, I started making my way to the cars I’d use to leapfrog.

The parking lot stretched out for about 100 yards, and moving across it felt about a thousand times as long. Each time I’d climb up on a car I’d have to pick up the bat, swing it into the skull of whichever ghoul was wedged in front of me to clear enough room to squeeze through, and then plant my hand on the shoulder of another undead just to be able to make the jump to the next car. Then I’d usually stare down at a smudge of

goop on my palm and frantically wipe it on the trunk of where I'd landed before having to do the same thing all over again. Only problem was... it was already midafternoon. And at this rate I'd be lucky if I made it into the mall by morning, let alone by nightfall. I'd told my mom I'd be back by then. I'd told her that... dammit! Dammit, dammit, dammit! I couldn't do that to her. I couldn't just leave her at home worried sick about me! But... at the same time... I'd told Carson that I'd be at the mall—that he'd have to 'come and find me' in the sporting goods store. And if the Convoy showed up here looking for me... if I really was as important as he said I was and the Convoy actually went through all of the trouble of clearing these ghouls and I wasn't there, then... who knows if I'd ever be able to see them again? They were supposed to move out the next day... they already had their plans arranged and in motion. I was just... some desperate little kid. I hadn't thought it through. I was just... trying my best... and I worried constantly that it wouldn't be good enough.

A blinding white light forced my eyes shut and I raised a hand up to my head for half a moment trying to look in that direction. But then... what felt like tornado whipping itself into the side of me knocked me off the car and threw me to the ground. Every car in the parking lot shook, and a number of the undead lost their balance and fell over. One of them landed right on top of me and pinned me to the ground. The smell of the still moaning still moving thing made me gag and sputter for breath. It slowly found its way back to its feet as I swatted at it to get off me, then after what seemed like an eternity, I managed to squirm free. I pressed my hands against the side of the car I had been standing on and hoisted myself back up, turning to look in the direction of the white light to see a huge stack of smoke instead.

"Oh my god!!! Whh—whaaaaat happened?!" I asked myself, realizing that the direction the blast had come from was where the Convoy had been. A stack of smoke so large that it was as if the entire thing had suddenly vanished. Maybe one of the gas tankers had exploded?! Maybe they had some sort of weapon or bomb or something that they'd found and had triggered by accident? I didn't know. I had no way of knowing. But then what I noticed was that the entire hoard of ghouls surrounding me in the parking lot began moving in the direction of the blast, slowly funneling out of their tightly packed crevices to move freely through the open field surrounding the mall. It was then I realized I might just be able to make it into the mall by nighttime after all. But... given the size of that blast, it was uncertain whether the convoy would be able to now come looking for me. That explosion meant they had bigger things to worry about... if they were even still alive. I hoped they were.

Because... without them... who knows when, if ever, I'd see anyone from the outside world again.

CHAPTER 35: MAYDAY

Anna Simmonds, Upstate Massachusetts, 2018

My leg was bouncing up and down out of anxiety so deep it felt like every single second took about a year to pass. It was nearly the end of the afternoon and still there wasn't any word from my little girl. She was out there all by herself, stubborn and risk-taking as always, sure to get herself in some sort of trouble that I had no way of knowing whether or not she'd be able to get herself out of. And there I sat, perched on the top of the barn, staring out at open fields through the scope of my rifle praying that any of the silhouettes I saw on the horizon might be hers. But they weren't. They never were. All day it was nothing but the occasional ghoul straggler walking past like it had someplace more important to be. For a while that thought had given me pause... made me consider the idea that maybe something was going on someplace else that saw all those undead find their way to a different part of the town. But as soon as I started thinking that, I did nothing but start worrying myself sick all over again. Cause she still wasn't home. She still wasn't safe. And, if she didn't come back soon, well... I just didn't know what I'd do.

The faintest of sounds perked my ears and I stood up sharply and placed the rifle on my shoulder—scanning the open fields in all directions for where it might be coming from. Then, in a way that at first made me feel a rush of relief, I spotted something moving quickly towards the house. But, as I saw that the figure was alone... without my little girl by its side... I started worrying all over again even worse than before. Elvis, our old hound dog, jogged briskly toward the barn, barking loudly every so often to try and catch my attention. He had gone into town with Susie earlier that morning and now he was coming back to the house all alone. My heart seized up and I sucked in a tearful breath of utter distress and agony. She was still out there. She was alone. And I knew... I just knew she was in trouble.

Elvis came to stand just at the base of the barn, barking loudly and jumping back in the direction he'd come from—trying to tell me something. But I already knew what it was. Somewhere along the line, he'd gotten separated from Susie. Somewhere along the line, something had happened that he wasn't able to stay with her for. And now... he wanted me to follow him so he could show me what it was. But... I... I just... couldn't. I couldn't leave that place like I was some sort of marine! I couldn't just take off without knowing full well that Susie wouldn't be able to make it back by nightfall like she said she would. And, given that

the sun was about to fall, I couldn't risk stumbling around in the dark in a world poised to eat me alive. No matter how I looked at it, I was trapped. Whether I stayed there and shook myself sick or ventured out and risked everything I had... I was trapped with that feeling of pain and agony—my heart tied to the thought of my little girl.

Then, as I rolled one idea around the side of my head just to feel it sink into the depths of my heart, something happened that changed all that. A light about a few dozen miles away engulfed the sky and shook me to my core. A moment later a shockwave came rumbling across the open fields and rattled them raw, shaking me off my feet and the rifle off my shoulder. Elvis stumbled and fell himself, turning around sharply and perking up his ears in the direction of the blast. And then, as I stood back up, looking out at where that light had been, all I saw was smoke—a huge, unbelievably high stack of black smoke along with the hellacious roar of the blast that had pounded its way into my eardrums.

“My God,” I whispered, unable to fathom what had caused it or why it had happened at all. I looked down at the tiny rifle I had dropped... perched on the top of the meager shelter we had that a blast like that would almost assuredly swallow whole, fortified or not. And then, I looked back to Elvis barking harder and more desperately than he was just moments before. It was then I knew... my little girl needed me. But... first... I needed... I needed... “Son of a bitch,” I seethed, sucking in a tearful heart-wrenching breath as the idea forced its way into my head. The size of that blast wasn't anything that could be made short of a fireworks factory exploding or a bomb being dropped, and our town didn't have a fireworks factory. Matthew, that God awful son of a bitch, had spent the last decade in the military... he'd turned his bloodlust and hatred into a weapon for sale... and, until I'd turned off the radio making that awful beeping noise over and over again, it had been Matthew on the other end of the line trying to reach this place and communicate something. If I needed answers, I owed it to Susie to try and find them wherever I could.

I quickly rushed down the spiral staircase and made my way to the radio I'd unplugged, reaching behind it to push the receiving device back in and reconnect the antenna. Then, flipping through the instructions that Sebastian had left in one of the journals, I combed over what I'd need to do to be able to listen to what was being said and respond to it. After about five minutes of fidgeting with equipment and turning things this way or that, I managed to get myself set up—plugging in a pair of headphones and bringing out an old microphone. But, to my surprise, as I plugged in those headphones, the message that had previously been on repeat was no longer there—leaving me no choice but

to be the one to reach out. And so, I did as the instruction told me to do, pressed the button that allowed me to speak, cleared my voice and held my breath—reneging on the longest promise I had ever made myself... that I would never, ever, ever under any circumstances speak to Matthew again.

“Matthew... I hate you more than the devil himself. But my little girl is out there and I need to know what the hell is going on?!”

CHAPTER 36: SPEAK OF THE DEVIL

Matthew Simmonds, Virginia, 2018

Since losing those two men, the White Coats carried themselves with a chip of paranoia weighing on their shoulders. Now, they never ever, for a single solitary second looked away from the entrance to the funnel. The man they had pulled from underneath the fallen car was dead. And with his loss they had all changed—entering an emotionally disengaged landscape within themselves—a numbness and hardness almost necessary to embrace an order to survive hellacious times like these. Why, if I hadn't thought of them as such a liability in the first place, I might just have been proud. Hell... I still kind of was. Damn proud in fact. They got it now. We were very likely going to die. We were very likely never going to find Roger or recover the hard drive we needed to get that elevator working or stop the drones droning. And the only shot in hell we had for anything going right ever again was for them to suck it up, pull it together and reduce their scientific minds to the level of animals working to survive. That's a hard pill to swallow. But they managed to do it and to keep working all the while.

The line of trees that lay just out beyond the parking lot was now a flood of undead packed shoulder to shoulder as they emerged from the woods. The towns that hadn't been engulfed by strikes were all slowly making their way here—this base being the single loudest thing for miles, begging for a brood to blossom. And though I had enough ammo to take out ten or twenty thousand of those sons of bitches myself, I knew all too well that if the base got too crowded for too long, we were likely going to be bumped up the list of which target was bombed next. The drones were coming. The undead were marching. And time was running out.

The White Coats peeled body after body away from the tip of the funnel, doing a damn fine job of clearing the ghouls and double checking the pockets of every single one that they came in contact with. They managed their job and I helped slow the waves marching towards them—clearing targets who were wearing clothes nothing like what Roger had on when he disappeared. But as I fired off another handful of rounds into lurking skulls, a ring chimed into my ear that I didn't expect to hear again unless it was to inform me that we were all gonna die. Shivers went down my spine as I reached away from my rifle to the sound of the ringing. My trigger finger lightly tapped the tablet, turning my attention back to Dennis. But, to my surprise, it wasn't him calling me. Instead, it was a notification for a channel in use—a radio frequency that I recognized. It

was my brother Seb—he was still out there! And now he was calling me back! I quickly tapped the button—assuming Dennis had directed the call for me and that is was ok to answer.

“Sebastian?” I asked, speaking into the device. A moment later the line cracked and popped and I heard frantic breathing become audible. I raised my hands up to cover my mouth and right ear—trying to silence the relentless wails of the alarm so that he’d be able to hear me speak.

“Sebastian’s dead,” Anna stated blankly, startling me not only with what she said but from the sound of her voice—the first time I’d spoken to her since I had tried to kill her all those years ago. “Two of my children are out there, I’m down in a bunker under the barn he built and some sort of bomb just fell a few miles away big enough to destroy a whole town,” she exclaimed, rushing through her words without so much as taking the time to curse me to hell or remind me that that’s where I deserved to be. “What is going on?!”

“Did you receive the broadcast I sent out?” I asked, trying to determine just how much Anna knew.

“No... I... I didn’t hear it,” she confessed, knowing absolutely nothing about what was going on. I took a long breath and paused—trying to think of how to break something like what was happening right now. About the disease—the bombs—Ellex—all of it... how do you say that without robbing someone of all the hope they’ve got?

“Before he died... did Sebastian ever tell you about the protocols?” I asked, swallowing a sinking feeling in my heart from the news that my brother hadn’t made it... that I never got to tell him how sorry I was.

“He never told me anything! I only found out when he got bit!”

“Alright... I only ask so I know what kind of language I can use to explain the situation,” I stated, rerouting my brain to remember that I’d need to translate codes and contingency situations into layman’s terms for her. But looking around me I quickly gave up on the idea of keeping our chat strictly logistical in nature. I was gonna spell the full-on-absurdity of what was happening out for her—not lie to her or pretend that we had everything under control. I was gonna tell her the truth. Hard to stomach as it was, Anna could handle it. “In a nutshell... Some trillionaire asshole named Ellex Vussel purposefully weaponized and spread the virus called Solanum all over the globe via water treatment facilities. Now he’s drone bombing the undead to cover it up. First he’s striking the largest most populated areas, but... eventually he’s gonna bomb every square inch of

the earth. I don't really know why yet or what he's building up to. Frankly, I haven't spent that much time thinking about it, I'm more just trying to survive," I explained, appreciating on a whole new level how utterly insane the situation must sound to her as I described it.

"I... I..." she stuttered, unable to fully grasp the scope or severity of what I had just told her—that it wasn't just a disease outbreak we had to worry about—this was literally the end of the world. "Are you... are you deployed right now? Is something being done to stop it?"

"Well... it's complicated," I answered, looking down the long field of undead winding their way around fallen corpses I'd shot as they moved slowly toward the funnel of cars. "So there's this guy named Roger with a hard drive in his pocket and... um... honestly, Anna, I'm probably gonna be dead pretty soon. If we can't find this guy and get that hard drive out of his pocket, there's not much that can be done to stop the drones. I'd say the likelihood of our success rate is about 1%, tops."

"This is what the military is doing? Looking for a guy with a hard drive in his pocket?"

"No... just us. Me and some scientists I nicknamed the White Coats. They're not very good at soldiering yet, but... they're getting better every minute."

"Are you fucking kidding me?!" Anna screamed, never one to swear.

"Fraid not... we're probably all fucked. Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, Anna, but... feel free to contact me again anytime. I'll let you know if we find the guy and manage to stop the drone strikes, alright? Otherwise... I'm really sorry, about everything. I'm really, really sorry," I confessed, needing to say those words to her so badly it felt like my apologizing mattered as much as saving the world did.

"What the hell do I do, Mathew?!" she asked, clawing for any semblance of hope or direction in the mess I'd just described. Her voice was raw—torn to a shrill desperate plea for sanctuary or assistance. My chest ached listening to her—the very first time I'd heard her voice or that agonizing tone since all those years ago when I'd nearly put her to death. The memories of Seb lying broken on the dirt—my torn fists covered in his blood—clenched teeth—seething rage... all turned to pulp over time... God damn I was sorry for what I'd done. And sitting there, holding that tablet, trying to think of what I could do here and now to make up for it... I felt even more sorry. I didn't know if I could save her in time. I just didn't know...

“There’s not much you can do... one way or another, eventually, those bombs are gonna hit your bunker. And I guarantee no matter how well Seb reinforced it, it won’t withstand what these drones are dropping. So... the longer you want to survive... stay the hell away from populated areas and try and keep radio chatter to a minimum,” I finished, deciding that I’d spent as long on the line spelling out the situation to her as I felt comfortable doing at the time. “Now I gotta get back to work. I’m sorry to hear about Sebastian... I’m sorry for what I did to you both all those years ago... but I’m gonna try and make it up to you now if I can,” I finished, pushing a button on the tablet to end the call and cut the line—still paranoid about the idea of using open communications even if the message of her call had popped up for me to see. Something about that didn’t seem right... like Dennis shouldn’t have put that call through to me... shouldn’t have risked our lives for something like that... But... sitting there in that moment... I just, uh... Jesus Christ... my feelings got the better of my worries. Soon enough, they got the better of me too. I had to take a second for myself. I just had to.

I thought of my brother before I started firing again... Just like he’d taught me all those years ago... setting up soda cans in the forest. I remembered he used to tell me he loved me or tickle me as a tactic to get me to stop crying when I was still really young. I remembered eating the crust off his pizza and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches cause he never did learn to like them. I remembered the posters that hung on his wall as a teenager—the bright yellow breasts of April O’Neil especially. I remembered it all. In a flood of nostalgia, it all hit me in that moment. I had just spoken to Anna... she had just lost her husband... and the world had turned to such unimaginable shit that she had actually dared to reach out to me for help. My God... as bad as I thought regret was... now I wouldn’t even have the luxury of unsaddling myself from that. Now, instead, it would have to fuel me—push me to achieve the impossible. Saying ‘sorry’ to my brother was no longer an option and saying sorry to Anna simply wasn’t enough. I needed to save her and her family too. That was the price of my forgiveness.

CHAPTER 37: KNOCK KNOCK

Ellex Vussel, Eden Island, 2018

The detonator that had gone off in my stomach's inner lining was a tiny device that injected a capsule of densely infected gelatin into my bloodstream. It immediately resulted in a mouthful of infected blood that I had conveniently managed to spit in the face of my once chief security officer, Nahuel. But it was not simply that blood that was infected. It was my own. It was me. And the chemical processes that resulted from the particular gelatin now infused with my biology promised a slow and agonizing rot. It wasn't as simple as the means by which the weaponized water-soluble version of the *Solanum* virus operated. Instead, this gelatin, which was much more volatile and could not sustain itself as a biological agent for more than ten minutes outside of a contained body temperature capsule, helped incubate a gradual process of transitioning my organs to become a wheezing, sniveling mess that poured infected, highly contagious air into my surroundings. It was a particularly brutal variant of that which normally brought about the undead. And while it wouldn't turn me into one of 'them' per se, it would, instead, turn me into something more akin to a festering spore pod—bubbling my skin into puss-filled boils that poured disease and death into the lungs of anyone who came into contact with me or breathed the air I breathed.

I watched the vent above me in the room I was held captive in. It would only be a matter of time until the screams began, until the gunshots rang out from one crew member murdering another. Paranoia would set in too—trying to understand how so many of them had suddenly contracted such a disease without any direct contact to someone who was infected. It would drive them mad. It would curdle their already dwindling resolve. And slowly, as the time passed, each and every one of them would die and turn a very special kind of undead. This was the cost of Nahuel's foolish and rash decision to remove me from my island. This was the price those attempting to undermine or disrupt my plans would have to pay. And while the timeframe for them to turn according to the airborne pathogen was significantly longer than it was for those who ingested the water-soluble version, or for that matter, those who were bitten by the infected; nevertheless, I remained confident in my ability to outlast the sickness I would spread. For now, trapped on this ship, waiting for the undead to rise, it was time and time alone that would determine how the chips of my fate would fall.

My son, Desmond, was another matter. He had been taken hostage and was being used as leverage by the ships acting Captain. Both Desmond and the man who just moments earlier had been interrogator, were now en-route back to the island to act as the genetic password needed to enter the deepest trenches of my underground bunker. And with a team of specialized military personnel at his side, it would have been foolish of me to suppose that they would have any intention to keep him alive after my clone console was successfully destroyed. For when those men found their way into the belly of my island and burned the very machine playing God with everything they had once had the audacity to presume was ‘their’ weapons, ‘their’ infrastructure or ‘their’ power... well... when that happened, they would almost certainly have the audacity to skin my son alive simply to make me watch. They wanted revenge after all. Not simply to stop what was to come, but to make me suffer for all I had done. Desmond was the greatest opportunity to see me suffer, and Desmond would be the one made to suffer on my behalf. Or... so they thought.

Two guards stood behind me, one over each shoulder, as I sat handcuffed to a cold metal table. My shirt was stained from the blood I had spit into Naheul’s face and my brow was soaked with sweat. In front of me lay a tablet streaming the live feed of the extraction team as they made their way back to the island. Desmond sat on the side of their motorboat squeezed tightly in between what looked to be a group of Navy Seals dressed in full gear—assault rifles pointed in the air and their eyes fixed on the island ahead of them. Nobody spoke. No idle chatter or code words passed back and forth. They knew where they were going, they knew what they were doing, and so far as they were concerned, by having my son with them, they believed themselves to have the upper hand. But my island was not for the taking—nor for intrusion or intruders. I watched my son’s terrified expression as he stared into the camera pinned on my interrogators breast, and in that moment I wondered how he would remember me... if this window to what was about to unfold would be the last chance I’d have to see him? I wondered if once everyone on this ship had turned into ghouls, I might be able to make it to shore and claw my way into a chamber to watch him grow from afar? But mostly I wondered if he would find any joy in the lonely life he would now be forced to lead... my heart broke at the thought... This isn’t what I wanted... It wasn’t what I wanted for him. But... so much had gone wrong that this final contingency was all that remained to keep my plan from unraveling. Goodbye Desmond. I’m so sorry it came to this.

The boat entered the dock of my now evacuated island and the team took to approaching my compound by foot—jogging at a hurried

pace, carrying Desmond between two of them as if he were a cargo crate not a person. They entered the side door not far from where my private quarters were and, as they quickly maneuvered down the hallway, I caught a brief glimpse of my room—the door still closed. I held my breath at the notion that my wife might still be trapped inside where I had locked her earlier that day. Nahuel had tried to taunt me with her whereabouts, but... I had no way of knowing where in truth she had wound up—or, for that matter, what use she might now serve to anyone on this earth?

The team quickly moved past the bedroom to find my personal office—entering the door using a keycard that I had neither issued nor approved. I clenched my jaw and ground my teeth—recalling the statement Nahuel had made about my ‘friend’ turned betrayed, Gregory Voustin. A spy I could only hope had been brought aboard this ship as well—a spy who would now slowly rot along with the rest of the crew. Perhaps it was he who was responsible for that access card... or Nathan Gills... miraculously wandering around Washington D.C. talking on his phone trying to coordinate my downfall? The questions churned around in my mind—staring at that screen—waiting for the moment ahead... the moment that would decide if my son lived or died. And so I watched in growing anxiety and brooding stress as they marched Desmond toward the thick double doors on the floor of my office—crouching down and pulling the necessary levers on a nearby bookshelf to allow it to open. Desmond’s hand was then stretched out and placed firmly against a flat plane of translucent glass—scanning his DNA to confirm both who he was and that he was still, in fact, alive. The door opened—a four-meter wide access port to a deep and winding staircase adjacent to a cargo elevator. They climbed in the elevator and hit the switch—alarmingly familiar with the layout of every detail of my facility. Or so they thought. Because, while the scan had registered Desmond’s DNA in order to access the bunker, it wasn’t the only active scanner once they were inside.

Underneath my compound was an even more sophisticated and expansive bunker. An interface for the clone console existed above ground, but destroying that did nothing insofar as interrupting or extinguishing the automated protocols of the actual clone console itself. That was the heart they needed to sever. And so they rode the cargo elevator to the base of the bunker, climbing out one by one guns drawn as they advanced down a long hallway toward an impenetrable door the size of a house. Desmond was carried sniveling and whimpering up to the door and then dropped onto his knees... no longer able or willing to stand. My interrogator angled the camera on his chest upwards towards the panel featuring a variety of necessary security clearances. And then,

for the first time since setting foot on my island, he spoke to me about what needed to be done to spare my son's life.

"Say it," he instructed, referring to an audio signature that would be required to initiate the subsequent steps of entry.

"Open sesame," I sneered, knowing as he did that the words themselves were of no relevance, only the tonality of my voice. The other devices soon activated and Desmond's hand was extended once more to register his genetic signature. His retina was then scanned by pulling back tightly on his forehead to force his eyes open. A few seconds passed and I sucked in and released a deep anticipatory breath. Any moment now... they could still kill him—out of desperation as they were torn to shreds... Desmond could still die... and my eyes stared at that screen—never so vulnerable as I was in that moment.

The lighting suddenly shifted from the normal overhead white illumination to an emergency red backup. The doors security devices powered down and the cargo elevator immediately shut and locked. The men turned in all directions trying to understand what was happening and my interrogator grabbed my son tightly by the throat—lifting him up gasping for air so that all I could see through the camera was the terrified face of my son being choked to death. I prayed that the systems were still functioning correctly—that they would be swift and precise. I had seen to it that they would work but... if anything went wrong... if any tiny detail of my operations were incorrect, then it would be Desmond who paid the price for my error. I stuttered a moment, unaccustomed to such indescribable distress—waiting to catch a glimpse of my machine through the corners of the screen I looked upon.

"What is this?!" the liaison demanded, tightening his grip around my son's neck—forcing more tears from his eyes and nearly snapping his spine from the pressure. Then, just as I had programmed it to, the sound of metal and exhaust reorganizing itself could be heard in the background along with a distinct sequence of shrill pulses. I closed my eyes and released a terrified breath—knowing that they would all be dead any moment. A handful of gunshots rang out from behind my interrogator as the marines accompanying him began to realize what was happening around them.

"I didn't say anyone beside family could be there when that door opened," I replied, the sounds of lungs being torn in half mid-scream filling the room as a splatter of blood hit Desmond's swollen face. The camera feed cut out a moment later and the audio went dead. One of the guards behind me grabbed me by the back of the neck and inserted a knife until it made contact with a vertebrae along the top of my shoulders.

I winced and released an agonizing yell—knowing that now my son would be safe... locked away where no one could find him—locked away for as long as it would take for the world to burn and be remade.

“What just happened?!” the guard holding my neck demanded as the other one in the room attempted radio contact with any of the men whose vital signs had just gone cold—neither of them capable of comprehending the thing that had just ripped their rescue party to pieces. “What just happened?!?”

“They earned Medals of Honor,” I growled, tightening my fists and pressing my forearms hard against the table to grapple with the stinging sensation in my spine. “Now kindly inform the Captain, not his fucking ‘liaison’, that I would like to speak to him!”

CHAPTER 38: RABBIT HOLE

Wes Korb, Unknown, 2018

Her name was Alice. She had survived by hiding in the ceiling and coordinating noise between the other people still remaining in the facility. Or, that's to say, that's how she was surviving until a couple of days ago when most people stopped responding to her calls. Either from running out of rations... having their hiding places smashed into by the hordes of undead... or... from ending their own lives. She never exactly knew which one it was, only that when they stopped answering their phones it meant they were no longer there to reach out to—able to use the rings and vibrations as a desperate attempt to lure the undead in a different direction. I hadn't met her yet. I'd only received my instructions of what was necessary for me to accomplish before she'd be able to climb down from the ceiling. And so, rather than waste time asking questions on the phone, I got right to work.

First, I closed and locked every door on this level of the facility by using the advanced keycard I had removed from the ghoul wearing the suit. There were up to a hundred doors that I either needed to open to let ghouls wander out of, or that needed to be sealed off to ensure that the floor we were on was secure. Those doors were all across the sprawling underground lab that I'd thus far only been able to explore the top level of. But as I walked around it, I increasingly got the idea of what was going on here. Every room had an identifying sequence of numbers that was also color-coded. Red, Yellow, Blue, Green and Orange. The red zones were typically mechanical in nature—huge machines that did God knows what lying around in semi-constructed masses or packed away tightly in shelving units that stretched all the way to the ceiling. Yellow Zones were recreational—cafeterias, game rooms, vast computer stations, gyms, swimming pools and even the occasional rock climbing wall, tennis or basketball court. Blue was... as far as I could tell, chemical or biological in nature. Those rooms were usually filled with multiple sectional dividers, clean rooms, racks for biohazard suits and a sprawling array of lab gear ranging from automated machinery to football field length 3D printing conveyor belts. Green Zones were living quarters—huge sectioned off portions of the facility that seemed to stretch on for blocks. Each room within those sections contained either one or two double beds, a side table, a chest of drawers, laundry as well as garbage shoots, and a small bathroom too. Nowhere in any of the green sections were there cradles, small beds or any indication that children had ever lived here. Finally,

there were Orange rooms. And they... were... always empty. Completely empty. I'd step inside, stare out over gigantic spaces that had nothing in them, and wonder what in the hell they were supposed to be used for? Eventually deciding that Orange rooms were, most likely, yet to be designated... allowing the facility to grow and expand as needed.

After the doors to the other levels were sealed, I was tasked with making enough noise in one area to lure the remaining undead to it. If I tried to go by foot and destroy each of their brains individually, it would take me days, potentially even weeks to find them all. Not to mention that I'd then have those rotting biohazards in close proximity to Alice who, unlike myself, didn't have an immunity to the disease. The only times she had been able to come down from the ceilings to gather supplies in the Yellow Zones was when she had coordinated noise with the other survivors. Those efforts were usually time consuming, complex and intermittently unsuccessful. The way in which she had told me to create noise was different than what she had done previously. I wouldn't be sitting in a crate banging a wrench against a wall. No... instead, I'd be turning on one of the gigantic machines and orchestrating a noise riot. As I came to stand before the thing, I pulled the phone out of my pocket, glanced down at the touch panel control screens that connected to Alice's number, and then placed a call to her so that she could tell me exactly what needed to be done.

"Ok, I'm ready," I exclaimed, wiping away a thick layer of sweat I'd accumulated from walking around adjusting doors for the past hour.

"First, put the access card down on top of the grey circular area. That should power on the panel so you can input commands," Alice explained, the sounds of moaning ghouls coming from her end of the line. I did as she requested and the touch screen illuminated.

"Ok, now what?"

"Upper left-hand corner there's a square white icon. Click that," she continued as I intermittently uttered the word 'Ok' following each of her instructions to the letter. "Now select unit 462-XI, interchange mode. Click activate. Then cycle, repeat, maximum intensity. You'll be given an error prompt but the keycard you're using will allow you to override it. Once all of that's done hit the green activate button and leave the room as quickly as possible."

"Ok," I said, following her instructions to the letter. "Once this is on, where do I meet you?"

"You don't... it'll take the infected a little while to make their way to that location and I'm not comfortable coming down until they do. I'll

call you again after I feel enough time has passed,” she finished, hanging up before I could get another word in. I pulled the phone down from my ear and slipped it into my pocket. Then without fully understanding what I was about to set in motion I moved my hand over the panel and hit the activate button.

At first nothing seemed to happen... only a few minor clicking noises. But then I noticed part of a nearby square wall of densely packed circuitry that I had assumed was one cohesive object start to re-arrange itself—extending this way and that like a gigantic Rubix Cube isolating squares and then ejecting them outwards. It looked so strange and intricate that I couldn’t help but pause and watch it develop, ignoring the instruction Alice had given me to get out of the room as quickly as possible. After a few more moments the clicking noises had intensified and become a brooding hum growing in volume. What sounded like a sonic boom soon came out of a nearby power conduit and a jolt of visible electrical current made the jump between a generator and whatever the hell was being assembled out of the mass of circuitry. I didn’t hesitate any longer. I turned and jogged outside of the room and then pressed my face against the thick plastic barrier between the zone I had been in and the hallway.

What looked like a sandcastle growing out of a square mound of densely packed components continuously emerged, re-arranged and then disappeared back into the blocks it had sprouted from. Like some mix of tiny objects that collectively formed a mechanistic school of fish—swirling and swarming around one another. At times it seemed as if it might become a building. Other times it seemed like something closer to an insect’s anatomy. At no point did it ever actually become anything or decide on one single formation, it only cycled through a variety over and over again—feeding off the power conduits as they emitted booms that slammed hard into my ears on the other side of the divider. As Alice had told me, this thing would make enough noise to lure all the undead on the first floor into that room. And then, as she had described it, the repeating cycle of strange shapes would act as something closer to a lawnmower—sucking up the brainless masses of infected as they lumbered towards it to investigate. I watched intently as the first ghouls entered the room, slowly making their way toward the buzzing building-sized mound of evolving circuitry. Then, just as Alice had said would happen, when they got too close to it one of the sonic booms staggered their balance, knocked them forward and their body was then swept up and flung like an ant getting hit by a leaf-blower, smashing them into a nearby wall. A burst of blood accentuated the area of the zone that the ghouls body had struck and their

broken bones and skulls now lay limp, pulverized and dropped across a table.

I temporarily left the outside of that viewing area to find another nearby Red Zone. It only took me about five minutes to locate the ear protection I needed to be able to withstand the booming noises without hurting my head. Then with a sense of curiosity not unlike a child watching a construction site, I made my way back to watch whatever this amorphous cube was as it continued to decimate every undead that approached it. The raw power of the thing was baffling to watch... similar to a gigantic waterfall crushing trees like toothpicks or a tornado ripping a house out of its foundation. This glimpse of something that I otherwise would have never imagined, was every bit as daunting and vicious as anything I'd seen in nature. The swarm of undead grew in numbers, packing themselves into that room as they all struggled to squeeze through the doorway. The walls and surrounding tables were now covered with mangled crushed corpses either flattened from the force of impact or torn into shreds and then splattered in all directions like water balloons in a jet engine. It was incredible to watch. And as the number of ghouls slowly turned from hundreds to just a handful, I felt the anxiety that had burdened me every moment since all this began start to diminish. I had made contact with other people. I had found my way to... wherever the hell this place was... and I was about to meet Alice. I told myself she would be different than the other cryptic assholes who had only led me down here to get me to do their bidding and then hang up. But the truth was, I didn't know who she was, what she'd want or, for that matter, if she'd see any use for me after I had done what she asked me to do. I wasn't supposed to be down here after all. And the more I thought about it, the more concerned I became about that unfortunate reality... What if Alice didn't want me around anymore after I had fulfilled my task? What if she told me I had to leave?

After a couple of hours, the flow of infected had slowed to one or two every ten minutes—usually using their hands to crawl forward, dragging their limp bodies behind them. An hour after that I was lucky to see any at all. And yet, still she hadn't called me back like she said she would. That feeling was something I had grown accustomed to, constantly messaging women on online dating sites and never receiving a response except when they were trying to con me. But this time it hurt more than usual. This time it felt like I was being rejected by the whole world and everyone who was still alive on it. I wiped away a few desperate, lonely tears... feeling like the answers to all the questions in my mind wasn't enough. I needed a hug. I needed a friend. I needed to know there was still something worth hoping for beyond some secret government bullshit

buried deep under the city. Cause as cool as watching that machine rip undead limb from limb was... I couldn't help but wonder how much in common I shared with them—blindly marching towards my death without any understanding of what lay ahead of me.

Another two hours later and still nothing. It was getting late. It was beyond late at this point; it was the middle of the night or early morning. Still nothing. I had tried calling her but she didn't answer. So I tried calling her again after another half an hour and still there was no reply. Had something happened? Did the infected manage to find her when they were making their way here? Did she fall trying to get down from the roof? She had mentioned something about her arm being injured... is that what had caused her to fall? What if she needed my help? How was I supposed to find her and help her if I didn't even know where in this gigantic place she even was? Every single possible worst-case scenario ran through my mind over and over and over again. And it exhausted me. I had sunk down to the ground outside the room and sat staring at my fat gut spread out overtop of my legs. I was brutally depressed. After nearly six hours she hadn't called, she hadn't responded, and I still had no idea what was happening or if she'd even bother to show up at all. I cried. I felt sorry for myself. I lied to myself that everything was going to be ok and that someday they might even think of me as a hero. But that thought never lasted very long. I wasn't a hero. I wasn't even up to the caliber of comic relief. I was just... there. And I was so fucking alone that I didn't even feel like I was present in my own body. No one was here. No one.

I woke up without realizing that I had drifted to sleep. A sudden shift in tone from the room where the undead had been lumbering pulled me out of my half-realized dream. The high pitch buzzing noise and booms had stopped and were now winding down. I pushed myself off the ground and walked back to the viewing panel, watching as the visible electrical currents decreased in intensity. The walls were literally painted with blood and mounds of hair from skulls smashing against them. Hundreds upon hundreds of corpses littered the ground and the small building-sized, densely packed mound of seemingly impenetrable circuitry that had moved like sand, morphing from one shape to another, was now silent and still. The sequence Alice had me program had come to an end. And, for the first time since the infection had broken out... the moaning had stopped. Silence. Beautiful, pristine silence emanated down the halls and into my heart, letting me breath freely without a foreboding sense of the hell that had been unleashed. And then... footsteps. I heard the sound of footsteps coming closer.

A tiny figure who stood about five and a half feet tall moved briskly down the hall toward my location. Her hair was black, her complexion was pale and she was very beautiful. She wore a set of blue clothes not too different from those worn by everyone else in the facility. And, as she came closer, I could see that she was smiling at me... as if she was happy to see me too. As if I weren't just some dumb fat intruder who had stumbled into a place I wasn't supposed to be. No. Instead, she looked at me like I was her savior. Then, when she had reached just a few feet from me, she extended her arms to hug me—pulling me close and holding me in a way where I felt as if I were a human being again. I staggered on a tearful breath of immense relieve. Then, after a stunned moment, managed to place an arm around her back and hold her too. She cried. We both did. Happy to have someone... anyone to be able to hold.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," she repeated, sucking in deep relieved breaths and long appreciative sighs of gratitude.

"Happy to help," I stuttered, taken aback by the tender, decent-hearted regard she had shown me as a person. She released the hug a moment later and wiped away a tear.

"I'm sorry I didn't call you like I said I would... I dropped my tablet trying to climb down and it slid under a crate I wasn't able to move," she explained, glancing into the room she had me calibrate the sequence in to see the devastation that it had caused. "Then I stopped by medical to treat my arm and that took me longer than expected. Thank you for being patient... I don't doubt it felt like a lot longer than it took."

"Yeah, sure... no problem," I replied gingerly, delighted to have someone to talk to—let alone someone who was actually being nice to me.

"I'm Alice," she said, extending her hand to shake mine. "I cannot thank you enough for doing what you did."

"Really, I'm just happy to be of some use... and it's very nice to meet you too Alice, I'm Wes," I exclaimed, tenderly shaking her hand before wiping away the remains of my own tears. I felt embarrassed. Overwhelmed. It was surreal. It was all just so surreal and overwhelming.

"Wes... if you don't mind, I'd like to ask you some questions to better understand what you know and who it is you spoke to. Is that alright?"

"Yeah, of course. Whatever you need."

"Good... Firstly, the phone you said you found before you entered this facility... may I see it?"

“Yeah, sure, here it is,” I stated, pulling the small tablet phone that I’d found on the floor of the Oval Office out of my pocket and handing it to her. She pulled it open a moment and reviewed some of the information inside—closing her eyes sharply and clenching her jaw, in clear dismay about something she’d seen. “Is everything alright?”

“No... it’s not,” she whispered, sucking in a deep breath and fluttering her eyes open again, struggling to cope with everything she was feeling. “I knew the person whose phone this was and... it’s very distressing to learn that they died in the way that they did and... without being able to accomplish what they needed to.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I replied, frustrated that the only thing I could think to offer for condolences was so generic and devoid of insight. I had no idea what she was going through... I barely even knew what I was going through.

“Thank you,” she sighed, putting the phone away by placing it into one of her pant pockets. “If it’s alright with you, I’d like to hold onto this to review further when I have the time, is that all right?”

“Sure. Yeah. That’s ok.”

“Thank you... now... the people you said you spoke to... the ones who instructed you on how to get down here... did they mention anything about who they were or what they were trying to accomplish?”

“No. I mean... it was just one guy and he never told me who he was or who he was in contact with. He just kept repeating that the drones were coming and I needed to do what he told me without asking too many questions.”

“Drones?” Alice asked, her expression stunned from what I’d said without offering an explanation behind it.

“Yeah... they’re dropping bombs all over the world.”

“Show me which room they directed you to, now!” she instructed, her eyes opening wide and her tone shifting drastically from the relieved appreciation she had shown me just moments before to a deep and unsettled anxiety that visibly knocked the breath out of her.

“Ok. Follow me,” I answered, turning sharply down the long hall we were in to make my way to the control room—the large oval computer screen area that the man I had spoken to on the phone had instructed me to place the hard drive in. Alice followed quickly, realizing as we approached the room what was happening. She began running and outpaced me, reaching the consoles and their displays before I did. I

entered the room a moment later, out of breath from the jog to find Alice hunched over a console frantically tapping the interface.

“How?” she exclaimed, a look of baffled confusion consuming her. She raised her hand from the screen to her forehead and paused... slipping into a pensive reverie. I waited silently a moment, swallowing uncomfortably as I regained my breath. “Did he say anything else? Did he... mention... anything else important that you can think of?”

“I don’t... think so,” I stammered, trying to comb my memories for anything I might have overlooked. “He just said the drones were bombing everything... and then he had me put that hard drive down on that panel and,” I tried to say, as Alice turned away from me mid-sentence once I gestured towards the small S shaped hard drive, still resting where I’d left it on the other side of the room. Alice pulled out the chair in front of the console and began scrolling through files—navigating them with a speed and familiarity that made me wonder how much of this information she might already have had the opportunity to be able to review. She typed something I didn’t have the time to read into the index and then combed through the associative files... looking for something in particular. I stayed silent... watching her closely, hoping she’d be able to figure out whatever it was that was consuming her attention.

“Oh my God,” she whispered, leaning back from the screen and letting her arms droop beside her.

“What is it?”

“He... they...” she tried to continue, eventually giving up entirely and folding overtop the keyboard, planting her elbows on the table and burying her head into her hand. I gave her a moment. But my curiosity was eating away at me too much to bite my tongue for long.

“Did... they get what they needed from the drive? Are they going to be able to stop the drones?” I asked, putting together the only two bits of information I had—‘they’ needed to stop the ‘drones.’ And ‘I’ needed to believe that I had helped them do that. Alice sucked in a couple of weighted breaths before partially uncurling from the wounded way she sat. She looked at me without speaking for a moment. Processing whatever it was she was struggling to say aloud.

“They can’t stop the drones. That’s not the point,” Alice told me, closing her eyes as she spoke, trying to grapple with all that was happening. “You need to understand that... many people suspected something like this might happen someday. We’ve been preparing for the possibility of a collapse for a very long time. But... it didn’t happen the way anyone expected it might,” she continued, opening her eyes and turning to look at me—her strained attempts to find the right words the

only way to bridge an understanding of the world she knew to the one I was still hoping might be saved. “They only brought you down here because they want to exempt themselves from the targeting array. They can’t save the world or control collateral damage. That’s inevitable at this point. They’re just trying to save themselves.”

“Planned?” I asked, struggling to understand if what she had just said was what I was actually hearing. Planned by whom? Why? What the hell was this place?! And how could she say something like that with such a casual regard—as if people preparing for the end of the world were as normal as talking about the weather!

“Yes. It’s a contingency... end of the world scenario.”

“Who’s scenario?” I whispered, trying to stretch my mind from watching Netflix a couple of weeks ago to standing where I was, hearing what I was hearing.

“It’s not ‘who’... it’s an idea... it’s a contingency plan. A way to try and save the species. In the event of a global collapse or conflict that meets a certain threshold of deterioration... the protocols shift from conservation to incineration. When that happens, if nothing can be saved or salvaged, rebuilding becomes the priority.”

“Rebuilding? But... they’re bombing everything! How is that rebuilding?”

“They’re clearing the surface of threats in order to rebuild,” she stated in a strangely logical, emotionally withdrawn way. The reality of what she was saying didn’t seem to strike her anywhere near the way it did me—she wasn’t taken aback by or hurt by the fact that all of this was happening. More just... viscerally surprised by the fact it was happening in the particular way that it was. It was then that I paused and felt a deeply unsettled churn in the pit of my gut. I didn’t know who this woman was. I didn’t know what this facility was. I didn’t know the person I had spoken to on that phone. And I didn’t know... anything... anything at all! I was just... blind, stumbling from one moment to the next trying desperately to do the right thing. But trying to do the right thing when you have no idea what you’re doing can potentially be even more damaging than doing nothing at all. A ‘plan.’ This was a ‘plan?!’ What kind of psychotic fucks would ever possibly plan anything like this?!

“How do you know all this?” I asked Alice, looking at the screen flashing red dots of bomb impacts—scattered everywhere on earth. “What do you do down here anyway?”

“It’s not what any of us did that matters... It’s what this type of facility is capable of that’s important,” she answered, turning away from

the screen to look me square in the eye—like this was all part of some elaborate rulebook I hadn't had the luxury to read.

“Ok, whatever! Then what do these facilities do?”

“In times like these, they're the only hope to save the species.”

CHAPTER 39: ANSWERS AND MORE QUESTIONS

Derek Riggs, Louisiana, 2005

I didn't 'weather the storm' the way I thought I'd be able to. Instead... I survived it. In retrospect, it was fucking crazy and stupid to think about being where I was, let alone to actually attempt it with my thick skull and sense of pride. Trees were uprooted for Christ sakes! It didn't matter that I had roped myself to one to keep from being thrown off and sucked under—swallowed by a crocodile or impaled by a sharp branch. If the entire fucking thing got pulled out of the now loose soil from the water soaked into the ground, all my rope would do was tether me to an anchor and guarantee a watery grave. I didn't weather that storm, I didn't pull some bad ass, hardcore, prove myself moment. I got lucky. That's it. That's all there was to it. And it was important that in retrospect I be honest about that fact. Being ready to survive anything and willfully plunging yourself into something that nobody can survive to test your resolve are not compatible concepts. I fucked up. I got lucky. I learned my lesson and I tried to keep my wits about me moving forward past that point. Because, even though I had been dumb enough to stay at my encampment during the storm, now that it was over... I'd have to be even dumber to waste the opportunity it had given me.

New Orleans was... gone. Devastated. Flooded in a way where nothing and nobody was able to escape the damage or the boot prints of the storm. People sat on rooftops waiting to be rescued—pushed shopping carts full of loot they'd sniped into large rubber rafts. Patches of oil sat atop stretches of water and dogs circled endlessly looking for a spot of dry land to pull themselves up onto to keep from drowning. I hadn't been to the city much before the storm hit so I didn't really have a firm mental image of before and after to compare it to. But whatever the before had been, after looked like the end of the world. And that clear and simple truth was painted on the faces of everyone around. But I wasn't there to help them, to join them, to hear their stories or to lend a hand in the cleanup. I was only there for one reason—to loot the gear I'd need before I could leave again.

A face down corpse floated not far from the place I identified had the needed supplies. And yet, despite the clear chaos of the situation, I had yet to hear helicopters or supply drops. There wasn't an active radio feed of information coming in being chattered between people about 'help on the way.' There was just the sounds of people crying and doing their utmost to help one another. Being there in that moment instilled in me a greater respect for the resolve and resilience of the average individual who, prior to then, I had assumed would do little more than collapse and wail. But they didn't. They cried, they grieved their losses and looked to the sky for someone to come and help them. But that wasn't all they did. Most of all, they helped one another. Most of all, they did what they had to do to be safe and then did what they could to make each other feel better once they were. I respected that even though I wanted no part of it. And the

occasional call that was made by locals for me to get to safety and get out of the water were ignored. Instead, I only dove down, searched for what I needed until I was able to pull the gear together and then left just as quick.

Scuba gear, wetsuit, extra oxygen tanks since I didn't have access to a machine to refill, flashlight, flippers, rope, bolt cutters and a big-ass knife. That's what I needed and that's what I salvaged before anyone else could loot it or the government could fly in and claim the wreckage of the town as their personal stomping grounds. I got in and out quickly—finding a still functional old wooden boat to paddle my way toward where my encampment had been. One mile from that spot was the perimeter fence I needed to reach to be able to scrounge through the now underwater facility my father was once stationed at. That was my mission. Dive in, take everything I could, pray anything still worked or could be saved and then... scour every last bit of that info for any clue about the virus. That was my mission. And my heart beat about a mile a minute thinking that I might actually have the chance to accomplish it.

I ditched the boat and fastened it to a fallen half-submerged tree. I kept the gear that I wasn't wearing bulked together in a stretchy-net-sack and then proceeded under water until I reached the outer fence. The bolt cutters let me hack a large enough hole into the side of it that I'd be able to make a quick exit. I then lugged the extra breathing tanks into the facility to plant them along the outer wall. By the time I reached that point, I only had twenty minutes of breathing time left on the first tank, just enough to be able to poke my head in, do some light recon/navigating and then come back out again. I ducked my head under, powered my flashlight on and entered the facility that I had been watching hungrily for so long.

I spent the better part of the morning wondering how long it'd take me to cave in one of the bases side windows—trying to decide between needing to jerry rig a few mounds of termite or just flat out try and drill the thing loose. I knew they'd be bullet and blast proof. I knew they'd take me the better part of my morning to puncture. But... as it turned out... it didn't matter either way. The motherfucking front door was open—left in a state of disarray and complete indifference by the final personnel who fled the building as it began to flood. Morons. Goddamn idiots... who I was very appreciative were idiots, that is. They just saved me a few hours and, hopefully, earned me extra loot. I decided to go back and fetch an additional tank of air right away—did a quick circle of the facility underwater to check for loose items and then made my way back to the front, tucking the couple of things I'd discovered into my net bag. An ID badge, a soaked through notebook and an oddly shaped cartridge I assumed was either ammunition for some sort of secret weapon or... hell... maybe just a toy from McDonalds I'd never seen before. Whatever... I gathered everything I could and threw it into that bag, more concerned with collecting everything I could carry than I was with being excessively disconcerting about what I grabbed.

The water was murky and full of floating bits that made me feel like I was swimming through a half-churned puke smoothie. The light I had fastened to the side of my head mostly helped illuminate whatever it was that was floating closest to my face at

the time. In one hand I held another light and in the other a piece of tiling that I used as a fan to flutter junk out of my way. The military base had been turned into a snow-globe of scattered papers and documents that I fished through and lumped together to haul out as soon as my air supply dwindled. Fish picked at junk off the floors and every so often I'd find a part of the facility that wasn't completely flooded—poking my head out of the water to see if I could salvage anything that hadn't been doused in mud. The top drawer of a filing cabinet felt like finding the Holy Grail. I took twenty minutes to carefully remove every single one of its contents and transfer them into protective plastic bags. By the end of it I was feeling light headed—quickly returning to the oxygen supply in my tank before pressing on. The first floor above the surface was mostly logistics... paperwork, filing, records. Pure gold to sift through later on but relatively uninspiring all the same. It was deeper in the facility I hoped would hold the secrets I came for. And as I finally found my way to the hatch that led down to it, I let go of the piece of tiling I had been using as a fan and removed my knife instead.

From what I could tell, it was a long stretch of cells. But they all had the doors closed. Every single one as I moved past—one after the other, hoping to catch a break. I'd press my goggles up against the glass to try and decipher what was inside—spotting movement in many of the rooms. But I could never make out the figures... I could never tell if it was something that had once been alive or something that was caught on a generator or an exhaust or something. It was maddening. To be that close and still kept from the truth I sought felt like a piece of meat dangling on a string just out of reach of my tongue. I was so hungry... I was so desperate to know once and for all if what my father had told me was true... But the doors were locked. That is... except for one. The last one at the very end of the hall was open. I clutched my knife, ready to strike, and drifted inside. A chair with broken straps sat in the center and tables of scattered medical equipment and syringes surrounded it. But no one was in the chair and nothing in that particular room was moving.

Something grabbed tightly onto my leg and I felt myself being pulled backwards. In a defensive jolt of surprise and panic I curled into a ball—the light on my head gleaming against metal surfaces and blinding me as I searched for my attacker. A brief glimpse of pale white naked skin accentuated the darkness and a hand clutched tightly to my ankle—yellow teeth protruded from blackened gums and milky eyes sat in the center of a balding withered skull still chattering for flesh and food—gnawing at my ankle like a chicken wing. I felt the teeth scrape up against my wetsuit and I worried that it might have punctured the material. But, as I had trained myself to do, I reacted first. The knife in my hand pressed up against the throat of the thing and my other hand cupped the top of its skull—angling it backwards as I began sawing frantically. The muddy water half obscured the look of complete indifference on the face of the undead I was beheading and soon, after severing the spinal cord, the grip on my ankle went limp. I shook my leg to free myself—still holding the severed head of a ghoul—clouds of blood pouring out around us. A real life actual ghoul in the flesh. And then... staring into its drooping still flapping mouth gnawing at me like it wanted a

make out partner at the prom, I released a slow unimaginably grateful breath of gurgling bubbles—as if nothing in the whole world could be better than that moment of validation. I allowed myself to sink down to the ground and rested on my knees—staring into the eyes of my beloved.

*I had my answer. I had finally found and proven the truth. It was real. And like a father clutching a newborn baby, tenderly holding that severed head brought tears of joy to my eyes. At long last I knew—I really, genuinely, definitively without question knew! Despite all odds, I had what I came for. Proof!!! Irrefutable proof! That and mounds upon mounds of top-secret evidence to sift through! Files, hard drives, mysterious syringes and more! And as enlightening and heart pounding as that real tangible undead specimen was, in that moment it occurred to me that this serendipitous discovery was only the tip of the iceberg. I looked around the blurry drowned room at the medical supplies—at the nuances of where I was and what potential greater purpose this place might have! So, **so** many more questions about this place and what they were trying to accomplish here remained—bouncing around in my mind like I had opened a door into another dimension. My detective work wasn't done—not by a long shot! Instead, now, I came to realize my true mission. I was tasked with delving even further—tasked with understanding 'why all of this was what it was' and 'who on this earth was ultimately behind it?' That was my mission now. And my work was just getting started. I swam out of that lab in utter bliss—undead head in hand—a cloudy trail of its blood fluttering in my slippers all the way to the surface.*

CHAPTER 40: FAMILY REUNION

Susie Simmonds, Upstate Massachusetts, 2018

“Hello?!” HELLLLLLOOOOOOOO?!?!?! I’m not talking to myself here!!!! Am I? Somebody?!?! ANYBODY!!!!! ARCHEEEEEER!!!!!!” I shouted, cupping my hands and putting my weight into my cries—hearing nothing in return. The grate I had my face placed up against was connected to a length of the cafeteria inside the mall. After the blast lured the undead away, I was able to slowly make my way toward the building—eventually sandwiching myself up against the side of it, looking for a way in. All of the doors were blockaded and reinforced from the inside. Mounds of manikins, furniture and all sorts of stuff kept them from being opened. The windows and doors were all covered with dried blood and tiny bits of the undead flesh that had fallen off them from their continued banging, but the glass was still intact—shatterproof and built to last. I gave up screaming into the vent for someone to come and ‘let me in’ and instead, decided that I’d need to find my own entrance.

I circled the mall a little more until I spotted one of those emergency ladders that was always up too high to be able to grab onto. I then sifted through the pack I had brought with me and fished out a length of rope—tying it to the baseball bat. Then, after attempting to toss it up and through the bottom part of the ladder a few times, I finally connected and looped it in between steps. The baseball bat with the rope tied around it fell through the bottom hole in the ladder and I snatched it off and ground—quickly tying it around itself—tugging on the rope until the bat was pulled all the way back up—like a lasso with a safety anchor built into it to give me the support I needed to be able to climb. But... I sucked at climbing! I remember they’d made me do this in gym class a few times but I never made it all the way to the top. I even faked an injury for the final test just so that I wouldn’t have to try it again! Now, I kinda wish I’d just practiced and learned how. I remembered that I needed to fasten my legs in a certain way... that I could cheat a little by doing that. And then, sort of just shimmy up one bit at a time. But it was **really** hard and it hurt my hands and legs to even attempt. But I didn’t really have a choice. I didn’t have a big foamy mat to break my fall and I didn’t have the luxury of pretending to be hurt. Whether it hurt or not, I was still going to have to climb. I left the bag I’d brought with me behind to lessen the amount of weight I’d have to carry. And then, determined and hell-bent to reach the top... I started to climb. It hurt. A LOT. OW/WW/!! But... not moving forward hurt more. I had to... I just had to! And eventually, to

my own surprise... I did it. I made it! I actually made it! And once I managed to scale the length of the rope and grab onto the ladder, my swollen stinging hands clasped onto cold metal over and over again until I found my way to the top of the mall—out of breath and desperate for rest.

The roof had candy bar wrappers on it. Empty bottles of water, a few porno magazines and a handful of buckets that were... EWWWWWWWW!!! They were covered in poop! Gross!!! Ughh... the smell hit me like someone poured it all over my face and I gagged and recoiled, coughing to try and clear my nostrils—looking beneath where I was standing as I did so to see stains of pee and poop flung off the side of the roof. Whoever lived here was using this place to dump their dumps, and that awful smell was my first real indication that someone was actually still around! The porno magazines made me suspect my brother was one of them, but I tried not to come to any conclusions too quickly. After a few more moments of avoiding the buckets on the side of the place, I spotted an open hatch with a ladder poking out of it. I walked briskly over to it, climbed inside and poked my head around the corner until I could see a long empty hallway. A smear of blood ran down the length of the floor, but it was old and dried. I walked cautiously along the side of it until I reached a door... gently twisting the handle and peering into the larger open area of the mall.

The lights were all off but the place was still well illuminated from the sky lighting—long panels of glass that domed in the center. A thin, stretched out pool with shrubs planted on both sides of it was in the middle of the mall and ran the full length of the area I was in. There were two floors beneath me and the top level that I was on had the fewest stores of them all. Half had their metal dividers pulled down as if they were closed while others had stacks of stuff sticking out of them and spilling into the halls. At the very end of the level I was on I could see a large stack of bodies laying motionless on top of one another—piled up and pushed off to the corner to rot. I stepped forward and placed my hand against the railing, craning my neck one way and then the other to see if I could spot any place where the people who were living here had set up their areas to sleep or hang out. As I did so, I noticed the water in the central pool was muddied with blood and numerous smears and stains covered the floor on the bottom level. That is except for the area over by the cafeteria. There, along a stretch of chairs I could see a clear change in texture and hue—almost as if someone had mopped up the blood to keep the place clean.

“Heeeeeeeellllllllloooooooooo?!?!?” I echoed, cupping my hands again and crying out into the long empty space. My voice bounced off the

walls and simmered in my ears but no response but my own came back to me. I sighed and looked around for stairs or an escalator to take to the bottom level and investigate—eventually spotting a set of them half a rotation around the upper level away from the stack of dead bodies.

I wasn't running out of breath from fear anymore but I sure was having to hold it to keep from vomiting a lot! That stack of bodies REEEEEKED... like, even worse than the tubs of pooh on the roof or the giant hoard of ghouls that had been rotting outside the mall. I guess something about being trapped inside made them smell even worse. As I glanced at the people, I noticed all of them had some sort of damage done to their skulls. They weren't just normal people who had died; these were infected who had been eliminated. Some with bullet holes, some with blunt objects. But all of them had been ghouls. I looked down the stairwell I was approaching to see more dried smears of blood on the ground. Then, careful not to mess up my clothes too much so that I might appear to be an undead myself, I descended the stairs and followed the blood trails towards the cafeteria.

Some of the lights were on in the stores in the cafeteria. As I went back and looked, even a few of the fridges still worked—large stacks of boxes containing French fries and beef paddies were kept in decent shape. A bunch of dirty dishes rested next to the sink and crumbs littered the countertops. But still there wasn't any sign of people other than the mess they'd left. A mess, for that matter, that almost assuredly meant it was a group of boys living here. The dishes weren't even scraped clean after use... they were just left there to rot as if someone else were going to clean them. I exited the cafeteria to look in other places, hoping to stumble across someone when, just as I did so, I spotted a figure moving quickly at the other end of the mall. I held my breath and froze in place.

"Hey! HEEEEYYYYY!!!" I shouted, waving my arms to try and get their attention. But they were too far away and couldn't hear me even with a silent mall for my cries to echo through. I started to jog quickly down the length of the mall, realizing where I was as I did so. The place I had seen the figure moving was just outside the sporting goods store—the same place I had told Carson to have the Convoy come looking for me. As I approached I noticed more lights on and big stacks of stuff and gear sorted into piles just outside it. Guns, blades, crow bars, chainsaws, all kinds of stuff. And then, square in the middle of those stacks of things, I spotted a group of teenagers standing in a circle having a conversation with one another.

"We need to try at least or we're gonna be trapped in here forever!" one of them insisted, very likely discussing either the blast that had recently occurred or the fact that the undead were no longer

completely surrounding the mall. “They might all come back! We don’t know!”

“And where are we supposed to go?! We don’t know if anyplace else is safe! What if this is the best shot we’ve got, huh?! We can’t just abandon this place!” another teenage boy replied, holding onto a rifle big enough to make him look like nothing more than a kid. I kept walking slowly towards them, hoping not to startle them too much. They were all holding guns—their hair cut off to the point where it was almost non-existent. Then, just off to the side of the group, I spotted something else. Three teenage girls sat around a table sifting through stacks of supplies—eyeballing the group of boys like they were tired of listening to them argue. Then as one of them shifted her eye line between the argument and the ammo, she spotted me—recognizing me just as I recognized her. Bree—my brother’s girlfriend. Her mouth drooped open and she slowly pushed herself up from the table, stuttering a few times on what she wanted to say.

“A-A-Archer!!” she yelled, waving her hands in the direction of the group to get their attention. As she did so the guys in the circle took notice of her and then quickly swung around to look at me—nearly all of them pointing their guns at me as they did so. I immediately stuck my hands up in the air and spread my fingers out like a fly stuck in a spider web. In the center of the group was a boy I barely recognized without his long black hair, sullen expression or cold shoulder. My brother Archer stood holding a rifle—the only one that wasn’t pointed at me. And standing there, looking at me, I could see a side of him bubble to the surface that he would never have shown me before the infection struck. He was happy to see me—he was so unbelievably happy to see me that tears swelled up in his eyes and one of his hands reached for his heart.

“S... Susie?”

“Please stop pointing your guns at me!” I hollered, relieved to see all of the boys quickly lower their weapons without accidentally firing a round at me or themselves. I put my hands down by my sides and took a deep breath—first walking quickly and then jogging towards my brother—leaping into his arms and hugging him so damn tight it was like I needed that embrace to survive. He sputtered a few thoughts of utter disbelief to see me—hugging me back just as tight as I hugged him. And then... desperate to understand how I had gotten there and what I knew was happening in the outside world, he started asking about Sarah... about mom... about dad. But... I couldn’t answer his questions. I couldn’t even breathe. Not because I was out of breath. But because all I could do was cry and wail so hard that my arms melted away from him and I collapsed into a frail heartbroken ball. He picked me up and held me

close—hugging me and gently rubbing my back. I wept in his arms for I don't know how long. And he started to understand why I was crying without me ever saying a word.

CHAPTER 41: FETCH

Anna Simmonds, Upstate Massachusetts, 2018

Drones. Bombs. Inescapable. Stay away from populated areas. Inevitable. Payloads of explosives big enough to puncture fallout shelters. Everywhere. They're going to bomb everywhere. The shelter isn't safe—the explosion that happened was from a drone, dropping a bomb on a highly populated area. And more were coming. The thoughts flowed through my head at a steady pace, growing more and more terrifying with each moment. My little girl was out there searching for my only son. And wherever they were... wherever Susie had managed to find herself, I could guarantee she'd be someplace either chock full of people or chock full of ghouls. She was bound to be in a populated area... or the remains of the town... or... maybe even where that blast had just come from. Drones. Bombs. Inescapable. Barking... Elvis was still barking—calling for me to get off my ass, pick up my rifle and go out there to rescue my little girl. I stared at that radio for a moment—having just ended the call with that son of a bitch Matthew. And then, as the dull faint sounds of Elvis's bark chimed into my ears, one desperate plea for me to pay attention to him after another, I didn't hesitate to make a decision. I was going after her—I was going to find my little girl and bring her back, hoping and praying that somehow Matthew would find a way to stop the hell that was about to rain down on all of us.

I strapped a fanny pack full of ammunition to my waist and grabbed a duffle bag of guns—slinging my favorite assault rifle over my shoulder and slapping my hand against the long rope ladder to climb off the barn. I jotted down a quick note and stabbed it next to the ladder in the event that Susie managed to find her way home before I managed to find my way to her. Then, with Elvis barking at my side, I quickly made my way to our old car. Susie had taken the truck that morning and I didn't trust heading out by foot. So instead, I climbed aboard that old wagon, strapped in and put my foot to the gas—rolling down the window so Elvis could put his head out the side and help me navigate. I fidgeted with the radio as I drove, searching for anything other than static. I found an old emergency broadcast telling me to 'stay indoors' but that was about it. The car screamed down a long length of road and I quickly swerved to avoid the few parked-cars along the sides of. I could see a few straggler ghouls lumbering their way in the direction of the blast and I figured it might be a good idea to head that way to. That is, until I realized just about everything over that way was already making its way towards me.

My eyes widened and my mouth opened in disbelief—not just at the fact that there were other people still alive, but at the unbelievably huge number of them and all of the gear that they were packing.

About two hundred motorcycles, dozens of trucks, fuel tankers, heavy equipment, horse trailers, RV's, hummers and 4X4's scorched their way across the horizon, kicking up enough dust to blot out the sun. Just ahead of them looked to be about two thousand ghouls all marching towards the direction from where that blast had come from just as all those vehicles were kicking it into high gear to get away from it. Each group moved toward the other, and I suddenly pulled a sharp left to get on the road that would see me intersect between them—caught in both a rush of excitement to see other people and also apprehensive that a populated area that large might just end up being the next target of a drone. But even with that worry itching my mind, a group of people that large was too rare a sight to pass up unexplored. There wasn't a rock unturned or a person unquestioned I could risk leaving until I knew exactly where Susie was—and it was very likely that she had made her way toward them too. I turned to Elvis, panting happily out the window to make the final decision for me.

“What do you think?” I asked him, slowing down the car as the huge pack of vehicles came head to head with the dense mess of ghouls—people firing machine guns off bikes and jeeps to thin the herd closest to them. Elvis looked gingerly over at me and barked for me to keep going. “You better be right,” I groaned, picking up speed again and angling the car to join the others—steering wide and approaching from the rear to avoid stray gunshots or ghouls.

The motorcycles acted like a swarm of locusts fanning out from the fatter vehicles in the group—circling the undead in a constant stream. As they did so, the ghouls slowly moved away from their central mass, attracted by the noise and confusion. After only a few moments, what had been a dense cluster of a few thousand undead had thinned out in all directions across the huge open field covered in trampled or half harvested crops. As this happened, the other vehicles and the masses of people that were either riding in them or sitting atop them came to a rest just on the outskirts of the commotion. There they waited and picked off one undead at a time. The bikes kept circling, careful not to shoot any cross-fire-rounds for fear of stray shots finding their way into other vehicles. Then after a few more hectic minutes, near every darn ghoul in that field lay decapitated and motionless on the ground. Like pigs to the slaughter. Like whoever these people were had done that same maneuver so many times it was as natural to them as eating breakfast.

The group of vehicles once more started peeling away from their parking spots as the motorcycles out front steered a new course. I put my foot to the gas to try and catch up with them, approaching quickly from the rear. Eventually my family car, still equipped with a handheld videogame console and a deck of playing cards, made its way into the fold. I rode in between a monster truck and a school bus—both of which had what looked like darn raiders hanging off em, touting guns big enough to blow up cars. Who the heck were these people?! And where were they going now?! Elvis turned his neck forward to bark ahead of the direction we were all headed, seemingly wondering the same thing as I did the best I could to steer around the bodies of undead laying in the field. I realized after a moment of doing this that most of the vehicles in the group had fanned out to the sides to protect their tires, while I had foolishly stayed on course—too distracted by the insanity of the people I'd encountered to keep my wits about me. The front tire lodged hard against a mangled torso and my head hit the ceiling from the sudden jolt it gave the car. Elvis whimpered and yelped, yanking himself back into the front seat to keep from getting thrown sideways. And, just a moment after that, another body part lodged itself in the rear wheel and saw my car come screeching to a halt.

I stepped out of the vehicle, intending to un-lodge one of the corpses from the wheel, but instead saw the school bus I had been riding beside pull to a stop to help me—as if I were one of the group and could use a friendly pit-stop. I froze in that moment, watching a handful of women carrying submachineguns jog over to me. Their hair was all cut short and their skin was muddy and sunburnt. But still, despite all of this and the hell falling down around us, they managed to keep level headed expressions on their faces.

“Hey! Which club are you with?” one of the women asked, throwing me a question I didn't quite understand to greet me and the predicament I was in.

“What?” I replied, Elvis hopping out of the open window and jogging around the car to come stand by my side.

“What club are you with? Were you able to get word before we left or did you just... grab a car and start driving?” she exclaimed, clearly confused by my choice of vehicle.

“I'm just looking for my little girl. Her name's Susie. She's about four feet tall, strawberry blonde hair, orange backpack and a button nose. Have you seen her?”

“Was she in the tents or the fields when the blast happened?” another one of the women responded, her tone solemn and concerned.

Suddenly, all five of them seemed less interested in seeing me on my way and more concerned with helping me find Susie.

“I... I don’t know. I haven’t seen her since early this morning when she left the house,” I tried to explain as Elvis started barking again—his head aimed in the direction where the mass of vehicles had driven.

“Well... if she was in the fields... then I’d say there’s not much point in going back and looking for her,” a woman stated grimly, giving me the impression that that’s where the blast had struck. “But we’ll get all that sorted after we re-supply at the mall. If you’d rather, you’re welcome to ride with us,” she continued, gesturing back to the school bus as the horn sounded and the driver waved his arm for us to hurry up. I took a couple of short breaths, looked back at my stuck, old, run down vehicle and then decided that it might be better to travel in a group. I reached into the back seat, grabbed my bag of guns, slung it over my shoulder along with my rifle and then took off to the bus like I was late for school. The other women jogged along quickly, their demeanor firm and determined like they did this sort of thing for a living.

We climbed in through the back hatch of the bus that had been left open and one of the women with the biggest guns pounded her fist against the ceiling to give the driver the go ahead to start moving. The bus peeled away a moment later, subtly swerving this way and that to avoid fallen ghouls. More motorcycles caught up to us from behind, some veering off ahead like they already knew exactly what to do while others slowed their pace along the front of the bus to try and grab a word with the driver. Eventually a pack of two or three of those motorcycles were then waved back to speak to the ladies I was riding along with. The big-gunned bad ass who had pounded the ceiling turned her attention to shout to the men on the cycles and I got my first taste of what it is they were all up to and where it was we were all headed.

“What the fuck was that?!” one of the bikers screamed, barely audible over the sound of his hog and our bus.

“We don’t know!!! Relocate to the mall, re-stock what we lost and wait for word!”

“Word from who?!” another biker shouted, his voice frantic and exasperated. “The whole fucking council was parked in those fields!!! Who the hell’s running this show?!”

“Until we re-stock the show’s running itself!!!” another one of the women answered, waving them forward to catch up to the rest of the cars. “You’re not the only one’s who don’t know what the fuck’s going

on!!!” she finished, turning back from the window and rubbing her forehead with her hands, suddenly more distraught than when she’d first found me.

“Is that true?” another one of the women asked, having overheard what the biker said.

“What’d he say?” the big gunned woman asked, putting her hand up to her ear as if she were either hard of hearing or still suffering from ringing ears.

“Just... give me a minute,” the woman who was rubbing her forehead said. She clenched her jaw and shook her frown this way and that... trying to grapple with what she’d just heard. Something about a ‘council’ being in those fields... the same fields they’d mentioned ‘weren’t worth going back and looking through.’ She seemed like she was fighting off tears... like worse had just come to worst. And then, in that moment, I realized I might just have something to offer them to understand what was going on.

“It was a drone strike!” I hollered, pulling all of their eyes and ears to rest on me.

“Where’d you hear that?”

“Someone I know in the military... I just talked to them about fifteen minutes ago.”

“The military? What are you talking about... what...”

“I don’t believe we’ve met yet,” the woman who had been fighting off tears interrupted—extending her hand to firmly shake mine. “I’m Sarin, this is Sue-Ellen, Pamela, Jocelyn and Dorice. The driver and the fellow riding shotgun are called the Tweedles but we only call them that because we don’t know their real names,” she explained, passing my hand from one woman’s to the next till I had shaken them all. “We were stationed with this rig to help sort and distribute goods throughout the Convoy, but... we got sidetracked when that explosion happened. Where exactly is it you were stationed and how is it you came to speak to someone in the military?”

“I’m... I just got here. I wasn’t stationed anywhere. I was sitting at home, waiting for my girl Susie to come back when that blast happened. After it did, I placed a call on a frequency my husband set up to contact his brother who knew to use that same line,” I explained, doing my best to keep what had happened straight in my own head let alone sufficiently explain it to them. “I didn’t speak to him long but he said that there are drone strikes that are going to be bombing the most populated

areas! They're going to bomb everything eventually, but... they might be able to stop them somehow... he doesn't know yet!"

"You said you were sitting at home? What club are you in?"

"I don't know what that means," I stuttered, having a flash of recollection in my mind of an old TV show as I said it. "Do you mean which 'motorcycle club' am I in? Cause, I'm not... I'm a local here."

"Holy hell," Dorice exclaimed, moving quickly to the front of the bus to bark something at the Tweedles. "Find out whoever the fuck is running this and tell them we got intel to tell!!! Top priority, you understand?"

"What the fuck are you talking about?! We don't know shit!" one of the Tweedles shouted in response, swerving the bus around a pack of still standing ghouls as we approached what looked to be the town's new shopping mall.

"Our passenger does!!! Now do what I said!" she exclaimed, turning back around and making her way to me. "What's your name?"

"I'm Anna."

"Anna... It's a pleasure to meet you. Just hold tight for now... try and gather your thoughts to pass them along," she continued as the bus pulled to the side and came to a rest on the outskirts of the mall's parking lot. "There's gonna be plenty more introductions we're gonna need to make, and while that's going on we can try and see if your little girl is anywhere to be found in this mess. But it's important that we have you tell what you know to the people running this show as soon as possible!"

"Yeah... whoever that is," Sarin quipped, shaking her head at the thousands of confused people unloading from all kinds of vehicles and making their way toward the mall.

CHAPTER 42: LIMB

Derek Riggs, Oregon, 2018

I opened my eyes to see Cory holding a pistol in my face. I didn't move to snatch it from him. I didn't spring to my feet to throw off his aim or ask what it was he was doing. I just looked at his bulging eyes and then down at the barrel of the gun waiting for him to pull the trigger. In my mind, I was a ghoul now. In my mind I had been infected, passed out and turned into one of them just in time to rest my eyes on the final sight I'd see on this earth... Cory rightfully and justly putting a bullet in my skull. But he didn't. He just stood there holding the gun... sharing a moment of silence with me as his eyes darted back and forth between my gaze and my mouth, waiting for me to either speak or moan... but I wasn't moaning. And I wasn't talking. Cory clearly didn't want to risk doing anything until he knew for certain that he wasn't making a mistake. He was scared. But he was determined.

"You passed out two hours ago... you would have turned by now, right?"

"Two hours?" I asked, rolling the words around in my mind ten times before I was able to form the sentence. I closed my eyes and concentrated... trying to remember the details of the logs I'd read well enough to convince myself that I was going to be alright. "You're sure it's been two hours?"

"Yes. Two hours, three minutes and forty-seven seconds," Cory explained, gesturing towards the military clock on the wall—giving a live reliable feed of the time. "Since you blacked out, six explosions have occurred. They all came from the same direction and... there isn't much moaning anymore," he continued, jogging my memory to the super cluster we had just barely escaped from. I turned to my side to try and view my cut and bruised shoulder but felt myself held in place—I looked down to see a pair of handcuffs on each wrist—tethering me to a supply rack. A rope was fastened tightly around my legs. Cory had been cautious... ensuring that if for some reason the gun didn't fire, he'd still be able to keep the situation under control. Or, conversely, he had made sure that even if I did wake up uninfected... he'd be the one in control.

"If I were infected... I would have turned," I replied, concentrating on my blinking and breathing—realizing as I did so that I still had the same sickly feeling in my gut. I maneuvered my fingers in the handcuffs towards my stomach and felt around—realizing that one of my

ribs had been broken and had pushed inwards. I winced ever so slightly from the pain of trying to dig it out, giving up after a moment as I felt a couple of other bones wobble and sway. We had landed hard when the glider fell and I had made sure to angle us so that it would be me, not Cory to suffer the bulk of that blow. I looked at his tender swollen face to see that he was already starting to bruise from the impact. But he was able to stand and hold the gun well enough that I didn't worry how wounded he might be. If anything, I was proud to see the way he was handling himself in this situation. He did good... he did really, really good. "I would have turned... It's ok Cory, I would have turned already," I assured him, watching as his nerves slowly unraveled and he convinced himself it was ok to lower the gun.

Cory looked down at the weapon in his trembling grip. But he didn't put it aside and he didn't pull up the handcuff keys to unshackle me. He just stood there... somewhere in between concussed and perplexed. His breaths were slow and buried... as if the air he was taking in was feeding a side of him just recently revealed. It was then I realized a part of him had wanted me to be infected so he could shoot me and the other part of him, now that I was awake, might just want to keep me locked up. The last thing I'd done before jumping into that undead nightmare was fight with any perceived weakness he might show... because that's the only lesson I knew to teach... I'd dangled him over the super cluster like a piece of meat I might just throw to the dogs. I had tried to explain to him afterwards why I had acted that way... to tell him about my father and the training I'd endured to be ready for when the infection finally happened. But whether he understood me or not, he was still angry with me... still torn with what to do now that he was the one in control... a kid unable to cope with being stuck here with the likes of me. His hands trembled and he deliberated back and forth between the gun and the keys. But he never did make a decision. He only stood there waiting for me to push him one way or the other. I recognized that face... of confusion and despair turned inward. And sure as the shackles on my wrists reminded me of my father chaining me up all those years ago... so too did the way I had treated Cory remind me of my father as well. I was so sorry. I was so very sorry. And in that moment... helpless as I was... I wanted to die.

"You don't have to unlock me if you don't want to," I finally said, breaking Cory's internal deliberation and surprising him at the same time. He looked up at me—pulled out of reverie—and a few burgeoning tears fell down his swollen cheeks.

"What?"

"I said... you don't have to unlock me if you don't want to. I wouldn't blame you if you didn't," I continued, keeping my breaths low to try and diminish the throbbing pain in my sides. "I haven't had a friend in a very long time... and... I'm not very good at it."

"I... I'll unlock you... I'm just being... cautious," Cory replied, pushing away the deep down reservation he'd clearly shown for reasons beyond suspicion that I might be infected. He wasn't just scared of everything that had happened to the world. He was scared of me too. And looking at the way his hands were trembling... the way in which he was struggling to form sentences or make sudden movements... I was starting to suspect he might be in some form of shock. "I should be cautious... right?"

"Yeah. You're doing great, Cory. I'm really proud of you," I replied, thinking of something a good person would say to try and cheer someone up that they cared about. Only... this time it was true... and the simple fact that it was true weighed on my heart in a way I struggled to accept. As that feeling sunk in, my mind tried to jump from one distraction to another—to checking supply numbers... to turning on the emergency broadcast signal to see who was still out there. But... I couldn't. Not yet. Not while I was chained there, my ribs broken, my shoulder smashed... my ability to think, fight, survive or so much as move brought to a standstill. Because now, locked down here, surrounded by falling bombs, an infection that had already swallowed the whole earth and no idea if we'd ever be able to set foot outside without getting sucked into the next blast... my dream of what the infection would be wasn't like anything I had spent all the time dreaming about. Instead, it was just over and done with... like the whole fucking thing had come in an instant only to be gobbled up and wiped away by those goddamn drones. And now, down in the safety of my fort, it wasn't the number of undead I could slaughter that mattered most. It was seeing Cory get better so I didn't have to feel like I had done to him what my father had done to me. I hadn't taught him shit. I was the student now, not him. And that lesson was eating me alive.

"Funny thing about trauma... is it's like a phantom limb," I confessed, staring at the handcuffs pressed against my scarred skin. "Even after you don't feel it anymore... sometimes something will happen that will bring the sensation back."

"What's a 'phantom limb?'" Cory asked, staring at the gun in his hand. Still crying. Still breathing low and slow.

"It's when you lose a finger... or an arm... or... some part of yourself. But... even after it's gone, you can still feel it sometimes. And if

someone pushes a knife into the area where your limb used to be... you can feel the limb that isn't there as if it were being stabbed," I explained, feeling a sticky glue-like substance around the handcuffs on my wrists even though I damn well knew it wasn't really there. Smelling whiskey and cigarettes in the air... the sensation of pavement grinding against my cheek. "If you go through enough pain... you end up with more phantom limbs than real ones. And then... everything feels like it's stabbing you when it gets too close."

"I don't understand," Cory stated, looking up from the gun but never putting it down.

"You will," I mumbled, seeing that what I was describing was only making Cory feel worse—confusing him more and intensifying the feelings of dread that were holding him in submission. I swallowed hard and closed my eyes, trying to clear the smell of whiskey and cigarettes from my mouth but I couldn't. My phantom limbs were being stabbed by memories... my father locking me in that warehouse... the chains Cory had put on me felt like they were transporting me back in time. I took a few deep, uneasy breaths—digging through my mind for something I could say to make him feel better. But I didn't know anything. I never talked to anybody. I only ever ignored them and thought about the best way to kill them in three moves or less. Not exactly proper social etiquette. And so I tried to shift my thoughts from what I knew to say to what I had overheard other people talking about. The office douchebag who I had smashed with a keyboard in the face on my way out of L.A... I thought of him. Of all the stupid bullshit he used to blather on about. Everything he had frivolously lived his life by to avoid feeling any semblance of anguish, let alone being chained in place with it. That motherfucker always knew exactly what to say to put a smile on his own face. And so I focused on him... channeling his fucking stupidity with the hope that maybe I could use it to numb the volcanic despair brooding inside me. "What did you do on the weekend?" I asked, opening my eyes and trying to smile at Cory as I said it.

"What?" he asked, every bit as confused as he was when I had mentioned phantom limbs. "What do you mean?"

"Did you watch the game?"

"What?"

"The football game... did you watch it? Or... did you like to watch football when your TV still worked?" I asked, combing over my statement and revising it until I could make sense of what I was saying—swallowing over and over again to try and get rid of the whisky flavor. But it only grew stronger, more pronounced. A shotgun blast rang out in my

mind and I felt tiny pinpricks of pavement-shrapnel shoot up against my cheek. I pulled violently to the side, shut my eyes and clenched my teeth. Cory backed away from me... not understanding my motions... not understanding my emotions... just confused and without reference for what was happening. Phantom limbs, being stabbed by memories, over and over again. “Ahhh... ahhh... before the infection happened did you watch sports?! Did you... like TV?! What shows did you watch? What shows did you watch on Netflix!?” I asked, wincing again as another blast went off in my mind—the hot sticky glue on my forearms starting to bubble along with my skin.

“I didn’t... I didn’t watch much TV,” Cory answered, now standing on the other side of the room—his expression changed from one of confusion and dread to one of horror and bewilderment. “Derek... what’s wrong?”

“I... uh... ahh... AHH!!!” I shouted, hearing my father’s voice screaming in my ear—telling me how it wasn’t real... it wasn’t real... it wasn’t real. “Nothing! I’m just... the chains are... the handcuffs I mean... my ribs are broken Cory, and I need to move to stop the pain,” I exclaimed, my breaths increasing out of control as my hands began to shake—clawing at the cold metal clasped around them. I needed him to take the chains off me... I needed them off me right now! RIGHT NOW!!! “Cory, I need to move!!! Unlock the handcuffs so I can move!!!” I cried, my whole body writhing to try and break free—feeling the sticky tar on my arms start to spread all over me—feeling the taste of whisky melt my tongue and cigarette smoke fill my lungs. Shotgun blast after shotgun blast echoed in my ears and pretty soon I couldn’t even hear the sound of my own screams. Reality melted away and I was left with nothing but the memory eating me alive, over and over again. I screamed and I cried—begging for Cory to let me out... to just take off the chains and help me. But there was nothing he could do. Infected or not, my mind was gone.

CHAPTER 43: WALKING DREAD

Matthew Simmonds, Virginia, 2018

Like waiting in line at customs at the airport, the undead were pressed shoulder-to-shoulder, snaking around stacks of bodies and vehicles, all the way to the edge of the tree line. The skin on my trigger finger had started to puff up from constant use, despite my already well established callous. My wrapped, broken digits on the other hand were throbbing along with the pain in my leg—stiff and worn. This time I took fewer pills to numb the sensation, realizing that we might just live longer than I had anticipated. Any moment I expected a blast to suck all this up and erase us from existence. But instead, all I got was more of that damn alarm sounding, pulling every ghoul that hadn't been blown to bits in the towns around us straight towards this base. The White Coats at the front of the funnel selectively pulled ghouls out of the tiny opening between mounds of bodies and cars—like yanking snapping lobsters out of their cages—checked their identity to rule out if whatever rotten sack of flesh they had grabbed was Roger or not and then promptly put a point-blank bullet in their heads. After that, to keep the area clear, they'd have to haul the corpses back to the rear of the funnel to dispose of them. It was hard physical labor—grueling and constant. But since this whole ordeal had begun, they had grown better and better at doing it without getting themselves killed.

My job, on the other hand, was quickly growing irrelevant. Popping heads in the distance didn't accomplish much when every square inch I could see was covered with ghouls. Moreover, the trajectory of the bullets made it tough to tell if by killing one I might be severing the spinal cord of another—potentially pulling Roger's lumbering corpse to the ground and out of sight for identification. So now rather than firing into the crowd, I scoped through it—stopping to look and scan every single face and expression of every single ghoul—praying to spot that missing NSA asshole, wherever he had wound up. I would then walkie that intel to the White Coats out front with the hope of helping them expedite their identifications. Some of the ghouls were intact, some of them were charred, some of them were bitten and some of them were downright unrecognizable as human. They reminded me of burn victims without bandages or the expressions that wounded soldiers would make in the field before they'd had the chance to look in a mirror—trying to figure out how bad the damage was and how ugly they'd end up being. They curled up their lips, exposed their teeth, and dropped their heads this way

and that... like monsters... Looking at the front of one ghoul in particular whose entire face was missing with its eyeballs dangling out like cherries, I couldn't help but remember a young recruit who I once pulled off an IED blast. I couldn't quite recall his name, though I know exactly what his shrapnel scratched skull looked like.

"What the fuck was his name?" I whispered to myself, sitting on the memory for no reason other than the fact that I couldn't quite recall it. Only selective parts had pushed their way past my vague recollection to form a handful of clear, vibrant images etched into my brain. The sort of thing you see when you look at burnt toast or cloud formations. It's not what's in front of you that you're looking at, it's where your mind goes as a result.

A repeating flash came from the tablet resting by my side and I lowered the scope of my rifle to turn my attention towards it. Dennis was calling me directly for the first time since he insisted radio chatter and active communications be kept to a minimum. I hesitated, looking at the device, wondering if it were nothing but Anna calling back, praying for better news—desperate for me to tell her something more than what I already had, or, what she could possibly expect to go wrong next. But I didn't have any better answers for her than the disappointing sort that I had already passed along. Just more of the same depressing, impossible bullshit that I was trying to wade through myself. I pushed the button to answer anyway, adjusting the tablet next to my ear and covering it accordingly to silence the wails of the alarm.

"What's going on?" I hollered, crouching down low behind a few crates of ammo and then pushing my leg out in front of me to give it a much-needed flex and rest.

"Sitrep time!" Dennis exclaimed, his voice rejuvenated and full of pep. "I've now got an active feed of the drones targeting systems, re-routed through military command to exempt selective coordinates," he explained, using a type of jargon that made me feel like I was back in the Middle East.

"And... are we about to die then or what?"

"Nope, that's why I'm opening the lines again... there's a lot going on I haven't filled you in on," Dennis continued, catching me up on what he'd been doing since going dark. "The gist of the story is this: there's a fleet of ships on the other side of the world carting around the brass that are left alive. They managed to do two things of importance that I figure you should know. First, they uploaded a hard drive from an underground facility that allows them to temporarily delay and exempt

selective strike areas. That means us and other bases like us who have active personnel!”

“Great! Any chance they can turn off the alarm and start the elevator too?”

“No. You’re probably still fucked. I’m just saying you’re not gonna get blown up anytime soon. Later, yeah. But not soon.”

“Ok,” I grumbled, unsure of how to take Dennis’ unique mix of enthusiasm about the improving situation and his simultaneous complete indifference about whether or not we lived or died. “What’s the second thing?”

“Apparently... they raided Ellex Vussel’s island and they now have him in custody.”

“Really?” I stated, unsure of exactly what the implications of that fact would be. “So... What are we still doing up here? Can I tell these scientists to relax so we can get some R and R or what?”

“Sorry lieutenant, word on the horn is him being in captivity doesn’t really change much,” he stated in complete sincerity. I hiccupped on a moment of disbelief and damn near screamed in response, struggling to swallow the shit I’d just been fed.

“Well la-de-fucking-dah Dennis! Who else they got in captivity then? Any cute goats they rounded up on his island?!”

“I don’t have to tell you this shit if you don’t want to hear it. I just figured you’d want to be in the loop. We got the guy! That’s a big deal! You’re killing my buzz here, asshole,” Dennis snapped sarcastically, strictly focused on the big picture and oblivious to my concerns or where I was coming from. We were going to die. We were almost positively going to die!

“Do we still need that hard drive from Roger?! That’s what I need to know!”

“To make the elevator work? Absolutely,” he reassured me, feverish typing accompanying his words as always. “Depending on what specifically is on the drive it could also help delay the drones. The brass made it clear to me that it may or may not be redundant with the information they already acquired, but... They don’t really know one way or the other without seeing it for themselves,” he yammered on, reminding me of countless deployments I’d been on just to rule out irrelevant data—missions I’d been on to storm compounds, hold air fields, clear bunkers, etc, etc, etc. All kinds of borderline suicide runs I’d

been through for the sake of unconfirmed ‘intelligence’. I bit my lip to keep from screaming again and took another deep breath.

“So, what does—”

“So they absolutely still want you to find that drive! Because of THAT drive this base is now a top priority in their books.”

“Top priority?” I exclaimed, momentarily experiencing a spike of hope when I said the phrase aloud. “What are we talking about here? Reinforcements? New toys? Air support? What does being a ‘top priority’ actually change?” I asked, torn between frustration and confusion—relying only on Dennis’ word to tell me what to expect one way or the other—his acting as my eyes and ears to whatever was left of the outside world. Dennis cleared his throat loudly and paused before responding—giving me a sense of the bad news even before it hit.

“No... sorry to say that... it doesn’t really change anything. You’re still on your own for now.”

“Bullshit! I’ve never been a top priority before! Have em airlift in some fajitas or something!” I joked, trying my best to shrug off the shitty situation and keep my focus on getting the job done. Dennis chuckled a moment and took a deep breath before responding.

“Roger that Lieutenant, I’ll call in the request,” he answered, his chipper change in tone a welcome spot of hope in the abyss of bullshit surrounding me on all sides. I tried to remind myself that in the big scheme of things what he had just told me was a good thing, even if it didn’t directly help us out here and now. We had more time—that was something. Maybe that meant Anna had more time too? That thought made me feel better—so I tried to focus on that feeling to keep my spirits up. “Anyway... just giving you a friendly reminder of how important your mission here is. Stay vigilant, find that drive and we might even be able to exempt the strike coordinates you had me relay before!” he suggested, dangling the idea of saving Anna in front of me like a carrot smacking against a horse’s mouth. The line cut out a moment later and I sat there juggling what he’d just told me. Half hope, half doom and gloom—mixing together and churning around in my gut. Unsure of exactly how I felt, but positive that I needed to take a mighty big shit.

Ellex was in custody, the drones weren’t going to bomb this base just yet, communications were open again, our mission to find that hard drive was a ‘top priority’ and that little fucker Roger was still MIA. And while we were all almost assuredly going to die sooner or later, for the most part what Dennis had called to tell me was pretty damn good news! Even if he said it didn’t really change anything, I still felt better after

hearing what he'd said—like everything wasn't quite so fucked as it had been just a few moments before. In fact, I felt so much better from our little chat that I wanted to spread the good news! Share the love with the White Coats and let them know all wasn't lost just yet. I glanced down at the tedious dredge work they were doing and decided that since I wasn't involved with anything particularly important at the moment, it would benefit everyone more to be kept in the loop—to boost morale and help them stay focused on the task at hand. So I put my rifle down, stretched my neck and then casually made my way over to the ladder to move back inside.

Leanne and a few other wounded were still camped out in the medical bay, idling their time. The blood splatter from the head of the infected White Coat who I'd shot had been cleaned up—meticulously removed from direct sight so that the ominous reminder of the mistakes he'd made wouldn't linger after his body was dragged away. The bullet hole was still there though—a single black dot in the middle of the white wall. As I came to stand in the doorway I could feel everyone's demeanor shift to one of uncertainty and dread—none of them particularly liked me much after all. The only times they'd hear from me was when I needed to remind them to act right or if the shit was about to hit the fan. Other than that, I kept to myself, not only when I was living with them back in the Eden Corp facility but here isolated on the roof as well. So when I finally did come to stand before them in a relaxed, calm and socially conscious way, it was clear they didn't quite know what to make of my mood. Hell, me appearing alright and borderline happy probably scared them half to death. They all stared at me waiting for some sense of what was going on and I even went so far as to let myself sneak a smile into the mix.

“We're all gonna have a little chat. I've got some good news!” I announced, patting my hand on the side of the doorway and then turning to make my way toward the front of the funnel. I whistled an old TV theme I liked as I walked, removing my side arm to help clear the numbers at the front so that we could close the gated-barrier long enough to have a comfortable chat.

“What's wrong?!” one of the White Coats yelled, startled to see me and unnerved by the weapon in my hand—no doubt remembering the bitten man I'd killed. After a moment, he managed to pull his eyes up from the gun I was holding, but it was crystal clear from the look on his face that he wasn't thinking about much else. He was sweating profusely, out of breath and aching for a rest—they all were.

“Nothing! Everything's fine! We just need to have a quick huddle is all! Everybody's doing great! You should all be proud of what you've accomplished here!” I explained, walking past them to the very front of

the funnel—a combination of cars propped up on their sides and long protruding lengths of metal grating that acted as makeshift gates. The four White Coats at the front of the funnel would periodically rotate the gates, grab the outstretched arm of one or two undead, toss them back into the opening behind them and then press their weight up against the barrier all over again—like pulling weeds that never stopped growing and carefully controlling the flow of ghouls. This approach—the contingency needed once the fields were completely overrun—allowed them the luxury of handling each ghoul with individual care. If Roger was somewhere in this mess, then they would absolutely, positively have the chance to spot him firsthand. Then, like clockwork, they'd quickly destroy the brain, search the ghouls' pockets, carry their body to the rear, throw it over the mounds of cars or stack it in a storage room inside the base so that there'd be enough room to keep sifting through more bodies—repeat, repeat, repeat. Like a monotonous assembly line churning out all kinds of fat-assed or falling-apart-ghouls to sift through, that was their routine and they had done a darn fine job of keeping their wits about them while they did it! Like actual fucking soldiers! Not candy-ass scientists—real grunts doing real grunt work.

The rest of the ghouls snaking around the mounds of bodies pressed up against the sides of the funnel, relentlessly banging their lifeless arms toward us in all directions. A recurrent thumping sound that echoed off car doors, undercarriages and rooftops—creating a dense mess of noise between the relentless moans, metallic banging and that constant, nagging alarm. The smell in the front lines was more intense too. At least on the rooftops I had the luxury of only catching the occasional gust of shit carried by the wind. But down here it was another matter altogether. Every one of the White Coats had protective surgical masks layered twice overtop their noses and mouths—all of them splattered with specks of blood, brains and feces shot up from having to haul around rotten corpses. I hiccupped on a deep breath of putrid infected air and let it out of my nostrils slowly—coming to stand at the very front of the funnel ready to help them all take a much-needed breather.

“Chain the latch!” I instructed, referring to a thick mound of chains they could wrap around the metal barriers if they needed to tightly secure it and step away from the gate for good. The two White Coats currently pushing their weight against the grate nodded in response and did their best to slide the chain through a number of interconnecting spots. They struggled and bore their teeth—feeling the heaving mounds of undead pressed up against the other side that made moving the barrier completely shut all the more strenuous. I took a moment to analyze the posturing of the ghouls sandwiched up against it—where their arms and

legs were relative to one another—and then quickly crouched down and fired at an upward trajectory to ensure the bullets wouldn't hit multiple targets—firing those rounds just a few feet to the sides of the White Coats shoulders—snagging six headshots in a matter of seconds. The White Coats seemed to react with uncertainty and dismay—both remembering the wounded man I had shot before and having little to no experience of live fire going off directly next to them. I could see that doing that spooked them good—each of them visibly jumping from the loud cracking sound of my sidearm going off. Their eyes looked at me in a way where they half expected I was there to execute them—like I was the real threat, not the undead. The six ghouls I'd shot collapsed to the ground and their weight against the grating was temporarily reduced enough to where the two White Coats at the front could comfortably ensure the chain was reinforced—closing the slim slit and sealing the entrance for good. They then slapped a lock on it and stepped away—eyeballing the metal dividers anxiously, wondering if it was going to hold against the swollen weight of the undead on the other side. It did. It held just great—just like I'd designed it to.

“What's going on?!” one of the exhausted White Coats asked as he wiped away a muddy layer of goop-infused-sweat from his face—relieved to have a moments peace without fear of something chattering to eat him alive.

“Head inside and catch a breather! Only two people need to watch the gates for now, alright?” I continued, glancing between them to see who would volunteer. They all looked at each other until eventually a couple of them unenthusiastically raised their hands and took the job—slowly crouching down to plant their butts on an ammunition crate and stretch their tired arms and legs. I patted them on the back and gave my heartfelt thanks—wishing I had some way to reward them other than a quick smile and a parting salute. These men really were doing a great job after all—especially for untrained scientists who'd never had to actually confront a ghoul face to face let alone kill and sift through thousands of their blood-soaked, shit splattered corpses. They were doing a great fucking job.

“Thanks again!” I repeated, trying to clearly demonstrate my gratitude to the men who had volunteered to stay behind—turning away from the tip of the funnel and leading everyone else inside to discuss what Dennis had told me.

The handful of exhausted White Coats hobbled alongside me into the medical bay where Leanne and everyone else was camped out. As they stepped into the room their shit covered clothes brought with them the vile stench from the environment they had all been working in—a thick

wafting aroma of death, innards and feces that had been cooking in the Virginia heat. Everyone else still had clean clothes—making a point of keeping the interior of this facility as tidy and sterile as they could. Even I was relatively clean and wore a well fitted, near spotless pair of fatigues and boots. But those White Coats who had been stationed out front of the place on the other hand? No, no, no... They smelled half as bad as they did when they first emerged from that lake of shit we'd all had to crawl through back when we'd escaped from the town—the lake of sewage we'd had to wade through, soaking its way into our scalp, nostrils and ears. That sickly awful smell was a pronounced reminder to the wounded of just how foul the situation out there was—whether they had it in them to assist in staving it off or not—smelling it again gave them a taste of how hardcore the duties of their healthy colleagues were. They were heroes. Plain and simple—they were all heroes.

“Ok everyone! Listen up!” I announced, watching as the men and women from the front took to guzzling water and snacks—savoring the moments rest to refuel and gather their wits anew. “First of all, I cannot tell you how proud I am of the dedication and resolve you’ve shown. You are operating as an effective, cohesive unit. You’re doing your job, hard as it is, and we’re making real progress here as a result of that! Excellent work everyone! Really, excellent work!” I continued, glancing from one dull stare to another—understanding how my appreciation didn’t amount to them actually feeling better about the situation we were in. We still hadn’t found what we’re looking for—and they still didn’t have much hope that we ever would. I cleared my throat to continue my address, allowing a rare smile to creep onto my face. “Besides that, I’ve got some good news for everybody!” I exclaimed, turning my eyes to Leanne as I said it with the hope of somehow seeing her smile again. Her eyes retained a faint trace of the indignant contempt left over from when I’d confronted her earlier in the day—looking at me like I owed her a thousand more apologies than the one I’d given to ever stand a chance of getting close to her again. “Dennis has informed me of two crucial updates to our situation here. This base has been temporarily exempted from drone strikes—giving us much more time than we previously had to find Roger. And, secondly, and more importantly, a fleet of ships has docked off the coast of Ellex Vussel’s island. The military have taken him into custody and they are working together with the remaining factions of survivors to put an end to his plan! They got the fucker!” I stated, my words followed by a unanimous silence of uncertainty and confusion. The White Coats didn’t know how to take that news either. Sure, the super-villain-asshole responsible for all this was in custody, but it didn’t really change the fact that we might all still die in an instant. I returned my eyes to Leanne, looking from face to face at the other people gathered together

in the room until she eventually turned her eyes back to me, cleared her throat and broke the silence.

“Dennis already passed that news along,” Leanne replied, taking the reins to speak for everyone else in the group—gesturing up and to the side of the room where an intercom was mounted—next to a camera that he would undoubtedly be able to watch us through. “Is there anything else?”

“Oh... alright then... that’s uh... good! We’re all on the same page!” I exclaimed, getting the feeling that everyone in that room wanted me to head back up to the roof and keep from bothering them again—like even with the thousands of ghouls surrounding us on all sides somehow I was the most unnerving part of all this. “Well, anyway, everyone take a breather—get your energy back, rotate the people working out front—do what you have to do to get ready for one more hours work... The sun will soon be all the way down. We can discuss sleep rotations then,” I finished, nodding sternly to them, no longer inclined to try and cheer them up. My eyes lingered on Leanne a moment as she resumed giving me a frosty shoulder—shifting her focus to the mental wellbeing of those who had just come in from the front lines—like a mother or nurse attending to a shell-shocked child, trying to determine how broken down and torn up they were. Then, standing there watching how everyone in that group collectively kept their attention away from me, I took it upon myself to give them the space they needed. I wasn’t a part of the survival-bond they had come to form with one another after all—Instead, I was nothing but the hard-ass-gun-toting-outsider they feared as much as the undead. I swallowed my urge to celebrate a tiny victory with them and retreated into the solitude of the base instead, searching for the closest thing to silence and peace that I could find.

After a couple of minutes meandering around this way and that I found what was the closest thing to solitude and quiet that I’d heard since this whole mess started. A toilet in a locker room tucked away in the middle of the place became my throne of reflection and relief. Sitting there, pinching out a long-held-in, extra thick turd into the still pristine waters of the unused bowl, it almost felt like none of this was really happening. The walls were white and tidy—just like I’d grown so accustomed to in the military. No graffiti, no marks of the undead—with the exception of the bits of ooze and blood that I had carried in along with me on my boots when I’d entered. No, instead, this place—this throne of white in a blood splattered world—gave me comfort and solace the likes of which I never would have guessed. Who’d of thought having a pretty place to take a dump would matter so much? But it did. And, not only that, it was quiet too! Leaving only a faint murmur of the blaring

alarms out front. Peace. Just me, plopping sounds and nobody to nag me or tug at my mind.

I spent a good ten minutes on that throne. It was heaven. Taking that shit was a special kind of vacation I knew I might never have the pleasure of seeing again. When I did finally stand up, exit the booth and glance at myself in the mirror, the sight of me brought with it a hard reminder of just how rundown I was—it wasn't just the White Coats who were starting to wear... it was me. A short beard had formed—various bruises were on a number of places on my face. Heavy purple and yellow bags were under my eyes and my complexion was damn near white as a ghost. I looked like a heroin junky who'd just run ten marathons—scarcely able to stay standing let alone think and order other people around. I planted my hands along the side of the sink and leaned in—examining the marks on my skin to see if the darker bits were wounds or dollops of shit that had somehow found their way onto me. I unrolled a few wads of paper towel and did my best to wipe away the mess—returning to another unused toilet to fetch the needed water inside of the bowl to wipe myself clean. But then... just then... my heaven came crashing down and reality knocked... hard.

Strewn across the toilet stall I had retreated to was a shit covered mound of clothes stuffed into the bowl. I reared my head back ever so slightly and winced in response to the sight—remembering everyone who had changed their outfit before, all putting their gear into disposal bags to keep the place clean. Everyone had been there—wounded or not—they had all switched out their gear for fatigues we had found here on site. Then, all of our soiled-clothes had then been tied off, tossed aside and forgotten about. **No one** had come back here to switch gear and **no one** had stripped their shit soaked garments to be abandoned in this otherwise pristine bathroom. Hell, for all I knew, this was the first time any of us had come to this particular part of the base at all... So then... why-oh-why was there a shit-soaked stack of garments back here out of sight of anyone? And not just any 'lightly splattered dirty garments' at that—completely shit soaked—the distinct markings of the hell we'd all had to wade through to escape the town and reach this place at all. It was then a deep uncomfortable growl howled out of my belly and questions started to scream at one another in my mind. I stepped forward and reached down into the bowl—removing the clothes to look at them better—to investigate the scene as if it were a murder or a clue to a murderer. Then, with half shaking hands, I unfolded the garments—recognizing as I did so the person who had once worn them. Roger. These were Roger's clothes. He had already been here. The man we were all looking for—the entire fucking reason for all of us doing the insane bullshit we were doing. He

had been here. He had changed and prepared himself. And then... before any of us had even arrived... he had either hightailed it someplace else or... Dennis... Dennis?!

“Motherfucker,” I whispered, looking up into the corners of the bathroom to check whether or not there were any cameras in here. Nothing. All clear. My eyes then fell back down to the ground—to the smears of shit and blood I had assumed I was solely responsible for trekking in along with me. But there were more than just my footprints, there were Rogers too! I hadn’t noticed when I’d first entered—too preoccupied with squeezing out my turd in silence to focus on every detail around me. But now I could see those dirty footprints clearly—leading all the way to the toilet where the soiled clothes had been left. This was fucked. This was absolutely fucked! Because if Roger had been here in this bathroom, that absolutely positively meant that Dennis had seen him enter! He was watching the base after all—he could see **everything** that went on inside this place—if a light switch was hit, if a gun was removed, a door opened—all of it—he could see all of it! Which meant, either Dennis had sent every one of us on a wild-goose-chase to keep us busy—to keep us ignorant and distracted! Or... there was no Dennis at all—only Roger playing me for a damn fool—using some fake voice to throw me off his trail... unwilling to risk letting anyone enter wherever the hell it was that he’d taken that elevator down to! Dennis and Roger might just be the same fucking person! And... if that were true... then what the fuck else was he lying about?

CHAPTER 44: JEKYLL AND HYDE

Ellex Vussel, Eden Island, 2018

I gently sipped a cup of water and coughed again into my hand. I had been moved from my cold metal interrogation room to a portion of the viewing deck surrounded by windows on all sides. There I sat at a table under watch of the crew—firm-standing, tight-assed sailors wearing crisp clean uniforms, all stationed just outside the doors. Carbon copies of one another, one after the other, all the way down the length of the deck. Perhaps in their minds this ‘show of force’ meant something of significance. To me it meant only proof of their assimilation and uniform mechanical rigor... no different than the undead clawing like animals were these ‘individuals’ standing true to ‘their’ convictions. Directly in front of me sat the presiding judge, who in addition to his gavel wielding tantrum, would also act as my jury in the moments to come. Front row was the acting Captain—a gentleman who had refused to speak to me directly despite my insistence that it was for his own good to do so. And there on that sunny deck of a ship designed to oversee raining hellfire in times of war, my ‘trial’ or, more appropriately, my ‘reading of guilt and the verdict to come’ was well in motion. Nahuel, that stupid fucking ape, grinned smugly as usual—visible on the outskirts of the formation of sailors on the deck... though, I could tell from subtle sweat accumulating on his brow that he was already starting to feel somewhat ill. I grinned back at him—holding eye contact, imagining his imminent death, until my fantasy was interrupted by the judge’s bellow.

“Do you understand the charges that have been placed against you?”

“Honestly, I wasn’t paying attention,” I admitted, coughing again—hacking and wheezing as my condition slowly worsened and my skin began to ferment. The judge scowled at me and clenched his jaw... of the opinion that I should know and accept some semblance of wrongdoing before I was sentenced to death for all of the wrong that I had supposedly done.

“Mr. Vussel... If we’re going to be honest with one another... it is an absolute shock to witness firsthand the type of person that you are,” he stated, undoubtedly the sperm that, sixty years ago, penetrated an egg wooed by a marriage built to culminate to such a predictable and indistinct man. A protégé of conformity and student of staunch tradition, bound by the constraints of the world that had raised him and cut to fit

the robes that were then cut to fit him. I laughed on the inside... taunting his temper with my complete and utter indifference to his insistence that I somehow take him and these proceedings seriously. "Early in my career, I tried juvenile delinquents more impressive than the likes of you. Some drug-addled, cruel or downright sadistic... and even they had the courage to be present in the room when the gavel fell."

"Courage? If I shit my pants just now it would bear more weight and resolve than this mockery of a trial," I exclaimed, the phlegm in my throat rolling around the words I spit in opposition to him—counting the seconds—wondering if there were any way I could manage to outlast the time it would take the infection to kill them all. "It doesn't require 'courage' to be present in a room where one's presence is a formality of their impending condemnation! I am well aware of how utterly irrelevant my attention is here, 'your honor.' So, as stated, I might as well just empty my bowels and fit right in with the verdict you're about to give!"

"Guilty. You will be executed on the deck, in front of the full crew of this vessel, to take place as soon as the acting Captain deems fit," he stated grimly, cutting my petulant jesting short as he tightened his grip around the gavel. But if I were going to buy time to do something—to somehow outlast all of them... I would certainly need more time than what he had just proposed I had left to live. I sucked in a breath of air and shouted loudly for him to **'stop!'** before his ears suddenly closed and this mockery concluded.

"Does it concern you in the least that at no point did I ever break a single solitary law!?" I asked, turning my taunts from the absurdity of pursuing justice in a dead world to the very real truth of how I had managed to infect and kill everyone these men so loved. The judge's brow curdled in response—intrigued in a deeply guttural indignation that I would say such a thing, let alone actually mean it. He was, after all, experienced enough to tell the difference. And he knew that I wasn't lying. I took that moment's pause to be an insignia of weakness—not for his inability to condemn me but for his desire to record and understand the nature of the most infamous man who had ever lived before I was put to death. The cameras in all corners of the room that he undoubtedly hoped to solidify himself in the pages of human history churned a friendly reminder that he had all the time he wanted to question me... to prod me for answers... to expose me for those whom he thought would one day be privy to learn the lessons he was sitting session over. And so... his self-adorning ego lowered the gavel and gave me freedom to speak—suddenly present in the room.

"Elaborate, Mr. Vussel."

“In English the word apocalypse means the ‘end of days.’ In Greek it means ‘lifting of the veil and the revelation of unknown truths.’ Because, really, that’s all it takes to bring about the end—telling the truth. The Greeks understood that. They lived through it. But now, most don’t grasp the significance that the truth holds. You’d think a ‘judge’ would be different... that they would care to hear the truth, no?... Aren’t you at least a tad bit curious how ‘one man’ was supposedly able to accomplish all of this? Hmm? How could ‘one man’ destroy the entire world on his own?”

“If you wish to provide testimony, you are more than welcome to do so Mr. Vussel. These proceedings will either conclude once I’ve grown tired of listening or once you’ve grown tired of confessing. But you are certainly welcome to try and present ‘revelations’ to us.”

“So... you want me to take the time to tell you exactly how I managed to do all of this?” I asked, pleasantly surprised by the opportunity—a way to both buy the time I needed and spend the day gloating about my accomplishments.

“I’ll hear what you have to say, yes.”

“It’s going to take quite some time to sufficiently explain, your honor...”

“If your testimony helps us document a record then I can see the merit of it,” he clarified, still clutching his tiny wooden stick. “But if at any point your testimony strays from what I consider relevant, then these proceedings will be at an end and I will enjoy watching you die. Do you understand?”

“Yes, your honor,” I exclaimed, pausing to cough once again before sitting stiffly upright to continue my address—stalling and buying as much time as I could, for while they had temporarily managed to subdue my drones strikes in a select number of coordinates of their choosing, it would only be a matter of time until they themselves fell under the gavel. I rotated my jaw slightly and sternly clenched my teeth—knowing that they would never dare trust me again... that any attempt I would make to convince them one way or another would be futile. But... a confession... an elaboration on the details and nuance of how I had come to burn this world... that was another matter. I stopped rotating my jaw and transformed my expression to a more tolerant professional variant—meeting the judges cold stare with one of my own. “Very well... if it’s a confession you’re after... I have one of the highest security clearances on the planet. I know things that those on this ship would, under normal circumstances, never have the opportunity to learn. I know things that you may simply be unable to fathom are possible at all.”

“No one in this courtroom is as ignorant or as stupid as you seem to think, Mr. Vussel,” the judge growled, seemingly taking exception to my notion that I understood this world’s history and inner workings far better than his closed mind could possibly grasp. “Maintain a tone of respect for the full duration of your testimony. Do you understand?”

“Of course, your honor... I’m happy to set the record straight. I’m not guilty—my actions were necessary,” I stated, freely loosening my tongue to speak of the agenda that I had hijacked and replaced with my own—gutting the lifelong machinations of those on this earth whose murderous intentions had predated even me. The judge’s brow twitched and swayed with every word—furious that I had suggested my actions in any way were ‘necessary.’ He sat livid, watching me in pensive rage—both suspecting some unspoken motive for my sudden shift in cooperation and secretly longing for the moment when I would finally be put to death. Perhaps he believed I intended to persuade him? Or perhaps he believed I wished only to gloat? It was no matter what his thoughts were. For now at least, his curiosity had stayed his heavy hand. And because of that... I had him and the time he awarded me firmly in my clutches. My confession, just as my plan, would be a masterpiece.

The vast, comprehensive explanation of what this world really was beneath the surface—below the superficial veils of nationalism and patriotism—lurking deep, deep in the depths of unspoken history—that testimony—that truth—would keep him in my web for quite some time indeed. And if I managed to stall through this day to another session the morning after, my disease would have progressed to the point of being a valuable specimen for them to study. No longer a criminal to be ‘punished’ or an ‘example to be made.’ No, no, no... An ‘execution’ would no longer bear relevance in their minds once they realized the true nature of what was happening inside of me and the implications it held for what would soon destroy all of them. A different strain of the *Solanum* virus—mutated ad nauseum into an expedited hell quite unlike the first. And so, if they needed to study me, instead of murdering me outright, the only thing that would matter about my pathetic life would be using my body and flesh to try to understand the disease I carried. To quarantine, dissect and analyze me. To explore my puss filled boils and swollen body for some sort of cure or remedy. That... and to enjoy watching as I slowly decomposed into something else altogether... wailing in agony all the while... rotting and peeling away, layer by layer like a highly contagious sponge melting in a vat of acid... but not to die... only transforming into something else... I coughed once more into my hands—fully aware of the horrific mutation I had promised myself by

choosing to remain alive for as long as I could—to wither into a monster—to watch them all die...

“Some of this will come as a quite a shock to you, your honor. But... well... where should I start and what would you like to know?”

CHAPTER 45: MATTER OF TIME

Wes Korb, Unknown, 2018

There were no other survivors in the building. None. Alice had done some sort of sensor sweep or something for vital signs, or... something high-techy that I was surprised to hear was possible. But... then again... just about everything I considered to be at all possible was shattered by being in this place. It was surreal. And sitting there with her as she gradually moved from one scenario to another, it grew more and more beyond the scope of anything I had ever imagined. She tried to reach other facilities—places just like this one located elsewhere in North America—but no one responded. She asked me to review the phone for numbers to reach out to, but I informed her that I had already left messages on the line with everyone I could. I even tried calling the number of the man who had instructed me to come down here in the first place, but... he didn't answer. No matter how much we called—for whatever reason—he never answered. We were cut off. It was just the two of us, sitting in that command center, struggling to understand what if anything was left of the world. And... how long it would still be here?

At first, Alice mostly kept to herself. She told me things when I repeatedly asked but also hesitated as if I weren't supposed to know. It was strange. Sometimes she'd look at me like I were her enemy and then other times as if I were her only friend. She'd occasionally allow a glimpse of her beautiful smile to shine through and, when that happened, I could feel my heart skip a beat. After more and more scenarios to reach out to the world were tried and failed, I noticed she was answering my questions without as much reservation. She had told me that facilities like this one were going to save the species and rebuild the world, but... I... I didn't really understand or know what that meant or would entail. So, once more as another dead-end reared its head and we found ourselves cut off from anyone and everything... I decided to keep asking. To my surprise, she answered everything this time—almost as if my ignorance were something she needed to clear up to be able to tolerate having me around. She was a lot smarter than me. Late middle-aged, trim and very beautiful. It mattered a lot to me that she began to talk to me like I wasn't just a stranger or an intruder—that I could be trusted. Even if... I didn't know what the hell I was talking about or what was going on. As far as I was concerned, I needed her as a friend. Otherwise... I was just disposable and alone.

Eventually she made the decision to go to sleep and begin again in the morning. She kept the phone that I'd found in the White House with her to review and have on hand in the event that somebody called—informing me that 'if it were the man who had led me down here, she'd need to wake me up to speak to him.' I agreed and we said 'goodnight.' I slept in a room across the hall from the one she selected in the residential zones—choosing two that weren't stained in blood or any reminders of death. The smell was far enough away that it didn't bother us—the sound of moaning was gone. It was just me lying in a strange bed in a secret underground facility with the knowledge that bombs were destroying everything I'd ever known. If I weren't so unbelievably exhausted, I wouldn't have been able to sleep. But I did. I eventually drifted off and made it through the night—opening my eyes to see a simulated pattern of daylight trickle across the room.

It was then I realized the walls weren't just a static color or texture—they were versatile three-dimensional display screens. Beside the bed was a touch panel that indicated preferences, and as I looked at it I noticed 'Tuscan Sun' was selected as the default. I scanned my eyes across the walls at a magically lifelike recreation of hills in Italy painted with beautiful golden light and my heart seized up. I had never been there. I had never had the chance to visit. And now it was gone—just a setting on a dial to be recreated to make this mechanical place feel more human. But still... I watched it. I sat there patiently through the entire simulated sunrise until, eventually, I couldn't take it anymore. I had to know more about this place. I had to know more about what was happening and what would happen next. I just had to.

Alice wasn't in her room. She had already gotten up. There was no note or indication of where she had gone. Nothing left for me to find or feel better by reading when I finally came to. In a way, I was disappointed by that, but I figured she had more important things to do—matters to attend to that were literally life and death for somebody somewhere out there. From the way she'd described things, 'they' or 'whoever was still alive on the surface,' had known about this place and the plan that went along with it. If something like this ever happened and a certain level of outbreak reached a critical threshold, a contingency mode was triggered that bombed the surface and shifted the purpose of these underground labs to prioritize rebuilding. That's what she'd told me. That there was a 'plan' to destroy the surface if it could no longer be saved and that these facilities were designed to save the species and rebuild the world if that happened. I spent the hour or so that I lay in bed trying to grasp that concept—to really wrap my head around it, but... there was so much I still didn't understand. So, after looking in her room

for her, I quickly began searching the rest of the facility—eventually finding her hunched over a keyboard in the command center where I’d previously dropped off the hard drive.

“Good morning... I think it’s morning anyway,” I announced, stepping through the doorway and making my way towards her. She turned away from what she was doing and looked at me as if she were inconvenienced by the distraction.

“Hi Wes.”

“How are you doing?”

“I’m fine, thanks,” she replied, giving a fleeting smile before turning back around to continue what she was working on. I took a few uncertain breaths searching for things to say or questions to ask. But I could tell she just wanted to be left alone. I took a seat in one of the chairs in the room and glanced at one of the larger display screens again—still registering target coordinates all over the globe. I sat there silently for a moment, as out of place as I possibly could be. But, eventually, my curiosity and insecurity got the better of me. I was still too ignorant and afraid to be able to keep my mouth shut. I had to know more. I just had to. And maybe, even though I was pestering her for information... maybe Alice would also want someone to talk to?

“Alice?”

“Yes?”

“Did they call back?”

“No.”

“Oh... did you... um... do you know what we’re supposed to do?” I asked, hoping the question wasn’t a stupid one. I still didn’t really know what was happening after all, or for that matter, what her job here had been. Alice turned to face me again and stopped what she was doing—picking up on how disoriented and clueless I still was.

“There isn’t really anything we’re supposed to do, Wes. Everything’s automated at this point.”

“Oh... ok... What um... what were you working on then? If... it’s ok to ask that?”

“I was reviewing system diagnostics to see if Ellex still has control of the facility.”

“I’m sorry, who’s Ellex?”

“He’s the man who released the virus all over the world.”

“H-holy shit,” I stuttered, unaware that there was a particular person responsible for all this—that his identity was known and that... apparently he had been in control of this facility—daunting and huge as it was. “I uh... I didn’t know anything about that.”

“Yeah... well... I’ll try and help you understand what I know,” Alice sighed, seemingly needing a break from the work she was doing. She planted an elbow on the surface in front of her and cupped her hand on the side of her head—preparing herself for a lengthy explanation. “The man who you found the phone and hard drive on? His name was Nathan Gills. He was... on the surface trying to insist on a press briefing about an imminent outbreak. But... I don’t think he was able to get across to people how bad the situation was. This sort of thing isn’t supposed to be... viable really. It requires so, so many different things and... so many people’s cooperation or unknowing consent that... it’s not supposed to be possible. In fact, it’s technically impossible. These facilities were designed to make this sort of thing impossible. But... it still happened.”

“So... how did it happen then? If it’s not possible?”

“I’m still trying to figure out the details of that... from what I’ve gathered... Ellex found a way to remotely control these facilities and potentially all other Eden Corp facilities. That’s not supposed to be something anyone can do—they were designed to be isolated from the rest of the world or external intervention so he would have to have been planning this for a very long time in order to be able to pull it off,” Alice explained, doing her best to make me feel better despite how overwhelmed and exhausted from grief we both were.

“Why would... anyone do that?”

“I still don’t know exactly.”

“Is he just completely crazy or—”

“No... I’ve met him. A number of times. He’s not crazy. He’s... very isolated. Like... someone who thinks in a way that... or... on a level that... would just take too long to explain to other people. Like he’s thinking ahead of what you’re going to say even before you realize what it is... So he didn’t explain himself and he didn’t have much patience for other people either. He had enough power and money where he didn’t have to. He just told everyone what to do,” Alice said, her face assuming a troubled distance as she recalled the encounters of meeting the man responsible for all this. “Nathan worked with him a lot more than I did... he eventually replaced him in the company after Ellex was removed as CEO. But... it didn’t change anything. This contingency plan was here

well before Ellex was. He just... sabotaged it... expedited things in his own way.”

“Jesus,” I whispered, unable to conceive of how all this worked—a contingency plan—a madman at the helm and... Alice... a woman who seemed normal and rational—only she was speaking about Ellex as if he were the oddity, not this entire facility in the first place. I swallowed and rubbed my hands together uncomfortably, searching for words. “Alice... what’s the ‘contingency plan’ you keep talking about?”

“His bigger plan? I don’t know... I haven’t figured that out yet.”

“No... not his plan... the one you said was here before him—the one that he ‘expedited.’”

“It’s usually... a series of interconnected labs and storage areas. Just really big well-funded research installations, data storage, a variety of manufacturing hubs and computer mainframes. But... if doomsday strikes... then the drones can be deployed to clear the surface of threats. Once those bombs start falling, these places become something else altogether. Fallout shelters—safe havens from whatever’s going wrong on the surface. So, now... these labs are... buried like seeds until it’s safe to rebuild the world.”

“Rebuild the world? What does that mean exactly? The world’s still up there.”

“Wes... you have to understand that... the way things were happening on the surface was just,” she tried to explain, clearly held back by some sort of reservation—whether it was how much she felt she could explain or how much she felt I would be able to understand, I didn’t know. But she was careful and pragmatic with her words—speaking as if my mind wasn’t ready or able to hear what she might say if she went too quickly. I pressed my hands together more tightly—jittering my leg and tapping my toe uncomfortably. Perhaps she was right. Maybe all this wasn’t something I could handle. But... I had no choice. I wanted to know. I needed to know. “The contingency plan was... to give you the broad brushstrokes... what’s happening right now is a contingency in response to catastrophic system failures across the board. The drone deployment bases are registering the causes for this disaster as exponential population reduction due to nationalist wars, pandemic and natural disasters. That’s how the computers are making sense of this—justifying the devastation. So, what it’s doing as part of the contingency plan in response is a series of countermeasures to ensure absolute control moving into the future. To be absolutely certain the species survives.”

“But... what does... What does that even mean?”

“It’s an automated process to begin rebuilding the world, Wes. Part of rebuilding is understanding how the previous infrastructure needs to be removed if it’s a threat to the species.”

“I don’t really understand what you just said. Removed? You mean bombed?”

“In this scenario, yes.”

“So... this... the outbreak or... the drone strikes? That’s what you mean by this scenario? They’re removing the... everything on the surface? Is that right?”

“Yes but... again, this wasn’t supposed to happen. It’s only possible in the event that somehow everything goes wrong everywhere on the planet all at once. This is not what Eden Corporation planned. This is Ellex’s plan.”

“So then what was supposed to happen? I’m not understanding this. Is murdering people always a part of the plan or not?” I asked accusingly, unaccustomed to viewing the future through a haze of intense moral decay. Alice was describing something awful. But she wasn’t describing it as though it were awful.

“If you look at individual lives as the determinant of morality in the middle of the world ending, you are incapable of understanding how preservation of the species really works. A few people on the surface are nothing compared to what these facilities are capable of saving,” Alice stated blankly, as if she didn’t so much as care about the magnitude of suffering that she was scientifically quantifying. I squinted, furrowed my brow and let my mouth hang open—baffled and chilled by what she was spelling out for me. “The world is a lot more complicated than you realized, Wes. That can be hard to digest. Especially when you start to understand the scenarios that were planned in the event that everything fell apart. It’s not comfortable. It’s necessary to preserve the species.”

“If... if this wasn’t supposed to happen then... is the world ever going to... did Ellex just want everyone to die, everywhere? Was he trying to exterminate the entire species then or what?!”

“I don’t think so. But I don’t know.”

“I’m not getting this,” I complained, genuinely, literally unable to put this information into my mind. It’s not possible. This is not possible...

“Wes... this was just the first step... A lot more is supposed to come after this. The world isn’t over. It’s just changing to accommodate a very different future.”

“If it’s just ‘changing for a different future’... then what happens? What does the future look like when those doors open?”

“I don’t know anymore,” Alice whispered, reacting to my agitated inability to digest what she was saying with increasing sensitivity. I could tell she felt imposed upon by how unsettled I was by all of this. She took a brief moment in her own mind before continuing to explain. “The only contingency plan that I was aware of involved the people who worked in this facility still being alive. But they’re not. And I still don’t understand why. I don’t have any idea why Ellex would also kill the people in these places?... I don’t understand,” she confessed, clarifying just how big of a mess even her own grasp of the worst-case scenario was. Ellex had veered of course and seemingly changed everything. And whatever was going to happen next—whatever was going to rise out of the ashes of the world he had burned—was something only he truly understood.

“Isn’t there anyone else left out there?”

“I’m not an oracle.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s ok.”

“When do you think we’ll be able to go looking for other survivors?” I asked, hoping that once those drones were finished wiping away the undead we’d finally have our chance to reach other people. Alice didn’t respond to what I said—staring blankly into her hands, her mood sinking even deeper. “Alice?”

“Wes... I didn’t tell you yesterday but... Ellex put all underground facilities like this one on lockdown for twenty years. We’re not going to be able to go looking for other survivors,” she eventually answered, throwing another wrench into my understanding of what was going on and baffling me anew. This place wasn’t a sanctuary after all. Ellex had turned it into a prison for anyone who survived. We were trapped. “I don’t understand how that hard drive you brought down here allowed you to bypass that lockdown but... it’s very much in effect. We can’t leave.”

“Twenty years?”

“Yes.”

“So... you mean... the doors won’t—”

“We’re stuck down here, Wes,” Alice interrupted sharply—her face tired and numb. She had had the night to reflect on the fact that this facility would be our prison for most of our lives. But I was just hearing it now—only just realizing that that was even a possibility. Alice’s hands

nervously caressed one another in her lap, and I wondered just how much else she had yet to tell me about our prison. She was afraid. So much so that even if she wanted to she couldn't hide it. I waited a few moments, sifting through my mind to try and find some semblance of hope I could communicate to her—some way to spin the situation of being trapped down here alone with me for most of her life to seem like it wasn't so bad. I didn't even think of myself in that moment—I was too worried about the clear distress she was showing.

"Maybe there are other survivors on the surface? You know? Maybe they'll be able to make it down here to safety too?" I suggested, looking at the screens of where the bombs were dropping... wondering if it were something that could be escaped at all. Alice stared at me a moment without speaking—seemingly more frustrated by what I'd said than consoled by it.

"That's just it, Wes... it's not safe down here either."

"What... what do you mean?"

"Ellex still has control of these facilities. From what I can tell, his operating console that gives him access to these places is still up and running. That means anytime he wants to kill us, he can. And if anyone from the surface also manages to find their way down here... then our chances of being identified will go up—we'll die even sooner," she explained, her hands now tightly clasping one another on her lap—as if suggesting that the only reason we weren't dead already was either because Ellex hadn't noticed anyone in this place was still alive, or because he was simply too busy with other things to kill us right now. But he would. I could tell from the way Alice was looking at me that it was only a matter of time until he murdered us both. "We're not going to live the twenty years it takes for the world to change, Wes. We are not a part of Ellex's plan. At some point, he'll realize we managed to survive, and he'll find a way to program this facility to kill us. That is... assuming he hasn't already."

CHAPTER 46: AFTERTASTE

Derek Riggs, Louisiana to Upstate Massachusetts, 2005

Smuggling stolen shit out of a drowned city in a number of garbage bags I'd packed into suitcases hidden under the floorboards of an abandoned boat was surprisingly easy. In fact, it was borderline fucking normal among the chaos of that place. A lot of locals sat on their rooftops or stayed around to do everything they could to help one another. Most had been moved to large stadiums to try and provide basic food and shelter. But many, including myself, took to using our wits to getting the fuck out of there however we could. Given the cargo I was hauling, that meant traveling an unconventional and non-confrontational route. I pulled the boat out of the harbor, rowed inland through overflowing rivers turned into fat, sweltering lakes and then docked in the middle of the woods to make the rest of the trip by foot.

I lugged over a hundred pounds of shit on my back through a thick, damp overgrown swamp. Didn't see anyone for a couple of days and I was happy not to. When I eventually did emerge and spot some semblance of society again, I overheard that FEMA was fucking up the management of Hurricane Katrina worse than people could possibly have imagined. But it made perfect sense to me. Expecting anything from the government other than prioritizing themselves above the needs of ordinary people was what was crazy. I knew that simple fact better than anything. Because, as soon as the infection finally broke out, it wouldn't be their job to 'save people' it'd be their job to kill whoever needed to be killed for the sake of the 'country', like a cancer buried deep in the body of a person, willing to kill the person to save the cancer. And yet, so many people, so many sheep gathered tightly together in their flocks had pledged allegiance to those they had 'elected' to come and 'save the day.' To no surprise of my own, and the great dismay of reality crashing down upon them, that didn't happen. They were on their own. They were just too spoon-fed to admit it and too indignant to understand that that's the way it's always been.

After pulling myself out of the swamp again and reaching roads, I tethered all the suitcases I had been lugging into one big mass and began pulling it down the side of the highway en route to Mississippi. Every so often a concerned citizen or cop would pull over and question me, to which I sang a very simple, very clean-cut sob story about where I was coming from and where I was going now. The cops tried to get me to register and take me to designated facilities to wait it out. I told them I was meeting someone at a rendezvous and that he was going to get me home instead. The cops accepted that and then let me be. But the concerned citizens were willing to let me hop a ride for lengths of highway they happened to be traveling down. A few days more of hitchhiking and trekking across the country and I managed to reach a bus station I felt comfortable enough loading my butt into. I sandwiched my cleaned-up luggage into neat and tidy

garbage bags, excused the appearance of them with tales of heroism and horror brought back from down south, and then waited the bus ride home.

My mother met me at the station. First time she'd seen me in over a year. She looked better, cleaned up and tidied inside and out. My father dying had been the best thing for her. And my leaving home had been the best thing for us. She was surprised when I had called her from the road, telling her I'd be home again—setting up a tent in the woods to call my own until I figured out my next destination. But she insisted I stay with her instead. I obliged her insistence even though I would have preferred to refuse it. I knew to expect awkward talk and long drawn out silences. But I didn't anticipate her being as utterly relieved and elated to see me as she was. She hugged me at the bus station, squeezed long and hard, and then helped me get my hefty number of bags into the car. She was happy to see me. For the first time I could remember in my life, it was as if I were the son she actually wanted.

"You certainly gathered together quite a collection while you were traveling," she exclaimed, closing the trunk and walking around the front of the vehicle—a make similar to the one my father had crashed and gotten himself killed in. I wondered if it had been her decision to purchase it or if she were forced into it by her insurance plan. Either way, that car made me nervous even before I stepped inside.

"Yes," I replied, undoubtedly keeping her somewhat unsettled by the fact that I hadn't told her my reason for coming home.

"Did you tell anyone else you were coming?"

"Yes," I admitted, ever so slightly admitting a truth—and, moreover, the reason I had come back, besides my dwindling funds and need for a safe house. Sebastian had lived. Since the last time I saw him swollen and sewn together in the hospital, he'd managed to go through physiotherapy and get back on his feet. I had called his parents to ask about him—surprised that they too were happy to hear from me. It felt like the Twilight Zone... something out of a parallel universe or lucid dream. Everyone was being very nice to me and I didn't know how to react to that.

"Have you spoken to Seb then?" my mother asked, putting two and two together.

"No."

"He's doing much better... even saw him around town last week," she exclaimed, starting the ignition and shoulder checking before pulling away. I looked down at my hand, tightly gripping the side of the vehicle. I tried to release it, but... the sound and familiarity of the model of car kept it in place. I reached over with my other arm and pried it free—tightly folding my fingers together and squeezing my palms to try and alleviate the brooding stress. But... something felt off... something felt very, very off... not just about the car—about me.

"Any word about Matthew?" I asked, curious about what had happened to him.

"We don't talk about him. Nobody talks about him."

"Why not?"

"He's in the past now. The police didn't find him... and then... his parents and Anna's parents agreed it was better off it stayed that way... something about not wanting to traumatize everyone for their whole lives with a drawn-out manhunt," she explained, shaking her head and tightening her grip on the wheel. "I don't know how they got Anna to agree to that. Her dignity counts more than his future."

"You're saying... they just decided to let him go?"

"Without outright saying it, I believe so," she confessed, clearly embittered by the choice they'd made. "I know he'll never get to show his face again, but losing his home and his family isn't nearly punishment enough for what he did to all of you," she sighed, turning to look at me as we pulled to a stop at a red light. I glanced over at her to see her eyes swelling up with emotion, as if this were it—the moment she'd been waiting for to spring her feelings on me whenever she again got the chance to see me. "You're a hero for saving them like you did."

"No," I grunted, my hands gripping each other so tightly it was as if I were about to break my own fingers. Cars sped quickly across the intersection in front of us and the engine of the vehicle we were in trembled and vibrated in sync with my leg starting to shake—pumping up and down over and over.

"I'm sorry I didn't... I'm sorry I..." she began to say, stuttering on whatever it was her heart was about to vomit out. "Your father convinced me that... you had helped Matthew try to kill those two and... I believed him," she blathered, more concerned with getting something off her chest than she was in understanding what was weighing on mine. The scars on my arms from when my father had abducted me and locked me up began to itch... I felt a waft of cigarette smoke blow in through the crack in the window—making me gag and clench my jaw to hold my composure. "I don't know why... but I always believed him."

"You believed him because you hate me," I stated coldly, unaccustomed to feeling this... this... overwhelmed by nothing. Like some sort of buried anxiety ripping my focus away and churning deeper into my skull. The car was the same as his... the exact same fucking model only painted a different color and upgraded with a new stereo. I stared at the dials remembering when he had downed the bottle of whiskey and wept in the driver's seat the same goddamn way my mother was pouring her heart out now. Two sides of the same fucked up coin insisting I consider their two cents.

"I don't hate you. I don't hate you one bit," she announced, lying to herself about who she had been through all the years when he kept strict watch over her—over her illness—over her sanity and view of reality. "I just... I just..."

"You just what?!" I shouted, needing the car to start moving again so we could get home and I could unpack my things. I needed to get home. I needed her to say what she wanted to say, cry her fucking tears and then shut the hell up. The taste of

whiskey started to creep up on the back of my tongue and I gagged again, quickly pulling one of my hands up to wipe away a trickle of drool creeping out of my mouth.

"I just... all those years... I just wasn't allowed to have an opinion," she confessed, so broken and dismayed by the truth of her words that she couldn't so much as bring herself to pull forward when the light finally turned green. Shattered heartbroken tears streamed down her face but she didn't sob or weep. She just accepted it—so entwined with the pain that it didn't hurt her to feel it. It reminded her of who she really was behind the polite smile she wore to hide it. She was a bad mother desperate to make amends now that the town considered me a hero.

I don't remember the rest of the car ride or anything she said after that. I just know that by the time we got home I had ground my fingernails into the back of my hands hard enough to puncture the skin. At some point she hugged me and wept—saying over and over again how sorry she was for letting him control her all those years... for not being a better mother and for not just leaving him for good. But the entire time she was hugging me I was just focused on getting the taste of whiskey and cigarettes out of my mouth. Later that night when I lay in bed trying to sleep—forced to wait another day before I ventured out to meet Sebastian or dared to unpack the mounds of illegally smuggled documents I'd gathered from the lab—I stared at the ceiling of my old room. There I fantasized about torturing and killing my father. About doing to him what he had done to me. But I never got the chance. And no matter what I did, I couldn't get that fucking taste out of my mouth.

CHAPTER 47: ROT

Derek Riggs, Oregon, 2018

The rack of supplies I had been chained to had been knocked on its side and its contents spilled across the floor. Jars of screws and nails had burst open, empty clips and rolls of duct tape had bounced all the way to the other side of the room. The emergency shower was still running, and to my surprise I found myself squatting under the water licking the wounds on my wrists like a dog tending to an infection. The handcuffs were gone and only deep jagged cuts in my flesh remained. The light whirl of the air intake kicked in again and a gust of simulated breeze found its way across my skin. I shuddered from the cold—naked and trembling. Cory wasn't with me. Somewhere in between my fit of... memories... haunting smells, sounds and pains that... drove me crazy. Somewhere in the fit of my desperation to escape from the handcuffs and rope around my ankles... I had blacked out. When I woke up, I was free. The place was a mess. And Cory was nowhere in sight... maybe hiding... maybe gone... maybe... dead for all I knew. I looked at the smears of blood on the floor and I asked myself if they belonged to me or to him. And squatting there in that shower like some sort of wild animal, I could only hope that he had gotten away all right.

“Cory? Cory?! Are you still here?!”

After a few more minutes of tending my wounds, I managed to turn the water off and walk shakily to an office chair parked next to a computer console. Three of my ribs were broken, my shoulder was inflamed, my wrists were cut bare, and a number of other scrapes and cuts adorned my already deeply scarred and calloused crocodile-skin. I was lucky to be alive. Lucky to have reached the safety of this fort without suffering a bite or a scratch that saw me slip slowly into death. Only... instead of death calling me it had been insanity instead. I had suffered flashbacks before in my life—black outs, rushes of memories or tastes and smells that weren't really there. But I'd never reached the level of confusion and despair that being locked up again had brought me to. It made me feel like I was back in that warehouse... a broken kid brought to torture.

“Cory?! I'm alright now!” I shouted, resting a hand on my tender ribs at all times. I heard nothing in response. If he was still there... he no longer had any trust in me at all. And then I saw it. Next to my computer console, penetrating straight through the desk was a bullet hole. I placed my fingers to it, examining it for blood but found none. I double checked

myself again in case I had been hit, but found nothing. Jesus Christ... what had I done?

My tired and jittering hands found their way to the keyboard and powered on my computer. The internal system I had developed for this fort gave me an immediate prompt to either deactivate or engage noisemakers surrounding the facility. I bypassed the prompt and entered the control menu—custom designed for an ideal interface. Then, to both my surprise and amazement, I saw the flashing red icon that indicated a recording of an emergency signal had been made. Only two other people besides myself knew that particular frequency to be relayed in a time like this. And the ongoing monitoring that I did of that region had remained in tact despite the outbreak of the infection and the subsequent blasts clearing away the undead. I couldn't believe it... they were alive... Sebastian and Matthew... they were alive—and they had spoken to each other. My intention to review the security footage was deprioritized from my intense curiosity of what my old friends had communicated to one another—about what they knew about these bombs and the infection that I had yet to hear. I pressed play and turned up the volume, focusing intensely on what they had to say.

A conversation between Mathew and Anna informed me of what I needed to know and reaffirmed my suspicions. The drones were clearing up the mess. Though... the fact that they were scheduled to strike everything came as a devastating surprise. It seemed insane. It didn't make any sense. But, then again, from the length of time I had spent delving through files and scouring government bases, it certainly wasn't beyond the realm of possibility. Sebastian was dead... but his family was alive. I never did meet his youngest children, but I could only hope he had trained them well. At the end of the conversation Matthew made it clear that there might be some kind of rescue operation under way... that if he found a 'hard drive' he could potentially find a way to keep all this from happening the way it was. But I could tell from the purposefully detached slightly sarcastic tone he was using with Anna, that despite what he said, he knew he was as good as dead. He was just trying to enjoy himself while ghouls still roamed. I didn't blame him. And I didn't expect anything from him either... if those drones were going to hit everything that moved on every corner of the earth, then my plans had changed. I couldn't head North knowing what I knew now. Instead... after clicking out of that conversation and sitting with what I had learned for a moment, it became crystal clear to me that I was going to die in this room—very likely sooner than later. But... before I did... I needed to know what had happened to Cory.

In the corners of the facility were cameras that kept a running loop of the past twenty-four hours before compressing it for long-term storage. Anytime that door opened, those cameras turned on. And then, navigating the custom interface of my computer, I sifted through old recordings of myself prepping the facility all the way until I reached the most recent ones of Cory and myself rushing in to clean ourselves. I fast-forwarded past everything I remembered—bringing the timeline to a halt and pressing play just as my crazed tantrum to escape the handcuffs began. And then, sitting there, watching myself and what I had done... who I had become... I felt my heart tear apart and my world collapse. I was no different than my father. I was no different than Matthew. And despite the safety of my fort, nothing could have protected Cory from what I had become.

CHAPTER 48: CHAMELEON

Matthew Simmonds, Virginia, 2018

Think... shit, shit, shit... think! How bad is this?! Fuck! That motherfucking NSA motherfucker Dennis or Roger or... God dammit... think... think! Think of everything he ever said... every single word! Every excuse he ever fed me... think of all of it and do it quick! What's his end game? Why is Roger lying like this?! Why did he separate from the group only to rush to this base the way that he did? And, now that we're all here, locked up top away from him, why did he take the time to let me speak to Anna?! Why is he telling me things about the condition of the outside world?! He must need us somehow! Otherwise he wouldn't be tending to us like chickens in a roost. We're laying eggs for him to collect somehow—we have to be! There just has to be some reason why, since we all first arrived here and he put us to work looking for something that didn't exist, that he's selectively been grooming us with information! There has to be a motivation behind that! I assumed that my idea to fortify the base and control the influx of undead was my own decision, but... Dennis or Roger or whoever the fuck it was I was speaking to on the other side of that elevator had presented me with an impossible situation—an impossible situation to which there was, ultimately, only one real solution: fortify! He wanted us to fortify the base—to keep us focused on the undead around it rather than wondering around inside it. That's what it was! That's what it had to be! A distraction! He was keeping us distracted—preoccupied with bullshit! But... distracted from what?!

I breathed heavily and stepped out from the stall I was in, still staring at the shit splattered clothes inside that bowl. I planted my butt against a sink and let my weight rest on it—my mind reeling from all the possibilities flooding in. He had told us so many different things I had assumed to be absolute truth, but... I had no way of knowing for sure. The best lies and the best liars always, always, **always** align their lies with the truth—it makes it easier to keep track of them that way—so I had to assume a lot of what he was telling me was somehow true. I had spoken to Anna—I had absolutely spoken to Anna! That meant there was contact with the outside world. Ellex Vussel may or may not actually be in custody and this base would very likely no longer be a threat for drone strikes at all. Maybe Roger had known that was going to happen?! Maybe he was using us to buy time for some other objective?!

The 'hard drive' we were looking for was a mind-fuck technique that he had used to keep me occupied—that was for damn sure. But now

my mind was free. I knew I was being conned. Only problem was... as soon as I set foot outside this bathroom I'd be back under the watch of his cameras again. And if that were true—if he were taking the time to carefully watch this base and control the situation—it meant he very likely already knew that I had walked in here—that I had decided to enter the place he had changed his dirty clothes in—a place with incriminating evidence of who he was and the lies that he had been telling! Fuck! That meant one of two things were about to happen! Once I left this bathroom he'd either know or suspect that I knew something more than I was supposed to, or I'd be lucky enough that he wouldn't have noticed the particulars of where I decided to take my shit. But that wasn't likely. Fuck no! He'd know! He would absolutely 100% know I was in here—that I had been in here for ten full minutes! That's a looooooong time to be holed away in a room with the only evidence he'd left behind of what was actually going on here. He would assume I was onto him. Absolutely, no doubt. And then, depending on the control he had over this base, that could mean any number of things he might do to intervene. That is, assuming he didn't still need us somehow?! Fuck! Think, think think!

Suddenly I remembered the demeanor of the White Coats back in the room I'd had them huddle in—the intercom in the corner that Leanne had gestured to! What if he were speaking to them this whole time too?! What if he were seeding their minds with a different version of events than he was telling me—cultivating a story right underneath my nose—turning them against me so that if at any point he needed to, he had them on his side?! What if by me coming in here the White Coats were now double agents?! What if he could somehow trick them into doing something for him?! What if he already had?! FUCK! There were too many possibilities! Too many chaotic situations and converging lies! The entire situation we were in slid out from under me and I felt my breaths become deeper and more intense—fueled with anger and confusion—my mind returned to the tiny tablet I kept on my side to keep in contact with him if need be. I looked down at it, wondering how much control Roger truly had down in his secure little bunker—the place where every word he ever said was immediately accompanied by the sound of him feverishly typing. What if he were using the device on my hip to track me in real time?! What if that same device had a camera active?! Or a microphone?! FUCK, FUCK, FUCK! What did he want?! Why was he lying like this?! Why was he keeping us all quarantined up top—risking our lives and playing us like pawns?! And what in the flying fuck was all of this elaborate bullshit designed to be a distraction from?! What was so damn important about this base that he couldn't risk us stumbling onto it?!

WAIT! Holy shit, wait a minute... wait a God damn minute... I rifled my hand down to the holster on my hip and fished out the device I'd been carrying—the tablet 'Dennis' had told me to keep with me so that I could be in contact with him anytime I needed. Earlier in the day when we had first arrived—before 'Dennis' had told me it was necessary for us to go dark and stop using communications, before I'd received the notice to speak to Anna, and even before 'Dennis' had called me to give me updates about Ellex—before any of that, he had made sure I had this tablet on me for a very simple reason—it not only gave me access to talk to him but it was also necessary for me to be able to move through locked doors. The entire facility was in emergency lockdown after all. A new building with electronic locks and encrypted access codes—cycling through an internal security system, renewing itself every hour. Because of that, keycards weren't good enough for the security of this place. Instead, it required personal identification tablets in place of cell phones. Which meant, the personal tablet I was now carrying had previously belonged to someone else—someone with clearance to go wherever they needed to go within this facility. 'Dennis' had set that up for me... but he had done it just prior to informing me that we needed to 'go dark' and 'stop all communications.' In other words, 'Dennis' had tricked me into assuming someone else's identity—into using their phone—their logged in account—and running around that base fortifying the place as if the local personnel were still somehow stationed there. But... they weren't... the entire place had been eerily empty since the moment we arrived. Only ghouls and traces of blood. That, and the loudspeaker mounted above the locked Eden Corp blast door—the place where Roger was supposedly hiding, orchestrating this headache.

I pulled my finger quickly across the screen and navigated through that tablet every which way. Finding the button I needed to press if I wanted to call 'Dennis'—located in an application altogether different than the one I had used when I'd spoken to Anna. He had never actually connected her call to me after all—the indicator noise had just shown up out of nowhere, almost like it was being automatically relayed. That little fact gave my suspicions gas to keep searching through the tablet in my hand. Maybe Roger had only put out the call to Anna because I had threatened to do so myself if he didn't?—to go looking for a way to contact the outside world without him! And, while sure he had gone along with appeasing me enough to keep me from asking questions, he had never actually seen to it that we speak to each other—the application had—the system diagnostics had—spitting out that strange communication and flagging it in response! I scrolled through that device and re-opened the place I had spoken to Anna through—a program designed for relaying and recording bogey-communications—texts, calls,

radio communications—all kind of things that weren't established military so that all communications made from within the perimeter of this facility could be permanently recorded and immediately confiscated. Like a voluntary dragnet of constant surveillance that was mandated for all people who had worked in this building. Every single person who had been stationed here had any and all outside communications recorded the second they occurred. And the application I had used to speak with Anna was FULL of other recordings I hadn't thought to pay any mind to until then.

"Three presumptive positives, one known actual. Confirm location: 875C, 'Charlie'. Drones are temporarily redirected, extraction has been approved. On standby to proceed. Team inbound, waiting on your word, over," a man's voice stated smoothly, in the unmistakable military jargon that I had grown so accustomed to hearing. That is with the exception of one thing: 'Location 875M.' We didn't use coordinates like that in the military—at least, not for geography. But codenames? That was another matter. And the odd thing about the codename that that man had just given, was that it sounded strangely similar to another one that I had grown up hearing all the time—321R—the base Derek's father had been stationed at and a secret passcode that we had all come to use with one another.

"Roger that," Roger's voice replied—clear and distinctly him, not Dennis. I was right—it had been him playing double agent all along. But who was he talking to? And what on earth were they talking about? "Specimen is verified and intact. Awaiting extraction. Base is **completely** surrounded by infected. The main facility is also currently occupied by a militarized civilian threat. Requesting their removal, over."

"Oh fuck no... fuck me," I groaned, clicking the next message that had been flagged by the system—the unique automated relay application that identified and recorded any unknown communications that happened while on the premises of this military facility. That meant one big, terrifying thing in particular about what I had just heard: whoever the fuck Roger had been talking to in that recording—whoever he had been confiding in this whole time to come and save him—they were NOT THE MILITARY. And that meant whoever he had placed a call requesting 'removal' from, would very likely not be friendly to anyone who was active military stationed at this base. In other words, ME. I was the threat! He described us as a 'militarized civilian threat!' Hell, he was outright calling for our executions!

"Two birds, one hour. Touchdown at nineteen hundred. Extraction point, radio tower helipad. Confirm, over?" the man asked in another message. I shot my watch up to check the time—18:14—and

slammed my eyes shut, trying to decode everything that was going on before it was too late. 46 minutes left to understand what the fuck was happening before whatever it was, directly happened to us. ‘Two birds’ meant two helicopters were inbound. One I could understand if they intended to send in a team to neutralize a ‘militarized civilian threat’ or whatever. But two? That told me something else. They were coming here to get something more than just Roger... they were coming here to transport something! But... what?!?! ‘Specimen is safe and secure?! What Specimen?!

“Confirmed. I will be inside the radio tower. The specimen is being held in the main complex behind the Eden Corp restricted area, over.”

“What strain of virus, over?”

“You won’t need biohazard suits. Not for this place, over,” Roger explained, seemingly telling them that ‘whatever they were here to transport was hidden behind that blast door.’ I lowered the tablet for a moment and met eyes with myself in the reflection—no longer drained or fatigued. Now... now I was about as angry as I’d ever been. Not only had Roger been playing us like pawns this entire time but he had called in a rescue team to save him from us! I looked at my watch again—18:15—45 minutes to get to him before his extraction team arrived. Not much time to hunt a man and see him confess his sins. But in that situation, I fancied myself a special kind of furious. The rage I felt standing there... hell, ain’t no kind of hate in this world a vendetta can’t tame. Fuck the lie Roger had told us about a miraculous hard drive to stop the drones. Now I knew the truth.

I burst out of that restroom and started running, not even giving a damn whether the cameras spotted me acting suspicious. I assumed Roger had already identified my behavior and I didn’t have enough time to play things casual moving forward. I needed to move as quickly as I could and I needed to do it now. I found my way back to the armory—to the place where we had first scoured for resources to solidify the fortress we now occupied. In that room was the side panel inventory layout that allowed me to count crates, review orders and identify where in the facility certain ordinance was either stocked or distributed to. What I needed to know was where on the premises of this facility or the surrounding area did helicopters touch down—I needed to know how their fuel was being tallied, if any armaments were directly here at this facility, or, if unlike air bases, perhaps this place was only outfitted for transport vehicles? I didn’t know. But navigating that walls interface allowed me to quickly find out—there wasn’t much at this facility to resupply choppers. But all of it was in the same place—an isolated building to the northwest—just behind the

main facility—half a mile down a paved road, on the corner of the fenced perimeter. That's where Roger was hiding—that's where his communications relay had been established—not underground—not behind that sealed blast door—above ground, half a mile away. And in that building is exactly where he expected his extraction team to meet him. I had him. I knew exactly where he was. Only problem was... ever since that alarm sounded, every square inch between this base and that helipad was now covered in ghouls. That meant one thing and one thing only. To get to Roger, I would have to kill everything that stood in between us.

CHAPTER 49: INTEL

Anna Simmonds, Upstate Massachusetts, 2018

The school bus came to a screeching halt and I braced myself with my hands against the seat in front of me. The warrior women who had picked me up from the middle of the field quickly rushed out of the back and I followed tightly behind them. Every inch of the pavement surrounding the mall was covered in smears of blood and feces—goop piled up as if the concrete were sweating human remains. The undead had been here—had been pressed up against the sides of the mall trying to break in. And that thought made me take pause and wonder. Not that I was able to stop. Instead, I was being rushed forward to relay information I knew about the drone strike that had just hit—to tell everyone the little bit of information Matthew had passed down to me. But if the ground surrounding the mall were like this, that meant that maybe, just maybe, there were survivors inside that mall? And if that were the case, I couldn't help but hope and pray one of them might be my boy Archer or my little girl Susie who'd gone looking for him. Elvis jogged by my side, his belly soaking up some of what we were running through, and as the pack of us darted between other vehicles and the quickly growing mounds of people around the mall, I started to get a better sense of the disorienting devastation that these people had just endured.

People who at first I feared might be undead lay across stretches of portable tables. But they weren't undead. They were burnt. Their skin charred and cracked like marshmallows placed too close to the flame. They writhed as others held them down—some given shots of morphine as bandages were wrapped frantically around them. Entire teams of doctors or people wearing protective gloves and masks tended to them, but... the screams... nothing could tend to the sound of their screams—dipping in and out of my mind as the revving of engines and shouts of chaos bounced off one another. The women turned and swirled their wrists in the air to give those following in the back a sense of the direction they were headed. One held me gently by the arm, making sure I wouldn't get lost or separated from the group. Then, as I spotted a few dozen motorcycles parked in a circle next to a big rig, I got the distinct sense that whoever was in charge was trying to gather folks together—to meet and get some sense of the hell that had just rained down on us.

"I do not fucking care if it costs resources! We're going back and combing for wounded!" one man shouted, standing in a group of other men wearing a similar style of jacket to the one he had on.

“We already got enough people on that! We need to fortify this place!” another man insisted, wearing a different sort of jacket with a different patches on it. As I looked around the group I could see tons of different styles—different tattoos. All kinds of every kind of color and creed bickering with one another about what to do next and how to come to terms with all that they’d lost.

“Ain’t no place fortified from bombs dropping! We need to move and keep moving! But most of all, we need to stay the hell away from the undead! That’s what they’re striking! That’s gotta be what they thought they was striking when that bomb fell!”

“Intel! Now!!! Top Priority!!! Who’s in charge?!” one of the women leading our group shouted into the air—ignored by the bickering circle of men as if they’d heard it all already. Dorice, a particularly burly one in the bunch shook her head hard, unwilling to just sit back and wait. She promptly lifted her rifle into the air and popped off long bursts of fire aimed out over barren fields so the bullets could land without accident. The men jumped from the sound and perked their ears up, some of them pointing their weapons at us out of sheer surprise. “I said shut the fuck up and listen!!!”

“You ain’t part of this conversation! We’re trying to—” one man insisted, waving his hand at us to get the women to stay quiet and disappear.

“Stop talking while I’m interrupting!!!” Dorice screamed, quickly gesturing me forward with her arm so the group could see and hear me. I moved hesitantly forward, still clutching my rifle with Elvis making sure to stay by my side. But I was just about the only one in the group who wasn’t wearing a jacket, didn’t have any tattoos, and besides what I’d only just learned about the drones, I didn’t know much of anything about who these people were or what was going on. “This is Anna! She’s a local! She recently had contact with the **military**! And she knows what just hit us! So listen!!!”

“You talked to the military? They’re still out there?” a big bearded man holding a bloodied bandage to his head asked, stepping away from his bike toward the center of the circle to meet me. I hesitated for a moment looking around the group of people—still hoping to catch some glimpse of my little girl.

“I... yes... I mean no... but... I talked to Matthew who was in the military. He’s at a base working with people trying to get inside... he said drones are dropping bombs everywhere. All over the place,” I tried to explain, darting my eyes around the group—always looking, always searching. The man with the bloodied bandage took it down from his

head to reveal a long cut on his forehead. His eye wasn't hit by it, but the blood made it so he could only really look at me with one.

"How did you talk to him?"

"A radio. There's a frequency they set up when they were younger."

"Do you remember the frequency?"

"No, I—"

"Where's the radio?"

"It's," I began to say, remembering what Sebastian had warned about never leading anyone back to the shelter. I swallowed a moment and bit my tongue. I didn't know who these people were or what was going on. That wasn't why I had left the shelter. I needed to find Susie. It was driving me crazy. What if she had been in that blast? "I'm looking for my little girl. I need to find her," I explained, my eyes stretching across swarms of people moving past one another to try and get inside the mall. The entranceways were barricaded—each one blocked off. So men with shotguns stepped up to them and fired a few slugs into the glass, shattering them and kicking it clear.

"We can look for her as soon as we've got some sense of where people are at. How old was she? She might have been with the chicks," the big bearded man said as another, less polite man stepped forward to press me for more answers.

"You said drones were dropping bombs?" the man sneered, looking at me like he suspected I was full of it. I nodded frantically and looked back to the man with the cut on his head, hoping to resume brainstorming about finding Susie. "That payload ain't something a drone could drop. A bomb that size takes a bomber."

"All I know is what he told me. He said they were drones."

"Look, what's your name again?"

"Anna."

"Anna, we're gonna need to talk to your friend."

"I need to find my little girl. Her name is Susie. She's about this high," I explained, raising my hand to my mid torso to give them a reference point. "With strawberry blonde hair pulled up into pigtails, wearing dark clothes."

"A lot of people just lost their little girls too," the rude man sneered, shaking his head like my hurt wasn't the only one needed

focusing on. I swallowed my judgement and took a deep breath—realizing he was right.

“I’m sorry... I’m sorry, you’re right,” I nodded, deciding I couldn’t risk taking Sebastian’s advice with bombs falling from the sky—risking blowing even our shelter to bits. I owed it to these people to give them all the information I could and every last chance they’d be able to fight for. “If you give me a ride, I can take you to the radio and call Matthew again. Then you can hear it for yourselves.”

“How far from here is your shelter?” the man I had foolishly judged as rude asked, already moving back to get his bike.

“Only a few miles.”

“Alright. Hop on. Three with me,” he instructed, as three other men wearing the same type of jacket as his volunteered their service and revved up their engines. Dorice and the other women nodded reassuringly to me as I moved toward the bike to saddle the back of it—swinging my rifle over my shoulder and placing my arms around the man in front of me for support. Then, just before we were able to pull away, the man with the gash on his forehead made his way over to me—giving me a look like there was something unsaid that he needed to make known.

“Your little girl... clever, smart-mouthed a little maybe? She wouldn’t happen to be wearing an orange knapsack, now would she?” the man inquired, making my heart skip a beat and my eyes flutter like rain was falling on them.

“Yes! Yes she was!” I recalled, remembering the bag that I had stuffed supplies and ammunition into for her to take when she left the shelter. The man grinned widely and shook his head as if something about all this were amusing.

“Well I’ll be,” he chuckled, now looking around the crowd as if he half expected to recognize her someplace running around. “I had the pleasure of meeting your little girl this afternoon. Name’s Cherry.”

“Hurry it up!” the man on the front of the motorcycle interrupted, the engine nearly drowning out Cherry’s reassuring words to me. “We gotta go!”

“Ok, ok! Anna, I’ll look for her, alright?! Make sure I find her by the time you get back too!” he hollered, his voice fading as we pulled away. But I didn’t forget his smile. A warm, reassuring gaze that let me know he knew exactly who Susie was—that he remembered her well and clear. And, if she was still there in that Convoy, his smile told me that she’d be waiting come time I returned. My heart half melted and fear sunk back in. Cause sure as he knew he’d met her before... there was no way

for me to know if she had gotten lost in the blast they'd just been through. There was no way for me to know anything. And so the whole ride back to the shelter I did nothing but anxiously hope and pray to see my little girl again, alive and well.

CHAPTER 50: DELVE

Wes Korbuto, Unknown, 2018

Our bodies were hungry... but eating food wasn't appetizing. The meal itself was amazing. Absolutely delicious. I'd never had 3D printed food before. Cartridges of carbohydrate and protein goo churned into elaborate concoctions and flash baked or blended, mixed and layered over and over again until something that would have come out of a restaurant slid out of a machine. It was incredible. Everything about this place was. But it was also devoid of humanity. Empty. Stained with traces of blood or knocked over cafeteria trays. Cups. All kinds of things were laying around everywhere. Like a vacant spaceship floating through nothingness—lost forever. Only Alice had survived. And I had stumbled upon her searching for any hope of someone or something still left on this earth. But this didn't feel like earth. It felt very, very different. We ate together, not saying much—each of us staring at the food that our bodies demanded. But still we found it hard to swallow. Eventually, halfway through our meals, we both gave up and sat in silence.

I had stopped asking Alice questions about the future—about this place. About everything I didn't understand. I could tell she was starting to get really disheartened and bogged down. She answered me, yes, but with decreasing interest. Her eyes stared off to the side—looking through space. I knew she wasn't listening. That something about what she'd discovered on those screens was the only thing on her mind—of Ellex still out there—able to control this place anytime he wanted to. Because of that, I wasn't much of a factor... I was just someone to accompany her as we both waited for things to suddenly get worse. But rather than trying to focus my energy or attention on her insistence that he could kill us at any moment, instead, I tried to think of ways to cheer her up—anything... even if it was just by sitting quietly by her side. I accepted my role in that place underground just as well as I had accepted a similar role on the surface before all of this happened. I was invisible. But it still hurt being that helpless... It still made me wish I mattered or that there was some way for me to be a hero. But I wasn't and I couldn't. Anytime I'd try to say something reassuring or mention something positive, Alice would just shut down. Pretty soon I stopped trying. Ironical as it was, as much as we needed the company of other people, now that we had each other, we needed to shut up and sit in silence more... to process all that had happened to us. I sat quietly in her presence—

allowing that silence to consume us both—and what seemed like hours passed with each of us locked in our own minds.

Eventually, Alice stood up without speaking and began picking things up off the floor. The particular cafeteria, or meal room, that we were in was about the size of a large restaurant. The walls had the same kind of material that the room I'd slept in did—allowing them to double as flat screens or digital illuminations. The settings, as they were currently adjusted, felt like an evening dining scene. Bright spots contrasted with dark ones and a number of trees and plants rustled in a fake breeze. The wall itself almost seemed to have texture as if it were more than just a projection or a flat surface but a digital hologram as well. I had walked right up to it for a moment to try and figure it out—seeing that there was in fact depth to it. But I couldn't understand how that was possible. I placed my hand against the material only to feel it press against a smooth surface not unlike glass. It looked closer to a mural or diorama in a museum—the way stuffed animals would be posed against elaborate paintings to give an approximate compilation of reality. But still... a simulation... not entirely like the actual reality, only bearing a convincing likeness thereof. The ceiling wasn't much different. Spinning overhead fans like you'd find in a rustic cabin churned above us, and I could literally feel the air circulating as a result but... they weren't there. There wasn't anything there. I had stood up to touch the ceiling too and Alice had watched—allowing me the freedom to explore this new and incredible environment. I had seen things like it on the surface before—art exhibits or displays at tech conventions but... this was a whole new level. It was awe inspiring. And yet, not unlike the 3D-printed food churned out of a machine that processed vitamin and calorie rich goo... it somehow felt sterile and stripped of life. This entire place was now empty. And something about the missing people made it feel less like the warm amicable environment it had been built to represent and more like a prison.

Alice placed the cups back into the automated washers. Sifted through fallen items and placed them into the appropriate receptacles. She picked up everything and tidied it so that there would be no visible trace of what had happened. When she came across a long stain of blood, she walked over to a wall terminal and selected the coordinates in the room from a digital panel. She clicked on them and a moment later, a small rack of cleaning supplies protruded out from one of the walls and glided itself over to where she had identified the stain was. It didn't actually clean the blood up though. Alice took that upon herself—removing an already prepared long rod with a sponge on it to quickly mop up the mess. I offered to help but... She just ignored me. She needed this. She needed to

clean things up with her own hands—if only something as simple as a stain on a table to make her feel like she still had some control.

After we had managed to force down our meals, Alice returned to the command center to continue researching our options, and I decided to explore more of the facility. Every room felt emptier than the last. Work that people had been doing was still underway. Personal things were on tabletops. Half-written notes logged into tablets were still powered on. I found a crucifix necklace lying on the floor. The semi-thick-chain had been broken in the middle. I picked it up and stared at it, slid it into my pocket and returned to wandering the halls. When I'd come across a still active display screen I'd try to sift through it for information. Most of it seemed like gibberish—design schematics or facility spreadsheets. Every so often I'd find personal logs of people—video recordings between scientists saved over periods of time. I took a seat and watched them—irrelevant, utterly meaningless information about the buoyancy and physical properties of a particular type of quantum engineered foam that some of the scientists here had been experimenting with. I watched those videos for hours. I held the tablet in one hand and kept a few fingers pressed against the screen with the other—desperate for human interaction. So fucking desperate. Listening to the sounds of their voices was both a relief and a torture. One of them looked like my brother but acted more like me. He didn't talk much other than to ask questions and make bad jokes. But he was better looking than I was. He'd speak to the other people working with him in the lab and every so often one of the women would joke around with him—flirt or show interest in who he was or what he had to say. I sat there watching those videos, thinking of how if I maybe looked like him Alice would like me more. But... that wasn't a new thought... that was something I thought every single day. Society always treated fat people like we were either in the way or invisible. And I had always been one of the two. Except, down here, I was both.

I woke up to find myself asleep in the chair, the tablet still resting on my stomach. I set it down and leaned forward, the fresh feeling of new sleep rejuvenating my otherwise deep depression. Somehow drifting off for even a few minutes always seemed to wash away accumulated despair in a way that would let it start brooding all over again. It was then I heard a faint banging sound—coming from one of the doors that I had sealed earlier. I stood up and made my way over to it—seeing as I did that a number of undead had pressed themselves up against it from the lower levels. A translucent panel was in the center of the door but it was shady and dark on the other side. Fingertips and forearms could be seen as they hammered relentlessly against the barrier—but their faces were obscured

by shadows. I walked up to that door to try and see them better—wondering if any of the people I had watched on the videos might still be around somewhere, lumbering these halls. But... I couldn't tell who they were... their features were swollen and faded. The way dead faces look, you don't get the impression that the person who lived in those bodies is there anymore. It's just something else—something without consciousness or any semblance of humanity. Nothing but withered, drained remains, reanimated by a virus screaming out for blood. Except... even to them I was invisible. Even to them I didn't matter. I pressed my hand against that translucent panel where their arms were banging and hugged the door—pressed my fat body up against it and wept for how close and how far from other people I found myself. I slipped down to the ground and felt despair again consume me. I had no purpose. I had no reason to be alive. I was alone. Really, genuinely, truly alone. And... even though I had gone to such lengths to survive, in that moment I wanted nothing more than to die. I looked at the undead once more hammering their hands to break free and a part of me felt jealous that they didn't have to live in this world any longer.

I returned to the control room where I had previously dropped off the hard drive to find Alice asleep in a chair. I sat down near the entrance without waking her and looked at the display screens on the periphery—the same indicators as always of bombs about to fall and the world I had known slowly being consumed by fire. The things Alice had told me about the 'plan' that existed—the reason this facility existed—still echoed in my mind. It hurt. Like learning that Santa Clause didn't exist as a kid... it didn't seem like the whole world would be able to lie to me like that. But it had. Then I thought about people who join cults or become religious extremists—the mindset it takes to genuinely believe something and how much of people's lives were consumed by those beliefs. Going to church every Sunday... swearing by ten commandments... fasting... praying... coming up with entire versions of history and reality... all for a feeling—all for the feeling of things making sense in the world and life having purpose to it.

If it weren't for where I had found myself and all that I had seen since the infection broke out, I couldn't possibly have believed in any of this. It would have seemed as crazy to me as the idea of a religious cult. It wasn't possible. It just wasn't possible. And if a thousand-people wearing white robes or chanting slogans had banged on my door and insisted I look... I would have looked the other direction and told myself they were crazy. Just a bunch of 'conspiracy theory' kooks. Raving lunatics. Idiots. Fucking idiots who believed in nonsense just because they couldn't handle how chaotic the world we lived on was without turning to false realities to

console themselves. That's what I would have thought. One hundred percent. But now... I wasn't allowed to think those thoughts anymore. I didn't have a choice. This place was real. And my mind was still struggling to catch up with that. Not unlike the fear that had kept me locked in my apartment for the first week after the infection broke out—the same feeling of defensiveness and dread now lingered within my own mind, desperate to process and comprehend where I had found myself... In a God damn facility made to rebuild the world... Jesus Christ... What the hell kind of world would that be?

"Hey," I timidly uttered, softly waving to Alice as she pulled her head up from the chair she had been sleeping in. She took a moment before responding—released a coupled deep breaths and rubbed her hands against her eyes. I got the impression she was as exhausted and worn down as I was—working as often as she could to find answers to the mess we were in. I toggled lightly back and forth in the chair I sat in, rotating my foot on the ground until she decided to respond. Looking at me like I was really in the room with her for the first time in a long time.

"I'm sorry, Wes."

"For what?"

"I'm somewhat... unable to cope with all of this... and... it occurred to me that I had stopped listening to you... That must be frustrating."

"It's ok. I'm probably pretty annoying."

"No. You're not. It makes sense... this place is... a little overwhelming at first."

"Yeah... yeah it is," I agreed, feeling some of the weight of my anxiety lift from the apology she'd given—thoughtful enough to stop and think about how I felt in all of this too. "Did you find what you were looking for?" I asked, gesturing to the computer in front of her—the way in which she was desperately digging for any solution to the impossible situation we were in—sitting ducks waiting for Ellex to realize we were still alive and then promptly murder us. Alice rubbed her eyes sluggishly and shook her head.

"I don't know... I have a few ideas but... it all depends on specifically how it is he's controlling this place."

"So... Ellex could—"

"Right now, if he realizes we're here, he can kill us... and however he chooses to do that, we won't see it coming" she interrupted blankly—flatly crushing any hope I had of a happy ending. The console

Ellex had built gave him a backdoor into this facilities functionality—a way to hack into it or confiscate just about anything he wanted to use against us. Alice spent her time thinking about a way to undo the seemingly omniscient control he had—to look for clues in the mess of data for some way—for any way—to sabotage his plans and remove the noose from our necks. But I could tell she didn't have much if any hope to be able to succeed. Instead, she only tried because there was no other alternative. It was this or accept death. Her expression sank after she finished speaking—a grave reminder of everyone who had already died in this place by Ellex's hand.

"Is there anything I can do?" I asked sheepishly—not because I thought there actually was anything but more because I felt like Alice needed me to ask. To try and support her—to contribute somehow and to give a shit. She smiled gently in response and shook her head. There was a long pause between us and our eyes drifted to the screens—red dots sprawling out across a map of the world—coordinates of where the bombs would fall next. It looked like a game of Battleship. I remembered playing with my brother when we were younger—I remembered trying to cheat only to have him catch me and tease me for my pathetic attempt. Then I remembered what had happened to him... of tying his cold arms together back in my apartment to keep him still... and then... I remembered his infected body writhing around on the floor until my foot caved in his skull... my hands trembled at the memory—feeling like a murderer even though I had set him free. Alice seemed to notice how shaken up I was and placed her hand on the side of my arm.

"Wes?"

"Yeah?" I whispered, fighting back tears as more memories called for my attention—swallowing me up from where I was and throwing me back into the past... the dead people on the train tracks—torn in half and still crawling... the blood... the smell... the hope that someone would come and save me, suffocating me from the inside... Jesus Christ... How the fuck is any of this really happening?

"Tell me about yourself, Wes," she encouraged, sensing that I was every bit as vulnerable as she was—leaning away from her keyboard to tend to the wounds buried inside of me.

"There's not really much to tell," I laughed, accustomed to describing myself with generic terms and indistinct hobbies. I watched TV. I played videogames. I masturbated to porn too often and ate fast food every other day. I didn't have a girlfriend—I rarely ever had a girlfriend. I was insecure about my weight, about my intelligence, about how interesting I was and about how well I could talk to strangers. I was a

comic book nerd growing up but that was before comic books were cool. I hated public speaking or any large group event. I laughed too hard when other people told jokes so that they'd like me more, and I was accustomed to biting my tongue if I felt like what I was going to say was rude or intrusive. For most of my life I had been a coward. I was bullied when I was younger, and the only reason I wasn't beaten up more was because my brother stood up for me... only he was gone now... There wasn't really much if anything that was interesting about me at all. I was just... normal. But not normal in a good way. Normal in a way that made me feel like I didn't matter. I knew Alice was trying to make me feel better by asking about me—by trying to learn more and find common ground. But the idea of talking about myself only made me feel worse. I didn't like myself at all. I didn't like the idea of revealing something bland and boring to someone who was so much more interesting than I was—Alice was beautiful, smart, elegant and considerate. I didn't want to talk about me. I just wanted her to feel better. I uncomfortably shuffled around in my chair and cleared my throat to try and divert her attention away from how I was feeling and focus instead on her—the only one in the room that mattered. "I'm just... I uh... I'm ok, I'm just... still a little confused about a lot of things and... I just want to help you however you need me to help so that you can do whatever needs to be done. You know? I just want to help."

"Thank you, Wes. That's kind of you," Alice replied, pulled away from our conversation by the chime of an indicator on the screen in front of her. She turned to the keyboard and navigated through a few screens—a look of pensive deliberation curdling her brow as she took in whatever was happening. I stayed quiet and waited—wondering how bad it was. After a moment she released a muffled 'hmm' sound and folded her arms across her chest—leaning back in her chair to think. I glanced at the screen and read a few phrases—oblivious to what was happening and utterly dependent on Alice for every scrap of purpose and direction I had. Like my brother before her, I needed someone who was a leader to tell me what to do. Without that, I was just... lost... wondering around, hoping to find someone who knew better than I did. "Wes... There is something you can do after all," she eventually announced, turning her focused and intense expression towards me. I felt a rush of elation at the idea that I might actually be able to be of some use—nodding emphatically even before I heard what it was she needed.

"Yeah! Great! Anything!"

"Ok, good," she replied, quickly standing up from her chair. "Follow me please," she instructed, snatching a tablet from the side of

where she had been working and then promptly turning and walking out of the room.

Alice briskly moved down the length of the large hallway past the blood-splattered area in which I had lured the undead into being destroyed. She moved to the outer length of the hall to avoid getting their remains on her shoes. I followed in her footsteps—briefly glancing back into the chamber where the giant rotating machine slept dormant. As she walked, Alice navigated through the tablet she had grabbed—keeping her focus on it rather than explaining what was happening to me. But I didn't mind. I was just happy to hear that there was something I could finally do to be of use. As she kept walking, I realized that I had already visited this part of the facility—it was where I had watched the videos of the scientists earlier—the place I had collapsed against a doorway, wept in self-pity and begged for human connection—the place the undead were pressed against, banging relentlessly to try and break through. Alice walked right up to that door and turned towards me—tablet in hand.

“You're absolutely positive that you're immune and that they ignore you? They won't surround you or attack you at all?” she asked, already giving me some sense of what would be required of me—entering the parts of the facility that I had previously sealed off to ensure that the undead on the lower levels wouldn't find their way upstairs.

“No. They completely ignore me. It's like I'm invisible to them,” I explained, proud of the one unique feature about me—my immunity to this disease. Alice smiled and extended the tablet in her hand towards me. I reached out and took it—looking down to see a map was open with a charted course for me to walk. A long, snaking trajectory through numerous rooms and halls. I took a moment to myself to digest what her request was. She didn't just want me to enter the lower levels—she wanted me to scour them and stop at dozens of locations.

“It's possible that because of your immunity, Ellex won't notice you,” she explained, stepping away from the door as the sound of an undead banging against it startled her. She moved a few paces back and stood on the opposite side of me—unnerved and in a hurry. “You remember the scan I did previously to look for survivors?”

“Yeah.”

“Those scans register employee biometrics. Everyone's fingerprints, retinas, DNA and voice signatures are stored in a database here. This facility's sensors send out pings and collect those signatures remotely,” Alice described, her eyes jumping back and forth between my own as she spoke as if simulating the sensors this place had to log and register the genetic information of my body as a digital insignia. I nodded

along as she spoke—doing everything I could to reassure her that I was following every word. “You are the only person in this entire building that is not on that database. The system should have identified you as an intruder the second you walked down here, but it didn’t.”

“Maybe it’s because of the hard drive I was carrying with me? Maybe that gave me clearance or something,” I suggested, spitting out the only justifiable reason I could think of. Alice shook her head—clearly having already thought of that as a potential excuse. I remembered the ‘hmm’ sound she had made sitting back at the keyboard just before we had walked here—wondering what it was she was thinking and how her plan to send me lower into this facility might help our situation.

“As far as I can tell, the system didn’t identify you because it thinks you’re an undead too. That’s my best guess anyway. That means you might be able to probe for weaknesses in Ellex’s uplink without him realizing you’re there.”

“Might?” I asked, noticing Alice’s tense demeanor. She kept silent for a moment, already confirming my suspicion that there was a serious risk in what I was about to do.

“If Ellex is only relying on the automated sensors of this place, it’s possible he won’t see you. If he receives any other notifications or even just happens to look at the cameras, then he’ll see you right away. There’s no way to know one way or the other.”

“And if he sees me?”

“Then he’ll very likely program some part of this place to kill you or do something as simple as encrypt the locks so that you’ll be trapped in a room and starve. It’s up to him. And, if any of that happens, then he’ll also realize I’m here and I’ll be as good as dead too.”

“Ok,” I mumbled, realizing that my zeal to be of use meant I’d now be risking both our lives—doing whatever it took to make sure the man responsible for all of this remained ignorant about us—the only two survivors in this entire facility. My heart began to quicken at the idea, and I tried to imagine exactly what she was asking would require. Up until this point uncertainty had been the only thing that plagued my mind. But now, Alice was outright telling me there was danger—a chance we could be sabotaged and targeted. I felt the hard weight of those words and remembered crying in my bedroom—wrapped in blankets waiting for the world to take my fears away. But it was up to me to venture out and change things. I remembered that feeling... of needing to be the one to get up out of bed and force something different to happen. I cleared my throat and accepted what was ahead of me—no matter how dangerous it

was—I had no choice. “What do I do when I get to the places you’ve marked on the map?”

“I’ll talk you through it just like I did before when I helped you activate the machine. I’ll be right on the other end of the line the whole time, ok?” she exclaimed, placing her arm on the side of my shoulder reassuringly to wish me luck—sensing my sudden shift in anxiety. I had never done anything brave before... ever. She did her best to muster a smile, but I could tell how stressed, desperate and hurried she was too. We needed this to work, but I couldn’t decipher one way or another from how Alice was acting if there was any real chance it would. All I knew was that she too was afraid. We both were... Then, without further explanation or wasting anymore time, Alice quickly moved toward a door far from the one I was about to disappear through—leaving me with the tablet in hand that I would need to navigate the lower levels. “I’ll be talking to you the whole time, ok?”

“Yeah... ok... ok, sure,” I hesitantly agreed, suddenly filled with a sense of dread and dismay—looking at the dimly lit area the handful of undead lingered in, banging against the door to enter this part of the facility. I hated them. Immune or not, the idea of being back in that environment—the moaning, the smell, the reminder of everything that had happened—that made the hair on my arms stand on end and a nauseating feeling creep through my blood. Alice placed her hand on a switch to close the door as she stood on the other side—to keep her safe from the undead I was about to go sifting through. Then after a stern nod of her head to bid me goodbye, the door shut and I was left alone. A fraction of a second later the sealed hatch beside me raised and the smell of the undead returned like a punch in the face—their outstretched arms and open mouths bidding me welcome to the lower levels.

CHAPTER 51: DEVIL IN THE DETAILS

Ellex Vussel, Eden Island, 2018

The beat of my heart would incrementally quicken—nearly doubling in speed. My hands would shake and my fine motor skills would deteriorate, like a hybrid between Parkinson’s and ALS. From a medical perspective, it could easily be mistaken for intense stress. The sweat—the constant sweat that would pour out of my body—could also be easily brushed aside for one reason or another. The coughing could be seen as a common cold, and the way in which I clutched my stomach could be construed as seasickness and nothing more. But... in time... after more than a full day had passed since this disease was released into my blood... then my symptoms would take a drastic turn for the worse. At that point, it would become clear to everyone that something was horribly, horribly wrong with me. My skin would start to change color—start to grow things. My gut would swell—fluid accumulating in my organs. I wouldn’t be able to breathe easily anymore. Instead, I would wheeze—like a rusty whistle was caught in my throat... every agonizing moment growing worse than the last.

The later stages of the disease would see me become something that was scarcely recognizable as human. But before that time came—before I was completely bedridden as a contagious spore pod hacking poison into the air—I would hopefully have the good fortune of watching what these sailors would transform into. The disease crawling through their veins would bring about an untimely end quite different than what it would do to me. I had seen it many times before—in test subjects throughout the years. I had been absolutely certain of it. And now... on this ship—a floating den of brooding plague was about to erupt... only a matter of time... time that I spent by cooperating as best I could—staring into the camera before me—describing in full detail exactly how it was that I had managed to accomplish the liberation of this earth. How it was that ‘one man’ had murdered mankind.

Two people presided over my testimony—the end of my trial and the beginning of my full confession, made in front of the judge and this ship’s captain. Like clunky remnants of a dead society, these two men were there to witness the only public tell-all I would ever make—unfiltered—unrestricted—complete and earnest in every single way. A recording of scathing testimony, not unlike the Nuremburg trials, to be passed down as a cautionary tale for generations to come. A glimpse of ‘sickening madness’—of one man, an indescribable villain, desperately

justifying himself and his actions any way that he could! Or so they thought... I had a very different interpretation of these precedings. My reasoning for confessing the truth for the very first time was not something for 'future generations to pay heed to.' Oh contraire. How could they? Everyone who might see this recording would soon be dead. I was certain of that. But in these men's eyes—locked in the binds of illusion that had haunted their lives—I could see that they felt very differently. To them there was still hope for this world—there was still a fight to be fought—a chance to see me undone and stop me before the horizon disappeared into fire. They believed they could still scrounge some semblance of victory. That I could be bested. And I, dreary in my insistence to the contrary, no longer bothered to spend the energy to laugh at the idea. Instead, I took deep breaths, bit my tongue and occasionally looked to my side—staring out the window of the vessel we drifted on—my eyes combing the sandy beaches of the paradise I had built here. My now abandoned island... named after my late wife... so close and yet so far... reduced to little more than a symbolic tribute to my tremendous success and sudden failure in these, the end of days. There was no justice to be found here. Only quickly disappearing memories of an irrelevant past.

As I answered the questions that were asked, I let these men know of how my life had been a slow preparation to subvert the establishment as it stood—a studious climb through knowledge and occulted wisdom. I let them know how my life had been a legend of one man pitted against a great many—vying for power and control—for the legacy of this entire earth, only to find myself here... at long last... on the tip of collapse in the palm of these men's hands slowly clenching to fists. A hard end to a hard road. And now, my reward for their outraged condemnation and threats against my life would be giving them the answers they so demanded... for this I would meticulously describe the timeless evil that I had done away with and the reasons that my actions in burning the world were ultimately just and true. The reasons that I was a hero painted as a villain—a visionary misconstrued for blind—for maleficent—for somehow confused or mistaken. Genius was so often misunderstood. And they, the military, the law, the few scattered remains of the world that had been, would now be my judges. I would speak to them truth! Buried occulted truth! Both priceless and profound! And their minds—their tender, fragile, coddled minds, would undoubtedly sputter and blubber denial in response—unable to fathom the wisdom I revealed—to hear the reason 'why' which had been kept from them all of their lives.

“Everybody knew,” I huffed, interrupting the judge’s futile attempts to dismiss my contention outright—providing either a rebuttal or a narrow-minded-critique to every statement I made, as if somehow he knew better than I did. “People just framed it in their own minds in very different ways. But everyone knew it was coming.”

“I warned you,” he snapped, clearly torn between his personal hatred of me and the unique opportunity to delve into my mind. I understood his sentiment of course. But I still looked down on him for the uncouth zeal of his temper. “Do not waste the time you have been given with slander or misrepresentation.”

“I’m not. I’m following your instructions.”

“Telling me that ‘everybody knew’ this was going to happen—that ‘everybody knew’ the world was going to come crashing down because some psychopathic, self-aggrandizing, super-villain wannabe was plotting the apocalypse is NOT the testimony I’m interested in hearing! Your cartoonish reduction of reality is a waste of time,” the judge explained, hacking at me for scraps of information like I was a cadaver tied to a table. I took a long breath, hoping to calm my worn nerves—reminding myself to be patient—reminding myself of how immensely ignorant these men were—and, moreover, of how the ignorant do so fight to keep their ignorance safe. I cleared my throat and allowed a moments pause before responding—handling the judge’s temperament as if he were a cranky child with a filled diaper.

If I could buy enough time to extend my testimony into the next day they might just let me live long enough to see the infection break out on this ship. If that happened, I had a chance to become their test subject... to outlast them as the disease grew more and more out of control—as they desperately tried to study what was happening to me in order to understand it... and then, assuming they didn’t simply decide to murder me for revenge alone, perhaps, maybe then I would have the chance to get to shore? To scrounge for what remained of my influence and control before ending my own life?... If not... well... if not, I’d be executed as soon as that gavel fell—perhaps in minutes... perhaps in just a few short hours... There was no way to know... and so... I needed to buy time—as much time as I could. To maintain any semblance of the upper hand, I needed to talk. Talk, talk, talk, talk, talk—to make these men—staunch and rigid in their ‘understanding’ of what this world had been—I needed to talk in order to make them see how things had **really** worked behind the scenes. That was the only hope I had to stay the judges gavel—persuading both him and the captain, a pair of pawns, to transcend the game of chess that they had lived their entire lives as pawns in—to see the game being played, not simply the pieces on the board.

“That’s not what I’m suggesting your honor. Not at all. It’s more complicated,” I stated plainly, hoping to re-contextualize his ill focus of seeing me as a madman and nothing more. “The things I say may seem absurd or farfetched. But the devil is always, always, **always** in the details. When I say ‘everybody knew’ I don’t mean that they knew **this** was going to happen... I meant that they knew something ‘like’ **this** was going to happen... one day or another, one way or another. Everyone knew **this** was going to happen if the world continued in the way that it was.”

“I’m not interested in speculation. Clarify who **specifically** had foreknowledge of your actions.”

“Which actions?”

“Those which resulted in the virus being released. One by one.”

“All right... If you want me to tell you exactly how this world was destroyed, I will... I’ll tell you everything. But **understanding** how and why this world was burnt may take quite some time,” I grumbled, trying to think of how best to explain the utter absurdity of the system I had helped implode—a behemoth built to manufacture war and enslave humanity. “Look at the outbreak from the perspective of Eden Corps shareholders and investors... in their eyes, my actions went against contracts, protocols, profitability, future planning and legality. I consequently was removed from Eden Corp as acting CEO, where thereafter I relocated to this island. The decision to remove me as CEO, so far as everyone else and public records were concerned, was over my head and against my wishes. This is **not true**. I orchestrated my own removal by following a calculative trajectory of what my peers would perceive to be... well... frankly... utter insanity on my part. I knew **full well** what their response to my actions would be. I knew how they would be perceived, how the long-term-repercussions would unfold, and moreover, how internally within the company those same repercussions would eventually be addressed well **after** my removal. You understand? Are you following along?”

“You set up corporate stooge dominos. Is that right?”

“In essence, yes. That’s it exactly.”

“To what end?”

“After a certain level of automation and future planning is reached in a corporation of that size, there is very little that individual people within that system can actually do to change its course,” I explained, trying to elaborate on the mindless mindsets of those so entrenched within the machine that they had fundamentally failed to exist

as free-thinking individuals in this world. “Profit-based momentum within a centralized bureaucracy is akin to a runaway freight train.”

“Plain English, please.”

“When a company gets to be **that** large, **that** powerful, has control or influence, or more importantly **leverage**, over that much of the world, it can do or force absolutely anything it wants. Nothing stands in its way so long as people continue to feed the machine. No one on board the train with good intentions do anything to stop it. Trains built like that, moving in that way, bend the rest of the world to the tracks they’re on. That’s what Eden Corp working in conjunction with governments all over the world became. With or without me—even if the other people working there were miraculously replaced, it wouldn’t have mattered... Eden Corp had become unstoppable.”

“Unstoppable?”

“Yes, your honor.”

“What about sabotage?”

“Yes. That’s precisely what I was doing that saw me removed from the company.”

“You were attempting to sabotage Eden Corp?”

“Yes. Quite overtly, at that. I was attempting to derail the path of destruction it was on. But momentum perseveres.”

“And you knew and understood that you would fail to effectively sabotage your company?”

“Absolutely.”

“So you didn’t legitimately try to sabotage it.”

“No. I commandeered it instead. I knew where things were headed... I saw the future of what this world was becoming. Frankly, it was going to take too long. I wanted a better version of the future and I wanted it within my lifespan.”

“So rather than legitimately attempting to stop your company from culminating a global catastrophe—you decided to speed it up?”

“Exactly right. I set out to achieve complete control of this world in the shortest timeframe possible. It was the only choice I had,” I declared, sipping a cup of water—churning it around in my mouth and swallowing tenderly. The judge seemed taken aback by my words. He squinted, contemplating my contention and began shaking his head even before he opened his mouth. His nauseated animosity of every fiber of my being was palpable.

“No, Mr. Vussel... You had many, many other choices. For instance, you could have taken the initiative to genuinely stop what was happening rather than playing games with the fate of the world,” he insisted, clinging to a pedantic and obtuse rational. “You had that power and chose, instead, to use the infrastructure you described to unleash this virus.”

“Again, it’s not that simple, your honor,” I contested, putting a microscope over the semantic details of what he continued to try and paint as simply black or white. “I’m describing a toxic environment that only allowed poisonous individuals to thrive. Say hypothetically that I had **not** released the virus?... It wouldn’t matter. A very similar version of events would have transpired regardless—very likely escalating **global war**. It simply would have taken more time.”

“You cannot know that.”

“Yes, I can.”

“Then do a better job of illustrating how you know.”

“Of how everyone knew?”

“Yes.”

“All right... I need to emphasize the economics again... this is all fundamentally about economics after all—resources and the people on this earth who controlled those resources. That control was orchestrated through corporations and governments. The long-term planning of trying to exponentially improve profits of a single corporation or government inevitably results in the decay of that entity’s surrounding environment like a parasite that grows more powerful than its host. A train that bends the world to the tracks its on... Eden Corporation itself was like a parasitic virus that had infected this planet. It worked intimately with governments everywhere. And because of that marriage between industry and government, this world was incrementally culminating to global catastrophe. Collapse was absolutely inevitable and everyone knew that to be true in one way or another.”

“I don’t doubt you believe what you’re saying, Mr. Vussel. You’re mistaken.”

“How am I mistaken?” I scoffed, appalled that his thick skull seemed to reject every attempt I made to spell out the obvious for him—that all I had done was expedite the inevitable. Like putting down a wounded dog, my actions in the bigger picture were, if anything, merciful not cruel.

“Your entire mantra of belief stems from other people being like you. Some people simply are not corruptible. Those **in** power play a pivotal role in how that power is realized. You could have acted differently and you could have stopped this from happening. Your personal decisions spread the ‘parasite’ you describe. You and those like you are the disease, not the corporation you collectively assembled. You.”

“No... that’s not fully correct... you’re not understanding my point,” I insisted—needing him to grasp what I was describing—needing him to see how profoundly important this fallacy in his mind was—the fine line between the choices an individual makes and the corrupt authoritative world that exists around them, suffocating and taxing the foundation of all choice. It was a trap—the entire system the way that it had been built was nothing but one large con-game, manipulated from behind the scenes. “It was only a matter of time—only time—not ‘who’ was involved, not ‘which’ decisions they made—it was inevitable because of the way the system was built,” I declared, spreading the full picture in a way I hoped he might not get lost in assembling the puzzle pieces of—like talking to a fucking infant with a toy hammer that I needed to charm. “It’s essential to understand that this was a plan set in motion long preceding my involvement in it. That plan not only preceded me, so too did it extend well beyond me. It was a continuous-ideology. That’s what I’m trying to describe. Not the individual men who held that ideology—the **idea itself**. It was built to culminate in such cataclysmic ends. All right?”

“I’m listening...”

“Once again, ‘ruling the world’ is an idea grounded in simple economics—economics being the backbone of social control—how to herd and rule over people like sheep. If you own or control what people need, then you own and control them. Looking into the future, the needs of this entire species depended on redesigning the global infrastructure and distribution of vital resources. The world **desperately** needed to evolve beyond what it was. The powerful maintaining their power over the course of that transition, however, is not spontaneous; it’s meticulously and exhaustively planned.”

“And the purpose of this ‘diabolical plan’ you’re describing was to murder the majority of the population on this earth?”

“In a roundabout sort of way, yes. But you don’t outright murder people. You convince them of the need to kill one another instead,” I corrected, alluding to the timeless tactic of dictators and tyrants throughout all of human history—divide and conquer. “You convince people to turn their backs on one another in times of civil unrest or

shortage of vital resources. You create an elaborate lie that reduces normal everyday people to paranoid, reactive animals. Murdering everyone is far less efficient. Propaganda would compel people to murder one another. In time, yet more propaganda would compel people to wage larger and larger wars.”

“So, your corporation had a long-term plan to slowly poison the minds of the entire population of this planet until global war erupted as a result?”

“My corporation in conjunction with a vast network of likeminded consolidated economic interests all over the globe who stood to directly profit from increasing war, yes.”

“To what end?”

“In the short term, profit and power. But in the long term, much later on, such tactics would be used to engineer the future.”

“Engineer?”

“Yes.”

“You’re describing infecting and burning the entire world,” the judge growled, tossing aside my explanation and failing to see the part that he and the other people aboard these ships had played in the unfolding of recent events. I glared hatefully at him for a moment—losing my patience to the reminder of how I had been abducted and dragged to this ship... chained... beaten... threatened... and now, here in this room, backed into a corner. In the judges’ eyes I had ruined the world. In my eyes, everyone else had. “I don’t see how your corporation deciding to destroy the world in this way would result in ‘engineering a future’ for anyone but yourselves?”

“Yes, well... To clarify an important point... the rate at which these bombardments are currently taking place was not my first choice, your honor. Not at all,” I responded, referring to the shackles I now found myself in. “The world is only burning at this pace because I was abducted from my island—forcing the drones to automate. Otherwise, this whole process of ‘cleansing the surface’ would have been much more pragmatic and less ominous.”

“You still haven’t explained how this plan of yours actually helps to engineer the future? You destroyed the world, Mr. Vussel. You haven’t built a better one in its place. And even if you did, there wouldn’t be much if anything left unburnt.”

“I haven’t built a better future ‘yet.’ But I will. These things take time,” I insisted, alluding to the days, decades from now, in which my vision for the future of this species would finally be realized. “Wars,

famines, economic collapses, disease outbreaks and other disasters are beautiful ways of rearranging the global stage and consolidating power. Change takes too long to actually change anything. War expedites matters,” I declared, so used to seeing disaster as a way to improve market shares that, to me, discussing it held little more weight than the morning paper. I didn’t care about common people’s lives. They were practically livestock to me. The judge on the other hand—a lifelong military man who had fought and served for the citizens of the United States—had quite a different take on the matter—now staring at me in tepid frustration. Undoubtedly, on some level, he knew all of this already—the hidden motivations of wealth and power lurking behind the superficial veil of his patriotism. But to hear it again as my final confession in the end of days, left a bitter, scorned taste in his mouth. I could see it clearly, painted on his face—squinting his eyes as if looking upon a raving madman.

“What you’re saying is insane, Mr. Vussel,” he declared, as if my sanity were so glaringly lacking that its absence had all but slapped him in the face. I grinned, accustomed to the suggestion that I was insane from those who didn’t understand.

“I don’t see why it’s insane... this sort of thing has happened constantly over the course of history. War resets the chessboard and removes unnecessary players. That’s how the game of ruling the world is played.”

“It seems a little far-fetched that a corporation would hold board meetings on how to slowly destroy the world. Wouldn’t planning the apocalypse interfere with your Christmas bonuses?” he bitterly jested, his subconscious indignation lashing out through petulant humor. I smiled politely and nodded—reminding myself over and over again to be patient with him.

“Once again, it doesn’t really work that way... it’s far more subtle,” I corrected, coughing a few times and taking a shuddered breath. My hands were beginning to hurt—to throb and swell... just one of many changes that would slowly unfold as I transitioned from the disease. I clenched my jaw and curled my fingers open and closed a few times, trying to escape the uncomfortable sensation creeping through my veins—hoping the captain and the judge would fail to notice as my symptoms grew steadily worse. I then returned my focus to the judge and leaned forward, spreading my sweaty diseased hands along the surface in front of me in search of words to help him understand. “Disaster is a bulldozer that paves the way for new infrastructure—new possibilities that otherwise never could be realized. It’s best to think of what I’m describing as ‘long-term planning for the redevelopment of the species.’”

“Long term planning masterminded by you?”

“In part, yes. But once again, the broad brush-strokes just described significantly preceded the formation of Eden Corp. Our job—my job—was simply to facilitate the pre-existing plan to rebuild the world out of the ashes of disasters and wars that would unfold by using the technology that my company produced. I was but one hand—among many hands—working to plan a better future.”

“And whose plan was this originally?”

“Originally? That goes back thousands of years,” I explained, his expression quickly morphing to one of exasperated dismissal and annoyance—as if my confession were satire and nothing more. I cleared my throat and shook my head—quick to correct his shrewd interpretation of what I had just said. “It’s a concept that I’m describing, your honor! The concept underlying it goes back thousands of years—the idea to have a superior bloodline inherit the world—the strongest people, the best of the best, that sort of thing. The ‘plan’ to actually see that to fruition however has been slowly evolving—for as long as we’ve been a species I’d say. Bloodlines were the founding concept of monarchies everywhere—of a certain ‘type’ of people inheriting the worlds’ fortunes. For a while that same notion of ‘superior blood’ was called Eugenics—the pretense for Nazism and trying to create an elite Arian race. More recently Eugenics has taken on the name of molecular biology—those in positions of privilege designing children and restricting breeding for everyone else. But the concept is still very simple and easy to grasp. It is the powerful deciding on how to control who lives and who dies—which countries have food and amenities and which countries do not. That’s what I’m referring to. Control of the entire species via influence and manipulation. That’s the business I was in.”

“Very well...” the judge grunted, grudgingly accepting that I was serious about what I had just confessed. “To reiterate and clarify for the record, Mr. Vussel... your corporation, in conjunction with governments all over this earth, would orient your business models according to which people would live and die—what wars would or would not be encouraged from behind the scenes—in order to control vital resources and determine which version of the human race would one day inherit the future? Is that correct?”

“Yes, but... it didn’t exactly work like that. We didn’t ‘plan to destroy the world’ over margaritas and fireworks. We were conducting business. That’s all. We simply planned the best way to make money in the short term while simultaneously ensuring Eden Corp would stay in power for as long as possible. Business. That’s all.”

“That’s all?” he scoffed, jotting something down on his pad and double checking that the camera beside him was still recording.

“Yes. As well as planning the infrastructure of what society would eventually become in the best interests of the species. That’s all we ever did.”

“Please describe that process to me in a way that doesn’t seem so... ludicrous and devoid of sanity,” the judge suggested, underscoring his kneejerk disregard of my confession thus far. I nodded my head in agreement—knowing that the details and nuance would need to be meticulously reviewed to compel him forward and distinguish the trees from the forest. I wasn’t crazy after all. But I knew all too well how my words could paint me in that light. The captain, sitting at a long desk across from the judge, sternly folded his arms, loudly cleared his throat and contemptuously glared at me as well—as if somewhere in the details of what we were currently discussing threads of his own nerves had been tugged at. It was clear that neither of them wanted to believe me. But that didn’t mean I was lying.

“I apologize if this all sounds far-fetched or absurd. It’s not. The longstanding ‘plan’ to engineer society and dictate the terms of how the future reveals itself is an ideological notion that supposes great minds can best determine what happens, not anarchy or free people alone. The common belief in ‘rulers’ or bowing to ‘authority’ has plagued this species for as long as we’ve existed. People have always turned to a king or a master. There has always been a government or a church. And behind all of these things are those who pull the strings—those who wield information to sew webs of influence. It is those at the very top of these hidden pyramids who play the game of power that I describe—who subtly groom society. Great minds like mine.”

“Great minds?” the judge huffed, sickened by the concept I described—of using power to discretely subvert democracy—to subvert legitimate freedom and the like. I could see his patience and temper were worn thin by my words. He morally detested what I was describing to him, as if I were nothing more than a lowly troll hawking excrement over the internet. whispering truths of fantastical conspiracies and covert global agendas. He seemed to marinate in his contempt for the secrets I endeavored to explain—he writhed and quivered from his own outrage and brooding tantrum—thinking all the while ‘how unfair it had been that men like me had ruled this world from behind the scenes!’ He sat, visibly stirred by those juvenile feelings of naivete for a few brief moments before continuing on—his fingers gently rubbing against the fiber of the gavel he held... perhaps wondering for the first time in that moment if the ‘law’ he had sworn his life to uphold truly gave him any insight on this

earth? I did my best to keep from smiling as his mind pulled itself apart—understanding how delicately I would need to traverse this subject should I live to see another day.

“Mr. Vussel...” the judge finally said, breaking away from the abyss of his own lost emotions to return to a professional state of mind. His tone was more subdued now—more pointed in its direction and clear in focus. As if somehow in confronting these long-unspoken truths he had discovered exactly what it was he needed to say. “How do you plead?”

“On what charge?”

“The first ten minutes of this recording are me reading the charges against you. I will not repeat them. You understand what I am asking. Do you consider yourself guilty for taking the actions that you have?”

“Absolutely not guilty,” I stated proudly, holding firm to my insistence that I had done nothing illegal in order to bring this world crashing down. The judge shook his head in baffled dismay—as if he were as preoccupied with trying to spell the truth out for me as I was with spelling it out for him.

“I’ll phrase the matter in another way... Since you seem to reject the idea of any personal guilt in all of this, do you feel that the environment of clandestine power that you’re describing simply created itself?”

“No. It didn’t create itself. Eden Corp was created and reinforced by those who benefitted from it. That’s obvious.”

“So... you, the CEO of this seemingly omniscient company, were a key beneficiary and participant. Were you not?”

“Yes, your honor.”

“Is that not itself an explicit admission of guilt?” he asked, pointing a damning finger at me for the position of wealth and privilege I had come to covet—as if astounding financial success and moral corruption were one and the same. He had a point. But my flagrant longstanding moral decay didn’t mean that I had actually broken the law. I hadn’t.

“No... It’s not an admission of guilt, your honor. It’s an admission of success,” I corrected.

“In the context you just described, it seems that the two are synonymous, are they not?”

“No. Guilt would require the public understanding that they are being conned. That’s the difference. Since understanding is the key to accountability and powerful men like myself know this, the media and the public portrayal of economics is kept excruciatingly misrepresentative of reality. Otherwise, people would simply realize how they’re being preyed upon.”

“Please further describe what you mean.”

“In what regard?”

“The misrepresentation of reality—of deliberately keeping the public ignorant of what you’re describing. I want this record to thoroughly detail how you and those predators like you used propaganda to create an amicable environment to goad people into war.”

“I may have already stated this earlier, but... to create the sort of environment I’m describing is very simple. In essence, you treat people like children. You tell them very easy to understand stories about what history is—how events unfolded—the motivations for how people behave... how and why the world supposedly works the way that it does, etcetera and so forth. You simply teach people to view the world in an inaccurate way. You indoctrinate their understanding of reality with a farce, a delusional superficial veil the public then indulges in of its own childish volition in response to reductionist propaganda—engineered and stoked to keep them at the level of children. Children dependent on the government or large corporations like mine to provide for them and to keep them ‘safe.’ Like Stockholm syndrome—people become complacent cattle in their own exploitation and subservience, easy to rule and dictate the terms of what reality was perceived to be.”

“Plato’s Cave.”

“Yes. Precisely.”

“I’d like to focus the line of questioning on those in the shadows painting the picture you describe. Men like you.”

“Yes?”

“I am not disputing the oversimplification of societal narratives and the manipulation of propaganda to bring about war. That’s explicit. I am asking you to account for the ‘devil in the details’ as you put it. Not the broad brushstrokes. Those responsible for painting the picture as it is today on an individual level. Do you understand my meaning?”

“Perhaps... but—”

“I want names, dates and decisions, not generalized ideologies, collectivist mentality and corporate sleight of hand. I understand the point you’re highlighting by describing all of that. Now I want names.”

“Individuals can’t destroy the world, your honor. Only corporations and governments have the power to do that.”

“I’m well aware that ‘War is a Racket’ Mr. Vussel... I firmly grasp the concept you’re getting at. But again, I repeat myself... My point is not about contractual logistics or sinister motivations like Eugenics. I am speaking about individual accountability, plain and simple. Individual accountability exists, whether you’re willing to admit that to yourself or not.”

“I don’t see your point.”

“My point is that you are guilty because of your individual choices. You were aware of your own moral repugnance within the system as it was. That you can justify your actions to yourself in order to be successful in the business you were in does not surprise me. But you are fooling no one. You remain accountable for the choices you personally made, regardless of the corporate environment in which you made them.”

“I don’t care if you see me as morally repugnant. That’s not the point I’m illustrating.”

“Insofar as contextualizing and framing your guilt, I disagree. That is very much the point that needs to be illustrated.”

“My ‘guilt’ isn’t only ‘mine.’ When you’re in bed with government, accountability is defined by doing what they tell you to do. I did what I was told under the threat of coercion and arrest. Do you hear me?”

“I believe so... You’re saying you were engaged in illegal activity on behalf of the government contracts your corporation held. Is that correct?”

“Yes. And they would have killed me or arranged for my removal if I significantly interfered. That doesn’t make me guilty, it makes the governments I had contracts with guilty. They ordered the manufacture of the virus. They ordered the study of the virus. They ordered every single thing that I am currently being blamed for. So how is it ‘my guilt’ and not theirs too?”

“Once again, you are not going to insinuate that ‘everyone’ within the private sector or government was as morally repugnant as you are. I

am as aware as anyone about the depth of corruption that this world faced. You are on another level.”

“Actually, I’m not. I’m pretty standard in the ring I inhabited. That’s my point.”

“Your point is both a scapegoat and a strawman Mr. Vussel. And a rather poor one at that.”

“You don’t have to believe me. People everywhere genuinely believed that the world could not allow a vacuum of empathy to exist like the one that I’m describing. And, moreover, that those people like me who had consolidated the most wealth and power on this earth could get away with such acts of ‘evil’ as we did. But corruption, deceit, and most importantly, indoctrinating the masses with logical fallacies were the underlying tenets of maintaining the ruling class unbeknownst to the public. Public ignorance creates a void that those who lust for power desire to exploit and enlarge. **That** is what came to be at Eden Corp and **that** is what facilitated Eden Corp reaching a level of momentum where it could not be stopped. This ‘apocalypse’ was inevitable! I can be blamed for the rate at which it eventually transpired, yes. Otherwise, I am without guilt. I simply did what I had to do to keep from being murdered myself.”

“In your own words describing the events leading up to the release of the virus, you stated: ‘my actions went against legality.’ How can you freely admit everything you just said and yet still hold true to your previous statement that ‘you didn’t break a single solitary law?’ Failing to oppose or impede known violations of the law is itself **breaking the law**, Mr. Vussel!”

“Corporate legality is null and **void** once entwined with state mandates,” I explained, combing over the details one by one, over and over again—like shit circling the bowl that never flushed—the immensely, indescribably sophisticated con-game in which the entirety of the species had come to believe lies above reality—how they had come to believe that their governments weren’t criminal cartels ruling over them like sheep. “Put simply, if something is deemed illegal but a government still wants it to happen, its legality is suspended and held in perpetual suspension unless it’s somehow publicly disclosed. In other words, if people don’t know what their governments don’t tell them and that information is classified as ‘national security’, then it’s not illegal! And not only that, but the way in which the law is written in the post 9/11 era, the semantic loopholes of the Deep State are such that they **fundamentally** incubate a prolonged era of suspended legality and secrecy! The **thousands** of contracts that Eden Corp had with governments all over the world in essence gave it legal impunity. Legal impunity combined with profit based

momentum in a globalized market means that **this** or something ‘like’ **this** was inevitable. The system I’m describing was more of a virus on this earth than the Solanum virus itself! Don’t you understand that?!”

“Did you release the Solanum virus? Yes or no.”

“Did I personally walk up to the virus and say the words ‘I release you.’ No,” I exclaimed, pausing a moment to cough and wheeze.

“Yes or no questions are not preceded by inane qualifying statements. Now answer the question. Yes or no?”

“Yes and no. Also, no and yes. But before you bang your gavel out of indignation, understand that I’m not saying this to be a smart ass—the truth is not as simple as binary oversimplifications. This is a matter of extreme nuance. And to appropriately contextualize that nuance... I’m afraid you’re going to have to hear me out.”

“I’m growing very tired of hearing you out, Mr. Vussel.”

“Very likely because you think I’m merely coming up with excuses... but these aren’t excuses. This is how the system was **designed** to excuse itself—**designed** to excuse doing absolutely anything it wanted on behalf of those pulling the strings,” I declared, emphasizing the nature of the machine that had been running for so long that this collapse, and the New World Order that would be built after that collapse, had become imminent—absolutely imminent. The judge rolled his eyes and shook his head—not in disbelief so much as grappling with my redundant semantic loops—saying the same thing over and over again. He took a deep breath to respond and pointed his gavel down at me—fancying himself some sort of God on high.

“A morally-bankrupt economic and geopolitical cabal of nation states and corporate contracts is a **far cry** from a system **designed** to release a deadly virus in every country on this earth! And while, undoubtedly, any number of things could have transpired that would have led to some sort of fallout, global war or... some sort of ‘collapse’... this!? This nightmare you’ve unleashed is another matter!” he barked, pointing out the window to the barren horizon where his friends and family had once dwelled just beyond—now lumbering corpses quickly being gobbled up by my drones. He, like so many, saw the world according to morality—according to loved ones and pretty little rainbows spread across the sky. But that’s not what I was talking about. I was talking about economics. Economics and morality are entirely different worlds. Because of that, anyone with a firm moral conscience would inherently struggle with grasping the reality I was describing. I wasn’t talking about ‘ordinary people.’ I was talking about power! Power catapults you to another

universe—the powerful conduct themselves like another species! But the judge didn't understand that—moreover, he outright refused to believe it. I bit my tongue until he had finished his tiny little tantrum—doing everything he could to keep me from popping the hazy bubble he lived in determined to remain ignorant of how corrupt the most powerful men on this earth had truly been.

“Your honor... the devastation that this virus released is exactly—**exactly**—the same as what would have transpired eventually in other ways. That's what I'm trying to explain to you,” I insisted, understanding that his lack of understanding would take days upon days to be able to break through—appreciating all too well that the barrier before him was not, in fact, the information that he would be presented with but rather the hurdles within his own mind that would keep him from being able to regard that information as possible, let alone as truth. For, unbeknownst to the likes of him, the superficial world and the pages of history were never anything but as Napoleon once put it “Lies agreed upon.” And looking at the experienced and yet staunchly conventional man that the judge was, I could see the depth and rigidity to which he had come to live his own life in strict accordance with those lies. I cleared my throat and coughed a few more times before continuing my train of thought. “The plan I'm describing has always been bigger than just profit. The plan is about ensuring that the future continues according to an ideological mantra. It is a way to perpetually ensure certain people and certain societies remain in power—like England before the United States or Rome before England—power proliferates thusly, especially if there's a war or some sort of global collapse in which the world would need to be rebuilt by the powerful—painting themselves as if they're ‘coming to the rescue.’”

“Preparing for disasters and outright planning the end of the world are not the same th—”

“They are absolutely **identical** to one another if you **know** the system will culminate to a similar end,” I interrupted, skewering his contradiction that governments all over the world were merely preparing for such events as ‘precautionary measures’ if worse came to worst. This disaster, this nightmare, this unfolding apocalypse wasn't a coincidence. It was, and always had been, a well-engineered affair. And though I was the one to finally preside over its culmination... specifically selecting the Solanum virus to be the chief architect of sparking destruction and rebirth... I couldn't take all the credit. Men like me had existed throughout all of human history. And like a torch passed from one ruling generation to the next, oppression and exploitation were a refined art of the ruling elite. I, like them, was an artist. Only I was better. “This was a

plan to engineer the future, your honor, only disguised as a ‘contingency’ to hide it deep in the shadows. One of many such plans.”

“Planned by **whom** specifically?”

“Honestly! I’ve said all this already! It’s not simply individuals... it’s a way of **thought**! It’s not one wave, it’s an entire **ocean**! The people are interchangeable—they don’t matter! It’s the environment—the governments—the power structures that they create using the illusion of authority that’s important to grasp! ‘One ring to rule them all’ if you need a God damned pop-culture-reference to understand what I’m saying!”

“I hear you Mr. Vussel but—”

“No! Listen! Hear me when I say this: the state is a **state of mind** as much as it is the state itself. Because of that, every thought you’ve ever had about the intentions of the most rich and powerful people who have ever lived has been **spoon fed** to you through subtle social engineering and half-truth logical fallacies. Politicians, kings, deities and Gods alike could themselves be indoctrinated pawns in this game—toys and tools twisted this way or that by those **behind the scenes**. Your entire conception of history, ideology, theology, philosophy and very likely every ‘thought’ that has ever passed through your head is a calculative byproduct of the social environments you were groomed in—environments of ignorance that the aforementioned power elite helped cultivate and create for you to be groomed! It is a self-replicating, self-perpetuating state of mental slavery orchestrated by the ruling class throughout the ages. And the fact that I am sitting with you, speaking about it here today is only possible because both they and their slaves are now dead! Of **liberating** this specie’s future, you are very correct—I am guilty! And for that, you are welcome!”

“If I’m understanding your convoluted psychopathic reasoning in all of this... because other wealthy powerful officials had contingencies in place that would eventually result in severe depopulation, you somehow consider yourself a ‘hero’ for beating them to the punch and murdering everyone on this earth faster than they could?”

“I consider myself smarter, more creative and efficient,” I corrected, seeing that if I continued to present this information in the self-adorning unapologetic way that I was, he would lose patience with allowing me to breathe. I coughed lightly once more and held a hand up for a brief moment to stall whatever he might say next—my skin slowly beginning to change color and brood tiny boils. I quickly tucked my hands away—carefully buying as much time as I could before they realized I was infected and quarantined me as a result. “In any case... you do make a good point your honor. Morally, I am ‘guilty’ for my choice to cooperate

as I did... though, even then it's a matter of semantics and debate. Legally, however, at no point did I break a single law."

"I've heard enough," the judge sighed after a long moment to decide whether he would bother to revisit the notion again. He could see quite clearly that I would never budge from the position I held—nor that he would ever budge from his denial of the truth I spoke. In his mind, I was guilty. It was as simple as that. And on a simple, superficial level, of course I was guilty. But I also knew and understood things on a deeper level that he didn't—I knew what was buried in the shadows and why... In reality, we were all guilty of what had eventually unfolded. Everyone was guilty of following orders of a hopelessly corrupt power cabal—of choosing to remain ignorant—of blindly listening to or supporting those in power. That was the crime. That was the cause of all this suffering. Because, in truth, without brainless indoctrinated pawns following orders, men like me—men who used the illusion of authority to give orders—such men would, instead, be reduced to the level of raving lunatics. It was only mindless sheep who didn't think—those who were coddled and conditioned to be complacent and complicit in this world—it was because of them that any of this had been made possible. I shared in that guilt for the part I had played as a corporate sheep, yes. But it was not my guilt alone.

"We're not going to hang you because of the legality of your actions, Mr. Vussel," The acting captain suddenly interrupted—breaking his silence and speaking to me directly for the first time since his liaison had been killed on my island the prior day. His eyes locked on me in an unflinching unaffected manner, and I could see something unspoken was afoot—that something had been off for the duration of my testimony, itching at the back of my mind. The captain's half-greyed hair shone in stark contrast to his black furrowed brows—like a silverback Gorilla, chest thumping with the tone of his voice. "And, as for your contention of being 'smarter'... I don't doubt that statement is true. But I can see that your confidence depends on this plan continuing as planned," he continued, standing up and nodding to the judge—the balding white-haired dinosaur of convention and denial.

"I'm satisfied if you are," the judge stated blankly—a clear admission of my preconceived guilt and impending assassination. They had heard enough. I was out of time.

"If I've somehow failed to address your questions or curiosity, I apologize," I exclaimed, doing my best to scrounge for more scraps of life—to continue infecting those on board this ship with the air I breathed. The aching wound in my stomach pinched from the gravity of

what was unfolding around me—I hadn't talked long enough... I couldn't prolong the inevitable... it was out of my hands now...

"You've made your points, Mr. Vussel. Thank you for taking the time to speak to us. Taking more time beyond this would be a waste."

"I assure you that's not the case. There's a great deal I have yet to delve into—"

"You can keep your assurances," the captain growled, his composure and professionalism as easily eroded as the hotheaded-buffoon who had died on my island the day prior. He took the few steps from where he had been standing to come and loom over me—his eyes the true gavels that would seal my fate. He took a moment to fester in his own hatred and condemnation of me—the 'one man' supposedly responsible for the hell that this earth had become. "I understand you don't care if you lose your life—that you've anticipated it. But not all of the men you orchestrated the deaths of are dead... not all 'slaves' have been murdered."

"So I can see," I sneered, exhaling a long breath directly into the man's face—a gesture he would only understand the significance of after he realized I had been slowly infecting his entire crew—leapfrogging from ship to ship as sailors came and went, gradually corrupting the whole fleet. He placed his hands on the table I sat behind and slowly leaned in further—posturing himself as if somehow important.

"I want you to know that those of us who have survived will ensure that our way of life continues, not yours. This fight isn't over."

"That's very admirable; you should be an admiral," I quipped, utterly unaffected by his insistence that mankind, as it had been throughout all its broken history, would persevere despite all I knew and all that they remained ignorant of.

"You don't believe me?" he stated, a condescending grin curling up along with my suspicions he might actually know something that I didn't. Something about the look in his eyes—the confidence he carried stunk of more than just the usual shit that he and those like him were so full of. "The 'slaves' as you call us are going to break your 'Dam's' Mr. Vussel," he declared, saying a word that he had no rightful place knowing let alone uttering—saying the most hubristic, audacious thing he possibly could. My jaw dropped in response and I nearly choked. My Dams... he knew about the Dam's—locked away underground—holding the still uninfected people who had been chosen to rebuild this world out of ashes.

The illness in my gut suddenly struck me harder than before and I remembered the call made from Nathan Gills phone in Washington D.C... taunting me that he might still be alive... that he might still have some semblance of a hope to undo my certainty and alter my plans. Perhaps they had come to understand how those underground facilities worked in a time like this? Perhaps they knew the particular technical details of what I had done to commandeer and rearrange the effervescence of the future? And if what the captain had just said were actually true—if he had some means of ‘breaking my Dam’s’, that meant he had the brazen, shortsighted, God-damned balls to imagine any other way forward for this species. No doubt supposing he and those on board these ships would become the chosen torch bearers of the future. He stared at me contemptuously, watching my mind grapple with his words—with the idea that he had come to knowledge that he wasn’t supposed to know only to try and use it to torment me.

“Excuse me but... exactly what do you think you’re talking about?” I stuttered, struggling to digest or comprehend his full meaning. It wasn’t possible. It couldn’t be. He didn’t really know what he was talking about. He couldn’t really understand—not really... it was a bluff! He had to be bluffing!

“We’re not going to execute you this evening, Mr. Vussel. Instead, we’re going to make you watch what we do next. We’re going to make you watch the counter offensive to your drones and the infiltration of your bunkers. And then we’re going to kill every single person you intended to protect,” he declared—his words a baffling hubris.

“Horseshit. You can’t get inside those facilities,” I huffed, catching eye of Nahuel once more standing out on the dock—looking even worse than he had just an hour earlier. I needed this outbreak to begin—I needed to get back to my clone console—to use the power and control that I retained through that console to see what was really happening—to patch any holes that might have arisen in my plan. But, most of all, I needed to know exactly what these men did and didn’t know about those underground bunkers—about the next generation of people being prepared, hidden within my Dams.

“We’re already inside Mr. Vussel,” he stated, no doubt alluding to the phone call that had transpired the day prior—the phone call from my former colleague and friend Nathan Gills that I witnessed overtop D.C.—the man responsible for the spies who had been watching me and leading up to this abduction and supposed ‘defeat.’ There was an access tunnel and series of elevators to an underground bunker not far from there... and if they had access to the genetic insignia required... if they had the codes they needed... loaded into a particular type of hard drive—a drive

that doubled as an access key capable of overriding the doors lockdown... then... they could have gotten inside... I realized in that moment that what the captain was saying was actually possible... despite my insistence to the contrary, it was possible after all... my God... my God... a spiraling sense of deflated heartbreak swelled over the pain in my stomach and the sweat on my brow—as if both the world and the future were crumbling around me... it was possible... they... could... ruin... everything...

“You don’t understand what you’re doing... you’re making a terrible mistake,” I whispered, deflated and aghast—granted my desire to live longer only to have to watch these men destroy everything I had done. For if what the captain had said was true... if what he had just said to me was actually true... they would unknowingly ruin everything. I had burned this world for nothing and the whole of the species would soon be at an end.

CHAPTER 52: TRIGGER FINGER

Susie Simmonds, Upstate Massachusetts, 2018

“Why’d you leave?”

“I was going to run away,” Archer replied, sitting with his arms draped over his knees—staring out blankly at the aisles of sporting goods. The others were still at the front, the group of shorthaired teenagers that Archer had managed to survive with. But they had never left the mall. And they didn’t know how big or how bad it was out there. They had asked me questions—too many questions all at once. I couldn’t answer. I either didn’t know the answers... didn’t realize what was important that I was supposed to know or not... or... I couldn’t overcome the tears when the right questions were asked. I told Archer our dad had died protecting our sister... I told him a lie so that I wouldn’t have to say the truth. Sarah died because our mom didn’t know what to do. So, instead, she did what she had to. She did the only thing that was reasonable without knowing more than she did. She reacted.

“Why were you going to run away?”

“Dad and me were fighting again. He wasn’t listening to me... he didn’t care what I thought... so... I didn’t bother talking... I just left,” Archer admitted, reacting to the news of dad’s death differently than I expected. I couldn’t read his emotions or get a real sense of how he felt deep down. But I could see brief moments of agitation force their way to the surface. And because of that I got the sense that he was exploding inside... tearing himself apart for leaving the family at the worst possible time. “I’m sorry, Susie.”

“You didn’t know,” I told him, saying the same thing that I told myself anytime I tried to undo the past. My gaze lingered on the tiny specs of dirt and dried blood that had soaked into my shoes, and I quickly shut my eyes to try and keep the memories at bay. Distant banging sounds echoed from outside of the department store—what I assumed were faint traces of undead still lingering near the mall.

“Why didn’t he tell us? If he knew about this... if he built that shelter... why didn’t he tell us? I could have helped him. I would have known better.”

“Mom said that... you know uncle Matthew?”

“Not really.”

"I mean... you know how 'we don't know' uncle Matthew? How none of us did? It's because of this," I sighed, remembering mom's hesitation when I had asked about it—when I had read through some of dad's journals mentioning them as kids. "Mom said... 'If dad had told her... if he had ever so much as mentioned the idea of a fort under the barn... she would have left him and he knew it.'"

"Why?! He was right!"

"I don't know," I admitted, reflecting on the censored version of the story that my mother had shared with us. We knew that our uncle wasn't considered part of the family. But we didn't know exactly why. Not really. But over the years I had seen my father's expression soften the few times his name happened to come up. One time I asked him '

Why they never spoke' and 'What happened to make you hate each other so much?' He just looked at me without speaking... churning different versions of what he wanted to say over in his mind until he had been silent for so long that, right or not, he had to just pick one. "The closest dad ever came to explaining what happened was to say that "They were all young, selfish and stupid. All of them were. But Matthew was most of all."

"What does that mean?" Archer snapped, almost as if he took it personally—interpreting the 'young and stupid' part to be about him running away.

"It means mom was still so angry about whatever happened that dad couldn't tell me the truth," I suggested, shaking my head in frustration and resentment that adults always felt the need to lie to kids. They treated us like we weren't able to live in the real world... like we needed protecting all the time. But we didn't. What we needed most was honesty. To be present in the same rooms with adults doing everything they could to try and stay hidden right in front of us—to try and keep the real world hidden. Dad had never made me feel that way. Except when it came to this... this one thing... It was their secret. And they had a right to their secrets. I tried to remind myself of that. Because if I didn't see it that way... it didn't make any sense at all and it only hurt to think about.

"Have you asked mom about this since... since," Archer tried to say, tears welling up despite his best attempts to conceal them as he stuttered remembering dad. He shut his eyes tightly and fought against showing me how hurt he was. I put an arm on his back and leaned in to half hug him. He smelled like campfire half burnt with gasoline and his body shook like the canister was still on fire inside him.

“Mom... isn’t really the same anymore,” I explained, reflecting on how her firm but chipper tone had always let us know that even when she meant business she still loved us more than anything. But now when she spoke... it was as if... a part of her deep down had just vanished along with my dad and sister. “She’s just... worried. All the time. And when I come into her room at night and sleep beside her... she clutches onto me so hard it almost hurts,” I confessed, doing my best to keep my own tears from drowning out my ability to speak. “She’s so scared of losing us Archer. It’s like she can’t even be herself because of it... But I knew you were still out there... you just had to be.”

“I feel the same way,” Archer admitted, opening himself up for a fraction of a moment as the tears he had tried to keep bottled in eventually broke free—streaming down his face without anything to stop them. His demeanor was calm and placid. So shaken that he couldn’t even shake. “Since this happened... it’s like I’m not here anymore. It’s just pain. All the time. I mean all the time!” he continued, speaking about himself on the inside for the first time I’d ever heard. “I thought it used to hurt before, you know? I thought I used to feel alone... like mom and dad didn’t listen... like they didn’t understand. But now? Jesus Christ, Susie... I’m really sorry and I miss them so much,” he sobbed, pressing his head into his knees—his shoulders finally giving way to the weight built up inside of him. I leaned in further and wrapped my arms all the way around him, feeling every bit of hurt he let out and being glad to be there to hug him. I still had my brother. My sister was gone and my dad was with her. But I needed my brother and I hugged him so hard that I hoped he knew that.

“Hey! Archer!” one of the guys from the front of the store yelled—cupping his hands over his mouth down the length of the aisle we were sitting in. “Come here!”

“Give us a minute please!” I shouted, angry at how insensitive the other teens were.

“No! Get over here now!”

Archer pulled his head out of his knees and swiped at his face with his shirt to clear away the tears so that the others wouldn’t see. I kept an arm on his back for a moment until he gently pulled my hands away, standing up and swiveled the rifle he carried off his shoulder and into his hands. He clicked off the safety and readied it for use as if an experienced veteran with guns. I could see the pain sink back down inside him—something he had no choice but to try and grapple with another time. I followed his lead and stood up alongside him. He immediately moved in front of me to keep me safe. We walked to the front of the store, unsure

of what all the commotion was about. Then, to my surprise, every one of the teens that he had befriended now stood in firm defense of the barrier between the entrance and the mall—guns pointed outward as if they were about to be taken by force. It was then that I saw it—a bright glimmering reminder of where I had been and what I had wanted to happen. Sparks from a welding torch were burning through the closed gates of the front doors—just visible at the very far end of the mall. And standing there immediately on the other side were a handful of shadowy figures I knew to be people from the Convoy—slowly digging their way in. I swallowed apprehensively and tugged on the bottom of Archers shirt to get his attention.

“They’re here for me! I told them to find me here!” I explained to him, unsure of how angry they’d be that I’d taken off running, let alone made them come all the way here to find me. In a way, I was relieved to see them—to know that my brother was safe and that we’d all soon be getting out of there soon. On the other hand... I didn’t know what they were going to do to me. I was the only one who was immune. And remembering that trailer with all the cut-up body parts in it... my mind started to jump from one possibility to another. What if they experimented on me? What if they quarantined me? What if, despite my best intentions, I hadn’t led a rescue party to my brother. What if, instead, I’d made us all captives? I looked around at the teens pointing their guns and I took a deep breath in search for words.

“Susie, what are you talking about? Told who to find you here?”

“They call it the ‘Convoy’. It’s all the biker gangs and people they’ve found who are working together. I ran away from them. They know I’m immune. I told them I’d come here.”

“Bikers?!” one of the teens interrupted, swiveling his neck toward our conversation as if what we’d said gave him a mental flash of something he’d seen in a movie. “You told a bunch of biker gangs to come here?!”

“Yeah. They’re called the Convoy.”

“We need to hide!” the teen continued, appealing to the others to lower their guns while they still could and look for someplace that they wouldn’t find us.

“No,” I exclaimed, swatting away Archers hand as he attempted to lead me back into the store. “I need to talk to them,” I insisted, moving around my brother and the fearful expressions of the other teens—reacting as if a gang of thugs were about to conquer their territory.

“Susie, I...”

“I know what I’m doing. Please, just trust me,” I insisted, seeing the protective instinct in Archers eyes loosen to my assurances. He lowered his hand and nodded his head.

“Where are you going?!” one of the teens shouted, a crack in his voice making his deep anxiety clear to all of us.

“Keep your guns down! I’ll be right back!” I announced, jogging out of the store and swiping up a foam golf flag at the front of the aisle. Then, without really considering that they might just shoot first and ask questions later, I moved briskly towards the men cutting through the entrance to the mall—waving the flag with the hope that they’d see I wasn’t infected. “Hey! Hey!!! I’m right here!!!”

A second later the latch on the front gates bent in and the hot melted sections of doors dripped down onto the tile, changing color as they made contact. It was then I realized it wasn’t just a couple of bikers who were there, it looked more like an entire army. The doors burst open and a number of men stepped through, guns drawn and pointed right at me. I held my hands up in front of me, clutching the golf flag in one of them. But it was then I noticed I wasn’t standing in the light—the mall was dark, the overhead lighting wasn’t shining down on me, and from where they were coming, I might appear as if nothing more than a silhouette. I stared down the barrels not able to recognize the faces of the people who had just stormed in. And, in that moment my heart nearly beat out of my chest. I couldn’t believe I’d been so stupid. Why didn’t I just wait? Why didn’t I just let them find us! I was so stupid! I was so damn stupid! And it wasn’t just paranoia that made me think that. The flagpole in my hand dropped. A gunshot rang out alongside my scream and I felt my foot violently come out from under me—collapsing to the ground.

CHAPTER 53: PATIENT

Derek Riggs, Upstate Massachusetts, 2005

I had only spoken to Sebastian on the phone for as long as it took to arrange a meeting time. His voice was warm and welcoming. Mine wasn't. That brief call between us wasn't a friendly one to me—it was a necessity. An absolute necessity. After four intensive days locked in my room combing through evidence—through all the files I'd gathered, the hard drives, hand written notes, equipment I didn't fully understand, syringes loaded with different colored mystery liquids, McDonald-toy-looking-devices and other knickknacks and junk, I finally had the information I needed to present to Sebastian. Not to mention the still animated severed head wrapped in a garbage bag—wriggling proof of the ghoul that I had found in the bowels of the sunken lab. Something even Sebastian's denial wouldn't be able to deny. I had packed that head and everything else I needed into a backpack and decided to walk the few miles to Sebastian's family farm. I asked him to keep the meeting secret... knowing that, even with my request, he'd still probably tell his girlfriend and codependent other half, Anna. Hell, I even wondered if she'd be there when I arrived to greet me—treating this whole thing like some sort of happy reunion with the man who had saved their lives. But I didn't care about that... it wasn't important to me... not at all.

Since infiltrating the sunken lab in Louisiana, I had a new rush of determination and zeal. I had clues and treasures the likes of which I would spend further years scrounging for more information about. And so, for now, the only thing that mattered to me was business—not a warm and fuzzy reunion between friends—but the cold hard realities of what I would need to accomplish to understand the infection that was coming—the undead apocalypse that the government was studying. So, I wanted Sebastian to treat this meeting as seriously as if we were still abiding the protocols and doing recon. But I could hear in his tone a deep hesitation at my request. Perhaps suspecting that I had returned only to get revenge on him—to finish what Matthew had started for his betrayal of both of us. Like that's all I was... an assassin holding onto pointless grudges... He was wrong. I wasn't there to kill him. I was there to use him.

I stood outside the barn at exactly 0900. The bag on my back jittered ever so slightly from the constantly gnawing jaw of the undead. I had a pair of thick latex gloves in my pocket that I had prepared for handling it. Its level of decomposition was already fairly advanced and I needed to be sure to maneuver it carefully in order to observe the stages of decay it would go through—to shove various objects in its mouth to test for bite strength—to do noise tests, visual observations—all kinds of things while that head still had muscles to function. But for now at least, all I needed was to simply show Sebastian that the damn thing existed. That, along with a number of other things that I knew he'd never so much as dare try without the still animated undead remains.

But he had to. I was on an ongoing mission after all—doing recon—gathering clues. And before I could fuck off to the other side of the country to start my life anew, I needed to test a crucial theory about some of the information that I had found in that lab... that, and... I needed to see if my old friend could potentially be persuaded to become a relay asset. Not someone I would ever trust or rely on in the least. But someone I could know was out there in the event that I needed to skim information post-outbreak. To accomplish this, he'd need to create a fortified bunker for himself and his loved ones—a way to escape, hidden somewhere on his huge unused stretch of farmland. That was the case I was there to make to him. And that's damn sure what he was going to do if he had any sense at all.

He emerged from the house with a cane in one hand and a wrapped-up bundle of blankets in the other. I froze at the sight of what he was carrying, unsure of what was going on—why he was overtly holding something in blankets, concealed from view? A basket of fruit? Something he needed to take out to the barn? Or... a weapon? Was he seriously carrying a weapon without thinking I'd notice? I fidgeted my backpack and uncapped the button at the bottom of it, releasing the concealed machete at its base should I suddenly need to use it. Sebastian hobbled towards me—a look on his face of great relief and appreciation to see me again. A ruse. A lie. Something to put me off guard so he could strike out at me without my suspecting it—to kill me before I had the chance to try anything with him. I positioned my legs in a defensive stance and he could see my paranoia screaming from my posture. He stopped sharply and changed his expression. Then I heard it. A sound come from the bundle of blankets he was holding in his hands. A tiny gurgle and murmur. It wasn't a weapon... it was even worse... He was carrying a baby.

"His name's Archer," Sebastian stated, turning the bundle in his arm so I could see the chubby cheeks of what I assumed to be his little brat. My expression stayed firm, choosing instead to linger on the number of scar lines I could still identify on Sebastian's face—comparing them to the last time I'd seen him stitched up and barely alive in a hospital bed. His smile was different now—the cracks and scars in his face having healed in a way that distorted the fine movements of his facial muscles. He appeared pained in every expression he gave and I allowed myself to pull my eyes down from his face to look at the gurgling poo-sack of life that he held in his arms.

"Did you bug him or something?" I asked, trying to think of other deceptions that Sebastian might have under his sleeve or tucking up his baby's ass. Sebastian laughed a moment and shook his head—knowing me well enough to expect these sorts of suspicions.

"I'm just introducing you to my son, Derek. That's all this is," he replied taking a few more steps forward. His cane was always one foot in front of the knee Matthew had fired the bullet into—more scars from when he'd barely escaped with his life. "He's cute, isn't he?"

"Um... but..." I began to say, looking at the plump, chubby little bugger with a pensive contradiction battling itself around inside my mind. He was already pretty large—not just something that popped out a few weeks ago, but likely a couple of months, potentially more. And, if that were the case, either Sebastian had gotten out of the hospital sooner than I had expected and was suddenly well enough to mount his girlfriend again and get her pregnant immediately. Or... she had already been pregnant when the attack had occurred. I looked at Sebastian, deliberating for half a second on the question in my mind, and then decided to just go ahead and ask it outright rather than doddle on deliberation. "Is he yours or Matthews?"

"He's..." Sebastian began to say, looking down at the chubby fingers protruding out of the bundle he carried. An even more pained smile forced itself onto Sebastian's face and he turned to look at me again. "He's ours," he replied, giving me the only answer he could without admitting to the fact that he might not really be the father.

"Fuck... that sucks," I muttered, tucking my hand back around my back to re-fasten the buckle of my concealed machete. Deciding that as long as Sebastian was carrying both a cane and a baby he likely wouldn't try anything stupid.

"No, it doesn't 'suck,' Derek," Sebastian buffed defensively. "We're happy to have him. And we love him very much."

"Whatever man. Liabilities were never my thing. But I guess you're stuck with it now," I grumbled, turning to look at the barn, expecting Sebastian to hurry up and open it so we could get this meeting under way already. He understood my meaning and stepped up to the door, turning to hand me the bundle so he could fish out the keys. I took the wriggling little bastard out of his hands and held it like it was a bomb that might go off. Then after Sebastian had opened the lock, we traded places so that I could be the one to pull against the weight of the door and he could hold his bastard son.

"Anna sends her thanks," Sebastian stated, making his way over to an old plastic covered couch kept in the barn so that it wouldn't get infested with rodents or bugs. He lowered himself carefully down into it and slipped his baby into a child's seat/ bed contraption beside him—showing clear agitation in the way in which he moved because of his leg. I took a long subtle breath in response, understanding exactly what his words meant. He was crippled—seriously crippled at that. When the infection eventually did strike, he wouldn't be able to run, he'd have to hide. Only from what I could tell from the outside, he hadn't been fortifying the house or the property in the ways that he should have. The fence was in disrepair and there weren't any tripwires or noisemakers embedded in the soil. It was just flat out negligent. But then, I had to remind myself that he had chosen to forget—that he had chosen to bury that side of himself along with our friendship years ago. I clenched my jaw and shook my head, returning to what he had just said to me about 'Anna sending her thanks.' Just like I thought he would—telling his other half even after I'd asked him not to.

"Cut the sentimental bullshit, I'm not here for that," I growled, removing the bag from my back and approaching a workbench on the other side of the barn to unpack things. I removed the latex gloves from my pocket and slipped them on, fishing through the bag for the duct-taped-garbage-bag. Sebastian eyed me suspiciously—still not fully understanding my motivation for coming to see him. I hadn't patted him down because of the baby and the cane... but it was still possible he had a weapon on him to defend himself... I looked him up and down as his eyes lingered on what I was sifting through and cleared my throat—giving him specific instructions of what needed to be done. "Stand up and come here."

"Just tell me what you want, Derek. If you don't give a damn about being my friend or listening to anything I have to say... at least tell me why it's important to see me?" he sighed, clearly discouraged by the cold demeanor I was showing him and my general indifference to the life he had made.

"I want you to stand up and come here," I repeated, beginning to undo the garbage bag. Sebastian groaned and hesitated a moment but eventually did as I said, pausing to place a pacifier in the mouth of his infant son and a multicolored rattle in his hands. He leaned heavily on his cane and hobbled in my direction, eyeing me suspiciously all the while—not knowing what was in the bag and more than a little unnerved by the precautions I was taking to handle it. "You ready?"

"For what?"

"To start fortifying this place," I stated, pulling down the sides of the bag and removing the head from inside of it. Sebastian recoiled at first at the sight and smell of rotten human flesh—thinking I'd gone completely insane—thinking I'd just brought some regular old corpse here to show off to him like a cat that killed and collected birds as trophies. But as I turned the head towards him to reveal the still animated eyes and mouth, his revulsion melted away and bewildered amazement consumed him. He could see now. He was looking right at it—the very thing we had spent our entire lives preparing for, finally unsheathed in front of him.

"Oh my God," he whispered, frozen in place—his eyes staring into the milky, soulless orbs of the ghouls' gaze—looking right back at him. "How did... where did... I... I..."

"His name was Doug Wilson," I announced, recalling the details I scrounged for in the stacks of documents I'd gathered. "The transcript of his time before experimentation cited him saying that 'However baa things seem, there are people that would love to have your life.'" I quoted, having memorized every detail of that transcript. "I wonder if he'd agree with what he said now? If anyone would want to end up like this?"

"The... the transcript?" Sebastian gasped, watching as I removed carefully preserved pages slipped into plastic protectors from my bag alongside handfuls of other

stuff he had no way to identify. "Where the hell did you get all this stuff, Derek?! What is this stuff?!"

"It's the logs of experimentation. What they were doing, why they were doing it and the people they were experimenting on," I said, laying out the contents of the bag in a grid formation of importance—ready to show whatever I needed to show to make damn sure Sebastian couldn't deny the truth any longer. "This guy? He was just a regular nobody who needed some extra cash," I continued, holding up an identification form and pointing to a few subsections that had been filled out about his motivations for registering for the program. "Too bad for him he was off-grid enough that his disappearance wouldn't go noticed. They had all kinds of drifters, ex-cons, former military... anyone and everyone they didn't see a use for in society, ready and waiting to be processed through their lab."

"Their lab?"

"Yeah... the same lab my father used to be stationed at," I explained, removing from another sealed bag the syringes that I had gathered from the room I'd found Doug in. I turned towards Sebastian, his eyes still looking at the gnawing severed head on the workbench in front of us. Then, holding two syringes in my hands—I cleared my throat to pull his attention back to me. "The same lab I recovered these from."

"What are... what... what are those?" he stammered, suddenly becoming defensive and overwhelmed—scarcely able to believe what he was seeing.

"From what I could tell, they were trying to find a way to protect against the virus. They'd infect some people and try to inoculate others," I explained, reciting passages from the stacks of documentation I had gathered and hard drives I'd delved through—anything to learn more about the virus and the people responsible for manufacturing it—who they were, what they were doing—but, most of all, what their end game was? "And do you know what they found?"

"What?"

"They found that these shots could delay the rate of infection... Sometimes, they can even reduce the attention paid by the undead," I described, rotating the syringe in my hand—displaying the liquid inside that had been preserved through the flooding of the lab. "The log described that they were trying to find a way so that the undead wouldn't see certain people. But that's not the most interesting thing about it."

"How in the hell did you get all this stuff, Derek?" he interrupted, seemingly no longer interested in what I was revealing to him but rather the potential repercussions of how I had come to know all of this—how I had so many secret government toys at my disposal.

"I told you... the lab—321R! It was underwater after Katrina hit. So I went diving," I grumbled, annoyed that he was showing the degree of fear that he was—that he was so scared that the government might be looming over my shoulder waiting to

clamp down and take us both away. "Stop whining and listen to me Sebastian... it's important."

"I am listening... believe me, I am," he insisted, staring wide-eyed at the syringes in my hands. One for him and one for me.

"Good. Because if you're gonna have any more children... you're gonna want them to be immune, right?" I explained, twisting how I was going to use him as a test subject in a way that would appear enticing to his family plans. Sebastian flinched in response to my words—suddenly realizing that I intended for him to voluntarily take the shot the government had been using to experiment on people. I kept my eyes firmly locked on the contours of his expression—dissecting how much and how hard I would have to forcefully push him if he didn't agree to do what I said. "So far as I've gathered, full immunity is only genetic recessive, Seb... Now roll up your sleeve."

CHAPTER 54: MUTATION

Ellex Vussel, Eden Island, 2018

The remarkable events that had unfolded in the past few days were... as awful as anything I had ever anticipated could go wrong... the absolute worst-case scenario. My mind combed over the situation—scorning myself relentlessly for the helpless state I was in. I felt I had taken every necessary precaution to ensure my plan couldn't be undone. Every single one. But hearing that my former friend Nathan's help allowed other people to enter my bunkers—destroy my Dams... hearing that... devastated me in a way that I hadn't felt for years, as if my hard-earned dream for a better world had miraculously come true only to vanish in a puff of smoke at the very last moment—nothing but a mirage after all.

I retained some semblance of hope that these men would still fail—that their petty squabbling and lack of deeper understanding would plague them to their graves just as it had throughout all of their lives. But the truth was... I didn't know what would happen... who would win... who would die... and, not least of all, if the liberated future I had so dreamed of would simply burn instead... just as the surface now did. All I knew for certain was that I had been right for the bold endeavor I'd undertaken and the unyielding actions that saw them come to pass. I had been completely right in every single way. Whether anyone else on this earth ever saw me in that way or truly understood my motivation, didn't matter to me in the least... I knew... I understood the truth—the virtue of what I had fought for, cloaked in spilt blood—what I had lived for—what I would now in my final days, suffer beyond words for! And, for all of this, I was a hero! A wise man turned martyr by selfless sacrifice... all to save this world from the ongoing plague of every man, woman and child who had ever lived in it—corrupted in a way that their tragically broken minds simply couldn't grasp. Sheep. Ill bred, mutilated, poisoned sheep so full of petulant entitlement that they had come to believe that their right to live was more important than the need to change. It wasn't that they all deserved to die... it was that the future deserved far better than for anyone like them to continue to live.

My skin was slowly accumulating liquid beneath the surface, like a water balloon being filled. I sat in my quarters coughing—knowing that the vent above me would circulate the putrid air I breathed throughout the vessel. I had seen the nauseated expressions of crew members—not simply from their hatred and disdain of me but from the rot slowly

creeping through their veins. My skin was turning yellow—like some thick mucus you’d hack up from a sinus infection. Boils were forming and sweat dripped from my brow constantly. The guards who had dropped me off had finally taken notice of my condition—unsure of what to make of me... whether this were medically ‘normal’ or not. And so they had requested an examination—for someone qualified to diagnose my condition to come to my quarters and see what was the matter. And so I sat idle, my hands trembling as my body slowly transformed before my eyes. Now, suddenly, as repugnant and vile on the outside as I had grown to be on the inside. Rage and hatred boiled within me—nagging at my every thought. But not for long... not for much longer... or... so I could only hope...

A knock came from the door and it opened soon after. The two guards stationed outside the door at all times watched as another man with a faint sweat upon his brow entered the room. The door remained open so that the guards could oversee our interaction with one another. The man who I assumed to be a doctor held with him the appropriate medical equipment to examine me, contained in a puffy carrying case. He approached without speaking—as if he were inspecting something that wasn’t so much as human. And, as he approached, his brow curdled in confusion and anxiety—noticing the taint of my skin and the ample bloated discoloration forming under my eyes. He didn’t take a single step closer. Instead, he merely swallowed the already nauseated feeling growing inside him, turned and immediately exited the room—pulling the door shut quickly behind him to seal me in my quarters. I grinned with pride, knowing full well that a quarantine would be futile. The ship was already heavily infected. And, unless there had been some strict unwavering lock down of all crew members transferring back and forth from one vessel to another within the fleet, so too would all the other ships be infected by now. It would only be a matter of time until they began to turn—tearing each other limb from limb.

It was then, staring down at the bloodied clasps of my handcuffs, that I noticed my wedding ring was still on. My finger had swollen around it—the skin bright and red, with a dark yellow liquid reminiscent of ketchup mixed with honey oozing out of the sides. As if the ring were eating the finger it was on. I paused to think of my wife Hannah and pondered if she too might be on this ship? If one way or another she would fall ill too? I didn’t know... I hadn’t asked. For all I knew, she could be dead...

Looking down, I tried to close the hand my ring was on, to keep the blood flowing in my fingers. But a long stream of viscous puss erupted out of my left hand’s ring finger, like a zit popping over a sizzling

barbeque. I stared at the wound, my mouth quivering open—remembering the experiments I had watched of men undergoing the transformation that now lay just ahead of me. A loud clanging noise accompanied the hatch door opening and I slowly rolled my eyes up to see four blurry figures approaching me. A number of men wearing biohazard suits stepped through the door—arms already out—galloping towards me and slapping their hands on my loose deteriorating skin—moving me towards a stretcher. Thick plastic surrounded it on all sides—like a coffin I'd have the luxury to peer out of on my way to the lab.

I hadn't decided if I would explain what was about to happen to the Captain as well... or if I'd simply leave it up to his imagination to grapple with—the world melting around him revealing one nightmare after another. All of this while he and the rest of the people on this earth scurried to save themselves—inadvertently erasing the whole of the species at the same time. I had tried to warn him. To beg for them to realize how dangerous what they were attempting was—dragging me out of the courtroom despite my pleas for them to come to their senses. We could all die now... every last person on this earth... if the captain had his way and those bunkers were breached... if my Dams were destroyed—the habitat for the only uninfected people left alive... if that happened... we could all die... every single one of us... not just the people the Captain was trying to save or the survivors I had arranged to inherit the future. But everyone, everywhere. The entire species might suddenly disappear... that is... except for Desmond—locked away underground in my private bunker—the only one of anyone guaranteed to survive. Alone. With little but an array of equipment and my clone console to keep him company.

CHAPTER 55: THE DAMS

Wes Korbuto, Unknown, 2018

The lower levels of the facility were in a state of emergency lockdown. Aside from the constant glow of LED pathways on the ground, leading to and from every exit, all of the rooms were black and ominous. Overhead lights only came on in response to movement. The temperature was colder down here too. No machinery or equipment was still active. Just empty remains of the daunting spectacle that this place had once been. An entire facility that felt like it was now floating in space—barren and robbed of life. If it weren't for the sounds of the infected lingering in the halls and moaning constantly—pressing themselves up against doorways and banging their arms to try and force their way through—if it wasn't for that, the silence would have allowed me to hear my own heart, pounding half way out of my chest. I was so anxious and afraid... expecting to be discovered or confronted by some unexpected horror at any moment. Ellex could be watching us after all. Ellex, or the defenses that he'd programmed to keep anyone from interfering with him, could be lying in wait—discover me and Alice at any moment—realize that two insignificant specs of life had managed to survive the infection and then crush us like ants. That thought lingered in my mind with everything I did... knowing that the man who was responsible for murdering the entire world held an omniscient control over this facility. My gut hurt just thinking about it, like a fish who swallowed a jagged hook whole, just waiting for the line to pull tight and rip me inside out. That's the feeling of paranoia and doom that moved with me from one console to another.

To get down to the lower levels I had to push aside and squeeze through about fifty ghouls lingering in a side stairwell. Apparently, of all the entranceways I could have taken to descend, that particular one was the least congested. Alice remained in the safety of the top level, watching me via the tablet I carried—speaking reassuringly into my ear to remind me that I wasn't alone. She instructed me as I moved, directing me through the halls like a jittery-rat running a booby-trapped-maze. Occasionally lights would turn on in the distance—in adjacent rooms or hallways. And every single time that they did I would jump and whip my head in that direction, half expecting to see something that had been sent to kill me. Only instead, all I would see without fail was the swollen discolored faces of an infected who had either contracted the disease without being bitten or those ghouls whose mangled flesh had been

ripped into bits as if a pack of wolves had descended on a housecat. It was always a toss-up between those two types of walking corpses, the ones who had succumbed to the disease first and the people that they had then preyed upon... corpses that were now barely recognizable as human... monsters, everywhere I looked—the world was full of monsters... Hell, that I was almost getting used to seeing, carved flesh and rotten corpses now as familiar to me as the sound of my own voice.

“Ok, it’s loading,” I stated, hiccupping on a stifled breath. A cold bead of sweat inched down the side of my forehead and I nervously wiped it away—watching a progress bar on a load screen transition to an interface that allowed me to type. This was the second last console I needed to access. It had taken me hours to reach them all—carving paths through ghouls and blocked off sections of the facility where crates or vehicles had been knocked about. All it required of me was to access the computer, enter a sequence of code that Alice sent and then wait for her word of whether or not it was alright to continue. That’s it. But mentally... mentally it was another thing. The feeling in my stomach intensified anytime I stepped up to a console. The first one that I had used I had to stop and throw up half way through entering code... breathe a few uneasy breaths, shake my head like I was recovering from a rollercoaster and then get right back to it. I expected each console after that to get easier—to feel less imposing and scary. But in reality, it was just the opposite, because I couldn’t shake the feeling that Ellex was now personally out to get me—that I was going to fuck up somehow. And that, when I finally did, it would be my fault for causing the death of both Alice and myself. Of course, I didn’t actually communicate any of this to her. I just followed orders and did what I was told—trying with every step to keep from succumbing to the fear or just curling into a ball and sucking my thumb.

“Here’s the next sequence of code,” Alice replied, bringing my attention once again to the tablet I carried. I glanced at it and carefully copied the text she had sent—a jumbled sequence of letters and numbers reminiscent of a Wi-Fi password sprinkled with a few unique symbols and icons that I had never seen on a normal keyboard before—some sort of company-specific-hieroglyphics or something. It always took me a few moments to find exactly what I needed, and I always made a point of triple checking everything before I hit enter—terrified that if I so much as misspelled anything that it would be the final keystroke that would alert Ellex to our presence. I got the impression that Alice felt something similar to me anytime I’d step in front of a computer and do what she instructed. Whenever I approached one of these consoles to probe for and disengage the control Ellex had, Alice became deafly quiet on the

other end of the line. She held her breath, her eyes bulbous and full of dread staring into the camera or watching the monitor she sat in front of—waiting for any indication of something changing for the worse. And then, after a few moments, she would exhale, breathe in deeply and give me instructions of where I needed to walk to next—repeating the same sequence of steps over and over again on different consoles until we had exhausted every known way in which Ellex might discover us.

“You can use the elevator now,” Alice assured me, offering at least some good news. Prior to that point, anytime I’d needed to move from one floor to another I had to use the stairs—pushing past undead like I had been catapulted into the bowels of hell. Sandwiched between rotting corpses—gagging to keep from throwing up—feeling a sense of claustrophobia pounding its way into my mind until I could barely stand it. I hated that feeling so much. And forcing my way through dense packs of ghouls to get to the places Alice instructed me to go had put a toll on my mind. I hadn’t been forced into situations like that since I had first escaped from the metro when the disease broke out. Since that time I’d kept my distance from large groups of ghouls and they had ignored me in return. But now... now it was like I was one of them... swallowed by the group, prying my way through rotten flesh as I moved from one area to another. The news that I could use a working elevator again came as a jubilant surprise and I breathed easier at the idea—half caught on her suggestion being too good to be true.

“Are you sure?” I double checked, spotting the elevator doorway she had directed me towards and moving hesitantly in that direction—my eyes fixated on the button that I would press to descend down to the lowest level, a seemingly simple, ordinary elevator button.

“Yes, I’m sure. Each one of these consoles disables some of what Ellex has control over. He won’t be able to disengage the elevators now. There’s just one more console to go. Then you can come back,” Alice explained, mapping my movements through her end of the conversation. She knew I was standing right in front of it. She knew I was looking right at it. But she didn’t know how I was feeling—how I had felt worse and worse every minute that I had been down here expecting to be suddenly murdered. At first I felt like the news of the elevator was a good thing. But then... actually standing there... actually looking at it... the memories started to come back... of leaving my apartment... of kicking my brothers skull and then standing in the dark hallway, idling by the elevator, staring at the button—so completely out of it that I didn’t even realize what I was doing. And now, standing in that place staring at that button, it felt like I was back in that apartment building all over again... about to descend to another level of hell. I stood there, staring at that elevator and time and

time again swallowed a brooding sense of trepidation only to feel it come roaring back even worse than before. I didn't really understand what I was feeling... it wasn't rational, it was instinctual... and, whatever it was, it wasn't going away—it was getting worse. My hand was shaking, trembling like I had been left out in the cold. It surprised me that I could feel so strongly so suddenly. But I did. It was overwhelming. And I just stood there... staring back and forth between my shaking hand and the button in front of me, listening to Alice try to understand what was going on. "Wes?... Wes, is everything ok?"

"What if... what if you're wrong and it's not safe?" I asked, startled by an overhead light switching on just down the hall—triggered by the movement of a lingering infected, wandering aimlessly. The skin on his face had been peeled off, now hanging down like melted plastic. I watched him... the ghoul... the creature that he had become... remembering the gnawed remains of people in the subway when I had first woken up... remembering the infected children in the school when I had gone searching for survivors... I looked at that mans ragged hardened flesh, illuminated from the overhead lights, and I couldn't help but pause and consider the psyche of anyone on this earth who could knowingly allow that to happen to another person—the mindset of anyone who, under any circumstances, could find it in themselves to actually do what Ellex had done. To murder everyone, everywhere... to torture them by sending this entire world to hell and then burning the surface to ashes... like... some sort of supervillain or Machiavellian demon from another dimension. The antichrist or Satan himself. I wondered if he was even human? How could he be? How could someone do that? How could someone **actually** fucking do that?! And there I was, an ordinary nothing of a man charged with the duty of confronting someone I couldn't so much as comprehend the existence of? Fuck me... Wes Korbut... hero? Savior? To the rescue? Please! My fat, useless, middle-aged office-pylon ass had gone my entire life without breaking the law or stepping out of line. And yet... there I was... practically on another planet in a facility I still couldn't believe, taking orders from a woman I barely knew in a desperate attempt to keep from being murdered by a madman! I didn't believe in myself enough to think that I could actually succeed and so... every step I took forward without being caught or suddenly failing and fucking things up, in my mind it only became more and more likely that I would ruin everything with the next thing I did. I didn't have the confidence or resolve to be a hero. I had always been a failure, a nobody. And that reality came crashing back in that moment, freezing me in my place.

Staring at that elevator button my mind melted in on itself worse than I ever could have imagined and a storm of doubt consumed me. As if that tiny little button were everything that could go wrong past this point and my fragile sanity simply couldn't handle that concept anymore. I didn't want to be there. I wasn't strong enough or skilled enough. I was just lucky. Just plain, dumb lucky to have the immunity that I did. But that luck wouldn't save me from Ellex—luck wouldn't save me from the clutches of a madman! That was different. That was very, very different. The undead didn't scare me anymore—I knew I was immune. But him? The idea of having him personally torture and kill me? That terrified me. That absolutely terrified me. I looked down at my now firmly shaking hands and felt a convulsion in my abdomen—my body beginning to spasm and quake. I was so afraid. So unimaginably afraid that I couldn't so much as control my motions any longer. A warm feeling began to seep across my leg and I realized that I was urinating. A drop of drool lingered on the tip of my mouth and I noticed that for some time now—how long I couldn't be certain—Alice had been speaking to me—begging me to respond.

“Wes, please say something!” she exclaimed, drawing my attention back to the tablet—away from the walking corpses, my shaking hands and the ominous promise of things even worse to come... our imminent murder, one way or another... “Are you ok? Talk to me!”

“I, uh... I can't do this,” I wheezed, raising a hand to my heart and leaning against the wall. My eyes peeled to the side—facing the hard metal surface in front of me—trying not to look at anything—staring into the wall—burying my vision like an Ostridge putting its head into the sand. I dropped the tablet and slowly lowered myself down to the floor. I wasn't a hero. I wasn't a hero. I wasn't a hero. I was just a normal, everyday, law-abiding, boring person who did what I was supposed to. That was all. That was all. And I didn't have it in me to confront Ellex.

“Wes? Wes?!”

I pressed my hands tightly against my eyes and pulled my knees closer to my chest—needing a moment to think... to relax... to try and pull myself together again. But I couldn't control my body—the involuntary way it was reacting to how terrified I was—I wasn't doing that... It was the fear! The fear that I had convinced myself had subsided, now erupting to the surface worse than ever! My teeth chattered against themselves and I realized I was making a moaning noise—whimpering like a beaten dog. I couldn't handle this anymore... I couldn't handle the pressure... and that fear... the terror that had kept me locked in my apartment for the full week before I had overcome it... that terror was clawing back at me now—screaming in the rear of my mind in a way that

I couldn't silence or ignore. All because of a button... because of pushing a single, solitary, nothing-of-a-button on a fucking elevator! It was ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous. But it was true. That's all it took to finally break me... that's it... I gasped for air. I writhed on the floor and went through minutes or potentially even longer without any sense of time or what was happening around me. My sanity was crumbling, falling out from under me like thin ice breaking over black oil. An abyss, quickly swallowing the sniveling infant that I had been reduced to... whimpering and begging for someone to come and save me... and then, as if all of that weren't sad and pathetic enough, my gasps intensified and I blacked out.

When I woke up a mangled ghoul's intestines were smacking against my cheek. The tablet lay beside me—the sound of Alice's voice constant enough to lure the infected towards it. The device now lay in between a forest of looming figures. The same infected man with the drooping skin hanging from his face had been attracted by the noise as well as every other ghoul in the vicinity—now pooled together, looking in all directions, unsure of what to do. The dried, coagulated entrails of one of those ghoul's intestines smelt of such putrid shit that it had seeped into my mind and snapped me back to life. I coughed loudly and recoiled in disgust, breathing frantically for a few moments until I was able to calm down again. I reminded myself of where I was and what I was doing. And then, hearing the sound of Alice's voice speaking through the tablet, I forced myself to confront my fear and stop whining like a baby. I had to get up. I had to keep moving. And I couldn't make or accept any excuses for acting like this ever again.

With overwhelmed frustration and rage I pushed myself to my feet and used my girth to ram the ghouls out of the way. They easily fell over, their bodies and heads slamming against the ground without reflexes to use their arms to brace themselves from the fall. I moved from one infected to another—using my fat body and boiling rage to attack them not unlike how I had before when I had bludgeoned my brother's skull in. Apparently, that's what it took for me to have courage at all... to wither into nothing, realize I had no choice and then rise up—lash out—and do what I didn't fathom I was capable of. After a few moments, like a rhino charging intruders, I had knocked every ghoul away from the tablet and found myself out of breath and free of fear. Then, still hearing the sound of Alice's voice, I leaned down and plucked the tablet back up. It was then I realized that, while Alice had been speaking this entire time, she hadn't been speaking to me. I looked into the camera on the side of the device to see her face—holding a phone to her ear. She noticed me in the moment and held up a finger, asking me to wait without saying a word. I

froze at first, worried that perhaps it was Ellex that had called her. But that thought quickly faded as I realized what was happening. The man I had spoken to before—the cryptic man who had directed me down to this base in the first place—he had finally called back—whoever he was, wherever he was, he had finally broken the silence and was now speaking directly to Alice.

“I can’t promise that,” she stated sternly, moving her hands in front of her as she spoke—navigating through the computer system she sat beside. “Yes, we’ll try... I understand... Yes... Yes... I will,” she finished removing the phone from in between her shoulder and her ear and placing it aside. She took a moment to look at it—frozen in conflict before returning her attention to me. “Are you alright?”

“Yes,” I answered, unsure of whether or not what I said was actually true. I felt better since I had woken up—since I charged into the ghouls around me like a rhino on steroids—reminding myself that I wasn’t completely helpless in this world. But I was still ashamed for collapsing the way I did—for reacting the way I did. And I couldn’t say for certain whether or not I was actually ok. That fear had... it had just come out of nowhere... triggered and boiled over in no time by something as simple as a memory. In my mind, and likely in Alice’s as well, that sort of conduct was simply unacceptable. But like it or not, I was the only hope we had. I was the only one with immunity. I had to be ok, even if I wasn’t.

“What happened, Wes?”

“I’m more afraid than I thought,” I admitted, unable to look at her as I said it. There was a moment of silence between us and my mind returned to the call she had just finished. “Did he tell you who he was?”

“Yes, he did. But... Wes, seriously, are you ok?” she replied, her eyes subtly dissecting me for weakness or frailty. I could tell she was worried if I’d be able to continue or if I’d somehow need a while to fully regain my composure. But, at the same time, I could tell she was frustrated by the concern she had to show in a situation as desperate as this. She wanted me to man up and carry on without being as weak as I was. I wanted that too. And the embarrassment I felt for having unraveled like that scorned me in the back of my mind. I couldn’t ever let anything like that happen again, fear or not.

“I’m better now. It won’t happen again. I promise,” I explained, relieved that she had spoken to someone and that whoever it was, they had actually confided in her. “I’m ready to keep going, whenever you need me to,” I continued, reaching out and touching the elevator button as I

spoke. The indicator light turned on and a mild near whisper quite hum triggered—the sound of the device responding to my touch.

“Ok... good... I’m glad to hear you’re alright,” she admitted, allowing a tender friendly smile to underscore the sentiment—doing everything she could to reassure me that there was no ill will. “The man you spoke to was a communications liaison in charge of outreach to survivors. He’s not of particular importance. But where he said he’s calling from is,” Alice explained, her face more animated than before, less weighed down and devoid of hope. I paid careful attention to her, praying that there was some sort of good news ahead. “He said he’s on board a ship docked off the coast of Ellex Vussel’s island. There’s an entire fleet there—surviving factions of the US navy and a few other national ships they bumped into along the way. Together, they’ve pooled their resources and are trying to coordinate a counter offensive.”

“A counter offensive?” I asked, tilting my head up as my elevator arrived. I stepped forward, no longer consumed by fear, and pressed the button for the floor the final console I needed to decode was on. The very bottom level of this gigantic lab—only accessible because of the keycard Alice had equipped me with to give me clearance. The door quickly closed and I returned my attention to what Alice was saying.

“Yes. They’re trying to stop the drones and they’re planning to fallback to these bunkers in the event that they’re unsuccessful,” she described, a window popping up on my tablet as she spoke—a live satellite feed of hundreds of servicemen scattering along the deck of a large ship, all busy at work preparing for something. “There are a lot of survivors all over the world, Wes. But it’s been difficult for them to communicate with one another because of the drones. Ellex programmed the system to prioritize anyone who was using lines of communication... the system is identifying them as ‘enemy combatants’, no matter who they are or where they are. It’s killing everyone. But... from what he said, they’re hopeful they’ll be able to do something about it. They think they have a chance to stop it.”

“What about Ellex?” I asked, doing my best to decipher and reconstruct the situation that was unfolding around us. The elevator began to slow and I moved my eyes up to the entranceway—anticipating that more than a few ghouls might be waiting for me on the other side of the door once it opened. But, before the door opened, Alice said something that ripped my focus back towards the screen.

“They already have Ellex in custody,” Alice announced, startling me and giving me pause to wonder—if the man who was behind this had been apprehended then... would the world still be destroyed? I twitched

my mouth on the verge of interrupting but soon Alice continued with what she was saying—answering my question before I had the chance to ask it. “Apparently, the drones aren’t depending on receiving instructions from him directly. He automated their targeting. Something about a ‘failsafe contingency’ in the event that Ellex is abducted from his island,” Alice continued, toggling the video feed I received to show me a simple man cuffed to a table.

My heart congealed at finally seeing his face. Ellex fucking Vussel. His cold eyes and pail complexion... a stern expression but still, somehow, relaxed... ordinary... just like any man you’d see riding the subway or shopping in a mall. I was surprised. He didn’t look evil. He just looked... like a regular person, having a bad day... a regular person who had come down with a case of the flu or something. He coughed into one of his hands and cleared his throat—the volume on mute, keeping me from hearing his voice or what he had to say to whomever it was that he was speaking to. My eyes remained locked on the video feed of him even as the elevator doors opened, accompanied by the moans of a handful of undead. Ellex Vussel... the man responsible for all of this, in custody... fallible after all... and yet, surprisingly unbroken despite his defeat. And then, just as Alice finished speaking, Ellex turned and looked at the camera—he looked right at me—as if he could see through everything that was happening into where I was standing at that very moment. I swallowed nervously and clenched my fist to keep my hand from shaking, trying to think of what I was supposed to say or do.

“Does this mean it’s safe for us now? That I don’t need to worry anymore?”

“No... not necessarily,” Alice sighed, a look of dread and uncertainty returning to her tired expression. She turned off the video feed I was receiving and the text prompts of code she had previously been sending to me returned. My stomach felt like it was in knots just looking at it—already knowing what would be expected of me. “Depending on how this console is operating now that it’s completely independent of Ellex’s control, there could be any number of things that could happen. It all depends.”

“So... what do I... um...”

“Nothing has changed. It’s still extremely important that you reach that last panel,” Alice insisted, seemingly more concerned now than she had been before. I didn’t know everything that had been said to her by the man over the phone but something about her tone led me to believe that the same fear I had felt looking at that button might be rearing its head in her mind because of that phone call. Part of me wished

I could talk to her and make her feel better. But for the most part I felt too drained and exhausted to so much as try. Instead, I looked up from the console into the area I had arrived in—already spotting the panel I would need to approach illuminated on the other end of a very long hall. Alice typed something else, unrelated to the instructions she was giving me and I started walking—leaving the elevator behind and moving as quickly as I could to finish what needed to be done.

As I stepped up to the console I felt a cool breeze slither across my back—a startling and unexplained shift from the placid temperature everywhere else. The air in this facility didn't circulate in a way where you felt it circulating. Instead, a ventilation system kept running at all times churned in a barely audible repetition. But not here. Something about this area was different. I placed the tablet beside the console and began navigating the now familiar load screens—tapping past the log in details that Alice had already prepared for me on the keycard I was carrying and into the prompts reserved for maintenance and security checks. As I entered the text Alice had sent me, I'd occasionally catch eye of her expression—nervously biting her already short fingernails as she waited to see if what she needed me to do would actually work. But as I approached entering the final line of code... as I approached the very last line that I needed to input before I could return to her in the control room, a deep, visceral foreboding feeling jumped up and down in my gut. Like this was it... like it was all about to be over and I had played my part as a sacrificial lamb. Alice had sent me on a suicide mission, the men in the military had finally gotten in contact with her and I—the fat useless civilian—had played my part in the end of the world. I was ok with that. I accepted it, without whining or dwelling on the fact that I was going to die, because at least they'd caught him. And soon, he'd be made to suffer for what happened to my brother and everyone else in this world who didn't deserve any of this. I hit enter and held my breath—expecting to die.

Nothing. Just the same sound all the other consoles had made when I did what Alice said. After a moment I opened my tightly closed eyes and blinked in disbelief. It was ok. Everything was ok. Alice released a deep sigh followed by an elated laugh. I had done it. Despite my emotional meltdown, constant dread and unwavering self-doubt, I had managed to override something the evil genius had thought he'd made fool proof and allowed people to continue to live in this facility unbeknownst to him. I looked at Alice—smiling and laughing at our victory and her expression melted my heart. I allowed myself to smile too... to feel something other than just despair and worry. But it didn't feel good. It just felt... strange... to smile in a world like this despite

everything that had happened and could still go wrong. I felt guilty for smiling but continued for Alice's sake.

"Is that it?" I asked, double checking my own insecurity to be absolutely certain that I had done everything I needed to do.

"Yes, yes! You did great, Wes! You have no idea how important this is!" she exclaimed, celebrating me like I mattered somehow—like I was actually a hero. "You can take the elevator all the way back to the top level. I'll unlock the adjacent doorways so that you can get back to where I am before the reinforcements arrive," she continued, quickly typing something and again picking up the phone beside her. I paused at what she said—wondering if I had heard her correctly.

"Reinforcements?"

"Yes. A recon team—they're en route here now that you've made sure it's safe," she continued, tapping her fingers on the phone as she spoke with me. "They're sending an extraction team to recover the hard drive you brought down here. They'll need it to get people from the surface down here as well," she explained, filling me with a sense of hope and wonder at the idea that soon other survivors might call this place home too—that we wouldn't be alone for the rest of our lives in a place that felt like a different planet. "I'll explain everything when you get back, ok? I even know how to program the dispensers to make champagne," she finished, suggesting a celebration she was so elated. I nodded in agreement and turned to leave—anxiously shuffling down the long hallway to escape despite how positive Alice seemed to be that everything was now ok. But before I reached the elevator again... something strange caught my eye.

When I had previously wondered around the facility to get a sense of the layout and how things worked, I had noticed a consistent color coding for how rooms were organized. Every time, the use of a room had corresponded with a particular color and barcode or number sequence—the only exception being the Orange labeled rooms. They were always empty. Every single one I had visited in the entire top floor of this facility had been empty. I had come to conclude that this meant that 'Orange Zones were areas that had yet to be designated'... places that were reserved so that this facility could continue to evolve as they build it and re-arranged things, a rationale that was just my own way of making sense of something that I couldn't really understand. But down here, on the lowest level, in the very heart of this place... things were different. I noticed that every single room designation in the area was **exclusively** Orange. All of them. Every... single... one, except... none of these rooms were empty. And, for whatever reason, all of the doors had opened

as I walked past them—presumably triggered by the keycard I had been carrying, selected by Alice to allow me access to whatever part of this facility I needed to reach.

All of the now open doors connected to gigantic rooms—like airplane hangars surrounding me in all directions. At first I kept walking—trying to move past them and return to Alice. But then... something about them made me pause and reflect. I was curious about what was actually in the Orange Zones? What was down here that was so different than it was on the floor where Alice was? So I stopped and walked back... I entered one of the doors—too enchanted by the fact that there was clearly something inside to simply leave without finding out what it was. She said everything was ok now after all... that I had done it... that it was time to celebrate. So if that were true, it meant it would be ok for me to take an extra moment to investigate—to try and understand what this place was and some of the secrets it had hidden in it. I took deep, slow breaths to try and keep calm—feeling my heart quicken as I stepped through the doorway and into one of the giant hangars.

It was then that my curiosity quickly shifted from innocent and harmless to unsettled and shocked. It wasn't just 'something' that filled these rooms. It was... like nothing else I had seen in this entire place. Huge, 3D hexagon shaped buildings almost as large as the room itself... like an apartment complex assembled inside of an underground hangar. Most of the walls were dark metal or something that strongly resembled metal—cold, impossible to see through and without any indication of what might be inside of these things. But one part of the hexagon I stood in front of was different. One part of the hexagon was emitting light—a strong glow that clearly wasn't part of this bases' emergency lighting, but rather something that was continuing to work just as it always had. I approached that light—an opening at the very base of the structure, just a few brief steps from where I was. I stared into it... my mouth ajar and my heart pounding.

It was then I saw them... my eyes adjusting as I stepped forward into the light... despite everything Alice had already told me and everything I understood was happening in this place—whether I believed it or not... there they were... I was looking right at them. She had said this facility was empty... that there were 'no other survivors.' She had said that she had done a scan for life and the system had shown nothing and no one in this entire place but us. But she was wrong. She was completely wrong. In that giant hexagon, through the area the light was coming from, were other people—dozens of them... hundreds of them, in one structure alone—one hexagon of how many exactly, I couldn't say... people... isolated... separated from me and one another behind a long

clear surface that I believed none of them were able to see through. Individual rooms, with individuals quarantined within them. Children—locked in countless rooms and intersecting areas that the viewing panel I stood in front of allowed me to peer into. A huge, complex, interwoven-web of compartments and chambers... like a labyrinth... or a maze... something that they were all collectively locked inside together—yet each individual person remained isolated... like pieces of an unbuilt puzzle kept from realizing the bigger picture of which they were all a part. I didn't really understand what I was looking at. But I could see them clear as day. The structures were full of children.

CHAPTER 56: REMAINS

Derek Riggs, Oregon, 2018

Cory's face was swollen, pummeled by my fists. His tiny body was curled in a heap on the floor. His arms stretched back behind him tethered by a length of rope to a couple of racks in one of my supply rooms. The video feed in the shelter had shown me break free, charge at him, sidestep a single bullet he fired in defense as I ripped the gun out of his hand and then scoop him up in an inescapable rage of insanity and despair. I didn't remember it. I had blacked out—been consumed by the memories of whisky and cigarette smoke. Memories of my father. Of being abducted and tortured by my father. Of carrying that with me all these years and never ever, ever so much as letting even a little bit of it out for fear of showing weakness. But when Cory had locked me up... when he'd handcuffed me just to make sure that if I had been infected and I did turn into a ghoul he'd be able to manage the situation... worse had quickly turned to worst. I didn't turn. I didn't become an undead. But from the looks of what I'd done to him, I might as well have.

"Fuck me," I gasped, quickly rushing forward to undo his straps—gagging on memory as I felt a sticky goo surrounding the binds on his wrists. I pulled him up into my arms and spread him across a table, doing a preliminary pat down and assessment to check for internal bleeding. As far as I could tell he was ok, but... I'd hit him repeatedly in the ribs and the right side of his body was half caved in, potentially even with a collapsed lung—as if I'd pinned him to the ground and just kept hitting him. Like a fucking punching bag, like he wasn't even human. The tape I had watched was incomprehensible—the screams coming from the storage room sounding more like an animal backed into a corner, driven mad and tortured for life. It didn't sound like me. It didn't sound like anything I'd ever heard. Just raw anguish and suffering pouring out into the world—pouring out onto this innocent little kid because I was too much of a coward to manage it, to let it out sooner or so much as admit to myself that it was there at all. God damn me. God damn me to hell. I was the Devil. I was my father. "I'm sorry Cory," I sputtered and wheezed, heartbroken awestruck tears overwhelming me as thick snot began to drip down from my nose—my wails morphing from those of pure anger I'd heard before to unrelenting sorrow. "I'm so sorry Cory!!!"

I bandaged him up. Treated his wounds. Softened pillows and inserted an IV drip with a saline solution. But I never stopped crying. Wailing. Hating myself for everything I'd become. Everything I'd ever hated in this world bundled up and hidden deep, deep inside of me—

underneath the training, behind the scars—that's who I really was. After I'd done everything I could for Cory, I sank down to the floor, wrapping my arms around myself as I writhed in disbelief—broken. Completely and utterly broken and alone. But... it wasn't just because of what I'd done to Cory... it wasn't just because of what my father had done to me... it was because even after everything I'd been preparing for came true, it didn't feel the way I told myself it was going to feel. I didn't feel validated. I didn't feel strong or capable, just weak and out of control. Alone. More than anything I felt alone. It had never occurred to me that just having people around to hate the presence of mattered so much to me. It never occurred to me that lamenting and detesting had become my social past times—fed every day I went to work and every time I ventured outside. But now... it was just me and what remained of Cory. And the feeling of dread that brought with it was indescribable. People weren't made to be alone. The monster I had become was the only company I had left to keep.

I blacked out again. Then, fluttering my eyelashes back to the room around me I realized I sat beside the computer console eating a number of freeze dried food rations with my hands. Cory was still asleep—still unconscious. My hands trembled as I looked down at my fingernails covered with the remains of what I had been shoving in my mouth, that and the continued stream of heavy snot and tears that were gushing out of my skull. I didn't remember anything since I'd bandaged Cory, but... it had been almost half an hour. What the fuck was happening to me? I looked down at my broken ribs to see that I had also tied bandages around me—I had gone into autopilot and started doing everything responsible that I needed to. Anything to escape that all-consuming pain... that fucking regret chiseling itself out of my head like a jackhammer trying to break free—spreading my brains all over the ground, no different than the undead. A firearm sat at my side—a precautionary pistol within arms reach at all times. And I stared at it... intermittently looking back up at Cory, the only reason I didn't put it in my mouth and blow myself away right then and there.

Suddenly, a chiming sound from the console in front of me startled me and I snapped the pistol into my hand and pointed it at the computer. I breathed frantically, only realizing after I had acted that way that I was treating the screen as if it were a person or a mobilized threat. But... it was just a sound... a familiar sound... of the emergency broadcast line we'd set up when we were younger! It was in use again! And that meant that Matthew or Anna were talking to each other again. I slammed the gun down, reached toward the keyboard and through jittering fingers managed to open the display screen that would allow me to overhear. But... nobody picked up the line. There was nothing. Just

one end reaching out to the other without response—just Anna desperately crying out for Matthew to answer her. After a moment she stopped and the noise went quite. But then, it started over. Over and over again. Why wouldn't he pick up? What had happened that they were suddenly out of communication? Had a drone strike hit? Had the undead overwhelmed him? Or... was it something else that even I couldn't guess? I stared down at that button—the one to be able to speak to her and communicate if I wanted to. And then... almost as if acting without thinking, I reached forward and pressed it, so desperate to talk to someone... to talk to anyone that... I risked exposing Anna to the monster that I had allowed myself become.

"Matthew?! I need to talk to you about the situation! I'm here with... with some people from something called a 'Convoy', which is a group of survivors! They were just hit by one of those drone strikes and I need to know where they're gonna bomb next!" Anna frantically exclaimed, her voice sounding about as shrill and unraveled as anyone I'd ever heard. I cleared my throat and lingered on silence for a moment. "Hello?! Hello?!?"

"Anna... it's Derek," I muttered, finding it difficult to speak clearly.

"Derek? Where are you? Are you with Matthew?" she asked, both surprised and disappointed to hear that it was me. I didn't blame her. I didn't have any answers. I didn't have anything to contribute. I was just there. A survivor without the will to survive.

"I'm... Oregon... fortified bunker... Matthew's... wherever he was last time you spoke to him I assume, but... I don't know," I continued, glancing to my side to see the logs of information that had been broadcast in lieu of him answering the call—it was then I saw it. It wasn't an audio recording, it was toggled Morse code. I stared at the continued readings that had been sputtered out via an automated system so they could be translated to broadcast via radiofrequency and scrunched my face up in stark confusion. It didn't make any sense.

"Derek... do you know anything about what's going on?" she asked, her voice calming down a little now that she had someone to talk to.

"I... I listened to your conversation with Matt," I confessed, my eyes still caught on the computers spreadsheet of constant radio chatter—coordinates. The code was giving coordinates, constantly. But... they didn't add up. They contradicted one another. At first I thought it was just my fried brain unable to do the math or read what was being output but... intermittently they'd get half way through giving one set of

coordinates and then change completely. So... either the information was being broadcast incorrectly or... it was changing as it was being broadcast. An automated system doubling back on itself over and over again—somehow plugged into not only the radiofrequency we were now communicating on but others as well—dozens of them—warnings to anyone who was out there listening to any radio.

“Derek? Derek are you there?”

“Yeah... yeah I’m here,” I muttered, unsure of what she wanted me to say... of how I could be of any help at all.

“Have you spoken to Matthew? Do you understand... all of this better than I do?”

“Not really... I’m uh... I’m not uh...” I tried to say, my eyes drifting to the side to focus on the gun again—the same one Cory had held before I beat him half to death. I choked on the feeling that thought brought back and my body convulsed, trying to keep it together well enough to be able to continue speaking to Anna. Her voice was nice. Even though she was scared... it was good to hear her voice.

“Derek are you ok?” Anna asked, picking up on how... on what... picking up on the way I sounded.

“We don’t have time for this,” a voice grumbled from Anna’s end of the line—a man—frustrated and impatient.

“Who’s with you?” I asked, unsure of why someone would have been brought back to Sebastian’s shelter—a clear violation of fortification post-outbreak.

“He’s from the Convoy. He gave me a ride here to find out more about the drone strikes. And he’s not going to interrupt again,” Anna snapped, her voice drifting off slightly as she turned away from the microphone to address the man directly. “Derek are you ok? What’s happening where you are?”

“End of the world,” I muttered, still looking at the duel feed of information my computer was dissecting from the line we were talking on and the other radio chatter crisscrossing the nation. The strike coordinates being broadcast out of where Matthew was located were still running—giving live updates of where they were going to hit next. Sebastian likely had some sort of system to relay this information on his end too so that it wouldn’t have to be done by just listening in, but because I didn’t expect Anna to be able to understand the system well enough to navigate beyond just using it to talk. As far as she was concerned, Matthew didn’t answer because he wasn’t there. In reality, he, or someone else, had left her a note—a warning of what to expect next.

“Bombs are dropping there too? Are you safe?”

“Not from myself,” I growled, looking down at my food stained fingers again—seeing blood whether it was really there or not. I curled my hands into fists and banged them against the table—furious at what I had done—furious that I had lost control. “Get it together, God dammit! Fuck!”

“Derek?” Anna asked, unsure of whether or not I was speaking to her.

“I’m sorry... I’m sorry, I just... I’m not doing so well, Anna,” I wheezed, trying to take deep breaths to calm down again—to be able to focus. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll get through it,” I continued, looking down to the pistol again... wondering if Cory would ever come to and how soon I might be able to end it all if he didn’t.

“I never did get the chance to thank you,” Anna said, catching me off guard. I paused a moment, wondering what on earth she could be talking about.

“Thank me? For what?!” I scoffed, appalled at the idea that anyone on this entire earth could possibly see any good in me at all.

“For saving our lives.”

“I... I,” I tried to say, remembering when I had pulled them out of the fort—remembering when Matthew had nearly killed us all and I had decided to prioritize getting them help over meticulously destroying everything we had hidden there.

“So thank you, Derek. If there’s anything I can do to help you, I hope you’ll let me know,” she said reassuringly, somehow knowing that something was really wrong—somehow connecting to the pain I was feeling and deciphering how raw I was without me so much as saying anything in particular about all that had happened. My heart withered back in on itself and shuddered from the softness in her voice... my lips trembling. No one had spoken to me like that in years... and it left me speechless. My hands shook out of the clenched fists I had formed and my fingertips began rubbing gently against one another—just like when I had visited Sebastian in the hospital, broken and sewn together. The final remains of the most vulnerable parts of me, exhumed by the tender tone in Anna’s voice.

I didn’t know what to say. I couldn’t speak. The feeling of her caring about me for that split second in time completely overwhelmed me. If I hadn’t been so broken down and swallowed by guilt, I almost assuredly would have brushed it off as if it didn’t matter but.... she had heard the pain in my voice... she had listened to the struggle in each

breath... and she had communicated something deeper than words alone. She had cared about me. She had thanked me. And that meant so, so, so fucking much that I couldn't fathom sputtering out a sentence or a sentiment to express how grateful I felt. Instead I just sat there... staring at my hands... at the computer screen updating coordinates... at the... the... wait... no, no, no... wait a minute. I wiped away the tears from my eyes to make sure I was reading the feed of numbers correctly. The coordinates had doubled back on themselves again. They had initially sputtered out a latitude and longitude somewhere around Boston but... after re-adjusting it was a different set altogether—ones that I knew by heart and had used over and over again as a reference point for rendezvous as a kid. Sebastian's house! The barn where he had built his shelter! The place Anna was calling me from at that very moment—it had just been targeted for the next bombardment!

“Anna! You have drones inbound on your location! You need to leave now and get clear of the area!” I screamed, standing up and shouting as loud as I could. I heard a frantic half attempt to speak on her end of the line, quickly cut off by the sound of a chair screeching and the man who had spoken before insisting that the other people in the room ‘Come on, come on!’ But I didn't know if they had time to get away. I didn't know how long it would take between those strike coordinates updating and the bombs actually falling. From the size of the payloads that had been dropping, the impact area might be too big—the blast radius could swallow her up no matter what. All I could do was scream at the top of my lungs over and over again. “Run, Anna!!! Run!!!”

CHAPTER 57: HIGH ROAD

Anna Simmonds, Upstate Massachusetts, 2018

I ran as quickly as I could up that staircase—the men who had given me a ride here on their motorcycles already ahead of me. The rifle on my back clanged against the railing and the light from outside slowly emerged as I ascended, feeling as if it might be from the lord in heaven, giving me one last glimpse of life before he took it all away. Derek had told me a drone was headed this way—another bomb falling to cleanse this earth of the hell that had befallen it. And I, like so many left alive, scrambled and clawed just to be able to live another day. For my little girl... for my son Archer... for the memories of those I'd loved and the life I'd lived. I ran. Summertime picnics on days just like this one—under light like the one poking out of that tower raining down on me. Morning jogs the few days I found the time—listening to my favorite old disco songs that gave me the motivation I needed to get moving. I ran. I ran. Remembering the look in my husband's eyes twinkling in the crack of dawn every time I turned over in bed, groggy, knowing that it was time to get up—waiting for his tender touch to give me goosebumps and help me rise to my feet for the day ahead. I ran. I ran. I ran. And for the hope that I might see yet more memories ahead—through this hell, past these trials—I ran for my life. The life I'd had sure as the life I was living. Cause all it takes is a moment to take it away. And that thought, staring up into that light made that spiraling staircase out of the shelter seem just that much longer to ascend. When I got to the top, I fell to my knees. The strap on the rifle on my back had become caught—ripping me around and tumbling me down, down, down again until my outstretched arm managed to finally stop me. It was then I heard it. The sounds of the bikes engines revving up. And though I ran quickly back to the top of the barn again... it wasn't soon enough. They peeled away. They left me behind. And my heart seized up in terror.

"Hey!!!" I screamed, swinging my legs over the top of the lookout and quickly descending the rope ladder. But it was too late—the sound of their engines faded away, roaring off into the distance as if I didn't so much as exist—just some stupid woman who had served her purpose and was nothing but trash to leave behind. Susie had taken the family truck into town earlier that morning... I had taken the car to go after her only to get it stuck in a field and leave it behind. There were no more vehicles here. Nothing. Just me, standing in shocked daze in that moment trying to think of a way to escape. "What do I do... what do I do!?" I gasped and

sputtered, turning and looking in all directions for anyway out of what was about to rain down on me.

I turned sharply back toward the barn and yanked on the door—then acting strictly from memory I jogged forward and reached up to the wall with a bunch of junk pinned against it—an old bicycle of mine mounted on the wall alongside a wagon wheel and fishing gear. I tore the bike down and turned back around toward the entrance of the barn—stopped dead and shrieking at the top of my lungs as a figure stood in the entranceway, a dark silhouette surrounded by light pouring in. Its hands reached out towards me and the sound of air escaping its punctured throat gurgled where moaning otherwise would have been. But I didn't have time to fight this thing or doddle a single solitary second. My rifle had fallen off when I'd tumbled back on the stairs and all I had now was the bike in my hands. So without even pausing to think about it, I let out a roar of anger and charged right at it—holding the bikes tires out in front of me and knocking the undead square in the chest. The ghoul fell down, arms still reaching up as I mounted the bicycle and started peddling hard. The tires were a bit flat but it still worked well enough. I stood upright on the bike and peddled harder—harder than I ever had before.

The dirt road that extended out from the farm was long—and biking down it felt like I was barely moving. I didn't know how much time I had or how big the blast was gonna be when it finally hit. But gauging from the one I'd seen on the horizon before, I didn't trust that any distance I could peddle would be far enough away. Up ahead I saw a few cars pulled off to the side of the road—corpses fastened in them, stuck dead inside wriggling to try and break free, held down only by their seatbelts. But... I didn't know what to do... I didn't know if I had enough time to try and get away on a bicycle. I didn't know anything! I just knew I needed to move faster than I was—the semi-flat tires making it ten times as much work as needed to cycle at all. And as fierce as my will to survive was, I wasn't any kind of athlete made out of steel. I made my decision, dangerous as it was, and pulled over to hijack a ride.

An undead arm reached out towards me and I firmly grabbed its wrist from the side, leaning hard against its cold skin to keep it pinned in place. Another ghoul sat in the passenger side seat—stretching in my direction but unable to reach its festering gums far enough to take a bite. I opened the driver side door, still holding the undeads arm, and then moved down to stab my finger at the latch on its seatbelt. The seal broke and I leaned back heavily, clapping onto that ghoul—unintentionally popping its shoulder out of its socket but still managing to keep a firm grip on it. The ghoul fell out of the car and I dragged it along the ground with all my might—pulling it along the dirt road until it was far enough

away for me to make a run back to the car. The other infected, still locked in its seat by a seatbelt kept moaning and leaning over as I slid into the driver side—slamming the car door and keeping myself pressed against the edge to keep as much room between us as possible. Then, sitting in my getaway vehicle I froze—the keys were missing—pulled out of the ignition. The car had been pulled over to the side of the road—not just left in the middle of it—which meant that either the undead I had just pulled out of the driver’s side still had them or...

“There!” I shouted to myself, lunging down and snatching them off the floor mat—clumsily fumbling them around a few times looking for the right one—feeling a sinking pull of panic the longer I stayed in that spot without moving.

Once I had the keys in, I flipped my wrist hard and the engine fired up. I immediately slammed my foot to the gas and felt the pavement slide out from under the back tires—grinding forward along the gravel. The moaning ghoul in the passenger side leaned hard against the seatbelt pressed firmly along its bloated gut. Then, from the strained force of it trying to break loose wedged so hard against the strap, its bloated, gas filled, long-dead-belly suddenly burst open and a mound of maggot filled intestines spilled out onto the side of my leg. I scooted over as much as I could but I couldn’t escape the goop slathering down on me—my hand pressed firmly against the wheel, barreling down that road like a bat out of hell. Ahead of me I could see the bikes of the men that had left me for dead—the good for nothing scoundrels that had abandoned me for no good reason at all, just cause they were too darn cowardly to wait half a second for me to stand back up! The car had a nice amount of kick to it and accelerated well but it didn’t have the speed I’d need to catch up to them. And then, just as that thought crossed my mind, I felt it—the blast hit and my head jumped into the sealing along with all the goop that had just emptied itself onto my lap. I held my breath and clenched my jaw to keep from biting my tongue straight off or ending up with a mouthful of infected blood. The car toppled over on its side and then scraped along the dirt—pushed like a broom screeching along the road. The windshield cracked from the impact and the ghoul fastened in the passenger seat dangled down overtop me—its gnawing gums chattering just inches away from my squinting eyes, screaming through pursed lips and clenched teeth. After a few more moments of forward momentum the car began to slow but not before the dirt that had gathered from it being pushed along the road grew to the size of a tiny speed bump—forming a light mountain of mass just big enough for the edge of the car to topple over. The car rolled off its side and onto its roof, the mounds of intestines slopped around the front seat in all directions and the ghoul next to me now

dangling upside down flailing this way and that like a chicken with its head cut off. My hand frantically swatted at the open window, eventually managing to turn myself right-side up again and crawl out of the car—feeling the fingernails of the undead still trapped behind me graze against my ankles as I did so.

A billowing plume of black smoke lay behind me where our family farm had once been. I was covered from head to toe in human feces and coagulated blood—crawling maggots and moldy puss. I removed my shirt quickly and used it as best I could to mop it all away—looking all around myself for any minor scrapes or wounds that it might get into. Then, glancing back at the car, I noticed that the trunk had popped open when it flipped upside down. Right there was a case of bottled water kept in the back in the event of emergency. I ran over to it, opened a few bottles and began feverishly washing myself clean—my ears still ringing from the unbelievable force of what had almost swallowed me whole. I did my best to get all the blood off, but no matter what, my skin retained the slight tinge of having just been soaked in an undeads' insides.

After a few shaky minutes, I managed to get as clean as I could... standing in my bra and soiled pants midst the empty fields leading to the mall. I breathed heavily at first... so riled up and pumped full of energy that every single second felt like it took ten to pass. But soon enough, out of the corner of my eye, I spotted the two bikes of the men who had left me behind crashed not too far from where I stood—each lying on their sides, flung forward by the same force that had nearly killed me. I first began walking down the road and then soon switched to a jog, coming up alongside the bikes to find the two men had been smashed and scraped along the dirt.

The one who had stood watch over me in my own shelter had his face half shaven off—a pool of blood forming around his head fast enough so that I could tell it wasn't just a vein that had burst, it was an artery. His chest didn't rise or fall, and nothing other than a mound of scalp dangling off his head so much as moved, flapping lightly in the breeze. The other man had a broken leg, snapped open like a pretzel sticking out of its wrapper. He bore his teeth looking down at the thing, grimacing as he squeezed one hand tightly to the side while removing his belt with the other to use as a tourniquet. I walked up to him still out of breath, glaring at him like some punk little kid who didn't know better than to treat the whole world and all the people in it like a toilet. He looked back at me, unsure of what to expect—his eyes drifting down shortly thereafter to glance at my half-exposed breasts. He wasn't exactly helping me feel any sort of sympathy for him. But... I wasn't like the likes

of them. So, rather than just mounting his bike without him, I decided to take the high road to get us both back to the mall.

“I’ll help you get back up on that bike and give you a ride, but I don’t much care how much it hurts, so keep your damn whining to yourself,” I snapped, leaning over the fallen bike and heaving with all my might to bring it upright again. My back buckled and my arms shook but I was so filled with rage and determination that I got it standing. Then, after a few deep breaths, I turned around and extended an arm for him to grab onto. He held off a moment, finishing clasping the belt around his mangled leg before taking my wrist. He clenched his teeth hard and growled like a cat getting dunked into a bath. I did my best to counter his weight, working with his still good leg, until eventually we managed to prop him upright. He hobbled forward, his elbow on my shoulder, and I helped him till his tight leather pants were again able to wrangle the back saddle of his steed. “Gimme the keys,” I demanded, holding my palm out toward him.

“They’re still in the bike,” he grumbled, wiping away the dirt filled sweat that covered his pale white face. “You ever driven one of these before?”

“Do I look like a basic bitch to you?!” I snapped, using a buzz word that I’d heard Susie and Sarah throwing around before the infection broke out. “Now hold tight! I don’t plan on taking this easy!” I growled, straddling the bike, kicking the throttle into gear and moving as fast as I could to get back to my little girl.

CHAPTER 58: MAUL

Susie Simmonds, Upstate Massachusetts, 2018

When I opened my eyes, I was on a stretcher staring at the ceiling—at racks of supplies climbing up toward some florescent lighting you'd set up to paint a house at night with. An oxygen mask was strapped to my face and breathing was... easier. Even though I could tell I was out of breath, I could still breathe. My fingers and toes tingled. My mouth hung open—the tip of my swollen tongue feeling the backs of my teeth... had I bitten it? What had happened? I turned my head to the side to see a man with his skin so burnt that he looked like he had spent his whole life in fire. And that was when I remembered. I had marched towards the front entrance of the mall without a thought in my head and... a bullet had... oh my god... oh my god! I began to wriggle around looking down at myself, looking at every part of myself for where the bullet had hit. I was so scared and worried that I was gonna die! That I was all alone and that there was nothing anyone could do for me! But the more I moved the more I realized... it didn't hurt to move. My terrified eyes turned to the side to see Carson heading over towards me—walking right past entire teams of other people wearing medical gear, wheeling other wounded people around.

“How you feeling?” Carson asked, placing a bottle of water beside me and gesturing for me to remove my oxygen mask.

“I'm...” I started to say, forgetting to first take the mask off. I sat up fully and reached around my head—gently removing the mask and setting it down on my lap. “I'm... not shot am I?” I asked, speaking in a slow dazed way where I could barely keep up with all that was happening. I felt faint, exhausted... like I'd had so much go on that day that the idea of anything else happening made me want to puke.

“No, you're not shot. You just fainted is all,” Carson replied, pulling up an office chair on wheels and taking a seat next to me. The man with the burnt skin was quickly taken away by a handful of people and my eyes drifted back to him—remembering that I had told Carson to come find me here—that I had tried to blackmail my way into him convincing the entire Convoy to save my brother on my behalf.

“It worked... you came after me,” I exclaimed, in disbelief that my plan had actually accomplished all of this. My brother was safe, the mall was clear and, as far as I could tell... we were ok.

"That's not what happened," Carson disagreed, shaking his head and pressing his lips tightly together as if what I'd just said was completely absurd. "I didn't have time to talk to anybody about you Susie. We only came here because we had to."

"Huh?"

"You saw the blast, didn't you?" he asked, a broken look in his eyes. His tone was more solemn than when we'd spoken before back in the Convoy—almost defeated in a way. I nodded and he sighed... filling in the details of what had happened for me.

"After you ran away, I went back to work cutting up bodies. And then... not long after you left, that bomb hit the perimeter of the Convoy—the place where the elders or... 'biker gang council' or whatever the hell they were calling themselves were all set up trying to plan our next move," he sighed, watching as more people frantically ran past right next to a forklift—wedging its tongs into a metal gate that was sealing off a store, forcing them upwards. The screeching sound made me lift my hands to my ears for a moment until the locks all buckled and they were able to lift the barrier the rest of the way by hand.

"So... um... I... uh—"

"They're all dead. Now... I don't know what happens when every senior member of feuding biker gangs all die at the same time. But something about the environment around here is making me a little nervous," Carson confessed, folding his arms across his chest and eyeing the groups of bikers as they looted the mall from end to end, searching for whatever they needed in order to do absolutely whatever they wanted. I looked back to Carson, tapping his leg nervously against the floor and wondered... why was he telling me this? I was just a kid. I didn't know anything. Didn't he have anyone else here he could talk to?

"I'm sorry to hear that," I muttered, turning around to look for my brother Archer. "Do you uh... do you know where my brother is?"

"Yeah... they had the teens who were camped out here help show them around. I think he's still off doing that," Carson explained, removing a pack of cigarettes from his pant pocket and shimmying one out for himself. I watched him as he raised one to his mouth, still trying to regain the full functioning of my brain... I think I might have been a little high or something... breathing that oxygen made me feel kinda funny. Carson looked at me looking at the pack of cigarettes in his hand and then courteously held the pack out, offering me one as if I were an adult too.

"I'm still in grade school," I replied, shaking my head, making me feel even more dazed as a result.

“Yeah, well... when the world’s ending it’s never too late to start,” he groaned, clearly dismayed and having lost the side of him where he kept his spirits up and tried to make me feel better. I felt sorry for him... for the hurt in his tone... He took a long drag of his cigarette and then looked up at me as he noticed me staring. “I’m sorry... I know I shouldn’t be... ugh fuck it, I’m not sorry. The world’s ending. I’m gonna do and say whatever the fuck I want to for once,” he continued, taking another long drag of the cigarette in his mouth before pausing to cough repeatedly. I got the distinct impression that he didn’t smoke.

“What do you mean the world’s ending?”

“The bombs, Susie. The bombs,” he grumbled, tossing away the cigarette and rubbing his pant legs nervously. “Look, you’re gonna be ok... But I... Ugh... I need a drink... when you can stand, go get a new pair of shoes from one of the stores or something. You’re lucky, the bullet went right through without hitting your foot,” he finished, gesturing to my legs before standing up sharply to march off with some group of bikers in search of... alcohol, apparently. I looked down at my foot to see my shoes had been taken off—now resting beside me. The bottom part of my right shoe had been peeled back by the single shot fired when they’d entered the mall. The same shot that I had thought hit me and made me faint. Holy hell that was close.

“Susie?! Susie?!” I heard a voice, echoing down the length of the mall. I turned my head around, darting between the mounds of people to see my mother looking for me—shirtless for some reason, wearing a white bra stained red with blood. I pushed my legs off the side of the table I was lying on and stood up—wobbling a moment to get my balance right. Then, as my mom kept moving in my direction, I waved my hands in the air and jogged briskly towards her.

“Mom!” I cried, feeling a deep sense of relief and joy flood into my heart as her eyes came to meet mine. She jogged forward and we hugged each other so tightly and so long that it was like everything else in this place melted away.

“Oh thank you God, oh thank you,” she sighed, taking in long deep breaths, shuddering each time she exhaled.

“Mom! Archer’s here!”

“What?!” she gasped, pulling away from our hug to look at my face. “Where?!”

“He’s helping the Convoy find supplies right now, but... he’s around somewhere.”

“You’re... you’re certain? You’re absolutely certain?”

“Yeah, he’s ok,” I smiled, my cheeks spread so wide that my eyes practically closed. I didn’t think I had it in me to smile like that again. But seeing all the love in her eyes when I told her that Archer was alright made me feel like our family was still whole. It wasn’t just her and me anymore. It was us again.

“Oh my God, thank you,” she cried, looking up to the overhead lighting and touching a tender hand to her heart.

“What are you doing here? And... why... why aren’t you wearing a shirt?”

“I’m... I... there are bombs falling, Susie and,” she tried to explain, quickly interrupted by a noise demanding our attention.

“Mom!” Archer shouted, pulling her head to the side and severing her train of thought. Archer stood next to a group of bikers and the teenagers he had been hiding with in the mall. He moved forward quickly—heading straight toward my mother’s open arms. And I realized that I recognized one of the bikers he had been standing with. Cherry... the man who had dropped me off with all the other ‘chics’ stood with a slight grin of appreciation—recognizing me too. Archer’s face lit up like he used to when he was younger and we weren’t busy fighting all the time. He slipped into our mother’s embrace and she shut her eyes, so moved and struck by the moment that she practically fell over. I pulled my gaze away from Cherry and leaned towards the two of them—clasping onto their already tightly formed hug to savor the moment too. We all stood there for I don’t know how long, hugging each other like hopped up hippies. And I wished that moment would last forever—picturing my sister and my dad as if they were there with us too.

“What happened to your shirt?” Archer eventually asked, noticing the tainted blood color of our mothers’ bra as the hug loosened and questions returned to our minds.

“The house is gone,” she answered, not fully answering his question but shocking us both all the same. “A bomb hit it and... it’s just... it’s all gone now,” she explained, as if saying it aloud seemed so surreal that she could barely believe it was true. I couldn’t either. What was happening? What was... and then I remembered what Carson had said: ‘the bombs.’ That it’s ‘never too early to start when the world’s ending.’ I remembered the blast that I’d seen out by the Convoy—the burnt man beside me when I’d woken up. Something was happening. Something I didn’t know about was happening and... our home was gone now. I looked at my mother for some sort of answers but I could see in her face that she was struggling to try and find them too.

“Excuse me... Mrs. Simmonds?” Bree, Archers girlfriend, timidly said—standing with her hands folded across her waist as if she had a confession to make. “My name’s Bree and... I just wanted to say that... I’m really sorry that I encouraged Archer to run away. And that—” she tried to say, mournful tears billowing up in her eyes as she spoke. But before she could continue my mother quickly reached out and pulled her towards her—hugging her just as tightly as she had hugged us.

“It’s ok. It’s all ok. You don’t need to apologize for anything now, you hear?” she assured her, as Archer looked on appreciatively—seeing that his girlfriend had somehow come to blame herself for him not getting to see our father again. He put a hand on her shoulder and guided her hug away from our mother towards him—rubbing her back gently and reassuring her that it was ok... that it was going to be ok... I watched him do that with both surprise and admiration—seeing a tender, heartfelt side of Archer that he had never before shown in front of me. The way he moved and how he held Bree told me that he loved her very much. It told me that he had so much love in him that he had never felt comfortable letting out before. But here and now that love was all there was. That’s what was holding us together and pushing us forward despite the hell everywhere around us. And, because of that, I felt hope.

CHAPTER 59: THE SPECIMEN

Matthew Simmonds, Virginia, 2018

A distant storm set the sun before the day was done—roaring black clouds crawling across the land just like the night before. Except now, tasked with a very different objective, tucked away in the safety of this base, there was no longer any need to sift through the hoard of ghouls surrounding us. Instead, all the White Coats, pulled back from their posts, were finally able to sit down for a moment. Not that rest would undo everything that the day had already done to them. The White Coats faces were stained from the blood long after the blood was wiped clean. I looked at the expressions of the men and women who had been slinging through bodies out front of the base all day and I could see the unmistakable gleam of war burned into their eyes. Looks of trauma, exhaustion, fried nerves, shaking hands, pounding hearts and clenched teeth. All of that sandwiched inside subtle ticks of their faces popping up in between long shell-shocked stares. They weren't quite in the room anymore. No... they were practically on another planet. Fuck me... those untrained, unprepared, scared shitless civilians had followed their orders alright. But whoever they had been earlier in the day had gone missing come nightfall. And it was all for nothing—all for the lies Roger had been poisoning us with.

Leanne scanned over the group and swallowed apprehensively—rolling a wheelchair from one person to the next. She was passing out rations—taking the time to check in on her friends. Her face was tender and dedicated. Each person in that room was a longtime colleague and important part of her life. They had all worked together, survived the outbreak together, escaped, found themselves here—confronted with the very disease that they had helped manufacture. And now... they were locked inside their own minds reflecting on that fact. By studying the Solanum disease for Eden Corp, they had all played a part in bringing about the end of the world, whether they had considered it before or not. I overheard Leanne's whispered assurances and comforts to the others of how they were still 'good people'—of how it was still important to keep fighting and to keep moving. As she spoke, saying those things, I felt for the raw fragility of their situation even before we passed word along to them of a truth far worse than anything they already knew—Leanne still had to tell them that everything that they had gone through since this day began had been orchestrated by their former so-called friend, Roger. And now, as much as they needed to lie down and rest, instead, they would

have no choice but to go into hiding—to find a place in the rear of this facility where an extraction team wouldn't bother to hunt or kill them.

Leanne had struggled to hear the story I had told her about Roger—to digest the truth and believe it could even be possible, let alone true. No doubt those White Coats would struggle with it as well. Nobody wants to believe that their friends can betray them even worse than their enemies ever could. But that was the job of the NSA—betrayal was the profession of every spy on this earth. Perhaps now the White Coats would understand that Roger never really was their friend—not now and not for the entire year that they had all been working together. Or, far more likely, they would never have the chance to come to terms with that truth—they would only have the chance to run from the consequences of it.

I had given Leanne the tablet I had been carrying with me so that they could use it to descend deep into the furthest reaches of the base—to clear the emergency lockdown, sealed doors and find inaccessible nooks, hopefully out of reach. Perhaps, if they could get far enough away, keep moving and avoid detection, the extraction team that was currently inbound wouldn't waste time on killing them? Why would they? The White Coats were harmless, clueless and burned down to nothing from both ends—practically on the verge of a psychological break. They weren't worth anything to combat forces. Only I was. That was Roger's concern after all... neutralizing the 'armed civilian threat' as he had put it—making absolutely certain that I didn't have the chance to hold him at gunpoint again. Old grudges die hard.

Once I had informed Leanne of what was going on and ensured that the White Coats would have some hope of escaping the hell that was approaching, I set to work gathering what I needed to clear the field surrounding us and reach the radio tower's helipad. From having combed through the base supplies earlier in the day, I already had a good idea of what was immediately on hand and ready to use. I knew I couldn't burn the field of ghouls for fear of the fire also engulfing this place. I couldn't bomb them completely either as the on-site-munitions only gave me artillery shells and mortars to work with. Effective, yes, but they simply required too much time. Crates of grenades came in handy and I was sure to stock as many of them with me as I could. But the *crème-de-la-crème* of what this place had to offer that might give me a fighting chance of getting through those fields without being eaten alive wasn't a weapon at all—it was a suit of armor.

For decades, different methods have been tested to establish the best protective gear for soldiers. Few if any soldiers received that gear albeit as it was too damn expensive to bother equipping them with. But experiments were continuously done with ways to manufacture futuristic

body armor, if not necessarily ways that accommodated their means. Bomb suits weren't bulletproof—only Kevlar with thick metal padding built in. Bear suit models were too damn hefty and felt more like deep sea diving equipment than something that granted additional mobility and function. Mechanized gadgets, drones, bomb diffusing robots and the like had been most commonly used in combat for anything that otherwise might require personal armor. But in the last few years, thanks to quantum designs, full body armor suits had become lighter, more compact, less cumbersome and more daunting in implication. Layers of material as thin as a flimsy textbook could now stop a fifty-caliber bullet cold. Quantum engineering had pushed the known physical boundaries of body armor design into new and miraculous territory. And this facility—built in the last couple of decades—just so happened to have a few prototype models in stock.

As I put the finishing touches on suiting myself up, the base alarm suddenly stopped. I continued moving, unfazed by the change in noise, but appreciative of the insight it gave me. The alarm suddenly stopping meant that Roger had deliberately set it off in the first place—he had that power this entire time—and now, watching me change everything about the way I was acting and clearly suiting up for combat, it no longer served his best interests for ghouls to pool around this base and trap us inside. No... instead... now he would want them to pool around whatever it was that was going to make the most noise—me. I was the target now. And as much as the idea of body armor gave me confidence that Roger wouldn't simply shoot me along the way to where he was holed up, it didn't quite round out the equation of everything that I'd need to complete the job. For that, a weapon would be required. A fucking magical one. And no better weapon exists on this earth to kill entire droves of ghouls than the one I had chosen. That, and the entire crate of ammunition I would soon use—loaded onto an off-road-palette-jack outfitted with tank treads, not wheels, chugging along behind me.

As I marched to the front entrance of the base I spotted the White Coats disappear behind one of the locked security doors. The tablet I had given Leanne allowed them to pass through without restriction. Perhaps Roger might still try and speak to her using it—to poison her mind one way or another. Or perhaps he would simply let them go—show mercy for a change. I had no way of knowing. Maybe it wasn't even a choice that was his to make? Instead, perhaps the troops en route to this location would have to follow orders and hunt down every single one of them? It all depended on what they had been told to do, who had told them to do it, and what it was that they intended to accomplish once they reached this base? I had no way of knowing the answers to any of that.

That is, until the moment I had Roger's skinny little fucking neck tightly clasped in my hands. Then I'd get answers. 15 minutes until his rescue birds arrived. Half a mile of well paved, ghoulish covered road, stood between us... and about 20,000 undead I needed to cut through. Yippee ki ay—time to get some.

The M134D Minigun is a $7.62 \times 51\text{mm}$ NATO, six-barrel rotary machine gun. Normally mounted on helicopters or vehicles, it can also be powered by an external 24 volt DC battery. It fires 3000 rounds per minute. Fully outfitted with the motor and delinker it weighs approximately 90 pounds, not including the weight of the ammunition brought along with it. I could barely carry the fucking thing for five minutes even when it wasn't being fired—and the second I pulled the trigger, it became even worse—adding a few hundred pounds of recoil pushing against you and if it weren't secured properly, thrashing around in your hands like a Great White Shark. However, despite those limitations, having the gun mounted on those all-terrain-palette-jacks made it possible for me to use a weapon like that on an individual basis while still retaining some degree of mobility. After all, I didn't have a full-grown tank to mount it to or a helicopter to shoot it from—no magic pill that would suddenly turn me into a super hero. But I did have a fuck-ton of experience firing that weapon. This kitty purred mighty pretty when you pet it right. And God damn if it didn't roar like a lion too. I marched out to the front of that funnel—directing one palette with the gun mounted on it in front of me, my hands wrapped around the joystick firing controls—while another palette loaded with a large crate of ammo was lugged along behind me—feeding me rounds as well as giving me the option of reloading should my momentum fail to push through the hoard. And then, standing there like Iron Man and Master Chief's bastard baby, I unclasped the lock at the front of the funnel and got to work making a batch of undead soup.

After squeezing the trigger, a hard but precise flick of my wrist cut the trim of ghouls in front of me like butter. Like I was icing a cake with their insides. I hauled my heavy arms sideways, fluid and steady in pace—painting that field with streams of metal—melting flesh with bullets and fire. The sheer force of the gun's kick weighed against me ten times as much as my armor did. Shards of skull, teeth, cheek bones, spines, shoulder bones—all kinds of human shrapnel ripped free of those ghouls, sprayed out behind them—like they were converting the bullets I was firing into a firehose of blood that stretched across the length of the field. Plumes of insides erupted out of liquefied torsos—like swollen diseased chicken carcasses jammed into a woodchipper spewing chunks of meat and puffs of blood instantaneously turned into a red-brown-mist

that hovered around my line of fire. Trudging forward, the smell of putrid shit slowly changed. Those fields weren't just the reek of death anymore. Now they were undead barbeque, medium rare. The barrel of the gun was starting to glow red it was so hot—covered in a white residue of shredded burnt flesh that continuously rained down on top of it, eventually catching fire and flaring out to the sides. It was so God damn hot that I could feel it radiating underneath my armor. The barrel would stop spinning any second—roaring at full speed through the crate of ammo tucked away behind me. I walked firing that weapon for a full minute straight before needing to adjust the feed of ammo coming in and, also, shake my wrists back to life from holding onto what felt like a man made earthquake.

Depending on how close the infected had gotten to that gun determined if they would still have bodies when the air finally cleared. Most would be reduced to writhing, undead pulp. The rest would crawl through the mounds of bones and fine-ground-beef surrounding them, using their still attached body parts to drag themselves forward. Like a field of half-human-maggots folding one over the other, all wriggling in my direction. I dropped the minigun and looked at my hands—completely soaked in blood and tiny fragments of bone, like a chunky cherry jam slathered in white sprinkles covering every single inch of me. It looked like I had clawed my way through a giant placenta to stand where I was. I hastily wiped the visor of my helmet clear and opened and closed my throbbing fingers a few times—the powerful shake of the gun still tingling my nerves. Then, hearing the searing sound of cooking flesh, I turned my head to the side to see the tip of the minigun resting inside of an open ribcage—its fiery hot barrel right where the bowels of a ghoul had been. The pungent reek of shit-charred-steel hit me right in the face, and I stepped to the side to breathe normally again.

Damn near the entire field of undead wrapping around that base now lay sliced in half. Every body of everybody shot full of holes big enough to rip them to shreds or cripple them for good. They were slower now. That gave me room to breathe, even if my head did happen to slip under water. Phase one complete. Phase two was the march of my life, because while I was initially able to move with that minigun well enough to clear a path, as I continued on past the mid-point of my march, it became hell on earth to move an inch. The density of human remains was too much even for treads I had mounted my gear on. Moreover, as I got further away from the base, the density of the crowd had thinned enough that continuing to fire would only slow me down—I had room to move now—I had room to breathe now. And so, rather than staying put where I was, prioritizing confirming kills, I left the gun where it lay and began running instead—ignoring the still writhing chunks of ghoul and building

up speed and momentum. I had 9 minutes until touchdown and it was imperative that I be as early as possible.

Besides a few functioning hands still attached to brainstems, little of the mess of flesh that I ran through was a threat to me. The terrain was painful to move across—pavement underneath literal tons of shredded human remains. My feet would step on half crushed skulls and slip to the sides. My arms remained extended outwards, doing my best to keep my balance as I moved. I had spotted the tower Roger was hiding in—a relatively small, older building that no doubt had preceded the more recent construction of this facility. It stood four stories tall with a large array of antennas sticking out the top. The helipad, much to my dismay, was not on ground level. Instead, it was on the roof. That painful realization brought with it the potential that I might have to climb if Roger had taken enough time to fortify the doorways—if he had destroyed the staircase leading to the upper levels or stacked enough gear against the entrances so that even grenades going off couldn't clear the way. If that was the case, it was extraordinarily unlikely that I would catch him before he escaped. But I wouldn't know for certain until I reached those doors and blew them open.

Suddenly a hard kick like a mule drugged up on steroids pounded against my chest and I fell to my knees. I looked down at the breastplate of my armor to see that it was still intact—only the paint had been stripped away. But right there in the center of an otherwise pristine new suit of armor dripping with undead blood was what should have been a shot straight through my heart. Just like I suspected, Roger knew damn well that I was coming for answers. And he was doing whatever he could to slow my progress. He knew as well as I did that I wouldn't be able to fend off the helicopter once they arrived or survive heavier munitions. And so, if he kept me pinned down or sufficiently delayed out in the open, his extraction team would soon become my execution team. No matter how much it hurt or how hard it was to move, I had no choice. I was going to reach that tower and I was going to make him answer for the hell that he had put us through—holding him hostage to keep the extraction team from murdering us all.

More shots hit me—one after another. There had been an initial pause after the first bullet, almost as if he couldn't believe that I had survived it. It should have been a kill shot—my heart should have been spread out across the mess of mangled flesh surrounding me on all sides. But instead, it was nothing but a coat of scratched paint on a nanotube suit of magic. Underneath the armor, however, it was another story. Each bullet that hit me still felt like a baseball bat. It didn't penetrate what I was wearing, it didn't cut me open or risk infecting me either, but it sure as

hell hurt beyond description. Eventually, as Roger realized I had outfitted myself to be a walking tank, his shots strayed from my chest to more pinpoint precision—more debilitating places. The leg that Leanne had previously stitched up had been hurting all day. A bullet hit it—slamming against the plate of my armor and pumping the force of its momentum directly into my wounded muscles—I couldn't so much as move an inch. I froze—so stunned and sledgehammered by the blow that I all but threw up in response. I had never felt anything that painful in all of my life.

More undead hands now clasped onto me and I did my best to pull them free—occasionally finding mostly intact skulls gnawing at me. As I came closer to the radio tower, the ghouls that remained standing were closer to unharmed. The spread of the minigun had only chewed those immediately around me into pulp. Out here they still had some degree of their original form. And because of that, even though the hoard thinned, so too did they grow more menacing. I reached into an armored side canister strapped to my leg—something different than the quantum engineered super armor that I was wearing—a normal ammunition case. Then, just as a few handfuls of fully functional ghouls reached out to grab me, I let a couple of grenades tumble out behind them. But in that moment—just as I did that—another shot hit me square in the eyeball and I felt the helmet I was wearing crack in response. I couldn't see out of my left eye anymore. For all I knew, the bullet could have made its way through and permanently blinded me. With my other still working eye I scraped my head off the dirt and tried to regain my sense of where I was. But I wasn't able to do it before those grenades went off. The blast shook me hard and I could feel dents of shrapnel scrape up against me in all directions. The ghouls who had reached out to grab me were torn to pieces—their legs taken out from under them—and freshly charred handprints were the only part that remained of them touching my body. And then, despite the agony of what I was enduring, I stood up and kept moving.

More grenades escaped my hands as I jogged the final stretch between where Roger had been shooting at me and the doors that I intended to use. Those grenades ignited in well placed areas—right where I had intended them to—revealing just as I had feared, a number of stacked crates, furniture and other heavy objects immediately behind the doorway. Not only that, but a handful of infected were still huddled around beside that building—half banging against it, the other half reaching for me. Those ghouls wore military uniforms—those ghouls wore lab gear and business suits. And, as I looked at them, I realized that those ghouls were the remains of whoever it was that had been at this

base. They had no doubt followed Roger all the way here after he had arrived and escaped the main compound.

I slammed my shoulder against the door I had attempted to blow open to see if there was any give to it. The door itself collapsed in response, but the crates of shit behind it stayed relatively solid. Roger had done a decent job of fortifying himself, but it was clear that he hadn't expected anyone to come for him like I was. There weren't any booby-traps, claymores, or anything that he had set up for an assault on his position. Instead, there was only a quickly fading timeframe that I still had to catch him. Using my one good eye, I dropped a few more grenades into the holes of the broken door and stepped away to give them time to explode. Then, in that same window, I removed my side arm and calmly executed every still standing ghoul in my immediate vicinity. The grenades exploded half way through taking them out and I turned my focus back to the door—hammering my shoulder against it over and over again until finally, I managed to force myself through. The now shattered remains of what Roger had attempted to fortify the entrance with surrounded my ankles and I pressed forward into the building.

Once I was inside, I could hear it. The sound of approaching chopper blades. The two helicopters had arrived just as I entered the radio tower. Roger's attempts to shoot me had stopped for some time now—unable to keep me from continuing. But that's only because he was using a weapon that wouldn't be able to puncture or subdue what I was wearing. The helicopters were a completely different matter. And so it came as no surprise that half a second after I heard those blades, I heard their bullets too.

A hot metal stream of glowing orange exploded into a mist of dirt and metal as bullets rained down into the bottom level of the facility. The neon overhead lighting shattered and chips of the tile flooring vaporized on contact. I didn't know if they were using thermal, infrared or some other sort of targeting gear to pinpoint me specifically. But I did know that their line of fire was dangerously accurate. They didn't hit me directly—curled up, rolling towards the base of the stairwell, praying to God that I'd stay in one piece. But they sure as shit did destroy the entire bottom of that facility like it was nothing but a house of Lego thrown under a jackhammer. As the firing continued, I couldn't hear anything but noise. Not the blades, not the moans of the undead, not even my own fucking screams. Just debris, shrapnel, heat, hurt and hell pouring in from every direction.

After a few moments, the firing stopped. My ringing ears gave me just enough sense of things to understand that one bird was now descending to extract Roger while the other had veered off course to

focus on the main base. I looked down at myself and the mounds of chewed up building materials covering every inch of me—like a breadcrumb slathered, previously blood splattered, chicken fucking nugget ready and waiting for the deep fryer. I coughed hard, peering through the hazy air, and reached my arm out—eventually slapping it against the railing of the stairwell. I looked up through the haze in front of me and saw that the stairwell was still intact—in one piece—and I began to climb. As I did, a few plates of the armor I had worn fell off—not broken, but so pummeled that the connections of the straps ceased to function properly any longer. Perhaps they had been hit directly by the bullets from the helicopter overhead? Or perhaps my armor had never reached a point where it was actually fit for deployment. Either way, I felt a distinct sensation as if parts of myself were now falling off as I ascended those stairs.

My side arm was already out as I moved from room to room—clearing the building to try and find where he was. Every room was empty—covered in torn papers and scattered junk. The helicopter had only fired on me on the lower level, but even with that, a number of bullets had still rocked the upper portions. Whatever this facility had been capable of, God knows if it was even able to send a text message anymore. I moved up another floor and looked again—paranoid that he might just jump right out and grab me—hand to hand combat—put a knife in a slit between plates of armor or just flat out hold me down. He was smaller than I was. But I was so fucking tired, out of breath, beaten from bullets and pinpoint shots from his own hand that I honestly didn't know if I'd be able to overpower him. And yet... I kept moving... I heard the sound of those blades spinning round so close, and all I could think was that this man had betrayed us all. Not only did I want to make him pay for that—not only did I want to watch him suffer, but most of all, I wanted to understand... why? Why in God's name had he decided to take this path rather than seeing us as allies?

On the next floor I came across a room of sprawling computers, empty candy wrappers, water bottles and viewing screens. I knew that I had found where it was that Roger had been operating from, but he had since made a run for it. I moved my pistol from one corner to another, but couldn't see anything other than the still active feeds of dozens upon dozens of cameras he had left open on screen—showing inside views of bases all over the country just like Roger had said he could see. For half a second I spotted Leanne and the White Coats moving through a screen—and, at the same time, with the corner of my still good eye I could see an exterior camera showing the second chopper lowering itself toward the funnel—a handful of men wearing all black gear fast-roping their way

down to the ground. It was clear to me that that chopper would need longer to make an extraction than the one that had been hunting me. But, at the same time, it also meant that if they managed to get Roger out of the radio tower, I wouldn't be able to step foot outside this building again until after they had all left. I couldn't handle a direct line of fire from one of those birds. Even if my remaining armor kept the bullets at bay—a direct hit could puncture organs or shatter ribs. If the chopper at this base had already managed to move away and establish a line of fire toward me, then it would already be over. Roger would have escaped. I would be too late. And so knowing that there was only one place left to go, I pulled my head away from the screens around me and made my way for the roof.

I could see a bright light shining down from overhead. The wind slapped up against the walls and clouds of dust formed like tornadoes as a result. I could see all of that through the open doorway leading to the roof. My excruciatingly painful leg was stiff and could barely move. I could feel blood coming out of my wounded eye under the helmet I wore, pressed up against the fractured viewing panel. I kept my pistol in front of me—the other hand against the wall of the hallway so that I could keep my balance. Then, after finally enduring all hell to get to that spot, I exited the building barely able to keep standing let alone move forward another inch. But... just as I glanced outside of that doorway to see if I could still do something—do anything to bring that fucker to justice and find out what in the hell he had been up to all along—as I glanced outside, a hail of bullets tore that doorway up and chased me into submission. I was too late. They got him. They extracted him. And now... I was pinned down.

I crawled along the length of that hallway as more covering fire was laid down to make sure I didn't risk fucking with them anymore. The helicopter veered away from the landing pad—having never actually touched down and instead only thrown a stretch of rope for Roger. The drywall of the hallway around me peeled away and littered the floor. A garbage can was directly hit by a bullet and was sent flying in all directions—some pieces smearing the ceiling while others covered me. I put my hands over my ears and froze—knowing that there was nothing I could do now. If they really wanted to spend a full effort ensuring I was taken out, they'd be able to do it. I wasn't fast enough. I wasn't good enough. And because of that, if the enemy now so chose, I was as good as dead. Knowing that and accepting that, I lay still on that hallway floor and played like I were dead already.

The firing stopped after a few more moments but I knew damn well that they'd have their sights on my location in the event that I persisted. I shifted my weight to the side to keep from hurting my leg anymore and caught a glimpse of my shivering hands—my fingers were

pulled back into a claw like formation that didn't even look human. Not because they had been wounded. But because I was so God damn scared that even my hands assumed the fucking fetal position—curled inward, frozen in place, defeated and incompetent. God damn me. He got away. And all I could do lying in that hallway was hope and pray that the extraction team wouldn't waste their time focusing on those White Coats in the same way that they had focused on me.

After a few minutes, I couldn't just lay there anymore. I couldn't do it. I understood my own sense of self-defeat and frustration with not having accomplished what I set out to do. But I couldn't forgive myself for it. I was still alive. Maybe I would lose an eye and maybe I had a little internal bleeding to worry about. But I was still fucking alive. And as long as that was the case—and as long as I stood a chance to help Anna—then lying on the floor of a torn-up hallway feeling sorry for myself quite simply wasn't an option. After a few minutes I pushed myself back up, brushed myself off and moved back down the stairwell to the room that Roger had been operating from.

The computers were still working. The fire that the choppers had laid down had only focused on the top floor and the bottom floor. This level, however, was still relatively unharmed. Because of that, while I couldn't directly interfere with the mission these assholes were running, I could observe everything about what they were doing. Just like I thought, one of the choppers was circling the perimeter of the other that was still floating just above the front entrance—keeping an eye on me and an eye on that base. Meanwhile, inside the building, I could see a group of four men waltz right up to the Eden Corp blast door and begin typing away at the panel on the exterior of it. A wafting haze of smoke surrounded them, pouring in from outside, and each and every one of them wore gas masks. It occurred to me that they had likely laid down a few canisters of tear gas just in case some sort of ambush had been laid in wait for them by the White Coats. And now, unencumbered by any threat getting in their way, they were in the process of opening that mysterious fucking blast door. Roger had told me it was an elevator but... that, like so much of what he had passed along, was a dirty lie.

It was in that moment—the second that the blast door opened—that I realized some of the camera feeds on those view screens were already streaming what was happening inside the area. What looked like a long, wide hallway lay immediately behind that Eden Corp blast door. About a handful of ghouls wandered aimlessly inside it—quickly taken out by the men breaching the front. As those ghouls came crashing down and the men progressed further into the facility, I was able to piece together where they were and what specifically they were looking for.

Cells—prison cells adorned the sides of that entire length of hallway—each and every one of them with a camera inside it. Most of them were empty or only had dead people left inside them. But there was one cell that was different than the others... Very different.

Inside of one of those cells wasn't a person or a ghoul. There was a large, six or seven-foot coffin like black box, standing fully erect like a fucking monolith—stowed away not only behind the security of the Eden Corp blast door but within a cell behind that door too! Whatever the fuck that box was, in it was very likely the 'specimen' that these men had come to retrieve. I watched as attentively as I could—relieved that they didn't seem to be paying any mind to the White Coats, still hidden away in the rear of the facility. The men moved toward their target, managed to unlock the door and then filtered into the cell to surround the box on all sides. They then pushed their shoulders against it—either scraping it along the ground or moving it on built-in-wheels. I don't know how heavy the thing was, but they sure didn't seem comfortable doing what they were doing—one member of the team keeping their rifle pointed directly at the box the entire time that the others were moving it. And then, once they had pried the box out of the cell, they slowly lowered it down to the ground and collectively huddled in front of the thing to try opening it.

A moment later the front popped open just like a coffin—likely an extremely close-quarters holding cell—and, to my surprise and wonder, a child's limp body fell out. One of the men immediately put a gas mask on the child and began checking for vital signs—while another one of them removed a bag with medical equipment and began frantically fishing through it. But, just as a portable defibrillator was taken out and readied for use, the man checking vitals waved it away—knelt down beside the child's body with a hand pressed on their neck, feeling his cold skin. The specimen was dead—locked away inside that box, inside a cell, behind a security blast door—alone for God knows how long. Left with no water after the infection had broken out. The man holding the defibrillator put it away and, for a fraction of a moment, I assumed they had all failed in their mission. That is, until they took a bone saw out.

First, they cut the kids head off—surgically and with tremendous care as if they intended to preserve it. Next, they sawed off both arms from the elbows down. As they did so, the head was placed into a carrying container—like a portable bag you'd bring diapers to the airport in—a sort of black duffel bag with tight-sealing areas inside it to contain biological agents. After the head, each arm was placed into one of the slots in the bag. And then, lastly, the saw was moved across the child's torso—providing a large enough incision for the man to reach into the wound and split open the rib cage. Then, like cutting a turkey for

thanksgiving dinner, they began hacking the child's heart out. I bit my lip, not understanding what in the fuck I was watching. After they had finished working, they zipped up the bag, raised their rifles back in front of them, and exited the complex.

I sat there, glued to the screen as they made their way back to the chopper. The blast door had been left open behind them—an area that I'd soon be able to explore once they left us all to die in peace. I couldn't see Roger from the angles I had of the choppers. But I could see the gear the men who had come to rescue him were using. Whether these men were military or not, they had flown two Black Hawks into battle. All the rest was fairly standard for your high-end gun toting aficionado or private military contractor. But it was the make of those helicopters that made me pause and wonder most... who were these people? NSA? CIA? Eden Corp? Some sort of private security team? Who the fuck knows... and why oh why in the ever-loving-fuck did they come all this way just to hack up a little kid's body and stuff it into a duffle bag?! What the fuck sort of 'specimen' was this?!

A minute later and they were gone. In and out, quick and painless... for them, anyway. I on the other hand was... was... so utterly taken aback by the awe of what had just happened that in that moment, I very likely couldn't have told you my own name if you had asked me. It didn't make sense. None of this made sense. I stared at the headless, mangled remains of that child's body—no older than 8 or 9—and asked myself repeatedly without satisfaction for any answer I could come up with... why?... Why had they just done what they did to that kid's corpse when they realized that they were unable to save them? Why had that little kid been locked inside that box in the first place? Who were they? What had just happened here?! And now that it was all over, now that the enemy was gone and we had all been left behind to rot in this base—would I be able to find the answers I needed now that the blast door was finally open?

To be continued in Fall...

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