Chapter 1

"Keep your attention on what's in front of you." Sebridge offered a warm grin, eager to witness his captive's reaction.

Carly felt Sebridge's eyes on her and the others.

Marik clenched his fists, digging a thumbnail into the meaty part of his palm to avoid flinching as the scene played out.

Justine stood motionless, her face devoid of expression.

Carly and the others watched through one-way glass as Ramirez entered the adjacent room. In the room's center sat an elevated table. On the table, a woman lay strapped into place, unable to move.

Her face contorted in terror as Ramirez locked eyes with her. "No! No! Stay away from me!"

Ramirez approached with caution at first, then much faster. The woman screamed, shaking her head. Tears ran down her cheeks.

Marik's stomach knotted as his testicles shrank, adrenaline raging. He fought harder to remain motionless. His mind flashed with images of what came next. Marik experienced profound helplessness taking over.

Ramirez savored the moment, running his tongue along his lips. He brought his hands beside the woman's head as she struggled in vain.

"No."

The woman pleaded as a child would.

"Please… don't."

While loosening and tightening his fingers in a steady rhythm, Ramirez formed a wide grin as he grabbed the woman's head. His body shook with anticipation.

None of the spectators saw the tentacles protrude from Ramirez's fingers as he bore into the woman's skull.

"Watch him enjoy it. Revel in it." Sebridge positioned himself behind the prisoners. "Take it all in."

The woman's body convulsed, eyes rolling back in her head, drool bubbling from her mouth onto the table.

Carly's head twitched as she struggled not to look away. She could feel the woman's agony. Despite everything she had been through, this horrific scene made her tremble.

The woman continued to spasm. Saliva puddled next to her head on the table.

Marik noticed the woman's hair brushing back and forth in the puddle. His stomach knotted, causing an audible gag.

Sebridge placed a hand on Marik. "Stay strong, soldier. It's almost over."

The woman's body jerked off the table twice and then stopped moving. Her head flopped to one side as Ramirez clung to her.

A couple of minutes passed in silence. Carly's knees wobbled. She felt lightheaded and nauseated.

Ramirez released the woman's head, backing to the wall. He leaned against the bulwark for support.

As he studied the expression on Ramirez's face, Marik likened it to a junkie getting a much-needed fix. Pure ecstasy. Marik willed himself not to recoil.

"Excellent." Sebridge patted Carly and Justine on the shoulder. "You have done so well. How about we get some dinner? I'm sure you're all eager to reconnect over a tasty meal."

Sebridge moved his captives to the exit. A soldier stepped aside, and the automated door swooshed open.

Sebridge waited and motioned for Carly, Justine, and Marik to leave.

Carly and Marik made for the door. Justine hesitated, turning to smile at Sebridge. Sebridge frowned, not expecting this reaction from any of them.

Marik walked close to Carly. "The nutty man is an abomination. I knew the Colonel was using him against us. I told you."

Carly felt the toxic energy radiating from Marik. She chose not to take it on herself. "Maybe so. Maybe Ramirez cannot help himself and Sebridge is trying to set us against each other."

"He cannot help himself."

Marik spit his words.

"None of the monsters can. They just do it."

Justine walked a distance behind. She heard them talking but remained quiet. Carly did not look behind her. She felt nothing but loathing for Justine. It became a daily effort not to rip out Justine's throat over breakfast.

Carly entered the cafeteria, finding a new occupant. The woman looked familiar.

Marik barged in after Carly, moving around with his usual huff as he did when she blocked the entrance. Marik glanced at their new guest but appeared to take no interest.

"Hello, Ms. Hennington."

The woman smiled, looking at Carly. "I'm Joelle Abebe, from the facility in Belgium."

*That's it!* Carly nodded, remembering the last time she had seen the woman.

Justine brushed past Carly, bumping into her.

Carly forced herself not to glare at Justine, instead continuing to look at Joelle.

"Hello. Apparently, you survived whatever happened."

"Yes, I did." Joelle looked away, her face showing a hint of fear. "Somehow."

Carly retrieved her tray, sitting next to Joelle in her preferred spot, as far away from Justine as possible.

A minute later, Ramirez entered. Carly watched him move across the room.

Ramirez held a confident grin, sauntering over to get his tray. He sat in his usual spot at the middle table, between the others.

Marik held his spoon in his mouth, feeling his stomach knot. He cleared his throat, forcing himself to chew.

"Everyone's so quiet today." Ramirez put on his usual cheerful demeanor.

"The Colonel took us on a field trip," Marik said. His stomach gurgled as he resisted the urge to vomit.

"Did you?" Ramirez picked up the orange from his tray and began peeling it. "Where to?"

"To see a specimen feeding." Marik willed his stomach to settle and swallowed the food in his mouth, trying not to throw it back up.

"Oh." Ramirez paused, thinking of what to say next.

"It was you, Ramirez." Justine broke her silence. "Quite entertaining."

Ramirez looked at Justine, giving her a puzzled look. "Me?"

"Yes. You." Marik made an S shape in his soup. "Nutty man is a freak monster."

"Don't call me that." Ramirez surprised everyone in the room by sounding harsh. "Ever again."

"What are you gonna do? Feed on me?" Marik dipped his spoon in the soup, bringing it to his mouth.

"I'll ask Sebridge if I can." Ramirez shifted position to face Marik, fixing his eyes on Marik's head.

Marik shot up, turning toward Ramirez and delivering a swift blow to the side of his face.

Two soldiers appeared at the door. One shot a tranquilizer dart, hitting Marik's ribcage. He stumbled and fell to the floor.

Everyone remained still as the soldiers hauled Marik's unconscious form out of the cafeteria.

"Finish your meal. Dinner ends in five minutes." An unknown voice came over the intercom.

Joelle sat with both hands beside her tray. "Fucking hell."

Carly forced herself to finish her soup, even though she had no appetite. She ignored Joelle and the others for the rest of dinner.

Carly left in silence when the call came to return to quarters, then saw Joelle enter her periphery.

"I guess we're neighbors. You're heading my way." Joelle's voice remained timid.

"I see." Carly tried to process today's events.

Marik would undergo reconditioning on the automated waterboarding table, or worse. Carly intended to avoid experiencing that again. Even if it meant working with Ramirez on future assignments.

"Keep your head down if you want to live, Ms. Abebe." Carly didn't look at Joelle as she entered her quarters.

Chapter 2

This one must suffer defeat. It threatened the Ancient Ones.

The pickup approached with a massive wave of infected in pursuit.

Vodyre touched its target's mind.

A jolting rebuff sent Vodyre to the ground in agony. The enemy's mind defended. Vodyre did not understand. This defender of the Ancient Ones had never encountered such a shield.

Vodyre stood, feeling remnants of pain radiating through its psyche. The damage would not mend during this engagement.

Cowboy felt the assault. He couldn't relate it to anything, swerving out of control before slamming his foot on the brake.

"What?" someone called out from the truck's bed. "What happened?"

"Why did we stop?" Mia asked from the passenger seat. "Are you hurt?"

Cowboy took a breath. "No. I'm fine."

He felt anything but fine. He heard voices behind him. His passengers sounded alarmed but uncertain about what to do. Cowboy listened to the steady hum emanating from behind his truck.

To the right, some fifty yards ahead and inside the tree line. A purple glow. Cowboy didn't see it with his eyes but in his mind.

Vertigo overtook him. Cowboy straightened in his seat. He knew whatever attacked him posed a severe threat, and he must act.

Cowboy stumbled out of his truck, turning to address people in the pickup's bed. "I need one of you to drive. Something's in the woods. I have to check it out."

"Without you?" Cassie rubbed the barrel of her shotgun.

"Yes, without me." Cowboy kicked his boot against the side of the truck. "Drive fast enough to keep them behind you, but not too fast you lose 'em."

"How far should we drive?" Lenard glanced toward the herd as it encircled Cowboy's truck but kept some distance.

"I was thinking Ponderay, about thirty miles from here." Cowboy looked beyond his truck. The purple glow vanished. "We gotta move. I'll catch up on foot if I can."

Cassie jumped out and headed for the driver's side. "We'll go back the long way."

"Yeah. See that you do." Cowboy backed away as Cassie closed the door.

Headsuckers had made it to the front of Cowboy's truck. Cassie floored the gas to get through the area ahead that remained open.

Cowboy waited to see the group get free, then sprinted into the woods.

Instinct told him to run into the forest. Cowboy couldn't see his adversary, but his senses told him it approached at an angle, seeking to intersect his route. It moved with swiftness.

Vertigo returned. Cowboy felt something push against his mind. His footing became unstable for a second. He adapted to the unfamiliar sensation. He had no choice. His body understood the danger.

Vodyre could not enter this one's head. Strange indeed. This had not happened before.

No matter. Other avenues of attack existed. Vodyre's body held tremendous energy. The energy that poured into its physical form.

The enemy moved fast, but Vodyre moved faster. It used stealth to take this target unaware. A sudden and overwhelming offensive should quiet this mysterious threat.

Vodyre appeared in front of its target, running straight into the man. The force knocked him back into spruce, shattering the trunk enough to send the tree toppling.

Vodyre sank fingertips in as they collided with the first thing along their trajectory.

The man screamed as Vodyre's tentacles penetrated his skin.

Rather than precious mind energy, Vodyre received a sudden, agonizing jolt. The force knocked Vodyre back, setting the man free.

Vodyre hit the ground, stunned, unable to move.

Cowboy lay on his back, losing consciousness.

A throbbing in his head brought him out of the fog. Pain shot down his spine, his ears ringing. Cowboy noticed a dull ache in his back, getting stronger by the second.

Urgency told him to move, but he couldn't. Cowboy rolled over, unaware of his actions. He vomited. The retching cleared his head.

Cowboy pushed himself to stand with effort. He staggered sideways, trying to regain balance.

Cowboy saw his attacker. It remained on the ground, shuddering. Its body appeared female, but not. Muscular and lean, with unusual, elongated arms and legs.

A purple glow, like the one Cowboy had seen before, ran along the surface of its face, rendering its features indiscernible.

Cowboy realized he could not stand straight. His back suffered an injury. He would not fight hand-to-hand. Cowboy grabbed for his knife and gun, realizing he no longer had them.

Cowboy scanned the ground for any weapons. As he did, the thing in the dirt stirred, getting to its feet in one smooth motion.

Vodyre watched the man back away as it stood, still reeling from a failed attempt to feed on its target. Unless the man neared death, continuing to fight would prove foolish.

The man looked weak. Vodyre's energy dwindled, making it impossible to determine the enemy's ability to continue.

Vodyre noticed the man looking for something, perhaps weapons. This may show weakness and an inability to engage in physical combat.

Vodyre strategized how to proceed.

The man stared at Vodyre. He stood hunched over, appearing injured. This chance might not present itself again.

Vodyre summoned a last burst of power, but not without consequence. The urge to follow its calling and cut down enemies of the Ancient Ones overwhelmed Vodyre.

Cowboy resisted the urge to grimace in pain as he faced his attacker, standing a few feet away.

This creature stood over a foot taller than him. She… It remained motionless before Cowboy, the purple glow increasing in intensity. Cowboy adjusted his footing. He could sense a strike coming.

It lashed out at him. This time seeking to rip through Cowboy's chest, the mighty creature made contact. Cowboy deflected, but the assault crippled him.

The blow knocked him off balance, pushing all the air out of his lungs. Cowboy gasped as he fell to the ground.

The creature swerved, lunging at him again. One hand swung down as it fell on him. Cowboy couldn't move fast enough to avoid sustaining a blow to the head.

As the thing's fist struck, Cowboy thrust out his elbow to meet his attacker in the center of its ribcage. This lessened the impact of the blow and sent the dangerous beast toppling to the ground.

Cowboy fought to relax his chest and regain his breathing. The creature rolled away from Cowboy, clicking like electricity snapping across a power line.

The ground beneath him heaved and wobbled. Then everything turned dark.

Vodyre knew it failed. This first engagement wouldn't end victorious.

With its body beginning to repair, Vodyre fled.

It must feed. Spending this much power demanded replenishment.

Vodyre moved toward the herd and Cowboy's truck. It would take many infected.

Then, perhaps, the humans leading them.

Chapter 3

"They're hungry."

"And mean."

"Shit, yeah mean."

Luke heard the two men talking next to him as his body hung against the wall, shackled by chains. Gavin dangled beside him.

One man bent toward Luke, bringing his mouth within inches of Luke's ear. "You assholes face off against the brainers."

Luke pulled away, overwhelmed by foul whiskey-cigarette breath and body odor.

The other man knelt close to Gavin. "This one's still nappin."

"Wake him up." The man next to Luke flicked his cigarette toward Gavin.

The other captor hit Gavin. Gavin spit out his mouth, startled. "You awake, cutie pie?"

"He is now." The man next to Luke stepped away, fumbling for another cigarette. "Get 'em ready. This'll be a quickie for sure."

Gavin roused, still dazed from the beating he and Luke received from their abductors. Luke came out of the fog ahead of Gavin, aware of his surroundings. His head ached where someone clobbered him, and his ribs screamed in protest as he struggled to his feet.

The one who slapped Gavin grabbed both chains, leading Gavin and Luke into a dark hallway. Luke could hear faint groaning indicative of scramblers and people begging for help as he and Gavin passed several doors.

"Keep up, shithead." Their captor yanked Gavin's chain as Gavin stumbled to keep up in the hallway. Luke could tell Gavin struggled to stay upright. He did not know their destination. Luke felt sure it couldn't be anywhere pleasant.

"These two ain't gonna be worth it." They entered a large room at the hallway's far end.

"Shit. That's what I was sayin." The man yanked on their chains again. Gavin fell to the ground. "You worthless fucker. Get up."

Luke took hold of Gavin's shoulder, pulling him up. "Just try to walk." Luke kept his voice low, not wanting to get any feedback from the man holding their chains.

"Give'm tha sticks." The man in the larger room pointed. "Not gonna make any difference, but we gotta be fair."

Chains holding Luke and Gavin dropped to the floor. The other man gathered long wooden shafts, broken off a shovel and a rake. He turned toward Luke, throwing the handles at Luke's and Gavin's feet.

"Try not to die too quick." Both men ran out of the room.

Luke hesitated for a second, then crouched to pick up the shafts. The pointed ends looked well used, with dried blood and other unknown matter caked on the tips.

"Gavin. Get ready." Luke held out one shaft, pushing it into Gavin's chest.

"Ready for what?" Gavin coughed, unable to articulate.

A buzzer sounded before Luke could answer. The door opened at the same time.

The familiar inhuman groaning of the infected reached Gavin and Luke seconds before a handful of scramblers came rushing in, pushing each other aside to enter the room.

Luke aimed his makeshift spear at the first scrambler. Gavin shook his head back and forth, clearing cobwebs, and did the same. These captives faced a fight to the death.

The first scrambler hesitated for a second. Another scrambler pushed it out of the way, rushing towards Luke and Gavin.

Luke swung his stick around, batting this scrambler across the face as hard as he could. It staggered to his right. Gavin was ready, jabbing his spear into the scrambler's mouth and out the back of its head.

As the scrambler fell to the floor, Gavin couldn't retrieve his stick in time.

Another scrambler jumped over the one on the floor, pushing Gavin against the opposite wall. Gavin almost tripped, but the chains connecting him to Luke held him up long enough to hit the wall instead.

The force of Gavin driven backward spun Luke around halfway as the chain pulled tight on his leg. Two scramblers tackled Luke from the side as he turned toward Gavin. Luke tried to escape the two scramblers.

Gavin fought, slapping and pushing at the scrambler pinning him to the wall as it tried to grab his head. In a split-second decision, Gavin ducked, scooting out the side in a mad dash to retrieve his stick.

Luke rolled away from the scrambler holding him against the floor. Still, one latched onto his shirt, preventing Luke from moving away. As he let out a scream of frustration, Luke brought his elbow down on the scrambler's hand, trying to break its grip on his clothes.

Gavin's fingers searched for his stick, still stuck in the first scrambler's head. The chain pulled tight again on his leg, causing him to lunge headfirst onto the dead scrambler's stomach. He looked at the scrambler he had dodged.

Two scramblers rushed toward Gavin on the floor. They dived at him, landing below his hips on top of him. These infected fought over first dibs on Gavin without opting for their target straightaway.

Gavin adjusted his grip on the wooden pole. He thrust the pointed end toward the scramblers on his legs, trying to puncture the top of their heads. He hit shoulders and arms, but getting a solid shot on each head proved difficult because of their erratic movement.

With one leg over the second scrambler that tackled him, Luke kept the one holding his shirt pinned long enough to break free. He clutched his spear again as he rolled away.

Luke glanced toward Gavin, seeing two scramblers fighting on top of Gavin's legs as his partner jabbed at them in desperation. He used the stick to hoist himself up.

The two scramblers Luke had rolled away from scooted toward him across the floor. Luke held up his stick, lunging at the first one to reach him. It fell at Luke's feet.

The other scrambler latched onto Luke's ankle, trying to pull itself up his leg.

Luke jabbed the stick into the scrambler's spine, just above its shoulders. It collapsed to the floor as well, paralyzed but not dead.

Luke ran to Gavin as one scrambler on top of Gavin pushed the other scrambler away.

Luke jumped on top of the scrambler holding Gavin. It fell flat against Gavin as Luke plunged his stick into the scrambler's head.

The one remaining infected scooted around, getting closer to Gavin's head.

Gavin couldn't move away with one dead scrambling and Luke on top of him. Luke yanked his spear, freeing it from his target.

He used the blunt end to hit the scrambler reaching for Gavin. The scrambler fell to the floor but jumped to its feet.

Luke hopped off Gavin, pulling the dead scrambler off his friend.

Gavin rolled away as the one on its feet lunged at him again. It hit the floor where Gavin had been a second before.

Luke jumped on its back, holding the scrambler down as he shoved the blunt end of his stick into the back of its skull. In a rage, Luke continued thrusting as the thing's cranium disintegrated, brain matter smearing onto his makeshift spear and the floor.

A hand on his shoulder. Luke whirled, ready to swing at an unknown threat.

He saw Gavin.

"We got 'em." Gavin's breath came in shallow bursts. He could not finish a sentence. "It's over."

Luke lowered his stick, dropping it to the floor.

Two men entered the room.

"Wow! You sure beat the odds!" The heavier of the two whistled.

"We'll put you in front of a crowd and place bets next time." Skinny man chuckled, rubbing his fingers together.

Gavin collapsed on the floor.

"Get 'em out of here!" Big man hit Skinny man. "They need rest. We'll make money on these shit heels."

Luke knelt to check on Gavin. He felt a pulse.

Skinny man gave Luke's chain a yank. "Move, you piece of shit!"

"My friend is unconscious." Luke allowed his anger to seep through.

"Pick him up." Skinny man ordered. "I'll leave him for the brainers if you can't carry him outta here."

It took all of Luke's remaining strength to pull Gavin out of the room, walking backward as Skinny man jerked Luke's chain.

"We need food and water." Luke remembered his famished state, despite feeling weak, tired, and beat up.

"You'll get what I give you." The man pulling Luke's chain sounded annoyed as if Luke had insulted him.

"Grab 'em some grub and water, Enis."

Fat man yelled, standing amidst the dead scramblers.

Luke didn't know how far he could pull Gavin without collapsing.

He knew one thing.

They had to escape this death circus.

Soon.

Chapter 4

"I don't know. I don't recognize this alarm." Sal's face contorted into the ugliest frown Deena had ever seen.

"Maybe it's not an alarm?" Deena bumped her knuckles on the table next to Sal. "Some machines may be malfunctioning."

"It's an alarm." Sal didn't sound convinced, but he possessed legendary stubbornness.

"So what do we do?" Deena expected Sal to produce an answer off the top of his head. She regretted not taking to heart her father's attempts to educate her on technical aspects of The Mountain.

"I'm thinking." He didn't want to look helpless in front of his daughter.

"Do you know who's inside?" Chloe watched as Genevieve hunched over a small panel hidden behind a boulder.

"I need a minute." Genevieve responded to Chloe without thinking, focusing on the flip-up screen within.

Chloe stepped back, turning to look at their vehicle parked alongside a minor road twenty feet away. The sun had risen moments prior, beginning to chase away the crisp, cool air. They had made excellent time the past two days, arriving early.

"I can reverse the ventilation system for thirty minutes from here." Genevieve fiddled with something as Chloe examined the other scenery. Tall grass and a few trees stood among the otherwise barren terrain. Thicker groves of trees spread farther away.

"Will that kill them?" Chloe became anxious about confronting some unknown intruders.

"No. They'll lose consciousness long enough for us to get in and handle them." Genevieve closed the panel, standing as she brushed the dirt off her hands.

"Should be easy." Chloe winked at Genevieve, ready to get moving again. "Let's go handle them."

Genevieve walked over to Chloe, giving her a flirtatious slap on the bum. "Yes, let's."

Deena gasped in surprise as another alarm sounded.

"Dammit." Sal hit the keyboard in frustration. "The HVAC system is being rebooted. We're losing air."

"What are we going to do?" Deena asked.

"There are emergency breathers in the closet." Sal grabbed Deena's arm, pulling her along. "We have to hurry."

Deena began feeling light-headed, unable to determine if her thinking caused this sensation. They had to go down one level before reaching the survival gear.

The elevator door panels turned red as they entered.

"That's fucking convenient." Deena pointed to the countdown timer, showing how much longer they had breathable air. It displayed nine minutes and fifty-two seconds.

"We'll make it to the breathers." Sal looked relieved when he noticed the timer. "We can figure it out."

"Could someone have done it?" Deena's mind raced with worry as she contemplated being attacked inside this underground cage.

"None of the proximity alerts sounded. Just a caution alarm, then the HVAC rebooted." Sal looked away, shaking his head. "We would get a warning if someone got near this place at ground level."

The elevator doors whooshed open. Sal sprung forward, not waiting for Deena. She jumped out to catch up with her father.

"Still, it could be an attack." Deena ran to Sal's side, still trying to raise her concern.

Sal didn't answer. He walked/jogged to pick up his pace. Sal pushed a button to open the closet door.

"Hurry." Sal barked. "Go inside."

Deena entered ahead of Sal. He brushed past her to reach the portable breathing masks and connected tanks. "There's enough to last for hours. If not, we need new tanks."

"We better figure it out." Deena didn't care that she sounded hysterical. "Suffocating to death sounds horrible."

"We won't suffocate." Sal didn't care about upsetting Deena's feelings. "I worked too hard to get us here."

"This will get us in undetected." Genevieve led Chloe along a hidden path after they exited their vehicle in the middle of nowhere.

"Who do you think's inside?" Chloe repeated her question. "Will they be unconscious in time?"

"I'll know more in a minute." Genevieve stopped next to a large tree. Chloe noticed something odd about the tree but could not place it.

"This tree's a wee bit different from all the others we passed." She examined the leaves and branches as Genevieve moved behind them.

"I put it here." Genevieve didn't stop to examine the tree. "Stay close."

Behind the tree sat a large bush, almost as tall as Genevieve and Chloe. Genevieve reached the middle of a few thick stalks, pulling on something Chloe couldn't see.

Chloe heard a slight rumble. She stepped back, looking for any disturbances below her feet. She saw nothing.

"It's behind this bush." Genevieve scooted around the tight space between the plant and the tree. Chloe followed.

"Impressive." Chloe watched Genevieve bend to loosen a circular handle attached to a dome-shaped protrusion sticking out of the ground.

"It's my emergency escape." Genevieve hesitated, grinning. "Or entrance, in this case."

Genevieve opened the hatch, revealing stairs into the darkness beyond. "We'll be able to see and hear everything inside soon."

Chloe followed Genevieve down. They reached the bottom a minute later. Chloe stood in complete darkness as Genevieve moved further into the room.

A few seconds later, lights came on above. Genevieve stood next to a panel on the wall. Chloe moved closer to Genevieve. As she did, the hatch above them closed.

A door opened when Genevieve pushed another button on the panel.

Inside this second room sat a large desk full of computer systems. A flat-panel display occupied an entire wall opposite the computer station.

"Let's see who's in my fortress." Genevieve began typing commands into a keyboard before Chloe entered. "Shouldn't take but a moment."

"I'm ready for some fun with these squatters." The rush of hunting prey with her lover sent delightful tingles through Chloe. She wanted to kill and fuck.

"I should have known. It makes sense now."

Genevieve's face broke into a devilish grin. "Brilliant, Sal."

A corner of the screen expanded, filling the monitor. She saw a man and a woman. "You know these people?"

"Yes. One is an old colleague. The woman is his daughter." Genevieve spun, moving to a closet beside the standing desk.

"Take one of these." Genevieve opened a metal door, selecting two handguns unlike any Chloe had seen.

"Tranquilizer guns." Genevieve handed one to Chloe. "I don't want to kill them right away."

"Gotcha. You want to play with them first."

"Among other things."

Genevieve winked at Chloe. "Seeing them got my appetite up a bit."

"Where are we going?" Deena found Sal's haphazard path around the maintenance level more than a touch annoying. "Shouldn't we go straight to HVAC?"

"No. It's not it." Sal started jogging faster.

"What's not it?" Deena sped up as well, sensing her father's concern.

Sal shot around a corner and out of sight. Deena swore to herself, running even faster to catch up.

Deena came around the corner. She gasped, glimpsing her father on the floor and two women standing a few yards beyond.

"Hello Deena." Genevieve's frigid tone sent a chill through Deena.

"You're supposed to be dead." Deena froze. Her brain couldn't make sense of what she saw.

Genevieve smiled wider.

Deena watched the woman next to Genevieve raise a gun toward her and pull the trigger.

Chapter 5

“You can’t let the little ones near her.” Charles grabbed his oldest daughter, holding her shoulders tighter than ever. “She’s terribly sick. Not in her right mind.”

Brianne felt stunned enough by how her father handled her to keep silent for a moment.

“Did one of them get her?” Brianne’s voice faltered, fearing the answer her father would give.

Charles looked away as he held Brianne. He wanted to shelter his children, but this changed reality would no longer allow it.

“Yes.” Charles exhaled. “It got into her head.” Charles felt his eyes watering. He fought back tears. He couldn’t let himself break down in front of his daughter. Not yet.

“Can I see her?” Brianne pushed against her father’s grip, edging toward the closed door to his right.

“You don’t want to see her, Brianne.” Charles felt wetness running along his cheek. “She’s not all there anymore.” He didn’t know how else to give his daughter the heartbreaking news of her mother’s terminal state.

With her father in this much anguish, Brianne couldn’t help herself. She put her arms around him. Charles accepted the hug, falling apart more. His body shivered, accompanied by quiet sobbing.

“She’s liable to get worse, Brianne. It’s not only the scrambler that got her. I think her sickness is back. She’s in so much pain.” Charles began petting Brianne’s hair, trying to calm himself.

Brianne pulled away. “How long?”

Charles understood Brianne’s meaning but refused to contemplate living without his wife. He stared back at his daughter, unable to speak.

Intermittent moans broke the silence, filling the space between Brianne and her father. Brianne looked at her parents’ bedroom door again. “I need to see her, Daddy.”

Charles stood silent. Brianne looked back at her father. His eyes focused on the floor. She waited another moment, then stepped around him.

Charles listened to his daughter enter the bedroom as he stood motionless, overwhelmed with grief.

Brianne closed the door behind her as she stepped into the bedroom. Anxiety came on strong as she felt a growing dread. Brianne kept her eyes on the door as she closed it. Brianne tried to stretch out the seconds before locking eyes with her mother. The sense of apprehension grew within Brianne until she could resist no longer.

“Mommy?” Brianne tried to sound confident, but her tone revealed fear instead. “Are you okay?”

Brianne heard a soft groan behind her. Her back stiffened, and her shoulders sagged as she got up the courage to turn around.

Brianne gulped. Light from the bedroom window showed her mother bound to the bed by ropes. Brianne put her hands to her mouth, stifling a cry as she watched her mother struggle against the bindings in futility.

“Mommy?” Brianne kept her hands over her mouth, unable to move them aside.

“Baby.” Charlene’s head twisted toward Brianne’s voice. “Come here. Help me.”

Brianne stepped closer, wanting to help her mother. She stopped short of the bed.

“Why are you tied to the bed?” Brianne felt disgusted at herself for seeing her mother this way. It was a tragic scene.

“Daddy doesn’t trust me.”

Charlene groaned in pain. Brianne realized for the first time how odd it sounded. Not human.

“You can trust me, baby. Just come closer. Let me touch you.” Charlene’s fingers pulled at the air.

Brianne stepped closer, feeling her own eyes watering.

She felt something else as well. Brianne felt afraid of her mother.

“Why did Daddy tie you up Mommy?” Brianne’s voice shook. She wanted to run away.

“Let me touch you!” Charlene startled Brianne. She took a few steps backward.

“No! You little bitch! Listen to me!” Charlene screamed at Brianne.

Brianne backed away, bursting into tears and bumping against a wall beside the door.

“Get over here now! Fucking listen to me!” Charlene coughed, then her body grew limp, eyes rolling back, flittering. Her body started convulsing.

Brianne reached out for the doorknob, eyes locked on her mother. Brianne’s hand couldn’t seem to find what she wanted.

She glanced toward the door, returning her gaze to the bed. She was terrified her mother would get loose and come after her.

Brianne fumbled with the door, somehow getting it open. She exited the room, overcome by fear and anger. Brianne slammed the door behind her.

Charles was still standing in the hallway outside.

“You see why the little ones can’t come near her?” He still wouldn’t meet Brianne’s eyes.

Brianne looked at her father’s face. Before she could say a word, she burst into tears, running past him down the hallway.

Charles collapsed to the floor, sobbing alone outside the bedroom.

He felt impotent as a husband and father.

His world turned upside down.

Chapter 6

"Stay down, bitch!"

Roger got two hundred miles from the prison and scramblers before running out of gas.

"We're gonna take your stuff and maybe we'll let you live."

Thugs.

Roger crouched behind the minivan to see if it had gas. He encountered no other vehicles for miles.

The minivan sat by the road, doors open, unoccupied. Ahead stood the first building in a small community. Population 234 Roger thought the sign read. Roger passed another town, but no vehicles there.

"Please don't hurt us."

Roger heard a voice. The husband or boyfriend.

"You can have anything you want. Just don't hurt us."

"Shoot 'em Brandon! Get this shit over with already."

"Please don't hurt us." The husband again.

Roger pictured getting involved and then killed. He still had that soldier's rifle.

Roger thought about running. Not his fight. He could avoid poking his nose in. Walk away.

Roger threw a rock on the store's roof. It skipped and fell near the voices.

"What was that?"

"I don't know, dumbass. Check it out. Hurry."

Roger ran around the store. He wanted to keep ahead of these idiots.

"Don't move!"

Roger heard the thug yell. He snuck a glance. Two men with guns. Their backs faced him as they watched a man, woman, and child beside another minivan.

Roger ducked behind the building, counted to three, then jumped out. He fired twice, hitting both gunmen in the back.

They hit the ground. The other reappeared from the building's side. The man shot wide, too impatient to aim.

Roger stood motionless to get a clear shot. He fired again, hitting this man in the chest.

Over in less than ten seconds.

The three on the ground didn't move, continuing to cover their heads.

"They're dead. You can get up." Roger tried to sound non-threatening.

"Who are you?" the woman asked, surprised and confused.

Made sense. Roger appeared out of nowhere.

"Just passing through. Heard the commotion. Decided to check it out." Roger lowered his gun, wiping sweat off his forehead.

"It's okay, Niko. We're safe." The woman rubbed her son's back.

"Thank you." She stared at Roger. "You saved our lives, Mr?"

"Roger. Pleasure to meet you." Roger wanted to get moving. He didn't fancy small talk with strangers.

"I'm Bailey. This is Niko. My husband's Kenneth." The woman helped her son stand. The man got up as well.

"Where you headed?" Roger asked.

Kenneth stared, unsure of Roger's motives. Roger stood in front of him, a stranger holding a gun.

"Nowhere in particular. Tryin' to find a place tonight." Roger took a step toward the road.

The woman looked at her husband, her face anxious.

"You can come with us." She said.

Her husband's face contorted into a look of astonishment.

"Bailey! What are you doing?" Kenneth gestured toward Roger. "We don't know this man."

"He already saved our lives." The woman shook her head. "I'm pretty sure we can trust him."

Roger thought about refusing and returning to his minivan. He decided on a different approach.

"Are you headed anywhere in particular?" Roger tried to look uninterested.

"Just got out of the city. Nearly got killed. Then we ran into these men." Bailey dusted herself off.

Roger looked at the people he liberated, frazzled by their recent encounter.

"We've got no plan other than to leave the city." Kenneth looked at his minivan, then at the road. "We didn't think about after."

The boy coughed, doubling over.

"Niko." Bailey patted the boy, running her other hand through his hair. "It's okay. You're okay."

"Does he have asthma?" Roger placed his rifle over one shoulder, turning to the store.

"No. Nothing like that. He coughs when he's nervous. It's a tick of sorts." Bailey followed Roger's gaze. "Do you think there's anything to eat inside?"

"Maybe." Roger walked to the front door, finding it unlocked. "Wait here. I'll check it's safe."

Roger walked inside, making a cursory sweep and checking the small office behind the counter. He found it unoccupied. Picked clean, canned items on shelves and gallon jugs of distilled water.

"It's clear. You can come inside." Roger held the door.

The boy entered last. He turned toward Roger.

"Your light is beautiful."

Roger felt a pit in his stomach. He heard that before.

"Niko!"

Bailey yelled. "You're not supposed to say that. We talked about it."

Roger fixed his eyes on Bailey.

"He's infected." Roger knew the boy's condition.

"It's okay. We can control it." Bailey beckoned her son to get him away from Roger.

"Control it?" Roger tightened his grip on the rifle. "How?"

"He feeds on Kenneth and me." Bailey grabbed Niko, pulling him closer. "Just a little at a time. We're okay."

"Shit Bailey." Kenneth held a jug of water. "He won't understand."

"You won't hurt Niko. Will you?"

Bailey's face pleaded. A mother protecting her son.

"We had a boy get infected where I stayed before." Roger looked at the floor, his voice quiet. "We let his mother take him into her trailer. He turned. He attacked her. They tried to get others."

Roger locked eyes with Bailey. "I put them down."

Bailey tried to sound calm, but the fear in her voice came through. "No. That won't happen with Niko. We can control it."

Eyes watering, Bailey tried again to convince Roger. "We can. I promise we can."

Roger took a last look at Niko. "You won't be able to soon. I can't stay with you."

Roger left the store.

He didn't want to kill another child.

Chapter 7

“We’ve been set up,” Baako said into his earpiece. “Clear out. Now.”

“Where’s Cormac?”

Silas glanced behind Baako. “I didn’t see him get clear.”

“Unknown.” Baako motioned in the opposite direction. “Evac.”

Teagan’s ears caught the all-too-familiar whistle of incoming artillery. An explosion ripped through the earth to his left, lifting him skyward.

With enough force to knock the air out of him, Teagan hit the ground, already working on relaxing his diaphragm and catching his breath.

Before the dust cleared, Teagan heard a second whistle, feeling the concussion of a second explosion less than a second later.

Teagan felt his body shift into another gear, eyes burning and ears ringing. A power awakened within, granting him the will to move.

Teagan heard Baako yelling for everyone to get up and move. Despite the immense dust cloud around him, his vision cleared.

He could see two people ten feet away, Silas and Jenna. Baako appeared a second later.

“Teagan.” Baako’s voice came through the smoke and dust. “Let’s go.”

On his feet, before Baako came into view, Teagan joined what remained of his squad as they sprinted out of the haze.

Safety of cover loomed ahead, a thick blanket of tropical greenery. A lifetime away at the moment.

“They are like us. It’s another team.” Baako looked ahead, offering a bit of intel on their mysterious enemy. “Sent to take us out.”

“That’s absurd. Why?” Jenna echoed Teagan and Silas’s concerns as well.

“It’s happened before. I’ve never had proof before today.” Baako checked his gun mid-stride, wiping the nozzle with one hand.

No sound. Silas’s head exploded, and he fell to the ground.

Teagan knew Silas beyond help, jumping over his body without pause

Baako entered the tall grass first, followed less than a second later by Jenna and Teagan. Three left. This op started with nine soldiers.

The remaining four squad members ran at a feverish pace, darting between the exotic flora and ancient trees of the dense rainforest. Their attackers pursued. Baako knew this with certainty.

The ground sloped downward. Difficult to tell as several large trees had fallen along their descent path. Baako jumped over the first, but the next proved too cumbersome. Recent growth had taken over the sides and top of the trunk.

Baako hoisted himself using a branch, offering a hand to Jenna.

As she reached for Baako, he jumped into the tall grass growing along the trunk. Jenna and Teagan crouched, waiting, listening.

Baako gestured in the direction they came.

Teagan heard nothing. Several seconds later, Teagan heard it too. Footsteps, light and fast. Adept hunters. Teagan knew formidable adversaries pursued them. Gentle footfalls over uncertain terrain sent a tingle up his spine.

The footsteps became louder. Their foes neared where the three hid. Baako held still, eyes closed, gun aimed toward the sound of disturbed underbrush. Teagan and Jenna held their weapons up as well, eyes open.

The footsteps fell silent. Baako tapped his finger against the foregrip of his rifle. Teagan knew the signal well.

Baako squeezed the trigger, his rifle pointed upward to his left. Jenna and Teagan held their fire a few seconds longer.

Two shots rang out several meters away, ripping into the tree and shattering bark inches from Baako and Teagan’s heads.

Jenna and Teagan relied on their heightened senses, less proficient than Baako’s, to figure out the shooter’s origin and squeezed their triggers. Baako joined them.

They heard nothing as seconds ticked by. Teagan pondered how these mysterious attackers pinpointed their position in the woods. He forced the thought out of his mind, focusing on the surrounding stillness.

Baako held two fingers out for Teagan and Jenna. That meant their shooting had neutralized two targets. They did not know the total number pursuing them.

Teagan glimpsed the explosion before it again threw him upward and away from the tree’s trunk. A more intense blast this time.

He didn’t know how much time elapsed, but Teagan heard footsteps.

Teagan gritted his teeth and moved his hand toward the knife on his hip, unlatching the clip. He gripped the blade tight, ready to roll over and lunge at his target in one smooth motion.

He forced his eyes open, despite the overwhelming pressure in his cranium. He saw tall grass and palm leaves next to his face.

Teagan pushed himself up, reaching a crouched position with his head below the surrounding vegetation. A man emerged from the high grass, running straight into the blade of Teagan’s knife.

Teagan jabbed deep into the man’s sternum, twisting while holding a hand over the man’s mouth. He brought the man to the ground. Teagan stood up again, listening.

He could hear nothing, as he expected.

Minutes passed with nothing but the sounds of the rainforest in his ears. Teagan ventured through the grass wall when he heard a yelp close by. Then more shooting. Round after round. That meant panic.

Teagan moved through the grass, taking advantage of the distraction. Jenna, or parts of her, greeted him.

The top half of Jenna lay at his feet. Bloody flesh and other parts lay strewn about. Jenna’s eyes stuck open. Teagan had seen many dead. He didn’t stop for Jenna. She became another fatality, like Silas and the others.

Teagan heard someone yelling out in surprise and pain, then more gunfire.

He kept moving.

His head rang again, forcing Teagan to his knees. The explosion affected him more this time. He forced himself to his feet, gritting his teeth so hard they almost shattered.

Teagan took a few more steps. Baako came into view.

Baako lived, but not for long, missing an arm and half of his face. Teagan found him sitting against the same tree trunk.

A dead soldier lay on Baako’s lap. The soldier wore a uniform Teagan didn’t recognize. Baako had taken one of them out, despite his condition.

Baako noticed Teagan as soon as Teagan saw him.

“Run.”

Baako mouthed the word to Teagan. Gunfire continued. Frantic shooting in all directions.

*Cormac.* Teagan obeyed his commander’s last order and ran away from the commotion as fast as he could.

What to do now? Teagan considered recent events and his agonizing days at boot camp.

Because of the ambush, he couldn’t report back to HQ. He might as well shoot himself instead.

The sound of gunfire receded, fading away at last.

Teagan moved through the rainforest at lightning speed, not slowing for hours.

Not helping Baako had taken more effort than anything else Teagan had ever done, including the experiments and his training. But he followed his commander’s orders without hesitation. Baako’s training remained absolute.

Baako commanded such loyalty with his unassuming demeanor. Teagan didn’t know how. He just did.

Baako had a notion that his squad faced a threat from the inside. He had prepared every member of his team for this day. No one questioned it, whether they may have found it strange.

Should the team fall into a trap, they knew how to survive.

Teagan remembered his training.

Disappear. Become a ghost.

Get a new name.

Chapter 8

“Chertov urod. Derzhis’ podal’she!”

Marik knocked his head against the table like the woman Ramirez fed on two days ago. His legs, arms, and chest fastened to the table.

Carly didn’t like Marik all that much, but watching it happen to him brought forth anxiety and revulsion.

“Acts of violence cannot stand without consequence, Mr. Sidorov.” Sebridge let out a long breath, grinning. “Think of this as gaining empathy for your victim.”

“Net!” Spit flew from Marik’s lips as he shook his head from side to side, furious and terrified. “No!”

Joelle stood next to Carly. Justine kept a noticeable distance from Joelle and Carly.

Carly sensed Joelle’s apprehension. Joelle shifted from one foot to the other, breathing out of her mouth loud enough for Carly and Justine to hear.

Ramirez entered from the same door. He did not smile as before. Carly sensed something off, despite this being a surreal experience.

Marik strained his head, his eyes searching. Ramirez walked toward the head of the table.

“Otoydi ot menya monstr!” Marik banged his head against the table to injure himself before Ramirez could get ahold of him.

“Remember your instructions, Mr. Ramirez.” Sebridge’s relaxed demeanor contrasted with Marik’s despair.

Ramirez turned toward the one-way observation window, frowning before returning his attention to Marik.

Joelle shuddered, turning away.

“None of that, Ms. Abebe. I will not say it twice. Keep your eyes on Mr. Ramirez and his guest.”

Sebridge kept his tone relaxed.

Joelle flinched, then returned her attention to the other room.

Ramirez allowed Marik to slam his head against the table for another minute, smiling with satisfaction at his new victim’s torment. Then he grabbed Marik’s head with sudden force, holding it in place as he bent to look Marik in the eyes.

“Just a little old pal.”

Ramirez smiled. Marik’s face contorted in horror.

His eyes locked on Marik. Ramirez clenched even harder, driving the tips of his fingers into Marik’s scalp.

Marik jerked once, his body stiffening.

Ramirez straightened as he began feeding on Marik. Carly could see the pleasure Ramirez experienced on his face.

Marik drooled but like the woman. His body also did not spasm.

“That’s enough. Let him go.” Sebridge stepped forward, intent on making Ramirez obey.

Ramirez let go. Marik’s head rolled to one side, facing away from the window. His body quivered for a couple of seconds, then became still.

“He’s alive.” Ramirez backed away, combing his hands through his hair.

“Excellent. Return to your quarters.” Sebridge nodded to an attendant behind him. Ramirez exited the same door he had entered.

“You may all leave,” Sebridge gestured to the three women. “Dinner’s in about an hour. I expect civility from all.”

Joelle dashed out of the room, her hand covering her mouth. Carly looked at Sebridge, then at Justine.

Justine turned to Sebridge before leaving. “Excellent show.”

Sebridge narrowed his eyes, not expecting any comments. His cheeks reddened as Justine saw herself out.

Sebridge greeted everyone in the dining area. Carly had only seen prisoners in the cafeteria until today.

Carly did not look at Sebridge as she gathered her tray, taking her usual seat. Sebridge sat in Marik’s usual spot.

“Don’t worry. We’ll have Mr. Sidorov back in your company soon.” Sebridge waited for everyone to sit before speaking. “I know you miss him.”

Ramirez entered the room just as Sebridge finished speaking. He glanced at Sebridge in surprise, then shrugged, collecting his dinner tray as usual.

“I didn’t know his last name.” Joelle sounded like she was referring to a dead person.

Justine smiled at Sebridge, almost looking like a regular person as she did so. It turned Carly’s stomach, but she showed no reaction, continuing to shovel food into her mouth.

Sebridge returned Justine’s smile. “I want you to work on the artifact together.”

Sebridge stared at the floor.

“Things are breaking down outside and we’re running out of time.”

“What do you want us to do?” Joelle asked.

“Fix this whole clusterfuck.” Sebridge spread his hands out. “Or you aren’t much use to me.”

He stood up, shooting a brief glance at Justine. Carly thought he looked uncomfortable around her, like she unsettled him somehow.

“You begin tomorrow, first thing after breakfast.” Sebridge nodded toward Joelle and Carly before leaving.

“I, for one, am ready to get started.” Ramirez bit into his steak sandwich, unbothered by his recent interaction with Marik or anything else.

“What is it like?” Justine turned toward Ramirez.

“What is what like?”

Ramirez focused on his sandwich, uninterested in Justine.

“Feeding on someone.” Justine twirled her finger across the table where she sat, examining Ramirez as one would a lab specimen.

“Pure ecstasy.” Ramirez sat by his food, closing his eyes. “Indescribable joy.”

“Hmm.” Justine scratched the table for a moment. “I would like to know that feeling.”

“Be fed on first.” Ramirez opened his eyes, directing his gaze toward Justine. “That part is not at all pleasant.”

“How so?” Justine grinned at Ramirez.

“Ice-cold electricity pours over you. It’s pain beyond anything you can imagine.” Ramirez shivered, remembering the sensation.

“But then pure ecstasy.” Justine curled her lips up further, revealing clean white teeth.

“Yeah, when you can get it.” Ramirez looked back at his tray, pushing it away. He sat back, folding his arms across his chest. “They like to control how much I can feed. It sucks.”

“No doubt.” Justine resumed eating, satisfied with frustrating Ramirez.

Carly felt sure Justine would keep trying, but for what purpose?

“When do they let you feed Joelle?” Ramirez looked over at Joelle, still irritated.

Carly froze. She had not considered Joelle’s fate at the facility.

“Umm.” Joelle shifted her eyes between Carly, Ramirez, and Justine. “I don’t want to talk about it. Please leave me alone.”

Joelle’s cheeks flushed bright red. She buried her face in her hands and cried.

“There’s nothing you can do about it. Just survive.” Carly put a hand on Joelle’s shoulder, looking at Justine with unflinching courage. “Don’t let them fuck with your head.”

Carly realized that may have been a poor choice of words. She squeezed Joelle’s shoulder and sat back again.

“Return to your quarters.”

The cafeteria’s atmosphere grew awkward as the announcement came.

Carly rose, leaving the room while Joelle wiped her eyes.

Ramirez also left in silence.

Justine stopped by Joelle. “I envy you. Feed whenever you can.”

Joelle coughed, her throat tightening. She stared as Justine offered her a warm smile, leaving Joelle alone in the cafeteria.

She stood, remembering the announcement. Joelle took a few steps out the door.

Joelle felt relieved Sebridge had not required her to feed as a spectacle.

She knew Ramirez as his superior at the facility. Awkward, too chatty, but never dangerous. Here, his behavior changed. His manner proved sinister. Joelle didn’t understand.

She filtered his behavior as differing from her own. He embraced feeding. Made peace with it.

Joelle loathed it, despite sharing Ramirez’s bliss. She couldn’t bring herself to look at her prey and tried to get through it without emotional distress.

Joelle felt her humanity slip away like melting wax. Panic set in, yet the part of her that embraced this change grew stronger each day. Her fear mounted as she recognized a force she couldn’t resist. The sensation, both terrifying and tantalizing, threatened to consume her.

She knew it would take over.

What would she become then?

Chapter 9

"Make the pain work for you. Use it."

Cowboy sat upright, still hearing Baako.

The world spun, and Cowboy collapsed. He floated in space, weightless and free, and the stars wheeled above him.

Pain throbbed in Cowboy's head, intense and pounding like a war drum. It wrapped around his skull, crushing it in a vice grip. Stars danced in the black sky. The sensation of it crashed through his body, bringing waves of vertigo.

Cowboy grimaced as a sharp pain shot through his left shoulder blade. He ignored it and focused on the fierce headache that seemed to swell with each aching heartbeat.

How did he end up here? He found himself unable to concentrate with his brain wrapped in cotton and wool.

Something had battered him. If only he could remember how it happened, where it happened. Who attacked him?

Cowboy focused on breathing as he lay on the cool earth for an indeterminant amount of time. He checked if the sky still spun above him.

Things settled. He could keep his eyes open without becoming dizzy.

He tried sitting again. The nerve endings in his body got the message loud and clear. He had no dizziness but incredible pain in his back. He counted two broken ribs.

Cowboy's legs felt like jelly. The sensation perplexed him. Cowboy hadn't experienced aching muscles in years.

His mind told him he needed to get up. Start moving.

Cowboy waited for his body to seize or protest his movement. It didn't keep him from standing.

He took in the sight of towering trees. The sky glowed a deep, velvety black covered in innumerable stars, and a soft half-moon's glow illuminated the canopy. A chorus of crickets and frogs punctuated the quiet night.

His senses detected no immediate threats.

Instinct told him he needed food and water soon.

The mystery of his unconsciousness alarmed Cowboy. No memory of getting here troubled him more.

Cowboy realized he couldn't remember where he had been or with whom, if anybody.

His half-brother, Sam, flashed through his mind.

"Sam." Cowboy spoke the name aloud. Then he thought of Georgie.

He wanted to find his brother and his childhood caregiver alive and well. Had they remained in the swamp?

Aside from Baako, they were the only people Cowboy remembered.

His brain worked but felt sluggish. He needed to exercise caution until he could think straight and make rational decisions.

He should find Sam. Sam could help. And Georgie. Why did he think that? Why did he feel such an urgency? If only he could remember what happened. His mind spun, a clear sign of stress.

"Deena," Cowboy said the name aloud but couldn't remember to whom it belonged.

Cowboy closed his eyes, allowing his lungs to fill with oxygen. The act proved painful. He pulled in and pushed the air out with a steady rhythm.

Rolling his shoulders, Cowboy started walking. He had no particular direction in mind. He followed the easiest path.

Hours blended until the first hints of sunlight peeked over the horizon. Cowboy traveled south.

Cowboy trudged through the monotonous forest, his boots crunching against fallen leaves. He had no map and only a vague sense of direction to guide him, yet he kept walking, determined to find something beyond the endless blanket of trees. Cowboy expected to see a road or sign of civilization.

Hunger turned into a brick in his stomach. The sun's rays burned tree branches into glowing charcoal rods. Leaves on the ground became dark silhouettes. Crickets chirped one last song, greeting daylight. Cowboy swallowed hard.

Trees gave way to rock-laden open land filled with grass and scrub.

Cowboy saw a road ahead, about half a mile away. That should get him to a town, walking in either direction. He chose left, favoring east.

He wouldn't mind finding a vehicle. He could hot-wire it, provided it still had gas. Cowboy hadn't realized it, but his chosen direction took him toward Sam and Georgie.

He didn't know his location, but a road sign should give a hint.

For days, Cowboy walked along the road. He stumbled upon a few vehicles with dead batteries.

Cowboy scavenged mushrooms and berries along the way and a few half-empty water containers in vehicles. Some water had a foul odor, but he drank anyway, thirst getting the best of him.

A week into his journey, Cowboy encountered someone.

He sat by an abandoned Mercedes, coaxing the last bit of water from a plastic bottle. The sound of a vehicle brought Cowboy to his feet.

Cowboy did not hide or flee. Instinct told him to remain still. Wait for the automobile.

"You lost?" The woman rolled down her window as she stopped about ten feet away.

"No. Well, kind of." Cowboy found it challenging to speak in complete sentences, his brain still fuzzy.

"Well. I am." The woman focused on Cowboy. "You planning anything shitty?"

"No." Cowboy frowned, not getting the woman's meaning. "Are you?"

The woman laughed, holding up a pistol. "Not yet. But I will use this if you try something shady."

"No. I won't." Cowboy realized again how hungry he felt. "I could use some food. If you have any to spare. I'm starving."

"What will you give me in return?" The woman asked.

"If you let me join you, I can get you to a safe place." Cowboy grinned, despite feeling weak with hunger. "If you can spare some food."

"You look like a homeless mountain man." The woman debated what to do. "But your eyes aren't mean. I feel inclined to follow my gut and give it a shot. Get in."

Cowboy eyed the road. "Thank you."

He opened the passenger door.

"Damn, you are ripe, Mr."

The woman waved her hand. "We'll need to get you dunked in a river or somethin’."

"I look forward to that." Cowboy sat, closing the passenger door.

"My name's…" Cowboy hesitated, his mind drawing a blank. "Uh… Cowboy."

"Are you sure?" The woman's brow furrowed. "You okay?"

"Something happened to me in the woods. My head. It's a tad fuzzy." Cowboy felt awkward, not remembering his name.

"Well, I'm Lanisha." She held out her hand. "Pleasure to meet you."

Cowboy accepted Lanisha's hand. "You as well."

"Where's this safe place of yours?" Lanisha looked back at the road ahead, ready to get moving.

"It's east. You need to turn around." Cowboy looked behind them.

"I came from that direction. Lots of nasty stuff that way." Lanisha ran her fingers over the steering wheel.

"I can't imagine a safer place. My kin's there. It's out of the way. Difficult to find. Secluded." Cowboy turned his gaze on Lanisha. "We can make it."

Lanisha blew air through her mouth. "Dammit! Okay, but you better be handy in a fight."

"Let's try to avoid those." Cowboy examined the surrounding area. "Get there in one piece."

"Great idea." Lanisha turned her truck around, heading east.

"There's jerky." Lanisha pointed a finger toward the backseat. "Help yourself."

Cowboy tried not to appear famished as he forced himself to chew the jerky one piece at a time. It tasted better than anything he had ever eaten.

"Thank you," Cowboy repeated, enjoying his first food in days.

Lanisha nodded. "Yep. Next bath time for you. First chance we get."

Cowboy refrained from eating all the jerky. His stomach protested as he returned the package to the backseat with a few pieces inside.

They could find more food.

He felt relieved to find someone not dangerous.

Their trip to Louisiana may prove uneventful. Cowboy knew he held unrealistic expectations but couldn't help himself.

He needed things to turn in his favor.

Enough to find Sam.

Get to safety.

Chapter 10

“Woo-hoo! Get ‘em!”

Luke flung his flail weapon at the scrambler rushing him. The chain wrapped around the scrambler’s legs. Luke’s attacker flew forward, face skidding against the concrete floor.

Gavin drove his spear into the scrambler’s head from behind.

Two more infected appeared.

Luke pulled, trying to unwrap his armament from the first opponent’s legs before new challengers reached him.

As he watched Luke struggle, Gavin heaved his spear at the closest scrambler, hitting it in the abdomen. It kept running, but the other end of the spear caught on a pole, spinning it around into the second one.

Absent reasoning skills, they clawed and growled at each other. These berserkers sought one thing: to feed.

Luke got the chain untangled with repeated effort. He waved Gavin back, spinning his body to gain momentum. Luke flung one end toward the tangled-up scramblers.

The far end of the chain grazed one of them in the shoulder, bouncing into the other’s eye socket. Viscous matter flew from the second scrambler’s face as the chain pulverized its left eye.

A piece of eye dangled from its cheek. The thing screamed, shoving the other scrambler with enough force to knock it back onto the floor.

Gavin jumped on its chest, lunging his spear into the downed scrambler’s mouth.

Luke tried to swing his chain at the scrambler still standing, but it darted out of the way, pushing Luke into the wall and holding him there. It scratched and clawed at Luke’s shoulder, clutching his head and groaning in anticipation.

Luke wrapped his chain around the scrambler’s forearms, pushing himself off the wall with his legs. His opponent spun around as Luke yanked the chain. Its arms bound up in the chain, the scrambler couldn’t adjust its center of gravity. It wobbled, almost losing its footing.

Gavin whacked the scrambler across the face with his spear, trying to throw it further off balance. It wanted to keep itself upright as it ran sideways into the adjacent wall.

He continued running toward the scrambler. It wobbled into the wall. His spear held high, waiting for a shot. Gavin shoved his weapon through the scrambler’s cheek.

The spear exited the scrambler’s other cheek. This scrambler twisted its head back and forth. Gavin’s spear wobbled, still stuck in both cheeks. The creature swatted at both sides of the long wooden handle in a frenzy as its frustration grew.

It lunged at Gavin, catching a piece of his shirt and pulling Gavin to the ground on his side. Gavin yelled out in surprise and pain as his leg buckled at an odd angle.

Luke picked up the chain as Gavin fought to keep the scrambler’s hands off his face. He stepped next to Gavin’s attacker. Luke used his weight to drive the tangle of chains into the scrambler’s head.

It ignored Luke, fighting to reach for Gavin’s head.

Luke scooped up the chain, driving it into the scrambler’s head again. Gavin freed himself while Luke covered the thing’s face with the chain.

Luke kneed the scrambler in the ribs several times, knowing it wouldn’t have much effect, but out of options.

On his feet, Gavin pushed Luke aside as he jumped on the chain pressed against the scrambler’s head.

Gavin jumped up and down, crushing its skull.

The scrambler stopped moving. Gavin flopped on the ground, exhausted.

Luke remained sitting with his legs in front of him, depleted of energy.

Onlookers clutched the chain-link fence lining the arena, shouting and booing in a cacophony.

“Pay up, losers!” Luke recognized Clyde’s voice. He called on the losing gamblers to settle up. Clyde, the sturdy man Luke and Gavin met before their first fight, led this gang.

“Nobody leaves till all bets get settled!” Clyde would do well as the voice-over guy for a local used car dealership. His boisterous tone made Luke’s skin crawl.

Several audience members protested as everyone made their way to the betting window. Two men stood inside, armed with shotguns. Clyde held two German Shepherds on leashes where he made announcements outside the arena.

Aside from two men with shotguns, no one could possess firearms inside. Failure to comply meant death. Luke and Gavin watched one man get shot in the stomach twice for sneaking a knife inside during their previous fight.

This being their fifth fight, Luke noted that the odds of him and Gavin winning had climbed since first entering the arena. Too tired to give a damn, Luke focused on escaping this pit of death.

Any day, one of these fights would end in defeat. Millions of scramblers remained for Clyde and his posse to round up. Plenty of people like Luke and Gavin still wandering about as well.

Clyde’s gang gave new meaning to savages. They valued human life not a bit. Scramblers less.

“We gotta get out of here.” Gavin rolled over to Luke, his hamstring sending a warning signal. “I think I pulled my hamstring.”

“Shit.” Luke dropped his head between his arms. “We will.”

Gavin nodded, not confident in Luke’s assertion.

“You fellas earned a decent meal.” Enis strolled into the cage, waving pieces of paper around in the air and holding a gun. “I made bank on you shit stains tonight.”

Enis yanked his head at Luke and Gavin, showing they needed to get moving. Luke and Gavin no longer required chains. After the first brawl with scramblers, Enis informed them they would find themselves gutted and left alive to watch Clyde’s dogs eat their innards if they tried to escape.

Enis relied on the threat to ensure cooperation from Luke and Gavin.

The idea of escaping chased other thoughts out of Luke’s mind. He knew they would die as captives of Clyde’s gang. Better to die seeking freedom.

Luke helped Gavin stand. They walked out of the room ahead of Clyde.

“You got tore up in there, bucko.” Enis snorted, then sneezed. “Might be game over for ya next round.”

Neither Luke nor Gavin replied, finding it prudent to avoid conversation with Enis. Any words elicited only anger.

Luke vowed emancipation for himself and Gavin before another battle with scramblers. His mind began sorting through possibilities.

Gavin’s injury would not heal before the next fight.

Luke needed a plan, pronto.

Time ran against him.

Chapter 11

Deena heard a woman humming.

Her head ached.

"Are you waking, sweetie?"

Through murky eyelids, Deena saw the distorted image of a smiling blonde woman. Her brain refused to focus. Pressure in her temples danced around. Deena felt nauseous. She gagged, then vomited on herself.

"Damn, those tranqs were vicious!" The woman moved closer to Deena, shimmering into view.

"They should both be awake shortly."

Deena recognized this voice. Genevieve.

Her brain fog lessened. Deena remembered seeing Genevieve and the other woman on the maintenance level.

Genevieve shot her with a tranquilizer gun. She couldn't remember when. No matter. Here she sat, captive to the woman Deena hired her favorite hitman to assassinate.

The sound of footsteps and a slap to her father's face. "Wake up, Sal. Nap time's over."

"Ahh." Still dazed, a groan escaped Sal's mouth.

Genevieve slapped him again. "Snap out of it, old man!"

"Ohhh." Sal tried turning away from Genevieve. Deena figured his brain also felt muddy.

"This should wake them up."

Deena heard Genevieve's voice, then footsteps approaching. She felt a pinch, too dazed to react. Then she heard Sal cry out again nearby.

"Why are you here, Sal?" Genevieve went at Sal, impatient for answers.

Deena's extremities tingled, followed by an adrenaline surge. She coughed. Sal began coughing as well.

"Why are you here, Sal?"

As her vision cleared, Deena saw Genevieve in front of her father, who sat on the floor nearby. His and Deena's hands remained bound.

"I didn't think you made it out of the facility." Sal coughed again, clearing his throat and taking a deep breath. "I figured you wouldn't mind if you were dead."

"How charming you thought of me." Genevieve grinned at Sal, turning toward the woman Deena didn't know.

"And you brought your daughter too. How sweet." Genevieve eyed Deena with an expression both contemptuous and seductive. Deena thought she looked flattered as well.

"What to do with them?"

Deena heard the other woman speak but kept her eyes facing forward.

"Oh, I've fallen behind in my manners." Genevieve waved her hand in the air, exaggerating the spectacle. "I forgot to introduce you all to each other."

"Sal, ah Deena, isn't it?" Genevieve poked her chin toward Deena. "This is my friend Chloe."

Deena looked up at Chloe this time, keeping her expression neutral. She thought her father might talk his way out of this unfortunate situation.

"Hello, you two," Chloe said with a curtsy, offering a warm smile.

Deena noticed that Genevieve and Chloe seemed off. Maybe they got infected, which compromised their rational thinking.

"I have something for you, Genevieve." Sal coughed, clearing his throat again.

"Something for me?" Genevieve frowned at Sal, holding her scowl as she glanced in Chloe's direction.

"Yes, and you will want it. I know you will." Sal took a deep breath, feigning confidence.

"You did manage to get my security protocols for The Mountain. So, I wouldn't put it past you to have something else up your sleeve." Genevieve bent closer to Sal, curious. "Tell me what you've got."

Sal swallowed once. "A program to fix The Chamber."

With a sneer, Genevieve leaned away. She began pacing the room, hands on hips. "Please! I've had the best programmers on that thing for years, Sal. You can't possibly do what they couldn't."

"I can. Not only that, I can make it perform beyond its original design." Sal followed Genevieve with his eyes, eagerness in his voice.

Genevieve slowed her pacing, looking at Chloe. "I don't believe you. But I will give you one chance to show me. If you are lying, I will kill your daughter in front of you."

Genevieve approached Sal, leaning close with a devilish grin. "Then I will feed on you."

Sal didn't flinch. "Agreed."

Genevieve stepped behind Sal, grabbing a pair of pliers along the wall. She kneeled to cut a zip tie, holding him to the utility closet. "Get up Sal. We're off on a field trip."

Sal rubbed his wrists as he stood, using the utility closet for support. Genevieve pointed to a panel near the exit. "Keep that intercom open. Listen for me."

Chloe nodded, stepping out the door for Sal and Genevieve to exit. Genevieve paused near the exit after Sal left. "Keep her tied up. Grab a gun from that closet. Use it on her if she tries anything."

Chloe leaned in to give Genevieve a kiss. Genevieve put her hand around Chloe's head, pulling her close.

Deena kept focusing on the wall across from her. Sal's ploy worked. What now?

How long before Genevieve finds them unnecessary? Deena closed her eyes, forcing those thoughts away.

She needed to trust Sal, a challenging task under normal circumstances.

Chapter 12

"Figure out how this thing works. Use it to come up with a remedy for our global problem." Sebridge stood back from the prisoners. Everyone stood around a backlit table.

"But…" Joelle sounded flustered. "We didn't have time to understand it better."

"That's not my problem, dear." Sebridge did not hide his contempt. "You decided your fate when you accepted a paycheck from the sickos, helping them unleash the clusterfuck outside."

Joelle closed her eyes, trying not to tear up. She felt the familiar stress of her days at the facility.

"Those are your instructions. Get along. Get it working." Sebridge left the prisoners to their task.

Everyone knew the penalty for disobedience. Sebridge frightened everyone enough to ensure compliance.

Justine leaned over the artifact. "I only saw it in person once after they brought it to life."

The artifact sat atop the large conference table, a dim reflection of how Joelle remembered seeing it.

"We need to power it up. I don't know how they did it." Ramirez shrugged his shoulders, looking at Joelle.

"Yes, I know the basics of it." Joelle coughed to settle her nerves. "But I wasn't hands-on getting it powered up."

"You walk us through it. We are quick learners." Marik stood farthest away, either afraid or not trusting himself to not strangle Ramirez.

"It's not that simple." Joelle scratched her neck. She felt bumps form as her anxiety increased. "I only know the general process. Not the specifics. Mistakes with this thing are dangerous."

Carly put a hand on Joelle's arm. "Take a breath. Tell us what you can. We'll start there."

Justine took a dismissive tone. "Get yourself together. You cannot be this ignorant."

"Ignore her." Carly squeezed Joelle's arm. "Walk us through what you can."

"I heard some about it." Ramirez kept his eyes on the artifact, feeling fear and excitement. "Maybe I can fill in some gaps."

"They tried so many times to get it working. I don't know who knew it was possible. But someone did." Joelle placed her hands on the table, leaning closer to the artifact. "There were a lot of mistakes. Many processes were written and rewritten."

"Yeah, a few of the lead scientists talked about it occasionally." Ramirez closed his eyes, searching for any details he could remember. "They used a modulating low voltage pulse… something about speeding up and slowing the amperage at the same time…" Squeezing his eyes tight, Ramirez lowered his head, frowning.

"We need to confuse it into working." Justine walked back to the table. "It came alive when we confused it. That's what Belinka told me."

Joelle nodded, looking at Carly, then at Justine. "That's it. It had to be tricked."

"Great. We turn on a knob to control the electricity." Marik rubbed his hands together, eager to get started.

"Umm. People died trying to activate this thing." Ramirez's condescending tone earned a scowl from Marik, but he recovered his relaxed expression.

"The quantum computer gave them the correct sequence." Joelle said, remembering details from listening to Ramirez and Justine.

"Sebridge got it too. We have it at our disposal." Ramirez looked pleased, knowing another detail no one else did. "I know how the interface works. We'll look at the history logs to see what happened."

"How long will it take?" Carly felt Joelle's anxiety. Like Marik, she wanted to get started.

"I gotta find the correct log entries first. Then see if Joelle or Justine can help interpret the information." Ramirez glanced at the clock. "A few hours, maybe longer."

"We have nothing to do until lunch." Marik avoided eye contact but recovered his courage. "Get working, Ramirez."

Carly found it odd hearing Marik use Ramirez's name. Being traumatized by Ramirez softened him. Carly didn't trust it, however. She knew Marik. He hadn't given up on breaking free.

"Please, Ramirez. We need you to find it. All our lives depend on delivering results for Sebridge." Carly thought Ramirez would accept her encouragement over anything Marik said.

"I'll get started on it." Ramirez glanced around. "Hmm, maybe Justine and Joelle could assist. Knowing the lead scientists might help with searching for keywords."

"Great." Marik shifted his attention away from the conference table. "Carly and I will take inventory of supplies."

Carly frowned at Ramirez, then stepped away to work with Marik.

Marik kept watch on Ramirez and the two women as Carly approached him. She saw a flash of hatred on Marik's face, but it vanished.

"I know you don't like him, but try to get along with him." Carly took on a conspiratorial tone, figuring it would lower Marik's defenses.

"I will." Marik sounded professional for a second, then lowered his voice. "He will pay later."

Carly wanted to know if Marik needed to feed like Ramirez. She thought it too soon to ask.

"I will call out items. You write." Marik handed Carly a digital tablet.

Carly accepted the tablet, nodding to Marik. "Works for me."

Sebridge wanted to build tension among the prisoners, Carly knew. She could see the strategy working. If they lacked trust as a group, that meant less chance of hatching devious plans.

Marik also recognized the dynamic Sebridge wanted to create. Since all conversations in the lab came under scrutiny, she couldn't speak about it with Marik or anyone else.

Hushed tones or whispering involved risk. That behavior drew unwanted attention. Carly could see cameras monitoring the room. If Sebridge wanted, he could interrogate any of them at his convenience. Conformity remained vital in this environment.

"They will move us one day." Marik changed the subject between calling out items in a wall cabinet. "The sickos will force everyone to leave."

"Maybe not all of us." Marik glanced toward Ramirez again. "If we don't show our worth."

Carly wanted to know how Sebridge determined the prisoners' worth. "We don't know his criteria, so it's useless to speculate."

"Whoever can get that thing working." Marik puffed out his chest, retrieving an item from the cabinet. "It will require being brave. Fearless."

"So certain death, or possible death." Carly used a stylus to write the item's name and quantity. "Fantastic."

"I will be fearless." Marik moved on to the next cabinet. "He will not shoot me."

Carly looked over at Ramirez and the others standing around a computer terminal. Her subconscious mind ranked their value. Like Marik, she would need something to distinguish herself.

Carly hated being held captive and a pawn but wanted to live. She needed to keep playing Sebridge's game long enough to get away.

Carly felt confident she could manage the task.

Chapter 13

“Jesus.” Lanisha depressed the brake pedal. “That’s brutal.”

Cowboy and Lanisha watched as two wolves cornered a third. These infected predators brutalized the other wolf, one latching onto its hind leg. The other sank sharp teeth into the victim’s midsection. Eerie howls reverberated through the air.

The injured wolf yelped, then growled as it tried biting the nearest attacker.

The altered predators subdued their target in less than a minute, sinking fangs into the animal’s head. Their eyes blazed with manic hunger as sparkling saliva dripped to the ground.

“Should we drive past?” Lanisha shivered, then looked toward Cowboy.

“Yeah, gun it. They’ll move.” Cowboy sounded confident.

The hounds retreated as Lanisha got within twenty feet.

“Huh. Didn’t expect that.” Lanisha eyed the wild dogs in her rearview mirror.

“I had a feeling they would.” Cowboy kept his eyes forward. “Just a gut feeling.”

“Have you seen anyone do that?”

“I really don’t remember. I can’t tell you why.”

“You must have got messed up.”

Cowboy heard Lanisha, but his thoughts drifted into snippets from the past. He saw people or places. They faded in and out. Nothing stayed long enough to focus.

“Do you remember anything about the woods? What got you?” Lanisha kept her voice casual, not wanting to make Cowboy defensive.

“I can almost see it for a second, then it disappears.” Cowboy said. “I keep trying to get it back.”

“Not trying to force anything...” Lanisha licked her lips. “I’m a superb listener. Sometimes saying things aloud, even if they make no sense, can connect the dots.”

“I see a muscular thing. Just the shadow of it. A purple glow. Then I feel a headache coming on if I try holding the image.”

Lanisha considered Cowboy’s description. “Sounds like a person. Not an animal.”

“I think so. Yes, a person, I mean.” Cowboy didn’t expect Lanisha’s idea to work, but the image became more precise.

“It is a woman. I think.” Cowboy closed his eyes, trying to see more. “She’s misshapen. Hungry, but not for food...”

Lanisha slammed on the brakes. “Oh, shit!”

Cowboy’s hands hit the dashboard. “What is it?”

He didn’t need Lanisha to answer.

Men and women holding weapons stood in front of vehicles facing Lanisha’s car.

“Give me your gun.” Cowboy sat back. “I’ll handle them.”

“I only have the pistol.” Lanisha grabbed her revolver, a thirty-eight snub nose. “Cylinder’s got five in it. Got a box of bullets. That’s it.”

“It’ll be enough.” Cowboy accepted Lanisha’s pistol.

She hunted around in the backseat. “Here. That’s all the bullets.”

“Back up till you’re out of sight. Don’t get out for anyone.”

“What? Why? Lanisha tensed as Cowboy left the vehicle.

Lanisha saw people ahead, pointing in her direction as Cowboy ran across the highway and into the bushes.

Lanisha peeled out in reverse. A woman raised a gun and fired at her. The bullet bounced off Lanisha’s hood. A second shot missed. Lanisha cursed, turning to watch behind her.

She came around a curve and stopped.

Some people at the roadblock moved into the trees.

Lanisha heard two gunshots. People on the road began yelling. One of them took a blind shot into the woods. More yelling followed. The two who ran into the woods did not answer their comrades.

One of them looked at Lanisha. He disappeared behind the blockade.

“Shit.” Lanisha felt her anxiety skyrocket. “Fucker’s gonna sneak up on me.”

Lanisha didn’t know whether to drive away or stay put. She hit the steering wheel in frustration.

Lanisha heard another shot, this one fainter. The people standing along the blockade vanished.

The sound of multiple gunshots followed. She heard more yelling. More shooting.

Lanisha brushed her fingertips along the steering wheel, tapping her feet. She felt the urge to speed off in the opposite direction. “Dammit, Cowboy! Hurry.”

Someone appeared between two vehicles, running in Lanisha’s direction. Another shot, and the woman fell.

Then quiet. No voices. No guns.

Several minutes passed in unnerving silence.

Lanisha flinched as she heard a tap on the car’s trunk. She saw Cowboy.

Lanisha unlocked the doors.

“It’s over.” Cowboy didn’t appear winded. “Let’s drive up. Collect their guns and ammo.”

“You killed them?” Lanisha didn’t believe Cowboy. “All of them?”

“Yeah, including the one that took off in the woods to flank you.” Cowboy winked. “Let’s go.”

“Unbelievable. Fucking crazy.” Lanisha drove forward. “How did you take them all out?”

“With not much difficulty, it seems.” Cowboy didn’t sound surprised. That made Lanisha uneasy. Who did she invite along for the ride?

“Help me collect the weapons.” Cowboy paused for Lanisha.

“Yeah, I guess. Why not?” Lanisha looked at Cowboy. “Who are you?”

“I’m trying to remember.” Cowboy stepped out. Lanisha followed.

Time to collect their bounty.

Chapter 14

He watched one of them attack the other, starvation driving its behavior.

A group of thirty scramblers had found Roger, but they couldn’t see him. Roger hid in the small attendant’s office, located among four parallel rows of covered gas pumps.

Bulletproof tinted glass separated Roger from the dangerous things outside. He did not know how, but they gravitated to his position. He felt sure of it.

As it circled the convenience store/pay station, one scrambler became enraged. It jumped on another scrambler, pulling it down like any uninfected victim.

The scramblers circling Roger ignored the one’s cannibalistic behavior. Roger found it disturbing and comforting. They could take each other out and lose interest in him.

Done feeding, the cannibal scrambler got up, stumbling like a drunk before rejoining the others.

Roger studied it, seeing if it would take an interest in another of its kind. He noticed it no longer moved like the others. Its limbs did not jerk, and it did not search the sky.

The thing walked more humanlike. Less animalistic. Less creepy.

Roger could see its eyes. Not the pupils of an average person. Glazed, yet somehow radiant, its eyes matched the other infected.

Roger did not fancy inviting it in for a chat or sharing a candy bar.

He thought of the family rescued from outlaws two weeks ago. Roger figured the odds of the parents killing their infected son or getting infected by the boy. He bet on the parents’ turning. They loved their child. The mother, at least, handed herself over by allowing the boy to feed on her.

Roger remembered the mother and child he shot in the trailer park. He felt relief not being a father. In this environment, children proved a liability.

Roger lowered himself to the floor behind the sales counter. Sleep overtook him, accompanied by vivid and disturbing dreams. Seconds before jerking awake, Roger fled a deranged, winged chimpanzee as it screamed at him in the voice of his long-dead mother. He sat, allowing his mind to wake up from a fucked-up version of Oz.

When he clutched the bottom shelf beside him, Roger’s stiff muscles informed him they disapproved of his sleeping arrangements. It took a moment to stand.

Roger yawned loud enough to startle himself, covering his mouth in surprise. A scrambler passing the front window paused, looking in. It couldn’t see through the thick tinting, but Roger recoiled in fear.

Roger took several deep breaths. He chuckled, feeling ridiculous about his reaction. Not sleeping well for days, Roger wondered how long before he started talking to himself.

Would he become one of those muttering nutcases?

Roger looked outside. Thick, tinted windows lined the back wall. He enjoyed a panoramic vantage point.

Four more dead scramblers lay on the ground. It took Roger two seconds to find the one he had watched feed. It stood next to the back door. Roger swore he saw a quizzical expression on its face.

It couldn’t understand the doorknob’s function but seemed to remember it related to getting inside. Roger locked the door, but this scrambler’s behavior alarmed him. It exhibited behavior a step above mindless.

It could pose a challenge when trying to make a break for it.

Roger took inventory of his food and water rations. Four candy bars, a bag of chips, and a package of red licorice remained on the shelves. Roger counted four pint-sized bottles of water.

This six feet by six feet cubicle offered no wiggle room. It became toasty in the afternoon, with minimal ventilation provided by holes in the glass for talking to customers.

Aside from that, Roger used the corner farthest from him to handle bathroom duties. The smell grew after a few uses. It would get unbearable in the heat.

Hydration took priority over the food situation. He urinated often. Roger made a number two deposit on one occasion.

Safety from scramblers would compete with wanting to escape this shit-stinking hot box.

Roger knew the infected hung around after finding a food source. They wouldn’t wander away soon. The cannibal amongst them might make his escape easier, but it would still pose a threat. A scrambler possessing thinking skills.

Maybe it lost its taste for humans after feeding on its own kind. Roger hesitated to test this theory in real life.

Sleep deprivation and heat stress from holding up inside the pay station triggered nightmares. Roger awoke in late afternoon, the cooling effect of nightfall at least three hours away.

Roger took another deep breath, reminded again of his body waste nearby. He could not risk escaping in daylight with this many scramblers. Roger doubted the night provided an advantage.

They didn’t rely on sight. Roger saw the group heading in his direction before entering the building. They still found him.

He needed an escape plan. They may not leave before he needed to get out.

Too hot to sleep, Roger sat on the floor again, seeking its coolness. He reached for the bottled water, unscrewed the top, and took a long sip.

Roger gasped when something banged against the back window. He stood up to investigate. The semi-thinking scrambler had thrown something at the window. Roger watched the scrambler retrieve the item and chuck it again.

This time Roger could see the broken cement brick. The piece bounced off the window, falling to the ground. He didn’t think half a cement brick would break the window, but the sound of it hitting glass unnerved him.

“Fucking asshole.” Roger watched the scrambler retrieve the fallen object to throw it at the window a third time.

Dangerous and obnoxious, it continued throwing the brick and then retrieving it. It gave up and resumed trying to understand the doorknob’s purpose. Roger found the scrambler’s confusion humorous.

As he sat on the floor, Roger willed the coolness below into his body.

He needed to escape this death trap.

Chapter 15

Luke held up the key as they heard Enis outside the door.

"Remember, get close to the lock. Try to do it without anyone noticing."

Gavin yanked his head up in a nod. His knee felt tender from their last cage match.

"Show time shit…" Enis coughed mid-sentence. "… stains!" He recovered his composure. "Get moving."

Gavin and Luke stood before Enis entered. Gavin did his part to avoid limping. He and Luke detested how Enis took pleasure in tearing into them while providing an escort to their probable death.

"Got a bunch a'ol'baddies for ya taday." Enis danced around, giggling like a child. "Probably your last hurrah."

"Probably." Luke knew better. He couldn't help it.

"Shut your hole!" Enis shoved Luke from behind. "Stupid shit."

Luke kept walking, a grin on his face. Enis lacked muscle, and his shove had little behind it.

For emphasis, Enis grabbed Luke and Gavin's chains before entering the cage and led them in like a lion tamer at the circus.

The crowd swelled this afternoon. Screams, curses, and solicitations greeted the two captives' ears. Several people banged fists along the fence, hooting and whistling.

Luke ignored the depravity of human character. *A reset of everything needed to happen.* Luke thought, too tired and angry to care.

"Last call for bets!" Clyde held a megaphone against his mouth. "Thirty seconds till all betting's closed!" He waddled around the arena like a duck.

Enis dropped the chains, holding his arms up like a conquering warrior. The crowd ate it up, hollering louder still.

Gavin shook his head, echoing Luke's thoughts.

"These fuckers'll get what's comin to 'em." Gavin leaned close to Luke, favoring his healthy leg. "We're getting out today."

Luke nodded, studying the onlookers for any sign of humanity. He saw none.

Many of them would die this afternoon. Or get turned. Luke didn't care. They deserved their fate.

"Let's get it on!" Clyde moved his arms, eliciting yet another series of yells and shouts of profanity.

The scramblers emerged into the cage as the door rolled up.

Turning toward it, Luke and Gavin readied themselves for the onslaught.

They couldn't hear the scramblers coming over the crowd's roar. Four darted out, getting tangled up in the confined space.

Two more ran into them from behind. They ran straight over the others on the ground, heading for Gavin, like they could sense his injury.

Neither paid any attention to Luke as he stepped to the side. He wound the jagged metal chain in his hand for a big swing across one of the scrambler's faces.

Luke contacted the thing's chin, spinning it around into the other scrambler as it reached for Gavin.

Gavin spun around, wincing in pain. He pulled his chain up, wrapping it around the other scrambler's neck as the other ran into it sideways.

Gavin used the scrambler he choked as a shield to keep a distance between himself and the other scramblers who had got to their feet and closed the distance to their intended prey.

Luke dispatched the first one to reach him by shoving the bar into its mouth as it ran at him. Luke twisted his hips, sending it to the ground. He yanked out the bar, which sliced through the back of his target's skull as it fell.

Another scrambler reached around the one Gavin used as a shield, grabbing a fistful of hair. Gavin yelled in pain as he ducked, a clump of hair tearing out of his scalp.

Gavin jerked his head for a second to get his position relative to the gate leading from the ring to the spectator area. While making his way toward the scrambler, he tugged at the chain still around its neck and began pulling it backward.

Luke moved away from Gavin, causing three scramblers to follow him in the opposite direction.

He tried to keep one in front of the other two. Luke jabbed at the closest one's head, trying to puncture its eye sockets. He tore up its face. Onlookers cheered in response, reveling in the carnage.

The other two got around the first. One lunged for Luke's feet. The other bull rushed Luke, clawing at the air, trying to grab hold of any part of him its fingers could find.

Luke brought one knee down on top of the one at his feet, holding its head against the ground. He swiped his bar through the air across the throat of the one above him. Blood flew from its throat, disorienting it.

Luke stood, driving his bar through the side of the other one's head, twisting it out again.

Gavin's back pressed against the fence. The scrambler he choked clawed and snapped, trying to twist around to face Gavin, but he held it tight with the chain.

He bent backward, using the gate as leverage. Gavin almost dropped the key as he dug it out of his pants. Gavin, screaming in pain, turned toward the gate, hoisting the scrambler he held off the ground.

He shoved the key into the lock to keep the gate closed. It stuck, but Gavin held the lock as he torqued it with all his might. The key broke off as it opened.

Gavin pulled on the gate to loosen the chain holding it.

Spectators near the gate screamed as Gavin let go of the chain, releasing his scrambler as it faced the open gate.

As Gavin opened the gate, four other scramblers rushed into the fighting area.

Luke and Gavin moved away from the gate, pulling it open to give the scramblers a clear path out of the cage.

As Luke expected, the scramblers ignored Luke and Gavin, seeing feeding opportunities outside the open fence.

It took less than three seconds for all the infected to reach the audience. They pulled down anyone they could, feasting on the unarmed.

Luke grabbed Gavin by the shoulder for support. They followed the escaped scramblers, making a B-Line for the exit door near the arena gate.

Gavin hobbled beside Luke to the exit door. Luke flung it open, getting Gavin outside before closing it shut. He pushed a barrel in front of the entrance to hold it shut just as someone began screaming to get out. Luke and Gavin could see hands moving along the door's edge.

"Quick. That way." Luke said to Gavin. They ran along the building's side.

About two minutes later, they reached the back of an old junkyard full of vehicles and machinery in various states of decay.

Running across a small dirt road and field beyond, Luke and Gavin didn't look back.

They escaped certain death and regained their freedom.

Freedom to face dangers on the outside.

Chapter 16

"That'll do it." Cowboy cranked the old pickup's engine. It sputtered and puffed, coming to life.

"I really fucking hate leaving my car." Lanisha frowned, glancing back at her car. "It's been so good to me."

"Change can be healthy." Cowboy grinned sideways. "Sides, it's our only option."

Lanisha's car began sputtering hours ago, dying within a hundred feet of a truck stop.

Cowboy spotted the truck. It took a few minutes to get it running.

"We got a lot of stuff off those bandits." Cowboy joined Lanisha, looking back to the car. "We can drive over and get it."

"That thing probably gets terrible gas mileage." Lanisha pointed her thumb at the truck. "Won't get us far."

"Farther than walking." Cowboy got into the driver's seat, waiting for Lanisha. They drove to her car, collecting all usable items and resuming their journey ten minutes later.

"Are you remembering anything else yet?"

Cowboy pursed his lips, thinking of how to answer. Vivid memories of seeing Baako sitting against the tree trunk, mutilated and dying, crept through his mind. Cowboy recalled this incident over the past two days. It returned to him unbidden and unwanted.

"My commander. I found him dying, but still alive." Cowboy couldn't remember why.

"Recently?" Lanisha saw Cowboy struggling to remember and forget at the same time.

"No. At least, I don't think so." Cowboy shook his head, ready to give up.

"Maybe try to think of something else. Give yourself a break from that one." Lanisha stretched, finding the bucket seat spacious.

"If only it were that easy." Cowboy's eyes darted away as if doing so would throw his brain off the scent of Baako's death.

"Return to the strange woman. What else can you see happening?" Lanisha felt her eyelids getting heavier.

*Cormac.* That name. Someone connected to Baako. Another member of his team? Cowboy couldn't place it but knew Cormac meant something to him.

Lanisha's head began bobbing. She recovered, rubbing her eyes, but the urge to sleep overwhelmed her.

"Get some rest. I can handle driving for a while." Cowboy stroked the steering wheel, feeling the truck's vibrations traveling into his hands.

Lanisha curled next to the passenger door, allowing herself to drift off. Cowboy could hear her snoring after a couple of minutes.

Baako's face returned. Cowboy took a breath, pushing Baako away. He tried rewinding from the image of his commander. He could hear guns shooting around him. They came under attack. But more too.

Something got them running. They retreated. From what?

*Teagan*.

Cowboy heard a voice in his head. It remembered his name. Teagan. Teagan died. But why?

Whose voice said his name? Cowboy knew that voice. It belonged to Cormac. Cormac lived. How did Cormac fit in?

Baako's voice came into his mind. Baako told him to do something. Told him to run.

Cowboy remembered running. Everyone else died. He remained alive. Why did Teagan disappear? Details eluded him.

He sucked in air, eyeing the fuel gauge. Half a tank. That would give them anywhere between 200-250 miles before needing gas or another vehicle.

*Teagan*. Cowboy pressed the brake pedal, hearing the voice in his head once more. Lanisha stirred but did not wake. This time, he knew with no doubt. Someone called Cowboy, and he knew that someone.

Cowboy applied slow pressure to the gas pedal, his mind working to understand how Cormac could reach him this way.

Cowboy thought his head sustained more damage than he realized back in the woods.

Memories foggy and uncertain, this possibility sat with him for a while as he drove. Cowboy thought of how he handled the bandits a few days past. The fight required drawing on his mental faculties and coordination. They did not fail him. That ruled out brain damage.

Could Cormac reach him through telepathy? Could Cowboy do the same?

Cowboy tried answering in his mind. *Cormac?*

Nothing happened. Maybe not telepathy. Cowboy frowned, trying again.

*Cormac*.

Cowboy counted the passing seconds in silence.

*Yes. It's me.*

Cowboy tried responding, but overwhelming fatigue settled upon him. His vision blurred. He felt light-headed.

Cowboy pulled off the road.

"What happened?" Lanisha awoke, looking worried.

"Nothing." Cowboy did not feel ready to unload his experience on Lanisha. "I need to rest my eyes for a minute."

"Maybe we both should. We can drive later." Lanisha fell back asleep.

He hadn't seen her sleep much. Cowboy thought she must feel comfortable enough to lower her guard and allow her body to relax.

He rolled down his window, listening. Cowboy heard chirping, but nothing out of the ordinary. The afternoon sun hid behind a thin layer of clouds. Soft wind greeted his face.

He leaned back in the seat, closing his eyes.

His mind may clear after a nap.

Chapter 17

Roger tried standing, but his backside went numb during sleep. Two attempts got him to his knees.

On his third night sleeping in the aforementioned shit-stinking hot box, Roger noticed the putrid odor of his own waste.

Sunlight peeked through outside. Some remained shadowed, obscuring Roger’s view.

Roger saw no scramblers. Maybe they wandered off.

Roger knew better than to rely on magical thinking. He would wait a few hours before abandoning his foul refuge.

Sleep offered a break from the smell. The tedium of staying awake and smelling stink with each breath tested Roger‘s patience. He couldn’t stay here much longer.

Roger had one unopened water, a half-drank bottle, one candy bar, and half a package of red licorice. Enough for the day, but he didn’t intend to stay that long.

The sound of a bird singing greeted Roger. The thick glass offered excellent soundproofing. Not a priority. Roger wanted to hear outside.

This area looked abandoned when Roger arrived, and he saw no recent human activity. Aside from the scramblers, Roger found himself alone.

By hour two, Roger tapped his toes and used the small counter as a drum set. His mind drifted to random past events. Roger tried devising a plan for what to do, but his brain wouldn’t cooperate. He lacked sleep and calories.

Roger scanned around again, deciding to take his chances. He scooped up his remaining food and water.

Roger tensed and opened the door, preparing to slam it shut. He saw no threats.

“Getting paranoid, old man.” Roger said to himself. It didn’t feel crazy. Crazy people thought that too.

The parking lot of this generic strip mall featured a few damaged storefronts. The town’s main road sat to his left. Two vandalized cars. Someone smashed all the windows in both vehicles. Glass sparkled in the sunlight around the derelict frames.

Roger stepped away from the pay station, feeling tremendous relief breathing fresh air again.

If the scramblers started cannibalizing each other, the number of infected would dwindle. Massive destabilization had already occurred. Bandits, outlaws, criminals, and worse, blazed a path of carnage.

Thinking about both things, Roger ran from the pay station to the sidewalk. His body tingled. Roger felt uncomfortable in the open. He needed to get somewhere out of sight.

Roger didn’t eat or sleep well on the run, taxing his body and mind. Other people brought challenges, but facing chaos alone drove a person to the edge.

Arlene flashed through Roger‘s mind as he examined a broken storefront. This fashionable boutique catered to upscale pet owners. Roger looked inside. He saw a small bag he could use to keep his meager belongings.

Shattered pieces of glass littered the ground from the store’s big display window. Someone smashed the glass door into the shop. Roger pulled the door open.

Short aisles made it possible to see the entire store. A cash register and a couple of desks stood in the back. Roger saw another door leading to a storage area.

Glass crunched under his feet as Roger searched for items.

He spotted a nylon handbag advertising, “Bring your furry friend too!” The duffle provided transparent sides with breathing holes on both ends.

Roger grabbed it, tearing off the packaging and placing his items inside. He looked for pet food, ignored by vandals and looters. Two medium-sized bags of dry cat food sat on one shelf. Roger preferred dog food but took cat food.

His travel case didn’t provide enough room for both bags. He ripped the top off one bag and poured the cat food into the case, pouring it around his human food and bottled water.

Roger spotted two plastic garbage bags on the floor next to the cashier counter. Roger walked over to pick up one sack. He spotted a blue backpack on top of one desk. It looked roomy enough to hold one bag of cat food.

“That’ll work.” Roger grinned, feeling more comfortable talking to himself than when he left the pay station a few minutes ago.

He might worry if he graduated to mumbling nonsense syllables. However, doing so meant his mental faculties deteriorated beyond giving a damn.

Roger heard an inhuman growl from outside.

Roger held still as he peeked outside. He recognized the cannibal scrambler. It looked like a scrambler, except for its face. The average scrambler had no facial expressions. This one’s face contorted with anger.

It fed on the other group members or wandered out of sight. Roger didn’t know or care. He felt exposed. Roger could reach the door behind him before the cannibal scrambler grabbed him. An exit door beyond would allow him to escape unseen.

Roger prepared to run.

He looked at the scrambler. It looked straight at him. Because of the bright sun outside, Roger thought it might not see him. He remembered these creatures relied on another method to find prey.

The scrambler’s focus seemed intense. It must sense prey within. In seconds, the thing would rush him.

An engine sound reached his ears before a suburban sped across the parking lot. It smashed into the scrambler at high speed.

This scrambler’s body folded up like a hinge, the top half slamming into the hood. It stuck to the hood as the suburban skidded to a stop, scrambler falling to the pavement. The suburban pulled forward again, driving over its neck. Eyes popping out of their sockets, the scrambler continued opening and closing its mouth as the suburban drove toward Roger.

The driver pulled up, window rolled down.

“You need a hand?”

It sounded like an old woman.

“Decide. I ain’t gonna wait all day!”

Roger ran. He grabbed the passenger door, hopping inside.

“Maybe you are smarter than you look.”

Roger could see the driver. A woman. An older woman, at least in her seventies.

“Name’s Claudia.”

“Roger.” He shut the door. “Pleasure. Thank you.”

Claudia accepted Roger‘s hand, shaking the tips of his fingers. “Let’s get outta here. A few others followed that one.”

Claudia pointed to the parking lot’s far side. Roger saw members of the old band. The cannibal in their midst hadn’t fed on all of them.

Claudia floored the gas, causing the large vehicle to jerk forward. Roger grabbed the armrest, leaning into the door.

“You handy in a fight? There’s ruffians about. I’m tryin’ to get to a place where it’s safe.” Claudia jumped the curb, bouncing the suburban onto the main road and speeding up.

“I can be. Yes.” Roger saw the remaining scramblers give chase.

“I saw you head into that gas shack a few days ago. Decided to help you after my food ran out. Figured we could help each other.” Claudia swerved to avoid an abandoned car. Roger‘s head bounced off the passenger side window.

“I appreciate it.” Roger rubbed his head, feeling his back muscles tense. “I think we can slow down. I don’t see ‘em anymore.”

Claudia slowed. “Young man, you look wiped.”

Roger felt Claudia‘s eyes giving him a once over. “I’ve been here for a while. Not much sleep or food.”

“I hear that.” Claudia‘s tone showed she understood Roger‘s haggard appearance.

“You said you knew of a place.” Roger wanted details about the place offering safety. He felt desperate for shelter.

“Yes, I did.” Claudia sounded guarded. “A friend of mine from many years ago founded a town. He was one of those doomsdayers you hear about.”

“I see.” Roger regretted his lack of preparation. “And they’re accepting new residents?”

“Well.” Claudia leaned toward Roger. “They’re accepting me. You are with me, so they’ll accept you too.”

“Thank you.” Roger felt genuine gratitude. He also felt apprehensive, remembering his experiences with Jesse. He decided not to share his reservations with Claudia.

“Sound too good to be true?” Claudia sensed Roger holding back his skepticism. “Like a scam?”

“What?” Roger didn’t know how, but Claudia read him. “I came from a community. It got overrun.”

“This place might be great or not.” Claudia didn’t beat around the bush. “Compared to out here, I’ll chance it.”

“Me too.” Roger nodded.

He would take anything over the shit-stinking hot box.

Chapter 18

"I don't think they're comin'." Gavin sat on a couch by the front door. Luke woke to find him there. Gavin did not look rested.

"Did you sleep?"

Luke worried about Gavin. He thought Gavin suffered from PTSD. Luke did, but it didn't present the same.

The cage haunted Gavin. The horrors inside woke him three nights in a row.

His body twisted, and sweat poured as he screamed. It took strenuous effort to calm himself. Rage and fear awakened Gavin from nightmares he couldn't escape. Gavin refused to confront that terror again, so he stayed awake.

"Some. Not really."

Gavin shuddered, rolling his shoulders. "I keep getting up. I keep moving. Don't want to fall asleep."

"You were supposed to wake me. We agreed to take turns keeping watch." Luke did his part not to sound irritated. "We both need to keep our wits. Stay sharp."

"I know. Next time, I will. I couldn't sleep last night." Gavin stretched, then pulled back the curtain. "It's been quiet all night."

"I don't think they're looking for us." Luke wanted to support Gavin. "We should check out that used car lot. Might be a car."

"Speedy's Super Deals?" Gavin let the curtain fall. "Your job is your credit!" Gavin said in his finest used car voice.

"Yeah, that one." Luke saw Gavin hadn't lost his sense of humor. That could be a person's most effective coping mechanism. "You up for it?"

"Sure." Gavin tossed a wooden bat at Luke. "Where we gonna go?"

"I would like to put some space between us and Clyde. Thought you would like that idea." Luke twirled the bat around, trying to balance it in one hand.

"I do. I hate those fuckers." Gavin made a face. "Can't get too far away."

Gavin eyed Luke for a moment before speaking.

"How are you feeling about your dad? I know that was tough. You had no time to process."

"I'm fine. It's tough. But I'm fine."

"Liar." Gavin could see Luke hiding his pain. "I know it hurts. But it wasn't your fault. You did nothing wrong."

"It doesn't feel that way." Luke realized losing his father dulled the trauma of being abducted and fighting scramblers. The captivity blunted his reaction to losing his father. "I guess I feel numb about the whole thing."

Gavin put his arms around Luke. "I'm here if you ever need to talk. Just wanted you to know."

"I'm here too," Luke said.

Luke put his hands on Gavin's face, drawing him closer. Gavin didn't resist.

Luke met Gavin's lips with his own. They stood like that for several moments, uncertain of each other's feelings.

"It's okay." Gavin stepped close to Luke.

Luke didn't care about anything else. He wanted to feel something real.

Luke and Gavin embraced again, this time abandoning any reservations. Gavin pulled Luke's shirt over his head, rubbing his chest and stomach as they kissed.

He ran his hands along Luke's back, feeling the rough scars that ran up and down like a map of battles hard won. Luke gasped as Gavin's mouth closed around his nipple, sending a thrill of pleasure through his body. With each touch, Luke felt his physical and emotional walls crumble.

They spent the next hour forgetting burdens of the outside world and finding comfort in each other.

Gavin slept afterward. Luke didn't wake him. Gavin needed rest.

Gavin roused after midday. He found Luke on the couch.

"Are you okay?" Gavin didn't know how Luke felt about their intimacy.

"Yes. I feel better. Thank you. I needed that." Luke realized he felt less stressed.

"I'm glad." Gavin relaxed. "Me too. I enjoyed it as well."

"I could tell." Luke let out a breath. He winked at Gavin.

Gavin laughed, shaking his head. "We still gonna try for a car?"

"Yeah, we better move. Daylight's goin' fast." Luke jumped up, grabbing the wooden bat.

It's a little way, I think. Maybe an hour." Gavin opened the front door, checking for any dangers lurking outside. "We should have plenty of time."

"It's not quite an hour." Luke figured thirty minutes."

"We'll see." Gavin saw no movement outside.

Gavin didn't trust his instincts. Clyde's ambush caused him to second-guess himself. Luke recognized Gavin's hesitation.

Leaving the house didn't phase him, but Gavin became uber-cautious on the street. More than once, he grabbed Luke's arm to stop him.

"You're twitchy."

Luke spoke up after a while. "I get it. Clyde's guys got one over on us."

"Why doesn't it bother you more?" Gavin tensed like he expected Clyde's gang to appear without warning.

Luke said his first thought. "Maybe it should bother me. I haven't allowed myself to think about it."

"Wish I could do that." Gavin grew envious, unable to bury his trauma.

"I'm not saying my strategy's better. I don't know how else to cope." Luke squeezed Gavin's arm. "Bottling things up gets me through the day."

"You're right." Gavin started walking. "I need to figure that out, too."

They exchanged a few words on the way to Speedy's. It took forty-five minutes to reach the place. Gavin did not pay attention, relieved to arrive without incident.

Damaged vehicles had broken windows and body dents caused by looters.

A blue Ford Escort sat in back, untouched by looters.

Gavin and Luke pushed open the broken door of the log cabin to find keys to the vehicle. Looters ravaged the place.

Luke spotted a metal cabinet next to the restroom. The cabinet hung open with key holders empty. Two sets of unlabeled keys remained.

"I found some that might work." Luke said as Gavin rummaged through drawers in one desk behind the sales counter.

"Great. I found a knife." Gavin held up a pocket knife. "We should be safe with this."

"Yeah, nobody will mess with us for sure." Luke grinned as he walked outside, heading toward the Escort.

Neither set of keys worked. Luke headed back inside. He found Gavin still rummaging through drawers. "No luck with these. Maybe they're hidden elsewhere."

"Wouldn't want anyone stealing that fine piece of machinery." Gavin pulled files out of a bottom drawer.

"I don't care what it looks like, long as it runs." Luke walked along the back, examining shelves for any sign of keys. He saw inventory binders, sales team workbooks, and other paperwork.

"It might have been an employee's car. Did you see any keys in the desk?" Luke pulled open the top drawer of the desk.

"Not yet. Just a bunch of crap. Nothing useful besides the knife." Gavin stood, rubbing his temples, looking out the broken windows.

Luke progressed through the desk drawers, ready to give up on finding the keys. He saw a lanyard hanging from a screw under the desk. It held an ID card, a flashlight, and keys.

"Ah ha!"

Gavin turned, startled by Luke's outburst. "What?"

Luke grabbed the lanyard. One key had the Ford emblem engraved on its surface. "This has to be it."

Gavin ran after Luke. The Escort started with no problem.

"Just over three quarters of a tank. We should get hundreds of miles out of this four-banger." Gavin slapped Luke on the back. “Excellent job, amigo.”

Gavin and Luke drove out of the lot. Time to put the death cage behind them.

Chapter 19

“Jacksonville, huh?” Roger read the engraving out front of the enormous gates as Claudia pulled up to a man, motioning her to stop. “Sounds familiar.”

“The fella running this place lived in Jacksonville, Florida. He’s nostalgic, I guess.” Claudia rolled down the driver’s window, nodding at the man standing outside. “Hiya fella. I’m a friend of Dane‘s. Tell him Claudia stopped by, would ya?”

The man scowled, squeezing a rifle strap over his right shoulder. “You’re a friend of Dane‘s?”

“That’s what I said. You hard of hearin?” Claudia raised her voice, keeping her tone polite.

“Wait here. I’ll check with Dane.” The man walked away, entering a door beside the swing gate blocking entry to Jacksonville.

“See what that smartass says to me next?” Claudia‘s defiant tone made Roger nervous. He didn’t want to get into a shouting match with these strangers.

The man came out after a minute, jogging to the Suburban. “Pardon me Mam. Welcome. We’ll get the gate open. You can head in. Dane‘ll meet you inside.”

The man stepped back as the gates swung open.

“Thank you.” Claudia gave the man a wink as she put the vehicle in gear.

As she drove in, Claudia spotted her old friend walking toward them along a wide street. The orderliness of this place impressed Roger. It looked clean and civilized.

“Let’s say hello.” Claudia opened her door, hopping out with more finesse than Roger predicted. He joined Claudia in front of the Suburban.

“Why Claudia Parks! Never thought I would see the day!”

Claudia giggled, sounding forty years younger. “Hey Dane!”

Dane made his way over to Claudia, holding his arms up before he reached her. They embraced. Skinny but muscular, Dane stood over six feet tall. Roger guessed him about the same age as Claudia.

“You’re as pretty as ever, young lady.” Dane pulled back, keeping his arms around Claudia.

“Never had the sharpest eyesight, did you?” Claudia rolled her eyes.

“This is my new friend Roger.” Claudia gestured toward Roger.

“Oh, I see.” Dane cleared his throat. “Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Roger.”

“Oh, I’m teasing you.” Claudia slapped Dane‘s chest. “I rescued Roger from one of them nasties. Brought him along.”

“You always were a tease, Claudia. Still haven’t learned my lesson, I guess.” Dane took Claudia‘s hand. “And I never want to either.”

Dane kissed Claudia‘s hand. “Of course you are both welcome. We’ve set up a haven. Folks keep to themselves. Lot of solitary types.”

Roger could see well-dressed people walking down the street. He noticed people of all ages bustling about, doing ordinary things.

Roger waited while Claudia and Dane flirted, then extended his hand to Dane. “Thank you. It’s much appreciated.”

Dane shook Roger‘s hand, his grip firm. “Any friend of Claudia‘s is a friend of mine. You are very welcome.”

Dane followed Roger‘s gaze. “We’ll get you set up somewhere. Plenty of options.”

Dane gave Roger an inquisitive look. “You handy with tools? We’ve got a duplex needs finishing, but construction stopped after the collapse.”

Roger grinned. The thought of doing something constructive sounded inviting. “Yeah.. I can do that.”

“Great.” Dane nodded to Claudia, winking. “Tell you what. You get it finished, and it’s yours. Deal?”

“Absolutely.” Roger clapped his hands, rubbing them together. “I can work on it right away.”

Dane shook his head, laughing. “We’ll get you some food and rest. Life out there is anything but easy.”

“And a shower, too. Claudia threw up her arms, giving Dane a disgusted look.

“Of course. First thing if you like.” Dane held out his arm for Claudia. She took it with a curtsy.

“This place looks formidable from the outside.” Roger kept a respectable distance from Dane and Claudia.

“I had such grand plans for it. I guess we have to use what we got. Just ran out of time.” Dane sounded resigned to living in his unfinished planned community. “Builders I got stay busy with things that must get done.”

“I understand.” Roger‘s body loosened up, making him realize his mental and physical exhaustion. He yawned, unable to stop himself.

“We’ll get you both cleaned up and fed. Then you can get some rest. Long due by the looks of it.” Dane stopped next to a nondescript building along the main street. “Men’s is on the right. Women’s on the left. I’ll meet you out here in front in about an hour.”

Dane squeezed Claudia‘s hand and walked off. Roger and Claudia stepped inside. It looked like a fitness center, but several areas still needed to be completed.

“See you in a while, Roger.” Claudia hurried off, not waiting for Roger. “I’m gonna take my time in the water.”

Roger stood a moment, taking a deep breath.

He headed for the men’s room to wash away grime and exhaustion from weeks of surviving alone.

Chapter 20

“Watch out!”

Marik’s body rocketed through the air, smashing into the wall with a sickening crunch. He lay there motionless, a casualty of his own recklessness.

Ramirez’s face twisted with disgust as he shook his head. “He’s gotta stop rushing it. He’s gonna get one of us killed.”

Joelle stared at Marik’s still form on the ground, her expression one of horror.

“What about him?”

Ramirez’s eyes narrowed, and his lips curled in disdain. “He’s expendable in my book.”

He spat out the words like poison, a chill radiating from his voice.

“Do you feel that way about all of us?” Justine held a false tone of sympathy. She offered Ramirez a sly grin.

“Not if you’re useful, and I don’t get shot by Sebridge because of you.” Ramirez had become less cordial over the past two weeks. He held no regard for the other prisoners.

Ramirez leaned over to yell at Marik. “Get up bub! Maybe take it slower next time!”

Marik rolled onto his stomach, pushing himself to his knees. He took several deep breaths before standing. “We must work faster. Think faster.”

Ramirez rolled his eyes. “Let’s regroup. Try again.”

Carly no longer felt uneasy around Justine. The certainty of a death sentence for not delivering on the artifact focused her attention.

This didn’t keep Justine from picking at Carly.

“Don’t trust her.”

Justine glanced at Carly. Joelle shook her head.

“Ignore her. She’s nasty and bitter. That’s all she’ll ever be.” Carly put a hand on Joelle’s shoulder. Joelle nodded before joining Ramirez and Justine.

In Carly’s view, Justine had done nothing to endear herself to anyone involved in getting the artifact working. She sealed her own fate without Carly’s help. Justine deserved whatever she got.

“Are you well?” Justine seemed concerned about Marik. Marik had changed after being fed on by Ramirez. Marik no longer revered Justine.

“I’m fine.” Marik didn’t look at Justine. He concentrated his energy on not lashing out at Ramirez. Marik would not risk violating Sebridge’s orders. Sebridge became Marik’s de facto leader for the moment. “We must continue.”

“I don’t understand it.” Ramirez paced in front of the artifact. “We followed the logged procedures. Why isn’t it working?”

“Our captor expects an update in four days.” Justine leaned over the table, inches away from the mysterious cube-shaped object. “We must give him something.”

“If only I had known half the things I’ve learned in the past two weeks...” Joelle sat in a chair across the table, hands flat on the table.

“What? What would you have? A way to fix this?” Justine’s mocking brought no reply. “We don’t have time for what could have been.”

“She’s right.” Marik joined in. “We only have now. If we don’t get something useful out of this thing, he shoots us.”

“We should use it on a test subject. “Someone infected.” Carly saw an opportunity to offer a different approach. “Maybe we can give Sebridge something.”

“Like what?” Marik’s question got a laugh from Justine. Carly ignored them.

“Many logs detail how the artifact affected test subjects.” Carly looked toward Joelle, then Ramirez. “It paralyzed them. Maybe it can do more. Maybe reverse the condition.”

Ramirez threw his hands up. “I’m up for trying. We hit a wall here. Might buy time, at least.”

“Will it affect us too?” Marik let his concern show. “Three infected work here.”

“Not if we keep away from it during testing.” Joelle stood to pace behind her chair. “The artifact’s influence extends several feet, maybe ten- or twenty-feet max.”

“You are certain?” Marik didn’t hide his skepticism. “Like the logs would get it working, too?”

“No..I. No, I’m not.” Joelle closed her eyes, counting backward from ten in silence.

“So it’s a guess. Fuck. You know nothing. Stupid.” Marik spit on the floor.

Sebridge entered the room at the same time.

“Control yourself Mr. Sidorov. I don’t like that temper.”

Marik’s face showed panic. He nodded several times, backing away from Sebridge and lowering his head like a scolded pet.

“That’s better. I can’t have any bickering. It’s wasting my time. We won’t have this conversation again.” Sebridge took his time, settling his eyes on each prisoner, forcing them to meet his gaze.

“You aren’t making progress and want to try something different. Use one of the infected.” Sebridge turned to Marik. “Splendid idea.”

“Mr. Sidorov.” Sebridge waited for Marik to look at him. “You will select the subject for testing. First thing tomorrow. I will collect you an hour early for this privilege.”

Marik nodded, standing straight to accept his orders.

“In the meantime, use the rest of today to figure out what you will do with said test subject.” Sebridge exited the room without another word.

Joelle sucked in a breath. “We have to give him something. He’s about to shoot us one by one.”

Carly looked at Justine. “Sebridge watches everything. He’ll shoot troublemakers first.”

Chapter 21

"You back with us?"

Cowboy heard a woman speak.

His mind raced, traveling from darkness to light in spiral loops, thoughts swirling together like the currents of a river. He remembered Lanisha and their trip across the country.

"How long was I out?" Cowboy sat forward, flexing his muscles. They felt strong.

"Damn. Since yesterday when you needed to rest your eyes. I pushed you over so I could drive." Lanisha sounded chipper and fresh. "I woke up about an hour ago. Took a morning siesta myself."

"I slept for a day?" Cowboy couldn't believe it. "That can't be accurate."

"It is, and you did." Lanisha opened the truck door. "I gotta pee. When I get back, it's your turn to drive. My turn to check eyelids."

Cowboy flicked his fingers in a salute to Lanisha as she strode away. He wanted to drive. He felt alert and vigorous, recovered from whatever attacked him in the woods.

He remembered Cormac.

The mind connection. Did Cowboy dream it?

Cowboy knew better. Cormac's thoughts reached him? No sense in struggling with it. Denial wasted time.

Cowboy didn't relish explaining Cormac to Lanisha. She tried to help him remember the thing in the woods. He needed to recall those details.

Cowboy got out of the truck to handle some personal business while Lanisha managed hers. He walked to the driver's side afterward, taking a moment to inspect their surroundings.

Tall pine trees, with a few spruces mingled within, surrounded them. These ancient pines rose from the ground, twisted and weathered, their bark flaking and gray. This part of the highway stretched narrow and windy. Mountains rose in the distance, the rocky peaks streaked with white patches and ice.

"See any signs for Tennessee?" Cowboy waited until Lanisha had gotten in the truck.

"Yeah, a couple. I think it's seventy something miles to the border." Lanisha stretched, yawning. "Driving makes me so tired."

"No problem. I'll drive the rest of the way." Cowboy started the truck. "We'll need to find gas or change vehicles before Tennessee."

"We might do some walkin' then." Lanisha said. "I haven't seen a lot of cars."

"Something will turn up." Cowboy's confidence made Lanisha laugh.

"If you say so." Lanisha yawned again. "I'm gonna pass out for a bit."

"Understood." Cowboy enjoyed the scenery. Tall trees and narrow roads soothed him.

Window down, Cowboy listened to the wind. Lanisha began snoring after thirty minutes.

Less than a quarter tank of gas. It might get them into Tennessee.

Why did Cormac reach out to him? Cormac disappeared years ago. The carnage. Explosions and running under a dense canopy of leaves.

Cormac could fill in the blanks. Why did Teagan have to die? Did he know Deena? What happened to Baako? Questions arose. Cowboy didn't allow his mind to entertain them.

Doubts and uncertainty fell away. He reached out to Cormac as the wind brushed the side of his face.

It felt different. Calling Cormac worked better this time.

*I am here. Are you well?* Cormac responded within seconds.

*Something or someone injured me. I am recovering, but I can't remember things.*Cowboy wanted to keep the conversation straightforward.

*When you recover, I may help you recall your memories.*

Cowboy didn't know what Cormac meant by "assist" with recall.

*Explain. I don't understand.*

*With your agreement, I can enter your mind and see what you cannot see.*

The idea of Cormac or anyone entering his mind worried Cowboy. He didn't know what to expect.

*Explain how you can do that.*

*I've been able to for years. Many times, without the person knowing about it. It's not debilitating or disruptive. You won't notice I'm doing it.*

Cormac might clear up the confusion, allowing Cowboy to puzzle pieces together.

*I'll let you know when I'm ready. It will be soon.*

Cowboy gave his body one more day before taking the leap. Caution, not fear, motivated him. Cormac knocked Cowboy before. One step at a time.

Cowboy recalled road signs after walking out of the woods. He awoke in Idaho. Why? Did anyone accompany him?

Cowboy focused on the trees along the road, pushing all questions aside once more. He needed to keep driving.

Get to Sam.

Chapter 22

"No fucking way, man!"

Gavin threw his hands up. "We're not gonna get taken by these fuckers. I'll die first."

Desperados lurked everywhere. They drove fifty miles before getting caught in another net.

"We shoulda lost that Silverado when it started following us." Luke gritted his teeth, echoing Gavin. "Don't worry. We'll go down fighting."

"I don't know how they knew to block this road." Gavin squeezed his hands into fists. "If only we had guns, or at least one gun."

Luke stopped two hundred feet from the roadblock. The Silverado edged closer and parked.

As Luke watched in the rearview mirror, someone exited the passenger side.

"Scumbag has a big gun." Gavin pulled out the knife he found at the car dealership, blade open.

Luke held his breath as the stranger tapped the Escort's roof, approaching Gavin's side.

He tapped Gavin's door with the revolver's barrel. Gavin took a breath, rolling down the window.

"You fellas look lost." The man held his gun inches away as he addressed Gavin.

"No. We're okay." Gavin kept his voice even.

"No. You're lost." The man bent closer. "Fortunate for us. Not so much for you."

Gavin squeezed his knife.

"How about letting us go?" Luke felt numb, hearing his own voice so calm. "Forget we ever saw each other."

The man laughed, raising his revolver. "No, dumb shit. How bout we don't?"

Gavin held still as the man pressed the barrel to his head. "Get out of the fucking car. Maybe we don't kill you after."

Luke kept both hands on the wheel, sensing Gavin's move.

"Okay, we're getting…"

Gavin threw his head back, jabbing the knife into the man's hand.

The gun fell on Gavin's lap as the man staggered backward.

Gavin grabbed the revolver, kicking his door open.

He fired two shots into the man's chest as the Silverado driver opened his door.

Luke heard gunshots as the driver fired at Gavin. Gavin ducked beside the Escort, holding up the revolver and shooting twice.

The driver jumped out, returning fire.

Luke crawled to Gavin's door, sliding onto the ground. Gavin handed him the knife. Luke made his way to the other side of the truck.

More shooting from the blockade. Only moments before reinforcements arrived.

The driver retook aim. Gavin shot first, hitting him in the shoulder. The driver hollered as he ducked out of sight.

Luke made it around the truck, waiting for the man to shoot again.

Another truck sped past, swerving around the Silverado. As it did, someone fired, hitting Luke's target.

The driver went down as the other truck sped off.

He heard shooting ahead. A battle raged at the blockade.

Luke ran to the dead man, grabbing his gun.

"Gavin! It's me!" Luke stepped out to see Gavin by the Escort, looking furious, his gun pointed at Luke.

"It's me!" Luke held up his hands. "We're okay."

Gavin lowered the gun. "Fuck. That was intense."

"Yeah. You looked ready to take me out." Luke hurried to Gavin. "Let's get out of here."

"No problem." Gavin jumped into the passenger side of the Escort.

Luke hesitated, thinking about the abandoned Silverado.

"Hey, I'm gonna check the truck." Luke didn't wait, stepping over the dead man and hopping into the driver's seat.

Gavin joined him on the passenger side. "I'll look over here. Make this quick."

Gavin snatched a shotgun from the floorboard, and Luke grabbed another handgun off the dashboard.

They saw more guns, ammo boxes, and loose bullets on the back seats and floor.

"Pull the seat forward." Gavin yanked the passenger seat.

As they gathered munitions, another vehicle approached. Neither Gavin nor Luke heard.

Two people approached the Silverado.

"Easy fellas. Step out of the truck real slow. No sudden moves. Let's all be friends."

Gavin glanced out the door. "We can take 'em."

Luke hesitated. "No. Let's do what they say. That first truck coulda shot us."

He put a hand on Gavin's shoulder. "Let's go along for now."

Gavin lowered his head. "Okay. Fuck. Okay."

"We're coming out!" Luke turned away from Gavin. "We're unarmed!"

Gavin shook his head. "I'll kill myself before becoming a prisoner again."

"We won't let it go that way… no matter what." Luke squeezed Gavin's shoulder.

Gavin stared at Luke, then nodded.

They stepped out. A man and a woman greeted them, looking healthy and well-dressed.

"Excellent." The man grinned. "Looks like you two got mixed up with some nasty characters."

Luke nodded. Gavin said nothing.

"Jacob's gonna want to meet you." The woman's eyes moved between Luke and Gavin. "Get a read on your character."

"Who's Jacob?" Gavin's voice betrayed no emotion, but Luke could feel his anxiety.

"Our leader." The man replied. "My name's Fitch. That's Ira." Fitch tilted his head toward the woman.

"Jacob's fair. We're not bandits." Ira lowered her gun. Fitch didn't. "If Jacob decides you ain't bandits, you got nothin' to worry about."

"We aren't bandits. Just protecting ourselves." Luke met the woman's eyes.

"No." Fitch lowered his gun. "I don't reckon so. But Jacob'll have final say."

Gavin lowered his hands. "Great. Let's meet Jacob."

Chapter 23

"You some kind of magnet for old trucks?" Lanisha brushed a strand of dark hair from her face.

"That's what we found. Two in a row isn't my fault." Cowboy examined the dead headsuckers nearby.

"Those things were ferocious." Lanisha looked as well. "I haven't seen them act that way. Keeping their distance like that."

"They're starving." Cowboy also found the headsucker's mannerisms puzzling. "Can't say about their behavior."

"You ever touched one?" Lanisha stepped toward the headsuckers. "They're so cold." She stopped short of bending to touch one.

"Maybe. I don't remember."

Recent events in Cowboy's life remained hidden in darkness. He held onto images like a rope, trying to pull himself out of the fog.

"Have you been able to remember anything else?" Lanisha retreated from the headsuckers, angling toward the passenger side of their latest acquisition, a truck similar to the last they had driven.

"Bits and pieces." Cowboy glanced at Lanisha sideways. "I remember a man named Cormac from my past. We served together. It's still not clear."

"Keep at it, but don't force it." Lanisha climbed into the truck. "Let it come to you."

"Easier said than done." Cowboy didn't hide his doubts.

"I'm not pretending to understand what you've gone through. Just giving you a different perspective." Lanisha sensed Cowboy's reluctance. "Take it or leave it. I won't pry. Talk about it. That's all."

"We'll see Sam in a couple of days." Cowboy's tone relaxed. "Plenty of time to think. Get my bearings."

"How do you remember where Sam lives?" Lanisha hadn't thought of asking Cowboy this question before.

"Not sure I do." Cowboy rested his hands on the truck bed by the driver's door. "We'll see when we get closer."

Lanisha kept quiet as Cowboy got into the truck. She reconsidered her decision to let him travel with her. What if Cowboy couldn't find Sam? She decided bringing him along proved beneficial. Cowboy could handle himself. He seemed decent, regardless of his cloudy past.

"Starvation could make them more dangerous." Cowboy changed the subject by alerting Lanisha to the danger of starving headsuckers.

"They weren't already dangerous enough?" Lanisha grew anxious at the prospect of greater peril from these ravenous mutations.

"Things will get worse before they improve."

Cowboy's words lingered as Lanisha peered at the blanket of autumn colors hugging the mountains on either side. A heavy silence followed.

They crossed into Tennessee a few hours later.

Cowboy pulled off next to a small, beat-up motel long past its prime. The sign in front hung broken in several places, shot up by passersby. Fading and cracked paint rendered the sign indecipherable. Duct tape and chicken wire covered some windows. Weeds littered the cracked asphalt of this derelict structure's empty parking lot.

"We could use a proper bed. Maybe this place will fit the bill." Cowboy drove along the front and back of the building. "Looks abandoned, but let me check it out. Wait here."

Cowboy stopped where he had begun. He grabbed a revolver sitting between him and Lanisha. Lanisha waited while Cowboy checked out a few rooms and the main office.

"Looks clear. I found a room with two beds. It looks unused."

"Great. A comfortable bed sounds outstanding." Lanisha and Cowboy grabbed some items from the truck. She followed him to the room he had chosen for them.

"No running water, so we'll have to make do with the water rations we brought." Cowboy shut the door behind him, locking and latching it after Lanisha entered.

"I'm gonna freshen up before hitting the sack." Lanisha grabbed a container, a quarter full of water, and disappeared into the bathroom.

Cowboy remained at the window. He drew the curtains and placed the revolver on his bed.

Lanisha emerged from the bathroom several minutes later. She plopped on the other bed, rubbing her hands over the blankets and pillows. "This feels so nice."

Cowboy nodded. "It'll do for one night. We'll be fresh tomorrow."

"Best idea you've had yet." Lanisha pulled the bed's covers to get underneath. "I'm going to pass out in a minute. Don't mind me."

"I won't." Cowboy's dismissive tone made Lanisha giggle.

Cowboy peeked out the window again before sitting on the edge of his bed. He examined their accommodations as Lanisha drifted off.

A picture on the wall opposite his bed displayed an evening desert scene with cacti, rolling hills, and a starry sky. Rustic wood paneling lined the walls. A chalkboard hung on the bathroom door. It read, "Don't leave the potty on your hands."

Lanisha started snoring, the customary signal she had zonked out.

Time for Cormac. The reason Cowboy stopped here. He wanted a stationary place away from Lanisha watching over him. The old inn accomplished both objectives.

*Cormac.* Cowboy reached out.

*I am here.* Cormac answered a couple of seconds later. *Are you ready?*

*Yes*. Cowboy scooted back on the bed, trying to relax his body.

Cowboy waited to feel something, but no odd sensations greeted him.

*I see it. The thing that attacked you.* Cormac's voice came through, void of any emotion.

*I didn't know you offered play-by-play.*Cowboy grinned, finding the situation amusing. He glanced at Lanisha, thinking she didn't appreciate his sense of humor.

*Other beings created it to protect the Ancient Ones.*

*Who?*

*One step at a time. It could not defeat you and will learn from your first engagement, adapting to strike with efficiency and power.*

*What is it?*

*A thing created by the artifact. As are you. And me.*

*What is the artifact?*

*Its origins are unknown. It came not from this planet. No one understands its true significance.*

Cowboy wondered if Cormac could find more memories.

*Why did I fight it in the woods? Did anyone come with me?*

Silence as Cowboy waited to hear Cormac's voice.

*I see an old barn. You lived under it. A woman lives nearby. Gloria.*

Cowboy remembered his cramped and cool bunker under the old barn. The smell of stale air and dust. Gloria and Lenard. And Mia. Other faces Cowboy could not name.

He remembered why he entered the woods. Cowboy saw the creature standing by the road. He got out to distract it while the others led a herd away from their refugee camp.

*That's enough for tonight.*Cowboy needed to think and put it all together. Decide his next move.

*Very well.*Cormac's voice remained expressionless. *I will be in touch soon. More to discuss, and we must prepare.*

Cormac fell silent. Cowboy sat in his thoughts.

Lanisha snorted in her sleep, drawing Cowboy's attention.

He returned to the desert scene on the wall.

As the sun disappeared outside, Cowboy stretched out on the bed.

He would spend the night sorting his memories in silence.

Sunrise greeted him in the same place, putting his mind back together.

Chapter 24

"These will transform your precious chamber beyond reckoning."

Sal pulled two items out of a duffle bag. One shaped like a round disk, about two inches thick and four inches in diameter. He also produced a thumb drive.

"And I suppose you know how to integrate and program whatever that is?" Genevieve doubted Sal's claim but couldn't resist the possibility.

"It's all very simple. Anybody could install this thing." Sal did his darnedest to sound authoritative, not wanting to show desperation.

"Why didn't you already install it? Use it for yourself?" Genevieve sensed something off but didn't picture Sal risking his daughter for a gimmick.

"Haven't had time yet. This fortress of yours takes a lot of labor." Sal didn't know if Genevieve would buy his reason.

"Bullshit!" Genevieve knew Sal lied. "This place runs itself."

"Try living in it. Keeping it on track. You'll find out what I'm talking about." Sal pressed on as he inserted the thumb drive into a workstation computer.

She needed more time to learn the operations at The Mountain. Sal may deceive or not.

"Whatever. Show me how you intend to get the Chamber working." Genevieve stepped away, peeking through the open door leading into the Chamber.

"I have to install it in the main room." Sal stood, walking around Genevieve.

Genevieve stayed. She intended to use Sal as a guinea pig after he finished.

Sal removed a panel from the wall and began fiddling behind it. Genevieve moved closer. "Hold on Sal. I want to see what you're doing."

Sal stood straight, huffing in frustration. "Fine. Hurry. I want to get this thing running."

Genevieve pushed the intercom button next to where she stood. "You'll fucking wait until I'm ready, old man."

Genevieve spoke again. "Chloe, dear, how is Sal's lovely daughter behaving?"

Chloe's voice came through an overhead speaker in the ceiling. "She's a well-behaved young lady. And pretty too. Maybe we can enjoy her together later."

Genevieve looked at Sal for a reaction. He stood facing the open panel on the room's back wall.

"Perhaps my dear. I'm planning to leave this line open. Give a holler if necessary." Genevieve walked over to Sal, unwilling to let him dictate timeframes for anything.

"Will do!" Chloe said.

"Explain what you are doing." Genevieve pressed her gun into Sal's back. "And never talk to me like I am one of your slaves again."

Sal's shoulders sank as he bent over to finish his work.

"I don't understand how this thing works. I just know that it does."

"And how the fuck would you already know it works if you haven't installed it yet?" Genevieve thought she might catch Sal in his lie this time.

"This isn't the only chamber." Sal began. "I hired my own scientists to build one for me. They didn't have time to finish it, but conducted a few initial start-ups. It would have worked better."

Genevieve watched Sal install the cylinder. It took him a few minutes. Sal reattached the panel, stepping away.

"It's ready. You can try it out for yourself." Sal rubbed his hands together. He motioned Genevieve toward the Chamber.

"You are such an arrogant shit, Sal." Genevieve crossed her arms. "You're first. Then maybe your daughter."

Sal's smile lessened but held. "Very well. No problem. I'm ready."

Sal's reaction surprised Genevieve. She didn't know what to say.

"Anything wrong?" Sal asked, trying to erode Genevieve's confidence with his own.

"Not at all." Genevieve shook her head, lowering her gaze. She tried to see Sal's angle in his willingness to play guinea pig, and maybe he bluffed, thinking she would try it on herself first.

"I'm ready then." Sal moved to the cocoon-shaped object at the room's center, pressing a button to raise the lid.

Genevieve felt unsure of herself. She only had one thing to say. "If you are lying, I'll have Chloe shoot your daughter before the sequence ends."

"You won't know if I'm lying until the sequence ends." Sal climbed into the cocoon as the lid stopped above him.

"Start the sequence."

Sal rested on the small reclining bed inside, grinning at Genevieve. "I'm ready when you are, Messina."

Genevieve almost told Sal to get out. She would go first.

"Very well." Genevieve stepped into the other room. She expected Sal's daughter to die soon.

Genevieve cursed, still torn about her decision to let Sal go first. Maybe he used reverse psychology on her. She had no way of knowing. Crafty Sal working an angle.

The cocoon hummed. As the sequence started, a beam of light encircling the pod changed from orange to green.

Genevieve knew the sequence should take thirty minutes, at least in theory. She never got the thing working. It would give her supremacy over the drainers and all humankind if it did. Limitless power at her disposal.

Looking up. She saw the countdown timer begin at thirty-one minutes.

The Chamber continued humming as Genevieve stood watching the cocoon. She needed to neutralize Sal after the sequence ended. If Genevieve failed, he could overpower her and Chloe.

Sal should take a moment to recover. Genvieve had a bullet waiting for him. Same for Deena after Chloe defiled her. Genevieve shuddered with perverse anticipation at the thought of killing Sal and joining Chloe in defiling his daughter.

Fifteen minutes in, Genevieve stopped herself from tapping on the workstation table. Nerves kicking in. She needed to get that under control. Focus.

Glancing at the clock gave her a twinge. Anticipation, she thought, but the feeling intensified.

Genevieve felt her heart thud in her chest, a deafening sound to her over-stimulated ears. The humming grew to a relentless roar as her vision blurred, causing her to stumble away from the workstation. The humming ceased, leaving Genevieve in unbearable silence. Dizziness overwhelmed her.

A suffocating terror enveloped Genevieve as the ground beneath her heaved and spun out of control.

The cocoon lid lifted. Genevieve had to act, but her body wouldn't respond. She fumbled around like a drunk, unable to balance.

*You foolish bitch*.

Sal's voice ripped through the air. It felt like an invisible sledgehammer had smashed into her chest, leaving Genevieve breathless. The sheer force of it knocked her to the floor, her body curling into a ball as a tsunami of terror enveloped her. A savage onslaught that left her gasping, quivering in fear, surrounded by an abyss of shadows and despair.

Darkness retreated. Genevieve's eyes opened, her vision clearing. She pulled herself to standing along a support beam, floundering to keep upright.

No Sal. Genevieve's head swiveled as she rushed to the intercom.

"Chloe! Shoot that bitch!"

No response.

"Chloe! Dammit, answer me!"

Silence.

Genevieve's eyes darted in all directions, trying to comprehend her situation.

She looked at the clock. Genevieve couldn't reconcile it.

Four hours since Sal entered The Chamber.

"What the fuck?" Genevieve bolted out of the room. She needed to find Chloe and figure things out.

Gun out, ready to shoot anything, Genevieve entered the stockroom, where she left Chloe and Sal's daughter.

She found Chloe sprawled on the floor. Genevieve ran to Chloe, kneeling to check her vitals.

Chloe remained conscious but unaware.

"Chloe!" Genevieve shook Chloe to get her attention. "Chloe! What happened?"

Chloe's eyes flickered. Unintelligible sounds escaped her mouth.

"What the fuck Chloe?" Genevieve lowered her head to Chloe's chest. "Please talk to me."

Genevieve recognized Chloe's hold on her. This sensation brought discomfort. So foreign to her. Caring for someone.

*Fuck Chloe. How did you do this to me?*

Raw emotion threatened to swallow Genevieve. She straightened to regain composure.

"I'll come back for you. I need to find Sal. Stop him." Genevieve kissed Chloe on the forehead and stood.

Sal roamed unchecked.

His altered form posed a significant threat.

Chapter 25

"That sounds mighty wicked."

Jacob spoke after Luke recounted events leading to Jacob and his people. "You fellas are damn lucky to be alive."

"You wouldn't have met us if Luke hadn't talked me out of trying to get a jump on Fitch and Ira." Gavin's frown lessened, thankful for trusting Luke. "I was pretty squirrelly out there."

"Can understand you being jumpy after what happened to ya." Jacob placed a hand on Gavin's shoulder. "Mighty glad you listened to your buddy."

Gavin's frown disappeared. "Thank you for what you did today."

"I'm a fair man. You fellas can keep anything in that truck. Take it with you when you leave." Jacob glanced at Luke. "Your kill. Your keep."

"I don't suppose you're out here doing charity work, Jacob." Luke wanted to get a feel for Jacob's perspective on attacking bandits out on the road.

"No. I ain't." Jacob turned back to Gavin. "I figure fair means you owe me."

Gavin's face twisted into a mask of worry, but Luke interceded before it escalated into a full-blown panic attack.

"Tell us what you want."

Jacob's gaze lingered on the three figures beside a battered pickup truck. "I expect your help for a while. Give me two weeks of your time, and we'll be square."

Gavin blew out some air, relaxing his shoulders.

Jacob's eyes twinkled. "Hell, you may decide you like our group of enforcers and stay." Jacob offered Gavin a sly grin. "Your choice either way after your debt's settled."

"We'll see." Gavin forced a smile, meeting Jacob's eyes. "We'll pay our debt and then take it from there."

"I'm a fair man, but I don't take any shit. You do what I tell ya, and we'll get along fine." Jacob squeezed Gavin's shoulder, then addressed someone else in his group.

"It's not the most awful thing." Luke stepped closer to Gavin, lowering his voice. "He saved our asses."

"Yeah," Gavin said. "Way better than Clyde offered."

Luke chuckled, despite the horrific circumstances of their recent imprisonment. "No argument there."

"Jacob says you fellas are welcome to that truck and all the stuff in it." Fitch approached from behind Luke.

Gavin walked toward Fitch. "Thank you for everything. You guys got us out of a tight spot."

"It's what we do." Fitch accepted Gavin's handshake. "Pays better than turnin' bandit."

"So you take everything from the bandits you kill?" Luke wanted to hear Fitch's perspective on Jacob's operation.

"That and other things in buildings, houses." Fitch rubbed his elbows, grimacing. "Damn joints get to bothering me sometimes."

"What did you do before?" Gavin asked.

"Journeyman plumber." Fitch rubbed his neck. "Bout tore up my elbows and knees doing it too. This's simple work for me."

"How's bout your fellas?" Fitch took a swig of water, wiping his mouth and spitting on the ground.

"I worked all kinds of jobs. Customer service mostly." Gavin accepted Fitch's water bottle, taking a drink.

"I helped my father run his store in the city." Luke looked at the ground, feeling a wave of sadness overtaking him.

"Your Pa still around?" Fitch began rubbing his knees.

"We got separated when another group of outlaws cornered us between them and a herd of scramblers." Luke sounded distant, as if not addressing Fitch.

"That's a shame." Fitch walked over to Luke. "I know it hurts. Somethin like that. I lost my wife and kid to some o'the sickos few months back."

Luke glanced at Fitch, then at the ground.

"We'll probably push on soon. Reckon we got everything these shitheads were carryin'. You boys best get your new ride. Load up."

Gavin nodded once as Fitch set off to find his own vehicle.

"You okay man?" Gavin focused his attention on Luke.

"Me? Yeah. I'm fine. Let's get going." Luke released a shuddering sigh and brushed a hand across his nose. He made for the Silverado, tears burning behind a dry face.

After a moment, Gavin followed.

Chapter 26

“About half a day, give or take.” Cowboy sat in the passenger seat. Hours earlier, Lanisha told him she wanted a turn driving.

“You close with your brother, Sam?” Lanisha fished Cowboy’s past.

“Close as I am with anyone.” Cowboy managed Lanisha’s questions as best he could. His memories grew stronger by the day. She acted like a sounding board. Cowboy didn’t mention Cormac, fearing she wouldn’t understand.

“You see each other once a decade?” Lanisha slapped Cowboy on the shoulder, shaking her head.

“Something like that.” Cowboy’s mouth curled up in a grin. “You got anyone? Any family?”

“A brother overseas when this whole thing happened. We saw each other every few years. Not as close as we used to be.” Lanisha took a breath. “Didn’t know mom too well. Took off when I was six.”

“What about your dad?”

Lanisha rubbed her legs. Cowboy felt her tension rise. “He didn’t make it. I couldn’t save him.”

Lanisha said nothing. Cowboy saw Lanisha biting her nails, unsettled by this topic. He dropped it. Not worth getting her worked up.

The hours slipped by with few words spoken. Cowboy found much of his memory returning. He recognized landmarks along the way and looked forward to seeing Sam and Georgina.

Cowboy negotiated the winding driveway to the main house on his deceased mother’s property. Crabgrass and henbit carpeted the road. He wanted to check the area before venturing into the swamp.

“Wow, fancy digs. Who lives here?” Lanisha sounded back to her old self.

“It was my mother’s house.” Cowboy answered. “Left it to Sam, Georgie, and me after she passed.”

“You were a rich kid?” Lanisha seemed surprised.

“I guess. I didn’t stay here much. Lived with my father in Colorado.” Cowboy noticed two broken windows as he pulled up next to the wraparound porch. He expected to find the place looted. Locals knew this estate well.

The dusty pickup rattled to a stop as Cowboy killed the engine. Lanisha stepped out without waiting for an invitation, shielding her dark eyes from the sun’s glare.

Cowboy grabbed his pistol from the front seat before bounding up the front steps. He waited on the porch. “Watch yourself. Don’t know if we’ll run into anyone.”

He found the massive front door locked. Cowboy ran down the steps to retrieve a key hidden under the stairs. He unlocked the door, placing the key in his pocket. “Wait here. Let me check it out.”

“I’m gonna grab a gun. Let me know when it’s safe.” Lanisha ran back to the truck.

Cowboy stepped inside. He didn’t mind someone sheltering here but wouldn’t tolerate getting shot.

Late afternoon sun penetrated the opulent windows. Cowboy noted dirty shoe prints coating the hardwood floor and debris scattered about. Fragments of a cobalt blue vase lay near the double-winding staircase.

Cowboy glided through the kitchen, straining his ears for any sign of life. From childhood, he knew the ease of roaming undetected. His mother’s house featured sturdy floors and thick walls.

Cowboy cleared the rooms downstairs. He found Lanisha standing outside as he returned to the front room and readied himself to search upstairs.

“Downstairs is clear. I’m about to check the second level.” Cowboy motioned for Lanisha to step inside. “Shoot anything but me.”

Lanisha entered the grand foyer of the old mansion, and a chill ran up her spine. It felt like trespassing in a graveyard. Peeling paint and cracked walls surrounded her. Cobwebs weaved in and out of the musty air in an eerie dance. The world collapsed as this home decayed. She didn’t want to linger.

“Would you like a tour?” Cowboy descended the elegant staircase to join Lanisha moments later.

“I’d rather not.” Lanisha clutched the door handle. “I’d like to get moving. This place creeps me out.”

Cowboy developed no connection to this house. He enjoyed seeing Georgina and his mother. This property never felt like home. The swamp felt more comfortable and less pretentious.

“Yeah, I get it.” Cowboy glanced around. “I never settled in well myself.”

“Your mother must have been wealthy to own a place like this.” Lanisha inspected the various shrubs, manicured trees, and lawn making up the front yard as Cowboy drove down a dirt road paralleling the property.

“Yeah, she was born into it. Never worked a day in her life.” Cowboy kept watching for vehicles or people lurking around the property.

“And you rebelled by joining the military?” Lanisha kept looking outside as she contemplated growing up rich like Cowboy.

“No. I got into trouble in Colorado. It was that or prison.” Cowboy thought of the last time seeing his father in the Canyon City Courthouse years ago.

“You, a gangbanger?” Lanisha couldn’t picture it, Cowboy, a troublemaker. “Difficult to believe.”

“I got high with some buddies. Broke into a drugstore at night. Smashed a guy’s skull with a tire iron.” The scene played out in Cowboy’s mind. He hadn’t recalled this event in decades.

“Damn!” Lanisha said. “You don’t seem like that guy at all.”

“Life after changed me.” Cowboy found it strange. He had become more dangerous since that fateful evening and less violent.

“Military plumbed you up, huh?” Lanisha didn’t sound surprised. “I had a few friends join the military. Some people changed not for the better. A few seemed to benefit, though.”

“It can work either way.” Cowboy agreed. “Like life.”

They neared the bayou. Cowboy didn’t know if Lanisha had ever visited Louisiana or a wetland. He wanted to see her reaction.

It took her a minute. The semi-sweet odor of decay and fetid ground came on strong. Lanisha wrinkled her nose, trying to adapt.

“We should head to Sam’s.” Cowboy gathered a few things from the truck, and Lanisha followed suit.

“Sounds spooky. I’ve seen movies where people disappear into a swamp like that.” Lanisha tried to sound light-hearted but could feel herself getting tense. “Are there alligators and gigantic snakes?”

“Yeah, Copperheads, Kingsnakes, and gators.” Cowboy gathered his gear, directing his attention elsewhere. “They won’t bother you unless you bother them first.”

“You can handle all that dangerous stuff, right?” Lanisha’s tone held a note of hesitation.

“Won’t be a problem.” Cowboy motioned for Lanisha to follow him. “We’ll reach Sam in less than thirty minutes.”

Lanisha followed the edge of dry land, keeping close to Cowboy. She saw no sign of a boat.

Cowboy headed for a cluster of Cypress and Tupelo trees extending into the wetlands. The boughs twisted so close together that Cowboy bent over to pass through them. He pushed aside twisted branches and disappeared.

Lanisha glimpsed something grey. She waited for Cowboy to reemerge. She heard rustling. A minute later, Lanisha saw the edge of a grey rowboat come into view.

Cowboy winked at her as he brought the paddle boat closer. “I’ll hold it steady while you climb in.” Cowboy placed one paddle in the water, pressing it against the bottom of the swamp for support as Lanisha stepped on.

“Cozy ride.” Lanisha struggled to keep her balance and get seated. “Intimate.”

“Easy to hide.” Cowboy winked at Lanisha. He sounded amused. “Nimble in tight spaces.”

As Cowboy set each ore in the water, tiny whirlpools formed, bringing bubbles to the surface. Lanisha saw bugs skirting across the water’s surface. A mosquito flew into her ear, causing her to flinch.

“They’re not as problematic this time of year. Worst time was about a month ago.” Cowboy slapped his arm, smashing a mosquito into his shirt. “Still a nuisance.” He frowned at the dead bug.

Lanisha took in the view, defending against flying blood suckers as Cowboy navigated around trees and vines.

Still a few minutes away from Sam’s place, Cowboy stopped. Lanisha’s breath caught.

“What’s wrong?” She felt alarmed by Cowboy’s abrupt halting of their progress. “Did you see an alligator? A snake?”

“Someone’s in the water with us. Close by.” Cowboy didn’t seem apprehensive.

“Are we being followed?” Lanisha reached for her gun, but Cowboy raised his hand to stop her.

Cowboy spoke. “Howdy Sam.”

Lanisha let out a gasp. The sound of her breath startled her. She put her hands to her mouth in surprise.

“Hiya brother.”

Lanisha heard a voice. She glanced around but saw no one. “Who is that?”

“Sam,” Cowboy said. “Meet Lanisha.”

Lanisha heard a swish of water. Another grey boat identical to the one she and Cowboy used emerged from behind a cypress tree to their right. It glided through a narrow opening in the patch of trees.

A lone figure maneuvered the canoe, surrounded by the dark backdrop of the murky swamp. With the sun setting, only a few stray light rays shone through the maze of gnarled tree branches.

Lanisha couldn’t make out the man’s features. He sounded older than Cowboy, and grey hair hung in a ponytail over his shoulder.

“Pleasure, Miss Lanisha. Welcome.” Sam’s teeth reflected the moon’s brilliant twilight.

Sam rowed his boat to Cowboy and Lanisha. He stared at Cowboy for several seconds before saying anything. “Didn’t know you’d visit again, old man.”

“I never doubted it.” Cowboy’s mouth curled into a grin. “Came to check on you and Georgie.”

“Always glad for the visit.” Sam eyed ripples in the water. “Georgie will want to meet your new friend.”

Sam adjusted his boat’s direction, winking at Lanisha. Cowboy started rowing, keeping pace with his brother.

Scenes from several horror movies flashed through Lanisha’s mind. She brushed them aside. Lanisha felt calm for the first time since entering the swamp. She knew this place offered protection. Lanisha did not understand why.

They arrived at their destination. Cowboy brought the boat to the side of the higher ground, anchoring it with his oar as Lanisha stepped out.

He handed her the items they had brought. Cowboy tied the boat to the same trunk Sam used for his boat.

Lanisha took in her surroundings, searching for buildings or other landmarks. “What next?” she wondered aloud.

“Beyond those trees, yonder.” Sam’s calloused hand ripped a strand of grass from the damp earth before shoveling it into his mouth. He stepped around a misshapen tree trunk, choosing a path Lanisha hadn’t noticed.

Cowboy wanted to say hello and get Lanisha settled. He looked forward to seeing Georgina and Sam.

His last conversation with Cormac, if one could call it that, generated more questions than answers.

Dispense with social pleasantries. Find a quiet place after.

Cormac awaited him.

Chapter 27

“You’re gettin’ right along!” Dane watched Roger shingle the roof.

Roger held his hand up, blocking the sun. “I’m almost done. I’ll finish out here tomorrow, next day at the latest.”

“Fantastic.” Dane paused at the entrance of the meandering path. He surveyed the duplex, his face a portrait of serenity and fulfillment.

He marched up the paved walkway, thick soles of his steel-toed boots scraping against the surface. He paused, squinted into the sun, and adjusted his baseball cap. His gaze shifted from the empty driveway to Roger, still on the ladder. “I’m glad you like the place.”

“I do.” Roger descended the ladder, feet clanking against the metal rungs. “Thank you again. It’s more than I expected.”

“I should thank you.” Dane accepted Roger’s hand. “For bringing Claudia to me.”

“It was the other way.” Roger watched people pass by. “She brought me.”

“You brought each other.” Dane kicked against the step of the duplex’s covered porch. Roger sensed Dane had something else.

“You want to discuss more?” Roger removed his gloves. He squinted in the sun and wiped his forehead before reaching for a chilled glass of water.

“Yeah, I do.” Dane hesitated, tugging at the ends of his shirt sleeves. “Jacksonville’s defense is an ongoing effort.”

“You want my help with that?” Roger hadn’t foreseen Dane assigning him a task straightaway. Despite Dane’s relaxed manner, Roger detected worry in his voice.

“Well, first take a week or two. Get this place fixed.” Dane didn’t want to pressure Roger. “I’ll keep track of your progress. But yes, we need you.”

“Bandits?” Roger glanced at the fifteen-foot wall. “Do they turn up often?”

“Off and on.” Dane looked as well. “We got twenty-four-hour shifts, but they test us. Infected too.”

“Starts happening as resources dwindle.” Roger spoke from experience. “Hunger drives people to desperate measures.”

“I agree.” Dane turned to Roger. “More will come.”

“Give me a week on the duplex.” Roger retrieved his gloves and climbed the ladder. “I’ll have it done.”

“Will do.” Dane saluted as he departed. “And thank you, Roger.”

Roger returned to his shingles.

It didn’t surprise Roger that Dane found recruitment challenging. Many lacked the skill and motivation to fight the infected or other people.

For that reason, Roger saw many killed.

Those able to contend formed groups and banded together. Half became vigilantes, extracting resources from the weak.

Roger resolved to help. This community offered sanctuary.

He saw this as a long-term refuge and would kill to defend it.

Dane and Claudia warmed Roger’s heart. They manifested kindness. Most expressed contempt or worse.

His ability to fight made Roger an asset.

Roger had a home and a bed. Restaurants and stores.

An opportunity to thrive.

Chapter 28

"No, I won't make it easy, dumbass!"

"Suit yourself." Luke stood outside the door to a house where outlaws fled. Jacob's group had subdued most, but a few stragglers remained. Jacob insisted on cleaning up "leftovers," as he called them.

Two people covered the back entrance. Luke and Gavin took the lead.

Luke slammed the butt of his gun against a window. Several shots came from inside the house, punctuated by the sharp sound of glass as more fell onto the porch.

Luke and Gavin dropped behind a porch railing, waiting for the barrage to cease. Luke hurled a smoke grenade through the window.

Coughs and screams greeted their ears.

The front door flew open as someone ran out, tripping over his shoelaces and face-planting on the steps. He squirmed for a few seconds before rolling over. This ruffian hadn't noticed Luke and Gavin while clamoring for something beneath his shirt.

Gavin sent one bullet into the struggling bandit's chest.

A few seconds later, the sound of weapons discharged. Luke and Gavin ran toward the commotion.

They jumped a rusty fence, peeking around the corner. Two men in baggy clothes lay motionless on their backs, shocked expressions still visible on their faces. Beside them, a woman in a flowery dress sprawled on her side with a crimson stain spread across her chest.

"Came out in a hurry." One man shook his head. "Like fish in a barrel."

Gavin's lips curled into a grin. "Excellent job guys."

Luke and Gavin watched as two men searched the bodies.

Gavin twirled away. "Beats scramblers in a cage."

"No argument here." Luke surveyed the backyard's tangle of grass and weeds. A mess of wilderness overtook clipped hedges and blooming flowerbeds. He didn't relish contending with desperados, but Jacob offered a better deal than Clyde.

"These bandits give up a lot of stuff." Gavin's stomach growled, remembering the bounty he had lifted from bandits the day before. He felt his mouth water as he imagined sinking his teeth into juicy roast beef. His fists clenched in anticipation, eager to fill his belly with a much-needed meal.

"You think we should join Jacob?" Luke plucked a blade of grass and rubbed it between his fingers. The long, green strands smelled of pollen but tasted bitter on his tongue.

"Umm, no. Not really." Gavin clasped his hands together. "I enjoy being on our own. Not getting shot."

Luke put a hand on Gavin's shoulder. "Yeah, more than once a week risks voiding my life insurance."

Luke and Gavin made their way to the Silverado they claimed after killing the previous owners.

"We've got six days left to pay off our debt." Gavin popped the tab on a warm soda from the back seat. He nudged the car door closed with his foot. "Got any idea what we're gonna do?"

"I've heard of a place. It's maybe a hundred miles east, just off 80." Luke stretched his hamstrings, holding onto the passenger door. "Hampton Flats."

"Who told you about it?" Gavin knew some of the crew lacked credibility. "Dedrick or Kenny?"

Luke brushed aside Gavin's insinuation. "No. No bullshit. Ira brought it up. After that lunatic drove his car into the pond by the old feed store."

"Ah, okay." Gavin relaxed, reclining the seat on the driver's side to take a break. "Credible intel. Tell me what she said."

"Decent size community. Well protected. Organized. Looking for people to venture outside. Kill scramblers. Get supplies."

"We can make it in two days." Gavin opened a plastic bag with smoked roast beef inside. "Jacob's route takes us in that general direction."

"Yeah," Luke said. "He told me yesterday we're heading north tomorrow. More outlaws."

"Ask Jacob about Hampton Flats next time." Gavin's eyes grew heavy.

"I will." Luke stretched his back. "I'm gonna talk to him soon."

"Uh-huh." Gavin's voice trailed off.

Luke picked up his water bottle and closed the passenger door. He intended to ask Jacob about Hampton Flats. Jacob may travel with them.

He set his mind to check it out. Ira spoke of it, saying she would go, but couldn't leave Jacob.

Life on the road, sleeping in a vehicle every night, and fighting bandits didn't qualify as Luke's idea of happiness. Gavin agreed. Luke saw why people liked Jacob, but this life didn't suit him.

Time to leverage the experience of their misfortunes in a community that valued a particular skill set for something Gavin and Luke desired.

A home.

Chapter 29

General Tibern studied the quantum computer with a cautious eye. His knuckles turned pale as he grasped the cane for balance. “How long?”

“General?” Leong dreaded these visits from the old man. He made a habit of not specifying his questions.

“How long has this gizmo been AWOL?” The General’s eyes darted to Leong. “Answer my goddamn questions.”

Leong knew better than to react when Tibern became irritable. “The first recorded incident occurred twenty-six days ago.”

“You think it’s becoming an artifact? It caught some cosmic gobble from the other thing?” Tibern wanted a straight answer from Siskee’s longtime assistant rather than hypotheses and speculation.

“We know little about quantum machines or the artifact.” Leong moved closer to the quantum computer as she gestured toward it. “It reacts to linking with the artifact.”

“Can we use it?” Tibern’s cane smashed against the marble floor, punctuating his rage.

Leong tensed in quiet resolve, refusing to cower in the General’s presence. “For what?”

“To beat this damn pestilence outside!”

Tibern spat the words.

“Attempting to do anything without better understanding invites significant risk.” Leong walked around the artifact, creating space between herself and Tibern.

“Give me something I can use, for fuck’s sake.” Tibern squeezed his cane. “Or I’ll find somebody who can.”

The clack of his cane against the floor filled the room with a sinister cadence as Tibern issued a departing threat. “You are on borrowed time as well.”

Tibern hobbled out of the room, leaving an oppressive aura of dread in his wake. Leong took a breath. She had grown accustomed to Tibern’s rantings since agreeing to continue Siskee’s work under his patronage.

However, the collapse of civilization brought an unsavory turn in her benefactor’s demeanor. Tibern, whether from age or stress, teetered on the edge of sanity.

Leong feared he could suffer a break at any moment spiraling into madness. She needed an escape plan in case a fracture occurred. Tibern wanted something actionable from the quantum computer. Leong sought breathing room.

She needed help. Leong knew where to find it.

“You are off on a field trip.” Sebridge sat behind his desk as he addressed Marik and Joelle. “Your skills are required elsewhere for the time being.”

Marik looked from Sebridge to Joelle. “Are you going to shoot us?”

“What?” Sebridge’s face flashed a look of genuine surprise. “No. I told you. Your skills are required elsewhere.”

Joelle hadn’t seen Sebridge surprised before. Threats outside had taken a toll on the Colonel. Attacks on the compound grew more severe. Why would Sebridge send them into the terror? Absent protection from these walls and the armed soldiers, she and Marik faced certain death.

“You are being transferred to another location.” Sebridge leaned forward, folding his arms across the desk. “You’ll work on another project there.”

“When?” Marik did not practice subtlety. Joelle couldn’t fathom how he avoided execution for his lack of deference to authority.

“Now.” Sebridge looked up at Marik. “My men are waiting to escort you to the transport vehicle.”

Sebridge pressed a button on his desk. The door behind Joelle and Marik opened, and two men entered, dressed in full combat gear.

“Escort Ms. Abebe and Mr. Sidorov to the transport vehicle. Keep them alive.” Sebridge remained seated as his subordinates grabbed Joelle and Marik by the arms, escorting them out of the room.

“Be ready.” Marik grumbled.

Joelle didn’t know if Marik had addressed her. She said nothing as they loaded onto the armored vehicle. Military personnel handcuffed Marik and Joelle to a steel bar running along the wall behind them.

Three armed soldiers sat opposite the prisoners, all clad in protective gear as though headed into a war zone.

With a jolt, the carrier took off. Joelle found this transport rough compared to the vehicle in which she arrived. Marik didn’t seem to care.

Muffled noises came through the reinforced walls, reaching Joelle’s ears. She heard machinery outside and yelling. The truck stopped multiple times, waiting for the path ahead to clear. Joelle felt her anxiety rise each time the vehicle jerked forward.

“We are outside the gate.” Marik leaned over to Joelle, talking out the side of his mouth. “Into the badlands.”

Joelle felt and heard the transport picking up speed as its powerful engine vibrated in her seat. The soldiers across from her and Marik sat stone-faced.

They rode along without incident for the first thirty minutes.

The transport jerked to the right. Marik and Joelle slammed against the wall.

Marik grunted, and Joelle let out a whimper from the impact. The soldiers looked at each other. One scooted across the bench, reaching for an intercom button in the driving compartment.

“Status update.” The soldier barked into the intercom.

“Bogies advancing.” A voice replied. “We’re trying to outrun them.”

The soldier next to the intercom glanced back at his comrade. “How many?”

“Looks like a few dozen, maybe more.” Whoever answered sounded nervous. Joelle’s nerves tingled.

The transport lurched, sending all occupants into the air. Marik cursed, rolling his shoulders.

Joelle closed her eyes and slowed her breathing. She could feel a panic attack coming on.

Everyone looked up at the sound of gunfire above them.

“Shit.” one soldier across from Joelle pursed his lips. “They’re comin’ at us.”

A smile came across Marik’s face. He tasted opportunity.

“Hey!” Marik called out to the soldiers across from him and Joelle. “You can’t leave us tied up. What if they get inside?”

The soldiers glanced at Marik.

“You have to uncuff us.” Marik’s urgent tone sent Joelle over the edge. She began hyperventilating.

“She needs help!”

Marik cried out. “You gotta calm her down!”

“Get control of yourself, lady.” One soldier grabbed the metal railing behind him, getting to his feet as he spoke. “That’s an order.”

“She needs a sedative.” Marik wanted to escalate the situation. Give himself a chance to get the upper hand. “Quick. She’s infected.”

Joelle’s panic wouldn’t allow her to say anything as she hyperventilated.

The truck swerved again. The soldier who stood to address Joelle slammed into the wall behind him, grunting in pain.

“How’s it lookin’ out there?” The man sitting by the intercom held the button, waiting for a reply.

“It’s… Shit!”

The truck hit something, spinning around in a half circle. Joelle screamed. Marik cursed again as he and Joelle smashed into each other.

The man sitting by the intercom flew across the compartment, his head bumping the wall next to Marik. The other two soldiers landed on the floor at Joelle’s feet.

Marik squeezed his hands, trying to grab the unconscious guard crumpled across the bench beside him. Both soldiers on the floor near Joelle groaned as they sat up.

Something hit the side of the transport, making a loud thud against the wall. Another thud followed seconds later.

One soldier stumbled to the intercom as Marik attempted to grab something from the unconscious trooper.

Thumping came from all around the transport. Joelle whimpered in fear. Infected surrounded them.

Gunfire resumed as the mini-gun atop the vehicle came alive. Joelle thought she could hear someone yelling expletives between brief shooting bursts.

“Get us moving!” The soldier screamed into the intercom. “Drive!”

“We can’t!” came the reply. “We’re hung up on something!”

“Let us free.” Marik looked straight at the soldier speaking into the intercom. “We can help.”

“Quiet!” The other soldier stood by the loading door as he addressed Marik. “Just stay put.”

Neither of the soldiers noticed Marik trying to grab something from the unconscious soldier beside him. Joelle pulled against her handcuffs without realizing it. Flashes of the facility entered her mind, threatening to send her into hysteria.

“We’re safe in here.” The soldier at the intercom tried to even out his tone. Marik saw the name on his uniform. It read “Ames.” As Marik snatched an item from the lifeless soldier’s waist, his hands retreated behind his back.

“Ames.” Marik kept his eyes on Ames, wanting to distract him. “Those things will kill your friends if you don’t help them.”

“Stay quiet.” Ames repeated the other soldier’s instructions. “We’re not opening any doors.”

“You could still help them,” Marik said. “Save their lives.”

The bursts of fire above ceased.

“Oh shit.” A soldier cursed as the truck shook. “They’re climbing up. Going after Ony.”

“You better hurry.” Marik spoke with urgency. “Your friends will die soon.”

“I said…” Ames started toward Marik, raising his rifle to hit Marik with the butt end.

Marik waited until Ames got within a couple feet of him to lunge, shoving Ames as he grabbed the rifle. Ames yelled out. The soldier standing by the door rushed for Marik, raising his rifle.

Marik pivoted, jamming the rifle’s nozzle into the approaching soldier’s stomach as he wrestled with Ames. Joelle heard the rifle fire as Marik pulled the trigger. She watched, paralyzed, as the soldier who had rushed Marik crumpled. His armor kept the bullet from entering his body, but the impact put him on the floor.

Ames reached for his knife as Marik tried to yank the rifle out of his hands. Marik stepped to the side, trying to escape Ames’ reach. He didn’t quite get out of the way as Ames jabbed the knife into Marik’s shoulder.

Joelle watched the soldier on the floor. She could see his nametag. It read “Rimley.” Rimley choked and spit at Joelle’s feet as he recovered from being shot. He tried twice to sit up, seeing the scuffle between Marik and Ames a few feet away.

Marik fell to his knees. Ames ripped the gun out of Marik’s grip, swinging it around to aim at Marik’s head. Marik’s head drooped to his chest for a second. Ames hesitated, waiting for his attacker to fall.

Head against his chest, Marik bolted forward, pressing between Ames and the rifle. Ames screamed as Marik’s forehead hit his nose. Marik clasped his hands around Ames’ head.

Joelle screamed as Marik pulled Ames’ body down on top of him. Ames spasmed as Marik fed on him. Rimley stared at Joelle, then pushed himself to stand, wobbling toward his comrade.

Rimley bent to pull Ames away from Marik, grabbing his legs and pulling as he grunted.

Joelle looked at the bench beside her. The keys Marik used to free himself sat there. Joelle scooted the keys with her right leg as Rimley focused on getting Ames away from Marik.

She moved the keys toward her right hand under her leg and bottom, leaning over to get her fingers around them. No one paid attention to Joelle as she freed herself and stood.

Marik’s feeding terrified her at first. Then Joelle got hungry.

Joelle approached Rimley from behind, not in haste but with calm certainty. She intended to feed.

Joelle lifted her arms, closing her hands around Rimley’s head and boxing his ears.

“Ahhh!” Rimley squealed in surprise and terror as tentacles from Joelle’s fingertips dug into his skull. In a motion almost comical, Rimley’s body appeared to slow dance downward.

Sounds of soft gurgling filled the enclosure as Marik and Joelle fed in silence.

Done feeding, both stood, leaving the drained soldiers on the floor.

Marik leaned down to grab Ames’ rifle, pointing at Rimley’s weapon. “Get his gun and knife. Grab the magazines too.”

Joelle did. Marik moved past her to the back door. He unlocked the hinge, holding the door shut, then pushed it with his leg. Hands filled the void. Marik used both arms to open the door further.

Hands gave way to heads and torsos pressing against the rear bumper of the transport vehicle. Marik didn’t hesitate. He stepped onto the bumper, pushing scramblers with one arm while steadying himself with the other.

“Let’s go.” Marik tilted his head toward Joelle. “They don’t like us.”

Joelle followed Marik onto the bumper and then the road. Scramblers pressed against her and Marik as they moved away from the vehicle.

Full of mind energy, Marik and Joelle vanished.

Chapter 30

"It brings my heart such joy to see you and your lady friend." Georgina's warm voice filled the main room of Sam's cabin. "Sam and I are so happy to see you."

Sam smirked, keeping quiet. Like Cowboy, Sam loved Georgie and would never disagree.

Lanisha liked Sam and Georgina. They couldn't be more unlike one another. Sam, gruff and quiet. Georgina, nurturing and warm. Lanisha knew Georgina welcomed her. She didn't know about Sam yet.

Lanisha sat next to Sam at the wooden table between the fireplace and the front door. Bench seating ran along both sides. Orange flames danced across gnarled logs, sending wisps of smoke into the chimney. The table's rough-cut timber provided an authentic charm Lanisha found soothing.

Cowboy sat across from Lanisha and Sam. "I'm relieved to see you both alive and healthy."

"Of course we are." Sam nudged Georgina with his elbow before flashing a mischievous grin... "Georgie's as badass as ever."

Georgina huffed, then frowned at Sam in mock offense. "Sam! Manners."

Lanisha grinned, savoring the exchange. Sam cherished Georgie. His comment, irreverent as it may sound, highlighted that.

"Thank you for making me feel at home." Lanisha directed her comment to Sam and Georgina.

"Of course, dear." Georgina passed a basket of bread rolls. "We wouldn't have it any different. Would we Sam?"

"I suppose she can stay, long as she behaves." Sam raised his spoon to Lanisha.

Cowboy ate grits and bread without joining the banter. His mind traveled elsewhere. He intended to reach Cormac after breakfast. That required excusing himself for a few hours.

"Sam's going to take you on the bayou tour." Cowboy rinsed out his bowl and silverware. "I'll be away for a while. Back around sunset."

Lanisha's eyes widened. "You are?" She looked at Sam." He is?"

"I am?" Sam found himself surprised as well. "A tour?"

"Get to know each other." Cowboy replied. "Lanisha should know the area. For her safety and ours."

Sam shrugged, thinking about Cowboy's reasoning. "Suppose so. If she's up for it."

"Is something the matter?" Georgina got up, taking Sam and Lanisha's breakfast dishes. "You got trouble?"

"No, I'm okay." Cowboy took the dishes from Georgina to wash them. "I got personal business to handle."

"Well." Georgina looked between Cowboy, Sam, and Lanisha. "Ya'll be safe wherever you go. Watch yourselves. Be back for dinner."

"I'll keep her safe, Georgie." Sam patted Lanisha's back. "She'll be skinnin' gators in no time."

"I don't know about that." Lanisha chortled. "Maybe we hold that training off till next week."

Sam shook his head, turning toward the door leading outside. "Nah. I'll get you hooked. You'll see."

Lanisha watched Sam walk out of the cabin, then turned to address Cowboy. "Everything okay? I didn't know you had business elsewhere."

"Need time to think." Cowboy stacked the dishes, not turning to make eye contact with Lanisha. "Put my thoughts in order. You'll be safe with Sam and Georgie."

"I know." Lanisha clasped her hands, deciding whether to pry. "I'm here to talk. It's the least I can do. You stuck to your word. Got me to a safe place."

Cowboy stepped back, unsure how much to share. Cormac and the way Cowboy communicated with him didn't lend to straightforward explanations.

"I will talk when I figure things out." Cowboy walked to the table, finding Lanisha's eyes. "I need more information first."

"If you want to." Lanisha glanced at Georgina, who busied herself sweeping as she hummed an old tune. "You don't owe me. I'm not trying to push you."

"Pay attention to what Sam shows you." Cowboy began walking away to gather his gun, knife, and canteen. "Maybe the Bayou will speak to you."

"Speak to me?" Lanisha had yet to learn what Cowboy meant. He said nothing, vanishing from sight.

"Can I help you with anything?" Lanisha found herself alone in the cabin with Georgina.

"Oh?" Georgina's head tilted in surprise, lost in her own thoughts. "No dear. Sam does most of the cleaning. I try to beat him to it."

Lanisha smiled. Exploring the bayou with Sam sounded exciting and intimidating.

Cowboy got into the boat, pushing away from the soggy bank.

He focused on insects skating across the water's surface and a family of mottled ducks zigzagging in the opposite direction. His boat ride through the wetland took him to the elevated hideout he built a year ago.

Like the bunker in Idaho, Cowboy equipped this shelter with necessities for survival, protecting himself, and monitoring the outside world. Only Sam knew about it.

Cowboy sought privacy for reaching Cormac, and his refuge above the swamp provided it.

Two hours later, Cowboy stepped onto a strip of land, breaking the water's surface. At other times of the year, this area would submerge or rise a couple of feet above the murky darkness.

Cowboy unfastened a rope ladder secured to an ancient black gum tupelo tree. The makeshift platform of cypress wood and willow branches swayed underfoot. As Cowboy expected, deep blue, waxy berries hung from the tree's limbs. He picked a few while climbing to his destination. Sour juices greeted his taste buds.

Cowboy walked to the edge of the elevated platform, remaining outside for today's chat with Cormac.

*Cormac.* As before, he called his old comrade.

*Yes. I've been expecting you.* Cormac responded faster this time. *Our link grows in stability.*

*How?* Cowboy made a mental note of things to ask Cormac since their last link-up.

*Siskee changed the formula you received.*Cormac's tone sounded different this time. Cowboy sensed Cormac wanted to discuss other matters. Cowboy wanted answers first.

*You died? Then came back to life?* Cowboy knew Cormac in the military. Cormac seldom spoke during that time. He knew little of Cormac's history.

*Perhaps. My vitals weren't registering. Siskee wrote me off as a specimen to be dissected and studied. My heart started beating again. My breath returned before he got around to it.*

*Everyone receiving the injection almost died, and most did, from what I understand.* Cowboy recalled Baako's explanation of the injections.

*Yes. Siskee sought to create a superior lifeform by siphoning the artifact's power. He didn't mind using up many lives.*

*This artifact bears responsibility for what's happening now.* Cowboy deduced this from Cormac's explanation regarding his debilitating encounter with the creature in Idaho.

*Excellent, you put that together*.

*Why must we prepare?* Cowboy's mind had put things together.

*The artifact's power favors none.* Cormac's statement sounded cryptic, but Cowboy thought he understood. *And it may offer divergent results to its users.*

*Sounds chaotic*. Cowboy recognized the danger after Cormac explained it led to his sparring partner in Idaho.

*A thing of unknown origin and power should give anyone pause.* Cormac's voice took on a disgusted tone. *But maniacs cause chaos when granted license.*

*Stopping the maniacs is no longer an option. You and I are supposed to face creatures like the one that attacked me? Why should we?*Cowboy felt no obligation to humanity.

*The Ancient Ones will arrive through The Portal. If they succeed, this planet will cease to exist in its current form. No life as you know it will survive.* Cormac did not seem frustrated or surprised.

*No life as I recognize it?*

*It may mean death or changed into beings like the one you faced. I am not gifted with this knowledge.*

Cormac still existed as an unknown. Cowboy didn't know if Cormac had changed as well. Cormac never gave reason to doubt his words.

*Can we stop this portal thing?*Cowboy strategized a means of preventing this mysterious threat.

*I think not. The beings designed to form it are beyond any known power to thwart them.*

*Explain how we stop these Ancient Ones from having their way.*Cowboy needed to see where he and Cormac came into the picture.

*We gain our power from things we fight.*Cormac answered. *Like you, I faced one of them that sought me out. Like you, it did not kill me. I met it again and won.*

*You became stronger after?*Cowboy knew his body and mind changed after engaging with a changed being. He could verify this part of Cormac's story.

*More than that. I understood its purpose and its power. I took strength from it.*Cormac ran circles around any of the enhanced soldiers before. Cowboy couldn't imagine Cormac's potency today.

*Why do you need me?* This seemed like an obvious question when considering Cormac's abilities.

*You will become like me when we face them together. Perhaps stronger.*

Cowboy didn't expect this answer. He remembered Cormac's comment when they first met but had brushed it off as simple banter.

Instead of pleading humanity's case, Cormac spoke to Cowboy's self-preservation. He emphasized staying alive and not becoming enslaved to some unknown entity.

Cowboy studied the putrescent swamp, teeming with life and decay. A red-spotted purple butterfly fluttered nearby, its kaleidoscopic wings defying a vacuous backdrop. He decided.

*Tell me the plan.*

Chapter 31

Luke recognized Jacob's game after a week of working with him.

Jacob saw himself as a peacekeeper, an enforcer of law and order. Luke saw Jacob as a glorified vigilante. Jacob lived by a code, as did everyone under his authority. He tolerated no savagery or disrespect and looked after his people, overseeing their safety and well-being. Jacob rushed to defend anyone threatened by roving hoodlums.

Luke respected Jacob but also recognized the delusional qualities of this gang leader. If Jacob lost patience with someone, he let them feel the full wrath of his temper.

Luke stood by as Jacob executed people who disrespected him. For such things, he showed no mercy.

Gavin recognized Jacob as a gang leader as well. "He's gotta be tough. This world doesn't favor the weak."

"He's got the charisma of a leader." Luke digested Gavin's comment.

"Do you know what he did before?" Gavin asked.

"No." Luke handed Gavin a canteen. "Nobody else knows either. Jacob won't talk about it, I guess."

"What about Hampton Flats?" Gavin raised his hand before accepting the canteen to finish chewing his food.

Luke took another swig. "Said it's an excellent place. I guess he's got history working with them on odd jobs."

"How about us going?" Gavin held out his hand for the canteen, frowning at Luke.

"He doesn't want to lose us, but he'll keep his word and let us go." Luke covered his eyes to glance at the sun. "We're already a week over our agreed-upon time."

"Dedrick says we're gonna head that way again." Gavin offered. "I checked with Ira to verify."

"That could take a couple weeks." Luke considered what dangers they would face.

"We'll survive. Two weeks, give or take, is nothin'." Gavin sounded enthusiastic.

"I guess." Luke didn't share Gavin's enthusiasm. He wanted to escape the chaos. "I want to get somewhere I won't worry about getting shot at while I'm sleeping."

"That only happened once," Gavin said. "And they probably weren't shooting at you specifically."

"I'm not that special, huh?"

"Maybe," Gavin said. "You may have a price on your head already."

Luke shook his head, grinning at Gavin. "Fucking asshole."

Gavin had a knack for brightening Luke's mood, no matter how low he sunk.

"Hey, fellas!" Luke turned to see Kenny push his sunglasses to the top of his head. Kenny's ruddy complexion, flushed with years of exertion and blemishes, widened into a grin that put an extra twinkle in his dark eyes.

"Hey Kenny." Gavin said. Luke nodded.

"We're headin' in soon. Thirty minutes to reach 'em." Kenny took his turn, gauging the sun's brilliance. "We'll have this wrapped up fore' nightfall."

"Yeah, for sure." Gavin felt antsy to get moving. "No problem."

Kenny squinted at Luke. "You depressed again, son?"

Luke hated Kenny calling him s*on*. The way he said it sounded so cheesy. "No. I'm great, Kenny."

Kenny nodded, feeling the chilly vibe. "Uh-huh."

"It's not you Kenny. He's terrible at opening up to people." Gavin said. "Just ignore him."

Luke forced a smile, relaxing his tone. "Thanks Kenny. We'll get ready to leave."

"Okay fellas." Kenny waved as he started walking away. "Stay safe."

"You shouldn't be so standoffish to Kenny." Gavin said as Kenny moved out of earshot.

"He's a bombastic ass." Luke shook his head, collecting trash from the hood of their truck. "It grates on me."

"Yeah, but everybody knows that." Gavin scooped a wrapper from the ground. "Just be nice. That's all. Play along and ignore him."

"Easier said than done." Luke watched as others got into their vehicles. "Let's get to work."

These bandits did not take it easy.

"Fuck!" Gavin screamed as a grenade exploded fifteen feet away, tearing Ira apart before his eyes. "We gotta get back!"

Luke couldn't hear Gavin above the shooting and explosions. Two vehicles from Jacob's crew blew up seconds earlier, and Luke saw Jacob yelling something at one of his people.

Bandits tossed smoke bombs, creating a dense haze between Luke and the chaos.

"We gotta get back!"

Gavin yelled in Luke's ear.

Luke's eyes darted toward Gavin. "Yeah! Okay!"

Luke and Gavin withdrew. A handful of Jacob's people beat them to it. Luke saw them seek cover off the road.

"Head toward them!" Luke pointed to Jacob's people.

"They're picking us off too fast." One of Jacob's people, Bammer, as everyone called him, spoke as Luke and Gavin drew close.

"We need to flank them." Luke ran to Bammer. "We have no time."

"Okay." Bammer glanced at the others. "It will take a few minutes."

"Then let's get going." Gavin clenched his jaw, ready to hit back. "Time's wasting."

Luke, Gavin, and the rest of Jacob's posse zigzagged between pine and maple, hearing yells and blasts to their left. Smoke filtered through the branches. People Luke had fought beside perished by the minute.

It took about eight minutes to get into position behind the bandits. Bammer motioned half the group to move in for a direct strike. Half would flank the side.

"Wait till they get focused on us. Then hit 'em." Bammer waited for the group to get into position. He gave Gavin sixty seconds, then opened fire behind the enemy.

Luke closed his eyes, trying to hold it together for one more fight. He and Gavin must survive and get to Hampton Flats, no matter what.

Gavin held his hand up to steady his companions, letting the bandits get focused on Bammer's attack.

"Stay low. We need to be close." Gavin ran in a crouch, using the trees for cover. Everyone stayed close to him, ready to rush the enemy.

Gavin emerged from the trees, keeping his body low. None of the bandits noticed him. Jacob continued to offer some resistance from the front while Bammer's group held the enemy occupied from behind.

Gavin waited for one bandit to notice him before opening fire. He focused on one target.

The man Gavin focused on noticed Gavin and the others, alarm on his face as he hollered at another beside him. Gavin's finger tensed against the trigger. The bullet ripped through his target's leg, splintering bone and shredding flesh. Someone beside Gavin fired next, hitting the man's chest.

Luke let out a primal scream and sprayed bullets at the people shooting Bammer's group as he rushed headlong into the fray. Without realizing it, he found himself among the adversary.

Luke swung his empty revolver on impulse, cracking a bandit's skull with the butt end. Someone put a bullet in the man as he raised his gun.

Luke's fist collided with another bandit's face in a crunch of bone and cartilage. The blow sent the man careening into a woman gripping a rifle. Luke whipped out his blade and thrust it into the man's abdomen as he fell atop the woman. The woman shrieked with rage as Luke withdrew the knife and drove it into her forehead.

Luke pushed himself off the wounded man atop the dead woman. Someone else put the gut-shot outlaw out of his misery.

Luke sat amidst the carnage. Bullets whizzed around him, but he didn't care. Luke hadn't killed with such violence before. His mind sank into shock.

"Luke?" Gavin approached Luke. "You okay? We did it."

"Huh?" Luke glanced up, not understanding what Gavin meant at first.

"You really caught 'em off guard, dude!" Gavin's jubilant tone brought Luke to the present.

"I killed them with this." Luke held the knife for Gavin to see.

"What's wrong?" Gavin asked. Luke didn't sound coherent. "Are you hurt?"

"No." Luke became transfixed by the knife. "I just killed them."

"He's in shock." Bammer put a hand on Gavin. "Give him a minute. First time getting dirty can be rough."

Gavin stared at Bammer, then at Luke. "Tell me you're okay, man."

Luke said nothing.

"Give him a minute." Bammer said again. "Don't push him. We got time."

Gavin sat on the ground next to Luke, a couple feet from the people Luke stabbed.

Jacob barked instructions from somewhere in the distance as Gavin sat with Luke.

After several moments, Luke rolled onto his knees and stood. Gavin did as well.

"I'm okay." Luke made eye contact, then looked away.

"We did it." Gavin repeated, not sounding excited. "They're all dead. No prisoners today."

"Jacob takes no prisoners." Luke heard Jacob barking instructions in the distance. "This was the toughest fight yet."

"Woulda been toast if we bumped into these fellas on our own." Gavin thought about their decision to stay with Jacob longer.

Luke agreed. He didn't feel guilty about killing two people. Only relief.

"Yeah, fortunate for us. Too bad for them." Luke said.

He needed a drink. Something heavier than water.

Chapter 32

Deena rechecked the door. Sal's raspy breathing filled the room as he sat against the opposite wall. The air felt thick with anticipation and dread, each breath a reminder of the danger surrounding them. Sweat beaded on her forehead as Deena moved away from the door and towards Sal, her steps unsteady.

"That little stunt..." Sal's throat tightened as a sudden coughing fit stole the words from his lips. His body shook, face flush red. With a heroic effort, Sal took a deep breath and regained his composure. "... took it out of me, my dear."

"She is determined to find us." Deena's stomach lurched with fear, the overwhelming weight of their situation bearing down on her. The tiny room became a cell, the walls closing in and cutting off any escape. No place to hide, no way out.

Sal fainted after dragging Deena inside and ripping out the keypad screen to unlock the door. Deena noticed circuit boxes lining two walls illuminated by neon green lights that hummed with energy. One terminal station above where her father rested flickered with life, the console whirring in a steady beat. A peculiar aroma of ozone, electricity, and oil saturated the room. Deena did not find the smell displeasing.

"Of course, but she cannot get inside fast enough to stop us." Despite his weakened state, Sal's tone remained confident.

"From doing what?" Deena felt none of Sal's certainty.

"We can shut it all down here. Lock her out." Sal grimaced from the effort of speaking.

"Then what?" Deena hated pulling details out of her father. Why couldn't he lay it all out?

"Genevieve will lob threats and insults to begin..." Sal took a breath. "... Then our inhospitable host will settle for negotiating like a civilized person."

"Explain to me the bargain you intend to make." Deena pondered her father's ulterior motives.

"We agree first to stop trying to kill or imprison one another. Then we establish power sharing." Sal's eyes fluttered. Deena feared he passed out or died.

"Sal?" Deena tried not to panic as she imagined fending off Genevieve alone. "You still with me?"

Sal remained still. Deena moved closer to check for a pulse. Her fingertips grazed his neck, and she felt a faint throbbing. Sal lived but had lost consciousness.

Deena sat next to Sal. She didn't know what to do when Genevieve showed and her father remained unconscious.

Amped by adrenaline for the past few hours, Deena's body downshifted. Jitters gave way to dull tingling and muscle spasms.

Deena's head fell forward, eyelids heavy. She jerked as fight-or-flight hormones balanced themselves out. Deena drifted, sleeping the restless sleep of a prey animal.

A bristling phantom pursued her across a sunless landscape. Paralyzing breath seared the back of Deena's neck. Her arms twitched. Deena snapped awake. Shadows morphed and danced on the walls as if trying to reach out and consume her.

"Sal!" Deena turned to see her father no longer beside her. "Where…"

"I am here."

Sal's voice sounded distant.

"Building leverage and making it difficult for Ms. Messina to determine our location."

"How long was I out?" Deena rubbed her temples, pushing the panic away. The monster existed only in her nightmare.

Deena looked over to see her father fiddling with wires behind one panel. He offered no reply as he focused on his efforts. She stood, walking over to examine Sal's work.

"Is there any other way out?" Deena looked for other exits.

"No, my dear. We must intensify our adversary's willingness to negotiate."

Sal began humming an archaic tune, finishing his task and stepping away from the circuit board. "I've put things in motion. I'll reach out to her after a few things go haywire."

"How long can we stay here?" Deena eyed the ventilation duct. At less than a foot square, they couldn't escape.

"About as long as we can go without water or food, I suppose." Sal opened another panel, scanning the circuitry inside. "She may cut air, which will leave less time."

"How did you get away?" Deena remembered Sal escaped Genevieve and incapacitated Chloe.

"She made me a Guinea Pig, and I took advantage."

He returned to the panel he had left and compared it to the second one.

"That's what made you pass out?" Deena did not know what Sal meant by Guinea Pig.

"I expect so. I didn't know what would happen." Sal moved to the second panel, poking his fingers behind circuit boards.

"Sal! You bastard! What did you do to Chloe?"

Genevieve's voice came over the intercom before Deena could ask more questions.

Sal looked at the ceiling, grinning. He did his best to sound cheerful. "Genevieve, darling. I trust you rested."

"Shove it up your ass, Sal."

"That won't do at all. Let's be civilized, shall we?" Sal winked at Deena.

"Fuck you!" The intercom clicked off.

"Well, I tried to reason…" Sal frowned at the ventilation duct as he fell silent.

"What is it?" Deena followed Sal's gaze. "What happened?"

"She's cut our air. Very well."

Sal resumed his work on the cluster of wires. "Soon, she'll find herself in the same boat as us."

Sal walked over to an input station by the door, pressing one button. "Genevieve. My dear. You will find negotiating favorable to strong-arm tactics in these circumstances. I've reversed the air flow site wide. You'll be running out of air within a couple of hours."

No reply came at first.

Sal turned to Deena. "No doubt she's attempting to override my commands. She won't succeed. We'll hear from Ms. Messina again."

As Sal predicted, Genevieve returned about ten minutes later.

"You fucking shitbag! What did you do?"

"Tone, my dear, tone. Speak to me with civility, as I have done the same with you." Sal kept his tone casual as if handling an unruly child.

"Fuck you, Sal!" Genevieve sounded ready to turn insane any second. "Go fuck yourself!"

"No, my dear. If you can't do two things for me, I'll let you and your girlfriend die." Sal waited in silence for Genevieve to accept his condition.

"I'll kill you for what you did to Chloe." Genevieve's voice came across smoother this time but no less psychotic.

"Her condition is not permanent if I choose." Sal maintained his refined tone. "Now, accept my terms or you and she will die together. Your choice."

A full minute passed before Genevieve responded. "What conditions?"

"That's better." Sal started. "Speak to me with respect and agree to negotiate."

"Tell me what you want." Genevieve labored to keep her tone even between breaths.

"We all agree to live here in peace. You and I share power over The Mountain." Sal closed his eyes, standing inches from the wall.

"Bring Chloe back first. Then we talk."

"I will allow her to return for a bit. Then I'll take her away until you agree to my terms."

Sal snapped his fingers in the air.

"Go to her. See for yourself. Speak to me again after."

Sal stumbled, grabbing the wall to support himself.

"Sal!" Deena called out. "What's wrong?"

Sal's breathing became raspy again. "No, I'm fine." Each word came with effort. "Give me a moment."

Deena put a hand on her father's shoulder. "Maybe you should sit."

Sal shook his head, taking slow breaths before letting go of the wall. "All is well. I can stand."

"What now?" Deena realized for the first time that Sal had impressed her. His ability to outsmart a maniac like Genevieve put him in a new light.

"Give the ladies their precious moments to cherish. Then take it away. She'll be ready to meet my demands. I've discovered Chloe's significance."

Deena nodded, directing her attention to the panels along the wall.

She and her father may be out of harm's way soon. Much hinged on Sal's ability to manage Genevieve and her raucous temper.

"If she doesn't double-cross." Deena remembered how Genevieve and Chloe had talked about her.

"I will set up safeguards to prevent it."

Sal turned to look at his daughter.

"You will be safe."

Deena met her father's eyes, allowing him to see her uncertainty. Sal stepped closer to hug his daughter.

"No harm will come to you."

Sal spoke in a soothing tone. "I will keep you safe."

He stepped back, holding Deena at arm's length.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I must bring Ms. Messina back to the negotiating table."

Chapter 33

Gavin frowned, bewildered by Luke's unwillingness to accept Jacob's idea. "It's our ticket. We do them a favor. Jacob gives us a positive recommendation. What's the problem?"

Luke avoided eye contact, staring off into space.

"You givin' me the silent treatment?" Gavin moved closer to Luke.

"No. I'm not." Luke's resentful tone surprised Gavin.

"Dude, what gives? Talk to me."

"I'm tired. Tired of fighting and almost getting killed."

Luke's eyes teared.

"Putting myself in danger every day is not honoring my father."

Gavin could see Luke getting emotional. He stepped back.

"No. It isn't. That's why we should do what Jacob wants one last time."

A bitter chuckle escaped Luke's mouth.

"In the movies, that's when someone dies. The last job."

Gavin rubbed the scuffed toe of his boot, clenching his jaw. He relaxed his shoulders and forced a smile, adopting a nonconfrontational posture. He wanted Luke to hear his words without becoming defensive. "We want the best chance of getting into Hampton Flats. With Jacob's recommendation, we have it. You do what your father wanted."

Luke shook his head again.

"Listen," Gavin said. "I can't guarantee we won't die tomorrow. We might. We could die anytime. I want us to get the best chance of getting in. That's all."

"I'm worn out with this shit. This life isn't me."

"Me neither." Gavin admitted. "I don't hate it as much, but I don't want to die fighting bandits."

"You won't miss Kenny?" Luke asked. "I think you're becoming buds."

"Kenny's okay. He's just full of shit." Gavin bristled but calmed before getting angry. "I want to get us into Hampton Flats. Walls around us. People who live normal, well close to normal, lives."

"Okay, I'll do it. But this is it. I'm walking away after."

Gavin hugged Luke. "Thank you."

Jacob had everyone rising before the sun cast its first rays. He wanted the element of surprise.

Jacob explained that a contract to clear out highwaymen for Hampton Flats favored Gavin and Luke. A few people had joined Jacob's crew, filling vacancies created by recent deaths. Jacob looked out for people under his authority, but the work involved significant risk.

The intimate killing of two people with his knife proved a turning point for Luke. He could kill without regret. He wanted out before turning into a fatality himself.

"Hampton Flats is only twenty miles away." Gavin couldn't hide his enthusiasm as he drove the Silverado that day. "We'll be residents by nightfall."

"Yeah. Watch yourself today, man." Luke sounded all business.

"Always. We're gonna make it Luke."

Luke rechecked his rifle and sidearm, eager to end the day's unpleasantries. He ran his fingers along the cold metal of his weapon, feeling the moment weigh on him. An acrid mix of gun oil, sweat, and dirt filled the air.

Bandits had held up and slaughtered two scouting teams in the past month, leaving Hampton Flats shaken and desperate for retribution. With the stakes high, eagerness to exterminate these vermin intensified.

Jacob fit the bill. His crew dispatched outlaws far and wide. Luke and Gavin witnessed outlaws retreat several times instead of facing Jacob head-on. Jacob's crew caught up later, killing them anyway.

However, Jacob wanted to give these bandits no chance of escape. They would find themselves hit from both sides. Hampton Flats wanted them all dead.

"You two hotheads are with me." Kenny greeted Luke and Gavin as they approached the front of Jacob's parked caravan at the edge of a long, winding gravel road.

"Looks like them." Gavin tilted his head toward another group of vehicles parked around a farmhouse off the road. Morning dew glistened above a field of weeds and crops. "They don't seem worried about us."

"All still sleeping." Kenny said. "Lazy bastards."

"Better for us." Luke lifted his gun to sight in on the farmhouse. "Quick, clean."

"Fuck yeah." Kenny patted Luke's shoulder in approval. "We'll get 'em."

Kenny forged a path through the waist-high grass and wildflowers of the overgrown field east of the main house. His companions rustled leaves underfoot as two other groups moved in from the north and south. Dawn's glow cast a blonde hue over the quiet earth.

"No one outside." Earnest met Kenny's group halfway across the field. "Piece a cake to take the house."

"Let's do it, ladies." Kenny did his finest John Wayne impersonation.

Gavin mouthed the word "Wow" toward Luke. Kenny's failed attempt offered a moment of levity.

Three squads advanced toward the house, anticipating no resistance. Two teams took the front and rear doors while the third hung back in case any desperadoes tried to bolt.

A wrought-iron gate, with no visible latch or opening, stood waist-high between the field and the porch.

Blinds hung heavy, obscuring any view of what lay inside. Everyone prepared to breach the front and back thresholds.

"On three." Lester signaled to the man holding a battering ram.

Luke stood next to Lester, Gavin across from them both.

The door shattered, sending dust and splinters flying into the room. Jacob's people stormed in.

A rush of adrenaline surged through all as they charged into the fray.

Yells from somewhere inside the house. Then more shouting from upstairs. A few seconds later, the back door busting open met everyone's ears.

Bullets pinged against metal.

"Take cover!" A voice Luke didn't recognize. "We're bein' raided!"

Repeated thuds above made Luke glance at the ceiling. He pointed up, looking at Gavin. "Let's check it out."

Gavin saluted in agreement. "Right behind ya."

Luke faced the staircase leading to the second floor.

A woman appeared out of nowhere. "No way fuckers!" She fired twice in Luke and Gavin's direction.

Luke and Gavin ducked to avoid getting shot, but the woman didn't bother taking aim. Her shots sailed far above their heads.

Gavin, still kneeling, motioned for Luke to climb the stairs while he provided covering fire. Gavin pointed his gun where the woman had slid out of sight, spacing his shots while Luke crept up the stairs.

The woman jumped out again. Her face registered surprise as she raised her gun. Gavin's bullet caught her in the leg. Luke swung his pistol to finish the job.

Gavin hastened up the stairs. They started sweeping as two more of Jacob's crew joined them.

Shooting and cursing from below made it easy to move unnoticed. Gavin and Luke took positions opposite the first door to their left.

Gavin tested the doorknob, twisting it and shoving the door open. Someone fired a slug into the hallway. Luke raised his gun, reaching around the door to take a shot. Gavin did the same, going low.

Another shot from inside the room. The slug pulverized wood, inches from Luke's back. He lunged forward on instinct, exposed in the doorway.

He glimpsed the shooter. With a double-barrel shotgun in hand, the man tried to reload. Luke raised his gun, sending lead into the man's chest. The man staggered, eyes wide with shock. He fell into the wall, sliding to the floor with a whimper. Together with Gavin, they scoured the room, finding no one else.

Gunshots crackled through the air. Gavin and Luke remained alert, advancing to the next room.

"Watch out! Behind you!"

Gavin shouted in alarm as they took their places opposite the door.

Luke spun to find a woman charging him. The woman pounced before he could fire his gun. Gavin hollered as the woman dug her fingers into Luke's scalp.

Luke's body stiffened, cold electricity assailing every nerve in his body. The feeling vanished. Luke fell to his knees, unable to see or speak.

"Luke! You okay?" Gavin drew closer. Luke tried moving his mouth, but no words came out.

He couldn't move. Luke's body fell to the floor face-first, Gavin still yelling his name.

Gavin shook Luke's body, turning him over.

"Goddammit, Luke!" Gavin found a pulse. Luke had lost consciousness. "Don't worry, buddy. I've got you."

Gavin sat next to Luke, wiping his forehead.

Jacob's people ended the bandits' reign of terror.

Gavin sought Jacob. He must get Luke to Hampton Flats.

Pronto.

Chapter 34

Cowboy could not tell Lanisha everything. It would only confuse and anger her. Out of necessity, Cowboy gave her bits and pieces.

"That's all you're gonna say about it?" Lanisha held her hands by her sides, showing Cowboy she expected a better explanation. "You gotta meet with some old army buddy to plan an attack?"

"That's not what I said." Cowboy sounded casual as ever, not in the least rattled by Lanisha.

"I paraphrased your lame-ass story. Give me a break." Lanisha realized her tone and word choices weren't getting her anywhere. "I shouldn't have yelled at you. You did what you said and don't me you anything."

"It's not about that." Cowboy stuffed a day-old biscuit into his mouth. "I don't want to confuse you with things I don't understand."

"Will you be coming back?" Lanisha looked outside to where Sam and Georgina had exited moments ago.

"You don't like my family?" Cowboy grinned. "They rub you the wrong way or something?"

"No, that's not it at all." Lanisha caught Cowboy grinning at her, revealing the glow of his emerald blue eyes. Her cheeks bloomed crimson. "I'm concerned about your safety."

Cowboy nodded, looking away. "I don't know if I'll be back. It will be a while before I do."

"You don't know if you'll survive."

"Many times, I didn't know. This is no different." Cowboy looked for more leftovers. His appetite had picked up today. "I agreed to go, and I'm going."

Lanisha ran to Cowboy, wrapping her arms around him. She pressed herself into him, meeting his lips. Her firm breasts pressed against his chest, and her soft lips devoured his mouth.

Cowboy stood rigid for a second, not sure how to react.

He pulled her tight against him and pressed his lips back against hers. The kiss deepened as she tilted her head and let out a small moan. He wrapped one of his massive arms around her waist and used the other to cup the back of her head, running his fingers through her raven hair. They stood in the kitchen, oblivious to the world or anybody in it.

Lanisha pulled away.

"Follow me. Don't speak."

She led Cowboy to the spare bedroom she occupied next to the kitchen. He stood in her doorway wrapped in darkness, and Lanisha could still taste his lips on hers.

Her hands left fire trails on his skin as they moved to his waist and undid his belt buckle. "Take off your shirt."

Cowboy removed his shirt as Lanisha helped him out of his jeans. She turned her back to him, letting her pants fall in a puddle around her ankles.

Lanisha pressed against Cowboy, feeling his rigid member pressing against her backside. A surge of heat pulsed through her veins. He cupped her breasts, letting out a soft moan.

Lanisha walked over to the bed. "Lie down."

Cowboy did so, lying on his back atop the covers. Lanisha crawled across Cowboy's body, straddling his hips.

His mouth found hers again as she continued grinding against him at an ever-increasing tempo. Every nerve in her body felt alive as their bodies rocked together in a shared rhythm.

She traced her fingertips across his chest. Cowboy moaned again as Lanisha leaned forward, taking him inside with her hips. She found Cowboy's mouth, placing his palms over her pert nipples as her thighs circled with reckless abandon.

The intensity swelled to an overpowering crescendo. With one last frenzied thrust, they both trembled in a wave of pure bliss.

Lanisha collapsed onto Cowboy's chest in a euphoric glow, feeling contentment radiating from the depths of her core.

She surrendered to the warmth of Cowboy's body and drifted into slumber. His heart throbbed against her, and his breath tickled her neck.

Lanisha's limbs lay limp as she floated on a cloud.

He remained still for half an hour, listening to Lanisha breathe and feeling her chest rise and fall beneath his arm. Then he slipped out from under her, getting back into his clothes.

He stepped out of the room while Lanisha slumbered. Cowboy hurried to gather his things.

Cormac expected him tomorrow. Cowboy needed to get moving.

*I will be with you soon.* Cowboy's thought reached Cormac.

*Very well. Yes, I sense you are getting close.*Cormac answered. *We begin.*

After bidding farewell to Sam and Georgie, it took Cowboy thirteen hours and some change to rendezvous with Cormac. His journey through the wilderness of Louisiana to College Station in Texas required using side roads and alternative motorways. Finding gas proved difficult, as Cowboy needed to swap rides a handful of times.

Cowboy knew Cormac had traveled a long distance to bridge the gap between them. Cowboy and Cormac relied on their heightened senses to avoid scrutiny while traveling.

*I am here. It's abandoned.* Cormac reached out to Cowboy upon arriving at the agreed-upon location.

*I should be there before nightfall.* Cowboy did not find it baffling for Cormac to arrive first. Cormac moved fast, regardless of how he traveled.

For gathering at an abandoned oil field outside College Station, Cowboy knew to take the first left onto a gravel road after state route forty-seven split off to the right from route sixty. Cormac kept things simple to minimize confusion.

Cowboy hiked the last five miles to understand his surroundings and remain unnoticed by outlaws or headsuckers.

*I'm here*. Cowboy approached the lonely well, no longer working to siphon fossil fuel out of the earth. Deep ruts cut through the dirt in a wide circle around it. Dust devils raced across dry land to Cowboy's right.

"We can speak now."

Cowboy recognized Cormac's voice from a lifetime ago. The old warrior hadn't lost a step, sneaking up on Cowboy like in ancient times.

"How are you still alive?" This question lingered in Cowboy's mind since fleeing the carnage that killed his commander and team members.

"I'm not." Cormac's lips formed a sinister grin. "But to answer your question, I knew it was a setup before any of you set foot in Aripuanã."

"You worked with the team sent to take us out?"

Cowboy's thoughts raced like a stampede of horses, clashing and colliding to form a cacophony, flooding his mind with fragments of memories, facts, and concepts that begged to be sorted and pieced together into a cohesive understanding.

"Yes." Cormac glanced at three white storage tanks a hundred feet north of the derelict oil well. “As a personal favor for Baako.”

"He was trying to get proof of sabotage." Cowboy mumbled the words, realizing the intensity of his feelings.

"This was the only way." Cormac focused again on Cowboy. "I earned Tibern's trust. He knew I was the strongest specimen from Siskee's experiments."

"And you couldn't prevent what happened?"

Cowboy questioned Cormac's narrative as the pain of losing his beloved commander resurfaced.

"Baako was too confident." Cormac's eyes took on a deeper hue… of some color Cowboy didn't recognize. "He thought you would kill them first."

"He walked into a trap on purpose?" Cowboy focused his attention on pushing away the unwelcome emotional avalanche within. "To get evidence. Then what?"

"Baako needed to purge his own conscience before seeking retribution."

Cormac paused.

"Tibern, Siskee and a few others would feel his wrath after."

"You tagged along with the other team." Cowboy knew Baako gambled. "Baako thought the risk worthy."

"Indeed." Cormac's confidence moved through Cowboy's body. "Baako lost many under his command as tests for updated models of Siskee's elite soldiers."

Cormac allowed Cowboy to absorb this information.

"I sought vengeance on Baako's behalf. Killed Siskee and one of his lab assistants. Could not get to Tibern in time. He eludes me to this day. Siskee's other minion escaped with Tibern."

"Tibern lives?" Cowboy remembered Tibern's aged appearance thirty years ago.

"I'm certain of it," Cormac said. "He received the same injections as you and me. The same sickness."

"So, now he enjoys a longer life." Cowboy mused. "More time to do shady shit."

"I cannot speak to his recent activities, but yes."

"You said we needed to hunt." Cowboy removed his Stetson, combing hardened fingers through sweat-dampened hair beneath. Time to adjourn today's history lesson and get down to business.

"There are others like the one that attacked you."

Cormac returned his gaze to the road leading into the small oil field.

"We must gain strength from killing them. Be ready to greet our guests."

"The Portal." Cowboy thought about the mutations Cormac mentioned beyond any ability to thwart. "Those traveling through it."

"The more we neutralize before the Portal forms, the better for us." Cormac bent to touch the dirt near his boots. "The thing that attacked you serves those coming through the Portal."

Cormac scooped a fistful of ashen dust, eyes closing as he held it to his nose. "This planet knows the doom it faces." Cowboy watched Cormac sniff the earth, mulling over where to find a creature like the one he engaged in Idaho.

Cormac thrust his chin skyward. "One lurks close. Perhaps hibernating."

"I feel nothing." Cowboy shut his eyes, trying to detect any headsuckers nearby. "Explain how you recognize it."

"Your intuition will sharpen as we track and kill them. You will soon sense them as I do."

"Let's get to it." Cowboy peered at the highway beyond. "We're short on time for this portal thing to appear."

"We hunt them as they hunt us." Cormac strode forward, his gaze focused on the dirt road leading to the highway. "On foot."

Cowboy's attention lingered on the forsaken wildcat. It stood sentry over a decrepit oil field riddled with bent girders and corroded pipes.

A moment later, he joined the hunt.

Chapter 35

"Escaped?"

Tibern's cane quivered, its silver tip making a sharp clack as it struck the tiled floor. His eyes blazed with contempt, and his nostrils flared like a beast ready to attack.

"It appears so, General."

Leong looked past Tibern to a lab table jutting out of the wall. "It appears the quantum computer disrupts our satellite transmissions. We only received word today of the escape."

"Appears so?"

Tibern's nose twitched.

"How long have you known about it?"

Leong fought the urge to scream, fingernails carving crescents into the tender flesh of her palms. Her eyes settled on Tibern. "I informed you of it two weeks ago, when we noticed the interference. It has become more problematic since then."

Tibern's expression shifted from surprise to rage.

"You did no such thing, Ms. Bui! I would remember something like that, for fuck's sake!"

Leong's stomach felt like a thousand pit vipers roiling beneath the surface, picturing the General ordering her execution. She mustered the courage to try a different tactic.

"We've placed radio tags on both subjects. I instructed an operator to locate them earlier today."

Bewilderment washed over Tibern, dousing his rage. His face shifted to the ceiling, then to the floor. "Tracking them? Well, that's excellent. Send someone to retrieve them."

"It's not that simple, General."

Leong braced herself for another verbal onslaught. "Infected activity is dense around their location. Anyone we send may not return."

"You will accompany the retrieval team." Tibern's expression lightened as his tone grew frigid. "You will see to the subject's recapture." Tibern paused for emphasis. "Do not return without them."

Tibern tapped his cane once, winking at Leong. He limped out of the room, his gnarled hands gripping the handle like a stout old tree branch.

Joelle clutched the berserker's head, sinking her fingers into its skull. Tentacles made their way into its mind, and a rush of energy washed over her body.

Marik discovered he could feed on scramblers with impunity. He urged Joelle to join him. She did a few days later. The infected became a source of nourishment. Plentiful and offering no challenge, they supplied a steady stream of energy for Marik and Joelle.

Shyness or guilt about her awakened appetite vanished after escaping the personnel transport ten days ago. Something changed in Joelle. No longer bound by the shackles of servitude, she embraced newfound freedom and strength. Captors would no longer use Joelle as their puppet and discard her afterward.

Like Marik, Joelle drank in the wave of power that ran through her body as she consumed the infected. Her body trembled with pleasure as raw light energy flooded her senses, letting her feel her quarry's strength and the ecstasy of their demise. Mutated essence pumped energy through Joelle's mind, breathing life into her transformation as every molecule in her body seethed with newfound vigor. The force of her metamorphosis became unstoppable.

Marik and Joelle gorged on scramblers, taking any of them at their leisure. A hypnotic euphoria consumed them, an obsession with the alluring bliss that swept over their minds.

Telepathic ability strengthened. Joelle opened her mind to Marik and felt his consciousness enter. She felt his presence deep within her as if their minds had melted together and the boundaries of individual thoughts blurred. He knew her thoughts, and she his.

Joelle became more assertive, her body transitioning to a new form. Her body became leaner and skin paler, her movements more fluid. Streaks of light rose from Joelle's skin as if intercepted by stained glass.

Soon, no remnant of her former self would remain.

Marik noticed the awareness of something unknown first. Joelle detected it soon afterward. An entity, unlike them but also different from the mindless ones upon which they fed, approached.

She discerned its power. Joelle had no reference for it but knew it threatened her. Marik recognized it. They knew this menace sought to take their energy for itself.

From under the canopy, rising from the wilderness floor itself, a colossal terror set upon them. Its oppressive form cast a deep veil over the land.

Marik and Joelle fled in the opposite direction, trying to distance themselves from the strange being.

It pursued them, however, gaining ground by the hour.

Marik and Joelle agreed on a destination. They sought the artifact.

Neither knew the location. No matter. They felt the artifact's potency. Sebridge took possession after neutralizing the facility in Belgium.

Marik and Joelle made haste, days away from where Sebridge held Carly, Ramirez, and Justine captive.

Everyone inside faced a mortal threat from the thing hunting Marik and Joelle. It might hail from primordial entropy, from the far realm, from nightmare dimensions, or from another planet. This monstrosity had no origin in the world of humanity, though it had somehow found its way here.

It would slice through defenses with a ferocity unrivaled by any weapon.

Joelle and Marik possessed the capability to breach the base's defenses. Energy from the infected mutated their bodies, granting enhanced physiological prowess.

The artifact pulsed with unprecedented intensity, an invisible force that brought three dread creatures together. They glided under its allure, drawn to an ancient conflict that seemed foreordained.

Chaos followed.

Chapter 36

Gavin fidgeted while Jacob's mechanic shimmied around under the Silverado. Luke lay inside the truck, unconscious.

"It's all seized up. Won't run again."

Weems struggled to stand, joints creaking in protest. "You're gonna need another ride, I reckon."

Gavin's eyes shifted to Luke, slumped against the passenger door inside. "I gotta get Luke to Hampton Flats. He got hit by one of those fuckers in the house."

Weems squinted in Luke's direction. "Won't be getting there today." Weems lit a cigarette. "Too much scrambler activity. Gotta wait for 'em to pass."

Gavin's face reddened. "I can't wait that long. Shit!"

"Can't do nothin' bout it." Weems spit on the ground. "Damn infected'll eat ya for lunch today."

Gavin recalled the encounter with a herd of scramblers that claimed Luke's father months ago.

"Sides." Weems took a drag from his fast-burning smoke. "Young fella might wake up anytime. Not need any attention at all. Probably just got his bell rung. Happens all the time."

Gavin clung to the secret of Luke's condition, asserting that one outlaw swung a rifle and knocked him unconscious. Jacob knew the fate of anyone attacked by a scrambler. Gavin feared someone putting a bullet in Luke's head.

The woman grabbed Luke's head for a second. Gavin held on to the possibility he might avoid infection.

"I'll see about gettin' a new set of wheels." Weems leaned on the Silverado. "Saw a few vehicles parked by the house ya'll raided."

"Thanks Weems." Gavin clenched Weems' hand. "I'll ask Jacob about it."

"No need." Weems tossed his cigarette to the ground, pressing it into the dirt with the toe of his boot. "I'm headed that way. I'll talk to him bout' it myself. Stay with your friend."

Gavin said nothing as Weems departed, preoccupied with Luke and the scrambler herd between them and Hampton Flats. Gavin dreaded running into the infected, but Luke may not survive.

Forty-five minutes later, Weems reappeared holding three bottles of water. "Here. One for each of us."

"Thanks." Gavin accepted a bottle for himself and Luke.

"How's your buddy?" Weems peeked at Luke, still unconscious.

"He's doing okay." Gavin lied.

"White pickup is all yours." Weems grinned. "Should wait till tomorrow to head out."

"Yeah, okay." Gavin tilted his bottle toward Weems. "I'll say my goodbyes to Jacob and we'll head out tomorrow, same time as you all."

"If the Flats don't fit the billing, Jacob would take you back." Weems glanced at the farmhouse to their right. "You two are damn handy in a gunfight."

"Thanks." Gavin took a swig of water, setting Luke's bottle on the hood. "Fighting bandits isn't our thing."

"I get it." Weems stared at the farmhouse to their right. "It's hazardous. Not for everyone."

"We'll see you again." Gavin patted Weems on the shoulder. "Jacob will do more jobs for Hampton Flats."

"No doubt."

Weems agreed. "He gets steady work from there."

Weems offered Gavin one last nod, then continued on his way. Gavin checked on Luke before heading off to find Jacob.

Gavin could see Luke shuddering and moaning in his sleep. "Luke? Can you hear me?"

Luke's eyes opened. "Gavin?" He sounded dazed.

"Yeah, it's me." Gavin put the back of his hand on Luke's forehead. It didn't feel warm, but cool instead. "How are you feeling?"

"Groggy. Cloudy." Luke took a breath. "Can't focus."

"That hit you took at the farmhouse." Gavin kept his voice low. He wanted Luke to avoid getting worked up.

"I remember that lady grabbing my head, then…" Luke's voice trailed off as he tried to remember.

"You passed out." Gavin filled in the rest without getting into detail. "I stayed with you till we cleared the house, then two other people and I carried you out."

"I'm about to say goodbye to Jacob. You stay here and rest. I'll let him know how you're doing." Gavin changed the subject before Luke asked more questions.

"Yeah, okay." Luke didn't feel up to walking. "Tell him I said thank you."

"Of course, yeah." Gavin stepped back from Luke. "Watch your hands and feet."

"No. I want the door open. Fresh air." Luke stopped Gavin from closing the door.

"Suit yourself." Gavin did his best to sound casual. He didn't want to leave the door open. "Be back soon."

"Hey Gavin." Jacob greeted Gavin from several feet away. "How's Luke?"

"He's awake, but groggy."

Gavin smiled, reaching out to take Jacob's hand.

"Not up to walking yet."

"My, he must've taken a wallop in that house." Jacob shook his head. "I've seen him get up after taking a few hits."

"Yeah, he did." Gavin avoided eye contact with Jacob. "Outlaw clobbered him."

"Weems told you to stay put tonight because of the herd?" Jacob noticed Gavin fidgeting. "I know you're eager to move on, but it's not an excellent idea tonight."

"Yeah, he told me about them." Gavin took a breath, forcing himself to relax. "We're gonna wait."

"Excellent." Jacob nodded. "Glad to hear it. I've decided I can put off our next job a bit and go along to the Flats."

Gavin's eyes widened. Jacob intended to accompany Luke and Gavin to Hampton Flats, but another job required his attention.

"What about the new job?" Gavin asked, trying to sound nonchalant. He felt nervous about Jacob and company traveling with them if Luke's condition worsened or he turned. Gavin intended to shoot Luke if that happened but didn't want an audience.

"It can wait." Jacob waved a hand. "Sides, I gotta report mission accomplished to the Flats."

"Great. We appreciate the escort and positive recommendation."

"Sure thing."

Jacob picked up a piece of bread with mustard and a slice of bologna on top of it. "I'll see they let you in."

Gavin thanked Jacob again and returned to Luke, avoiding any conversations with other members of Jacob's crew.

"It is pretty here."

Luke commented as he saw Gavin approaching.

"Did we get a new vehicle?"

"What?"

Gavin rubbed his temples.

"Pretty?"

"This place."

Luke continued.

"Beautiful farmland. What's up with the new truck?"

Gavin looked around. Fields stood overgrown with chickweed and vaseygrass. Majestic silver maple trees and red oak trees surrounded the dirt road along the edges. A breeze moved over the weeds, rolling like a wave.

"Yeah, it's peaceful… I guess." Gavin moved closer to Luke. "Are you feeling funny or anything?"

"My head's clearing up." Luke massaged the back of his neck. "I'm seeing stars or something. Maybe I got a concussion."

"Wanna try walking?" Gavin asked to help Luke get out of the truck.

"Sure." Luke grabbed Gavin's hand. "I should walk some."

"Our old ride broke down. Weems couldn't fix it. So Jacob gave us a vehicle from the farmhouse." Gavin updated Luke on their transportation.

"I'll miss that truck. Smooth ride." Luke ran a hand through his hair, turning to examine the older model replacement.

"Jacob's coming with us tomorrow after all." Gavin felt nervous around Luke, not knowing what to expect, but he tried to stay calm.

"After all?" Luke frowned. "I thought that was the plan."

"Another job came up," Gavin said. "He was gonna take it instead."

"Ah, okay." Luke bent his legs, testing his balance. "I'm glad he's going. Should make getting in easier."

"Agreed." Gavin watched the trees beyond the field to take his focus off Luke. He envied the maple tree closest to the farmhouse. He wondered if it had any idea civilization collapsed and billions of people died or turned into brain-sucking monsters. Gavin shook his head, realizing the futility of his thinking.

"You shouldn't push yourself." Gavin spoke to Luke without looking in his direction. "Rest tonight so you are fresh tomorrow."

"I will." Luke rotated his shoulders, swinging his arms to limber up. "Just want to limber up first. Got quite stiff."

Gavin turned toward the other vehicles in Jacob's group. People gathered along the road, making small talk and laughing. Gavin dreaded what he needed to do if Luke turned.

As Luke climbed into the truck, a cloud settled in. Gavin knew he wouldn't sleep well. Luke appeared relaxed, closing his eyes after a few minutes.

As Luke slept, Gavin tried to detect warning signs. He realized he didn't know what showed a person on the verge of turning. Gavin tried to relax. He wanted to spend his last night socializing and saying goodbye, not teetering on the edge of an anxiety attack about his friend becoming a scrambler.

Hours passed, each minute feeling like an hour to Gavin. Luke awoke once, asking Gavin strange questions about his light before falling asleep again. Gavin did not take Luke's meaning, trying to brush it off.

The next day, Luke appeared normal, at least at first. "Hey man, how did you sleep?"

"Pretty good." Gavin felt amped and jittery from not sleeping. "And you?"

"Weird dreams. But I guess I slept well." Luke stretched, opening the door. "Gotta take a piss."

An image of Luke turning while relieving himself flashed through Gavin's mind. He chuckled, picturing Luke in a manic state with his thing hanging out as he chased people. His head shook as he stopped laughing. Sleep deprivation, Gavin reckoned.

"You need to go before we leave?"

Luke returned to the pickup without incident. "It's a bit of a haul."

"Yeah." Gavin opened his door. "Be back in a sec."

"I've never noticed that light around you before."

Luke commented as Gavin walked around the back of the vehicle. "It's beautiful."

*What the fuck?* Gavin thought to himself. *Is that the first sign?*

Gavin offered no response, changing the subject as he returned to the driver's side. "It should take four or five hours. We'll be there by early afternoon."

"Great." Luke sounded relaxed. "I wanted to tell Jacob thank you before we get moving."

"I'll go with."

The words came out of Gavin rapid-fire. He sighed, shaking his head.

"Listen man. I gotta tell you what's up."

"Huh?" Luke frowned, not understanding. "What are you talking about?"

"A scrambler got you in the farmhouse. Had its hands on your head." Gavin didn't know how else to say it. "It got you."

"A scrambler got me?" Luke asked, digesting the implications. "I'm infected?"

"I don't know." Gavin hit the steering wheel. "You're acting kind of weird, but I don't know what it means."

Luke stared at Gavin. "What are you gonna do if I turn?"

"Shoot you. But I don't want to." Gavin looked straight ahead. "Its got me all jacked up thinking about it."

"Talking about your light isn't normal, is it?" Luke thought about his behavior since waking up.

"Not really. You were making me nervous." A weight settled on Gavin. "We gotta make it to Hampton Flats. I know they can help you there."

"How do you know that?" Luke examined his hands, trying to feel anything different.

"It's just a feeling," Gavin admitted. "I don't know."

Gavin looked up to see Jacob headed their way on foot. "Looks like Jacob is coming to check on us. Please say nothing about lights."

Luke followed Gavin's eyes. "I won't. I'll be cool."

"Just act normal. Be polite. Keep it short." Gavin instructed as he opened his door.

Luke felt some of Gavin's anxiety as he opened his door. The thought of turning into a scrambler horrified him. He didn't want to stop being human. The idea of Gavin shooting him made Luke tremble.

He thought about killing himself to spare Gavin the trauma.

How on earth could anyone at Hampton Flats treat Luke's condition?

Luke didn't know.

Chapter 37

Roger dove for cover as a hail of bullets whizzed past, bursting splinters and rock fragments into the air. Dane warned the marauders off. A group of wild-eyed, unkempt men with bandanas covering their faces. They bayed and howled at each other in a barbaric symphony of chaos.

These crazed savages worked themselves into a frenzy, their rage and desire to overrun Jacksonville’s bulwarks amplified to a deafening level.

For three grueling weeks, Roger helped defend against six groups of nomads and two infected herds. Jacksonville offered better protection than the tattered walls of the trailer park. Yet, the relentless attacks took a toll on everyone.

“Keep on them! We’re gettin’ the loot today!” One attacker yelled as bullets tore through the air. These bandits focused on the front. At least, that’s what they wanted Jacksonville’s defenders to believe.

Roger thought it too obvious. “We gotta send people to the back.”

Dane motioned for Roger to go.

Roger, Dane, and four other defenders kneeled on a deck fourteen feet above the ground. Jacksonville’s enclosure stood seventeen feet high. Staircases at each end allowed access to this observation post. They had three feet of wall to duck behind.

“Bernie, come with me!” Roger grabbed the person next to him. “We’re gonna check the back!”

The two men ran toward the stairway, their booted feet pounding against the wooden planks of the observation post. Roger and Bernie hurtled down the steps, throwing themselves into a car and revving the engine. Dust and gravel flew as they hurtled towards the back gate of Jacksonville’s fortified walls.

A strict protocol for lockdown during attacks ensured a clear path.

The people of Jacksonville kept their firearms within arm’s reach and knew how to use them. If intruders breached the wall, they faced stiff opposition.

Roger and Bernie reached the rear barricade in less than five minutes. Bernie pointed out what Roger saw. Two outlaws climbed over the wall. Roger watched as the unwelcome guests plucked rifles from someone out of sight. A ladder or something similar allowed them to scale the barrier.

A third person climbing over spotted Roger and Bernie.

“Take ‘em out.”

Roger didn’t hesitate. He jumped out, holding up his rifle. Roger’s first bullet missed. He retook aim as the two strangers ducked, and the third fled behind the wall.

Bernie shot a stranger in the collarbone. Roger hit another in the knee. The person behind the wall popped up, brandishing a pistol. Bernie fired as she appeared, but no luck.

Roger blasted one man through his chest on the balcony. He collapsed to the ground, lifeblood spilling from his chest.

Roger saw that the man Bernie shot still lived. He sat against the inside of the wall, clutching his shoulder, head lolling as he fought for breath.

Bernie sprinted toward the platform.

The woman sprang up a third time. She aimed at Bernie, clicking off two shots. The second projectile hit Bernie’s elbow, spinning him in a circle. Bernie shouted in pain, and his gun fell to the ground.

Roger found a clean shot while the woman aimed at Bernie, hitting her in the neck. Her head snapped sideways as the gun flew from her hands. She fell away, vanishing from sight.

“I’m okay.” Bernie cradled his injured arm close to his chest. “Keep going. I’ll catch up.” Bernie waved Roger toward the platform. “Get up there!”

Roger dashed up the staircase, trying to beat out any other contenders. He pulled his sidearm. A man appeared in the stairwell, bloodlust filling his eyes and clenching a gun.

Roger fired. The man’s head exploded in a spray of red mist. Blood and brain matter rained down the stairs.

Bernie caught up with Roger a few seconds later.

Roger peeked over the wall. A bullet zipped past his face. Roger motioned Bernie to move around him.

“Get some space between us. Then take turns going at ‘em.” Roger whispered.

Bernie shouldered his gun and crept away.

Roger counted to five, glancing outside. A spray of bullets rang out like a raging storm harvesting destruction. Bernie took advantage of the chaos and fired a few rounds.

GOT ONE.

Bernie mouthed the words. Roger gave Bernie a thumbs up. This time Bernie provided the distraction, drawing aggro as Roger rose from behind the wall.

The bandits expected it. Two of them released a volley of fire. One bullet caught the edge of Roger’s ear, scorching his flesh with a searing heat akin to white-hot iron. His cry of pain echoed through the air, sending a wave of rage through his veins.

“Like that asshole!” echoed through the air. “Got lots more for ya!”

Roger clenched his jaw, feeling the intense heat of the bullet. He needed to neutralize these thugs before one of them sent him or Bernie to their graves.

Roger motioned for Bernie to pause as he navigated the stairs. He used signals to let Bernie know his plan, pretending to hold a steering wheel.

Bernie gave Roger an OK sign, crawling over to the crank that opened the entrance on one side of the elevated walkway.

Roger turned the ignition and shifted the automobile into gear, wedging his rifle between the driver’s seat and the gas pedal. He caught Bernie’s attention, waving for him to spin the crank.

Roger waited until the gate opened a quarter, driving the car closer to the exit before jamming the accelerator. He leaped from the automobile, sprinting to the entrance behind it. Bernie tossed his firearm at Roger.

The driverless decoy sped up, heading straight toward the outlaws. Roger shot one bandit in the chest and another in the gut.

Roger followed as his car hit a pickup. He kept running, gun ready to strike any moving figure. Bernie remained in place to cover Roger.

He encountered no resistance. The man he shot in the stomach lay writhing on the ground. Roger put an end to his suffering.

Roger saw no one else. He checked the inside of each vehicle, spotting provisions and guns, but no people.

“All clear!”

Roger yelled.

“Check in with Dane.”

Bernie radioed the front gate. “How’s everyone up front?”

Dane replied. “We’re cleaning up the rest of ‘em. A few got away. But nobody’s shootin’ anymore.”

“That’s the end of it!” Bernie surveyed the vehicles and bodies around Roger.

“Fantastic!”

Roger swept his hand toward the empty vehicles.

“Let’s get this loot inside.”

Today’s clash rocked Jacksonville. More intense than previous skirmishes. Roger wanted to discuss a full-time watch with Dane, and the city’s ramparts also needed bracing.

The withdrawn outlaws may return with more numbers and better armaments.

Jacksonville needed fortification.

Chapter 38

Cormac surged across miles of rugged terrain without a hint of fatigue. Cowboy found Cormac’s pace brisk, feeling the effects of sedentary life in Idaho returning to haunt him. Sweat dampened Cowboy’s shirt. His chest strained for breath and his muscles rebelled against the strain.

*It’s close.* Cormac slowed his pace. *Soon it will sense us.*

Cowboy remembered Cormac’s debriefing on Wyrtevore, as Cormac referred to them. These mutated creatures responded to perceived danger with violent fury.

*Keep alert for its horde.* Cormac preferred speed and agility over excessive weaponry. He and Cowboy donned machetes and hunting knives to face the looming danger.

*I sense nothing.* Cowboy felt awkward, unable to perceive their adversary as Cormac did.

*In time, you will.* Cormac pointed across a gravel path to an abandoned grain shed one hundred yards away. Untamed grassland separated the hunters from their quarry. Cowboy tried focusing on noise or movement beyond the overgrown field. A single grain shed in the distance seemed to mock him with its promise of hiding enemy forces.

Cormac spoke of Wyrtevore using headsuckers for defense and attack. Cowboy scoured the horizon for signs of the infected, but the landscape remained still. He felt the hairs on his neck prickle as he realized that either no infected lurked in the shadows or concealed themselves beyond Cowboy’s ability to detect them.

*It knows we are here.* Cormac sprinted out of sight. Cowboy tightened his grip on the machete, its blade glinting in the fading light.

Dense maple and crabapple saplings defined a boundary around the field ahead. Scarlet fruit adorned the crabapple trees, a rich bounty of sour delight. Cowboy might take a sample, as he did when visiting his hideout on the Bayou. But not on this occasion.

Tension intensified in Cowboy’s head seconds before two dozen headsuckers emerged from tall branches and leaves to his left, twenty feet away, circling in a synchronized fashion. Expressionless eyes fixed on him.

*Your barrier will only last until their leader gets close.* *Then they will rush you.* *Be ready.* Cormac flanked the Wyrtevore while Cowboy held its attention.

The crack of wood splitting drew Cowboy’s attention. One oversized oak door to the grain shed ripped off its hinges. Shards of lumber scattered from the entrance as a shape resembling the thing from Idaho stepped onto a patch of cement lining the building’s exterior.

Well-defined muscles bulged along both arms as this fearsome beast locked eyes on the one daring to approach. The first wave of psychic energy slammed into Cowboy.

He stumbled, feet slipping from beneath him, and plummeted to the ground. The headsuckers encircling Cowboy advanced, invigorated by their master’s presence.

Cowboy flipped onto his side, leaning on his elbows and knees to stand. Another swell enveloped him. Cowboy did not falter. He turned into the wave, steeling his mind against the etheric tendrils trying to ensnare him.

In an instant, the attack ceased. The Wyrtevore pivoted, vanishing as Cormac leaped fifteen feet away. Cormac landed where his target stood less than a second prior.

Without delay, it glided toward Cormac with speed and agility Cowboy didn’t think possible. One sinuous arm swiped at Cormac’s midsection. Cormac failed to get out of harm’s way as talons pierced his flesh, catapulting him through the stout oak of the barn in a shower of splinters.

While Cormac engaged the enemy, Cowboy advanced.

He swung his machete, aiming for the beast’s midsection. Cowboy’s blade sliced deep, getting jammed in its ribcage. The mutant concentrated a psychic jolt into Cowboy’s mind, throwing razor-sharp claws eager to shred flesh.

Cowboy leaped in time to evade but couldn’t prevent the headsuckers from crashing into him. He fell against four berserkers. They seized him, no longer held at bay.

The horde besieged Cowboy, lifting him from his feet and slamming him into merciless gravel. His bones shrieked in agony as Cowboy disappeared beneath a tangle of ravenous infected. The Wyrtevore hurtled toward the structure that swallowed Cormac seconds prior.

Tentacles tore into Cowboy from all directions. Cold electricity invaded his body. Each bolt of electricity thrust his mind further into the abyss. He fought against corruption threatening to devour his consciousness.

Purple light erupted from gashes along his stomach, chest, and head. Cowboy felt an unexpected burst of vigor radiating from the depths of his being. The lavender phosphorescence cascaded into the headsuckers as it fluoresced, mushrooming in intensity till it shone glistering white.

The headsuckers became incandescent until they burst into a billion pieces, dispersing in a sudden explosion of diaphanous fragments.

Cowboy lay motionless on the ground. Devoid of thought, staring at the sky.

Gashes and other wounds riddling his body, Cormac staggered out of the shed. His torn clothing revealed a desperate struggle for survival. As he emerged, gaping cuts across Cormac’s face and chest began sealing shut.

Cormac’s gaze shifted across the graveled earth to Cowboy. Lacerations covered Cowboy’s mangled form. Skin flaps hung in tatters, like an overripe peach splitting open on a tree branch.

Cormac checked his surroundings for the infected.

He rushed to Cowboy.

*Are you with me?*

Cormac felt nothing from Cowboy. Could sense no consciousness in his partner’s mind.

Silence hung in the air, taxing Cormac’s restraint.

*I’m here.*

Cowboy’s weak reply came forth.

*I’m not clear-headed. It’s all fuzzy.*

Cormac relaxed, relieved Cowboy’s mind had not faded into nothing. *Give it time. You will heal. Gain strength.*

This battle took all of Cormac’s and Cowboy’s combined strength. Cormac knew Cowboy needed to get stronger, or they faced inevitable ruin.

Cormac gambled on the possibility that Cowboy absorbed energy from the mindless horde.

Would it prove enough?

Chapter 39

“Not a moment too soon.”

The man dressed in a lab coat flashed a light across Luke’s eyes. “He’s close to turning.”

“Can you help him?” Gavin pressed a hand against his forehead to clear away the perspiration.

“Is it too late?”

“I can’t say until afterward.” The man motioned his staff to place Luke on a gurney. They grabbed the end of the gurney and lifted Luke into the air. “We’ll know soon.”

“Please… do whatever you can.”

Gavin’s eyes pleaded with the man.

“I will.” The man left Gavin outside the building. Words etched into the structure’s front wall read “Chamber House.”

Gavin watched as Luke disappeared.

Patrice Jefferson walked beside his new patient along the well-lit corridor. “Try to relax Luke. We’ll take excellent care of you.”

Luke heard the words, but his mind swam. Fever set in after entering Hampton Flats. Luke deteriorated at a rapid pace. Hot sand filled his throat, and his joints burned like fire. Skin tightened around his bones, and he grew weaker by the minute. Heat radiated from Luke as he mimicked a stew pot boiling over.

Gavin’s hand strayed to his gun holster, forgetting the requirement to turn in all weapons. Gavin did not fear Luke turning but killing Luke with his bare hands. An intimate killing of Luke might push Gavin over the edge.

A yell for help brought aid. Ten minutes later, Luke entered The Chamber House.

Three people placed Luke inside a cocoon-shaped pod. The top half hung suspended by wires and metal arms above the lower section.

Luke muttered as his fingers clutched the air, waging an unseen battle.

The technicians handling Luke wore protective gear to avoid any risk of infection.

Everyone except Luke vacated the room, leaving him secured and encased in the cocoon. The upper portion snapped in place to make one object.

A chime started the sequence that released an unusual cocktail of gases. Luke fought his bindings while visions of tethers spinning filled his mind.

He passed from consciousness, descending into a place of no thoughts, feelings, or awareness.

“How are you feeling?”

Luke recognized the voice. It belonged to the man speaking moments ago, or what seemed like moments.

“Okay, I guess.” Luke opened his eyes to see a curved dome above him. “Where am I?”

“You are inside The Chamber.” The voice explained. “A treatment for victims of those unfortunate creatures roaming the land outside Hampton Flats.”

“Treatment?” Luke closed his eyes, focusing his mind. “Did it work?”

“You still talk like a regular person...”

The voice answered.

“… so my guess is yes. But we’ll need blood samples to confirm.”

“Thank you. What’s your name?” Luke opened his eyes as the dome retreated, revealing a small room with sterile white walls and gleaming steel equipment. A sharp antiseptic smell stung his nostrils.

“Doctor Patrice Jefferson.”

Patrice laughed to himself.

“You can call me Patrice. Let’s keep it simple.”

“Thank you, Doc… Patrice.” Luke corrected himself. “I can’t tell you how thankful I feel.”

“Of course. You are welcome.”

Patrice opened the door, stepping into view. Luke saw the strange man... no, doctor in purple scrubs... with glasses perched atop his wrinkled nose, obscuring triumphant eyes, grey strands woven within curls of black hair. Stocky with extra padding, Luke’s new doctor kept a confident posture.

Patrice’s face seemed a strange blend of boyish innocence and wisdom beyond his years. Smooth skin with creases at the corners of his eyes betrayed a life filled with challenging lessons. Luke couldn’t tell if he beheld an old man or a young one.

“We must take precautions. As soon as we get these samples analyzed, you’ll be free to go.”

Luke glanced at the straps holding his wrists, chest, and legs to the reclining chair in the pod. “Yeah, no problem.”

Luke detested the bindings but understood their necessity. “What about my friend?”

“Gavin?” Patrice’s chin tilted toward the door. “Yes, I’ll have someone bring him in while we wait for the results. He was worried silly.”

“Thank you.” Luke repeated. “I know he worried about me. He convinced himself I would be okay if we could make it here. I don’t understand why.”

“Premonition maybe.” Patrice placed a hand on Luke’s shoulder. “You made it and we got you treated in time.”

Luke smiled, feeling exhausted.

A lab technician arrived to take blood samples. Luke disliked needles but felt too exhausted to care. He fell asleep before she finished drawing samples.

Patrice stepped out, his expression changing to one of concern as he approached a colleague wearing a nametag that read Marion. “Keep a close watch on him. No one removes the restraints until we get results.”

“Understood.” Marion nodded to the tech exiting the room. “I’ll let you know as soon as we have them.”

“We must get this thing working.” Patrice exhaled. “We are losing too many of them.”

Marion shook her head. “This offers the most promising chance yet.”

“It has to be better!”

Patrice clenched the muscles in his jaw and swallowed the lump in his throat as he chided himself.

“Apologies. I’m not scolding you. I’m disappointed in myself.”

“You’ve done so much.” Marion stepped closer to Patrice. “No one could do…” She gestured toward the pod where Luke lay in slumber. “… any of that.”

Patrice locked eyes with the pod, feeling an invisible weight press against his chest.

“Let me know when the results are available.”

Patrice stepped around Marion, struggling not to view Luke as a lost cause as he sought time to meditate. To find an answer.

The Chamber’s success rate for treating scrambler victims held steady at fifty-four percent. Patrice put on a brave front but felt none of the feigned confidence.

Luke could still turn despite treatment and appearing normal.

Patrice took every failed treatment as a personal defeat of his intellect.

He needed to solve the chamber problem.

Chapter 40

Joelle struck first, eluding the spotlight as she leaped onto the nearest guard tower in a blur, ripping away the metal barrier protecting occupants inside.

Before either of the two sentries sounded an alarm, she flung them against the wall. With a sickening crack, one soldier's head struck the support beam, shattering his skull. Joelle wasted no time sinking her razor-edge tendrils into the other guard, whose body trembled before slumping unconscious.

Marik began his assault by striking at the rear of the military installation. Like Joelle, he possessed raw strength and vigor. Marik scaled the wall in seconds, somersaulting to the ground with predatory elegance. He moved as if pulled by an invisible string.

Marik found two soldiers walking away from him as he predicted their direction based on the light energy emanating from his quarry. Marik bound onto one as he reached for the other's head, wresting them to the ground in unison. One exhausted of mind energy, he consumed enough from the second to excite his berserker rage.

A short distance away, another creature advanced on Marik and Joelle. Like them, it sensed the artifact's immense power. The Wyrtevore's psychic and physical abilities dwarfed the pair it chased.

Nothing could prevent it from getting to the artifact. Lt. Colonel Adam Sebridge's fragile reprieve from the chaos shattered tonight. Fate unleashed a tempest upon this world with savage fury, shaking the foundations of civilization to its core.

This Wyrtevore first sought two sources of prime hybrid mind energy. However, as it neared the relic, a relentless desire for the ancient object intensified with every step. To this powerful being, it meant returning home.

Joelle revealed herself before Marik. She sprang from the watchtower and landed twenty yards from six soldiers returning to their barracks for the evening.

Two broke away from the other four, desperate cries escaping their lips. Joelle could not subdue them all. She tore into the skulls of two wretched victims, offering both a chance to flee.

Joelle left one of her victims to the sinister fate of becoming a berserker. A strategy devised by Marik to sow discord within the facility. This frenzied monster would rise and sink tendrils into prey of its own, ravaging hapless souls without mercy or remorse.

One soldier staggered to a call box fifty feet away from where Joelle lay, feeding on two victims atop her, facing toward the sky.

"Two infected breached the walls! We are under attack!" The soldier screamed into the handheld receiver, terror-filled eyes darting toward the monster draining his comrades. "Multiple fatalities!"

Joelle heard the plea for help off to her left. She thrust away the bodies above her, reaching her feet in a single motion.

A hail of lead spewed forth as armed soldiers opened fire nearby. Rounds sizzled past her ears.

Joelle felt the impact of each bullet as it tore through her body, flinging her backward to the ground. The onslaught ceased as the soldiers closed in to confirm their kill.

Marik heard echoing shots ricocheting off the walls and buildings. The one he left behind stirred and rose to its feet. Marik didn't pay any attention as it headed in the other direction to satisfy its hunger.

Marik heard a chorus of screams from around the building to his right. Marik spun on his heel and sprinted toward the cacophony of voices. A wall of twenty armed personnel greeted him around the corner. Their focus elsewhere, he burst forward, unleashing a flurry of brutal strikes, snapping three necks in rapid succession before they could bring their rifles to bear.

Marik hurled one soldier into the line standing in front of him. He sunk fingers into a woman's jaw, tearing away her helmet with enough force to sever an ear. It dangled by a thin strip of skin as she tumbled into a fellow combatant.

Several soldiers fired at Marik. Despite this, bolstered by mind energy, he overpowered two more who had opened fire on him. He clutched one by the throat and threw the other into the air. A gun fell from limp hands as a soldier's head collapsed onto his shoulder and neck, ruptured by a single swipe of Marik's open fist.

More shooting followed. Marik wobbled as dozens of rounds dug into his flesh. Almost no blood seeped from his wounds, but the pounding slowed him.

Marik raced back the way he had come. As he tore around the corner, eight remaining troops pursued him, intent on neutralizing their enemy.

To heal his injuries, Marik needed sustenance, so he dashed into a nearby building and searched for something—or someone—to help him get it. It didn't take long before a woman in civilian clothes appeared in the hallway.

The men advanced toward Joelle. When they came within arm's length, she rolled in their direction, colliding with the legs of her attackers.

The first infantrymen she encountered cried out in surprise at Joelle's deceptive speed on the ground. She reached them in the blink of an eye. Without hesitation, she sprung up, driving her fist into one man's crotch, grabbing whatever she could to climb up his body.

Joelle's muscles rippled as she hoisted onto the man's shoulders, jumping onto the nearest soldier. He had no time to raise his gun. Instead, she plunged her fist through his mouth with a sickening crunch before ripping it out of the back of his skull. He flipped backward as Joelle kicked his body away to retrieve her hand.

She grabbed another soldier, spinning him around to wedge fingers between his helmet and scalp. Joelle fed on the helpless infantryman, using him as a human shield against the other shooters.

No one fired at her for fear of hitting their comrade. Joelle drained his mind energy in seconds, hurling his body forward as she ran behind the dead soldier, still holding his head in one hand. She ran his body straight into a hesitating soldier, spinning and grabbing her new target by the helmet.

This one she fed on in the same fashion as the one before, also using him to protect herself from any attack.

A guard tower crashing to the ground drew everyone's attention from Joelle for a split second. She vanished from sight.

Joelle knew what brought down the tower. As did Marik. He felt it from where he hunched over his third victim since entering the building moments prior.

A mutated, almost human creature flew into a mass of soldiers hastening toward the tower. It sawed through limbs and legs in a blur, leaving a heap of dismemberment in its wake.

It sought one thing. The artifact.

"How many?" Sebridge kept his tone authoritative and calm.

"Unknown. At least three. Maybe more. They're tearing through the base." A voice, far from calm, replied.

"Lock down the lab. Nothing gets in. Protect the box." Sebridge used a nickname he made up for the artifact. "Use extreme measures if required."

"Copy Sir. Will do."

The voice replying to Sebridge held no confidence.

"Out."

Sebridge turned to an officer nearby. "Put all personnel on the lab. Use the fucking tanks. I don't care. Stop those things."

"Yes Sir." The lieutenant hurried from the room.

Sebridge knew next to nothing about the so-called "smart infected."

This attack seemed coordinated. Planned. He didn't know about advanced mutations. They executed an effective attack. He feared these advanced mutations too powerful for him to protect the artifact, as Colonel Tibern demanded.

An emergency evac plan for such a contingency as befell him tonight existed. He needed to move. Sebridge trusted only himself with this withdrawal plan.

But he also needed help to uncover secrets of the artifact. Refuge with Tibern might prove difficult or impossible based on what happened with Marik and Joelle's transport.

He needed Carly and Ramirez to decipher the relic.

Explosions reached Sebridge's ears as he bolted from his office, heading toward the underground tunnel leading to the base's advanced laboratory.

The attackers ground on.

These creatures ripped people and buildings apart along their path. Sebridge held no doubt they sought the artifact based on his prisoner interrogations.

If Sebridge learned how to use it, he gained control over the infected. Sebridge imagined possibilities beyond commanding a fearless and formidable horde ready to do his bidding.

He could escape Tibern's iron grip at last.

A long night of changing fortunes lay ahead.

Chapter 41

“You siphoned their vitality.”

Cormac broke the silence as Cowboy opened his eyes.

As he sat up, Cowboy realized he felt no pain, despite ripped and bloodied clothes clinging to his body.

“I’m not injured.”

He ran his hands over his arms, chest, and legs, sliding past the illusion of bleeding wounds but finding no injuries.

“You will become more effective next time we encounter the Wyrtevore.”

Cormac’s eyelids shuttered as if searching for their next adversary.

Cowboy noted their surroundings.

“Something else worries you.”

They hadn’t moved from where Cowboy lost consciousness. The sun had fallen into darkness, replaced by an oppressive sky forbidding even the faintest pinpoint of starlight.

“It’s a peculiar thing.”

Cormac gazed into the night, then closed his eyes.

“Some kind of energy I cannot decipher.”

“Something like the Wyrtevore?”

Cowboy stood, testing his muscles, feeling a surge within. His mind felt clear, sharper.

“No. Not like that at all.” Cormac opened his eyes, relaxing his expression. “This source does not move.”

“An unmoving power source.” Cowboy mused. “The artifact powering up?”

“Perhaps.” Cormac clasped his hands together in contemplation. “One of Tibern’s underlings may have figured out how to awaken it.”

The wind carried the scent of sage and earth from the east, as it had when they started their journey weeks ago.

“Like The Group did in Belgium.” Cowboy recalled Cormac’s brief account of The Group and his feelings about the artifact’s immense power falling into nefarious hands.

“Similar, but not the same.” Cormac glanced eastwards, narrowing his focus on the horizon. “This feels different, but I cannot explain it yet.”

“Maybe there are two artifacts.” Cowboy directed his attention east as well. “Someone’s using the other one.”

“Maybe.”

Cormac let out a quiet breath, a resolute grin spreading across his face.

“I learned everything I could about the artifact, which is next to nothing.”

“The Wyrtevore may also sense this emergence of power.” Cowboy contemplated their next move. “We should head for it. Set up a trap for them there.”

Cormac said nothing for a minute, then tilted his head toward Cowboy.

“Excellent strategy. We shall do that, yes.”

Cormac began walking east without another word. Cowboy gave the grain shed one last look, thinking about the recent battle. When his barrier defense failed, fighting the infected took every ounce of his strength.

He only faced unthinking headsuckers. How would he measure up against a more formidable adversary next time?

Cowboy recalled his one encounter with the Wyrtevore, feeling a strange flutter.

He granted Cormac a great deal of credibility. A fragment of doubt lingered, however.

Cormac never promised victory in this war against advanced mutants of ancient design.

He offered a chance.

Cowboy felt the validity in one thing Cormac told him. The power flowing through his body invigorated him.

Their next battle should reveal it.

Chapter 42

Carly saw terror grip Ramirez.

"We can't stay here. I can feel it." Ramirez shuddered, his eyes darting in every direction.

"You are a paranoid coward." Justine's tone betrayed something Carly hadn't noticed before. Fear.

Carly couldn't decide whether Justine's disposition reflected concern about Ramirez going crazy without warning or something else. Regardless, she found the shift curious.

"No." Ramirez stopped, hands trembling. "Something's out there. It's coming."

"What do you mean, Ramirez?" Carly preferred to err on kindness if Ramirez drifted off the rails. He might seek after Justine, as she never shied away from insulting him.

"It's one of them. The smart ones." Ramirez started pacing again. The veins in his neck bulged as he walked back and forth, pumping himself up with each step to the brink of a meltdown. "This one sends trippy vibes."

"Close by?" Carly found it necessary to press Ramirez. "Near this place?"

"I think it's inside." Ramirez slammed his fists against the wall. "We gotta get out of here." Perspiration splattered from his forehead onto his clothing.

A low rumble vibrated through the floor, followed by a muffled explosion. Ramirez withdrew from the wall, his face a mask of dread as he glanced between Carly and Justine, seeking help they couldn't provide.

Ramirez banged his head against the wall, closing his eyes tight as he shielded his ears. "Too much. Make it stop!"

Carly tensed, ready to deflect him onto Justine if he came at her.

"Stop your foolishness, idiot." Justine's complexion drained of all color. She sounded on the verge of panic. "You endanger us all."

Ramirez did not register Justine's words. His mind retreated, trying to escape the force assaulting it from outside. An invisible grip squeezed his brain. The room's colors blended in a nauseating swirl.

Justine shook her head, avoiding eye contact with Carly.

Carly focused on the table where she sat, alert to sounds of movement from Ramirez. As she did, the door slid open. Sebridge stormed in.

He glanced at the cafeteria's occupants, taking out his sidearm. Without flinching, he squeezed the trigger, and a deafening shot echoed through the room.

The bullet passed through Justine's head. Blood, brains, and broken fragments of her skull sprayed outwards in all directions, painting the walls in a gruesome crimson hue.

Carly remained seated, staring at Sebridge. She waited for the barrel to swivel in her direction.

"You two." Sebridge motioned toward Carly and Ramirez with his pistol. "With me. Now."

Carly sprang up, heart pounding. Ramirez continued leaning against the wall, hands covering his ears.

"Ramirez!" Sebridge barked. "Snap out of it!"

Ramirez flinched, lowering his hands. He glanced toward Sebridge, astonished by the Colonel's presence. "Huh?"

"Let's get moving. Keep your head clear."

Sebridge ordered without sparing them a glance. Carly followed.

Ramirez glanced at Justine. She sat in the same place, head flopped onto her chest. It took Ramirez a tick or two to realize Justine would not join their party.

A grin spread across Ramirez's face. He nodded, sprinting after Sebridge and Carly.

"We're under attack."

Sebridge informed them without taking his eyes off the hallway ahead.

"A few advanced ones thwarted our defenses. Stay close or become dinner for one of these monsters."

Carly glanced behind to see Ramirez running towards them. She resisted the urge to walk sideways, fearing Ramirez might fly off the handle.

"Is there a safer place in here?" Ramirez wanted to hear an affirmative response.

"Negative."

Sebridge halted to listen for threats before taking a corner. "We're getting out of here. The attack compromised base integrity. I expect more infected to follow."

Sebridge led them along the hallway Carly used to reach the canteen. She glanced at the door to her quarters.

Ramirez did so as well.

"Not so sweet home."

Ramirez chuckled, looking at Carly.

Carly reconsidered Ramirez's mental state. He appeared harmless. Carly remembered what he did to the woman and Marik. She had to stay sharp; Carly could find herself in a world of trouble with one false move.

"We gotta cross to another building outside." Sebridge flashed an ID badge to open the exit door. It glided open, revealing a wide street. On the other side, Carly saw loading docks and a pedestrian ramp. "Hurry!"

Sebridge bolted outside. Carly and Ramirez stayed close. Halfway across, Ramirez noticed movement to his right. A man stood in the street. Ramirez recognized the man.

"Marik?" Ramirez stalled, transfixed by the lone figure.

"Ramirez!" Sebridge paused, turning to call his dawdling prisoner. "Get moving!"

Marik spotted Ramirez. He remembered the agony and humiliation of Ramirez feeding on him. Furious, Marik bolted for the source of his torment.

"Ramirez!" Carly ran to Sebridge. "Hurry!"

Sebridge raised his sidearm and began shooting at Marik. Each struck home, but Marik kept twisting forward in a diabolic frenzy.

Ramirez snapped out of his trance, scampering toward Sebridge and Carly. Marik closed on Ramirez as he neared Sebridge and Carly.

Sebridge continued shooting, squeezing off round after round at Marik until his gun ran dry. "Get to the door!"

Carly and Ramirez stayed on Sebridge's heels as he waved his ID badge to gain access. "Inside!"

The door shut as Marik crashed into it. A dull thud sounded inside as the door's metal frame groaned. Carly flinched. Ramirez peered at the barrier separating him from the rabid lunatic bent on revenge.

"We gotta keep going." Sebridge paid no attention. He needed to reach the tunnel underground to retrieve the artifact.

"We're preparing to retrieve the artifact and evacuate."

Sebridge used his badge to open another door with stairs leading down. Ample lighting illuminated their way, revealing a lit pathway at the bottom.

"The artifact?"

Ramirez felt himself getting edgy again. "That thing wants it too."

"I figured."

Sebridge maintained an urgent pace. Reaching the end of the staircase, he broke into a jog.

"Let's get there first."

"The artifact will make us beacons."

Ramirez spoke only for Carly to hear.

"It's coming for us."

"How do you know?" Carly wondered how Ramirez gained this information about the mysterious creature overtaking an entire military base.

"I just do," Ramirez said. "I can feel it in my head."

Ramirez ran past Carly.

"It can feel me too."

If Ramirez understood this creature's intent, tagging along with Sebridge may put her in greater peril. With that in mind, she decided to take whatever opportunity presented for her to separate from Sebridge, Ramirez, and everyone else.

Carly spotted several other doors along the tunnel as she caught up with Sebridge and Ramirez on the other side.

"It's this way."

Sebridge took the stairs two at a time.

Ramirez offered Carly a worried frown before taking the stairs. Carly ascended last.

"How are we planning to leave?" Ramirez felt his anxiety rising as the pressure in his head intensified. He felt the creature draw closer.

The lights flickered twice as a deep rumble traveled through the floor beneath them.

"Damn."

Sebridge waved Ramirez and Carly through the door. "We're running out of time."

Sebridge didn't respond, so Ramirez asked again.

"How are we leaving this place?"

"Just stay with me. You'll be safe." Sebridge crossed the room, accessing another door.

Carly saw the soft glimmer of workstations. In the room's center sat the artifact. Flat scanners moved over the cube, inches away from it. They all followed a repeating pattern around the object.

"We gotta lift it off that podium." Sebridge motioned for Ramirez to assist him with disconnecting the scanners and lifting the relic out of its cradle. "Set it inside that box with the lid."

The sound of gunfire in the building met Carly's ears as she watched Sebridge and Ramirez set the cube-shaped artifact inside a square container. Muffled yelling and shooting as Sebridge walked to the glass barrier between the hallways.

"It's inside the building." Sebridge glanced at Carly. "Help Ramirez pick it up. We're heading out the back."

They both took one side. Sebridge led them to a door on the room's opposite side. He knelt to pick up an automatic rifle from the floor.

Carly and Ramirez made it to the hallway. Five seconds later, two soldiers appeared in a hallway intersecting where Sebridge, Ramirez, and Carly stood.

"Your transport is ready, Colonel." The soldiers exchanged panicked looks as someone appeared around the corner, shooting his gun at something out of sight.

"Lock it up, Lieutenant." Sebridge admonished the soldier standing in front of them. "Stay sharp. Lead the way."

"Yes, sir!"

The soldier snapped to attention before swiveling his polished boots in the other direction.

One soldier motioned for Carly and Ramirez to move forward as a loud scream pierced the air. As she spun around, Carly saw an armored person flying at the serviceman, aiming his weapon at an unseen enemy.

The body lunged forward, crashing into the man and sending him careening across the hallway. His gun clattered to the floor as a deep, menacing growl emanated around the corner, echoing in the corridor.

"Get moving!" The soldier yelled, pulling Carly out of her trance. She and Ramirez started running.

"We need backup! North exit door!" The soldier behind Carly and Ramirez screamed into his walkie. "One of them is on us!"

Upon reaching the door, Carly felt someone shove her outside as the soldier behind her closed it. He fastened a chain around the door's handles, attempting to barricade it from the outside.

Carly and Ramirez sprinted to where Sebridge waited with a group of some thirty-armed guards. Carly felt mats of sweat-drenched hair flapping against her forehead.

Sebridge spoke to one subordinate, and she ran past Carly and Ramirez in the opposite direction.

"Get in!" Sebridge barked, pointing to the back of a jet-black, four-wheeled vehicle. It looked like some type of futuristic military vehicle.

A transparent roof covered fold-up doors in the back. Step pads extended down, allowing access to the bucket seats inside. The front door glided forward on the driver's side, disappearing into a compartment Carly couldn't see.

The truck resembled an armadillo, sporting oversized tires with smooth surfaces blending in with the pavement beneath them. Armor plates along the surface shifted and twitched as if alive, woven together like dark pieces of a mysterious puzzle. Sparks of light emanating from within their inky-black depths shrouded everything around it in a cloak of sinister shadows.

Sebridge shifted the transport into gear as the minigun perched atop the vehicle rotated to face their escape route. The barrel spun, tracking for a target lock while armor-piercing bullets whirred and held steady in alignment with the sights.

The engine made a quiet whirring noise as Sebridge revved the engine, heading away from the building. The car's tires made soft sucking sounds as they glided over an asphalt path.

Carly watched in horror as the massive chain-barricaded doors burst open in an explosion of steel, throwing a lethal shower of jagged metal upon the unsuspecting mass of armed men and women. Amidst the screams and gunfire, she saw bodies suspended in midair before crumpling to the ground.

The remaining soldiers opened fire, but the creature remained defiant against all efforts to halt its advance. The beast's hide shrugged off each strike with ease.

Sebridge turned a corner. Carly saw no more.

"Geezus!"

Ramirez gulped in a hoarse breath. "Drive faster! We aren't safe yet!"

Sebridge slammed his foot down on the gas, propelling the car forward with a force that threw Ramirez and Carly against their seats. The engine roared with fury as they bolted down the street, each second an eternity.

"It's still coming!"

Ramirez yelped as Sebridge dodged a couple of smashed vehicles on the street.

"Shit!"

Sebridge swerved wide as something or someone slammed into the vehicle's left side. The transport's large tires bounced off the road's surface twice as Ramirez uttered another scream. Carly closed her eyes, clutching the armrest and handrail attached to the front seat. White spots danced before her eyelids. She fought waves of panic that threatened to drown her.

The transport spun in a half circle, skidding in front of a concrete slab before coming to a shuddering halt.

"That's Joelle!"

Ramirez shrieked.

Carly's eyes snapped open, whirling in her seat to scan behind them. Sebridge gritted his teeth as he struggled to re-align the tires. He needed to back up.

Shards of light zipped through the air, hurtling toward Joelle in a radiant streak that scorched the night.

The minigun's barrage tore through Joelle like a hot dagger. She flew backward as Ramirez and Carly witnessed chunks of flesh ripped from her body.

Sebridge paid no attention as the car lurched, tires screeching as they bit into pavement. Spikes along the smooth tread dug into the surface to propel them onward.

"Almost there."

Sebridge muttered to himself.

"It's closing on us!"

Ramirez squeezed his head with both palms as if to crush it. Carly noticed tears streaming down his agonized face.

"It fucking hurts!"

"Hold it together, Ramirez!"

Sebridge glanced into the rear compartment. "Ms. Hennington, keep him calm back there. It's to your benefit if he doesn't snap."

Carly put a hand on Ramirez. "We're almost there. Try to breathe."

Carly felt the air press in on her, knowing she could not protect herself should Ramirez lose control and try to feed off her energy within this cramped space. Images of him clutching her head seized Carly's mind.

Ramirez lifted his lids, shifting his gaze with shaking hands still crushing his ears. For a moment, his eyes softened. Then Carly saw his expression register utter panic.

"It's here!"

Ramirez howled as the ceiling above them buckled inward several inches from something hammering from above. Carly heard metal scream as the minigun flew off its bolts, skipping across the ground behind them.

Seconds later, Carly saw a ball of fire hurtling through the darkness.

"Hold on!"

Sebridge braced himself as the lit-up projectile contacted whatever menace ripped the auto turret gun off the vehicle's roof.

A concussive blast lifted Carly from her seat as the vehicle lost contact with the ground. The top of her head collided with the side window. Stars exploded before her eyes as she collapsed back into her seat.

Ramirez also flew up, his head smashing into the caved-in ceiling.

Through a haze, Carly saw Sebridge yelling from the front seat, but she couldn't make out his words. A deafening ring in her ears and an unbearable ache at the top of her head overwhelmed all other senses. Carly retched into the front compartment.

Carly's hands sought the source of her pain. She felt liquid, warm, and wet. Pulling her hand away, Carly saw something dark dripping from her fingers.

She lost consciousness as Sebridge unleashed a string of curses from the front seat.

Chapter 43

Luke sat on a bench, surveying the horse-shaped fountain in the center of a shallow pool. It marked the heart of a downtown park, enclosed by a fence.

Made of cement gray stone, the fountain's smooth surfaces and delicate curves gave nothing away but age and use. Its rider looked as though he galloped forward against gravity.

Water bubbled up from a cement trough and splashed across the low stone wall into the surrounding garden pool. Thick leaves grew on a sycamore that rose to full height in an enclosure twenty yards across.

Gavin tried, but depression set in. Uncertainty about Minjun's fate and this new illness weighed on Luke like a heavy cloak.

"What are you doing?"

Gavin found Luke at the stone fountain. Spheres of water bounced off another brick platform at Luke's feet.

"Nothing, enjoying the fountain and thinking,"

Luke forced a smile.

"You're depressed."

Gavin returned a false grin.

Luke winced.

"It's okay."

Gavin sat beside Luke.

"You're allowed to be overwhelmed. Losing your father, not knowing what happened. Your condition. You've survived a lot and you still have so much to live for." He grinned. "I know because you have overcome other challenges. You're strong enough to get through it."

Luke leaned back, shaking his head. "Doesn't feel like it. I go back and forth between angry and numb. Can't settle."

"Feel everything. Just don't allow it to grow roots inside."

"Roots?" Luke pictured weeds on a lawn.

"Let it pass through you."

Gavin swept his arms through the air.

"Let it stick around, grow roots, and it'll get stronger. Take over."

"Where did you get such wisdom?"

"I sorta came up with it, you know, from reading stuff and my family life."

Gavin swatted a mosquito off the bench's armrest.

"I reached a breaking point at about thirteen and something snapped inside me. My mother didn't provide the things other moms did. She showed no concern for my well-being. Never asked me about my day. Tuned me out."

"Spared you any pain from losing her."

Luke regretted the comment.

"Shouldn't have said that. I wasn't trying to be insensitive."

Gavin looked away. "You're probably right. Everyone finds their own way of coping.

"Being numb is a way to cope."

"Yeah. It works for some people."

The two remained silent. People from Hampton Flats strolled by, some ambling into the lush park.

Gavin stayed in his seat.

"Are you happy here?" He asked.

Luke returned Gavin's gaze, and the conversation ended. Gavin stood, patted Luke on the back, and said, "You decide what happens next."

He winked at Luke, walking away.

Did he feel happy? Luke knew his father wanted him to live without trepidation. Easier said than done.

Luke wanted time for regret and self-pity. It satisfied something inside. If only for a short while.

Hampton Flats offered the luxury of time. Luke didn't realize how much he needed it.

He allowed himself another day to wallow.

Luke needed a productive outlet. He faced hardships before Hampton Flats. Calamities added fuel to life's fire.

Luke still had plenty of fuel.

He stood, feeling renewed vigor.

Search & Clear allowed Luke to prove his worth to himself and others.

His way of making a difference.

Chapter 44

Leong's eyebrows furrowed in confusion, her mind stuttering as she tried to process the words.

"Please repeat the last, Colonel."

"Marik and Joelle attacked Vanguard Outpost, along with another infected. Breached our defenses."

Sebridge's clipped words dropped like a bomb on the line.

"Attacked your base?"

Leong struggled to fathom how two prisoners overtook a garrison of armed troops. It seemed impossible.

"Got past your defenses?"

"There was another one."

Sebridge sounded frustrated.

"Stronger than anything I've seen. Could rip through metal. They were after the artifact. I have it."

Leong's heart thudded against her chest as the horror of the situation sank in. She felt her stomach heave and twist. If those three infected threats reached Tibern, destruction and mayhem came with them - not only from the terrifying infection they carried but from the terror their mere presence would invoke.

"Where are you?"

Leong glanced at her search team. "We can assist."

"Headed to Tibern. Myself and two prisoners. Be there in a day."

Leong forced herself to remain calm despite the urgency that pulsed through her veins at Sebridge's words - this new threat changed everything.

"Very well, Colonel."

Leong lowered the walkie, sifting through options. "We'll debrief you there."

Marik and Joelle figured out a way to render their tracking devices inoperable. The retrieval team stopped receiving telemetry soon after departing Tibern's base. Leong followed orders to search for prisoners but didn't report back to Tibern.

She didn't know if Tibern would remember the tracking devices. He forgot many things of late.

Sebridge fleeing his own base? Leong never thought she'd see it. Any creature that breached Vanguard Outpost held significant power.

She knew Sebridge wanted Tibern gone. Tibern knew that too. Sebridge did Tibern's bidding with tact and skill. Tibern found Sebridge reliable and effective. Therefore, Tibern ignored his subordinate's ambitions to usurp power.

Leong figured the old man admired his protégé's antics.

No one knew Tibern's age or much else. Leong met him as an old man. The General's recent behavior concerned her. He held himself in check, but only just. Leong feared Tibern losing his sanity.

She plotted ways to pit Sebridge and Tibern against each other. The outside world offered a bleak chance of survival. Leong knew she wouldn't survive without the trappings of modern life and protection from threats lurking beyond the walls.

Unease set aside, Leong addressed her team.

"The prisoners eluded us. Let's head back. Report in."

Members of the retrieval team moved away from the wreckage of a transport vehicle, leaving the deceased soldiers inside.

They met no infected on their way to this location. But that could change in an instant. Leong wanted to put on a credible show.

An eight-hour drive lay ahead to reach Tibern's seat of control and Leong's haven from the chaos. As much as she dreaded returning to Tibern, his compound represented her best chance of staying alive.

Leong ran through various scenarios to escape Tibern's grasp. These options included using the artifact on herself. She didn't know what to expect. If things worsened, she might risk it.

"You return empty-handed?"

Tibern greeted the retrieval team as they exited their transport in the garage.

"Nothing to show for your efforts?"

"Not exactly." Leong addressed the General with practiced calm.

"We received a transmission from Colonel Sebridge. He is en route."

"Explain."

Tibern brandished his cane at Leong in a threatening gesture he had adopted over the past few weeks. "Get to the point."

"His stronghold came under siege from the infected. He identified the two prisoners you tasked me to capture as the perpetrators."

Leong took a breath. "The other attacker remains unidentified. Sebridge described the unknown as powerful enough to rip through metal."

"You said you could track the prisoners."

Tibern lowered his cane, forming a deep scowl. "How did you not know their location?"

"We realized the tracking devices emitted a false signal halfway to the crash site."

Leong looked at one member of the retrieval team. "We conducted a thorough search of the area, finding no evidence of the prisoners."

If Tibern remembered that detail, he wouldn't veer off the rails today. Leong crossed her fingers that this equated to the General behaving himself.

"If Sebridge fled his base, he believed that his only option."

Tibern turned to a man standing beside Leong. "Dismissed."

Leong waited for the retrieval team to disappear.

"Sebridge brings the artifact. We can use it to decipher the quantum computer's behavior.

"And get our comms back. Would that be too much to expect?"

"The artifact never interfered with communications. It may nullify the quantum computer's interference.

"I don't enjoy being blind. It's unnerving."

Leong kept silent as her boss brooded over his grievances. She knew speaking up could spark a storm of angry reprimands.

"You are dismissed as well."

Tibern turned away.

"Get that artifact to your lab when Sebridge arrives. See what you can do."

Leong nodded to the General, following the retrieval team. She realized the constant expectation of outbursts from Tibern had frayed her nerves.

She didn't like Sebridge. Leong knew him capable of maniacal behavior on par with Tibern. Sebridge, however, did not show violent mood swings. His ruthlessness ran on a predictable schedule.

Leong could live with Sebridge overthrowing the General while seeking shelter.

By playing it cool, she might buy enough time to survive the short-term tumult of a power struggle.

If she avoided Tibern's unpredictable wrath until then.

Chapter 45

*This is too easy.*

Cowboy sent to Cormac while their boots crunched over dried underbrush.

*Something's off*.

Their adversary lurked beneath the ashen sky.

Cowboy sensed it through his pores, an ominous feeling that vibrated from within.

*They grow confiden*t.

Cormac replied in Cowboy's mind.

*This beast will prove more challenging than the last.*

Cormac's mind blistered with anticipation as they moved closer to the beast. He readied for the battle ahead.

*It's hiding something from us.*

A sense of foreboding crept over Cowboy. An edginess he could not define.

*Remain focused but open.*

Cormac exuded his usual confidence.

*Do not let it beguile your awareness.*

Cowboy knew the Wyrtevore sensed him and Cormac. Its power radiated like a seething hive of ravenous wasps, eager for aggression's sweet sting to rouse primal fury.

Yet it showed no alarm. Cowboy expected its horde to remain hidden until summoned by its master. This tactic served the Wyrtevore well in the past.

Instead of approaching straight on, Cowboy made for a grouping of smaller buildings to the north of the hardware supply store occupied by the dangerous creature. This time, Cormac took the direct route, trading places with Cowboy for their second coordinated attack.

I feel something. Like the presence of… Cormac's message cut off. Cowboy froze.

What hap… Before Cowboy could finish reaching out to Cormac, a shadow blurred across the street in front of him. An instant later, something crashed into Cowboy from behind. He flew forward, knocked off his feet.

Before Cowboy landed on the ground, the same mysterious attacker stiff-armed him. Cowboy's body flew the opposite way. His boots crashed onto the paved surface, and he landed with a bone-jarring thud. Cowboy tensed, realizing his machete had slipped from his grip during the commotion.

This time, he saw it. No mistaking the Wyrtevore leaping toward him. Dreadlocked fur along its elongated arms and neck billowed in rhythm with its movements.

The thing growled at him. But instead of sound, the growl reached Cowboy as a ripple of air molecules.

Cowboy leaped out of its path as the creature came down with pulverizing force onto the concrete, smashing a crater into the smooth surface.

The Wyrtevore spun toward Cowboy, its fist still stuck in the small crater it formed when landing. Cowboy used those precious seconds to get back on his feet. Without thinking, he rushed the Wyrtevore, throwing his shoulder into its chest.

Cowboy continued forward after his enemy, striking it with a punishing uppercut. As he did, Cowboy felt hands grabbing him from behind. Four headsuckers tackled Cowboy, pulling him to the ground.

Cowboy thrashed to break free, tangling hands and feet along the way. He slid over many bodies before finding the cold street below him.

A sharp edge sticking out from underneath the closest headsucker caught Cowboy's attention. His machete. Cowboy brought his palm down on the nearest headsucker's throat, collapsing its windpipe.

That would only slow it down for a moment, but that's all Cowboy needed to retrieve his machete.

The Wyrtevore swept toward Cowboy as his fingertips found his weapon handle. Cowboy snatched up his machete, twisting around to greet his assailant with the blade's end.

Cowboy's machete dug deep into the beast, slicing through its leg with a fearsome thrust. The creature hissed as its entire body weight crashed onto the blade, piercing through hipbone and sinew until lodging within. Cowboy unsheathed his knife, dragging it up the Wyrtevore's sternum as he stood.

The blade ripped through the skin like a jagged lightning bolt, carving a deep chasm. Cowboy wrenched the blade away with a savage twist. He leaped backward with impeccable timing to inflict maximum damage.

Cowboy spun around as a headsucker lunged at him. He wasted no time plunging the blade into its right temple - right up to the hilt - and then ripping it out, leaving the lifeless husk slumping onto the dry earth.

More headsuckers approached. Cowboy's head pounded to the beat of their steps. He felt their numbers swelling.

Cowboy sprinted for the injured Wyrtevore with fierce determination. He grasped his foe in a vice-like grip, and with one powerful thrust, he spun it like a top. Cowboy didn't let go at the sound of cracking bone. He squeezed and pulled as its body flew around in a half circle.

The Wyrtevore toppled backward, its feet flying up as the top half of its spine separated from the lower half. A sickening crack echoed through the air.

Cowboy's extra effort caused tendons and skin to rip from its body. Ribs snapped in his chest as Cowboy hit the street again. He choked back an agonizing scream, rolling away from the Wyrtevore as it spasmed on the ground.

The approaching headsuckers kept their distance from Cowboy, expressionless faces staring at him. The Wyrtevore's ability to overcome his protection radius evaporated as it lay near death.

Cowboy stepped up to the fallen monster and pulled out his machete, slicing off its head in one motion.

The group of fifteen headsuckers hovered around him. Cowboy glanced in their direction.

Cormac.

Cowboy closed his eyes, concentrating on his comrade.

His body felt something else at that moment. Energy flowing into him. Cowboy looked at the fallen Wyrtevore. A purple string of glowing light flowed from its body into him, like mercury dripping from a thermometer placed in a hot oven.

The sound of his ribs reattaching met his ears. Cowboy's mind sharpened. His vision changed. Everything came into crisp focus and increased resolution. He knew his adversary's strength as it became one with his body.

Cowboy could see light energy generated by the headsuckers surrounding him. They shifted side to side and bobbed their heads as if listening for something more than sound. Wyrtevore's last power entered him.

Cowboy reached out toward the headsuckers; he focused and pulled at the bright sparks of light embedded within them. They wobbled toward him, their steps losing confidence along the way.

One at a time, each headsucker tumbled to the ground as Cowboy absorbed all the mutated mind energy they exuded.

*You vanquished it.*

Cormac came through to Cowboy.

*The force will strengthen body and mind.*

Cowboy felt more vigorous, and though he didn't know what that meant yet, he figured he would understand soon.

*I can feel the power.*

Cowboy sensed Cormac's presence not far away. He felt the other Wyrtevore as well.

*The one we seek is stronger than the one I killed.* *Its strength surges like a tide.*

*Agreed.*

Cormac sensed it, too.

*It will take us working together to destroy it.*

*I'm coming to you.*

Cowboy dashed across the street towards the side of the hardware store.

*I sense a swarm inside the building.*

Cowboy's vision blurred, and his limbs trembled as searing pain burrowed into his skull. The Wyrtevore within the building infiltrated his mind, its evil presence sending shivers down his spine. It clung to his consciousness like an unforgiving parasite. His body became leaden, sluggish.

*Hang on.*

Cormac rushed to Cowboy's aid, pushing back against their nemesis within. Cowboy felt the pressure lessen. He rose to stand with Cormac in defense against the mental attack.

*Reach toward it with your thoughts.*

Cormac moved closer, squeezing his palms onto the building's outer surface.

*Press into the creature.*

Cowboy did not know how to accomplish what Cormac asked, yet he persisted. He scanned for the most potent power gathering inside, where countless invisible currents intersected, and concentrated all his efforts for a few moments there.

*Don't strain.* Cormac instructed. *Strike from a place of stability.*

Unsure of how to proceed, Cowboy stood his ground and focused on the core of energy within the structure.

A wave of psychic energy pulsed from the source, lifting Cormac and Cowboy off their feet. It threw them back onto the concrete as if shot by a cannon.

Within seconds, a primal humming sound resonated in their ears. Dozens of headsuckers emerged from both sides of the building, stampeding towards them. Cormac leaped up. Cowboy rolled over to stand.

A second wave assaulted them. Along with it, the wall in front of them burst apart. A creature dashed out from behind cascading rubble and collided with Cormac.

Cormac met the creature head-on. His reflexes faster than Cowboy's, Cormac sent the Wyrtevore somersaulting away in the opposite direction.

The Wyrtevore kept going for several feet before grinding to a stop, twisting to face Cowboy and Cormac.

The headsuckers came within reach. Cormac unleashed a guttural roar Cowboy felt in his marrow. Time froze as the mindless berserkers stilled, then collapsed in unison.

Cormac stumbled and fell to his knees, trembling.

*Keep it distracted. I need a moment.*

Cowboy charged toward the creature as if running straight at it. He sent a force of energy through his mind ahead. Cowboy waited for the Wyrtevore's mind to push back. As it shoved against him in a psychic defense, Cowboy drew the creature's energy back toward him, channeling the combined energy wave into Cormac.

Cormac stiffened, then stood up. Cormac held for two counts before allowing the wave to continue through him and back toward the Wyrtevore.

Cowboy summoned every ounce of his mind strength into the wave, veins bulging from his temples.

It hit like a wall, slamming into the beast. Instead of knocking it backward, the force acted upon the Wyrtevore as a vortex, sucking its energy into it. Reality trembled in protest around the epicenter in those few seconds.

Cowboy barreled forward, swinging his machete at the creature.

Unable to focus, the Wyrtevore could do nothing as Cowboy swiped his blade across its head. The severed upper half of its skull popped into the air before disintegrating.

The creature's body flopped down like a wet rag onto the curb a second later. A thick, glistening substance oozed from the dark-colored chunks of brain tissue scattered across the cement.

Cowboy lowered his machete as the wall of mind energy rebounded toward him and Cormac.

Both Cowboy and Cormac shuddered at the sudden onslaught of raw energy. Cormac recovered faster, righting himself again. Cowboy stumbled a bit, then regained his footing.

Once again, a violet energy ribbon surged from the vanquished master's broken form into Cowboy and Cormac. Cowboy experienced intense heat radiating throughout his body.

These advanced mutants wreaked havoc on their bodies, but Cormac and Cowboy gained tremendous empowerment from the undertaking.

Their bodies would transform again, adapting to refine the power they gained from today's victory. The energy radiating from them felt tangible, an undeniable force.

Like Cowboy and Cormac, however, the Wyrtevore also swelled with might and ferocity.

At a close distance, one mutant observed the hunters engaging in combat with two others like it. Soon, it would reveal itself to them.

It had developed a unique ability that distinguished it from its peers, moving unnoticed by its own kind and even these new predators. Its secretive and nimble capabilities kept it alive and free.

The predator lurked, unfaltering and patient, analyzing every move Cowboy and Cormac made. Its silent malevolence radiated through the air, stalking them as they trod on, ignorant of its presence. Whenever an unsuspecting berserker passed by, it pounced without hesitation, feasting with a savage hunger that never relented.

Cowboy and Cormac became its prey.

Chapter 46

"I've heard of it being done but never witnessed it."

Dane's words surprised Roger. "This is going to be rough."

A sense of dread settled in Roger's stomach. For the first time, he saw concern etched on Dane's face. If Dane questioned their ability to repel bandits and scramblers, Jacksonville faced a severe threat.

These outlaws organized their approach. They started by driving around the place on ATVs, taking potshots at the guard towers. This got people's attention but did not pose an alarming hazard. Reinforced guard towers provided cover for sentries.

As a result, Roger dismissed these bandits as run-of-the-mill hooligans out to raise hell for the thrill. He realized later that this group represented the first sliver of a much larger force.

"One bite at a time."

Roger echoed a mantra Dane often used about eating an elephant. Dane relied on this one-liner whenever someone faced a monumental or small task.

Dane grinned, showing his old confidence before doubt returned to his face. "Yeah, one bite."

"Keep picking off scramblers. Thin the herd. Make it manageable."

Roger gestured to the infected pressing against the gate.

"We use guns for close shots and RPGs for stuff farther away."

Dane clapped Roger's shoulder.

"Let's get to it."

Dane moved away to bark out orders, taking intermittent shots at bandits circling the perimeter.

ATV drivers kept their distance from the scramblers.

Roger figured that worked to Jacksonville's advantage. Some of the town's residents came from military and hunting backgrounds.

"Dane!"

Roger shuffled across the front wall platform.

"Put sharpshooters on the fifties. Take some of their herders out. They won't get close to the scramblers."

Dane nodded. "I'll put one in each tower. Cover all sides."

Roger knew that only two fifty-caliber rifles existed inside Jacksonville. Many hunting rifles, however. Those should neutralize the targets.

This attack bothered Roger. It seemed like the outlaws held back. Why didn't they focus on the towers with greater intensity?

The scramblers made them nervous. Berserkers threatened attackers and defenders alike. The invaders exercised restraint but why? A strategic move? Or did they hide more sinister plans? The air hung heavy with uncertainty and tension, like a storm cloud ready to burst.

Roger's question found an answer seconds later when chunks of brick near the main entrance blew outward. A billow of smoke rose in its wake, cloaking the area in an ominous grey haze.

"Mortar rounds!" A man called out. "Take cover!"

Thunder rumbled the ground beneath Roger's feet, followed by a deafening boom that reverberated through the air. Explosive echoes shattered the silence, sending dust shockwaves billowing into the sky in enormous clouds. People panicked, their screams echoing through the haze as successive bombings pounded the walls and sent debris flying.

Scramblers pounded against the wall, screeching like ravenous beasts, desperate to break through.

"We gotta get shells firing in their direction!"

Roger didn't wait for Dane. He descended the platform, weaving between people in the dust cloud below.

The attackers outside concentrated their mortar fire on the front gate to demolish it and let loose a horde of scramblers. That would cause chaos, decimating the town's population.

The bandits could pick off the infected afterward.

Roger sprinted to the munitions shed, a hundred feet from the entrance. He noticed someone else leaving with a grenade launcher in hand.

"Where's the other one?"

"Inside. Haven't got it ready."

She finished loading the RPG, pointing over her shoulder. "Put it together if you know how."

"To the front, fast as you can!" Roger pressed on the woman's shoulder. "They're trying to blow apart the gate. Let the scramblers in!"

The woman's eyes widened in panic, but she regained composure as Roger entered the small workroom. His mind raced with images of bandits scaling the rear barrier as he yanked out the other RPG from a container on the floor.

Roger wanted to fight the threat before him but couldn't disregard the danger in Jacksonville's rear. These fuckers might get creative.

Roger opened the door to a flurry of explosions and scattered wreckage. All the mortar shells dropped close to the gate. Jacksonville's buildings and other infrastructure remained unscathed. These mortarmen worked the heavy artillery with precision.

Roger searched for a vehicle. He spotted someone by a truck on Main Street. His pace quickening, Roger raced towards it.

"Hey!"

Roger hollered to the truck's owner.

"Give me a ride to the back!"

The man flinched, wide-eyed and disoriented as he stumbled back.

"Um, I don't know…"

"Give me your keys!"

Roger barked at the frightened stranger, leaving no room for negotiation.

"Hurry!"

The man fumbled, then produced a set of keys, muttering. He tossed the keys to Roger. They fell short of where Roger stood.

Roger knelt to pick up the keys.

"Move!"

Roger shoved the man as he opened the driver's door, placing the RPG in the gap between the two rows of seats. The truck owner froze in place, eyes wide and mouth agape.

Roger's worry about the back gate proved well-founded. He watched in horror as the two guard towers and platform surrounding the gate entrance erupted in a barrage of bullets.

That meant someone had climbed the wall.

Roger caught the explosion out of the corner of his vision. Half of the left gate panel shattered into fragments. The platform above the gate collapsed, sending figures plummeting like stones into a sea of flames and smoke.

Seconds later, a dozen scramblers burst through. Without hesitation, they set upon the guards on the ground. Some sprinted up the stairs, their claws ready to rip into anyone. Roger saw scramblers fall to the ground as people holding guns on the raised deck neutralized them.

Out of the smoke poured a swarm of scramblers. Less than Roger feared, but enough to cause disruption. As the attackers outside intended.

Roger floored the accelerator, plowing through three scramblers. He came to an abrupt halt thirty feet from the gate entrance, which stood in ruins. Flames and smoke obscured any view, leaving them unaware of what lay beyond the gate.

With blind aim, Roger fired the charge he loaded into the RPG through the curtain of smoke and fire.

The projectile disappeared into the haze. Roger heard something explode beyond but did not know what target he had struck.

Two scramblers came within grabbing distance. Roger swung the RPG around to clobber one on the noggin as he reached for his pistol.

Roger dispatched the remaining scrambler with his forty-five as the other teetered. He took that one out next. Roger continued dispatching berserkers.

Defenders unleashed a merciless assault on the last infected, bullets and blades cutting them down with ruthless efficiency. A roaring blaze began billowing at the back gate, threatening to consume anything in its path. Scramblers tried to enter while Roger and the other watchmen cleaned up. The fierce blaze torched scramblers late to the party, engulfing them as they passed through it.

Activity outside the wall ceased.

The outlaw's attempt at breaching the back gate hinged on the infected taking out sentries holding that position.

"Everyone check in!"

Roger yelled to get his voice heard above the burning rubble.

"We need to account for those on duty. Put down infected."

"I've got the roster. I'll do it."

A woman named Deesha spoke up. Roger nodded, stepping aside as Deesha called out names.

"We'll cut it off and let it die. Should take care of itself."

One man led three others away.

Time to clean up. Roger wanted an update on events at the front. He returned to the truck, grabbing his walkie.

"Dane. It's Roger. Over."

Roger waited.

Another voice came over the walkie.

"Roger, it's Bernie."

Bernie said nothing for a few seconds.

Roger spoke up again.

"Where's Dane?"

"He took a bullet to the chest. Someone got off a lucky shot." Bernie's voice grew sullen.

"He didn't make it."

Roger didn't know what to say. He brought the walkie to his mouth, but no words came. Roger's jaw tightened as he clenched his other hand into a tight fist. After a pause, he said, "Okay Bernie. We gotta clean up here. They blew a hole through the gate. We'll talk later."

Dane got shot? Roger couldn't believe it. He filled his lungs with air to calm his nerves.

Dane held this place together with his talent for inspiring those around him. Dane revealed the grand design and encouraged others to envision it too. What would become of Jacksonville? Who would bring people together?

Roger scoped out the wreckage. He watched people cut sections of the gate and surrounding infrastructure to isolate the fire. Flames gutted a considerable section of the gate and the surrounding infrastructure, leaving behind burnt orange flames and blackened, twisted metal and masonry.

Another group searched for scramblers.

A wearisome breath escaped Roger's lips. The day's carnage exacted a steep toll.

His shirt clung to his skin like a wet sheath, its fabric heavy with the stench of fire and sweat. Roger trudged alongside other pale-faced survivors combing through the wreckage. Smoke hung in the air beside oppressive silence.

Time for grieving the dead came later.

Chapter 47

On Luke’s fifth trip to the Chamber House, Patrice opened up. Requiring one session per month, Luke found his condition manageable.

"You're luckier than you know, Luke."

Patrice offered a warm grin as Luke exited the small room where he received treatments.

"I'm so glad it worked for you."

"I really am grateful, Patrice."

Luke smiled in return and noticed how Patrice's cheerful expression turned to one of apprehension.

"Is something bothering you?"

"We've got it working better."

Patrice sucked in a breath.

"Few made it in the beginning."

"Of the infection?"

Luke didn't follow Patrice's meaning.

"It killed most of the people, Patrice."

"No, that's not what I mean." Patrice creased his forehead, trying to explain. "In here. This machine helped some, not all."

"So, you didn't know what would happen to me?" Luke still didn't understand Patrice's point.

"You had a better than fifty percent chance."

Patrice said, not making eye contact with Luke. "I thought it best not to give you odds."

A new thought occurred to Luke. "Patrice, how long did you spend outside before getting here?"

"What?" Patrice frowned in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"Did you spend time out there amongst the bandits and infected?" Luke wanted to give Patrice a different perspective.

"No, not really," Patrice confessed. "I got here before it all fell apart."

"So, you may not appreciate the chance you've given people who have spent time out there." Luke placed a hand on Patrice's shoulder.

"Out there…" Luke waved his arm. "…there is no chance. It's game over if a scrambler gets you."

Patrice met Luke's eyes.

"I understand. Thank you."

Luke patted Patrice on the shoulder several times before leaving him alone in the hallway.

Outside, he found Gavin at the entrance.

"Hey dude." Gavin seemed enthusiastic about something. "I got someone I want you to meet."

"Really?" Luke grinned. "Trying to set me up with someone already?"

Gavin scoffed.

"No man. Shut up. It's a guy who works on a crew searching for supplies and clearing infected areas outside the Flats."

Luke offered Gavin a doubtful glance.

"Come on man! I know you've been thinking about ways to keep busy. Find meaning." Gavin grabbed Luke's arm. "This could be it."

"Give me the rundown on this guy." Luke resisted Gavin's efforts to lead him, relenting after a few seconds.

"His name is Ray, but everyone calls him Bingo." Gavin explained. "He's a character. Guy's into everything that happens here."

"That's what he told you about himself." Luke accompanied Gavin to a nearby restaurant.

"No, I picked up on it from listening to him." Gavin stopped before they reached the restaurant. "We're gonna have a beer or two inside with him. Just stay mellow."

"Okay, no problem." Luke gestured for Gavin to lead the way. "I can drink beer with anyone."

"Great!"

Gavin slapped Luke on the back, opening the door.

"Should be fun."

"There he is!"

Bingo held his hands up in the air, making a big scene out of inviting Gavin to his table. The restaurant accommodated a full house this afternoon. Animated conversation and laughter greeted Luke's ears as they stepped inside.

"Brought your friend along to meet the gang!"

Gavin stepped away from Luke to accept Bingo's hand.

"This is Luke, my friend I told you about." Gavin gestured toward Luke.

Luke also stepped forward, shaking hands with Bingo.

"Pleasure, Bingo."

"You fellas are interested in S&C work, I understand."

Bingo paused as people scooted to offer space for Gavin and Luke.

"I'd like to know more."

Luke shrugged, scoping the booth to size up Bingo's friends.

"Then I'll decide."

"That's fair."

Bingo smirked out one side of his mouth, sipping his ale. He raised his hand to get someone's attention near the order counter. When someone glanced over, Bingo circled in the air to fetch another round for the table.

"I'm definitely the guy to see then."

Bingo waited as a round of drinks reached the booth. Luke, Gavin, and everyone else took a cup from the tray as the waiter held it out.

"S&C's not for everyone."

Bingo held a fresh cup of barley cider to his mouth. His half-drank cup still sat on the table.

"Not for the average person."

Bingo pulled a massive swallow from the glass, setting it by the other.

"How so?" Luke took a swig as he waited for Bingo's answer.

"It's dangerous is the first thing."

Bingo grinned again.

"Scramblers and outlaws run the place out there, waitin' to grab anybody."

Bingo swung his head and gave a magnificent sweep of his hand. Luke heard glasses clinking and utensils scraping along plates amidst the chatter filling the restaurant.

"Look around. Most of these folks ain't up for it."

"Why do you do it?"

Luke took a turn examining the restaurant's occupants.

"I suppose I'm a bit of an adrenaline junkie." Bingo winked at Gavin. "Also, it keeps me sharp and useful."

"I might be interested."

Luke sat his cup on the table.

"Tell me more about it.”

Chapter 48

Days bled into months while they searched and slaughtered without mercy. Cowboy lost track of time along the way. Sometimes they clashed with Wyrtevore, and other times, feral berserkers. An unquenchable thirst to find the next target gnawed at their cores while they trampled down their foes.

Like Cowboy and Cormac, their prey evolved and adapted. The Wyrtevore hunted humans, infected, and each other. They became more cunning, more vicious.

Cowboy and Cormac navigated toward the mysterious power signature Cormac recognized as echoing the artifact. Along the way, he sensed a power change. It felt like the energy from the ancient relic merged with an unseen force from the depths of eternity. The arcane sources of power sent shuddering reverberations into Cormac's mind. Cowboy's less developed senses also felt the shift.

On two occasions, the two hunters witnessed Wyrtevore engaged in combat with one another. Cormac called these skirmishes clashes for dominance. Cowboy and Cormac refrained from involving themselves, favoring the enemy's culling strategy.

Cowboy sensed something tracking them along the way. His skin tingled in a way he had never experienced before. The night air carried the rancid scent of spoiled fruit and decaying flesh.

As they continued along the path, an invisible force followed them–its presence undeniable, but its location unclear. The creature's intent came through to them, leaving no doubt.

*One of their kind.*

Cormac assured him.

*Adapted to hunt us with stealth. It will strike without warning.*

And so it did.

The sun dipped low in the sky, drawing a blood-red hue across the sky like spilled wine dripping down the map. They approached the largest herd of infected Cowboy had seen since the attack on Gloria's cabin in Idaho a lifetime ago.

The treeline thinned ahead, and he could make out their undulating forms.

A mass of bodies moved across the forested terrain in a surreal scene of ambling drunken puppets keeping a rhythm known only to their master.

This creature's shrewd style relied on patience, misdirection, and brute force. It remembered its first confrontation with the one it had fought long ago. Body and mind learned and adapted from that experience, as feeding on multiple energy sources gave it more power.

Like the ones it hunted, this hybrid Wyrtevore, fashioned from the blended energy of others like itself by The Nameless, wanted the artifact.

Desire burned into destiny.

It attuned itself to its quarry's energy and rhythms, learning to act and move as they did. It witnessed these hunters in action, noting strengths and weaknesses of planning and execution.

Vodyre's time to strike had come.

Cowboy and Cormac approached the herd without caution. A faint signal Cormac recognized as Wyrtevore emanated from the herd's center. An injured master or a mutated version better able to mask its identity? The ambiguity put Cormac on edge.

They met an increasing number of Wyrtevore displaying new abilities and adaptations along their journey.

Cowboy's senses matured as well. Different from Cormac, as Cormac predicted, Cowboy felt and saw mind tethers in a way Cormac did not.

It touched his consciousness as static shocks on his spine. Cowboy knew at once the meaning. Finding no time to alert Cormac, Cowboy spun as five headsuckers fell upon him out of nowhere.

*Ambush.*

Cowboy sent the thought to Cormac, but no reply came as the headsuckers clawed at his skin and face, tearing away flesh.

*I see them. Hold on.*

Cowboy found the reply odd. It sounded like Cormac, but not Cormac.

One headsucker found Cowboy's head as he grappled with a tangle of arms clutching him. Its tentacles dug into him. He felt another sink tentacles into his ribcage. None had opted for any target other than his head before.

Using the force of his psyche, Cowboy rebuffed the entire group in one fell swoop. They flew out of sight, evaporating into the thicket of dogwood trees to his left.

Cowboy got to his feet, searching all around for Cormac. No Cormac. He scanned the herd they intended to attack. It stayed in place, clustered together.

Wounds mending, Cowboy felt his vigor return. An eerie tingling rubbed at the edge of his awareness. Cormac's voice in his head. His body responded with visceral apprehension.

The sensation didn't register in Cowboy's mind when fighting the gang of headsuckers on top of him. His adapted brain studied each encounter with the infected of its own accord. The sense of familiarity grew until his mind found a matching interaction from the past.

The creature from Idaho.

Every follicle on Cowboy's body went rigid, pressing against his clothing like tiny spears. This creature came within a whisper of ending Cowboy back then.

This night, it sought him once more. Cowboy recognized the predator as the one he sensed, tracking them on and off for months. Again, Cormac predicted its behavior with accuracy. It struck without warning.

More than that. It could mimic Cormac's psychic frequency. Well, almost.

Despite the heat of battle, Cowboy's body told him something didn't sync.

But what of Cormac?

Had this Wyrtevore snatched him while Cowboy found himself pinned under its minions?

Cowboy cast his mind outward, seeking any trace of Cormac. Their connection grew stronger each day as they hunted together. A magnetic connection that strengthened with every passing moment and compelled them to push further into the unknown.

He should find some trace of Cormac, whether living or perished. They shared consciousness between them.

The air became oppressive, wrapping Cowboy in a toxic, cloying embrace. Some new ability of the creature, warping the atmosphere itself, corrupting it into something poisonous and malignant that clung to every inch of Cowboy's skin. He felt his senses dull as the toxic force infiltrated his body, overwhelming him with a wave of mounting dread.

Cormac's signature popped up inside the towering fence of endless branches facing Cowboy. In the same direction the headsuckers disappeared.

Cowboy hastened forward, pushing through the forbidding outgrowth. Cormac's retreating energy tether fueled an urgency to close the distance.

Forty steps in, the same headsuckers set upon Cowboy once more. Sinister shapes emerged from the gloom. With their master moving farther away, Cowboy detected their presence this time.

Hidden within tree limbs above his head, these headsuckers knew how to strategize and hunt as a team. Two jumped from overhead, aiming to surprise Cowboy. He side-stepped them at the last second, splitting one in half as it flew past him. The other one tumbled away on the ground.

Three others approached from opposing directions to disorient him. Cowboy spun in tight circles to keep watch on all of them. He also tracked them with his mind, gathering real-time intel on their positions relative to him.

The one he cleaved in two dragged its mangled form over the fallen leaves and pine needles, reaching out with quivering fingers. Cowboy held a level gaze as he plunged the end of his machete into its skull with a sickening crunch.

Two of the three headsuckers rushed Cowboy from the foreground while the third waited a beat before lunging from the rear.

Cowboy relied on his mind's eye to track the one behind him, holding steady until the last second. Cowboy leaped as it reached out to him, still sprinting at top speed, flipping backward over the headsucker.

It ran straight into the other two. All three collided with arms outstretched, ripping through the air. With efficient speed and maneuver, Cowboy shredded through their necks, separating bodies from heads in one swipe of his machete.

The headless berserkers floundered before collapsing to the damp earth below.

Cowboy resumed tracking his comrade before these dismembered attackers fell to the ground. Cormac's signal faded. The headsuckers he dispatched served as a distraction, allowing their master to widen the gap.

Cowboy noticed as he tracked Cormac and the Wyrtevore that it continued toward the artifact. He predicted it would sense the power.

Maybe this creature also meant to use the artifact as bait. Cowboy didn't know if the Wyrtevore had some knowledge or ability to tap the artifact's power. If so, this creature might emerge invincible.

He needed to rescue Cormac if possible. If not, try to stop the beast before reaching its destination.

This Wyrtevore sped over the terrain with impossible haste, but Cowboy doubted it could maintain this velocity without feeding again. Patience to gather headsuckers and imbue them with abilities to strategize and work together required effort.

He might catch it.

He must keep pace.

Seize his chance to strike.

Chapter 49

"Can I have some water?"

Brianne's jaw dropped. Sandra appeared in the kitchen, asking for a drink.

Color had returned to Sandra's complexion, and she appeared, well...human. Her face had come back to life, and although it remained pale, it had lost the gray cast of death. A flush of pink colored her cheeks, and her lips glowed with renewed vitality.

Since Casey died, Sandra hadn't uttered a word or left the bedroom she and Brianne shared. She retreated into a shell of numbness after witnessing her mother yanked out of the other cabin by sadistic scavengers preying on easy targets.

Charles, Charlene, and Brianne took turns bringing Sandra food and getting her to use the bathroom. She ate little and often soiled herself in bed. Brianne feared she would waste away instead of getting better.

"Umm, yeah, of course sweetie."

Brianne stumbled to the water tank Ed set up inside to provide fresh drinking water.

"I'll get it for you."

"I'm feeling better."

Sandra held out her hand to accept the cup of water.

"I don't want to stay in bed anymore."

"I'm glad to hear that."

Brianne still reeled from what happened to her mother months ago. Somehow, her father kept Charlene alive these past several months, bringing her food, water, and other things Brianne couldn't think about.

Charles never released his wife from her bonds, leaving the room filled with a pungent aroma of rot and excrement. Brianne felt disgusted and horrified at the same time. The rancid memory of it all twisted her mind into an impenetrable thicket meant to protect her from the reality of her mother's condition.

"Where are Lyla and Charlie?"

Sandra asked as she sipped her water.

"I want to see them."

"Playing outside."

Brianne glanced out a window above the kitchen sink.

"We can go find them together."

Sandra set her cup on the edge of a counter next to Brianne.

"Can I eat something first?"

"Yeah, you can."

Brianne put her hands on Sandra's shoulders.

"Are you really okay now?"

"Yes."

Sandra looked up at Brianne. "I can't be sad anymore."

"It's okay to be sad." Brianne countered. "But you had us so worried when you wouldn't speak or get out of bed."

"Why can't I get into Mommy's room?"

Sandra ignored Brianne's remark. "The door's locked."

"Mommy is very sick."

Brianne looked at the cabin's floor, stepping away from Sandra.

"Promise me you won't try to see her."

"Why?"

Sandra glanced over her shoulder into the hallway to her parent's bedroom.

"She will hurt you."

Brianne didn't know what else to say.

"She won't mean to, but she will."

Sandra nodded, turning back to Brianne.

"Okay. I promise."

Brianne wrapped her arms around Sandra.

"Let's find the monsters."

"Where is that old guy who lives here?"

A perplexed expression crossed Sandra's face as they made their way outdoors.

"He left."

Brianne shuddered, her mind replaying the frightening scene when her mother regained consciousness in the living room upon returning from a trip to find Ed's arthritis medication.

"Had to visit friends far away."

Charlene stirred about an hour after Brianne's father carried her mother's limp body into the cabin. Brianne pictured the scene as if it had occurred moments ago. By chance, Ed stood closest to Charlene as she regained consciousness.

Brianne heard that awful growl in her head. Charlene sprang to her feet, seizing Ed by the neck and dragging him to the ground. Brianne shrieked as Charles rushed back into the house, shouting his wife's name.

He tried to pull Brianne's mother away, but Charlene forced her fingers up to Ed's face, digging into his flesh. Charles could not break her grip. After what felt like an eternity to Brianne, Charles struck Charlene with the butt of his shotgun, sending her back into unconsciousness with a stomach-churning thud.

Ed never regained consciousness. The next day, they buried him near Casey's grave.

"I hear them over there."

Brianne forced a grin, pulling Sandra along toward their younger siblings. "Sounds like they're having fun."

"Lyla! Charlie!"

Sandra squealed as she ran ahead of Brianne.

Hearing their sister's voice, Lyla and Charlie leaped from behind bushes beside the driveway.

She watched them giggle and hop around together, envious of their innocence.

Charles had left hours ago to get food and "other" things to keep Charlene fed. Brianne wondered how long they could stay here. The food situation concerned her. And her mother's condition terrified Brianne. What if Charlene got loose? Who would she go after first?

Maybe her father's new friends in Alpena knew where to find shelter. A place for her younger brother and sisters to grow up away from the chaos.

Brianne made peace with her mother's condition weeks ago. Losing her older brother, defending against raiding outlaws, and taking on parenting responsibilities gave Brianne emotional calluses. She felt grateful for them. This world offered the weak no leniency.

She resolved to confront her father about leaving when he arrived.

And decide about Charlene.

Chapter 50

Conrad knew the location well.

He braved the harrowing trek over five hundred miles with his brother to exact revenge and secure refuge. Sheer will kept Conrad and his companion alive despite the perils they encountered.

Genevieve noticed the unwelcome guest first.

"I see a familiar face outside."

"What?"

Sal walked to the workstation where Genevieve accessed multiple feeds within and beyond The Mountain.

"Is that Mr. Doren?"

"How would your minion know of this place?"

Genevieve grew suspicious of Sal, given his past with Conrad.

"How should I know?"

Sal adopted a defensive tone.

"You called on Mr. Doren for more than a few tasks. Maybe he learned of it from one of your contractors."

Genevieve scoffed. Her tenuous armistice with Sal relied on working together. She did not want to jeopardize it over accusations she could not substantiate.

"It's of no matter." Sal added. "We shall settle the issue of Mr. Doren forthwith."

"How do we get in?"

Gerald folded his arms, surveying the expansive parking lot as Conrad removed one of his boots to knock out a few pebbles.

"I'll show you in a moment."

Conrad slid his foot back into the boot, grimacing at the tight fit.

"Bernardi will know of our presence by now."

"He'll be ready to shoot us as soon as we step inside."

Gerald shook his head.

"This is not a good idea, man."

"Relax."

Conrad stood, stretching his back.

"That's why we took that brief detour to visit the lead contractor's house."

Gerald let out a dry chuckle.

"That Oskam guy? You think it'll work?"

"It must." Conrad motioned for Gerald to follow him. "Come on. I'm ready for a shower and some edible food."

"And a gunfight." Gerald added in a mocking tone.

"He's accessing the intercom subsystem."

Genevieve pounded her fists against one of the computer stations in the central control room of The Mountain. "What the fuck is he doing? I can't stop him."

"Probably trying to negotiate."

The spot between Sal's shoulder blades twitched as he tightened his jaw. Conrad didn't know about Genevieve. Sal had no contingency for Conrad showing up unannounced. What if Conrad mentioned the hit Sal put out on Genevieve?

"He has nothing to offer."

Genevieve interrupted Sal's thoughts. "What a fool."

"No, he doesn't."

Sal's mind raced as he mouthed the words. "Pay him no mind. I will eliminate Mr. Doren while you distract him."

Sal exited the room as Genevieve stalled Conrad.

"Hello Sal."

Conrad's voice echoed through the room. "How is our shelter treating you on this fine day?"

"Mr. Bernardi is away at the moment," Genevieve answered. "It's only me."

"Ms. Messina?"

Conrad sounded bewildered at first. "How are you alive?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" Genevieve replied, still attempting to disable the intercom.

"Sal dispatched a hitman to take you out in Belgium." Conrad's thoughts raced through ways Genevieve avoided death. "It's impossible for you to be alive."

"Well, I am."

Genevieve kept her tone neutral. She must not betray emotion. This news of Sal trying to assassinate her could be true or something Conrad fabricated to sow uncertainty. She couldn't confirm anything.

"No one made an attempt on my life. Unless you include the maniac who attacked the facility, releasing all the test subjects."

"So he never got a chance."

Conrad's voice settled. He regained composure.

"No doubt Sal greeted you when entering your cave of solitude. Tell me, did you kill him?"

"None of your business Mr. Doren."

Genevieve found Conrad's knowledge of Sal's residence in The Mountain unnerving. "Please be on your way; you won't need to die today."

"I can't do that."

Conrad let anger seep into his voice. "Sal and I were supposed to share The Mountain after he got rid of you. I'm here to ensure he honors our agreement."

"I know nothing of your agreement with anyone." Genevieve scrutinized Conrad through her monitor. "Be on your way, Mr. Doren."

"This certainly complicates things." Conrad glanced off to his side, looking at something outside Genevieve's view. "I'm coming in, welcome or not. I will coexist in peace with you, but I'll kill you if I must."

Conrad's hands vanished into the control panel without a word. Genevieve's display went blank.

"Fucking hell!"

Genevieve cursed. What if Conrad told the truth about Sal? Genevieve could do nothing about it as things stood. Sal had leverage over her with Chloe.

With Sal's link to Chloe, he could render her unconscious on a whim or kill her. Sal's psychic link also allowed access to her thoughts, so Genevieve could not plot Sal's demise with Chloe or divulge any compromising information.

A wicked sneer played across Genevieve's lips as she remembered Sal had departed to handle Conrad. A rare moment in his absence, perhaps her singular chance to access The Chamber. She could give herself whatever enhancement Sal gave himself. Level the playing field. Catch him unawares.

She and Chloe could escape Sal and turn his pretty daughter into a plaything. Maybe keep her around. Maybe not.

Genevieve hurried to reach The Chamber before Sal finished with Conrad outside. She couldn't afford to let Chloe in on her scheme lest Sal catch wind of it via his psychic link.

Sal wouldn't know what hit him.

"Somebody's comin'."

Gerald sounded the alarm while Conrad adjusted the artificial plants to gain entrance to the underground.

Conrad halted his attempt to open the panels.

"Take cover. Shoot as soon as you spot them."

Gerald flashed Conrad a thumbs up, sprinting toward a massive Angel Oak tree with misshapen appendages spiraling outward. Conrad ducked behind an olive bush across from the tree.

Conrad heard no footsteps. He questioned Gerald's claim when a twig snapped nearby. Footsteps off to his left. It couldn't be Genevieve. Who then?

Sal searched for Conrad's tether signature. He found two distinct light streams dancing above him. Conrad brought someone along to reclaim The Mountain. This made Sal's task more challenging. No matter. With enhanced power coursing through him, he knew he had enough vigor to take both of them. He could feel the raw energy emanating from his palms as he prepared to unleash it on the two unsuspecting foes.

Chloe trembled with anticipation, her hands hovering over the locker's weaponry. She felt an electric hum radiating from the arsenal of guns and blades as if they called out to her. With a deep breath, she waited for Genevieve's signal to unleash fury upon her enemies.

The intercom remained silent. Chloe felt her fight instinct kick in. She needed to do something. Chloe gritted her teeth and clenched her fists, listening for any sounds.

Groaning in frustration, she snatched a forty-five semi-auto handgun from the locker and bolted out of the room. The pistol's cold steel rubbed her abdomen as she tucked it into her waistband. A jolt of frigid static danced along her midsection. She needed to see Genevieve face-to-face. Get an update.

A quick glance in the control center revealed Genevieve had moved elsewhere. Did she leave without warning Chloe?

"Shit."

Chloe cursed, eyes sweeping the corridor where she stood. Satin, rust-colored tiles stretched out in both directions at her feet. Cream-colored walls merged into the vented soffit above.

Her mind drifted to Deena for a second. Where had that girl gone?

Chloe didn't have time to dwell on Sal's daughter. She needed Genevieve. Chloe progressed from room to room, calling Genevieve's name and peering around corners. She found no trace of her beloved.

Chloe remembered Genevieve describing the chamber room where Sal served as a test subject before attacking Chloe's mind. Maybe Genevieve intended to use the chamber, thinking to rival Sal.

It took Chloe less than five minutes to reach the chamber room. She found the door ajar.

"Genevieve!"

Chloe called out. No answer.

Chloe stepped inside. Glancing to her left, she noticed the entryway leading into the smaller room housing the cocoon-shaped apparatus.

She spun toward the workstation, crammed with lit-up arrays and various input screens to use the chamber. A pyramid of monitors that resembled an intricate skateboard ramp. One camera inside the machine allowed the person using the controls to view inside the cocoon.

Chloe's breath caught. She could see Genevieve's face through the monitor. Genevieve lay in the reclining chair with her eyes shut.

"Baby, please. You've got to survive this."

Chloe heard trepidation in her own voice. She knew from Genevieve that this procedure carried significant risks. A person may not survive it.

Chloe could do nothing but wait for the cycle to end before knowing if Genevieve survived.

Sal had to figure out which tether before him belonged to Conrad, as he had never seen either. He chose one strand on a whim. Moving with newfound agility, Sal felt his body and mind sharpen for combat. He intended to dispatch this one with precision and move on to the next target.

Sal hunted large game animals before. He approached this hunt the same way he did others, with patience. Choosing the right moment to take his best shot meant the difference between bringing a trophy home in victory or a riveting tale of the one that got away.

Sal's ears perked up as he soaked in the ambiance, using his heightened senses to absorb every noise. A breeze whispered through the leaves, thornbush, and tall bluestem. Birdsong mixed with the chorus, creating a pleasant melody. Sal felt the earth giving off its gentle hum in a steady rhythm.

Steps light across the ground, Sal crept within feet of the tree behind which a tether snaked into the sky.

His moment arrived. Sal darted towards the tree at a sprint. He rounded the corner to discover a gun pointed in his direction. Sal glimpsed an unfamiliar face, followed by a revolver's hammer clicking. The bullet's force in proximity knocked Sal off his feet.

"Gotcha motherfucker!"

The man yelled out.

"Hurry Connie!"

Sal tumbled away, stunned but uninjured. He regained his feet seconds later, darting behind a thornbush. The man fired several shots as Sal vanished. One bullet grazed Sal in the calf, causing him to stumble into a tangle of sprouting dandelions. Sal crouched to avoid taking more damage.

"Where did he go?"

Sal recognized Conrad's voice.

"Around there?"

The other man replied.

As Sal knelt, listening, an image of Genevieve inside the cocoon flashed through his mind. Sal heard Chloe's voice begging Genevieve to endure the treatment cycle.

Sal cursed under his breath. He must reach Genevieve before she exited the cocoon. That meant he couldn't neutralize Conrad and his accomplice until later, if at all.

Sal ran for the back entrance without delay. He needed to address the more pressing threat. If Genevieve completed the infusion, she might equal or surpass his abilities.

"Come on Sal! We'll make it quick!"

Sal heard Conrad's voice yelling out to him as he fled. His foolish protégé from another life could wait. Sal looked forward to feeding on Conrad after handling Genevieve.

If he reached her in time.

Chapter 51

Marik and Joelle took advantage of their head start, wasting no time pursuing Sebridge and the artifact.

The M72 rocket struck the Wyrtevore as it tried to break through Sebridge's experimental vehicle, causing severe injury. The beast used all its remaining strength to flee the onslaught.

It sought nourishment and recovered, picking up the artifact's trail with renewed vigor. Able to move faster than Marik and Joelle, it would catch up to them. But not before they reached Tibern's fortress.

Marik and Joelle capitalized on the pseudo-artifact's communication and sensory equipment disruption. Under cover of night, they evaded detection until entering the compound.

"They tracked you here!"

Tibern burst into the lab where Sebridge stood halfway through instructing Ramirez, Carly, and two other technicians regarding the artifact. Leong entered at Tibern's side, saying nothing.

"Sir?" Sebridge frowned, not understanding Tibern's meaning.

"Those two pets of yours. They breached the wall." Tibern did not conceal his anger. "You should have covered your tracks better."

Sebridge shook his head. "Impossible. My men would have taken them out."

"Not so, Colonel."

Tibern scoffed. "Handle them. Now."

Sebridge glanced at Carly and Ramirez, then nodded. "Yes, Sir." Sebridge scooted out of the room as he barked orders into his walkie.

Ramirez closed his eyes, trying to feel outward with his mind. As he did so, Ramirez began taking deep, audible breaths.

"What are you doing?" Tibern squished his eyes together, tilting his head toward Ramirez. "Meditating?"

Carly backed away from Ramirez, uncertain of his mental state since fleeing with Sebridge.

"I'm trying to feel the other one."

Ramirez kept his eyes closed as he answered. "See if it's out there."

"The other one?" Tibern's pitch increased to a squeal. Carly winced.

"The stronger one. Marik and Joelle are nothing compared to it."

Tibern inched closer to Ramirez. "Can you feel it out there?"

Ramirez shivered, then collapsed to his knees. The technicians in white coats skittered away, their faces showing alarm. Tibern ignored them both, stepping closer. The General's eyebrows drew together in a fierce scowl as he exhaled a sharp breath through flared nostrils.

"Tell me what you…"

Tibern never finished his sentence. Ramirez sprang from the ground, grabbing Tibern. Carly froze, shocked by Ramirez's agility. Leong and the two technicians rushed out of the room.

Carly found herself unable to move as Ramirez dragged Tibern to the laboratory floor. A gut-twisting shriek tore from the General's throat as his arms writhed in futility.

Ramirez made quick work of Tibern, draining him in minutes. The old man's legs quivered a few times in slow motion, then became rigid against the expressionless tiled surface.

Carly forced herself to swallow, making an audible gulping sound as she found her legs again. She retreated, trying her best to remain silent and undetected.

Ramirez shifted onto his back, taking deep breaths. His eyes remained closed as he spoke.

"You have nothing to fear, Ms. Hennington."

A wide grin spread across his lips. "I'd already taken you if I wanted."

Carly let out a breath, realizing she had held it in. "Ah, thank you, Ramirez. I appreciate that."

Carly's gaze drifted toward the room's exit, debating her options. "Umm, did you sense the stronger one out there?"

"Yes,"

Ramirez hummed to himself.

"We're screwed. I wanted to feel this one last time."

Carly stumbled backward, colliding with one of the lab tables. She reached out to grab hold of it, clinging on for support. Her eyes landed on a pair of digital microscopes connected to a computer terminal. The thought that some covert analysis would remain unfinished after tonight struck her as humorous.

"Ramirez."

Carly kept her voice soft. "We have to try. Try to save ourselves. Get out of here."

The humming continued as Ramirez rolled onto his side, propping his head on one elbow. He kicked Tibern's lifeless body one time.

"Hmm. Maybe you're right. But how?"

"Everyone's distracted by Marik, Joelle, and whatever that other thing is." Carly stepped forward, gaining confidence. "We can slip away unnoticed. Out the back."

Ramirez squinted at Carly, smacking his lips. "I suppose we could try." Ramirez bobbed his head, humming louder for a few seconds. "Yeah! Why the hell not?"

Again, showing an agility Carly didn't think possible, Ramirez rocketed to his feet.

"Let's go out swinging!"

Carly giggled despite the circumstances. Ramirez's ninja skills on Tibern and subsequent humming of Looney Tunes pushed her to the brink in this dire situation.

Ramirez smiled again at Carly's giggling, winking at her.

"You ready, pretty lady?"

Carly burst with nervous energy. She felt giddy and jovial. Carly didn't understand this reaction inside of her but found she didn't care.

"Yes, kind sir. Lead the way."

"Let's take that with us. I know a place we can go and maybe figure out how to use it for real." Ramirez lifted the artifact from the table and tucked it inside the case.

"Wouldn't that be dangerous? Other smart ones drawn to it?" Carly leaned toward the door, eager to depart.

"We can figure out how to use it." Ramirez hoisted up the case. "Sebridge spoke about another location. It's unoccupied. I thought he was taking us there at first."

Ramirez approached Carly. "He discussed it with a technician when I last fed in captivity. Said it was the safest place left. Didn't think I was listening."

"How will the artifact benefit us?"

Carly didn't want to travel anywhere with that magnet for the infected.

"We can tune it to repel them. Keep them away from us. I think I know how, from reading all the logs Sebridge retrieved at the facility in Belgium." Ramirez sounded confident.

"Fuck. Okay. Let's get moving."

Carly gestured for Ramirez to open the lab door. He dipped his chin, swiveling toward the exit.

As Ramirez entered the hallway, Carly swore she heard him humming The Merry-Go-Round Broke Down.

A bizarre night of terror awaited.

Chapter 52

It took three months and several dozen drinks with Bingo before Luke joined Gavin on the Search & Clear team.

Gavin joined a week after they met Bingo. Luke took more time getting his mind and body fit for duty. He appreciated Gavin not pressuring him to speed up the process.

Luke befriended Patrice from the Chamber House. He would spend hours chatting with the reclusive genius outside of scheduled treatments. Luke found Patrice fascinating and enigmatic.

"You're gonna love this!"

Gavin couldn't help himself. Luke felt his best friend's excitement as they started their first shift together as S&C crew members. Luke shared Gavin's enthusiasm.

"It's like working for Jacob, without getting shot at several times in a week."

"I feel ready for it."

Luke took in all the other fresh faces sitting around him. He knew most of them from orientation and training. Everyone wanting to join S&C passed through a mandatory two-week orientation. Further training courses also brought S&C veterans up to speed on revised practices and procedures.

"Keep a cool head out there. Follow the procedure. You'll all return in one piece."

Janice adjusted her mirrored aviator sunglasses as she peered at the eager faces from her perch in the driver's seat. She led the two-week boot camp for newcomers.

"If you don't know, ask."

Luke flashed a smile at Ralph, another new recruit to S&C. Luke enjoyed getting to know Ralph but found his ethics dubious. Luke figured Bingo and Ralph would get along well together.

"We'll probably find a whole case of hooch out there."

Ralph winked at Luke, offering a grin in return.

Luke shook his head.

"You gonna sell it under the table?"

"I don't know what you're talkin' about."

Ralph feigned innocence, glancing at the people sitting beside him. "That sort of thing's frowned upon by the good folks of Hampton Flats."

"Whatever."

Luke shook his head as the crew members beside him chuckled.

"I'd rather not hear about that."

Janice yelled back at everyone. "Out of sight, out of mind."

Ralph gestured toward Janice and nodded in agreement.

The drive took about forty-five minutes. It had been more than a year since Luke had stepped foot outside of Hampton Flats. He recalled little about the area surrounding the Flats because of his fevered state back then.

All abandoned vehicles within several miles sat off the thoroughfare, pushed aside by S&C crews. Luke found none of the terrain they passed recognizable. Slender trees rushed by outside, and bright blossoms of vibrant hues decorated the roadside. He enjoyed the fresh scenery. It complemented his new lease on life.

They stopped outside a planned community with an elaborate iron lychgate at the main entrance. The upper portions of upper-middle-class homes appeared behind a stucco wall enclosing the neighborhood.

"Everybody out."

Janice announced. "We'll move house to house. Clear out infected and salvage useful items for the Flats."

Luke, Gavin, and the other six people lined up outside beside the van. Janice stood at the front, waiting for her crew to assemble.

"Teams of two."

Janice began.

"Cover each other room to room. Clear the house first, then take inventory."

Janice ushered everyone through the pedestrian entryway next to the main gate. Luke and Gavin walked to the third house on the first street. The teams searched homes on either side of the road.

"Looks like someone's been using this house."

Gavin pointed to a green mud-covered Jeep Cherokee parked in the driveway. "Could still be inside."

"Does that happen a lot?"

Luke's fingers tightened around his gun, memories of working for Jacob returning.

"I've seen it a couple times out here."

Gavin reached for his gun as well. "There were people, but nobody got shot."

"I prefer that outcome."

Luke murmured. He preferred the S&C crew's policy of avoiding violence to Jacob's zero-sum game approach.

"Yeah, me too."

Gavin sounded disappointed.

"You miss runnin with Jacob?"

Luke asked as they approached the front door.

"I miss the excitement of it sometimes."

Gavin admitted. "But I prefer the stability of doing it this way."

Luke knocked on the door as Gavin spoke, following procedure. No one answered.

He looked at Gavin, who nodded for Luke to try the door. He turned the handle, pushing the door open. Luke and Gavin stepped for cover as the door swung inward.

"Hello?"

Gavin called out. "We're from Hampton Flats. Not meaning to intrude if anyone's here." Still no answer.

Gavin nodded to Luke again, taking the lead as he entered the house. Luke glanced behind them before stepping inside as well.

"We'll check all the rooms downstairs first."

Gavin gazed around the spacious family room, observing the furniture and decorations. "These people weren't suffering much."

Luke pointed to the coffee table in front of them. "Somebody's been here."

Gavin glanced in that direction, seeing the half-full water glass next to an old book and stack of Better Homes & Gardens.

"Yeah, they don't always answer our friendly greeting."

Gavin pointed to a couple of shirts draped over the couch and a pair of shoes. "Might still be here. Think we're scavengers or something.

Luke chuckled. "Which we basically are."

"Don't put us on the same level as those bastards." Gavin replied with a tone of mock irritation. "We got standards."

"And what would those be?"

The sound of a woman's voice made Luke and Gavin freeze.

"We're not looking for a fight."

Luke spoke first. "We're on a crew from Hampton Flats. Search & Clear."

"I've heard of it."

The woman replied. "You can turn around and leave now."

Luke kept his eyes focused on the woman, and the shotgun pointed at him and Gavin. "We will. No problem."

"Drop your guns first."

The woman waved the barrel toward the floor. "I'll set them out after you get to the end of the driveway."

"You could come with us to the Flats." Gavin risked a few more words. "It's better than living out here. Less dangerous."

"You say that to everyone you meet after breaking into their house?"

The woman's tone left no doubt she didn't believe a word Gavin said. "Set your guns down and exit the same way you came."

"We had no idea this was your house." Luke kneeled, setting his gun on the Cardigan grey vinyl plank flooring. "We knocked to see if anyone was inside."

"Polite looters. I'll give you that."

The woman laughed as she spoke. "You have manners."

Gavin spoke again as he and Luke withdrew toward the door. "We're gonna check the other houses around here. If you change your mind, find anyone on our crew. They'll help you."

As they reached the driveway's edge, the door opened a crack. Luke saw a hand leave two guns on the porch stoop and retreat inside, closing the door.

"We'll that's one house off our list."

Gavin stared at the house for a moment. "Maybe she'll change her mind."

Luke nodded. "Where to next?"

Gavin pointed three houses down. "That one. You go first this time."

Gavin and Luke spent the next several hours searching and clearing homes. Most dwellings had rotten groceries in their refrigerators and canned food items in cupboards. Plastic bread packages, grey with mold, sat on dining room tables.

They discovered a working generator and power tools in one house's garage.

Everyone hauled their bounty to vans parked along the street as their shift concluded. The veterans joked and snickered about rookies fatigued on the first day out.

Luke took it in stride. He exercised on a regular basis, but this type of work tested his stamina in other ways. He longed for a hot shower, something edible to eat, and the warmth of his bed.

S&C crew members still faced decontamination protocols after cataloging everything they brought back. Hampton Flats implemented these procedures with great care to stop the infection from spreading further. Beyond direct contact, people knew little about how the illness spread.

Luke and Gavin stood beside a van, with Ralph trying to persuade Gavin to purchase some of his top-shelf liquor. The local currency of Hampton Flats allowed a goods and services market to exist among the residents. Individuals made a living by working the same jobs they did before the collapse.

Ralph skirted the line between approved commerce and the underground economy. As did Bingo. Luke suspected they might work together based on what Ralph said to Gavin.

Luke spotted the woman as she approached. He put one hand on Gavin as he raised the other in a greeting.

"Hello!"

Luke put on a warm smile. "Change your mind about us?"

"Maybe."

The woman stepped closer to Luke and the others. Luke saw she still held the same shotgun.

"Tell me more about where you're from."

"It's called Hampton Flats."

Gavin joined in. "We've been there for almost a year. A guy named Jacob first told us about it."

"Jacob?"

The woman grinned at Gavin. "Self-proclaimed keeper of the peace, Jacob?"

"You've met him?"

Luke shook his head. "Did he rescue you from outlaws?"

"No." The woman scoffed. "I happened upon him driving cross country."

"Did he mention Hampton Flats?"

Ralph poked his head around Gavin to address the woman.

"He did actually."

The woman answered. "Said it was a place I might like if I headed that way."

"Well, are you?"

Gavin moved aside so Ralph and the woman could see each other better. "Going that way?"

"I might be interested in checking it out."

The woman turned, looking back at the house. "I have a daughter."

"That's no problem." Luke approached the woman. "She's welcome too. My name's Luke." Luke held out his hand to the woman.

"Gloria."

The woman clasped Luke's hand. Luke noticed the strength in her grip.

"Pleasure, Gloria." Luke took a step back after shaking Gloria's hand. "Have you travelled far?"

"Started in Idaho. Took the long way around to get here." Gloria swung the shotgun over her shoulder. "It's rough country in some places."

"Yeah, we worked for Jacob to pay off a debt." Luke tilted his head toward Gavin. "Got into it with quite a few thugs on the road."

"Jacob wanted me to tell you and your friend hello if I made it to Hampton Flats." Gloria turned to recheck the house.

"Do you need any help?"

Gavin stepped beside Luke. "We can load stuff or whatever."

"No, thank you."

Gloria addressed Gavin.

"I just need to get my daughter and a few things. Give me twenty minutes and I'll follow you."

"Great!"

Luke rubbed his hands together. "We can talk more once you're settled."

Gloria grinned, nodding. She returned to the house where Luke and Gavin met her, disappearing inside.

"Well, that's a first."

Gavin slapped Luke on the shoulder.

"What's a first?"

Luke offered Gavin and Ralph a puzzled expression.

"Taking someone back with us."

Gavin spun to finish loading the van with Ralph. "Never would have done that with Jacob's crew."

"No." Luke agreed.

Luke joined Gavin, Ralph, and the others in loading supplies.

He felt better than he had in over a year.

Chapter 53

"Please don't ask me to do that!"

Charles pleaded as he kneeled at the end of the bed, his head cradled between his arms. The moment lingered between them.

"I can make it work. I can."

"I need more light."

Charlene pulled against her restraints. She felt her strength grow. Soon, she would break free of this prison. "You aren't giving me enough. I don't want to hurt you or the children."

"I can give you more. I can..."

Charles lifted his head, eyes wide as Charlene moaned in frustration and hunger.

"You can't."

Charlene growled at him.

"Kill me or let me go."

Charles twitched, unable to comprehend his wife's words. He fumbled for the door, slamming it shut with enough force to shake the walls.

Charlene tested her bindings again, feeling them stretch against her arms. So much had gone awry.

Loss of contact with The Group rekindled Charlene's sense of freedom. As an operative, Charlene didn't get called upon often, but the few tasks required took a toll. Charlene detested keeping this secret from her family.

She couldn't risk telling any of them for fear of consequences worse than death.

At first, Charlene bought into The Group's purpose. It's mission. Over time, however, she began questioning the things asked of her. Charlene exploited people to advance The Group's objectives. She saw little to no payoff for her efforts.

Charlene told herself the collapse of civilization might give her and her family an escape from The Group's clutches. Then her oldest son got killed less than a month later. A few months later, here she sat, tied to a bed. One of the infected.

The Group's representative, Charlene's handler, gave Charlene an inoculation a year before the collapse. She didn't know what it did or why she needed it. She understood after getting infected.

Charlene didn't succumb to the infection like everyone else. She could still think like before. She held on to her cognitive abilities.

The craving for light energy, however, proved unquenchable. Despite the futility, Charlene must satisfy it. When she gained enough strength to break free, Charlene feared for her family.

She began planning a way to get away from Charles and her children upon waking to find herself secured to the bed she shared with her husband.

The things Charles had done to keep her alive, bringing her strangers upon which to feed in the darkest hours of night. It tore away his sanity little by little. Darkness threatened to consume the father of Charlene's children. The one parent still looking after her babies spiraled further into despair each day.

What she did to Ed haunted her as well.

Charlene couldn't keep doing this to Charles or herself. He needed to get rid of her for his sake and the children. She would not burden her family any longer.

Charles updated Charlene on Sandra's recovery, telling her that Sandra appeared back to normal, playing with Lyla and Charlie as before. No visible remnants of past trauma.

Brianne visited her a few times. Her oldest daughter tried to act normal on those occasions, but Charlene saw the anguish and grief behind her child's eyes.

Brianne possessed the resilience to survive without her mother. Charlene understood that about her daughter. Brianne didn't see it for herself. Charlene knew Charles relied on Brianne to keep the younger children safe. And to keep going as a father. So many challenges lay ahead for them. Charlene vowed not to intensify that burden.

Tonight, when Charles hauled in the latest of his growing list of victims to satisfy her ravenousness, Charlene intended to end her captivity.

"Don't feel guilty about this one at all."

Charles kept his voice low as he heaved a woman's limp body across the bedroom's threshold.

"She killed two people in front of me before I knocked her lights out."

Charles found some drugs in the hospital where they had gone to find Ed's arthritis medication during one of his many outings away from the cabin to locate food and supplies. He did a few jobs for Bridget in Alpena to gain access to the medical center. A simple cocktail made with these drugs allowed Charles to subdue his quarry.

"I don't feel anything about them."

Charlene heard the coolness in her voice, lacking any hint of decency. "Bring her to me."

Charles glanced at his wife, then dragged the body over to her. Charlene felt his disgust, both with her and himself. A shared contempt burned out this couple's humanity.

He placed the woman's upper half on Charlene's lap. Charles stepped to untie the rope he used to loosen her bindings several feet from the bed.

Charlene yanked her arms forward, grabbing the woman's head. Charles grimaced as the tentacles from his wife's fingertips dug into the woman's skull. The unconscious victim convulsed as Charlene took her time consuming the woman's life energy.

Ecstasy and warmth from this body's light flooded Brianne's mother. A low growl of satisfaction escaped Charlene's lips, causing Charles to recoil inside. He felt a deep revulsion crawl over his body each time his wife fed. He turned away, ashamed of himself.

Charles thought he heard a burping sound coming from his wife. Thinking this unusual, he turned his head toward her.

"Charlene?"

Charles called out to his wife. "Are you okay?"

Charlene didn't answer.

In the dim light, he thought he saw her eyes flittering. Charles secured the rope in place, inching closer to Charlene.

"Charlene? Baby?"

Charlene's body seized as her legs went rigid. Saliva foamed around her mouth. The dead woman's body flopped to the floor beside the bed.

"Oh God! No!"

Charles abandoned caution, running to Charlene. He clutched her by the shoulders, desperate for a response.

"Charlene! Talk to me!"

Charlene spasmed for several more seconds before her body became flaccid and still. Her eyes wide and fixed, and Charlene stared at the ceiling. Her lips parted in a wide, endless yawn.

"Fuck no! You can't. No!"

Charles shook her body as he did with his oldest son, forcing her to answer.

"Answer me, for fuck's sake!"

Charles pressed his forehead against Charlene's face.

"Please don't go. I'm not ready."

He held Charlene to his chest. Unrestrained sobs wracked them both as Charles cradled the body of his beloved.

"Daddy? What's going on?"

Charles stiffened as he registered Brianne's voice.

"Don't come in here."

Charles tried to keep his voice steady, but his somber plea betrayed him.

"You don't want to see this."

"Is Mommy dead?"

Brianne's tone lacked any fear or sadness.

"Is she gone?"

Charles' daughter stepped into the room, approaching.

"It's best this way."

"What?"

Charles stammered in surprise.

"Wh...why would you say that?"

"She didn't want to live like this, Daddy."

Brianne touched her father's shoulder.

"She told me each time I visited her."

"You visited her?" Charles had no idea Brianne came into this room alone to visit her mother. "I told you it was too dangerous."

"I had to." Brianne fixated on her mother's face. "I had to see her. Talk to her."

"I can't believe she wanted to die." Charles looked from Brianne to his wife. "I can't accept it."

"She wanted us to live." Brianne removed her hand from Charles. "To survive. She put us in danger each day by being here."

During that moment, Charles noticed his daughter's serenity. He found it reassuring and inexplicable. He felt powerless over everything. How could she remain so composed?

"I'll leave you alone to finish saying goodbye." Brianne backed away. "We'll tell the rest of the family tomorrow. Then bury her together. Next to Ed."

Brianne left Charles alone, shutting the door behind her.

Charles' gaze shifted back to his wife, an onslaught of emotions blazing. Pain, regret, love, and desperation clashed within him like thunder in an infinite storm.

He could only cry as he spent the rest of the night holding her in his arms.

Chapter 54

A sense of urgency compelled them.

Marik and Joelle felt the menacing creature pursuing them, drawing closer every moment. No time for planning an attack on Tibern's base.

They must reach the power source ahead of their adversary. Only then would they stand a chance against it.

Unconcerned about their own safety, the two hybrid mutants zeroed in on the most vulnerable point on the facility's exterior wall. It took mere seconds to scale the barrier. Soldiers on duty along the perimeter caught sight of them from a guard tower. An alarm sounded across the garrison as armed personnel opened fire on the intruders.

Marik and Joelle dashed towards their target, taking the most direct route possible, favoring haste over engagement. They could feel its irresistible song, promising safety and strength to these desperate wanderers.

"Keep 'em back!"

A man's voice, then a sonic whistle unlike any Marik had experienced. He and Joelle felt it move through their bodies, disorienting them both as it did. Marik's vision wobbled, and his legs stopped listening to his brain.

Joelle felt it too, but her body handled the assault better. She continued running forward, jumping into the group of four defenders holding a contraption she didn't recognize. Joelle slammed their heads together, striking one soldier hard enough to send him flying.

Marik caught up to her, and they resumed course. Joelle heard an explosion far away but paid it no heed as she focused on reaching the artifact.

Cowboy found the Wyrtevore before it reached the well-fortified military base. He saw dozens of its horde holding Cormac in psychic stasis. Cormac appeared conscious but unable to move. The mindless ones held him in place with their tentacles. They marched across the uneven forest floor with machine-like precision.

Cowboy didn't understand why the creature didn't kill Cormac, instead bringing him to the energy source along with it. Perhaps it required the artifact to defeat Cormac and siphon his essence. Maybe it intended to enslave Cormac using the artifact as a conduit.

The Wyrtevore seemed surprised, unsure of how to proceed.

Cormac must not fall under Wyrtevore influence. Cowboy would do everything to prevent such a catastrophe. He must set Cormac free. To defeat this powerful beast required a team effort.

Cowboy sensed the cause of this creature's hesitation. Another approached from the opposite direction. If this Wyrtevore felt threatened, so did Cowboy. He needed Cormac's help to fend off both foes and survive the night.

The Wyrtevore's reluctance provided an opening. Cowboy surged forward, straight into the headsuckers holding Cormac. The Wyrtevore, distracted by its own kind, failed to intercept Cowboy in time.

The headsuckers scattered in all directions, Cormac crashing to the ground. Cowboy heard his friend groan in pain, reeling from a sudden disruption in the psychic link.

*Cormac. I freed you. We must fight.*

Cowboy relayed to Cormac, aware the Wyrtevore listened as well.

As he hacked into the disoriented horde, Cowboy didn't notice the Wyrtevore advancing toward him. The beast coiled its lean, muscular physique with fluid efficiency. An intimidating specimen enriched by untold numbers of victims. This creature embraced mayhem.

It raised one arm as it leaped, poised to sever Cowboy's spine while he focused on the mindless ones.

Cormac regained his senses enough to intervene, body-slamming the creature to knock it off balance. Cormac and the Wyrtevore landed on the ground several feet behind Cowboy. The hybrid mutant thrashed against Cormac in a fit of rage. Energy teeming below the Wyrtevore's frigid hide sent violent jolts into Cormac as he fought to contain his adversary.

He clenched its lethal claws tight against his frame, daring it to unleash its fury upon his skin. The Wyrtevore renewed its brute force attack on Cormac's mind, battering his mental defenses without mercy.

*Hurry. I've got it.*

Cormac replied as Cowboy cut Cormac's previous captors into jagged pieces of meat and bone. A peculiar scent of ozone and lavender drifted from disjointed body parts as they made contact with the earth.

*The rest of its horde will be on us in seconds.*

"Breach. South wall"

One guard gripped his walkie like a lifeline in the raging storm. An infantryman beside him fired an RPG at the fearsome monster raging unbridled through this stronghold. The beast disappeared as the projectile exploded.

"Lost visual. Send reinforcements!"

Joelle knew their pursuer drew nigh. With it came certain death. An entire platoon of soldiers guarded the front entrance to the laboratory, housing the artifact and the pseudo-artifact. The building's twelve-inch thick, reinforced cement exterior prevented Marik and Joelle from smashing through. They abandoned attempting to do so after a few seconds of pummeling the dense barrier.

Marik led Joelle up the wall to the building's roof. They would seek access from above. A squad of soldiers clad in full combat gear greeted them. A flurry of muzzle flashes lit up the night.

"They're on the roof!"

One soldier howled into his earpiece amidst the deafening chorus of bursting shrapnel.

The trespassers absorbed multiple impacts as they weaved a zigzag pattern, shortening the distance between themselves and their attackers.

Joelle approached from the side opposite Marik. More explosions sounded nearby as the thing threatening them approached. Marik reached the soldiers first, throwing one into the air and stiff-arming another. Joelle propelled herself behind the first line of shooters, landing atop two sentinels. She pulverized the ones behind her using her bare hands.

The remaining squad members panicked, firing in all directions. Several perished, cut down by fratricide.

Marik snatched a knife for each hand from two fallen bodies. Cold, honed edges promised death and destruction. He cleaved through four soldiers still standing, opening them from pelvis to throat. Innards and limbs splattered against the flat roof's indifferent membrane.

Joelle plucked a gun lying to her side, absorbing a few more rounds into her body as she neutralized the remaining shooters. She leveled the rifle at the door, providing access below. She blew out the door's handle.

They had mere moments. Marik and Joelle disappeared inside. Soon, they would reach their goal and gain power to vanquish the one hunting them.

Cowboy tore across the moss-covered undergrowth to reach Cormac, machete in a tight grip, ready to unleash fury on the Wyrtevore. Cormac seized the monster's elongated appendages, buying precious seconds for Cowboy.

The creature's head swung toward Cowboy. It flipped onto Cormac, driving its right hand into his chin. Cormac twisted as one talon made contact, breaking free of the Wyrtevore.

The creature rolled away from Cowboy's fatal blitz, getting to its feet and vanishing from sight. Cowboy pivoted, ready for it to attack from another direction. His mind sensed the creature moving toward the nearby military installation.

The horde appeared, descending like a black flood on Cowboy and Cormac. Hundreds of berserkers intent on neutralizing these hunters. The synchronized hum of the infected offered an eerie reminder of the Wyrtevore's absolute control.

*Over the wall.*

Cormac jumped to his feet, racing after the Wyrtevore. The horde poured over the ground their master and the two hunters vacated seconds prior.

"Sir! They've breached the lab!"

A panicked voice crackled through Sebridge's earpiece.

"They got past the roof guards. We're sending the rest of the platoon inside to stop them."

"No matter what, don't let them reach the artifact."

Sebridge barked as he watched personnel launch multiple rockets toward the creature bearing down on him.

It darted in and out of the shadows, skirting past cars and structures to gain ground on Sebridge. He led a squad guarding the rear accessway to the lab. None of the weapons at his disposal seemed effective at neutralizing the creature.

Sebridge cursed under his breath. He should have taken the artifact to the other facility, but fucking Tibern insisted on bringing it here.

Sebridge didn't have time to escape before intruders reached the artifact. When they did, Sebridge knew he lost any advantage over the infected in all their mutated forms.

Marik rounded the corner in a blur, flying into one soldier and knocking him against the far wall. Joelle held up a fist as she followed Marik. Her closed knuckles tore off the front of the soldier's face as he bounced off the wall. Marik slid his knives into two more armed personnel before they raised their guns to fire.

They could hear soldiers shouting in the hallway.

Marik felt a pulse of energy as he stopped outside the door. Something changed in the few moments it took him and Joelle to reach this lab floor. The power felt different. Less concentrated.

Joelle opened the door before Marik could smash through the glass. They stepped inside. Marik saw it. From afar, the object called to him. Every inch of the surface teemed with metal cords and tubes that extended deep into the unknown void of its depths as if trying to capture something within it. Something that begged for release.

Marik and Joelle rushed to the pseudo-artifact without time to appreciate its elegant simplicity. A violet radiance emanated from the device as the two hybrid mutants drew closer. Intricate lines of fine tubing and alloy plates within the altered quantum computer shimmered and pulsed in a welcoming rhythm. Circuitry embedded in the main board shone like a relic from a bygone era, brilliant and haunting to behold.

Marik's veins buzzed with anticipation. Joelle felt a presence brush against her consciousness, expressing itself in a manner she could not yet fathom.

Marik took Joelle's hand in silent agreement. Together, they reached for the glowing object, its light engulfing them. As they made contact, a pulse wave erupted outward in all directions.

The walls fractured and burst as if struck by lightning. Chunks of debris shot outward like arrows from a bow, filling the air and triggering a cacophony of sounds. Glass shards glimmered like stars in the water. Pieces swirled and coiled in a chaotic dance as they melted into one rippling mass that floated along with the wave's deafening roar.

The pulse continued outward, washing over the advancing soldiers in a vacuous cobalt glow. They crumpled to the floor, limbs failing as energy from the pulse infused every cell of their body with its essence. They would awaken, transformed into a revolutionary breed of infected by the fledgling pseudo-artifact.

As it spread beyond the building, the pulse wave enveloped several others. Sebridge and the surrounding soldiers could not escape. An unseen hand reached inside, taking control of their entire being.

They, too, would rouse again to serve a new master.

"Get down!"

Ramirez threw himself on top of Carly, pushing her to the ground. She glimpsed a dazzling blue light before Ramirez fell on top of her.

A few seconds later, Ramirez rolled off Carly.

"We have to hurry. They're all here for it. We gotta' find some wheels."

Carly choked, turning over to sit up. She felt her cheeks. Her fingers ran over the gash caused when Ramirez pressed her face into the pavement.

"Sorry." Ramirez held out a hand for Carly. "I had to act fast."

"What happened?"

Carly allowed Ramirez to help her stand.

"What was that light?"

"I think one of them reached the quantum computer." Ramirez looked eager to move. He waved Carly on as he started running again. "It gave them power."

She heard her fellow escapee's urgent tone but didn't know what it meant. Carly kept pace with Ramirez as they raced along the street.

"That should do it."

Ramirez stopped near the corner of a building across from the lab. Carly saw the armadillo-looking thing Sebridge drove to get them here. She nodded to Ramirez, and they bolted for the prototype vehicle. Every second seemed like a minute as they crossed open ground.

"Can you drive?"

Ramirez asked as they entered the vehicle's front.

"I'll put this in back." Ramirez set the case in the seat behind them.

"Yeah, of course."

Carly tried to figure out how to turn on the ignition. "If I can find the start button or whatever gets this thing going."

"It's here."

Ramirez pressed a button near the steering column.

Carly took a deep breath, feeling frayed nerves catch up with her.

"Where to?"

"Sebridge came here instead of heading there. I think there's a map in this thing's navigation system."

Ramirez examined the center display.

"Just get going. I'll tell you where after we get out of here."

Carly glanced around. The sudden lack of explosions and yelling spooked her. She got the "armadillo" in gear, lurching forward and picking up speed. Carly expected some terrifying beast to hurl itself at the vehicle without warning.

"Crash the gate if it's closed."

Ramirez fumbled with the touchscreen monitor. "Don't stop for anything. Fast as you can."

A grin betrayed Carly's adrenaline rush as she floored the accelerator, swerving around corners. A few soldiers darted out of the way as she neared the entrance.

Ramirez let out a wild yowl as Carly smashed through the reinforced gate, knocking a concrete pylon off its foundation. The vehicle lurched as a second pylon hit the front bumper before collapsing into two pieces.

We'll be safe soon."

Ramirez glanced at the nav screen.

"Keep driving fast."

Carly and Ramirez put Tibern's base behind them as they sped away in the darkness.

Chapter 55

"It's okay, dude. We'll take the back this time."

Gavin gave Ralph's shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

"Luke and I got you covered, man."

"I heard something in there."

Ralph's excited tone betrayed his apprehension. His fingers traced the handle of his gun. Ralph's gaze drifted away from the house as if thinking of a matter requiring his presence elsewhere.

"I hate those fuckin' things, if that's what it is."

"Yeah, me too."

The reply sounded harsher than Luke intended. Ralph shot him a glance. Luke shook his head.

"Not you man. I'm mad at them."

Luke pointed to the house. "Let's clean it up if there's scramblers inside."

"No worries, Luke."

Ralph smacked his lips. "I guess you got a right to your bitterness."

"Let's do this!"

Ralph's partner, Waylen, clapped his hands. "I'm ready to blast some grabbers, dudes!"

Gavin gave Waylen an exaggerated thumbs-up.

"Yeah, we will, Waylen!"

Gavin turned to Luke and Ralph, rolling his eyes before spitting into the dew-covered grass at their feet. The crisp air clouding his breath hinted at autumn's arrival, extending her reach even further each day.

"Guy's too stoked about shooting things."

"He'll wash out." Ralph chimed in, overhearing Gavin's comment. "Too spastic."

Luke grunted in agreement, taking the lead as he and Gavin headed away. A cream vinyl fence ran the backyard's length. Luke unlatched a hinge, swinging the gate open.

The familiar scene of overgrown fescue and ryegrass greeted him. A tangled mess of hydrangea and elderberry bushes lined the fence's interior, obscuring a top layer of pea gravel.

Plump meadowlarks flitted from tree to tree, their trills a cheerful but ominous reminder of winter's inevitability. Gavin and Luke trekked over wildflower-adorned gravel to the sliding glass entrance.

Something bumped against the wall from inside as they neared the rear entrance. Luke froze. Gavin flinched in surprise.

"Damn."

Gavin swore under his breath. "A person wouldn't do that."

Luke took out his pistol. Gavin did the same.

"Be ready to shoot it."

Luke walked to the door. "Put it down fast."

Gavin halted, his gaze locked on the wall's white vinyl siding for a brief moment before catching up with Luke.

"You stand clear. I'll slide the door and you shoot whatever comes out."

"Okay. Give me a sec."

Luke waded into the tall grass perpendicular to the door. "Ready."

Gavin pulled on the door handle.

"Damn it! It's locked."

"Door's locked back here, Ralph."

Luke spoke into his walkie. "Make your way to us first."

"Shit. Okay."

Ralph's nervous voice answered.

"Hold on."

Gavin glanced at Luke. An apprehensive breath escaped his lips. Luke held his gun level with the door's handle. He expected a scrambler to smash through the glass. Seconds ticked off as they heard footsteps inside.

Gunshots echoed through to the backyard, and a muffled yell came through the glass. Gavin ducked. Luke flinched, bending his legs in the grass. He kept his gun pointed at the house.

"Someone's coming."

Gavin whispered.

A hand fumbled with the lock as blinds tussled back and forth. Ralph's face appeared. He unlocked the door, yanking it open in a hurry as he glanced behind his back as sweat trickled down his neck.

"Got one, but another ran upstairs."

Ralph stepped aside for Gavin and Luke to enter. "We're gonna sweep as a team."

"Let's go! Let's go!"

Waylen stomped at the bottom of the stairs, urging his compatriots onward.

Gavin rolled his eyes. Luke frowned.

"We're comin' dude."

Ralph showed irritation in his voice. "Can't get ahead of ourselves."

"I'll go first." Waylen took off up the stairs.

Luke sighed, following Waylen. Ralph and Gavin followed Luke.

A bump from somewhere downstairs halted everyone except Waylen, who forged ahead unfazed.

"Did you hear that?"

Gavin leaned over the staircase.

"Yeah."

Luke and Ralph answered in unison.

Gavin descended the stairs a few steps. A gunshot rang out above.

"You fucker!"

They heard Waylen shout. "Stay still!"

"I'm gonna' check it out."

Gavin turned, heading downstairs. "One of you, check on Waylen."

"shithead'll shoot us." Ralph quipped.

"Let me check on Waylen."

Luke climbed the stairs. "Stay with Gavin."

"Waylen!"

Luke's back hugged the wall to his right. "Sound out!"

"In here!"

Luke heard Waylen's voice down the hallway. It came from the second door.

"I'm coming down the hall! Don't shoot!"

Luke glanced behind, then jogged to where Waylen had gone.

"Yeah, got it."

Waylen spoke again, confirming his location.

Luke entered the room with his pistol drawn.

"Anymore up here?"

"Nah."

Waylen said. "Already got the other one. Just this one left."

Luke stepped closer to Waylen and the body in this second-floor home office. Waylen stood over the scrambler. Half of its body lay under an office desk. A chair lay on its side near Waylen's foot.

A shot rang downstairs, drawing Waylen's focus away from the immobilized scrambler.

"What are you doing?"

Luke saw the scrambler's eyes open. Its body didn't move.

"Shot it in the neck."

Waylen chuckled. "Damn critter's paralyzed."

"Why didn't you shoot it in the head?"

Luke raised his gun, firing one shot into the creature's forehead.

"Hey!"

Waylen snapped. "I was seeing something."

"Seeing something?"

Luke met Waylen's eyes. "Seeing what?"

"If I could see anything human."

Waylen spit on the hardwood floor. "Then you shot it."

"That's what we're supposed to do."

Luke shook his head. "We gotta back up the others. Move with purpose. That's how we avoid getting killed out here."

Luke backed away.

"Come on. Gavin and Ralph need backup."

"Fuck it."

Waylen gave the dead scrambler one last look.

"On my way!"

At the bottom of the stairs, Luke slowed to listen. Faint voices in the back of the house.

Luke ran toward the back door. Waylen stomped down the stairs behind him.

"Gavin? Ralph? Where are you guys?"

"In here!"

Ralph's voice redirected Luke to a door leading away from the kitchen.

Luke entered the spare bedroom off the kitchen and froze. A monster from his past smiled at him, gun pointing toward Gavin and Ralph.

"Hey friend, long time."

Clyde's tongue danced behind jagged teeth.

"Never got to say goodbye. You left in a tither."

Waylen entered a second later.

"What the fuck?"

Waylen's mouth dropped as he took in the appalling scene.

At Clyde's feet lay one disemboweled scrambler and a woman's body. The woman bore no telltale signs of infection. However, the bullet hole in her forehead left no doubt about her status.

With a catchpole, Clyde held a scrambler with no eyes in its sockets. The mindless creature reached out to grab the void in slow motion as a wretched and guttural humming noise escaped its throat. Luke noticed one of the scrambler's ears torn off and stapled across its nose.

Clyde flashed Waylen a crooked yellow-tooth grin that lingered too long. It made Luke's skin crawl.

"Too bad you missed all the entertainment."

Clyde glanced at the bodies. "Had fun with those two."

"He made me call you,"

Ralph said. "He'd shoot Gavin if I didn't."

"Shut your hole' fore I shut it for ya!."

Clyde screamed, yanking his captive scrambler by the throat in Ralph's direction. "I do all the splainin' now."

"Tell us what you want."

Luke's hatred and fear resurfaced. He refocused. "We'll help you. Then you let us go."

Clyde winked at Luke and mimicked a yawn. Then twirled his revolver toward Gavin, firing a shot. The bullet whistled past Gavin's head. Waylen ducked and let out a garbled curse. Gavin didn't flinch.

"I want it all back. Everything you took from me. I never dreamed I'd see you two shitheads again, but it's a day of special blessings."

Two S&C crew members appeared.

"What's going on?" a woman asked. The man with her left in a hurry.

"Place'll be surrounded in minutes."

Ralph kept his eyes on Clyde. "You'll never get out alive if you shoot us."

"Maybe I ain't lookin' to."

Clyde spat on the dead scrambler at his feet.

"Just wanna take you all with me."

"One of us will get a shot before you get us all." The woman kept her gun pointed at the floor.

"I got a better idea." Clyde said.

"Everyone back out real slow. Everyone 'cept this handsome fella."

Clyde waved his gun at Gavin. "Get out or I shoot."

"Come on." The woman said.

"Luke, Ralph, let's go."

"I'm not leaving without Gavin."

Luke lowered his hands, placing his gun on the floor. "If he stays, I stay."

"That's not the deal."

Clyde winked at Luke again.

"You can watch your friend die right here, right now, if you don't skedaddle."

"Come on, Luke, we'll cover the room outside. He can't go anywhere."

Ralph touched Luke's arm. "It's the best play."

"I'll be fine, Luke."

Gavin twisted his head to glance at Luke. "Do what he says."

Luke lowered his head. Then he looked at Clyde. "Don't do anything stupid."

Clyde made a silly face and waved for Luke to leave.

"Last chance. I'm gonna start shootin' you're not out in five seconds."

Luke, Ralph, and the woman backed away, facing Clyde.

"Shut the door behind ya." Clyde said as Ralph stepped out.

Ralph closed the door, turning to give Luke an apologetic expression. He took Luke by the arm, pulling him to the kitchen. Ralph nodded to three people from the S&C crew standing in the hallway.

"We gotta wait him out."

Ralph kept his voice low. "He'll realize we're holdin' all the cards."

Luke saw Gloria enter the kitchen.

"Wow, a hostage crisis on my first shift." She saw the worry on Luke's face and hurried over to get an update.

"He's got Gavin alone in the room."

Luke's eyes shifted between Gloria and Ralph. "This guy held Gavin and me prisoner. Made us fight scramblers for sport in a cage."

"Shit."

Gloria ran her tongue along her lips.

"He's a sociopath."

She glanced down the hallway. "This will not end well."

Ralph scowled at Gloria.

"I'm tryin' to keep our boy calm here. Not helping."

"It's okay."

Luke pulled away from Ralph. "She's right. He's sadistic. Lives mean nothing to him."

"Maybe Gavin can..."

A tormented cry and erupting gunfire drowned out Gloria's words. Bullets ripped through the wall between the bedroom and the hallway. One of the women standing outside the door grunted and crumpled to the carpet in a heap.

"Get down!" Ralph shouted.

The two remaining S&C members dropped to the floor as the shooting started. Ralph grabbed Luke and Gloria, pulling them down behind the kitchen's hulking refrigerator.

"Let me go."

Luke wrestled free of Ralph's grip. He ran for the bedroom, ducking as another round of bullets tore apart the door.

Luke cringed as he lowered his body, grabbing the handle and easing the door with breath held. He retreated behind the wall, heart pounding. A single drop of sweat rolled down his face before colliding with his left eye, burning like liquid fire. Luke sat motionless, anticipating the next bullet that never came.

He glimpsed the blinded scrambler an instant before it meandered into the hallway, the catchpole still ensnaring its neck. The scrambler bumped against the opposite wall as it stumbled in a frenzied burst.

Luke fired his weapon at the creature, watching it drop onto the lifeless S&C crew member.

"Gavin!"

Luke hugged the wall for cover. "Say something!"

"Stop!"

Luke heard a commotion outside the house. Two bangs.

He peeked into the bedroom. Clyde opened the bedroom window to escape. The ear-piercing crack of gunfire had ceased, replaced by a silence that crept along the hallway.

"I got 'em!"

Someone hollered from outside.

"Clear!"

Gloria and Ralph rushed down the hall to where Luke crouched by the bedroom entrance.

"We're checking the room!"

Ralph held his hands over his mouth to project his voice outside and tried to convey authority over the chaos.

"Hold your fire!"

"Gavin!"

Luke sprinted to where his friend lay, face pressed into the deceased lady. Before fleeing, Clyde had thrust one of Gavin's hands inside the woman's ripped-open trousers. One final violation to remember Luke's former captor.

"No! Gavin!"

He saw deep gouges carved along Gavin's face. A viscous mixture of blood, dirt, and sweat dripped from Gavin's chin to the expired victim beneath him. Luke shook Gavin, trying to rouse him.

"Gavin!"

Ralph knelt beside Luke, inspecting Gavin for bullet wounds. He sighed upon discovering the hole in Gavin's shirt and the crimson stain around his chest. Luke stared at Gavin's favorite Moon Pie and RC Cola t-shirt, now tattered and bloodied.

"Fucker shot him."

Ralph turned to Gloria.

"in the chest."

Luke slumped on the floor, numb with shock and disbelief. His mind refused to accept this reality. Gavin couldn't die. Couldn't leave him too.

"It can't be like this. It can't."

A sudden fury surged through Luke's body as he rose. He bolted down the hallway and into the kitchen, stopping in the backyard.

Luke's boots made a sharp crunching sound on gravel as he marched to where another crew member stood over Clyde with his gun trained on Gavin's injured killer.

"Did you enjoy my gift?"

Clyde's lips quivered apart to expel bubble-red saliva onto the elderberry bush trapped beneath his head. A violent choking fit overtook him before he could rasp out more words.

"Did him up special for ya, my best cage fighter."

Luke raised his gun. He unloaded his forty-five into Clyde, from feet to abdomen, piercing skin, and cracking bone. Clyde's body writhed as each bullet tore into him.

"Worth it."

With a single breath, Clyde murmured his last words loud enough for Luke to understand. Clyde's body ceased twitching, and he lay still.

Luke stumbled out of the backyard without speaking. A numbing emptiness enveloped him as a thick fog descended over his surroundings. All sounds and sights faded into nothing.

The void threatened to swallow him in its depths.

His mind blanked, unable to process Gavin's death.

How would he continue on?

Chapter 56

“Watch the damn corners!”

Roger heard a gruff voice.

“Ah, hello?”

Roger rounded the corner to see an older man, somewhere in his seventies by Roger’s estimation. A lit cigarette dangled out one side of his mouth. He stood a foot taller than Roger, wearing a pristine white lab coat over his slender form. Grizzled silver hair cropped a face etched with proof of too many years spent beneath the sun and harsh living.

The man turned. “Yeah? Can I do somethin’ for you?”

“I came to ask the same question.” Roger extended his hand. “I’m Roger.”

“Doc.”

The man took Roger’s hand, giving it a firm shake. Doc’s hand felt like sandpaper and leather in Roger’s grip.

“That equipment in my truck. If it isn’t too much for you, you can help the kid.”

“Kid?”

Roger looked in the box truck’s cargo area. He saw Get In! Get Moved! written across the side in bold green letters.

“This fella.”

Doc waved at someone out of view.

A tattooed man with long brown hair tied in a rubber band appeared. He jitterbugged around a wooden crate, wiping the perspiration off his forehead. Tattered, loose-fitting jeans obscured boots that looked too big for his feet.

“Hey. My name’s Jensen.”

Roger nodded. “I’m Roger.”

“Great.” Doc pulled the cigarette out of his mouth. “You can work unloading now that you two lovebirds are besties.”

Jensen laughed, giving Doc a thumbs up.

“Sure thing Doc.”

Roger found Doc’s blunt manner charming. For reasons he could not fathom, meeting Doc felt like reuniting with an old friend Roger had never met.

Under Doc’s watchful eye, Roger and Jensen spent four hours unloading the truck into the hotel-turned-hospital. Despite the exhausting labor and Doc’s occasional critiquing, Roger found the work satisfying.

“You fellas did all right.”

Doc commented after inspecting his equipment. He removed a blackened cigarette from his lips, frowning at it before flicking the butt into his truck’s empty cargo bay. “Might be worth keeping around.”

“Thanks Doc,”

Jensen said. “That’s high praise from Jacksonville’s grumpiest new resident.”

Jensen shot Roger a mischievous smirk, anticipating Doc’s ornery reaction.

“Keep your smart-ass comments to yourself, jackass.”

Doc struck a match, lighting up another cigarette. He took two long drags, squinting at Jensen and Roger with a sidelong glance.

Roger shook his head, unsure how to respond.

“You two get outta my sight, unless you need medical attention, which you might if your mouth keeps runnin.” Doc walked away without another word. A cloud of smoke followed him.

“That’s his personality. Don’t take him too serious.”

Jensen spoke after Doc got out of earshot. “I rode with him for two days. He’s like that all the time, but Doc’s a big softy.”

Roger gave Jensen a puzzled glance. A young punk and a surly old doctor made an odd couple.

“How did you end up together?”

“He saw me runnin’ from scramblers. Told me to hop in before I became lunch.”

Jensen rubbed his hands together to remove grime before pulling the rubber band from his hair. “Brought me here.”

“We’re lucky to have a doctor.”

Roger mused, still trying to size Jensen up.

“I know.”

Jensen shrugged his shoulders. “I look like a thug or somethin.”

Roger shrugged. “I don’t judge. It’s rough out there. I’ve lived it. I know.”

“Yeah.”

Jensen stepped toward the double doors leading out. He ran one hand through unruly locks, nourished by weeks of sleeping outdoors, body grease, and neglect. The noxious mess hung in clumps from his scalp.

“Nearly tapped out more than once.”

“You fight a lot?”

Roger tried to gauge Jensen’s experience. He knew the kid would not shy away from work. Jensen also understood the value of repaying kindness, providing free labor for Doc. Roger’s mind turned to the challenges of tomorrow.

“Almost every day.”

Jensen motioned for Roger to join him. “Let’s get outdoors. I need to cool off.”

“Wouldn’t wish it on anyone, but livin’ on the edge straightened me out, sobered me up.”

Jensen paused by the hotel’s sign. “Weird to build a hotel in the middle of town. Seems outta place.”

“Dane planned Jacksonville’s hotel before the collapse,” Roger said. “For friends and family to stay without crowding homeowners.”

“Ahh, okay.”

Jensen rested one boot on the sign’s concrete foundation to fiddle with a knotted lace.

“You’re not afraid to work then.” Roger stared at the converted hotel.

“You need help?”

Jensen pushed off the concrete with a grunt to face Roger. “I can pound nails, move stuff. Whatever you need.”

“I’m looking for someone to go scavenging.”

Roger turned to Jensen. “Can you keep a cool head? Handle a gun?”

Jensen shifted on his feet, gazing away from the hotel.

“I can tell which end bullets come out of.”

Jensen winked. “I used whatever I could find to stay alive. Sometimes a gun.”

“Great.” Roger grinned. “You got a place to stay?”

“Yeah.” Jensen gestured toward the hospital. “Doc put me in the hotel after we arrived.”

“Excellent.”

Roger held out his hand. “I’ll pick you up here tomorrow at eight sharp.”

Jensen took Roger’s hand. “That’s a tad early, isn’t it?”

“Don’t be late.”

Roger winked this time. “We’ll see how you do.”

“Fuck.” Jensen nodded. “All right.”

“I got a hot meal waiting.”

Roger started walking away. “You’re welcome to join us.”

“Us?”

Jensen hesitated, examining his torn shirt and stained pants for the first time since arriving in Jacksonville. He peeked back toward Roger before raising an arm to sniff. He gasped in disgust from the odor that assaulted him. Jensen clamped a hand over his mouth, trying not to cough.

“Claudia. She lives with me.”

Roger said as he continued along the sidewalk. “I look after her. She does the same for me.”

“Okay.”

Jensen shrugged, running to catch Roger.

“She expecting you to bring company?”

“She won’t mind.” Roger smirked. “Long as you mind your manners.”

“I’m a touch rusty with those, but I’ll do my best.”

Jensen felt a tinge of anxiety. “I’ll say please and thank you a lot.”

“Be yourself.”

Roger chuckled. He noticed Jensen smoothing out his shirt and trousers. Roger thought of what Claudia might say if Roger forgot his own manners.

“She’ll take to you better.”

Jensen surrendered to a cackle of desperation as he abandoned the futile effort of untangling the snarled rat’s nest atop his scalp. Rebellious hair defied any attempts to tame it.

Roger offered Jensen a reassuring squeeze on the shoulder to relax his nerves.

“First, we’ll get you cleaned up and into a fresh set of clothes.”

Flashback – Patrice

Days before the collapse…

Patrice forced a neutral expression as Sal Bernardi repeated his last sentence. He could ill afford the luxury of voicing his inner frustrations.

"Use the monkeys. I procured them for this reason."

Patrice's chin dipped, then rose in slow motion like a buoy bobbing in the sea. He wanted to acknowledge Bernardi's suggestion but avoided eye contact. Patrice relaxed his jaw, clearing his throat before speaking.

"Our stunted progress does not relate to a lack of test specimens."

"Let's not explore that rabbit hole again this fine morning, Dr. Jefferson."

Sal blew air out of his mouth to show his displeasure.

Patrice pressed on.

"The challenges we face will not disappear because you wish it so."

Unlike most people, Patrice held no fear of Sal Bernardi. He knew Sal's public and private history. Without a doubt, the man retaining Patrice's expertise cultivated a reputation for brutality. And the public image didn't scratch the surface of Bernardi's hidden nastiness.

"You are the brightest mind available to handle this project."

Sal did not threaten in order to motivate those around him. He made people disappear instead. Patrice knew this. He also knew Sal had no other options for this project.

"You absolutely must succeed. I expect it. You will do it."

Patrice turned his eyes to Sal this time.

"I understand you are a man accustomed to getting what you want, Mr. Bernardi."

Patrice allowed a gradual smile to form on his lips. He wanted to keep this conversation amicable.

"I accepted the challenge and the consequences of failure when I agreed to your terms. I will see it done."

"I know you will."

Sal answered Patrice's grin with one of his own.

"I leave it to you, doctor."

Patrice took Sal's meaning.

"I will use the primates during today's testing."

Sal tilted his chin in satisfaction, feigning deference to the doctor's expertise. Patrice pretended to accept Sal's acknowledgment as genuine.

He relished the challenge presented. However, Patrice became more cognizant each day of his own intellectual inadequacies. The two subordinates Patrice brought to assist offered generous helpings of innovative paths to explore.

Sal's tolerance had limits. Patrice often tempered his underlings' wild notions, keeping their focus trained on the most workable options. He could not try Sal's patience forever.

"Did we agree on this earlier, and I don't remember any of it?"

Gillian's question did not fluster Patrice. He would never tolerate frequent defiance of authority if not for her intellect.

"Mr. Bernardi insisted. I relented." Patrice said. He braced himself for the scathing retort sure to follow.

"Sal's pulling harder on that leash."

Gillian scowled as she spoke, but the remark did not sound like a rebuke. More a realization of what she, too, accepted in working for Sal Bernardi.

Her expression shifted to one Patrice had not encountered before today. Concern.

"Are we running out of time, Patrice?"

This time, Patrice noted a hint of fear in Gillian's voice. He tried to ease Gillian's worries by presenting a less dire outlook on their circumstances.

"I didn't accept this undertaking without explaining the uncertainty of success to Mr. Bernardi up front."

Patrice fixed his gaze on Gillian before saying more. "That being said, we must make some forward progress in developing this technology."

Patrice paused again, then added a final thought.

"That's how we all walk out of here still breathing."

"And what happens if it does work with the monkeys? Planet of the Apes?"

Gillian smirked in a way that let Patrice know part of her favored that outcome.

"Don't get too excited Gillian…"

Patrice tried to sound ominous as he finished speaking.

"…The Apes might keep us alive for decades as slave laborers."

Gillian's smirk vanished. She had not entertained the notion of superpowered primates not annihilating her within seconds of their transformation.

Patrice allowed himself a couple of indiscernible seconds of satisfaction at silencing his petulant assistant before resuming the task at hand.

"Please, if you would, prep our first subject for the chamber sequence."